

Paula McLean

Peculiar Slant

September 13 - October 19, 2025

Titled after a phrase in the John Ashbery poem, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, in which he states: “But your eyes proclaim that everything is surface. The surface is what’s there and nothing can exist except what’s there,” *Peculiar Slant* is an investigation of surfaces, in particular performance surfaces.¹ Elements and structures typically relegated to the periphery, displaced and distanced from the central dramatic or musical action—like the stage, the backdrop and the scrim—are put into focus, promoted to the actor. Translucency and mirrored images repeat themselves, producing a distancing effect that is flattened and becomes pure visibility, like the kaleidoscopic piano players from a 1930s musical morphing into a screen-like façade during a choreographed sequence. Musical notation and “stuttering” distorted words (cut from translucent plastic) are set against and play off of interior architectural spaces, sourced from Youtube screenshots of an orchestral performance, an artist talk, and a personal photo taken of a theatrical backdrop in downtown Toronto.

In his book, *Realist Magic*, Timothy Morton discusses the inscribed surfaces that must be present around us in order for meaning to occur at all. “There must be some aperture at the beginning of any system, in order for it to be a system—some irreducible *uncertainty*. Some kind of magic, some kind of illusion that may or may not be the beginning of something,” he says.² The surface or screen, therefore functions like an opening, an aperture—something pre-aesthetic and pre-linguistic that allows for language and other coded systems to become meaningful to an observer.

Theatricality and performance exemplify this thought process more so in a literal, tangible sense. The stage, the backdrop and the scrim are all inscribable surfaces against which actors recite their lines and move through demarcated, fabricated spaces. Members of the audience are also implicated in this system as they themselves help to constitute a theatrical event. Josette Féral describes the theatrical as being “alterity emerg[ing] through a cleft in quotidian space,” a cleft that the audience members produce.³ Again, there is an opening up of something, a move toward a coded, aesthetic system. There is therefore a phenomenological link between the inscribed surface and the observer, as both prompt and partially constitute the work (be it theatre, art, music, etc.). I might even go as far to say that they are mirror images of each other.

¹ John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 1975

² Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Open Humanities Press, 2013. pp. 141

³ Josette Féral, “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language”. *SubStance*, Vol. 31, No. 2/3, Issue 98/99: Special Issue: Theatricality (2002), pp. 97

Paula McLean (b. 1995) is a visual artist based in Toronto. She received a BFA from Concordia University in 2017 and an MFA from the University of Waterloo in 2019. She has exhibited her work at Patel Brown (Toronto), Hearth, Pumice Raft, Blouin Division (Toronto), Espace Maurice, KWAG and Weatherproof in Chicago with a forthcoming group exhibition at LVL3 in Chicago. A recipient of the Keith and Win Shantz Scholarship, she was a studio assistant for Ireland-based painter Ciarán Murphy in the summer of 2018. Her thesis show, *To Catch a Glimpse of Things*, was exhibited at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery in May 2019.