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Heartwork

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Heartwork

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

by

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Memphis College of Art
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Abstract

Heartwork is a collection of paintings, drawings, and sculptures that explore the many ways identity is shaped by familial histories and personal memory. Focusing on my time growing up on a pine tree farm in Jackson, Mississippi in the early 90s, *Heartwork* explores gender, religion, regional traditions, family and art. Through conversations and collaborations with my family, painting acts as an impetus for strengthening relationships. By reevaluating the past, I am able to create a web of interconnected narratives that inform and shift my understanding of the present.

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Heartwork
Forest of Emerald Green
Coded Atmospheres of Collapsed Familial Timelines
Existence Colored by Labors of Love

On a small farm outside of Jackson, Mississippi, my grandparents planted thousands of loblolly pines and cedar trees. Year after year, this forest of emerald green rose around me, shrouding histories in shadows that fell across the landscape. Today I find this place charged with flickering afterimages of past selves. If the self is ever malleable, these encounters reveal a new and clearer present upon each return.

Pushing into a painting's surface is an exercise in traversing psychological thresholds. Memories gather, forming coded atmospheres of collapsed familial timelines. As a vehicle for self-investigation, painting is a "terrestrial gateway"¹ toward a better understanding of family, gender, religion, regional traditions, and art.

This process is *Heartwork*; a chronology of reflections in service of strengthening bonds built on vulnerability and communication. Labors of love color our existence. It is joyously physical work in perpetual motion, moving forward while doubling back, like the rhythm of my grandmother's cursive.

¹Beuscher, Alexandra, and Turner, Darienne. "Terrestrial Gateways to the Divine." Essay. In *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*, 26–31. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 2018.

Material & Immaterial Forms
A Language Built in Bodyweight
History of Rhythmic Action
Walk the Path (Time Collapses)

This process can be broken down into many moving parts that intersect and become a collective idea, or body of work. As the title suggests, many of these parts revolve around various forms of labor. Whether a charcoal drawing, a collage, or an installation; the hand is always present. Art objects are vessels for compiled actions, memories, narratives, and questions. The process takes on both material and immaterial forms, the latter influencing the former.

Many of the dominant works in the exhibition are large-scale, un-stretched, canvas collages. My paintings begin very gesturally as I roll out full sheets of canvas and begin accumulating large marks mimicking calligraphy. The paintings remain on the floor where they are repeatedly walked on, accumulating a record of my movements.

These sheets are delicately cut into images and laid on top of each other. The initial, gestural process remains visible to the end despite the paintings transforming into intricate, structured collages. Simply painting the images, rather than using this collage method, would save a lot of time and material but I would lose all the nuances of a painting language built in bodyweight. A history of my own rhythmic actions is recorded. Arden Reed argues that duration-based artworks split into two categories, either an artwork "stretches into an event," or "the event coalesces in an image."² Here, both take place; the time-consuming, gestural process remains visible and independent, yet compiles into a whole.

I associate this stacking with the way memory operates non-linearly. On the pine tree farm, time doesn't pass but collapses in on itself. The landscape is embedded with decades of

² Reed, Arden. *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. 27.

familial history. For me, visiting the farm is an encounter with my late grandfather, with the exaggerated tales of my father's childhood, and with my own personal experiences as a young man. All this compiles in the present as I wander the cobwebbed paths my predecessors walked thirty, forty, or fifty years before I was born. Georges Bataille writes in *Tears of Eros*, "One moment has meaning only in its relation to other moments. We are at each instant only fragments deprived of meaning if we do not relate these fragments to other fragments."³ Only by taking the time to walk the paths and collect the isolated histories will I be able to construct a meaningful present.

³ Bataille, Georges, and Peter Connor. *The Tears of Eros*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990. 165.

In the Abyss
A Treasure Chest of Invisibility

Family history is often relayed orally. Conversation is one of the foundational stones on which relationships are built. I am not only interested in the narratives that inhabit this place, but the spaces between the narratives. Or as Martin Herbert puts it, the "gaps between images and subjects, [where] in the abyss, new and shared meanings may emerge."⁴ The emotional ambience that surrounds the farm is a treasure chest of invisible content formed by a collective, past presence.

⁴ Herbert, Martin. *The Uncertainty Principle*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014. 30.

An Atmosphere of Rumbling Events
Bombardment of Sentimental Noise
Heartwork (Divinity)

The farm is shaped by an atmosphere of rumbling events, decades of memories colliding into one another. To emulate this further in the work, I cut various texts into my paintings. These texts range from stories passed down to conversations with my grandmother or voicemails from my father. By layering these texts in canvas, I create paintings that are bombardments of sentimental noise, similar to the ones that overwhelm me when sitting at my grandmother's dinner table playing canasta or wading through murky creek water in search of old Coca-Cola bottles.

These compilations of abstracted texts, such as *Heartwork (Divinity)*, are made to envelope the viewer in calligraphic static, creating space for reflection and meditation without being tied to personal symbols of Southern boyhood. Language can be a foundation for abstraction.

Terrestrial Gateways to the Divine
Just Behind the Veil

This way of working was inspired by my own studies in Paleolithic cave art. The painted hands of Lascaux have been interpreted by some archeologists as the caveman's attempt to press through the cave wall and access "terrestrial gateways to the divine."⁵

Paintings in European caves have been interpreted as depictions of life forms moving just behind the veil of the cave wall, in distinct realms, while finger painting and handprints on the walls may have represented attempts to access these realms ... As hands were covered in [paint] and plunged into crevices in the rock, devotees penetrated into the world beyond and left behind their traces in the sacred paint.⁶

I began to ask myself, "What do I hope to access by pushing into these canvases?" Painting can be a gateway to hidden histories and personal truths.

⁵ Beuscher and Turner, "Terrestrial Gateways to the Divine." 26.

⁶ Ibid.

Remember to Call Mimi More

While the paintings serve a function in the exhibition, their primary purpose is to be a vessel for connection. Painting becomes a reason to routinely call my 90-year-old, widowed grandmother and listen to her stories of a by-gone era. Painting becomes a reason to send letters to my father. Painting becomes a reason to connect with my great-uncle and learn his analog woodworking techniques. In the end, the art objects are only by-products of a process whose purpose is self-growth and the strengthening of familial bonds.

Lightness & Transience
My Grandmother's Cursive (Snake Over Pond Water)
Forever in the Day
The Swinging Standoff Between Beginning & End

I soon began searching for ways to instill qualities in the work that mimicked the ethereality of memory. Of all the ways to describe the intangible, I landed on *lightness*. Writer, Italo Calvino describes the need for lightness in art as a natural "reaction to the weight of living"⁷ Calvino writes:

I soon realized that the gap between the realities of life that were supposed to be my raw materials and the sharp, darting nimbleness that I wanted to animate my writing was becoming harder and harder for me to bridge. Perhaps I was only then becoming aware of the heaviness, the inertia, the opacity of the world - qualities that quickly adhere to writing if one doesn't find a way to give them the slip.⁸

I began searching for ways to subtract the weight of the Earthly subjects I was drawn to without losing their presence in the work.

I focused on symbols that seemed to carry an inherent sense of lightness. Birds, butterflies, spider webs, smoke, the upward spiral of vines and briars, or the growth rings of trees; these things not only seemed to defy Earth's gravitational pull, but also seemed to parallel ideas of transience. Others carried rhythms that implied motion, like my grandmother's cursive or the movement of a snake over pond water.

Ideas of lightness best manifest in the sculpture, *Forever in the Day*. Structurally, the sculpture is based on the stained-glass windows at my grandmother's church. The windows are architectural elements designed to mediate light while serving as portals between Heaven and Earth. A grid of string fills the sculpture's interior allowing it to be adorned with constellations of objects that point towards lightness. The most obvious: a small butterfly, a scrap of paper with

⁷ Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. 32.

⁸ Calvino. *Six Memos*. 4.

the word, *Heartwork*, written in my grandmother's cursive, a plastic angel, and pencil shavings that quiver as they balance on the grid.

For me, transience is an element of lightness. That which is in motion, or in progress, is caught between two states and, like painting, is "marked by a notion of constant transition rather than stasis."⁹ When working gesturally, I create paintings that feel like they're interconnected, caught in an evolving state between beginning and end. Martin Herbert describes the process poetically:

You stop not when you've reached a static representation, but when, among the parts and the whole, you've got perpetual motion: a complicated, instinctive, swinging standoff between resolution and irresolution, minimalism and maximalism, existence and inertia. The art seems to breathe and expire continually before your eyes.¹⁰

I achieve this perpetual motion formally by avoiding composition, using rhythmic marks that resemble calligraphy, treating most surfaces similarly, and working in thin washes that generate luminosity, revealing a buried history of brushstrokes.

⁹ Rottman, André. "Remarks on Contemporary Painting's Perseverance." Introduction. In *Thinking Through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas*, 9–13. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014.

¹⁰ Herbert. *Uncertainty Principle*. 81

Towards Perpetual Motion
The Paleolithic Impulse

Towards Perpetual Motion is a mural-size grid of gestural, abstract paintings running the length of the gallery. Organized like large-scale color swatches, the grid is made up of 56 unstretched canvases that reflect this idea of painterly movement and lightness. As mentioned before, these gestural works would usually be cut up and incorporated into large-scale collages. However, here they function as an immersive field of paintings, stalled mid-process, waiting to become finished artworks.

This painting drapes down, like a massive curtain, extending into the gallery's floor space. Finished paintings are hung on this grid, inviting the audience to step into the field of color to get a closer look. In this way, the audience enters the painting and become actors. They walk on the surface, pressing their bodyweight into the canvas, and participate in that Paleolithic impulse to seek meaning beyond the veil. While paintings hung on the grid, like *Heartwork (Divinity)*, are metaphorical portals into self-investigation; *Towards Perpetual Motion* is a physical platform for discovery.

Linear Time Accumulates in Death

Heavy

The Tempo of a Cemetery

Mischievous Angels

Careful with Christianity

This body of work was initiated by conversations with my grandmother. Spending time with her inevitably led to discussions of Christianity, faith, spirituality, and death. Christian perspectives on death, specifically Southern Methodist interpretations, are a filter to experience the work. While the paintings are built on non-linear perceptions of time, the Christian symbolism scattered across the pine tree farm is a constant reminder that linear time accumulates in death. Symbols of Christian death and afterlife, such as crucifixes and angels, are my grandmother's go-to decor. Crucifixes adorn her neck, her doors, her fireplace, her front yard.

I find these objects extremely interesting, yet difficult to use. This is partly due to my own, unresolved relationship to Christianity, shrouded in equal parts wonder and terror. They also carry emotional weight as cultural symbols. Calvino writes:

We might say that as soon as an object appears in a narrative, it becomes charged with special force, becomes like the pole in a magnetic field or a node in an invisible network of relations. The object's symbolic value can be explicit or not, but it is always present. We might even say that any object in a narrative is a magic object.¹¹

In the American South, death has always felt like a secret, "reserved for hushed conversations in the sanctity of a church or temple, always with the promise of afterlife."¹² While these objects are comforting reassurance of life everlasting for my grandmother, they are constant reminders of death and the unknown for me. They taint the room with an uneasy presence, capable of transforming an exhibition in unsettling ways.

¹¹ Calvino. *Six Memos*. 39.

¹² Herbert. *Uncertainty Principle*. 32.

On the contrary, while these symbols do feel heavy emotionally, the sheer quantity of iconography repeated throughout my grandmother's house can render the symbols into a form of background noise. The iconography can even become rhythmic, the way that crosses in a cemetery have a certain tempo to their organization. This, surprisingly, leans even a crucifix towards lightness.

Angels have taken on a slightly different function in the work. Much like Paul Klee's angels of the 1930s, my angels are tainted by human characteristics and are the focus of an unfolding, loose narrative. Perhaps, in a way, the angel drawings allow me to navigate time backwards and forwards, inserting myself into stories passed down to me. The angels are mischievous, playful, and bring an air of spiritual mystery to the work. I think of Bruno Gonz's character in *Wings of Desire*, the angel Damiel, who gives up immortality for love and the taste of coffee.

It's in this way that Christian symbols carefully decorate my work: rhythmic reminders of life's temporality and a side-eyed wink toward a realm beyond this one. The decorative objects that I'm drawn to the most are those combining Christian iconography with domestic craft traditions. For example, the embroidered bible verses in my grandmother's kitchen, the semi-functional birdhouses shaped like crucifixes built by my uncle, or the Sunday school cross collages made by my father in the 70s.

The Generative Object
Crash I (Obit: Letter to My Father)
Crash II (Obit: Letter from My Father)
Confined to Masculine Validation

My father's childhood artwork has played an important role in the development of this recent body of work. I've spent the last two years recreating drawings, mostly of cars, that my father made when he was around six years old. I've found that by recreating the drawings, I'm able to enter into a dialogue with a very approachable, child-like version of my father. Elaine Scarry argues that any "generative object continues, in some sense, to be present in the newly begotten object."¹³ Reproducing his drawings brings my father's presence into the work while simultaneously allowing me the opportunity to meditate on various frictions that have cropped up between us. Drawing brings us closer to one another and closer to resolution.

This concept takes the form of two identical drawings at the entrance of the gallery depicting a car crash; *Crash I (Obit: Letter to My Father)* and *Crash II (Obit: Letter from My Father)*. While our love for classic cars has always been a neutral place for paternal bonding, it can also be a form of masculine validation that confines and excludes individuals from masculinity.

While the drawings of the crash adhere aesthetically to my father's wobbly, childhood depictions of vehicles, the background is densely filled with script. On the left, the crash is surrounded by a transcribed letter I wrote to my father explaining the importance of his drawings to my work, the reasons for my lack of communication over the years, and a request for collaboration. In the second drawing, the crash is surrounded by my father's eloquent and

¹³ Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000. 9.

sentimental response. Side by side, the two drawings are by-products of steps taken towards demolishing barriers built around filial, masculine invulnerability.

Grim Reaper (Crossing the Threshold)
Redemption
Invisible Labor

Various vehicles make appearances in my work. While the aesthetic structure of these vehicles conforms to my father's drawings, they do bend and stretch to represent specific models of cars that hold significant narratives. For example, *Crossing the Threshold in a Lincoln Towncar* is a large collage of the last car my grandfather drove before he passed away. In 2004 on his way home from work, two bank robbers shot out his driver-side window on the highway. Surprisingly unharmed, he died of a heart attack one week later while clearing shrubs in the backyard. For me, the Lincoln Towncar has come to symbolize the grim reaper of classic cars. Or, more poetically, my grandfather's "terrestrial gateway to the divine".

While death is a heavy notion, I've found making work about death redemptive. Poet, Christian Wiman, argues that "one of art's functions is to give form to feelings that would otherwise remain inchoate and corrosive, to give us a means whereby we can inhabit our fears and pains rather than they us, to help us live with our losses rather than being permanently and helplessly haunted by them."¹⁴ In this way, cars become a multifaceted platform for conversations about paternal relationships, constructions of masculinity, and loss, while also serving as metaphors for transience and Earthly temporality.

While this painting is illustrative, it still adheres to the formal qualities that characterize paintings like *Heartwork (Divinity)*. Many layers of canvas have been cut and stacked to create an image. While a story is told by way of signs and symbols, the painting is a coalescence of time. Within each layer of canvas is visible and invisible labor. While the time spent working in

¹⁴ Wiman, Christian. *He Held Radical Light: the Art of Faith, the Faith of Art*. New York, NY: Picador, 2019. 64-65.

the studio inevitably manifests physically, it also manifests as self-reflection, research, dialogue, and collaboration. These elements of invisible labor are at the core of *Heartwork*.

The Final Symbol of Lightness (Time Travel)
A Flittering Glimpse
New and Different Labyrinths

Hung high above the gallery's exit is a framed drawing of a butterfly my father made in 1975. This drawing is significant to me because on the back there is a small logo stamped "Jackson First Federal," where my grandmother worked as a bank teller for most of her life. Time collapses effortlessly, as I imagine my father scribbling away at company stationary, waiting for my grandmother to clock out, his legs not quite touching the floor. They travel through time and space to sit above the gallery exit, the viewer gazing upward on their way out, taking in a final symbol of lightness, motion, and time.

This piece is a comma rather than a full stop to the exhibition, implying that a pursuit of understanding is a way to navigate and enrich life rather than define it. The answers found here are only flittering glimpses at new avenues of inquiry, extracted from the objects and relationships that surround us every day. This is *Heartwork*, the never ending "grasping [of] the past and its shaping of the present ..." ¹⁵ in service of tomorrow. Herbert writes:

There is the past, which never really goes away, that we must deal with in the present to understand that how we see what's gone depends on our consciousness of being *in* the now. When we look back we don't see a true yesteryear, rather an edit of it: a view that suits us, mostly. Nationalism, radical conservatism, so-called golden age theory constitute a form of pernicious nostalgia, harking back to a "better," simpler time- but there are none, only history's shearing away of contradictory details, a forgetting whose consequences can be catastrophic. ¹⁶

Dad's butterfly, as light and dismissible as it is, comes to us as a time capsule, unearthed after 50 years, to provide us with a momentary pause in the "loud and aggressive, roaring and rumbling ... realm of death" that has come to define daily life. ¹⁷ It is an opportunity to reevaluate and better understand the past, in hopes of living intentionally and fully. As Eudora Welty put it,

¹⁵ Herbert. *Uncertainty Principle*. 132.

¹⁶ Herbert, Martin. *Unfold This Moment*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020. 118.

¹⁷ Calvino. *Six Memos*. 14.

"... though the woods may look the same from the outside, it is a new and different labyrinth every time."¹⁸ Painting becomes a tool for unearthing latent truths, aiding in lighting new paths forward, by giving a reason to look once more at the close and familiar.

"Time is in the table at which I sit and in the words I type.
In the red-checked shirt my father's mother used to wear
when she was gardening and which I kept
because it held her smell (though it does no longer)
there is still plenty of time."¹⁹

¹⁸ Welty, Eudora. "Place in Fiction." Essay. In *On Writing*, 39–59. New York: Modern Library, 2002. 45.

¹⁹ Wiman, Christian. "The Parable of Perfect Silence" Lines (18-22). Poem. In *Survival is a Style: Poems*. 57-69 Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020. 57.

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