

*Paper Trail*, Gallery Jones, May 2024.

During the development phase of this show, I read an essay by German art historian Wilhelm Worringer entitled *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), translated into English and published in the 1950s. He divided painting into two aesthetic schools: abstraction on one side - attempting to connect with the spiritual, existential and intangible, and on the other, what he defined as empathetic painting (naturalistic), projecting our physical connection to material existence. Worringer's essay not only elevated abstraction to the 'respectable' level of representational artwork, it entrusted a fundamentally important role in the human creative project: to explore the fleeting, obscured and experiential aspects of mortal life.

It struck me that I have never committed to one lane. I continually move in opposing directions, swerving freely across an invisible divide, pursuing a series of expressionistic abstract paintings, then veering into naturalism with surrealist recklessness. My statements, however, have been sure: I work with action and reaction, tightening my realism hand for a series of paintings to manipulate, (or empathize with, for Worringer) the natural world, until I'm overcome with an urge to cast that world aside and run away into creative impulse. A next series of paintings is often born of a need to be spontaneous, expressive and loose, to look inside rather than out.

Beginning this new series, my descriptive for these two directions in painting began to lose hold, perhaps even invert. I discovered that a very expressionistic piece, painted to feel loose, impulsive and fleeting could be transformed by the addition of a realistically painted piece of lightly adhered masking tape. With one small addition of something appearing less permanent than a gestural mark (tape, a post-it note, etc.), realism takes on an expressive fragility, and the gestural abstraction becomes the painting's bones, the solid ground on which realism sits lightly.

In his essay, Worringer wrote: "The need for empathy and the need for abstraction are two poles of human artistic experience". Walking back and forth from home to studio over the winter, I began to question whether this is true, in my experience. Do I flip flop between poles, or do I prefer to lose myself in a spectrum? As the series of paintings grew, I continued to walk back and forth along familiar streets, through the change of seasons, I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable with Worringer's dichotomy. Without noticing, I diverted my attention to the actual poles on my route: the lamp posts hosting notices of people's needs and offers. My empathetic and abstract paintings began to incorporate messages left by strangers. "French Teacher From France" seeking students. Another evaporated cat... All found their way into the paintings.

Out of this came the title of the exhibition: *Paper Trail*. I paint my way back and forth, looking for my lane, refusing to stand in one place. It is not possible to separate engagement with the material world from personal interior space. My paper trail of paintings leads to one conclusion: all of art is an abstraction, exploring the very real experience of fleeting life. There is, finally, no division between worlds.

Fiona Ackerman, 2024