

Spring 2014

[Sabbatical Report]

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Academic Unit: Art Department
Sabbatical Period: Spring 2014

Refresh: Exploring Contemporary Applications of Buon Fresco

I am grateful to have been granted a spring 2014 sabbatical leave. This sabbatical provided me with the time and focus to advance my art studio practice in the buon fresco painting technique. Through a variety of experimental and process-oriented studio activities, I investigated ways in which the technique can be utilized in the contemporary painting discourse. Traditionally, this form of painting was employed on a freshly plastered wall or ceiling in a process that is rigid and fixed. My experiments yielded results that advance the potential modes of creation and presentation of the buon fresco painting technique. I am pleased with the quantity of the works completed and their initial reception in the field and encouraged that much of what was accomplished is groundwork for future works.

The results and success of my sabbatical activities can be grouped into the four main activities that were proposed in my application, which I will outline below.

Concepts and Compositions

I developed concepts and pictorial compositions that reflect the medium's history while providing a "fresh" contemporary point of access that acknowledges viewers' unique perspectives.

In almost all of the works that I created during the sabbatical, I dispersed the figure through a number of strategies. This dispersal is a way to counter, destabilize, decenter, or ultimately change the power structure within and around the image.

In his essay, "The Portrait's Dispersal," Ernst Van Alphen argues that a portrait adds authority to a person because it is *assumed* the person is worthy of being depicted.¹ My artwork titled *Analogue* (Figures 1 & 2) explores this idea and suggests that the scale and media, in this case monumental buon fresco, amplify this bestowed authority.

In *Analogue* I painted pixels, the elemental parts of an image, and expanded the space between them to a point where the figure is communicated but the individual's identity is fragmented. This

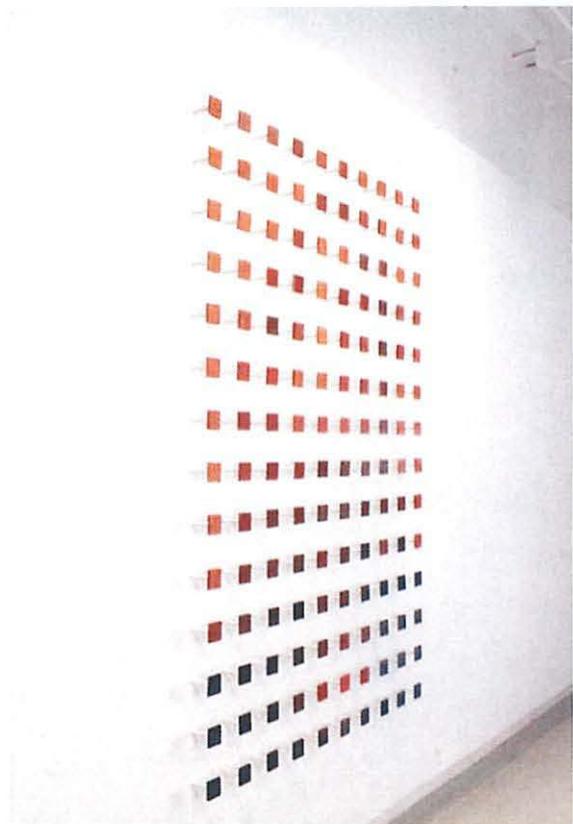


Figure 1, *Analogue*, modular buon fresco on clay tiles (6 x4')

¹ Ernst Van Alphen. "The Portrait's Dispersal," in *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 22.

fragmentation or loss of information acts as a counterpoint to any bestowed authority of the portrait. Isolating the pixels brings attention to the fact that the painting itself is a representation (made of pixels) that is ultimately limited to a narrow slice of information. This isolation of information further draws on Van Alphen's discussion about the implications of representation on a subject's sense of self and the portrait's ability to render wholeness.² The information that is communicated and lost in *Analogue* suggests a false isomorphism.

I reiterated the idea of a dispersed image through the use of airbrush, a tool that literally disperses pigment onto the fresh plaster. This proved to be a challenging method in which to paint buon fresco. Results were unpredictable based on a number of factors and I will continue to explore additional airbrush applications. In the context of a discussion of power and representation it worth noting that airbrush images relate to graffiti art with a conceptual grounding in power dispersal. This is in contrast to the creation of frescoes in top down power structures. I also explored reductive techniques where scratching and chiseling were used to transform previously completed frescoes. Finally, the construction and displays I have explored have proven to be versatile and variable in ways that will be fruitful for future compositions and conceptual explorations.

Construction and Display

I investigated new ways of constructing and displaying buon fresco paintings that reflect contemporary aesthetic trends in painting and installation while problem solving the medium's physical limitations.



Figure 2, Detail of *Analogue*, showing floated modules

I imagined ways in which I could liberate my use of fresco from the traditional support of walls and ceilings. My goal was to use the technique in ways that are structurally sound yet create contemporary interactions with viewers. For example, some frescoes I completed, such as *Analogue*, change its character from different viewing distances.

I successfully fabricated display hardware, frames, posts, hanging cleats, and lightweight supports that allow me to "float" buon frescoes off the wall using modular ceramic (Figures 1-3) and Styrofoam (Figure 4) forms. The successful creation of works on these supports was an extremely challenging feat because buon fresco is an unforgiving technique that reacts to the slightest changes in application. Changes include atmospheric differences and any number of variations that occur in the plaster's thickness or its contact with materials of different absorption rates, hardness, and sizes. Through a continued

² *Ibid.*, 31

process of trial and error I learned to work with the plaster in new ways. My gains in the construction and display of buon fresco are groundwork for future works.

Construction of modular fresco paintings

I constructed two large scale modular fresco paintings that evidence the beginning of a larger body of work.

I successfully created a dozen experimental buon frescoes that are finished works in themselves and exhibition ready. Two of the successful works, *Analogue* and *Disperse / Intersperse* (Figures 1 & 4), are large-scale modular frescoes each created using different fresco supports. One support is ceramic tiles the other Styrofoam sheets. The exhibition ready paintings are only a portion of the frescoes I created. Many works, including a third large-scale piece, were given up to experimentation.



Figure 3, *Brume*, floated buon fresco on clay tile (16x16")

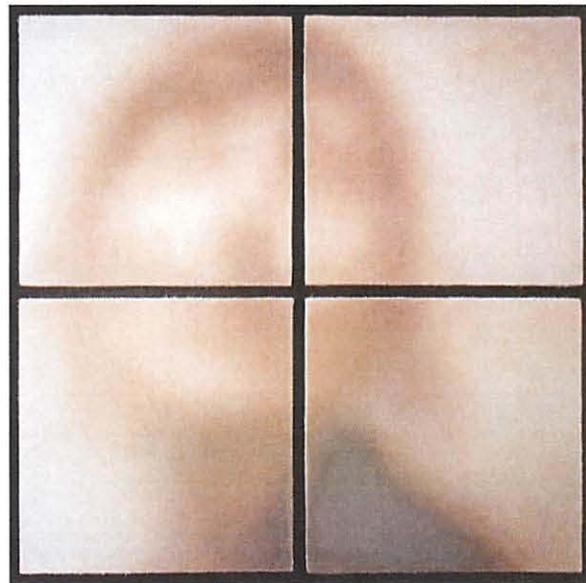


Figure 4, *Disperse / Intersperse*, modular buon fresco on Styrofoam (4.5x4.5')

Venues for Discourse

My proposed sabbatical activities included seeking venues for discourse through exhibitions and/or lectures.

I am optimistic about the reception of the work based on some of the critical attention it has already received. My fresco titled *Brume* (Figure 3) was selected for inclusion in the Red Clay Survey 2014, a significant regional survey of contemporary Southern art hosted by the Huntsville Museum of Art in Huntsville, Alabama. Over 1,500 entries were submitted, from which nationally-acclaimed artist Susanna Coffey selected 90 works by 72 artists in a two-stage jury process. The acceptance letter has been included at the end of report.

I have a solo exhibition at Lindsay Wilson College in Columbia, Kentucky scheduled for November, 2014. This presentation will include buon frescos from my sabbatical research as well as a workshop presentation. I also have a two-person exhibition scheduled at Fontbonne University in St Louis, Missouri for the fall of 2015.

My sabbatical proposal included four venues to which I am committed to submitting my work. Upon seeing an image of *Brume*, Jason Franz, Executive Director and Chief Curator at Manifest Galleries in Cincinnati, informally encouraged me to submit this work to their publication, the *International Painting Annual (INPA)*. The *INPA* is one of the venues listed on my Sabbatical Proposal and this is welcome encouragement. I formally submitted my work and the jury of professionals will make their decision by August 30th. I plan to apply to the other three venues listed on my sabbatical application when the submission windows open this next academic year. I will submit to the publication *New American Paintings* in December and I will then present applications for solo exhibitions at Middle Tennessee State University and Murray State University.

Work Cited

Van Alphen, Ernst. "The Portrait's Dispersal." In *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*, 21-47. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Red Clay Survey 2014 - 2nd Stage Artist Notification

David Reyes [dreyes@hsvmuseum.org]
 Sent: Wednesday, June 25, 2014 4:40 PM
 To: Nichols, Michael
 Attachments: Bio Template.doc (23 KB)

Dear Mike:

Congratulations! The second stage jurying has been completed for the upcoming **Red Clay Survey** at the Huntsville Museum of Art, and I am pleased to inform you that all of your work has been retained for inclusion in the show. The competition for this year's version of the show was characteristically stiff. Over 1,500 entries were submitted, from which juror Susanna Coffey selected 113 works by 81 artists for the second stage of jurying. After on-site jurying was completed this Tuesday, the show was refined to **90** works by **72** artists. Coffey selected an impressive exhibition, with a range of excellent work in a variety of media and styles.

At this point in the process, we need your condensed bio for the exhibition catalogue. Please see the attached template for the format we use for our catalogue. We would appreciate you adapting your bio to fit this format. Return it via email to Peter Baldaia

at: pbaldaia@hsvmuseum.org **no later than Monday, June 30**. If you have any questions or concerns, please email or give me a call.

The awards ceremony and preview reception for **The Red Clay Survey** will be held on **Saturday, August 16 from 7 to 9 pm**. We have a festive evening planned, with great food and drink, good music, and lots of people expected. We will send you a digital version of the exhibition announcement for your e-lists when they are produced in late July. You will also receive a small number of printed announcements for your files and selected distribution. You and a guest will be placed on a comp list for the opening reception. Additional tickets can be purchased from the museum website. We hope to see you at the opening of the show!

Sincerely yours,

David Reyes, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections
Huntsville Museum of Art