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## LOVE STORY

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# LOVE STORY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By Grace Weaver

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MFA Virginia Commonwealth University 2015

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## ABSTRACT

### LOVE STORY

By Grace Weaver, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015

Major Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking Department

I think of my paintings as pop songs. My aim in the work is to embrace a complicated femininity, championing and questioning the aesthetics of girliness, cuteness, and whimsy. This is the realm of the Young-Girl. The text that follows will chart a path from the cliché to the empathic—holding hands with philosophical comrades in that same territory, ranging from Taylor Swift to Kaja Silverman—seeking the way in which the paintings relate to the grand tradition of the love story.

## INTRODUCTION

### *I. IN THE STUDIO*

My work in painting is inextricable from a practice of dancing, leaping from one large canvas to the next—paintbrush in hand—and crooning along with the adolescent love songs of Taylor Swift. The rhythms of my paintings derive from these very balletic gestures—each curve, arc, and curlicue is built from my body in a sort of gestural record-making. I bring in Swift because of the aesthetic predilections that unite my paintings with her pop ballads: both insist on a sugary-sweet cuteness, both are earnestly invested in fairy tale narrative. Most importantly, Swift and I share the same urgent ambition: the wish to speak truth to our particular life experiences as young American women: to naïveté, to yearning, and to heartbreak.

I spent my childhood in a tiny Cape Cod-style cottage on a dead end street in the heart of a small Vermont city. As a girl I was absorbed in a world of all things miniature—building “fairy houses” of moss and lichen in the Vermont woods, stitching tiny wardrobes for pint-sized Steiff bears, and imagining elaborate plays for an ever-growing company of paper dolls. This particular empathy with all things tiny—along with the cute, quaint, quirky, and whimsical—is something that I have carried with me past childhood and into the studio.

Nowhere are girliness and whimsy more evident in my paintings than in the limited cast of stylized characters that populate them. There is the dandy—costumed in paisley patterns, pointy boots, and a curlicue coif—a hyper-feminized man whose anatomy is constituted by swirls and arabesques. There is the couple—intertwined but

apathetic—whose physical connectedness overlies psychological discontent. And there is the ensemble—a cast of posturing exhibitionists negotiating desire in the public arena.



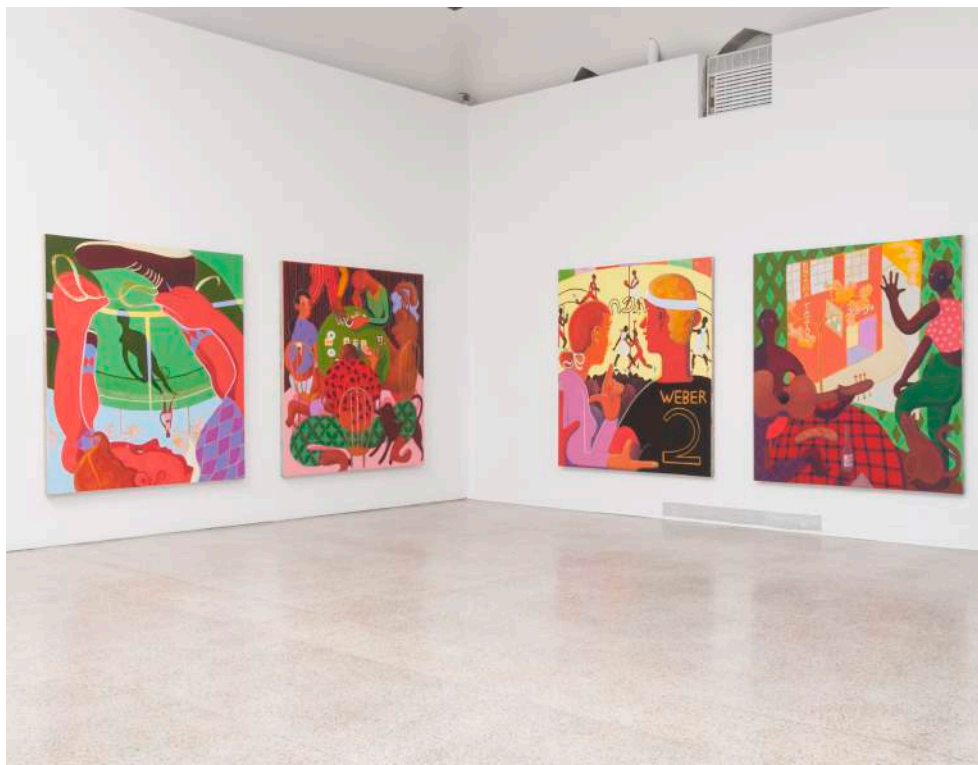
*Détente, oil on canvas, 2014.*

My aim is to ground this “girly” painterly perspective within a long lineage of large-scale oil painting. Each composition depends on a tightly managed under-painting whose forms rhyme and interlock like a vast abstract tessellation. The palette of pinks and vermilions might recall Mattel, just as much it indebts these paintings to de Kooning, Guston, and their shared struggle to depict a body felt from the inside out. A painting like *Détente* might suggest a narrative of juvenile dysfunction—but another subtext resides in its abstract qualities—in the interruption of a broad half-circle of



magenta, in the chromatic dissonance of viridian stripes over cadmium orange underpainting.

My hope is to contribute a voice to painting that fuses numerous art historical references into a new language with a complicated femininity, championing and questioning the aesthetics of cuteness, whimsy, and girliness. In writing further, I will explore in depth these diminutive aesthetics as they appear in a broad range of works that I cite as influences—ranging from Fassbinder’s cinema to Taylor Swift’s music to Persian miniature paintings. My aim in this written exploration of my work is to chart a path through the clichéd elements that I begin with—the insistence on lovers and love stories—to the deeper ethics of the work, the space between us as individuals, and our relationship to the ground we tread. I hope that this trajectory in the writing will echo my concerns in painting.



*Installation view, VCU MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2015.*

## II. TOWARDS A WEB OF ANALOGY



from Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas Project*, (1924-1929)<sup>1</sup>.

My method here will be to weave together a picture of my practice through a web of analogies to multiple works of cinema, art history, and pop culture.<sup>2</sup> While in my

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<sup>1</sup> "Warburg's combinatory experiments in the *Atlas* follow his own metonymic, intuitive logic, even as it is propelled by decades of rigorous scholarship. Warburg believed that these symbolic images, when juxtaposed and then placed in sequence, could foster immediate, synoptic insights into the afterlife of pathos-charged images depicting what he dubbed "bewegtes Leben" (*life in motion* or *animated life*). As such, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* strives to make the ineffable process of historical change and recurrence immanent and comprehensible (Johnson 1)."

paintings a face, a form, or a figure might recall some historical work of painting or fiction, I would like to propose an alternative construction to a patrilineal notion of artistic forefathers<sup>3</sup>. My relationships to the artists that I will mention ahead are less characterized by borrowing than they are by the serendipitous discovery of artistic kinships across time.<sup>4,5</sup> In this light, I often think of Kaja Silverman's account of Sigmund Freud's epiphanies about art history that appear in the psychoanalyst's *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva*, a passage in her incredible text, *Flesh of my Flesh*:

*Even more astonishingly, Freud entertains the possibility that we are all enmeshed in the same analogical network: "The different variations of the human form are not independent of one another, and since in fact even among ourselves the ancient types reappear again and again (as we can see in art collections), it would not be totally impossible that a modern (woman's gait) might reproduce the shape of her ancient ancestor in all the other features of her bodily structure as well." If we were to pursue this train of thought a bit further, we would arrive at the following conclusion: it is through its formal affinities, rather than its appeal to our narcissism, that art bind us together. These affinities are not authorial fabrication; everything really does echo everything else. They also link us in an irrevocable way to each other and the world (62).*

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<sup>3</sup> In her essay *Like a Veneer*, Mira Schor gives a useful account of patrilineage, which she began in another essay from 1991 entitled simply, *Patrilineage*. She focuses mainly on scholarship surrounding Lisa Yuskavage's work, and the trend of "legitimation (being) established through the father (Schor 118)." Schor notes how rare it is for a historical female artist to be used as legitimation for a male artist's practice, and that the inverse is problematically par for the course in art historical writing (118-133).

<sup>4</sup> Charline von Heyl also discusses Aby Warburg as a touchstone as she accounts for her relationship to art history. Joe Fyfe references von Heyl's lecture at the Hammer Museum, describing the manner in which she "(mines) visual history and culture for formal resonances" and in effect, "reanimates the image bank of painting, her own and others, manipulating sources drawn from her 'community of affinities' to breathe life into effigies (3)."

<sup>5</sup> Batia Suter's *Parallel Encyclopedia* project is another relevant touchstone here, an exhaustive exercise in visual affinity, categorizing images across cultural history irrespective of chronology (Suter).



*Gradiva, "the girl splendid in walking (Mayer 560)."*

The promise enfolded here—that an artistic practice might be founded in a free-wheeling romp through art history in search of kinships (and not father figures)—encapsulates how I find my practice bound to those of the artists I love. Silverman’s great proposition is that the hunt for analogy happens unconsciously, and ultimately

reveals the artist to himself: "The author listens to the possible developments of his own unconscious by attending to the formal affinities it reveals to him (61)." She goes on—and brings in Rainer Maria Rilke's biography—to bear out the philosophical implications of analogy as a model not only for art historical relationships, but for life itself,

*Analogies that are not of our making really do connect our lives to many others—to lives that are over, and to lives that have not yet begun, as well as to those proximate to us in time and space. Rather than a self-contained volume, authored by us, our history is only one chapter in an enormous and ever-expanding book, whose overall meaning and shape we cannot even begin to grasp, let alone determine. But this does not mean that there is another kind of author, no one stands outside the Book of Life, to whom it could be imputed. This volume is written from inside, through the analogies we acknowledge and those we refuse (65).*

In the same chapter, Silverman also brings in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, by way of Rilke's notes on the text. As for Rilke, for me Proust has been an invaluable instructor on how to transcribe the world into an artwork. In *Time Regained*, Proust gives his thoughts on how the writer (and by extension the artist) ought to "read" the world for analogical meaning: "I realized that the essential book, the one true book, is one that the great writer does not need to invent, in the current sense of the word, since it already exists in every one of us – he has only to translate it (*Time Regained* 291)." And Silverman writes that in *Swann's Way*...

*...the narrator neither creates nor controls this analogy; although he senses that something in the present is corresponding with something from the past as soon as he tastes the tea-soaked Madeleine, he must presently wait for the latter to reveal itself. The task and the duty of a writer are those of a translator (65).*

That Madeleine is the lynchpin in the popular understanding of Proust, the key that unlocks the series' treasure chest of unfolding memory. I have also found great meaning in another less often-cited metaphor from the boy narrator's musings in bed at the outset of *Swann's Way*: that of the Chinese lantern.<sup>6</sup> Proust uses the lantern—which depicts the epic narrative of Golo—to visualize the far-reaching analogies that a miniature object might project, in a vivid account of the large projections cast by the lantern on the walls of Marcel's bedroom. The miniature creates meaning far beyond its tiny contained actuality.

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<sup>6</sup> "At Combray, as every afternoon ended, long before the time when I should have to go up to bed, and to lie there, unsleeping, far from my mother and grandmother, my bedroom became the fixed point on which my melancholy and anxious thoughts were centred. Some one had had the happy idea of giving me, to distract me on evenings when I seemed abnormally wretched, a magic lantern, which used to be set on top of my lamp while we waited for dinner-time to come: in the manner of the master-builders and glass-painters of gothic days it substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colours, in which legends were depicted, as on a shifting and transitory window. But my sorrows were only increased, because this change of lighting destroyed, as nothing else could have done, the customary impression I had formed of my room, thanks to which the room itself, but for the torture of having to go to bed in it, had become quite endurable. For now I no longer recognized it, and I became uneasy, as though I were in a room in some hotel or furnished lodging, in a place where I had just arrived, by train, for the first time.

Riding at a jerky trot, Golo, his mind filled with an infamous design, issued from the little three-cornered forest which dyed dark-green the slope of a convenient hill, and advanced by leaps and bounds towards the castle of poor Geneviève de Brabant. This castle was cut off short by a curved line which was in fact the circumference of one of the transparent ovals in the slides which were pushed into position through a slot in the lantern. It was only the wing of a castle, and in front of it stretched a moor on which Geneviève stood, lost in contemplation, wearing a blue girdle. The castle and the moor were yellow, but I could tell their colour without waiting to see them, for before the slides made their appearance the old-gold sonorous name of Brabant had given me an unmistakable clue. Golo stopped for a moment and listened sadly to the little speech read aloud by my great-aunt, which he seemed perfectly to understand, for he modified his attitude with a docility not devoid of a degree of majesty, so as to conform to the indications given in the text; then he rode away at the same jerky trot. And nothing could arrest his slow progress. If the lantern were moved I could still distinguish Golo's horse advancing across the window-curtains, swelling out with their curves and diving into their folds. The body of Golo himself, being of the same supernatural substance as his steed's, overcame all material obstacles — everything that seemed to bar his way — by taking each as it might be a skeleton and embodying it in himself: the door-handle, for instance, over which, adapting itself at once, would float invincibly his red cloak or his pale face, never losing its nobility or its melancholy, never showing any sign of trouble at such a transubstantiation (*Swann's Way* 9-10)."

Despite their large dimensions, I think of my paintings as miniatures, in the sense that they behave more as dollhouses than as depictions of our everyday world. Figures are streamlined and malleable, furniture is simple and stylized, and architectural space is compressed. My hope, in the following pages, is to explore the projections that my miniatures cast (in the manner of Marcel's lantern), sifting through the analogies that lie therein, and writing my own chapter from the inside of the "ever-expanding book" of art history, enmeshed with the painters, filmmakers and musicians that I most cherish.



*Meet-Cute, oil on canvas, 2014.*

## CHAPTER ONE: THE CAST

### I. THE DANDY AND THE DEVIL

*"Dandyism is the last spark of heroism amid decadence... Dandyism is a sunset; like the declining daystar, it is glorious, without heat and full of melancholy." - Baudelaire (28-29)*



*Hot Dog Heaven, 2014, oil on canvas.*

Before I delve deeply into a discussion of influences and concepts surrounding my work, I want to first zoom in on a single character that has permeated the world of my paintings and appears, occasionally, alone. This is a male figure who resists the aesthetics of the prototypical male subject. He is a dandy, a louche languid exhibitionist, costumed in paisley patterns, pointy boots, and a curlicue coif.





*detail, Détente, oil on canvas, 2014.*

There is something of the devilish trickster in him too, the harlequin of the demi-monde, and those meddling specters that haunt Russian literature as unsettlingly corporeal presences—as in Nabokov’s *McFate*<sup>7</sup> or Bulgakov’s even more present *Devil*<sup>8</sup> (or similarly, the Devil of Carlos Reygadas’ *Post Tenebras Lux*<sup>9</sup>).

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<sup>7</sup> In the *New York Review of Books*, Gary Wills describes *McFate*’s increasing corporeality as he haunts Humbert Humbert: “Humbert Humbert knew, without knowing it, that *McFate* would speak in time—‘Aubrey *McFate*,’ the obscure thwarter hovering somewhere. Even when this private devil acquires a face (and endless cars), there is nothing to call him, for a long time, but *McFate*. Only when clues jumble near each other for a long time do they, clair-obscurely, finally spell out in patches this devil’s name: Clare Quilty (1).” Wills goes on to suggest the unique discomfort created by such a figure, who exists halfway between our human realm and what might be called the “spirit realm”: “Is this devil enough, powers and



*still from Carlos Reygadas' Post Tenebras Lux, 2012.*

This character is the product of a stylized manner of mark-making that rhymes evenly across the surfaces of these paintings. Curlicues and arabesques constitute his anatomy—he is all image and no interior. In this sense, he echoes the men of Rainer

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principalities enough to prey in and on us; and, through us, in and on others? Perhaps—perhaps that is why we want to disentangle ourselves from such disturbing thoughts, and those works of art which lift us up where great men battle darkness. Better, it seems, to breathe free under a spiritless sky and in a dry vista. But at times that rasp and whisper can still be heard, behind us. Is it a person, an image, a symbol? Oneself, or a part of oneself—or that self 'personed' in others? Part of me? Then *which* part? That which went out and reached others, mingled with them, grew large and came back at me as alien, unwanted? The corruption I bred absent-mindedly in others—the child come home for revenge on its parent? A person, a necessary aspect of personality; an inter-person, a 'personing' where our spirit touches others (9)?"

<sup>8</sup> An account of this in the *London Review of Books*: "Above all, we need to rid ourselves of the rationalist, humanist superstition which holds that the devil doesn't exist. The devil comes to those who call him, of course, preys on the credulous; but he seems to descend with a peculiar force on those who deny him, who summon him, so to speak, by claiming there is no such creature... Bulgakov makes this point very clearly towards the middle of his novel – 'This nonexistent being was, in fact, sitting on the bed' ... Another way of saying this would be to claim, as Bulgakov implicitly does by gleefully scattering his novel with a whole set of exclamations – *the devil only knows, what the devil, the devil take me, go to the devil* and so on – that where an idiom has a continuing life it corresponds to some reality, not necessarily literal, but not merely, securely metaphorical either (Wood 1-2)."

<sup>9</sup> Manohla Dargis describes Reygadas' antagonist as "a red, radiant devil with horns, hooves, swishing tail and a literal toolbox entering a house at night, like a handyman from Hades on an emergency call (1)."

Werner Fassbinder's films, men who are emphatically objects of desire. In her essay *Fassbinder and Lacan*, Kaja Silverman writes,

*As a result both of their oppression, their specularization and their forced confrontation with their own lack, Fassbinder's male characters acquire the capacity to become something other than what the male subject has classically been—to slip out from under the phallic sign, away from the paternal function. They may even approach that condition of "beauty" which Fassbinder associates with victimized women (80).*



*still from Fassbinder's Ali: Fear Eats the Soul, 1974.*

Continuing with Silverman's premise and turning to my own paintings, this feminized subject performs a different brand of masculinity; what the author might refer to as "masculinity at the margins." I want to create images of men as performative subjects, men as objects of female desire. Of course, the women in my paintings are performing their possessability in equal measure; everyone is a player in the same game. This kind of rethinking of the traditionally-gendered starkly unequal power dynamic proposes a new order—one in which neither man nor woman has a firm

hold on the “gaze” proper and both play into a more convoluted network of desirous “looks.” Writing on Fassbinder’s ethics, Al LaValley suggests that the director’s idiosyncratic gender dynamics have a necessary utopian quality to them. His premise is similar to what Baudelaire champions in the vanishing race of men that he calls “exquisites, *incroyables*, beaux, lions or dandies (28).” LaValley explains,

*I want further to suggest that there is something highly positive and even utopian in this interest of Fassbinder’s, a thrill of discovery and power that counters the darkly depicted themes of history and personal alienation which have been the object of much critical attention. There is an odd utopianism even behind the negative narrative trajectories and often suicidal ends of his heroes and heroines; behind the images of futility is the constant search for a way out, a differently structured world (112).*



*detail from Masquerade, oil on canvas, 2014.*

To picture the dandy, for me, is to picture the perfect subject. He is wholly self-contained—eyes closed, posed in an affected *contrapposto*. He becomes like a vase in a still-life—arranging his body without regard to possessing another figure in the picture. This dandy is most concerned with performing for his own pleasure in his image—posing such that the flip of his coif rhymes in perfect harmony with the curl of his pointy-toed boots. He thus exists also for our disinterested viewing pleasure, and ultimately, embodies the concerns of a painter more than he captures an individual subjectivity.

## II. THE ENSEMBLE



*still from Fassbinder's Beware of a Holy Whore, 1971.*

I now want to move beyond the lone hero and into the ensemble, towards a picture of its interplay of connected gazes. A number of my paintings picture a multi-figure cast—whether gliding in the close proximity of a street scene, or posed

lasciviously around a poker table. That aforementioned “dandy” might be the prime example of a character whose exterior supersedes his interior, but the same sentiment suffuses the ensemble as a whole. Silverman suggests that “what happens within Fassbinder’s cinema is that both the gaze and the images which promote identity remain irreducibly exterior, stubbornly removed from the subject who depends upon them for its experience of ‘self’ (Fassbinder and Lacan 57).” *Interior* psychology is hidden in a network of *exterior* pose and affect.



*Masquerade, oil on canvas, 2014.*

Lacan (as cited by Silverman) writes that it is “through the mediation of masks that the masculine and the feminine meet in the most acute, most intense way (Fassbinder and Lacan 75).” In a painting like *Masquerade*, each face is a cold mask,

each posture affected, each embrace uncomfortably stiff.<sup>10</sup> This carefully mannered orchestration of looks and gestures is an attempt to bury motivation and narrative, and to bring a mood of complicated eroticism to the surface in their absence. The effect of this (in Fassbinder's work, and I hope, my own) is to implicate the viewer into that complex network of affect, as yet another figure who "looks" but does not hold the power of the "gaze." Thomas Elsaesser (as quoted by Silverman) describes this phenomenon in Fassbinder thus,

*The audience is inscribed as voyeurs, but only because the characters are so manifestly exhibitionist. Substantiality is denied to both characters and audience, they derealize each other, as all relations polarize themselves in terms of seeing and being seen... to be, in Fassbinder, is to be perceived, esse est percipi (Male Subjectivity at the Margins 127).*

To be is to be seen. It seems to me a great myth that self-consciousness and nagging insecurity die away as high school becomes an ever-more-distant memory. That painfully uncomfortable ritual of the high school dance is always within us. As it was painted, I thought of *Masquerade* as a portrait of anxiety—or more accurately, a self-portrait—in which that particular awkwardness of pimply brace-faced adolescence is transmuted into the setting of a chic dimly lit dinner party. Our adolescent selves lie forever at the core of our adult selves.

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<sup>10</sup> "The Young-Girl wears the mask of her face (Tiqqun 36)."

### III. THE COUPLE



*The Armchair, oil on canvas, 2014.*

As I have evolved in my paintings from meditating on a single figure to attempting complex multi-figure compositions, I have returned again and again to a distilled romantic unit: the male-female pair. These couples are most often caught in moments of tired codependence verging on ennui. Bodies become confused with furniture, statically bent and arranged around a claustrophobic domestic stage. Dissatisfaction might simmer below the surface, but there is never release in the form of a cathartic narrative crescendo. This is where I find my most meaningful affinity with Fassbinder's project.





*still from Fassbinder's Beware of a Holy Whore, 1971.*

The phrase repeatedly attached to Fassbinder—his “aesthetics of pessimism”—seems to hinge on the dynamics of romantic couples (both hetero- and homosexual) within his films (Fassbinder and Lacan 1). The proposition (in Fassbinder’s work and in mine) is an “anti-revolutionary” spirit, a world in which individuals are discreetly contained, affects remain enigmatic, and the “personal redemption of classical tragedy” never arrives. It is a suggestion that—even in the throes of apparent romantic ecstasy—each lover remains sealed behind his mask, shrouded by manners, contained by politesse. Love is a game and there is no way to win or to escape.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE GIRL

### I. ROLE MODELS



*still from Douglas Sirk's All That Heaven Allows, 1955.*

I will turn here, briefly, to a relationship between two directors, with the intention to shed some light on the relationship between my own work and that of Taylor Swift, who will act as a touchstone throughout this text. German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder counted the German-born Hollywood director Douglas Sirk as a key cinematic influence. In a simple sense, this comes down to fact of the two directors' subject: the fraught romantic narrative. Fassbinder was drawn to the formal expressivity of Sirk's cinema: theatrical lighting and a dramatic use of zooms contribute to his trademark hard-hitting melodrama. And while Sirk's films often end with uncertainty (i.e. the tragedy of the lovers' reunion after a near-fatal accident in *All That Heaven Allows*, among other films) that uncertainty is balanced equally by high-octane emotionality.

That seed of uncertainty—which complicates Sirk’s cinema—becomes the bedrock foundational principle in the films of Fassbinder, the very water in which his romantically confused characters swim. As Kaja Silverman writes,

*And Thomas Elsaesser, as always Fassbinder’s most astute reader, writes that identity in his films is “a movement, an unstable structure of vanishing points, encounters, vistas, and absences” – that “it appears negatively, as nostalgia, deprivation, lack of motivation, loss,” and that characters “only know they exist by the negative emotion of anxiety (Fassbinder and Lacan 1).”*

If Sirk’s endings are complicatedly cathartic, Fassbinder puts a melodramatic syntax to use to utterly non-cathartic ends. As Elsaesser (quoted by Silverman) suggests, anxiety (the least cathartic of emotions) is the predominant affect throughout his films (1). And, of course, so many of Fassbinder’s films conclude without a lovers’ reunion or with the suicide of one of the pair.



*still from Fassbinder’s Fox and His Friends, 1975.*

Fassbinder retools Sirk's melodrama in order to create a different emotional landscape: one of estrangement, alienation, and ennui. A lack of cathartic crescendo makes his films no less affecting. Elsaesser constantly emphasizes that it is not *narrative solution* but rather *identification* (between filmmaker and subject, and as a result, between viewer and subject) which Fassbinder's cinema achieves.

The Sirk-Fassbinder relationship might reveal something of my own admiring (albeit conflicted) relationship to Taylor Swift. I aim to steal the framework of but strip the catharsis from Swift's ballads of adolescent love and meditate within them.

## II. THE CLICHÉ



*John Currin, The Hobo, 1999.*

*"I think what I do is find a cliché and try to believe in it, try to get to where I don't laugh at it."* – John Currin (Seward 78-80)

*"Fairy tales are parables. They are yearnings towards the good in an imperfect world."*  
- Chris Kraus (141)

I begin each painting with a cliché. The heart-fluttering excitement of glances exchanged on the street. The palpable ache of lovesickness. The delicious precariousness of a first date or a first dance. The scenarios addressed fall within a decidedly narrow emotive range—the paintings' affective spectrum positioning a coy flirtatious encounter between strangers at one end and a comfortable ennui between long-term companions at the other.

Perhaps Taylor Swift's magnum opus, the ballad *Love Story* borrows from multiple canonical romantic tragedies (*Romeo and Juliet*, *The Scarlet Letter*) among other references and weaves them into one inter-textual object. The power of this seemingly lightweight song is that its sparseness leaves it porous to analogies with a thousand other love stories. Who could fail to be moved by such yearning? I hope that making use of such cliché might invest my paintings with a comparable sense of universality, and create an opening for many viewers to engage with the work.



*still from the music video for Taylor Swift's Love Story, 2008.*

My hope is to “live in” romantic clichés in order to locate more complex meaning therein; to give them a specific face and context. In an essay that I will bring in at length in a later chapter, T.J. Clark addresses Pieter Bruegel’s use of proverb, which has some resonance with my own employment of cliché:

*But literalizing it—monumentalizing it, making the proverb loom up in the flesh in front of the viewer—also peels it away from the proverbial frame. Proverbs are concrete but blessedly abbreviated: their fewness of words is the key to their power: they slip by or slip out almost before the user is aware of producing them. Stopping a cliché in its tracks, magnifying it, giving it specific features—this is always in a sense turning it into something else (172).*

III. I LOVE YOU LIKE A LOVE SONG, BABY<sup>11</sup>



*promotional image for Selena Gomez & The Scene's Love You Like a Love Song, 2011.*

*"The Young-Girl has love STORIES." – Tiqqun (29)*

*"It's been said and done  
Every beautiful thought's been already sung  
And I guess right now here's another one  
So your melody will play on and on, with the best of 'em."  
– Selena Gomez and the Scene (1)*

They tell you to make art about what you know—art should come from your deep well of lived experience, replete with losses, lessons, and personal evolution. But what if your most poignant encounters with love have come in the form of a proxy? Via high school English class readings of Shakespeare, confrontations with half-understood

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted from the song "Love You Like a Love Song" by Selena Gomez and the Scene (1).

Old Master paintings, or the Bruce Springsteen cassette stuck in the deck of your parent's '88 Volvo wagon? This is what you know. You can make love stories about a glance on the street that seems to promise Jane Austen-worthy ravishment, about the longing for a true and perfect love story, about the melancholic let-downs of "good-enough" relationships in your 20s. The slightest brush with romance can be enough to tether a song (or a painting) to the vast canon of love stories. The key is that tether.

This is the secret that Taylor Swift knows, and Selena Gomez too. How has Swift had the time, in her preternaturally quick ascent to sky-high fame, to experience the love and loss that she seems to so authentically process in her ballads? There is authenticity in her imaginative extrapolation. In an interview with *New Yorker* writer Lizzie Widdicombe, Swift says that her subject is "love, and unrequited love, and love that didn't last, or love that you wish had lasted, or love that never even got started (3)." This could not be more revealing of Swift's limited experiences, and unique ability to elaborate on the minute to the point where it achieves grandeur. Widdicombe continues,

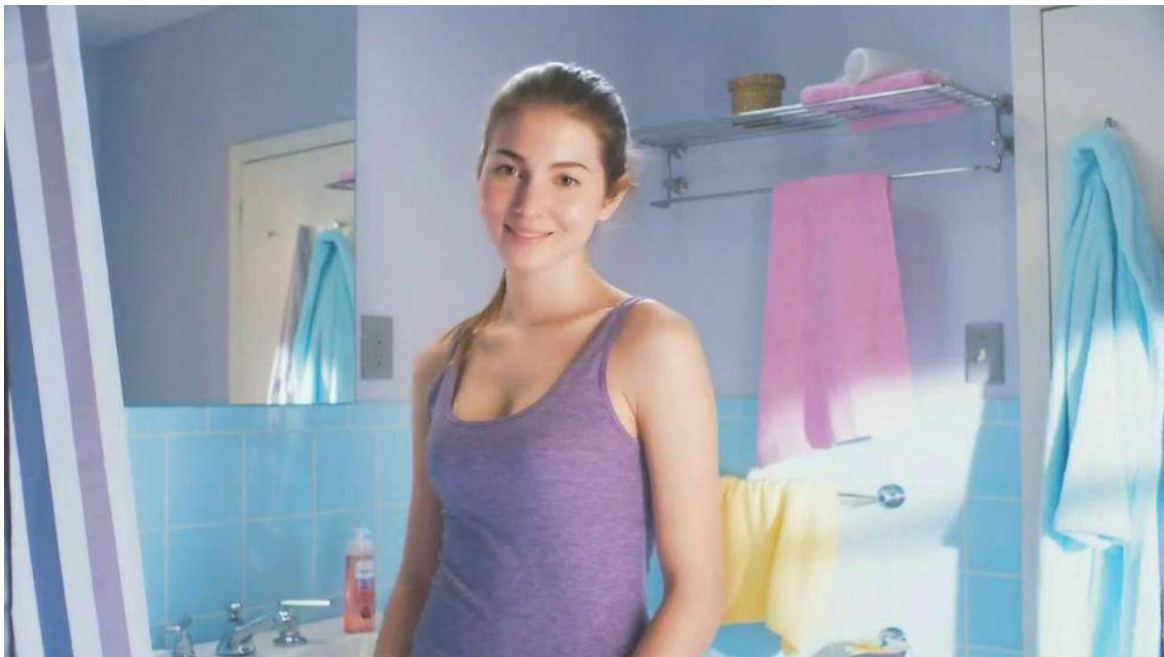
*A perusal of the songbooks begs a logistical question: where does she find the time to date so many people? The answer seems to be that a little goes a long way. Many of the songs are based on a memory or on a flirtation. In "Enchanted," Swift murmurs in a pleading voice, "Please don't be in love with someone else." It was inspired, apparently, by a brief conversation that she had, in New York, with the musician Adam Young, who performs under the name Owl City. The interaction was "just small talk and stuff," Young told me. "She talked about how she grew up in Pennsylvania, I talked about how I grew up in Minnesota. She's very genuine (15)."*

To speak of love in this way—however high-drama the results—always reveals a certain myopic vision. It is a picture of love created by the individual, with marked



disregard for the intricate realities of the other. In *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, the French authors writing under the moniker “Tiqqun” declare that “Love for the Young-Girl is just autism for two (30).”<sup>12</sup> To live *for* love—like Baudelaire’s dandy—is not to be *in* love.<sup>13</sup> It is to create an ideal world from a comfortable distance, without the inconvenient complications of encountering another subjectivity.

#### IV. FOREVER YOUNG



*Clearasil ad for Daily Clear Refreshing Superfruit Wash, 2014.*

*"Adolescence is a recent category created according to the demands of mass consumption."* – Tiqqun (26)

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<sup>12</sup> I will make repeated use of this text, but I should note here that my intentions are not easily aligned with those of Tiqqun. While Tiqqun’s text is critical of the Young-Girl at heart, I am proposing here an embrace of the Young-Girl, using Tiqqun’s terms but not fully accepting their judgments.

<sup>13</sup> “If I speak of love in connection with dandyism, this is because love is the natural occupation of the idle. The dandy does not, however, regard love as a special target to be aimed for (Baudelaire 27).”

In my paintings, I hope to embrace the juvenile and its relentless preoccupation with the romantic, and—without launching an overt critique—do so as a sort of politics. The central couple in so many of my paintings underscores this by way of indicators of youth—in their lithe bodies and skin-tight clothes—as well as class—supple muscle-less limbs and easy poses hint at a bourgeois leisure. These insistent facets of this core couple—youth, suburban leisure, and simplistic romantic scenarios—combine in the paintings to tie their vocabulary to the lexicon of pop songs. Specifically, my paintings have an affinity with love songs created for and by young American women.



*page 8 of K-HOLE's "Youth Mode" 2013<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> I do not have room to give K-HOLE's "trend report" *Youth Mode* the lengthy discussion it deserves here, but the text is an incredible (albeit snarky) investigation of all things adolescent, as well as the origin of such terms as "norm-core" and "acting basic (K-HOLE)."

In Taylor Swift's *Love Story*, there are glancing references to two canonical works of literature (occurring at one point in a single nonsensical lyric: "Cause you were Romeo, I was a scarlet letter; And my daddy said stay away from Juliet") as well as a host of class signifiers that fail to add up to a single narrative (1). Swift makes mention of "ball gowns" but also the "outskirts of town," oscillating between fairy tale and a generic Americana. My instinct is that these details (while failing to conjure up a single image of individual lovers in a specific time and place) somehow add up to more than the sum of their parts. What is created is a pointedly nonspecific picture of love, a non-narrative meditation on longing for escape and ultimate salvation in the union of lovers. I aim to combine multiple references to class in my paintings, in order to circumvent a narrow reading of the paintings as pictures of a hyper-specific (perhaps bourgeois) subculture, and invest them with something like Swift's seemingly universal resonance.



Virginia Provincial, *oil on linen*, 2015.

In a recent painting called *Virginia Provincial*, I found inspiration in a more specific place than is typical for me in my painting practice. In Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole*, the narrator, Bob Dollar, observes the eccentric jumble of quasi-sophisticated faux-French decoration and pure Texas aesthetics in LaVon's Panhandle kitchen,

*While he drank his water Bob noticed flamboyant knickknackery everywhere. LaVon said the kitchen was French provincial, though to him it seemed Texas provincial, a clean white linoleum floor, a white Formica table with chrome legs and matching chairs, a calendar on the wall next to a portrait of Jesus constructed of macaroni and seeds, and against the walls aged and noisy white appliances. The dishtowels, stamped Bonjour at the bottom, showed the Eiffel Tower. On the counter stood ceramic jars*

*labeled CAFÉ, SUCRE, FARINE. A poster reproduction of Brassai's Steps of Montmartre hung over the wine rack, which contained not wine but bottles of whisky; a good sign, thought Bob Dollar (66).*

I am enamored with the idea described here, of the jamming together of an appropriated European design sentiment with an insistent Americana. I hope for something analogous to begin to happen more in my paintings, given my simultaneous identity as an American painter and one substantially influenced by Bonnard, Matisse, and other early twentieth-century French artists.

#### V. THE PERFECT GIRL



*"The triumph of the Young-Girl originates in the failure of feminism." – Tiqqun (36)*

*"She tilts her head from side to side and appears to blink back tears—the expression, which is projected onto a pair of Jumbotron screens, is part Bambi, part Baby June."*

*- Lizzie Widdicombe on Taylor Swift (2)*

How to be the perfect girl? “How to be sexy without coming across as a bitch? (Tiqqun 74)” Best not to ruffle too many feathers on your quest for world-domination. Hillary gets pilloried for self-promoting “like a man,” for scheming and conniving when she employs the same campaign strategies as her male counterparts. And adding insult to injury, she is simultaneously critiqued for her wrinkles, her cosmetics, and her hairdos. America worries that she looks “too old.” A girl has got to look pretty and play nice, even on her quest to become an international political power.

Taylor Swift—who started courting labels as a pre-pubescent pre-teen—must be the shrewdest of businesswomen under that candy-coated façade. But the façade is key. She somehow manages to have, “the pretty, but not aggressively sexy, look of a nineteen-thirties movie siren (Widdicombe 2).” Beauty and sexiness are threatening in their power. Better to employ a less “pure” aesthetic strategy—the pretty, the cute, the dainty, or the whimsical. Beauty might chart its own path, but these minor aesthetics self-generate knowingly through images that are altogether familiar (thus Swift’s insistently retro styling) and always with an air of infantile vulnerability. Cute is a teary-eyed puppy, a blonde girl-child with a skinned knee.<sup>15</sup>

There are so many possible responses to and retaliations against objectification, but I wonder if there might be some power in taking the reins—objectifying oneself before another assumes that power—and using cuteness as a weapon.

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Harris (quoted also by Ngai in *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde*) describes the wounded cute object usefully with the example of Little Mutt, “a teddy bear with a game leg that a British manufacturer has even fitted with an orthopedic boot...” arguing that a subject is cutest when it is “in the middle of a pratfall or a blunder: Winnie the Pooh, with his snout stuck in the hive . . . Love-a-Lot Bear, in the movie *The Care Bears*, who stares disconsolately out at us with a paint bucket overturned on his head (Harris 5-6, *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde* 816-817).”

## VI. GIRLS AND DOLLS



*“While the boy seeks himself in the penis as an autonomous subject, the little girl cuddles her doll and dresses her as she dreams of being cuddled and dressed up herself; she thinks of herself as a marvelous doll.” - Chris Kraus (146-147)*

I have made a parallel between my paintings and dollhouses not only as a harkening back to a childhood pastime and its attendant girlish aesthetics. There is also something sinister in the dollhouse that lies deep within my painting, which I want to explore here. My relationship to the paintings necessitates complete control of form, a torquing of bodies and furniture without regard to anatomy. Mine is an activity of playful manipulation that—like a girl arranging her dollhouse—can take on a brutal air when taken to the extreme. This existence of grotesquery latent in the work need not necessitate an account of an aesthetic that counters their emphatic charm or “cuteness.” The cute is enough. In the same breath, the cute speaks the language of harmlessness and darkness.

## VII. TOO CUTE!<sup>16</sup>



Precious Moments figurines<sup>17</sup>

*"How much it is to be wished that similar field work will soon be undertaken in, say, aesthetics; if only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy."* – J.L. Austin (5)

Hannah Arendt describes the cute as the "modern enchantment with 'small things,'" that which preaches the "art of being happy... between dog and cat and

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<sup>16</sup> Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* includes quite a few quotations from French women's magazines, enmeshed with the authors' own writing. "TOO CUTE" is one such quotation (40).

<sup>17</sup> In *My Pornography*, Heather Sellers likens Precious Moments to pornography, in a passage that has some resonance with my paintings: "Pornography, like Hummel or Precious Moments figurines, is not beautiful or ugly; it's harshly sweet, and collectible, meaningless without a series, and similarly odd. Porn, Hummel, Precious Moments—in each case the body is pressed into shapes that bear little resemblance to daily real shapes. And an awful lot of weird shades of pink. A kind of bisque (33)."



flowerpot (52).” It is beauty in a comfortably canned form: the charm of the tchotcke on the coffee table, the easy attractiveness of the “French provincial style” dishtowel in the suburban kitchen. The pretty, the girly, the cute, and the quaint—these “minor aesthetics” form Sianne Ngai’s wheelhouse. In *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde*, she introduces this category of “minor aesthetics” thus,

*The minorness of the concepts in this subgenre might be ascribed to their derivation from feelings more ambivalent and diffuse, or weaker in intensity, than the strongly positive or negative feelings of pleasure/displeasure that ground the concepts of the beautiful and sublime (811).*

Sianne Ngai ties in the concept of lack (which I will elaborate on further in Wes Anderson’s cinema, quoting Kaja Silverman, and in Persian miniature painting) in order to account for cuteness as the chief aesthetic of consumerism. In an interview with *Cabinet*, Ngai unpacks her framework for a specific discussion of the cute, which necessitates the object’s central lack,

*Cute is a good example. I am compelled to speak of it as an objective property of an object, which reflects my demand that everyone judge that object the same way. But our experience of something or somebody as cute is itself easily overpowered by a second feeling of manipulation or exploitation. Like the sentimental, which as literary critic Jennifer Fleissner points out, we wouldn’t call “sentimental” if it really moved us deeply in the way that it aims to, the cute seems coupled with a certain inability to complete its own project (Jasper 7).*

Ngai continues in *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde* from the passage quoted earlier in this chapter to couch her notion of “weak aesthetics” within the context capitalism and consumerism. She does so by invoking Adorno’s framing of aesthetics in terms of consumption, which can bring an artwork “into an uncomfortable proximity (with) cuisine and pornography (814).”

The devourable nature of the cute cultural object makes it the perfect currency for consumer culture. The cute combines (uncomfortably) a maternal will to care for and an aggressive will to devour. Ngai writes that “for in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle (816).”

*Revolving around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening, cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for “small things” but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further (Our Aesthetic Categories 3).*

The “cute-ification” of the paintings perhaps indicates my will to control them, and if there is an aspect of self-portraiture in the work, this is combined with a will to control myself. The paintings are records of self-control.

### VIII. YOUNG-GIRL AS COMMODITY



*screenshot from Taylor Swift's Instagram page, April 2015.*

Tiqqun's "Young-Girl"—the simultaneous subject of and audience for consumer culture<sup>18</sup>—is formed around a central lack not unlike what Ngai accounts for in her picturing of the cute cultural object. One of the many platitudes of "Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl" describes that "the Young-Girl's sentimentalism and materialism, however opposed they may appear, are really in solidarity: two aspects of her central void (38)." I think (and Tiqqun might disagree) that this central lack must create an opening for meaning elsewhere: emptiness can be overcome by a radical, whole-hearted embrace of surface. Seen through this lens, Swift's relentless self-promotion begin to appear less cynical, perhaps suggesting that we find meaning beyond her musical output:

*When I visited Swift, she was rehearsing inside the Bridgestone Arena, home to the Nashville Predators. Twenty-two eighteen-wheelers were parked outside, bearing gauzy portraits of her face, along with the logo of Covergirl, which is sponsoring her tour. In addition to her perfume, she has sold greeting cards, a line of fourteen-dollar Walmart sundresses, Jakks fashion dolls—they wear Swift's outfits and carry mini versions of her Swarovski crystal-encrusted guitar—and, on her Web site, calendars, iPad skins, Peter Max posters, robes, headbands, journals, and gift bags. Swift professes a kind of auteur approach to marketing. "I do not believe in endorsing a product that you do not want to endorse," she said, with feeling. "I have always wanted to be a Covergirl. I have always wanted to have a fragrance, and so when it comes time to go on 'Good Morning America' and wake up really early in the morning to promote that fragrance I am going to do it with a smile on my face (Widdicombe 6-7)."*

If Widdicombe's vision of Swift is correct, then the pop star's authenticity lies not at some deep personal core, but in the consistent feeling and affect that unite her multi-media empire. In the hyper-extension of her representation, in her earnest faith in

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<sup>18</sup> The Young-Girl is most succinctly defined in the text as "the culminating point of this *anthropomorphic of Capital* (Tiqqun 18)."

the products she endorses, Swift has become a broad continuous surface of sentiment. Representation becomes a kind of religion.

### IX. GIRL POWER: THE TALKING OBJECT



*Lily van der Stokker, I am an artwork, 2004.*

*"Albertine comes from nowhere, and is very modern in that way: she flutters, comes and goes, from her absence of attachments she derives the instability and the unpredictable quality which give her her power of freedom."*

- Jacques Dubois (27)

*"A new sort of realness: Swift is sometimes called a twenty-one-year-old 2.0—the girl next door, but with a superior talent set. She has an Oprah-like gift for emotional expressiveness. While many young stars have a programmed, slightly robotic affect, she radiates unjaded sincerity no matter how contrived the situation—press junkets, awards shows, meet and greets."*

- Lizzie Widdicombe (1)

This is where I part ways with Tiqqun's text, which sees the only solution to the problem of the Young-Girl as her destruction: "THE YOUNG-GIRL IS ENTIRELY

CONSTRUCTED. THIS IS WHY SHE CAN ALSO BE ENTIRELY DESTROYED (135).” For Tiquun, the Young-Girl is synonymous with the Spectacle, and therefore necessary to overtake. I wonder if there might be a future for the commodified Young-Girl, in a role of power relative to the Spectacle.

In children’s books the dolls come alive at night. Objects take on the agency that there-to-fore was only exercised upon them, and carry out their own lives.<sup>19</sup> It is only so long before the Young-Girl (the perfect commodity) speaks for herself. And how might she sound? She would speak with a delicate lilt and an unflappable charm. How might she write? Only in bubble letters, loopy cursive, and “i’s” dotted with hearts, of course. And her looks? Sparkling with youth, and the approachable prettiness of the girl-next-door.

Like Proust’s Albertine, the empowered modern Young-Girl is one who takes the clichés that the Spectacle attaches to girlhood, and uses them to craft her own freedom. Taylor Swift has done this, conducting business and building an empire with smiles and sweetness. Lily van der Stokker has done this too, developing a rich world of uneasy emotion and dark humor through a syntax of sugar-y pastels and loopy doodles. It is

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<sup>19</sup> There is the field of Object-Oriented Ontology to mention here, but the idea of objects coming alive and taking their own agency is included much earlier in Karl Marx’s passage on the table in *Capital*: “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will (Marx 163).”

my intention in my paintings too, to speak in a language of pure girliness: to indulge the desire to place a swath of dianthus pink next to a deep magenta, to embellish with curlicues and arabesques and flourishes. It is the reason behind my heroine's floppy ponytails, their lovers' button noses, and their pets' curly-lashed dopey eyes. I want to make images of complicated emotion through the language of the Young-Girl. This is a rejection of the idea that a girl can only assume power by rejecting her girliness, a suggestion that the girly can be reclaimed and repurposed to powerful ends.

#### *X. COSMETICS*



*still from Taylor Swift's Instagram page of the artist with model Karlie Kloss, May 2014.*

*"RORY: You've had one goal since the BEGINNING of the year.  
FRANCIE: To achieve the perfect liquid line.*

*RORY: To take Paris down.  
FRANCIE: And to achieve the perfect liquid line.”  
- Gilmore Girls (1)*

*“Everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation.”  
- Baudelaire (32)*

The teenage girl becomes a master of make-up. She dabs on foundation with tender delicacy. It takes finesse to perfect the calligraphic swish of liquid eyeliner, to apply false eyelashes, and to master the impeccable red lip. Such artistry ought not be trivialized. In a less frequently quoted passage of *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire makes his case for cosmetics, arguing that beauty originates not in Nature, but in man’s perfection of its raw materials (31-34). He writes that,

*Woman is quite within her rights, indeed she is even accomplishing a kind of duty, when she devotes herself to appearing magical and super-natural; she has to astonish and charm us; as an idol, she is obliged to adorn herself in order to be adored. Thus she has to lay all the arts under contribution for the means of lifting herself above Nature, the better to conquer hearts and rivet attention. It matters but little that the artifice and trickery are known to all, so long as their success is assured and their effect always irresistible (33).*

Make-up, in a poetic sense, is designed to conjure an appearance of health and life out of “dead” materials through a magical sort of artistry. Tired flesh becomes transformed by powders and paints into an image of blushing youth. In this sense, makeup performs the same magic that oil painting does. In *Chromophobia*, Donald Batchelor writes,

*In at least one sense, all painting is cosmetic. All painting involves the smearing of coloured paste over a flat, bland surface, and it is done in order to trick and deceive a viewer, a viewer who wants to be tricked and deceived into seeing something that is not there. And behind the make-up*

*that is painting, there is nothing. There is no substance beneath the surface, no depth behind the appearance (62).*

If the activity of painting contains this sort of artificiality by its very definition, my aim is to embrace cosmetic color for all the pleasure that it is worth. I want each painting to radiate with warmth. I often arrive the same combination of vermillion, cadmium yellow, and a touch of white for skin tones, which become over-saturated to reach sun-burned complexions. My palette is always covered in pools of pure cadmium red, Old Holland's 'Brilliant Pink', and nearly everything gets tinted with a bit of yellow. I aim to embrace sensuous pleasure in every choice of color, mirroring the way in which a teen girl applies blush to her cheeks and red to her lips in an effort to elicit and also to recreate the visual effects of sensual pleasure. My aim is to cultivate an approach to color which is simultaneously artificial and lush. Batchelor continues, in the same passage,

*Colour, then, is arbitrary and unreal: mere make-up. But while it may be superficial, that is not quite the same as it being trivial, for cosmetic colour is also always less than honest. There is ambiguity in make-up; cosmetics can often confuse, cast doubt, mask or manipulate; they can produce illusions or deceptions—and this makes them sound more than a little like drugs. Drugs that are applied to the body: drugs of the skin. If colour is a cosmetic, it is also—and again—coded as feminine (52).*





The Tournament, oil on canvas, 2015.

If color has the transformative power of a drug, and its employment has the effect of feminizing whatever it touches, one of my wishes for the paintings is to transform the most unlikely (and more specifically, masculine) of subjects into emphatically feminine images. This was my thinking in a recent painting called *The Tournament*. I wanted to infuse a picture of two fans at a VCU basketball game—perhaps not the most girly of subjects—with candy colors and over-powering warmth. There are essentially no “cool” colors in this painting. I want the combination of ochres, oranges, pinks, and yellows to reach the limit of what a viewer might find pleasurable, to overwhelm her with sweetness and warmth.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE MINIATURE

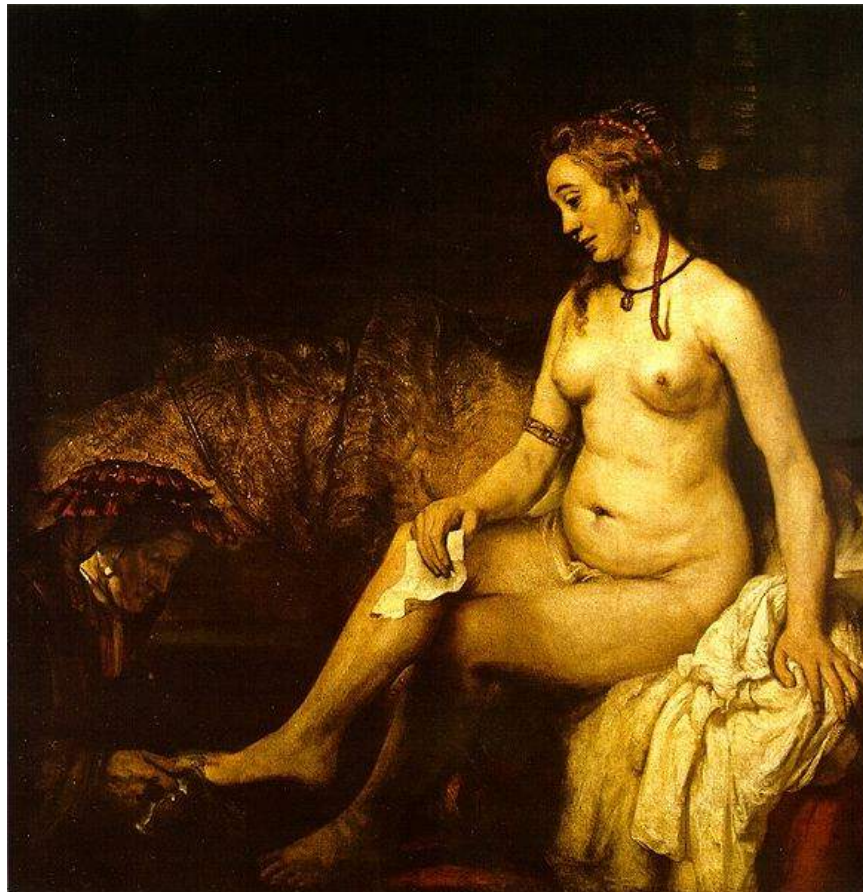
### *I. THE PORTRAIT*



*Rembrandt van Rijn, Portrait of a Young Woman, 1665.*

The tradition of portraiture so often depends on single vector of meaning, a one-to-one identification of the viewer with the painting's subject. Rembrandt's lumpen and vulnerable heroines call out to their beholder, establishing a bond that exceeds their painted world by reaching into ours. Most often, this bond hinges on the gaze of that heroine's eyes, but the nude or otherwise compromised body can present just as

disarming a "gaze" of its own, as in the case of *Bathsheba at her Bath*. In either variation of that gaze's formulation, the result is a brief disruption that cracks open the integrity of her scene and allows the viewer in. This confrontation is undoubtedly the most direct route that a figurative painter might take to establish empathy between her subject and her audience.



*Rembrandt van Rijn, Bathsheba at her Bath, 1654.*

## *II. ON MISE-EN-SCÈNE*

I am after an alternative construction of empathy. What if a painting's interior relationships remained self-contained? What if there were no break? No singular bridge from subject to viewer? Perhaps the greatest example of an artist who allows no break in his stylistic world is Wes Anderson. In many ways—in the anachronistic props, the

improbable plots, and the caricaturesque<sup>20</sup> characters—Anderson emphatically seals his cinema off from the everyday world of his viewer. This, I think, comes down first and foremost to the cast of characters that populate each film, and refuse to break the fourth wall. Kim Wilkins describes this as a phenomenon across all of Anderson’s films,

*Wes Anderson creates a brand-like consistency through the recurrent casting of Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, Jason Schwartzman, Kumar Pallana, Angelica Huston, Luke Wilson, Seymour Cassel, and Andrew Wilson. In keeping with Anderson’s carefully constructed set designs, clothes are intrinsically bound with identity...which establishes a theatrical, stage-like quality (Wilkins 29).*

Incredibly, Lisa Yuskavage transposes a cinematic concept of cast (in her case, inspired by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose cinema contains many parallels with Anderson’s) into her own multi-figure paintings. In a recent *BOMB Magazine* interview, she explains,

*I have always been interested in how people like Fassbinder reused actors, Hanna Schygulla and even himself, for example, over and over again in his films and plays. Like an ensemble theater group, but in film. Or Philip Guston, who said he was just letting his characters—the bean head or the Klansmen, for instance—play out mise-en-scènes. This frees the artist up to develop other aspects of the work (de la Torre 7).*

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Gluck’s 1983 lecture at the New Langdon Arts Center provides a compelling definition of caricature as a means by which society comes to “know itself (Gluck).”



*still from Fassbinder's The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, 1972.*



*Lisa Yuskavage, Teresa and Lauren, 2008.*

Applying Yuskavage's thoughts on mise-en-scène to Anderson's cinema, the strategic reuse of actors "frees" Anderson to locate his content elsewhere. The uncertain emotions exchanged between characters and the affected production style supply the emotional content in his films, more so than any one character pulls at the heartstrings of the viewer. A similar mechanism is at play in Yuskavage's work—a mellow green Vuillard-esque light suffuses the 2008 painting *Teresa and Lauren*, softening and blurring the faces of her two heroines, denying the specific indications of emotion or persona that we expect to locate inscribed in more precisely drawn features. Instead, atmospheric light steps in to explicate the relationship between the two women, enveloping them in a coy world of sensual possibility—performed knowingly in all its uneasy complexity for the viewer. Light creates a foggy atmosphere in Yuskavage's works, an atmosphere that keeps their beholder at a deliberate distance, and implicates that viewer as a morally-suspect interloper or voyeur.

### III. ON PURITY

Reflecting on the idiosyncratic worlds of Andersonian cinema, Donna Peberdy writes,

*Despite their eccentric fluctuations, Anderson's characters are not incongruous within their cinematic contexts. The characters are isolated from external interaction, as Anderson focuses on small families (biological or constructed) of characters in confined, insular environments. These environments are cinematic worlds that are both familiar and inauthentic representations of reality (Peberdy 34).*

Although Anderson operates under a strict self-imposed system of signature constraints—the strained decorum with which family members inevitably interact, the

stilted dialogue, the preposterousness of his characters' defining quests—potentially estranging his films from their audience, emotional investment still manages to take hold. Kim Wilkins describes this seeming contradiction of method and effect by way of Anderson's "pure cinematic characters (25-26)." Such a character bears little similarity to an individual in the "real world," his biography holding only tangential correspondence with the lived experiences of Anderson's audience. Instead, these characters function as "cinematically constructed figures whose improbable experiences and reflexivity are facilitated by, and imaginatively confined to, one particular film (25-26)."



*still from Wes Anderson's The Royal Tenenbaums, 2001.*

Wilkins describes this "purely cinematic character" further as one who is "rather than a *reflection*... a *refraction* of contemporary existential anxiety mediated through Anderson's idiosyncratic cinematic aesthetic (27)." That mediation is announced from

the very beginning of his films in the director's trademark theatrical credit sequences. Wilkins goes on to argue that this mode of characterization necessitates a very particular practice of viewership: a strategic distance from Anderson's characters is needed in order to establish empathy with them (26-27.) It is the sort of distance that I am after in my paintings—conceiving of my figures as “pure *painterly* characters”—distances from the viewer by an overwhelming stylizing ethic.

#### IV. ON DEADPAN

Sam Davies writes that “(Anderson) doesn't do characterization so much as character design (68).” Anderson's directorial mannerisms tend to lend his characters a blankness, a kind of deadpan mask that veils interiority in even the films' most heightened moments. While this consistently flat affect might suggest a denial of empathy, it might also indicate a wholly different structure of feeling in operation. Donna Peberdy gives a sophisticated account of the convoluted effects of Andersonian deadpan:

*The deadpan performance mode is thus an illusion of blankness, functioning as a mask that both disguises and protects. Deadpan is not a simple case of emptiness, as Randall Knopes has pointed out, deadpan takes on a 'doubleness... between an intentionally blank face and idiocy, or between cunning and naïveté. This definition is particularly appropriate in thinking about the deadpan on display in Anderson's films where the characters interactions are often as much about the incapacity of expression as they are the result of ignorance regarding an appropriate response (59).”*

This notion—of a clutch of characters whose capacities of expression are each insufficient to the situation—is perhaps where the empathy lies in Anderson's films. In



viewing all of this individual lack, the viewer takes in the narrative in its entirety—as though from a bird’s eye view—and herself fills the gaps in which affect or action might be deficient. In that sense, Anderson’s characters do not give us the knowing gaze of a Rembrandt nude, but rather fall into the tradition of naive literary protagonists who know less than anyone around them.<sup>21</sup>

Anderson employs so many of the aesthetic modes that Sianne Ngai interrogates—the cute, the quaint, the whimsical—and in effect, denies his viewer the possibility of cathartic identification with a single character. Ngai’s conception of “noncathartic aesthetics” apply uniquely well to Anderson’s cinema, defined as manifested in “art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended ‘action’) and does so as a kind of politics (Ugly Feelings 9).”

What Anderson provokes is what Susan Feagin (as quoted by Ngai) calls “meta-responses” (i.e. the feeling of envy does not solely produce envy, but a guilty awareness of this envy, thus doubling the negativity of the emotion (10))<sup>22</sup>. Herein lies Anderson’s politics of affect: this distancing of emotional connection with his characters puts him in a separate category from traditional melodrama and theatricality, which trade in what Ngai calls the “grander and more prestigious passions... the moral

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<sup>21</sup> It is significant that Anderson cites J.D. Salinger as an important influence, given the myopic adolescent naïveté that characterizes so many of Salinger’s protagonists. The New Yorker’s Richard Brody describes their relationship as a reminder of “the enduring importance of art made by grown-ups about young people (1).”

<sup>22</sup> “The Young-Girl is never simply sad, she is also sad that she’s sad (Tiqqun 27).”

emotions (10).” His project is not a melodrama, but a more sophisticated manipulation of complex emotions from a distance.

### V. MINIATURE WORLDS



*Bihzad, Yusuf and Zulaikha, 1488.*

Anderson's cinematic "dollhouses" bear many connections to painting<sup>23</sup>, and in particular, deserve a comparison to the tightly managed worlds contained within Persian miniature painting. Anderson's meticulously constructed sets—thinking particularly of the submarine in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, but also the titular Grand Budapest Hotel, the Tenenbaum's home, and the Darjeeling Limited passenger train—are asserted as complete worlds unto themselves. The very architecture becomes both a character and a stand-in for the world as a whole.

David Roxburgh describes the poetic implications of the viewing experience that Persian miniatures provide in his 2003 text, *Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting*<sup>24</sup>, employing film theory—along with visual syntaxes including comic book narrative—to explore the paintings' temporality. The dense "matrix" of information that Persian paintings contain—the elaborate pattern, the vibrant flora and fauna, the multiple viewing perspectives—has the effect of demanding of the paintings' viewer a different paradigm of looking than does much of the canon of Western painting. Rather than peering into a window, one beholding a Persian painting takes on the very active role of "(knitting) together the image into a unified entity (25)". In these paintings, architecture—like obliterating light in Yuskavage's worlds and meticulous production

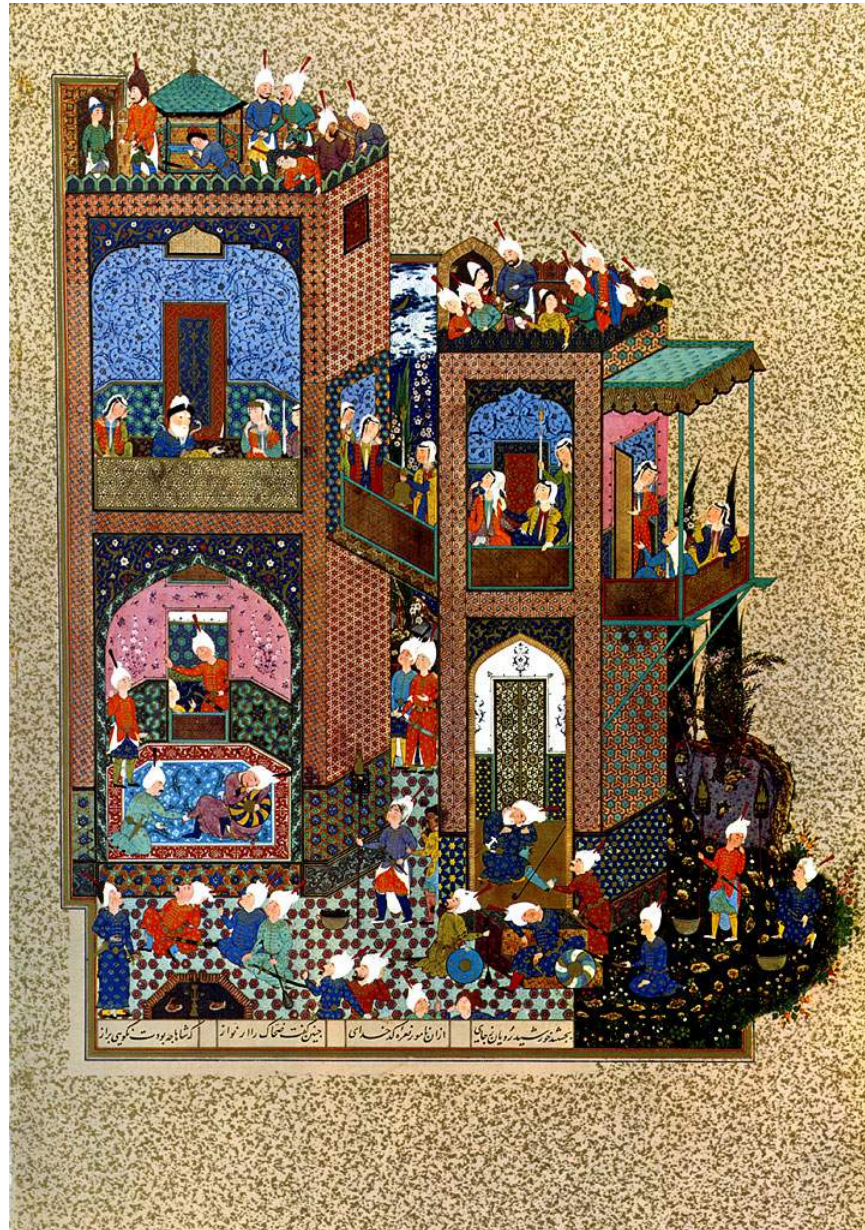
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<sup>23</sup> For one, Thierry de Duve's explanation of the balanced compositional ethic that characterized *tableaux* painting in the nineteenth-century French Salon (2).

<sup>24</sup> The generalizations that I will pose about Persian miniature painting here—indebted to Roxburgh's text—are mostly based on characteristics of work from the pinnacle of that genre, paintings made during the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries. Roxburgh writes that earlier works (the Great Mongol Shahnama for instance) were done in a rougher, less tightly managed style... "One can only assume that painters from the fifteenth century onward considered some aspects of the fourteenth-century pictorial language to be too indeterminate; from the last years of the fourteenth century onward, the formal aspects of painting become increasingly coherent and codified (13)."

design in Anderson's—becomes just as much a subject as the diminutive figures that illustrate the bedrock textual narrative from which the paintings spring.

### VII. COMMUNICATED COMMUNICATION



The Nightmare of Zahhak, artist unknown, folio from the Tahmasp Shahnama, 1525-35.



*production still from Wes Anderson's The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou, 2004.*

In one spectacularly rich footnote to his text, Roxburgh makes a direct comparison between cinematic constructions of relationships and the multiple figures at play in Persian miniatures. He does so by way of Alois Riegl's study *Das holländische Gruppenportrat* (1902), which explores narrative structure in group portraiture,

*Film studies were quick to develop (Riegl's) propositions, developing the terms diegesis, gaze structure, and scopic regime to discuss "point-of-view identifications" provided by the camera as it was inserted into a "network of glances" (perspectival presentation is the equivalent term used in literature). Riegl focused on "communicated communication," the ways that paintings can convey group cohesions only through specific kinds of relationship with the viewer ("external coherence" by including the viewer; "internal coherence" by fiction of non-viewer (27)).*

It is impossible not to draw a parallel to Anderson's cinema here, but I first want to return to my claims about Western portraiture from the outset of this chapter. In a sense, Persian miniatures could not operate more differently from a Rembrandt

portrait in the address of their viewer. I wondered “if there were no break” in the otherwise self-contained world of a painting—a break so often made by a confrontational gaze—might there still be a way to invest the viewer in a painting’s subject? To establish empathy? Roxburgh provides the answer in the above footnote when he brings in the notion of *internal coherence* versus *external coherence* (27). Persian miniatures at first announce their internal coherence through their technical precision and marked lack of direct gazes out of the picture plane. Wes Anderson too suggests—as Riegl puts it—“a fiction of non-viewer” through seamless production design and an insistent suspension of belief. His actors never break the fourth wall.



*still from Wes Anderson's The Royal Tenenbaums, 2001.*



detail from a folio of the Tahmasp Shahnama, c. 1525.

The fascinating twist here, is that Roxburgh argues that internal coherence and the “fiction of non-viewer” are just that—fictions. Although they appear hyper-complete, these “internally coherent” paintings work in such a way as to demand a viewer in order to achieve complete coherence. It is the viewer who “knits” together the incongruous architectural spaces into a meaningful structure, the viewer who triangulates the gazes of figures who seem not quite capable of connecting within the frame itself. This viewer practices something more akin to *reading* than to *beholding* when she undertakes to understand one of these paintings. Western painting might traditionally depend on a direct confrontational address of the viewer, calling out to make a bond beyond the picture plane. Persian miniature painting—and Anderson’s cinema for that matter—

ensnares the viewer through its own lack, and enmeshes that viewer as an active agent in the dense matrix of information within.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE GROUND

### *I. DOWNWARDS-LOOKING*



*Nicolas Poussin, Landscape with Diogenes, 1647.*

When Nicolas Poussin—the great French classical painter—went out into Nature to collect inspiration for his paintings, his eyes turned downwards, towards the earth.

T.J. Clark describes his journeys thus,

*Remember, a contrario, the famous accounts of Poussin coming back from his walks by the Tiber, and his admirers noticing that "he carried in his handkerchief pebbles, moss, flowers, and other such-like things"—"jusqu'à des pierres, à des mottes de terre, & à des morceaux de bois" is how André Félibien puts it in his Entretiens— "which he wanted to paint exactly after nature (134)."*

I want to propose that the painter who represents the world around him becomes



immersed in Nature in the manner of the wildlife biologist. As a young girl, I dreamt not of becoming an artist, but of a career as a naturalist, an expert on the flora and fauna of New England's forests. In fact, perhaps my first real artwork was a first-grade collage long-taped to the refrigerator of my parents' home: six oak galls Scotch taped to construction paper with the caption "I find oak galls wherever I go!"

Scouring the forest for specimens or for insight, the inquisitive scientist or painter must become like a dog with nose to ground. George Bataille observed that, "only with the human does there appear transcendence of consciousness in relation to things, or vice versa. Animals are the absence of transcendence. The animal is in the world like water in water (19)."<sup>25</sup> To embrace animality—an animality required of she who studies Nature—is to lose one's sense of individuality and become fully immersed in the surrounding environment. In this last chapter, I want to explore the poetics of the ground—the painterly stand-in for the earth or Nature—as it acts in both Poussin's paintings and my own.

## II. GRAVITY

If the dollhouse has acted as a recurring motif in my writing thus far, I want to turn next to an easily overlooked component of this house—the floor upon which the dollhouse's owner arranges her dolls and props. This owner peers down into the dollhouse and sees her world from a bird's eye view, conducting domestic dramas and games on the groundplane, rather than in profile. My paintings often operate analogously—with the groundplane tipped up, so that the horizon approaches the top

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<sup>25</sup> Similar ideas are explored in the first chapter of Kaja Silverman's *Flesh of my Flesh*, titled "The Oceanic Feeling (17-36)."

edge of the canvas. The cramped space that results from an upturned groundplane springs from an effort, I believe, to exercise severe control over the painted space. Supplanting a vanishing atmosphere behind the figures (which might position humanity as small in the context of infinite space) the emphasized groundplane potentially positions the painted frame as a miniaturized stand-in for the world itself. It suggests that the events taking place within the frame are a representative microcosm of the vast world of relationships—both among individuals and between individual and environment.



*Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Land of Cockaigne<sup>26</sup>, 1567.*

To further unpack the painter's decision to accentuate the groundplane of a composition, I want to bring in a pair of brilliant lectures given as part of the Tanner Series at Princeton University by T.J. Clark. Here, Clark gives a sensitive and enthralling

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<sup>26</sup> The French and English titles for this painting are both variations on *The Land of Cockaigne*. The original Dutch title, however—*Luilekkerland* (or *Schlaraffenland* in the German)—translates directly (and entertainingly) as "Lazy-greedy-land (Clark 132-133)."

account of two painters—Nicolas Poussin and Pieter Bruegel the Elder<sup>27</sup>—in whose paintings the groundplane itself becomes an integral part of the painters’ humanist ethics. Clark refers to the phenomenon of a painter’s tipping up the groundplane as “ground level painting,” contrasting it with a more customary mode of picture-making in Western art in which the ground is largely ignored in favor of figures posed strictly upright against a deep receding atmosphere.

Clark’s brilliant proposal is that these “ground level” painters get at something of humanity that others in their discipline pass over. Clark’s words here are too poignant to paraphrase, as he defines his central argument in the following passage,

*Some painters... step away from the common unconsciousness. They too exist in a world of uprightness, inhabited by bipedal bodies. But for some reason this uprightness is, or comes to be, a subject in its own right: not a fact taken utterly for granted, from which proceed all the actions and aspirations that constitute the interest—the value—of the human world, but rather, the fact of facts, which both (they agree) inflects and informs the whole texture of human doings but also (they suggest) sets limits to those doings, threatens their balance constantly, puts them off their stride. Yet at the same time it humanizes them, this mere physicality—this precarious footing, this instinctive adjustment to the force of gravity (134).*

Here, we can see the route that Clark has taken from the aesthetic to the ethical—in tilting up the groundplane, the painter humanizes his figures, and ties their humanity directly to the limitations imposed by a struggle against gravity. Clark suggests that a picture of a completely upright world—i.e. figures standing steadfastly erect amid vertical architecture and against the vanishing horizon—is a metaphor for such grand topics as the Word, and also Reason, Law, Speech and Justice (150). While

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<sup>27</sup> Clark isolates Poussin and Bruegel as practitioners of this sort of world-view, although he notes its sporadic and rare recurrence across art history, independent of trends or movements in other facets of painterly technique (135).

these may be subjects in Poussin's oeuvre—and that of any "ground-level painter" for that matter—Clark insists that the painter's use of the groundplane contributes something significantly different to these ethics. Clark continues from his opening passage,

*Perhaps one could say that most painters are chiefly interested in the First phrase of Milton's request to God at the beginning of Paradise Lost— "What is dark in me illumine"—and not in the one that follows— "What low, / Raise and support." The drama of illumination, and the tipping of human being always between darkness and light: this is a metaphoric world that painting occupies automatically, seemingly as part of its very nature. Very few painters see that their art can occupy the second of Milton's worlds just as naturally, and show the business of bodily raising and supporting, and even articulate what that act of elevation means—what resistances it works against, what constraints it acknowledges, and above all what lowness (what ground bass of materiality) it depends on (134).*

It is man's "baseness" that defines him, not necessarily in a negative sense, but in the sense that his struggle is always one of the body to stay upright, of the organs to function, and the limbs to propel him forward.

### III. THE FEAR OF FALLING



*Nicolas Poussin, The Triumph of Pan, 1636.*

Poussin's subject in *The Triumph of Pan*<sup>28</sup> is a peculiar sexuality—full of the odd pairings and attitudes that the bacchanal affords—giving Poussin the license to make assertions about human sexuality with more liberty than would a less allegorical scene. Clark describes Poussin's thinking as a "wild speculative biology" in which the painter ponders the metaphysics of human intercourse. It all comes down to the ground. As

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<sup>28</sup> "When Gian Bernini, on a visit to France in the 1660s, came face to face with copies of the Richelieu Bacchanals (including *The Triumph of Pan*, for certain, which the diarist describes as the picture "où sont ces masques jetés par terre") one thing he singled out for praise, apparently, was the paintings' *terrasses*. The word is mildly technical: it means the painter's handling of the groundplane and foreground, and built into it is an awareness on the part of practitioners of what careful steps have sometimes to be taken to reconcile the groundplane with the picture plane and have the groundplane reach a satisfactory accommodation with the painting's literal bottom edge. Will it cross it regardless, as if continuing out and into the viewer's space? Or will it take a final step or two down, as if feeling the pull of the picture's frontality and flatness the nearer it gets to the bottom of things (Clark 137)?"

Clark sees it, Poussin couches his account of male arousal in the context of bipedalism—the erection is a secondary struggle to stand up, to fight the gravity that makes us supine in our resting state. Clark writes, “Pleasure, says Poussin—or phallic pleasure, at least—is essentially an effort at levitation, at ecstatic escape from gravity. It is full of the fear of falling. Pleasure equals uprightiness, ejaculation, the wild rictus of the mask (147).” Throughout the picture, there are suggestions of the phallus—veiled, revealed, erect, flaccid—that reveal male arousal to be the painter’s latent subject.<sup>29</sup> Clark contends that the earth (as foregrounded heavily by Poussin) has the effect of ironizing the attempts and failures of human sexuality. All of these spent evocative props accentuate the tragically wooden stiffness of the figures by contrast.

Clark is careful to explain that this is not a moralist’s project. In *The Triumph of Pan*, inanimate props are lent a tremendous empathy in their careful arrangement, and the human struggle (as well as the phallic struggle) to stand upright is highlighted with tenderness rather than moralism. Poussin’s relationship to his content is made sympathetic for his use of the ground. A similar scene set in front of a vast atmosphere would have been encumbered by those lofty subjects that Clark enumerates—Reason, the Law, Justice—tipping this painting into a kind of social critique. It is the ground that saves Poussin; it is the source of his tender and insistent humanity.

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<sup>29</sup> We see that Poussin’s eroticism is rooted in the groundplane as Clark elaborates: “The debris on the grass seems to me to ironize that dream machinery, but with an infinite tenderness. The crumpled sheet is a shroud, as I say, a broken body, and its efforts at expression are rightly literalized as masquerade. The panpipes are overbuilt and architectural, like a fragment of architrave fallen from a temple. The tambourine is pure abstraction. Thyrsus and pinecone are robbed of their magic. The two broken trees reiterate the message. The wine in the bowl is a last splash of real sensuality—wine red, but blood red too—which makes the machine up above seem the more anaemic. The red of Pan’s mask is a ghastly facsimile of the flush of orgasm (147).”



*The Game, oil on linen, 2015.*

In my paintings, I have long tipped up the groundplane without grasping its ethical implications. The rhyming phalluses that cover Poussin's composition—from the sheet to bodies in motion to Pan's actual organ—not only underscore his erotic concerns, but also organize the picture compositionally. Without intending it so deliberately, I often encounter this correlation between erotic form and compositional order. In the rhymes of bodies, props and furniture across the picture plane, phallic imagery has unconsciously become a recurrent motif in my paintings, first as small instances of visual innuendo and becoming a more persistent theme. It must be (at

least in part) the groundplane that leads to this phenomenon. Humanity seen in all its baseness—on the ground—will reveal its latent eroticism. There is a complex interplay of desire and fulfillment that suffuses a cast of characters gathered together in a space; eroticism is always an undercurrent in our relationships to one another.

## CONCLUSION

*"What is the reason that as soon as one human being shows he needs another (no matter whether his need be slight or great) the latter draws back from him? Gravity."*  
- Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Kraus 140)

"What is a woman? What is a man? How do they—and how should they—relate to each other?" – Kaja Silverman (*Flesh of my Flesh*, cover text)



*Match Point, oil on linen, 2015.*



The exploration I have launched in the last chapter—unpacking the ethics that are encoded in a painter’s choices in depicting space—have led me to imagine more unusual spatiality—inspired, in part, by cinematographic influences detailed earlier—as an area of inquiry to be addressed in future works. In *Match Point*, a very recent painting, I chose a tennis match as a setting in which to playfully manipulate space. The two figures—though separated by a significant distance—are connected by the girl’s elongated shadow, a shadow that has the effect of linking the two together almost as a visual manifestation of their relationship—the way a speech bubble might function in a comic book. If my work has dwelt on relationships and love, I see this as an exciting way to inhabit and make visible that uncertain space that separates us from those in our proximity, the zone in which we communicate, the territory of affect. In a discussion of Freud’s Oedipus complex, Kaja Silverman writes,

*The extraordinarily difficult task imposed upon the child’s primary care-taker not only by culture but also by Being itself is to induct it into relationality by saying over and over again, in a multitude of ways, what death will otherwise have to teach it: “This is where you end and others begin (Flesh of my Flesh 94).”*

Throughout this writing, I have repeatedly insisted on the importance of juvenile or adolescent concerns in the work. Perhaps Silverman’s quote gets at a core concern of mine, a concern that is crucial in the lives of children: the urgent drive to understand how one relates to the other and what divides us. On this hunt for analogy—looking to other painters, writer, cinematographers with whom I have found kinship—analogy has revealed itself as the true subject of my work. In these paintings, my ultimate ambition

is to explore the most distilled sort of analogy—the space between the lover as she relates to her beloved, between man to woman, between self to other.

Taylor Swift’s career has been a meditation on love. My paintings, too, take love as their insistent subject. Asked by an interviewer about the persistence of love as a theme in her scholarship, Kaja Silverman responds,

*For me, love is about the creation of value not relative or exchange value, but rather absolute value. Absolute value is what we confer upon creatures and things when we allow them to body forth what we lack. This embodiment has important political ramification, since as a result of our unique libidinal history each of us possesses the capacity to affirm both what others cannot, and what the larger culture renders abject. For the most part, such affirmations remain psychically circumscribed. However, certain subjects succeed in externalizing what they see in the form of aesthetic works. A work of art can make it possible for others to see beauty where they themselves could not otherwise see it, and—thereby—to expand their capacity to care (Pachmanová 10).*

This perhaps elucidates my ethical stake in wishing to picture the bonds between us.

That fundamental painterly concern—the ambition to breath life into the “negative space” between figures—is one of painting’s most positive promises. To enliven that space with empathy is to provide a viewer the shock of realizing otherwise inaccessible feeling for what previously seemed inconsequential. To paint is to facilitate a small experience of love for another.

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