

**What Light Reveals: Strangers and Strangeness**

Zoë LeBlanc de Smith

Metafora Studio Arts

Michael Lawton

Mercedes Mangrané

Rubén Verdú

### **What Light Reveals: Strangers and Strangeness**

In this thesis paper, I focus on the concepts that connect all of my recent works together as well as detailing the processes that led to creating them. The physical work on which this thesis is written primarily consists of oil paintings, whose subjects stem from an interest in the human figure and light and color as it appears under artificial lighting at night. In the most recent iteration, I presented the work as an installation using ready-made objects and non-traditional painting surfaces to loosely reconstruct the essence of the original events depicted. Source images for this specific project come from two celebratory gatherings held in my home state of Michigan in the northern United States. I captured images from these high-summer celebrations of close friends, the delightfully decorated corners of the party and the activities throughout the night. Once the paintings began to accumulate into a larger body of work, the concepts revealed themselves. By analyzing the works and their source imagery together, I was able to coax out a common thread from each work to formulate into a cohesive narrative. Discussion and reflection on the paintings with peers and teachers as well as research on related and not so related subjects helped deepen the conversation. The paintings I create now are derived from these concepts, and although they have come about after the conceptual legwork, they continue to fit in seamlessly among the other pieces. The new works propose fresh ideas, too, which in turn help to broaden how I view the previous paintings. In the following pages, I will describe which aspects of the party scenes initially provoked my interest to photograph them, always with the intention of turning those images into painting. I will then delve into the conceptual peculiarities born from those images. With the concepts clearly laid out, I will conclude by describing how the culmination of paintings interact with the ready-made objects to produce a fragmented reconstruction of the source scenes resulting in the installation: *Strangers and Strangeness*. Painters who have inspired my work and have been referenced in this paper include Clare

Woods, Wilhelm Sasnal, and Théodore Géricault. Other figures who have influenced the concepts in this thesis include art historian and author Victor Stoichita, film director Gaspar Noé, French philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty, and photographer Jeff Wall.

## Origins

*Strangers and Strangeness* is a project whose humble beginnings lie in painting from image. My practice has expanded from painting on canvas to include non-traditional painting surfaces juxtaposed alongside ready-made party decor. The paintings installed with the decorative holographic fringe curtains place the viewer in a cross section of the original affair. What initially appeared to be an innocuous divertissement shared among familiars is hinting at a more menacing reality. The curtain squeezes the spectators and the painting subjects into the same claustrophobic space. Portraits on reflective foil peer vacantly at the viewer, the two larger opposing works detailing a foreboding scenery and ambiguous movements in the dark. The process of reconstructing starts with a loose form of staging of the event, documenting it with mobile phone photography, and then painting from the images, providing fragments that combine to give a fuller re-experience for the viewer. The first step in the artistic practice I've developed over the last year started by placing myself within a specific context, making abundant the subjects I love to paint: figures, uncanny scenes and intense colors. I find these subjects most ubiquitously at house parties where the conditions are already set out before me. People are engaging in various activities providing ample expressions and gestures for painting. The party lights illuminate each guest and reflect neon colors and contrasting shadows. Small corners of the party, now void of any lifeforms, are left only with empty chairs and empty cups, leaving an uneasy scene behind them. I set out into these situations with my camera in hand, attending the gathering as a participant but also a voyeur, capturing the moments of this

occasion I find intriguing in order to draw from later on. In a sense, the process is a collaboration between me, the host, and the attendees. Their contribution of creating and participating in the scenes is integral to the outcome of my paintings. This collaboration is the preliminary staging for my work. Searching for compositional sweet spots, the edge of the forest sets the backdrop and the fire pit provides the stage lighting, the actors in place in their lawn chairs and picnic tables. The host sets up the atmosphere with lights, chairs, and music and the attendees provide themselves as the models. I traverse the party, moving and conversing from person to person, capturing images of them and the surroundings. By choosing to photograph my subjects under these conditions, I am planning my paintings ahead of time, later to be translated from image to painting. The common thread found throughout these images initiated the following conceptual narratives that now underscore this body of work. They are based on the effects of the unnatural illuminations of festivities after dark.

### **The Phenomenon of Light**

What does the light show us? Are all light sources created equally? Does a change in lighting indicate a change in reality? The subjects of my latest paintings are objects and beings that I've found to reveal themselves in an uncanny manner, illuminated by artificial light in darkness, in which a secondary world comes to the fore, one that is timeless and disconcerting and altogether different from our diurnal world. I wasn't certain of what originally drew me to the scenes of the source images of my paintings, however the following concepts may point to their alluring nature. Two concepts have fascinated me and driven me to the fluid conclusion that our perception and experience of reality shifts in intriguing ways when the lighting of our environment changes. The first concept being that the perception of color changes under different sources of light. The second concept indicates that the movement of shadow is a way



to visually perceive the passing of time, and therefore its absence indicates a halting, a timeless chasm between dusk and dawn.

Sunlight's all encompassing glow permeates our surroundings, its presence immerses us in baths of amber and its absence drapes us in blankets of louring darkness. The first concept is a phenomenon that occurs in the retinas of our eyes. After daylight fades and what we usually perceive as a colorful world loses its chroma, dialed back to a palette of varying greys. This happens because the cone photoreceptors in our eyes are only able to communicate color in well-lit circumstances. Meanwhile, the rods take over to provide a black and white view of a dimly lit world. Color seeps out of our field of vision and we are left with an altered appearance of our surroundings. Things are not how they appear in the brightness of day each moment disappearing slightly more without some other illumination to visually sense them. In this absence, replaced with artificial light, a doppelgänger emerges to take the place of the quotidian object. My painting subjects appear under this light. My subjects are the doppelgänger that appears. The familiar object becomes foreign, allowing itself to be observed with new, objective eyes. The unfamiliarity allows us to see it for what it is without preconceived notion, or rather how it chooses to reveal itself to us in that light. With darkness tinging the edges of vision, illumination, whether by firelight or neon light, whatever we are able to perceive here has a touch of oddness that entices deeper contemplation. The voyeur in me comes forward, searching for the proper angles of composition and striking moments of strangeness and satisfaction. Colored bulbs light up the faces of party guests. Anatomical features reflect unnaturally vivid hues rather than the expected flesh tones. This motivates me to wonder whether it is the same realm of existence we're seeing or if this certain slant of light exposes a parallel existence, always hiding just below a delicately veiled surface. Exploring this possibility

through painting brings the unlikely hypothesis to life, arriving at a haunting and uncanny simulacrum to be experienced.

### **The Static Shadow**

*"It is shadow that gives painting its lustre."*

-Nicolas Boileau, Satire IX (Stoichiță 91)

Light and shadow are interdependent in the visual construction of the physical world, and indispensable in effective figurative painting. Light is what makes shadow appear, but without shadow there is no contrast to convey the light. Objects appear to us only if light is shown on them, and at night that source has a limited scope. The second phenomenon I wish to discuss is that of the cyclical movement of shadow as an indication of time passing. The presence of sunlight acting upon the objects around us shows its passage, where still objects stand as monolithic clock hands below the sun. In the crepuscular darkness, we depend on a false light source to reveal objects. The fixed glow of that source freezes everything in its radius, including the silhouettes it doesn't touch. With no hint of movement, time's constant march forward is visually indiscernible. Similarly asserted by Victor Stoichita in *A Short History of the Shadow*, "a shadow in sunlight denotes a moment in time and no more than that, but a nocturnal shadow is removed from the natural order of time, it halts the flow of progress" (Stoichiță 20).

Frozen in the darkness and illuminated by artifice, uncanny versions of all that surrounds us appear while the sensation of stopped time produces uneasiness. Surfaces are lit by fire or fluorescent light but provide a limited view of things as their intensity is nowhere near the magnitude of the sun. Distinct sources produce variable outcomes; firelight causing a flickering warmth and producing projections that dance wildly, fluorescents producing an unnerving, static

light. Everything it illuminates sits statically and sterilely. Time was invented by the cosmos but we are released from its grasp once a day, perhaps we sleep to deal with its absence.

It is these two phenomena that contextualize each individual work in *Strangers and Strangeness*.

### **Strangers and Strangeness**

The installation *Strangers and Strangeness* exhibited at Mutuo Centro (2021) and Espai 2 (2022) both in Barcelona, Spain, encapsulates the uncanniness and stillness outlined in the previous paragraphs. The artificial light is doubly represented in the foil portraits and echoed as well in the fringe curtain. The lustre and contrasting shadows of the larger paintings illustrate the still illumination of the artificial source frozen in time. The way I reconstruct the event is similar to the methodology of photographer Jeff Wall. He describes his workstyle in the following quotation from an interview with DB Magazine:

“I didn’t want to miss out on life, and so I involve this notion like a cinematographer, and I reconstruct. And the reconstruction is both; it’s as faithful to the event as I can make it. I feel I should be free to do things such as change the place, the season, the time of day.”

Like Wall, I document certain moments and adjust them as I like when it comes to applying paint to the surface. Although the paintings may be more abstract, colorized and stylized than the original image, I try to remain true to the essence given by each person, object, or action.

Each painting and ready-made is a fragment of the event. By piecing together these fragments, the viewer gets a replicated and removed version of the experience. Semi-realistic representations of enchanted party objects confront the blurry, layered, and heavy portraits. The duo-toned after-image paintings and the sparkling curtain round out the installation and the

viewer is immersed in a world where in one instance everything is clear and the next what appears before us is blurry and confused whereas a new, obscured reality appears.

By fragmenting the event and applying the different filters as ways of seeing, I can create the “whole” through pieces and explore various methods of paint application. This manifests in three different painting classes: figurative, portraiture, and the duochromatic abstraction.

The opportunity is presented to invent color when the source images come from limited, night vision greys. In this limbo of monochrome, I can invent and apply colors of my choosing. The faces I paint on foil with hyper acid hues, varying thicknesses and shapes resemble familiar features but are not an exactly recognizable representation of the humans depicted. One may also consider the obscuring of our familiar surroundings with the use of intoxicating substances, that perhaps the viewer is seeing their own face in the mirror, unable to recognize in that state of delirium the face looking back at them. The characters that appear out of the darkness are composed of elongated shadows, appearing as if they are melting or morphing into someone else, the likely possibility of intoxication blurring the precise details and delivering the viewer to an alternate reality appearing before them, on a reflective and wrinkled surface, further confusing their vision. These languid portraits are akin to Portraits of the Insane from Géricault of the Romantic period. In an essay on these portraits by Ben Pollit, he writes:

“The paintings were executed with great speed, entirely from life and probably in one sitting. Critics often remark on the painterly quality of the work, the extraordinary fluency of brushwork, in contrast with Géricault’s early more sculptural style, suggesting that the erratic brushwork is used to mirror the disordered thoughts of the patients. In places it is applied in almost translucent layers, while in others it is thicker creating highly expressive contrasts in textures.”

My portraits on foil are painted to reflect the state of consciousness of those depicted, similar to the Portraits of the Insane. The paint is applied haphazardly, often completed in a single session of 30 minutes or less. The reflective surface is flat and thin and the marks used to represent each face are far from precise, yet we are able to construct a face out of the ooze. The bright and highly saturated hues oppose the thick and heavy shades combining to form some semblance of a strung-out face.



*Stranger, 2021, Zoë LeBlanc de Smith*



*Portrait of a Woman*

*Suffering from Obsessive Envy, 1819–20*

*Theodore Gericault*

Film director Gaspar Noé creates anxiety and terror from the combination of hyper color and the gradual development of more and more sketchy events. Circumstances begin to fill with anxiety and foreboding, eventually climaxing in an explosion of horrific events, with brilliantly wild color palettes constructing each scene. In the images below from *Climax* (2018), Noé communicates intense sensations of urgency and uneasiness in edgy, monochromatic stills.



Film stills from *Climax* (2018), Gaspar Noé

*Empty Scene No. 1* brings another piece of the party to the installation. We see an equipped area ready for action, however it remains frozen, uninhabited and abandoned. This still scene establishes a mood that sets the installation on edge. Contemporary painter Clare Woods' work as analyzed by Michael Bracewell echoes the sensations evoked in *Empty Scene No. 1*:

"Clare Woods has also made paintings based on woodland ponds and they have a similar sense of unease or disquiet. Their dark surfaces capture the sky's reflection, hinting at a world unseen beyond the dank recesses of the painting's space.

Sinuous branches and clumps of foliage become ambiguous presences as they are silhouetted against the light or reflected in the water, the instability in their presence and position in space adding to their symbolic potential and the possibility of them being something other than what they seem. If not anthropomorphic themselves, they conjure an atmosphere of threat and anxiety akin to walking in a forest at night."





*Empty Scene No. 1*, 2021, Zoë LeBlanc de Smith



*The Bishops*, 2009, Clare Woods

Below: *Untitled*, 2009 Wilhelm Sasnal

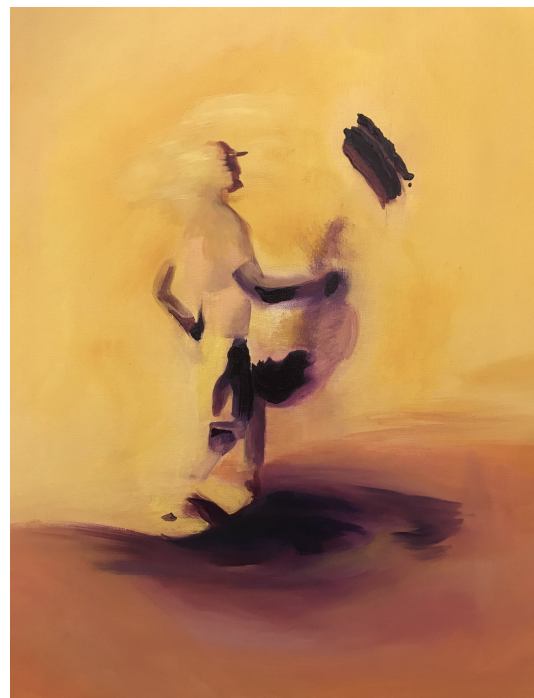
In moments of doubt, I have taken cues from Wilhelm Sasnal's treatment of vast swathes of what I consider "empty" sections on the painting surface. There is a sensation of fullness and calm in these areas which helps to balance the overall aura of the painting. The shift from intense light and color to gentle darkness allows the viewer to experience urgency and peace at the same time.



The visions we see in the dim light of the fire are kindred to the visions on the backs of our eyelids when we sleep. Soft shapes appear out of the panorama of blackness much like watching a dream; only the necessary visual information makes itself seen. In *After Image* 2021, I chose a duo-tone palette and blurry, atmospheric surface treatment to achieve the sensation of a burned image on the retina that appears when the eyes squeeze shut and see only a ghost of what was just there. I want the viewer to feel like they've seen this before, that they were physically there to witness whatever is happening, but now it appears inside their minds, and simultaneously making an appearance before them in the painting, a representation of the memory itself on a flat surface, an illusion composed of color, line and shape.

"Suppose we construct, by the use of optics and geometry, that bit of the world which can at any moment throw its image on our retina. Everything outside its perimeter, since it does not reflect upon any sensitive area, no more affects our vision than does light falling on our closed eyes. We ought, then, to perceive a segment of the world precisely delimited, surrounded by a zone of blackness, packed full of qualities with no interval between them, held together by definite relationships of size similar to those lying on the retina. The fact is that experience offers nothing like this, and we shall never, using the world as our starting-point, understand what a field of vision is."

- Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*



*After Image*, 2021, Zoë LeBlanc de Smith



**Concluding Remarks**

At the present moment, all the pieces come together to form the installation *Strangers and Strangeness*. Here, the viewer is able to experience each fragment as a part of the whole and immerse themselves in the experience of the alternate reality under timeless artificial illumination. Clouded faces mush together on the shining silver surface, objects come to life under an unnatural, fluorescent glow creating an eerie uncertainty, enclosed by the reflective fringed curtain: the threshold that delivers us to a new existence. So we close our eyes tightly to reset what we think we are seeing, only to be presented with an ambiguous afterimage that pulls us deeper into our interior selves searching in that distant memory for the way back to a familiar reality. The viewer is forced to contemplate where they are, if they have been here before, if they are surrounded by strangers or does strangeness displace them into an alternate reality in the depths of their own minds?

## Works Cited

1. Krunak-Hajagos, E. (n.d.). Staged photography. ARTORONTO. Retrieved January 16, 2022, from <https://www.artoronto.ca/?p=180>
2. Merleau-Ponty, M. & Smith, C. (2018). Phenomenology of perception. Franklin Classics.
3. Pollitt, B. (n.d.). Géricault, portraits of the insane (article). Khan Academy. Retrieved January 16, 2022, from <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/romanticism/romanticism-in-france/a/gericault-portraits-of-the-insane>
4. Stephens, C. (n.d.). 'Sombre , magnificent': Clare Woods and the neo -romantic past. Retrieved January 16, 2022, from <http://www.clare-woods.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/%E2%80%98Sombre-Magnificent%E2%80%99-Chris-Stephens.pdf>.
5. Stoichiță Victor Ieronim. (1997). In A Short History of the Shadow (pp. 20, 92). story, Reaktion Books.