



TAKE MY CRAYONS

TAKE MY CRAYONS

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## **ABSTRACT**

My work explores the juicy world of color, shuffling bright hues together like a stack of paint chips and choosing the boldest and most saturated as the primary vehicle for the expression of the piece. Portraits are the current subject that I use to conduct my color experimentation, using cropped compositions and absurd expressions to create an environment strange enough serve as a balance for the high impact color. The resulting portrait is intensely chromatic and more than a little ridiculous. Approaching the artistic process in this way allows me to satisfy my craving for color and indulge my fascination with facial expressions. I use limited, high key palettes so as not to overwhelm the portrait with the kaleidoscope of colors at my disposal. This also unifies the piece, giving it a strong graphic quality. I seek to convey the strange delight it is to be alive and hope to create an image that is deeply relatable for the viewer. I'm interested in exposing the colorful and the personal. Nothing else will satisfy.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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I am honored to have had the opportunity to learn from you.

## **DEDICATION**

To the dream team, Dan and Kathy Sonnek, for giving me life.

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## **TAKE MY CRAYONS**

### **DESCRIPTION**

If I could eat color, I would. For health reasons, my physician has informed me that my liver could not handle the repercussions of consuming pure pigments, so I must content myself with smearing them all over a canvas instead. Colors excite and fascinate me the same way that a new relationship does. The more I explore specific hues—their history, their complements, their purest states—the more my appreciation for them develops. They're so intangible and changeable depending upon the environment they are placed in. At their core, colors are beautifully human and an integral part to how most of us experience our world.

I define myself as a contemporary colorist oil painter whose work is characterized by the use of intense chroma and expressive portraits. When I pick up my brush to paint, color is the primary reason. I have an instinctual and compulsive attraction to bright hues. They excite me. Only when I have exhausted my interest in the colors that I am using do I feel comfortable calling a painting complete. It is for this reason that I give myself the colorist label.

As a self-diagnosed ambivert—which Webster defines as a personality with both highly extroverted and introverted characteristics—I seek out the company of others and require an outlet to process the stories I've gathered through these interactions. I choose portraits of close friends as the vehicle for my color experimentations, as well as a means to capture their unique spirit and experiences. By nesting warm and cool tones throughout the facial features, I gently coax the conflicting emotions, personal biases, and intensity of spirit that lie shrouded in the visage of each portrait. Dynamic and complex personalities meet me

at every stage in life, I'm fortunate to call them friends. As I get to know each face, their stories correspond to different emotions that just beg my hamster brain for visual representations. These emotions typically translate to intensely chromatic colors in my paintings. My palette is covered in the brightest cadmium hues, all bumping into each other like minnows in an ice cream bucket. Love for these slippery creatures drives every stroke I make; my fascination runs deeper than just simply the visual enjoyment of a good magenta or chartreuse. Strategic use of these intense colors creates layered, complex relationships that reflect the experiences of my models. I am just now beginning to unwrap the implications of what I can do with hue. It's a terrifying and wonderful present.

As a child of the digital revolution, I've used programs including Photoshop and Procreate to change or enhance colors on my reference photos. Color edits are some of the easiest adjustments to make on these platforms. If I simply wanted to see brightly colored portraits, this would be the easiest solution. Why spend hour after hour faithfully mixing pigments and rendering a portrait in oil paint? For me, the answer is simple: the classical tradition of oil painting, if carried out effectively, offers a final result and holds an irreplaceable quality that is simply not achievable through a digital medium. Art historian John Berger analyzes the practice in this way:

What distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts. It defines the real as that which you can put your hands on. Although its painted images are two-dimensional, its potential of illusionism is far greater than that of sculpture, for it

can suggest objects possessing colour, texture and temperature, filling a space and, by implication, filling the entire world. (89)

This potential that Berger speaks of is best realized through great works of art, which have the ability to enlighten and open the mind across generations. I cried in front of



Figure 1. Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1477-1482, 6'8" x 10'4", Tempera on Panel, Uffizi Gallery.

Botticelli's *Primavera* (Fig. 1). I have never cried over any of the graphic designs, illustrations and digital paintings that flood my social media feeds. As much as I appreciate what great developments are possible through creative programs and the great might of the Adobe

suite, they simply do not hold the same attraction for me that the practice of the fine arts does. This does not make digital mediums less valid in any way, just less visceral and engaging for my creative practices and my viewing experience.

My painting process is primarily intuitive. I rely most heavily on my gut instincts, and not a specific set of creative directives or any other artistic blueprint. Painter Leslie Brown describes the intuitive artist in this way, “[Intuition] is an overwhelming sense of knowing, when you realize you are the vehicle and not the driver. You are just moving through it and it is moving through you. You become the ‘is’ or ‘am’ . And it is perfect” (qtd. by Seed). For me, intuition fits beautifully into this definition. Intuition is a difficult process to defend, a

remanent of “if it feels good, do it” mentality that makes so many educators nervous. This approach is often ridiculed in academic circles for its ability to exonerate poorly designed and executed works. If my intuition says the composition should be presented in this way, who is anyone to tell me that my gut has created a piece that, from an academic perspective, is trite and unremarkable? What is the point of pursuing higher education at all if a creative already has the innate tools needed to create works?

For me, the simplest way to avoid these pitfalls is to use my intuitive sense on a leash of sorts. I compile what I have learned from my professors about classical painting—including but not limited to color theory, value structure and the elements of design—and allow my gut feelings to run and grow within these confines. Higher education has given me the tools needed to widen these confines, opening up new ideas and concepts for my intuition to explore. My piece, *I'm Immortal!* (Fig. 2), is a good example of this approach. It features the portrait of a man at a three-quarter turn, smiling impishly and wearing an oversized hoop earring. He is rendered in shades of dusty red and pink, and only appears at the very bottom of the square canvas. The background is a uniform mint hue. It's a larger piece at 30 x 30 inches, and the man's head is just over life size.

This size was chosen to reflect the larger-than-life personality of the model.

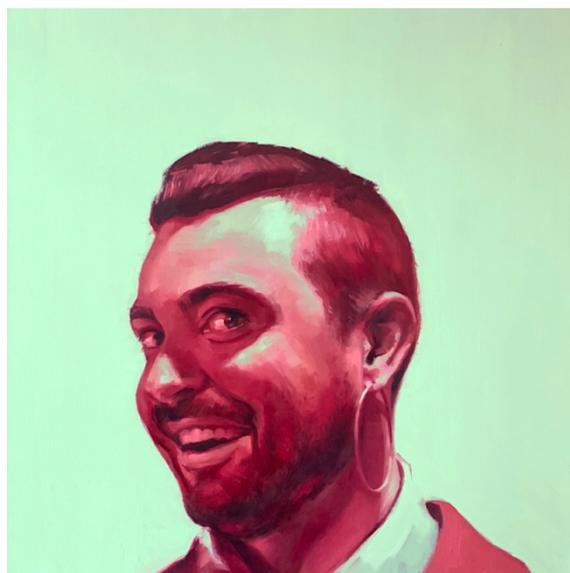


Figure 2. Laura Sonnek, *I'm Immortal!*, 2021, 30 x 30 Inches, Oil on Canvas.

This painting was born out of a deep sense of appreciation. It depicts my old boss—and now close friend—Matt. We met when I walked into a locally-owned suit store in rural Minnesota when I was 19, broke and more than a little dumb, and asked for a job despite knowing nothing about either menswear or men as a general category. The owner Matt and I hit it off right away. His boundless generosity and off-color sense of humor made me want to work extra hard to repay his kindness. One of his most wonderful and unusual attributes was that he was always looking for ways to make the daily lives of his employees a little more fun. We would play games while we worked. He brought in Chipotle for everyone on a weekly basis. He would send us home with free ties and socks for our boyfriends. Matt was always trying on my earrings too. Halfway through a 10-hour shift, my hoops would start to pull on my ears, and I'd take them out for a self-proclaimed resting period on the back counter. He would inevitably slip one on and wait for me, or the client he was working with, to notice. It was a frequent occurrence, but it always sent me into peals of laughter. The photo I used for reference was chosen from a buffet of similar shots, all collected over the three years I worked for the company.

Since Matt has one of the best senses of humor I've ever encountered, I felt strongly that the composition would also have to be designed in such a way as to impart a little of his natural ridiculousness. I chose to have him peeking out from the bottom third of the canvas, showcasing his trademark dimple, wearing one of my favorite earrings. I enjoy using complementary color schemes in my work for their ability to generate both attractive harmonies and visual punch. My initial color studies included very little red. Despite this, my instincts kept pulling me towards deep alizarin crimson for the portrait when I began

painting. I was confused at the time. Red faces are typically associated with anger or—in intense cases— the demonic, neither of which apply to Matt. Intensely chromatic reds are a favorite color of mine to explore, since the vibrancy of a good red creates an immediate, visually arresting focal point. I wondered if my preference for red was doing a disservice to both the subject and composition, but intuition compelled me to continue laying down thick strokes of brick and cherry red in varying intensities. The mint background increased the impact of the chroma, and I incorporated that light green color within the highlights in the face to create a greater sense of unity.

It was only after the portrait was completed that I realized what that intense red signified for me. A close friend of Matt's started the suiting business and remained heavily involved with it even after Matt took over. This unnamed individual is the worst skirt-chaser I've ever seen. His broken marriages and relationships are a testament to this. I was wary of him and kept as much distance I was able. Despite my best efforts, he made an aggressive move on me a few months before I moved out to California. It was of a physical enough nature that I would have been in my rights to press charges for sexual harassment, but I was concerned that legal proceedings would adversely affect Matt and his family. Older now, I notice similar traits between that friend and Matt that make me nervous, especially the way they both talked about women who were not present. Matt is still one of my all-time favorite humans, but there is a slight danger in my mind that he will eventually adopt some of the predatory nature of the former owner. The red color used in *I'm Immortal!*—a title inspired by one of Matt's favorite catchphrases—is the visual representation of this danger.

Ultimately, the work is an homage to my former boss's unique personality, but the red serves as a subtle warning to the audience.

My most recent self-portrait, *Hidden Fees* (Fig. 3), utilizes a slightly different approach to the portrait. It is a large-scale orange, yellow and green painting that only shows the left side of my face. I'm making a slightly anguished, moderately constipated



Figure 3. Laura Sonnek, *Hidden Fees*, 2021, 48 x 20 inches, Oil on Canvas.

expression—eyebrow furrowed, eyes wide and mouth slightly open. It is a highly melodramatic, slightly ridiculous work. The 48" x 20" scale heightens the grandiose nature of the composition.

Self-portraits have been a difficult subject for me to fully embrace since I started painting six years ago. They were a frequent exercise in my college classes, and I did everything in my power to get out of actually doing them. I am not particularly fond of my facial structure and do not enjoy drawing it. My biggest fear with these self-portrait assignments was that I would inevitably give in to the temptation to edit out the imperfections I saw, creating a portrait that wasn't authentic and

looked nothing like me. My insecurities would be exposed.

As I grow more confident with age, however, I become more comfortable with the idea of self-portraits. A change of environment helped as well. When I started my graduate studies, many of the incredible artists around me were planning their thesis around depictions of themselves in a journey of self-discovery or metamorphosis. It was around the time that I first began to paint with highly chromatic hues that emboldened me to complete my first self-portrait, *Drool* (Fig. 4). It's a hideous painting, in terms of both likeness and the sickly green of the background. I enjoyed painting it. The colors are intense, none of the pigments had been pre-mixed or diluted with other colors. The surprised expression rendered in the portrait mirrors some of the shock I was

experiencing after grappling with my new West Coast surroundings and the fact that I still needed my GPS to find the grocery store. My internal uncertainty and discomfort were transferred from the reference image for *Drool*. The painting illustrates the very beginnings of a new artistic, colorist direction that had not yet been fully developed. My firstborn was a grotesque baby, born out of a love for pure color that had not been refined.



Figure 4. Laura Sonnek, *Drool*, 2020, 40 x 30 Inches, Oil on Canvas.

*Hidden Fees* was completed about 10 months after *Drool*. It represents a large jump in careful portrait cropping as well as formal structure. At this stage in my education, I had started enough bad paintings to realize that hues hold a tremendous amount of emotional weight, and therefore had to be carefully considered in the light of what emotion I wished to convey to the viewer. The photograph for *Hidden Fees* was recorded very early during the first coronavirus lockdown. It started as a scared selfie taken for a fellow artist friend who felt the compulsion to draw anguished faces as a coping mechanism. She never actually used it, but I liked the theatricality of the image. When cropped, the photograph felt deliciously melodramatic, I could almost hear a fake scream from an old film noir.

I needed an intense color scheme to match the intensity of the cropping, but I wanted to avoid the random hue pairings of *Drool*. After playing with multiple color studies, I chose a palette based on warm oranges for the shadow shapes and a cool lemon chartreuse for the highlights. It's a relatively simple color scheme, but I was hopeful that staying faithful to a more restricted palette would provide a consistent sense of unity. Orange and that particular shade of green are also my two favorite colors. I wanted them to play nicely for my sake. I came to realize after some light research that my affinity for orange is not shared by the general public. It holds a strong societal connection to imminent threats. Color historian Kassia St. Clair explains it in this way:

[Orange] is used to draw attention to potential danger. It is the color of Guantanamo Bay jumpsuits, Agent Orange, and since 9/11, the second-highest terror-level threat in the United States. Orange is used in traffic signage and warning symbols on roads, in part because it forms a high contrast against the blue-gray asphalt, even in low light.

And the black boxes on aircraft, which record flight information, are, in fact, orange, in the hope that this will make them easier to find in the event of a crash. (93)

Orange's vibrancy makes it an eye-catching catalyst for danger. It was the ideal pairing for the fear that lay partially exposed in the portrait's expression. As St. Clair states, orange is usually offset or tempered by blue. Their complementary relationship can be used to calm the vibrancy of the orange to make it more palatable. Swapping out the blue for the chartreuse served to increase the visual impact for both. The result is bright, dramatic and a little ridiculous—adjectives I would use to describe my personality as well. For this reason, I consider the work a success.

*Jersey* (Fig. 5) differs from the other works so far discussed in that it does not hold an intense or unusual expression, just quiet sadness and a little distain. It depicts my very close friend, Michaela, looking over her shoulder toward the viewer. One arm slightly obscures her face. The top of the head is cut off and the portrait, measuring 30" x 40", is incredibly oversized. The crop creates a personal environment for the viewer. Michaela is a true original who moved to California from New Jersey, and her personality is chaotically charismatic. This large portrait reflects her strength of spirit.

The first time I met her, she told me that she had accidentally tried meth on her seventeenth birthday and that she was raising a chameleon named Philip. Anyone who is comfortable enough telling a stranger about either of those things within the first five minutes of an introduction is worth getting to know on a deeper level. She is one of the most honest people I have ever met. We work together as servers at a local restaurant, and I have had the pleasure of seeing her react to a myriad of stressful situations. She works hard and she works

at a high volume, always laughing or yelling about something. Visually, she reminds me of the color magenta. Vibrant, warm and irresistible.

Despite her sunny personality, Michaela has some perpetual family drama that causes her deep pain. Her mother has been struggling with debilitating addiction for the entirety of



Figure 5. Laura Sonnek, *Jersey*, 2021, 30 x 40 Inches, Oil on Cotton.

her daughter's life. Because of this, Michaela has served as both a support system for her father and a substitute mother for her four younger siblings. As the eldest child, she missed out on a large part of the innocence of her childhood and teen years by the added responsibility of taking her sister and brothers to all their school functions, cooking, cleaning the family home. The still-absent nature of her mother causes her endless frustration and perpetual sadness, in addition to a myriad of trust

issues. I was drawn to the reference image that inspired the painting because it revealed, at least in part, a little of her internal struggle. For the palette for this portrait, I chose to temper the magenta of her personality with a cool blue turquoise. The hard set of her mouth and the light anguish behind her eyes add a somber tone to a vibrant color scheme. She is present for the viewer, but in pain.

Exploring color, cropping and expression through portraiture for me are the ultimate adventure. I find the process more exciting with the completion of each new piece, and I have an insatiable itch to create bigger and better combinations of these color harmonies to reflect the stories of my subjects. Using humor or drama in conjunction with unconventional compositions, I seek to convey the strange delight it is to be alive. Depicting the human experience in this way, I hope to create an image that is deeply relatable for the viewer. I'm interested in exposing the colorful and the personal. Nothing else will satisfy.

## **RESEARCH**

My affinity for highly chromatic colors started at a young age. Like most children, I was enamored with bold hues, but my enjoyment of them could not be contained by simply observing them. I had to touch them, squeeze them, consume them. One of my earliest memories is sitting under the kitchen table in my parent's house, calmly and quietly eating crayons. I thought I could taste the difference between orange and pink, but it turned out I just liked wax. Play dough was also an occasion of sin. As I grew taller, my enjoyment for colors matured past the primal consuming stage. My favorite outings in the late summer were our family trips to the local renaissance and county fairs. I was a pretty anemic kid, and my dad would hoist me on his shoulders so I would not have to walk as far. There were so many colors—the food, the rides, the entertainers, the buildings, even the astroturf—and the often-peeling paint still had a bright energy to it. The hues all screamed for attention: “Look at me! I'm the brightest and the best!” Nothing matched, yet the color relationships still worked in tandem to achieve a weird, loud harmony. I felt like a bug, pulled closer and closer by an uncontrollable compulsion to touch the colors I saw.

It was not until much later that I realized you could still use those bright, carnivalesque colors in art as well. When my history class was old enough to go to the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA) without fear that one of us would accidentally knock over a marble bust, my favorite piece to visit was *Portrait of Paris Von Guttersloh* (Fig. 6) by



Figure 6. Egon Schiele, *Portrait of Paris Von Guttersloh*, 1918, 55 x 43 Inches, Oil on Canvas, Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Egon Schiele. The image is of a solitary male figure, sitting in a chair with his hands and arms raised. The MIA includes the context of the pose for this particular piece, and the museum website informs the viewer: “Schiele admired his friend’s extraordinary intellectual and artistic talents and sought to portray him as a creative genius. With hands raised in a gesture of both attraction and repulsion, eyes transfixed and body tense, Gütersloh is shown at the moment of artistic inspiration” (Minneapolis Institute of Art).

This moment of creative divinity translates to a kind of beautiful agony, an irresistible helplessness. It was my best friend Sophia’s favorite painting before it was mine: she turned the corner and saw it first. The disrupted texture of the rusty orange background is matched perfectly by the intensity of the figure. Sophia liked the angst. I liked his bright cobalt tie.

The more frequently I visited this particular painting, the more I came to appreciate how the palette served to convey the emotion of the subject. The man would lose his energy almost completely if his surroundings were rendered in greyscale or muted greens; the psychological scream which I felt so strongly would diminish to a murmur. Schiele didn't always take a colorist approach with his work, but when he did, he made my hair stand on end.

The term "colorist" seems confusing and redundant. Don't all painters use color? Isn't this the same as calling someone a "cooking" chef or a "math-y" engineer? The dictionary definition is rather vague; Webster defines colorist for us as "one that colors or deals with color." Color is a critical component of many revolutionary art movements including Impressionism and Fauvism. One of the most famous movements that includes the actual term in the title is the Scottish Colourists. The movement was spearheaded in the early twentieth century when a group of four Scottish artists—Samuel John Peploe, F.C.B. Cadell, Leslie Hunter, and J.D. Fergusson—traveled to France (National Galleries Scotland). They were deeply moved by the Fauvist's use of vibrant colors, quick brushwork, and bold expression. Peploe and Hunter chose to focus on the genres of landscape and still life painting to experiment with hue relationships, as many of the Impressionists did. Cadell and Fergusson's works include a much greater emphasis on the figure and portrait.

Cadell's pieces in particular combine energetic brushwork with specific areas of heightened color, foiled for greater impact against planes of muted heather and grey tones. This is clearly illustrated in his *May Easter* (Fig. 7), which shows a serene woman, seated quietly in a blue-striped chair. Her body is turned away from the viewer, but her face can

clearly be seen. The skin is so light it appears almost translucent, her eyes are pale and unfocused. The palette is primarily cool in tone; the background is one flat neutral and so are her clothes. The use of these desaturated tones is an excellent foil for the figure's hair, which is rendered in a brilliant cadmium red. Her jewelry sparkles against it, directing the viewer's

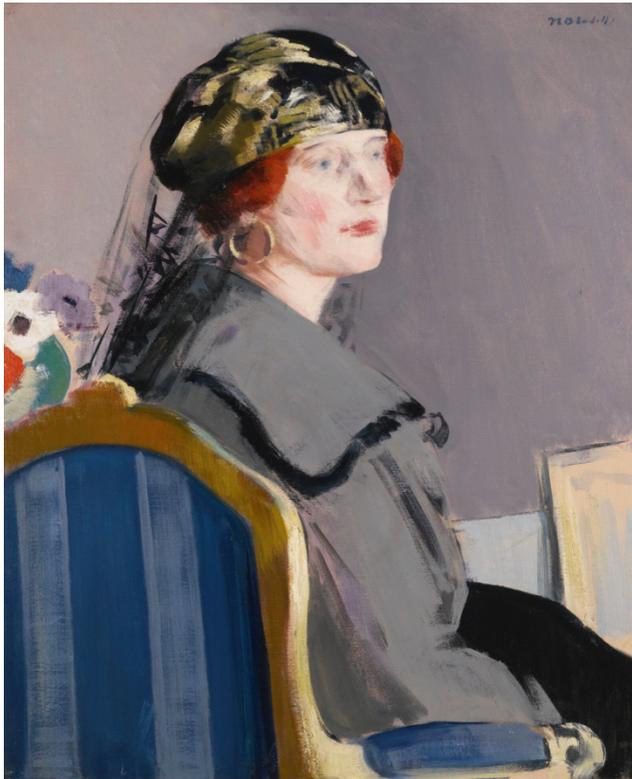


Figure 7. Francis Campbell Boileau Cadell, *May Easter*, 30 x 25 Inches, Oil on Canvas, Private Collection.

eyes to her head as the primary focal point. Sotheby's auction house, which listed the painting in their catalogue for auction in 2015, notes in its description that there is nothing remaining on the frame or canvas itself to confirm the identity of the sitter or the name of the painting. It is simply a woman who, if not for her chromatic red hair, fades quietly into the background. This mystery woman would be of no more importance visually than the chair upon which she

sits. The intentional use of that cadmium red imbues her with power and distinction.

Both Cadell's *May Easter* and Scheile's *Portrait of Paris von Gütersloh* depict a seated single figure, offset by a solid-color background. Neither one relies on a complex composition or thick textures or surrealist distortions of the figure itself. The nuances in the treatment of hue bestow upon each image a distinctive voice we now associate with their respective creators. These two artists used color relationships differently. Both are valid, as

they each elicit different reactions and emotional responses from the viewer. One is intensely charged, volatile. The other holds a serene, restful energy. Adept understanding of how different hues play off of each other is the unifying factor for the two paintings. It is their greatest commonality. While the color palettes for my own work are much more intensely saturated, these works have taught me the importance of being sensitive to how shifts in color and tone directly impact the emotional impact of a painting.

I define colorist as an artist who uses color relationships as the primary means of expression. John Ruskin, one of the most influential art critics of the Victorian era, explains the colorist attitude in this way. He writes: “You ought to love colour, and to think nothing quite beautiful or perfect without it; and if you really do love, for its own sake, and are not merely desirous to colour because you think painting a finer thing than drawing, there is some chance you may colour well” (187). As Ruskin implies, colorists spend their entire artistic careers chasing colors and drowning in them. The best ones combine this affinity with a well-developed knowledge of basic design principles and sensitivity to form. When they break conventional drawing and painting rules, they do so intentionally to best serve the color relationships they have created within the composition.

When I began to experiment with chromatic hues during the second semester of my master's program, the more pushback I received from my former teachers and peers alike. I was surprised by the reaction when my first intensely saturated portrait was publicly released. I felt as though I had done a brave thing, and that my risk taking should be met with at least a solid “atta-girl” or a hearty handshake. The reality was quite different, both humbling and necessary. I remember bringing my self-portrait *Drool* (Fig. 4) home to show my parents.

The piece was met with subtle distaste and more than a little confusion. “I like your landscapes better,” my mother said, with her characteristic Italian bluntness. “This new work is atonal. I don’t like it, it’s too bright or something.”

In my opinion, society is comfortable with art that reflects back at them what they know to be true: realistic proportions, symmetrical portraits, naturalistic colors. It’s easy for the eye to communicate with the brain, and there is money to be made in safety. Some contemporary artists have based their entire careers on producing soft, neutral paintings of women that are guaranteed not to clash with the collector’s home décor. Kassia St. Clair, arts editor for *The Economist* and author of the deeply insightful *The Secret Lives of Color*, makes this clearer. She writes: “A certain distaste for color runs through Western culture like a ladder in a stocking. Many classical writers were dismissive. Color was a distraction from the true glories of art: line and form. It was seen as self-indulgent and, later, sinful: a sign of dissimulation and dishonesty” (29). The disturbance my mother felt when looking at my painting was a clear illustration of the societal distaste that St. Clair examines. I wrestled with her unfavorable reactions to my newest painting, which were echoed in other reviews from my inner circle of non-artist friends. I tried to go back to painting with strictly earth-toned pigments, but their muted nature bored me, and I lost the desire to paint. For a moment, I wondered if my family and friends back home were right when they told me that a master’s education in the arts was a waste of time, money, and effort. It was only through researching well-regarded contemporary colorists—including but not limited to Jenny Saville, J. Lewis, and Alex Merritt—that I realized that there was a market and an appreciation for high impact color.

In my experience, intense colors are often regarded as lowbrow, gaudy or immature. Walking through any Nordstrom will reinforce this theory; the brightest colors are segregated to the children's section. A trip up the escalator to the women's and men's departments is a sea of black, white and grey tones. We unconsciously associate neutrals with sophistication, wealth, and adult responsibilities. Chartreuse and its similarly bright relatives are dismissed as appropriate only for those who have not matured. But why is this? Colorist historian David Batchelor explains this phenomenon further. He writes:

In the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded [...] as with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable. This loathing of color, this fear of corruption through color, needs a name: chromophobia. Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge color from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity. More specifically: this purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. (22-23)

With chromophobia running as a strong, but veiled, undercurrent throughout society, why would the artist willingly choose to buck the trend and express their subject using these intense hues? There are two main reasons why I personally would risk such an approach, and I believe that they apply to all colorists in a general sense. The first reason is a desire to challenge societal norms, embrace and own the label of outcast, or use the shock value or

disgust to generate a conversation about the art on display. For this particular mindset, much inspiration can be found in street art and other non-traditional methods of artistic expression.

The second reason is simply pure color intoxication. Literary and design theorist Roland Barthes describes this kind of creative drunkenness: "...Color ... is a kind of bliss ... like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell" (qtd. in Batchelor, 32). This enjoyment can become a form of artistic addiction for those who allow themselves to drown in this particular form of intoxication or bliss. In summary, fascination with color is something you either do or do not understand. Since it is not endorsed in society, it must therefore be innate and self-cultivated. A primary compulsion for colorists exists in different hues' slippery nature. Color is never static. It is always adjusting to its environment. Artistic theorist Josef Albers explains the nature of colors: "Colors present themselves in continuous flux, constantly related to changing neighbors and changing conditions" (5). I have noticed this as a frequent occurrence in my own work. I will faithfully mix what looks like a neutral medium green on my palette, but when I add strokes of it next to a light magenta color on my canvas, it turns a bright yellow. Colors are fickle things depending upon their environment. I like to think that they play with me just as much as I play with them.

However, it is important to note that all is not crayons and child-like joy in the world of a colorist painter. Obsession with anything, particularly in the arts, comes with a cost. Batchelor continues: "Colour is dangerous. It is a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness – at least for a moment. Colour requires, or results in, or perhaps just is, a loss of focus, of identity, of self. A loss of mind, a kind of delirium, a kind of madness" (51). My

enjoyment for this process trivializes the threat of lost sanity. I am willing to make the trade for the opportunity to create remarkable, juicy paintings.

John Ruskin further expands on this idea of surrender to hue. He writes to his class of students in his *Elements of Drawing*: "...you must also take great care not to be misled by affected talk about colour from people who have not the gift of it, [they] are just like people who eat slate-pencil and chalk, and assure everybody that they are nicer and purer than strawberries and plums" (162). I don't intend to suggest that I have the "gift" of color relationships, but I'm learning to cultivate my own taste for them. For this reason, I find myself in the unique position of discarding advice from those who are much more intelligent than me. They do not assign the same level of importance to color relationships as I do within the artistic tradition.

Ruskin goes on to write that color will forever disguise form. This plays beautifully into St. Clair's earlier observation about the distrust that many feel when confronted with intense saturation, since the human eye is largely incapable of determining for itself whether the lines and shapes were accurate in the first place. It's similar to having a very bright flash go off in your face, making it difficult for a few minutes to see the details in your surroundings. High-key color in figurative art works in a very similar manner. For this reason, it must be used with intentionality or not at all.

My current body of work explores the relationship between chromatic colors and the psychological state of an individual. This exploration has been met with a fair amount of suspicion, as explained earlier. Batchelor continues in his research to explain the roots of this phenomenon. He writes:

To this day, there remains a belief, often unspoken perhaps but equally often unquestioned, that seriousness in art and culture is a black and white issue, that depth is measured only in shades of grey. Forms of chromophobia persist in the diverse range of art from more recent years – the varieties of Realism, for instance, with its unnatural fondness for brown, or in Conceptual art, which often made a fetish of black and white [...] When Hollywood discovered colour, it was deemed suitable mainly for fantasies, musicals and period pieces; drama remained largely a monochrome issue. (30-31)

I don't consider my art to be particularly serious, probably because of these social constructs surrounding both color and expression. However, my work does not rely solely on championing my colorist label.

As an intuitive artist—one who makes decisions primarily based on instinct, and not following a strict set of academic processes—my interests as an artist activate a very strong, very primal fight-or-flight response. In a graduate program, I am in a near constant state of mild panic. My advisors, teachers and classmates are often frustrated when looking at one of my in-progress pieces, and I am unable to give a concrete explanation for my stylistic choices. With much of my work, I only know what specifically I am painting through or about after the piece has been finished. I find myself often quite envious of the legendary Pablo Picasso, who would simply retrieve his revolver from a deep pocket and fire blanks at anyone who asked him what specifically his paintings were about (Luling). This is not a practice that is encouraged in academia. I keep the iconic picture of Picasso, cigarette

dangling out of a corner of his mouth and inspecting his firearm, pinned to my bulletin board just the same.

An invasive question which is often levied by my non-artistically educated peers, when it is revealed that I am an oil painter is the simple and terrible, “But why?” Our societal pressures are largely centered around financial security, stability and success—the three most difficult attributes to achieve as a living artist. In the current artistic climate, game artists and graphic designers hold the most demand. Oil painters are at the very bottom of the food chain, with sporadic or nonexistent revenue from their works. What could possibly compel the artistically minded to complete work in this tradition? Simply put, I enjoy the physicality of the oil painting process and the tangibility of the paint and solvents. I spend my studio days treating canvases, mixing different colors with my palette knives, drawing and redrawing until my fingers cramp. I too desire to fill the world with my perspective of the things I see, and I want these things to be tangible, handmade and irreplaceable.

My interest is piqued most strongly through examination of the people around me. I refuse to curb my fascination with the faces I encounter, as well as the stories that pour out from their mouths and the cherished hurts and emotional pain that tries to hide behind the eyes. My earliest memory is the very blurry outline of a face, my tiny arms trying and failing to touch the mystery blob. In many ways, I feel as though I am still reaching out to communicate with this unknown figure. I love people, but I know I can never fully understand the complexities of their interior life. I use paint to try to understand my relationship with the people around me, and the process brings me peace.

## METHODOLOGY

My process for selecting models is incredibly personal, since I enjoy painting the portraits of those I know on a very close, intimate level. It's difficult to illicit the type of outrageous facial expressions and emotions that my work requires from someone with whom I have no real rapport. My friends and family are familiar enough with my personality that, if



Figure 8. Laura Sonnek, reference photograph for *Hidden Fees*, 2021.

I ask them to floss for me while I take pictures, it doesn't raise as many eyebrows. I asked a very lovely professional model to do the same thing—flossing—last semester. Although she did execute the task willingly and with grace, it just wasn't the same as my childhood friend Isaiah drooling through an outrageous wad of floss while telling me about the mandolin solo on his newest album track. A large majority of my favorite paintings, including *I'm Immortal!* (Fig. 2), was created based on spontaneous candid shots of my friends making random

facial expressions or midway through some unflattering activity.

Once I have taken or rediscovered my primary reference images for a new painting, I spend a few days exploring cropping options in Adobe Lightroom. Figure 8 shows the original, unedited photo for *Hidden Fees* (Fig. 3). Fiddling with the composition is one of the longest parts of the preparation process. I try to create between 15-20 unique image

variations. By the time I've reached this quota, or I feel as though I've exhausted my options, there are typically only two or three that have strong compositional balance. Between these options, I choose whichever one I think is the funniest in its absurdity. I like to laugh while I paint, and there are so few funny paintings that I've found circulating in the contemporary fine art market.

Generating color studies is the next step. Experimenting with hues excites me the most, and I primarily focus on generating chromatic complementary or tertiary color relationships as I did for *Hidden Fees* (see Figs. 9 & 10). They pack a lot of visual punch in a very limited palette. Additionally, utilizing the relationship between two or three colors at most allows me to focus on establishing value structure while I paint, without getting distracted by the entire rainbow of colors I could include in the composition. Playing around digitally with multiple color combinations allows me to quench my thirst for colors without wasting actual paint on the canvas or valuable time. When I was first experimenting with vibrantly colored portraits, I would often ask my model what their favorite colors were and do my best to render their face using only those colors. This quickly turned stifling, since so many of my friends are very passionate about earth tones and I had a hard time psyching myself up to paint different variations of dirt brown or ochre.

I decide on the final color study to use as reference for a new painting based on gut instincts. Whichever combination of hues delights me the most is the one I throw all my excitement behind, regardless of whether or not it is the most aesthetically pleasing pairing. For example, I stumbled upon two dynamic color options for my self-portrait *Hidden Fees*.



Figure 9. Laura Sonnek, first reference edit for *Hidden Fees*, 2021.

Figure 10. Laura Sonnek, second reference edit for *Hidden Fees*, 2021.

The first one (Fig. 9) I found to be more pleasant and spicy to look at, but the second one (Fig. 10) I felt was more compelling due to the odd combination of bright lime and burnt orange. I knew I had to paint the second image, even though it was not quite as flattering as the first.

Approaching the painting process in this way gives me the freedom to explore more options and

avoid major mistakes before my brush even touches the canvas. I feel more relaxed and confident that I have chosen the most interesting composition out of the possible options explored. This mindset yields quick paintings with bold brushstrokes. These works are so much fun to create, and I hope they are just as much fun for the viewer to see. When seen together, my pieces form a comical array of humanity, a mood ring of expression and experience.

## CONCLUSION

As I reflect on my growth in the program, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for all the help and encouragement I have received during my time here. I started the program with a basic understanding of how to paint a semi-realistic portrait and a vague desire to improve. In the last two years, I have experimented and grown more as an artist than I suspected was possible, and at a higher level than at any other point in my education. My mentors, advisors, professors and peers have inspired me with their artistic genius and concepts. Through their honest observations and questions, I realized how my early work lacked real focus, concept and technical skill. They inspired me to dig for something richer: a combination of expression, color and humanity that would connect me to my work, and my work to a broader audience. Throughout this process, I've found a painting style that feels as natural as breathing and as exciting as waking up in a new country. I look forward to continuing my experiments with this new skill set, creating a body of work that will resonate across multiple generations.

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## APPENDIX

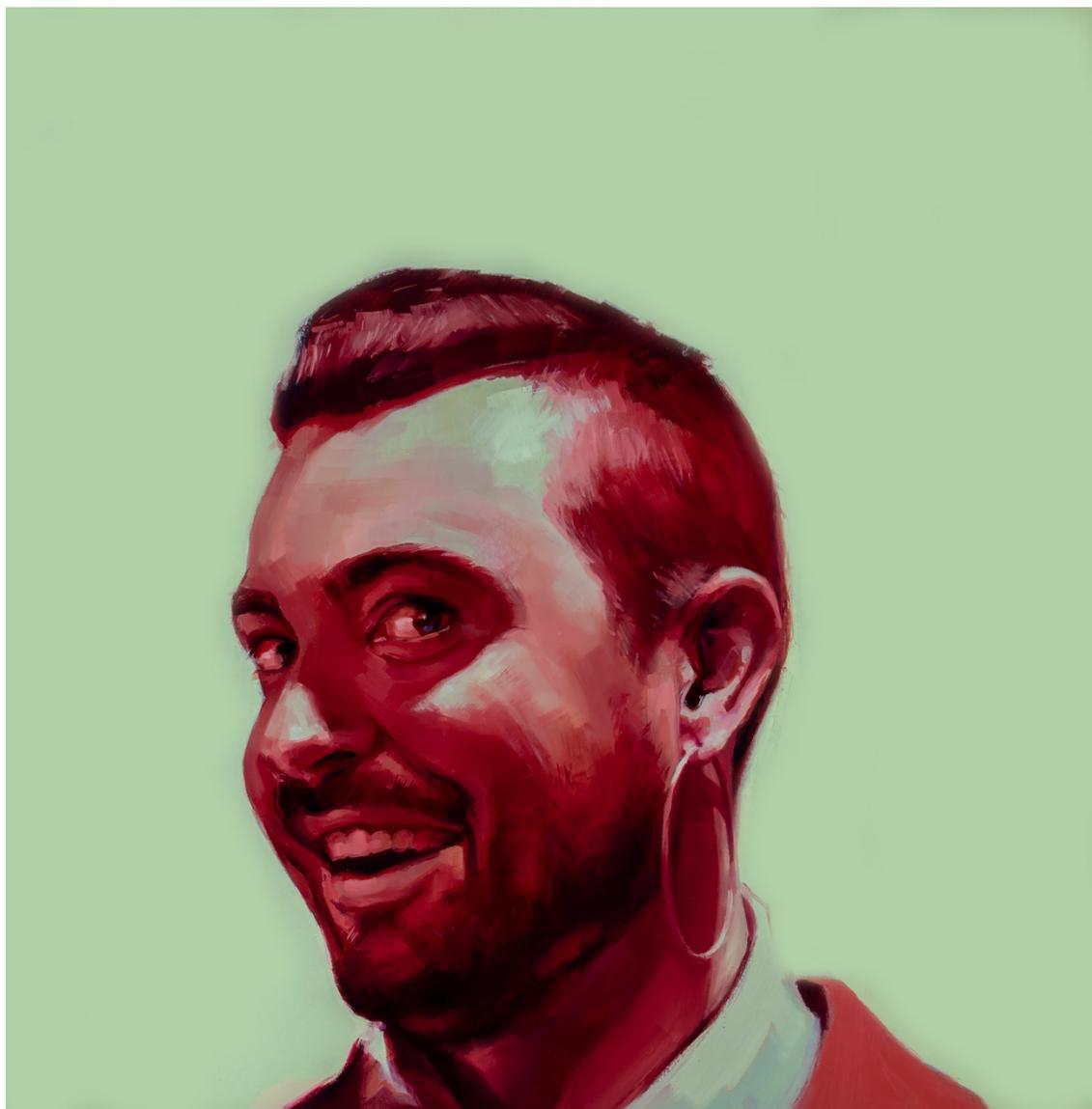


Plate 1. *I'm Immortal!*, Laura Sonnek, 2021, 30 x 30 Inches, Oil on Canvas.

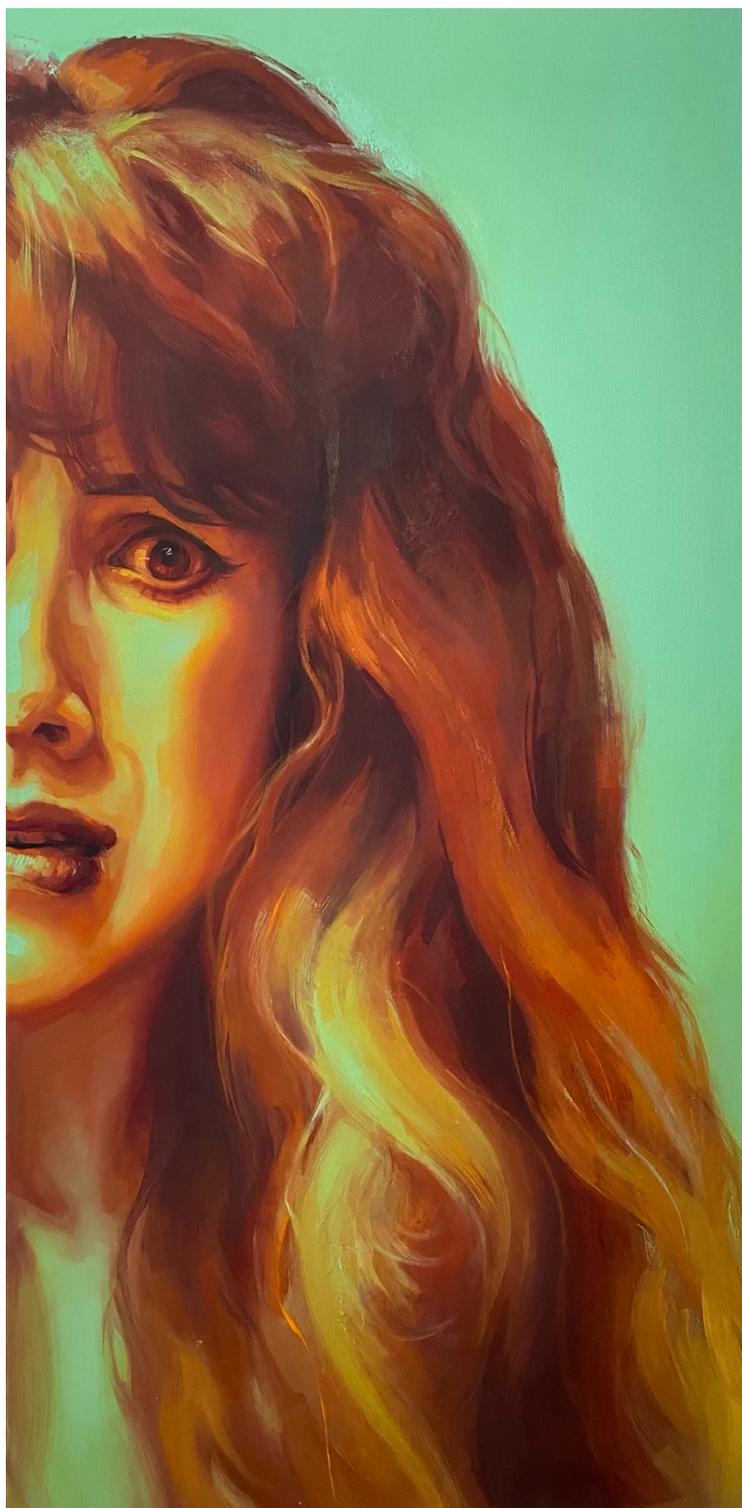


Plate 2. *Hidden Fees*, Laura Sonnek, 2021, 48 x 24 Inches, Oil on Canvas.

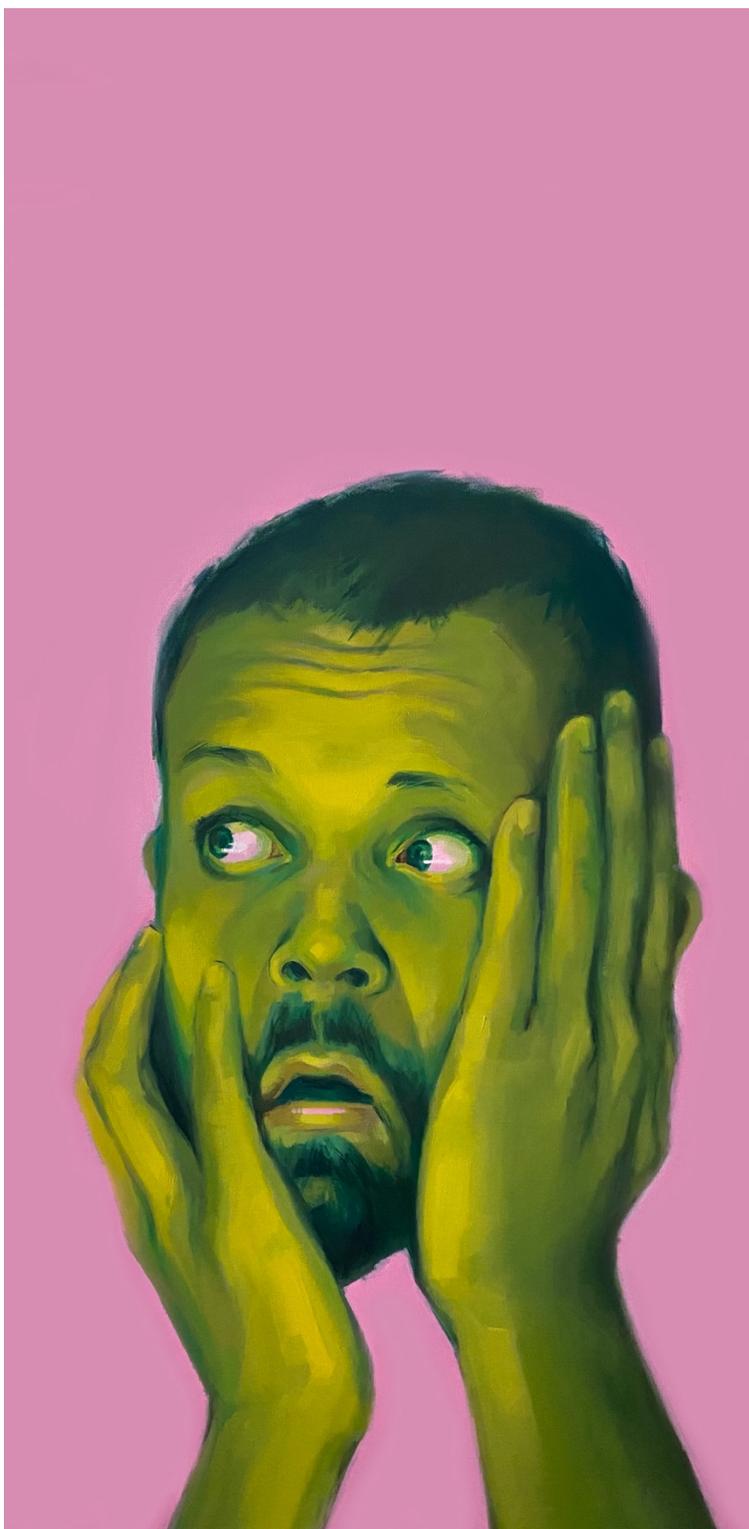


Plate 3. *Melancholic Melodrama*, Laura Sonnek, 2021, 48 x 24 Inches, Oil on Canvas.



Plate 4. *Jersey*, Laura Sonnek, 2021, 30 x 40 Inches, Oil on Canvas.

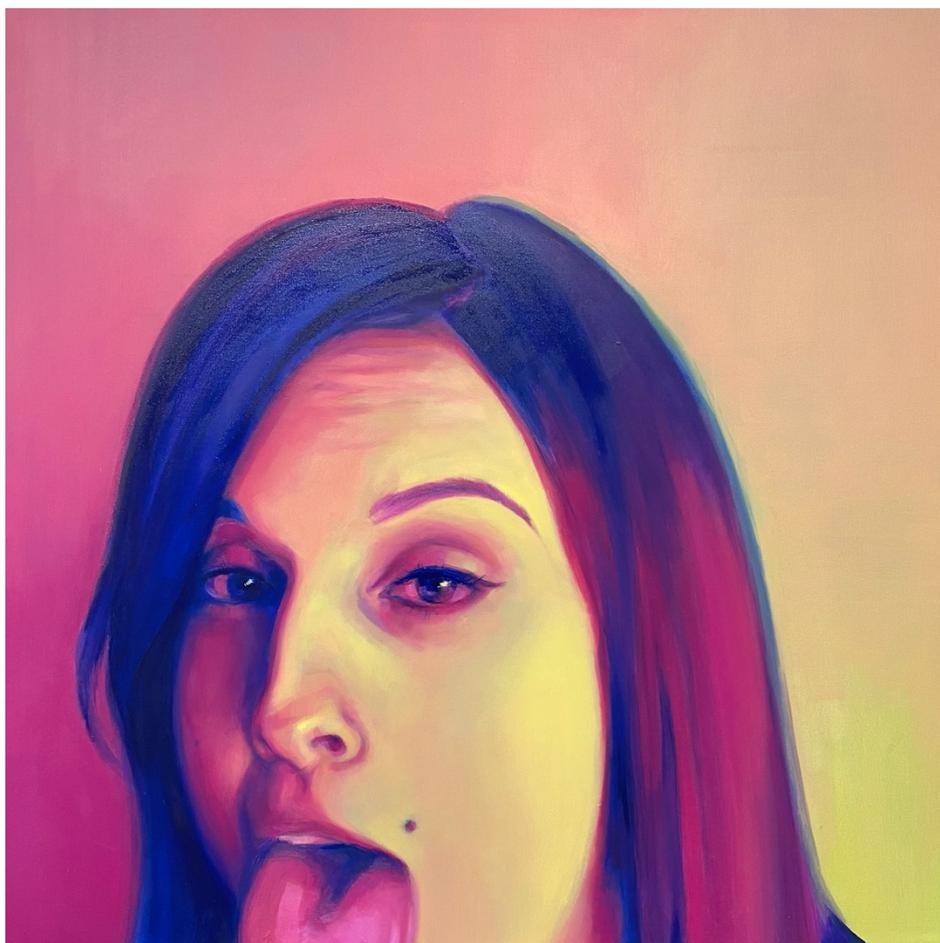


Plate 5. *Too Hot to Handle*, Laura Sonnek, 2021, 30 x 30 Inches, Oil on Canvas.