The Artist Doesn't Know:

On the epistemological limits of representation and the framework I call Structural Omission

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Abstract

Some truths are not hidden; they are simply beyond reach. No matter how long you look or how fully you render, the whole story will not appear because it was never fully there. This essay examines that epistemological limit and its implications for representational painting.

Structural Omission is a framework I originated that structures representational painting around omissions as compositional architecture. These are load-bearing absences that reveal the limits of perception, narrative, and knowing. Rather than disguising uncertainty, the work builds from it.

Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied perception, Ludwig Wittgenstein's unsayable, and contemporary painter Megan Rooney's resistance to finality, I argue that painting can acknowledge what cannot be known without surrendering rigor or depth. Structural Omission does not conceal truth; it asserts that some truth is inaccessible and refuses to offer false wholeness or narrative closure.

This position reframes realism for a post-certainty era, resisting the polished, algorithmic completeness of contemporary image culture and restoring honesty about the limits of seeing and knowing.

Some truths may not be hidden. They may be simply out of reach. No matter how long you look, how well you draw, how complete your rendering, you'll never get the whole story. Not because it's buried, but because it was never all there to begin with.

That's the ground condition of my paintings. And it's the premise of Structural Omission: the idea that what's absent isn't a gap to be filled, but a permanent condition of how we perceive, interpret, and represent.

This is the reality I build from.

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The Myth of the All-Knowing Image

Much of Western representational art is tethered to the belief, sometimes implicit and sometimes loud, that the artist sees what others

miss. That the artist knows, and that the work reveals. A Romantic inheritance. A Modernist echo. A commercial fantasy.

But I paint from what I know and what I can't. What can't be retrieved. What can't be confirmed. The limits of epistemology—what it's possible to know, and how we ever think we know it—are not an obstacle in my practice. They are the site.

Let me say that more precisely:

> **Structural Omission doesn't conceal truth. It asserts that some truth is inaccessible.**

That's not a dodge. That's the premise.

Merleau-Ponty and the Incomplete Gaze

Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that **"The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being."** To him, perception was never passive. It was active, embodied, partial. You don't view a thing from outside it. You're entangled with it. The body is the locus of perception.

What that means for painting is that even our most rigorous attempts at depicting the world around us are always caught in this bind:

You can't access the subject in full.

You don't even access yourself in full.

And yet you must proceed.

Structural Omission acknowledges that this entanglement means you will always miss something. Not because you weren't careful. Because it's not available to you.

Wittgenstein, Language, and the Unsayable

Ludwig Wittgenstein closed his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with a sentence that should be etched into every studio wall:

"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

But painting isn't speech. So what then?

In my work, that silence takes form. Not withholding, but structuring representation so it can't pretend to be complete. The image can't

resolve. The narrative can't close. There is no catharsis, no moral arc, no final brushstroke that delivers clarity.

And that is not a flaw in the painting. It's the painting's honesty.

Wittgenstein later rejected parts of the *Tractatus*, but the insight stands. There are real limits to what can be expressed in language. Structural Omission applies that same limit to representation. The unsayable becomes the unpaintable, and the work refuses to compensate for that.

Megan Rooney and the Interruption of Form

Look at Megan Rooney's paintings and you'll see something similar. A compulsion toward form that never settles. Rooney's works suggest shapes, gestures, characters even—and then immediately undo them. It's not destruction. It's resistance to finality. Rooney seems less interested in what a painting can say than in how long it can keep you in the act of trying to hear it.

She once said in an interview:

"I want the painting to feel like it's remembering something it never lived."

That's not just poetry. <u>That's epistemological collapse.</u>

And it's what I chase too. Not the illusion of memory, but the conditions that make wholeness impossible.

Rooney's strategy is interruption; mine is omission. Architecture that is built from what's structurally absent.

Origins, Not Answers

I didn't set out to name a framework. I was trying to solve a problem in the work, in my life, and in my studio practice. in a medium that rewards illusion, resolution, and the appearance of clarity. Over time, the pattern revealed itself. The unresolved wasn't a flaw. It was the engine. And the omissions were structural.

Eventually I had to name it. Not to theorize it, but to work from it.

If Structural Omission is showing up in conversations, essays, or panels, I'm glad. It means the concept is doing its job. It's opening something. But this idea didn't come from critique. It came from the canvas. It came from my life. From a discipline of not knowing, of resisting premature conclusions, of painting toward epistemological limits instead of around them.

You don't need to know everything to make something worth knowing. You just need to start with the truth that some things can't be known.