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I've been exploring. Adventuring and exploring in and out through my fears, questions, anxieties, and excitements through my own narratives; story-telling my way through these present emotions. I use myself in the medium of oil painted self-portraiture as a character for these narratives, investigating my own sentimental pieces and parts--strong and weak, and what exists in between. I create worlds for myself: painting and finding objects to inhabit these worlds, often as a form of protection from what exists outside of my created space—the present and future. I push against it but also yearn to embrace it. Fear of exposing my vulnerable-self creeps around me and the need for protection is heightened. I use textiles or dense plains of a single color to create a backdrop or landscape, setting the tone for my preciously crafted territory. Tensions between materials mimic tensions I am exploring conceptually. I peek into and question the thin line that often exists between anxiety and excitement and travel back and forth in my chronology attempting to not answer or pacify, but further burrow into questioning my own views of myself and my roles in the world around me.

BABY OF MINE

by

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CHAPTER I

BIG AND LITTLE STEPS

Two years out of undergrad I arrived to UNCG and demanded a change for myself. Historically I have painted portraits. It is what I love to do. Faces are so mushy and complex and emotive. Skin is full of color and depth that oil paint captures beautifully. But! I decided to stop when I came to graduate school. I wanted to challenge myself and get out of my comfort zone, break my rules. My first semester I created works on panels using found objects. I collect little tchotchkes and trinkets and things that catch my eye or have importance to me, they are usually small so I had a good source of tiny material to use. I am not a fan of clutter or mess so I keep my collection in three glittery pencil boxes, the kind you'd have in elementary school, in order to contain these items and limit their size and how many I collect. Knowing myself, I could get carried away with collecting baubles or stockpiling items that I could deem sentimental. The pieces created with these items revolved around my fuzzy ideas of domesticity and my own life. Working with objects rather than paint was wonderful. I used these tiny objects similarly to paint: put a dab of red there with a shiny plastic cherry and then offset it with a line of stringy green AstroTurf. Using objects opened up my visual vocabulary and got me out of a stiff set of habits I had for myself in making. I found these satisfying to make and visually pleasing but they didn't motivate me as much as I wanted and conceptually were unresolved. The focus of these pieces became more aesthetically driven than I had

anticipated and I found myself feeling pushed more by the formal elements of the pieces than the ideas that were supposed to be behind them. I fumbled when trying to talk about them and what I did end up saying didn't feel genuine.

The next semester I continued to resist traditional painting and instead began making sculptural objects that could be hung on the wall. Conceptually these were more connected to me. They were about my view on my own "ladylikeness" and what the term "ladylike" even means. I delved into considering expectations of people around me and then my own expectations for myself. I was raised going to the same private Christian school, in Charleston, South Carolina, for twelve years where I always felt like I was too much of a tomboy or too hyper and childish compared to most of the girls there. Even though we were all required to wear the same uniform of a plaid skirt and white button-up shirt I always felt less put together than everyone else, less "ladylike". Even through etiquette lessons I still felt a sense of inadequacy. A lot of insecurity about my femininity rose from this time which got better after I graduated from that school but leads me to questions about what I felt like I was lacking, and sometimes still do. These works propelled me to consider notions of identity and led me to create self portraits without using paint or the figure, again opening up a whole world of new materials to use. These were expressions of myself continuing to tie in my tchotchkes as well as fabrics like satin and lace, using traditional canvas stretchers as bases for some of these pieces but not painting on them. At this point though I missed painting. There was some insecurity in being entirely experimental and not allowing myself to use my entire toolbox of skills.

The time spent restricting myself felt necessary but I was ready to move on. I began to paint again, this time feeling more certain of why.

This brings me to my current body of work. In these pieces I want to question and connect with my feelings of anxiety about the world and my place in it while exploring self, material, and paint in a way that pushes what I had done with portraits in the past. I want to break the rules I have for myself (there are a lot). These rules have boxed me into a way of making that restricts what I can create and how. It's my own ideas of control and my own ideas of what my art is and proving myself as a good artist to others that are limiting me. By having an idea of what my art should look like I am making my creative world infinitely smaller. By trying to consistently prove "I am an artist!" I am scaring myself into making safe choices and not pushing past processes I have tried and set for myself. Breaking all the rules doesn't happen overnight and I'm attempting and learning to be patient with myself while driving myself forward with my own pace of creative acts of rebellion against these rules.

CHAPTER II

“ADULTSHNESS”

Scholastic Book Fair was a piece made in a state of overwhelm of the present. It was made in a state that yearned for sweet innocence and a rose colored lens on the world. It yearns for the day when my biggest worry was if mom was going to get mad at me for getting my frilly white socks dirty. It wants to be in a time before airless, suffocating romantic relationships. It *needs* a time before expectations from family got so heavy; when did they even get that heavy? A figure, a representation of my current self in this state of overwhelm, is found in an expanse of shiny pink cellophane. Wonderfully, colorfully, tacky Lisa Frank stickers are sporadically placed around her. These stickers were a currency of my childhood; usually traded for a variety of goods ranging from the dessert in someone’s pack-lunch to a secondhand bendy pencil that would have been originally purchased at the Scholastic book fair. The vibrance of the cellophane shines through her skin in gleaming fragments. She’s sinking back into this shiny crinkly pink world, wanting it to take her back to a time before the fear of what’s next and before the great weight of the world pressed down so hard. She picks at her thickly painted skin, hoping to chip it away and that the cellophane will shine through, causing her to disappear into her own world even more. This looming fear, great weight, and loss of innocence are all part of a concept I call “Adultishness”. “Adultishness” is my own set of

expectations for what it is to be an adult and what you do as an adult and also what you lose when you cross the threshold into adulthood.

The more I dig into the word “adulthood”, the more sure I am that I have chosen the correct phrasing. It is not the objective definition of being an adult, it is a purely subjective view. The suffixes I’ve included, “-ish” and “-ness” are derivational suffixes because they change the meaning of the word: ‘-ness’ meaning 'a state of being' and ‘-ish’ meaning 'slightly' 'fairly' or 'approximately' or 'having the quality of'. It’s a state of being aware of adult things and maybe even doing adult things but pushing against them. It is wishy-washy and unclear and I feel like my suffixes purposefully make it that way. The word itself is bouncy and seems made up and childish. The overuse of suffixes creates a sense of confusion. I feel like the distinction of the term “adulthood” from just the term adult also stems from putting even more separation between myself and my concept of what it means to reach adulthood. It makes it more of a distant imaginary thing that I can see as “oh they do that but I don’t” rather than a real concept that I am participating actively in or that is rapidly approaching. Rather than a push back against responsibility or specific acts that adults do, it is more of a loss. It is a loss of naïve excitement, hope, spontaneity, innocence, and pure, simple, goodness. Since this term is a loss of certain states found in childhood, this concept is seen in my work as an absence. I include this concept in my work by bracing for it. It is the thing that the figure is sinking away from in *Scholastic Book Fair*, you don’t see it but it’s there-- swirling around the viewer, trying to invade the sweet pink picture plane to envelop my figure.

The Lisa Frank stickers act as a patchy defense and the cellophane as a portal to a place of bright, idealized, optimism.

These are merely illusions to temporarily ward off my anxiety for the future or problems of the present. They don't solve the problems, they merely mask them. They're created on the unstable foundation of the denial of reality. The defenses are made of thin, fragile cellophane and tiny paper stickers that are not meant to last. Similar to some of the ways I cope with situations that are difficult for me to handle or control, this way of thinking and method of protection is not healthy. It will not hold up against the perils of life.

Jump Castle, Sheet Cake, Asthma also operates around methods of protection.

Long, slightly transparent, ribbons of flagging tape fall from and around another anxious figure. My dad, an architect, would always have a box of colorful flagging tape in his car in order to mark an empty lot with boundaries of property lines or where the walls of a house would go. I use flagging tape in my work to create my own boundaries. The streamer-like tape puddles onto the floor, creating a physical border around the piece, not letting viewers get close. The figure, pensively on the defense, looks out, watching, from behind ribbons of tape and on top of her sparkly façade of an idealized place of party and fun that she would rather be in. This is a place that the grit of the world threatens and she must defend. Anxious hands are not sure she can be strong enough to hold off the grit and terror but she confrontationally stays. Her gaze bearing down on whatever comes near.

CHAPTER III

THE EMERGENCE OF BRAVE EM

After finishing those two pieces, *Jump Castle*, *Asthma*, *Sheet Cake* and *Scholastic Book Fair* I felt exhausted from constantly thinking about and expressing my fear. The world was heavy and I felt emotionally drained which makes it hard to get excited or driven to create. I call my mom frequently and something she says to me is that “you gotta fake it ‘til you make it” so I decided I would have to do just that to try and drag myself out of my slump. I created a character last semester that I like to call Brave Em. I dressed myself up in a yellow rain suit (that was way too big) and donned an equally as ridiculous and vibrant yellow hard hat that all paired perfectly with my yellow Chuck Taylors. I filmed myself in public places doing useless tasks that I would carry out with the utmost precision and care, like blowing up balloons and then strategically popping them using my surroundings. Creating and becoming Brave Em was less about the video created but it was entirely an exercise for myself in being unapologetically and unafraidly existing in the present.

My piece *When the Band Began to Play the Stars were Shining Bright* features an appearance by the optimistic Brave Em portrayed on yellow rip-stop fabric, an industrial material often used in safety uniforms such as firefighter’s jackets or military attire. She faces the world with her chin up, gripping her yellow coat as if she’s prepared for whatever adventures are to come. The bold and graphic nature of this piece, vibrant flat

colors paired with a more volumetric figure, hints at the work of Evelyne Axell and her undaunted and spirited self portraiture. Deep green letters dangle above Brave Em depicting the words “Good Morning”. This is a reference to a song in the musical *Singing in the Rain*, one of my favorite movies that my dad and I would watch when I was younger. The song transitions a moment of pure discouragement into one of inspiration and renewed energy. That song was a perfect ingredient in my formula to brew a taste of ‘fake it ‘till you make it’. The painted star balloons (also on rip-stop fabric) tie into my recurring theme of the bubbly, youthful, anticipation, associated, for me, with birthday parties. This smaller painting is gently set on a playful yellow hamper. When I could fit, I would sit in our hamper at home gripping the sides with my tiny pink fingers and my dad would drag it around the carpet of our house like I was in my own little car. Star stickers constellate across the backgrounds of both paintings as well as the wall, radiating a sparkly flurry of fun. This is Brave Em’s world: it is tough, fun, plucky and courageous-emanating undaunted optimism. She is present and prepared for the trials and wonders that the future holds.

CHAPTER IV

LITTLE EM

Lately I've been feeling a lot of anxiety about living up to the expectations for my adult life that I had when I was younger. Little Em is another character created from my anxieties and questions surrounding these expectations. She represents a younger, idealized version of myself. She does what is right. She is naive and hopeful, excitable and silly. I don't want to disappoint her. In an attempt to calm my anxieties about disappointing Little Em I decided I would create a piece for her that would be similar to a letter. It would let her know that I haven't completely screwed up and I am still attempting to stay true to the better qualities of my younger self. One of these qualities that I still retain is being goofy. It's an approachable trait to begin with, not too heavy and one that came to me easily when considering these retained qualities. I can ease into the conversation, a little dip with my toes, rather than diving straight in and risking going into a full blown existential crisis. It's a place to start. The world can be such a serious place, full of stress and scratchy, abrasive, situations; it can be scary and hard to deal with. A way that I combat the scratch of the world around me is with play and giggles and laughter. One of my favorite pieces I saw when visiting New York two summers ago was Urs Fischer's interactive installation called *PLAY*. He harnesses the silly approachability of dancing and interactive rolling desk chairs. Art lovers came in, people trying to catch a break from the heat came in, kids came in and we all laughed and

danced with the chairs together. There is a need for being vulnerably goofy. I was raised going to cotillion. This meant dance and etiquette lessons, white gloves, itchy dresses, and stale molasses cookies. I despised going and thought it was ridiculous; it was the opposite of my sporadic goofiness. I reference this with my pinky-up tea-drinking position in the piece *While Blasting Enya's Greatest Hits*. The figure's face is puffed up like a child's who doesn't want to pose for a picture; the eyes still serious, those of a slightly jaded adult who sometimes has to stifle the silly in order to navigate the perils of adulthood. The title of this piece refers to a time in middle school when my parents would go to work and finally felt comfortable enough to leave my brother and I at home-- sweet sweet freedom. We had this big black dusty boombox that could play tapes, cds, and the radio. My favorite CD from my parent's small selection was Enya's Greatest Hits. I would pop it in, hit the play button, blast the volume, and hop on my Razor scooter, gliding around the smooth hardwood floors of our house singing with Enya at the top of my lungs. A wonderfully playful way to start a day that would not disappoint Little Em. Cherubs and weenie streamers encase my portrait in this piece, protecting the vulnerable moment of reflection.

I love the way Jessica Stockholder talks about objects and color and uses them in her work. She uses objects as paints in her work; if she needs some yellow here (maybe a nice smooth yellow) she'll find an object that fits the need or paint the perfect object with the perfect surface to fit the need. She talks about color beautifully and in such an approachable way that I relate to in my own work. In an interview with Timeout she says,

“I’ve always loved color because it’s a little bit like music. I love that it seems to be both physical and ephemeral and engages us as a metaphor for our feeling lives”.

My colors are the hot pink of my slinky, the yellow in the seat of a swing set, the loud blue and metallic swirl of a hula hoop, a full set of Crayola markers, the red yellow and blue of a shiny birthday balloon. They are the magenta of Sky Dancer’s hair and the green of a fresh bouncy ball. They are not muted, muddy or diluted. They provide familiar certainty and are reminiscent of the simple joy that comes from childhood play. They reference the colorful, outlandishly idealized advertisements for children’s toys or games. These ads show a world full of fun and play and perfect families with perfect neighborhood friends. My colors are a tether or harness to the joy seen in childhood toys as well as marketing geared towards kids. They tether me to a sense of simple, easy to find, happiness as I dive into concepts that are more difficult to deal with and are often based in uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. The seriousness of these emotions and the actual looming presentness of them comes out in my darker colors. These bring the pieces back to the present, back to reality. The blue in *While Blasting Enya’s Greatest Hits*, for example, brings the piece back to the seriousness of my present anxiety about not wanting to be a disappointment to my younger self. I am not drawn to the blue the way I am drawn to a pretty pink but at the same time it makes sense. Ridiculous strings of rose-colored weenies are draped around the figure, creating a layer of protection for her. They offer a familiar, silly, approachability to the more dense problems of her present. The piece is multi-faceted. Life is not always joyful and cheery and I cannot always view everything with the bright colored optimism that I hope to and that was so much easier to

find in my youth. The concepts I am dealing with in my work are echoed in the tension that the combination of bright, happy, idealized, colors gain in being paired with the darker, deeper colors that push me into reality and the present.

CHAPTER V

MY GENTLE

I would love to pride myself on being gentle. This is another trait Little Em possesses that I have been questioning if I have retained through my adult-ish times. At first glance I see myself as gentle: soft and tender. I care, I will take the time to care, I will show you that I care. On second glance I question my gentle. Thinking too much about it I am disappointed with my gentleness. Would Little, young, sweet, shy, softhearted Em act in the ways I have in my adultish time? Would she know better? As I've grown I've learned that not everything is black and white. The world seems sharp and pointy. Good is harder to find. I find my soft-self deflated by daily pokes and prods from this prickly world. If you step on a soft thing enough it gets squished, matted, and hardened. Am I squished, matted, and hardened? Hardened is stronger though, right? Can I be gently strong, carry a soft strength? I don't think it's that simple and I am exploring this complexity within myself.

With my piece, *Piggy Wiggly Whole Milk Right Before Bed*, I explore my gentle, usually finding more questions than answers but discovering myself along the way. I wanted to change my process with creating this piece. My process usually begins with an expression; the portrait. Instead I started with the crows; they were the first thing that came up when I thought of my prickly world fear: a representation of the deflation of my gentle. Along this process of painting and thinking about crows I did my research and

discovered that crows raise their offspring to adulthood and then often live in family groups after that. When a crow is unable to leave the nest, other crows will feed them and bring them nesting materials. They are empathetic, nurturing, considerate... gentle? Despite all of these things, crows are fierce. They are quick to attack when they are threatened but will not become aggressive without reason. As I said before, nothing is black and white. Maybe I can be considered as gentle as a crow.

My milk in this piece was what I thought of as soft, safe, and of a gentler time. When I was younger, my dad, brother, and I would crowd around the kitchen counter and have these big glasses of milk right before bed. We would talk about our days and life and silly things that would make us giggle and then all go to sleep with full milk bellies. We had at least two, usually three, Piggly Wiggly gallon jugs of whole milk in the fridge at all times. On special occasions, or if I was upset and put down by a prickly day, my dad would heat milk on the stove with a little bit of vanilla and use a fork to whisk it until it was warm and frothy. I would grip my toasty mug and try to settle down, feeling a little better and sporting a vanilla milk mustache. This was my favorite pre-tuck-in treat. There's something safe and comforting about those memories that feels gentle and careful. I needed to place the milk high up on my piece, it's important. But also precarious. Gentle moments are fleeting, precious, and precarious like milk on the edge of a shelf. They should be protected. As this piece evolved I saw the crows more as protectors of the gentle. They crowd around the announcement of gentle, gathering on a soft semi circle of white fur, creating a beady eyed wall between viewer and piece; between my gentle and the world. I realize that throughout my pieces I am often brought

to protecting my vulnerable characters of self-expression. They express my fears, my questions, or a momentary pause of reflection. In order to be vulnerable, there is something to be lost, I am allowing my soft self to be exposed and criticized by a not so soft world. The need for protection becomes necessary.

CHAPTER VI
THREE BIG FISH

Creating paradoxical moments and tensions, like sharp crows on soft fur, in my work revolve around my drive towards specificity. I want to be more specific because the more specific I am in my work the more I connect to it. It's about combatting the complicated emotions I feel presently or the anxiety I have for the future with the simpler past. In my piece *Three Big Fish* I combat these complicated emotions with three dauntingly large L'Oreal Shampoo Bottles that radiate from the figure. They are my tethers to being tiny in big white bathtub and strawberry scented hair. Crooked wet bangs cling to my forehead as I deep sea dive my L'Oreal Shampoo bottle down into the tub, swimming his little fish self through the bath water around me. The piece is on a 36" x 36" panel that is 2" deep. I sculpted a form out of insulation foam to seamlessly attach to the panel to create the shoulder of the figure that is painted onto the panel. The shoulder creates a sort of shelf for a shiny pink slinky, the one that has lived in my studio, getting use if I'm in need of a break or occupying my hands while I'm feverishly spewing ideas to someone who happened to stop in. My slinky sits on the figure like a parrot inhabits a pirate's shoulder. The bent body of the slinky becomes a companion for the journey ahead. The painted self portrait on this piece is looking to the right, not aware or not caring about the gaze of the viewer: entirely focused on something else, maybe you should be focused on it too? There's an expression of suspenseful expectancy. Pink

acrylic, smooth and flat, is covered with thick, pigmented, red stripes of oil paint across the torso to create a t-shirt, the kind of shirt my mom would call 'play clothes' that I'd wear in the heat of the summer. A little red scrunchie ties the figure's hair back. Deep dark green surrounds the figure in this piece, aware that she isn't in her idealized, bright colored world, regardless, she looks forward in expectancy for what is to come.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUDING

I want to focus on joy and excitement all the time. I want to be strong and brave and be able to face every conflict with the right answer and the right attitude, not letting anything get me down. I can ‘fake it till I make it’ but sometimes I really can’t make it. I want to be honest with my self, experiences and emotions but I don’t want them to consume me. I’ve been struggling with how much to let myself explore the bad: my feelings of anxiety and fear and sadness for what has been or what is now or what will be. I easily want to deny these emotions, put on a smile, my favorite yellow dress, and squish the bad back down until I can’t contain it or maybe, hopefully, if I’m lucky, it will just disappear... but when does that really happen?

My mindset often revolves around this notion that if I layer myself up with enough protection of the good, like my L’Oreal shampoo or a string of weenies, maybe the bad can’t get in. At the same time I know it’s better to address these things head on but also with a sense of balance so I don’t just dig myself into a hole of sad-- but also trying not to embrace the good so hard that I end up denying the present. My work is an attempt to deal with the more difficult things that I often don’t want to address but in a way that I find approachable. Finding the balance and approachability between all of these emotions and ways to deal with them is the goal. My work is a journey towards that

goal. Sometimes it can be laying down in defeat, it can be face-planting through hurdles but getting back up, but it can also be making successful strides towards balance.

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CATALOG OF IMAGES

Figure 1. *While Blasting Enya's Greatest Hits*, oil on panel, insulation foam, paper, embroidery thread, 65 x 52 in, 2020.

Figure 2. *When the Band Began to Play the Stars were Shining Bright*, oil paint on ripstop fabric, wooden letters, hamper, 82 x 37 in, 2020.

Figure 3. *Scholastic Book Fair*, oil on cellophane, Lisa Frank stickers, 24 x 24 in, 2019.

Figure 4. *Jump Castle, Asthma, Sheet Cake*, oil on vinyl, flagging tape, 23.5 x 66.5 in, 2019.

Figure 5. *Piggly Wiggly Whole Milk Right Before Bed*, acrylic on panel, faux fur, simulation foam, oil on paper, 95 x 36 in, 2020.

Figure 6. *Three Big Fish*, acrylic on panel, oil on panel, insulation foam, oil on paper, slinky, 36 x 40 in, 2020.



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