

BEACHCOMBING

by

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CHAPTER I

ORIGIN AND FRAMEWORK

MY FLORIDA: YOU CAN'T MAKE THIS SHIT UP¹

I love my beach, my coast. The patterns, the surprises, the changes. No matter how hard I try, I cannot escape the draw of the beach, of my coastline from which I have been absent for years.

My practice of painting about desire for faraway landscapes and their promises of something outside of my everyday life began as a teenager. I painted abstract mountainous landscapes which promised escape from my mundane upbringing in the safe, suburban Clearwater, Florida. I moved from Florida to Boulder, Colorado, in January 2016, during my early twenties. It did not take too long that winter, scraping ice from my windshield and tromping through the snow, to know that this move to the landlocked West was not the great escape I desired. My paintings turned tropical as I gazed towards home. I began to understand why my parents moved to the Tampa Bay area in the 1970's: they were searching for a beach where they could live and explore, one that would satisfy their cravings for adventure and the ocean. And now, despite my distance, I find myself harboring those same desires. My work is inseparable from my home landscape.

From far away, Florida became a cartoon concept rather than my mundane reality. I could not quit dreaming about this neon, overhyped paradise. Once bored with living along the Florida coast and thrilled to leave, I was now head over heels with the flashy, advertised idea of the place. At the same time, I knew the landscape of home, the minute details and the shapes of the land. I missed that familiarity.

As an adolescent, I unwittingly cultivated a deep biophilia in the Florida summers. I

¹ This is what my dad says when we are walking along the beach or boating along the coast.

explored the neighborhood fields where frogs laid their eggs, dots of black covering the grass. We – family, friends– picked blueberries, hunted for shark’s teeth, and beachcombed for the most surprising seashells. Spoil islands guaranteed abundance. Anything unfamiliar had the potential to spark joy. Vignettes of my sister and I swimming down to the seafloor to pluck a sand dollar from a bed of thousands, or watching a wall of summer rain emerge and engulf our bodies, filled my memory.

The dreamt Florida suggests perfect tans, leisure activities, sport, sun, and a worry-free life. My experience of home, while not exactly aligned with this vision, provided similar sensations which are borne from different sources, such as exploring along the beach or in the parks and gardens and swamps enmeshed in the built landscape. When I am at the beach, I expect to play, to be filled with joy, to be excited. My recollections, too, are of moments where pleasure is central. This pleasure is the reason I revisit the memories time after time. I recount and I yearn. Memories change when accessed, vacation advertisements are saturated and edited. The edges of reality soften, disappear.

SENSATION AND SEARCH

Far from the coast I know, I find these sensations in the practice of painting. The landscapes, fragmented and weird, are at once attempts to fulfill my longing and to offer a shared exploration. My practice is a repetitive visual dreaming, an active search. I cultivate the sensations of excitement which lead to personal fulfillment. It is a practice of happiness.

Just as I am comfortable exploring my home coastline, my painting practice has a familiar structure. From the familiar, I explore the unfamiliar. The state which I have encountered while swimming or walking up and down the coast, lost in land and thought, and which I search for now in a concentrated way, can be called flow. Flow is defined by Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as a state of optimal experience which is characterized by deep involvement and concentration, enjoyment of the process, and a sense of transformation

in one's time. Csikszentmihalyi notes "In our studies, we found that every flow activity, whether it involved competition, chance, or any other dimension of experience, had this in common: It provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality."² Finding flow is my first reason for making. I am thrilled with the possibilities of discovery, even with the idea of placing two colors next to each other and seeing what happens. I paint not only to experience, but to share that experience. My works are invitations for discovery.

At the same time, chasing a sense of flow and contentment is not the only purpose of this painting project. I think this search of mine, my desire to escape one reality and enter into a new and improved one, is not mine alone. I only need to imagine the default wallpaper on my family Microsoft desktop circa 2001, the iconic *Bliss* taken by Charles O'Rear of the rolling green California Wine Country hills under a blue sky.³ I remember my neighbor's wall calendar, each month featuring an image of another seemingly untouched island. Google searches and social media feeds swirl with endless photographs of faraway destinations.

German filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl closes her seminal article "In Defense of the Poor Image" with: "The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality."⁴

While the images I reference are not always poor or displaced images, the idea of circulation and fracture applies to my work. Painting about the beach approaches the line of boredom, as the beach itself is oversold and overhyped, its image circulating for decades. Pictures of faraway beaches edited and cropped are removed from the realities of the actual places. The images become wishes themselves, dreams of the untouched, the undiscovered, a

² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 74.

³ "Bliss (image)," Wikipedia, accessed February 25, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bliss_\(image\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bliss_(image)).

⁴ Steyerl, Hito. "In defense of the poor image." *e-flux journal* 10, no. 11 (2009).

possible reality apart from the one I am in. The images of advertised beaches are seductive, meant to sell the possibility of contentment and personal reinvention. These places never quite match their realities. The idea of untouched lands full of relaxation is typically tarnished by the flocks of other tourists, of bad traffic, of thick humid stickiness, of mosquitos and sunburns. I frequently hope for the former in my search for the perfect place. These more-than-real landscape images circulate and keep the dream of a distant place alive.

I grew up with the idea that I am supposed to get an education, get a good job, and get to work. Occasionally there would be the reward of a vacation, and eventually, after decades, I would arrive at the ultimate achievement: a cushy retirement, a condo somewhere nice, unlimited leisure time for the end of days. When I moved to Colorado, I picked up a copy of Tim Ferriss' *The 4-Hour Workweek*. I read it in a day. I was ready to reinvent myself and consider how I could get out of this boring narrative of work-then-retire. I considered the prospect of a steady 9 to 5 to be revolting. *The 4-Hour Workweek* promised me and millions of other readers a way out of this labor construct through lifestyle design, which would allow me to take-mini retirements and test out my dreams rather than toiling for one faraway wish in 40 or 50 years.⁵ I was sold. I consumed more and more of this self-improvement literature, thrilled by the possibilities. These sources often discussed travel as a method of accessing the promises of the faraway and reaching one's full potential.

Later, I noticed many of the writers and podcasters suggesting this lifestyle improvement through a brand of self-discipline and Stoic thinking were often tied to Silicon Valley and start-up investing. This felt a bit too close to the burgeoning economy of turning personal information into products, and began taking on a sinister edge as I consumed this content. Some of the lifestyle improvements began to feel like less of a conduit to total freedom, and more like a system in

⁵ Timothy Ferriss, *The 4-hour workweek: Escape 9-5, live anywhere, and join the new rich*, (New York: Crown, 2009).

which I was the product. The tension between my desires and how to achieve them only intensified.

Grace Weaver put this sense of skepticism well in her interview with Nylon magazine speaking to the title of her show: “It’s just *BEST LIFE*. It’s a simple phrase that opens up the more you think about it. And maybe it’s just me, but I think there’s something kind of bizarre and maybe a little bit dark about the idea of living your best life. Like how much are we going to try to optimize our lives? It seems somehow to me exceptionally torturous to feel the pressure to live your best life.”⁶

The more I considered it, the more attaching oneself to the dreams of a specific landscape seemed like an extension of this lifestyle optimization. Landscape, and for me, the warm coastal subtropical landscape of Clearwater beach, began to function as a place where dreams collected. I was sold on the idea of the place rather than its experience. The experience of landscape as a site of discovery and wonder felt further away from me the more I grew up and began working. Rarely did I spend afternoons exploring the beach or paying close attention to the bugs roaming in the grass. When I did visit home, I was tied to my computer, working remotely. The close biophilic ties to my Florida coast had begun to sever. The landscape and its promises began taking place more in my mind than in my reality. The land became a backdrop rather than something I was tangled up with.

In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai discusses the aesthetic of zaniness as one strung between play and labor, creating a sense of unsettled desperation.⁷ The often alienated labor that institutions and corporations insist on, the system of trading my time for money, does not simply produce value for these institutions. It also produces within me a discontent with reality, a desire to play and explore outside of this system. The landscapes I want to explore only exist in pictures, distant and pristine. They are glimpses of what could be and what is not.

⁶ Grace Weaver, “Grace Weaver Paints About Skin Care and Avocado Toast,” interview by Jane Drinkard, Nylon, September 14, 2018, <https://www.nylon.com/articles/grace-weaver-paintings>.

⁷ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2012.

My beach is my escape from realities around labor. When I am engaged with a deep observation in the landscape, experiencing sensations of joy through the act of searching and moving about along the coast, I come closer to my ideals of connection with the ecosystem. At times I am strung between my ideals and a sense of flow. My paintings observe my own internal zaniness as I labor with my body to construct images of places unreal. They are artifacts and monuments to the contradiction I live with: my love of exploring the land, and the desperate labor to optimize my reality within my search for joy.

JOY, HOME, SAFETY, CONTROL

I cannot control reality. I want to – I want to live in bliss that never ends, exploring the environment as in my childhood, untethered to daily duties. I am not in control of time, of the landscape, of the results of this search. Luckily, images sometimes come to me in glimpses and dreams, in a flash of something living in the landscape out of the corner of my eye. Sometimes I can turn and look directly at that moving hermit crab, watch it move about in its own world apart from mine. Sometimes, in passing moments, I successfully cultivate the sensations I value: those of joy and of flow when searching and finding.

When these moments occur, I want to capture them, to the same degree as I would like to pick up and take home a rock with a lovely pattern or a shiny shell. Painting is my way of pinning these moments, internal and external, visual and felt, and arranging them on the picture plane, where I can keep them safe. I can return to something that might slip away because I will have placed it somewhere secure. If these moments are visualized and physically exist outside of me, I can maintain control for a moment – or so I think. And while I know the power is in the experience, the moments and objects kept in image can still serve as a reminder.

In my moments of joy, I am suspended in time. I am engaged fully in the moment of discovery and awe. My attention is fixed.

Outside of these moments, I forget how good they feel. This is similar to forgetting how good post-workout endorphins can feel. I forget that I can fill up an internal void with these good feelings. The memory of the feeling fades into the past, not extending into the present. In an effort to satisfy my hungry ghost⁸ I turn to the easy habit of consumption, spending money, looking for the next solution to an invented problem. This is how I think of the vacation meant to satisfy a lifestyle craving versus the experience up close with the land. I indulge in the wrong places, and the answers here fade quickly, more smokescreen than substantive.

When I experience flow, the connection with land and self, I remember. The discovery can happen anywhere, and then the joy returns and I wish to capture it again. By painting, I can cultivate those feelings more readily than I can travel home or be immersed in the land. It is the “practicing” facet of my practice which delivers the joy and flow as I take memories of the experienced world and process them into new surprises.

During my search for joy, I am suspended between the last moment of joy and the next. Sometimes I forget that it is the thing I search for. When I realize that I am without the joy and flow, I often worry. Florida is my home, and though it brings me moments of joy to be at home, roving around on the beach, I worry about its future. Suffering ahead of time, I dwell on the death of those I love, of not being able to return to the house I grew up in. In the words of Seneca, “We suffer more in imagination than in reality.”⁹ I invent my suffering. I suffer prematurely, perhaps as an instinct for self-preservation and home-preservation (which often feel one in the same). Joy is about existing in the moment, in flow, unaware and in sync with time simultaneously. Suffering deals with the past and the present, and though it is based in love, it is also based in the desire to grasp onto what I cannot hold.

⁸ “Hungry Ghost,” Wikipedia, Accessed March 3, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungry_ghost.

⁹ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, Vol. 1. (London: Heinemann), 1917. 75.

Through this lens, painting is the cultivation of joy and the desperate capture of the fleeting. I cannot step in the same river twice.¹⁰ So often I am distracted, forgetful, thinking about the future of the past, the leaf in the river which passed me minutes or hours ago, now long gone. I forget to attend to the present. This relationship with time can make everything seem so absurd and fragile. The images are safe from my forgetfulness, bits of information tucked away. My paintings are a personal library, a lexicon of shape and color to revel in and remind me of joy. Images, shapes, and colors captured are less likely to be forgotten and fade away. When they are safe on paper or canvas, I can release my internal grip on these moments and move along in my search. It is a relief.

I miss home, but its physical form is simply the inlet through which I access feelings of security and safety. To feel at home is to be secure and fulfilled. The flow of thought is secure in the image, and the paper or canvas becomes home, ink and pastel embedded into the surfaces, kept safe. Each painting is a home for a passing moment, a way to witness the ephemeral nature of experience.

I aim to make the paintings sweet and playful, like listening to a Sublime song or swimming for fun with my sister. As the lead character Santiago in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* discovers, the treasure is at home.¹¹ However, I could not see how valuable the connection with the land was, the comfort of a place deeply known, until I had departed. When I am far away, I need to disguise or distract from the pain of being apart. The worry and the absence in the space between home and myself can overwhelm me. I distract myself by creating a new home in images. I must cultivate good times and joyful spaces. I must practice being vividly alive and connected before it all ends. I insist on joy as a reason to keep on living. It is a constant search to fulfill the desire for a life of bliss. I am always practicing and searching.

¹⁰ Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified June 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/heraclitus/>.

¹¹ Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, trans. Alan R. Clarke (New York: HarperCollins), 1993.

There is forever a new image to capture and include in my collected moments of joy and excitement. My scenes are permutations for how each shape and color can exist, and each comes with the opportunity cost of another reality foregone. The search to capture every moment while more collect is endless, an eternal project within the finite span of time I have. Under this way of existing, desire will never be fulfilled, the idealized never fully comes into view. Painting is home and not-home, a frontier that is more home than home is, so personal in its form. In this consistent capture, there is a promise of rest and the ongoing lack thereof. As long as I am working to capture the images, I risk not living within the moment – forever stepping on the shadow of what was. This repeated action gives me life but refuses to let me achieve the end: the idealized beach, the endless moment of joy. The surface of the work becomes the visual reckoning of this dilemma.

I believe in the power of the self to nurture a reality as close as possible to paradise through mindset and practice. I am always returning to the quote from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."¹² I choose to practice bliss-making while I am alive, even though I recognize the practice is imperfect and makes me ache. I believe I can construct the feeling of home around me, even when far away, externalizing my internal landscape.

LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENT

I think of landscape – alternatively, "environment," – in four ways: as the physical, real place; the remembered environment; the advertised or dreamt environment; and the internal environment.

The physical environment is the totality of any environment or landscape or ecosystem. I think this is nearly impossible to fully understand since my human perception skews and

¹² John Milton, Barbara K. Lewalski, *Paradise Lost* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

re-colors and is only one way of understanding the environment. Still, it is the other, the place in which I go to connect to myself.

The remembered environment is that of my home where I am attached to the place through a subset of knowledge based upon lived experience. I am familiar with a subset of the physical environment and this collection of knowledge allows me to have a relationship with the land over time and through personal memory. This remembered environment can expand and change with time as I experience, expand, and forget the physical environment. As a teenager, I detested the beach as a way to rebel, claiming my jadedness as a badge of honor. Far away from the beach and from late adolescence, I have begun reclaiming my love of the beach, a rebellion against my younger self.

The advertised or dreamt environment is a way of looking at a given landscape through a social or cultural lens. I use the American tourist lens as a foil for the landscape I know personally – the remembered environment. The dreamt environment is often collective. For example, the beach became a mid-to-late century dream land in American tourism. The lexicon of the American tourist beach landscape is that of smiling plastic bright red starfishes, simplified pink flowers, and friendly bright teal dolphins. It is the association with place over time, collected through image circulation and storytelling. In the history of Florida, the beach was not always considered a place for play. It took hundreds of years for travelers to visit this land after colonial expansion. The tourist industry bloomed in the late 1800s. Rest away from home and natural spring water were considered remedies for health ailments such as tuberculosis. Taking the water developed into a trend to take vacation time away from everyday life, the middle class following the wealthy in this pursuit.¹³ By the time my parents were meeting on the beach and sailing together in the 1980's, the beach landscape was firmly a place of play and leisure. It is

¹³ Tracy J Revels, *Sunshine paradise: A History of Florida Tourism*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).

the souvenir-shop Florida that I think of when I think of the dreamt environment, a full-on reinventing of reality through color and form and advertising.

The internal environment, like the remembered environment, is personal and far less collective. It can be considered the inner or the emotional landscape. It responds to my external environment as I swim or beachcomb or hike. When I see a stingray swim away from me as I wade in the water, my inner environment is affected – I am delighted and surprised. I think of the inner environment as the most abstract environment because it does not have a direct visual corollary. Instead it is a collection of experiences of flow, enjoyment, suffering, anxiety, and on and on.



Classic Harbor. Oil pastel on paper and panel. 2022.

This is best expressed in the painting *Classic Harbor*, an abstract oil pastel painting which uses the repetition of ovals and other basic shapes to build up a space and whose title leans heavily on metaphor. The title suggests that this place is not only related to the landform,

but the internal act of harboring. The build-up of marks and the voids of the large white ovals are inseparable from the paper. The shapes are held persistently in their home on paper, just as I harbor moments of joy within my internal landscape.

Each painting is its own space or environment. I start with the idea of the landscape I know and make according to my memories of the Florida coast. However, the landscape in my painting is not a reproduction of something already visually existent, but of my own personal geology and emotional scape, translated into a language of abstraction. I use references to the horizon, the color of the sky, or a pile of ovals representing stones to build this place.

Because my work is as much about the inner emotional and psychological landscape as it is about the physical landscape, I often consider the history of Romantic landscape painting and Chinese landscape painting. Those working under Romantic ideas in the late 18th century favored emotion over reason as a driving force for creativity and treasured the individual's internal experience, painting landscapes which communicated internal emotions. Aesthetic experiences in the landscape were often about the beauty and the sublime.¹⁴ While artists like Caspar David Friedrich did pave the way in the Western world to use the landscape as a carrier for non-physical information, Chinese painters – often of the literati class – had been painting imagined landscapes for hundreds of years before Romanticism took hold. With the Tang Dynasty the tradition of ink wash painting began, going on to inform Chinese landscape painting traditions for over a thousand years before Western Romanticism took hold. The aim of Chinese landscape painting, especially ink wash painting, was to capture the spirit of something rather than its exact form.¹⁵

I think of this project of capturing the spirit of landscape as an act of abstraction. I fill in the gaps of what I remember a landscape to be like with the feeling of what it is, and that comes

¹⁴ William Vaughan, "Romanticism," Grove Art Online, Accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www-oxfordartonline-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000073207>.

¹⁵ "Ink Wash Painting," Wikipedia, accessed February 28, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ink_wash_painting.

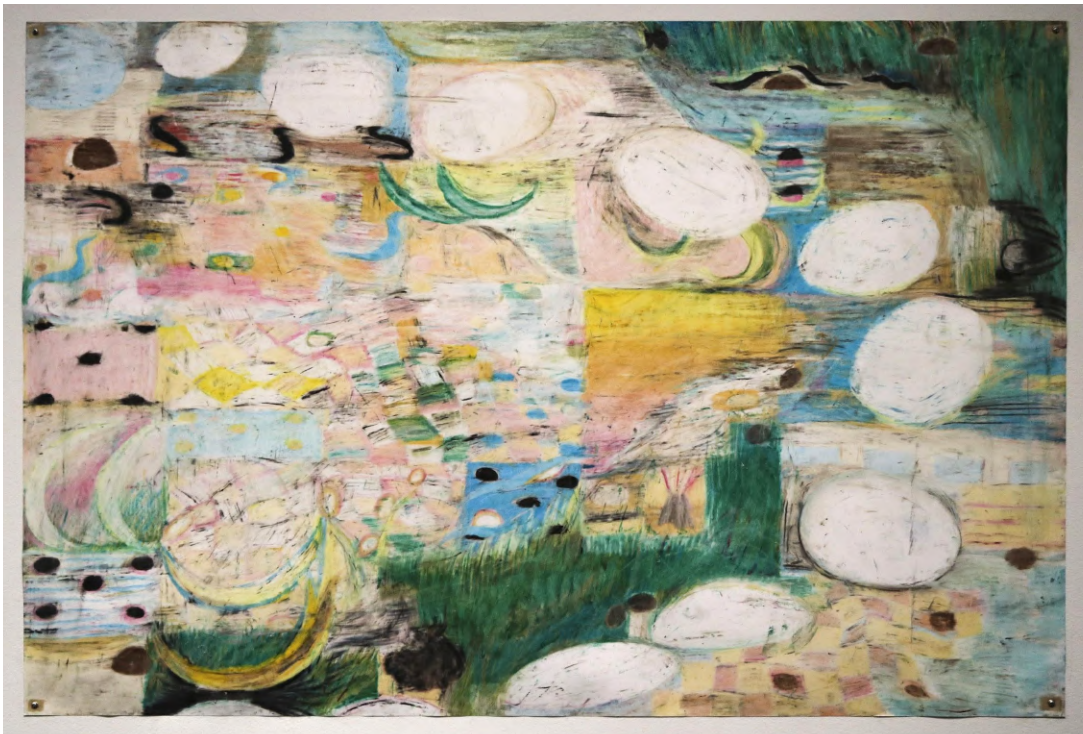
out through abstraction. When the literati painted scrolls, mountains became less nuanced and more about the pattern and repetition of line and value to form weight. A sense of the sublime emerged from the blank paper. The ideal form of the landscape emerged in its creation.

While I currently work to capture the spirit of a landscape, my landscapes are fragmented and abstracted, infused with the spirit of the current socio-political and technological landscape. My landscapes are meant to evoke a feeling of endlessness and restlessness, alongside my intention to make them sweet and playful. The constant visual movement, as if on a speedboat trying to glimpse a flash of something underwater, disrupts historic landscape traditions centering tranquility and the sublime. Instead, my paintings center on my lack of focus when I consider a landscape. Attention is divided, space is fragmented. I glance up from my phone, or I get caught in a wave of thought about something someone said to me, emails unanswered, the parking meter running out as I sit watching physical waves roll onto the shore. I come in and out of focus on the landscape. Not only am I distracted by thoughts, but my attention switches between the panorama and the micro as I lift a cowrie shell up to eye-level. The landscape I create is never as fully relaxing as I wish it to be, but it reflects back to me my values and my position as someone existing in this time. I insist on capturing a landscape that is not there, one that I am not even attending to while I am immersed in it. My ideals alone do not pervade the landscape; my reality does as well.

Around the time Romantic notions were gaining traction, William Gilpin was introducing his *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770*. Gilpin's ideas of the picturesque were about the beauty of the landscape within a picture. He toured the English landscape to behold picturesque scenery, influencing other travelers to do the same.¹⁶ This framing of the landscape for pleasurable consumption seems to be a root of the tourist experience which I

¹⁶ Stephanie Ross, "Picturesque," Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, Accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199747108.001.0001/acr ef-9780199747108-e-567>.

grew up alongside in Florida. This kind of leisure travel landscape commodification exists today in the postcard racks at grocery stores, in the highly saturated landscape photo of a palm tree swooning above a white sand beach alongside bright blue water on a desktop in an office, and in travel-influencer Instagram accounts with a collection of well-visited vistas. I can experience the picturesque, or a shadow of the picturesque, with a grid of images from a Google search providing me with an impression of what to focus on and what to cut out in any given landscape. This framing and curating of landscape snippets, arranging them alongside one another, feeds directly back into my work. I collect moments of an imagined landscape and arrange them, as in *Voyage*, seen below.



Voyage. Oil pastel on paper. 2022.

I love considering how Monet actively engaged with this sort of landscape framing to reject reality in the name of beauty, turning the coast more desirable and more artificial than real in the act of segmentation. In *Monet on the Normandy Coast*, Robert L. Herbert reveals that Monet would travel along the Normandy coast with his family, and while painting, crop out

evidence of the leisured resort lifestyle in which he was an active participant. Monet's landscapes were inseparable from the social trappings surrounding these natural spaces, but his choice to crop out evidence of the resort spaces allowed him to reimagine the coast as wild or at least rustic and relatively untouched.¹⁷ The fabrication of landscape as separate from the built environment exists through images and dreamt ideals of paradise, but never in lived reality. Landscape itself is fragmented by the built, but the desire for interaction with the wilderness remains nearly untouched itself. Only the desired landscape changes form through time. The desire does not change. Desire only exists when unfulfilled. Because the dreamt environment is not real, it can never be had. In response to personal desire, I churn¹⁸ out images which contain traces of my experience with the physical, social, and remembered landscapes.

Contemporary landscape painter Shara Hughes engages with landscape imagery as a way to think about abstraction. When interviewed by the Brooklyn Rail, Hughes states:

I just started playing around, using the landscapes as an access point for myself to just be natural, to be a painter. I didn't need to make a storyline before starting the work. Of course they're not easy to make, they're not simple at all, which I realized after I said "I'm gonna make something simple such as landscapes." I like for you to be able to totally believe in the painting but then know that it stops at the edges, and going back and forth between something that feels real but that you know is basically talking about abstract painting.¹⁹

When I paint, what is outside goes inside of me and then comes back out in a different form. Landscape becomes the inlet and structure for me to make primarily abstract paintings where there is an experience of searching and moving through space. I select and place color and form to turn the inner landscape outward.

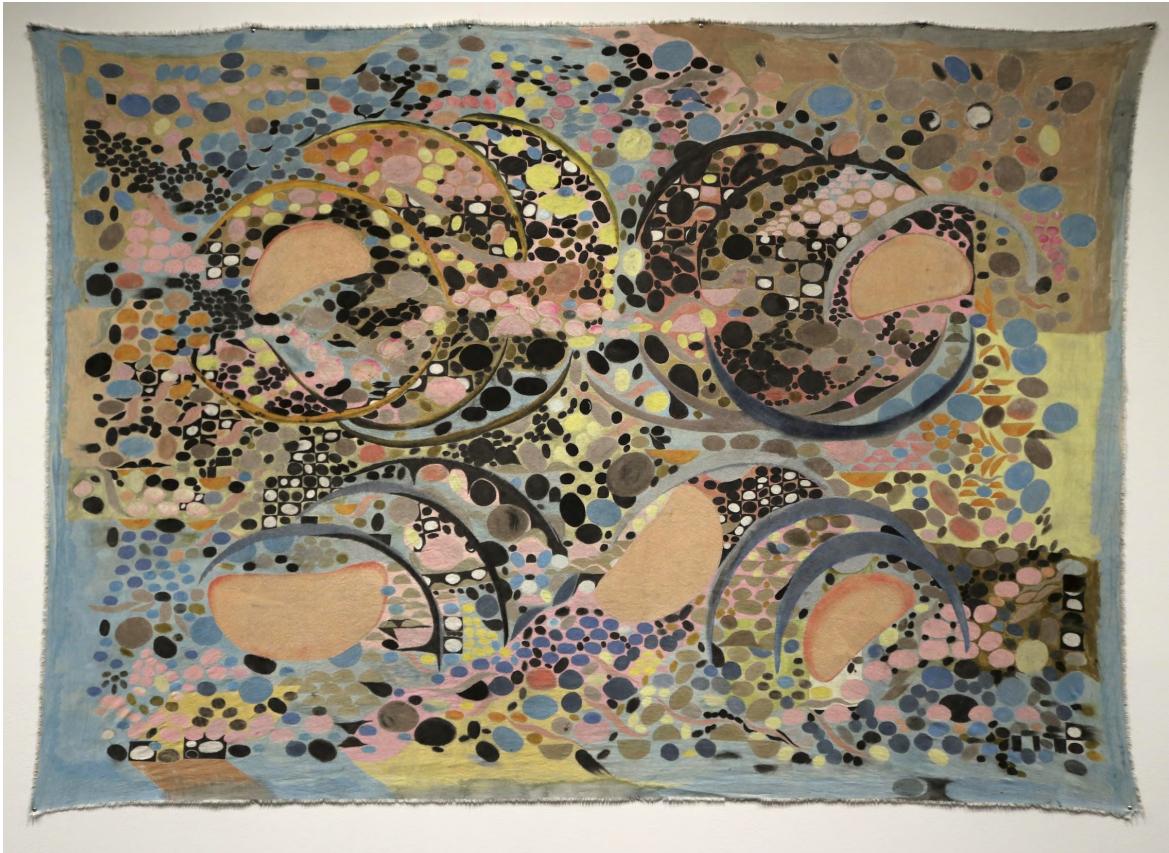
¹⁷ Robert L Herbert. *Monet on the Normandy Coast: Tourism and Painting, 1867-1886* (Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Amy Sillman, "Shit Happens," *Frieze*, November 10 2015, <https://www.frieze.com/article/shit-happens>.

¹⁹ Shara Hughes, "Shara Hughes with Alex A. Jones," interview by Alex A. Jones, *Brooklyn Rail*, June 2019, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/06/art/SHARA-HUGHES-with-Alex-Jones>.

CHAPTER II IN THE WORK

ABSTRACTION



Take It or Leave It. Acrylic ink, Sumi ink, and India ink on canvas. 2022.

This body of work is primarily abstract. I consider the move of plucking something internal, a sensation of a moment or a memory, and capturing that feeling in the physical canvas or on paper as an abstract move. Specific moments – the palm leaf I saw brush the surface of murky water sparking in the sun – could be referenced figuratively. However, the power of abstraction in my work is the capture of sensation before specifics. While the experience of the palm leaf brought a moment of wonder to me, it is the wonder itself I wish to share first. I do not want to bog the image down with too many figurative details. The reference becomes more

about shape, color, and compositional function. In the case of the palm frond, I think about the space between the frond and the water as a containing structure. In *Take It or Leave It*, I use the crescent shape to reference the palm, repeated to reference the multiple leaves on a single frond. This shape creates a shelter for the orange slice and is reflected over a horizontal axis to reference the reflection of the palm frond in the water, as seen below in the photograph. Using basic shapes and colors as carriers of meaning, I allow the viewer to experience wonder in the act of searching through the image on the canvas. The language of specifics does not bind the viewer to a read closed off from imagination. Through abstraction, I make room for guessing, allowing for there to be pleasure within the unknown.



Left: My photograph of a palm frond and water. Right: Detail of *Take It or Leave It*.

A blurred grey oval may remind me of a stingray darting out from under the boat, surprising in its sudden appearance and speed. But, it is also a grey oval that may look like it is being sped by or it itself is going fast. When I am out on the water, it is the animal or shell underwater we have sped by so quickly that I never know exactly what it is that is the most wondrous and frustrating. It is disguised in its speed, unknowable. My mind wanders, trying to attach language and capture some idea of what it is, but the moment is gone and that act is impossible.

Lacking specifics, abstraction allows for associations to gather. The world in many forms and images can collect as a matrix of possibility.

Beyond the image's translation from internal imagination to the external and tangible world, the use of abstraction within image-making describes the idealization that occurs at a distance from that which I desire. Since I cannot experience the physical landscape of Florida from far away, I must depend on its existence as a remembered, dreamt, and advertised environment. That version of the environment is always a bit different, lacking the details of reality. The images that do appear are iconic, and otherwise, only the essence of the place and its sensations are captured.

IMAGE SELECTION

In this body of work, I mostly forgo direct references: only the rare seashell, flower, cloud, and palm yell "beach". These images I used more frequently in earlier bodies of work, but are fading in importance as I continue to arrange space. More often, I am using ovals and some more subtle images to intimate a stock version of a tropical, beachy location. The move towards abstraction is a way to focus on the voyage through rather than the specific details of the land.

The oval has maintained considerable importance over the years to me. First, it is important to note that the black oval (often simply a black mark, or another shape in black) and that white oval come from different places. There are several origin points for both the black and white oval in my work.

Both black and white shapes have origins first in childhood. The black oval began as a black dot or circle. I had several bouncy balls, called "teeny balls" by my toddler self and my family. These bouncy balls came in a variety of pastel colors, and I cherished my collection of them, which has dwindled considerably over the years. I began using this black dot on different shapes in my early twenties to talk about a loss of childhood innocence while dealing with grief

and mourning. At the same time, these bouncy balls have always been a source of joy and play for me, and so I reference the original pattern in the work *Mapping Honey Holes*.

Beyond the reference to “teeny balls”, I have often thought of the black mark as a pebble or rock. One of my uncles lives in Juneau, Alaska, and my mom would occasionally bring down her souvenirs from atop her television cabinet in her room: a basket of egg-shaped granite rocks so smooth and perfect. She told us the beaches in Southeast Alaska were covered in these rocks. I was riveted, and the anticipation of visiting this magic landscape kept my imagination engaged for years. When I visited as a teenager, I would spend hours on the beach, looking at and collecting rocks, enthralled.



A photograph I took of a rocky beach in Alaska. The photograph of the beach compared to the collection of black marks which reference this landscape is an example of the abstraction of the environment through memory and mark-making.

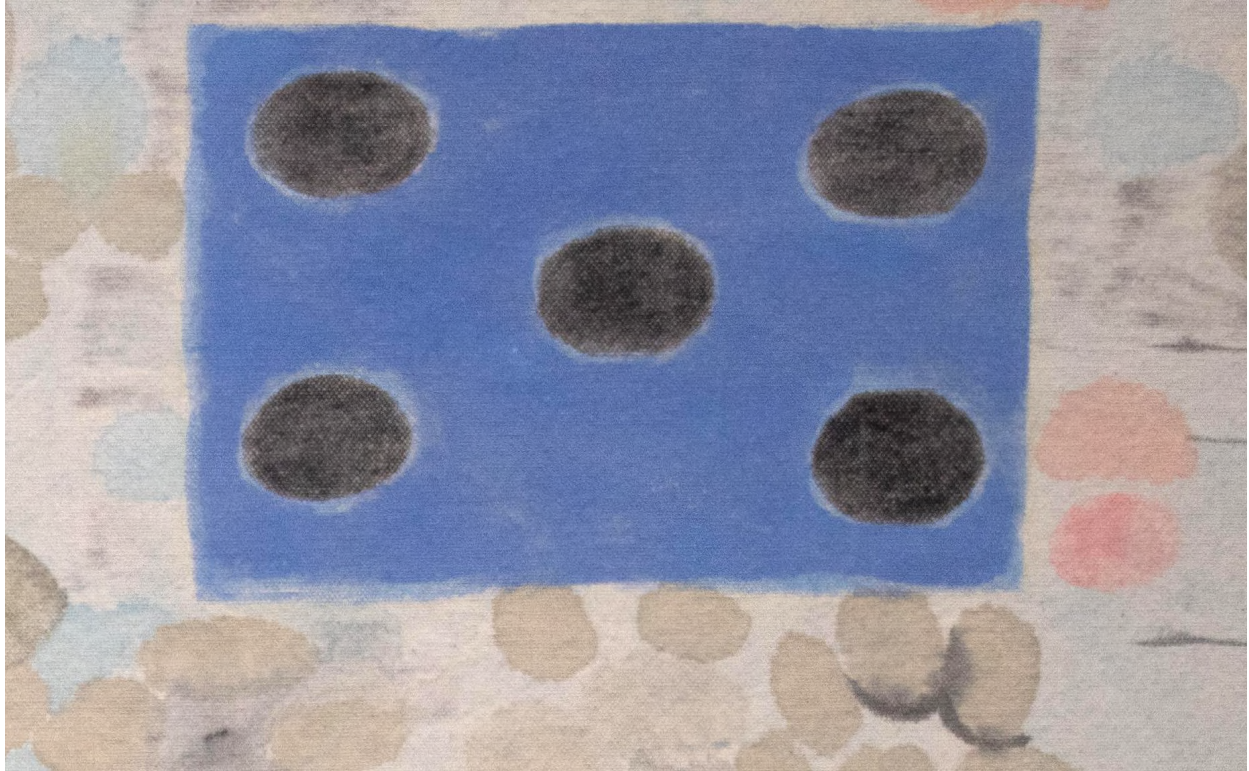
The black ovals and shapes are a mash-up of these memories. They fill space as a rock or pebble would fill the beach. When arranged in a grid, they remind me of tile patterns adorning interior spaces. The black mark or black oval holds space and contrasts the soft colors of the surrounding shapes. The black has a high density as a color and can puncture the space, drawing the eye and shaping the space.

My use of the white oval originates in my curiosity about the environment as well. As a child I owned a big puffy sea biscuit, bright white and about 5 inches long. I began drawing this sea biscuit. It looks like an inflated ovate sand dollar. The shape of the sea biscuit morphed, through abstraction, into a white lumpy oval, often flattened on the bottom as if I were looking at the biscuit from the side. This soon shifted into a white oval without a flat “bottom” of the shape. The white oval, especially when rounded, looks like a void – an emptiness untouched on the surface. This is a direct relation to the ideas of the emptiness inherent within desire. I have an urge to fill the surface of the painting with shapes and colors, even with these void-like white shapes, paralleling my urge to fulfill my desire.



Left: A sea biscuit. (Photograph by Rob Growler. Wikimedia Commons. Accessed April 9, 2022. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sea_biscuit.jpg). Right: Detail of *Classic Harbor*.

The white oval led to ovals of any and every color. The ovals of all colors are often arranged as patterns, and point outward to many associations. An oval in the work can function as a stone, a pool or pond, a seed, a ball in motion, a cookie when ovals are stacked like an Oreo. The oval can be a game piece in othello or checkers, a skewed polka-dot, a dot on a domino, a candy like the dots of colorful sugar on the roll of paper my grandpa would buy me.



Above: Detail of *Mapping Honey Holes*. Below: Detail of *Voyage*.

In *Voyage*, I relate the ovals and oval-like shapes to several references. Small colorful ovals reference coquinas. Coquinas are little clams that come in a rainbow array of color. They use one big “foot” to wedge themselves up and down in the wet sand while they eat from the other end of their bodies. If I stand or sit in one place and let myself sink into the sand – then the coquinas become displaced and surface around me. When they emerge on the surface, they frantically dig to recover themselves with sand. The actions of these little clams feels mad and frenetic, and I relate to this being the way they exist every day.



A photograph I took on Clearwater Beach of exposed coquina clams.

The larger white ovals, arranged like a necklace or like the foam pushed onto the beach by a winter wave, do relate back to my first sea biscuit: during a recent trip taken to St. Croix to

visit my sister, she took me snorkeling. As the two of us swam back to shore, we saw a few sea biscuits – the first time I had witnessed any in the wild. She swam down 20 feet to pick one up for me, knowing how much I cherished this strange creature with its simple form.

As evidenced in this description, the oval is ever-changing. Alongside the ovals, new shapes sneak in, like those in *Take It or Leave It*. This painting is meant to capture the sense of how nature was to me as a child and still is in my best moments of open observation and play. I came to this work considering how the landscape and everything in it is portrayed in children's books and in animation, like Disney's *Fantasia* or Hayao Miyazaki's films - not as foreboding but as wondrous, mysterious, full of secrets and life. I hide forms in the collections of the ovals, allowing them to stack and be strung along to form larger shapes. The pink squiggles can be both leaf and shrimp, and sometimes they act more as ornamentation than animated characters. Half-ovals merge and turn into waves and hills. Droplets become rocks and bubbles. The combinations are never-ending.



Detail of *Take It or Leave It*.

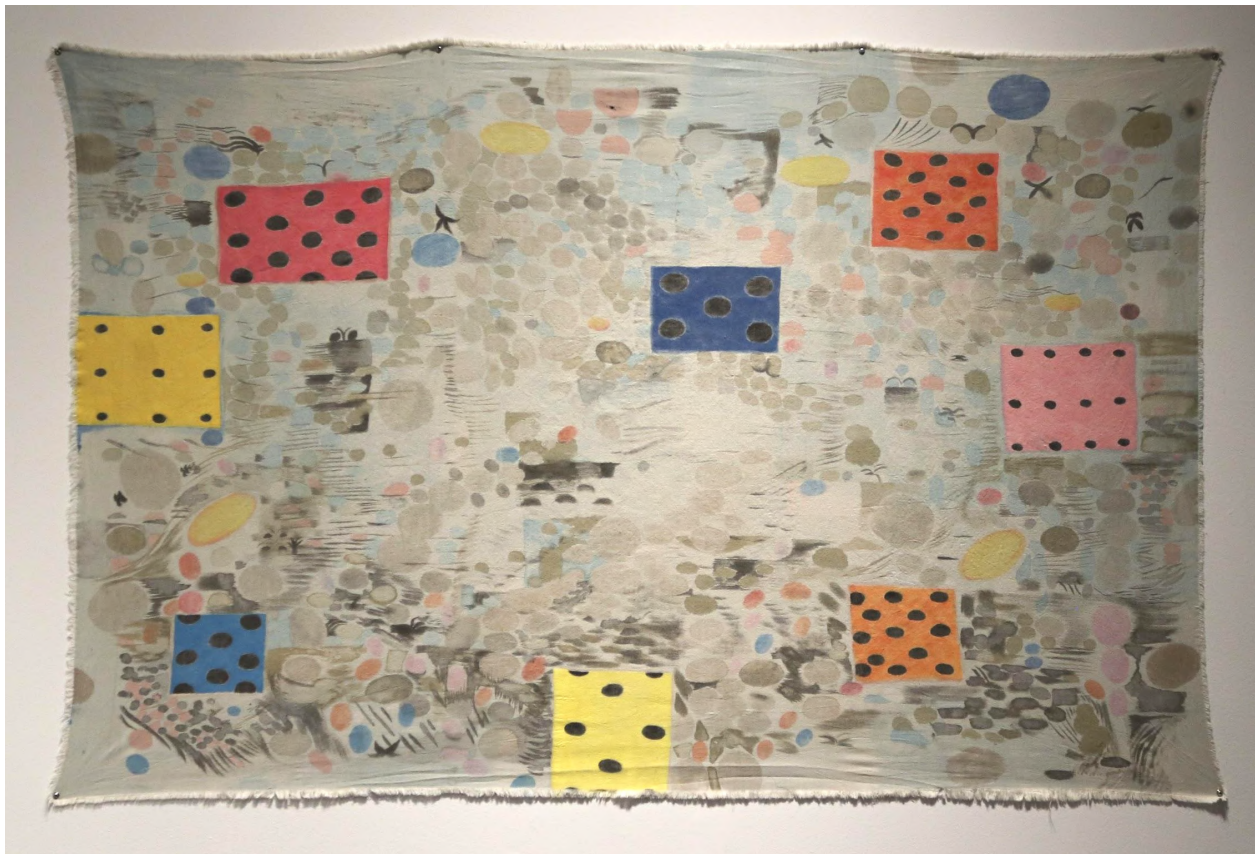
Other shapes and images feature in this body of work besides the oval. The checkered pattern points towards associations with game and pattern. I associate a checkered pattern with game boards such as checkers and chess, which I played with my family throughout the years. Checkered patterns also point to race cars and race tracks, a direct correlation to speed and competition. My dad was a daredevil in the Joie Chitwood Thrill Show as a teenager, traveling around the country from raceway to raceway to perform for a live audience, so I own this pattern as a part of my family history. And, in my own lived experience, the checkered pattern harkens back to our picnic blanket laid out at the park or the beach, a pattern on which I took respite and bathed in the sun. It is a reference to cloth within the fabric of the canvas.



Percolation Structure. Acrylic ink, Sumi ink, and India ink on canvas. 2022.

Another reference to fabric occurs in the blue and white stripes in *Voyage*, a direct reference to my dad's striped baby blanket named Pebbles. Blue and white stripes are always a reminder of the classic Breton shirt worn by sailors in the French navy, diluted and circulated over time to become one facet of an American coastal aesthetic.

I use the rectangle with an arrangement of five dots to point to dominos, but they also act like tiles. The dots within these colorful spaces become islands or holes within a field of color. A blue rectangle can be a space of water on a map. A pink rectangle is like the color of my teddy bear. These float on top of the surface or are wedged into the landscape, removing the viewer from the reality of the landscape with their simple strangeness. In *Mapping Honey Holes*, these black-dotted rectangles function as markers on a map. In my family, a good shelling island or spot along the beach is called a honey hole. The rectangles represent honey holes, where the density of bright color and pattern relates to the promise of treasure.



Mapping Honey Holes. Acrylic ink, Sumi ink, and India ink on canvas.

Bromeliad and flower shapes nod towards the tropical *Percolation Structure*, disrupting the dark black ink structure in pale yellow. My mom collects orchids and we also have a collection of bromeliads in the backyard. These humid-loving plants do not need to have my personal connection attached to direct the viewer to the subtropical Florida backyard landscape.



Above: Detail of *Percolation Structure* featuring the shape of a bromeliad and the shape of a pier as seen from the side. Below: My sister took this photograph of me while we snorkeled beneath the Frederiksted pier, referenced in *Percolation Structure* and *Voyage*. (Photograph by Jillian Job. Author's personal collection.)

Seen in *Percolation Structure* and *Voyage* is also a reference to the architecture of a pier I recently snorkeled under with my sister this spring. Its shape holds the memory of that adventure.

Orange slices are reminders of oranges (iconic as a Florida crop), clementines, or gummy candies, another reference to the Marco Island candy shop with grandpa Lewis. I arrange them as if they are falling or have fallen onto the ground, a moment of loss in action.



Hideaway. Acrylic ink, Sumi ink, and India ink on canvas. 2022.

Figurative images are meant to ground the viewer just enough to get a sense of place. In *Hideaway*, hermit crabs, pink and white sea shells, and cowrie shells dot the swirling space, placing the viewer in the Caribbean. These are references to vacations with my family and shells in my collection, but are immediately recognizable as creatures and objects found on a beach.



Above and below, left: photographs taken by the author of hermit crabs. Above and below, right: details of *Hideaway*.

Grass is both backyard grass, pointing to a space of enclosed and private relaxation in American suburban culture. It also can function as seagrass within the coastal lexicon I employ, a diverse marine habitat which has a critical function as a carbon sink.

The images I select are themselves often abstract or open-ended, less specific than the references I bring to them. That is because each image is a place-holder for multiple memories and ideas, not just one. In the abstraction and simplification of each image, abundance is inherent.

IMAGE HANDLING AND TREATMENT

When I do place a recognizable image into the mix, these images are often simplified. They reference the touristy social landscape and are often immediately recognizable, pulling a whole world behind them through their indexical power. An example of this would be a palm tree, often simplified in my work as a few rounded lines gathered somewhat radially around a vertical supporting line - or tree trunk. This sort of abstract removes specificity in favor of something that is palatable, more iconic than realistic. These symbols become markers on a map. The map can be geologic, or like the map for a video game or water park, and sometimes the space is like all of these different types of maps at once, as in *Mapping Honey Holes*. The space of the image thus changes through abstraction from the potential of being a believable landscape to a flattened and idealized version of land. This feeds back into the consumability of landscape, to the tourist-trap surf shops on Mandalay Avenue and the Tommy Bahama patterns on the pillows of my family home and the homes of my childhood friends. The generic images speak to this “everyplace” of the tropical dream-beach which is an ultimate symbol of leisure.



Detail of *Mapping Honey Holes*.

The paintings are not only places to search within and fragments of landscape, but also models and maps. All of these ways of thinking about space come together to form an amalgamated, ambiguous environment filled with shape and color.

COLOR

I select color intuitively, often adding or changing the palette of the work during the making process. Because my paintings are overwhelmingly abstract, with only moments of figuration, the colors do not match a specific reality but instead direct the viewer to a sense of place. Bright colors I think of as pulled from a kitschy beach tourist shop where everything for sale is a bright primary or neon color. Soft pastel shades of baby blue and pink index the colors of my childhood toys and bedroom. In *Hideaway*, the white ovals couched in the top area of light pink are a reference to my teddy bear. Browns, whites, blacks and other “neutral” colors reference the natural landscape – these are the colors of stones, seashells, and sand. Blues are often references to sky and water. Oranges are earthy but also reference one of my favorite

flowers, tiger lilies. In telling my mom about this last reference, she mentioned that her wedding bouquet was filled with tiger lilies, too.

My lack of regard for “realistic” color choices is based in a deep appreciation for Matisse and the Fauvist movement. Matisse chose color intuitively, based not on reality or to get an overall impression of something real, but to indulge the senses and express something internal.²⁰ I love Matisse’s color rebellion because it relates directly to my attempt to build something personal. The coastal landscape of Florida is something so well-advertised that it has become generic. The idea of the beach is ubiquitous, I think, when advertised as a site for vacation and recreation. I do not disagree with this, but I feel as if I am rebelling against the standard of what the beach is while I work to personalize this place. Color is a major tool in this action, combining my own recollections and ideas with what is already there to make it into something new, something more.

PATTERNING AND REPETITION

Patterning features heavily in the work. Patterns are repetitive regularities, comfortable, predictable, safe. A pattern sets up an expectation and delivers on the promise. It is a visual habit in my automatic making process. I like to think of this sort of habit as it relates to the wider concepts in my work: as I project my desire for a place that is ideal and therefore unreal, I submit to a cycle of expectation and lack of fulfillment, and my search for a place perfectly fulfilling continues.

²⁰ "Fauvism," The Oxford Dictionary of Art, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198604761.001.0001/acref-9780198604761-e-1238>.



Two photographs I have taken while beachcombing show disruptions in the expected matrix of sand, left, and shells, right.

Repetition produces habit. It is a visual display of discipline. In the act of searching, the searcher must maintain a constant concentration or risk overlooking a key detail. I turn time after time to the act of beachcombing as a parallel process to my practice. While walking along the beach, a familiar and structured activity, I visually “comb” over the sand with my gaze, looking for aberrations in the matrix of sand and shells. An aberration is any moment of interest within the matrix departing from the norm. When beachcombing, I may not know exactly what I am searching for, but upon finding something outside of the ordinary seashells and seaweed, a startled surprise is produced. The surprising object is the vessel for this affect. My paintings are vessels for these sensations translated into image.

With the patterning in my paintings, I aim to set up an expectation and then to disrupt it. A beach vacation promises relaxation, sand, and sun. But the beach landscape and its expectations do not carry over into my work in the way I might expect when I hear the phrase “beach paintings”. I bring into existence a version of the coast, but I disrupt it, turning the

environment strange and more than what it is in everyday experience – often nearly unrecognizable as landscape or beach. The disruption makes space for change and expansion, widening my internal landscape, personalizing place. Painting becomes a space for wish-fulfillment and the indulgence of fantasy. I follow my impulse, even if that action is disruptive, knowing that disruption can bring more images into my lexicon, more colors into this imagined world. It is the repeated process of building a visual pattern in the pictorial space and disrupting it that is a pattern itself. Dreaming about what combinations can exist is the discipline.

PERMUTATIONS

Related to pattern is the idea of permutations. How can a shape exist in the work? How many different ways and interactions can it have? I ask these questions as I paint, repositioning images and allowing the ovals to change in form and function. I color and recolor. The game of painting is one of permutations, providing new life to each type of mark, exploring the possibilities of each element.

Katherine Bernhardt speaks about this sort of permutation-play in an Artspace Interview about her Pattern Paintings: “I’ll pick a couple of things I want to make a painting of, like hammerheads, Malta India, and tostones...They’re just good colors and shapes. Look at a sock: it’s got really good colors, white with red and blue stripes. Toilet paper is a squarish oval. A cigarette is a line. A dorsal fin is a triangle, and so is a Dorito. ...It’s more about color choices and color combinations.”²¹ She arranges the objects in her paintings, creating a matrix which represents its own slice of life through selection and exclusion.

I aim to do the same thing with my work, creating a matrix of color and shape to build a space with its own discrete quality. I repeat images and colors and hide, in plain sight, vectors. These vectors – the spaces between two similarly sized pink ovals, for example, creating a

²¹ Katherine Bernhardt, ““The Best Painters Don’t Intellectualize Their Art”: Katherine Bernhardt on Her New Paintings, & Why She Loves the Tropics,” interview by Dylan Kerr, September 19, 2015, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/katherine-bernhardt-interview-53118.

relationship and direction through space – allow for the movement in the image without clearly stating the relationship. The permutations in a work or a body of work can be viewed by tracing each color or shape as it changes and echos. Something stacked might end up falling, as in *Take It or Leave It*. A shape may start taking on another color on the right side of the painting, and then changing form as a reaction, becoming something entirely new. Metamorphosis is inevitable through this repetition, and the permutations are arranged and strewn amongst the space to be visually sorted.

Painter Dan Walsh engages with these subtle modulations in his gridded abstract paintings. I find companionship in his idea of story in the work: “The paintings invite you to come and read them, as opposed to telling a story through a narrative.”²² In my wider practice, each painting is a permutation of a dream dreamt actively through making and imagining and piecing together. The visual ingredients are woven and stacked, offering something different each time but familiar in their reiteration. There is a story in these permutations and variations. The story of my thought process can be traced as the shapes dance throughout space. The subjects are the shapes, changing colors and form, telling the story of endless change.

SCALE

Scale shifts frequently in the paintings. I use scale to disorient, but also to provide multiple vantage points of understanding the environment. The micro and macro operate to zoom in and out of the environments I paint.

When I enter a real landscape, walking through a swamp, I notice there is such a density of small details. I want to get up close, squat down, and look at each flower and leaf and understand through engagement with the micro. Then, I stand up and look out, where the space

²² Dan Walsh, “Beer with a Painter: Dan Walsh,” interview by Jennifer Samet, October 10, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/593589/beer-with-a-painter-dan-walsh/>.

expands and the scale shifts – the small things are no longer right in front of my eyes, but small in relation to larger plants or the sky.

I capture this scale shift in my paintings, explaining visually how I use my body to experience reality. These bits and fragments are smooshed up together and create a whole new space where the small and the massive panorama are experienced all at once. The hierarchy between experiences of one landscape fragment versus another can be dismantled or flipped – a tiny reference to sky may not be as important as a huge swath of space dedicated to a pattern from a snail shell. This sort of scale shift from area to area in a painting is best exemplified by *Voyage*, where a string of tiny details around the bottom perimeter surround a quilt of animal-like forms turning into belts of blue sky and transitioning into a flowery form floating in darkness.

Like the cubists who aimed to capture an object in space through time and from multiple viewpoints, I lean on the strength of painting to provide the manifold ways of viewing landscape all on a single plane. But, more like the Surrealists, I infuse the dreamt and the internal into that reality.

CHAPTER III

PROCESS

AUTOMATIC MAKING AND CREATING SPACE

Doodling is a practice of drawing freely, filling space without the pressures of formality. In the western canon, doodling came to the forefront during the Surrealist movement with automatism. Automatic drawing was a way to doodle from the subconscious, channeling the personal unknown into a visual existence. Some Surrealists would embellish upon what came out afterwards, intervening in the result to create some readability.²³ I constantly search for new shapes and symbols through this automatic drawing or doodling process. This is the start of each work. I fine-tune and riff on shapes to understand the possibilities. I think in permutations in each shape and also in each arrangement of shapes while making. My doodles deal with the arrangement of space, but also in fine-tuning shapes or riffing on shapes to understand their variations and possibilities, using muscle memory as a shape recall tool. This drawing practice leads to a hint at something to expand upon at a larger scale where I can truly explore the space with my body, becoming immersed in the process of painting. I take myself on the voyage of creating the painting as I think through what image comes next.

The start of this doodling practice began early in life. As a child, my mom reported that I would draw circle after circle, filling a sheet of blank white paper. I remember, when repeating this exercise later in adolescence, that I was attempting to capture a perfectly round circle on paper, iterating until I came closer to making that goal a reality. During this striving I created pattern and space.

My home along the Gulf coast of Florida is simply the bedrock for my artistic practice.

With my lexicon of symbols and images gathered from doodling about this place, I automatically

²³ "Automatism," The Oxford Dictionary of Art, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198604761.001.0001/acref-9780198604761-e-216>.

build each space pebble by pebble, riffing and responding over hours and days. The result is an unplanned environment slipping between pattern, abstraction, and geologic landscape.

Ambiguity rules, and only the occasional suspended palm frond or shell points to the tropical nature of this invented place. Repetition is the method of building, with each mark filling space. This is like the repetition of experiencing the landscape of home, beachcombing for hours and days, until looking for shells feels like being in a trance. The decisions I make while painting center on which images to select from my lexicon and how to weave them into the work with the colors I want to include. Each work is a slice of an imagined world, a combination that becomes its own ecosystem and environment at once.

The collected shapes and colors are arranged to provide a structure which to travel through, like a garden or an interior designed to certain effect. Each color points outwards at the lived reality in which it comes from, though those references are not explicit. The collection becomes a new whole. This arrangement is determined during the states of flow and automatic making process, but my compositions are still guided by my ideas around fulfillment and desire. The edge of a painting may be blank, as if the void is on the edge of a space bursting full with colorful ovals, a reminder of why I am filling space. This is the case in *Take It or Leave It* and *Hideaway*, where the viewer may be drawn in, away from the empty edges and towards the dense center.

In comparison, the structure of *Percolation Structure* and *Mapping Honey Holes* keeps the viewer on the surface, traveling atop of the image rather than being drawn inwards. These act as maps of landscapes more than landscapes themselves, using rigid geometric structures to move the viewer about the surface.

The structure changes again in *Voyage* and *Classic Harbor*, where the image continues off of the edge. These are meant to be two separate moments within an expansive landscape. The search I enact time after time is itself a landscape, and these paintings are moments of focus within that larger search.

The search I am on in my practice is not always one of anxiety and suffering. I enjoy the process of ideal-chasing and trading out a set of images for the next set as I pin each one down.²⁴ The souvenir, or the painting I make (an artifact of my personal search for the perfect environment), is a way to hold and extend a moment, to live inside of it, to bask in the experience of wonder – as opposed to the mundane. It is not the moment, but a reminder, a marker. This automatic making process is a search to get to a place that is not real, and that I must access through labor and imagination rather than reality.

For me, searching implies finding. As I build my image I am constructing space, imagining and translating the image onto the physical surface. Life is compressed within me, and I cherry-pick moments from my life, plucking slivers and tossing them onto the canvas, arranging and stacking diligently. The filling of space and the stacking of shapes is satisfying. I become fulfilled through making. The shapes and colors start their own lives outside of me, swelling in size. In their visualization, I can imagine how else they might exist, and that often gets swirled into the mix, too. The constructed space is unstable, but that is because it is always changing. The place I find is never complete – movement is constant. The movement is about the endlessness of the search. The excitement of capturing lives alongside the anxiety of losing – the emotions experienced while searching. Positive and negative, excitement and anxiety, color the experience. Speed is embedded, especially in the work where the marks of pastel being scraped away are captured.

Urgency is instilled in the automatic making process because each image is forever captured within the surface of my work and cannot be erased. In an interview with Bomb Magazine about her show *Grey Area*, Amy Feldman speaks to this immediacy in the image as a carry-over from her process:

²⁴ Kate Berlant and Jacqueline Novak, hosts, “Souvenir Tiger,” POOG (podcast), November 30, 2021, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/1119-poog-with-kate-berlant-an-73595748/episode/souvenir-tiger-89896993/>.

I give myself one chance to make the work. It's related to delivering the punch line in that respect—if you don't get it right, the audience doesn't laugh. Either it works or it doesn't. It's all or it's nothing. The performance happens in the application of paint to canvas, and the viewer can almost re-create the steps that were taken to make the painting. I love Robert Ryman and Ryman worked on these terms. I've read a number of texts about him because I think his work is an anomaly on some levels; and think many artists of my generation are interested in him as the "minimalist misfit." Ryman said "When I do a painting, it's a one-time thing." His material assertion of paint through space and time is compelling to me. Reworking isn't possible. I like having the clean sheet. Risk and anxiety are important. I want to communicate a clear urgency and the work must feel immediate and direct.²⁵

I echo this attitude in my work. Any image placed on the surface is there to stay, so I have to be confident in my choices and work with mistakes "live". Although I work over a longer period of time with each work, nothing gets covered up. I fill the space and stop when it is full. Then the work is uncovered, and each material pairing I work with undergoes a different process.

MATERIAL AND PROCESS: PAPER AND PASTEL



Detail of *Classic Harbor*.

²⁵ Amy Feldman, "Amy Feldman," interview by Mary Jones, June 26 2014, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/amy-feldman/>.

Paper is, first and foremost, a space of comfort and dreaming. The material is accessible – it is the first material I would draw on as a child.

I layer pastel on paper, covering the entire surface. Then, I scrape the image off of the surface after laying the pastel down. This moment of reveal stirs up the image and blurs it, but also allows only the embedded color to be accessed, the color which first impressed upon the paper. Not only can one search within the image, but there was a process of reveal with my body while making, which lends a blurry and smeared quality to the work by creating a second layer of marks and a softening of color. The blurring relates to the quickness of a fleeting sensation or memory of the environment, underlining the fact that this image is an artificial space, an imagined place. It also reveals the speed in which I made the marks on the surface and with which I excavated the image. I am restless when I make these paintings: this speed is a physical trace of my excitement and anxiety. The blur can be the blur experienced when riding on a speedboat, the procession of images²⁶ flying by as I whip my head around to catch a glimpse of something I passed. It can be the blur through tears, too, the overwhelm of feeling spilling out of me while I capture the trigger.

Excavation of the image in this process feels like digging for a treasure I hid for myself in another time. I reveal to myself what I already have, and at the same time, what I desire. I am geology in action within each work, eroding what I have built. Each image is an artifact of the physical process and my internal processing of the shapes and colors within the work. Every painting takes the labor of my body and turns it into a space for dreaming for a space away from labor, where exploration of the land and the internal reign. The work of this translation captures my vitality. The image is sealed into the surface, a fossil of my action.

I keep my pastel scraps and make them into new blocks of pastel, melting them until the bits of color are fused together. Then, I make more marks on paper. Like the rock cycle, the process of layering and removing and remaking and layering continues onward through time.

²⁶ Sean Blumthal, text conversation with author, January 18, 2022.

MATERIAL AND PROCESS: INKS ON CANVAS

On canvas, I paint until no raw material is left exposed. I wash the canvas to remove the texture from the ink on the surface. The colors wash out and fade. The material becomes soft and worn, as if used time and again. Water was once present and is no longer – a way of speaking to the distance from my home along the coast. The canvas paintings become an archive of memory – the memory of color, of water. The work does not contain the smeared sort of mark-making that the pastel on paper does because it centers on comfort and safety rather than speed and anxiety. It is slower – the remedy for the speed, the space in which to rest, the fabric which could surround me like a blanket. I cannot run around outside all day, thinking of the past and present and future. There has to be a space for rest. Speed is present in the process. Time is sped up during washing, and the painting fades quickly, over a matter of hours rather than decades. This material is like a sun-bleached awning over a store, weathered by many storms and pounds of salt by the seaside. The material is like my dad's baseball cap, used again and again while we are out boating. It is like our beach blanket, a white and red picnic quilt where we can set up a home base on the sand. It is sweet in its consistency over time, always there, used and worn again and again.

The fabric is faded and worn, preserved and displayed but with its own past life. It is smooth and soft like a rock or shell turned over and over again in the waves, something I pick up and rub against my cheek for the sensation when I am relaxed at the beach. The oval shapes I use recall this watery presence because I think of them as the stones, the geologic building blocks of land. When a stone is smooth and round, it is because it has been worn down by the motion of the water over time.²⁷ While I expect a stone to be hard, I think of them softly, as little objects part of a large whole, a system moving so slowly I cannot comprehend. This shifting of geologic scale and material wearing makes me feel small in time, ready to be

²⁷ Orion Quintanilla, conversation with author, November 2021.

wrapped up by something soft. And each mark, each oval stone, is only a stain, a presence that is in the process of disappearing.

Helen Frankenthaler worked with stains, pioneering the soak-stain technique later used by Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis. She would spread raw, unstretched canvas on the floor, which I do as well. Then, the paint she poured onto the material would soak up naturally into the organic fibers. Color was embedded in the surface. Color and mark were one. The image and the ground were joined, inseparable.²⁸

The images I embed into canvas are not separate from the canvas. They do not float on top, but are soaked in, leveled by washing. I can wash and wash this fabric, but the color will remain, desaturated but permanent. The lack of saturation on the faded canvas creates an effect of frustration, too – the bright image cannot be retrieved as it once was.

In both materials, softening and smoothing occur. I think of this as a way of optimizing for comfort – I prefer how soft and smooth materials feel, like a stone, like a blanket. The sensation fulfills me. Optimizing for these experiences, loss occurs – I am homesick and it shows through the wearing of the materials. I choose loss again and again so I can find the sensations which please me. I will miss what I have to give up, but I cannot wait to see what is underneath.

²⁸ “After ‘Mountains and Sea’: Frankenthaler 1956 - 1959,” Guggenheim Bilbao, accessed October 1 2021, <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/exhibitions/after-mountains-and-sea-frankenthaler-1956-1959>.

CHAPTER IV

APPROACH TO PRACTICE

ENJOYMENT AND REBELLION

My practice is first and foremost about enjoyment. I started making art seriously when I was a teenager. I made work about grief for many years, into my twenties, processing the untimely death of a loved one. Over time, and as I healed, this lost its appeal. I was no longer driven by sadness. I wanted to make work about what I was excited about, to focus my energy on what could be rather than what was. I later encountered the philosophy of Laura Owens which has become central in how I speak about the way I work. Owens speaks about a studio visit she has with Mary Heilmann while in school, and how that visit changed her approach as an artist. She picked up an attitude of being serious about being casual from Heilmann. Laura Owens says that “a painting should fit into your life,” and be something you can live with,²⁹ and I agree. I would even say that I would like to make paintings I wish to live with and within. I want to travel through and explore each painting. I aim to suspend suffering. I do not think pain needs to be the main driver for expression in my artistic practice – I can recognize and give it space but choose to be curious and joyful primarily.

Like Heilmann, who rebelled when the popular narrative was against painting,³⁰ I also come to painting from a place of rebellion. My parents often took me to art fairs in the Tampa metro area. I was often dismayed at the sheer volume of realistic paintings of blue herons calmly standing in the reeds or along the shore. I knew there was so much more to paint about when it came to nature, but I did not see the paintings I wanted to exist being made. Later, in

²⁹ Laura Owens, “1000 Words: Laura Owens,” interview by Susan Morgan, Summer 1999, accessed October 1 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/print/199906/1000-words-laura-owens-32257>.

³⁰ John Devine, “Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone” at the CAMH,” December 20, 2007, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://glasstire.com/2007/12/20/mary-heilmann-to-be-someone-at-the-camh/>.

high school, my friend Leah and I would swap Juxtapoz and Hi Fructose magazines, gulping down the gaudy Pop-Surrealism of the early aughts. We couldn't get enough. A few years later, having seen enough, I felt this sort of work was fluffy and gimmicky in the ultra-commercialized form it adopted. I loved the apocalyptic and dreamy worlds the artists created, though, so I set out to make my own world, one combining the familiar seaside landscape with the kind of otherworldliness I craved. Sometimes I encountered this place in moments of wonder with the land, and found this a valuable territory to mine.

FOCUSING ATTENTION

With my canvas works, particularly *Take It or Leave It* and *Hideaway*, I wish to engage attention. While I do not promise an overwhelming emotional experience, I do wish to use the paintings as a distraction away from our everyday screen-based distractions and the horrors of future realities. Captivation is the name of the game. The title *Take It or Leave It* is a directive: it is an option to engage with the painting, to be captivated and transported. Everyone must make their own choice when presented with the option.

I want to suspend myself in time in the action of making, and suspend the viewer in the action of looking. The goal is to remove myself and others from anxiety. My search is a distraction from suffering, but it also is a way of placing attention on joy.

I want to create an experience of attention with an environment, even the painted environment, however artificial it is. It comes from my internal mixing and meshing of the external. My hope is that what goes in and comes out will go back into another person and come out as a fresh way of engaging with surroundings, with color, with modes of observation in the outdoors. My painting practice is a form of "cultivating my own garden" (CITE) and enjoying the moment, the home I have, the beloved landscape, and even my relentless desire for this special place. I grapple with the problems of desire, of laboring for rest and paradise – but I think that my grappling carries with it its own embedded joys. The attention turned on my

internal landscape allows me to observe the emotional results of living in an imperfect world. I bring the imagined into focus, and begin to close the distance.

PLAY AND GAMES

The repeated, obsessive desire for the water, the beach, the coast of Florida, seems at times like a sly joke. The silliness of such a fixation is not lost on me. This sort of insistence on one subject arranged hundreds of ways is how I play, a way to think about patterns in my life through the conduit of the coastal Florida landscape. Like Heilmann, I am serious about playing around with these ideas, these shapes and colors. I think of it like an endless game. It may be futile and absurd, but by conceptualizing this very heartfelt, frenetic search in that way, I can choose to also make it fun.

My sister and I were taught to play games the “right way” – serious, focused, rules always followed diligently – by my grandmother Betty Rutledge with those red fingernails referenced earlier. She would pick us up from school and the three of us would drink Coca-Cola on ice and play slap jack, scat, and hearts. Betty died this past year, but I continue to return to her legacy in my life: her serious sort of play that actually made the games fun by being so high-stakes, so engaging.

In a society so obsessed with production, linking personal value to labor, it is tempting to keep always looking ahead. I often do this, consumed with optimizing my surroundings. I have to remember to keep having fun, to stay engaged with the present game, to play and to focus on enjoyment – that is the game I want to play. The framing of my work is just as much about the card table or game board as it is the computer screen or the edge of a postcard. The game of painting and building a space focuses my attention and controls me, just as I control the world I’m building. So much in this life feels out of my control, but I can cultivate enjoyment and play with landscape and internal space, making a world of my own. It is an antidote to the fear, the void, filling time and space with the act of play, again and again.

CHAPTER V

EXHIBITION DESCRIPTION

DISPLAY

The work in the final show is presented in three ways, further exploring ideas of capturing something that feels fleeting which also appear in the images. The four canvases are stretched flat, attached to the wall with grommets and screws. The paper works are displayed in two different ways. *Voyage* is hung flat against the wall, while *Classic Harbor* is mounted flush to a panel with a depth of about an inch and a half.

The canvas edges are soft and frayed like a worn blanket or towel, and this stretching method allows that softness to frame the image itself. The hard metal of the grommets and screws conflict with this softness, a matter-of-fact pinning of something precious and cherished. Grommets are references to sailboat sails and the trampolines of catamarans, which are the types of sailboats I grew up learning how to sail on and enjoyed with my family while growing up on the coast. Because of the scalloped and curved edge that comes with stretching canvas directly on the wall, these paintings are reminiscent of not only those sailboat trampolines in shape but of something that is alive and organic. The hanging of the top edge of *Mapping Honey Holes* is meant to look like a face of a cownose ray, a common ray found on the Gulf Coast of Florida. The other paintings are hung to accentuate the corners, which stretch outward as far as possible. This sort of pinning of something organic reminds me of my grandfather's pinned butterfly collection, which my mother inherited upon his passing. The butterflies in the display case are so carefully preserved and pinned, keeping intact what was once alive and moving. This hanging mechanism of the butterflies is why I chose to "pin" the top edges more on the canvas works than the bottom edges: there are just enough screws and grommets used to show the image as fully flat. The canvas is not disrupted by the hardware – no additional

grommets were used to create visual symmetry from top to bottom or decorate the edge. The canvases, like the preserved bodies of butterflies, should be held just enough and no more to display the image.



Detail of *Mapping Honey Holes* displaying the soft frayed canvas edge and the grommet hanging mechanism.

The grommeted work on paper maintains those same references to sailing, but the edge is not stretched and scalloped. Instead, the rectangle of the paper remains rigid. Pressed flat against the white wall of the space, the white ovals seem to be voids into the wall itself from far away. I consider the above mentions of how images of the beach are circulated in everyday spaces, on calendars and in postcards. This image becomes poster-like, a wish pinned onto the wall of a faraway place. This sort of casual pinning of the fragile paper accentuates the flatness of the work and the image. While the painting itself is real, this hanging method quickly implies that the place in the image is artificial – a pinned wish, a circulating image.

In the case of *Classic Harbor*, the paper is mounted directly onto a wooden panel, which lends it a flatness as in the other works. This keeps the paper from curling up – it itself is glued down and made to be flat, so the image emerges first. The panel provides weight to the image

and enters into the space of the gallery. There is no hardware visible on the front-facing plane, allowing the image to be undisturbed. The conceptual weight behind the painting comes from this idea of harboring memories and feelings inside myself, and is underscored by its physical support.

ARRANGEMENT

I arranged this body of work in the space touching on ideas of hunting for treasure in the landscape and manmade games. An image, like the rectangle with a series of dots, is used in two paintings next to one another, and then again across the space. The large white ovals which relate often to sea biscuits flow throughout the exhibition, arranged within the paintings differently. Black dots, curving palm fronds in the shape of crescents, and pink squiggles spread across works. Gridded structures bookend the exhibition in *Hideaway* and *Voyage*. With this sort of display, I ask the viewer to trace the images and colors appearing over and over, providing an opportunity to search and travel not only within each painting but within the body of work hung in the space.



Installation shot of the thesis exhibition.



Installation shot of the thesis exhibition.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

I grapple with the ideas of what is real and what is imagined, churning out what is inside of me into physical paintings. My internal sensations and memories become external images. I find the image through making, layering and uncovering repeatedly. The paintings come undone as they are made, the image slipping away speedily as I bring it into reality. I search through what is inside of me and reveal my own joy to myself. These works contain my sadness for the fleeting nature of existence, but they are also reminders of the magic of home, of Florida's coast, and in my personal search for fulfillment.

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