On the Brink of Collapse

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Prerequisite for Honors in the Studio Art Department of Wellesley College

April 2015

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Studio Art faculty, who have taught me so much over the years and helped me grow immensely as an artist. My time here at Wellesley has been such a delightful, rewarding journey because of the Studio Art and Art History faculty, and I cannot thank them enough.

I would like to give a special thanks to Daniela Rivera, who has taught me more about painting and the conceptual thinking that goes into making art than any other person. I feel so fortunate to have been her student.
Introduction—Background

Looking back at the entire thesis process, this project has evolved into something I could not have imagined at the start of fall 2014. At the time of my thesis proposal, I intended to explore the theme of fragmentation. My interest in fragmentation stemmed from my final project for Introduction to Painting in fall 2012.

For that final project, I took the image of a purple rhododendron and broke it up across ten canvases, all different sizes and shapes (figure 1). My idea was that each canvas would be a complete abstracted image on its own, but all together they would make a larger, cohesive narrative representation, creating a contrast of interpretation between the individual fragments and the pieced together unit. The blank spaces between the canvases were the locus of viewers’ agency to connect the abstracted fragments to the whole. Another avenue of exploration for this piece was that later installations could play with the arrangement of the canvases, making the piece as a whole more exploded, allowing viewers more power in their interpretations and associations.

Figure 1. Oil on canvas, approximately 6 ft x 7 ft. 2012.
I felt this work was successful because it required viewers to engage in visual thinking, since they had to mentally visualize the relationship of the pieces to see the whole. After this project, I knew I wanted to thesis in Studio Art because I realized that I could establish a dialogue with viewers through painting and their interpretations could be an important component to the meaning of the artwork. As I went into my Advanced Painting class in the spring of 2014, I thought that fragmentation was a theme that would allow me to develop this relationship and deepen viewer agency, so I began to explore different methods of approaching fragmentation. I already knew that breaking up a single image across multiple canvases was a technique that worked, so I wanted to see how alternative modes of fragmentation could create a new reading or experience of a piece. Building on what I knew, I came back to the idea of visual thinking and blank spaces as a way to engage viewers in the completion of the work of art.

One of the pieces that came out of pushing myself to think more materially about various modes of fragmentation was a collection of images on ripped paper. I printed out three pictures of a crystal table centerpiece at three different sizes, tore them up, and painted half the torn pieces on ripped and cut paper (figure 2). They were displayed in a pile that viewers could physically interact with, rearranging them and even fitting the images back together if they chose. Additionally, I left some areas of the object unpainted, or in a more ‘unfinished’ state so that viewers would have to fill in the empty spaces to construct the whole. With this piece I was hoping to involve viewers in a direct and prolonged interaction with the work.
Figure 2. Detail excerpt, 4 out of 9 painted images (18 images total, including 9 photographic images). Oil on paper. Varied sizes. 2014.

With this type of work done, at the time of the thesis proposal I was already thinking of fragmentation in a broader way and seeing in it the potential for experimentation. I came to understand a fragment as a portion of a former real or imagined whole and that fragmentation could be an experience conveyed through the materials and methods of painting, not just through the literal shattering of a unity I had previously represented. Additionally, I thought of fragmentation as a way to study the parts to better understand the whole.

I wanted to grow more as a painter, and at the time I thought the best way to do that would be to challenge myself stylistically, and that the theme of fragmentation would be a fitting lens to do so. At the end of this intense process I have grown and am still developing immensely
as an artist, but rather than facing stylistic challenges I was confronted by material ones that brought with them profound conceptual implications.

Part One—Exploration in Materials, Methods, and Subject

Cracks

At the beginning of the academic year, I focused on experimenting with materials and methods. I started out interested in the notion of cracks and the action of making them, since I thought of them as a possible origin for a fragment. Some of my previous paintings obtained small fissures in their surfaces while I was working on them, and while this acutely bothered me at that time, I later saw them as an interesting path to investigate. I thought it could be interesting for something that started out as an accidental disruption of the continuity of the image to turn into the subject itself.

First, I tried to make the primer on the canvas break using pressure, but that did not work, so I made small scratches with a blade instead. These turned out to be too subtle and uninteresting, so I decided to try a more conventional route and paint simple, illusionistic cracks on small canvases as a test, which were loosely based on reference photos of cracked pathways and surfaces from around campus (figure 3). Since this test was only slightly better than the first experiment, I realized I had to make the surface fracture itself to get a more genuine breakage. Testing out multiple thicknesses of primer on the canvas, I primed canvases with five, ten, and fifteen layers of gesso, then kept folding and stretching them until they cracked. I also did a test
canvas where I painted a dark ground underneath eight layers of primer and used an x-acto knife to expand the cracks made from folding (figure 4).

**Figure 3.** Oil on canvas.

**Figure 4.** top left—5 layers of gesso; bottom left—10 layers; bottom right—15 layers; top right—8 layers (and acrylic underneath gesso)
Ultimately, while these were useful exercises that allowed me to learn more about how canvas and gesso behave, the results of how they looked were not what I was hoping for. Fifteen layers of gesso cracked the most easily, and the fewer layers there were, the harder it was to break and the less prominent the fissures were. However, the way fifteen layers of gesso bent and cracked looked like worn leather, which while surprising, was not the effect I sought. I wanted the surface to present an instantaneous accident, not the decay of time.

To that end, I started to work with plaster, since I believed I could get more material breakages with it. For my first experiment, I poured plaster on canvas, leaving raw canvas on the edges and placing thicker plaster in the middle so the fissures would have more weight in that area (figure 5). This turned out well, particularly because viewer interaction revealed the full extent of the fractures. As time goes on, these encounters expand the crack and small pieces of the plaster get lost.

Figure 5. Cracked plaster on canvas. Left—unbent. Right—bent.
After that first experiment with plaster, I wanted to make more present cracks, to merge material and subject. To this end, I filled in stretcher bars with plaster and dropped it from the top of a staircase. I kept all the pieces and, like a three dimensional puzzle, fit them back together and glued them back in place (figure 6). I did multiple variations of this, including one on a plank of wood where I played with making ‘brushstrokes’ out of plaster with my fingers. For every iteration, there were always pieces that no longer fit, but I still kept them. They were still part of the former whole, even though the event split them off from the rest of the pieces.

Figure 6. Plaster, stretcher bars, canvas; oil on some.
While I was walking around campus photographing fissured surfaces and objects for reference, I came across an acorn on the ground with a large split in it. Something about it and the form of the split drew me to it, so I picked it up and painted it on a whim (figure 7).

![Figure 7](image)

**Figure 7.** Oil on paper. First of twelve acorns.

I only intended to do one painting of the acorn, but when Daniela Rivera saw the painting of the acorn, she found something compelling about it too, and suggested I keep painting it. The repetition of the image of the split acorn would simultaneously delay and confer meaning on this fairly insignificant object. Furthermore, while the acorn is the same acorn, from the same angle, and in the same position, every single painting of the acorn is different. It is impossible to paint something identically because of the accidental variations introduced by the human hand. Sometimes I intentionally made a small adjustment, like making the base color for the painting a little warmer or cooler. Also, the first acorn painting was based solely on the acorn as a model, while the next used the acorn and the first painting as a referent, until they all were based on the first painting and my familiarity with the image. No matter the reference I worked from, the
acorn paintings became a series I continued throughout the year. It was something I could come back to whenever I was confused on what to do next. At these times, I would paint another acorn to stay productive. I could just paint it without much thought, so I could think about what to do next while still painting, and every repetition, with its slight idiosyncrasies, added to the acorn’s ability to escape a one dimensional signification.

Painting the acorn repeatedly was one of the first steps I took in trusting my instincts more. I have a strong tendency to doubt my instincts, so in the past I would plan all of the steps of my painting projects in advance. While having a plan is usually a good thing, for me it often actually prevented me from responding to the material aspects of the painting and its process. I would stick too rigidly to my plan, which closed me off from more interesting possibilities for my work. So, an important goal for my thesis was to learn to be more present and responsive to the painting process and let go of my fear of failure and losing control. This aim was more difficult to achieve than I thought it would be. While I have learned to take more risks than I ever thought I would in less than a year, I do still worry about taking the paintings too far, or making the wrong decision, and having the painting fail.

3D Printed Material

At the beginning of the fall semester, I came across 3D printed material in the media lab. There were jars of purple and clear colored plastic fragments left over from printing, and I was curious as to what they were, so I started looking through the jars. While I was examining these objects, the media lab assistant, Jack Wolfe, explained the process of 3D printing to me. The model needs to be printed on a raft to prevent potential breakage when it is removed from the printer’s platform, and it needs supports for any overhang areas of the model itself. The 3D
printer cannot print on thin air, so it randomly generates support material in the model’s negative space. Once printing is completed, the supports, as well as the raft, are broken off and discarded.

It was the leftover supports in the jars that I was drawn to. The bright, plastic color of the purple made me notice them, but the actual form of these randomly generated fragments kept me intrigued. These tiny objects had a complex structure to them, and very important function to the process of printing. They reminded me of miniature, ruined buildings, and are an invisible presence in the finished product of their medium. I thought that making them visible through painting and using them as “supports” for my material explorations could help me in my pictorial journey. I was also interested in transposing this new technological support on a more historical and traditional one.

At the same time as I was experimenting with materials and methods with the plaster cracks, I experimented with modes of painting with these cast-off 3D printed fragments. I started with simple oil sketches, then made two more detailed small paintings that were the same. On one of them I poured a thin layer of plaster over the painting, and then dropped it to make some of the plaster break off so the painting could show through (figure 8). It was an interesting conceptual exercise, but the resulting image was not very compelling. It did not work well as a physical object because the plaster does not adhere well to the painted canvas. Also, I had made the plaster layer as thin as possible unsuccessfully attempting for the painted image to show through the unbroken plaster. Ultimately it only resulted in a plaster layer that broke too easily.

For the other test canvas, I experimented with sanding away the paint. Daniela brought up the idea of the palimpsest, which was when something written on a piece of parchment was scraped away to write something new on the page, but there was still a ghost of the previous writings. It was an interesting idea to make a painted palimpsest, but after partially sanding
away the image, I was not satisfied with the result, despite the fact that it did make an interesting texture. Something about it did not work for me, so over the sanded image I painted layers of the same 3D printed fragment in different colors with a slightly changed placement (figure 8). This did not work either, because I found it difficult to paint the same image without following what I had already done, so there was not enough difference between each layer. If I were to do it again I would create more noticeable changes among the layers. After all of this trial and error I rapidly rejected the idea of the palimpsest as a meaningful process in my painting practice.

Figure 8. Oil on canvas. Top left—painting before plaster layer. Top right—after plaster. Bottom left—after sanding. Bottom right—after different colored layers.
Despite many explorations, I felt I still had not found something worth pursuing at a large scale. However, the 3D printed fragments were still interesting as models. They are fascinating little objects, so I decided to carefully observe them and paint them at a large scale. In my artwork in the past, I had almost always been concerned with depicting things that are overlooked in some way, whether it is because of their small size, or because they are taken for granted, or simply just not noticed as something of interest. I am a detail-oriented person, so I am constantly noticing small, often mundane, things and finding something of note in them as I go about my day. Since I did not feel like my experiments with sanding, layering, or even the plaster cracks were yielding as fruitful results as I would have hoped, I decided to fall back on the skills I already knew I had.

In the middle of fall semester, I started a large painting of two 3D printed fragments that struck me because of their resemblance to a ruined tower. At the imprimatura stage, Daniela pointed out to me how fresh the brushstrokes were in comparison to my previous paintings (Untitled 1, figure 9). I had intended to cover this layer with detailed full color, but I grew to like the visible, looser brushwork, and that it allowed room for interpretation of the subject matter. However, something about it was unfinished. I did not know what it was, but I did not want to rush to the wrong path for this painting and lose the successful qualities of it. This was the first larger painting I did in the fall, but I was so afraid of ruining what was already on the canvas that I did not return to it until partway through the spring semester.
While I thought about what to do with this unfinished painting, I decided to start another one of the same type. I became very interested in more gestural brushwork and decided to explore it on a larger painting (*Untitled 2*). Since I intended to leave this painting at the imprimatura stage, I was concerned with making it polished. Consequently, the brushwork was tighter and more careful, and the painting ended up being less interesting and less alive. By the time I had finished this first grey layer, I still had not figured out what to do with *Untitled 1*. At that point I had two unfinished paintings and my frustration grew at not knowing what to do with them, so I put them both aside and did not return to working on *Untitled 2* until winter session.
Part Two—The End of the First Semester

Part of the way through fall semester, Daniela pointed out that I was working more in the realm of ruin than fragmentation. I still liked the idea of fragmentation at that point, so I felt I was working with both ruins and fragmentation, and came to think of the connection between the two as the crack since fissures must form before there can be a fragment or a ruin. I was physically making ruins with my cracked plaster pieces, and I was using fragments to make painted ruins. As Phyllis McGibbon pointed out at a critique, I had a preoccupation with leftovers, which actually tied back to the intentions of my previous work, depicting things that are overlooked.

By the time of the mid-semester critique with the majority of the Studio Art faculty and all the thesis students, I was at a point where I did not know what to do next or where to go. At the critique many of the faculty responded well to 3D printed objects themselves and the bendable cracked plaster on canvas. They suggested displaying the 3D printed leftover fragments, perhaps on top of the cracked plaster. While this was an interesting idea, it seemed too easy to me and I wanted to present paintings, not found objects. The faculty also suggested printing out the forms of these 3D printed supports, but that was not the point of them. The supports are something randomly generated. The form of them is an accident, and they are meant to be broken off and thrown away. I also wanted to invert the scale and monumentalize them through painting. Furthermore, intentionally generating them would have eradicated their nature as an accidental by-product.

After the feedback from the critique, I had more ideas to work with, but I still did not know what I wanted to do or how I wanted to proceed. I was in a video production class,
Moving Image Studio, so I decided to use a project for that class to work through some ideas for my thesis and explore the theme of ruin, particularly digital ruin.

I set up the 3D printed fragments in sand to look like a ruined, abandoned city. I shot a combination of video footage and still images. At the same time, I also took more photographs of the staged landscape to use as a reference for painting. For the video piece, I manipulated each clip slightly differently to become more and more distorted, mimicking analog and digital video failings, both unintentional and intentional (figure 10). For the soundtrack, I chose the sound of whistling wind to reinforce the idea of ruin. The subject and the visualization of it came together to depict digital debris.

![Video still.](image)

Every time I went to the sculpture studio I had picked up discarded plaster fragments that were unused pieces or from failed molds. Just like the split acorn or the 3D supports, I did not know why I was attracted to these forms, but I picked them up on instinct. At first I did not know what to do with these strange plaster pieces, but when I started working on the video project, I thought projecting the video on these pieces would materially reinforce the subject and workings of the video. For the installation of the video, I projected it into a white corner filled
with the plaster pieces to make the projection of a digital ruin distort further on a physical one (figure 11).

![Figure 11. Video installation still. 14 minute run time.](image)

Around the same time I made this video piece, I also took photographs for reference on the 3D printed material set up like a ruined city and on the cracked plaster surface. While I did not want to present just the objects of the supports by the cracked plaster, I did like the idea of collapsing two different types and occurrences of accidental breakage into one space and time in one layer of paint (Untitled 3, figure 12).

I decided to make the next paintings a pair, connecting and creating a dialogue between them through their format. While narrowing down which images to use as reference for these paintings, I had the idea to also print out pixelated versions of the photographs and use the
pixelation to create texture in select places in the paintings. I thought this would create visual interest and emphasize the ruined and digital nature of the subjects.

I chose one image to be a more traditional landscape that had more of a narrative character, exploring subject matter as the way to tell a story (Untitled 4, figure 12). Very soon after starting working on these paintings (figure 12), I realized that my idea of including pixelation texture was not appropriate for the paintings. It would not add to the message or narrative of the paintings, since pixelation is a failing unique to digital photography. It would have been a false imposition to translate that to these paintings.

Figure 12. Untitled 3, left. Untitled 4, right. Oil on canvas. Each 46 x 56 inches. In progress state by the end of fall 2014.

Miniature Art Historical Pieces and Other Work

Over the summer of 2014, I was able to study abroad in Italy, so I got to see famous works of art in Italy and Paris. Since I am a double major in Studio Art and Art History, I was very moved to finally see many works of art that I had studied over the years in person. I wanted to connect my majors and I thought it would be interesting to take monumental works of art and
make them miniscule and almost insignificant. I decided to decontextualize the works by choosing small sections, fragments, of the work to paint. It was important for me to choose works I had a direct experience with and that the references for these paintings were my own photographs, the evidence of that experience.

Figure 13. From left to right, starting at the top—after Laoccon sculpture; after Jacques-Louis David’s Death of Marat; after Sandro Botticelli’s Birth of Venus; after Artemisia Gentileschi’s Judith Slaying Holofernes; after Peter Paul Ruben’s Arrival of Marie de Medici at Marseilles. Oil on canvas board. 2 x 2 inches or 3 x 3 inches. 2014—2015.
For some of the sections I chose, I decided to pick an insignificant area of the painting. For other sections, I chose areas that held key information about the scene, but that in such a small fragment would require knowledge of the source material and time to recognize it.

While I was doing this work, I tried painting on stone. After a group critique, Carlos Dorrien suggested painting on stone, and gave me a piece of marble to work on. I was very excited to paint on marble, but I was nervous as well, so at first I did not know what image would be worthy to place on the stone. In the end, I decided to do a more sketch-like painting of a 3D printed fragmented support on the stone (figure 14). I loved the result because I was deeply interested in the idea of subverting the usual use of stone for sculpture and instead paint a flat image on it. This piece also brought together two kinds of discarded supports in one object.

Figure 14. Oil on marble.
Another experiment I tried at the end of first semester, also at the suggestion of Carlos Dorrien, was to paint an image directly on cracked plaster. With his help, I made two flat plaster surfaces, reinforced by burlap. I painted a crack on one of them and 3D printed supports on the other (figure 15). On the painting of the crack, I broke the plaster with an impact from the back. On the painting of the 3D printed supports, I cracked the plaster with an impact from the front. I liked how the painting of the crack with the fracture coming from the back was subtler and that there was less evidence of violence of the impact. I appreciated that the irregular edges of the paintings were an unexpected element to find in painting and that there was a small yet significant interactive component with the bendability of the breaks.

![Figure 15. Oil on cracked plaster.](image)

Part Three—Second Semester and the Large Paintings

Coming back to working on this project at the start of spring 2015, I decided I wanted to focus back on painting in a more traditional sense, with canvas and stretcher bars as the support. I knew I wanted to push myself farther as a painter, but I was still struggling with how to
translate the discoveries I was making in other media to painting. The two large paintings of the crack and the abandoned landscape were the most straightforward to continue, so I spent most of winter session working on those (figure 16). As I continued with them, I did want to keep some of the freshness of the brushstrokes that I liked in my previous paintings of 3D printed fragments, so I worked to avoid getting too tight or detailed too rapidly with the work.

During winter session, I had space in the studio to spread out, so I brought out my first two large paintings of 3D printed supports again. As I worked on the other paintings, I was still grappling with determining what they needed to become finished pieces. I was not satisfied with how Untitled 2 looked, so I was less concerned with damaging what I had already done. Eventually I had the idea to use a still from the video piece I had made as a reference to paint over the existing image. But since there was an area I did like and did not want to cover, I decided to only paint over the right half almost as if there were nothing underneath (figures 17 and 18). As I painted over it, though, I was intrigued by the areas where both images were visible, where the layer underneath could be seen through the layer on top. The intervention of
the video still was the right direction, and the beginning of the path to where *Untitled 1* and *Untitled 2* are now.

**Figure 17.** 52 x 62 inches. First layer visible, second layer in progress.

**Figure 18.** Second layer completed.
At the beginning of spring semester I still could not bring myself to paint over the first large imprimatura painting of the 3D printed support. I had become too attached to the way it looked at that initial stage. Instead, I found it easier to keep working on *Untitled 3* and *Untitled 4* and getting those closer to a finished state.

In my spare time, I was watching a television show online, but one day the video broke as I was watching it. The image broke down into irregular patterns formed by very bright, rectangular color blocks. This happened twice, and I quickly took screenshots both times because I found the forms and colors fascinating. At this point I had been painting with neutral greys for some time and these explosions of color captivated me. I decided to paint these moments of video displaying its materiality as a break from my other work (figure 19).

![Figure 19. In progress.](image)

When Daniela saw these paintings, she said there was something about them that she could not explain in words. She asked why not make those kinds of interventions on the larger paintings. These comment stayed with me and while I had initially considered the brightly colored works as a rest, the idea of placing them on the larger paintings took hold of me. Using a projector to help me visualize how the addition of the bright, blocky colors would look on
*Untitled 1,* I was still hesitant to cover what I had already done, but I was finally intrigued to see what would happen with the addition of the color field layer (figured 20).

![Figure 20. *Untitled 1.* Second layer from broken video in progress.](image)

After I started placing this second layer of bright colors on top, I became extremely excited about this painting. It was far more interesting and I identified more with the bright colors. But I still did not want to lose the first layer, so I employed glazing to use oil paint’s translucent aspect to let the first layer show through the color, which I had learned could make an interesting effect from working on the second layer of *Untitled 2.*
I realized that the images from broken videos worked very well on top of the 3D printed supports. Both make representation collapse, exposing the material processes and functions of their mediums. I then brought that same kind of malfunctioning video intervention on *Untitled 2* as a third layer, which I started doing over spring break. Instead of placing it all over the entire canvas from one single image, I more selectively chose which areas to paint over with the color blocks, and drew from multiple images from screenshots of broken videos I had taken (figure 22).

**Figure 21.** *Untitled 1.* Second layer completed.
I continued finding images to collect in this painting, looking back at all the relevant references and source material I had gathered physically in my studio and digitally on my computer. The projector helped me to see how each potential addition would affect the painting, but after each addition, I found it more difficult to pick and place layers. Each new layer provided another layer of meaning and interest, but I was still apprehensive of pushing the painting too far and losing sight of the representational aspects of the painting. Daniela kept encouraging me to put aside my fears and continue pushing the painting, adding more and more layers (figure 23).
Figure 23. *Untitled* 2 in progress; more elements were gradually added.
After working on *Untitled 2* for a while, I returned to *Untitled 1*. Again, something about it was not quite done. When looking for layers to add to *Untitled 2*, I came across a 3D printed hexagonal grid. Seeing it projected on *Untitled 2*, I thought it might be better suited to *Untitled 1*. At first I did not know why I thought that, but I listened to my instinct and starting placing the hexagons on *Untitled 1*. While working on it, I realized that the grid structure was more suited to this painting because it related back to the image in the first layer. It revealed the structure of the 3D printed support. Later I realized that the particular hexagonal grid I had picked was a failed print, since each layer of plastic thread is supposed to line up perfectly, but this one did not and had staggered, misaligned threads. These mistakes in printing drew me to that particular grid in the first place. Just like the acorn and the other 3D printed supports, I was instinctually drawn to the revealing collapse of material.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 24.** *Untitled 1*. Third layer in progress.
References

Throughout the year I looked at the works of other artists for inspiration, such as works by Gerhard Richter, Adrian Ghenie, Michel Borremans, Daniel Schnell, Adriana Varejao, David Hockney, and others. I also read interviews with and writings by Gerhard Richter, an essay on ruins by Eduardo Cadava called “Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins” (2009), and David Hockney’s book That’s the Way I See It (1993). For most of the year, most of the artist’s work did not resonate much with me. I admired their work, and thought much of it was intriguing, but I did not see myself making work like them. I also wanted to discover solutions and experience materials for myself, without feeling obligated to repeat other artists’ experiments and successes. I wanted to find my own voice and process of painting. Now at the end of the thesis process, after I have made such large steps in my painting process, when I look again at some of those artist’s works, some of them do resonate with me. For example, I am now much more attracted to Daniel Schnell’s paintings. His surfaces are full of activity and covered with layers, but it is an organized chaos that barely eludes a consistent reading. My work is starting to operate in a similar way.

Conclusion—Reflection

Looking back at the entire thesis process, it has been a search to find my own painting process and at many times it has been a battle with myself and my own tendencies. My main goal was to develop more as an artist and to keep pushing myself to try new things both stylistically and conceptually. I lost direction along the way, but in the end I feel like I definitely accomplished that goal. Even though I am still discovering what these final paintings are fully
about, since they are in constant evolution, all my work this year has had much more conceptual thinking behind it. The materials and my explorations with other mediums have challenged me to rethink the way I approach painting and respond to the materials and process of painting.

Painting was and is important to me because it involves the investment of time. It requires labor of the human hand to create, and that fact alone is enough to raise the question in viewers of what makes the subject worthy of being painted. Painting is also an act of translation and interpretation, rather than just a transcription of the subject. I believe it requires a negotiation of subject and materials since they work together to create the meaning. An artist chooses both the materials and the subject for a reason.

Since I had my major breakthroughs so late in the thesis process, I do not feel like I am done exploring these themes. At the beginning of the year, I happened upon a subject that challenged the way I approach making art, from the thinking behind it to the execution of it. I believe I am really at the beginning of a new path to a new body of work that is going to continue beyond this thesis year, and that I am going to continue to build on the discoveries I have made and everything I have learned through my thesis.