



*Mirror*

MIRROR

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by

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## ABSTRACT

I look for transient moments where light takes shape, creates lines, or illuminates color as it reflects off a surface. When I paint people under these conditions, I find that abstract qualities of visual perception are a compelling vehicle for empathy. Through what I consider the act of *seeing*—a process of observation, reflection, and then empathy—I am able to look closer into both my subjects and myself. As I paint, I discover how the mundane moments I have captured reflect broader themes and poetic revelations in my personal life. Beyond this, I ask to what degree empathy is an integral part of the aesthetic experience. I consider my paintings to be like mirrors that reflect emotional states found within me, my subjects, and my viewers. Through the poetic depictions of people in ephemeral environments, my paintings channel an intimate view into moments of psychological solitude—a quiet stillness intended to invite empathy, introspection, and self-reflection.

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**DEDICATION**

For my family.

**EPIGRAPH**

*The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inner significance.*

*-Aristotle*

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## **MIRROR**

### **DESCRIPTION**

On one of my darkest days in 2020, I found myself seated before a tree. It was that weird time after the election but before Biden's inauguration when nothing felt real or certain. The country was nearing what would be the first peak of the pandemic and my family had almost reached our first full year of staying afloat after a tragic accident. My mind could no longer comprehend the chaos of what was happening in my life and the world. Both seemed to be crumbling at the same time. I felt disoriented, like I had no sure-footing, and somehow I felt lucky—lucky to have a family, to be in school, and on that day, I was lucky to have a sketchbook on hand.

I sat there, my mind seemingly suspended in time, as my eyes guided me through the contour of the tree's limbs. With every stroke of my pencil, it felt like my body was moving in sync with each gestural branch. Some jutted out towards the sky, and my spine stretched in accordance. Some curved back inwards, and I followed, twisting slightly to feel their motion. Gradually, my thoughts felt lighter, and a centeredness came over me. My worries were not so much lifted, but the pain of them no longer felt meaningless. Instead, their purpose felt beautiful when accompanied by an incidental tree. And I felt incidental too, like I was the tree, who had been there all this time as each stranger passed by it with their own joys and sorrows. To observe from a place of impartiality placed me not as a bystander but as a witness to all things good and bad in my life. I could see the harmony in their duality, just as I felt in harmony with the tree I was drawing. In intimate observation, I considered the tree's place in the world, like I was empathizing with it. But in reality, I knew it only reflected me

back to myself. Maybe that is empathy, I thought, an endless mirror for us each to understand ourselves, and in turn, to better understand each other.

My paintings are about the act of *seeing*. *Seeing* entails not just looking but empathically engaging with my subject. This process always leads to my own self-reflection, which informs the meaning of my finished painting. I often paint about things I do not know, only to find myself understanding what they mean to me in the process or after the painting has been created. Like the tree, they are mirrors that reflect my internal landscape. They relate to my subconscious in a profound way, becoming emblematic of themes currently going on in my life. The act of *seeing* positions me in a way to process my experiences and give them meaning. My painting *Still at the Table* (Fig. 1) began with a random snapshot of my Oma at dinner but ended with an insight on perseverance. My painting *Apollo on the*

*Stairs* (Fig. 2) was inspired by the light coming through a window, but in its creation, I grappled with innocence and freedom. I am fascinated with the strange activity that is artmaking: the process of taking something ordinary and making it meaningful. I like to think of William Carlos



Fig. 1. Kelley Mogilka, *Still at the Table*, 2021, oil on panel, 24 x 24 in.

Williams' poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow," when describing this phenomenon:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens

A red wheelbarrow is just a red wheelbarrow until it is witnessed by the poet. When it is glazed with rainwater, beside the white chickens, it becomes a moment eternalized in poetry. Its meaning relative to the poet is why so much depends upon it. The poem illustrates how

a small object can become meaningful in a vast universe with only those four words, "so much depends upon." Williams' poem reveals a meaning beyond a red wheelbarrow. It reveals to the reader that a small life does not make it insignificant. If a poem about a red wheelbarrow can provoke this insight, I thought, what can a painting do?

My work carries an emotional energy that is created intuitively. I do not begin a painting with a set idea or goal—only my fascination with the abstract elements of an image, i.e., the lines, color, and shapes. The uncertainty of an outcome is what drives my curiosity to discover inner truths in myself. I must abandon any preconceptions about the painting. To



Fig. 2. Kelley Mogilka, *Apollo on the Stairs*, 2021, oil on panel, 24 in x 36 in.

define my paintings before their creation is like silencing them before they can speak. Because of this, I never know how a painting will behave when it is created. When I painted *What's Mine Is Yours* (Fig. 3), I realized that empathy plays a vital part in my work. I painted my partner, Mason, sitting on the steps outside of an LCAD classroom. It was an ordinary evening after class, but I was taken aback by the dramatic shapes of shadow created by a fluorescent light at night. I snapped a photo and was immediately inspired to paint it the next day. As I sat with his captured presence for eight hours, his isolated image and melancholic expression began to mirror itself to me. I felt *simpatico* with his isolation but also in awe of the power of empathy. I knew I was only responding to paint on a panel, not his physical



Fig. 3. Kelley Mogilka, *What's Mine is Yours*, 2021, oil on panel, 16 in. x 20 in.

presence, but it reflected my own feelings of companionship and connection that I have to him. His pain was my pain; his happiness amplified mine. The words “what’s mine is yours” echoed in my head. I realized that was what my paintings are saying to me. They are reflections of me and my experience. No matter how much of a presence they hold on their own, I discover myself in them.

When I look at my work, I often see more of myself than I do the people I have painted. I sometimes wonder if all of my paintings are self-portraits. I take my own perceived experiences, decipher them through a painting process, and in the end, they reflect my own thoughts and feelings about my life. Like how drawing a tree requires empathy, painting a person's face is even more of an empathetic act. To capture the mood of a person requires me to enter their state of mind. Sometimes I find myself mimicking their expression as I work, with each flick of a brush meaning the difference between sadness and contentment. But I often ask myself, to what extent am I truly feeling *them*? Where does my own perception end and their experience begin? It is critical for me to experience my figure's emotional state to imbue the painting with an emotional charge, but I always find myself asking, to what extent can we truly feel one another?

As I have grown as a painter, I have strayed away from literal depictions of nature and delved further into the ambiguous dialect that is emotional energy. I consider painting to be a visual language, and I want my work to emphasize that. There is no specific narrative element to my paintings, other than what a viewer might

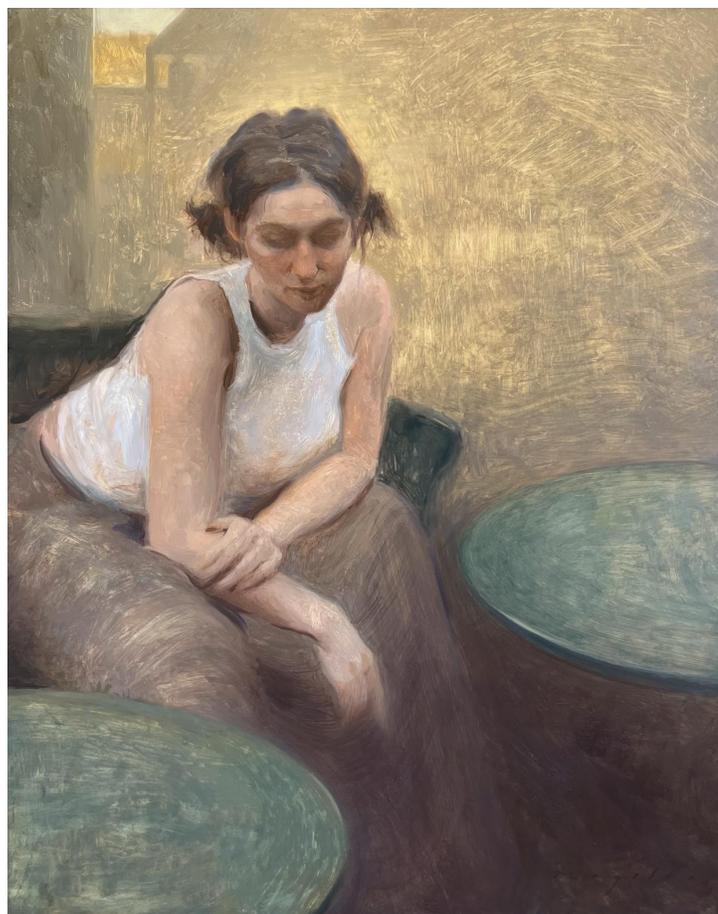


Fig. 4. Kelley Mogilka, *A Way Out*, 2022, oil on panel, 16 in. x 20 in.

bring to the work. Because my paintings take on a life of their own, I become a vessel for their presence to emerge. In my painting *A Way Out* (Fig. 4), I began to sacrifice definition in areas of the painting to amplify the emotional energy of my figure. Previously, my practice of *seeing* was predominantly focused on responding to my reference photo. But in this painting, I started to respond to the presence of the painting itself. Blue table-like structures are left on the verge between object and abstraction; edges between figure and ground are left unclear. In straying from the literal and leaning into the abstract, I hope my intent for my work can become clearer: that it is about the emotional space, not the physical one. I encourage my viewers to step into this landscape and bring their own experiences and perceptions to my paintings.

In painting my experiences, I consider how they become time capsules or records of my life through my eyes. These qualities are what connect me to the paintings of 19th century Realists and Impressionists like Joaquín Sorolla, John Singer Sargent, and Anders Zorn. Fascinated by optics and creating the illusion of light and space with paint, their paintings become timeless *because* they solidify those qualities. Just like a random moment of a wheelbarrow becomes eternalized in poetry, so does a beach scene when painted by Sorolla. Simple scenes of everyday life suddenly become dissected in paint, frozen for the viewer to gaze into and to contemplate their own moment—their own fleeting place on a timeline. This is something I was thinking about when I painted my self-portrait, *Mirror* (Fig. 5). I tried to capture the air and energy around me as I paused to look at my glowing reflection. I was leaving my house to catch a view of the sunset, but it caught me first—its orange rays shining through a nearby window stopped me dead in my tracks. Moments like this lull me into submission. *I have to paint you*, I think, and sometimes even shamelessly



Fig. 5. Kelley Mogilka, *Mirror*, 2021, oil on panel, 8 in. x 9 in.

mutter to myself when I am so mesmerized. I take notice of how the edges of my hair dissolve into space, almost like I am becoming one with the captured moment. A print of a Renoir painting is framed behind me, almost completely abstracted, a memento of the lineage of observational artists whose

footsteps I follow. I wonder if some day someone will look at this painting when I am gone and consider my perspective—how this moment was captured through my eyes. I question if paintings, or any art form, are capable of harnessing and containing the emotion of an artist for someone in another lifetime to feel. If this were true, does that mean empathy can transcend time and space? Or are we merely reflecting our own lives onto each other?

Famed astrophysicist Carl Sagan once said, when describing the fact that we are all made of star stuff, that “we are a way for the universe to know itself” (“The Shores”). I always took this to mean that every person’s experience is linked in a way—that each person’s life adds to a growing collection of evidence of what the world has to offer. Whether or not empathy is a mirror, everyone experiences similar emotions, even if they arise out of completely different lives. I believe that paintings provide the perfect place to witness this connection. It should not matter who I am painting for a viewer to relate to my

work. A grandmother, a child, or a young woman all become emblematic of people we have all been or will be, either physically, emotionally, or psychologically. I want my work to have the timelessness of emotions or states of being that all people experience. The significance of my work relies on what my viewer brings to them, just as I do when I am painting them. That said, what is meaningful to me is potentially vastly different than what is meaningful to my viewer. But I strongly believe that great art has the ability—the openness—to allow the viewer to insert themselves into a painting and make it theirs. As the artist, I want to make beautiful paintings that lure my viewer into a place where that can happen—to take visual moments and encourage the viewer not to look, but to *see*.

## **RESEARCH**

My paintings reflect a part of me that I try to channel each day: an introspective, centered presence. The act of *seeing* and painting is one of the ways I access that presence. Like meditation, it allows me to remove myself from an analytical mind and enter a deeper place—one where I navigate the world intuitively and with serenity. I believe that when I operate from this part of myself, free from my external responses to an outside world, I am living closer to my truest self. Artist and author Frederick Frank describes this experience in his book, *The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/drawing as Meditation*:

When [seeing/drawing] happens there is no more room for the labelings, the choices of the me. Every insignificant thing appears as if seen in its three dimensions, in its own space and in its own time. Each leaf of grass is seen to grow from its own roots, each creature is realized to be unique, existing now/here on its voyage from birth to death. No longer do I “look” at a leaf, but enter into direct contact with its life-process, with life itself, with what I, too, really am. Becoming one with the lilies in

seeing/drawing, I become not less, but more myself. For the time being the split between me and not-me is healed, suspended (7).

The figures in my paintings express this state of being. It is both something I look for in the people I paint, and a part of myself that I imbue in each painting.

In my painting *A Way Out*, a seated woman looks downward, her gaze almost exiting the picture plane. Her environment begins to dissolve around her as peripheral noise. A hint of a building, perhaps a home, lingers in the distance (Fig. 6). Her presence is directed inwards, almost asking the viewer, where is she, truly? Which is the way out? As a figurative painter, I consider how a person's presence invokes questions and emotions in a viewer.

Because humans are a social species, we constantly respond to the emotional energy given by those around us. Some give us steadiness and comfort; others invite anxiety or self-analysis.

In researching for my thesis, I discovered that this behavior can be attributed to mirror

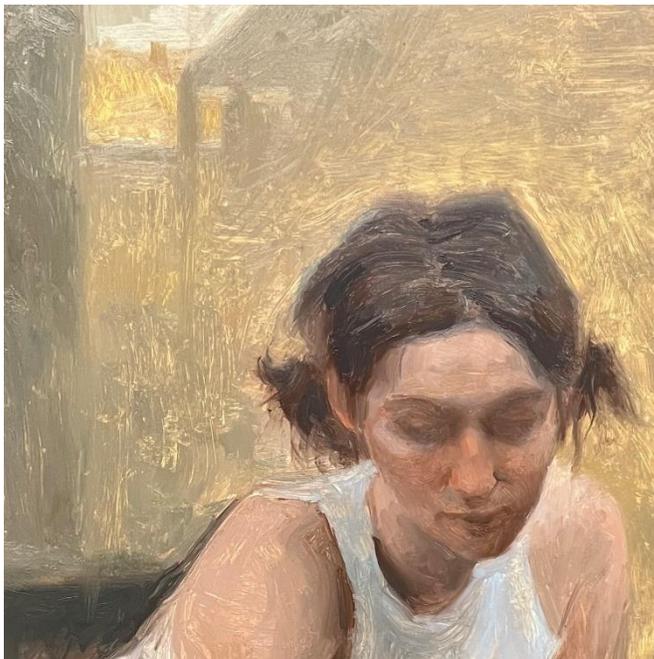


Fig. 6. Kelley Mogilka, *A Way Out* (detail), 2022, oil on panel

neurons (Iacoboni 659). A fairly new concept, mirror neurons are considered to be the scientific basis behind empathy. They are neurons that activate not only when we take action, but when we see other people cry, laugh, or dance, we feel in our brains like we are doing those things too. Neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni explains, “this [finding] suggests that through imitation and

mimicry, we are able to feel what other people feel. By being able to feel what other people

feel, we are also able to respond compassionately to other people’s emotional states” (659). In my own paintings, I question to what extent paint application can enhance these mirror-like responses. When a painted figure begins to dissolve into brushstrokes, what emotional impact can that have on my viewer?

In creating my painting, *Revelation* (Fig. 7), I learned that the figure is a powerful tool for viewers to place themselves in an abstract setting. As a viewer mentally imitates the actions of a woman plucking a lemon from a tree, do they, too, feel engulfed in its diffusing leaves and branches? Ingar Brinck, a Swedish researcher, argues that the aesthetic experience in viewing art is rooted in empathy. She describes that it is the bodily and emotional engagement with works of art that enables the viewer to “move with and be moved by individual works of art” (201). In my own work, I try to enhance this experience by painting figures that my viewer can empathically identify with. I want the presence of my figures to invite introspection in my viewer—to be a mirror they



Fig. 7. Kelley Mogilka, *Revelation*, 2022, oil on panel, 18 in. x 24 in.

can find themselves in and engage with their own lived experiences.

There is a part of me that always looks for the microcosm in the macrocosm: how small things like a red wheelbarrow become significant, and seemingly big things like a family crisis are really not so big after all. I search for simplicity in chaos and complexity in the mundane. Simple scenes of everyday life offer an avenue for understanding in a complicated world. This is another reason why late 19<sup>th</sup> century Realist and Impressionist paintings are such a rich source of inspiration for my work.



Fig. 8. Joaquín Sorolla, *Summer*, 1901. National Museum of Fine Arts (Havana)

My work is most influenced by artists like Sargent, Sorolla, and Zorn, who rest on the cusp between Realism and Impressionism. As Realists, they painted simple moments of life, celebrating the everyday person in the everyday moment. As Impressionists, however, it was their attraction to the effects of light, color, and shape that encouraged them to abstract these moments and preserve them in paint. Like cave drawings that have the ability to transport a viewer to another time, Impressionists not only solidified their moment on a timeline, they

recorded the sunshine, the air, and the feeling of their perceived experience for us to experience now. In the words of art writer Duncan Phillips, Impressionism is an artist's personal feeling imbued in the painting. It is the impression of what the artist intends to create—their perception, their story, their feeling of that moment captured on canvas. In many ways, as Phillips argues, it is “the one true philosophy of all painting” (706). To me it

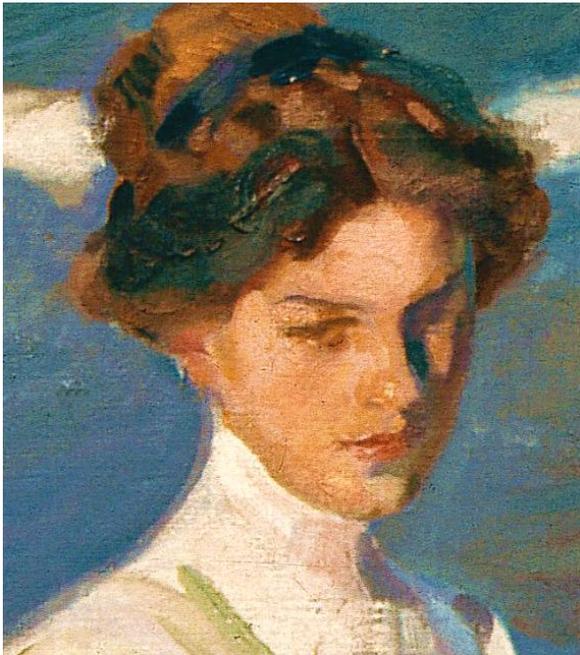


Fig. 9. Joaquín Sorolla, *Strolling Along the Seashore* (detail), 1909. Sorolla Museum (Madrid)

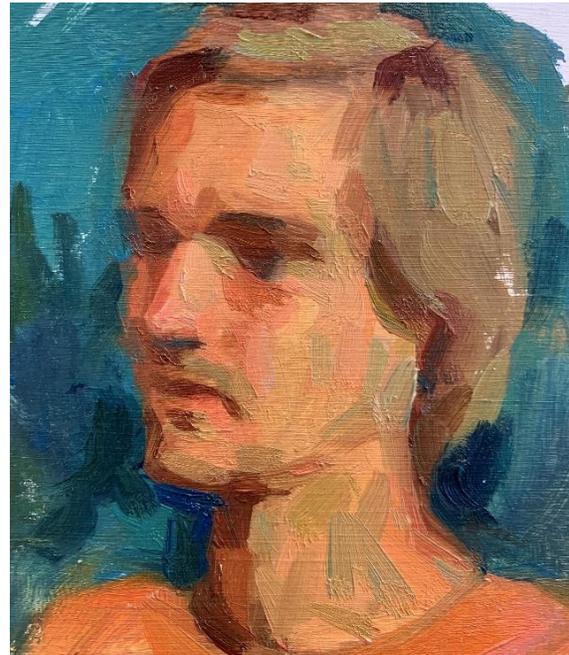


Fig. 10. Kelley Mogilka, *Study of Mason* (detail), 2020, oil on panel

is the epitome of empathy to see a painting like Sorolla's *Summer* (Fig. 8), to stand in his shoes and witness his life through his own eyes. Frederick Frank attributes this feeling to Zen, “a direct perception of and insight into the presence, into the transiency, the finitude that I share with all beings. It is a fleetingness that makes this very moment infinitely precious” (14). To then walk up closely to these paintings and see them dissolve into large swathing strokes of a brush was like witnessing the microcosm in the macrocosm. Sorolla's grandiose beach scene was, after all, a painting consisting of oil and pigment—and the Impressionists

intentionally and boldly championed this fact by the nature of their brushwork and broken color. In Sorolla's paintings, features like the eyes are simplified into unified shapes, as in the detail of *Strolling Along the Seashore* (Fig. 9). My *Study of Mason* (Fig. 10) exemplifies a similar quality. Rather than explicitly depicting an eye, a simplified shape allows the brain to fill in gaps of detail, which is what makes Impressionist paintings so lifelike when viewed from a distance. With the invention of photography, many painters today render explicit detail down to a pixel level in their paintings to make them look what many people today would consider to be realistic or photographic. But rather, the Impressionists believed it was the preserved abstraction that lent itself to reality. Sorolla noted this himself when viewing Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*:

If ever a painter wrought a miracle of illusion with brush and pigment that painter was Velázquez in his 'Las Meninas,' at the Prado in Madrid. Now, I have studied this picture with a lens, and what do I find? Why, that Velazquez got that marvelous atmospheric background by one broad sweep of his flowing brush, charged with color so thin that you can feel the very texture of the canvas through it. Nature, the sun itself, produces color effects on this same principle, but instantaneously. The impression of these evanescent visions is what we make desperate attempts to catch and fix by any means at hand. At such moments I am unconscious of materials, of style, of rules, of everything that intervenes between my perception and the object or idea perceived. No, *mes amis*, impressionism is not charlantry, nor a formula, nor a school. I should say rather it is the bold resolve to throw all those things overboard (Huneker 213-214).

Capturing the elusive effects of light, to me, is beyond just making a representational image. It is about responding to my present moment so that I can witness my place in it. When I am able to take a step back out of my own life and view it through my paintings, I find myself



Fig. 11. Kelley Mogilka, *Reverie*, 2022, oil on panel, 16 in. x 20 in.



Fig. 12. David Jagger, *Kathleen*, 1925. Williamson Art Gallery & Museum (Birkenhead)

experiencing life differently—with more gratitude, compassion, and presence. I lose the noise of chaos and embrace what connects me to it all: myself. My paintings champion this sacred and intimate relationship with the self. My figures often rest in isolation, as seen in my painting, *Reverie* (Fig. 11). However, the young woman seen here is not alone. She is engaged in a deeper moment with herself that is entirely her own. No one can interrupt her or intrude on her connection. She is powerful in her vulnerability and her devotion to her seized moment. Inspired by David Jagger's *Kathleen* (Fig. 12), I wanted to evoke the sense of divine connection I felt in his painting. Gazing upward as if looking at the stars, Kathleen sits

isolated in darkness. Her connection to what is above, like my connection to drawing a tree, is what positions her in her present moment. I find that in these moments of presence, of looking inward, I gain clarity in an otherwise unpredictable and sometimes overstimulating life. Frederick Frank describes,

A ‘non-creative environment’ is one that constantly bombards us... overloads our switchboard with noise, with agitation and visual stimuli. Once we detach ourselves from all these distractions, find a way of ‘inscape,’ of ‘centering,’ the same environment becomes ‘creative’ again. Seeing/drawing is such a way of inscape from the overloaded switchboard. It establishes an island of silence, an oasis of undivided attention, an environment to recover in... (Frank xii)

In centering myself through seeing and painting, and empathically engaging with the universality of emotion I feel with my subjects, I find myself taking part in a collective human experience. I recognize that painting is a way for me feel connected to myself and people of past and present. My painting *What’s Mine is Yours* (Fig. 13) and Anders Zorn’s *Vallkullans Söndag* (Fig. 14) were created over a hundred years apart, oceans away from each other, and in two different lifetimes, but they share an identifiable and relatable emotion of solitude. It is human nature to look at another person and feel what they are feeling, but it is through the filtered lens of our own experiences that we bring life to the emotions we feel for one another. As contemporary artist Colleen Barry says, “art reminds us of what is constant in an ever-changing world” (“Adam Driver”). Empathy is that constant; it exists to connect us with each other and ourselves. *Seeing* (and painting) is merely slowing down long enough to witness it.

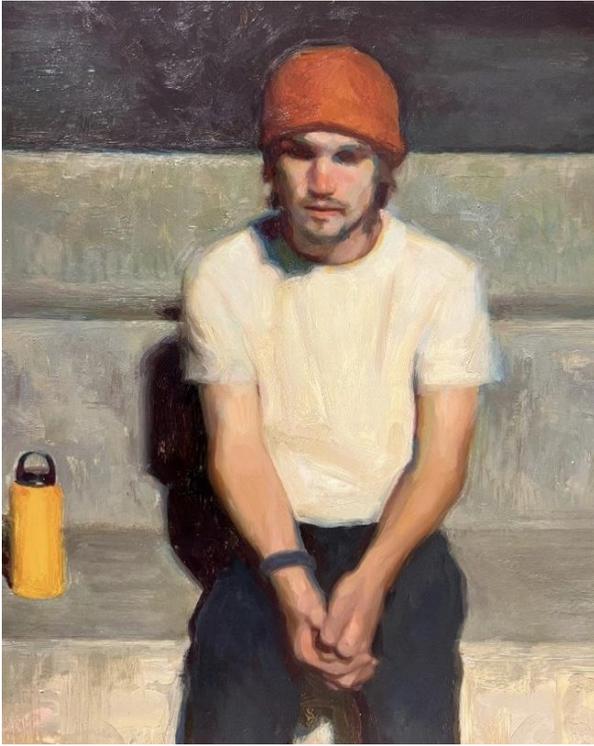


Fig. 13. Kelley Mogilka, *What's Mine is Yours* (detail), 2021, oil on panel



Fig. 14. Anders Zorn, *Valkullans Söndag (The Herding Maiden's Sunday)* (detail), 1912. Private collection.

## METHODOLOGY

When I began my thesis work, I believed my practice of observational painting was meaningless. Not meaningless in a negative sense, but that I was drawn to shapes in nature and I repeated them—there was no underlying significance or narrative to tell. I felt defiant in that my paintings rebelled against these narrative or conceptual demands. They did not need a written description next to them for the viewer to understand. “This is it, this is all there is to know,” they said. They were not here to add to the confusion of life. They were here to simplify it, to demystify it, and to revive the visual in visual art. These intentions still hold true to me, but in the past year I have realized how the poet in me uncovers an inner

significance of my subject matter and gives my work meaning, particularly during the painting process.

A few years ago, my parents remodeled their home to accommodate my brother, his wife and two children. Faced with their own set of challenges, my brother and his family lived with my parents off and on for a few years before making the arrangement permanent. Every household has their own unique complications, which at times may feel bleak and never-ending. But despite my family's darkest periods, and perhaps in spite of them, there are moments when we sit together at the handmade dinner table in my parents' kitchen. It is an octagonal table with chairs made of church pews my dad found discarded by a local church. They were used to create a table that fits perfectly in the corner nook of the kitchen to meet the needs of our family of ten. Most importantly, to me, it was like the dinner table from my childhood—it symbolized a time when things felt simpler.

Today, a family dinner at my parents' house is not as wholesome as it used to be, where everyone was called by the dinner bell to eat together like a typical Southern family. The dinner table is now just the biggest table to put the six large boxes of pizza on when everyone is too exhausted to cook. Now dinner is eaten in relays, people coming and going, trading off child-duty and clean-up—often it feels like a haze of people wandering through a bus stop. But throughout the evening, typically towards the end of the chaos of everyone getting their meal, there is a stillness that happens at the table. With plates of pizza crusts and dirty utensils, a few of us remain seated, still talking, laughing, and communing. Ever so quietly, there is a subtle buzz of energy in the kitchen. We feel like family again. But the difficulties are not forgotten—they remain quietly in the absence of those not at the table. I wanted to capture this feeling in my painting *Still at the Table* (Fig. 15).

*Still at the Table* is a painting of my grandmother, Carol. She is a 93-year-old woman, on my mother's side, born during the Great Depression. She is seen eating the last few pieces of her pizza, looking at my mother, who was sitting to my right. I quickly snapped a few photos of her without her noticing to get a candid shot. In the original photo reference, there were objects scattered across the table's surface. But as I painted her, I found the large empty space of the white tablecloth amplified her isolation. It further reinforced the shrinking numbers at the dinner table. This exclusion of the objects also led me to the title for the painting. What was going to be a still life of objects placed across the table became a still life of my grandmother. This revelation led me to a play on the word still, as in the still life

object, the stillness of the moment, and the fact that she was one of the few still at the dinner table.

I was initially drawn to the scene because of the large green shape of the wall behind her and how it silhouetted the shape of her figure. Both the large shape of the wall and the table



Fig. 15. Kelley Mogilka, *Still at the Table*, 2021, oil on panel, 24 in. x 24 in.

made her feel remote. But as I painted her, I noticed how her gesture mimicked her character. A strong matriarchal woman, she often tells me, “Don’t demand respect, command respect,”

alongside stories of wartime and struggle. She protects her family at all costs, at times to a fault. And as I painted her arm resting across the table, her gesture and her expression seemed to say, “Do not mess with my family.” Her entire life she fought for what she had, building herself up from poverty into a family lineage of ten. Throughout the hardest of times, she has persevered. She will not give up now. She is still at the table.

In the quick moment that I took the picture of my Oma, none of these thoughts occurred to me. I did not think about her life in its relation to a table, or that the thought of my family’s absence would reveal itself to me as I painted the scene. I was simply thinking about shapes, and the outward appearance of them. It was not until I paused long enough to deconstruct the moment in paint that I realized the inner significance of the moment I had captured. To deconstruct or dissect the shapes around me is to discover inner truths that lie within them.

If a composer were to write a song, or a poet were to write a poem, they would start with a singular idea. In music, it could be a four-bar tune, and in poetry, it could be a simple phrase, “a red wheelbarrow.” But a music note is defined by the beats of rest placed around it, and a word is only understood in the context of others. Just like how cacophonous drums are made louder when prefaced by wispy piccolos, the value of a seemingly insignificant red wheelbarrow is magnified when the words “so much depends upon” are placed before it. It is the relationships between these concepts that mold life into art. In the culinary arts, the tart taste of apple is expanded by the earthy aroma of cinnamon, but the fundamental building blocks of such a delicious flavor combination starts with the apple. This idea of outward building comparative relationships is how I approach painting.

In my painting *Apollo on the Stairs* (Fig. 16), Apollo's face is my apple. It is the building block that will determine how the environment around him will respond. His facial expression will not only set the mood for my painting, but it is how I gauge color

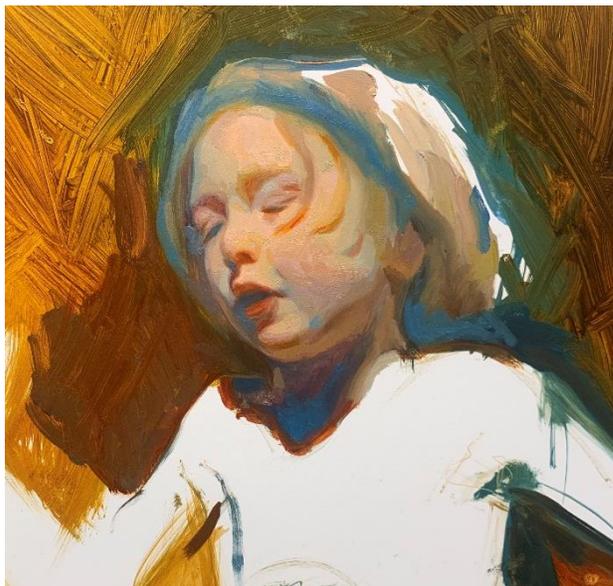


Fig. 16. Kelley Mogilka, *Apollo on the Stairs* (first stage), 2021, oil on panel

relationships as well. For instance, if I start working from a singular color on his face, like the peachy color of his skin, I can start to expand outwards in shifts of color, achieving subtle changes of green, purple, pink, yellow, and so on. But I only recognize these shifts because I have my building block to compare it to, the peachy skin color of his face. When I am immersed

in this comparative observation, my eyes begin to see color as a roadmap. This is my favorite part of the painting process, and how I enter my flow state, when I am totally submerged in the world of color. Just as the poet's words come together to form poetry, colors not initially observed in the photo reference begin to come forward to my eye, and I apply them to the panel. They suddenly have meaning and purpose in relation to each other. I spend however long it takes to finish the face in one sitting, using each color variation as a point of connection to the next. If I leave in the middle of this process, my pathway is lost, so I try to stay in this flow state for as long as possible, working in long bursts of typically four to five hours.

Slowly I begin to expand outwards from the face and into the atmosphere surrounding Apollo (Fig. 17). Vibrant blues floating around his head start to come forward to my eye.

Because I use a primary palette of three colors, a red, yellow, blue, and white, the range of what my colors are capable of is limited, so the painting becomes almost like a process of elimination. I only have one dark blue. I ask myself, “Is this color next to it lighter? Is it greener? Is it warmer or cooler?” Exhausting my palette allows me to truly explore the range of my given colors, which helps me to achieve a harmony within them.

After a few *alla prima* sittings, moving outwards and through each section of the figure and environment, I finally have the panel covered. At this stage, I can



Fig. 17. Kelley Mogilka, *Apollo on the Stairs* (second stage) 2021, oil on panel

visualize the larger color relationships in the painting rather than the intricate relationships in the skin or how the colors around it relate to the face. It is the same comparative color process, just on a larger scale. I make minor refinements as new visual perceptions pop out at me, like colorful edges where two large shapes meet. Over time, I find myself moving outwards and inwards to a finished painting.

In creating my paintings, I often look to past artists to find compositional solutions and ideas. One particular compositional trick has echoed in my mind since my mentor, Kenny Harris, told me, “A lot of painters will give you a way out of the painting.” We were

looking at Ramon Casas' work, *Au Moulin de la Galette* (Fig. 18), and noting how the tiniest indication of a bright window in the distance breathed air and space into the room. By simply placing a finger over the window to visually remove it, the room became claustrophobic and stiff. The window was an essential element that added both compositional and psychological dimension to the painting: two things I hoped to achieve in my painting, *A Way Out* (Fig. 19).



Fig. 18. Ramon Casas, *Au Moulin de la Galette*, 1892. Museum of Montserrat (Spain)

I started hiring models for my series when I began to realize that it truly did not matter who I was painting; I was always painting inner parts of myself that I was reflecting onto my figures. Even in my painting *Still at the Table*, I was painting my Oma, but the meaning I began to attribute to it had more to do with me and my relationship to her than any of her true feelings. When I started using models, I found that I was coming closer to conveying my own personal experiences without any kind of conflicting emotions that might occur when painting someone close to me. With a model, I gave myself more opportunities to find moments of shape and color that resonated with me. In one such moment, my model and I wandered around a friend's property at dusk as I looked for shapes of light. I had her sit at a bench next to a round glass table, and suddenly something was there. Her face was almost partly in shadow, and her skin glowed under the fading sky. A hill in the distance

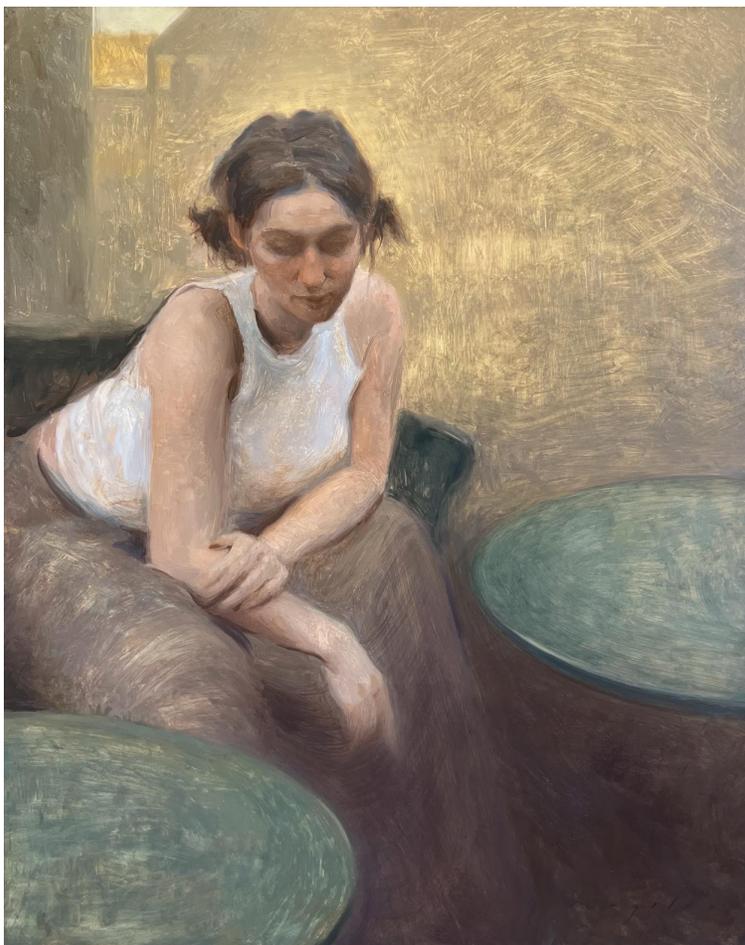


Fig. 19. Kelley Mogilka, *A Way Out*, 2022, oil on panel, 16 in. x 20 in.

brimmed as it was lit by the fading sun, creating tiny angular shapes of blue and yellow. All these things—the abstract qualities of the moment—came together to create an intense energy emitting from her gesture. It mystified me, like something deep within my soul knew I had to paint it to discover something. When I entered my studio the next day, the painting flowed out from my brush in one sitting so seamlessly as if I were exhaling

it onto my canvas. It was like a part of me that already existed, and I had finally found a visual avenue to let it out. I saw myself in her place, in between two tables and the sunlit hills behind her. My little window, my way out, became my home. I felt positioned within the noise of day-to-day life, but my soul was someplace else—with my family, with painting, with something greater. My way out of the noise was *seeing*. That is why I am a painter—to observe, empathize, and find myself in the abstraction of life.

## CONCLUSION

Before I came to LCAD, I was two years deep in an intense practice of studying the technical side of painting and observation. I created hundreds of small paintings of heads and hands, landscapes and still lifes, slowly discovering my own visual language in strokes of paint. The MFA program assured me that I found that voice and pushed me to say something with it. It feels like in the last two years I have only begun to understand how paintings behave, how much power they have, what they say about me, and what I can say with them. With that said, I am in a time in my life where my work is evolving in meaning and subject matter on a weekly basis (which led to a lot of deleting and rewriting in this thesis) and I feel like I have only dipped my toes into a well of what lies deep within me artistically. It was certainly challenging to write a thesis about this discovery as it was happening, but I feel like it was an integral part of that unfolding. I know that much of my work relies on an ambiguous, intuitive understanding that can be difficult to put into words. At times I felt resistant to defining it, that doing so diminished the mystery to mere image making. If I did not have a message, it was a meaningless picture; even worse, I felt like I had to come up with a witty theme as cause for creation.

But during this program, I uncovered something in my work that felt authentic to who I am. Painting paved the path for understanding my life long before I even realized it. My paintings travel alongside me, providing me with questions and answers to things I would never consider related to painting. They are a lens for me to constantly rediscover myself and the world around me, and they never fail to challenge me on what I think I know. Perhaps in the future, when I have wrangled and tamed this mysterious beast that is painting, I will be at a point in my life where I will feel the need to wield a painting in a way that tells

a story or delivers a message that I am prepared to tell. But at this moment, my paintings are teaching me more than I can teach any viewer. They are growing as I grow; and together we are slowly becoming familiar with a language of our own creation. I know in the future we will become fluent. My hope is that one day, we will write poetry.

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## APPENDIX

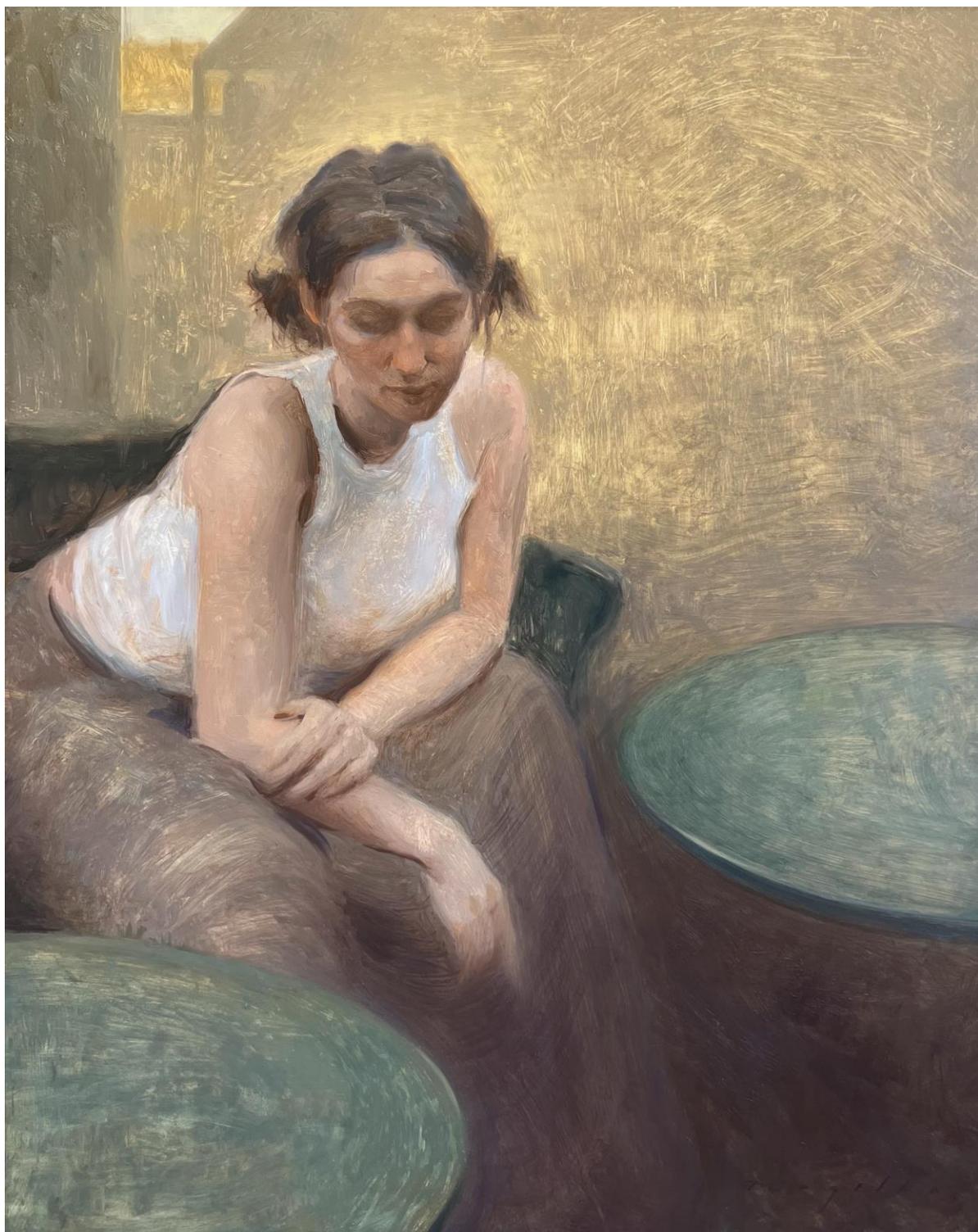


Plate 1. *A Way Out*, 2022, oil on panel, 16 in. x 20 in.



Plate 2. *Mirror*, 2021, oil on panel, 8 in. x 9 in.

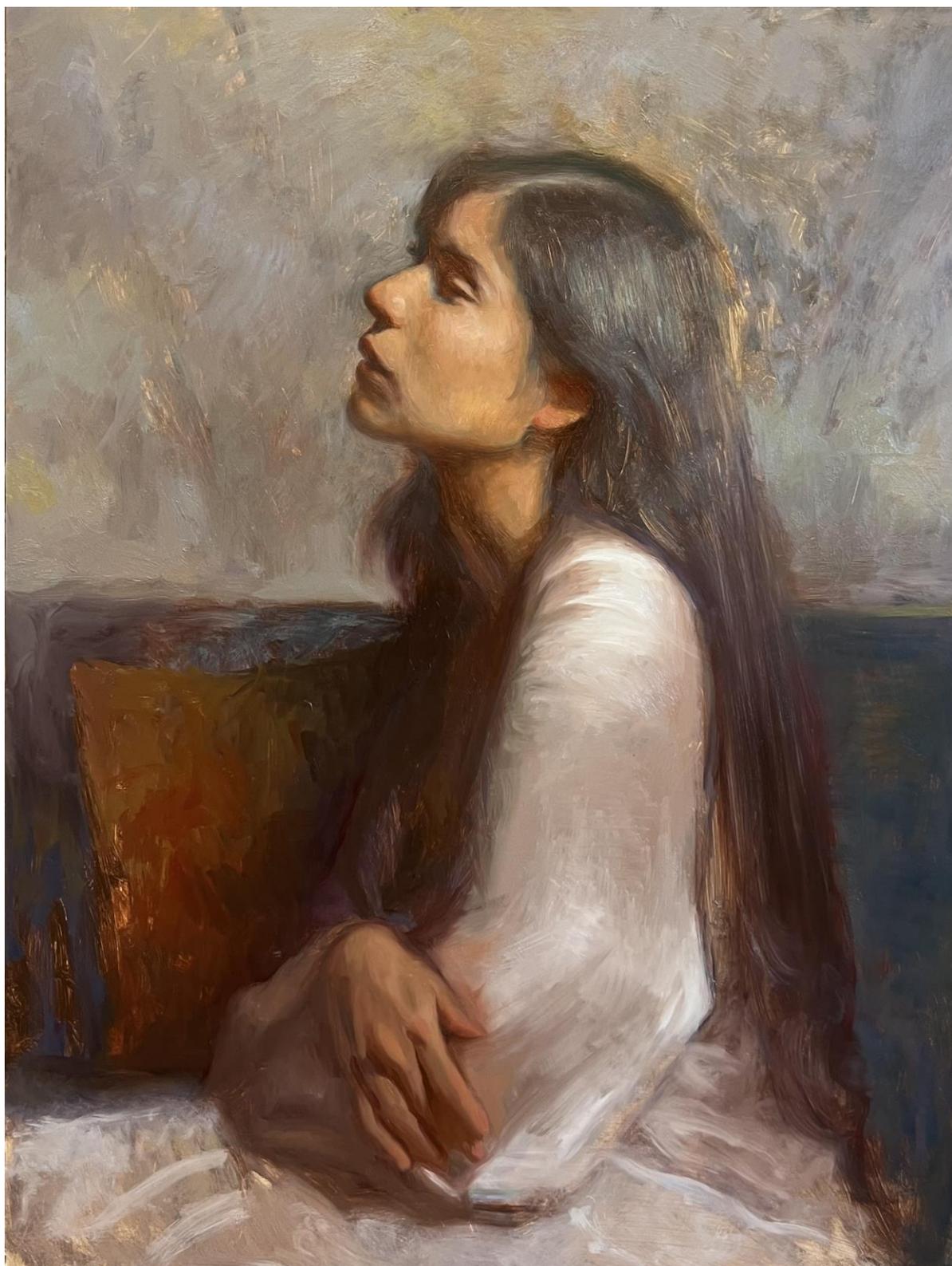


Plate 3. *Reverie*, 2022, oil on panel, 12 in. x 16 in.

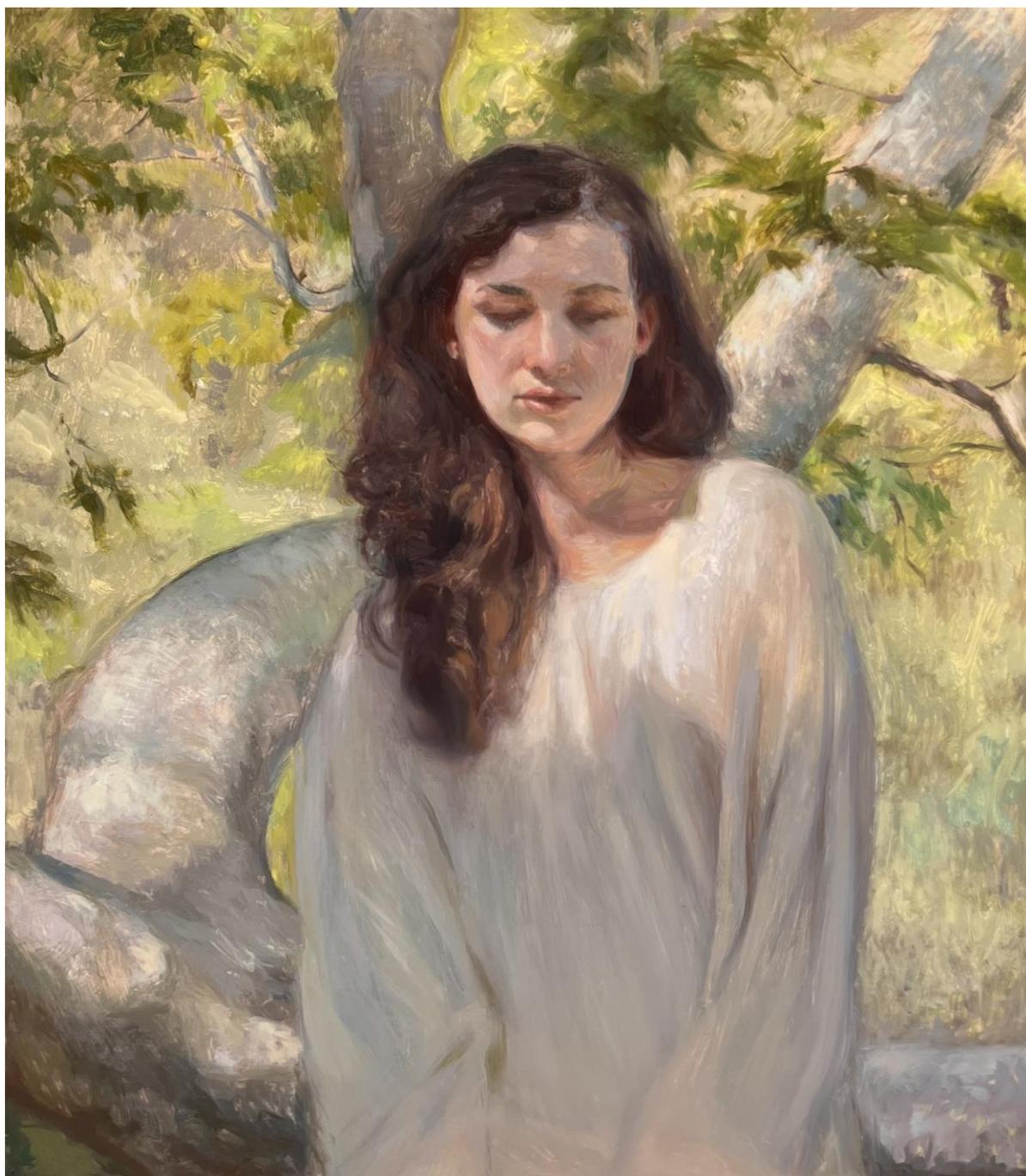


Plate 4. *Tethered*, 2022, oil on panel, 16 in. x 18 in.



Plate 5. *Revelation*, 2022, oil on panel, 18 in. x 24 in.



Plate 6. *Still at the Table*, 2020, oil on panel, 24 in. x 24 in.



Plate 7. *What's Mine is Yours*, 2021, oil on panel, 16 in. x 20 in.

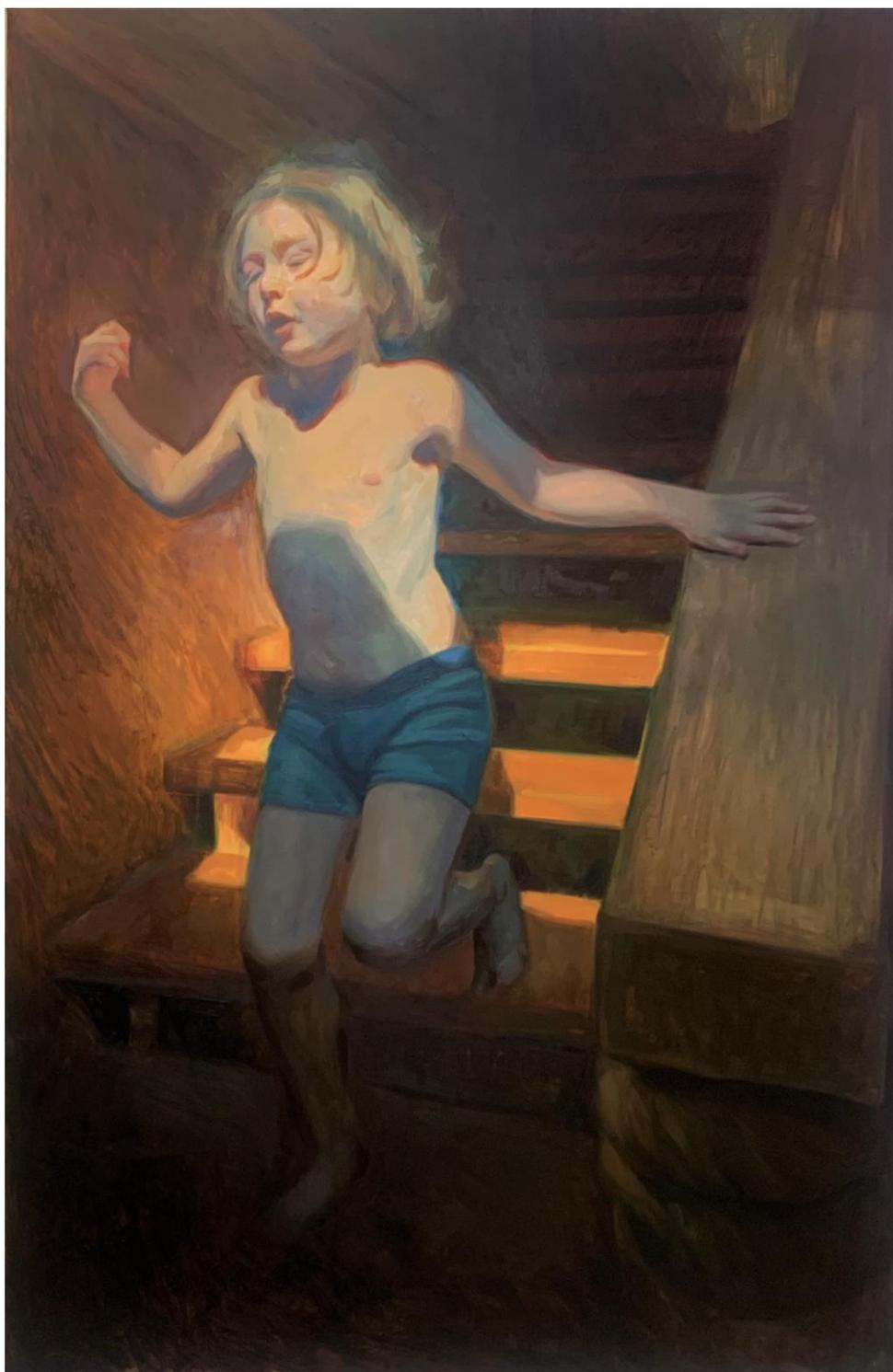


Plate 8. *Apollo on the Stairs*, 2021, oil on panel, 24 in. x 36 in.

**ARTIST'S NOTE**

To view more of my paintings, visit [kelleymogilka.com](http://kelleymogilka.com)