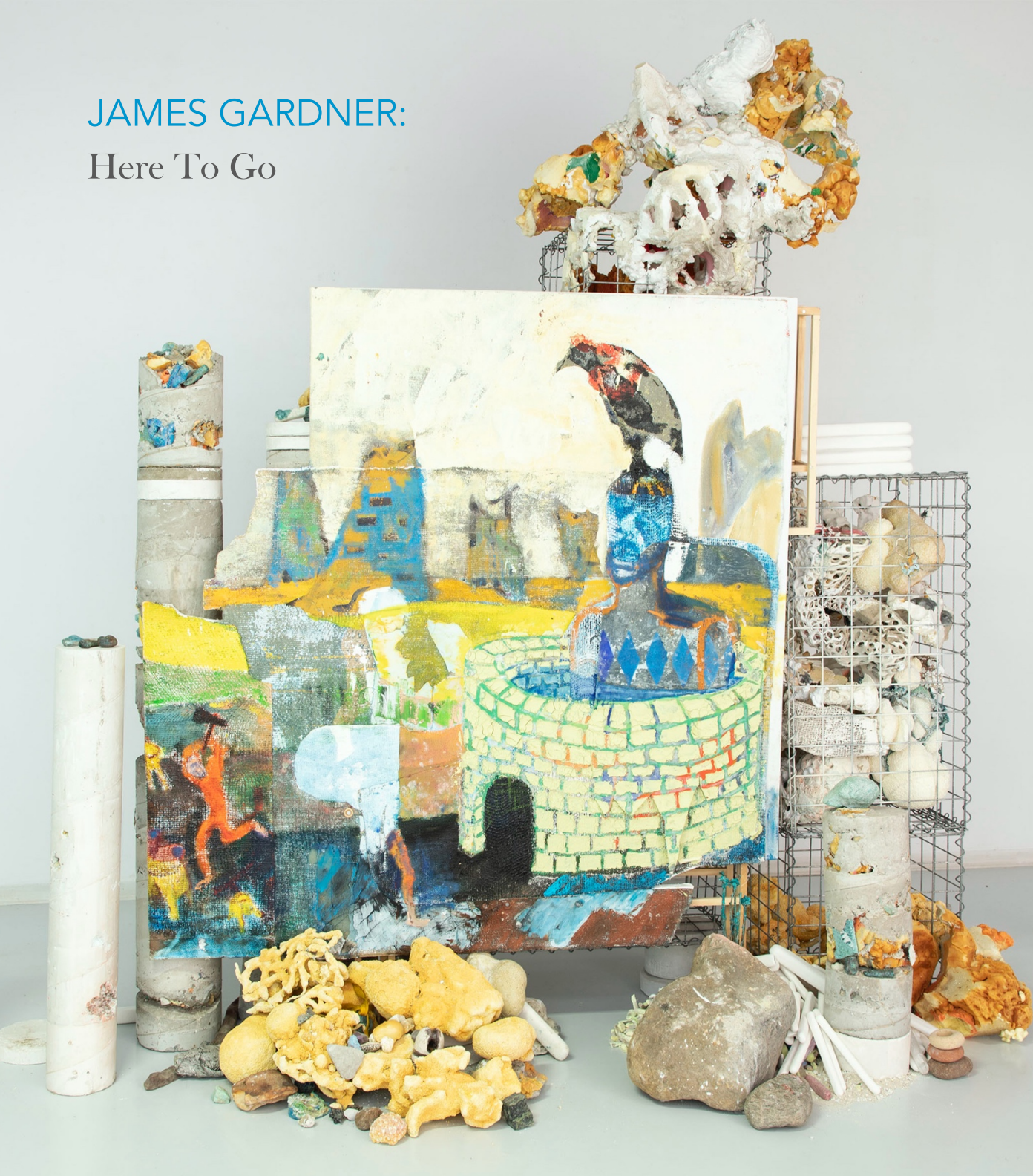


JAMES GARDNER:

Here To Go





Boy in the Vineyard (After Uccello), oil, acrylic, marble dust, digital image transfer, and paper on burlap (2021)

Memory, Alchemy, Magic:

James Gardner and the Life Cycle of Images

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

In her formidable book *The Art of Memory* (1966), Frances Yates demonstrates how memory techniques were used to quickly recall complex information. For philosophers, mages, and monks, this aspect of cognitive processing was elemental to oratory and rhetoric. Yates details how its proper utilisation can assist in delivering “long speeches from memory with unfailing accuracy.”¹ What became known as the method of *loci* (also termed the memory palace technique), involves pairing an image to a specific physical place (*loci*) like one’s home in the mind. The mind can then wander through the home – from the foyer to the living room, into the kitchen, and so forth – to retrieve the images that are anchored there in a specific order. As the orator shares their speech, they simultaneously move through this imagined place in their mind, recalling the mental images placed there. It may sound complicated but the technique is fairly straightforward, albeit with some training. From Greek antiquity to the 14th century, it was one of the most widely implemented cultural practices and is still used today by card players, illusionists, and magicians.

James Gardner’s curiosity with Yates originated in 2010 when he stumbled upon a bruised copy of *The Art of Memory* in an old studio. Yates swiftly became a revelation because she convincingly elucidated how images and memory structure new modes of understanding objective reality. There was more. The book also overlapped at critical points in his growing fascination with Western esotericism² and its proto-sciences like alchemy, the ancient branch of knowledge dealing with the transmutation of metals. Practitioners maintained a keen interest in the enchanted potential of alchemy led others to surmise that iron could be “cured” into gold.³ Gardner’s approach to art often invokes alchemical methodologies, especially when considering how material and process can generate aesthetic and symbolic meaning through alchemical processes like distillation, fermentation, or transmutation.

There is a certain type of magic afoot in the *ars memoriae* as there is in the hermetic tradition of alchemy. The arcane liberation of being and matter into, say, panaceas that cure disease and extend life illustrates why there exists a preternatural component attached to both. Applying the mechanisations of memory and alchemy to critical aesthetics provides, according to Gardner, a “magical way of thinking about material reality.”⁴ In other words, they are a base from which to explore how objects and images impact his knowledge and experience of the world.



Baldachin Joachim, oil, acrylic, marble dust and paper on burlap (2020)

In *Here To Go*, Gardner contributes several paintings that employ mnemonic frameworks like those outlined in Yates's *Art of Memory*; namely, in *Baldachin Joachim* (2020), he renders architectural features like archways and staircases to reflect the significance of spatiality to memory techniques. After all, Yates stresses that the first step to the method of *loci* is to "imprint" a series of places on the memory, and the most common "mnemonic place system used was the architectural type."⁵ The painting also pays homage to Giotto's luminous blue vaulted ceiling and unusual mural cycles in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy. Completed in 1305, these murals represent the seven virtues and seven vices of Roman Catholic theology. As claimed by Yates, they were strongly informed by the method of *loci* in order to be more memorable to the pious onlooker. She persuasively argues that Giotto "made a supreme effort to make the images stand out against the carefully variegated *loci*, believing that in so doing he is following classical advice

for making memorable images."⁶ Gardner adheres to the teachings of Yates (and Giotto) and exerts them in *Baldachin Joachim* to forge a memorable image of his own volition. In short, the painting maps Gardner's interpretation of the foundational knowledge that structured Western esoteric thought and aesthetics during the medieval era.

Surface remains a priority in Gardner's painting. He accrues numerous layers of paint and material on anomalous backgrounds like burlap. In paintings such as *Tree Cutter (Grafter)* (2021), for example, these layers are then meticulously scraped away, reworked, and restored back to the surface. This process is repeated until areas of the composition expand while others recede. The consequence is an uneven, fragmented surface that intentionally appears scratched, blistered, and imperfect. It's a particularly laborious, durational approach that finds him intentionally eroding the superficiality of two-dimensional surfaces to uncover "subjectivities" in its substrata.⁷ But it also categorically stretches the boundaries of contemporary painting while approaching the ethos of collage or assemblage.

The veritable surface disruption of *Here to Go (SMN Post Flood)* (2021) positions this painting as one of the most abstracted in Gardner's exhibition. However, it also stands as one of the strongest displays of the artist's image philosophy and thus serves as the title for the exhibition. Its subject matter references Gardner's encounter with Paolo Uccello's 15th-century frescoes in Florence's Santa Maria Novella church. Regrettably, the frescoes were heavily damaged during severe flooding in 1966. Using personal photographs as source material, the painting replicates an architectural motif painted by Uccello that was nearly destroyed by high waters. The result is an entirely new painting that places the image in-between the original painting and the flooded painting, in-between the mechanisms of emergence and decay.

Gardner's entanglements with abstraction may also speak to the alchemical experimentations of old and the speculation that matter such as concrete and stone can be recomposed into new and unexpected combinations. Many of these principles are at play in his ongoing installation *Idle* (2020-2023). It is created from a breadth of material including debris from Toronto's Leslie Street Spit, rocks, foam, and found objects. "I cannot help but think of these scraps as some sort of image-vehicle or image-matter," writes Gardner, "as they still hold traces of the painting they helped build."⁸ For instance, Gardner introduced store-bought spray foam into his paintings in 2008 and has compulsively kept every scrap that is cut away or discarded ever since. This is not an exaggeration. To recycle petroleum-based byproducts like spray foam is not only environmentally-conscious, it categorically transmutes the material into an aesthetic object. When this and other accumulated material is placed next to each other, it becomes a kind of living installation that partakes not just in the present, but in a much deeper geological time.

The inclusion of these materials in his work points to an unfolding dialectical relationship between total states of becoming and deterioration. Installations such as *Idle* articulate the progressive breakdown of images, texts, and symbols as time unfolds. It also articulates how they can be ratified to produce new meaning and knowledge of objective reality. This is as true of *Idle* as it is of Gardner's paintings like *Tree Cutter (Grafter)*. What becomes clear is that he sincerely cares for the mercurial agency of objects and images.

Preparing for Gardner's exhibition provoked me to think about the nuances of cognition and memory. This became more urgent a few weeks ago when my grandfather passed away and I was called on to write his obituary. Looking back through decades of

memory, I was struck that my strongest memories of him were rooted to specific places that are utterly familiar. The images of him (and us) together almost always relate to his Scarborough home – playing darts in the basement, watching him pour molasses on toast during breakfast, drinking red wine in a red glass in the living room, smoking his pipe while picking beans in the garden, and so on and so forth. In my mind, I keep his memory alive by wandering through the spaces he once filled. It is not as Yates intended with the method of *loci* but it works, however painfully. I acknowledge that the memories of my grandfather will decline, regenerate, and surface as time passes for this is the life cycle of memory. Objects and images have life cycles, too, and Gardner's work has allowed me to edge closer to understanding them.



Here to Go (SMN Post Flood), oil, acrylic, gesso, and insulation foam on burlap (2021)

Notes

1. Frances Yates, *Selected Works: Volume III, The Art of Memory*, first published 1966 (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.
 2. Western esotericism is a field of study that critiques the received history of the west by looking at neglected, rejected, and "secret" knowledge within western culture. An umbrella term, Western esotericism covers important aspects of Gardner's research such as the legacy of astrology in western visual culture, the influence of Alchemy in the early sciences, Eastern influence in early western philosophy, and the occult influences on the origins of Modern Abstraction.
 3. John R. Clark, "Anonymous on Alchemy, Aristotle, and Creation: An Unedited Thirteenth-Century Century Text," *Traditio* 61 (2006): 149.
 4. James Gardner, "Through Static and Distance: Image Agency and Painting," MFA Thesis and exhibition brochure essay (Montreal: MFA Gallery, 2020).
 5. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 3.
 6. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 93.
 7. James Gardner, "Statement," last modified 2023, web.
 8. James Gardner, "Statement," web.
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About the Artist

Born in Kitchener and raised in Brantford, James Gardner is a visual artist currently living in Montreal. After completing his MFA at Concordia University in 2020, Gardner's thesis work was awarded both the Petry Award and William Blair Bruce European Travel Scholarship. Earlier this year, as a component of his scholarship, he visited Greece and Turkey to conduct research on Byzantine Icon painting traditions. His graduate work and recent research is centred on collaborating with institutions like the Warburg Institute and other image archives and historical sites related to the study of Western esoteric image traditions. Previous to Montreal, Gardner completed his undergraduate degree in Studio Art and Art History at the University of Guelph, and was a founding member of the Toronto collective and artist-run centre VSVSVS (2010-2017). Gardner's work has been supported by several scholarships, prizes, and awards including the TFVA Artist Prize, the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canadian Master's Scholarship, and multiple grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council.

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Cover: *Idle*, oil and marble dust on canvas with sculptures, found objects, and rocks, 2020-2023 (ongoing). Image courtesy of the artist.

Back cover: *Tree Cutter (Grafter)*, oil, acrylic, and latex on burlap (2021)

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