

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE OF A GENTLE SOUL

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UNCONDITIONAL LOVE OF A GENTLE SOUL

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Unconditional Love of a Gentle Soul* focuses on human connections. I draw inspiration from the relationships that I have with people around me, who are both unique and artistic. By choosing to dig deep and highlighting the most vulnerable everyday moments and feelings I have in these interactions, I consciously capture not only their cheerful, uplifting, and pleasing aspects, but also the real, raw and sometimes uncomfortable attributes. My chosen artistic path has been a straight, yet very rocky road, but the reward comes with challenging myself to become a bolder and stronger creative.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you so much to everyone that has been on this amazing journey with me! I am especially grateful for my family and my mentor - Natalia Fabia, who guides me through all my self-doubts and hardships. I also want to send my heart out to every single person that plays a role in my experiences with human connection. Even though some are no longer a part of my life, I love you and still deeply care about you.

**DEDICATION**

To mom, who has always been my number one support from a distance.

Without you, my dream would never come true.

**EPIGRAPH**

*Mười năm*

*...Có người đến, có người đi và có người ở lại*

*Có lúc khôn và cũng có lần nhờ dại*

*Có lúc tủi, có lúc vinh và có lúc thăng hoa*

*Có ngày cười, có ngày khóc và có ngày hoan ca*

*Đòi cho ta quá nhiều thứ*

*Ta chưa cho đòi được nhiều*

*Đến bây giờ vẫn chưa học được cách làm sao để lời*

*được nhiều*

*Mười năm như một bức họa, cũng may là trời đỡ xám*

*hơn*

*Thứ mà ta học được nhiều nhất là cách xin lỗi và lời*

*cám ơn...<sup>1</sup>*

*-Đen*

<sup>1</sup> Translation in Appendix B

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## UNCONDITIONAL LOVE OF A GENTLE SOUL

I consider myself to be a bold, strong and expressive fine artist. My art is most recognized for the choices I make in color. I often use vibrant and pastel pigments, like permanent rose, cobalt violet, gradient blue, red and green, to express the emotion and feeling of my subjects. In addition, brushwork is my favorite tool to communicate how I feel and what I want to say in my paintings. I tend to refine the focal point by employing tighter rendering, but for the background, I use big painterly strokes to give energy to the piece and to set my feelings free.

Friendship, as the theme of my thesis work, *Unconditional Love of a Gentle Soul*, is very important to me. Since I moved from Vietnam to the United States ten years ago, I have constantly been trying to find the same unconditional love that my parents have for me. I quickly realized that not everyone would go out of their way to love me like family. However, coming from a Buddhist household, I believe that forgiveness is the key to peace of mind. Thus, as I learn to let go of all ego and anger from my past scars through painting this body of work, I have become a much happier person with a greater capacity to love others. My goal while creating this series is to train myself to focus on the bright side of all human connections. To that end, this work was personally rewarding and satisfying to create.

### DESCRIPTION

I paint about love and human connection because relationships play a significant part in my everyday life. My art tells a story of friendships and relationships that I have had with unique creative individuals, whom I consider family. From my experiences with human connections, relationships do not only contain happy and loving moments, but also raw and uncomfortable ones. Often, in order to further grow and understand one another, my friends

and I must go through a process of learning each other's good and bad qualities. As our relationship progresses deeper, we develop an unconditional love and acceptance of our flaws. When portraying human connection in art, it is important for me to stay honest and paint both good and bad aspects of all relationships because these layers of depth keep my audiences intrigued and analytical. My goal is to have them relate to each painting in many different emotional levels.

The first painting that I made for this series of human connection was *Too Hot to Die* (2017) (Figure 1). This was the first group-figure painting in my body of work. *Too Hot to Die* brings the audience to my

personal space, the vanity area of my room. Here is a scene of three young females, including myself, getting ready to go out. On the upper left side of the canvas, the first figure, Mary, a close friend of mine, is wearing a lime green dress with a dark blue denim jacket. She is leaning on the wall with a champagne flute on her left hand while looking and smiling at me, who is on the right side of the painting. As I look and smile back at Mary, my hands are curling the hair of the third figure – Claire. Claire is sitting on a



Figure 1. Dan Nguyen, *Too Hot To Die*, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 36", Private Collection.

chair below Mary and me. She is holding a small table mirror on her left hand while having another champagne flute in her right hand that slightly touches Mary's flute as they cheer. Her eyes gaze up to Mary, creating a circle of movement throughout the painting.

In this painting, color and content are used to deliver the story of my friendship with these two young women. Both Claire and I were wearing red dresses, the opposite temperature and hue of Mary's clothing. I made this choice intentionally in order to show the differences in our personality. Mary is often more tomboyish and simpler in the way she dresses in comparison to Claire and me. The fact that we were all smiling at one another in the exact same way makes the piece seem superficial to me. The circle of movement from one facial expression to the next appear posed and insincere. My development of this content works for *Too Hot to Die* because this circle of friends often focuses on having exciting activities together, instead of being there for each other in the way that best friends do. After finishing up this piece, I realized that our friendship was not as close as I had always thought. Therefore, I have never shared any deep conversations with them ever since. The next painting in this series, *Painterhood* (2018), however, captures an intimate relationship of mine with more depth and insight (Figure 2).

*Painterhood* (2018) is about my special relationship with my best girlfriend and fellow artist, Kaela, whose personality is very different from mine. It was inspired by a semester I spent here at Laguna College of Art + Design, sharing a small studio space with her. In this painting, I portrayed our friendship through the placement of figures and contrasts I created using colors. First, to show intimacy between the two figures, I positioned us sitting close to each other in the middle of the painting. I also chose to overlap us in order to emphasize the small scale of the studio. This showed that we were comfortably creating art in

the cramped space together. It suggests our support and love for one another regardless of our differences, which the audiences start to notice at second glance.

I used the contrasts in colors as a tool to show an important



Figure 2. Dan Nguyen, *Painterhood*, 2018, Oil on Board, 24" x 18", Allan Proctor Collection.

characteristic of our friendship – the differences of our personalities. On the right of the painting, I wear a fluffy fur coat in pastel colors: orange, blue, green and pink arranged in rainbow-like order. My face is shown at a three-quarter angle, pointing away from my large painting, *Too Hot To Die*. It is placed on a brown wooden easel to my right as a nod to the shallowness of past relationships and my present desire to have deep friendships. Next to me over to the left, Kaela is dressed in a black sweatshirt. Her blonde hair is pulled up in a messy bun. Her face is looking down very closely at her small painting placed on a black metal easel. In her painting, a female figure is also wearing all black and sitting against a black background. The distinct contrast between the colors of our clothes and arts indicates big differences in our personalities and painting styles. I am colorful, romantic, and expressive, while Kaela is darker, practical and realistic. However, that never stops us from being close and supportive towards each other. Once again, having two figures whose personalities are different in a shared personal space together helps communicate that we comfortably accept

each other. The interesting dynamic of our friendship is what makes it intimate. This painting for me is an example of the application of unconditional love. My friendship with Kaela indicates good relationships celebrate differences. While being two different individuals that we are, we still enjoy loving and more than anything letting the other be themselves.

Similarly, my painting, *3AM* (2018) focuses on the same meaning of human connection (Figure 3). It is my favorite piece from my body of work that portrays the layers of depth in the unique relationship that I have with my former roommate – Robbie. Here, I used content and colors in order to get my story across to the audiences. The painting



Figure 3. Dan Nguyen, *3AM*, 2018, Oil on Board, 24" x 24", Private Collection.

was a scene in our living room at three o'clock in the morning. Around this hour, Robbie and I would often hang out and watch TV together on our gray leather couch because he worked long hours and I studied late. I usually ordered food and ate out from a to-go box while enjoying our favorite TV show. Robbie, on my right, had his feet on the coffee table as his body sank into the cushion of the couch. He slowly got more and more quiet. Out of curiosity, I turned around to look at him only to realize that he had fallen asleep. As a result, I got annoyed. However, I did not want to wake him up, which showed my care and empathy

for him. I understood that Robbie worked very hard and came home late at night, but he would still give us time to catch up at the end of the day. Even though the time we spent together was not long, it did not change our intimate friendship because we accepted and loved each other unconditionally.

The color blue in *3AM* plays a significant part in setting a somber tone to my story. I pushed the blue TV light source to be much stronger with a layer of thinned out ultramarine blue in order to show a dramatic effect of the piece. The intense blue tone brings more weight to the story. Blue symbolizes sadness, and it implies the worry that I had for Robbie. When I stared at him, I sensed his extreme exhaustion after a long day at work. Deep down inside, I knew that he was trying very hard to survive as an expressive free spirit in the society filled with judgements. As the color blue takes over the atmosphere, audiences start to connect with the somberness and quietness of *3AM* at a personal level.

The fourth painting that belongs to my theme of human connection is *Ghosting Friends* (2019) (Figure 4). Instead of capturing an actual scene of my everyday life, this painting has invented elements, specifically an imaginary scene, because it symbolizes my inner pains and struggles that I face in friendships. According to Urban Dictionary, ghosting means “when a person cuts off all communication with their friends or the person they're dating, with zero warning or notice before hand.” Throughout my life, I have experienced ghosting numerous times. There were many people who wanted to be my friend only to suddenly disappear one day without any explanation. When getting into an intimate friendship, I tend to be overly caring. I often go out of my way to help friends. To people that prefer personal space, I can be viewed as clingy and needy. For the longest time, I would feel

hurt and upset whenever my kindness was not returned with the same type of treatment. I constantly live with my past scars and often end up feeling isolated and alone. That is why in *Ghosting Friends*, I painted my self-portrait in a twisting and turning gesture as the focal point in the foreground. It implies that I get caught up with what is behind me and not be able to see what is in front of me.

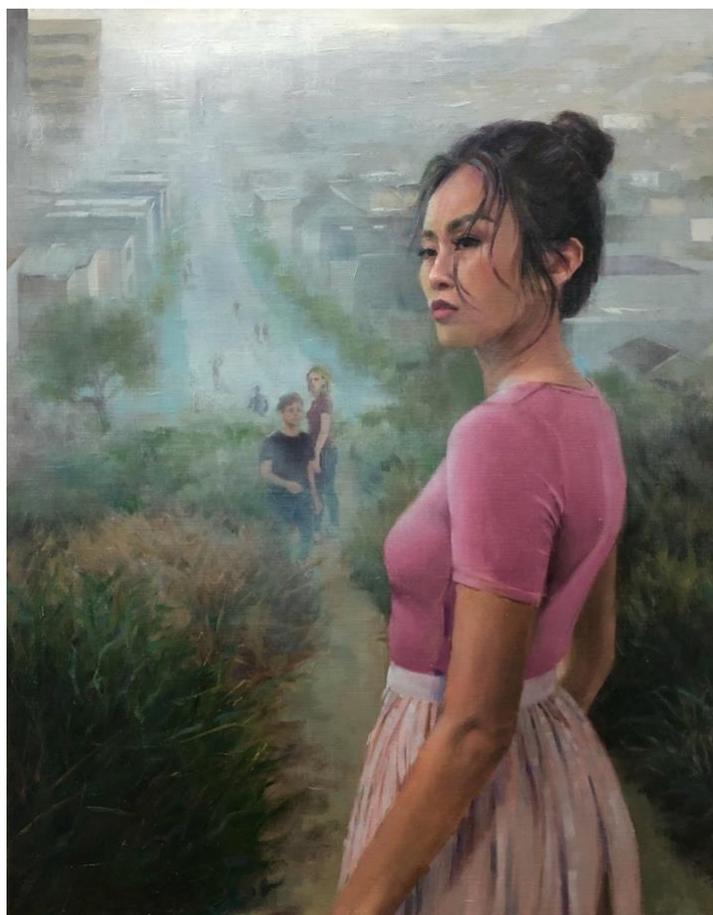


Figure 4. Dan Nguyen, *Ghosting Friends*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 30", Private Collection.

In this painting, I developed a complex composition and used desaturated colors to help deliver a multiplex story of past friendship experiences. I invented the whole space by painting San Francisco cityscape as the far background and Laguna Beach as the near foreground. The contrast between cityscapes is the most important component in building the narrative for *Ghosting Friends*. I intentionally did so to separate the two types of relationship that I have experienced. In the Laguna Beach nature setting, a couple of my friends are waiting for me to catch up. One of them even turns around to get me. I painted the plants and figures here with hints of saturation but still kept the color mostly cool for a believable atmosphere. By making this choice, I imply that within this part of the painting, people are warmer and more loving.

Painting nature is my way of saying that people that stand here are in the present and aware of what really matters to them. In contrast, among the cityscape of San Francisco, there are silhouettes of people walking always like ghosts. They slowly disappear into the fog, an important character of the city. For this half of the painting, I used a lot of cool and neutral greys with highly compressed value range to create a haunted atmosphere and sorrowful mood. This painting reminds me that people are simply busy sometimes, but whoever truly cares about me will always be there for me in hard times. This is the reality of life and relationship. Because of that, I need to stay open-minded and have faith in them.

The fifth painting that I consider to be my most important piece of *Unconditional Love of a Gentle Soul* is *F4* (2020), the largest group figure painting that I have



Figure 5. Dan Nguyen, *F4*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 6' x 4', Private Collection.

ever created (Figure 5). The narrative of *F4* took place at the art studio of my mentor, Natalia Fabia, where five female friends, including herself and me, were hanging out while being creative together. In the middle of the painting, Natalia sat on a rolling stool with her left hand holding a piece of paper towel and her right hand holding a paint brush as she talked. She pointed her brush at her previously toned canvas on a wooden easel. With her lips slightly opened, her face at a profile was looking straight to the posing model that sat on the

model stand to the right side of the painting. The model is Erin, a close friend to us, whom I consider to be my American aunt. She is the most respected person in this friend circle because she always takes good care of us like her own nieces. Under Erin in the painting was Carolina, another close friend of mine, being captured from a back view. She sat right by Natalia on a pink plastic chair as she watched her paint. However, Carolina could not help herself but to be distracted and looked at the two figures on the left, my friend, Jessie, and I. We were having fun together and dancing on heels as Natalia's painting demo went on.

I pushed content and composition in this piece to be my main vehicles that communicate our femininity and the diversity of this friend circle. For example, in this art studio, there are often so many different activities that take place. We dress up, paint, talk, laugh, and dance together. *F4* is an example of our jolly intimate hangouts, where we can comfortably be ourselves and express our femininity although we come from different varieties of age, personality and race. This painting is not considered to be a relatable experience for most people because they often associate art studio with serious work mode and dirty paint marks everywhere. However, Natalia is known for her glamorous fashion style and her bold, girly personality. Her studio, with the pink floor, greatly represents her. At first glance, in the middle of the painting, Natalia was dressed in her sparkly diamond boots and mixed-pattern outfit of a white polka dot blouse with a pink floral mini skirt. I chose to tightly render every single glamorous detail on her to make her the focal point of the painting. Since we were in Natalia's studio, I wanted to make her the most important figure of the piece. Next to her, Carolina also dressed up, wearing a black provocative off-shoulder top with a tight gold sequin skirt. On the other hand, Erin, on the model stand, was wearing a long sleeve black dress with pearl necklaces, implying that she was more conservative and

matured than the rest of us. On the left of the painting, Jessie and I were standing back from everyone while having our own playful interaction. We both dressed in revealing dancing outfits of sport bras, boy shorts, knee pads, and exceeding high heels since we were practicing and showing the girls a choreography that we have learned. The way I captured all of us, through how we dressed to our body language, our multitasking ability, showed our confidence and highlighted our femininity. *F4* is my way of introducing to the audience a beautiful diverse friendship that I have with these strong women, who never forget to have fun together regardless of our different backgrounds.

Human connection is the theme for my current body of work. My paintings are about different experiences I have had with each relationship in my life. The narratives in *Too Hot to Die*, *Painterhood*, *3AM*, *Ghosting Friends*, and *F4* are examples of how much each of my unique friendships means to me.

## **RESEARCH**

Relationships play a significant role in my life and represent who I am as a fine artist. Using oil paint as my main medium, I explore relationships through the lens of both Realism and Impressionism. My expressive and colorful paintings focus on telling stories of my experiences with the special friendships that I have had in my life. I often depict single or multi-figured compositions in carefully crafted environments that support the narrative. In this way, my art spotlights my moral value of love and human connection.

I choose Realism to capture the theme of love and human connection because it supports the autobiographical narratives I am depicting. Realism "...refers to a mid-nineteenth century artistic movement characterized by subjects painted from everyday life in a naturalistic manner" (Tate). However, the term is generally used to describe artworks

painted in a realistic, almost photographic way. It can also be “...a passive capturing of reflection of the real” (McGrath 20). To me, it is important for my audiences to recognize the theme of my paintings immediately. With that being said, Realism is the style that most successfully communicates my theme.

Another style that I apply in my work is Impressionism. It gives me energy and freedom when painting. Impressionism was developed around the same time period as Realism. Its



Figure 6. Joaquin Sorolla, *Nude Woman*, 1902, Oil on Canvas, Private Collection.

characteristics include rapid brushwork that is “broken into separate dabs in order to render the fleeting quality of light” (Tate). One of my favorite masters that practiced Impressionism is Joaquin Sorolla (1863-1923). He is “[a] painter and graphic artist especially known for his lighting effects on canvas and rich coloration” (Askart.com). I had a chance to view his painting, *Nude Woman* (1902), in person in Spain, and it completely blew my mind (Figure 6). The figure’s forms are beautifully captured with subtle shifts of pastel colors, while the satin sheet was painted with big brushstrokes representing light when hitting the fabric surface. The main shadows are in the figure’s hair, areas under her arms and between her legs. These dark notes found on the nude figure direct the audiences to where he wants them to look. I incorporate elements of Impressionism especially in the background of my paintings mainly for visual effects. It does not necessarily help me deliver my theme better, but it drives the viewers’ eyes to my focal point – the relationship that I am painting about.

The evidence for this style is shown in the background of my painting, *3AM*, where the wooden floor, under two focal point figures, is painted with pronouncedly active brushstrokes, following the direction of its perspective. Impressionism is my favorite design tool when composing figurative paintings against a large environment.

In sum, I embrace both Realism and Impressionism in order to give my paintings a complex contrast within surface and texture. While figures in my paintings are always rendered smoothly, leaving very few brushstrokes to be seen, I handle the background around them loosely and boldly. This does not mean that I fully abstract the background. I paint every area of my paintings as the representation of reality with some experiments of mark making. In the back of my mind, I consciously want to stay honest and vulnerable with the viewers while leaving room for their endless interpretation.

When looking for inspiration, I am attracted to the qualities of my mentor, Natalia Fabia, a figurative artist that also merges Realism and Impressionism together. Her website states, “Infused with Fabia’s signature style, vividly saturated candy color palettes

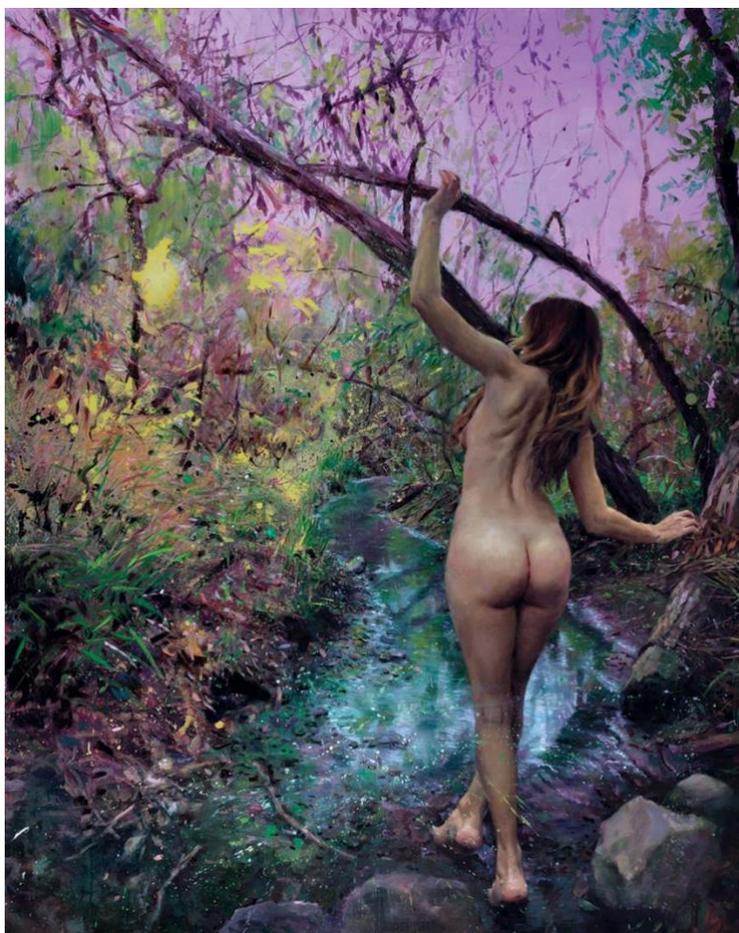


Figure 7. Natalia Fabia, *Path*, 2016, Oil on panel, 48 x 60 in, Private Collection.

and a dazzling spectrum of light, her work is a combination of fantasy narratives and actual moments captured from the artist's life" (nataliafabia.com). For example, in her painting, *Path* (2016), she used saturated colors, painterly brush strokes and paint splatters (Figure 7). In contrast to the expressive background, Fabia highly rendered the nude female figure in the front, which keeps the eyes focus on the body forms. This combination of Realism and Impressionism becomes a characteristic of my work after having studied under her for many years. I have learned to explore paint application in many ways, like using palette knife, fingers, paper towels, the edge of drawing papers, etc. I aim for my audiences to feel the excitement when viewing my works like they do with Natalia's works.

I also draw inspiration from Nick Alm, another young contemporary figurative artist that produces paintings of one or multi-figures against indoor or outdoor environments. It has been said that Alm "...moves freely between realism and abstraction, often in the same painting, in a dynamic interplay" (*Nick Alm: Selected Works 2010-2018 2*). What makes his works so remarkable to me is the beautiful glowing effect that he achieves from his control of

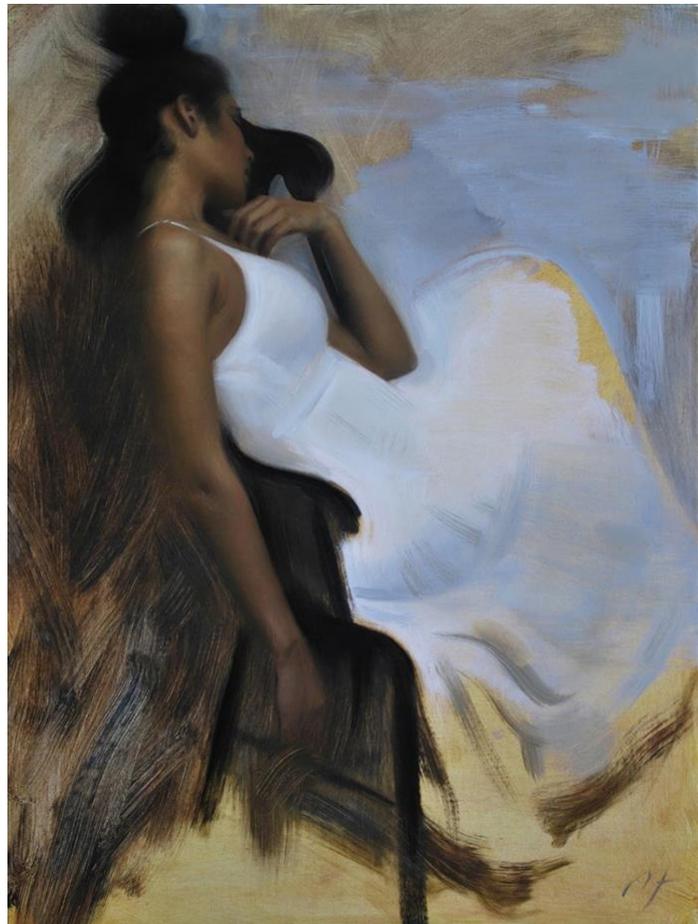


Figure 8. Nick Alm, *Emma*, 2013, Oil, 60 x 45 cm, Private Collection.

lighting and value. Not only that, his composition where he places objects and figures is very well designed that the viewers cannot stop staring at and engaging to them. He often emphasizes the facial expression and body language of the figures in his work. This emphasis is something that I use in my own personal work to support the interpretation of my narratives.

Furthermore, Alm often plays with simplification. He sacrifices secondary details in order to draw the viewers' eyes to his focal point. For example, in the painting *Emma* (2013), Alm abandoned all the details on a figure's right hand and feet (Figure 8). They are painted with two or three values, without any indication of fingers and toes. He is able to keep them very suggestive but accurate at the same time, which requires a lot of experiences with painting. Another area that he often simplifies is the background. He paints it expressively with thinned out paints with little to no details. His paintings are not direct copies of photos but the products of intentional execution and confident decision making. This is a huge influence on my work. Even though I do not paint my background as thinly as Alm, I still keep it fairly loose compared to my figures. I slowly give up unimportant details in my paintings in order to make room for the viewer's eyes to rest after they concentrate in highly rendered areas – the narrative and connection of my figures. I make the decision to design my paintings with big graphic shapes of solid color or putting certain areas in complete shadow for dramatic lighting effect. This helps with creating emotion for my works. I try to look at each of my paintings as a whole instead of focusing so much on the tiny little details.

The motivation for why I choose love and human connection as my theme goes way back to when I was a child. I was born and raised in Hanoi, Vietnam in 1992 in a big family. I have a total of eight uncles and aunts from my mother's side, and each of them has at least

one child. As a result, I was always surrounded by love and laughter. My cousins and I often played games, shared toys, and slept over at each other's house. We were like actual siblings to one another. My experience as a child was filled with warmth and loving interactions from my family. This influences me to become a warm and caring person that I am today. My main value in life remains to be love and human connection for years. As so, friendships and relationships are the main subjects in my body of work.

My late grandmother was another reason why I grew up valuing love and human connection. She was the person that helped take care of me when my parents were busy working. I remember her as a fiery and confident woman, who would do anything in order to support the family, including crossing the border of Vietnam and China to import fruit and selling them at local markets. One of her biggest values was her religion. She was a Buddhist, so I grew up believing in Buddhism.

Buddhism influences my views on friendship and relationship. I study and practice Buddhist teaching in order to help me deal with anxiety and stress. One beautiful lesson that I have learned particularly from reading about Nichiren Buddhism<sup>2</sup> is that: "...at the heart of Buddhism lies the belief that each individual has limitless positive potential and the power to change his or her life for the better" (SGI). Regardless of each person's individual background, gender, race, color or creed, there is potential for good. I always carry this teaching and apply it to my daily life. Throughout my time in the United States, I have been friends with a wide variety of people of different races, genders, educational backgrounds

<sup>2</sup> "In the 13th century, the Japanese priest Nichiren expressed the essence of the Lotus Sutra as "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo." He taught the practice of chanting this phrase as a means for all people to overcome suffering and lead happy and fulfilled lives." (SGI)

and ages, so diversity has a direct connection to the subjects and compositions of my art. We, as human being, sometimes forget that we are sharing a home together on this earth. It is important to be there, supporting and motivating each other no matter how different we are.

My body of work includes narrative figure paintings set within environment that enhances the nature of the relationships conveyed. Each painting is a separate story of special and unique friendships that I have in life. Since human connection is complex, I intentionally arrange my compositions and contents to show layers of depth and different emotional states for these relationships. Instead of only capturing exciting and uplifting moments, I dig deeper to capture somber and quiet scenes as well.

Some of my somber narrative paintings about human connection took inspiration from my time living in the States alone without family. I had to learn to take care of myself and stay independent emotionally. Occasionally, when life got tough, I could not help but miss my family. Slowly over time, I developed a new emotional support system within the friendships that I considered family. My favorite sentiment about family comes from a quote that I read on Elitedaily.com, “Family – Life’s greatest blessing. A group that dreams, laughs, plays and loves together. Those whom you can always count on, always present not only in the good times. The most precious gift.” The way I treat my friends is very similar to the way I have learned to love my family unconditionally, which means that they can count on me in both good and bad times. It is loving and caring for each other, not expecting anything in return. Unconditional love is not a transaction. As I get older, I have learned that not everyone is willing to love me unconditionally like my family. There are many times that I need emotional support; I cannot find anyone who is available to be there and listen to me

vent. People are busy with their own lives, families and careers. This experience has hugely affected the artistic voice and some sorrowful narratives of my art.

Everyone has his/her own personal experience of love and human connection, so it is normal that a few audiences disagree with me about my value on love. Some may even question why I have to constantly seek for support and happiness in life from other people. If so, I have to admit that at one point in my life, I have counted on my friends and loved ones to validate that I am a worthy being. I felt like if I surrounded my life with human interactions at all times, it must mean that I was important to them. However, the moment I could not get a hold of anyone, I started to question my existence on earth. It was not until the past two months that I have fully realized that I did not love myself enough. I have learned that there is no better unconditional love than the infinite self-love. My fear of isolation starts to fade away as I invest more time in caring for myself. My painting *Ghosting Friends* was the first time that I openly voiced my struggles on friendship and self-love. I portrayed myself in a very vulnerable stage. I seemed lost and upset as my friends left me behind. Little do I know; I am often caught up with my past scars that I do not see there are people who truly love me unconditionally. Moreover, I am so afraid to be alone that instead of viewing my personal time as an opportunity to grow, I sink deeply into depression. As I painted the piece, I learned a lot about my past scars and realized that I should have a more positive perspective and give people second chances.

In summary, as a fine artist that focuses on Realism and Impressionism stylistically and uses oil as the main medium, my art is narrative of my love and connection with the people around me, whom I consider family. My childhood faith in Buddhism has had a direct influence in the way I pick friends and express my love to them. Those relationships also

represent who I am as a person. Each of them showcases a different side of my personality and life story. Regardless of the ups and downs that I have experienced on human connection, until today, I still hold my belief about unconditional love.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I make art not only to express myself, but also to portray the love that I have for the unique and creative people, whom I consider family. Therefore, my body of work focuses on human connection. By digging deep and touching the most vulnerable mundane moments and internal feelings that I have in these relationships, I consciously capture both their cheering, uplifting, and pretty aspects and also, the real, raw and sometimes uncomfortable aspects. I am an organized person when it comes to planning my everyday routine, thus my creative process also tends to be very structured. While there are details within each step that shift depending on what painting I am working on, I generally follow a consistent system from start to finish. That includes journaling, preparing photo reference and painting.

Journaling is the first step of my creative process because this is where my inspiration comes from. I do not always have a clear vision of what I want to paint, but my intuition tells me that I should chase after a certain message. Whenever I feel that way, I know it is time for me to journal. Journaling sends me to my highest meditative state. It helps me organize my thoughts and feelings. It is a way to self-reflect and self-analyze in order to give me a better understanding of what I am going through before I can paint it. This practice also helps me seek answers and solutions for my relationships. It is very much like the job of a fortune teller, in which she helps finding closures and answers for clients by looking into their past and present. By writing down all the current thoughts, I discover my vision for future

paintings, similar to how a fortune teller foresees the future by gazing into her crystal ball during scrying ritual.

To begin, I prepare a comfortable space, where I can journal. The space is usually a dark quiet room like that of a fortune teller's booth. Darkness allows me to enter a trance-like state. I usually go for a cozy indoor spot with warm, dim lighting like my bedroom. I love sitting on the mattress, tucking my feet inside a fluffy blanket, and positioning my back against two to three pillows. Then, I turn on meditation music. Sometimes, I light up candles or incense sticks to help soothe my mind and awaken my senses. Having a dreamy light source and lingering smoke around the room is essential for concentration. As I feel more at peace and focused, I place the laptop on my lap and start typing.

While I journal, I envision symbols and metaphors that represent those past and present as they relate to the narrative or issue regarding my relationships. For example, I was going through a tough time grieving for my grandmother and a close friend, both of whom passed away not long ago. After two months of feeling the urge and conflict as to whether I should create a painting expressing my love and sadness for them, I decided to journal to find an answer. As I was writing about my feelings, the symbol of a lotus kept appearing in my mind. Lotus is considered the national flower of Vietnam, and in Buddhism, it stands for recreation and rebirth. It reminded me of my childhood when I used to chant with my grandmother every night before we went to bed. She was the only person in my family that frequently practiced the teaching and philosophy of Buddhism. Since the lotus symbol did not disappear from me, I knew that I needed to hold onto it.

After I am done typing, I ruminate on the visual messages that appear during my journaling meditation in order to find direct inspirations for my paintings. My vision of the

lotus flower was not an exception. When I slowly awoke from my meditation, I went online to look for pictures of Buddhist art. I wanted to confirm that the image that I envisioned was associated with Buddhism. As I looked through them, I felt more confident and certain to make a painting of lotus flower. Then, the next step following my journaling was gathering photo reference.

Preparing photo reference is the second step of my creative process because it is crucial to have a high-resolution picture with an effective composition to refer to while painting, especially for figurative artists like myself. The production of photo reference starts out with sketching at least five small thumbnail ideas in my sketchbook. These drafts help me see my overall vision tangibly in front of me for the first time. Each thumbnail would present a totally different arrangement of composition and value range so that I can look at and compare them together. Then, I pick one to three strongest compositions to be the direct reference for a photoshoot. Deciding on my favorite thumbnails saves me time from guessing on what to do at the photoshoot. Moreover, it acts as a guide to communicate with my models and photographer to make sure that no one misunderstands my vision.

After choosing the final thumbnails, I contact everyone that will be at the photoshoot. Most of the time, I prefer to take my own picture reference because I can better control the camera angle to the best of my liking. However, when I appear to be one of the figures in my paintings, I ask a close artist or photographer friend to help me with shooting. Once I make sure all the figures are in their position like in my thumbnails, I would take or direct my friends to take the actual photos. This process is usually somewhere around twenty to forty minutes. I, then, go through all the pictures the next day and pick my favorite ones that have high resolution, distinct lighting contrast, compelling facial expression and body language.

With the photo that conveys my narrative best, I use Photoshop to revise colors and rearrange some placements of objects before I jump to painting.

The last step of my creative process is painting. To best demonstrate my execution, I use *3AM*, a painting from my body of work, as an example since my work mostly follows the same order. *3AM* portrayed the special bond and friendship of my ex roommate, Robbie, and me. It captured a scene in our living room, where Robbie was falling asleep on the couch next to me as we hung out and watched TV late at night. With the edited photo reference that I have previously chosen, I roughly painted a small color study on an 8" x 8" gesso board. My goals for making a quick color study before creating any final product is to prepare myself with deep understanding of color, lighting, and composition of each scene. For *3AM*, it was to test out how much blue tint I should paint for the overall lighting coming from the TV. I also wanted to practice for any drawing difficulties on perspective of the coffee table and couch. Because of that, adding information and details on the faces was not necessary.

Once the color study was completed, I went to the art store to pick out a surface to paint on. I chose a 24" x 24" gesso board, my preferred surface since it is smooth and nonabsorbent, which allows me to play with mark making and painterly brushwork. I wanted a medium sized board instead of large because there was not a lot of details in the faces in my reference photo. Besides, I did not want to go with a small board because the viewers often looked at paintings from a distance, so there needed to be enough room on the surface for me to showcase details of smallest items on the coffee table. Afterwards, the actual painting part began.

On the chosen gesso board, I often start with toning my surface because painting on white is difficult for me to judge any value range and color relationship. While a lot of

painters prefer this first layer to be neutral, I like to take advantage and pick a color that helps creating a filter for the painting. For specifically *3AM*, I used a layer of thinned out ultramarine blue, using Gamsol, to emphasize the hue of TV lighting. Once this layer was dry enough to the touch, I began drawing using dark earth tone colors like burn sienna mixed with olive green or ultramarine blue. In this painting, there was a lot of perspectives involved, so I used a 03 x 03 grid template to guide myself. For some bigger works, I prefer to project the picture onto my surface and trace over it, and for smaller works, I freehand the drawing using my eyes and paint brush as measuring tools. As I have the drawing as close as possible to the reference photo, I fill in shadow shapes with the same thinned out paint that I used for the drawing. This whole layer of the painting is called a wash, or underpainting. I always leave this to dry overnight before moving to the next layer.

On top of the wash, I pick between the figures or background to start blocking in with paint mixed with little to no medium. I like to work from thin to thick consistency because doing so helps my paintings maintain its original colors and condition over time. *3AM* was a painting of figures in environment, as so the background was the larger area. I began painting the couch with a grey mixture created by adding thirty-five percent of ultramarine blue, thirty percent of alizarin crimson, twenty percent of radiant turquoise and fifteen percent of viridian that neutralizes the purple hue. For the wall, I used the same colors but with a slight ratio adjustment where I added titanium white until it reached my desired brightness. Next, I mixed color for the table in similar process, but I warmed it up with radiant red and cobalt violet paint to give the piece variety and complexity. Lastly, I painted the figures, my friend and me. For my regular skin tone mixture, I often use burnt sienna, yellow ochre, and titanium white, depending on how light or dark the area is. Then, I add in either olive green,

ultramarine blue, alizarin crimson, cad red light or cad orange, depending on the temperature of their flesh tone. I try my best to get the value and color as close to my planned-out color study as possible so that I do not have to repaint over this second layer. In *3AM*, my blocked-in layer was quite accurate except for the table's perspective that I had to make adjustments on, using my photo reference to refer back. After repainting the table, I waited for *3AM* to be complete dry to add color glazing on top.

Last but not least, glazing layer is necessary for me because it helps with color unification and acts as a quick complement to value contrast of the painting. For instance, with *3AM*, I added a tad of olive green and ultramarine blue in some walnut oil on the areas on the left where the wall and blinds were not facing the TV. This act darkened the plane that was not catching any TV lights and furthermore carried on the blue color harmony. Once all of what mentioned above were completed, I considered my painting to be done.

My consistent painting process includes three steps of journaling, preparing photo reference and painting. For me, it is most efficient to stick with an organized structure because it allows me to compose a cohesive body of work. Not only that, I find this process effective because it best assists me in achieving my personal goal of making successful paintings that consist of thoroughly rendered focal point, high contrast in lighting value with a good balance between saturated and desaturated colors.

## **CONCLUSION**

*Unconditional Love of a Gentle Soul* is a journal about my complex relationships and vulnerable emotions. Through my paintings, I tell the stories of my life experiences with the people around me, whom I consider family. Each painting in the series represents a milestone of my path in developing my deep values for love and human connection. Because

relationship is a complex idea, I include in this body of thesis work both uplifting and sorrowful aspects of my experiences. The unhappy moments, that I have had, mostly come from my desire to seek for outsiders to fill up the emptiness of my heart. *Unconditional Love of a Gentle Soul* started out as my way to voice an opinion on how relationships should contain unconditional love. However, what I have learned from this series is that I need to let go of all my expectations for people and love. I, instead, accept that change happens on regular basis, and that people make a daily choice to whether they want to stay with me or not. As I paint through each painting, I have brought myself back to inner awareness that self-love is what I lack within me. Self-love is the only thing that I have full control of. From there, I work on caring and dedicating more time to myself so that I do not have to search for fulfillment from others. Instead, people around me – my family and friends – can truly play their role as my support system and not as my validation. This, perhaps, will inspire me to paint my next series focusing on love, specifically, self-love.

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## APPENDIX A



Plate 1: Dan Nguyen, *Too Hot To Die*, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 36", Private Collection.



Plate 2: Dan Nguyen, *Painterhood*, 2018, Oil on Board, 24" x 18", Allan Proctor Collection.



Plate 3: Dan Nguyen, *3AM*, 2018, Oil on Board, 24" x 24", Private Collection.



Plate 4: Dan Nguyen, *Ghosting Friends*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 30", Private Collection.



Plate 5: Dan Nguyen, *Grief*, 2020, Oil on Board, 11" x 20", Private Collection.



Plate 6: Dan Nguyen, *F4*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 6' x 4', Private Collection.



Plate 7: Dan Nguyen, *Wellness Witchy Club*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40", Private Collection.

**APPENDIX B***Ten Years*

*...People come and go but some are meant to stay*

*Sometimes I'm wise but at times I'm a fool*

*Some days are bad while other days are glorious and  
uplifting*

*Life is full of laughter, tears, and celebration*

*Life brings me so many things*

*But I haven't given much back to it*

*Till today, I still don't fully know how to gain from all  
my mistakes*

*Ten years seem like a painting, and fortunately the sky  
has slowly gotten less gloomy*

*At the end, what I have learned the most is how to  
apologize and appreciate...*

*-Den*

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