

EMBODIED PERCEPTION

by

DARIO SALVATORE BUCHELI GALVAN

Bachelor of Arts, 2016

University of Dallas, Irving, TX

Submitted to the faculty Graduate Division College of Fine Arts Texas Christian University in

partial fulfillments of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2020

EMBODIED PERCEPTION

Thesis Approved:

Adam Fung

Major Professor / Adam Fung

Kalee Appleton

Kalee Appleton

Mark Thistlethwaite

Mark Thistlethwaite

H. Joseph Butler / Associate Dean / College of Fine Arts

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank the faculty and staff of the TCU School of Art, especially the members of my committee: Adam Fung, Mark Thistlethwaite, and Kalee Appleton.

I want to thank my family and friends who have supported me through my studies; this thesis is dedicated to you.

Lastly, thank you to my graduate painting peers.

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VITA

Dario Salvatore Bucheli Galvan was born on October 8, 1993 in Monclova, Coahuila (Mexico). He is the son of Dario Bucheli and Rocio Galvan. A 2012 graduate from Antonian College Preparatory High School in San Antonio, Texas, Bucheli received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Studio Art from University of Dallas, Irving, in 2016.

In 2017, Bucheli was awarded a Graduate Assistantship from Texas Christian University in Studio Art. While working towards the completion of his Master of Fine Arts degree, he worked with the Art Galleries at TCU from 2017-2018, then as a Teaching Assistant for Advanced Painting from 2018-2019, and finally as an Instructor of Record for Drawing I from 2019-2020.

During Bucheli's time as a graduate student, his work was exhibited widely in the Dallas-Fort Worth area as well as internationally. He participated in the TCU School of Art Artist Residency in the Tuscany region of Italy. The research Bucheli conducted during this residency ultimately led to the thesis project that is presented here.

Perception and its constituent aspects

Embodied Perception is a body of work in which photographic documentation of paintings found on the internet are given material form through the medium of painting. These paintings out two different aspects in the psychological process of perception between looking at photographs of paintings as opposed to seeing them in person. Photographs of paintings incite intellectual engagement with the image due to the distance it creates between the viewer and the subject; on the other hand, looking at paintings in person allows the viewer to relate to the work by using their body as a point of reference to experience the art's affective power.

By materializing photographs through the medium of painting, the works in *Embodied Perception* bring attention to the differences between those two types of images: painted and photographic. They also propose that the constituent aspects of the process of perception must be considered simultaneously in order to provide a comprehensive experience of the artwork.

This principle is particularly relevant in light of the immense amount of photographic documentation of paintings found on the internet. Recent technological developments allow the viewer to see a large number of exhibitions from distant places, at multiple points in history, which would be inaccessible without the internet. The viewer can have access to a museum's permanent collection and see objects that may be too delicate to ever be displayed. Social media provides insight into an artist's studio practice and of works which might never be considered for public display.

Avenues for physical interaction with art also took an unexpected turn when, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, authorities across the United States issued shelter-in-place orders. Non-essential businesses, including art museums and galleries, were suddenly forced to close to the public. While many exhibitions were cancelled, some institutions opted to move

their exhibitions online and presented them to the public as installation shots, detail views, and video walkthroughs. These online exhibitions reinforce what many artists have come to believe: that photographic documentation of artwork can provide sufficient information for understanding the experience of the work it depicts.

This belief may have originated during an artist's university education. All studio and art history courses rely, at least partially, on photographic documentation as a pedagogical tool. In the classroom, the formal qualities of the art object depicted in the documentation are acknowledged. Yet, the discussion of the work is predominantly contextual: it turns into the political, historical, cultural, and economical conversations surrounding the work. This is what I refer to as the "cognitive experience," where the interpreter focuses on what the work means, rather than what it looks like in its physical presence. This is the first constituent aspect of the psychological process of perception.

The conclusions drawn from the "cognitive experience" often take precedence over formal considerations. This may be due to contextual conversations having dominated the discourse since the emergence of conceptual art and such conclusions have the advantage of being easily communicable between people. An agreement about the meaning in a work can be reached as long as the viewers share an understanding of the cultural, historical, or theoretical principles discussed in regard to a work of art.

However, many formal properties of works of art cannot be fully experienced through photographic documentation alone. The experience of formal qualities, independent from their relation to the cognitive experience of the art, is what I call the "embodied perception" of the work. This is the second constituent aspect of the psychological process of perception. It is the use of the viewer's own body as a point of reference to experience the affective power of the art object. It

attends to formal properties such as scale, texture, surface quality, and relative spatial location; all of which necessitate physical proximity to the work to be experienced.

The conclusions derived from the “embodied perception” of an artwork are not as easily communicable between viewers as those derived from the “cognitive experience.” That is because the former is physically and emotionally subjective: the viewer’s mental state upon encounter with the work, the conditions of light, or the amount of noise in the exhibition space (to name just a few) can have an impact on the experience of the artwork. Thus, the conclusions may differ greatly between viewers.

I argue that internet-mediated photographic images encourage the viewer to have a “cognitive experience” of them because they lack any material nuances that can be considered. This might be appropriate when viewing certain photographs, however, in the case of photographic documentation of paintings, it is insufficient. This is because paintings are physical objects with materially affective possibilities which cannot be accessed without an “embodied perception” of the work.

The works in this thesis bring attention to this reality by giving material form to photographs of paintings which were found on the internet. They propose that both constituent aspects—the “embodied perception” and “cognitive experience” must be considered simultaneously whenever a painting is encountered. Only then a more informed and fuller experience of the painting can emerge in the viewer.

The Post-Internet framework

The paintings in *Embodied Perception* bring attention to the ways in which the internet is shaping the way viewers experience artworks. This thesis is strongly guided by the intellectual

field of “Post-Internet” art theory. The accuracy of this term has been debated since it was first coined by Marisa Olson in 2008.¹ It is now commonly accepted as a way to describe an intellectual approach to making and interpreting art. Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, the authors of the essay accompanying the 2014 exhibition *Art Post-Internet: INFORMATION/DATA* at the Uljens Center for Contemporary Art Berlin, defined Post-Internet as:

not to a time “after” the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind — to think in the fashion of the network. In the context of artistic practice, the category of the post-internet describes an art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception.²

Following this intellectual framework, the paintings presented in this body of work move past embracing networked technologies as a novelty or a mere aesthetic device for inciting conversation. Instead, they assimilate internet structures in a way which emphasizes conceptual considerations.

My work assumes the ubiquity of the internet and the viewer’s familiarity with it. One such example is *Grace* (fig. 1) which incorporates two paintings by artist Stephen Deffet, as they were found on his portfolio website. The composition presents one of the works in its entirety, towards the bottom of the painting; the other is a partial image that extends to the top of the painting and partially wraps around the edge of the canvas. The composition includes a gray shape on the right side which references a scroll bar, as it is seen in various software.

¹ Marisa Olson, “Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture,” are.na, access date 26 April 2020, <https://www.are.na/block/1982570> .

² Karen Archey, Robin Peckham, “Art Post-Internet: INFORMATION / DATA,” Internet Archive, access date 26 April 2020, https://archive.org/details/art_post_internet/page/n3/mode/2up .

This digital element establishes the relative location of the viewer within the interface, thus suggesting that the pictorial space extends beyond the edges of the digital screen. It is a recognizable element of internet platforms that a viewer with some familiarity with digital technologies could identify. This framing of images also points the viewer towards assumptions made about the nature of painted images made since the Renaissance, namely, the view of painting as a “window to another world” has been presented as a characteristic of the practice of painting previous to modernism. In a similar way, digital devices (computers, tablets, and smartphones) operate with a similar understanding. They establish the image within the frame of the screen as portion of a navigable space. Through the inclusion of the scroll bar, which implies spatial movement and interactivity, *Grace* establishes (by contrast) its own stillness as a painted image.

Similarly, *3 of 4* (fig. 2) also references a pictorial space extends beyond the edges of the canvas. The composition was taken from a PDF document about an exhibition by artist Konrad Wyrebek. The gray bar cuts across the canvas in the lower third of the composition marks a distinction between pages in the document; the icon in the upper left hand reads “3 of 4” and indicates to the viewer the page they are seeing at the moment; all but the lower portion of Wyrebek’s painting is seen, implying that the rest extends beyond the edges of the canvas. All these elements can suggest to a viewer, who is familiar with this type of digital files, that the edge of the canvas functions similarly to the edge of the screen: it frames a small section of a larger pictorial space.

The paintings captured in the photographs, which were incorporated in this thesis, were made by artists whose work expands the conceptual and material field of Post-Internet painting. For example, an installation view of Jeff Elrod’s 2015 exhibition *New York Paintings* (Simon Lee Gallery, Germany 2015) is incorporated into one of my paintings, titled *New York* (fig. 3). The

painting by Elrod, placed on the left side of the composition, depicts scribbles and chaotic lines created using commercial software (such as Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator). These lines are rendered on canvas using analog materials and processes such as acrylic paint, aerosol, or silkscreen printing. Therefore, Elrod's work establishes a direct connection between the tradition of gestural abstraction and the digital tools available for the production of paintings in the twenty-first century.³

Formal Parameters

The relationship between the works in *Embodied Perception* and Post-Internet practices is reinforced by certain formal considerations that are consistent across the paintings. The proportions of the canvases consistently follow a 16:9 format. This reflects the most common aspect ratio for smartphones, computer screens, and televisions. Since these proportions are not commonly followed by pre-stretched canvas manufacturers, every canvas was built and stretched individually. Their handmade quality sets them apart from the uniformity of pre-made substrates and the sleekness of digital devices. By choosing this specific set of proportions, the paintings maintain a relation to the digital screen from which the composition originated.

The relationship between the works and the screen from which proportions were taken is further emphasized by the composition of each painting. The process began through online research about particular Post-Internet artists and painters. After a relevant work was found, the composition contained on the screen could be modified by zooming in or out, clicking, and scrolling. Once the components within the frame of the screen were in place, a screenshot of the

³ "Jeff Elrod," Simon Lee Gallery, date accessed 26 April 2020, <https://www.simonleegallery.com/artists/jeff-elrod/>

composition was taken and saved to the device for future use. This process transfers some compositional authority to the smartphone device and the internet platforms. While the composition could be specified through certain interactions with the screen, the interactions themselves were intrinsically limited by the user interface design of each internet platform, as well as the capabilities of the smartphone. For example, the composition in *Open in App* (fig. 4) is divided into multiple horizontal sections. Some of them show portions of photographic documentation of paintings by artist Michael Staniak, while other sections present text blocks, icons, and links to other software applications. This composition echoes the design of the mobile-optimized websites (from where this painting was drawn) which prioritize vertical movement on the screen, as opposed to horizontal.

This process of composition also revealed that photographic documentation of paintings is only a single aspect of the information contained within a variety of internet platforms. This was emphasized in the paintings by including other elements such as text blocks or web navigational icons. Thus, the experience of looking at photographs of paintings on the internet is disrupted by these other elements, which compete for the viewer's attention. In certain instances, these components take precedence, or even obstruct, the experience of the image. This is addressed in paintings such as *Current Issue* (fig. 5), which incorporates a painting by artist Kim Owens. While the painted photograph of the work encompasses a significant portion of the painting, it only shows a section of the original painting. This reveals the white background of the website in which it was found, around the top and right edges of the canvas. Furthermore, as a result of zooming in on website during the compositional process, the navigational bar shifted from its original location in the browser. In the final composition, it floats above the incorporated painting, therefore interfering with the viewer's experience of the work.

Survey (fig. 6) is another painting which illustrates a similar point as *Current Issue*. The painting incorporates three works by the artist Wade Guyton, as found on a website about a solo exhibition of the artist's paintings. A portion of my painting is occupied by an element which is modeled after a pop-up window from the website and it obstructs the experience of the three works. This element challenges the belief that websites are merely repositories of information as websites are known to actively collect data such as the user's demographics, internet activity, and related interests. This information is used determine the kind of content that the viewer is shown.

My paintings maintain their connection to their origins on the internet by referencing its formal elements, the use of the smartphone as a compositional tool, as well as the specific format of the stretcher. However, other formal aspects of this project reaffirm their status of painted images rather than digitally mediated pictures.

Scale is one of the most notable of these aspects. When the artwork is experienced solely through digitally-mediated photographic documentation (typically on a smartphone or desktop computer), this aspect of the "embodied perception" is inaccessible to the viewer. But only by giving material form to the photograph does the viewer have the opportunity to use their body as a point of reference to experience the work. *View in Room* (fig. 7) addresses this issue directly by incorporating a painting by artist Shawn Hawkins, as it was found on artsy.com. This commercial website, popular among galleries and collectors, has a feature that allows the viewer to contextualize the size of any two-dimensional work. It places the selected artwork inside a virtual exhibition space, which includes a bench with a scale referent. This digital feature reveals the acknowledgment of the limitations that photographic documentation poses to understanding the size of an artwork. Yet, this is only a partial solution to the issue given that the use of one's body is the only authentic way to perceive that aspect of the work's affective power.

In addition to the aforementioned formal concerns, the painted surface of each work in this project was carefully constructed. This was achieved by selecting a heavy-weight cotton canvas made with a rougher weave. Once it was stretched, acrylic gesso was selectively applied by hand: the sections in the composition which contained the photographic documentation received many more layers of gesso and were sanded down to a smooth surface. The areas that depict the background of the website from which the images were taken, as well as any other elements (text blocks, navigational icons, and other graphics) received only a few layers of gesso. This process resulted in different textures and physical depth on the surface of the canvas, which further distinguishes the elements of the composition.

This becomes particularly relevant in works such as *Zoom (fig.8)* which incorporates a work by Cory Arcangel. His painting was entirely created in Adobe Photoshop and digitally printed on paper. The icons shown in the painting reference a tool commonly used in image database websites that allow the viewer to see the surface of the work more clearly. In the case of this photograph, the tool becomes pointless given that there is no considerable physical texture on the surface (due to the painting's digital origins). But the experiential possibilities are increased when the photograph is given material form. The viewer has access to an “embodied perception” of the work by observing the physical texture of the canvas—which was not possible through the photograph alone.

The paint application for this project was also considered. During the painting process, a variety of mediums were mixed with the acrylic paint to achieve a diverse set of surfaces. Matte modeling paste or heavy gel medium were mixed to create impasto finishes in the sections that depict the photographs in the website. All areas outside the incorporated paintings were rendered by using a high-flow medium and allowed the surface to remain relatively free of brushstrokes. To

achieve a wide range of paint application a variety of tools were used during the painting process, including palette knives, a wide set of brushes, as well as my own hands.

Once my paintings were completed, several coats of protective high-gloss varnish were applied over the incorporated paintings in the digital composition. This resulted in highly reflective surfaces within the areas of my canvases that depict the paintings, while the other areas show a satin finish. These formal considerations enhance the experience of the image found within a digital screen. They create physical distinctions between the elements of the composition, and reaffirm the painting's status as a painted surface, rather than a mere image.

Hermeneutics and the process of Interpretation

The subtle variations on the surface of the canvas can only be fully experienced through a physical encounter with the painting rather than photographic documentation alone. This is important to consider because the meaning in a painting does not only lie in what is revealed by the "cognitive experience" alone. Instead, the insights revealed through an "embodied perception" of the work are an essential component of its perception. Thus, by giving material form to web-mediated photographs, my paintings illustrate this point: the source of meaning in a painting lies in its contextual analysis as well as the experience of its physical manifestation.

This relates to a hermeneutic theory of painting developed by Christian Lotz, who proposes that paintings themselves are a form of intelligence that contain the meaning of the work within the surface.⁴ This theory sets itself apart from a strict semiotic approach which claims that meaning and material can be related conventionally but are inherently independent.

⁴ Christian Lotz, *The Art of Gerhard Richter* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 17.

For example, Joseph Kosuth's approach to painting minimizes the involvement of the medium to its lowest possible degree. In works such as *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) [Water]* (fig. 9) he employs the medium of painting as a device to create the words which can bring forth in the viewer's mind that which the words convey (in this case, the idea of water). This kind of approach was characteristic of the Conceptual turn of twentieth century art. It placed a greater emphasis on the ideas which art conveys, rather than formal qualities. In Kosuth's case, he employed painting merely as a way to convey the written word to the viewer. This semiotic approach compares the function of painting to that of language: as a sign which points to an idea (in this case, that of water) agreed by convention.

In Lotz's view, the unity between material form and meaning within the practice of painting had simply been assumed until the nineteenth century.⁵ This principle was questioned throughout the twentieth century (by post-modern practices, such as Kosuth's) and artists realized that the medium could not be considered to be contingent to the meaning in the work.

In contrast to Kosuth's semiotic approach, my paintings are guided by Lotz's hermeneutic theory. *Embodied Perception* emphasizes the necessity to experience paintings in person in order to incorporate the insights drawn from a contextual analysis and those drawn from a physical encounter with the work. Ultimately, my painting's meaning are intrinsically tied to their existence as material surfaces, rather than as photographic images.

Painting the Photographic Image

The decision to materialize the photographic images through the medium of painting brings attention to the differences in perceptual experience between photographs and paintings. Christian

⁵ Christian Lotz, 19.

Lotz attributes the differences in experience to the nature of each type of image. He discusses photographs by first quoting Susan Sontag: “First of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask...”⁶ She proposes a commonly accepted view about the medium of photography: that a photograph presents a truthful representation of reality, which the viewer can then experience subjectively. This theory establishes a direct connection between photography and the natural world and reflects the documentary objectivity which is often attributed to the medium.

Lotz’s hermeneutic theory challenges this view. He references Roland Barthes’ claim that photographic images are not merely a copy of reality.⁷ They are not mere signifiers, but instead are objects of the gaze. Barthes establishes through his phenomenological approach that photographic images do not simply represent reality; they present a world of its own kind, indexically related to the natural world, yet constituted in its own terms.

Tom Gunning reflected on the role of indexicality within photographs.⁸ He recognizes that photographs can present an accurate view of the natural world, since they are used as evidence in police investigations and in court. The reliability of a photograph is contingent on its indexicality and iconicity (how accurate a photograph is and how closely it resembles the subject, respectively). The accuracy of a photograph is conditioned by artistic decisions and technical considerations: shutter speed, aperture, type of lens, angle of the camera, film stock—as well as post-production

⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador, 1980), 154.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 88.

⁸ Tom Gunning, “PLENARY SESSION II. Digital Aesthetics. What’s the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs,” *NORDICOM Review* 25, no. 1-2 (2013): 39. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2017-0268>

techniques. Ultimately, Gunning concludes that the truthfulness of a photograph could always be called into question, as long as it remains mediated by external conditions.⁹

Since photography cannot present an objective and unmediated view of the world, photographic documentation of paintings does not bring the viewer closer to the work itself. Instead, it creates an irreconcilable distance between the viewer and the work it depicts. This is because the viewer experiences the photographic image *as such*, rather than the artwork it represents. My paintings bring attention to this situation, but they do not attempt to bridge the distance between the viewer and the work. Even though they give material form back to the paintings that are depicted within the photograph, this in itself does not bring the viewer closer to the original work. This is because they are paintings of the photographs of the paintings, rather than replicas of the source.

The paintings in *Embodied Perception* give new context to digital photographs which contain photographs of other artist's paintings. The result is a different kind of experience of these images determined by its physical manifestation as a painting. This is supported by Lotz's hermeneutic theory of painting, and his assertion that the meaning of the paintings is found as an intelligence embedded in the painted surface.

The first thing that occurs when a photographic image becomes a painting is that it opens a line of communication between the viewer and the artist. Through the application of paint, the creative process over time is contained within the surface, which the viewer can access. Furthermore, the paint application leaves traces of the artist's decision-making. Thus, considering the formal properties of the medium of painting is essential for understanding the intentions of the

⁹ Tom Gunning, 48.

artist, ultimately leading to a more nuanced interpretation of the work. In other words, by observing how the painted surface was constructed we could better understand why it was painted that way.

Web-mediated photography, on the other hand, can allow the viewer to ignore the medium. This is because photographs can be regarded as an image to be looked at in and of itself, and not as a materially constructed reality. The paintings in this body of work depict the same image found on internet platforms and implies that its experience as painting is altogether different. Because of the construction of their formal properties, the painted images display material affective possibilities which a digital image lack. While some formal aspects of a painting can be observed through photographic documentation, many of them must be experienced in person to be fully apprehended. This leads to the conclusion that the complete experience of these works must incorporate their “cognitive experience” with the “embodied perception.” This is true even though the images in these paintings are the same both as a painting and as a digital image: the material manifestation of the first sets it apart from the second.

Conclusion

By giving material form to web-mediated images through the medium of painting, *Embodied Perception* highlights the differences between the experience of looking at paintings and of looking at photographs. It brings attention to the fact that, although each work’s composition originated on the internet, their experience as paintings is entirely distinct from that of its source.

This is because the locality of meaning is different for each type of image. Paintings derive their meaning equally from their outside referents as well as from their material construction; photography owes its meaning to an outside referent, which is then presented as its own contained reality. Thus, photographic documentation of paintings does not bring the viewer closer to the

work it depicts. It creates an infinite distance between the painting and the viewer, which cannot be closed through its own means.

This is not to say that the practice of certain painters could not distance the viewer from the subject that is depicted. Many painters do not attempt to merely recreate the subject, but to communicate a certain aspect of it. This is achieved through the careful construction of formal qualities as a way to reflect the chosen aspects of the subject.

My paintings do not intend to bring the viewer closer to the subject. Since the paintings use web-mediated photographs as a starting point, there is already a vast distance between the viewer and the subject. On the other hand, they bring attention to the fact that paintings are a kind of material intelligence (since they bear the decision-making process to the viewer through their material construction) which is not fully accessible through photographic documentation alone.

Ultimately, this body of work invites the viewer to consider two constituent aspects of the psychological process of perception, which lead to a comprehensive experience of the work: the “cognitive experience” and the “embodied perception.” Given that a painting embeds meaning in its material surface, both aspects of perceptual experience are necessary for understanding the work more fully.

PLATES



FIGURE 1: *Grace*, 30 x 16 x 1.5 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2019.

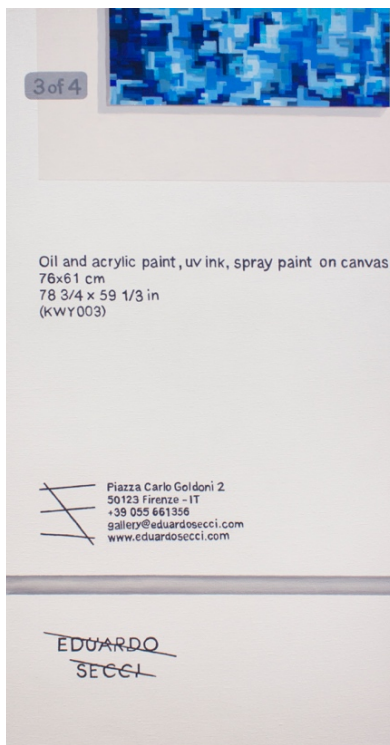


FIGURE 2: *3 of 4*, 30x16x1.5 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2020.



FIGURE 3: *New York*, 40 x 71 x 1.5 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2020



FIGURE 4: *Open in App*, 54 x 30.5 x 1.5 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2019.



FIGURE 5: *Current Issue*, 32 x 60 x 1.5 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2019

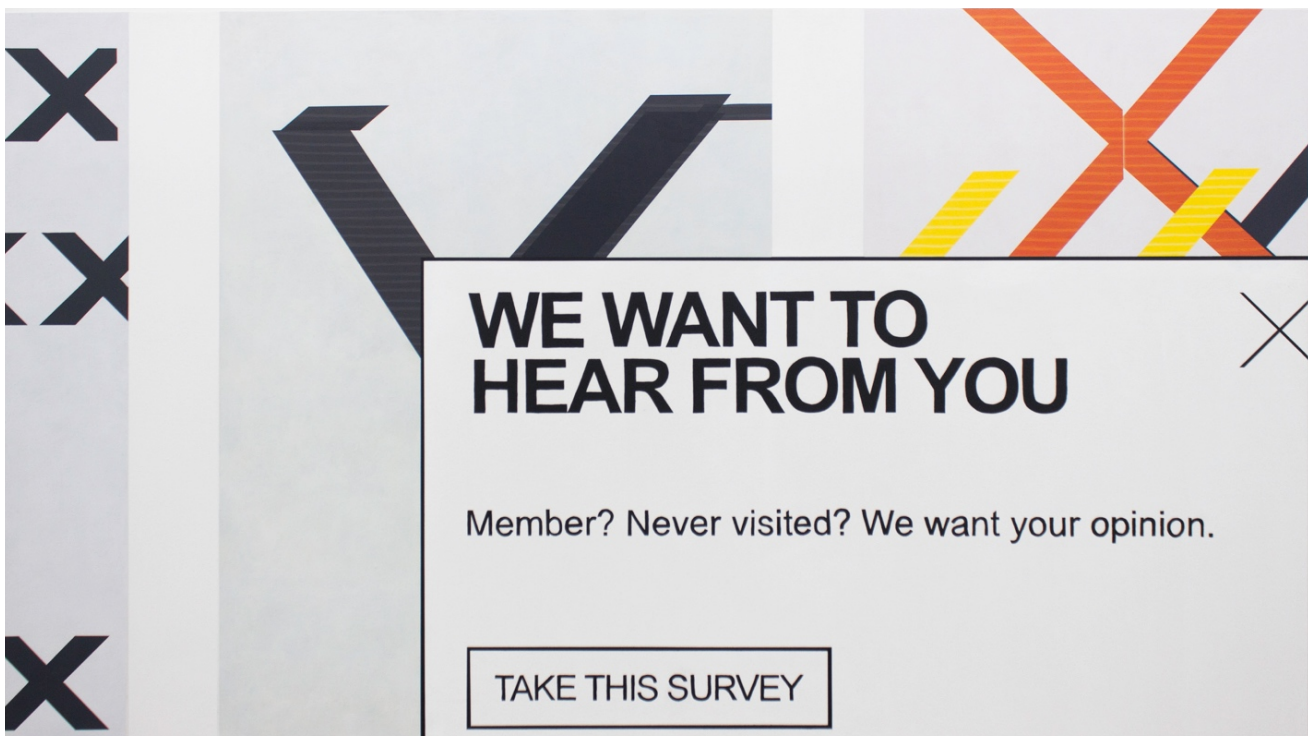


FIGURE 6: *Survey*, 40 x 71 x 1.5 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2020



FIGURE 7: *View in Room*, 30 x 16 x 1.5 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2019

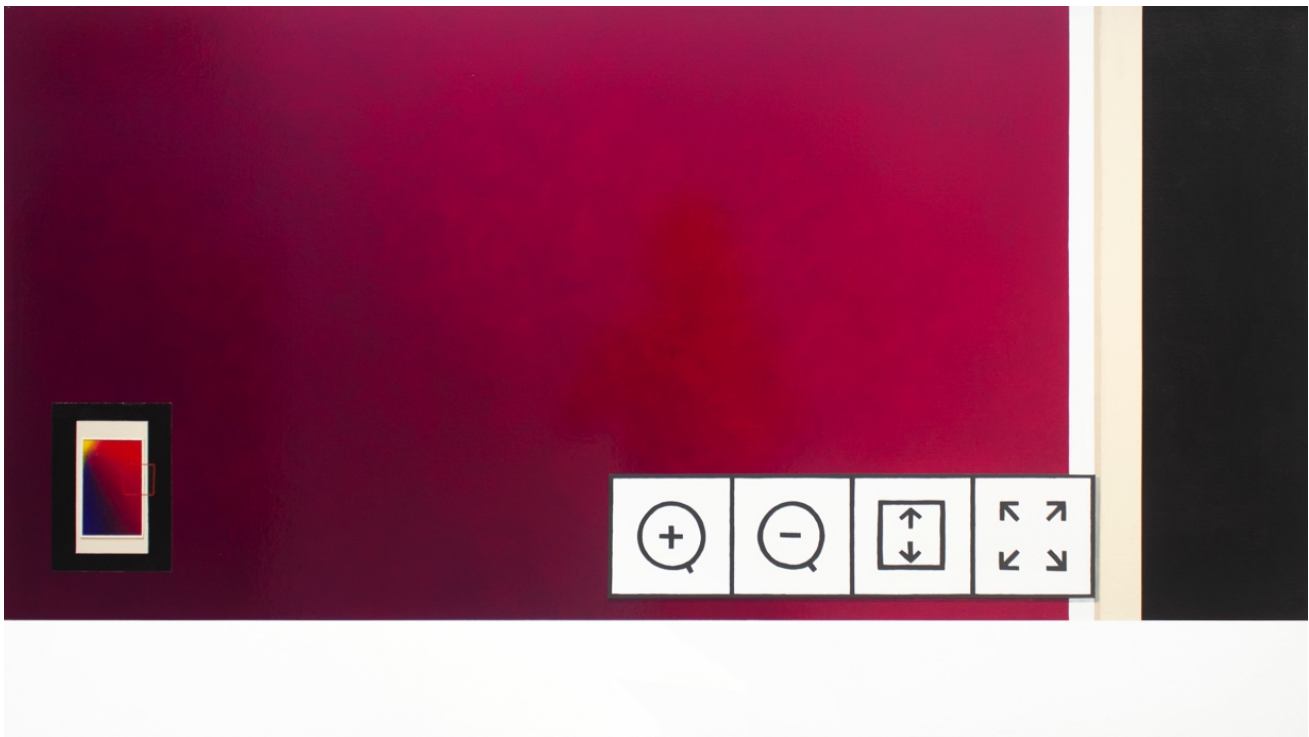


FIGURE 8: *Zoom*, 30.5 x 54 x 1.5 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2020

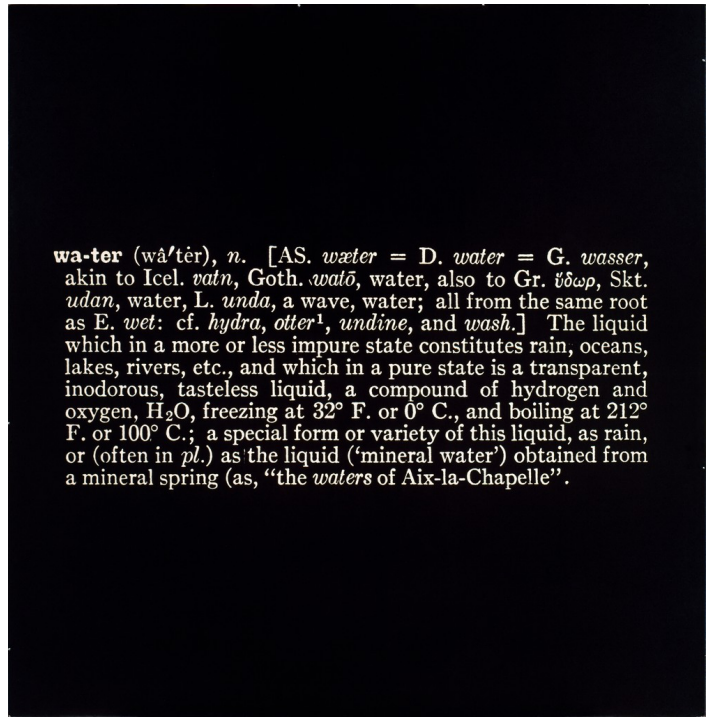
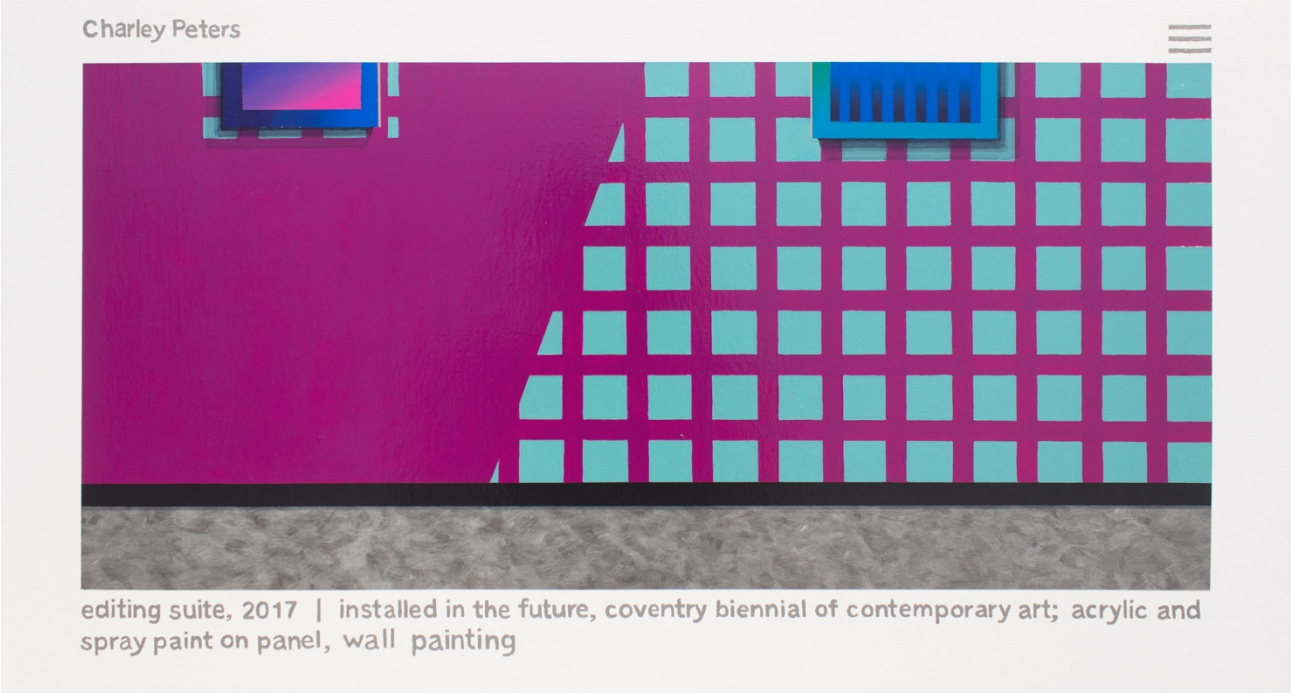


FIGURE 9: Joseph Kosuth, *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) ' [Water]*, 1966.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, Leo Castelli, New York, 1973.
<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/2362>



editing suite, 2017 | installed in the future, coventry biennial of contemporary art; acrylic and spray paint on panel, wall painting

FIGURE 10: *Menu*, 16 x 30 x 1.5, acrylic on canvas, 2020

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ABSTRACT

Embodied Perception is a series of paintings of pictures of paintings by other artists, as they were found on the internet. They invite the viewer to reflect on the differences in experiencing paintings online and in person. They serve as a way to explore the constituent aspects of the psychological process of perception and how they inform the experience of a painting. The body of work consists of acrylic paintings on canvas.