

2012

# Color locality

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## Recommended Citation

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# **COLOR LOCALITY**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art

by  
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B.A., Centre College, 2006  
May 2012

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
Landscape.....	1
Subject.....	2
Location.....	2
Outside.....	3
Color.....	3
Space.....	4
Water.....	4
Format.....	5
Composition.....	5
The Viewer.....	6
Art Historical Influence.....	6
Contemporary Style.....	7
REFERENCES.....	9
VITA.....	10

## **Abstract**

I go outside to make small drawings and sketches of the local landscapes. My paintings are created in my studio. I use the lines and shapes from the drawings as a guide in making a design of color and space. This practice allows me to relate my enjoyment of the outdoors to my interest in color relationships.

It is very important to me to spend time outside, to interact with the natural environment, when so much of a person's time is spent in a man-made setting. Living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana I have found two locations that reveal these two situations encountering one another. The I-10 Bridge that crosses the Mississippi River downtown and the I-10 overpass that goes through the City Park Lake are man-made forms in a natural environment.

I wanted to paint about the relationship between the man-made structures and the environment in which they exist. As well, I wanted to paint in response to my physical and visual connection to these places. The paintings show spaces and objects that are important to me, while also demonstrating an understanding of color, paint, and design.

Painting is a visual, physical, and yet non-verbal form of expression. It allows me to investigate and explain felt experiences and ideas through visual means, most logically as a visually-minded person. The need to express my visual experience in an intellectual manner motivates me to paint. Not only does this desire drive me to paint, but it constantly demands attention and re-evaluation.

## **Landscape**

I paint landscapes to be connected to the city in which I reside as well as to a specific location where I find myself at any moment. There is an acute awareness of my surroundings. My thoughts are formed from visual cues. When in a location I often see isolated objects, colors, or shapes that warrant my attention. They are focal points that constantly switch from one object to the next as I move through moments and spaces. This might be a bird in flight or an automobile driving past. I notice how the two-dimensional contour of an automobile will change shape as it approaches, reaches, and passes by me, where a tree will become the focal point, leaves moving in the wind, light breaking through spaces between the leaves. Sometimes it is color that attracts my attention -- orange, light green, or yellow. At other times shapes between the pylons of a bridge, will appear from a glow of bright light as I pass beneath the bridge.

This visual stimulation will change according to the light, time of day, or weather. Different light will reveal widely different colors on the same object. At the most intense moment of sunshine, at the peak of the day-light hours, colors of objects will be very light, almost hazy, and less vibrant chromatically. As the amount of sunshine decreases (to a certain point) colors will gain a little vibrancy and then lose it as the sunlight decreases further and colors of the world become only grays and browns at night. I will also see different colors depending on what I am doing, the weather conditions, or the season.

The obvious explanation is that actual colors of landscapes, colors of leaves or a presence of blooming flowers, are different. However, small flickers of light and color that happen when I am outside reveal different colors depending on the season. Light coming through tree branches can be a cool green in March then a warm yellow in June. These small glimpses of intense color appear and disappear in a second. And then the question arises: are these colors that I relate to the temperature of a season or time of day? Does a summer day simply produce colors of light yellow, warm red, vibrant orange, and all warm colors? Relating the feeling of heat through a painting is more easily done by using warm colors. At the same time, colors and light change from one environment to the next.

I respond physically to my environment. Colors in my mind may vary whether I am casually walking or cycling. Colors I perceive change due to where I am and how I am moving. I am passionate about being outside and doing physical activities that require me to relate to my environment at a basic, physical level. The purest moments one can have are those that challenge the body physically. I enjoy running, biking, swimming, and walking through an environment. It is a combination of euphoria and physical exhaustion.

These outdoor activities allow me to know every rise and fall in the landscape, to experience a breeze changing direction when I turn a corner, or to hear birds and passing vehicles. It becomes an introverted time, placing me in the middle of my environment, allowing me to be a removed observer. I feel consumed by these landscapes that I am painting. This enables me to explore my interests in painting while using my passion for the outdoors as inspiration.

## Subject

I am concerned with showing the harmonious co-existence of human structures and natural forms. It is not an interest in showing the differences between the two, although this occurs as well. I am constantly overwhelmed by size, weight, and power that certain structures present. This overwhelming feeling is enhanced further by powerful structures being surrounded by a calm, softly-flowing environment.

My paintings deal with these comparisons formally and theoretically. Formally, I look for a variety in line and shape. Biomorphous lines and shapes encounter straight and geometric lines and shapes. Theoretically, I compose my paintings in a way that allows man-made and natural objects to encounter one another in the same environment, suggesting an interaction between the two.



Detail of *Pink Cypresses*. 2011. Acrylic and oil on panel.

These comparisons come directly from the landscape. Contrasting elements are found in man-made structures situated in a natural environment. They inhabit the same space and visual field. One sees, for example, a house with a vehicle parked beside it and then birds in a tree. The concept of contrast is present outdoors and in my paintings, but in two different regards -- pure observation which is then translated into design.

## Location

I have found two places in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for observing this dual existence at its peak. The first is at the City Park Lake. Here the I-10 overpass runs through a lake that is one of the most natural feeling environments in the city. The second is where the I-10 Bridge crosses the Mississippi River downtown. These two locations natural habitats co-existing with tractor-trailers, enormous steel beams, and concrete structures. They provide perfect contexts for painting about the harmonies and juxtapositions that exist with humans in nature.

Bridges are intriguing for their skeletal structure. The bridge reveals powerful geometric shapes, some of the most interesting found in the understructure. The steel beams that support the road above intertwine in magnificent patterns of triangles and straight lines which, seen in two-dimensional perspective, become diagonals. The geometry contrasts the biomorphous forms, such as trees, that are adjacent to the bridge, demonstrating the co-existence of human constructions and natural forms through formal design elements.

I have a specific interest in the shapes of the spaces between bridge pylons. There becomes an isolated space between the water, two pylons, and under the bridge. This is spatially a unique area. Logically the bridge should move forward in space and the background should

appear distant and less defined. However, it is often the case that light shining through spaces under the bridge is more vibrant than the pylons. This light becomes more dominant visually. I use this spatial contradiction from my experience outside to express the same sort of unnatural space in my designs. Areas around objects become more vibrant and emphasized than objects themselves and come forward visually. The shapes within the bridge are less important and recede visually. These pockets of space beneath the bridge give the most ambiguous areas of perceived, illusionistic depth. It is through the context of the entire painting that space of a real landscape is understood; the bridge is closer to the viewer than brighter areas behind.

## **Outside**

My paintings are quiet and serene as is my experience of being in these places that I have chosen to paint. There are moments when the world slows down, becomes calm, and all one can do is observe. It becomes meditative. As I move different lights, sounds, and shapes flash and move. Different colors appear and disappear. These moments are important moments for me each day, time to relax. For so many people time never seems to slow down. Life is stressful. There is no time to just listen to trucks pass by, view ripples in the lake, and feel a soft breeze.

Two birds fly overhead and I watch their changing shape as their wings move up and down in flight, their changing from light to shadow as they move from one side of the sky to the other; my head has to turn to stay with them.

Painting landscapes relates my personal appreciation for the outdoors, and specifically these places in Baton Rouge, to my painting practice. I spend a lot of time in both locations, thinking of making a painting. I value shapes that appear from the real world. The intrigue is that the shapes are part of reality. I draw attention to this fact by keeping the general composition from my sketches while exaggerating colors. It is a balance of reality and abstraction. I want to show an appreciation for shapes and show that they are a part of everyone's reality. Contemporary artist Nicole Eisenman said it very well, "Through painting I can find the point at which representation dissolves into abstraction and at which abstraction begins to represent." (Nicole Eisenman, *Art Forum*, Summer, 2011, 375.)

## **Color**

Color plays an important role in my paintings. Most of my colors come from colors I observe, a blue street sign, orange and yellow road cones, pink flowers, bright yellow flashes of light through the trees. I choose colors that I feel express my sensory experience outdoors during a specific time. This usually deals with temperature, both temperature of color and air temperature. In reference to my painting, I think of one or two colors that will be the colors emphasized. Other colors are then used as supporting colors to give the painting more variety and subtlety.

The color choices are made in thinking of color relationships that happen when one color is adjacent to another color. The color theory of Joseph Albers has influenced these color decisions. He demonstrated how colors are perceived relatively. One color can appear to be many different colors depending on which color is placed next to it. A middle-tone red will look dull when placed next to a vibrant orange, but the same red will look vibrant when placed next to a gray. A green will look light next to black, but this green will look dark next to light yellow. When a warm color is placed next to a neutral color, the neutral color will appear cool, and vice versa. Colors are relative.

Vibrant colors are used for a few reasons. I either want to show a strong light on an object, to emphasize a particular shape, or to emphasize a particular color. Thinking of color's relative properties, the vibrant colors are placed next to less-vibrant or contrasting colors to make the color appear more vibrant. To achieve these points of vibrancy my palette is primarily neutrals and earth-tones, low-intensity colors. The vibrant colors are used sparingly. In these vibrant areas I use colors that I feel are more industrial, fluorescent, and contemporary. The contrast in the colors speaks to the idea of industry and nature side by side. In other areas the colors will be very subtle, for example, three very similar oranges placed next to each other. The subtle shifts in color help to play off the blatant contrasts and give a different sort of visual interest to the areas that are not the focal points of the design.



*Fluorescent Lake*. 2012. Acrylic and oil on panel.

## Space

The paintings have a deep space as in an open landscape. There are also smaller, more closed spaces, like the spaces under the bridge and between trees. These specific spaces have a more easily understood volume and inhabitability to the viewer.

The space under each bridge is encompassing due to the monumental size of the structure. It creates an interior space in an exterior environment. As one passes under the bridge, there is a physical sense of entering and exiting. Light diminishes; noise enhances; there is a feeling of being encompassed within this environment.

There often occur contradictions of visual space. Areas and objects distant from the viewer are generally less visually defined and vibrant. However, when I am outside, certain instances contradict space. Flashes of bright light on an object come forward to obscure how space is perceived. For example, a man wearing a fluorescent orange t-shirt across the lake or a distant automobile that catches the sun for an instant, stand out more than grass directly in front of me. Distant objects and colors warrant my attention. I think of this as visual space, as opposed to physical space. Objects that are far away from me become the closest visually.

## Water

Water adds another geographical element while outdoors, and compositional element while in my studio painting. Water is a part of the landscape that implies a more natural, unoccupied-by-humans space. The lakes in Baton Rouge are where people congregate to escape pressures of daily life, although they are ironically man-made, to jog, cycle, and fish. The Mississippi River is similar. People visit the levee in downtown Baton Rouge, where the I-10 Bridge is located, to exercise or marvel at the expansive view, to retreat from reality.

Water is uninhabitable for people. It is mysterious. Most often, the bottom of a lake or river cannot be seen. It can be intimidating, frightening, or can have endless possibilities for exploration. It can be an illusion, as is the case with City Park Lake, appearing deep, but only about four feet deep at any point.

The appearance of water is constantly changing due to light, wind, and time of day. A large range of surfaces can be seen while viewing water. Painting water is a challenge concerning color, reflections, glimmers of the sun, and shapes made by movement of the water seen up close. All are to be taken into consideration while painting. My best solution, at this point, is to break apart water into all of these different states and paint them one at a time, one on top of the other, allowing layers to create a sense of depth and surface of the water.



Detail of *Yellow Light*. 2011. Acrylic, oil, spray paint, and pencil on panel.

### **Format**

My paintings are horizontal to mimic the layout of the exterior environment. The panoramic format gives a clearer indication of open space. It enables the viewer to move back and forth through the painting more so than in a single panel, where the entire scene is condensed. This movement through several panels alludes to time. An image is broken to suggest that there are several different moments and perspectives grouped together to create a larger image. The viewer's eye is a roving eye, moving around and seeing different smaller parts of the larger landscape. This is how one sees, not all at once, but consecutively. Colors and lines change and shift to infer the way in which one perceives the ever-changing, visual world.

The varying height of the panels also suggests a shift. Different areas in a landscape are viewed in different ways. As one observes, the orientation of one's head in relationship to the visual space is constantly moving. Distant views are seen as horizontal bands; close-up views are seen in a more vertical manner. I chose the panel heights relative to the other panels, taller or shorter, according to how I had observed a particular area of the landscape. The triptychs are not perfect rectangles because the outdoors is not a perfect rectangle. But, they remain rectangular acknowledging that they are paintings.

### **Composition**

My paintings are composed in a collage-like manner – shapes fitting together, each equally important. For example, a shape that represents a tree is only as important as a shape that represents space around the tree. Shapes around objects are sometimes more interesting than objects themselves. Every area of each painting is considered to create visual congruencies and tensions.

There is also an attention to texture in the paintings. To produce a diverse range of marks I use matte, gloss, transparent, opaque, scraped, smooth, and brushy surfaces. I also paint with

both oil and acrylic paint, with occasional inclusions of spray paint, pen, and pencil to have a further variety of marks. This gives the paintings subtlety and small surprises when viewed more closely. The challenge in using this variety of marks is to allow contrasting surfaces to work together. Each texture should complement the next through contrast or similarity.

Painted textures are taken from reality. I manipulate textures of objects and spaces from their real-world-source to their painted state so that the viewer is presented with a landscape as well as a design of abstract colors, shapes, and textures. It alludes to paint and texture while keeping an element of reality. Both the place and the painting are equally important to me. There is a fragile balance between representing the location and showing the process and materials involved in making a painting.

### **The Viewer**

My paintings challenge the viewer to understand the aforementioned ideas as being balanced. Nature and human-industrial forms coexist harmoniously as important subjects within my paintings. The bridge pylons are not placed in the lake as an invader of nature. Both bridge and lake are able to exist together. Nor are the birds being shown as weaker than automobiles. They move through the landscape equally.

In my paintings people are constantly being referenced by automobiles, chairs, boats, and other objects. It is not necessary to include figures to convey the idea of human existence. There is a balanced emphasis of humans with that of nature. The existence of nature, all too often an oversight in everyday life, is exemplified by the animals that are put into the scenes.

Including human forms in the paintings would place too much emphasis on people. It is my thinking that viewers tend to focus on figures in an image. Contemporary Italian artist Marco Mazzoni said of his own portrait work, "... the (removing) the eyes allow me to remove the distinctive, identifying human characteristics. So, in my works, the viewer thinks less of the piece as a portrait, but instead, like a still life, a composition in which all elements are equally important." (Kirsten Anderson, "Marco Mazzoni," *Hi Fructose*, Volume 20, 2011, 41.)

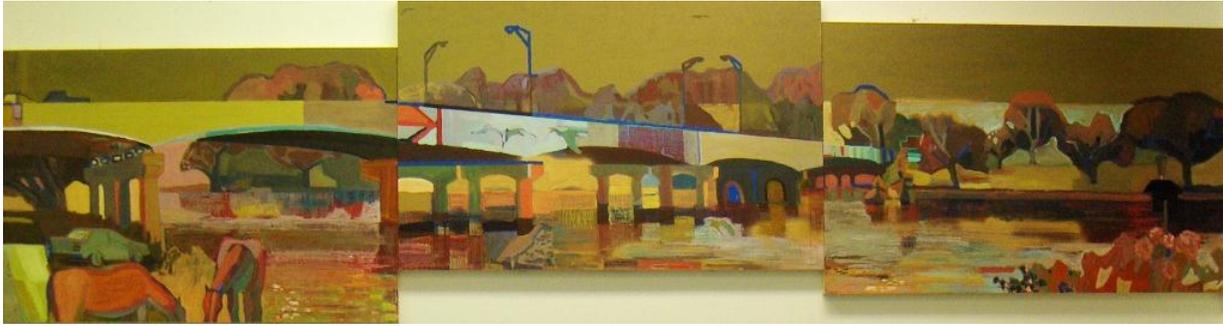
All objects, animals, automobiles, and trees, serve as the figures in the paintings. They give the landscapes a feeling of being alive. Rodin had said in a similar light, "True artists are, then, the most religious of mortals... The landscape painter perhaps goes further. It is not only in animated beings that he perceives the universal soul. It is in the trees, the bushes, the plains, the hills." (Auguste Rodin, *Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 80-81.) I approach painting figural objects as if they were people. Each tree and bird has its own individual characteristics, and they seem to communicate with each other.

### **Art Historical Influence**

My paintings have a direct relationship to art history. In the contemporary art world it is impossible not to reference painters and techniques from the past when making a painting. Most techniques have been so well established and experimented that one finds individuality in painting by using variations and combinations of the styles of past artists.

I reference medieval paintings. I want to show bright light of the outdoors by using gold and silver paint, gold paper, or shiny spray paint to suggest sunshine. This idea comes from the use of gold leaf in medieval art, artists such as Giotto and Fra Angelico.

This idea also references the glittery look of today's commercial world. Everything is glimmering to attract the consumer eye.



*Golden Overpass*. 2011. Acrylic, oil, spray paint, pencil, and gold paper on panel.

My use of spray paint comes from contemporary graffiti culture originating from spray painted images and words on subway trains and walls of buildings that has become a prominent fixture in art. There is energy in graffiti that comes from the bright colors and quickness in which the designs are made. The look is simple images and letters distorted enough to become abstract, interesting shapes that are given life through vibrant and cohesive colors the artist has chosen.

Graffiti is generally an urban phenomenon. Growing up in rural Kentucky, I did not get to see much graffiti. Seeing it was exciting. It meant that I was traveling, seeing new things, and experiencing new places.

Looking at impressionism influenced my technique and color choice. I think of Claude Monet when painting water, energetic dashes of paint to give the idea of light hitting ripples of water. Although I do not paint outside, there is also an obviously-shared interest in painting landscape. It is an appreciation of a moment in time, a specific space outdoors, and how light changes as the day progresses. A single place can warrant several paintings due to the time of day and seasonal changes, as found in the paintings of *Rouen Cathedral* by Monet.

The fauvists and expressionists, such as Andre Derain, Kees van Dongen, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh have influenced my palette. I found it incredible how van Dongen could paint a woman using both bright orange and green for skin tones.

My interest in color went further with the Bay Area painters from California. Elmer Biscoff, Richard Diebenkorn, Fairfield Porter, and Wayne Thiebaud have aided my color choice and layering of colors.

Contemporary artists Jean Arnold, Mark Bradford, Marlene Dumas, Kim Frohsin, Eddie Martinez, Daniel Richter, to name a few, continuously influence how I see and think about painting. Ideas of contemporary colors, layering and scraping paint to achieve different surfaces, objects becoming simple shapes and colors, the process of painting, and painting fast, come from these artists. I also draw inspiration from other contemporary artists seen in museums, galleries, and contemporary art magazines: *Art Forum*, *Art News*, *Art in America*, *Juxtapoz*, and *Hi Fructose*.

### **Contemporary Style**

My approach to painting combines techniques of artists past and present. As previously stated, the language of painting has been defined. A way to achieve new-and-original is to find a unique way of combining ideas and techniques of the past to achieve an individual style.

Artists of the past and present become a great resource. What becomes important for me is to incorporate influences and inspiration from others to enhance my personal style of painting.

The landscape motif is traditional. However, my work becomes contemporary in its color choice, its industrial subject matter, and its attention to the process of making a painting.

It seems that there is a societal push for promoting hand-made products in today's world. As so many aspects of life have become super-efficient -- giant, all-inclusive shopping centers or multi-functional cell phones, there is a need for balance, a more craft-oriented, tranquil side of life. This can be seen in the popularity of narrative art and needle work in multi-media work; people are recalling a simpler lifestyle. The art becomes about storytelling and craftsmanship.

Mark Bradford is an artist who makes paintings that address the process of layering paint by sanding it away to reveal layers. Bradford is an artist who speaks to today's need of attention to process with his paintings. This need is carried over into the rise in popularity of home-gardens and organic farming. It is all connected in a common appreciation of a physical process.

My paintings have a place in this ideology, where everything around us is moving so fast that it is important to periodically adjust and appreciate one's surroundings. The paintings depict humans and nature coexisting. Images selected hold important personal significance for me, spaces where I go to experience brief moments only hearing a breeze blowing past my ears. The paintings are inspired by this feeling of calm and the colors I see around me. They are meant to entice the viewer to slow down, to get a sense of place, to discover details in the physicality of paint, and to appreciate shapes, textures, and colors.

## Reference

Rodin, Auguste. *Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

## **Vita**

Michael Secor was born in Washington state, moved to Pennsylvania at age 1, and moved again to Morehead, Kentucky, at age 3. He grew up there, spending a lot of time playing sports and other outdoor activities with the other boys in the neighborhood.

He studied art and French at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, graduating with a Bachelor of the Arts in painting in May 2006.

Traveling has been a notable aspect in his life. He was fortunate enough to visit Europe, mainly to France, a couple of times with his immediate family growing up. His father and mother have a particular interest in traveling, and his father is a French professor, often teaching abroad in Paris in the summer. As a student at Centre he spent a semester in Strasbourg, France, and one month in New Zealand.

Between undergraduate school and graduate school at Louisiana State University he spent ten months teaching English in two elementary schools in Dijon, France, time back at home in Kentucky, and seven months living in Denver, Colorado. Seeing different cultures and locations has played an important role in his viewing of the world. He relates strongly place and his surroundings.

He studied painting as a graduate student at Louisiana State University for three years from fall of 2009 to spring of 2012.