

Adam Gunn

*Anything*

*Anytime*

*Anyplace*

*For No Reason at All*

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*“Whatever you say it “is”, it isn’t”<sup>1</sup> - Alfred Korzybski*

## **First Things First**

I have a hard time explaining myself and what I make. I feel that anything I say is a lie by omission, because there is no way to explain all of it. I think part of the reason I have difficulty unravelling this work is that the process and content are so intertwined that it is hard to consider one aspect in isolation of the other. I’ll explain how this conflation of content and process is indicative of concerns about complicated orders inherent in nature and a preference I have for a zany aesthetic; an aesthetic that at its center is a tension between anarchy and order. I can get overwhelmed when I explain, and my thinking can get tangled, but I’ll try to give you the best tangled version I can. There will be contradictions and logical inconsistencies and I apologize in advance for this. I’ll present some reference points and ruminated thoughts, and explain what I think I am doing with the work in this show.

## **A Personal Foundation Myth**

It is a bright white winter afternoon and I am standing in the small hallway-like space between the stairs, the living room and the dining room of my parent’s house. Sometimes when I’m alone, I like to lie on the floor here and stare at the ceiling. I pretend it is a floor and plot out safe routes to travel across it. The light shades and stairways are particularly tricky. This is also a good place to eat spoonfuls of sugar straight from the kitchen’s yellow tin sugar can, but what place isn’t? Today is not one of those sugar and ceiling-as-floor days: I’ve done something wrong and my mother is lecturing me. I’m a ten-year old smart aleck who believes his fresh mind moves more quickly than hers. I think I know everything she’s going to say before she says it, and the pace she speaks at is excruciatingly slow. Tuning out during one of her scoldings will make her angrier, but I have a typical ten-year old’s low attention span and will likely have trouble focusing. So I try to invent some way to appear to be sincerely paying attention: I concentrate on her face while I nod along.

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<sup>1</sup> Korzybski, Alfred. *Alfred Korzybski: Collected Writings 1920-1950*, collected and arranged by M. Kendig, with C. S. Read and R Pula (New York: Institute of General Semantics) (1990) p. 627

I have the thought to play a little game and ask myself: What if I had never seen a face before? What if I was from an alien world and didn't know anything about people or faces? I look intensely at my mother's face, studying it like an alien scientist. At first I am just playing, but then it suddenly becomes real and the intensity of this looking is like being hit on the back of the head, but it's painless. The face in front of me stops making any sense. I'm unsure if the eyes are above or below the mouth, or even which way is up and down. Nothing I see seems to be connected, all the features are moving independently of each other. I stare into one brown/amber/green (I'm having trouble naming colours) eye ; I think it's the right one, and that something is looking back at me through it. There are pores everywhere and hundreds of thousands of hairs (I estimate, but numbers are also giving me trouble). Then I look down (sideways?) at the mouth, which appears as a hole that is continuously making inconceivably complex shapes.

I now notice the sounds I'm hearing. It's a language, but I can't recognize any meaning in it. They are complexly rich noises and are synchronized with the shapes of the mouth-thing I've been staring at. My mother has a very resonant voice with clear pronunciation, but her speech is now incomprehensible to me. I am completely mesmerized by this fantastic spectacle of sight and sound. The intensity of her voice is then taken up a notch, and I feel an alarm from deep within myself – a tug at the back of my head. For a moment it is hard to shift my attention back, but then I snap back to seeing and hearing in my normal manner and realize my mother is asking me if I understand. I find myself able to repeat back to her the jist of what she's said and this seems to satisfy her and I am dismissed.

Looking back from adulthood on that experience, although maybe I knew what my mother was going to say I probably didn't really understand why she was saying it. I was quicker, but she was wiser. I no longer remember what the lecture was about. Maybe it was about eating all that gross sugar straight from the can? During that strange experience I was never unaware that this unrecognizable jumble of eyes, nose, mouth, eyebrows, and hair was my mother's face or that her voice was speaking English. I felt like I had entered a different mode of experience, but I was not afraid because I knew I had caused it to happen. I remember thinking afterwards that I could

do that anytime I wanted and never needed to be bored again; *real* looking could make anything endlessly fascinating.

It was around the same time as that childhood experience that I began drawing obsessively, especially from life and especially faces if I could find someone to sit still for me. I can see quite clearly in my mind a drawing I made of my grandfather that same year; his right leg crossed over his left, hands folded in his lap, the texture of his sweater vest over his crisp yellow polyester shirt, the large square glasses, his wavy Ronald Reagan like hair and his slightly amused but contented expression. He looked very comfortable with himself and at ease in general. The whole drawing was skewed to the right; I didn't have any sophisticated drawing skills beyond looking, but I already understood how *that* was the most important part. All I have is the memory of the drawing because it was ruined by a water tank leak in my parent's basement, maybe fifteen years ago along with most of my childhood drawings. I think I remember most or all of them.

That experience with my mother's face made me feel like I'd stumble upon some hidden truth, some way of seeing things in the raw. I would guess some filtering system in the brain was turned off, so that the aperture that controls how much perceptual experience gets in was opened much wider. The very familiar became very strange, and I had a realization that everything was strange if you *really* looked at it. I think when I draw and paint, I switch to the mode of attention that I found then. My experience of this is much less intense now, perhaps, because I am more familiar with it. I can now more easily switch from that mode to other attention modes, but I am no longer able to hear English without understanding it, so maybe it is not entirely the same thing anymore.

## **Things**

I am primarily a painter of *things* and my practice has grown out of a process of subverting the genre of still life. Prior to coming to Concordia I had been constructing colourful blob-like forms with insulation foam. They were made from artificial materials but represented something natural and organic. I arranged these in complex diorama like assemblages which I would then

paint meticulously from life. There was spontaneity in the still-life assemblages, but I came to desire to have that surprise happen in the painting process itself. Since coming to Concordia I have transformed my process towards working in an improvisational manner and without any reference. I'm attracted to the unpredictable and am now painting in an almost completely unplanned manner, improvising with paint in a way that complements the subject matter. My previous work hinted at themes of improvisation and unplanned growth in the content depicted, but the current work also incorporates these ideas more thoroughly into their making as well.

## **Shape**

I've always been particular about the starting point of a painting and the first thing to deal with is the support surface. I paint on wooden panels because I like the qualities of a firm surface that I've sanded thoroughly. I find the texture of a canvas to be problematic, and would rather work on something more neutral, but this could also be related to my experience working as a digital animator for many years. Perhaps I've developed a preference for a smooth screen-like surface from that experience. But even if I do like that smooth texture, I have become uncomfortable with support shapes that remind me of screens or windows. I don't mind it in other artist's work, but have been feeling dispassionate about using those shapes myself. I've moved away from working on right-angled supports to painting on organic rounded shapes. The first rounded panel I made was for an installation project, but after seeing the shape I had a desire to paint on it, and then after seeing the rounded painting next to my right-angled paintings, I had an intuitive feeling that they should all be on shapes like this. It was later after some pondering that I realized I wanted a boundary shape that felt like a closer representation of our field of vision – something more organic and a little wonky. These shapes also better suited the evolving subject matter I was depicting which itself was organic and wonky. I found that these panels worked best as boundary shapes when they were only made of convex curves. If the panels had parts cut-out of themselves they pointed to the outside world and made the painting more of an object.

## Improvisation

Working improvisationally has also inspired me to work with these unique shapes. By working in a manner of constant response the paintings have become very sensitive to initial conditions, and shape is the first condition the painting has. Each painting is its own imperfect and singular shape drawn out by hand just before I cut them. I've made diverse sizes as well as shapes and these variations affect the way I begin a painting. I often begin with an atmospheric ground of related neutral colours and then causally place larger brush strokes onto this surface. At this point the only thought will be something about a general possible composition or feeling of movement; left to right, in the middle, ect. . . I then respond to those brush strokes by painting them into some form I see suggested in their shape. I slowly build the painting up in this way sometimes painting over what was previously painted the session before. I have an enthusiasm for rendering forms in a chiaroscuro manner and it doesn't take long for me to see forms that could be developed from my initial mark making. It's an intuitive way of working and the end result is a painting I would never have planned.

There is a blurring of ends and means to this process and the paintings are as much about how they were made as what there is to look at. I have come to think of this ends/means blurring as having something in common with the form of a pilgrimage in which neither the journey or destination can be separated from each other without collapsing the meaning or significance of it. If one arrives at a pilgrimage destination comfortably and quickly by plane or car then the journey has no weight and becomes merely tourism. Despite usually being a journey to somewhere specific, a pilgrimage is not an ends focused activity. Rebecca Solnit dedicates a chapter in her book *Wander Lust* to exploring the idea of the pilgrimage – *The Uphill Road to Grace: Some Pilgrimages*: "There is a symbiosis between journey and arrival in Christian pilgrimage, as there is in mountaineering. To travel without arriving would be as incomplete as to arrive without having traveled. To walk there is to earn it, through laboriousness and through the transformation that comes during a journey."<sup>2</sup> As Solnit says, a pilgrim walks because they

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<sup>2</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, "*Wanderlust: a History of Walking*," Penguin Books (2001), p.50

are hoping for an experience of transformation which will happen during their journey which takes time and is difficult. Painting is also difficult, but it is pleasurable too and in comparing the process to pilgrimage, I am not talking about the cliché notion of an artist “suffering” for their work. The similarity is that there is hope in the improvisational way of working for a transformation ; something that will lead me to a painting I could not have taken a direct path to.

### **Imagery: Space and Content**

All of the paintings in this show depict painted objects in an atmospheric like space. The space is painted this way to avoid being a landscape or an interior. There is no horizon or suggestion of a limit outside of the edges of the painting support. Space to me is a potential for something to happen or be in, and that is what the atmospheric grounds I’ve put down are in a practical sense – a place for something to be painted. I’ve not depicted this space as “outer-space,” but as something more familiar to my own experience of space; I think for instance that the paintings with grey grounds are related to the coastal skies I grew up seeing in Nova Scotia, which are often grey and windswept.

The imagery depicted is discovered as I paint. It’s not something I have envisioned, I am as much a visitor as creator of these spaces. I don’t have definite ideas about what each object is or their relationships to each other and their situation. My thinking about them is more general, even though they take on particular specific forms. Most of this imagery has developed trends, tendencies and themes of biologic-like forms:

Weeds

Leaves

Flowers

Hair

Organs

Shells

Fleshy matter; cords, tubes and lumps

I'm unsure if this subject matter is coming from a momentum I'd built up from painting these forms before, a natural ease with which paint depicts these forms, or an unconscious interest in these themes. My guess is that it's a bit of all of these things and that the subject matter and process of making have become more related. Living forms are always a bit unpredictable and it's impossible to know precisely into what final form they will grow. My paintings have become like that themselves. There is also the next order of change to consider: biological forms pass off their patterns from one generation to the next; my painting has developed a similar momentum. Sometimes mutations are passed on and sometime this transmission fails; I feel this also happens from painting to painting.

In addition to the organic matter depicted in these paintings there are also rocks, some possibly man-made matter and the brushstrokes themselves. I use to have a rock collection as a child that I kept in the bottom of my closet on a metal baking sheet. I always kept them hidden in there as if I was embarrassed to be hoarding such worthless objects; they were just for myself and nobody else took any interest in them. My favorite rocks were the ones that seemed as if they were deliberately made; the ones that had been polished to perfect smoothness by the sea, broken cleanly, of an interesting colour, and the cube like shapes of pyrite (fool's gold). There is something weird and attractive about the natural posing as artificial and vice versa. The paint does something like this in some of these paintings. There are some brush marks that pose as brush marks within the depicted space by casting shadows like objects, and then there are some that are painted more thickly and sit as paint on the surface.

There is a sense of movement and precariousness in many of these paintings. A few depict a whirlwind of spinning debris with some objects cohering to each other, and others being flung or drifting away from a central cluster. Other paintings are like catching a glimpse of an organism or an ecosystem of organisms in an in-between stage of unplanned growth. There is a mirroring between the improvisational way of letting a painting unfold and the way organic and natural inorganic matter unfolds its form and relations in unpredictable ways. There has come to be a collaboration among my process and content, and the subject matter has become representational of a process of growth, creation and change itself.



## Attention and Intention

Painting is both artificial and natural. It is artificial in that something made by a person is the very definition of artificial, but some have argued that the creative urge is something that has evolved from our distant animal ancestors. Elizabeth Grosz discusses in *Art And The Animal*, that art is part of an animalistic seduction strategy and something not uniquely human in nature, “but from something excessive in the world, from what is unable to be predicted, from the animal.”<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Miller argues a similar point in *The Mating Mind*, but from his position as an evolutionary psychologist. Miller builds his theories about the evolutionary origins of human abilities for art, morality, language and creativity on the idea that the process of sexual selection, not natural selection, was the major driving force for the evolution of the human mind.<sup>4</sup> If you are convinced by the ideas of Grosz and Miller as I am, it complicates creation as being both artificial by definition, but also one of the activities of people most connected to their animal nature. For myself, it seems natural where I feel compelled by the pleasure of making, and also an uncomfortable experience of stress if I’ve gone too long without creating something. The moments of creative insight are pleasurable and feel natural to me because they are instants of intuition; they are more moments of recognition than they are anything arrived at by thought. But thought can play a part as a tool to whatever it is that actively recognizes. This recognizer could be named simply as attention.

My attention in my painting is now more involved with the process than the content, and I think this is a strategy I’ve developed to remove some of my intention. Intention is full of too much knowing and can get in the way of finding. It can be a real disservice to a process of exploration to begin with too well formed an idea of what might be found. Intention to find something can exclude the possibility of finding the unexpected, and the unexpected is the most interesting, exciting and valuable thing to find. Intention is something that must be handled carefully, because it is needed to start a painting, but it must become flexible and more open once put into action.

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<sup>3</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. “*Art and the Animal*,” *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, p.63

<sup>4</sup> Miller, Geoffery. *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*, London: Heineman, 2000

As far as artists interested in denying or minimizing intention from their art, John Cage is the example “par excellence”. It’s not that Cage wished to reduce human responses to sounds, but that he wished to hear sounds free from human intentions. Much of Cage’s philosophical approach to music and sound stems from his interest in Buddhism. He wished to define music as simply a condition of listening, and to free sound from the contamination of human ego. The reduction of intention in my work is not nearly so complete as Cage’s, so there is still something of myself in the work, but what there is of myself is coming less from a place of thought.

### **Complexity, Order and the Unmanageable.**

I think that shifting towards a practice focused more on process than subject matter has revealed concerns about complexity and order. The themes of growth, creativity and change that are both in my subject matter and imbedded in my improvised painting technique are processes that lead to more complicated states of order. Orders that would be hard to plan by conscious effort, can unfold in unpredictable ways. The ubiquitous tendency of order to move toward chaos has a scientific term: entropy. It is not well understood, but it might be the most fundamental aspect of existence, driving everything from gravity to time and the emergence of life. But who decides what is order and what is disorder? Order is such a subjective concept.

One of my oldest friends Ben used to live in an apartment that most people would consider a disastrous mess of the tenth degree. His floor was covered back to front with stacks of comics and books three feet high like miniature skyscrapers. The ceiling was covered with an army of flying toys hanging by strings. There was more picture space than wall space, and he stubbornly refused to use shelves or storage boxes – it’s as if he needed everything to be out in the open where he could see it all at once. There was a narrow path from the door to the computer to the bed, and Ben was the only one who could ever navigate it without causing a catastrophic avalanche of books, comics and toys, but Ben knew where every item was within this “mess.” Chaos does not mean a lack of order, just an order that is incomprehensible to most minds. I’ve recently listened to a recorded interview with Physicist David Bohm in which he says something very similar about chaos, that it is not disorder, but a more complicated order. In this interview he explained, “I think we have to free our mind from the idea that order is just some. . . always

just some simple thing we can grasp. . . whatever we say order is, it isn't, it's more than that. ”<sup>5</sup>  
In the complicated order of chaos the parts are more particular, less general, and less hierarchal.  
An ecosystem is a good example of this because of the interdependence of all the parts, it  
becomes very hard to know which are the important parts since they all are. Systems like this are  
unmanageable, but they somehow manage themselves.

Entropy is not a one-direction arrow.  
It moves in all directions simultaneously.  
It is aimless aside from this outwardness.  
It is not progressive.  
Nature builds and destroys at the same time.  
One order for another. Even Steven.  
“What’s the difference?” says nature.  
It is a secular change.  
It is nothing personal.  
Even the process of change changes.  
The changing has a momentum that from the beginning went past the point of no return.  
The strange becomes stranger.  
It grows upon itself.  
Mutations build and compound themselves.  
What works, works because it works.  
Why do things happen?  
Because of reasons.

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<sup>5</sup> David Bohm interview by Michael Tom, *Creativity, Natural Philosophy & Science*, for, *New Dimensions Foundation/Sounds*, 1988, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcElqtlM3Dc> 18:00/47:39  
I will have to read David Bohm’s book, *Science, Order and Creativity* when I get the chance.

## No Such Thing as Nothing

The original use of the word chaos in Greek mythology meant “yawning” or “gap,” essentially nothingness. If you ask most people to picture chaos now they are likely to describe something like an overwhelming disorderly mass of things or unpredictable processes like weather. It is interesting that this word would come from almost the opposite visual metaphor, but I suspect it is no coincidence and that the different meanings of the word are on a deeper level expressing the same thing – an unmanageable order of reality.

Our everyday approximate experience of empty space is the air around us. It is the thinnest thing we have contact with, and we don’t think about its physical density often owing to how our minds tend to ignore any information that is not novel. This is the phenomenon of habituation where the hum of a refrigerator becomes unnoticeable after a while, something we only notice when it stops. But even if you could remove all the matter around us, I’ve heard that contemporary physicists confidently believe that “empty” space is boiling with paired particles that are continuously popping into existence and then immediately annihilating each other. It’s not a pristine and tidy void. I think the best way to think about space is as a potential for things to happen in, but whatever it actually is, is indescribable, because there is in our physical reality no such thing as nothing.

Then there is also the *idea* of nothing which is self-contradictory; as soon as you think about it you have turned it into a thing again, a thought, something. Thoughts are things even if they aren’t materially based. They take up some kind of space in your consciousness (again thinking about space as potential for things to happen in). In the 1980s children’s fantasy film *The Never Ending Story*, an imaginary land (Fantasia) is torn apart and dissolved into oblivion by the film’s main antagonist, an elemental force the film’s characters call The Nothingness. Adapting this story to screen must have been quite a challenge for the filmmakers – how do you depict a force that is nothingness? Their solution was to show it as a great storm, a swirl of chaotic debris and atmospheric forces that tore apart the order of the world of things; it had to be shown as something. I’ve adopted the same solution in some of my paintings. We are stuck in an existence where things and ideas can only be represented by other things; could there even be an existence

that didn't work that way? Perhaps nothingness is even more imaginary an idea than Fantasia. Somehow I suspect this problem with the concept of nothing is an indication of a flaw in logic itself, perhaps it exposes a limit in thinking.

### **Meaninglessness Has More Meaning**

Lately I've been thinking of meaning in relation to my understanding of nothingness. If nothingness is impossible or misunderstood and self-contradictory as both a phenomenon and in concept, then maybe "meaninglessness" has similar issues. The same way that by thinking of nothingness you have turned it into something, if you try to make something meaningless it will end up standing for meaninglessness; so it will not in fact be meaningless. True meaningless should contain the possibility of meaning, it is a "space" for the potential of meaning. It should feel like a meaning that you can't quite comprehend. It should be able to produce multiple meanings, but it should never let you settle for just one. Meaninglessness is multidimensional. It vibrates. It is alive. Meaninglessness has more meaning.

Gerhard Richter has expressed something very similar about meaninglessness;

Theory has nothing to do with a work of art. Pictures which are interpretable, and which contain a meaning, are bad pictures. A picture presents itself as the Unmanageable, the Illogical, the Meaningless. It demonstrates the endless multiplicity of aspects; it takes away our certainty, because it deprives a thing of its meaning and its name. It shows us the thing in all the manifold significance and infinite variety that preclude the emergence of any single meaning and view.<sup>6</sup>

This last Fall in a lecture of David Elliot's *The Exile's Return: The Rediscovery of Painting (1969-1989)*, he brought up the same quote from Richter about meaninglessness, but David felt that the keyword in Richter's statement was "Unmanageable," and I think he's right, because it's not that a picture is absent of meaning, it's that it presents possibilities for meaning without giving a single easily understood one. It's a type of meaning that is of a more complicated order than can be grasped in a linear logical way. Clement Greenberg has said something similar about

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<sup>6</sup> Richter, Gerhard. *Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2009. p. 32

poetry and meaninglessness, “The poem still offers possibilities of meaning – but only possibilities. Should any of them be too precisely realized, the poem would lose the greatest part of its efficacy, which is to agitate the consciousness with infinite possibilities by approaching the brink of meaning and yet never falling over it.”<sup>7</sup>

We run into real problems with defining concepts like nothing, meaninglessness and noise as well. They are fundamentally antithetical to definition in that they resist abstraction and representation – they cannot be reduced.

### **The Zany Roots of it All**

I think there is a zany aesthetic in art and culture that I am drawn to that relates to these ideas about the unmanageable and complicated orders. It is an aesthetic that Sianne Ngai’s discusses in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Ngai argues that these three minor aesthetics have become the most relevant aesthetics in our late capitalist era’s culture, because of how they relate to production, commodity and consumption. She identifies the zany as an aesthetic of goalless play that is always bordering on stressful work – a kind of fun/unfun that relates to late capitalism’s emphasis on productivity.

At first glance, zaniness seems purely a symptom of the “perform-or-else” ideology of late capitalism, including its increasingly affective, biopolitical ways of meeting the imperative to endlessly increase productivity. Yet for all its spectacular displays of laborious exertion, the activity of zaniness is more often than not destructive; one might even describe it as the dramatization of an anarchic refusal to be productive<sup>8</sup>

My earlier work was related to this anarchic fun/unfun aspect of zaniness. I can see it most clearly in what I consider my first good painting, *The Myth of Silliness*. My artist statement from that time specifically mentions trying to achieve a juxtaposition of playfulness and seriousness. The painting looks zany in the variety of things depicted – a variety that is not based on any sound logic, except for a balancing of opposites: monstrous and silly, the natural and the

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<sup>7</sup> Greenberg, Clement. *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944*, University of Chicago Press (1988), p.33

<sup>8</sup> Ngai, “*Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*,” Harvard University Press (2012), p.12

unnatural. It's a busy painting and the most central figure is a bird-like creature with a head made from a wind up chattering teeth toy with wide eyeballs – this face has a stressed-out look, but because it is a toy it also points to fun. I didn't see the zaniness in this painting before – at the time I was thinking of the absurd, which is likely related to the zany. The title, *The Myth of Silliness*, was in part a reference to Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which has a novel way of looking at Sisyphus as finding a kind of dignity and satisfaction in his never-ending repetitive sentence of useless work; my own title combines this idea with playfulness.

My earlier paintings depicted ambiguous characters and I think this relates to the zany as well, because the word zany itself began as a name for a particular kind of character, one who performs many different roles and odd jobs, but without a fixed identity outside of this fluid sense of self. Ngai uses the example of Lucy from the 1950s TV show *I love Lucy* and Jim Carrey's character from the film *The Cable Guy* as examples of more modern day zanies. Both these characters are defined by their ability to overly enthusiastically take on other jobs and



Figure 1 *The Myth of Silliness*

roles, while having none of their own. When I eventually moved past toys as subjects in my still lifes, I was still creating characters of sorts using insulation foam sculptures. The organic shapes of the foam index their own making as a process of growth and they appear like a kind of living matter. They are like actors performing spontaneity and improvised action and their blobby shapes feel like they are in an in-between state of form. They each have a singular specific shape, but they are also general where their forms are not identifiable by name and seem impermanent like they may become another shape at anytime. They are like the mutable identity of a zany character.

Similar to how the zany character's identity is their virtuosic ability to fluidly perform other roles and identities, the aesthetic of zany is one about formless form. Ngai explains that at heart the zany is about anarchic movement and exaggerated activity, and by being something we can feel and identify as an aesthetic, it is a way of giving form to these formless energies.<sup>9</sup> There is a conflict built into the zany; it is an anti-aesthetic aesthetic. It is a kind of form that represents anti-form and/or anti-order. The work in this show is related most to this aspect of zaniness. The subject matter of unplanned growth, creation and change is more of a manifestation of these energies than my previous work because of the improvisational painting method, but there is a loss of the quality of fun/unfun that was in the older work. The playfulness/laboriousness aspect has shifted toward the experience in the painting process and the zany character who performs is now partly the painter in the act of painting rather than only being depicted. Ngai explains how a character is always there in some endangered form in the zany:

Because zaniness is, at bottom, a style of and about action and doing, it cannot exist without some reference, however oblique or indirect, to an agent or doer. And because it also evokes situations or contexts in which acting or doing becomes precarious (including situations or contexts that may not include people, which is why things like wallpaper and pants can be zany), the aesthetic has to make some reference, however implicit, to a living agent endangered by that endangering activity.<sup>10</sup>

In this work the danger could be implied for the viewer in the chaotic growth and movement in these paintings. There is a precariousness to many of the situations depicted that can transfer a feeling of insecurity for someone looking at the painting, and it is also a feeling that I had to deal with as a painter working without a plan. The method of working improvisationally in my case manifested in a depiction of unstable forms; this also relates to the shapes I've been using as supports again, they are less stable as forms than right-angled shapes. The whirlwind like depiction of spinning debris in some of these paintings is a materialization of the resistance to form aspect of the zany. Ngai explains that, "the form of zany performance involves a certain deformation of the forms of activity, a certain indifference to their qualitative differentiation. Indeed, for all the devotion of figures like Lucy to the particular task or job of the moment, the

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<sup>9</sup> Ngai, p.231

<sup>10</sup> Ngai, p.223



final image of action her zaniness produces is one of an undifferentiated chaotic swirl.”<sup>11</sup> Ngai sees this feeling for an aesthetic about instability as related to a condition of economic vulnerability felt by many in a late capitalist condition of part-time work, odd jobs and especially for women and the many simultaneous roles they have had to traditionally assume.

This feeling of instability is a feeling of being overwhelmed by a lot of things to keep track of.

“Zaniness is essentially the experience of an agent confronted by – and endangered by – too many things coming at her at once.”<sup>12</sup> And this is how I think it relates to the unmanageable and complicated orders I’ve been talking about before. This feeling of being overwhelmed by too many things coming at once is comparable to the childhood experience I had of my mother’s face; there was too much detail to take in, but I didn’t feel endangered by the experience but thrilled by it. An experience that is thrilling implies the potential for danger – it is a kind of nervous pleasure and is something I’m drawn to in the aesthetic experience of zany in art where the danger is only perceptual but not a real one.

### **Zappa The Exemplary Zany Artist**

I’m not trying to make a case that my work is the best example of this zany aesthetic, there are many other artists from fine arts and popular culture who’s work is so much zanier. The work I’ve made for this show does not even appear zany in the common sense of the word, but I see roots and connections to it that make the zany unavoidable to discuss; it is related to some sort of world view that I and others have an affinity for. This aesthetic is something I’m drawn to in people, in music and work of other artists like David Bowie, Hieronymus Bosch, animator John Kricfalusi and Frank Zappa. Zappa is a musician that seems to embody this aesthetic thoroughly in his work. There is a kind of manic glee about his music which is equally playful, subversive, technically impressive and of considerable output (He released some 50 albums worth of material.) This blend of seriousness and whimsy is exemplary of the zany aesthetic. His first album *Freak Out!* with his band *The Mother’s of Invention*, includes a list in the liner notes of his influences - the introduction to this list reads, “These people have contributed materially in

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<sup>11</sup> Ngai, p.197

<sup>12</sup> Ngai, p.183

many ways to make our music what it is. Please do not hold it against them."<sup>13</sup> This introduction is funny in a self-depreciative way and it reveals the self-conscious minoriness in the attitude of Zappa's aesthetic. The list itself includes avant-garde composers like Edgar Varese and Karlheinz Stockhausen, pop and blues artists, movie stars, writers, teachers, friends, acquaintances, and the painters Salvador Dali and Yves Tanguy (both of whom also work with a zany aesthetic). It is an extremely eclectic list that makes a strong statement about his openness and it also makes him hard to define. Zappa has later said that he included names of people who's work he *didn't* like as well as work he likes in this list, because they also had an influence on him. This makes it even harder to define him and a resistance to definition is a key characteristic of zaniness. I suspect that there is a strong drive behind this; a desire to leave creative possibilities as open as possible. I feel this urge myself and Zappa summed up this idea nicely in an interview when he spoke about the aesthetic of his music:

You should be able to organize any kind of sound and put it into your music, so I wound up with a style of music that has snorks, burps and dissonant chords, and nice tunes, and triads, and straight rhythms and complicated rhythms, and just about anything. In any order. . . And the easiest way to sum up the aesthetic would be, **anything, anytime, anyplace, for no reason at all**, and I think with an aesthetic like that you can have a pretty good latitude for being creative.<sup>14</sup>

His description of the aesthetic "anything, anytime, anyplace, for no reason at all," resonates with me and as a painter of things it seemed like an apt title for my show. It is a great encapsulation of the anarchic sense of order in the aesthetic of zany.

Zappa was known to require high standards of musical virtuosity from the musicians who worked with him, as well as being quite technically accomplished himself. He was often composing work that was at the edge of what was possible to perform and needed musicians who could stretch themselves to those limits. In the 1980s he hired the London Symphony Orchestra to record some of his compositions and delayed its release for years because he was disappointed

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<sup>13</sup> Zappa, Frank, *Freak Out!*, Verve Records, 1966

<sup>14</sup> Zappa, Frank, "Peefeeyatko." Interview by Henning Lohner, 1991

with the performance of the orchestra. The album's liner notes includes the following sarcastic statement:

Rock journalists (especially the British ones) who have complained about the 'coldness', the 'attempts at perfection', and missing 'human elements' in *Jazz From Hell* should find *L.S.O. Volume II* a real treat. It is infested with wrong notes and out-of-tune passages. I postponed its release for several years, hoping that a digital technologist somewhere might develop a piece of machinery powerful enough to conceal the evils lurking on the master tapes. Since 1983 there have been a few advances, but nothing sophisticated enough to remove 'human elements' like the out-of-tune trumpets in *Strictly Genteel*, or the lack of rhythmic coordination elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

You're working with high standards of technical proficiency when the world's top orchestra isn't up to snuff for you. This valuing of technical skills is part of Zappa's desire for a wide creative latitude, but it's not that skill is of value itself, it's the possibilities that skill allows for. This is probably a common element to many artist's who have a zany aesthetic and I have the same value for the creative possibilities that technical skill allows for.

### **Connections, Inspirations and Scapegoats**

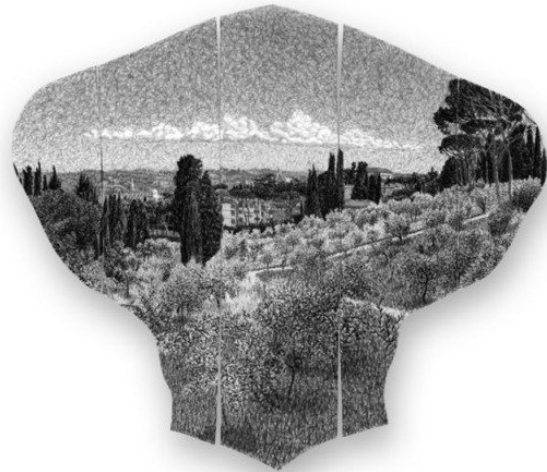
I've often had my work compared to certain Surrealist artists. I first became aware of Yves Tanguy when a friend pointed out the similarities of the shapes of insulation foam I was painting to Tanguy's paintings. The specifically nonspecific organic shapes he paints have that same quality of having a fluid like identity which makes them zany. I could also compare my shapes to Henri Moore's for the same reasons all though he was not a surrealist he was certainly influenced by the movement. As a child, yes of course Salvador Dali was an artist I liked along with René Magritte. I can still remember seeing Dali's *Santiago El Grande* at New Brunswick's Beaverbrook Art Gallery as a child and the impact it had with its size and fantastic sense of perspective. I've also heard comparisons to Dali's Nuclear Mysticism period, but I would like to distance myself from this – to me it is work that is a bit embarrassing because of its overly

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<sup>15</sup> Zappa, Frank, "*London Symphony Orchestra Vol. I*" I, Barfko-Swill, 1987

serious tone and obvious use of Christian and scientific iconography; it's in my opinion, too illustrative and manageable for my taste. But who can deny that Dali was possibly the zaniest of all zanies? Surrealism in general seems to be a zany movement. I've always liked Max Ernst's technique of Decalcomania, and I am a great enthusiast for the Surrealist Exquisite Corpse drawing game. I think my own application of chance is more pragmatic than the Surrealists who had a kind of spiritual allegiance to it. For me the chance I employ is a tool to take me outside of my tastes and habits.

My use of shaped supports is not original, as there have been painters working on tondo shapes going back at least to Greek antiquity. The traditional purpose of tondos has been more decorative, sometimes applied for a trompe l'oeil effect on objects and architecture. The shapes I make are never perfect circles and are meant as an alternative boundary shape, to avoid referencing perception through windows and screens. My reasons for these shapes are closer to the work of Ryan and Trevor Oakes; twin artists who draw on concave shaped surfaces as an exploration of human visual perception. Their shapes are based on a scientific inquiry into the shape of our visual field. My shapes are intuitively arrived at and more playful, but like the Oakes I am interested in how shape can come closer to a direct experience of seeing.



*Figure 2 Ryan and Trevor Oakes*

As I have begun working without reference I find myself interested in the work of painters who also paint representationally, but without reference. Dana Shutz, George Condo, Philip Guston, Etienne Zack and the paintings and drawings of Shary Boyle. They all have a bit of a cartoonish quality in their work, which is probably a natural consequence of making something look representational from your head alone. The cartoonish is a kind of simplification, a caricature of form, that likely comes closer to how the mind remembers form. There is a permissiveness about this cartoonishness because it is not normally perceived of as serious as something realistically

rendered. Looking at the work of these artists makes me feel more free to paint from my own head and to trust my intuition.

### **From Still Life to This Show**

Because my work evolved from still life it is connected to the history of that genre. I've always had admiration for the Dutch and Flemish still life paintings I had seen; the way they captured the presence of objects in paint and could create an exaggerated intense and thrilling experience of looking. As far as the hierarchy of painting genres go, still life is at the bottom, and this was interesting to me; it is a minor genre and I feel I am attracted to minorness in things (and minor aesthetics apparently). I have a preference for the underdog, and I think this is a propensity many people from the Maritimes share, as it is a place relatively isolated from where the action seems to be happening. Still life is the most simple and obvious kind of painting to do, but I felt it had been unfairly underestimated in that it still has possibilities that haven't been explored. My initial attraction to still life was also to the potential for control of a composition in a painting that it allows for – to have the items exactly where I placed them and lit exactly as I choose. But I was interested in subverting this genre, which I initially did by using atypical objects for a still life. This subversion has since evolved in to a way of working that is almost the antithesis of still life, where I now use no physical reference and paint without a planned composition. It seems that my aesthetic preference of zany has deformed the genre. The zany, a form about anti-form, destabilizes a painting genre that at its heart is about form.

The moment of creative possibilities opening-up gives me a feeling of exuberance. I don't get it every time I enter the studio or even that often, but the hope to feel it again is what I am always chasing, and is what keeps me coming back and struggling through the times when the work is tough. The zany for me personally feels like an embrace of too muchness, of complicated orders that are unmanageable. The motivation is probably towards a feeling of being lost in the doing of something; for a moment when form dissolves into the creative energies that generate form. By taking on an improvisational way of working this process and the content have become conflated, but centered around ideas of a tension between anarchy and order.

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