

Metafora Studio Arts

Signs, Symbols, and Psychic Automatism:
An Analysis of My Practice

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Taking point from Surrealists, and specifically, directly from André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism*, I employ psychic automatism throughout my practice. Psychic automatism, per Breton, is defined as a way "by which one proposes to express verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (Wood and Harrison 438). However, in my practice, the key is an ebb and flow between being in the meditative state of automatism, and being lucid and reacting through decision making in the work. One thing leads to another, and inevitably, back again¹.

Beginning with a blank surface² I scrawl any and all thoughts coming to mind³. Scrawl is a key word in this context, as the writing is almost always illegible, even to me immediately after writing it. In line with the thinking of Vilém Flusser, the tasks that are normally served by linear texts are now being served by visual information, in the form of illegible writing (Flusser 5). This language turned into form and gesture provides a base to begin working both visually and contextually. Visually, it provides a base layer, some form to loosely follow, and serves to break up the blank space, though it is often painted over and built on top of. Contextually, it provides a subject matter to work with, and becomes the backstory of the piece. This subject matter is often

¹ It's funny how in this zoned out, meditative state, things appear. And then I snap out of it, maybe take a sip of my coffee or stand up and stretch, and there they are. These moments lead to other moments in the work that are sharing something, and guiding me to the next action. Very cyclical.

² I think it's unfair to use the word canvas. Firstly, it has too many art historical connotations and expectations that I'd like to avoid. I also tend to just collect surface materials from the trash and life around me in general that can be a starting point to create. Why not paint on that shelf? It kinda reminds me of religious art that was painted on wood panels, but now and within this throwaway culture we have. Or that old refrigerator door I saw walking through Eixample a few weeks back? I really should've grabbed that thing and figured it out later.

³ Stream of thought, innermost thoughts, song lyrics, rants, unintelligible ramblings basically. Stuff I want to say but don't want anyone to hear. And thank god honestly that once it's there it's impossible for me to even read. I just want to be done with whatever it is. Unfortunately sometimes, the work just holds that secret or emotion or whatever you want to call it, and while I can't read what I wrote, I know the feeling. I know what the piece is about. And sometimes it makes me really dislike my work. I don't want to use the word hate, because it's so strong, but maybe I should because hate implies some investment or love that may have been there before, whereas indifference is maybe what we think hate actually is.

rooted in the mind, and is based in emotion and thought, rather than direct visual depictions, though those do come into play more often in my work recently.⁴ This concept is directly related to what Georges Perec discusses in his book, *A Species of Spaces*. He says:

⁴ I think that right now my work is more based in the actual visual depiction of things than it's ever been. I just got super tired of painting my "emotional landscape" and being perpetually sad or emotional or whatever it was that I needed to be to paint. Now, honestly, the paintings are just fun. The names are kinda funny, the hands are wonky, the shapes are weird. The paintings are like inside jokes. Probably though just like inside jokes, they're only funny to those in on it.

"I write: I trace words on a page,
 Letter by letter, a text forms, affirms itself, is confirmed, is frozen,
 Is fixed:

a fairly strictly h

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line is set down on the blank sheet of
 paper, blackens the virgin space, gives it a direction, vectorizes it:

from left

f

to right

r

o

m

t

o

p

t

o

b

o

t

t

o

m

Before, there was nothing, or almost nothing; afterwards, there isn't much, a few signs, but
 which are enough for there to be a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, a right and a left,
 a recto and a verso" (Perec 10-11).

Upon first reading this passage, I was immediately aware of how relevant it was to my practice; writing as a way to fill space and find a sense of direction and orientation within a work⁵. Through this, the spark for my practice can be, and has been, everything. Moments I share with others, conversations, feelings, thoughts, private, personal experiences, and dreams. I am able to reduce these experiences through psychic automatism, to the minimum of bodily movement, line, color, and shape, and I begin to analyze them in that reduced state.

You can see these themes present across many of my works. Looking at *Neither Here nor There (Cuidado)* (figure 1), you can easily see the layering of illegible text, and where it becomes about gesture and mark-making rather than writing. Similarly, in *2 Weeks, 1 Day, 1 Week* (figure 2), the automatic illegible writing is present down the left side, but again, serves a visual purpose, rather than a literary one⁶. Though the written language in my pieces is often illegible, where legible, it is identifiable as words in French, English, and Spanish, even if the viewer in question doesn't speak one of those languages. For those that are able to understand what legible text there is, there will be an intrinsic connotation or reaction to the word or phrase that is visible, like what is shown in figure 3, and later again in figure 18. This works as a guide for the interpretation of the work by the audience. Mostly though, the writing is intended to serve as a whispered thought, translated into something less literal, that is the abstraction of experience.

⁵ Really this entire book is so interesting and has so much impact on me as an artist. Thinking about space and how to describe it, nothingness, uselessness and if that's even possible, it's crazy to read. I could really cite the entire book or multiple passages at least, but then I'd probably just wind up having copied down half of the book here. It's funny because even these rambling footnotes are influenced maybe in some way by him and how he wrote this book. Maybe I could just list the pages I find most impactful so then I won't feel like I'm leaving so much out. Pages: 9-13, 15, 18-19, 24-25, 28-34, 37-39, 50, 55, 63, 70, 77-78, 80, 83-85, 89-92. Considering that *A Species of Spaces* is 96 pages, that's nearly the whole book.

⁶ Visually for ages I was super influenced by Cy Twombly and his gestural drawing within his work. I think for sure this influence is still present, but is becoming part of the theoretical background and thought process rather than the visual part of the work, and the pieces are becoming more unique and my own.



Figure 1: Neither Here nor There (Cuidado), 2020
House paint, acrylic, pencil, pastel, charcoal, marker, and tape on canvas
Two Panels, 73x60 61x50
Photo by Author

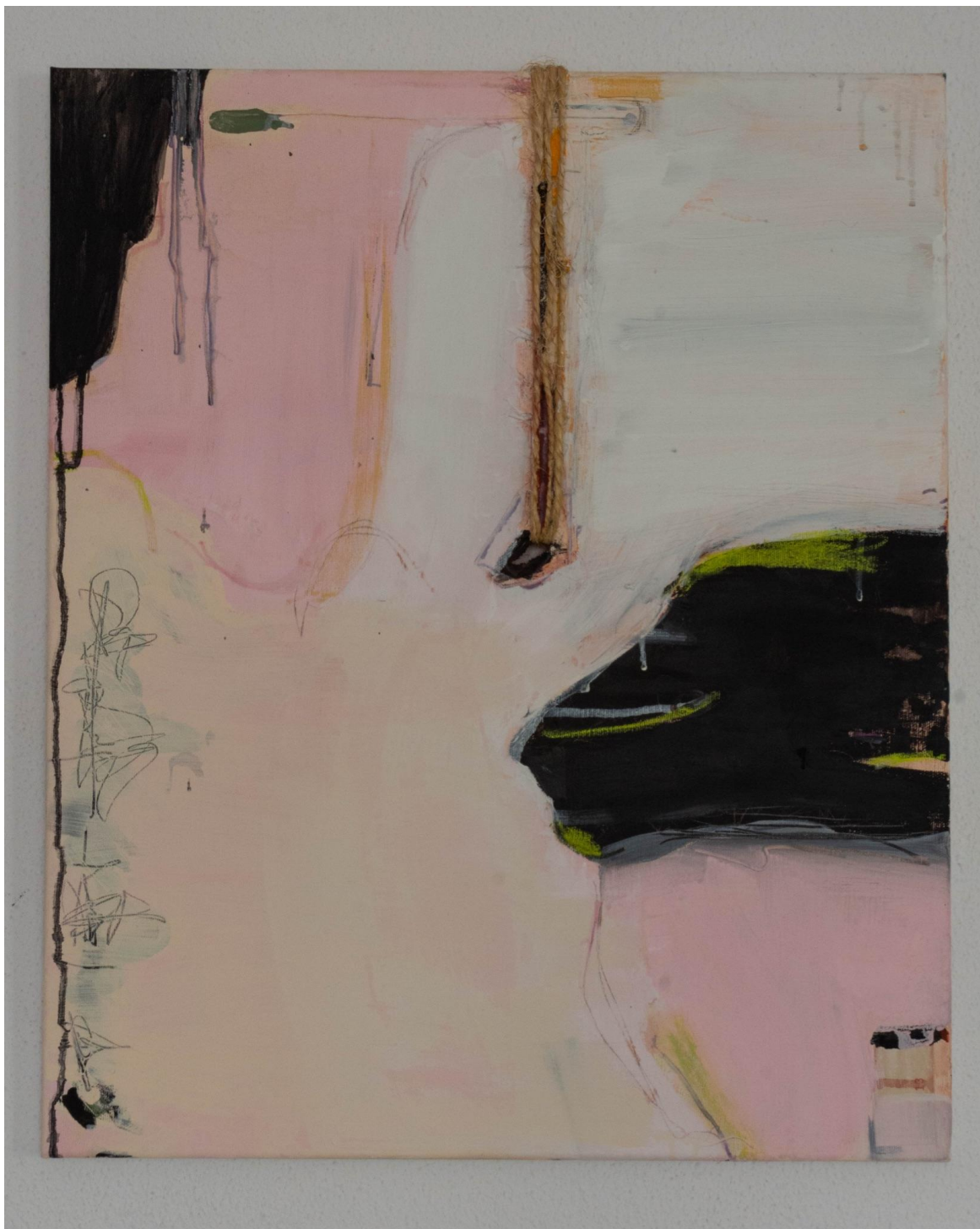


Figure 2: 2 Weeks, 1 Day, 1 Week, 2021
House paint, acrylic, pastel, pencil, paper, needle, thread and rope on canvas
61x50cm
Photo by Author



Figure 3: Neither Here nor There (cuidado), 2020
House paint, acrylic, pencil, pastel, charcoal, marker, and tape on canvas
Detail of left panel, 73x60
Photo by Author

The signs I employ are often pushed to an extreme interpretation, a point of complete abstraction and absurdity, or queerness⁷. For instance, a common theme in my work is the use of braille. Through psychic automatism, a phrase or a word will appear, and I will translate it into braille, and then stitch it into the paper or canvas that I am working on, as seen in figure 4. Conversely, I will sometimes make the braille two-dimensional on the work with paint or other mark making materials. Both of these applications of braille are absurd. On the one hand, the stitched braille is (technically) legible; however due to the context that the braille is in, it is impossible to read (as it is considered inappropriate to reach out and touch an artwork, unless otherwise instructed). Similarly, the two-dimensional braille is illegible within the context of braille as a whole and the method with which it is normally read (with the fingertips). While in both cases the braille, and the symbols that form it and make it language are still there, and they still hold direct meaning, they too become little to nothing more than a gesture or an intervention into the work. Over time, the direct meaning of the braille is also lost to me, the artist, for similar reasons that the observer fails to decipher it in the first place. In this way, I am able to speak directly in my works, and still maintain subtlety.

⁷ These days, I'm really thinking about queerness in everyday situations, further than being an identity, and taking it as a philosophy. I'm thinking about queering situations like Adriadna discussed in class, and how that can be about challenging beliefs and norms. Or in the research I did about queer bible hermeneutics and it talked about how mysticism and everyday changes are queerness because they don't follow normative binaries. So yeah to me stitching braille into a canvas and breaking the rules of the language so that you can't touch it to read is super queer. Which also makes me think about queering languages in general. Spanish for instance has a structure based on gender and were challenging that structure and breaking the rules of it by making new words like *elle* and *amigues*. Which is circling me back to Adriadna's class and later reading the *Left Hand of Darkness* and just falling into this world where gender is flexible and the world is foundationally queer.

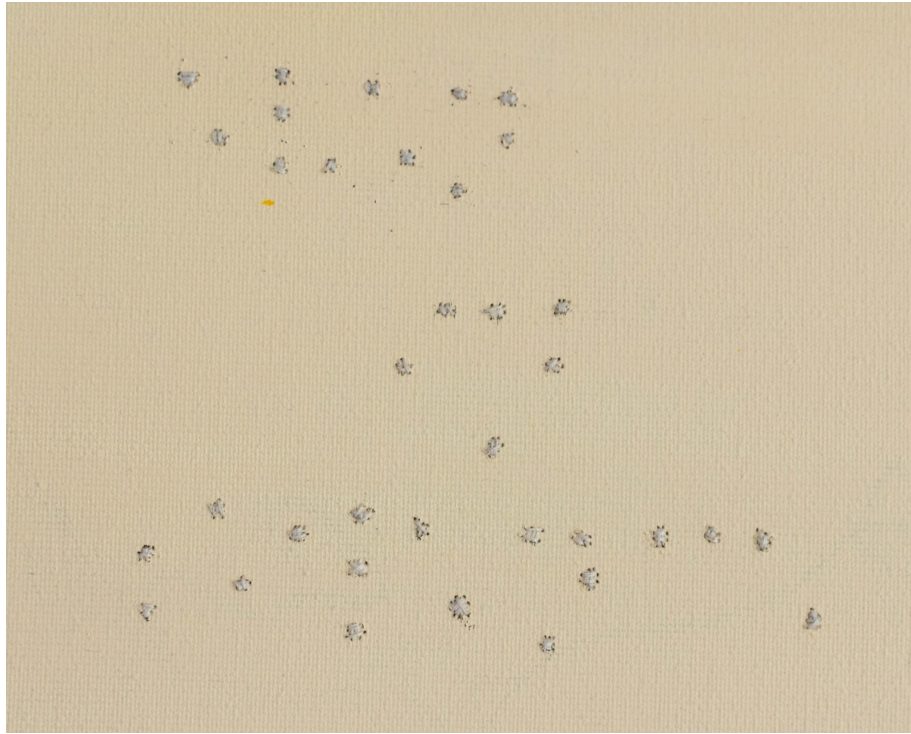


Figure 4: Untitled (Even In), 2020
Mixed Media on canvas
Detail, 89x116cm
Photo by Author

Moving forward with the use of psychic automatism, written language, and signs as a starting point for my practice, I begin to employ the same technique, but with color and shape to further translate my experience. In most cases, the colors used are chosen to further explain the feeling or experience I am depicting, rather than being descriptive of reality. In some cases the colors used are directly related to a memory or vision I have. To the viewer, it, like the language used, is nothing more than an intervention and visual aid for them to move through the work and towards their own understanding and connection to the piece. The shapes in question are similar, mostly coming through the meditative state of psychic automatism. However, as mentioned previously, there are moments where lucid decisions are made that allow the work to become cohesive and whole. While these shapes and decisions are directly related to what is happening in my subconscious, there is often little cognitive control of them (Figure 5). In the

Manifesto of Surrealism, Breton describes it best, saying: "...With a pencil and white sheet of paper to hand, I could easily trace their outlines. Here again it is not a matter of drawing, but *simply of tracing*⁸. I could thus depict a tree, a wave, a musical instrument, all manner of things of which I am presently incapable of providing even the roughest sketch. I would plunge into it, convinced that I would find my way again, in a maze of lines which at first glance would seem to be going nowhere. And, upon opening my eyes, I would get the very strong impression of something "never seen" ("Andre Breton - From the First Manifesto of Surrealism" 4) It is through this method, I have realized, that my strongest work has been made, and when I stray from it, there is an undeniable struggle between me and the materials. Closely related to this feeling, is what Robert Motherwell discusses in the documentary: *Robert Motherwell & the New York School: Storming the Citadel*. He says "I will often start a picture with automatic drawing, with marks and then already the ice is broken. The instant you make two marks, then they cry out for a third, and then when you have a triad, it may cry out for four more, but each element that you already have changes as you add to it. One can have a really superb work nine-tenths completed and then one does one little element and the whole thing suddenly is off again" (Tatge) This again calls to that ebb and flow between meditation and lucidity that is so crucial to my work.

⁸ This concept of tracing is so interesting. It's mentioned also by Perec and I think it's such a strong word and concept for this. Tracing words, memories, histories, lineage, the outline of someone's body with my fingertips, lines on a map. So relevant.



Figure 5: Untitled (Even In), 2020
Mixed media on Canvas
89x116cm
Photo by Author

While my practice has always been about the internal moving to the external, it is not a vacuum of the self. Throughout my work I employ various signs and symbols that could be considered somewhat universal, or recognizable. These signs and symbols are somewhat interpretable within the context of religion, music, language, currency, queer theory, art history, and more⁹. For example, my current work depicts hands in various positions, as seen in Figure 6. These hands were painted in reference to how they felt, and as an exaggeration to what they really looked like. The positions range from observatory to playful. The position of the second hand from the left (figure 7), is in reference to Christian iconography and Christ Pantocrator, where Christ and others are often seen making the spelling gesture (ICXC) of his name, or the gesture for “speaker” (figure 8). However, within the context of my work, it is also pulling in

⁹ It's only fair to leave this comment open ended as I am still creating work, still finding references and inspiration.

meaning from the queer community as a sexual gesture (figures 9 & 10)¹⁰. This positioning of the hand can be seen in some of my other work as well (Figure 11), and carries the same meaning. The flat palms seen in iconographic works are also present (figures 6, 11 & 12), usually representing trust and the absence of evil, or showing the stigmata. In my work, it takes on more of an observational position¹¹, more closely related to that of the stigmata*¹²(figure 13). Looking further, I am also referencing and being playful with other gestures related to queer life, that are specific to the community as well as to subsets within the community, that are used to pass a message (figures 14 & 15)¹³. The use of scratching back into the paint allows me to demarcate areas of interest, add definition and details, and to create depth and texture in a subtle way that is also in line with the other elements present in the works.

¹⁰ This is my favorite part of my work is my favorite right now because it's so funny to me. Bringing together two things that in my experience don't go together at all, and there they are. My family would hate it, but that's probably why I enjoy it so much.

¹¹ Since developing eczema on my hands, I find myself looking at them in this position often, as a way to observe how well they are doing. I really don't know what causes it. It might be nuts, might be some stuff in soap, who knows. I go about my life and check back in with my hands by looking at them in this position often to see what has an impact on them. Also very related to anxiety and worrying about how they look to an outside viewer. Are they gross? Do they think I'm sick? It's not contagious, it's just eczema.

* Stigmata: In Christian mysticism, bodily marks, scars, or pains corresponding to those of the crucified Jesus Christ—that is, on the hands, on the feet, near the heart, and sometimes on the head (from the crown of thorns) or shoulders and back (from carrying the cross and scourging). Thanks merriam webster for that definition.

¹² I feel like my hands look just like those paintings sometimes. Disgusting. Huge and deformed like gloves. Cracked, bumpy, peeling, bloody, oozing, misshapen, grotesque, wounded. And I'm talking about the paintings I did. Not the religious ones. I'm not comparing myself to Jesus or something, maybe just making a parallel about wounds and hands. Thinking about things at the same time is all.

¹³ We get it, you're gay.



Figure 6: Homage to My Hands, 2021
House paint on canvas
5 paintings, 41x33cm
Photo by Author



Figure 7: Detail of Homage to My Hands
Photo taken by Author



Figure 8: Religious artwork reference
Photo taken from web



Figure 9: Queer sex reference
Photo taken from Instagram

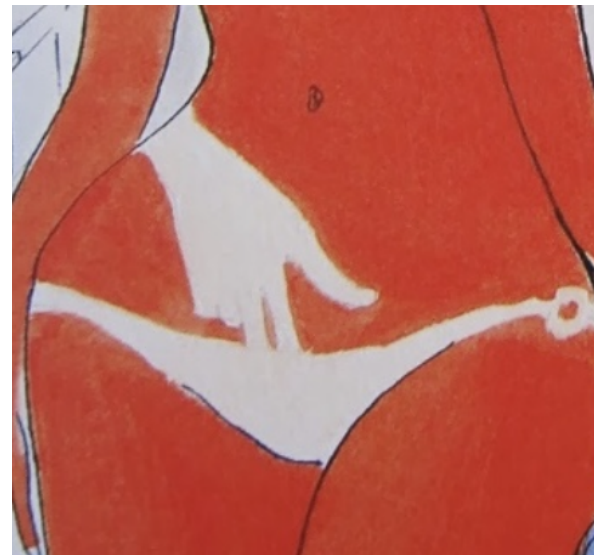


Figure 10: Queer sex reference
Photo taken from Tumblr



Figure 11: Can you take your rings off?, 2022
House paint and thread on canvas
89x130cm
Photo by Yvon Groot



Figure 12: Homage to My Hands, detail
Photo taken by Author



Figure 13: Religious artwork reference
Photo taken from Web



Figure 14: Sketch
Photo by Author



Hand Gesture for Lesbian
K9keystrokes

Figure 15: Cultural hand gesture for Lesbian
Photo taken from Web

All of these expressions are rooted in basic semiotics¹⁴. The signifier being illegible text, braille, hand positions, colors and shapes. While the signified is something less obvious, as it is more personal. Motherwell very concisely explained my goal when he said "I have tried to make a language that is not a meaningless symbol, a pretend language, but which at the same time cannot be as specific as a symbol for, say, a hurricane, or a house, or whatever... Sometimes I think it is all subjective, in the sense of intensity...but it is so real to me that it feels "real"...It depends on the inner sensory discriminations and life of whoever is looking" (Colin). For me, the artist, to attempt to decode the work and thus dictate what the audience should see and feel, would be the undoing of the paintings and my practice as a whole. Through painting, my experience has been reduced to color and shape. If I were to try to again redefine it in language, not only would the work lose its essence, but the viewer would be robbed of an experience. The experience of cultivating their own key of signifier and signified that is guided by their own understanding of and experiences with life. I believe that the works I make can be, and should be understood as they are, rather than as what they represent¹⁵, and that this is possible through observing the elements present, and through the context provided in the title. The naming of the work is just as important as the creation of the work in my practice, as it is one of the strongest pushes in terms of direction that you can give the viewer, because for a moment I am doing the opposite of painting, and I am translating something that is visual, back into a literal framework.

¹⁴ There's this meme that I completely cannot get out of my head about semiotics and it's so funny and spot on and anytime someone asks about my thesis I show them that. I don't really know where is best to put it but whatever, maybe I'll throw it on the last page to be fun (figure 19).

¹⁵ This whole section is really referring to the semiotics paper I wrote where I basically said in a lot of words no thanks. I'm not going to explain my work and here is why. I could basically rewrite that entire paper here in the middle of this one but just like with Perec's book, why do that. So again I'll just do my best so that I can feel like I'm doing my thought process justice and not leaving too much out. Look at Barthe's Image-Music-Text, and that about sums it up. There needs to be some burden on the viewer to put some work in, otherwise it's turning into this narcissistic vortex of the artist talking back and forth with themselves. Closed loop. This is really not the point of art.

The materials I work on and with are also a very important part of my practice. Most of my materials have been found, or given to me secondhand, and in turn have imperfections and histories from their lives before me. Some of the found objects I have used as foundations for my work include stained cotton paper, used transparency film (figure 16), books, photographs, pieces of furniture (figure 17), and car doors (figure 18). This theme has been present in my work since I began creating, and is still fundamental to my practice. Similarly, many of the materials I draw and paint with are those of my late grandmother, or have been found on the street. Though I do paint on canvas, it is not necessarily my preferred base, and it is often sourced for free as well. This sourcing of materials further allows me to move freely within the realm of psychic automatism and free association by opening doors of possibilities, and in some cases, challenging and even removing boundaries held by traditional painting¹⁶. Further, in response to using non-traditional materials as surfaces, the way I work also adapts and changes. For example, writing on a wood panel might not provide the results that I want, but scratching into the paint can. Or using a base that is not a blank canvas, can retract the need for automatic writing to be the foundation of the work. In each case, there are different possibilities and guidelines created by the combination of materials used, and the work and I are, in turn, somewhat at their mercy, both during creation and presentation¹⁷.

¹⁶ Maybe there are no more boundaries when it comes to painting. For a long time now, a painting can be a lot of things. I think even the rugs I am experimenting with I will consider paintings. So maybe it's pretentious to say that, but I mean it in regards to my own practice. It takes some of the pressure off of what something "should" look like, and adds possibility to everything, even to the way it will be presented.

¹⁷ This is bringing me back to the boundaries of traditional painting. Paintings are meant to be hung on a wall within that context. But painting on a car door or on floor tiles or glass bits of a window allows so many other possibilities than on the wall, or on the floor if you are feeling edgy.



Figure 16: Journal #1, 2014
Acrylic paint and transparency paper on stained cotton paper
Photo by Author



Figure 17: Figure 1, 2022
House paint on found wood panel
51x73.5
Photo by Yvon Groot



Figure 18: Qui suis-je, 2015
Acrylic Paint, marker, and transparency film on car door
Photo by Author

In conclusion, no one part of my work is more or less important than the other. My personal semiotics are layered endlessly within the work, at some points visible and traceable, while in others wholly obscured and obfuscated. There is a perpetual give and take between myself and the materials, myself and the viewer, and between the viewer and the work. This is what makes the work whole; the constant conversation and interpretation of the signs and symbols that are forever changing in relation to the world around me and via the experiences and lenses I view them through. Automatism, text, theory, colors, shapes, lines, gestures, mark-making, stitching, and language; it all has its place within the work and within my practice. With this philosophy, the decoding of my personal semiotics, and as a result, this paper, can be viewed as an art piece, as it has many of the same elements¹⁸. Something of an attempt to recreate the experience of creating a painting, or the events that led up to the painting. The markings in my work mean both everything and nothing. They are the internal brought to the external, they are questions and answers, they hold my secrets but still beg for yours. Holding space for others to place their own signifier and signified within, just as I have.

¹⁸ The ebb and flow, the rambling automatism, some thoughts that probably don't belong there but there they are anyways and who knows, maybe they'll still be glossed over and missed even in their directness and out-of-placeness that makes them so glaring and obvious.

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