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### A Lived-In Life

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**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

A 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**

A Lived-In Life

by

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November 23, 2013

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## **Abstract**

A Lived-In Life documents the creation of my thesis work and accompanying discoveries. The movement of Fauvism and artists Vincent van Gogh, Alice Neel and Henry Darger are named as historical inspirations. Contemporaries named as influential include female figurative painters Jenny Saville, Xenia Hausner, Hung Liu, Elizabeth Peyton and Anna Bjerger.

I reflect on my position within contemporary art culture, placing myself between abstraction and photo realism. I discuss graduate school epiphanies on material, asserting my commitment to sustainable and safe practice. I address the historical use of photographic reference, as well as the role of photography in contemporary culture and how I approach it in my own work.

Significant changes and decisions made in the months leading up to the show are discussed. These include elimination of projects created in New Forms, a change in printmaking technique, and the inclusion of artist books.

The paper will also detail the multitude of artistic techniques learned throughout my time at RIT, specifically those techniques that were used in the creation of my thesis work.

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## **Introduction**

To embark on the creation of a body of work is to begin to unlock doors behind which exist the reasons why you are driven to create. Each day in my attempt to create a cohesive body of work, I found myself stumbling upon little epiphanies. It was not until my thesis was close to completion, however, that I began making the greatest realizations about my art making process. While earning my MFA, I hoped to:

“thoroughly investigate how my emotions [could] transform a photograph into a personal artifact of my life. Using the repertoire of colorful mediums that I have built up in my time here at RIT, I hope to visually expand on the experience of simply looking at a photograph. Furthermore, I want the intimacy that I feel while making artwork from these photographs to reverberate through my viewers’ experience. All the while, I will strive to achieve organic and truthful meanings in each quietly intimate, yet reverberatingly colorful celebration of people who have shaped my life.”

This is the conclusion of my thesis proposal which was conveyed by the art I produced, as well as through the presentation of my thesis. The paintings I created form a timeline of people who have helped to shape who I am. My nontoxic prints further explore the photographic image, which was the inspiration for all of the work. The books I created invited the audience to explore details of my life on a level of intimacy that two-dimensional pieces hanging on the wall can lack. The conclusion of my proposal struck a chord when I wrote it: I felt that I had put into

words both what I wanted to say in my thesis show and provided an ample justification of why it was important for me to focus on and create this work. I have come to realize far more about my process through the end results, and will delve into the strengths and weaknesses of my final output.

For my thesis, I was working with nostalgia that is embedded in past images of family and friends. These are images that I carry with me physically in photographs and emotionally through their representation within the artistic process. The greater the movement through time and from people and events, the stronger the sense of nostalgia becomes. In this sense, the element of time is critical to an understanding of my artwork. My goal was not only to celebrate the significance of the photographs, but to enhance my subjects through the vibrant pigments on my brush or plate; to recontextualize them in a more personal celebration.

## **Historical Influences**

When studying abroad in Florence, Italy, I took a painting class. The assignment that changed my way of painting forever came in the form of a self-portrait using only primary colors. While the obvious information to be gleaned from the assignment was to learn how to mix primaries to create virtually any color, my prerogative was not to create a typical flesh tone but rather to explore the potential of color by painting my skin blue and my hair fire engine-red. While this may not have been necessarily what my professor had intended, she lauded my work when it came time for the critique. I succeeded by warming up the blue of my face, undulating the tones according to the changes in my bone structure. Titled *Fascism* (Figure 1), I kept my

lips a more natural color, which I believe also aided in the believability of the piece. My ability to mix colors facilitated the creation of “reality,” even with such a bizarre color scheme. This experience left me undaunted by color and I often used paint straight from the tube to create intensely expressionistic portraits.

I was made aware by my undergraduate art professor that my work was entrenched in a fauvist tradition. Similar to the Fauves, who set out to shock with their colors and textures, I have no interest in achieving realism in terms of color in my own paintings, nor do I wish to lose the marks that my brushes can make and the beautiful things that can happen when pure paint is mixed directly on the canvas. The adoption of the practices of these “wild beasts” (Elderfield 13) is fitting as I am an artist trying to bring the energies of color and texture to portraiture, breaking the “rules” that can be seen to define the tradition of realist figurative and portrait painting. The energy and intent I bring to my paintings is not unlike that of expressionist painter Robert Motherwell, whose process I observed in a video shown to me in Research and Thesis. This video showed Motherwell painting large, black shapes on a white background. The most important part of his process for me occurred in his response to “accidents” and the decisions he made based on them: Motherwell allowed the process of painting to speak within the work. For me, the emotional component of abstract expressionism traverses ground similar to that found in Matisse’s fauvist portrait, “The Green Line,” a powerful and inspirational painting. The way in which the portrait began its departure from realism in favor of abstraction: a portrait of the act of painting, being named after an abstraction of a facial shadow. The hand of the painter, so



Figure 1. *Fascism*. Oil on canvas, 2007. Artist's own image.



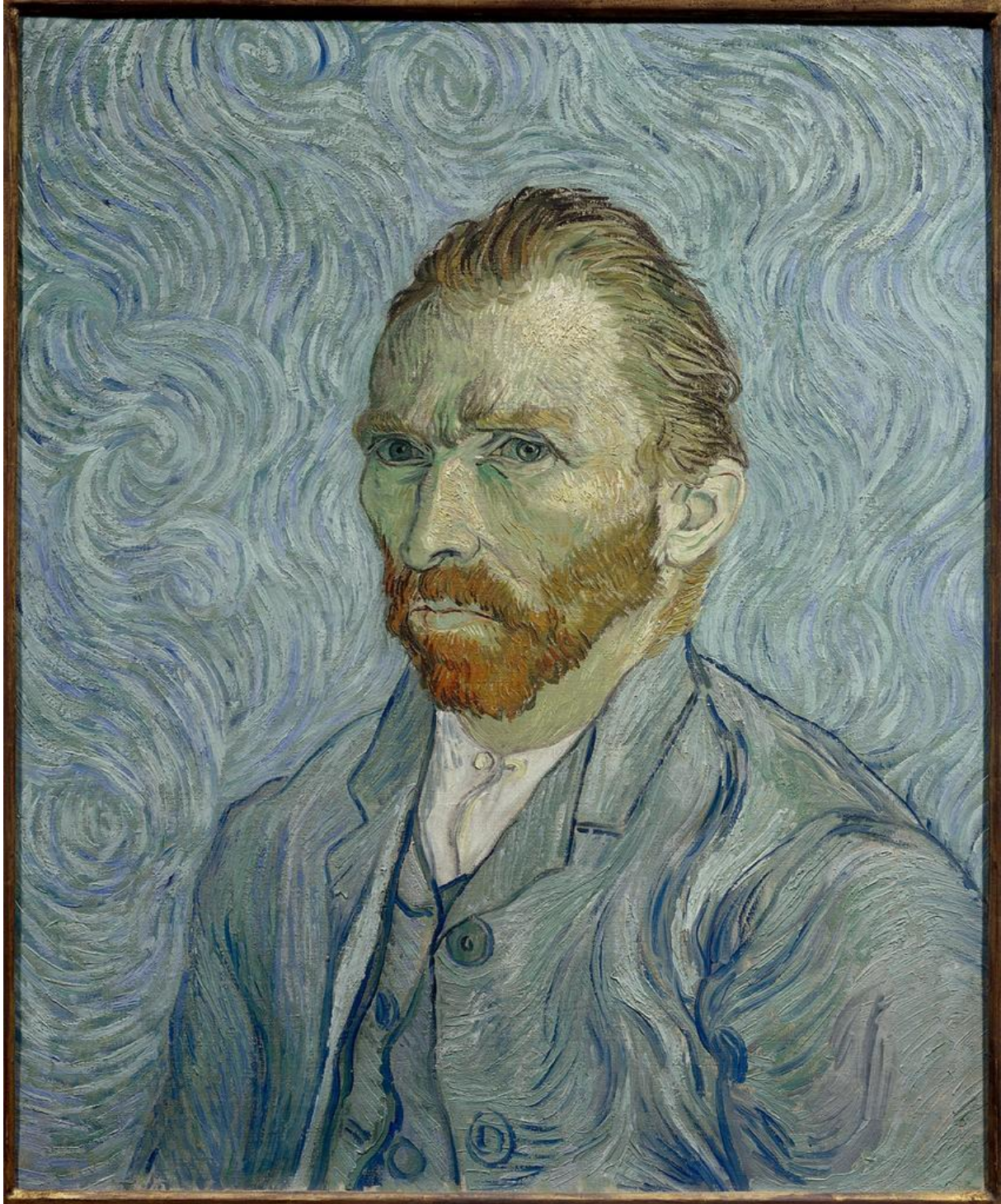


Figure 2: Self-Portrait by Vincent van Gogh. Oil on canvas. 1889-90. (c) 2006, SCALA, Florence /ARTRESOURCE, NY.

visually apparent in the strokes, and application brings our attention to the concept of self-reference in the figurative imagery. Impressionism and fauvism are in part responsible for bringing the figure out of reality and into my own fictional world of color, shapes and textures.

Vincent van Gogh's work makes a cameo in John Elderfield's book "*The Wild Beasts*": *Fauvism and Its Affinities*. The raw emotion with which van Gogh painted was also considered wild and unrestrained in its own time. In my earliest days of creating work in elementary school, van Gogh's treatment of paint spoke to me with its impasto, implied textures, and color juxtapositions. While Matisse and Derain also used color and texture masterfully in their fauvist works, looking at a painting of van Gogh's is like turning up the volume so loudly that it causes you to shake and your windows to rattle: His colors and textures together are literally screaming.

During my first year here at RIT, I was asked to write a paper about an artist who has impacted my own artistic practice. After much deliberation about which artist I would chose, I decided to go back to my earliest art memory when I wrote a paper entitled *Van Gogh as Influence: Richness of Color and Texture from Heavens to Portrait*. While van Gogh's own work was influenced by and is infused with symbolism and elements of his own spiritual beliefs, what he was able to do with the portrait was groundbreaking for his time. His portraits, particularly his self-portraits, are inspiring to behold even today.

I was introduced to van Gogh through *Starry Night* and his other plein-air landscapes. What is so remarkable when viewing his figurative and portrait work is how he was able to translate all of the movement that he found in the sky, fields and flowers of his landscapes, into the faces of his models. The mark of his brush acts as a repeated tendril, rapidly changing colors to create form and volume. It is these tendrils that give a spiritual life to the worlds he creates,

and it is evident in his portraits that he sees that same feverish and undulating life in people. Even his famous still-life paintings of peasant shoes and the chair that sat in his bedroom resonate with the life of those who use them. The lamps in a bar above the pool table are encircled by an otherworldly yellow. Humans and inanimate objects alike were given that same reverberating quality that van Gogh imparted to his landscapes. To further illustrate van Gogh's belief in the energetic and spiritual undulation of all things, his backgrounds are often articulated with the same manner of brushstroke. The sky beyond the tree branches is treated with the same movement that the leaves themselves are treated. Likewise, in van Gogh's self-portraits, the background planes undulate the most, especially when juxtaposed with his tortured, outward stare. Although we can only know all the inner details of our own mind, the chaos, movement, and emotion of van Gogh's self-portraits seem to reveal every bit of turbulence wreaking havoc within his (Figure 2).

Alice Neel has also been an inspiration for me, both consciously and subconsciously. Regardless of our similar aesthetic, she is an inspiration for her beautiful and illustrative portraiture speaking loudly amongst the prevailing voices of abstract expressionism. I believe it is her fire and determination that helped to keep figurative art alive and well during that period of time in American art. During my undergraduate years, I was able to visit New York City and Washington D.C. for museum visits through my college. During one of my first trips to D.C. as a freshman in 2005, I found myself in the National Museum of Women in the Arts, seeing Alice Neel's *Women* exhibit. I fell in love with her expressive treatment of the figure and her unabashed use of color. Although it was too early in my artistic career to see similarities in our work, I believe that the inspiration of her painting was responsible for what my work would become. I do not recall standing in front of Neel's portraits of women and consciously thinking to

myself “I will paint like this.” Yet her lines, colors and expression undoubtedly made an impact on me as a young artist.

Although we differ in process, I see a profound connection in our finished portraits and also in the emotional reaction they are able to generate. Neel worked from live models while I work from photographs. I chose to focus on the singular moment captured in the photograph of a person, while Neel felt the need to be in the person's presence. Reading through the captions of the plates in *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, there is a very clear story for each individual portrait: they seem to transcend individuality and somehow come to represent every person. Neel's famous portrait of her daughter-in-law Ginny (Figure 3), painted right before Neel passed away, shows Ginny in the throes of grief, just recently having lost her own mother (Lewison 164). Neel mirrored that response in recognition of her own imminent death, creating a profoundly successful work that undoubtedly rounded out her oeuvre of portraits. The purple and blue drapery of Ginny's modest and mournful dress, her unadorned hair and gaunt, tortured expression all convey the idea of one having to face death. Even the background of the piece, awash in white with a muted sea of blue, evokes the idea of facing the afterlife. Neel's treatment of the background that she painted poignantly mimics the cool-colored dress, as though to signal the artist's understanding of her own imminent passing. This profound expression in the space beyond the figure was a discovery that greatly inspired the creation of my art.

Given the power of the portrait and the attention demanded by a subject's eyes, I initially struggled with the backgrounds of my work. I paint portraits because I find the face can be representative of so much and often serves as a vast metaphor for a continuity of human



Figure 3: *Ginny* by Alice Neel. Oil on canvas. 1984. Photographer: Larry Qualls, from his private collection.



Figure 4: *Mom and Dad; June 2nd*. Acrylic, screen print, and paper on canvas. 2012. Artist's own image.

experience. The way in which Neel was able to push her backgrounds into further conveying what the face already offered is one inspiration that helped me with this task. An additional inspiration for the delineation of space within my paintings emerged from a fascination with the patterns of decorative papers. While I initially wanted to paint these patterns into my backgrounds, Alan Singer suggested that screen-printing would be a more appropriate process for transferring pattern. I experimented with this, and my piece *Mom and Dad; June 2<sup>nd</sup>* (Figure 4) demonstrates this exploration. The graphic quality that screen-printed images produce lent itself well to the translation of the stained glass church window in the original photograph of my parents from which I worked.

The layout of my show was inspired by the work of Henry Darger. I have an emotional connection to his work for his unabashed honesty and devotion. After seeing the film of his work, “Realms of the Unreal,” I imagined Darger's work cluttering his small Chicago apartment, much like an old attic filled with treasures that double as remnants of life. In imagining Darger’s chaotic, lived-in work space, I began to consider the idea of including some sort of furniture in the installation of my work. Initially, I thought it would be more intimate to display some work in a bedroom setting. However, several of my portraits contained the subject eating, thus a dining room setting seemed more fitting (Figure 5). This is the room of the house where guests are typically invited. I wanted my audience to feel invited into my world, and into a “conversation” with the subjects of my paintings.

In addition to serving as inspiration for my installation, Darger’s process points to the importance of the enjoyment of making art. According to Debra N. Mancoff in her book *50 American Artists You Should Know*, Darger’s materials included photographic enlargements,



Figure 5: *A Lived-In Life*, 2012. Artist's own image.



watercolors, carbon, tracing paper, source materials including “comic strips, advertisements, and pictures of child stars” (Mancoff 79) all pieced together on ten-foot long strips of paper. One of the initial struggles in creating my body of paintings was in paring down the complexity of the work and focusing on what had become most important to my concept. This proved to be difficult for me, with so many mediums at my disposal while I was in graduate school. Facilities and equipment that would be too expensive for me to purchase were readily available. Artists like Darger inspire me to enjoy the creation of art, and above all I enjoy experimenting with different processes.

The incorporation of artist books in my oeuvre became a means for me to continually experiment as well as deal with the idea of intimacy. When I first studied nontoxic printmaking techniques under Keith Howard, I was frequently asked to create an artist book as a final project. When I began studying traditional bookmaking techniques under Scott McCarney, the artist’s book became even more familiar to me as a medium. Upon completing my body of work for the show, I began to feel as though the books were an intermediary element that brought my paintings and prints together, by incorporating aspects of each.

## **Contemporary Influences**

Jenny Saville was the first contemporary artist I had known as a high school art student. I grew to recognize her as one of the first artists involved in the resurgence of figurative painting at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My appreciation of Saville's work became a justification for my continual focus on the figure in my own work. Our process is similar in that we use photography

as reference, work with the figure, and favor a painterly style. Most importantly, her paintings constantly inspire in me the importance of figurative art. As a feminist, I saw Saville's work as making a statement on woman's self-perceptions in today's world with the most poignant brushstrokes (Figure 6). Through her paintings, it became clear to me that the human form could clearly communicate everything: our joys, problems, fears, doubts, and dreams. Everything we do, say, make or think is a manifestation of our minds. The human body and most importantly the face provide a perfect canvas to convey our deepest-seated truths.

To return briefly to Saville's utilization of the photograph as reference, her process revolves around collecting images of surgical procedures and medical deformities. She collages these images into her figures to create her confrontational paintings. Without these photos, it would be hard for Saville to achieve the realism for which she strives. She would be unable to render as confidently as she does, as it would be too difficult to find models with specific maladies and impossible to paint at her larger-than-life scale in an operating room or hospital. Although she produces work that is thematically very different from my own, I continue to look to Jenny Saville as the pinnacle of a figurative painting today as well as a fellow artist who draws inspiration from photography.

My undergraduate painting professor introduced me to Xenia Hausner, another figurative artist who has been tremendously influential. Hausner, a German figurative painter and mixed-media artist, uses every color when she paints. Her figures interact with the viewer, often meeting their gaze. I particularly connect with Hausner because she has her paintings alongside photograph-based mixed-media works in her body of work presented in *Hide and Seek*



Figure 6: Example of Jenny Saville's work. *Pause* by Jenny Saville. Oil on canvas. 2003.

Photographer: Larry Qualls, from his private collection.

(Hausner). Her brush, often poised at-the-ready with bright, neon colors is evidenced every time it is dragged across the picture plane. In contrast her mixed-media pieces, which appear to be altered photographs, remind me of my photo-intaglio prints existing within my own diverse body of artwork. Hausner's deeply interconnected paintings and mixed-media pieces provide a refreshing reference as I struggled to reconcile the differences between my own paintings and prints as my show came together. The way in which Hausner's hand is revealed in her paintings is also evident in her mixed-media pieces. She alters the photograph with her painterly marks and colorist palette. Like Hausner, I believe a big part of my personal connection to her work lies in the color palette. I have been considering the use of similarities in texture, like those that Hausner uses, as a means of bringing my paintings and prints into further cohesion. I have only skirted the texture issue, incorporating papers into my paintings to mimic the chine collé I often use in my prints.

In terms of my process, I have also been inspired by the work of contemporary figure artists Hung Liu, Elizabeth Peyton, and Anna Bjerger. Hung Liu's arresting portraiture combines figures wearing China's traditional dress with a modern solvent-laden drip quality within her paint application. Liu uses old photographs as a way to write her own story. I was inspired by her work at first because it was very evident to me that she was paying homage to the past through the photographs she used. Liu grew up in China during Mao's Cultural Revolution (Harthorn 4). During the revolution, government bureaucracy looked down upon any sort of relic speaking to personal identity, and thus many families destroyed portraits and photographs in fear of persecution (Harthorn 4). Liu's collection and use of old photographs allows her to pay homage to the past while writing her own story. Having lived through such a strictly regulated childhood, Liu paints with a light and airy freedom. Her hand is evident in her strokes and drips, whether

she renders realistic figures or flowers, birds, pottery and other objects and characters in the style of traditional screens (Figure 7). Liu's work continues to be an inspiration for my own as I struggle with the role of the photograph. Eventually, I hope to figure out when to step away from a photographic reference and begin to “write my own story” as Liu so eloquently does in her own work. In Sandy Harthorn’s essay, she includes a quote from Hung Liu in which she says “A lot of true history is either forgotten or hidden” (Harthorn 5). I strive to celebrate people in my life using the photograph at a specific past moment. It is important to underscore what is true, and to dig out what may be hidden. Perhaps also, as painters, we are responsible for keeping people from forgetting. For Liu, she is bringing back the relics of her people that were forcibly thrown away. For me, I never want to forget how fortunate I am to have met and spent time with the wonderful people in my life. It is my deepest desire that this sentiment resonate within my own work and be transcendent and accessible to my audience if they view my work and are reminded of those most important in their own lives.

Elizabeth Peyton is an artist whose paint quality and application have been an inspiration. She works with sketchy washes to create images of regular and famous people. Her thin application of paint speaks to the state of “the beautiful people,” their transient quality, and the tragedy of those who die young from becoming famous both too quickly and too soon. Although I do not care to paint famous or well-known faces because I do not know or have any sort of emotional standing with any famous person, I respond to Peyton’s paint quality coupled with the statement Peyton is making on “the fragile beauty of her generation....the melancholy insouciance and vulnerability of singers like Jarvis Cocker and Pete Doherty” (Mullins 2006, 74). Manipulating the texture of paint to convey one’s observations as an artist ultimately interests me as a painter who also seeks emotional truths.



Figure 7: Example of Hung Liu's work. *Apsaras-Red* by Hung Liu. Oil on canvas. 2009.

Photographer: Larry Qualls from his private collection.

Scandinavian artist Anna Bjerger also uses a thin wash of paint that drips into her portraiture and figurative work. However, it is her process of using her own personal photographs as well as found photographs as inspiration for her paintings (Mullins 2006, 162), that I found particularly compelling. In Mullins book *Painting People*, I was drawn into an image of a set of paintings from Bjerger's *129 Swedes* (Figure 8), which repurpose the photographs of awkwardly posed Swedish workers from the 1970s (Mullins 2006, 162). I find that Bjerger's ability to reinterpret photographs from the past by bringing them into the present tense, validates my own use of the photograph. Her work testifies to the way in which the photograph can play with the timing of the moment, and how adding the texture of paint underscores this reinvention of a moment.



Figure 8: 23 paintings from Anna Bjerger's series *129 Swedes*, 2002. Photographer: Larry Qualls from his personal archive.



## **Contextual Relevance**

Richard Shiff's essay "Drawn on the Body," discusses A.R. Penck's neo-expressionist figurative work. While reading this essay, I felt compelled to locate my own art on a sliding scale, where far left is abstract, neo-expressionist, and far right is photo-realistic work, I place my work in the middle, favoring the right side slightly. In discussing Penck's figurative abstract imagery, Shiff states "only the formal structure need retain a logical direction – to experience Penck's imagery is to invert the usual order of ideology; nothing compels you to receive from the image what it gives, instead, what you get is whatever you take" (Scala 43). Given that I place myself between abstraction and photo-realism, this quote made me realize that a viewer is drawing from a medium amount of recognizable information when interpreting my work. With my portraits and the connection I have to my subjects I would like viewers to feel a similar sense of love and gratitude for their family and friends. More generally, I hope a viewer can glean gratitude or feel a sense of happiness from my work. Because my work is not photo-realistic, I hope that the viewer's response is not affected merely by the image itself, but also by color and texture. It can be argued that any one work any one person creates can elicit a plethora of responses from numerous viewers. However, I believe that the further an image is from abstraction, the more specific a viewer's reaction becomes. Art is neither created nor viewed in a vacuum. It is important that an artist is able to be more objective and ponder how their work could be received.

The greatest epiphany I've had in graduate school revolves around materials. I amassed an arsenal of new techniques that put many new materials into my hands. I was also fortunate to learn about new contemporary artists, and be surrounded by fellow artists on a daily basis. I saw

so many fellow artists use new and creative materials to make innovative pieces of art, particular in New Forms class. This class focused on the use of unconventional materials in art making. We were often introduced to artists creating interesting video or sculptural works, and were encouraged to research other contemporary artists working nontraditionally. I discovered Tara Donovan, who uses everyday materials to create gorgeous, undulating sculptures. Donovan's use of everyday materials was in large part responsible for opening my eyes to contemporary art's echoes of Marcel Duchamp's fountain: absolutely nothing is off-limits in art-making. Donovan's discovery of these materials came accidentally: she happened to knock a box of toothpicks off of a table in her studio, and immediately recognized the toothpicks' free-standing ability to take shapes (Baume 7). From this accident, she created the piece *Toothpicks* (Figure 9), a large, free standing cube made entirely of its namesake.

Donovan is quoted as saying "A lot of art-making comes from just paying attention to accidental discoveries" (Chattopadhyay 29). That accident often plays such a large role in art is both fascinating and inspiring to me. In addition to respecting Donovan for seeing such great potential in accident, I am drawn to her for also recognizing that beauty can manifest even in everyday objects. My favorite piece of hers, *Nebulous* (Figure 10) is made entirely of Scotch tape, undulating together in long ribbons that cover an entire gallery room floor. Not only did she discover an unconventional material's potential as a medium, she created pieces from these materials that are aesthetically arresting in their beauty. Tara Donovan is certainly the best example I know of in addressing how many contemporary artists now are thinking outside the box in terms of materials.



Figure 9: *Toothpicks* by Tara Donovan. Toothpicks held together by friction and gravity only.

2004. Photographer: Larry Qualls from his private archive.



Figure 10: *Nebulous* by Tara Donovan. Scotch Tape. 2002. Photographer: Larry Qualls from his private archive.

In addition to Donovan's ability to create beautiful work from mundane materials, I think she is resourceful. Although she is using so much more of these products than the everyday person will use in their lifetime, I cannot imagine how much money it would cost to cast sculptures the size of hers in metal, or how much money paints would cost to cover a canvas the size of a wall. In addition to this, many artistic processes can be toxic, or require much care and equipment in order for an artist to not cause self or environmental harm. Creating sculptures out of toothpicks, scotch tape, plastic cups and paper plates is comparatively sterile.

When I first discovered Donovan, I had begun to take nontoxic printmaking. On the first day of class, Keith Howard, who invented the process, was not shy in explaining that he has survived cancer twice. He explained the dangers of traditional printmaking techniques. This impacted me beyond the printmaking studio, as I began questioning my own use of solvents in my painting process. I had used oil paint since my freshman year of college, but switched to acrylic at the end of my first year of graduate school. Acrylic paints had not been a part of my regular practice since I was in high school. It is strange now looking back that I did not fully realize what a challenge this would be for me so far along in graduate school. Due in large part to this decision, my thesis work would not be up to par with what I had been used to creating with oils. However, as a contemporary artist, I am personally committed to sustainability. With every feasible object fair game for art-making, I see no reason to use a technique that is harmful either to myself or the environment. I am grateful to have entered the art world at a time where nontoxic printmaking exists, and where anything is fair game as medium.

Additionally, I am lucky to be an artist in a time where photography is so readily available. My generation has grown up with smart phones, Facebook and Instagram. I have so

many photographs of loved ones who are physically far away, but simultaneously a click away. Historically, photography opened many doors for painting. Paul Galassi's book *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* explains how the medium developed both as an aid and as its own medium in a paint-dominated art world. The camera obscura in particular was primarily used by artists to trace scenes (Galassi 11). Because painters were using these photography-like methods, Galassi quotes Helmut and Alison Gersheim as saying "the circumstance that photography was not invented earlier remains the greatest mystery in its history" (Galassi 11). So many inventors were allegedly working toward the invention of photography that Galassi refrains from pointing to a single person, but rather mentions in passing numerous inventors including Nicéphore Niépce, William Henry Fox Talbot, L. -J. -M. Daguerre and Johann Heinrich Schulze (Galassi 11).

Charlotte Mullins in her essay "The Past Deconstructed" cites how the advent of stop-motion photography aided cubist artists in the creation of their work (Mullins 147). Roland Barthes is quoted from his 1980 publication *Camera Lucida*, a book suggested to me in full by an art history professor, as saying "I see photographs everywhere, like everyone else, nowadays; they come from the world to me, without my asking; they are only "images," their mode of appearance is heterogeneous" (Mullins 149). In part, I agree with Barthes, particularly given the vast accessibility of photography nowadays. Billions of photographs are taken and broadcast on social media each day. As an artist working currently, it is extraordinarily easy to use a photograph and manipulate it in Photoshop as opposed to hiring models and painstakingly setting up a scene. Photography is now such an inherent part of our culture, and we are now closer than ever before through social media. We are constantly reminded of our beginnings, how we have progressed and how we have developed.

The implicit difference between past and present is why painting subjects from life has not been much of an interest to me. Artists have done this for centuries. While it is important to work from life in the beginning of one's artistic career to build and understand shapes and volume, photography is its own symbolic medium. It has undoubtedly burnt a permanent hole in the fabric of contemporary culture.

Conceptually, I believe the biggest struggle came from the role of the photograph in my work. I felt the need to justify my utilization of reference photography in my painting. Why was I so entranced by the photograph? Why did I seem to need it so much? I instantly thought about how much I have always loved looking through photos and revisiting memories- how having a photograph of someone I missed somehow brought them closer to me. The idea of the photograph *inspires* my work, a concept emphasized in my proposal, “Through the use of a bright, saturated palette, color will be a tool I use to transform photographic representation into vividly amplified portraits.” The use of the word “transform” is appropriate, but a more appropriate terminology would have been “I will take inspiration from moments captured in photographs to create my expressionistic and vividly amplified portraits.” My focus on the photograph itself bound me to the reference photos themselves rather than the idea and connotations of them. It was not until a month before my show that I realized that I was more interested in what the photograph captured, and in order to convey this in my work I needed to treat the photograph less like a reference and more as an inspiration.

## **Reflections on the Past Year**

Initially in my process, I wanted to pursue some ideas I had developed in my new forms class that I thought would convey intimacy. The first time I took new forms, I used the glass of an old window from my parents' house as a substrate for portraits. The smooth surface of the glass allowed me to remove the paint I had applied with a razor blade, and it came off in lovely, curled wisps. I loved the idea of paint as object, and wanted there to be a piece in my show that would be somehow interactive, allowing viewers to scrape paint. I also felt that the wisps of paint could be held in a jewelry box or in the dresser of a more intimate, bedroom-like installation. I had wanted to include some element of this piece in my show, but the concept had not been fully explored from the single ten weeks during which I had focused on this project. I also knew that I wanted my paintings and prints to be in the show, and working on those took priority.

Since the beginning of the year, my paintings have changed in several ways. They have amassed more texture through the integration of paper on their surfaces and have begun to favor a more red tonality through the use of quinacridone magenta. This specific color helped me to define skin tone. It is also quite attractive, livening up entire palettes. I thought that I would regret becoming so entranced by a single color and was unsure that such a magenta-dominated palette would defy my original intention of having a celebration of colors. However, utilizing this color throughout brought some cohesion to my body of paintings.

I also started to decrease the size of my painted portraits. When I had decided to show the work in an intimate household setting, I immediately thought of displaying the work salon style, cluttered on a wall similar to how family photographs are displayed in homes. In order to achieve



this look, I knew that I could not have all large paintings, and needed to vary the sizes in order to achieve this arrangement. I was unsure about working smaller, but the possibility of bringing viewers in more closely to the work led me to experiment. This experimentation seemed to oppose an inclination in the painting world to work on an ever increasing scale. Large paintings seem to have a life of their own, fulfilling ambitions many artists want to create beyond themselves. The intimacy of small work became for me far more attractive as it resulted in greater intimacy between the piece and the viewer. The process also resulted in a heightened sense of intimacy between myself and the work. Although I believe that every relationship between an artist and what they create is an intimate one, I had been previously focused on continually going larger with my work. Creating smaller pieces introduced me to new problems involving the creation of successful marks in a smaller space. These new discoveries brought a freshness to my process, and instead of it feeling mechanical, I increased the intimacy I had with my pieces by being more present than I had been in a long time.

My process in printmaking also grew and changed considerably. At the end of last year, I was using a watercolor monotype technique to imbue my prints with different layers of colors. In this technique, I would sand and cover plates with gum Arabic, to which I applied wax crayon and watercolor. I would couple these plates with my photo-intaglio plates. At my first committee meeting, it was agreed that my prints were not reaching the color levels of my paintings, and Eileen Feeney Bushnell showed me a new technique. Instead of creating watercolor monotypes, I began rolling out planes of solid colored ink using a brayer, which would then act as the background of my photo-intaglio plate. I started by inking two “background” plates in this manner, using transparent base or stencils to block out where I would want a previous plane of color to stand out. I also utilized stencils made from Yuppo paper to create decorative shapes.

Using ink throughout the process instead of partially using duller watercolor mediums provided a stronger level of color cohesion between my paintings and prints.

Although I spent a lot of time trying to bring a sense of cohesion to my paintings and prints, I managed to create a collection of art books. During the winter quarter, I took Scott McCarney's bookbinding class. I was a creative writer as an undergraduate student, and I always looked at the medium of the artist's book as a perfect marriage of my passions of writing and art. Scott's class gave me a more instructional, step-by-step knowledge of book construction. My initial thirst for books in graduate school was quenched in Keith Howard's printmaking classes, where we were asked to create book projects as a final assignment. Before taking Scott's class, I looked to Esther K. Smith's *How to Make Books* which provided information about the construction of a variety of interesting types of books that seemed appropriate for showcasing prints. While Smith's book includes information about coptic and stab-stitch bindings, something about sewing does not translate as well in written instructions as it does when you see an instructor physically construct a book. Scott's class helped to fill in the blanks with visual examples of more complicated types of sewing. Although I ended up focusing primarily on accordion books, my "coptic variety show" project involved the construction of a coptic book using non-traditional materials. This piece made its way into my thesis show (Figures 11 and 12). This book was made with birthday cards and postcards from loved ones as well as memorabilia from studying abroad in Italy. The very personal nature of the book made the ones I created fit in perfectly with the other pieces in my show.



Figure 11: *Pieces from a Lived-In Life*. Mixed media coptic-bound artist book. Photo courtesy of the ETC.



Figure 12: *Pieces from a Lived-In Life*. Mixed media coptic-bound artist book. Photo courtesy of the ETC.



Figure 13: *Photo Album*. Photo Intaglio Destruction plate with chine colle. Variable size. 2012.

Photo courtesy of ETC.

## **A Lived-In Life**

My use of books serve as an intermediary exploration of my paintings and prints. *Photo Album* (Figure 13) is a large print consisting of many wallet-sized images, with the paper folded down so each photograph had its own page. I was happy with the cascading effect I was able to achieve in the display of this book. *A Lived-In Life: Poems* (Figure 14) was the last piece I conceived before my show, as I wanted to include some ekphrasis poems of my paintings and prints. As an undergraduate, I mostly wrote poetry and focused on ekphrasis for my senior chapbook. Ekphrasis is essentially a description or artistic response to another work of art. This book was constructed with an accordion pocket fold with two masonite panel paintings affixed to either end as side covers. One cover featured a painting based on a Polaroid of my parents when they were young, and the other cover was based on an expired Polaroid picture I took of my boyfriend and myself. These painted covers served as a symbol of the timelessness of relationships that we all build, cultivate and grow. Given my obsession with photography in the creation of my thesis, I was happy to use the iconic and recently discontinued Polaroid as inspiration for one of my books. Although you can read this book from either end, I wrote the title on this cover in Sharpie marker, as one would traditionally do with a Polaroid. My third book, *Pieces from a Lived-In Life* (Figures 11 and 12), was the coptic-bound variety show project I mentioned earlier. This piece consists of my own cherished, palpable memories and it references the sentimental center of the home, the dining room. The table for my installation was set with a large lace tablecloth, and a vase of flowers (Figure 5). The book was displayed on a cake stand, fanned out as though each pair of facing pages were a cut piece of cake.



Figure 14: *A Lived-In Life: Poems*. Mixed media. 2012. Photo courtesy of the ETC.

In my paintings, I found difficulty maintaining consistency in the building of volume. Some paintings were too flat because of my reliance on flat photographic references lacking volumetric color information. Although *Mom and Dad; June 2<sup>nd</sup>* (Figure 4) was one of the flattest paintings in my show, I could not have a show celebrating those who have most influenced my life, and fail to include my parents. The reference photograph I chose was a small snapshot taken on my parents' wedding day by someone in the pews after my parents walked back down the aisle together. It was a spontaneous moment that I felt deserved to be captured in paint. Unfortunately, this photograph which I felt deserved to be painted came from a time before digital SLR cameras existed. The quality was poor, especially for a 35 millimeter snapshot, and this made for a frustrating time rendering the image. This painting is a prime example of why I needed to use the photograph as inspiration, not allow it to be the final say in how I applied paint to the canvas. The piece *Holly* (Figure 15), a portrait of my older cousin when she was seven or eight years old, suffered from this same problem.

*With Dad* (Figure 16) has similar problems of flatness because of the reference photograph. However, I stumbled upon a realization with this piece and *Selves* (Figure 17). These two paintings contain self-portraiture, both of which feature me looking to the side. Most other painted figures in my thesis are looking straight ahead, while I seem to be looking to the figures in the adjacent paintings. This reinforced the major point of my thesis, that I am revering all of the people who helped shape who I am. Even my painted form encourages viewers to help celebrate those who are close to me.



Figure 15: *Holly*. Acrylic on canvas. 2012. Artist's own image.





Figure 16: *With Dad*. Acrylic on canvas. 2012. Artist's own image.



Figure 17: *Selves*. Acrylic and paper on canvas. 2012. Artist's own image.

The most experimental facet of my show was *Selves* with its second, translucent ghost portrait that was referenced directly from the long exposure of the reference photograph. I was pleased with the translation of the ghostly image in the photograph to the surface of the painting. This piece also represented a successful foray into the inclusion of paper collage. In this piece, the paper fit into the background design seamlessly. The concern about the piece lay in its unfinished layering of paint. I will admit that as time drew closer to my show and other works needed more work, I liked what was going on with the layers of paint I had on the canvas and was not sure if another layering of paint was necessary. The swatches of yellow were particularly attractive juxtaposed to the darker plum and cherry tones of the painting, and I did not want to risk losing their freshness. One of the main issues I have in my painting is in knowing when to be finished, particularly with my recent return to acrylic paints after a five-year hiatus. Graduate school has helped me to understand my process more, and I have been able to recognize when pieces become overworked. Although I recognize that *Selves* could have been stronger, I am proud of the experimentation I encountered with it.

Paintings included in my thesis show that succeeded in creating a sense of volume were *Ray*, *SBL*, and *Meghan* (Figures 18, 19 and 20, respectively). These were based on recent photographs that I took of my coworkers with a Canon digital camera, using no flash. Because of the improved technology and thus the improved reference photographs, I was able to increase the volume in these forms. Being able to delve into the figure and pick out the greater variation of color for added volume helped immensely with my layering process. A photograph taken using natural light promises the addition of high and lowlights, which in turn promises the addition of more color. When I used these photographs, I took advantage of these added colors, not realizing



Figure 18: *Ray*. Acrylic on canvas. 2012. Artist's own image.



Figure 19: *SBL*. Acrylic on canvas. 2012. Artist's own image.

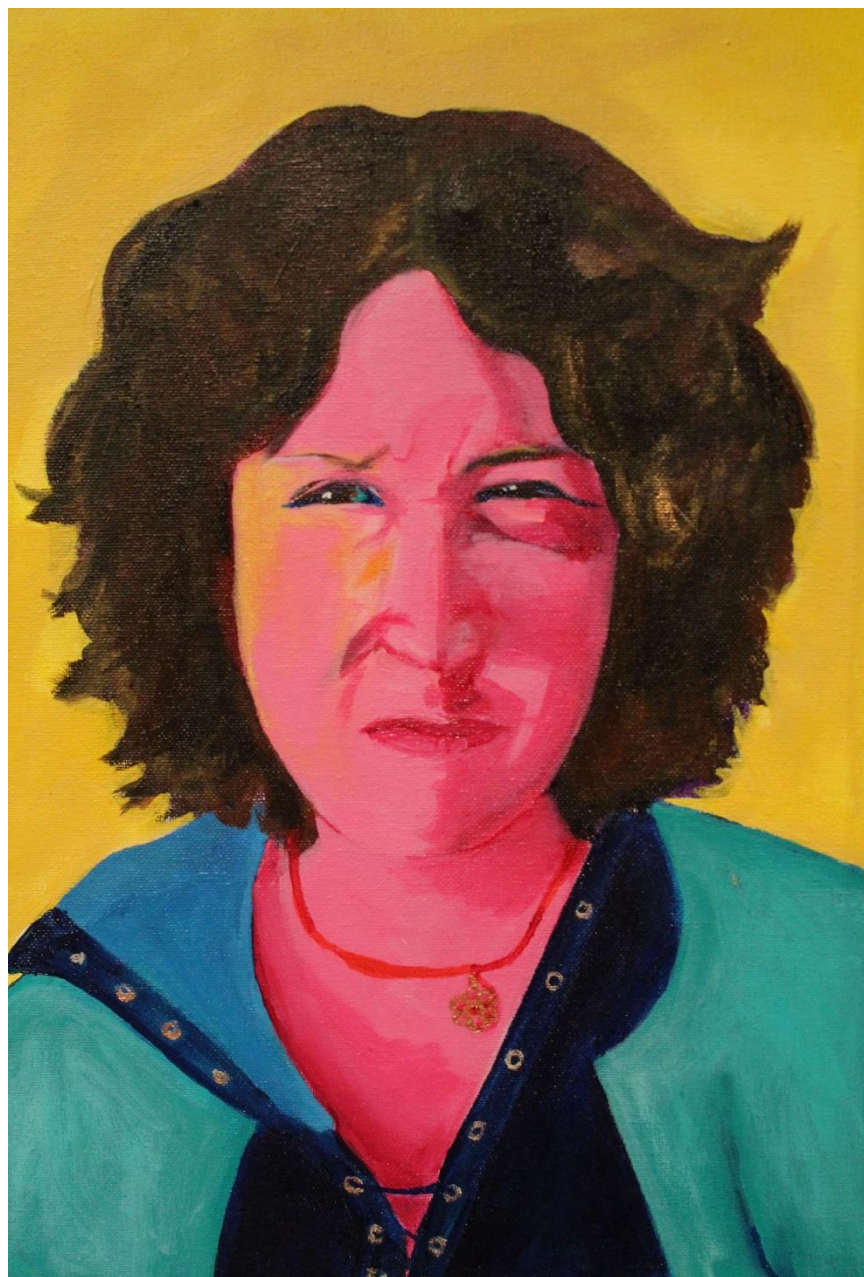


Figure 20: *Meghan*. Acrylic on canvas. 2012. Artist's own image.

how drastic the difference would be between these and the paintings created from the flatter, older flash photographs.

*Silv at Mings* (Figure 21) and *Kuka* (Figure 22) were, like *Meghan*, part of my experimental foray into working smaller. In *Silv at Mings*, I strayed from the the quinacridone magenta flesh tone and rendered the figure with more of a peach tone. *Kuka* was my first foray into working on a much smaller scale, as I had originally intended to enter the piece into Rochester Contemporary Art Center's 6x6 show. Seeing the delicate marks that smaller brushes made was important to my overall painting process. When I return to larger paintings, I will be even more aware of the subtleties of my brushstrokes.

My prints contain fewer similarities to my paintings than I would like. As a newer medium for me, it was initially harder to achieve color and texture in these images. However, printmaking enabled me to experiment with a variety of approaches. In my first year, I created monoprint plates using watercolor and wax crayons and augmented the resulting image with chine collé. In my second year, I achieved brighter colors by applying ink with a brayer to multiple plates for a layered effect along with using stencils and screen filler to alter photo-intaglio plates. *Froggie Ann* (Figure 23) was completed in the spring of my first year. It was done with a photo-intaglio and monoprint layering technique shown to me by both Keith Howard and Paul Mitchell. I took a Monoprint Figure class with Keith the previous quarter, and when I took printmaking with Paul in the spring, he helped me use this method with my photo-intaglio prints. Along with a photo intaglio plate of the image, I also created an intaglio plate using a rubylith stencil in which the figure was cut out. When layering this plate on top of the photographic image, color would be applied to everything except the figure, so as to separate and



Figure 21: *Silv at Ming's*. Acrylic on canvas. 2012. Artist's own image.





Figure 22: *Kuka*. Acrylic on canvas. 2011. Artist's own image.



Figure 23: *Froggie Ann*. Photo intaglio monoprint. 2011. Photo courtesy of the ETC.

highlight it. The first plate that touched the paper was the sanded monoprint plate, painted with gum Arabic and then drawn on with wax crayons and watercolor. This information applied to the plate usually contained only small details of the overall image. In *Froggie Ann*'s case, it was painting the flower in her hair with watercolor, which made for the drippy detail. The silhouette plate was inked and run through the press, and the photo-intaglio plate followed. I did many versions of this print with varying colors and chine collé additions, but the version I put into my show fit the color scheme of the paintings as well as the nature of the other prints.

The same sort of trial-and-error experimentation applied to *Silvana* (Figure 24), which was created with the Akua ink and brayer plate-layering technique. When I wanted the shirt to be darker, I applied screen filler with carborundum to achieve a darker ground. However, the texture of the screen filler showed in the print and although it was not the effect I was going for, it helped with the print's textural interest and overall visual appeal. This was my own happy accident, a la Tara Donovan. To mask the figure as I did in my monoprint, I placed the inked plate over the photo-intaglio plate or the transparency of it and removed the ink from the portion of the plate where the figure would be. Through the layering process, I added the stencils as shapes to reveal the color field beneath. Blending medium applied to the plate which had been rolled with a solid color, then allowed to sit, would also create interesting marks that would show up in the background. This same process was used for *Phil* (Figure 25) and *Chaz and Kuka* (Figure 26).

The prints were hung on a separate wall from my paintings because I have yet to reconcile the stark photographic qualities of my prints with the expressionistic qualities of my paintings. I had hoped that the prints could be interspersed with the paintings, but the show

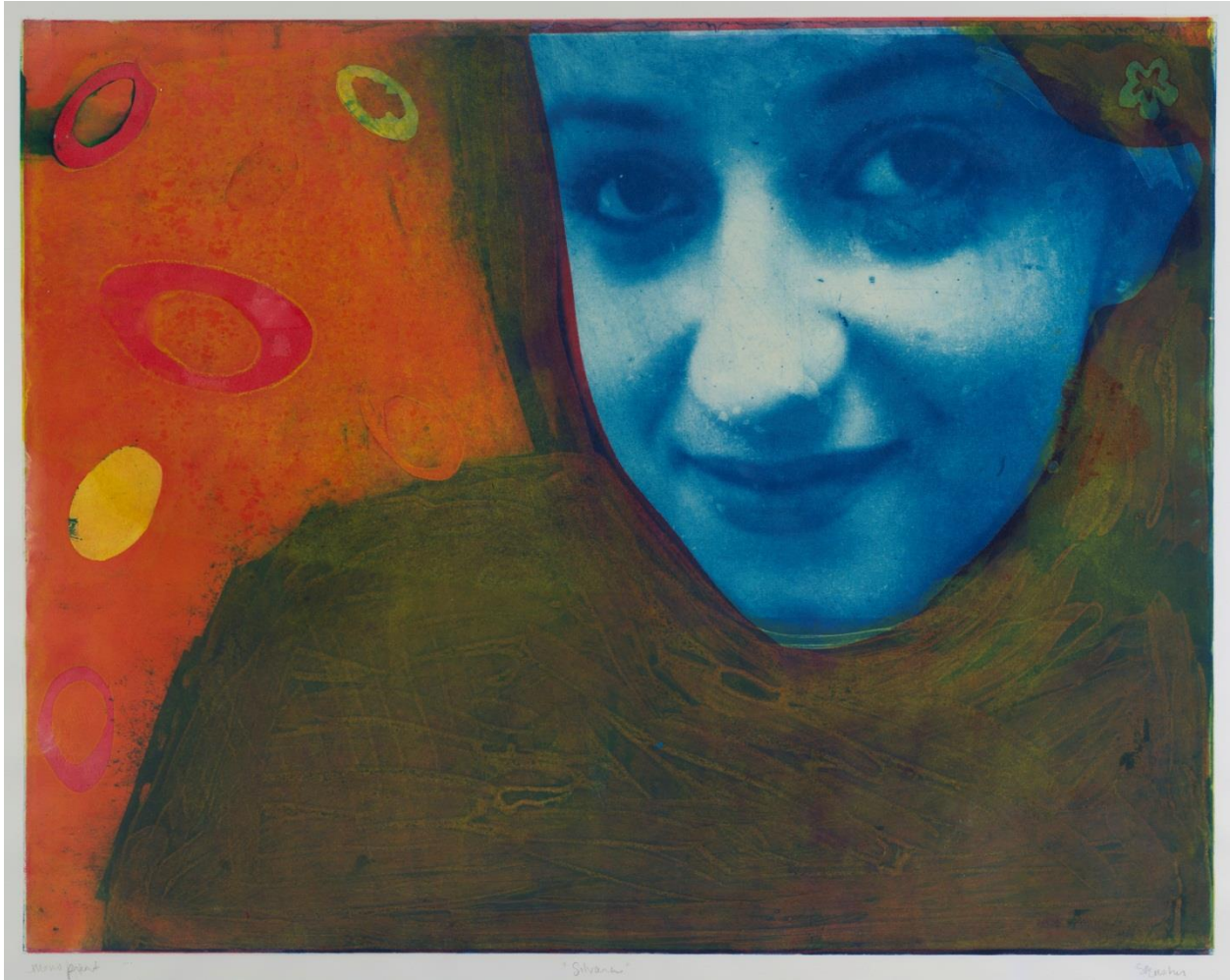


Figure 24: *Silvana*. Photo intaglio monoprint. 2012. Photo courtesy of the ETC.



Figure 25: *Phil*. Photo intaglio monoprint. 2012. Photo courtesy of the ETC.



Figure 26: *Chaz and Kuka*. Photo intaglio monoprint. 2012. Photo courtesy of the ETC.

worked better with the works separated. Although I want to achieve more cohesion between the two mediums, I am hesitant to lose the photographic quality of my prints. I wonder if textures and colors can be worked up similarly in either medium so that my paintings and prints can cohesively exist in a show. I know I have been working toward this already, but I do not feel like my command of color using the akua inks is up to par with the more intuitive way I choose colors when I am painting. Color was my main focus in attempting to bring together my paintings and prints, but this may be where quinacidrone magenta failed me. Because the color was so prominent in the paintings but barely visible in the prints, color was not as much of a uniting factor as I would have hoped. Additionally, ink acts differently than paint, and my experiences using printing ink has been limited to the duration of my time in graduate school. Perhaps when I am at the point where I can layer inks similarly to the way I layer my paint, and can play with similar textures or even include actual paint in my prints, the two mediums will become harmonious.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although there are problems of cohesion and inconsistencies in the quality of my work, I was pleased with the installation and layout of my show. The dining set and tablecloth paired with the salon style hanging of my work truly evoked a home's comfortable dining room or kitchen. I was also pleased with the contextual placement of my paintings and prints. The last print on the opposite wall looked inward as though to keep everything moving toward the artwork, just as *Selves* looked inward from the left. The works in my show interact with one another, further illustrating the interconnectedness of the people that I chose to celebrate. I was also pleased with the layout of my books. Their fragility led me to display them so that visitors

of the gallery could see each page without having to handle them. Displaying books, as I learned in Scott McCarney's bookmaking class as well as at his lecture for his show *Books and Pieces* at Wallace Library, is quite difficult. I believe that I managed to incorporate and display the books successfully into the interior scene, and that the sensitivity of their making matched the presentation of the show.

I am not satisfied with the cohesion of my paintings and prints. In addition to some solutions I have previously stated, another possible solution lies in the treatment of the background of the figures. In painting, I've mostly given the figures solid fields of color, but have begun to incorporate background information that I feel is relevant (*With Dad, Mom and Dad; June 2<sup>nd</sup>*). In printmaking, I have also begun to manipulate the information in the photograph to create more interest behind and around the highlighted figure. I am interested in pursuing the use of background interior space as an element of my compositions. Because of my almost complete reliance on photographs, I have felt in the past that I must include a whole background scene. Between looking at the varied use of background in contemporary figurative work, and realizing that the photograph is my own to manipulate when creating my work, I feel that I can include even a subtle hint of a background to boost a composition rather than take away from the subject.

I have experienced an unusual problem in being too close to my subjects. I had a specific idea of what I wanted my thesis show to be in terms of portraying people who are and have been important to me. This forced me to include an image of my parents that is flatter than many of the other paintings in my body of work. In future work, I need to truly go beyond the photograph. I plan on doing this by creating more detailed figurative work from life to get a



better handle on light source and human anatomy, where shadows and highlights fall and where I can thus experiment with a volumetric layering of color. I am not going to eliminate the photograph from my work altogether, but I do need to rely on it less in order to become a better figurative painter. In stepping away from the photograph, I hope to not only practice drawing and painting from life, but to develop greater confidence in my own intuition when I create.

Another part of my justification for including *Mom and Dad; June 2<sup>nd</sup>* was its experimentation with screen-printing and paper. However, Eileen expressed that the screen-printed part may as well have been painted. Screen-printing ink is an acrylic ink and looks like acrylic paint, so there was no visual difference. However, this is one example of my integration of multiple mediums and processes while working. During my time here at RIT, I learned so many new processes, even within printmaking alone. Learning a plethora of new ways to make marks was so exhilarating that it did not occur to me that the screen-printed window looked just like paint. While I enjoy having a process that allows me to draw from so many different techniques, I must be able to take pause and seek out the means to make each work extraordinary. I need to get out of the way of my work at an earlier point in my process and become more in tune with what each piece I create is capable of being.

In terms of my future art, I am excited to create without having to necessarily consider a cohesive body of work. I saw this wave of creative energy emit from the graduate students the year ahead of me upon the completion of their theses and had been looking forward to experiencing a similar creative freedom. I have found an outlet for this excess of creative energy in collage, as I am finally taking a class in the medium. My current penchant for collage is probably due to my fascination with Darger, as well as my preference in using multiple mediums

and processes when creating. Although I have always had an affinity for collage, I never had the opportunity to have a professor critique my work and give me solid foundational knowledge on the subject. I find myself spending hours in my studio holding ephemera up to various substrates, seeing if the composition feels right, and tirelessly gluing. While intuitive, the process is a little bit more black and white than painting. I would say that it is a logical next step from printmaking, which also always felt like more of a linear routine to me than the act of painting. This other medium that is so process-oriented has, for the moment, taken the place of printmaking while I am without access to a printing press. However, I was pleased to discover in my fall Digital Printmaking class that there are easy ways to make photographic transfers using hand sanitizer. Since my printmaking aesthetic revolves around grayscale photographs, this serves to be a promising direction for my prints even without access to a press in the near future.

As I expand into the realm of collage, I am excited to see how the different mediums with which I experimented through graduate school interplay with this medium that traditionally encourages mixture. Printmaking without having access to a press has caused me to seek out more accessible processes, such as linoleum carving. Zerbe Sodervick suggested I look at a book entitled *Print Workshop: Hand-Printing Techniques + Truly Original Projects* by Christine Schmidt that is filled with alternative printmaking methods. I have only scratched the surface of the possibilities within this book, trying my hand at carving linoleum blocks in order to stamp the images I carve into future collages. My hope is that I can begin to make discoveries about possible connections between my prints and paintings by physically converging them within collage.

Obviously this is a different method of printmaking than what I experienced when creating my thesis work. I hope to find access to a press at some point, and when that does happen, I believe an idea for more successfully integrating my paintings with my prints lies in my print *Silvana*. Although the texture in that plate was applied primarily with screen filler as I previously stated, I also discovered that I could alter the transparencies themselves. The idea of altering the photograph and making my hand present as early as possible in the process may release me from my previous devotion to the photograph and would place new textures and rhythms into the actual image. Xenia Hausner's prints and paintings both exhibit her painted texture. When I initially looked at her prints, I was unsure of whether they were photographs or photorealistic paintings. While I am not entirely sure of her process, it looks as though she applies the color on top of the photograph. In my own work, I believe that involving my hand from the inception of the process will make the finished prints more visually connected to my paintings.

Knowing what I know now about my painting and printmaking processes and creating these pieces simultaneously for a cohesive body of work has allowed me to see my works' differences. I believe that these differences have shown me more about my work and process than producing a perfectly cohesive body of work would have. It was here in graduate school where I first became enamored with non-toxic printmaking, and had I been focused on only perfecting my painting technique, I may have never engaged in printmaking enough to have produced the prints in my show of which I am so proud. Indeed, I am glad to have the problem of needing to reconcile my paintings and prints, as I love working in both mediums and plan on continuing in both throughout my career. I am also grateful that non-toxic printmaking inspired me to work toward my own commitment to sustainable, safe, and eco-friendly methods of

creating art. While I may not be entirely satisfied with my show's final results, I am excited that I experimented with and discovered a multitude of ways to create. I am content to never master any one medium, but to instead retain a sense of experimentation and play throughout my artistic career.

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