2010

The Everyday in America

Janet Bruhn

Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

Part of the Art and Design Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/2177

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
The Everyday in America

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

by

Janet Bruhn

MFA Painting and Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010.

Director: Hilary Wilder, Assistant Professor Painting and Printmaking.

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
April 27, 2010
Acknowledgment

This thesis and exhibition are dedicated to people who are not versed in art dialogue. This is for people who like what they like. This is for the doodlers, the tinkers, and the day dreamers. Thank you for helping me find my own way to make a painting.

With special thanks to my parents Patricia and Mark and my sisters Julia and Laura, I could not have done this without your infinite love and caring, thank you from the bottom of my heart.
Table of Contents:

1. Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 4
2. Studio ..................................................................................................................................... 5-13
3. Ideas ..................................................................................................................................... 14-21
   A. Artistic Influences ............................................................................................................. 14-15
   B. Betty Crocker .................................................................................................................... 15-17
      a. Jell-O and Rainbow Cake ............................................................................................. 17-18
   C. The 1980’s ....................................................................................................................... 18-20
   D. The Backyard .................................................................................................................. 20-21
4. Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 22
5. Appendices ............................................................................................................................ 23-30
6. Vita ........................................................................................................................................ 31
1. Abstract:

My vanilla, Grade A, white bread, run-of-the-mill, middle-of-the-road, threadbare, well-worn, moth-eaten, potato sack, butterscotch, grass stained America is what I want to tell stories about.

Mundane American life is an existence clinging to the ordinary, where a quilt of mass-mediated preferences and ingrained traditions define many people, specifically from north to south and east to west. Yet, the tastes and dialects of people within the mundane are complex. Ideological preferences are rooted in immigrant history and political persuasion. Various modes of realism have been used by American painters such as The Ash Can School, Regionalists of the 1930’s, and Pop Art. The notion of the real and mundane have an integral link to each other in art, as often the real may reveal a truth about the world, that which may be ugly or sordid. Depictions of everyday objects and common people break down the great divide between high art and popular culture. Pop Art is postmodern in its "generational refusal of the categorical certainties of high modernism."

In this paper I will dissect the complexity of the mundane through the use of my own and others’ paintings and photographs. Through reference and description Americana’s well-worn customs and preferences in day-to-day life will be analyzed.
In my painting I try to be as honest as possible. I full heartedly depict my background and upbringing in the Midwest, and sense of a distinct American place. I aim to celebrate forgotten, simple places and the people and things that occupy them. Objects that have become stationary in middle class society are chosen to reinterpret into painted imagery. In what may be overlooked as a boring, land-locked small town I find ingenious reuse of objects and a thriftiness that solves problems. Critiquing proverbial American life feels ungracious to me. I feel as though I am a diplomat to the heartland by painting what I know. The Midwest is a place where the world’s food is grown and machinery built. By using inexpensive store-bought items and photographs from my personal life I can democratically piece together American stories. My practice can be divided into themes of food and portraiture. Food is essential to nourishment as well as creating specific, quirky cultures within its consumption. Portraiture allows me to describe the people that mold Middle American regions. Painting is the ideal tool for my ideas, as it is a malleable medium that allows simplified editing and a heightened emphasis on color. It is adaptable, not needing to be plugged in, requiring only basic materials such as wood, canvas and paint. Painted form surpasses a subject’s mundane root, turning an already discernible image into a spectrum of beauty. Distinct from the science of photography painting relies solely on the artist’s hand. Whereas film keeps moving, a painting is frozen, allowing the viewer to look and to revisit any number of times. A painting also takes time to develop, where each session allows small alterations to happen. As the painting is adjusted the static image has any number of possible outcomes. The slow process of mixing color and applying stroke after stroke of paint.
allows the painting to develop deliberately. In this way I have complete control over the outcome of the piece.

During my childhood and adolescence I grew up on an isolated rural road surrounded by several large dairy farms and a retirement stable for old show horses. My sisters, Julia, Laura and I would, depending on the season, entertain ourselves by roaming the creek in our backyard or by riding our bikes up and down the mile long Reinhardt road. We would make our own covered wagons, slip n’ slide in the backyard, oven baked clay creations, dance parties in the basement, tree swings and failed forts. All of our toys and clothes were shared, often having battles about whose was what with my Mom acting as referee.

The road with its infinite pot holes, clods of dirt and cow manure was surrounded on both sides by feed corn. You could look at these fields and know what the season was; spring was marked by the manure sprayer shooting 15 foot long streaks of cow poop, up into the air and onto the freshly plowed fields. Wet, sloppy paint-like mud mixed was in abundance. Summer was a brilliant, eye popping, green time with tiny shoots that grew inches every week turning into knee high corn by the Fourth of July (Fig. 12). During fall the first frost turned the corn brown, thus drying it before cultivation. It made a rattling, scratching sound like a dry brush on canvas. The harsh Wisconsin winters held barren deep brown fields devoid of any life. Although I didn’t grow up in a farming family (my dad is an orthodontist and my mother a schoolteacher), the cyclical rotation of crops and roaming cattle is something I have an innate feel for.

Chicago was my second home growing up. Every other weekend we would make a mind-numbing, daydreaming three-hour drive, past dairy farms and Milwaukee to my grandparent’s homes. My parents grew up in Forest Park and Niles, Illinois, suburbs of Chicago.
It was their dream to raise their children away from the city that in some ways overwhelmed them growing up. They encouraged my sisters and I to look outside of the box for our livelihoods, as studying art and music was never a possibility for them. They took us to art museums, enrolled my younger sister in music lessons, and made sure we had limited access to cable TV or video games. Nature walks were special to them, having grown up within the shadow of Chicago, where there weren’t fields and woods to spend time in.

We were country kids, yet we weren’t truly from Fond du Lac or from Chicago. We were outsiders, shy kids, entertaining ourselves, day dreaming in school. Although I moved away from my rural beginnings, the simplicity of that place, the sounds of quiet cicadas and crickets chirping, the acidic smells of manure, the sharp itch of fresh cut hay, instill a sense of peace and reassurance inside me. This simplicity is a freedom from complexity and pretentiousness. It helps guide my artistic decisions as well as my day-to-day interactions. In painting this translates into singular themed compositions. It also allows the lush, beautiful nature of paint to be apparent in certain areas of paintings.

The paintings themselves represent different aspects of everyday life from my Midwestern roots. The first series of paintings consists of centrally placed still life’s composed of food from various holidays or celebrations. Each scene comes directly from the event either before or after the item has been consumed. They have simplified figure/ground relationships, often with the shadows pared down to two or three color variations that draw attention to the object painted. Lush colors and juicy brush handling is used to describe the greasy, oily food. The compositions are focused. They allow the viewer to immediately recognize what has been
painted, focusing on the solemnity of the object. Also a jar of pickles is a peculiar depiction (Fig.4), like that of a traditional portrait, forward in space and calling attention to it.

The first in this grouping is Leftovers (Fig. 1). A clear plastic Tupperware container placed on a light beige counter top is filled with day old mashed potatoes, corn and meat loaf slathered with ketchup. Growing up, Tupperware was used to save dinner left overs, often lunch or dinner for the next day. More often than not these clear plastic containers, filled with opaquely colored foods, brown liquid gravies, and questionable substances would sit in the fridge for weeks. They became mini iceberg fortresses in the refrigerator, constantly toppling over until my mom would throw them away with a great burping, frozen purge.1

In Buns (Fig. 2) a clear outer wrapping encases an 88-cent value bag of Kroger hot dog buns. The generic appeal of the clear wrapping marks the value of 8 buns for 88 cents. In the painting, glossy cobalt blue, cadmium red and lemon yellow highlight the text on the sale item, as something simple and appealing to a super market shopper. The wrinkled bag feels as though it was tossed in the back seat of a car or thrown off the edge of a picnic table. Strokes of bright orange and yellow paint describe the buns, hyper stylizing the factory made uneatable, quality. In the summer you can often see massive piles of these buns at the grocery store calling out to the weekend warriors, tail-gaiters, campers and BBQ picnic goers. This object summed up my feelings of July more than fireworks or a beach scene.

1 Tupperware is a curious American invention, which was, created after World War Two. The era in which women, such as my grandmother, were sent back into the kitchen after their husbands came back from the war. Memories of my grandmother, filling her “Jubilee” orange colored containers, filled with roast beef and Jell-O are dear to me. Now I participate in the same ritual with my red topped Tupperware, scooping in left over vegetarian 3-bean chili and making my own plastic monument in the refrigerator. All the while I know it will probably end up as a frozen hunk in the back of the fridge.
In a similar way BBQ (Fig. 3) addresses a specific time and place. A massive array of 30 drumsticks is grilling on a serrated grill top with glowing coals underneath. Tiny spurts of smoke trickle outside of the picture plane. Over all the drumsticks are red-orange with burnt ochre indentations across the meat. The meat looks delicious yet is sickening in such a large quantity. This can often be seen at large outside get-togethers. Food is casually being prepared while people talk and catch up. Overall, the grill top much like a painting-is enticing, drawing people near it in anticipation of a good meal.

*Kosher Pickles* (Fig. 4) was made in conjunction with a larger study of works made from happenings at the Virginia State Fair. Rides, barn yard animals, performances and importantly food is apart of this annual event in conjunction with farming competitions. The event in which rural meets festival seemed a fitting arena to tackle. Condiments are often a side note. Bottles and jars are kept to the side, messy and full of high fructose corn syrup. They are often used to “dress up” something bland, so their primary colors are fitting. The tastes range from sweet to mildly spicy to hot. Pickles are goofy, finger shaped “Jolly Green Giant” appendages, floating and bobbing in a sea of brine. The pickles represent a scene within a scene, a fragment of something that is often not focused on.

*Aria for Pop Tart Eaters* (Fig. 5) is an aerial view of a strawberry Pop Tart. Sweet candy sprinkled frosting and strawberry jam ooze out of the pastry. A rainbow of pinks, purples and yellow ochres collide with each other on the surface of the rectangle. I look at this as a breakfast celebration. It is something beautiful that comes from a factory, packaged in a box. Each Pop Tart is the same as the prior. The jam is the same sweetness, and the frosting has the same hard outer consistency. My younger sister has been struggling with a brain disease for the past few
years and has to take a considerable amount of medication daily. With her medication, she has to ingest a small amount of food to coat the lining of her stomach. Pop Tarts and granola bars have become her go-to, an immediate bite that can wash down the drugs. Where she is pale the Pop Tart is an ecstatic pink. Sprinkles and celebration are a stand in for her ill health.

*Half Turkey* (Fig. 6) is the remains of a Thanksgiving turkey as it rests on a cutting board. The bird has been cut half way through to the bone and gristle. Pieces of bone, flimsy skin, and stuffing litter the lower part of the composition. Pale purples and blues mark areas where veins divide the turkey’s flesh. Quinacridone red accentuates bloody areas; these bright ribbons of paint are folded in between areas of beige meat. Opaque, creamy yellows, glistening with paint medium and linseed oil, describe the half eaten turkey carcass. Despite the warm values, the painting feels cold, discarded and grotesque. A carcass isn’t a pleasant thing to contemplate too deeply. However this bird’s life provided a celebration and the painting renders the aftermath of that place. The scene is dimly lighted, a quiet mess undisturbed on a cutting board with grease you can almost feel on your fingers. Unlike *BBQ* (Fig. 3) where the grill top with meat being cooked creates an enticing magnetism, *Half Turkey* has a disgusting quality. It asks the viewer, “*Did we really leave this mess on the table?*”

Another take on eating habits and packaged meat is *Beach Cliff Louisiana Sardines* (Fig. 7). In this painting a square can of sardines takes up the majority of the composition; chunks of sardines are littered around like globs of paint and a party straw dissects the upper right corner of the painting. I was drawn to painting this because of the graphic image on the can, a simple ocean landscape of a lighthouse atop a cliff with waves below it. The object itself felt very painterly, especially with the shine of the metal and strong primary colors. The lighthouse image
was depicted with a bold line of cobalt blue and red. Likewise, the water was colored orange because of the spicy Louisiana hot sauce that in which the sardines were encased. The small lighthouse stood out when I purchased it at the grocery store, shining out amongst a sea of packaged products at Kroger. I loved this simplified landscape atop an object. It spoke of an ironic situation, the romantic sea with a beacon to lead ships ashore and a lowly can of sardines in hot sauce. The sardines are painted in surreal deep blues, greens, paprika reds and yellows. Colors themselves transformed this tiny store bought object into a tribute to the ocean and little packaged fish.

Although still-lifes of food are an important theme in my work, the figure is another subject I find meaningful to touch upon. Portraiture and the figure allow me to specifically examine the middle class people that shape and create everyday things for consumption. Often the food they eat is unhealthy, packaged in a factory and shipped in fleets of trucks. This is reflected in paunch bellies and bags under their eyes. Their landscapes are unmonumental, glorifying the beauty of the backyard and suburban home. The objects that litter their daily life come from places as different as factories overseas and grandpa’s garage. These items hold sentimental weight and importance. A plastic toy or a homemade chair can evoke the absence of a figure, thus even common household things or landscapes represent people in my work. The figure is felt in the sag of a chair and the worn-down heel of a sock.

**David in the Backyard** (Fig. 8) is a painting of my uncle in the backyard of his childhood home. The grass has grown wild. It is yellowing and browning in the bright summer sun. Twisting purple and blue wildflowers have sprung up between these grass stalks. There is a walkway dividing the grass on the left side and a yellow house in the background. David (who I
have heard many stories about yet only met a few times) is watching the grill. Like a ghost, he is standing over the rusted metal hood, smoking a cigarette and waiting. He is a middle aged man with a paunch and graying hair. Wearing a blue-collared shirt and khaki pants, he feels at ease in this domestic scene. It’s a vivid summer day, yet everything is still, waiting. The only action is the smoke coming out of his cigarette, a small gesture in the midst of a brilliant summer afternoon. I wanted to project loneliness in the midst of a beautiful, simple backyard. I feel as though this type of place, an overgrown patch of grass, weeds, and flowers, is something many people can relate to. Maybe you’ve seen it a thousand times, and then one day it just jumps out at you. It’s not well taken care of, but for some glimmering moment it’s a place that is a piece of all places. It’s where you played as a kid, where odds and ends from the house ended up, and where get-togethers happened.

While working on *David in the Backyard*, I became interested in making a large-scale portrait, treated in a similar manner to some of the still-lifes. I settled on an image of Wes, who is my boyfriend, by the James River. The contours of his face seen in fig. 10 matched some of the undulating rock formations of the river. Choosing a saturated purple and Indian yellow palette allowed the viridian green in the background to read in a similar vibrancy. The colors I choose to describe his face are not true to life, but the arrangement read very harmoniously and the variations of warm yellows and soft purple set the scene at dusk. Casting a warm glow, the portrait feels like a rock formation or a landscape, each crease a striated rock or ripple in the water.

In another piece I touched on similar reflections of my sister’s state of health. The painting *Laura* (fig. 9) was one of my first real attempts in graduate school to paint the figure. It
was a piece where I gave myself permission to go down the road of figuration which I had previously closed off. The image is from a photograph of my younger sister on a band trip at Niagara Falls. Nostalgia permeates this period of time for me and my family. It was a time when my sister was healthy, before she was diagnosed with spinal bifida. Her diagnosis was ultimately life changing. Where within a scope of 3 years after she graduated high school she went from a thriving flutist in her college’s orchestra to a bed-ridden sick person dealing with brain surgeries. Even today I feel ill equipped to deal with these changes. It made sense to try to immortalize her good health in a painting, while also rendering something of a premonition of her future into the piece. By squarely placing her in the composition her body becomes the focal point. She is smiling broadly projecting confidence and ease. Niagara Falls dissects both sides of her, with water cascading down and falling onto rocks. By altering the color of the water to a sap green I intended to project decay, change and sickness. Her flesh tones are vibrant with extreme oranges and purples, reflecting her good health. The grandness of Niagara Falls doesn’t overwhelm her. Yet the size of that particular place is recognizable, distinctly American. Even snapping a picture in such a way describes a traveler’s attitude, happy and at ease.

In *Big Da’s Chair* (fig. 11) I wanted to use the same warm Indian yellow palette in *Wes* to describe the time of dusk for a painting. This time of day is special because all colors saturate and overlay rapidly over a short period of time. The chair in this piece was made by my grandpa. This single, empty chair symbolizes absence, representing a person who isn’t present. In its own way this painting celebrates my grandpa who is present in the simple things he left behind. Lawn chairs are also unique to middle class people; they represent a standard of living appreciated by people who have yards and grass to mow. Simple things from around the home are valued-a
clean, well-kept yard shows pride in ownership and success. Pleasure is derived from the beauty of the neighborhood, providing a place to be in comfort with other people of similar status.

3. Ideas

I draw inspiration from recollections of simple, wholesome things in my painting. Partly this is nostalgia for the places and things my parents rolled up their sleeves and worked for. I value gestures of a freshly ironed shirt or home cooked meal. This is reflected in work that is at times idealized, as the backyards and portraits I paint don’t show much of the grit of daily life. Instead color variations are heightened, able to translate the ache of everyday beauty. The artifacts from daily middle class American life best describe the Americana I am interested in. Common things from around the home, such as lawn chairs or Tupperware are amazing in how they relate to so many people around the country. These common threads are understood in my particular interest in Betty Crocker, the backyard, and several groups of artists that inform my work.

Two artists who have heavily influenced my sensibilities as a painter are Alex Katz and Andy Warhol. Pop art has been a necessary movement to study and appreciate in conjunction with my work embracing the everyday. The graphic, simplified nature of this artist’s work allows color and form to vibrate without expressionistic sensibilities. Importantly, the imagery they use such as soup cans and figures, are recognizable things in people’s day-to-day lives. In America, pop art marked a return to hard-edged composition and representational art as a response by artists using impersonal, mundane reality, irony and parody to diffuse the personal symbolism and "painterly looseness" of Abstract Expressionism. [1]
I appreciate the direct sampling that took place in Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (fig. 12). They are a simple grouping of cans, with the red and white label facing forward. It’s apparent from the imagery that Warhol is not critiquing Campbell’s soup but reiterating its formal properties and how the repetition of the product talks about the rhythm of the object in the world. He took something very common and painted it to bring attention to its simplicity and frequency. Similarly, Alex Katz has made a career of painting close, familiar people over and over again. He has painted his wife Ada hundreds of times. In *Black Dress* (fig. 13) the artist’s wife is seen sitting and standing, posing for the viewer. She has been reduced to two colors, an eerie white for her skin and black for her hair and dress. In all, the painting is primarily four colors, a reduced system that Katz has used throughout his career. *Black Scarf* (fig. 14) is the artist’s wife more than thirty years later. This time it is a portrait where Ada is looking off into the distance. Once again Katz is using a palette of 4 colors, essentially one pale flesh tone, black, white and red. With this mood there is a distinction to Ada, a woman that has grown older yet is still beautiful. Since the 1950s, he has worked to create art more “freely” in the sense that he tried to paint “faster than [he] can think.” Just like Warhol’s soup cans Ada’s face becomes iconic in its frequency. By repeating form and working quickly he is creating a rhythmic, simplified depiction of her life.

**Betty Crocker**

A well marked three ringed binder of recipes, stained from gravy and sauces, was the most important book in my household growing up. Stored in a cupboard along with our Sunday school bibles and telephone book was my mother’s go to cookbook on how to make anything from pot roast to rhubarb pie. Other cookbooks came and went during the 1980’s and 1990’s but
my mom swore by her Betty Crocker Cook Book (fig. 15) from the 1970’s. As the years wore on the saturated Kodachrome reproductions of pineapple upside down cake, glazed ham, and roasted turkey began to look dated, like an old National Geographic with grainy, colorful drenched images. The color reproductions of the food in this book kick the warm tones up a notch, a normal red cherry takes on a vermillion luster and scalloped potatoes look flawlessly golden. Food became abnormally appealing in these reproductions, looking at one moment plastic and another cooked to culinary perfection. Today with digital photography and photoshop editing, images look clean with even amounts of color balance to look appealing yet believable. I admire the theatrics of Betty Crocker’s Cook Book from the 1970’s. For a long time I think I subversively referenced this book when I worked out a palette for my paintings. I have a tendency to use a lot of cadmium yellow, the color used in the cook book to make pie crusts look buttery and muffins expertly baked. In Beach Cliff Louisiana Sardines (fig. 7) and Half Turkey (fig. 6) color has been purposefully stretched to match this aesthetic. Through this book I learned that you have to often stretch the reality of the colors you use in a painting. A color such as brown is actually a spectrum of several warm and cool colors, not just a flat tone. Kodachrome photography attracted me with its bright reds and cerulean blues. William Eggleston’s photographs are a good example of an artist who uses a form of dye transfer on his film to take on the appearance of painterly Kodachrome photography. I appreciate their saturated, vibrant sensibility and simple depictions of mundane life in the south (fig. 16-18). A simple light bulb and red ceiling in his work becomes a lurid, creepy place. The red that he uses in Untitled (Fig. 16) isn’t a standard red; it’s a sticky candy apple red, like cough syrup, evocative of a backroom where grievous acts happen. In Freezer (Fig. 18) heavy layers of ice in the refrigerator take on a pale blue glow making the boxes of frozen foods look dull and faded. It’s a cluttered domestic
scene that is specific to American life, yet so common it often goes unnoticed. The image feels like a painting with tints of titanium white added to the all colors. It’s important that the freezer is messy and unappealing. Eggleston’s uses color to make the scene soft and otherworldly, reminding us of the beauty in our everyday places.

Jell-O and Rainbow Cake

Branching out from Betty Crocker’s Cook Book two important recipes that were to later inform how I handle paint are my grandma Rea’s Jell-O cake and rainbow cake. Every Birthday she would make each of my sisters and me a rainbow cake. Essentially, it was a pound cake that she dyed with food coloring to look like a rainbow. The recipe called for a pound of butter which made the cake more brick-like than cake-like. But the colors were an awesome array of pink, yellow and purple. Later when she passed away my sisters and I learned how tricky it was to properly dye the cake into a rainbow. The first time we tried we made more of a sewage cake, with layers of dark green, red and purple. Mixing tints requires an acute delicacy and too much dense color can obstruct balance in a piece. This taught me a little bit of pigment in painting goes a long way.

The other cake she used to make at Easter time was a Jell-O cake. This cake had about 6 layers of Jell-O colors. Layers were interspersed with CoolWhip, creating a wiggly, fluffy, sugary tower that took all day to make. Basically, a layer of Jell-O was poured into spring form pan and allowed to set in the refrigerator, then the CoolWhip was added and another layer of Jell-O was laid down to set again. It was pure magic to help my grandma make this. Considered a fruit option the Jell-O cake was served with Easter dinner. It dissolved onto the plate like a hallucinogenic river with ham floating in it. Globs of CoolWhip covered green beans creating a visceral, sticky plate of sweet fighting salty. This experience taught me to appreciate paints
volume, how its gluey nature could be used to my advantage. By allowing my materials to run or be heavy I learned how to work with paint as it naturally exists. With the right amount of linseed oil, wax medium and galkyd I can create the same tacky effects as my grandmas much beloved Jell-O cake.

My affinity towards frank, uncomplicated objects and recollections from my life is mirrored in the late paintings of Phillip Guston. He found, “something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art.” That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, therefore we habitually analyze its ingredients and define its limits. But painting is 'impure'. It is the adjustment of ‘impurities’, which forces its continuity. We are image-makers and image-ridden. There are no wiggly or straight lines." This statement best encapsulates his transition from abstraction to representational painting. His frustration lead to painting images such as Klansmen, light bulbs, shoes, cigarettes and clocks. He is best known for these melancholy, existential works that expressed his reflections on life as it was nearing its end. By painting a Jell-O cake I am not only painting a depiction Americana I am also looking at the way my family expressed themselves spiritually through something as common as a cake.

The 1980’s

The 1980’s a rubbed off on me in a humorous way. Maybe it was the crimped hair and side pony tails. Or being a middle child and experiencing both of my sister’s growing pains and cast off toys. I strongly remember wearing my older sister’s BUM Equipment hand-me-downs, stone washed jeans and sweat shirts appliquéd with pudgy paint and plastic gems. They were the kind of outfits that only mattered if they fit because clashing patterns were all the rage. There was a particular hot pink spring jacket that I inherited with shoulder pads and black zippers. I wore this with hammer pants that ballooned around my waste. It’s a funny outfit to imagine but
similar to Aria for Pop Tart eaters (fig. 5) in palette and approach. Why not wear pants that can also function as a parachute? Why not paint a sprinkled breakfast pastry? Today I still dare myself to do silly, almost stupid things in my work. With humor I can keep the content on the ground.

There is a particular episode of Mr. Rogers’s neighborhood that I am still captivated by. It was the episode where they visit the Crayola crayon factory. The episode must have been shot in the 1970’s because the film quality has that grainy, keyed up color feel. Mr. Roger does a voice over explaining the process. Essentially the crayon starts as delicious liquid wax and is poured into a mold holding hundreds of crayon slots. Magical, ambient music is played in rhythm with the moving crayons. Once the wax has cooled they pop the crayons out and put paper labels on them. Then they move down a massive conveyor belt and are channeled into collating machine where kaleidoscopes of different colors are put into groups. At this point the crayons look like a psychotropic river of colors, streaming towards only a few outlets. Finally, they are packaged into boxes of crayons. I specifically watched Mr. Roger’s neighborhood for a long time in hopes of seeing this episode. It goes back to falling in love with liquid color where slippery streams of wax make solid material. Big Da’s Chair (fig. 11) comes out of this sensibility, where thick layers of paint used to describe the grass and chair feel like heavily layered crayon. The paint has a waxy shine to it parallel to when the wax was first poured into the crayon molds. I appreciate how Amy Sillman’s paintings have a fluid, heavy-handed feeling to them, like molten crayons ripped and scribbled on top of each other. Her abstract compositions are organically dissected; yet maintain lopsided architecture that creates planes of saturated color. At times the figure will make a point of entry in her work, where a simplified arm will squeeze and lift deflated cubes and broken lines. She uses elemental forms such a limb,
bird, tree, or plumbing as if a child were trying to recognize the nomenclature of the world around them. Opposed to the play associated with crayons, her strokes create awkward forms that mimic small pieces of the everyday world. With modest, clunky shapes and lavish mark-making the struggle of painting is felt best. Whereas Sillman is piecing together slivers of imagery to make rich abstraction, I am assembling meaty chunks of paint to create a recognizable image.

The Backyard

Another crucial theme within my work has been the backyard. The people and things that occupy this space behind a typical home are important to study in conjunction with everyday American life. Overgrown grass, the grill (fig. 8), lawn chairs (fig. 11), and sunny days that heighten color are moments I reference in my paintings. It’s a place where life happens; children play, get-togethers happen, toys and projects are forgotten and left to rust.

Fairfield Porter’s paintings of family and friends lounging in the lawn of his Maine home have been important to study. In Jane and Elizabeth (fig. 19) two figures pose, overlooking the wild grasses and woods of his backyard. With a reduced sensibility Porter minimizes his palette to several fresh colors, accentuating the playful pose of the adult and child in the foreground. The woman’s lavender dress matches the color of the horizon, and the child’s bright red overalls complement the green grass. David in the Backyard (fig. 8) uses similar tactics where his shirt matches the color of the wild flowers. Another painting that has influence is Under the Elms (fig. 20). In this painting the back of Porter’s home is barely visible, with trees and shadows covering the lawn. A young boy is in the foreground with a floral shirt that is camouflaged by and diffuses into the landscape. The shadows on the lawn are all described in a deep phalo green, with a bright chartreuse where the sun is shining through the branches. The contrast of these
colors creates a pattern similar to the boy’s shirt, making a rippling effect: the boy and the yard read as a similar pattern. In *Big Da’s Chair* (fig. 11) I implemented a similar effect using extreme light and dark contrasts of green to diffuse the chair in the landscape. Within Porter’s paintings of backyard scenes and my own there is a feeling of tranquility, as though life within this sphere couldn’t get any more peaceful. These yards describe specific places, where Porter’s is in New England, mine is in the middle of the country.

Grant Wood is quoted to have said, "I had to go to France to appreciate Iowa." In a similar sense I have had to move across the country and go to graduate school to appreciate the beauty of coming from the middle of nowhere. Pickles, BBQ and Pop Tarts transcend their common origins to become humorous portrayals of daily life. With my work I better understand the people, places and things that shape my life. Through the act of painting I celebrate things that are otherwise forgotten.
4. Bibliography


5. Appendices

Fig 1. Leftovers, Oil on canvas, 4.5 x 5 ft.

Fig 2. Bun’s, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 24 inches.
Fig 3. BBQ, Oil on canvas, 4.5 x 5 ft.

Fig 4. Kosher Pickles, Oil on canvas, 14 x 18 inches.

Fig 5. Aria for Pop Tart Eaters, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 24 inches.
Fig 6. Half Turkey, Oil on canvas, 18 x 22 inches.

Fig 7. Beach Cliff Louisiana Sardines, Oil on canvas, 6 x 7 ft.

Fig 8. David in the back yard, Oil on canvas, 4.5 x 5 ft.
Fig 9. Laura, Oil on canvas, 4.5 x 5.5 ft.

Fig 10. Wes, Oil on canvas, 3.5 x 4.5 ft.

Fig 11. Big Da’s chair, Oil on canvas, 20 x 26 inches.
Fig 12. Corn, Oil on canvas, 4.5 x 5 ft.

Fig 12. Andy Warhol, Campbell’s Soup Cans, 1962


Fig 16. Untitled (Greenwood, Mississippi) (Red Ceiling), William Eggleston, 1973.
Fig 17. Woman on a swing, William Eggleston, 1971.

Fig 18. Freezer, William Eggleston, 1970

Vita

Janet Marie Bruhn was born on September 9, 1983, in Mayville, Wisconsin, and is an American citizen. She graduated from Fond du Lac High School, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin in 2002. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from The Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, Ohio in 2007. She received a Master of Fine Arts in Painting from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia in 2010.