



Practice-Based Research in Painting: From Studio Practice to Knowledge Making

Sarthak Varshney^{1,*}

¹ School of Architecture & Design, K.R. Mangalam University, Sohna, Gurugram, Haryana, India

* Corresponding author: sarthak.varshney@krmangalam.edu.in

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the practice of painting as a method of practice-based research is analyzed retrospectively via the interpretation of four studio pieces related to themes of travel, movement, memory, mapping and everyday objects. Unlike painting considered just a final visual artifact, the study interprets studio practice as a process of observation, material transformation, reflection and communication of the lived experience. Four studio paintings done by the author in 2021 Companion I, Companion II, Companion III and Navigation are the main practice evidence in the research. The qualitative, practice-based and reflective case study methodology is applied for comparison of recurring motifs, material choices, cartographical elements and concepts' evolution in the sequence of paintings. It is shown that mobility, mapping, memory, everyday objects, relocation and material transformation are intertwined concepts and that the recurring motif of a bag evolves from the urban traveling object into the device for analyzing journey, relocation and navigation. In this context, an Experience-Studio-Knowledge (ESK) framework is proposed to explain the transition of lived experience through observation, selection and association, material encounter, artistic decision, visual transformation, reflection, and contextualisation into communicable visual knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Research Context

Painting is often understood in relation to its finished product: an artwork that is exhibited, reproduced, analysed, or situated within an art-historical context. For the case of the practicing artist, the completed painting is only one moment in a larger process that entails observing, selecting, material experimentation, modifying, and reflecting. The selection of surfaces, of transparency, of color, of scale, of superimposition, of subtraction, and of juxtaposition can change an initial direction in the process.

Barrett & Bolt legitimise creative practice as an appropriate field for researching inquiry [1]. Borgdorff places artistic research between the realms of art and academia [2]. Smith and Dean stress the cyclical interaction between creative practice and research [3]. Sullivan sees the visual arts practice as an organized knowledge-making process [4].

Frayling's differentiation among research of, through, and for art and design provided a useful set of terms for the distinctions among the various connections between practice and research, with research through practice having particular importance when making enters into the research process [5].

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Foundational Approaches to Practice-Based Research

Foundational accounts of practice-based and artistic research establish that creative making can operate as a mode of inquiry when it is connected to explicit questions, reflection, documentation, and critical contextualisation. Barrett and Bolt frame creative practice as a legitimate site of enquiry, Borgdorff positions artistic research between artistic and academic domains, Smith and Dean emphasise iterative relations between creative practice and research, and Sullivan argues for visual-arts practice as a systematic form of knowledge construction [1–4]. Frayling's influential distinction between research into, through and for art and design remains useful for locating making within the research process [5].

1.2.2 Recent Developments and Research Gap

Recent literature extends these debates toward materiality, assessment, and the contemporary role of the artist-researcher. Rioseco and Rose examine contemporary painting as an embodied and material process capable of producing forms of knowledge through making [6]. Riley proposes a contemporary criterion for assessing practice-based research in the visual arts, reinforcing the need for research outputs to generate fresh understanding [7]. Majumder further describes practice as research as a reflexive relationship between creation and critique, with the artist-researcher both producing and evaluating knowledge [8]. In the Indian context, Raha and Majumder identify a continuing need to integrate studio practice, theoretical inquiry, analysis, and documentation in visual-art research [9]. Together, these studies indicate a gap that is directly relevant to the present paper: although artistic research is increasingly established as a field, there remains value in showing, through a specific painting practice, how everyday experience, material encounter, recurring imagery, mapping, and retrospective reflection can be organised into a transparent account of knowledge production.

Painting is particularly suitable in this case because knowledge can emerge through interaction with surfaces, images, memories, and material processes. An artist may begin with a concept, yet the act of painting can modify that concept as relationships among transparency, space, objects, maps, and material layers develop. This emphasis on material and embodied making is consistent with recent painting research that treats painting as a process through which new understanding can emerge [6].

Mlicka's practice-led study is especially pertinent because it treats painting as a research method and argues that the outcome of such inquiry need not be merely an artefact; it can include advancement of knowledge of and within a specific painting practice [10].

The same point is made by Pearce in his argument that in arts practice as research, knowledge creation may take place through the process itself rather than the end product of the art [11].

Within the Indian visual-art context, Raha and Majumder discuss the need to integrate artistic practice, theoretical inquiry, analysis, and documentation rather than treating studio activity and academic research as disconnected domains [9].

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

In this research, the author carries out a retrospective analysis of four paintings created in 2021 - Companion I, Companion II, Companion III, and Navigation - to examine how painting can transform lived experiences of mobility, memory, and everyday objects into forms of visual knowledge through material experimentation, reflection, and iterative studio practice. These paintings emerged from personal experiences of travelling and relocation and repeatedly combine bags, luggage, maps, routes, and navigational structures.

The primary research question is: How can painting transform lived experiences of mobility, memory, and everyday objects into forms of visual knowledge through material experimentation, reflection, and iterative studio practice? A secondary question asks: How does the recurring image of the bag function as a visual and conceptual device through which experiences of journey, place, relocation, and personal memory are investigated?

The aims of the research are the following: (1) to examine the ability of painting as a process to exist within the practice-based research approach; (2) to analyse the interaction of lived experience, recurring visual motif, materiality, and artist's decision-making in the course of studio practice; (3) to carry out a critical analysis of the four paintings as evidence of a developing visual investigation; and (4) to develop a process-oriented model of recording and expressing, on an academic level, knowledge obtained through painting.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Design

This research utilizes a qualitative, practice-led, and retrospective case study approach, supplemented with reflective visual analysis. The researcher acts both as a practitioner who painted the works and an analyst who afterwards looks for relationships between the works.

Practice-based visual-art research is appropriate where creative practice constitutes an integral component of inquiry and where technical, conceptual, and reflective processes contribute to the development of knowledge [1, 4, 9, 12].

This study adopts a retrospective research design. No formal research protocol, studio journal, or analytical framework was established during the production of the paintings in 2021. The artworks, their original descriptions, and technical information therefore constitute the primary practice evidence, while the present study provides a retrospective critical analysis.

Four paintings have been selected to create a coherent practice by analyzing luggage, maps, travel, and relocation: Companion I, Companion II, Companion III, and Navigation. The analysis focuses on works where the connection between luggage and maps is clearly seen.

2.2 Materials and Primary Practice Evidence

The primary practice evidence comprises four paintings created by the author in 2021, together with their technical details and original descriptions. "Companion I" (2021) is painted using malmal cloth and acrylic on handmade paper; the size is 52 × 63 cm. "Companion II" (2021) is painted using malmal cloth and acrylic on handmade paper; the size is 56 × 66 cm. "Companion III" (2021) is painted using malmal cloth and acrylic on handmade paper; the size is 56 × 76 cm. "Navigation" (2021) is painted using malmal cloth and acrylic on handmade paper; the size is 56 × 66 cm.

Furthermore, the study relies on the initial description by the artist of his works and later reflection on repeating images and materials used. No humans are involved in the study through interviews or questionnaires.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

Adapting Mlicka's emphasis on making, reflection and understanding, the analysis moves between the material conditions of each work, the experience that initiated it, the visual relationships generated during making, and the understanding that becomes available through retrospective comparison [10]. Comparing recurring motifs across the works in this way follows established qualitative techniques of thematic analysis [13].

A total of six categories of analysis were adopted: mobility, mapping, memory, everyday objects, relocation, and transformation of materials. Rather than viewing these paintings as detached pictures, the analysis aims to investigate how the meaning of the recurring bag shifts from one painting to another.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Practice-Based Research and Artistic Knowledge

Borgdorff situates artistic research within the crossroads of both the artistic and academic fields, stating that artistic activities can make knowledge and meaning but can still hold onto forms of inquiry particular to art [2].

Sullivan likewise conceives visual-art practice as a mode of inquiry wherein studio activity can create and convey meaning as opposed to making objects that must be subsequently interpreted [4].

Painting alone does not necessarily constitute academic research. Artistic practice becomes research when it is organised around a specific question and supported by contextual knowledge, process evidence, critical reflection, and a contribution that can be communicated beyond the finished artwork.

Gray and Malins emphasise research approaches adapted to the characteristics of art and design practice, including visual and practice-centred methods that can make the research journey explicit [12].

Schön's concept of reflection-in-action provides a useful account of how practitioners think through situations while engaged in practice, responding to emerging conditions rather than merely implementing predetermined theoretical solutions [14].

Smith and Dean describe practice-led research and research-led practice as mutually informing and iterative, allowing creative practice to generate research insights while research can redirect subsequent practice [3].

Carter's concept of material thinking is relevant because creative knowledge can be generated through the relationship between conceptual intention, material encounter, and the actions of making, rather than being fully formulated before material practice begins [15].

In this current body of work, the malmal cloth, handmade paper and acrylic are no mere mediums. The translucent and fibrous nature of the cloth allows for cartographic data and painting objects to coexist simultaneously in the visual plane.

3.2 Companion I: The Everyday Object and Urban Mobility

Figure 1 presents Companion I as the starting point of the visual inquiry. The work emerged from reflection on travel in the Delhi Metro: a familiar messenger bag occupies the foreground while the metro network crosses and extends beyond its form. The figure therefore establishes the first relationship between an everyday object and an infrastructure of movement.



Figure 1. Sarthak Varshney, *Companion I*, 2021. Malmal cloth and acrylic on handmade paper, 52 × 63 cm. Source: Artwork by the author.

The painting combines two modes of carrying – a bag which carries belongings, and the metro network which carries travelling bodies. In such a way, the relation between the personal and intimate scale of the traveler and the infrastructural scale of the city appears.

Thus, the map of the metro does not perform only the role of the geographical map. The lines, intersections, and stations of the map interact with the contour of the bag, its pockets, and surfaces. Thus, the first transformation in studio practice can be defined as: everyday object → careful observations → associations with movement → visual transformation.

The knowledge gained through the process is relational. Neither bag nor metro map alone expresses the whole concept; the conceptual relation arises through their visual combination.

3.3 Companion II: Geography as Personal Memory

Figure 2 extends the inquiry from urban movement to geographical journey. In Companion II, the bag is placed against a map of Himachal Pradesh in relation to the author's journey to Dehra for postgraduate study. The figure demonstrates how the recurring object begins to carry geographical as well as personal memory.

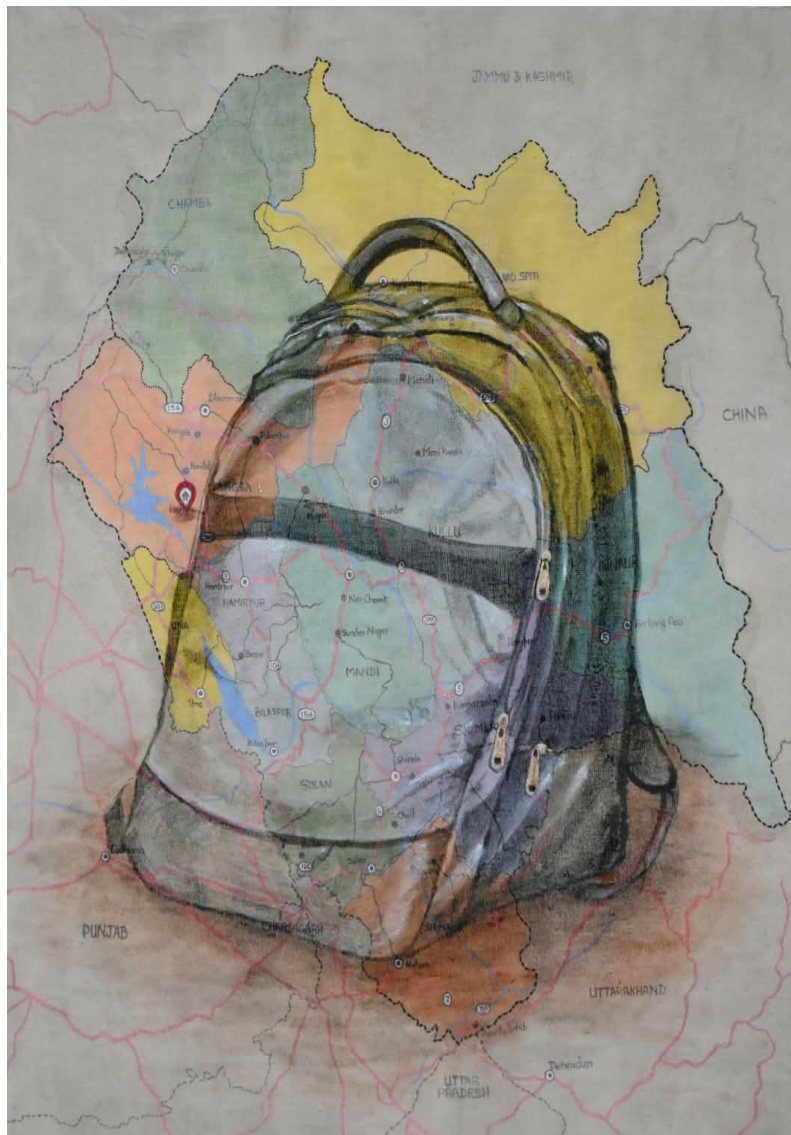


Figure 2. Sarthak Varshney, *Companion II*, 2021. Malmal cloth and acrylic on handmade paper, 56 × 66 cm. Source: Artwork by the author.

The visual function of mapping is transformed. In Companion I, the map symbolizes a network of transport that was used many times within an urban setting. However, in Companion II, mapping becomes associated with the journey between regions, and the experience of relocation.

The title of *Companion* is meaningful since the bag was the companion of the traveler both physically and figuratively as it carried his things along the same journey. By paying sustained attention, the utilitarian object became associated with the idea of travel of the traveling subject.

The map transforms in a similar way and becomes a structure which organizes the personal experience visually. This process can be defined as follows: geographical map → travelled route → remembered journey → painterly structure.

The iterative relationship between practice and research described by Smith and Dean is relevant here because creative work can generate insights that subsequently redirect the developing inquiry [3].

Thus, the repeated depiction of the bag is more than a repetition of the subject matter since each time one returns to the motif, a new aspect of the movement can be studied.

3.4 Companion III: The Material Condition of Relocation

Figure 3 develops the theme of relocation through a group of bags rather than a single isolated object. In *Companion III*, luggage is combined with a mapped route so that the material burden of relocation and the geographical trace of movement occupy the same pictorial field.

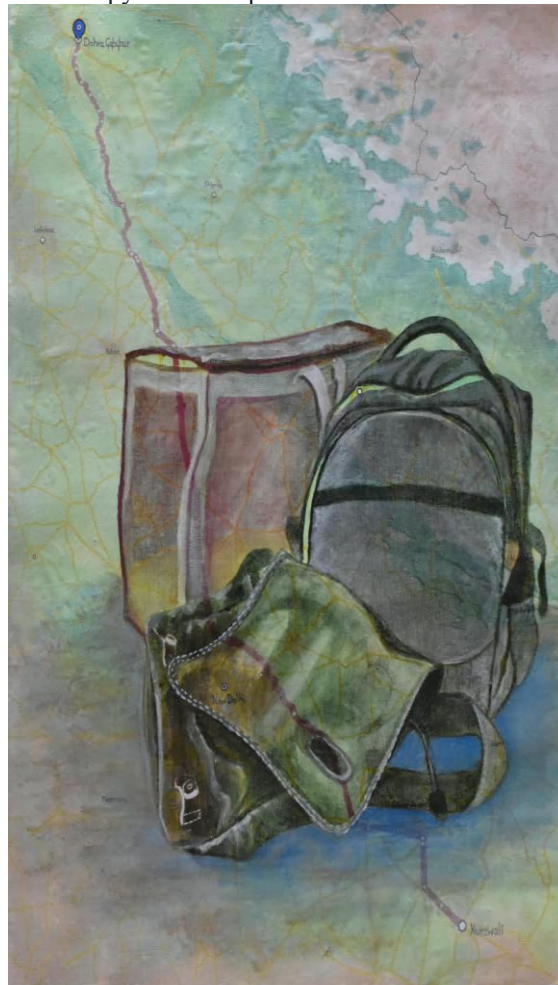


Figure 3. Sarthak Varshney, *Companion III*, 2021. Malmal cloth and acrylic on handmade paper, 56 × 76 cm. Source: Artwork by the author.

The inclusion of more bags changes the concept behind the piece. In this piece, the focus is not on one object being the companion of the journey but the material necessities of relocation. Bags can come in many different forms depending on their purpose.

The path also brings a different type of proof. While cartography uses maps to denote movement geographically, the luggage is an example of the material that the traveler carries. The piece brings together two different aspects of relocation: the movement of the path and the movement of the luggage.

In this way, geography comes into the surface of the objects. However, the presence of the luggage breaks the neutrality of the map since geography becomes personal when movement, belongings, and physical effort are involved.

Sullivan's account of visual-arts research is relevant because it positions artistic practice as a form of inquiry in which visual processes can construct and communicate understanding [4].

Across the four works, the conceptual development can be read as Movement → Journey → Relocation → Navigation → Knowledge. This sequence is a retrospective analytical finding rather than a structure claimed to have been predetermined in 2021.

3.5 Navigation: From Movement to Orientation

Figure 4 shifts the investigation from objects accompanying a journey to systems of orientation. Navigation illustrates an open suitcase with travel items and a large compass-like structure is placed at its back to make direction, organization, and the physical aspects of travel apparent in the artwork.



Figure 4. Sarthak Varshney, *Navigation*, 2021. Malmal cloth and acrylic on handmade paper, 56 × 66 cm. Source: Artwork by the author.

Opening the suitcase represents a departure from the existing pattern. Previous pieces have highlighted the outer surface of bags as travel buddies or material proof of a change of address; in *Navigation*, the inside is being shown. Personal clothes and travel items shift focus to the process of carrying and organizing things while traveling.

A new tool of navigation is introduced through the use of a compass. Therefore, in the series, multiple tools for navigation are presented: metro system, geographical map, drawn routes, and directional symbols. These systems exist alongside the luggage which contains the material needs of the traveler.

The piece also creates an opposition between knowing where you are heading to and keeping your belongings safe during navigation. The compass symbolizes orientation, while the open suitcase symbolizes the material side of traveling. Overall, the concepts of navigation become connected with the physical conditions of moving.

Schön's reflection-in-action concept is useful for this development since practitioners are able to generate knowledge in response to conditions met in the process of practice and not just implement predefined solutions [14].

The sequence becomes legible retrospectively as Movement → Journey → Relocation → Navigation → Knowledge. It is not presented as a predetermined plan for the paintings but as an interpretive structure that emerges through comparison of the completed works.

3.6 From Studio Process to Knowledge Production

Analysis of the four paintings reveals that research value of each painting does not lie within the painting itself, but rather, emerges through connections between different pieces and repetition of the constant motif in different versions.

The first one is knowledge through experience. Travelling between different locations led to multiple interactions with luggage, transportation systems, maps, and routes. This type of knowledge was initially gained through everyday experience, not research and painting became a medium that allowed reflecting on it. The seemingly unimportant bag has become important because repetition has revealed its permanent presence.

The second one is material and visual knowledge. Malmal cloth provides for partial visibility of visual information under or through the paint. This quality allows for fulfilling the conceptual necessity of presenting both the object and geography at once.

This supports the broader proposition that artistic understanding may emerge through interactions among practitioner, material, and process rather than solely through verbal reasoning before the work is made [10, 15].

The third one is reflective knowledge. Looking back and making comparisons allows for noticing patterns that might not have been consciously formulated while creating every piece individually. Now the repeating bag can be perceived as an object, carrier, substitute traveller, storage, and companion at the same time.

Reflective practice is important here because professional knowledge can develop through reconsideration of actions and decisions made within practice, rather than solely through the prior application of abstract theory [14].

The connection can therefore be established as follows: artwork in itself does not equal research knowledge; practice, documentation, reflection and context provide practice-based knowledge to become more communicable.

3.7 Experience–Studio–Knowledge Framework

From the reflective analysis, an ESK (Experience-Studio-Knowledge) model of the knowledge production process in painting is formulated in this paper. This model is illustrated in Figure 5.

Lived Experience → Observation → Selection / Association → Material Encounter → Artistic Decision → Visual Transformation → Reflection → Contextualisation → Visual Knowledge

Figure 5. Experience–Studio–Knowledge (ESK) framework for practice-based painting research. Developed by the author.

The iterative character of the framework corresponds with Smith and Dean's account of practice and research as cyclic and mutually informing processes [3].

Experience forms the first phase, after which come observation and the choice or combination of repeated visual motifs. The material encounter offers opportunities and limitations that cannot be known in advance. Compositional choices about arrangement, layering, color, size, transparency, and juxtaposition effect the visual transformation. Reflection allows the practitioner to assess what was created in comparison to the initial experience, whereas contextualization allows for the incorporation of relevant literature in the understanding of that process. Visual knowledge gains communicability through the interaction of these phases rather than simply the end product.

The model is not supposed to imply a mechanical linear process. Some insights might lead the practitioner back to previous steps; new paintings can pose the questions resolved in previous paintings.

Pearce's argument that process itself is a key location of knowledge production in arts practice as research reinforces the need to preserve and analyse intermediate stages rather than relying only on the finished artefact [11].

3.8 Implications and Limitations

This shows an important difference between producing artwork and producing research about art practice. The paintings preexisted in the publication and could not be retrospectively analyzed as if all artistic choices were based on an existing academic research methodology. Questions of authorship and agency in

knowledge production are also being re-examined as automated systems enter creative and professional work [16].

Research relevance arises through systematic investigation of connections between practice, experience, material choice, and reflection. This is precisely what makes research into artistic practice demand methodological rigor.

Artistic practice becomes academically communicable when the practitioner can identify the question being investigated, contextualise the inquiry, preserve appropriate evidence, critically examine decisions, and articulate what has been learned through the process [1, 2, 4, 12].

Mlicka's work is especially relevant because it demonstrates how painting can be examined for its operational role within a practice-led methodology and how research can advance knowledge within a specific painting practice [10].

The research produced in this study is context specific. The research does not imply that the bags necessarily symbolize companionship or migration everywhere. Instead, the research shows how, in one specific painting practice, working with such a trivial object became significant and yielded a visual vocabulary for investigating movement, geography, and memory.

Raha and Majumder's Indian-context discussion further supports the importance of documenting inspiration, technical development, process, and presentation so that knowledge surrounding artistic practice is not lost behind the finished artwork [9].

However, there is one aspect that poses a limitation to the study. The lack of systematic process documentation as a research methodology in 2021 means that the current research is retrospective and cannot claim contemporaneous evidence for each artistic choice. Future artistic research can improve that aspect from the start.

Such documentation becomes particularly important if significant dimensions of knowledge production in practice-as-research reside in making rather than exclusively in the outcome [11].

4. CONCLUSION

The retrospective study of the painting practice was used as the method of exploring knowledge production through the analysis of Companion I, Companion II, Companion III, and Navigation. The main idea of the research is that the knowledge creation process is not contained in the final product but happens through the interaction between the lived experience, motifs, materials, art decision-making, comparisons, reflections and context.

In the entire series, the repetitive bag transforms itself from being a functional item of daily use into a means of exploring the aspects of journey, displacement, and memory. Also, maps and navigational systems change their role from providing some context to becoming part of composition. Thus, the Movement → Journey → Relocation → Navigation → Knowledge describes the analytical development of the paintings under investigation. The choice of materials such as malmal cloth, handmade paper, acrylic, transparency and layering as well as usage of the cartography elements proves that material and visual choices are actively involved in the process of creating meaning.

The paper contributes to the problem formulated in the title by identifying the conditions when studio practice becomes an academically acceptable form of research. Art practice becomes research when the making is linked to a question posed, when the materials and visuals become the evidence for the reflection, when the process of making is critically situated within relevant literature and the understanding created during the process can be communicated beyond the single work of art. This statement corresponds with both traditional and contemporary literature on artistic research and painting as knowledge-making practice.

The Experience-Studio-Knowledge (ESK) framework brings together these ideas in a model consisting of nine interconnected stages: the lived experience, the observation, selection/association, the material encounter, the artistic decision, visual transformation, reflection, contextualisation, and the visual knowledge. The framework is not the rigid procedure but the model which helps to document the processes of turning the experiential and tacit aspects of studio practice into research knowledge.

Retrospective analysis of the artworks limits the contribution of the paper since no research protocol nor studio diary had been designed at the time of the creation of the paintings in 2021. Thus, it cannot be claimed that every single moment of making is evidenced and future applications of the ESK framework should include process photographs, reflective notes and material tests starting from the very beginning of the production of the paintings and examine its effectiveness for other painting practices. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates how painting can function not only as an artistic process but also as a mode of research through which studio practice contributes to knowledge production.

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Ethical Issues: This paper is based on the author's personal experience and does not involve work with humans or animals.

Data Availability and Material Sources: The main visual material is embodied in artworks produced and owned by the author.

Author's Contribution: The author is the originator, producer, and reflector of artworks.

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