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The foundation of this work explores how one can exercise forgiveness, and the come to acknowledge the innocence of the perpetrator of the harm done. Forty-nine portraits done in oil paint comprise a radical act of forgiving my father's physical and verbal abuse lasting twelve years from childhood through early adolescence. When I was fifteen, my father answered the call from God, committing himself to accept Christ as his personal savior and to preach the Word of God. Matthew 18:22: "21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!" As an adult, taking the inward, conscious steps to forgive my father, I questioned the practical application and usage of the scripture. From therefore decided to create my own version of forgiveness. This act was not intended to result in a final reconciliation, but rather was an exercise to explore the fragile human emotions and the complex dynamics of family abuse as they engage with issues of culture, parental control, and lack of love. I See Him In Me was an outward act or expression of compassion that affirmed innocence, both his and mine.

7x7: I SEE HIM IN ME

by

Charles Williams

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Approved by

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### *7x7: I See Him In Me*

The foundation of this work explores how one can exercise forgiveness, and the come to acknowledge the innocence of the perpetrator of the harm done. Forty-nine portraits done in oil paint comprise a radical act of forgiving my father's physical and verbal abuse lasting twelve years from childhood through early adolescence. When I was fifteen, my father answered the call from God, committing himself to accept Christ as his personal savior and to preach the Word of God. *Matthew* 18:22: "21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!" As an adult, taking the inward, conscious steps to forgive my father, I questioned the practical application and usage of the scripture. From therefore decided to create my own version of forgiveness. This act was not intended to result in a final reconciliation, but rather was an exercise to explore the fragile human emotions and the complex dynamics of family abuse as they engage with issues of culture, parental control, and lack of love.

*I See Him In Me* was an outward act or expression of compassion that affirmed innocence, both his and mine. I'm interested in how human beings interact with one another when in different environments. I question and explore unfamiliar perspectives to see how we can connect within our differences. It is within my own personal moral view that I find myself compelled to create visuals examples to expose, to narrate, and to illustrate hope for guiding us all toward connectedness. From observing various environments, I have learned how to see multiple perspectives through questioning my own, as well as others. From where I stand, I'm able to find those quiet moments to stop, observe, and experience what is present and to respond as an artist.

In working toward an M.F.A. degree, I was curious about and open to the possibilities for the development of new ideas, for gaining community commutative support, for furthering my career, and for personal and artistic

growth. Early in my artistic practice, I was interested in capturing in paint the organic nature of the landscape. I sought to translate natural beauty into aesthetic beauty. Although I engaged in mindful study and observation of the landscape, and spent countless hours in the studio attempting to bring more to my painting than what I had objectively observed, I concluded that something significant was missing from my art practice. Therefore, I began, and was also publically noted for, my body of work, *Swim*, a series of self-portraits based on my personal experiences with water combined with cultural narratives involving racial stereotypes.

I felt the MFA program would provide a scholarly and artistic environment for the development of my work. I was willing to confront challenges, both personal and academic, and took necessary steps toward understanding myself through my art making process. I realized that if I allowed myself to trust and let go, further exploration in the studio could redefine my practice as an artist.

In graduate school I began to research into the history of the United States (1900-1970) and to investigate photographic images from the Civil Rights Movement. As a result of that research, my style of painting began to shift from photorealism to action painting, that explored mark-making from a more intuitive and emotional point of view. I explored this new style of painting with the series *Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See*, a more subjective body of work stemming from current reports of ongoing police brutalities perpetrated onto Black Americans. Subsequently, I moved toward a more discursive body of work with *Everyone Loves The Sunshine*, based on historical photographs of Black and white Americans coming together during the 1960's. My intention was to remind us what is possible.

Both series' make use of documentary photography. It was important for me to use photography to ground my paintings in historical evidence. They carry the traces of the photographic image as document, as portrait, as instrument of social change in the name of justice. Therefore, all of these concepts are incorporated into my work through appropriation.

Both series' challenge cultural standards; however, in *Everyone Loves the Sunshine* (as with my current thesis work), I was motivated to explore a different point of view that began by looking inward. I had to re-examine historical events to engage in a more open and nuanced dialogue with contemporary events. Francisco Goya has influenced my most recent works. In his *Disaster of War* series, Goya records the trauma associated with the French conquest and military occupation of his native Spain.

His figures were often integrated with re-appropriated historical sculptural form and religious iconography, which conveyed his personal viewpoints. These views communicate established hierarchies, which make these etchings more than just documented events. In *The Disaster of War* series, plate 37, entitled *This Is The Worse (Esto Es Peor)*, 1810, Goya re-appropriated the Hellenistic Greek Belvedere Torso sculpture in to construct the body of the dead victim. In plate 15, *And There's Nothing To Be Done*, 1810, he recreates the blind-folded figure as the *Alter Christus (Another Christ)*. Goya's etchings offered an example for me to reestablish my own vision and intention for my work.

For my thesis work titled, *7x7: I See Him In Me*, I was compelled to move away from historical narratives and return to the personal. I was raised in a household with a mother, a father, two brothers and my grandmother who lived down the road in rural Georgetown, SC. As a middle class family, we appeared well kept and were put together nicely. Behind close doors, however, was a tense environment riddled with physical and verbal abuse. I was the middle child, sensitive and curious, and I questioned my father's dictatorial ways, which targeted me for abuse. For twelve years, my father took his pain and stress and anger out on my brothers and me. By enforcing his controlling, harsh lessons that he mistakenly thought he could prepare us for success. What he didn't realize was that his methods were physically and psychologically damaging to our development and growth, and more importantly, our connections to him as a father. I remember watching my father beat my older brother with a wooden broom, breaking his son's arm as he continued to utilize the broom as a weapon. I remember my father forcing my older brother to chase me down and drag me back to my father to be beaten in front of my siblings.

I developed a habit of running away; I feared being physically hurt. He would demand that my older brother hold me down while he whipped me with a dogwood tree switch or his western leather belt. After some beatings he would pick his nose and wipe snot on my shirt, laugh and tell me, "I'm doing this because I love you." I never understood how physical abuse equated to love. Eventually, however, I accepted it because he was my father, and because the behavior continued consistently for twelve years. There were many hard lessons delivered. My mother painfully would watch in agony as he abused us. Sometimes she would yell, "Stop!" Other times she would escape into her room. My mother was strong in her relationship with Christ. At times I would watch her secretly pray to God to change my father. On Fridays my paternal grandmother would buy things for us at the local grocery store, and for me she bought art supplies. I would sit near her while she watched TV, and sometimes I would draw her, or things that she had lying around and show her, saying, "Look, Grandma, at what I did." My grandmother and my mother were strong spiritual women who showed me how to love and how to express myself. My grandmother's house was a safe haven for me. Both my grandmother and mother would teach my brothers and me about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, which was very confusing for me, as my father's behavior was not congruent with those teachings. As a child I wondered, "If God is so great, why does my father beat me until I bleed?" "If he saves lives, why doesn't he save me, my brothers and my mother?" I grew weary of my mother sharing with us, "Do right and love your father." I grew weary of seeing my dad and my older brother physically fight in the backyard with my father using army tactics to hurt him. I grew weary of seeing my mother hold her head down in shame, feeling hopeless. After fifteen years of her consistent prayers, she finally received her request, "Save my husband."

My little brother and I were watching WCW wrestling one Saturday night at my grandmother's house while my father was sleeping on the couch. My grandmother was in the kitchen cooking dinner and I heard my dad tossing and turning, talking in his sleep. I continued to watch him, staring as if I wanted him to read my mind without waking him: "shut up!" His words continued until it became more forceful, angry and aggressive. He stated, "No! I will not preach your word." At the time my father had lost his job and most of his business assets, so our visits with my

grandmother were more frequent. I felt uncomfortable with the things he was saying as he slept and wrestled on the couch. I ran to get my grandmother. She held me tight and smiled, stating, “The Lord’s working on him.” He soon stopped and woke up with a weird, child-like, expression. At fifteen, I saw for the first time a happy expression on my father’s face. My mother later told me that my father was wrestling with an angel, and God told him He wanted him to preach His word to His people in the community. That night on the couch at my grandmother’s house was the moment he committed himself to give his life to Christ and answered the call to preach God’s gospel.

My father was later baptized and delivered a sermon on how God had saved him. All of this was weird, confusing, frustrating and made me angry as I reflected on the trauma he had brought to the family. I remember one school night I was upset about making a bad grade and I didn’t want to hear him lecture. My father looked at me and said calmly, “Son,” then a long pause, “I know you’re upset with me for how I’ve treated you in the past, but please understand that I love you. You have to see that your actions are hurting you by keeping this anger inside. Again, I understand you’re in pain and I’m truly sorry. I hope you can forgive me, and know that Christ is there for us to lean on him for help, guidance, and truth.” At that moment I began to surrender my anger and take steps toward forgiving my abusive father. I had trouble with this newly transformed version of my father. At the age of fifteen, I reacted to his transformation by responding negatively toward him just as he did to me growing up. The abuse had stopped from him, the anger was now gone, and the environment in our household changed. I realized after he spoke to me and I submitted myself to forgive, that he had broken the generations-old curse of family abuse and so did I.

*7x7: I See Him In Me* was created in response to my past, growing up with my abusive, controlling father and his transformation through Christ. In the biblical scripture from *Matthew*, Chapter 18, Peter asks the question, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (*Matthew* 18:21-22.) The message of the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Matthew* instructs that we must restore faith in one another and not limit others or ourselves through hard-heartedness. We must forgive as many times as it takes, just as God forgives

continually. This idea is also connected to the parable of the *Unforgiving Servant*, (*Ephesians 4:32*). Innocence is inferred in the title *I See Him In Me*. From looking at my father's childhood and early adult photographs, painting them every day, I engaged a physical exercise, an action in letting go of the physical and mental pain and abuse I endured. In the series *I See Him In Me*, five selected photographs of my father, from the time he was a child through his teenage years, were repeatedly painted. These documented family snapshots were repainted with my own 8 x 11 inch versions of the scratchboard. These versions of scratchpads were created using (in order of layering) gesso, melted crayon, gesso, and oil paint. After painting my father's portraits, I would incorporate tools that he used for physical abuse. Tools used as weapons, such as a hammer, a broom, a tree branch, a belt or shoe, and other various materials were utilized to intuitively scratch and distort the painted image of my father. The process of utilizing these tools allowed me to psychologically and emotionally create a place where I could express myself within the complex, layered, fragile works, as I expressed and recorded traumatic moments from my past. As I have moved forward in forgiving him, I want to communicate that people can receive a second chance through reflection and self-exploration toward healing.

My grandmother's purchases of art supplies—crayons, markers, paints, paper, scratch pads—allowed me to express myself and to interact with her. Her and my mother's continued combined efforts helped me to open up and let go through art. Five selected childhood photographs of my father were repeatedly painted from my own 8 x 11 inch scratchboard versions. The scratch pad is a small, intimate, fragile, matt board with wax crayon colors underneath an inked black surface. The colors are revealed by scratching into the black ink to create an image. The colors come as an emotionally charged surprise. The emotional connectivity when scratching onto the surface reveals a visual surprise of the colors. There is a psychological association with play that is connected to childhood games of discovery such as hide and seek, and the treasure hunt. Five selected childhood photographs of my father were repeatedly painted from my own 8x11 inch scratchboard versions. Before painting the images on top of the scratchboard acrylic surface, I researched color associations and the psychology of colors associated with trauma.

Reading Joseph Albers' color theory book, I used his two researched examples of vibrating colors. examples of vibrating colors. The first set of colors was "orange tomato red" beside "matt gray blue" that were painted from crayons melted onto gesso-coated watercolor paper. The second set of vibrating colors, "slime radiant green" next to "rose pink" was applied onto a second sheet of white, gesso-coated, watercolor paper. I prepared forty-nine sheets of prepared paper with two coats of white gesso on watercolor paper, melted crayon, with white gesso painted on top. The final layer is the painted portrait. The multiple layers, built up, make the surface tough to inscribe, which is a metaphor for the challenges of giving myself permission to become vulnerable and open, to listen from within, to paint intuitively, rather than to rely than to rely on tight control and my acquired skills. This method, has allowed me to explore and create a new language for my studio practice. The act of painting each of these five images of my father is an intuitive first stage prior to breaking down, distorting, manipulating, and literally digging into the image. Forty-nine times, staring for countless hours at my father's portrait, I translated the Biblical idea of forgiveness into art. I believed that by this act of staring, I am confronting my father while exercising self-expression. My method now incorporates references to abstract expressionism and action painting, as well as to more conventional forms of portraiture.

Looking into the process of inscription within art history, I found that the technical term for the physical uncovering and scratching away is *sgraffito*. This process was used in fifteenth and sixteenth century European and African art. My use of *sgraffito*, or scratchboard, is complemented by my adoption of automatic drawing as a mode for gaining access to the subconscious. In this series of works, my psyche dictates my mark making. This mode of working has precedents in Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. Andre Masson's works offer an inspirational example in this regard. These distorted, transformative paintings -- achieved through the delineation and subsequently incised, expressionist excavation of my father's photographic image -- ultimately celebrate his childhood innocence, thus leading to forgiveness.

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