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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DREAMS AND MEMORIES

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1. Abstract

In this document I analyze my work, process, and the success or failure of each piece in a body of artwork completed for the Masters of Fine Arts in Fine Arts Studio at Rochester Institute of Technology. My artwork explores personal dreams and memories through experimentation with material, color, technique and form. The works, a combination of paintings and objects, are each connected to a dream or memory and convey a paradox between reality versus illusion, or a sense of detachment from the real world.

2. Introduction

I began my time pursuing my degree at the Rochester Institute of Technology by taking this opportunity to step away from my comfort zone and experiment in a new type of artwork. I was inspired by the changing colors of the fall season's foliage and intense hues of the Rochester sunset. I used these colors to express my feeling about moving to a new environment and city far from home. These works came in the form of small abstract watercolors in which I placed paint and form on paper spontaneously, letting the natural flow of the watercolor bleed and combine to create each piece (see Plate 1-4).

Through research I found that this technique of spontaneous mark-making has been used by surrealists and is called "automatism." Surrealists would use automatism, usually with drawing, as a means of expressing or revealing something within the subconscious.¹ I began to ask myself- why am I so drawn to this form of making so closely related to the subconscious? What is it about revealing the subconscious that is so intriguing to me? I started to connect this interest in the subconscious to my interest in dreams and memories and how delicate and fleeting they can be. After more research about dreams and memories, I wanted to create work that would portray moments, which were particularly meaningful to me, but others can relate to through their own experiences.

¹ Gibson, Jennifer, "Automatism," Last modified 2009,

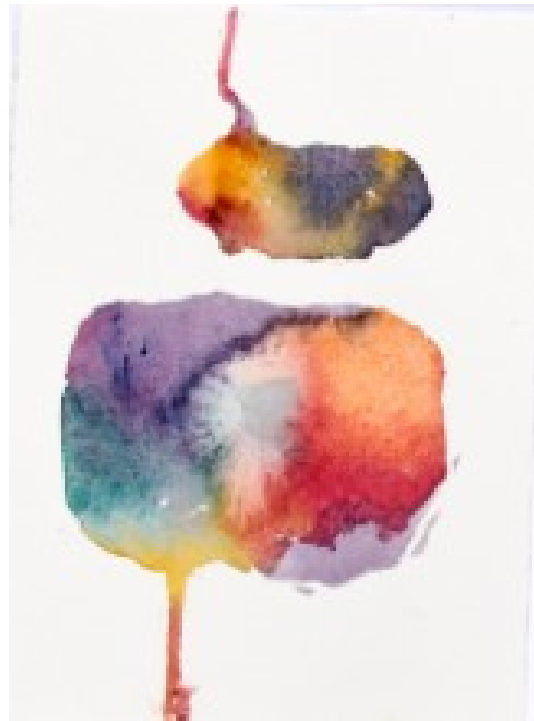
http://www.moma.org/collection/theme.php?theme_id=10947 (Oxford University Press)



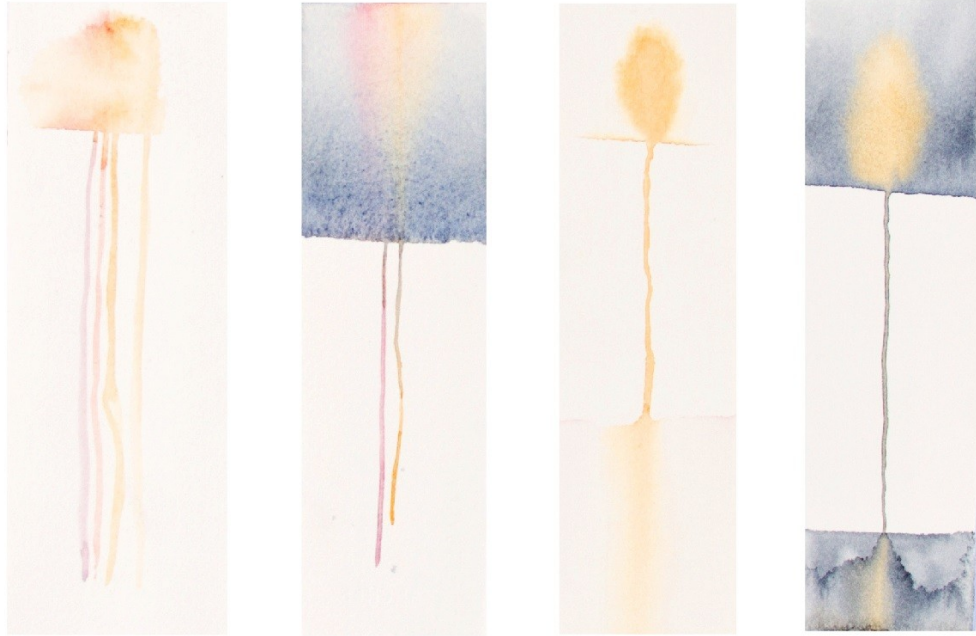
(Plate 1)



(Plate 2)



(Plate 3)



(Plate 4)

Once I understood what I was drawn to naturally, I used my dreams and memories as imagery to communicate my concept. These works began to convey the paradox of illusion versus reality within dreams and a sense of being detached from the real world. I decided to continue to use the bright color palette I employed in the experiential watercolor works. I aspired to create a dream-like atmosphere which viewers can relate to by evoking emotions and memories from their own experiences. I hoped the visuals would stay with the viewer, unexpectedly recurring later in their own dreams.

Dreams are an inevitable part of the human experience. They create a common ground between myself and the viewer that makes for a deeper understanding of my work and a more fulfilling, interactive experience. I believe dreams, which originate in the subconscious, inspire richer and perhaps more abstract visuals of past memories which can evoke emotions set deeper in the human psyche.

3. Context and Influences

The bulk of my work originated from my childhood memories of dreams and a journal that I used to catalog dreams throughout my life. The following is an excerpt from my dream log, which was framed and displayed alongside my work during my thesis exhibition.



(Plate 5)

“I loved the fact that we lived across the street from the park. Mom would take my sisters and me every weekend to play on the tire swing where Dad spun us until we grew dizzy. On this particular afternoon Mom took my sisters and me out for a picnic. While lying on an old blanket beneath the usual giant oak tree, I could see my house in the distance through the jungle gym, across the busy street.

If I rolled over there was a parking lot on the opposite side of the oak tree. This lot usually drew no attention, except for today there was an unusually large amount of parked cars, despite the small number of people on the jungle gym. I remember being mesmerized by the heat waves floating above the black asphalt. As I lie there lost in my own thoughts, I saw some kittens stretching their long necks out from around the tire of an old Jeep. There were quite a few kittens, which I remember thinking was odd because I didn't know small cats traveled in packs, however I was only 5 years old, so what did I know? As the animals came nearer, I noticed they were staring me in the eye as to say they found me just as

interesting as I found them. I was not afraid, because their colors were so pleasing. Mixtures of reds, yellows, oranges, greens and blues, each cat was unnaturally colored and I could tell they knew more than a common house cat. Once they were in audible range, I heard the first of the bunch ask if we wanted to play hide-and-seek. Of course I agreed, what 5 year old would turn down this opportunity? I went to find the best hiding spot I could squeeze into. I waited.

Some time passed and no one was coming to look for me. I crept out from my hiding spot and searched for my family. At the moment I got back to the old blanket under the oak tree I knew something was wrong. "MOM!" I yelled. "Mooooom!" At first she was nowhere in sight. I turned towards the parking lot, "but no one hides there," I thought.... Right? It was there that I found her. My mother had been taken prisoner by these savage animals. They were not here to play games, they were here to take her away from me, perform tests and possibly hurt her. I screamed and ran that direction. By now they had taken her into a white building. When they entered, the walls turned into glass. I tried to save her but all of the doors were locked. I thought this would be the last time I ever saw her. Through the glass I could see her trying to grab for something, anything, but there was only glass. She screamed for help as they pulled her away from the window and into the dark silence.... That is when I woke up."

As a child I remember waking up and trying to make sense of these dreams. Despite their absurdity, the sensation that these dreams were so real captivated my interest. I wondered how my mind could so easily be fooled into believing these illusions.

Along with conducting research investigating dreams, I also studied artists whose work, either through subject or technique, inspired me. I became interested in artists who utilize this juxtaposition of illusion and reality. In the beginning I looked to Max Ernst who combined both illusion and reality. In speaking about his process, Ernst talked about keeping one eye looking into his mind and one eye on reality. This leveled perfectly with how I was approaching my own working process, keeping one eye on reality, while looking into the subconscious

simultaneously.² Like Ernst, Frida Kahlo created art combining illusion and reality, although she did not consider herself a surrealist. Kahlo said “I paint my reality”.³ In painting my dreams, I felt as though I was doing the same, painting my reality. It is not only the illusionary and surrealist aspect of her work that I connected to; I studied her many self portraits because I also used myself as a model for many of my paintings throughout my thesis. I believe there to be more intimacy when painting a self -portrait. Looking at the way Kahlo put her life and heart into each painting, illustrating the struggles of her life, inspired me and served as a catalyst for introducing my own vulnerability.

Part of this vulnerability was being able to change how I painted to truly express my ideas. I began to study painters such as Alice Neel and Jenny Saville who bring emotion to their work by both the use of paint and subject matter.⁴⁵ On the surface, these artists’ works look very different; however it was their painterly strokes of color on the figure that attracted me. I began to experiment with color especially fragmented colors in a way to abstract the figure to create a picture. I associated this technique with the work of Paul Cezanne and Jenny Saville whose brushstrokes create planes in which, through color, there is form.⁶ I began to break the image

² Ernst, Max, Robert Powell, Peter Marinker, Linda Joy, Shelley Thompson, James Greene, Peter Schamoni, Igor Stravinsky, Home Vision (Firm), and RM Arts (Firm). 1991. Max ernst. Chicago, Ill.: Home Vision [distributor].

³ Amy Stechler. *Life and times of frida kahlo*. PBS: .

⁴ Lewison, Jeremy and Tamar Garb, *Alice Neel Painted Truth*. (New York: Yale University Pr.)

⁵ Jenny Saville, *Jenny Saville*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2003).

⁶⁶⁶ Jenny Saville, interview by Nicholas Cullinan, Modern Art OxfordPodcast Video, June 29, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/46612357>.

down into fragments instead of blending on the surface. From a distance, this created the illusion of a blended, complete image, but up close revealed broken down sections of color (see Plate6 for example of fragmented color portrait study). I have always been drawn to the use of color, but only more recently have I been interested in what texture does to the work. This may be in part due to my experimentation in sculpture and installation.



(Plate 6)

4. Evolution

I do not look at the evolution of my thesis work as continuous change but rather as continuous growth. In order to change, I believe there must be a set and secure end point in mind and somewhere along the road, a decision to turn and find a new destination. Rather than constraining my work with a final goal, I allowed the work to grow through a subconscious creative process. This process was more of an exploration beginning with an idea, and having the ability to weave and change freely as my ideas or techniques evolved. Sometimes pieces found me. Other times, I struggled to bring a work to fruition. This body of work was about a constant give and take between artist and material.

Originally, I was interested in creating work that was dramatic and encroached on the viewer's space. After spending time thinking and working on these pieces, I came to the decision that this was not in my nature. Instead, I sought to create work that I hoped would draw the viewer in and cause them to think, wonder and make connections to their own lives.

As the ideas grew so did my painting style. I knew how I wanted my paintings to look but it took time to get to a place where I was content. Throughout the thesis process I created double the number of paintings that were finally displayed in the exhibition. Originally, each of these works had a place in the show, but after careful examination, my earlier works had no place being in the same space as the later much more evolved pieces and were edited out. This process of give and take is evident in these earlier paintings which helped improve my skill, but ultimately acted as a sacrifice for my later paintings that were shown in the thesis exhibition.

5. Body of Work

I began my thesis work with the idea of reality versus illusion in dreams and wanted to let the work, with guidance, speak for itself and point me in the right direction. I wanted the work to be process based while still focusing on my initial concept of dreams. Being restricted by a concept alone seemed counterproductive. I wanted my thesis to center on dreams, memories and their obscurity, but not be solely narrative depictions or illustrations.

a. Untitled

Untitled is the first work I envisioned for my thesis show. It portrays a reoccurring dream of mine where my teeth begin to fall out of my mouth into my hands. In fact, there are so many that I cannot juggle them and they fall on the floor. I hoped that through creating this work I could somehow realize why this particular dream held such an impact.

I wanted to create a work where the reality was an illusion and the illusion was brought into reality, and I knew with the particular imagery and objects I wanted to use, this could come to life. By this I mean, when I am in a dream, I am real and I know this. Having all of my teeth fall out during the dream is an illusion; however through the vividness of the dream I begin to believe that this illusion is reality. Therefore, I wanted to juxtapose these contrasting elements by making the reality a two-dimensional illusion, via oil painting, and bring the illusion into three-dimensional reality, by sculpting teeth out of clay and placing them in the real world.

Untitled went through the most trial and error before completion as compared to any other works in the show. I painted and repainted the figure multiple times in different poses before I was happy with the outcome. Originally I had painted a more static less detailed image of the same model in a relaxed pose. I eventually realized this was not the true sense of the dream. I changed directions and photographed more dramatic, dynamic postures to not only

make the painting more enticing to viewers but also become a true statement of the dream the painting represented.

For the teeth, I began by creating small, almost life-size, replicas of teeth from porcelain. Through this process I realized that I wanted the teeth to be different sizes to give a sense of abnormality. After research, I found that many people had dreams, similar to this one that dealt with loss of control. Some people lost objects, or their family, others lost their teeth in a similar way that I did in my own dream. This caused me to want to add a few other objects into the pile of teeth. I only added a few other shapes such as faces and diamonds, to represent the connection to others' dreams.



Untitled
Oil on Canvas, Porcelain, Acrylic
Dimensions Variable



Untitled (detail)

b. The Mind Grays in Waking

The Mind Gray's in Waking began by taking a step back from my comfort zone and trying to find what did and did not work in my art. As I mentioned before, I created hundreds of small abstract watercolors within my first year as a master's student which ultimately culminated in helping me pursue and find a palette that I connected with. The success of these small abstract watercolors caused me to investigate a shift in scale. I took one small painting and projected it onto a large canvas and manipulated oil paint to look like watercolor. This proved to be interesting but not successful. I knew there had to be more to this work; however I was not sure what at the time. After being tucked away in my studio for several months, I revisited the expanded watercolor painting and decided to use the textures created as an atmosphere for a new work. This piece came to be my largest work in the exhibition, *The Mind Grays in Waking*.

This piece originated from personal dreams, although through research, I realized the universality of the concept. My dreams were about falling through cracks or falling off cliffs and the inability to be in control. Through logging of dreams, I realized that this loss of control is a common thread in many of the dreams I was interested in portraying. This oil painting took by far the longest to complete, with its evolution spanning several months. This may have been in part due to the size and technique of blending colors instead of leaving visible brushstrokes as seen in the four other paintings exhibited. The long evolution of this painting caused me to have dreams associated with the images in the painting. One in particular changed my view on the piece due to the emotional stress.

I did not want to be in the passenger seat with them. I can remember knowing how they were so many years ago, I hated them. I had heard them talk and have seen their actions, and tonight it was no different. I wasn't sure if he in particular had been drinking but he was in the driver's seat and steering

recklessly. Why would anyone drive over an icy pond? My anxiety was building and I could feel my teeth chattering, not because of the cold. Fishtailing on an iced over pond, I wanted with everything I had not to be here, but I was. Turn after turn, I pressed against the door like one does on rollercoaster rides in the park as a child. But I was not a child and this was not a rollercoaster I decided to be on for amusement. I felt the door beside me, and something was not right. One last fishtail to the left, and I pressed hard against the door only to be thrown from the vehicle like a ragdoll onto the pond, which could not hold my weight when I hit the ice. It shattered. There I was, lying belly down in the ice cold water, surrounded by blocks of ice. All I could do was suck as much air into my lungs and float so I wouldn't drown. I knew my body could not handle cold for too long so I arched my back to get my head out of the water and look for help. Whoever I was with just looked at me through the open car door while I pleaded for them to get me out. I remember wanting to scream but being scared that letting that much air from my lungs would be a death sentence. I lay there, floating in what would be my icy death bed with no means of escape or help for what seemed like eternity.

This dream likely stemmed from the long days in my studio contemplating this painting. When I got back into the studio, I recognize the atmosphere as ice, and my body floating in the water with nowhere to go. I believe the grey represented the icy water and the yellow shape above it is where I wished to be, or the place from which I fell. Creating the image as though two planes, the foreground and skyline, lie flat on one flat plane gave the painting an interesting dynamic. More importantly the fact that I psychologically carried these images home and incorporated them into new dreams became extremely exciting.



The Mind Grays in Waking
Oil on Canvas
64" x 96"

c. *Dreams In Color*

After having struggled to create oil paintings reminiscent of watercolors, I decided to experiment with combining the two to truly develop the effects I desired. Bleeding specific watercolors together onto a large canvas to create an abstract atmospheric background was the start of this project. Once I had created the abstract background I began to think about how soft and ignorant of hardship this made me feel. It was very different than what I typically experienced in my own dreams. It seemed as though this is what a child must dream of. I chose an old photograph from my childhood to be the subject of this painting. The photograph serves as a memory of an easier time to which I sometimes crave to return. I wanted the child in the photo to be part of the background so I treated the figure much like that in *The Mind Grays in Waking*, floating in and out of the atmosphere. This painting in particular is one I did not try to force by adding too much to the figure that would prove overwhelming and distracting. Once finishing the figure, I had a lot of empty space within the background. I suspended a wire sculpture, which I constructed a few months before, in front of the open space filled with abstract watercolor. The object represented a mobile or dream catcher hanging off a fishing pole, symbolically “catching” any nightmares. This, yet again, brings an illusion – catching nightmares - into reality.



Dreams In Color
Mixed Media
48" x 60"

d. Adrift I & II

Along with creating work that juxtaposes reality and illusion, I spent many hours and days reminiscing, organizing, and interpreting dreams. This was an important process in my work and I wanted to document this in a painting. *Adrift I* came about early in my thesis work. I was interested in painting a figure, mainly a portrait, in a meditative or even sleeping state. I photographed a few people for reference but for some reason did not feel a connection to the images. Finally, I received assistance in photographing myself and was inspired to paint. Many times when I create self-portraits, I research and look at images of other artists who do this, such as Frida Kahlo. There is something very intimate about painting yourself, and I believe this is evident in her work. I was interested in giving myself more room than I had ever previously done and allow the portrait to be exaggerated in both color and scale. I fell in love with my process of exposed brush strokes along with incorporating evident warm and cool colors into the face. I felt very comfortable with this process and allowed it to influence the following works. Some ideas may have been in the works before this painting (such as *Untitled*), but after I painted *Adrift I* is when I went back and repainted *Untitled*.

Adrift II was the very last work conceived of for my exhibition. I had, through my process, become more and more comfortable with the ability to bring unnatural colors into the figure and wanted to further push my comfort zone. Foreshortening hands has always been a difficult area in terms of painting for me and can be a personal barrier for completing work. I challenged myself to create a work incorporating hands and having them draw in the viewer. This process improved my technique in ways I had hoped it would. I see elements of my research into Cezanne in the fabric as well as Schiele in the figure's color.



Adrift I
Oil on Canvas
42"x 46"



Adrift II
Oil on Canvas
36"x 48"

e. Spindle

Throughout my process I would surround myself with objects of inspiration. One such object was a small broken chair with a lot of character that otherwise would have been thrown in the trash. There was something intriguing about placing this chair on the wall and seeing it as a piece of art or history, in and of itself. I began also collecting flowers to dry and weave together for multiple projects and hanging them on the wall. These flowers soon found their way to hang above the chair as a sort of halo. It was not the idea of the halo that excited me, but the ability of these objects, which anyone would disregard, to become such a beautiful and eerie statement of the past.

After spending some time with the piece in my studio I began to wonder why it meant so much to me. After some time, the connection hit me. As a child, I became very sick. As I lay in the dark at night I could barely see the posts of my twin size bed. As I unknowingly drifted off to sleep I remember having the most uncomfortable dream but not having the ability to move or release myself from it. At the end of my bed was a spindle of yellow thread. It spun ever so slowly, agitating me. All I could do is lie there and see it spin, and spin and spin. The color made my stomach curl and the movement gave me chills. The chair reminds me of my childhood bed, the dried dandelions remind me of the yellow thread. It was a combination of these two objects that culminated in the final work.

After recognizing this connection to my past, I wanted to know why this combination of objects seemed to find meaning with others. Obviously their view on these objects would be much different than mine. After research and observation I believe both the chair and flowers are universal symbols for comfort and serene relaxation, but how does this change when the chair is not longer useful, and the flowers are dead and dry? When seeing these objects

presented without any obvious purpose, there is a sense of discomfort. I realized the reason I connected with this object was because the chair no longer had a seat, again relating to my fear of loss and discomfort. The same thought related to the dried flowers; now that they are dead and dried, they are merely a memory of what was. The viewer can relate to these objects that they interact with on a daily basis, but when they are broken or dead, the initial reaction is to disregard it. I think it is intriguing to bring such objects to a public space in a voyeuristic sense. I wanted to arouse curiosity within people about an unwanted object. I believe this display of weathered objects become a relic for a dream or memory.



Spindle
Dried Flowers and Found Object
Dimensions Variable

f. Flower Bed

Flower Bed was my initial combination of dreams and memories in a three-dimensional space. Each flower is a representation of a memory, one at a time, waiting to be plucked from the subconscious and carried into a dream. The woven flowers came from a childhood memory of my mother braiding dandelions in the same fashion for my sisters and me to wear as crowns and necklaces.

I wanted to create an intimate space in which viewers could recognize the object as a sort of bed, or sacred space. This was not to be a literal bed but metaphorical for what happens in that space. The jewelry box represents keepsakes and memories that one does not want to let go of. The other flowers could represent things that pop up in dreams that you may or may not want to remember. I placed a copper, electroformed bee on the bed entangled in the flowers to represent unwanted memories or dreams. The mobile above the head of the bed was intended to invoke a sense of ethereal or childlike softness and comfort. I chose white linen and sheer fabric for this purpose. Along with these soft fabrics are the very delicate flowers which can be broken and turned to dust at any time, much like a memory being forgotten forever.



Flower Bed
Dried Flowers, Fabric, Twine, and Found Objects
Dimensions Variable

g. Dream Circle (Forgotten Memory)

My interest in exploring and sharing my own dreams and dreams of others is represented in *Dream Circle (Forgotten Memory)*. The idea behind the piece and its ideal execution was simple, hands in the action of sharing dreams. I decided to create these objects from ceramic clay and glass instead of painting them because I wanted the objects to be tangible. I wanted this work to relate back to the idea of illusion versus reality. Dreams are an illusion but when we share them we make them a reality. Each set of hands could represent a person or a dream being shared, or possibly given up to be thought of as irrational. I chose these particular materials, glass and porcelain, because they are considered precious and delicate. I feel it can be difficult for people to share their memories and dreams because, to them, they are precious. Much like the flowers in *Flower Bed*, these hands can be broken and forgotten about, just like a memory lost in the subconscious.



Dream Circle (Forgotten Memory)
Ceramic and Glass
Dimensions Variable

6. Presentation

After the completion of my work and decision to edit out specific pieces due to the evolution of both painting style and the concept of objects in relation to space, the final step was presentation. I created a to-scale model of the gallery space and tested many variations of arrangements that would best suit the work. Originally, I was planning on displaying the work as an installation with painting depicting dreams on the inside of walls and those depicting reflection placed on the outside. The idea was to have the viewer walk the outside reality into a dream space where things are more obscure and surreal. In the end, it was decided that the presentation of my thesis exhibition would be in traditional gallery style. The installation did not leave enough room for each piece to be viewed individually, but created one single work of art, which was not my intention. Therefore, paintings were hung and objects were placed in relationship to the spacing of paintings, giving each piece enough room to be looked at as its own entity. Lighting was not ideal; however, I compromised for the vast amount of space allotted in the gallery for my work. Each piece was carefully placed to both draw in the viewer and have a relationship to the work beside it.



7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this body of work has allowed me to explore and analyze the subconscious mind through dreams and memories as well as color and material. Through my experiences exploring the subconscious and analyzing the work, I have found that one may never truly understand the subconscious mind. I am, however, continually intrigued by this exploration and analysis of dreams and memories, whether I understand them or not. I am also continually inspired by using saturated color and selecting delicate materials as a means for visual communication of my concept.

This intrigue with examination of my relationship to dreams and memories made me aware of my subconscious fear of loss. I feel this is innate in every human being. When I speak of loss, I feel there are two types, which can be difficult on people, loss of control in a situation and loss of a memory. In my experiences, loss of control came through in my dreams at night: the first, was of my teeth falling out, and the second, was of being thrown into a frozen pond. This sense of helplessness was terrifying and uncomfortable. I want to further explore this concept through paintings and objects. Loss of a memory can be upsetting because memories fade with time. If memory of a moment or person is gone, what is left? I plan to explore these types of loss in separate bodies of work, possibly by using automatism to relay my feelings visually.

After completing my thesis work, I felt my work had an association with time that I had not yet explored. It was the illusion of time standing still or an extension of time, which was not reality. I would like to continue to explore this area of time and its association to relationships.

These concepts will be brought to life through more exploration of my painting style of fractured color to abstract the figure. I want to push the boundaries of my work both literally and figuratively. I hope to continue to work on a larger scale while incorporating the ideas of loss

and time. Aside from painting, I would like to continue to explore my interest in the use of delicate materials. I feel I have only touched the surface of what can be researched and explored. I look forward to exploring the possibilities of painting on materials such as glass or translucent fabric as well as continuing to use natural objects like flowers, leaves, or small insects. I believe this work has led me in a new artistic direction with much room for further exploration.

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