

DETAILS

by

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of

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in

Art

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ABSTRACT

In Details, my Master of Fine Arts Written Thesis, I explore the intersection between my personal experience, environmental observation, Art Historical as well as Contemporary Influences, and my artistic expression through large scale oil painting. My work began with my upbringing in Mississippi and has been further shaped by my experiences in Montana where I examine native wildlife, landscapes and patterns through my spirituality and curiosity. My paintings that make up my thesis are the result of a lifelong dialogue between observation and emotional response - I seek to paint somewhere between documentation of animals and landscape and the spirituality they carry to me. I chose painting over all mediums as I enjoy its expressive flexibility. My background includes fieldwork with ornithologists, ongoing field research spending time in the backcountry, conservation experiences growing up, and images from the field via cell trail cameras.

CHAPTER ONE

WHY

My husband Kyle and I were driving in his truck in the mountains about an hour outside of Dillon, Montana, scouting new fishing spots. We rounded a corner and there was a bachelor herd of about 9 bighorn sheep walking down the road heading towards us. One was collared, and a few of them had full curls. They were merely 10 yards away from us. They paused, decided we weren't a threat, and continued towards us.

I turned my head so Kyle wouldn't see, because at that moment I was embarrassed. Tears welled in my eyes and fell. I had never had such a close encounter with these sheep. The distance between us was so close I could see the pupils in their eyes. Their muscles rippled under their beautiful fur as they moved with strength and in slow motion. Burnt umber shades or brown, toned down with a white cast, and French ultramarine were the colors I saw in their coats. Their massive necks carried the weight of their horns. These are the moments that I think about God.



Figure 1. Painting of Big Horn sheep outside of Dillon, Montana

I am terrible with my words. I am also a back row Baptist. I do not think that I am making art to fulfill any biblical calling, and somehow I do not feel guilty about it. I fear God and I think He gave me the ability to paint and did not give me the ability to speak eloquently. I really would rather be alone, with my family and friends and no other social interactions. I think I am selfish with my art and not worried about if people see what I see.

However I find so much joy in others enjoying my paintings. I do seek validation from my parents, my siblings, and my closest friends, but it is not the driving force in my art.

I am making these large scale oil paintings out of obsession.

Growing up we had a fenced in several acre yard on an old homestead. My grandfather built the house with his hands and his Army engineering degree after he served. My parents bought the house from my mom's parents and raised my brothers and me there. My parents were careful and decided to fence the entire several acre yard with more aesthetic chicken wire to keep my siblings and I from going into the swamp down the hill. They warned the swamp was filled with cottonmouths.

One of my earliest memories is asking my mom what the rainbow bird was that kept flying back and forth across the back acres. "It's a painted bunting!" she said. There was never a moment that I did not know who painted the bunting, it was so obviously apparent to me that an Almighty Creator took the time to craft that bird, hand paint the evolution behind its molting patterns, and the delicacy of its feathers.

I guess this is when I gained consciousness because I remember these days well. My youngest brother was being born, which required my parents to go to the hospital. My grandmother came to "watch" us (hint she was not good at this) and I was getting curious about

exploring the other side of the fence. I picked a spot that seemed the most accessible and went to climb it. In the leaves directly on the other side of the fence was a beautiful snake that I spotted, perfectly camouflaged with the September fallen leaves. This fulfilled my parents' teachings of the dangers on the other side of the fence. I climbed back down and observed the beautiful creature from the safe side of the fence. My mom had taught me about the camouflage of this venomous snake called a copperhead. The snake was so perfectly designed.

I settled instead to stay inside the fence and watch our resident kingfisher from afar as he stabbed fish out of our swamp down the hill. His beak was so perfectly crafted to spear the fish, he flew so swiftly, and when he shook the water off his wings he was so cute I forgot he was a killer. I have painted him so many times as well as the painted bunting.

I am aware that my obsession with these things was given to me by my parents. At 21, my dad moved from west Louisiana, just a few hours away, to be in the heart of the Mississippi Flyway as he apparently had not been close enough. He met and married my mother, and they spent their years before kids watching the duck, geese, and snowbird migrations for dates. They also hunted together in the swamps and bluffs that they decided to raise us in.

They found a church to raise us in. We did not, and still do not, fit in all the way because of our lack of committed attendance. We spent many a Sunday with our backs against an oak tree instead of the wooden pew. It seemed balanced and right to me.

Hunting and fishing was an important part of the culture where we grew up. What else are you going to do in Vicksburg, Mississippi? Obsession was part of the culture. Experiences outdoors made up my childhood. My family taught me about the patterns and lives of the

animals, how native versus non native plants contribute to our environment, and how humans had negatively or positively impacted the land.



Figure 2. A photo I took hunting in Mississippi with my brothers.

CHAPTER TWO

WEST

At 12 I joined my dad for an antelope hunt in Colorado. I had not experienced a landscape devoid of trees until then, and I remember the new phenomenon of not having anything to adjust my eyes to on the horizon. Cactus, new-to-me species of birds, and heavy snowfall were parts I remember. We watched the antelope for a few days before I was able to harvest an antelope buck. I made the shot I was taught to make, one that respectfully ends the animal's life within seconds. We approached the animal. I reached down to feel the antelope's fur and became fascinated with how different it was from the animals I was used to seeing harvested. Coarse fur that felt hollow. The meat was so good. I painted an antelope when I got home, and now at 26 I am painting another antelope for my thesis, still fascinated by the animals. I enjoy watching them in Yellowstone National Park, particularly during their rut season which coincides with some of my favorite fishing hatches.

Often Kyle and I start our day, entering the park through Gardiner, Montana, photographing the antelope, and seeing the light reflect or shade across their coarse fur, and thinking about how I can render the oil paint to create the shadows of their horns across their backs. Then, my husband and I hike into some of our favorite fishing spots. I am so thankful for the conservation efforts that created this park, and with every catch I am confronted with either management or mismanagement of the land - will this fish be an introduced brown trout or a native cutthroat?

I have a biased favorite. I would take the native cutthroat any day, and that is why I enjoy spending the time hiking into the areas where the native cutthroat flourish. It is easy to say

spending the day watching them aggressively attack my fly that mimics the different grasshopper species of Yellowstone is a favorite pastime of mine. I could do it everyday.

But these days are made so much more special by their fleeting nature. The particular grasshopper hatches on my favorite stretches of backcountry water only last a few weeks. I'll go back and swing a few streamers, as the days get shorter and the fish get a little more aggressive. The most important events of the year for the high country are coming - the annual snowpack.

My large scale elk painting is about an experience I had last fall. My husband and I were leaving a favorite fishing spot of ours during the elk rut. A herd of elk came running by us so quickly, and when we saw the massive female cows, we knew the bull who would be tailing the group would be a good size. The elk covered the sage bench in an instant. The bull came last, and he bugled to the cows to keep going. The sun was setting across a ridge behind him, and the light painted him so beautifully. My painting was my first attempt at rendering him. I am interested in going back to the same spot this fall to study and photograph the exact light and scene to paint, but first I wanted to render the bull alone, without the landscape. Only after I had rendered the bull was I interested in studying the light cast on the mountain range where we saw him



Figure 3. My bull thesis painting.

CHAPTER THREE

PAINTING

I am glued to my window on the flights in and out of Bozeman/Big Sky International Airport. I don't turn my cellular data off... I'm on OnX pinning spots I want to fish as we fly over Yellowstone or the Absarokee Range. I usually can maintain a signal to Cody. One of my main oil paintings for my thesis is a photo I took from the plane of the Absarokees just above Emigrant, Montana. The moments I get to experience the mountains from above never get old to me, each time I am thinking about the God I believe in.

I knew that this 5 and a half by 5 and a half foot oil painting of the range would be extremely challenging. I have spent so many hours layering and rendering the individual snow chutes and shadows casted by the mountains. It does feel like a meditation to me. I do not think that my viewer will have the same feeling as me when I am flying above the actual mountain range. Does that make the painting successful?



Figure 4. My mountains thesis painting.

I am truly struggling with this. I am compelled to make these paintings, and I find so much personal enjoyment in doing so. In my art practice I have to force myself to the easel. But once I get through the first ten minutes of wrestling with how technically challenging my decision to paint these landscapes or animals is, the hours fly by. I so enjoy being sucked into these paintings and accomplishing the level of rendering I am wanting to achieve. I often wonder if my viewer experiences the same level of awe as me. Sometimes I consider photography as a solution to offer more accurate representation, but then I am brought back to my desire for the process of painting.

One way I have sought to achieve my desired level of rendering over the course of graduate school is by getting closer to my subject. In 2024 I began carrying a clear plastic tub with me into the field. When I catch a fish that is small enough to fit, I fill the bin with water and place the fish in the bin. This gives me time to take reference photos of the scales of the fish without killing it. I used this method to gather reference photos for my three by four foot oil painting of the scales of a brown trout. The painting itself was a great experiment but something I need to render several more times before I find the method that satisfies me. There are also times that I go into the field in Yellowstone and I am required legally to kill some of the fish that I catch. This gives me plenty of time for reference photos. I feel that I am ready to start talking about that in my work but I have been afraid to approach it because of the mindset that killing trout is morally wrong. In Yellowstone National Park, if an angler catches a nonnative rainbow or brown trout, it is illegal to return that fish to the water. This is to help restore the native cutthroat population.

At any given time my family has about 30 cell phone trail cameras sending us images directly from the woods across the country. I am able to receive wonderful reference photos from these cameras. I have only used these images in my work so far as studies for the posture of animals. As I finish graduate school I am planning to begin painting using the trail camera photos as reference photos. I will address that later in my paper.



Figure 5. Turkeys on trail cameras.



Figure 6. Brown Trout pattern research.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH

At 18 I received an Art Merit Scholarship to attend The University of Mississippi. I am very proud to say that this scholarship covered half of my tuition for each semester all four years. I applied to the scholarship with my portfolio of copies of watercolor paintings I had been making and selling since 15. These paintings were extremely commercial: my high school job had been to create paintings of houses for a real estate agent. On every closing day, she would give the clients a bottle of wine and my painting of their new home. Thankfully for me she sold a lot of houses. Art has been a job for me since fifteen and it has felt like a blessing and I have never had a shortage of work.

After my freshman year of completing the entry level art courses or Foundations courses, I began in the oil painting class. Our professor was a Baptist preacher, and he pushed us to begin thinking about what concepts and issues we would like to include in our art. I wanted to study birds closer and get involved with the scientists on campus, so I found the ornithologist professor's office hours, went across campus and asked if I could take his 300 level ornithology class with no prerequisites for the sake of art. He agreed, and I set about the task of getting the University to count me taking the 300 level course in place of my 100 level geology course to count towards my BFA. They also agreed.

For a whole semester, I dissected bird specimens and studied scientific terms with a class full of pre-med and pre-vet majors. My classmates cared about memorizing the names of the organs to pass the tests, but I cared about learning more about the birds of Mississippi that I had

already spent my entire life with. The hues of a painted bunting are much different under the fluorescent lights in a lab than they are in the humid, warm Mississippi woodland light.



Figure 7. Sketching dead birds from life.

That summer the ornithologist professors were leading a two week intensive study to the Chiricahua Mountains in the Arizona desert along the Mexican Border. The class was for pre-med and pre-vet majors but they allowed me to join the class as the only non-major. For the two week trip we hiked and studied the different species in the ecosystem. At night the students studied and I would draw or watercolor paint the flora and fauna we had seen during the day. At the end of the two weeks I presented my 20 something paintings to my professors and classmates. My ornithologist professors pointed out how I had accurately rendered the bird species to the point of scientific illustration, except for the fact that I included sunlight warmth or cool shadow tones on the feathers, so my paintings could not accurately be used for identification. It was great to be made aware of the difference between scientific illustration and painting for the sake of painting. I was not upset that my paintings did not look like scientific illustrations because the illustrations are very flat. For the sake of identification, there cannot be added hues from the environment that would cast sunlight or shadows onto the birds.

I was able to do an art science collaboration during my graduate studies at Montana State in January 2023. I was able to collaborate with two PhD candidates who were studying rangeland ecosystems. Together we discussed the positive impact that bison had on the land when grazing. I chose to visualize this by creating an image that I felt would visually appeal to viewers by being inviting and aesthetically pleasing, with the goal of some viewers becoming interested enough to read the accompanying research provided by the PhD candidates. Therefore I depicted the most aesthetic parts of rangeland flora that had evolved alongside the bison and benefited from the bison grazing. I did the research, presented the flora species to the PhD candidates who double checked that they were accurate, and did all of the painting work in just seven days. The

result was a triptych painting with each panel being five feet high and two feet wide. I was not given any positive feedback within the department. The feedback I received was that the depiction did not communicate any of the research. I knew that the depiction did not convey the research but that was not my intention. My intention was to create an aesthetic image of flora that would potentially resonate with a few people. My project and efforts were not brought up again over the course of graduate school and I felt that branching out to work interdisciplinary was not required by the MFA program nor valued, so I decided to focus on making it through the program and that I could work with scientists in the future. During my time in Bozeman, outside of the academic environment, my husband and I have made a great group of friends. In our friend groups we have an entomologist, an ichthyologist, an ecologist, and even a rocket scientist that all work and study at MSU. These friends have shared with me their research and we plan to collaborate in the future.

Working with the two PhD candidates was very enjoyable as they were both passionate about their work and very excited by my painting. They were satisfied with my depictions of the native grasses and flora that I rendered in oil paint, which was different from my past work with scientists. I believe it boils down to the individual, but these two PhD candidates were much more excited by an artistic interpretation rather than scientific rendering. Perhaps it was their age or personal philosophy, they seemed relieved that art did not have to follow the rules of institutional science.

I am excited to begin collaboration with my entomology friend this summer as he is able to give me feedback on my plans to study species of butterflies and bees that live in Yellowstone National Park. Most importantly he can convey important topics to me and double check my

field identifications. I feel that I thrive outside of academia and will be able to focus on my field studies and render these studies in my studio without worrying about meeting academic requirements.

I would like to tie this to my aesthetic choices to allow expression in my paintings and not strictly adhere to scientific illustration. When I did my research in Arizona, I was happy with the feedback that the scientists pointed out how my paintings differ from scientific illustration. When I began looking into MFA programs I also looked into scientific illustration programs, but I did not want to go the scientific illustration route because I had already fleshed out during my undergraduate career that I enjoyed the aesthetic freedom that painting allows.



Figure 8. My art show at the Arizona Research station following two weeks of field observation.

Art History and Contemporary Influences in my Work

I began to explore different research from biologists in my area, and attempted to convey their research. My undergraduate professors began to point me towards studying John James Audubon and ask me about my work in the context of art as a means of scientific identification. In the South it seems that everyone has an Audubon print of their favorite bird species somewhere in their home. My parents had several Audubon prints in my childhood home given that they are avidly interested in birds through hunting and bird watching.

I believe I was influenced by Audubon by growing up surrounded by his images with white backgrounds. I have always had mental permission to make pieces that exist without a background because I was so accustomed to Audubon's work without backgrounds. I resonate with Audubon often including a narrative into his work, such as a bird defending their nest from a snake. However, Audubon regularly depicted his subjects or birds along with the flora they were most often found in. In my undergraduate paintings I chose to depict the flora that coincided with my own experiences, in other words I would paint the flora that I saw when I seasonally experienced the bird species, not the flora that the bird might have used for nesting or their own purposes.

One artist that has been shared with me during graduate school that I resonate with is Toba Khedoori. What I enjoy about Toba Khedoori's work is that I believe the negative space along with the technical rendering allows for a quiet meditation on the subject matter. Khedoori's work allows space for reflection. Khedoori's work also seems similar to mine in that when viewing the work it seems that there is a level of enjoyment conveyed from artist work - the artist seems to enjoy the tedious process. There is tension between the vast open spaces and

the tedious renderings. The paintings feel like a visual depiction of a quiet but powerful meditation. This is how I want my paintings to feel, and I am going to continue refining my work to achieve that. I am excited by the idea that art work is a lifelong pursuit, that there is no end in sight and I might never achieve this idea.

I believe one such way I can continue striving to achieve this feeling is by inviting viewers into my studio and hearing their interpretation of the work. Just as in graduate school, I can take or leave their feedback. I believe this will help me to continue evolving my work.



Figure 9. Dead Birds from the Arizona Research Station.

Why I did not paint depictions of hunting, fishing or guns for my thesis?

These intense college courses combined with my life's experience have been the research in my work. I feel that I have been studying my subjects for as long as I can remember. I have learned the most in my time outdoors. Hunting and fishing are a hobby and a means of gathering low impact food - but that is not my obsession. These hobbies have gotten me closer to my subjects than any form of bird watching or classroom studying. Hunting has forced me to experience the worst parts of the swamp and the most inopportune times - countless times cutting through the floating hydrilla marsh plants in the dark with no lights on and not making a sound. That is how I learned about the swamp. Experiencing the sunrise more times than I could ever count on days when it was hard to get out of bed with the 3 am alarm has given me the chance to experience sunrises and hear birds chirping in different ecosystems across our country. I have learned first hand how different barometric pressure systems affect the activity of birds chirping or turkeys gobbling. Trudging through mud flats in chest high waders where people simply do not go, just for the chance to see what migratory patterns the birds were feeling that day due to the weather. On the winter days when an extreme record-breaking cold front and ice storm is forecasted, my family and I are making plans and we will be out in it the next morning. Those are the days the birds and big bucks move the most. I have belly crawled across the ground to stalk animals my whole life and in turn it has forced me to become extremely acquainted with the smallest plants and what time of the year they appear and what time they die. Recently with moving to Montana, I have begun learning through experience on how to stalk elk while hiking up the sides of mountain draws, and fortunately I have a lot more to learn. I have seen the bitterroot flower blooming out of the ground in the middle of a sagebrush flat and began studying

the coinciding bug hatches. All of these experiences have come from hunting and fishing, but they have only served to get me closer to the animals than I ever could have been experiencing as a bystander.



Figure 10. Feathers collected to understand colors and patterns.



Figure 11. Feather from my thesis show.

Many times while hunting with my brothers through the swamp in Mississippi we have come across a water moccasin, a venomous North American viper. I have experienced first hand many times the aggressive nature of water moccasins, but each time we remain calm and stand with the viper for a while. While hunting we cannot run away and disturb the environment or else we will spook the game animal we are hunting. I am not afraid of snakes because of how I have been forced to spend time with them, understand them, and learn how to avoid close contact with them. This is another way hunting has taught me to slow down and experience the world entirely differently.

I have chosen to deliberately sidestep the artistic romanticism of hunting and instead focus on the experiences I have. I do not want to paint my shotgun or my fly rod because that is not what I care deeply about. For example my shotgun is a tool that I can use to harvest a select number of species during specific hunting seasons and following important regulations. However, the drive to kill a limit of mallards forces me out of my bed into the remote parts of our country where I will experience the seasons, harsh weather conditions, watch sunrises, study up close protected migratory shorebirds that use the same migratory flyways, and experience the landscape, flora and fauna in all seasons. To many who have never had the experiences I have had, it might seem to be about the killing of the animal. It is nearly impossible to begin putting into words the experiences I have had while hunting, and oftentimes I will take a picture after the hunt is over of my harvested animal or the meals I cook that the animal provides. Maybe the picture of the harvest is what makes it seem like that is all that has happened. I have only begun to try and record my experiences in my paintings in my studio practice. My BFA thesis and my MFA thesis have been different attempts.

By the time I made it to my BFA Thesis senior year I still had no clue what concepts were in my art. My thesis was depictions of the seasons, animals, and according native plants in Mississippi. I would have been so happy to be where I am today, to be able to say that I know my art is about my obsessions and what I believe is my experiences with God.

CHAPTER FIVE

FUTURE PLANS

I am thankful for the three year MFA program that has allowed me to be able to confidently say I know for sure what my work is about. I am leaving graduate school still very interested in exploring conservation, combining research from scientists into my art, public outreach and education about the things I am passionate about, and I am interested in what I can do to better my home state of Mississippi. I was not able to do all of these things at once and I am okay with that because I have the rest of my life to continue my work. As my thesis paintings come together, I realize how much I want to continue this work. I want to continue to make paintings about the snowpack and how it affects the entire ecosystem here. I was not able to articulate it yet for my thesis. My show feels like a jumping off point. All of my interests fall under an umbrella of what I see in nature. I am obsessed with the details.

Therefore I am excited to use my thesis work as a stepping stone and continue the direction of the work I completed in graduate school. The piece I have started planning is a four by four foot painting of butterflies in Yellowstone based off of photos I have been gathering since I began spending so much time in the park in 2020. I also have a series of aerial mountain range photos I want to paint. I have favorite gnarled trees in Yellowstone that I want to sketch from life, iPhone photos of the bitterroot flowers I find in the sagebrush flats, a favorite colony of cliff swallows on the Gallatin River that I spend a lot of time fishing under, and the list goes on.

Commercially, I am thankful that my subject matter resonates with others in a way that compels them to purchase my paintings. I can paint what I am truly interested in without having

to feel that I am catering my art just to sell it. At the time I am writing my thesis I have two people who have reached out and offered me representation and I am actively pursuing both of those offers. I believe that in the future I will have regional gallery representation. I know that art is an ever changing path. I enjoy that if I spend my free time fishing, and I catch a beautiful fish that I am compelled to paint, that I have the option to sell that painting so that it can make someone else happy. Sometimes it is as simple as that.

I think that regional gallery representation is the best fit for me at the time because my audience is people who enjoy the outdoors and hunting or fishing in the Rocky Mountain Region, along with people who live in the Southeast. I do not feel that my audience is limited by this statement. I fully intend to produce pieces that I am able to commercially sell while also taking chances and experimenting with pieces that might not sell. I have always operated this way.

As stated earlier in my paper, I began doing commissioned painting work at age fifteen and have enjoyed it. As I finished my thesis I began working through my list of commissions. I am thankful for the people who have contacted me asking for commissioned paintings and I asked them if I could start on the commission when I finished my graduate school. The main motivation driving me to do commissions is that painting comes naturally to me and it does not feel like work. I feel extremely rewarded when I give a family a commissioned work of art and I know that they cherish the piece. One such project I am starting soon is a new direction for me. I am painting from a beautiful image taken by my friend's trail camera on her father's farm in Kansas. I am so excited to work on the image and I know it will resonate with many people.



Figure 11. Kansas trail camera photo.

REFERENCES CITED

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