

PASSAGE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Laguna College of Art+Design

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

May, 2009

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my wife Mary,
and my daughters Natalie and Emily.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the teachers and mentors at the Laguna College of Art + Design, who opened my eyes and helped me to see.

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ABSTRACT

Parker, Michael S. MFA, Laguna College of Art & Design, May, 2009. *Passage*. Major Professor: Grant Hier.

My aim is to make strong, memorable images that invite the viewer to participate in a narrative. The narrative is a means of expressing emotions and meaning and allows freedom in the interpretation of ideas. *Passage* explores themes of traditional family relationships and dynamics, through implied narrative. I will explore dynamics of changes within the family which I view as a living and changing entity, constantly evolving and moving. I aim to explore the individual's relationship to the whole as he/she moves from one stage in life to another. I draw upon personal family experiences as well as from the observation of other family experiences. The aim of *Passage* is to create meaningful images that explore the living and flowing dynamic within the family.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Passage is an exploration of the visual narrative. I am interested in presenting an open-ended narrative to the viewer, that invites the him or her to enter within. In order to keep the narratives somehow related to one another I choose themes for my paintings that are related to family. Family is something that is important to me, and something to which many people can relate. Therefore I search for narratives that involve the family in some degree, as a whole or with the individuals within the family unit, and how they relate and interact with the family. Much of what I focus on are moments of transition and change. These moments can include the birth of a new child, death, marriage, divorce, leaving home, losing or regaining a loved one, or any of the other myriad ways we experience change as it relates to us and our families. My paintings focus on what I know, see, and my own personal experiences. This work is an exploration of these observed moments and memories, through the vehicle of the implied narrative.

The narrative is the most comfortable mode of expression for me, because of my background in illustration. My undergraduate work was with illustration, with a focus on book and children's illustration. My work during this time was centered on making a picture that told a story. Narrative artwork has always been intriguing to me. As a child I remember being fascinated by books with pictures that fueled my imagination as I read the story. That fascination continued through the years and still influences what I do as an artist. When I made the shift into learning more about what makes a painting rather than a book illustration, I was learned about implied narrative from my mentor Wes Christensen. In fact, the term “implied narrative” was one that he used to describe not

only his own work, but the work of other artists who paint in a representational manner using figures to tell a story. I had a hard time understanding the difference between simply illustrating a story and presenting a narrative painting that has implied meaning and an openness to those who view it. What I learned is that the beauty and mystery of a painting is what is left out rather than what is explicitly stated-- an approach almost opposite to that taken in illustration, in which the work must be clear and easy to read to in order to get an idea across quickly. It has been said that the greatest meaning is read between the lines. An implied narrative is that which is not seen. It is that hidden meaning I search for in my narrative paintings; I want to present a situation that can be read on many levels and with more meanings than are visually presented. I feel that these meaningful situations invite the viewer to participate more wholly in the experience of the painting, and thereby makes the painting more important and memorable to that person.

For my paintings to be meaningful to other people I feel that I need to address themes and ideas that I know the most about and feel most strongly for. I've always been told in my artistic training that a painter should only paint what he knows best. Many of the artists from whom I draw inspiration did or do this in their practice. Anders Zorn spent his time painting his wife, the places he lived, and the people he knew. Nicolai Fechin did likewise painting the people and landscape that surrounded him, no matter where he lived. Andrew Wyeth painted only people he knew closely and places with which he was intimately familiar. If you want to know what is important to someone, just look to what they give their attention. Or, in the case of the artist, look to what he focuses his attention in his work. As I thought about this and reflected on where I have put my creative efforts into the past few years, I came to realize that my family and how I see them was what I put brush to canvas for. In fact, the process of creating a painting based on my experiences with my family gives me the opportunity to discover who I am as a father and a husband, as well as to examine more closely what it is that ties all families together. It is the process of not only exploring experiences, past and present, but also

the very act of applying paint to canvas that allows me to meditate and reflect in a different way about my family and “the family” in general. The creative process helps make me more aware of myself, my experiences, and my relationship to my family. It makes sense to explore themes and ideas about the family, since it is something that consumes me on a daily basis. It is my hope that other people can identify with my own familial experiences, because I think that much of what I am exploring is universal.

After I decided to focus on the family, I wanted to narrow my ideas down even more. The family presents diverse situations and narratives that can be explored, too many for a single body of paintings. For this body of work I chose to focus on transitional moments-- changes that can occur within families that impact as well as define the character of the family and its members. These changes can also serve to cause a shift in one's thinking, and can help to clarify what one knows about one's life and relationship to family. I have always been interested in these types of moments within my own life, especially those that have served to shape me into the person that I am today. Many of these life movements can be cyclical, as well as universal, such as birth and death. I felt that many people can relate to these pivotal moments on a variety of levels, depending on their own personal experiences. These are moments of change wherein when the family, or family member, will become something new and different, having passed through their experience.

The family is an interesting group. Love is usually what ties the members of a family together. Even when there is contention or argument amongst members of a family, in the end there something that draws them together. We feel a special affinity towards members of our family. This is something that doesn't seem to occur with other relationships, such as with friends or co-workers. Close familial bonds can be forged between people that aren't related at all, depending on the situation. However, no other organization or relationship can take the place of family. When all it said and done in life, it's the relationships that we have with our families that seem to be most important to us. David O. Mckay said, “No other success can compensate for failure in the

home.”(Call 1) Most of us won't lay on our death beds thinking about how successful we were in life with our career, but our minds will most likely be turned towards our family, and our relationship to them.

It seems that many changes that occur in life are associated with family. These changes can not only bring us closer together as a family, by helping us learn to help each other, but also helps us to better understand our place and role in the Human Family. When we experience something for ourselves, we develop empathy for others who go through something similar. Many of the changes to which I refer are better described as passages or stages we pass through in life. As we pass through these stages, we develop kindred feelings for others who have experienced them as well, helping us to feel that we are more similar than different.

This desire to explore these moments comes from examination of my own life, by which I've been able to look back and see moments when I became a new person through some lived experience. For instance, when I left for college, I couldn't fathom that I would not be coming back to live in my parent's house, as if I was simply off for summer camp. That time away was, however, necessary for me to learn independence and self-reliance, as my parents were no longer always there to take care of me. It was not an easy thing to do at that time, but it was through that process of leaving and learning that I took steps toward being an adult. Another such pivotal moment in my life was when my first daughter was born. It was during this time that I realized that my life had changed, and that it could never go back to being what it was before. Now that newness of becoming a father has faded, but that single moment when my daughter came into this world has changed the definition of who I am. The interesting thing about these transitional moments, is that the period of time over which they take place varies. Some experiences extend through days, weeks, even years. Others may take but a few seconds. Therefore in my analysis of the themes behind this series, a “moment” can refer to various lengths of time.

Ultimately the direction I would like to go with my work is to explore narratives that are not necessarily literal in their presentation, but rather become symbolic of deeper meanings. This is not to say that the paintings in this series don't have more meaning than what is there to see. I want to try to imbue my paintings with layers of meanings, and allow the viewer to enter within and fill in the narrative with their own thoughts, experiences, and ideas. First and foremost the narrative must be interesting enough that I want to explore it, and interesting enough for the viewer that he will want to look at it. Then the layers of meaning can unfold and be there to be discovered. I do, however, try to steer away from including veiled symbols and ideas that limit the accessibility of the work to only a certain kind of person. With this series I am experimenting and trying to push the meaning beyond what is seen on the surface, to allow the viewer's imagination to lead him through the layers of the painting. I am seeking to open the narrative, and allow the viewer to immerse himself in the painting.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH

Before I began working on this series, many of the artists that I looked at for inspiration were based on their technical merits, or how well they painted a picture. I was struggling to figure out my personal style, so my interest was in how to paint and not so much in the content of my work. As I started to discover my own painting style and developing my ideas, I changed from looking at artist solely on their ability to paint to looking at artists for both their technique and the content of their work. I realized that it takes more than just skill with a paint brush to make good paintings. Looking at art history as well as contemporary artists, helped me to shape more definitely what I want to put into my work. I continue to look at what other artists are doing and have done with their work, to help me better understand my own.

Much of the contemporary painting that I was looking at before I started this series, was for their technical merits, and usually consisted of single figures, figures in landscapes, or head studies. Although beautifully painted, these are not paintings rich in content and layered with meaning. I was concerned with my own style, and how it should be developed. I learned, though, that “style”, or the way that I paint, is like my handwriting that is discernible from the handwriting of other people, and has been developed through practice and use. Landscape painter John Carlson said that a painter's style “as in writing, is subconsciously developed. It is what you are going to 'say' on canvas that is all important, and not how you are going to put on the paint or handle the thing” (Carlson 12). I decided to focus on what I want to say instead of worrying so much about how I go about saying it, and started to search out work with more substantial content. By allowing my style to develop of it's own accord allows me to

concentrate more fully in what I want to say. Still, I believe that the way you say something is just as important as what you say. An artist's style can help to reinforce what he is trying to say with his paintings. As in my own work, I am painting narratives that I want people to believe could be real. Therefore I paint a little tighter to help make the narrative clear to the viewer. As I researched more contemporary figurative artists, I realized that the style mattered less to me than the meaning and message of my images.

Realist works do not simply represent the world through mimetic reproduction. They can also represent the reality of who the artist is, or of how he views the world, which in some ways can be a more “realistic” representation of this world we live in. Realist works can be about re-presenting anything that seems “real” to the artist. It can mean a realistic mimetic representation of the world through paint, much like a photograph. It could also be a realistic depiction of the artists emotions or thoughts by re-presenting them on canvas in any number of ways, which do not have to be done in any one particular way. The beauty of representational realist works is that it can be anything about re-presenting the reality of the artist and how he sees and feels the world around him.

I started to seek out contemporary artists that were doing the types of narrative paintings I envisioned doing. I became acquainted with the work of many artists who paint the narrative into their work. Of those artists, the work of Wes Christensen, F. Scott Hess, and Bo Bartlett influenced me the most. From these artists I learned more about implied narrative-- narrative with multiple layers of meaning.

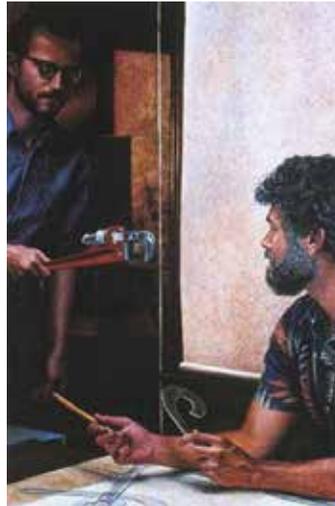


Fig 1 "Thought Insertion". Christensen, Wes. www.weschristensen.com, 1989

Wes Christiansen's work (fig. 1) deals with the implied narrative, in a smaller sized painting format. He depicts scenes with people doing seemingly random acts, interacting with each other in different ways. His paintings allow the viewer to enter them and fill in the spaces that he left for the viewer to interpret. Wes also includes references to other artists as well as to art history. Similar to Wes, Scott Hess paints situations such that their meanings are implied and open to interpretation (fig. 2). His paintings have a sense of the strange, mysterious and dramatic, which I particularly enjoy seeing. He too draws inspiration from art history.

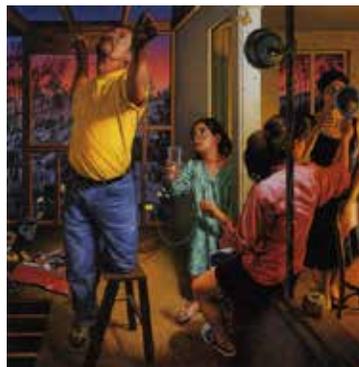


Fig 2 "The Measure of Love". Hess, F. Scott. The seven Laughters of God and other Paintings. 2004.

It was my pleasure to work with Wes Christensen and Scott Hess in the LCAD mentorship program. At first I was hesitant to work with either because I felt that their styles of painting were different than mine, and I wanted to study with someone whose style was more similar. I realized later that this doesn't matter, as I could learn much from my mentors regardless of how they paint. Sometimes it's nice to be able to push past the technical aspects of painting and focus on the idea and content. I was able to bounce my ideas off Christensen and Hess' experiences and knowledge and in that way refine my own direction. I don't think that I could have arrived where I am without their guidance, most of which came in the form of suggested readings, and introductions to the work of other artist's. I tend to prefer learning on my own-- either through reading about a subject, or by trial and error. It was nice to have the freedom to explore on my own, with the assurance that my mentors were constantly pushing and nudging me in the right direction.



Fig 3 "Damascus Road". Butler, Charles et al. [Bo Bartlett](#). 1998.

Besides Christensen and Hess contemporary figure painter Bo Bartlett (fig 3, 4), has influenced my work as well as my development as an artist. He also paints people doing things that seem normal and yet strange at the same time. The messages in his

paintings are hidden and allows the viewer to search them out. With this type of painting, I feel that the viewer is allowed to participate more fully. The viewer can also find new meanings each time the work is viewed in the light of new experiences. Bartlett came to visit LCAD during my second year and I was able to listen to him lecture about his work. I have known of his work for some time and find myself returning to it for inspiration. Much of what Bartlett talked about on his visit struck a chord with me, and stirred the creative fires within. The thing that I find most interesting about his work is that he paints what is important to him; much of his work seems autobiographical. He references artists that have served to inspire him, such as Andrew Wyeth, Thomas Eakins, and Norman Rockwell throughout much of his work. One of the remarks that he made that has stayed with me was that as artists we should make the kind of work that we want to see. I felt as if my eyes had opened. I knew then that painting is about who I am as a person, as well as where I fit into art history as an artist. This helped me in my development of ideas for paintings, for I try now to paint what feels right for me, as opposed to trying to cater to what other people think I should be painting.



Fig 4 "Estrelita". Butler, Charles et al. Bo Bartlett. 1994.

As I mentioned above, my background is in illustration and so I also draw inspiration from illustrative work. My goal is to marry some of the traits of the illustrators of the past with contemporary representational realist painting. I look to many of the illustrators from this last century especially. Many artists from this time period had great skill in painting and the way they visually tell a story is interesting to me. Among the many illustrators that have influenced my work, NC Wyeth, Howard Pyle, Dean Cornwell, and Norman Rockwell are the few that I find myself returning to often for inspiration. Through the use of composition, character development, color, and paint application, they were able to quickly and effectively tell a story. I also enjoy the various styles of these early illustrators, with the boldness of Cornwell and Wyeth, and the sensitivity of Pyle and Rockwell. An important part of their work was drama, created through the use of color, composition, and lighting. I sought to emulate much of what these artists did in their work in my own paintings, trying to learn lessons of not only the painting process, but how to present a dramatic and interesting visual narrative. This era of illustration has influenced me greatly, and I continue to find reasons to study these artists.



Fig 5 *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho*, Anobile, Richard. London, Pan Books. 1974.

Along the same lines as illustration are Alfred Hitchcock films, as far as developing a narrative. Alfred Hitchcock became a source for many of narrative ideas, and helped me learn to create drama and mystery. I watch his films to see how he composes each shot in his movies, as if he were composing a work of art with each frame.(fig 5) An interesting book on Hitchcock's movie *Psycho* shows frames from the movie and one can see how well Hitchcock thought out and composed each scene. Many of his films are in black and white, and he focuses on the lighting in each shot so that the lighting helps tell the story. The lighting in his work creates drama and suspense by casting light from unconventional angles, and playing on the lost and found, such as a dark figure blending into a dark background and then emerging into the light. The reduction to simple black and white values helped me to focus on working out more interesting lighting situations in my own paintings. The drama and mystery that pervades all of his work inspires me and drives me to include these same elements within my own painting. I've also found it to be interesting how the viewer is not shown the whole story and is left guessing the outcome until the end when everything comes together. For instance, in *Rear Window* Jimmy Stewart's character is confined to a wheelchair and spends his time watching his neighbors. Through his spying he thinks his neighbor has killed his wife. We are left guessing whether or not Stewart is delusional, or that his neighbor really has murdered his wife. There is something in having that sense of not knowing what's happening that adds to the mystery and drama. The way the figures are posed in the shots create suspense, such as placing the figure with their back to an open door, or letting the viewer see something that the character can not, which creates anxiety within the viewer. These elements play on the emotions of the viewer, which in the case of Hitchcock's films is fear, suspense, and anxiety. By watching his films I learned to study out simple things such as lighting and figure poses to help create a better narrative in my own work.

Through study of art history, contemporary artists, illustrators, and film I can combine elements and ideas to create my own work. All these sources of inspiration feed

my subconscious and when I am working through ideas I recall certain things that I have seen or read. I am constantly trying to add things to my mental library, so that I never run out of ideas for future paintings. I've found that the more I study and learn the easier it becomes to think of new ideas for my work. At times it feels that I don't have enough information to draw upon, and Scott Hess wisely told me that I had more than enough right now to begin. His only caveat was to continue feeding my memory with information and knowledge. Hopefully, with time and experience, my work can only broaden, deepen, and become more meaningful.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Philosophical Approach

When I started this project I thought it would be good to envision the finished product or body of work. This way I could picture the end product and thereby see the steps I needed to take to make it a reality. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but in reality, I couldn't solidify in my mind the finished body of work. I could only examine my thoughts and build on them. This whole project has been an experience of building and learning; I have consistently added to the knowledge and experience gained, and each time reached a new plateau of understanding of what my art can be. It is not the end product that I am interested in now, but rather the means by which I may gain more insight into who I am as a painter and what I am trying to say through my work.

I feel that much of my difficulty in learning what painting was all about came from my background in narrative illustration. During my undergraduate studies it became very important for me to be able to show quickly to the viewer what was happening in a picture. I studied many of the Golden Age illustrators to see the sort of pictorial devices they used in their visual storytelling to create drama and interest. I thought that I could take that same approach to narrative illustration and apply it to fine art painting. The narrative itself is not so much the problem as in how one approaches the unique problems of making a painting as opposed to making an illustration. For me a painting needs to have an openness to it, whereas an illustration needs to be more closed and directed. I

came across an essay that defines narratives in painting in an interesting way. It came from an idea put forth by professor Dr. Richard Fehrenbacher, teaching at the University of Idaho. He had challenged his class to examine the narrative outside of literature. One of his students, John McHugh wrote an essay that talks about the “closed narrative”, and uses traditional fairy tales as examples. The basic idea is that all conflicts within the story are resolved completely, leading the reader to believe in a “happily ever after”. McHugh used Hansel and Gretel as an example:

Everyone already knows how fairy tales are supposed to end: "and they lived happily ever after" and much time has been spent in modern interpretations poking holes in this convention. Nevertheless, that clichéd phrase marks the example *par excellence* of ending and closure. Let's return to *Hansel and Gretel*, all the conflicts presented in the story are perfectly closed by the end. The poverty of the family is ended when Hansel and Gretel return with pockets full of jewels from the witch's house, the "wicked" step-mother who had convinced the father to leave the children in the woods is dead, the witch has been killed, and the children are finally reunited with their loving (though apparently rather weak-willed) father. Not only have all the conflicts presented in the story been rather tidily straightened up and closed off, but the very ending itself "and they lived happily ever after" even denies the possibility of future complications" (McHugh 1)

The narrative of the fairy tale is one that really leaves nothing to the imagination beyond the ending. McHugh compares the idea of the closed narrative with painting, and uses the “Final Judgment” of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel as an example. The painting, as is pointed out in McHugh's essay, is centered on the Christ figure, and the outcome is certain and known. It is a closed narrative painting, where we are not left to wonder what is occurring, the events leading up to that moment, nor the ultimate conclusion. When the narrative becomes less closed and more open, the interpretation of the narrative is left to the viewer. One is curious about what is taking place and is lead to invent more of the story behind the painting. The viewer questions, “What happened before this moment? What are is taking place? What is going to happen after this moment?” It's narrative is open to past, present, and future events. McHugh gives us an example of an unclosed narrative painting with “The Scream” (fig 6) by Edvard Munch. He states:

At first, then, *The Scream* seems like the most basic narrative possible, a single

instance frozen in time with nothing about the past or future presented and in actuality, unnecessary to the narrative of the painting. However, the evocative nature of *The Scream* is so powerful, viewers can't but help imagining what events would have led up to moment we see and what will occur afterwards. *The Scream* moves, through the audience, from a closed set, a single instance caught in its totality, to an unclosed work, where the audience is invited, even required, to flesh out the narrative. It seems that this requirement of the audience to fill out the rest of the narrative enhances the evocative nature of the work. (McHugh 1)



Fig 6 "Scream". Munch, Edvard, 1863-1944. University of California, San Diego . www.artstor.org.

The work becomes more personal and easily accessible to the viewer. For me this strikes a resounding chord with what I am attempting to do with my work.. It differs from narrative illustration, in that illustrations have the "happily ever after". A narrative illustration's purpose is to be closed for the most part, as it usually accompanies a written story. All the parts of the story are spelled out in the text so the viewer is aware of the context of the illustration. With narrative painting, the absence of descriptive text allows it to be an open narrative. The audience can identify more readily with an open or implied narrative, and find greater significance in the meaning of the work.

As I came to this understanding, I struggled with what sort of narratives I should paint. Through this process of learning about an open narrative, I solved some problems that allowed me to advance in my discovery of what a good narrative painting can be. My first attempt was "End of the Road" (fig 7), a painting of a teenage boy and girl. Many of

the problems I encounter when creating the paintings in this series first emerged during the process of creating this painting.

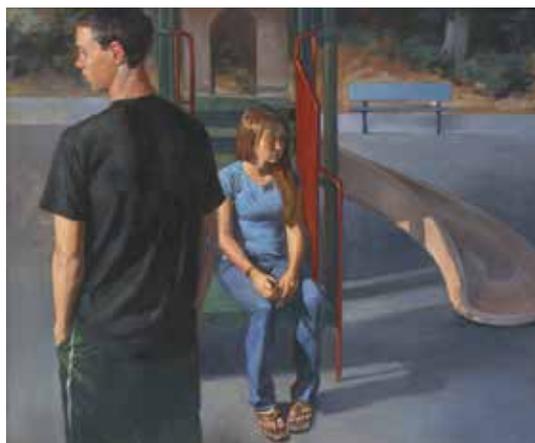


Fig 7 "End of the Road". Parker, Michael. 2008.

One of the first issues I tackled was size. Before I started this project I had limited myself to paintings that were usually around 18" x 24" or smaller. Much of this was due to a small studio space. Since I have more space in which to work now, it was my desire to paint something larger. The first thing I noticed was the problem of translating a small drawing into a painting of large proportions. What works very small won't necessarily work very large, and that pushed me to develop a strong composition that would still work at any size. There were, for example, problems with dead or negative space that had not been present in an earlier small drawing. I had to move things and make adjustments as I transferred the drawing to the canvas. Also, with the size of the painting being so large, I ran up against something not experienced before: boredom with a painting. Generally, I work very quickly in a direct manner, painting everything in one or two sittings over a period of a few hours. Yet a painting larger than 24" x 24" makes it almost impossible to finish in one sitting. I had to learn how to develop an under painting and how to paint back into areas that were already dry from previous sessions. This took much more time to complete and about half-way through I grew bored and restless with

the work. I felt that I should have finished it already and that it was taking far too long to complete. After setting it aside for about a month or two to work on other things, I mustered the strength to continue and finish. This helped me to understand the importance of having multiple projects to work on, so as not to grow bored.

The other problem I encountered with this first painting was how to compose the painting so as to not “spell out” the whole narrative. I struggled to accomplish this. My idea was simple and I was not sure how to convey the sense of mystery and levels of meaning that I knew needed to be there. I spent hours on sketches and drawings before deciding on a composition. It was interesting to spend more time on the content of the painting than the actually painting itself. It helped me to understand how to craft a painting, as opposed to simply taking photographs of a subject and painting what was in the photograph. It began to open my eyes to how my own creative processes worked.

Another of the issues I faced was whether to use canvas or to paint on prepared board. Previously, I had been painting almost exclusively on board, which I chose because of the relative inexpensive cost, the rigidity, and the smoother surface. However, with a painting the size of “End of the Road” I felt that because of the heavier weight of board, I would try canvas instead. This was a struggle in and of itself. The stretcher bars that I bought ended up being too weak and they snapped at the corners while stretching the canvas. I had to use reinforcements on the back to strengthen the stretcher bars. After this experience I decided that if I were to continue using canvas, I would make need to make my own stretcher bars to ensure their strength.

Much of what I experienced with this painting, both in terms of technical issues and content in my paintings, helped me to shift my thinking of creating illustrations to making paintings. I learned the process I take from concept to sketches to the final painting process. My paintings now tend to be larger than previously, and painting at this size no longer intimidates me. From “End of the Road” I learned that I tend to paint the heads of figures at a size that feels comfortable to me, and adjust the painting size accordingly.

Creative Approach

Passage will be a series of 8 paintings. These paintings will be done on canvas and on board. As mentioned above, I now make my own stretcher bars and stretch my own canvas, thereby giving me greater flexibility in sizing and format. I enjoy the process of stretching canvas and making my own stretcher bars, as it gives me a creative outlet outside of painting. The physicality of the process of cutting the wood, gluing, and stretching the canvas allows me to distance myself from constantly thinking about the finished painting; I can lose myself in simply building. It gives me great satisfaction to build, and through that work I can let my mind ponder my ideas subconsciously rather than thinking about them directly.



Fig 8 “Live, Love, Laugh”. Parker, Michael. 2009.

My approach to a painting is generally the same with a few variations. I sketch out my ideas in small thumbnail format, around an inch in size. These are very rough and are for used to roughly state simple shapes and values. Many times I find myself having to write down an idea in order to explore it through with words rather than visually. Ideas

come and go and the best way I've found to capture some of them is through a small notebook. Many times, the ideas come rapidly, building off of a triggered memory or event. The idea for "Live, Love, Laugh" (fig 8) came almost instantly in a single moment. I was focused on other ideas that weren't quite working out for me, and I happened to see our friends coming into church. It dawned on me that they would be perfect for a painting, not because of that particular moment, but because the memory of being in their apartment, and the personalities of each person came flooding to my mind. I knew almost instantly how I would have them pose in their living room to create an interesting narrative. The final composition for the painting is nearly the same as what I saw in my mind that day in church.

Other times it seems as if I need to sit and grind the idea out from thin air. This seems to occur more frequently than the previous instance. Still in struggling with an idea I have learned that if I let it stew in my mind long enough it will resolve itself. Most of the time the idea is great, but I struggle with how to compose the figures, how to light it most effectively, and how to best portray the narrative in an interesting way. For instance, for a painting I'm working on, "True Love's First Kiss", the idea of a first kiss between teenagers had been sitting on my mind for about a year, without a satisfying solution as to how to compose the picture. I researched many old master paintings, and drew seemingly endless thumbnails. I eventually put the idea to the back of my mind, and focused on other things. One night much later, I was watching *Sleeping Beauty* with my daughter and the scene where Prince Philip ascends the tower to plant love's first kiss on the sleeping Aurora struck me with full force. The solution came to my almost in that instant: I could position the girl on the couch with a young man kneeling down before her to kiss her with true love's first kiss.

I have found that an idea is much like a seed and needs time to germinate in my mind. Most of the time I have an idea and feel it has potential, yet I can't make it seem to work compositionally in my head or on paper. I would try sketching the idea out and it would make me frustrated. I learned that I need to concentrate on an idea until I can go

no further, at that point I must let it rest and allow an idea to resolve itself in my mind. I As I go about daily routines and work on other things, the solution eventually presents itself to me. Sometimes this happens while I'm driving the car, or while working on another painting. This process can sometimes take time, and doesn't happen on demand. It's good to have a few ideas floating around in my head, so that I always have something I'm thinking about. The solutions I'm seeking most of the times are who to use as a model, where the setting should be, how to arrange the figures, the composition, and the direction and kind of lighting. For me, it feels as if I am simply a channel for inspiration, and after putting in my own sweat, I must wait for the rest (and possibly the best part) to be added to my own work.

Once I have a solid direction, my next step is to work out small compositions, around three to four inches square. With these I can play with figure composition, expression of the figures, background elements, lighting situations, etc. All this is done preparatory to taking photographic reference. A teacher once taught that I should be able to sketch out most every detail of the painting before taking photographs, so that when it comes down to taking the photographs I know exactly what I am looking for. Once a good composition and idea is resolved more completely, I turn to the task of finding models for the final painting.

I work from photographs, not only for financial reasons, but also for the model who usually is not a professional and is greatly appreciative of the shorter sitting time. The people that I like to use as my models are usually people that I know well-- friends and family, close associates, fellow students. I tend to shy away from asking complete strangers, and rely on using people I know. I try to find a person who I think would be a good character for the nature of the painting, much like choosing the right actor for a part in a movie or play. Where the photo shoot takes place depends on the lighting situation, the background, and the environment I desire, and I generally end up piecing together figures and backgrounds from various places. I don't do much by way of costuming

unless I am looking for something very specific, usually using contemporary clothing and making sure clothes don't blend in with background elements, and other figures.

From the photos taken, I am able to digitally compose the painting using Photoshop. This is especially useful in a multi-figure painting with complex and diverse background elements. I can move, cut and paste, scale, and rotate the photo reference to finalize a composition. This process takes time but in the long run cuts down on the mistakes that might be made without the use of the computer. In Photoshop I can determine the size of canvas, as well as set up a grid system to draw out the image on the canvas. Once the canvas is stretched and primed, I sketch in a drawing with vine charcoal. I usually paint directly from the computer monitor. I find that it's easier to adjust the image and zoom-in on a desired area at any given time, and there's no cost for printing.

After the drawing is done, I start the under-painting, trying to approximate values, color and color-temperature. My main goal at this point is to cover all the white of the canvas. Usually the under-painting dries before I paint over the top, but it can be painted into wet. I tend to paint in a more direct method, laying in every stroke as if it a finishing stroke. I want to simplify as much as possible and state the large shapes first. The paint is worked from thin to thick, and dark to light. I often let the paint dry in areas and return to it with dry-brushing, glazing, and scumbling paint over the surface. By placing cools and warms in juxtaposition the paint tends to vibrate. This vibration of color helps to enliven the painting, and makes it exciting for the eye to see. It's mostly a technical effect but can add to the drama and mystery of the narrative. When the painting is complete, and has had sufficient time to dry a layer of varnish is applied to deepen the darkest hues.

As for the framing of my work for *Passage*, simple square frames are made to complement the paintings, and to provide unity and cohesion to the body of work. I do the work myself because as I mentioned before, it gives me a different creative outlet. I feel that the frame can become a part of the overall artwork, and not just something that

complements the painting. The frames are black and simple, meant to showcase the paintings subtly.

Description of paintings



“End of the Road” (fig 9) was, as I previously mentioned, the turning point in my way of thinking about painting. The motivation behind the idea was partly from a memory and also from a scene I had observed at the time. I was at the park with my wife and young daughter, and there was a teenage boy and girl sitting on the playground equipment having what looked like a frank discussion. It appeared that they were both

Fig 9 “End of the Road”. Parker, Michael. 2008.

upset, not speaking to each other for a time and staring off in different directions. Eventually they left without much resolution, and I found myself thinking how interesting it was, being teenagers, that they would come to a playground to talk. I thought back to when I was a teen, and remembered that I would go to a playground with a girl either to pass the time or to simply talk. The playground seems to provide a place of refuge, and safety. The playground reminds me of the innocence of youth, free from the responsibilities of adulthood.

I took this idea of teens at the playground, and wanted to create an interesting narrative. I changed the composition many times and the result of that process was interesting. There is an up and down motion that moves in a circle through the painting, up the figures, down the slide, and back up the figures again. I used dramatic lighting, with the sun streaming from the side, casting light across the figures and the playground equipment onto the ground. I placed the figures so that they overlapped slightly, as though they were touching yet they are really several feet apart. The girl and boy that I used as models are students that posed for me. The challenge was to put the figures and background elements together convincingly since they were all photographed separately. The boy has his back turned to the viewer which makes him seem more vulnerable. Both the boy and girl look in opposite directions, but not at anything in particular. The girl fidgets with keys in her hands. I wanted to create this moment where they seem to have arrived at a decision or crossroads.



Fig 10 “Child”. Parker, Michael. 2007.

“Child” (fig 10) is an earlier painting as an exploration of myself and my relationship with my oldest daughter. At the time she was our only child, and almost three years old. This painting is in part about my relationship with my daughter. I feel like I am still young and not nearly old enough to have child to care for. Regardless though of how I feel, she is my daughter and knows that I am there to protect her, and despite my own reservations I have to oblige.

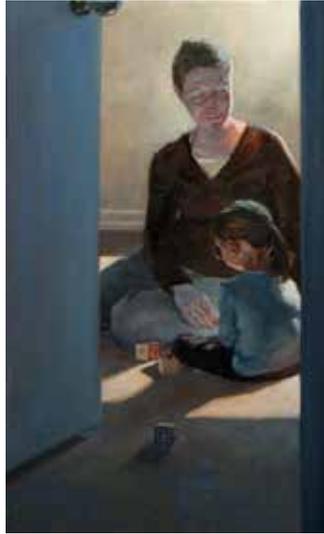


Fig 11 "Building Blocks". Parker, Michael. 2008.

My main purpose in painting "Building Blocks" (fig 11) is an homage to my wife, and all that she does for our children. My wife stays at home with our children, putting her art career on the side. I was studying Edward Hopper when I came up with the idea for this painting. What I really like about Hopper's paintings is the way that he sometimes frames the edges of the picture plane with a piece of a wall, a door frame, or a window sill.(fig 12) This gives the viewer a way to enter the painting, and yet it also separates them from what's going on inside. What is happening within the painting becomes a quiet and candid moment. I wanted to show a this kind of moment between my wife and daughter, like catching a glimpse as you pass a doorway. At the time, my daughter was playing a lot with her blocks, and learning the alphabet. She loved to sit with my wife and read the letters on the blocks and make the letter sounds. I wanted to capture this moment that I knew wouldn't last long.



I used the door and the door frame to enclose my wife sitting with my daughter on the floor. I incorporated the open door and a piece of the door knob. The inclusion of the door frame and door create a sense of looking in from the outside. I experimented with different lighting and chose to have the warm window light coming in from behind the figures, illuminating my wife's back and my daughters face. The light casting across the figures onto the floor creates a strong warm of the sunlight against the coolness of the interior.

Fig 12 "Hotel Lobby". Hopper, Edward. The Indianapolis Museum of Art, www.ima-art.org. (www.artstor.org), 1943.

For me this painting has personal meaning. However, I wanted to make it interesting for other people who have children, who want children, or who were children themselves at one time or another. This painting becomes a moment to which many can relate.

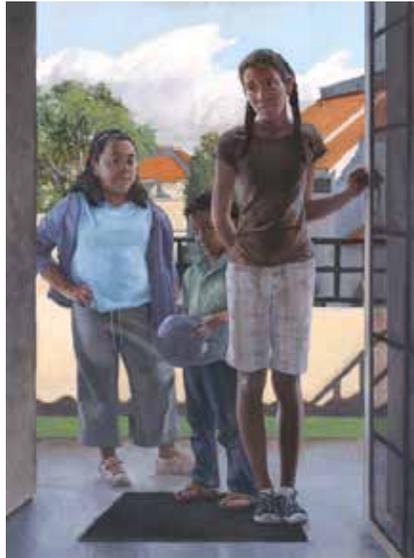


Fig 13 “The Solicitors”. Parker, Michael. 2008.

“The Solicitors” (fig 13) idea came from the neighborhood children where I live. My daughter is three years old and these three children, a sister, her younger brother, and another girl, would always come over to see if my daughter could come out and play. I thought this was an interesting arrangement, they being so much older than my daughter. It pleased me to see these children playing out-of-doors, instead of being inside watching television. They would play kick-ball, tag, and any other game they could think of. They would include my daughter and wife in their games. There was also an order to their little band of friends, with the older sister being the leader, the other girl being the caretaker, and the little brother being the troublemaker. I wanted to try and capture these children and chose the moment when they come knocking at our door. Much like “Building Blocks” I used the door-way of the front door to frame the children in, and tried to create a sense of being in the same space as the figures. It was difficult to get the kids to pose for me, since they had never done it before. They would fidget around, make funny faces, and giggle at each other. I decided to take their pictures individually, while the other children played on the porch. I then composited them together on the computer to get the desired effect of them standing together. I wanted to have the darker lighting of the door

way with the brilliant sunlight behind them. I focused on their individual personalities and to create a narrative through the small details of how they are standing, where they are looking, and the mood of the lighting.



Fig 14 "The Hidden Half". Parker, Michael. 2009.

"The Hidden Half" (fig 14) was an idea that came from my my wife's association with a young woman going through a divorce. This young woman had been married for about seven years, has a two-year-old daughter and the marriage was ending due to her husband's lack of fidelity. She and my wife are good friends and through that relationship I got to know this young woman and her daughter. I felt sorry for her, and more so for her daughter who didn't seem to understand what was happening to their family. When we went over to visit her one time, I found it intriguing how they were living. They have a small one bedroom apartment, and the mother sleeps on a day bed in the living room, while her daughter sleeps on a mat in the bedroom. All they have is a small TV, a couch, a computer, and a few bare essentials.



Fig 15 "Up in Flames" Browne, Margaret F. University of California, San Diego. www.artstor.org. 1884-1972.

I was interested in painting a narrative about her divorce and situation. As I pondered how to go about this painting, I came across a painting by a Margaret Browne "Up in Flames" (fig 15), which shows a woman from the waist up, with various household items cradled in a towel held in her arms. Behind her buildings are on fire. This painting intrigues me because it makes me think about what people find important in their lives. If our house caught on fire, what would we grab in our rush to get out? Then I thought of this young woman and how her marriage was falling apart. What would she try and salvage as her marriage falls apart and she is forced to move on? I thought it appropriate to have both the mother and the daughter in their living room, which becomes an interesting backdrop because of the room's relatively spartan space. The television provides a reflective surface, and being turned off gives another dimension to the space, though the reflection is darkly obscured. The mother and daughter both stare off in opposite directions, making us wonder what it is they see. The mother's pose is taken from the painting by Browne, and within her cradled sheet she has items that might be important and significant to her, and are symbolic of who she is as well as what she is experiencing at this moment.



Fig 16 “Quarter-Life Crisis”. Parker, Michael. 2009.

My idea for “Quarter-Life Crisis” (fig 16) came from many sources, and took some time to develop fully. This last summer I went to Wyoming for a painting contest. I had decided to attempt a painting of a cowboy. I took photos of a friend who is a cowboy, with a ranch, acres of land, and horses. He saddled up his horse, put on chaps, and rode his horse around while I took the photos. After taking pictures he graciously let me ride his horse around his ranch. That was the first time in my life I had ridden a horse without someone leading it around. It was exhilarating sitting on that enormous animal. After the painting competition was over and I came home, I kept thinking how great it must be to have the life of a cowboy. Growing up in Wyoming I was disinterested in anything country-western, and even cried when my mother made me wear cowboy boots to church. Now I can feel the romance of the Old West and wonder how it would feel to be out riding the range like Roy Rogers.

I think I was going through was a bit of artistic self-doubt. I had placed poorly in the painting competition in Wyoming and because of what I thought to be a poor performance, wanted to hang up the artist's smock for a life of cow herding and long nights on the trail. Instead of actually taking up the cowboy life, I channeled my

frustration into an idea for a painting. The term “quarter-life crisis” was used in a song by John Meyer, and is defined by Wikipedia as “ a term applied to the period of life immediately following the major changes of adolescence, usually ranging from the early twenties to the early thirties.” (Wikipedia 1) Being in my late twenties, I felt that I was going through a stage where I was doubting my own ability to be an artist and financially provide for my family. I wanted to escape and become a cowboy; a life that seems hard, and yet carefree at the same time. I eventually came to the realization that despite my shortcomings as an artist, it's who I am.

The composition of this painting came to me as I was sitting at my dining table staring into the kitchen. I had the idea of having myself look into the fridge with a cowboy hat, and holster and pistol at my side. I wanted to incorporate my wife and daughters, since they are what ground me to reality. I took pictures of my wife feeding our youngest daughter in her high chair. My oldest daughter came and kind of hid off to the side in an interesting way that shows her shyness. I also included a few of my oldest daughter's drawings on the table, as a comment on art-making and how it at times seems child-like and not much like the work a normal adult person would do. In essence it's a family portrait, but it's more than that too. I think that we all go through phases of life where we question the validity of what we are doing. At those times we indulge our fantasies, and imagine ourselves escaping. Reality brings us back, as it often does, to our responsibilities.



Fig 17 "Eight". Parker, Michael. 2009.

"Eight" (fig 17) is the only painting in this series with a single figure. It was Christmas last year and I was visiting my wife's family. There are many niece's and nephews who were there to celebrate the holidays. I love to observe people and especially children. Most of these children I had seen grow up over a few years and watched them change, both physically and with their personalities. One of my nieces stood out to me. She was eight years old at the time. I noticed how graceful and beautiful she was becoming. Girls at this age are starting to become young women and seem unaware of their developing gracefulness. They border on being awkward and beautifully graceful, much like a foal learning to walk. Yet at this age they are still very much children. It seems that they are constantly trying to catch up with their own maturing physique. I wanted to paint a simple portrait of my niece and try to capture this moment of transition. I put her in front of a window and the light bouncing off the snow outside illuminated her from behind. I played with warms and cools throughout her face and clothes. The painting become more iconic with the glow of the light illuminating her especially behind

her head. This painting was difficult for me, because I struggled to get the likeness, and didn't have the best photographs to work from. In the end though it was more about depicting her likeness than achieving the effect of light and the simplicity of the figure against a plain background.

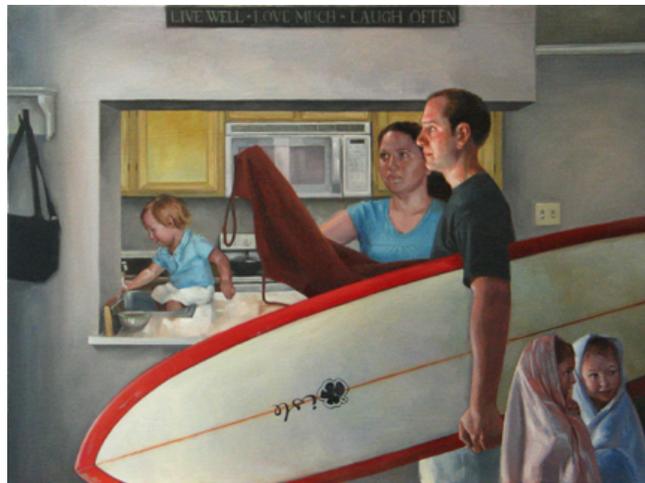


Fig 18 “Live, Love, Laugh”. Parker, Michael. 2009.

Sometimes a painting manifests itself more readily to my mind. “Live, Love, Laugh” (fig 18) came rather quickly to me and almost seemed to develop itself. I was sitting in church one Sunday and a family that I know well came in with their two young daughters. I'm not sure what it was but in that instant that I saw them, an idea for a painting materialized in my mind. I could see it almost as it's painted now. It was only a matter of resolving a few compositional issues before I was able to set up a time to take

their pictures. The two main figures of the husband and wife were inspired by a portrait by John Singer Sargent, “Mr. And Mrs. Isaac Newton Stokes”. (fig 19)



Fig 19 “Mr. And Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes” Jennings, Kate. John Singer Sargent, 1897.

In Sargent's painting, he puts a man and a woman next to each other with the woman in front. To make her the focus with the shallow space between the figures, Sargent puts her in light and the man in shadow. I also wanted to put the husband and wife overlapping each other, but separated by the counter in their kitchen. I was able to make the husband the focus by lighting him with a strong side light, and putting the wife in the dimly lit kitchen. The children are secondary to this main idea. With children I've found that I should have a rough idea of what I want them to be doing, and then allow them freedom to be themselves. My daughter was with me when I was taking pictures. I called her and

the daughter of the couple out so I could shoot their picture and they came out with their blankets over their heads. It's not what I expected and it turned out to be an interesting element in the narrative. The couple's youngest daughter was placed on the counter with her feet in the kitchen sink. She was fidgeting quite a bit so we turned the faucet on and she sat there playing in the water. It's nice to have that unexpected element in the development of an idea, relying almost solely on the model.

This painting is similar to “Quarter-Life Crisis”, as it deals with elements of parental responsibility. I enjoyed playing with the geometric forms of the interior space, juxtaposed with the organic shapes of the surfboard and the figures. It's becomes a scene of daily life, and yet there's more to be interpreted. “Live, Love, Laugh” is one of those paintings that seemed to paint itself. It's always nice to have ideas that flow from some source other than my own.

CONCLUSION

My experience with the MFA thesis project has given me the opportunity to develop my ideas about what my art can be. In retrospect my art and creative process have gone through many changes and I ended up creating work different than initially envisioned. Through the guidance of mentors and my own personal study I gained the tools necessary to develop myself artistically and allow my ideas to grow and change. With the knowledge I've acquired, I continue to paint using the narrative as a vehicle of expression. Along with a better understanding of how to develop my ideas, I have also learned the importance of being eager to learn new things and to consider ideas and concepts that are alien to me. Most importantly I have developed a way of working that keeps me motivated to paint and to create my work.

Working with practicing artists that share similar views about art and their experiences has been extremely beneficial. My mentors have guided me to the place I am at now, and have given me the direction I need to continue. They instilled within me the importance of associating with other artists with whom I can share ideas and challenges. However, the experience of studying under another artist is not over. It has always been my personal philosophy to continue learning even after my formal schooling is finished, and part of this learning will come from the guidance of others who have more skill, knowledge, and experience than I have. I plan to continue a relationship with my mentors, sharing ideas, successes, failures, and criticism. I will also search for other artists from whom I can draw inspiration and knowledge. In the distant future I hope one day to pass on what I've learned through my experience as a mentor to a young artist, but that day is far off.

At the beginning of this project my ideas were varied, and indefinite. At the start, I knew I was going to be doing work that involved the figure in some way. I considered painting figure arrangements in out-door landscape environments as a man-versus-nature commentary. My ideas evolved from that point to what they are now. Part of this journey of discovery was simply to take time, and only through time and pondering can ideas be realized. I realized that it was the element of time that was needed to figure out my direction. After a period of trial and error during which I tried different themes and ideas to see how they would work for paintings, and through the guidance of mentors and teachers, I came to understand that I should focus on painting narratives. It's interesting to look back and see that the narrative was the common thread through all of those ideas. This focus on implied narrative, has given birth to many possibilities for expressing different ideas and themes. For this reason I plan to continue using narrative. It allows me the opportunity to explore themes other than the family if I choose. For the time being, I haven't exhausted the possibilities that familial situations can provide, and I plan to explore this theme for as long as the ideas keep coming.

In addition to discovering my direction while exploring narrative painting, I learned more about how my creative processes work. Being an illustrator I've learned how to work quickly and with a deadline, which puts limits on what I can do with my work. With painting, the anxiety to produce is still there but not as imminent, and the limitations seem almost non-existent. Not feeling the weight of a deadline allows me more freedom in the development of my ideas. Of course the drive to paint comes from deeper within and ultimately is about who I am, whereas illustration in general, is more about creating an image for quick consumption. Both are satisfying to me, and both give me the opportunity to exercise my creativity in different ways. By exploring painting with this project I have allowed a different side of my creativity to emerge, which will affect how I go about any of my work, illustrative or otherwise. Learning how to let my ideas percolate in my mind, has taught me to manage my time better, and has instilled in me the importance of doing multiple projects at a given time so that I always have

something on which to work. It's my feeling that with time and practice I can hone this approach and understand even better how I develop my ideas. I've learned that it's okay to let the work evolve on its own. It's when I allow my ideas to evolve and open myself to discovery that true creativity happens.

I feel I have been fully and personally invested in this work. My work schedule revolves around being with and taking care of my own family. They drive everything I am about, and my painting allows me to explore this relationship. I have tried to maintain a high level of studio practice, and I hope to continue developing my sense of professionalism. Working on this project has opened my eyes to the need for balance in my life and has led me to reorder my priorities. I have had to let some things slide and alter my course to be able to fit in those things I find most important. At times it has felt that the day-to-day experience of having a family has been the fuel and the heart of this work. Through the exploration of this work I have discovered myself.

The creation of *Passage* has been a process of learning how to paint, and how to think about painting. I have developed my own personal style and voice and have found the direction I want to take my art. I have completed a series of paintings that works together as a body of work both thematically and stylistically. I have changed the way that I see paintings, and have changed the way that I approach the construction of my own ideas. I look forward to painting and long road of personal artistic discovery ahead of me.

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APPENDIX

List Of Plates

1. "End of the Road". Parker, Michael. 40" x 36", oil on canvas, 2008.
2. "Child". Parker, Michael. 20" x 48", oil on board, 2008.
3. "Building Blocks". Parker, Michael. 24" x 30", oil on board, 2008.
4. "The Solicitors". Parker, Michael. 30" x 40" oil on board, 2008.
5. "The Hidden Half". Parker, Michael. 36" x 30", oil on canvas, 2009.
6. "Quarter-Life Crisis". Parker, Michael. 30" x 24", oil on canvas, 2009.
7. "Eight". Parker, Michael. 12" x 24", oil on canvas, 2009.
8. "Live, Love, Laugh". Parker, Michael. 32" x 24", oil on canvas, 2009.

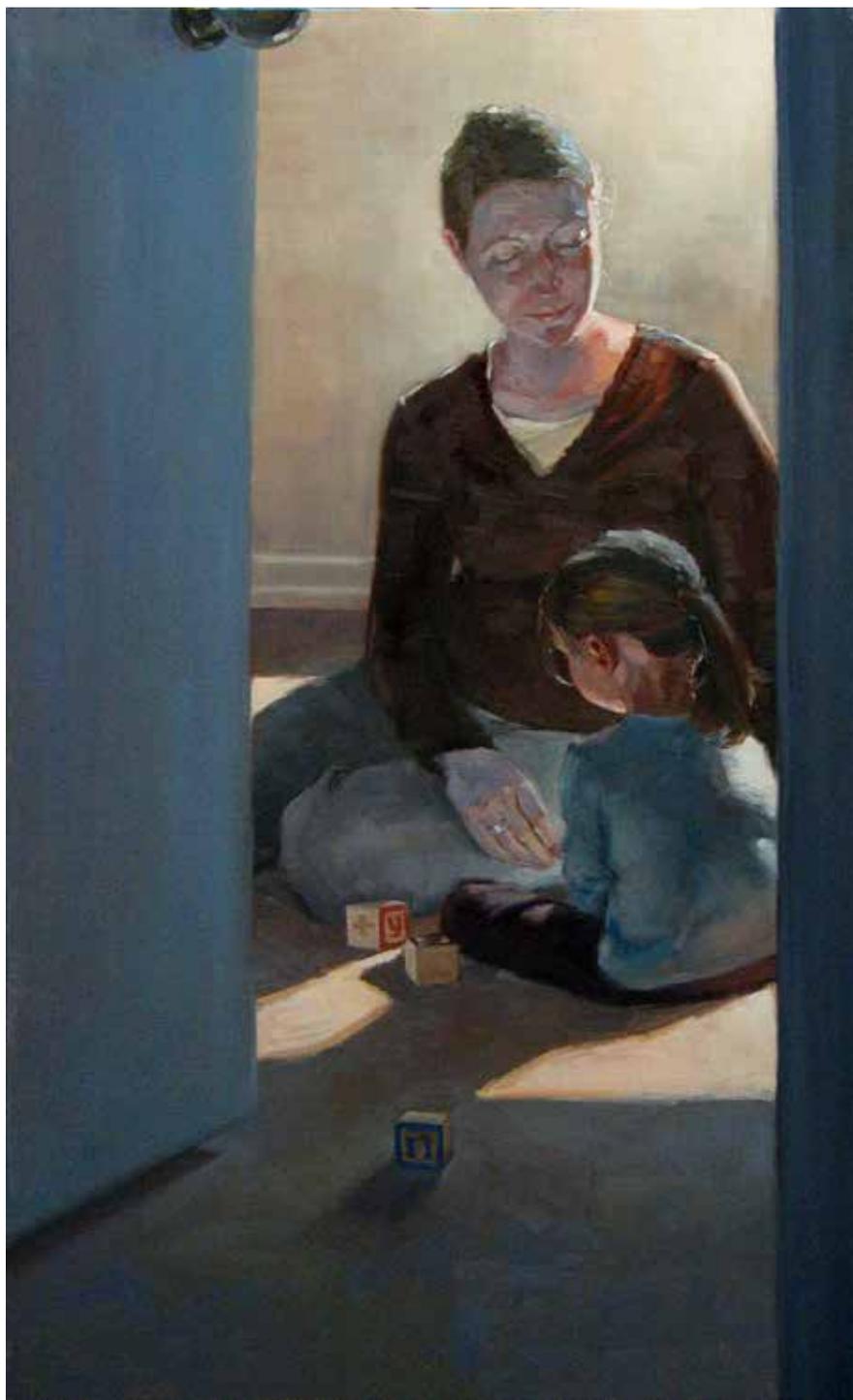
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