

Reflections of My Mother

Honors Thesis Statement

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My thesis work centers on my mom and her battle with cancer over the past two years. In March 2013, I lost my grandmother (my mom's mom), and soon after that my mom was diagnosed with cancer—the very thing that took my grandmother's life. These events have formed the primary impetus for my current work and research, as I have watched and become part of my mom's experience over the past two years.

In this series of paintings, I draw upon personal experience to explore the channels through which body image, confidence, and femininity are shaped, as well as how loss and recovery of identity are reconciled. I am interested in how illness is on one hand small, cellular, and microscopic, and at the same time something that transforms the body's entire identity. This tension between micro and macro influences on the body and identity drives my mark making, as I will further elaborate.

I have sought to investigate the contrast between projections and perceptions of self—one a type of public psychology, the other private. I am propelled by the connection between illness and feminine identity and the idea of certain types of masks we put on, to reflect who we feel we are supposed to be. Stalwart projections of womanhood, assurance, and strength can be susceptible to unraveling and shifting. I have come to see identity—the state of who we think we are or who we claim to be—as an ever-shifting complex, a matrix formed through time and memory. This series of paintings thus focuses on the vestiges of time and memory in context of loss, pain, renewal, and healing.

As I reflected on the meaning and impact of my mom's experience as a conduit for the creative process, I felt increasingly fragmented in my own personal recollections and reactions to her illness. Each painting therefore approaches a different stage of her cancer, or a different memory I hold. I treat each painting individually as I respond to a certain psychological or physical moment of my mom's experience. As the artist, my

mediating factor is the synthesis of perceptions and my own emotion that I imbue into each work.

I became increasingly cognizant of how my relationship with my mom and my shifting attitudes or feelings toward our relationship started to mold and shape components of my painting. Capturing my mom through portraiture was not about resemblance, nor was it about the aesthetic of beauty, but my work became a meditation on her experiences and our relationship at particular points of her illness. I view the endless layers and stages that each of these paintings went through as a reflection on the nature of my mom's health, uneasy in a constant state of flux. Over the course of time, my memories of my mom's illness are often crisp, poignant, and harsh. At other times, they are nebulous and abstract. Sometimes I remember my mom's peace, serenity, and optimism through suffering, and sometimes I recall flashes of utmost gravity and vulnerability. In attempt to capture and reconstitute different perspectives of my mother, my painting took a long, indirect, and often convoluted path from beginning to "completion" as I found myself perpetually burying layers of paint underneath new ones, then carefully wiping or even rapidly, violently scraping away sections to uncover hints of what was once there.

The artist Tim Stoner said: *"Subject matter finds its way into a painting through activity, process, and application. I rework paintings until they reveal unforeseen meanings that exist beyond any preconceived model (because life just isn't like that)."*¹ In the first three paintings I did for this series, my grasp on my subject matter (and perhaps my subconscious inability to let go of that stronghold) took precedence over the exploratory direction of the work. Dependence on the source material of the subject matter gradually weakened when I began to see the figure solely as the initial stimulus or starting place to be eventually superseded by exploration of the paint, its form, and color.

¹ Charlotte Mullins, *Picturing People: The New State of the Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 25.

Photography was my source imagery, and I have since conducted ongoing research on the ontology of medium through the writings of Roland Barthes. In his study of photography, Barthes emphasized the idea of the referent and the indexical nature of the source—a source that is, at some previous moment in time, reality.² Barthes stresses the lack of mediation between existence and sight in photography—what we see and what is captured is without compromise, influence, or change. Therefore Barthes argues for the truthful evidentiary nature of photography, explicating that the privilege of the medium comes from the unavoidable absence of arbitrary choice on behalf of the maker, the photography. In today's world, I think often about how the proliferation and ubiquity of photographs of people, as well as the sheer accessibility and resources available for documenting our lives through the camera, makes us inundated by the medium to the point where we stop really looking—or at least looking with a keen and discerning eye. I wanted to create paintings that would make people properly look by finding certain slippages between representation and abstraction.

If photography adheres to its referent as Barthes claims, then I wanted to partly negate that referentiality through painting—to alter what might otherwise be taken as truth, to find points of confusion and merging where illusion would blend with flatness, where the accessibility of representation juts up against an arbitrary mark that exists as nothing other than paint, and finally, where buried layers peep through the surface, offering subtle yet essential clues to the internal infrastructure or early foundations of the painting.

My figurative-based work leading up to my current work had followed a very logical sequence of development. Until this year, I relied on methodical comfort, resting in the standard of an academic process that I had begun to learn from an early age. For portraits, I would use grisaille technique, never straying from a heavy reliance on

² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 99.

combinations of burnt sienna, burnt umber, yellow ochre, and cobalt blue. My dependence upon blue was especially heavy, and in this current body of work I have worked to expand my palette beyond the safety of color combinations I memorized, regulated, and controlled with relative ease. I was taught to blend accurate skin tone, model flesh, and portray the face and body through a sense of realism. Physical resemblance had heretofore always taken precedence over explorations in mark making and the embrace of arbitrary paint handling.

However, as I worked on this series, before ever laying down the initial sketch or underpainting of the portrait, I painted several foundational abstract layers to catalyze the tone and direction of the portrait. Building a new painting on top of a completely abstract painting denied my ability to differentiate between figure and the ground. My process became puzzle-like, with each new layer incorporate parts of past layers. This approach could hold the picture plane in place between illusionistic depth and the painterly surface itself—fossils of different marks, areas of thickness, and areas that had been wiped away then restored. I attempted to find a way of putting the paint on the canvas in a form of near trickery, trying to manipulate it, move it, stretch it, and place it in a way that allowed borders and boundaries of color and forms to come together and materialize. I desire was to reconcile a concern for resemblance with an utter abandon of concern for illusion at all—fully embracing the paint itself as a function of instinct and product of intuition.

In contemplating my process, I considered how the act of building upon shifting perspectives and layers lent itself to the concept of the stabilities of health and identity. When paint lays claim to both the representational and the abstract, its conviction is fragile. At such junctures of fragility, I seek to relate the process of loss and reclaiming of oneself. From a psychological perspective, both vagueness and clarity hint at shifting notions of identity, as well as correspond to the types of fragmented views and reflections of the self that we find inherent in introspection through times of suffering,

weakness, and uncertainty. On a more physical level, the idea of fragility and fragmentation and further lends itself to the nature of the biological transformations taking place within the body through the course of disease and illness.

I strove for an ambiguity and tension between those aspects of a painting that are instantly human—recognizable—and the aspects that register the arbitrary act of painting itself. Such instances, again I refer to the part of slippage between figuration and abstraction, play a role in fomenting an unknown narrative. The choices I have as the artist and the creator of this unknown narrative allow me to evince, revise, and even fabricate the possibility for open interpretations of the narrative.

Based on my interest in the body and physical transformation, I was at first interested in painting the nude figure. My mother wished to not model in the nude for me, and I honored her request. Without concretely delineating scars, lumps of the skin, the left-behind traces of a mastectomy, and then—to follow—the reconstructed imitation of the natural breast, I sought to allude through manipulations and distortions in the paint to the idea of disfigurement and imperfection.

I often felt certain contradictions between my study of art history and my own practice of painting. The benefit of studying art history allows me to draw from a wide and deep range of inspirations, yet this also complicated my progress since I felt pulled between divergent and sometimes irreconcilable sources of influence—a conflict that felt particularly strong as I teetered between impassioned phases of influence from highly representational and realistic figurative painters to the abstract expressionists. Ultimately, my main influences were contemporary artists whose work helped inform certain innovations in my own work. I looked extensively at Alex Kanevsky, in whom I found a similar layered and process-based work ethic. Earlier I mentioned my struggle with burying layers of the painting beneath the final surface; this so-called burial and recovery process is perhaps singlehandedly the most salient attribute of Kanevsky's

work and offered a formative stimulus for my own work. While Kanevsky served as an important formal influence, I looked to Jenny Saville, Adrien Ghenie, William De Kooning, Cy Twombly, Cecily Brown, Michael Borremans, Kent Williams, and Lucian Freud as I thought about how my mark-making brushwork lends itself to relating content within a figurative context. From these artists, I drew on their manipulation of the portrait and their methods of addition and subtraction—including bold and brash strokes of paint, followed by erasure and scraping, and then a continual process of alternating between building up and then deleting substance and content on the canvas.

This project is the most comprehensive studio-based research practice in which I have ever engaged. Committing to subject matter was difficult for me, as I initially thought that my subjects would be the main variable amidst the scope of the whole project. I realized that attempting to vary subject matter and thus work with multiple narratives meant that I would lose depth while attempting to capture width. By concentrating solely on the personal experience of my mom and my relationship to her process of suffering and healing, I feel that I not only was able to create a more consistent and focused group of paintings but also negotiate a more profound agreement with myself for why it is that I paint—that I am fundamentally driven by the desire to understand my own humanity within another's.

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