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Wanderlust

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Wanderlust

by

Yifan Qian

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Fine Art Studio

School of Art
The College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Abstract

My work discusses fantasy coping and how I heal myself through it. I created a series of works through watercolor, glass and acrylic painting to express my inner state, through reality, fantasy, and the state between reality and fantasy, to present my mental state.

My watercolor landscapes represent fantasy worlds, and I repeatedly prove to myself and the audience that this world is real through quantity. My realistic works represent the real world, I record my experiences in the real world, and why I need fantasy coping. My watercolor portraits and my glasses represent the fragile and unstable state between fantasy and reality.

Introduction

Since last year, I have fallen into a state of extreme depression due to the pressure of study, loneliness in a foreign country and a toxic relationship. This very unhealthy mental state is like a swamp, and I am struggling and helplessly in it. I longed for a place where I could escape the pain of the real world. Wanderlust is a strong desire to travel and explore the world, while also expressing a desire to escape. And in my work, I use wanderlust to express my desire to explore and stay in my fantasy world.

I use fantasy coping as my creative theme to record my self-healing process. Through reality, fantasy, and the state between reality and fantasy, to present my mental state. I created a series of landscapes and portraits, trying to communicate with the viewer through colors and shapes, and tell my own story. My series of works are composed of many small paintings. Through this repetition, I repeatedly prove to myself and the audience that the fantasy world is real. I use glass, watercolor, and acrylic painting to express my emotional changes. To some extent, my work is like a diary. I show my life to the audience through the way of recording.

Fantasy coping

Fantasy coping is a psychological defense mechanism in which people cope with unpleasant or difficult emotions by retreating into an imagined world that is safer, more comfortable, or more manageable than the real world. It is a natural human tendency to seek refuge in the imagination when faced with stress, anxiety or trauma.

Alice's Journey to Wonderland is a classic example of fantasy coping. Using her imagination to escape the mundane world around her, she finds adventure in a world of talking rabbits, mad hatters and magic potions. Or Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, a film set in the Spanish Civil War about a young girl who escapes into a fantasy world of fauns, fairies and monsters as she deals with the violence and trauma around her story. And in Frances Hodgson Burnet's *The Secret Garden*, a young girl named Mary finds solace in a neglected garden found on her uncle's estate. As she tends the garden and brings it back to life, she also learns how to heal from the loss of her parents.

The basic idea behind fantasy coping is that it allows individuals to temporarily escape the harsh realities of life and enter a world of their own creation, where they have greater control over their environment and can explore different possibilities and outcomes. This can help people who are dealing with difficult emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness, or who are struggling with feelings of powerlessness or loss of control.

Fantasy coping can be used as a therapeutic technique in psychotherapy. It involves using imagination to create an inner world that provides comfort and healing to the individual. In psychotherapy, a therapist may encourage clients to explore their inner world and use their imagination to create a safe and supportive environment.

Zhuangzi's Dream of Butterfly

My original source of inspiration was Taoism, in which there is a great emphasis on living in harmony with nature and finding balance between opposing forces. This includes the idea of balancing one's inner world with the outer world, as well as using imagination and creativity to connect with the natural world and cultivate inner peace and balance.

In Taoism, there is a story called Zhuangzi Dreaming of a Butterfly. In the story, Zhuangzi dreamed that he was a butterfly, flying freely in the air, enjoying the beauty of nature. He was completely immersed in the experience and felt a kind of joy and freedom that he had never had before. When he awoke from the dream, he was confused and disoriented. He didn't know if he was a butterfly dreaming of being a man or a man dreaming of being a butterfly.

The story of Zhuangzi's Dream Butterfly offers insight into the nature of reality and the power of the imagination to shape our perception. This taught me that people can find a sense of freedom and peace by letting go of their worries and anxieties and focusing on their imaginary world.

Evolution

In the creative process, I was stuck for a long time at the beginning. In the third semester of my postgraduate study, I started to create landscapes and head portraits, and I am still not sure if this is an appropriate direction for my graduation project. In the beginning, I just defined them as my classroom works, and the watercolor landscapes were so that I could show some works in the watercolor teaching assistant class. Those little square figures were sketches I was going to paint on the glass. When my watercolors reach a certain number, I hang them on the same wall. This group of paintings looks powerful, and I began to see the possibility of this direction.

I've always preferred watercolor as my creative material because it makes me feel at ease. If I use conversation as a metaphor, watercolor is like a simple and casual communication with friends, while my oil painting is more like a carefully planned speech. When I determined my direction was to record and express emotions, I chose watercolor as my main medium. In my creative process, I also tried a lot of different materials, hoping to enrich my works. Such as oil pastels, charcoal pencils, acrylics, markers, etc. These different materials often surprise me, and help me express my emotions more accurately from the texture of the materials.

I wanted to put some sculpture-ish pieces, not just paintings. This is also my expectation for my graduation project. I have very little experience and knowledge of sculpture and different materials, during my graduate studies I experimented with installations, glass, ceramics and wood. These are at a very novice level, and it is difficult for me to use these materials for artistic expression.

I later tried painting on glass and then firing it. At first, I didn't intend it to be part of my graduation project, I was just very curious about the way it was made. I quite like the final effect, and I plan to continue exploring in this direction. I encountered a lot of difficulties when making it. Some colors will change after burning, or disappear directly. In order to achieve the effect I want, I have to fire repeatedly on the same piece of glass.

Body of Works

Brownish

I have created a series of fantasy landscapes through the combination of imagination and painting. These landscapes are like my landscape sketches. I repeatedly use these landscapes to demonstrate the existence of this fantasy world. Because I long to have such a space for self-healing and escaping from reality.

These landscapes are constantly changing with my emotions, because this imaginary world is operated by my spiritual power as nourishment. This is a world created by my emotions and feelings, so I can feel free and relaxed in it. The colors and styles in my landscape paintings I try to match my mood at the time. I was struggling with my depression and crankiness while creating this group of works, so my colors are often sad or crazy.

I still remember the first painting of my group, which is the only square painting in it. At that time, I was very anxious because I did not find the direction of my graduation project, and the changes in my life made me very unhappy. I randomly scribbled on the paper, and unexpectedly found that the colors on the paper corresponded very well with my emotions after I finished the painting. This is the state I have always pursued in painting, but I have never been able to achieve it before. It was this sense of accomplishment that healed me and made me start to explore in this direction.

Another time when I was in a good mood, I found that the watercolor paints I usually used were not bright enough to match my mood, so I went out and took a bus for two hours to buy a pink acrylic paint.

Before I paint, I usually meditate first, to find the environment I want to be in, and then I will try to draw it. Sometimes the first one achieves the effect, and sometimes I need to draw a dozen or even two consecutive ones. Worrying about the same painting for three days. This process of looking for landscapes in my imagination is also my process of self-exploration.

The title Brownish comes from a friend of mine. After watching my series of landscape paintings, she told me that although I used a lot of colors, she still felt that every painting was covered with a kind of brown. I think what she said is very interesting. Although my emotions are different every day, there is an overall tone that is projected to each of my landscape paintings through my subconscious mind.

In the way of display, I choose to display the painting behind the acrylic, and separate the reality from the fantasy world through the acrylic board. The hard acrylic seems to me like a shield, or a defense mechanism, while the watercolor represents fragility and illusion.

Eevee

Eevee is my English name, it can represent me in reality.

These acrylic self-portraits were completed by me in different periods, recording my state at that time. The green one was the first one I finished, it happened to be the beginning of my second semester of graduate school, I was excited about the new semester, when I painted that picture, my life was full of hope, and some faced the unknown Nervous, I chose flowers and cicadas to express my mood.

In the second painting, I used nosebleeds to record my first experience of emotional damage after arriving in the United States. This is also the first time I choose to use purple to express sadness and depression. To some extent, this painting also influences the creation of my subsequent landscape paintings. That self-portrait with the mirror expresses my fear of eye contact and social interaction, during which time I completely shut myself off. The blue self-portrait is looking up. Before I painted that picture, I was going through a violent incident, and it recorded my helplessness at that time.

My landscape paintings represent my inner world, and these self-portraits represent reality and the reason why I want to escape.

In fact, I was very reluctant to show these self-portraits of mine before, because I was afraid that after I honestly expressed my trauma, the viewer would focus on my painting skills. But in the end, I still chose to face up to everything I have experienced in the past and share it with the audience.

Cocooned-watercolor

I painted a group of small watercolor portraits to express the intermediate state between the inner world and reality, which can be understood as a bridge between the two worlds. The distorted colors in the picture are still expressing imagination and fantasy, while the portrait shows that I am living in reality as a human being.

I use my imagination to create a cocoon around me and use this to protect myself from what is happening in reality. This is somewhat similar to dissociation in psychology. This cocoon reduces my ability to feel and communicate with the world, which is how I protect and heal myself. I used a lot of beautiful elements in the paintings, such as flowers and butterflies, to cover my eyes and mouth, because these are the organs used to transmit and receive information to the outside world.

In this composition, I made three mirrors. The audience can see themselves in the mirrors, but the images are not clear. I use these mirrors to express my state when I am struggling to communicate with the outside world through the cocoon.

I display the work in a suspended manner to express the unstable state. And the blocked space between the paper and the wall is defined as the inner world, which the viewer cannot see, but can speculate on my mental state through these portraits.

Cocooned-glass

In this group of works, besides watercolor, I also chose to use glass for creation. The figures in the glass are completely enveloped, they appear translucent and incomplete. I also like the sense of loss of control in making glass, because in the process of firing glass, the result is difficult to control. Whether it is the material itself or the production process, glass well expresses the state between fantasy and reality.

I encountered many difficulties in the process of making glass, and this is also the first time I use glass as a material for creation. Many colors cannot be controlled, for example, red will always disappear or turn white after burning. Although I have tried my best to adjust, half of the works still cannot be displayed because of poor effect.

When presenting, I chose to place lights under the glass so that each layer of the glass can be seen more clearly. I love the unexpected air bubbles in the glass, giving a nice atmosphere in the light, like being in water.

Conclusion

Before I came to RIT to study in graduate school, I didn't know much about fine art, and my undergraduate degree was not in this major. I was very worried at first that I would not be able to graduate because of my lack of ability. Overall, I learned a lot and grew a lot in graduate school. Gradually I found a way of artistic expression that suits me, and I became more and more confident in the process of creation.

Although there are some regrets, for example, I didn't light all my glass decorations, and the realistic painting doesn't match the whole style. In general, I am very satisfied. I always hope that I can make a work that expresses myself. In this series of works, I have learned how to use art to express and dialogue. In this creation and research, a direction has been deeply excavated and some good results have been obtained.

This project is both the end and the beginning for me. I feel quite hopeful about my future

Images













