

Aesthetics of the Unseen

Opacity, Memory, and the Limits of Perception

Interview with Chantal Meza for the Istituto Fiorentino di Critica Culturale

This conversation with Chantal Meza approaches painting as a disciplined practice operating at the limits of perception, memory, and ethical intelligibility. Rather than a vehicle for expression or intention, painting is understood as an engagement with material and sensation shaped by slowness, restraint, and the acceptance of failure.

Abstraction is treated as a means of accessing experience prior to its organisation into language and beyond its sedimentation in memory. In this context, painting becomes a site where violence, fear, and uncertainty are encountered through their effects on perception, without recourse to representation or narrative resolution.

These reflections unfold against conditions of visual saturation, in which visibility often obscures rather than clarifies. Meza emphasises duration, repetition, and resistance to spectacle as necessary conditions for forms of attention capable of sustaining what exceeds immediate comprehension. Painting does not seek to render experience transparent or resolved; it remains with what cannot fully appear without loss.

The conversation thus frames practice as a mode of attention through which perception is worked over time, memory remains unsettled, and experience is allowed to persist without closure.

MAGNUS GREEN: To begin, I want to ask about practice rather than identity. When you insist on calling yourself a painter, what does that demand of how you work and how you attend to the world?

CHANTAL MEZA: I always struggle with these quick introductions, I have decided recently to introduce myself as a painter, rather than as an artist. Not that I have anything against

someone calling themselves an artist, but I do notice that more and more there is this idea that it is almost fashionable to call yourself an artist. And I think sometimes when everything is art, when everyone is an artist, then nothing is art, or nobody is an artist.

Painting, being a painter, almost feels like bringing you back to earth. I enter my studio and every day I can observe the paint, the brushstrokes, the canvas. It feels very humble.

As a creator of images, it is important to remain yourself that what you are doing is a conversation with the material. Paint is what I use to have a conversation and an understanding of the image of life.

To be aware you are entering a space (spatial or physical) to have a conversation and learn you must leave aside the ego or you'll fail to observe with clarity and potentially understand the subject. Thinking you already know before beginning is a common mistake.

That is my first approach. If you do not understand how difficult it is to learn a technique; how to use a brush, how to make sure your hand and your fingers do what you want them to do, then you do not understand that learning happens in every step. Every stroke can fail. You always make mistakes. You always feel like a failure. You finish a painting and it is not there. It is not enough. You still need more. Another encounter.

You have to accept that it is never enough and that becomes a form of inspiration, a way of understanding life.

Calling myself a painter is not backwards or forwards. It is not more or less than being an artist. It is almost a determination. This is my job. I am a painter. Calling myself a painter brings me back to the beginning. Why am I obsessed with red, with black? Why am I obsessed with mixing colour? Why am I obsessed with observing an image change through the light of the day, through the sunlight or through the darkness?

All those things are always there. It is beautiful to know you are a shaper of images.

What does that sustained negotiation with material make possible that intention alone cannot?

It is your own hands. You treat them almost as part of you, but they do not belong to you. If you do not take care of them, they do not exist. Their existence depends on me. If I do not paint, they do not exist.

Yes, it is an expression of yourself, but it is based on everyone else. And this is where ethics comes in, and also the question of subject. It is not about picking a subject. It is about what you do not control in life.

You go through life, you meet people, you live in a society with specific problems, specific characteristics. You are born there. You grow there. Painting becomes for me the language of the image. It never leaves me. It lives with me.

If I encounter a family affected by violence, it affects how I understand life. And that ends up in my painting. Not because I chose it as a subject, but because it takes hold of my perception.

Abstraction is often described as withdrawal. You seem to treat it instead as a point of access. What does abstraction allow you to reach?

You are talking about what happens in between. Between yourself, experience, and what comes after. That in-between is where abstraction exists. That is where something is bubbling, where creation happens. That is where you break through and start working.

Painting abstraction does not mean painting something that does not exist. It means trying to capture that moment before something is processed, before it is organised into language.

We demand explanations from images that we never demand from language. We do not ask why we speak, how we speak, why words come. But we ask why an image is red, why that brushstroke is there.

With painting, I am silent. I am not talking. I am remembering. My hands move. I mix colour. I decide to apply a shape. That connection becomes an image rather than a word.

Does painting allow you to work before experience is organised by language?

For me, it does. It is faster. It is easier. Before it reaches language, I take it out. Sometimes it reaches language later, and that is fine. But painting takes weeks, months, sometimes years. It is not the one-hour conversation.

I think a lot about the sensorial. Emotions are important, but they can become superficial. The sensorial is something you cannot fully understand. You feel it through the skin, through the body, through organs. Those sensations have to be saved. They have to be remembered. That is what you work with.

I admire Rembrandt because you can see how sensation matters. It is not only an eye, a face, a body. It goes beyond that. You are not creating a human being. You are creating an image of what a human being provokes.

How does memory operate in the image when it can no longer be addressed directly?

Memory is everything. A person is not only a physical body. Memory is about everything you know of them. It involves places, their physicality, the memories you created with them, the things you lived with them. Memory is not one thing. It is many things at once.

If I were a realistic painter, if I were doing a portrait, I would engage with the body, with the face. But it would not be only about the eye, the head, the light, the shadow. It would be about how you create something that moves. Memory is never static.

We humans seem to desire the repetition of stories. We want to repeat the story of a person again and again. We also reshape what we remember, or shape it because of our sensations, or our particular situation. But I don't think memory works like that. You have to allow it to move. The same way light comes and goes, darkness comes and goes, the image has to come and go. You cannot paint something that is only static. You have to live with it.

You describe memory as something that moves, that shifts. What does painting have to do in order to remain open to that movement?

If you want to communicate something, if you want to communicate a story, it becomes personal. It becomes your relation to that person, your relation to that experience. In order to do that, in my case, because I work with abstraction, I need to use different elements to construct a different image of that person.

In painting, the elements are limited. You have shape. You have light. You have shadow. You have pigment. You have the canvas. That is pretty much all you have.

So imagination enters. Metaphor enters. For example, a person might feel like the wind to me. Then I start thinking, what is the wind? Is it movement? Is it force? Does it have noise?

What kind of noise? Is it soft or violent? Does it move through trees, through bodies? Does it have a smell? Does it carry something?

Then colour comes in. Does the wind have colour? Is it connected to fire, to water, to earth? Because the wind can push. It can destroy. It can also move gently. What kind of force was this person?

And then there are other things. Was this person going through trauma? Were there multiple traumas? How do those shape the way this wind behaves? All these relations begin to tell a story. They begin to build something.

Memory is not something you can fix. It is not stable. It does not stay in one place. It appears and disappears. It changes depending on time, on distance, on what you have lived since.

You cannot control it completely. You can work with it, but you cannot dominate it. Painting allows that because painting itself takes time. You come back to it. You leave it. You return. The image changes with you.

Does this instability place a limit on what can be shown?

Yes. And that limit is important. Because there are things that you cannot show directly. There are things you should not show directly.

Painting is not about illustrating something. It is not about showing facts. It is about working through what affects you, what shapes your perception, what stays with you even when you try to move on. That is why memory in painting cannot be fixed. If it becomes fixed, it becomes something else. It becomes information. And information is something different.

So the image has to resist closure. Because closure gives the impression that something is resolved. And many things are not resolved. They stay open. They stay painful. They stay unclear. Painting has to allow that. Otherwise it becomes dishonest.

When the work approaches violence, what ethical risk does painting take on?

Painting can be violent. Sometimes art is violent. In order to move beyond a direct relation, in order to transgress a simple position, you have to find ways of becoming something else. Becoming someone else, and that requires certain forms of violence.

This touches ethics immediately. Because in order for me to paint something like *the collapse*, or *the obscure beasts*, I have to be able to experience anger, pain, fear. Not superficially. I have to go there.

Sometimes the reason you cannot understand something is not intellectual. It is because you do not have the lived knowledge. You do not have the experience. And time matters here. To paint rage, to paint deep pain, you have to be able to become a bit of that. And that is dangerous.

Dangerous in what sense?

You can get lost. Because it is not about your opinion. If I paint from my idea of what a perpetrator is, or what a victim is, then I am telling a story. I am producing a pamphlet. That can be useful. It can be information. But it is not painting.

In painting, I need to try to inhabit different perspectives, even when I cannot reach them fully. Even when I cannot understand them completely. And sometimes I cannot. There are things I cannot reach. There are things I cannot understand. And that failure has to remain in the work.

Because pretending to understand everything would be unethical. Pretending to master something would be dishonest.

The knowledge you have, the memory you have, the sensorial tools you use, all of that enters the painting. But you are also just another tool. You are not the subject. You are not the centre. That is why, when a painting is finished, it does not belong to me. It belongs to itself. It is not a representation of me. If it were, I would just paint myself.

Does this imply a withdrawal of authorship?

Yes. Or at least a reduction of it. Because the painting carries things that exceed you. Things you did not plan. Things you did not fully understand when you started. And that is necessary. Otherwise the work becomes about control. And control is already part of the violence we are trying to understand.

Does this also relate to fear outside the studio?

Very much. When I am painting, I can go into places I cannot go in daily life. I can think things I do not want to think otherwise. I can feel things that would be unbearable outside that space.

But outside the studio, I am afraid. I am afraid when I go back to Mexico. I am afraid when I speak about certain subjects. I am afraid when I exhibit certain works. I am afraid because I know what exists. I know the risks.

Painting gives me a space where that fear can exist without paralysing me. Outside of it, fear becomes something else. It becomes very real. It is exposure, but under different rules. I accept things there that I cannot accept elsewhere. I go through things there that I would not survive otherwise.

But that does not mean it resolves anything. It does not make the world better. It does not give solutions. It allows something to exist. That is all.

We live inside an unprecedented saturation of images. What does this do to perception?

It produces opacity. Too much visibility does not create clarity. It creates blindness.

We see images constantly. We consume colour, movement, information all the time. And yet we do not really see. We do not have time to stay with an image. We do not allow it to affect us. This is why I think slowness matters. And restraint. Because when everything is visible, nothing is actually perceived.

Too much visibility does not create clarity. It creates blindness.

So opacity is not absence, but overload.

Yes. It is produced. It is not natural.

When images are produced endlessly, they lose weight. They lose risk. They become interchangeable. And then violence becomes another image. Pain becomes another image. Everything becomes consumable. Painting cannot work like that. At least not for me. Painting requires time. It requires returning. It requires staying with discomfort.

Does this resistance also apply to hope?

In painting, I do not find hope easily. Most of the work is surrounded by melancholy, sadness, darkness, rage, confusion, violence.

Sometimes there is an opening. Sometimes there is a passage. And usually that appears as light. An area of light. Not a solution. Not an answer. Just a way out. But I cannot force hope into the painting.

Painting allows me to go into places I do not want to live in. Places of violence, fear, collapse. I can stay there because it is contained. Because it has limits. In daily life, I need other things. I need joy. I need humour. I need moments that are light. That separation is necessary. If I did not separate them, I would not survive.

Therefore, the darkness of the work is not the darkness of the person.

No. But if you only saw the paintings, you might think that.

You might think I am completely dark, completely violent, completely unstable. And maybe sometimes I am. When I am working. But in daily life, I need to remain sane. I need to function. I need to laugh. I need to live. Painting takes what I cannot carry otherwise.

I know some things. And I do not know many others. And I have to accept that. I have to be open to listening. And I have to allow others to listen to me. That exchange depends on recognising limits. The space of art, for me, is a space of constant discomfort. Of not knowing. Of being aware that you do not know. And that is very difficult.

Most people prefer certainty. Certainty is comfortable. Certainty feels safe. But as a painter, I cannot be comfortable. I cannot settle into the image. I cannot say, this is my masterpiece, this is resolved, this is finished in that sense. If I did that, the work would be dead. You have to learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. That is not chaos. It is discipline. It is attention.

You accept that things are unresolved. You accept that light and darkness exist together. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot paint without light and shadow. And you cannot live without both either.

Does this also shape how you think about change?

There are the practical changes in life, and what happens in a painting could potentially change the way you see, but it is not a given. A canvas holds the material: paint. It allows things to exist. But it doesn't fix perceptions, it allows them to shift constantly even if

nothing is tangibly resolved, because perception is not neutral. It is shaped. It is organised. It is pressured.

That shift matters.

Closing Reflection

For Meza, painting offers a space in which experiences that cannot be carried elsewhere may nonetheless be approached through material, duration, and repeated encounter. Memory and fear do not settle into form; they shift in relation to time, distance, and the changing conditions of perception.

Within a cultural environment shaped by speed, clarity, and spectacle, such a practice may appear resistant or insufficient. Yet its force lies precisely in that resistance. Painting alters the conditions under which seeing and sensing take place, creating a space in which attention can be sustained without resolution.

The image holds tension rather than answers. It accommodates what exceeds language and resists closure. In doing so, painting assumes an ethical charge not by rendering the unseen visible, but by remaining accountable to what cannot be fully shown.

Author Notes

Chantal Meza is Painter, the Artist Director at the Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies Journal and an Artistic Fellow at the University of Bath, where she is also engaged in teaching and public pedagogy. Her work addresses sustained questions of disappearance, memory, loss, and the ethical limits of representation, developing an abstract visual language attentive to wounding, forgetting, and the spectral traces of history. Her *State of Disappearance* series (2017–2023) is on permanent public display at the University of Bath. Recent solo exhibitions include *Eden Bleeds* at St Mary's Cathedral, Bristol, and *Disappearance of Worlds* at Pembroke College, University of Oxford, where works were acquired for permanent public display.