

## HOLDING STILL AND LETTING GO



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HOLDING STILL AND LETTING GO

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## ABSTRACT

*Holding Still and Letting Go* captures powerful personal emotions and intimate experiences and transforms them symbolically as universal expressions for the human condition. The themes in this collection are based on two profound periods—during early childhood and later in midlife—where I experienced a deep sense of separation and loss in its many forms; physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. My work may take cues from actual life, but it is my imagination that creates my own unique perspective of reality. The paintings are visual equivalents of combined stories based on my memories, thoughts, and musings. They reveal themes of loss, isolation, perseverance, and self-discovery, and are all told through the use of toys and miniature-scale objects. Any story that can be pried from them must be deduced from subtle clues that I provide. Like with an unsolved mystery, withholding details leaves more room for the viewer’s imagination to run wild. Influenced by my childhood toys, I reclaim my inner-child as I play with reality and paint symbolic representations of miniaturized worlds. I am able to subvert the playfulness of these toys as a tool to explore through which I explore deeply emotional material. By painting these adult themes in a playful manner, I am able to contort the sometimes harsh realities of our daily existence into something whimsical and more meaningful. My paintings have helped me unravel the mystery of what lies in the depths of my mind, heart, and spirit. They have become the keys to a better understanding of who I am as a human being (and as an artist) and where my place is in this world.

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## DEDICATION

*To my husband, Reese.*

Just as you say that my paintings are too big for words, I can't possibly express how deep my appreciation and love is for you with words alone. I will forever be grateful for this journey we have gone on together. Thank you for holding the light for me every step of the way.

## EPIGRAPH

*It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.*

*~ D. W. Winnicott*

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## DESCRIPTION

My thesis, *Holding Still and Letting Go*, develops the themes of loss, isolation, and subsequent self-discovery as told through toys and miniatures. I express however these deeply meaningful and mature themes through the use of small-scale models and children's playthings. There are two primary periods in my life that are inextricably intertwined with my work's themes and subject matter. The first period involves the loss of a pair of beloved, delicate birds in my childhood during the painful years when my family was falling apart. The second period involved a separation from my husband both physically and emotionally while I lived in a remote town off base on the isolated island of Sicily as he served the United States military during the war in Afghanistan. Through both of these periods, I was psychologically reformed and refined in sorrow and solitude. While initially I was left feeling supremely vulnerable, each period ultimately made me more curious about how I viewed the world around me, and made me a more resilient person to face life's challenges.

The themes in this collection are various projections of these two periods in my life. The ideas represented here capture symbolic expressions of my own memories, thoughts, and musings. Additionally, the themes express my fears and anxieties during my journey of self-discovery. It was then that I gained the ability to overcome loss and separation. As I create each narrative, I closely consider the emotions that get stirred up inside when I'm confronted with the intimate sentiments of life: loss, separation, isolation, and unexpected death. My intent was to create paintings that expressed these themes with open-ended narratives that not only represented my own my anxieties and fears as I faced these difficult circumstances, but also left room for the viewer to respond to each piece in their own personal way.

The subject matter of my thesis work comes from an expanding collection of three-dimensional miniature-scale models and toys that I have saved and collected since childhood, along with a vast collection of photographic reference images that I have created and cataloged for over a decade. By using miniatures and toys, I am able to subvert their playfulness as a mechanism through which I explore this deeply emotional material. I arrange props and toy figurines as “still lifes” within carefully composed settings where the drama can unfold. The settings for my paintings are play spaces in this way. The toys are small visual representations of objects that exist much larger in reality. I use them as models with the intent to convey themes of fragility, vulnerability, and isolation without engendering fear and anxiety in the viewer. I don’t want the viewer to “shut down” so I give them the psychological distance they need. Using miniatures allows me to capture these powerful adult themes in paradoxical, playful, and engaging ways that disarm the viewer. This tactical point of view and reference that I use permits the viewer to engage in my experience with these emotionally charged themes.

### **Dollhouse Series**

My series of dollhouse paintings are primarily based on the loss of my cherished pet birds during a turbulent time of my parents’ divorce. They represent a journey into, and exploration of, the uneasy fears that arise from loss. Each scene carefully weaves together my childhood memories and midlife experiences with my fears and wish for safety. While processing the themes of loss and separation, change and death, I am making statements about the effect that uncertain and insecure living situations can make on an individual across an entire lifespan.

The series consists of four different domestic spaces, each showing a single bird and its relationship to its surroundings. I chose the birds to represent the fundamental emotions associated with abandonment and isolation: fear, loneliness, and melancholy. The birds also act as symbols for myself, and for humanity in general. This is so because I see the birds as fragile and delicate, but also highly sentient and powerful.

The first two paintings I completed in this series, *Looking Back* (Fig. 1) and *The Curious Case of the Broken Vase* (Fig. 2), illuminate my fears of loss, change, and separation. I painted them as a set, just as the subject matter, which comprises a male and

female zebra finch, are considered to be a set. The normal life expectancy of a caged zebra finch varies between five and nine years. I have since learned that the greatest threat to their survival is cats. The pair of finches I owned in childhood lasted less than a



FIGURE 1. *Looking Back*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2016, Oil on panel, 12 in. x 16 in.

week as an intact family. My dear pet cat would look for every angle to get a taste of my new birds, so I did everything in my power to keep the birds safe. I had four full days as a loving bird owner before I came home and found to my horror that my birdcage had been torn down off a chandelier hook placed high up on the ceiling. The thin bamboo walls of the cage were on the floor in splinters; they had shattered under the weight of my cat and the impact from

the fall. The female finch's body lay lifeless with only one wing attached. Her white belly was sunken and deflated. I knew she was gone. It was then that I learned my cat was a cold-blooded murderer. I first felt fear which was soon replaced by sadness. Anger came next in a matter of seconds. Where was the male bird? I had never lost anything I loved before. How could my cat do this? That cat meant the world to me! Frantically scanning the room, I found my bird, miraculously peering through the window of my two-story dollhouse perched on top of its miniature grand piano.

I was to be the proud owner of a bird for only one more day. My finch, who I named Charming, died sometime before nightfall the following day. I found his body lying in a small space between the piano and the love-seat on the dollhouse living room floor. His head was tilted down, his tiny red beak rested on his zebra-striped chest feathers. His black tear-shaped markings along his cheeks pointed to his closed eyes.

The memory of finding the male bird in my dollhouse, alongside the underlying feeling of melancholy and remorse of losing him, haunted me for forty years before I finally decided to paint him. That day, I discovered him safe inside that house was a mysteriously captivating image of survival that ultimately drew me to want to recapture its essence in a painting. Standing at the opening of a doorway, a male zebra finch stands on a vividly-colored exotic rug with its chest facing away towards a brightly lit room that stands before him; his face is turned toward the viewer. The doorway is a symbol for change. The room on the other side of the doorway is in strong contrast to the dimness of the salon room the finch stands in. The light that hits his chest represents this hope, showing us that where there is darkness, there is also hope. Each miniaturized surrounding represents something important to me. The bookcase on the right filled to the brim with tiny books represents knowledge.

There is a miniature replica of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's painting entitled, *Expectations*, which represents me while I was waiting for my husband to return from the war. On the left, the piano recalls my first date with my husband where he caught me off guard by playing a hotel lobby piano impromptu. Tucked in the shadow behind the door, a grandfather clock stands in as a metaphor for the time my husband and I waited to be reunited after being separated for so long during the Afghan war. An even tinier bird sits at the opening of its birdcage which duplicates the situation that the finch bird is in. The lost feathers resting on the carpet represent the struggle that the bird appears to have gone through. The bird stands facing towards the future after having reconciled the past. Overall, the male bird in this context represents the tension and dynamic challenge of hope and reconciliation. In this sense, any living being who experiences a psychological tension can either move forward or can stay back and struggle, but either way, they have to make some decision. I initially began to paint *Looking Back* to honor the life of my male finch, but as the painting evolved, so too did my ideas. The painting became more complex as I spent time on it. In the end, I was able to acknowledge my fears and the sadness of this childhood remorse by turning it into something beautiful—something exquisitely redeeming.



FIGURE 2. *The Curious Case of the Broken Vase*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2017, Oil on panel, 12 in. x 16 in.

I painted *Looking Back*'s partner, *The Curious Case of the Broken Vase*, as a way of keeping the two birds figuratively together as a couple and honoring the relationship that was lost as result of the male bird's unfortunate death. The painting shows the female zebra finch standing in the draped archway of a sitting room that—if hung side-by-side, these two paintings can be viewed adjacent to the room in *Looking Back*. The room is classically furnished in the complimentary colors of blue and yellow. This choice of color reflects a notion of harmony. Small antiquities and art pieces complete the setting. The finch, like her mate, also gazes at the viewer, but the female's face expresses a look of concern or worry. A broken vase lies on the carpet in front of her. A door leading to a hallway stands ajar. Did the accident just happen? Was it indeed an accident? Who is responsible for the damage to the vase? Was it her or has the culprit just gone through the door that was left open? Whatever happened, something was left broken and unfixable.



FIGURE 3. *Moving in with Mrs. Thorne*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2017, Oil on panel, 12 in. x 16 in.

My piece, *Moving in with Mrs. Thorne* (Fig. 3), best exemplifies the anxiety that I felt while seeking safety during the periods of upheaval on which I have based this body of work. Particularly, it represents the security that comes with having a place to live, even settle down. I painted *Moving in with Mrs. Thorne*, during my most recent move. From the time I was a child, I have felt the struggle of moving far too many times for my comfort. Altogether, there have been eighteen moves. Some of those transitions occurred unexpectedly and something happened at the last minute. All of them—until my recent move—felt temporary. After our first night's sleep in our new house, I woke up to discover a purple finch had crashed into our living room window. Sadly, the bird wasn't alive. It was then that I decided to add another painting to my dollhouse series. In this painting, a purple finch is precariously perched on a rail of a staircase; its back pushed up against the ceiling of an elegant dollhouse foyer. With a blind determination, the bird pulls at a loose piece of red thread from the far corner of a traditional area rug. The room is lit dimly to help set the sense of mystery. The string is held taut by the bird at a diagonal to bring a feeling of tension to the space.

A delicate orchid flower sits alone on the top of a tiny table, highlighted by the natural light coming through the window. The orchid is pink which represents grace and joy. Grace and joy are two qualities that I believe are always within reach if we set aside the things with which we are struggling. Questioning the action of the bird, one art critic asks, “Is the bird simply feathering its nest? Dismantling the house [or] protecting it? Or just trying to feed itself and mistaking a taut string for a worm?” (Barton 28). I specifically painted the thread red with the intention that the narrative would be left mysterious. However, if pushed for the real answer, I will confess that the red thread represents my “heartstring” and my

deepest need to finally settle down and find a place to at last nest in the most permanent way one possibly can.

The latest painting in my dollhouse series reveals the self-discovery that I achieved upon completing the other three paintings in my dollhouse series. I started composing the painting at the same time as I decided to return to a serious practice of yoga and meditation after years of being away from it. I created my painting, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Fig. 4), on a custom-made wood panel, which I constructed into the shape and size of an actual four-story dollhouse. Inside the house are eight rooms, all displaying their own personality. The house portrays my mind, while the interior rooms I create are reflections of the spaces that I am exploring within my psyche; all while appearing at the same time as a charming dollhouse. In the attic, a determined bluebird pulls a piece of yarn up a tiny ladder that goes up to the “crow’s nest” above, but the yarn appears to be wrapped too tight around the bottom of the ladder. The bird has taken a journey through each room, pulling the piece

of yarn in and around the doorways of rooms, across rooms to exit and enter the side windows of the house, eventually making it up to the attic.

The kitchen at the bottom left side of the dollhouse was inspired by Johannes Vermeer (1632 - 1635), as is the map in the living room. The music room honors my brother who is closest in age to me. He was (and still is) my greatest ally growing up. The only actual prop I used to paint

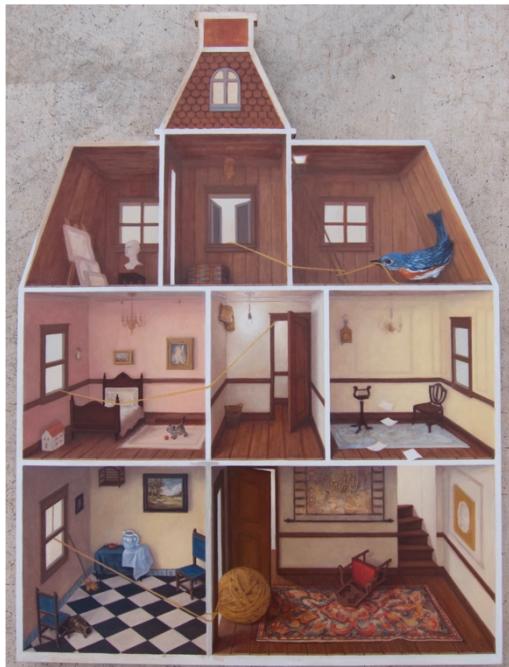


FIGURE 4. *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Unfinished),  
S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2018, Oil on panel,  
35 ½ in. x 26 in.

from real-life observation was the tiny ceramic cat in the bedroom, which I borrowed from the menagerie of ceramic animals I have collected since I was a child. The rest of the painting was created mostly out of my imagination with the help of a few photos for inspiration.

The inspiration for the bluebird came to me after a young fledgling bluebird injured itself when it flew into the window of my studio. He wasn't strong enough to be left on his own. I kept him safe for the night with the hope of releasing him the next day but discovered he had died sometime in the early morning hours. My heart sank. Just as I had done in the other bird paintings, I honored this bird's life by giving it a home. This piece holds a collection of themes, which are all connected by a piece of string. The theme of "letting go of the string," as a meditatively-driven strategy for spiritual surrender and coping, is central here. In this work, the notion that one may either choose or not choose to "hold on tightly" to painful thoughts, musings, fears, and anxieties is paramount. In my journey with meditation, I often contemplate the notion of having to choose to hold on or to let go of thoughts. The string represents a way of coping and succeeding whereby if the string would only be released, other issues might resolve themselves.

The memory of losing my birds reminds me of just how fragile life can be at times. There is a profound spiritual power that accompanies acceptance of one's mortality, fragility, and impermanence, especially during times of isolation and loss. This is so because such acceptance is absolutely necessary for the strengthening of the spirit that forms the core of resiliency. Psychological "grit" and resilience do not come without significant exposure to uncomfortable and life-changing events. In this sense, the understanding of one's impermanence becomes the impetus for developmental change and moment-to-moment

appreciation for the present. Here, the bird paintings represent the idea that anyone (even the smallest of birds) who is willing and able to face the turbulence of change can carve out a meaningful space for themselves in this world.

## **Landscapes**

The landscape paintings are an alternate expression of my personal journey to understanding change and coping with danger and uncertainty. The scenes I depict in each landscape come from what might be thought of as ordinary daily life: a middle-class neighborhood, a train station depot, or a set of crossroads along a rural highway in the middle of who-knows-where. My inspiration comes from low-tech, hand-built, three-dimensional fabrications of small worlds that I find in miniature train sets and theatrical dioramas. I intended for the scenes themselves and their specific locations to suggest something beyond the ordinary. Feelings of isolation can be seen in these paintings, but so can representations of quiet determination, strength, and independence.



FIGURE 5. *Lonely Tom*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2015, Oil on panel, 12 in. x 12 in.

*Lonely Tom* (Fig. 5) is a tiny glimpse into my thoughts and my imagination at play. At first glance, *Lonely Tom* appears to be a typical urban scene. It is only after coming in for a closer investigation that there is a moment one may realize that the figures and objects are actually toys, which I designed to suggest that the narrative

might belong to the viewer's imagination rather than my own. Because the true size of the objects in the work is not readily appreciable at a glance, one's sense of trust in the validity of one's visual experience comes into question. I find it thought-provoking to consider how our perceptions evolve, and how much of our first-glance appreciation of our surroundings can change at a moment's notice. I attempt to further disorient the viewer and cause the viewer to question the true scale of the objects by adding a naturally inspired but scale-appropriate sunset. The sunset and particular angle of light at that imaginary hour link *Lonely Tom* to a particular time of day, further challenging the viewer to believe that the illusion of what we are seeing might be "real". We then question if the more realistically rendered train and automobile are miniature scale or real. One might question, too, is "Lonely Tom" the man or the cat? Making use of small-scale toys as stand-ins for reality gives me myriad opportunities to play with the viewer's visual senses.

*Lonely Tom* is also a little escape into an imaginary world that stems from the sense of isolation and detachment that I often experience, especially while traveling. While drafting out my composition for *Lonely Tom*, I realized that the image I was building represented the feelings of loneliness and disconnect with which I wrestled during the many times I traveled alone to and from Sicily when my husband was deployed in Afghanistan. The two "traveling" figurines, each standing still, facing opposite in direction, express the awkward, paradoxical feeling of stillness that I often experience when I travel. The figurines depict loneliness, separation, and transition, which are common experiences for travelers. It seems to me a strange contradiction to feel a sense of stillness and a state of limbo despite the physical act of traveling; the notion that both time and geography change, while one is seemingly still. I designed this piece so that the viewer bears witness to the moment when the

man and the cat, each separately focused on their own little worlds, are both in transit. They are in the same place physically, and connected by their common activity of traveling, but nonetheless unconnected from each other emotionally. In fact, they are quite literally facing away from each other. Without relating to the other, each is embarking on a journey of their own without any concern for the other standing nearby. This for me intensifies and amplifies the feeling of loneliness.

The metaphor of concealed peril is present in my landscape painting titled *The Lunch Break* (Fig 6). I constructed the entire composition from miniature toy props and my imagination. The scene shows an intimate look at the lives of tiny toy people. The bird's-eye view shows two houses tucked up on a hillside lined with artificial shrubs and trees. A girl



FIGURE 6. *The Lunch Break*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2017, Oil on canvas, 16 ¾ in. x 29 in.

wearing a bright red dress holds a chicken while standing at the side of a pool. A shark waits for its meal from the shallow-end of the pool. A man stands by his car. Is he her father or the neighbor? Has he just arrived or is he on his way out? The shark is a metaphor for danger and

fear. The girl stands with confidence as she faces the danger and faces her fear. She's not afraid of it. In fact, she has tamed the beast and is now keeping it as a pet and feeding it by hand. The background for this work comes from my confrontation of fears I experienced when living among the concealed dangers of small-town Sicily. The painting represents my musings on Sicily, where hidden danger was always present due to decades under the influence of organized crime. The painting demonstrates that despite the apparent tranquil nature of the scene, the lurking menace and hidden danger are always present. The objective personification and instrument of my fear is here represented by a shark. The shark symbol harkens back to the time when I was nine years old and the movie *JAWS* was released in the theaters. To this day, putting my head underwater in a pool or bathtub brings on a sense of fear. I know my fear of sharks is not rational since my chances of actually being eaten by a shark are little to none. But despite knowing this, the fear still exists for me. So, it is with this painting that I confront and master my fears, transforming them into a metaphor for taming the shark and then keeping it as a pet.

The painting entitled *Standing at the Crossroads* (Fig. 7) further illustrates and amplifies my recurring theme of isolation as an agent of transformative spiritual experience. In some sense, this piece serves as a transitional piece, both in terms of technique as well as content. Here the male figure from *Lonely Tom* reappears, and again he in the state of flux represented by the act of traveling. He comes to a literal and metaphoric point of reckoning, symbolized here by the crossroads. The motif of travel and isolation is embodied in the train moving through a remote and distant outpost. However, a change in perspective

characterizes this painting because of the trompe l'oeil quality of the masking tape and wood panel. Here, I am not simply at the physical crossroads but have come to see the process of painting and my journey as a painter in a different light. In this work, the masking tape and wood panel in the background draw the viewer's attention to a change in overall perspective and thus to a new kind of awareness.



FIGURE 7. *Standing at the Crossroads*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2017, Oil on panel, 13 in. x 36 1/2 in.

In this piece, the viewer is taken beyond the smaller worldview of the individual figure and begins to see the journey in a larger perspective. The wood paneling and masking tape serve as cues to the viewer regarding the true scale of this painting, and thus suggest a new state of understanding regarding the smaller issues and individual themes experienced by the figures. In the background, a landscape with big puffy clouds appears natural at first, but upon closer examination, the landscape is actually a poster of a painted landscape. I used trompe l'oeil here to create an illusion that the poster is being held up against the fake wooden-paneled wall by a few pieces of masking tape. The trompe l'oeil quality of the painting is illustrative of the process of metacognition whereby I have begun to see things in a new light.

On a smaller scale, the work reflects my thoughts of what it is like to be an independent person on the journey through isolation. It's about coming to the crossroads of a decision that one must make independently from others, and stand strong while moving on the right track to decision-making. The panorama shows the male figure that was in Lonely Tom, now walking along a desolate road out in the middle of a rural landscape. Again, the miniature surroundings show figures in proximity to each other, but who are actually psychologically quite alone. I chose to use a passing freight train, with its imagined melancholic wailing and haunting sounds to develop the theme of isolation even further.

The next painting in the landscape series is a panorama titled, *Queen Bee* (Fig. 8). The painting serves as a summary and connecting principle for themes explored in earlier landscape works. Here the female figure of Frida Kahlo has endured the isolation and the chaos life has brought, made peace with these seemingly uncontrollable forces and in doing so rises triumphantly as *the queen bee*. The painting marks the resolution of some earlier themes of loss and isolation with a sense of acceptance and playfulness, symbolized by the



FIGURE 8. *Queen Bee* (Unfinished), S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2018, Oil on panel, 12 in. x 72 in.

monkeys.

The scene for *Queen Bee* takes place in a tiny section of town in some imagined place along the border of Mexico. The painting is a humorous take on life's little dramas based on a still-life scenario I composed using photo references taken from a diorama at The San Diego Miniature Train Museum and my imagination. While imagining the narrative for this

piece, I often thought about how it takes strength, courage, and wisdom to overcome obstacles. I looked to Frida Kahlo and her turbulent life experiences, as well as my own, for inspiration. An empowered Frida Kahlo stands confidently to the side of a vintage toy car. Her husband, Diego Rivera has been struck down by the car. He lays there with his paint palette and paintbrush still in hand. Resting in the dirt is Diego's hat, which has flown off of his head from the impact of the car. The painting features a cast of characters: a man sitting on a donkey cart, buyers and sellers under a shaded market stall, a woman is seen through an open window of a second-story apartment building, a three-piece mariachi band playing at the wedding of a pregnant bride, and two nuns converse behind the back of the church alongside a small cemetery. In the street, I strategically placed Frida's monkeys to bring a sense of balance and connection to the long, panoramic scene. For a sense of continuity, I employed the same trompe l'oeil effect of using a poster on a wall as a backdrop as I did in *Standing at the Crossroads*. The poster is reminiscent of the vintage California-style fruit labels I grew up with being a Native Californian. The only character seemingly paying attention to the accident is a woman looking out from the second-story of an apartment window. The woman is Cristina Kahlo, Frida's younger sister, with whom Diego had an affair. The affair eventually caused a separation between Frida and Diego. The painting represents a found independence and gained personal power which comes once chaos is controlled. I imagine there are many times that Diego drove Frida to the point of desire for revenge. In *Queen Bee*, she gets that revenge.

Each of these paintings have taken me on an emotional and psychological journey, and an artistic one, too. Their creation from start to finish has brought a deep level of understanding of the innermost workings of my thought process as an artist. They have shed

light on what it is to be a sensitive person while experiencing the changes and uncertainties that come with the ebb and flow of life. As this collection stands now, each painting represents a milestone on that journey of self-discovery. They mark the way I have come to better understand who I am and where my place is in this world

## **RESEARCH**

My parents' separation became a pivotal point in my life because not only did I learn that my parents were ending their relationship, but that my seventeen-year-old sister moved out of the house without notice. To add to the confusion, my sixteen-year-old brother left to go to a boarding school in another state. Our family of six became a family three in what felt like a blink of an eye. My parents chose to keep the plans of their separation quiet, so I was in complete and utter shock when they told my siblings and me the news. The loss was overwhelming. I learned at this very young age that, no matter how hard I tried, I had little to no control over things I wish could change. Life was never going to return to what it was before. A piece of me—my own personal sense of security and comfort—was lost. I was only in my childhood home for five more years before my serial moves would begin...all seventeen of them.

Several decades later while living in Sicily, I would grapple with the same feelings of loss, separation, and anxiety that I felt at the young age of six. When I learned that my husband was to deploy to Afghanistan, I was shocked again. I had already experienced a long separation a few years before when my husband was sent off to the war in Iraq. I was reminded, once again, that I had no control over what was happening. My husband and I weren't expecting to have to be separated from one another during our time of being

stationed overseas, because technically, we were already stationed overseas. None of that matters though during a time of war. I was to be stationed on an island in the Mediterranean Sea, surrounded by the exotic culture and great food that Sicily had to offer, but I was also not in my comfort zone. At best, I spoke the Italian of a six-year-old. Not knowing the language well enough to navigate through the challenges, I experienced a regression into a childlike state of dependence and limited autonomy that I recall so well from my experience at six years old.

The metaphor of birds is central to my work. Their fragility and delicacy are clear, but in return for these frailties, they are permitted to fly and to gain the perspective of one who soars above the fray. As a child, I was left bewildered by the death of my two birds. Immediately following their deaths, I was overwhelmed by the intensity of feeling their loss. Their deaths came at a time when I had already suffered too many losses surrounding my family. That summer, I was imprinted by first-felt emotions that made their way to the core of my being: real sadness, helplessness, rage, remorse, regret, and frustration, all mixed with a deep yearning for a sense of stability and safety. I sometimes wonder if I might not have taken their deaths so hard if my family stayed together. I was just a young child who hadn't experienced the cruelties of life yet. I wished that I could fix or control things, but had no way to. In many ways, I have a desire to return to a time before my ego thought differently; before I understood death, separation, betrayal, abandonment, and isolation. Paradoxically, we can never go back to the carefree days of childhood, but it does not stop people from yearning to return. Using the birds as metaphors in my dollhouse paintings allows me the freedom to share my experiences surrounding loss and death without having to attach those themes to any one person or event.

Growing up, we had HO-scale miniature train sets that we could play with all year round. My mom had a Z-scale set—the smallest commercial railway scale in the line of miniature trains—she would take out around Christmas time. At some point, I inherited my mom's train set. I'm not sure what happened to the HO-scale set we grew up with. It was likely donated somewhere in one of our moves. When I was a full-grown adult at 30, my father gave me a Bachmann HO-scale set for my birthday knowing how much I loved them. As a child, while visiting my father on alternate weekends, he would purposely ask me to tell him stories, providing me the undivided attention and time for me to engage my imagination to concoct fantastical stories. He has always encouraged me to stay young in heart and spirit. To this day, on birthdays and Christmas, my dad will gift me a new building or tiny people to add to the collection. My husband has taken on the same tradition. Just this last Christmas, he added to my collection a handful of vintage train cars. I enjoy the escape into pretending through imaginary play, and I love the connection that I have with my dad and my husband over these toys. By using these toys as props in my paintings presently, I am able to conjure up imaginative stories just as I did as a child, but also to have them reflect an adult point-of-view.

In the early 1990s, I worked as a model builder for an amusement park design company. Our company was responsible for building scaled models for the construction of large theme parks around the world. My job ranged from being a façade designer for all the front facings of the miniature buildings to painting clothes on the tiny people, making certain that no one was left running around the amusement park without clothes. This was my dream job. I got paid to play make-believe! Our largest project was a 25' x 40' HO-scale model that we built to scale for a 150,000-acre amusement park that was in the process of being built in

Japan. To save time on having to design structures that were more typical in style, we purchased prefab miniature toy buildings typically found in miniature train catalogs. It became clear to me as I shopped for many of the items that the architectural style of many of these buildings dated back to the 1930s, which is the most popular time period in model building. My eye would gravitate towards the miniature model buildings that reminded me of Edward Hopper's (1882 - 1967) paintings of city street scenes, especially *Early Sunday Morning* (Fig. 9) and *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (Fig. 10). I found the

miniature artificial trees—shaped all too perfectly in model form—resembled the trees in



FIGURE 9. *Early Sunday Morning*, Edward Hopper, 1930, Oil on canvas, 35 in. x 60 in. Whitney Museum of American Art



FIGURE 10. *Manhattan Bridge Loop*, Edward Hopper, 1928, Oil on canvas, 35 in. x 60 in., Addison Gallery of American Art

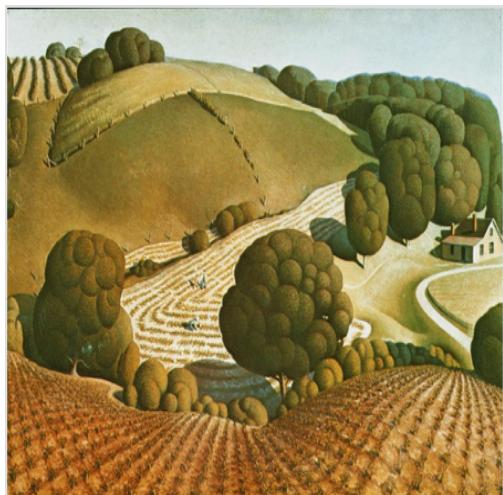


FIGURE 11. *Young Corn*, Grant Wood, 1931, Oil on panel, 24 in. x 29 7/8 in., Collection of Cedar Rapids Community School District

sense of nostalgia that one experiences when viewing the work of these great artists.

Grant Wood's (1891 - 1942) painting titled *Young Corn* (Fig. 11). The form and style we see in the work of both Hopper and Wood is straightforward and uncomplicated, and this simplicity reminds me of the time in my life when everything was much simpler. Thus, I likewise chose to paint simple objects and uncomplicated settings, because I believe that this evokes in the viewer the same

Working with miniatures on a daily basis shifted my awareness about how I viewed my place in the world. It gave me more clarity on my life experience as a whole. When I work with the miniatures in my collection, their small size reminds me of the delicacy and fragility of the nature of life, relationships, and our own personal view of the world. One minute, the tiny figure is sitting on my desk and the next second they're gone, getting lost in the shuffle of paperwork. No matter how thoughtful and careful I might be when holding onto these tiny little figures, they can easily slip from my fingers and crash-land somewhere entirely different, usually at my feet. On these occasions, I am reminded of how small and vulnerable we, as humans actually are in relation to the "big picture." It is with this idea, therefore, that I use the toys' size as a way of expressing the notion of feeling vulnerable to whatever life has in store for us.



FIGURE 12. *The Lunch Break*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2017, Oil on canvas, 16 ¾ in. x 29 in.

In my painting, *The Lunch Break* (Fig. 12), I created my own version of an ideal landscape, which includes stylized artificial trees inspired by Grant Wood. The houses I chose in model form for the same painting are reminiscent of the houses Edward Hopper painted in his Cape Cod landscape scenes like *House by 'Squam River, Gloucester (Cape*

*Ann, Massachusetts*) (Fig. 13). Viewing something in small-scale has the ability to transport me to another place and time.

As a child, my earliest memory of experiencing a real landscape rendered in miniature was while riding on the Storybook Land Canal Boats at Disneyland. After a short boat ride through Monstro the Whale's mouth, one enters an enchanting miniature realm that takes you on a journey past a menagerie of intricately replicated villages and homes of classic stories found in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Wind in the Willows*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I found it amazing that we could be first in the real world then enter into an imaginary world in a matter of moments. I want to create that same sense of wonder within my paintings. While crafting my compositions for *The Lunch Break*, *Standing at the Crossroads*, and *Queen Bee*, my aim and hope was to try to elicit the notion that any viewer could escape into another place by evoking their imagination and perhaps even stirring up a sense of nostalgia via memories of their own experiences from the past.



FIGURE 13. *House by 'Squam River, Gloucester*, Edward Hopper, 1926, Watercolor, 13 ½ in. x 19 1/16 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Beside the fact that models and dioramas are compelling constructed scenes, they offer me limitless possibilities of recasting the world—its public spectacles, private spaces, and hidden realms—of the sort of intimate scale I see in my imagination. As I began painting my first piece based on miniatures, *Lonely Tom*, I wondered if there were other artists who

felt compelled to work with miniature subjects besides the craftspeople and toy train aficionados with whom I was familiar. I came across the book, *Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities*, a fully illustrated catalogue from an exhibition that took place at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York in 2011. The catalogue focuses on the works of over 35 international contemporary visual artists working with miniatures, ranging from painters and sculptors to photographers and videographers. The artists have created miniature dioramas and tableaux as three-dimensional sculpted environments that both stand alone and sometimes become the subject matter for paintings, photographs, or videos. I was captivated by the work of these artists--so detailed, so tiny, so mysterious. Each artist, in their own unique way, made me want to go deeper into the tiny worlds they created. They are creating magical worlds that are, as David Revere McFadden, the museum's chief curator, wrote "all about places, and the emotions, memories, and visions we perceive and also create in these small realities" (8). This statement resonates deeply with me, as I aim to produce work that expresses the same ideas about place, emotion, and memory in the environments that I create in miniature scale. Art historian, Josephine Gear, another contributor in *Otherworldly* describes "re-creations of one scale of existence in another smaller iteration as 'unintimidating and approachable,' allowing us to establish a physical and emotional relationship with miniatures that evoke childhood associations" (15). Gear believes that "the viewer is either the omnipotent observer or someone whose own perceived scale has changed to carry him or her into the scene" (15). The visual effects of the miniature art in *Otherworldly* are both disarming and inviting. This allows the artists to pull the viewer deeper into the fantastically imaginative worlds they have created. These concepts are central

to my work. The smallness of each tiny prop and the intricate spaces in which they reside provides me with the vehicle with which to engage the viewer without intimidating them.

While looking for literary inspiration on the subject of dollhouses, I came across the book, *The Miniaturist*, by Jessie Burton. The fictional work tells the story of a young woman who receives a miniature Dutch cabinet house from her husband as a wedding present. The story is based on the actual 17th-century *Doll's House of Petronella Oortman* (Fig. 14) on display in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

The story is based on the actual 17th-century *Doll's House of Petronella Oortman* (Fig. 14) on display in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. I was fortunate to see this dollhouse in person a few years ago. As I peered into the Rijksmuseum's collection of Dutch cabinet houses, I was reminded of my childhood dollhouse and the moment I found my male finch hiding inside it. The largest and most stellar example on display was Petronella Oortman's actual dollhouse. Displayed next to this massive dollhouse, which—most certainly—was not made for a child, hung a large painting of the same dollhouse by Jacob Appel (1680 - 1751) (Fig. 15).

Petronella's dollhouse demonstrates the sort of perfection that I find mesmerizing. Nothing felt awkward or peculiar, unlike much of what we see in dollhouses that are made today. I was struck with



FIGURE 14. *Doll's House of Petronella Oortman*. Anonymous, c.1686 - c.1710, Wood, h 100 in. x w 59 in. x 30 ¾ in. x 11 in. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



FIGURE 15. *The Dollhouse of Petronella Oortman*, Jacob Appel, c.1700 - c.1720, Oil on parchment, 34 ¼ in. x 27 in., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

wonder as to how the craftsman added doors and a staircase that added depth to the interiors but lead to nowhere. I saw that even the most exquisite dollhouse that was rendered in perfect scale didn't have to be totally logical. These ideas of adding imagined spaces are something I have now incorporated into my paintings to enhance the feeling of mystery and wonder. Looking into Petronella's dollhouse made me feel like I was both a curious child and a Peeping Tom at the same time. It was at that point that I became aware of the power a dollhouse can possess on a deeper psychological level. In her study on toy characters in children's literature *When Toys Come Alive*, author Lois Rostow Kuznets explains the "lure of the dollhouse" (119). She states that in "Freudian terms, it may portray a longing to be small enough to return to the womb" (119). In a related psychologically-minded interpretation Kuznets informs us that Katherine Mansfield, the author of *The Doll's House*, "suggests further that a powerful voyeurism is present in this lure...[m]oreover, beneath the fascination of gazing upon other people's domestic arrangements lies a narrative impulse: to construct stories from these settings about the secret lives of their mysterious inhabitants" (119). This ability to both connect with the subject matter contained in the dollhouse, yet simultaneously keep psychological distance through objectification, resonates with my work. My hope is to create work that encourages the viewer to engage with mature and profound emotional themes but to do so through the use of non-threatening toys. In my series of dollhouse paintings, I explore the spaces within the home by using miniaturization as a means to play within my imagination. At the same time, I am seeking to capture an intimate moment in time and space within my narrative, to express my emotions and psychological musings within these spaces.

As I continued my research on how the effects of place, space, and scale work on a deeper psychological level in relationship to my paintings, I wanted to better understand the love that I have for all things miniature. In my research, I came across the word topophilia in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Topophilia is defined as "the love of place." In his original thesis on the explorations of the space regarded as a home, the French philosopher shows us how our own perceptions of architectural structures shape our memories, thoughts, and imaginations. He introduces us to his concept of topoanalysis, defined as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8). Bachelard links the relationship between physical space, our consciousness, and poetics in his work and writes of his desire to suspend time. He considers the house to be the most intimate space available to us, providing protection to those of us who daydream, therefore understanding that to examine the space in which people dwell is in fact a way of examining the human soul. Topoanalysis examines the intimacy that can be found inside the house by looking into every space, room after room. The rooms Bachelard describes are not actual physical spaces, but rather the places of our dreams, the imagined and remembered places, which invite us to become more intimate to the core of the mental experience. In his analyzing miniature spaces, he suggests that objects and spaces that are represented as tiny bring us back to our childhood.

When viewing my dollhouse from the outside façade looking in, I am once again inspired by the paintings of Edward Hopper. This is especially true of his painting *Night*



FIGURE 16. *Night Windows*, Edward Hopper, 1928, Oil on canvas, 29 in. x 34 in., The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of John Hay Whitney

*Windows* (Fig. 16). This voyeuristic view of a woman who is captured at the moment she is bent over with her ample backside facing the viewer screams to my inner provocateur. Through images like this one, I recognize the manner in which the viewer's point of view plays a powerful and important role in picture making. Playing on people's curiosity adds to the level of connection with the viewer.

For this same reason, I am inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's (1899 - 1980) visual study of obsessive human curiosity in his 1954 masterpiece *Rear Window* (Fig. 17). Hitchcock's



FIGURE 17. *Rear Window*, Alfred Hitchcock, 1954, Paramount Pictures

specific point of view places the viewer in a position where they are looking across the courtyard to a display of windows, allowing us a peek into the private lives of others. It is Hitchcock's vantage point that inspired me to choose the same point of view when I created my panoramic painting titled *Queen Bee* (Fig. 18).



FIGURE 18. *Queen Bee* (Unfinished), S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2018, Oil on panel, 12 in x 72 in.

When representing and designing the interior space in my dollhouse paintings, I look to Dutch Baroque painter Johannes Vermeer for inspiration. While I look at Vermeer's work, I am reminded of the power that a painting can have on the spirit. His interior paintings bring an exquisite sense of space and atmosphere. With every carefully positioned object, he draws



FIGURE 19. *Woman Holding a Balance*, Johannes Vermeer, c. 1662 - 1665, Oil on canvas, 16 ¾ in. x 15 in., National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

the viewer in with precisely measured and perfect perspective. The walls glow with vibrating light within the layers of his subtly placed glazes of color in every room he paints, which brings a certain amount of spirit and life to his work. In his book, *Vermeer*, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. emphasizes that Vermeer's use of "color, light, and perspective to reinforce the emotional impact of a scene is characteristic of his work throughout his career" (136). I hope to capture this kind

of essence and spirit in my own work by emulating Vermeer's use of perspective, design, light, and color, to enhance the emotional impact.

What attracts me most about Vermeer's work is the level of quiet intimacy he creates within his paintings. The singular figures set in calmly lit, private, domestic spaces reinforce this intimacy. The way he seems to capture his figures in a moment of suspended time fascinates me. This sense of stillness is what I hope to achieve in my work. Many of his paintings, for example, *Woman Holding a Balance*, focus closely on specific moments

captured in time within a small, and very personal, space (Fig. 19). I aim to have my work reflect the same concerns for time and place, but rather than depicting a young girl—or a human for that matter—my models are common finch birds, such as the one seen in *Moving in with Mrs. Thorne*.

I also feel a deep kinship with contemporary American fine art photographer Gregory Crewdson (b. 1962), who is best known for his elaborately staged scenes that he builds to perfection—down to the most minute detail—with the assistance of large production teams. Using small-town America as a backdrop, Crewdson creates hauntingly surreal images that strongly convey unsettling moments and mystery (Fig. 20).

In his essay, *In a Lonely Place*, Crewdson remarks on a particular class of artists who capture this sort of loneliness and engage in what is sometimes called the ‘American vernacular’ to reveal both its beauty and its darkness” (80). Their work deals with the concept of beauty, sorrow, and yearning merged “with an underlying sense of hope and possibility” (80).

Crewdson suggests that there is a common interest shared among these American artists: they all “share a fundamental interest in the intersection between theatricality and everyday life” (80). I, too, use America as a backdrop for my landscapes paintings for this very reason. For example, *Standing at the Crossroads* exemplifies to me this merging of sorrow, disconnect,



FIGURE 20. *Untitled (Flower Pile)*, Gregory Crewdson, 2001, Chromogenic print, 48 in. x 60 in., J. Paul Getty Museum

and isolation with the sense of “hope and possibility” that Crewdson is proposing. I can argue that my interiors showing birds are founded on the same idea.

While watching the 2012 documentary *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters* that traces decades of Crewdson’s work, I learned that he masterfully stages and directs every single detail of each scene down to the smallest detail. Concerning himself with the specificity of each prop for its particular shape, color, and texture, he controls every aspect as he aims for perfection despite the fact that he knows it is impossible to achieve. I understand the perfectionist side of him; I hold the same attention for every stage of my painting, much like a cinematic director. Each prop, each beam of light, and abstract shadow shape is important to the piece. Each of these elements might be chosen to add balance and harmony to the composition or be placed as a color note to keep the eye moving through the picture, or it might act as a symbol to bring deeper meaning to the narrative.

In Crewdson’s essay, *In a Lonely Place*, he mentions the work of Edward Hopper. Crewdson states that Hopper’s narratives are told “in a single picture,” depicting “impregnated moments: the images seem to pose a question—and that question remains unresolved.” He remarks how Hopper’s “still vignettes seem eternally suspended in an instant between ‘before’ and ‘after’” (80). It is this same kind of feeling that I hoped to capture in *Looking Back* and *The Curious Case of the Broken Vase* where the viewer is witnessing an in-between moment that leaves one questioning what may have just happened or what might happen next.

Crewdson’s insights extend beyond classical emotional territory—which juxtapose dark foreboding imagery against iconic images of beauty—and moves into themes that explore deeper existential moments about that strange dynamic. Instead, he creates imagery

that explores profound existential moments where the extraordinary connection between beauty and darkness dance together. This is the reason why his attraction to Edward Hopper is one that I share.

The underlying expressions of melancholy and existential solitude embodied in Edward Hopper's work resonates with me. In Bryan Robertson's article, *Edward Hopper Reality and Artifice*, Robertson explains, "Hopper favoured stillness, perhaps from his own Dutch forebears, and he focused on solitude, even when more than one person is portrayed, and something very near to alienation—and desolation." He further states that no other artist "got anywhere near Hopper's special world of solitude and silence" (43). For this very reason, that is to say, capturing the feelings of solitude and stillness, I keep returning to the paintings of Hopper for inspiration. I also seek to emulate the same mysteriousness that lies behind Hopper's paintings by using implied narratives.

As I began to delve further into my research about what attracted me to Hopper, Crewdson, and Vermeer as artistic influences, I came to understand that their works involve a strong sense of control, logic, and precision. I know my work requires that I work thoughtfully and carefully in my orchestration of each composition to make an effective piece of art. Besides possessing strong technical abilities and a deep understanding of the formal elements which are necessary to create a captivating image, these artists understood how to draw the viewer into their work by their use of implied narratives. Their hidden narratives are left open to interpretation, which piqued my curiosity. My childlike imagination wants to run wild as it wonders what might these artists be telling us. What do they want us to feel? As when asked to solve a puzzle or a riddle, I want to try to figure out the meaning. When one understands the notion that holding back the answers adds a sense of

mystery, this in turn invites the viewer to engage their imagination. It was artists such as Vermeer, Hopper, and Crewdson who led me to think about my paintings in the same way.

## METHODOLOGY

Creating personal narratives was something I knew I wanted to do during my time in graduate school. From a mid-life point of view, I am looking back on my life experiences. Additionally, I am seeking to understand what made me who I am today, as a way of trying to make sense of my responses and feelings experienced at certain times in my life. Translating my thoughts onto canvas seemed intriguing and quite logical, but the idea of sharing my private thoughts was not so simple. My biggest challenge while exploring my ideas was trying to find a way to translate personal narrative—the deeper parts of my psyche—into something visually precise without being obvious or overt about it. Before graduate school, I was drawing and painting only from life from either a model or “en plein air” using the alla prima method. Often, I was painting in the company of others, either in open studio life drawing workshops or by meeting a group of other artists who paint in plein air. Working alla prima has its benefits; it doesn’t require a lot of preparation and it gives me immediate gratification. However, despite the love I feel for producing paintings using intuitive, quick, loosely placed brushstrokes, I am completely and totally seduced by paintings and drawings showing meticulously rendered details. I am a detail-oriented person by nature. Some might think to the point of obsession, but I actually find comfort in crafting the smallest of things as close to perfection as my ability can take me. A certain amount of focus is required when rendering tiny details. Within that focused space comes a quiet—

almost meditative—moment where I find myself most alive and connected to who I feel I really am. With this understanding, I am given a profound sense of purpose.

When I began graduate school, I soon learned that in order for me to make the images that I wanted to create—images coming from my imagination and disparate sources—I would have to work in a style that was totally foreign to me. I wasn't familiar with working in the slow process of oil glazing, but I realized that I would need to utilize all the outlets available to help me achieve my final vision for each piece. Painting quickly would not allow me to achieve the level of detail required to make things appear more real. Instead of squinting my eyes down to soften the details in order to look for the big notes of expression and abstractions while painting in the style of alla prima, I needed to open my eyes to the tiny nuances of each detail as it sits in its own space. Rather than surrounding myself with others, which helped motivate me in the past when working outside or in workshops, I now needed to isolate myself in order to focus. I needed to slow down, get quiet, and to create the space for myself and my surroundings to allow my thoughts and ideas to flow easily. Once I made the decision to change to an indirect method of painting, I found a new compass that would help me find my way to form and refine my ideas. Through this new method of working slowly and more thoughtfully, I have become more fluent, decisive, and precise in my mark making, which has helped me to develop a mature, significant body of work using painting as a form of communication. Moreover, the process of working indirectly has substantial overlap with my pursuit of perfection and making things feel solid and stable.

## Ideation/Conceptual Stage

The foundation for all of my paintings starts with an initial vision. Inspiration for me is everywhere. Often an image will come to me on a whim, like an unexpected gift. This happens more often than not. Other times, I will set up scenes using the interior spaces of my dollhouses or miniature train sets to help call the muse of inspiration. Occasionally, I will spot something that sparks an idea for a new painting when it triggers my thoughts or captures my imagination during a museum trip or during my travels. For example, the idea for *Lonely Tom* came to me during a stop at the Amtrak train station in Glendale, California. Likewise, I recall seeing *The Thorne Miniature Rooms* on display at The Chicago Art Institute, which caught my attention and remained in my memory until decades later when I was drawn to paint *Looking Back, Moving in with Mrs. Thorne*, and *The Curious Case of the Broken Vase*.

The idea of *Lonely Tom* was born through empirical observation on the day I was traveling alone by train to Glendale. Inside the depot's waiting room sits an HO-scale miniature diorama of the Glendale train station. On closer examination, I realized that, in reality, I was standing inside the exact same depot building that was replicated in the miniature scale model. Within the model, placed at the corner of the small depot, stands a tiny plastic male figurine walking along the sidewalk while holding a suitcase. For such a Lilliputian figure, he has a load of character. Noticing him there—alone—struck a chord with me. I felt as alone as he appeared to be whilst standing there. As I looked down at him, my emotions stirred. In my imagination, I exclaimed: “curiouser and curiouser!” (Carroll 15), just as Alice Liddell did in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. I wondered, is he arriving or departing? Where might he be going? Either way, he was walking with intention. Of course,

he wasn't actually walking at all because he was a plastic figurine, but I imagined that he was. I also imagined that he was middle-aged. He wore a cowboy hat, but he isn't a cowboy. He's just a simple, middle-aged man wearing a cowboy hat. If he were real, he would look a bit like the country music legend Hank Williams (1923 - 1953). In my opinion, he's just arrived at the train station and is on his way to his next destination—a tiny parkway motor inn perhaps. And what, pray tell, is in his bag? My imagination ran wild with the possibilities of what this tiny man's story might be. I considered his situation far beyond the time I was standing there. My thoughts continued for days—then weeks—to the point I felt compelled to capture the scene in paint for *Lonely Tom*.

The form of *The Pursuit of Happiness* began with the idea of creating an entire dollhouse image several years after seeing *The Dollhouse of Petronella Oortman* at The Rijksmuseum. Unlike my earlier paintings showing birds in close-up cross-sections of interior room spaces, I wanted a greater challenge for myself. I was determined to make a painting showing a complete cutaway of an entire dollhouse just as I had seen it in Jacob Appel's painting of Petronella's dollhouse in Amsterdam. Because of this, I commissioned a woodworker to build a custom support in the shape of an actual dollhouse.

My collection of toys and miniatures were placed in storage for several years while we were stationed in Sicily, but after seeing Petronella's house, I longed for the day that I could pull all of my toys out of storage to enjoy them again. After waiting a total of seven years while the toys were in storage I was reunited with my dollhouse items and miniature train. I couldn't wait to get them out to play with! With every piece of furniture I unwrapped, I felt excited for what my next painting was to become. It was then that I discovered once

again that my toys brought a level of lightheartedness and comfort to me. It was in their familiarity that I rediscovered a childlike sense of play.

Play is very important to me. And pretend-play while using miniatures fascinates me beyond just regular playing. There is something very childlike about the activity of building and constructing a microcosmic world. There is an irresistible force these tiny worlds have that pulls me in. I experience a deep sense of wonder and joy that come from being playful. I feel like my soul is being tugged on and pulled towards the direction of creativity. It is also nice to not have to feel like an adult for a while. And it is with this understanding that I bring to notion of play to the core of my work. While setting up miniature scenarios as interpretive play spaces, I notice that my mind wanders into another realm. My mind takes me out of my real-life existence and lands me in a place that my imagination would like to explore for awhile. I will sit and decorate a room inside my dollhouse to get my mind to wander, or pull out my treasure-trove of toys and miniature toy train parts and wait for the tiny people to inspire me. Just observing the light passing through the dollhouse over time will help stir up ideas. Once I find the vision I would like to paint, I completely saturate myself in the process of making that image come together for a final piece.

I have a keen eye for design, so my first consideration with any piece is the aesthetic appearance with the actual space, either a room interior or miniature-scale landscape. In my work, the interior space of a dollhouse frequently suggests a setting in which to pose a singular figure (a bird), the landscape acts as a backdrop for a selection of various miniature figures. While continuing to study the various spaces, I imagine the main figure situated in different positions within the space, arriving at one position which seems particularly strong. I then look for an effective combination of both formal (abstract) design and psychological

(associative) aspects that will bring strength to the overall composition. It is important to me to have a well-crafted concept of space and place as a foundation to build on. Whatever the inspiration, my images evolve over time through sketching in my sketchbook and by collecting imagery and props that will help me to realize my vision for a painting.

### **Record and Resource Collection Phase**

I made a discovery when I was exploring the ways in which to convey the stories of my life experiences through painting. I realized that I did not want to express my ideas in an obvious way. I had already expressed my youthful angst artistically by working “large and blatant” when I was going to school for my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Illustration from California State University in Long Beach, California in the early 90’s. Unlike then, I don’t particularly enjoy looking at things that are overly explicit now. I like things that are nuanced and subtle, but more importantly, I like being left curious to the mysteries that life can set before us. My intention now is to create spaces that feel intimate as well as safe, allowing my work to be approachable. Making paintings smaller in size helps me to reinforce the notion of wonder that comes with being curious, allowing for a closer engagement with the viewer and a more intimate way of relating the themes.

Typically, I determine the size of the canvas by the size of the figures that I represent in the scene, in keeping with my intention to let the final piece remain small. Once I establish the size of the work, I then consider what the final shape and size of the composition will be. The aspect ratio of the canvas is something I measure precisely—down to the millimeter—based on the dimensions of my final image. In my sketchbook, I create rough thumbnail sketches and written notes. My notes and thumbnails detail all aspects of the initial concept

including such items as the point of view, perspective, the direction of the figure or bird, proposed furnishings or props, main shadow patterns, the position of the light source, and time of day.

When working with a three-dimensional model, I take color photographs of the setting from different points of view and apertures, including variations on the scenario in terms of lighting. Photographs are primarily a convenience—especially while traveling—and serve as a reference for substituting real life observation. It is most favorable when I can reference an actual three-dimensional model because I have more control over the lighting and the placement of each object in space. Once I select the final photos, I convert them to black-and-white to assist me in determining what are the value structures and large abstract shapes in the overall composition.

### **Developmental/Arrangement Phase**

After selecting my photos to work with, I assemble a small-scale composite by combining my sketches and photographs and then mounting them together in an old school, cut-and-paste style. I carefully analyze the formal arrangement and abstract relationships within the composition at this stage. I am always thoughtful when constructing the pictorial space of the composition with the aim to draw the viewer into the scene. I do this by creating as much depth in the pictorial plane as possible by using carefully planned-out linear perspective. I look for rhythms and patterns that will intentionally connect the sum of the parts into a well-planned environment. After completing the small-scale “composite” sketch, I create a photocopy in black-and-white. This paper photocopy becomes the foundation for my value sketch which I then modify as desired using black, gray, and white pastel pencils.

This step of making a value study is a important one as it gives me a reliable rendering as a reference to work from when I begin to paint.

Being the daughter of an architect, I learned to measure twice and cut once, so I dedicate myself to measuring with the same amount of exactness and accuracy as an engineer or master craftsman. My aim is to produce images of complexity and depth—where proportion and perspective are rendered with precision—that bring me the sense of harmony and correctness I am often looking for. Each painting I create with the utmost care by way of layering the paint, measuring of perspective, adjustment of lighting, spatial design, and placement of each prop within the composition. These considerations come from my study of Renaissance art history and from my admiration of the Dutch Golden Age artists from the 17th century. Working in this detailed, Realist manner, I am mindful of the history of form as I plan my images. I would not be able to create the work that I do without honoring and paying homage to those who worked with Realism before me, specifically artists such as, Johannes Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch (c. 1629 - c. 1684), Jan Steen (1626 - 1679), and Gerald ter Borch (1617 - 1681).

Although much of my linear perspective is planned and measured to perfection, sometimes there is cause for manipulating the space in order for it to be perceived as more natural to the eye. This was the case for *The Pursuit of Happiness*, where I chose a one-point perspective view looking straight into the backside of the dollhouse. I tried to adhere to the rules of linear perspective but found that because of the point of view I wanted for each floor section, I had to purposely skew the perspective to achieve the spatial relationships I was aiming for. This was also true while I was designing the long panoramic landscape for *Queen Bee*. Here, I took the limits of perspective and stretched them by choosing one-point

perspective station points for each section of the panoramic scene and stitched them together. In both cases, the perspective isn't correct as far as proper perspective is concerned, but the overall piece successfully suits my aesthetic eye and satisfies my vision.

### **Execution Phase**

After creating a solid composite sketch, I use it as a reference to develop a draft—at full-scale to the size of my canvas—onto tracing paper. I use tracing paper to take advantage of its transparent quality, but it also becomes a template to use as an option to draw or paint from later. I either draw this draft freehand or by way of using a cartoon transfer method using graphite paper. Once the basic layout of the image is transferred onto the canvas or prepared wooden panel, my painting process begins.

During the painting process, I reference all the materials I have compiled. Since many of the items I paint come from my imagination, I often decide on the individual colors of the objects during the time I am painting them. For instance, I chose the colors of the rugs, walls, and other furnishings intuitively as I get further along in the painting. I apply the paint using many thin layers, starting with lean earth tone layers first and building the layers gradually over time with opaque and glazed layers. Ideally, I apply each layer to the largest abstract shape first, then work gradually, layer by layer, until I reach the smallest abstract shapes. I apply these layers in order from dark to light as well.

As the painting progresses towards its final stages of completion, I may make modifications by editing out or adding in props to strengthen the overall piece. The darker tones I adjust by using glazing techniques to enhance the overall tone. The lights I brighten, usually by adding a touch of lead-based white. In the final stages of a painting, I pay close

attention to each and every object as if it exists alone in its own isolated space. Sometimes, I use a magnifier to focus even more scrupulously on the tiniest of details, which are challenging to see otherwise. I look for ways to refine the specificity of each detail as accurately as I can by pushing the individual values lighter or darker, or sharpening or softening an edge of a form. By working thoughtfully and carefully, I know that I can easily omit random things outside of my control. Having a greater chance at determining just how things will turn out brings me solace. Being fixated on trying to get the tiny details exactly rendered makes me realize how persistent and tenacious I am, and how committed and patient I am while in the process. This kind of devotion to detail is where I find myself most centered in the process of painting and most centered with myself. My process of being so meticulous using paint becomes a meaningful form of communication for me. The fashion in which I lay down each color, shape, value, and stroke allows me to express myself with something that I can't do with words alone. It helps me translate an aspect of the visual component into a larger meaning.

## **CONCLUSION**

My paintings have provided me a way to reimagine my experiences and reframe my thoughts and feelings into images, and have permitted me a place to honor my emotions by giving them a place to reside. At first, I thought that it was going to be impossible to try to convey my deeply personal thoughts and feelings onto canvas. But through my creative process, a deep awareness of myself has been discovered and refined. I recognize that my desire to go beyond simply studying and painting the things that are directly in front of me is explained by my need to stay connected with my childlike imagination. I also found a unique

way for me to process my ideas, make sense of them, and transform them into something more meaningful than their origins. In turn, I am now able to make a little more sense of where my place is in this world. I found that, except for meditation and yoga, there are no other processes of exploration that offer me the same in-depth examination of my reaction to life itself or a greater understanding of who I am as a person. This is liberating for me.

Although it was not my original intention in creating the series of paintings I have made for my thesis, I discovered that my thesis work for my MFA ended up being cathartic. My journey while creating the paintings in this collection has brought me to the realization that I have been researching and laying the foundation for my work since I was a child. The thesis has helped me to learn that feeling safe is important to my well-being. The very act of painting was meditative; a “space” in itself that was a healing safe haven. As I reached deep into my psyche and into my heart, any fragility or regret I may have felt from my past fell away like lost feathers with each and every painting I made. The paintings themselves gave me the task of setting down on canvas—or “letting go” of—all of the feelings I have carried for so long. By finely tuning into my beliefs, and considering my emotions around those beliefs through painting, I came out the other side to find the essence of my own existence. In the end, the journey through my painting process gave to me not only a stronger awareness of self but a deeper connection to the world around me. This, in turn, has given me much more room to experience joy.

As I reflect back onto the paintings that make up the thesis work for my MFA, I am reminded of a quotation from one of my favorite books, *The Phantom Tollbooth*. In it, Norton Juster wrote, “If you want sense, you’ll have to make it yourself” (175). This fictional tale tells a story of a boy named Milo who learns more than he ever thought was possible

while he travels into an imaginary world beyond his expectations. Milo's story resonates with me on a deep level. With each painting I create, there is a journey. My paintings become magical gateways of discovery; often going to places far more rewarding than I first anticipated. Moving forward from my thesis work, my voyage of self-discovery and painting will no doubt be a constant one. I will point my compass and aim my magnifying glass in the direction towards unraveling the mystery of what lies in the depths of my mind, heart, and spirit. Like hitching a ride with Milo into the Phantom Tollbooth, I'm not sure where I am going, but I know that at the end of the journey I will have grown far beyond my expectations.

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## APPENDIX

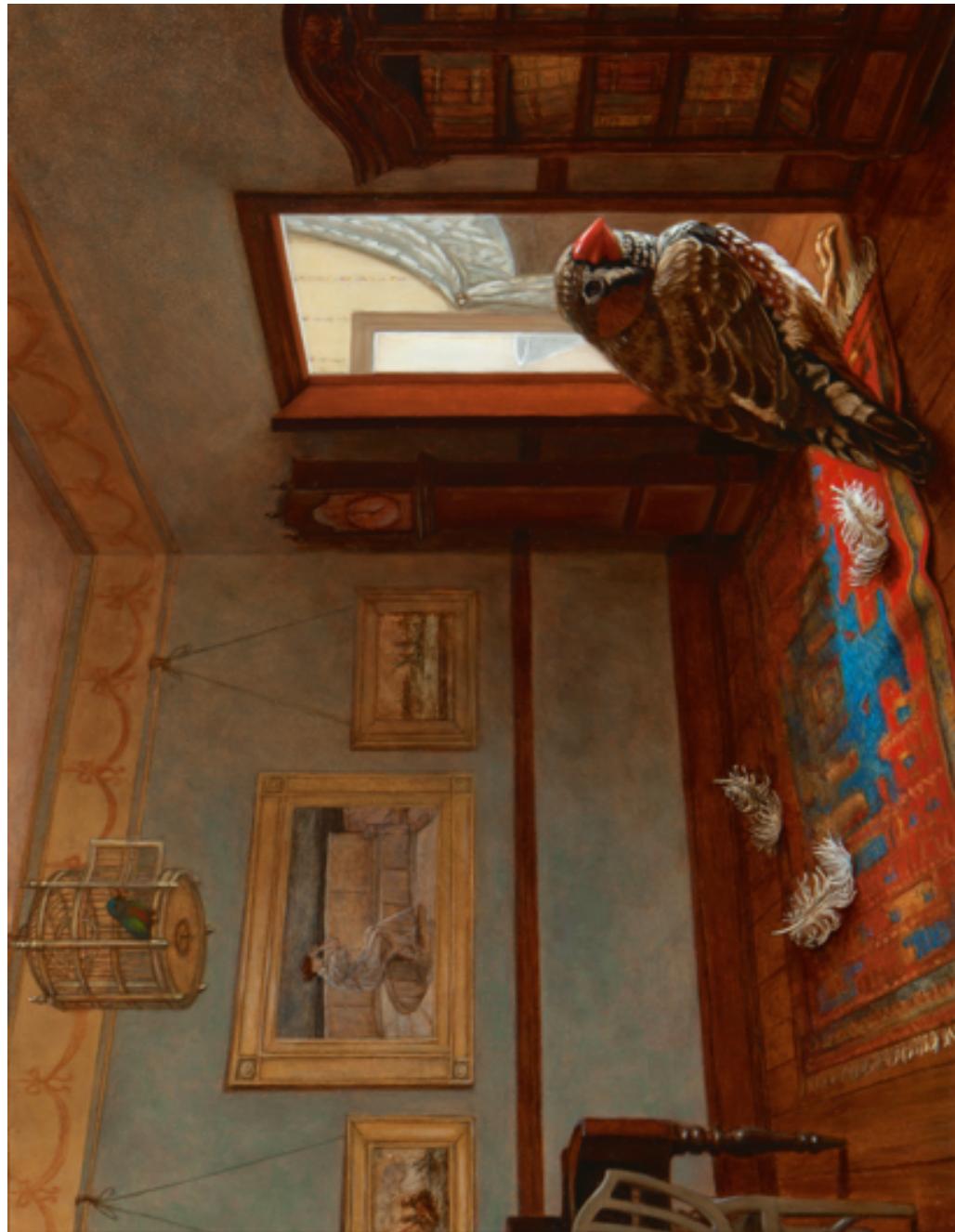


Plate 1: *Looking Back*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2016, Oil on Panel. 12 in. x 16 in.



Plate 2: *The Curious Case of the Broken Vase*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2017, Oil on Panel, 12 in. x 16 in.



Plate 3: *Moving in with Mrs. Thorne*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2017, Oil on Panel, 12 in. x 16 in.



Plate 4: *The Pursuit of Happiness (Unfinished)*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2018,  
Oil on Panel, 35 ½ in. x 26 in.



Plate 5: *Lonely Tom*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2015, Oil on Panel, 12 in. x 12 in.



Plate 6: *The Lunch Break*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, Oil on Canvas, 16 ¾ in. x 29 in.

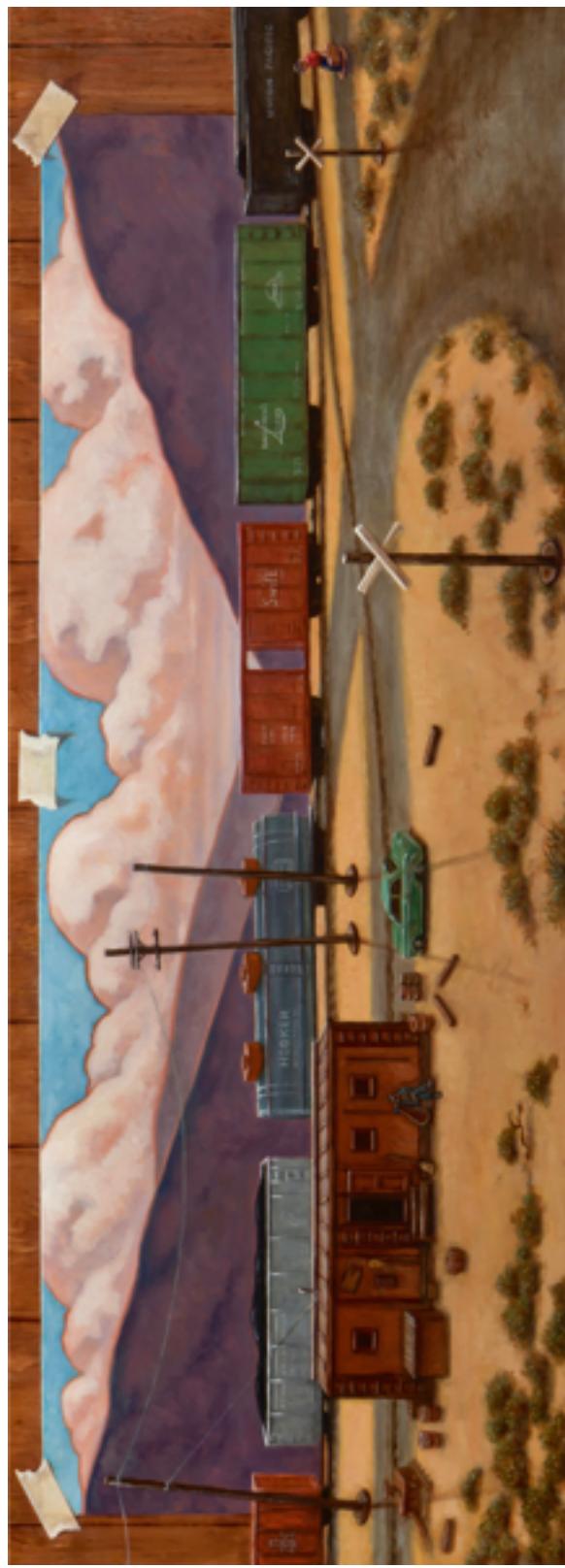


Plate 7: *Standing at the Crossroads*, S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2017, Oil on Panel, 13 in. x 36 ½ in.



Plate 8: *Queen Bee* (Unfinished), S. Jacqueline Nicolini, 2018, Oil on Panel, 12" x 72"

## ARTIST'S NOTE

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