

HOPING FOR DOMESTIC SUCCESS

A Thesis

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by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis work examines themes of family and marriage. In particular it explores domesticity with its associated anxiety, and the attempt to escape from such. For me this anxiety stems from the uncertainty that originates with the possibility of failure. This uncertainty is depicted in a series of paintings featuring a variety of floating, flying, or unbalanced people. Some of the paintings are portraits of myself and my family, and some represent my family. The narrative is furthered by use of specific hand and body gestures that relate to the struggle of achieving domestic success. Portraiture is used frequently in the body of work, which includes large multi-figurative paintings, drawings, and small painted head portraits. The work strives to depict individuals with a tenuous relationship to gravity, as a metaphor for a larger struggle against the fear of disillusionment.

## DEDICATION

This body of MFA thesis artwork with its associated paper, are dedicated to my beautiful wife Allison and our two lovely daughters Jane and Elsie. The likenesses of all three appear regularly in the work, homage to the love, support, and inspiration they gave me throughout the process.

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## DESCRIPTION

The work in my show is about family, and the burdens and happiness of marriage and child raising. The work comprises portraits either of myself and family or of others. The others, are often proxies for me and my family. Because portraits are used to convey the primary themes of the show, portraiture itself is also a theme that is explored. These ideas are studied in single and multi-figurative narrative paintings, drawings, and a series of small portraits.

I believe that many of us find ways to be happy enough in the moment, either through relationships with others, routine, distraction, or career; I see reflections of these moments in my work. Perhaps the most common way to achieve this livable state of being, and the way that is depicted in my art, is through my relationship with my family. This is why I use my family and the experience of domesticity as subject matter. As the people in my work represent my family, animals appear frequently representing the responsibilities that come with raising a child, or any kind of burden born through life.

The figures in the larger works are found in varying compliance with the laws of gravity. These paintings and drawings describe a moment in which the responsibilities associated with life, particularly the burdens of childcare and domesticity, lead to both joy and anxiety. This is why the floating or unbalanced people in my work, while insecure physically, often have quite calm expressions and have found a peaceful state. For me this suggests hope. These people hope not to fall, much like all people hope not to suffer failure or unhappiness.

The figures in the large paintings are positioned with particular hand and body gestures. These specific hand positions and gestures relate to the larger narrative of the paintings. They reference the struggle of finding success in domesticity.

Included in the thesis work is a series of small painted portraits and mid sized portrait drawings. The small portraits, as a group, speak to themes of individuality in a crowd or in society. This group of people is not literally a family but perhaps a metaphor for one. The

drawings explore similar themes but through the lens of marriage.

There is, however, some breaking of the formula as described above. For example some of the figures are subject to gravity and not everyone wears a calm expression. Also, some of the larger narrative paintings have a less decipherable narrative and develop in a subconscious way as I make changes during the process. While they maintain the same themes as the other works, they take on additional mysterious elements that interest me, but I find myself able to only partially explain.

### *Family and domesticity*

The larger narrative paintings all center around the main theme of family and domesticity, and all refer to the associated struggles. This is most evident in *Family Portrait with a Car* (figure 1). This painting, while a depiction of a specific moment in time (me and my family in graduate school), it is not meant to be a recognizable scene from life. The painting attempts to depict a feeling or show visually the intangible relationship from husband to wife to daughters. The large blue sky, the bright red dresses, the upward lifting of the girls all speak to hope. This hope is tempered by the reality of the gulls populating the ground, and the old car behind us. My wife and I, on opposite sides of the painting, are off balance in a way to suggest we either will fall to the ground or continue to float in a way that defies gravity. Our feet are intertwined, suggesting marriage, while between our bodies we both use one hand to support our two weightless daughters.

The upper panel of the *Stolen Lunch Triptych* (figure 2), called *Attempt to Leave Orbit* (figure 2), is both the top third of the larger scene and a self-contained family portrait. This painting can be read as a continuation of *Family Portrait with a Car*, done the previous year. Like *Family Portrait with a Car*, it is an example of the way the thesis work has acted as a subconscious mirror for me and my family. While only about six months separate the two paintings, the differences and similarities are evidence of a rapidly changing time for us. Where previously only the girls were in the sky, now the entire family is floating. In the earlier painting there are birds, a car, and other elements; in the later work only the sky exists



behind us. While there is less stuff behind and around us, the way our clothes hair and other elements dissolve to combine with the clouds and sky and the narrow color palette place us deeper into the space. The girls are supported differently in the later work, clutched tightly to their parent's chests instead of floating weightlessly. In this painting they bear burdens of their own. Jane holds only her stuffed owl and Elsie has her pink bear. The depiction of the girls carrying their little animals asserts that even at their young age, they have worries and concerns, and tells of a future full of uncertainties.

The changes in the work track the level of stress I was feeling at a given point in the MFA process. A fair amount of anxiety occupied my mind the summer of 2010, when I painted *Family Portrait with a Car*. The two off balance figures and the 1984 Volvo, that I was then driving and wishing that it would last the duration of school, are evidence of this. Despite this, I perceive this painting as betraying a hopeful moment in my mind. The hopeful state of the girls, as described above, depicts this. Similarly, the optimistic marital sentiment demonstrated by the intertwining of Allison's and my legs, speaks to a hopeful time. The painting depicts a time, when I was still able to suppress the anxiety associated with leaving graduate school with an uncertain financial future; this reality was still a year away. At the moment I painted *Attempt to Leave Orbit*, I was in my final semester and the panic of potential financial doom was looming. While I plainly see that most viewers of this painting will read it as a serene escape from the troubles below, I created it in tandem with the rest of the triptych, and for me it embodies much of the same anxiety. Allison holds Elsie, and they both gaze at the ground and the scene below with solemn expressions. I hold Jane, whose panicked flailing is juxtaposed with my fearful gaze into space. The people in the two lower panels, who are all stand-ins for my wife and myself, depict a struggle that I felt and still feel very much a part of. This struggle flows through the entire triptych, including the top panel where we are at best "attempting" to leave orbit.

*In the Trees with a Cat* (figure 3) differs from *Family Portrait with a Car* and *Attempt to Leave Orbit*, in that it is a painting of only my wife, Allison. While it embodies many of

the same themes as the previously discussed pieces, it was likely an attempt to pay homage to my wife, and her particular struggles. While we share in the anxieties associated with navigating graduate school, poverty, child-raising, and the added burden of uncertainty about our future, I alone enjoyed regular escape. This escape came while alone, in my studio, painting. In painting *In the Trees with a Cat*, I believe I was subconsciously attempting to sympathize with my wife's plight, and depict her in a wishful escape. Allison either runs or floats with a cat in hand through some trees while she looks over her shoulder in the opposite direction. While she seems to be fleeing, she brings with her a cat that is a representation of the burdens of motherhood. The cat is a weight that must be born unfailingly as it needs to be cared for and remains an ever-present companion even in the hour of flight. Allison's calm expression, the perfect order of the leaves, and the peaceful although strange passage of a propeller plane, all speak to hope of at least a temporary reprieve.

As a counterpoint to the large paintings, I have also done some medium size drawings. I drew them with a combination of charcoal and graphite on Duralar. The drawings each depict a single figure without any specific background or context. One of the drawings is of myself and the other is of my wife. The drawings *Drawing of Allison* (figure 6) and *Self Portrait Drawing* (figure 5) again return to the theme of relationships and families, or at least are a direct reference to marriage, when shown side by side. Shown thusly, the impulse is to scrutinize differences and similarities, looking for compatibility or the lack thereof. In the drawings we both stand firmly on the ground, subject to gravity as normal. Our straight-faced expressions engage the viewers with a confidence that we are on a sure footing and we enjoy a security that frees us from anxiety. The figures in the drawings are rendered representationally, as are the ungrounded figures in the family portrait paintings, but they lack both color and an environment, thus putting them in an empty space. This nothing-filled space is an aspiration, a place where a calm assurance of a secure world, or perhaps the absence of the world, is hopefully achieved. The drawings still show elements of stress and worry; the figures are weighty and the faces, while calm, aren't necessarily serene. The

aspiration of a calm, grounded state, which for me is embodied by these drawings, is more evident when compared to the narrative paintings with the floating figures. Even if the drawings show stress and weight, at least the footing is certain and maybe the future is too.

### *Gravity defying figures*

The many ungrounded or floating figures in the work can be grouped into two opposing states. The first I imagine as a state of grace or apotheosis. The second is a state of anxiety. While some of the gravity-defying figures are clearly in one state or the other, there are also examples within the thesis body of work that demonstrate elements of both states. Both the idea of a state of grace and apotheosis are borrowed from old master works, and thus bear implicit spiritual undertones. I first became aware of the idea of apotheosis when the department head in the program, Perin Mahler, directed me to Peter Paul Ruben's *Apotheosis of Henry IV* (figure 13). States of grace and apotheosis in the thesis work are seen in the floating figures who have risen above, and somehow physically and spiritually separated themselves from worldly stresses. Anxiety is the reality that binds the off-balanced figures to the ground and a possible fall.

Examples of both states are found in the large narrative paintings. *In the Trees with a Cat*, already discussed at length above, offers the clearest example of a state of grace, while *Family Portrait with a Car*, *The Stolen Lunch Triptych*, and *Three People and a Dog* (figure 4), all demonstrate elements of both.

The state of apotheosis in the work is clearly seen within *Family Portrait with a Car*, as represented by my two daughters. In the same painting, however, my wife and I, while not floating off the ground are quite off balance, betraying our feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. *The Stolen Lunch Triptych* also embraces both states: calm and anxious. Those in the bottom panel, *Line Dancing with the Salesman* (figure 3), assume a precarious pose, referencing again anxiety, in an effort to keep in step. The middle panel people seem to be grounded normally. However, in the previously discussed *Attempt to Leave Orbit* (the top panel) my family's effort to fly above the difficulties depicted below may or may not be

doomed to disaster. The ambiguous trajectory leaves the viewer uncertain if the family is on a constant ascent that will take the family up and away or if they are at the peak of an arc that while not high enough off the ground to kill people, will end with a painful landing. This shows examples of both states in one; we are separated from the difficulties below and seem to be doing okay, at least for the moment.

### *Hand and body gestures*

The hand gestures and poses, that appear in the work describe the struggles that the characters are engaged in, which are mostly the struggle of supporting a family, chasing a middle class life, or achieving some kind of success. Sometimes the very posed hand gestures describe specific actions that tell the story of the characters in the paintings. Other times the gestures and poses are nonspecific and can be read as flailing, or just a general struggle.

In *Family Portrait with a Car*, our free hands (the ones not supporting a daughter) are gesturing to a life or world outside the confines of domesticity. For my wife, a cupping motion above her head speaks to a desire for something else, maybe social or intellectual stimulation. My hand reaches backwards perhaps to a time gone, but more likely to a future with less anxiety. Our daughters assume a pose with their entire bodies that describes upward, weightless ascendance. This example is clearly one of hopefulness, a hope held by parents for the futures of their children.

The middle panel in the triptych, *Recovering Lunch with Magic* (figure 3), shows a couple who has lost their lunch to a coyote and are casting magic spells in an attempt to recover their stolen lunch. This is an example of hand and body gesture, which is specific to the narrative of the painting. The food the couple so desperately wants is a metaphor for a middle class life, the good job, the bills paid, the American dream. The focus and determination on their faces betrays only sincerity in an effort that seems obviously doomed. The spells they are casting represent the common experience many people face in an attempt to achieve traditional success, probably meaning, for most, a “good job.” Where in the past or in other cultures people could consult a shaman or perform a rain dance to ensure their

future, we seek job search advice that is filled with suggestions on how to navigate the alchemy of modern norms.

The bottom panel in the triptych, *Line Dancing with the Salesman*, contains a scene with a salesman who is leading other individuals in a line dance. The intensely focused salesman knows and confidently moves through the steps. The woman to his right has to peer to her left, in an attempt to keep up. Her face betrays a hint of skepticism. The line of dancers continue off both sides of the panel, with a man to the right also watching the salesman and someone's feet in the left corner. The number of people trying to replicate the steps, as prescribed by the salesman, is indefinite. Like the spell-casting couple directly above them, these individuals have assumed specific body and hand poses. The difference is that this time, rather than to produce an incantation, their goal is to merely not deviate from the prescribed steps. The hope is the same for both line-dancers and spell-casters: to obtain success by means that seem arbitrary and maybe pointless. *Line Dancing with the Salesman* implies that regardless of what craft or skill a person learns, equally important is that individual's salesmanship.

### *Portraiture*

Because portraiture is a repeated vehicle for communication in the thesis work it became apparent that portraiture is itself a theme. The notion of family and relationship, is explored throughout the work, and is present even in the pieces that don't explicitly portray families, like the individual head paintings (figure 7).

Isolated from the rest of the small paintings, an individual painting speaks to the specifics of the features, mood, or any other idiosyncrasies of the individual. In a group, the paintings, while retaining these qualities, become a direct metaphor for society. We compare one to the other, noting differences and similarities. We also assess cosmetic elements, like visual esthetics, of the individual who's likeness has been painted and the physical marks of the paint application, as well as deeper things like the emotions they convey, again as individuals and as a whole.

### *Evolution and uncertainty in the process*

In the process of painting some of the larger paintings, at times the ideas and content of the paintings would change. This was sometimes problematic. The best example of this is *Three People and a Dog*, which began as a companion piece to *In the Trees with a Cat*. This painting approaches the same ideas, but lacks the serene state achieved in *In the Trees with a Cat*. In this confusing painting the two main figures (that probably represent myself and my wife) perch on fragile branches. The man, who wants to help, has only a large dog, an offering that can't benefit the situation. I imagine this as a subconscious metaphor for my own efforts to help my wife to achieve happiness and satisfaction through my efforts in graduate school. The fact that the dog was a late addition, as was the third sideways figure, complicates many of the interpretations of this piece. Also, the fact that I lost control of the narrative in the process of making this piece is likely a metaphor for my fears of losing control of my financial future. The trees are twisted and the palette grew murkier as it progressed, until that trend reversed, and I painted the dress on the main female figure a bright green. It is perhaps significant that the bright green was introduced after my financial future had been made somewhat more certain, with a job offer to teach for a year in Wisconsin. The mysterious figure in the background, who floats sideways and seems to have an unexplainable relationship with the wife figure, perhaps came in late to offer solace to the anxious-faced main figure. The two front people have worried expressions, in contrast to most of the figures in the thesis work. The strange floating girl behind them, despite her sideways awkwardness, wears the only calm expression in the piece. She has found the only state of grace in the picture by letting go completely and seeing the world upside down. I don't know what that means.

### **RESEARCH**

The research I did and the variety of influences I was exposed to in the course of completing my thesis work, fall into the categories of paintings, books, and people. While

this may be a slight oversimplification, I find that any small exceptions can be fit well enough into one of these.

### *Paintings*

It seems obvious that anyone born in last several generations has been exposed, by the normal course of life, to a nearly infinite number of images. I'm no exception, having seen a multiplicity of photos, books, television programs, videogames, websites, animations, paintings, etc., It is impossible, and useless to try, to credit every imaginable visual influence. That said, here is my attempt to cite a few examples that are at least consciously my most prominent visual influences. I, like many painters, look primarily to other paintings for inspiration, drawing on a mix of paintings ranging from old masters, modern and contemporary painters, and illustrators.

### **Old Masters**

Since entering the MFA program, I have been drawn more than ever before to older art historical works; thus a variety of old masters paintings have been the principal influence on my own body of thesis work. While no single artist, period, trend, or style describe the work that I drew from, I imagine these paintings as having some binding similarity. Perhaps this is only so in my imagination, and the similarity is that elements of them can be found in my work. Foremost among the list is the work of Jan Van Eyck, in particular the *Arnolfini Portrait* (figure 8). While painting *Family Portrait with a Car* I looked to this piece for its portrait of a married couple. Though my own portrait differs in significant ways, I tried to convey similar positive emotional qualities like hope, love, and fidelity, which I find prevalent in the *Arnolfini Portrait*.

In a related time and region I looked not only to the Van Eyck brothers, but also to Robert Campin (figure 9), Rogier van der Weyden (figure 10), Hugo van der Goes (figure 11), and Hans Memling (figure 12). I looked at many reproductions of these works in books with the intention of copying how they paint skies, gradating from a pale yellow at the horizon to an intense blue-green at the top of the sky. The result was the absorption of many

other aspects of these paintings aside from their handling of the sky. An example of this is van der Wyden's *The Annunciation* (central panel of a triptych) (figure 10). While this image contains only a tiny window of sky, which is treated in the exact fashion I was trying to imitate, I was much more influenced by the serene expressions on both Mary and the angel's faces. The specific and seemingly meaningful hand gestures, the use of intense red in areas, and patterned gold elements, are aspects which all found their way into my paintings.

Paintings by Peter Paul Rubens were also present in my mind through much of the thesis work. Again the best example of this is in *Family Portrait with a Car*; the girls angelic floating and bright red color palate were influenced not only by the work of van Eyck and van der Wyden, but by Rubens's entire *Marie de Medici Cycle*, specifically as stated above in *Apotheosis of Henry the IV* (figure 13). These paintings contain not only important figures clothed in intense red, but also commonly depict floating or flying figures.

Other old master paintings also influenced heavily the floating and flying imagery present in my paintings. In western art history it isn't uncommon to find figures floating or flying or in some way defying gravity. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Giotto's *The Lamentation* (figure 14) featured angels depicted as babies flying above the scene of mourning below. A similar flying baby is seen at the top of Botticelli's *Primavera* (figure 15), this time as Cupid rather than an angel. Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (figure 16) depicts figures both to the left and right of Venus floating off the ground. The Italian Mannerists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century played with the way figures were weighted on the ground. An example of this is Pontormo's *The Entombment* (figure 17); the figures in the foreground, while bearing the weight of Christ's body as well as their own, almost float with just their toes connecting them to the ground. Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, particularly *The Last Judgment* (figure 18), are depicted entirely in the sky. Clouds support some of the figures but most of the others are floating in the sky.

### **Modern and contemporary**

Artists from recent centuries have also influenced my work. Like Gustave Klimt, and



Egon Schiele. In 1918 Schiele painted *The Family* (figure 19), a portrait of a squatting couple with a baby. Like the *Arnolfini Portrait* by van Eyck, I tried to take some of the emotional qualities from Schiele's family portrait. The expressions on the couple's faces in this painting, combined with the beleaguered quality of the bodily gestures and the dirty nature of the paint application speak of a family in distress. While Schiele's approach in depicting sadness for this family is far more heavy-handed than my own, it is again the quality of the scene not being that of every day life, but more of a metaphor for the emotional state of the family, that I tried to borrow.

With few exceptions, the contemporary painters I drew most heavily from while in the program were L.A. and Southern-California-based painters many of whom are affiliated with the school (Laguna College of Art and Design), and consequently available for personal interaction. The list includes: Peter Zokosky, John Swihart, Wes Christensen, Perin Mahler, Kent Williams, and Joseph Todorovitch. The specific influence of some of these artists will be further explained below, under the heading "people."

### **Illustration**

Having completed my undergraduate work mostly as an illustration major, I continue to have a lot of influence from illustration. "Golden Age" American illustration such as, Maxfield Parrish, J.C. Leyendecker, N.C. Wyeth, and others influenced the way I learned to draw and paint. I also looked to contemporary illustrators like Brad Holland and Greg Manchess at the same time, and much of their process and mark-making is still evident in my work.

### *Books*

The books that probably most influenced my work during the development of the thesis show are literary fiction works, mostly from authors of the past. The stories related in the classic works of fiction are about people. Typically they employ intimate portraits of individuals, or groups of individuals, in the pursuit of a larger truth. This is something I hope to emulate. I paint people, and portraits of individuals, but with the hope of conveying

something beyond just the likeness of a particular person. The impact of these novels, on my paintings, I believe has been more tonal than literal.

By chance I read, while in the process of creating the thesis work, *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy. While this was an unplanned reading, I believe this book became the major literary influence on my paintings. While this manifested itself mostly in tone, it also influenced the content of the work, particularly in its familial themes. There is a part in the book where Vronsky, Anna's extramarital love interest, rides his prize mare to what would be a victory, only to misgauge the final jump, fall, and kill the mare. This section of the book is a metaphor for the larger narrative involving the lives of Anna and Vronsky, the mare of course representing Anna. An example of how I borrowed, intentionally or unintentionally, from the quality described above, is in *Recovering Lunch with Magic*. The scene depicts literally what the title describes, a couple casting spells in hope to recover their lunch from a thieving coyote. It however refers to a more common life struggle of people trying to achieve success.

Another example of the tonal influence of literary fiction is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The author is able to blend reality with fantastical elements in the novel. At one point the characters are described as riding a flying carpet, but soon after the carpet seems forgotten and their struggle is a quite realistic scene of war. This pairing of both the realistic, in the naturalistic handling of the figures and general use of representation, and the unrealistic, in the impossible floating, bending of space, and subtle abstracting of elements within a scene, elements in a single work is something I've attempted to emulate in my thesis work. The story follows the lives of many individuals, some playing more important roles than others, in what becomes a multi-generational narrative, both about a single family but also about society and culture. This way of telling a grand story through individuals is something I'm attempting, both in my larger narrative pieces, and in the collection of many small portraits.

Besides literary fiction, the sources I have drawn from most are art history and theory texts that I have read for classes I have taken during my Master's studies, *Realism* by Linda Nochlin and *Realism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Painting* by Brendan Prendeville are two examples.

### *People*

People who have most influence my progress in the two years of MFA are those I have worked with directly. The MFA mentor program offered opportunities to work with several working artists. The various teachers, faculty, visiting artists and many working artists in the area were all helpful and influential.

Jon Swihart was the first of these. Exposure to John's art, studio, and working methods, combined with the opportunity to get the response from an artist that I admire helped me with my technique and content. It also provided me with much-needed affirmation early in the program.

I worked with Peter Zokosky the following semester. The work I did in that time marked the beginning of a transitional phase. Under his direction I began to discover and explore the theme of family that ultimately shaped the entire body of work. These conceptual advices came as I broadened my technical approach to include a wider variety of paint application methods. Peter also has a series of portraits of primates (figure 20) that I respond to, and that influenced my own series of portraits.

Kent Williams was challenging to work with, both logistically, and intellectually. However, his critiques were very beneficial as they clarified for me many of my strengths and weaknesses. He also offered more technical advise than any of the other mentors I worked with. Evidence of how this affected my own process is the increased use of glazing techniques, something he demonstrated for me.

Wes Christensen is the final mentor with whom I worked. Many of the benefits of working with Wes came in the form of fortuitous coincidences. An example of this came while taking his class, when it was discovered that we had both simultaneously read *Anna Karenina*. This book ultimately influenced my thesis work as I described under the

subheading “books”, an influence that was augmented by the conversations with Wes about the book. Another example of this is when he emailed me an image of a painting by James Tissot, imagining that it had relevance to my work. Only a few days prior I had attended a show featuring the work of Tissot. The piece in the show that most held my attention was the same that Wes had emailed me.

Wes also helped greatly in my exploration of gesture in art generally, as well as my own work. This was studied during the course of his seminar he introduced the class to the “Attitudes” of Lady Hamilton. The series of poses and gestures, which Wes had recreated by a model for our class, I found very relevant to my own interest in the topic. To expound further on the topic of gesture, Wes used the Russian ballet dancer Nijinsky to illustrate how a history of poses are held in our “collective unconscious”. Over the course of my final semester Wes maintained a practice of authoring exhaustive and informative emails on a variety of topics related to art and my thesis work specifically. It was in one of these emails that he commented on my use of the a coyote in *Recovering Lunch with Magic*:

[H]e is a concrete, poetic metaphor -- not a real animal. He is a device you're using to suggest something else -- the joker or trickster that is so important in art all over the world. He is called many names and we see him working when things go from easy to tough all the time. . . It is a funny and profound pictorial device that combines the ideas of chance and of nature, making a concrete visual metaphor that runs off with ou[r] best laid plans -- causing us to frantically use every prayer and/or magic spell we can think of to get those plans back again. (Chistensen)

Perin Mahler, the department head, was influential for many conversations and critiques I've had with him. I owe much to the influence Perin had on my work during a transitional time in the summer of 2010, when I was painting *Family Portrait with a Car*. It was Perin at this time that introduced me to the idea of apotheosis. He also then loaned me

the books *Paintings in the Louvre*, and *Painting in the Hermitage*. From these I spent time studying images that influenced my thesis work.

## **METHODOLOGY**

My ideas usually come visually. Sometimes an idea comes as an image of an animal or object or even a whole scene. Usually however the visual comes in the form of a pose, generally a static pose, reminiscent of early Christian art or Indian art where the hands and the head are being held a bit unnaturally. Commonly, the figure striking the pose is also either floating or unbalanced in some sense. It is often the case that when such a pose is captured, in one of these previously mentioned art genres or elsewhere, it carries a very specific meaning. I think the poses hold meaning for my own art as well. There is an intentionality to the poses and the specificity of the positioning of the hands and head. There's a staged quality that I believe isn't representative of a moment from everyday life. I think these figures for me are actors that are used to enact the conscious or subconscious ideas that make up my art. Most of the time my visual ideas won't come to me unless I have been actively trying to produce an idea or a starting point for a painting. My best ideas seem to come on their own, but only after some effort that usually includes looking at a lot of work and doing some sketching. When they do come on their own, it is not while I'm in the process of trying to produce ideas, whether through sketching or drawing. Often the ideas I feel ultimately work the best come in a daydream, or while driving, but most commonly on a sleepless night.

There are easier ways for me to produce ideas; however, the ideas that seem worthy of the time needed to make a painting come through the longer process I described above. I make small drawings from my head to try to capture the poses. I will sometimes draw two or three figures interacting. More commonly I draw just a single figure usually in a pose like the ones mentioned. Sometimes there are slight variations depending on how well I can draw a particular pose or whether I feel it works better if I change it a bit. I keep these drawings;

most of them exist on a pile of loose papers. I've used them to help with ideas or just to set up poses for larger paintings.

When a drawing or other idea in my head needs to become a painting, it happens in a few ways. One approach I use is to draw the idea on large paper or newsprint so that it is the same size as the painting it will become. From there I have done a few different things. I have transferred the drawing onto the painting surface and then painted it. I have used the large drawing as a reference as I redrew it in paint on the board. More common than these two methods is for me to lay in a few structural elements with graphite or charcoal, and then go directly into the figures with paint.

To paint the figures, I work from reference that I shoot with a camera. I am particular about the lighting and I am insistent on getting it how I want it. I prefer diffused light to a dramatic light in almost all cases. Sometimes I will use the internet or other sources for images. Some of the stuff in the paintings I just make up. The majority of my thesis work is oil paint. I generally paint on Gessoed panels that I cradle myself. There are a few exceptions. I have painted with oils on canvas and Mylar. My thesis show also contains drawings that are done with a combination of charcoal and graphite on Mylar.

My work prior to the MFA program was drawing-based with the application of thin layers of paint to create flat shapes interspersed with volumetric areas generally in the face and other points of interest, like hands. The process for making these early paintings was meticulously accurate in the initial drawing and employed very little looseness at any point in the development. The evolution to the more recent work began with a painting that was done over a drawing, but more opaquely and directly. While this first piece broke from the initial working method, it was still painted using a transferred drawing. In the piece that followed, the figures were painted directly and with no initial drawing. This marked a shift in the way I approach the work. The next painting was done with minimal drawing initially and only in the background. The figures were painted and the drawing was established as the painting developed. This allowed for more flexibility in the process and changes were made along the

way. The paintings done from that point until now have followed a similar methodology, have become more painterly, and are more workable than the early pieces. Recently, I have returned to drawing. Some of the drawings have been combined with paint while others are just drawings.

## **CONCLUSION**

The ideas described in this thesis paper were all first explored in the paintings and drawings. The writing followed the art. The images and working process evolved and the ideas followed that evolution. The writing came last in an attempt to document the ideas. From the beginning to the end of the process my family has been at the center of my art. The manifestation of this has, however, changed. Initially, as I begin to discover my family's presence in my work it was only depicted symbolically and portrayed only the burdens and responsibilities of domesticity. The next stage showed my whole family in the struggle together, or at least my wife and I shepherding our daughters through. Finally the work evolved to show more characters and struggles of life generally. My family appeared in this later work both as part of the struggle and attempting to escape. In future work I imagine my family will continue to be prevalent.

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## APPENDIX A



Figure 1. Nathan Wilson. *Family Portrait with a Car*. 2010. 48" x 48". Oil on Panel



Figure 2. Nathan Wilson. *The Stolen Lunch Triptych*. 2011. 49" x 72". Oil on Panel



Figure 3. Nathan Wilson. *In the Trees with a Cat*. 2010. 31" x 48". Oil on Panel



Figure 4. Nathan Wilson. *Three People with a Dog*. 2011. 31" x 48". Oil on Panel



Figure 5. Nathan Wilson. *Self Portrait Drawing*. 2010. 18" x 36". Charcoal and Graphite on Duralar.



Figure 6. Nathan Wilson. *Drawing of Allison*. 2010. 18" x 36". Charcoal and Graphite on Duralar.

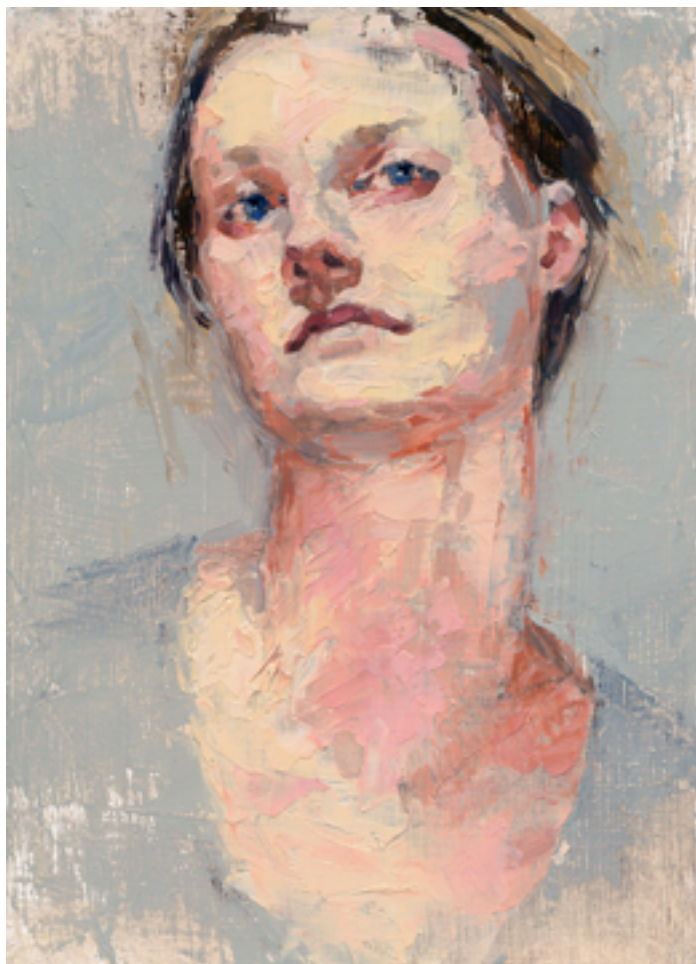


Figure 7. Nathan Wilson. *Portrait of Allison* 4.5" x 7". 2010. Oil on Panel.

## APPENDIX B



Figure 8. Jan van Eyck. *The Arnolfini Portrait*. 1434. Oil on panel 33 x 22½". The National Gallery, London.



Figure 9. Robert Campin. *Merode triptych*. ca. 1425-1430. Oil on panel. Center 25 3/16" x 24 7/8" each wing approx. 25 3/8 x 10 7/8". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1956.





Figure 10. Rogier van der Weyden. *The Annunciation*. (Central panel of a triptych). Wood, 34 x 36½" Formerly in the Royal Gallery of Turin; entered the Louvre in 1799.



Figure 11. Hugo van der Goes. *The Portinari Altarpiece*. (open). ca. 1474-1476. Tempera and oil on panel, center 8'3½" x 10', wings each 8'3½" x 4'7½". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 12. Hans Memling. *The Resurrection with the Martyrdom of St. Sebastian and the Ascension*. Wood, central panel 24½" x 17½"; wings 24½" x 7½". Louvre. Acquired in 1860.



Figure 13. Rubens, *Apotheosis of Henry IV*. Canvas, 155 x 286¼" Louvre.



Figure 14. Giotto. *The Lamentation*. 1305-1306. Fresco. Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel. Padua, Italy.



Figure 15. Sandro Botticelli. *Primavera*. ca. 1482. Tempera on panel. 6'8" x 10'4". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 16. Sandro Botticelli. *Birth of Venus*. ca. 1485. Tempera on panel. 5'8 7/8" x 9'1 7/8". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy.



Figure 17. Jocopo da Pontormo. *The Entombment*. ca. 1526-1528. Oil on panel, 10'3" x 6'4". Santa Felicita, Florence, Italy.



Figure 18. Michelangelo Buonarroti. *The Last Judgment*. 1534-1541. Fresco. Sistine Chapel



Figure 19. Egon Schiele. *The Family*. 1918. Vienna, Austria.



Figure 20. Peter Zokosky. *Frans*. 2004. 12" x 18". Oil on panel.