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At Home: Explorations in Painting

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**At Home:
Explorations in Painting**

Zsofia Schweger

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in the Studio Art Department
of Wellesley College

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Preface

In Gerrit Dou's *Man Writing by an Easel* (fig 1.), 1630, the painter is at work but is not painting. Instead he sits in his impeccable studio, wearing a fur-lined scholar's tabard, and is immersed in writing. He is surrounded by common still-life objects, such as a violin and a globe, which double as symbols of sophistication. The artist is a student, a scholar.

It is through Dou's work that art historians Michael Cole and Mary Pardo introduce their overview of the development of the artist's space and its depiction in painting from Renaissance to Romanticism in their book *Inventions of the Studio*. Cole and Pardo relate that "until the late seventeenth century, Italians called the artist's shop a bottega, or simply a stanza, and used 'studio' primarily to denote the room, or even the desk, where the scholar sat."¹ In Dou's space, both a bottega and a studio, "the distinction between the artist's abode and the scholar's has become all but indiscernible:"² focus had shifted from artistic production to scholarly activity.

"What does it mean to be a scholar in the visual arts,"³ asks art historian G. James Daichendt in his 2012 book *Artist Scholar*. Are artists scholars? What is artistic scholarship, practice-led research, or new knowledge? Why write? As I began my Thesis Essay, a reflection on my Honors Thesis work in Studio Art, I referenced Daichendt often. Because I view my work so deeply rooted in the place that is Wellesley College, it seems fitting to contemplate what it means to be an art student at Wellesley where most of my time has been spent in class and with research and writing.

Cole and Pardo offer an encouraging thought as it appears in the treatise *On Painting* by 15th century scholar Leon Battista Alberti: they consider the artist as student and the artist's studio as conducive to scholarly activity.

*But some will say: "What benefits the painter all this inquiry?" Every painter judges himself an excellent master who fully understands the proportions and joinings of surfaces -- a thing that very few know, and if you ask them what they aim to do upon that which they take to be a surface, they will give you anything but an answer relevant to your question. So I beg studious painters to not be ashamed to listen to me.*⁴

Studiously, I, too, am writing by an easel.

¹ Michael Cole and Mary Pardo, *Inventions of the Studio, Renaissance to Romanticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 3.

² Ibid, 3-4.

³ G. James Daichendt, *Artist Scholar : Reflections on Writing and Research*. (Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2012), 1.

⁴ Cole and Pardo, 5

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Introduction

1

A contemporary archetype, a successful businesswoman who speaks five languages and owns three homes in three different countries is key in philosopher Agnes Heller's essay "Where Are We at Home?". Heller believes the itinerant woman's "geographic promiscuity symbolized something uncanny, namely the abandonment of, perhaps, the oldest tradition of the homo sapiens, privileging one, or certain places against others."⁵ Later Heller suggests the woman is "kind of a cultural monster"⁶ for she has no "living-center on Earth."⁷ Am I, an international student, a cultural monster, too? Or do I have a home?

Questions about displacement, family, and nostalgia have accompanied me since I left my native Hungary at the age of 16 to study abroad, first in New York and later at Wellesley. I obsessively read (and re-read) an erratic selection of expatriate literature in which characters often blamed their emigrant experiences for their unhappiness. Apropos of geographic promiscuity, consider *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih in which the confused, restless narrator, upon his return home to the Sudan after years in London, postulates that he "must be one of those birds that exist only in one region of the world."⁸ Similarly, protagonist Mustafa Sa'eed who had studied abroad in Cairo and London specifies in his will that his sons shall never travel in order to spare them "the pangs of wanderlust."⁹ Milan Kundera's character Sabina in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* appears to have given in to wanderlust, for she

⁵ Heller, Agnes. "Where Are We at Home?" In *Aesthetics and Modernity: Essays by Agnes Heller*. Ed. Rundell John (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 203.

⁶ Ibid, 204.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*. (New York: NYRB, 2009), 41.

⁹ Ibid, 54.

“knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown.”¹⁰ Postcolonial literary theorist Edward Said, too, speaks of constant movement when in *Orientalism* he says “exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.”¹¹ And indeed, in his essay “Self-Reliance” American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson attests that “traveling is a fool's paradise” but he has “no objection to the circumnavigation of the globe for the purposes of art, of study, and benevolence.”¹² Yet, when Usbek in *Persian Letters* by Montesquieu leaves Persia “for the love of knowledge,”¹³ he feels he has “undertaken too much for [his] own peace of mind.”¹⁴ Are all travelers cultural monsters because they lack a living-center on Earth? Are all doomed to pangs of wanderlust?

2

In my studio-based inquiry, I set out to counteract the above conjectures by exploring the concept of home: I aspired to shape a home for myself where I might have a peace of mind.

My work explores the concept of home through the visual study of interiors, with a focus on Pendleton West 321, a shared studio space at Wellesley College. I take the dynamic workspace of the studio as a potential place of comfort, and intend to create a home. My *Pendleton West 321* series of oil paintings records, narrates, and guides my search for a sense of being-in-the-world at Wellesley: I locate home in the studio, and later in painting.

I write this essay as a reflection on the body of work, which I produced between August 2011 and April 2012 within the frameworks of the Studio Art Senior Honors Thesis program and

¹⁰ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 89.

¹¹ Edward Said. *Orientalism*. (New York: Random House, 1979), 55.

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The collected works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1971), ...

¹³ Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*. (London: Penguin, 2004), 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 45.

the Pamela Daniels Fellowship. Below I present my development following a linear narrative, divided into twenty episodes and organized into two parts. In Part One, I recount the research that grounds and orients my work, whereas in Part Two, I account for my creative process. My purpose in writing is to expand my understanding of my own artistic process and of the possibilities of studio-based research in general.

Part One

3

The 2010 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum exhibition *Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/Performance* explored memory, trauma, and nostalgia. Concerned with appropriation, the archive, documentation, reiteration, and the uncanny, *Haunted* helped me understand my own attachment to souvenirs and photographs from Hungary. Sheets from Gerhard Richter's archival *Atlas*, for example, are reminiscent of digital images of family photographs randomly arranged on the scanner bed, which I often viewed and later laboriously copied by hand. My first work concerned with home, *Wall I* (fig. 2) from May 2010 combined graphite copies of old family photographs with found materials arranged into a wallpaper pattern, recalling a living room. Similarly, *Wall II* (fig. 3) from November 2010 - obviously influenced by Richter's *Uncle Rudi*, 1965, reproduced in the *Haunted* catalog, - featured a series of black-and-white paintings done after family photographs set against a patterned mylar sheet. Seeking to articulate memory, the passing of time, longing, and homesickness, I appropriated and obsessively copied, drawn, oil painted, and re-recorded family photographs and videos.

4

In February 2011 for a still-life assignment by Professor Bunny Harvey, my Advanced Painting class had arranged a random array of props on a large table in the middle of the studio, Pendleton

West 321. As a brief individual comment, Bunny told me I could do anything, I could paint the whole room. And so I did.

My painting (fig. 4) started with a pink ground color on a 38x32" canvas and a loose linear structure in brown. I quickly discovered my fascination with overlapping surfaces: moveable walls, canvases, easels, and the objects on the table. I remember the excitement when I started laying down color in response to these surfaces. Although I completed the painting with finer detail and presented it for critique, the memory of the initial excitement was compelling enough that I decided to paint over much of the painting and reduce it to a few shapes of color. This painting may not be successful but was a defining moment in my development.

I went on to produce a short series of paintings that were similarly inclined. At the end of the semester, in May 2011, I wrote:

I explored Pendleton West 321 and its ever-changing arrangement. Seven of us who shared this space spent countless hours among the overstuffed cabinets, moveable walls, and hectic furniture, making a constant mess. In my paintings, I clear out the space and remove superfluous objects, retaining those that function as spatial markers. Instead of inserting the elements of the room into a linear perspective system and using rulers, I rely on freehand observation which leaves me with crooked lines, discrepancies in relations, and momentary confusion when my point of view shifts with each glance. This approach becomes all the more applicable when I deal with people returning library books that I am painting, inserting large couches into the middle of my composition, or shifting the movable walls within the space I am observing. I am interested in reconciling spatial drawings that rely on line solely into color paintings: assigning a single color and volume to a plane, leaving guiding lines exposed, or introducing a transient, sketchy group of easels into more rigid compositions help first to deconstruct, then to recreate the space. As I organize parts of the chaotic room into paintings and begin to analyze and to abstract, I develop a new appreciation for and heightened awareness of the space we occupy and use.

At this point, I recognized my strong formal interest in the spatial arrangement of the studio, gathered some descriptive and experiential knowledge, and began to defend some of my formal choices. Yet my ideas about painting were contained and isolated. The large conceptual divide between my work in 2010 and my earliest 2011 paintings seemed impossible to bridge.

5

Charles Sheeler, a photographer and painter of the early 20th century offered a new perspective.

I was drawn to Sheeler's interior paintings, among them *Home, Sweet Home* (fig. 5), 1931, because of their formal qualities, but it was a conceptual leap that familiarity with his work enabled.

Sheeler is often categorized as an American Precisionist committed to futuristic machine aesthetic. The Metropolitan Museum's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History describes precisionism as a "highly controlled approach to technique and form"¹⁵ which "consistently reduced ... compositions to simple shapes and underlying geometrical structures, with clear outlines, minimal detail, and smooth handling of surfaces."¹⁶ I saw in Sheeler the first painter whose work I thought resembled mine and researched him extensively: I believe my painting, *Pendleton West 321, #6* (fig. 6), where I broke up planes into multiple shapes of flat color may be a direct response to my readings on precisionists and Sheeler.

Home, Sweet Home, 1931, depicts a domestic interior scene, where table, bench, chair, fireplace, stairs, rugs, and wooden floor form a harmonious American home. But harmony is swiftly deconstructed as one notices the bold discrepancies in perspective, a formal feature that I had embraced in my own early paintings. Art historian Mark Rawlinson argues that "Sheeler breaks up [our] sense of place through the dissenting line and shifts the emphasis again toward art making itself the focus of the artwork, despite stripping the painterly surface."¹⁷

Rawlinson's discussion of *Home, Sweet Home* and its formal dissonance propelled my interests towards the concept of home in painting. His chapter "Is it Still Life? - Sheeler, Adorno and Dwelling" brilliantly explores and connects Sheeler's formal choices with nostalgic notions of home through a discussion of critical theory, especially Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and

¹⁵ Jessica Murphy, "Precisionism". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-), <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/prec/hd_prec.htm>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mark Rawlinson, "Is It Still Life? - Sheeler, Adorno and Dwelling," in *Charles Sheeler: Modernism, Precisionism and the Borders of Abstraction*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 127.

Minima Moralia, while also referencing Martin Heidegger's ontology. Below I offer some of Rawlinson's closing thoughts which influenced my thinking on painting and home immensely:

The modern subject, faced with uncertainty, seeks the refuge of home. However, the home is no longer a dwelling in the true sense and cannot offer the experience the human subject seeks. Sheeler's *Home, Sweet Home* captures this loss, caught as it is between *presentation* and *representation*, between a rejection of the overactivated painterly surface and the continuation of formal innovation through spatial abstraction. It is also caught between the impulses of realism and abstraction, the harmony of the domestic interior and the dissonance of its aesthetic construction, and finally, between mimesis and rationality. ... [*Home, Sweet Home*] depicts ... nostalgia for the authentic experience of home or dwelling, one irrevocably damaged under the conditions of modernity.¹⁸

My interest in Sheeler's interiors lead me to contemplate the concept of home and to commit to my intuitive efforts dealing with PNW 321.

6

The definition of home, however, is vastly confusing, even on a personal level. If home is the house in which I grew up in Hungary and for which I often longed, then how do I explain the detachment, resentment, and even pain of return? If home is my hometown, then why am I often apprehensive when walking down its main street? If home is my home country, then why do I make mistakes in my mother tongue? If home is where my family lives – well, which members of my family? And where is home once they move to other houses, cities, and eventually, countries, as my immediate family has done? Where do I want home to be?

Scholar Shelley Mallett offers a starting point in her essay, "Understanding home: a critical review of the literature," in which she "raises the question whether or not home is (a) place(s), (a) space(s), feeling(s), practices, and/or an active state of being in the world."¹⁹ Mallett considers recurring themes such as "house, family, haven, self, gender, and journeying,"²⁰ as

¹⁸ Ibid,126-127.

¹⁹ Shelley Mallett, "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature," *The Sociological Review* 52, no. 1 (2004): 62.

²⁰ Ibid.

well as “notions of being-at-home, creating or making home and the ideal home,”²¹ eventually concluding that “it all depends.”²² She argues that “clearly the term home functions as a repository for complex, inter-related and at times contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people's relationship with one another, especially family, and with places, spaces, and things.”²³ I acknowledge that in addition to my experiences as an international student, my viewpoint is grounded in my status as a college student, separated from parents and a sibling with no partner or children of her own.

7

“Dual Residencies and the Meaning of Home,” a 2005 article by Marjolijn van der Klis and Lia Karsten explores what home means for those who have multiple residencies. Although the paper focuses on the situation of a commuter partnership in the Netherlands, it is relevant to my experience as a young adult living away from my significant others.

In order to understand what the commuter residence (the secondary home) means for the commuting partner and analyze the data collected from respondents, Karsten and van der Klis introduce the concept of the space-place-home continuum.²⁴ The space-place-home continuum begins with a space that is “anonymous, unfamiliar, purely functional,”²⁵ through place that is “significant, thoroughly familiar,” to home: “intimate, personal.”²⁶ The study tracks behaviors of domestication and asserts that as a space is brought under control it becomes a place, and eventually a home.

²¹ Mallett, 62.

²² Ibid, 84.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Lia Karsten and Marjolijn Van der Klis, "Dual Residences and the Meaning of Home," in *Doing, thinking, feeling home: the mental geography of residential environments*, (Delft, Netherlands: OTB Research Institute for Housing, Urban and Mobility Studies, 2005), 10.

²⁵ Ibid, 9.

²⁶ Ibid.

The notion of the space-place-home continuum is evidently inspired by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's book, *Space and Place*, which associates place with security and space with freedom.²⁷ Even though Tuan believes that we are attached to place and long for space, I argue that for my purposes, longing for space is something to be overcome. Consider, in addition to the earlier discussed "pangs of wanderlust" and "unsettling forces," that Tuan concludes his chapter titled "Attachment to Homeland" with a quotation attributed to a nine-year-old: "[my mom] tries to teach me to live decent. Like some people don't have a very good life because they don't settle down in one place and don't stay for very long."²⁸ Suppose I want to settle down in one place and have a home: how might that be done? Tuan explains that "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."²⁹

Tuan acknowledges the difficulty of knowing a space and experiencing place, but guides me to a concept I can put to use as a painter. Tuan argues that "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place."³⁰ Once space has become a "thoroughly familiar" place, it is expected that it may become a home as well, because according to Tuan, "home is an intimate place."³¹ But how might I gain intimate knowledge and experience of a space?

The idea of the space-place-home continuum led me to organize and to redirect the impulses behind my early PNW 321 paintings. By September 2011, I wanted my paintings to show pause and potential for serenity within a hectic studio which, because of its shared nature, was in constant, dynamic motion. Recall that I had struggled with people shifting the walls

²⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 3.

²⁸ Ibid, 160.

²⁹ Ibid, 6.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 144.

within the space I was observing, returning library books that had occupied a primary spot in my painting or, on one occasion, inserting a large couch into the middle of my composition. I began to think of my observation, drawing, and painting of the studio as a process of thoroughly familiarizing myself with the space and turning it into a place. Establishing a place of comfort through the act of painting has been of utmost interest to me, as I hoped it would lead me to the creation of a home.

Part Two

8

At the outset, my intuitive process of choosing a section of the room to paint and moving my set-up nearby felt playful and frank; but with critiques and studio visits, I had to reconsider these quick compositional choices and prepared to defend them. Consider *Pendleton West 321, #9* (fig. 7), the first painting of the Fall semester which set the tone for the following months. *#9* depicts a group of brand new art carts lined up against a wall with a blackboard and large windows ending in a corner. I chose this corner in order to begin studying the new carts, keeping with my goal to accumulate knowledge about the room in flux. I purposely did not manipulate the slightly disordered arrangement and hoped to depict it candidly, to produce a snapshot, if you will.

After *#9*, I began to see similar compositional choices traveling throughout my work. In order to decipher my compositional inclinations, I looked to my paintings that came immediately before *#9*, such as a triptych of studioscapes I painted during my internship the Cow House Studios. *Cow House Studios, #3* (fig. 8) encompasses a large vertically oriented space from roof, through mezzanine, to floor. *CHS, #3* is fundamentally different in that the visual field is extended and attention is diffused. By contrast, *#9* restricts the visual field and concentrates focus in a corner: as such, spatial relations are better observed and learned. My approach

remained similar for a line of paintings: consider the central position of the far corner in *Pendleton West 321, #20* (fig. 9). “The corner is a sort of half-box, part walls, part door,”³² explains philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his hugely influential book, *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard devotes a chapter to corners and argues that “the corner is a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly--immobility.”³³ The immobility of a corner is one way to create pause, and may explain the recurrence of the corner in my paintings.

Reexamining *CHS, #3* where a white table top in the foreground occupies more than 1/3 of the canvas vertically helped me identify similarities as well. I saw that I often gravitated towards compositions where a fragment of a piece of furniture partially blocked my view and consequently occupied a corner or edge of the canvas. In *#9*, a purple plane - a back of the chair - blocks the view, whereas in *#20* a blue art cart occupies the majority of the lower third of the image and a fragment of a brown drawing board enters from the side. This device served several purposes. (1) With the diminishing of scale, I could gauge the relative size and space between objects and architectural elements that were further away. (2) A diagonal shape in a low corner, such as in *#20*, provided a dynamic entryway into the image and (3) also provided a comforting anchor to which I was physically closer and could observe better.

9

Anchoring was also accomplished through the choice of color. I reduced the room into flat color shapes but preserved representative impulses: my work shows an imperative formal interest in overlapping surfaces but welcomes moments of recognition and of comfort, too. Moving away from the fragmented aspects of *CHS, #3*, where floor and walls were rendered by small shapes of

³² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 137.

³³ *Ibid.*

different colors, by #9 I tended to assign a single color to a plane (with the exception of strong shadows), aiming for smooth, flat, quiet surfaces.

I also began to give more careful consideration to my palette, which is now comprised of 11 colors (2 kinds of red and yellow, 4 kinds of blues, and 3 browns) plus white. In the first months I relied upon alizarin crimson, Prussian blue, and burnt sienna most heavily to mix a range of blacks and greys with which I then used to mute more saturated colors. My choice of color is always a response to observation: my decisions are largely intuitive and are based on lighting conditions and tonal relationships. For example, the walls of PNW 321 are a dirty-white with a yellow overtone, which I usually interpreted in my paintings as yellow, green, or grey. The dirty-white linoleum floor appears a range of greys, beiges, and pinks in my paintings, whereas the blue art carts are translated into a range of blues and greens.

I often struggled to find the right shade and tone; I sometimes judged color to be out of place and repainted it multiple times until I found a replacement. Reflecting upon my work last fall, I wrote of *Pendleton West 321, #32* (fig. 10), in which a parallelogram stands in for a drawing board, whose color I had reapplied at least five times, looking for just the right shade of purple which could replace the actual burnt umber-grey of the board. I likened the intensely frustrating process of finding the color to disorientation and to the opening lines of the chapter “Homesickness” in *Architectural Uncanny*, where author Anthony Vidler writes about the sliding of coziness into dread.³⁴ It reminded me of the way an anticipated return home sometimes felt dreadful to the point of tears; my paintings both resisted and contemplated such experiences. Appropriation, layering, collage, and gestural marks felt too overt when dealing with these kinds of memories. Holding back as a painter paralleled my experience of holding back emotionally

³⁴ Anthony Vidler. *Architectural Uncanny*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 57.

while living away and abroad. I consciously restricted myself and relied on an essentially flat (emotionless) application of paint.

Some of my studio critics questioned the lack of gesture and flatness of my paint application and while I worked to address these criticisms, my attempts were unsuccessful. A more gestural, fluid application of paint, which embraced curves and speed resulted in too much hastiness and my colors quickly dirtied. I thought perhaps if I strategically layered my colors and allowed underpainting to peek through, I might animate my paintings and complicate their final structure. With this in mind, I made two paintings where I laid down saturated compliments of each color that I anticipated would be the top layer. In the first (fig. 11), I overpainted the various compliments as planned, but because of the sheer number of colors already present, I ended up with a confused image that lacked unity. On second try (fig. 12), I applied the final layer more haphazardly with a palette knife, allowing the colors beneath to show but for me the painting lacked a sense of genuine purpose and clarity. Eventually I concluded that my flat application of colors, my “rejection of the overactivated painterly surface”³⁵ was necessary for this series because these paintings corresponded mostly to my formal interest in overlapping planes and to my goal of minimizing movement, creating pause, and encouraging a state of contemplation.

10

Despite my resistance, instances of nostalgia found their way into my work, especially in the smallest paintings that read as objects due to their scale and wooden support. I was intrigued by how a painting became a small object (as a result of frequent handling, as well as the weight of the wooden panel supporting the canvas), one that could take its place among family photographs or leaned against a row of books in a living room.

³⁵ Rawlinson, 127.

Initially, my choice of scale was solely practical: I began with small canvases because I wanted to work faster and to discover what surface might be preferable. For this reason my early thesis paintings are inconsistent, including canvas, canvas on wood, masonite board, and paper supports. In time it became clear that I strongly preferred to paint on canvas stretched over wooden blocks and I also became committed to the small scale. My paintings ranged between 6 x 6", 8 x 8", and 9 x 12", rarely bigger: I could pick them up and hold them close to my eyes as I worked.

When hung salon style, these small paintings read as family portraits and reminded me of a photograph-sized, 6 x 3.5" oil painting that my mother painted in her teens. In blues, reds, greens, and grey, it depicts a dreary village house, next to a leafless tree. As long as I can remember, my grandparents have cherished that painting and kept it on view on shelves or in vitrines, but sometimes it would turn up in boxes of old photographs. I think this might be the only work of my mom's earliest works that held its course, while others ended up lost or in storage. The dearness of the painting implies my family's attachment to the house depicted.

11

I sought to reinforce and understand my enthusiasm for the small object by way of Susan Stewart's book, *On Longing*, as well as in Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, mentioned earlier. Both offered clues to the process of pausing, of making space a place. Stewart asserts that "in its tableaulike form, the miniature is a world of arrested time,"³⁶ and argues that the miniature's interiority and "stillness emphasizes the activity that is outside its borders."³⁷ Suddenly, the activity outside the borders may be seen objectively, from a distance, detached, as reasoned by Bachelard when he writes, "to have experienced miniature sincerely detaches me from the

³⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

surrounding world, and helps me to resist dissolution of the surrounding atmosphere.”³⁸ For Bachelard, “the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world”³⁹ through which once we enter, in Stewart’s words, “the outside world stops and is lost to us.”⁴⁰

Bachelard speaks of restfulness when he discusses the miniature as a “dominated world”⁴¹ and insists that “miniature . . . allows us to be world conscious at slight risk.”⁴² He feels “more at home in miniature worlds, which for [him], are dominated worlds.”⁴³ Recall that in my discussion of the space-place-continuum, I accepted that as a space is brought under control it becomes a place and eventually a home. The device of the miniature is applicable to my goal of creating a home: “the cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it,”⁴⁴ says Bachelard, and I agree.

A magnifying glass is what Bachelard prescribes if one intends to enter a miniature. With a magnifying glass in hand, one could enter and “right away images [would begin] to abound, then grow, then escape.”⁴⁵ With a magnifying glass, “we have to accept unnoticed detail, and dominate it.”⁴⁶ These details “can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness, [for] [m]iniature is one of the refuges of greatness”⁴⁷ and will enable a “liberation from all obligations of dimensions.”⁴⁸ As he begins to explore the enlargement that miniatures inherently imply, Bachelard argues that “to use a magnifying glass is to pay attention,

³⁸ Bachelard, 161.

³⁹ Ibid, 155.

⁴⁰ Stewart, 67.

⁴¹ Bachelard, 161.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 150.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 154.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 155.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 154.

but isn't paying attention already having a magnifying glass?"⁴⁹ Therefore when Bachelard considers the miniaturist, he speaks of focused visual attention, patience, peace, as well as a love of the space. My own longing to pause, to gather knowledge, and create a sense of place through experience, went hand in hand with my formal decision to paint small: but how else might that magnifying glass be put to use?

12

While in Hungary over winter break I began to notice the peculiarities of the place where I grew up. My childhood house stands on the edge of the Southeastern small town Sandorfalva in the Great Plain region of Hungary. Looking out of my old room's window I would see a row of backyards where chickens are raised and gardens are tended expanding into a perfectly flat infinite landscape (fig. 13). I knew very well some conditions of the land: that one had to wear rain boots to walk the marshy ground and long pants to withstand the tall grass; yet, I had never noticed its flatness.

I now recall "The Alföld," a poem by 19th century Hungarian poet Sandor Petofi that all Hungarian elementary students are asked to memorize. In Jane Henderson's translation a section reads:

I know the heights, but now my searching eye
Must claim horizons limitless and free;
Now the expanses of the Alföld are
My watery kingdom and a home to me.

My thoughts, like wild fowl of the marshes, soar
Through low-hung clouds that veil my wide domain,
And in imagination I can see
The Danube as a girdle round the plain.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Bachelard, 156.

⁵⁰ Petofi, 158.

13

At home, I had never noticed the abundance of contrails either that are usually visible above my house. My grandfather often cites contrails as a source of worry: he associates them with my being away, overseas, flying back and forth often. Contrails punctuate the sky, arrest the gaze, and invite thought.

Preoccupied with notions of flatness and vastness, of land, sky, and horizon, I recorded some videos while at home, including some of contrails, and was intensely interested in the arbitrary diagonals in the sky (fig. 14). This effort helped insert an earlier video work of mine into context, as well: taken in the Wellesley Science Center atrium, *Saturday Morning* (fig. 16) looks out onto the sky through the building peculiar linear roof structure and records the peaceful passing of clouds.

For the first time, I thought of home in terms of land, the Great Plain, the horizon, and a vast sky: I carried this interest back to Wellesley where throughout the spring I took quick cell phone images of contrails passing by (fig. 17). Although these images do not appear directly in my thesis work, the activity directly connected the Wellesley campus to my home town.

14

From my last paintings of December where entry into the composition was almost always entirely blocked by shapes corresponding to drawing boards (fig. 18), I moved on to consider openness, a straight-on view, symmetry, and larger sizes in the Spring semester.

I began to position myself facing objects straight on which brought with itself looseness and, consequently, a more vivid and saturated palette (fig. 19). Consider *Pendleton West 321, #36* (fig. 20) from February 2012, which at 24x28" is considerably larger than my earlier work. *#36* began with a saturated green underpainting onto which I sketched my composition in a

complimentary red, including implied lines which I use always but document rarely. Through looser interpretations, the white of the wall became yellow while the blue of the art cart took on purple. #36 remained unfinished because it triggered my impulses and I was eager to move on. Yet, it was the directness of #36 that allowed a leap forward: I went on to paint large and to paint from painting.

15

I set out to paint large by stretching a 50 x 50” square canvas, the largest the canvas roll would allow directly onto the wall. The wall happened to be positioned by the windows and chalkboard that my first painting of the project, #9 (fig.7) had depicted: excited by the strategic placement, I decided to repaint and to enlarge the originally 8x8” #9 onto the 50x50” canvas (fig. 21). I laid down a green ground color (in attempt to improve upon #9 which didn’t have any underpainting) onto which I projected and copied the composition of #9. I was thrilled to see the painting nearly life-size, doubling its environment and in my excitement I overlooked some basic issues. For example, I did not correct discrepancies in linear perspective that I got away with on a small scale, but not when magnified: the drawing was clearly awry and the painting already awkward. Having decided to wipe away some of the color I had laid down, I discovered the frottage effect that the uneven surface of the wall provided when rubbed: ghostly marks of old nailheads and pins appeared.

In the meantime, I contemplated other earlier paintings where I was happy with some sections of the canvas but struggled with unresolved color and compositional issues overall. Using white sheets, I cropped areas of my paintings and played with removing context by zooming in and abstracting further. I selected two tiny areas, one from *Pendleton West 321*, #15

(fig. 22) and another from an oil on paper work done after a photograph I had taken at home, *Sandorfalva, #2* (fig. 23), and copied them onto 18x18” square canvases (figs. 24-25).

With composition and colors already determined, I reduced my process to sketching and remixing colors. I mixed familiar colors that I had designed with care months before with ease. Suddenly, the colors were endowed with personal history that recalled hard work and gentle care, as well as a memory of being-in-the-place when they were first created. In mixing and applying these colors, I was at home.

16

This sense of home, comfort, and confidence energized me and I quickly decided to combine my experiences painting large and painting from painting. I lifted a section from *Pendleton West 321, #35* (fig 19.) and using a projector, I copied it onto a large 45x60” canvas stretched onto the wall ready with a thin layer of orange ground color (fig. 26). This time, before applying the next layer of color, I corrected some of the discrepancies in perspective, used a level to make sure my verticals were straight, and masked my lines for a cleaner finish.

As I experimented with process and intention in this work, I noted one strange association: while painting, I recalled my 2011 visit to Dun Aengus, a prehistoric fort on the Aran Islands in Ireland which sits on the edge of a 330 ft cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Without an artificial barrier, visitors are allowed to approach the edge which I did, too, crawling on my stomach.

17

“Immensity is within ourselves,” explains Bachelard, “it is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone.”⁵¹ As

⁵¹ Bachelard, 186.

opposed to the caution and “a mental world of proportion, control, and balance”⁵² associated with the miniature, for Stewart, “the gigantic presents a physical world of disorder and disproportion.”⁵³ She observes that “our impulse is to create an environment for the miniature, but such an environment is impossible for the gigantic: instead the gigantic becomes our environment, swallowing us as nature or history swallows us.”⁵⁴ Stewart’s thoughts correspond directly to abstract expressionist Mark Rothko’s often quoted 1951 statement:

*I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however -- I think it applies to the painters I know -- is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. . . . However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command.*⁵⁵

I suspect that I thought of Dun Aengus and the horizon as a result of my large the vertical red strip that cut across my composition. Although the red strip originally denoted a lamp in #35 (fig. 19), it now revealed a familiarity with abstract expressionist Barnett Newman’s zip paintings. Newman brings together the painter’s relationship to the large canvas, a sense of place, intimacy, and the gigantic as an environment in a 1965 interview, when he explains:

*One thing that I am involved in about painting is that the painting should give a man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself. In that sense he related to me when I made the painting because in that sense I was there. Standing in front of my paintings you had a sense of your own scale. The onlooker in front of my painting knows that he's there.*⁵⁶

18

I made my final paintings by taking Bachelard’s metaphorical magnifying glass and enlarging small segments of miniature paintings. In the making of *Ferry Ride To Cape Clear Island* (fig.

⁵² Stewart, 89.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Mark Rothko, In *Declaring Space*, ed. Michael Auping. (Fort Worth, Tex: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2007), 104.

⁵⁶ Barnett Newman, In *Declaring Space*, ed. Michael Auping. (Fort Worth, Tex: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2007), 31.

27), I selected a segment of #20 and enlarged it by a factor of about forty, whereas in *On Sundays At Noon* (fig. 28) I revisited a segment of *Sandorfalva, #2*. I intended to enter the miniatures I had created in the fall, and to discover the worlds they held within. I wanted to take ownership of my compositions, yet I could not command them: they expanded beyond the canvas. *Ferry Ride* for example surprised me once I finished laying down all colors, because with its tilted horizontals it disoriented me for a moment, reminding me of the only time I had been seasick on a ferry ride to Cape Clear Island in Ireland. Even if the effect was passingly unpleasant, I rejoiced in the physicality of my painting. I, for sure, knew I was there standing in front of it, as well as within it. I was at home in my painting.

For *Sundays*, which has its distant roots in a photograph I took in my childhood home, the gesture of continuous revisiting, repainting, and locating home on the canvas is as applicable as it was in *Ferry Ride*. First I tweaked my photograph digitally, printed it on paper, traced it onto gessoed paper and painted with oils, making *Sandorfalva, #2*. #2 then hung on my studio wall and was revisited for a series of abstractions (fig. 24 and 29-30), and eventually became *Sundays*. Although I do associate the corner depicted with the intimacy of the home and the routine of my family's Sunday lunches, my purpose was not to re-create a long lost home or to display nostalgic affection. After all, "home is neither a space nor a time, but a place that holds a space and time within it"⁵⁷ according to Heideggerian phenomenology: my painting holds my sense of being-there and being-in-the-world. In *Sundays* I try to annul nostalgia, any pain associated with the return home, and instead I intend to reinforce my sense of being-in-the-world while standing in front of my painting.

⁵⁷ Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place : Explorations in the Topology of Being*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), 162.

Ferry Ride and *Sundays* will hang in the Jewett Gallery affixed directly onto the wall through grommet holes, without stretcher bars. I intend to show the way they were painted, stretched directly onto the wall, recording anomalies of the wall surface. Additionally, I leave a border of left-over marks which record the speed of my brush strokes around the otherwise contained image. I want to expose the objecthood of my canvas.

19

Although with the making of *Ferry Ride* and *Sundays*, I arrived at a sense of being-in-place that I sought throughout my thesis work, I do not believe my inquiry have to stop here. Looking forward, I see multiple ways to rethink my process of interpreting older paintings. Critics of *Ferry Ride* and *On Sunday* insisted that my colors lacked considerable depth: the beginnings of my response will be on view at Jewett.

Although *Hungary Has No Beaches* (fig. 31) was made through a familiar process, this time I selected a PNW 321 painting as its source (fig. 32) which in itself was not yet resolved. With no fixed color decisions to abide by, *Beaches* records a more honest painting process where mistakes and indecision, trial and error are recorded. As a result, the treatment of the surface is looser, often wiped, repainted, and wiped again. Even though the canvas surface carries a very thin layer of paint as a result of wiping, I tried to equip my fields of color with more depth by exposing the warm, vibrant yellow underpainting.

Believing that being in my studio was newsworthy, I set out to create a postcard assembled of old historical Europe maps that I had found among still-life props. I cut up the found material into shapes of color, and based on the same original painting as *Beaches*, I compiled a postcard-size collage, titled *Response to a Postcard from South Africa* (fig. 33). *South Africa* shares both composition and intention with *Beaches*, yet looks vastly different.

With clearly readable fractions of the maps preserved, however, I hoped to indicate scale, distance, and depth: an image of the studio could contain the whole world.

And in the world, I am at home.

Conclusion

20

My thesis work is intensely rooted in Pendleton West 321 but is not contained within it. By the end of my year-long studio-based inquiry, my paintings depicting the studio secured for me a sense of being-in-the-world and thus allowed me to open up to a range of associations and formal possibilities. From my explorations of the Miniature where I felt at home in the studio, through engagement with the Giant where I felt at home in painting, I arrived at a peace of mind in *Ferry Ride To Cape Clear Island* and *On Sundays At Noon*. I begin to enjoy this confidence as I extend my tools and modes of approach in *Hungary Has No Beaches* and in *Response to a Postcard from South Africa*: in the world, I am at home.

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APPENDIX A: FIGURES

Figure 1. Gerrit Dou. *Man Writing by an Easel*, 1630.



Figure 2.
Wall I, 2010, mixed media, 122 x 250 cm



Figure 3.
Wall II, 2010, oil on canvas and mylar, 92 x 187 cm



Figure 4. *Pendleton West 321, #1*, 2011, oil on canvas, 38 x 32"



Figure 5. Charles Sheeler, *Home, Sweet Home*, 1931.



Figure 6. *Pendleton West 321, #6*, 2011, oil on canvas, 36 x 32"



Figure 7. *Pendleton West 321, #9*, 2011, oil on canvas, 8 x 8"



Figure 8. *Cow House Studios, #3*, 2011, oil on canvas, 17 x 24"



Figure 9. *Pendleton West 321, #20*, 2011, oil on canvas on wood, 7 x 9"



Figure 10. *Pendleton West 321, #32*, 2011, oil on canvas on wood, 6 x 6"



Figure 11. 2011, oil on canvas on wood, 18 x 18"



Figure 12. 2011, oil on canvas on wood, 18 x 18"



Figure 13. Video stills

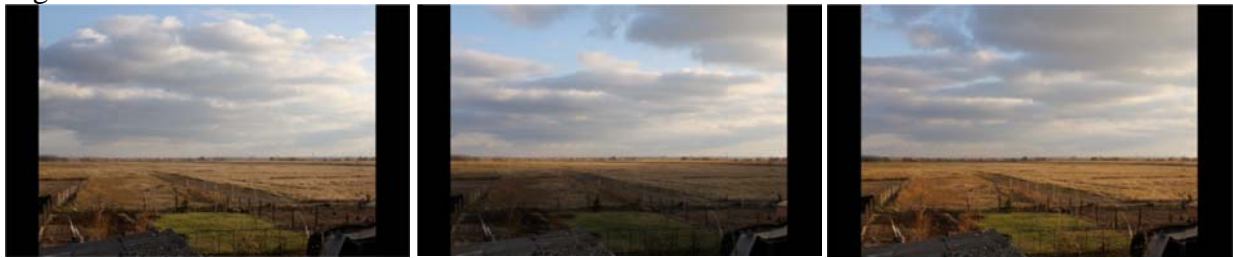


Figure 14. Video stills



Figure 16. *On a Saturday Morning*, 2011, video still.



Figure 17. mobile snapshots, 2012, Wellesley College campus



Figure 18. *Pendleton West 321, #31*, 2011, oil on canvas on wood, 6 x 6"



Figure 19.
Pendleton West, #35, 2011, oil on canvas on wood, 16 x 16"



Figure 20.
Pendleton West, #36, 2011, oil on canvas, 24 x 28"



Figure 21. in progress snapshots, oil on canvas, 50 x 50"



Figure 22. *Pendleton West 321, #15*, 2011, oil on board, 6 x 6"



Figure 23. *Sandorfalva, #2*, 2011, oil on paper, 12 x 9"



Figure 24. 2012, oil on canvas on wood, 18 x 18"



Figure 25. 2012, oil on canvas on wood, 18 x 18"



Figure 26. 2012, oil on canvas, 45 x 60"



Figure 27. *Ferry Ride To Cape Clear Island*, 2012, oil on canvas, 45 x 60"



Figure 28. *On Sundays At Noon*, 2012, oil on canvas, 50 x 50"



Figure 29. 2012, oil on canvas, 35 x 35"



Figure 30. 2012, oil on canvas, 35 x 35"



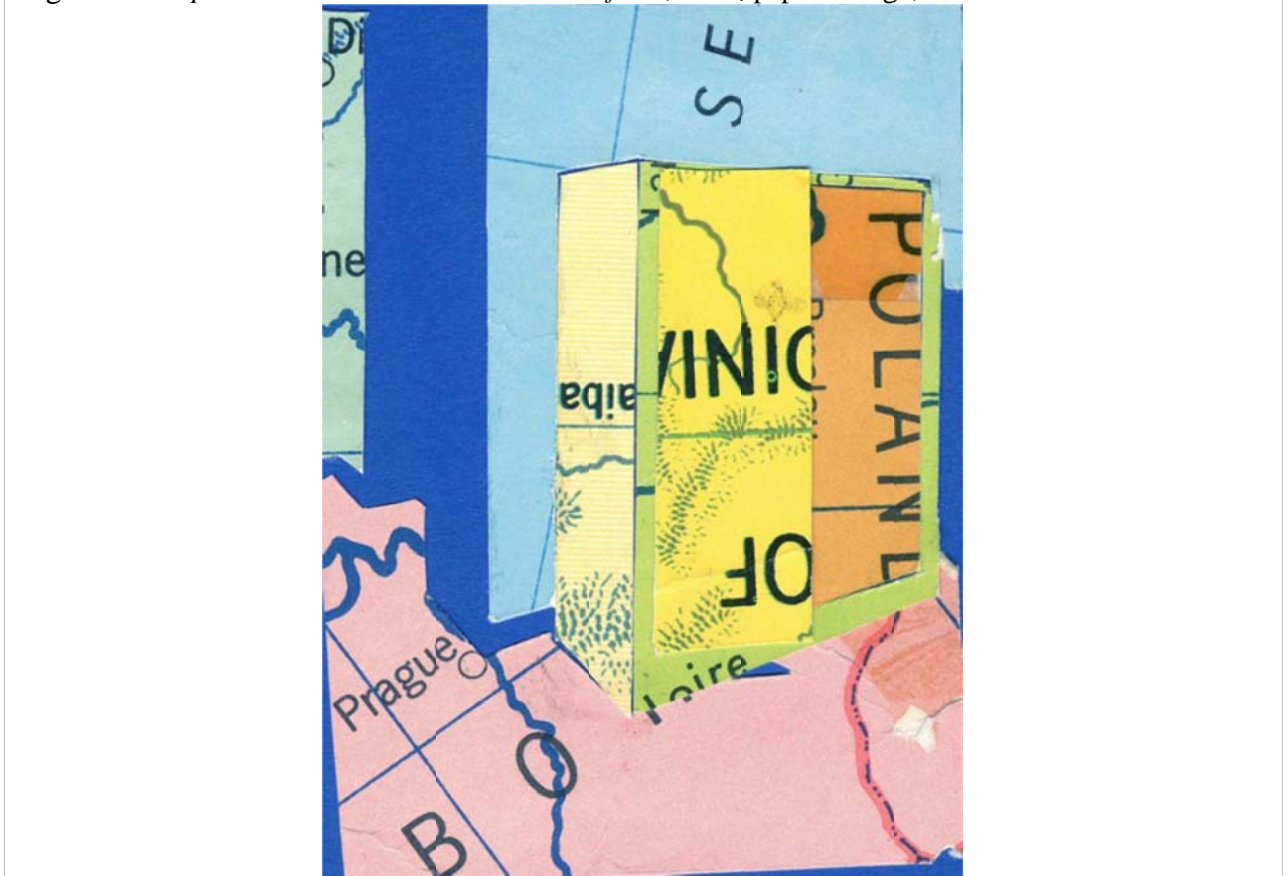
Figure 31. *Hungary Has No Beaches*, 2012, oil on canvas, 45 x 60"



Figure 32. 2012, oil on canvas, 35 x 35"



Figure 33. *Response To A Postcard From South Africa*, 2012, paper collage, 3 x 4"



APPENDIX B: Relevant Work in Painting and Drawing, February 2011-April 2012
(chronologically arranged)





The Study Table, Sketching
Fund of Spacious, 2012/2013

