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Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable

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Abstract

Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable investigates the aspiration to access an unreachable landscape. This body of work deals with ambition in both process and content, utilizing artists' materials and a visual vocabulary to reference pursuit. In the context of this research, ambition represents endless reaching; the tendency to idealize what is physically and immaterially remote; and the aspiration to close the gap between the near and the far. James Elkins' *What Painting Is* outlines a distinct relationship between the painting practice and the pursuit of an unknown outcome. Artistic waste, such as leftover oil and acrylic scraps, serves as evidence of this process. Additionally, this body of work uses staircases, windows, and the color blue to reference elusive distances. The color blue draws upon the writings of Rebecca Solnit, associating it with the tendency to idealize what is far away. For this reason, various shades of blue are evident throughout *Perpetual Pursuit*. Staircases function as a symbol for endless climbing; they are the means to access elevated spaces. Windows serve as another architectural device: framing the unattainable, they act as visual abbreviations of longing. Influences include contemporary artists who reference abstraction and architecture such as James Turrell, Richard Jacobs, and M.C. Escher. James Hyde's and Robert Rauschenberg's use of unconventional materials as well as their combination of painting and sculpture also informs this series. *Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable* seeks satisfaction in the act of pursuing.

1. Description of Research

Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable intends to visually investigate the relationship between the artistic process and ambition. This series uses the painting process as a means to pursue the unknowable. For the purpose of this research, ambition refers to the desire to access the unattainable despite its impossibility. It is the state of perpetual pursuit; the tendency to idealize what is distant; the aspiration to close the gap between the nearer and the farther. In actuality, this end goal is not an end at all. Idyllic spaces can never be reached, for as soon as you access them, they are no longer ideal. As these landscapes can never be truly accessed, they only exist as an idea, a pursuit, and a process—like painting.

To characterize perpetual pursuit, this series utilizes a distinctive visual vocabulary: namely, the color blue, two and three-dimensional architectural references – principally, staircases – and repurposed materials from the painting process, deemed artistic waste. In these painting constructions, the blue-space represents ambition's objective: a place where everything has changed for the better; a landscape where the commonplace tragedies of reality cease to exist. The staircases are the means of pursuit, and the artistic waste the visual artifacts accumulated in the process.

1.1 Painting and Pursuit

The painting process and the state of pursuit share an integral relationship. Put simply, to paint is to pursue. When I paint, I am working towards an unattainable end goal – a future, elusive image that I can't foresee, but invest in anyway. When I begin painting, I have no idea what the end result is going to look like. Instead, I allow one visual decision to dictate the next, intuitively responding to the array of colors and textures the media affords.

In *What Painting Is,* James Elkins uses alchemy as a metaphor for painting. Since the painting process cannot be defined in scientific terms, alchemy provides a better metaphor to represent the unpredictable nature of the medium—specifically, its capability to generate an unpredictable array of elements that science cannot capture. Elkins describes the painter's studio as a fantastical landscape where material is king. The process of painting represents the artist's pursuit of an unknown outcome "filled with unknown materials."[1i] Indeed, paint is seductive in and of itself: one can get lost in the patterns and textures of a palette the same way you can get lost in a never-ending landscape. His book ponders why the medium "has such a powerful attraction *before* it is trained to mimic some object, *before* the painting is framed, hung, sold, exhibited, and interpreted".[ii]

For me, paint's beauty stems from the fact that it is physical evidence of the artist's ambitions. When I paint, I generate an abundance of artistic waste, such as leftover oil and acrylic scraps on my palette. Far from insignificant, these cast-offs become visual evidence of the process of painting. Unlike more traditional artistic mediums, artistic waste cannot be purchased or manufactured; it must be generated from past creation. This distinction makes it more visually and conceptually compelling. While anyone can buy materials at an arts and crafts store, supplies alone are not particularly interesting. Unused, art supplies lack narrative and personality. Conversely, artistic waste has a history. It communicates the visual narrative of past use. Acting as evidence of the artist's ambition to create, artistic waste tells the story of an artists' pursuit.

1.2 Ambition, Distance, and the Color Blue

This series of paintings is designed to elicit longing in the viewer, create an aesthetically superior place, and serve as visual embodiment of unattainable space. The visual devices employed intend to create an abstract, unattainable landscape worth pursuing. Utilizing the color blue to reference the gap between the near and the far, this series focuses on the tendency to idealize the a space that can never be truly achieved or accessed. In her essay *The Blue of Distance,* Rebecca Solint eloquently characterizes the tendency to long for far away places.[3] She proposes that the farther epitomizes an unobtainable landscape—both literally and figuratively.[4]

Solnit associates that which "can never be possessed" with the color blue.[5] She writes, "Blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in, for the blue world."[6] Additionally, she notes the importance of the color blue in art history, arguing that many artists have "seized upon the blue of distance as another means of giving depth and dimension to their work".[7] She argues this infatuation with the color blue remains a trend among painters, citing examples from artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Yves Klein, Hans Memling, and Raphael.[8] She notes that mountainscapes, bodies of water, and the horizon all appear blue because the particles of light on the cool end of the spectrum literally scatter, leaving distant places cloaked in this color.[9] UV light—the light of sky—cannot be focused on by the human eye; it is literally imperceptible. These remote, inaccessible landscapes inevitably carry associations of longing. '"Longing," says the poet Robert Hass, "because desire is full of endless distances.'"[10]

Physical distance makes objects appear more beautiful, as immediacy has a way of debunking and demystifying. Conversely, when a thing becomes real, it loses the allure that distance affords. Just like we idealize something we used to have, we idealize something we *could* have. Being hypothetical, that unreachable thing is not subject to all the imperfections of reality. It remains perfect, unadulterated—a construct of our own, idyllic world.

To be ambitious is to pursue something despite the knowledge that attaining the thing you want will not fulfill your aspirations. Ambitious people tell themselves that once they get that A, earn that promotion, or receive that acceptance letter, *then* they will live within a glorified landscape that only exists in their minds. Of perpetual striving, Herman Hesse wrote, "when someone seeks… it easily happens that his eyes see only the thing that he seeks, and he is able to find nothing…because he is obsessed with his goal."[11] The problem with this thought process is that once the goal is achieved, it looses its splendor. The actuality doesn't match up with the ideological construct. More often than not, attaining their goal doesn't drastically alter their lives. The person immediately turns their attention to the next goal.

This is not to say ambitious people are oblivious to this logical fallacy. On the contrary, they are well aware of their position, as it only takes one or two experiences to recognize a disconnect between expectation and reality. Telling an ambitious person of their situation is like telling Sisyphus he will forever climb the mountain.[12] The true task is not to recognize the pattern, but to find value in the need to perpetually climb.

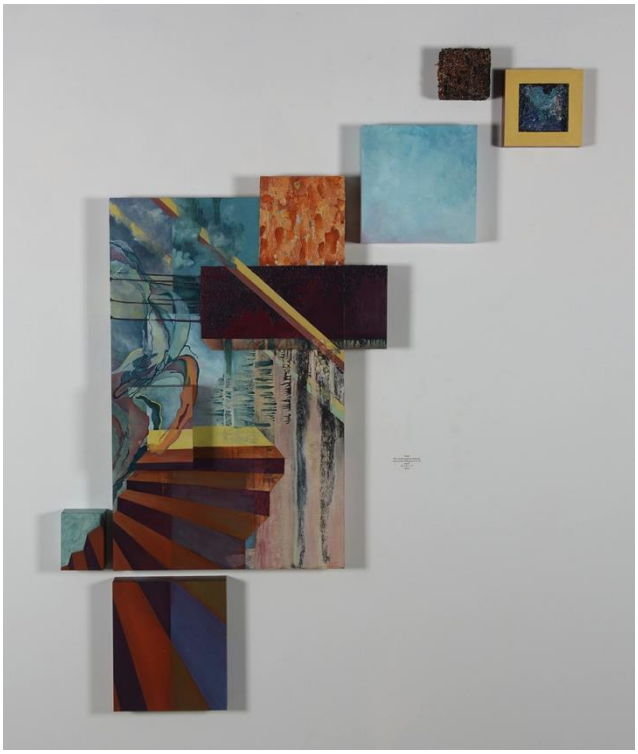

Fig. 1. Kelly Olshan, *Climb*, 2014-15. Oil, molding paste, charcoal, recycled paint and charcoal on 3D panel, 40" x 48" x 3.5".

"Climb" ascribes to this idea by presenting an unattainable landscape. The formal elements of art become very important in suggesting the allure of the inaccessible. The title immediately invokes a sense of height, inviting the viewer to approach the staircase and proceed skywards. Elevation remains a theme throughout the piece: the constellation of panels proceed upwards on the wall; the abstracted architectural beam leads the eye towards an apex that remains out of view. Together, these elements orient the viewer towards the land of the above.

The juxtaposition between geometric and organic forms elicits visual interest within the piece. Box forms are presented as both illusionistic and actual rectilinear objects, pushing sideways and forward into the viewer's space. The 8" x 6" rectangle emerging from the panel particularly accentuates the tension between the 2 and 3-dimensional. This element also acts as a kind of framing device, forcing one to pay particular attention to the composition within a composition it highlights. The drips of linseed oil and the use of blind contours accomplish this as well, offering a counterpoint to the rectilinear forms. Curvilinear lines and shapes literally encroach on the geometry.

This blue window – the destination of the staircase – possesses its own particular purpose. The cyanine blue tones make the space seem to recede into the distance. With so much visual information overlapping it, it remains relatively obscure. This space represents another landscape the viewer cannot quite see or access, implying that the place at the top of the staircase is an esoteric one – just out of the viewer's reach.

The staircase holds its place as the most dominant objective form in the painting, succeeded only by the blue window. With its ascending, zig-zag pattern, the complementary colors of purple and ochre clearly indicate a staircase; yet it is still treated with an abstractionist vocabulary, depicted entirely through shape and color. With no references to a specific object or place, the viewer is able to discern that this is an indication of an imaginary space rather than a particular one. Proceeding from the bottom left to the top right, the stairs guide one's eye upwards and throughout the composition. The two additional panels on the bottom left leave the stairs looking disjointed and spatially incongruous, indicating that if one were to try and climb this staircase they would have difficulty. "Climb" intends to leave its audience wanting to climb the staircase, seeking to access this imaginary space despite the structural impossibility.

1.3 Worldly Success and Delayed Gratification

Despite its unrealizable nature, ambition serves as a powerful motivating force. Social scientists Kenneth I. Spenner and David L. Featherman explore the link between achievement and ambition. Their article concedes achievement's prevalent, yet still mysterious incentives.[13] Despite the predominance of this value, however, psychologists have not been able to pinpoint one dominant theoretical paradigm to explain ambition as a psychological phenomenon. Regardless of its mystery, Western industrialized nations consistently deem "worldly success" as a predominant cultural goal.[14] One conceptual framework known as role theory defines "worldly successes" in terms of academic grades, educational credentials, and career success, both in terms of "monetary and status attainments"—common empirical means to quantify achievement.[15]

In order to achieve these worldly successes, one has to delay gratification. Delayed gratification is characterized by the willingness to forgo something in the moment for the possibility of attaining a greater reward later. The most famous psychological study associated with this phenomenon is known as the *Cognitive and attentional mechanisms in delay of gratification.*[16] In this study, children were asked to choose between a small reward delivered right away or a preferred reward offered later. The majority of children attempted to postpone gratification, one third of whom were successful enough to receive the reward.

Follow-up studies investigated the performance of these same children later in life. Over ten years later, those who were able to successfully delay gratification achieved better social outcomes in life.[17] They earned higher test scores,[18] greater educational attainment,[19] obtained a healthier weight[20], and were described as generally more competent.[21] Such research surrounding indicates there exists an implicit connection between delayed gratification and achievement.

Such a framework mirrors that of ambition, as attaining worldly success requires making sacrifices. Intuitively, these results make sense, as adults are presented with similar options as the children in the experiment. Common, day-to-day examples include: Sleep or study? Go get a drink with coworkers, or stay late at work to finish a project? While sleeping or relaxing with coworkers are the most immediately enjoyable options—the reward received in the moment—the latter choices represent an investment in the future, or a long-term, preferred reward. Studying will likely lead to better grades and educational attainment; working late often yields career success and even monetary and status achievements. Presented in this context, it is no surprise that the same children who were able to successfully delay gratification achieved better social outcomes later in life.[22]

Thus societal frameworks reinforce the tendency to work towards an unforeseeable goal. Sacrifices today are thought to pay off later, as if one is immaterially investing in a better life. From a very young age, children are encouraged to prize the next space, the next object, or a future reward over an immediate one. Thus many come to idealize what is out of reach. In doing this, the future becomes somehow more valuable than the present, even when we're not able to physically see what's to come.

In both the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment and in everyday life, the promise for something better is elusive and unreliable. We have no reason to trust the man in the white coat promising an unforeseen marshmallow any more than we have reason to trust ourselves when we say, *If I make straight As, then I'll be happy. As soon as I land my dream job, then everything will be better.* And yet, the ambitious pursue their goal anyway, despite the completely unreliable promise that it will somehow fundamentally alter the landscape of their lives. The elements employed in the painting series *Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable* intend to embody the notion of this elusive future.

1.4 Height and achievement

Language uses height to communicate value, achievement, and superiority. Common terms for success are often associated with literal elevation. Consider the implicit meaning behind everyday phrases: being "above" someone or something means one is somehow better than them; if an athlete's performance peaks, it means they are doing better than ever; if a goal is "out of reach," it is so valuable that it is impossible to actually attain. Phrases such as "aspire *higher*," "reach *higher*," or "reach for the sky" likewise associates achievement with physical height. Setting oneself "above the rest" presupposes that literal height dictates figurative worth. It is as if highness automatically affords moral, intellectual, or societal eliteness—so much so that western monarchies take to calling their royalty "your highness." These expressions are used to qualify value and success, ultimately implying that what is physically above is somehow better.

Visually, our world is surrounded by objects that carry the same message. Buildings in particular often communicate their importance through height. Skyscrapers, monuments, and other tall buildings are all associated

with high achievement. Examples include the former World Trade Center, One World Trade Center, the Chrysler Building, Burj Dubai, Cologne Cathedral, Shanghai Tower, The Petronas Towers, and The International Center of Commerce, to name a few. The underlying message seems to be that what is physically above us somehow seems more powerful, more valuable, or more worthy. The high above is similar to Solnit's conception of the far away in that they both "cannot be possessed".[23] The land of the above is likewise physically remote, a land of "there seen from here," a space of "where you are not and where you can never go."[24]

1.5 Architectural Devices

In *Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable*, architectural devices serve as metaphors for ambition and endless striving. Drawing upon architecture's ability to reorient the viewer both metaphorically and spatially, this series utilizes the symbolic connotations of staircases and windows in particular to transport the viewer to another place. Stripped of their utilitarian function, the purpose of these devices becomes chiefly that of metaphor.

Staircases are often cited as important architectural symbols, as they provide both a literal and figurative means to access another space. Strong indicators of place, they are used to motivate, inspire, and visually orient.[25] In *Stairways of the Mind*, Juhani Pallasmaa writes, "climbing steps reflects an archetypal psychic longing to approach the heavenly sphere of the cosmos."[26] Much of this connotation has to do with ascension: descending stairways carries very different associations. Climbing stairs, however, sets the participant up to pursue the land of sky. In this body of work, staircases intend to speak to a constant, unrelenting pursuit of the unknown, of the future, and of a potentially better or more successful place.

Fittingly, psychoanalysts utilize staircases in symbol-interpretation, beginning with Sigmund Freud's contributions in particular.[27] In German, Freud's native language, the word for "stair" denotes different connotations than "stairway," creating a unique set of symbols for each.[28] The latter denotes a "word picture" of an individual "climbing," "mounting," or "going up."[29] Thus staircases not only serve as a physical means to access a higher space, but carry deeper psychological associations. This series of paintings intentionally draws upon this ideology, aiming to spatially reorient viewers into the land of the above.

Fig. 2. Kelly Olshan, *Staircase in Blue*, 2014-15. Recycled oil paint, molding paste, and graphite on 3D panel 15" x 9" x 11."

Fig. 3. Kelly Olshan. *The Land of Above: Detail*, 2014-15. Oil, acrylic, molding paste, and graphite on panel, 40" x 27" x3.5".

Stairways are also unique in that they walk the line between architecture and sculpture. One architect contents that they can function as either due to their "peculiarity."[30] Despite the fact that they clearly reference architectural structures, the staircases in this series are stripped of their function: they cannot literally transcend the viewer from one space to another. Not only does the scale prevent them from being climbed, the proportions make the forms

insurmountable. For this series, the literal function of staircases isn't as important as the figurative one: the means of accessing a superior, elevated space.

However, the stairways are not merely pictorial. Many of them are three-dimensional forms, physically invading the audience's space. *Staircase in Blue* borders a traditional 2 and 3-dimensional form. While the piece is clearly 3-dimensional, it's essentially five 2D panels stacked on top of one another. This distinction alone allows them to function as a sculptural object. If the five blocks were displayed individually, they would read as small, 2D paintings. To heighten the tension, the surface of the sculpture is treated exactly as if it were a 2D panel. Beyond the form's initial construction, the application of paint and found objects are relatively flat. This hybrid reads simultaneously as surface and form, leaving the viewer with something that is not quite a painting, but not quite a sculpture either.

Like staircases, windows also carry powerful symbolism. In architecture, windows are considered a means to qualify the relationship between interior and exterior, as they allow the viewer to simultaneously occupy two spaces.[31] Looking out a window requires peering past the current position and into the next one. Often this view represents a place they would rather be. On the outside looking in, what's out the window seems somehow more desirable; it's easy to idealize a space you can see but not feel. In lieu of an actual experience, one is left to imagine one. Thus the faraway landscape is less of an objective image, and more of a subjective notion the viewer has created.

To illustrate this point, imagine a mountain climber is looking out a window and into a mountainscape. The scenery is beautiful: the peaks are cloaked in blue, their rise and fall into sky and clouds neatly framed within the confines of a rectangle. They long to be in what Solnit calls "the blue space," but in actuality, the idea of this place is very different than actually being there. Mountains are cold: the wind would chill the climber's body and beat against their face. In the mountains, the climber doesn't have the vantage point to see the magnificence of the landscape in its entirety: all they can see are gravel and twigs at their feet, a few scattered trees on the ground that disappear as they climb. Objectively, it's the same landscape captured in the window, but it has totally changed. Reality and immediacy has changed it.

Thus the idealization of a place vanishes upon arrival. The space hasn't changed, but the viewer's perception of it has. In his poem *Windows*, Rilke writes about the desire and romanticism windows evoke: "O you window, measure of longing,/ refilling so many times as one life spills over and hurries/ toward an other life".[32] Rilke's words pinpoint windows' ability to visually isolate an unreachable space. Windows idealize landscape, leaving the viewer wanting something they can never have. Like Solnit, Rilke associates distance with longing—the "other life" that one can see and conceptualize but never truly access.

Fig. 4. Kelly Olshan. *The Farther*, 2014-15. Oil, acrylic, recycled paint, molding paste, graphite, charcoal, and hot glue, on 3D panel. 50" x 55" x 7."

Figure 5. Kelly Olshan, The Farther: Detail, 2014-15. Oil, acrylic, recycled paint, molding Paste, graphite, charcoal, and hot glue on 3D panel. 50" x 55" x 7".

In this series, the windows are the blue spaces Solnit describes. They are the places at the height of the staircases, within the portals, physically above the rest. Hazy and atmospheric, they are designed to look visually appealing. Yet often these blue spaces are quite difficult to get to. To reach the blue space in the top right corner of Fig. 3., for instance, the climber would have to navigate a spatially impossible stairway. There's nowhere to travel but up, yet in doing so, the climber is subject to fall into blue oblivion.

2. Methodology

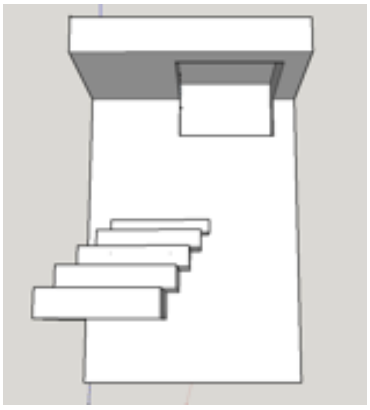

Fig. 6. Kelly Olshan, *Panel Plan for Land of Above Front View*, 2014. Virtual Model, 40" x 27" x 3.5".

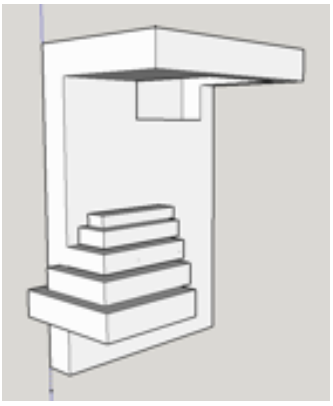

Fig7. Kelly Olshan, Panel Plan for Land of Above: *Side View*, Virtual Model, 40" x 27" x 3.5".

My painting process begins by designing the panels in Sketchup, a 3D modeling software. This approach allows me to manipulate the measurements and proportions until I am satisfied with the overall composition. Given that architecture itself is 3-diminisional, I try to create forms that physically impact the viewer's sense of space. Fittingly, these designs intentionally mimic architectural components. Figure 1 and 2 illustrate a panel with explicit references to a staircase and window. The 3D staircase pulls into the viewer's space, wrapping around the leftmost edge of the panel. Overhead, the plan contains a shadowbox, or "window" that pushes back into space. This piece hangs above eye level, forcing viewers to turn their heads skyward to investigate the overhead platform.

To establish visual consistency, every panel constructed possesses a deep edge of 3.5". These thick sides reference a wall or window frame—depending on their orientation—which allows the work to further take on an architectural presence. When I am finished designing the plans, I submit them to a professional woodworker who in turn creates the forms.

Once the actual panels are in hand, I begin the painting process. I work instinctively, utilizing risk-taking and intuitive problem solving to arrive at complex, interesting forms. Marks are made, colors are chosen, canvases are flipped, and brushes are ruined. As I work towards an unknown, it is precisely this ineffable, mysterious quality I find so compelling. Were I merely realizing a sketch, I would miss out on the excitement and engagement afforded by enigma. This process mirrors Elkin's alchemical one. Appreciating the beauty of the material itself, as well as experimenting with it, allows for visual discoveries. In this sense, my work is as much about pursing an elusive ideal as it is about illustrating one.

While many of the decisions surrounding color palette are likewise made intuitively, the color blue remains an important constant. Blue carries important connotations, as these hues are the color of skyspaces, waterscapes, mountainscapes, and the horizon seen from a distance. Moreover, blue is the color of the next space—the one that remains forever out of reach. Blue represents that which one seeks to attain, but can never truly access.

Fig. 8: Kelly Olshan, *Perpetual Ascent*, 2014. Oil on 3D panel, 40” x 48” x 3.5”.

Different shades of blue evoke various implications. Some of the paintings in this series are a darker and cooler blue, cloaked in phthalocyanine blue designed to elicit the sensation of swimming underwater. Ultramarine blue is slightly warmer hue, used to remind the viewer of an overcast sky or distant horizon. The brightest of the blues, the Ceruleans, are intended to conjure images of bright sky. Combining various shades of blue, these paintings layer and mix white and naples yellow to convey an atmospheric perspective.

In addition to creating 3D architectural forms, I also depict them in paint. In this stage I add staircases, windows, portals, or other complementary elements. The only objective imagery in my work, these structures ideally transport the viewer into an abstract landscape, one incapable of being navigated in reality. As such, the staircases are intentionally rendered un-climbable. Steps go missing, heights fall out of proportion—leaving the staircase impossible to surmount. And yet, with the alluring colors and textures, the next space looks appealing. These techniques intend to embody the state of perpetual pursuit, as well as the desire to access another world.

Once the majority of the surface is established, I begin to further develop the landscape. In this stage, I often draw a blind contour directly onto the surface. Blind contours are line drawings of a subject conducted without lifting one’s pencil or looking at the drawing’s surface. Commonly used in foundational art courses, this exercise forces the artist to focus their sole attention on the object they are rendering. My motivations for using this technique, however, are not to develop my rendering skills. Instead, the blind contour’s lines serve as a means to generate new, organic visual material. It’s like hitting the refresh button—the quick, intuitive lines can activate a simple, monochromatic area. Direct, spontaneous marks possess a vitality that planned sketches do not accomplish. For this reason, I choose to execute these drawings directly onto the surface.

Blind contours accomplish another task: they juxtapose geometric and organic elements. When choosing reference material, I deliberately select an organic subject. The resulting curvilinear lines offset the straightedge, architectural forms already established. Most often, I base my sketches on images of fabric and curtains as they obviously relate to architectural constructions, especially windows. As both functional and decorative objects, curtains are known for catching light and inviting the viewer to look into the opening. I intentionally choose images that show the fabric billowing, as this creates visual movement. Fabric billows when picked up from an outside wind, further connecting the interior and the exterior. Visually, its motion draws a diagonal line against the wall and the windowpane. More importantly, though, undulating fabric is more aesthetically pleasing. It invites the viewer to approach, and peer out into the next space.

Fig. 9. Kelly Olshan, *Detail of linseed oil dripping technique*, 2013-2014. Oil and mixed media on panel, 40" x 48" x 3.5".

For a similar but subtler effect, I allow the paint to drip freely. I begin by covering the area with solid passages of color. Once this layer dries, I choose a pigment to mix with heavy amounts of linseed oil. This produces a translucent, viscous mixture that drips when applied to the panel. When applied to multiple places, these brush strokes form a series of linear, vertical marks. While the medium is still wet, I tilt the panel 90 degrees, causing the oil to exude in the perpendicular direction. The result forms a pattern more or less indicative of an abstract archway. Once the linseed oil dries, I glaze in between the miniature "archways." The resulting pattern appears like collection of small, faint dwellings—as if the viewer is looking a façade seen from far away.

Thus pleasing color palettes, dynamic compositions, and juxtaposition of organic and geometric elements tie these paintings together. All of these visual devices aim to create an aesthetically pleasing experience. Together, they intend to compose a captivating landscape—one that appears visually and fundamentally more appealing than the ordinary world. Given the crucial role of aesthetics, formalism remains incredibly important to this body of work. Were the work not visually pleasing, the viewer wouldn't want to climb the staircase. They wouldn't feel compelled to reach the land of the blue, the land of the above.

My painting process generates many cast-off materials. I accumulate oil paint on my palette; pencil and charcoal shavings from drawing; and tape used to achieve straight edges. Typically, artists throw these materials in the trash. Yet I find these materials so visually interesting I began repurposing this artistic waste into original artworks. These leftovers are directly derived from my painting process. A piece with alizarin crimson and phthalo green tones, for instance, could result in something like Figures 10 and 11 below. I also recycle the empty paint tubes and bottle caps: Fig. 10 has a 250 ml tube of alizarin crimson; Fig. 11 has phthalo green, cadmium orange, and naples yellow.

Fig. 10: Kelly Olshan, *Palette Scrapings I*, 2014 Recycled paint on panel, 8" x 8" x 3.5"

Fig. 11: Kelly Olshan, *Palette Scrapings II*, 2014. Recycled paint on panel, 8" x 8" x 3.5"

Unlike more traditional artistic mediums, artistic waste cannot be purchased or manufactured; it must be generated from past creation. This distinction makes them more compelling both visually and conceptually. While anyone can buy materials at an arts and crafts store, supplies alone are not particularly interesting. Unused, art supplies lack narrative and personality. Conversely, artistic waste carries a visual narrative, its intrigue a function of its history. They act as evidence of an artist's striving to solve visual problems. As Elkins describes in *What Painting Is*, the paint itself is the mystical vehicle that turns nothing into something. Artistic waste serves as artifacts of the creative process, telling the visual story of an artists' pursuit.

Collecting artistic waste often involves scavenging around the studio for used paint. Oil painters typically use glass palettes; acrylic painters usually prefer paper or plastic. To remove dried oil paint, I scrape the pigment off of glass palettes with a razor blade. The textures of these paint leftovers vary as much as paintings themselves: one can extract thick, goopy balls of paint; shiny, film-like textures that gracefully fall onto the surface; and dry, paper-like shards that barely come off the palate. In addition to masking tape and pencil shavings, other found objects include paint tubes and caps, used paper palettes, and razor blades used to scrape oil paint off glass palettes. Each set of materials is stored based on categories and subcategories pertaining to the material's texture, shape, and color.

Category	Category Description	Subcategory	Subcategory description	Sub-sub-categories
Oil Paint	Scraped from glass palettes with razor blade and reapplied	Highly Textured	Thick, gooey deposits	Divided into all colors, particularly phthalos, cadmiums, alizarin crimson, naples yellow, and their related hues
		Medium Textured	Shiny and film-like	Likewise divided into all colors
Acrylic Paint	Paint peeled from paper or plastic palettes	Shiny texture	Thin and very smooth; peels off in sheets	Likewise divided into all colors
		Matt texture	Thin and somewhat smooth; peels off in sheets	Likewise divided into all colors
		Metallic	Very thin and somewhat smooth; peels off in pieces	Gold, bronze and silver
Painting Instruments	Items artists use to apply or handle paint	Paint tubes	Empty tubes of paint	Large, medium, small
		Paint tube caps	Caps from empty tubes of paint	Large, medium, and small
		Paint brushes	Worn and/ or broken paint brushes that are no longer usable	
		Razor Blades	Blades used to scrape oil palettes; typically covered in paint and medium	
Pencil Shavings	Pencil shavings from wood, artists' pencils and generic pencils	Manually sharpened	Crescent-shaped shavings with pieces of graphite	
		Sharpened with exacto knife	Pointed pieces with chunks of graphite or charcoal	
		Curly cue	Created when a plastic pencil is manually sharpened	
		Electrically sharpened	Very thin, snake-like shavings	
		Manual	Highly textured wooden shavings made by using a hand plane	poplar, basswood, alder, ash, and brown walnut woods
Drawing Instruments	Items artists use to draw	Recycled pencils	Pencils that are worn down to the stub and are no longer usable	Yellow, green, and blue

Fig. 12: Artistic Waste by Category

Fig. 13: Kelly Olshan, *Kelly's Palette*, 2014. Recycled paint on panel, 8" x 8" x 3.5"

Fig. 14: Kelly Olshan, *Louise's Palette,* 2014. Recycled paint and paint tubes on panel, 8" x 8" x 3.5"

After the cast-offs are collected, I begin to apply the recycle the materials onto the form. During this process, I am careful to pay attention to formal aesthetic elements such as color, texture, and integration of found objects. The sculpture's small scale allows the viewer to appreciate these subtleties. To further develop this less-is-more approach, I begin painting solid passages of color alongside the more complex areas (Figures 12 and 13). This method helps provide visual silence alongside textural intensity.

Fig. 15: Kelly Olshan, *No Summit: Extended*, 2014. Oil, graphite, and molding paste on 3D panel, 75" x 38" x 3.5"

, Fig. 16 Kelly Olshan, *No Summit Window* 2015. Oil on 3D panel, 13. 5" x 13" x 2.5"

Recently, I've begun adding extensions to my work. These extensions take the form of a smaller series of panels surrounding the completed or nearly completed piece, and are designed to visually extend and support the existing

image. Adding sections has served as a way of re-engaging with the imaginary landscape I've created: envisioning what lies to the left or the right of a staircase, or what one would reach if they were able to transport to the top. Moreover, they can supply a visual resting place to an otherwise complex image, as is the case with *No Summit: Extended.* Painted after the larger panel, the rightmost piece is a much simpler composition. To ensure the imaginary landscape functions a coherent whole, I intentionally reiterate the former panel's color schemes and visual elements. In the image above, this was achieved by employing phthalo blue, as well as repeating a version of the yellow and pink window.

Finally, adding pieces asserts the intentionality of creating a not-quite-rectilinear form. Without the extra pieces, the viewer could wonder why the panels are almost perfectly rectangular, but not quite. Adding the additional panels visually enforces the notion that this was a conscious aesthetic decision. More importantly, though, additional pieces create a constellation of miniature worlds.

To reinforce this notion, I've made additional pieces that explicitly reference past ones, such as *No Summit Window I*. This 3-deminsional window exactly mimics the size and color of the pink and yellow space painted in the proceeding 2-dimensional panel. Intended to supplement the larger painting, these pieces act as another entryway into this imaginary space. In a gallery setting, viewers are encouraged to make connections between these visually similar elements.

3. Influences

American artist James Turrell creates spaces, not objects. As a practicing artist for over fourty years, his work manipulates natural phenomena such as light, color, and optical illusions. Like our perceptions, Turrell's work change with their surroundings. The projections—and resulting images—are subject to the season, day, and even hour. This series remains particularly important to my work, as they inspired the physicality of my panels, particularly the ones that force the viewer to look up. Additionally, they encourage to viewer to focus beyond their occupied space and into another one.

In *Art in America*'s article *Blue Skies, Dark Spaces*, art historian and critic Kristen Swenson defines a "Skyspace" as a "geometric cut framing the open sky in the manner of the Pantheon, which 'brings sky down into the space.'"[33] Mixing interior and exterior, these spaces consist of a "specifically proportioned chamber" with an aperture on the ceiling.[34] The aperture projects what viewers perceive to be an architectural opening, or sky. In short, the Skyspace series selects "sections of ceiling… [and] cut[s] away from rooms to reveal the naturally changing light above."[35] The result forces viewers to consider space and perception using light as his medium, and the "sky as his studio."[36]

Fig. 17. James Turrell, *Meeting*, 1986. Installation.

Fig. 18: James Turrell, *The Second Meeting*, 1989. Installation.

One of Turrell's first Skyspaces, *Meeting*, achieves its sublime experience by "reminding us of nature by immersing us in artifice."[37] In other words, the artist uses an unnatural space to emphasize the natural. He uses the ultimate man-made space—architecture—yet pinpoints the focus upon with the sky itself. This juxtaposition of the organic and geometric is in no way subtle: the installation carves a rectangle of sky out of the building in one exacting line. This precision reinforces the contrast between interior and exterior space, organic and man-made elements.

In *Meeting*, the juxtaposition of city and sky benefits the work. The installation's location in New York City highlights the stark contrast between the bustling urban life and something that is "freed from the limits of the physical world."[38] By taking out all the superfluous stimuli—city lights, blaring taxis, incessant chatter—the installation makes its audience acutely aware of what has been there all along. Swenson cites this very phenomena: "the normal condition of life is distraction: reading, speaking, watching, hearing, touching, we're embedded within a full perceptual field."[39] Turrell's meditative Skyspace counteracts the oversaturated condition of the everyday.

One viewer pinpoints this effect while experiencing Turrell's *Second Meeting*, an installation erected in LA, California as a retrospective of the first.[40] The woman remarks how she notices the sky more within Turrell's space than actual space: "You go outside and you're out there for maybe 30 seconds looking at the sky. You come back in, and you see more blue than when you left."[41] Indeed, Turrell intentionally manipulates light to make the sky's blue appear bluer. In an interview conducted by Art21, Turrell remarks that painters often achieve a similar effect by manipulating color.[42] The only difference is that one is 2D, while the other is 3D. Swenson compares Turrell's work to "walking around *inside* a painting."[43]

Fig. 19. Richard Jacobs, *Summit*, 2014.
2014. Oil, acrylic, and dye on canvas 30" x 40".

Fig. 20. Richard Jacobs, *Corazon*,
Oil, acrylic, and dye on canvas, 40" x 68".

Growing up, I was surrounded by the images of abstract painter Richard Jacobs. Before graduating from Cooper Union and going on to receive his MFA in painting from Yale, Jacobs was my dad's roommate at a small liberal arts college in Colorado Springs. The two maintained a close relationship, and Jacobs would often send his paintings to our family as gifts. His work adorned the walls of my childhood home, and piqued my interest from a very young age. These images largely informed my aesthetic sensibility. I admired Jacob's abstractionist style and complete departure from objective forms. His handling of texture and color in particular came to define my understanding of formalistic success.

Understandably, it is easy to identify commonalities between Jacob's paintings and mine. First, Jacob's layering technique applies curvilinear shapes one over another. *Corazon* demonstrates this phenomenon. The thick, coral surface in the foreground poses a crisp edge as its negative was peeled away. The resulting forms invite the viewer to peer through the foremost layer and into the most distant passages, creating a kind of organic window. Thus Jacob's work mirrors the hard-edge geometry evident in my own paintings. In *Summit*, the receding passages are blue, and accordingly recede in space—representing another similarity with this body of work.

Jacobs also works intuitively, allowing his gut reactions to mandate his choice of texture, color, and composition. The painter cites this strategy's ability to immerse him in the present. In his critique of the painter's latest exhibition, *In the Moment*, Carl Benz characterizes the artist's process as "a brimming arsenal of options developed in response to their maker's evolving vision and ever-focusing yet intuitive urge to meaning."[4] Jacob's immediate decision-

making mirrors my own. When painting, my formal decisions are largely dictated by instinct. Each mark, color, and shape reacts to the previous one; they are by no means executions of a step-by-step master plan.

Finally, the non-objectivity of these paintings resonates with my aesthetic. While my work does utilize some representational imagery, even these forms are largely instructed by abstractionist sensibilities. The staircases and windows are largely comprised of nonspecific shapes and color rather than explicit references to a particular object or place. Instead, the forms remain universal, much like Jacob's. Belz characterizes Jacob's nonobjective approach: "[the paintings are] purposeful in being stripped of narrative and figuration with the aim of having them stand on their own".[45] My series of paintings carries similar intentions, as the abstract landscape is designed to exist independent of the physical world.

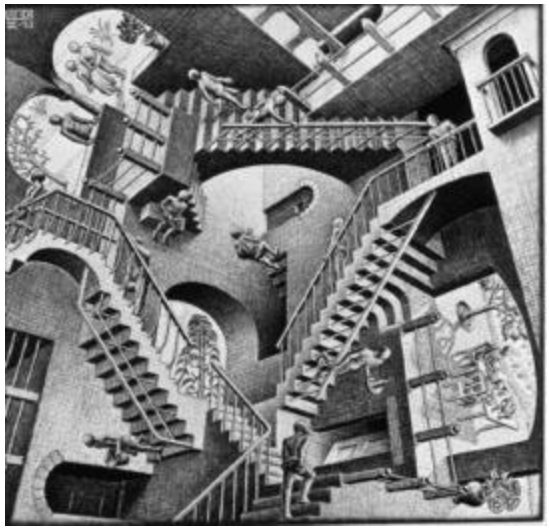

Fig. 21: *Relativity*, M.C. Escher, 1953. Lithograph, 277 x 292 mm.
University of California, San Diego.

Fig. 22: Edward Hopper, *Rooms by the Sea*, 1951. Yale University Art Gallery.
Reproduced from *ArtStor*, http.artstor.org

Edward Hopper's *Rooms by the Sea* have also greatly influenced this series. His use of a simple architectural device, an open doorway, invites the viewer to peer beyond the blank, white wall and into a beautiful, blue waterscape. This simple juxtaposition of interior and exterior, architecture and sea, effectively captures the viewer's desire to be somewhere else. Such an approach largely resonates with my own aesthetic sensibilities. Hopper's image inspires viewers to walk up to the window opening and look out into the ocean, or perhaps even dive into the inviting blue waterscape. Similarly, I want my viewers to *want* to climb the stairs to access a realm of sky.

Juhani Pallasmaa characterizes staircases as another means of spatial manipulation. She deems the architectural device a "vertical labyrinth," a phrase that speaks to stairs' ability to realign the climber both literally and metaphorically.[46] Climbing a staircase "can mediate the experience of getting lost, losing one's balance or even one's mind."[47] Escher's *Relativity* particularly exemplifies this effect: "M.C. Escher's drawings of 'impossible' staircases that simultaneously lead the viewer upwards and downwards, creating endless loops, are further examples of labyrinthine stairs."[8] Indeed, Escher's characteristic stairways "permit no exit"; instead, the climbers are left to endlessly pursue a notably absent destination.[49]

In my own work, I utilize a similar visual vocabulary, only to elicit a feeling of longing rather than anxiety. My paintings likewise render "impossible" staircases. However, unlike Escher, I want the viewer to want to climb the stairs *despite* their impossibility. Perhaps the form's association depends upon its visual direction, as ascending a staircase carries different connotations than descending one. Pallasmaa asserts that descending a staircase produces disquietude, "signif[ying] the entry into the realm of fear and menace."[50] If this is true, so is the reverse: climbing staircases can "signal movement into a prohibited realm," one that epitomizes an exalted, or higher state.[51]

Fig. 23: Robert Rauschenberg, *Reservoir*, 1961. Oil, wood, graphite, and rubber on canvas.
85.5" x 62.5" x 15.5"

Fig. 24. Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955. Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, sheet on wood supports.
6'3.25 x 31.25" x 8"

Neo-Dada artist Robert Rauschenberg famously integrated found objects into his artworks, creating "combines" that walk the line between painting and sculpture. This assemblage technique breaks the boundaries of conventional materials. In these pieces, anything can be utilized as a material, from the quilt in *Bed* to the clocks and trash incorporated in *Reservoir*. Researching this approach helped me see all objects as potential media, breaking away from the traditional notion of painting materials. However, instead of utilizing everyday household items, this body of work repurposes common studio art materials. A studio artist encounters these items just as often as most of us see a clock or a bed. Objects such as paint and pencils likewise become a part of an artists' commonplace visual vocabulary. Rauschenberg drew attention to the objects that infiltrate everyday life; I draw attention to the materials artists encounter in the studio on a day-to-day basis.

While Rauschenberg's work undoubtedly pushes into the third dimension, it does so carefully. *Bed* comes forward into the space where one's head would presumably lie. However, spatially, the work doesn't differ much from a traditional canvas. In fact, canvas is merely a different type of linen, making the work even less of a departure from a typical painting. *Reservoir* carries the same trend: the objects in the center of the canvas are sculptural, but overall, the work reads more as a 2D object than a 3-dimensional one. The same could be said of my works: while they have more literal depth than a traditional painting, the objects are more about surface than form. The five-sided cubes, for instance, occupy space, but are otherwise treated just like a painting. The surface is built up heavily, but in a way that adheres to each 2 dimensional plane more than a 3 dimensional environment. In both Rauschenberg's and my own work, this tension between painting and sculpture aims to elicit visual interest.

Fig. 25: James Hyde, *Radius*, 1995. Painted steel, found objects, acrylic sheet, 109" x 96" x 43".

Fig. 26: James Hyde, *Ratchet*, 1995. Oil paint, glass, and silicone Oil paint, glass, and silicone, 90" x 36" x 9"

James Hyde's Glass Box Painting series provides a great example of relating chaotic imagery with the precision of a rectilinear form. What looks like giant palette scrapings are encased in a life-size glass shadow box, allowing the viewer to visually juxtapose the curvilinear and geometric. After witnessing the work in person at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., I immediately recognized similarities with my own aesthetic. The box remains very important to my artistic series both formally and conceptually. Formally, a perfect rectangular form juxtaposes the organic artistic waste. The crisp edges of the cubes read very differently than the highly textured, heterogeneous recycled paint. The geometry allows for visual silence within what may otherwise be overwhelming material. Hyde's glass boxes function in a similar way: much of the glass is left blank, allowing for resting points from the busier elements. Finally, as the entire painting is held within the box, the chaotic material appears to be contained within a unit—much like my concept of rectilinear dwellings.

5. Conclusion

These paintings strive to transport the viewer beyond the complacency of the everyday, and into an idyllic landscape they wish to—but can never truly—access. They intend to highlight the tendency to endlessly pursue a future place, an elusive goal, or an unknown betterment. *Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable* invites viewers to relish in the intangible vision, to celebrate these aggrandized, fictitious spaces as they are a function of an innately human desire:

> "We treat desire as a problem to be solved, address what desire is for and focus on that something and how to acquire it rather than on the nature and the sensation of desire, though often it is the distance between us and the object of desire that fills the space in between with the blue of longing. I wonder sometimes whether with a slight adjustment of perspective it could be cherished as a sensation on its own terms, since it is an inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance?"[52]

Thus people create idyllic landscapes within their minds. They long to be in these landscapes, as they imagine this hypothetical space to be somehow better than the one they are in now. They set goals, defining destinations as means of access. The problem is, even if they attain their goal, they do not attain the associated landscape; once they arrive it immediately disappears, making the ideal landscape unattainable. This causes a dilemma in that one can never truly close the gap between the near and the far, the actual and the desired. The best that can be done, then, is to find satisfaction in the process—in the very act of pursuing. Painting itself is a process and a pursuit. Creating a series of paintings is a way of climbing the proverbial mountain over and over. Every time a new piece is begun, the ascent begins again. As Albert Camus writes of the man condemned to endless climbing, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."[53]

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