

Memories Americana: Finding Peace Through Metacognition and Memory

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Introduction

Even with a degree in critical studies, I have never really thought of myself as someone with all the right words for any given situation. Though I strive to build a powerful lexicon, I have recently been asking myself, why and for whom? I have a particularly strong disposition to overthink and hold anxiety about trivial things. Overthinking, coupled with a mood disorder, can make life nauseatingly complicated. I identified these complications through a fair amount of rumination, and they arise from my pathologized anxiety concerning pervasive social expectations. We live in a society that demands us to rise to or above the expectations it sets forth. These are expectations that seem to materialize out of thin air and take precedent without a literal dialogue between the social rule and its constituents. A salient example of the abstract materialization of social rules influencing social behavior before being explicitly taught is the use of “road rules” concerning a child observing the act of driving. Over time a child will inherently learn, for the most part, proper driving etiquette through self-observation and cognition before the maxims of consequence are uttered or explained. This cavalier attitude towards awareness of personal actions and those actions’ social rule correlates has perplexed me for years; how can you half know something? How can one do and experience life without knowing how or why? It is here, with these deep questions in mind, where I begin the process of learning and accepting the fractured reality of a mind made uneasy in hopes of finding a happy medium within potent memories, experiences and emotions. In other words, this body of work, *Memories Americana: Finding Peace Through Metacognition and Memory*, is an attempt to learn from my personal past by looking into my memories to regain parts of myself lost to circumstance and pervasive social expectations. The process of looking back is often haunting, it is like you are floating through space and time, never getting a full glimpse or mental picture of

the place the memory happened. Instead, memories are more like a puzzle or mosaic of sorts. Memories are the pieces, and each memory draws its value and context from the pieces surrounding it. In order to see the whole memory more clearly, one must step back and observe the bigger picture. My hope is that the paintings in this body of work command the viewer to do just that when viewing my work—step back, look and just experience it.

Metacognition

This perplexing situation about experience became a little less perplexing when I stumbled across the term *metacognition* in a paper. Metacognition is to be aware of one's thoughts, behavior, ideas, or thinking patterns. Since then, I have started to bridge the gap in understanding between a childlike naïve awareness in cognitive behavior, and metacognition to work through my pathologized overthinking. The “stepping back” I mentioned earlier is good layman’s term for metacognition. Since I now have a term explaining my own self-awareness of anxiousness, I now approach my paintings in a very meditative and therapeutic way. Because I have now started to see the value of knowing that painting is the remedy to finding peace and self-awareness, it is my therapy. Therapy requires embracing “process” that is paramount to the progression of internal conflicts and embracing the process of painting within my practice is now a requirement.

The painting process is seldom salient to the viewer which lends a mysterious quality that I have always found so enticing about paintings themselves. I take advantage of this childlike mystery and utilize it for its unbelievable charm to formulate colorful abstract meta-paintings illustrating my own metacognitive experience. My paintings act as a stand-in for the ways in which we as humans negotiate meaning and construct the world around us through images. Whether or not people understand or like the conceptual underpinnings of my work is secondary to my own intentions, but equally as important, because without the viewer how would my

paintings influence others to slow down and think about the peculiar existence we share as human beings. In the end, my primary function is to allow this metacognitive practice to help me formulate the means to a happy, healthy life through my awareness and terms.

I create my paintings to experience myself and my life through color, patterns, texture, hues, and abstractions. According to aesthetics philosopher John Dewey, “Life is an experience [...that] occurs continuously because the interaction of live creatures and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living.”¹ We, as contemporary humans, are constantly changing and adapting to the times. Living a fast-paced, instant everything life calls for fast progression and exceedingly high expectations. With these high expectations, it can seem nearly impossible for me to gain solid footing, which is why I lean into the creative process. Living with these expectations can make life very difficult for someone with mental illness. In living with mental illness, I can sometimes either feel defeated or inspired to get ahead. I have the choice to learn to live with an illness and let it subjugate me into a rather small definitive group or I can utilize the creative process to find peace within my own experience.

Meta-pictures

In utilizing metacognition as a systematic approach to my artistic practice, it is my belief that my paintings fall into and explore the theoretical makings of a *meta-picture*. A meta-picture according to W.J.T. Mitchell, is a picture about a picture—or more acutely— a picture that is used to show what a picture does.² In order to understand this pictorial classification a little bit better one must know the essential characteristics of how a meta-picture functions and influences

¹John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Minton, Balch & Company), 1-20.

² W.J.T. Mitchell, “Chapter 2: Metapictures,” in *Picture Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 35.

the way we see and live in the world. According to Mitchell, a meta-picture is an amalgamation of iconology used from our everyday life which creates, “our living world, a world that is not merely represented by pictures, but actually constituted and brought into being by picture making.”³ It is from this theoretical constitution of “our world” in which I build the case for the type of imagery that I utilize within my work— *Americana spaces* such as suburbia and motels, carnivals, gas station and trailer parks. Not only are spaces such as these lived and experienced spaces⁴ for American viewers, but they are spaces in which we understand through a multitude of artistic cultural expressions and representations of those spaces as well. Mitchell constitutes this creation of imagery as the nesting of outside images (first order discourse) vs. inside images (second order discourse) and their perceived meaning(s).⁵ It is in the experience of seeing representations of these spaces as well as our lived experience of these spaces which constitutes a literal understanding of Mitchell’s notion of outside vs. inside. To put it another way, this describes a real space vs. how we interpret said space. The way in which I accentuate this quality throughout my work (Figures 1-7) is in the fracturing or demarcating of space through line and color shift. These fractures in the image are meant to represent the suturing of our lived experience and our conceptual experience and the tension that presents itself when we attempt to understand the reality of these spaces.

³ Ibid., 41.

⁴ When mentioning *lived* spaces, I mean to reference any real quantifiable space with which a human has had tangible interactions with. When mentioning *experienced* space, I mean to reference a conceptual relationship between a place and a person- much like experiencing Las Vegas through a YouTube documentary. You don’t have to be there to experience what it may be like.

⁵ Ibid., 42.

Another way that my paintings echo the essence of a meta-picture is through formal compositional elements that are utilized to navigate the viewer through the tensions present within the paintings. In the paintings *How Bizarre HowBizarre*, *Just a Thought*, *California Dreamin'*, *Motel Americana*, *What the Shell?*, *Summer Nights and Carnival Lights*, and *Trailer Park Paradise* (Figures 1-7), I utilize color and line in ways that very literally represent the ways in which a viewer's eyes may move throughout the composition. This constant negotiation of space is central to understanding the images as meta paintings. Two specific examples of this effect (Figure 3 and 4) are within the shadow lines on the ground planes as well as the reflection lines inside the window-like motifs. The directional forces of these motifs are central to explaining the way in which the picture was created as well as how the viewer navigates through the painting. In other words, these formal qualities are the formal ways in which this painting reflects back onto itself in order for the viewer to access what it is they are seeing. These tiny elements are what keep the viewer locked into the investigation of each aspect of the image, keeping them forever looking. This shifting between each fractured mini image within the paintings is what also classifies these meta-pictures as *Multi-stable Images*.

Multi-stable Images

Multi-stable images according to Mitchell, are images that, “function as reflections on the basic nature of pictures, places where pictorial representation displays itself for inspections rather than effacing itself in the service of a transparent representation [or narrative] of something else.”⁶ The ways in which my paintings can be seen as multi-stable images are again through the fracturing of the form and picture planes. Each singular fractured area is necessary for understanding the entire sequence of fractured areas. As Mitchell puts it, each boundary

⁶ Ibid., 48.

between outside/inside image, or real and conceptual imagery, is that each fractured area, “does not refer to itself but rather creates a general gestalt in which a necessary shifting of one reference to another is achieved.”⁷ This shifting in reference points within the literal formal qualities of the painting itself as well as the conceptual and psychological qualities of the viewer is what constitutes another level of self-reference, “this self-reference is elicited within the multi-stable image through that of the observer as well as the meta-picture itself.”⁸ Multi-stable imagery according to Mitchell must always ask itself, as well as its observer, “‘What am I?’, ‘How do I look?’ or ‘how do I locate myself?’”⁹ These types of questions are what bring us back full circle to the umbrella theme of *metacognition*. My paintings are all about investigating experiences such as lived, formal and conceptual.

It should be noted that although the intentions brought to the forefront of creating these images are deeply rooted in creating some sort of visual and personal stable order in my life, I can see that my finished paintings almost achieve the exact opposite. Figures 1-7 do not really provide a sense of stability or structure without critical viewing. With this opposite effect in mind, my paintings present the salient reason for the presence of the viewer. Without the viewer, who would investigate and attempt to answer the painting’s question of, “What am I?”.

Thematic Expression

The themes present in my work revolve around vernacular Americana spaces. Including: suburbia, motels, gas stations, carnivals and trailer parks. These are spaces in which most of my viewers can relate by either the connection to American visual culture or through direct

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

experience. The reason I chose such common spaces is because I have found myself living inside such spaces in the past and a visceral memory reaction is created for me through such imagery. As I try to reconstruct these memories in visual form, there is a parallel experience happening between the conceptual space of memory and the thematic trope of the selected Americana spaces. Both memory and the Americana spaces I choose are what I would deem transitional spaces. Meaning, much like memories in the mind's eye, Americana spaces such as gas stations and carnivals are places that are passed through quickly and relate to the viewer in small fragments due to their high stimulation and short term occupancy. Just think, could a viewer really experience everything within these spaces saliently and remember it all? Or is the actual experience much like a memory, only taken in small fragments. My large-scale paintings are an attempt to ask and answer these questions. In the end, the chosen theme of American spaces and memory is a poignant attempt at creating a collective experience that can be appreciated by all, as we all have memories, and we all live within and experience Americana spaces.

Art Historical Influences

I gather most of my style from artists Joan Miro, Mark Tobey, Stuart Davis and David Hockney. I admire their passion for the exploration in finding the most authentic version of experience and meaning. I also admire their visual abstractions, which are often monumental in size and force us to reckon with the absurdity of reality and cast doubt upon the way we view the world. The most prominent aspect of these artists' influence on me is their use, understanding, and experimentation with color, shape, pattern, and compositional size. Joan Miro's surrealist palette, hard gestural line, and shape variation invite the viewer into an eerie but structured metaphysical space (Figure 8). Mark Tobey uses meditative calligraphy intertwined with color fields to create a space that metaphorically vibrates (Figure 9). Stuart Davis utilizes large abstract shapes that resemble cut-out paper to construct his vibrant environmental spaces (Figure 10).

Lastly, David Hockney has a mid-twentieth century retro color palette that calmly helps the viewer navigate his absurd compositions and landscapes (Figure 11). These painters have always inspired me with their complex conceptual and compositional subject matter, coupled with distilled painting techniques. At their most basic level, the rawness of such paintings inspires me to look clearly at the soft nuances and subtle variations. The innovative process-based techniques mimic different planes of existence in the most elegant ways. These sorts of things always seemed to be the most rewarding and honest things to get out of art.

In addition to demonstrating my metacognitive process, my paintings (figures 1-7) utilize four major techniques culled from my art historical influences (figures 8-11). The first technique used to create a surrealist space is the use of simple collage-style shapes to abstract and distort space. The arrangement of single-color shapes allows me to meditate while I sort out the composition details and create the necessary qualities of a multi-stable meta-picture. The second technique used within my paintings is pattern making. I work out a delicate balance between pattern and solid color in multiple single-application sessions. Each color and pattern are put down with paint, allowed to dry, and only then do I decide whether to add more color or pattern. Each session mimics and represents my systematic metacognition, giving shape and color to my feelings, thoughts, ideas, and insecurities. This “giving of shape” allows me to see my experience without feeling overwhelmed by unstructured and chaotic thoughts and mood patterns. The third technique, and probably the most important in my practice as a painter, is color schematics. I utilize Hockney-like color combinations (figure 11) to set a mood for each metacognitive therapy painting. The retro hues and heightened local colors of a Hockney painting bring a childlike wonderment and curiosity to the viewer. The juxtaposition of color and metacognitive content is intentional. The paintings’ (Figure 1-7) color schemes bring an air of naïve openness to my

vulnerability, depicting a deep subject and personal process with inviting colors which mimic my hope that others may go about searching and understanding themselves in a curious yet self-structured way. It was also intentional that there are no figures or human interactive objects, doing so would dictate some sort of an underlying narrative, and since these are paintings about the making of pictures i.e., memories, then the viewer is there haunting the space rather than interacting with the paintings, much like in their own experience with the metacognitive process of locating memories.

By honoring the layering process in all my paintings, I am honoring the process of healing and understanding. The brush strokes of each color represent the layers of habits that we humans act out in order to live, some acts are mistakes and other acts are successes. Up close, my paintings have a somewhat unfinished quality, and this reflects the balance between what appears to be a mistake and what does not. Embracing this ebb and flow between success and loss creates the balance I seek. In other words, by creating art through metacognitive means I allow myself to explore, accept and organize all aspects of myself.

Conclusion

Dewey theorized that “no matter what intentions are compelled on the artwork by the artist, an unknowable experience would present itself.”¹⁰ At the end of the day, concept aside, I aim to create an area in which viewers can visually contemplate and relate to the ordering of information; whether that information relates to the viewer’s life is subjective. I hope to persuade the viewer to take the time to look and notice the nuances within the painting, hoping to possibly inspire that same thinking in other aspects of their life. I believe it is important for us, as conscious beings in the world, to investigate the ways in which we create meaning and

¹⁰ Ibid.

perception of the world around us. I believe that I can utilize my color and surface techniques to benefit the experience I am trying to create: a painting utilizing a meta-gestalt and surrealist color palette that will offer a pleasing yet curiously haunting experience; a visual experience that attempts to represent the way in which we experience the world both past and present.

Figures



Figure 1. *How Bizarre, How Bizarre*. 36" x 48". Acrylic on canvas. 2020.

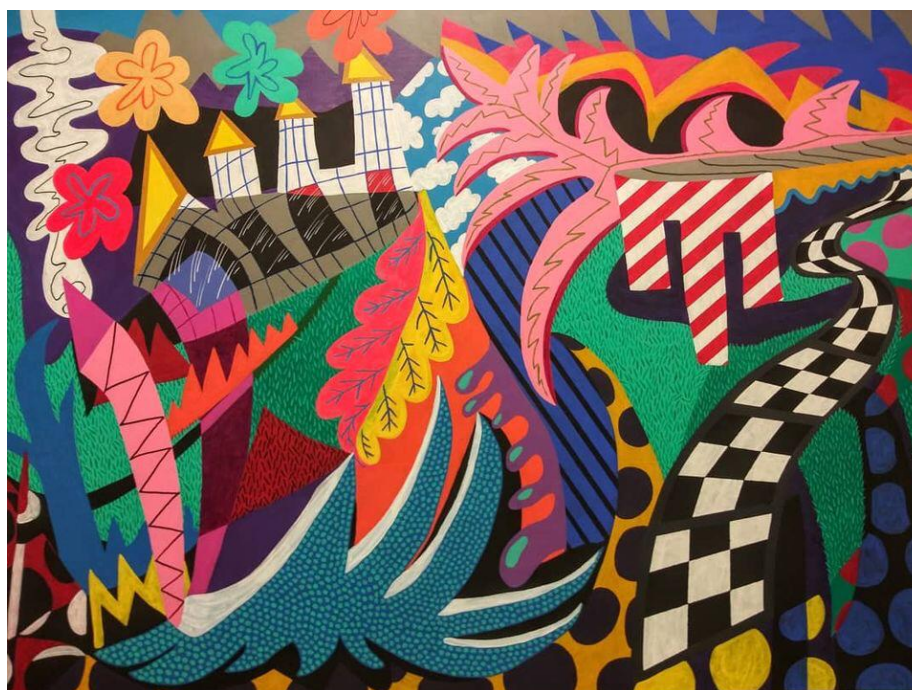


Figure 2. *Just a Thought*. 36" x 48". Acrylic on canvas. 2020.



Figure 3. *California Dreamin'*. 48" x 72" diptych. Acrylic on canvas. 2020.



Figure 4. *Motel Americana*. 48" x 72" diptych. Acrylic on canvas. 2021.



Figure 5. *What the Shell?*. 48" x 96" diptych. Acrylic on canvas. 2022.



Figure 6. *Summer Nights and Carnival Lights*. 48" x 96" diptych. Acrylic on canvas. 2022.



Figure 7. *Trailer Park Paradise*. 48" x 120" triptych. Acrylic on canvas. 2022

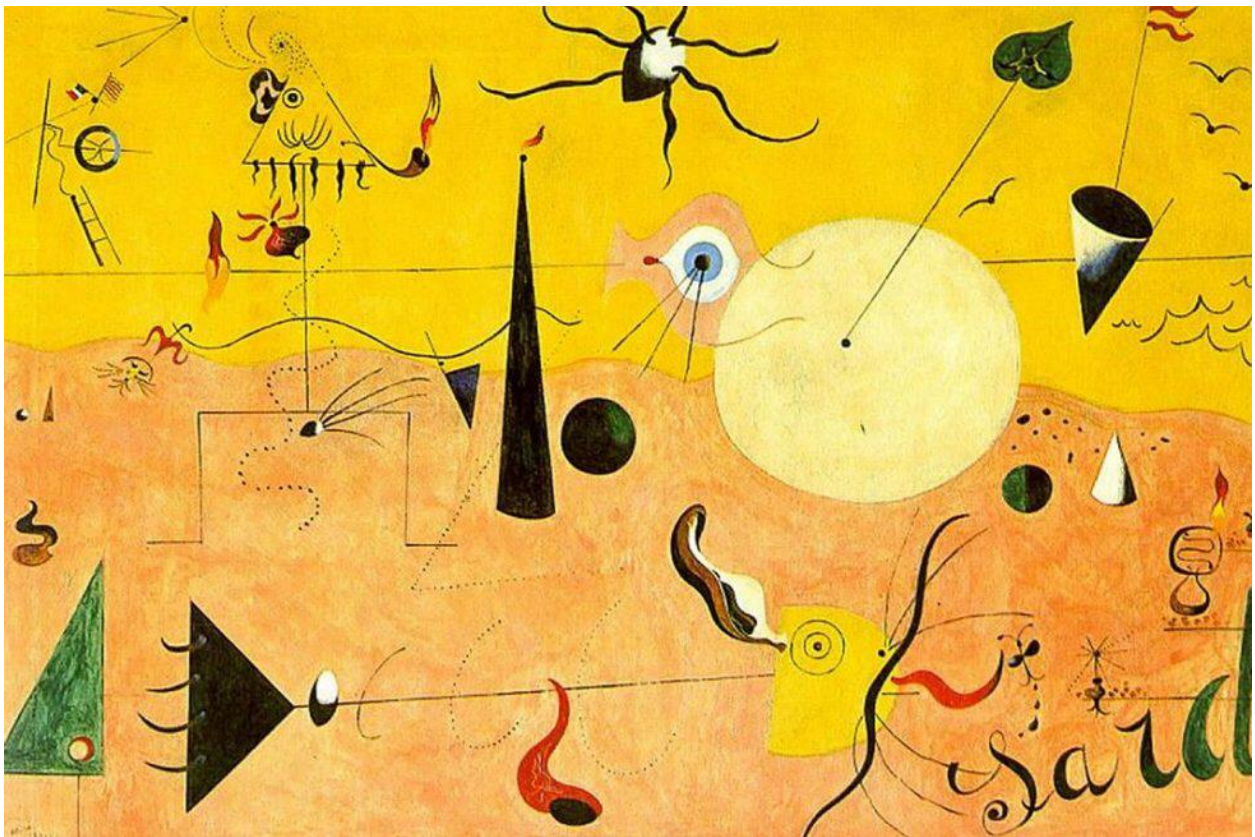


Figure 8. *Catalan Landscape*. 26" x 38". Oil on canvas. 1924.



Figure 9. *To Life*. 13" x 10". Color Etching. 1974.



Figure 10. *Composition (June Jitterbug Jive)*. 8" x 12". Oil on Canvas. 1940.



Figure 11. *Landscape with Shadows*. 82" x 144". Oil and Acrylic on canvas. 2021

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