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# The In-Betweens of Life

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THE IN-BETWEENS OF LIFE

by  
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Bachelor of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, Painting

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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## ABSTRACT

Have you ever walked through someplace too many times to count, and then one day it feels entirely new? The feeling of paying attention to an insignificant place for the first time interests me. We are constantly surrounded by buildings and trees and sidewalks and light poles, and don't often take the time to look at them. In this series of paintings, I am taking the time to look at the overlooked.

With *The In-Betweens of Life*, I am very particular about leaving my hand in each mark. Because the paintings are so small, the viewer is invited close to see them as each brushstroke realizes the subject. I hope that there is a conversation between my hand and the eye of the onlooker. My goal is to create familiarity with each place, as if it is somewhere specific yet universally everywhere. The painted mark identifies my connection with each place and serves as a record of my attempt to find the image within the painting. In order to find meaning with each place, the viewer's point of view shifts to suggest a new location and a new experience. My subject of "in-between" places is a metaphor for the experiences we fail to notice because we are in the search of the extraordinary. These paintings are meant to create anticipation for a longing of something bigger to arise.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family for their constant love and support, and for always encouraging me to pursue my interests. I dedicate this thesis to my late father, Gerald W. Chatham Jr, because of his love for life and ability to find the special moments in each day— no matter how small.

I would also like to thank all of my professors in the Art Department, who have challenged and encouraged me throughout my time in the BFA program, especially Philip Jackson. Without his constant advice and wisdom, I would not be the painter I am today.

I would also like to thank the Ole Miss Women's Council for Philanthropy, my scholarship donors and faithful mentors. I will always be thankful for the group of women that gave their time and resources to ensure I had the best possible college experience.

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## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SUBJECT

*The In-Betweens of Life* began as an exploration of painting from life, particularly en plein air. I learned that painting from life gave my paintings a vitality I hadn't noticed before and I was energized and excited by how much the subject changes as you try to capture it in a painting. I started by painting things I was attracted to, like flowers and significant buildings from Oxford, Mississippi. However, I quickly found an interest in painting the insignificant places of a space. I was responding to buildings and scenes that could be anywhere. Usually, there was something that caught my eye: it could be the light hitting a tree or the way a light pole was overlapping a building. These intuitive choices of subject I was making led me to think deeper about why I kept doing that. The paintings weren't meant to mimic reality, but to initiate a new experience from a mundane space. This body of work is an exploration of the idea of making the insignificant significant. The places we pass by to get to somewhere else.

Each subject is a space I have visited in real life, but often I will change portions of it to draw attention to specific aspects. In each painting, I use composition, color, and contrast to spotlight a part of the subject I found particularly interesting. It is these curious relationships that I notice in life, through light and color and perspective, and those are what I am documenting. As I expanded on the subject, I found many of my paintings had elements that hindered the viewer from seeing the most picturesque element of the image. This creates a sense of curiosity, or longing to see what is hidden. The series is a visual diary of day to day life and the scenes are mundane in a way that creates anticipation for a bigger moment.

## INTIMACY OF THE SCALE

For this series I chose to work on a small scale. Because of their small size, the viewer must come close to really see these paintings, which creates an intimate experience. I like the idea of the viewer being alone in the space, so I have chosen to remove all other figures from each scene. The size also makes the painting able to be viewed closely by only one person at a time: creating a reflection of what I felt in the space while painting. When you find something special in a seemingly insignificant space, it is very personal and almost exciting: a sort of secret between you and this space you have always overlooked. These paintings position the viewer so that an experience such as this can be felt when they are alone with my paintings.

## POETRY OF THE PAINT

Because my paintings are so small, the poetry in each mark is very important. In this work, my hand, or the action of it, is shown through lightly gestural, visible marks, and this creates a connection between the viewer and the artist — even when I am not there. My human touch is visibly seen through these marks, and the viewer is able to sense my own emotions through this element. The pressure and lift of the brush, along with the free-ness in each mark shows my connection to each space, and draws attention to certain focal points. A painting must speak for itself when it leaves the artist, and the life within each mark is most important to me. They have movement but are careful and tender. The swirls in my sky or sharp straight lines of a building are reflective of the emotion of that space. The change of thickness of the paint, along with the tone of each color, is in order to create a sense of physicality and atmosphere. These subtle decisions although intentional marks are meant to transform the impact of the subject. I want the viewer to see a record of my hand finding the image I have created.

## EXPERIENCE OF THE VIEWER

The composition is one of the most important parts of the viewer's interaction with my paintings. In most of these paintings, there are objects overlapping the true focus of the painting. This surrounds the viewer with the space. The act of "looking through" confuses the perspective and creates a longing to see what is in the distance. With each composition, I am particular about where I choose to crop each part of the subject.

The paintings are usually rectangular because I feel most comfortable painting in this traditional framework, but I still work to bring a different point of view to each painting. I am interested in painting the way things overlap at different perspectives, and how buildings look when glancing at them from different angles, rather than a composition of the picturesque. Things do not stay in one place when we look at them in life, they bend and overlap in a way that I capture in this series.

I keep each subject fairly ambiguous in order to create the *idea* of a place, rather than a rendering. Buildings are simplified down to their general shape and color, rather than to identify them specifically. I would like the viewer to imagine themselves in a space, perhaps with the feeling that they have experienced it before. Each painting is a special, personal, moment caught amidst the mundane-ness of day-to-day life. The series is a visual diary and an invitation to experience life in each moment, big and small. The scenes capture a quiet and peaceful moment and create the longing for something bigger to arise.

## ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

For *The In-Betweens of Life*, I was influenced a great deal by four artist's work. These artists are Brian Rego, Rackstraw Downes, Eleanor Ray, and Fairfield Porter. Each artist is very different, but they all have painted similar subject matter relative to my subject.

Brian Rego was a guest instructor for the plein air course I took in May Intersession of 2018 and his paintings and instruction greatly influenced my work. He encouraged me to experiment with my compositions and talked a lot about how they didn't have to be "true to life" in order to be interesting. In his paintings, he uses very thickly applied paint and distorts the proportions in a way that really interests me. He transforms the space he sees into an entirely new experience. During our class, he discussed breaking up space in a composition with what he referred to as "windows." Whether it be a tree trunk or edge of a building, this works to bring the viewer into the space. You will see I really like to do this in my own work.

Rackstraw Downes paints with immense detail, but his focus on overlooked places and what he has to say about painting from life is most influential on my work. He is quoted to have said he is interested in the "radical possibility of seeing what is in front of you." (Yau) The difference between a documentation of life and a thoughtful painting is the act of really looking. Painting gives us the opportunity to show life in a different way than a photograph can—the artist can turn around and raise and lower our head

while painting in order to show a different perspective. Rackstraw Downes paints in a way that makes the viewer feel there, experiencing the moment.

Eleanor Ray paints on a very small scale and I have studied the way she uses the texture of the paint to identify her subject. She also crops many of her paintings in a way that abstracts the space, which I have done in some of my paintings. In an email exchange with Ray, she told me she likes to work small because, “working small emphasizes a certain relationship between the image and the marks it's made up of -- surface, paint, abstract composition, color, space -- are visible all at once.” I have noticed that she often employs the aforementioned idea of a “window” or foreground obstacle within her compositions. In the same exchange, she said, “a foreground "obstacle" can make for a beautiful awareness of distant space against something closer (that space made between just two colors or marks touching on a surface), and can imply a specific point of view or emotional association.” (Ray) Her work, along with what she has to say about it, have been very helpful and influential to me in this series.

Fairfield Porter is another one of my influences, especially concerning his subject matter and use of color. His paintings are extraordinary renderings of ordinary life, and are often landscapes made up of simplified shapes and a unified palette. Porter painted in a representational style during the height of Abstract Expressionism, and really explored the close relationship between realism and abstraction. I believe he found the perfect balance. While painting this series, I looked very closely at the way he simplifies the shapes created by the shadow of a tree, as well as what he chooses to leave out when simplifying a landscape. This has been the most difficult element of the series—determining how

much to break down the shapes within a landscape. Through studying these artists, I was inspired to experiment with new color palettes and proportions in order to create more interesting and meaningful compositions.

## REFERENCES

Ray, Eleanor. (2014, March 21). Personal interview.

Yau, John, et al. "The Radical Possibility of Seeing What Is Front of You." *Hyperallergic*, 5 Oct. 2018, [hyperallergic.com/463694/rackstraw-downes-paintings-and-drawings-betty-cunningham-gallery-2/](https://hyperallergic.com/463694/rackstraw-downes-paintings-and-drawings-betty-cunningham-gallery-2/).



"The Walk to Work" | oil on paper | 4x3 inches



"The Neighborhood" | oil on paper | 5 1/2 x 4 inches



"The Path" | oil on paper | 5x4 inches



"The Hometown" | oil on paper | 3 1/2 x 5 inches



"Picking Pecans" | oil on paper | 4x6 inches



"The Old Road" | oil on paper | 4 x 4 1/2 inches



"Breakfast with a Friend" | oil on paper | 6x5 inches



"The Morning Stroll" | oil on paper | 3 1/2 x 5 inches



"Grabbing Dinner" | oil on paper | 4x5 inches



"Headed Home" | oil on paper | 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches



"The Country" | oil on paper | 5x6 inches



The In-Betweens of Life Exhibition in Meek Hall, April 2019