

*“Whether it tests the limits of consciousness, comprehension, imagination, or the senses, the sublime is that interruption, that flood of world toward the unitary self that threatens its integrity.”<sup>67</sup>*

## Psychedelic Violence

Painting operates within a framework that I specify here as *psychedelic violence*, a violence that destabilizes through visual substance. In that destabilization, or interruption, a portal opens to the sublime. Once connected to the sublime, this notion of psychedelia refers to the realm where accepted reality is ruptured, distorted, and reimagined. Today, psychedelia has been diminished into hallucination and primarily relegated to illicit substances *consumed* to alter consciousness. But painting inflicts a specific *violence upon consciousness* through disruption of pre-existing paradigms. Painting invokes the psychedelic through its implication of “cosmic unity” through applied color substance.<sup>68</sup> Beyond the surface level “trippy elements” of psychedelia, the word psychedelic here refers to sublime transcendence, collapsing the boundaries between internal and external worlds, associated with divine totality.<sup>69</sup> Painting as a primal technology dismantles “ontological security”, as all painting disrupts stable definitions and phenomena in its radical reconfiguration of matter, often leading to an

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<sup>67</sup> Lyuba Encheva, “Flow, Freedom, and the Gamified Sublime,” in *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime*, Editor Temenuga Trifonova. (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 139.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>69</sup> Joseph M. Gabriel, “Psychedelia and the History of the Chemical Sublime,” in *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime*, Editor Temenuga Trifonova. (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 211.

all-out 'overwhelm' of the individual.<sup>70</sup> Painting is a constantly slippery dimension of psychedelia, as the use of a colored pigment radically redefines a natural substance into surplus: first, an abstract red mark is made, conjuring representation (red = apple, flesh, or 'just' a red mark), then into its own separate world, portal, and screen with a dialectical distortion of the quotidian. The cultural insignificance of the psychedelic as aesthetic detritus of 1960's counterculture diminishes its potential as a theoretical framework to understand how painting operates as a network, simultaneously linking and disrupting reality and non-reality, distorting the body's embedded flesh outside of mortal time.<sup>71</sup>

The psychedelic sublime opens an understanding of painting that deals with broader notions of philosophy and consciousness. Meaning is constructed through individuality recognizing its embeddedness into a larger counterpart, a merging with totality, an experience that is inscribed into virtually all literature on mystical phenomena.<sup>72</sup> Research in psychedelia invariably expresses an altered state that draws upon "visionary forms of awareness in which the everyday self relates with the divine" and yet remains universally accessible.<sup>73</sup> Paint, as medium to access the psychedelic, is

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<sup>70</sup> Gabriel, "Psychedelia and the History of the Chemical Sublime," 210.

<sup>71</sup> Bernice Donszelmann, "Touch Screen," *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2015): 55–64, [https://doi.org/10.1386/jcp.1.1.55\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jcp.1.1.55_1).

<sup>72</sup> William A. Richards and G William Barnard, *Sacred Knowledge : Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 44.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

ambiguous, whether in abstract emotional configurations or in refiguring reality through a queer figurative approach. Painting as psychedelia can also be understood as a visual language of totality, a God's eye view, a visionary and boundary-dissolving summit or vista from which all can be seen, an immutable yet revelatory screen.

All painting also operates in the dimension of violence. There are multiple levels of violence in any painting: the marks made on the surface by the artist are not disparate from the violence against a human, animal, or organic entity, a violent and relentless agency of subject (mark-maker) against an object ('passive' surface/canvas or 'other'). With the term psychedelic violence, I am invoking violence both as "conceptual metaphor", as a mapping of networked relations, and an extension of 'literal' or 'embodied' normative violence.<sup>74</sup> Mark-making, from bullet holes to scratches and graffiti on walls, or even washing food remnants off dishes all deal with surface violence. In the same way, painting adds or subtracts matter to and from a surface screen. But violence in painting primarily contends with the metaphysical through material and its implicated meanings. Violence not only destroys meaning through destruction of an inscribed site elsewhere, but it destabilizes how meaning is constructed, thus revealing its vulnerability through the constant potential of oblivion.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Vasti Roodt, "Violence as Metaphor," in *Violence and Meaning*, Editors Lauwaert Lode, Laura Katherine Smith, and Christian Sternad. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 5.

<sup>75</sup> Felix Ó Murchadha, "The Temporality of Violence: Destruction, Dissolution and the Construction of Sense," in *Violence and Meaning*, Editors Lauwaert Lode, Laura Katherine Smith, and Christian Sternad. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 41.

Moreover, “the obliteration of the singular, the reduction of organic and structural unity to charred flesh and rubble, is not simply an event within a world, but an event that threatens worldly sense.”<sup>76</sup> Violence is not only or always a discrete event that begins and ends at a single point. Instead, it operates as expansive entropy through annihilation of meaning, substance, and thus discloses the hidden truth of impermanence.

Meaning is dissolved through painting’s psychedelic violence, albeit while simultaneously creating a novel, technological unity that is almost supernatural through pigment, form, subject matter, and the activation of the painting in the eye of the beholder. Violence enacts a traumatic dissolution of boundaries and exemplifies the potential presence of that which exists beyond form, a sudden formlessness, reflecting the boundary dissolution arising in transcendent psychedelic states.<sup>77</sup> Paradoxically, in its potential for destruction, psychedelic violence alerts the individual of the potential of “limitlessness.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, psychedelic violence reduces the subject to a “porous” state which disrupts their baseline experiences, concepts, and existential orientations.<sup>79</sup> The suddenness of painting’s visibility magnifies its violence upon the viewer, like an explosion of cosmic consciousness.<sup>80</sup> Even in the creation of painting,

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<sup>76</sup> Murchadha, “The Temporality of Violence,” 41.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

several levels of primordial violence emerge: violence of pigment suddenly defined as 'paint', the cave wall becoming 'screen', and the image projected therein becoming 'world', all at the loss of the pre-existing world, before these realms were violently amputated from origin and melted down into one painting. All balance and systemic equilibrium crashes into ruination through painting's omnipotent violence, subsisting both inside and outside of normative experience.

Paint itself is also violent in that it responds to yet resists the artist's manipulation and surface application. Liquid paint is tumultuous, spilling and pouring outside of the artist's complete control, disobeying its master, and, even when completely dry, paint reveals its violence against stability in sustained illusory movement.<sup>81</sup> As substance, paint possesses presence and sharply unites and divide the world's meanings and models in its simultaneous singularity and universality.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, industrially produced colors take on extremely saturated and completely 'unnatural' color through chemical processing, a transformation reminiscent of consciousness alteration.<sup>83</sup> What is more, paint always ruptures normative ontology, which returns to the notion of violence. All ontology is violent, because defining something in concrete terms "removes dynamic agency for change, via limitation of the Other. There is terror in the reductive gaze that makes one an object of another

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<sup>81</sup> Titmarsh, *Expanded Painting*, 97.

<sup>82</sup> Encheva, "Flow, Freedom, and the Gamified Sublime," 132.

<sup>83</sup> Titmarsh, *Expanded Painting*, 124.

person, and philosophy, in its attempt to attain neutralized distance to ascribe meaning ad infinitum, enacts a violence".<sup>84</sup> Therefore, painting as psychedelic violence operates as contradiction. On the one hand, all painting enacts a violence of its own ontology in redefining what exists. But on the other hand, by destabilizing - if not demolishing - existing ontologies, painting's psychedelic violence is a liberation from existing modes of hierarchy, othering, and liquefies meaning, if not renegotiating reality in and of itself.

Color, experience, reality, substance, chemical, and each of their emotional and intellectual components are spliced together through the sudden psychedelic violence of painting. The psychedelic violence framework for painting dissolves the simplistic binary of abstract and figurative divisions of painting theory. Any figurative painting inflicts psychedelic violence upon its 'real' subject matter through its abstract restructuring while also raising the issue of the original abstract substance that is color itself, material with the power to recall or implicitly represent all things of that shared color. Meanwhile, abstract painting inflicts a superficial violence upon all reality, while consistently summoning figurative or concrete images in the eye of the beholder (i.e., like the generic Rorschach test or any other visual stimuli that reverberates between that which is 'representational' or 'abstract').<sup>85</sup> Color itself has no real divisions (even its

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<sup>84</sup> Jason W. Alvis "Is Violence Inescapable? Derrida, Religion, and the Irreducibility of Violence, " in *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime*, Ed. Temenuga Trifonova. (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 115.

<sup>85</sup> There are many firsthand examples of the psychedelic violence that painting can inflict, whether abstract or figurative in nature. For example, an art teacher of mine completely burst into tears upon her

chemical components are scientific conventions that, while useful, are not 'truth'), and in this way diverges from language, which is entirely composed of "conceptual units" that come into abrasive contact with color's psychedelic universality and free-flowing cosmic quality.<sup>86</sup> This reflects the ability for painting as psychedelic violence to infiltrate and dismantle systems of structuring consciousness through the socializing force of language. All painting is thus the substitution or replacement of a real world, while it enters into a violent conflict with how we understand and interact with the linguistically bordered world.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, language to describe a painting inflicts overt conceptual violence against the painting, while the psychedelic violence involved in "union with God" creates a world that is separate yet liquefied enough as to seep into the realms of logic whilst retaining a mystical fetishism that might only exist within the one-off work of art.<sup>88</sup>

Painting is further related to structural violence through its power of *erasure*, exemplified in a fresh coat of paint placed over dilapidated housing and street graffiti, an instance returning to the notion of memory as being only surface deep. Entropy is perversely denied through freshly painted veneer, with an expansive structural violence

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first encounter with a Cy Twombly painting. Or, when I was a child, my dreams were consistently haunted by Picasso painting that I saw in a museum of an elderly woman in blue. I had recurring nightmares about her coming to my house for years thereafter, exemplifying the psychedelic violence of the haunting that this primal technology produced in my own subconscious.

<sup>86</sup> Titmarsh, *Expanded Painting*, 134.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud : Toward a History of Painting*. (Verlag: Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 23.

emphasized in history 'painting over' or denying the existence or plight of marginalized groups. Visibility and invisibility are inherently bound up not only in painting as technology, but in all technologies that reinforce hierarchies of power and subjugation, from intimate data owned by corporations to the making-visible of the previously concealed police violence against people of color in the United States. As Graeber highlights, structural violence operates through institutions and social arrangements, including poverty and sex or race-based disenfranchisement, while limiting personal liberties through the ever-looming threat of *actual* physical violence.<sup>89</sup> Painting through the prism of psychedelic violence grapples with stable systems of control and subjugation, upending dialectics of power and hierarchy, while reminding the individual viewer of their own potential for unrealized freedom, attainable through the anarchic substance of paint. Paperwork and bureaucracy operate as boring yet stable supports of societal structural violence, which means that the psychedelic violence of painting as primal, supernatural technology is a direct response to the war on the imagination and thus individual agency.<sup>90</sup> The complex ways that painting collapses or at least exposes historical narratives and social hierarchies will be illustrated in the following case study on velvet painting.

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<sup>89</sup> David Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 2 (September 2012): 112-3, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau2.2.007>.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.