

**TITLE PAGE**

DISPOSABLE PLEASURES:

Observing the Banality of Vice

by

Sonja M. Novak

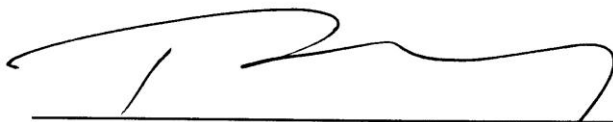
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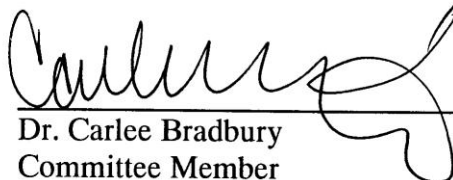
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## **ABSTRACT**

If seen in the street, the subject matter of my paintings would most likely be passed by without a second thought. Passers-by might shake their heads at senseless littering, or a Good Samaritan might go so far as to relocate the bit of detritus to its proper resting place in a trashcan. I paint the scattered refuse of our society, the discarded pleasures of our daily lives.

Vices are my main focus. Objects that are coveted and consumed, often with a pang of guilt, only to ultimately be discarded. Cigarettes, beer, junk food. Things that have the ability to cause harm yet are still indulged in anyways. I am instead questioning how value is determined, and showing that even unassuming pieces of trash have potential merit.

I work in both oil and watercolor, executing multiple paintings of the same object in similar compositions. The different mediums complement each other. Using a variety of mediums helps me to more fully capture my subject. Each painting, each medium, allows me to capture a different facet of the object, and combine together to form a cohesive image of my subject as a whole.

Ultimately, I hope to help myself and others appreciate the value of the world around us a little more, down to the minutest detail. My subjects are used up and discarded once their purpose is fulfilled, no longer important. The once highly coveted is demoted into something worthless, just a piece of trash.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **An Introduction**

Upon entering the Masters program at Radford University, I was convinced that my exit show consist of much the same subject matter that my undergraduate senior show was on, but I turned out to have been gravely mistaken. During my undergraduate degree I created a series of large female nudes glorifying the female figure. Now, I have moved on to create still lives of things that, although less alive, still prove capable of inducing an equal amount of passion.

I began my artistic career as an art major but not yet a painter. Initially I was focused on drawing, not on painting. I had not painted much before entering college, and had never experimented with my current medium of paint. On account of my inexperience with the medium the prospect of oil paints was slightly intimidating. Once I started using them, however, my affair with oils progressed swiftly. The first steps were taken hesitantly, and then I was taken over by them in a headlong rush. I was introduced to oil painting through the drawings that I was doing at the time. Working on large-scale depictions of the female nude in oil pastels, it was a natural progression for me to attempt to depict them in oil paints as well.

My undergraduate series of nudes, my ‘Ladies’ as I called them, began in one of my drawing classes. Once past the introductory courses, my professor gave us the option of more free-range exploration in which we would choose our own subject matter and work independently, and periodically he would give us guidance and feedback on our progression.

The semester it all began, my professor gave the class a quote to work off of and interpret as we would. The quote was: “The punishment for perfection is reproduction.” I

took this quote in a literal sense, in relation to the past and present demands placed on women to adhere to stringent physical aesthetic expectations. I also addressed the inherent negativity in the imperative to follow certain societal demands. For example, the pressure to produce children while being the perfectly flawless little housewife, with that being the only course a woman could hope for in life without facing ridicule and opposition. Sylvia Plath expresses a similar sentiment when she stated that “Most American males worship woman as a sex machine with small rounded breasts and a convenient opening in the vagina, as a painted doll who shouldn’t have a thought in her pretty head other than cooking a steak dinner and comforting him in bed” (Schneir 34). I am of the belief that a woman should not be forced into certain roles simply because of her gender or because she is thought of by some as inferior and incapable, and it was with this conviction that I began my series of female nudes, a genre once strictly verboten to women painters. This exploration of the repression of women eventually evolved into a celebration of the beauty and potential of all women, regardless of size or station.

Feminism and its progress through the years had a significant impact on my early work as I examined the ways in which women had and still continue to be put down. John Stuart Mill wrote, “We tend to accept whatever is as “natural”” (Hess and Baker 1). Thus for millennia it was looked on as normal for women to be treated as inferior as men. While men were confident, dominant, braving forays into the world, women followed his commands as mistress of the home and its running. So it had been for longer than memory, and so it seemed only right that situations should remain as they were.

The eras directly preceding our current one placed women in a definitive position of subservience. In an etiquette book entitled *The Family Monitor and Domestic Guide* that was

popular in both the United States and England, written in 1844 by Mrs. Sarah Ellis, young women are warned against the perils of trying too hard to excel at any one thing. A woman may render herself generally useful (to a man) by being able to do a number of things tolerably well. Devoted study to one thing, however, takes her attention away from her duties to home, parents, or husband, and is to “be avoided as evil” (Hess and Baker 28). This was far from the only constraint placed on Victorian women. Their feminine ideal of the “true woman” possessed piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Buszek 31). Times have certainly changed. Although not without their own stringent standards of behavior and beauty (such as the imperative to look like a photoshopped supermodel), most modern women would be likely to laugh in the face of anyone who told her she must adhere to the ideals forced on Victorian women.

Following these demands of strict compliance there was a brief time when women experienced a surge in self-sufficiency and independence. During World War II when so many of America’s men were deployed to fight, women had to step in to fill the vacancies in the factories and elsewhere that had been created in the men’s absence in order to support themselves and their families. Such freedoms were unfortunately short lived. When the war ended and the weary troops returned home, they returned to their former jobs as well, and women were driven back to the home with a constructed myth of “the ideal American woman as [either] a dependant and happy homemaker... [or] sex object, kept childlike by a permanently arrested development” (Buszek 236). Betty Freidan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, felt that war-weary troops, worn down by long and bloody battles, were eager to return home to a nostalgic version of home and hearth. The trials of war made men, and the woman they had left behind, willing to conform to an imaginary, idealized approximation of



what life was like before the war (Buszek 240). Through the myth of the kittenish, passive, frivolous and childlike housewife, woman was once more beholden to man, for nowhere in that fantasy of domestic bliss was there room for woman to think and function intelligently or independently from a man.

Looking back from a modern perspective it is impossible for me to comprehend why women would consent to give up their briefly held freedoms. It is not that I think a woman should not ever be a housewife. If that is what brings a woman true joy, then of course that is the path she should pursue. What I cannot support is the compulsion to be one, with no alternatives for those for whom that lifestyle would be a burden. This restriction to only motherhood was one of my key themes in my series of Ladies. *Lady Madonna with Child* (figure 20) and *Beast of Burden* (figure 21) show the mother as a saint, and the mother as unappreciated conveyor of youth, respectively. Their bright colors convey hope and optimism and, as with all of my Ladies, they retain elegance and strength within their roles of mother.



Fig. 20 *Madonna with Child*



Fig. 21 *Beast of Burden*

Modern women, too, share the burden of restricting roles and ideals of beauty. Women are urged to be tall, skinny, blonde and, if they can help it, young (Levy 12). Despite it being physically impossible for so many women to attain this goal, we are told that we are failures if we do not do so (Savacool 21). We are told that we are hideous, and that no man will want us if we are not skinny and pretty. We are taught to hate each other, and ourselves and to never be able to admit, “I am beautiful” (Chapkis 6). My first oil pastel was an expression of the self-loathing of women. *First Lady* (figure 22) is imbued with the darkness generated by hatred of self.



Fig. 22 *First Lady*

She carries scars from surgeries that were supposed to make her feel more attractive but never did. Scars from self-inflicted emotional wounds, normally hidden, are laid bare. Emaciated ribs show how she starves herself to lose just 5 more pounds, and beneath those ribs a human heart beats, a heart that must grow three sizes, and learn to love itself.

My undergraduate body of work explored the issues of women's repression and unrealistic self-image. Excepting my first, dark Lady, I did so through the distortion of the female body in pin-up style poses in bright, cheerful colors. My Ladies were done initially on large sheets of heavy brown cardstock-like paper, and eventually I transitioned to large-scale oil on canvas. *Orange Lady* (figure 1) and *Envy* (figure 2) show how the two mediums directly relate to each other. The figure is completed in the same manner, simply on a different surface.



Fig. 1 *Orange Lady*

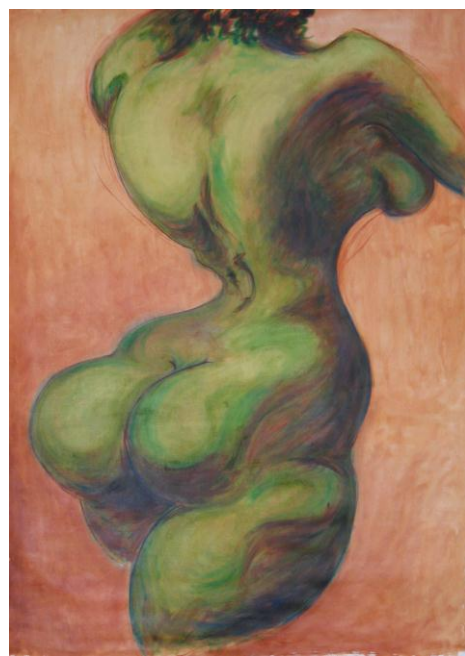


Fig. 2 *Envy*

The distortion of the figure and unnatural coloring of the skin is a direct reflection of the narrowly inhibiting, warped views on what constitutes femininity. The breasts and buttocks of my Ladies were enlarged to a size that referenced the tumescent figures of prehistoric fertility goddesses like the Venus de Willendorf. Contrasting with this overblown proportion the waist was shrunk down to become miniscule and wasp-like, reflecting the current obsession with thinness that is often taken to unhealthy extremes. The arms were generally left out as a reflection of how women are often viewed as weak, for a woman

cannot strike back in defense of herself, metaphorically or otherwise, if she has none. The head was reduced to a flowing mane of hair and a pair of full, pouting lips. With no need of a brain for independent thought, a woman's focus could be concentrated on perfecting the art of a coy smile, and on delicately arranging softly mounding sweet smelling curls that a potential husband could run his fingers through in wonderment as he drinks in her appearance.

My Ladies are by no means negative works. Despite the fact that I was exploring some of the unfavorable conditions that being female can result in, ultimately my Ladies are a celebration of overcoming adversity and triumphing when we are told that we are doomed to failure. They caution that there are still great strides to be made on the road to equality, but remind us of how far we have already come. The graceful joy that I imbued in all of my Ladies is an expression of the beauty, worth, and potential that can be found within all women, regardless of external appearance or station in life.

While I knew that my work would invariably change over the course of my graduate career, I had never imagined that it would change as drastically as it has. I envisioned that I would still be creating nudes, only more skillfully executed with greater knowledge of proportion and variety in my handling of distortion of the figure. Entering graduate school changed the details of my life completely. I became unrooted from who I was. I lacked drive and confidence, and my paintings became unsure, timid. My paintings reflected my struggle to adjust. My Ladies foundered, losing their footing in my artistic world. I had lost my confidence in them as well as in myself, a fact that became painfully obvious. I was going through the motions, creating works out of habit rather than strength of feeling or vision. My increasing skill in handling the proportion of the figure toned down my distortion of it and I

began to try to show women in a more realistic light (figure 3) rather than stylized stereotypes, but the vision behind the paintings was no longer as distinct.



Fig. 3 *Nude 5*

The message was weakening and, already having been brought to fruition once in the form of my undergraduate exit show, the driving passion behind it was beginning to fade. Cowboy wisdom tells us “when your horse dies, get off” (Bales and Orland 45). My artistic horse had died. It was time to dismount and search for a fresh one.

I had always been opposed to the idea of painting still lifes, under the false impression that they were boring and pedantic, a thing of the past. I had inherited the academic scorn for genre that had existed until recent times (Ebert-Schifferer 281). I felt that still life had its place, and could be instructive and enjoyed, but that as a figure painter, the genre was somehow beneath me. Yet with some gentle, and not so gentle prompting, I gave them a try and saw their worth in the present as the veil of prejudice was lifted from my eyes. I had a rocky beginning with still life as I once more searched for my voice and rebuilt my



work from the bottom up, learning new techniques and expanding my skill in handling the material. For a time, my still lifes were slightly boring, as I had feared they would be. They were studies more than anything as I tried to articulate what it was I was trying to express. *Still life with Plant, Book, and Spoon* (figure 4) holds the potential for some of the variation in brushwork that I later achieved, but I have not yet reached the point of distinct expression.



Fig. 4 *Still Life with Plant, Book, and Spoon*

As I chugged along at my studies, searching for a voice, I eventually got my feet under me once more, and struck upon my current path of observing neglected yet valued objects, things that are coveted, used, and ultimately forgotten as soon as their purpose has been served. Just as I once showed the merit in the down trodden masses of womankind, I now display the worth inherent in the discarded rubble of our society; both subjects deemed unworthy in their existence, held up for observation and appreciation. This series got its start when I painted a crushed Keystone beer can.



Fig. 5 *Keystone*

It holds the beginnings of my future works, and, with the isolated object dominating the canvas, and with the predominantly unified color of the ground, references to my past, although now the background was broken up with lively brushstrokes.

Despite the apparent outward alteration of my work, at its core it has remained reasonably similar. It is still, ultimately, about the observation of those facets of life that are frequently ignored. This continued focus on disregarded things is a reflection of an element in myself. Over the years I have noticed that in my day-to-day life I seem to notice little details that others seem ignorant to, at times to a fault in a not seeing the forest for the trees kind of way. Just as that is a failing, so is only seeing the forest and consequently missing the beauty of an elegantly arching limb, with single vibrant leaf clinging tenuously to it, quivering delicately in the grip of a sylvan breeze.

Previously, I was drawing attention to the unrealistic expectations that western women have been laden down with. While conditions have undoubtedly improved in some

respects over the course of recent years, the uncomfortable truth is that equality has not been fully attained. Regardless of how much we might wish that it has been, or how hard we try to convince ourselves that it has, there are still great strides to be made. Women still fight for their basic reproductive rights, battling invasive procedures and ensuring access to birth control, and I strove to show the necessity of awareness of ourselves and current issues concerning our rights.

From marginalized women made to feel inferior, to the paraphernalia associated with vices such as smoking, I continue to show things that tend to make people uncomfortable. Demons prefer to hide in the dark, where they are easily ignored. We do not like to admit to ourselves that women are not yet fully equal or that our pack a day habit will eventually give us lung cancer. There are times, however, when our demons must be brought out into the light and aired and confronted. My subjects of drinking and smoking carry with them powerful and often negative connotations. My intent in choosing them as my subject was never to anger or offend my viewers. My hope is to show that something that seems small and insignificant can be more than it appears, to help my objects shed their negativity, and to rise above their humble beginnings. My subject matter is not inherently bad and can bring significant enjoyment in their responsible indulgence, either in their original state, or as one of my paintings.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Inspirations**

From Rembrandt to Degas and beyond, painters have developed the ability to look at ugly or distressing things like a tired worker, an old woman worn from years of hard work a



dirty factory or a bloody revolution, and through the magic of line and light transform them into something strikingly beautiful (Edman 20). Still life painters, myself included, choose to focus on the objects of this downtrodden world ignored by human greatness. We focus on those dull and ordinary items that form the unassuming foundation of life yet are constantly overlooked by the 'important' despite the fact that its walls of greatness have been built upon the same mundane bedrock it neglects (Bryson 61).

My paintings enter into this lengthy and oft undervalued tradition of still life painting. The genre has existed nearly as long as painting itself has, as cultures across the globe have made the attempt to transport the mundane materials of their existence, a record of all that they are, into the realm of the immortal by transforming them into eternal art. Too frequently still life painting is regarded as inferior and as one of the low forms of high art. Critics have questioned the legitimacy of the genre since antiquity, and the relatively young discipline of art history was burdened by those same prejudices. It was only after World War II that still life painting began to receive recognition as a legitimate source for cultural and social history, as well as holding artistic value (Ebert-Schifferer 12). The subject matter of still lifes was considered unworthy of attention because it did not depict some famous moment individual in history, but therein rest its strengths. Rather than relying on the emotion of a momentous event to sway the viewer it transforms the uneventful happenings of life into exceptional moments of timeless beauty and import. Still life can tell us where we came from, who we are, where we are, and how we got here (Ebert-Schifferer 12).

The term "still life" comes from the Dutch word *stilleven*, which first came into use in the seventeenth century (Kahr 189). Strictly speaking the term refers to the depiction of objects that lack the capacity for self-governed motion. Flowers, food, books, musical

instruments, tools, utensils and decorative objects were all common elements in a Dutch *stilleven* (Kahr 189). A common theme across nations was mimesis, in which the still life was intended to look as realistic as possible. The French called this *tromp l'oeil*, “to deceive the eye,” and the Dutch referred to it as *betriegertje*, meaning “little deception” (Ebert-Schiffner 16). The goal of both was to make the objects appear as real as possible to cause viewers to want to reach out and touch them to assure themselves that the surface of the painting is actually flat.

Still lifes existed long before the Dutch invented a name for it. The Greeks decorated their homes and floors with mosaics of common foodstuffs and daily objects. Pliny the Elder tells of Peiraikos (third century b.c.), who painted barbershops and vegetables. For his depictions of ordinary life he came to be called ‘the painter of vulgar subjects, and *rhyparographos*, which literally translates as “dirt painter” (Ebert-Schiffner 15). Existing in the shadow of more important figurative or religious works, still lifes were looked on as popular with the public, but ultimately unimportant (Ebert-Schiffner 12).

By the fifteenth century painters began to intensify the meaning of their pictures by including objects from the everyday world in inset still lifes that were part of the composition as a whole (Ebert-Schiffner 27). From there, the first proper still lifes were on the backs or outside of private devotional figures (Ebert-Schiffner 29). These first still lifes were separated from but directly related to the main figural composition. The components of these still lifes were composed of symbolic elements that reaffirmed the message of the main composition. A skull reflects man’s mortality, while an errant fly stood in for the devil (Ebert-Schiffner 31). Symbolism, religious or otherwise, has remained a common theme throughout still life history.

There was a sharp increase in still lifes in modern Europe around 1600, for reasons unknown (Ebert-Schifferer 75). Many of these early still lifes were simple fruit arrangements, such as *Peaches in a White Ceramic Basket* (figure 23), by Fede Galizia.



Fig. 23 *Peaches in a White Ceramic Basket*

In this wonderfully executed painting “each piece of fruit is subjected to intense scrutiny and its most minute details are recorded with a delicacy that seems almost worshipful...” (Ebert-Schifferer 76). Richly detailed without being stiff or losing vitality, one can feel the crisp slightly chilled surface of the ceramic bowl, contrasting with the tender blush and velvet down gently coating the sweet fruits long turned to dust.

The Dutch favored flowers, and floral arrangements were frequently agents of disguised symbolism in fifteenth century Netherlandish altarpieces (Kahr 191). Eventually these transformed into independent still lifes of elaborate bouquets bursting with flowers that would never bloom together in nature. The artists did studies of individual flowers as they bloomed, and combined them later. Not only is the brief life of a flower symbolic of the transience of earthly things, but each bloom holds a specific meaning as well. The Madonna Lily, for instance, logically represents the Virgin Mary (Kahr 191). The Dutch have continued their love affair with flowers over the centuries. Tulip Mania gripped them in the

early 1600s, and was a massive speculative bubble. The bubble ultimately burst, and tulips that one day were worth more than some homes were the next day hardly worth the dirt they were planted in. Even today the Dutch play a key role in the international floral market, shipping vast numbers of frail blossoms through their ports every day (Pollan). Although centuries separate us from Dutch flower painters, we still treasure the natural beauty of a flower, representing with poise and grace the futility and transience of all living things.

One of my favorite and most frequent subjects, smoking and cigarettes, is steeped in history. Through the connection of smoking to cancer and often death, it slightly references *memento mori* (be mindful of death), a reminder to man of his own mortality (Ebert-Schifferer 31). It more so is connected to *vanitas*, still lifes devoted exclusively to the contemplation of the brevity and futility of earthly existence (Ebert-Schifferer 136). Each cigarette is a brief flash swiftly spent and extinguished, much like a human life.

In addition to *memento mori* or *vanitas*, my paintings of cigarettes and cigarette boxes are related to the Dutch *toebakje*. *Toebakje* are still lifes about smoking, a habit even then considered not altogether proper or ideal. Just as it is today, the Dutch considered the relatively new habit of smoking (introduced around 1580 by sailors) to be a vice, often of the lower classes, that was impossible to prevent, and so was looked upon with resigned acceptance of the inevitable (Ebert-Schifferer 130). This seventeenth century genre of Dutch painting nearly mirrors the concepts I am exploring in my own paintings, of the inescapable permeation of vices throughout a given culture.

Juan Sánchez Cotán holds the distinction of having painted the first securely dated Spanish still life in 1602, as a pupil of Blas de Prado (Ebert-Schifferer 80). His paintings contain an almost hypnotic fascination because of their calculated compositions and rigorous

concentration on a limited number of objects. His compositions are almost always based on an elegant parabola, with dark background and bare surrounding stone niches. Nothing distracts the eye from his sharply lit vegetables, fruits, and wildfowl, all rendered with incredible precision (Ebert-Schifferer 80). Cotán made the attempt in his paintings to reverse the thinking that only important events are worthy by choosing as his subject what is generally considered to be least important, such as the disregarded contents of a larder, (figure 11, figure 12) and lavishing upon it the kind of care and attention normally reserved for the aforementioned supremely valued grand happenings (Bryson 64).



Fig. 11 *Still Life with Fruit and Vegetables*



Fig. 12 *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*

Finding joy in the ordinary as well, Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin taught us “that a pear is as alive as a woman, a kitchen crock as beautiful as an emerald” (Tsujimoto 43). He shows that the elegance of a sensually snaking line or the drama of a razor sharp highlight is not reserved for the human figure, but can also be found demarking the soft edge of a fruit, or on a half-full glass struck by the sun. All of creation, man-made or from the domain of nature hold the potential for beauty within their beings. There are further connections between my work and Chardin’s beyond the commonality of our subject matter. Much the same way that the eye can only focus on a narrow area and all else in the frame of vision fades outwards in increasing fuzziness, in some of his still lifes Chardin included areas of greater focus, and other spots that were more vague and lacking a high amount of detail. Further, his seemingly blank backgrounds are “filled with incident, with mysterious flickers and sparks of colour that can be as engaging to the eye as any of the presented objects” (Bryson 91).





Fig. 13 *Still-Life with Pipe and Jug*



Fig. 14 *Kitchen Utensils with Leeks and Eggs*

Despite the centuries separating our works, I have developed methods similar to those two traits. My often solitary objects contain areas of greater clarity that are intended for the eye to focus on, and are surrounded by backgrounds that I try to imbue with a subtle life all their own that harmonizes with the object, supporting its voice without losing its own.

Further influences from the past visible in my works come from Cezanne, specifically in his paint application. His multiple thin layers of pigment resulted in areas of canvas that were still visible in the finished painting along with the initial lines and preliminary sketches

that Cezanne laid down as he fine tuned his composition. Cezanne's *Still Life with Apples* (figure 15) demonstrates his leaving of bare patches on canvas as he builds and molds his scene. Figure 16, a detail from the watercolor *Still life with Apples, a Bottle and Chairback*, shows his technique for building the painting layer upon layer, from the initial sketch to the fully realized rounded form of the apple.

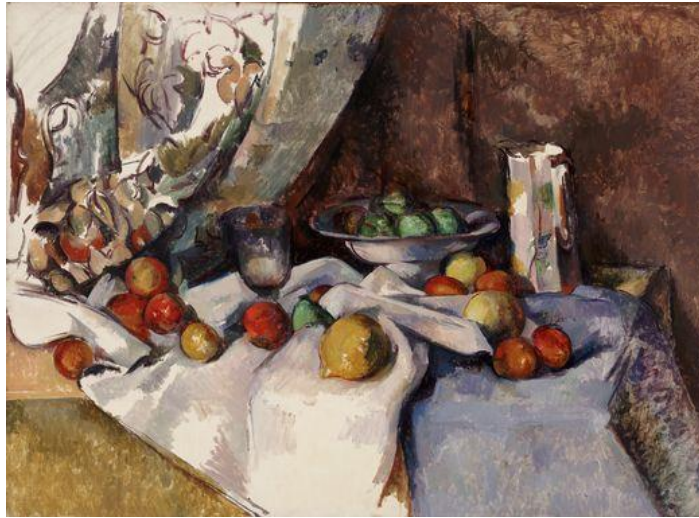


Fig. 15 *Still Life with Apples*

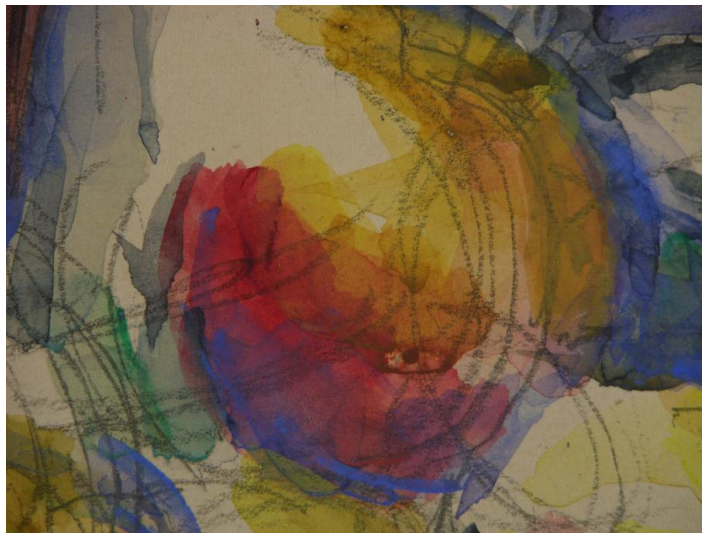


Fig. 16 Detail from *Still with with Apples Bottles and Chairback*

The use of thin layers of paint is more characteristic of the paintings I completed in my undergraduate years, such as the aforementioned *Envy* (figure 2), and my early graduate



works than in my current works, yet I still have a propensity for leaving visible those nearly bare patches and the questioning, exploratory lines of my preliminary sketch on the canvas.

It is not only the distant past whose influences can be seen in my paintings. Pop art is a recent movement that my paintings could be compared with. The Pop artists were concerned predominantly with mass-produced contemporary imagery, much as I am preoccupied with the commercial trappings that our society consumes and discards. The Pop artists rediscovered the object as both the glorified product of a new consumer society and as a disposable piece of trash in a new culture of waste (Ebert-Schifferer 378). Richard Hamilton, a forerunner of the movement, provided the following checklist of characteristics for the movement: “Popular (designed for the mass audience), transient (short-term solution), expendable (easily forgotten), low-cost, mass-produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business” (Shanes 22). While not a strict set of guidelines, and by no means definitive for the entirety of the movement, the list does provide a rough starting point for what works might be considered to be part of the Pop art movement.

### **Considering Cakes**

Often included in the movement, although not a full member of the ranks, stands Wayne Thiebaud. Far from the flat, slick, clean and modern industrial feel of many of the Pop artists, Thiebaud works in a painterly style that harkens back to the great masters of old (Tsujimoto 39). While he has also painted landscapes and the figure, he is most famous for depicting in glistening rows lushly modeled sumptuous cakes and pies, that glisten like idols within gleaming glass cases glowing with fluorescent light. The pastries of the past whisper faintly from the canvas with promises of fulfillment.

Thiebaud's cakes and pastries differ from what is to be considered quintessentially Pop. While the trend among Pop artists was to focus on commonplace happenings and objects, their focus was frequently directed at signs and sign systems; words, letters, numbers and writing. Their works were representations of already existing depictions of daily life, like comic strips and newspapers, one step removed from showing the objects of life directly (Tsujiimoto 38-39). Thiebaud's focus instead fell on the objects themselves, not previously existing secondary representations of them. His pastries like those in *Boston Cremes* (figure 17) are common confectionary trappings that would not look out of place in any corner bakery across America.



Fig. 17 *Boston Cremes*

In these ordinary baked goods, just as I do in my still lifes, he invites the viewer to “discover beauty and delight in that which we so often overlook” (Tsujiimoto 9). In a way, his pastries are the ultimate disposable pleasure. The pleasures I deal with leave reminders of their passing, and empty box or can, but Thiebaud's pastries leave nothing more than a bit of frosting, scraped across a plate, and a sense of satisfaction within.

Other similarities between our works arise in his executions of the same subject matter in a variety of different media. I produce a series of similar objects captured in different media (most often watercolor, ink, and oil) to gain a more complete understanding of the various aspects of my subject. In all his works Thiebaud is concerned with the technique of the execution, and is exploring how the same subject reacts differently when rendered in a variety of media such as ink, pencil, charcoal and assorted printmaking techniques (Tsujimoto 46). *Boston Cremes* (figure 17), *Boston Cremes* (figure 18), and *Boston Cream Pie* (figure 19) demonstrate his wide roaming exploration of the same subject medium.



Fig. 18 *Boston Cremes*



Fig. 19 *Boston Cream Pie*

Each depicts a Boston cream pie in oil, as a print, and in watercolor, respectively. Each work is an expression of the medium it is executed in, yet in each the subject remains unmistakably true to its pie-identity.

As well as expanding of our understanding of a subject through the repetition of it, we share the use of a simple background. Thiebaud nearly always gives his still lifes a white background, while mine generally involve at least a teaspoon of color in some way. The end goal, however, is the same, that of having the viewer focus more intensely on the object and, through simplification and isolation, cause small details to leap to the forefront and become instead major visual events (Tsujimoto 51). Thiebaud observes: “common objects become strangely uncommon when removed from their context and ordinary ways of being seen” (Tsujimoto 51). This, too, is my aim, to reveal the uncommon worth of the most banal aspects of life that lay before our eyes, silently yearning for our recognition.

The objects of Thiebaud are common, but not dull, and through skillful manipulation of the paint he is able to refine and give form to all aspects of life through simple ideas that are not simple minded in their execution (Tsujiimoto 167). His gently ironic humor and banal imagery serve to affirm that infinite riches are to be gained from the ordinary experience (Coplans 16). My paintings continue in a similar vein of exploration of the banally mundane facets of life, all the while making the attempt to question why so much of our lives is overlooked and fated to lie used and forgotten in our wakes as we amble ever forward, following the twisting turnings of our existence.

Often the artists who inspire me are not necessarily those whose works I would like to emulate, or who deal with similar matters that I do. Instead, I am inspired by those whose passions shine through in their art. I love when I am able to get a sense of the joy and excitement that went into the creation of a work. The subject or technique does not matter as much as the recognition of that exhilaration. Seeing it in the work of others sparks the desire in me to feel that same excitement and anticipation as they did, that happens when starting a painting. Like a child on Christmas, laying awake before dawn, waiting anxiously and counting down the moments until that first gray light of dawn peeps through the curtains, then! Rushing to the living room and a welcoming glow, tearing off the wrappings, and there, finally, my painting lies before me, fresh and new, glowing with promise and potential. Recognizing that same feeling of elation in the work of others ignites in me the urge to feel again that joy of creation, and perhaps one day have my paintings resonate with and inspire another in the same way I was.

## **The Power of the Written Word: Poetry and Perfection**

As much as I am inspired by other artists, I am also moved by the spirit of creativity in literature. The written word has the ability, to quote Wordsworth, to cause my soul to “with pleasure fill and dance with the daffodils” (Edman 79). This is not to cheapen or downplay the importance or influence of other artists and paintings on me, it is merely to state that language and the written word are able to inspire me in a completely different way, on an equal yet separate level, that the physical image is barred from entering.

The lack of physical images in writing causes my mind and imagination to be engaged as I visualize the scene as described solely through words. Fiction, especially, has this effect on me, and fantasy most of all. Books with rich descriptions of wondrous worlds and creatures never beheld by the eyes of man come alive in my mind’s eye. Fiction enables us to experience a life wider than we currently do or could potentially ever possess. We move in lands we have never traveled or that have never existed, experiencing loves and joys we have never known. These enriching excursions into these lives unknown allow us to more intensely appreciate and live more fully the lives we have (Edman 84). This mental exercising of my imagination, even for something that might have nothing to do with painting, like the fantasy novels I read for the sheer pleasure of it, makes my imaginative abilities stronger as I enter the creative process and visualize what I might like to attempt in a painting. My mind is used to conjuring up visual worlds based purely on literary sources, and can at times more easily translate that imaginative capability into the tactile creation of a painting, once again creating tangible images from the incorporeal bones of the medium. Language is valuable to creativity because of the thought stimulating power of words as they are transformed into images in the mind (Arnheim 231-232). Words have meaning but no

being, while the materials used to create art: clay, stone, paint, or ink, have substance with no intrinsic meaning. The two inseparably intertwine in the creation of a work of art, each one feeding the other in a constant cycle of meaning and understanding.

Poetry especially has a more intimate relationship with the visual arts than perhaps other writings are privy to. Poetry is comprised of images crafted out of incorporeal bones. The poet is able to paint with words, celebrating the world and communicating, “what has awakened his senses and stirred his emotions or provoked his ideas” (Edman 69). The painter, too, is trying to share with the audience these inexpressible things, hoping, perhaps, to stir in others the same burning passion or deep conviction that was the catalyst for a single painting or a life’s work. The poem is the word become flesh, or the flesh become word (Edman 76). They rise together to touch and see reflected in the other themselves. Language grants meaning, and “words are like pointers that single out significant peaks from the unbroken contour line of a mountain range on the horizon” (Arnheim 236). Words are able to assign significance to the endless swirl of life we see around us, while depending on that world and the inventiveness of the human mind for their own existence. Without words a painting could be beautiful or repulsive, compelling, depressing or inspiring, but there would be no way for the viewer to express those sentiments to others or even themselves. It is only with language that the meaning of the visual is capable of being expressed, and it is the visual that gives rise to the need for words with which to explain them.

The poems that most frequently inspire me are those dealing with perfection and impermanence. “Delight in Disorder”, by Robert Herrick, deals more with the former than the latter.

A sweet disorder in the dress  
Kindles in clothes a wantonness :

A lawn about the shoulders thrown  
Into a fine distraction :  
An erring lace which here and there  
Enthrals the crimson stomacher :  
A cuff neglectful, and thereby  
Ribbons to flow confusedly :  
A winning wave (deserving note)  
In the tempestuous petticoat :  
A careless shoe-string, in whose tie  
I see a wild civility :  
Do more bewitch me than when art  
Is too precise in every part. (Cooney)

The poem, written in 1609, addresses how imperfections can be more appealing than flawlessness (Cooney). The little flaws that make us human, make us who we are, they make us infinitely more interesting than a glossy utopian veneer. The “erring lace” that Herrick remarks on, is able to enthrall more completely than a precisely placed length of trimming because it invites speculation as to the nature of its destination, and how it came to stray in the first place. Such thoughts are incapable of finding a foothold in disarray, while immaculate conditions leave no cracks in which such wild imaginings of possibility could take root.

“Simplex Munditiis”, by Ben Jonson, was written in 1648 and, like the previous poem, also speaks of the downfalls of perfection, and how it fails to be as enticing as dishevelment (Cooney).

Still to be neat, still to be dressed,  
As you were going to a feast;  
Still to be powdered, still perfumed:  
Lady, it is to be presumed,  
Though art's hid causes are not found,  
All is not sweet, all is not sound.

Give me a look, give me a face,  
That makes simplicity a grace;  
Robes loosely flowing, hair as free:  
Such sweet neglect more taketh me



Than all the adulteries of art;  
They strike mine eyes, but not my heart. (Cooney)

The poem implies that seeking perfection is an attempt to hide something. Perfection has no place in the world, and the mind distrusts it as unnatural and alien. Dishevelment endears itself with its reality, while perfection is false and unapproachable. There would be no need for perfumes and layers of rustling silk twinkling with starlight, unless there were darker depths beneath, which an attempt was being made to hide in burning shame, with terror of their existence ever being discovered. Natural, unrefined beauty is honest and guileless. It has nothing to hide, and is enchanting in its straightforward self-acceptance. It is the blemishes that set us apart and make us each unique. They hold no shame.

The appearance of perfection is an unsustainable deception, and its façade cannot last. True perfection is unattainable, and would not be desirable even if it were. Perfection is dead. An empty shell with no future. Perfection contains no spark of potential to ignite new growth. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde, one of the main characters Gwendolyn, upon being called “quite perfect” retorts, “Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions” (Wilde). As Gwendolyn well recognizes, only imperfection gives cause for betterment. When perfection is attained it becomes futile to continue to try for any further improvement and so, even as it reaches its peak, perfection stagnates and dies. It is illogical to strive for perfection in a painting, and hope of actually achieving it. Not only is it impossible to do so, on account of humankind’s flawed nature, the pursuit of perfection leads to insanity in a world of eternally seeking and never finding. Instead of trying to hide the inadequacies of life, it is better to show them, recognize them, and hope to improve upon them. When all the fancy trappings

and flashing sequins fall away, it is the honest reality of life as it is that will keep stay with us through the years, and teach us lessons of ourselves.

Perfection is a trap. Only works that continually generate new and unresolved issues inspire the creation of more art (Bayles and Orland 99). My art is not perfect, nor does it seek to be. It is a transient portrait of life as it passes. It is the plain, unadorned leavings of living, and its beauty is found in its commonality. It is the shame that so often accompanies smoking and drinking, lifted away. It is hope in the beauty of small things. If beauty worthy of recognition can be found in such insignificant details, it can assuredly be found in the rest of life as well. In the disposable pleasures of a college town, I am able to see elements of all humanity. We all have our vices. The existence of some is simply more visible than others. We cannot overlook the parts of our lives that we are less proud of, for in doing so we lose the whole picture of ourselves. Even, especially, the banal and mundane aspects of existence, tell us who we are. They ought not be ignored, but instead celebrated as a part of life and examined for clues as to how we might better ourselves.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Concept**

A painting must have some sort of an origin or idea. Lacking a concept it is impossible to relate to the past or guess at the future, and the painting becomes nothing more than an exercise in technique. It may be instructive, but not particularly effective at conveying a message. I fail to see the point of painting at all, if not to at some point show some sort of contemplated concept, no matter how trivial or obscured from immediate understanding. Such observations are no less meaningful or relevant than the sweeping

philosophical revelations of some other works. Both are necessary, and both have their place in the canon of art history. It is not possible to exist solely in epiphanies, and to do so would be exhaustingly unsustainable. Small things and minor details make up the majority of our lives, combining and building up to moments of divine clarity. Momentous realizations could not occur without the culmination of countless seemingly banal pieces of knowledge. A piece of advice that could be a cornerstone of my work is, “Sometimes you need to scan the forest, sometimes you need to touch a single tree—if you can’t apprehend both, you’ll never entirely comprehend either” (Bayles and Orland 101). Each has its place, and ultimately the two sides serve to balance each other. In both art and life, there must be some sort of sense of purpose and inner meaning, the drive to create and live fully. A sense of purpose serves as the catalyst for continued growth and development.

I am a painter of objects: depicter of things that are physical and tangible captured in a fluid and incorporeal medium. I reflect a three-dimensional object and compress it, distilling and capturing its essence within the confines of a two-dimensional field. For me, the resolution of the disparity between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional results in a successful painting. I isolate a snapshot of life, a single moment in time that encompasses the entirety of it. Each instant is a culmination of every moment preceding it, and its ghost lives on in every subsequent one. In documenting these instances, I lift the veil of time and allow others to see the past as I did at the moment of creation, captured in the form of my painting.

I choose the objects that I paint from daily life. They are objects that are used, consumed, and ultimately overlooked. My observation of the mundane is centered primarily around that which is considered a vice or guilty pleasure, things which can cause harm even

as they bring delight to their users. Smoking and drinking paraphernalia are the main objects on which I focus, as well as over-consumption and gluttony to a lesser extent, with images of soda cans and fast food containers. My subject matter is not chosen to be deliberately incendiary, offensive, or controversial. I want my paintings to be thought provoking, but in a positive way that promotes growth and wisdom. The cigarettes and beer containers come not from my being a smoker or an alcoholic, for I am neither. They come instead from the hedonistic world that is the reality of the multitudes in college. What would be looked at in another setting as radical and dangerous behavior becomes a sort of norm in certain college atmospheres. As the saying goes, “you’re not an alcoholic, you’re still in college.” Binge drinking and risky sexual behavior are often a weekly ritual. What is normal for so many in this supposed atmosphere of higher learning is to those on the outside a vice of the most extreme kind.

Vices are inescapably intertwined in our lives and are as much an influence on us as our positive habits. Even vices that do not hold sway over us personally can have a deep impact. Anti-smoking laws are increasingly put into effect. Smokers in Virginia must now exit a building to light up, where previously they were able to do so in a ‘separate’ part of a restaurant as non-smokers, where magical smoke screens prevented their exhalations from wafting over to the non-smoking section. Smokers might look upon having to momentarily leave a restaurant as inconvenient, but those who suffer from allergies or asthma might look on anti-smoking laws as a boon to their well-being. Children of alcoholics may be hyper aware of their alcohol consumption, self-conscious and vigilant about ensuring that they themselves do not succumb to a family tradition of alcoholism. Or, they may choose to shun drinking altogether, with strong memories of the past making strong drinks utterly repugnant.

The widespread vices of our society have the ability to inspire passionate responses. I paint the remnants and aftermath of our guilty pleasure: the trash that is left behind and that we would rather toss away than have lying about reminding us of our indiscretions. I take this banal detritus and transform it into something positive, monumental, and beautiful. It is a part of our lives, ourselves. It can teach us to be aware of our faults, to learn from our past, and to indulge with responsible pleasure, thus ensuring that we maintain dominion over our vices, and not they over us.

In contrast to this somewhat serious examination of some of the downfalls of our society, I have also been painting a series of clothespins. A light-hearted play on words, clothespins are a vice in the literal, clamping sense, instead of a moral one, while still being mundane and overlooked items. The clothespins, while still in use, are old fashioned, bearing with them a sense of nostalgia, an image of sheets fluttering in the winds of time in a pastoral backyard. These little bits of wood, once in widespread use, have fallen by the wayside, a quaint reminder of times past. They serve as an anchor, granting perspective, context, and relevancy to the present by raising the question of what permeates our lives now that will suffer a similar fate? What thing does nearly every person now have that will fade into obscurity in the future? Will these things we hold in such high esteem even still exist, much less be important to us? It seems likely that they will become archaic and obsolete, like the wooden clothespins of old.

### **The Quest for More**

Western society's drive for instant gratification has resulted in a people with no depth, no substance. We lack a sense of solidarity, and cheapen the inheritance of the future with our present preoccupation with impermanence. The western world has become a

throwaway society. We strive to possess more and more, only to discard it for the next new thing in a cycle of planned obsolescence. It is not, however, the continual purchasing of more things that is inherently negative, but the impression that you will only find contentment by obtaining more things. This becomes an enslaving pattern. There will always be something else to buy, and the promise of happiness is pushed continually away. It is an endless treadmill of increasing consumption in a pursuit of fulfillment that cannot be gained through possessions.

Those items that failed to bring happiness are discarded as the next newer thing comes along. This disregard of things seems to be increasingly seeping in to our associations with other people. Interacting with our possessions replaces interacting with people. Rather than chat with friends in person, we bask in the blue glow of a screen, chuckling in solitude at cats in funny hats. I have found an expression for my concern over our neglect for the world and the people within it through my paintings. The objects that I choose are ordinary things that are seen and used every day, that are needed, but whose importance is unnoticed. There but overlooked, they are invisible, used pieces of trivial necessity. I paint the neglected pieces of the world, those things that life would not run as smoothly without, but that are only noticed in their absence as I wonder how long it will be until we treat people the same way.

I glorify the wonderfully unremarkable qualities of life that constantly surround us. You do not have to look far and lofty for worthwhile subject matter to center a work of art around. All of life is worthy of receiving recognition, regardless of how insignificant it may appear. I am perplexed by the propensity of artists to feel obligated to produce works of deep philosophical import, each work more of an epiphany than the last. It is not always necessary

to be expressing some grand message or to speak with the voice of divine inspiration. What is important is that you say anything at all. It may be a small message, or it may be a large one, but if it is not shared, it cannot be heard. Speak your message with the voice of yourself, and let people hear and make of it what they will.

### **On Observing**

Vision is a peculiar thing. An integral part of (most) lives, we take it as a given that we see what we look at, and that we understand what it is we are looking at, yet upon closer examination this frequently proves to not be the case. Untold millennia have conditioned the human mind to be geared towards survival, and to focus on that which best aids that goal. Vision is formatted in such a way that what is labeled as inessential to survival is relegated to the background. While aiding survival, this habit has the unfortunate tendency to carry over into the art world, where paintings are merely scanned and glanced at without being deeply observed (Danto 115). This scanning of our surroundings arose from the need to be able to swiftly gain a general understanding of a new or newly altered environment and ascertain what might prove to be a threat and what might be friendly to us.

Vision is purposefully selective, and continually and unconsciously catalogs our surroundings, creating a hierarchy of importance in which the lowest levels are disregarded (Arnheim 19-20). That which changes is the most arresting to the senses. A sudden change might indicate an approaching enemy, an escaping opportunity, or a pressing demand to be faced. By the same token that which repeats the same change or motion over and over is dismissed as a non-threat. Psychologists call this satiation, and even primitive animals will stop reacting when the same stimulus reaches them time and again (Arnheim 20-21). The mind will continue to treat a repetitious and familiar stimulus as harmless until something

happens to alter that perception. Examples of satiation would be a constant noise or smell. A person living next to train tracks will after a time become accustomed to the noise, and cease to mark the unending rumblings and shrill cries of the locomotive as it creeps past in the night.

While practical, this selective attention becomes a drawback in certain situations, like when small details are to be considered, such as in the contemplation of a painting. Conscious effort is often needed to notice or remember the little things, like the face of the woman we passed earlier on the street or what we had for breakfast yesterday. Countless gestures and routines, small details, are unconsciously repeated to fill our lives. Numb to the particulars, we see things as we expect to, a dangerous habit when it extends to all aspects of life.

I attempt to interrupt this monotonous viewing of unimportant life in my paintings not only for my viewers but for myself as well. My paintings are a reminder for me not to take things, people, or my life for granted and at face value. I attempt to choose as my subject things that are not appreciated and that are only missed when they are gone, and possibly not even then. For that which was dismissed by all for so long could reveal itself to be the most valuable thing of all. Or it could turn out to be nothing more than a piece of vagrant detritus, but we will never know for sure unless we pause and take the time to appreciate its existence for all that it is, and all that it could be.

### **Developing Desire**

Advertisers especially, take advantage of that evolutionary quirk in the brain that causes us to be captivated by the new and the flashy, predictably trying to tell us what is important to us, what we need, and even who we are in order to sell a product. By



continuously changing their ads and packaging, and canvassing the market with a constant stream of eye-popping images, the consumer is forced to notice the product, and compelled to buy whatever it is, because obviously a new model would not be on the market unless it was better than the previous one. The irony in this is that companies strive to attain the consumer's attention and get them to buy their products, only to want them to immediately forget that they have, and want to buy it all over again. In a willful amnesia we forget the things we have and their failure to bring lasting contentment. We discard them and move on to the next because this time, this thing! Will make us happy, in a way none of the other soulless things we bought have.

I make the attempt to raise the question: what is wrong with what we have, and why do we dispose of our once coveted pleasures? If these things are so important, why do we ultimately discard them? Why do we not see the merit of what it is, and recognize the inherent inability of any object, however fetishized by the cult of consumerism, to grant peace of mind and joy? We get distracted by the cult of the new, and fail to recall not only the value of what we already have but also the value of not needing anything at all, or of being able to obtain more and being free from any desire to do so. We have forgotten the joy of not getting, of being content with what we are, what we have, and perhaps most importantly, those we know. All too often the ability to sit and observe life, existing in harmony with it, seeing and accepting things for the way they are, has escaped us. We must open our eyes, and see the world for the wonder it is.

## Chapter 4

### Painting

My paintings nestle up against the past, reflecting its traditions while looking to the future of art through the prism of the present. Much like the Impressionists who “imbued even the simplest objects, by means of color and painting technique, with a festive aura of the joy of life” (Ebert-Schifferer 299). I celebrate the life of my banal subjects. Subtly dancing arabesque lines fill my backgrounds with a liveliness that supports and uplifts the solidity of my objects. In *Pinup in Yellow* (figure 24) the shadow of the clothespin and the ground on which it rests crackle with energetic lines in subtle variations of blue, highlighted with notes of yellow and red. My watercolor version of the same composition, *Pinup in Red and Blue* (figure 25), has a more fluid, organic energy.

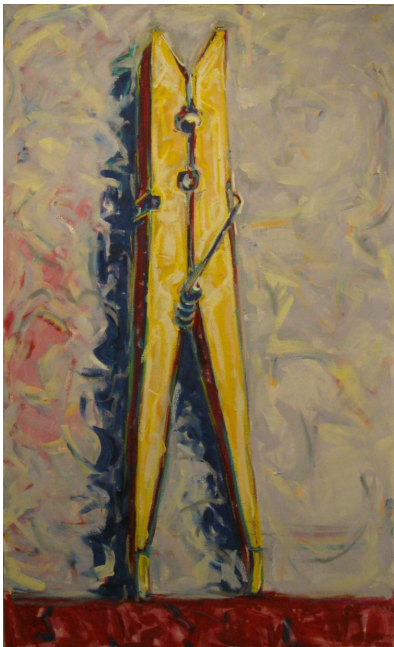


Fig. 24 *Pinup in Yellow*

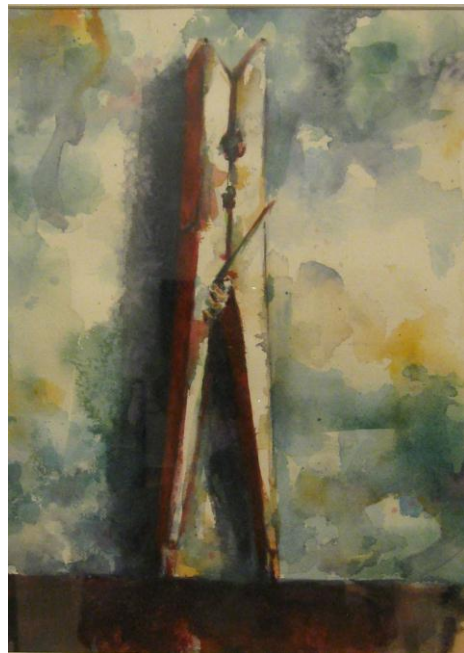


Fig. 25 *Pinup in Red and Blue*

Waves of blue and yellow oscillate behind the red and white body of the pin, punctuated by patches of green flotsam. Daubs of oil and waves of watercolor carry with them essence of the clothespin, and unify the two paintings in an expression of vitality.

I am not exclusively an oil painter, nor do I think I ever will be. Drawing, watercolor and oil are all simply different avenues leading to the same expression. The journeys are different but the destination is the same. They are all related, informing and feeding off of each other. I do not differentiate one from another in terms of importance. At times I tend towards one more than the other, focusing more on watercolor perhaps one week, and oil the next. This continuous cycle of focus allows me to recharge my energies for the one while working on the other. I have recently been working in a progression from drawing, to watercolor and/or ink, to oil. Although I do deviate from the order at times, this method allows me to build my understanding of the object and composition as the works increase in size. Some of the Pop artists, like the Nouveaux Réalistes, created compositions using variations of the same object in the belief that multiple examples of a particular object can illuminate its unique essence (Ebert-Schifferer 388). I do this as well, only instead of having many objects in a single composition, I break them up into separate paintings, like my aforementioned *Pinup in Yellow* and *Pinup and Red and Blue*, so that each example of the one subject has its own unique expression that, when combined together, illuminate the subject in its entirety. My continuous shifting from one medium to the other, and from a large to small scale, helps keep my thinking fresh and prevents me from getting in the rut of a habit unconsciously repeated. Each medium has its strengths and weaknesses, and by the time I have completed a series of images with all of them, my hope is to have captured a cohesive

vision of the item, like the different strains of a chorus culminating in a richly varied and beautiful melody.

More than anything, in the production of my paintings I strive to avoid overworking them, which results in vastly inferior products. I try to keep the marks fresh and spontaneous, as though they were springing forth from the canvas of their own volition. I like to keep the initial spark of energy that created the stroke, rather than fussing over it and turning it into something tight and fiddly. When I overwork a painting it becomes muddy and dull. The marks lose their distinction and independence. The bit of life imbued in each stroke in their creation leaks away, unable to withstand the onslaught of overlaid marks repeated out of habit rather than conscious reason or inspiration.

It is often easier to overwork and ruin a watercolor than it is an oil. In watercolor, a mark made is made forever. Make too many marks in the wrong place, and the colors can become muddy and dull, or fuzzy and limp. The oversaturated paper absorbs the undefined layers of color and becomes a senseless mud puddle. The brightness and vitality of a watercolor can be destroyed in an instant when the white is killed, when the natural white of the paper is obscured by too much paint. The integrity of the white of the page is essential, as white pigment should be used sparingly or, as I prefer, not at all. The white of the paper is the sole source of light in a watercolor, and once it is slain, there is no hope of recovery. One of my early watercolors, *Study of Wild Apples* (figure 26) is a prime example of what happens in the absence of the white of the page.



Fig. 26 *Study of Wild Apples*

I had not yet realized that the whole sheet of paper does not require a layer of paint, as the canvas does in oil painting. My background is a single hazy mass, when it ought to have been permeated with soft light creating highlights on the apples and leaves. More recently, I had to stop work on a watercolor of Marlboro Blacks (figure 27).



Fig. 27 *Marlboro Blacks* (unfinished)

While there was still abundant white of the page visible, the blackness of the box and the shadow underneath were monotonous and lacking in variety of color, freshness, and excitement. I may at a later date in time be able to attempt to work on it again to see if it can be saved, but for now, any attempt at further work on it would be tantamount to murdering it.

One of the hardest things for me to learn has been knowing when to take a break from work, or when to stop working on a painting completely. Learning that I do not have to work on a painting for hours upon days upon weeks in order for it to be successful has been surprisingly difficult. Some of my best works have been the ones that I did not work on for an extended period. My watercolor *Marlboro Reds* (figure 28) was completed in only a few short sittings yet is one of my strongest watercolors of late.



Fig. 28 *Marlboro Reds*

It has a strong sense of light and identity, and a subtle playfulness in its coloring. The paintings that I work on in spurts, long or short but only for as long as inspiration grips me, have been my greatest. The hard part has been learning to recognize when my muse has departed, and to shift my focus to a different work instead of slogging on stubbornly on the same one out of some mistaken impression that I have to keep working on it because I have not worked “enough”. I have worked enough on a painting when it is still exciting, and successfully speaks its message. I have learned, painfully at times, that I am more of a spontaneous and brief painter, no matter how I might wish I could slave for hours over a painting, fine tuning subtle details. Working too long on a painting of mine is tantamount to murdering it, and I have a crypt stacked high with the bones of failed paintings to prove that I

have learned, and continue to learn that fact well. In *Art and Fear*, which deals with some of the personal obstacles faced by artists and how to overcome them, the authors reassure their readers that “the function of the overwhelming majority of your artwork is to simply teach you how to make the small fraction of your artwork that soars,” and that “even the failed pieces are essential” (Bayles and Orland 5). My failed paintings are not failures at all. Each unsuccessful painting teaches about what techniques I personally need to employ in order to achieve success, and helps me to become a stronger artist.

Another aspect that I have to watch for is that my paintings do not become too overwhelmed with the very energy that I search for, and thereby lose their focus. On the opposite side of the spectrum of when a painting is boring and overworked, this happens when the energy runs rampant and takes over, overwhelming the work. When this happens there is nowhere for the eye to rest and settle on as it absorbs the entirety of the work. It becomes merely busy, fluffy and decorative. Avoiding having this happen is one of the reasons that I use a simple background in my oils. Its subtle presence is a complimentary contrast to the more overt identity of the object it is supporting.

*Grease Stained Wretches* (figure 8) has one of my busier backgrounds, but it avoids being overwhelmed by it.



Fig. 8 *Grease Stained Wretches*



I took advantage of the natural habitat of a McDonald's combo, giving the composition meaning and weight within reality. Keeping the fry box the main focus, the cup base and edge of a wrapping provide framing and support. Since these objects make sense within the context of the subject, and are in supporting roles, they do not detract from the overall painting, but rather enhance it. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum of avoiding an overwhelmingly busy background stands *Red Pinup* (figure 10).

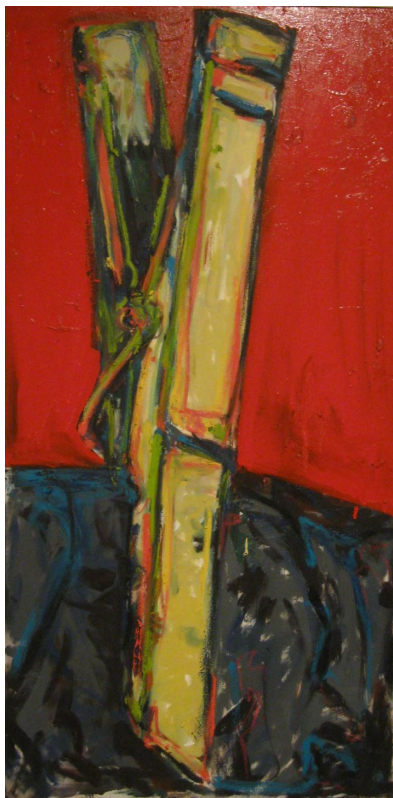


Fig. 10 *Red Pinup*

Its stark red background boldly calls the eye of the viewer, but lack of variety in the color allows it to do so in such a way as to not overtake the equally luminescent bright yellow of the clothespin that is the painting's main subject.



## Monuments to Mundanity

In my paintings I use graphic marks with the repetition and layering of distinct lines to create the form. I tend towards simple compositions that are intended to highlight the object therein. In *Reds* (figure 29) the viewer has no choice but to focus on the vast Marlboro Reds box, backed with an ethereal, yellow tinged white and offset by a deep blue shadow that brings to mind the shadows of Thiebaud.



Fig. 29 *Reds*

Given that my compositions are generally more simplistic, I try to use cropping, placement and brushwork to maintain a level of excitement. My isolation of the object coincides with my goal to draw attention to that which is otherwise disregarded. I choose the one thing that will be the focus, and avoid cluttering the scene with other related paraphernalia. This is not to say that those other items are unimportant, it is more that they are deserving of their own painting, rather than having to share the glory in one. On those occasions that I do include more than one object, which happens more in my watercolors than in my oils, I will at times

make it so that either one of the objects is the obvious focal point or the other fades to become part of the background. In *Aftermath* (figure 30) the main focus is the slightly tattered fallen box of, once again, Marlboro Reds.



Fig. 30 *Aftermath*

An ashtray bearing a dimly lit half gone cigarette, and water rings marring the tabletop recede into the meandering rivers of color that fill the space behind the table.

Alternatively, I give the objects equal weight and magnitude and strive to make them read as a cohesive visual unit, as though there was only one object in the painting rather than multiple. In *The Twins* (figure 31) each peculiarly standing cigarette butt is as important as the other, even though one is half cut off by the edge of the painting.

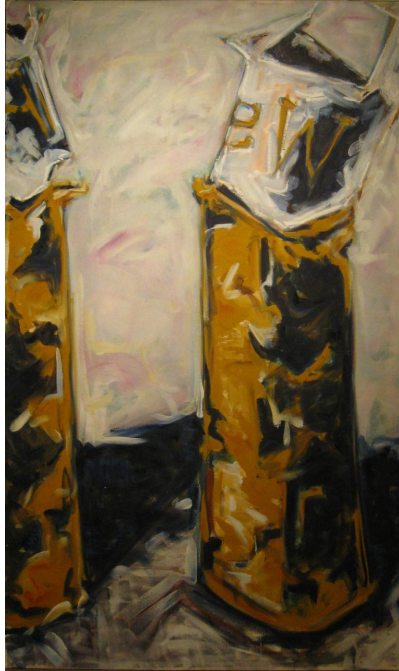


Fig. 31 *The Twins*

They are both executed in the same manner, and their shadows and level placement in the field of view give them dual impact and equal importance.

Isolating a single object in the manner that I do, especially at the grand scale in which I tend to create my paintings, also gives the viewers no choice but to look at what I am displaying. I give them nothing else to focus on and distract themselves with. The object stands alone, straightforward and unapologetic, and presents itself to the world with all its flaws and greatness.

In order to avoid having my generally solitary objects become dull or repetitive, I frequently crop the view of my subject in peculiar ways. This employment of unusual cropping works on the viewer to achieve an alteration in normal perception. By not including the object in its entirety, the mind must engage with the painting and work to construct the rest of the image before moving on to attempt to understand it. This gives pause and holds the viewer's attention for longer than only an object plopped smack dab in the middle of a

canvas might be able to. *Camel Butt* (figure 6) attracts attention because of initial ambiguity as to what it is I am actually presenting. Then, the small camel on the bottom of the filter catches the eye and throws the rest into focus. *Pinup in Yellow* (figure 24) is arresting not based on cropping of the object, but instead relies on its sheer magnitude, and the unfamiliarity of seeing such an ordinarily small item presented on such a grand scale.



Fig. 6 *Camel Butt*



Fig. 24 *Pinup in Yellow*

Since the mind is already working to understand the object on a basic level, it is more receptive to the meaning behind said object, that of the intrinsic importance of the object alone.

A phenomenon dependent on the isolation and distinct cropping of the object within my paintings is the creation of a monolithic or monumental effect. Already shown at a far larger scale in my paintings than they are in reality, my cropping transforms my insignificant subject matter into architectural edifices. Shown perhaps a hundredfold times larger than it



would be as it rests in an ashtray, a cigarette butt towers like a skyscraper, while a fast food container squats on the horizon, gazing out like an Easter Island head over an endless progression of white-capped waves. *Camel Butt* (figure 6), and *KFC* (figure 7) are two of my earliest examples of this monolithic feeling coming to fruition. *Camel Butt* was my first larger piece in quite some time. Prior to it I had been doing smaller studies, so it was a great joy to be working on a large scale again. I think it was that happiness that helped catapult this one from being merely another study into the realm of success. The put out cigarette butt stands tall and proud of its nature, escaping the bounds of the canvas by a hair, as the background shimmers with subdued energy. It has weight to it. There is a tangible sensation of the act of crushing a spent cigarette, this slender rod with a history of pleasure fated to be forgotten and fade into nothing more than a few white wisps drifting into cracks and the corners of walls.



Fig. 7 *KFC*

*KFC*, a smaller piece than its predecessor *Camel Butt*, attains its architectural nature through the cropping of the subject. By only having a portion of the rectangular box that was once the final resting place for some paltry pieces of poultry and carbohydrates, and having that section that is visible take up the majority of the frame, it takes on the nature of a large

corner of building looming over a passerby on the street. Both the cropping and the large scale transport the object to a realm less ordinary, and further assist it to be seen in a different light than usual. That altered vision brings with it an appreciation that had been lacking previously, incapable of perception while it was obscured by the definition in the mind of the thing itself. Capturing this other facet of the item's existence creates a world of knowledge concerning it that had not even existed in the realm of possibility prior to that moment. I use the unusual compositions and large scale of my paintings to confront preconceived notions concerning my subjects. I create for my paintings their own reality. They reference the external world from the perspective of their own existence. They exist through substance and weight, through the tactile tangibility of the paint. My paintings have their own structure and form in space created by the physicality of the paint and line work, and each possesses a unique construction that is unmistakably its own.

A less overly confrontational medium than my large-scale oils, watercolor has been a recent addition to my repertoire, and a welcome one. It is the perfect foil for the bolder, stronger brushwork in my oils. The strength of my brushwork in my watercolors is of a more subtle kind, working in harmony with the fluid and at times intuitive nature of the medium. A successful watercolor, for me, never loses the fluid identity of the medium, the blooms of water and shrinking back of color away from tiny granules of salt, like microscopic universes exploding outwards in a rush from each one. Watercolor lets me say the same things I do in my oils, examining the permeation of certain vices and the trash items associated with them, but in an entirely different voice and from an exciting new perspective.

It is easier for me to achieve a bright sense of lightness in my watercolors. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in *Dew* (figure 9).



Fig. 9 *Dew*

A single crushed can stands on the left side of the frame, sharply contrasted in light and dark. Its distinct, elongated shadow creates dynamic tension. The deep folds in the metal create worlds within shadows on the lee side of the can bathed from behind with warm indirect sunlight. Also imbued with light, *The Golden Ticket* (figure 32) is almost swallowed up with bright, glowing illumination.



Fig. 32 *The Golden Ticket*

The sparse shadows beneath and the rippling contours on the surface of the wrapper give this ticket to ride a distinct, Spartan identity, isolated within itself and its environment.

Both *Dew* and *The Golden Ticket*, like so many of my paintings, are discarded pleasures. They are throwaway remnants, reminders of the past like a Cinderella slipper on a sweeping stairway to mark our passage through the night. My oils and watercolors approach my observation of the banal from different perspectives, opposing directions. They meet and agree to show the good and the bad elements contained in my objects. They discuss our glories and downfalls in frank terms. Not through what we claim, but through that which we deny. In our mountains of trash, we see reflected ourselves.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

Those works of mine that have been most successful have been the ones that I was most excited about starting out, and then was able to retain that excitement throughout the creative process. In my oil paintings, as previously mentioned, my best works are ones that impart a monolithic, architectural feeling. My watercolors possess fresh brushwork, defined light and playful coloring and patterns. The color in all of my mediums is vibrant and eye-catching, and helps to grab hold of the viewers and show them what is before their eyes. With a classic object displayed in nontraditional ways, large or small, cropped or colorful, the message of the necessity of observation, of looking at things and seeing them in their unadulterated glory of being is reiterated.

The common thread for all of these successes, in both mediums, is the overriding joy I found in their creation, regardless of the inevitable frustrations I encountered in each one. Ultimately, that is the reason I make art: the fact that it brings me happiness and a peace of mind like nothing else can. I want to share the things that I see with others, these things that



need changing, that are not often looked upon, or things that are merely beautiful, if beauty can ever be described as a 'mere' quality. There is no life without it, and it lies within all things, needing only to be sought out and appreciated.

My work has changed over the years, but it has remained an expression of my identity. I learned about myself along the way, as I articulated my views on feminism and women's rights, asserting that women must no longer accept that their only position is prone (Girls 47), and discovering the joy I found in noticing the mundane in life, and the desire to share that joy and beauty with others. My paintings are the descendants of all those who came before me. The ancient Greeks, the Dutch of a Golden Age, Italians, Spaniards, Impressionists and Pop artists, their genes were present in my artwork even before I knew to look. The discovery of the influence of history within my paintings enriches them for me, as I see how my own works fit in with the others who came before me. I find it slightly ironic that I have come to paint still lives; a genre that historically female artists had to settle for, since they could not study nudes and therefore could not create 'higher' works of history or religion. I have chosen it freely, out of all other options, because it, coupled with my dual strengths of oil and water, is best suited to convey my current message. Even the little things, even the shameful things in life are important, for they are ultimately what make us human.

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APPENDIX

LARGE IMAGES



Figure 1  
*Orange Lady*, 2007. Oil pastel on paper.



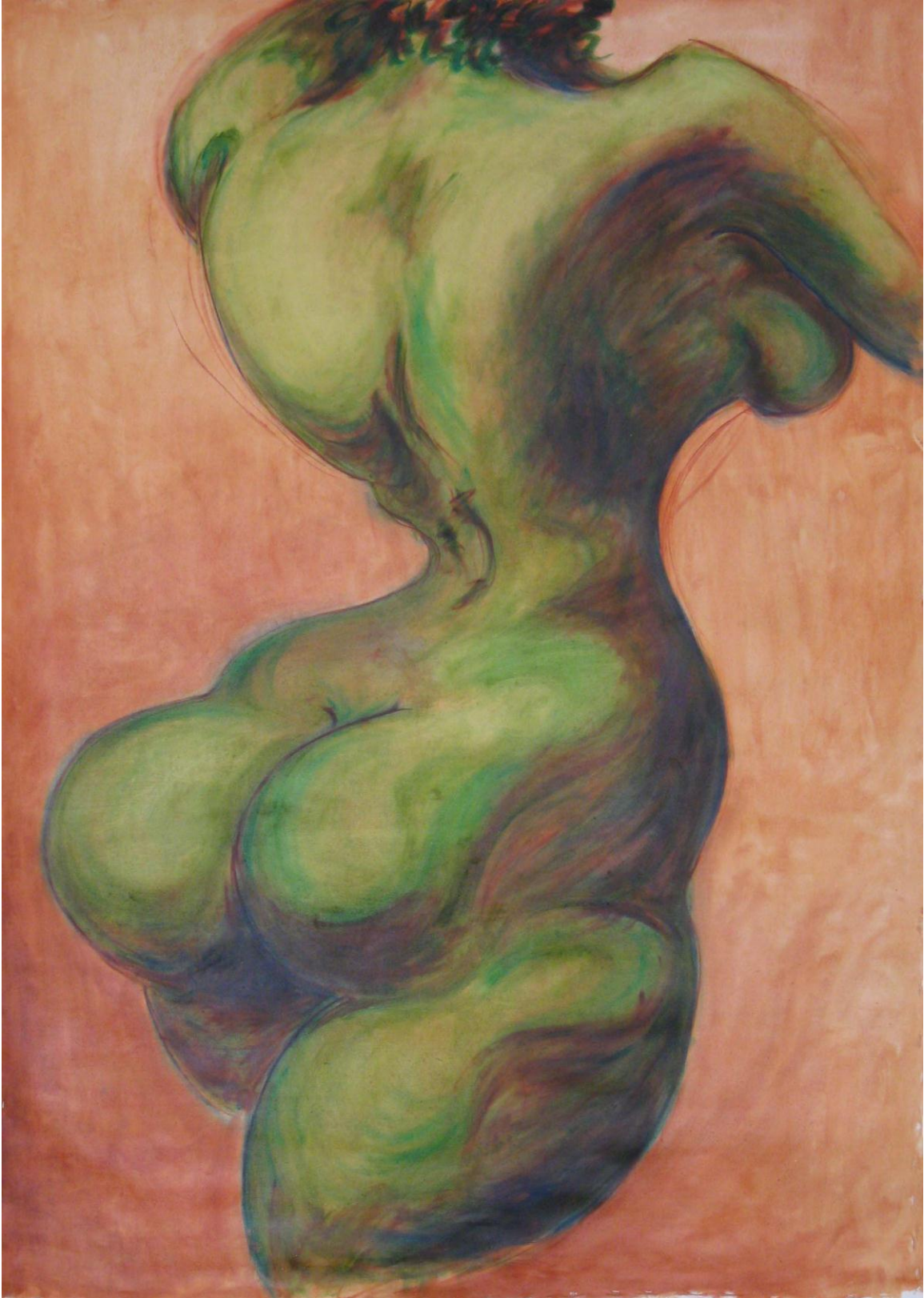


Figure 2  
*Envy*, 2008. Oil on Canvas.





Figure 3  
*Nude 5*, 2010. Oil on canvas.



Figure 4

*Still Life With Plant, Book, and Spoon*, 2010. Oil on canvas.





Figure 5  
*Keystone*, 2010. Oil on canvas.



Figure 6  
*Camel Butt*, 2011. Oil on canvas.





Figure 7  
*KFC*, 2011. Oil on canvas.



Figure 8  
*Grease Stained Wretches*, 2011. Watercolor.



Figure 9  
*Dew*, 2011. Watercolor.



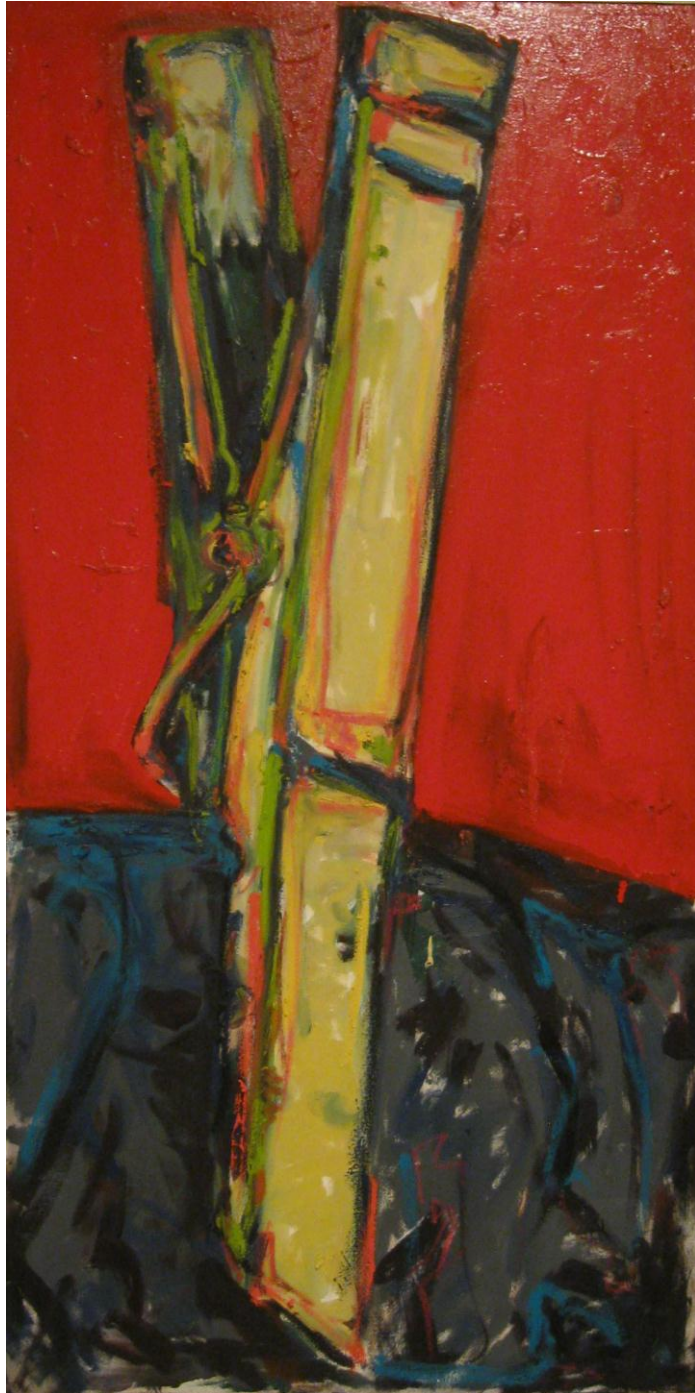


Figure 10  
*Red Pin*, 2011. Oil on canvas.



Figure 11  
Cotán, Juan Sánchez. *Still Life with Fruit and Vegetables*. c. 1602.



Figure 12  
Cotán, Juan Sánchez. *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*. c.1602.





Figure 13  
Chardin, Jean Baptiste Siméon. *Still-Life with Pipe and Jug*. c. 1737. Oil on canvas.



Figure 14  
Chardin, Jean Baptiste Siméon. *Kitchen Utensils with Leeks Fish and Eggs*. c. 1734. Oil on Canvas.



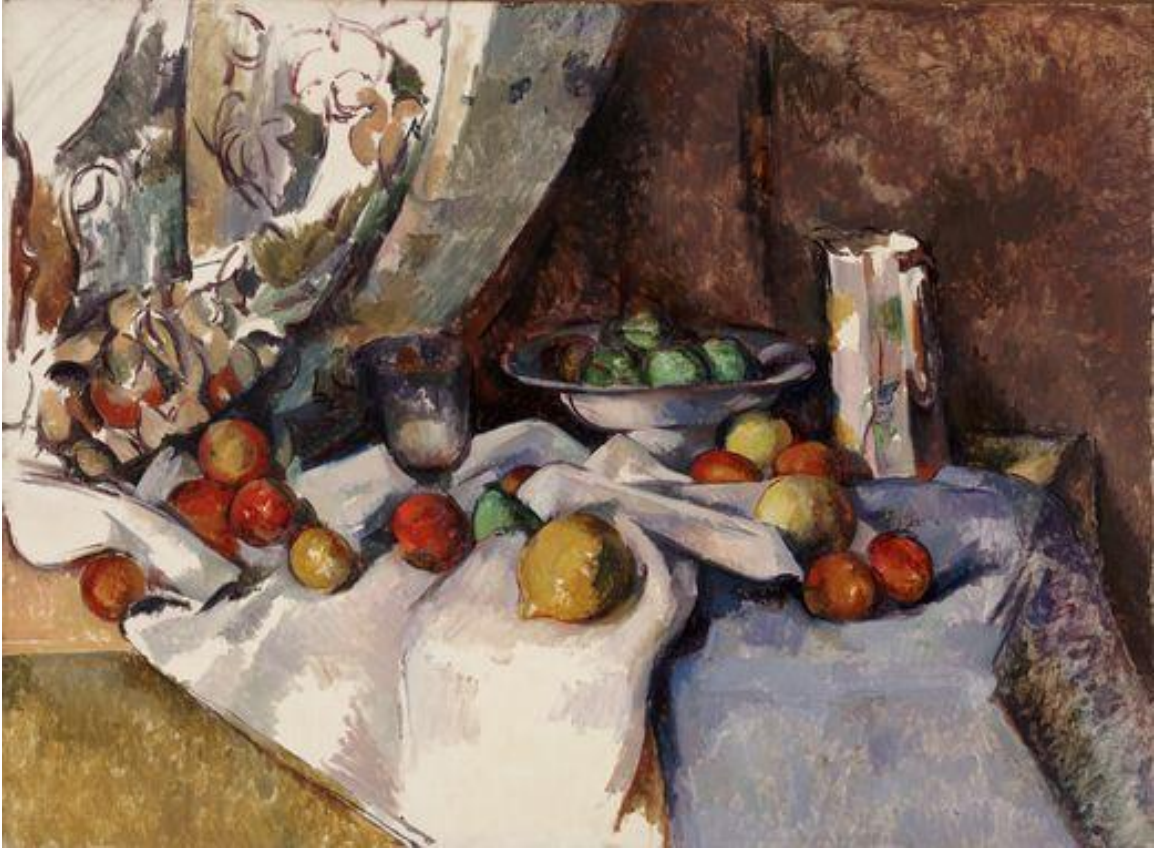


Figure 15  
Cézanne, Paul. *Still Life with Apples*. Oil on canvas.

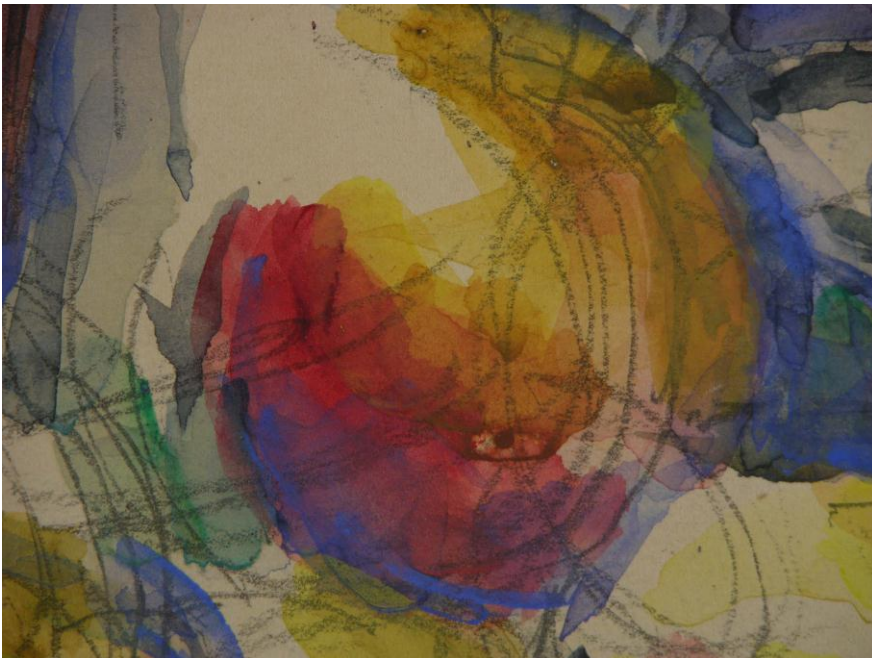


Figure 16  
Cézanne, Paul. Detail from *Still Life with Apples Bottles and Chairback*. Watercolor.



Figure 17  
Thiebaud, Wayne. *Boston Cremes*. 1962. Oil on canvas.



Figure 18  
Thiebaud, Wayne. *(Boston cremes): from a portfolio of seven still lifes and a silver landscape*. c. 1970-71.



Figure 19  
Thiebaud, Wayne. *Boston Cream Pie*. 1964. Watercolor on paper.





Figure 20

*Lady Madonna with Child*, 2008. Oil on Canvas.



Figure 21  
*Beast of Burden*, 2008. Oil on canvas.



Figure 22  
*First Lady*, 2007. Oil pastel on paper.



Figure 23

Galizia, Fede. *Peaches in a White Ceramic Basket*. c. 1600-1605. Oil on wood panel



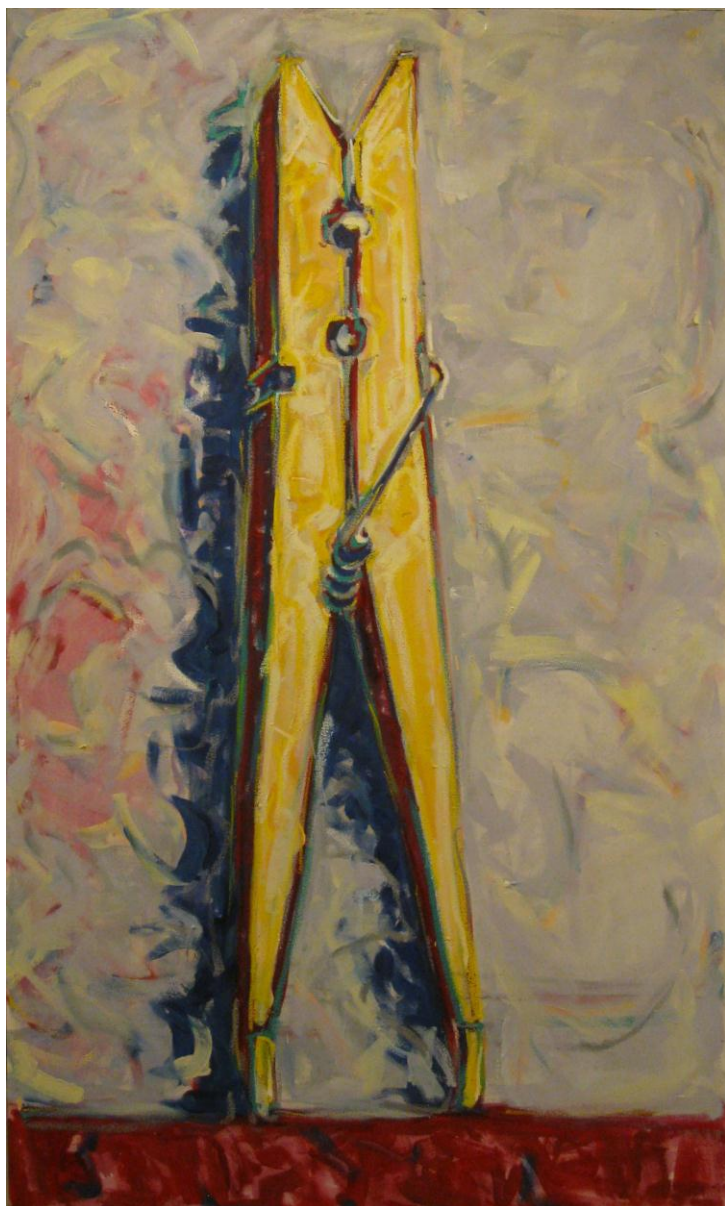


Figure 24

*Pinup in Yellow*, 2012. Oil on canvas.



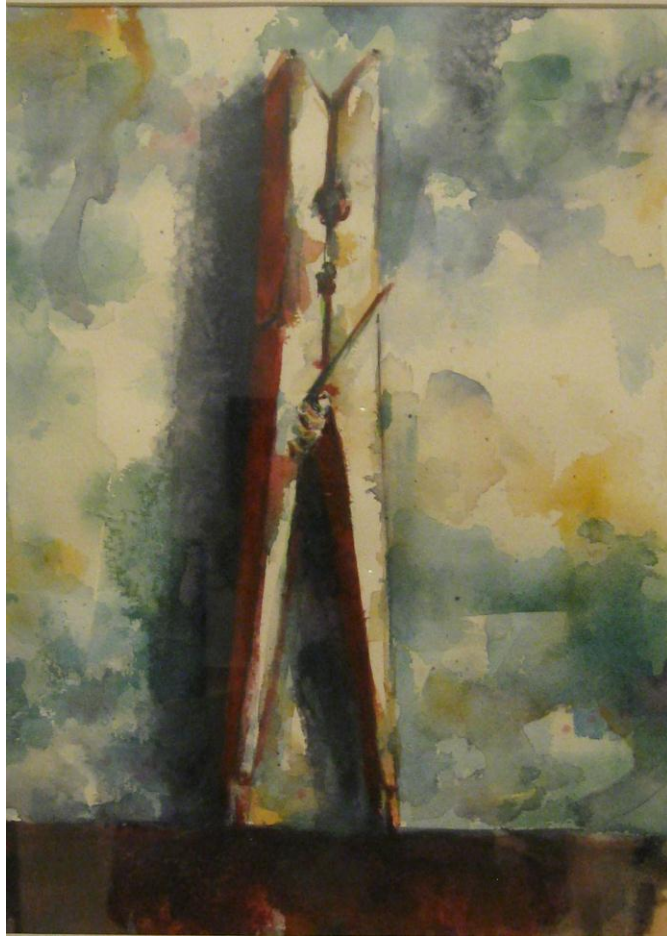


Figure 25  
*Pinup in Red and Blue*, 2012. Watercolor.



Figure 26  
*Study of Wild Apples*, 2010. Watercolor.



Figure 27  
*Marlboro Black*, unfinished, 2012. Watercolor.





Figure 28  
*Marlboro Reds*, 2012. Watercolor.



Figure 29  
*Reds*, 2012. Oil on canvas.





Figure 30  
*Aftermath*, 2012. Watercolor.

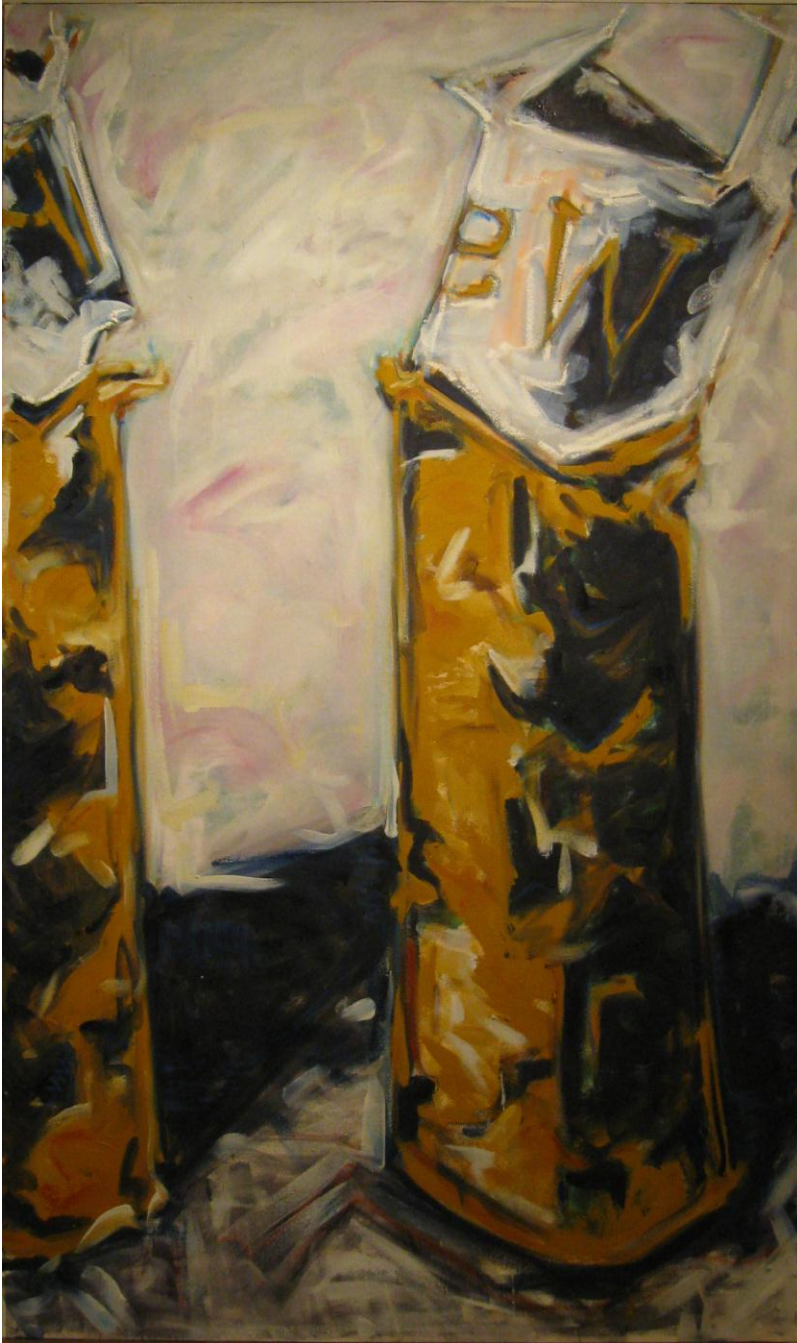


Figure 31  
*The Twins*, 2012. Oil on canvas.





Figure 32  
*The Golden Ticket*, 2012. Watercolor.