THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

A THESIS
SUBMITTED ON THE THIRD DAY OF APRIL 2017
TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS
OF TULANE UNIVERISTY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
BY

KAORI MAEYAMA

APPROVED:

RONNA S. HARRIS, MFA

TERESA COLE, MFA

AARON COLLIER, MFA

ANTHONY BAAB, MFA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis committee, Ronna Harris, Aaron Collier, Anthony Baab, and Teresa Cole. Their generosity and guidance have been invaluable, and none of the paintings in my thesis exhibition or this writing would have materialized without their support.

I would also like to thank the faculty, staff, and fellow students of the Newcomb Art Department for constantly providing a rigorous, supportive, and creative environment: Elizabeth Boone, Laura Richens, Dan Alley, Anne Nelson, Jeremy Jones, Kevin Jones, Francine Stock, Molly LeBlanc, Alicia Dugas, Abdi Farra, Wiley Aker, Pippin Frisbie-Calder, and Christopher Gray.

These paintings would have looked less distinct from my past work without the insights of the former Newcomb faculty Adam Mysock; Doyle Gertjejansen, the retired Fine Arts Department Chair at the University of New Orleans. I am equally indebted to Phil Sandusky, Billy Solitario, and Sarah Griffin Thibodeaux for their teaching and immeasurable encouragement; Maureen Loughren for affecting me with her strength, compassion, and a slight anarchist leaning; Jason Affolder for our discussions on the dark side of New Orleans.

My paintings have their roots in what I have learned at the New Orleans Academy of Fine Arts, Arts Council of New Orleans, American Routes, the University of New Orleans Film Department, and the weekly Japanese calligraphy class by Ms. Ishikawa near my childhood home.

My sincere thanks goes to Takeshi "Apache" Akagi for putting the city of New Orleans, my muse, in my radar by playing me the Wild Magnolias albums back in 1994 at Tracks Records in Fukuoka, Japan. I am forever grateful to my parents, Chieko and Kazuo Maeyama, and my brother Takeshi Maeyama, for sending me to college halfway around the globe despite the financial sacrifice. I would also like to express my appreciation to Barbara, John, and Alysson Rushin for their kindness and encouragement.

Lastly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my guiding light, Aaron Rushin, for his selfless support, poetic vision, and excellent driving skills.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Distorting a New Orleans cityscape through a painted image in order to express the psychological state of the painter is similar to shooting a narrative film packed with metaphors. Without audio or moving images, dark street corners and urban highways exemplify a sense of alienation and uncertainty – something most people have felt at one time or another – with the use of canted angles and a predominantly muted palette. Affected by the combination of a sparse composition, blurred subject matter, and pixelated forms that disappear into the void, the scene insists on the viewer as the protagonist who shares the anxiety of the painter in a visceral way.

The collection of paintings in this exhibition represents New Orleans from two vantage points. In the series of black paintings, quiet street scenes from residential neighborhoods accentuate the pedestrian's point of view with the stillness and the eerie effect of sparse streetlights. Focusing on tones and atmosphere, the monochromatic nocturnes convey how places feel. The point of view of the passenger in a moving vehicle is indicated in the second series of images, replete with shadowy highway signs and structures. Seen from the security of a passing compartment, the moving images of the city's backside as seen through the windshield give the passenger a sense of speed and progress, although the passenger, unlike the driver, will never be in control. The uneasy existence in this borrowed space is only temporary, and where or how the journey ends is unknown.

The title of the exhibition, *Through a Glass Darkly*, refers to the use of a camera lens that first captured these reference photographs before human hands abstracted them into paintings. Another layer of glass (the windshield of a moving vehicle) further influenced the paintings in the passenger series. Additional reference is made to Ingmar

Bergman's 1961 film of the same title that the filmmaker adopted from a biblical phrase. The expression is used to explain having the "obscure or imperfect vision of reality," and that "we do not now see clearly, but at the end of time, we will do so."[1] The paintings may seem bleak or out of focus, but in each image there is light at the end of the dark tunnel. Using the New Orleans nightscapes as the subject matter, these paintings express the sense of unease, as well as fear and excitement by what may lie ahead.

Landscape as an expression of a psychological state is successfully achieved in Michelangelo Antonioni's first color film, *Red Desert* (1964). With unnatural hues and manipulated spatial relationships, Antonioni visually expresses the protagonist's struggles in an oppressive urban landscape filled with smoke and fog from the industrial factories and shipyards. The audience sees the world through her awkward and alienated eyes, and Antonioni's subjectivity dominates the picture beyond the typical point-of-view shots. The auteur stated that what mattered was the "reality that ends up on the screen. My reality."[2] His attitude towards what constitutes reality exemplifies Relativism, and his film greatly influenced the content of paintings in this exhibition in terms of utilizing visual metaphors to express the personal history and psychological condition as the reality of the painter.

The immediacy of the painting process proved essential in producing these paintings. Although they were made in a studio environment based on reference

---

[1] "through a glass darkly". *The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005. Web. 25 March 2017. http://www.dictionary.com/browse/through-a-glass-darkly

[2] Williams, James S. "The Rhythm of Life: An Appreciation of Michelangelo Antonioni, Extreme Aesthete of the Real." *Film Quarterly,* 62, No. 1, Fall 2008, pp. 46-57.

photographs, the visceral impression of a place played a crucial part in creating each painting, similar to painting a landscape on location using an *alla prima* process. In a way, painting on location is like musicians playing a live show instead of recording a studio album; no overdubbing, no re-recording of that out-of-tune guitar solo. Often called *plein air* painting, the goal of location painting is to capture the overall atmosphere of the place in that particular moment in an impressionistic manner. The paintings have to make the viewers feel as if they were there at the time of their creation.

Combined with composition and subject matter, overall color intensity and temperature can exaggerate the feel and atmosphere of a place. The city's abandoned structures, dumpsters, oversized trashcans, graffiti, cast shadows and reflections made strong impressions on me, and over the years, emphasizing negative space and a muted palette became more important in my paintings than realistically recording what was seen in a particular scene. Slowly the bleak subject matter progressed into night scenes filled with large negative spaces. Instead of capturing the effect of sunlight, the stillness and the loneliness of the night scenes are exaggerated with the use of a monochromatic palette. Although the subject matter of the urban landscape stayed the same, each composition became strictly tonal and devoid of color, with special emphasis on sparse streetlights and their uncanny effect.

The primary inspiration for this transition came from American *film noir* of the 1940s and the '50s. Many earlier Hollywood films had previously used city streets and nightscapes as a backdrop for the characters in the foreground, but in *film noir* the background became a lead character. Strategically lit streets in canted angles reflected the mental state of the protagonist who is usually a war veteran-turned private eye in

isolation, searching for his own space in an unfamiliar post-war society. With the sparse composition and large amount of dark negative space, the paint layers of the black paintings are left as thin as possible in order to mimic the projected film on a silver screen.

Another visual influence was the nocturne series of paintings by James McNeill Whistler, including *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875). They may lack definitive narrative elements, but his hazy, atmospheric nocturnes establish tone and mood, and the subject matter becomes the feeling evoked. Whistler was a collector of Japanese artifacts and woodblock prints, and although his nocturnes did not replicate the compositional elements of well-known Japanese prints, "those Nocturnes in which he aimed at a narrow range of colour and whose main characteristic is subtlety and delicacy have a strong resemblance to monochrome *sumi-e* (ink paintings)."[3] The allure of traditional *sumi-e* is its visual purity and simplicity expressed by the black of the ink and the white of the paper, and Whistler considered black as "the universal harmonizer," since his teacher Charles Gleyre taught him that "ivory black was the base of tone."[4]

The use of black in American paintings is most prominent in Abstract Expressionism, especially by the New York painter Norman Lewis. Underappreciated for the color of his skin, his art utilized black as both the medium and the subject matter. Ann Eden Gibson, a scholar of Abstract Expressionism, explains that Lewis' post-war black paintings are consistent with Theodor Adorno's belief that the use of black as content in

---

[3] Ono, Ayako. "Whistler's Japonisme." *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and nineteenth-century Japan*. London. RoutledgeCurzon. 2003. pp. 41-86.

[4] Ibid. Ono. pp. 78.

art is "one of the deepest impulses of abstraction."[5] Gibson also suggests that the painter's intent after 1945 was "to make paintings that resisted narrative interpretation."[6] A layer of black paint can shut the viewer out at the surface and deny entry into a painting. In landscape painting, on the other hand, the painter and the viewer share the vantage point, and even the large amount of blackness in my nocturnes can invite the viewer into the space beyond the picture plane. The illusion of standing on the street corner and looking at the unlit structure one block ahead is exemplified in the painting *The Dark End of the Street*.

In New Orleans, dark quiet streets have a way of generating visceral, multilayered emotions. Instead of screaming for attention, the shadows permeate tranquility and uncertainty at the same time. Mundane cityscapes remind me of the Japanese term *wabi-sabi*, which praises an amalgamation of characteristics in everyday life, such as solitude, simplicity, naturalness, modesty, and melancholy. The term also implies the beauty within impermanence, imperfection, and emptiness: I consider these implications as both the locals' view of their own city, and the fatalistic unease that residents pacify with temporary pleasure.

By focusing on tones and atmosphere, my monochromatic nocturnes convey how places feel through painted images. Aside from the thinned raw umber undertone, black is the only color employed, with value change as the sole means of describing forms. Instead of building up paint layers, subtraction methods retain the translucency of the

---

[5] Gibson, Ann Eden. "Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York." *Norman Lewis Black Paintings 1946-1977*. New York. The Studio Museum in Harlem. 1998. pp. 11-30

[6] Ibid. Gibson. pp. 25.

black paint and warm undertones, inviting the viewer to step into the darkness. A lack of color transforms the familiar street scenes into something mysterious, and absence of detail allows common objects to become alluring. These sparse compositions rely on the viewer's memory and imagination to fill the dark negative spaces.

As a Japanese painter living in the United States, my goal was to create my version of *sumi-e* with Western art materials, such as oil paint and oil painting brushes, and a mash-up of traditional Japanese aesthetics and contemporary Western ideology. A series of nocturnes on canvas were created using ivory black oil paint, with positive space carved out in a subtraction process utilizing clean brushes and paper towels soaked in odorless mineral spirits (Gamsol). After experiencing months of debilitating headaches, Japanese *sumi* ink and water replaced oil paint and Gamsol. As a result, the use of *sumi* ink allowed me to celebrate my cultural identity even more. At the same time, the untraditional method allowed me to bend the long, strict, and religious history the medium implies.

Undiluted, mass-produced liquid *sumi* ink on canvas denies the subtle gradations that master ink painters of the past created with solid ink sticks ground with water on an ink stone, then applied to absorbent paper with a long, soft round brush made of animal hair. Traditional techniques are replaced with the use of a reduction process wherein light areas of the canvas are created from wiping off the inked surface with a clean brush and paper towels. Also, the typical light-dark ratio in composition is inversed in my night scenes, as opposed to conventional *sumi-e*, where black ink creates positive forms, and the white of the paper exists as negative space. Instead, the positive space in my paintings is devoid of ink, and the black negative space holds the most layers of pigment. *Sumi*,

like any liquid ink, is not made for the vertical surface of a stretched canvas on an easel. Embracing what is considered a taboo in traditional *sumi-e* practice enabled me to manipulate the old medium and utilize it in my own way, while visually retaining a trace of Japanese *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, as well as the immediacy of the process in only having one shot at completing a piece.

Ironically, the static compositions of *sumi* paintings, where the time seems to stand still, needed to be finished within a matter of an hour or two due to the short working time of ink on canvas. The time restriction was a hindrance in creating a large-scale work like the triptych *Lumière*. Moreover, the urge to express the other side of the coin in paintings that resemble dynamic movement and speed grew stronger. As a result, an idea for another series of paintings emerged that would mimic the blurred vision of a passenger in a moving vehicle. The passenger series complements the concept of merging the static and dynamic, or stillness and movement (*sei-to-dou* in Japanese), which is similar to the Chinese philosophy of yin and yang, or light and dark, where opposing forces are believed to synergistically elevate each other.

Printmaking brayers proved to be the perfect choice in executing the dynamic paintings opposite of the static *sumi* series made with brushes. With accelerated movement, brayers can produce a hazy, pixelated visual effect in adding and removing layers of paint, and express the sense of time and speed. Also, Cobra water-soluble oil paints along with Gamblin Solvent-Free Fluid were used in order to avoid toxic solvents while allowing for longer work time. The inherent tackiness of water-soluble oil paint prevented the use of conventional paintbrushes: a squeegee, Q-tips, and kitchen silicon utensils along with brayers took over as primary instruments. Consequently, the highway

overpasses and road signs in the reference photographs are abstracted into simple geometric shapes. In order to express the intangible quality of light and dark as seen in film projection, translucent blacks, blues, and warm earth tones dominate the new paintings. The long open time of oil and the brayer widths varying from two to six inches enabled the passenger series to be executed on large wooden panels up to four feet by eight feet.

Looking out of a moving car at night as a passenger evokes a vague feeling of helplessness and emptiness, because the passenger is not in control. The powerlessness of the passenger is evident metaphorically in another Antonioni film called *The Passenger* (1975), where the protagonist, a reporter who fakes his own death to assume the identity of a dead man, slowly slips into the inescapable downfall in a foreign land. Just like the reporter who threw his identity away by choice, sometimes the sense of identity and individuality dies inevitably when one moves into a new environment alone, and there is a long and dark void before a new identity emerges. Similarly, Iggy Pop's *The Passenger* has its protagonist go through identity shifts, as the subject pronouns switch from "I" to "we" to "he,"[7] as if the passenger starts off as an individual, then becomes a part of a group, and finally transforms into another human being.

The lyrics were inspired by the singer's excursions through the streets of Europe and the United States, and what he saw through the passenger side window, since he did not own a car or a driver's license.[8] The words are also loosely based on a poem about cinema and vision by Jim Morrison called *Notes on Vision*:[9]

---

[7] Pop, Iggy and Ricky Gardiner. "The Passenger." Lust For Life. RCA. 1977.

> A room moves over a landscape, uprooting the mind,
> astonishing vision. A gray film melts off the
> eyes, and runs down the cheeks. Farewell.
>
> Modern life is a journey by car. The Passengers
> change terribly in their reeking seats, or roam
> from car to car, subject to unceasing transformation.
> Inevitable progress is made toward the beginning
> (there is no difference in terminals), as we
> slice through cities, whose ripped backsides present
> a moving picture of windows, signs, streets,
> buildings. Sometimes other vessels, closed
> worlds, vacuums, travel along beside to move
> ahead or fall utterly behind.

Driving a car provides a temporary security and a sense of being in control so strong that most longtime drivers can never give up driving. There is a clear division between the inside and outside of a car, and this divide develops an instant 'me against them' mentality. Car interiors are also the driver's private space, a sanctuary. A passenger, on the other hand, is transient. Alienated from the outside world, the car interior gives solace to a passenger, but reminds one of powerlessness at the same time. It's only a borrowed, temporary space.

The canted angles in my paintings express the sense of unease, and unbalanced compositions create tension and suspense. The speed of the brayer's movement matches the speed of the moving vehicle, and the geometric marks follow the outlines of repetitive highway structures. The hazy landmarks and suggested details fall into the darkness, or they are just an illusion all along. Imaginary fog, smoke, and smudges on the windshield

---

[8] Perry, Kevin EG. "Josh Homme on Iggy Pop," *The Gurdian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 5 March 2016. Web. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/mar/05/iggy-pop-and-josh-homme-talk-about-their-post-pop-depression-album

[9] Morrison, Jim. "Notes on Vision." *The Lords and the New Creatures: Poems by Jim Morrison*, Simon & Schuster, 1969, pp. 32.

indistinguishably meld together on the painted surface. The line between fact and fiction is extremely thin, and in some cases the line is invisible. In *Louisiana Blues*, the rectangle highway sign at the end of the dark bridge, as well as the transparent paint and the flatness of the surface, resemble a film screen. The vertical marks made by a clean brayer have the appearance of pixelated digital images, in addition to that of a driving rain on the windshield. The ambiguity of blurred forms invites active looking, imaginative interpretations, and contextual guesswork by the viewers based on their memories.

The paintings in this exhibition were created in isolation, in a spacious studio with north light coming through thick blocks of glass. It was an ideal space for any painter to work in. At the same time, it felt dark, cold, and damp compared to the sunny public street beyond the thick blocks of glass wall. It was a perfect place to dive into an identity crisis, and express my anxiety in painted images. It also gave me the opportunity to question every aspect of my past painting practices handed down by my former art teachers. This studio with a glass wall challenged me to make my own choices for the first time in my painting career and for better or worse, a new identity was born out of this experience: the identity as a realism painter, an unreliable narrator, and a manipulator of the material world, who can create alternative realities within the picture plane.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gibson, Ann Eden. “Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York.” *Norman Lewis Black Paintings 1946-1977*. New York. The Studio Museum in Harlem. 1998. pp. 11-30

Morrison, Jim. “Notes on Vision.” *The Lords and the New Creatures: Poems by Jim Morrison*, Simon & Schuster. 1969. pp. 32.

Ono, Ayako. “Whistler’s Japonisme.” *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and nineteenth-century Japan*. London. RoutledgeCurzon. 2003. pp. 41-86.

Perry, Kevin EG. “Josh Homme on Iggy Pop,” *The Gurdian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 5 March 2016. Web. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/mar/05/iggy-pop-and-josh-homme-talk-about-their-post-pop-depression-album

Pop, Iggy and Ricky Gardiner. “The Passenger.” Lust For Life. RCA. 1977.

"through a glass darkly". *The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005. Web. 25 March 2017. http://www.dictionary.com/browse/through-a-glass-darkly

Williams, James S. “The Rhythm of Life: An Appreciation of Michelangelo Antonioni, Extreme Aesthete of the Real.” *Film Quarterly,* 62, No. 1, Fall 2008, pp. 46-57.

# BIOGRAPHY

Kaori Maeyama is an urban landscape painter born and raised in Fukuoka, Japan. Since arriving in New Orleans alone with one duffel bag in 1994, she has been a focus puller, an audio editor, and a plein air painter. While studying in Tulane's MFA program she learned to paint without paintbrushes or white tube paint. A life-long passenger by choice, she is interested in moving images, linear perspective, and the use of landscape as a depiction of the psychological state of the protagonist that is not seen in the picture.

After graduating from Fukuoka YMCA International College, Kaori worked as a buyer at Tracks Records before relocating to New Orleans. She received her BA in Film Production at the University of New Orleans, worked for a public radio program *American Routes* for 15 years, and participated in plein air events in and around New Orleans. In 2012, two of her paintings were hung at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans as part of *Louisiana Contemporary* juried exhibition.

Installation View, Front Gallery

Installation View, Front Gallery

Installation View, Back Gallery

Installation View, Back Gallery

*The Road Never Ends (Nocturne in Black and Gold)*
2017, oil on panel, 24”x18”

*Louisiana Blues*
2017, oil on panel, 48”x48”

*Diamonds on Your Windshield*
2017, oil on panel, 48”x38”

*Huey P. May Ice in Cold Weather*
2017, oil on panel, 32”x48”

*The Dark End of the Street*
2015, oil on canvas, 16”x22”

*Intersection*
2016, ink on canvas, 18”x24”

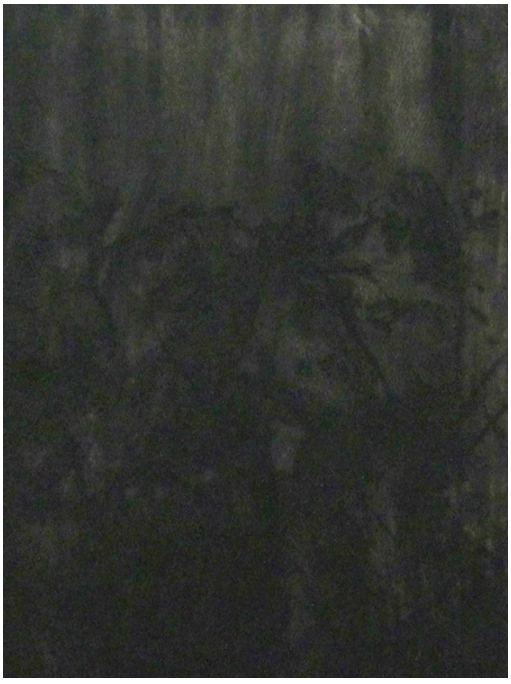
*Portrait of a Hydrant*
2016, ink on canvas, 18”x24”

*Fences*
2016, ink on canvas, 18”x24”

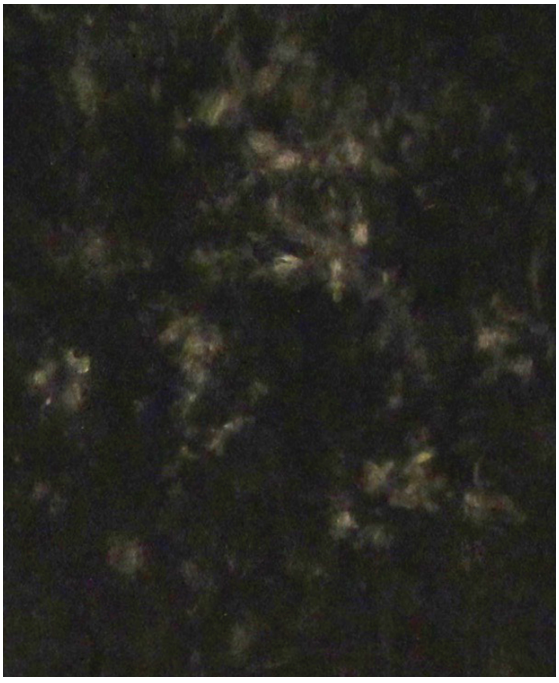
*Roisin Dubh*
2016, ink on canvas, 18”x36”

*Roisin Dubh* (detail)

*Lumière* (triptych)
2016, ink on canvas, 48”x96”



*Lumière* (detail 1)



*Lumière* (detail 2)

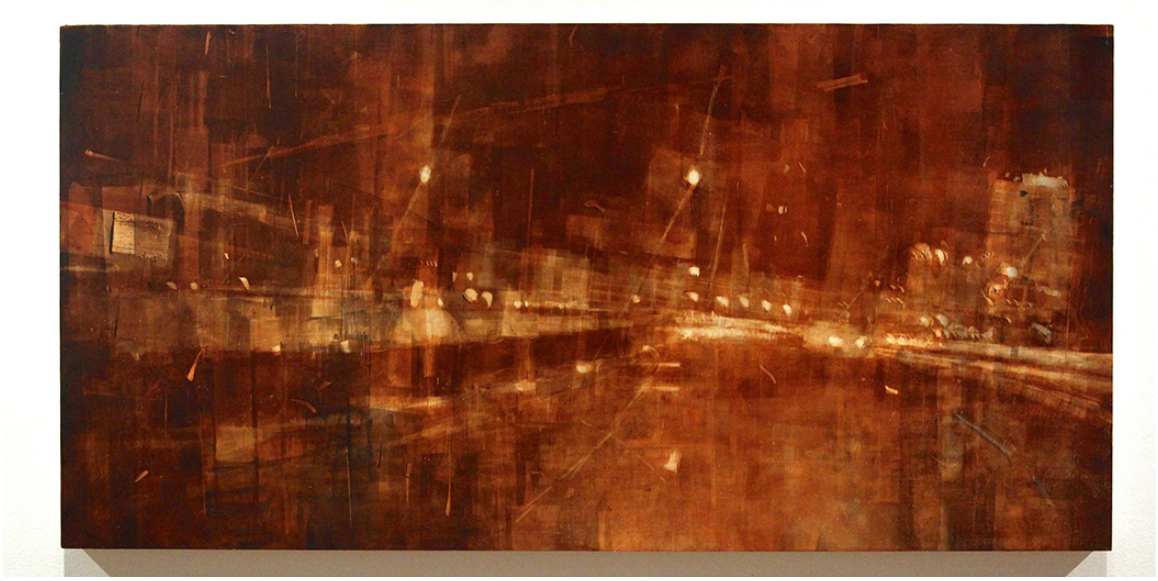
*Chocolate City* (diptych)
2017, oil on panel, 48”x96”

*Chocolate City* (detail)

*Through a Glass Darkly*
2017, oil on panel, 12”x16”

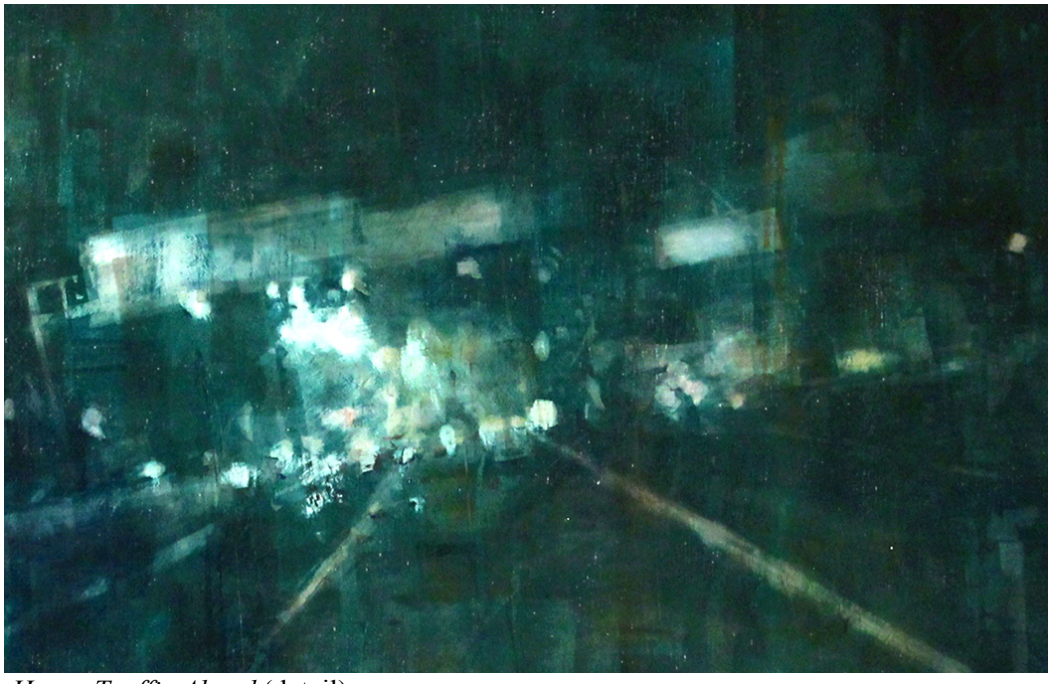
Installation View, Front Gallery

*Up the Ghost of Saturday Night*
2017, oil on panel, 36”x48”



*Around the Bend*
2017, oil on panel, 24”x48”

*Heavy Traffic Ahead*
2017, oil on panel, 36”x48”



*Heavy Traffic Ahead* (detail)

*Into the Void* (diptych)
2017, oil on panel, 48”x96”

*Into the Void* (detail)