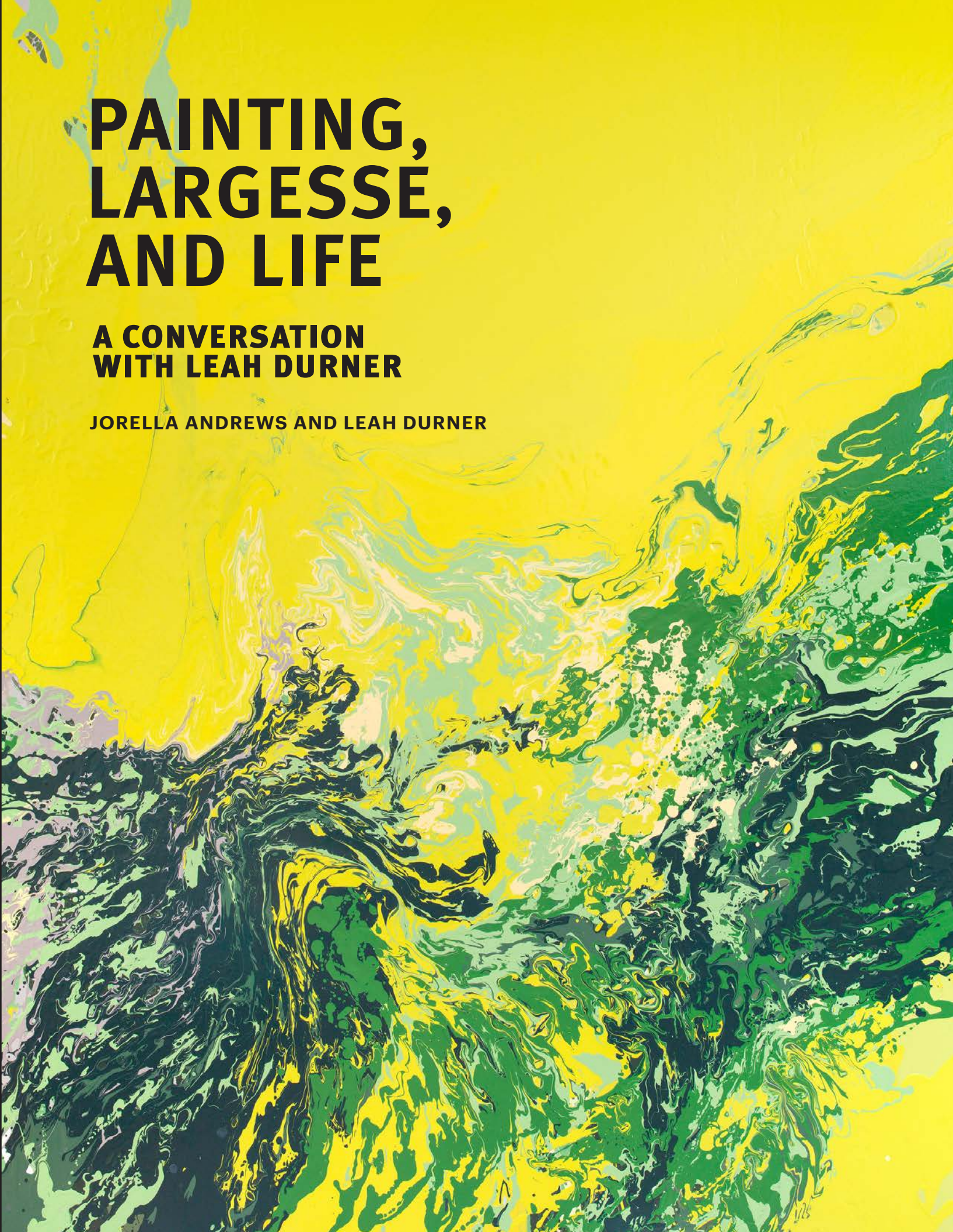


# **PAINING, LARGESSE, AND LIFE**

**A CONVERSATION  
WITH LEAH DURNER**

**JORELLA ANDREWS AND LEAH DURNER**



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# INTRODUCTION

Leah Durner is a contemporary abstract painter living and working in New York City. She is one of the artists whose work I discuss in my book *The Question of Painting: Rethinking Thought with Merleau-Ponty* (Bloomsbury, 2018) and a detail of her 2006 painting *Rousseau*—named after the French eighteenth-century philosopher and advocate of freedom and compassion, Jean-Jacques Rousseau; he was also a composer, novelist and botanist—is on its cover.

For Durner, as for me, the writing of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) has long been an important, ongoing source of inspiration. This extended conversation with Durner about the relation of her work to practices and histories of painting acts as an important companion piece to the book. Durner reflects on her development as an artist since the 1980s and on how the activity of painting has led her to identify and pursue some particularly deep veins of intellectual and ethical curiosity and concern. Uppermost here are Durner’s explorations of the aesthetic and ethical potential of the inter-related concepts of largesse, plenitude, generosity and extravagance, explorations that have emerged as much within and from her painterly practice as within and from her engagements with philosophy, particularly, phenomenology.

I think of this conversation as a companion piece to *The Question of Painting* because, as well as reflecting on Merleau-Pontean and painterly themes, it is also deeply phenomenological in its approach. It tells an expansive story of art, philosophy, the ethical, and the political through the lived experiences and insights of one person. As Merleau-Ponty put it (and these words are among my favourite; I come back to them again and again!): ‘We are grafted to the universal [a concept which he treated non-reductively, as open and full of differences] by that which is most our own.’<sup>1</sup>

Jorella Andrews

London, November 2018



Leah Durner  
*redorangegreenpink pour*, 2011  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
60 x 48 in, 182.88 x 152.4 cm  
Collection of the artist

## THE IRREPRESSIBILITY AND INTELLIGENCE OF PAINT

JORELLA ANDREWS A great deal of intellectual energy is circulating today around the question of painting. Arguably, this is connected with a renewed philosophical interest in aesthetics as it relates to ethical and political agency and with various developments in visual and material culture. These developments include the recent emergence of the interdisciplinary field known as the ‘new materialisms’—as in the work of such thinkers as Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett, Vicki Kirby, Rey Chow, Manuel DeLanda and others—which (amongst other things) has helped refocus attention onto the realms of pre-objective, pre-linguistic, and pre-personal experience, the unusual efficacies of which have, of course, always been of great concern to painters, particularly abstract painters.

Today certain ‘post-conceptual’ approaches to painting, like yours, in which long-standing oppositions between the conceptual and the aesthetic, the philosophical and the painterly, the figurative and the abstract, are *inoperative*, provide particularly fruitful sites for philosophical reflection. A good starting point are the paintings you have been making since 2005, not by applying paint to canvas with the use of a brush or other mark-making instrument but through a process of pouring layers of enamel paint onto your canvas ground.

Although your work has always had a strong expressive and exuberant character, it is perhaps especially in the poured enamels that the energies of emotional and intellectual generosity and risk are in evidence. (These are characteristics that I also discuss in *The Question*

of *Painting* with respect to the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical thought.)

In our ongoing conversations about painting you have favoured the terms largesse, plenitude, generosity and extravagance in this regard. We will focus the main part of our conversation around this topic, discussing how you understand these sensibilities to be operating in your work and in various key moments in the history of painting. We’ll also think about the contemporary importance of plenitude, generosity and extravagance, as you use them, particularly with respect to the environments and cultures of austerity that are being proclaimed over us. We have already begun to explore this topic together, specifically in the 2017 CAA (College Art Association) Conference panel that we co-chaired: ‘Immeasurable Extravagance: Proposals for an Economy of Abundance in an Age of Scarcity’.<sup>2</sup> It is worth saying, I think, that as a painter and as a person your overall aim has been to try and live in extravagance, largesse and generosity as it were and—this is crucial—to try and do so even in the absence of having the obvious *worldly* (or *economic*) wherewithal to back this up.

You started painting in the 1980’s in an artistic and theoretical environment that was considerably inhospitable to painting and certainly very conflicted about it. Douglas Crimp had published his well-known essay, ‘The End of Painting,’ in 1981,<sup>3</sup> which was uncompromising and forceful in its anti-painterly views. It was written at a historical moment when painting, including figurative painting—particularly under the auspices of what came to be called ‘neo-expressionism’—was perceived as making a comeback after a couple of decades of art’s domination by conceptualism. It was, in particular, a polemic directed against Barbara’s Rose’s attempts to rehabilitate painting, notably by means of her prospectively titled 1979 exhibition *American Painting: The Eighties* at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University and—with sponsorship from the United States Information Agency—at several mainly European locations. Most of the works shown are now part of The Shore Collection.<sup>4</sup>

There was a broad sense during your formative years as a painter that you were becoming involved in a questionable, socially indifferent or irresponsible practice, and this is a view that still leaves its traces today—a significant proportion of contemporary artists and theorists regard painting as a culturally outmoded approach to image-making, others that it has been by now too problematically and irredeemably co-opted by market forces.<sup>5</sup> But there *has* been a climate-change; painting is alive, well, in demand, and, I would add, philosophically interesting as it continues to test its parameters, evolve, and also, quite frankly, to please. But as I said, your training in the 1980’s occurred when those questions about the validity of painting—the ‘death of painting’ debate—were at a height.

LEAH DURNER I was in the M.F.A. program at Rutgers University between 1983 and 1985 when those anti-painting debates were a primary focus of discussion, as was an ongoing critique of the visual and of representation. As you indicated, painting was seen as a socially irresponsible practice, as supported by Crimp’s assertion in ‘The End of Painting’ that painting held itself ‘separate from everything else.’<sup>6</sup> Also, extending as far back as the 1950s and through the 1990s, there was a sense of ‘art’, ‘philosophy’, ‘history’, and all other master narratives ending. In the visual arts, painting was hardest hit by this sense of ending, since it had historically been most closely associated with those master narratives.

At Rutgers, I studied painting and theory with Leon Golub, a painter whose work was strongly political. I also studied theory with Martha Rosler, known for her strong intellect, and whose total practice encompasses teaching, speaking, writing, photography, video, installation and performance. There were also a number of Fluxus-associated artists at Rutgers, including Geoff Hendricks, with whom I studied performance, and that was a strong influence. So, where postmodernism, debates about painting and its relevance, abstraction, and political and ethical responsibility as an artist were concerned, this was



Leon Golub  
*Interrogation II*, 1980–1981  
acrylic on canvas  
120 x 168 in, 305 x 427 cm  
Collection Art Institute of Chicago  
Gift of Society for Contemporary Art

a territory both Golub and Rosler had been navigating for many years, and in which we were also very much immersed at Rutgers.

Seminars were focused mainly on the continental philosophy that was informing art theory at the time, in the USA, Europe, and elsewhere: Baudrillard, Barthes, Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, Jameson, Kristeva, Lacan, Lukács and Lyotard, for instance. We did not read Husserl or Merleau-Ponty. Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) was one of the first things we read but it was Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) that had the greatest impact on me because it raised doubts about the validity of painting as a practice if one wants to be a responsible cultural participant.

In his 1955 article 'A Critique of Abstract Expressionism'<sup>7</sup> Golub had aligned himself unambiguously with figuration, declaring abstract expressionism, then well established and respected, to be dehumanized, anonymous, and irresponsible in its denial of representation. Theodor Adorno's 1970 text 'Black as an Ideal,' was also emblematic of the attitude that painting was retrograde and unethical. It also problematized art-making more broadly and included a critique of color as frivolous:

If works of art are to survive in the context of extremity and darkness, which is social reality, and if they are to avoid being sold as mere comfort, they have to assimilate themselves to that reality. Radical art today is the same as dark art: its background colour is black. Much of contemporary art is irrelevant because it does not take note of this fact, continuing instead to take a childish delight in bright colours. The ideal of blackness is, in substantive terms, one of the most profound impulses of abstract art. It may be that naïve tinkering with sound and colours that is current now is a response to the impoverishment wrought by the ideal of

blackness. It may also be that one day art will be able to invalidate that ideal without committing an act of treachery. Brecht may have had an inkling of this when he put down these verses: 'What an age is this anyway where/A conversation about trees is almost a crime/Because it entails being silent about so many misdeeds?' By being voluntarily poor itself, art indicts the unnecessary poverty of society ... The injustice inherent in all cheerful art, especially in the form of entertainment, is an injustice against the stored-up and speechless suffering of the dead.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to its perceived separation from everyday life, painting, especially abstract painting, was also seen as irresponsible because of its association with spiritual transcendence and escapism, both of which Marxist critique had rejected. It was seen as an individual rather than collective practice which prioritized visibility and beauty, both of which were then being strongly devalued. There was also the anti-art/anti-aesthetic influence of Duchamp and the Dadaists and the Situationists International (SI).<sup>9</sup> 'In 1961–62, the group famously declared all art "anti-Situationist" and expelled the remaining artists from the group.'<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile Asger Jorn continued to work as a painter employing a very specific set of painting practices and interventions designed as détournements<sup>11</sup>.

The death of painting conversations took place in the larger post-war context of endings and deaths: Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Towards a New Novel* (1963); Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (1967); Arthur Danto's essay 'The End of Art' (1984) published in the book *The Death of Art* edited by Berel Lang, and Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* (1989). These death/ending ideas—which, in my view, may actually have been a death of modernism conversation—had an important and continuing legacy although painting was still living during that period. Painting has witnessed a resurgence since the early 2000s, not as the premier form of art, but as one among many forms of practice for contemporary visual artists.

Indeed, Robert Slifkin noted in 2013 that a 'generation of scholars [and painters] has emerged ... with no memory of the [death of painting] period and no personal stake in the original debates around it.'<sup>12</sup>

**JORELLA ANDREWS** There was a strong neo-conceptualist turn in art-making during your early years as a painter, and the creation of work that had an overtly political or activist agenda, not only in the west but around the world. Art history and theory, too, were focused on issues of semiotics and social contextualization. Ironically, though, this period of proliferating assertions not only around the death of painting but also the 'death' of authorship understood as authority, was precisely the historical moment when multiple, non-hegemonic and dissenting voices were just beginning to find expression. There is a strange paradox here.

**LEAH DURNER** Yes, the death of the author agenda was anti-authoritarian and emancipatory in intent. It was meant to place a new emphasis on the spheres of reception and responsiveness, but I have also always been rather suspicious of this idea. Is it evidence of a deeply embedded sexism/racism/classism in the work of even the most advanced thinkers that, just as women and other marginalized people around the world begin to gain a voice politically, it is also asserted that the voice *cannot* be considered authoritative? Is it a way to keep denying women, the poor, and people of color authorship and agency?—although even using these group identity terms I find to be reductive and dehumanizing. It is not enough simply to address the issue of voice in order to redress oppression. Women and other marginalized people need access to money and resources as access to power. How does 'having a voice' or 'being visible' increase access to power?<sup>13</sup> By power I mean the power to have full agency as a human being. Power and agency are not necessarily equivalent to domination. When I refer to the 'voice' of women and other marginalized people, I also need to be aware that such terms—'voice', 'speech', 'language', and the 'verbal'—have multiple and

unstable meanings. Consider, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's evocations in 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' of speech as gesture, as embodied language, which of course is also powerfully visual.<sup>14</sup>

Barthes' text 'The Death of the Author'<sup>15</sup> appeared at a significant moment—circulated during the May 1968 student riots on Paris—and was intended to challenge systems of power. Its first English-language publication was in the American journal *Aspen* in 1967 and it was later published in 1977 in *Image-Music-Text* and then in *The Rustle of Language* (1984). (More on [Aspen](#).) To me the error in subsequent discussions about this concept is in confusing authorship with authoritarianism. This is an example of how a liberating concept can subsequently be used to deny agency to others.

The death of painting/death of art debates arose when the cataclysms of 1914–1945 were still resounding loudly—two world wars, revolution, the rise of totalitarianism, genocide, displacement, economic depression, and famine—with tens of millions of people killed and maimed. They still resound today and are intertwined within contemporary contexts and concerns. Have we ever been able to fully mourn that period? This question complicates and expands any discussion of the post war period. Yves-Alain Bois addressed this in his essay 'Painting: The Task of Mourning' in the catalogue for the 1986 ICA Boston exhibition, called, tellingly, *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*. In it, he wrote that:

Painting might not be dead. Its vitality will only be tested once we are cured of our mania and our melancholy, and we believe again in our ability to act in history: accepting our project of working through to the end again rather than evading it through increasingly elaborate mechanisms of defence (this is what mania and melancholy are about) and settling our historical task: the difficult task of mourning.<sup>16</sup>

I see the post-war era as extending into the early 1970s. I came of age in the early 70s and I knew I was living in a dystopian period. The rise of neo-conservatism, economic stagnation, the elections of Margaret Thatcher (1979) and Ronald Reagan (1980) and their anti-social and inhumane policies cemented this understanding. Beyond that, as Henry A. Giroux has discussed, neoliberalism and its ideology of hardness<sup>7</sup> and cruelty has taken over the United States.

Under the regime of neoliberalism, especially in the United States, war has become an extension of politics as almost all aspects of society have been transformed into a combat zone. Americans now live in a society in which almost everyone is spied on, considered a potential terrorist, and subject to a mode of state and corporate lawlessness in which the arrogance of power knows no limits.... Moreover, as society becomes increasingly militarized and political concessions become relics of a long-abandoned welfare state hollowed out to serve the interest of global markets, the collective sense of ethical imagination and social responsibility toward those who are vulnerable or in need of care is now viewed as a scourge or pathology.<sup>18</sup>

The post-1970s neoliberal age has created a very different set of circumstances for understanding history.

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Having said all of this, you've also remarked that while you were working between Rosler and Golub during the 1980's, with your knowledge of the New York scene, and despite your first-hand experience of being immersed in an often conflicted and therefore challenging artistic and intellectual environment, you nonetheless didn't feel *deep down* that painting and ideas, or painting and politics, were incompatible. Quite the contrary—and I think that this is an important point. Oppositional mythologies and supposed incompatibilities often get built up within the realm of art history and theory, perhaps because of the impact of a particularly

polemical text, or due to a reductive understanding of the nature and scope of a key concept or practice—like what it might mean to be socially or politically engaged—and they start to cast doubt on those deeper intuitions. In actuality, oppositional approaches to sense-making, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrated so powerfully, often contradict what artists, like you, were actually doing, thinking and experiencing. False distinctions get built up, when the reality was much more complex and entangled.

**LEAH DURNER** Complex and entangled are great descriptors! At that time, I did experience being a painter as a heavily compromised position and I felt conflicted, suspect, and full of doubt. I kept painting nevertheless while also making text-based conceptual work. It was all about living in conflict and still acting. For me, in a sense, painting at that time was an act of rebellion. However, I am not a declared partisan for painting as opposed to other forms. Painting was, and still is, where I live as an artist. At the same time, I did not agree with assessments of painting as an elitist practice, inevitably in collusion with systems of domination—probably the most prominent accusations that were directed towards it.

We need to remember the agency of the artist. Painting is an act of which one of its products is a visual object. Painting is also an act of philosophy. In 1998 I wrote a paper (on a crucifix misidentified as an early work by Michelangelo) in which I discussed theology as explicated, 'written,' if you will, through the work of art. In Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy theology was explicated not only through texts. Painting, sculpture, music, and architecture were an actual working out of theological concepts, not merely tools with which to convey established doctrine to the illiterate. Indeed, lingering Protestant iconoclastic, anti-sensualist attitudes played an important role in (especially American) anti-painting theory. I met director and playwright Julia Barclay-Morton in 2014, and discovered we had been working independently along similar lines. In 'Practicing



Leah Durner  
*Can't Swallow*  
from the Seven Warning Signs of Cancer series, 1985  
acrylic on paper  
each panel 38 x 50 in, 96.52 x 127 cm  
overall dimensions 38 x 102 in, 96.52 x 259.08 cm  
Collection of the artist



Leah Durner  
*Swept Away*, 1983  
 acrylic on paper  
 20 X 24 in, 50.8 x 60.96 cm  
 Collection of the artist

Philosophies' (2009), a paper revised from her Ph.D. thesis, she set forth this idea well in her discussion of theatre as a philosophical practice. 'Theatre', she wrote

.... has the potential to be an act of philosophy. Theatre can offer experiences that give us a way of 'relearning to look at the world'—Merleau-Ponty's definition of philosophy<sup>19</sup>—so that we re-examine our assumptions about reality, which is arguably the goal of most philosophical writing. Whilst theatre does not supersede philosophy as its own discipline, given that poststructuralist philosophy has left us with a radical critique of any kind of stable base from which to analyze the world, theatre offers a potential place (as it has for millennia within different philosophical contexts) where embodied concepts can shift and stumble and contradict one another without having to resolve into an argument to be defended and yet with the rigor (i.e., the necessity) that the concepts must engage with living bodies in a room in a specific shared moment in time ... If, as Deleuze says, his philosophy is 'by nature creative or even revolutionary, because it's always creating concepts',<sup>20</sup> so too, I would argue, can artistic works whose object and results include the creation of concepts be considered philosophical or even revolutionary. The image is of two interlocking circles and the space wherein they overlap being the place where certain philosophical texts can be considered artistic and certain theatrical events can be considered acts of philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

**JORELLA ANDREWS** What sort of work were you making when at Rutgers, and beyond? Also, didn't you get involved in curating during that period?

**LEAH DURNER** I started curating after I left Rutgers, including *Real Property: A Contemporary Landscape Show* (1986) for City Without Walls, an alternative space in Newark and *Ruination* (1990) at Wake Forest University,

both of which addressed issues of gentrification, land use, and social formation. In 1987, I curated *Aspects of Conceptualism in American Work*, for Avenue B Gallery in the East Village, a two-part exhibition which traced conceptualism from the Dadaists through the Pictures Generation. For Part One, *Historical Precedents*, I used Duchamp as the starting point for his direct influence on the American avant-garde beginning with *Fountain*, 1917. For Part Two, *Modern and Contemporary Conceptualism*, I used John Cage as a starting point, as a composer, artist, and teacher who influenced many Fluxus artists.

It was through curating that I was introduced to phenomenology. In 1990, when working on the exhibition *Dan Graham: Public/Private* (1994), for which I served as special consultant, I had a series of conversations with Graham and wrote an (unpublished) essay on his oeuvre. Graham had read deeply in Husserl and his performances and installations, especially *Intention Intentionality Sequence* (1972) and his two-way mirrored glass works had a strong engagement with the body and inter-subjectivity. Having started by reading Husserl, I then became interested in Merleau-Ponty as the philosopher who is, for me, the most humane of thinkers, who addressed our bodily experience in the world, whose prose is itself beautiful, and who also specifically engaged with painterly practice.

In the 1980s and early 1990s I continued to paint but worked primarily on political/conceptual work that required research, that had physical and aesthetic presence, sensuousness of materials, used black as a color, and which addressed the figure/ground relationship. The play of figure and ground has been a formal concern in modernist painting and was also addressed by Gestalt Theory. Later, I related this to Merleau-Ponty's concern with figure and ground and the idea that we are not subject/object or figure/ground but are continuous with and embedded in the living world. I become interested in his idea of *promiscuité* (promiscuity)—the



intermingling of seer and seen, self and world, as well as the incompleteness of all our projects. The first of these conceptual works were in my *Texts* series of 1985–1992. My original (1987) statement regarding *Texts* provides a succinct description:

Works in the *Texts* series pull common phrases out of the cultural stream. Each piece has multiple meanings that emerge depending on the viewer's physical, political, and psychological point of view. The background (ground) is very heavily built up with compressed charcoal which creates a velvety black matte surface. The text (figure) is very heavily built up with graphite which creates a very shiny surface. The text emerges from the background when light reflects off the shiny surface of the graphite. When light does not hit the graphite, the piece looks like a simple black rectangle and the text nearly disappears into the background. (See [Ad Reinhardt](#).)

**JORELLA ANDREWS** So you were working between the conceptual, the painterly and the aesthetic all along and in a way that was, well, promiscuous, to re-use that word of Merleau-Ponty's.

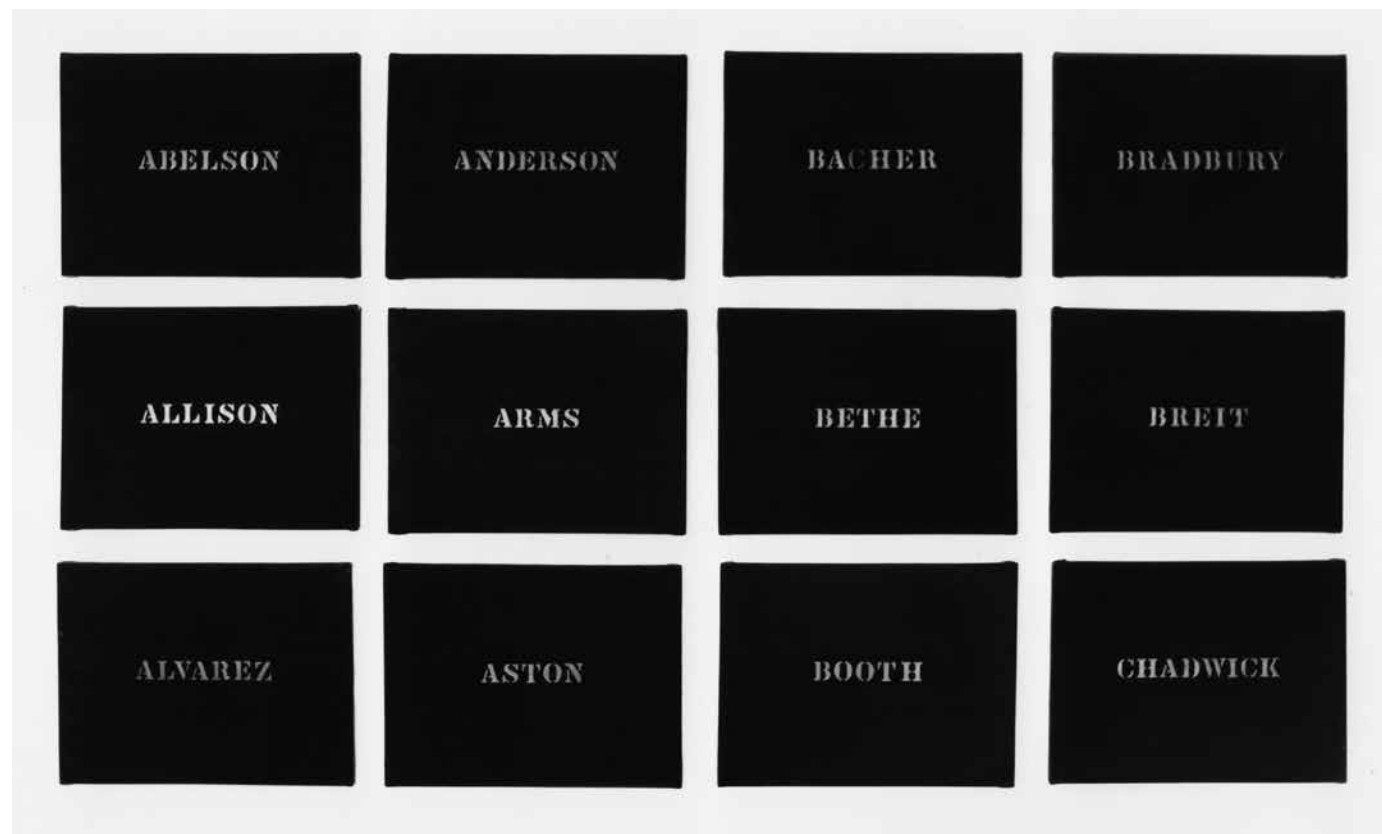
**LEAH DURNER** Yes. The aesthetics of the conceptual text-based works were very important. I also wanted to create works that had a somatic force because of their materiality, their tactile aspects (the matte/velvety quality of the surfaces of certain of these works was especially important), and their visual presence and scale. If you did touch them, your hands would become dirty; the works could come off on you. Getting dirty, having dirty hands, is important to me in relation to 'good clean dirt', and doing a day's work. (I come from a line of mill workers, farmers, and builders so dirty hands are familiar and beautiful to me—I think of the hands of my grandparents.) Dirty hands can also implicate one in the whole messy business of being human and being a day

laborer (see Kierkegaard's example of the day laborer in *The Sickness Unto Death* of 1849).<sup>22</sup> A dirty hand is not the same as a bloody hand. Also, we humans are 'carbon-based lifeforms', if you will, and compressed charcoal is pure carbon, so charcoal—the material used for the works—is of a piece with the material of our bodies. This makes material Merleau-Ponty's declaration that 'The world is made of the same stuff as the body'.<sup>23</sup> (Painting, drawing, and gardening, I get my hands dirty and take direct action with materials.) A related piece, *We are Stardust, We are Golden, We are Billion Year Old Carbon* (1984), was based on Joni Mitchell's song *Woodstock* (1969). The next line in the song, 'and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden,' expresses a utopian vision of peace, companionship with each other and with the divine, and personal and environmental prelapsarian innocence. The earliest pigments used by painters were earth colors—blacks, oxides, ochres, and umbers (Philip Guston called paint 'colored dirt').

The fact that the *Texts* were black on black was also aesthetically and conceptually important. The background was dense, dark and mysterious while the light reflecting, or not, off the graphite words evoked subliminal messaging. This was apt, because the phrases I was recording—*Feast or Famine*, (1986) and *Useless* (1987), among many others—were ones that we may use in everyday speech. When they are lit, brought to attention, we realize the enormity and the multiple meanings of these accustomed phrases: the expression 'feast or famine' slips off the tongue but in reality people are dying of hunger while others indulge; the word 'useless' points to the devaluation of children, the elderly, and others who cannot perform labor, and is a call to take the radical stance of being a 'useless' member of society (see also Guy Debord's 1963 graffiti, "Ne traivallez jamais."); when read as two words, it is a call to opt out of consumerism. The *Texts* were also informed by Barthes' *Mythologies*<sup>24</sup>—the idea of holding up for inspection, if you will, a commonplace phrase, in order to reveal the multiple



Leah Durner  
*Feast or Famine* from the *Texts* series, 1986  
compressed charcoal and graphite on Fabriano paper  
38 x 50 in, 96.52 x 127 cm  
Collection of the artist

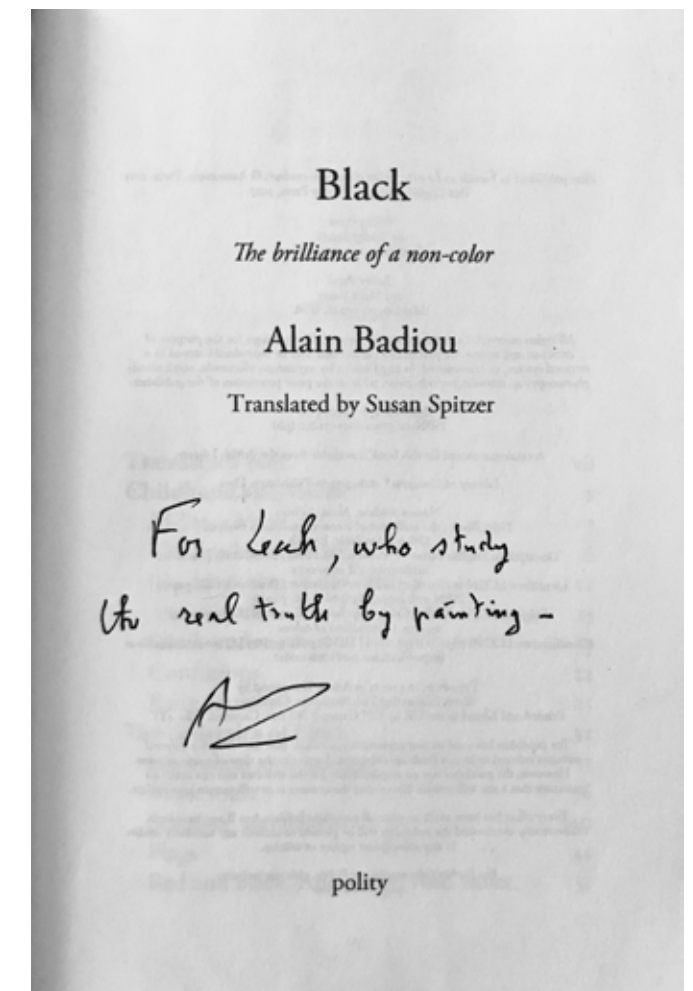


Leah Durner  
*Scientists*, 1988–1989  
 sumi ink and graphite on paper mounted on canvas  
 each panel: 18 x 24 in, 45.72 x 60.96 cm  
 12 of the 112 panels, total dimensions variable  
 Collection of the artist

meanings and assumptions behind it, and also pointing to the ‘mass production in word and thought’.<sup>25</sup> They are also less directly influenced by Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Received Ideas* (1880), which was appended to his final, unfinished novel *Bouvard and Pecuchet*<sup>26</sup> and in which he hilariously flays commonplaces and clichés. *Texts* also refer to the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt. Reinhardt is a touchstone painter for me. Reinhardt was adamant about the absolute matte surface of his black paintings (which are actually ‘not black’ but very dark) so that they would absorb light; he was strongly opposed to a glossy surface which would become a mirror and reflect the outside world.<sup>27</sup> He prepared his paint so that nearly all the oil was leached out of it thus producing that matte and very fragile surface. Reinhardt’s black paintings invited touch. In many of his early exhibitions protective barriers and ‘Do Not Touch’ signs had to be installed since many paintings were besmirched by oils from the hands of people who had reached out to touch them.<sup>28</sup> In addition, black as a color was very important to my work. Black is rich with associations which—while also always remaining aware of its problematically raced usages—range from darkness, night, and fear, to elegance, simplicity, and sobriety. Black can be both full and empty. Black can be not merely reductive but enveloping and embracing. In *Texts* the positive/negative associations we have with black alternate just as its figure/ground relationships alternate with the lighting.

I employed the tactile appeal of surface,<sup>29</sup> and black as a color, in other conceptual works, including a number of projects focused on the United States’ nuclear program—nuclear weapons testing was still taking place during this period with the last US nuclear test performed on September 23, 1992. Among these works were *Scientists* (1988–90), multiple units made from sumi ink and graphite on paper stretched over canvas. Each unit measures 45.72 x 60.96 cm and contains the surname of a scientist involved in the development of

the atomic bomb. The *Powder* series (1986–1989) were images of nuclear clouds and fallout shelter symbols made from powdered charcoal, powdered graphite, and powdered titanium dioxide pounded into raw canvas. *Detonations* (1989) was a proposed installation designed to be printed as wallpaper and intended to cover all the walls of a gallery space; it was a chronological list of all nuclear tests performed on earth—by 1989 about 1,800—by members of the nuclear club (United States, Russia, France, China, United Kingdom, Israel, Pakistan, India, North Korea). *Detonations* already existed in a printed format, and the installation was intended to create a site for lectures, panels, and actions regarding the new, more diffuse post-Cold War tensions of nuclear politics.



Alain Badiou, *Black: The brilliance of a non-color* (2015), English translation by Susan Spitzer published by Polity Press, Cambridge, 2017. Title page dedication by Alain Badiou to Leah Durner, written on Friday 27 October 2017 at Badiou’s lecture “Humanity and The Question of the Other,” at Albertine, bookshop of the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, New York.



Other works that used black as a color and appealed to the nonvisual senses were *Silence* (1988) and *Revolution* (1989), designs for large-scale curtains in black velvet akin to theatre curtains with the text appliquéd onto them in black velvet, again making the text obscure, not readily discernible, against the ground. In addition to the visual and tactile qualities of these works there was an auditory reference; the curtains actually muffle sound. In *Silence* this becomes a descriptor of one of the work's effects, and in *Revolution* it becomes a metaphor for the nonviolent 'soft' or 'velvet' revolution of the former Czechoslovakia.

1989 was a remarkable year on so many levels, politically, with Gorbachev's perestroika and the end of the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union, the Berlin Wall coming down, the Velvet Revolution as mentioned, the Romanian revolution, the beginning of apartheid's collapse in South Africa (1989–1991), the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie.

Also in 1989—and this was an issue of particular concern to me—was a series of legal and legislative actions regarding the desecration (so-called) of the flag of the United States. In *Texas v. Johnson*

(1989),<sup>30</sup> the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a Texas statute prohibiting desecrations of the US flag was unconstitutional and that burning the US flag is a protected form of free speech. Within months, as a direct counter-response, the US Congress passed the Flag Protection Act, which criminalized the burning of the US flag and sought to punish any person who 'knowingly mutilates, defaces, physically defiles, burns, maintains on the floor or ground, or tramples upon any U.S. flag ....' A year later, in *U.S. v. Eichman* (1990),<sup>31</sup> the Supreme Court found the Flag Protection Act unconstitutional, after which Congress attempted to pass a Constitutional Amendment to 'prohibit physical desecration' of the US flag, which to-date has not been ratified.

*Flag Burning* (1990, acrylic on paper, five units, each 127 × 96.52 cm), shows the sequence of a US flag being burned, from the first lick of the flame to the flag's near total consumption in the fire. There were a number of considerations in this piece, the primary one being that the prosecution of Johnson, the passage of the Flag Act, and the attempted passage of a constitutional amendment prohibiting desecration of the flag were, in fact, more destructive to constitutional freedoms—including freedom of speech—than the act of burning a flag, which is a constitutionally permitted act. Also significant was the philosophical conjunction of flag as symbol and painting as representation: the flag as a flat object similar to the painting's substrate and the visual similarity between the red stripes of the flag and the flames. In this way, *Flag Burning* returned me to a much more painterly mode of working and to discovering content that was philosophically and materially concomitant with painting.



Leah Durner  
*Nuclear Cloud* from the Powder series, 1987  
 powdered charcoal and powdered titanium dioxide pounded into raw canvas  
 54 x 60 in, 137.16 x 152.4 cm  
 Collection of the artist

Leah Durner  
*Detonations*, 1989  
 wall paper installation of all nuclear tests performed on Earth as of October 1989  
 dimensions variable  
 Collection of the artist

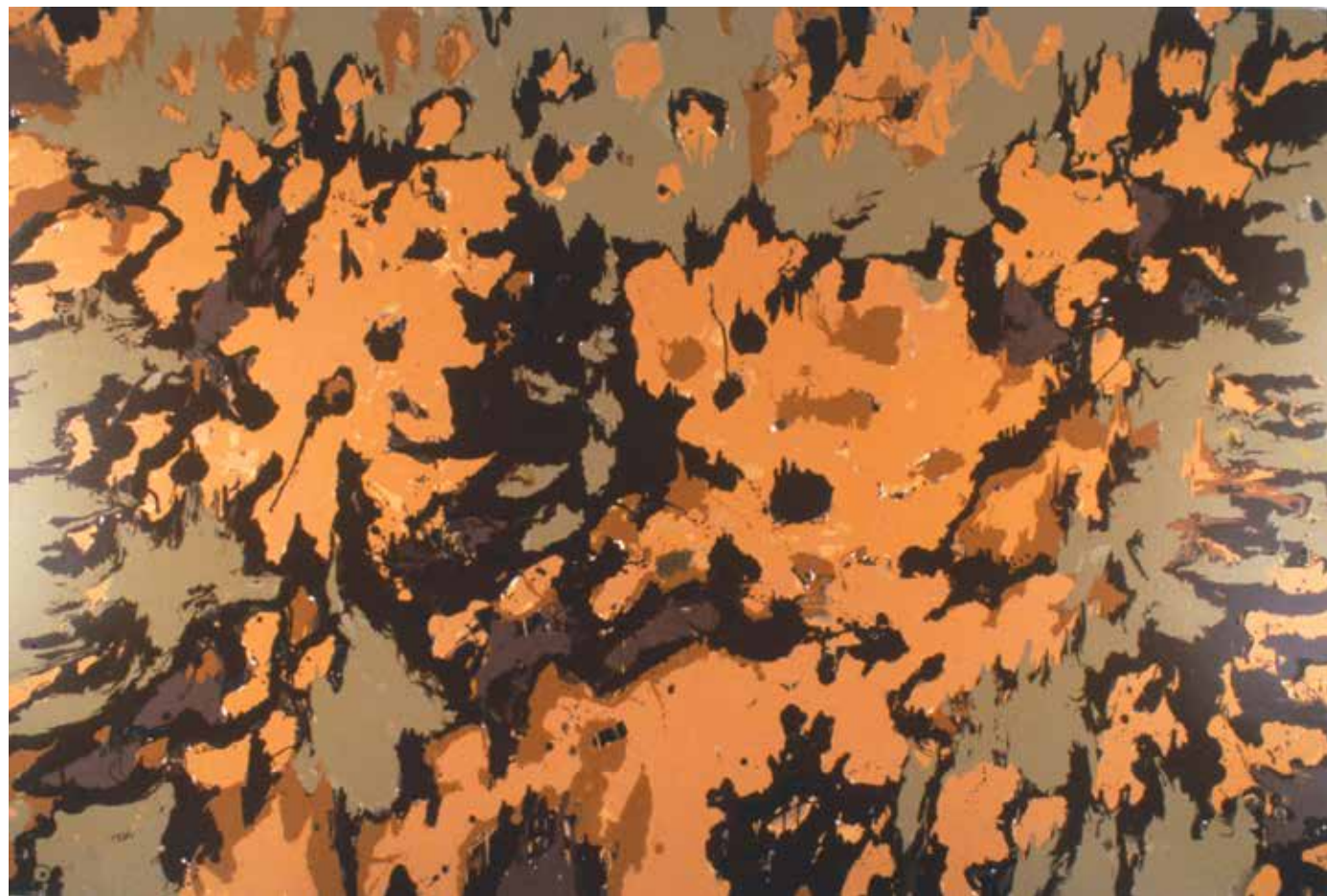


Leah Durner  
*Flag Burning*, 1990  
acrylic on paper  
each panel 50 x 38 in, 127 x 96.52 cm  
overall dimensions 50 x 206 in, 127 x 523.24 cm  
Collection of the artist

## POST-CONCEPTUAL PAINTING: ABSTRACT, GESTURAL, POURED

JORELLA ANDREWS The moment of the *Flag Burning* project is very interesting. On the one hand, as you say, political content, materiality, and a gestural approach to painting all came together in this project in a very special way. But on the other hand, this project also marked a turning point because from then on the more immediately obvious political content that had always been important to your work dropped out of your art practice and the painterly and the gestural, which had also always been important, intensified and took over. From a pictorial point of view, this was a shift towards abstraction. This was a significant development given your training—I'm thinking not only of that strong conceptual background that was there with Rosler's teaching but also back to Golub's 1955 critique of precisely the mode of abstract and expressive art-making you were now starting to make—although you did still go to add a number of pieces to the ongoing *Texts* series. How interesting that it was though your work on the *Flag Burning* project, which was all about the importance of speech, and free speech, that you found yourself being gripped and redirected by abstraction.

This didn't mean that you stopped being interested in politics. But you began to rebalance the way in which concerns with painting and the political, and concerns with verbal and non-verbal forms of communication manifested themselves in your work. Your *Camouflage* series begun in 1989—which we will talk about in more detail shortly—embodied this shift and seemed to set a precedent for the interests around painterly abstraction that still drive your work today.



Leah Durner  
*WW2 German Oak Leaf Pattern green*  
from the *Camouflage* series, 1989  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
72 x 96 in, 182.88 x 243.84 cm  
Collection of the artist

LEAH DURNER You make a very interesting point with respect to my turning away from an overtly enunciated concern with language, and rebalancing the verbal/non-verbal constellations of my work apropos the political. This is where challenging the false idea of oppositional ‘camps’ (the conceptual and the painterly), that you mentioned earlier, comes into play. Speech is regarded as fundamental to the formation of political ideas and political calls to action.<sup>32</sup> However, just as philosophy can be explicated visually so can politics. I agree with Irit Rogoff’s observation that ‘...[A]rt does not have to be overtly political in its subject matter in order to produce a political effect thus constituting a politics rather than reflecting one.’<sup>33</sup> It is by interpreting the visual in Cartesian terms as separating the subject from the object that the error occurs and this is why Merleau-Ponty is important to an understanding of painting and its many possible effects and affects. Once the painter and the painting are viewed in terms of their embeddedness in the world, that separation is removed and with it the domination/submission, verbal/nonverbal, political/personal model.

In my essay, ‘Gestural Abstraction and the Fleshiness of Paint’ (2001, published 2004),<sup>34</sup> I made a point about the ineffability of painting making it suspect because the ineffability of painting had become conflated with the concept of the infantilism of the painter. Both words, ‘ineffable’ and ‘infant,’ have as their root the Latin word *fari*, to speak. Thus, the ineffable is that which cannot be spoken and an infant is a person who is as yet unable to speak. A theme that keeps coming out in our conversation is the falseness of oppositional thinking and separation, which is why a break with the Cartesian way of being in the world is of foundational importance. For instance, opposing the linguistic to the visual is a false distinction. Merleau-Ponty discusses both language and painting as rooted in perception and states that both reach us across silence: ‘...all language is indirect or allusive ... it is, if you wish, silence. The relation of

meaning to the spoken word can no longer be a point for point correspondence that we always have clearly in mind’.<sup>35</sup> In the years since I wrote the essay—which I stand by—I have been living and working in a new way in the world that is not hard and oppositional. This is why extravagance, largesse, and overflowing are so important to me.

My turn to a more painterly mode in the early 1990s was not a retirement from engaging with the world, but a turn to a different, and for me, deeper, way of engaging with it. Also, my turn to abstraction and engagement with the painterly—building a painting with color—was a way of addressing joy as a theoretical issue in art, a joy that is deeper than sorrow, an art that could become an invitation to joy as transformation. My thinking on this was also informed by the roundelay in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which includes the phrase ‘Joy—deeper yet than misery.’<sup>36</sup>

While addressing the painterly tradition, my painting since 1990 has at the same time addressed conceptualism. In a sense post-conceptual painting always includes an address to conceptualism. However, painting cannot be reduced to a conceptual practice<sup>37</sup>. The *Camouflage* series (1989–1992) were works in poured enamel on canvas and acrylic on paper that still had a strongly political and philosophical basis while appearing abstract. Sourced from a series of catalogues of German WW2 camouflage design authored by Jean-François Borsarello, a French physician and amateur military historian who studied and catalogued military camouflage, I developed themes of long-standing interest with respect to relationships between power and expression, but now with a strongly visual emphasis. I was concerned with practices of concealment, with the play of appearance and disappearance and the political and the aesthetically pleasing; about the power of surreptitious modes of expression, and of hiddenness as a means of gaining dominance over others.



Leah Durner  
*WW2 German Oak Leaf Pattern green*  
from the Camouflage series, 1989  
acrylic on paper  
60 x 90 in, 152.4 x 228.6 cm  
Collection of the artist

In support of the Nazi quest for territorial expansion and domination, the Germans had designed a greater number of camouflage patterns than any other nation, referencing a remarkable variety of terrains, climates, and seasons. Consisting of specific sets of codified visual and patterned references to the natural world, the printed/painted application of the camouflage designs to their various substrates played, or were intended to play, a crucial role in the successful pursuit of war. The paintings in this series appear harmless and even beautiful—they could easily be misinterpreted as purely decorative. Their large scale is also important in terms of their impact and commanding presence. I wanted to work with attraction and repulsion in relation to beauty—at the level of aesthetics and at the level of reception—and wanted to focus in on the old suspicion of beauty as both an inspiration and a snare. The viewer can be attracted by the decorative beauty of the apparently abstract painting and repulsed when the source of the design is discovered.

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Navigating conceptual as well as perceptual ambiguity is something in which you are very involved. What are some of the ways in which you have approached this?

**LEAH DURNER** The scintillation of figure and ground is important in all of my work, both in the earlier conceptual text pieces and in my paintings. I achieve this scintillation by several means, including: layering marks and colors which make it difficult to distinguish figure from ground, leaving areas of canvas or paper unmarked and open, and by having painted areas that don't fully meet or flow over the edge of the substrate. These effects again relate to Merleau-Ponty's idea of promiscuity – intermingling and incompleteness. There is also some relation to the contemporary trend of 'provisional'<sup>38</sup> and 'casualist' painting which the painter and arts writer Sharon Butler has described as being concerned with 'multiple forms of imperfection: not merely what is unfinished but also the off-kilter, the

overtly offhand, the not-quite-right.'<sup>39</sup> She added that here the idea is to 'embrace everything that seems to lend itself to visual intrigue—including failure'.<sup>40</sup> The expanded field of painting includes the imperfect. In fact, the idea of incompleteness is carried within the word imperfect: 'perfect' comes from the Latin *per* (thoroughly, completely) + *facere* (to make or do), so that which is perfect is that which is completely made and that which is imperfect is that which is incompletely made.

However, in accord with our non-oppositional commitments, my engagements with the incomplete and the imperfect sit alongside the fact that I was trained rigorously in traditional academic skills in my undergraduate program and at the Art Students League in New York City, where I studied anatomy and figure drawing with Robert Beverly Hale. Through him my pedagogical lineage extends back to Jean-Louis David. I am highly skilled as a colorist and a traditional draughtsman (to use the old term). I do not eschew or deny mastery of a skill. For those of us who have *been mastered*, our own authorship and mastery of a skill or form needs to be claimed—mastery of a skill is not necessarily related to domination. The 2016 Kerry James Marshall exhibition entitled (and brilliantly spelled) *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*<sup>41</sup> addressed this, doubly-framing the work of an African-American painter by foregrounding his mastery of technique in a way that also contained the historically- and culturally-freighted meanings of the word 'master.'

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Perhaps you could say more about the large-scale works you were making at this time, not on canvas, but on paper?

**LEAH DURNER** Between 1995 and 2005, I painted primarily on paper due to my low income, an example of the impact of dealing with limited resources. The 2005 statement I wrote to accompany these pieces addressed ideas of casualness and simple economy:



Leah Durner  
*Oxides*, 2001  
acrylic on paper  
60 x 54 in 152.4 x 137.16 cm  
Collection of the artist





Leah Durner  
*yelloworange bluegreen, 2003*  
 acrylic on paper  
 approx 54 x 57 inches 137.16 x 144.78 cm  
 Private collection

Paper cut roughly from the roll; strokes of paint barely bounded and incompletely covering the naked paper surface; paint running by force of gravity and scattering drops along the bottom edge of the sheet; overlapping, brushed out, and smeared color applied opaquely and transparently; color that is in places sweet, sonorous, or sickly; minimal materials (just pencil and paint, paper, brush, and knife); and baroque sensibility (a lifetime of, among other things, painting, drawing, looking, reading, thinking, speaking, listening, laughing, crying, and praying)—it is impossible to be cool when every day the messy reality of life is calling out to be met.

The paintings each have a completeness that seems to be contradicted by their casual craftsmanship. Into each painting is poured the complete attention and physical strength of the artist and that already mentioned lifetime of painting. The paintings are informed by the historical tradition of the painterly—extending back to the Venetians of the Renaissance, through the American Abstract Expressionists and up to today in the trend of extreme abstraction.

Fashion as an art also informs the paintings—the ‘sick color’ of Miuccia Prada’s Spring 1996 collection was especially influential in daring to be ugly-beautiful. And the dandy—who stood before the mirror tying, undoing, and retying his cravat until he had achieved the perfect appearance of carelessness—is an older brother who reminds us to refuse the laborious and to look over there where ‘*Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, Luxe, calme et volupté.*’<sup>42</sup>

JORELLA ANDREWS Two factors are central to the work you’ve been producing since 1989 and exclusively since 1995. First your engagements with abstraction: your gestural abstractions on the one hand, and your poured

works on the other. As you’ve already argued this was absolutely not a regressive or conservative turn in your work to a kind of esoteric, uncommunicative, ‘art for art’s sake’ formalism although work of this kind has, until recently, frequently been dismissed as such. And second—but actually, this is interconnected—your engagements with colour. Why have these two issues become dominant, and remained dominant for so long? What do they mean to you?

LEAH DURNER In 1995 I was thinking about abstraction in western painting as an unfinished project; that there was a richness there, still to be brought forth—that ‘digging in the same place’ you had discussed apropos Merleau-Ponty. I’m especially interested in various relations among abstraction, materials, and thought, particularly embodied, intercorporeal, and lived thought as it was explored in Merleau-Ponty’s work. Also, as a painter, I have never considered there to be a great divide between abstraction and figuration—something that Merleau-Ponty discusses in ‘Eye and Mind’: ‘... the dilemma between figurative and non-figurative art is badly posed; it is true and uncontradictory that no grape was ever what it is in the most figurative painting and that no painting, no matter how abstract, can get away from Being, that even Caravaggio’s grape is the grape itself.’<sup>43</sup>

That said, the early 2000s saw the start of a resurgence in abstraction—albeit very different from modernist abstraction. Before then, several exhibitions stood out for me in terms of opening up important discussions apropos painting, beginning with Marcia Tucker’s 1978 exhibition, *Bad Painting* (which wasn’t about abstraction, but opened up the discussion of quality in painting) at the New Museum, New York. Then: *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* of 1985 at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), curated by Maurice Tuchman with Judi Freeman; the Guggenheim Museum’s 1996 *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* curated by Mark Rosenthal; the

Pompidou's 2002 *Dear Painter, paint me... Painting the Figure since late Picabia* curated by Alison M. Gingeras, Sabine Folie, and Blazenska Perica (again not about abstraction but important for painting; even at that late date the Director's Preface discussed the death of painting as a very recent battle<sup>44</sup>); *Extreme Abstraction* at the Albright-Knox (Buffalo, New York)'s in 2005 curated by Louis Grachos and Claire Schneider, which I consider the clearest marker for the emergence of a new attitude towards painting and abstraction; and the Kitchen's 2010 show *Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture*, among many others.

In addition, the 1988 Art Gallery of Ontario exhibition, *Gerhard Richter Paintings*, which I saw at its Hirshhorn Museum venue with curator Richard Torchia—who has a particular interest in conceptual work—was important because Richter is a 'painter's painter' while always engaging the political and the photographic. In his work. He is able to incorporate all modern and contemporary concerns into his oeuvre and he even references his own oeuvre, with its variations over time, which can be seen as a kind of critique of a consistent body of work.

What happens in painting is so much larger than those old oppositions allow us to discuss (those 'oppositional mythologies' you mentioned earlier). I am not creating oppositions between painting and idea, abstraction and figuration. I am interested in opening up *everything*. As Merleau-Ponty said:

What is irreplaceable in the work of art, what makes it, far more than a means of pleasure, a spiritual organ whose analogue is found in all productive philosophical or political thought, is the fact that it contains, better than ideas *matrices of ideas*—providing us with emblems whose meaning we never stop developing. Precisely because it dwells and makes us dwell in a world we do not have

the key to, the work of art teaches us to see and ultimately gives us something to think about as no analytical work can...<sup>45</sup>

This idea of a meaning that we never stop developing and a world that we do not have the key to also relates strongly to my interest in extravagance and overflowing, incompleteness and the unknown. In addition to extravagance, movement and action are important to me because I constantly fight my own inertia and tendency toward isolation. Maurice Blondel's *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice* (1893) is also another major influence on my thought—not as reference to 'action painting' but as reference to the inescapable decision each of us must make to act, or not to act, in this life. Blondel's book relates back to the idea I discussed earlier of painting as an act of philosophy. In his words:

Action is that method of precision, that laboratory test, where, without ever understanding the details of the operations, I receive the sure answer no dialectical artifice can replace. That is where competence is to be found no matter if it costs dearly. If I try to evade decisive initiatives I am enslaved for not having acted. If I go ahead, I am subjugated to what I have done. In practice no one evades the problem of practice.<sup>46</sup>

I find the expanded field in the many ways in which ideas are formed in painting, in writing, in acting, in thinking, in conversing, as now, with you, Jorella.

JORELLA ANDREWS Colour is crucial in your work and was of course also sensitively and interestingly explored by Merleau-Ponty. The sensuousness of colour, like the 'fleshiness of paint,' as you have described it, can be seen as problematically threatening. In the anthology *Colour Codes* (1995), edited by Charles A. Riley II, Riley wrote that a decade of research had led him to conclude that



Leah Durner  
*redvioletyellowbgreen pour*, 2006  
*blueyellowviolet red pour*, 2006  
 poured latex enamel on canvas  
 each panel: 60 x 20 in  
 Collection Mandarin Oriental New York



colour ‘is a source of great anxiety for Modern artists and thinkers’ because there is something unbounded and—to use that term again—promiscuous, about colour. We find this theme in Merleau-Ponty’s writing too but while it can and does provoke anxiety Merleau-Ponty is more interested in the sense of promise it also carries with it; its capacity, when attended to, to provoke various de- and re-classifications. Not surprisingly, though, questions about the relative value of colour and line within the pictorial arts has been a topic of heated debate time and again, with line (understood as rational and disciplinary) traditionally being prioritized over the vagaries of colour. It’s there in Descartes’ *Optrics*, for instance. Traditionally, the relationship between the colour and line has been regarded as oppositional; another of those false binaries that Merleau-Ponty saw Cézanne’s art-making, for instance, to be challenging and breaking up.

The realm of colour is tricky, quite apart from its problematic cultural connotations in relation to race and the assignment of human value with which we are so familiar today. Colour as a modality is difficult to control which probably accounts for the ‘sheer multiplicity’<sup>47</sup> of

attempts to codify it, whether through sets of symbolic associations or variously structured, but never sufficient, classification systems. It has a tendency to refuse to stay where it has been put. Not only that, Riley cites then-recent research in the field of molecular biology that testifies to how highly subjective colour perception is: ‘... a difference between a single amino acid—the minimum genetic difference between two people—can cause a perceptible difference in colour vision,’ he wrote, then reporting that research carried out at the University of Washington in Seattle and at Johns Hopkins University ‘tracking the genetic basis of red photopigments, a type of protein,’ confirmed that ‘there is a nearly infinite number of ways to see red alone.’<sup>48</sup> Colour, and its study, also crosses disciplinary boundaries. The structure of Riley’s book witnesses to this: after his introductory chapter (entitled, rather nicely, ‘The Palette and the Table’—table as in colour chart), come chapters dealing first with ‘Colour in Philosophy,’ then in painting and architecture, in literature, in music, and finally in psychology.

Interestingly, where colour and the topic of the infantile are concerned—I’m picking up on your earlier comments about that term but am using it in a non-pejorative way—Riley turned to the writing of Kierkegaard (another of your favourite philosophers). Describing him as ‘one of philosophy’s most sensitive colourists’ he wrote that Kierkegaard ‘associated chromaticism (also a musical term) with childhood’:<sup>49</sup>

A moving entry in ‘Diapsalmata’, which begins the first volume of *Either/Or* [1843], captures the emotional force of the child’s colour world. All of *Either/Or* is essentially an attempt to link the aesthetic and the ethical in one intensely personal and psychologically complex philosophical statement. The reminiscence of [the activity of] childhood painting is an elegiac means of pulling together seeing and feeling in a medium that is now lost to him.<sup>50</sup>

He then cited Kierkegaard as follows:

How strangely sad I felt on seeing a poor man shuffling through the streets in a rather worn-out, light yellowish-green coat. I was sorry for him, but the thing that moved me most was that the color of this coat so vividly reminded me of my first childish productions in the noble art of painting. This color was precisely one of my vital hues. Is it not sad that these color mixtures, which I still think of with such pleasure, are found nowhere in life; the whole world thinks them harsh, bizarre, suitable only for Nuremberg pictures [i.e. amateurish, inexpensive illustrations that were popular at the time] ... And I, who always painted my heroes with this never-to-be-forgotten yellowish-green coloring on their coats! And is it not so with all the mingled colors of childhood? The hues that life once had gradually become too strong, too harsh, for our dim eyes.<sup>51</sup>

What does colour mean to you? Why are you drawn to it? And how have you been working with it?

LEAH DURNER Color can seem suspect, trivial, feminine, decorative, childish, and even savage. Color is able to elude capture in that it cannot be readily defined or even located and it is constantly changing. The old ‘line’ versus ‘color’ debate and its associations with the ‘monochromatic, linguistic, mathematical, rigorous, masculine, defined’ on the one hand versus the ‘colorful, visual, wordless, undisciplined, feminine, amorphous’ on the other hand, captures our attention and locks us in an oppositional stance that keeps us distracted while all the world is ‘churning and flowing’<sup>52</sup> around us. Again—this is a recurring theme in our conversation—whenever we encounter the oppositional set up we can melt it by shifting from a dualistic context to the ‘phenomenological attitude,’<sup>53</sup> which encompasses everything imperfectly. Additionally, as Julia Kristeva notes:

Although semiological approaches consider painting as a language, they do not allow an equivalent for colour within the elements of language identified by linguistics. Does it belong among phonemes, morphemes, phrases or lexemes? If it ever was fruitful, the language/painting analogy, when faced with the problem of colour, becomes untenable.<sup>54</sup>

In 2011 I started a series of works on colored papers that examined the materiality of color both as substrate and as applied to the surface. In these works color is confirmed as material both in the colored paper and in the paint applied to the surface of the colored paper. In each work, I used one paint color that was a match or near-match to the paper color, producing a conceptual and visual tension as to whether the color one was seeing was the color applied to the surface as paint or the color inhering in the paper. There was a visual and conceptual fluctuation between the color as painted (super) or unpainted (sub). And color as substrate has an even deeper meaning. In *The Exile’s Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*, Thomas McEvelley wrote that: ‘Color’s “ontological” aspect means that it is not only a quality, but an embodiment of the substrate of pure being and that it can exercise the force of pure being, beneath or beyond all qualities.’<sup>55</sup>

I exhibited a group of these works in my 2011 exhibition, *Naked Color, at 571 Projects in New York*. The ‘naked’ of the title again referred all at once to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of flesh, to the co-extensiveness of our bodies with all that surrounds us, and to the raw quality of paint application in my gestural work.

With color, our responses are not merely optical but also bodily. One’s entire body participates in both the creation and reception of a painting. For me, this bodily response to color, which is outside the realm of traditional semiotics, also recalls Marcel Proust whom Merleau-Ponty discusses in *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>56</sup> *In Search of Lost*

Guido Reni  
*The Union of Drawing and Color*, 1620—1625  
oil on canvas  
47.63 in, 121 cm diameter  
Collection Louvre Museum



*Time* is dense with visual images but is framed by non-visual sensory experiences that call forth the Narrator's memories. The first volume, *Swann's Way*, includes the famous scene in which the madeleine is dipped into the tisane (taste) which calls forth images of the Narrator's childhood. In the final volume, *Time Regained*, upon his arrival at the party which comprises the extended and culminating scene in the novel, the Narrator loses his balance on an uneven paving stone (entire soma) and this change in his body transforms his state from discouragement to felicity, and memories flood in. Once in the party, the sound of the spoon ringing against the plate (hearing), and the feel of the napkin (touch) bring him more felicities and memories. This extended party scene is the transition from the Narrator's long idleness, and is the point where he turns to begin writing the novel we are at the end of reading. It is through these bodily

Leah Durner  
*orange 1*, 2011  
 from the colored papers series  
 gouache on Fabriano Tiziano colored paper  
 39 x 27.5 in, 99.06 x 69.86 cm  
 Private collection

sensations received through what are conventionally thought of as the less intellectual (nonvisual) senses that the Narrator experiences awakenings, memories, and images that call him into action. I bring up Proust's memories called forth from his body, because my entire body participates in Being and because these memories and sensations are a call to participation with the world. As Dermot Moran has written, following Merleau-Ponty:

I grasp the unity of objects through having a prior pre-cognitive grasp of the unity of my bodily experience. The different sensory paths are all experienced as part of the one body, and I have no experience of the senses working separately; rather the senses overlap and 'transgress' each other's boundaries.<sup>57</sup>

So again, there is the intertwining and overflowing.

**JORELLA ANDREWS** You indicated that you have a particular interest in ugly-beautiful and hyper-beautiful juxtapositions of colour.

**LEAH DURNER** My interest comes from my love/hate relationship with comfort. Yes, I love beautiful, sonorous, soothing, pleasing color but I don't want to soak in a warm bath! Challenge me, push me, awaken me, set my teeth on edge, and let us open out the totality of life! Also, my practice is about compositions and color combinations barely holding together and teetering on the verge of chaos, or the edge of the abyss, if you will! And there is my interest in the beautiful. In the modern and postmodern period beauty has been denigrated; there are many reasons for this including the feminization of beauty, the association of beauty with elitism and with conformity to a given standard, as well as the seeming triviality of the beautiful. The beautiful is different from the pretty, in line with (the late sixteenth-early seventeenth-century philosopher) Sir Francis Bacon's statement 'There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.'<sup>58</sup> Or in the color!



Leah Durner  
*Prada Spring 1996*, 2006  
 acrylic and oil on canvas  
 60 x 66 in, 152.4 x 167.64 cm  
 Collection of the artist

Color based on [Prada SS 1996 RTW collection](#)

JORELLA ANDREWS You said earlier that the Prada Spring Collection from 1996 was of particular importance?

LEAH DURNER Yes. My painting *Prada Spring 1996* (2006) was a turning point for me in my use of color. It was based on the palette of [Miuccia Prada's Spring 1996 collection](#) in which she introduced 'ugly' color—beige, brown, mustard, lime green, purple—and a clunky cut that really began contemporary geek chic. This 'ugly' color palette is still prevalent in Brooklyn hipster style. The collection was a breakthrough coming as it did after the monochromatic and minimal feel of much 1990s fashion (although Marc Jacobs had done his grunge collection in 1993, it was an anomaly and poorly received at the time). So my interest in design as well as in a more complex understanding of beauty caused me to expand my palette. I keep my eyes open for surprising/beautiful/ugly/jolting/sickly/pretty combinations of color and surface, and take notes and photographs to add to my personal color library. You could call my interest as being in 'occurring color'—the colors that catch my eyes, including the dense occurrence of artificial industrial colors that are all around us in the urban environment.

JORELLA ANDREWS This brings us back to the poured enamels we referred to earlier. You make these works by pouring coloured enamel paint onto canvas and, alongside the gestural abstractions you've been making since 1995, pouring has become an increasingly important methodology. It's an approach to the application of paint that produces a spontaneous and improvised effect but actually involves processes that require very careful planning and exquisite control. In the *Camouflage* series, it seems to me, pouring was important because it enabled marks to be produced that didn't have the immediate appearance of being handmade, or of being intended or designed as such. This gives them a naturalized presence. This means that they also allude to automated or machined forms of production and start setting up a

dialogue between the processes, tropes, aims, and also the modes of reception belonging to fine art on the one hand, and design on the other.

Since the *Camouflage* series, an often very overt engagement with design has been central to your work. This is another way in which, again, your work might be regarded as moving in a direction, and having concerns, contrary to those of recent and contemporary advanced, politicized, and supposedly anti-market-orientated art.

LEAH DURNER The poured enamels (2005 to the present) use a lexicon of color from industrial, commercial, fashion, design, and vernacular sources; the high gloss/slick surface combines with the organic flow of the paint and the performative aspect of pouring.

Painting—particularly abstract painting—and design in the modern and postmodern periods have commonalities but are, of course, distinguished from each other by context, intention, utility, and in many other ways. The method of manufacture in these works differs from the 'handmadeness' of my gestural paintings in that the application of paint by pouring increases the space and time between the painter's hand and the support and allows for another force to intervene. I use commercial high gloss latex enamel that I purchase directly from a manufacturer of industrial paints and coatings. I do not use the color 'straight out of the can' though. I mix a predetermined number and palette of colors which becomes a 'color chart' for each painting.<sup>59</sup> The color charts I create are not systematic but based on that 'occurring color' I referred to earlier, taken from 60's psychedelia, the urban and industrial environment, and contemporary and historical fashion and design.

My references include process art and the modernist tradition of abstraction while having deeper sources in the exuberance of the Baroque and Rococo. In the studio I spend a great deal of time mixing color. This



is my primary concern and where the main decisions are made. Pouring the enamels is a very active and physical process during which I must stay totally focused and uninterrupted—the accidents and indeterminacy involved in how the colors flow contributes to the final painting. The titles for the poured enamels simply list the most prominent colors in the painting, in order, from the greatest to the least area covered by each color. This keeps the titling formulaic; the references are to the colors themselves. This precludes any evocative associations imposed by me, or at least attempts not to make any associations predetermined.

My painterly relationship to design links to artists as designers, as in the Bauhaus tradition. I do not see design as a depoliticized product. Modern and contemporary design thinking is based in utopian and democratic ideals. Additionally, my interest in design is related to my interest in 'beautiful living,' in how we human beings live and have lived in space and in community, and how we have cared for and clothed our bodies. I have many design enthusiasms, including landscape, architecture, interiors, furniture, products, textiles, and fashion, and I always work to understand design in its historical, social and political context. Fashion has especially interested

Leah Durner  
*darkpinkgreyvioletblue pour*, 2015  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
60 x 66 in, 152.4 x 167.64 cm  
Collection of the artist

Colors based on [Prada FW 2015 RTW collection](#)

me because of its relationship to interweaving – a theme throughout Merleau-Ponty – and 'tissu' (a word used for our flesh and for cloth, and which relates to the *toile* or the muslin model of a couture dress made by hand) and the physical touching/closeness of clothing to the body.

My interest in design links with my earlier, overt artistic interest in text. As a very early and life-long reader, text has always been important to me, including typography (word as image), and books and magazines as designed objects. *Vogue* from the period of Diana Vreeland's editorship (1962–1971) was a huge inspiration to me as a child and opened my eyes to life beyond my small town context. I am very interested in works on paper, drawings, and books, and continue to read widely in design, art, interior, architecture, and design print magazines for design inspiration.

In my 2012 exhibition at the [Loretta Howard Gallery in New York](#), I had the opportunity to position my work within Loretta Howard's programme of post-war painting and sculpture with direct reference to modernist design and its histories and contexts. I created a reading room furnished with mid-century modernist furniture and had a selection of books on art and design available for perusal. My reading room was inspired by my own life-long, wide-ranging reading, my personal love of interiors, and my interest in exhibition spaces beyond the white cube (again, I am not opposed to the white cube I am simply interested in exhibition venues that create different contexts and opportunities for interaction). The reading room was also inspired by the Martha Rosler Library created collaboratively with *e-flux*.<sup>60</sup> I further activated and socialized the space by holding a series of lunches in the gallery space with other artists, writers, designers, and friends. The gallery provided some very 'off' flower arrangements—including a nicotine plant—which added a further horticultural layer to the installation. When conceptualizing this show I had begun thinking about modernist painting and design—



Leah Durner  
*pinksilverbeige pour*, 2008  
*gunmetalsilvermetallicvioletpink pour*, 2008  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
each panel 60 x 48 in 182.88 x 152.4 cm  
Collection of the artist

now aestheticized and made easy—in relation to the period and context in which it was made, that is, as a series of responses to the cataclysms of 1914–1945. Mid-twentieth-century architects and designers used both artisanal means and mass production to create spaces and objects that offered a utopian and inclusive vision of a new way of living. Seen in this context, the **individual**, masculine, American, Abstract Expressionist painter can be seen not entirely as a heroic posturer, but also as a human being addressing dehumanization. I specify **American** as against the various apparently abject forms of post-war abstraction produced by European painters like Jean Fautrier—an issue I'd like to return to later.

I was able to enter the mass market when designers from **West Elm**, the U.S. based contemporary furnishings and home décor company, saw my paintings and invited me to create a line. I've since designed two lines for West Elm, one in 2013 and one in 2015. I welcomed the opportunity to design products within a given set of parameters and fabrication possibilities that could become part of people's homes at generally affordable prices.

In the last five to ten years there has been an increasing cross-relationship between art and design, for example, with the industrial designer Mark Newson represented by Gagosian, the furniture designers Mattia Bonetti and Les Lalannes represented by Paul Kasmin, and numerous design projects being pursued by established artists.



Leah Durner  
Color study for Céline series  
paintings based on Céline Pre-Fall 2016 RTW collection  
2016  
60 x 40 in, 152.4 x 101.6 cm



Leah Durner  
yellowgreendarkgreenbeigeturquoise pour from the Céline series, 2017  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
72 x 60 in, 182.88 x 152.4 cm  
Collection of the artist

## PLENITUDE

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Looking at your work, viewers might at first assume that it fits into a modernist idiom, perhaps a formalist one. But if, as Thomas Lawson put it in his 1981 essay ‘Last Exit: Painting’ the ‘anxious perception of nothingness resides ‘at the heart of modernist expression’<sup>61</sup>—Lawson’s essay was an argument about the crucial discursive potential of painting, despite the ways in which this often was evaded by painters themselves—then the work you have been producing (especially in the form of the poured enamels) is anything but. Its basis, or its source, is, rather, the perception of plenitude. Outpourings —not at the level of *self*-expression but as process and openness.

**LEAH DURNER** Yes to plenitude! This is my project—to make paintings so full that they overflow! Radical generosity strongly informs my work, as an idea, as an ideal, and as a practice. One of the first words that inspired my thought on generosity—or largesse, the term I used for many years, before I began using the word extravagance—is the word ‘superfluous,’ most often used in a derogatory sense. Certain kinds of painting, especially painting constructed from beautiful or candy color, such as my beloved Rococo, are referred to as superfluous (also decorative—a different matter to explore—and which may also relate to the examinations of ornament you’ve been carrying out in your teaching over the last several years). What is the definition of superfluous? I find going to the etymology of a word revelatory because it grounds us historically in source and usage:



Superfluous early 15c., from Latin *superfluuus*: ‘unnecessary,’ literally ‘overflowing,’ from *super*: ‘over’ plus *fluere* ‘to flow’; fluent (adj.) 1580s, ‘flowing freely’ (of water, also of speech), from Latin *fluentem*: ‘lax, relaxed,’ figuratively ‘flowing, fluent’; *fluere*: ‘to flow, stream, run, melt,’ (cf. Latin *flumen*: ‘river’; Greek *phluein*: ‘to boil over, bubble up’; *phlein*: ‘to abound’).

One of the first meanings of superfluous is unnecessary! What a failure! What a crime! To be unnecessary ... and not to function! I love this! That which is superfluous overflows the boundaries that one attempts to construct and overflows the banks of any channel that would direct it toward usefulness (such as when a flowing stream is pressed into service to turn a mill wheel). Superfluity is related to excess, extravagance, abundance, and much-too-much. Overflowing generosity and over-the-topness—in line with opera—is really my goal in painting, in which case an ironic stance will not do!

This overflowing of boundaries is also related to Christ’s teaching. In the same chapter of Matthew’s Gospel where the Beatitudes appear we read:

You have heard it said ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun<sup>62</sup> to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. If you love those

who love you, what reward have you? ... And if you salute only your brethren what are you doing more than others? Do not even the Gentiles to the same? You, therefore, must be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.<sup>63</sup>

This instruction overflows the channel of reciprocity and introduces radical forgiveness—in a sense, a jubilee. Here, all debts are cleared and love can flow in all directions, not just toward those who return our love: an act of radical generosity.

With its emphasis on fruitfulness, fleshiness, and abundance, the Baroque has always been a compelling period to me, philosophically and theologically as well as in terms of the painterly. I am drawn to largesse, superfluosness, extravagance, uselessness, and the Baroque and Rococo, because of my own interest in expansiveness, abundance, and beauty, not only as a detached philosophical interest but because they are life-giving; and because they are suspect/discredited terms (the term ‘Baroque’ was itself originally a negative term, related to the irrational and excessive) and I like to look deeply into that which is discredited.

The useful and the useless, the necessary and the unnecessary, and their relationship to virtue were issues of key debate and areas of opposition that marked an important distinction in Europe with the emergence of Protestantism and the Counter Reformation, and again in eighteenth-century Europe during the Enlightenment. Here, the work of Jean Starobinski, the Swiss literary theorist and historian of ideas, has had a strong influence on me, especially his book *Largesse*, which accompanied the 1994 exhibition at the Louvre’s Department of Graphic Arts, for which he wrote a marvellous group of highly original essays on forms and meanings of largesse, including the ostentatious gift, random fortune, and charity, and with a chapter on children and poverty called ‘New Children’s Battles.’



Leah Durner  
*yellowpalevioletpalegreen pour* from the Céline series, 2017  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
72 x 60 in, 182.88 x 152.4 cm  
Collection of the artist

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Largesse is an interesting, and challenging term not because, as is the case with the superfluous and the extravagant, it is a denigrated term, but because it has negative connotations associated with high-handedness and privilege, a giving from above to below. Perhaps this is why you said earlier that you now prefer the word extravagance? For a long time you wanted, indeed you still want to hang onto it—‘largesse’ features in the title of this conversation. Along with the superfluous, extravagance, and plenitude, you see it as a descriptor of the energy that is implicit in, and expressed by your work, specifically, but not only, the poured enamels.

**LEAH DURNER** For many years I used Starobinski’s title, *Largesse*, as the term for my project. I am interested in largesse, not in its association with a form of distribution that would intend to subjugate, humiliate, or capture others, or that expects some kind of return. There are a number of reasons why ‘largesse,’ in contrast to, say, ‘generosity,’ was an important term for me. Largesse contains a sense of scale, expanded territory, and flow, in its etymology:

Largesse (n.), ‘willingness to give or spend freely; munificence,’ c.1200, from Old French *largesse*: ‘a bounty, munificence,’ from Vulgar Latin *largitia*: ‘abundance,’ from Latin *largus*: ‘abundant’ (see large). Large (adj.) c.1200, ‘bountiful, inclined to give or spend freely,’ also, of areas, ‘great in expanse,’ from Old French *large*: ‘broad, wide; generous, bounteous,’ from Latin *largus*: abundant, copious, plentiful; bountiful, liberal in giving,’ of unknown origin.

Its main modern meanings of ‘extensive; big in overall size’ emerged in the fourteenth century. An older sense of ‘liberated, free from restraining influence’ is preserved in ‘at large,’ which derives from the late fourteenth century. There is even a sense of this openness or expansiveness when you mouth the word ‘largesse’; it is not only how the word is defined, but how it feels when it is spoken that is so meaningful to me.



Generosity has a very different etymology. It has its root in the Latin *genus* so it conveys a sense of ‘one birth-event after another’ rather than a sense of extensive territory like largesse: Generous (adj.) 1580s, ‘of noble birth,’ from Middle French *généreux*; from Latin *generosus* ‘of noble birth,’ figuratively ‘magnanimous, generous’; from *genus* (genitive: *generis*): ‘race, stock’. It also produces a very different feeling in the body when spoken.

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Saying ‘generosity’ involves a kind biting down, doesn’t it?

**LEAH DURNER** Yes! The feel of the word as it is spoken creates a bodily sensation. Speech is somatic! With largesse, there is a sense of outpouring, of giving, of a surging forth. We can understand a word differently as it is spoken from when it is written.

Cover of *Largesse* catalogue for the 1994 exhibition curated by Jean Starobinski for the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Louvre  
Cover illustration: Corregio, *Eve Offering the Apple*, 1526–28, 4.17 x 4.09 in, 10.6 x 10.4 cm, red chalk with white highlights

Our discussion of largesse in 2013 brought me to another expressive synonym: extravagance. Since then, I have used the term *extravagance* for the constellation of interests that are important to me. Derived from the present participle of *extravagari* which means ‘to wander outside or beyond,’ from the Latin *extra*: ‘outside of’ + *vagari*: ‘to wander, roam,’ extravagance contains the notion of wandering, vagrancy, roaming, even of drifting across boundaries rather than destroying or transgressing them which are violent actions. Also, in extravagance, there is the sense of the mobile body (an important concept for Merleau-Ponty) and of going beyond the limitations of necessity, of beggary (vagrancy), and of wealth.

**JORELLA ANDREWS** The centrality of extravagance connects with your interest in Baroque painterly explorations of fruitfulness and their ethical and political significance. This becomes particularly apparent in a juxtaposition of two works in the Wallace Collection in London: Jacob Jordaens’ *An Allegory of Fruitfulness*, from 1620–1629<sup>64</sup> and Peter Paul Rubens’ *The Rainbow Landscape*, c. 1636.<sup>65</sup>

**LEAH DURNER** Yes! During our first series of face-to-face conversations on extravagance in London in 2013, it was a gift of irreducible importance for us to stand together in the Wallace Collection East Drawing Room (the walls covered with deep red brocade silk fabric) and to experience, discover, and discuss the paintings while in their very physical presence.

The Jordaens depicts an allegorical community of mythological and human figures painted in a shallow, frieze-like tableau. Pomona, goddess of orchards and gardens, is embracing a giant cornucopia and is surrounded by satyrs and nymphs (satyrs being companions of the god Bacchus, also a fertility deity) and with a fertile young woman and children. Jordaens began work on this celebration of peace, and the fruits of peace, towards what would be the end of the Twelve-Year Truce that had been ‘enjoyed’ by the Northern and

Southern Netherlands between 1609–21 during the reign of the Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella of the Spanish Netherlands. In other words, it was created in an atmosphere of great fear that the Truce would end and hostilities resume and so it had an important polemical role—during the seventeenth century, incidentally, there were only seven years when there was no war on the continent of Europe. Rubens’ *The Rainbow Landscape*, painted a few years later, depicts an idealized community of humans and animals living in harmony under the rainbow seal of God’s promise.<sup>66</sup> It is set in a deeper, extensive space—the cultivated and fruitful landscape of his estate, Het Steen, in Brabant. Both paintings are different representations of harmonious community. Both underline the importance of a cultivated and abundant nature, a kind of utopia. Rubens is especially important to me. Starobinski wrote that ‘Rubens ... could never let go of life. He was the painter of overabundant life, the master of largesse “where life flows and churns without end” in Baudelaire’s admirable expression.’<sup>67</sup>

Another work by Rubens, this time in the National Gallery, London is *Minerva Protects Pax from Mars*. It was painted in 1629–30, thus contemporaneously with the Wallace Jordaens, and it particularly closely aligned with it in terms of its imagery and political purpose. It was painted while Rubens—a diplomat as well as an artist—was in London negotiating a peace treaty between England and Spain in his position as special envoy to Philip IV of Spain. At the urging of the Archduchess Isabella, who was Philip IV’s niece and Rubens’ patron, the painting was given to Charles I as a diplomatic gift. In Rubens’ painting, the helmeted head of Minerva, the Goddess of Wisdom, is at the apex of a compositional pyramid in which are crammed Peace, expressing milk from her very body into the mouth of Plenty while Hymen (the God of marriage) is leading young children (representing the fruits of marriage) towards an enormous cornucopia where they are invited to feast. Also present are representations of a satyr and a playful leopard, both part of the retinue of the fertility god,



Jacob Jordaens  
*An Allegory of Fruitfulness*, 1620–29  
 oil on canvas  
 79 x 90 in, 200.7 x 229 cm  
 The Wallace Collection London

Bacchus. Nymphs or maenads and a putto are also part of this scene of abundance. Minerva, meanwhile, is shown driving away Mars, the God of War, and Alecto, the Fury of War, who are positioned outside of the painting's stable yet dynamic triangular compositional structure.

In both the Wallace Jordaens and the National Gallery Rubens, prosperity and the arts are depicted as the fruits of peace. Both paintings had a political function as requests for peace, serving as diplomatic instruments intended to effect a powerful political result. How these paintings functioned in the world and what they represent are of a piece.

Also important in these paintings is the foregrounding of nakedness. Here, naked and clothed are not oppositional, and nakedness is not always to be read as sexual, just as clothing can stand in for the nakedness of the flesh. Nakedness also stands for certain ways of being. It is this scintillation of clothed and naked that also overwhelms me as a viewer of Baroque painting. Take Ruben's paintings, with their hurling, writhing bodies! That excessiveness, today, is seen as problematic or laughable. There are people who ridicule Rubens' painting. A 'modern audience may find the idiom of the painting [*Minerva Protects Pax from Mars*] difficult to grasp, obscure, or even, perhaps, a little ridiculous ... [and] the elaborately posed mythological figures may seem overblown and merely rhetorical.'<sup>68</sup> Again, for me, having gone deeper into the sensibility of that age and understanding its visual rhetoric, I see that Rubens' paintings have a vital existential and socio-political meaning.

JORELLA ANDREWS This foregrounding of painted and painterly extravagance and generosity is reminiscent of the theme in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of painterly activity: his description of it as form of bodily donation'. In 'Eye and Mind' he wrote that it is 'by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.'<sup>69</sup> I'm repeatedly drawn to that idea in his writing.

LEAH DURNER Yes, my bodily donation as a painter and as a human being is a matter of life and death. Merleau-Ponty also wrote, "If creations are not a possession, it is not only that, like all things, they pass away; it is also that they have almost all their life still before them'.<sup>70</sup> I have almost my entire life before me unto my death, and I participate with my whole being. So acting is a life and death choice and of eternal consequence. Blondel, again, is relevant here (italics mine):

*More than a necessity*, action often appears to me as an obligation; it has to be produced by me, even when it requires a painful choice, a sacrifice, a death. *Not only do I use up my bodily life in action*, but I am forever putting down feelings and desires which would lay claim to everything, each for itself. I must commit myself [to act] under pain of losing everything; I must compromise myself. *Head, heart, and hands, I must therefore give them over willingly or they are taken from me*. If I withdraw my free dedication, I fall into slavery. I have no right to wait or else I no longer have the power to choose. If I do not act out of my own movement, there is something in me or outside of me that acts without me and ordinarily acts against me. Peace [meaning complacency] is defeat; action leaves no more room for delay than death.<sup>71</sup>

The notions of bodily donation and superfluity are also related to the radical generosity of Christ pouring out his entire life and offering His body as food and his blood as drink. The great central mystery and genius of Roman Catholicism is the Transubstantiation where the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ—not a mere *symbol* of Christ's body and blood. The total giving of Christ's body is revealed in that He was crucified naked (as was the Roman custom) and in the Resurrection where His body is raised from the dead demonstrating that Christ had gone beyond the boundary (death) from which there is no return and *had* returned. Alain Badiou in his *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (1997) stated that Paul



Peter Paul Rubens  
*Minerva Protects Pax from Mars*, 1629–30  
oil on canvas  
80.11 x 117.32 in, 203.5 x 298 cm  
Collection The National Gallery London

presented the Resurrection as ‘...pure event, opening of an epoch, transformation of the relations between the possible and the impossible.’<sup>72</sup> The Resurrection is, to Saint Paul, the sole defining event of Christianity. Badiou also discussed Nietzsche’s statement that if Paul ‘shifted the center of [Christ’s] entire existence beyond this existence, it is neither in accordance with death, nor in accordance with hate, but in accordance with a principle of *overexistence* on the basis of which life, affirmative life, was restored and refounded for all.’<sup>73</sup> (Again, italics mine.) We so often see Christian practice as an ascetic or negating practice (as it has been used to control and proscribe human behaviour and as influenced by pagan ascetics and Augustine) but when seen in the life of Christ it is actually non-dualistic and expansive.

Educational, communal, intellectual, emotional, relational and spiritual riches are often seen as luxuries outside of the physical requirements of food, clothing, and shelter that are necessary for human survival. Without denying that basic necessities must be met, I do not see these ‘other’ riches as separable from a humane and liveable life. There is a richness that goes beyond our definitions of property, wealth, and poverty, a surpassing and overflowing that is related to both extravagance and poverty.

Richness is the abundance of what grants the possession of one’s own being, in that it opens the way to its appropriation and has an inexhaustible command to become ripe for what is one’s own. Abundance is not the enormous quantity that always is present in surplus on the table of one who is satiated. Genuine abundance is an overflowing which overflows itself and thus surpasses itself. In such surpassing, the overflowing flows back toward itself and learns that it is not sufficient unto itself because it is constantly surpassed. But a surpassing-itself which is never sufficient unto itself is an origin.<sup>74</sup>

**JORELLA ANDREWS** In light of this discussion of abundance and thinking, too, of those etymological meanings

associated with extravagance to do with wandering, roaming, and vagrancy, let’s talk about your interest in Esteban Murillo’s paintings of beggar children. Why are these works by Murillo so important to you? And how do they open up ethical (as well as painterly) questions? I’m also thinking back to your involvement with this broad theme in your *Feast or Famine* piece from the *Texts* series.

**LEAH DURNER** These paintings of beggar children are important to me because I am a beggar and constantly hungry. Further, with respect to richness, poverty, and vagrancy (as noted, ‘vagrant,’ another term for beggar, comes from the same root as in extravagance) Esteban Murillo’s *Three Boys* (c.1670), in London’s Dulwich Picture Gallery, is densely layered with possible readings. In it, two (white) boys are sitting on the ground and one (black) boy is standing and reaching out toward a pie which one of the white boys withholds and attempts to hide. Meanwhile the third boy reaches into the black boy’s pocket while turning to the viewer with a mocking smile. Murillo may have used his own children as the models for the two white boys (he fathered eleven children), and the black boy in the painting may be the son of the Juana de Santiago, a black enslaved woman who was owned by Murillo and whom he freed six years later in 1676.

The painting is set up in opposition to the three Graces with many-layered meanings: begging, withholding, stealing as compared with their desired opposites: giving, receiving, returning—the actions of the three Graces. Also conveyed are slavery and the ownership of the body and its opposite: freedom; black people and white people; adults and children; surfeit and hunger; clothing and nakedness; the reality of a child beggar’s life and the *representation* of their lives in these genre pictures.

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Opposites, or oppositions, which when investigated more closely may turn out not to be? That may end up being profoundly inter-related in various complex and compromised ways? Here, I can’t but help

recall an art-historical instance of this referenced by Merleau-Ponty in ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’. At issue here are the modes of visual expression adopted by the contemporaries Delacroix and Ingres, which during the nineteenth-century were regarded as diametrically opposed (one painterly and expressive, the other linear and restrained). Merleau-Ponty observed that when the images produced by both painters are viewed from more distanced historical and cultural vantage points those oppositions recede and they now look more like the work of twins—not because the works resemble each other but because both artists were responding *differently* to a broad set of artistic and cultural concerns in which they were both embedded and therefore shared. Indeed, this kind of argumentation runs through Merleau-Ponty’s writing and it applies, equally, to other relationships at first deemed to be oppositional: those of ‘enemies’, for instance, who, seen from a different or broader vantage point, appear to be standing side-by-side. Their affinities are now more obvious than their reputed differences. But back to the painting! Let’s indeed take a closer look!

**LEAH DURNER** Right! As I said, *Three Boys* was designed to be interpreted as the ‘opposite’ of the iconography of the Three Graces. It shares some of the basic compositional elements of the other (approximately twenty) paintings in Murillo’s series of beggar children: the use of a limited palette of earth colors with the sky being the only location for pinks or blues (in many of the paintings the pink and blue pigments have degraded over time and are no longer apparent); the children placed in the close foreground; the children depicted outdoors or in a nominal shelter; the children dressed in rags, dirty, and barefoot; and finally, the children in the presence of food for which they beg, bargain, steal, or play a game. In most of these paintings the children are standing or sitting on the ground. In the iconographic tradition of Western European painting, sitting on the ground is a sign of humility and poverty. (See for example, the early Renaissance traditional representation of the Madonna

of Humility in which the Virgin Mary is depicted in this way, as in Raphael’s *Alba Madonna* c.1510, now part of The National Gallery of Art, Washington’s collection.)

**JORELLA ANDREWS** From where I’m standing, Murillo’s paintings are hard to read. Overall, his beggar children are depicted as appealing and amusing, much in the way the peasantry was depicted in seventeenth-century Dutch *tronies* or later, rather sentimentally, poor children in eighteenth-century British art. The reality was that in Murillo’s context, these children were despised, and I know that this issue of orphanhood was one that Murillo was deeply involved with. Was his agenda to make these children appear appealing in order to garner sympathy and support?

**LEAH DURNER** Murillo was himself orphaned at the age of ten and had experienced the poverty and insecurity of the beggar children he depicted in his paintings. Murillo was recognized for his skilled and sensitive paintings of children, not only these beggar children, but also his depictions of the Christ child, the infant John the Baptist, and cherubim. Murillo was also a devout Catholic and active in charitable organizations. However there is an ambiguity in the way that these paintings were collected—primarily by Dutch and Flemish merchants living in Seville. (Seville was a major port and center of trade with the Americas in the seventeenth century.) Murillo would also be admired and collected in eighteenth century England. Gainsborough owned three Murillo paintings which inspired him to produce beggar child paintings of his own.

In fact, my appreciation of these Murillo paintings is grounded in my interest in the entire history of representation of child beggars in Western European painting and literature from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, and its relation to economic and social justice as well as the sentimentalization of children in the arts and its effects. Rousseau<sup>75</sup> was a key figure in



Bartolomé Estéban Murillo  
*Three Boys*, c. 1670  
 oil on canvas  
 66.25 x 43.22 in, 168.3 x 109.8 cm  
 Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

this regard (although he gave his own children away to a foundling hospital), as was his valorization of the rural/natural over the civic/artificial. His thought continues to influence unexamined ideas about all three topics to this day, although usually without understanding of the source of the attitudes. In *Largesse*, Starobinski cites Rousseau in his discussions of equitable and non-equitable giving – the contrast between child beggars fighting over gingerbread that Rousseau randomly distributed (had thrown into the crowd) and Rousseau’s equitable distribution of apples – neither act “true alms, but merely a better ‘amusement’ he was happy to provide.”<sup>76</sup>

Carl Jung stated that ‘Sentimentality is the superstructure erected upon brutality.’<sup>77</sup> I am interested in sentimentality as the mask for cruelty, which these types of pictures evidence. However, I want to dive down deeper than surface sentimentality to reach those feelings of being bereft that perhaps we all experience. Murillo’s child beggar paintings show us the poverty of children, many of whom are begging for food. The 2013 Murillo exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery, which we visited together, reminds one of *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) a picaresque novel of a young beggar who *suffers from perpetual hunger*.<sup>78</sup> This idea of perpetual hunger relates also to the stream of hungry children extending into our time<sup>79</sup> and to our own inner craving for being.

I have discussed this idea of perpetual hunger and craving with the philosopher Jim Roi, who has a strong interest in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Jim introduced me to the ideas of the Christian mystic and theologian Jakob Boehme (1575–1624), who places hunger or craving at the very source of creation, which he calls the *Ungrund*. “The unground is an eternal nothing, but makes an eternal beginning as a craving. For the nothing is a craving after something ... Seeing then the craving is a process of desire, and this desire a life, this same desiring life goes in the craving forward, and is always pregnant with the craving.”<sup>80</sup>

Although undifferentiated, the *Ungrund* possessed the inherent potentiality to become something actual and concrete. The first manifestation of this potentiality, according to Boehme, was the experience of a hunger or, as he otherwise expressed it, a ‘longing [or ‘craving’].’ As the will of the unmanifest Godhead sought to reveal itself in its primordial freedom—that is, as containing no other features or attributes than the mere will to become sensible—all that this will could possibly bring forth was ‘the property of the hunger, which is itself.’<sup>81</sup> The spiritual hunger began as a ‘darkness’ obscuring the purity of the *Ungrund*. The result was a movement of drawing in upon itself, a contraction into a core of being. This core then became the ground (*Grund*) of all subsequent stages.<sup>82</sup>

JORELLA ANDREWS Boehme’s profound reflections around that idea of the *Ungrund* seem far removed from Murillo’s roguish beggar children...

LEAH DURNER Hunger in its many depths can drive the Godhead as well as a beggar child. The presentation of the beggar as a rogue is a form of denial of the beggar’s true neediness; a way of maintaining ‘beggar’ as a social role; a way of saying the beggar is not ‘really’ without resources and also that the beggar is not worthy of charity because of this dishonesty. Assigning this roguishness is also a refusal to recognize the physical, emotional, and spiritual/psychic pain of being hungry, at the edge of survival, and rejected. The roguishness is also related to the fact that beggar children are vulnerable to being employed by the criminal underworld for many different functions. This remains the case in our current world situation of proclaimed austerity, cruelty, denial of resources to those in need, hoarding of resources by corporations and the wealthy, and despoliation of natural resources.

JORELLA ANDREWS Again, this links back to our most recent, and ongoing, collaboration on the theme of how

an ethics of extravagance (understood in its etymological richness) might intervene into today's global cultures of actual and putative scarcity.

In Murillo's painting, we might say that the roguish child beggar is presented as a type of hero. As a figure of resilience, perhaps, who remains cheerful and unthwarted in the face of deprivation. There is, in any case, a sense of a refusal of passivity and of being positioned as a victim. In *Three Boys*, this is also the case with the rendering of the black boy. On the one hand he is depicted as in need, asking for a share of bread, and being stolen from. But on the other hand, compositionally, he towers over the two seated white boys with that (possibly empty but possibly full) jar balanced on his shoulder. He is not a subordinate figure.

LEAH DURNER I see we human beings as comprising everything including both beggars and heroes. Recently there has been a distrust and scepticism about the heroic which has had to do with a hatred (rightly so!) of domination. But have authority and heroism been wrongly defined and misused as a means to dominate others, to such an extent that their virtues are irretrievable? Barbara Kruger's *We Don't Need Another Hero*<sup>83</sup> could be more accurately phrased 'We don't need another dominator'. How do we go deeper into the idea of the heroic and indeed the authoritative/authorial rather than dismiss them? Are we 'allowed', to be heroic? Are we 'allowed' to be authoritative? Or must we apologize, diminish ourselves, or become ironic? Again, I am a bit suspicious of the anti-heroic, which is intended as a critique of male domination and hero-worship. Nevertheless, women and other marginalized people need access to the heroic. The anti-heroic message seems to say to women and other marginalized people, 'You are essentially unheroic, so we will devalue heroism and authority since you are incapable of being heroic or authoritative.' What is true heroism? I relate this to contemporary ideas of the subhuman or posthuman as

opposed to the old idea of the superhuman. The real question is, can we stand to be truly, fully human or is the 'tormenting secret pain' of that reality unbearable (Nietzsche)? As Merleau-Ponty said, '... there is no one who does not have a human's life to live...'.<sup>84</sup>

JORELLA ANDREWS At this point, I think it is interesting to bring these themes into conversation with kinds of post-war painting that were taking place in Europe when Merleau-Ponty was also writing. Less obviously heroic and much more wounded; that sense of aftermath: Europe as ravaged and evacuated; indeed where art itself was concerned there was the reality of the art world's centre of gravity having shifted from Europe, notably Paris, to New York. Now, of course, there are further shifts with the buoyancy of the Far Eastern and Asian art markets with Hong Kong and Singapore jostling for a dominant position.

LEAH DURNER Yes, since Europe was the theatre of the world wars it is understandable that post-war European painting would be more abject than American painting. During our second series of face-to-face conversations while we were in France in 2015, I visited the Pompidou Centre and was drawn to their excellent collection of post-war European painting. I realized that I had previously discredited this work and not fully appreciated it. This new attraction and realization made me look into it more deeply. I saw 'gnarly', clotted, and burnt-out qualities to the paintings that were not simply formal inventions but responses to having lived through the war in the theatre of war. For example, Jean Fautrier's *Otages* paintings were begun in 1943 after his arrest and interrogation by the Germans, as a member of the Resistance, and during his subsequent withdrawal to a mental asylum. Alberto Burri, a physician and frontline soldier in the Italian army, created his burned and gouged works during the postwar period. The influence of Surrealism's exploration of madness and naiveté continued in the work of CoBrA, and Dubuffet and Art Brut. So this work was in a sense a response to the horrors of war



and to the hideous choices offered by totalitarianism. A new interest in the art of this period is in evidence in a number of exhibitions. Especially notable is Alison M. Gingeras's 2015 exhibition *The Avante-Garde will not Give up*<sup>85</sup> which does excellent historical work examining CoBrA, its historical context, and continuing influence. The abjection of this post-war painting did not emerge in the post-war period but was planted long before. Julia Kristeva identifies 'the drive-foundations of fascism' in abjection. She wrote that abjection is:

... the economy, one of horror and suffering in their libidinal surplus-value which has been tapped, rationalized, and made operative by Nazism and Fascism. The mass movements offered a logic for a society of individuals slipping into psychosis, they provided a sense of belonging and a set of contours ... totalitarianism offers a 'suicidal escape' for the individual from their reality of being alone.<sup>86</sup>

What are my capacities as a painter and thinker groping my way in this current age?

JORELLA ANDREWS Returning to the topic of 'abject' post-war French art, there is nonetheless an irrepressible energy in these works that were made in the face of these traumatic scenes, the result of what we could call a heroic—to use that term again—staying put, and looking,

and feeling within these scenarios. In *The Question of Painting*, I discussed this with respect to the painting and photography of Wols. I think that this is an important dimension of the aesthetic, which generally gets reduced to the apprehension only of that which feels affirming.

LEAH DURNER Yes, again, that is why extravagance, largesse, and overflowing are central for me and the life of painting is unbounded. Necessity, defined as the bare minimum required to sustain human life, as sufficient measure, is inherently cruel. For me the benchmarks of necessity and usefulness are cruel and inhumane. The association of necessity with virtue is informed by any number of religious and philosophical ascetic practices—from the ancient Stoics, Christians, Buddhists, and many others—but these ascetic practices are particular and must occur in a given context and religious community to be meaningful. What I am interested in—even proposing—is this extravagance and this opening up or our economy for all.

JORELLA ANDREWS This summons up the possibility of a very different politics and economics. For me, the work of the Chicago-based African-American artist and community activist Theaster Gates is heroic in this regard. I think that everyone should listen to his TED talk 'How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art.', in which he insists upon the provision of beauty as 'a basic service'—*especially* in the most socially deprived areas.<sup>87</sup>

LEAH DURNER Yes. Being human in the world and participating in what Merleau-Ponty called 'wild being' is where freedom and connection exists. Hence, wild being and 'the unaccountable infinity constituted by a singular human life,'<sup>88</sup> a phrase from Alain Badiou that I like very much because it describes the infinite—unmeasurable—importance of each human being. A new and more generous understanding of what it means to be human is the ground for a transformed politics and economics.

Jean Fautrier  
*L'Écorché (Les Otages, Le Grand Otage)*, 1944  
oil on paper mounted on canvas  
31.49 x 45.27 in, 80 x 115 cm  
oil on paper mounted on canvas  
Collection Centre Pompidou



Leah Durner  
*blackdarkgreyvioletblue pour*, 2017  
poured latex enamel on birch board  
24 x 18 in, 60.96 x 45.72 cm  
Collection Alex Katz Foundation

## PAINTING, HISTORY, SOCIETY

**JORELLA ANDREWS** In order to draw our conversation to a close, I'd like to turn again, but this time in a very explicit way, to the issue of art and life, art and the political, and the question of how or whether art can change the world. Indeed, what do we mean when we say this? It is one of those phrases; an everyday expression—in fact many of us hold it up as an ideal to strive towards and it is generally the benchmark that is held up in order to work out whether a work of art is worthwhile and worth supporting. But have we really thought through what we mean by it? I suspect that although grand gestures with easily decipherable, transmittable and *quantifiable* effects are lauded, perhaps the more powerful forces for change are more surreptitious, involving an extravagance—akin to that modelled by Christ on the cross, if I may refer back to earlier discussions—that may remain, temporarily or permanently, at the level of the consciously unregistered and unembraced.

Rubens, a person of undeniable privilege who, like his European contemporaries, was situated in an historical and political context of on-going precariousness and was clearly on a quest to change the world through his combined efforts as a painter and diplomat. Although the paintings we discussed earlier, *The Rainbow Landscape* and the earlier *Minerva protects Pax from Mars* present visions of plenitude rather than aggressive competition, it is interesting to think of them as a type of war painting that goes far beyond the documentation of atrocity or the expression of outrage.

**LEAH DURNER** Yes! Rubens sets forth peace as dynamic and exciting. Change the world is a very interesting phrase and there are many answers that can radiate from it. You point out it is 'one of those phrases' (Rimbaud's



'Change Life and Marx's 'Change the World').<sup>89</sup> But the world is not a thing. Firstly, just by being born into or dying out of the world I change the world. Merleau-Ponty said that we are embedded in the world—we and the world are of a piece. My very presence in or absence from the world has meaning. This is not a flippant response but fundamental—a recognition of the infinite importance of each human being.

The crucial thing is: how do I answer to my responsibility to myself and other people? Within the context of our conversation about the 'questionability' of painting, much of this has to do with its perceived politically irresponsibility. This is due to painting's association with the commodity, the personal, and the beautiful.

The larger issue to me is *why* painting must be useful? This smacks of a reductive functionality—this constant pressing-into-usefulness of everything and everyone; this utilitarian attitude that everything and everyone must be serviceable in an identifiably profitable way. That said, I believe that painting, including in its abstract and aesthetic formations, can be an act of philosophy, an act of politics, and an act of revolution.

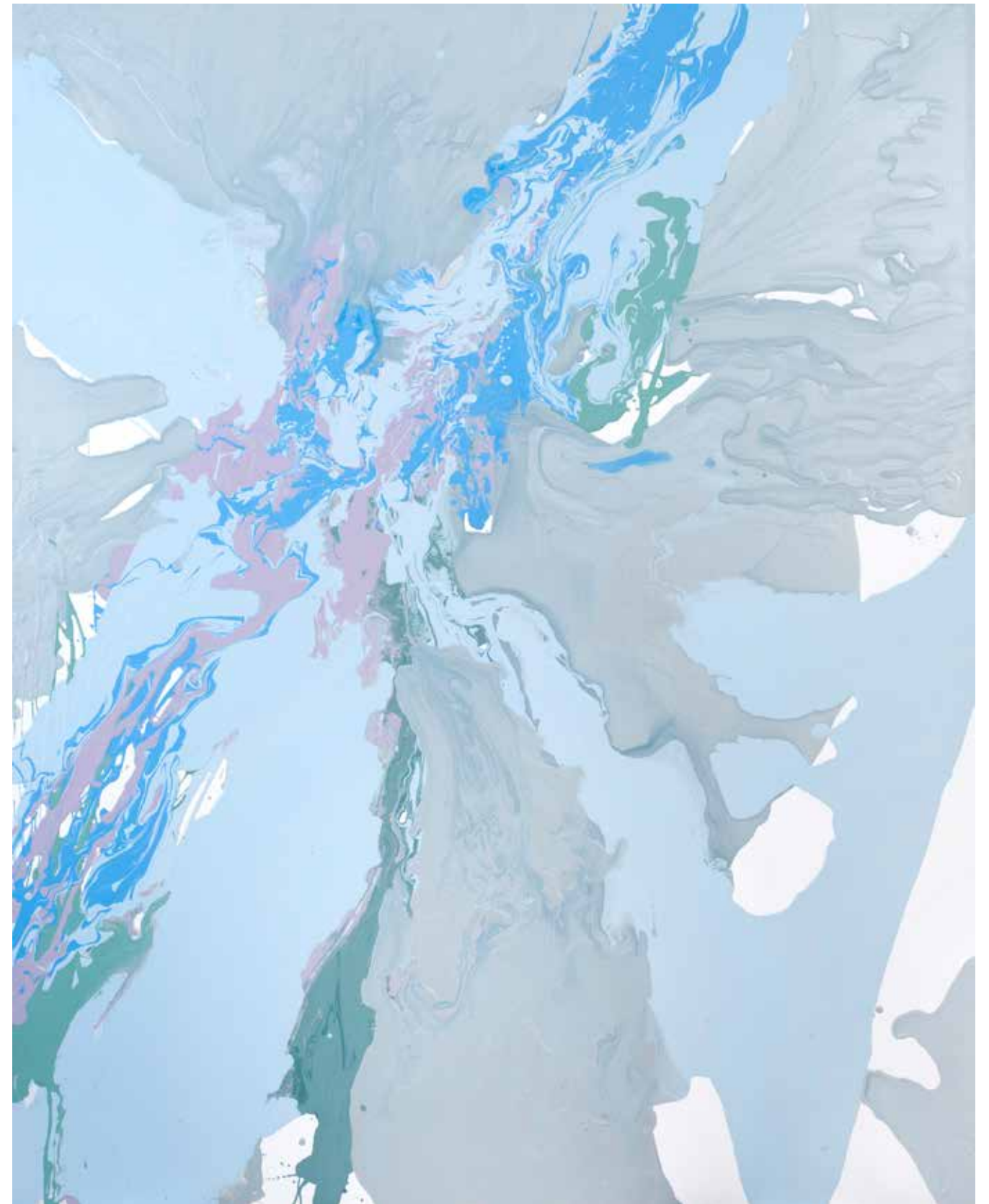
**JORELLA ANDREWS** This issue of usefulness takes me back to our earlier discussions of extravagance. If paintings are not seen to be doing useful, remunerable work then they must be pushed aside: the idea of non-productive paintings as vagrants, if you like.

Having said that, an aspect of your paintings—certainly your poured enamels—is that their expression of plenitude, superfluity, and extravagance is contained: by the canvas ground, and by the form and dimensions of the wooden stretcher supporting it. This could lead to your work being read as operating within conventionally modernist or formalist legacies. This is in contrast, for instance, to the much-discussed, expansive works in pigment by Katharina Grosse (which I write about in *The Question of*

*Painting*) which have eschewed the conventional painterly constraints of canvas and frame, and are differently distributed. You work according to traditional painterly formats. But I see this as doing something important; by acceding to constraint, by keeping-within-bounds, a differently articulated but increasingly urgent mode of extravagance is released. It is a mode of expression that is revelatory and passionate but refuses physically to invade and impose itself on the space of others.

**LEAH DURNER** Yes. One of the ideas for my poured enamels is that the painting becomes a kind of stream into which you can dip your hands and drink. Plenitude and extravagance flow around obstacles and resistance; they spread a cloth and open an invitation. Attempting to impose is an act of domination and an attempt to rob another human being of their freedom. As Galen A. Johnson wrote '...there are "surpluses" within our posture toward the world that are pre-personal and exceed our own origin'.<sup>90</sup> This is a depth, deeper than habit, and deeper than personal history. In my painting, I'm reaching for this.

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Continuing with our attempts at countering claims about the questionability of painting with respect to its perceived incapacity to address the urgencies of life, I'd like to recall Roger Fry's 1917 lecture 'Art and Life' in which he problematized notions of direct or explicit relationships between art and the broader politics and social mores associated with a specific period or culture. Political efficacy is often associated with ideas of direct action but I'd like to valorise instead an association that can be made to between extravagance, as we've been discussing it, and the importance of taking detours. Detours are non-utilitarian; they are not economical—certainly in the short term. There are no guarantees; we might end up 'nowhere' and with 'nothing'. But to embark upon such journey nonetheless, I believe, means discovering that 'nowhere' and 'nothing' exist in name only. The detour is where we discover plenitude.



Leah Durner  
*silverbluegreenviolet pour*, 2014  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
60 x 48 in, 182.88 x 152.4 cm  
Private collection

LEAH DURNER Yes, this is about going into the unknown and into ‘the polymorphous world that *gives rise to* all modalities of expression, though it *corresponds to none*’.<sup>91</sup> Extravagance is wandering and overflowing across a territory. I love that our face-to-face conversations for this project took place in a context of detours—the first while we wandered through London in 2013, visiting the Wallace Collection, the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the Tate, the National Gallery, and various commercial galleries: on the street, on the tube, and then in your home, and then with a day trip to Brighton to see the Biba exhibition<sup>92</sup>; and the second in France in 2015, where we wandered through Paris and then when we were in the countryside, reading, writing, drawing, and painting beside the pool of our rented cottage (I think of Merleau-Ponty’s paragraph on the swimming pool in ‘Eye and Mind’<sup>93</sup>) and visiting the church in our local hamlet...

JORELLA ANDREWS ... yes, which had to be specially unlocked for us and was a revelation of homespun, dust-laden beauty...

LEAH DURNER ... and our visit to the Pech Merle cave—that all of our conversing was consonant with extravagance in its root meaning of wandering outside the boundaries. That we were physically present together in both locations, that our conversations took place in front of the physical artworks, and that shared experiences were part of the conversation also truly demonstrates the embodied nature of our thinking! And now all of this is being transcribed, added to, and edited to appear on these pages!

JORELLA ANDREWS The detour allows for so much more to be gathered up and brought into play.



Leah Durner  
*beigeorangeyelloworangegrey pour* from the Céline series, 2016  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
72 x 60 in, 182.88 x 152.4 cm

## EXTRAVAGANCE, MEDIUM, AND EXPANDED FIELD

**JORELLA ANDREWS** In an essay from 2001 called ‘Where is Painting Now,’ Daniel Birnbaum presented his contribution to discussions about forms of ‘post-medium’ painting. He wrote—in a way that evoked notions of extravagance as we’ve been discussing it—that ‘painting no longer exists as a strictly circumscribed mode of expression; rather, it is a zone of contagion, constantly branching out and widening its scope. Painterly practices emerge in other genres, such as photography, video, sculpture, printmaking, and installation.’<sup>94</sup>

**LEAH DURNER** Painting had been considered to be ‘a strictly circumscribed mode of expression’, separate from life, as we discussed earlier. But I say that painting has always been extravagant. Any idea of an ‘expanded field’ is so much more than a multiplicity of mediums or interdisciplinary practices—using a variety of media and methodologies do not necessarily expand the field. We do not have to define or ensure an expanded field, we are already in it! It is the realm of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘wild being’ which is completely open and contains that which is beyond our ability to perceive. When we view painting from the phenomenological point of view and we recognize each human being as a singular infinity, then the entire model of domination, submission, and expansions that consists of gobbling up territory is dissolved and we enter into a new realm. The understanding that a painting is a something rather than a nothing that it exists physically—is of vital importance. Somethingness, rather than nothingness, is a theological and philosophical problem.



Leah Durner  
*darkgreylightgreyyellowviolet pour* from the Céline series, 2017  
 poured latex enamel on canvas  
 72 x 60 in, 182.88 x 152.4 cm  
 Collection of the artist

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, in the chapter entitled ‘The Intertwining—The Chiasm’, Merleau-Ponty discusses this openness:

...a naked color, and in general a visible, is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision which could be only total or null, but is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances, a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world—less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility. Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things.<sup>95</sup>

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Your foregrounding of the physicality of painting reminds me of a claim by Paul Crowther in his recent book *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision* about the important fact that paintings endure in a way that electronic images, for instance, do not. He described this as crucial because, as he put it, ‘the physicality of the medium is integral to the emergence of virtual meaning.’<sup>96</sup> I’m also reminded of a quotation from Merleau-Ponty’s ‘Eye and Mind,’ about his understanding of the durability of painting. He is writing, precisely, about the openness and inconclusiveness of painting, and indeed of all our researches, and insisting that this is not, as some may feel, a condition of failure. He claimed that: ‘this disappointment issues from that spurious fantasy which claims for itself a positivity capable of making up for its own emptiness’.<sup>97</sup> He continued:

It is the regret of not being everything, and a rather groundless regret at that ... If no painting comes



to be the painting, if no work is ever absolutely completed and done with, still, each creation changes, alters, enlightens, deepens, confirms, exalts, re-creates, or creates in advance all the others. If creations are not a possession, it is not only that, like all things, they pass away: it is also that they have almost all their life still before them.<sup>98</sup>

**LEAH DURNER** Yes, openness and incompleteness go together as does Merleau-Ponty’s idea that both language and the visual are rooted in being and are not oppositional.<sup>99</sup> Your reference to the durability of painting reminds me of our visit to the Pech Merle cave to see its 25,000 year old paintings. Our painter-ancestors, women—as evidenced by the hand stencils found in the cave identified as those of women—and men, entered 50 meters deep into a dark cave with tallow lamps, pigments, and binders. The skill and delicacy of the drawings and their use of the form of the rock face to emphasize the drawn form was staggering. Merleau-Ponty, wrote about the openness of painting from its very beginning:

Advent is a promise of events ... the expressive operation of the body, begun by the least perception ... develops into painting and art. The field of pictorial meaning has been open since people

Anonymous  
 Panel with spotted horses and hand stencils, c. 29,000 BC  
 manganese and iron oxide  
 Pech Merle cave, Cabrerets France  
 approx. 4 meters wide

appeared in the world. The first cave drawing founded a tradition only because it had received one—that of perception. The quasi-eternity of art is of a piece with the quasi-eternity of incarnate existence; and in the use of our bodies and our senses, insofar as they involve us in the world, we have a means of understanding our cultural gesticulation insofar as it involves us in history.<sup>100</sup>

**JORELLA ANDREWS** Do you think that there is a connection between this sense of painting as an expanded practice and how you express extravagance, abstractly and through colour, in your work?

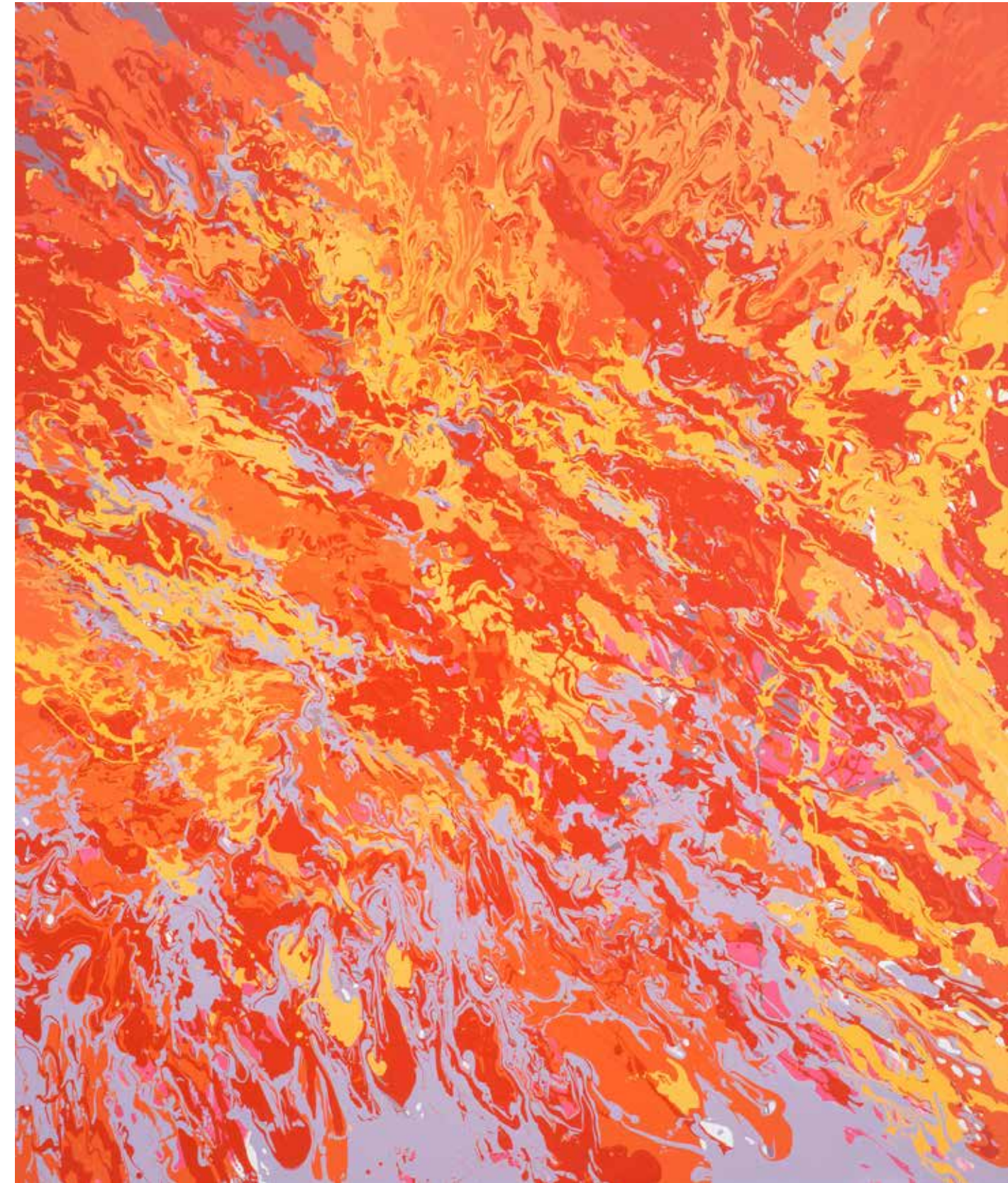
**LEAH DURNER** Yes, definitely. Pouring the paint is a demonstration, in a sense, of the idea of overflowing. For me painting as an expanded practice means painting as a practice in relation to/beside/beyond philosophy explicated in language. And expanded practice means going even beyond ideas like ‘expanded practice’ and taking that leap into Wild Being. If we are living in a totality, then extravagance already exists. There is no need deliberately to transgress or expand because we are dealing with that which is already infinite.

**JORELLA ANDREWS** This is also about taking profound risks and being vulnerable. This makes me wonder whether there are deeper, more personal reasons (rather than only socio-political ones) behind twentieth- and twenty-first-century refutations of painting, that have to do with a certain fear of expression and exposure? Of the vulnerability of saying, or showing, who you are? Note that the upsurge in painting during the 1980’s was frequently made as if in an ironic mode, accompanied perhaps by a certain refusal to commit? A kind of bad faith?

I’m drawn to your work because I see that you are seeking to work with a sense of emotional honesty, which isn’t always necessarily pretty. Often these

materialized emotions might register a kind of sourness as well as exuberance, or despondency, or frustration, or anger. The aesthetic is not just about the sensation of what we tend to call ‘positive’ energies. There is something in particular about the capacity of colour to access areas of vulnerability that we might not want accessed or might not know are there. But it is vital that we do so, and this again is where it is so important not to think the aesthetic and the political separately. Political change, to return to that, is not just a matter of knowing what’s right and wrong. It is also about having the rightly ordered motivation, the desire, to effect—and endure—change. The writer Kathleen Norris put it well, in her book *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer’s Life*. Provoked by her ruminations of the writing of Dante, she observed that in his reflections on this task he ‘ties anger, which is caring too much about the wrong things, to acedia, which is caring too little about the right things’.<sup>101</sup> Whether political efficacy is about transforming society or about being able to stick it out in a difficult situation, is a matter of heart and soul, not just of will. In the end it is less about opposing, objecting, protesting, rejecting, and tearing down but about the *adventurous redirection of perception and energy* so that other possibilities may be discovered and, as you put it earlier, made liveable.

**LEAH DURNER** Yes! I can see this ‘adventurous redirection’ you are proposing as not about transcending, denying, or ignoring life but participating more fully. And “adventurous’ can relate to “advent’ as discussed by Merleau-Ponty. I also like your idea of color accessing areas of vulnerability—this links to my earlier observation that I ‘see’ color with my whole body. Vulnerability also opens up in relation to how we ‘code’ the world, not just in terms of the visible and invisible, but also in relation to color. As Lawrence Buell put it in his foreword to *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013), apropos ‘the speciousness of reducing ecology or ecocriticism to green’:



Leah Durner  
*redorangeyellowviolet pour* from the Céline series, 2017  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
72 x 60 in, 182.88 x 152.4 cm  
Collection of the artist

Why not red (blood)? Why not brown (the Mississippi Delta)? Why not violet black (the deep sea)? For that matter—another insight for which polar experience prepares you—why not UV? For *just because it is invisible to the human eye does not mean it is not constitutive, penetrating you even when you are not aware.*<sup>102</sup>

What is happening, what is influencing me, what is penetrating me, what is occurring beyond my ken? The word ‘ken’, is an ancient word going all the way back to the Old Norse meaning ‘to perceive’ or ‘to see’. I cannot help but be immersed in and participate in the ‘flesh of the world’, no matter how I may conceptualize the world. Again, Merleau-Ponty:

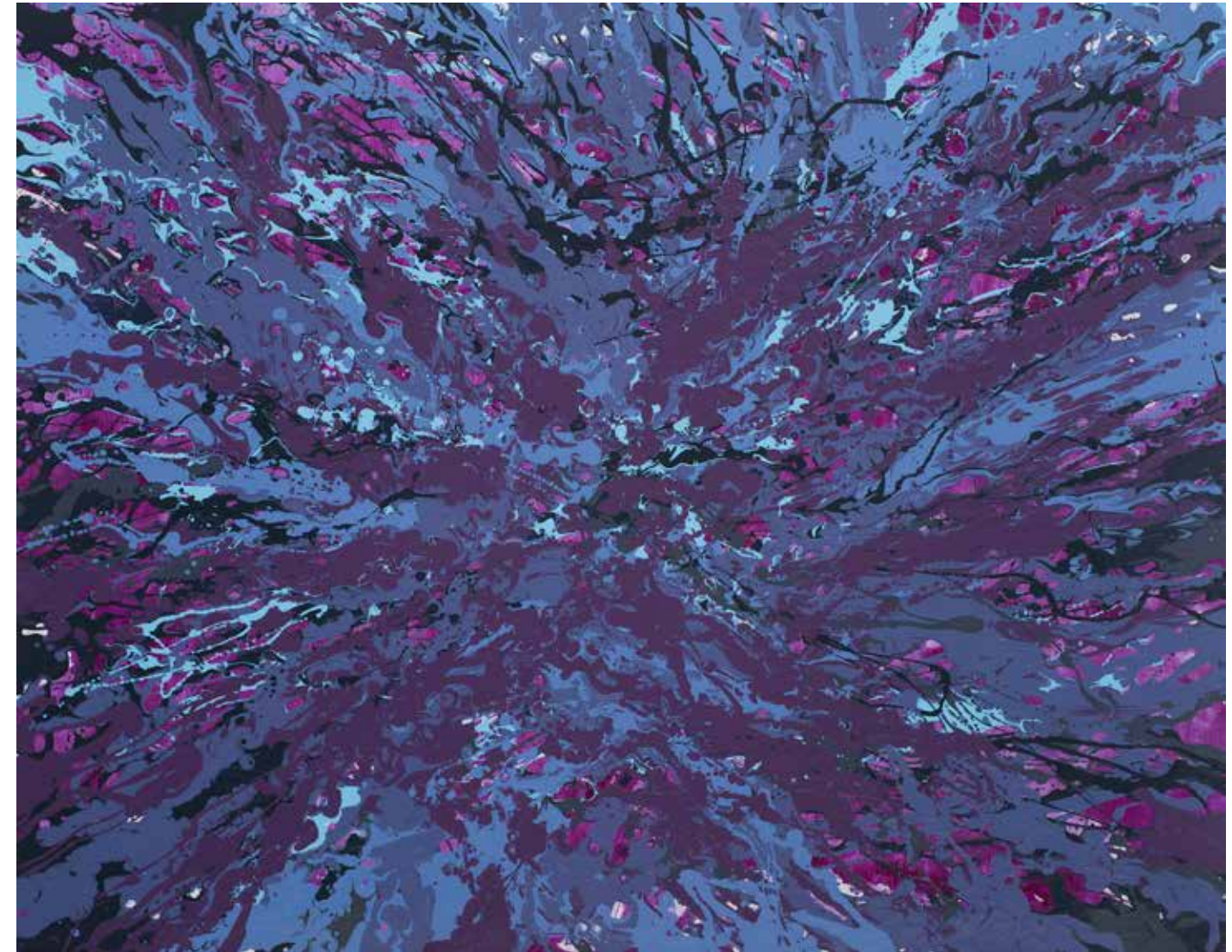
That means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the felt [*senti*] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping——<sup>103</sup>

So how do I live in the face of dehumanization of which neoliberalism, sexism, racism, classism, ecological unconcern, are all forms—without denying it or acquiescing to it? I can keep painting—that is my task. I do not escape; I perform my task. That is why extravagance/largesse/radical generosity is foundational for me. As Merleau-Ponty said apropos Bergson, ‘Everything happens, according to Bergson, as if man encountered at the roots of his constituted being a generosity which is not a compromise with the adversity of the world and which is on his side against it.’<sup>104</sup>

I understand extravagance, largesse and joy not as a denial of suffering or offer of escape, but as a way of Being, a place where I stand and from which I move, just

as I make a stand and live as a painter. The color, beauty, and scale of the work, as well as the barely-holding-together quality of the compositions and their flow, are my communication to you.

I am interested in living a radical vulnerability that is not a capitulation. I own nothing and I have no power. I have nothing but myself to give. This is the radical generosity and radical vulnerability of my life as a painter.



Leah Durner  
*darkvioletfuschiablackpaleblue pour* from the Darkness series,  
2017  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
48 x 60 in, 121.92 x 152.4 cm  
Collection of the artist

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', *Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 39–83, 52: 'Modern painting presents ... the problem of knowing how one can communicate without the help of a pre-established Nature which all men's senses open upon, the problem of knowing how we are grafted to the universal by that which is most our own.'
- 2 Jorella Andrews and Leah Durner. 'Immeasurable Extravagance: Proposals for an Economy of Abundance in an Age of Scarcity'. Conference Panel at CAA (College Art Association) Conference 2017. New York Hilton Midtown, NYC, United States, 15 February 2017.
- 3 Douglas Crimp, 'The End of Painting', *October*, Vol. 16, Art World Follies (Spring, 1981), 69–86.
- 4 Barbara Rose, *American Artists—The Eighties*. The Shore Collection. [http://theshorecollection.com/collection\\_Art\\_of\\_the%20\\_80s.html](http://theshorecollection.com/collection_Art_of_the%20_80s.html) Accessed 28 October 2017. The exhibition debuted at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York City, September through October 1979. Subsequently, it toured to Houston, Nantes and Paris, France; Helsinki; Aachen, Vienna, Tel Aviv, Budapest, Warsaw, Bari, Genoa, Barcelona, Lisbon and Madrid.
- 5 This is discussed further in the Introduction to Andrews, *The Question of Painting: Re-thinking Thought with Merleau-Ponty*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 2018, 6.
- 6 Crimp, op cit., 81.
- 7 Leon Golub. 'A Critique of Abstract Expressionism', *College Art Journal* Vol. 14, No. 2 (Winter, 1955), 142–147.
- 8 Theodor Adorno, 'Black as Ideal,' 1970. Excerpted from *Colour: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Art Gallery. David Batchelor (ed). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008, 157–157, 157.
- 9 Peter Wollen, 'Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International' in Elisabeth Sussman. *On the passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: the Situationist International, 1957–1972* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 25. Add: Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-Garde Won't Give up* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), 181.
- 10 Karen Kurczynski, 'Expression as vandalism: Asger Jorn's 'Modifications', RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics, No. 53/54 (Spring – Autumn, 2008), 293–313, 298.
- 11 Alison M. Gingeras (ed.), *The avant-garde won't give up : Cobra and its legacy*, with contributions by Marie Godet, Kerry Greaves, Karen Kurczynski, Claire de Dobay Rifelj, Los Angeles : Blum & Poe ; Munich ; New York : DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2017. Published on the occasion of the exhibition *The Avant-garde Won't Give Up: Cobra and Its Legacy*, curated by Alison M. Gingeras. Blum & Poe, 19 East 66th Street New York, NY 10065, September 9/October 17, 2015,
- Blum & Poe, 2727 South La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90034, November 5/December 23, 2015.
- 12 Robert Slifkin, *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), x–xi.
- 13 See Peggy Phelan, "Broken Symmetries: Memory, Sight, Love," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Oxon: Routledge, 1993, 1–33, Section II, 5–11 on visibility and power.
- 14 See Merleau-Ponty's discussions in the first part of 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' (1952) Translated by Richard C. McCleary, Edited by John Wild, 159 – 81. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 39–83.
- 15 The first English-language publication of Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' was in the American journal *Aspen*, no. 5–6, 1967. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' translated by Richard Howard, *Aspen* no. 5–6 The Minimalism Issue, Brian O'Doherty (ed.) New York: Roaring Fork Press, Fall-Winter 1967, unpaginated. Twenty-eight numbered items, including advertisements folder. Edited and designed by Brian O'Doherty, art direction by David Dalton and Lynn Letterman. Published Fall-Winter 1967 by Roaring Fork Press, NYC. *Aspen*, conceived of by Phyllis Johnson, former editor of Women's Wear Daily and Advertising Age, was a multi-media magazine that came in a box which included booklets, sound discs (33 1/3 rpm), and 8mm film reels. Ten numbers were published between 1965–1971.
- 16 Yves-Alain Bois 'Painting: The Task of Mourning'. In *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, (Boston: ICA, 1986) 29–49, 47.
- 17 Henry A. Giroux, 'The Violence of Organized Forgetting' published on Truthout online July 22, 2013. Accessed August 13, 2013. The ideology of hardness and cruelty in relation to neoliberalism is a recurring theme in Giroux's writing
- 18 Henry A. Giroux 'Neoliberalism and the Machinery of Disposability,' *Truthout*, published online April 8, 2014. Accessed July 11, 2018.
- 19 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London and New York: Routledge, 2004, 77.
- 20 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University, 1995), 136.
- 21 Julia Lee Barclay, *Practicing Philosophies*, selected and revised from Julia Lee Barclay, *Apocryphal Theatre: Practicing Philosophies*, Doctoral Thesis for The University of Northhampton, 2009, for publication as chapter in book from paper and workshop given at Theatre and Performance Research Conference, 2009.)
- 22 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition of Edification & Awakening by Anti-Climacus*, translated by Alastair Hannay, London: Penguin Books, 1989. 115–120. Here Kierkegaard discusses the "much too much" of Christianity and gives the example of the male day laborer who cannot accept that the mightiest emperor who ever lived wants to make him his son-in-law and fears being made an object of ridicule for such seeming overreaching. The day-laborer would even prefer just a small favor, rather than such total elevation and generosity from the emperor.
- 23 Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind'. In *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 163.
- 24 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, (London: Paladin Books, 1973).
- 25 Jacques Barzun in Introduction to Gustave Flaubert, *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, New Directions Paperback, Jacques Barzun, translator and author of Introduction and notes, (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Books, 1954), 3.
- 26 Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pecuchet with The Dictionary of Received Ideas* Introduction and translation of *Bouvard and Pecuchet* by Alban J. Krailsheimer. Translation of *Dictionary of Received Ideas* by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Classics, 1976).
- 27 Barbara Rose, 'The Black Paintings,' in *Ad Reinhardt Centennial 1913–2013, The Brooklyn Rail* (eds. Alex Bacon and Barbara Rose (Brooklyn: December 2013/January 2014) 160–161, 160.
- 28 Ad Reinhardt 'Chronology' in Jewish Museum and Lucy R. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt Paintings* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1966), Reinhardt's Chronology begins on page 30, the last numbered page in the catalogue. '1963 Six paintings in New York and six paintings in Paris get marked up and have to be roped off from the public. 1964 Ten paintings in London get marked up.'
- 29 'Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes*, Edited by Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134.
- 30 Texas v. Johnson, 491 U.S. 397 (1989) Argued March 21, 1989 Decided June 21, 1989 491 No. 88–155.
- 31 United States v. Eichman 496 U.S. 310 Argued: May 14, 1990. Decided: June 11, 1990. No. 89–1433, 731 F.Supp. 1123 (DDC 1990); No. 89–1434, 731 F.Supp. 415, affirmed.
- 32 In the post 1970s period, the United States Supreme Court has interpreted ideas of speech and personhood to devastating political, social, and economic effect on the life of the nation. Two decisive cases are Buckley v. Valeo (1976), in which the appellants argued that FECA's limitations on the use of money for political purposes were in violation of the First Amendment since no significant political expression could be made without expenditure of money, and Citizens United v. FEC (2010), in which corporations were considered to have the same rights to freedom of speech as persons and that speech could not be limited based on the speaker's wealth. The American Civil Liberties Union, the premier advocate for the protection of US civil liberties, among them freedom of speech, wrote amicus briefs in support of both Buckley and Citizens United because the ACLU considers money as a form of speech. The equation of money with speech is a topic for a separate conversation.
- 33 Irit Rogoff, "How to Dress for an Exhibition," in *Stopping the Process? Contemporary Views on Art and Exhibitions*, Mika Hannula ed., (Helsinki: NIFCA Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art: 1998, 130–152, 131. Rogoff uses an excerpt from Peggy Phelan's book *Unmarked – The Politics of Performance* (1993) as the epigraph for her essay and on page 134 cites Phelan's book as "ground- breaking."
- 34 Leah Durner, 'Gestural Abstraction and the Fleshiness of Paint, *Analecta Husserliana, The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research Volume LXXXI Metamorphosis Creative Imagination in Fine Arts Between Life-Projects and Human Aesthetic Aspirations*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 2004, 187–194.
- 35 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence'. In Galen A. Johnson (ed), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993, 76–120, 80.
- 36 Frederic Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, Oxford World Classics, Graham Parkes, Trans. And author of Introduction and Notes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2005), 199.
- 37 See Jan Verwoert, and Hugh Rorrison: 'Why are conceptual artists painting again? Because they think it's a good idea,' in *Afterfall: a Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 12 (Autumn/Winter 2005) 7–16. The authors discuss Yve-Alain Bois's *Painting as Model* (1990) and its model that requires painting to be justified and legitimated in terms of its immanent conceptual potential.
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- 39 Sharon Butler, *Abstract Painting: The New Casualists*, The Brooklyn Rail June 3, 2011, 57.
- 40 Ibid., 57
- 41 Kerry James Marshall, Helen Anne Molesworth, Ian Alteveer, Dieter Roelstraete, and Lanka Tattersall, *Kerry James Marshall: mastry*, Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, Ill.), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles, Calif.). (2016).
- 42 Charles Baudelaire, 'L'invitation au voyage' in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861) in *Baudelaire: The Complete Verse* Volume I (English and French Edition) , Francis Scarfe (Editor, Translator, Introduction) 125–126, quoted in Leah Durner 'On certain of my works on paper' (2005), self

- published <https://issuu.com/leahnewyork/docs/durner.paper.2005>. Accessed July 15, 2018
- 43 Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' op cit., 188. In the footnotes Merleau-Ponty references A. Berne-Joffroy, *Le dossier Caravage* (Paris, 1959), and Michel Butor, 'La Corbeille de l'Ambrosienne,' *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1959, 969–89.
- 44 Alison M. Gingeras, Sabine Folie, and Blaženka Perica. *Dear painter, paint me...: Painting the figure since late Picabia*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Kunsthalle Wien, & Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. (2002).
- 45 Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence'. In Galen A. Johnson (ed), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, op cit., 114.
- 46 Maurice Blondel *Action* (1893): *Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*. Translated by Oliva Blanchette, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1984, 7
- 47 Charles A. Riley II, *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995, 1.
- 48 Ibid., 2. The source he was referencing is: Winderick J, Lindsey DT, Sanocki E, Teller DY, Motulsky AG, Deeb SS., 'Polymorphism in red photopigment underlies variation in colour matching'. In *Nature*. 1992 Apr 2; 356(6368):431–3.
- 49 Ibid., 16.
- 50 Ibid., 16–17. My explanatory additions are in square brackets.
- 51 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*. Translated by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959, 22–23. The insertion is my own.
- 52 Charles Baudelaire, 'Les Phares,' in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1861), in *Baudelaire, The Complete Verse, Volume 1*, opus cit., 63–66, 63. "Rubens...où la vie afflue et s'agite sans cesse..." In this poem (title translated "The Beacons") Baudelaire wrote separate stanzas for painters he admired. The poem culminates with the passionate cry of painters from the depths of time.
- 53 See Robert Sokolowski's *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 42–51 for a good basic overview of the natural and phenomenological attitudes.
- 54 Julia Kristeva, 'The Triple Register of Colour', 1972, in *Colour, Documents of Contemporary Art*, London and Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2008, 158–162, 158.
- 55 Thomas McEvelley, 'The Monochrome Icon,' in *The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*, Contemporary Artists and Their Critics, Donald Kuspit General Editor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 9–56, 35.
- 56 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, op cit., 149–151.
- 57 Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, London: Routledge, 2000, 422.
- 58 Francis Bacon, 'Of Beauty,' in *The Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral*, Oxford World's Classics, Edited and with introduction and Notes by Brian Vickers, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 98–99, 98.
- 59 See Ann Temkin's exhibition *Color Chart: Reinventing Color from 1950 to Today* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2 March to 12 May 2008) for more on artists' use of commercial and industrial color in the post war era. <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2008/colorchart/flashsite/>
- 60 The Martha Rosler Library can be accessed at <http://projects.e-flux.com/library/>
- 61 Thomas Lawson, 'Last Exit: Painting,' Art Forum, October 1981, 40–47.
- 62 Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (written in 1949 and first published in French in 1967 as *La Part Maudite* by Les Edition de Minuit) also uses the sun as an example of superabundance and indiscriminate giving: 'Solar energy is the source of life's exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy—wealth—without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving ... Solar radiation results in a superabundance of energy on the surface of the globe.' *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy Volume I Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley, (Brooklyn: Zone Books 1989), 28–29.
- 63 St Matthew's Gospel 5: 38–48, *The Holy Bible*, The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version containing the Old and New Testaments, Edited by Herbert G. May and Bruce M Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 64 Full details: Jacob Jordaens, *An Allegory of Fruitfulness*, 1620–1629, Oil on canvas, 200.7 × 229 cm. Wallace Collection, London, East Drawing Room.
- 65 Full details: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rainbow Landscape*, c. 1636, Oil on oak panel, 135.6 × 235 cm. Wallace Collection, London East Drawing Room.
- 66 Genesis 9:13–17, *The Holy Bible*, op cit. (the story of Noah).
- 67 Jean Starobinski, *Largesse*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) 52–53. The French edition of this book was published in conjunction with an exhibition conceived and organized by the Department of Graphic Arts at the Louvre. The exhibition dates were 20 January to 18 April, 1994.
- 68 Christopher Brown and Peter Paul Rubens. 'Peace and War' *Minerva Protects Pax from Mars by Rubens*. Painting in Focus series, London: National Gallery, 1979. Pamphlet, 8 pages including front and back covers. Unpaginated.
- 69 Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', *The Primacy of Perception*, op cit., 162.
- 70 Ibid., 190.
- 71 Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): essay on a critique of life and a science of practice*. Translated by Oliva Blanchette, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1984. 4. The emphases are mine.
- 72 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, 1997, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 45.
- 73 Ibid. Badiou, 61.
- 74 Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry* trans Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 154.
- 75 Leah Durner's painting *Rousseau* 2006, acrylic and oil on canvas 60 × 66 in 152.4 × 167.6 cm is on *The Question of Painting's* cover. According to Durner, 'The painting's title references the ongoing (and usually unidentified) influence of Rousseau's thought on contemporary Western attitudes toward the natural and the artificial—of the association of the natural with childhood, innocence, and the rural and of the artificial with adulthood, decadence, and the urban. I have more to say on this matter!'
- 76 Starobinski, *Largesse*, opus cit., 122.
- 77 Carl Jung, "Ulysses: A Monologue," in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 15: Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature: Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature v. 15, Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature* Bollingen Series XX ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R.F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1966) 109–131, 122. First published in German 'Ulysses' in *Wirklichkeit der Seele* (Zurich: Rascher, 1934).
- 78 Anonymous, *Lazarillo de Tormes* in and *Lazarillo de Tormes and The Swindler (El Buscón, Two Spanish Picaresque Novels* Translated and with an introduction and notes by Michael Alpert, (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 1–60.
- 79 In the United States in 2018, 43% of children under the age of nine live in low income households and 21% live in poverty. National Center for Children in Poverty, [www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org), Young Child Risk Calculator. Accessed August 19, 2018.
- 80 Jacob Boehme, *Mysterium Pansophicum or A Fundamental Statement Concerning the Earthly and Heavenly Mystery, How they are in one another and how in the earthly the heavenly is manifested...* Translated by John Rolleston Earle, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), 153–154.
- 81 Jacob Boehme, *The Signature of All Thing with Other Writings*, Chapter II, #10), Everyman's Library Philosophy & Theology (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd. and New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1912), 14.
- 82 <https://web.archive.org/web/20130531005828/http://www.uwec.edu:80/philrel/faculty/beach/publications/boehme.html> Gives a basic overview of Boehme.
- 83 Details: Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We Dont Need Another Hero)*, 1986, photographic silkscreen/vinyl, 277 × 533 cm. Mary Boone Gallery, New York. Also exhibited August 15 – October 21, 1986 in Berkeley as part of the University of California, Berkeley, University Art Museum MATRIX program. <http://archive.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibition/100>
- 84 Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence'. In Galen A. Johnson (ed) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, op cit., 95
- 85 Alison M. Gingeras (curator), *The avant-garde won't give up: Cobra and its legacy*. Blum and Poe, New York, September 9 – October 17, 2015. The associated book, published by Prestel, came out in 2017.
- 86 Julia Kristeva as quoted in Nicholas Chare, *Auschwitz and afterimages: abjection, witnessing, and representation*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011, 30.
- 87 Theaster Gates, 'How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art.' TED talk, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9ryIM7JlyE> Accessed 28 October 2017.
- 88 Badiou, opus cit.10
- 89 Arthur Rimbaud, 'Delirium I The Foolish Virgin, The Infernal Bridegroom *A Season in Hell*' (1872), in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. with Introduction and Notes by Wallace Fowlie, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 188 (French) 189 (English). Students in the May 1968 uprising used Rimbaud's "changer la vie," as a street cry. Karl Marx, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." in Frederick Engels, 'Marx's Theses on Feuerbach (Jotted down in Brussels in the spring of 1845)' in *Ludwig Feuerbach And the outcome of Classical German Philosophy With an Appendix of Other Material of Marx and Engels relating to Dialectical Materialism*, The Marxist-Leninist Library Volume Two Edited by C.P. Dutt (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1936, reprinted 1941), 73–75, 75.
- 90 Galen A. Johnson, writing on Merleau-Ponty and postural latency in relation to depth, in the section on Beauty and the Imaginary in *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010, 183.
- 91 See Michael B Smith, 'Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics'. Ibid, 204.
- 92 Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, *Biba and Beyond: Barbara Hulanicki*, 22 September 2012 – 14 April 2013. Biba (mid-1960s to mid-1970s) was a hip and affordable fashion line created by Barbara Hulanicki that referenced late 19th – early 20th century decadence, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco and used "off" colors like olive, rust, and deep purple. Hulanicki's Biba shops in London were designed as a social and theatrical experience.
- 93 Ibid, 142.
- 94 Daniel Birnbaum, 'Where is painting now?' *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art*, London and Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel Art Gallery and MIT Press, 2011, 157–160, 158.
- 95 Merleau-Ponty, from the chapter entitled 'The Intertwining—The Chiasm' in *The Visible and the Invisible*, op cit., 132–133.
- 96 Paul Crowther, *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision: A Post-Analytic Turn*



- London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013, 5.
- 97 Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' *The Primacy of Perception*, op cit., 190.
- 98 Ibid., 190.
- 99 See the chapter 'Interrogation and Intuition' in Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and The Invisible*, op cit., 105–129, for his discussion of the origin of language and the visible in Being.
- 100 Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence'. In Galen A. Johnson (ed), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, op cit., 106–107.
- 101 Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2008, 202.
- 102 Lawrence Buell, 'Foreword', *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), ix. My emphasis.
- 103 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, op cit., 248.
- 104 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Bergson'. In: *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963, 9–33, 25–26.

The illustrations in *Painting, Largesse, and Life: A Conversation with Leah Durner* (the "Conversation") Jorella Andrews and Leah Durner are identified in their accompanying captions. This list of weblinks is added as a reference for those who are reading the Conversation in print form. In the Ebook format the weblinks (highlighted in blue and appearing in both the body of the conversation and the image captions) are live.

- Weblink 1: Leah Durner, Extravagant Painting: Outpouring and Overflowing, Broadsheet published in print 14 February 2017. Published online on 13 February 2017 on issuu.com. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://issuu.com/leahnewyork/docs/leahdurner.extravagantpainting>
- Weblink 2: Martha Rosler, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained*, 1977, Video 39:16 min, color, sound. Available on Electronic Arts, Intermix eai.org. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://www.eai.org/titles/vital-statistics-of-a-citizen-simply-obtained>
- Weblink 3: Interview with Geoffrey Hendricks. Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks discusses the performance of *The Sky Is the Limit: A Happening at Princeton University* on 10 October 2013. Princeton University Art Museum. Published online April 16, 2014. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoGXIn8MrwY>
- Weblink 4: Aspen no.5/6 Fall/Winter 1967. The Minimalism Issue. Published on UbuWeb ubu.com. Online publication, date unknown. Accessed 15 July 2018. <http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/index.html>
- Weblink 5: Giuli Mutti, "Aspen Magazine: A Surprise Box of Delights". AnOther another.com. Published 31 March 2015. Accessed 15 July 2018. <http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/7220/aspen-magazine-a-surprise-box-of-delights>
- Weblink 6: Leah Durner, Aspects of Conceptualism in American Work, Exhibition Catalogue 1987. Published in print 18 June 1987. Published online on 8 July 2018 on issuu.com. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://issuu.com/leahnewyork/docs/durner.conceptualism.catalogue.1987>
- Weblink 7: Museum of Modern Art New York gallery label for Ad Reinhardt Abstract Painting 1963, oil on canvas, 60 × 60 in, 152.4 × 152.4 cm, from *Focus: Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko*, 2008. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78976>
- Weblink 8: Joni Mitchell singing Woodstock in September 1970. *BBC In Concert* London. Broadcast 9 October 1970. Accessed 15 July 2018. <http://jonimitchell.com/library/video.cfm?id=204>
- Weblink 9: 571 Projects, Leah Durner: Naked Color New Works on Paper, Exhibition brochure with essay "Color/Sensation" by John Yau, Published in print 5 May 2011. Published online on 26 October 2017 on issuu.com. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://issuu.com/leahnewyork/docs/durner.yau.571.may2011>

- Weblink 10: Prada SS 1996 RTW collection slideshow on vogue.com. Publication date not available. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1996-ready-to-wear/prada>
- Weblink 11: Video of Prada SS 1996 runway show on Prada.com. Publication date not available. Accessed 15 July 2018. <http://www.prada.com/en/collections/fashion-show/archive/woman-ss-1996.html?video=video-dpe96>
- Weblink 12: Video of Prada FW 2015 RTW runway show on Prada.com. Published 2015 (exact date not available). Accessed 15 July 2018. <http://www.prada.com/en/collections/fashion-show/woman-fw-2015.html?video=video-pradafallwinter2015womenshowweb>
- Weblink 13: Sarah Mower review of Celine Pre-Fall 2016 collection on vogue.com. Published May 10, 2016. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/pre-fall-2016/celine>
- Weblink 14: Loretta Howard Gallery, Leah Durner Paintings 2002–2006, Exhibition brochure. Published in print 13 July 2012. Published online 13 May 2013 on issuu.com. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://issuu.com/leahnewyork/docs/durner.howard.brochure.28july>
- Weblink 15: Museum of Modern Art New York gallery label for Jackson Pollock, *One: Number 31*, 1950, oil and enamel paint on canvas, 8 feet 10 inches × 17 feet 5 5/8 inches 269.5 × 530.8 cm. Collection Museum of Modern Art New York. Accessed 29 November 2018. [https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78386?artist\\_id=4675&locale=en&page=1&sov\\_referrer=artist](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78386?artist_id=4675&locale=en&page=1&sov_referrer=artist)
- Weblink 16: Museum of Modern Art, The New American Painting: As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958–1959 curated by Dorothy C. Miller. Exhibition materials: catalogue, press release, checklist. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1990>
- Weblink 17: Studio Visit: Leah Durner, Interview with Leah Durner and Jake Lemkowitz, Front + Main a blog from west elm. Published February 15, 2013. Accessed 15 July 2018. <https://blog.westelm.com/2013/02/15/talking-with-leah-durner/>

*Painting, Largesse, and Life: A Conversation with Leah Durner*, Jorella Andrews and Leah Durner, 2018

A companion piece to *The Question of Painting: Rethinking Thought with Merleau-Ponty* by Jorella Andrews (Bloomsbury, 2018)

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#### coverimage

Leah Durner  
yellowgreendarkgreenbeigeturquoise pour  
from the Céline series, 2017  
poured latex enamel on canvas  
72 x 60 in 182.88 x 152.4 cm  
Collection of the artist

