

From Quiet to Resistance: Practice, Space and Abstraction

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by john ros

Art has long been more than simply a cultural product; it is a political act. In a world increasingly shaped by political realities and polarization, abstraction offers a powerful form of resistance — a quiet refusal to conform to the deterministic logics of power or the binary constraints of divisive narratives. Against the relentless noise of contemporary life, this radical subtlety urges us to pause, reflect and imagine anew.

By committing to studio practice — and in many ways, embracing abstraction — artists challenge the algorithmic certainty of the digital age and counter reductive narratives. Through abstraction, viewers are invited to confront complexity, engage with tension and navigate uncertainty. It encourages us to exist beyond the confines of digital platforms and build coalitions of support and care. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”⁰¹ Art and abstraction align with this ethos, creating spaces for critique, care and solidarity.

Politics of Art Practice

Art practice is never neutral. Every decision — whether in the studio, within a community or in the broader cultural landscape — is a political act. Where and how we create, what materials we use and who interacts with our work are all imbued with meaning. In many ways, to make art is to stand against indifference and erasure.

The studio, often romanticized as a sanctuary, is also a site of engagement. It is where space is claimed, identities negotiated and questions asked of the world. As bell hooks argued, education must be a practice of freedom, a shared endeavor that fosters dialogue, reflection and mutual growth.⁰² Similarly, art must remain accessible — a space where ideas and communities can converge. Both art and education are processes of exploration and transformation, rooted in questioning and discovery. They share a commitment to fostering critical thinking, empathy and the potential to envision alternative ways of being. Together, they create spaces where creativity and learning become acts of liberation.

Rest, too, becomes a form of resistance. Tricia Hersey’s [Nap Ministry](#) reminds us, “Rest makes us more human.”⁰³ In a culture that glorifies productivity, rest asserts dignity beyond standard metrics. It sustains creation and resistance, offering the necessary

recuperation for artists to challenge the very systems being an artist critiques. For Melissa Dunn, quiet serves as both rest and recalibration — a way to step back from the relentless noise of modern life and rediscover balance.

Dunn describes intentionally turning down the noise in her life — driving, walking and creating art in silence — as a way to reconnect with her inner compass. This shift, initially a coping mechanism, evolved into a deliberate act of subversion, allowing her to take risks and focus on what truly matters in her work. During her six-month @HOME Residency with studioELL, Dunn explored the rhythms of her studio practice and its interplay with daily life. By presenting *Edges, Corners, Trees* within the intimate spaces of her home — extensions of her studio — we highlight the profound connections between personal reflection, quiet attention and broader cultural critique. Melissa Dunn’s work demonstrates how intentional quietness can serve as both an act of care and a powerful form of resistance in a noisy, hyperproductive world.

Politics of Home and Space

The concept of home transcends its physical definition, existing as an emotional landscape — a nexus of security, community and identity. For artists, the studio often embodies this duality, serving as both sanctuary and laboratory. It becomes a space where personal and political forces converge, revealing the tensions between belonging and displacement, creation and destruction.

Louise Bourgeois captured this duality in her *Personages*, a series of tall, slender sculptures created between 1945 and 1955, which evoke both human figures and abstract forms. As Lynn Somers notes, these works reflect Bourgeois’ deeply personal exploration of the relationships between space, form and emotion.⁰⁴ Melissa Dunn’s studio practice extends this tradition, transforming the idea of home into a critical inquiry. Dunn extrapolates from the world to present new possibilities — alternative vantage points. Her “highly energized objects” draw from science, history and the everyday, inviting reflection on the systems that shape us.

Dunn’s exploration is in conversation with the practices of artists like Olivia Bax, whose wrapped forms evoke the precariousness of home as both a physical and emotional necessity. Through their material inquiries, these artists challenge familiarity and space. Dunn extends this tradition, using abstraction to reveal the contradictions of interior and exterior, private and public. Her work transforms the studio into a site of contemplation and making, where materiality becomes a language of being. In this

quiet, iterative process, she aligns with Agnes Martin's assertion that "art is about the inner life of each of us" ⁰⁵ — creating work that invites viewers to reflect on their relationships with home and the systems that shape it.

In her studio, Dunn's acts of making embody a balance between observation and transformation, where materials are both a medium of exploration and a means of connecting with the world. This attention to materiality and space mirrors the reflective stillness of her practice — a quiet act of resistance against the fast-paced demands of contemporary life. Through this lens, the studio becomes not just a physical space but a conceptual one, where contemplation, care and the essence of home intersect with broader cultural critique.

Politics of Abstraction

Few questions in art are as enduring — or as complex — as whether abstraction can be political. Historically, abstraction has both critiqued and reinforced dominant cultural paradigms. David Craven argues that Abstract Expressionism was revolutionary in some contexts — particularly in Latin America — even as it was framed as Cold War propaganda in others. ⁰⁶ Similarly, Clement Greenberg's call for modernist purity, often claimed to be apolitical, has been critiqued for its implicit political undertones. Far from being detached or neutral, abstraction frequently functions as cultural critique during moments of ideological tension.

What makes abstraction powerful is its resistance to reductive binaries. It demands that viewers wrestle with complexity, navigate ambiguity and engage with the unfamiliar. In a political climate dominated by fear and division, abstraction disrupts simplistic narratives, inviting us to imagine beyond immediate appearances. It fosters critical thought, encouraging us to see and think anew — a tool as subversive as it is subtle.

Melissa Dunn's work exemplifies abstraction's potential to ask questions. Like [Hoang Duong Cam's](#) swirling forms that engage cultural memory, Dunn's practice merges historical narratives with material experimentation — bridging abstraction and political critique. ⁰⁷ For Dunn, materiality is foundational, functioning as both medium and metaphor. Her use of space — within her compositions and in the environments she creates — transforms abstraction into a language of connection and inquiry. She explores how materials interact, overlap and resist, revealing layers of meaning through movement, texture and form. These interactions evoke a dialogue between

the tangible and the conceptual, grounding abstraction in the lived realities of her surroundings and relationships.

Dunn's studio in Memphis, Tennessee, serves as a space of observation and transformation, where abstraction takes shape through her deliberate engagement with material and process. Rooted in contemplation, her practice reflects the quiet yet persistent power to reimagine. Ultimately, abstraction is a frame of mind — a way of observing, distilling and bearing witness to the artist's surroundings, relationships and communities. These abstractions are records of profound connections expressed through movement, color, line, shape and texture. They are both viscerally clear and deeply resonant with our time — meant to be observed, felt and lived.

Abstraction is also inherently observational. Images, color combinations, rhythms and textures are experienced by the artist — distilled and reinterpreted. Even the most realized or tightly rendered images become remarkably abstract when closely examined or isolated in parts. Abstraction, then, is everywhere — as much a political act as it is a creative one.

Art as a Catalyst for Change

Artists play a vital role in imagining alternatives to the status quo. The studio is not just a space for making but for questioning, connecting and envisioning new possibilities. James Baldwin reminds us, "The artist's struggle for integrity is a metaphor for the struggle of the human race."⁰⁸ When artists are whole, they create spaces of wholeness for others — acts that are inherently political.

Art's power lies at the intersection of creativity and community. Workshops, public installations and collaborative projects foster resilience, trust and collective strength. These shared spaces challenge systems of division and inspire futures built on compassion and hope.

Now is a time for courage. A world rooted in equity, justice and sustainability begins with collective action and imagination. Art grounded in care and solidarity reminds us of our shared humanity, urging us to reimagine and act. Together, we can confront division and build a future shaped by collaboration and quiet, transformative acts.

VIEW THE EXHIBITION
studioELL.org/gallery/melissa-dunn/

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