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## The Experience of Emptiness: A Creative Exploration of Indeterminacy

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THE EXPERIENCE OF EMPTINESS: A CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF  
INDETERMINACY

by

Olivia Kjellander

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Philosophy, Art History)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2025

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## ABSTRACT

In an exploration of my own experience of being-in-the-world I produced five pieces of art which are meant to represent my relationships to my environment, with other beings, and the interplay between these interactions which constitute indeterminacy. Informed by readings of phenomenology, existentialism, and classic Chinese philosophy, specifically the Dao De Jing, I expressed my experience as a woman in the 21st century as I engaged in a constant reciprocity of viewing, watching, and self-surveilling. I expressed this experience through art because of art's unique ability to parallel bodily experience in that it promotes the same exchange of power in the shifting of attention of the viewer from the work to the ways in which the art works on themselves, just as our perception functions as we move through the world with our horizons expanding and contracting, simultaneously constituting our surroundings and being constituted by our surroundings.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to Kirsten Jacobson for creating an immensely supportive and comfortable environment for my philosophical thoughts and writing to flourish. Thank you for always encouraging me to push the boundaries of traditional academic thinking, I will be lost without your audio recording assignments to guide me in my future studies.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee, particularly my co-advisor Dr. DeTurk, for pushing me to complete my writing when my motivation was dwindling. Thank you to Dr. Hong for facilitating many discussions over lunch about indeterminacy and emptiness. Thank you to Dr. Jacobson for encouraging my rebellious desire to reject traditional formatting. Thank you to Dr. Grillo for encouraging me to inadvertently do research on my thesis while studying art history. And a special thank you to Diana Baumbach, Assistant Professor of Art & Director of Galleries at the University of Maine, for working with me to have my art displayed on campus; I greatly appreciate the time taken to walk me through the installation process and the enthusiasm expressed in having my paintings visible to the public.

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## DISQUISITION

### BACKGROUND/PURPOSE/INTENT

“The condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak” - Cornel West

In my first semester of college, I listened to a lecture given by Cornel West at Harvard University in which he spoke to the condition of truth; the place where truth lives and where we can find it. I was already compelled by the question of why we as conscious beings feel so inclined to find and prove truths and upon hearing this notion of truth in relation to suffering, I was convinced. In that moment I had the first inklings of belief in the idea of truth as subjective, as purely built by experience and more specifically, as West claims, truth as coming from experiences of suffering. This desire for truth I have found is not escapable. I continue to search for it, but there is a comfort and sensibility I now find in the philosophical conclusion that truth is malleable, it shifts and contorts, and like water, I cannot fully grasp and hold it. Truth now becomes entangled in experience and in an effort to pull at the strings of my own jumble, I turn to art through which I can parse through my own experience and therefore analyze and question my perspective and the truths that are born from my ‘suffering’.

The question of “why” then feels embedded with underlying assumptions. In a desire to find truth and meaning in my human experience I chose to endeavor an exploration of said experience through the means which feel most applicable to me. Though the medium of creative exploration seems to be the only reasonable means through which to embark on this journey, I am asked why I chose this way in the shadow

of the more widely accepted traditional thesis. Here I am placed in the position of defending my choice when, the way I feel it, there was no choice. Though others may feel the need to express their passions through other means, more traditional or otherwise, I am only able to express my research and studies through the creative, through art, through painting. I would deny the quality and authenticity of my purpose to regard Cornel West's truth and my intent to process and display personal experience if I appealed to the normative and empirical structure of analysis or if I attempted to argue the validity of such a choice.

I must, of course, acknowledge that my confidence in the necessity of the format of my research has been informed by uncountable philosophical texts and excerpts; a handful of the most influential will be discussed in the style of a literature review. I cannot claim that such an approach would be applicable to every other form of research but due to the very nature of my questions regarding a distrust of empirical, from-above, observational analyses and therefore in favor of a subjective, internal, multi-faceted pattern of study which, as is informed by my research over the course of my four-years studying philosophy, art history, art, and chemistry, follows more directly the actual experience of being-in-the world. The world we perceive is not one which we see from above or observe externally. We are in the world, surrounded by fellow perceivers, who can view us, and therefore a reciprocity between agents and environments is inherent which I cannot disregard in my presentation of my research on human experience.

Due to the necessity of reciprocity in staying true to the reality of the experience of being-in-the-world, I turn to art. Art is a window into the experience of the creator but simultaneously a mirror which reflects the observing act onto the viewer and, therefore,

the relationship is alive between the internal and external in a way which makes it difficult to distinguish between what is in us and what is outside of us. When art is experienced, the viewer is within the piece, the reflective interplay of viewer, artist, and art blurs the lines between what the viewer understands to be internalized and what areas of the 'external' world we allow to seep into our beings.

Through the process of creating pieces of art which are concerned with my bodily experience I hoped to be able to mark and identify my experience for myself and to, in a more transgressive sense, attribute some primacy to a way of understanding my experience through the classic Chinese philosophy of the Dao De Jing. In an attempt to remain true to my existential, phenomenological understanding of the world I also intend to elucidate for the viewers of my artwork some ways in which they may relate to such understandings of themselves and their relationships to others or, just as importantly, ways in which they feel differently about their experience in the world.

I must acknowledge that my perspective of the world is one which is assembled by unique, individual, contradictory, and infinite perspectives of others as well as myself. Therefore, such claims about the necessity to appeal to subjectivity in my research and understanding of myself does not imply a claim that this is the only way to understand the world. I cannot, in claiming reality to be subjective and assembled, claim another's perspective of the world as singular and objective as false in any way, but I do claim in some sense that in accepting and compiling multiple experiences we can confront a more holistic understanding of the world; it is not that one reality or experience is ever universally 'true', it is in this assembling of the multiple that there is born a truth as it acknowledged the suffering of all beings. Now, in the striving toward a universal truth,

this assemblage becomes theoretical and realistically impossible as it requires a blending of the experience of all experiencing beings, infinite experience becomes the quintessential example of truth.

In the Dao De Jing this notion of infinity, the most extreme version of multiplicity, becomes indeterminate. It is indescribable, like the Dao, it is empty, and in its emptiness, it holds an infinite potential. Like the Dao, art can employ infinite potential in interpretation. An art piece is empty without the experience of the viewer impregnating it with meaning and this meaning comes from unique experiences of infinitely differentiated beings. Here I argue the unique ability of art is how it simultaneously acts as a window into the experience of the artist as well as a mirror which reflects judgment onto the experience of the viewer. It is through ample ambiguity that this is possible, as representations of experience which claim a singularity of truth in 'what really happened' fall short where art has the ability to represent experience in a way which has many - infinite- interpretations and understandings, allowing for the bridging of common grounds between many different people and their experiences. Art is translucent and reflective simultaneously and reciprocally. Art is water as the Dao is water and their power in the ability to engage emptiness and the infinity of indeterminacy is due to their qualities of subtlety, submissiveness, fertility, and potential as described in the philosophy of the Dao.

As a map of experience, my paintings use gesture, texture, and variation of pattern to replicate or closely resemble the feeling of being in connection with other agents as well as under the influence of the surrounding environment. There are points of reference, small dots which resemble singularities rather than lines which feel like

infinite representations of a point. These maps, however, do not serve to simply connect the dots or in terms of experience, draw a sort of arborescent family tree of relations. Instead, these singularities are embedded within the environment as moments which one is able to refer back to. The memory function of the human comes into play here as I painted through my experience in a way that relies heavily on my own perspectival bias which is deeply entangled with the function of my memory. The way that my experience feels to me is full as there is no opportunity to view any other experience with the same nuance as my own, but the reality of my experience becomes closer to that of a synthesis of the ways in which I have analyzed my experience with others; not inside of myself in some essential way but not completely external to myself in some omnipotent observation. To view a point in this painting as myself and the other points as others disregards the magnitude with which my life has been informed by the relationships I have held with other agents as well as my environment. This influence is so powerful that the concept of a singularity-of-self disintegrates as all relationships become entirely my own being and, therefore, I am within all parts of the map.

In the 'empty', negative space the lack of self becomes a defining factor of the experience of being-in-the-world. Through a definition by negation, my lack of presence in the less textured areas of the paintings acknowledges the function of horizons which imply a space in time which exists but which I have not engaged, an indeterminate space. This very thesis of a space which is yet to be engaged inches closer to an understanding of the potentiality of experience as more powerful than an understanding of experience as singular. This space's quality of being both unengaged and present opens the possibility to engage with it meaningfully, and though indeterminate or indescribable it presents a

relationship which I have with nothingness or the place beyond my horizons. The map which I have created imposes meaning on that which has happened, and though there is something to be said for the potentiality of my own memory being fluid and therefore past experience shifting and being malleable, there is a concreteness to my laying down of foreground which simultaneously destroys an aspect of potentiality, though painting over something is always an option, and births, implies, and defines, the boundaries of indeterminacy and potentiality. In destroying some aspects of my experience as fluid through the mapping of my being artistically I can form a physical representation of the indeterminacy which is so powerfully described by the Dao De Jing. It is not my action of mapping which does this directly, it is the non-action; the automatic and unconscious creation of that which is outside of myself. To try to define this indeterminate space through language loses the feeling that it has been created outside of oneself as there is no fleshing out or highlighting of that which I have not typed, maybe besides the space in-between each word or letter, as language does not hold the same formal commitments; it does not rely on the realm of the tangible and therefore it cannot represent the intangible.

## THEORETICAL INSPIRATION

### Dao De Jing

In multiple books of the Dao De Jing there are allusions to the ‘Enigmatic Female’ which imply an understanding of women as a critical aspect of following the Dao, or the Way. In these books, the ‘Enigmatic Female’ is described in tandem to symbols of emptiness, water, maternity, vitality, and fertility, all of which are also characteristics of the Way and therefore art, as I have previously described it. I believe there to be a powerful application of these thematic connections in my process of describing and expressing my bodily experience as a woman through art.

In chapter six of the Dao De Jing the ‘Enigmatic Female’ is introduced and described interchangeably with the “spirit of the valley” (Ivanhoe, 165). This idea of the valley is very common in Daoist philosophy, and it represents a place physically in the negative, or empty in comparison to the full and tall surroundings, but simultaneously full of vitality. The valley produces and sustains life in the same way that women create and sustain human life. The chapter goes on to describe the “portal of the Enigmatic Female” as “the root of all Heaven and earth” (ibid, 165) and in doing so alludes to the vagina in its power of creation. An interesting notion is present in this claim that the vagina is the valley and the root of all life because of the empty yet inexhaustible traits of the valley. In more modern feminism there is an acknowledgment of the vagina as empty in the sense that it requires to be made whole and, in that sense, it is always tied to the male in a way that is inescapable. The emptiness is looked down upon and perpetuates an understanding of women as less than in that they require some outside intervention on the part of men to become useful or full.

Though this same concept is present in the Dao, there is a much more gracious understanding of this emptiness as useful in and of itself. There is no need to be whole or full, the Dao praises this emptiness in its inexhaustibility and therefore completely dispels the claim that there is any female dependence on the male singularity, rejecting classic patriarchal understandings of women. Moving to a much later chapter, chapter sixty-one, the Dao describes the “female of the whole world” as “the delta of a mighty river” (ibid, 192). This comparison of the female as water is again a claim of emptiness and inexhaustibility in the fluidity of water. Water has no form but can be very powerful and so the female is empowered in her emptiness. The delta is also described as the place, “where the whole world gathers” and is reminiscent again of the vagina or the birth canal as its tapered shape resembles the uterus and the idea of a point of mass creation can be linked to the process of birth.

#### Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology

Jean Paul Sartre discusses aspects of both his understanding of the Other’s existence and phenomenological negation which illuminate an existential view of the experience of living in a world with beings who have some agency as I have agency in my experience of myself. Sartre describes examples of witnessing the Other’s existence as well as the experience of being witnessed where, “All at once...I am ashamed. It is evident that my shame is not reflective...Now, the Other is the indispensable indeterminacy between me and myself: I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other,” (Sartre, 308). This relationship between ourselves and the Other is expanded throughout Sartre’s theory where he begins to claim the permanent ties which our being holds with the being of the Other. Sartre argues that “even if we wanted to attribute to me a body



that was entirely constituted *before* it existed for others, we could not accommodate my vulgarity or my clumsiness as potentialities within it because...they surpass my body,” (ibid, 309) and in doing so he claims the interchange of meaning which is present between ourselves and the Other. There is a space which Sartre describes in his discussion of relationship and meaning which exists “between me and myself” or between an agent and their objectification where he states, “I am unable to place myself at the center; the distance that unfolds...is a negation of the distance that I establish-as external negation...It appears as a pure disintegration of the relations that I apprehend between the objects in my universe,” (ibid, 350). This “disintegration” relates to the description of horizons provided by Maurice Merleau-Ponty which describes the shifting of attention in our natural perception and therefore our inclination to be pulled into the beings of the Other across some “negation of...distance” which then allows us to “discover [ourselves] in the process of becoming a probable object for a subject who is certain,” (ibid, 352). Again, Sartre drives home this understanding of our being as indisputably tied up in the being of the Other as we traverse negative space to encounter ourselves through the eyes of the Other.

This expanding of horizons is described again when Sartre claims, “I am suddenly conscious of myself insofar as I escape from myself, not insofar as I am the foundation of my own nothingness but insofar as I have my foundation outside myself,” (ibid, 357). Here he pushes further to argue that the shifting of perspectives and meaning-making does not remove some meaning from my primary bodily experience, instead it expands this experience and accounts for the distinct feeling of being watched. This interplay of my reality and the reality of the Other becomes a reciprocity in the ebbing and flowing of

horizons which creates an in-between in the understanding of my own freedom alongside the acknowledgment of the freedom of the Other. This in-between is indeterminacy; absence in Sartre's terms and "absence therefore is a connection of being between two of several human-realities that necessitates the fundamental presence of each of these realities for the others," (ibid, 379). The acknowledgement of multiple human realities as necessary to the reality of each other outlines the reciprocity of experience which I hope to emphasize in the exchange of meaning between myself as an artist and the viewers of my art. This reciprocity, therefore, opens the understanding of absence, of indeterminacy and negation, as the shifting of perspective relies on this undefinable in-between.

Sartre's discussion of phenomenological negation begins to flesh out this in between space and its meaning. Sartre claims that through a phenomenological lens, "nothingness cannot be nothingness without nihilating itself explicitly as the nothingness of the world...it must explicitly direct itself in its nihilation toward the world in order to constitute itself as the refusal of the world," (ibid, 53) and in doing so he claims an understanding of nothingness as having tangible, relational ties to our world. Sartre seems to dispel the notion of nothingness as infinite absence or some intangible understanding of what we are 'not' and therefore, he claims there to be meaning in the understanding of nothingness as the negation of our world. In the same way that he has described our existence as dependent on the existence of the Other, negation and nothingness are dependent on fullness and 'things' and vice versa. In using the example of a segment between two points, Sartre claims that, "the negation escapes from the points—which cease to be limits—to impregnate the actual length of the segment and its two terms with the negation that is internal to its structure...there are two figures and the condition of

one of them appearing is the disintegration of the other,” (ibid, 55). Again, we see a description of reciprocity, of an exchange of meaning, and of the expanding and receding horizons of perception which apply meaning not simply through ourselves as primary preceptors but also through our negation, our objectification, and therefore through the understanding of our presentation in the face of the Other as a watcher.

### Phenomenology of Perception

Maurice Merleau-Ponty works through his notion of being-in-the-world as a phenomenological agent in his philosophy of perception and in doing so aligns himself closely with Sartre’s perspectives on the entanglement of self with one’s surroundings; environmental or in relation to other lived-bodies. Merleau-Ponty describes horizons; the waves of connection which radiate from beings and objects, intersect with each other, and therefore constitute the meaning which the Other makes for our being and vice versa. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, “the inner horizon of an object cannot become an object without the surrounding objects becoming an horizon, and so vision is a two-sided act,” (Merleau-Ponty, 70). Again, we see the reciprocity of visual and experiential exchange which defines our being-in-the-world in this ‘two-sided act’; we view, and are viewed, therefore we experience, and are experienced and this ever-repeating process our meaning is revealed to the Other and to ourselves. There are cyclical and an almost hypnotic process of movement which Merleau-Ponty describes in terms of horizons, he says a horizon is “but a presumptive synthesis, it only operates with certainty and precision within the object’s immediate surroundings. I no longer hold in hand the more distant surroundings, for it no longer consists in still identifiable objects or memories,”

(ibid, 72). There is a distinct imagery of ripples here where the attention of perception follows the wave away from the self and therefore the self falls away.

This experience of expanding and contracting attention helps to outline efforts which both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre have made in reframing the connections we hold with our surroundings as integral to our understanding of self; “the body schema is not merely an experience of my body, but rather an experience of my body in the world,” (ibid, 142). Merleau-Ponty also speaks of infinity, multiplicities, and, in relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s descriptions of space and gesture, a turning away from, “any analysis of bodily space that considers only figures and points, since figures and points can neither be conceived nor exist at all without horizons,” (ibid, 103) and toward an acknowledgment of our position in the world as, “immediately situated in relation to a thousand virtual coordinates,” (ibid, 131). Merleau-Ponty asks not for us to visualize the individual beings and things which we interact with but instead the relational quality that exists between our understanding of self and the world around us which exists in a constant interplay of infinite horizons and gestures or coordinates.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty also discusses the issue of freedom in his writing on perception. Here we can acknowledge the same reciprocity of existence which Merleau-Ponty outlined for us in previous sections; here he discusses a reciprocity which transcends time in arguing, “that we give history its sense, but not without history offering us that sense,” (ibid, 475). In Merleau-Ponty’s understanding, there is not only an exchange in the present between the experience of oneself and their surroundings, but it also exists between one’s past self and present position in terms of making choices. To drive his main point home, Merleau-Ponty writes,

“To be born is to be simultaneously born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is always already constituted, but also never completely constituted. In the first relation we are solicited, in the second we are open to an infinity of possibilities...we exist both ways simultaneously...I am never a mere thing and never a bare consciousness.” (ibid, 480)

Here, I believe, is the pinnacle of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of our being-in-the-world where he argues against any notion of essentialism; that there is some primary, unique, and therefore essential part of our beings which exists only for us and within us. Instead, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the understanding of human experience as in constant and necessary relation with the world which simultaneously constitutes us and is constituted by us.

#### Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison

In accordance with Sartre’s thoughts on the experience of being watched and of being a watcher, Micheal Foucault’s analysis of supervision in the guise of capitalism encouraged my understanding of the power of the gaze. The dynamic which Foucault outlines in his thinking is one which acknowledges the human experience as simultaneously dealing with being viewed, like the description provided by Sartre in his discussion of shame and viewing the Other in our agency in judgment and the reciprocal exchange of the gaze. Foucault then introduces complications to the experience of perception where, “there were the minor techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen; using techniques of subjection and methods of exploitation,” (Foucault, 171) discussing the illusion of the gaze and claiming there to be developments to supervision which claim a power in the watcher being unwatched. Foucault expanded my understanding of the modern experience of being watched in this complication of the interaction between watcher and watched and

even further the experience of, “supervisors, perpetually supervised,” (ibid, 177) in self-supervision. Alongside this notion of self-supervision is the Panopticon which exists, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power,” (ibid, 201) and in its function, the Panopticon creates the same illusion of the watcher which forces those who feel they are watched to reform their behavior under the implied gaze of authority.

Even more than this, supervisees become supervisors of their peers to try and hang onto a shred of their agency and climb the ladder of power. The picture of the power of the gaze which Foucault paints in his writing gave rise to an understanding of the function of my own self-surveillance which plays into my bodily experience and subsequently into the representations I have made of my experience. In terms of the interchange of the gaze and therefore of power dynamics, the experience of viewing art becomes an example of the shifting between viewer and being viewed. When interacting with art there is an immediate feeling of power one has in the ability to view the piece without eyes gazing back. However, the secondary understanding of the piece of art comes from an acknowledgment of how the piece relates to one’s own bodily experience and in this aspect of the viewing, the piece of art begins to pull power from the viewer and the power dynamic shifts as the art becomes the viewer. I hope to elicit this feeling of being watched through my art to extricate some form of introspection from the viewer which will only emphasize my own experience of being watched and of self-supervising for the viewer.

### A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia

My reading of Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Felix Guattari served to help me begin visualizing my approach to my process of creation. The French philosophers describe in great detail the images of rhizomes, plateaus, multiplicities, maps, tracings, and arborescence and in reading these descriptions I was able to begin to visualize the meaning which I wanted to impose on my creative work. I felt a desire to create pieces which did not encompass “pseudomulti-plicities” (Deleuze, 7) where, “the Tree or Root as an image, endlessly develops the law of the One that becomes two, then of the two that becomes four,” (ibid, 5). This misconception of multiplicity is evident in Deleuze & Guattari’s descriptions as they define multiplicity, not in terms of an addition or a counting of singularities but instead as some layering or assemblage which disregards binary logic. In their words, “a multiplicity is defined not by the elements that compose it in extension, not by the characteristics that compose it in comprehension, but by the lines and dimensions it encompasses in ‘intension’” (ibid, 245). These visualizations of multiplicities as lines and dimensions with ‘intension’ directly informed my creative work as I attempted to represent this ‘intension’ or, in my eyes, a visceral tension between rhizomatic lines to create a map of experience.

This idea of a rhizome begins to inform further an understanding of what it means to represent multiplicities as, “an assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections. There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines,” (ibid, 8). We can now visualize the assembling of layers of multiplicities, of plateaus, which are rhizomatic and therefore rely only on lines; on the same in between spaces described by Sartre, the ones which he describes as distances

impregnated with negation. To finalize this visualization, Deleuze and Guattari describe how these concepts come together to form maps as opposed to the more arborescent tracings which they claim rely on, “pseudomulti-plicities” (ibid, 7). They claim that “the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation,” (ibid, 12) which in terms of art pushes a reliance on non-representational, malleable art which can be reformed. Deleuze and Guattari push against ideas of pictorial representation as it encourages an understanding of things and beings as singular and unchanging which is an arborescent quality of the Root-Tree. A more rhizomatic form of representation allows for temporal, locational, and emotional changes and in terms of my own art, I have not put any ‘finishing’ coats on the pieces which could cement them in singularities of meaning, allowing for the pieces to be revisited, “torn, reversed, adapted”.



## PROCESS/APPLICATIONS/REFLECTION

### Process of red

*red was the first born. It began with my hands deep in the salmon tone. I molded the pigment creating the texture of myself in the wash. My fingerprints, my identification, remain in the empty expanses of the painting. In the guise of a completed spring semester of studying 20th century existential philosophy, I began mapping pinks and yellows over the natural concaves and convex-es of the canvas alongside the waves of depth from the wash. red is frivolous and swift. It moves with bursts of energy and in many areas the linework melts together to create spaces of compressed chaos. While working through this piece there was a feeling of moving away from academic relationships back to domestic relationships and so the piece was formed through a transitional period. The simultaneous ending and beginning filled the canvas with an engulfing wave of linework headed for the barren upper half. The movement is emphasized by deep purples and lavenders which point to the variety of length, thickness, and opacity of stroke.*



*Figure 1. Kjellander, Olivia. red. 2023, Bodwell Gallery Lobby, Maine.*

## Process of green

*green is embryonic. After reading Kate Zambreno's "Drifts" on her experience of pregnancy, the painting was born on a background which, covered with green many months prior, outlined fertile round and voluminous spaces onto which linework and mapping began to unfold. There is a sparsity to the first layer of lines which leaves vast open space on the painting as if to deny the desire to fill. Grappling with my own fear of pregnancy and re-reading the Dao I felt an un-comfortability in filling space and the desire to leave the potential of emptiness alive shone through. About six months later I felt estranged from my fears and while discovering a new relationship I returned to the canvas to reform it. There is similar chaos in this layer as there is in purple and I feel a pattern in the birth of new relationships where there becomes a desire to fill but what does fill the map which I create is overlapping, jumbled, and in direct contrast to the orderly linework of previous layers and paintings. With this new layer integrated and shadowing the experience of my past summer I developed the background into the foreground. The layers began to melt together, and the amalgamation of plateaus rose forward. This pattern of order and chaos in the building of relationships with others and environment shows through the constant desire to express the feeling of an ever-changing being. As I gaze upon my works I desire to feel connected to them as maps of my being but when I do I see memories and the experience of myself as stagnant becomes unsettling and untrue so I paint a new layer, not to forget, but to develop, to empty out new space to be filled and to sit with the understanding that the canvas provides an infinite potentiality of plateaus which assemble here and will assemble as I myself assemble.*





*Figure 2. Kjellander, Olivia. green. 2023, Bodwell Gallery Lobby, Maine.*

## Process of blue

*There is a fullness to blue which was unprecedented at the time of creation. The summer had just begun, and I had completed one other painting. I used my mother's old hard-body acrylics and made a wash over an old canvas. Phthalo blues and greens have always called out to me and when I began working the blues and greens into the cheap canvas, I felt the need to fill them out. The watery translucence wasn't enough, so I thickened the pigments with hue-less white. I brushed in areas of thick, full, blankness which receded and protruded in layers from the background. The idea of a background implies a foreground and so the moment I covered the canvas with the first layer of paint, there was not only a background but a horizon of foreground which was built from texture. The background wash then becomes the environment of the subject, it has its own texture, form, and areas of fullness and emptiness which constitute each other. The imposed map, which builds the form of personal experience, relationship, and therefore the interactive threads which tie my being to the world, then falls as a layer on and within the 'background'. The interpersonal ridges and waves of the environment shape the flow of the horizons which my being reaches. The flesh-y lines demolish a systematic point system as they overlap, intersect, dance around, and cover each other. There is density in the map which implies a near and therefore inescapably a distant connection. If my being resides within this map, it is within it in every stroke, not a singular point which I represent. My being runs along the threads like a nervous system, I am within it, and it is within me. In the center of the piece, with an intense stroke of white, the environment has imposed on the map, a mountainous intrusion refuses connection. Like the crest of a wave, it cuts through the expanse of blue and the horizon is separated. The forces which*

*push against connection here imply a lack of 'freedom' which resolves to attempt to impose some form of rigidity on the movement of the lines, but they continue to flow. The lines move around the imposition and are malleable to the environment in which they are engulfed, in a sense, they submit. In its completeness, this piece represents aspects of my being-in-the-world which are significant and relevant to the readings discussed, however it misses a key experience of femininity. The concept of the potentiality of emptiness. There is a distinct flow of this piece from the top right, across the canvas, down and around to the bottom right. The density of the line-work undulates within aesthetic comfortability and though there are areas of emptiness in terms of a smooth surface/background, there is a compositional finality which I resolve to remain untouched. The satisfaction I have in the finished nature of this piece questions the experience of emptiness as it is described in terms of the Dao's non-action as water. The piece begins to shape itself as ideal. It has a beginning and end, it is comprehensible, and though visceral in its fleshiness and activity, it lacks an indeterminacy which is vital to the experience of being in the world which I seek to represent.*





Figure 3. Kjellander, *Olivia. blue.* 2023, Bodwell Gallery Lobby, Maine.

## Process of purple

*purple began in solitude. I had been in the woods of New Hampshire for a few weeks already tending to log cabins and to increase the severity of my solitude, my one point of social interaction, my friend, left for home. The background screams for attention. There are fissures of blues and reds which melt and drip into the foreground and though sporadic and energetic with movement there is a depth to purple which is menacing. The line work is unprecedented and unique from many of the other works. and since I had not spoken aloud for multiple weeks since my friend drove back home, the entanglement of my thoughts formed a distressing jumble of mappings on the canvas. purple is nonsensical and confused. Amid a great loneliness there was a stranger which filled one week of bliss but in the end only added to the racing of my mind. Small geometric sparks fly in from the bottom left of the work and approach the center of chaos where an area of dense gestation resides. After many months away from this work it was distant, the stranger fell farther and farther away, and the once devastating loneliness I felt in New Hampshire became a sweet, melancholy yearning to be in nature again. The final painting is developing infinitely, the foreground falls into the background as if a layer of meaning and a new foreground emerges with a birth understanding. The pink fog which still clouds my memories of the past summer silences the calls from the tortured purple background and leaves a new emptiness which asks to be covered, to be filled, with gestures.*



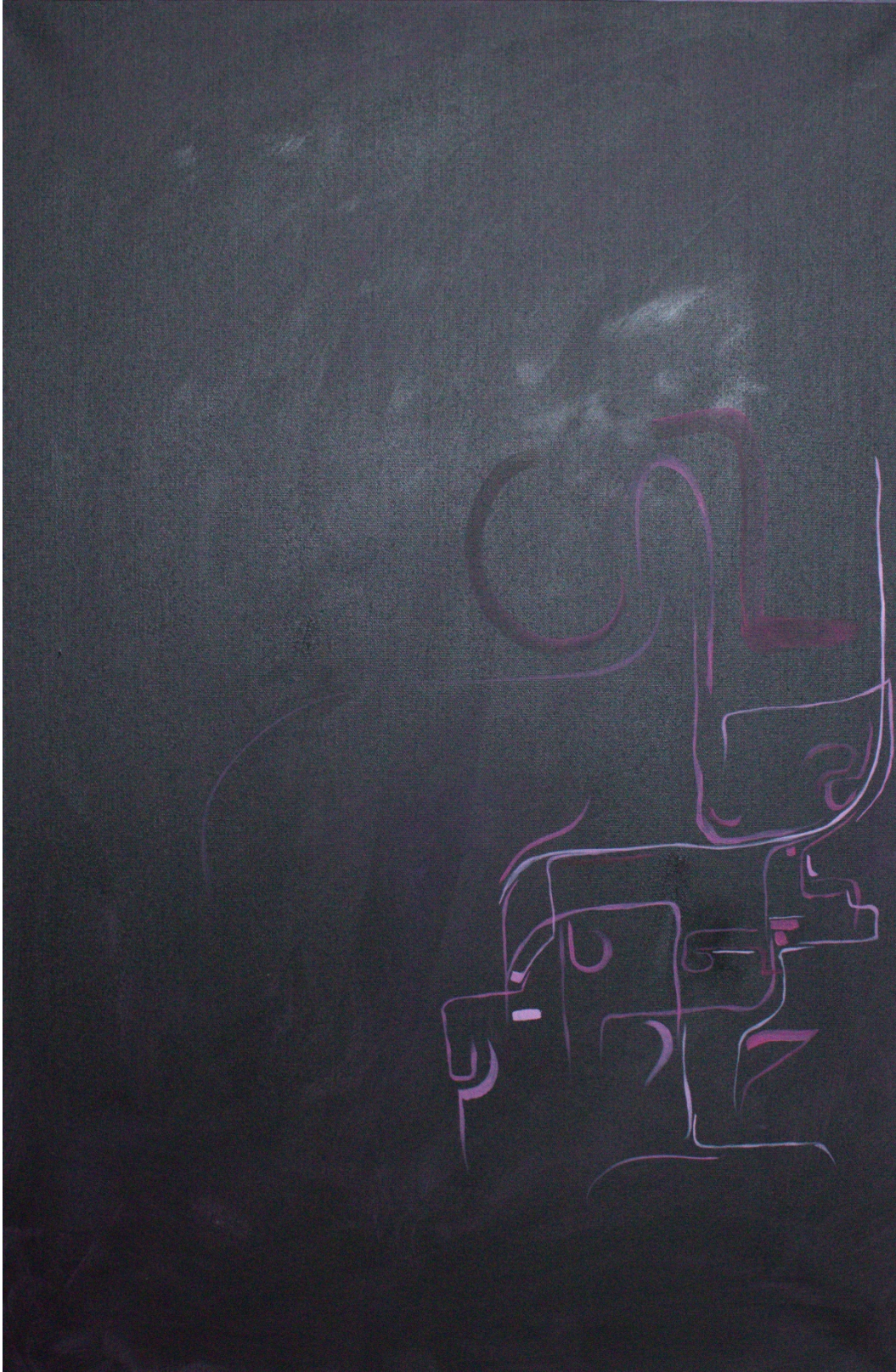


*Figure 4. Kjellander, Olivia. purple. 2023, Bodwell Gallery Lobby, Maine.*

## Process of black

*black is devastating. The painting is young and faint. It is quiet and contemplative, and it weeps for the memories it has of happiness. The emptiness is jarring and though pregnant with potential and indicative of a turning point in my personal development, it smirks at the chance that I make the wrong decision...again. It is not layered and in fact its background, despite its texture and variation, falls away leaving the twiggy, weak map to stand alone in oblivion. It asks me what I will do, who I will choose, where I will go, and what is important. I am unable to advance this painting at this point, it does not exist as a map of myself but instead remains a close memory of my willingness to act in ways which inevitably lead to despair. I cannot paint over this experience as it has not been resolved. The long spindly strokes extend extraneously to reach for connection, but they are lost, and, in some places, they are so faint that they fall into oblivion with the background. There are points of connection otherwise, but they are separate and distant, and they feel impossible to reach. Looking down into the chasm which has been split by misunderstanding and miscommunication I see this figure looming; a stain which has been left on my map and which feels inescapable. It is cyclic and I am thrown down into the naive line-work, through the map, and out into oblivion before I fall back once again into the trap.*





*Figure 5. Kjellander, Olivia. black. 2024, Bodwell Gallery Lobby, Maine.*

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## ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Olivia Kjellander was born and raised in Kingston, Massachusetts on the South Shore. She played soccer for more than half of her life, has done art for as long as she can remember, and in high school she fell in love with the critical problem solving of the discipline of Chemistry. Upon arriving at the University of Maine in the Fall of 2020, she studied one semester in the Chemistry Major before becoming engulfed in seminar style classes in the Honors College. She switched her path of study to Philosophy in her second semester and has since added a second major in Art History, retaining her love for Chemistry in the study of her minor. In college she discovered an intrigue in music and volunteered to be a DJ at the on-campus radio station while balancing her studies in her double major, an appointment in the Honors College, her 4-year, ongoing, position as a Residence Assistant, and shifting positions as a peer-instructor for the Honor's college as well as an ambassador for the Philosophy department.

Olivia Kjellander plans to complete her both of her degrees in the spring of 2025 and move on to pursue a master's degree in art restoration/conservation in an effort to synthesize her love for the philosophy, art, and chemistry. She hopes to use this higher education to pursue work in galleries/museums either in curation or maintenance.