

THESIS

NAVIGATING THE INTERIOR

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY LAUREN GRIMM ENTITLED "NAVIGATING THE INTERIOR" BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

NAVIGATING THE INTERIOR

I am interested in the polarity of life, the yin and yang of existence. Without the continual tension between these forces, I believe life would not exist. We need both in order to find balance in our lives.

I utilize the interior as the basis for my subject matter, in part, because of its intrinsic, dichotomous nature. On the one hand, interiors are womblike in nature as their walls enclose us and protect us from the rain and cold. Interiors allow for the intense interaction and intimacy experienced between humans. However, the walls of the interior often becoming confining. They limit our view, our senses, and our ability to interact with nature. At times, the walls of the interior restrain our human essence which longs to be free and wild.

As I experience the process of painting these interiors, I have discovered that the interior also serves as a cogent metaphor for self. In other words, I am not concerned with the task of replicating an interior. Instead, my challenge lies in demonstrating how an interior feels. These interiors become a manifestation of self, my subconscious.

The paradoxes of the interior are strengthened through the elements of polarity and balance which are so imperative to the formal qualities of the work. I purposefully create and at times deny believable space within the interior. My

experiences are translated into the language of paint by juxtaposing the elements of: color temperature and intensity; inactive and active brushstroke; ambiguous light and direct light; and opaque paint with translucent glazes. The collage materials used, often include richly patterned pieces of fabric and/or paper. These materials are used to evoke not only a memory of place and/or time, but also on a formal level, to push the tension between the flat, two dimensional space and the suggested depth of the three-dimensional space.

As these interiors emerge on the canvas, I begin to see and feel places which are familiar, yet at the same time distant and quirky. Through the process of painting, I begin to experience a feeling of déjà vu in which the memory of a particular fabric, combined with the emotive qualities of color and paint transport me to a new reality.

These paintings rejoice in the intrinsic nature of experience, that cannot be easily defined or proven.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Matt and Gail Cooney, who cultivated my interest in the arts at an early age, and whose continued love and respect have allowed me to pursue my painting career with confidence and determination.

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NAVIGATING THE INTERIOR

"I'm increasingly drawn to the idea of solitude. Days go by when I'm, wearied by interdependence. When responsiveness is mechanical and tedious. I want not just a room of my own; I want figurative space in my life. I'm slowly finding that my view of myself is not solely in relation to others, but is one that emerges in moments of impenetrable, profound silence, moments in which I am alone, moments in which I am no longer mother, daughter, teacher, wife." ¹

My paintings emerge from the farthest, most interior corners of my mind, and soul. These painted interiors evolve from a personal need to discover and create a "room of my own," in which I am able to process my experience. It is within this mental space, that my experience metastasizes into an emotive energy. This energy becomes the drive behind each painting, and stems from single or multiple memories of time and place. In order to maintain the elusive and somewhat mystical qualities of experience, I manipulate space, color, brushstroke, pattern and image to illicit and suggest sensory responses of aroma, sight, sound, and touch.

Each interior recalls a place and time which is familiar, yet at the same time, foreign, in the quirky and unbelievable nature of things. I am not concerned with the task of replicating interiors. Instead, my challenge exists in demonstrating how interiors feel. Thus, the interior becomes a manifestation of self.

I attempt to convey the dichotomous tendencies of both the self and the interior by juxtaposing formal elements of paint, and composition including: opacity vs. translucency, active vs. inactive, cool vs. warm, and dark vs. light. Likewise, the interior flickers with the constant flux between believable and unbelievable space. This continual interchange of space in conjunction with the shifts between the perceived and the imagined, creates an atmosphere of timelessness; an atmosphere for transition and change.

Within each interior, it is conceivable to encounter variations in light, space, and color; hence mood, atmosphere and time.

The impermanence of the interior is a reflection of my chosen process of painting, which I call layering. The process of layering includes the stratification of opaque and translucent areas of paint, paper and fabric on the canvas. This process becomes not only retrospective of experience, but also gives birth to new experience. It is similar to the geological layering of sediment which provides a historical narrative of the earth, and also fuses each successive layer to the previous one. It is as if through this layering of paint and fabric that past and present experience become joined. This process has become the cornerstone of my work. Thumbnail sketches precede the painting, and it is in these, that I lay down the basic compositional structure. However, the initial structure continues to flux as I continue to paint. It is often the linear energy within these initial sketches which begins to set the mood for the painting.

As I begin and develop the layering, my decision making is paradoxically, both intuitive and rational. The necessity for both components of decision making is captured in this quote by Richard Diebenkorn:

"Part of painting is physical. Another part is intellectual. The most highly prized aspect is intuitive, when it is operative. The percentage changes with each painting. There should be a balance."²

Like Diebenkorn, I continue to search for a balance between all three elements of painting. For example, throughout a painting's development, paint, fabric, and brushstroke are often applied to certain areas based on a desire to flatten out a shape or suggested object in the painting. I perceive this decision making as more rational than

intuitive. In the lower left section of **[A Visit From The Anonymous Beacon, Plate, VI]**, I allude to the existence of a chair, by painting the chair's shape, and by applying upholstery-like fabric. However, the geometry of the red-checked fabric, along with the surrounding drips of red glaze, force the viewer's eye to acknowledge the two-dimensional surface, and deny the three-dimensionality of the chair. The manipulation of fabrics, through the application of glazes also serves to create atmospheric qualities in which patterns move in and out of focus, thus alluding to the mystical and somewhat transient nature of experience. This can be seen, for example, in the upper right portion of **[The Wingback's Domain, Plate I]**. With each new painting, my efforts to portray the elusive nature of experience, continued to evolve. The final two paintings, **[Clairvoyance At Brooks Avenue, VII]**, and **[The December Reunion, Plate VIII]**, illustrate a conscious attempt to paint this ambiguity by employing brushwork which is more gestural, and less defining of believable space. While the decision to increase the use of gestural brushwork is rational, the physical act of applying loose brushstrokes to the canvas, emerges from my intuition.

During a productive painting session, I experience what I call a fluid phase. It is during this phase that I become less aware of my surroundings, and instead, become totally immersed in the act of painting and layering. Although, I continue to tap into rational decision making, it is the fluid phase that allows me to access my intuition. My intuition often helps to establish a particular mood for the painting. This is accomplished during the layering when certain fabrics and areas of paint are applied because they feel right, and because their application suddenly elicits an emotive response, connecting me

to memory of place and time.

The painted and collaged patterns serve dual purposes. First, they enhance the overall composition, by providing size and shape variation. Secondly, through the application of patterned fabric, I attempt to induce myself and the viewer into a somewhat nostalgic and commemorative state of being. Each fabric may evoke different responses from the viewer depending on his or her relationship to pattern and/or fabric.

Color usage within these interior spaces, becomes an active reflection of self. In other words, instead of using color to describe a perceived interior space, I often use color in order to define my own emotive experience, past and present. In addition, I attempt to further this metaphor of the interior as a reflection of self, by animating suggested objects with the pulsating rhythms of color temperature. In **[The Wingback's Domain, Plate I]**, the orange chair appears to glow from the inside, as if illuminated by fireflies. In **[Clairvoyance At Brooks Avenue, Plate VII]**, the colors vibrate, through the close juxtaposition of compliments and varying degrees of color intensities. The heated reds, pinks and oranges which dance about in the lower left of the painting are cooled by varying degrees of blues and greens. I utilize the push and pull of color temperature as a means for creating a rhythmic tension between the two dimensions of the picture plane and the implied, three dimensions of the imagery.

The animated nature of these interiors is also reflected in the use of relatively large canvases. The nearly human scale of these canvases allows the viewer to be almost completely surrounded by the space, perhaps as if standing within the interior. It is this vantage point that may cause the viewer to feel at times, entranced by vibrations of color

brushstroke and pattern.

In order to balance the active qualities of the interiors' composition, it became necessary to provide a passageway to the exterior. The exterior light from the window-like openings, often operates as a source of visual respite, almost beckoning the viewer's eye to move closer. If the interior serves as a metaphor for self, the window-like openings become the non-self or the environmental component. I utilize the suggested exterior light, not only to provide a visual reprieve within the composition, but also to create a sense of mood and mystery. In addition, both the interior and exterior light is used to further convey the ambiguity of experience. For example, in [A Visit From The Anonymous Beacon, Plate VI], I attempt to convey this ambiguity by, allowing the exterior light to exist as direct light which floods the room, thus suggesting the illusion of space. However, in the central portion of the painting, the leaves of the plant are surrounded by a glowing light which does not originate from a specific source. Instead of suggesting the depth of the interior, this light seems to radiate from within and around the plant and floor area, denying the implied space of the third dimension. The development of spatial tension in conjunction with the push and pull between the active interior and the inactive exterior, imitates the polarity found within our inner selves.

This stormy yet necessary marriage between the "inner and outer," specifically within an artwork, was first discussed by Wassily Kandinsky in 1914;

"A work of art consists of two elements, the inner and the outer. The inner is the emotion in the soul of the artist; this emotion has the capacity to evoke a similar emotion in the observer. Being connected with the body, the soul is affected through the medium of the senses- the felt. Emotions are aroused and stirred by what is sensed. Thus, the sensed is the bridge, i.e., the physical relation, between the immaterial (which is the

artist's emotions) and the material, which results in the production of a work of art. And again, what is sensed is the bridge from the material (the artist and his work) to the immaterial (the emotion in the soul of the observer)."³

Through the manipulation of paint and collage, these interior/exterior settings reflect my attempts at devising a bridge between my inner self and my environment. In addition, I hope that their presence will provide a vehicle for the viewer to cross that same experiential "bridge" between self and environment.

Through the process of finding my own voice in painting, I have discovered connections between my own thought processes and the likes of such artists as Howard Hodgkin, Richard Diebenkorn and Henri Matisse. In particular, I identify with Hodgkin's efforts to paint the emotive aspects of his experience. In his 1994 retrospective on Howard Hodgkin, Andrew Graham-Dixon comments on Hodgkins' attempts at defining the undefinable;

"Feelings complicate matters. Hodgkin wants to paint pictures of 'emotional situations', but his art acknowledges (even insists on) the unrepresentability of these kinds of emotional situations that make up life. His pictures attempt to address those aspects of human experience, shadowy, half apprehended, which it is beyond the capacities of certain kinds of traditionally representational art to express."⁴

Like Hodgkin, my work rejoices in the intrinsic nature of experience, that which cannot be easily defined or proven. Unlike Hodgkin, my work suggests the evasiveness of experience through the tension between representation and abstraction. I further express the transitory and mystical attributes of experience through the use of spatial dichotomies, and paradoxes, combined with the use of evocative color, active brushstroke and rich patterns.

Endnotes

1. Denise Wear, The Center of the Web: Women and Solitude, (New York: State University Press, 1993), p. 4.
2. Richard Diebenkorn, as cited by Gerald Nordland, Richard Diebenkorn, (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p. 225.
3. Wassily Kandinsky, as cited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Art, Creativity, and the Sacred, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984), p.7.
4. Andrew Graham-Dixon, Howard Hodgkin, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 39

PLATES



PLATE I: The Wingback's Domain
acrylic, fabric, and paper, 60" x 67"

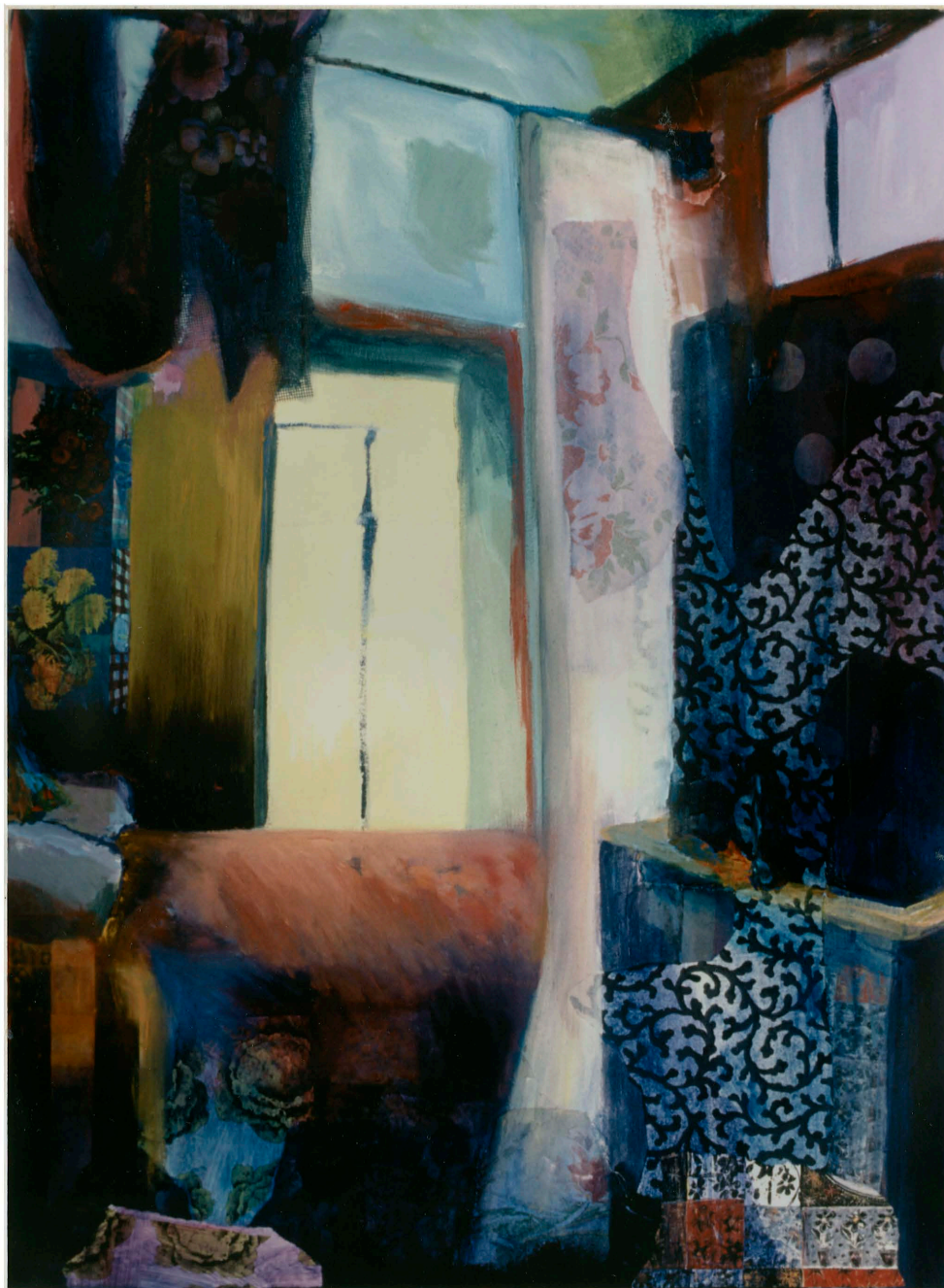


PLATE II:

Reprieve In The Green Room

acrylic, fabric, and paper, 30" x 22"



PLATE III: Polka-Dots and the Luminous Bystander
acrylic, fabric, and paper, 30" x 30"



PLATE IV:

Eliza's Parlor

acrylic, fabric, and paper, 48" x 47 1/2"



PLATE V:

Pink Levitation

acrylic, oil, fabric, and paper, 78" x 47 1/2"



PLATE VI:

A Visit From The Anonymous Beacon
acrylic, fabric, and paper, 72" x 60"



PLATE VII: Clairvoyance at Brooks Avenue
acrylic, fabric, and paper, 60" x 48"

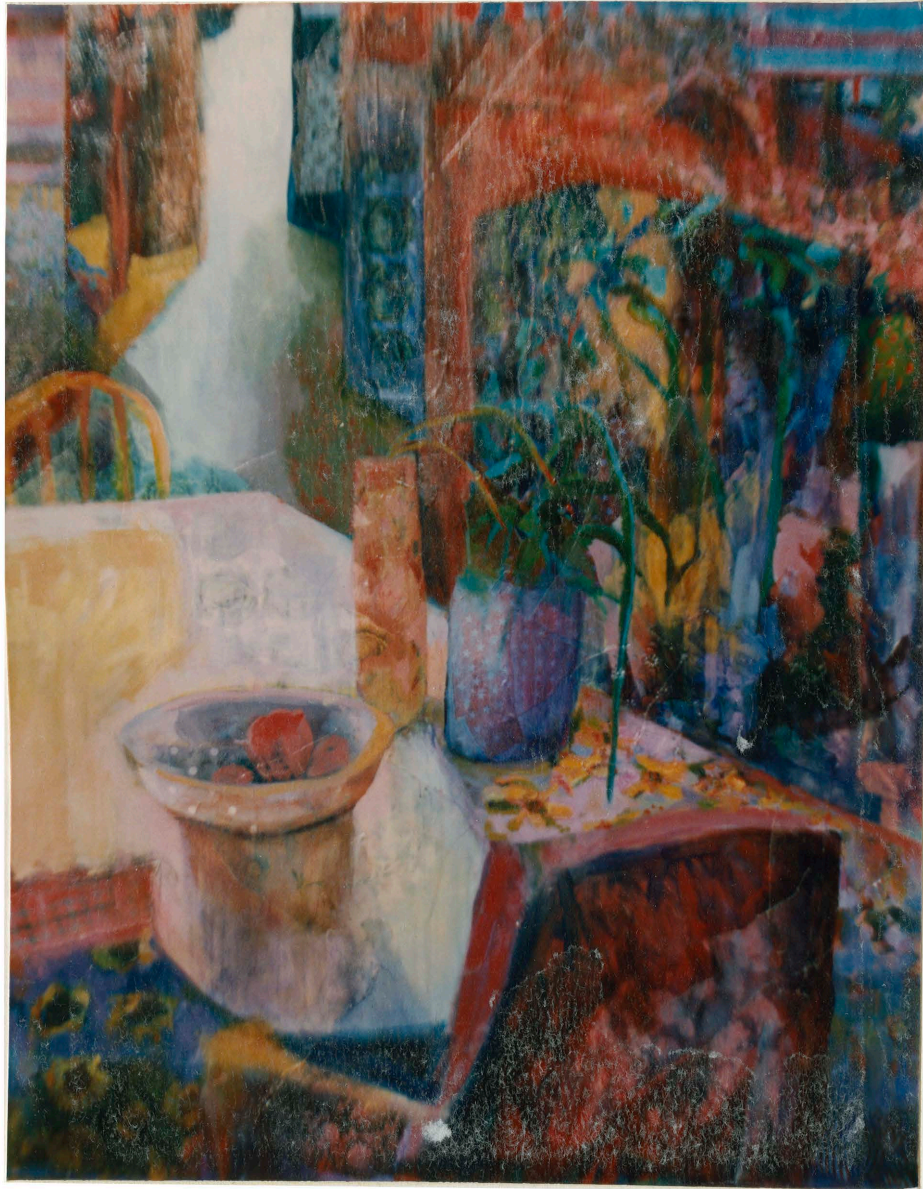


PLATE VIII: The December Reunion
acrylic, fabric, and paper, 60" x 48"