

# 142 studios visits

## The emergence of artistic thinking through studio conversations

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### Abstract

Throughout the past two years, I traveled across Canada, visiting 142 artists in their studios. Through in depth interviews with artists about their artwork, process and communities, and exploration of the studios through photograph documentation I examine artistic ways of thinking within the context of contemporary painting practices. In this paper, I explore the studio space as a space of creative and generative production through conversations with artists. I draw from my interviews to examine ways that artists discuss studio spaces and the creative processes that occur within that space as they engage with art making. Through doing so, I propose that the studio is not simply a space, but rather a way of thinking that emphasizes emergent, intuitive, embodied and nonlinear processes. By reflecting on the ways studio visits and artist interviews have shaped my own artistic practice, I reveal how this research is integral to my own artistic research process, thus framing the interviews as practice-based arts-based research.

**Keywords:** art studio, creative process, interviews, painting

### Bio

**Alison Shields** is an artist and art educator who lives in Vancouver, Canada. She is currently a PhD candidate in Art Education at the University of British Columbia. She has exhibited her paintings in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver and has participated in artist residencies across Canada and the United States. Through her doctoral research, which took her on a cross-Canada journey visiting over 125 artists' studios, Shields explores creative processes, painting as inquiry, and the relationship between thinking and making through studio work. This summer (2017) she will begin a position as an assistant teaching professor in art education at the University of Victoria.

## Emergent processes in the studio

And no longer is the studio seen as belonging to a “system” . . . as a space characterized by box-like enclosures, of “frames and limits,” each assigned a discreet place in some rigid, stable, and all-determining structure or order.

What system or structure does exist today is more properly described as a *network*. (Relyea, 2010, p. 220)

Over the past several years, a renewed interest in process, materiality and making in contemporary art discourse has led to a renewed celebration and engagement with the art studio. Art theorist Lane Relyea (2010) describes these spaces as locations of change, rupture, multidirectional movement, mobility and transmutation (p. 222).

Throughout my Master of Fine Arts program, I spent two years reflecting on the generative potential of abstract painting through the creation of several large abstract paintings that continued to evolve over the course of several years. I brought these understandings into my doctoral research as I continued to examine creative processes within the artist’s studio. Realizing that I needed to expand this exploration beyond my own studio, beyond my frame of reference as an artist, I visited over 142 artists’ studios across Canada. Through in depth interviews with artists about their artwork, process and communities, and exploration of the studios through photograph documentation, I examine ways of thinking, meaning-making and creative research that emerge through the painting process.

I chose to interview painters because, as a painter myself, this allowed the research to continually be shaped through a self-reflective return to my own practice. I cannot separate my lens as an artist from my research into artistic processes. Therefore, while drawing from qualitative research methodologies, the creative and reflective engagement with my own practice frames this work as practice-based arts-based research. Furthermore, through highlighting the processes described by artists that are echoed in my own research process, I reveal how our practices are shaped, not simply by what happens in the studio, but through conversations and relationships with other artists that allow us to reflect on our own practice. Through this reflective practice, I seek to highlight the relationships between artistic practices and arts-based research.

Gubrium and Holstein (2003) describe an “active interview” as a dynamic meaning making process, wherein meaning is constantly reconstructed through the conversation. Addressing practice-based research within artistic research methods, Hannula, Suoranta and Vadén (2014) similarly describe how narrative interviews don’t address a whole, but instead seek out deeper nuances. It is a creative encounter that takes place in a specific time and place. As an artist entering the studio, a space that within my own work is dynamic, intimate and alive with ideas, the visit continuously allowed me to reflect on my own perspectives about creativity, artistic processes and the question that drives me as an artist and art educator: Why make art?

In one of my visits, Ottawa-based artist, Carol Wainio referred to *Multiple Universe Theory*, which states that at each decision, one could go in multiple directions. She describes how her work emerges through the process: “What happens in there is that there’s a space that gets created and then elements get put into that space to see what those elements can possibly say to each other or how they can inform one another” (C. Wainio, personal communication, September 3, 2014). Berlin-based, contemporary art writer and theorist, Jan Verwoert (2005) uses the term *emergence* to describe the way that art emerges through the process of making. Verwoert refers to the definition of *emergence* as “a process of becoming, coming into existence and coming out” as well as “to work one’s way out of a crisis” (p. 42). At each moment, multiple pathways emerge and we are confronted with new decisions. His discussion resonates with several of the conversations I had with artists about their processes, as they described their works emerging through improvisation, material exploration and problem solving.

I similarly view my arts-based research process as emergent. Describing the a/r/tography research method, Irwin (2013) uses cartography to describe the journey of research as an emergent process that is self-reflective and self-reflexive wherein the interactions with other individuals continually shapes the unfolding of the research process. Regarding mapping, Irwin states: “A map is not a tracing. It is about experimentation: altering, reversing, modifying, among individuals and groups across time and space” (p. 211). The map, as described by Irwin, serves as an appropriate metaphor to apply to my emergent practice-based research project. While I had planned questions that I asked each artist, the interview with each artist unfolded in its own unique

ways, as artists told stories, speakers went on tangents, and the art and objects surrounding the room shaped the conversation.

This paper examines the studio as a space of creative and generative production through examination of artist interviews. I seek to reveal the emergent, intuitive, multiple, nonlinear and embodied qualities of the painting process to contribute to a more complex understanding of painting as a form of artistic inquiry. Furthermore, through reflecting it back on my own practice, I reveal how peer interviews shape our practice and are an integral part of arts-based research.

## The studio space

In one of my first studio visits, Vancouver artist Fiona Ackerman (figure 1) described a recent project (personal communication, June 23, 2014). She had similarly gone into artists' studios as a source of inspiration for her paintings. Instead of interviewing artists, she was left alone in the studio to explore. She explained how her paintings of those studios were a combination of that artist, and her own perceptions and interpretations of the artist's space. Ackerman (2012) described how she stumbled upon an essay by Michel Foucault about "Heterotopias" which became a framework through which she then came to view her studio visits. Through this research, Ackerman came to consider the studio as "two things existing at the same time, the real and the imaginary" and as a "space where incompatible realities are played out." Kamloops-based artist Andrea Kastner (figure 2) explained that a studio becomes an "other" space that is distinct from another type of work space because of the paintings that act like portals or wormholes that take you elsewhere (personal communication, July 11, 2014). James Gardner described the studio as a pressure cooker where all of his experiences become materialized through the painting process (personal communication, October 17, 2014). Throughout the trip, studios were described as being like a brain, a laboratory, a playground, a waiting room, a stage and simply as "the place where I work." These metaphors helped shape my understanding of the types of thinking that occur within the studio, alluding to the play, experimentation, exploration, brainstorming, problem solving and performances that take form through art making. These metaphors were reinforced by the imagery that surrounded the room all organized in their own unique way. In one studio, for example, puppet-like cut up paintings lined a wall of a re-purposed elementary school classroom. In

another, paintings hung by chains on a stage to be dipped into vats of paint. In some, materials were organized in a particular fashion, while in others paint exploded around the room. Notes and ideas were written across walls. Found objects were piled in a corner in one space, while neatly placed in a cabinet in another. The spaces contained clues to a thinking process that revealed the complexity of this process for each artist.

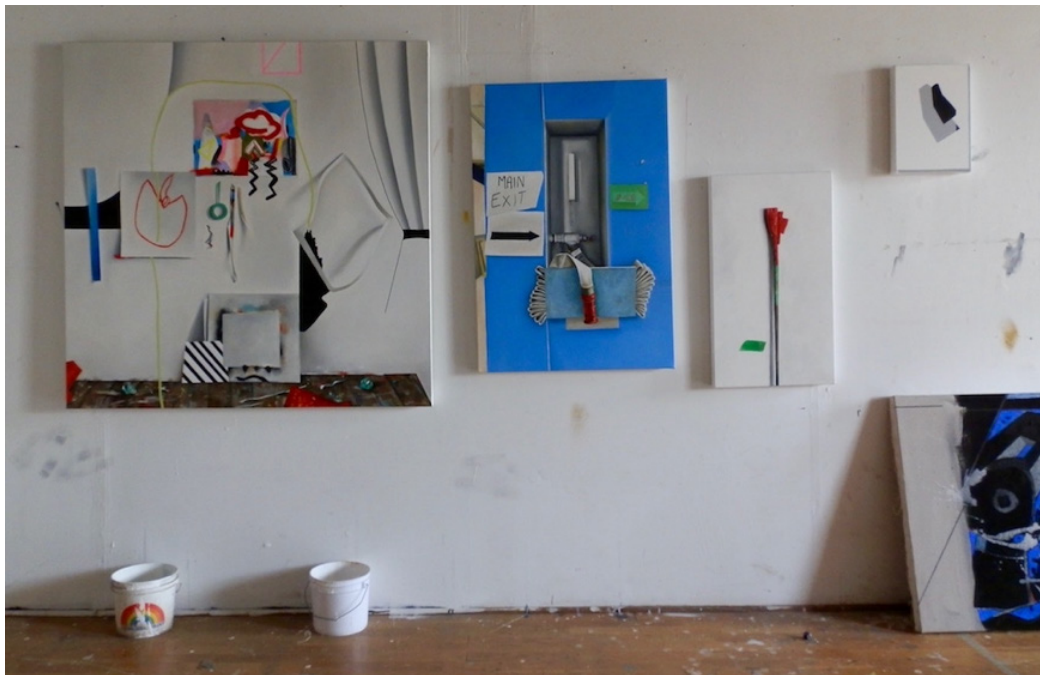


Figure 1. Fiona Ackerman's studio, Vancouver June, 2015. Photograph by Alison Shields.



Figure 2. Andrea Kastner's studio, Hamilton, April, 2016. Photograph by Alison Shields.

Sandra Meigs' studio (figure 3) was an absurd and energetic space filled with over a hundred small, colorful, circular paintings. Describing the intention behind this work to create an immersive space, she said: "It's a huge ideal, but I think that art can transport you to an actual different world. I think that is what the artist strives to do, to take the imagination elsewhere" (personal communication, June 18, 2015). Adding to the conversation about painting, imagination and alternative worlds, Montreal-based artist, David Elliott states: "When it comes to art, I like the notion of a parallel world.... Whatever that enriched world is, it's that kind of heightened reality, which is like a parallel space" (personal communication, October 15, 2015). I interpret these statements as revealing the ways that art may evoke an emotional response, allow for personal connections, generate new connections, challenge our understandings or provoke our mind to wander. Referring to a/r/tographic research methods, Irwin (2013) refers to these as in-between spaces that prompt disruptions of our ways of knowing and our conceptions of identities.



Figure 3. Sandra Meigs' studio, Victoria, June, 2015. Photograph by Alison Shields.

## Studio thinking

Regarding painting, Hamilton based artists, Daniel Hutchinson (figure 5) stated: "I think it has some direct taps to the nervous system, that attracts me

to painting. I do think a really good, really affective painting can kind of hit you in the spleen or something” (personal communication, July 25, 2014). We had a long conversation about the meaning of the word intuition: “My definition for intuition is everything you’ve ever learned bubbling up in random ways that you can’t possibly understand. I imagine this kind of soup of stuff with this unimaginable depth of knowledge that I’m not fully conscious of.” To expand on this concept, he provided as an example, a vivid memory he has of being a child and drawing on the carpet with his fingers. He explained that he remembered that you can make a face, you can make a grid, you can make lines and then you can erase. This comment complicated my previously held conceptually-based perception of his monochromatic paintings as purely a conceptual and theoretical response to modernist color-field painting. However, this description allowed me to not only understand a more intuitive approach to his work, but it allowed me to embody his process as it provoked similar childhood memories. In Winnipeg, Mark Neufeld (figure 4) also used a metaphor to describe intuitive knowledge within studio practice: “It’s like a stack of paper with holes in it, so it’s a sculpture and a collage and the holes might burrow from one piece of information to the other” (personal communication, July 22, 2014).

Hutchinson talked about anxiety of overthinking influence, the anxiety of trying to figure out all the threads that come into one decision in the studio and he said this anxiety can be both debilitating and strengthening. Regarding the multitude of influences, London (Ontario, Canada) based artist Colin Dorward (figure 6) similarly exclaimed: “That’s the thing I love about painting! It trickles into that part of the brain that thinks about visuals a lot and it’s sometimes so behind the scenes that we can’t sometimes know what our own influences are or it takes years sometimes to notice what it was that triggered you to do something” (personal communication, October 26, 2014). Describing images as viral entities that parasitize and inhabit the human mind and propagate across the mind, Dorward argues that painting provides a basis for their continuation. In Montreal, Eliza Griffiths and I discussed the phrase “thinking through painting” (personal communication, August 28, 2014). She explained: “It’s a process of call and response. It doesn’t execute the idea; it generates the idea.” These descriptions further reveal the emergent processes inherent in inquiring through painting, as well as the importance of not knowing how the painting will unfold or generate meaning.

The generative capacity of getting lost was at the center of several discussions. Janet Werner (figure 7) described the connection between getting lost and creativity: “Ultimately you always learn from that experience of being lost, because otherwise how are you going to find yourself. I think of the creative process like digging a hole and having to find your way out of it” (personal communication, August 26, 2014). Dil Hildebrand similarly described painting as an infinite game and an ongoing process of getting lost. “It’s like a walk in the wilderness where you don’t know where you’re going and every decision is based on what’s there right now. It’s not based on a map that gets you to where you are going. I don’t have a map. There are problems with that because sometimes you do get lost. I get lost each and every time” (personal communication, August, 25, 2014). Hildebrand compared his painting process to an ongoing learning process. Other artists described painting as a research or inquiry process, but one that seeks out impossible questions or produces more questions than answers.



Figure 4. Mark Neufeld’s studio, Winnipeg, July, 2014. Photograph by Alison Shields.



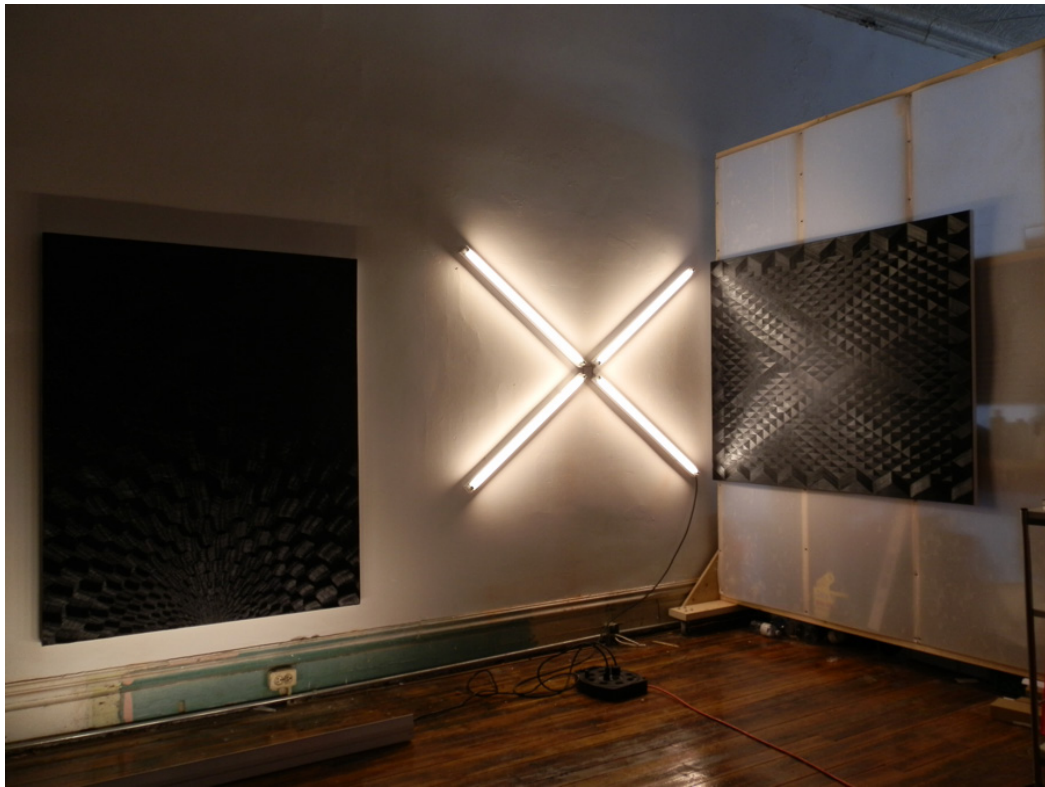


Figure 5. Daniel Hutchinson's studio, Hamilton, Ontario, July, 2014. Photograph by Alison Shields.



Figure 6. Colin Dorward's studio, Halifax, October, 2014. Photograph by Alison Shields.



Figure 7. Janet Werner's studio, Montreal, September, 2014. Photograph by Alison Shields

## Studio knowledge

Winnipeg artist, Mark Neufeld asks: “How do you make knowledge that’s not just about ends, to have an excitement with discovery?” Contemporary anthropologist and writer, Tim Ingold (2011) critiques research methodologies that are situated in a movement towards a terminal closure (p. 3). He describes this research model as “a gradual filling up of capacities and shutting down of possibilities” (p. 3). Instead he seeks to replace end-directed methods that connect a point of origin with a final destination, with methods that emphasize movement, uncertainty and multiple pathways. Curriculum theorist, Patti Lather (2007) questions the objectivity of research methodologies. In describing the importance of getting lost in research, Lather challenges traditional notions of research that emphasize control and mastery and seeks research methods that are multiple and in flux. Lather affirms the importance of not knowing and getting lost as a means of acquiring knowledge.

Relating these same principles to artistic inquiry, artist Ann Hamilton (2009) suggests that a comfort in not knowing is a driving force of art making, stating that an artist goes from what they know to what they don’t know. She explains the importance of this process “Not knowing is a permissive and rigorous willingness to trust, leaving knowing in suspension, trusting in possibility without result, regarding as possible all manner of response” (p. 68). As a researcher, this not-knowing exists within my research question itself, as I

try to understand creative processes while simultaneously resisting defining or apprehending them. I have come to realize that my desire to understand creativity is not out of seeking to find an answer, as it is not something that should be put into a box or framework. Instead, it is something that I seek to complicate, and through each of the studio visits my understandings were challenged, disrupted and transformed. I became more comfortable with allowing for this complexity of conversations.

Throughout my journey into art studios, artists revealed the following qualities of art making: it is generative; it is experimental and exploratory; it allows one to situate oneself in relation to the world; it opens up conversations; and it exists in a space of not knowing. Through my studio visits with artists, I propose that a studio lives in this complex and in-between space, as an emergent and active space where ideas, images and questions are continuously formed and reformed.

## Studio conversations

In the beginning of my research journey, I thought I could keep my own art practice at a distance from this research project, allowing it to influence it from a distance. The relationship between my research and my art practice became apparent this past year, as I made a group of paintings of artist studios from the photographs I took. Painting the artists' studios as I listened to the interviews, allowed me to engage with the conversations in a more embodied way, as I brought these conversations into my own studio. This process also made me realize the entanglements that exist within arts-based research, wherein all of our influences and conversations become intertwined. I am just beginning to understand the visual conversations revealed through these paintings and what they uncover about my research journey (figure 8).

As I engage in the multiple strands of my research, I ask: How has this research affected my practice as an artist and educator? I could say, I learned about the many kinds of blue from Doug Kirton, or that I learned to expand my material explorations with paint. I could say it provoked me to repeatedly rethink the meanings of abstraction or representation, or that it helped me to better engage with theoretical texts on new materialism or artistic research. I could say I was introduced to new artists, cities, texts and stories. All of the above are true. But the more in-depth answer is that it allowed me to consider the essential role of conversation in art, education and research. Through an education in

fine arts, I learned to contextualize my work within contemporary art theory and practice. But I have come to realize that contextualizing is different than conversing. Contextualizing fixes (or possibly imposes) meaning. Conversations, on the other hand open up meaning and allow it to remain fluid.

As I began writing this paper following my research journey, I addressed the importance of embracing the ambiguous, intuitive and affective qualities of art making. I emphasized the importance of not knowing in research and art making, a key quality of the creative process as I have come to understand it. But what I have come to realize through conversations with artists and reflecting back onto my own practice is that “not knowing” is only a part of the journey. We are then left asking what are we creating when we are in this space of “not knowing.” To address this, I return to the elusive question I continue to ask myself, artists and art educators: Why make art? Through this research process, I have come to my own conclusion; we make art to create conversations. I hope that this research may create a conversation between my role as an artist and an art educator, and between artistic practices and arts-based research. With regard to my own work and how I situate it within my interests in art education, this research has led me to reflect back on myself and ask myself: What conversations do I want to create and what conversations do I want to be a part of? I believe that this is the value of a reflective arts-based research practice.



Figure 8. *Studio Conversations*, paintings by Alison Shields. Quest University, 2017. Photograph by Byron Dauncey.

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