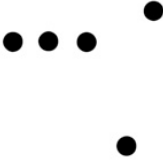





**Nicole
Ondre**

Pirl




Under many coats of white paint, a field of maroon stains the west wall of CSA gallery. Nicole Ondre painted it a decade ago to make *Curtain* (2012)¹. She saturated the wall with broad, horizontal brush strokes that met the edges of the abutting walls, ceiling and floor, then pressed a piece of photo backdrop paper, approximately the same size as the surface, onto it. The sheet was offset to the right and its excess rolled gently to rest against the blank north wall. The left edge was loose and curled around the radiator, revealing the painted ground behind it. The gallery was flush with the odor of wet oil paint and linseed oil, which drew one's attention to the immediacy of the installation's procedure.

Curtain played with the gestures, materials, armature and object of painting. Oil paint was applied directly to the wall—much like house paint, and was manipulated like a dye that soaked through the paper over time. In its role as a shroud that covered the painted wall, and a ground that absorbed oil, the paper was a proxy for drapery and canvas. Like a pliable curtain, the materials responded to the architecture. The paper shifted around the radiator, allowed its protrusion to elevate the material, and curled with the support of the perpendicular wall. After the exhibition closed it was disposed of, while the painted field remained permanently affixed to the gallery. The separation of the work's elements dematerialized the painting, calling to mind how a curtain's colour fades and fibres weaken from sun exposure, yet continues to bear the imprint of a window's frame.



Following *Curtain*, Ondre further experimented with painting's customs in installations such as *Cadmium Yellow Window* (2013), in which she used a painted wall as a matrix to print a mirror image on photo backdrop paper, then hung it opposite its original². In *Double Bind* (2014), she printed and stained layers of tar paper, photo backdrop paper and plastic sheeting that were composed on the gallery floor. In *Curtain*





Curtain, CSA Space, 2012



for *Projection* (2016) she applied oil pigments to a scrim of Tyvek and hung it from a wire that bifurcated the room like a soft wall. Recently, she has soaked tracing paper in polyvinyl acetate and pigment, then sculpted the pliable material into suspended forms such as drapes, bows, veils and braids³.

These works highlight Ondre's curiosity about the sensual qualities of painting, and our experience of these phenomena. She works with materials and procedures that skirt the boundaries of the discipline. Their dislocation may pique one's perception of and attention to a medium that can easily be taken for granted. In addition to working with textiles, paper and plastic, she recently introduced ceramics into her material vocabulary and has been working with and against its natural inclinations. For *Pirl*, she's created a series of experiments from the fundamental elements of painting and its place in architecture—the wall, the nail, the composition of fabric, the brush—that test clay's potential. The works in the exhibition draw attention to simple gestures that incongruent materials and tools can make challenging.

Before even the most basic loom was invented that introduced the warp and weft structure to fashion canvas, knitting sequenced a pattern of loops that formed knots to make garments. There are numerous iterations of knitting patterns configured from two basic loops: the knit and purl stitch. Like all knots, these

two loops bind to each other by dispersing tension along their threads. Tension is higher at points where multiple threads converge and friction is intensified. There is more pressure on a single knot than there is dispersed amongst a sequence of knots.



Plying clay into thick tubular strands and then contorting them into narrow, irregular loops works against the medium's natural inclination to be thin, broad and consistent. Ondre's method tests the composure of clay and the processes of drying and firing. If the density of the strands are uneven, bear too much pressure when looped and layered, or dry too fast or too slow, they easily crack and break.



The stress that she puts on her materials creates mishaps that in turn introduce opportunities to append, repair or embellish. Ondre's curiosity about formal risk has been influenced by the notion of 'antifragile', a paradigm that examines how systems thrive by growing with rather than retreating from instability, failure or calamity⁴. Thought alongside the experience of making art, antifragility suggests that encounters with fallibility or indeterminacy can be propositions. If your works keep breaking, then perhaps 'breaking' is a gesture to lean into, rather than avoid.



Trigger Points, *Rungs* and *Slip Stitches* puncture the facade of the white cube. They extend the gesture expressed in *Curtain* to level painting off of a support and onto the wall (where the discipline began)⁵. By inserting forms into the drywall, Ondre makes the armature of the gallery the ground of the work. The fabrics, plastics and elastics that form *Slip Stitches* enter and exit the wall in patterns that hint at a sequence of knitting or embroidery loops. One side of the stitch is visible, while the obverse stitch that is counter-balancing it, is obscured. Joined in a continuous line, *Slip Stitches* disperses tension around the gallery, and sutures the installation. In contrast, the *Trigger Points* exert pressure on single points, like tender spots in a contracted muscle.

Ondre experiments with mediums that carry coloured pigments, and the means of applying them. In *Trigger Points*, *Rungs* and the knots and knits, ceramic glazes are applied with loose and irregular strokes in layers that occasionally bleed. She paints

across the breadth of loop sequences, or off the edges of knobs onto the wall, treating the forms like grounds rather than objects. The fabric, plastic and elastic ties that form *Slip Stitches* are dipped in oil paint and stains, much like raw fibres for knitting would be dyed.

Helen Frankenthaler said that the lightest touch is the strongest gesture⁶. Held in proximity to the ethos of antifragile, this reminds me that the redemptive potential of failure is relative to the scale of a condition and one's response. The preposition *anti-* suggests that an oppositional energy to *fragile*—that of force, is needed to experience fortitude in the face of volatility. However, resilience may actually require the strength of the lightest touch—something akin to tenderness, in order to flourish. The works in *Pirl* express the practice of touching lightly. Lithe brush strokes feather out at their edges. The frayed edges of fabric sutures are subtly exposed. Clay ropes are gently coaxed to bend and loop. A wire is patiently pulled over the surface of a thin clay base. Plastic, fabric and elastic, which bear distinct degrees of tension, are carefully pulled taut.



Pirl is an obsolete sixteenth century spelling of purl that variably referred to: snow, wind or water that swirls, eddies or ripples; to grope or fumble with hands or feet; a twist or knot of hair at the back of a woman's head; and a thread or cord made of twisted gold or silver wire used for embroidery. The word suggests a correlation between movement, wandering, drifting and entanglement. These gestures are synonyms for indeterminacy, suggesting that one can choose to move with rather than against uncertainty, like water eddies around an obstruction, or one finds stable footing in turbid water. It is an apt allegory for experiencing doubt or confusion when making and encountering artworks.

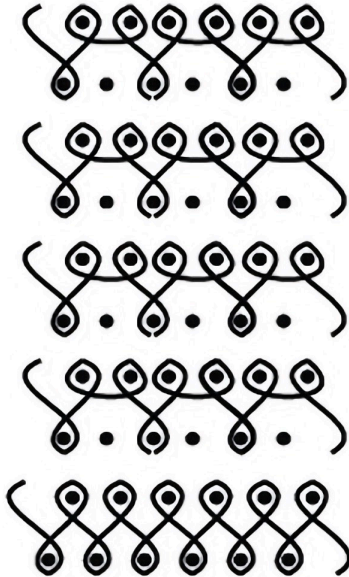


Amy Sillman says “paint your doubt”⁷. Her advice implies that the experience of painting is laid bare when questions regarding purpose, value or meaning are worked out through form. Ondre's wariness with the medium's conventions and her curiosity about its virtues, led her to use tools, processes and materials that are adjacent to painting. Doubt, the lightest touch and antifragility share commonalities—namely privileging



sensual over rational values. By attending to material phenomena, I think she metabolizes (though not resolves) this discord. The traction that is deployed in *Slip Stitches*, the reparative suturing of ceramic *Shells* and the softening of surface tension suggested by *Trigger Points* are expressions of this process. They suggest that the experience of painting is to work with, rather than against dissonance—to lean into, rather avoid the moments where it drifts, falters or breaks.

—Amy Kazymierchuk



Notes

1 *Curtain* was presented in Ondre's solo exhibition *PAINTINGS* (April 27 – June 6 2012), which was curated by Graham Dalik and Adam Harrison. It also featured Ondre's works *Landscape, cut* (2012), which was an irregular shaped piece of paper that was painted blue then stuck to the wall like a sticker and *CSA monoprint (nickel yellow)* (2012), which was made by painting the wall, pressing a piece of paper to it, and then hanging the monoprint over the painted patch.

2 A matrix is the surface on which a print is made.

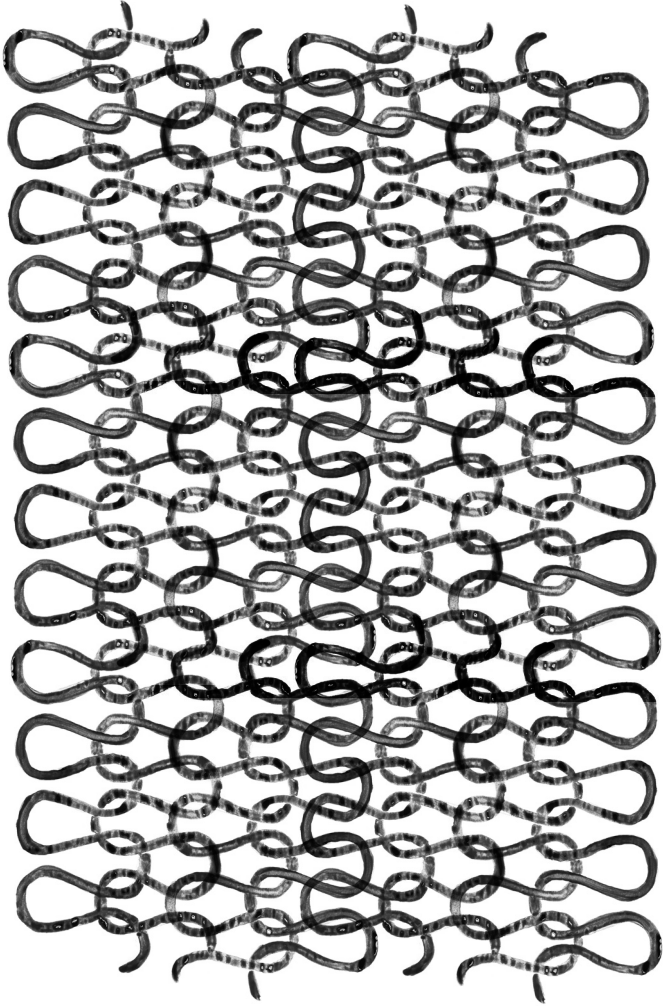
3 *Cadmium Yellow Window* (2013) was presented in *After Finitude*, curated by Eli Bornowsky at the Or Gallery, Vancouver (February 23 – April 6, 2013). It was installed alongside work by Neil Campbell, Hanne Darboven and Cheyney Thompson. *Double Bind* (2014) was presented in the two person exhibition Neil Campbell/Nicole Ondre, curated by Christina Ritchie at Diaz Contemporary, Toronto (July 26 – August 23, 2014). *Curtain for Projection* (2016) was presented in Ondre's MFA thesis exhibition at the Hochschule für bildende Künste, Hamburg in 2016.

4 The paradigm of antifragility was developed by Nassim Nicholas Taleb and detailed in his book, *Antifragile* (2012).

5 I'm thinking about cave paintings, petroglyphs and frescos.

6 Alexander Nemerov cites this quote in his online lecture "Desire Is the Theme of All Life: Helen Frankenthaler in 1950s New York" for Stanford University Alumni in April 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDFfAI4feII>, 21:53min.

7 Linda Norden cites this quote in her article "The Elephant in the Painting: The Art of Amy Sillman," *Artforum*, February 2007. <https://www.artforum.com/print/200702/the-elephant-in-the-painting-the-art-of-amy-sillman-12394>



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