

## Notes on Abstraction

*Whoever thinks, offers resistance. – Adorno<sup>1</sup>*

Abstraction has been described as the most universal form of communication. It has also been called irrelevant. In times like these of political, cultural, environmental, and economic crisis, I often ask myself if painting abstract pictures has a place. Is it still a useful way of communicating or do we need narratives, manifestos, interventions, and action? In this moment of speed and oversaturation can we afford slow, investigative practices?

Recently, I read in Stuart Jeffries' book, *Grand Hotel Abyss*, that The Frankfurt School, formed in 1923 to counteract fascism through cultural research and critique, was later denounced for being too abstract, for dealing too much in theory and not enough in practice, for thinking rather than acting.

These paintings in my studio are the most strange and tentative works that I've done, yet they are coming closer to something accurate. And this uncanny accuracy seems important. I think about beauty, but all I want is the struggle and some kind of reckoning with it. That is the roughness I'm looking for. But I also want a tentative touch, and it is almost impossible because I constantly jump ahead or fall behind it.

I don't recognize this work. Each day I dig myself deeper into that fact. The peculiar roughness is somehow accurate. It isn't about expression or angst exactly. It is more quiet than that, maybe more controlled, and definitely more awkward. Also more bare.

*One is tempted to say: once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him en route as in a dream. – Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup>*

They are sick, insecure, fake. They are all line. They are not enough in their timidity, utterly lost and muddled. But it isn't angst or anger that will lead out of this, and it isn't thinking. It is listening. This is the stage where content is planted.

And then, suddenly, I finish a small painting and it seems that three months of empty frustration caused me to land on this quirky and true thing.

There is a fine line between a painting that will fail utterly and one that will fail on its way to being something.

*We cannot even imagine how to be humble. Agnes Martin<sup>3</sup>*

Sometimes you just need to do nothing because the alternative is to go in circles. This was said at an all day sit today in reference to samsara and nirvana but it applies to painting. I keep trying to fix things and that is not working. It takes discipline to wait and to get out of the way. To make just one small mark and stop there instead of trying to resolve.

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno quoted in *Grand Hotel Abyss* by Stuart Jeffries, pg. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, pg. 566, Letter to Gerhard Scholem, June 12, 1938.

<sup>3</sup> Agnes Martin: Writings Schriften, pg. 17.