

The Sky Inside: Ryan Wallace, Cusp, 2012



Ryan Wallace, Cusp, Morgan Lehman Gallery (Installation view)

The following is an essay I wrote for the catalog of Ryan Wallace's exhibition, Cusp, now on view at Morgan Lehman in Chelsea.

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The Sky Inside

In 1909, the mouthpiece of a group of restless young artists, F.T. Marinetti, proclaimed, "Standing on the world's summit we launch once again our insolent challenge to the stars!" This last line of *The Futurist Manifesto*, printed and reprinted in newspapers across Europe, signaled from atop some perceived precipice a dawning awareness of changes sweeping the world. Branded as Cubists, Futurists, Dynamists, and Supremacists, the electric hearts of modern painters and poets, racing against the new stimulants of moving pictures and automobiles, were hedging on the belief that visual perception would never be the same. Huddled together in cafes, the various factions of modern art theorized the stripping away of observational representation, searching for the spirit

within the industrial machine.

Could those sentinels of Futurism, faces “covered in factory mud, covered with metal scratches, useless sweat, and celestial grime,” have anticipated that the action of the future would lead not to extroverted takeover, but a further and further descent into insularity? A century later, the future does not seem be *out there*—on the highways, in the cinemas, or factories—but rather *in there*—in the electric interior of circuits, conduits, and networks. The clanging of mechanized steel has become a steady ambient hum, as the future transmits wirelessly through the very air—the content become ether, the cerebral superseding the celestial.

Having seen the future (and those proclaiming it) come and go, only to be replaced by other propositional futures, it seems now only natural that restless young artists join the fray and try to wade through the aesthetic muck of the present. Ryan Wallace, deeply attuned to contradictions of portraying the ‘cosmic’ or the ‘futuristic’, uses the lineage of abstraction to produce paintings, drawings, and sculptures that visually adapt to the recent evolution of human spatial engagement, whether through the virtual space of digital realm, or the theoretical space of the cosmos.

A hundred years after witnessing a *Nude Descending A Staircase* and the Cubist need to stagger speed into component parts, humanity stands at another precipice (or perhaps a better term would be a ‘cusp’) between two divergent modes of visual perception. Wallace is part of a generation of artists uniquely situated on this cusp—as children having learned the customs of the analog world, and as adults having no choice other than immersion in the digital.

Perhaps Wallace is amongst the last generation to know what it is like to share a household telephone, connected by a cord; to shoot photographs on film; to be taught to research primarily in a library; to experience images on screens as mere passive entertainment, instead of as fully interactive surfaces; to hand-write letters, on paper; to require numerous devices of specific function to interface in real space with real things. While this generation was hitting puberty, the pantones and pixels of the virtual came creeping in, as hours spent engaging in the new space of the digital screen increased steadily.

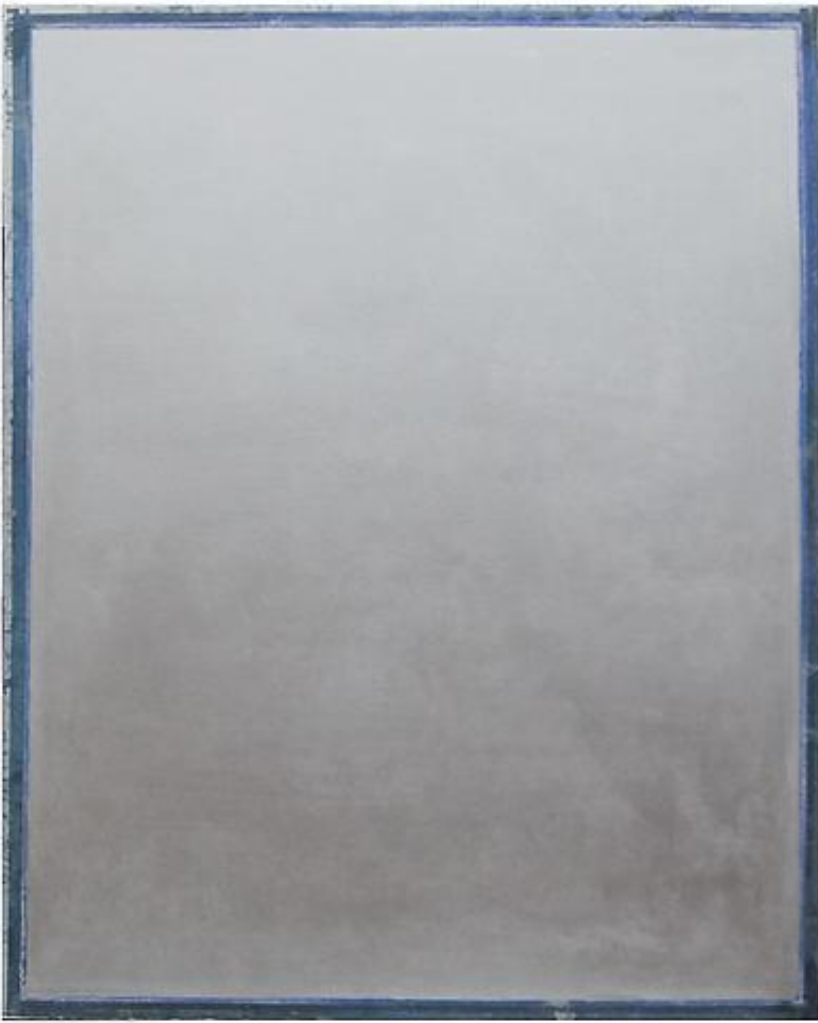
This new space, a paradox of two and three-dimensional space, is actually set at a re-

move, behind this screen. The screen is a barrier between these two spaces. From the lexicon of a working space we have moved beyond the limited clutter of a 'desktop', as our screens are becoming filled with something wholly other: image, icon, tab and window float in transparent 2D scrim, the strata of which implies massive depth in its ability to store and hold infinite content. New features and applications, meant to speed the ease of navigation of this space, are blindly leading away from the logic of physical analogy to a wholly metaphysical space with its own set of internal logic. Yet this internal cosmos is still contained within that familiar rectangular framing device that owes its existence to painting, that stubborn manual illusion of space that birthed photography and eventually our current saturation of self-propelled and endlessly proliferating images. Instead of a single framed and controlled illusion of depth, we are now confronted with a customizable and interchangeable set of frames within a virtual interface.

This new space has heightened the level of abstraction in our perception of the world. The space behind the screen does not actually exist. Without constant electric charge, and without our continued perceptual interpretation, it would vanish into nothingness (while other artifacts, such as paintings, would at the very least continue to exist). Thus, it seems that painting, especially the realm of abstract painting, is a competent medium by which to analyze and monumentalize this developing space.

In the 20th century, as painters grappled with a new pace of visual perception, they gravitated towards abstraction as the means to grasp onto an ever-changing present. With a nod to the haunting margins of abstraction exemplified by Robert Ryman, Jo Baer and Agnes Martin, Wallace's works inhabit the ghost of abstract painting, but are not merely experiments for the sake of formal dynamism. They are hybrids of representational content and formal abstraction. They are filtered distillations — attempts at representations of the various parts of the virtual and celestial, worlds we cannot directly experience without the aid of written or visual language.

His paintings are not 'about' digital space, nor are they clear depictions. Instead they are, like the title of his latest exhibition, on a *Cusp*. They imply that spatial conditions are in flux, that both the internal and the external logic of this space should be considered. The external, treated as a framing device (like the place on your tablet or your phone or your laptop where your hands rest) is as essential as the internal, in that with-



out its encapsulation the depths of the internal would be incomprehensible, spilling out into the physical world. Without the shelter of the frame, the encroachment of the physical world would render the virtual world vulnerable. In many paintings, the external framing-device segregates the action inside and outside the frame, but also enables a dislocation, and obliterates notions of scale.

As if to mimic the changes of human engagement with the format of the screen, Wallace's work is evolving from that of his largest paintings, usually in the landscape format, which is the orientation of television and cinema as they follow characters laterally as they move

across the screen. The latest series he calls *Tablets*, reinforce how we've begun to flip our screens (on phones and tablets) to the portrait format, perhaps reflecting the narcissistic investment we have with these tools *all the time*. Like books or mirrors, we bury our heads into them.

Wallace uses a subtle formal trick to transfer us between his different bodies of work. In the landscape format, the labor evident in the strips of cut paper and tape form a dense vertical web covered by a veneer of glued Mylar, as if manageable volumes of coded information are filed into an invisible armature, and yet even though the accumulation feels absolutely massive, it remains limited, as if we are witnessing an incomplete formation. Occasionally, he digs into the surface of the painting, past the Mylar scrim, so that the frame and the screen appear on level ground, while the depth of the information explodes and recedes into the physical world. In the *Tablets*, the framing remains

consistent with the landscape format, constructed with similar widths of tape, but the interior space is now a vast, subtle hue of ethereal vacancy. Oddly, this space, by virtue of the framing feels incredibly vast, more infinite and immaterial than the detail of the former paintings. And perhaps this speaks to the specter of what this new technology suggests: by abandoning the keyboard, the mouse and the trackpad, and adopting direct screen interface, we are pushing our fingers directly into the infinite. We are fusing the virtual and the real, one step closer to the reduction of all our tools into one tool, a singular space to navigate for every need. Wallace has suggested, as if his work were a metaphor for technological invention, that the *Tablets* literally emerged from his other paintings: he began them by imagining what one of the collaged rectangles would look like pulled out from the painting and then oriented in a new dimension. Like pulling a book by its spine, and revealing its cover. As if each painting were a segment of an infinite library of coded data.



Before delving further into the rabbit hole of infinite space, allow me to return for a moment to Marinetti and his *Futurist Manifesto*. I've brought him into this not because Wallace's paintings are necessarily descendants of Futurism, but because there is something important to recognize about the phrasing of the manifesto, and about the motivations of a certain kind of artist. What seems peculiar about Marinetti's language is that he chooses 'stars' over 'society' to hurl his challenge against. He chooses not to inflict his

rhetoric on a specific class of people, but at the sphere of the celestial, as if his ideas were boundless in their import. Note too, that he and his compatriots are launching their challenge 'once again', suggesting that they are part of a lineage, as if it is the duty of each generation of artists to think macrocosmically.

Within Wallace's work, there also seems to exist a fascination with the celestial. Again, he seems to be on a cusp of two ideas, two competing sets of awareness. The titles of his work, littered with references to theories of particle physics, mathematics, astronomy, cosmology and singularity, suggest an earnest investment in the philosophy of existence, from the microscopic to the macroscopic. The labor and sophistication of his work show a renewed faith in our shifting ideas of sublime experience. But certain formal decisions in his work lead me to believe that Wallace has a slightly cynical notion of the faith required to fully invest in physics and futurism.

At the edges of the interior space of the *Tablets*, we see spectrums of light emerging at the frame, as if the glitches of LED light somehow equate to magic. The bitmapped images, metallic tape, frosted plastic, and glitter incorporated into the paintings imply an imitation of transcendence, or at least the synthetic refuse we conjure to sell 'transcendent' experience. Within the immaterial space of some of the *Tablets*, and within the dugout sections of his *Glean* paintings, purple and iridescent glitter frosts the scene. Glitter and iridescence are certainly not associated with established values of taste; in fact, they are generally relegated to the cheap, the tacky and the infantile. But these are the materials we use to represent 'the future', as sure as glitter twinkles like stars in the night sky.

In his most explicit references to cosmos—(((Ω))), or the Omega paintings—the backgrounds explicitly reference the pixilated construction of the digital realm, and are glazed in glitter and blue/black textures that suggest denim, which are overlaid with a centralized orb of white paint. But are these really paintings of nebulae, exploding suns, or Big Bangs? Or are they really bright spotlights pointing back at us, the viewers, just like the other paintings that so explicitly reference the screen that reflects unto us our descent into cerebral insularity? And if they were as optimistic and opportunistic as the Big Bang, why wouldn't they be Alpha, the beginning? Instead they are Omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet, declared by the book of Revelation as the definitive, absolute end.



Perhaps Wallace is suggesting that the only constant in all the artifice of science, mysticism, technology, philosophy, literature and painting is that they represent no more than the system of the human mind itself. That at our most complicated levels of thought, we face limitations. That even if the particle physicists at CERN come up with a new explanation for formation of matter; that even if humans achieve singularity by fusing artificial and biological intelligence, inevitably it will be limited by the imaginations that constructed it.

Looking through the Plexiglas vitrines of Wallace's latest experiment in sculptural space (*Consensus 1 – 4*, 2012), we can see an arrangement of four stones, painted white and arranged like prehistoric standing stones. The vitrines each house identical rocks and are covered by tinted film, like the kind used to trick out auto-glass, which again collapses our ability to discern between high and low culture. The first vitrine, offering the clearest view of the stones, contains real rocks, the originals. Each successive vitrine reveals cast copies of the original rocks in the same formation, as if the potential mystical experience of standing stones is infinitely repeatable, except for that tinted film between you and the rocks, which I take to be an analogy for perception, for the influence of the *way* a thing is seen.



I imagine that these replicas of rocks, when considered through the tinted screen, through the language of the digital future, could self-replicate ad infinitum. I then recall something Wallace mentioned to me at his studio. He was wondering aloud what would happen if we were able to bestow nanotechnology with artificial intelligence.

Would this new consciousness seek to beautify the world by making flower arrangements? Would it make sense of the world by making art? What would this art, made by a synthetic sentient being, look like? Would it remain tethered to our own consciousness, since we invented it? Would it feel as we do, restrained by context, trapped in our own space and our own time? Or would it be able to step outside of its own consciousness, perhaps understand itself in its entirety, realize its complete and unyearning being? Would then consciousness finally stop hurling insolence at the indifferent stars; finally would it be satisfied?

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