

An abstract painting featuring thick, layered brushstrokes. The composition is dominated by deep blue and vibrant red tones, with white and light grey strokes creating a sense of depth and movement. The brushwork is expressive and textured, suggesting a sense of place or atmosphere. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional intensity.

FRAN O'NEILL

*sensing place*

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(c) Fran O'Neill

Front cover: shutter, 48 x 48" (122 x 122cm), oil on canvas, 2016

Second to last page: 40 gird, each 12 x12" (30 x 30cm), oil on clayboard, 2015-16  
(Photo courtesy of the artist, from installation at MOCA Jacksonville, FL)

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Essay: *Next Stop* by Jennifer Samet

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## Next Stop: Paintings by Fran O'Neill

By using a painterly, gestural approach, and translucent, wide swaths of viscous pigment, O'Neill joins a lineage of abstractionists. She adopts a vocabulary that was formerly, and foremost, associated with a male gesture. And yet, this gesture has been, and continues to be, reinvented and reconsidered by women artists. This conversation is crucial to O'Neill's work. In considering her painting, I think of artists like Louise Fishman, Amy Sillman, Carrie Moyer, Joanne Greenbaum, and Andrea Belag – as well as artists like Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis, who re-invented movements associated with the male colleagues.

When O'Neill was asked, in a recent interview, about her relationship to Abstract Expressionism, O'Neill quoted Andrea Belag as saying, "Yes, but where is the female voice? We are doing this now." Belag is clearly a key touchstone for O'Neill, and Belag has been exploring these questions — the implications and aesthetics of a female voice in gestural abstraction — for decades.

A central aspect of O'Neill's work is that she does not prioritize a conventional notion of beauty, even as her material and approach might easily lend itself to that. After all, she is using "pretty" colors and a sensually, liquid touch. Neither does O'Neill prioritize neat, orderly compositions. As a young painter, O'Neill was attracted to mathematical systems like the Fibonacci sequence. Her work may still bear some oblique reference to these systems, but, clearly, divergence from — rather than adherence to any rigid system — interests her more.

It is this that makes me think of Hesse and Benglis. Eva Hesse took the systems of minimalism but prioritized the organic, the personal, the hand. In her installations of repeating forms, each had been hand touched and manipulated. Lynda Benglis considered the ways in which her generation – peers like Mel Bochner and Sol LeWitt – were responding to the "death of painting." Benglis observed that these artists were "setting up closed deductions," whereas she "was interested in the opposite – open deductions. She continued, "I didn't try to define geometric situations, but to make work that responded to architectural situations and perspective, so the art was always based on the scale of the body..." Both Hesse and Benglis were invoking imperfection, lumpy, drooping forms – the gravity of the body.



*marvelous night for a moondance*, oil on canvas,  
70 x 100" (178 x 254 cm), 2016

O'Neill's work encompasses what we might describe as a female re-invention of a formerly male vocabulary. Her painting utilizes a system of open deductions (for example, the orientation of her paintings is often subject to change at the end of the painting process.) An organic and inevitable gravity is present. There is a tolerance of interruption, displayed by the particular nature and quality of juxtapositions of color and form. Imperfection and awkwardness are embraced. Also, vulnerability and a tentative quality are present – despite the wide, arcing gestures.

I see her work as about interactions: between people and their environments (landscape, the earth), between bodies, between oneself and one's body and movements. In this way, her work relates to that of Amy Sillman, whose abstract paintings are, in fact, almost always figurative, and about the awkward, messy business of touching one another. O'Neill's paintings "spooning beauty," "watermelon teaser," and "dance with me," fall into this category.

In O'Neill's paintings, forms are never perfectly mirrored, or symmetrical in scale. These are imperfect unions. "white knight" seems almost a tongue-in-cheek title; the orange area so overshadows the white peeking out from the corner. The title "swan" is similar; the relationship to the creature feels accidental, more than a mythical, art historical reference.

The final layers of O'Neill's paintings usually manifest as a reduced palette of about three to five colors, although there may be entirely different colors buried or semi-visible below. She applies pigment directly from the tube and wears long, thick rubber gloves, and a raincoat, using her arm and body to move the paint across the canvas.

This process prevents the paintings from being too perfect, too beautiful. It gives them an earthy realness. Her sensual, nearly iridescent ribbons of paint often culminate as more humor, cloudy puddles. It is this kind of approach which translates as the tentative, the foiled gesture, or the revelation of imperfection. It corresponds to human interactions — our tendency to test closeness by pulling back, as much as we lean in to seek intimacy.

Her marks tend not to always round curves in a way that might satisfy our initial desires. This is true of "shutter" and "marvelous night for a moon dance" where our anticipation of three echoing forms is interrupted by a kind of interjection of opposing elements.

We also might find ourselves expecting views into distinct, deep spaces, as O’Neill’s arrangement of forms, and the viscosity of paint creates these areas of occurrence. Yet, it is just as likely that O’Neill keeps us in the labyrinth, as in her paintings “feeling green” and “magenta wave.”

“next stop” is the painting which most suggests a deep undertow and reveal. The relationship between the orange-red beneath, and the purple-black passages top is fiery and tempestuous. It feels, as the title suggests, like a harbinger of what is to come – in her work, and beyond.

- Jennifer Samet

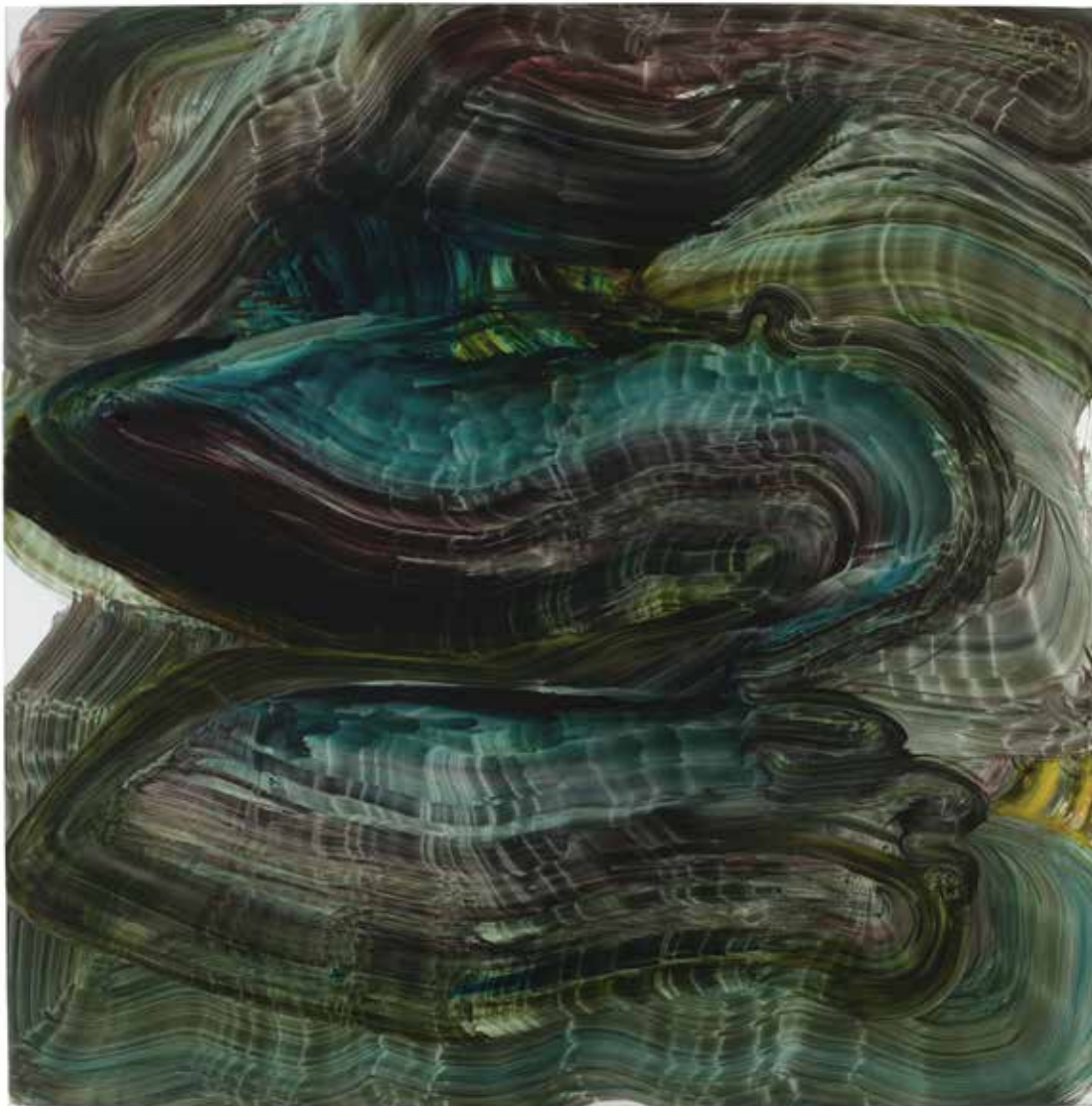


***next stop***, oil on canvas, 66 x 66" (168 x 168 cm), 2016





*decisions*, oil on canvas, 66 x 66" (168 x 168 cm), 2016



***underwater chatter***, oil on canvas, 66 x 66" (168 x 168 cm), 2016



*feeling green*, oil on canvas, 66 x 66" (168 x 168 cm), 2016



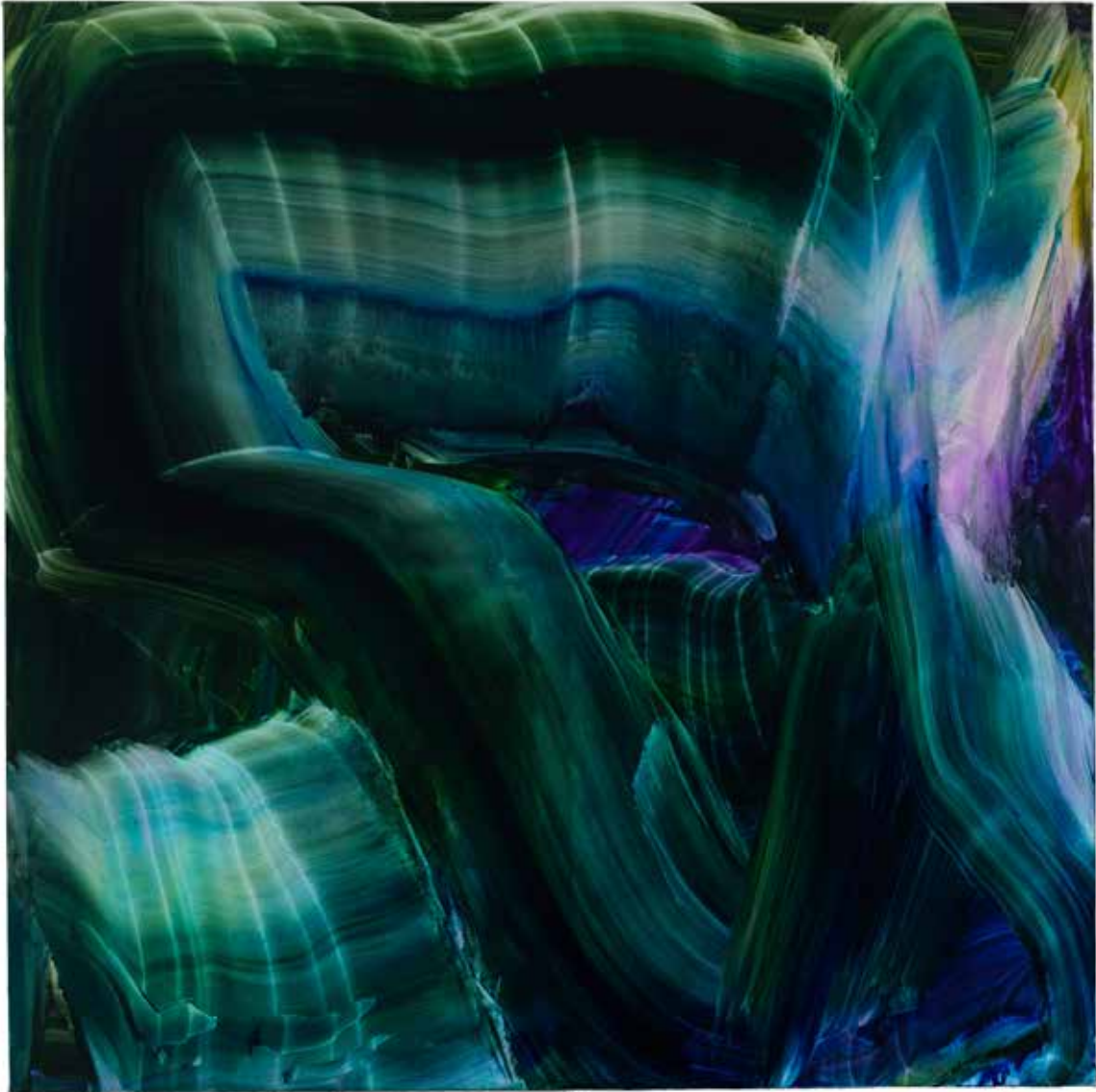
***magenta wave***, oil on canvas, 66 x 66" (168 x 168 cm), 2016



***shutter***, oil on canvas, 48 x 48" (122 x 122cm), 2016



***softly***, oil on canvas, 48 x 48" (122 x 122cm), 2016



*slow move*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48" (122 x 122cm), 2016



*climb up to meet you*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48" (122 x 122cm), 2016





***swan***, oil on canvas, 30 x 30" (76 x 76cm), 2016



***dance with me***, oil on canvas, 30 x 30" (76 x 76cm), 2016



*spooning beauty*, oil on canvas, 84 x 84" (213 x 213cm), 2015



***watermelon teaser***, oil on canvas, 24 x 24" (61 x 61cm), 2016

**Fran O'Neill from** Wangaratta, Australia, lives, teaches and works in Brooklyn, New York.

O'Neill attended Monash University, earning a BFA and completing a Post Graduate Year. Her studies continued at the New York Studio School's Certificate Program, and she completed her MFA at Brooklyn College.

In 2007 O'Neill received a Joan Mitchell Foundation award. In 2016 her work was exhibited at MOCA in Jacksonville, FL in a group exhibition: *Confronting the Canvas: Women of Abstraction*. Additional 2016 solo exhibition's at CUAC, Salt Lake City, UT: *Magical Thinking*; and at Miller Gallery, Cincinnati, OH. Group exhibitions at Life on Mars Gallery, Brooklyn, NY; *A Cup of Sugar* - Lorimoto, Brooklyn, NY; and at Hathaway Contemporary, Atlanta, GA.

O'Neill's previous solo exhibitions have included: Life on Mars Gallery; Brooklyn, NY, John Davis Gallery, NY; New York Studio School, NY; and Sussex College, Hastings, UK. Her work has been included in various group shows through out the USA, UK and in Australia. Her work resides in private collections in the USA, Australia and UK, and is in the collection of MOCA Jacksonville, FL.



L: ***left field***, oil on canvas, 24 x 24" (61 x 61cm), 2016  
R: ***white knight***, oil on canvas, 24 x 24" (61 x 61cm), 2016

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Photography: Jason Mandella

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