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Graduate Thesis Painting
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Artist Statement

My current work is an exploration of the process of creating identity through experience and sense of place. I am interpreting the impact of perception, memory, and surroundings on personal development and formation of identity. I am also interested in the way events serve as a marker of time. Finally, I am interested in how destruction impacts the overall experience of loss, and how memories can be maintained when there is no longer a physical signifier.

I grew up in Biloxi, Mississippi, and have been formed, in part, by a store of images from that experience. Editor of The Sun Herald, Stan Tiner, wrote about the people of Coast, before Katrina,

“Generations of Mississippi Coast dwellers enjoyed their piece of paradise with a certain enthusiastic embrace of the good life that is part of our heritage. The good times have rolled through the decades with a party that never quite ends, fueled in more recent times with the glitter of electric lit rows of casinos and a booming economy.” (Brinkley 179)

From my own memory and experience, home is a place surrounded by water; filled with swampy marsh lands, sandy beaches, and lush vegetation. The streets are canopied with ancient oak limbs whose Spanish moss hangs through the humid air. Seagulls, cranes, and pelicans dot the sky. The size of the bugs found in Biloxi conjures tales of those from the Galapagos, and the climate is as tropical. In late summer, the temperatures frequently reach or beat 100 degrees, a heat that is unexplainable and downright oppressive. The way of life is warm, slow, and eccentric. There is a saying in the northern three quarters of Mississippi that "The Coast is always late". My family home is on the bayou, and as a child, I would walk down to the marsh and talk over the buzz of boats and jet skis to the alligators that weren't yet big enough to be a threat.

Meanwhile, the culture is colorful and loud. Mardi Gras rivals Christmas in the extent of decoration, celebration, and reverence for tradition. That moon pies are thrown from Mardi Gras floats is as common a knowledge as that Nativity scenes are expected during Advent. Fresh caught seafood and Cajun recipes are the regional cuisine. Peeling crawfish is a skill so finely tuned that it feels instinctual. Driving down the beach at night, you explain to visitors that the lights in the shallow water are the flashlights of fishers floundering. Then you explain floundering. You offer them meat tenderizer from your beach bag when they complain of painful jellyfish stings.

By the time I was in third grade, I knew how to read a hurricane chart. The most trouble I have ever been in resulted from a trip to Bourbon Street with a bunch of friends (without permission, obviously) when I was seventeen. Three things: It was neither my first nor last trip, several of my friends' parents laughed it off and said that's what teenagers in Biloxi have always done, and everything you have heard about New Orleans is true... and then some. I have noticed, only after living away, the significance of this collection of memories as definitive truths that separate the people of this region from those of another. I am interested in exploring the visual, tactile, and gestural demonstrations of this specific culture as an unspoken part of the vernacular and dialect of the place. I hope to also allow the exploration of these regional truths to lead to the uncovering of experiences of growing through struggles and reflection that have a much broader significance.

On the Gulf Coast, life is defined as before or after Katrina, or as we now know it, "The Storm". When we grow, our height is recorded along the wall. When there is a flood, the water level is logged on stilts or flood-walls. In a parallel way, I think that events are inscribed upon us, and act as a reminder of where we were, and of where we have come since; as an unwritten inventory of losses, gains, and growth. *Waterline*, is inspired by this analogous relationship and

by personal experience. The first time I went back into my house after Katrina, there was a line of muck on all of the walls that showed how high the water had risen. Everything above that line was unharmed, and everything below was ruined. In the painting, the waterline is transcribed onto the figure, and functions as a division of time that separates the pristine quality of life before the storm from the tattered and soiled aftermath.

While I am interested in memories of my home before Katrina, part of my exploration of the hyper reality of the Gulf Coast, as well as the metaphorical symbols utilized in my paintings, is directly influenced by the hyperbolic language used in writings of processing, describing, and remembering the events and effects of the storm. In Douglas Brinkley's *The Great Deluge*, the author chronicles the events leading up to, through the immediate aftermath of, Katrina by interlacing historical data and personal recollections of those who directly experienced the storm. In all of the stories, those interviewed search for words to describe what happened. They pull from fantastic religious stories, mythology, Hiroshima, poetry, and surrealist art in attempts to describe the devastation, but find that, "...no, it's not like anything. It is what it is. That's the hard part. He, with all of us, lacked the words." (Brinkley 173)

In *The Language of Contemporary Criticism Clarified*, William Innes Homer muses on the Baudrillardian notion that the reproduction of the real becomes reality, and the real is produced from memory banks. He says, "Rationality, purpose, and linear thinking give way to a non-rational world of fragments. Things are no longer seen as wholes, but as fleeting images not linked in any logical fashion." (66) In my paintings, I am creating a reflection of a basic reality by stitching together fragments and fleeting images from my own memory, and using them as signs that represent experience and place. (Connor 54) Self-aware applications of this notion are not uncommon in the arts. In the play, *Old Times*, Harold Pinter writes that, "There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened," and that "The past is what

you remember, imagine you remember, convince yourself you remember, or pretend you remember.” In contemporary literature, John Irving writes, “Your memory is a monster; you forget—it doesn’t. It simply files things away. It keeps things for you or hides things from you—and summons them to your recall with a will of its own. You think you have a memory, but it has you!”

My paintings are primarily figurative, and are self-portraits used self-reflexively to come to a better knowledge of myself, and “through this knowledge, to think differently, perhaps more productively.” (Homer 155) While the paintings are definitely self-referential and tell bits of my personal story, the figure is also meant to be a character, a traveler through whom the viewer can project their own experiences of growth. The skin of the figure is an area of focus, and is comprised of a stylized linear mapping to act as topography that charts the shape of the figure and to suggest a documentation of journeys. My intention is to show the permanence of the impression of experience with mapping that interacts with series of spots and scars that function as constellations and landmarks to mark past destinations and to suggest navigation through the present and the plotting of future paths. The inclusion of freckles, sun spots, and moles further functions to support the authenticity of my identity in a self-portrait, as I have, for as long as I can remember, been covered in spots and associated them with my truest self.

I draw from the memories of growing up along the coast to pull images of infestation—tree frogs, fiddler crabs, locusts, barnacles, love bugs, Spanish moss, lubber grasshoppers; all things that are easily overlooked, even forgotten, before they take over, uninvited, for periods of time. These symbols of infestation are cyclical and ephemeral in nature and are used to suggest rising and falling while moving through the passing of time. Additionally, their seasonal nature is important to describe the quiet pervasiveness of our pasts in comparison to the intensity of present experiences. While experiences are only real to us, and in the forefront of consideration,

in the immediacy of the moments of their occurrence, shadows of the perception of these experiences live on inside of us acting as a foundation that continues to inform our relationships with self and others. In the same way, the elements of infestation are not gone in their off season, but are instead cycling through periods of invisible systemic functionality.

I am interested in the cyclical patterns of infestation in relation to instinctual psychological survival behaviors for maintaining strength and avoiding anxiety. In forward motion, by laying the memories of intense experiences to rest in the quiet forgotten space of metaphorical and literal past seasons, mothers seem to forget the extreme pain of child birth and the discomfort of pregnancy so that they can have more children. People forget the instability and fear of making a path-altering decision when they are happy in their steadiness. People desensitize and forget the crazy feeling and excitement of love when they have travelled long without it. We heal and forget the all-encompassing pain of heartbreak until it again sickens our stomach and dominates our every thought. We discredit our victories and forget the satisfaction and confidence of success. We underestimate and forget our strength and resilience until it is tested by disaster. In all of these examples, the intensity of the initial experience is put away, working quietly or lying dormant, until, when its season returns, it is retrieved and used to draw strength from the familiar. By shaping the familiar, the origins and outcomes of our own personal battles influence our actions long after the battles have been won or lost.

C. S. Lewis famously said, “Experience: that most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my God do you learn.” Experience is defined as “direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge, and the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation.” It is further defined as “the conscious events that make up an individual life.” Through my paintings, I seek to acknowledge the importance of direct experience on personal development while relating the effects to those of the lasting imprints of

regional history and experience on a person's identity, perception and processing of new events, and behavior. The painting, "Lovebugs, battle scars, and other marks of courage," demonstrates this concept with a collection of scars, in various stages of healing. The body functions as a traveler's log, as a record of experience and growth. The character uses sunscreen as protection to prevent future damage while ignoring her body's obvious current state of abjection.

Additionally, I am working to deconstruct the work of mourning the loss of a place that to some extent still exists, and to understand and explain that process through writing and making art. These intentions are inspired by Jacques Derrida's dedication and honesty in *The Work of Mourning*, and Sally Mann's tireless pursuit of understanding and expression of the relationship between death and memory in her series, *What Remains*.

There are many steps necessary to do this. First, I must explain the importance of the connection between loss and death. Robert D. Storolow contends that,

"In virtue of the finitude not only of our own existence, but of the existence of all those with whom we are deeply connected, authentic being-toward-death always includes a being toward-loss. Death and loss, to turn a Heideggerian phrase, are existentially equiprimordial, and both are anticipated in the experience of existential anxiety."

The work of mourning one is parallel to that of the other, and for my purposes, the collective loss from the devastation left by Katrina will be categorized as a death. The work of mourning, and it is work, produces a series of unresolvable conflicts. The first brings the question of loyalty in the conflict between the loss of other and the loss of self. On Derrida's, *The Work of Mourning*, Storolow posits that mourning, "necessarily evokes an unresolvable conflict of loyalty... because when we lose a friend, we also lose a part of our own selfhood. We lose the emotional world—our own world—that had been constituted around the friend who is now lost." Of that loss of emotional world, Derrida would say,

"The world suspended by some unique tear... reflecting disappearance itself: the world, the whole world, the world itself, for death takes from us

not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up..." (107).

It is difficult to navigate the balance between the loyalty of mourning the friend who is lost and the selfishness of mourning the loss of part of one's self.

Equally difficult is the conflict between whether to speak or not to speak. This is a common problem surrounding death, as those who are not immediately affected struggle to offer genuine consolations, while those directly affected cannot believe that "you know how they feel," or that "it will be okay." Worse yet, are the interactions between participants and those who have only heard about the loss. Strangers interrupting mourners with awkward gestures of kindness or remorse. In the instance of widely and famously reported loss, these interactions are magnified and extend to include non-participants with no direct emotional or personal connection. The paintings, "Spectacle" and "Spectacle II," are a point of entry for my research on ownership and imagery, and are reflective of the reactions of participants of Katrina on the Gulf Coast to non-participants using that experience for gain. Both paintings use confrontational gaze and flat yet provocative expression to acknowledge the gaze that is upon them and to define their response as slightly threatened, but mostly bothered, unimpressed, and bored with the attention drawn by the interesting appeal of suffering and by fascination with ruin.

Through my research, I am working to relate the tension between the need to speak and to not speak, on a broader level that expands upon personal loss, to the loss of place and jeopardizing of culture effected by that loss. Drawing on this relationship, my intent is to make paintings that capture a feeling equivalent to the haunting memory of a place that is beautiful and terrible, of an everyday life that is pregnant with the past, and slightly surreal if only through a heightened sense of reality. As a part of the Deep South, the coast is broadly viewed as a place of beautiful scenery and an almost unspeakably horrible history of violence and destruction. But we

must speak about it, we must remember. Like scars, the familiar signifiers of the history of the place insist that you remember. The confederate graveyard and sprawling estates of Beauvoir, the home of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, sit on Beach Boulevard, the coast's main thoroughfare, in a way that is mutually unsettling and ordinary. In the landscape, reminders of devastation from hurricanes stand casually among rebuilt structures, quietly demanding recognition.

“Gone. The saddest word in the language. In any language.” (Slouka) These images, and the weather, smells, and sounds of the coast persistently linger through my memory; I'm not sure I will ever forget images of enormous oak trees, uprooted by hurricane winds and fallen on their sides, with roots taller than one story buildings. I'm not sure I want to. I understand now that the less desirable parts of history are an important part of what weaves the story of a place, the same way our worst battle scars helped form the story that is now our present.

The painting, “Pry: When you try to forcibly remove a fundamental part of yourself, what is left is not clean or pristine.” is inspired by the experience that helped found this new understanding. The character tries to pry off unsightly evidence of her life in the water, hoping to reveal a pristine surface to represent a more ideal self. She is, instead, left with wounds, pock marks, and inflammation from attempting to remove and destroy a fundamental, though not so pretty, part of her history and self. When faced with her body's abjection, she finds that she cannot become full by emptying the truth.

That understanding pushes me to find a way to keep those memories, to collect them and give them a new signifier since the original signifiers are gone. The images are meant to be evocative of emotion and focus on perception more than reality, on the feeling of a place more than an accurate image of it. “Paper paper cranes” is an example of this attempt to create a new signifier, and focuses on the constructed aspects of memory by the construction of the image

through the use of cut-outs repurposed from an earlier painting. The salient figure sits patiently, watching as the wash figure reaches for something, but we don't know what.

The figures in my work are set against the white of the paper, implying a psychological space by stripping evidence of a real location from the figures' surroundings. I am zooming out from the figure to create a feeling of voyeurism, though the viewer is ambiguous. I am hoping to imply a viewer that is "other" as well as viewer as "self" reflecting on the projection of a memory. In "Grasshopper," the point of view is drawn back and above the figure and establishes a hierarchy by giving the viewer an obvious observation of a candid personal moment and slightly awkward pose. To further support the voyeuristic feel, the paintings measure 50x70", and function as a blown up 5x7" snapshot of a psychological moment in time. Through these snapshots, I hope to capture a raw and honest vulnerability that comes with introspection and self-examination.

The large scale paintings are a combination of watercolor, ink, gouache, and drawing materials on paper. The materials are the most appropriate for this body of work, as they are intentional layers of water compounds that have been deposited upon and forever changed a strong but delicate surface. The raw paper is symbolic of what was. Each layer of paint, wash, and mark-making represent the gradual buildup of time. The finished product now holds not only the original memories of my experience, but also the new memory of the process of building this physical signifier.

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