

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Alfred University

**Ruminations:**  
**A Psychoanalysis of Self Through Art**  
**by**  
**Grace J. Evans**

In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Alfred University Honors Program

May 2022

Under the Supervision of:

Chair:

**Stephanie McMahon – Professor of Painting and Drawing**

Committee Members:

**Taylor Keister – Adjunct Professor of Painting and Drawing**

**Dr. Kerry Kautzman – Professor of Spanish**

# Table of Contents

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT	3
PERSONAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
<b>ARTIST STATEMENT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>RESEARCH</b>	<b>9</b>
RUMINATION	9
SURREALISM	12
LITERARY AND ART THEORY	13
MEMORY: IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF LIFE EXPERIENCES	16
<b>PROCESS, MATERIALS, AND METHODS</b>	<b>17</b>
THE PROCESS: HAVING FUN	17
PAINTING MATERIALS	20
CERAMIC MATERIALS	21
SIGNIFICANT IMAGERY	22
LAYERING: TRANSPARENCY VS. OPACITY	22
<b>INFLUENCES</b>	<b>23</b>
FAMILY HISTORY	23
ARTISTS	24
<b>CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>SELECTED WORKS</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>31</b>

# Acknowledgements

## *Land Acknowledgment*

I grew up on the ancestral homeland of the Osage and Shawandasse Tula, in what is now known as the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The body of work for my thesis was largely made in Alfred, New York- the ancestral homeland of the Onöndowa'ga (“Great Hill People”) for multiple centuries before our arrival. For only 185 years, Alfred University has existed within this beautiful valley.

## *Personal Acknowledgments*

Many people and communities have supported me and allowed me to grow into the person and artist I am today. My parents, Thomas and Joanne Evans, are my biggest supporters and my best friends. It is because of them that I can attend college and pursue my dreams. I am grateful for them and their guidance every single day; I could not picture life without them.

Coming to Alfred University was the best choice I could've made. My classmates, friends, and significant other have given me so much inspiration and confidence: thank you for being my Alfred family and loving me unconditionally. I especially want to thank my various senior studio advisors for their advice and consistent support: Whitney Hubbs (Photo), Taylor Keister (Painting), Stephanie McMahon (Painting), and Adero Willard (Ceramics). I'd also like to recognize the impact of my Spanish professor, Dr. Kerry Kautzman, and her commitment to helping me in both my Spanish and artistic studies. The same goes for my supervisor Caitlin Brown, who has given me personal advice, professional direction, and friendship. Thank you all for seeing me and my experiences, and always pushing me to do more and dig deeper.

# Artist Statement

*If you carry your childhood with you, you ~~never~~ become older.*

My work is inherently sentimental: I explore my own memories, investigate my family history, and navigate my feelings as I settle into young adulthood. This body of work, *Ruminations*, dissects, psychoanalyzes, and obsesses over my childhood experiences. I do this through the representation of objects, patterns, and both abstracted and constructed spaces that blur the lines between artistic mediums. They beg the questions, what am I looking at? and why?

*Presence, absence, grief. Isolation, tension, stillness. Discomfort, comfort, discomfort.*

For me, ruminations are uncomfortable, repetitive feelings that come from highly emotional events. A memory serves as a trigger for a strong feeling that comes with the remembrance. It soaks into every crevice of my daily life, and my past is now concurrent with the present moment.

In my art, I portray the concept of rumination through fragments of memories. Instead of showing an action, I show the result of it. Instead of painting the contents of a difficult conversation, I sculpt a nonfunctional telephone. I don't paint about loss directly, but I paint fields of empty space and ghostlike figures. Ruminations aren't about the fine details, but rather how they continue to make me feel long after something has happened. Just as I am figuring out my past, I want the viewer to string together my thoughts and feelings through my symbols, narratives, and emotions depicted throughout my work. If every piece is a sentence, my work together forms the whole poem.

*Bitterness. Regurgitate it and spit it out. Again.*

I seek to bring the psychological space that obsessive thoughts occupy into the physical world in an immersive, sometimes playful experience. Material exploration is essential in the portrayal of rumination, giving each piece tactility beyond its visual presence- leaving something that is “stuck” with the viewer.

Within painting, I demonstrate the idea that thoughts are not always easily identified and labeled. The fragile, blurred lines of our own mental spaces become visible through oil paint, gesso, textured mediums, various paint thinners, and varnishes. I am interested in the interaction between painting and ceramics, as clay is an intuitive material that allows me to engage an installation through form and space. I use colored slips, glazes, and a catalogue of techniques related to surface treatment to create scenes on a variety of clay objects. The forms themselves reflect domestic objects, cementing the viewer in a space that feels reminiscent of a home. Ceramics relates to my paintings in a way I find represents not only my creative process, but how psychological space functions within my mind. Through the translation of my thoughts into physical objects, my art serves as a visual encyclopedia of both the lived experiences of myself and my thoughts regarding my family.

*“The chicken or the egg?” they ask. I think about grass.*

I have so many questions. About life, about the past, about what it means to be conscious. Most of my ruminations are just questions. I can’t answer most in general, let alone with words. And I think that’s why I make art.

# Introduction

When I was younger, I remember asking my mom: “Do you ever get thoughts in your head that you can’t get out? I can’t stop thinking about this, and I want it to stop.”

I think the first time I voiced this concern about repetitive thoughts was when I was 9 years old. I saw *Horton Hears a Who*, and at the end they sing REO Speedwagon’s *Can’t Fight This Feeling*. It took weeks for me to not only get the tune out of my head, but the specific moment when the notoriously introverted character belted out in song. The song itself wasn’t the issue, it was moreso the discomfort that came with it. I can’t quite describe it in words. I don’t know why, but it took up nearly all of my thoughts for a long, long time. It was more than a bad memory- it was a forcible replaying a scene that made me uncomfortable over and over again.

That was what made this feel different than any other times I had a “song stuck in my head.” This was something I couldn’t get rid of, in fact, the more I thought about how much it bothered me, the more I thought about it. Unable to ignore it, unable to forget about it, and unable to find anyone who could relate to it, I continued to have moments like this for a long time with little things here and there: the ending of a book, an emotional part of a video game, a certain character. What I didn’t expect were for these things to become painful and interfere with my day-to-day life. In middle school, I became unable to stop thinking about what I can describe as highly emotional moments in different narratives.

It was around this age that my doctors mentioned that I might have tendencies towards Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). “Obsessions are recurrent and persistent thoughts, impulses, or images that cause distressing emotions such as anxiety or disgust. Many people with OCD recognize that the thoughts, impulses, or images are a product of their mind and are

excessive or unreasonable.”<sup>1</sup> I wasn’t officially diagnosed until recently at the age of 20. I have what some describe as purely obsessional OCD or “Pure O,” meaning that I don’t have physical compulsions that might look like washing hands frequently. The compulsion is mental- it is **rumination**. Rumination is defined by Dr. Michael J. Greenberg as the following:

When I talk about rumination, I’m talking about any type of mental engagement with the problem ... I’m talking about shifting into problem-solving mode. This includes analyzing, mental reviewing, mental checking, visualizing, monitoring, and even directing attention toward the problem. **Crucially, all of these mental processes are controllable. They don’t happen to us; we do them on purpose.**<sup>2</sup>

I’m not saying I have more thoughts than my friends, but the way that thoughts function in my daily life is different from anyone else I know. It’s not just the *thinking* itself, it’s the thinking about how I can **control** the thinking. Exploring rumination is a large part of my honors thesis.

It’s at this point in thought that I ask myself, “Am I making art about my mental illness?” The answer is no- I’m making art about myself and both the physical and psychological spaces I inhabit. It is through my artwork that I’ve discovered my artistic process derives itself from and is strengthened by my ruminations. Has OCD hurt me? Undoubtedly, but it’s interwoven in everything I am and do. It has helped form how I think and how I act. In the novel of my life, OCD is not a chapter, but lives in the beginning, in the acknowledgements.

*I’d like to thank OCD*

*for everything it’s done to make me who I am today.*

*Thank you for never believing in me.*

---

<sup>1</sup> “What Is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?,” Psychiatry.org - What Is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?, December 2020, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ocd/what-is-obsessive-compulsive-disorder>.

<sup>2</sup> “Defining Rumination,” Dr. Michael J. Greenberg, October 20, 2020, <https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/defining-rumination/>.

In the artistic process, rumination functions in a (mostly) positive manner for me. An image will pop up in my mind, much like an intrusive thought. It could be anything from a specific scene, a pattern, or an object. That image feels “stuck” until I find its appropriate place in a piece of art. I then enter the problem-solving mode that is key in understanding rumination in OCD, and it forces me to focus on how I can resolve this through art.

I think material comes into play here too. There is something tactile about a painting or a ceramic sculpture; the artist has effectively brought something from their mind to a physical space. Ruminations are analytical thoughts that prove to be extremely vivid in my mind’s eye, and I find it therapeutic to have the ability to make my internal thoughts tangible through materials. In other instances, I come across something I immediately know will inspire a piece. This happens frequently when looking through family photos, nostalgic images, estate sales, old school projects: usually things that are rooted in the past.

However, most times my art is not direct. I love working with metaphors in allegories in my work. (Ants on a brick wall? What could that mean...?) I’m trying not to be too obvious about what I’m saying. I’m interested in a sense of ambiguity, while still portraying a strong emotion. How can I show someone what I’m feeling through material and object, rather than explicitly depicting a scene? Barbara Rose: “Jasper Johns does not want to be understood too quickly.”

I’ll end this by saying my thesis is centrally about myself and how I see the world. Talking about mental illness isn’t my goal, but rather how a difference in brain function can influence the way a person observes and reacts to their environment. I hope to connect with others through that to begin a broader conversation about strong emotions, our memories, and our consciousnesses.

# Research

## *Rumination*

I don't think a lot of people understand how Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder functions. There are two sides to the disorder- the obsession, and the compulsion. Obsessive thoughts are involuntary, and do not go away. Compulsions, on the other hand, are voluntary and can be controlled with practice. They serve to protect against the possibility of the obsession coming true. For example, someone who obsesses over getting sick might take extreme precautions and do them in excess to avoid illness. These compulsions can look like hand washing, avoiding garbage, wearing different clothes inside the house, etc. If the compulsion is not completed, the obsession roars and incites panic. There is no reasoning with the obsessive thoughts, and the compulsions can provide temporary relief. That's why we do it; it's the only way we know how to cope until outside intervention shows us differently.

OCD is typically treated through Exposure Response Prevention (ERP) therapy. This entails intentionally exposing a patient to the very thing that makes them anxious without completing the compulsion. Continuing from the previous example, a person could be asked to touch a piece of garbage without washing their hands. Then, after a few times of doing this, the exposure increases to something more difficult to do in the hierarchy of fears. Maybe this is touching a piece of garbage, not their washing hands, and then touching their face. The goal is to expose the patient to the fear until they realize that nothing catastrophic is happening- they are safe, and the obsession is inherently invalid.

Recently, I've learned that this therapy isn't very helpful for people like me who experience Purely Obsessional OCD (Pure O). Under the umbrella of OCD are many different categories of

obsessions and compulsions. With Pure O, it is not to say that I don't experience compulsions, but that my compulsions are literally obsessing over my obsession. In other words, I ruminate. The ruminations are not just thoughts; they are analyses of "what-if" questions. Here's an example:

"What if" statements consumed her: "What if I lose control and actually act out my obsessions?" "What if I do something bad ten years from now?" "What if I go crazy and do something I'm unaware of?"

After asking these questions, she might tell herself, she will go to jail, her boyfriend will disown her, she will never work in her profession again, and she will never have children. Then she would reassure herself that that wouldn't happen. And her OCD asked her, "Are you sure?" Around and around she went in her mind.

She analyzed and analyzed, but there are no answers to these obsessions. She was engaging in mental compulsions in order to lessen the terror she felt having these horrible thoughts of harming someone. These mental compulsions gave her momentary relief when she thought she had "the answer." But then her OCD became stronger because there are no reasons she is having these thoughts, other than that she has OCD.<sup>3</sup>

This observation by Dr. Patricia Thornton really resonated with me. She had perfectly described what happens within my head: the fear of being bad, the circles of thought, the temporary reassurance, the OCD reminding me that there is no answer besides the diagnosis itself.

Now, I had heard the phrase Pure O before, but never that there was another way of treating it besides ERP. Upon listening to episode #252 of the OCD Stories (titled "Rumination

---

<sup>3</sup> "Demystifying Mental Compulsions and 'Pure-o,'" Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA, July 24, 2019, <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/demystifying-mental-compulsions-and-pure-o>.

is a Compulsion”), I had my first encounter with Dr. Michael Greenberg. Dr. Greenberg is a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Anxiety Disorders and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. He talks about his own experiences with OCD, specifically Pure O. Many clinicians treat Pure O the same as any other type of OCD, but Dr. Greenberg has developed a newer practice specializing in Rumination-Focused ERP. Rather than inducing anxiety to teach the body to habituate, he believes the following:

I now believe that anxiety is a consequence of cognitive activity (namely, rumination); that it is therefore not subject to habituation; and that it persists until the cognitive activity is ceased. In other words, if you’re anxious you’re ruminating, and you’ll continue to be anxious until you stop ruminating. Habituation is irrelevant.<sup>4</sup>

This simply blew my mind. I spent the majority of 2020 talking with new therapists, learning how to go through very difficult exposures, and truly seeing little change in my ruminations. And according to Dr. Greenberg, the exposures should not be focused on inciting anxiety and habituating- it doesn’t help those with ruminations as compulsions. He states, “RF-ERP sees anxiety as evidence of rumination, so asking someone to feel anxious would mean asking them to engage in a compulsion. Thus, according to this model, feeling anxious would never be the goal of an exposure.”<sup>5</sup>

While it was hard for me to process that the months of therapy were possibly making my ruminations *worse*, I am grateful that I was able to find Dr. Greenberg’s methodology and learn more about myself through my artistic practice. After experiencing these thought loops all of my life, rumination really has defined how I think, and therefore, how I make.

---

<sup>4</sup> “Rumination-Focused ERP: Turning Exposure on Its Head,” Dr. Michael J. Greenberg, April 9, 2021, <https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/rumination-focused-erp-turning-exposure-on-its-head/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Targets and Rationales for RF-Erp Exposures,” Dr. Michael J. Greenberg, April 9, 2021, <https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/targets-and-rationales-for-rf-erp-exposures/>.

## *Surrealism*

I spend so much time asking “what ifs” for things that haven’t happened and probably never will, that I end up thinking in many nonexistent spaces. Sometimes the thoughts are so powerful that it feels like I’m dreaming with eyes open. Or a feeling is too difficult to describe in literal language, so I turn to metaphors and symbolism. In the realm of art history, this concept of a dreamlike state, symbolism, psychoanalysis, and the irrational, unconscious mind<sup>6</sup> is directly linked to Surrealism.

When I make art, I am not actively thinking about the Surrealist movement and how to make work that fits into its ideology. However, my motives for creating come from a similar place that theirs did. I find myself breaking “rules” of artistic medias. I use hardware materials in my 2D work, blending the lines between sculpture and painting. Some of my ceramic tiles look like prints or paintings. The founder of Surrealism, André Breton, “also intended Surrealism to be a revolutionary movement capable of unleashing the minds of the masses for the rational order of society. But how could they achieve this liberation of the human mind?”<sup>7</sup> This thought of the avant-garde, of breaking the former tradition because of mental and creative restriction, is how I approach my art. My reasoning is more personal and internal with the ruminations I experience, rather than as a political or social rebellion. I want to make art that makes the viewer question what they’re looking at and push them into a new psychological space.

When I think about how Surrealists worked to produce unconscious artwork, I think about how I do the same thing, and yet the opposite. For instance, I cannot always control the images or symbols that come to mind- I just know intuitively that I need to paint them. On the other

---

<sup>6</sup> Artsy Editorial and Jon Mann, “What Is Surrealism?,” Artsy, September 23, 2016, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-what-is-surrealism>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

hand, I think deeply about what those ideas mean and how they relate to my concepts. I think both of these ideas of unconscious thoughts and the deciphering of them really summarizes the influence of Surrealism in my artwork.

Specifically, I find myself drawn to metaphors and symbolism as a way of explaining my concepts. Something I am passionate about in art is the way that multiple pieces can speak to each other through the figurative language and symbols they use. Take Surrealist master Salvador Dali's *Lobster Telephone* (1938); he uses connection across multiple pieces in order to inform the viewer of his ideas. The symbols he uses mean something because of context; there is no inherent meaning:

I do not understand why, when I asked for a grilled lobster in a restaurant, I am never served a cooked telephone; ... why champagne is always chilled and why on the other hand telephones, which are habitually so frightfully warm and disagreeably sticky to the touch, are not also put in silver buckets with crushed ice around them.<sup>8</sup>

"What does this mean?" many will ask. The real question is, "Where does the meaning lie?" Is it found internally, or within other works of Dali? Should we dive into the social context of the time? Or is it dependent on the viewer? How can we decipher this?

Now, the intellectual basis of Surrealism comes into play, and theory becomes relevant.

### *Literary and Art Theory*

My friends, family, and classmates often ask me about my work, "What is this about? What does it mean?" I almost always respond with, "What do you think? What does it make you feel?" There is an assumption that because something was created by a person for a specific

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dali-lobster-telephone-t03257>

reason, that there must be a specific interpretation, and therefore a specific meaning to it as well. But what is meaning, and where is meaning derived from?

In literary theory, we think about the *author* as someone who creates a text, but also someone who is given *authority* to influence opinions. They are accepted as genuine and part of what we call the canon. Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searles Giroux state,

To be an author in the canonical sense is to be invested literally with author/ity, to be taken seriously and even revered for your accomplishments. Canonicity not only establishes “authority” through the designation of “genius” or “greatness,” it also establishes a particular relationship to authority, one based on honor and reverence as opposed to critical questioning and challenge.<sup>9</sup>

In the last part, it is clear that the audience (in both literature and art) tends to not question the meaning of something as is given by an author. However, meaning is not *produced* by an author to be *found* by someone. For example, in mathematics and the sciences, the authenticity of texts was accepted on their own merit without the validation of an accredited author. A reader did not need to establish the authorship of a concept, they were able to understand and interpret on their own accord.<sup>10</sup>

It is here that Nealon and Giroux explain that without the guarantee of meaning behind the words of an author- a so-called “death of the author”- there is an opportunity to free up a multiplicity of meanings. “Once the author’s privilege has been debunked, meaning is then no longer *found* but rather *produced*.”<sup>11</sup> When I first read this chapter from “The Theory Toolbox” in my Spanish Literary Theory course, I instantly connected to it. As an artist, I take the role of

---

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon and Susan Searles Giroux, *The Theory Toolbox Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 17

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 18

an author in that I create a piece of work for an audience to view and interpret. However, I do not wish to have authority over these interpretations. I want every individual to be able to draw a meaning that is unique to their experiences and feelings, as everyone has different eyes to look through.

Artists have written about meaning within the art world as well. In *Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (on Time)*, David Joselit states, “Here is a strange fact: every artwork is indescribable. And since we can neither grasp a painting in language nor exhaust it in experience, how can we assign it a meaning?”<sup>12</sup> This connects directly to previous thoughts on authorship but also to how **imagery**, both on canvas and within language, can function and differ from person to person.

Painting (and all forms of art) tries to do the same thing that figurative language does in portraying something indescribable. For example, which of the following statements best represents the flight of a bird more- something that humans can’t experience themselves;

1. *A bird flies through the air.*
2. *Feathers scraped the clouds as the bird swam with the wind.*

Imagery creates something that is felt in the mind, not felt directly through the senses or the literal text/image. I find the feelings inspired by figurative language to be reminiscent of my ruminations and the difficulty in describing them. I tend to use it subconsciously when I create. While the artworks are of personal moments that relate to my personal experiences, they portray feelings that connect with my audience. I want people to “read” my work and produce their own meaning from it. That is the goal of my thesis.

---

<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (Sternberg Press, 2016), 11.

As the final connection between literature and art, often compare my life to chapters of a book: my artwork are the poems that fill each chapter, and this thesis is an anthology of many chapters. In fact, painter R. H. Quaytman has created “chapters” of interrelated works with a common theme and the intention that the viewer moves from panel to panel and doesn’t sit with any one work for too long.<sup>13</sup> The sum of all these chapters is more important than each individual one, and yet each one speaks for itself, separate from the rest.

### *Memory: Importance and Impact of Life Experiences*

Thinking on the concept of life as a book divided into different chapters and pages, there is a significant sense of chronology. The first chapter influences what happens in the second chapter, the second to the third, and so forth. This is the same way in which memory functions in our lives. As we go about our day, we constantly reference past events and use them in our present decisions. If you order takeout from somewhere and dislike the food you ordered, next time you will order something different based off of that memory.

As a twenty-two-year-old, my memories and life experiences are rather limited. On the other hand, they are all that I have. Life experiences influence everything that I do. More than that, when I am ruminating, I seem to have a movie of my life on repeat. Everything I have learned, witnessed, and experienced are stored in my memories to reference, willingly or not.

In my research, there are two types of memory: explicit and implicit. Under explicit memory exists episodic memory, which is what I’m most interested in. It is described as “part of long term declarative memory, and comprises a person’s unique recollection of experiences,

---

<sup>13</sup> Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (Sternberg Press, 2016), 18.

events, and situations ... it will be different from someone else's recollection of the same experience, e.g., your first day of school."<sup>14</sup> There are three elements in particular: specific details of the event (time and place), context (what happened next), and emotions (how you felt).<sup>15</sup> That being said, memory is linked to both a sense of time and personal history. We are able to recall things from the past because they are in the past. And yet, we can reexperience an event and the context/emotions surrounding it anytime we wish.

In my work, I try to take into account all three parts of episodic memory and let them influence my final piece. I don't just look at the details of the memory, I think about the events that followed, how I felt about them *then*, and also how I feel about them *now*. The end product is a collage of all aspects of my memories and experiences.

## **Process, Materials, and Methods**

### *The Process: Having Fun*

It's interesting that with topics as heavy as ruminations, memory and family history, that my process is so fun and flexible. Once I have a starting point, I can use anything to create art. I love solving problems and finding new solutions through fun materials and out of the ordinary subjects. Trey Abdella talks about both searching for and finding materials to make with:

I'm really unsatisfied by just figuring something out, and that being it. I'm always trying to figure out a new way of approaching a painting or changing things up. I like playing with materials and different painting languages, finding things I can throw in to just

---

<sup>14</sup> [Saul Mcleod], "Simply Psychology," Simply Psychology (Simply Psychology, January 3, 2014), <https://www.simplypsychology.org/>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

surprise myself in fresh ways. I just find that really exciting. I wouldn't say I have a super consistent process in which I plan out some of the ways to integrate different techniques. I try and plan them out as much as I can beforehand in the sketching process, but then sometimes, when I'm in the middle, I'll see something in the store that I would like to incorporate. For example, I found this dog collar at a shop and thought that I absolutely needed this particular collar with its printed name, Roxy. I needed that in my painting! Or I'll be at Michael's Crafts, and see their bead selection for friendship bracelets, and go: "Oh my God, I really want a friendship bracelet. One that says "KILL ME!" I'm totally going to use that." Whenever I'm going anywhere I always look around for things that I can use somehow.<sup>16</sup>

Similar to Abdella, I am constantly toing with materials and trying new things. There is no "right way" to do anything, and the way I'm doing things is always changing. It's about play and collecting and finding inspiration in the everyday. Then, it's taking those objects and feeling bold enough to use them in the painting. Simple moments made impactful through context and material; that's art. It's these little moments that I find a deep interest in, especially those that occur more sporadically. My process is a mix of examining everyday occurrences, material experimentation, thinking about the past, and not being afraid to "mess up."

A brief example of how the creation of a piece goes is seen through my painting "Another Brick in the Wall." In the studio, I knew I wanted to create a brick pattern with the drywall joint compound I had. So, I laid out tape, put down the texture, and peeled it off to let dry. I then painted it to look akin to a brick wall, but I knew it needed something more. Thinking

---

<sup>16</sup> Sasha Bogojev, "Juxtapoz Magazine - Trey Abdella: Still in Detention," Juxtapoz Magazine - Trey Abdella: Still In Detention, 2021, <https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/magazine/features/trey-abdella-still-in-detention/>.

back on my previous work, I thought about reincorporating the motif of ants, and so I added them sporadically around the painting with little bits of caulking.

Then, as I was walking home one day, I saw an amazingly grotesque and funny little scene. On the sidewalk, a piece of chewing gum was covered in ants. I laughed for a moment and carried on. But the next day the gum had been stepped on, and the ants were still there in the same spot. In fact, *they were embedded in the gum*. So obviously, I needed to add chewing gum to the brick wall; and it fit perfectly.



Once I did this, it opened up a whole new category of thoughts and memories that surrounded such an image. The painting started out with texture play (material), continued with a chance encounter (external input), and ended with a new sentiment and meaning (internal evaluation and further decoding of symbols). With such a simple addition, the painting shifted dramatically. More often than not, my art begins as an incomplete idea- a fragment of a sentence. Finding the final piece of the puzzle that is the biggest challenge, and also the most exciting part of my process.

Much like rumination, the constant cycles of new thoughts, questions, and ways to problem solve arise and alter my paintings in the middle of my process. And yet, I'm enamored with how my process works and continues to surprise me: whether it's something found by chance or something from the unconscious that arrives to the front of my mind.

## *Painting Materials*

Some paintings I've made take weeks to complete- close to 20 hours. I would keep coming back to add things in, rendering it to perfection. Now, most pieces take between 1-5 hours. The reason? I homed in on the materials I use, simplified my imagery, and introduced smaller pieces into my practice.

In terms of *what* I paint, it could be anything. Sometimes it's a scene; other times it's simply an object. I paint from photos, memories, things from the past, words I've written- anything. There's no limit or restriction to what images I portray or how I create them.

I work with both panel and canvas, making my own stretchers/panels from 2x4s or reusing old ones. Before I lay down anything, I decide if I want to gesso the surface or utilize the texture of the raw material. If I know I will be using oils later on, I often will choose to gesso. But before anything is brushed on, I decide on textures. In most of my paintings, I use materials like drywall joint compound, caulking, and popcorn ceiling patch. These help me build up the surface in a way that fuels my concepts, saves paint, and allows me to just have fun. It also blurs the line between medias, so my paintings lean close to sculptures sometimes. Once the texture is applied, I gesso the canvas. After it has dried, I usually lay down a color field in acrylic paint. It dries fast, and I can go back in with more gesso or texture if need be.

Oil paint is my favorite paint to work with. The color it produces, and the oil mediums I can work with produce many different surface qualities from matte to glossy. Cold wax medium, galkyd, gamsol, linseed oil, stand oil: I use all of them for different things. From building up thick layers, to subtly creating transparent washes of color, oil paint can create anything I need.

## *Ceramic Materials*

My ceramic work is primarily sculptural. I use a premixed white stoneware body that I add superfine and medium grog to, along with paper fiber. This mix has proven best for my methods, whether I am coil building, slab working, or using press molds. Ceramics is unique in that I can build a form that stands strongly on its own, while still focusing on surface treatment as if it was a painting.

For my forms, I have more of a focus than I do with painting. I center on domestic objects (sinks, pillows, telephones, lightbulbs) or create wall hangings that act as “paintings.” There is something fascinating to me about making realistic objects in clay that are nonfunctional: the sink has no drain hole, the lightbulb has no electricity, the phone is disconnected, the pillow is hard. In terms of making the forms, I utilize coils, slabs, and molds. I challenged myself to make a large plaster press mold so that I could make realistic pillows again and again. The process took me weeks, but with the support of faculty and friends, I have a great mold that lets me make pillows from large slabs within an hour.

When focusing on the surface, I think about what I would want to carve into the clay. Sometimes that means I lay down slip and carve into it (sgraffito). Or vice versa, I will carve into the clay and fill it with slip (Mishima). Then, I can begin “painting” my work. For much of my work, I use underglaze and slips for matte areas on green clay and bisque fire to cone 04. I use majolica for shiny areas at cone 2. Sometimes, I add decals on top for any photographs I wish to transfer at cone 014. The pillows, however, use no carving or glaze. I covered them with terra sigillata (Tile 6 and XX Saggar) and fired them to cone 04.

The materials and process that go into ceramics give me time to think and force me to think far in advance unlike painting. I like the patience and planning that come with the media.

The contrast between the materials I use helps to keep my practice interesting and unique. Working in multiple disciplines allows me to explore different ideas in the ways that suit them best.

### *Significant Imagery*

I want to keep my discussion of imagery brief, as the works should stand for themselves without me giving you the definition. Within my work, I am drawn to different kinds of objects, patterns, and bugs. These are elements I find either are subjects of my ruminations or serve as a metaphor for them.

The most notable objects in my thesis are the representation of domestic objects. These include basic objects like pillows, sinks, telephones, electrical outlets, Ziploc bags, RCA cables, lamps, and lightbulbs. They also include slightly more personal objects that are still found in everyday households, like necklaces, lawn chairs, Box Tops, arcade tickets, and more.

Next, pattern plays a large role in my paintings especially. Chain link fence, tile, ribbed fabric, plaid and gingham, sunburn lines, an old blanket's fabric, bricks: these are all patterns I like to explore both through material and meaning.

Bugs are a new development in my work, but I find that in general each bug represents something different based on my own personal experiences with them and how they act as a species. Some I include in my thesis are ladybugs, ants, lightning bugs, moths, and flies.

### *Layering: Transparency vs. Opacity*

Creating layers is key in both my paintings and ceramic work: choosing what to show and what to block out, what to carve in and what to emboss. Transparency is playful, open, and embarrassing. It reveals and invites. Opacity, however, is a shadow. It blocks out, it hides and

pushes away. The contrast of these two concepts relate to the visual pleasure of eye movement around a work of art, but also how memory and thoughts function. Some things are left out, and other things remain in the forefront. Transparency and opacity allow me to show the constant changing of our minds.

## Influences

### *Family History*

A huge part of my identity, and also of my ruminations, stems from being an only child. I am highly independent, overly imaginative, and have a “I can do it myself” attitude with nearly everything I do. Growing up without siblings, I placed more emphasis on the relationships I had with my parents and extended family members. I loved looking through photo albums and learning about my family’s history- I still do. I am very close to my parents, but the rest of my family began to grow further apart as the years went on. Now, we are close with only a few relatives outside of our household.

So, when I began to grieve family members, both dead and alive, I found solace and heartache in those same images. I still love going through family albums, zooming in on certain details that feel like they convey the mood I want to achieve. My thesis includes many works, in both painting and ceramics, that come directly from old photographs.

Stories from my parents are another source of knowledge, learning about how they saw the same events and interactions from a different, older perspective. There are things I didn’t know because I was too young to understand; so hearing another side of the story always opens my eyes to new things.

Now, I am reevaluating how I see people. I have my own interpretations because of the I've changes seen throughout my life. As I continue to gain new context for the memories I have, I can create new compositions that help me understand my family history as it was and where it stands now- where *I* stand now.

## *Artists*

I want to end my thesis with a brief paragraph about artists who have influenced me, as other artists do not help me begin my artistic process, but rather help me finish a piece. I often look to see how people resolve their own work when I come to an impasse. For example, Trey Abdella's bold use of material and different styles has taught me that not everything needs to be the same. He inspired me my entire senior year and helped me to discover how I wanted to paint. Jonathan Walteridge and Sung Hwa Kim use incredible colors and contrast to make their subjects glow. I love how Walteridge renders water and people, while Kim achieves nighttime wonder beautifully. Gabe Langoltz showed me that simplicity and domesticity can still portray emotion. Ordinary does not mean boring.

Looking through other artists' works is extremely inspiring and fun. Sharing thoughts and influences with my peers is one of my favorite parts about being part of a community of artists, and my biggest influence has to be my friends. Talking with them late at night in the studio about our experiences and lives outside of university has been the highlight of my college career. I can only hope to keep interacting with others and learning all I can about the artists around me.

## Conclusion and Reflection

The truth is, I don't think this thesis has an ending point. Like many of my pieces, it is hard for me to decide when to stop. When it's something so personal to me, like making art, I could speak on it forever.

However, through this body of work, I've learned to take joy in the process and not focus so much on the "end." It seems timely, as I am coming upon graduation. Every moment seems to matter so much, and yet, I know I will have more moments. So why am I placing emphasis on these ones? Taking the pressure off of myself is also a lesson learned this year. I know I will continue to make art for the rest of my life, and I have time to keep developing my skill. The little voice in my head tells me that "This is it! This is THE show! Make it PERFECT!" but I know I will have so many opportunities in my life.

That's why I wanted to use my thesis to have fun and keep exploring. This paper is formal in some respects, but in most it is more "informal" than my other academic papers. Informal in the way that the subject is highly personal, and I am speaking from the heart. However, through writing this thesis, I learned more about myself in the months I spent researching than I did through years of therapy. Introspection is an amazing tool, and I am truly grateful to have the resources and support to write something like this.

That being said, as I bring my BFA thesis and honors thesis to a close, I feel ready to continue making art. The year has taught me who I am and what I want to do, and I am **excited** to move forward. I have a direction, I have myself, and I have my tools.

What more could I need?

## Selected Works



*Mojo and Licorice*  
acrylic, spray paint, house paint, oil,  
popcorn ceiling patch on canvas  
3 x 5 feet



*How I Imagined It*  
acrylic, oil, oil pastel, and wax on canvas  
14 x 14 inches



*The Swimmer*  
oil on canvas  
5 x 3 feet



*Caught*  
oil, acrylic, plaster, marker, caulking on  
panel  
5.5 x 4 feet



*Pavement*  
acrylic, spray paint, tissue paper on canvas  
14 x 14 inches



*Restless*  
stoneware, terra sigillata, cone 04  
22 x 20 x 6 inches



*Threadbare*  
stoneware, terra sigillata, cone 04  
22 x 20 x 6 inches



*Infestation (multiple ladybugs)*  
stoneware, majolica, underglaze, cone 2  
4 x 6 x 4 inches



*Infestation (one ladybug)*  
stoneware, majolica, underglaze, cone 2  
4 x 6 x 4 inches



*Bacon Grease*  
acrylic, oil, cold wax on canvas  
14 x 14 inches



*Collecting Dust*  
caulking, acrylic, airbrush, chalk pastel on  
canvas  
24 x 20 inches



*Bedroom View*  
acrylic, paper, airbrush, wood, linen on  
panel  
2 x 2 feet



*Lost Connection (pillow)*  
stoneware, terra sigillata cone 04  
26 x 24 x 6 inches

*Lost Connection (phone and receiver)*  
stoneware, majolica cone 2, phone cord  
14 x 5 x 4 inches



*Blue Carabiner*  
caulking, acrylic, oil on panel  
10 x 8 inches



*Sunk*  
ceramic, majolica cone 2  
18 x 24 x 8 inches



*Growth*  
oil and oil pastel on panel  
8 x 10 inches



*Is This an Outlet?*  
acrylic, drywall joint compound on canvas  
12 x 9 inches



*There's Always a Chair (For You)*  
oil, paper, graphite on panel  
10 x 8 inches



*Aqua Fresh*  
caulking, acrylic, oil on panel  
10 x 8 inches



*SPF 30*  
acrylic, airbrush, caulking on canvas  
24 x 12 inches



*Ticket Counter*  
oil on canvas  
16 x 12 inches



*Ladies in Waiting*  
drywall joint compound, caulking, acrylic on panel  
3 x 3 inches



*Box Tops*  
chalk pastel on panel  
3 x 8 inches



*Protection and Identity*  
caulking, acrylic, and oil on panel  
8 x 8 inches



*Cereal Milk*  
acrylic, caulking on canvas  
36 x 24 inches



*Out of Jars*  
acrylic, caulking, wood, ink on canvas  
5.5 x 4.5 feet



*RCA*  
caulking, acrylic on panel  
8 x 10 inches



*Family Tree*  
stoneware, majolica, decals, underglaze, slip  
Various sizes under 10 x 10 inches



*Another Brick in the Wall*  
drywall joint compound, acrylic, caulking on panel  
14 x 14 inches

# Bibliography

Bogojev, Sasha. "Juxtapoz Magazine - Trey Abdella: Still in Detention." Juxtapoz Magazine - Trey Abdella: Still In Detention, 2021.  
<https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/magazine/features/trey-abdella-still-in-detention/>.

"Defining Rumination." Dr. Michael J. Greenberg, October 20, 2020.  
<https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/defining-rumination/>.

"Demystifying Mental Compulsions and 'Pure-o.'" Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA, July 24, 2019. <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/demystifying-mental-compulsions-and-pure-o>.

Editorial, Artsy, and Jon Mann. "What Is Surrealism?" Artsy, September 23, 2016.  
<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-what-is-surrealism>.

Graw, Isabelle, and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth. *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*. Sternberg Press, 2016.

McLeod, [Saul. "Simply Psychology." Simply Psychology. Simply Psychology, January 3, 2014.  
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/>.

Nealon, Jeffrey T., and Susan Searls Giroux. *The Theory Toolbox Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.

Ralph, Stuart, and =. "Dr Michael Greenberg - Rumination Is a Compulsion (#252)." The OCD Stories, November 15, 2020. <https://theocdstories.com/episode/dr-michael-greenberg-rumination-is-a-compulsion-252/>.

"Rumination-Focused ERP: Turning Exposure on Its Head." Dr. Michael J. Greenberg, April 9, 2021. <https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/rumination-focused-erp-turning-exposure-on-its-head/>.

"Targets and Rationales for RF-Erp Exposures." Dr. Michael J. Greenberg, April 9, 2021.  
<https://drmichaeljgreenberg.com/targets-and-rationales-for-rf-erp-exposures/>.

Tate. "Lobster Telephone', Salvador Dalí, 1938." Tate, January 1, 1970.  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dali-lobster-telephone-t03257>.

"What Is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?" Psychiatry.org - What Is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?, December 2020. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ocd/what-is-obsessive-compulsive-disorder>.