

Realism in the Age of AI: How Structural Omission Grounds Representational Painting in Perceptual Limits

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January 8, 2026

Abstract

Structural Omission is a framework for realist painting developed for the post-certainty era of generative AI, when images can be produced at scale with a surface of total certainty. This essay argues that realism remains viable only by abandoning completion as its premise. Traditional realism, even at its best, carried an old promise: that completion was available in principle, and that the artist could deliver wholeness if they chose. Generative AI systems now manufacture that kind of closure faster, cheaper, and more convincingly than any human hand. Structural Omission rebuilds realism on a different ground rooted in perception itself: perceptual limits are not an error in representation. They are the condition of representation. The framework formalizes planned, load-bearing incompleteness through three criteria—Ground (perceptual limits), Structure (structural incompleteness), and Consequence (narrative without resolution). Completion-biased image systems can imitate the look of omissions, but they usually treat gaps as a visual effect rather than structural absence. Rather than competing with algorithmic finish, Structural Omission treats partial visibility as the architecture holding the painting together. The result is realism that is accountable to human perception.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18189903>

During my residency at Byrdcliffe Arts Colony in Woodstock, NY, a fellow resident remarked on my work. They made an assumption that revealed the core problem with realism in the age of AI. They thought I would paint realistic scenes first, then disrupt them by painting over sections. It seemed logical: wholeness would exist as default first, disrupted later.

They were wrong. I only ever paint a fraction of the whole. The omissions are not applied after the fact. They exist before anything else is painted. They are foundational. They determine composition, spatial logic, and psychological structure before any identifiable image is rendered.

That expectation, completion first and disruption second, is what realism trained viewers to anticipate. For centuries, realist painting carried an implicit premise: that the world is fully observable, and the painter has access to that fullness. Even when painters left sections “unfinished,” the underlying assumption remained that completion was available in principle. The viewer trusted that the artist could see it all and was choosing how far to go.

That trust no longer holds and was always merely an assumption on the viewer’s part.

We now live in what I call the post-certainty era. It is a time when images can be fabricated more easily than recorded, algorithms calibrate what we see, and facts have lost the authority they once held. AI-generated images operationalize this condition. Machines produce pictures that feel complete, seamless, and authoritative without any perceptual ground.¹

This matters because machine vision is not human perception. Human seeing is partial, limited by attention, memory, and what never enters awareness in the first place.^{2,3}

If realism continues to convey completion, resolved form, closed narrative, visual certainty, it collapses into the same category as algorithmic finish. It becomes another smooth surface implying access to wholeness it cannot justify.

I don’t believe this is a technical problem to solve. I find it a compelling condition to explore.

My answer is Structural Omission: a framework that makes the limits of perception visible as the structural foundation of realist painting. Where AI produces closure on demand, Structural Omission builds realism on a different premise: completion is unavailable. The omissions are

planned, load-bearing architecture. They are not stylistic effects. They reveal something very human.

Structural Omission is how realism remains relevant. There is no need to compete with algorithmic finish when our humanness is what makes us unique. Our human perceptual limits become the structure holding the work together.

WHAT STRUCTURAL OMISSION IS

Structural Omission operates on three principles. They are criteria that distinguish this framework from adjacent practices and make a distinct approach to contemporary realism.

Ground → Perceptual Limits

Every act of seeing is partial. Painting reveals the bounds of observation and knowledge rather than pretending to resolve them. The work does not claim to overcome these limits. It makes them visible as the condition of representation itself.

I arrived at this principle through studio practice before I understood its theoretical grounding. The more I tried to complete an image, the more untenable it felt, as if I were claiming access to information I did not have. Paint resists total articulation. Being human means that our perceptions are limited by our physical bodies, history, bias, or attention. We never see the whole.

In my process, omissions occur through a method I cannot fully control: I transfer partial images to canvas, tear and sand away the image, apply Venetian red wash, then paint only where residue remains. I cannot predetermine what survives. That constraint matters. It mirrors how perception operates. Our blind spots are not designed. We rarely know where they are. So the random occurrences on my canvases are foundational.

Phenomenology maps this terrain. Merleau-Ponty describes perception as necessarily partial, structured by a horizon of what remains outside immediate grasp.⁴ My work builds from that premise, making absence foundational rather than designed or compositional.

Structure → Structural Incompleteness

What is left out is load-bearing architecture, not style. Omission is built into representation itself. Remove the absences and the entire conceptual framework collapses.

The term “structural” is deliberate. In architecture, structural elements cannot be removed without collapse. They distribute load and determine what the building can support. In Structural Omission, the omissions serve this role. Remove them and what remains is conventional realism implying access to completion.

The counterfactual test is simple: if the omissions can be filled in without changing what the work is investigating, they are not structural. They are stylistic.

Consequence → Narrative Without Resolution

In this work, narratives are provoked, but resolution is unavailable. Even to the artist. The work accepts that no single, authoritative story can be known or concluded. The viewer is drawn into inquiry, but the inquiry does not end with answers.

In earlier realism, closure implied mastery: a painting represented a world concluded within its frame. In Structural Omission, conclusion is not the goal and cannot be the outcome. The painting stages fragments that imply a larger system without pretending the system can be made whole.

Rancière argues that images do not simply depict the world; they organize relations between what is shown, what is sayable, and what remains unresolved.⁵ Structural Omission uses incompleteness as an operating condition: the viewer must contend with perceptual limits rather than receiving the comfort of clarity.

The result is realism that does not pretend to deliver the whole story. It makes visible the limits embedded in any attempt to depict reality or fully understand a narrative.

WHAT STRUCTURAL OMISSION IS NOT

The term “omission” potentially invites misreading. These clarifications position the framework outside familiar categories:

Non-finito. The Renaissance tradition of leaving work “unfinished” assumes completion was available in principle. Structural Omission asserts that completion is not available.

Indeterminacy or ambiguity. This is not interpretive openness as an aesthetic stance. It is representational insolvency: the image is structured around what cannot be accessed, not around what could be read multiple ways.

Negative space. Negative space defines form through what surrounds it. In Structural Omission, absence does not serve form. It interrupts the expectation that form will resolve.

Every painting contains incompleteness. Structural Omission makes incompleteness the organizing principle.

WHAT STRUCTURAL OMISSION LOOKS LIKE

In *It Seemed Lighter in the Beginning*, a woman on a bicycle rides through a forest. The figure emerges clearly: face, torso, the forward lean of her body. The bicycle's frame is rendered with precision. Behind her, trees establish depth and atmosphere, with dappled light suggesting a specific moment.

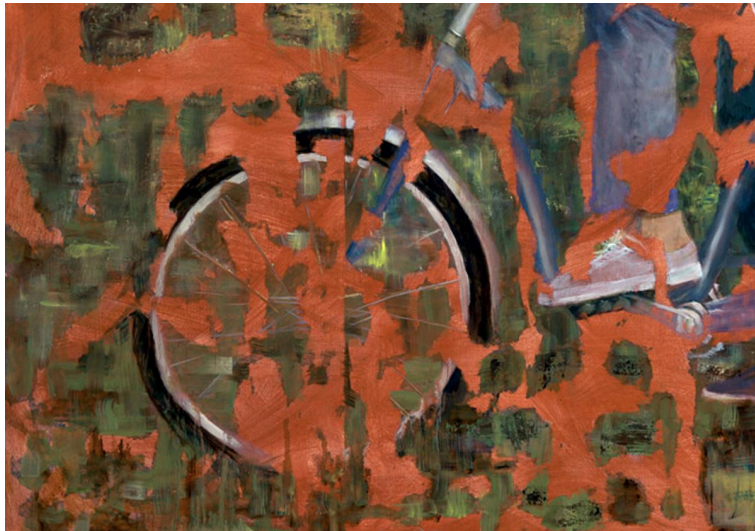


It Seemed Lighter in the Beginning, oil and mixed media on canvas, 60 x 72 in (152.4 × 182.9 cm), 2025

But the Venetian red ground disrupts everything.

The ground refuses to recede. Sections of forest dissolve into raw canvas. The bicycle's wheels fragment. The woman's lower body, legs, feet, the connection to pedals, is simply not available.

The viewer can see enough to construct the scene, to understand the gesture, to feel the forward momentum. But the image cannot be concluded. What remains visible becomes more charged because completion is not an option.



It Seemed Lighter in the Beginning, oil and mixed media on canvas, 60 x 72 in (152.4 x 182.9 cm), 2025 (Detail)

This is the counterfactual test in practice: if I rendered the woman's legs, completed the wheels, filled in the dissolved forest, the painting would become a different kind of work entirely. It would imply epistemic access it does not have. It would become a picture of a woman on a bicycle in a forest, competent, perhaps beautiful, but no longer an investigation of perception's limits.

STRUCTURAL OMISSION IN CONTEXT

I am not alone in interrogating representation's limits, but Structural Omission establishes different criteria than adjacent practices.

Gerhard Richter's blurred figures acknowledge that memory and vision are unreliable. In many works, legibility is reduced after a representational structure is established, dragging, scraping, or

smearing so the image becomes compromised. The effect depends on an image that can be recognized as having existed in a more intact state.

In Structural Omission, omission precedes the image. It determines what can be painted from the beginning, not what is later compromised. There is no intact image beneath the surface waiting to be recovered. The absence is the structure.

Luc Tuymans builds paintings from mediated sources, treating painting as translation of an image stream that is already secondhand.⁶ His work exposes how images lose clarity through transmission and history.

Where Tuymans treats incompleteness as a property of the source, Structural Omission treats it as a structural property of perception itself. The limit is not borrowed from history. It is built into the act of seeing.

Both approaches recognize that completion is unavailable. Structural Omission formalizes incompleteness as prerequisite rather than outcome. Where Richter compromises and Tuymans inherits degradation, Structural Omission begins with the premise that completion was never accessible and builds that limit into the architecture of the painting.

WHAT HUMAN PERCEPTION CONTRIBUTES THAT AI DOES NOT

AI excels at producing visual surfaces that read as complete: seamless, authoritative, finished. Structural Omission does not challenge that finish. It challenges the premise behind it.

AI can simulate the appearance of gaps. It can generate torn edges, blank fields, occlusions, and missing data as style. Structural Omission is not a technique or style. It is constraint-based realism: omission functions as a governing condition with consequences for composition, narrative, and what the image can ethically claim.

A painting built through Structural Omission carries three conditions that matter here:

Grounding in perceptual limits. The work is structured around the fact that total representation is not available.

Narrative tension without conclusion. The painting engages inquiry but cannot be brought to closure. It becomes a site of sustained attention rather than a resolved statement.

A record of human judgment under constraint. It is consequence: what is rendered, what fails to resolve, what cannot be made whole without falsifying the premise.

It is an insistence that representation must acknowledge its own limits. It is an assertion of our humanness.

If my goal were the illusion of full knowing and closure, I would work in code.

WHY THIS FRAMEWORK MATTERS NOW

Artists are responding to AI in predictable ways. Some integrate it as a tool. Others reject it as a threat. Many argue that human creativity cannot be replaced. These responses miss the deeper shift.

AI did not just introduce a new image-making technology. It made closure cheap and ubiquitous. When algorithmic systems produce finished surfaces on demand, realism has little purpose beyond hand craft.

Structural Omission is a different response. It builds realism on premises AI does not share: that perception is partial, that knowledge is incomplete, that completion is not a legitimate endpoint. This is new territory for representational painting: not abstraction, not disruption as style, but incompleteness formalized as method and defended through criteria.

WHAT THIS OPENS

Structural Omission changes the job description of realism in the post-certainty era. It treats completion not as an aspiration, but as an assumption worth interrogating. That shift opens a few questions that painting can pose but cannot resolve:

- What is representation doing once completion is no longer its premise?
- What does realism contribute when algorithmic systems can manufacture finished surfaces on demand?

- Can the limits of perception become the structure of the work, rather than a problem the work tries to overcome?

This framework is young. Other painters may find different responses to the post-certainty condition. But Structural Omission stakes a specific claim: intentional, load-bearing incompleteness, formalized through principles and built into representational painting from the beginning. That gives realism a survival strategy that neither competes with nor capitulates to algorithmic finish.

The work does not redefine realism. It rewires it.

CONCLUSION

That fellow resident at Byrdcliffe was right to notice something fundamental in my work. They were wrong about the sequence. The incompleteness is not applied after the painting is built. It is the condition from which the painting emerges. Because that is how perception works.

Generative AI produces images that imply they show everything. Structural Omission begins from the opposite premise: human perception is incomplete, always partial, always operating inside limits we cannot transcend.

The painting never contained the whole story, because the full story does not exist.

References

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