Sillage

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SILLAGE

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Art and Art History
The University of Mississippi

by

Brooke P. Alexander

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ABSTRACT

The blurry, the dark, shadowed places hidden and dwelling amongst the certainty steal my attention. Such places can communicate a vast sense of both time and setting, can convey that which is both occurring and that which is past. I do not think those spaces can be explicitly defined. They are reflections and explorations of the figures’ minds, providing a place for both their physical bodies and their thoughts to live.

The paintings that compose Sillage communicate a space that requires engagement and that is not readily understood. The painted area changes as it invites and rejects visual entry. These ambiguous spaces begin when understood edges become unclear, when objects merge into another, and when uncertainty becomes apparent. They overlap, supersede, and fragment into one another and become disjointed. Within this tension, the significance and vastness of tangled space envelops the figures, more grandly connecting place and form. The two push and pull against each other as the space threatens to overwhelm the presence of the figure. In this contested environment emerges the figure as a distinct dialogue from which the space stems.
DEDICATION

To Donald and Paige Alexander, my unwavering supporters.
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My love and appreciation to all who are a part of my life. These paintings are about you and me.
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sillage. . .
intimate longings
ever-ongoing wanderings

*I’ve run mad.*
shadows sighs
deeply darkly dreamt – lost
a trace a-foot a-tangle
a-caught
vials of secrets
extracted thoughts
curious rooms

*(they’ve all eyes of blue)*
they’re darkening by slow degrees
it was he who did it
no twas she
“They came from some place in Yoknapatawpha County”

– *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner
CHAPTER I: THE REAL & THE UNREAL
“To give unreality to an image attached to a strong reality is in the spirit of poetry.”¹ It is the peculiar role of art to bring out ambiguity, an element that is already present in the object but that often goes unnoticed. The role of the unreal in my work speaks about that which is always already there. Dreams, daydreams, and thoughts of a wandering nature are often discouraged, and considered frivolous, childish, and of little use. They are not true, so their point is questioned. Yet, they are intimately real and have real effects. They combine incidents, interests, desires, and a multitude of other categories that live in our hearts and minds. By drawing attention to this atmosphere, the ambiguous mixing with the certain, I strive to create a space where one can be convinced that that which is unreal is more present than the real.

I intend my paintings to be poetic images. A poetic image transcends the realm of the ordinary and the expected. It expresses a life and experience that can be felt in no other way. The poetic image has a great deal of mystery to it, for who can ascribe traits to define what is and is not poetic? There is a mysterious essence of the “unknown” in poetry that is felt by the viewer through the artist, just as a reader feels such emotions through a writer. To reach a poetic level of space is to redirect and display space in a different light than is usually seen and understood. Unlike the spaces one meets every day, these are familiar spaces steeped in the unfamiliar. The juxtapositions, pairings, and contrasts create questions of how to navigate through such rooms. Poetry contains a mystery and obscurity that evokes intrigue and stirs the mind into new thoughts. The poetic occurs when the medium rises up to present itself. The painting is no longer only concerned with the structure of the composition and the narrative through imagery, but also reveals the paint itself as an element that must be understood through a different, intertwined lens. The nooks and shadows of uncertainty are where poetic spaces dwell.

These are not happy spaces. That does not mean that I was unhappy while painting them or that the viewer has to be saddened by them. I find effusively happy stories to be, in general, far less complicated than troubled stories. As Tolstoy memorably notes, “All happy families are alike.”

Tales of the content tend to have the same rectangular houses, and I grow weary after walking through too many white picket fences. Those with complex shadows and serious, maddened gazes have always captured my interest. Leaking roofs and creaking floorboards convey a clearer reflection of life and deal with more elaborate, obscure emotions.

The different spaces mingling together act as companions for the figures. Not only as places but beings as well, they are ghosts always already there, lingering in the physical and mental rooms, blending and blurring as one thought collides with another, each making their own individual sense before confusing momentarily upon collision and then reaching a degree of clarity that allows the viewer to finish the story.

The human figures who live in these spaces are alone with their thoughts. The decision to populate the space with only one figure is an explicit part of the paintings. Magnolia et du mure (Figure 6) could be argued to have two figures because there is a ghost image behind the figure. My intent was to make the ghost subtle enough that he is not automatically seen and is more part of the space than a figure. Although he does have a face, body, and limbs, he is mostly air in the space, a presence lingering but not fully formed and has equal importance with the room and objects around him. Therefore, I feel I can say that there is only one figure in the painting for the ghost is merely a semblance of a figure.

The category of portraiture immediately comes to mind when only one figure is presented with paint. For centuries, artists have been hired to capture a person’s likeness so that the memory of their physical features might not fade after death. The point was to convey what the

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person looked like, as well as to display hierarchy, wealth, or a special occasion. Not until Rembrandt do we see artists beginning to resist those restrictions. Rembrandt, although still working for patrons with traditional portrait rules, began allowing us to “see her mind as much as … her body.”\(^3\) I wish to take that thought and extend and exaggerate it. I wish the viewer to feel an inner depth to the figure that completes and complicates their physical features. There is no concern on my part about preserving my model’s image for history. My paintings are not about the models. The painted figures are my own. To combat being pigeonholed as portraiture, the figures are placed in more non-traditional poses. In *Borrowed Flowers* (Figure 3) the female figure can hardly be seen, while in *Tangled Lines* (Figure 10) you are looking over and down at her shoulders. In a desire to defy portraiture while using some of its rules, in *Staircases* (Figure 9) the figure is more central, standing with her body facing forward. However, her shadow is large and central and, therefore, balances and competes with her attention, as does the space around her which seems to be disintegrating more than substantiating.

While my paintings are not centralized around portraiture, and, indeed, combat portraiture in several ways, the road I traveled for this body of work did begin with portraiture. *Discerned Obliquities* (Figure 5) was the painting that sent my work wandering down the specifically undefined road it travels. Begun as a traditional portrait, I painted myself (with the use of a mirror) in the bathtub. That, in and of itself, was a unique experience, having never painted myself while wet, nor while confined to such close, precarious quarters (trying to keep my palette from falling into the water). I painted my self-portrait, and then shifted. I moved and looked down at the tiled floor of the bathroom itself. That physical movement to see a different angle changed my thought process. I painted an abstracted grid at the bottom of the painting that

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\(^3\) Robert Zeller, *The Figure Artist’s Handbook: A Contemporary Guide to Figure Drawing, Painting, and Composition*, (China, Monacelli Studio Press), 41.
echoes the tiles and shows a different perspective. The tiles are altered in an abstracted way that I had not painted before. As the painting evolved, I added a window that both deepened and confused the space, for it reads as both a window with space within it and as a reflection of space behind the viewer. The intention behind my portrait had been challenged and had changed into a space that pushes and pulls the viewer. My painted gaze resists entry while the window pulls you in to investigate its illuminated space. The towels impede a view of what is behind, and the grid at the bottom is a third perspective connected to the window panes that exist as an independent thought as well. From there I began to experiment with ways of pushing and pulling spaces, along with conflicting perspectives, to visually disturb the equilibrium of my paintings.

The spaces reflect and explore the figures’ minds, providing a place for both their physical bodies and their minds to live. I think I want them to be uncomfortable because I am not comfortable in my mind. I dream troubling things, I daydream excessively, I am creating and insisting on my freedom, but I am not very confident in it. The ghost image in *Magnolia et du mure* (Figure 6) was the original placement of the figure. However, after blocking him in the placement felt wrong, and he was too high in the composition. I wanted him to be closer to the viewer, to allow them to approach more easily. After I scraped off the paint, an impression of him was left that suggested a restlessness and a history, both of my process of laying down, wiping off, and rebuilding the image and story, and of representing the restless quality of the figure’s mind. The paintings reveal interior portraits, both in the sense that they are in rooms, but also that they reflect the interior of the figure and their thought-life. Thought-lives are the threads and lived existences of thoughts. They occur in our heads, but their presence, albeit invisible and often never revealed, affects our physical spaces.
I am rebelling against “normal” structures. There is no such thing as a static space when experiencing it in real time. The space has objects, ever-changing light and shadow, and people. The thoughts of the people in rooms distract or embellish spaces. I am trying to make such interactions and thoughts tangible. By involving several places and perspectives in one composition, there is a sense of constant transition, by which I hope to convey a fleeting quality of time and light. Although I wish to make visible the thoughts, I do not want them to be explicit. There is an obscure quality about the whole painting that embodies the wandering of the mind. Obscurity in a painting creates drama and intrigue. In my paintings there are moments of clarity so the viewer has aspects to firmly grasp before falling into the uncertain ceilings and corners. With this intentional blurring of specificity, the viewer is invited to invent and “finish” the work. Moments of obscurity are moments in flux that morph and change. “They are not ‘reasonable,’ because we do not live in ‘corners of the ceiling’ while lolling in a comfortable bed, because a spider’s web is not, as the poet says, drapery.”4 Preconceived concepts are put aside and my interpretations of space are painted instead. In my paintings, the spaces are interpretations of the figures. I present an altered space that guides and encourages rethinking of those places and the rules that apply to them. Bachelard speaks of the “abandoning quality of poetry.”5 By not fully resolving any one space, I am abandoning it in a sense, just as we often abandon thoughts, leaving them unfinished or folding them away to be taken out later and ironed. The power of suggestion, of what remains, is as great as that which is clearly depicted.

There is a sense that the figures inhabit these unfinished spaces, that it is their living quarters (where they are living, or at least resting). Yet, they are not necessarily comfortable

there. Interiors are meant to shelter, but the storms of our minds are with us always, and that internal conflict causes upset and disruption. They have curious existences in these contradictory disjointed spaces. Shelter of a sort is given to them, but it is a fragile structure of protection and the unraveling of that shelter is shown as the solidity of the room begins to fall apart. In *Always already there* (Figure 1), the figure lurks on the side, not quite real or reflection. The window frame is finished to a higher degree of verisimilitude, yet the bottom of the frame is on a different plane because of the weight of the figure. That which is thought to be stable falls apart in the webs of the mind.

Flowers, dying and dead, are a continuous thread throughout the paintings. The flowers are intimately and inextricably connected to people and memories. The viewer has no need to know what or who the flowers are to me personally. It is a layer of mine that is there in the paintings and is felt rather than elucidated. The flowers are fragile characters that yearn towards the status of figure. They are almost figures, both in their upright posture that reflects humans, as well as their significance in my paintings. They act as symbols as well, drawing attention to mortality as they are shown dead and dying, and to the temporality of life. In these places where nothing is certain, neither is life or death, for even when they die they linger in a forever sort of living on the canvas.

There is a play between inside and outside in all the paintings. There are windows, holes, openings that draw parallels between the real and the unreal. The boundaries that normally exist between inside and outside, here and there, are confused, and they live with each other in the spaces. In *Shades of Gold* (Figure 7) the figure is clearly in an interior space, and behind her a city scene is revealed through a window, yet the city continues on into what can be interpreted as a wall. In *Beets* (Figure 2) there is a more defined window at the floor where a fireplace is
expected. It is a bright exit from the dim lighting that is cast over the rest of the painting. These exist as moments of thought that offer places to escape to, to explore, to be distracted by, and as such they speak towards the way our minds work jumping from one subject to an entirely different one, never restricted to one place.

The animals who occupy some of the paintings are there to positively complicate the stories. They are elements furthering the space. By presenting them in an unusual way, the paintings challenge the viewer to figure out why the animals are put in such positions. In Staircases (Figure 9) the zebra has its head down and its legs are cut off by the floorboards. By having the zebra there, the space is deepened as we know the zebra must have space to stand there. Conclusions about the painting are halted as well with the zebra there. It is such an odd choice that it jerks thoughts in a different direction from the one the figure inspires. Animals live in a strange, uncertain category between humans and objects and could be argued into either grouping. By deleting their faces, mine are treated more like objects, and my objects long to be human. In that way they are the same, yet, perhaps the animals are a bit closer to being humans because they have a living breath that the objects and flowers do not yet possess.

Along with the animals, still lifes are also present in the paintings. Historically, traditional still lifes are objects on a table or shelf, and are typically illuminated by a single light source. The objects are carefully chosen to make statements through the use of symbolism attached to the objects. My paintings have still lifes crowded in among the spaces. They serve as commentatores on the space and the figures, and have the historical symbolism that cannot be separated from them as well as personal significances that will change with the viewer’s perspectives on the objects.
Figures, animals, and objects live with each other in my paintings. Their relationships question what is actual and what is implausible, declaring all to be real as they exist in paint.

There are unknown avenues and corridors in these collisions of space and thought that are never ending and ever unfolding. That is why they continuously fascinate, because they are not static, but always shifting with the light and shadow of our minds.
CHAPTER II: DREAMS
This push and pull between real and unreal, sense and impossibility, focus and wandering reflects the way my mind (and, I feel, others minds) works when daydreaming and reading. There is no concrete whole because details in their entirety cannot be formed in the mind, but are constantly in flux and shifting. With each new piece of information different aspects are suggested that are then emphasized or negated by the next thought, which leads ever in a meandering path. They’ve an element of dream about them. At first I disliked the idea of my paintings being dreams or dream-lifes. To call them such seemed to make them frivolous in some way. My perception of dreams was that they were of lesser quality than “life.” Yet dreams are often more real than life. I have lived a life full of dreams, both sleeping and waking. Beautiful, troubling, felt dreams. Dreams are incredibly intimate; they are secrets composed by the subconscious mind. But are my paintings dreams or daydreams or perhaps musings of memories? Or are they all three and in between?

Daydreams, for me, have more longing in them than dreams that occur during sleep. There is also, quite often, a structured depth to my daydreams that my dreams do not achieve. Yet my dreams have a level of terror that my daydreaming mind never touches. A sense of terror is not one that I wish my paintings to possess. In *Always already there* (Figure 1) I hope a little of my terror at the feline can be felt, but I do not wish to scare away. Instead, like a ghost story that frightens one in a thrilling way, it is not threatening except in the elaborations of the listener’s or viewer’s mind. Dreamscapes, where unrealistic factors can coexist together, are where impossibilities can thrive. My paintings are unlikely arrangements of longings, desires, and thoughts. When I am in front of a painting by another artist or reading literature, I am living and breathing their air, allowing the artist or writer to direct my thoughts, mind, and imaginings. I believe all they tell me, and their world becomes a piece in the fabric of my own world.
Dreams and daydreams, concerning their basis of invention, are aspects of losing touch with the generic understanding of reality. Straying too much into such areas leads to rumors of strangeness and of an unsound mind. Madness is a presence of sense with fragments missing or excesses of meaning. These painted spaces lean towards madness in that sense, because there is no whole. There is either too much or too little by “normal” spatial standards. There are spaces missing, and in those missing pieces are fragments that are spaces themselves, blocking one and presenting another. In *Discerned Obliquities* (Figure 5) towels impede the viewer’s gaze from knowing what is above the figure’s head, yet invites the gaze to enter into another space where, between the window panes, shines a light that could not possibly live in the same room with the figure. In opposition, *Borrowed Flowers* (Figure 3) shows an excess of information. Flower upon stem upon flower upon stem clogs the space, giving a sense of maddening confusion that clouds the brain. Madness is possibly also displayed in the obsessiveness of the paintings. The patterns and repetitious elements display an unyielding interest that gives them a higher sense of importance as they are painted over and over.

Whether dream or daydream, madness or sanity, the oppositions to normality are apparent in my paintings. Surrealistic in some aspects, the representational quality of the paintings is what creates the trust that allows you to fall into the spaces and believe them to be real. How miserable and monotonous a life would be where there were no places to pause and dream.
CHAPTER III: LOOKING & SEEING
Looking and seeing truly is an obsession of mine. I have an intense gaze that people have remarked on. I look people in the eye and have been reprimanded for doing so at length. I have also made people uncomfortable, and have given people the wrong idea by the intensity of my gaze. I have thought at times that perhaps I should train myself to stop looking so strongly, especially at people, to avert my eyes as is generally done. Yet, to do so would be untruthful; I continue to look and see as I will, as I want, as I desire, and as I am inclined come what may of consequences and misunderstood interpretations. It is better to deal with those negatives should they arise than to not have fully looked and seen and known.

To look is to gather information, which I do constantly; every moment of the day I strive to be attentive and absorb angles, skin colors, and hundreds of other things. Seeing is processing what I have looked at and breathing it in deeper with the hope to understand in the round. Not only to have accurate outlines, but to have a fully fleshed reflection that conveys a sliver of the soul. I hope my paintings contain the intensity of my gaze, a history of looking and seeing, allowing the viewer to be stirred into following my line of thought and sight. I want viewers of my paintings to know that I have looked, to be able to see my sight made physical in paint.

The form of looking involved in painting from life is intense. Staring is a necessary evil for how is one to understand, translate, and depict if not carried out thoroughly. In some of the paintings the figures stare back at the viewer. The figure in *Shuttered Secrets* (Figure 8) stares out at the viewer, her gaze a reflection of yours. Her knees are drawn to her chest, so she is protected to a point, and has closed herself off from inspection. Simultaneously, though, her gaze is direct and allows you access through her eyes. When painted eyes stare back it is a plea or a demand to be seen by the viewer. A response is evoked, sometimes of discomfort, when the staring gaze of the painted pupils, unmoving, address their stare-er. Most of the figures gaze off
and out, absorbed in the daydream surrounding them. Only one painting has (nearly) no eyes at all (Always already there [Figure 1]). They are suggested upon closer inspection, but at first glance the male figure seems to be a shadow with skin only on his hands and feet. The seeming lack of other body parts is a device to create intrigue, to invite investigation of the shadows more fully, and to entice a closer inspection of the painting so that more might be seen.

As humans, we see semblances of ourselves in the merest of suggestions. The threshold of figurality can begin with the slightest suggestion. To be fully seen, to know someone’s inner workings and longings, is the most intimate kind of gaze. To feel truly seen is a rare form of beauty. So, the models are needed to create a physical proof of having looked and understood. This is where my gaze extends beyond the model and capturing their body. I want my figures to feel fully seen to the viewer. The inflections and wanderings of internal hearts are my own in the paintings.

These paintings are self-portraits, yet not entirely nor always intentionally. They contain fragments and slivers of me that create wholes, just as the disjointed spaces dwell together to institute an atmosphere to support the figures. They reflect my subconscious mind, and are secrets in that way, made visible in part, but are whispered lines of thought and not loud decisive statements. They are my characters, drawn from life and literature and my own imaginings. They are seated in reality with the use of the model, but they stray in the mental spaces I have created for them to live in. The more you look the more you see. There is an infinite amount that never ends, ever-changing, fading, resolving. In these nooks and shadows of the paintings I find myself.

I am trying to explore the concepts of looking differently, of seeing further and deeper, of being curious. I am trying to forsake the “rules” of reading space. My paintings stray from a
“normal” reading of space because the painting is not a sensible space. I am forsaking the rules of normality for those of the mind; and the mind does not ensure that every memory has ninety-degree angles and sturdy walls.

The act of looking is a trait belonging to artists. This trait does not, of course, exist in artists alone, but in anyone who is willing to make themselves available to really look. In general, we look and see more than those around us in our everyday lives. The obsession of looking and truly seeing, the consequences of, the benefits of, the mental overload of are all deeply rooted in my work. When working from life, the model, the space, and the objects hold me accountable. They are there, telling me if I am painting them wrongly or visually ill-treating them. That ordeal and effort (as well as the experience) is important because it informs everything I imagine or invent in the making of the painting. It aids believability, especially in the figure where the act of looking allows my painted bones to have more weight and my skin to have more life than my mind alone could supply.
CHAPTER IV: SKETCHES
As I work and come to a deeper understanding of my thesis work, literature, words, and the act of writing have found a firmer and more articulated place in my work. Those things have always been important but have never been as in tune with each other as they now are. In my mind I live somewhere between the words and the paint. Poetry has become a part of my painting process. My paintings suddenly cried out for it in clear, knowing terms. The placement of the poems in the timeline of making the work varies, sometimes coming into being before the painting is begun, and sometimes in the middle of the painting. They come when needed, and are a different form of sketching. By placing things together in the space of a white page, in the same line, in a single word, I can see what happens when elements and moods come together. I can see the painting relationships in different ways, can see if elements resist each other, if they create disturbances. I am using the poems to produce new elements – a metaphor, an insight, an illumination. They allow me to experiment with the placement, juxtaposition, and sequencing of images a lot faster and more easily than on the actual canvas itself. Poetry works alongside my charcoal sketches in this way. Both have black and white color palettes that allow me to see the values and light and shadow in a more direct way. The poems as sketches, as “drafts,” as conceptual practice runs that use verbal arrangements to try out, test, and explore visual ones. Pairing, contradicting, burrowing into the paint with words allows me to understand my work in a more complex way, and opens a path of exploration that I am eager to travel anew with each painting.

The title of the show, *Sillage*, is a word that evokes several senses. The French word indicates a simultaneous presence and absence. It is a subtle impression or trace that someone leaves after passing through. I used the word in one of my poem sketches, and it encompasses the paintings as no other word I have found. The word is mysterious because not many of my
viewers will understand its meaning. Therefore the title of the show creates an ambiguity that is reflected in the work itself. The word also refers to the mysterious ability of words to communicate scents and scents to communicate images. A perfect example of sillage’s definition is the remnants of perfume still present after the person wearing it has left. Words can evoke the five senses much easier than visuals. In *Shades of Gold* (Figure 7) there are cups of coffee, and throughout the other paintings there are flowers. Each painting does not need a scent, nor is that an objective of mine. The mysterious connections between senses is what I hope it alludes to through the use of this word. Words open up “windows” of thought about smells, sights, textures, and sounds. In turn, images inspire nooks of imaginings that we choose words for to describe. The connections between the senses are intimately linked, and I intend *Sillage* to indicate that.
CHAPTER V: INFLUENCES
Edwin Dickinson, if a single artist must be chosen, is the painter who most influences my work. Dickinson “listened to the whisperings of strange muses, and has followed untrodden paths”\(^6\) in his work. He at once seems to reveal and hide the objects of his desire. I want my paintings to follow untrodden paths as well. Dickinson’s figures are attractive unknowns, and you have to spend time with them to know them just as one must with literary characters. I want my figures to be beautiful strangers, unknown to the viewer until they follow these disjointed holes of their soul and mind. Dickinson had a “bias towards works that had a dark, tragic, or romantic colouring.”\(^7\) I have such biases too, and that is why his color palette of greys, darks, and delicate tones is so attractive. They tell complex contradictory narratives, an aspect of which attracts me as well. His paintings are mystery narratives because of the uncertainties, tragedies because of the elements of sorrow and death, and romances because one cannot help but fall into Dickinson’s worlds and love them with a tenderness that he himself must have felt towards them.

“The poem possesses us entirely.”\(^8\) Although Faulkner was not primarily a poet, the sentiment expresses a large part of why I am drawn to his writing. He demands an entire surrender to his characters and his method of writing. A total sacrifice to the novel must be given in order to begin to understand the stream-of-consciousness that fills the pages. Faulkner has a way of painting with his words, letting the light drip in golden drops [“flecks of sunlight slipping along the pole across his shoulder and down the back of his shirt… yellow butterflies

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flickered along the shade like flecks of sun”⁹ and personifying the shadows of the mind
[“Trampling my shadow’s bones into the concrete with hard heels… I walked upon the belly of
my shadow”¹⁰]. In *The Sound and the Fury*, honeysuckle is as much a character as Quentin. Its
embodied presence repeats and repeats in his mind until it becomes a living entity and perfumes
the entire section of the novel: “honesuckle coming up out of the darkness into my room where
I was trying to sleep,”¹¹ “honesuckle got all mixed up in it the whole thing came to symbolize
night and unrest.”¹² Faulkner’s written senses are oftentimes all mixed up. The word sillage has
an aspect of synesthesia to it because of its suggestion of a presence now absent that can still be
smelled but cannot be seen. My patterns are an attempt to replicate this honeysuckle effect of
Faulkner’s, as the flowers become an obsession. The reader of Faulkner’s novel encounters a
realism that “unless he abandons himself to it without reservations, he does not enter into the
poetic space of the image.”¹³ Faulkner’s literary landscapes are poetic spaces. When reading his
works I feel as though Faulkner gives an overload of information affecting every sense. One
often cannot understand it in a tangible way, but instead feels and experiences it by living in his
world. Since I am jilting readily understood spaces for those of greater obscurity, I am striving
to create spaces where one must live in the painting to fully understand it.

Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* has passions and desires woven to a depth and height
of captivating intensity. Even though the story is told in a few different locations, the reader
tends to forget that she is anywhere but Wuthering Heights. When the characters are not at the
house they are talking about it, and there is a sense that there is no other space but that which

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¹³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look At How We Experience Intimate Places*, tr Maria Jolas
(Boston: Beacon Press, 1994),
exists in Wuthering Heights. There is an intimacy between Cathy and Heathcliff that cannot be unconnected to the house, and you are pushed and pulled between the minds of the hero and heroine, whose souls live in the stone walls of Wuthering Heights, where shadows dwell all day long. Wuthering Heights is not a single room, but it is one entity and its significance is so great that even when the tale is momentarily in the other places Wuthering Heights is lurking there on the edges of your mind. Its connection with the characters is inextricable, and there cannot be one without the other. The house is their minds and hearts made physical. I feel that my paintings live in one space too, a Wuthering Heights mansion, of sorts, but I do not know where specifically unless it be my mind. Perhaps they are housed in the thought that they could belong together in one structure.

My figures are not in pairs or couples, but are alone in the spaces, so a relationship such as Cathy and Heathcliff’s cannot be had in the same way. Yet the viewer knows that the painted figures cannot be the only person in their stories, so there must be other people. Then comes the question of where are the others? Perhaps the viewer is the other. The spaces and the objects suggest themselves as other characters. In Wuthering Heights, Cathy dies and Heathcliff is left alone except for his memories of her and the ghosts of her that wander through his imaginings. Perhaps they are Cathy’s ghosts, or remnants of her; perhaps they are Heathcliff’s, alone but haunted, and so not alone after all. Perhaps they blend elements of both characters. Perhaps some are one and some are the other. Perhaps this is what has happened to my figures. Perhaps they are lost, forsaken, forgotten, neglected, living in these uncertain inside outside places.

The influence of the beet, occurring in a few paintings including Beet (Figure 2) and The Crocodile (Figure 4), comes from Jitterbug Perfume by Tom Robbins. Robbins uses the beet as a mysterious, obsessive thread that runs throughout the novel. The meaning is not fully
understood until the end, and, even then aspects of its significance is unobtainable. My viewers have no need to know anything about Tom Robbins or his *Jitterbug Perfume*. I had no knowledge of beets whatsoever before the novel. I had never eaten a beet, had certainly never thought to look at or paint one, and had never even wondered about one. Therefore, they were a mystery to me, and I gained knowledge of them through my paintings, which is there in the layers of the paint. The beet is an odd choice of character. It contains an air of history about it, an essence of earth, a rawness that reflects the qualities I wish my paintings to have. I wish them to have a history in the paint, and an honesty to them, an emotive quality that would bleed like the beets do when cut open.

Returning to the influence of painters, Gwen John’s female figures are “portentous, eerie, with a sustained mood of beauty in strangeness.”\(^{14}\) They are alone in pieces of rooms and have a delicate strength in their muted tones. They have a powerful sense of touch to them. John’s gaze in deeply observing them and knowing them is felt through the paint. They are almost like beautiful flowers, carefully preserved in the spaces of their minds, gazing out and silently asking you some secret question that you desperately want to know. John’s paintings are different than mine in that sense. Her figures are somewhere else in thought, and you, as the viewer, are given no indication of where that might be. I wish my paintings to have an air of secrecy, but it is a secret that is being revealed in part. In accordance with John, as a painter of touch, I want my brushstrokes to be seen, so that my hand is apparent in the work. The paint, moments of color and impressions of brushes, shows my reaction and attention in a physical way. Such are characteristics that I deeply wish my paintings to have – a sense that through the paint one can come to know the figures and the hearts that live within them that is really my heart.

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CHAPTER VI: UNDEFINITE ENDINGS
Within people are various and many rooms. Though we all have but one mind and heart, they contain multiple spaces, and I wish my paintings to depict some of those rooms. There is no possible way to show every space of a person, and that is not my intent. Rather, I hope to give glimpses into some of the rooms, hallways, cellars, and ceilings; these multitudes are represented and contained within the minds of the painted figures. There is no one in the room other than the painted figure and the gaze of whoever might be looking. Therefore, the possibility of intimacy is created. Yet they are not alone. Other characters fill the story in the guise of objects. They interact with and further the narrative revolving around the main character.

Bachelard writes that, “The great function of poetry is to give us back the situations of our dreams.” ¹⁵ My paintings are constructed to be poetic narratives through their refusal to be certain about anything but to revel in their ambiguity. Like short stories they are narratives with varying degrees of closure; like dreams they shift and move with thoughts and desires. Within each painting I display different rooms, with varying lights and shadows of the mind. My images are meant to be engaging and to encourage further imaginings, perhaps to an ending, perhaps only to a more distant chapter. I do not want a definite conclusion because the mind has none, but is ever ongoing. In these paintings, spaces, objects, and animals seek to be human. Yet, they are not the only ones, for I find that my figures long to be figures, too.


Zeller, Robert. *The Figure Artist’s Handbook: A Contemporary Guide to Figure Drawing, Painting, and Composition*, (China, Monacelli Studio Press, 2016).
APPENDIX A: IMAGES
Figure 1: Always already there

Oil on canvas

43 ½” x 42”

2017
Figure 2: Beets

Oil on canvas

30” x 30”

2018
Figure 3: Borrowed Flowers

Oil on linen

21 ¾” x 29 ¾”

2018
Figure 4: The Crocodile

Oil on canvas

20” x 20”

2018
Figure 5: Discerned Obliquities

Oil on canvas

16” x 20”

2018
Figure 6: Magnolia et du mure

Oil on Canvas

42” x 43”

2018
Figure 7: Shades of Gold

Oil on canvas

38” x 50”

2018
Figure 8: Shuttered Secrets

Oil on canvas

20” x 24

2018
Figure 9: Staircases

Oil on canvas

36” x 54”

2018
Figure 10: Tangled Lines

Oil on canvas

38” x 38”

2018
Figure 11: Installation
Figure 12: Installation
Figure 13: Installation
VITA

Brooke P. Alexander was born and raised in Athens, Alabama. She completed her BA in Studio Art with a minor in English in 2015. She received her MFA in Studio Art with a concentration in Painting in May 2018 from The University of Mississippi. Her work has been shown regionally and nationally. She currently lives in Oxford, Mississippi, and is working as an adjunct instructor at The University of Mississippi.