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DRAWINGS WITH RIVER

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

By Greg Piwonka

BFA Texas State University 2003

MFA Virginia Commonwealth University 2018

Director: Peter Baldes

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Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

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ABSTRACT

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By, Gregory William Piwonka, 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, 2018.

Major Director: Peter Baldes, Associate Professor Painting and Printmaking

These paintings are a record of my recent past, a past with a new son, major life shifts, big decisions and risks. These paintings are a record of my distant past, of my relationship with my father and siblings. These paintings are a record of my present, my relationship to art, current, past, good and bad. These paintings are both joyful and cathartic, simple and confusing. They are about my life, and my attempt to not repeat the mistakes of the past, but to try create joys for the future.

HOW DID I GET HERE

Most people ask this of themselves at some point in their lives. Here is where I am currently. I left a well paying job as a graphic designer at a clean energy marketing firm to come to grad school to pursue my painting MFA. My partner Kelley, was supportive and understood when I told her that I need to go to grad school and quit my job. Our child River had just turned one year old. A mid-life crisis is usually accompanied by a convertible Corvette, or a Harley, but in my case I needed to get this degree. I had to prove to myself that I could do this thing that had been in the back of my head since 2003 when I finished undergrad. I couldn't have done this without Kelley and it turns out River was also a driving factor in me having the nerve to apply to grad school. I figured if we could keep ourselves and River alive for a year, grad school will be easy. Also, I wanted to be able to show River that he could do anything he wanted to and not be afraid to take risks. After many conversations wondering if this is a risk worth taking, we packed up all of our things and our 15 month old child, and moved to Richmond, VA. A place that neither of us had ever even visited before. We rented a house that we had only seen on the internet, in a new town, and hoped for the best. I drove here in a car with my brother Jeff, and unloaded a trailer full of our stuff into this house in a neighborhood called Brookland Park. Jeff told me at one point, while we were unloading the truck "goddamnit Greg you better get famous after all of this". That is how I physically got to Richmond, Virginia but how did I get here in my painting practice, let me explain.

DEPRESSION AND AUTHORITY

I find so much joy in making these paintings, sometimes I laugh out loud in the studio when I am making them. I don't always intend for the animals to be so strange looking. The animals look strange because that is just what came out when I drew them. Like Philip Guston, sometimes I can't quite explain why I drew something exactly how it is drawn. They are intuitive decisions. The animals look funny in the paintings, because they are a stand-in for my own emotions. The narratives that I derive in my head about the paintings revolve around the animals knowing more than the humans, or trying to stay away from humans. The looks on the animals faces are often a look of bewilderment.

Depression is an ongoing issue in my life. It is hard to discuss and I have gotten good at working through the bad times. Painting is my way to work through these times without having to use words. My art is my therapy and has been for as long as I can remember. Rather than talk or explain how I feel in words, I found a way to embed my feelings in the paintings. The paintings are a way to work through my own self doubt and depression.

The depression goes back to my parents getting divorced when I was 13. My three brothers and I stayed with my dad . My mom left and took my sister with her. Divorce is common and it can be handled in a way that is healthy for the kids, or in my case it can be handled in a way where the kid gets put right in the middle. Since I was the oldest

and my parents refused to speak to each other, I was the mediator. I heard the most awful things from both of my parents about one another. I didn't talk to my mom for 6 months after the divorce. I didn't really understand why she would leave, and my dad was willing to blame everything on her.

I can't recall a lot of my childhood, but sometimes memories sneak through me into the paintings. The animals expressions in the paintings sometimes, reference my own emotions.

As my son River gets older, I remember things like this that happened between me and my father. One of the driving factors behind these paintings is to create positive memories. I hope River will remember these as good times. I'm dead set on not repeating the things I experienced with my dad.

ARTISTS

There are many artists that are important to me, but I want to focus on Philip Guston, Joan Brown, Tal R and Amy Sillman. These four artists all incorporate a play between figuration and abstraction, humor, psychological examination of the self and an often mysterious subject matter that is revealed and hidden at the same time.

Guston

Philip Guston said he could never escape his past, that he always felt like he was painting in a closet feeling hidden and strange. It is clear in his paintings that he was wrestling with his own demons. As a ten year old boy he found his father after he had hung himself. Guston's brother was accidentally run over by his own car and had both legs severed later dying from gangrene. His paintings mix a cartoon style and subject matter that is often hidden, at first appearing humorous, but upon further scrutiny revealing a troubled artist.

“What measure is there, other than the fact at one point in your life you trusted a feeling? You have to trust that feeling and continue trusting yourself.”¹ When I see a Guston painting it is clear that he trusted himself when making the painting, and that is why I am so attracted to his work. He doesn't avoid difficult subjects he lays himself open, in a way that reveals everything using his own language. He forgets about everyone else and makes the paintings for himself. He gave himself the freedom to

invent his own language to discuss his own life. "That's the only possession an artist has--the freedom to do whatever you can imagine." (Guston 2014 p.126)



Philip Guston, Web, 1975

Guston's painting *Web* is a picture of himself with one big eye, the other head is his wife Musa the green in his paintings often refers to her. The two spiders are from a memory of him and Musa both watching a spider weave a web at their house. The web connects them together highlighting his need for her in his life. It is personal, funny and foreboding.

I enjoy the personal aspect of his work and the humor and I try to incorporate those aspects, but I also want to try to incorporate joy into my paintings. I want to make sure

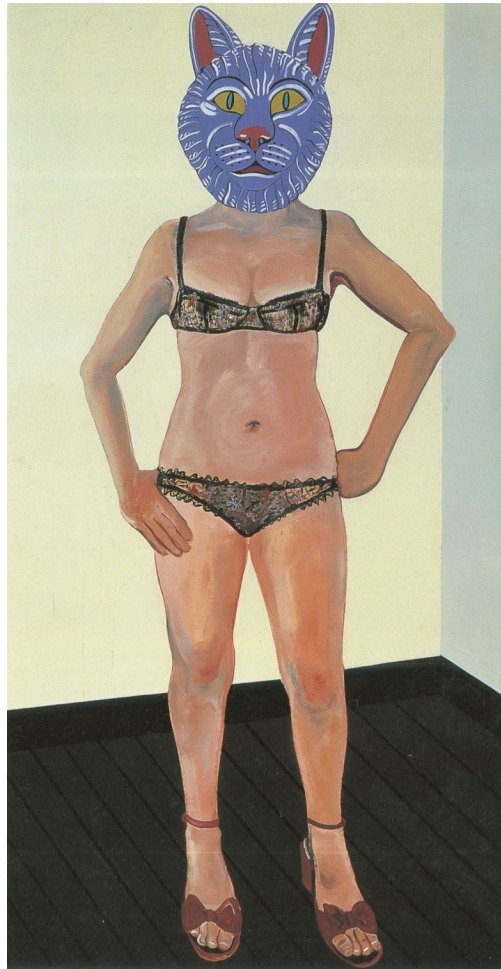
and incorporate my child into my paintings, Guston had a daughter, but I can't think of one painting that includes her.

Joan Brown

I find that an old shirt from the thrift store that is already broken in, is much more comfortable than a brand new shirt from Target. A painting by Joan Brown, has the comfortable feeling of a thrift store t-shirt. I can tell that she trusts herself when making a painting. Brown gives herself the freedom to paint whatever subject she sees fit. Her works often contain recurring themes such as "her own life, including herself at various ages, her child, her pets, and others she cared about." ²

These paintings feel comfortable, because of how they are painted. They feel like the person next door could have created them. Yet there is always something brooding underneath the surface. In her self portraits she often has the most intense look on her face. Self portraiture can be a way of scrutinizing one's own personal psyche. Brown said she often painted self portraits because it was easier to model for herself, and she didn't want anyone else in the studio. Critic Thomas Albright said this about the portraits, "The overwhelming impact of these images was not at all intellectual rather it was the result of a dizzying tension between the stark immediacy of Brown's figures and the oblique inscrutability of what she was depicting." (Baas 1998 p.108) While Brown was often accused of being naive, she was much smarter than one might think at first.

This sleight of hand is what makes the paintings so compelling. The subjects seem simple, but looking at the painting only leads to more questions.



Joan Brown, *Woman Wearing Mask*, 1972

In *Woman Wearing Mask*, the title isn't clear if the figure in this painting is Brown, or another woman. Wearing a mask creates anonymity, but standing in one's underwear is very revealing. A hiding and revealing is taking place in this painting and that is why it is so interesting. The figure is placed right in the middle of the canvas so as to directly address the viewer, creating drama. The space is painted flatly with color that has little modulation. The right wall is just slightly darker, and that simple difference in color, with

the simple division of the space by line, is enough to make the whole room have depth. Her elbow interrupting the space of the two walls makes the figure come forward. The figure in the painting is rendered in a fairly realistic style, but the cat mask is cartoon like, creating a tension. One begins to question if this painting is real or imagined. If it is real what is actually taking place? The underwear and heels suggest a sort of erotic encounter, but the look on the face of the mask, and the way the hands are placed on the hips is not inviting. It is as if the cat mask is laughing back at the viewer.

Brown's use of personal subject matter and its impact on me, has allowed me to blend my own personal life into my paintings. I give myself permission to make paintings based on my life and interactions with River. Her frontal flat rendering of the figure is a tactic I have borrowed as well.

Tal R

What interests me most about Tal's paintings are how mysterious they are. They are often of specific places, but the time and the actual location is obscured. His use of color inspired me to try to use color in a more direct way. His latest paintings look like giant coloring book drawings made with crayon. His cartoon drawings were inspiring to me when I was making my own drawings at the beginning of 2018. Those drawings capture simply a picture of a place with a minimal amount of information using only a few colors and marks. The place in question is not known but it exists right in front of the viewer in the form of drawing or painting.

“What I want is to stay very close to a kind of impulse that evokes a narrative without the necessary details.”³ This is key to my experience of Tal’s paintings. They tell a story, but that story is open ended. I’m interested in that with my own paintings as well. I want for them to operate the same way as his paintings so the viewer can enjoy the painting as a place without having to know any of the backstory of the image. I think my work gets more complicated the more one knows about it, but the initial reaction is still a painting of a place that is not quite recognizable.

“You must be able to explain it to someone who cannot see it. The actual experience of the works though, is something quite different, as the works, despite their figurative character, clearly challenge the relationship between the two poles in modernistic western painting: figuration and abstraction.”⁴ This statement aptly describes the balance that I love so much about Tal’s work and what I am trying to achieve in my paintings. One can tell what they are looking at, but then questions arise as to what one is actually looking at. It allows me to have in my work, the freedom I love with abstract painting in regards to color and form, and to mix narrative and story-telling in a highly imaginative way.

There are many formal qualities about his work that I enjoy. The drawing is often like children’s drawing. It is free of concern for academic representation. They exhibit a

freedom that I aspire to in my own work. Tal is not worried about being too conceptual, he is just worried about making the painting and sometimes the painting is enough.

Amy Sillman

Amy Sillman's work deals with the body, but it is intentionally confused by looking like abstraction. She deals with what it is like to be looked at as a female and to have a body. Often her pictures are of others or other things, but the subject of her paintings is always herself and her own emotions. Sillman works in an intuitive method taking into account herself as an abstract painter, a form historically led by "male heroes."

An interview I read with Sillman really changed the way I thought about making paintings. She was the missing link in all of my influences that really helped me turn the corner. In the interview she talks about politics and being an activist artist and says "I think activism is different than resistance. Painting for me is about the practice of negotiating between those two states—being both tremendously analytic and at the same time being lost or at least a bit naive. Naivete allows for levity and a kind of goofiness and confusion." ⁵ I was working in a way that was improvisational at the time and being lost was the part that was the most uncomfortable and comfortable, when I finally resolved the painting it was a triumph. They then go on to talk about having a sense of humor and she says "Oh well, I'll probably screw it up" That may be a good thing. That kind of approach is a way of emptying something of its content and refilling it with what is new but may be wrong, something that you've gotten from the wrong place

with the wrong equipment and faulty understanding.” (Sillman 2008 p.20) This sense of humor is the way I think about my paintings I always think the painting is going to end badly or take a wrong turn, but I just let it go that direction anyway. She then says “My work is always psychological whether I want it to be or not. The shapes that I am interested in looking at and drawing always turn into forms that have some kind of psychological narrative.” (Sillman 2008 p.20) Narrative has always been something in which I am interested. There always has to be some sort of narrative in my paintings even when they are abstract, like Sillman’s. She says “Working becomes ridiculous in a good way when you realize that you may not want to make art about feelings but there isn’t anything else.” (Sillman 2008 p.22) Then the conversation turns toward humor the interviewer asks “What gets released in the funny parts of artworks?” and Sillman replies “The irrational. It’s an anxious state. That’s what I like in paintings. I wish there was more funny art. There isn’t enough funny art.” (Sillman 2008 p.23) I gave a presentation about Sillman for our professional practices class. Afterwards, in response to a writing I submitted, Hope asked me about humor in my work, why can’t art be funny? I wondered about that question and then this is when I changed from making abstract paintings to the paintings from drawings with River. The paintings became funny, but still psychological.

The humor in her work is what most attracted me to them, but in relation to my work I think it is connected through how it feels to be judged. I am constantly dealing with self doubt and if my accomplishments are good enough. It is my own judgment of myself

that I confuse with what I perceive as others expectations. I feel these sorts of investigations happening in Sillman's paintings.

I find her paintings anxiety ridden, funny and full of self doubt all at once. I am revealing these feelings in a hidden way in my work, using animals as a stand-in for my own emotional baggage, likewise Amy is using abstraction to hide figures that express emotions. "I see the figure and all her anxieties, the voice swirling in her head, her physical discomfort. Her inability to be properly scaled to her situation. I see her and I recognize her and I laugh, not so much at her as at myself." ⁶

I also want people to be able to relate to my work through awkwardness as well as humor. Sillman claims awkwardness is what she is searching for in her paintings. "Awkwardness is that thing, which is fleshy, funny, downward-facing, uncontrollable; it is an emotional or even philosophical state of being, against the great and noble, and also against the cynical. It is both positive and negative, with its own dialect and dialectic." ⁷

BAD PAINTING

Awkwardness exists in bad painting along with a questioning of taste and value. Bad painting, as defined by the “Bad” Painting catalog essay is “figurative work that defies, either deliberately or by virtue of disinterest, the classic canons of good taste, draftsmanship, acceptable source material, rendering, or illusionistic representation.”⁸

With this approach to painting I can pick and choose which skills to use or abandon at my discretion. It gives me a clean slate to make the painting how I see fit.

Guston, Brown, Tal R and Sillman all have some qualities that fall under the bad painting umbrella. Bad painting creates awkwardness by the use of drawing that is not representational. Colors are often embellished for emotional effect to dramatize or provoke a viewer. Paint is used in a way that seems unacademic not adhering to tradition of classic painting rules. The subjects are sometimes highly personal or very common.

Painting creates a world where possibilities are endless. A painter is not beholden to use perspective or color in a way that is representative of the world. In painting, mistakes can become solutions, and that isn't possible with most everyday activities. For instance, if the IRS finds a mistake in a tax return, they won't fondly admire the fuzzy math. In painting sometimes the bad idea is the best idea, and leads to inventive new solutions.

Quality and taste are of course, subjective. While painting I often ask myself if something is good or bad. Good is when a painting blurs the line between sophisticated and shoddy. The work then challenges the viewer to decide for themselves what is quality, what is taste.

I think my paintings are good paintings. I intentionally use decisions that appear to be unintelligent decisions. I do this to make a viewer question their own assumptions about taste and value. It is an attempt on my part to ask the viewer to slow down, to be open minded, to question what is behind the work. This method is more than just a painting question, this is something that should be practiced in everyday life. To be critical of what is presented instead of accepting it on preconceived or learned notions of value.

COLOR

My paintings are very bright and hard to ignore, even jarring. I make them this way on purpose. I try to make sure and draw attention to the animals and their expressions to highlight them because they are the protagonist in the painting, relaying a sometimes anxiety ridden look on their faces.

Color is personal, everyone sees it in a different way. Color can be tasteful or distasteful. In crit someone asked me why I made an object black. Immediately I replied “That isn’t black. It’s Egyptian Violet. It looks almost black, because it is on top of orange.” I painted it that way on purpose, to appear in an elusive, in between state of color. I wanted the viewer to question their understanding of that color. The person who wanted to know why I painted that element black couldn’t stand that part of the painting. Others in the room were in love with that part of the painting. For me that one element was the comedic part of the painting. It was also the part that started to question taste.

When painting I never write down the colors I mix, I try to only remember how to repeat a color. This intuitive way of working is hard to describe. When I think about which color is the correct color the answer is a feeling from within. “This way of working with color—anthropomorphic, relational, emotional, psychological, and corporeal—has nothing to do with color theory, only the theory of ignoring a theory. In other words, let us welcome the collision of mistakes, accidents, desires, contradictions, destruction, and possible disasters that color embodies.”⁹

At times I can visualize how to replicate a color from a previous painting. Color sticks in my memory very vividly. This can lead to mistakes, but those mistakes often turn into solutions. Many times I find color interactions that would not be possible without allowing myself to go through with bad ideas.

In the thesis paintings I tried to use color in new ways. I wasn't concerned with transparency in earlier work, but in this work I realized how to use transparent color to make slight shifts, and to use it to achieve strange light. At the art supply store I found myself looking at the back of paint tubes to find new transparent colors I had never used. Before going I would plan to find the brightest colors so that I could make the paintings louder. Placing complimentary colors next to each other is my favorite method to make colors brighter.

Drawings with marker led me to paint in a way where color was considered in relation to the color next to it. In my previous paintings I would have tried to mix colors that were hard to identify often grays and browns, and then I would put another color next to it to alter it, similar to Josef Albers' color studies. After drawing with markers I switched to using more colors straight from the tube and then placing other colors on top by glazing. This way of working led to the paintings becoming more clear in their colors.

The color in my painting changed as a direct result of my drawings with River. Without this, I might not have had the revelation about transparency and layering colors on top of each other.

DRAWING

I have been drawing with River since he turned 15 months old. Drawing together was just fun time for me to forget about drawing for myself and make drawings that were totally free. River and I draw on computer paper with Magik Markers, the Magik Markers colors sit on top of the paper the way oil paint sits on canvas with an oil ground. Colors act as transparent color on top of one another, this is when I first started to think about transparent color. I would draw them really fast and try to fill in space as quickly as possible. It made me wonder about using thinner paint and trying to alter the paintings. Instead of using really thick paint all of the time I could try to use thinned out paint and glazing.

When River began learning how to talk the drawings changed, they got more interesting because we could have a conversation about what to draw. Typically I would ask River what we should draw and then he would suggest cats, dragons and cows. Later the things he wanted to draw changed to fire trucks, busses and cars. Sometimes we would draw together and River didn't want to draw. He would tell me what to draw, but when I asked him if he could draw something he would get upset. When I first showed these paintings in crit and explained the process I mentioned this happening. Someone said they were concerned that River was shutting down. I didn't really think that was the case until a few days later we were drawing together and I asked River to draw something, and after he drew it he got upset. I asked him what was wrong and he said he didn't like

it because it wasn't as good as the one I had drawn. I felt awful like a sick feeling in my stomach. The last thing I wanted to do was inhibit River's will to make his own drawings.

There is still a predominant theory in art education that children should be only given materials to make things and then adults should step aside, the so called free expression pedagogical approach. It stems from the early modernism idea of the artistic genius in their studio making beautiful pieces of art. Conversely, in a recent study from 2016 adults collaborated with children using "Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural educational philosophy according to which learning is understood as a social process and interaction between two culturally defined partners, the learner and a more accomplished partner. According to Vygotsky, learning is quintessentially assisted by adults. They are the more accomplished conveyors of social knowledge able to scaffold the learning task using appropriate devices." ¹⁰ In the study adults and children collaborated together as equal partners to create drawings that led to more complicated narratives. They found "A different conception of the creative process as a joint interactive practice indicates a new pedagogical consideration. The notion of artistic creativity seems to be disentangled from the innovations of the gifted individual attaining mostly aesthetically pleasing images. It acquires a more reflective nature and seems to be dependent on mutual exchange. Understood in the context of the Vygotskian thesis, creativity cannot be explained as an inherent disposition and independent of social influence. It is dependent on the predominant social tools and symbols brought into the arena of collaborative drawing by both adult and child." (Kouvo 2016 p.289)

River and I always collaborate as equal partners, but he is still three years old. He has realized he has power so he will often just refuse to compromise. There is not much reasoning with a three year old. So my methods had to change if I wanted to draw more than just fire trucks or airplanes. I started to just listen to conversations we had and make mental notes. If River made a drawing by himself I would ask him what it was and listen to his explanation. These conversations led to the final paintings of the project.

My Own Drawing

I didn't actually make very many drawings before coming to grad school. I painted with sumi ink on paper, but my drawing practice had lapsed. When I was in undergrad I did take many figure drawing classes and learn to draw the human form the traditional way. Drawing with River made me reconsider the simplicity of drawing and how much I enjoyed it. I started to look at David Hockney, Matisse, Bonnard and specifically Tal R. When I saw Tal R's simple crayon drawings that he did from a ship in an expedition to Greenland, I was taken by how easily he had conveyed information with such little form. The drawings were often only one color and fairly minimal. This inspired 15 drawings I made at the beginning of this year before I started this project. Those drawings revolved around the idea of place in a painting, but I wanted the place to be invented and not from an actual landscape.

MUSIC LEADS TO NEW IDEAS

The paintings in the beginning of this last year were abstract paintings. Working in abstraction was an attempt to eliminate narrative from the work. I was questioning why I always needed to have a story. Every abstract painting had something that was figurative or referenced landscape. In my mid-term review someone said to me that the paintings looked like abstract paintings that could be anyone's work. They told me these are nice paintings that could be in a gallery anywhere. That really struck a chord. I left that review really thinking about what I was trying to achieve with the paintings. I was trying to play with semantics, but I didn't understand what the abstract paintings meant.

I am always listening to music at home and in the studio, and music has introduced many ideas that influence the work. Last semester I was listening to U.S. Maple everyday in the studio. Their music is chaotic and sounds like a trainwreck, it is always on the verge of being almost together and then just falling apart. When I first heard their music I thought it was just improvised. After becoming more acquainted with the music I realized that all of it was highly planned and the songs were purposefully crafted. It made me wonder if a painting could function in the same way.

Jonathan Lasker makes abstract paintings that are based on improvised sketches that he later turns into small paintings. The work becomes a highly planned copy of the maquette. I started to use this as a method of working to make my abstract paintings. I

would make a drawing and then copy it for the painting. I still allowed myself the freedom to improvise. I would change colors and forms in the paintings as they were created. Lasker refers to himself as an actor, playing the role of a painter, the study is the script and he follows it when making his paintings, essentially removing intuition. I didn't want to become an actor, I still wanted to react to things that were happening on the canvas in the moment.

Since I am a musician, I know how planned and practiced a piece is, but despite that preparation, it never gets performed the same way twice. Unexpected things happen that alter the way a song unfolds. While playing I was always reacting to my bandmates actions. Tempos change because of nerves, cymbal stands fall over, guitar strings break, amplifiers blow fuses, a multitude of things can happen that cause the musicians to react despite the plan. While painting I am always reacting to myself. I perceived Lasker's paintings to be completely improvised, but found that they were highly planned. U.S. Maple was connected to that idea because I originally had the same perception of their music.

Dan Ruccia compared the vocals of Al Johnson, the vocalist of U.S. Maple and Derrida's theory of deconstruction. He states: "By the late 1990's, a critical consensus emerged that the band was "deconstructing" rock, a consensus which is now ubiquitous—almost every reference to the band these days uses some variant of "deconstruction" as a descriptor."¹¹ While Johnson's vocals actually have lyrics they are

intentionally distorted and broken to obscure meaning. He will break words into pieces by eliminating consonants and dragging vowels.

“While not every song by U.S. Maple features incomprehensible vocals, Al Johnson's vocal delivery and word choice still seeks to obscure more meaning than they create. His focus is on crafting a personalized language inspired by a combination of the semantic fragments discussed above and various forms of slang, with the hope that it be legible as a language...He is unconcerned that his listeners understand every word (or sound) he says, only that they recognize that what he is saying is in a language, has a strong sense of "narrativity," and has some internal consistency and coherence. In other words, his goal seems to be probing the limits of what can be understood as language and using the results as the basis for rock lyrics, thus further prioritizing the "Saying" over the "Said.” (Ruccia 2014)

Reading this essay led me to think about how I could play with semiotics in painting. An important part of these paintings is my interaction with River when we conceive the subject. The paintings represent an interpretation of that interaction, and the paintings become a signifier for me of that previous moment of interaction. That moment can't be conceived by the viewer standing in front of the painting, because they were not present. So the viewer is left with only the painting to base their own experience and create their own meaning. The painting becomes the “saying”, but my memory of the moment of interaction is the “said.” I want to hold on to my memory of the interaction with the painting.

This is also similar to the way Amy Sillman uses abstraction in her painting by drawing figures and then abstracting them. Sillman makes drawings from models and then new

drawings from the memory of the first drawing. These drawings from memory lead to the intuitive abstract paintings.



Amy Sillman, N, 2007

“The type of semiotics I am suggesting in relationship to Sillman’s new body of work is not analytical. Rather, it is a kind of idiosyncratic semiotics that eschews the formulaic or programmatic in favor of what might be described as an intimate synthesis—a bringing together of opposing forces, a narrowing of the space between viewer and painting, a boundary breaking proximity, that at times, threatens to engulf or to simply continue fracturing, its elements toppling over each other and then reconstituting into another arrangement. The subjects of these paintings have been evaluated and pulled apart—made into fragments—and pieced back together, but the semiotic structure Sillman gives herself is unstable and constantly changing.”¹²

I wanted to attempt to do this with representation and narrative. As my project progressed I would begin to introduce more of my own personal memories into the original narratives, creating a synthesis of multiple past experiences.

Brend

Henry Flynt is a composer, philosopher and conceptual artist. I originally came to his work through hearing his music which is a mixture of influences, Indian music, free jazz, old time music and country blues. He typically plays the electric violin in compositions that sound like meditative noise arrangements. I find them to be enjoyable at times and annoying at other times. It just depends on my mood or how much other chaos is happening. Through his music I found his philosophical writings. In addition to Joan Brown, his writing about *brend* was important for me and allowed me to make these paintings from my and River's drawings.

Brend is Flynt's word for a person's "just likings." To determine one's *brend*, Flynt says, "Consider all of your doings, what you already do. Exclude the gratifying of physiological needs, physically harmful activities, and competitive activities. Concentrate on spontaneous self-amusement or play. That, is concentrate on everything you do because you like it, because you just like it as you do it." ¹³ This made me think specifically about the drawings that River and I make together. Why does River choose the things that he wants to draw? He chooses them because he just likes them. River likes fire trucks and things with wheels. Specifically I thought that the drawings River and I made together were *brend*. We were both making them for pure spontaneous reasons without regard for anyone else.

In a studio visit someone asked why they should want to look at any of these paintings for more than five minutes. This made me question why I choose the subjects of my paintings and who is the audience for my paintings. After deliberating, I realized that I really make my paintings for my own amusement. I became curious about why people like my paintings and wondered if I made things that were just based on my drawings with my son would people still like them. What I was really questioning was my own and others value system. If someone really wanted one of my paintings, I wanted to test the limits to see how dumb appearing I could make them. I still wanted to make the paintings really well, but they weren't going to be nice looking abstract paintings. They would be based on drawings with River. This was my thought process in the beginning of this series, especially with the *Fighters* painting.

Flynt gave up making art saying that art is a useless endeavor. I disagree with that, I think painting is still a wonderful way for me to work out ideas and emotions. Without reading his theory of breed and thinking about just likings I would not have made these paintings. It was essential to me giving myself permission and the freedom to make images about anything I can conceive.



Sketch for fighterfighters, crayon on paper, 2018

FIGHTERFIGHTERS

Fighterfighters was the first painting in this series of work. River and I made several drawings together on this same day, the firefighter drawing and the werewolf drawing were two of them. I didn't intend to turn these drawings into paintings at the time, we were just passing time, having fun.

River drew some marks on this drawing but I made the truck, dog, hydrant and people. When we started, I asked River what we should draw and he said a firefighter. After I drew the first one, he asked me to draw another one, and pointed to the spot on the paper where it should go, he then asked if that firefighter could have a moustache and pointed to his lip in the drawing. That was funny, I laughed, and drew the moustache. The firefighters needed a dog, I asked River if we should draw a dog and River agreed. So I drew the big headed dalmation that also resembles a bull terrier. We have had

many pit bulls and they are my favorite dogs, but someday I really want to have a Bull Terrier. I don't know why I drew that dog so strangely, it was spontaneous, but the look on the dogs face was what made me want to make this into a painting. Something about the look on that dogs face really speaks to me, it's funny, but also has a real look of concern.

After I drew the dog River asked to draw a fire hydrant, and then told me to draw a firetruck and pointed up to the top of the page. I did all of these things and we moved on to another drawing. I kept coming back to this drawing, I still had not allowed myself to consider making this into a painting, even though I really wanted to paint the dog.



Fighterfighters, 64 x 48 inches, Oil on Canvas, 2018

There was no background in our drawing so I had to invent the environment. I imagined the buildings being around Lombardy park in the Fan, where River and I often hang out. The dog was the part of the painting I was the most excited about. Saving the dog for last was my original thought, but I painted it in before the buildings and the firefighters were finished. I felt pretty embarrassed about painting a fire truck so I think I needed to paint the dog so I would keep going.

There was a big space between the fire hydrant and the fire truck. I added another firetruck under the top one I thought that if two were stacked up on top of each other that it would look funny. That solution didn't work so I wiped that whole firetruck out with rags and gamsol.

We had a fire hydrant in our front yard in Austin it was right outside our bedroom window. I remember getting woken up at night when the fire truck would show up and they would test the hydrant. They unscrewed the hydrant and let all of the water just run into the street. Based on this memory I painted a bunch of water coming out of the hydrant. I thought the painting needed some blue anyway and the shape started to flatten and it resembled a head. It was funny to me how close the hydrant was to the dogs butt and I just painted around it. It reminded me of how dogs always pee on fire hydrants but this one is almost peeing on the dog. I added the reflection of the fire truck later, the reflection also reinforces the head shape acting like hair or a brain.

I can't really separate the things I know from my paintings, I think about Guston's paintings and how he uses humor to talk about really difficult subjects, often revolving around his life and biography. That dog has an awkward feeling I have sometimes because of my own self doubt. The feeling of being uncomfortable in my own skin is in that dog's expression. An interesting thing is the dog's expression changes from the drawing to the painting. Maybe I felt better on the day I painted the dog than on the day we made the drawing.

In my mind while I was making this painting I was thinking about Richmond because this is where River first became aware of firetrucks. I took a picture of River in front of a firetruck at the Kroger parking lot in Carytown when he was still pretty young and that picture became our first Holiday card from Richmond. This picture is the most relevant image I have of River and his connection to firetrucks. The Holiday card made think about how this painting is really capturing a moment with River, and then I expand it later to include other memories of my own in the painting. This idea would be crucial to the next paintings that I made.

WEREWOLVES OF JALISCIENSES

Jason Molina is the person behind Songs Ohia and Magnolia Electric Co. He also released a few solo albums under his own name. His music is some of the bleakest I have ever heard, but I find comfort in listening to really sad music. I was going through some depression before we moved to Richmond. I didn't like my job I had been doing graphic design for a long time and it seemed like there was no way out. Coming to grad school was my plan to get out of the graphic design world so I could teach. I spent a lot of time listening to Magnolia Electric Co. in that time before grad school. I think rather than helping me it just made me more sad. Jason Molina died in 2013. He drank himself to death. It reminds me of my dad and his alcoholism whenever I listen to Molina's songs.

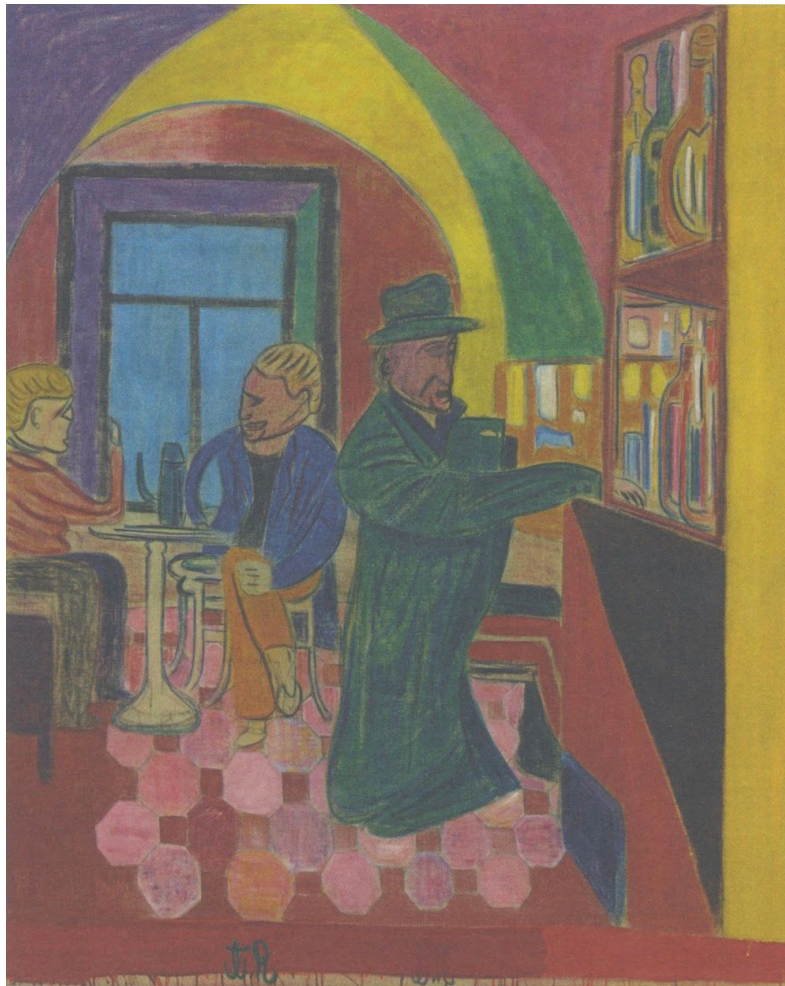
The only Molina song I can listen to without becoming sad is the Magnolia Electric Co. cover of the Warren Zevon song *Werewolves of London*. The Warren Zevon version is one that I remember liking as a kid, because it is strange and very visual to me. While we were in the living room River asked me out of the blue one day to listen to *Werewolves of London*. I was so surprised because he had only heard the song a few times. We learned to play it together, I played the guitar River played his little drum set. While we were making drawings I asked River if we should draw a werewolf and he said "yes". I asked him what else should be in the drawing and he said a plate of enchiladas. I know he wanted to add that because we made enchiladas recently and it was on his mind. I never would have let myself devise this narrative on my own.



Werewolf drawing, Marker and crayon on paper, 2018

When I decided to make this painting I thought I could invent a really abstract architecture like Tal R. I spent a lot of time just thinking about how to make that painting work. I was worried that this was going to be a massive failure, but much the same way Amy Sillman makes paintings I invited the failure knowing it would lead to something, and I thought it was going to be funny. I thought about where the setting could be and I settled on a restaurant by our old house in Austin called Los Jaliscienses. I have driven past this place for 20 years, it was right next to a spot where I used to skateboard. The

architecture of that place is so strange from the outside the roof looks like a strange hat. On the inside the ceiling is curved and almost touches the floor on each end. I stole a bunch of formal elements from this Tal R painting, and I wanted to make this painting seem like a place, but also very imaginative. I think his paintings do that really well, they have a sense of narrative that is very abstract.



Tal R, The Invisible Chair, 2013

In my borrowing from Tal R I tried to incorporate the transparency and lightness from his paintings into this painting. I also tried to draw all the things on the table like Guston would draw. I stuck the werewolf right in the middle of the canvas and treated it like I

was just making another drawing with River. The shape of this canvas is awkward I had to fill in some space which helped me be more inventive.

I don't feel any sort of anxiety about this painting, like I did with *Fighters*. I think it is just hilarious and ridiculous. I do really feel a sense of longing in this painting though, because I really miss this place and my friends and family that are right around the corner. This painting is a happy place, from a Molina song, which is a rather depressing source. It's paradoxical for me even. In my internal narrative the werewolf is all alone, it is late at night. I'm not sure if everyone is gone or if they left in a hurry because of the werewolf. It is still a lone wolf in a restaurant though, maybe it's about feeling alone in this far off place. The enchiladas make me really hungry and they are funny like they might fall on the werewolf's head. While in crit, two other VCU MFA students from Texas, Lauren and Diana, mentioned they also felt really hungry looking at the food. I think they had a sense of longing for a place that they know and possibly miss.

The drawing River and I made is a funny memory and the painting still reminds me of the narrative we created, but I've inserted all of my own memories into the painting. The meaning for me gets complicated so easily. Without any backstory all of my meaning is devoid from the viewer. This complication is what I want in the work, it appears simplistic and ridiculous and then gets more complex, like Joan Brown's *Woman Wearing a Mask*.



Werewolf of Jaliscienses, 54.5 x 88.5 inches, oil on canvas, 2018

VIMO VOUNSTOE FISH

This is the painting where the method of working started to change. Instead of always drawing together I just started listening and observing what River was doing. River made a drawing on his own and I asked him what it was. He replied “It’s a bird. No it’s a fish and it’s a whale. It’s a Vimo Vounstoe fish.” My mind was blown it was totally fascinating that he had drawn this and given it a name, in a sense inventing his own species. I recalled an article I had just read on Slate about a rarely seen frilled shark. A Vimo Vounstoe fish is totally plausible, there are so many things in the ocean that we have yet to even discover. I asked River more about his Vimo Vounstoe fish and he told me it was red and blue. With that information from River, I set out to paint my interpretation of the Vimo Vounstoe Fish.

This is one of the first paintings I made on an oil ground. I really thought about the marker drawings that River and I made together, when working on this painting. I would remind myself to treat this like a big marker drawing on computer paper, and to keep the paint thin and fluid since it was underwater. All of the vegetation was painted with the same brush to give it the feeling that everything was flowing underwater from the ocean currents. The greens in the vegetation were also highly considered. I tried to use only transparent greens so that it would appear luminous. The painting feels backlit like it’s actually just in a fish tank. When River and I go to Petco to buy dog and cat food he

loves to look at the fish. I tried to think about that when I was painting the bottom section with the vegetation to get that fish tank glow.

The scuba diver was not really planned at all I just wiped it in with my finger wrapped in a rag at the end of the day. It was a last minute intuitive decision, it was one that seemed bad at the time, and I knew I was about to leave but, I just did it anyway knowing that it would force me to deal with it when I came back to the studio the next day. When I came back and looked at the painting I realized that the scuba diver reminded me of the cover of a Daniel Higgs book *The Doomsday Bonnet*, so I decided to leave it. Higgs was the singer of Lungfish one of my favorite bands.

The fish in this painting is similar to the dog in the *Fighters* painting, I'm not completely sure what the look on its face is saying. It's laughing at the viewer, and also scared because it's trying to get away from the scuba diver who is rather sinister looking. That in between space is where it gets interesting for me, like many Guston paintings, this one looks funny, but it isn't actually that funny. Overall the painting feels dark and devious in a silly cartoon way. The fish doesn't want to be found. It is such a rare species it would rather be left in the bottom of the ocean all alone. That is better than the fate of being stuck in a lab and studied, or captured and stuffed or eaten. The little octopus on the bottom is trying to hide as well using its skin color to blend in and camouflage itself. The fish is so bright though it can't hide very easily, it becomes ironic and then it becomes funny again. The mouth on this fish is the part where it really hits

home. The esophagus is the egyptian purple part that one person found so annoying in crit. (I talked about this in the color section) It is the funniest part of the painting. The fishes esophagus, is drawn in a way that can't possibly travel through the fish's body. The fish's body bends in space in the wrong direction. After I painted the esophagus I laughed, and knew I had finished the painting. That spot leads into a whole other dimension.



BOULANGERIE VOUBEK

River and I go to Idle Hand bakery on Fridays, it is our special treat. When we were talking about what to draw one day, River mentioned wanting to draw a croissant, and then I asked if we should draw the bakery. We did make some croissant drawings, but they weren't really what I wanted to do with the painting. Food paintings are funny and I love croissants, but I wanted to capture the space from the bakery and reimagine it in my own way. To relate to the rest of the paintings I thought it needed an animal, and I didn't know how to incorporate one.

Azim, one of my classmates, gave River a children's book last year called called *Du Iz Tak* by Carson Ellis, which uses an entirely made up language. There is a spider in the book called a voobek. River was really excited about the voobek and wanted to look at spiders whenever we found one. I liked how the spider was illustrated in *Du iz Tak*, furry and brown with eight eyes. The prospect of painting a voobek was exciting, but I didn't know how I could relate it to the other paintings. It dawned on me that River had probably named his Vimo Vounstoe fish after we read *Du Iz Tak*. Since it has a made up language maybe he just decided to make up his own name for his fish. I thought that was enough of a connection to make this painting of the spider in the bakery.

After I decided I was going to make this painting, whenever River and I would go to the bakery I paid attention to all of the things in the space. I took some pictures for reference and would look at them and think about how this painting could work. This

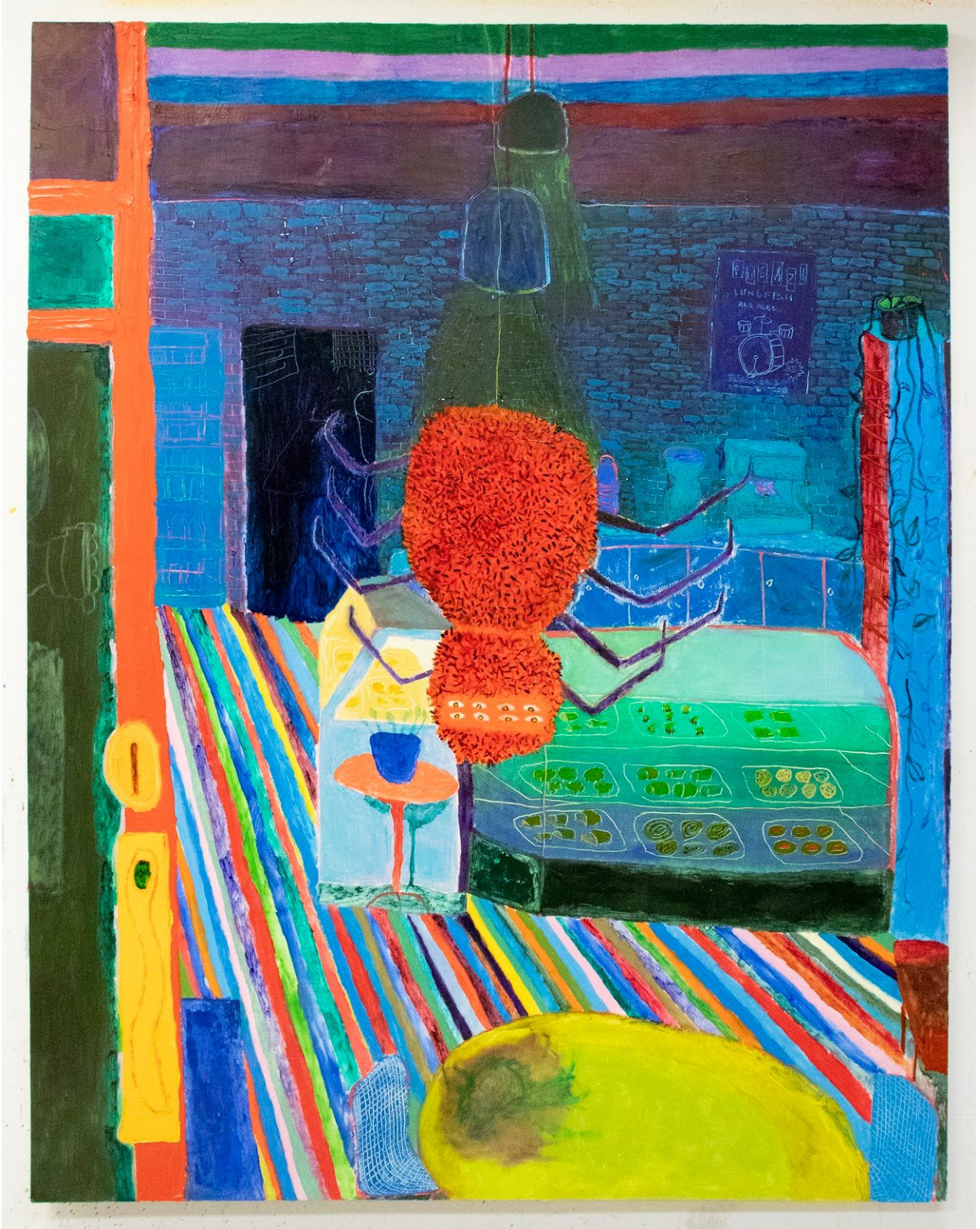
helped me get a mental picture of the interior space. I made several drawings of the outside of the bakery. I used these drawings as the idea for the painting, but I didn't copy the painting from the drawings. Like Sillman, I just put the drawings away and tried to remember them to make the painting.

The light in this painting is blue, I wasn't sure what time of day the painting was going to be it just sort of worked out that way. When I painted the spider I was thinking that it was going to be on the outside of the window and trying to sneak in the door while it was cracked open, but I made it coming down from the ceiling instead. The spider has a paranoid look, because it has so many eyes. I told myself that the spider was emerging after everyone had left, and it was being cautious, but finally felt safe to emerge and nibble a pastry in the middle of the night. It's funny to me the way the light beam is like a strange force, it hits the spider's butt and pushes it forward and down toward the table. It reminds me of how vulnerable spiders are when they descend on their silk. When I stand in front of this painting it feels like the spider could spin on the silk and see other parts of the store. It is disorienting in person because of the bright red spider against the blue background.

On the back wall of the bakery I needed to take up some space so I added a show poster of my favorite bands Fugazi and Lungfish. They are both on hiatus so it's a dream show. I made it all ages so River would be able to go. I was going to make the show at Strange Matter, but then thought I would rather see them at a small venue so I made it

at Black Iris. The poster is referenced from an actual poster I found on the internet. The little cocktail drum set was perfect, because it is like River's drums. As a joke, I changed the date on the poster to be the date of our thesis show, so I would be able to remember the thesis date whenever I see this painting. It's ironic because if the show was real I could be stuck at the opening instead of seeing the concert. A few weeks before the opening I posted a detail showing just the poster on Instagram. My friend Travis saw it and told me he spent a whole day thinking the show was real.

Going to the bakery with River is one of my favorite things to do, and this painting really captures those moments that we spend together. Since I added so many other elements it starts to become the synthesis of many memories, and becomes an experience on its own.



Boulangerie Voobek, 59 x 77 inches, oil on canvas, 2018

These last four paintings are inspired by interactions between River and I, they are from the recent past, but while making the painting I look back further to my own distant past, often incorporating memories of interactions with my father. In making these paintings I record these interactions with River to signify a memory so that I will not forget this time. When I inject my own memories into the painting it allows me to consider how my father's actions affected my memories of my life, and how my current actions are shaping River's life. The paintings are both cathartic and joyful, simple and confusing. They are about my life, and my attempt to not repeat the mistakes of the past, but to try create joys for the future.

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