
AUGUST KLINTBERG is an artist who works in the field of art history. He is represented by Pierre François Ouellette art contemporain in Montreal, Canada, and is an Associate Professor in the School of Critical and Creative Studies at the Alberta University of the Arts.

ASHLEIGH BARTLETT'S work is informed by a fascination with abstraction, theatricality, and questions that arise from the historical trajectory of painting. Bartlett has exhibited at Ortega y Gasset Projects (Brooklyn, USA), Five Points Gallery (Torrington, USA), Nave Gallery Annex (Somerville, USA), Paniki Gallery (Batan, Philippines), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Montreal, Canada), TRUCK Contemporary Art (Calgary, Canada), The Art Gallery of Calgary (Calgary, Canada) and The Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery (Kitchener, Canada). She is the recipient of grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Lieutenant Governor's Emerging Artist Award, and a finalist in the 2014 RBC Painting Competition. In 2011, she earned her MFA from the University of Guelph. Bartlett has a collaborative practice with Jessica Groome called CIRCLES & WIGS. Together, they have exhibited in Canada, Norway, and the USA.

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Bartlett currently lives and works in Calgary, Alberta. Her activities occur on the traditional Treaty 7 territories of the Blackfoot people including the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Piikani and Kainai), the Tsuut'ina (Sarcee), the Stoney Nakoda First Nations (Bears paw, Chiniki and Wesley), and the Métis Nation of Alberta (Region III).

S N A I L ' S

S P A C E

BY AUGUST KLINTBERG

Behind each fold and fringe is a flirtation—or is it a fabulation? Contours out of sight are shaped behind and within each form. There are folded and flat irregularly shaped panels. There are wig-like curtains. A fringe is an edge but also the substance that makes that edge visible. I imagine the not-unpleasant sensation of these silken fibres brushing against my lip, of a cut that draws blood from a deftly angled edge. These are deeply imagined, deeply sensed feelings.

The title of Ashleigh Bartlett's exhibition "Snail's Space" refers to an animal with a shell that twists and folds upon itself and a meandering, extemporized path (do snails improvise?) at work in the artist's compositions. This title suggests slowness (from the homonym "snail's pace"), but equally the spatiality of this mollusk's body (a phenomenology of a snail's inward twist). This work renders abstractions. In interview Bartlett explained to me that "abstraction is so open, and there's something about that that I gravitate to." These dozens of objects forming an installation are open—spatially they flip and flit away from the wall, and they are resistant to anything as pedestrian as "meaning." They are also open in another sense, in terms of categorization. Object to object there is what Ludwig Wittgenstein might call family resemblance, measured by a fold, a curve, a hue, an edge—according to which categories can be understood as rules of similarity rather than strict rules of inclusion and exclusion—and in this work, as in Wittgenstein's model, there are qualities of resemblance that are simply undefinable.

When evoking the moist and the desiccated in contemporary and modern painting, Mira Schor's collection *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* is a frequently selected guide. For example: Schor, writing about Elizabeth Murray's artwork, compares her paintings to the fluids theorized by the French philosopher Luce Irigaray and the ominously moist creature of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979). Taking Schor's lead, still other fleshy and fluid registers can be drawn from the cupboard of phenomenology. The sensations and surfaces

and folds of "Snail's Space" bring to mind a pair of authors, a pair of essays, that deal with braiding and touch: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray, will you please join us in the fold? Irigaray's essay "The Invisible of the Flesh" directly replies to Merleau-Ponty's "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" and in this, the two essays themselves constitute a folded relationship. New folds emerge when we bring these texts to Bartlett's exhibition.

Merleau-Ponty describes the intertwining of two human hands attached to one body, where self-touches-self (not unlike a snail's self-touching spiral). The body, he argues, is the very tool that makes the world visible (and touchable): "We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them..." (168) He writes about concentric "circles," "vortexes," and "spheres" to parallel these two leaves, whereas Irigaray gets more to the point: a body's lips (oral and vaginal) are things among things and also touching one another, in regular and intimate contact with one another (like Bartlett's dyed silk fringes of fabric). Both of these authors are investigating bodies, but when Merleau-Ponty discusses "the flesh" he is clearly intoning a non-specific or universal, human, bodily membrane. Irigaray probes the interior accounting for the individual. With a tone that seems mournful and enraptured by turns, Irigaray reflects "nor will I ever see the *mucous*, that most intimate interior of my flesh..." (emphasis original, 574) I have not read a passage where Merleau-Ponty is interested in getting so sticky. That wet-and-sticky-to-crust quality of viscera holds Irigaray's reader, and Bartlett's audience, on edge.

Then there is colour. Merleau-Ponty describes how colour is defined by difference, and yet each object's colour is constituted in relation to its similarity to all other things of similar colour. "The red dress" he writes, "a fortiori holds with all its fibers onto the fabric of the visible, and thereby onto a fabric of invisible being. A punctuation in the field of red things..." (165) Irigaray counters, with a hint of derision, that he employs the "talisman of

colour" to make an argument (565) She writes about colour and identity:

Color? The symptom and aftereffect of our incarnation, our genetic fate, our identity prior to any proper form perceivable from outside, to any visible, which will nevertheless appear but without ever encompassing itself in its growth.

Irigaray's interest in colour is more about human individuation, race, and subjective identity than Merleau-Ponty's abstraction of colour; after all, she does accuse him of solipsism, and of overlooking the "mucous of the carnal." (569) Imagine: carnal mucous. The encrusted surfaces and edges of "Snail's Space" are pigmented echoes of crusts of viscera worked over, picked at, and maybe tasted. Encrusted on the edges: adhesive? pigment? something wet and something and dry? Perhaps like Irigaray, Bartlett is antagonistic to idealized visions of colour like Merleau-Ponty's, according to whom a red is merely a red. "A red is red in accord with or in function of its material ground," Irigaray counters to Merleau-Ponty, "from which it cannot be separated. Also the concept of red is impossible. One could go so far as to say that it has no meaning." (567) Bartlett, seemingly taking a similar stance on colour, mashes together and pulverizes colour on these folding surfaces, which bring to mind the tectonics of alternately irritated/calmed surfaces, leaving the hypnotizing trace of the snail.

While I read Irigaray, I wonder: what mucosal folds are bound in my gut, on my lip, in me, and what is inside the snail's shell? As I say when I am frustrated with vagaries, "Let's get real." As a practical example, my mucocoele occurs when my mouth's, my lip's salivary tracts become clogged. My body, a body, is not accustomed to such subcutaneous accretions of saliva, and so it seals off the drool in a sack that inflates and bursts with troubling alacrity. If a sanguine mucocoele is not surgically removed this pageantry of goo will continue indefinitely, I am told, so I have been cut and stitched. Today, when my lips touch there is a film of sticky, pigmented viscera stoppered by a stitch. It reminds me that the poetics of

phenomenology are tempered with the cut, when the sphere or vortex gets clogged and riven. A sticky pliability of mucous or blood (which can carry pigmentation) soon dries to crust, and so I reckon with such results in Bartlett's compositions.

A fold wraps in on the self or object, it rubs against, producing friction or wetness or clogging. Returning to the title of this show: what is the pace and form of the snail? The snail is moist and spiraling until it is dehydrated and its habitat is crushed to shards. The snail moves with what I might assume to be intent, but perhaps the snail improvises, like Bartlett, leaving viscous paths. She has referred to these objects as "quarantine friends," suggesting that each is a member of a crowd of closeness during a year of great distances, and global grief. During a time of mass trauma and mass isolation, might there be something in fabricating relations with objects, and specifically artworks? Remember: when a snail senses the alarm of arid conditions, it retreats to its home and seals the entrance to survive and preserve its moisture contained in a sack, in a spiral.

ENDNOTES

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Clive Cazeaux, ed. (London: Routledge, 2000, first published 1961): 164–180.

Luce Irigaray, "The Invisible and the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining—The Chiasm,'" in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Clive Cazeaux, ed. (London: Routledge, 2000, first published 1993): 563–582.