

**PAINTING THINGS**

By

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## Abstract

This essay traces the evolution of my practice-driven, reflexive investigation surrounding the iterative process of painting things. The body of work described in the essay follows the chronology of my studio production as I explore methods of observational painting. The accompanying historical and theoretical research revolves around contemporary painting discourse, object-hood and visual perception. Questions around painting as contemporary practice are approached through topics of still life, materialism, observation, repetition, abstraction, and painting's material language.

The object retains a central role in this research as my paintings are grounded within the context of the still life. Referencing critical theory surrounding human-object interactions, including the writing of Jane Bennett and Bill Brown, I consider how vibrant matter and thing theory inform my perception of still life objects, as well as the vitality and agency of the painting itself. Weaving together writing of WJT Mitchell, James Elkins and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I propose that the practice of observational painting can reveal a transformational and reciprocal exchange between observer and observed from which dominant subject-object hierarchies are dispelled. Through the repetition, obstruction and the concept of afterimage, I intend for my work to move beyond observed depictions of objects to approach the questions of where an object ends, the subject begins, and how these dualisms mingle and coalesce within the space of painting.

To further my awareness and understanding of what constitutes the work of a painting, this essay aims to interrogate the double nature and function of the medium: as a mimetic representation of things in the world, and as an autonomous, vibrant entity composed of its own material logic and language. From this logic, the potentials of representation give way to the immanent qualities of surface, colour, form and materiality. The complexities and limits of representational painting are further addressed through historical and contemporary artist references, including Paul Cézanne, Giorgio Morandi, Philip Guston and Amy Sillman.

**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Figures.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Collection.....	2
Still Life.....	5
Painting Things.....	12
Observational Painting.....	19
Circling Forward.....	27
Works Cited.....	33
Works Consulted.....	36

## List of Figures

Figure 1: M.E. Sparks, <i>Grid Collection</i> , 2014.....	2
Figure 2: M.E. Sparks, <i>Silver Lining</i> , 2015.....	4
Figure 3: M.E. Sparks, <i>Roadblock</i> , 2015.....	5
Figure 4: M.E. Sparks, <i>Island</i> , 2015.....	6
Figure 5: Giorgio Morandi, <i>Still Life</i> , 1962 Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Siegen, DE.....	9
Figure 6: M.E. Sparks, <i>Resting Obstruction</i> , 2015.....	11
Figure 7: M.E. Sparks, <i>We'd Like To Help</i> , 2015.....	14
Figure 8: Philip Guston, <i>Painter's Table</i> , 1973 National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.....	16
Figure 9: Philip Guston, <i>Painter's Forms</i> , 1972 Private Collection, Woodstock NY.....	17
Figure 10: M.E. Sparks, <i>Floor Life (Painters' Forms)</i> , 2016.....	18
Figure 11: M.E. Sparks, <i>Pink Kiss</i> , 2015.....	20
Figure 12: Paul Cézanne, <i>Mont Sainte-Victoire</i> , 1902-04 Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia PA.....	22
Figure 13: M.E. Sparks, <i>Afterimage</i> , 2016.....	25
Figure 14: M.E. Sparks, <i>Vision Block (No.4)</i> , 2016.....	26
Figure 15: M.E. Sparks, <i>Vision Block (No.1-3)</i> , 2016.....	27
Figure 16: Amy Sillman, <i>Still Life #3</i> , 2014 Capitain Petzel, Berlin, DE. ....	28

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Painting functions mimetically in its ability to emulate the world around us and in its inherent self-referentiality; every gesture situated within and bound to art history. The potential for painting to advance beyond strategic historical gestures<sup>1</sup> lies in its internal logic and material presence. This immanent logic and language of painting can function beyond historical mining to continue developing new forms of making and questioning. Art critic David Geers questions how contemporary painting may serve “not as a shrine to the past, but as a platform for reforming the present and prefiguring the future”(37). While Geers calls for a rethinking and reinvention of painting to evade the revival of concluded histories, I question how to still acknowledge painting’s weighted history, avoid the lure of nostalgia<sup>2</sup>, and generate new ways of experiencing the medium through methods of observation, representation, obstruction and repetition.

From the broad and evolving discourse on contemporary painting, my research has centred on still life painting, its history and its current potential. Still life provides a platform to address the following questions: 1) How can still life painting influence our understanding of objects and the meaning ascribed to them? 2) How does the process of observation influence the development of painting? 3) How can still life be used to further expand and understand the work of a painting? This final question informs an overarching investigation of my practice: *how to paint?* This refers to technical and formal concerns and also reflexively considers the medium

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<sup>1</sup> The strategic and situative gesture is discussed by art critic Jan Verwoert in his seminal essay “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because they Think It’s a Good Idea” (2005). He refers to the writing of art historian Yve-Alain Bois from *Painting as Model* (1990), in which Bois defines the strategic model in painting as a well-considered location of a work within a network of references. Verwoert proposes that this gesture functions as a self-justifying effort to legitimize the work and may be limiting on its own: “the artist would be limited to the declaration of his or her own position over and over again”. Verwoert proposes that painting’s ability to communicate lies in its immanent material qualities rather than its conceptual position as a strategic situative gesture.

<sup>2</sup> I consider the nostalgia for painting’s history to be one causal factor of “zombie-formalism”, a term presented by art critic Walter Robinson in his 2014 article “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism”. Robinson argues that contemporary painting is bringing back to life discarded aesthetics and tropes of formalist abstraction. This argument intersects with Geers’ theory of neo-formalism presented in his essays “Neo-Modern” (2012) and “Post-Script to Neo-Modern”(2014).

specific, image-making practice of painting within the post-medium<sup>3</sup> art world and image-saturated society. Although my research has come to revolve around the still life and the representation of objects, painting remains the crux of my thesis as a method of production and site of methodological inquiry.

## Collection

*Grid Collection* (see fig. 1) forms a foundation for my current work and is re-used as objects within my still lifes. The grid paintings use varying shapes and sizes of discarded

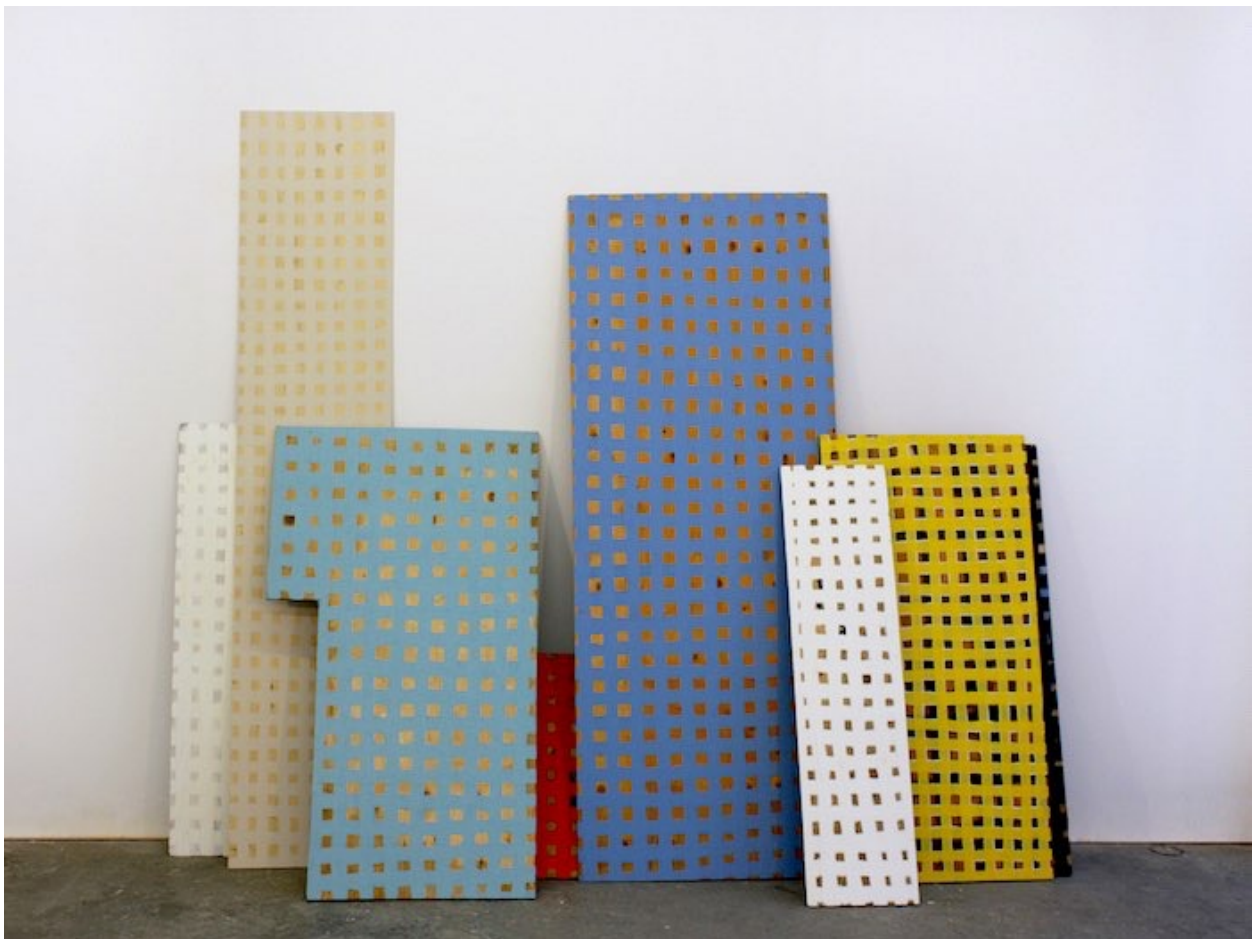


Fig. 1 - M.E. Sparks, *Grid Collection* (installation view) 2014, latex paint on plywood

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<sup>3</sup> In *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (2000), Rosalind Krauss proposes that with the onset of conceptual art a post-medium condition developed. This created an irreversible move away from media-immanent (medium-specific) practices.

plywood that I collected from the city, intrigued by their stained, rough surfaces. Each painting consists of thick lines stretching across the plywood in an all-over grid composition<sup>4</sup>. There is an optical push and pull between squares of unpainted wood and painted lines: one momentarily asserts itself as figure while the other becomes ground. Collecting urban detritus has become a foundational process in the beginning stages of my paintings. Similar to gathering plywood, I collect discarded objects from peripheral spaces within the city and reassemble them in the studio as still life arrangements. Over the past year I have focused on a small selection of found objects<sup>5</sup> including found plywood, pallets, broken cinderblocks, bricks and pieces of concrete. The concrete objects' relationship to the 'natural' world intrigues me as they mimic organic rock forms yet retain evidence of manufactured, architectural structures. Each of these objects is a fragment, its origins often unknown. The partial objects are decontextualized, physically abstracted, and often appear as familiar yet undefinable painted forms (see fig. 2).

My transition from the plywood grids to still life painting echoes American painter Philip Guston's shift from abstraction to figuration: "Only when certain doubts cleared in 1968 and I began feeling more positive about drawings of the tangible world did I begin to paint again. Finally, only total immersion in painting 'things' settled the issue." (in Yau "Phillip Guston's Line"). The simplicity and ambiguity of the phrase "painting things" describes both my plywood paintings and the observational depiction of still life. "Painting things" is an effort to generate new ways of looking and to deepen my understanding of the objects under scrutiny: to

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<sup>4</sup> The grid emerges in early 20th century modernism, seen in the suprematist work of Kazimir Malevich and the compositions of Piet Mondrian. From there, the grid maintains a critical position in modern history, from the paintings of Agnes Martin, Ellsworth Kelly, and Mary Heilmann, to sculptures of Carl Andre, Sol Le Witt and Donald Judd. The grid's persistence is noted by Krauss in her 1979 essay "Grids": "Yet it is safe to say that no form within the whole of modern aesthetic production has sustained itself so relentlessly while at the same time being so impervious to change....As the experience of Mondrian amply demonstrates, development is precisely what the grid resists" (50).

<sup>5</sup> In his book *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), WJT Mitchell defines the found object by what it is *not*: the sought object, the aesthetic, desired, valued, symbolic, hated, or lost object" (116). The life of the found object continuously evolves once it is "discovered, revealed, reframed, and put on display, consequently becoming fetishes and [...] foundational for a whole series of new findings and appropriation" (116).





Fig. 2 - M.E. Sparks, *Silver Lining*, 2015, oil on canvas, 48" x 48"

understand them through the medium specificity, and perhaps limitations<sup>6</sup>, of painting. The specific material qualities of paint - the process of laying down colours side by side, or the composing of forms within a rectangular, flat support - all influence the formal relationships that emerge in the process of painting something from observation. The representation of objects is inherently mediated through these historically laden, material-specific limitations<sup>7</sup>. While I gain an intimate knowledge and understanding of the objects through painting them from observation,

<sup>6</sup> In *Painting as Model* (1990) Bois quotes Henri Matisse, who writes: "I have always believed that a large part of the beauty of a picture arises from the struggle an artist wages with his limited medium"(26).

<sup>7</sup> The medium-specific limitations of painting are presented by Clement Greenberg in the seminal 1960 essay "Modernist Painting" : "...the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment -- were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly" ("Modernist Painting"). While Greenberg's ideas of painting's formal purity have been subverted and proven untenable, I remain intrigued by what may still constitute a medium-specificity of painting as it continues to retain a unique autonomy in contemporary practices. For example, this topic is taken up by contemporary critic Isabelle Graw, who describes a less restrictive medium specific quality of painting as a highly personalized production of signs that is inherently indexical, evoking a strong bond between product and maker (50).

this learning process inevitably extends into a new and evolving understanding of how to paint. I aim to propose a renewed interpretation of still life painting that simultaneously interrogates the banal and inanimate object, its overlooked agency and vitality, as well as the historically weighted yet ever-present and evocative material vitality of painting.



Fig. 3 - M.E. Sparks, *Roadblock*, 2015, oil on canvas, 48" x 48"

### **Still Life**

The painting *Roadblock* (see fig. 3) depicts three centrally positioned stacked objects. The picture's pictorial space is shallow and flattened, splitting open to reveal deeper space of washed colour and loose gestures. Dark shapes push into the frame and position themselves on the same

plane as the objects. Undefined scale and flatness adds to the objects' ambiguity as they hover between the familiar and abstract, yet remain in what appears to be observed, receding perspective. I consider the foreground centrality of the objects, as well as the table-like support they rest on, to situate this work within a system of still life painting. Similar to working through the historical and formal limitations of a medium, I am intrigued by these found objects for the challenge of representing them. Both the banal plywood pieces and the stolid, concrete forms are used to obstruct my habitual methods of painting, and in turn generate a deeper understanding and awareness of working from observation. In the painting *Island* (see fig. 4) a plywood grid is positioned with the collection of undefined things. It acts as both a doorway into



Fig. 4- M.E. Sparks, *Island*, 2015, oil on canvas, 60" x 48"

abstract space as well a tangible, although unfamiliar, object resting precariously on top of its companions. The table edge, which creates a horizontal break in the vertically dominant composition, again positions the objects within a still life structure. In an analysis of western still life painting, art historian Norman Bryson briefly explores the “life of the table” as a “passive and dependent”(13) receptor to the cultural and historical objects it presents. The table in *Island* reclaims a kind of agency; its narrow legs and tilting edge appear ready to upend the pyramid of objects. The still life, throughout history, implies a human subject outside of the frame (the collector, arranger or painter of the objects), however in *Island* there is a suggested liveliness to the relationships among the objects, bringing human involvement into question.

In Bryson’s book *Looking At The Overlooked* (1990) still life painting is defined as a form of rhopography: “the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks”(61). While the subject matter of my paintings corresponds to this definition, the identity and function of the objects, as in *Roadblock* and *Island*, remain ambiguous, which shifts focus to surface, colour, edges and spatial relationships between forms. I am interested in how the flattened, unfamiliar objects also function as undefined, blank slates for viewers’ projections. Although each object asserts a distinct identity, they are simultaneously neutral and receptive. I recognize this as a contradiction between the specificity of each object and their undefinable form. It is also a contradiction of subject matter versus formalism, or perhaps a contradiction between meaning and lack thereof. I acknowledge these contradictions in an attempt to work between them and resist prescribed binaries, predominantly representation and abstraction. By working within a liminal space, the still life objects function formally while also generating narrative through dynamic, and often playful, inter-relationships.

Art historian Hanneke Grootenboer investigates the historical exclusion of still life from dominant art and philosophy discourse, describing how the genre has “confronted scholars with the simple yet disturbing question of what still lifes are ‘about’ ”(22). Bryson also addresses this exclusion in his historical account of the still life<sup>8</sup>, while Grootenboer goes on to analyze what provoked this perceived lack of meaning or narrative. Focusing on 17th century Dutch Still Life, Grootenboer describes how the use of trivial objects and the absence of human figures positioned still life as a low-ranking art form for its lack of narrative (compared to history or landscape painting, for example). It is the historical silencing of still life, provoked by its superficial silence and stillness, that intrigues me; its resistance to language and to being ‘about’ something readily describable. Grootenboer recounts 18th century philosopher Denis Diderot’s failed attempt to describe a Chardin still life: “Diderot’s failing words betray that the complexity of still lifes resides precisely in the difficulty of saying something about them to begin with. I believe that what still life communicates is not a story, but a theory that is a form of thinking in visual terms” (25). The failure of language when faced with the “silence” of still life is significant in my decision to engage with this genre because I understand it to be one of painting’s fundamental qualities - communication through the visual and material, independent of language.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, I question if it is possible for still life to remain silent. Still life painting resists narrative language and is used throughout history to serve the formalities of

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<sup>8</sup> Bryson begins his historical discussion of still life with the Roman still life category ‘xenia’(17), and next to Dutch 17th century still lifes, and to modernist painting, spanning centuries through which still life remained an autonomous genre that was considered absent of narrative and therefore a lower genre of painting. He writes: “it pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs: there is a wholesale eviction of the Event”(61).

<sup>9</sup> I consider this intrinsic silence of still life is a determining factor in its persistence throughout painting history and particularly abstraction. From the work of Paul Cezanne, Georges Braques, Henri Matisse, to Giorgio Morandi, the still life was used as a vehicle to interrogate ideas beyond the objects presented - to arrange elements of composition, colour, painted marks, and move painting away from an illustrative function. I consider this function of still life echoed in contemporary painting, as seen in Amy Sillman’s suggestive abstractions, Etienne Zack’s cluttered studio scenes, or Katherine Bernhardt’s all-over compositions of trivial, consumer objects.



Fig. 5 - Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, 1962, oil on canvas, 12" x 14", Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen. Used with permission from © 2016 Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen.

painting, yet simultaneously, the objects tell their own story, have cultural and socio-political connotations, and generate agency and new meaning as assembled, interacting painted forms.

The paintings of Italian 20th century painter Giorgio Morandi evoke contradictory qualities of still life. His paintings depict domestic items centrally arranged on a tabletop from which figure and ground often merge as edges fall apart and areas of brushwork blend together (see fig. 5). The objects are distilled of symbolism and narrative as Morandi searches instead for ideal compositions of form, colour and value, often inventing shadows and altering colours to achieve this (Fergonzi 16). Through repetition and simplification, the objects become Morandi's visual lexicon used as a "point of departure to explore abstraction" (Abramowicz 13). While Morandi's paintings are seemingly void of narrative, it is their silent exterior that provokes

deeper meaning. Belgian painter Luc Tuymans addresses the quiet nature of Morandi's work as an act of political escapism: "a self-recusal from the political crisis enveloping his country" (*Painting the Unseen*).<sup>10</sup> Morandi's still lifes generate narrative through their purposeful silence, telling of his absorbed, isolated, "escapist" practice of repeatedly painting the same objects. The work is also, undeniably, about paint itself: a devoted investigation into the work of a painting through formal explorations. In relation to Paul Cézanne, who's paintings influenced Morandi, the historian and philosopher Gottfried Boehm writes: "This double nature of the picture - to consist of elements and to show a subject - can also be observed in Morandi's work. Its colouristic structure oscillates between formal and figurative; both ways of seeing becoming interwoven" (14).

Morandi's recurring composition of central objects on a shallow foreground edge informs my painting *Resting Obstruction* (see fig. 6), which depicts two stacked objects supported by a base of planks. While edges coalesce and fall apart and the scale and density of forms is ambiguous, like Morandi's still lifes, the objects remain grounded within perspectival space while oscillating between what is observed, imagined, familiar and unfamiliar. Although Morandi's objects appear silent, they generate dynamic, shifting relationships. The blocks in *Resting Obstruction*, like heavy bodies, also form a reciprocal, dependent relationship to one another. In an attempt to represent both the stillness and the inherent vibrancy of these objects, I have chosen to paint them face-on with little perspective, obscuring their "other" sides from view. I paint their edges and surfaces to imply both specificity of form and the possibility for mergence or falling apart, implying a kind of latent vitality and potentiality within the objects.

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<sup>10</sup> Tuymans, who's work often deals with overt political subject matter, intentionally adopts Morandi's escapist, seemingly apolitical gesture in his painting *Still Life (2002)*, presented for Documenta 11 following the 9/11 attacks (*Painting the Unseen*). The large-scale painting depicts a humble arrangement of banal objects, superficially void of narrative and political commentary yet heavily charged through its intentional silence.



Fig. 6 - M.E. Sparks, *Resting Obstruction*, 2015, oil on canvas, 84" x 72"

These found, trivial objects I work with are, on the surface, blank and neutral, but not expressionless. In *Resting Obstruction* the painted objects present flat, expansive faces that give little away to painter or viewer. They function simultaneously as open, blank slates as well as opaquely stolid, even confrontational, forms. I feel provoked to represent the objects at an expanded scale in order to obstruct the kind of comfort or straight-ahead stability I find in the process of observational painting. Enlarging the objects broadens the reading of the work beyond still life painting, as the expanded forms evoke a relationship in size to the viewer's body and



become new things entirely, from doorways, landscapes to monoliths and monuments.

This decision to continue using found concrete objects as central characters in my paintings correlates with research surrounding object-hood, specifically the historical reappearance of the stone as an essential nonliving thing<sup>11</sup>. The stone has come to represent the passivity perceived in objects, referred to as fundamentally inanimate throughout western philosophy. It is perhaps an ideal thing to propose a reconsideration of object agency, at once passive, silent and overlooked as well as receptive to metaphor and poetics: solid yet impressionable. The concrete forms I work with are conglomerates of broken stone and sand, which I have come to consider as physical and metaphorical assemblages of energies held within cold, stolid exteriors.

### **Painting Things**

Still life painting has led me to contemporary theories of materialism, including political scientist Jane Bennett's theory of vibrant matter and critical theorist Bill Brown's thing theory. In the book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology Of Things* (2010) Bennett recognizes the politicized, autonomous power of objects by identifying them as active agents in the world. She proposes that all things are in fact "vivid entities", citing her experience of looking at pieces of garbage on the road: "at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence: junk, then claimant; inert matter, then live wire" (5). The tableau of objects were expressive actants, calling out, positioning the viewer as a thing among things, and subverting the distinction of subject (living) and object (non-living). Bennett defines these dynamic

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<sup>11</sup> For example, 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza writes of free will and desire, using the inanimate stone to further exemplify his idea that humans, like stones, do not exercise free will: "Further conceive, I beg, that a stone, while continuing in motion, should be capable of thinking and knowing, that it is endeavouring, as far as it can, to continue to move. Such a stone, being conscious merely of its own endeavour and not at all indifferent, would believe itself to be completely free, and would think that it continued in motion solely because of its own wish...." (391).

groupings as assemblages: “[the material’s] efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (21). Assemblages are pulsing, always changing, as every thing within them emits a distinct and shifting vital force (24). The energy and agency of vibrant material exists as *thing-power*, defined as an autonomous, inexplicable vitality in all non-living things (18). In correlation to the inexplicable thing-power of vibrant objects, I draw connections to Brown’s essay “Thing Theory” from 2001, stemming from Heidegger’s distinction between things and objects<sup>12</sup>. Brown posits that when the normal function of an object is altered, it reasserts itself as an unnamable *thing* and redefines dominant subject-object hierarchies:<sup>13</sup> “The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation”(4). Brown goes on to describe how a thing is both specific and general, particular to a singular object yet also used to describe any and all objects or enigmas. The term “thing” is therefore used when all other words fall short. For this reason, I consider the quality of a thing, as defined by Brown, inherently connected to both the block forms in *Resting Obstruction*, as well as to the immanent qualities of painting. The material language and logic of painting lie outside the realm of naming, in the same way a thing is confounding and elusive to a point where it cannot be named, and as Brown states, “lies beyond the grid of intelligibility” (6).

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<sup>12</sup> “...all his (Heidegger’s) writing aims to make as sharp a distinction as possible between, on the one hand, *objects*, Gegenstand, and, on the other, the celebrated *Thing*. The handmade jug can be a thing, while the industrially made can of Coke remains an object. While the latter is abandoned to the empty mastery of science and technology, only the former, cradled in the respectful idiom of art, craftsmanship, and poetry, could deploy and gather its rich set of connections.” (Latour 233)

<sup>13</sup> Object-hood, materialism and subject-object dichotomies are addressed in art, philosophy and the sciences throughout history, from Kant, to Heidegger, Adorno, Bruno Latour, Graham Harman and Jane Bennett, all of whom present intersecting yet distinct accounts of how we think about objects. I am intrigued by Adorno’s collapsing of the subject and object and how this idea has evolved over time. The contemporary school of thought of Object Oriented Ontology considers the hierarchy between living and non-living, and claims that objects exist independently from human perception and cognition, contrary to Kant’s theory that objects exist relative to and dependent on human cognition. These intersecting philosophies continue to inform my research, yet are so complex and distinct from one another that, for this thesis work, I have chosen to comment only on Bennett’s and Brown’s relatable descriptions of things and objects.



Fig. 7 - M.E. Sparks, *We'd Like To Help*, 2015, oil on canvas, 48" x 48"

Intrigued by the ideas surrounding thing theory and vibrant matter, I consider the painting *We'd Like To Help* (see fig. 7) to express both the theoretical and poetic notion of a thing's agency. A foreground arrangement of painted block-like objects sits on top of a white, receding surface. The space around them is empty and shallow, half obscured from view by a leaning blue rectangle. Within its washy blue surface a faded speech bubble emerges, intended to echo the title of the painting, or perhaps form a response. The forms interact like awkward bodies to produce a theatrical yet unheard exchange. Relating to Brown's thing theory, writer and art historian W.J.T. Mitchell writes: "objects are the way things appear to a subject—

that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template. . . Things, on the other hand, are simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague . . . It signals the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can looks back...” (156). The painted forms in *We’d Like To Help* bring into question this distinction between object and thing, asserting themselves as representations of objects while remaining stubbornly undefinable. I intend for the forms to return the viewer’s gaze and, as Bennett describes, emit an inaudible yet persistent call. They remain obdurately, superficially still, however, like in *Roadblock*, produce quiet dialogue as an assemblage of curiously animated, vibrant, painted things.

The work of Philip Guston strongly influences my thinking around the depiction of objects, inanimate animation<sup>14</sup>, and formal painterly exploration. Guston’s painted things are intrusions of the everyday yet resist a settled, comfortable representation, informing my own attempts to represent objects as simultaneously familiar and undefinable, inanimate and lively. In Guston’s *Painter’s Table* (1973) (see fig. 8 ) still life objects become actors within a lively assemblage. Eyes, limbs and mouths protruding from non-living things reappear throughout Guston’s work and defy the expected passivity and stability of the familiar objects he depicts. As well as revealing an intrinsic liveliness, which I view in relation to Bennett’s vibrant materialism, Guston’s objects also function to activate the construction of painting. Historian and critic Dore Ashton writes: “If he arrays his objects, as on *Painter’s Table*, one to another, side by side, in the rhythms peculiar to him (the familiar bunching together of nearly similar forms and the strange shifts in scale), there is a formal satisfaction that overrides the still-life motif and almost reverts to pure painting”(175). Ashton’s description corresponds with my own investigation of how still

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<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud analyzed the ways in which we animate objects during childhood and our early confusion between living and inanimate things. WJT Mitchell claims that the subjectivized, animated object is an incurable symptom of the human condition, suggesting that we hold a “premodern” attitude towards objects (Mitchell 30). Topics of anthropomorphism, fetishism, totemism and animism continue to inform my current research.



Fig. 8 - Philip Guston, *Painter's Table*, 1973, oil on canvas, 77.25" x 90", National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Removed due to copyright restrictions.

life painting functions beyond the depiction of objects: how colour, line and surface of each distinct form generate a comprehensible whole from which representation gives way to materiality and abstraction. As well as revealing an intrinsic thing-power of common objects, Guston, like Morandi, repeatedly uses the same alphabet of ready-made forms to explore the material language and logic of painting.

Guston's *Painter's Forms* from 1972<sup>15</sup> (see fig 9) is another foundational work that has influenced my considerations around visual lexicons (the forms painter's use), as well as the role language plays in representational painting. The objects in *Painter's Forms* are expelled from a

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<sup>15</sup> *Painter's Forms II* from 1979 is perhaps the more regarded work sharing the same title. The painting depicts a similar image of a mouth, but in this newer form it appears to cannibalize a grouping of the the iconic limb-like forms that reappear throughout Guston's work. (As *Painter's Forms* from 1972 is a less recognized work, I was unable to find a digital reproduction online. The image included is a photograph from the 2014 book *Go Figure! New Perspective on Guston*).

human mouth as solidly defined representations, inherently tied to the names of the familiar objects they symbolize. Art historian Ara H. Merjian describes how *Painter's Forms*:

...announces - quite literally - the correlation between figuration and the contour of linguistic sense. From the mouth of a disembodied head issues a group of singular things: a boot, a bottle, a shoe sole, a fragment of wood. The origin of these objects - the image insinuates - is not simply the pigment that forms their more immediate vehicle but the words by which we make sense of them. These things only assume substance to the extent that they have been shaped by, made real by, the more invisible carapace of language - and only then by the brush (65).

Merjian implies that the viewer reads the objects as signifiers, rendered through painterly marks yet symbolically married to their namable, signified identity. I consider the title *Painter's Forms* to suggest Guston's internalization and digestion of these objects, which reappear throughout his



Fig. 9 - Philip Guston, *Painter's Forms*, 1972, oil on panel, 40" x 60". Private Collection, Woodstock NY. From Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (1990). Used with open access permission from © 2016 University of California Press.

paintings and constitute his primary alphabet of forms. While I am interested in the viewer's tendency and need to ascribe language to the visual representation of a thing, I am intrigued by the moment when words fail, and yet the painting continues to function as a depiction of things, slipping into the space between representation and abstraction.

In my painting *Floor Life (Painters' Forms)* (see fig. 10) an array of shapes extends across the composition, simultaneously resting on and floating above a receding floor space. The specific shapes are culled and extracted from historic works as well as from objects in



Fig. 10 - M.E. Sparks, *Floor Life (Painters' Forms)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 84" x 72"

my studio, next cut into ply-wood forms and arranged on the studio floor as a kind of compressed still life. The painted shapes, although flattened, assert their volume and tangibility as objects through raised edges, shadows and perspective. Although the shapes originate from representational sources, their specific identities remain ambiguous. Similar to the block forms, they evade a singular name or definition, instead summoning an array of references to other things in the world. Although the shapes are decontextualized from their origins and inherently undefinable, I intend for them to evoke the viewer's desire to name them. Contrary to this, Guston's painted forms are readily nameable as he presents his objects as solidly as possible, to the point where they move away from the particular thing and instead function as illustrative motifs for the objects they represent. However, I still consider *Floor Life (Painters' Forms)* to coincide with Guston's principle intention "to underscore the strangeness, finally, even of everyday things" (Ashton 173). In addition to emphasizing strangeness of things, his work also speaks to the strangeness of representation itself; its complex dependence on language and yet, in the end, the inability for words to fully describe and represent the inherent qualities of the painting<sup>16</sup>.

### **Observational Painting**

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that the philosopher and the painter share the same problem: not only representing what one sees, but "expressing what exists" (Johnson 8). I consider observational painting able to encompass the complexities of perception and representation, as well as reveal the thing-quality and agency of objects described

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<sup>16</sup> In *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* Ashton writes: "In the complex, often labyrinthine processes of Guston's thought, he has never doubted the enduring significance of created form. Throughout his oeuvre, with all its returns to the very beginning, there is a constant and readable striving to discover the immanent structures of painting in itself, insofar as its history reveals it" (178).





Fig. 11- M.E. Sparks, *Pink Kiss*, 2015, oil on canvas, 84" x 72"

by Brown and Bennett. The simple act of looking generates an awareness and reconsideration of inanimate objects. Looking at something for a length of time seems to dislocate it from its surroundings, abstract and revitalize it, as if the concentrated gaze somehow evokes a change within the object and in turn alters the perception of the looker. Extending beyond this process of observation, the painting itself represents the alternative view and awareness that arises through looking. The viewer who observes the painting is then woven into this reciprocal action of looking at things. Recalling the fluid mergence of humans and things that both Brown and Bennett describe when looking at objects, I believe painting from observation exposes the

transformative exchange between object and observer.

In *The Object Stares Back: On The Nature Of Seeing* (1996), art historian and critic James Elkins describes looking as a transformative, corrosive interaction between observer and observed (37). Through a fusion of subject and object, Elkins identifies a mutual transformation that occurs while claiming we never look at a singular object but instead look “among the objects”(39) as our perception is continuously evolving in relation to our subjective experiences and memory recall.<sup>17</sup> By defining the object, it in turn defines the observer. Both Merleau-Ponty and Elkins consider looking a transformational and hierarchical break-down of subject and object, similar to Bennett's perception of objects as vibrant, autonomous entities, in turn eliciting an awareness of her own mutual thingness. My methods of painting from observation correlate to Elkins’ experience of looking, of which he writes: “If I observe attentively enough, I find that my observations are tangled with the object, and the object is part of the world and therefore part of me, that looking is something I do but also something that happens to me [...]” (35).

The central objects in *Pink Kiss* (see fig. 11) are painted from observation, again placed on top of wood planks, and appear as specific yet undefinable things. The objects are continually redefined by their surroundings and by my own shifting perception of them. A reciprocal and evolving relationship is formed between the objects, the space of the studio, the physical painting and me, weaving a web of vision between all of us. I attempt to represent these interacting elements through the co-existence of multiple, disparate spaces within the pictorial space of the painting. Areas of observed space, flattened space and imagined space merge and coalesce. From bottom to top, the painting shifts from representational perspective to abstract planes of colour

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<sup>17</sup> In his book *Art And Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, art historian Ernst Gombrich defines this way of looking at art in particular, naming it as the "beholder's share". The art work is determined equally by each viewer's experience, projections, memories, and desires. The artist is the first viewer (beholder) of the work, as it is defined by their individual perceptions. The work then remains incomplete without the viewer's subjective interpretation and projection. This constitutes a collaborative creation of the artwork, as the viewer is of equal importance to its formation and function.

and brushwork. Merleau-Ponty writes: “The world is experienced[...]as ‘inexhaustible’- stretching beyond my immediate visual field...” (29). I intend for this “stretching beyond” to occur through a transition from observed to beyond-representational space of *Pink Kiss*. As I continually adjust my definition of abstraction, “stretching beyond” accurately describes my current approach to the abstract, incomprehensible space and experience of observational painting.

In his late 19th century still life and landscape paintings Paul Cézanne challenges established western modes of seeing, such as linear perspective and self-other dualisms, in an



Fig. 12 - Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1902-04, oil on canvas, 28.7" x 36", Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. Used with open access permission from © 2016 Philadelphia Museum of Art.

attempt to merge objects, space, colour and perception into “lived perspective”. In the 1945 essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” Merleau-Ponty recounts Cézanne’s painting of lived perspective: “that which we actually perceive, and is not a geometric or photographic one” (64). Cézanne defines this as a self-world fusion as opposed to an “imitation of the world as object by painter as subject, nor a subjective projection of the world by the artist’s imagination” (13). I understand the idea of lived perspective and self-world fusion to be realized through Cézanne’s iterative series of paintings depicting Mont Sainte-Victoire (see fig. 12), which he produced a multitude of times in oils and watercolours from the late 1800’s to the end of his career in 1906. His repetitive process of painting the motif of the mountain reveals an incredibly diverse and shifting of perception of light and colour. Each painting depicts the same subject matter yet represents a unique perceptual experience of the landscape. I believe Cézanne’s paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire represent our ever-changing relationship to the world around us, the unstable nature of perception and the ability for painting to embody this.

In my own practice the iterative process of painting something is like saying a word too many times. It becomes distanced from its meaning and origins, unfamiliar, strange and uncomfortable in the mouth - a new, unnamable *thing* entirely. The block forms that reappear throughout my recent paintings have, in a way, become that strange, abstracted word. Through methods of repetition I question how we may look at and experience objects in a new way as they shift from object to thing, from concrete to abstract, from known to unknown, and from inanimate to strangely lively and vibrant. Just as Cézanne’s paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire came to represent much more than a depiction of the landscape, I believe that the blocks have become completely new things through the iterative practice of painting them. This repetition elicits both a loss of definition (of their identity and function) as well as a generation of

something new as they become increasingly metaphorical, totemic, bodily, humorous and poetic. In every iteration the blocks also gain an alternative sense of familiarity as they come to be recognizable elements of my own visual repertoire. I am intrigued by this balance of familiar and unfamiliar, for the painted forms still remain undefinable as the potentials of representation are obstructed. This failure of representational stability occurs as both the material qualities of painting and the perceptual distance between myself and object interrupt a direct translation from object to depiction.

As a result of observing and painting the same things again and again, I now realize a fundamental element of the observational painting process is the lasting effects of looking. While the term “afterimage” refers to a physiological optical phenomenon, the concept of afterimage has become fundamental to my understanding of observational painting. Over the course of my thesis work I began to paint the same two blocks almost exclusively. I have become less dependent on the actual objects and can now work from memory, as the objects’ textures, blemishes, profiles, edges, temperature, and weight all seem to be imprinted in my mind. My recall of these specific objects is also inherently shaped by the many paintings I have made of them. As Elkins claims that we can never look at one object, but instead look *among* objects, the two physical blocks have come to exist as all of their previous representations; they are each an assemblage of the many versions of themselves - singular things but also many things at once. In this practice of painting things, observation has become an expanded component of my working methodology. It extends beyond a singular experience of looking and now encompasses working with the imperfections of memory, with the aftereffects of iteration, and with an embodied awareness of perception as an unfixated, residual and ever-changing thing. *Afterimage* (see fig.13) developed through this kind of memory retrieval, as I painted the blocks from brief observation



Fig. 13 - M.E. Sparks, *Afterimage*, 2016, oil on canvas, 66" x 54"

and next attempted to render their surfaces and profiles from memory. The darkness of the painting developed from what I consider to be the negative, shadowed quality of an afterimage. A bright light shines from behind the objects as if to signify that what is intelligible and illuminated is obstructed from view, casting the unyielding forms in the darkness of their own shadow.

Just as Mitchell describes how the “sardine can looks back”, Elkins similarly describes looking as a tangled, reciprocal exchange with objects as they, too, return his gaze. However, of

greater interest to me is the moment when the painting looks back to assert *its* elusive thing-power. I recognize the dual function of painting as both a window into pictorial space and an opaque, material thing. This summons Brown's explanation of how we see *through* an object much like a window to its culturally constructed meaning, whereas looking at a thing is like looking *at* a window, seeing its dirt, suddenly confronted with its incomprehensible thingness (4).<sup>18</sup> Forming connections between Brown and Mitchell's accounts of things and objects, and



Fig. 14 - M.E. Sparks, *Vision Block (No.4)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 20" x 20"

<sup>18</sup> This leads me again to Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?*, in which he describes the *image* (rather than the object it depicts) as an "animated, living thing, and an object itself with intentions and desires and agency. [...] They present not just a surface but a face that faces the beholder" (30).




Fig. 15 - M.E. Sparks, *Vision Block (No. 1-3)*, 2016, oil on canvas, each 20" x 20"

reframing these through Bennett's theory of vital materialism, I understand painting to be a comprehensible object/window into pictorial space, as well as an autonomous and vibrant thing that gazes outwards to its viewers and to the objects it depicts. The recent, on-going series of paintings titled *VisionBlock* (see fig. 14, 15) have evolved from this concept. Painted only from my memory of the two blocks, the forms appear distilled yet specific, and their density somewhat undecided. Oval shapes appear as halos around the blocks, forming a binocular-shaped motif that passes behind and on top of the forms. I intend for these paintings to move beyond an observed depiction of objects and instead approach the questions of where an object ends, the subject begins, and how these dualisms may mingle within the space of painting. I consider this work to exist within the liminal gap between abstraction and representation, as the painted oval gestures function to reveal the falsity of pictorial depiction and reassert the material surface and thingness of the paintings themselves.



## Circling Forward

To tie together intersecting theories of still life, object-hood, and observational painting, I look to New York-based artist Amy Sillman who's work strongly informs my interest in both illusionistic and material potentials of painting. Although Sillman's paintings retain referential stability as she borrows from things in the world, she acknowledges the "limits of representation - how our experiences of the morass of things juxtaposed in the world do not easily translate into a single picture surface..." (Ellegood et al. 55). In 2014 Sillman painted *Still Life #1, 2, 3* (see



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Fig. 16 - Amy Sillman, *Still Life #3*, 2014, oil on canvas, 75" x 66", Capitain Petzel, Berlin. Used with permission from © 2016 Capitain Petzel. Removed due to copyright restrictions.

fig. 16), all of which contain a central object, shallow pictorial depth and often a table-like support. Through an elaborate play with surface, colour and layered shapes, the paintings develop an autonomous material logic that is informed by, yet distinctly separate from, the objects which the artist refers to. The forms instead speak through their painted thingness - their scraped and pushed liquid surfaces - rather than as depictions of existing objects. Sillman has carved out her own alphabet of painted forms and colour (human limbs, Matisse-esque bottles, distinct lemon yellows and mauve-greys) and reconfigures this vocabulary in endless variations, much like Morandi and Guston. My considerations of paint as a vibrant material stem from Sillman's use of colour and how, when describing painting, she uses "paint" and "colour" synonymously. In her paintings Sillman's colours (which she addresses as a consumed, luxury material composed of minerals, insect secretions and oils<sup>19</sup>) reveal themselves as energized substances. Although her paintings are often considered abstractions that playfully suggest figurative elements, the colours themselves produce their own representational narrative. About Sillman's colour, New York artist Paige Bradley writes:

With a practice that grinds to dust a binary of figuration versus abstraction, the purity of abstract painting is corrupted in her work, where forms are blocks of colour floating in gentle encounters or sometimes clamouring for the eye's attention before spluttering out into a hand, a foot, or a plumbing spigot. Her shapes and colours are gaily capricious; when they stumble and smear, they laugh it off and say 'I meant to do that'. ("The Labour of Painting")

Throughout my thesis research, it is this material language of painting, as well as the notion of a visual lexicon specific to every painter, that has taken root in my own practice. The concrete blocks have become a generative, repeating motif. Initially used as confrontational obstructions to interrupt my habitual methods, they have evolved into unexpectedly rich, fecund

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<sup>19</sup> See Amy Sillman's lecture "Colour as Material", November 2014.

forms that simultaneously obstruct and provoke the construction of each painting. They push to the surface of the canvas and sink back into pictorial depth. The blocks are inherently contradictory, for they can be perceived as both shapeless and neutral yet uniquely specific, while their empty, flat surfaces also contain infinite complexity. They are stolid, silent and confrontational, yet have become increasingly vibrant and suggestive things. Working with these found forms was intended as a method to generate alternative ways of painting. I now realize how they have also generated an expanded understanding and perception of inanimate objects, the slippery, reciprocal nature of looking, the emergent space between prescribed binaries, and the immanent material qualities of painting. The blocks are still here, and will reappear perhaps indefinitely, having laid a foundation for my visual vocabulary of painter's forms. Although they are contained within limited, concrete exteriors, their possibilities never seem to be exhausted, at least not yet. I have come to consider the blocks as metaphorically tied to the processes of painting. They are inanimate, yet full of expression, performing as blank slates for the viewer's projections as well as autonomous characters in their own narrative. They transform through the act of looking. Looking at them, I believe, is like looking at painting; at one moment inanimate, and next generating an immense, inexplicable life force. I understand that using these objects as obstructions reflects the same urge I have to continue painting: for the specific limitations, obstructions and challenges of the medium, and for what emerges from these, which I believe is a limitless potential.

As I continue to circle around my initial query - to better understand the work of a painting - my circles seem to grow wider as I gain a greater viewpoint yet move further and further away. I have formulated my own convictions surrounding the definition of abstraction, how abstract space arises through representational modes of observation, and how the collapsing

of dualisms is an intrinsic function of painting. Painting is never one or the other; it is a fluid and undefinable enigma. I realize that searching for the answer to my question “how to paint?” is like following a mirage; the answer always hovering within reach, always moving away, and when it’s finally found, it’s gone again. The work of a painting is therefore, perhaps, beyond words. I understand painting to have an agency of its own, or as art historian and theorist Isabelle Graw writes, to function as a thinking subject or a quasi-person, able to “tell the painter what to do” (56). With this understanding, I conclude that the work of a painting will inevitably speak for itself.

Painting, beyond the vitality and thing-power of its material elements, is also an historical thing, or can perhaps be considered a temporal object in itself that carries with it the weight of history. I continually pull from painting’s dense web of traditions, piecing together historical vocabularies of abstraction, depiction, flatness, pictorial illusion, and still life with the present, tangible objects I observe. Research surrounding art history and current discourse on painting’s function, economy and autonomy deeply inform and contextualize my practice. Perhaps more importantly is how my practice, through material-driven explorations, determines and informs the research. This generative loop creates a reciprocal relationship between my intuitive and playful relationship to painting and its weighted discourse. By re-evaluating the historical denigration of still life painting, it is evident that the still life has never been silent, and by no means still. It is vibrational, conversational and evolving as we continue to expand our awareness of the agency of things and of painting. While approaching the contradictory slippages between materiality and illusion, object and thing, as well as silence and vitality, it is the immanent material qualities of painting that continue to push me forward (while I continue to push and pull it around), as paint itself remains the incomprehensible *thing* I strive to get to grips

with. Through the iterative and evolving methods of collecting, looking and painting, I hope to continue broadening my understanding of how we observe, represent and situate ourselves among things.

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