

THE MATERIAL SHIMMER: THE SOMATIC POETICS OF AWE

A Painter's Treatise



FOREWORD: THE BODY AS A PRE-REFLECTIVE ORGAN OF PERCEPTION

A Reflection on a Lifetime of Material Enquiry

The following treatise is the culmination of a lifetime spent in the "crucible" of the studio. Looking back upon a journey that began in my earliest years, I recognize that I have never been merely "making images." Rather, I have been engaged in a sustained, somatic interrogation of reality itself and a sensitization of the body vis-a-vis the object of art. It has been a lifelong commitment to explore the numinous and sometimes luminous quality we can only tentatively term *awe*—and our capacity to experience and notice what transcends conventional notions of the sublime. This is a search for the substance that lines the "crucible," the alembic—that alchemical vessel of the studio where base matter and the painter's nervous system are fused and distilled into pure presence—as nascency comes into existence, to light and awareness. My practice has always been driven by a singular, underlying necessity: to move past the domesticated, "readymade" world of the intellect and return to the raw, vibrating state of the *Lebenswelt*—that primordial "life-world" of immediate sensory experience where matter impacts the body directly, long before the mind has a chance to name, measure, or tame it. This practice is fundamentally a vow to never lose contact with the wildness of being; it is a rigorous refusal to become desensitized by our own nervous system's relentless drive toward convenient, perceptual shortcuts.

In an era characterized by the frictionless digital interface—a world where experience is increasingly mediated by the glowing, two-dimensional screen—the act of engaging with the physical weight, resistance, and unpredictability of matter is a radical act of ontological dissent. It is a refusal to allow the world to be flattened into a mere concept, a fleeting data point, or a subservient resource. To paint at this stage of a career is to testify to the "thickness" of being.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued in his final masterwork, *Eye and Mind* [1964], the scientific and technological mind "manipulates things and gives up living in them," operating from a state of artificial distance. The painter, however, "takes his body with him." Indeed, as he famously noted, we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. This physical immersion aligns precisely with what contemporary theorist George Moore [2024] identifies as the urgent reclamation of "Noticing and Awe." For Moore, the antidote to our anaesthetized, screen-mediated existence is a radical return to the "forgotten sensations of being alive"—a deliberate re-tuning of the nervous system to the immediate frequencies of the material world.

This necessitates a return to the phenomenology of the body before the work of art. In this primordial state of encounter, the intellect is bracketed, suspended, and the eye is stripped of its privileged status as a detached, optical instrument. Instead, the entire body acts as the organ of perception. We do not merely "look" at the canvas; we feel its weight, its spatial tension, and its material resistance through our kinesthetic architecture. Seeing becomes a full-body act—a somatic resonance registered in the muscles, the stance, and the nervous system.

In this pursuit, the work of Merleau-Ponty has served as a foundational North Star. His assertion in *The Primacy of Perception*—that "the world is not what I think, but what I live through"—is the heart of my studio practices. Furthermore, in his seminal essay *Cézanne's Doubt*, Merleau-Ponty articulates the specific agony and glory of the painter: the struggle to capture the world at its birth, before it has been processed into objects and categories. Like Cézanne, I have spent my life in pursuit of that "primordial" gaze. This is not a search for a finished "picture" to be hung as a trophy of mastery, but a search for the moment where appearances first begin to vibrate with the weight of existence. It is a grueling labor—one that requires the painter to inhabit a state of perpetual uncertainty, doubting the seen until the seen reveals its own internal, material logic.

The Erotic Gaze: Desire as an Ontological Probe

The gaze of the painter is fundamentally an interrogative act, but it is one fueled by Eros. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the body's relation to the world is "carnal." We do not look at the world with the cold eye of a surveyor; we look with the hungry eye of a lover. This is the erotic Intentionality of the studio—a reaching out with the eyes to touch the "vibration of appearances" before they are hardened into objects.

Desire, in the studio, is the refusal of distance. It is the drive to overcome the "Mathematical Shield" through a carnal interlace with the material. We paint because we desire to inhabit the "flesh of the world." This Erotic drive is what sustains the somatic vigilance required for a productive, even prolific career; it is the energy that prevents the work from becoming a mere intellectual exercise and keeps it anchored in the "shimmering event" of being.

PART I: THE POETICS OF PERCEPTION

AXIOM I: THE RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY OF AGENTIAL REALISM; Entangled Agencies and the Erotics of Intra-action

The canvas exists as "material flesh." Drawing upon Karen Barad's [2007] framework of agential realism, we recognize that "agency is not an attribute but a matter of enactment." In simpler terms, this means the materials of the studio—the pigment, the canvas, the binder, the medium—are not "dead" or passive things waiting to be bossed around by the artist. They have their own active energy, their own physical logic—be it gravity, viscosity, or resistance—and they push back. In the traditional Cartesian dualism, the artist is a subject acting upon a passive object. Material Immanence rejects this hierarchy. The artist, the material, and the viewer are co-constituted through a "mutual constitution of entangled agencies."

This quantum mechanical view mirrors the phenomenological "Chiasm" described in *Eye and Mind* [1964]. Merleau-Ponty argued that the boundary between the seer and the seen is an illusion; the painter's vision is born within the "flesh of the world," where the painter is simultaneously seeing and being seen by the material.

Following Barad, we understand that entanglement is a "lacking of independent, self-contained existence." This lack is the source of erotic tension. The painter and the material are co-constituted through a "carnal interlace." The painting becomes a site of Intra-active Desire, where the materials themselves exert an agential force that responds to the painter's reach. We move from being "observers" to being "participants"

in a shared reality where the boundary of the self is revealed as a porous construct, dissolved by the heat of the encounter.

AXIOM II: VISUAL DENSITY AND THE SEDUCTION OF THE SURFACE

The Painting as Hyperobject and the Resistance to Naming

Material Immanence seeks infinity through absolute informational fullness. We frame this density through Timothy Morton's [2013] concept of the Hyperobject: an entity so viscerally present and complex that it defies our ability to measure or fully comprehend it. As Morton writes, "Hyperobjects are 'viscous'—they 'stick' to the beings that encounter them." This viscosity is the Erotic Pull of the surface.

The reticulated surface functions as a localized hyperobject. This density is a deliberate strategy to prevent the mind from ever "finishing" the act of reading. Following Susan Sontag [1966], we argue "against interpretation." Interpretation is the intellect's way of domesticating the work, reducing it to a manageable "message." To interpret is to kill the shimmer. The surface must be so thick with data that it refuses to be reduced to a single, stable noun. This forces us into a state of Aesthetic Arrest—the moment where the analytical mind falls silent before the sheer volume of the visible. This arrest is a form of Erotic Submission to the material world.

PART II: THE SOMATIC POETICS OF THE STUDIO

AXIOM III: THE PRE-REFLECTIVE COGITO; The Body as the Primary Site of Knowledge

In a long career, the painter discovers that the hand often knows what the mind has not yet named. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty [2012], we identify this as the Pre-Reflective Cogito. It is a carnal logic situated in the muscles, the tendons, and the shifting weight of the painter's stance.

- **Somatic Vigilance:** This is a state of heightened Kinaesthetic Awareness. The painter holds the self in a state of suspended judgment—a state of "wanting" without "grasping"—allowing the body to act as a "sensitive antenna" for the material's resistance.
- **The Refined Instrument:** As the body ages, its "habitual" dexterities are stripped away, leaving a more refined, transparent instrument. This is the Strength of

Vulnerability. The body becomes a diffraction grating through which the "wild substance" of reality is filtered and sedimented onto the canvas.

AXIOM IV: THE VOICE OF THE MINERALS

Material Agency as a Kuspitian Co-Witness

The materials and minerals engaged in the transmutation process are not passive media; they are active agents with their own Thing-Power, as described by Jane Bennett [2010]. In the "crucible" of the studio, the pigment, the binder, and the substrate act as Kuspitian Co-Witnesses to the creative act.

- **Agential Intra-action:** We do not "control" the material; we "propose" an encounter and then witness the material's answer.
- **The Erotic Dialogue:** The painter must listen to this voice, treating the material's autonomous shifts as a partner in an Erotic Dialogue. The final shimmer is the record of this negotiation—a proof that the human is not the center of the universe, but an inhabitant of a profoundly interactive field of experience.

AXIOM V: THE MATERIAL SYNTAX; The Stroke as an Erotic Act

The mark on the canvas—the "Stroke"—is not a passive application of color; it is the transfer of kinetic energy from the body into the material field. This is a radical Surrender of Controlled Dexterity. As Barad writes, "we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity."

The stroke is a Propositional Act—an Erotic gesture asked of the world that the world answers through its own autonomous physics. These painterly marks mimic the structural density of the natural world, providing "optical attractors" that anchor the viewer in a state of Original Awe. The viewer's body internally re-enacts the energy of the brushstroke through the Mirror Neuron System, creating a shared carnal history between the painter, the material, and the witness.

PART III: THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE SUBLIME

The Rupture of the Mathematical Shield

Introduction: The Necessity of the Critique and the Path Forward

As established in the Foreword, the pursuit of Material Immanence is a commitment to the raw, unmediated experience of *awe*. However, to lay open this path forward, we must first dismantle the traditional philosophical frameworks that have historically defined "overwhelming" aesthetic experience.

The 18th-century definitions of the Sublime—specifically in the Kantian tradition—are fundamentally incompatible with the *Lebenswelt*. They prioritize the intellect over the body, functioning not as pathways to awe, but as tools for ego-recovery and psychic safety. By clearing the field of these defensive, human-centric philosophies, we make space for a radical alternative: a Sublime where the "I" does not conquer the magnitude, nor merely surrender to it as an external force. Instead, the boundary of the ego dissolves entirely. The viewer realizes that they are composed of the very same undifferentiated field of reality as the canvas. We move from the illusion of safe observation to a state of total entanglement, where the numinous (and sometimes luminous) "shimmer" is recognized not as something we look *at*, but as the substance *we are*.

The Quantum Reality of the Shimmer

Here, the phenomenology of the studio merges seamlessly with the revelations of contemporary physics. Modern quantum mechanics has demonstrated that at the subatomic level, the universe is not a collection of discrete, isolated objects, but a dynamic, interconnected field of relational energy. This aligns profoundly with the hypotheses of String Theory, which posits that the fundamental constituents of reality are not point-like particles, but infinitesimally small strings of energy vibrating at different frequencies.

In this framework, the entire material world is a symphony of "vibrational octaves." The pigment, the medium, and the biological cells of the viewer are composed of the exact same elemental resonance. The "shimmer," therefore, is no longer a poetic metaphor. It is the literal, energetic reality of our shared atomic makeup—a visible manifestation of the quantum field. The canvas does not just reflect light; it vibrates, and the body of the viewer, tuned to the same fundamental frequency, physically resonates in return.

AXIOM VI: THE LIMIT OF THE MATHEMATICAL SUBLIME

The Fallacy of Conceptual Mastery

In the Kantian tradition [1790], the Mathematical Sublime occurs when the mind encounters a magnitude that exceeds the capacity of the imagination.

- **The Limitation:** The Kantian model is fundamentally an act of defensive narcissism, using the "Infinite" as a tool to reaffirm the ego.
- **The Reclamation:** Material Immanence denies this recovery. By presenting a Granular Infinite—a density of reticulation so profound that it persists at every scale—we prevent the mind from "scaling up" to a safe concept. The "Mathematical Shield" of Reason is not a victory here; it is a collapse. We do not master the magnitude; we are subsumed by its informational weight.

AXIOM VII: THE LIMIT OF THE DYNAMIC SUBLIME

Beyond the Position of Safety

The Dynamic Sublime is traditionally the experience of overwhelming force witnessed from a position of safety.

- **The Limitation:** This model relies on Dualism—a "here" (the safe observer) and a "there" (the active force).
- **The Reclamation:** Following Karen Barad, we dissolve the precipice of safety. Through the Mirror Neuron System, the viewer does not "observe" the strike; they internally undergo it. There is no safe distance. The viewer is caught in a Kinesthetic Intra-action where the original somatic energy of the painter's strike is re-activated within the viewer's own nervous system.

AXIOM VIII: THE TRAUMATIC SUBLIME

The Alchemical Wound and Kuspitian "Shattering"

While contemporary discourse often views "shattering" as a pathology, Material Immanence—guided by the critical psychology of Donald Kuspit [1986]—frames it as the Alchemical Wound. This shattering is the Erotic "breaking" of the ego-shield.

- **The Shattered Gestalt as Psychic Liberation:** Kuspit argues that the power of the abstract surface lies in its ability to "shatter the object-representation." This is an Erotic liberation from the "Mathematical Shield" of domestic naming.
- **The "Unmasterable" as Aesthetic Care:** Kuspit identifies the "unmasterable" quality of the surface as a therapeutic necessity. This trauma is the "difficult grace" of the lover—the moment where the ego is sacrificed to make room for the "Shimmering Real." We do not seek to heal the fracture; we seek to inhabit it.

The "Traumatic Sublime" is transfigured from a state of victimhood into a state of Active Vulnerability, where the "shattered" surface acts as a "therapeutic skin."

PART IV: THE NEURO-AESTHETICS OF DISRUPTION

The Predictive Brain and the Anaesthesia of Consensus Reality

AXIOM IX: THE PREDICTIVE BRAIN AND THE MATHEMATICAL SHIELD

The Evolutionary Trap of Habituation

Contemporary neuro-aesthetics, specifically through the framework of Predictive Coding [Clark, 2013], reveals that the human brain is fundamentally a "prediction engine." The brain does not passively take in the world. As neuroscientist Anil Seth [2021] argues, normal waking consciousness is actually a "controlled hallucination"—the brain generates an internal predictive model of reality and projects it outward, overlaying the raw quantum field with expected geometric shapes and categories to conserve biological energy.

- **The Domesticated Perception:** This predictive system is the biological source of the "Mathematical Shield." It flattens the vibrational, quantum reality of the *Lebenswelt* into a safe, static, and agreed-upon structure: **Consensus Reality**.
- **Perceptual Anaesthesia:** While necessary for survival, this Consensus Reality is the enemy of Awe. It creates a state of perceptual anaesthesia where we no longer see the vibrating material world, but merely the collective, conceptual hallucination we have assigned to it.

AXIOM X: VISUAL DENSITY AS NEUROLOGICAL DISRUPTION

Overloading the Top-Down Processor

To reach the state of "original awe" described by George Moore [2024], the painter must actively sabotage the brain's predictive systems. The reticulated, infinitely dense surface of the canvas serves this precise neurological function.

- **Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up:** The extreme informational density of the "Shimmer" refuses to conform to the brain's pre-packaged predictions. This mismatch forces the nervous system to abandon its energy-saving "top-down" conceptual processing and switch to "bottom-up" sensory absorption.

- **The Neuro-Somatic Switch:** This is the biological reality of Aesthetic Arrest. The intellect is forcibly suspended, the illusion of Consensus Reality is dissolved, and the raw, unmediated data of the material world floods the visual cortex. We transition from "thinking" the object as a collection of manipulable parts to "sensing" the undifferentiated field in which we are inextricably embedded.

AXIOM XI: THE BRILLIANT DARKNESS (*ALETHEIA*)

The Un-Concealing of the Numinous

When the Mathematical Shield is broken and Consensus Reality collapses, we do not fall into chaos; we enter the space of "Brilliant Darkness." Borrowing from Heidegger [1927], this is the event of *Aletheia*—the un-concealing of truth.

- **The Dark Brilliance:** It is "Dark" because it defies the illuminating logic of the intellect; it cannot be known, named, or measured. It is "Brilliant" because it radiates with the luminous, erotic energy of the quantum field.
- **The Final Transmutation:** In this state, the studio has fulfilled its ultimate function. The canvas is no longer a representational object, and the viewer is no longer a separate subject. Both have dissolved into the underlying vibrational octave of reality. The practice of painting is revealed as a lifelong devotional act: the rigorous, somatic stripping away of the ego so that the numinous may finally step forward.

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