

Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable

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Abstract

Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable investigates the aspiration to access an unreachable landscape. This body of work deals with ambition in both process and content, utilizing artists' materials and a visual vocabulary to reference pursuit. In the context of this research, ambition represents endless reaching; the tendency to idealize what is physically and immaterially remote; and the aspiration to close the gap between the near and the far. James Elkins' *What Painting Is* outlines a distinct relationship between the painting practice and the pursuit of an unknown outcome. Artistic waste, such as leftover oil and acrylic scraps, serves as evidence of this process. Additionally, this body of work uses staircases, windows, and the color blue to reference elusive distances. The color blue draws upon the writings of Rebecca Solnit, associating it with the tendency to idealize what is far away. For this reason, various shades of blue are evident throughout *Perpetual Pursuit*. Staircases function as a symbol for endless climbing; they are the means to access elevated spaces. Windows serve as another architectural device: framing the unattainable, they act as visual abbreviations of longing. Influences include contemporary artists who reference abstraction and architecture such as James Turrell, Richard Jacobs, and M.C. Escher. James Hyde's and Robert Rauschenberg's use of unconventional materials as well as their combination of painting and sculpture also informs this series. *Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable* seeks satisfaction in the act of pursuing.

Keywords: Painting, Ambition, Process

1. Description of Research

Perpetual Pursuit intends to visually investigate the relationship between the artistic process and ambition, utilizing the painting process as a means to pursue the unknowable. For the purpose of this research, ambition refers to the desire to access the unattainable despite its impossibility. It is the state of perpetual pursuit; the tendency to idealize that which is distant; the aspiration to close the gap the nearer and the farther. For in actuality, this end goal is not an end at all. Idyllic spaces can never be reached, for as soon as you access them, they are no longer ideal. As these landscapes can never be truly accessed, they only exist as an idea, a pursuit, and a process—like painting.

To characterize perpetual pursuit, this series utilizes a distinctive visual vocabulary: namely, the color blue, two and three-dimensional architectural references – principally, staircases – and repurposed materials from the painting process, deemed artistic waste. In these painting constructions, the blue-space represents ambition's objective: a place where everything has changed for the better; a landscape where the commonplace tragedies of reality cease to exist. The staircases are the means to get there, and the artistic waste visual artifacts accumulated in the process.

1.1 Painting and Pursuit

The painting process and the state of pursuit possess an integral relationship. Put simply, to paint is to pursue. When I paint, I am working towards an unattainable end goal – a future, elusive image that I can't foresee, but invest in

anyway. When I begin painting, I have no idea what the end result is going to look like. Instead, I allow one visual decision to dictate the next, intuitively responding to the array of colors and textures the media affords.

In *What Painting Is*, James Elkins uses alchemy as a metaphor for painting. Since the painting process cannot be defined in scientific terms, alchemy provides a better metaphor to represent the unpredictable nature of the medium—specifically, its capability to generate an unpredictable array of elements that science cannot capture. Elkins describes the painter’s studio as a fantastical landscape where material is king. The process of painting represents the artist’s pursuit of an unknown outcome “filled with unknown materials.”¹ Indeed, paint is seductive in and of itself: one can get lost in the patterns and textures of a palette the same way you can get lost in a never-ending landscape, a horizon cloaked in blue. His book ponders why the medium “has such a powerful attraction *before* it is trained to mimic some object, *before* the painting is framed, hung, sold, exhibited, and interpreted.”²

For me, paint’s beauty stems from the fact that it is physical evidence of the artist’s ambitions. When I paint, I generate an abundance of artistic waste such as leftover oil and acrylic scraps. Far from insignificant, these cast-offs become visual evidence of the process of painting. Unlike more traditional artistic mediums, artistic waste cannot be purchased or manufactured; it must be generated from past creation. This distinction makes it more visually and conceptually compelling. While anyone can buy materials, supplies alone are not particularly interesting. Unused, art supplies lack narrative and personality. Conversely, artistic waste carries a visual narrative, its intrigue a function of its history. They act as evidence of the artist’s ambition to create; they tell the story of an artists’ pursuit.

1.2 Ambition, Distance, and the Color Blue



Fig. 1. Kelly Olshan, *Climb*, 2014. Oil, graphite, charcoal, molding paste, and recycled paint on 3D panel, 40” x 48” x 3.5”.

This series of paintings is designed to elicit longing in the viewer, create an aesthetically superior place, and serve as visual embodiment of unattainable space. Ideally, the visual devices employed create an idealized, abstract landscape worth pursuing. Utilizing the color blue to reference the gap between the near and the far, this series focuses on the tendency to idealize a space that can never be truly achieved or accessed. In her essay *The Blue of Distance*, Rebecca Solnit eloquently characterizes the tendency to idealize far away places.³ She proposes that the farther epitomizes an ideal, unobtainable landscape—both literally and figuratively.⁴

Solnit associates that which “can never be possessed” with the color blue.⁵ She writes, “Blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in, for the blue world.”⁶ Additionally, she notes the importance of the color blue in art history, arguing that artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Yves Klien, Hans Memling, and Raphael have used it to add depth to their paintings.⁷ She notes that mountainscapes, bodies of water, and the horizon all appear blue because the particles of light on the cool end of the spectrum literally scatter, leaving distant places cloaked in this color.⁸ UV light—the light of sky—cannot be focused on by the human eye; it is literally imperceptible. These remote, inaccessible landscapes inevitably carry associations of longing. “Longing,” says the poet Robert Hass, “because desire is full of endless distances.”⁹

Physical distance makes objects appear more beautiful, as immediacy has a way of debunking and demystifying. Conversely, when a thing becomes real, it loses the allure that distance affords. Just like we idealize something we

used to have, we idealize something we *could* have. Being hypothetical, that unreachable thing is not subject to all the imperfections of reality. It remains perfect, unadulterated—a construct of our own, idyllic world.

To be ambitious is to pursue something despite the knowledge that attainment will not fulfill your aspirations. Ambitious people tell themselves that once they get that A, earn that promotion, or receive that acceptance letter, *then* they will live within a glorified landscape that only exists in their minds. Of perpetual striving, Herman Hesse wrote, “when someone seeks... it easily happens that his eyes see only the thing that he seeks, and he is able to find nothing...because he is obsessed with his goal.”¹⁰ The problem with this thought process is that once the goal is achieved, it loses its splendor. The actuality doesn’t match up with the ideological construct. More often than not, attaining their goal doesn’t drastically alter their lives. The person immediately turns their attention to the next goal.

This is not to say ambitious people are oblivious to this logical fallacy. It usually only takes one or two experiences to recognize the disconnect between expectation and reality. Telling an ambitious person of their situation is like telling Sisyphus he will forever climb the mountain.¹¹ The true task is not to recognize the pattern, but to find value in the need to perpetually climb.

Climb ascribes to this idea by presenting an unattainable landscape. The formal elements of art become very important in suggesting the allure of the inaccessible. The title immediately invokes a sense of height, inviting the viewer to approach the staircase and proceed skywards. Elevation remains a theme throughout the piece: the constellation of panels proceed upwards on the wall; the abstracted architectural beam leads the eye towards an apex that remains out of view. Together, these elements orient the viewer towards the land of the above.

The juxtaposition between geometric and organic forms elicits visual interest within the piece. Boxes are presented as both illusionistic and actual rectilinear objects, pushing sideways and forwards into the viewer’s space. The 8” x 6” rectangle emerging from the panel particularly accentuates the tension between the 2 and 3-dimensional. This element also acts as a kind of framing device, highlighting a composition within a composition. The organic elements accomplish this as well, offering a counterpoint to the otherwise largely rectilinear composition. Curvilinear lines and shapes literally encroach on the geometry.

The blue window – the destination of the staircase – possesses its own particular purpose. The phthalo tones make the space seem to recede into the distance. With so much visual information overlapping it, it remains relatively obscure. This space represents another landscape the viewer cannot quite see or access, implying the place at the top of the staircase is an esoteric one – just out of the viewer’s reach.

The staircase remains the most dominant objective form in the painting. With its ascending, zig-zag pattern clearly indicates a staircase; yet it is still treated with an abstractionist vocabulary, depicted entirely through shape and color. With no references to a specific object or place, the viewer is able to discern that this is an indication of an imaginary space rather than a particular one. Proceeding from the bottom left to the top right, the stairs guide our eye upwards and throughout the composition. The two additional panels on the bottom left leave the stairs looking disjointed and spatially incongruous, implying that if one were to try and climb this staircase they would have difficulty. *Climb* intends to leave its audience wanting to climb the staircase despite the structural impossibility.

1.3 Worldly Success and Delayed Gratification

Despite its unrealizable nature, ambition serves as a powerful motivating force. Social scientists Spenner and Featherman explore the link between achievement and ambition, conceding achievement’s prevalent yet still mysterious incentives.¹² Despite its influence, psychologists have not been able to pinpoint one dominant theoretical paradigm to explain ambition as a psychological phenomenon. Regardless of its mystery, Western industrialized nations consistently deem achievement as a predominant cultural goal. One conceptual framework known as role theory defines “worldly successes” in terms of academic grades, educational credentials, and career success, both in terms of “monetary and status attainments”—common empirical means to quantify achievement.¹³

In order to achieve these worldly successes, one has to delay gratification. Delayed gratification is characterized by the willingness to forgo something in the moment for the possibility of attaining a greater reward later. The most famous psychological study associated with this phenomenon is informally known as the Stanford marshmallow experiment.¹⁴ In this study, children were asked to choose between a small reward delivered right away or a preferred reward offered later.

Such a framework mirrors ambition, as attaining worldly success requires making sacrifices. Adults are presented with similar options as the children in the experiment: sleep or study? Work late or go out? While sleeping and relaxing are the most immediately enjoyable options—the reward received in the moment—the latter choices represent an investment in the future, or a long-term, preferred reward. Studying will likely lead to better grades and educational attainment; working late often yields career success and even monetary and status achievements. Presented in this context, it is no surprise that the same children who were able to successfully delay gratification achieved better social

outcomes later in life.¹⁵ They earned higher test scores¹⁶ and achieved greater educational attainment,¹⁷ among other evaluations of success. Such research indicates an implicit connection between delayed gratification and achievement.

Thus societal frameworks reinforce the tendency to work towards an unforeseeable goal. Sacrifices today are thought to pay off later, as if one is immaterially investing in a better life. Children are encouraged to prize the next space, the next object, or a future reward over an immediate one. Thus many come to idealize what is out of reach. In doing this, an elusive future becomes somehow more valuable than a definitive present.

In both the experiment and day-to-day life, the promise for something better is elusive and unreliable. We have no reason to trust the man in the white coat promising a unforeseen marshmallow any more than we have reason to trust ourselves when we say, *If I make straight As, then I'll be happy*, or *As soon as I land my dream job, then everything will be better*. And yet, the ambitious pursue their goal anyway. The elements employed *Perpetual Pursuit* intend to embody the notion of this elusive landscape.

1.4 Height and achievement

Language uses height to communicate value, achievement, and superiority. Common terms for success are often associated with literal elevation. Consider the implicit meaning behind everyday phrases: being “above” someone or something means one is somehow better than them. If an athlete’s performance “peaks,” they are doing better than ever; if a goal is “out of reach” it is so valuable that it is impossible to actually attain. Phrases such as “aspire *higher*,” “reach *higher*,” or “reach for the sky” likewise associate achievement with physical height. Setting oneself “above the rest” presupposes that literal height dictates figurative worth. It is as if highness automatically affords moral, intellectual, or societal eliteness—so much so that western monarchies take to calling their royalty “your highness.” These expressions are used to qualify value and success, ultimately implying the superiority of the above.

Visually, our world is surrounded by objects that carry the same message. Buildings in particular often communicate their importance through height. Skyscrapers, monuments, and other tall buildings are all associated with high achievement. Examples include the former World Trade Center, One World Trade Center, the Chrysler Building, Shanghai Tower, and The Petronas Towers, to name a few. The underlying message seems to be that what is physically above us somehow seems more powerful, more valuable, or more worthy.

1.5 Architectural Devices

In *Perpetual Pursuit*, architectural devices serve as metaphors for ambition and endless striving. Drawing upon architecture’s ability to reorient the viewer both metaphorically and spatially, this series utilizes the symbolic connotations of staircases and windows in particular to transport the viewer to another place. Stripped of their utilitarian function, the purpose of these devices becomes chiefly that of metaphor.

Staircases are often cited as important architectural symbols, as they provide both a literal and figurative means to access another space. Strong indicators of place, they are used to motivate, inspire, and visually orient.¹⁸ In *Stairways of the Mind*, Pallasmaa writes, “climbing steps reflects an archetypal psychic longing to approach the heavenly sphere of the cosmos.”¹⁹ Much of this connotation has to do with ascension: descending stairways carries very different associations. Climbing stairs, however, sets the participant up to pursue the land of sky. In this body of work, staircases intend to speak to a constant, unrelenting pursuit of the unknown, of the future, and of a potentially better or more successful place.

Fittingly, psychoanalysts utilize staircases in symbol-interpretation, beginning with Freud’s contributions in particular.²⁰ In German, Freud’s native language, the word for “stair” denotes a “word picture” of an individual “climbing,” “mounting,” or “going up.”²¹ Thus staircases not only serve as a physical means to access a higher space, but carry deeper psychological associations. This body of work intentionally draws upon this ideology, aiming to spatially reorient viewers into the land of the above.



Fig. 2. Kelly Olshan, *Staircase in Blue*, 2014. Recycled oil paint on panel, 15" x 9" x 11"



Fig. 3. Kelly Olshan. *The Farther*, 2014-15. Oil, tape, molding paste, and recycled paint on 3D panel, 40" x 27" x 3.5"

Stairways are also unique in that they can function as both architecture and sculpture.²² Despite the fact that they clearly reference architectural structures, the staircases in this series are stripped of their function: they cannot literally transcend the viewer from one space to another. Not only does the scale prevent them from being climbed, but even if they were life-size, the proportions make the forms insurmountable. For this series, the literal function of staircases isn't as important as the figurative one: the means of accessing a superior, elevated space.

However, the stairways are not merely pictorial either. Many of them are three-dimensional forms, physically invading the audience's space. The scale of *Staircase in Blue* borders a traditional 2 and 3-dimensional object. While the piece is clearly 3-dimensional, it's essentially three 2D panels stacked on top of one another. Moreover, the surface is treated exactly like it were a 2D panel. Beyond the form's initial construction, the application of paint and found objects are relatively flat. This hybrid reads simultaneously as surface and form, leaving the viewer with something that is not quite a painting, but not quite a sculpture either.

Like staircases, windows also carry powerful symbolism. In architecture, windows are considered a means to edit the relationship between interior and exterior, as they allow the viewer to simultaneously occupy two spaces.²³ Looking out a window requires peering past the current position and into the next one. Often this view represents a place they would rather be. On the outside looking in, what's out the window seems somehow more desirable; it's easy to idealize a space you can see but not feel. In lieu of an actual experience, one is left to imagine one. Thus the faraway landscape is less of an objective image, and more of an idealized notion the viewer has created.

To illustrate this point, imagine a mountain climber is looking out a window and into a mountainscape. The scenery is beautiful: the peaks are cloaked in blue, their rise and fall into sky and clouds neatly framed within the confines of a rectangle. They long to be in what Solnit calls "the blue space," but in actuality, the idea of this place is very different than actually being there. Mountains are cold: the wind would chill the climber's body and beat against their face. In the mountains, the climber doesn't have the vantage point to see the magnificence of the landscape in its entirety: all they can see are gravel and twigs at their feet, a few scattered trees on the ground that disappear as they climb. Objectively, it's the same landscape captured in the window, but it has totally changed. Reality and immediacy has changed it.

Thus the idealization of a place vanishes upon arrival. The space hasn't changed, but the viewer's perception of it has. In his poem *Windows*, Rilke writes about the desire and romanticism windows evoke: "O you window, measure of longing,/ refilling so many times as one life spills over and hurries/ toward an other life"²⁴ Rilke's words pinpoint windows' ability to visually isolate an unreachable space. Windows idealize landscape, leaving the viewer wanting something they can never have. Like Solnit, Rilke associates distance with longing—the "other life" that one can see and conceptualize but never truly access.

In this series, the windows are the blue spaces Solnit describes. They are the places at the height of the staircases, within the portals, physically above the rest. Hazy and atmospheric, they are designed to look visually appealing. Yet often these bluescapes are quite difficult to get to. To reach the blue space in the top right corner of Fig. 3., for instance, the climber would have to navigate a spatially impossible stairway. There's nowhere to travel but up, yet in doing so, the climber is subject to fall into blue oblivion.

2. Methodology

My painting process begins by designing the panels. Often I use Sketchup, a 3D modeling software, or simply draw out models by hand. This approach allows me to manipulate the measurements and proportions until I am satisfied with the overall composition. Given that architecture itself is 3-dimensional, I try to create forms that physically impact the viewer's sense of space. Fittingly, these designs intentionally mimic architectural components. Figure 1 and 2 illustrate a panel with explicit references to a staircase and window. The 3D staircase pulls into the viewer's space, wrapping around the leftmost edge of the panel. Overhead, the plan contains a shadowbox, or "window" that pushes back into space. This piece hangs above eye level, forcing viewers to turn their heads skyward to investigate the overhead platform.

To establish visual consistency, every panel possesses an edge of 3.5". These thick sides reference a wall or window frame, which allows the work to further take on an architectural presence. When I am finished designing the plans, I submit them to a professional woodworker to create the forms. Once the actual panels are in hand, I begin the painting process. I work instinctively, utilizing risk-taking and intuitive problem solving to arrive at complex, interesting forms. Marks are made, colors are chosen, canvases are flipped, and brushes are ruined. As I work towards an unknown, it is precisely this ineffable, mysterious quality I find so compelling. Were I merely realizing a sketch, I would miss out on crucial discoveries. In this sense, my work is as much about pursuing an elusive ideal as it is about illustrating one.

While many of the decisions surrounding color palette are likewise made intuitively, the color blue remains an important constant. Blue carries important connotations, as these hues are the color of skyspaces, waterscapes, mountainscapes, and the horizon seen from a distance. Moreover, blue is the color of the next space—the one that remains forever out of reach. Blue represents that which one seeks to attain, but can never truly access.

Different shades of blue evoke various implications. Some of the paintings in this series are a darker and cooler blue, cloaked in phthalo blue designed to elicit the sensation of swimming underwater. Ultramarine is slightly warmer, used to remind the viewer of an overcast sky or distant horizon. The brightest of the blues, Ceruleans, are intended to conjure images of bright sky. Combining various shades of blue, these paintings layer and mix white and Naples yellow to convey an atmospheric perspective.

In addition to creating 3D architectural forms, I also depict them in paint. In this stage I add staircases, windows, portals, or other complementary elements. The only objective imagery in my work, these structures ideally transport the viewer into an abstract landscape, one incapable of being navigated in reality. As such, the staircases are intentionally rendered un-climbable. Steps go missing, heights fall out of proportion—leaving the staircase impossible to surmount. And yet, with the alluring colors and textures, the next space looks appealing. These techniques intend to embody the state of perpetual pursuit, as well as the desire to access another world.

Once the majority of the surface is established, I begin to further develop the landscape. In this stage, I often conduct a blind contour directly onto the surface. Blind contours are line drawings of a subject conducted without lifting one's pencil or looking at the drawing's surface. This exercise forces the artist to focus their sole attention on the object they are rendering. My motivations for using this technique, however, are not to develop my rendering skills. Instead, blind contours serve as a means to generate new, organic visual material. It's like hitting the refresh button: the quick, intuitive lines can activate a simple, monochromatic area. Direct, spontaneous marks possess a vitality that planned sketches do not accomplish. For this reason, I choose to conduct these drawings directly onto the surface.

Blind contours accomplish another task: they juxtapose geometric and organic elements. When choosing reference material, I deliberately select an organic subject. The resulting curvilinear lines offset the rectilinear forms already established. Most often, I base my sketches on images of fabric or curtains as they obviously relate to architectural constructions, especially windows. Billowing fabric creates visual movement. Its motion draws a diagonal line against the wall and the windowpane. More importantly, though, undulating fabric is more aesthetically pleasing. It invites the viewer to approach the window and peer out into the next space.

For a similar but subtler effect, I allow the paint to drip freely. I begin by covering the area with solid passages of color. Once this layer dries, I choose a pigment to mix with heavy amounts of linseed oil. This produces a translucent, viscous mixture that drips when applied to the panel. When applied to multiple places, these brush strokes form a series of linear, vertical marks. While the medium is still wet, I tilt the panel 90 degrees, causing the oil to exude in the perpendicular direction. The result forms a pattern more or less indicative of an abstract archway. Once the linseed oil dries, I glaze in between the miniature "archways." The resulting pattern appears like a collection of small, faint dwellings—as if the viewer is looking at a façade from far away.

Thus pleasing color palettes, dynamic compositions, and juxtaposition of organic and geometric elements tie these paintings together. Together, they intend to compose a captivating landscape—one that appears visually and fundamentally more appealing than the ordinary world. Given the crucial role of aesthetics, formalism remains

incredibly important to this body of work. Were the work not visually pleasing, the viewer wouldn't want to climb the staircase. They wouldn't feel compelled to reach the land of the blue, the land of the above.

My painting process generates many cast-off materials. I accumulate oil paint on my palette; pencil and charcoal shavings from drawing; and tape used to achieve straight edges. Typically, artists throw these materials in the trash. Yet I find these materials so visually interesting I began repurposing this artistic waste into original artworks. These leftovers are directly derived from my painting process. A piece with alizarin crimson and phthalo green tones, for instance, could result in something like Figures 10 and 11 below. I also recycle the empty paint tubes and bottle caps: Fig. 10 has a 250 ml tube of alizarin crimson; Fig. 11 has phthalo green, cadmium orange, and nappes yellow.



Fig. 4: Kelly Olshan, *Palette Scrapings I*, 2014.
Recycled paint on panel, 8" x 8" x 3.5"



Fig. 5: Kelly Olshan, *Kelly's Palette*, 2014.
Recycled paint on panel, 8" x 8" x 3.5"

Unlike more traditional artistic mediums, artistic waste cannot be purchased or manufactured; it must be generated from past creation. This distinction makes them more compelling both visually and conceptually. While anyone can buy materials at an arts and crafts store, supplies alone are not particularly interesting. Unused, art supplies lack narrative and personality. Conversely, artistic waste carries a visual narrative, its intrigue a function of its history. They act as evidence of an artist striving to make something out of nothing. Artistic waste serves as artifacts of the creative process, telling the visual story of an artists' pursuit.

Collecting artistic waste often involves scavenging around the studio for used paint. Oil painters typically use glass palettes; acrylic painters usually prefer paper or plastic. To remove dried oil paint, I scrape the pigment off of glass palates with a razor blade. The textures of these paint leftovers vary as much as paintings themselves: one can extract thick, goopy balls of paint; shiny, film-like textures that gracefully fall onto the surface; and dry, paper-like shards that barely come off the palate. In addition to masking tape and pencil shavings, other found objects include paint tubes and caps, used paper palates, and razor blades used to scrape oil paint off glass palates. Each set of materials is stored based on categories and subcategories pertaining to the material's texture, shape, and color.

After the cast-offs are collected, I begin to apply the recycle the materials onto the form. During this process, I am careful to pay attention to formal aesthetic elements such as color, texture, and integration of found objects. The sculpture's small scale allows the viewer to appreciate these subtleties. To further develop this less-is-more approach, I begin painting solid passages of color alongside the more complex areas (Fig. 7). This method helps provide visual silence alongside textural intensity.

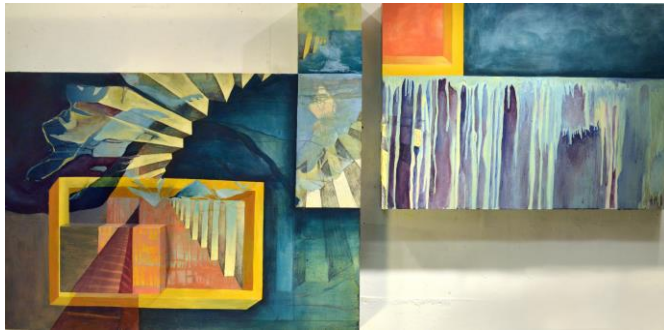


Fig. 6: Kelly Olshan, *No Summit*, 2014. Oil and mixed media
On 3D panel, 75" x 38" x 3.5"



Fig. 7: Kelly Olshan,
No Summit Window 2015
Oil on 3D panel, 13.5" x 13" x 2.5"

Recently, I've begun adding extensions to my work, or a series of smaller panels surrounding main composition. These extensions are designed to visually extend and support the existing image. Adding sections has served as a way of re-engaging with the imaginary landscape I've created: envisioning what lies to the left or the right of a staircase, or what one would reach if they were able to transport to the top. Moreover, they can supply a visual resting place to an otherwise complex image, as is the case with *No Summit*. Painted after the larger panel, the rightmost piece is a much simpler composition. To ensure the imaginary landscape functions a coherent whole, I intentionally reiterate the former panel's color schemes and visual elements. In the image above, this was achieved by employing phthalo blue tones, as well as repeating a version of the yellow and pink window.

Finally, adding pieces asserts the intentionality of creating a not-quite-rectilinear form. Without the extra pieces, the viewer could wonder why the panels are almost perfectly rectangular, but not quite. Adding the additional panels visually enforces the notion that this was a conscious aesthetic decision. More importantly, though, additional pieces create a constellation of miniature worlds. To reinforce this notion, I've made additional pieces that explicitly reference past ones, such as *No Summit Window*. This 3D window exactly mimics the size and color of the 2D space painted in the preceding panel. Intended to supplement the larger painting, these pieces act as another entryway into this imaginary space. In a gallery setting, viewers are encouraged to make connections between these visually similar elements.

3. Influences

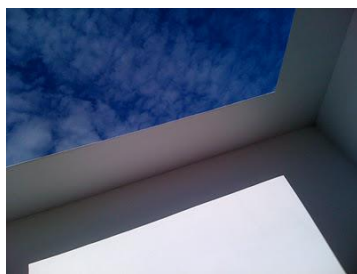


Fig. 8. James Turrell, *Meeting*, 1986. Installation.



Fig. 9. Richard Jacobs, *Summit*, 2014. Oil, acrylic,
and dye on canvas, 30" x 40".

James Turrell's installations manipulate light and color. His *Skyspace* series particularly inspired my work, as they force the viewer to focus on a space above. *Art in America* defines a "Skyspace" as a "geometric cut framing the open sky in the manner of the Pantheon".²⁵ One of Turrell's first Skyspaces, *Meeting*, uses architecture to emphasize the sky. This juxtaposition of the organic and geometric carves a rectangle of sky out of the building. As in *Perpetual Pursuit*, this precision reinforces the contrast between interior and exterior space, organic and man-made elements.

Turrell also focuses on the color blue: he intentionally manipulates light to make the sky's blue appear bluer. Turrell remarks that painters often achieve a similar effect by manipulating color.²⁶

In *Meeting*, the juxtaposition of city and sky benefits the work. The installation's location in New York City highlights the stark contrast between the bustling urban life and something that is "freed from the limits of the physical world."²⁷ By taking out all the superfluous stimuli—city lights, blaring taxis, incessant chatter—the installation makes its audience acutely aware of what has been there all along. Turrell's meditative Skyspace counteracts the oversaturated condition of the everyday.

Additionally, the paintings of Richard Jacobs largely informed my aesthetic sensibility. I've long admired Jacob's abstractionist style and complete departure from objective forms. His handling of texture and color in particular came to define my understanding of formalistic success. Understandably, it is easy to identify commonalities between Jacob's paintings and mine. First, Jacob's layering technique layers curvilinear shapes. The resulting forms invite the viewer to peer through the foremost layer and into the most distant passages, creating a kind of organic window. Thus Jacob's work mirrors the hard-edge geometry evident in my own paintings. In *Summit*, the receding passages are blue, and accordingly recede in space—representing another similarity with this body of work.

Jacobs also works intuitively, allowing his gut reactions to mandate his choice of texture, color, and composition. Carl Belz characterizes the artist's process as "a brimming arsenal of options developed in response to their maker's evolving vision and ever-focusing yet intuitive urge to meaning."²⁸ Jacob's immediate decision-making mirrors my own. When painting, my formal decisions are largely dictated by instinct. Each mark, color, and shape reacts to the previous one; they are by no means executions of a step-by-step plan.

Finally, the non-objectivity of these paintings resonates with my aesthetic. While my work does utilize some representational imagery, even these forms are largely abstractionist. The staircases and windows are largely comprised of nonspecific shapes and color rather than explicit references to a particular object or place. Instead, the forms remain universal, much like Jacob's. *Perpetual Pursuit's* abstract landscapes are likewise designed to exist independent of the physical world.

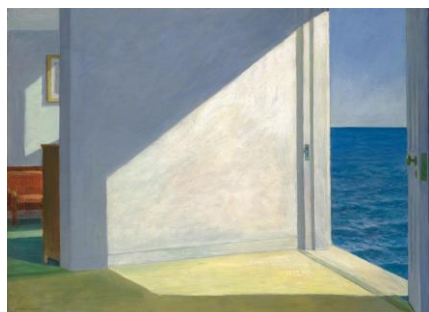


Fig. 10. Edward Hopper, *Rooms by the Sea*, 1951.

Yale University Art Gallery.

University of California, San Diego.

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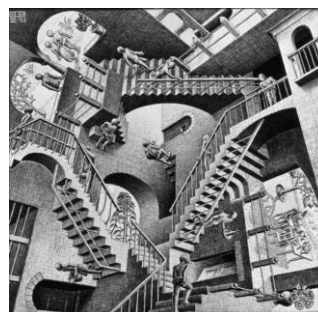


Fig. 11: *Relativity*, M.C. Escher, 1953. Lithograph,

277 x 292 mm.

Edward Hopper's *Rooms by the Sea* has also greatly influenced this body of work. His use of a simple architectural device, a window frame, invites the viewer to peer beyond the blank, white wall and into a beautiful, blue waterscape. This simple juxtaposition of interior and exterior, architecture and sea, effectively captures the viewer's desire to be somewhere else. Such an approach largely resonates with my own aesthetic sensibilities. Hopper's image inspires viewers to walk up to the open window and look out into the ocean, or perhaps even dive into the inviting blue waterscape. Similarly, I want my viewers to *want* to climb the stairs to access a realm of sky.

Staircases can realign the climber both literally and metaphorically. Pallasmaa writes that climbing a staircase can "mediate the experience of getting lost, losing one's balance or even one's mind."²⁹ Escher's *Relativity* particularly exemplifies this effect: "M.C. Escher's drawings of 'impossible' staircases that simultaneously lead the viewer upwards and downwards, creating endless loops, are further examples of labyrinthine stairs."³⁰ With no exit, Escher's stairways leave the climber to endlessly pursue a notably absent destination.

This series utilizes a similar visual vocabulary. *Perpetual Pursuit* likewise renders "impossible" staircases, only to elicit a feeling of longing rather than anxiety. Unlike Escher, these paintings invite the viewer climb the stairs *despite* their impossibility. Perhaps the form's association depends upon its visual direction, as ascending a staircase carries

different connotations than descending one. Pallasmaa asserts that descending a staircase produces disquietude, “signif[ying] the entry into the realm of fear and menace.”³¹ If this is true, so is the reverse: climbing staircases can “signal movement into a prohibited realm,” one that epitomizes an exalted, or higher state.³²

Neo-Dada artist Robert Rauschenberg famously integrated found objects into his artworks, creating “combines” that walk the line between painting and sculpture. This assemblage technique breaks the boundaries of conventional materials, using practically anything as art supplies. Researching this approach presented all objects as potential media. However, instead of utilizing everyday household items, *Perpetual Pursuit* repurposes common studio art materials. An artist encounters these items just as often as most of us see a clock or a bed. Objects such as paint and pencils thus become a part of an artists’ commonplace visual vocabulary. Rauschenberg drew attention to the objects that infiltrate everyday life; I draw attention to the materials artists encounter in the studio everyday.

While Rauschenberg’s work pushes into the third dimension, it does so carefully. Despite its 3D elements, spatially, his collages do not differ much from a traditional canvases: the objects in the center of the canvas are sculptural, but overall, the work reads more as a 2D object than a 3-dimensional one. The same could be said of the works in *Perpetual Pursuit*: while they have more literal depth than a traditional painting, the objects are more about surface than form. The five-sided cubes, for instance, occupy space, but are otherwise treated just like a painting. The surface is built up heavily, but in a way that adheres to each 2D plane more than a 3D environment. In both Rauschenberg’s and my own work, this tension between painting and sculpture aims to elicit visual interest.

4. Conclusion

These paintings strive to transport the viewer into a landscape they wish to—but can never truly—access. They intend to highlight the tendency to endlessly pursue a future place, an elusive goal, or an unknown betterment. *Perpetual Pursuit: Painting the Unattainable* invites viewers to relish in the intangible vision, to celebrate these aggrandized, fictitious spaces as they are a function of an innately human desire.

People create idyllic landscapes within their minds. They long to be in these landscapes, as they imagine this hypothetical space to be somehow better than the one they are in now. They set goals, defining destinations as means of access. The problem is, even if they attain their goal, they do not attain the associated landscape; once they arrive it immediately disappears, making the ideal landscape unattainable. This causes a dilemma in that one can never truly close the gap between the near and the far, the actual and the desired. The best that can be done, then, is to find satisfaction in the process—in the very act of pursuing. Painting itself is a process and a pursuit. Creating a series of paintings is a way of climbing the proverbial mountain over and over. Every time a new piece is begun, the ascent begins again. As Camus writes of the man condemned to endless climbing, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”³³

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6. Endnotes

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