The Medium

Sue Zemka

1. An introduction that has little relevance to what comes after.

My purpose is to follow a path of thoughts suggested by two related words, "medium and "mediate," both of which are etymological descendants of the Latin *medius,* meaning "in the middle."

I am drawn to this etymological family because it enables us to think at the same time about two dissimilar subjects. One the one hand, "the medium," meaning the painting medium generally, or more specifically the oily stuff we use in painting (mediums, solvents); and, on the other hand, "mediation," which is something abstract and portentous – a philosophical idea about the nature of reality, namely that we can't know it directly, only indirectly. "Mediation," in continental philosophy, suggests that everything we see, touch, hear, and know it is not immediately given but rather accessed *through* other things, such as the senses (empirical philosophers, Merleau-Ponty), or reason (Kant), or socio-economic structures like the state and capitalism (Marx; Adorno and Horkheimer), or language (Wittgenstein, Lacan), or all of the above (post-structuralism; Foucault, Derrida).

I am also drawn to this etymological family because middleness – being "in the middle" – is an existential condition, a place where we all wind up, eventually.

Midway in the journey of our life

I came to myself in a dark wood

For the straight way was lost (Dante, 2007, p.56).

2. A caveat, the face

All through my studies I have been drawn to the motif of the human face. I've done numerous paintings of human faces, usually on the same spatial plane (25 x 30 cm.), often working quickly, and with limited palettes built around one dominant hue (either a red, an orange, or blue). So drawn am I to this motif that I also wrote my thesis on it, focusing on Marlene Dumas, an artist who has painted hundreds of human faces in her career. Dumas's face paintings are decidedly not in the tradition of portraiture; rather, they are executed on principles of minimalism, anonymity, and acknowledgement of their cultural environment, specifically its mass-circulation of images.

I find myself fighting against a desire to focus again on the human face, not so much for the sake of a focus as out of a tendency to think of human faces as standing in for painterly motifs in general. Isn't it arguably the case that a face is the consummate object of the painter's endeavor, even when there is no face in it? A tendentious statement, and personally I'm not even happy about it being kind of true. But then there's Jacques Ranciére, who summarizes a large exhibit of contemporary art by anthropomorphizing it: "the obtuse presence of contemporary histories becomes the luminous power of a face-to-face" (2019, p. 23). Figuratively speaking, the face stands for the face of a painting that exists to be seen. It's the sign and sample of presence, of a human act of image-making intended for human eyes. For these reasons, one a convenience and the other a premise, I keep coming back to the motif of faces. As I do again here . . .

3. The medium

> Oh let them be left, wildness and wet;
> Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet (Hopkins, 1967, p. 89).

For some of the works included in her 2024 "Mourning Marysas" exhibit, Marlene Dumas poured paint on paper then guiding its flow until the image of a face appeared. The process sounds aleatory, and partly it is, although it only succeeds due to Dumas's five decades of working with her materials. It also succeeds because of her lifelong fascination with human physiognomy and its photographic reproductions. At this point, Dumas has an intuitional knowledge of the minimal information necessary to

convey the idea of a face. She also has psychology on her side. One painting, titled “Pareidolia,” exemplifies the phenomenon that makes the entire show work. “*Pareidolia*,” she writes, “is the tendency to see something meaningful in ambiguous images. Sounds a bit like paranoia, the word for seeing faces in everything” (2024, p5).

Figure 1: *Pareidolia* (Dumas, 2024).

Everything has been stripped down to utmost simplicity – her usual minimal color palette exchanged for an achromatic one, informational detail limited to a few wandering unbroken lines. Almost in spite of itself, the lines suggest a face. The face looks ancient, ‘primitive’, like a neolithic drawing, or the relic of an accidental shamanism.

Pareidolia: why would you see a face here, unless you wanted to, or were programmed by nature and experience to do so? Turns out we are so programmed. According to the evolutionary biologist Michael Sheehan, "humans are phenomenally good at recognizing faces; there is a part of the brain specialized for that . . . humans have been selected to be unique and easily recognizable. It is clearly beneficial for me to recognize others, but also beneficial for me to be recognizable" (Sanders, 2014).

"Pareidolia" looks as much like stone as a face. If it seeks an illusion, it's the illusion of being a face on a rock. But it's made from manipulating the movement of a fluid. In terms of material, the key one is a liquid – really, the condition of liquidity – the pourability of the paint, how far it spreads, how thick or thin it is. I'm belaboring the point because I feel like there's something hiding in the obvious that I can't quite articulate. It's the wetness I want to get at. The oil in oil paint.

Robert Massey lists 27 recipes for mediums and 9 for glazes in *Formulas for Painters* (1967, pp.99-137). In three years of art school, I have tried a few of these but only scratched the surface. I was introduced to one medium in particular last fall at the start of a two-week intensive course at the Charles H. Cecil Studio in Florence. "The medium we will use in this course," the teacher explained (I paraphrae), "is exceedingly important to the method of painting we will be learning. The recipe is centuries old and has been lost and rediscovered several times. The key ingredient is a type of lead-infused linseed oil that we make by soaking lead plates in linseed oil in the sun for several weeks. It is then combined in a 1:3 ratio with Canada balsam and Venetian turpentine. The Canada balsam is a compromise because the type of balsam resin we prefer is no longer available." Also, for what it's worth, Cennini's well-known *The Craftsman's Handbook* also mentions a method for preparing linseed oil that involves a period of baking it in the sun (1933, n22).

Figure 2: Mixing mediums at the Charles H. Cecil School

I was less impressed with the improvements this medium brought to my painting than with the near-magical powers attributed to it by members of the Cecil School. It replaced store-bought varieties of oils and resins with something alchemical. Purportedly it gave the paint on your brush the perfect amount of glide and shine without yellowing (or drying, for that matter, slow-drying mediums being a badge of honor). Moreover, as much as the sight-size method taught at the Cecil school, 'the medium' connected students to a venerable lineage that stretched from Velasquez and Rembrandt through Joshua Reynolds and John Singer Sargeant. It was *their* medium, a club secret. Why bother with anything else? The toxicity of the lead only added to the mystique.

It's easy to condescend to the Cecil School approach, but there is a historical validity in their mixture of magic and materialism that gets suppressed in Modernist aesthetics by the desire for

theoretical sophistication. When Clement Greenberg made "the painter's medium" the celebrated purpose of mid nineteenth-century painting, he meant "medium" generally, as the paint, the canvas, plus whatever stuff an artist might've added to a two-dimensional surface (1961, p. 86). All of these characteristics he subsumed under the painting's "flatness," which for modernists trumps the priority of the image thereon (87). The point was that now we were to attend the physicality of painting and the pleasures thereof (visual, tactile) over the primacy of the representational illusion. There are many ways to explain this turn towards materiality:

it's a reaction to the camera, which owns representational illusion in a way the painter never can;

it's a post-war despair of artistic meaning in the traditional sense, ala Adorno's pronouncement "there can no poetry after Auschwitz;"

it's a movement to the meta level over the mass-circulation of the technological images, ala Benjamin and DeBord;

etc. A common denominator throughout the discourse, however, is that "medium" does not mean oil or liquid medium specifically. One means "medium" in a more elevated and intellectualized sense; one is theorizing materiality.

And in so doing, one sublimates and suppresses the object. For the implication is that the material medium is not enough on its own; it can't speak for itself, needs a little explanation. Thus while Clement Greenberg and the Cecil School move in opposite directions when they talk about "the medium" – the one towards secular theory, the other towards magical thinking – they both, to a certain extent, move away from what they are talking about. They hoist their petard to something more important and aesthetically consequential than just oil: the Old Masters and what they were about; the new geniuses and what they are about.

Maybe this is because oil, *qua* oil, is messy, wet, sticky, really rather unpleasant? On the face of it, that sounds facetious, but I am quite serious. The characteristics of soiling, smelling, and muck-making are at best intractable, at worst ignoble.

In all these regards, the fate of the oil medium-as-object resembles the fate of woman-as-object. Women have been historically associated with fluidity, especially fluidity in the sense of messiness, soiling, liquids that require control and special handling to contain their tendency to spread, contaminate, pollute and be polluted. Feminism has long been keen to reveal an age-old branding of women's bodies as intractably liquid. Thus Irigiray, on "patriarchal" perceptions: when "the woman-thing speaks . . . it speaks fluid" (1985, p. 110). Julia Kristeva analyzed this association psychoanalytically, arguing that it is rooted in ambivalent feelings about the mother's body, not only her milk but her blood (1982, p. 71). Buried feelings about the mother's abject body perseveres in the unconscious as an intolerance for things (real, conceptual) that lack boundaries, including one's nascent self, which traverses "fluid demarcations of yet unstable territories where an 'I' that is taking shape is ceaselessly straying" (p. 11). The thesis echoes Freud's belief that the key psychoanalytic moment in human development is a universal myth centered on the penis, its discovery and its loss. But once we follow Freud down that path we are in the world of "phallocentrism," whereas Kristeva and Irigiray want to reconceptualize the myth with woman's "lack" at the center, a lack which, insofar as it conforms to matter, conforms to matter that is soft, amorphous, intractable . . . like liquid.

The general point is that French feminism see the voicelessness and formlessness of liquid as characteristics which patriarchal culture discursively attaches to women, first their bodies and then the ways they think – and not really as positives. I stand by the merit in their argument, and yet:

The reader will note that having taken Greenberg et. al. to task for reifying oil into aesthetic theory, I have just done the same thing by thinking about liquidity from a feminist perspective. My mistake is the lesson to be learned, the thing about oil: it exists *as* transition, as a liminal but material movement. In these regards is never self-identical, doesn't a stable identity over time. Once it dries, it

does, but then it's not a liquid anymore, it's a thing, the painting. By referencing French feminists, I have proven myself incapable of remaining with oil's mute materiality, its asemiotic self. This is an essay after all, and essay on what we talk about when we talk about oil, and unavoidably once we are talking *about* oil we have moved away from painting *with* oil, which, in its activity or process, its 'middleness', suffers the stress-laden uncertainty of becoming. In that middle-state, paint in its liquid form exists between a 'nothing' that is a material with mutable form, depth, and commitment, and a 'something' that has made decisions, made compromises with all those things.

Given that, perhaps we should turn to a practicing artist for clarification. I turned to Bridget Riley, an artist whose writings and interviews are copious and astute. Asked what she means by "the medium," Riley replies that "it seems to be identical with the means." As she expands on this, her language echoes what we've heard so far about liquidity: the medium is "potential," a "listening-in:" her use of colors seeks not to inhibit their "expansion and mutability," to let them "play freely" (2009; p. 104-5). Pressed by the interviewer for clarification, Riley states:

> When these elements are *not* asked to do something which is against their nature – (not asked to serve concepts or to represent) – *then* I think they are allowed to 'play freely – to show their vitality (p.106).

"Vitality" is an important word for Riley. Surprisingly enough, for an artist known for linear precision, she emphasizes that her linear forms seek to convey dynamism and instability (1967, p. 87). The parallel, colored bars of her many paintings create fields of static precision only to make them shake. They vibrate, they agitate, they disturb perception.

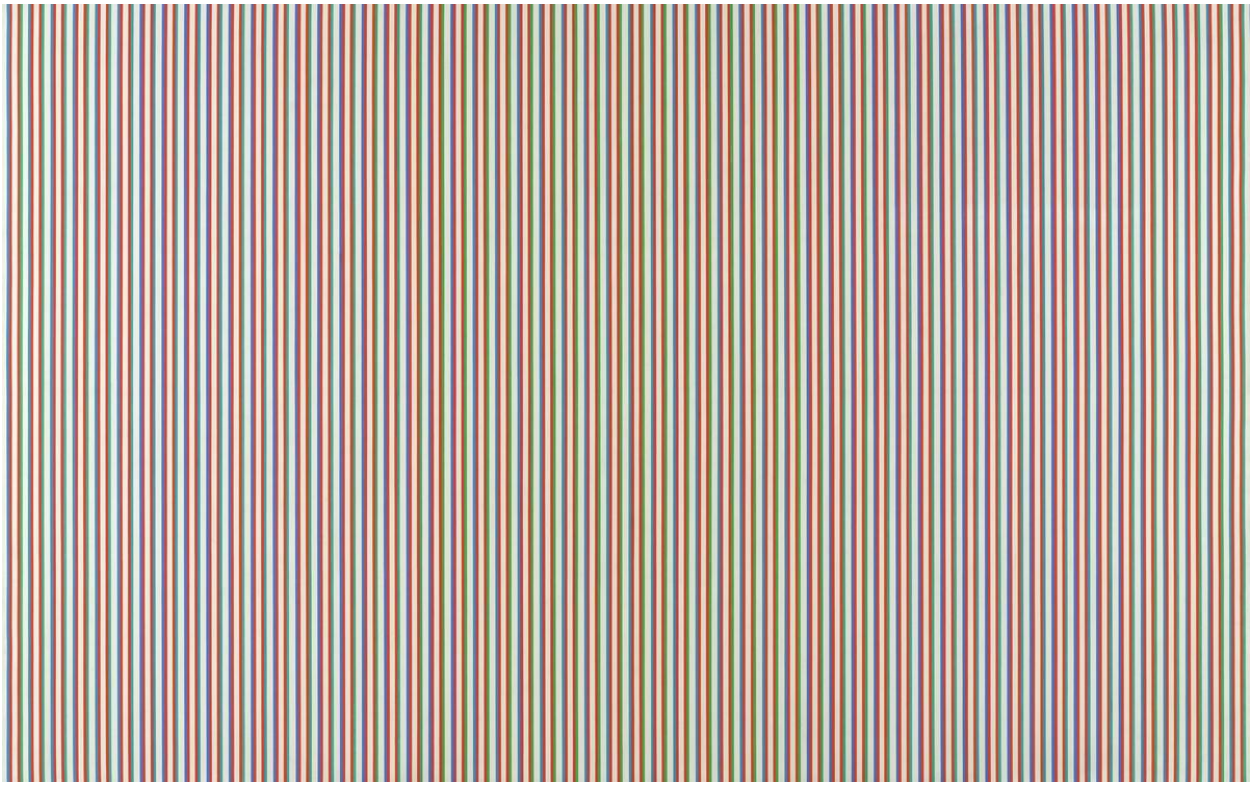

Figure 3: *Late Morning* (Riley, 1967 – 8)

While I wouldn't have immediately guessed it, Riley is an artist for whom "the medium" is important in the ways I am developing it: as painting in its liquid state of emergence, compounded by a desire to preserve a spirit of liquidity or metamorphoses in the final image; also as a veiled acknowledgement of the occluded presence of a face or "facingness" in every painting. For Riley is an artist emphatic about her desire for a conversation with her viewers, or in her words, of listeners. "Listening" is what she does while painting; what they do when they "let the painting speak" (1972, p. 108). Nothing could be less like a face than a Riley painting, and yet, there it is, a tendentiously non-facial "face-to-face" gaze (or conversation) with its viewer (Ranciére 2019, p. 23).

Given Riley's status as a woman artist, it's tempting to revert here to my previous point about women and fluidity – tempting but possibly wrong, or at least simplistic. Are women painters inclined by nature of their woman-ness to revel more than men in the feminine aspects of their fluid mediums, its oiliness, bleedability, and mess? And by extension, of its liminality and in-betweenesss? I don't

think so. Who would dare answer this question except by saying “yes and no.” Probably the most famous painter of liquidity is Jackson Pollock, and no one in the panoply of modern painting is more “male” than Pollock. His drip method was, early on, defended as “aerial painting,” imitative of flight (Menand, 2021; p.147), and this at time when aerial warfare, dropping bombs from planes, was on everyone’s mind. This is not an association I have in mind for oils.

More conducive to the thesis that women painters are uniquely inclined to embrace the liquidity of their medium is Pollock’s contemporary, Helen Frankenthaler, who thinned her paints to the point they no longer formed a skin on top of the canvas but soaked into its very weave.

Figure 4: *Flood* (Frankenthaler, 1967)

Frankenthaler's method might be the purest example of an artist extolling the medium as a permanent liminality of fluid color. No discernible brushstrokes, few (if any) lines, no representational allusion; instead, color fields that ebb out to soft boundaries. Echoing our liquid thesis, Mary Gabriel says "[Frankenthaler] created oceans" (2018, 459).

After Frankenthaler, pouring paints becomes an established method, both for color field painters and those who flirt with representational elements – Morris Louis, Pat Steir, and Cecily Brown, to name a few. The theoretical touchstones for this method have grown along with its popularity among painters in the last thirty years. Painters who pour might be influenced by eco-theory and triple O (Object-Oriented-Ontology), or by Jane Bennett's influential book *Vibrant Matter*, which proposes rethinking acts of making as involving an "assemblage" of actors, including humans and non-humans, organic and inorganic materials. Making in the spirit of Bennet's assemblages proceeds by acknowledging agency in the materials (2010; p. 27).

As radical as Bennett might sound, the agency of the medium, in the older sense of the happy or not-so-happy accident, has always been a gift and a problem in painting. At some point, the wet drip became an aesthetic. That moment might have been as early as the 14th c, when Pietro Lorenzetti scrupulously guided drips of red tempera down a gold-leaf gilder poplar board:

Figure 5: *The Crucifixion* (Lorenzetti, 1340s).

Lorenzetti executes a level of control over red tempera that is on the far end of what an abstract expressionist does when giving ‘free play” to liquid color. Indeed, the precision of his control is the ‘wow’ factor in his art for most viewers, then and now. Thus I doubt many art historians would be receptive to the idea that there is an assemblage of agents collaborated on *The Crucifixion*. Lorenzetti,

however, *might* have been more receptive, knowing first-hand the intractability and tetchiness of his materials, the dependence, even for the most adept craftsman, on a little luck, a little magic.

Magic is endemic to many if not most artists discussion of their practice, sometimes under the rubric of a spiritual, inspired, or simply unconscious vehicle or guide or purpose. (e.g., for the sake of casting a wide net that supports this claim, Jack Whitten: "THE PAINTING IS A MAGIC OBJECT . . , YOU HAVE THE LIGHT . . . GIVE IT ALL TO GOD" [2020, p. 236-7]). When the subject is a crucifixion, magic becomes quite explicit and bound up with ideas about the origins of western painting. The original magical element here – the blood of Christ – has a representational substitute, the red tempera, which would have been composed of ground minerals, probably cinnabar, emulsified by egg yolk and water.

We are now, believe it or not, at the very heart of the matter (of the medium). Because, when we step back and consider of all these uses and approaches to the liquid medium of painting, the question 'mediate what?' must eventually get asked, and the answer better stand up to the effort, expense, and importance assigned to the task. One cannot abide forever in the middle-zone of play, of wetness and change. Decisions must be made, a commitment to form, to a two-dimensional image that will fix itself dry. No one, even an atheist, is going to quibble with the cultural significance, the representational worthiness, of a crucifixion scene. It is so redolent with meaning it *stands* for meaning. The whole history of western secular art might be understood as an explosion of that motif into a million fragments. No more crucifixion scenes, please, but I'll take a little of their charisma.

I realize here why I was compelled to start with the lines from Hopkins's "Inversnaid." His cry for wetness, for the watery conditions that perpetuate an out-of-control fecundity, the wildness of green in a rainy spring – all of that is from the heart but blasted through with sadness. Because Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, believed even more than most that the exuberant frenzy of creation must tie itself down to a purpose in the end. A sign, a referent, a bounded form, or simply a moment to stop.

Is there a message communicated by all this crazy beauty? Contemporary art rankles at the communications-theory underpinnings of the question. Why does everything have to mean something other than its mute self? Why does 'meaning' have to comport to the rules of language? There is another way of stating the question (the question of what is mediated) that does not come from semiotics but rather from a philosophical tradition: what is mediated is presence, reality in its purportedly pure form, apart from representation or perception. The fact that I qualify "pure form" with "purportedly" is a giveaway that I write as a person raised on a heavy diet of post-structuralism, and thus gave up long ago on the belief in any such experience of pure immanence. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, it would strike you blind.

But the desire is always there. It must be there; it's called living. The trick played on us is that the middleness is the purpose rather than the point. Or, to put this in terms of painting, the two-dimensional image that you wind up making, which is a never a replication of the motive, idea, or motif with which you began, is the different but good enough (if not wonderful) purpose; the image of its own middleness.

When Lorenzetti allowed his paint to drip or emulate dripping, he cashed in on the visual power of seeing blood. Blood, like God, is an ultimate referent (that for another time). I have suggested that most of us learn to be content in not taking things that far, and instead accept the substitutes (of life, of play, of oil, as the resulting paintings) as ends in themselves. I am haunted by an art-work that is called to mind by Lorenzetti's crucifixion; it's Ana Mendieta's *Body Tracks.*

Figure 6: *Body Tracks* (Mendieta,1982)

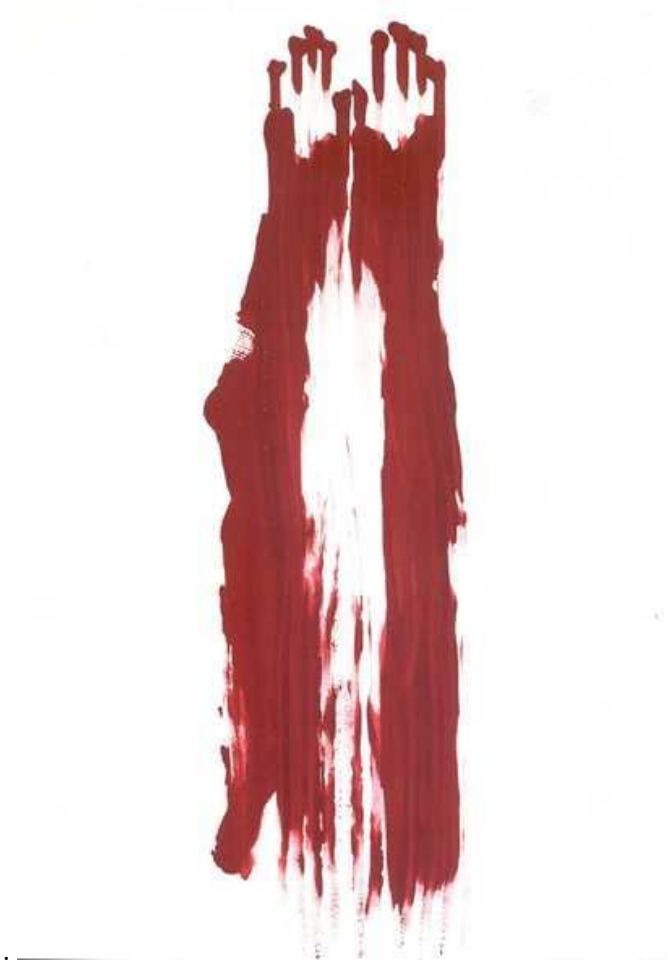

Figure 7: *Body Tracks* (Mendieta, 1982).

For this famous work Mendieta entered the performance to the sound of drums, purposefully walked up to a wall where three large sheets of paper had been posted, and, dipping her hands into a bowl of animal blood mixed with tempera, proceeded to drag her hands and arms down the wall three separate times, leaving the imprint of her body behind. Much has been written about *Body Tracks*; in the context of this essay, it takes us back through Lorenzetti's crucifixion to Kristeva's words about blood and women's blood as abject substances (unstable things; an outside fluid that belongs inside; a fluid that is both alive and not alive); we might go further back to Dumas's 2024 painting *Pareidolia,* with its poured paint so uncannily resembling a face. Like *Pareidolia,* the three paintings that came out of Mendieta's performance piece seem to stare at us like terrifying traces of a life, icons made out of things that were

animating liquids: oil, water, blood. In the end the marks and stains left by these are what remain of all our middleness.

Bibliography

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things.* London: Duke University Press.

Cennini, C. (1933). *The Craftsman's Handbook* (*Il Libro dell'Arte*). Trans. Daniel V. Thompson, New York: Dover.

Dante, A. *The Divine Comedy* (1999). Trans. Robert Hollander. New York: Random House.

Dumas, M. (2024). "Painting as mourning." In *Mourning Marsyas,* London: Frith Street Books.

Freud, S. (1977). *On sexuality: three essays on the theory of sexuality and other works*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Penguin Books.

Gabriel, M.(2018). *Ninth Street Women*. New York: Back Bay Books.

Greenberg, C. (1961). “On Modernist Painting.” *Arts Yearbook*, vol. 4 (1961). https://archive.org/details/clement-greenberg-modernist-painting/page/n3/mode/2up

Hopkins, G. M. (1967). “Inversnaid,” in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. 4th Ed. Ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie. London: Oxford University Press.

Irigriray, L. (1985). *This Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter and Caroline Burke. New York: Cornell University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Cornell Univeristy Press.

Massey, R. 1967. *Formulas for Painters.* New York: Watson-Guptill.

Menand, Louis (2021). *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*. New York: Harper Collins.

Ranciére, J. (2019). *The Future of the Image*. Trans. Gergory Elliott. London: Verso.

Riley, B. (2009). “In Conversation with Robert Kudielka,” in *The Eye’s Mind: Bridget Riley. Collected Essays 1965-2009*. Ed. Robert Kudielka. London: Ridinghouse.

Sanders, R. (2014) “Human faces are so variable because we evolved to look unique.” [online]. *UC Berkeley News.* Available at: https://news.berkeley.edu/2014/09/16/human-faces-are-so-variable-becausewe-evolved-to-look-unique/ [Accessed 10/06/2025].

Whitten, J. (2020). *Notes from the Toolshed*. N.P: Hauser & Wirth.

Illustrations

Figure 1: Dumas, M. 2024. *Pareidolia.*. 125 x 105 cm., oil on canvas. Available at: https://www.frithstreetgallery.com/exhibitions/231-marlene-dumas-mourning-marsyas/ (Accessed 07/06/2025).

Figure 2: 2024. Mixing mediums at the Charles H. Cecil School, Florence. Author’s photograph.

Figure 3: Riley, B. 1967-8. *Late Morning* . 226 x 359 cm. Polyvinyl acetate paint on canvas. Available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/riley-late-morning-t01032 (Accessed 07/06/2025).

Figure 4: Frankenthaler, H. 1967. *Flood.* 316 x 357 cm., acrylic on canvas. Available at: https://whitney.org/collection/works/2879 (Accessed 09/06/2025).

Figure 5: Lorenzetti, P. 1340s. *The Crucifixion*. 42 x 32 cm., tempera and gold leaf on wood. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/438605 (Accessed 09/06/2025).

Figure 6: Mendieta, A. 1982. *Body Tracks (Rastros Corporales).* Photograph taken during a performance at Franklin Furnace, New York City. Available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/11/the-body-is-present-even-if-in-disguise-tracing-the-trace-in-the-artwork-of-nancy-spero-and-ana-mendieta (Accessed 10/06/2025).

Fiigure 7: Mendieta, A. 1982. *Body Tracks (Rastros Corporales)*. Blood and tempera on paper. Available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/11/the-body-is-present-even-if-in-disguise-tracing-the-trace-in-the-artwork-of-nancy-spero-and-ana-mendieta (Accessed 10/06/2025).

.