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School's Out Forever

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Joshua Saunders

Committee in charge:

Professor Rubén Ortiz-Torres, Chair  
Professor Sheldon Brown  
Professor Babette Mangolte  
Professor Anna Joy Springer

2017



The Thesis of Joshua Saunders is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

School's Out Forever

by

Joshua Saunders

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Rubén Ortiz-Torres, Chair

This thesis attempts to use the different functions of micro-fiber rags used in my studio practice as a metaphor for the more nuanced reality occurring in the formal choices made within the paintings and within the practice itself.

In the northeast corner of the spray booth where I make my paintings, there used to be a large pile of micro-fiber rags. These types of rags are useful for a variety of tasks due to their softness and absorptive qualities. I rely on the microfiber rags at every stage in the process of making a painting. This is why until very recently there was a large pile of discarded micro-fiber rags collecting next to the sink in the spray booth.

The micro-fiber rags that I have been consistently stocking are either orange, blue, or white. They are generally 10 to 16 inch squares, come in packages of 16-20, and are modestly priced under 20 dollars per package making each rag cost around a dollar. Recently I discovered a thicker yellow micro-fiber described as “job site tough”. These micro-fiber rags have quickly become my favorite but don’t imagine the yellow rags in the pile I described because these are a new development since the pile has been removed.

The pile started without an agenda and was rapidly growing over the course of the last year. There were days when I entered the space and saw the pile and found it beautiful, the rags folding over each other creating erratic line and color compositions accidentally, succumbing to gravity and folding into the shape defined by the unified pile, and creating ample folds and caves for light to hide in. Other days the rag pile would only seem like a problem, like an unmade decision just continuing to get put off with no solution or change upcoming. I believe it is the combination of these oppositional perspectives that allowed it to last as long as it did. One feeling wasn’t stronger than the other and thus the rag pile grew.

I start to make a painting by first unwrapping the aluminum panel. The panels come from the fabricator with a film covering their entirety for protection during transport or storage prior to use. I sand the new panel with 320 grit sandpaper and a 6 inch pneumatic orbital sander. The sanding helps open up the fresh panel so it can accept the epoxy primer which is the first step in the

painting process.

After sanding the panel I soak a fresh micro-fiber rag in a wax and grease removing solvent and wring out the excess liquid so the rag is perfectly damp. I fold the rag into fourths to conserve as much of the clean surface area as possible during this first cleaning. These first cleanings are particularly dirty with freshly sanded aluminum dust and factory grime from the panel's construction. It feels reckless to wipe the filthy panel with the perfect new rag and after each pass I flip it to a new fourth that is clean. Each time I flip it or refold it I see the filthy image of my own hand against the bright micro fibers. This first rag only lasts through this stage. It is destroyed for further use and immediately goes in the pile. The dark grey aluminum grit makes the rags used for this function look the most severe in the pile. The contrast between the color of the grime and the bright original color of the rag is frictional and visceral.

I spray one thin semi-wet coat and at least 3 wet coats of Epoxy primer on the clean sanded panel. The primer has to set-up overnight and in the morning I sand it again but this time with a 600 grit. When the primer is sanded a fine dust is produced. The dust is the color of whichever primer color was sprayed - often a cool grey or white. The result of sanding at this stage is a ultra soft marble-like surface which is porous and ready for paint.

The second microfiber rag is used in a similar way at this point. The rag is loaded with solvent and the panel is cleaned over and over, folding and flipping one or two rags until there is no more visible residue from the primer. I like to keep a fresh dry microfiber on hand during this stage as well to make dry passes with - meaning to remove dust left over after the panel is dry of solvent. The rags from this step are also destroyed from the process and have no further use except for the dry one which will continue to do the described task until the end of the day when it will go into a bucket for slightly soiled rags which will be used in the future in the spray gun cleaning process.

I spray color next. Depending on what color is being used this can be one or a few different steps but in terms of microfiber rags this is the stage where the rags get color to bring to the pile. Lets say I spray a purple which has been a recent color fascination. I would spray at least 3-4 coats of a deep bluish purple called "Pavo Purple" combined with a subtle blue sparkle affect called "Metajuls". I would sand between every coat with 800 grit which produces a very fine dust in the color of the painting. Accidental compositions are made as the dust collects with the solvent and enters the microfiber cloth. In this example the rags became marbled purple on blue or purple on orange. Into the pile they go.

The next step in the process of making the painting is clear-coating. This stage requires no microfiber rags at all while the clear coat is wet. In fact this is the one point in the entire process where the microfiber rag becomes a liability. When a microfiber rag is new it has little tiny loose bits of itself that need to be blown off with a air hose. These tiny hair like pieces of synthetic material are light and take flight very easy. If they land in the clear coat by accident it is similar to a fly landing on an interior wall freshly painted with latex paint - part heartbreaking, part rage-inducing, and tragically irreversible. During clear coating all microfibers are put away except for the pile. The assumption was that the pile was too far away from the actual booth to contaminate the process. The painting is left for twenty four hours minimum after clear coating.

Stepping into the booth after a successful or semi-successful clear coating procedure and seeing the painting alive with reflection and light is my most cherished moment in the entire process. I often touch the panel with a bare hand even though I know I shouldn't. My hand leaves prints and I immediately clean them with a brand new microfiber rag.

After the clear coat has dried I sand it again - this time with a 1500 grit - although it seems counter-intuitive. The freshly mirrored surface becomes hazy and it looks as though you have ruined the paintings' reflective finish. One more microfiber is used at this point to clean the panel of clear coat residue produced by sanding. The difference with this particular rag is instead of solvent it is saturated with water and rinsed and reused until the panel is clean. The reason the painting is sanded after being clear coated is to flatten any bits of dust or material that no doubt somehow landed in the clear coat during the spraying or drying process. Once the panel is uniformly hazy after sanding I know all the unwanted bits are now completely buried inside the surface of the clear coat so visually no singular distractive moments appear in the mirrored surface.

The stage following sanding the clear coat is called the compounding or buffing stage. This stage is the most challenging physical moment and the end of the entire process. The microfiber rags used after this point are used for polishing. When they are used for polishing they have much longer lives than those used in the earlier cleaning stages. All of the rags used for polishing end up being used for gun-cleaning or other odd jobs before ending up in the pile.

When I buff a painting I use a two-hand-operated rotary buffer that spins a six inch synthetic wool disc at 1500 revolutions per minute. I apply a polishing compound to the wool disc that penetrates the scratches of the sanded clear coat and polishes the surface of the painting into a mirror again. The compound is a particularly messy product. If it is allowed to dry it becomes hard to remove - it dries quickly and because of this the buffing stage is challenging and requires multiple micro fiber rags. One micro fiber rag is sprayed with a sweet smelling liquid wax that loosens and removes any residual polishing compound and adds a final shine to the painting.

At this point the painting is done. The paintings feel closed when they

have been made in this way. The clear coat aside from being a conductor of light acts as a protector for the sensitive color layers below it - it traps them and activates them. Ironically the painting continues to need to be accompanied by a microfiber rag after it leaves the studio. The painting for the remainder of its existence would be best maintained by a regular dusting and spray wax application applied with a microfiber rag.

The perfect painting making sequence would provoke the viewer to stand in front of the painting and evaluate themselves visually as if they were standing in front of a mirror. No ripple affects or orange peel should add unwanted distortion to the experience. The viewer should only experience themselves, the color and shape of the work and the directionality, intensity and quality of the available light in the space where the painting and viewer exist at that moment. In my mind the paintings are contemplations on color and material. The compositions and material stacking and additions of other industrial goods like stainless steel hardware are meant to complicate but point to the depth or quality of the paintings' color. Color I believe is infinitely rich with content and during my process of making paintings I seek not to understand color but to continually allow it to effect me and those who view my work in the vast spectrum of ways it has the power to easily do. I would never call color simple but rather powerful and consuming.

I have never been successful in making a painting in this perfect sequence. The process is in most ways a long fought battle against particulate debris and a labor-driven and meditative color worship. The process contains many parts of what I consider my practice-based artistic vernacular: repetitive labor, planning, impulsivity, waste, sentimentality, manipulation, fetish, humor, research and development, and until recently a large accidentally beautiful pile of fiber cloths.