

# Houses, Animals, and Children

## “A Thesis Experience”

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“In art the hand can never execute anything higher than the heart can inspire.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

I have always painted and over the past three years, as a University of Alaska graduate student, I have come to better understand why and how I create art. I have the personality of an internalizer I suppress and ruminate over thoughts and emotions, until they are released in a creative burst of energy. During this explosion the internal becomes something tangible, my heart races and seems to swell and my brain gets lost in a maze of decisions and discovery. I gravitate towards paint as a medium because of its capability to be worked and reworked, as well as its capability to be manipulated with speed. I never feel a painting is infinitely finished, but I know to stop a painting once I have exhausted the emotions addressed in the dialogue between the painting process and my mind.

As an undergraduate at Murray State University, in Murray Kentucky, I started an artistic pilgrimage exploring art materials and processes that were, unconventional, non-archival and repurposed. Interested in the paradox of mixing non- tradition mediums with more traditional media I found myself obsessed with pouring and dripping paint and observing different material interactions. I would use large quantities of house paints, lacquers, and stains in combination with artist oil and acrylic paints. There is an emotional release when engaged in this painting

process. Reacting to chaos with controlled mark making (such as lines, made with the aid of a straight edge) and color relationship choices. These more controlled contributions bring about a balance and harmony not only within the composition but within my mind as well.

During my time as a undergraduate I would research artist such as Jackson Pollock, William de Kooning, and Jean -Michel Basquiat. Attracted to how each of these artist tapped into the emotional and physical aspects of their creative processes. I found a kinship with Pollock and Basquiat, because they painting off the easel and on the floor, at times stepping on their paintings, allowing the emotional release and process to overrule the traditional painting conventions, which comparable to my painting technique. These artists have a raw and grotesque aesthetic siding on the fence with the sublime<sup>1</sup> rather than that of the rational and beautiful apollonian<sup>2</sup> approach. In my Bachelor of Fine Arts thesis statement I touched on the duality of Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian concepts, and personally felt more connected to the Dionysian whirlwind of freedom and destruction rather than the Apollonian predictability.<sup>3</sup> When in the studio I was like a tornado of curiosity, excitement, and boundlessness. Most of the paintings I made for each given critique were not so much high quality as much as high quantity. I was painting with speed and curiosity more concerned with experimental observation and less concerned with a realistic mimetic precision.

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Trans. John T. Goldthwait. University of California Press, 1961, 2003 Sublime being that of irrational thought and containing an indescribable overwhelming awe

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Ed. and Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Dionysian world based on the Greek god Dionysius the god of wine and excess.



*Untitled, stain, coffee, raw stretched canvas, acrylic paint, ink, polyurethane, 2005*

There is a five years gap between completing my Bachelor's degree and starting my Graduate degree. During the first semester of the Masters of Fine Arts Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I attacked the studio like a hungry lion. After many year of being a stay at home mom, in isolated Fairbanks Alaska's winters, I was busting at the seams for critiques and uninterrupted studio time. I claimed my space and had a number of paintings started before the semester officially began. At that time, I was still drawing on my undergrad experience and concentrating on process and rejecting the urge to incorporate image based subject matter, however this was a losing battle and images of landscape as well as text found a place within my compositions. Being the observant and daring professor that he is, Mike Nakoneczny, recommended that I counteract the raw surfaces of my paintings and embrace the

recognizable imagery creeping into the work. I pushed my comfort zone and created three separate series, in which, I strive to balance my experimental processes with recognizable imagery. The three series are titled Houses, Animals, and Children.

## HOUSES

The House phase came about as a way to better understand my experience living in Alaska and in a house under construction. Living without running water and a distinguishable area of living from that of construction kept me stressed and full of anxiety giving way to an overcharged protective urge to keep my children safe from what I saw as a hazardous environment. The paintings that best represent this series are *Pink house in a Blue room, No Roof, 12 ft.*, and transitional painting such, *Houses Falling in Fences, and The North*.

*Pink House in a Blue Room*, from 2011, is a painting that really clarified some life experiences for me. I began this painting like most with a found framed and stretched canvas of which I erase the original image and build surface texture by collaging, layering paint by pouring, smearing, and brushing, and subtracting paint by scratching, tearing, scraping. This particular painting contains the following materials: lace, flower print cotton fabric, acrylic artists paint, latex house paint, oil paint, polyurethane, ink, charcoal, and colored pencil. While painting pink house in a blue room I was concentrating on my eldest daughter and her previous blue antique bed in her “bedroom” with plywood floors and walls colored with patches of yellow and pink fiberglass insulation coated with a layer of shimmering clear vapor barrier.



*Pink House in a Blue Room, 2011*

The painting, *No Roof*, (2012) started with the real life experience living in a construction site once again, without a roof. A roof is the main protection against environmental elements and without a proper roof from June until September I was beginning to feel venerable and subjected and ruled by rain, wind, temperature, and noise. The actual house in this painting is small in scale and somewhat insignificant compared to the scale of swarming bees with large stingers as well as their hive of which consumes the majority of the composition. The bee's hive is very strong and the bee I s very protective of their dwelling and I

found a connection to this fact of nature, for I felt the opposite of the bees about my own dwelling.



*No Roof, 2012*

*12 feet*, (2012) is haunting. This painting shows the ghostly face of a girl trapped in the attic of a structure modeled after a dollhouse; where the interior and exterior are coexisting on the same plane... the outside is the inside and the inside is the outside. *12 Feet*, like the majority of my paintings is painted on the surface of a painting found in a dumpster. The



original painting stars back at the viewer, through the face of the child now entombed by the house, like a swaddled babe. Working from a found object particularly discarded paintings both of the Kitsch<sup>4</sup> and high art varieties is a practice I started decades ago out of both convenience and rebellion. The convenience aspect is for the most part self-explanatory, however, to start from a surface that already contains a history of mark making is much more exciting than the nerve-racking blank canvas that hums a tune of crashing expectations. When I paint on my own hand built and stretched canvases I always dirty them up, I step on them and drag them face down on a dirty studio floor, somewhat of a rite of passage, making the canvas mature enough to endure the brutality and love I will force upon it.



*12 feet, 2012*

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<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." [Partisan Review](#). 6:5 (1939) 34-49 Kitsch is referring to Clement Greenberg's philosophies of modern art vs other art (high art vs low art).

*Houses Falling on Fences*, from the year 2012, is another painting that really brings strength to the house series. This painting emphasizes my emotions by representing my anxiety stemming from a lack of control and balance in my personal life. The houses are free falling, like rain, from a storm only to find themselves imprisoned by a fence like cattle or swine. This seems really dramatic, but I feel it is important to truly and intensely feel or know something whether an emotion or an object to do it any justice in a piece of art. I always tell my art students in order to draw or paint a tree or a bowl of fruit you have to touch it, understand in its origins, its uses, taste, smell, etc, and that is why I painted *Houses Falling on Fences*, because I felt trapped and my mind felt stormy just like the painting portrays.



*Houses Falling on Fences, 2012*



*Houses Falling on Fences*, is painted over a found wooden panel painting once again allowing me to start my painting process by erasing a previous image of unsentimental value and replacing it with surface building and personal imagery. The subdued pallet plays into the feeling of a storm and being on wooden panel allowed me to really carve into the surface creating an extra deep layer of texture and release of emotion. Looking back I can see that Leonardo De Vinci's, *Storm Over Alpine Valley*<sup>5</sup>, was a subconscious gravitational force of inspiration for this painting, and that subconscious regurgitation intrigues me. In 2005, my painting professor Sarah Gutwirth (at Murray State University in Kentucky) showed me an image of Leonardo's *Alpine Valley* and it stuck with me swimming around in my brain until emerging in *Houses Falling on Fences*, in 2012.

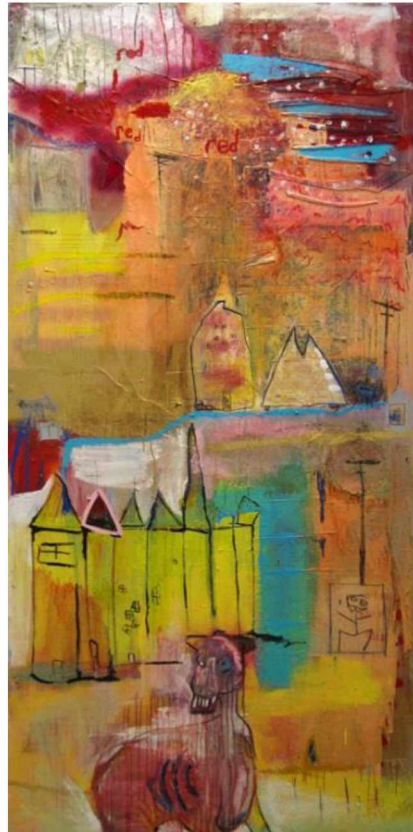
## **ANIMALS**

The second painting series I worked on during my time as a master student focused on a different imagery shifting from the structural elements of houses to the structural elements of animals. Like houses the animal form allowed me to transfer my emotional and psychological state into a tangible yet abstracted form. The animal series is what I consider my "self-portrait series". The houses at times seemed to take on human characteristics such as emotion and physical human traits like legs, but the animal form really allowed me to dive into an abstracted form of self-portrait. The first animal I painted came to be in 2012 within the composition of a House series painting titled, *The North*. I remember the horse form coming to be, as I layered

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<sup>5</sup> Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452-1519). Storm in an Alpine Valley, ca. 1508-10. Red chalk on paper. 19.8 x 15.0 cm

transparent ink pigments, I saw the form appear and just helped it emerge. I compare this painting to the primal animalistic experience of childbirth and a midwife's perspective of seeing the baby's head crown and massaging the vagina and watching the little squished head peek out of the abyss to only be sucked back in again and again... until POP the whole body appears.



*The North, 2012*

This painting reaches into the bowels of birthing my youngest child on a snowy November night at home with a midwife. Memories of staring outside the window by my birthing tub feeling like life was so quiet and dark out there when inside I was excited, fearful, and loud. I can relate to the horse like animal's confusion as well as its' grotesque appearance

in these moments of performing the animalistic natural birth. Strangely enough, *The North*, also marks the birth of my animal series in 2012.

When painting my animal series I started studying children behaviors, phases, and reactions to their environment. I observed my children, random children, and autistic children. I began to focus in on the art of children and overtime I limited my research to mostly that of autistic children. In the painting titled, *Lyin' Mother*, 2013 I climaxed in my animal series.



*Lyin' Mother, 2013*

*Lyin' Mother*, is one of my favorite paintings, because I can remember my mind going to the child like space or place and not being ashamed for doing so. This painting represents me as the lion, of who is confused, unstable, in a dangerous and awkward surrounding, suckled on, and followed. The house looks as though it will impale my skull if I lose my faltering footing, however, because of my color choices give off a feeling of innocence and humor (at least in my mind). During critiques I was often questioned about the bold outlines, so in turn I questioned

myself about the outlines. I know traditionally a painter is recommended to not outline their subjects in black.<sup>6</sup> I justified the outlines in my work feeling as though it enhances the juvenile feeling of the painting. In my mind I would think about coloring books and thick black crayons allowing these lines to lead me to the child- like place, deep in my thick adult brain.

Pablo Picasso is quoted, “It took me four years to draw like Michelangelo but it took me a life time to learn to draw like a child”<sup>7</sup>. It feels more natural for me to draw and paint with more emotion rather than rational mimesis. I lose interest and become annoyed with paintings and drawing that are realistic and I have always seen potential in the awkward and unconventional. Most of my animal forms are not true to any animal in the real world they are more like the essence of an animal and serve as a vessel for fragments of my emotions. Many of the animal are unbalanced, disfigured, confused, and out of scale to their environment. The animals’ environments are shallow and flat. The idea of a flat world reminds me of the children’s’ book *A Wrinkle in Time*<sup>8</sup>, in which the young protagonist travels to a fantastical world that has only one dimension, this world causes the characters extreme pain as if their bones and organs are crushing through compaction.

During the animal series I devised a method of process differing from that of the house series by painting and drawing on Mylar and to then secure in a found frame with spray foam rather than the traditional mat board and tape. Spray foam slipped its way in my work as a structural element and reference to my everyday experience living in a house under construction. Spray foam is a miracle substance with a high temperament. Spray foam is strong,

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<sup>6</sup> Matisse often outlined his subject matter to better enhance the structure of an object.

<sup>7</sup> Picasso, Pablo; Waldman, Anne (2004). *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz and Other Poems*. p. 322

<sup>8</sup> L’Engle, Madeleine. *A Wrinkle in Time*. New York: Square Fish, 2007. Print

light in weight, able to be used in a wide range of space sizes from small cracks to covering the surface of a whole house. Spray foam is also very finicky to environmental temperatures and if the temperature is too hot or too cold the spray foam will not perform to its best capability. The spray foam used in the framing process is visible to the viewer and will change over time; this change is exciting for me as the artist, comparable to watching children change appearances with age. I chose to place objects such as small coins Orange peels and string in the spray foam to satisfy the urge to collect and to remember.

Joseph Cornell is a brilliant outsider<sup>9</sup> artist who mastered making beautiful shadow box art works that have been inspiration, time and time again, for the fine art world. Cornell's shadow boxes play on the concept of collecting using found objects and creating an aesthetic whimsical scene full of irrational juxtapositions secured within the perimeters of a wooden frame. Cornell's piece titled *Bebe, Marie* is one of my favorites with its eerie beauty mixed with a feeling of childlike innocence.<sup>10</sup> *Scared-E- Cat*, from 2013 is an example of assembling a painting with the structural and capsulating qualities of spray foam.

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<sup>9</sup> Outsider is a term coined by Roger Cardinal in 1972 meaning a self-taught artist separate from but often recognized by the art world. I have always studied and respected the work of folk artist, outsider artist, as well as the art of children.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Cornell had an exhibition in which he catered to the sensibilities of children. Cornell placed the art works on the wall not at standard gallery height for adults, but lowered them to an easy visibility for children. Cornell also catered the exhibition opening with soda and cake rather than wine and cheese.





*Scared-E Cat, 2013*

## CHILDREN

The most current work, during my time as a University of Alaska Fairbanks Masters student, concentrates on everyday life and particularly that of my family. During the last year of my graduate thesis experience, I moved to Tennessee. This move changed my work. My new work is slower to come about than ever before in my art life and it involves less toxic chemicals, as well as being less chaotic, they are smaller in scale, and most of the newest works contain a human figure as subject matter. The new works are experiments just as my paintings have always been, however, the experiments are more controlled and involve more drawing and collaging techniques. Due to the intensities of single motherhood my children have found a place in my art. More and more they are the subject matter in full, such as in paintings titled *Mapes (2014)* and *Em-Smile (2013)*.



*Mapes, 2014*

The painting *Mapes* is centered around a quick drawing of my daughter, Maple, while she was watching me paint. The girls love to get down on the floor and watch me create things and I think it gives them confidence to create things as well. So often when I draw them I might already be in the process of painting, however, often times I get my creative juices moving by drawing a picture of them. *Em-Smile* is an example of using my daughters as a springboard for inspiration and studio time. *Em-Smile* is a drawing on mylar of Emma playing a v-smile gaming system. I used the spray foam differently in this work than the others by trying to make lines with the foam rather than blocking in the glass pane.



*Em-Smile, 2014*

When I realized I was using my children as imagery and understood the practical aspect of this action, I decided to push the ideas of the human figure and the child's mind. I have started making works referencing paper dolls with mylar, scraps of paper, crayons, oils paint, acrylic, paint, water color, color pencil ink, oil pastel, spray foam and found picture frames.



*Paper Girl 1, 2014*

I knew the graduate program would change my life and help me understand my painting more intensely. The Masters of Fine Arts Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks pushed and strengthen my capabilities and ideas. The challenge of such a program is not just in the university's requirements, but how to incorporate everyday life challenges into the mix. I know I am a painter and I will always paint. Some days I will paint more than others, for that is life, but being an artist is not the one and only reason I am graduating from the Master program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I am reaching the finish line because I believed in the people around me, the people teaching me, and I allowed my life to change when it was needed. I drug my thesis experience around with me through the mucky challenges and enlightening realizations all the time gambling with the outcome of completing the program, but now I have made it to the end and I feel thankful.

