

MY VISUAL MEMOIR

A Thesis

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of

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by

MICHAEL J. HARNISH

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of

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"I don't really have studios. I wander around people's attics, out in fields, in cellars, anyplace I find that invites me." -Andrew Wyeth

Abstract

The culmination of this body of works is centered on my experiences. The paintings of this series follow the story of my life at this time in the past and the present. I want to depict places and people that mark a specific time and place in my life. Each painting holds a purpose as part of a memoir and a personal reflection of that specific moment. These paintings will not hold the same value for different viewers; however the hope is that they too can relate to these personal experiences. These paintings are not necessarily investigations of the subject matter of the painting, but they are more intrinsically embedded. One cannot in other words recreate a moment in the way it was originally experienced. The paintings provide more than what a photograph might since they have a deep personal connection. This project, like a journal is intended to develop nostalgia for the viewer by painting an autobiography.

Introduction

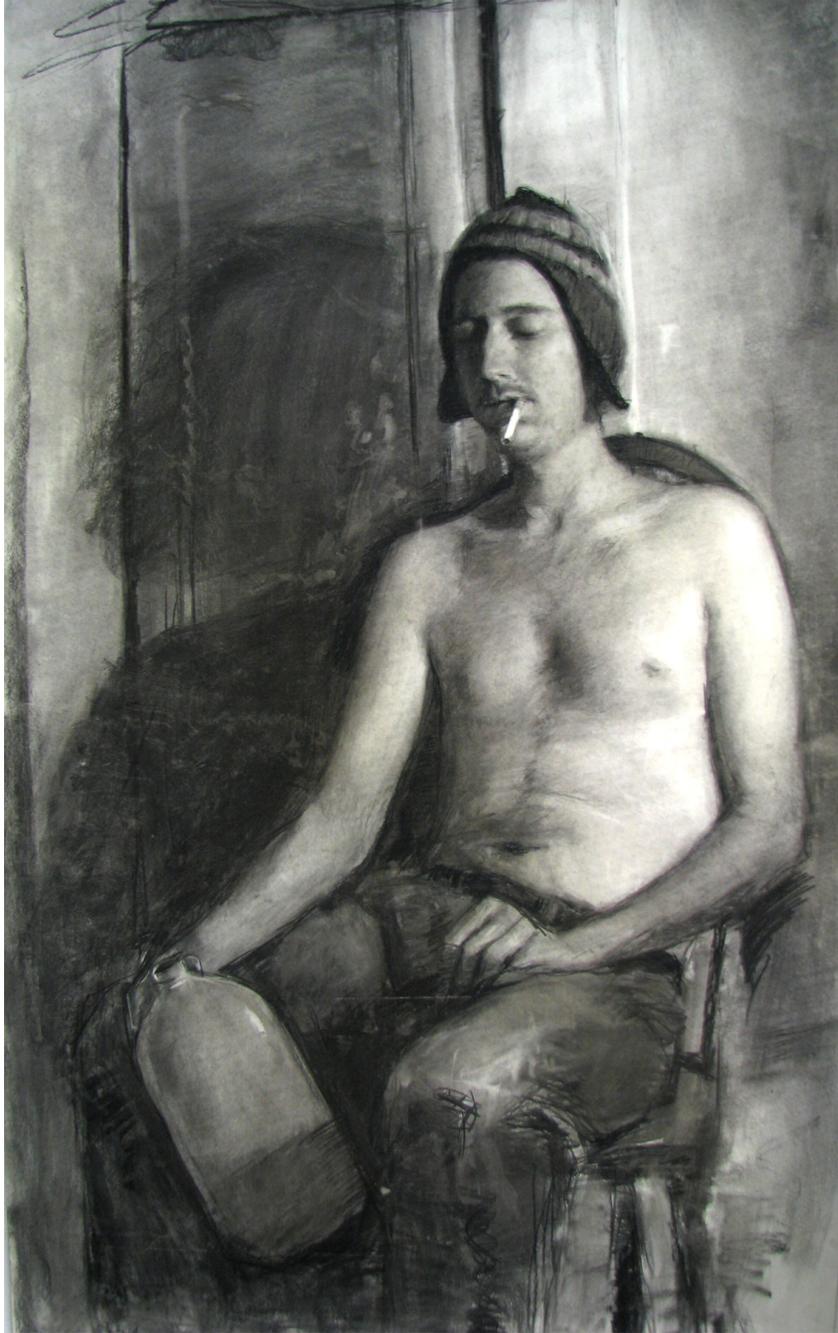
There was a great amount of liberty with the concept of painting a visual memoir. The original intention was for the work to not be considered as a standardized series of work. The commercial galleries' display or present guidelines for showing a particular artists work. For example, some of these guidelines are consistency of the scale of objects, a continuous color

scheme throughout the paintings, and fixed subject for the entirety of the presentation. It is possible that this is done in order to help them sell the work with greater ease. The proposed idea of this series was to disconnect from these perceived gallery norms. This can be viewed as the only true manner of interconnecting the variety of an artist's expression. By capturing places, people, and objects there is an informalized weave showing the greater sensitivity of life. By means of these depicted realities, the viewer will be able to gain an understanding of the artist as well as develop a story for themselves.

This project was formulated as a response to the multitude of mundane and exciting experiences of everyday life. By representing events, places, and experiences artistically, I am able to digest and further understand my role in society. I want to capture specific moments of life. These paintings serve as a book mark and a constant reminder of a specific time and place.

Drawings

My hope is that the included charcoal drawings will be valued with the same frame of mind as was outlined for the paintings. For example, the mark making and fluidity is quite similar to that of oil paint. Throughout time, drawings were seen as preliminary project for oil paintings. At one point were called cartoons. Dictionary.com defines a cartoon in Fine Arts as, “a full-scale design for a picture, ornamental motif or pattern, or the like, to be transferred to a fresco, tapestry, etc.” I do not want my drawings to be solely design elements for something more. They are the end result.



Julian, Michael Harnish (2010).

This first drawing is entitled; Julian is a charcoal drawing depicting one of my roommates. At this difficult point in life I portrayed Julian as a way of describing myself. My

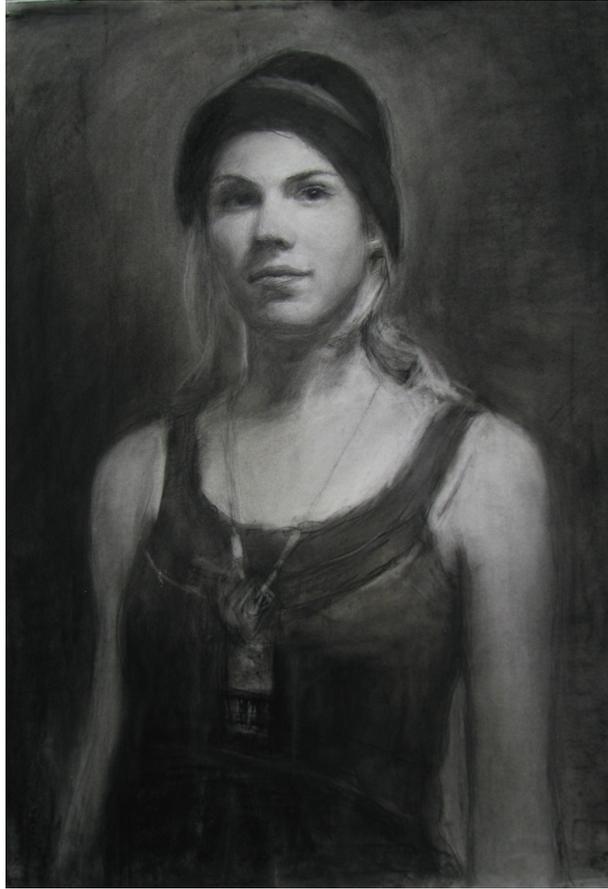
mind set and the environment I was living in felt cold and empty. I did not feel a sense of relationship with any of my surroundings at this point. The image shows my Julian with his shirt off, a cigarette in mouth, holding an empty container, and seated in an isolated space. The constant repetition of stale daily life along with a recent breakup was slowly eating away at any hope of peace. I chose to depict Julian as an outward depiction of my emotions and attitude at this point in time.

Heavy contrast in light with an emphasis on the dark areas helps to create a moody backdrop. A classical light source was used by many of the heavy Baroque artists of the 17th century to portray that same moodiness. I tend to gravitate towards more contrasting light when dealing with charcoal since I am working in tones. I want to utilize the full range of value.

The portrait of *Stephanie* is a life size charcoal drawing. This piece has significant meaning because it was drawn from the last photograph I took of my ex girlfriend. The odd look was captivating, so I found myself drawing it. During the execution I had no foresight that this would be one of the few visual reminders of the many years spent with this person. Her confident posture and awkward smile were what I gravitated to in the camera image. This basic gesture described her wonderfully. This image will serve as a strong bookmark for this time of my life.

The image is rather simple. Stephanie's light face pops out from the dark and simplified background. The drawing is more of an icon due to her centrality and the heavy cropping on the side. The mark making in the ambiguous background makes the setting a little uneasy since there is no place for the eye to rest. The background becomes a sublime space filled with tense charcoal marks. In each mark I struggled to find some sort of reason for their shape and position. I feel I over analyzed certain portions of this piece in much the same way that I overanalyzed the

relationship.



Portrait of Stephanie, Michael Harnish (2010).

Paintings

Oil paint is an endless medium for the exploration of life. It is filled with the personality and sensitivity of the artist when explored in its relative context. The specific application of paint is crucial and prominent when exploring the surface of an artist's work. Aside from the paint, subject matter helps to distinguish the individuality of the creator. Oil paint has many properties ranging from a dry solidified application to a wet, looser, and more transparent approach. This variation in the medium lends itself to the possibility of a perfect vehicle for creativity in

expressing ones personality.



Lemon Trees, Michael Harnish (2010).

Lemon Trees is an image portraying the garden behind my house. As I moved into my new residence, I found a sense of rebirth. The new home entitled *Chateau Du Champs* is the largest place I have ever found myself living in. The previous owner could not afford to pay the mortgage so we were given the opportunity to rent it at a reasonable price. The new experience turned my attention toward a new beginning.

I found the lemon trees and the space surrounding them interesting formally due to the amount of ambiguous shapes and colors within this environment and it was these things which sparked an interest in the composition. When I first began painting this scene, I found myself waking up at 6 am to paint the area from life. I wanted to capture a specific time. I found that during this time, there was not a lot of heavy light and shadows. Also there were a lot of intense dark colors which I responded to. As the painting progressed I found myself making diligent changes to the image and brought the painting into the studio. Here I invented a sky and changed a few passages of light and visual space on the ground plane. I found myself looking a lot at Corot who also loved darker depictions of space facing against the light of the sun.



Portrait of a Lamp, Michael Harnish (2010).

Portrait of a lamp is a painting of a lamp which was purchased at a local thrift store. The

depiction of an everyday object helped to describe this transitional period in life. The dryness that was experienced after having been in a relationship was communicated through this overlooked object. By painting this everyday object, I felt it would remind me of routine and help in the readjustment phase of life.

First, the shape and color of the lamp appealed to me. When it was placed near a grey wall in my studio, I found the relationship between the object and wall intoxicating. Not only was the contour shape of the lamp wonderful against the flat wall but also the color relationships between the two portrayed a peculiar beauty. It was this muted relationship that gave more validity to the choice of a lamp. It reminded me of a color palette that the artist James Whistler might have used. I too wanted to explore Whistler's color relationships using a personal item.

Using portraiture, I have investigated detailed attributes of people in my life. Each has contributed to my sensitivity and understanding of life. In response to notable portraiture of the past, the artist has glorified the subject by representing the image for future generations. The portraits in this series depict grandiose poses reminiscent of the 17th century artist, Diego Velazquez's royal portraits. In an attempt to echo this manner of representation, I chose to paint some of the subjects, life size. I felt as though the size would help add validity to the piece. Working on this scale, the viewer begins to become confronted by the image. The images I am creating are frontal in this format of traditional portraiture.



Portrait of Philip IV, Diego Velazquez (1628).



Portrait of Nicole, Michael Harnish(2009).

The portrait of Nicole is the second painting for this series of work. Nicole is a folk musician. Her talents have inspired me since her music provides uplifting tonal melodies. In this portrait, I wanted to invoke some of the joy that she brings. This is the reason for adding more color in this piece. It is intended for the viewer to gain a similar sense of peace and joy in viewing this portrait.

Nicole and I had a sort of intimate relationship at one time in life. I felt that by being in her company after another relationship ended, I would find a way to move forward. She was a great friend full of helpful insight and wonderful companionship. As my recent relationship ended, Nicole was on her own path, so unfortunately we were only able to share a few good times together. Her inspiring music and profound insight regarding the life of an artist were uplifting and helpful in me discerning my own placement in life.



Woman holding a balance, Johannes Vermeer (1664).

The expectation for the portrait of Nicole was to follow the great painter Johannes Vermeer. I found myself looking at Vermeer for his depiction of space and light. Vermeer's gives a wonderful sense of life in his space and figures. The wall behind her has a similar reflection of light casting from the left side as Vermeer's image; *Woman holding a balance*. The lighting in

this image is placed to help with the emotion of the image. Arthur K Wheelock Jr. describes Vermeer's light in a similar way. He states " This use of color, light, and perspective to reinforce the emotional impact of a scene is characteristic of his work throughout his career." (Wheelock , 1995)

The *Tea Drinkers* is a depiction of my two good friends Julian and Jack. They are portrayed in the sunroom of my current house drinking tea in the afternoon. I wanted to portray elements of both characters which help give the viewer a stronger idea of their character. Each person has turned into a different character due to their current surroundings. I found this fascinating and wanted to provide a narrative surrounding a conversation over tea.

I find it weird how life can take people on completely different paths. Jack's life is completely fast paced and full of adventure, while Julian's life is slow. It seems that the bond between them is weakening. The two close friends are now far removed from one another. The differences in interests and new environments can change a person in many unforeseen ways. This chapter of my life is a time to represent the rejoining of friendships. I feel like one of the characters in the painting, slowly drifting away from these characters as I also find myself on a new path.

In this painting I wanted to pay attention to a certain type of sensitivity to light and tonal values. I wanted a rather gloomy feel so I chose muddy colors with minimal saturation. The space helps create a sort of framework that helps add to the tension between the figures. The placement of the figures is odd in relation to one another. Jack is portrayed rather sluggish and worn and Julian stands in an erect pose. They are close to one another because of their

placement, yet they seem far away from one another.



The Tea Drinkers, Michael Harnish (*Figure.*)(2010).

Garden no. 2 is a depiction of the space behind my ex girlfriend's house. The garden depicts a copious amount of dying vegetation. At the time I was painting this scene I found the comparison between the dead and dying vegetables to be stimulating because of the relationships of green and brown colors.

The twisting and turning of tangled tomatoes vines mimic my indecisiveness and numbness at this time. I felt that the amount of stress was eating me alive. I had just moved out

for the first time and had been seriously contemplating the idea of marriage. However I felt I needed to be prudent in my decisions since I was not finished with school and had no financial means at the time. With all the outside pressure, I felt confused and it was leading me to become stagnant. I felt I was projecting my confusion and unhappiness on my past girlfriend.



Garden no 2, Michael Harnish (2010).

Methodology

I. *Creative approach*

I believe that from the point I witness a valuable moment or place of value, I have a strong desire to represent it. This inspiration cannot be forced but occurs when I least expect it. I see something, someone, or some place and I immediately find myself wanting to capture it. From the moment I start the painting to its development years later, the value of the image often increases. The captured memory holds the most meaning, while painting is always secondary to

the experience.

II. Technical approach

Traditions of various cultures are always something that has always appealed to me. Tradition represents a central ideology within a certain group and is part of the reason for my attraction to the traditional aspects of oil painting. In order to understand something, one needs to understand its origin and the evolution within that idea. At the least it provides a stronger framework for the additive process in being relevant within that niche. Oil painting is a secret language and a rare niche. Within the western framework of oil painting, I have enjoyed many of its elements, ranging from portraiture to landscapes. The process of capturing and exploring life itself is broad and adventurous; it can lead someone to believe that focusing in on one of elements would be an injustice to art exploration itself. It is my prominent reason for using this style of approach in presenting this project.

The pose and position of a particular figure has significant place in my artwork for me. I attempt to capture a position and placement that helps support both the personality of the person and the overall narrative of the image. Distances between figures and objects play important roles in helping with this vision. Aside from the spaces between objects, I find I am attracted to both naturalistic poses as well as staged poses. In composing a scene, I develop an image in my mind, and then compose accordingly when gathering the subjects. Other times I will compose on the spot with my models or subject. When dealing with placement, some of the most influential painters such as Henri Matisse or Giorgio Morandi, place heavy importance on shapes

and the relationships between them. I keep many simplified abstract compositions in mind when composing. As a following step I move inward toward with respect to detail of the space and figures. Spaces between objects can help evoke emotion and tension between figures. I find the space surrounding the characters to carry the same importance as the subjects themselves.

The painting process itself becomes fluid and intuitive only after I have developed a strong layout and determined the composition. As I begin the actual execution of most of my work, I find myself both altering color choices to make color harmonies as well as changing shapes to eradicate tangents. I try not to focus on keeping a shape or color in a single place. Openness for change throughout the entire duration of the painting process is a key success factor. This allows for a certain freedom, a fluid interpretation of the image, and a detachment from the image as a precious object. I feel as though I really begin to accept the painting as relevant to me about three quarters of the way through. When I near completion, I make little meticulous changes throughout the piece. I feel that a strong structured beginning and ending are critical.

Paintings that evoke nebulous mark making are echoed in my work. By nebulous, I mean unexplained and ambiguous as shown in (Fig. 1). I feel this chaotic form of working adds to the personal approach to my painting. Using this approach I paint large clusters of unexplained masses as a primary step. Later I will work into these clusters to determine the form by getting more specific. Sometimes I will start with line and use it as the preliminary structure. After I will move into a more intuitive stage, I enjoy having different methods in which to work since each can be applied depending on the painting subject matter.



(Figure. 1)

To help facilitate this ambiguous mark making, I prefer working on rougher surfaces. This allows me to keep the paint loose. I prefer to work on canvas or linen since it has a chunkier surface. I generally prime the surface with coats of acrylic gesso when working with canvas I use oil primer when working with linen. I avoid the standard sanding between layers of gesso applications since I enjoy a buildup. My drawings work well on a rougher paper. Using a texture as a surface, some of the medium (both charcoal and oil paint) can fall into the crevices of the surface texture. I want this additional element to the surface of artwork.

I prefer to work on a large glass palette. A glass palette is easy to clean and provides for a good surface in mixing large portions of oil at a time. I use a limited palette since I fancy muted tones. I use Ivory black, yellow ochre, lemon yellow, ultramarine blue, cadmium red light, rose madder, titanium white and raw umber. These colors help to depict what I want without colors to get confused from. I find that by having a limited palette I am able to remember mixtures.

Influences and Research

Looking into the timeline of painters, I find myself able to appreciate many artists for

their exploration in picture making. Some I value for their exploration in subject matter while others after their ability to translate life in a personal way through the process of painting. At times I find myself drawn however to a few specific artists whose approach I value and I feel has impacted my work.



Las Meninas, Diego Velazquez (1656).

Diego Velazquez is a huge inspiration for my art. His ability to create a visual image is exemplary in his depictions of life, as well as his application of paint to canvas. His famous painting, *Las Meninas* is always a model piece in designing my paintings. This artist does a good job of allowing the viewer to enter the space and world of his paintings. He does this well by

creating a space and depicting figures to which the viewer can relate with. The figures feel rather natural. Velazquez's exploration of the paint application is also fascinating. His unconventional, yet descriptive marks dance across the surface of the work to not only wonderfully describe form but also create an identity and signature mark of the artist. The contrasting clusters of thick and thin paint move in such a wonderful organic fashion that I find them to be very influential in my own application.

To have multiple elements of picture making in a work of art such as *Las Meninas* is something I wish to mimic in my own painting. I want to create space in my paintings which the viewer can "walk into". I am hoping to achieve many of the very things Velasquez explores in painting such as overlap of objects and figures, the scale of objects and figures, perspective, and the ability to create a simple narrative using the figures in relationship to one another. In my painting, *The Tea Drinkers*, I have created a sort of stage of open space in front of the figures. I am hoping that this room will allow the viewer to fill the void and play as one of the figures in my painting. I also use the overlap of objects and the scale of figures to give the painting the illusion of depth in the interior. Throughout this painting, I have found myself often referring to *Las Meninas* for help in building the spaces into existence.

Another artist I find myself looking toward for inspiration is Jean Baptiste-Camille Corot. I love Corot for many reasons, however at the top of the list I find the sort of poetic nature in his paintings to be the long lasting impact which I digest. In my opinion one of the reasons for his poetic sensibility derives from his color choices and his ability to arrange them in a wonderful way. His colors become a muddy tonal sea of subtle nuances pushed in a wonderful way to allow the viewer just enough understanding of the world which he creates. The tonal shifts of

color are composed of blues, grays, browns, and greens orchestrated in a way to evoke a soothing calm mood. This tonal mood has always been very attractive to me. Corot's world becomes an interpretive world with dream-like qualities. However with that said, there is enough depiction of form to allow a sort of grounding place for the viewer to enter in. I want to see if I can echo some of Corot's color palette in my own paintings and achieve some of his sensibility towards color and life.



The Oak in the Valley, Jean Baptiste-Camille Corot(1871).

A major contemporary artist I feel has greatly impacted the contemporary painting world is the artist Antonio Lopez Garcia. It is unavoidable to mention his name as a major influence on my work. Garcia recreates the world around him in his paintings. He takes the simple as well as the overlooked and transforms these objects, people, and places into master works of art. By capturing the world around him he leaves small clues into his life as an artist. He paints something as simple as his backyard or the sink in his bathroom. This introspective kind of art fascinates me when the artist has found a way of convincing the viewer of his meaningful and

unconventional subject matter. It is the reason I painted *Portrait of a Lamp no.1* and *Lemon Trees*. Antonio Lopez gave me the steps needed to evaluate the objects and places that I encounter.



Washbasin and Mirror, Antonio Lopez Garcia (1967).

Conclusion

It is my honest hope that through this series of personal portrayals I have been able to accurately transmit my feelings and emotions to the audience. Using historically artistic influences in my work it is also my hope that regardless of the personal subjectivity in the work, the viewer will enjoy their viewing of my paintings and drawings. For me this series will remind me of the events I encountered while attending Laguna College of Art and Design. As previously mentioned I respond to artists who I feel have created both a sincere and honest investigation within the traditional frameworks of oil painting. Part of this sincerity derives from

an artists' re-depiction of the events and places in their own world at their own time. They are entirely true to their own experiences. No one can copy these experiences. They are after all, the work of the artists' memoirs.

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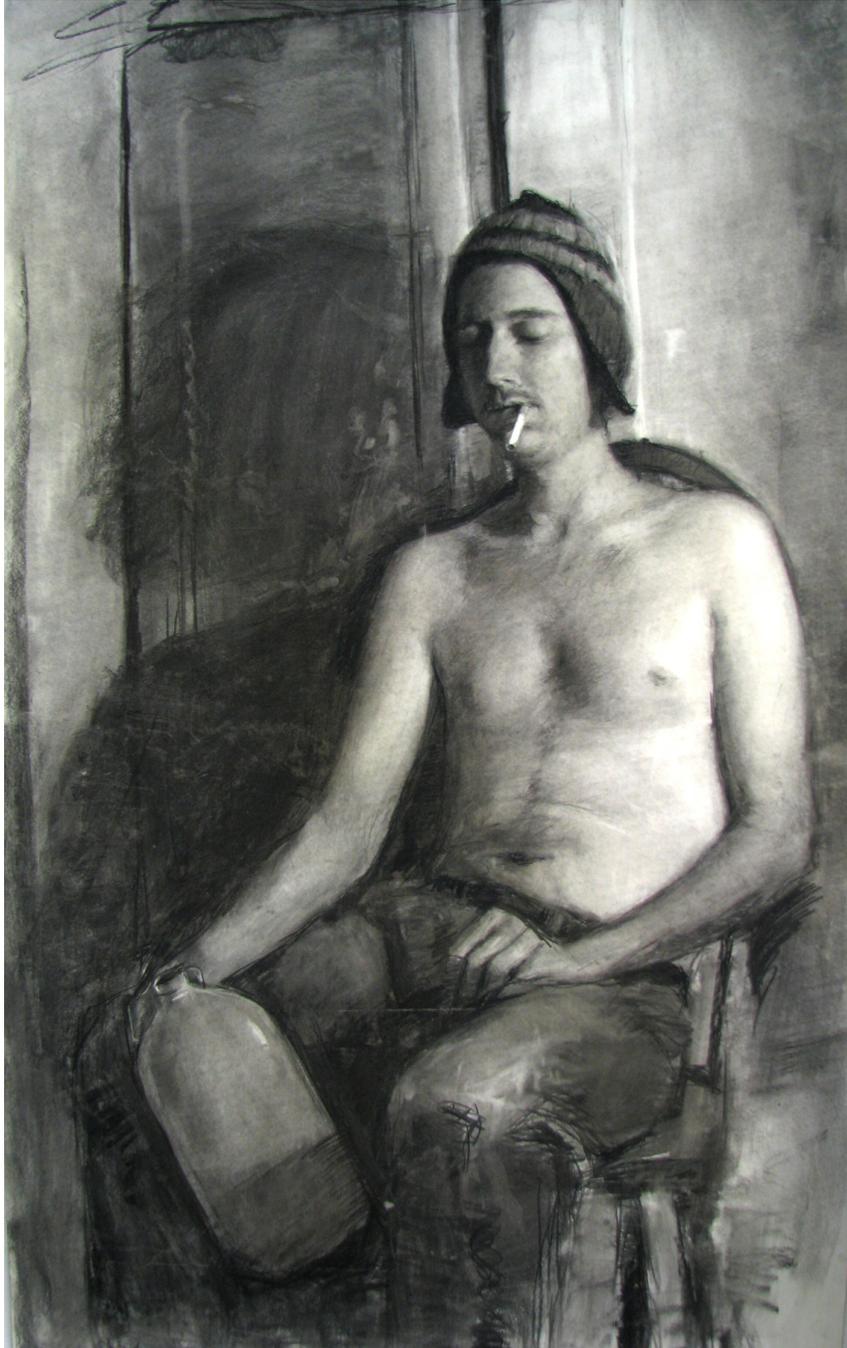
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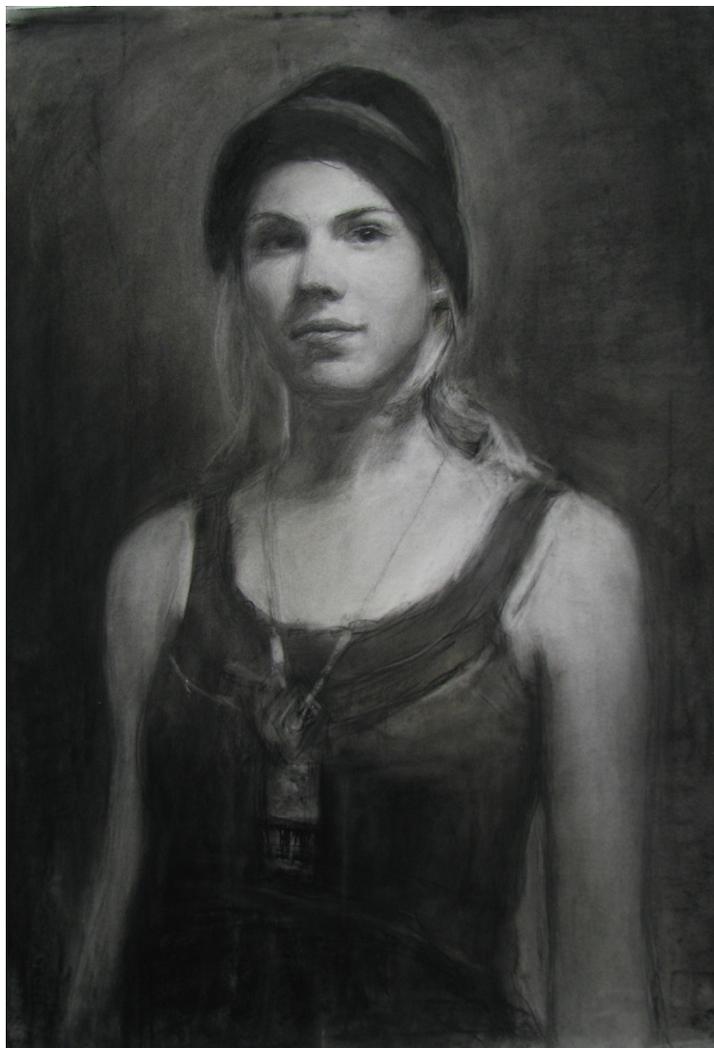
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Portrait of a Lamp, Michael Harnish (2010). Oil on canvas



Portrait of Nicole, Michael Harnish(2009).Oil on canvas



The Tea Drinkers, Michael Harnish (2010). Oil on canvas



Garden no 2, Michael Harnish (2010). Oil on canvas

