

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
ScholarWorks@UARK

Graduate Theses and Dissertations

5-2023

From an Unlikely Place

Brittany Borchert
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Painting Commons](#)

Citation

Borchert, B. (2023). From an Unlikely Place. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/4944>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact uarepos@uark.edu.

From an Unlikely Place

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

by

Brittany Borchert
Viterbo University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Music Theater Performance, 2004
Hunter College, City University of New York
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art, 2017

May 2023
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Marc Mitchell, M.F.A.
Thesis Director

Sam King, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Jody Thompson, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Abstract

From an Unlikely Place, a collection of eight ambitious paintings created while in residence at the University of Arkansas, examines the intersections of landscape painting, gendered gaze, feminine experience and the language of abstraction.

One of the challenges I faced while working on this project was finding points of connection between verbal and visual language. As an artist, I consider where vulnerability, sensitivity and generosity intersect my work and am curious about the strange potential an individual's visual language; in my case, a concoction of abstract and figurative forms has, to communicate the quality of experience.

When placed together on a painting's surface signifiers of feminine experience, my feminine experience, trigger a sensation of the sublime. With generous intent I offer the experience of *From an Unlikely Place* to the viewer. My hope is that they too might find the freedom to get lost in quiet contemplation and pay it forward.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Sensitive Spot	5
A Step Too Far	7
Next to Normal	9
The Longer You Play with It, The Harder It Gets	10
Fowl Behavior	12
Hers and Hers	14
Up Fast and Wild	15
And Now You're Mine	16
Conclusion	20
Bibliography	21
Appendix: Figures	22

Introduction

The validation of female experience has become increasingly important to me and is a primary goal in my work. While in residence at the University of Arkansas, I examined intersections of landscape painting, gendered gaze and the language of abstraction. By combining different elements of collected culture into one visual space, I invented images that, in their accumulation, could speak to an experience I understood. I related these varied elements to the experiences of oppressed gender and geographical stereotypes that I experienced as a woman raised in the Midwest. In support of justice, equity, access, diversity and inclusion, I imagined a code of conduct for artists where empathetic and vulnerable human beings aimed to understand the world together, where wandering was prioritized over winning, and as Anthony Huberman encourages in his essay, “How to Behave Better,” fearlessly commit to a politics of care.”¹

This attitude followed me into the studio. I was curious about the strange potential an individual’s visual language; in my case, a concoction of abstract and figurative forms had to communicate the quality of experience. When I would lean into this curiosity and paint, I reflected on how my consumption of culture and understanding of perception could be used to make sense of the world. My upbringing, early beliefs and expectations, whether conscious or subconscious, continually impacted me. When I moved through the world during this period, it felt like I accumulated experience and bits

¹ Huberman, Anthony. “How to Behave Better.” *The Serving Library*, <https://www.servinglibrary.org/journal/2/how-to-behave-better>.

of culture, which I brought back into the studio with me. This collection was a crucial launchpad for understanding how I came to be and what I make of myself today.

One of the challenges I faced in the studio was finding points of connection between verbal and visual language. Rather than researching an external topic or issue and making work that reflected that, I chose to do a tremendous amount of research and writing that seriously questioned the act of painting on a fundamental level. For instance, the relationship between painting and various ideas of experiential aspects of painting; how it intersected with a range of experiences and curiosities. The vast vocabulary of forms and inherited associations related to abstract painting that I juggled, references to the human body, pattern and decoration, interior and exterior spaces and architecture, whether ambiguous or overt, were plentiful.

The space I inhabited for most of this project was unlikely. Outfitted with everlasting windows that reached high above my head, the new workspace was airy and fresh. On the first days of occupancy, I stood before the windows and allowed the delicate winter light to gently warm my face and hands. I recalled the view from my childhood bedroom windows as I looked past the rooftops and toward the distant mountains. Atop a winding hill covered in densely forested land near the banks of the Wisconsin River, I could scan acres of leafy treetops for restless birds while the rising sun's rosy hues circled the room. At night the sky was dense with stars, and city lights glowed in the distance beneath an ever-transitioning moon. It was endlessly fascinating. Oddly, I began to imagine myself as the wanderer in Caspar David Friedrich's

painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (Figure 1) a painting I had not thought about since my introductory art history studies years prior.

Friedrich's painting is perhaps the most famous rückenfigur² in art due to the subject's prominence. Often referred to as a male wanderer, Friedrich's rückenfigur is wrapped in a dark overcoat and standing upon a landscape thick with sea fog, his back to the viewer. Pale, fading mountains rise to the left, leveling off into low plains on the right. He gazes out over a vast landscape as the wind catches his hair. Wreaths of fog stretch out indefinitely before him, crawling past rocks, trees, and piercing mountaintops, eventually encountering the horizon and becoming indistinguishable from the sky.

This painting has been considered one of the masterpieces of the Romantic era and is generally understood as a symbol of self-reflection. While researching *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, I discovered Friedrich also painted a female rückenfigur. *Woman at the Window* (Figure 2), depicting a woman seen from behind, looking out onto a landscape, was particularly interesting to me. Historically, gendered gaze in paintings has been examined through the objectification of the female form. I have no interest in furthering that conversation. Instead, I had located a pair of landscape paintings that could be used to examine gendered gaze in relation to landscape by using *Woman at the Window* as a counterpoint to *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*.

In *Woman at a Window*, the figure looks out onto a landscape. Though oriented in the same manner as Friedrich's wanderer, her attention is limited to peering through

² German: rear-facing figure.

a small, opened window. Hers is an experience of yearning rather than contemplative space. After examining these two works side-by-side, I was struck by the vast difference I perceived between the two experiences. A male gaze in relation to landscape was central, unobstructed and full of possibility; the female gaze was small, restricted by boundaries, stark, and limited. I was curious about my own relationship to Friedrich's masculine view.

First, I examined the distance between Friedrich's male and female gaze. Could I find a way to shorten that distance? If I were to reach out from where I stood as a woman, would I be able to grasp the masculine gaze for myself? And what would happen if I could get ahold of it and pull it toward me? What signifiers of female experience would I accumulate as I pulled the masculine gaze toward the feminine? Since I do not use traditional figuration in my paintings, would removing Friedrich's *rückenfigur* allow the viewer to fill that role and have a contemplative experience with my paintings?

As a lexical individual, I relish words. I search for strings of words, ideas, and bits of language to stimulate my work. This translates well to painting. There is an additional experience that should be mentioned. In "The Triggering Town," Richard Hugo³ discusses poetry as having two subjects, the impetus for the poem, referred to as the "triggering subject," and the generated subject discovered during the poem's writing. Hugo believes "a writer learns from reading possibilities of technique, ways of execution, phrasing, rhythm, tonality and pace."⁴ To offset the spontaneous nature of

³ Richard Hugo was an American poet whose work reflects the economic depression of the United States.

⁴ Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*. W.W. Norton, 2010, pp. 4-10.

my painting process, between actions in paint, I commit to sustained looking to decipher what a painting needs to move forward. I continue to engage with paintings through sustained looking and consideration for extended periods after I stop painting. This is when each work moves beyond painting decisions and my intentions in the studio and begins to communicate its significance to me. I write about what I perceive to be evident in the painting, the visual experience, but also what is embedded, discoveries made along the way. During this process, the paintings develop into evidence of my contemporary experience.

Sensitive Spot

Through an upper opening in the painting, a series of hole punch clouds laden with super-cooled droplets and particles shift subtly to reveal dusky views of nocturnal dunes palely lit by rocky moons and their tic-tac-like satellites. While the top of the painting has a sense of containment, as if watching time pass by an open window under the light of transitioning moons, the center of the painting features a shift in which the scale and perspective change dramatically. By tipping towards a bird's eye view of shimmering twin rivers flowing freely below, an island of dense vegetation suddenly becomes visible. To its west, gentle, glasslike water reflects a setting sun just off the coast, creating specular reflections in silken pinks and oranges. A single pillar of light slanting through shuttered blinds moves from coasting above into a face-to-face with indelible marks designed to adorn the female form. These marks hover over panes of dissolving amber glass and align to serve as a scrolling branched figure which

decorates the pediment of an incomplete structure. Under the uncertain protection of a disintegrating roof and surrounded by architectural nods to a Catholic upbringing lurking in the shadows, one last over-baked sunset hides and waits for morning's return.

In her book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit describes the benefits of artistic expression. Scientists “transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fisherman; artists get you out into that dark sea.”⁵ Scientifically, I appreciate the value of darkness. Immune systems function by producing melatonin during periods of darkness to fight disease. Artistically, the unfamiliar is my origin story. Opening doors to unfamiliarity, in this case, choosing to adopt a moody, nocturnal color palette, created happy detachment. This state of creative objectiveness allowed world-building narratives, unique creatures, yet-to-be-imagined plants and cosmic systems to spring to life within the world of *Sensitive Spot*.

Another point to mention about this painting; the process of smoothing or polishing the surface by sanding. I used this process to excavate and uncover elements of the picture covered and lost. Solnit recounts an encounter with a trail guide set on a routine mission to retrieve lost hikers. The experienced guide shares that hikers “usually reappear somewhere near where they had vanished.”⁶ In the earliest stages of this process, each canvas received a series of painted marks inspired by the pattern work of illustrator Suzie Zuzek.⁷

⁵ Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp. 29–31.

⁶ Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp. 29–31.

⁷ Suzie Zuzek was a staff illustrator for fashion designer Lily Pulitzer from 1962-1985.

Initially, I spent several days amusing myself by enlarging, minimizing, warping, layering and editing a playful pattern featuring Zuzek's mythical owls, cats, and bears and recording each move in paint. Inevitably, the marks inspired by Zuzek's work were covered with subsequent layers in paint, and I longed for what was deeply buried by then. These marks were like the lost hikers in Solnit's account, "somewhere near where they had vanished,"⁸ just beneath the surface. Sanding allowed me to remove delicate layers of paint and recover lost marks along with my connection to Zuzek. I now think of sanding painted surfaces as a search and rescue mission. I aim to reclaim what was once necessarily lost but continually desired.

A Step Too Far

There came the point when working on *A Step Too Far*, that I noticed a rhythm developing. In this imagined world, it was a moment when imagery that once seemed like unrelated detritus suddenly converged into belonging. Where lacy bands and folded fabrics mimicked the steep climb of a nearby hill, architectural framework buckled under the weight of numerous tiny moons, snapped off and landed haphazardly into a ghostly scrapyard strewn with remnants of vehicular on-ramps, retired string lights, and oversized scaffolds laid to rest. A manicured range of produce patiently awaiting harvest ushered me toward a pocket of escape near the center of the image but also highlighted the slight slips into what existed beyond, behind, and below, where the acts of peering into and peeking around became increasingly important.

⁸ Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp. 29–31.

Nothing was static. In *Uncoupling the Ordinary*, Maxine Greene⁹ creates a strong foothold for the desire to avoid “perceptual death”¹⁰. In contrast to the idea of stable or fixed meanings, I considered moments of “slippage,” a sliding of one type of meaning into another. Slippage assisted in the recognition and acknowledgment of the incomplete nature of everything and how experiences came into being through the context in which they appeared. Though slippage ultimately created an indeterminacy in meaning, it also allowed for multiple interpretations of experience and conflicted approaches to meaning to coexist. Even the small grid of windowpanes at the bottom of the composition, which at first glance reminded me of looking back into a space through small, weather-caked windows, wishing to return to the painted world, morphed into a view taken in from the driver’s-side window of a passing vehicle. Each square became an opportunity to scroll through. Though considered quickly, like flashes in a high-speed slide show, in my mind, it was always the same terrain, a moving landscape seen from a slightly different view and a slightly further distance.

As far as paintings go, *A Step Too Far* took a long time to resolve and accumulated much during the process. Throughout the construction of this image, I was grateful to have periodically paused my studio practice to develop healthier relationships to risk and failure. There were many instances in which sacrificing an idea or bit of imagery that I felt akin to was necessary to get closer to my understanding of a feminine experience or gaze. In those moments, I also had to acknowledge that accepting uncertainty and potential loss ran parallel to my lived life.

⁹ Sarah Maxine Greene was an American educator, philosopher, author and social activist.

¹⁰ Greene, Maxine. *Variations on a Blue Guitar*. College Press, New York, 2018, pp. 67.

Next to Normal

Palimpsests inform us of history, our built past. In *Next to Normal*, finding ways forward meant allowing what was troublesome to drift off on its own path and successfully laying a new foundation before resolution occurred. The palimpsest, a surface on which writing has been scrubbed to make way for subsequent reports, but on which traces of the original remain, is still a valuable metaphor for me in the studio. I align this definition of re-editing to the painting process in which existing layers of paint were covered, either partially or wholly and embraced that shadows would remain as layers were shuffled, rebuilt, or remodeled. Beneath the delicate blues of this painting existed a world of golden, buttery yellows complicated by the insistent marks of discarded illustrations. Views through rectangular windows refused to align and complete a view onto one landscape but bounced back and forth, confusing the figure and ground relationship for the viewer. Sometimes these views recede, creating an opening to escape, while other times advance as ghostlike pictures framed and hung on a deteriorating wall of solemn blue.

Proper registration in printmaking means that any impression on the paper occurs in the precise position as intended. The register is said to be "off" if any print job element is misaligned or displaced. In the case of *Next to Normal*, the original source, a vintage floral wallpaper design, was separated into layers. I wanted to continue the reoccurring sense of displacement present in this body of work. Each layer was moved slightly so that various colors and contours resisted alignment. The visual sensation this created, where layers, because of their proximity to each other, were perceived as part

of a whole but never converged to form a cohesive image, I equated to the navigation of unfamiliar spaces in which intersections of identity complicated communication and understanding. The eyes and mind became engaged, necessarily, in a state of constant multitasking, fighting for an impossible resolution.

The Longer You Play with It, The Harder It Gets

This was the first painting started in the series, but not the first finished. Though formal and technical proficiencies are my strengths, improvisation continues to play a significant role in how I paint. The studio is a laboratory where my interest in formal elements such as shape, edge, pattern, color and space are subject to experiments in method and process. As I worked on this set of paintings in the studio, moving from painting to painting, windows became a reoccurring motif. I found that as I moved each painting's composition away from Friedrich's masculine gaze, surfaces piled up with visual information. Compositions ultimately accumulated so many references to my feminine experience that complicated the paintings' spatial arrangements; after a time, they would, in a sense, lockdown.

Richard Hugo discusses this problem concerning young poets in "The Triggering Town."¹¹ Often, young writers find it difficult to free themselves from the initiating subject. Painting abstract windows created portals through which I could shift the image forward and, as Hugo called it, "get off the triggering subject." The opening of space

¹¹ Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*. W.W. Norton, 2010, pp. 4-10.

amidst accumulation allowed me to jump ahead, past the obstruction of painstaking repetition, and like the woman in Friedrich's painting, provided visual freedom.

The surface of *The Longer You Play with It, The Harder It Gets* is heavy, laborious, and in some sections, downright chunky. Painting a landscape in the orientation most often associated with portraiture was challenging. Instead of thinking about vast horizontal expanses stretching across the width of multiple canvases, I had to construct an image that respected the narrow verticals of the stretcher and still conveyed perceptual depth for the viewer. Usually, this involves investigating the subterranean towards the bottom of the painting and negotiating what appears to be a visual undercut into space. Still, this painting presented a new challenge, the ambiguous middle.

As a possible solution to this painting problem, I thought about a shuttered view. Up to this point, I had been generous with my imagery; what would happen if I deliberately placed a significant belt-like barrier that spanned the central section of the painting. I borrowed a small striped section from *Sensitive Spot*, reversing and inverting it as needed to fill the space. Maybe the insertion of a horizontal band of reoccurring stripes into a vertical composition recalled a memory.

Daniel Burren's colorful, striped interventions,¹² specifically one I had encountered while living and studying painting in New York City, stuck to the edges of my thoughts. Hunter College had, at one point, installed a piece by Burren that covered

¹² Daniel Burren is an artist known for installing contrasting, colored stripes that integrate visual surface and architectural space, usually on historical landmarks.

an elevated pedestrian bypass hanging over Lexington Avenue.¹³ Students could walk through the piece and envelop themselves in color. At ground level, passersby experienced a colorful rupture in their daily commute. They had visual access to the cityscape above and below the work but had to navigate through horizontal bands of color if they wanted both simultaneously. Buren's installation slowed down perception and forced the integration of visual surface and architectural space.

Fowl Behavior

What makes a view special? Great views have a sense of space that makes them feel like places worthy of returning to. Images depicting landscape offer viewers an opportunity to contemplate vastness, to momentarily lose themselves and think about something larger. The human mind seeks to understand the unfamiliar. At first glance, this painting has hallmarks generally associated with landscape paintings: patches of meadow, angular mountains, deep dipping valleys, trees, winding rivers, coastal views lodged between dunes, and standing crops flattened to reveal complex patterns into one scenic view that spans the width of two large canvases.

In her book, "*A Faraway Nearby*," Rebecca Solnit talks about places and how we often talk about our love for places but seldom reveal how the places love us back, of what they give us.¹⁴ The artists at the University of Arkansas have become part of how I define "place" and have provided my paintings with generous continuity, something to return to, an offering of familiarity to remain connected to, a coherence. An example of

¹³ In New York City, NY, located at Lexington Avenue between 67th and 68th Streets.

¹⁴ Solnit, Rebecca. *The Faraway Nearby*, Granta Books, 2022.

this nourishment can be explained through my experience teaching foundational drawing methods to beginning art students. I found that young students frequently struggled to understand how to utilize a horizon line when drawing in one and two-point perspectives. Students were encouraged to consider the position of the horizon line at eye level, where a line parallel to the line of sight and perpendicular to the picture plane was perfectly horizontal.

Since teaching, I have been fascinated by student drawings that include multiple horizon lines. Instead of a horizon representing the limitations of mental perception, experience, and interest, each straight line adds to a painting's limitless potential. A visual expanse that continues to build, grow, and unfurl offers opportunities to consider how identity affects interactions with and in physical spaces. In "*A Field Guide to Getting Lost*," Solnit, describes an emotional response to distance through color. To Solnit, distance is the "blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges of anything far away."¹⁵ I think of the reverse. In *Fowl Behavior*, color can best be understood in terms of distance. I thought about closing the gap between hues and how each color influenced another on a sliding scale of intensity that existed in my mind.

As a person who grew up in rural Wisconsin, I have always had a relationship with natural habitats, and my paintings reflect that relationship. Given my new surroundings for this project and my predisposition to the natural world, the transition to

¹⁵ Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp. 29–31.

using landscape as a deliberate organizing structure seemed logical. The view depicted in *Fowl Behavior* is situated between an understanding of actual place and imaginary scenes. I enjoyed most interchanges between colors close in value. By narrowing the gap so that colors can sit next to each other and relate instead of unnecessarily screaming over a wide divide, I highlighted their ability to create visual buzz through simultaneous contrast. The buzzing felt electric, like birds' stirring behavior before a storm moves through. I harnessed that sense of looming disruption to create visual paths throughout the painting. Exchanges between citrusy greens, sunny yellows, undeterminable beiges, and blues of longing became wildly energetic flocks navigating shifting terrains and reappearing horizons. As the image evolved, I felt like a tourist in my painting, searching for a vista that constantly remained distant.

Hers and Hers

In *Hers and Hers*, identically sized canvases arranged as a diptych appear to impossibly mirror the interior of a home from multiple angles. Hers is a place where leafed branches climb windowed walls and poke through tinted glass while a negotiation of what swings open to pass through and what serves only as adornment is constantly at play. Sills and sashes create layers of framework to draw attention to worn and peeling textiles against a backdrop of drifting afternoon light. Ghostly figures on the verge of dissolving hover in and around hastily wiped windows, and a violet haze rises from the depths, looms at the doorway under a pediment of decorative scribbly flowers as layers of ideas are built into the layers of paint.

This project, including the creation of this diptych, coincided with the end of another. The previous project involved better understanding artists' relationship to isolation, specifically artists who willingly incorporated isolation into their practice. In "*Tell Them I Said No*," Martin Herbert¹⁶ champions isolation as a necessary act of refusal for artists. When I thought about acts of refusal in relation to the painting, I recalled the bare, unadorned space the figure in *Woman at the Window* inhabits. Decorative elements such as wallpaper have a long history of covering the walls of interior spaces, but also of engaging in quiet acts of refusal. When women were primarily relegated to the home unless accompanied by a chaperone, wallpaper applied was a way to bring nature into their space. It was first recommended in 1868 to break the monotony of bare walls, but by 1880, most interior walls were painted with elaborate floral, leaf, and vine patterns in deep shades of burgundy, red and maroon, and organic brown, green and blue hues to breathe life into otherwise dull living quarters.

Up Fast and Wild

Every so often a painting will arrive at its stopping point so quickly that if I am not paying close enough attention, I will miss the opportunity. Thankfully, this was not one of those times. The painting's title, *Up Fast and Wild* (Figure 9), was inspired by songs referencing wildflowers individually written by American singer/songwriters Dolly Parton¹⁷ and Tom Petty.¹⁸ The painting's title refers to the nature of wildflowers, their

¹⁶ Herbert, Martin, 2016. *Tell Them I Said No*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, pp. 19-27. *On and Off the Grid*.

¹⁷ *Wildflowers*, written by Dolly Parton, recorded by Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt, Emmylou Harris, 1987.

¹⁸ *Wildflowers*, written and performed by Tom Petty, 1994.

tenacity and ability to withstand environmental pressures, to grow and thrive where they must, but are always deserving of a place to feel free. *Up Fast and Wild* also refers to the fresh, light treatment of paint application on the painting's surface. This painting, with its immortal tangerine orbs that hint at the passage of warmth and light over a pasture of wispy, transparent greens, oxides and yellows, serves as a moment of levity between the churning, unsettled energy of *Fowl Behavior* and the thick, beloved dustiness of *And Now You're Mine*.

And Now You're Mine

I look to the work of powerful women artists like Renata Cassiano Alvarez, Carrie Moyer, Valerie Jaudon, Elizabeth Murray, Gabriele Evertz and Amy Sillman for guidance when painting. Some of these women were the painters I learned from directly, and some I have learned from through observation and research. For example, studying Cassiano Alvarez's ceramic structures was of immense help in the beginning stages of this project as I considered how to convey visual density, structured space, transformative passages and modes of materiality in my paintings. In both situations, their solid and broad shoulders have been available to me as I develop my painting practice.

I continually try to find ways to connect to and extend this female-based lineage in my own work. As previously mentioned, illustrator Suzie Zuzek worked uncredited for many years. Her prints and drawings were just as iconic as the simple shift dresses they adorned. I thought about including marks inspired by the hands of a fellow female artist

as an intimate gesture of appreciation. Each painting in *From an Unlikely Place* began with marks inspired by her work. What I have not yet mentioned is that the second move in many of the paintings involved appropriating work from male painters.

Though I insist on an all-female lineage, I regularly examine my work and studio practice for unnecessary biases. It is a common practice for painters to look back to their predecessors for inspiration, guidance, artistic nourishment, etc. The issue with this practice is that painting's history is mainly exclusionary, a story constructed of predominantly white male artists. If I am making work that seeks to validate a feminine experience, I am hard-pressed to find answers in the work of men, so I exclude them from my historical narrative. Since this project is, at its core, an educational experience, I chose to examine this choice. I allowed the work of male painters, mostly ideas related to color structure, to influence my paintings.

At first, I was uncomfortable with the implications of covering the painted marks inspired by Zuzek with veils of color that I associated with male painters. It felt like I was reasserting masculine dominance in the painting. I spent hours inventing ways to reclaim her marks. It became a game in the studio. Late at night, Zuzek and I would challenge team Alla Prima Privilege¹⁹ for top billing. As time passed in the studio, the challenges became more demanding. Each time I managed to bring the marks I associated with femininity back to a painting's surface, I would celebrate victory. These small, petty acts felt freeing. I would later realize that connecting to the work of artists I

¹⁹ Fictional team. Currently, it has no official members, but I could suggest a few.

had long refused studio access to would strengthen my understanding of painting and how pictures operate.

In the survey of a picture, the eye naturally shifts from the focus of interest, which may be on one side, to the other side of the canvas. If something is there to receive it, the balance that the eye seeks is gratified. If it finds nothing, the artist must create something. New shapes were created when I began to view the negative space in compositional elements as a generous space for the viewer. These shapes, derived from my aunt's vintage bathroom wallpaper, have a dual function within the painting. First, the creamy-colored hard-edged shapes reminded me of broken porcelain suspended in a slow-moving, horizontal trajectory across the surface of *And Now You're Mine*. If attention is paid to the proximity of these shard-like shapes, grouping the nearby pieces together, it becomes a more generous viewing experience. Where once a barrier stood, replacing it was a weak partition, partially open, allowing viewers to peek inside.

And Now You're Mine was at a standstill for a long time. It was the last painting in the series to arrive at a stopping point. As the late-night painting games against team Alla Prima Privilege progressed, they became more challenging. This painting was the most difficult. I painted a straightforward quote of a Milton Avery landscape over Zuzek's marks to start the tournament's final round. I scaled his composition up to cover the 12' span of stretched canvas, matched the colors to his painting at an exacting level, and even considered his unique touch when applying the paint. When I stepped back, I

realized this painting no longer belonged to me. For two months, the painting lurked in the studio, taunting me, reminding me that I was on the verge of failure.

I am steadfast that open interaction remains available to the viewer and continually attempt to provide more space for autonomous interactions with my paintings. Why was I struggling to extend this same generosity to myself? I was stuck until I recalled a bit of Anthony Huberman's essay²⁰. If this game was not about winning but about a new model of artist that invested in caring, I could find ways to move forward. I would like to say that Milton Avery bent to my will in the end, but that isn't the case. I began to reclaim Zuzek's marks one last time. I thought about color relationships and value. If I could keep the value and saturation of both Zuzek and Avery's painted elements proximal, they could equally share the painted space, and the painting could move forward. The painting arrived and closed the project with only a few moments to spare, but we made it.

²⁰ Huberman, Anthony. "How to Behave Better." *The Serving Library*, <https://www.servinglibrary.org/journal/2/how-to-behave-better>. 2021.

Conclusion

As previously stated, one of the challenges I faced while working on this project was finding points of connection between verbal and visual language. As an artist, I consider where vulnerability, sensitivity and generosity intersect my work and am curious about the strange potential an individual's visual language; in my case, a concoction of abstract and figurative forms has to communicate the quality of experience. With the completion of this project, I better understand that references to the human body, pattern and decoration, interior and exterior spaces and architecture comprise my social topography. When placed together on a painting's surface these signifiers of feminine experience, my feminine experience, trigger a sensation of the sublime. With generous intent I offer the experience of *From an Unlikely Place* to the viewer. My hope is that they too might find the freedom to get lost in quiet contemplation and pay it forward.

Bibliography

Greene, Maxine. *Variations on a Blue Guitar*. College Press, New York, 2018.

Herbert, Martin. *Tell Them I Said No*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016.

Huberman, Anthony. "How to Behave Better." *The Serving Library*, <https://www.servinglibrary.org/journal/2/how-to-behave-better>. 2021.

Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*. W.W. Norton, 2010.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Penguin Books, London, 2005.

Solnit, Rebecca. *The Faraway Nearby*. Granta Books, 2022.

Appendix: Figures



Figure 1: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818.
Source: <https://online-sammlung.hamburger-kunsthalle.de>



Figure 2: Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at a Window*, 1822.
Source: <https://online-sammlung.hamburger-kunsthalle.de>