

SYNTHESIS

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ABSTRACT

My paintings are allegories of self-awareness. They acknowledge the universal realities of life, love, and loss. Blending elements of nostalgia and contemporary experience, I create non-linear narratives embedded with symbolism and metaphor.

My focus as an artist is rooted in perception and experience, while engaging elements of fantasy and mystery. Specifically selecting familiar and memorable objects and environments, I paint the things that I know and feel, continually pulling from past experiences to create new images. My process includes staging, photographing, and collaging plausible but highly unlikely situations in which the content shifts between contemporary portraiture and narration. I find inspiration in personal ritual, ceremony, and identity, and am significantly influenced by the natural and cultural milieu of Southern California.

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DESCRIPTION

“I make art out of all aspects of my identity, finding in the process that art integrates my experiences, beliefs, and heritage.” (Weisberg 1)



Fig 1. Robin Johnson, *At Dawn*, 2011, Oil on panel, 48" x 72"

The paintings presented in my MFA thesis exhibition are a series of allegorical images created through the synthesis of experience. They are an evolution of self, challenging the awareness and quality of experience. Combining actual and metaphorical occurrences, they are assembled into prescribed and inventive allegories. My paintings confront intimate sentiments, transcending the private, and resonating with universal themes of humanity: life, love, and loss.

In the studio I have created large-scale figurative narratives as a response to my personal experiences as a woman and as an artist in Southern California. Through the

juxtaposition of non-linear events, the resulting constructed allegories explore, expose, and confront femininity and authenticity of self, while also revealing my growing consciousness of expected roles, particularly within the persistence of male-dominated constructs. Utilizing symbolic and mythical tropes throughout my narratives, these images are at times poetic, facetious, and mysterious. This series is adorned with irony as a means of absorbing experiences raked in duality: conformity and opposition, chaos and order, comfort and conflict, control and submission. These paintings prompt the viewer to investigate the significance of my images, ultimately creating their own parables.

Utilizing diverse subject matter encountered throughout the course of my life, these images coalesce into plausible but highly unlikely situations. While my focus for this series



Fig 2. Robin Johnson, *At Bay*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 60" x 48"

is rooted in perception and experience, my paintings continually engage elements of alchemy and superstition. They are an escape and romanticization into such roles. The essence of ceremony, ritual, and tradition becomes significant in my work as history and desires often influence daily patterns and belief systems. Such influences can be seen throughout the composition of my work.



Fig 3. Robin Johnson, *At Dawn*, 2011, Oil on panel, 48" x

My thesis show contains eight oil paintings ranging from 3 feet to 6 feet in scale, depicting my interactions with various experiences and perceptions. Referencing personal and historical myth, each of these paintings are a re-creation of such interactions, constructing a series of allegories through the compounding of abstract notions.

Objects No. 1 was my initial exploration into the use of symbol and identity in my thesis work. This image visually presents a woman dressed in all black seated in an arm chair. Next to her, seated on the arm of the chair is a grey cat, and at her feet stands a brown dog. Both animals look towards the viewer, while the figure closes her eyes behind a large pair of eye glasses. She wears feathers in her hair, and holds a wild flower and a glass of wine in her hands. Both the chair and the background are covered in vivid colors and patterns, while the woman's attire becomes one solid black mass dissolving into the dark ground plane. She is surrounded by objects, seemingly unrelated, and at times undefinable. This painting uses objects symbolic of my personal experiences, and combines them into an entirely new context, and subsequently a new experience.

The Painting *At Dawn*, furthers the visualization of symbolism and identity, while also exploring the possibilities of space and time. This painting depicts a female figure lying on a lawn chair in an ambiguous expanse of white space. On the lawn chair she is surrounded by richly colored flowers, while large black crows fly in from all direction, landing on her body. Her arms lie crossed across her chest, and her eyes are closed. Beneath the lawn chair falls a striped shadow, mimicking the stripes on the dress that she wears. Adapting allegorical concepts, this painting combines an array of contrasting symbols, projecting many layers of interpretation.

The Bee Trainer is an image of a woman in a bright floral dress with her arms raised open and outstretched. Tied to the ends of her fingers and wrists are bees on strings. The bees tied to her right hand are chaotic, tangling as each flies in separate directions. On her left hand the bees have formed a pattern and fly in perfect harmony around her hand. She stands in an orange room with a dark doorway behind her; next to that a portrait of a young boy

hangs on the wall. Below the painting and along the wall sits an antique yellow cabinet, upon which clear glass jars are stacked. The jars are filled with free flying bees, while a trail of bees crosses in front of the figure, climbing up the cabinet and into an open pitcher. In this image I was interested in creating a recognizable environment, an interior room, while maintaining an unidentifiable space, exploring the possibilities of creating a stage on which to place my narrative. This image also explores the potential of viewpoint to add drama, as well as a heightened level of interaction and movement between characters.

At Bay incorporates a more suggestive use of narrative through the depiction of environment, though continues to create an overall ambiguous space. This painting aims to incorporate an essence of California through the loosely rendered depiction of orange trees, and dry brush vegetation. Applying a mysterious element in this image, a pack of wolves discretely emerge from the background, cautiously approaching the viewer. Employing a low horizon line, this painting is balanced by a great expanse of empty sky and a large female figure sitting in the foreground. The female reclines in a low aluminum beach chair, reading a magazine. In her hand she holds a leash to which a dog lays sleeping on the ground next to her chair.

The painting *Leda* is my re-creation of the Greek myth *Leda and the Swan*. In this painting I have adapted my own experiences, repurposing the myth with a contemporary viewpoint. Shown through aerial perspective, this painting looks down on a pond scene in which a female figure is chased onto the hood of a vehicle by a large white swan. The swan's wings fan out, mimicking the movement of the figure's arms, as it charges towards her. In her hand she holds a bag of Wonder Bread, of which a slice has been tossed onto the top of the vehicle. The vehicle she sits atop is a vintage Jeep, with graphic stripes across its hood.

Below the Jeep, on the black of the pavement are three ducks picking at bread crumbs. This painting explores the formal application of viewpoint to enhance context in my narrative, while also maintaining that my interest in personal experiences and perception are incorporated within the composition.

The painting *Gestation*, decidedly moves away from a presented environment, while maintaining a balance between an obscure and a definable space. Again exploring the use of viewpoint in narrative, as well as the creation of multiple meanings through composition, this painting is an expressive incorporation of experience and perception into my thesis series. Depicted in this painting is a female figure kneeling in a sea of green. On her hands she wears vivid orange and white gardening gloves, and in one she holds a spade covered in soil. Her shorts are patterned with colorful flowers, while her top is a contrasting somber grey. She is encircled by twelve evenly spaced holes in the ground, while clumps of grass and piles of earth permeate the ring she is centered in. Objects are partially visible in the holes, and behind her lies a discarded tool. This painting includes vast areas of graphic, flat color and becomes progressively rendered toward the central action of the figure.

The painting *Dust*, investigates the possibilities of continuing this series without the use of my own body, as well as incorporating multiple figures, while adhering to the concepts of personal experience and perception. This painting deals with the interaction of figures more than others in my series, depicting over nine dancing female figures, each adorned with patterned dresses and boots. One of the figures in the foreground stills herself and directs her gaze toward the viewer, while the rest of the figures are fully engaged in their own movement. They are set in a California desert landscape, with mountains in the distant background. Between the women and the mountains are a succession of wind turbines.

Returning to Greek myth as plot, the painting *Cassandra* is the final painting in my thesis series. Using familiar environment and objects symbolic in my life, my own experiences mesh with mythical trope to set the stage of this painting. An expanse of large, sharp rocks extend in all directions of this image, dominating the picture plane. Looking upwards, a dog sits in profile view in the center of the painting, while a black snake writhing its body, dangles from the dog's mouth. To the dog's right a female figure is draped across the rocks, her head and arms reaching to the next rock above her. Below them lays a discarded antique wooden horse toy. This painting is again a projection of my personal contemporary approach to the re-telling of myth, as well as providing multiple layers of inference within a narrative. This painting encompasses the totality of my explorations over the course of this series, achieving desired formal, thematic, and conceptual ambitions in my work.



Fig 4. Robin Johnson, *Cassandra*, 2012, Oil on panel, 48" x 48"

Through the depiction of my own body throughout these paintings, this series repeatedly visits the realm of self-portraiture. Used by artists as a method for self-presentation and exploration, the basis for creating an image of oneself historically has varied widely. In using images of myself throughout this series, my work may technically fall within the territory of self-portraiture, though as common visual objectives suggest, conceptually my work is not situated within the traditional tenets of this method. The use of self-portraiture in this series is not a direct association with the artist, but rather serves as a catalyst for greater universal themes of the self. To categorize self-portraiture one must identify the motive for the work. My work is not interested in exact likeness or a specific resemblance. The essence of my images are read through the convergence of body, environment, and object into allegory rather than that of recognition, found in traditional portraiture.

I find my genre of self-portraiture to be most closely associated with the work of contemporary artist Cindy Sherman. Throughout Sherman's career, she has relied on the use of her body to imbue a facade of characters in which she transforms into often unrecognizable personas. Referring to a series she created in the early 1990s, one of Sherman's only series not including herself, Sherman found it more difficult not using herself as she felt she couldn't play the



Fig 5. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #474*, 2008

characters well enough, and soon returned to injecting her own body into her work (Sherman). Much like Sherman's use of self-portraiture, the intention of this series and the use of my body arises out of necessity, to achieve a desired tone and nature in my narratives. My own work depends greatly on the emotional temper that develops in my imagery, and I find gesture to be an extremely important aspect in achieving the desired content. In this series, the actions of the figures often become the core of the narratives, breathing energy into my paintings. As gesture plays a significant role throughout these images, I am very particular about the kinesthetic relationship between body and content, which forms when using myself as a model. Experiencing the actual gesture and the space provides another layer of involvement and connections with my imagery, which is less accessible when using a model. I find the energy of people with different experiences and associations to deliver messages not distinctly fitting for a specific image, and therefore feel that the authenticity of the image or desired narrative transform with the use of another person. I also have more freedom using my own body in my work; while at times challenging, overall the process becomes more efficient and organic without the use or dependency on words to convey my inner ideas.

The lines between self-portraiture in my work may blur slightly further in that the narratives found in my images are rooted in personal experiences, thoughts, and beliefs that fuel the passion for my work. While the majority of this series utilizes my own body and experiences, they are not intended to be classified as a series of self-portraits or autobiographies. My aim is not that the viewer recognize my personal story, or an image to unearth about my specific life, but instead view my paintings as a stepping stone to develop her own version of the narrative and ensuing reaction to the images.

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.” (Merton 35)

As I explore deeply personal themes and experiences in this series, I am consciously creating private and often closed narratives denying the viewer direct access to my imagery. With the exclusion of definable passages to decipher my images, my paintings shift from my own exclusive experiences to a broader platform. This allows the viewer to reflect upon individual emotions, opinions, and judgments toward the paintings. Creating these narratives to function on a myriad of levels--aesthetic, thematic, symbolic, and allegorical--my aim is to raise viewer awareness to interpret and narrate experience for themselves.



Fig 6. Robin Johnson, *Leda*, 2012, Oil on panel, 60" x 48"

The use of symbolism and metaphor in my paintings plays a significant role throughout this series. Elements chosen for inclusion in my imagery are selected based upon my personal symbolic connection to them or for their universally recognized interpretation. As my process is intuitive, particularly in the beginning stages, the adaptation of symbols and metaphor often develop throughout the paintings: color, object, environment, gesture, and time. Such uses are rendered with their assumed symbolic identity or with my own personal analysis of that element, as I often question or challenge expected roles and identities throughout my imagery.

Symbolism and metaphor are integrated into my work as a source of visual language. They further describe the scene displayed or enhance the level of ambiguity, defining the intimate characteristics of the narrative to which the viewer is entrusted. Aiming to create



Fig 7. Robin Johnson, *Gestation*, 2011, Oil on panel, 48" x 48"

imagery in which my narratives can be interpreted on many levels, and through the use of coded compositions, I am not creating one concrete interpretation to unravel, confronting the expectations of analysis and evaluation. It is important to present my work but not to be didactic, therefore it is a decisive element in my paintings that the viewer remain unable to discern all symbols and metaphors incorporated into this series.



Fig 8. Robin Johnson, *Dust*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 48" x 72"

“The picture in order to move us must never merely remind us of life but must acquire a life of its own, precisely in order to reflect life.” (Freud 8)

Throughout this series, my images explore themes of regionalism from my individual perspective. Native to Southern California, I am interested in creating a spirit in my paintings that is unique to my experience with the environment. It is relevant that my images distill the nature of California, capturing an essence without portraying a specific environment, which

would alter the narrative by defining a recorded time and place rather than an accumulation of spaces and moments. My paintings therefore take an obscure approach to environment and regionalism, expressing an overall tone and atmosphere through space, color, and object. I express earthy, ruddy, and organic forms and temperature throughout my images, and contrast them with vivid artificial hues and shapes. In a similar manner, Southern California's successful commercial and entertainment industry are intertwined with its rugged, open, dusty, pioneering heritage. Throughout my paintings such elements and symbols are reflective of my experiences and interactions with Southern California, suggesting its alternate perspectives.

During the course of my study, the focus of this series has been significantly influenced by identity, place, and the progression of time. Through my explorations of the psyche and reconstruction of experiences I am expressing my own processing of knowledge, self, and culture situated within the context of contemporary figurative realism. I am cognizant of creating work which maintains a sense of relevancy and awareness toward the modern human condition. By addressing the general through the individual, I seek a transcendence of personal identity through a larger humanitarian context. The images incorporated into this series can be viewed individually or linked together creating a larger assemblage of narrative.

RESEARCH

Throughout the course of the LCAD MFA program there have been a select group of artists, styles, and ideas to which my investigations have continually returned. With the inception of each painting my research has led me back to these references, influencing the core of this body of work. As discussed earlier, the integration of portraiture, regionalism,



Fig 9. Robert Bechtle, *Watsonville Olympia*, 1977, Oil on canvas, 48'' x 69'', Fig 10. Fairfield Porter, *The Tennis Game*, 1977, Oil on canvas, Fig 11. Eric Fischl, *Barbeque*, 1982, Oil on canvas, 65'' x 100''



Fig 12. Paula Rego, *Dog Woman*, 1994, Pastel on canvas, 47'' x 63'', Fig 13. Lars Elling, *Mother's Day*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 67'' x 67'', Fig 14. Stanley Spencer, *St. Francis and the Birds*, 1935, Oil on canvas, 26'' x 23''



Fig 15. Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939, Oil on canvas, 67'' x 67'', Fig 16. William Beckman *Self Portrait*, 1982, Oil on panel, 50'' x 36'', Fig 17. Lucian Freud, *Standing by Rags*, 1988, Oil on canvas, 66'' x 54'', Fig 18. Tracy Emin, *There's a Lot of Money in Chairs*, 2001, Mixed

and symbolism have significantly impacted my paintings. Within these styles and/or genres there are hosts of artists whose work has fed the production of my series and who have dealt with similar postulations: the sense of regionalism through the color, form, and composition of painters Robert Bechtle and Fairfield Porter; the use of symbolism, myth, and allegory in the narratives of Eric Fischl, Paula Rego, Lars Elling, and Stanley Spencer; and the

expression of directness and sincerity of self and form seen in the works of Frida Kahlo, William Beckman, Lucian Freud, and Tracy Emim. Each of these artists contribute their unique approach to the contemporary process of visualization and experience. Through examining their works and writings I have gained a broader perspective as to the varied ways of approaching contemporary figurative representation as well as actual formal aspects of my own thesis project.

My focus throughout the duration of my MFA has been greatly influenced by my interest in psychology. My fascination in the field has led me to take many courses on the subject, and to consider entering the field of Art Therapy. The theme of identity permeated my undergraduate work, and led to the creation of the series titled *Cycles*, which served as an initial exploration into the role of psychology and symbolism in my work. Upon entering graduate school I found myself just as fascinated with this theme and was determined to combine it with portraiture, regionalism, and my love of interior design and the graphic arts.

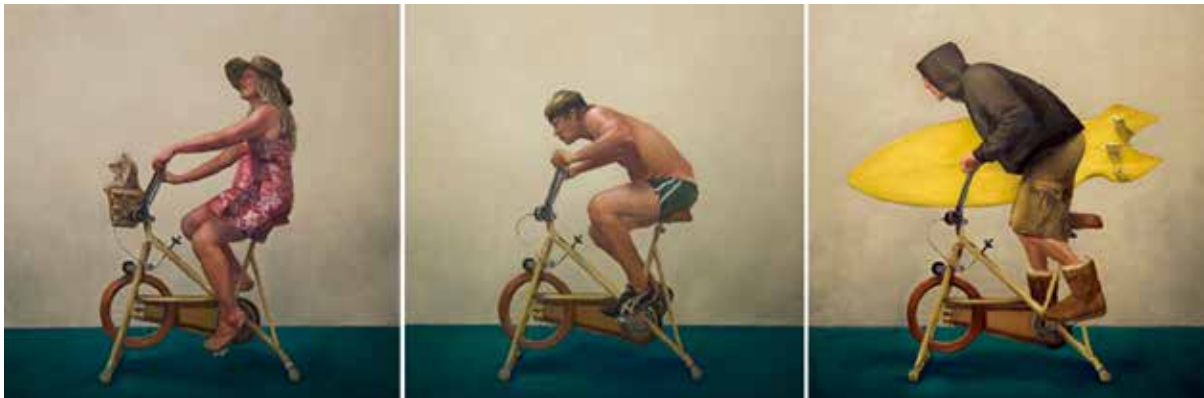


Fig 19-21. Robin Johnson, *Cycles*, 2008, Oil on panel, 36" x 36"

In researching philosophical and psychological roles of identity, self-concept, and experience, I was led to Carl Rogers and the theory of phenomenal field. Phenomenal field is explained as everything which encompasses one's collection of experiences, including environment, which we define our selves by (Boeree). This theory served to solidify and

encompass my ambitions in my images, and particularly the direction of, *Objects No. 1*, the first painting in this body of work. Roger's theory emphasizes that our selves are in constant flux as we are continually exposed to new experiences, choices, and decision making, ultimately altering our state of self (Boeree). Exploring the possibilities of articulating and visually describing such an idea--an image dealing with authentic identity, which could be painted an indefinite number of times (as the subject's endless experiences would continue to create an entirely new emotional and aesthetic image), yet still dealing exclusively with that



Fig 22. Robin Johnson, *Objects No. 1*, 2010, Oil on panel, 48" x 36"

subject's individual identity--proved challenging. This exploration specifically led me to the creation of *Rachel & Peter*, an investigation in identity and portraiture. Throughout my study I have been pursuing the collaboration of portraiture, symbolism, identity, and regionalism, while decidedly steering away from dream and surrealist narrative. Roger's theory provided a conceptual underpinning for the origins of my thesis project. The influences of this specific theory can be seen throughout my images as they are each an accumulation of events, images, thoughts, and emotions which have entered my own phenomenal field.



Fig 23. Robin Johnson, *Peter*, 2011, Oil on panel, 48" x 36", Fig 24, Robin Johnson, *Rachel*, 2011, Oil on panel, 48" x 36"

The incorporation of allegory, myth, and narrative were surprising developments in my work. At the onset of this program I had a clear idea of the work I didn't want to create: narrative paintings. Not fully understanding their potential as a powerful tool for visual communication, I simply had little interest in generating stories in my work. I then came to

realize that, through the dialogue that was forming between my subjects, I was already beginning to create such work. Through continued research and sourcing of narrative art, I came to realize that I could utilize contemporary approaches to narrative, and that I was not bound to a linear plot or grandiose epic. The art of Paula Rego, Eric Fischl, Lars Elling, and Stanley Spencer helped greatly to inspire a type of narrative and allegory that was fresh and relevant to me.

Taking a mythology and narrative painting course with artist F. Scott Hess was extremely important in my processing and creation of new works, discerning that the potential of my imagery delves much deeper than its formal inclusions. Encompassing the interaction and dialogue of object and figure, and the physical structure of the composition, in consideration of the intended theme of the narrative, operates as cohesive elements to both form and content in a painting. These influences can be seen throughout my paintings, and directly in the image *Gestation*, which hints at motifs of time and growth through its title and subject matter, while it is also formally staged in the shape of a clock. This course significantly impacted my process for creating an image, also leading to an interest in the adaptations of Greek mythology seen in many of the images included in this series. For example, in the painting *Leda*, I have applied my own contemporary approach by combining my experiences with nature, in addition to my experiences with the misuse of power roles, as seen by the Greek God Zeus.

The conceptual and formal properties of music, particularly folk music, has also influenced my process of narration, in that it creates a story line which utilizes many tools familiar to the visual arts. Like poetry, mythology, and storytelling, folk music is a richly layered form of communication inherited throughout cultures and generations, and filled with

symbolism and metaphor. Created with layers of interpretation and often adapted with each artist's retelling, folk transcends the aesthetic, and delivers messages on a personal level while transmitting greater themes of humanity and existence. I find my work inspired by the authenticity and veracity applied to such art, and see this series as my incorporation of the principles of folk: visual appreciation for the tradition and ritual found in the lyrical transmission of narrative.

Finally, the objectification of viewer and view, as it relates to the process of representation, and the detachment and transformation between origin and copy, has directly



Fig 25, Unknown, *Egyptian Bazaar and Ciaro Street (Rue de Caire)*, 1889

impacted the production of this series. The images in this series exceedingly consider the conscious disconnection between the narration by the artist as well as the viewer's reaction to the image. The article *The World as Exhibition*, by Timothy Mitchell, discusses the process of viewer and view as it relates to the World Exhibition held in Paris in 1889. In this text the author examines the process and responsibilities of representation, concluding that the viewer observes through the perspective of

his or her own interpretation and familiarity, and displacement and representation of the original ultimately transmits manipulation (Mitchell).

Even though the paint was made dirty and the donkeys were brought from Cairo, the medieval Egyptian street at the Paris exhibition remained only a Parisian copy of the Oriental original. The certainty of representation

depended on this deliberate difference in time and displacement in space separating the representation from the real thing. It also depended on the position of the visitor-the tourist in the imitation street or the figure on the viewing platform. The representation of reality was always an exhibition set up for an observer in its midst; an observing gaze surrounded by and yet excluded from the exhibitions careful order. (Mitchell 223)

In this series, the process of objectification directly relates to the theory of phenomenal field discussed above, and therefore ultimately sets the tone for the integration and influences observed throughout my imagery. The inclusion of such research and artistic influence has been an invaluable experience, in which my awareness and curiosity toward the creation of my imagery is indebtedly impacted.

METHODOLOGY

My thesis is a series of large-scale figurative oil paintings. Over the last two years I have dedicated my practice exclusively to working with oils. While I enjoy the use of varied media, and particularly mixed media, for the purpose of this series I centered my focus on oils to challenge my ability and awareness of its traditionally physical and historical properties. The majority of this series was created on birch panels, as I prefer the density and stability that painting on wood provides. I also appreciate the notion of working on a natural substance, and feel that the inherent qualities of wood support the organic themes throughout my work, including the interaction with nature and authenticity of self.

The evolution of my work is natural and spontaneous, relying greatly on an intuitive process. Aside from the re-contextualization of Greek myths, *Leda* and *Cassandra*, my images are the creation of personal experience, impression, and sentiment. My developing



Fig 26, Robin Johnson, *XXX PAINTING (In Process)*, 2012, Oil on panel, X" x X"

process begins with a simple word, color, thought, emotion, or situation which strikes me, and then begins to form an image. As the image and concept develop, I am continually considering the inclusion and implications of supplemental symbolic and metaphorical experience. I spend a great deal of time mentally developing my images before electing to put them on paper. This part of the process can take months or even years. I don't immediately write these ideas down, as I like to see which ones impact me enough to remember them. Most ideas are forgotten after a few days. For myself, and the quality of my work, I believe it is necessary that my images have personal meaning and purpose, allowing myself to truly invest and commit to them if I am going to paint them.

I do not keep a traditional sketchbook, finding my process more successful when journaling about my ideas with written word rather than drawings. I fill notebooks detailing ideas, themes, and use only very rough compositional sketches. My beginning process is comparable to how I begin a graphic design project, creating mood boards determining colors, emotions, atmosphere, environment, and scale. I have discovered this process to allow

my ideas to develop further, exploring all options without the impediment of rendering an idea prior to its fruition. Writing, rather than sketching, also allows for me to easier recall my initial impressions of the idea and the image. When I render ideas, even just sketching past composition, I find the original spontaneity and the enthusiasm for the painting begin to diminish, feeling bound to the sketch rather than the original vision. I have found my paintings then begin to lose their originality, instead adopting the feel of a reproduction as I'm continually chasing the sketch not the vision.

Once I have fully secured an idea, journaled, and committed to beginning a new painting, the process of photographing my reference images begins. This stage of my process is typically more time-consuming than the painting itself. When available, I prefer to paint from life, though unfortunately with much of my imagery that is not always an option. I value the importance of using my own photography so I invest a great deal of time sourcing and staging the models, props, and environments for my images. When permitting, I purchase props, hire models, and travel to actual destinations to photograph. If this is not an option, I lean toward altering the image to use what is accessible to me, as I favor the authenticity and utilization of local products and landscapes. Thrifting and antiquing become a significant part of my creative process as they inform new ideas, as well as providing the availability to obtain actual objects for reference in my images. My background in graphic design is extremely useful, particularly in these early stages of my painting process. While reference photos may not always accommodate the entire scene desired, I utilize digital resources to compile multiple images, creating a photo collage of the final painting. This also allows me to consider alternate pictorial and compositional options as well as any color editing prior to visiting the painting surface.

Once all preparatory decisions have been made and I feel satisfied with my photos and digital rendering, I lay in a loose underdrawing in vine charcoal on my panel. This process is rapid and gestural, and is erased before I begin painting. This allows me to see the image in full scale and make any further alterations if necessary. With my idea mapped out and the charcoal drawing removed, I then simply begin painting. I work from dark to light, modeling form and environment through value and hue. I keep my paintings fairly dark until the last few layers, adding illumination as the final emphasis. As with the objects and themes found in my paintings, I'm partial to keeping my palette fairly neutral. I believe imitating the organic and weathered objects and environments in my images, combined with areas of high intensity and saturation, mimicking the dichotomy of contemporary Southern California life.

Throughout my painting process I continually self-critique, constantly changing and adjusting the image. Comparable to the concepts and themes explored in my imagery, the awareness and quality of experience transcends to my formal process as these paintings are also a discovery and exploration of craft. I prefer my images to have abstract and ambiguous spaces, combining a graphic quality with highly rendered areas. My paintings are concerned more with process, action, and experience which evokes narrative, rather than high realism or idealized form. Accuracy and exactness are not the main objective in my work. The authenticity and originality of the artist and her ability is important to me and my work, particularly as a young artist. I want the character of my hand, not the accuracy of the image to create a distinctive visual impression, and therefore I do not use the practice of projecting, tracing, or gridding in my work. While creating a realistic image, the painting does not conform strictly to the properties of realism. I often exaggerate and manipulate my images to create a heightened and more personal sense of reality in my work, exploring and challenging

my artistic license, ability, and my expressive and creative experience throughout the process. I work impulsively, not committing to any specifics, allowing myself full freedom to make changes throughout the development of the painting.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of my work throughout my experience in graduate school has begun to prepare me for the challenges and successes that lay ahead as I pursue a career in the arts. I entered this program questioning what I could contribute to the contemporary discourse in figurative painting. My initial goal was to produce a series of portraits, concerned mainly with aesthetic and formal attributes. Lacking a greater awareness of the contemporary art world and the roles of painters in today's society, I was widely unaware of the potential to communicate through imagery. In a discussion with a successful artist years before, he encouraged me to paint what I know and what is important to me. Reflecting on this advice, I released the frustration of discovering some great epic to paint, and instead entrusted my ideas to what has influenced and inspired my own life. When I resolved to speak about what I know, it then became clear to me that I had an endless pool of unique experiences to communicate. Combining my messages with my design aesthetic, I discovered an ability to create obstacles and challenges for my viewers to engage in, while unearthing the courage to follow my own creative intuition.

Reflecting on my thesis body of work and the completion of my MFA in Painting, I see the significance of this project as much more than a series of allegorical paintings. Throughout this process, my awareness of myself as a woman and an artist, as well as my awareness of experience and interpretation, have been profoundly heightened. This course of work has significantly impacted my direction as a painter. I now am confident that I have the

tools to investigate and explore my practice and themes further, finding a direction and voice through my imagery. Having had the opportunity to engage with the Southern California art community through a myriad of instructors, outside opportunities, and shows, has encouraged and supported my practice, as well as an awareness and involvement of the arts in contemporary culture.

I would like to continue in my current vein of work, as the exploration of symbolism and pattern in life will continually provide narrative in my future creative process. I aim to increasingly incorporate abstract and graphic elements into my imagery, while continuing to create large-scale figurative paintings. My future ambitions include the continuation and development of teaching and commission work. I look forward to acquiring gallery representation and to sustain the production and showing of my paintings. I anticipate challenging endeavors ahead, though I am now confident in a life filled with art, and look forward to my creative future.

“A huge lesson for me was that if I was going to be successful, I had to be successful as myself- I couldn’t be successful doing what other people were doing. I had to do what I believed in and what felt real to me and felt true to me, because the worst thing to be is successful as someone else.” (Jay Z 43)

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APPENDIX



Plate 1, Robin Johnson, *Cassandra*, 2012, Oil on panel, 48x48"



Plate 2, Robin Johnson, *Dust* 2012, Oil on canvas, 48x72"



Plate 3, Robin Johnson, *Leda*, 2011, Oil on panel, 60x48"



Plate 4, Robin Johnson, *Gestation*, 2011, Oil on panel, 48x48"



Plate 5, Robin Johnson, *At Bay*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 60x48"



Plate 6, Robin Johnson, *The Bee Trainer*, 2011, Oil on panel, 60x36"



Plate 7, Robin Johnson, *At Dawn*, 2011, Oil on panel, 48x72"



Plate 8, Robin Johnson, *Objects No. 1*, 2011, Oil on panel, 48x36"

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