



Thisness & Whatness



Cover: "Decal 201"  
acrylic on panel  
by Tom McGlynn



Abraham McNally's *Wheellock*

# Thisness & Whatness

*Curated by Scott Reeds*

*October 12 – February 8, 2019*

*Rutherford Campus – Education Commons*

## What It Is

*By Stephen Maine*

In his 1954 essay “Abstract and Representational,” the American critic Clement Greenberg asserts the primacy of the individual work of art over any category to which it might belong. Discussing the relative merits of abstract and representational painting (a hot topic at mid-century), Greenberg writes: “That those who condemn abstract art generally do so in advance of experience is shown by the completeness with which they condemn. To hold that one kind of art is invariably superior or inferior to another is to judge before experiencing.”

Greenberg points out the absurdity of categorically dismissing an artwork before seeing and experiencing it (a prejudice that would logically extend to works that have not even yet come into existence). A description of what kind the work is—figurative painting, abstract sculpture, sound installation, political theater—can’t account for the particularities, compelling or not, of a specific work as an instantiation of its kind.

For the conscientious critic, both modes of reference are in play; the failure to distinguish between the two is a mark of bias or laziness. “I dislike the medium of video” is a far easier thought than “I’m unconvinced by the artwork in question, which happens to be a video.” Critical judgment must address the particular manifestation (of video, in this example) in the object at hand within the context of video art as an ongoing episode in a history of postwar art. To the extent that they’re alert to their responses to a work, the same is true of all knowledgeable viewers.

A few pages later in the same essay, Greenberg admits that, in fact, he’s more interested in abstraction. His intellectual investment in art’s teleological progress leads him to believe that abstraction is more advanced (again, the parlance of the period) than figurative, representational art. The ossification of Greenberg’s views continues

into his later years, and in time his professional assessments rely on formulaic criteria. Even so, it’s clear that he applies this (albeit quite limiting) critical method on a painting-by-painting basis.

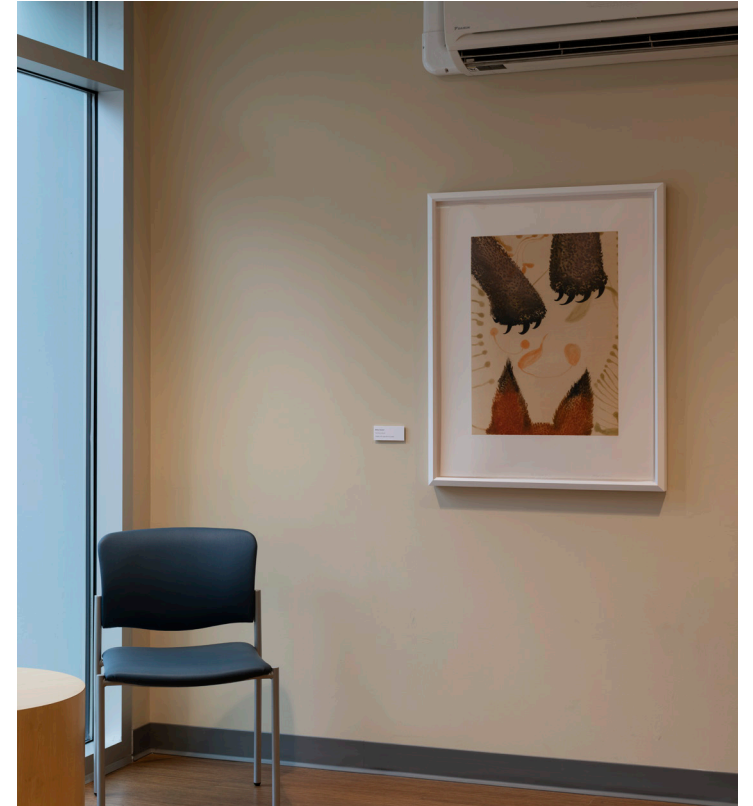
The Medieval philosopher and Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus would, if time’s arrow flew backward, call Greenberg a nominalist. In Duns Scotus’s day, positions regarding the metaphysical “problem of universals” were located on a spectrum from realism (belief in the objective existence of criteria—properties—which entities may have in common) to nominalism (belief that such properties—and therefore, universals—do not exist as actual, tangible things). To the question, “Are properties real?” the committed nominalist would answer “no” just as surely as Greenberg says “no” to whether it matters, in the end, that a painting is abstract or representational.

Another question arose. If there are no common natures—if there is no real unity among multiple entities, and quiddity (or “whatness”) is not tangible but rather a product of the intellect—then how is an entity identified? Dissatisfied to explain an entity’s individuality by saying what it isn’t (i.e., any of the innumerable other entities in the universe), Scotus coined the term “haecceity” to refer to a non-qualitative property, an entity’s “thisness,” the quality of being the thing that it is. Without corrupting the intention of Duns Scotus’s term, I hope I can correlate the idea of haecceity to the particularities of an artwork that set it apart from others of its medium, its genre, or even of its maker’s oeuvre. “Thisness and Whatness,” curated by Scott Reeds for Felician University, provides test cases by thirteen accomplished artists.

“Seven Beauties” is the collective title of a group of large-scale sculptures by John Monti, of which Wide Body is included in the exhibition. In their 2014 debut as a group, in the lobby of the Grace Building on West 42 Street in Manhattan, these arresting, monochrome works in hydrocal and fiberglass revealed common traits as well as individual quirks. Each is botanical in its allusions and strongly figural



Christian Nguyen’s *Land Otter*



Betsey Garand’s *Encounter 111*



Gelah Penn's *Tremor*

in its upright stance and limby-ness; each has its particular haecceity of color and morphology. *Wide Body* is painted a particularly jaunty red, and it does indeed meet the floor with a wide body. It's happy to share the space with you, but it's not going anywhere.

Beth Livensperger's *You're Rich, We're Rich* is narrative (and perhaps also allegorical) figure grouping, a time-honored genre of painting to which this painter brings a startlingly fresh vision. The three depicted figures strike unremarkable poses, but this painting is really about the visual relationship between that spectral house with those glowing windows behind that explosive tree behind that weird fence. The cascading cobblestone courtyard, also, is unlike any other. These guys might be rich, but it could all go down that little drain.

Denying the inherent significance of medium as such in "A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition," Rosalind Krauss refers to "the stupefying particularity of individual techniques... everything that embeds practice in the tedium of its making." To label Emily Berger's exquisite *Day by Night* a panel painting is accurate but woefully inadequate—likewise the appellation "gestural abstraction." The steady drag of Berger's wide brushes reveals the character of the wood substrate, coaxed into visibility by the artist's determinedly unforceful touch and further specified by paint viscosity, brush load, and velocity of application.

We often rely on genus/species formulations to describe artworks. Gelah Penn has categorized her *Tremor* and related works as "drawing in space," an accounting of its quiddity that could be narrowed to "mark-making in space" or even (in this case) "pipe cleaners in space." But the essence of this work is its unique interplay of materials, which also includes monofilament and a wire tomato cage. The artist makes little attempt to disguise these utilitarian origins, but they fade nearly to anonymity as the objects function as drawing in contrast to the supporting wall.

With quirky additions in the margins and corners of her painting,

Jessamyn Box distinguishes her take on lyrical abstraction. While perhaps not essential, these scratchy, scrappy notations are intriguing compositional whispers, asides, notes-to-self that might be drowned out by the painting's bellowing red ground if not for their sheer oddness.

In his recent work, Tom McGlynn gestures toward the idea of the generic in paintings that are paradoxically razor-sharp. There is a recognizable McGlynniness at work behind the façade of abstract normativity; these rectangles of flat, even color—parallel, not touching, on a uniform ground—command attention through a certain blankness of expression, an indifference to the viewer's scrutiny. "SYLVANIA OCTRON 5000K FO25/950/36" reads the fine print on a grow light positioned above a potted flower in the impeccably clean still-life photographs of Jeffery Sturges. In one, a pink geranium perches on a swath of turf, framed against a louvered gray window shade. Viewers of this work fall into two groups: those who notice the long-legged spider among the plant's ruffled leaves and those who don't.

Haecceity in Daina Mattis's *Makeshift* emerges from an irregular hard-edged shape near the center of the painting, which features a hyperrealist rendering of a section of a veined marble wall (or its faux facsimile) complete with a trompe-l'oeil light switch, washed in daylight and appropriately turned off. Someone appears to have tested a few wall-paint colors, one of which is not paint at all but a section of raw linen. Mattis deconstructs painting by pictorializing its substrate—a sort of anti-collage.

Unpainted canvas also features prominently in *Land Otter* by Christian Nguyen, marked by faint pencil lines through its central section, the only evidence of manual contact in this precisely executed work. On another level, the painting achieves uniqueness through hybridization of traditions, namely European fresco and Northwest Coast Native American long house and totem pole painting—two forms of architecturally-based painting with



John Monti's *Beauties- Wide-Body*

deeply encoded symbolic vocabularies that are rooted in property and power. The institutional inflection of Melissa Macalpin’s paintings is unmissable, but more shrouded and curious is her use of representations of period furniture to address issues concerning history and its reconstruction—stories and their objects.

The darkroom apparatus of traditional photography—sensitized paper, exposure equipment, chemical baths—gave birth to the photogram about a century ago. Tenesh Webber makes abstract pictures in that tradition, controlling the contact of light to paper by means other than a film negative. The constituent elements are few in type but many in number in these high contrast works in which white (and sometimes gray) elements are distributed across a deep black ground. Radius and Flight might allude to randomness and entropy, but also apparent are various organizing principles—groupings, sequences, progressions—suggesting that order underlies these seemingly arbitrary (and, to my mind, musical) compositions.

Traditionally, an edition of prints is valued on the basis that each print is virtually identical. (The variable edition, in which each sheet is discernably unique, is another matter.) Accounting for “thisness” in a multiple, then, might take into account the conditions of its display, which qualifies the viewer’s experience of any work. It’s a question worth considering whether haecceity is by definition inherent in the entity, or if the viewer’s subjective experience of the entity has some bearing on it. (The latter draws us close to Walter Benjamin’s “aura,” a younger idea by many centuries than Duns Scotus.) Betsey Garand’s Confluent, produced with a combination of printmaking techniques including spit bite, sugar lift, and chine collé, is presented in “Thisness and Whatness” on a wall that’s washed with changeable southeasterly light that reveals the subtlety of its palette and the distinctive tooth of the Somerset paper used in the edition.

The sole outdoor work in the exhibition is Wheelock #4 by Abraham McNally. The work is a tight palisade, oval in plan, about seven feet high and ten feet across. Made of beveled wood slats, the work is

somewhat wider around the rim than at the ground. The sides bulge a bit, hinting at a vessel form. But you’d have to be very tall to see whether it’s open inside or a solid mass. (It’s open inside.) The ribs of wood are pale poplar, a little rough, and between them stick out scraggly tufts of unprocessed, gray-brown wool, slightly repulsive but tantalizing in their tactility. It looks great on the lawn near The Castle.

With Wheelock #4, McNally nails the proposition behind “Thisness and Whatness.” A description of what this remarkable work is might well align it with several orders of quiddity: it’s an outdoor-scale, site-responsive, constructed sculpture exhibiting a reductive approach to form and a modular strategy of fabrication. No doubt there are many other ways to classify it, many other properties it has in common with other objects. These classifications and commonalities are useful points of reference; it conveys meaning to say that Wheelock #4 is less minimalist than Richard Serra’s Torqued Ellipses but more minimalist than Eva Hesse’s Repetition Nineteen. But in doing so we bump up against the limitations of language. Quiddity is comparative; haecceity is a singularity, and why would language bother with a word that refers to a property had by one thing and no other? It is what it is.

Stephen Maine is a painter who writes about art (and artworks). He lives and works in West Cornwall, Connecticut.

<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Abstract and Representational.” Reprinted in Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3: Affirmations and Refusals 1950–1956. John O’Brian, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993

<sup>2</sup> “The desire for historical order tends to subsume phenomena under concepts, which then become paradigms of epistemic progress.” Horst Bredekamp, Vera Dünkel and Birgit Schneider, The Technical Image: A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery. Chicago: University of Chicago Press in association with the Bard Graduate Center, 2000

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition.” New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000. In the book’s preface, Krauss is at pains to distance herself from the very word medium, given its Greenbergian associations, and advises the reader that she uses it reluctantly—as if under lexical duress—in the absence of a suitable alternative.



Jeffrey Sturges Fluorescent Still Life



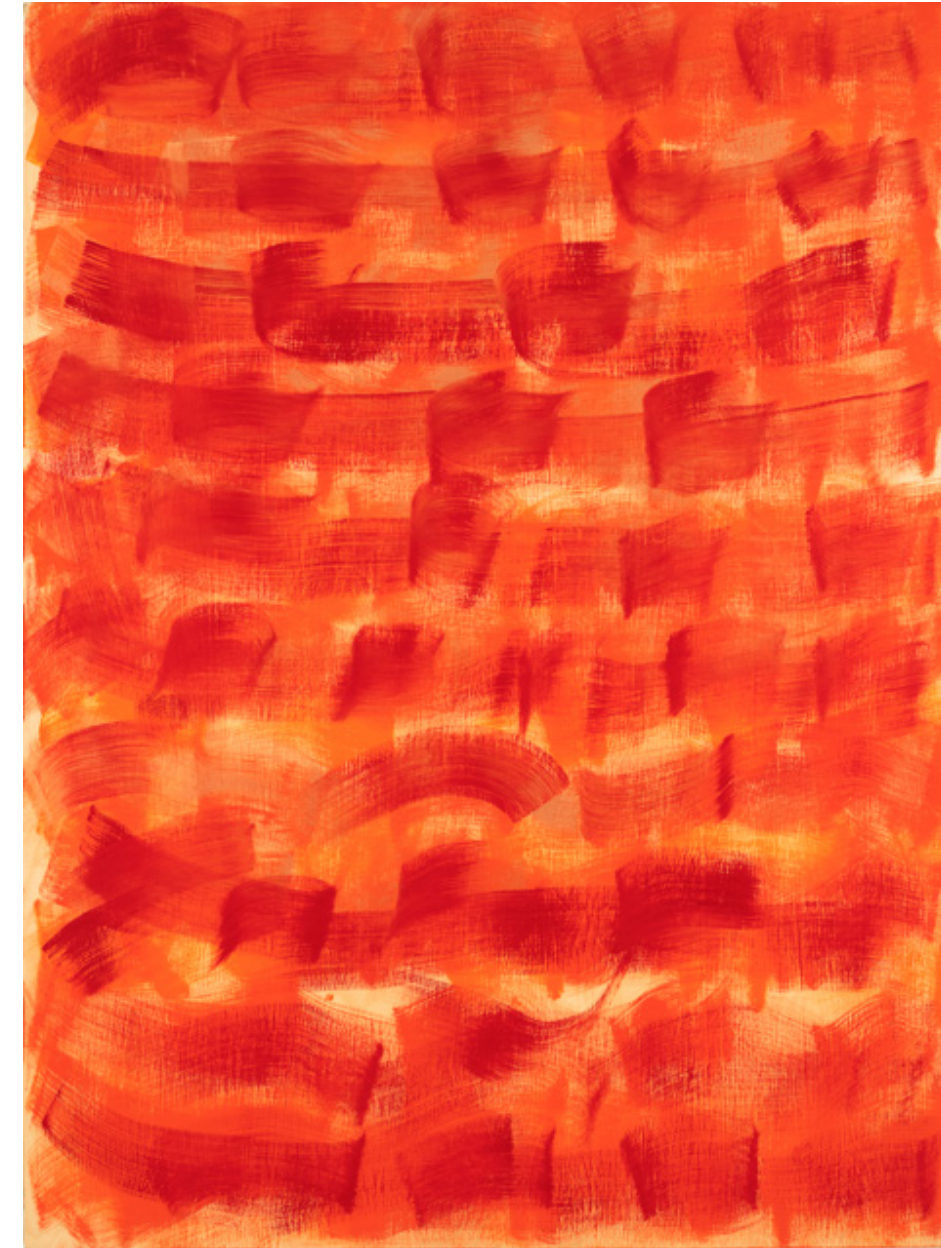
Beth Livensperger's *You're Rich We're Rich* and *Subterfuges*

*Jump Up*

oil on panel  
48 x 36"

**EMILY BERGER**

Emily Berger lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. A graduate of Brown University, she attended the Skowhegan School and received an MFA in painting from Columbia University. She exhibits her paintings widely, including recently at Scholes Street Studio, Norte Maar and The Odetta Gallery in NYC, and Abstract Project in Paris, and prints with Vandeb Editions. She is a member of American Abstract Artists, serving as Vice President and Exhibitions Committee Chair from 2013- 2018, in which capacity she planned and facilitated several exhibitions, including the traveling exhibition *Blurring Boundaries, The Women of AAA, 1936-Present*.



*Crazy Town*

acrylic and mixed media

48" x 48"

**JESSAMYN BOX**

Born in Edmonton Alberta, Vancouver based artist Jessamyn Box uses acrylic paint, marker, crayon, charcoal and ink to create large, abstract works of art that are grounded in colour and explore the relationship and territory between objects and form. Her work is a multifarious, dynamic fairy tale that forces the journey's plot and resolution into the eye of the viewer.

Jessamyn has work in private collections across Canada and the United States, and currently her work is available through Aion art gallery in Burnaby and the North Vancouver Arts Council.



*The Encounter III*  
intaglio “24 x 18” plate on “33 x 26” paper

**BETSEY GARAND**

The seed to Garand’s imagery was planted in New Hampshire having been raised on a small, self-sufficient farm in a family of makers. A twin and one of seven children, Garand’s childhood included sewing, gardening, carpentry, winter camping, riding horses and spinning and dying wool. She received a BFA in Printmaking from the University of New Hampshire and an MFA in Printmaking from Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University. After twenty years of living in New York City, Garand returned to New England where she is presently Senior Resident Artist at Amherst College.



*Subterfuges*

oil on canvas

“48 x 36”

**BETH LIVENSPERGER**

Originally from the Midwest, Beth Livensperger holds a B.F.A. from The Cooper Union, and an M.F.A. from Yale University. She has exhibited in NYC, nationally, and internationally including at The Abrons Art Center, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, RISD's Memorial Hall Gallery, and The Painting Center among many others. Her work has been reviewed in Politico, Two Coats of Paint, and WNYC's Culture Datebook. She has attended residencies at the Sam and Adele Golden Foundation, Virginia Center for Creative Arts, Vermont Studio Center, Chashama, and The Abrons Art Center among others.



*Please Guard My Bed*

Acrylic, gouache, ink, color pencil, graphite on canvas  
12" x 24"



**MELISSA MAC ALPIN**

Melissa MacAlpin is the Professor of Graphic Design at Felician University. She earned her BFA from Mason Gross School of Art at Rutgers University and received her MFA in Book Arts and Printmaking from University of the Arts. Her work is in the collections of the Newark Public Library, the Penn State Special Collections Library, the Visual Arts Library at SVA and the Sallie Bingham Center Women's Zine Collections at Duke University. She has exhibited at ABC No Rio in New York, Gallery Affero in Newark, NJ and The Gowanus Studio Space in Brooklyn, NY.

*Make Shift*

Oil on linen mounted to panel  
54" x 60"

**DAINA MATTIS**

Daina Mattis (b. 1984) is a Brooklyn-based artist born in Los Angeles, CA. Her paintings, drawings, and sculptures explore perception and disposability through vehicles of imitation, scale and time. Mattis was a Cooper Union A.I.R. (2016) and shows extensively. Exhibitions include: Vessels, High Noon Gallery, New York (solo), 2018; Bona Fide, AMAG at St. Thomas Aquinas College, New York (solo), 2019; The Cooper Union A.I.R. Exhibition, New York, 2016; Art in Miami, Context, J. Cacciola Gallery, 2012; and Daina Mattis, Frances Keevil Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2010. Mattis has been featured in ARTnews, Two Coats of Paint, and Professional Artist Magazine.



*Decal 203*  
acrylic on panel  
36" x 36"

**TOM MCGLYNN**

Tom McGlynn is an artist, writer, and independent curator based in the NYC area. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and The Cooper- Hewitt National Design Museum of the Smithsonian, among other national and international art institutions. A contributing writer to The Brooklyn Rail since 2012, he is currently an editor-at -large there. His most recent one-person show, of paintings, was held at Rick Wester Fine Art in NYC, Sept 24-Dec 24, 2017. A show of new work will debut there in March of 2020.



*Wheelock #4*

Poplar and wool  
75" H x 80" L x 70" W

**ABRAHAM MCNALLY**

Abraham McNally (b. 1975, Vermont) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He received a B.A. in fine arts from Bard College and his M.F.A. from Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College. His work has been exhibited in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, China, Germany, Belgium, and France. He teaches at Parsons The New School for Design.



*Beauties- Wide-Body*

Urethane foam, aqua resin, pigment and glitter  
69.5 h x 35.5w x 35d

**JOHN MONTI**

John Monti is a sculptor, based in Brooklyn, NY. Born in Portland, Oregon. Exhibitions include the Brooklyn Museum, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Sculpture Center, White Columns, Artists Space, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, Curt Marcus Gallery and the Wakita Museum of Art, Japan. His work is included in major private and public collections, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Brooklyn Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, The Eli Broad Family Foundation, The Portland Art Museum and the Wakita Museum of Art. Grants include the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Pollock Krasner Fellowship Grant, The New York Foundation for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.



*Land Otter*

acrylic on canvas  
48" x 40"

**CHRISTIAN NGYUEN**

Christian Nguyen was born in Saigon, Vietnam, 1968. He received an MFA at Hunter College in 2000 and his BFA from The Cooper Union School of Art in 1990. Mr. Nguyen began as an architectural photographer, and this informed his work and his artistic practice. He participated in the Maria Walsh Sharpe Space Program (2004) and the World Views Residency Program (2000) at the World Trade Center, received the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2004) and the Emerging Artists Fellowship Grant (2004) from Socrates Sculpture Park. Along with his studio practice, he makes Spanish guitars and teaches at Parsons and Pratt University.



*Tremor*

metal, pipe cleaners and fishing line  
56" x 37" x 44"

**GELAH PENN**

Gelah Penn's exhibitions include Muhlenberg College (Allentown, PA); SUNY Old Westbury (Old Westbury, NY); Center for Maine Contemporary Art (Rockland, ME); National Academy Museum (NYC); and numerous galleries. Her work is in the collections of the Weatherspoon Art Museum (Greensboro, NC), Columbus Museum (Columbus, GA), Brooklyn Museum Library (Brooklyn, NY) and Cleveland Institute of Art/Gund Library (Cleveland, OH). Reviews have been published in Art in America, The New York Times, The Brooklyn Rail and a feature in Sculpture Magazine. Penn has received a Tree of Life Individual Artist Grant and fellowships from the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation, Yaddo and MacDowell.



*Fluorescent Still Life with Turf Pink Geranium*

dye sublimation print on aluminum  
“30 x 40”

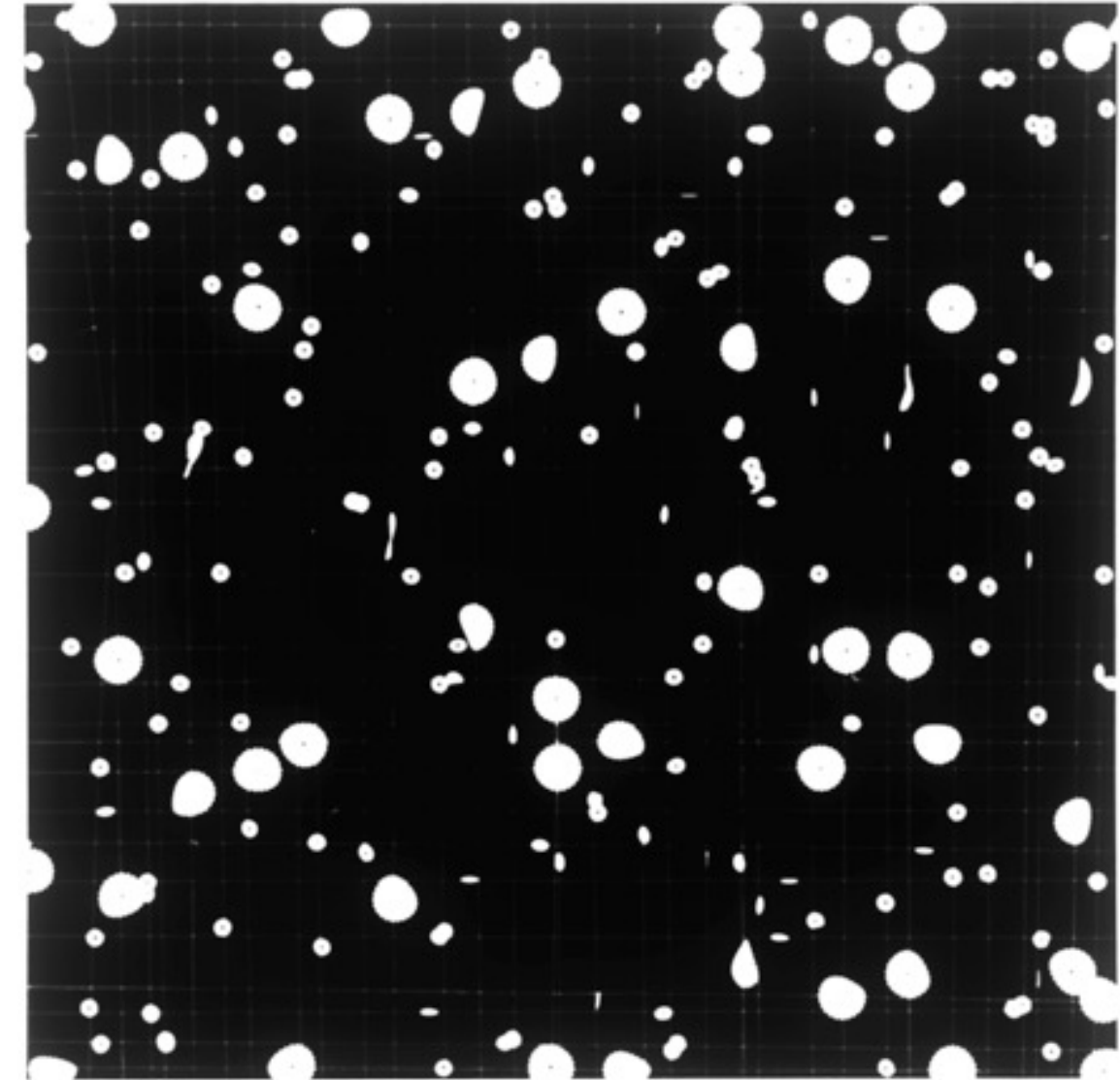


**JEFFREY STURGES**

Jeffrey Sturges is a New York artist with studios in Brooklyn and Kingston, NY. Having studied painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art, his practice then shifted entirely to photography. Jeffrey is also a professional photographer with close working relationships with museums, galleries and artists in New York. Having worked as a studio assistant early in his career, he is currently the Director of Exhibitions for The Estate of Tom Wesselmann.

*Radius*

silver gelatin print  
20" x 20"



**TENESH WEBBER**

Tenesh Webber is a Canadian artist. She studied at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, and at OCAD University, in Toronto. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally; including solo exhibits at Margaret Thatcher Projects, and Yossi Milo Gallery, in New York City, and at Howard Yezerski Gallery in Boston, MA. She has received many awards, including two Canada Council Grants, a grant from Art Matters Inc, a Photography Fellowship from The New Jersey State Council on the Arts, and a MacDowell Colony Fellowship. Webber's studio is located in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

ABOUT STEPHEN MAINE

Stephen Maine is a painter and freelance art critic who has lived and worked in New York City for 35 years, currently lives in West Cornwall, Ct. His work has been exhibited widely in North America and Europe; in New York, his work has been seen recently at Hionas Gallery, 490 Atlantic, Transmitter, the Fiterman Art Center at BMCC, and the National Arts Club. His shows have received critical attention in the Brooklyn Rail, Hyperallergic, The New Criterion, Artcritical.com, Abstract Critical, Haberarts.com, Painters Table, and Two Coats of Paint. He has received professional support from the New York Foundation for the Arts (2000) and Yaddo (2012). His work is in numerous public collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA Library Special Collections, the New York Public Library, the Phillips Collection, and the Art in Embassies Collection, US Department of State.

Maine’s criticism has been published in Art in America, Art on Paper, The New York Sun, Hyperallergic, Artillery magazine, Artnet.com, and Artcritical.com, where he is a Contributing Editor. He has curated exhibitions for numerous venues in the New York area, including Lesley Heller Workspace, The Painting Center, Frederieke Taylor Gallery and The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. He currently teaches at the Purchase College campus of SUNY.

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emilyberger.net

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betseygarand.com

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melissamacalpin.com

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dainamattis.com

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tommcglynnart.com

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Thank you

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