

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

It Was Supposed to Be Fun

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Preface

I find it rather timely that the intended title of my thesis exhibition was "It was supposed to be fun." I originally thought of naming my show this after I had found myself spinning out during my first year of grad school. I felt that my anxieties threatened my abilities to enjoy the present. I was always so worried about having fun that I seemed to scare it away. Part of the solution to this predicament was to observe small fleeting moments and record them via painting. The sentence "It was supposed to be fun" seems to hold much more weight in the time of COVID-19. Graduations, exhibitions, celebrations of all sorts are being canceled here and everywhere in order to stop the spread of this disease. I would like to thank Catlin Brown, Sharon McConnell, Jesse Plass and Katarina Riesing for coming up with creative solutions to work around the current circumstances. Although I will not have the exhibition I had planned for, I am thankful to be able to finish my MFA here at Alfred and I appreciate the experiences the program has given me.

A girl on her knees is puking in an alley; her friend holds her hair. A disk jockey is blasting sick beats unaware of the chaos that ensues on the dance floor. A lone soul basked in solitude by light from a motel pool. A group of women, surrounded by a plume of smoke, sit and talk while shot glasses and limes are scattered on the table. Three weathered small-town kids sit under the glow of a neon moon. In the early morning light a trash can holds a bouquet of flowers, wilted and unwanted. These are the narratives I collect and choose to translate into paintings.

I'm not looking to explore bar culture but rather I am investigating narratives of people seeking emotional release. These narratives tend to take place in public and noisy atmospheres but often convey emotions of loneliness, anxiety or chaos. In this body of work, I am painting what I know through observation, photography and memory. While using a process that utilizes washy paint floating on smooth surface, I paint figures in vulnerable states to deal with ideas of solitude, stimulation and interpersonal connection. I'm painting what happens when constraint is left at the door and inhibition is able to run wild and free. I paint the party, the sloppy after math, and the mundane events that happen in between. I paint the loneliness that is somehow still present in a crowded room. I paint the moments that were supposed to be fun.

I paint bar scenes because they are enduring evidence of the human condition. Whether it's a lively little room playing salsa music, a moody discoteck, an upscale bar or a honky tonk, they are places where people seek escape from their troubles, or escape from being themselves. The setting of bars in my paintings act as psychological spaces: limbo realms that offer freedom. There is a note from Susan Sontag's *Notes On Camp* that I find perfectly sums up the attitude of bars and their customers, "56.Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of character... Camp taste identifies with what its

enjoying"(Sontag 1964, 33). I feel the same way toward the figures I am painting. I feel a love and an empathy for the subjects in my paintings, partially because they are based on my experiences, but also, we have all been there. We've all gotten too fucked up, puked our guts out, and felt like shit the next day. Maybe it was last week or ten years ago, but we've all been there. And that's what I am interested in; I'm interested in exploring, my own as well as others, "little triumphs and awkward intensities" of life. When I show these paintings, it excites me that people can identify with these narratives that are personal to me. I'm excited viewer can find something to relate to in the content of the painting and laugh with me about it.



Fig1. Motel Oasis,
Oil on panel,
20x16in, 2020,
Alfred NY

Trajectory of Work

Throughout my time in this program, I have explored several ways of working. At the tail end of my undergraduate career I was working with the figure and photography in my practice in multiple ways. I was using 35mm film to directly photograph myself in different personas. Inspired by Cindy Sherman, I carried the ideas of these photo works into paintings. I began to paint myself in different constructed narratives to explore ideas of identity and desire. I would make collages of digital photographs on Photoshop, project them and paint tightly from the source material.

As I entered my first year in graduate school, I tried to loosen up from the tight way I had been painting. I began to work with text and female identity. I obliterated the figure and began to make signs that used craft materials (often marketed towards women), and explored how women reclaim degrading words by using them. Upon arriving to Dusseldorf for the first time, it became very apparent to me that cheap craft materials such as pom poms, pipe cleaners and foam core were not so easy to come by. I decide to return to a more traditional way of painting.

I began to observe the world around me with fresh eyes. This was the first time I had been to Europe. I painted the dogs I saw on the street, meals I ate, randos I encountered on my morning commute. Through these studies that helped me adjust to my new European lifestyle, I decided to pull from my personal experiences again. But this time things were not so contrived. This time I was painting in a diaristic way on small scale pages of yupo paper. My identity was no longer the driving subject in the painting

but rather as a present observer. I found this shift to be exciting and freeing. My paintings began to feel less idiosyncratic and more open.



Smokin' Hot Ladies, oil on panel,
70x100cm . 2019. Dusseldorf,
Germany



Sketch of the DJ Set. 12x16in, gouache on yupo. Anticipated to become a 7x6ft painting on panel. 2020. Alfred, NY

Process

Purge Poem

You want to know about her purge look at the girl tossing her cookies. No follow-through weak sauce fetish paint whore. What are you a kids' book illustrator? Because the best thing you've painted is that dog. Do you know how proportions and perspectives work? Obviously not, ya damn fool. You think you can paint your little yupos and they'll magically become a big beautiful oil painting? NO. that shit takes work.

Sloppy. You're sloppy. Clean it up. Also, you think you're a sculptor or something taking up space with your deep dish panels? Get 'em out of here! Get some fresh gamsol, Slobba the Hut. Your colors our muddy. Quirky sad girl art.

Listen, you need to double down, focus, and really paint. Take Friday, don't speak to anyone they'll just distract you, and paint your goddamn guts out because there's nothing but you and the painting now and neither of you are up to snuff.

Memory, Photography, Observation, Invention

I feel as if I am trying to synthesize memory, photography, observation and invention in my paintings. Many of these paintings come from personal experiences; sometimes I am living my life not realizing that I will end up painting that moment, and sometimes I'm in bars photographing things that interest me. I take from my conscious memories and quick snapshots on my phone. When I am lacking information, I ask a colleague or friend to pose for me so I can find proportions and perspectives that make sense. This also helps to make sure compositions are not ruled by the confines of a

photograph. I use the image as a tool to help remember what attracted me to the scene. Sometimes the translation of the photo to the painting is very direct and sometimes the photo is just a means to get the gesture right. Although there are a few exceptions, I find the paintings that fail are often the ones that are not personal and specific enough. This usually happens when I have not physically been to the place I am trying to paint. When there's not enough of my emotional presence in the painting they tend to fail. Invention comes in to play when the paint transforms into something else, like a plume of smoke, a pile of puke or an atmosphere.

Grounding, sanding, grounding sanding, tah-dah, smooth. Surface is very important to me. The yupo is a plastic paper that light tends to bounce off of. I work on panel due to the fact that when gesso or oil ground is applied and sanded it has a similar effect of bouncing light. Prepping these surfaces is time consuming but necessary to the painting's success. By using and creating surfaces that are so smooth, the paint is able to glide and float on top; brush strokes and mark making are apparent. It's funny to me that the surfaces take so long to prep because the actual painting is typically done in a few sittings. Some parts of the painting take time and require me to slow down, but there is a sense of freshness when they are able to come together quickly. I feel as though my process is performative. I do all this prep work of finding and observing images, building the surfaces, sanding and grounding the surface, making a yupo drawing, then it's time for the main event, to fucking paint. I'll project the image of the yupo drawing on to the labored surfaces, pour washes in sections, or make fast brushstrokes. This exploration of scaling up was cut short due to the current circumstances of COVID-19, but I think what began to happen was, as I scaled up these images they were able to become more specific and had to become more

planned and controlled. This sometimes led to images becoming stiff, and as a result I began to sand down these paintings allowing me to layer in ways that is not possible with gouache and yupo. The history of the painting no longer had to be a weakness but a strength.



A studio shot of small yupo and large scale panel side by side

memory: night
@ ugly tuna Columbus,
Ohio, Kennedy Cameron
held my hair



Reference photo of colleagues
recreating the scene



Watercolor on
yupo
11x14in
2019
Dusseldorf,
Germany



Easel sized oil painting on panel
60x40cm
2019
Dusseldorf Germany



Emergency Exit. Gouache on panel. 48x36in. 2020. Alfred, NY

Stories As Told By Painting

I find the narrative to be an entry point into the painting. The washy translucencies pull you into a hazy psychological space, the narratives are quirky and invite people in with humor. My work is equal parts about the technique and materiality of painting as it is about these fleeting moments. The stories are sometimes mundane, sometimes funny, sometimes sad and often a combination of all of these. Narratives help people navigate the world. They can gauge a sense of self, time or place. Our personal narratives and memories are intangible artifacts that we search for, but are just beyond our reach. That's why we so desperately try to capture the present through photograph and mementos. When people give us gifts, we associate that item with the aura of that person. The paintings are narrated from a sober, nonjudgmental, and observational point of view. Not to say cold and analytical, but like a fly on the wall or a passing bystander. I invite the viewer to slow down and look at the little things in our periphery that go unnoticed.

I get really excited when I'm in my studio and while applying a brushstroke my painting makes me laugh; I think sincerity is the crossroads of humor and painting. In order for a painting to be believable, it needs something true or genuine. For a joke to be funny, it has to be based in some sort of recognizable reality. And this is where I think the role of a stand-up comedian and artist overlap, both observe the things they see, then they make their observations palatable by using a rhetoric or a visual language that is complementary to their sensibilities and personalities.

In the book *American Realism*, by Gerry Souter, the chapter that focuses on Edward Hopper includes a direct quote from the artist's personal journal: "Great Art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his

personal vision of the world...The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of colour, form and design... The term 'life' as used in art is something not to be held in contempt, for it implies all of existence, and the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it" (Souter 2009, 30).

Similar to Susan Sontag's fifty-sixth note on Camp this quote by Hopper makes the argument that artist should not disregard life as a subject matter to paint, but rather use it as such. Throughout art history many artists have painted their lives and the worlds around them. I am drawn to Hopper particularly because he was known for capturing the isolation that takes place in the densely populated areas of America in the 1940's.

Another artist that so skillfully captured the world around him was Henri Toulouse Lautrec. Nathalia Brodskaya, author of the biography *Toulouse-Lautrec*, writes about how Lautrec was so capable of emulating the world around him through prints and paintings because he was very immersed in social scenes not just as an observer but also a participant. "Lautrec's depictions of actresses and singers could be harsh, caricatural and even misogynist, his treatment of working-class women and prostitutes was often extraordinarily tender and sympathetic" (Brodskaya 2011, 123). He had a love for the world he chose to paint and that is reflected in his sickly color pallet and whimsical mark making.

In my work I aim to represent people and objects accurately but not exactly. What I mean by that is I am not concerned with making a face look exactly like the person I am painting, but rather accurately convey the emotion and sensation that come from within the figure. I allow a line to represent a mouth and dots for eyes not as place holders but as suggestion; using very little information to express something as

complex as human emotions. I feel that the simplicity of the short hand language I use lends itself to humor and gives the subjects a playful nature.



Boys, Beers, and Brats. Watercolor
and oil on panel. 50x70cm. 2019.
Dusseldorf, Germany.

Short Stories: Tangible Artifacts of Intangible Memories

During all the current events I found it really difficult to keep writing, to get myself going again I wrote these short stories about my paintings. To find light in this difficult time, I was able to slow down and write these little stories; I'm not sure I would have thought of them if I didn't have so much time to think. I chose to conclude my thesis with these small poetic antidotes because they bring context to my personal narratives that are embedded in the paintings, and they're fun.

Filthy Martinis

Long day, fade away. Let the brine of a filthy martini heal me. Let the gin and vermouth soothe my soul from the work week blues. My salty treat, I've waited all week. Four olives please, I don't care if its shaken or stirred. I'll take it up or on the rocks. So please just one more round is all I require, for soon I must go home and retire to wake up to the buzzing alarm clock and an ice pick headache.

Der Einhorn

It was around 9:00 at night we were looking for a bite to eat on this quaint as hell street. the houses were brick with tin roofs and light blue shutters and little window boxes with little petunias growing out of them. But almost sickeningly cute like it was too good to be true... anyway we stumbled upon a pub called "Der Einhorn" (the unicorn in German). It was just what we were looking for, how very serendipitous. we sat at a round booth by the window. Behind me I noticed the most vibrant light source in this entire restaurant was this glowing plastic duck at first. I thought "Oh, that's cute," but then when we were outside again, I noticed how strange and devilish this duck looked. Surrounded by plastic foliage he watched over the unicorn bar like some ominous

guardian. He was just like the rest of this weird perfect village we were in... too good to be true.

The DJ set

It was an exciting new beginning. Hoping that this time around things would not be so disastrous. An acquaintance of ours was DJing an afro beat set at a basement bar called the cube. We were having a good time dancing and drinking. Then the werewolf man showed up. He didn't seem right. He cornered me and my friend chewing our ears off about nothing really. We made our way back down the janky stair case and werewolf man took my hand to help me down the stairs. I didn't think much of it. But I guess I should have. My love was mad at me because he was jealous, I was holding some randos hand. We fought. I left the bar crying. They all stayed out.

Let it be learned that werewolf men are nothing but trouble makers and that she has eyes for no one but you.

Love ain't no fairytale

In the morning light we see who we are for all that we are. You're just a little dough ball, one of many. So, rise and shine and realize life isn't short. It's a long haul of triumphs and colossal mistakes. Stretch your little bones outta bed accept that last night is over and you can't go back and that you just have to get through today. Realize that you're constantly growing and sometimes that comes with growing pains. Remember love ain't no fairy tale, it's fucking work. But if its right maybe all that work is worth it. Maybe after a few wilted bouquets and a lot of rough nights you find out just how incredible you and the people around you are. Don't let the petty thoughts of others

seem profound. Shower the regret off, sip your coffee, put your shoes on and walk out the door into the light. Because there's no better cure for a hangover than pretending you don't have one. Actually, a McDonald's hash brown, that's the ultimate hangover cure.



Love Ain't No Fairytale. Watercolor on panel.
30x40cm. 2019. Dusseldorf, Germany

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