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For Wintonbury: An Expansion of Narrative and Painting

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For Wintonbury:
An Expansion of Narrative and Painting

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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College of the Ozarks
Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art, 2015

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

In March 2017, I began planning the narratives of what would become my Thesis Exhibition. One year later marked my installation of the exhibit: *For Wintonbury*, located at the Fine Art Center Gallery at the University of Arkansas.

A merging of the visual arts and literary fiction, *For Wintonbury* offers a more immersive experience in storytelling. The painted scenes, drawings, three-dimensional compositions, and short stories each serve their own purposes in presenting partial glimpses into the longer narratives of Wintonbury. Through multiple media and entry points, the viewer is given the choice in which sequence and manner to take in the stories. The drawings present ‘the making of.’ The paintings resemble pages in a book and are treated as collages of something remembered and pieced together. The three-dimensional compositions further engage the viewer in a physical and tactile way, the objects carrying with them their own histories. The book of short stories shares more details concerning the lives of the characters. Together these works form the little world of Wintonbury and reveal themes of love, loss, family, communication, and alienation.

Here I will describe the story of Wintonbury; my role as author, maker, and collector; the four bodies of work; installation in the gallery; and the process of getting to this point in my studio practice and education at the University of Arkansas. I will conclude with a discussion of influences, artists, and my place in a contemporary context and field of work.

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Dedication

For Wintonbury is firstly dedicated to my family, who has consistently encouraged my career in the Fine Arts. Thank you for always being supportive, understanding, and having interest in my work, even when it means my moving away. Secondly, *For Wintonbury* is dedicated to Andy. At the table you said, “You will succeed. This is not me talking now. This is me knowing you.” I’ve kept that with me.

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For Wintonbury

Introduction

*This is a story about Annabel Olive and Wintonbury, Massachusetts, more specifically those inhabiting Bakers Street. (2)*¹

In June of 2016, I listened to the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco's video, "Richard Diebenkorn Symposium | Introductions | Richard Diebenkorn: Known and Unknown". Speaking about the early influences of Diebenkorn was Timothy Anglin Burgard, Ednah Root Curator -in charge of American Art at FAMSF. Burgard referenced the importance that great narrative had on Diebenkorn's childhood. He said that Diebenkorn spoke vividly about the influence of great illustrators, such as N. C. Wyeth and his illustration of *Robinson Crusoe*. The illustrations were among Diebenkorn's first great art experiences.

This resonated with me and opened an entire realm of possibilities for narrative to originate and manifest itself into my artistic practice. There are two aspects about Wyeth's illustrations that influenced Diebenkorn's work. One is that almost every illustration is theatrical, with a figure in the foreground and less defined fields of color as a backdrop. This theatrical aspect is often felt in Diebenkorn's work, most specifically in his figurative. He presents a voyeuristic viewpoint in a narrative, much like one of his, (and coincidentally one of my own), favorite artists, Edward Hopper. Secondly, N.C. Wyeth's painterly qualities came to influence Diebenkorn's paintings, offering their own kind of narrative and adding depth to the work with every intentional mark and subtle change in hue.² I would later reference the manner in which

¹ Segment from my written book *For Wintonbury: A Collection of Short Stories*, a component of the exhibit. These writings will be placed throughout the text of this Thesis when appropriate.

² Timothy Anglin Burgard. "Richard Diebenkorn Symposium | Introductions." 2013. Speech, *Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco Symposium*, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, October 28, 2017.

Diebenkorn handled his backgrounds with as much importance as the figures in the foregrounds as I began to make painted renditions of floors and walls. I would treat them, not as planes of depicting space, but as paintings, themselves, taking care in the mark and shifts of value and hue.

At the time, I was reading Jesse Andrew's novel, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* –a young adults book recommended to me by a friend who is a high school English teacher. The novel is written in first person with the main character, Greg Gaines, as narrator. Greg interacts with the reader through the novel, introducing himself on the first page with the heading, "A Note from Greg Gaines, Author of This Book." Jesse Andrew's character, Greg, becomes the author of the story. Greg writes in the first paragraph, "Can I just be honest with you for one second? . . . When I first started writing this book, I tried to start it with the sentence 'It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.' I genuinely thought that I could start a book that way" (1).³ The reader is immediately guided to believe that the story is being told, not by Jesse Andrews, but through Greg Gaines, in a metanarrative manner. This metanarrative would come to influence my decision to write *For Wintonbury: A Collection of Short Stories*, with character, Annabel Olive, as narrator.

I began to research storytelling and the connections of art and narrative. While doing so, I found there has been a steady shift in storytelling. The modern condition with its growth of technology, need for immediacy, shrinking of attention spans, and increasingly busy lifestyle are all changing the way books are consumed and movies and television are made and watched. Galleries are changing along with current times, shifting toward a concentration on experience. I decided I want to be a part of this evolution of telling narratives and providing an experience, so I made reading books of fiction a part of my studio practice as a starting point.

³ Jesse Andrews. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*. New York, NY: Amulet Books, 2015.

In June of 2016, I completed one abstract painting responding to Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park series. The painting, titled, *And, And The*, alluded to a scene in the Andrews novel (fig.1). The passage reads, "Actually I was crying the whole time, because for some reason it had never really sunk in with me that she was dying. . . Denise [the dying girl's mother] was just sitting there frozen" (276-278).⁴ The painting employs an icy color palette with two small square shapes distant in space to the horizontal rectangle in the front plane.

The Story

In *For Wintonbury: A Collection of Short Stories*, the reader is introduced to the lives of seven characters in a neighborhood of Wintonbury, Massachusetts, through a series of connected vignettes. The collection begins with the writer, Annabel Olive, in first person omniscient.

It was important to me that the narrative body consist of short stories, rather than a single cohesive narrative surrounding one character. I wanted to explore the human condition through several different viewpoints and stories. Additionally, I explored the idea that there is relevance in a partial story, in a fragment. I wanted to create a body of work that, when placed together, is not easily absorbed in one walk-through, and is therefore consumed in fragments. This encourages more visits to the gallery and more time spent within the story to try to get a firm grasp on the characters, themes, and connections in Wintonbury, Massachusetts. The viewer is offered the space that exists between an implication of a narrative and the entire narrative account. I want it to feel like sitting beside a stranger on a bus, sharing small pieces of one's life story.

The notion of character is primary in *For Wintonbury*. The short stories describe small moments of a banal sort of life, inviting the reader to empathize with the characters. Events take

⁴ Andrews, Jesse, 276-278.

place, but there is no five-act structure with rising action and a climax (253-260).⁵ Instead, what is presented is the narrator in the exposition, the people of Wintonbury, and a denouement in which it is revealed to the reader that Annabel Olive is the narrator of the town of Wintonbury –a story within a story. This further comes into play in the gallery, where the viewer can decipher whether the works in the exhibit are non-diegetically of the artist or diegetically a part of the narrator’s plans within the story.

There are five houses on Bakers Street. Walter and Henry reside in the first house. Henry is a young boy who has recently lost his mother, and has, thus, gone to live with his grandfather, Walter. Walter is a lonely widow who is now trying to take care of his grandson. Harvey and Theo are brothers living in the second house. Harvey is a young boy who is nonverbal, and Theo is a college student who feels a responsibility to stay at home and take care of his family. Elizabeth, in her twenties, occupies the third house. She is navigating the loss of her disloyal partner. Sophia, who lives next to Walter and Henry, has recently moved to Wintonbury to get away from the town from which she was raised. In the remaining house is writer, Annabel Olive, who has just moved in to assist her great-aunt.

There are several themes addressed in the collection of short stories, all connected to how the characters cope with reality. Problems include loss, burden of responsibility, or the lack of a sense of family. Loss -of life, innocence, and love is addressed, along with a love of family or significant other. Some of the characters are shown facing their problems, while others are avoiding and temporarily deflecting or fleeing.

She thought about the metaphorical implications of that day. What if she could run away from her problems, as an adult, like she had in the past with the ostrich –screaming and looking

⁵ Roland Barthes and Lionel Duisit. *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, 1975, 232-72. Accessed December 11, 2017. JSTOR.

*for one of her parents' legs to hide behind? She supposed that she had fled, in a way, by moving to Wintonbury. But at least here, she did not wear a torn sweater around her waist. (40)*⁶

Contemporary pop culture narratives frequently focus on the benefits of human connection. This is exemplified in the Netflix hit, “Stranger Things”, which presents a break from our divided and resentful world, in an effort to convince the viewer to believe that human connection “might just save us yet”.⁷ My short stories mirror this focus.

One’s life and personal reality may be difficult to face at times, and I am convinced that we turn to stories in books, television, movies, and other forms to feel less alone. My stories address this feeling by having a tone of sustaining some illusion of normalcy and deciding how to go on with life, despite setbacks. Every character is going through something different that is less than great, but the characters all connect in some way throughout *A Collection of Short Stories*, making life a tad more livable.

When I began forming the concepts behind *For Wintonbury*, I was considering the larger picture of what I desire my work to be about, and the answer quickly became ‘people’. Nothing I’ve done has been worthwhile unless it was shared with others.⁸ In his writings and personal interviews, David Foster Wallace was primarily concerned with what it means to be a genuine human being. He considered authors’ and characters’ sincerity to be of high importance, and Wallace once said, “. . . hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human . . .”⁹ I desire to make stories about characters who are struggling, and yet maintain a sincere yearning for human connection. That is why the characters on Bakers Street

⁶ Insert from “For Sophia”, taken from *For Wintonbury*.

⁷ Hayden Royster. “Why ‘Stranger Things’ is the Future of Storytelling.” Light Works. October 31, 2017. Accessed November 8, 2017.

⁸ “And most importantly, whatever you do in this life, it’s not legendary unless your friends are there to see it.” Barney Stinson in “Sunrise” *How I Met Your Mother* episode 9x17.

⁹ Will Schoder. “David Foster Wallace -The Problem with Irony”. Filmed October 2016. YouTube video, 9:54. Posted October 2016.

come together, and why the writer, Annabel Olive, is first person omniscient. The reader gets the opportunity to know the characters more closely and to see them behind closed doors, when they are left alone with their thoughts.

For Wintonbury is about community. We watch movies and television and read books to feel like we can relate to others, or to feel like we are not alone. These stories help us to get out of our own complicated stories and to, instead, sink into someone else's. No matter how isolated the characters think they are, they need others to be able to function. There is a simplicity and an innocence to the narrative I have provided, and as David Foster Wallace would say, “. . . to be really human . . . is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic.”¹⁰ The story is about decent people trying to do good things, and how disparate people in a town connect.

Author and Maker

Roland Barthes describes articulated language and still pictures as a few of the examples of narrative. (237)¹¹ I am an artist. I choose to go beyond traditional limitations of the rectangular painting by adding text and three-dimensional space. I am an artist, storyteller, and collector of ideas, a painter who is partial to narrative and object-making.

For Wintonbury is a body of work revolving around narrative painting. Included in this body of work is a collection of short stories; drawings depicting ‘the making of’, larger character paintings; smaller scene paintings; and the author's study, as well as four other compositions, which consist of painted three-dimensional objects, sketches and writings. I paint, build, or write, depending on the medium which best suits the details I narrate.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Barthes, Roland and Lionel Duisit.

I translate the story from writing to painting to three-dimensional object, not in any particular order or rhythm. In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin declares, “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original (3).”¹² My studio practice and narrative translation begins with a sentence. I hear a sentence that catches my attention in a movie, television show, book, or conversation happening around me, and I build the narrative from there. I am continuously reading fictional novels and watching movies and television shows, enjoying others’ stories while on the lookout for one sentence or scene where my narrative can begin. The constants in the sentences I choose to work with are: peculiarity, specificity in object or declaration, and the immediate formation of a mental image of what the sentence may look like if it were to be carried out visually. Life is odd, and the kind of ideas I collect have a quirkiness to them: from miniature silver forks given as a gift in substitute of flowers, to a colorful slinky left alone on a dusty floor, or an ostrich chasing a young girl in a zoo.

*“Neat little things, aren’t they?” the tall, quirky red-head had asked his to-be wife, giving her one of the two forks, as if it were a rose, on their second date. (39)*¹³

The process of ‘writing’ the stories is an additive one. I begin with a drawn sketch of what the scene of the sentence may look like. I find physical objects that might connect. I write the story, adding in my own experiences along with threads of stories from multiple sources. During the process of making paintings and building objects, the meaning of the original threads of sentences and experiences evolve into entirely new narrative accounts. The process of evolution during making becomes key.

¹² Walter Benjamin. “The Task of the Translator.” Translated by Harry Zohn. *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2000. 1-5. Accessed July 15, 2017. JSTOR.

¹³ Insert from “For Sophia”, taken from *For Wintonbury*.

The nature of my projects is primarily visual, but as with Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Green Box Notes)*, the paintings and objects are accompanied by a book and by author's notes, in an effort to add to purely visual responses.¹⁴ Combined text and imagery exist with the purpose of creating a fuller narrative.

In this work, text and imagery are two parts of a unified whole but play separate roles. My role as storyteller and narrator in multiple mediums defines myself as a mediator between the different media, similarly to the vision of the author-turned-director. I assign different roles to each of the various media. While I do place minimal image description in the writing, painting has a primary role of presenting details of setting. The purpose of the written component is to give background information and to describe the characters. In the paintings, therefore, the characters are not present -they are described through the space and their possessions. This decision is based on my own preferences for receiving visual information visually, rather than through a written description. Similarly, the written word moves the narrative more smoothly than a painting does.

Jonathan Tropper, author of *This is Where I Leave You*, adapted it and other stories into screenplays. Describing the adaptation process, Tropper states, "You try to isolate, thematically and structurally, the story you want to tell. . . In a novel, you can tell a lot of secondary stories, get into a lot of subplots and write whole tangents you can't do in a film."¹⁵ In a painting, the concept of storytelling is even more constraining, often limiting the viewer to just one snapshot or still of a scene. Tropper continues, "So you figure out what story you want to tell, then as you refine the draft . . . you start to see the scenes and what they're adding from a narrative

¹⁴ Dawn Ades. "The Large Glass" Edited by Neil Cox and David Hopkins, *DADA Companion*, World of Art, 1999.

¹⁵ Jonathan Tropper. "Jonathan Tropper on Adapting his Novel *This is Where I Leave You*." Interview by Bryan Abrams. *Where to Watch*, September 2014.

perspective.” (1)¹⁶ The large character paintings become the main “still” and focus of the narrative depiction. The smaller paintings offer additional visual narrative to that provided in the character paintings.

I am telling a story through the narrative paintings, but I also create additional behind-the-scenes material, subplots, and tangents to please the viewer who, like me, often craves more information. Having both visual and written language has allowed me to create a more fully developed Wintonbury. When making my paintings, I ask similar questions to Jonathan Tropper. He first asks himself if he can compress the scene. He states about the process, “You work out these economies and efficiencies and you find a way to tell the story in fewer scenes.” (2)¹⁷ When I adapt my writings to paintings, I, like Tropper, consider just how much information the viewer needs. I decide which scene of the story best describes the character, and which objects should be present. If there is an object or scene that I believe is significant but not a part of the primary character painting, I paint it onto one of the smaller scene paintings.

Annabel as Narrator

My name is Annabel Olive. On the Thursday in the last week of June, I walked out of the local Kum & Go with a vanilla Coke Zero in one hand and a set of keys to a light blue '94 Skylark Buick in the other. The Buick, smelling faintly of cigarettes covered by lavender from a previous owner, grumbled when I drove it, like an elderly man displeased with his place in the world.

I ended up in the Buick after a soot black SUV hit my Fiesta hatchback like a bowling ball hitting a golf ball. Except instead of being impelled out-of-bounds into a body of water, I spun around in circles in the hatchback, trying to remember and carry out the advice from my father about steering into the skid. (4)¹⁸

Because Annabel Olive is in first person, acting as narrator of *For Wintonbury: A Collection of Short Stories*, Annabel Olive and I become one and the same. Her story is made of

¹⁶ Tropper, Jonathan.

¹⁷ Ibid, 2.

¹⁸ Insert from “For Annabel Olive, Writer”, taken from *For Wintonbury*.

my notes, thoughts, plans, and previous objects and scale models from stories past. There is more distance between myself and the other characters. Olive, on the other hand, has a desire to write. She drinks a vanilla Coke Zero (fig.2). Someone hydroplaned into her on a highway in the rain. She stayed with her great-aunt (who is now deceased). These are all details of my history, placed onto the character of Annabel Olive. I write the story of Wintonbury through painting, writing, object-making, and collecting, and Olive is the narrator in the metanarrative.

I become Annabel Olive. There are pieces of people I know in all of the characters. My father is in Walter. Each character is a compilation of my personal experiences and those from various written and moving visual sources. This is where I come in as a collector of ideas. I work in threads of narratives, characters, sentences, and objects which contain potential to become stitched together into something new.

A Collector of Ideas

Being a collector of ideas, I observe and listen to my surroundings and always keep a pen accessible to record ideas in notes or drawings. Collecting is one of the most fulfilling parts of the process. As Jean Baudrillard stated, “. . . through collecting, the passionate pursuit of possession finds fulfillment and the everyday prose of objects is transformed into poetry, into a triumphant unconscious discourse” (2).¹⁹ I become the collector, cherishing the objects on the basis of their belonging to the connected short stories. I also become the connoisseur, loving the objects individually based on their unique charm.²⁰

Life becomes more tolerable through collecting, altering, and stitching together unpleasant stories. I’ve transformed the distressing events of my car accident and resulting

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard. “The Non-Functional System, or Subjective Discourse.” Translated by James Benedict. *The System of Objects*, 1996. Accessed July 25, 2017. JSTOR.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

Greyhound experience into events that occurred to the residents of Wintonbury. The unreliable replacement Buick has an alternate life in *For Wintonbury* and has since transformed into a nostalgic object to me because of the short stories. As David Foster Wallace once said, “Humor is a response to things that are difficult. . . Most of the stuff that we think we’re writing about in books is very difficult to talk about straight out. . . In some sense it probably can’t be talked about directly, and that’s why people make up stories about it.”²¹ I knew that I wanted to share my unpleasant Greyhound experience and the mother I observed holding her son closely. I was inspired when the lady I worked for pulled a pile of torn papers with writing on them out of her pockets, casually shrugged and said, “choices,” and when my sister got chased by an ostrich at her summer job. I knew I needed a slinky to be present in the work, with all of its figurative metaphors, when my student brought the broken slinky to class last semester. I take dominoes from *Collateral Beauty* and the box of chocolates from *Forrest Gump*. Those minor, seemingly insignificant, everyday items and events are the small, weird things from life that I compile, sort, and re-write; they are the building blocks of my work.

The titles of the short stories and paintings are a dedication. When making this body of work I thought a lot about Ben Folds’ tribute to Elliott Smith in his song, “Late.”²² I read as much as I could from David Foster Wallace, listened to interviews from the deceased author, and began to feel as if I knew him. I felt I owed something to both Folds and Wallace. I wanted to write something that got to the essence of being a genuine human being. *For Wintonbury* is for the people in my life and for those who might relate to the stories, emotional state, and tone of

²¹ “David Foster Wallace Uncut Interview”. Filmed November 2003. YouTube video, 1:24:02.

²² “Late” by Ben Folds, on the album *Songs for Silverman*, released in 2005. “The songs you wrote/ Got me through a lot/ Just wanna tell you that/ But it’s too late/”.

the book. The book is furthermore a dedication to the people who make up the characters and a nod to the fictional sources I have made use of.

“For Elizabeth” is a short story in the written collections, *For Wintonbury*. Here I will discuss ‘the making of’ this story and its accompanying visual works.

“Throw your towels in the washing machine,” were the last words she responded to him. It amazed her how close she had felt to him less than forty-eight hours ago –curled up in his arms, her head resting perfectly in the nook resting on his clavicle, his cheek to her forehead. He held her so closely through the entire night.

Elizabeth sat on her worn, blue love seat, the hue much too bright for her current circumstances. Surrounded by walls of a cold yellow—also too bright—she replayed the night over and over. She sat for a few minutes before beginning to pace around the room again. She couldn’t help it. Her hands were unsteady, nervous. Needing to be active, they clutched at and rubbed at the stitching on her faded gray college alumni t-shirt.

The neighborhood was quiet. Why was it always so quiet? The only noise she could hear was the immutable tick of the second-hand on her watch (32-33).²³

It began with hearing the sentence, “The fourth stage of grief is making piles.” I wondered what the first three stages were, and I immediately began to picture what that sentence might look like taking place in a young woman’s living room. I made drawings and painted sketches. The spatial depth of the living room, color palette, and piles of possessions changed with each painted sketch, as the person of Elizabeth gradually formed.

At first, I had written her as a woman sitting on an orange couch with warm yellow walls which were much too bright for her emotional state. But the warmer color palette didn’t fit the character or the tone of the story when this scene was painted and were therefore revised. I first painted the couch a medium “Barney” purple, which may have been worse than the orange. I altered the temperature of the color palette from warm to cool. I trimmed the couch into a less-round form to fit the character in the writing, thus describing more of a young, hardened person and less of a welcoming grandmother. I painted it blue with worn cushions. The room now read

²³ Insert from “For Elizabeth”, taken from *For Wintonbury*.

as more emotionally complicated than cheerful. Changes made into the painting were then echoed in the written story.

The development of the painting ran parallel to the development of the fictional writing. Personal details, in the form of objects returned and exchanged in the loss of a relationship, were added to both the painting and the story. The choices of pattern, color palette, and composition were based on the narrative of the story.

Perspective and scale is skewed slightly in the painting. The wooden musical frog, for example, does not appear to make perfect sense in relation to other objects in the space. The placement of the top cardboard box appears as if it should be tumbling out of the painting any time now (fig. 3).

I keep several paintings up at a time and the tab to my short stories minimized on my computer so that, even though they have met a certain stage of resolution, I can add and revise as more ideas occur to me and the stories and characters develop in details. I relate to Jonathan Tropper when he says, “The best part of the journey is once you’ve written the last page of the first draft. You now have a work in progress and can start molding and shaping it.” Then, “three acts, going back in and polishing, changing, adjusting and adapting, that feels like a way of organic process that only happens over time after you’ve lived with the script.”²⁴ The paintings become more complete as they develop layers of shifts in hue, composition, and object-placement. The patterns change and the spaces become more lived-in, making them more genuine and believable. There are physical objects, events, and ideas that remain unaddressed in either the short stories or in the paintings, and sometimes they only exist in the unfinished plans

²⁴ Tropper, Jonathan.

of *Annabel Olive's Study*. All of this allows for a rich enough world to allow strange things to happen.

Four Parts

I. Paintings

There is a quietude to the paintings, deriving from calm, horizontally- and vertically-structured compositions, and a politeness in the framing and cropping of objects. I have aimed to build a suite of paintings which the viewer can feel comfortable staying in for a longer amount of time. There are subtle details, shifts of hue and varying styles of painting, along with nuggets of repeated objects from one painting to the next to retain the viewer's interest, but with the calm, stable composition, I leave the viewer room to contemplate and breathe.

The margin around each of the paintings varies from milky white to light yellow ochre, resembling wear from the pages of an old book. In the painted framing exists a single page number in the bottom corner, placed either beside the left or the right margin depending on its correlating page in *For Wintonbury: A Collection of Short Stories*. These are cues that the paintings should be considered differently. They allow the paintings to link up with the written narrative; images replacing text on a page.

The paintings contain aspects which lead the viewer to question the believability of everything, thus, playing into the fictionality of the stories. The device of the painted, page-like margin around the image serves as the first cue that the work is fictional and narrative-based. From there, I apply other cues for a constructed reality. I painted a stuffed-animal lion in *For Henry*. It has stitching one would see on a stuffed animal, serving as a cue of fiction, and only partially exists in the space because the lion's painted body remains unfinished, with blankets showing through where there should be the lion's fur. The space in the paintings is often

ambiguous –another cue. In the diptych, *For Harvey* and *For Theo*, for example, the viewer cannot be certain as to whether the scene is inside or outdoors. In *Chairs*, the metal chairs almost seem to float in a sea of green grass. The window of *For Walter* is vague, opaque, and could thus be seen as either a faux window in a stage set or the idea of a window which the viewer is expected to accept. This window becomes a little world within a world (fig. 4). The same can be said with the wall decoration in *For Elizabeth*, the drawing in *For Henry*, the logo in *Rice Cakes* and the employees' office window in *Greyhound Station*.

I deliberately paint in the space between exact representation and 'I was never taught perspective and observation'. This allows me to place importance on significant details of the stories themselves, and not on accurate representation. With a fictional world and an earnestness to get the details of the story to the viewer, there remains flexibility with the added-in objects. I had believed I'd finished *For Elizabeth* a month prior to adding the ostrich to the pile of clothing. Another month had passed before I added a framed wall decoration. This leads to a painted surface that appears collaged, and I embrace this, because this is how life happens –we go through our days, continuously taking on more objects, items on our agendas, and stories to tell at dinner. With *For Henry*, I feel as though I can pick up and take out each individual piece of the painting, beginning with the red striped Adidas and suitcase, and leaving only the wallpaper and flooring (fig. 5). This kind of compiling is how literature happens. And sometimes, things do not seem believable or accurate, but still we accept these aspects as part of the story because of the whole. Frequently these questionable, weird aspects are what pique our interests in the first place.

I take the collage approach further when painting by referencing several images, all with varying shifts in lighting and perspective. The resulting scene appears deliberately cut-and-

pasted. This collaging and intentional disruption is also the process by which I write the stories, taking an object, quote, or storyline and adding to it.

I. A. Character Paintings

I aim for the paintings to reflect the characters in the stories, and so they are considerate, composed, and of a pensive mindset. As the storyteller of *For Wintonbury*, I make paintings that give me space to breathe. The color palettes reflect the characters in both age and in mood. I chose one scene from each character's story which has the most potential to best represent them for their larger, primary 'character painting'. I considered Walter Benjamin's thoughts when developing the character paintings. The most genuine aspects of a story occur when the psychological connection of the scene is not forced. It becomes, first, the viewer's responsibility to choose to interpret (150).²⁵ The quirks of the imagery convey an emotional realness to the viewer that a straightforward telling would not.

I. B. Scene Paintings

Significant secondary scenes in the short stories appear in the smaller paintings of *For Wintonbury*. The paintings are in a consistent 16 x 16 inch format with a 2 inch painted frame and a correlating page number. The scene paintings depict imagery from subplots and tangents, providing more insight into the character's history.

*When they both needed a break, they sat in the two metal chairs positioned slightly diagonal from each other. Harvey always took the blue one, Theo the red. Theo talked to Harvey about his day. These recollections often had amusing anecdotes. Harvey delighted in listening. He thought Theo should be a writer (25).*²⁶

For instance, *Chairs* came to be after I had driven several times past two rusty, and still brightly colored, metal chairs that were positioned diagonally across from each other in a yard on

²⁵ R.G. Davis. "Benjamin, Storytelling and Brecht in the USA." *New German Critique*, no. 17 (1979): 143-56.

²⁶ Insert from "For Harvey", taken from *For Wintonbury*.

a country back road. I could envision my character, Harvey, sitting in one of the chairs, fiddling with Theo's dominos as he listened to him describe his day (fig. 6).

II. Drawings

The drawings are made in pencil on paper. Displayed on the wall, they represent the plans and the making of *For Wintonbury*. They are questions asked in 'the making of' and depict a studying of the space. They vary from an illustration of Bakers Street to a drawing that Henry may have sketched of a creature in his mother's stories (fig. 7). They provide another marker of time in the creation of Wintonbury, occurring before the final products of the paintings and copies of short stories.

III. *Annabel Olive's Study* and the Characters' Three-Dimensional Compositions

In Karol Berger's journal article, "Diegesis and Mimesis: The Poetic Modes and the Matter of Artistic Presentation," Berger states, "If one wanted to find in painting something analogous to the immediately speaking voices of literature, one would have to enlarge the scope of the notion of "voice" to include a person's way of communicating his meaning by addressing not only our sense of hearing, but also our sense of sight. . . his total aspect" (415).²⁷

Annabel Olive's Study and the Characters' three-dimensional compositions are collections of painted, built, and altered found objects. The study has a handmade coffee table, bookshelf complete with ceramic slab-built books, two lamps, and a floating floor with a rug. A diptych hangs on the wall, implying a full backdrop of fictional wallpaper where Annabel Olive must have been writing notes. Present in *Annabel Olive's Study* are objects from the paintings and short stories brought into a different kind of three-dimensional reality, one that the viewer can physically experience. There are collaged polaroids taken by Olive of some of the scenes, and

²⁷ Karol Berger. "Diegesis and Mimesis: The Poetic Modes and the Matter of Artistic Presentation."

her Styrofoam Kum n Go cup, clumsily made from slowly-set plaster. Miniature versions of her Ford Fiesta and Henry's suitcase are here. Also accounted for are: Sophia's glass bird, Walter's coasters, and Theo's dominoes. Possessions from Elizabeth's previous partner have been left behind on the study's floor. Some of the parts of the study remain white and unpainted, to be interpreted as unfinished, and unwritten, especially as they fade into the gallery wall. This is a metaphor for the process of writing and the viewer's limitation of seeing certain aspects of 'the making of'. Pages of *For Wintonbury* are scattered on the coffee table with edits in red ink.

Annabel Olive's Study becomes my studio with the edited pages, sketches, photographs which inspired scenes from the narratives, and selected scale models from my previous stories. Drafts of writing and sketches show 'the making of'. The sketches are influenced by the ambiguity of Amy Kligman's paintings, which resemble a memory or a dream of a space, and similarly remain devoid of the human figure.

Combining fiction and reality, I have blurred the lines of diegesis and the world of Wintonbury with the gallery and the outside world that holds it. Dividing lines between artist and character and writer and narrator are obscured here, just as the faux-ness of built objects, painted shadows, and the merging of stories from my life with those from other sources call into question what is real and what is fictional.

Whereas *Annabel Olive's Study* is placed on a floating floor, the character compositions are directly on the gallery floor, making it easier for the viewer to imagine what it would be like to be in them. The physical scenes engage senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch in a way that is impossible with painting. The viewer can hear the music from Harvey's headphones, can almost feel what it would be like to sit in Walter's chair, is reminded of the taste of Lucky Charms in the ceramic cereal bowl, and can smell the scent of clementine throughout the gallery.

When I chose the objects to be represented in the three-dimensional compositions, I considered Jean Baudrillard's take on collecting. He spoke to the belief that everyday objects are "objects of a passion." This passion may be a passion for ownership or a vessel of emotional investment. Here, the possession is separated or abstracted from its original function and brought into a different relationship with the owner through memory, subject, and placement. The objects offer more than what they were originally purposed for: they begin to contain meaning and passion (1).²⁸

Because I'm creating a world in which characters of different ages and family backgrounds are living in the same community. Because of this, I have a spectrum of objects from the early 1900's to modern day. Time exists both functionally and sequentially in Wintonbury, representing more than one moment at a time. The objects presented are entirely possible and realistic. I include objects referring to current times (Quaker Rice Cakes and a Styrofoam Kum & Go cup), the recent past (a portable CD player), and the 1970's (a typewriter, Walter's floral curtains, and the burnt orange chair) (252).²⁹ All of these objects reflect different times, but can exist in one household or neighborhood today because of boxes in a storage unit or possessions passed down.

IV. *For Wintonbury: A Collection of Short Stories*, the Physical Book

Copies of the collection of short stories were present in the gallery in the form of physical books (fig. 8). The books present an opportunity for further engagement with the artwork and the exhibition. If a viewer desires to know the story behind a painting, he or she may reference the book by the correlating page number or title of the painting.

²⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. 1.

²⁹ Barthes, Roland and Lionel Duisit.

The narrative themes and details of events are more actively present in the book of short stories. The stories are another means for the viewer to engage with the happenings of Wintonbury. Listening to authors' interviews were a significant part of influencing the major themes of my work. I read Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection of short stories about a small town and the pitiful, but likeable "grotesques" that live there (1-2).³⁰ Jonathan Tropper influenced me in more than his book-to-screen adaptations. His stories are about characters who have landed in a less than pleasant place in life and are dealing with those circumstances in the best way they can, while attempting to be good, genuine human beings looking for redemption.³¹ I learned that this concept is what captivates me in a book or movie: the human seeking redemption.

The Exhibition

For Wintonbury, the exhibition, was displayed in the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of Arkansas (fig. 9). Beside the introductory wall text of the gallery was a seafoam green, wooden chair with paperback copies of *For Wintonbury: A Collection of Short Stories* (fig. 10). Along the main walls of the gallery, the paintings were displayed, organized by (fig. 11). *Annabel Olive's Study* occupied a central place against the floating wall in the middle of the gallery (fig. 12). The drawings depicting 'the making of' were placed to the left of *Annabel Olive's Study*.

Artifacts from the study and three-dimensional compositions were set up across the gallery floor, bringing the pieces of the story further into the reality of the viewer (fig. 13). The viewers were able to read the stories as they walked in the space that had become Wintonbury.

³⁰ Sherwood Anderson. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York, NY: Viking Compass, 1970, 1-2.

³¹ Jonathan Tropper. *This is Where I Leave You*. Farmington Hills, MI: Large Print Press, a Port of Gale, Cengage Learning, 2014.

The sound of the electric typewriter hummed in the background. Harvey's portable c.d. player will played *Plans*, by Death Cab for Cutie. The smell of Clementine air freshener was present. Rice cakes were available at the reception table. These were all aspects designed to let the viewer experience the world of Wintonbury more fully.

Outside of the world of Wintonbury, both narrator and characters are essentially, in Barthes words, "paper beings" (261).³² It is when the viewer enters the gallery and becomes a part of the story of Wintonbury that Annabel Olive becomes real (fig. 14).

Three Years: A Narrative

I arrived at the University of Arkansas in the Fall of 2015 with a basic knowledge of painting portraiture and landscape. In order to develop as an artist, I stopped painting what I knew and experimented with color palettes, subject matter, and a general questioning of what painting can be. I incorporated the text of fragments of sentences. I cycled through bodies of work with different themes and artist statements before realizing that my love for fictional narrative could be more than a guilty pleasure, but rather, used to enrich and direct my work. My paintings became narrative after reading Jesse Andrews' *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*. I added three-dimensional objects to my work, calling them paintings and bringing the narratives of my work into the three-dimensional world. From there, I began to think about the possibilities of a painting's place: painting backed-panels to be placed on the floor, leaning against a wall, or hanging six inches from the ground. As title cards, I typed the quote from which the story originated.

I made three-dimensional paintings which resembled stage sets. My first three-dimensional painting was a tall and narrow piece, called *Just Out of Reach*, featuring a wallpaper

³² Barthes, Roland and Lionel Duisit.

backdrop, faux wooden flooring, and an unpainted stool just short enough to deny a child of reaching the candy on the shelf. That piece led me to the larger painted sets containing complete, personally-developed narratives.

The body of work for which I defended in my Candidacy Review was titled *This is a Story About Three People*. In this work, I had the general idea of three people: Grandma Ada, Son Benjamin, and Granddaughter Gracie. Each of the paintings had a painted floor, backdrop, and painted and built objects to complete the narrative. In addition to the three main paintings were scale models, drawings, and small paintings depicting ‘the making of’.

All of the building for *This is a Story About Three People* made me realize my endearment for painting. My thesis work is primarily based around paintings on canvas, with accompanying three-dimensional collections. Evidence from my first and second year remain in the current body of work in various forms. I began creating the story, concepts, and scale models of this body of work in May of 2017 with Harvey’s three-ring pool and torn paper choices.

Artists, Influences, and My Place

As previously noted, Richard Diebenkorn is the artist who pushed me into a narrative direction. While he was looking at N.C. Wyeth’s illustrations, my early influences were N.C. Wyeth’s son, Andrew, a Regionalist painter. I relate to the still, quiet paintings of Andrew Wyeth and his ability to convey a portrait from a figureless scene. He depicts strong emotion in a simple landscape or room. Edward Hopper turned to the cinema for stylistic inspiration. His paintings portray a world of loneliness.³³ I look to David Hockney for his color palette, clean brushwork, manner of portraying objects and scenes simplistically, and for his symmetrical compositions. Michael Ward paints single, everyday objects with little spatial depth. Carolyn Swiszczy paints

³³ Philip French. “From Nighthawks to the Shadows of Film Noir.” *The Observer*. April 24, 2004 (accessed November 11, 2017).

places: using text and organizing large fields of sky and ground into various shapes with slight shifts in hue. Todd Hido's photographs which most appeal to me consist of a palette akin to that of Wes Anderson and portray desolate locations, particularly at night or in the snow and presenting train cars, telephone lines, exteriors of townhouses, and houses surrounded by a blanket of snow. I look at Eric Fischl for his emotional and psychological scenes of growing up in American suburbia. His paintings portray what is seen behind closed doors, which reflects my use of a first person omniscient view in the written work. When I considered the possibilities of displaying the story of Wintonbury, Massachusetts in both visual and written materials, I researched Duchamp and his *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Green Box)*. With that artwork, the writings become stray pieces of torn paper, offering the viewer the opportunity to participate in the notes' arrangement and interpretation.³⁴ This work by Duchamp helped me to realize that I did not want a one to one correspondence between the written story and the paintings.

Listing the artists in this way seems almost cursory, and while they have played significant roles in my artistic decision-making, somewhere along the way, I began seeing myself as less of a painter and more of a storyteller. As much as I value painting, the story comes first. The thread of a sentence in a narrative is what inspires subject matter, composition, and color palette for me.

Painting, then, becomes a means of telling the story, as does pencil, clay, plaster, and collected objects. When I state that this narrative work is a merging of the visual arts and literary fiction, I'm acknowledging that I have been just as influenced by those in the literary fiction field. In the larger picture, I am involved in a conversation with others who are engaged in

³⁴ Ades, Dawn.

creating narratives and metanarratives. Even calling my studies ‘the making of’ rather than studies for a finished piece of art is placing myself in the context of narrative, using the language of filmmakers rather than that of the art world. Instead of making ‘art for art’s sake’, I am interested in an art that moves in a more human direction, focused on the human experience and storytelling about the human condition. This enables my work to respond to the work of painters, authors, and filmmakers alike.

Wes Anderson seeps into my work when considering the miniature world I seek to create. I study his color palettes and listen to the movie, *Royal Tenenbaums*, on repeat. His films have the feeling of a work of literature, cinema, and scenes of a piece of art compiled into one. Anderson places an introductory paragraph with a small illustration before each of the chapters in *Royal Tenenbaums*, as a cue that this movie should be viewed differently. This cue lets the viewer know that he or she is watching a story, a book-like object, unfold. I am making similar decisions when formatting my paintings as pages in a book and in displaying *For Wintonbury* from ‘the making of’ to the final products, with tangents and subplots along the way.

Michael Chabon, American novelist and short story writer, describes the purpose of Wes Anderson’s film-making when he writes:

The most we can hope to accomplish with our handfuls of salvaged bits --the bittersweet harvest of observation and experience --is to build a little world of our own. A scale model of that mysterious original, unbroken, half-remembered. Of course the worlds we build out of our store of fragments can be only approximations, partial and inaccurate. As representations of the vanished hole that haunts us, they must be accounted failures. And yet in that very failure, in their gaps and inaccuracies, they may yet be faithful maps, accurate scale models, of this beautiful and broken world. We call these scale models ‘works of art’” (21-22).³⁵

This quote is written on my studio wall as a reminder of something for which to strive.

³⁵ Matt Z. Seitz. *The Wes Anderson Collection*. New York: Abrams Books, 2013.

Narrative is an important aspect of human experience, and how we experience the narrative is constantly evolving. A reader can become entirely immersed into a story, staying up all night to find out what happens to its characters. Now books are being translated into continuous television series, making it possible to keep the details of the story that were often lost in a two-hour long movie. This is evidence that we want more; we crave more details and for the story to be as fully-developed as possible. We have information at the tips of our fingers because of developments in technology, which only adds to us wanting more. I am convinced that a desire for a fuller narrative is not limited to books and the cinema but exists also in visual art. My work is based on the idea that contemporary art should push and break limitations of the narrative, and that begins with giving the viewer more than an implication of a story.

Discussing the future of storytelling on Lightworkers.com, Hayden Royster, writes, “On October 27, 2017, people across the world threw parties to celebrate the release of [“Stranger Things”] . . . Various Eggo waffles inspired treats were available for snacking. Signs like ‘Welcome to Hawkins’ were hung from mailboxes . . . partygoers dressed as their favorite Hawkins resident. . .”³⁶ What Royster is suggesting is that the love for “Stranger Things” goes beyond a nostalgia for costumes and the ‘80s. This event and events like this indicate that the way our society creates and consumes stories is changing in a substantial way.

Walter Benjamin saw this paradigm shift much earlier. In 1936 he wrote, acknowledging the changes in cinematic technology, “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character . . . Literary License is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property.”³⁷ This means that if a person has the capabilities

³⁶ Royster, Hayden.

³⁷ McBride, Patrizia.

of using technology, then a person can tell a story. This gives an artist, such as myself, license and power to tell a story because I have the necessary means within different media at hand.

“Stranger Things” was created with a purpose of being consumed successively in one cohesive narrative, like reading a book. We are in a culture which allows for stories to be entirely immersive through streaming and binge-watching. The task of the artist and the author may have an increasing challenge of keeping the audience’s attention, but art, like literature, is never going to disappear. David Foster Wallace addressed the issue when he said, “It’s true in the US that every year it becomes more and more difficult to ask people to read or to look at a piece of art for an hour or to listen to a piece of music that is complicated and that takes work to understand . . . because particularly now in the computer and internet culture, everything is so fast.”³⁸

I intend to keep the viewer’s attention through multiple paths of entry into the work and through multiple media. I am telling the story from the ‘making of’ to the finished artifact and creating a gallery space in which the viewer is completely immersed into the story, in this case, the story of *For Wintonbury*. My paintings are set up cinematically with a frame and a setting that appear as if it could be a room or a backdrop, a room, or an idea of a room from a compilation of observed and remembered scenes. The viewer is given the choice in which order to read the book [of collected short stories] or watch the movie [view the paintings/visual objects]. Some may consume both at the same time, following the works of art while reading the correlating pages.

Discussing matters of narrative and painting, Berger claims, “While we may easily find analogues for the setting and the personage in painting, a true narrative voice is more difficult to locate and may be something of a rarity. Normally, the setting and the personage exhaust the list

³⁸ “David Foster Wallace Uncut Interview.”

of categories of elements that may be found to constitute the worlds presented in paintings”

(417)³⁹ In *For Wintonbury*, I seek to present a true narrative voice in a (mostly) visual format.

The viewer, for however long he or she chooses, may contemplate *For Wintonbury* in the gallery space which has temporarily transformed into the artist and author’s mind and the town of Wintonbury, specifically Bakers Street. This exhibit and shift in narrative which I am proposing becomes a time-lapse of making. The viewer is not only given one singular, final product manifested in a painting. Rather, the viewer gets the opportunity to absorb a painting, read the story behind it, notice objects in the painting that enter into the three-dimensional components, and view the artist’s and characters’ thoughts and preliminary work. The viewer is given the opportunity to become as involved with the story and characters as he or she desires. I seek to give my information-seeking audience a whole narrative, rather than just an implication.

³⁹ Berger, Karol.

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Appendix: Figures

Figure 1: Cassandra Sanderson, *And, And The*. Oils on Panel. 2016.

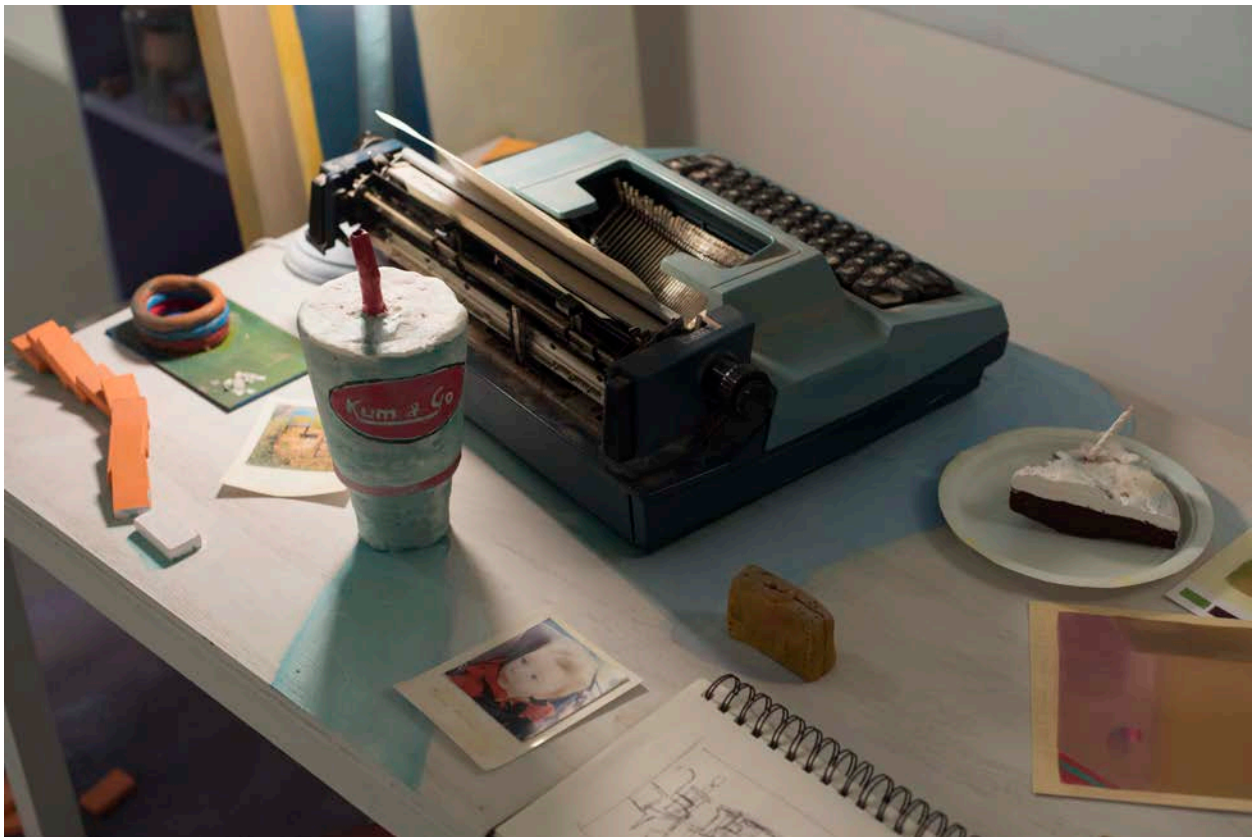


Figure 2: Cassandra Sanderson, *Vanilla Coke Zero, Portion of Annabel Olive's Study*. Plaster, red clay, acrylic paint, wood, paper, found objects. 2018.



Figure 3: Cassandra Sanderson, *For Elizabeth*. Acrylic on canvas. 2018.



Figure 4: Cassandra Sanderson, *For Walter*. Acrylic on canvas. 2018.



Figure 5: Cassaundra Sanderson, *For Henry*. Acrylic, sharpie on canvas. 2018.



Figure 6: Cassaundra Sanderson, *Chairs*. Acrylic on canvas. 2017.

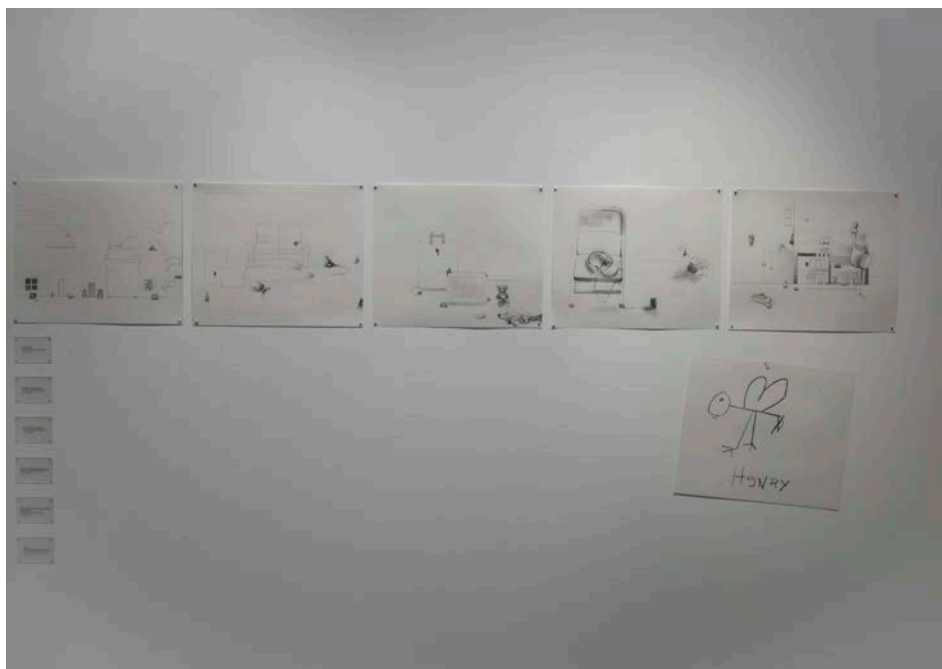


Figure 7: Cassaundra Sanderson, *Drawings (#1-6)*. Charcoal, pencil on Strathmore. 2018.



Figure 8: Cassandra Sanderson, Installation View of stack of *A Collection of Short Stories*, books, found chair, spray paint, wood, acrylic paint. 2018.



Figure 9: Installation View of *For Wintonbury*, Fine Art Center Gallery, 2018.



Figure 10: Installation View of books and statement, Fine Art Center Gallery, 2018.



Figure 11: Installation View of organization by household (Harvey and Theo). Acrylic on canvas, 2018.



Figure 12: Cassandra Sanderson, Installation View of *Annabel Olive's Study*. Acrylic, plaster, red clay, wood, paper, found objects. 2018.



Figure 13: Cassaundra Sanderson, *Chair and Ostrich (Harvey and Sophia)*. Acrylic, found objects, yarn, wood, faux grass. 2018.

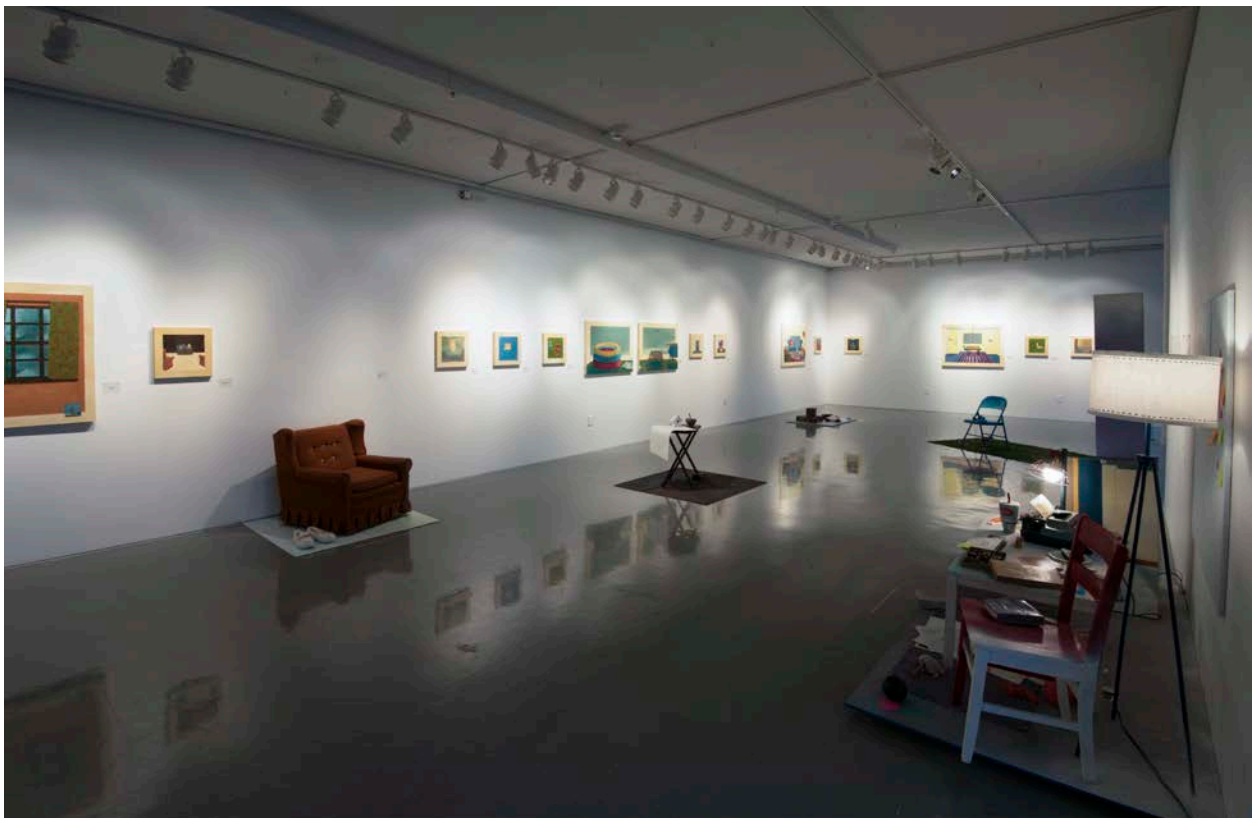


Figure 14: Installation View of *For Wintonbury*, Fine Art Center Gallery, 2018.