Anxiously Watching and Waiting

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

*Anxiously Watching and Waiting* is a personal examination and exploration through painting. The paintings exhibited are about witnessing people close to me undergo major life-changes. Attending ceremonies commemorating these events, I became a spectator as well as a participant, and during these occasions I began reflecting upon my own life. Because of the introspection caused and the strong emotions evoked, I felt driven to paint about these events. The exhibition includes paintings about my younger brother’s transformation, friends getting married, and about myself and my future.

Acknowledgments

A special thanks to Nina B. Marshall, my thesis advisor, for her vital role in this process. Nina has been my painting professor for every class, so she has really seen me through the entire process. Her belief in me and in my work has truly been encouraging and has helped me to grow as a painter. This year, she has devoted much time and energy meeting me on a weekly basis to discuss ideas and concepts and to critique my paintings. Her insight into each piece has been crucial as well. Thank you Nina for devoting so much to this project.
Anxiously Watching and Waiting is a project of personal examination and exploration. I am at a time in my life when everyone and everything around me is changing. Throughout the past year, I witnessed people close to me undergo major life-changes, and I attended many ceremonies commemorating these events: several graduations, and weddings of friends and family. At these ceremonies, I am a spectator as well as a participant: crying at the wedding of a close friend, dancing at a reception, watching proudly at my brother’s graduation. Though these celebrations are dedicated to the persons involved, I cannot help but to reflect on my own life during such occasions. Attending these events results in introspection and evokes strong emotions. I felt driven to paint about these events, not just to document them, but to record my feelings and even to sort them out. I also want to tell stories through my paintings, so that the viewer might be a witness in the same way that I was - a spectator looking in from the outside and searching herself as well.

Transformation

Transformation is probably the most important series in my exhibition. I feel that I have the strongest personal connection to these paintings. My brother’s graduation from Marine basic training was very difficult for me to witness emotionally. I felt that he had grown up overnight. It also meant we were parting ways as a family, and I would only see him on occasional visits.

These paintings tell the story of my brother’s difficult journey becoming a Marine. They show him “before” and “after” - from a child to an adult. The portraits are influenced by actual photographs of him, and only a few months had elapsed from the time the first one was taken to the one of him in uniform. These images reflect the extreme physical transformation which occurred. His facial expression on both images is important as well. The first painting depicts a somewhat dumbfounded awkward-look-
ing kid who is unsure of his surroundings. The other portrait shows him playing the part of a soldier, wearing a stern facade, but his eyes are those of a young boy who is scared, as if he is on the verge of tears.

The second panel of soldiers serves as a transition between the two portraits. It is interesting that these young men look like the toy soldiers that they may have played with not too long ago. The figures are faceless and abstracted in order to show their loss of individuality after joining the service.

The final painting of the marine barracks shows the isolation and loneliness of such a journey. The repetition of the lines in the painting reflects the discipline and monotony of a soldier's life at that time. It is also an intriguing notion that each young man literally sheds his baggage when becoming a soldier. Material possessions are no longer an important aspect of life. Each individual is able to fit all of his necessary belongings neatly into just a box at the foot of his bed.

Grasping for a Fairy Tale

Dancing

I have also attended many weddings lately. I found myself watching the happy new couples and wondering if I would ever find someone with whom I could spend the rest of my life. I also contemplate
the ideal of marriage versus the real thing - how happy and satisfied the couple really is and what happens behind closed doors. Though I may be upset or introspective one moment, the next moment I find myself dancing with my friends and celebrating right along with them.

These paintings reference photographs that show figure groupings frozen in time. By painting them, I attempt to capture a moment as if the viewer is there witnessing the event and watching people interact. And though the scenes come from photographs, I manipulate the settings to add a sense of mystery and uncertainty. These are not merely snapshots of girls reaching for the bouquet or wedding guests dancing at a reception; these images are my interpretations and my memories of the occasions.

![Empty Glasses](image)

*Empty Glasses* was the first, and definitely the most difficult, painting for me. When I was beginning, I had many ideas to sort through. I attempted to fit them all into one painting, and it might have been better to "spread out" over several panels. I became so frustrated with this painting because I felt that I would never resolve it. Then, after putting it away for a few months, I was able to face the painting with a fresh outlook. I reworked and simplified the image, and now I am happy with the outcome.

*Empty Glasses* is a self-portrait executed at a time when my own life was in a state of chaos, and I think that the confusion comes through in the painting. It has to do with the social aspect of college and the bar scene. In the end, a taste of this lifestyle did not fulfill me, but left me feeling empty. This painting shows two sides of myself having a conversation. I am trying to pick myself up off of the ground.
Because these paintings are about the people closest to me, I continued the series with the newest character in my life, Ryan. This is the final painting and a conclusion piece in a sense, but it is also about a new beginning and a hopeful outlook for the future. We are both waiting to see what happens.

The superhero figures in the painting are there to help to illustrate a dichotomy. Although Ryan is very mature and focused, he still holds onto the toys of his childhood. By identifying with these characters his whole life, he has come to espouse the values that these heroes represent, such as justice, truth, and heroism.

There is another dichotomy in that Ryan is a very loyal and grounded person, yet he is uncertain about his future. He has been anxiously waiting to see if he is accepted into medical school. I juxtaposed the superhero poses with figures looking away and standing with hands in pockets, giving the sense of uncertainty.

I feel that this is my breakthrough painting. I was able to paint the portrait using color in a way that I failed to do in my other paintings. The colors are vibrant, not washed-out or chalky. I feel that by the end of this project I made a technical leap in the way I use color.

This has not only been an incredible learning process, but a personal journey as well. I have always been interested in painting the human figure. I am largely influenced by Toulouse-Lautrec and Larry Rivers, whose expressionistic figure paintings are refreshing and invigorating. I attempt to paint the figure with a similar energy and movement. I enjoy painting groups of figures frozen in time. In this
way one can observe interactions between people captured in just one moment. I also sometimes tap into various painting styles and techniques. Some areas in the painting may be carefully modeled, while others are more loosely rendered and even sketchy. This balance is what I love about painting. Sometimes it is hard to know which aspects of the painting should be more refined, and even whether or not the painting itself is finished.

Over the course of the past year, I have explored myself through painting. This process has allowed me to think about my life as well as my relationships with friends and family that I am painting. I have also learned much about the medium of oil paint, color, and technique. I am satisfied with the outcome of this project, knowing that I have investigated my subject with a certain degree of depth and worked through the creative process, which has been difficult and frustrating at times. This has been a journey, and now that I am graduating from college, it is time to cross over into a new aspect of my life.
Bibliography


Anxiously Watching and Waiting

Honors Thesis Project

paintings by Amber Williams

University Theater Gallery
April 16 - April 22, 2001

Opening Reception
Monday, April 16, 2001
5-7 pm

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