

Use Authorization

In presenting this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree at Idaho State University, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for inspection. I further state that permission to download and/or print my dissertation for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Dean of the Graduate School, Dean of my academic division, or by the University Librarian. It is understood that any copying or publication of this dissertation for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Signature _____

Date _____

[De-]

by
Rebecca J. Merkley

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art
Idaho State University
Spring 2018

Copyright (2018) Rebecca J. Merkley

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of REBECCA J. MERKLEY find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Ahola-Young, Laura, MFA

Advisor

Warnock, Doug, MFA

Committee Member

Brunner, Elizabeth, MFA, Ph.D

Graduate Faculty Representative

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Images	vii
Abstract	viii
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Chapter II: The Problem with Abstraction	4
Chapter III: Fabrication and Decay	9
Chapter IV: Exhibition.....	17
Chapter V: Reflection	18
References.....	20

List of Images

Image 1: Detail <i>Portrait of Madame Matisse</i> (1913), H. Matisse, and Shira Punu Mask from Gabon.....	5
Image 2: Stills from <i>Auto-Destructive Art</i> , Liversidge, Metzger (1965).....	7
Image 2 (cont.): Stills from <i>Auto-Destructive Art</i> , Liversidge, Metzger (1965)	8
Image 3: <i>Corrosion</i> , R. Merkley.....	10
Image 4: <i>Friction</i> , R. Merkley	11
Image 5: <i>Ozymandias</i> , R. Merkley	13
Image 6: Floor Plan of Transition Gallery	16

[De-]

Thesis Abstract – Idaho State University (2018)

[De-] is an exhibition exploring relationships between decay, deterioration, and destruction while consciously investigating the impermanence of social institutions. My work is about change and dematerialization: water-based acrylic causes the steel surfaces to rust, which in turn affects the flow and color of the paint. Scraping away layers of pigment and oxidation resonates with philosophies concerned with deconstruction; they reveal the strata of power and expose its fabricated nature. Although the imagery is primarily nonobjective, a distinction is made against abstraction within an examination of historical and material context. The driving force is the literal destruction of seemingly impervious structures through nature, time, and effort. Corrosion and intervention produce opposition, but a progressive, synthetic whole emerges through which aesthetic beauty, growth, and potential are the visible results of decay.

Key Words: Art, Painting, Abstraction

Chapter I: Introduction

In his treatise “On Beauty and Ugliness,” Friedrich Nietzsche asks: “art also makes apparent much that is ugly, hard, and questionable in life; does it not thereby spoil life for us?”¹ He goes on to answer that question in the role of tragedy: “Courage and freedom of feeling before a powerful enemy, before a sublime calamity, before a problem that arouses dread – this triumphant state is what the tragic artist chooses, what he glorifies.”² Facing mortality is a daunting task. The fear of impermanence - of relationships, possessions, bodies, even civilization or culture – entices with a delicate dance between the profound and profane. If nothing is fixed or solid, is anything deemed important even *real* at all? This struggle forms a central theme in my work. Impermanence and decay serve as media in and of themselves, and direct many of the aesthetic choices throughout the visual fields and forms I create. They are designed to change and deteriorate over time, and contain life cycles of unknown and variable lengths.

Through analysis from the philosophies of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Dylan Trigg, I examine relationships between decay, deterioration, and destruction while consciously investigating the impermanence of social institutions. The accessibility and familiarity of mild steel makes it a natural vehicle for this exploration. As members of an industrial society, we encounter rust in a variety of forms (on the bodies of cars, street signs, or tools) and its color reflects the coagulation of blood. It indicates technology and age, but also indirectly the presence of water. Mild steel and its other iron-based cousins rust from both within and without due to the inescapable presence of moisture.

¹ Higgins, K. *Aesthetics in Perspective*, p. 56.

² Ibid. p. 56-57.

Despite hosting a seemingly solid, timeless, and powerful identity, steel is a human fabrication. Its various forms make up a significant portion of physical structures encountered constantly in daily life. As a construct, the production of steel mirrors the creation of social institutions. Ideas surrounding gender, authority, family, and other aspects of culture appear completely natural to those entrenched in a particular society, yet they too decompose and change with the evolutionary pressures of time. However, these seemingly determined and pendulum-like cycles also shift under the active efforts of cultural participants. We create new conventions or tear down oppressive traditions against ongoing opposition.

My use of water-based acrylic paint enacts a physical drama of frustration and sabotage by defining a path of immanent decay. I brush, pour, splatter, and direct highly diluted paint across the surfaces of the metal. Idiosyncrasies in the physical nature of the media drive the form. The unique topographical memories of each sheet and the industrial fingerprints of its creation determine oxidation patterns that emerge and stain the pigments. Water itself, as an agent of erosion, replicates formations observable in nature: it pools, recedes, and flows.

Elemental deterioration and human intention connect through the treatment of media. Selectively scraping away the oxidation and paint expose the reflective surface below. This action simultaneously erases layered efforts and gouges out narrow, vulnerable channels across the metal. However, the direction of each line is determined by moving between the rippling systems produced through water and pigment. Ongoing corrosion and intervention produce opposition, but a progressive, synthetic whole emerges, through which aesthetic beauty, growth, change and potential are understood as the results of decay.

As an artist/parent/educator/person, I am deeply committed to social change. Although it may not be immediately apparent to the viewer, my values, ideals, and activism critically define

the context through which I create. It is also the context through which I direct my academic mining of history, which has led me to study the problematics of representation in the western canon. Despite mostly lacking an obvious, direct depiction of an external reality, the work in this exhibition is also not separate from it, nor is it culled from essences. I am not only arranging color on a dynamic surface and these objects are literal examples of natural and human-made forces at war with one another. Decay is viscerally present, not implied. This distinction is vital to the content of my art.

Chapter II: The Problem with Abstraction

In early 1897, twelve hundred British troops marched into the interior of what is now southern Nigeria. Architects of The Punitive Expedition sought to punish the Kingdom of Benin for rejecting proposed agreements favoring foreign traders. When a group of British merchants ignored the decree to stay out of the Kingdom, the majority of the party was summarily executed. In a detailed account in his book, *The Benin Massacre*, Captain Alan Boisragon describes the justification behind The Punitive Expedition to the British people as retaliation for the “undue slaughter” of British merchants.³

Boisragon goes on to discuss the ruthlessness of the military force as it annihilated villages and farmland on the way to Edo, the capitol city. Throughout the campaign, they raided the countryside of masks, icons, and ancestor figures. Prior to burning Edo and many of its architectural marvels, the royal coffers were looted of gold, bronze sculpture, and other national treasures. The artwork and cultural products then made their way to museums and private collections across Europe, including the walls and shelves of artists’ studios, which in part inspired modernist abstraction.

As this one example out of countless others illustrates, abstract work carries a significant amount of colonial baggage in western art. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, art movements sought an escape from industrialization, and to visually reduce people, animals, and objects to pure essences. The “discovery” (or piracy) of abstraction in nonwestern art triggered a paternalistic revolution of form, which fetishized the pure, primitive, childlike,

³ Boisragon, A. (1897) *The Benin Massacre*. Methuen & Co.: London. p. 157.

and nonexistent ideal of the “noble savage.” The academies and markets of Europe shifted away from realism, and avant-garde artists aggressively pushed the boundaries of representation.

Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, their predecessor Paul Gauguin, and many of their contemporaries presented/re-presented the visual culture of *the other* through a lens shaped by western mores. Artists working in these methods removed context and imposed their own constructed values regarding race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and culture in order to reveal what they viewed as the simple, universal essence of humanity. Regardless of any of the artists’ sympathies or beauty found in the work, the legacy of colonial violence reads loudly across time through these experiments as artifacts of modernist pseudoscience.



Image 1: Detail, *Portrait of Madame Matisse* (1913), H. Matisse, and Shira Punu Mask from
Gabon

Retrieved from *departmag.com*

Although such work can never truly be divorced from this historical reality, new approaches to abstraction create an avenue of accessibility. Contemporary western society largely accepts abstract art and easily digests the decorative qualities of nonobjective imagery. This current understanding is several generations removed from nineteenth century colonial enterprise and the subversive nature of such representation within the western canon. Additionally, the commercialization of new abstraction pushes artists to stray into the realm of cliché. Critic Jerry Saltz writes:

Galleries everywhere are awash in these brand-name reductivist canvases, all more or less handsome, harmless, supposedly metacritical, and just “new” or “dangerous”-looking enough not to violate anyone’s sense of what “new” or “dangerous” really is, all of it impersonal, mimicking a set of preapproved influences.⁴

Saltz names this type of work “zombie formalism.” He sees it as derivative, overly academic, and lacking in creativity. The generational gap filed down the teeth and eliminated the bite of abstract art.

I cannot deny that I utilize some of the same tools as Abstract Expressionists of the mid-twentieth century. However, the destructive processes of Gustav Metzger resonate much more strongly. In his manifesto of “Auto-Destructive Art” of 1959, he lists several attributes immediately relevant to my work:

...Self-destructive painting, sculpture and construction is [sic] a total unity of idea, site, form, colour, method, and timing of the disintegrative process.

⁴ Saltz, J. (2014) “Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?”

Auto-destructive art can be created with natural forces, traditional art techniques and technological techniques...

Auto-destructive paintings, sculptures and constructions have a life time [sic] varying from a few moments to twenty years.⁵

Rather than seeking formalist essences or emotional purity, the critiques issued by post-structuralist artists like Metzger challenge the institutional roles and the historical commodification of art. He calls into question preciousness and exclusive access to art with the public, performative nature of his work and its necessary impermanence. The H. Liversidge film documenting *Auto-Destructive Art* (1965) shows Metzger donning a military gas mask and spraying a large canvas with acid. The subsequent deterioration of the canvas reveals its innate, finite materiality. The remains of which retain no value and are immediately discarded.



Image 2: Stills from *Auto-Destructive Art*, Liversidge, Metzger (1965)

⁵ Metzger, G. (1959). "Auto-Destructive Art."



Image 2 (cont.): Stills from *Auto-Destructive Art*, Liversidge, Metzger (1965)

Retrieved from Contemporary Films

The objects I create combine reappropriated elements of action painting with the literal depiction of dematerialization. Color and composition play important roles within the work, but the primary content is driven by the visibility of slow, inevitable destruction. This reference denies the self-reflexivity of purely formalist methods, yet the appearance of abstraction serves as a gateway into less palatable ideas of decay and the ravages of mortality. However, it is also loaded with historical significance with which to direct viewers into a subtle personal and political framework of social critique without the overwhelming didacticism of overt representation.

Chapter III: Fabrication and Decay

Steel technically does not exist in nature. Humans developed the alloy of iron, carbon, and other various elements over thousands of years. Today it is one of the most commonly used building and industrial materials on Earth. While it retains many of its historical roles, the forms mutate in service of societal needs. The differences between a surgical steel scalpel and early Iron Age swords illustrate this genealogy. When, if ever, and how steel has been used throughout the centuries also depends on geography and access. In this way, as a shifting human fabrication, it mirrors the creation of social institutions. Michel Foucault argued that cultural institutions are constructed through discourse, the processes of creating valued knowledge and resulting power relations. He states: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”⁶ This represents a cycle, wherein power gives way to resistance, which then becomes power, and on it goes through history. The deterioration of dominant social constructions fertilizes the ground for change.

That which Foucault terms “aggressive ugliness” serves as a mechanism for such resistance within the constructions of art. In discussing Foucault’s analysis of Manet’s *Le Balcon* (1868), Joseph Tanke writes: “Foucault explains that he does not have in mind the conventional associations with lowness or meanness, but the total disregard for aesthetic conventions.”⁷ In *Friction* and *Corrosion*, the orange and earthy hues created through oxidization loudly exemplify of the desecration of media. Gritty particles stain skin and turn to dust at the touch. Aggressive ugliness and active resistance to archival conventions become apparent through the visible and tactile dematerialization of the work. Rather than color and pigment, the rust becomes the focal

⁶ Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*. pg. 95.

⁷ Tanke, J. (2009) *Foucault’s Philosophy of Art*. pg. 80.

point in the composition. Paint etches into the surface of the ground and highlights the processes of destruction in the work.



Image 3: *Corrosion*, R. Merkley



Image 4: *Friction*, R. Merkley

“Docile bodies” represent the antithesis of resistance in Foucault’s work. Power perpetuates its structures through the process of creating amenable, disciplined bodies. They

become a utility in building and maintaining cultural institutions. Social hierarchies, conventions, schools, architecture, and other visible apparatuses serve to coerce and constantly maintain domination. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault states:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines.⁸

The consequences of failing to perform “docile-utility” range from self-inflicted guilt and torment to physical violence and incarceration on a large scale. However, despite the pervasiveness of institutional coercion, it is ultimately unsustainable. Power must still make concessions to resistance, and it erodes and shifts over time.

Judith Butler follows the concept of coercion in social institutions, but also demonstrates how power hides within their spoken and unspoken laws. The supporting structures of power are rendered invisible, as Butler writes:

“...political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation. Juridical power inevitably “produces” what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive.”⁹

We should be suspicious of anything that appears to be intuitive or “natural.” These ideas and intuitions are also products of systemic power relations. Under what basis does society deem any element “natural?” Butler deconstructs gender as a prime example. Public discourse justifies a

⁸ Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish*. pg. 138.

⁹ Butler, J. (2007). *Gender Trouble*. pg. 3.

constructed binary through linkage to a narrow range of observable biological difference. However, DNA hosts no code for the roles and regulations assigned to our gendered bodies. Even our perception and application of scientific information must be examined. This is done constantly in the field, as peer review and experimentation expand our understanding. Categorization of “sex” among other social fabrications as strictly binary restricts the nuance of possibility and operates under artificial language.

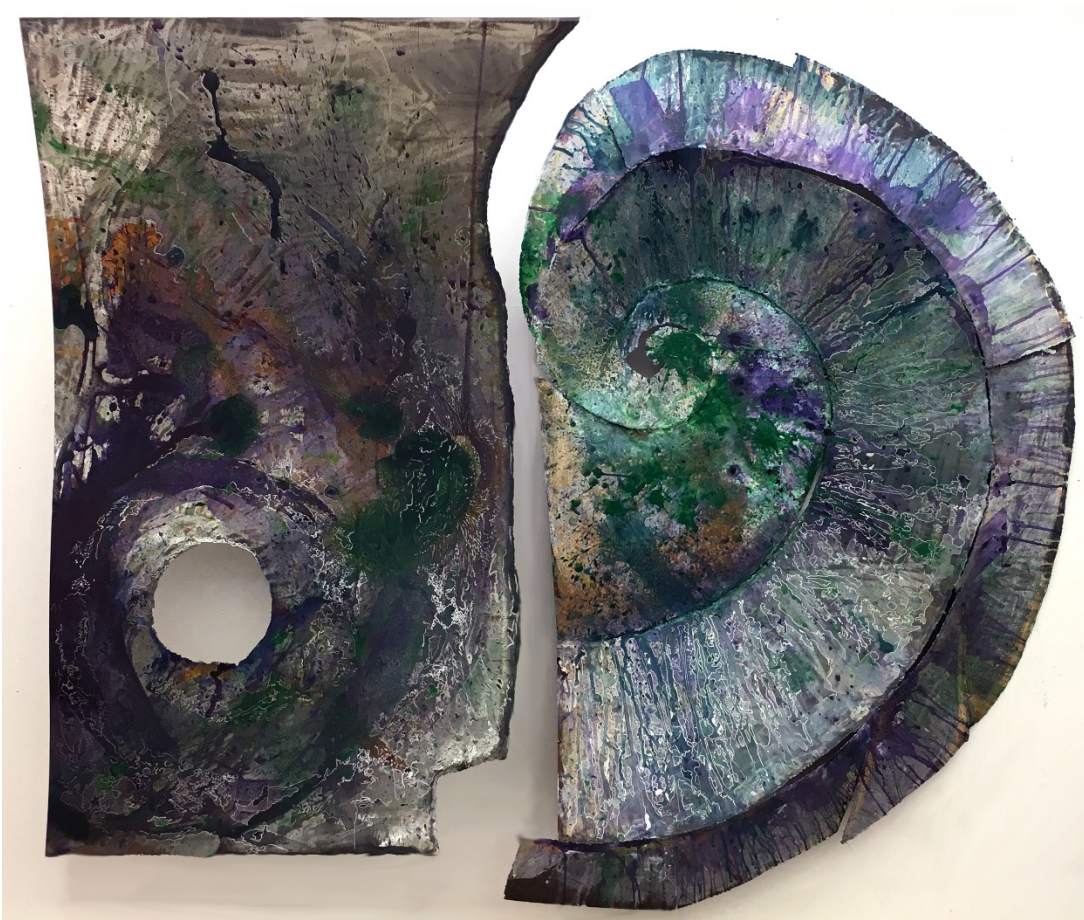


Image 5: *Ozymandias*, R. Merkley

In *Ozymandias*, the use of the Fibonacci spiral refers to the limitations of this language. Hubris marks thematic elements of the referenced poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and it speaks

to the decay inherent in even the most powerful of institutions. The steel itself is not being used for its structural strength as would be expected, but rather for its clearly recognizable vulnerability. This exposure unmasks the illusion of power and permanence.

On rust, contemporary philosopher Dylan Trigg writes in his book, *The Aesthetics of Decay*: "...the repugnant character of rust is due to its transitional nature. Near enough to remind us of what the structure once was, it induces a sense of regret to know that this is what the structure has become."¹⁰ The eventual failure and material death of human fabrications relate to the aging and deterioration of bodies. That which we construct to last forever constantly fails, and threatens our illusions of immortality and legacy. Although they represent similar processes of the erosion of civilizations, attachment to the nostalgia of ruined buildings arises from the hope that some lingering essence will remain. Conversely, rust repels by its immediacy and rendering of tools and machines to uselessness. The inevitability of its demise reminds us of our own.

Returning to Foucault's concept of aggressive ugliness, embracing the dual nature of steel/rust creates dynamic tension. This body of work is deeply inspired by the active resistance to oppressive cultural institutions. The desperation of industrial mark-making at once tries to retain the more desirable and shining qualities of the metal, yet it renders it more vulnerable to the air by removing the surface protection of the acrylic paint. The process reflects the cycles of power and resistance, both reliant upon and destructive to the other as discussed by Foucault. Degradation of the surface and the stripping away of layers reveals the true nature of the materials, and the structures they represent. This method follows Butler's analysis, and lends to the critique of unfolding levels of power. By seizing upon the revulsion and attraction to decay,

¹⁰ Trigg, D. (2006). *The Aesthetics of Decay*. pg. 173.

of culture, of structure, of bodies, I draw the viewer into a dialogue of resistance beyond fear,
and the inevitable decline of current regimes of coercion.

Chapter IV: Exhibition

The Transition Gallery at Idaho State University is a large, angular space with a cave-like alcove in the rear right hand side from the entrance. As I have observed during several other exhibitions, viewers typically enter the gallery and move in a counter-clockwise direction. My work follows this semi-spiral path with a gradual transition from the flat panels to relief pieces, and back to surface oriented compositions. This procession serves the themes of change and meditation.

Idaho State UNIVERSITY

Approximation of viewer movement

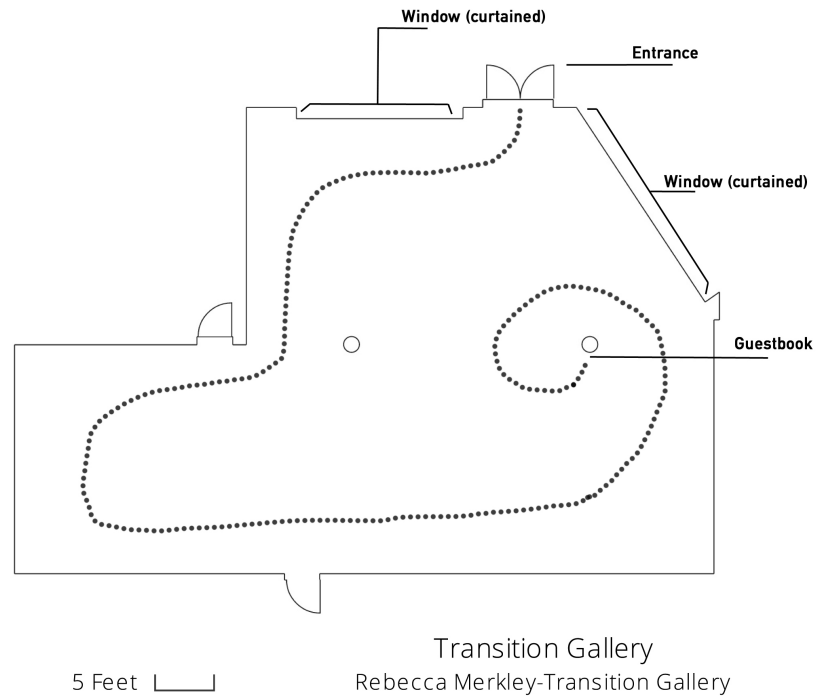


Image 6: Floor plan of Transition Gallery

Lighting plays a critical role, as it dramatically reveals the nature of steel. As one moves through the space, the light reflecting off of the exposed surfaces also mimics the nature of water. Relative darkness maximizes this effect. The only light in the space is that which is focused on the work. Curtains cover the long windows along the front of the gallery.

Sound is an additional component, lending to the overall experience. Samples of moving water intermingled with industrial noises (including some recorded during the actual fabrication of the work) play over the gallery sound system. Each aspect will vary in length and volume, never completely overpowering the other. The presence of both natural and human elements direct the aesthetic encounter of the exhibition.

Chapter V: Reflection

This work arose out of a need to heal. In the fall of 2016, I lost focus. I despaired at the potential long-term consequences of toxic political discourse. I officially “came out” as genderqueer the year before with all foreseeable complications, and my child experienced prolonged racist bullying that hit him harder than any previous incidents. The future looked bleak.

My artwork at the time aimed pointedly toward the society that marginalizes my family and me. It served an aggressive accusation to the viewer, with towering figurative assemblages looking down on the intruders in their midst. I pictured myself as a wounded animal inside the work, trapped by both internally and externally imposed steel walls. It was a lashing out and a deep gaze into the abyss, which put my ambivalent and unaffected oppressors at the center of my work. They came away laughing.

No one can live in the experience of another, and trying to force that perspective exhausted me psychologically and spiritually. My methods became didactic to the point of contrivance, and the communities I am part of and represent faded out of my process. Ultimately, I had to ask myself: *for whom am I making this? To whom should I be speaking?* Confrontation failed to change my world. I had to give myself a “reset button.”

I found it in a return to painting, but structural elements of steel walls remain. However, the walls no longer entrap me. Rather, they create a fortress for peaceful reflection. The process is meditative, directed by my interpretation of natural forces at work in the materials. It reminds me that everything is temporary. I speak once again centered within myself, and it soothes my broken heart.

The abolitionist preacher Theodore Parker stated in 1853, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. restated it in 1957: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”¹¹ These limitations will not stand. They are not immutable, natural structures. The war of attrition, though littered with devastating loss, will always favor progress. Through active participation, deconstruction, and inevitable dematerialization, the walls crumble. They fall and turn to dust.

If this work is a retreat in any way from the confrontational activism of previous pieces, it is a tactical one. My message is not adversarial; rage is not what is required now. Strength lies within the control that comes with inner peace. I rally to exist in a place of optimism and hope. A process of forgiveness rather than anger invites the viewer to become part of it. Through this I also practice the revolutionary act of loving myself. Though the visual language is subtle, the successes of **[De-]** lie in the articulation of resistance and struggle within a gentle call for change.

¹¹ Block, M. and Clayborne, C. (2010). “Theodore Parker and ‘The Moral Universe.’”

References

- Block, M., Clayborne, C. (2010). "Theodore Parker and 'The Moral Universe.'" National Public Radio.
- Butler, J. (2007). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Liversidge, H. (2011). "Gustav. Metzger : "Auto-Destructive Art" (1965, H. Liversidge)". Contemporary Films. YouTube.com
- Metzger, G. (1959) "Auto Destructive Art." radicalart.info.
- Nietzsche, F. (1996). "On Beauty and Ugliness." *Aesthetics in Perspective*. K.M. Higgins (Ed.). United States: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Saltz, J. (2014). "Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?" *Vulture*. New York: *New York Magazine*.
- Tanke, J. (2009) *Foucault's Philosophy of Art: A Genealogy of Modernity*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Trigg, D. (2006). *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Zaman, M. (2015). "Thoughts on cultural heterogeneity." *depart*, Issue 20. departmag.com