

CAPTURING ESSENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Through my thesis work *Capturing Essence*, my process enables me to explore my curiosity about the perception of my subjects through intuition and observation. The conversations I have with them deepen my understanding of the subject, influencing the pose, color choices, and objects I include in the painting which are viewed as significant to their story. While capturing their likeness is important, my ultimate goal is to show my interpretation of who they are as an individual, their essence, and to depict a moment that reflects on the human condition.

Capturing Essence

A Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts

By

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this document to all of those who have helped me realize my goals as an artist through their support, emotional and/or financial, and inspiration.

My beloved parents, Paula and Carmine (Babe) Scalamoni

My son...Zachary (Zac) Voynow

My partner...Andrew (Roo) Oyaas

My Instructors through the years

and

all the people I have painted and the many artists who have inspired me.

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To my friends, both undergraduate and graduate at East Carolina University

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“In a portrait, you have room to have a point of view. The image may not be literally what’s going on, but it’s representative.”

-- Annie Liebovitz

INTRODUCTION

In my thesis work, *Capturing Essence*, I explore my curiosity of people and how I perceive them through intuition and observation, often learning about my subjects through conversations we have. I show my perception of the sitter through their pose, my color choices and the objects I view as significant to the story I want to tell. It is not just their likeness I want to capture, but a feeling of who they are as an individual or a moment that reflects on the human condition. As an extrovert, I collect energy from those around me. From people’s stories, their laughter, and expressions I find my inspiration to paint. As a child my parents entertained frequently, and I was often fascinated listening to the conversations they had with their guests. I found comfort in my parent’s rituals preparing for an evening out. My senses were stirred as I watch my mother put on her make-up and choose her clothes carefully, the spritz of her perfume hanging in the air. My father would give me his wooden, three drawered box filled with trinkets. I would dump each small drawer on their bed enthralled with his treasures: cuff links, tiny metal dice, stamps and other knick-knacks. Similarly, I am intrigued with the objects and treasures of the people I paint and often represent them in my paintings. As fashionable people, I believe my parent’s sense of style shaped my desire to be in the arts, specifically as a fashion illustrator. It was their influence that encouraged me to follow my heart and work as an artist.

As a young adult, fashion illustration was a field I was excited to work in. I enjoyed dropping my portfolio in and around the fashion district of New York City and then meeting with clients, but overall it was a lonely business. This led to the realization that I wanted and needed to be around people. When invited to teach at two New York City Universities this craving was satisfied, however, something was still lacking.

At that time, I frequently visited museums and found myself looking at the people as much as the artwork. On campus I would observe students, faculty and models, especially their expressions, posture, and mannerisms. During nude model drawing studio visits in lower Manhattan I realized that studying people artistically was as important to me as observing friends and strangers in my daily life.

Capturing Essence is the culmination of the observation of those who have passed through my life and captured my imagination. Through the process of creating this body of work, I realized it is necessary for me to observe and be in the company of people. It satisfies my curiosity to learn who they are, emotionally rather than just physically and I show that in my paintings through color, pattern and objects.

I also realized that I have a specific process in my approach to painting people I know, which differs somewhat from painting those who are strangers. Just like the people I choose, both approaches have their own specific traits. What they share is this; I choose my subject, then I take research pictures which will influence the design of the painting. If it is someone I know, even casually, I interview them gaining a better understanding of who they are, which I am unable to do with strangers. Next, I consider the techniques and the art historical reference I will refer to while creating the work. Finally, the process of actually making the painting begins.

"To be a muse is to be a wonder in someone else's eyes, flaws and all."

-- L.H. Cosway

MY MUSE

Every painting I create starts with a person. I am attracted to all of them in some way, be it their mannerisms, attitude, or energy. Whatever it is, they capture my attention and I am intrigued. That "something" they have is what I consider their *essence*: the uniqueness of who they are. Everyone I paint fascinates me and I create my story of who they are through my painting.

"The purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love colour most."

-- John Ruskin

CONTENT AND INTENT

My paintings are all created by referencing photographs that I take. These photographs can be divided into two categories which I call "interviewer" or "voyeur". When I was young, I observed my parents, noticing their mannerisms, expressions and body language. Similarly, I observe the people around me the same way and when finding someone who interests me, I ask to photograph them. This leads to having a conversation with them while they pose, which helps to reveal what their interests are, how they move, their hand gestures, and their expressions. While "interviewing", I see or hear about the objects they cherish, just as my younger self examined my father's little box of trinkets. Throughout the time I am photographing, I am conscious of how I might compose the painting, particularly the position of the person, striving to create an environment where they feel, and therefore look comfortable.

Through this process I am looking for their true nature, their essence, which some people consciously or not, try to hide. This brings me to the other type of photo reference I take called "voyeur". These photos are taken at an unguarded moment, when the subject is unaware of being observed. By unobtrusively taking the photo, I am able to capture their "essence", their natural unposed, candid figure and expression.

My *content* is the inspiration of my muse whereas my *intent* is to show my vision of this person through my portrayal of them on canvas. I create portraiture through

mixed media techniques as well as painting. The way I use art historical and technical references is as important to me as the painting itself. I need to surround myself with photographs I have taken of the person, their trinkets, as well as with images of artists and techniques that inspire

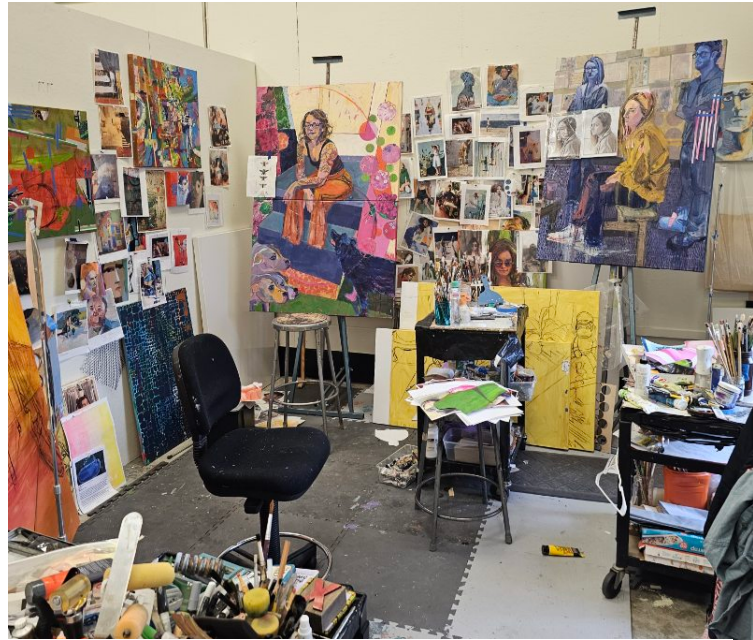


Fig.1: Studio Wall, Room 217, Jenkins Fine Art Center

me. Surrounding myself in the studio with these images set a mood for the piece and my approach for what I am intending to do with it. These steps help me to work on the painting in the style I envision that person and capturing their essence.



Fig. 2: Richard Diebenkorn, *Sleeping Woman*, 1961

There are some artists that I always have on my wall who have been a constant source of inspiration. For example, Richard Diebenkorn is an artist whose work has interested and inspired me for years. The way he arranges his figures in the space and applies thin washes of color that he also layers and scrapes away, but especially the way he abstracts objects in the background into simplified shapes still influences my process.

William Kortlander is another artist from the same period as Diebenkorn. I found a book about his work in the library where I live approximately twenty years ago, and it has been that long I have looked to his work as inspiration. Kortlander had an abstract figurative style that focused on shape and color. Like Diebenkorn, he also created paintings of people who were not recognizable as a specific individual, but instead as an everyman/woman. It was this abstraction of both figure and surroundings that has always inspired me.

Egon Schiele, was a Viennese artist active in the early 1900's. Schiele made figurative drawings that had a line quality that was varied and sensitive. He often drew long unbroken lines with a minimum of other lines within the figure. The immediacy and emotion of these drawings touches me still.

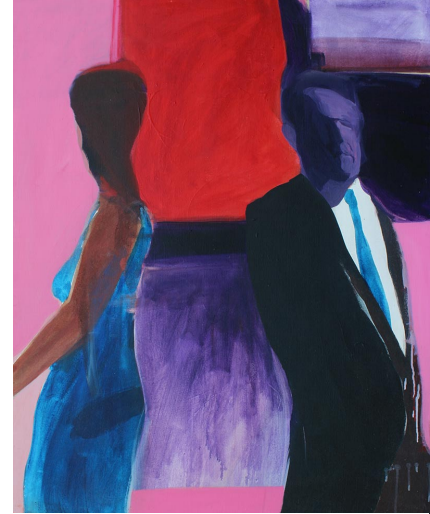


Fig.3: William Kortlander, *Untitled*, Mid-1960's



Fig.4: Egon Schiele, *Seated Woman with Hat*, 1917

Sometimes, when I am planning a painting, a subject reminds me of a particular artist's style or technique. For example, in the painting, "*Sim...Curious and Curiouser*", the work of Hope Gangloff and the way she approaches her canvases came to mind immediately. Her bold color choices and bright outlining along with use of patterns inspire me to be confident even when the canvas may be looking crowded.

Michael Azgour is another contemporary artist whose work was on my studio wall while painting "Sim".



Fig.6: Michael Azgour, "*Integration: Irek*", 2018

His use of line work runs from background into the figure and is inspiring for the way the lines create a sense of an unreal space in what seems to be a realistic interpretation of the figure.



Fig.5: Hope Gangloff, "*Late Night (Olga Alexandrovskaya)*", 2015

The images from these artists are inspirational to me as a reminder of their technique, making, not as people I am copying. Having their work surrounding me on my studio walls, even if seen peripherally, allows me to remember what techniques I want to include. I am channeling the spirit of artists approach, not duplicating what they do. I have my own hand, my own way of working, and do not choose to imitate anyone else's.

“A painting of a person can be descriptive but for me it’s about all the things that make up a picture – the feelings, the brushstrokes – more than describing somebody. People latch on to the personalities when they talk about my work and forget the other parts.”

-- Elizabeth Peyton

PAINTING PROCESS

In the previous sections I discussed how and why I choose my subject, how and why I take reference photos, and how and why I use technical and art historical references. I will use the painting of John: Rat Prince to illustrate how the whole process works. John was a graduate student in his thesis year. We had classes together and talked frequently about our lives, relationships, and basically anything on our minds. John was calm, funny and with an intelligent organized mind. But his car was always a chaotic mess.

I was intrigued about his love for his very uncommon pets: rats. I asked to see photos of them and wanted to hear why he had rats as pets, how they lived, did they roam about the apartment like a dog or cat might? I knew the rats would part of the painting. My knowledge of John continued to grow, and I began to learn about his thesis work which focused on binary



Figure 7: Reference Photo: *John: Rat Prince*



Figure 8: Detail: Origami Orb,
John: Rat Prince

communication represented by geometric forms and patterns, including origami. As I planned the design for the painting, I envisioned this Rat Prince sitting atop a pile of books, newspapers, and computers with origami orbs floating in the environment. These objects represented John's research into modes of communication. I wanted the rats to be climbing around him and as a Rat Prince it

was fitting that he wear a crown.

For the photo shoot I asked him to wear something he felt comfortable in. He chose to wear a colorful LOVE t-shirt acquired on LGBTQ+ awareness day which was meaningful to him as a gay man and supporter of one's choices about sexual preference and gender. I asked him to wear a plaid shirt with his t-shirt to allude to the grid patterns



Figure 9: Reference
Photo: Origami Rat, *John:
Rat Prince*

of his binary



Figure 10: LA Bryson, Detail: *Homage (Leon I)*,
2019

artwork. Wanting to reflect John's wonderful sense of humor, I asked him to create an origami rat so that I could photograph it sitting on his shoulder. For inspiration I tacked the work of LA Bryson to my studio wall. Bryson creates faces using brush and/or palette knives making marks that

may seem abstract up close, but blend and show the planes of the face, when viewed

from a distance. In Bryson's paintings, I hoped to find inspiration in the application of paint. These inspirations helped amplify my view of John as the prince of his domain: technology, origami, communication, and rats.

This painting began with the application of a base coat in acrylic paint which allowed me the option to let some of it show through as the painting progressed. I sketched the composition of John and placement of the computers, books, newspapers and rats in a soft vine charcoal onto the toned canvas and used acrylic medium to transfer photo copied images of his original thesis artwork in the windows of the painted computer screens. When the acrylic medium dried, I wet and rubbed the white paper backing off to reveal the image and also rubbed off areas of the transferred image to show the paint below. This was done to distress the mirrored image so that it does not appear "perfect", referencing the imperfection in life.

After the image transfers were applied, I began painting the top layer with oil paint. This allowed me to separate John's image from the background. It also allowed me to create balance with other colors I was using in the painting, as well incorporating color that was richer than the acrylic base.

I am interested in how color relationships and paint application affect the painting and form of the figure. Sometimes I do wish to flatten an area, whereas in the painting of John, I did want his form as well as the rats and orbs to have substance and weight. But when changing or adding a new color I needed to make adjustments throughout to maintain balance. What I am describing is a painting problem. How do I balance the likeness and reality of John with the formal quality of line, shape, and color?

By having conversations, I learned about John's likes and dislikes, his family, marriage, and how his is a dichotomy of brilliant, organized mind versus chaotic cluttered life. My objective was to create a painting that is representational, but also incorporated imagery that was crowded, colorful and humorous with moments that were surreal, as in the floating orbs and colorful rats.



Plate 1: *John: Rat Prince*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48" x 36"



Plate 2: *Observing*, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 48" x 36"



Plate 3: *A Day in the Wop Wop, NZ*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 72" x 36"



Plate 4: Sim: Curious and Curiouser, Mixed Media on Canvas, 60" x 48"



Plate 5: *Tripping the Light Fantastic*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 40" x 36"



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Plate 9: Aliyah: A Georgia Peach, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48" x 36"



Plate 10: *Just a Little Prick*, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 40" x 30"



Plate 11: *Prickly*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 24" x 24"



Plate 11: *Prickly*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 24" x 24"

"Painting is damned difficult – you always think you've got it, but you haven't."

--Paul Cezanne

CONCLUSION

I have discovered I am still exploring how I want to create portraits. In the past three years I have grown artistically and have seen my process change and my techniques expand. This group of paintings show my interest in showing more in a portrait than a person's "shell", capturing who the person is as well as their appearance. It is portraiture showing a glimpse into the essence of a person, displaying their individuality and having their personality come through.

Through the thesis process I figured out the steps in which I create my work. I know choosing a person interesting to me whether visually or because of their personality is the first step.

I then research to find art historical or technical imagery to surround myself with for inspiration. Regardless of the artist reference I can see my own hand in the interpretations. Painting a toned surface, forming my composition, adding my acrylic transfers and any collage elements have all become part of my routine.

Additionally, my visual vocabulary and knowledge has expanded, informing me as a portrait artist but with intention to approach landscape paintings in the same way.

My confidence as a painter has grown throughout this journey as well as my comfort level in exploring varying approaches. I believe I have the insight and skills to be successful, while keeping true to my vision.

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