

CALHOUN, CONNER. M.F.A. All Jokes Aside. (2023)
Directed by Professor Mariam Stefan. 34 pp.

This thesis explores my work over the past two years, with most of my energy being put toward building a bridge between drawing and painting. Spanning many different themes and ideas most of what I have become concerned with during the last few months has been focused on creating whimsical narratives with symbolic rigor that use the self as a means to explore psychological interiors, interior spaces that reference my direct surroundings and everyday life, and a self that embodies the emotional turbulence of a post sobriety wake. Pushing the figure beyond its physical limits, setting it out on symbolic tasks, contorting it into labyrinthine knots all while being badly disguised, ambiguous narratives unfurl, exploring the complex psychologies of recovery, grief, longing and desperation, with humor and irreverence as retainers of hope.

ALL JOKES ASIDE

by

Conner Calhoun

A Thesis
Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

2023

Approved by

Professor Mariam Stephan
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Conner Calhoun has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Professor Mariam Stephan

Committee Members

Professor Jennifer Meanley

Professor Nikki Blair

Professor Nicole F. Scalissi

April 19, 2023

Date of Acceptance by Committee

April 19, 2023

Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF IMAGES.....	iv
CHAPTER I: INTRO AND WORLD BUILDING.....	1
CHAPTER II: LABRYNTHINE SELF AND SPACES	2
CHAPTER III: UNBINDING MATERIAL HIERARCHIES	5
CHAPTER IV: THE BAD DISGUISE.....	9
CHAPTER V: AFFECTS OF COLOR	11
CHAPTER VI: STUDIO AS SUBJECT	14
CHAPTER VIII: HUMOR AND SUBTEXT.....	21
CHAPTER VIII: DUMBSTRUCK AND DESPERATE FORMS	23
REFERENCES	27
APPENDIX A: CATALOG OF IMAGES	28

LIST OF IMAGES

Figure A1. *I set my trap with a tear of joy*, Oil on Canvas, 7'x8', 2023 28

Figure A2. *It was the queerest feeling, as though I had painted this or had been here before.*
Graphite on paper, 35.5" x 15" 29

Figure A3. *Ablaze*. Unglazed ceramic and slim jims. 6" x 6" x 12". 2023 30

Figure A4. *Witch hand*. Oil on canvas. 38" x 48". 2023 31

Figure A5. *To pinch a flame, to hold a star/ I disguised myself as a ghost, so my old habits
wouldn't haunt me*, Oil on Canvas, 60" x 54", 2023 32

Figure A6. *Hey Sebastian, can you catch my wood*. Oil on canvas. 61" x 53". 2023 33

Figure A7. *Took it too far*. Oil on canvas. 35.5" x 42". 2023..... 34

CHAPTER I: INTRO AND WORLD BUILDING

I feel like I spent most of grad school beating my head on the painting surface until finally something made sense, but honestly, I don't really know if there is any other way to get to there. Painting's peculiarity, for myself, lies in the metaphysicality of an image, how a 3-dimensional form can exist on a 2-dimensional surface, essentially building illusory space. I hear these buzz words like world building being tossed around, and for myself, world building within a painting is simply that there is a whole world within the image. There are recurring themes, figures, and color palettes that have become my personal vernacular, that make the individual paintings feel unified through my idiosyncratic lexicons. The images that are depicted are often densely layered, with multiple ideas happening at once, this to me is one of the most exciting things about world building, is being able to experience multiple narratives within one image. There is an expansiveness to world building that feels wonderfully esoteric, and once I got my foot into the right psychological door it really stopped feeling like I was building a world, but experiencing my inner world. Feeling my feelings.

The past couple of years I have said I don't need painting but I really want it, finding some sort of satisfaction within my disillusionment. To be fair I was also hardly ever sober, very numb to everything, and hardly ever felt my feelings. And now I am sober, and now I'm not so sure if I don't need painting, maybe there is a part of me that needs to paint, or draw? I think without that urgency I wouldn't want to make anything to begin with.

CHAPTER II: LABRYNTHINE SELF AND SPACES

Overwhelmed with tasks, and fully preoccupied, the figures that typically preoccupy my psychological spaces are semblances of the self, whether they are singular or in multitude. The self exists in different physicality, and in different stylizations, different ways of paint handling, different color palettes, different wafts of light, different styles of beard... you get the point. I started using the self because I found it hard to work with something that was outside of my own experience, and it wasn't that I couldn't relate to other people identities, I just felt that I could dive deeper by turning into my psychologies, I also was able to utilize humor in a more severe way because the self was at the center of the joke's universe. It's through this self-deprecation that we create relatability, I've found that by utilizing self-deprecation it evens out the playing field between the painting and viewer, the painting has nothing to hide, so why should the viewer. We are all hot messes, so don't feel bad if you are a hot mess too.

Oftentimes, through this deep dive into self, I work with figures that fill an entire composition, the viewer's eye travels through the whole space of the composition as though the figure was a labyrinth or a Celtic knot. Limbs bend and loop around through themselves and we follow every body part into their own separate narrative. The figure is experiencing multiple narratives at once, multi-tasking in their present experience, or maybe not fully invested in what they are presently doing. The multi-tasking figure embodies the contemporary condition of not being able to do enough at once, and not being able to handle the task of doing nothing. There is this feeling that the figure can't do enough, and that they are pushed to their own physical limits as a means of holding everything together.

The painting *I Set My Trap With A Tear Of Joy* (Figure A1) isn't about crocodile tears. A figure is seen running through a space that is filled with wilted flowers, some of which hold for

dear life by stakes, a large-scale painting of a mountain scape and butterflies gives the painting a depth of field that is falsified, there is a feeling of running through flowers. The feet appear to be taking on the roles of the hands as the hands are preoccupied with themselves, one foot is stepping in gum, revealing the bottom of the tread, the other foot curves up and around towards the face and holds, acting as a surface for a mouse trap that is being set with a tear. I often think about how people only pay attention to you when you are struggling or making art about when you are actively struggling, and it somehow becomes slightly more championed, it might feel like I'm being encouraged to struggle, the tendency to sensationalize pain. Here happiness takes on the same material of pain in the form of a tear, because when you haven't felt anything for the majority of your life even happiness might feel a bit too overwhelming.

I can confidently say that working on something that began to resemble myself came out of recovery alcoholism and drug abuse, it's one of those things that even before I started using that I was suffering the consequences of other people's alcoholism and drug use and through my entire life I never really understood what life was like outside of this chaos. Becoming sober is a big step forward but nobody really talks about the aftermath, and what recovery might also mean is recovering aspects of who I am that I had lost due to 15 years of extreme drinking and drug use, and prior to that suffering the consequences of other people's alcoholism. You suddenly are forced to look in the mirror and begin to reconcile the thing that is the worst part of your life, and that is yourself, and unfortunately you no longer have the tools of blacking out every night to get through that reflective River of Styx.

The self, with its shifting complexities is extended from the figure to the spaces that these narratives exist in. The feeling of some of the interiors feels never ending and constantly shifting. In the drawing, *It was the queerest feeling, as though I had painted this or had been*

here before (Figure A2), the expanse of space is built through rooms leading into more rooms, there's a trail or stream of duct tape that goes from the closets room all the way out the last door that is visible, it evokes a river flowing to the foreground of a landscape painting. In Through the rooms we find glimpses of different figures, a foot exiting or entering a door, or we find the presence of person through actions that have occurred or objects that have been places, like a tipped over fallen tin-can lantern, each room might be a different point in time, possibly evoking the unfolding or unfurling of time while simultaneously it all being present at once within and image, the things in the past exist far off in the distance the same space as the things in the future.

The figure is knotted up in the easel, with supporting legs going in and out his nose, he is positioned in such a way that he has to use his ass to hold the brush to paint, these contortions like a labyrinth also make me think of Celtic knots. One of the interpretations of Celtic knots is that they have bad vibes or demons get lost or confused in them, this for me feels like a positive approach to the contorted body, the demons get exorcised because they get confused by the figures form, this confusion forces the bad vibes out.

Within this drawing we also have the presence of the in between spaces, like inside a wall. In this drawing a painting of a landscape is stored inside the wall space, and a small window is carved out revealing it to feel as though it is a real landscape to the figures inside the drawing, this falsified representation of deep space is then replicated through a painting that the figure has made, it feels echoey, and bit uncomfortable, like a glitch in the matrix, a memory blip. It evokes the disorientation of *deja vu*, or the feeling of moving through the echoey prayer of a labyrinth, I move around a corner and realize that I have already been here before.

CHAPTER III: UNBINDING MATERIAL HIERARCHIES

One of the biggest breakthroughs I had while in grad school was coincidentally at the beginning of the program, during a 4-week extensive class called drawing marathon. There was this expectation in the class that we needed to concern ourselves with quantity over quality, and there was this period at the start of the marathon where I could feel myself resisting and wanting to white knuckle all that I knew, but then eventually I felt that I was going to get a lot more out of the experience if I simply just handed myself over to not necessarily the process of making, but my own intuition and invent-fullness, and trust that I had the dexterity to move more frenetically through a drawing without losing any of its precious delicacies.

This sort of experience was first accomplished within my sketchbook, and ever since then I have been chasing and trying to figure out how to accomplish this sort of intuitive practice within everything I make, and the first thing I had to do was remove the sketchbook out of the equation, and implant the idea of the sketch book into all materials, and some of the solutions were profoundly simple and profoundly practical, like always have a pile of at least 50 sheets of paper all different sizes, or to always have at least 5 blank canvases at your disposal, to make the materials, even the ones that have more historical weight to them, feel as dispensable as the page of a sketchbook, to keep things every flowing, to make everything feel as though I'm just doodling away, to not make everything so precious.

Whilst I was in the process of unbinding my sketchbook I also found myself unbinding my pretensions toward material hierarchies, it was like unpacking a part of myself that I wasn't super aware of, I have this tendency to want to keep materials secluded to their own parameters, like a graphite drawing is simply a graphite drawing, or an oil painting is simply an oil painting; I don't think it was necessarily it's purity I was after, but it's through these simple choices that

I'm able to move quickly and not over think my decisions. But in my sketchbook, I allowed materials like yarn, glitter or craft felt to deviate some of these material pretensions. Although these material experiments no longer exist in a sketchpad, they tend to percolate into other objects and sculptural materials as well; I often think, especially within sculpture, I tend to take these liberties because I don't really have an advanced knowledge in working 3-dimensionally, so the structures begin to reflect the precarity of my figures, they are held together by the same desperation, "please don't fall over" is all that runs through my head and hot glue gun. When these cardboard structures are juxtaposed in the same room as the oil paintings, sometimes on a similar large scale, I unbind the material hierarchies, the room now has become my sketchbook.

It's also through this material hierarchy that I think my queerness behaves so brazenly. I think I had this push forward to make sculpture out of whatever the fuck I could get my hands on, and get it up by any means necessary speaks through the inherent spirit of queer creativity. I don't need a million dollars, a foundry, and a whole team of people to create something on a large scale, I also don't need it stand the test of time, just get that shit up, get it the fuck up now. If I need to hot glue my outfit together before I go to club, then that's exactly what the fuck I will do, and the same goes for sculpture. Period.

I also think about duct tape, and it's inherent diy nature, it tends to only serve the purpose of holding something together, but only for a brief period of time. It only takes a few months for the adhesive on the tape to dry and you have to apply some more, eventually you are left with a wad of tape over the initial fracture, like a hornet's nest wrapping around a branch. Duct tape has the inherent cliché also amongst country people of being the thing that can fix all your problems. I've spent so much of my youth in these dilapidated barns, and the most important support beam was held together by duct tape. I even remember there were moments before a horse show where

someone fancy show boots would split, or the zipper would break, and we would frantically wrap it up in duct tape and paint it to match the boot, it never looked nice, like wearing bad disguise, but it served the purpose and got the person to point B. Duct tape is also this material that holds together people's gender. I think of people who tuck their genitals or bind their breasts so that they can feel more comfortable in their own bodies, or as a means of stepping into their drag persona, duct tape becomes psychological and a material that not necessarily holds something together but transforms the thing that it is applied to. It simultaneously binds/liberates our bodies just as much as it unbinds material hierarchies.

And while there are the hierarchies to which we associate with prestige and monetary value, there are also the hierarchies associated with materials that have a stoicism placed within their tradition, or lineage. When we think of ceramics, we often associate it within these terms of traditions that are hard-nosed, and unwilling to deviate from because of the precarious nature of ceramics. These traditions and rules work for a reason, otherwise all your work will explode in the kiln. In the piece *Ablaze / full of regret* (Figure A3) a ceramic vase in the shape of a house holds a bouquet of slim jims, the slim jims in their orange, red and yellow packaging, and zig-zag, easy to tear packaging, feels like a flame and the cottage feels as though that it's been set ablaze. The simultaneous release within the flame, and the holding of the vessel, is a wonderful tension to note as well, accompanying the material tension of red-clay with the mass-produced plastic.

Even the material handling is something that could be thought of in terms of showing irreverence toward the hierarchies of materials like oil paint or graphite. What happens when you just start slinging paint on the canvas as though it was dispensable like a page in a sketchbook. I will say that this approach is achieved through very unexciting means, I always have three to

four blank canvases ready to go at any given time, I allow an overabundance of canvases and painting surfaces to exist at my disposal so I can always move without overthinking, without feeling too careful. By giving myself this sort of breathing room, movements that are rushed and brazen can coexist with more tedious and fussy moments.

Materials in my studio lean more towards not being precious, if there is a preciousness to the material then I find it hard to make the decisions that push my work in directions that fill me with wonder and surprise. And I need to work with materials that feel like I can go over, or layer without batting an eye, or feel they have the malleability of change like in a painting, or erasing something in a drawing, or collaging over things. I used to be really into these very laborious and tedious details within an image, but I felt that the decisions were too slow and I would get a little too caught up in the details. By working at a quicker pace, I feel more relieved of this and find that moving through a piece is a lot easier, and I am able to live with more of my initial decisions without constantly going over and editing certain points. It might feel that I'm working at a pace that is just a little closer to the speed of thought, and it is within the pace that I really begin to undo most of my material hierarchies.

CHAPTER IV: THE BAD DISGUISE

Wonky eyelashes, and a crooked mustache. In cartoon logic that's all you really need to totally change your identity. One of the things I have been pondering a lot is the element of disguise within a painting. We often think about painting, especially representational painting, as something illusory. Within this we conjure up ideas of deception or a lie. This makes me think about people who conceal their identity, or perhaps transform their identity, not necessarily to always make an illusion of something else but to reveal something true about who they are, this goes against western ideas of vulnerability, which is basically just paintings made by men in the 1700s showing women's breasts. We often think of stripping something down to its most basic form as the only form of vulnerability, but when we strip away too much, we aren't left with enough information to piece things together, everything becomes an unnamable object.

Like many things within my work, even this idea of a disguise is thrown together just moments before it has to go on the stage. The wig is on, but not glued on very securely. It's an identity that's having to be rushed in the morning. An illusion with too many side gigs. In the painting *Witch Hand* (Figure A4), I think it shows the briefest glimpse as to where my paintings are heading in terms of the complexity. A nitrile glove with oil paint splattered on it takes center stage, with red nails glued onto it, it sweeps away hair that has fallen on the persons face. When we look closer, we begin to notice the lace front of the wig, and a finger bursting through one of the gloves fingers, the figure feels as though it is wearing a bad disguise, evoking the sense of a drag queen who only has a few minutes before it's showtime. Behind the figure is an intermingling of painting studios and makeup counters, the whole area is painted in frilly pinks, a makeup room, layered into a painting studio, an easel with an ominous figure painted into it, the scene begins to double into a someone being pursued. This sort of complex layering of narratives

begins to fold into one another interweaving multiple stories to create an image that is inside and outside of itself.

The idea of a bad disguise also finds itself in falsified representations of deep space, a mountain scene is actually constructed through a painting within the painting, the staples on the edge of the canvas reveal themselves, here deep space wears the shake n go wig. This sort of representation simultaneously opens illusory space while revealing its illusory mechanism, it might feel like being able to see behind the scene footage, or like when a boom mic slips into the view of the camera.

Material handling is also something that I've taken note of in terms of being badly disguised, I had noted in an earlier chapter that the material handling questions material hierarchies, it also has the ability to make the image of a painting feel as though it is wearing a bad disguise. The visible paint stroke shows themselves fearlessly, they are queer as in fuck you. The bad disguise sometimes is felt to be worn intentionally, it pokes at the viewer with its self-awareness, it says I know I'm not actually the things I'm trying to represent. This sort of self-awareness of the illusory mechanism, or maybe even its honesty, isn't one that's trying to uphold its self-awareness to the standards of representational painting. It isn't a bad disguise because it needs to reveal its true identity, it's a bad disguise that is being playful with it's identity, and is aware of the fact that identity can sometimes shift.

CHAPTER V: AFFECTS OF COLOR

Color has been so difficult to come to terms with, it's like a decision that exists outside of logic. For so long I tried to reconcile these decisions with historical context, or attempting to understand it as a code, but the most productive usage of color for myself exists within the realm of emotion and sensation, and that's where it's unwavering complexities can be found. It makes me think about when my therapist used a chart that described different emotions, and I had to pick a few to describe what I was feeling in that moment, it wasn't just a singular tone, it was an orchestra of anger and sadness; it was within this naming of emotions that I realized that we never really experience the same emotion more than once, each emotion we feel is unique to its context or to its moment. Heartbreak feels so universal but all of our fissures look so different, yours is bigger than mine, maybe you don't have a fissure, maybe it's an underwater sinkhole.

Maybe the reason I had such difficulty with color was because I was afraid to feel anything for so long, even happiness seemed too overwhelming for me, it's all so fleeting and shifting in its glimmers, and I have manipulated myself into madness and delusion so many times. Emotion moves like the wind but I never get over anyone, or anything, you all sit soundly like dolmens through these tired winds, tedious and fleeting, inside and outside of time, carried through light.

My decisions with colors in paintings is felt on a guttural level, I forget which painter I heard it from, but it feels like I'm scratching an itch when a color palette evolves through a painting. A little darker here, a little warmer there. Through this development and through the pacing of the canvas I find a multitude of color palettes, acting almost like a journal of whatever I was feeling that day. I often think about color being in relationship to light, or color being an emotional tone within an image (like a soundtrack to a movie). Or sometimes I think of it as a

tone or an emotion to a word, it's not attached to language but it sits behind language or runs alongside language, like two rivers running toward a lake.

When a candle is present within a painting, I often pattern the space with a splotches of earth browns, this patchiness evokes a flicker, the movement or dancing of a light. I also like to think of this patchiness akin to the patch-work of a quilt, kindred to these objects or these things that are found in a home, made by hand, we can imagine a ghost stitching the patches of light to the walls and faces of the space. Light becomes sentimental through these quilted connections. The woodgrain also holds the flickering almost like water, the walls begin to feel like the babbling of a brook, the walls of a river bed; the flickering light transmutes water into wood. Here the physicality of the paint is painted in a somewhat clumsy fashion becoming reflective of the pathetic/comedic attributes I've learned to claim within my own practice, but also, we can think of the paint wearing a really bad disguise, or if we were to think of movies or theater it might almost feel as though a boom mic slipping into the view of a camera. I think for myself I've just really had to come to terms with the fact that I am a hot ass mess, I will never be cool or sleek, I'm like a walking tornado filled with cartoon characters and toxic waste bins, so for myself when I begin to utilize this sort of klutzy painting technique, I begin to hone in on it as sophisticated choice by juxtaposing it with complex narrative, color pallets, and compositional decisions, and also juxtaposing it with moments that are more finely tuned.

I pursue color in multiple ways, on one hand it is relative to the light of the candle, becoming warmer the closer we get to the flame, it draws you in toward the flame, like a moth, the colors through the space simple ripple in patches attempting to understand itself as flickering, here color is the dancing of light, it is calculated by the movement of light. We can also experience shifts of color as we enter different spaces, like when we move under the table the

flannel shifts, making the figure feel as though it is existing under a black light or an x-ray, or also we can think of the flannel almost like crystalline prisms that are ultra-sensitive to the light of their surroundings, here the figure becomes porous and closely tied to its environment.

The muddier colors are also something that I've begun to utilize and look at more closely, when we mix colors that aren't harmonious, we immediately think of it in terms of brown, like for instance orange and green. But while understanding a color palette through emotion, I've also begun to observe the complexities of these sorts of color mixings, it's not simply a brown we are looking at when mixing orange and green, but it's an orangish green. The green becomes warm in tone.

Hermitude or solitude is explored in moments of monochromatic color relationships, the most obvious being the monochromatic blue which has developed into its own symbol throughout varying paintings, I keep thinking about a poetic stillness that it gives, like a soothing anecdote to mania or being overwhelmed, it still delves into the pastiche of a blue melancholia and maybe even uses it as an emotional launching point, gather you in closer with its own associations. With these singular color moments, we begin to relate it to other colors in the room, it feels as though color is speaking to one another with blinking flash lights, smoke signals from their own isolated parts, further evoking the feeling of a solitary experience but one that yearns to speak one to another.

CHAPTER VI: STUDIO AS SUBJECT

The painter within a painting, even the studio within the painting, has been a recurring motif within my recent works, it feels like a feedback loop, something less whimsical than the uroboros. The furthest my brain can go back without opening a book is to Jan Van Eyck's mirrored worlds within his paintings. Van Eyck's reflective surfaces were entryways into the meta languages of thinking and looking at one's own studio practice, like turning a canvas inside out, or maybe self-imploding into an inverted realm. We also see the other side of his figures and suddenly the image exists fully in the round. Thus, the act of seeing the studio, helps us to understand the subject and the maker.

These sorts of dialogues and entry ways are something I layer into my own images and narratives, as a way of utilizing my most direct surroundings, and tying in the fibers of painting into my identity -- blue nitrile gloves get knotted up in blonde wigs, paint cans spill over, rulers and paint brushes get used to hoist thing things up. I've had so many conversations about how artists are people outside of their studio practice, it's said in a tone as though it is this separate creature we keep locked away in our musty basements. I want to rupture these boundaries and to take a moment and observe how the studio or our practices can be thought of and utilized in terms of subject matter.

Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage) is a video installation by Bruce Nauman that was a catalyst in my thinking. Its inside joke of a title is reflective of these interpersonal relationships from one artist to another, like passing notes between solitary, studio chambers, monks flirting with one another, knowing glances. The double titling of the piece, specifically the part about John Cage, came out of a misunderstanding when Nauman was invited to participate in an exhibition that asked artists to create work in response to John Cage's

conceptual legacy. Through Nauman's cunning, a piece was delivered with a letter that wrote "Fat Chance John Cage", the curators mistook it as the title, and Nauman new better than to correct them (Simon). Waxing poetic, or maybe just smearing his smart ass, this sort of accidental layering of meaning exists subtextually, in the throes of irony... throw up of irony.

Mapping the Studio, without its bubbling mythos, is a multi-channel video installation that documents the studio at night; illuminated with night vision, the feeling of a nature documentary is evoked. Ever so often we see a subtle movement, the small scurrying of mice; our eyes don't move fast enough to find them and before we know it the vermin have vanished back into the studio's subterranean layers. The eerie feeling of things that move through our studios without our own realizations is evoked, like the subconscious, or the wonderful mishaps that we hope for.

Mounds of studio detritus fill the spaces that are filmed; it's noted that most of these mounds are works that never came into full, like old ideas that fall off the table and slowly collect in the corner. It feels almost like a resurrection, or like a fungal process, a growth coming out of something that has died. It's a mode of productivity that I liken to my own mode of making paintings by purely scraping leftover paint onto a wooden panel. Both gestures are parallel because they are ways to allow for non-decisions. For myself it's as if I'm not wasting paint and making something that exists outside of my own decision making. For Nauman this regenerative process was done with simple effort, by pointing a camera at the things that had turned into detritus, it didn't really take re-inventing the forms but showing them just as they were, or maybe by pointing the camera at them they were re-invented. The wooden panel might be the same sort of regenerative agent as Nauman's camera.

In one of Nauman's earlier works, *Sound Dance* or *Square Dance*, he utilizes the studio as subject but places himself inside the work. Emptying his work space and taping a perimeter in which he would improvise movements and dances inside of every day. The perimeter of the square might feel like the limitations of the canvas, or anything dealt with an edge, and the dancing might feel just as monotonous as painterly strokes (Bruggen). The pacing and rigor of this piece began to echo the studio practice, often times quite literally, his studio being so empty that his mantras would reverberate through its emptied chambers (Tannenbaum), how the entire event of making anything happens in the studio, and whatever leaves is almost like whispers or documents of that event.

When we look at Nauman in these works one might say he actually is not using Bruce Nauman the person as the subject but using Bruce Nauman the artist, and perhaps this distinction is made clear by setting this action only within his studio, where the artist's identity is fully inhabited. It even makes me think about how many artists distinctly have separations between their studio and their home, a house might not be able to contain the capacity or the mess. Any sort of documentations of a creative act are what the viewers can experience; it's not so different from the solitude experienced by a painter, the monotony of the movements and material, the isolation of the studio, then out into the world the work goes. Here the studio is the stage and the artist is the actor and the audience is not really present. They show up after the show is over, observe the ghost of what has already happened; or maybe I'm only performing for whatever the future may hold.

Many painters thrive in a studio that is chaotic, one that is full, preoccupied on every surface and every wall serving a function. For the even more chaotic painters, they can only thrive in a work space that is fecund with splattered paint, every surface covered in the oil crud.

For Joyce Pensato, it's the grit and grime of her studio that seems to awaken her. Born in Brooklyn, NY, Pensato was very reluctant of the city that she lived and worked in, she had always wanted to "get the fuck out"(Corwin). In the early 2000s NYC was making big attempts to clean up its act, and the process of gentrification had really begun to ramp up. Pensato had always collected things off of the street but became more aware of it when the streets she lived on started to feel a little too tidy. Pensato felt the urgent need to preserve the grit and grime of the city; her studio filled with icons from pop culture; children's toys, and posters pile up onto one another making her workspace feel like a ground zero to her explosive painting process. During this process of gentrification, Pensato was eventually forced out of her studio due to increases in rent. This displacement eventually led her to using the gallery where she had an upcoming exhibition as a studio space. And, with her came her studio accumulations, which were exhibited as integral components of her practice alongside the paintings she made in the exhibition space.

Pensato's evocation of a grimmer NYC is filled with a nostalgia, but one that doesn't necessarily harp on the good ole' days. One review note "Pensato's work is resolutely in-your-face. It has the beat of the kind of street you might want to avoid on a dark night," (Searle). It's complex and not necessarily a love letter to the streets of Brooklyn, but maybe a letter that states the truth in all of its brutality, like confronting a parent who you are rightfully estranged from. When we think of shrines or even when we think of conserving things, we often overlook our tendency to conserve the awful shit too, or if you are me or maybe even Pensato it's the awful shit that you seem to not be able to let go of. But anyone can also look at how we treat history and note a similar indulgence in self-loathing. Nevertheless, when we spire through Pensato's reckless abandon, we are confronted with cartoonish figures, Elmo dolls that randomly move as

though possessed. There is an absurdity created through the tension of painterly grime and the glossiness of pop culture, an absurdity that allows very brazen in-your-face humor to bring a sort of levity to all the guts that have been spilled.

I'm not entirely sure if any of my work is directly related to the grimy tendency within Pensato's work, but I do make objects and allow them to hoard and accumulate into one another in my studio, and I have been saving some of my more abject things, like used nitrile gloves, and painting rags, in hopes that they will be used in one of these objects. And it's not necessarily the grime that might connect my work to Pensato's, but the encompassing way nostalgia is used as a means of preservation, but nostalgia that isn't rose tinted. When I look at my work some of the figures or parts of a figure are derived from cartoons, or Sunday comics, the whimsical nature of their form screams out in nostalgia that is typically akin to a precocious childhood. But the figures themselves aren't exactly experiencing the blissful joyousness that is akin to this particular nostalgia, they are knotted up, in states of mania, and driven to madness by their own desperation. This is where my ties with Pensato begin to feel tighter, while Pensato mucks through the literal grime, I'm mucking through emotional grime.

The first time I ever thought of the studio as being the subject was from Jeanne Silverthorne, her tedious rubber sculptures simulate her direct surroundings, and she takes inspiration in her wonderfully mundane subjects like shipping boxes, light bulbs, and her swivel chair, and breathes new life into them, most often times allowing these objects to become stand-ins for the figure or for the body, or maybe an extension of her own body.

What I've been most drawn to in her work is the usage of the shipping crate, it's something that at first you might look over, as they tend to be used as pedestals. But, when you take a closer look you begin to see the seams of the rubber mold caste and the idiosyncratic hand

markings of the wood grain. There is a doubling of experience within this process of observation, where you are first introduced to the object with an assumption and then you look back over your shoulder and realize that there is more depth to it than maybe you expected that the mundane object on display is this carefully crafted object.

The objects also tend to become anthropomorphized, which feels most directly related to my work. They slump over or hang themselves with a lightbulb noose, they conspire against themselves and feel pitiful, pathetic, and depressed. We often think of objects mostly in terms of what they can be vessels for, objects hold each other, in the solitude of the studio the least lonely things are the objects that speak to one another. When we align them all together it feels like a room full of figures, dilapidated, belligerent with their own sorrow.

In many of her works the sculptures have a self-awareness cast into them, they are “dumbstruck by their own physicality” (Tannenbaum). This self-awareness that we witness when looking at these sculptures is the same reflective surface in Van Eycks paintings, but instead of seeing ourselves directly, we might see ourselves through Silverthorne’s reflections. This is the relatable entry way into Silverthorne’s (and I’s) comedic approach, something painful like simply existing projected into the banality of everyday objects. What might make us not gloss over them is that the objects are protesting their original function, or “refuting its purpose” (Tannenbaum).

And when we think about the studio being something tethered to a body, Silverthorne explicitly uses her own body, her female body, as an act of reclamation (Tannenbaum). In one of her earlier sculptures, *DNA III*, this reclamation is found through ambiguity; two collapsed, hose like forms, that stand side by side in exact replication, except for in color, might stand in for human procreation. exemplified through this duplicity. It’s noted that within the canons of art

history “motherhood itself is accorded only negligible importance in relation to the (male) artist’s power to create ... Her (Silverthorne’s) sculpture mocks the hubris of breathing life into stone with images of DNA that look too sloppy and irreverent to entrust with data and codes,” displacing the presumptuous role of women as caretaker and mother.

It happens to me every year, typically in the spring or when the weather gets warmer, I’m still cloistered away in whatever space that I’m working in and I tell myself “Don’t worry I can enjoy the nice weather another year,” I fiddle away longer at whatever I’m hot gluing together, as though I’m going to figure out the unsolvable riddle. In many of my works there is this feeling of never-ending interior, or this feeling of never-ending work space, it evokes the feeling of an endless amount of ideas that need to be realized. It’s not exactly awe inspiring but there is the feeling of anxiety of this endless expanse, the realization of my own mortality and that not everything will play out, and the rooms that have already been worked in are filled with desperation of trying so hard to get to where I need to be, maybe even moments of regret. It feels strange to make work that is about failure, but I find that there is a great sense of relatability to admitting these feelings of woeful regret, it’s like an entry way into the image. It tells the viewer, it’s okay we are all hot messes at the end of the day.

CHAPTER VIII: HUMOR AND SUBTEXT

Humor is a retainer of hope during times that feel overtly against the self. When we live in a world that is constantly trying to bring negative change to marginalized peoples, we are put into a position where we have to always be on guard, stern, and as serious as the pillars that are attempting to take away basic human rights. I remember when I was in undergrad, I felt this need to reflect this seriousness within my work, colors were drab and monotonous, figures were tortured, no smiles, no laughter. One of my teachers quickly pointed this out to me and boasted how it felt I needed to make work that embraced the humorous, sharp witted, sassy part of who I was, that I needed to make work that “acted my age”, make work that was just as much of a hot mess as I was. Embracing humor began to feel like existing in a space that took place after a revolution, and it showed me how liberated spaces can exist within spaces that try, so very desperately, to take that liberation away. Humor is the action against anti-liberation. With that said, humor, like anything else, ought to be questioned and explored, and its precarity, especially in comedy and jokes, can quickly be utilized to bring othered people down.

Humor in a lot of my work comes through subtext, within the painting the title of the piece becomes entwined with the image, the joke that the painting explores. I wanted to explore where I existed within the punchlines of woodshop humor, even when I’m actively participating in it, I still can’t tell if my queerness is the punchline, even when the joke comes out of my own mouth. In the painting, *Hey Sebastian Can You Catch My Wood* (Figure A6) the character bends backwards, their body is contorted and loops around a never-ending stream of two-by-four that travels from out the door and into the sawblades and hands of the woodshop manager, this idea of catching wood comes in at an absurdly obvious innuendo, here the character feels as though they contorting their body to avoid the innuendos punchline. Their knee feels as though it is

being wrenched and breaking, almost like he is being possessed by a demon, here the internalized discomfort becomes externalized. In this sort of painting the power structures within a joke are completely dissolved, and we are left with something fervently more complex than a punchline.

The physicality of the figure within the painting also points to a slap-stick nature of humor, how we embrace pain and self-mutilation in order to get a laugh. Here the slap-stick nature is taken to a degree of bones breaking, or bones being completely melted with an arm that is tubular and rubbery. Slap-stick's absurd physicality is an embodiment of emotional turbulence, or maybe experiencing too many emotions at once, the feeling of being overwhelmed. I often think about how sometimes my emotions feel as though they can't fit into my physical form, so when I paint figures through a cartoonish absurdity it feels like a body that is feeling its emotions instead of trying to retain them. The figure here becomes an emotional embodiment, and the slap-stick, absurd nature, is the physicality of this embodiment.

Color also plays an important role in complexifying the humorous nature of this painting. The palette is muddied, with vibrant colors that have browned and been tinged with seriousness, within the colors the humor shifts away from laugh out loud. These "serious" colors set a tone that opposes the slap-stick nature of the image; within this tone the viewer is asked to become a little more contemplative of the joke, to participate in the narrative of the joke, as opposed to just being the laugh track at the end.

CHAPTER VIII: DUMBSTRUCK AND DESPERATE FORMS

When I used to work in reality tv as a production assistant there were many moments where I would get assigned these tasks revolving around the well-being of these every day, relatively overlooked objects. In particular, I spent so many hours, days and weeks of my life tending to curtains, hemming them, steaming them, making sure all the folds were moving in the right direction. At a certain point, typically around hour 10 of the work day, I would kind of slip into a state of being where I forgot who I was, it never felt threatening, in fact there was something soothing and rather tranquil, as though my mind had found the stillness of an object. I think this was when I really started to pay closer attention to overlooked objects. Objects in many of my paintings feel as though they have their own narratives and agency within the image, whether it be amongst other objects, the figures, or itself; the objects could also be figures in themselves. As I've continued to work, going deeper and deeper, the objects have become more and more specific and the narratives more and more complex.

In the painting, *To Pinch a Flame, To Hold A Star* (Figure A5), is a re-exploration of some of the motifs I was trying to accomplish in my paintings at the beginning of grad school, the ones specifically that were focused on still lives and objects. Prospectively I found that the painting wanted to be closed off in its space, possibly reflecting the same attitudes of apprehension or fear in the figure. Everything feels closed in, like the inside of a snail shell or a clam, the objects that fill the paintings composition feel as though they are stacked against each other like a file cabinet, or maybe even a theatrical set made of cardboard, they begin to knot and tangle into one another mixing and spilling into each other's metaphors and narratives. , this sort of methodology of layering objects also begins to have the potential to fluctuate hierarchies

within a painting, whether that be narrative hierarchy or the role of object/subject. Allowing the interior space to feel as emotionally complex as the figures/characters.

In the painting, *To pinch a flame, to hold a star/ I disguised myself as a ghost, so my old habits wouldn't haunt me* (Figure A5), the character hides under a table, with his hand reaching toward a flame through an armature shirt. The Shirt feels as though it was made out of a ghostly material, the hide of Casper, one of the armature legs wears the other shoe of the character grounding it in this reality, the armatured figure looks as though it is exploring the physicality of the flame. Here the idea of reaching out, through the disguise of a phantasmic material, begins to unfold into reaching out to another realm, like wearing a bad disguise to sneak your way into the ghostly realm, or to camouflage yourself from old habits that still haunt you.

In the bottom right corner, there exists a bottle that is cracked and laying on its side, this sort of symbol or iconography of an alcohol bottle taking on a different physical form other than being actively drunk is a recurring symbol throughout most of the paintings, in this painting it turns into a ghost bottle, taking on the role of an old habit haunting. I personally felt that most dialogues with sobriety and recovery sort of revolved around moments where people who are actively using and drinking

There are moments of reflection or mirroring within the painting that are intervened by longing or desire. In the window of the painting, we can see a sky filled with stars, something we can only experience on a moonless night, a cutout paper of the moon curtains over the window, here the moon exists within the sky but through the material absence of paper, here the moon is simultaneously there and not there, and the moon experiences the stars through its own absence. Here poetic device is achieved by facing its own realities instead of altering them.

If we look over the painting of the scene, we can find the moon existing in the sky, but here we have two mountains instead of one. This painting within a painting begins to act like a fiction within its own realities, becoming reflective of the desires and yearning that exist within the subjects of the painting.

While many of the objects I use are objects that I find within daily life, I also use objects that come from art history books, and archaeological sites. My most recent example is from the painting, *Took it Too Far* (Figure A7), in which the shadowy figure is pictured stretching out a Grecian vase as though it were made out of rubber. The timestamp of the material becomes displaced because it no longer feels as though it was made out of ancient stoneware, but made out of an industrious rubber. Time is both displaced and re-materialized. It also shows another Grecian vase placed on a bookshelf with objects like a mug, or a painting of clock, even within these simple juxtapositions of objects we are taking time out of its linear concepts, and the things we think of as dated, or far removed from through the measurements of time, begin to feel a lot closer to us, and possibly still affect our most minute interactions.

I think that *Took It Too Far* (Figure A7) is a painting that is aware of its own histories, its warped history. The Grecian vase, being an iconic idea of history, becomes stretched out to its fullest limits, we feel that it might snap, it stands for a history that is built precariously out of lies. The shadowy-ness, or transparency of the figure, feels that it was made out of *Allegories of Cave*, taking on the same physicality of an idea, or the same materiality, the same darkness that fills the spaces of undiscovered or forgotten histories. Even the space that the image takes place in feels cavern-esque, with a yellow light spilling into a dark bluey green room that finds a warm, earthy red in the deepest moments of the composition. The light feels as though it is discovering space. When we look around, we find another figure hoisting another vase,

attempting to use their feet like a shelf, and ruler to make up for the lack of balance. The room is filled with moments of precarious relationships with these fragile vases, and they relate to them either with the most respect or with the most irreverence. The object and the figure's complexities feel just as entangled as when I was steaming miles and miles and miles of curtains for that awful reality tv show.

The fragility of materials like paper – or more specifically the page – are also featured within the painting (*Took It Too Far*). The page is a vessel for words, a notebook page might be a vessel for personal, diaristic words, diarrhea words, a space for unfiltered word vomit, where words first start off as reactions to the world around you. The note book page is for spitting venom. In, *Took It Too Far*, the page is shown torn to pieces, and then taped back together, it feels like trying to apologize after an overly emotional, regretful reaction, to something as mundane as the object itself.

The taping back together of objects, or sometimes taping of things that haven't even broken yet, is another evolution within the images. This feeling of everything can be fixed or put back together with duct tape is something that feels simultaneously very Southern and also very Queer, I think about all these dilapidated barns that I grew up in and how the most important part of its foundation was held together by duct tape, this same holding together can be found in DIY and Queer spaces, whether it's being used out of necessity or maybe even aesthetically. It's this reveling in material precarity that feels close to the human condition, it says life isn't always pretty, and maybe nothing will be fully resolved, and I do have regrets, and I wish I could go back and fix things. It's my way of apologizing to everyone that got bulldozed in my path of destruction, or even more importantly my apology to the self.

REFERENCES

- Bachelard, Gaston, and Gilson Étienne. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by M Jolas, Beacon Press, 1969.
- Bruggen, Coosje van. 1988. *Bruce Nauman*. New York: Rizzoli.
- Corwin, Will. Other. *Joyce Pensato*. Art Papers, 2014. <https://www.artpapers.org/joyce-pensato/>
- Nauman, Bruce, Tate Modern (Gallery), and Tate Modern (Gallery). 2004. *Bruce Nauman : Raw Materials*. Unilever Series. London: Tate
- Searle, A. (2014, March 26). *Batman, Beavis and Bart: Welcome to artist Joyce Pensato's Funland*. The Guardian. Retrieved February 14, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/26/joyce-pensato-joyceland-lisson-gallery-review>
- Simon, Joan and Andrea Lissoni, “*Conversations: Joan Simon and Andrea Lissoni on Bruce Nauman*” . *whitecube.com*, March 30, 2023
- Tannenbaum, Judith, Jeanne Silverthorne, Ingrid Schaffner, Jo Anna Isaak, and University of Pennsylvania. Institute of Contemporary Art. 1996. *Jeanne Silverthorne*. Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

APPENDIX A: CATALOG OF IMAGES

Figure A1. *I set my trap with a tear of joy*, Oil on Canvas, 7'x8', 2023



Figure A2. *It was the queerest feeling, as though I had painted this or had been here before.*

Graphite on paper, 35.5" x 15"



Figure A3. *Ablaze*. Unglazed ceramic and slim jims. 6" x 6" x 12". 2023



Figure A4. *Witch hand*. Oil on canvas. 38" x 48". 2023



Figure A5. *To pinch a flame, to hold a star/ I disguised myself as a ghost, so my old habits wouldn't haunt me*, Oil on Canvas, 60" x 54", 2023



Figure A6. *Hey Sebastian, can you catch my wood.* Oil on canvas. 61" x 53". 2023



Figure A7. *Took it too far*. Oil on canvas. 35.5" x 42". 2023

