

In the Stillness of Your Presence

“My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent...”

Agnes Martin (From “The Still and Silent in Art” as quoted in *Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond*, 25)



Figure 1. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* exhibition installation view.

In the Stillness of Your Presence consists of 25 sheets of natural mulberry washi paper, each approximately ten feet high by three feet wide, suspended from the gallery ceiling to face the viewer upon entering the space. These panels were initially painted as several large images but have been broken up and re-distributed randomly throughout the exhibition. The shapes featured on these panels are echoed in acrylic gloss medium painted on the north and south walls of the gallery, as well as on the small abutting wall to the left as one enters the gallery.



Figure 2. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* exhibition installation view.

Throughout this exhibition I use the patterns of rock and ice formations found along the coast of Nova Scotia as motifs to connote thought at the pre-linguistic stage of development. The patterns of rock and ice are organic and are derived by tracing these shapes and the spaces formed between them; they act as metaphors for what is unsaid as well as experiences that remain beyond words. I started this investigation in my undergraduate degree at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design as a result of studying French feminist literary theory and in particular, *l'écriture féminine* as attributed to Hélène Cixous, which describes a process of writing the previously ignored and unthinkable feminine into being. *L'écriture féminine* purports to create a feminine presence from absence in and spaces between dominant patriarchally-inflected discourse with an emphasis on experience over language and is characterized as non-linear, pluralistic, fluid and cyclical. I was profoundly inspired by the sense of play

inherent in this approach to writing and the idea that absence or emptiness is in fact filled with infinite potential. The qualities of fluidity and openness fit well with the imagery and multi-layered processes I was using to describe the space of imagination. My engagement with formal French feminist literary theory continues to profoundly affect my approach to making art and the desire to explore absence as a space fecund with vast possibility continues to expand and grow in new directions.

Not only do the patterns of rock and ice inspire me, but the sensation of humility and awe one experiences when confronted with vast spaces, such as sitting on the rocks beside the ocean watching the birds soar or the ice pans ebb and flow, also motivate my work. This sensation in which one's interior state of mind and the external world seem to co-exist symbiotically and the resulting feeling of immense openness and reflexive space fascinate me. It's a feeling akin to that which Danish artist Olafur Eliasson investigates in his large-scale installations and which he describes as wonder: "a sensory and cognitive mode"...which is "at the very borderline between sensation and thought." (Grynsztejn 27) *In the Stillness of Your Presence* is an installation that investigates my interest in the crossroads between the meditative rhythms of the natural world and a psychological interior space, between experience and acquired knowledge and the desire to bring the qualities of those experiences into the work.

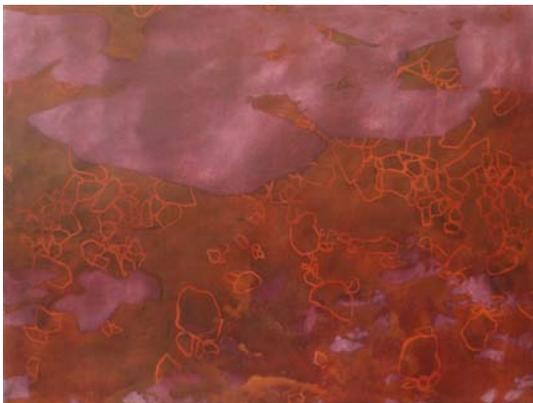


Figure 3. Dee Gibson, Thought Series #1, 2006, oil on canvas, 30" x40".



Figure 4. Dee Gibson, *Thought Series #3*, 2006, oil on canvas, 30" x 40".

I began by exploring these themes through the medium of paint (see Figures 3 & 4), building up multiple layers of brightly hued glazes and patterns using masking fluid resists. I moved from modest size canvases of approx 30" x 40" to larger ones 6' x 8' in an attempt to engulf the viewer in this space and create the sensation that this interior space of imagination was infinite and vast. Ultimately this work was unsatisfying. It was constricted by its materials; the traditional structure of stretched canvas set up a historical and material framework that bogged down my search for openness; the bold colours were pleasing but created a sharp contrast with the white gallery walls further reinforcing the edge of the canvas and enclosing the space.

Working with barely perceptible or even invisible notions such as gaps and absences, it is abundantly clear that as a society we place a greater value on those experiences we can see and name. In my exploration of these unseen and often unacknowledged elements, I have found American artist Ann Hamilton to be a great resource. In Hamilton's *accountings*(1992) smoke-licked walls act as visual and olfactory evidence of the movement of the person holding the candle up against it. In her installation, *tropos*(1993) the smell of burning text and the feeling of horsehair underfoot "invites us to trust unmediated somatic experience as a vital source of knowledge."(Posner 209) Hamilton's installations take on bodily associations as they omit pervasive smells, eerie rhythmic sounds and even at times take on the quality of breath itself.



Figure 5. Ann Hamilton, *accountings*, 1992.



Figure 6. Ann Hamilton, *tropos*, 1993.

These types of experiences are often dismissed not only because of the difficulty in articulating them but also because of an Enlightenment bias towards the hierarchy of mind over body; rationality over feeling. Somatic understanding of our experiences is an important type of knowledge to be able to access because whether or not we can discuss it with anyone, we all experience the world at a sensorial level and these experiences are powerful. I knew that my work needed to move beyond the framework of conceptual, non-objective paintings I had been doing up until this point in order to explore how I could let different types of knowledge contribute to the new work I wanted to make. I wanted to figure out how to create work that would evoke a sense of stillness, silence and meditative openness through a material presence.



Figure 7. Dee Gibson, *Thought Series*, 2008, relief prints on mulberry washi.

A course in printmaking proved to be a turning point in shifting from working with paint and canvas to a lighter, more ethereal mulberry washi paper. The series of resulting relief prints (see Figure 7) in muted tones of transparent blue-green provided a release from the weight of materials and rigid framing devices inherent in traditional canvas painting. The prints also allowed for light to pass through while conveying a sense of delicacy that was exciting. In addition, the muted palette led to a calmer, more contemplative response to the work than to the previous boldly-hued canvases I'd been creating. Releasing the washi prints from a traditional frame or standard rag paper backing provided key clues to creating a lighter, ephemeral somatic experience of the work.

In my investigation of sensations gained through experience in the natural world and the creation of work that attempts to reconnect the viewer with that experience in a self-reflexive way, Danish artist, Olafur Eliasson has been source of great inspiration. Eliasson often works with elements such as fog, mist, ice, water, heat, wind and light to create what he calls “devices for the experience of reality”(Eliasson as quoted in Grynsztejn 18), a reality which is at the “living edge between a haptic self and a heterogeneous and constantly changing universe” (Grynsztejn 18)

In his installation, *Notion motion* (2005) Eliasson employs a floorboard trigger to activate ripples across a pool of water that is projected on a rectangular scrim creating a constantly shifting, abstract painting.



Figure 8. Olafur Eliasson, *Notion motion*, 2005.

And in *Beauty* (1993) a perforated garden hose squirts an arc of fine mist in which one can see a rainbow from certain angles in the projected beams of light. His work encourages both introspection and attentive interaction; two qualities that are key to *In the Stillness of Your Presence*.



Figure 9. Olafur Eliasson, *Beauty*, 1993

The Power of Silence and the Poetic Stance

Silence is the key to accessing a state of contemplative openness and to experiencing this work which aims to create a sense of interiority by pointing to an ‘intimate immensity’, described by Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space*, as the space inside your mind that is infinitely larger than any physical space you will ever encounter. It is in those still, quiet moments when words drop away and you are completely present that this sense of immensity opens up. Québécois poet and feminist theorist, Nicole Brossard suggests that “ in each moment of silence, existence takes precedence over culture for silence projects us in space, pushes us gently in the vast movement of time and its fluidity. Silence, in fact, reminds us how small we are and nevertheless how good it feels to be reminded because it comes with an incredible sense of openness.” (Brossard, 42-43)

In order to access a sense of silence for *In the Stillness of Your Presence*, I found it necessary to discard not only the rigid and weighty materials of traditional painting, but also my earlier reliance on bold colour. Thus each panel in this installation has been painted using only painting medium; a mixture of citrus thinner, stand oil and dammar

varnish usually employed to extend oil paints and enhance shine. In this case, the painting medium is absorbed into the paper staining it unevenly and creating translucent shapes that appear to shift in opacity depending on the angle of viewing and the direction and quality of light.



Figure 10. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* (detail), painting medium on washi.

The repetition, in acrylic gloss medium, of these shapes on the abutting walls, adds to the quiet, fleeting quality of the interaction between the invisible and visible. The partial reflections of light on the glossy shapes shift as one navigates the space, thus encouraging the viewer to be very attentive and fully present.



Figure 11. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* (detail), acrylic gloss medium.

Not only do the materials used in this installation create a quiet presence, but they also make visible traditionally invisible support media; paper often remains hidden by an image; oil painting medium helps the paint to spread more easily and enhances luminosity; and acrylic gloss medium is used to seal a finished painting as well as to increase the shine and depth of colour. *In the Stillness of Your Presence* is an exhibition of silent partners that combine to generate a powerful experience of the hushed bounty of unvoiced thoughts and sensations.

Canadian artist Karilee Fuglem works with light, reflection and trace to explore ways to give the invisible a presence, and I found her insights helpful as I explored ways to give absence a presence. Fuglem uses simple everyday objects such as water to create drawings, monofilament to create barely perceptible spider web-like clusters in the corner of the gallery, and paper bags to create cloud-like installations. “ It is work that is initially understood and savoured by the body before it becomes an object of knowledge formed by language.” (Millard, 13)



Figure 12. Karilee Fuglem, *Imaginary Range*, 2007
Approx. 18km of invisible nylon thread



Figure 13. Karilee Fuglem, *Imaginary Range*, 2007
Approx. 18km of invisible nylon thread

In her installation *many things were left unsaid* (2003-2004), Fuglem has adhered excerpts from Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* to the gallery walls in glossy white lettering. The text is only revealed as the viewer and the lighting shift. Fuglem explains that “what [she] manage[s] to see, and to name and feel, is ... only an infinitesimal part of the infinitely larger range of [her] experience, and the reflection comes as an

unexpected echo of these uncharted dimensions of existence, a way of making me feel their presence.”(Fuglem as quoted in Ninac 80) In this installation, *In the Stillness of Your Presence*, the act of painting with the medium on the large washi panels rather than, for example, printing the image using large relief plates, enhances the sensation of corporeality through the mark of the hand and the organic seepage of the painting medium as it soaks into the paper independent of the artist’s direct influence. The transparent glossy images painted on the wall become visible when light is reflected on their surface thus establishing the presence of otherwise invisible shapes and creating an experience that is fluid and temporary. Both elements together combine to give the ephemeral notions I am interested in a ghostly, yet physical presence.



Figure 14. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* exhibition installation view.

I have used similarly sized panels at staggered but somewhat regular intervals to create a sense of reassuring repetition that helps to invoke a meditative state. The predictability and quietness provide grounding that allows for silent introspection. In

addition, the scale of these panels, being the full height of the gallery, helps to create a sense of vastness and a feeling of being immersed in contemplative space. Anchored only at the point of attachment to the ceiling, these panels float freely with the drafts of air created by the gallery ventilation system and visitors to the gallery.

Viewers are encouraged to walk in amidst the sheets of paper, engulfing and losing themselves in the work. As they move, the panels gently float to and away from them like ice pans in the ocean; when ice moves forward in the water, the water seems to retreat and when the ice ebbs back, the water follows it to fill up the space. This longing gesture is echoed in the movement of the paper; as one moves toward the panels they move gently away, but after one has passed by they trail after you. Additionally, the translucent images painted on the panels shift slightly in hue from pale yellow, to blue to grey depending on the light source and their proximity to the viewer.



Figure 15. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* exhibition installation view.

The figure-ground relationship also appears to shift, with painted shapes seeming at one turn to be semi-transparent and yet with another turn, opaque. The panels overlap and as such they are constantly forming and re-forming new combinations as viewers make their way through the space. The combination of movement, transparency, and shifting perspective create a fluid and dynamic sense of space.

Several years ago I had the pleasure of attending an installation of Canadian artist Ed Pien. The experience of being immersed in his large-scale drawings, which are derived from his subconscious and intuitive responses to dreams, was amazing and unnerving. Navigating through his labyrinthine installations, one is fully absorbed in a dream world of shifting visions. When planning the installation of *In the Stillness of Your Presence*, I was very much influenced by the way Pien uses light and translucent paper to create otherworldly experiences where shadows and intricate paper cut-outs have a presence equal in strength to drawn elements. This non-hierarchical valuing of positive shapes and negative shapes, as well as light and shadow forms a crucial metaphorical bridge between conscious and subconscious as well as rational and somatic forms of knowledge.

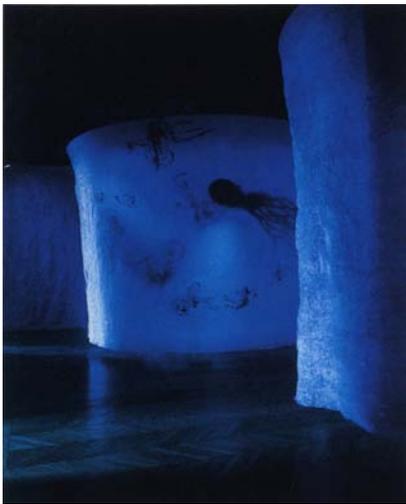


Figure 16. Ed Pien, *Deep Waters*, 2002.

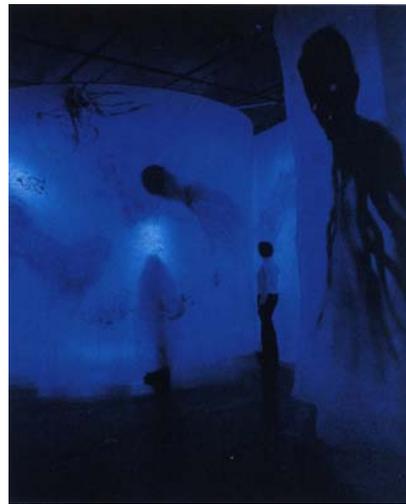


Figure 17. Ed Pien, *Deep Waters*, 2002.

In the Stillness of Your Presence is experienced with the 'body and gaze in motion' (Grynsztejn, 18) thus the speed of the exhibition depends on the speed of the viewer as they move through the installation. It is a collaborative, reciprocal act between the viewer and myself. The entire exhibition cannot be seen in one glance; it's a constantly shifting experience that you catch in glimpses and fragments.



Figure 18. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* exhibition installation view.

It is a situation that points to the complexity of the sense of openness that exists when the external world and one's internal state of mind are unlocked to each other. In his *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard describes this phenomenon wherein "...[I]nside and outside, as experienced by the imagination, can no longer be taken in their simple reciprocity; ...that the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances." (Bachelard 216). The shifting perspectives of the stained shapes on mulberry paper, the partial reflections of the shapes in acrylic gloss on the walls, the movement of the panels cutting and re-creating new images amongst themselves and in play with the acrylic gloss shapes on the wall embody this type of multiplicity, full of continually varying nuances.



Figure 19. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* exhibition installation view.

The process of creating this exhibition required a lot of letting go of certain types of knowing, of familiar process, of ego. According to Canadian poet Tim Lilburn, this poetic stance is

“[a] stance of quiet before things in which your various acquisitiveness – for knowledge, supremacy, consolation – are stilled, exhausted before the remoteness, the militant individuality of what is there. It is a stance of being alert without anticipating anything, a slackening of self which is a higher form of intensity... It is a way of giving up which is an expression of a desire for everything.” (Lilburn, 174-5)

In my own work this site of attentive and poetic reflection is readily accessed while quietly standing at the edge of the ocean, and perhaps with dedication, in meditation or quiet contemplation. It's a type of humility that opens one up to the world and rather than making one smaller by comparison, it makes one greater. This poetic stance is both an attitude with which the work was undertaken and in which it is meant to be experienced.



Figure 20. Dee Gibson, *In the Stillness of Your Presence* exhibition installation view.

In the Stillness of Your Presence is a studied investigation into how embodiment can function in creating meditative states and how non-cognitive powers of knowing might lead to a sort of consciousness of a different order. I continue to be interested in the way poetic contemplation, sensorial knowledge and visuality all come together.

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