

A SERIES OF LITERAL TITLES



A SERIES OF LITERAL TITLES

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ABSTRACT

For me, the act of painting is an act of being in the moment. I use it as a tool to stay in touch with the world around me and with my personal history. My thesis project, *A Series of Literal Paintings*, is a collection of observations that I have constructed a narrative upon. I place my subjects within a story that speaks about nature, connection, and mortality. These stories are speculations about the passage of time and what it means to die. They do not seek to convey the ultimate truths. Rather, they exercise a need that is intrinsic to human nature: to confront our existential fears with projection and myth.

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EPIGRAPH

Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces within its face - the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young-man - all present still, preserved as fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: Look at us - we have died - what is there to be afraid of?

It answers them: But it happened so gradually, so easily. I am afraid of being rushed.

-Christopher Isherwood

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A SERIES OF LITERAL TITLES

The desire to find meaning in the world often has a close association with death. We sum up lives with epitaphs, hold memorials, and practice religion to place our lives in a narrative which extends beyond our passing. The expectation of death is universal. It unites us in our life experience and reminds us to appreciate every moment we are given.

My experiences of having childhood cancer and living close to nature are the driving factors that inspire me to have an acute awareness of the present moment. My art focuses on the act of observation as it relates to mortality. Overlooked moments in ordinary settings are the subjects of my work. These are the things we often interact with but fail to appreciate. They are an underutilized source of bliss our hurried lives. My work often speaks to the idea of transcendence by uniting subjects from the world we are familiar with, with the world we cannot know.

I think of these two worlds in terms of philosopher Eugene Thacker's book, *In the Dust of this Planet*, in which he creates a model for understanding the world by separating it into three different parts. I only discuss two of those parts: *world-for-us* and *world-in-itself*. *World-for-us* can be described as the world that we interpret and give meaning to. *World-in-itself* is the world in its given state, without our interpretations imposed upon it. Thacker writes that "the *world-in-itself* is a paradoxical concept; the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the *world-in-itself* and becomes the *world-for-us*" (Thacker 5). We are often most aware of the *world-in-itself* when we are confronted with something that threatens our sense of control, such as death or a natural disaster. In my thesis work, I refer to "projection" when describing the

world-for-us and I refer to “paradox” when describing the *world-in-itself*. The act of painting about these themes is my way of placing life into a narrative that extends beyond mortality.

Description

My paintings are thematic; they are united by their focus on mortality. I like to display my reverence for life by highlighting what I see as the beauty in the overlooked, and frequently search my environment for inspiration. I have a preference for things with a sense of oddity and tactile quality. Since the subjects are often unusual, I provide context with literal titles that explain what the viewer is seeing. My paintings must be images of real things with very few imagined elements because I want to assert that the beauty conveyed is a genuine part of the natural world.

Many of my paintings focus on exploring patterns and textures. I attribute symbolic meaning to them. Textures and patterns that are man-made represent the world we create for ourselves by projecting meaning and purpose onto it. Organic textures represent the paradox of the *world-in-itself* which exists without the influence of our interpretations. Therefore, I see a close link between these symbols and mortality. The world that a person creates for themselves through projection is one that is formed from the experience of living. The world, as it is represented by nature, is one that escapes our understanding while simultaneously affecting us constantly. Despite the element of death within nature, I find more life in it than any man-made subject. I draw attention to the presence of life in nature by using dead animals as a subject in many of my paintings.

Of the completed paintings, I consider *Morning Fish* (2019) the most successful (Fig. 1). It features bright-red fish on a surface of man-made tiles. In painting this, I juxtapose natural and man-made items, uniting them in a shared space. The fish present a paradox by being simultaneously vibrant and dead. The texture of the scales and the pattern of the tile are given the most emphasis, which provides terrain for the viewer to explore. They are invited to project their meaning onto the paradox.



Fig. 1: Monica Orona, *Morning Fish*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 12" in. x 16" in., Collection of the Artist.

Morning Fish was painted in a loose and painterly style, unlike the many other tightly rendered images I have created. I did this to hint at the passage of time. Characteristics such as the shape of brush strokes, color, and texture, all serve to highlight the most important aspects of the image while I discarded the things that I deemed unimportant and distracting. I feel that the artful elimination of detail mirrors the foggy nature of memories. To me, this creates a feeling of transcendence which puts the viewer in touch with their sense of mortality.

This painterly style of mine that creates a feeling of transcendence through the selective use of detail is inspired by John Singer Sargent. Under the training of Carolus Duran, Sargent learned to simplify his forms. Part of this achievement is influenced by instructions to make wide use of half-tones and to paint the “envelope” of his subjects—meaning to convey the absence of hardness that occurs when a figure is viewed from a distance by making sure that all tints used in

the painting are “swept into and blended with their neighbors” (Arensman 8). One of Sargent’s earlier paintings from *Two Octopi*, (1875) is an example of what I aspire to both in terms of technique and affinity for unusual subjects (Fig. 2). It is a closely cropped image of two entangled octopi on the deck of a fishing boat from a tilted vantage point. Despite their shiny surfaces and complex forms, Sargent manages to describe them effectively with broad brushstrokes and a limited value range. The result, like an image from memory, is visually uncomplicated, yet somehow vivid. There is a sense of urgency to the technique which suggests to the viewer that Sargent has recorded a fleeting moment.



Fig. 2: John Singer Sargent, *Two Octopi*, 1875, Oil on Canvas, 16” in. x 12.5” in.

I repeat the subject of dead animals in the still life paintings *Dead Moth with Parasitic Wasp Eggs* (2019) and *Dead Lizard in My Driveway* (2019) for the same reason (Fig. 3) (Fig. 4). I intend to capture a fleeting moment in time, decay, in these two examples, and to find the beauty in it. *Dead Moth with Parasitic Wasp Eggs* is a portrait of a dead moth found lying outside of my studio. The body rests on top of an avocado leaf under the intense light of the sun. Its furry abdomen is split open, revealing a cache of parasitic eggs that had been lain inside the body. I painted this because I find the dead moth to be a morbidly fascinating oddity.

Unlike *Morning Fish*, I do not attribute any symbolic meaning to textures in this painting. Although there is the suggestion of pavement behind the avocado leaf, drawing attention to the



Fig. 3: Monica Orona, *Dead Moth with Parasitic Wasp Eggs*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 24" in. x 16" in., Collection of the Artist.

world we create for ourselves is largely unnecessary. The moth itself is an example of life within death in the natural world. Its dead body incubates eggs that will soon hatch into larva. There is a small circle of life occurring within this scene. The viewer needs little imagination to be reminded of mortality.

Dead Lizard in my Driveway is another scene in which my goal is to illustrate the presence of life within death. The title is an accurate description of the subject. I found this lizard underneath a purple Chaste Tree. It was late fall and the tree's branches were loaded with

bees getting their last fill of the flowers before the branches went bare. Meanwhile the lizard's body was surrounded by small piles of flowers that gathered around and inside of the body. I felt torn between fascination and repulsion as I gathered it for reference. It was dirty and it smelled terrible, yet the way the skin had deteriorated to reveal the bones of the ribcage were beautiful. I saw the flowers as a reminder of time and renewal because the changing season had caused them to fall. The coincidental symbolism made it seem as if the world-in-itself was humoring my desire to project meaning onto it. I draw comfort from this. Much



Fig. 4: Monica Orona, *Dead Lizard in my Driveway*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 10" in. x 20" in., Collection of the Artist.

like the eggs that were laid inside the moth, the flowers are an indication of continued life. I like to imagine that if the lizard were left alone, it would eventually get swept into the dirt, decompose, and become a part of the tree it had died under.

I feel as if I am constantly undergoing a process of death and reformation, just like the lizard and moth. To me, death is both a physical and psychological reality that occurs repeatedly in an individual. Over my lifetime, most, if not all of the cells in my body have died and been replaced multiple times. In this sense, my body is completely different than the one I was born in. I see this as a form of physical death. The fact that I have somehow managed to maintain a sense of unending identity despite this continual death is curious to me.

The psychological element of death in this context is a reference to changing personality. Mentally, I am not the same person that I was ten years ago. I probably won't be the same ten years from now, either. This thought is more daunting to me than physical death because it is closer to my realm of control. Although change is healthy, there is a part of me that always feels as if I should be putting a stop to this. If my personality changes too, what will be left?

As my work progressed, I began to paint less about physical death and more about psychological death. I did this by gravitating toward subjects with references to my past. The painting *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree* (2020) is an example of this (Fig.4). It is based on an old recording of a family cat perched in an apricot tree in our garden. Partially concealed, she looks down at the viewer. The warm glow of the sun causes the leaves to glow bright green. This is a phenomenon that I frequently observed and appreciated while growing up. Aside from the visual appeal, it is interesting to me it creates the illusion that the plant is illuminated from within.

Driving William to Medical School (2020) is another piece about psychological death based on familial and personal history (Fig.5). The image, created from photos I took a decade ago, features a profile view of my dad in the driver's seat. I initially



Fig. 5: Monica Orona, *Driving William to Medical School*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 20" in. x 10" in., Collection of the Artist.

took the pictures because I thought that the lighting seemed oddly cinematic. The background features golden fields with the same glowing effect that I was exploring with *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree*. This is contrasted with a dark foreground where the figure is in cool shadow except for one illuminated band of light over his eyes.

This moment, Dad driving my oldest brother to medical school, was a turning point in my life. Both of my brothers and I structured our lives around the idea that we would be working in healthcare like our dad. However, none of us went through with this. Life is unpredictable, we had to confront the predicament of choosing careers for ourselves. The person I was at the time of that photograph has become something like a fossil within me: dead and preserved.

The preoccupation that I had with uniting the *world-in-itself* and the *world-for-us* in the early stages of my thesis was more concerned with the idea of physical death, as opposed to the preoccupation with psychological death in my later paintings. Though both deal with mortality, I now see my corpse paintings as declarations of the importance of life, while my life paintings focus on the preservation of memories.

Research

I grew up on the edge of Clovis, California. Clovis is located near the foothills leading to Yosemite (Fig. 6). Much of my work is influenced by a childhood spent growing up with nature. I spent a large portion of my childhood exploring outside and observing animals. My pets included: cats, dogs, lizards, birds, tadpoles, snakes and insects. Insects were particularly fascinating to me; they have a radically different view of the world. My lack of understanding about them made them a blank slate for my imagination. I personified other living things by projecting human experience upon them. Watching animals contend with death in their own natural way is the most relevant example of this. Much like I do with my still life paintings, I observed a sense of continuity after death in the way their bodies became a part of the living landscape. As an adult, I still do this in my art. I create a narrative of life after death for the subjects that I paint.



Fig. 6: Foothills in Clovis, CA, 2017.

I split death into two categories: the physical and the psychological. Physical death is the focus of my still life paintings. This occurs when the body ceases to function. My preoccupation with physical death is derived from my experience of being born with neuroblastoma. Unlike most cancer survivors, I was lucky to spend the majority of my treatment being blissfully ignorant about death and my chances of survival. Rather, my experience is more accurately defined by the vague threat of relapse in my teenage years. It was something that was always in the back of my mind, but never really within my grasp to understand. However, nature

was, and still is, an essential subject I use in my art for exploring human experiences. By painting dead animals, I can explore mortality without directly confronting my existential fears. I do not do this to be morbid, but to open up a dialogue for interpreting the nature of physical death. Animals are the predominant subjects. Still life, in its technical definition, refers to paintings featuring objects that are not moving or dead (Tate). Works from Dutch Painters of the 1600s, such as Jan Weenix's *Still Life with a Hare and Birds* (c. 1675) are a classic example of this



Fig. 7 Jan Weenix, *Still Life with a Hare and Birds*, c. 1675, Oil on canvas, 50.9 in. x 41.9 in, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

(Fig. 7). Common subjects for still life paintings include household items, flowers and food.

I define psychological death as a form of mortality that can be experienced with each significant transition in life. A less melodramatic term for this is maturity. As people grow, they abandon interests, places, and people that were once important to them in order to become receptive to new opportunities. In psychological death, a person's sense of self is destroyed and rebuilt.

My narrative work that does not include still life is about psychological death. It documents fragments of my former self. Since I convey psychological death by using my past as reference, I use old family photos for inspiration. My goal is to capture an authentic, spontaneous, and fleeting moment from the past. The people featured in my references are unaware that they are being photographed.

Given that the themes in my art involve both physical and psychological death, realism is a pragmatic and useful choice for me as an oil painter. I stay within the style of realism because my observations are literal. I am simply painting what is there. I try not to exaggerate my subjects because it feels disloyal to my intention of presenting natural beauty. This is also why my works are titled with descriptions rather than ideas. It is important to note that the word *realism* has two definitions in the context of art – a historical one and a stylistic one. In the historical sense, realism refers to “...a mid-nineteenth century artistic movement in France, characterized by subjects painted from everyday life in a naturalistic manner” (Tate). The stylistic definition for realism is “generally used to describe artworks painted in a realistic, almost photographic way” (Tate). When I use the word realism to describe my work, I am strictly referring to the stylistic definition.

I associate the anxiety of physical and psychological death with the passage of time. In the semi-autobiographical novel, *A Single Man*, the author Christopher Isherwood places his middle-aged protagonist, George, in front of a mirror and describes this predicament in a way that resonates with me:

Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces within its face - the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young-man - all present still, preserve as fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: Look at us - we have died - what is there to be afraid of? It answers them: But it happened so gradually, so easily. I am afraid of being rushed. (Isherwood 10)

In this scene, Isherwood specifies that “being rushed” through each stage of his life and being unable to focus on the present moment is the reason behind the anxiety of psychological death.

This is the same reasoning behind my own fear of psychological death. I combat this by living in the moment through my paintings.

With my still life paintings, I confront my own fear of time passing by forcing myself to slow down, meditate, and connect with the present moment. The preliminary steps to my paintings are an exercise in connecting with the present moment as well. Most of the subjects in my still life paintings were found while exploring nature and paying close attention to my surroundings.

My non-still life paintings, on the other hand, approach the reverence for small moments in a different way. They step away from nature and focus on personal history. I look to John Singer Sargent as a source of inspiration when painting about memory. This is because he employed the technique of enveloping in order to simplify forms. In practice, enveloping simply refers to painting a subject in broad, general shapes without becoming too exact with detail. The most interesting thing to me is how this painting style evokes a sense of time. In a lecture from a digital painting class that I took as an undergrad, there was speculation that Sargent's painting style resonates with viewers on a subconscious level because it appeals to their sense of mortality (Oatley 00:9:30).

This speculation stuck with me and it is always on my mind when I analyze Sargent's work. His paintings possess a sense of looseness and movement that makes them appear as a fleeting moment. For example, I see the implication of time in the minimal use of brushstrokes in



Fig. 8: John Singer Sargent, *Vernon Lee*, 1881, Oil on Canvas, 32" in. x 36" in., Fogg Art Museum.

his portrait of *Vernon Lee* (Fig 8). Even the briefest implication of detail, such as the few lines that make up the glasses, eyebrows, and ear, appear delicate, as if the image is a fleeting moment rather than something solid and real. When I painted *Morning Fish*, I used the Vernon Lee portrait as reference in an effort to achieve the same effect. I support the theme of mortality by stylistically implying the passage of time. The use of a broad brush to capture large, general shapes is suddenly more apparent and the predominance of a limited palette of earth colors.

William's Prom Night (2020) is a painting from personal history that I completed with Sargent in mind (Fig 9). It features my oldest brother in his senior year of high school, accepting a corsage from his prom date. I see this as an example of psychological death because ten years have passed and they are both completely different people. Therefore, I keep the shapes and brushstrokes in the painting as simplified as possible in order to stylistically imply the passage of time.

I believe my repeated projection of death onto my subjects is fundamentally a part of my need for a sense of spirituality. In 2001, the neuroscientist, Andrew Newberg, and research psychiatrist, Eugene D'Aquili, published their research on the origins of religion in their book, *Why*



Fig. 9: Monica Orona, *William's Prom Night*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 18" in. x 24" in., Collection of the Artist.

God Won't Go Away. They noted that human cultures have a tendency to answer life's most

troubling questions, such as those associated with death, through the use of myth. Myth is defined in a more classical sense where it is not synonymous with fantasy, but characterized by “...the ability of its universal symbols and themes to connect us with the most essential parts of ourselves in ways that logic and reason alone cannot...” (Newberg & D'Aquili 97). This definition of myth encompasses religion.

Furthermore, they attribute the tendency to create myth to an involuntary mental drive called the *cognitive imperative*. The *cognitive imperative* is the “almost irresistible, biologically driven need to make sense of things through the cognitive analysis of reality” (Newberg & D'Aquili 103). It is thought to be a survival mechanism. The cognitive imperative is unique to humans because of the complexity of our cerebral cortex. Unlike most other animals, which only experience fear in response to an immediate stimulus, humans are capable of experiencing fear in abstract forms. In other words, we not only experience and react to fear in the immediate presence of danger, but at the idea of it as well. Therefore, myth is what prevents our cognitive imperative from running amok when it is presented with questions that cannot be answered. Newberg and D'Aquili note that all myths are essentially rooted in the confrontation of a crucial existential concern. Existential fears and the cognitive imperative are the reason why religion is so closely involved in reconciling life with mortality.

All of this is to say, I do not subscribe to any established religion, but I do believe it is my cognitive imperative to explore death through the genres of still life and narrative. Therefore, my paintings *Morning Fish*, *Dead Moth with Parasitic Wasp Eggs* and *Dead Lizard in my Driveway* all have a spiritual connotation. They feature dead animals that are sustaining the continuity of life. *Morning Fish*, features fish at a market display. In *Dead Moth with Parasitic Wasp Eggs*,

the moth is harboring a clutch of wasp eggs. The lizard in *Dead Lizard in my Driveway* is decomposing under a tree, possibly to one day become soil at its roots. These paintings reconcile us with mortality by minimizing its sense of permanence. This is accomplished by depicting subjects that are playing an active role in sustaining life after individual death.

Of course, there is no guarantee that these animals are experiencing any sort of meaningful reincarnation through the consumption of their bodies, but that is not important. It is just a myth. The point is to reconcile with mortality, not to explain it. It is also worth noting that embracing the myth making urge speaks to a desire to feel a sense of unity. By engaging with the cognitive imperative through myth making, I am allowing myself to be inspired by the same instinct that Newberg and D'Aquili describe as being at the root of every religion. Acting upon that universal instinct allows me to feel connected with the world.

I see the need to feel connected with the world as something universal. The research of Newberg and D'Aquili also supports this notion. They found that the brain activity associated with intense religious experiences of “transcendence” and “unity” is the same in Buddhist meditation and Catholic prayer. The area of the brain associated with orienting the body in space¹ is overstimulated through ritual to the point of briefly losing its function. This creates an illusion of feeling as if the body has merged with the world around it. In other words, the brain activity that occurs during both religious practices is exactly the same, but the interpretation of those experiences is dependent upon the individual's belief system. Meditation and prayer fall

¹Newberg and D'Aquili refer to this as the orientation association area, or OAA, for the sake of simplicity. Its proper name is the posterior superior parietal lobe. See Chapter 1, “A Photograph of God?: An Introduction to the Biology of Belief” for more detailed information.

under the category of ritual. Newberg and Aquili's research shows that the key to a sense of unity that ritual provides is due to elements of rhythm, which "...can drive the limbic and autonomic systems, which may eventually alter some very fundamental aspects of the way the brain thinks, feels, and interprets reality. These rhythms can dramatically affect the brain's neurological ability to define the limits of the self" (Newberg & D'Aquili 132). Of course, not all ritual is limited to religion. Any activity that involves rhythm and repetition has the potential to create feelings of unity.

Land art is one of the earliest art movements that spoke to me about this need for unity. Land art is a sub-category of the conceptual art movement in the 1960s and 1970s. It is characterized by sculpting land with the exclusive use of natural materials, such as rocks or twigs (Tate). Elements of rhythm and repetition are often present in the process of creating land art.



Fig. 10: Andy Goldsworthy, *Leaf Sheet*, 1986, .

I was introduced to the work of the land artist, Andy Goldsworthy through a Fresno State professor. Goldsworthy is an inspiration for my own work. I presume that he interprets mortality by creating a myth that centers around the ideal of unity between nature and himself. Similar to my own still life paintings, there is a narrative in which the finality of death is neutralized by viewing nature as an extension of ourselves, so that the termination of our bodies does not entail the termination of our being.

Goldsworthy uses no materials aside from his own hands and what he finds outside. He creates with the expectation that his art will expire. His creations are finite moments of beauty created from the natural world and they are made more precious by their impermanence. When I look at artwork done by Goldsworthy, I become more appreciative of the qualities of natural materials, such as the rich color of leaves or the richness of clay. It is the same element of elevating the ordinary that I strive for in my own work. For example, in Goldsworthy's sculpture, *Leaf Sheet* (1986) he draws attention to the beauty inherent in leaves by weaving them into a large object and illuminating them with the sun (Fig. 10). I explored this same lighting situation with the leaves in *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree* and the grass in *Driving William to Medical School*. I interpret this focus on the interaction between light and nature as a sort of reverential attempt to highlight the beauty of the ordinary with his work.

In the sculpture *Red Pools* (1995), Goldsworthy uses water and clay to create the illusion of bleeding rocks (Fig. 11). He has an



Fig. 11: Andy Goldsworthy, *Red Pools*, 1995, Ground Sandstone Mixed with Water, Galerie Lelong.

affinity for this particular clay. It is a recurring material in his work. The color comes from the iron content, the same mineral that is responsible for the color of human blood. In his 2001 documentary, Goldsworthy notes “I think the color [red] is an expression of life. Even though things die, there is a part of that flow still... I think that, when [I realize] that the color is also in me, then it is this feeling of both a color and an energy flowing through all things” (Rivers and Tides 00:16:10). In other words, Goldsworthy views his work with red clay as a form of ritual in

which he connects with nature. He makes the assertion that the red in the clay is an extension of the red in himself. This creates a narrative in which his being extends beyond his mortal body. I work to create a similar narrative in my still life paintings by creating a narrative where dead subjects are conveyed with lively qualities.

On the whole, the driving force behind my work is a desire to contend with death, both in the physical and psychological sense of the word. I do this by using realism to paint subjects that convey a narrative, or myth, of continuity that transcends mortality. My still life paintings focus on nature and address both physical and psychological death by using cycles in nature as a vehicle. Land art is a source of inspiration for me because it focuses on connection with the natural world and elevating the beauty of ordinary things. When addressing psychological death, I find that personal history is the most effective subject. Capturing moments from past stages of my life in paint allows me to transcend the gap between the person I am now and the person I was before. It allows me to reflect upon the parts of me that are no longer alive. This is not to say that my art is seeking to convey absolute truths. Rather, I am simply humoring my myth making urge.

Methodology

I am preoccupied with the fleeting nature of time and my art is an attempt to live more fully in the moment. The creative process in which I search for inspiration in nature connects to this theme. The first step of my process entails searching for a subject. For still life paintings, this means going out into nature and searching. For narrative painting, this means searching through my past. The second component of my process is the study and composition of my subject. This allows me to connect with it and to understand it more deeply. Finally, I work until I feel that my subject has been thoroughly analyzed and understood.

While growing up, art was gratifying to me. The act of making it served a cathartic purpose. Similarly, I now see art-making as a form of meditation. It is an act of pausing and living in the present. Therefore, I look at my process with a sense of spirituality. I refer to the act of searching for a subject to paint as foraging. The word, *foraging*, conjures up the image of rummaging around in nature, which is exactly what I do. In many ways, this process mimics the time I spent exploring outside as a child, searching for things to examine. While foraging, I look for artifacts from nature or in my personal history. This is how I found the original reference for *Dead Lizard on my Driveway* (Fig 12). The flowers from the Chaste tree that it had died under had lost their color by the time this photo reference was taken, and so they appear shriveled and grey. I later gathered some new flowers from a different plant to use as a color reference.



Fig. 12: Reference for *Dead Lizard in my Driveway*, 2019.

The act of foraging for my still life subjects and interacting with them is what helps me to feel connected with nature. For



Fig. 13: Frames from the reference video for *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree*, 2018.

obvious reasons, this is not possible for the narrative paintings I create while referencing old photos. My search for references is a nostalgic process. My main resource is a storage file that contains thousands of family photos from the past two decades. In digging through it, I can stay familiar with my past self. This helps me to ward off the anxiety of psychological death. I try to use multiple photos of a subject in my narrative paintings when possible. For example, with *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree*, the images were pulled from a video file (Fig 13). Having multiple images helps me to feel less reliant upon a single photo and to make adjustments to the composition.

I find that the process of exploring my subjects through studies gives me a greater feeling of understanding and connection. Exploration involves the creation of thumbnails, sketches, value studies, and color studies. Sometimes this is done on paper and sometimes this is done digitally, on my tablet. I prefer to do studies for detailed paintings on the tablet because it allows for more precision. Studies done with traditional materials are more efficient for simpler designs. Color studies must always be done on canvas because the computer's color spectrum has an unnatural, illuminated appearance that cannot be duplicated by oil paints.

For *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree*, I etched the outlines of the value study onto the painting surface through a charcoal transfer (Fig 14). A charcoal transfer is simply a method of tracing in which charcoal is applied to the back of the drawing before placing it on the painting surface and drawing over the lines to transfer the lines. This is a 6x6 inch painting with an uncomplicated composition. My value study is completed by hand.



Fig. 14: Value study and Grisaille for *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree*, 2020.

I will sometimes do a transfer using oil paint instead of charcoal. The type of transfer that I do is dependent upon what materials are on hand. With a transfer that uses oil paint, I do not need a spray fixative to keep the lines in place. I coat the back of the paper with a thin layer of oil paint instead. I choose something that dries quickly, like burnt umber. I then tape the painted side of the paper down on the panel and trace over my printed drawing with a ballpoint pen to press the image into the panel. This results in a detailed drawing that forms the foundation of my painting.

After transferring my drawing, I did a grisaille, purpose of which is to establish values. Grisaille refers to a method in which a painting is completed in greyscale before the application of color; it usually implies that the color layer will be transparent, but I use opaque paints as well. All of my paintings have some form of preliminary, value-based painting before color is



Fig. 15: Photo references (bottom) and value study (top) for *Driving William to Medical School*, 2020.

applied. Sometimes I might do an underpainting instead of a grisaille. This simply means that the colors are monochrome and transparent. The type of preliminary painting that I choose is based on intuition. I take my time on this. I focus on values and general shapes, looking to my thumbnails for guidance. When I start a painting with a grisaille, it tends to have a flatter appearance. Paintings that start with a transparent underpainting tend to have more depth.

For the painting *Driving William to Medical School*, I created a digital value study (Fig. 15). This image on the top draws inspiration from poses in both photo references, especially with the positioning of the arms. I wanted my dad

to look as if he was driving without bothering to protect his eyes with the sunglasses. This feels appropriate because of his tenacious personality. In this painting, the process was the same as *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree* except for the fact that the value study was done on my tablet. I used that study to create a grisaille and then applied color.

It is important to make sure that the values in the color layer match the values in the grisaille. The addition of color can make this distinction hard to see. If I am not certain about whether the values match, I will place a swatch of the color in question onto the painting and take a photo of it on my

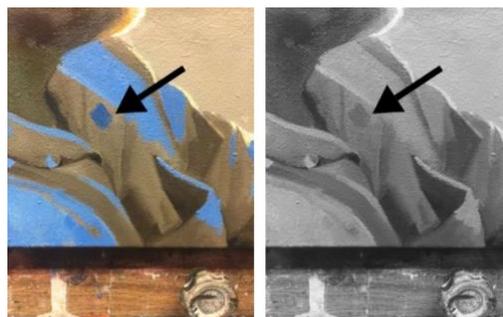


Fig. 16: A sample of paint on the grisaille for *Driving William to Medical School* with the saturation taken away on camera, 2020.

phone. From there, I can use a greyscale filter to see more clearly (Fig. 16). For example, I can check if the experimental swatch of blue that I mixed for the Hawaiian shirt is the correct value. My phone filter shows that the color is darker than what I need. This tells me I need to lighten up the mix before fully applying the color.

Many of my still life paintings, especially those involving insects, require a more detailed drawing. This is because their bodies have symmetry and complex shapes. These drawings are a method of exploration for me. They allow me to thoroughly examine the surface of my subject. My painting *Jewel Beetle in Soap Suds* (2020) is an example of a painting that required this (Fig.17).



Fig. 17: Monica Orona, *Jewel Beetle in Soap Suds*, 2020, Oil on Panel, 16" in. x 24" in., Collection of the Artist.

When I finish drawings digitally, I simply print the finished product to scale and conduct the same charcoal transfer I would do

with a physical drawing. I use the tablet in this case because the intricate and symmetrical form

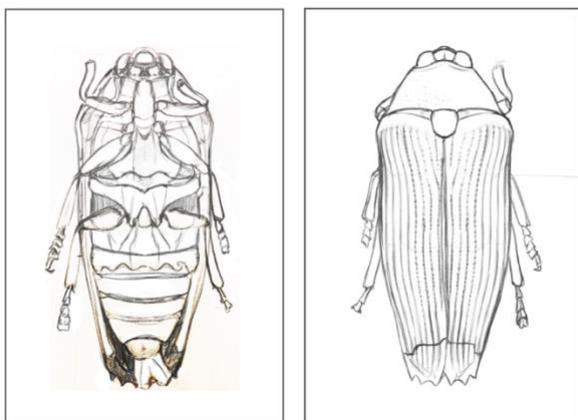


Fig. 18: Monica Orona, *Jewel Beetle Studies*, 2020, Digital Drawing, 16" in. x 24" in. for each panel, Collection of the Artist.

of the beetle's body requires a more precise interpretation of detail. My reference, a preserved jewel beetle, was examined closely and drawn by hand. Then I took the drawing to the computer to re-adjust proportions and create more definitive line art (Fig. 18). The photoshop brush that I used, *Stumpy Pencil*, is a customized resource that I got through my

online classes. It emulates the texture of a pencil. This helps me to keep a sense of consistency when working on a drawing that I started with physical paper. When I choose to do my thumbnails digitally, I am using skills that I developed while practicing digital painting and graphic design. I never draw from scratch on the computer because the slick surface of the tablet tends to make my work appear static. This is why the tablet is primarily used for editing and rearranging compositions that have already been drawn by hand.

I do not always have a good idea of how a large a painting should be until I have completed a drawing. If I finish a drawing and feel that the dimensions are not appropriate for a commercial canvas, I will custom build a support. I did this for *Jewel Beetle on Soap Suds* because I wanted the narrow measurement of 16 in. x 24 in., rather than the commercially available 18 in. x 24 in.

I create my panels by cutting a slab of hardboard down to the size I want. I then seal the surface with a wood finish to prevent warping. Although I am not a fan of stretched canvases, I still like the texture of a fabric surface. I create this texture on a solid surface by stretching and gluing fabric over the side of the panel that I plan to paint on. I often use leftover cuts of fabric from the craft store. These are typically about 50% linen and 50% rayon. Once the fabric is glued and trimmed, I prime the surface with about seven layers of acrylic gesso, lightly sanding as I go. The result is a hard, smooth surface that is ideal for transferring a drawing.

It is difficult to speak specifically about my color choices because they vary depending on the subject. Consistencies in my palette are simply a coincidence occurring from my choice of subject matter. The most frequently recurring colors are: titanium white, ultramarine blue, burnt umber, yellow ochre, and cadmium red medium. I try to keep my palette limited to these colors,

extending it only when necessary. This helps the colors in the painting to appear more unified. I do not avoid black altogether, but I find that using it sparingly, in the late stages of the painting, will keep my colors livelier. I often create a mix of ultramarine blue and burnt umber to replace black.

Outside of my studio at school, I primarily paint from home. My setup remains relatively the same in both places. I place my painting surface on my large wooden easel and set up a table with supplies on my right. I keep a container of *Gamsol* to clean my brushes and containers with linseed oil to thin out my paint when necessary. In the rare event that I need to glaze my painting, I use a mix of *Histo-Clear* and linseed oil. *Histo-Clear* is a plant extract that was developed to replace xylene as a supposedly less toxic clearing agent for tissue slides. In my studio, it replaces turpentine.

It is difficult to explain how I know when a painting is finished. I am primarily most concerned with completing the image from a technical standpoint; ensuring that the subject is conveyed realistically and in a pleasing way. Usually, I can tell a painting is finished when I get disenchanted with it. I start to feel as if every worthwhile characteristic of my subject has been wrung dry and there is nothing more to explore. At this point, I have to put it aside for a few days and look at it with fresh eyes before deciding what final adjustments to make.

CONCLUSION

To me, art is a form of myth-making. It is a tool that can be used to materialize answers to the impossible questions of life. This is all that it needs to be. Ironically, the effort I have put into appreciating the present moment has also put me into a mindset where I constantly anticipate death. I often forget that I am in my twenties and I will likely have a lot more life to contend with. Dealing with life sometimes causes me more anxiety than the thought of my mortality does. It comes with a whole new set of unanswerable questions for me to paint about.

When I explained the final steps in my painting process, I said that I use my disenchantment as an indicator for when to finish. I think this can also be applied to my philosophical obsessions. While I stand by the claim that painting is a way for me to live in the present, I do not think it will always be about confronting mortality. The paintings that I created for this project have allowed me to cover this topic exhaustively and I will be ready to move on soon.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1: Monica Orona, *Morning Fish*, 2019, Oil on canvas 12" in. x 16" in., Collection of the artist.

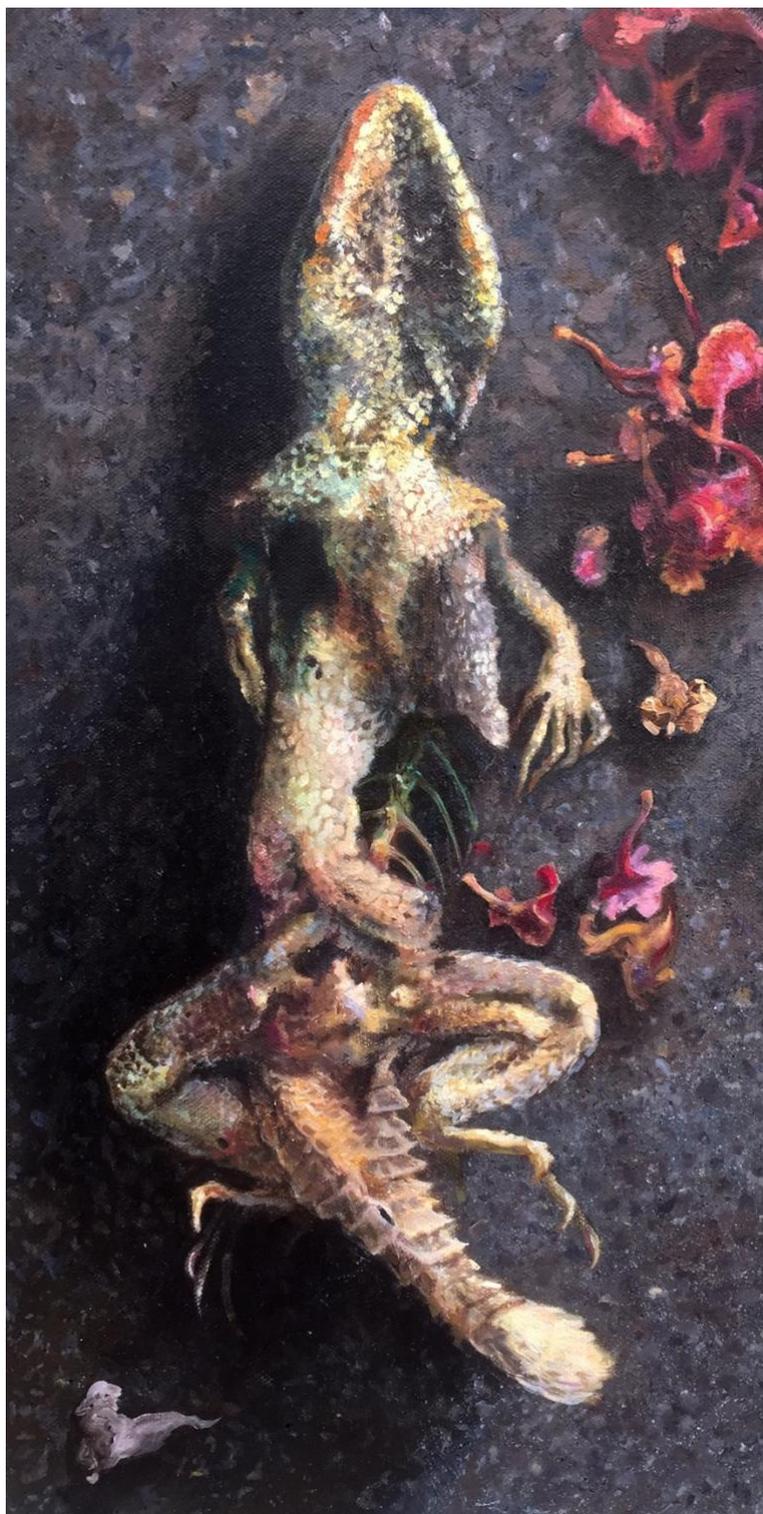


Plate 2: Monica Orona, *Dead Lizard on my Driveway*, 2019, Oil on canvas 10" in. x 20" in., Collection of the artist.



Plate 3: Monica Orona, *Jewel Beetle in Soap Suds*, 2020, Oil on panel 16" in. x 24" in., Collection of the artist.



Plate 4: Monica Orona, *Abalone on Plaster*, 2019, Oil on panel 12" in. x 12" in., Collection of the artist.



Plate 5: Monica Orona, *Dead Moth with Parasitic Wasp Eggs*, 2019, Oil on canvas 24" in. x 36" in., Collection of the artist.



Plate 6: Monica Orona, *Driving William to Medical School*, 2020, Oil on canvas 20" in. x 10" in., Collection of the artist.

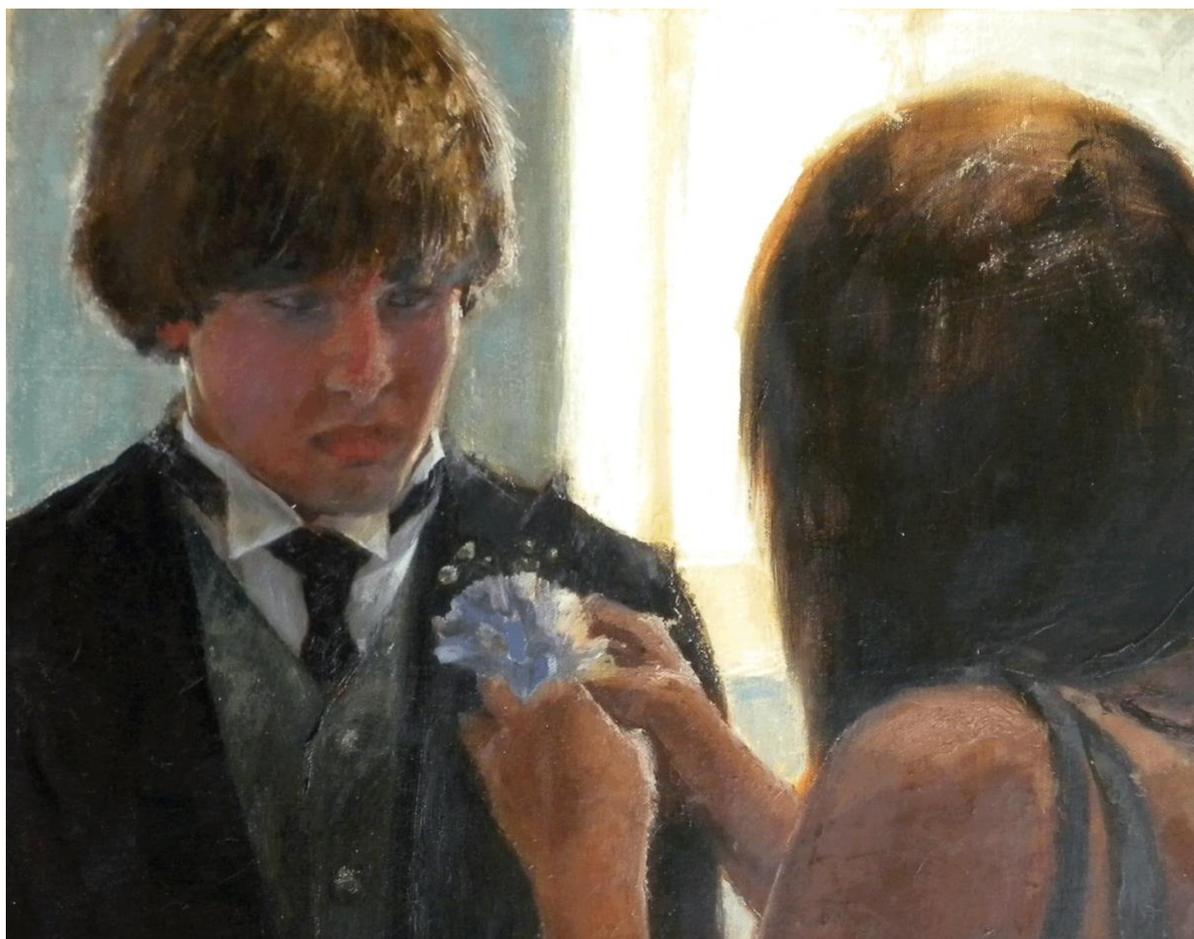


Plate 7: Monica Orona, *William's Prom Night*, 2020, Oil on canvas 18" in. x 42" in., Collection of the artist.



Plate 8: Monica Orona, *Pusheen in an Apricot Tree*, 2020, Oil on panel 6" in. x 6" in., Collection of the artist.

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