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Invisible Until

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Invisible Until

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

by

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Bachelor of Science in Art, 2014

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

“Invisible Until” explores my personal experiences while working full time at Tyson Foods in Pine Bluff, AR up until moving to Fayetteville for graduate school. The body of artwork comes from reflecting on past a present while drawing from inspiration from Jacob Lawrence, Kerry James Marshall, Jordan Casteel, and more. Using history as a tool to break down the American struggle I used conversations amongst my high school classmates to pull from their direct experiences to convey life and what it means to come from Pine Bluff. By using real people and their life events of trying to achieve progress, I am able to question notions of what is means to be a man in the 21st century, the idea and the importance of community, and to ask, is the American Dream possible for everyone, or is it only accessible to certain groups of people?

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Works

Chapter 1: Intent

I am an invisible man. No I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe: Nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids, and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, simply because people refuse to see me.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952

I am pushing through the layers of painting and the history of painting; as an African American, I'm forced to think about space. *Do I feel safe in this space? If I fail, what does that mean, and how can I protect myself within a domain that has excluded me?* Space gives a sense of time, importance, class, social status, and a specific narrative. I'm interested in telling my story through the lens of a particular connection to an environment. The work is based on excavating personal memories, experiences, and emotions growing up in Pine Bluff, dealing with certain stereotypes that forced me to reinvent myself.

I take as many pictures as possible of family, friends, and strangers. Most important are the spaces, gestures, and experiences shared through conversation. My goal is to capture a chapter of someone's life that tells a story about the place where we connected and reveals a previously invisible personal narrative.

In my work, I explore the psychological state of living as a Black male in the United States: constantly in survival mode of working, thinking, moving, problem-solving, and creating, while moving through systems that are meant to create division and broken relationships. I encounter a repeated cycle of disappointment, neglect, and rejection that affected my brain's development. One example is my living six years in Arkansas while my son lives in Atlanta. Because of the separation, I'm forced to work harder to build our relationship, while being disappointed in every effort to move to Atlanta.

I want to show my figures' facial expressions, profoundly impacted by their events. By representing Black people situated outside their rented apartments, isolated from family and a sense of community, I am showing and confronting the inequality gap in the United States. I intend for my artwork to help develop the Black community's agency, help bring awareness of educational and institutional disparities, and to build a culture of healing, accountability, and reciprocity.

Chapter 2: Process

I am interested in my subjects' subjectivity. I want to create a composition that captures their experience from a shared perspective. I want to point to a specific narrative that frequently gets overlooked. Not everyone has the opportunity to move up. Failure doesn't reflect one's character, but one's environment and lack of access. Abraham Maslow stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs and that some needs take precedence over others (Maslow). Our most basic need is for physical survival, and this will be the first thing that motivates our behavior. Once that level is fulfilled the next level up is what motivates us, and so on.

Part of my process is going into the community and taking pictures of individuals in their state of being. The sitter looks away from the viewer, in their own thoughts: reflecting on circumstances, transitioning from one job to another, getting from point A to point B, getting a bill paid, building a system of support, or maybe starting over completely. This authors a new existentialism, of the viewed. The sitter's gaze creates responsibility for the engaged viewer. I express the humanity of my sitters. The viewer experiences a moment of what it feels like growing up in Pine Bluff as a Black person; of what it feels like growing up in America as a Black person.

After reading Jordan Casteel's *Within Reach*, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's *Fly-In League* *With The Night*, and Kerry James Marshall's *The History of Painting*, I began to recognize meaning within the painting process: I allow my underpainting to remain visible at the surface in places, which reveals the painting's history. Underpainting is the qualification for what choices come next, like what gets rendered with more detail vs. what remains generalized or is pushed further into abstraction. I want the background to contrast with the figure by layers and mark-making to indicate more time was spent on the figure as a visual hierarchy. In this way of thinking, I am interested in people's gazes, creating a sense of desires, hopes, inspiration, and relationships.

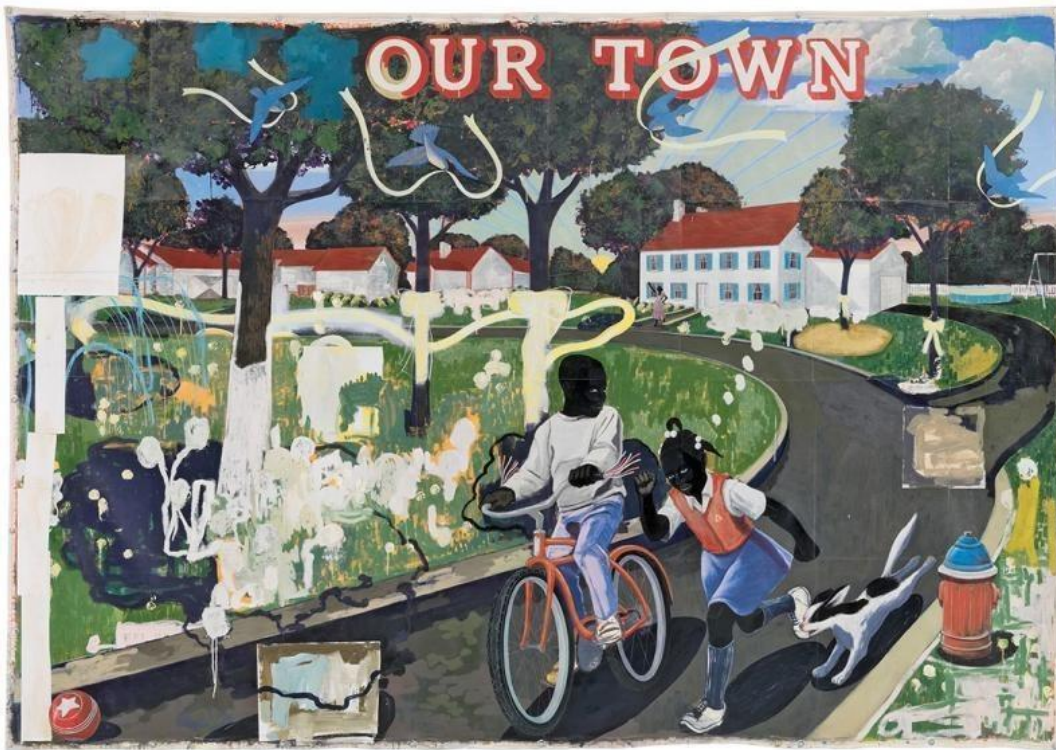


Figure 1 Kerry James Marshall, *Our Town*, acrylic and collage on canvas, 101 x 143 in., 1995
Courtesy of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas



Figure 2 Jordan Casteel, preliminary art for *Aurora*, 2020 Courtesy of Vogue

I'm interested in family. In particular, I am interested in the question of whether family has the same importance when families are separated by physical distance. I see shadows and bold flat blocks of color being abstracted through the absence of value to communicate a social break. Mark-making vs. flat color go hand-in-hand to create displacement through abstraction, which complicates the image. As I investigate my interest, some backgrounds become flat, separated from light, and reinserted, offering a point of entry for the viewer to wrestle with that calls for interpretation. By removing a clear light source for some elements, I am also removing

those elements' reference of time, yet they co-exist in the same painting with elements that are subject to light and to time's passage. This complicates the painting's visual hierarchy. I think about the figures themselves and what they represent, what they stand for, and who my painting serves. Time is essential in these paintings: it reveals what matters and what doesn't. What gets rendered with more details is critical. I want the viewer to reconsider their relationship to the present and to everyday space, to start thinking critically about choice. Mark-making is a kind of language, and I use it to call into question whose language is important. Language can represent family and identity.

After thinking more critically about the process and how I approach picture making, I started a new, exciting, more fulfilling way of selecting who I paint. I want my work to have a social charge. I have redefined what it means to make a painting. It means I am painting a piece of myself—something that represents me. I found that I need to see a strong relationship between me and who I am painting, besides the short but intimate time I spend taking pictures of them. I paint other people, but I see myself in their experiences: the part that people refuse to recognize. I started contacting members of my high school graduating class of 2006. I reach out to them through Facebook. We shared similar experiences and challenges growing up in Pine Bluff. I can share my personal experience through my classmates' perspectives.



Figure 3 Markeith Woods, *Educated and Still Just Another Nigga*, oil on canvas. 7 x 13 ft 2022
Courtesy of Skyler Maggiore



Figure 4 Markeith Woods, *Unemployed Again*, oil on canvas. 6 x 10 ft 2022
Courtesy of Skyler Maggiore



Figure 5 Markeith Woods, Still Segregated, oil on canvas. 6 x 10 ft 2022
Courtesy of Skyler Maggiore



Figure 6 Markeith Woods, Never Forget, oil on canvas. 6 x 10 ft 2022
Courtesy of Skyler Maggiore

The process of me making a painting starts from a conversation or idea. I then contact my high school classmates. I tell them I want to paint them going through a phase of their life where life was happening, and they had to think critically about the meaning of being a provider and what success or actual progress is. After they agreed to meet up at a location that best describes their personal life, we talk through events that happened or are still occurring in their life to agree on a scene that best represents their struggles and progress. I suggest a Pine Bluff location that supports and brings their experience to life. I don't necessarily know what kind of image I'm looking for; when I arrive at the agreed-on location, we talk through ideal poses, and I take about 100 up to 200 photos. After about an hour of shooting photos, I take the images to the computer, look through every one, and critically think about the stories and notes I take from our conversation to develop the best pose and supporting elements that might need to be added for the narrative.

Once I decide on the image I'm going to paint, I use a projector to cast the image onto the canvas after I have put gesso on it. I layer a thin wash first, which allows transparency to shine through. Even though my subjects face life challenges that can be discouraging, I want the viewer to never lose sight of hope. So, the underpainting serves visually as a beacon of hope. I then start addressing the composition, making changes and adding other subjects or objects as needed. I take photos on my phone, and use image editing software, which allows for quick and easy editing, to plan changes to the paintings. I want viewers to associate a sense of hierarchy in my work, and to reflect on value structures in their own lives. I leave some elements straightforward and flat, while rendering figures and some other elements with more details,

inviting the viewer to question what the most critical elements are. I juxtapose flat and detailed moments of areas to place more focus on the complicated moments. Due to my educational training, I didn't have a lot of formal training in color. I work wet into wet, and when I'm not able to mix an exact color, I layer up to 5 colors to hit the color I was trying to make but was unable to. Working in this way allows me to move the paint with more control for a better, more finished look. The experimental part of my process involves taking risks—part of my journey as an artist. I try to make a new move with each painting.

Chapter 3: Personal History

I grew up in Pine Bluff, AR and I feel the headline of Byron Tate's 2022 article, "Pine Bluff: 'Most Miserable City'" (Tate). Byron quotes 24/7 Wall St., a Delaware corporation and provider of financial news and opinions: "'Pine Bluff, Arkansas, is America's most miserable city. According to Census data, the poverty rate in the city is a remarkably high 26.8%.'" Glen Brown Pine Bluff council member blamed some of the city's woes on lending institutions that did not help people buy homes and businesses decades ago. While that might be true it still doesn't count for the job market that directly affects the opportunity to buy homes. Pine Bluff has a few companies, such as Walmart, Tyson Foods, Central Moloney, and Jefferson County Jail, the Pine Bluff Re-entry Center, the Randall L. Williams Correctional Facility, the Arkansas Division of Corrections Pine Bluff Unit, the Barbara Ester Unit, and the Jack Jones Juvenile Detention Center. The 2019 census stated Pine Bluff, AR had a population of 43.1k people with a median age of 35.5 and a median household income of \$34,723. Pine Bluff has an unemployment rate of 8.5%. The US average is 6.0%.

I started drawing at an early age when my mother bought me a drawing desk. This was in third grade, the same year my father was sentenced to five years in prison. Drawing helped me to deal with this. My father's imprisonment took all sense of structure and guidance away from me. There was no role model to fill his shoes. I attended Gundry Elementary School then, which closed in 2009, like many schools in poor areas. My teacher was a white man. He didn't detect my early signs of dyslexia, and I had to live with the symptoms: difficulty memorizing, reading, and comprehending. My mother noticed my progress report said I struggled in reading, but she couldn't afford to invest in a tutor. I felt like Frederick Douglass, wanting to learn how to read but due to these circumstances had to learn at a later time:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take a ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master-to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. (Douglass, 33)

My stepdad and I didn't have a good relationship because of physical, mental, and verbal abuse. As paraphrased in an article by Dr. Saul McLeod, Maslow states that the "hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid. Needs lower down in the hierarchy must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up. From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization" (McLeod). Thus, if individualized parents, family, teachers, or community cannot fulfill these

basic needs, the person stays stagnant. This unable one's growth towards self-actualization until the gaps are filled and addressed.

When I was in fifth grade, though I still remember as if it were today, my mother told me my stepdad died in a car accident. I felt like I was in a wreck, myself. It was the first time I felt sad and cried for a man that I barely knew and hadn't felt connected to or understood. My mother became emotionally unavailable as she grieved, holding her pain in. Because my mother's relationship with me died with my stepdad, I turned to rap music and material things for my personal and mental development.

Material things numbed the pain of missing my father. In the 9th grade, I finally had a Black male teacher that I could look up to, but by then, my perspective was already negatively impacted by my community. This affected the way I saw education. I didn't develop any study habits. Critical Race Theory has shown me that education and most institutions I've interacted with are designed to fail Black individuals. They are based on chattel slavery and capitalism. Carter Godwin Woodson stated in *The Mis-Education of the Negro* that "One of the strongest indicators of future success as an adult in this country is whether or not you graduate from high school and college. Workers 18 and over with bachelors degrees earn an average of \$51,206 a year, while those with a high school diploma earn \$27,915" (U.S. Census Bureau).

I felt like the education system is designed to fail students growing up in community with poverty. I understood Carter Godwin Woodson when he wrote,

If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one. (Woodson, 71)

Without a role model to teach me and show me a whole perspective of the world, I wasted a lot of time. Due to the structures of public education, I wasn't able to take classes on the thing I loved to do, art, until I got into the seventh grade. By the time I met my second male teacher, I had already checked out of my education.

I deemed studying not as important as working and trying to get into the NBA. During the same year, my father was released from prison. I thought my life would get better and I would find my identity, but I was wrong. He was dealing with the fact that he was a two-time felon with three kids.

After receiving a few awards for my artwork, I won an art competition for which the prize was a visit to the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. I had entered a drawing of Martin Luther King, Jr. My grandmother encouraged me to enter. She always read the newspaper and came across an announcement for the competition. My focus was not on art then—it was on something that made sense to me, like basketball. I only entered because she encouraged me. She wouldn't let it go! She even said that she would give me money if I entered, so I did. My grandmother knew that money could always motivate or encourage me. I didn't even know what an artist was, let alone how an art museum functioned. The only artist I'd heard of was Vincent van Gogh and his story wasn't something I wanted to emulate. By the time I made it to high school, I was working at a grocery store called Brookshires, making \$5.75 an hour, and playing high school basketball. Without any scholarship opportunities or mentors motivating me to attend college or showing me the process, I didn't pursue a career in art. I looked towards moving out of Pine Bluff to a better environment. People who didn't go to college or turn to the streets worked at the Paper Mill, Tyson Foods, and the Department of Corrections.

I started college at University of Central Arkansas but then transferred to Christian Baptist College, another school in Conway, where I walked on to the basketball team. I was stereotyped in school multiple times because of my long hair (braids) and my culture. After switching schools, I received a trespassing charge from UCA campus police. It was later dismissed in court, but I spent the night in jail. My grandfather bailed me out because my father wouldn't come. I was kicked out of school because of this charge. I felt broken similar to Frederick Douglass's experience when he wrote,

I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! Sunday was my only leisure time. I spent this in a sort of beastlike stupor, between sleep and wake, under some large tree. At times I would rise up, a flash of energetic freedom would dart through, my soul, accompanied with a faint beam of hope, that flickered for a moment, and then vanished. I sank down again, mourning over my wretched condition. I was sometimes prompted to take my life, and that of Covey, but was prevented by a combination of hope and fear. My sufferings on this plantation seem now like a dream rather than a stern reality. (Douglass, 70)

Tired of being treated like a criminal for my skin color, I moved back to Pine Bluff. I felt like I wasted a whole year of my life. I spent the next year working to pay off my balance at CBC before I could enroll in college again. After eight months, I was fired for being one minute late, but I was still able to pay my balance off with a little help from my dad and grandfather. I started school in August of 2012 at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. I was working at Tyson Foods by the time school started while attending UAPB. Before I started my major, I attended night classes. I experienced money issues, police profiling, job loss, and relationship problems. I was so far from thinking about God, even though I was raised in the church. I only had time to focus on working 40 hours a week plus overtime, often even on Sundays. After I finished my requirements in my first year of undergraduate education, I declared an art education

major, but this didn't last long. I didn't have the money or the time to study to take the Praxis test, which is required to become certified as an art teacher, so I switched to a visual arts major.

When I started learning about my passion and considering the possibility of being an artist, it brought me hope. My mind became free from my environment and past culture. I was able to create my own culture for myself. My dad had become a successful car salesman, but he didn't know any successful people that made a career in art, nor did he understand that I could only take art classes during the day. The UAPB art department is very small, so they don't offer any night classes. My mother raised my sister, brother, and me as a single parent working job to job and she didn't get a chance to go back to college until I was in my 20s. Now, with her degree, she still struggles to find a job in her field. I couldn't depend on them for answers or to understand the path I chose. I had to create my own identity. Learning about history, reading the Bible, and learning about my granddad being a successful businessman gave me the faith I needed. I watched my grandmother beat cancer for the second time as she was near death. I knew I could become an artist if I put my mind to it. I became an artist through my research and involvement as an intern working at the Arts & Science Center and meeting other artists. I felt caught in W.E.B. Du Bois's double-consciousness:

Yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness: an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 145)

My mom kicked my brother and me out of her house, which led me to stay with my grandparents. While staying with them, I met my son's mother. She lived next door, and we went

to the same church my family grew up in, New Town Baptist Church. I had my son in 2013, and I dropped out of school to go back to work at Tyson Foods for the second time.

I was ready to return to UAPB the next semester, but I was on financial probation. I had to pay for school out of pocket and pass six credits to get my financial aid back, which added up to about \$1,500. By the time I finished paying to get my financial aid back, no distraction was going to stop me from graduating. I put my homework and school schedule before my job's strict attendance policies. Because I didn't have many options and I could only work after 5 pm. The summer before I entered my last year of undergraduate study, I had to work at Kohler in Sheridan, 15 minutes away from Pine Bluff. I worked 16 to 19 hours a day to complete the requirements. My grandfather told me I couldn't do it all and I should drop something, and my mother said the same thing, but I knew I had to graduate. My adviser gave me the outline that summer of what I had to take in order to graduate: eighteen hours in the Fall and fifteen hours in the Spring. I gave up control over my comfort level and workload because I wanted to see a brighter future. I was in another car wreck right before my graduation art show. I asked God why I had to go through all these problems. Every day was a struggle trying to hold things together. If I lost my mind, my son would be without a father, and unable to fully take care of himself. I made a promise when he was born that I would be there, be the best father I could be, teach him to become a man, and do the things that my dad should've shown me how to do. It wasn't until my last year of undergraduate study at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff I realized that I didn't have a promising job in art, only a visual arts degree. There were no jobs in Pine Bluff for art. I needed to continue my education with a Master of Fine Arts degree. Based on my experiences, I can relate to W.E.B. Du Bois's statement:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging his wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois, 4)

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome.

—Booker T. Washington, 1900

I reflect on the journey of Jacob Lawrence. He became a world-renewed artist by being introduced to painting at the age of 13 years old at a community center. This is where he started working with gouache, a water medium, which he would continue to use even after he dropped out of high school and without formal training. Once Jacob turned 19 years old, he met Augusta Savage, a sculptor. She was already in the Works Progress Administration program funded by the Federal Government. She advised him and even walked him down to the W.P.A., because she thought by joining the W.P.A., Lawrence could fund his art practice. He was too young at the time, but the following year she assisted him again, and they allowed him to enter the program. This program gave him studio space, a community of artists and writers, and the time to focus on his work. He benefitted greatly from being in this program. He met the famous artist Romare Bearden, and created his Migration Series while being in the program for a year and a half, which led to a successful career as an artist.

Another critical factor in the development of Black artists is overcoming a lack of representation. Kerry James Marshall was fortunate to have Charles White come into his art class. This encounter inspired him and led to an opportunity for Marshall to visit Charles White's studio to see an in-progress painting and finished works of art. This gave Marshall a clear picture of what he wanted to become and what an artist looked like as he developed his voice to communicate his ideas as an artist.

I did not have people invested in making sure I was able to gain the necessary tools to explore an art career. The only community programs Pine Bluff had that I was exposed to did not have art as a part of their curriculum. Most of the famous artists I met either at UAPB or from attending art galleries and museums did not invite me to their studios. I did not have any resources from a program like the W.P.A. My production of art came solely from my jobs' wages, which meant sacrificing's life's basic needs.

Nevertheless, I am an artist, eleven years into his career. I came to graduate school without a clear plan, other than to work as an art teacher to become a successful artist, hoping that my work would get noticed in my small town, Pine Bluff. While in the University of Arkansas School of Art's graduate program, I acquired the knowledge, flexibility, mentorship, and resources to develop a body of work that makes my story, and others like mine, visible, and that brings me closer to my dream of being a full-time art.

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