Studio Metabolism: Mapping The Energy of Marking

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Studio Metabolism: Mapping The Energy of Making

by

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I have elected to write this artist statement as a compilation of sections. These sections are rather generic in their approach (i.e. who, what, where). However, I hope my strength as a thinker supports my novice writing ability. There are obvious topics that I have chosen not to talk about or discuss in depth. While the reader may find this frustrating it is partly due to my reductive nature that is also prevalent in my studio practice. I would like to clarify that when I use the term “object,” I am referring to all works in my practice that are two-dimensional and three-dimensional. I prefer the word “object” in relation to my paintings as I see them as physical bodies with multiple sides. Also “practice” refers to studio practice that is fundamentally my studio metabolism. My ultimate hope is that this is entertaining to read and reveals palpable knowledge about my working studio practice. I dedicate this thesis to my courageous wife.
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I. Introduction:

What’s the plan? Where are we meeting? What do I need to do? On any given day, my iCalendar (figure 1) is overflowing with commitments and overlapping time slots. I need and crave this structure within my schedule. I constantly plan my life, think about the future and then subsequently plan my way back to the present. I think of future objectives, goals or tasks and reverse engineer how I will get there, which ultimately returns me to the present. My advanced planning is an attempt to understand possibilities.
of my future. Deciding whether to take calculated risks or just unplugging from the world for a day could all have equal consequences to my future. I will make plans to not have any plans on a given day. I believe in the “knowing” that plans are set to provide a sense of control. This planning in life has become woven into my practice of making art. I plan and structure the making of my art by implementing a process. This process is my studio metabolism, which for me can be identified as a generative mode of working that involves steps and multiple mediums that work independently of one another but influence and perpetuate art production. This is to say the end result of any image or object created isn’t necessarily the final goal but the possible vehicle for another project. I make things with the intention that they will create other works. By doing this I am able to plan the next two to three bodies of work during the production of current pieces. The physical completed work (the energy) or the leftover matter (the waste product) from my process of making can generate new work. In both instances the energy and waste products are implemented to organize and sustain the process moving forward.

Currently, my process begins with photographic works that lead to paintings and continue with drawings. These mediums create the buildup of material and the breakdown of material in my studio’s circulatory process. While I make inanimate images and objects, the series of actions I take to bring them into existence share a metabolic process of exchange of material and energy through their making. This set of connected parts is what forms the network of my studio practice.
II. Methods:

Ritual and seriality are important subject matters’ of my working method. Each of these subjects operates within the concept of repetition. Repetition has been the key tool in understanding my pragmatism inside and outside of the studio. Making a daily action into habit organizes my thoughts and plans. Due to the repetition of my morning habits and the importance they have on my daily structure I consider them to be personal rituals. Seriality has provided efficiency to my work ethic and the ability to work through issues. Making things in a series helps me be a better creator. I can take things that I have learned from one piece over to the next within the different bodies of work regardless of the medium.

Seriality has circled my practice for the last five years. However, recently it has predicated my practice. Briony Fer, in her essay *The Infinite line*, defines minimalist seriality as *A series consists of a number of connected elements with a common strand linking them together, often repetitively, often in succession. But series, especially as they operate in art, rarely exist singly and are usually mutually interwoven.*¹ I believe Fer’s understanding of seriality has an important relationship to my studio as a metabolism. I interrupt her “seriality” as a process or system creating a number of objects or images with slight variations and many similarities. In connection with seriality, Fer notes a Deleuzian idea of *many registers of repetition*, that she renders as a method of operation

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to form new aesthetic strategies.\textsuperscript{2} In a very similar manner, I create images that are
connected by their shared fundamental components. I evaluate these components early on
in my practice by locating a ubiquitous subject matter from everyday life. These
essential components become the source material, which makes use of repetition to
generate other images. The method of making for these images becomes a constant
process of reproduction but with various results. This will become apparent as the bodies
of work (photographs, paintings, drawings) are discussed in terms of their physical
manifestation.

Ritual is an important aspect in my process. I don’t use “ritual” in the spiritual context,
but take from the everyday rituals of eating to build source material. James Livingston
unpacks ritual actions in his essay \textit{Sacred Ritual} that led me to realize the intersection of
my practice and ritual acts. Livingston explains, “rituals are found in every human
community and are a primary means of social communication and cohesion. The Greek
word for \textit{rite} derives from \textit{dromenon}, meaning a thing done to achieve a specific end.”\textsuperscript{3}
Looking at Livingston portion “a thing done to achieve a specific end” makes me
immediately think of goals. As discussed early, I am continually creating goals and/or
tasks to achieve a certain plan for myself. In my studio the goal is to always make
something, but then the question becomes, “how do you make something?” Asking this
question prompted me to look at my daily rituals due to their high significance in my life.

\textsuperscript{2} Fer, \textit{The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism}, 3
\textsuperscript{3} Livingston James, \textit{Sacred Ritual}” from \textit{Anatomy of the Sacred: An introduction to Religion}, (Upper
The ritual action of eating was a difficult but important choice to highlight. I was apprehensive to explore the inherent social, economic and political connotations around food. My initial engagement with introducing food into my art practice was not to address the political but to investigate natural forms. Food is so dominant in my life and not just for its practical purposes of sustaining life but the pure enjoyment. Food is a form of social communication and has the capacity to unite cultures. Food is a concrete matter in the world, which has many characteristics including growing, healing and dying. The universal characteristics of food created a building block for me to make objects that are inanimate, but reflect a similar process.

My intention to make daily drawings and photographic works with specific purpose has made them rituals. These actions may be daily rituals, but are mostly weekly rituals. These actions form a setting that creates a greater awareness for me to that activity. For my photographic works I begin by taking a picture of food, a form of nourishment. Despite many people posting food photos on social media out of habit, it is a ritual for me because it creates a more conscious connection to that meal. Through the image making, I acknowledge that I am fortunate to be eating a meal. I become more aware of how the food is on the plate, the relationship of the plate to the table, and the quantity of food in front of me. I also look at the color relationships of the different ingredients. This level of attention creates a more mindful eating ritual. Equally this mindfulness has manifested itself into the studio by creating a greater awareness of consciousness during the act of making.
My awareness in the studio needs to determine the “what” in my practice before I can begin to understand the “how.” The “what” gives me a platform to unpack the purpose of taking an action. Equally, I don't know how to make a piece without this baseline information. The “what” doesn’t necessarily dictate the content. The content is realized during the making of the work or after the piece is complete. My “what” could be as simple as making instructions on how to assemble a painting. New York based artist Rudolf Stingel famously does this in his late 1980’s series of paintings when he includes a book of instructions with each piece. (see figure 2) Making his painting procedures and materials public knowledge, step by step. In an interview with Flash Art, Stingel is questioned about the purpose of his instructions and their relationship to reproduction and seriality. His answer is simply stated, I am by far not the

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4 http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/rudolf_stingel_untitled.htm
first one questioning the “fairy tale of the creativity of the artist.” It derived first and foremost from a feeling of honesty towards myself. The “instructions” were a guide to calculate chance as a working method.\(^5\) I am looking for methods to limit an infinite amount of choices when making a piece. The use of guidelines allows me to narrow my choices by having set parameters in place. I believe these choices to be a reflection of my pragmatism. The “what” in my practice is an attempt to make generative bodies of work that have an ordered and linked progression from piece to piece.

Similarly to Stingels instructions, I incorporate a series of guidelines for each body of work. The photo collages, paintings, and drawings receive a set of guidelines based predominantly on the work that came before. The guidelines are developed by questions or problems from prior work. Equally, the guidelines aid in keeping the works generative by having a universal rule of repetition. The specific medium will lend itself to certain guidelines depending on the limitations of that medium. I allow the source material to influence the steps associated to the process. A major shared guideline of chance is used throughout each body of work. This guideline was instituted by honest questions. I have always circled around the idea of, “what dictates an honest work of art?”

\(^5\) Pacher Jeanette, Shit, “How Are You Going to Do This One?” (Flash Art July - August 2013) retrieved from http://www.flashartonline.com/article/shit-how-are-you-going-to-do-this-one/
III. Working:

The photographic works are the raw material of my studio. I have accumulated thousands of photos of food on my mobile phone and other digital devices with photo libraries. At first it was a choice of efficiency to use these photos along with their ubiquitous nature. Equally, as discussed earlier, the photos became a ritual act before I would sit down to a meal. All these images are from things I eat want to eat and/or cook. There are repetitive images documenting leftovers and the frequency of cooking favorite meals. I print the photos in blocks of time. For example, I will select the food photos I have documented from the last two to three weeks, which will average around 250-400 photos. These images are processed through commercial methods, such as FedEx Office Print or Walgreens One Hour Photo. Once I acquire the physical photos, I extract the main content by cutting around the profile of the food as if I was making a contour drawing. I attempt to cut as many photos as I can in one sitting. This task can be physically challenging. The cutouts collected are then used in a chance operation. I place the shapes in a large envelope and empty the contents onto a plexi sheet prepared with a clear adhesive. Where and how the pieces land is the place they will stay. They are then covered by another sheet of plexi, and the two pieces are bonded together, compressing the shapes into one. These series of steps are to create an instant double composition that is an attempt to abstract the content through physical layering. Ambiguity is created through the stacking and flipping over of these pieces. Some parts remain evident as to what they are, but ultimately as a whole configuration, the visual field is a distortion of
form and color. Due to the nature of the acrylic plexi being transparent this process results with two compositions. This method of chance eliminates a hierarchy, in doing so, imagery on both sides of the plexi becomes equally meaningful. I do not wish to privilege one side over the other as the information on each side functions in support of one another. One side may contain more representational information that draws specific content about the piece. The other side becomes more formal and is suggestive of the content but doesn’t completely reveal itself. I believe that the duality of the formal and representational aspects of the chance photo collages broadens their complexity as an object. It opens up the interpretation of food forms and images that is not directly associated with desire but more about the biomorphic nature of food.

Briony Fer defines the biomorphic in art as “forceful metaphors, which bring to bear the characteristics, of the living organism on an inanimate object - whether it be a photograph, a painting, a relief or a collage. They usually describe a set of curved, amorphous and apparently random forms - configurations that are contrasted with the geometric, the grid and the straight line.”

The relationship to the biomorphic

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resonates throughout my practice and can be attributed to the perpetuation of the food forms and the reduction of their content. Contrary to Fer’s definition I don’t advocate for the forms in my work to function as forceful metaphors, but imply a comparison between the inanimate and the living. As seen in figure three, the forms are a direct correlation to Fer’s definition of the biomorphic. This relationship happened by chance in the studio, but appears orchestrated. Compositions like these occur throughout my work, but are all by chance even when appearing constructed.

The photographic works left me with many photo remnants (the waste product). I saw potential possibilities for this otherwise discarded material for my paintings. After some time of studying these remnants I became interested in the physical hole in the images. (see figure 4) For this reason I started to look at the negative space or void of the remaining photo from my cutouts as a photographic stencil for paintings. Similarly to how the film negative is to a print, these photographic stencils would function as a homogenous method to paintings. This method operates through the shared common origin that exists between the negative space of the stencil and the positive form created on the painting. This results in similar structures with subtle differences. The negative
space offers a unique type of stencil that I use in my process of painting and drawing. I scan the remnants of the photo and then print it on transparency paper. The transparency paper allows me to fabricate the shapes in various sizes with the use of an overhead projector.

The negative spaces of the cutouts make the positive forms in my paintings. These forms build various types of space in the paintings that range from flat, atmospheric to three-dimensional. In the early stages of the paintings these forms are dropped from above or thrown on top of the painting while it is in a horizontal position. This is a similar operation to how the photographic works discussed earlier are made. These early actions are a working method to build space in the painting. This is aggressive as if I am attacking the paintings with these forms in an act of anger or frustration. I believe the frustration stems from the unknown, but it is this shared guideline of chance in both bodies of work that alleviates this frustration. In this instance the “unknown” is the painting. Why use the chance operation if your goal is to “know” or have an idea of the outcome? Chance has become the ultimate equalizer of apprehension in making a painting. While fear of the unknown remains, chance allows me to start a painting without over thinking my first actions. Whether the forms fall onto the substrate in a composition that is to my liking or not, it is out of my control. It is in the awareness of this that allows me to continue with the painting and be patient with my frustration. Additionally, chance has the capability to remove a portion of self-confidence in the making of the work.
I believe this removal helps to control personal taste that I will further address later in the paper.

Each painting receives its own series of the photographic stencils and its own color palette. I build many layers of one pigment over the entire substrate, alternating values, sheens and textures of color with each layer. Between each layer I drop another 3-4 shapes using a masking material traced from the photographic stencils that act as a barrier of protection for the previous layer. Much of this beginning process builds the flat space in the painting. Scale shifts between forms create atmospheric space that provides a push/pull effect in the compositions. However, the success of this isn’t determined until the masking material is removed. I delicately trim off the masked sections from the painting surface with various precision tools being cautious not to tear the layers of paint. Although I am careful with this procedure there are always moments where the paint does tear and I have to embrace that action. In the beginning it was difficult not to correct the tears and areas of paint loss. As I saw this happening in other works I began to see a relationship between the loss of the paint and extraction of the tape. The removal of the tape has given me the impression of the painting as a body. The tape prior to removal acted as a bandage of protection from succeeding layers of paint. In the end, the tapes’ purpose becomes a destroying factor in making the painting. It removes the layers applied to the top of it and at times pulls previous layers from underneath it. Thus exposing the bare surface and revealing it’s original state. This was an unplanned characteristic of the work, nonetheless it adds to the history of layers within the painting.
Including increasing the visual depth of the painting between the various flat and three-dimensional shapes.

The thicker and larger shapes are made from aqua resin casts that are sculpted out of clay from the same stencils as the two-dimensional forms in the painting. Plaster molds fabricated from the clay positives, are filled with aqua resin, which produces the three-dimensional forms for the paintings. These casted forms create the three-dimensional space in my paintings and produce shadows that are cast onto other flat forms. I plot these resin positives in various areas of the painting as a response to the existing chance composition already built up on the surface. These more sculptural forms have become the appendages of the painting. They build physical structure through their overlapping and density that is suggestive of architectural elements within the painting. This step within my process of painting has begun to feel more sculptural. The bonding of the casted forms to the surface physically sculpts the painting’s body. This action alters the inherent nature of the painting by inserting a foreign object that has been fabricated from the same imagery but is made out of an entirely different medium. This addition expands upon the painting’s internal logic and creates a hierarchy amongst forms. The three dimensional forms enforce a chain of command through their unique presence in the paintings. I say “unique” because out of the many possible forms in the painting only one form gets a mold. This mold makes many identical forms that make up one larger form in the painting’s composition. Due to their size in the composition they take precedence over the two dimensional forms.
The monochrome palette unites the majority of the painting’s surface with the embedded and relief forms. As well as being a unifying factor in my work I use color to create a persona and/or character for the painting. Each painting begins to have its own distinct presence that is dictated much by the chosen color. The current palette is based on the index of seasonal commercial house paints with food names. For example, a color such as “Creamy Blueberry” is a mixture of blue and a warm white that results in a purple. An argument could be made that the color should be based on observation of a natural source. Using the color of the unprocessed, natural state of the food itself such as an orange that carries the name of its pigmentation would be a prime example. Yet at this time in my practice, I am invested in the investigation and role of the natural forms in art production. There is relevance to the observation of natural color within my work, but the duality of the manufactured color with biomorphic forms of food creates a richer cultural critique.

The current palette is intended to conjure up ideas around the abject. The move to inject a sense of horror in the painting derives from a guideline to remove a layer of desire from the work. This rule came out of a question. How do you temper desire in paintings sourced from imagery of Food Porn? I addressed this in a rather ironic sense with color though implementing food inspired paint. Through studying the plethora of names at a painting supply store I was intrigued by the disassociation of the paint name and actual

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Footnote: Food porn is a glamorized spectacular visual presentation of cooking or eating in advertisements, infomercials, cooking shows or other visual media, food boasting high fat and calorie content, exotic dishes to eat or the glorification of food as a substitute for sex. Most frequently seen in food photography. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_porn
color. Most of the colors inspired by food were far from appetizing. Very few food items have a direct relationship to the color that they are. I believe culturally we identify certain natural objects by their name. Although an orange is a fruit and its own color, people may have a different idea of that color when they think of an orange.

At this point in my process the forms are on their second manifestation. They are two-steps removed from their original counterpart. In the *Laws of Chance* Briony Fer explains, *Hans Arp paper collage technique as a system which reduces the possibilities of resemblance to a minimum and focus attention on the scattering of forms across the paper.* In my own practice there is a similar action at play that further removes the pictorial imagery of food and creates a biomorphic form. This use of reducing representational content engaged the question: Is it possible today to make purely abstract paintings without representation source material and or theoretical rigor?

Outside of the studio I make what I refer to as "A Drawing A Day," a ritual that allows me to be more liberated to ease the amount guidelines I employ in my practice. This portion of my practice occurs outside of the studio as a method to continue my process wherever I am. These drawings have a simple set of foundational guidelines that prepares the works for making. The first is the repurposing of the masking tape from my paintings as a template for the drawing. Thus making this the third iteration of the original photos. I understand the moral implication of the word “repurpose”, but in this occurrence it is a

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8 Fer Briony, *On Abstraction*, 67
vital action for the studio’s metabolic process of being generative. I satisfy this adaptation of the material guideline in two ways. I use the remnants of the negative space of the tape once the positive has been cutout for the painting.

Essentially this creates a chance composition for the drawing and I can simply render in the unmasked portion of the paper. (see figure 5) The other approach I have committed to is using the positive portion of the forms once they are removed from the paintings. (See figure 6)

These shapes are arranged in a configuration dictated by the order they’re removed from the painting. The shapes determine where negative space will occur in the drawing. In both instances, once the drawing has been completed the tape is removed.

Furthermore, the drawings only use one medium. This is important due to the limited amount of materials I carry on my person outside of the studio and for efficiency. I want the ability to complete that drawing within the day that I started it as to keep it fresh and my cognition to a minimum.
While the physical act of making the drawing is labored, I wish to not belabor the thinking of its construction. The predetermined guidelines allow me to do this.

These meticulously drafted drawings of island-like forms are comprised of thousands of individual lines that create shapes with muscle like textures. (see image 7)

If my painting were the metaphorical skin of the bodies I construct, the drawings would act as the tissue underneath them. While this was an unintended relationship of the works it reinforces the structure of the studio functioning as a metabolism. Although separated by substrates and mediums there is a strong physical relationship between the drawings and paintings.

The drawings are influenced by the making and thinking around my paintings. It's a much-needed exercise that builds my craft muscles. These important muscles aid in my stamina in the studio and support healthy growth of the work. The cutting of the photographs proportionately has an interesting relationship to drawings. The Exacto blade is much like a drawing tool with similar movements for use and shared physical features. The physical actions of cross hatching the blade to remove details of the photo are a familiar method of the intricate marking making I employ in the drawing.
IV. Problems:

“We Should not be too quick to jettison the word formalism, because its enemies are our own: scientists, causationists, spiritualists, functionalists, “spontaneous”; attacks against formalism are always made in the name of content, the subject, the Cause (an ironically ambiguous word, referring to faith and determinism, as if they were the same thing); i.e., in the name of the signified, in the name of the name. We don’t need to keep our distance from formalism, merely to take our ease (ease, on the order of desire, is more subversive than distance, on the order of censure). The formalism I have in mind does not consist in “forgetting,” “neglecting,” “reducing” content (lets keep the word, provisionally); content is precisely what interests formalism, because its endless as is each time to push content back (until the notion of origin ceases to be pertinent), to displace it according to a play of successive forms.”

I revisited the words of Yve-Alain Bois (cited above) to address how I was going to start making paintings that felt more honest of me as an individual. For the longest time I distrusted the formal structure and approach in my work. I found it to be a crutch, a cop-out, and a trophy of intellectual art. At the same time, I revered the formal characteristics of artists past and present. I would stare longingly in the museums at Mark Rothko, Ellsworth Kelly and Barnett Newman paintings. It is not my intention to pigeon hole these artists as formalists. Over a decade ago, at the time of introduction to their work, I solely focused on the formal qualities of their practice. I know now that there was a lack of honesty on my part in the making of previous work. It was an unsettling judgment that slowly began to breakdown my practice. I needed to find a method of working that didn’t entirely remove formalism, but utilized it to my advantage and upheld my interests. I needed to make work that represented myself and not the artists that I adored.

Not only did I want to make work that represented myself but also engaged the world around me. This is what led me to thinking of my studio as a metabolic process.

My studio metabolism allows me to consider the formal and aesthetic qualities of my work while engaged in the act of painting, drawing or observing a piece in production. It’s a method of mapping space that happens within the work by dealing with the formal negotiations of the forms. These negotiations take place in all three mediums of my practice. It is most evident in my paintings in dealing with the relationship between the flat forms of the chance composition and the conscious placing of the three dimensional forms. Equally enabling me to understand the image’s reasoning to use as a building block. I see this as an action of building a map of the work’s history. This history is the physical marks and layers built up over time during production. Within the paintings the masked forms reveal a history and silhouette vignettes past forms. The drawings become studies for the forms after they are completed. In this instance the drawings are observational drawings of the forms made in the paintings. The photographic works remain as the original content and source material. They are the energy and investigative portion to the practice. I act as the conduit for all of these mediums and act in accordance to the guidelines set forth.

I have a limited ability to separate myself from the act of making art in a way that my own personal tastes don’t influence the image. This is why I believe strongly in the guidelines to set up a type of order or process that assists in fortifying this influence of my
own aesthetics. The process creates a distance between what is depicted and myself. Ironically this doesn’t alienate me from my work, but engages me more to interrupt my understanding of it. There is room for personal taste but it should be kept at bay. It’s not vital that a viewer is informed of these choices functioning in my paintings. Ultimately, the source material becomes a structure for me to hang the paint on.

How I choose or build a process is at times dumb or flat-footed. I am constantly documenting (mostly comical) approaches to making paintings and/or images. Writing down whims of ideas always reminds me of an important statement by David Hammons: Write down 500 ideas for an art project and choose one.\textsuperscript{10} This simple but daunting directive is a helpful tool for experimentation. I say “daunting” because I personally have never created 500 ideas in one sitting. I actually find that task somewhat oppressive because I would rather be physically making something and not sitting at my desk writing. In my mind two or three written ideas a day is an effective way to generate additional ideas for making work.

While I see these mediums of my practice linked together they are not meant to be exhibited together. This would make them didactic illustrations instead of generating their own unique content outside of one another. Specifically I feel the photographic works would become a footnote to the paintings in direct relationship to one another. I am unable to comment on the content a viewer would interpret but the separation of the mediums allows for a deeper visual investigation of the individual practices. The serial  

\textsuperscript{10} Jenkins Ulysses. King David (1978)
progression of works allows for a micro and macro experience. For me it would be beneficial for a viewer to grasp a process taking place within the work and being able to link that to something concrete in their life. I expect this to happen, but I hope the potential is there through the phenomenological experience of my work.
V. End:

Earlier in this paper, “honesty” was highlighted in Stingel’s statement regarding his purpose of including instructions with his paintings and using chance operations. I have spoken specifically about how chance operates in my work, but haven't answered the question how it is an honest gesture? Equally I have tried to understand, “why is honesty important to me in my work?”

I mention honesty because as much as I have embraced my practice of the last three years I feel uneasy about the label around it. For me this label is “processed based abstraction” or PBA for which I feel inundated by in the public and private art institutions. I feel that this was inevitable because of the amount of processed based abstraction that I look at and critique. Through osmosis PBA has become my method of working and I fear the pitfalls of losing all concrete content in my work. I believe this to be a generational fear. Many of my peers and I feel we need content to somehow justify our practices. Ultimately, I remind myself not to jettison the formal nature to my work. This in turn becomes a question of, “why fight what comes natural in my practice?” Could it be fear that if content doesn’t ooze from our work is it less relevant? I am not entirely clear at this point. I believe with time I will be able to come to an understanding that is somehow connected to why I have this working method.
I have presented a process of making that implements a map or residue of previous works. All of these actions are in hopes to produce other work that is generative. The regeneration of source material, fabricated objects, and their waste material is furthering my embrace of process-based abstraction. Next, I plan to use all the discarded dirty paint water from my previous paintings to make objects (see figure 8). As seen in figure 8, the discarded products of previous work have created a new object to unpack and explore. This new object will metabolize and produce other future works.

Figure 8: Joshua Holzmann, *To Be Titled*, 2016 acrylic paint on milk carton, 10 ½ inches x 10 ½ inches
Bibliography:


