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To Find a Stairwell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

TO FIND A STAIRWELL

By Cait Porter, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

Major Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking Department

To Find a Stairwell is an exploration and written supplement to my painted works and how it relates to loss, depression, and compulsive tendencies. Through examples of my own paintings and the research and influences leading my education is an articulate web chronicling two years of work from a focus in abstract painting to a place where representation and abstraction intersect.

1. Tension & Fragility at the Root

I remember the exact moment I realized just how powerful painting can be. It was the first time a painting (or in this case, a black and white reproduction of a painting in a book) resonated with me and affected me on a visceral level. I was a sophomore in high school and my art teacher had piled a bunch of old art books on her desk and asked each person in the class to choose one work and paint a copy of it. I'd already flipped through multiple books and was quickly leafing through another when I abruptly stopped: there, in the upper-right-hand corner of the page was an image of a strange, skeletal figure standing on a bridge. The figure was holding its skull-like head in its hands; its eyes were small, desperate holes staring back at me; its mouth was open, fixed in a silent scream. Swirling lines made up the figure's head and body, and continued into the surrounding landscape and sky. The whole piece appeared to be moving, melting even. Everything was simplified and amplified at the same time. I felt like I had been punched in the gut. I couldn't breathe and I couldn't look away. The painting was static and yet very much alive. It was pulling me in, trying to tell me something new while, at the same time, wholeheartedly affirming something deeply familiar within me—a feeling of unease, tension, and fragility that was permeating my everyday life.

It was only after I'd finished my 12" x 9" acrylic on Masonite version of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* that I learned I actually had been working from a black and white version of a much more colorful painting. When I finally saw a color photo of the

painting my feelings about the work only intensified. It was so much more complex and rich than the bare bones version I'd been working from—the painting articulated and gave voice to experience. It spoke to the realm of perception and emotion.

When I was thirteen my father committed suicide and a particular kind of silence became a fixture of my family home and everyday routine. The tragedy of his death quickly became something to get over and move past. In this atmosphere of silence, I felt that there was, and continues to be, anxiety and stigma surrounding his depression. Mental illness was something to fear and avoid, but it was also something to be expected—a hereditary condition that was lying in wait. Even as these fears were never spoken out loud it seemed to me that they were always present—the rooms and objects in our house were saturated with this weight. As Gail Weiss notes in *Refiguring the Ordinary*, “While the disruptions themselves tend to dominate one’s attention when they occur, when life is running smoothly and predictably most people are usually less inclined to question the status of the familiar.”¹ The death of my father punctured the feeling that life would run smoothly or predictably ever again, and the space between what was felt and what was actually said told its own story. A seemingly normal object or scene hinted at this unspoken narrative of anxiety, loss and the arbitrary fragility of life.

The first time I experienced depression for myself I was a freshman in college and I struggled to understand how it could be a part of my own body. It continued to belong to my father and what happened to him, and I felt an awful

¹ Gail Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1.

sense of wrongness and guilt for what I was experiencing. During this time I was also experiencing debilitating panic attacks where the floor and walls of whatever room I was in would shift. It was during one of these attacks that a friend told me to focus all my attention on normal details as a way to calm my mind—I traced the patterns of a cupboard and focused on the angles of wood against the bumpiness of the wall just behind it. (I wouldn't understand until much later that this tracing tactic is a self-monitoring technique in helping with panic and anxiety, and it's something I've been doing almost subconsciously ever since). As horrible as this whole experience was, it ended up changing the trajectory of my life. I'd enrolled in Vassar College specifically with the plan to major in art history, but afterwards I realized the only thing I could study was painting. I don't think I fully understood why this was the case at the time, but I've since realized that my decision was based on the power of painting (as I'd experienced with Edvard Munch's, *The Scream* years before) to describe these more difficult emotional states, to point to moments or situations that are avoided or overlooked.

2. The Everyday



Stovetop, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 24"

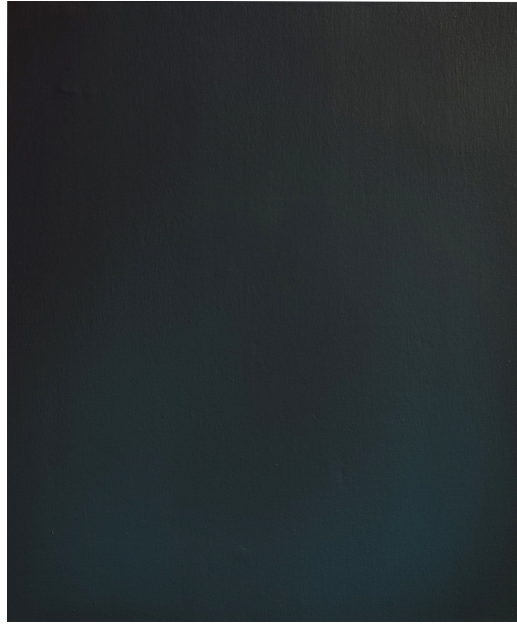
Flash forward to my final semester in graduate school and I am painting objects and settings within or near my apartment in Richmond. One such painting, *Stovetop*, depicts the surface of my stove surrounded by pots and pans. The silence between the objects communicates more about the painting than the pots and pans themselves. Instead of painting the pots and pans, which might be the more conventional subjects in still life painting, the concentration is on the still, dissociative moment between them. This sort of zoning out is a product of my emotional state. I painted the pots with such detail and made a reflective surface because a still life painting should offer fine details, but the focus of the painting is in the center, where there is nothing. The red paint of the

kitchenware wants attention, but the surface of white absorbing the reflection of the window above is where my eyes landed and where the viewer's should land as well.

In thinking about paintings of domestic settings by other painters I keep returning to Brandi Twilley's 2017 show at Sargent's Daughters titled *Where The Fire Started* which included multiple views of her run-down childhood bedroom just before her family's house burned down. In a review of her show for *Hyperallergic*, John Yau wrote that Twilley's home and room were in contrast with what Gaston Bachelard considers in *The Poetics of Space* to be the primary benefit of the house: "...the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."² Since reading Yau's review, I have also been thinking about my home in opposition to Bachelard's idea. Twilley's paintings make me think about how my present-day observations around my apartment continue to be shaped by the way in which I perceived domestic objects and details while experiencing trauma in my childhood, and while coping with anxiety and depression myself. I take comfort in the constant presence in ordinary details around my house, but I can also feel disheartened by their monotony.

² John Yau, "A Painter's Dreams Go Up in Smoke." *Hyperallergic*, July 16, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/390606/brandi-twilley-where-the-fire-started-sargents-daughters-2017/>

3. Glimpses Through the Lens of Abstraction



At Rest, 2017, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 20"

I've attempted to convey a feeling of fragility and tension in a number of ways. The trajectory of my research has led me to be more specific both about these emotions as well as the subject matter that I paint. During my first semester I painted numerous fleeting glimpses of my daily life in Richmond. These were layers of remembered experiences, compressed into a single, abstract space. *At Rest* depicts moments of light on a wall at night. An ethereal blue orb of light is situated in the lower half of the painting and is surrounded by an atmosphere of dark haze. The shifts in color are ever so slight, making the surface appear almost monochromatic, requiring the viewer to take a longer look in order to see the subtle changes. During this time I was reading Ann Truitt's *Daybook* and was drawn to this passage: "Certain sensory experiences elicit, draw forth into clarity, what visually they only infer. The laws they exemplify seem to spring from

behind them, organizing a whole of form and color that lies just beyond what my senses apprehend.”³ The important part I wanted to convey through the abstract, nearly monochromatic paintings like *At Rest* was that I could see something in this atmosphere— this was a space that had been filtered through my mind, memory and emotions and in this way there was content beyond pure sensory experience; an underlying feeling of anxiety remained, and meaning hid just below the layers of color.

The more I discussed and received feedback on my work and ideas, however, I realized that I was not attempting to create a painting that was strictly self-referential, an object that was only concerned with form and without subject. Nor was I trying to allude to a transcendental spiritual plane. I was going for meaning that was connected to the daily reality of living. For me I was creating these paintings with layers of meaning, referencing the world and my experience in it, and I knew I needed to rethink my approach.

4. Catherine Murphy and Finding a Place Beyond Minimalism

While I was reconsidering my strategy, an image of a painting I’d recently seen (online and unfortunately not in person) kept popping into my head. This painting was Catherine Murphy’s oil on canvas *Clasped*, wherein recognizable details emerge out of a subtly complex gradient of brown tones. The top third of the painting is a reddish-brown winter coat, finely depicted in all its fuzzy detail. In the middle of the coat is a button, a

³ Anne Truitt, *Daybook* (New York: Scribner, 1982) 92.

small circle of blue-ish brown that draws the eye downward towards a similar tone and the painting's middle section: a pair of leather gloves rendered in a similar a blue-ish brown, with highlights of pink on the fingertips, clasped just below the coat in a gesture that leads the eye into the third section. This third and final piece of the gradient takes up the majority of the painting: a leather bag, mostly depicted in green-brown tones, with highlights of yellow and white that reveal the slickness of the surface. The strap of the purse hangs down, mimicking the at-rest position of the hands just above. It's utterly simple and complex at the same time. And in this simplicity and complexity there is a discussion between abstraction and representation, between form and subject where the more I look at the painting the more I'm unsure of which one is which: is the abstract element the simple part or is the simple part the representational aspect? This unknowing creates an unease as to what I'm truly looking at and understanding.



Catherine Murphy, *Clasped*, 2013, Oil on Canvas, 46” x 49”

As I learned in a subsequent studio visit, Catherine Murphy moved out of minimalism and started making representational paintings. In an interview with Jennifer Samet for *Hyperallergic*, Murphy explains, “What interested me in looking at representational painting was how the information was organized. What I loved about the Minimalists was the possibility of a simpler movement through a painting.”⁴ Within her own painting practice Murphy explores how to get form and subject to support one another and to be mutually inclusive. That is, both form and subject are equally

⁴ Jennifer Samet, “Beer With a Painter: Catherine Murphy,” *Hyperallergic*, August 2, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/141273/beer-with-a-painter-catherine-murphy/>

important within the composition.⁵ As for me, thinking about trying to get the representational and abstract to have the same importance in a single painting was really exciting. I had been making my monochromatic paintings with the idea that meaning or specific forms were actually underneath the layers, and in this way I could point to specifics while still remaining open to the more mysterious, ethereal realm of abstraction that I had previously been exploring.

With this in mind, I made a series of paintings for my candidacy show that incorporated recognizable elements within an abstract field. I continued to look at moments and details within my apartment. I was not attempting to capture these moments for sentimental reasons. Rather I was more interested in the repeated act of seeing these details over and over again, in the daily task of perceiving and feeling. For this project I was interested in how my own emotional state changes my perception of objects and brings an abstract element into the scenario. In moments of extreme anxiety it can seem like there is no way to escape them or to even understand what is in front of me. All I can do is wait for it to pass, and to draw my attention even closer to specific shapes. For me this is a product of the hypnotic pull of light and daily ritual, as well as the compulsive tendency of my mind to return to the same thought over and over again, and to be compelled into doing something repeatedly.

Kitchen Sink, one of the paintings I included in my candidacy exhibition, provides a view looking down into a stainless steel basin. The sliver of the outer edge of the sink

⁵ Jennifer Samet, "Beer With a Painter: Catherine Murphy," *Hyperallergic*, August 2, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/141273/beer-with-a-painter-catherine-murphy/>

frames the upper left-hand corner of the painting, while the majority of the canvas opens up into the basin of the sink, with soft shifts in color depicting reflections and changes in light across a blue surface. A yellow band of light moves from the top edge of the sink down and across in an elongated L-shape, articulating the form and curve in the sink's basin. The drain itself is cropped in half, resting along the bottom edge of the canvas as a semicircle. Providing only a hint of both the outer edge of the sink and the drain draws the attention and focus to the surface of the sink; this view depicts more of a dissociative moment than a still life. When I find myself standing over the sink in my apartment, I am captivated by light changing across a surface, caught between abstract imagery and a descriptive object. I see new shapes and colors depending on the time of day or how many lights are switched on. In this kind of observation, I feel a sense of compulsion; a sense of not being able to look away. Light coaxes me into looking and holds me there.



Kitchen Sink, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 24"

5. Self-Monitoring and Sartre

The act of paying careful attention to details functions in two ways for me: On the one hand this attention is a kind of compulsion, an act of not being able to look away, a focus on the ordinary that carries a kind of heaviness. On the other hand, this looking is a kind of self-monitoring tactic, a way to ground a feeling of arbitrariness that creeps into daily life. Anxiety has the power to distort and speed everything up. Focusing on a particular shape, area of color, or point of light is a way to reorient and slow everything down. As Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, narrates:

As long as I could stare at things nothing would happen: I looked at them as much as I could, pavements, houses, gaslights; my eyes went rapidly from one to the other, to catch them unawares, stop them in the midst of their metamorphosis. They didn't look too natural, but I told myself forcibly: this is a gaslight, this is a drinking fountain, and I tried to reduce them to their everyday aspect by the power of my gaze.⁶

This particular passage from *Nausea* helps me orient my work, particularly when thinking about how representational and abstract elements function within my paintings. In certain states of mind the ordinary can take on unnatural, or strange qualities—the recognizable extends into another realm—one of abstraction. *3 AM* is a large-scale painting that depicts this kind of occurrence. The wall opens up in vast, abstract space—a

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 2007), 78.

bright white circle in the center expands outward into yellow rings of light, extending back into space and areas of green, which could either be read as areas of wall or shadows. The ceiling fan is depicted realistically and sticks out like a bug in the upper right-hand corner, reaching out through the atmosphere of light. Details of the room fall off into repeated shadows in the lower third of the painting. At night, when I can't sleep, I stare up at this fan. Often, I think I should get up and do something with my time, but I also hope that if I just stay in bed I will eventually doze off. I turn on my headlamp and read. It casts a bright white and yellow ring on the opposite wall.



3 AM, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 80" x 60"

While a sense of control comes through the act of looking, for me, it can also come through the act of painting. In her introductory essay in *Catherine Murphy*, Svetlana Alpers discusses how Murphy paints for herself first and foremost, quoting Elizabeth Bishop in support of this idea: “ ‘It seems to me,’ writes Bishop in a letter to

Robert Lowell, ‘the whole purpose of art, to the artist (but not to the audience)— that rare feeling of control, or illumination—life is all right, for the time being.’ ”⁷

6. A Month in Montespertoli

During the summer of 2018 I spent a month at a residency in Montespertoli, Italy. The space was a live-work studio, with the living room, kitchen, and bedroom on the bottom floor and the studio spaces on the second and third. I was the only resident. From the top floor of the studio I could see the surrounding hills and vineyards of Tuscany for miles. There were no screens on the windows, only long, flowing curtains. I had the feeling of being enveloped in a giant tent. I structured my schedule around opening and closing the windows, and watching the light shift throughout the house. The color and temperature of the entire studio would change throughout the day: soft and cool in the morning, bright orange and warm in the evening. I spent most of my time alone and new objects and views became a part of my new routine. At the end of the month my husband David came and stayed for a week and the speed of things picked back up, my solitary routine shifting back into a world with other people.

⁷ Svetlana Alpers, “From the Ground Up” in *Catherine Murphy* (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2016), 7.



Stock Pot, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 24"

While in Italy I studied Renaissance paintings and reveled in the way the masters magically captured details through the use of light and shadow. After a day of museums, I would think about what I had seen in relation to the ordinary objects in my immediate surroundings—what I wanted to paint remained within my daily life. I painted views from the windows, and scenes from within the studio that had become routine. I made pasta in the same stockpot nearly every day. In painting the smooth, polished surface of this ordinary stockpot as it melded into the adjacent and almost identical stainless range, I managed to capture something from the mundane routine that was of actual interest. Aside from being pleased by the way the range worked and how it differed from the one at home, it actually excited me to see something as simple as this and have it be different enough to spark something in my mind. When I was leaving Italy, I said to my husband that I wanted to make coffee the same way I had while I was in Montesportoli, but when

we got home to Richmond it was not the same, nor were the surfaces or how the pilot sparked and lit. I managed to capture something simply different with this painting, even if it was just a memory of a routine.

7. The Still Life with Chardin

As I continued to add familiar details as the representational elements within my paintings, an important and unavoidable backdrop began to emerge: that of the still life, the genre of painting with a long history of depicting ordinary objects. In *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Norman Bryson provides a great technical definition: “Rhophography (from *rhopos*, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks.”⁸ As a form of rhophography, still life painting depicts those things we take for granted in such a way that they become almost invisible. Within this tradition the presence of *vanitas* and *memento mori* are also of interest to me. Memento Mori translated from Latin means “*remember you must die*” and motifs commonly painted are skulls, clocks, candles, and flowers. *Vanitas* also points to human mortality, but includes objects that reflect the uselessness of material things, while providing a justification for painting them. I remember something that my dad told me (which had an effect on me making paintings around my apartment). He advised me to always make my bed—this would give me a sense of ritual and order. Furthermore he

⁸ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 61.

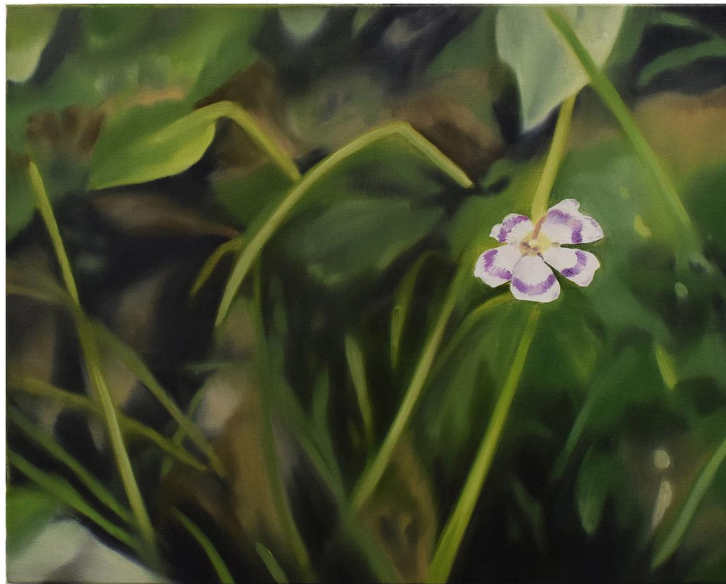
told me that his room was just a place where he stayed, it wasn't really his home. I believe this was an important concept he wanted me to understand: an attachment to daily ritual with a sense of detachment from objects. The importance of these ordinary aspects of life is that they coexist and occur alongside the extraordinary. A mug is concrete and in so doing can hold the remnants of these important moments long after they have passed. They can act as markers in time.



Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, *Still Life with a White Mug*, 1764, 13" x 16.2"

The 18th- century French painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin interests me not only because of his attention to the everyday, but also because of the way that he painted his objects, creating a particular effect of softness or blur within his paintings. Bryson talks about this blur as “perhaps Chardin’s most significant innovation, as though he were

trying to paint peripheral rather than central vision.”⁹ The notion of peripheral versus central vision functions in two ways to for me. One is that ordinary objects exist within our periphery on a daily basis insofar as they are overlooked and taken for granted. The other idea surrounding peripheral vision is that it speaks to the space just outside of what we can see fully, in the hazy space of our vision. This area of blur or fog speaks to a more psychological state—one of remembering perhaps.



Flower, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 16” x 20”

Flower, a 16” x 20” painting that details wilting grass and weeds that fall away from a small-faced purple flower, is interesting for a few reasons. As this school year began, I decided to start walking to and from school rather than riding my bike. I felt like it gave me more time to think or clear my head before beginning a day. When I was living in Brooklyn, I walked for hours every day and I thought maybe what was missing

⁹ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 92.

from my life here was this same ritual. This painting almost works better if you pass it quickly than it does as one you spend more time with. This is the opposite of my walking routine. I found the details of things I passed more engaging by moving past them slowly and giving them real attention than what I was giving them passing quickly on my bike. The peripheral view that this painting offers is a better depiction of the moment than looking directly into the painting.

8. Photos as Notes

My paintings are based on photographs that I've taken and drawings that I've made. I think of the photo as a note and the camera as a note-taking tool in service of each painting. As Luc Tuymans, another painter I've admired for a long time, explains: "Painting has the capacity to create a bigger fiction than film ever can. It begs a story which the mind concocts. It is not limited by the frame or the instant of the image of the thing represented. It joins our other memories, as film never can."¹⁰ While Tuymans is discussing film here, I feel this also applies to photographs in relationship to painting. That is, a painting can speak to something larger—a fiction, a memory, a personal experience in a way that photo cannot do. Where Tuymans talks about the capacity of paintings to create fiction, I would add that they also speak to very real realities—they have the ability to convey ethereal and emotional experiences in a very powerful way. The painter Josephine Halvorson explains: "I love how color can almost magically transform into something: it can become wood, it can become

¹⁰ Adrian Searle, "Introduction," in *On&BY Luc Tuymans*, ed. Peter Ruyffelaere (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 14.

concrete, it can become heat. I wouldn't understand the object if I were just meditating on it. It has to go through this *empathetic* medium of paint.”¹¹ The empathetic characteristic of paint is ultimately what makes it such a powerful tool in conveying something more, a feeling that is there but can't be stated. I must stress that I do not underestimate the power of photography as a tool to my painting. It has acted time and again as a placeholder for a memory and a storage space for ideas that memory itself could not allow or uphold. Gathering together the research for my paintings would not be possible by drawing on memory or the feeling of memory. The bedrock of research acts as the painting's foundation and it is entirely up to my techniques to create a painting that emotes in a way that one can relate to my memory and state of mind.

9. A Network of Painting Strategies

As I continue to include abstract and representational elements within my paintings, there are certain considerations and techniques I employ that help me to convey a sense of fragility, tension, and unease. However, there is no one formula that I apply consistently to every painting. The use of strategies happens more organically.

Light and shadow can be used to suggest a psychological state or an expanse that exists beyond the confines of the image. In F. W. Murnau's 1922 German Expressionist Film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, Thomas Hutter embarks on a real estate business

¹¹ Jennifer Samet, "Beer with a Painter: Josephine Halvorson," *Hyperallergic*, April 26, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/122527/beer-with-a-painter-josephine-halvorson/>

venture from his home in the fictional town of Wisborg, Germany to visit Count Orlok's castle in Transylvania. Count Orlok is looking to buy a house in Wisborg and unbeknownst to Thomas, he happens to be Nosferatu the vampire. Exaggerated use of light and shadow helps to create tension as Thomas makes his way to the castle. Once in the castle, things become even more sinister. In one scene, Count Orlok enters Thomas's room at night and we see the ghoulish figure standing in the doorway. When the shot moves to show Thomas cowering in the room, the shadow of Nosferatu looms over him, larger and more exaggerated than life, with an even more menacing gesture. The shadows aid in revealing that there is more to Count Orlok than what Thomas initially sees. In the darkness of the shadow there is possibility for nightmares and all of Thomas's anxieties come to life. Like the expressionism exemplified in Edvard Munch's paintings, German expressionist films explored subjective, inner experiences.



Still from Murnau's "Nosferatu"

While the shadows and forms in *Nosferatu* and German expressionist films are exaggerated, sometimes to the point of verging on the ridiculous, I've felt moments of extreme anxiety where shadows do loom larger than life—anxiety itself seems to take form within shadows and sharp contrasts of light. As I intended the shadows in *3 AM* to suggest more than a dark room illuminated by a light in the middle of the night, I hope that shadows function in my work to suggest the more ethereal realm of uncomfortable emotions.

Another purpose of shadow is to suggest something, either in meaning or in place, beyond what is actually seen. In her monograph on Lois Dodd, another painter of everyday subject matter who I admire, Faye Hirsch points out that “Dodd frequently paints shadows in the vicinity of objects that are not casting them, giving life to nature outside of the scene...It is in such passages that Dodd’s circumscribed confines telescope into an expanded universe.”¹² In Dodd’s painting *Tree +Shadow* (2013) a shadow falls across a purple tree trunk in the left foreground and extends down onto a patch of grass before moving further back into the painting and onto the sidewalk that separates the grass and bottom of the tree trunk from the green shrubbery behind. As this shadow moves across the painting it changes in shape. While starting off in a more geometrical form, it then splits into two long arm-like forms at the top, suggesting the continuation of the tree upwards and off of the canvas.

¹² Faye Hirsch, *Lois Dodd* (London: Lund Humphries, 2017), 114.



Lois Dodd, *Tree +Shadow*, 2013, Oil on Masonite, 20” x 12”

I love the thought that shadows within the frame of a canvas enable a limited space to become unlimited. Just as the everyday makes up the confines of Dodd’s paintings, those things that are within my apartment or just outside of the apartment make up the confines of mine, and attempting to get the telescope into an expanded universe is very important. As the objects of the everyday hold onto meaning and memory, there is indeed a great and expanding universe and possibility in painting them. The anxiety, and tension that I’m trying to impart seems overwhelming in scope sometimes, and altogether impossible to get across in its depth and vastness. A shadow can help allude to the fact

that there is more beyond what is understood or possible to comprehend—and in this expanse a specific thing is not necessarily meant to be articulated and defined.

Multiple painting techniques can be another way to suggest meaning beyond the object that is depicted. In discussing Lois Dodd’s multiple approaches within certain paintings, Faye Hirsch explains that, “the result is an optical and psychological immersion that undermines the clarity of the subject and our place in it.”¹³ In trying to figure out the painting both visually and psychologically there can be moments of confusion as to what one is really looking at and where one stands in relation to the painting.



Bathub, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 36” x 48”

¹³ Faye Hirsch, *Lois Dodd* (London: Lund Humphries, 2017), 46.

In my painting, titled *Bathtub*, I used different painting techniques to create a sense of confusion and tension. A bamboo bathmat occupies the lower half of the painting. Spaces between the bamboo slats are uneven and move upwards towards the horizon line. I painted this mat roughly, with “painterly” style. Between the space of the floor and the start of the bathtub there is a large band of beige molding. As I looked at the reflection of my actual bathtub this band delineated the space between the floor and endless space of the reflection. The reflection on the porcelain side of the tub takes up the majority of the painting—it is a smooth, hard surface and yet it opens up into an ethereal space that suggest a level of uncertainty and mystery.

Exclusion and cropping can be used to shift focus to areas that are overlooked, even among the already overlooked subject of daily objects. What I eliminate in each work varies, but the intention is the same: to give a view into the spaces between things, or to point at something else.



Table Top, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 30” x 24”

In the above painting, *Table Top*, I cropped most of the object out of the scene and intentionally filled the majority of the painting with the small details of the table’s wood surface. The focus is on the grain and the spacing of highlights. I want the identity of the cropped object to remain a mystery—it could be any number of different things. In the introduction to *ON&BY Luc Tuymans*, Adrian Searle writes about the reticence and mystery of Tuymans’s work: “What the paintings leave out or don’t explain is as important as what they depict. There is always a tangible referent in the world that has been reduced to the barest and most economical essentials.”¹⁴ In his painting *Light Bulb* (2018) Tuymans has simplified a lampshade into geometric forms and a two-tone color

¹⁴ Adrian Searle, “Introduction,” in *On&BY Luc Tuymans*, ed. Peter Ruyffelaere (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 13.

palette of yellow and purple. By simplifying the image, the lampshade takes on an ethereal quality and the only really recognizable referent to the real world is the center space that holds the light bulb, without which the painting would be completely abstract.



Luc Tuymans, 2010, *Light Bulb*, Oil on Canvas, 45" x 44"

Through the process of leaving things out or simplifying within my own paintings I am also hoping to create a sense of mystery that comes with not knowing. In discussing Tuymans's early work and how things are described in their simplest forms, Searle notes that it's as if "some secret was hidden in plain sight."¹⁵ This idea of a secret hiding in plain sight is important not only to my paintings but to the history behind them. It often felt as the silence around my own dad's death made it a secret, but of course we all knew it was there.

¹⁵ Adrian Searle, "Introduction," in *On&BY Luc Tuymans*, ed. Peter Ruyffelaere (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 13.

I am also exploring the use of cropping as a way to shift focus in the painting. By this I mean that sometimes the importance of the view is really the space between things or to the side of them. In cropping out the object the direction of the wood grain on the tabletop becomes the focus of the painting. The longer I looked at this surface the stranger it became and soon it morphed into an unrecognizable pattern of lines and points of light and the repetition of the pattern lured me into looking at it. In *Reconfiguring the Ordinary*, Gail Weiss explains Elizabeth Grosz' idea of the in-between:

The space of the in-between can best be understood, I argue, as a chiasmatic space: a place of possibility where the real and the imaginary are inextricably intertwined; it is the space between buildings, beyond buildings, and the space in which individual and cultural dreams as well as human beings' worst nightmares unfold.¹⁶

While I understand this idea concerns a larger scope, politically and socially, I think it makes sense in the context of the everyday. If the object represents a thing in a painting, showing the area just to the side of it speaks to the idea that the painting is about something larger than just the object—that something is not quite as it should be.

¹⁶ Gail Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 124.

10. The Object As Actor

There is another theory concerning objects that has enriched my understanding of the ordinary. This is the notion that objects have their own agency. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* Donna J. Haraway makes a case for feminist objectivity and a way of knowing the world that differs from the Westernized version of scientific objectivity and truth. As I understand it, within this feminist objectivity humans are not the sole decoders of the world and objectivity is more like a multi-faceted network, a complex mapping of nodes of information wherein humans and the rest of the world are all active participants. Objects are described as actors and in this way they leave the realm of passivity and become players in the world. As humans, we can no longer read truths or impose single ideas on objects because they have their own kind of agency. Likewise, these objects cannot reveal a single idea or truth to us because we bring our own understanding to bear upon the situation. The result is a conversation between us and the world—way of knowing, that is constantly shifting and in flux.¹⁷ In this case, my paintings of mundane objects cannot just be about my perception of them, and they cannot just be about the object or detail I am painting. There is now also the possibility that the objects and ordinary moments in and around my apartment are sharing information and knowledge with me. Thinking that a conversation exists between myself and ordinary objects opens the paintings up to an expanse of possibility that I find to be both comforting and a bit magical. The routine of the everyday extends beyond first

¹⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 1991), 201.

person subjective experience. In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* the political theorist Jane Bennett also argues that objects have agency and energy unto themselves. In the book's preface Bennett states:

I will turn the figures of “life” and “matter” around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something like the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound. In the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape.¹⁸

I particularly like this quote because I've often thought that looking at something for too long, a spot on the wall or the kitchen sink, or even a section of a painting is similar to saying a word too many times until it stops making sense. Again, perhaps there is more to observing an object than I have previously realized and the matter I am looking at is actively presenting something to me that in turn influences how I perceive it. Reading Haraway and Bennett has also made me think back to my time in Italy, where I was the only person among a studio filled with objects. I remember that certain things became my companions in a strange way. Why I was drawn to using certain pots or blankets, or to sitting on certain chairs. I don't really know, but perhaps their energy was somehow interacting with me.

In a 2014 interview with Jennifer Samet, Josephine Halvorson explained a little about her artistic process, stating: “Making a painting is a manifestation—a physical

¹⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), vii.

metaphor—for experiencing what the object is willing to reveal to me and what it withholds, as well as what I reveal to it.”¹⁹ Although I don’t paint from direct observation like Halvorson does, I like the idea that a painting can be a manifestation. The paint becomes another active player in the conversation. The painting acts as a mediator between my emotions and myself, drawing us to caucus and deriving an accord or agreement on the surface of the canvas.

¹⁹. Jennifer Samet, “Beer with a Painter: Josephine Halvorson,” *Hyperallergic*, April 26, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/122527/beer-with-a-painter-josephine-halvorson/>



Stairwell, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 96'' x 72''

11. Conclusion

Stairwell is the largest painting I've made to date and was the last painting I finished for my thesis exhibition. The 8' x 6' canvas had both physical and intellectual challenges. Incorporating techniques I had not used before to create textures similar to the actual walls in my apartment building staircase set new hurdles, as I have trouble with new ideas like these and whether or not I am cut out for these kinds of ventures with such a short timetable. Similarly, developing the idea behind the painting was as much of a task. How do I appropriately depict the tension of "coming & going" or how the staircase is part of my home, but also exists outside of my home? One of the only things I can liken it to is being locked out of your apartment. Although not necessarily stuck in the outside world in the elements or in public, you are not afforded the domestic relief of being "inside." There is some relief in the painting of something familiar and something I can say I am used to: the scuffs on the wall surfaces. These scuffs, made by bikes being carried up and down stairs, furniture, grocery bags, and recycling cans, are very familiar to me and are part of what is "home." But, the reflection in the circular window above shows a different, skewed perception of the same staircase back on to itself, making the overall space strange and odd, taking away from the home's relief. The result from it all is claustrophobia, or a space you simply can't walk away from—it becomes a kind a labyrinth. I have always thought my hallway is creepy, and painting it on this scale has only made me think that more so.

My need to make paintings will always be deeply tied to the death of my father, but as I grow as a painter I also realize that it continues to provide a kind of power—a way to bring ideas that are much harder for me to articulate or put in words. Describing my claustrophobia, my anxieties, what I find beautiful about a fragile bud that has bloomed too early, and so on is too difficult for me to describe in words. Sometimes in the end it is just a stairwell, but my fears and sorrow that I have poured into that image and the paintings I have done otherwise create a narrative a viewer can relate to; a relation of nothing being left inside you or a sadness too hard to speak about aloud.

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List of Key Words

Abstraction
Anxiety
Atmosphere
Bathtub
Catherine Murphy
Ceiling Fan
Chardin
Compulsion
Depression
Donna J. Haraway
Drain
Everyday
Exclusion
Familiar
Flower
Form
Fragility
Jane Bennett
Josephine Halvorson
Kitchen Sink
Light
Lois Dodd
Loss
Luc Tuymans
Minimalism
Munch
Mystery
Nosferatu
Objects
Oil on Canvas
Ordinary
Painting
Pots and Pans
Representation
Routine
Sartre
Shadows
Silence
Stairwell
Still Life
Stove Top
Subject
Tension