

Do Not Enter



DO NOT ENTER

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

Another cold brisk night in the city. Time to wander around, get lost, and find something else to paint. What am I looking for again? Tim suggested keeping my thesis idea in mind—the city is modern life with all the technology, supplies, services, cooperation, and participation that is required to function. The darkness of the city at night becomes the struggles and difficulties of modern life—all the stress and pressure that people put themselves through to keep going. The artificial lighting in that darkness—the streetlights, the displays, the neon signs...the light that we create ourselves—represents the strength we find in ourselves to persist. The act of wandering to find a composition to paint is akin to wandering through life to find a way. I seek buildings with interesting lighting and lots of signage—some of them are crooked. A mundane everyday scene most people would probably walk by without noticing is a perfect painting subject. The mundane has a *wabi-sabi* atmosphere—a Japanese aesthetic idea that celebrates the imperfect and decay as a reflection of the imperfection and impermanence of life—which is not too polished and clean but kept functioning well enough. A lot of interesting cracks in the sidewalk make the scene a little beat up. Yet the sidewalk makes a good path to indicate the wandering. Little details and lettering pose a nice challenge. “Do Not Enter” signs send a signal of danger and going the wrong way. Great, let’s do this!

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Oh, and I guess I should thank Peter Zokosky too. It was fun.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Dad who died of colon cancer in April 2020. He was my best friend and very encouraging of my art career. He loved photography, but because he once met an MFA grad working at a gas station, he decided to take a different path. He wanted to be able to support a family. Thanks to his sacrifice and decision, I was fortunate enough to choose art as a career. My Dad once said that my pursuit of painting inspired him to take more pictures which he would have continued to do into his retirement. Unfortunately, he died before that was possible. Thank you, Dad, for everything you gave to us. I am sorry you could not enjoy your retirement, I am sorry you could not spend that time with Mom... I wish there was something I could have done to help you, but instead I will try my best to be successful—whatever that may mean—and live my life as best I can, as I know you would have wanted. Thank you.

EPIGRAPH

Roll the Dice

*if you're going to try, go all the
way.
otherwise, don't even start.*

*if you're going to try, go all the
way.
this could mean losing girlfriends,
wives, relatives, jobs and
maybe your mind.*

*go all the way.
it could mean not eating for 3 or 4 days.
it could mean freezing on a
park bench.
it could mean jail,
it could mean derision,
mockery,
isolation.
isolation is the gift,
all the others are a test of your
endurance, of
how much you really want to
do it.
and you'll do it
despite rejection and the worst odds
and it will be better than
anything else
you can imagine.*

*if you're going to try,
go all the way.
there is no other feeling like
that.
you will be alone with the gods
and the nights will flame with
fire.*

*do it, do it, do it.
do it.*

all the way

all the way.

*you will ride life straight to
perfect laughter, it's
the only good fight
there is.
-Charles Bukowski*

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DO NOT ENTER

DESCRIPTION

Life is wild and hard and dark and scary and full of moments of beauty and messiness and everything else. Life is chaotic and erratic and never quite goes where you intend. Obstacles block the path; signs say to go the other way. Some people give advice, but no one else can make the decisions for you. They may offer help, but ultimately, you must face life on your own. There is a road with all sorts of turn offs, and they all lead somewhere different. Some people plan out the path ahead of time, prepare as much as possible, and expect to know where they are going. And oh, how so serious every deviation is.

I choose to wander, not taking things too seriously, and seeking out fun in the darkness. Wandering around the city at night is a great way to explore. Sometimes I use my phone to keep my bearings or find my way back. However, purposely getting lost, wandering with no direction, nor knowing where I am going, is just more fun. Wandering and exploring the city, the unknown, is much like life itself. You may have some idea of where you want to go, but you never know for sure where you will end up or what you might find. I wandered through life, first going to college for engineering, not really sure of what I wanted to do. Now, I make watercolor paintings of cityscape nocturnes, trying to capture this sense of wandering through life alone to face the challenges.

Some of the challenges that I face in my life, among the usual everyday obstacles, are mental health issues and substance abuse. Now I am doing a lot better: making smarter healthier decisions, steering clear from the problem substances for the most part, taking medications, and practicing socializing with the guidance of a therapist. Before entering therapy after engineering school, however, I struggled on my own with social anxiety,

generalized anxiety, dysthymia or chronic depression, and a curiosity for altered states of consciousness with the hope of self-medication.

I was depressed for as long as I can remember. To some degree I am just very introverted, but I am not really sure how much of my desire to be alone could have been the depression. I first got my taste for alcohol around third grade but did not start to really get drunk till high school. The intoxication helped me feel more “normal” in social situations. I would not be too afraid of being myself around others. Alcohol seemed to make the stresses of life more manageable.

At night, the city is enveloped in darkness and takes on a completely different personality than during the day. I feel more comfortable in the city at night. During the day, the city is full of activity, with people going to work or shopping, or just generally engaging with each other. At night, especially late at night or early in the morning, few people if any can be seen. Maybe a handful of people are still at the bars, but for the most part, the night life is over. Only the real drunks are out and wandering around, looking for a comfortable spot to spend the rest of the night. Some people may be cleaning up their shops or taking out the trash. The few people who are out tend to avoid each other, as everyone seems to be weary of the others who are crazy enough to still be out. Everywhere is quiet, almost silent, except for the occasional car going by or person screaming into the abyss.

Night in the city is indicative of the darkness of modern life. The darkness in life is something most people tend to avoid, much like the darkness of the city at night. Modern life is full of struggles that we must overcome to become successful, whatever that may mean for each of us. To find what success is, often we must wander from different passions and interests until we find the one for us. To find a way in life, we must persist through whatever

dark challenges obfuscate our path. My paintings depict this wandering by showing various scenes around the city at night.



Fig. 1. Brian Blasman, *Arcade at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 10" x 14"

The city is not completely dark. There is also the artificial light, light we create ourselves, to light the way. And naturally, there are other people who help light our way as well, but still, ultimately the decision and the work are up to us.

I have been told that some of the places I have wandered to were pretty dangerous. Late at night or early in the morning, the city is close to empty. There is not really anyone else out there, and for the most part, I have not had any problems. Though, the few encounters I have had were weird. Like the crackhead that looked strangely like one of my professors and wanted me to follow him in the train station. Or the math teacher I met in Okinawa who asked me a lot of probing questions.

Arcade at Night (Fig.1) is from a picture (Fig.2) I took in 2019 while wandering around Naha, Okinawa, Japan. I was there on a family trip. My Grandma was born in

Okinawa. We went there to reconnect with that side of the family. In Okinawa, they have big parties for special occasions, with the whole family, including many distant cousins and extended family members. So, we had big party in a banquet room, and I got to meet a lot of distant relatives. To give something back to them and to help reinforce the connection, I planned on making paintings for them from that trip, which I worked on during my first two semesters of the MFA program.

Behind the hotel where we stayed was an arcade, a street with a cover across the path for pedestrians only. Lining the street are various shops and restaurants. After midnight, on one of the first nights we were staying in Naha, I wandered around the arcade and neighboring streets. The shops were mostly closed of course, with metal corrugated doors blocking their entrances. But there was a lot of signage and graffiti. Some shops left a lot of boxes outside. And apparently, the custom in Japan is for businesses to leave trash bags out at night, for collection. There were a few people walking around and some of the restaurants and bars appeared to still be open with the last customers of the night.

For me, the city is a symbol for modern life with all the advantages and turmoil that it brings. Life in the city is made possible by complex systems such as waste collection, food and water supply lines, plumbing, electricity, transportation networks, and so much more. Modern life with all its luxuries and challenges is made possible by the technologies and networks that make up our cities. A delicate balance of participation and competence allows everything to function properly. Modern life, of course, is not limited to the city. However,

people, technology, and all the various aspects of modern life are especially concentrated together in the city.



Fig. 2. Brian Blasman, Reference for *Arcade at Night*, 2019, Digital Picture

Arcade at Night shows a figure walking away from the viewer, towards a blinding light and a storefront off in the distance. If I remember correctly, that figure was the math teacher. In the foreground, are closed shops in shadow with a mysterious red light coming from an unseen source. To the right is a bike leaning against a post in the dark as well.

Arcade at Night is a painterly, impressionistic cityscape. Perspective is not perfect, and the lines are not quite straight. These imperfections reflect the imperfection of the path. The dark shadows from where the viewer stands reflect the darkness in life. The lack of people emphasizes the feeling of facing something alone. Artificial lighting, however, lights the way through the darkness and provides an end in sight. The red light seems foreboding while the white light reflects against a rusty orange cover.

I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life growing up—an end to work towards was very difficult to see. Until about halfway through high school I was not very motivated to learn. By chance I found a movie, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This movie was based on a book by the same title, written by Hunter Thompson. When I discovered the book, I became obsessed with reading in a way I never was before. I had read books on my own before and to some extent enjoyed them. After discovering Thompson, however, I began to seek out more and more books like his. I read many of Thompson's other books. Since he was a journalist covering politics, I became that much more interested in politics and with that came a motivation to learn more about a variety of other topics as well.

After reading Thompson and other 60s era writers, I became infatuated with psychedelics. Substances that can change your perception of reality? I wanted to learn as much as I could about them and everything else related to them as well, like neuroscience, psychology, philosophy... What did it mean that a substance could change reality like that? But more importantly, these substances seemed to make a lot of these writers more creative, more confident, more weird, more... free. I was trapped within the confines of my fear and these substances seemed to be the cure.

I had some interest in drawing when I was younger, but reading Thompson really inspired me to write. In my assignments at school, I became much more creative, almost channeling Thompson's voice when pushing how far I could get away with what I wrote. Still, with my self-doubt and non-existent self-esteem, I did not think at the time art could be a possible direction for me. I was totally convinced that the only way to get a financially sustainable job was to pursue something in math or science. I begrudgingly went to school

for engineering, filled with anxiety, fear, depression, and a misguided hope for self-medication.



Fig. 3. Brian Blasman, *Restaurant at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"

Restaurant at Night is another painting of a picture from Okinawa, also from the arcade in Naha (Fig. 3). This is a place I found at the end of a dark hallway with no light. Around a corner up ahead of me was a warm glow. A giant paper lantern was on and bathed the closed restaurant in light. *Restaurant at Night* puts the viewer at one end of a walkway, illuminated by the paper lantern, looking down a path that becomes dark and mysterious, indexical of a destination or future that is hard to see. There is plenty of stuff around the viewer: boxes, crates, bags, a trash can and other objects in the dark. There is a counter inviting the viewer in the light to stay and take a seat. Or the viewer can wander into the dark pathway in the back. There are signs with Japanese characters, probably advertising different products or places, reflecting the advice others might give.

Down the middle of the painting is an asphalt walkway. This path leads into the back of the painting where the light does not reach. Some things can be seen in the darkness, but they cannot be identified. At the end of the path is a blue light from another unknown source. Another unknown destination one must go all the way to discover without fully knowing what they are getting themselves into. Another story about trying to find one's way in life through all the distractions, through the darkness.

Watercolor is my medium of choice for these paintings. I like the free-flowing nature of water and its unpredictability. This is another metaphor for life and its difficulties. Sometimes life is fun and spontaneous and sometimes life, or watercolors, requires a lot of concentration. Mistakes can be hard to hide in watercolors. Brushstrokes cannot easily be covered, and corrections show through. Lines are hand drawn and are not completely straight, and they cannot be fixed. I hope this reflects an attitude of trying to figure out life on my own, a skepticism of conventional wisdom, and a desire to not hide past mistakes. Instead, the mistakes are part of the character of the painting.

My mistakes are a part of who I am and help me to become a better person. To some extent, going to college for engineering was a mistake. I should not have let my fear of financial hardship guide my decision making. Studying engineering while being passionate about other subjects was very difficult. I hated myself for who I thought I was becoming. I hated myself for not having the courage to be something else. And I hated all the time and effort engineering required. I sometimes found myself crying for no apparent reason. I tried to power through all the studying while smoking weed and hiding in my apartment. I did not make any friends. The few people I did interact with I only met through group projects. And

I probably was not a very pleasant person to work with. Instead, I spent all my free time—well, time I should have been studying—drawing on top of my notes.

Yet, I am still grateful that I studied engineering and got my bachelor's. Despite my poor study habits, I still learned a lot and retained some of that information. Engineering has taught me how to think and revealed how technology works. When I look back on engineering school, I think to some degree, my disinterest and resentment towards engineering was due to my immaturity. Maybe if I approached engineering with more curiosity, I may have actually enjoyed it. With this in mind, I am even considering going back to engineering as a day job to help support my art habit.

My last quarter at University of California, Riverside (UCR) broke me and lead me to question my approach to life. For roughly four months, I took LSD about once a week, almost every weekend. I smoked so much weed in between taking the acid, I felt as though I was continuously on LSD. I became extremely paranoid on top of my social anxiety. Everything people said seemed to have infinite interpretations, and any of them could be true for all I knew. People appeared to speak more allegorically than literally, and I was not sure I ever understood what they really were talking about. Or even if what I said was what I thought I meant to say. The darkness was getting awfully confusing.



Fig. 4. Brian Blasman, *Traffic Cones at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 9 "x 12"

In *Traffic Cones at Night* (Fig. 4), much like I was feeling at that time, the viewer has no choice but to face the night alone and find a way through it. This painting, as well as the previous painting, are 9" x 12". This relatively small size is great for putting in my backpack to take with me wherever I go. In this way, the size literally communicates a sense of wandering. The small size has an intimacy that begs viewers to get closer, forcing them to experience the painting on their own.

Traffic Cones at Night shows a sidewalk along a street under some train tracks in Naha. Here, the viewer is put in another night cityscape, in the darkness looking at some ambiguous street scene off in the distance. Traffic cones warn the viewer from proceeding. The viewer may be standing in a dark place, but there is light up ahead. The path along the way is distorted and imperfect, probably hard to travel. But there is an end in sight.

Near the end of engineering school, there was a strange moment of realization. I am not actually sure when in the quarter this happened. The LSD seemed to take control of my inner monologue and started to talk to me. My thoughts took on a life of their own and continued without my control. I really felt as if some entity was talking to me, though I am not sure what or who—my subconscious, some higher power, the LSD itself? Regardless of who was talking, this dialogue seemed to make some valid points. I was miserable and not actively seeking a job because I did not like the career path I was on. With all the time I spent drawing or writing, I obviously wanted to do something more in that direction—an artistic path. And I would hate myself and be miserable if I did not at least try following that passion.

Could any of this be true? This whole monologue was under the influence of acid. Is anything it said reliable? Surely, I should not just change my whole life's direction because of some drug-induced revelation, right? I did not have good answers to these questions, and I was still on acid, so I did not really trust what I thought anyways. Or I was not sure I could.

I barely kept my head together to make graduation. Finals were over and like usual, I somehow managed to do fairly well on most of them, guaranteeing that I passed my classes. At this point, I was suicidal to the extent where I was afraid I might walk down the street and throw myself in front of cars. I was fighting a strong urge not to jump. Or I would cut myself and imagine how good cutting just a little deeper might feel. The suicidal thoughts were

becoming stronger than just thoughts, and I was genuinely afraid of them. I needed help and was considering seeing a therapist myself before my parents made the suggestion.



Fig. 5. Brian Blasman, *Library at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"

Library at Night puts the viewer in a dark parking lot at night with no real evidence of where they are, except for the title (Fig. 5). In front of the viewer is a path they face alone, a life they face alone. A nice quiet spot for the viewer to ruminate on everything they ever did wrong in their life. First, the viewer goes to the library's dumpster, then to a one-way sign that points to a tree covered in Christmas lights. Along the way, darkness, and obstacles such as trees prevent the viewer from reaching the light in the darkness far-off in the background.

Nighttime is full of desaturated colors which create a dark atmosphere and mood. Going out at night can be associated with danger or fun. When I was younger, night was when I could relax, when I was not expected to do anything for school. I often stayed up late in high school and college listening to music or watching movies or going out and exploring.

A friend and I used to go out to run to the beach at night. Night paradoxically represents exploration and fun as well as danger and darkness.

Unlike the first three paintings, *Library at Night* is a plein air painting, painted on location in Laguna Beach behind the library, looking towards its parking lot. Painting on location, especially at night, is more difficult and more fun. This sometimes requires repeated visits to the same location, staying there for hours at a time. This adds an element of persistence and determination to face the path in the paintings.

The path is imperfect, both in my struggle to paint and all the stuff in the way. There is even the shadow of a stop sign beckoning the viewer on the left side. Should the viewer trust where the one-way sign points or risk going somewhere else? What is the goal anyway—is there a goal? Paths take people from one place to another. Paths can branch off down detours that take people away from their destination or lead them to a different place than they originally set out for. Often the destination is hard to find and appears impossible to reach. Many obstacles can block the way.

After graduating, my path seemed to hit a dead end. My first therapist helped set me in a better direction. Or at least showed a way to possibly overcome some obstacles. After talking to her about engineering and the issues I had at school, she suggested I give art a try. She agreed that with as much time as I spent drawing, that seemed to be what I really wanted to do. Since pursuing my passion in art, I have started setting more positive goals to work towards. I have slowly been making healthier decisions. Recently, I have been less inclined to use substances or hang out with “friends” who were toxic influences. Getting to this point has been a long and challenging path with many deviations and setbacks. The temptation to go back to substances is often there, just around the corner. I have many waves like this

where I stay clean and return to substances. Addiction is probably something I will always struggle with, same with the depression. There will always be that curiosity for altered states. There will always be that part of the darkness to struggle through.

To some extent, I have let go of trying to use substances, especially as much as I used to. But there is still new research coming out that suggests psychedelics may have some benefits and when used properly and that there are few negative consequences, at least physically... the curiosity and thus the temptation will always be there (Fuentes). Right now, I no longer rely on these substances to self-medicate, and this has certainly been a positive change. I still struggle with different anxieties but working with a therapist has been a great help towards managing discomfort and pushing myself out of my comfort zone.

My paintings are to be subtly psychedelic to speak to what I have learned through my substance use, without glorifying their use or encouraging others to follow my path. Traditionally psychedelic art typically relies on vibrating colors, wavy lines, kaleidoscopic patterns, and mystical esoteric symbolism to scream, "I'm on drugs!" at the viewer. In my paintings, the unintentional perspective mistakes and wavy lines hint at visual distortions. Part of the inspiration for choosing mundane and otherwise uninteresting subjects is how psychedelics have a way of making anything and everything beautiful to stare at for hours while letting your thoughts wander. And somehow every thought seems to be allegorical and refer back to some dark part of you that you would rather not think about.

These substances also have a peculiar sense of humor. They can be very dark yet nonsensical and almost whimsical. One moment I could be terrified of my parents discovering what is going on in my room. I would be on the floor near the door, trying to

listen to what they might be saying. Their voices sounding like the volume is boosted a little bit, almost as if their voices are coming through a speaker just outside my door.

Wait, were those voices real? Then the next moment, I would be naked, staring at my clothes in a pile on the floor, trying to figure out what they are or what their purpose is. Should I go outside—no wait, would that not seem weird to everyone else? Another moment, I realized I forgot to breathe for—well, I am not sure how long. I aim to achieve this sense of humor in my paintings. This humor is hinted at in the wandering late at night when almost no one else is out. Sometimes the arrangement of signs or choice of location is funny, to me at least, in a weird sort of way.

Psychedelics have a way of breaking down all your beliefs and tearing apart the flimsy foundation your life is built on. They force you to question basic assumptions you did not realize you even had. Then the drug laughs hysterically in your face while you try to find some ground to stand on. With this type of questioning comes a certain empathy for other ways of interpreting reality. Through the experience of psychedelics, you have to face these thoughts alone. They come at such a fast pace, they are sometimes hard to get a hold of. Even if you are using these substances with friends, only you are experiencing your specific thoughts. Only you are wandering around this city at night.



Fig. 6. Brian Blasman, *Laundromat at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 22" x 30"

Laundromat at Night is another solitary scene that could appear in any city (Fig. 6).

The corner of the laundromat is on the left side while a house sits in the darkness with a sign in front and a picket fence. In the middle of the painting, is an alley that goes off in the distance to a dark mountain with a few shining lights on it. The warm glow from the streetlight pushes out the purple darkness. The viewer is left standing at the other side of the street, with no one in sight, thinking to themselves about where they are and where to go next. There is also a slight perceptual and perspectival distortion to throw the viewer off.

Laundromat at Night is bigger than the other paintings. I wanted to try increasing the size and found it very challenging. This too adds to the idea of struggle to get to the destination in the painting. The paper is hard to carry and is slightly too large for me to comfortably reach across it. The size is right outside my comfort zone.

My painterly impressionistic style is somewhat important to my paintings. The imperfections and the looseness of the paintings reflect the struggle for self-improvement as well as a laid-back, lackadaisical approach to life. This is something I want to retain while striving to depict space and form more accurately. This is part of what drives me to paint more. I want to explore the city, discover the different parts that most people do not see, or perhaps see those locations from a different perspective. In service of this, I want to be able to paint more accurately to get closer to the truth of the location.

Yet, I choose to retain the human imperfection of my hand and subjectiveness of my experience. Though photographs might help me, I still enjoy the challenge and struggle of trying to reproduce the image by hand. I also want to paint on location to embed more of the experience of being in these locations into the painting.

My nocturnal watercolor cityscapes aim to depict a beauty in experiencing life and persevering through the darkness. Everyone has their own darkness to fight with. My darkness comes from struggling with various anxieties, depression, and substance abuse. These paintings act as a reminder that the path may be imperfect and full of mistakes or setbacks. But we can still create our own light with a different perspective. The darkness can be fun.

RESEARCH

2 AM and I am driving down some street I do not know again. Not sure where I am. Looks like some vaguely residential area. Oh, there are some interesting buildings, but I passed them. Just keep going. I will find something else. Hey, there is a liquor store. They are closed but they have some lights on still. Quick, I need to pull over. Need to find parking. There is a residential street. Maybe I can find a spot down there... This will be a long walk.

Had to go down a couple blocks before finding anything. Oh well. Grab my backpack and time to start walking.

This is a fairly nice area. The houses are kind of nice. A lot of them have fences around their yards. Not too much trash in the street. There is a nice warm familiar glow from the streetlights. They do not have the daylight temperature streetlights yet. That is cool. There are some cracks in the sidewalk. A few used masks here and there. A plastic bag blows in the breeze across the street and stops up against a car.

Most people may not think of this type of scene as beautiful. There is only a normal everyday quality to the residential street with nothing picturesque about it. Not only is there no particular monument or object to look at, there is trash on the ground and the sidewalk is broken. This might qualify as *wabi sabi*. *Wabi sabi* is a Japanese aesthetic idea that originates from tea ceremonies and is strongly influenced by Zen (Koren). *Wabi sabi* celebrates the imperfect and the decay as a reflection of the imperfection and impermanence of life. I try to capture this kind of beauty in my watercolors.

I was first introduced to watercolors in art school in Chicago. For a research class, I made a copy of a watercolor by Peggy Macnamara, one of the other professors at school. We were challenged to do something different that we always wanted to try. I heard watercolors were hard to use, and I wanted to try them. Later, I met Professor Macnamara and took her class at the Field Museum, the natural history museum of Chicago. From her, I learned about other watercolorists like John Singer Sargent (Fig. 7). I absolutely fell in love with the looseness and freshness of Sargent's watercolors and wanted to capture that in my own work. This looseness and apparent spontaneity exemplify a Zen or *wabi sabi* appreciation of the beauty of the imperfect and living in the moment. In the *Venetian Canal* painting, Sargent

loosely depicts buildings that are fairly accurate at first glance. The windows were painted on with some speed and urgency that leaves them looking more like brushstrokes than rectangles, yet they still appear deliberate and meticulously thought out. The reflections in the water are also made up of these deliberate brushstrokes that are fast and fresh.



Fig. 7. John Singer Sargent, *Venetian Canal*, 1913, watercolor on paper, 15x20", Metropolitan Museum

Many of the authors I like write autobiographically, sharing very personal and revealing stories. Jack Kerouac wrote about his travel experiences, relationships, and addictions as I do in my thesis. For example, *Dharma Bums* is about Kerouac's time with poet Gary Snyder in the fifties in San Francisco before going to Desolation Peak in Washington. At this time, Kerouac was practicing Buddhism and Snyder was practicing Zen. These writers have influenced me to make paintings that are about my own personal experiences. I want to express a brutal honesty about who I am without hiding from the truth.

The notion that these authors were influenced by Zen excites me. However intangible, I had some sort of connection with them. I grew up going to funerals at *Zenshuji*, one of the first Zen temples in Los Angeles. This connection was enough to catalyze an interest in learning more about Zen and Buddhism in general. I had previously read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and a book on Buddhism I took from a hotel. I got into reading more about the philosophy online through various websites.

Zen is a meditation practice and philosophical system derived from Buddhism. As Buddhism was introduced to China, there was a heavy influence from local practices such as *Daoism*. *Daoism* is a Chinese mystical tradition that stems from Lao-tzu's *Daode Jing*, a text that describes the *Dao* (which literally translates to the Way) (Hansen). The mixing of Buddhism and *Daoism* created *Chan* Buddhism. *Chan* is the Chinese pronunciation of *Dhyana*, the Sanskrit word for meditation. *Zen* is the Japanese pronunciation of *Chan*. Zen Buddhism emphasizes the practice of meditation over reading scripture as a method of attaining enlightenment. Enlightenment is a loosely defined state of wisdom, non-discrimination, rejection of dualism, and embracing of compassion.

Though meditation practice is considered key, lots of scriptures and text have been written about Zen, forming a philosophical tradition that espouses different values such as the middle way. The middle way is moderation in all things, not going to the extreme in anything (Nagatomo). Even in following the middle path, one does not want to strictly follow it too much, as that would be considered an extreme. Zen also promotes straightforwardness, acceptance of all things as they are, and living in the present moment.

Aimless wandering can be construed as an expression of Zen—of the value of purposelessness and moving forward regardless. Or at least I think that is a Zen concept. A

lot of my exposure to Zen comes from either books written by English speaking authors or the internet, so I sometimes wonder if they are dubious sources. Alan Watts is cool to listen to and has several books on Zen. I also heard his writing may be more entertainment than an accurate portrayal of Zen. He criticizes Japanese practitioners for having a fetish for “sitting.” While other Zen followers I have read, like Suzuki Roshi, say sitting in meditation is essential to Zen. Regardless of what others may think, I rely on aimless wandering for my paintings as an attempt to capture some expression of Zen.

Another part of Zen I am attracted to is the many holy fool and trickster type characters in its history. The holy fool is typically someone who purposely eschews conventions of behavior or popular beliefs for a higher moral purpose (Gruslin). The holy fool is often attacked or rejected for their weird and bizarre behavior. Holy fools and tricksters are related and sometimes employ humor to express their message. Holy fools and tricksters have a particular approach to life that often challenges society’s accepted beliefs and laughs in the face of darkness. This is an attitude I hope to convey in my paintings.

I believe Hunter Thompson is an example of an American holy fool type character. He was part of the New Journalism movement that is characterized by using techniques from fiction and a more subjective perspective (Fakazis). Thompson specifically was known for his own genre called Gonzo Journalism, where he was the main character in his own stories, often reacting to the political situation at hand while having some weird adventure or mishap (Hirst). As Thompson said in a compilation of letters about his life,

Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke,

thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming ‘Wow! What a Ride!’

(“A Quote from the Proud Highway”)

Quotes like these inspired me to try and make my own adventure, to go out and do weird stuff and to not worry so much about what people think. Or at least that is what I would like to do. My social anxiety still holds me back.

Tom Wolfe is another of the New Journalists. In *Electric Koolaid Acid Test*, Wolfe writes about Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Kesey was a writer and hero of the sixties counter-culture movement. The Merry Pranksters were a group of artists and intellectuals who travelled with him. Tom Wolfe wrote about them with a very loose adherence to prescriptive grammar in order to create the mindset and feeling of actually being on drugs. Wolfe also wrote with a strong sense of rhythm that was very fast paced and fun to read.



Fig. 8. Alex Grey, *Gaia*, 1989, Oil on Linen, 144x96", Private Collection

For a long time, I wanted to capture that same sense of actually experiencing the drug in my own art. Yet, I also wanted to keep a sense of legibility, realism, and subtlety that accomplishes more than just screaming, “I’m on drugs!” The visuals can certainly be a big part of the LSD experience. Many artists use hallucinogenic landscapes or wavy lines and

kaleidoscopic patterns or other surreal and dreamy elements to recreate the LSD experience such as in Alex Grey's *Gaia* (Fig.8). To me, however, the more interesting part of LSD is the subjective experience: the thoughts and feelings that arise when under the influence. My LSD experiences were more than just drugged up visuals because the experiences are so much more than that. LSD inspires a holy fool, trickster-esque approach to life. While under the influence, one sometimes experiences the world with a sense of wonder as if they are seeing everything for the first time. LSD also has a way of making everything seem funny, no matter how dark or serious.

Charles Bukowski, who wrote my epigraph, is another favorite writer. He did not start publishing until he was 35 in the mid-fifties (Encyclopaedia Britannica). He wrote poetry, and later novels, about society's losers and rejects, like alcoholics and gamblers. I am more familiar with his novels that are autobiographical about his own experiences, struggling to make a living, the tragedy of having to work, his pursuit of women, and his never-ending thirst for alcohol. He also wrote about determination, especially to write or create, and perseverance to keep on going despite the worst odds, as well as solitude. I love his writing about being a writer, how he felt a need to write and could not stop, how he would stay up all night, slowly nursing a six-pack, and writing in a cold dark room. His perseverance definitely inspires me to keep painting. His love of solitude reminds me of my desire to be alone and my own social anxiety and introversion.

I also love Bukowski's frankness with the ugly side of life, showing himself in some of his worst moments with a raw honesty. Bukowski is one of the influences that lead me to paint the ugly, overlooked, and mundane side of the city, at night when no one else is around. "I opened my door. There was nobody in there. The furniture was old and ripped, the rug

almost colorless. Empty beercans on the floor. I was in the right place,” says Bukowski in his first novel, *Post Office* (104). Bukowski wrote *Post Office* about his experience working at a post office in Los Angeles at the request of his publisher. Out of fear, he wrote the book in less than a month. He paints a picture of a fallen broken world with ugly people and sadistic bosses with no escape except drinking, racetracks, and women. He speaks very matter-of-factly about his own addictions and failures throughout the book, although the great enemy is always the necessity to have to work for a living. Though I do not like who he was as a person, specifically how he objectified women and hit his wife, I really like his honesty in who he was. He never tried to hide the ugly side of his personality or the world around him.

These authors have had a profound influence on me and my philosophy of art. I like their sense of exploration and curiosity when it came to drug use and sometimes even trying to transcend drug use by accessing this sense of openness and creativity without drugs. Ken Kesey was the author of the book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a story about a jail bird that fakes insanity to go to an asylum with the hope that life there would be easier. Kesey used his own experiences with drugs and working in an asylum to help his writing. He explored the topic with, as close as he could get, first-hand experience. Kesey is a great influence for his willingness to explore the subject matter first-hand, his empathy for other people, and strong individuality that would not let other people's judgement limit his creativity.

With or without the drugs, I loved the Merry Pranksters' sense of exploration, their willingness to try weird things and go to weird places. I try to bring this exploration into my own painting through my wandering around the city. The Merry Pranksters had a sense of creativity and humor that really resonates with me—their cross-country trip being turned into

a movie, their school bus painted with neon colors and outfitted with an actual turret on the roof, their posters directed at the cops surveilling their house, their house in the woods of Big Sur decorated with psychedelic patterns, spiritual memorabilia, and all sorts of electronics. They were wild and embraced every new experience as a new adventure.

As Thompson said in one of his letters, “I understand that fear is my friend, but not always. Never turn your back on Fear. It should always be in front of you, like a thing that might have to be killed. My father taught me that, along with a few other things that have kept my life interesting” (Thompson *Kingdom* 30). My own lack of adventure is part of what makes some of the 60s era writers so interesting. Thompson’s attitude towards fear is something I aspire to live up to. Thompson’s infamous Vegas trip and Kesey’s bus trip across the country inspire me to face my own fears and do something weird too. I love their willingness to explore, unrelenting individuality, and sense of humor. They questioned the

accepted authorities of their time and crafted their own unique personalities. At the same time, the 60s put a special emphasis on empathy and universal love.



Fig.9. Brian Blasman, *San Pedro Bail Bonds*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 10" x 14"

My ideas about writing have parallels to how I think about painting and drawing. In my writing, I like using an auto-writing and stream of conscious style of prose. If I do not like what I wrote, I sometimes start over or rewrite instead of trying to edit. In my painting, I use watercolors which are hard to edit. Instead, I try to incorporate mistakes like the not so straight lines in *San Pedro Bail Bonds* (Fig.9) or the failed attempt at making a chain link fence in the same painting. I accept the problem and try to be mindful of that mistake in future paintings.

My landscapes and cityscapes have a certain sense of humor too in their outlook towards life. They reflect an appreciation of the imperfect, mundane, and the decrepit as symbols for the imperfections and tragedies of life. My paintings aim to embrace the darkness, find beauty in it, and laugh in the face tragedy. *San Pedro Bail Bonds* shows a broken fence and a severely cracked sidewalk. In the middle of all the darkness is a bright pink building that offers bail bonds, a slight hope for people in their worst moments. For me, the humor here comes from the attitude towards the darkness—a deliberate choice to appreciate the beauty in life despite all of its faults.



Fig.10. John Singer Sargent. *Claude Monet Painting by the Edge of a Wood*, 1885, Oil on Canvas, 540 x 648mm, Tate

In my paintings, I try to capture the play of the artificial light on different everyday spaces in the city. In this way, my painting descends from the impressionists. The impressionists went out of their studios to paint on location in order to capture the effects of

the light and scenes of modern life (Samu). They used bright, saturated colors to capture this effect. As can be seen in John Singer Sargent's painting, *Claude Monet Painting by the Edge of a Wood*, the Impressionists painted with looser, less rendered, and more sketchy style of brush strokes than realist painters did (Fig. 10).



Fig.11. George Bellows, *Cliff Dwellers*, 1913, Oil on Canvas, 40 x 42", Los Angeles County Fund

The Ashcan School, the American Impressionists, painted scenes of the city, typically of the lower classes (Weinberg). As can be seen in George Bellows' *Cliff Dwellers* (Fig.11), the Ashcan School used more muted colors and a much darker palette. Likewise, some of my paintings, like *Library at Night* (Fig.5), use a lot of grays and neutrals in order to capture the city. Like the Ashcan artists, I try to capture the imperfection of the mundane parts of the city with fast and spontaneous brushstrokes. This approach is also reflective of my interest in Zen

and *wabi sabi* aesthetics. I hope these paintings express a Zen-like holy fool-esque approach to life that embraces humor and acceptance in the face of darkness. At the same time, these paintings are meant to be brutally honest about my own imperfections as well as the imperfections of life itself.

METHODOLOGY

Two months before the brush touched the paper, I had these thoughts (expressed here as a dialogue) as I searched for the setting in the painting, *Arcade at Night* (Fig 1):

Ok, time to go. It's 10 pm. I didn't get enough sleep. That nap sucked. It's definitely not enough to stay out all night and keep going tomorrow. No choice. I have to go out. Get backpack. Get camera. Quiet! Don't wake up mom.... Leave room. Enter elevator. Walk through lobby.

"Goodnight," these hotel people are so formal. Out the door. Ahhh, so much nicer out here at night. It's still humid, though. Let's see, which way to go., Let's go to the arcade. That was... this way? ...ok. Wait, start taking pictures now. Yes, I need lots of pictures...

While in Japan, I took every chance I got to wander around and take pictures for photo references to potentially paint later (Fig. 2). I really loved the cityscapes I was finding in Naha and Tokyo. These cities are different from other cities I have been to before. There was a different feel to each of them, and there were many spaces that were unlike anything I have seen in America. The shops have unique signs, and the buildings seem to be organized differently with their own architectural idiosyncrasies.

That night in Naha, my inner dialogue continued, and I encountered someone unexpected:

Ha! The Arcade! Found it. Funny. I run into one of these in Japan after learning about them in my Art History class on French Paintings. An Arcade—a pedestrian street with a cover to bring the inside outside. I like how thrown together this arcade looks. It's falling apart a little bit with rust around the edges and all this neon signage. Reminds me of a Chinatown restaurant with all the boxes piled up everywhere. Oh, cool look at that graffiti! Graffiti!

“Hey, are you an artist?” ugh. a stranger is talking to me.

“What?” I am taken aback by the voice.

“Are you an artist?” he says again.

“Yeah, I guess,” I reply.

“You a photographer?” He is still talking to me.

“Well, sort of. I like taking pictures too, but I mostly use them as references for painting.”

“What?” He looks confused.

“I paint, you know... with a brush.” I wave my hand like a wand. Does this hand movement mean anything to this guy? I don't know.

“Oh ok, I'm a math teacher. Are you Okinawan?” He continues.

“I'm part.”

“What are you?”

“I'm part Russian, Hungarian, Okinawan, and Japanese.”

“Oh, so you're a koo-taa.”

“What?”

“Koo-taa, if there are four parts of a whole, we call one a-“

“Oh yes, a quarte—”

“Koo-taa!” He replied quickly.

Sigh. This guy must think I’m stupid. Hi, there stranger, I also have a degree in electrical engineering. All I need is some pitiful excuse to bring this up...

“What hotel are you staying at?” *This is a strange question.*

“The Hyatt,” *I reply.*

“What?”

“The... um... the Hy-yatt?” I sound it out and hope I’m pointing in the right direction.

“Wow! You must be rich.”

“No, I’m staying with my family. The doctor uncle is paying for everything, I’m just a student.” *This is a lot of information to share.*

“Um, ok, I have to go now,” *the stranger abruptly walks away.*

Ok, bye... what the hell... and what must that guy be thinking. He is probably just as confused as me. Oh shit! The picture! Get a picture of him walking away... well, kind of late, but anyway, that’s him (Fig. 2).

In Chicago, when I first started using watercolors, they were hard to control and difficult to use. Some mistakes I made included: not making straight lines straight, putting things in the wrong spot, not using the white of the paper, accidentally covering an area with a dark color, spilling water, water going in the wrong direction, and pigment falling mostly to one side of the water when I wanted a more even gradient. Gradually, I got used to watercolors and grew attached to them, though I still make a lot of the same mistakes. I started to enjoy the process of playing with the water, the unpredictable nature of

watercolors, and the sense of improvisation this brings. I learned to accept mistakes when they happen and not to get frustrated with them. Or at least I try not to. Overall, watercolors taught me mistakes are inevitable and that I need problem solving skills to fix them, whether that is wiping as much off as possible and putting a dark colored shape over it, using white gouache to bring back some light, or simply leaving it alone.



Fig. 12. Brian Blasman, *Picture from Damen Silos*, 2017, Digital Picture

I began to wander around Chicago taking pictures for paintings. That pursuit evolved into searching out places difficult to get to or that required some adventuring to get to. For example, online one night, I found an abandoned building called, *Damen Silos*, and then set out to take picture references (Fig. 12). I never before trespassed inside an abandoned building to explore it. The *Damen Silos* were about ten minutes on the train away from me. When I first approached the silos, I went to the front entrance which was guarded and fenced off. I almost gave up, but I noticed on my phone's map that there was a park nearby that had a border right near the silos. I went over there and found a dirt path that went around the back

of the fence to the main building of the *Damen Silos*. There were gaps I had to jump over to get to a door that was just open enough for me to duck under.

Watercolor has a huge advantage for *plein air* painting, especially if I go to more places like *Damen Silos*. I love the simplicity of watercolors. Compared to oil painting, fewer supplies are needed—just water, pigment, brushes, rags, and paper. I can fit most everything I need in my backpack and do not have to carry much if anything. When painting with watercolors in *plein air*, I have to move fast sometimes to mix wet into wet or to wipe off color to create a fade. In hot and dry climates, watercolors can dry fairly fast and allow for immediate layering. Regardless of how much I like using watercolor for *plein air* painting, I still rely on photo references a lot. Taking pictures to paint later allows me to wander around more and cover a wider area. Then I translate this to an image either by taking a picture or painting on site, starting with a blank page. I make a line drawing in graphite. This way, I can spend time working and reworking the drawing to get it right. In the next iteration, I add watercolors. The result is a complex pattern of lights and darks, lines and tones, and mistakes.

On my trip to Japan, I got to see what the environment looks like without any people, without all the noise of everyday life. The city takes on a whole different feel at night. Given my social anxiety, the streets are much easier and nicer to explore when they are empty and quiet. Sometimes I run into people, like the math teacher, who are curious about what I am doing, but certainly not as much as during the day in Chicago. Going out to paint is a way for me to face my social anxiety and practice talking to people. Nevertheless, I still enjoy the solitude of wandering around at night.

I like wandering around and thinking about whatever comes to mind, letting my thoughts wander as well. *Arcade at Night* (Fig. 1) was drawn a couple months after the original picture was taken in Japan (Fig 2). Working my way through the pictures took some time. I used a pencil to make marks and draw a shape on the left edge of the picture I chose to work from. I used this shape as a measure unit to keep my proportions relatively correct. I often use the pencil to gauge the angles of lines to keep those consistent. However, the paper I use is not always the same length to width ratio as the photograph, so the shapes do not quite match. I use 300-pound pre-stretched watercolor blocks that are easy for travel. They come in specific sizes and are thick enough to take a lot of scraping and water. Some shapes are not quite proportional, and I erase half the drawing to start over.

After drawing some of the angled lines, I can use them to estimate where the vanishing point is. Using the vanishing point to draw lines rather than the angles from the picture will help keep things proportional in the painting. I struggle with details like how many curved lines there are in the roof or the lines of the corrugated steel doors. I estimate the perspective by pointing the pencil toward the vanishing point. I hate chain link fences.

After finishing the line drawing, I start using the watercolors. With *Arcade at Night*, I started with the color of the red light, because if I layer on top of it, the red color can show through and make the area glow. This also helps me define the tone of the area affected by this light. In this case, I used an Alizarin Crimson, a bluish-red color, and paint a light wash where the light reflects off surfaces. I also painted a cool light with a mix of white, blue, and green to get a very pale color. Then I made a warm light on the roof and in the near background with yellow and orange. In the very back, I painted another cool light that is all blue.

By the time I am done painting the light in the background, the wash in the foreground is dry enough to start painting in some of the shadows. I added a layer of Prussian Blue, a dark greenish blue color, to neutralize and darken the Alizarin Crimson. Neutralizing a color makes the color less intense and look grayer. For *Arcade at Night*, I used the Prussian Blue to add the perspective lines in the corrugated steel doors as well. With the warm light, the shadows are all cool. In the foreground is a sign with *Kanji*, Japanese characters based on Chinese characters. I outlined the characters with the Prussian Blue, carefully going around the contour, the edge, of the characters with the tip of the brush.

In the shadow of the booth in the foreground, there is some reflected light. It is a cool light bouncing off one of the folds in the fabric. I mixed white gouache with some blue watercolor and painted it over the dark. The opacity of the gouache allows me to paint light over dark, even though I am using watercolor. I also used this same blue to paint the awning in the far background. I continued to add details throughout the painting: adding lines in the roof, adding lines for the bicycle, adding the figure and the figure's shadow, the rectangles in the background, and the netting holding the orbs in the foreground.

My only strategy for deciding what to paint next is to avoid what is wet, unless I want soft edges. Except for this rule, I essentially wander around the page until I finish painting. The finished painting is itself a chaotic system because it starts from a simple initial condition, a blank page, and becomes more complicated over time. I wander across the page, making marks with a brush or pencil, until the painting is complete, and an image emerges:

Ok, got those lines painted... let's see, what else? I don't know, I think that's about it. Ugh... I didn't spend enough time on this... does it look good? ...I don't

know... I don't want to overwork it though. I think I have to call it done. Try again next time...

My methods are chaotic for a purpose. I wander around a city in an area I am not familiar with. I take pictures or paint *plein air* scenes of messy, everyday, imperfect cityscapes. On my blank page, my pencil wanders from one shape to another. With watercolors, I slowly build up the painting. My chaotic patterns and behaviors, when repeated, create a form of order among my paintings.

CONCLUSION

My painting looks far better than when I started at LCAD. My technique has improved so much. The perspective looks better, the composition is more interesting and purposeful, the values are handled so much better, and even the scale is much better. I have grown a lot too. My work ethic seems to be a lot stronger. There seems to be more purpose behind my paintings. I am much more comfortable with talking to people than before. I am still socially anxious. However, maybe there is some truth to what Tim said, maybe the social anxiety is a story I am telling myself. I do not know. To some extent maybe it is, to some extent I am still anxious.

Yuck, graduation is coming up real soon. How will I support myself and keep painting? What will I paint? Whatever I do, I must keep painting. My work will have to serve the painting first. I want to give engineering a try again. I really think that because of all the issues I had back then, I was just too immature to handle it. As for painting, for the foreseeable future, I want to do cityscapes. I want to try making bigger ones. I have the paper coming in the mail soon, 40" x 60", that will make things difficult. But I really want to see

what I can make with a much larger scale than the thesis paintings. That will be a cool challenge. Just got to keep painting, man.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. Brian Blasman, *Arcade at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 10" x 14"



Plate 2. Brian Blasman, *Bike Alley at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"

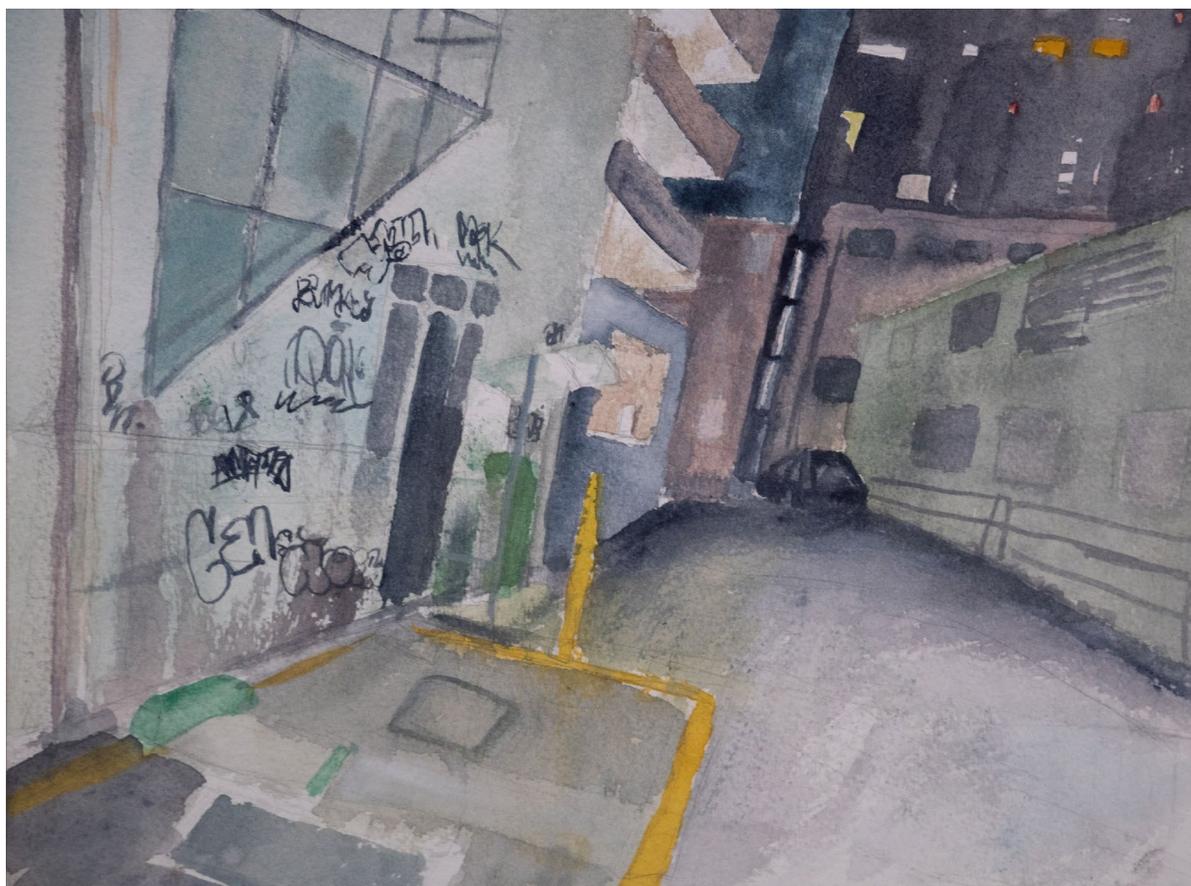


Plate 3. Brian Blasman, *Pay Phone at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"



Plate 4. Brian Blasman, *711 at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"



Plate 5. Brian Blasman, *Take Out at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"



Plate 6. Brian Blasman, *Restaurant at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"



Plate 7. Brian Blasman, *Fuji Square at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"

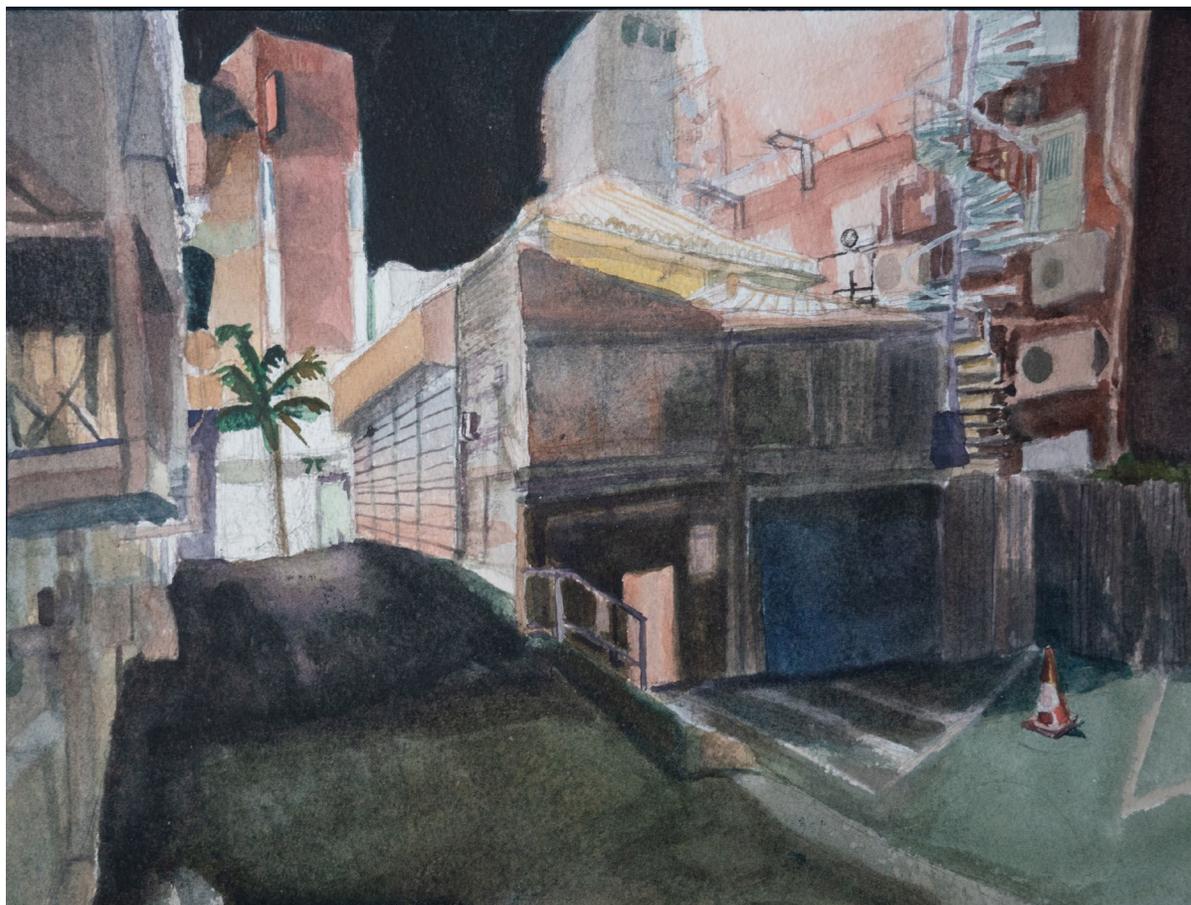


Plate 8. Brian Blasman, *Garage at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"

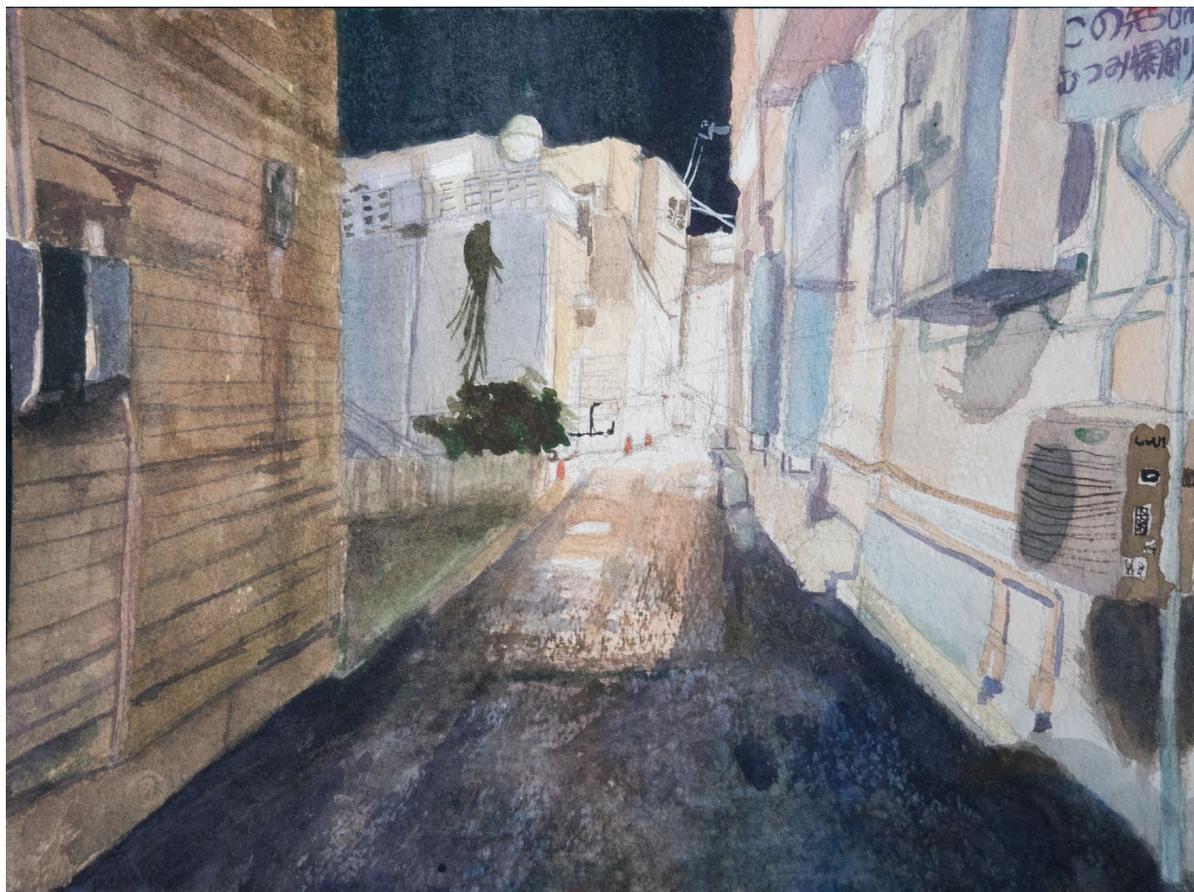


Plate 9. Brian Blasman, *Air-Conditioned Alley at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"

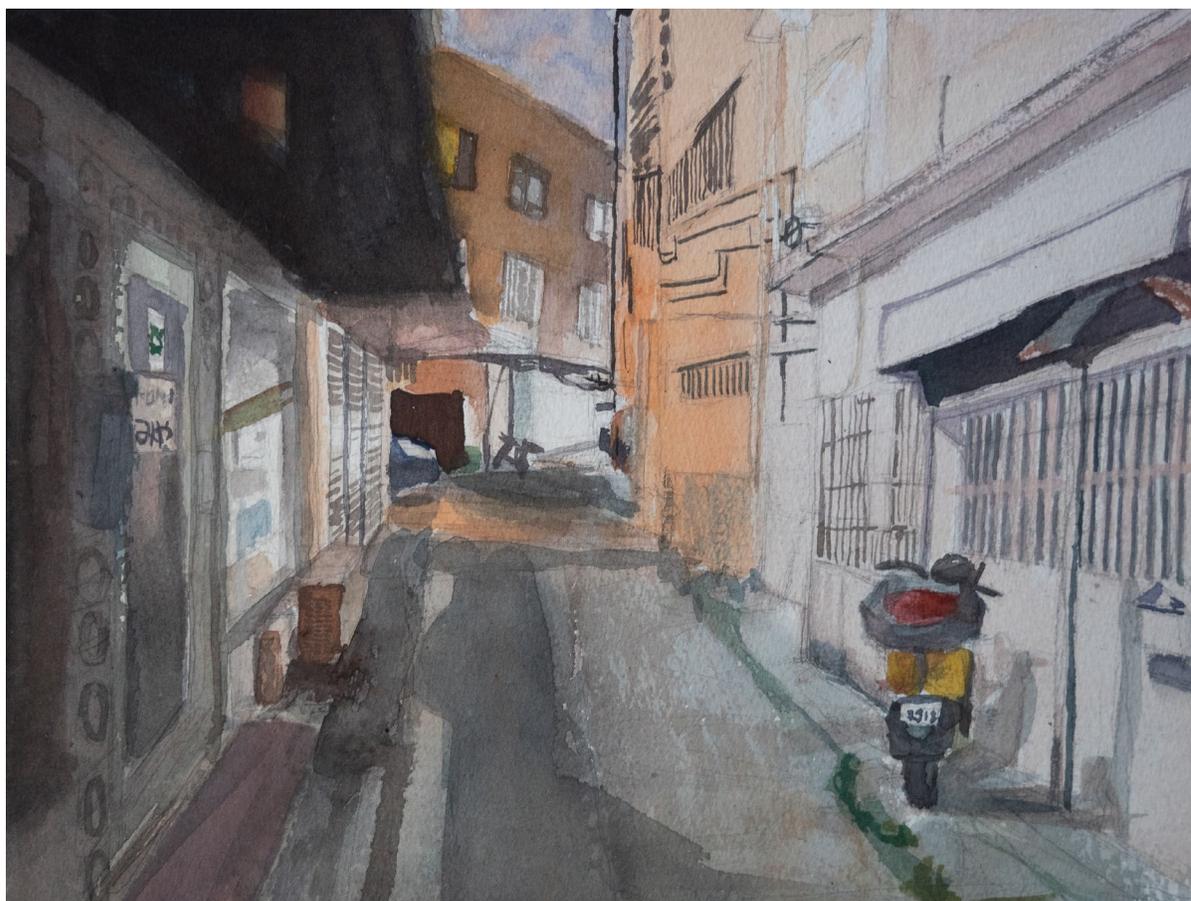


Plate 10. Brian Blasman, *Bike Alley at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"



Plate 11. Brian Blasman, *Library at Night*, 2019, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"



Plate 12. Brian Blasman, *Parking Structure at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 22" x 30"



Plate 13. Brian Blasman, *Neptune Electronics at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 22" x 30"

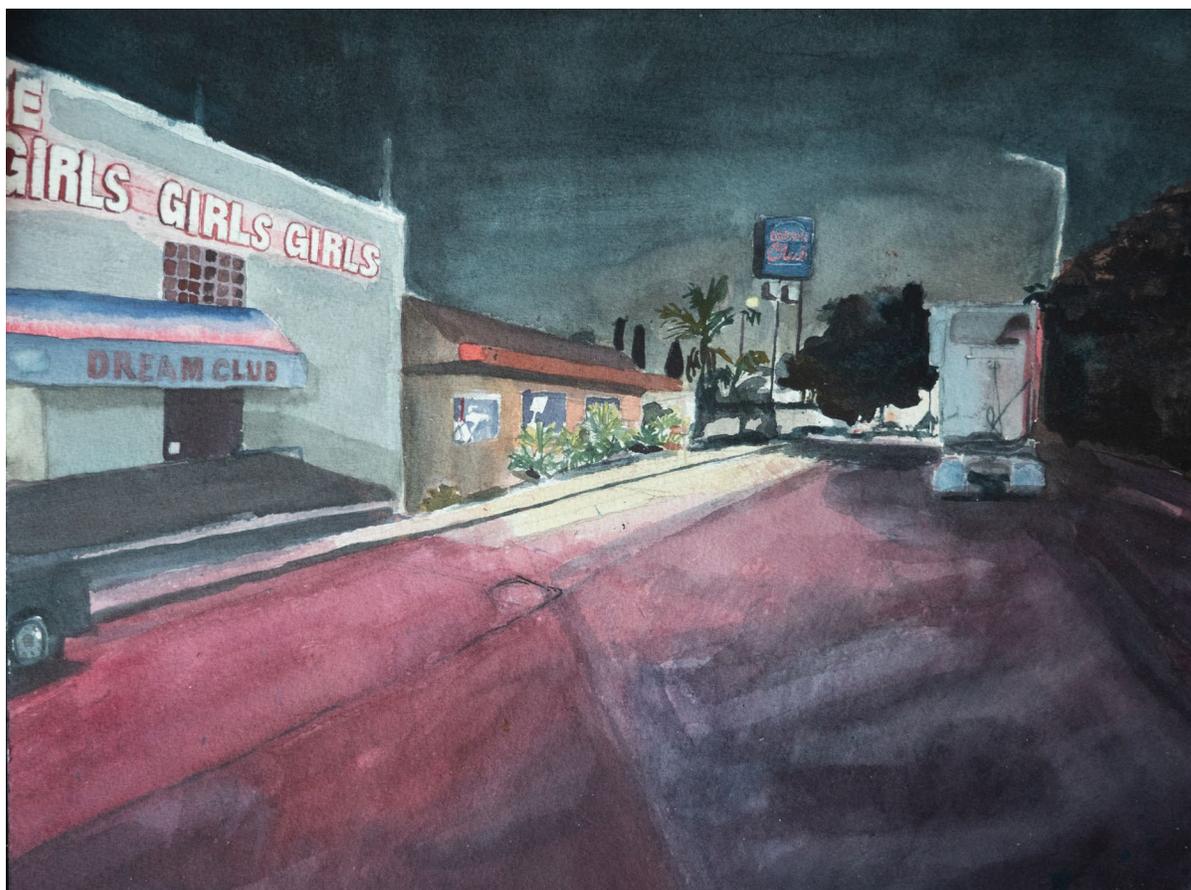


Plate 14. Brian Blasman, *Girls Girls Girls*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 12" x 16"



Plate 15. Brian Blasman, *Electronic Dumpster at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 9" x 12"



Plate 16. Brian Blasman, *We Will Be Back*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 10" x 14"



Plate 17. Brian Blasman, *Cemetery at Night*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 22" x 30"



Plate 18. Brian Blasman, *Authentic Mexican Food*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 10" x 14"



Plate 19. Brian Blasman, *No Smoking at the Beach*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 12" x 16"



Plate 20. Brian Blasman, *San Pedro Bail Bonds*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 10" x 14"



Plate 21. Brian Blasman, *Nighttime Orange*, 2020, Watercolor on Paper, 12" x 16"



Plate 22. Brian Blasman, *The Accident Lawyer Knows Best*, 2021, Watercolor on Paper, 12" x 16"

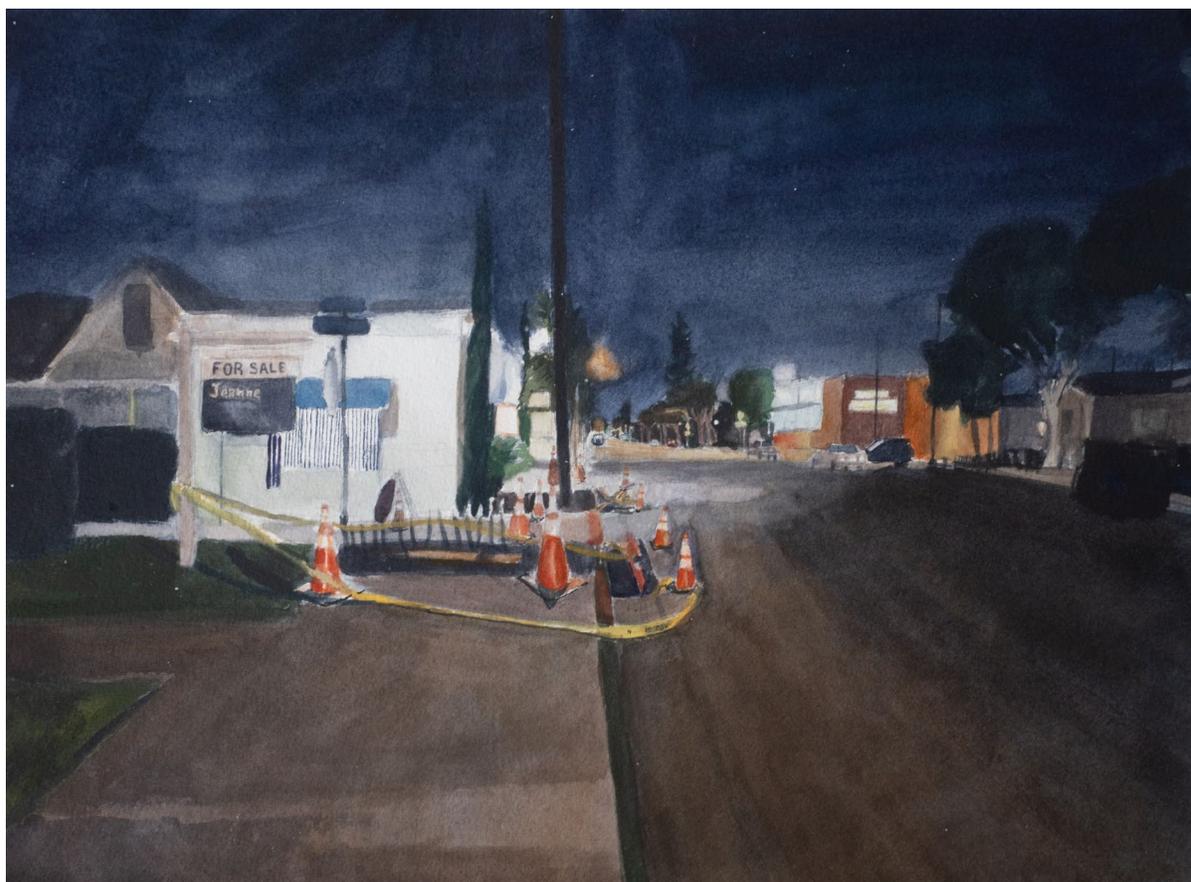


Plate 23. Brian Blasman, *Jeanne Sells Cones*, 2021, Watercolor on Paper, 12" x 16"



Plate 24. Brian Blasman, *Liquor Center Water Store View 1*, 2021, Watercolor on Paper, 12" x 16"



Plate 25. Brian Blasman, *D Since 1933*, 2021, Watercolor on Paper, 12" x 16"

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