

The Internal Space: A Perceptual and Visual Phenomenological Approach

by

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Abstract

How do I represent the intangible space of the psychological in a nonrepresentational manner? Building off the formal elements and principles at the base of this tradition, this thesis will dive into what space is, how it is constructed in my art, and look through the lens of my practice as an abstract artist to navigate what it means to visualize the “internal” space. Taking a closer look at two specific drawings—*The Quiet is Not Silent* and *Remnant*—I break down the process of their visual development and explain the influence of time in my art.

Artist Statement

Making has always been more than an action. It is the connection between my psyche and moments of existence, the means of grounding myself within the ever-oscillating space between order and chaos through material tactility. My process is a balance of intentionality and accident: a handoff of control from myself to the materials, and back again. Skin becomes stained with charcoal. Pools of water and pigment flow in slow streams across the floor. The beauty in my drawings stems from the visual intersections of material autonomy and my conscious hand. They are conversations between time, medium, and the internal.

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“Even if I cannot see it...I can sense it, and what
I sense I can also perceive, make visible.”

—Paul Klee, *Art and Phenomenology*

The primary question leading the investigation of my thesis was, “How do I create the illusion of an ambiguous space?” Being an artist focused within abstraction, the tradition of *trompe l’oeil* and pictorial illusion in painting is not often thought to be relevant in the same naturalistic manner. Rather than attempting to render anything recognizable to mimic what I am seeing, I am instead extracting the core technical principles of the tradition and applying them to a nonrepresentational composition. Form, value, emphasis and sublimation, line (defined and implied)—these concepts are visually familiar and provide viewers with a foundation on which to approach my drawings. With the work growing from formal fundamentals rather than conceptual knowledge, it gives a subjective experience basic visual roots that can be discussed collectively and objectively. This thesis will explore the process of making a space that cannot be recorded by traditional observational means through an examination of two of my works: *The Quiet is Not Silent* and *Remnant*.

My art centers around the exploration of an abstract space, but defining what exactly a space refers to has evolved considerably in the post-modern period. I am not rendering identifiable places that the viewer can position themselves within, with clear scale and proportion as Western tradition has taught; instead, the challenge when making my work is how I can effectively use my knowledge of formal elements to inspire the *sensation* of a space without it being connected to the physical world. Approaching space from this angle, the essence of my practice aligns more closely with Chinese painting traditions. Their historical emphasis on

balancing blank space with tangible imagery reflected the mentality of the literati, “creating an artistic realm where concreteness and abstraction coexist” (Wang and Wang). Similarly, William Dunning clarifies that “our ideas and images are changing once more as we now perceive space as a psychological entity” (227), bringing attention to the consideration of space as not just physical, but fundamentally intangible. My investigation of space brings the vast, ephemeral imagery of my psyche into the physical world. Alexander Eliot states, “There is as much space inside a person’s soul as there is outside” (184-185). This internal space—an entity of the unknown and intangible—requires a vehicle to be navigated, which is where the role of the artist takes shape. My drawings guide the audience through the intersection between the internal space and the body in a manner that presents rather than confronts.

Mark making is the foundation of my work and how I build up these invisible spaces. Lighter marks and dry media application using brushes draws attention to the small, seemingly insignificant moments and their delicate beauty, even amongst the most chaotic areas of the composition. Heavy, dark application of either opaque or densely packed media form spots of emphasis and help establish clearer foreground-background relationships without strictly defining them. The frequent use of black—to the point that certain moments can have a graphic quality—is a common happening amongst my drawings. Through the gradual, time-consuming process of layering these various marks and erasure, negative space becomes just as significant as positive space, producing a composition that is complex and stimulating. The emphasis of the mark echoes artists such as Cy Twombly, whose work brings the hand of the artist to the forefront in an unapologetic way. My personal experimentation has extended into making stretcher bars with more significant profiles, expanding the space beyond just the visual to the art object itself.

One such example is *The Quiet is Not Silent*, a large-scale drawing on Arches paper stretched around bars with a two-and-a-half-inch profile. Measuring forty-five inches tall by fifty-nine inches long, the scale alone grants it a presence, but the marks add a depth to the surface that shifts the drawing to something experiential. Layers of charcoal, pan pastel, water-soluble crayon, powdered pigment, and gesso display a collection of marks that are bold, delicate, smoky, and defined. The drawing was completed unstretched originally, going through many changes and iterations over the course of multiple months as it was pinned to the wall. Despite being satisfied with the beauty of the visuals and marks themselves, there remained something about the piece that was missing, keeping me from considering it to really be “complete.” I knew that the work could not live within a frame and behind glass, since there was an inherent tactility to the surface that would be flattened. At that time, I had been constructing my own stretcher bars with deep profiles on a relatively small scale as an investigation into whether altering the actual space the drawing takes up can enhance the visuals that are on an otherwise flat surface. I decided that I would attempt to mount *The Quiet is Not Silent* on large stretcher bars, but the question remained whether this presentation would be what the work needed to come alive. I had never made stretcher bars of this size then nor had I ever stretched paper in the same way as fabric before this work, so there was no precedent for what result to expect based on my experience. To ensure that the paper would be flexible enough to stretch without tearing in severe ways, I sprayed down the back of the drawing with water, relaxing the fibers of the paper enough without it being so saturated that it shrinks and renders the entire process moot.

The final result gave the drawing a weighty, profound presence that it never had during its time flat against a wall. The art object itself became a visualization of the psychological

space, not just what was on the paper. The dimensions of the work are large enough to fill your field of view when standing in front of it, but not so large that the experience becomes overwhelming. It allows you to digest the art from afar comfortably while encouraging viewers to approach and discover underlying details. Coupled with how the drawing extends around the two-and-a-half-inch profile, the experience of the art object changes as the body moves through the space around it. Unexpectedly—but delightfully—many viewers could not tell that this was a work on paper at first glance, as it is a rather unconventional method of displaying the substrate. A secondary illusionary phenomenon had been realized through this work: a physical *trompe l'oeil*.



The Quiet is Not Silent, charcoal, pan pastel, powdered pigment, water-soluble crayon, and gesso on stretched Arches paper; 45" x 59" x 2.5", 2025-26.

Whether it be the materiality of the art object itself or the process behind its creation, retaining some sort of ambiguity is essential for sparking intrigue in my audience. Visual ambiguity often manifest itself via a manipulation of focus in the case of my practice to influence perceived depth and figure-ground relations. “Unfocusing” your sight blurs and flattens, while at the same time broadening what your field of view can take in at once. On the flip side, focusing on a singular thing eliminates awareness of anything else. Things may appear to “vibrate” or contain energy even if there is nothing about them that is literally in motion; for my work in particular, comparisons like fireworks or explosions have been made multiple times. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his description of painting, claims it “gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; thanks to it we do not need a ‘muscular sense’ in order to possess the voluminosity of the world” (Crowther 110). While human perception may not be entirely contingent on real-world context to make sense of a painting, implementing familiar visual experiences can assist individuals who may need objective components to fully comprehend what is before them. Formal elements, such as shape, color, and line, can be perceived in different ways in accordance with their respective characteristics and the figure-ground relation (Crowther 106), influencing how we approach and understand a composition.

Although my practice is highly intentional in many ways, accident and medium autonomy is equally significant in the process. Joan Mitchell, one of the most prominent figures of post-war Abstract Expressionism, explained to Irving Sandler in regard to her practice, “The freedom in my paintings are [sic] quite controlled” (“Materials and Practice”). Despite the assumptions that abstract expressionism is always spontaneous and unplanned chaos—which it is for some artists—Mitchell preferred to know how her materials would behave and what the

results of her actions would be on the painting. The “controlled freedom” that Mitchell refers to only makes up half of my own process; the other half is the freedom of the material. Along these lines, philosopher John Dewey argues that true expression cannot exist in art without some sort of control to refine it:

With respect to the physical materials that enter into the formation of a work of art, every one knows that they must undergo change. Marble must be chipped; pigments must be laid on a canvas; words must be put together. It is not so generally recognized that a similar transformation takes place on the side of the “inner” materials, images, observations, memories and emotions...The impulsion that seethes as a commotion demanding utterance must undergo as much and as careful management in order to receive eloquent manifestation as marble or pigment, as colors and sounds. Nor are there in fact two operations, one performed upon the outer material and the other upon the inner and mental stuff. (77-78)

In the simplest way I can describe, my process is a balance between intentionality and accident, and my preference to work in charcoal reflects this. Its messy, temporal nature requires you to work with the material rather than exerting full control over it. It can manifest strong, bold marks, as well as delicate, ephemeral details. It responds sensitively to my movements, body, and guidance – an irrepressible aspect of the material’s experience that must be embraced rather than condemned. Charcoal is the mediator between thought and physical expression, developing the illusion of an indiscriminate space and pulsing, vibrating movement through nonrepresentational marks, while the marks themselves are the medium’s reactions to me in the moment. The introduction of water takes the art out of my hands just a little bit more, leading to a work that is

not planned perfection, but beauty blooming from periodically relinquishing control during the process.

There exists one specific artwork that was primarily made through bodily movements but had very little intentional intervention behind it compared to my other drawings. *Remnant* is one section of a larger piece of canvas that became multiple experimental works between the summer and fall of 2025. Unhappy with all the iterations and not feeling that they would lead to any further work, the entire canvas—unstretched—was taken down from the wall and placed on the floor of my studio. It spent the next few months being walked on and collecting residual media from other pieces, becoming a physical record of my practice rather than a visually curated artwork: powdered pigment pouring from the can too quickly, crayon added in the first experiment still peeking through, dirt tracked in with every studio visit. Eventually, I decided to cut and stretch the section of the work that was most intriguing, then expand upon some of the smaller details to bring them forward. The result is something quite different compared to most of the work I have made, but is simultaneously the connection between all of them, including the experimental works that never became anything more. Upon close inspection, the viewer can see the remnants of its history; however, more than just seeing, they can *feel* the marks of time that give *Remnant* its artificial patina. This drawing is the most honest physical embodiment of bringing my internal space to light.



Remnant, charcoal, pan pastel, powdered pigment, fiber paste, water-soluble crayon, and gesso on canvas; 38" x 40" x 0.5", 2025-26.

I have come to accept that some works cannot be finished within a singular stretch of time. There may come a point in time that they need to simply exist within proximity to me and other drawings before I return to them with a continuing direction, such as *The Quiet is Not Silent*. Other pieces may live as completed or experimental versions—as *Remnant* did—at first, but I instinctively understand that they are meant to become something greater in the future. Some marks just cannot be made unless time has passed. Metamorphosis and patience is ingrained within my practice, granting me the grace of knowing that my art does not need to be perfect the very first time. It may never be. The beauty of my process lies in observing how the

evolution unfolds, no matter how long it takes to get there, and trusting the art to tell me when I need to step back and, eventually, return.

In summary, my work visualizes the spaces and things that we cannot place, cannot describe, through a language of familiar optical experiences. “Only the artist comes and says, ‘Look inward, through what I have done, into your own starry heavens, yours alone’” (Eliot 186). My work does not define what you should be seeing or how you should see it; instead, it asks the audience to consider what the internal space of their own psyche might look like. There are compositions with more moments of clarity or definition, and others that deeply retreat into the unknown—both are manifestations of existence within the same space, just different moments. They are glimpses of reflection and introspection on where I exist. The internal space that I share with my audience will continue to amalgamate and reform as time carries on, but these drawings will serve as records of what it looked like when I first visually defined it.



Unraveling, charcoal and water-soluble crayon on muslin, 21.5" x 36" x 2.5", 2026.



Ventured, charcoal, pan pastel, colored pencil, and gesso on Arches paper; 22" x 30" x 2", 2025.



Pulse, charcoal, water-soluble crayon, ink, and gesso on canvas; 38" x 40" x 0.5", 2026.



Crest, charcoal, water-soluble crayon, pan pastel, and gesso on stretched Arches paper; 38" x 40" x 0.5", 2026.



Refraction, charcoal, water-soluble crayon, and acrylic ink on muslin; 15" x 11" x 2.5", 2025.



Recollection, charcoal, pan pastel, oil pastel, and gesso on muslin; 13" x 11.25" x 2.5", 2026.



Whispers of the Supernova, charcoal, water-soluble crayon, ink, baking soda, salt, and gesso on canvas; 38" x 40" x 0.5", 2026.



Set Off to Somewhere, charcoal, pan pastel, oil pastel, water-soluble crayon, ink, and gesso on stretched Arches paper; 38" x 40" x 0.5", 2026.

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