

University of Pécs  
Doctoral School of Arts

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THE MEMORY OF THE MOVEMENT

Additions to the Interpretation of Contemporary Gesture-Based Painting

Theses of the Dissertation

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The playing field of painting has turned into a conflict zone in which leaving a trace has become a quasi-strategic decision. It is as if the gesture of painting has lost its innocence – perhaps illusory from the outset – and is increasingly seen as an entity with historical associations, densely interwoven with cultural-political threads. It has emerged as a motif in its own right from the traditional toolbox of easel painting.<sup>1</sup>

My dissertation aims to closely examine contemporary gestural painting, or more specifically, the ideological load and origins of the autonomous gesture in painting, harking back to the historical period of Romanticism and its philosophical school. With the changes of viewpoint that unfold in each chapter, I have sought to provide input for an approach that emphasises the self-activity of the material. The oscillation of the thesis's focus is also important to me because the immanent nature of the painterly trace is wedded to notions of variability and fluidity.

First, I analyse the contemporary situation and expansive nature of the medium. If we look around us, we can assert that we are witnessing the painterly colonisation of interchangeable materials and various virtual surrogates of paint – be they ceramics, textiles, digital graphics or practically anything else. This unfolds with a new kind of materialism in mind. There is a tendency towards an increasingly extensive manipulation of the parameters of the components involved in the creative process, including the gestures of painting. Thus, in the second chapter of the thesis, the introductory lines are followed by a discussion of the expanded interpretation of painting. For this purpose, I draw on the 2017 book *Expanded Painting – Ontological Aesthetics and the Essence of Colour* by the artist and theorist Mark Titmarsh, in which the author reflects on the contemporary phenomenon of painting becoming intertwined with other disciplines. He argues that painting today can be imagined as a hybrid being that embraces both the living and the dead, the contemporary and the remembered. It can incorporate both craft and electronics or even spatial objects, performative elements and theoretical texts.<sup>2</sup> I believe that the possibilities of interpretation shed new light if we think in terms of a “mediumunspecific” conception of painting, i.e. if we take into account the emergence of the phenomenon of painterliness, which is otherwise

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<sup>1</sup> In several paragraphs of this text, I have drawn on a previous publication of mine, VETŐ Orsolya Lia, “Festészeti szövettan: A festészeti gesztus biológiája” [“The Histology of Painting. The Biology of the Brushstroke,”] *Új Művészet – Az absztrakció új lehetőségei* [The New Perspectives of Abstraction], theoretical supplement (2021/6): 6–11.

<sup>2</sup> TITMARSH, Mark, *Expanded Painting: Ontological Aesthetics and the Essence of Colour* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2.

rather difficult to define, outside the traditional forms of the easel painting.<sup>3</sup> My thesis focuses on the sub-area where the painterly gesture itself is extended – conceptually, performatively or through spatial solutions that go beyond the boundaries of the genre.

In the third chapter, I collect further perspectives along three theoretical paths to explore the possibilities of material-centred interpretative frameworks. First, I consider New Romantic tendencies as phenomena that saturate the references of the pictorial field and endow abstract pictorial elements with specific narrativity, mentioning, among others, Metamodernism that analyses the rearrangements of political and cultural spheres in a holistic unity;<sup>4</sup> Escapism, which places trust in the protective power of alternative realities, and the Emo-Romantic Turn, that reveals a new, privileged status of emotions.<sup>5</sup> I will then analyse the connection between material and the subject manifested in the painterly gesture while seeking to capture the organic, living quality of the pictorial surface. Finally, I address the formlessness<sup>6</sup> of the materials involved in the process of establishing the trace, an aesthetic of the formless that devours the distinct layers of precise meaning. I also discuss here the transformation of materials that can be connected to the quasi-discipline of alchemy.<sup>7</sup>

In the fourth chapter, through a deconstructed chronology, I trace the paradigmatic moments of the elastic transformations of the painterly gesture from the present day-and-age to the aesthetic perceptions of Romanticism in order to explore the contemporary phenomenon of hybridity in the pictorial surfaces that retain signs of an elementary desire to leave a trace, but at the same time are shaped by conceptual considerations, connecting layers of history as hyperlinks. To illustrate this with examples, I have selected many artists who participated in the *Frozen Gesture* (2019) exhibition at Kunst Museum Winterthur, perhaps the most directly related contemporary exhibition to my research. In the foreword to the catalogue, the show's curator Konrad Bitterli sums up the ambivalent relationship of contemporary artists to the painterly gesture by claiming that, "Artistic handwriting can no

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<sup>3</sup> GRAW, Isabelle, "The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons," In GRAW, Isabelle – BIRNBAUM, Daniel – HIRSCH, Nikolaus, eds., *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas* (Potsdam: Sternberg Press, 2014), 45–48.

<sup>4</sup> VERMEULEN, Timotheus – AKKER, Robin van den, "Notes on metamodernism," In *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*. Vol. 2 (2010): 1–13.

<sup>5</sup> NOVOTNÝ, Michal, "The Emo-Romantic Turn," *Mousse Magazine* (2018)

<http://moussemagazine.it/emo-romantic-turn-michal-novotny-2018> (downloaded: 31.03.2023)

<sup>6</sup> BOIS, Yve-Alain – KRAUSS, Rosalind E., *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> ELKINS, James, *What Painting Is. How to Think About Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York – London: Routledge, 2005).

longer be considered intuitive or purely expressive without reflection; instead, it is always deliberate, or mutated, parodied, cited, ironically broken, analyzed, and implemented, at least with a conceptual distance as is characteristic for contemporary painting”.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter Five presents both an appendix to the dissertation and a synthesis of its various assertions. It gives the reader a chance to recontextualise my research within a larger-scale temporal framework. Here I rely on the notion of the baroque *bravura*, drawing on the research of the art historian Nicola Suthor.<sup>9</sup> The chapter summarises the various aspects of my research: reflecting on the works of David Reed, I arrive at the sensual realm that, for me, is the essence of painting. This is concluded by a short final section.

Although a conceptual approach to the mechanism of sensuality is a controversial endeavour, I hope that the theoretical framework outlined in this thesis can provide a complex panorama of the painterly gesture as a citation, a drifting mass of material, a writhing creature-like quasi-person, an example of bravura or an ornament, forever escaping the grip of definitions.

During the compilation of my theses, I was also motivated by the need to amplify the specific voice of the artist. In my case, it was an experiment to see how the intuitive mode of praxis could be deployed in writing a dissertation. Can the mechanisms of artistic creation be activated by a phenomenon described in words? The frequent use of metaphors, associations and sensory descriptions seemed necessary to approach these abstract visual domains. This serves the purpose that, in following the linear thread of thought, the reader, for a few slightly overwrought paragraphs, can recall the whimsical (in the best sense of the word) experience that makes the creative and receptive processes attractive.

The contributions collected here thus mark a path for the interpretation of contemporary gesture-based painting, which, representing the autonomy of art, foregrounds its sensual character and in which historical, conceptual and other readings appear subordinated to it.

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<sup>8</sup> BITTERLI, Konrad, “Gestures: The Basics of Painting,” In BITTERLI, Konrad – KOST, Lynn – LUTZ, Andrea, eds., *Frozen Gesture*, exh. cat. (Munich: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Hirmer Verlag GmbH, 2019), 9.

<sup>9</sup> SUTHOR, Nicola, “Introduction,” In SUTHOR, Nicola, *Bravura. Virtuosity and Ambition in Early Modern European Painting* (Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021), 6–11.

In summary, the following ideas have emerged as the main theses of my dissertation, following the order of the chapters described above:

1. In the interpretation of gesture-based painting, analytical attempts to capture the living qualities of the material help the viewer experience the works more directly. Analysis focusing on the search for art-historical references can only serve as a starting point.
2. To contextualise and read contemporary gestural painting, it is necessary to map the media-related expansion and the related transgressions that fundamentally determine the contemporary situation of the genre and review the various New Romantic theoretical tendencies. The efforts that emerge—to reinstate art with magic and to explore unconscious regions—unfold in a kind of biopoetic sphere, far from the logic of the market.
3. The link between the painted surface and animism is a theoretically rich notion whereby the brushstrokes emerge as separate entities from the fabric of the paintings. This approach to painting, which emphasises the notion of the organic, is also historically traceable: it is inherent in the myth of modern painting. In the creative process, the formlessness of material and painterly articulation are pitted against each other, revealing the material's capacity for self-formation, i.e. it is not merely a subordinate, passive and mute material.
4. Subjectivity in contemporary painting can be understood as a phenomenon that goes beyond the 20–21<sup>st</sup>-century tradition of expressivity and anthropocentric readings. Instead of painting as a humanisation and taming of matter, I argue for the proliferation of entities born in the creative process and enriching the layers of meaning of the works through their fictional power.
5. The historical process from the conception of brushstrokes as a means of imitation to the creative processes that autonomously thematised the painterly gesture unfolded through a chain of paradigmatic images and related theories and critiques. The gradual valorisation of the painterly gesture can be analysed in the context of the 18–19<sup>th</sup>-century rehabilitation of emotion in the Romantic era and the 20–21<sup>st</sup>-century intellectual appropriation of the brushstroke, the conceptual hijacking of its personal and spontaneous nature. This narrative helps to reveal the contemporary stratification of the gesture, which encompasses a range of associations and also has a visceral impact. However, it can also carry microbiological hallucinations and notions of political independence as well.

6. By exploring the roots of contemporary painting, which places the painterly gesture in a prominent position, we can even go as far as the legacy of *bravura* —virtuoso stain painting — which creates a specific aesthetic language rooted in Baroque art theory. In David Reed’s work, this is brought to life in a hybrid way, integrated with the lessons of later periods in the history of painting.

7. David Reed’s work presents us with an opportunity to confront the most fundamental issues in painting: colour intensity, fluidity, transparency and vitality. Close encounters with the intimacy of painting can elevate the experience of art to the level of a “non-linguistically based [...] knowledge in the body”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> SCHOR, Mira, “Course Proposal,” In MYERS, Terry R., ed., *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), 99.

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