

Pure Numerical Formula Describes Wetness and Light

Mark Fell, Jordan Milner, Eileen Quinlan, Anonymous Tantra Paintings

25 June–30 July, 2016

Curated by Eli Bornowsky

If I could convey my research for this exhibition in the most general fashion it would be characterized as an attempt to scrutinize the relationship between sensation and intellect. Sketching this relation as a waveform, a sine wave for example, I would assign intellect to the peaks and sensation to the valleys of the wave, and the oscillation between the two would model the human experience of movement from inner thought to outer impressions and back again.¹ Whether this relation is drawn taut like a hummingbird or sags like a broken guitar string is up for reevaluation. From my experience it is always in flux, from pattering and purring to bending the throttle, and the intonation of mind-body flirtation is what makes it just as exciting to play with others as it is to play with oneself. Nevertheless, put this way, but only to begin, we would have to admit our collaboration with the Cartesian separation of mind and body. We tend to take for granted the dualistic mind-body invention and its role in divorcing experience and knowledge.² For now, let us install a mind-body program precisely to experiment with the code. What, for example, will happen while riding the oscillator if we take a headlong thrust to the left or the right of its axis? Our x, y oscillator will gain a z , a third dimension and once we have taken this liberty to change course, our freedom to play with the diagram is manifold.

In order to provoke my thinking along the sensual/intellectual oscillator, I decided in my role as part-time program manager at the Or Gallery to propose an exhibition about sex and mathematics. It should be obvious how this duo maps onto the oscillator described above and also how unlikely a pairing it is. Aside from uncovering a list of groaners on the subject of math and sex (subtract the clothes, add the bed, divide the legs) and a few books that approached sex and love with a mathematical analysis consistent with its application in other fields, such as voter turnout and finance (searching for patterns, endeavoring to nail the best chances for success). The subject, it seemed, was essentially barren. Without much material to bridge the poles of my interest, and beginning with what I knew best, the plastic arts, I embarked on a study of the erotic in visual form.

Unsurprisingly, my erotic research was very agreeable! I reminded myself of my personal favorites like Egon Schiele and Dorothy Iannone and I became enamored with Japanese Shunga woodblock prints and the history of the dildo. However, it quickly became apparent that eroticism in the visual arts foregrounds the body, picturing the flesh, and displaying its private parts and the modes of its interpenetration. Truly these are essential aspects of amatory life, but do not the astounding possibilities of sensuality also require an equal emphasis on the mind? What happens to the mind in wetness and touch? How do our thoughts inform where our fingers will go? Certainly sexual encounters can befuddle our inner lives for days on end. By analogy we all know the seductive experience of cinema where our bodies dissolve into our chairs, or actually, we evaporate into the fusillade of sound and image, we become montage. When the closing white on black credits return us to reality, where were we?

Perhaps the corporeal aspect of erotic art is all too obvious, and that it always risks mere titillation as its premature ending is hardly a risk at all. Nevertheless, my research suggested a bias I had towards the mind. Instead of thinking through my research, I wanted to sense through what it made me think. My oscillator was getting twisted but I could still measure it with my intuition.

Around the time of this realization I remembered a collection of work by Eileen Quinlan, a series of black and white nudes, both Polaroids and silver gelatin prints. Pictured are close-up sections of a woman's naked body emerging from a blackened space and approaching, full-frontal, the surface of the photo print. Sometimes there is a reflection of light as if the body is moving against a piece of glass that stands between the figure and the camera.³ There is moisture and disintegration of the body into scumbles, burns and stains from the photo chemicals, expired film and experimental

processes that Quinlan adroitly applies to the production of her prints. For me this was the body presenting itself, appearing, coming forth and also disappearing, vanishing and censoring itself through the process of its own exposure: her picture titled *Attachment* displays the reflection of the camera flash, the brightness of which obscures the breasts, abstracting itself beyond itself and beyond its picturing.

Here the body is forward and empowered, not caring for our gaze, liquefying itself instead, into the photochemical process. This transformation is itself arrested by the camera's own emulsion. The photo is the solvent in which the sensual body (our bodies as much as the body imaged) dissolves into abstraction. Quinlan and I arranged a selection of six Polaroids into a sequence beginning with a nude body emerging from a black void: the origin of the world, its lap with hairs below the belly, cordiform buttocks in chiaroscuro, and breasts gripped by hands working the body against the abstract picture plane with a final gesture, the left hand giving a blessing, a mudra, or waving goodbye. The next image is a dark clump of coniferous trees, their structure of vertical and horizontal needles and branches representing the vastness of diagrammatic space much more than the landscape the photo depicts. In the final image the transformation is complete; the galaxy is pierced by a meteor, a cosmic droplet rippling a universe of stars. The body hasn't disappeared; it has transformed into a language, an equation, an artwork and a code.

Despite my admitted bias to the mind in this case, as I illustrate the dissolution of the body into the ultimate I want to ask: are the deepest realms really the purview of the mind alone? Exploring the mind without embodiment is lonely and solipsistic.

Quinlan's titles are playful and balance the marvelous with the ordinary: *Super Moon*, *The Girls*, and *Star Stuff*, for example. The tension between transcendent outer space and the gravity of down-to-earth is precisely analogue to the oscillator described above. And so it is the speed of oscillation, the gradation of its movement that interests us here. Being black and white these photographs have already moved away from the material of colour towards the abstract referential realm. In photography the index is always present, and black and white is the register of catalogues, numbers, lists and illustrations. Perhaps photography is ultimately bookish.

**

"What are you looking at?" I asked my studio neighbour, the young painter Jordan Milner. It appeared he was staring at the ground, and for quite some time. Sitting on the edge of our communal deck, drenched in sun, Milner reached down to retrieve a torn portion of peeled-up paint. The chunk was corrugated and long with irregular furrowed edges. Milner displayed the paint chip to me and as he turned it in his hand revealed as much to me about the scrap of paint as he did about his elaborate perceptual apparatus. For Milner the smallest mottling of surface had value, and nearly imperceptible shifts in color could become fathomless fields. Worlds of texture arose and disappeared in the blue sunlight and the minutia of light and shade was divided and portioned into microscopic compositions. For a brief moment we were the Alpha and Omega in the palm of his hand.

From a painterly perspective Milner's special attention to detail, to the minutia of the details themselves, is unacceptable. Painters learn that the gestalt of the picture plane is a principle that erases all fiddle-faddle, and more often than not, painters tell other painters that bigger is always better. Milner's small paintings on display eschew these common modernist prescriptions and build a froth of trifles worthy of high phenomenological consideration. To get there, the viewer must zoom in perceptually, with the eyes, to observe the tiniest color shifts, layers, and transparencies. Mini strokes made with teeny brushes ask us to consider which direction they are headed as they trace. Ridges built by layering paint over a mask cast miniscule shadows, and the imperceptible moments where tiny daubs of colored paint touch ask to be pulled apart to reveal the boundless space behind.

One is tempted to ask if paint marks that require a magnifying glass to be seen really affect us physically. Well, everything affects us, we say, a butterfly flaps its wings, but the long-term effect of those wings is thought to be immeasurable. My question is, what role does the imagination play in turning the infinitesimal into an experience? What agency do we have – should we have – in choosing to experience the under recognized, the minute, the castaway and the pariah?

There is an interesting sexual practice termed Sensate Focus designed to increase awareness of sensual possibilities. Often used to help couples with sexual dysfunction, the practice forbids contact with the genitals. Instead the subtlety of bodily intercommunication is developed. Every square millimetre of skin becomes a territory for sensual discovery. Received ideas

about sex, along with their semiotics, are meant to disappear and these simultaneously restrained and freed lovers can improvise with goose-pimples, hairs, temperatures and transitions, weight and pressure, etc., directing attention to the sensations themselves rather than concepts about what these sensations might mean. Of course it is not a practice of anti-meaning; rather, it privileges the body in order to vouchsafe space for the mind to extinguish received ideas and fashion fresh conceptions about sexuality.

Furthermore, if we consider that the average surface area of a human being is 1.75 square metres, then to learn pleasure in a single erection of the skin turns the human epidermis into a near infinite landscape for experimental lovers. A cross section of human skin is rich with lymph, vessels, glands, and pores, and this is merely the surface covering of our viscera and vitals, all of which we sense, or can sense, if we put our minds to it.

Mark Fell has released records under the name Sensate Focus which was an appropriate coincidence in my research. Fell, whose electronic music has been central to my sensuality-of-mind thought experiment, uses a computer to remodel seemingly simple sounds into intense complicated patterns. I find precedents in minimal composers like Steve Reich, but Fell is particular in his precise exercise of computer patches, algorithms and synthetic sounds, as well as obvious references to rave culture and late night dance music.

We frequently picture music in a similar fashion to the common representation of time: a sequence of events organized in a line. In the case of pitch, this line moves up and down, it oscillates, and is organized with rhythm. The admirable consequence of Fell's sound production is to turn the run of musical notation into a field. Rather than reading the succession of musical events from left to right, as scores and music software interfaces frequently illustrate, the emphasis on repetition casts the collection of auditory incidents into space, like a mixture of unique shapes let loose from a height but paused at various positions in the air. Paused, but not frozen, the general set of relations between this spread of shapes is set on repeat. It has a molecular vibration and each individual piece of sound may become an object of study in itself, as well as in relation to all the others.⁴ An interested listener may move through this space, a brain-dancer, continually repositioning herself in relation to the arena of sounds, and so depending on the position from which they are heard (or seen), the sounds assume new aspects. In the gallery this operation is complicated, looping around itself as Fell further atomizes his sound works with an arrays of multiple high-tech speakers. It is a psychedelic game of composition, a synesthetic play-land for even the least visually inclined, and a mathematical one: we sense the numerical equivalents of musical patterns, scales, intervals and harmonics with the projection screen of our minds.

Nowadays scientists are endeavoring to construct computers with minds of their own, and the headway in computer speed has radically advanced AI research. The parallel with Fell's work is the use of algorithms, simple sets of rules that generate complex results. Algorithms for cell phone text recognition and self-driving cars come to mind, but the fantasy of an intelligent, conscious computer life form perpetually looms. A major uncertainty for AI is how to understand embodiment.⁵ Of course it is hard enough to understand embodiment in our own lives! Eschewing Cartesian dualism may be a good step, taking up experience in a new way. Where does the body actually end? At the skin? Perhaps it ends a few blocks down the street or somewhere up there in the heavens. Perhaps our inner lives are not as vast as they seem and our synesthetic lives are more physical than they appear.⁶ Can we introduce the spiritual dimension? Fell's work may come off as dry and secular, but its minimalism is a tremendous space for conjecture.

Finally, the abstract Tantra paintings chosen for this exhibition were literally stumbled upon, by sheer dumb luck, or perhaps divine intervention. Either way the experience illustrates the Tantric acknowledgement of pressure between the gross day-to-day and divine actualized being. I had been following a collection of unique Tantra paintings for years, originally brought to the West by the French poet Franck André Jamme in the 1990's. His first attempt to find these rare pieces ended in a serious bus accident. Years Later Jamme had healed and returned to India but again had no luck procuring them. Taking the advice of a friend, Jamme visited a soothsayer who (under strict conditions including who he could travel with and how much he could sell the works for) gave him the address of some Tantrika families who painted these marvels and he was able to begin collecting. It is a tragic and romantic story.⁷

I had been researching these pieces for my own work as an abstract painter and travelled to see them in the *Tantra Song* exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2011. Unfortunately, communication with galleries that had exhibited the pieces was of no use; there was no one to lend the works and I was told that Jamme did not have any in his collection at the time.

With the exhibition fast approaching I had given up, despite knowing how they would bring my reflections on the sensual and intellectual to a perspicuous place. Visiting Eileen Quinlan's studio in New York to select the works for this exhibition, she invited me to an opening at the gallery of the astute American collectors Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner. I was anxious on my arrival and having had a few drinks I made my way to the privy. I was astonished when I flicked on the light and before me, displayed perfectly above the hand towels, hung six gouache paper paintings. The style was unmistakable. I would like to thank Thea and Ethan for generously lending these special pieces.

Painted anonymously, they are not artworks in the Western sense. These simple painted shapes on old stained paper are spiritual objects, meditation tools and they are generally used as such until they fade or crumble and another one is painted. Indeed they represent an unconventional body of knowledge. Tantric practice is esoteric, like learning to find one's keys in the dark. Its practice is scientific, but each adept has the freedom to search in his or her own way. The key is to mend the dichotomy between the physical world and inner reality and to realize what we inherently know; an experience that is more real than real. The Tantrika's discipline both mind and body, not to leave this world, but to mainline reality as a pure form of ecstasy. Indeed Tantra practitioners purpose sex as a spiritual ritual, but it is remote from simple cravings. The Linga (male sex) and Yoni (female sex) are objects of worship and Tantric sexual practice intends to unify male and female through transformation into the divine. It seems Tantra emphasizes polarization: day and night, male and female, light and shadow, black and white, to seek them individually and to turn them into One.

The six paintings assembled here are to be observed for meditation and the memorized image may be conjured in the mind's eye throughout the day. It would be good to work with them while they are on display; the gallery can lend you a chair. As symbols they can be drawn in black and white, as they appear in illustrations from the few Western books dedicated to Tantra, and as colored paintings they sit somewhere between a sign and a picture. As Mookerjee and Khanna suggest, "they function as signs which pre-exist and are conditioned by pre-established codes similar to mathematical formulae."⁸ They are full of moving energy but primarily still, like ice cubes that melt but never shrink, or like simple polygons leaving Euclidean space and becoming fractals. In the gallery these works will be conspicuous; they are plainly from another world.

Eli Bornowsky, 2016

¹ It would be worth reflecting critically on how we commonly associate the refinement of the intellect with transcendent mountain tops and sensuality with the earth and its material. After all, my model seems to exist in Euclidian or some other abstract space. It could be turned upside-down or point in another direction; the tops and the bottoms are relative.

² Much of the thinking around this project began with my graduate thesis but I am indebted to conversations with Rebecca Brewer, and Hannah Acton that touched on many of the ideas covered here and that were critical of my own Cartesian presuppositions evident in this text.

³ In actuality these photos were taken in Quinlan's bathroom shower. Addressing the time constraints of raising two children she discovered the shower as a private reprieve and studio.

⁴ Fell is not alone in this musical operation but he happens to be very good at it. It is quintessential to electronic music, and far above the technology of synths and drum machines is an operation that makes electronic music so important and contemporary.

⁵ Here I appreciate discussions with Jed Brewer and his research emphasizing materials and embodiment as crucial aspects to understanding AI.

⁶ I figure synesthesia is an average condition. Most people have it to a greater or lesser degree, mostly less, in the sense that the mind's eye is a playing field for associations of sensations and information.

⁷ Jamme's story is included in his catalogue *Tantra Song* (Sigio Press, 2011), which accompanied the eponymous exhibition. I refer to this text as well as *The Tantric Way: Art, Science, Ritual* by Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna (New York Graphic Society Boston, Thames and Hudson, 1977) in my description of the Tantric religion.

⁸ Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, pg 44.