Lost and Found in Figurative Painting

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Lost and Found in Figurative Painting

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Science with Honors in Art and Art History from The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

The theme of my honors thesis deals with the lost and found figure within my paintings. Prior to the start of this project, I tended to over-define my works which limited the unity of the painted environment. Because of the over-definition, forms, especially figures, would separate from the surrounding space. Occasionally, one of my painted figures would unintentionally start to merge into its surroundings and become partially hidden, while remaining partially revealed. When this happened, not only did it improve the unity of the painting, but it altered the narrative of the painting as well. As I noticed a pattern of unintentional merging and intentional definition in my paintings, I felt compelled to investigate the dynamic in a more purposeful way. Through this honors thesis I was able to deliberately explore the lost-and-found figure, allowing me to develop more control of the figure’s presence and start to consider its presence in relation to the overall narrative of the painting.

The idea of “Lost and Found” is the interplay between the technique of painting and the psychological impact it has on the viewer’s interaction with a portrait. When looking at figurative painting, people are naturally drawn to the figure, especially to the face. In many cases this is the artist’s intention – the subject of the portrait being the main focus – and the artist might play into that psychological tendency by painting a highly rendered figure or placing the figure in a prominent spot within the composition. I am naturally drawn to this approach of over-defining the figure, and in the past the tendency began to stifle my paintings. I spent too much time painting details on faces and fingernails and would neglect the larger, more unifying elements of the painting. The result always fell short in effectively communicating the visual
experience I had when I was painting. Beyond the quality of my image, my narrative in each painting also suffered from over-definition. Setting up a portrait is an involved process for me, and it is important to me that my work tells some story. But if I failed to consider the objects and setting to be as important as the face while I was painting, then the narrative would be less effective in the finished work. By mandating that I “lost” the figure in some way, I was pushing myself to move beyond illustrating what is easily defined in a portrait, and seeking to truly explore the interaction of the figure and its environment.

How does one lose a person in a painting? I define “losing” the figure as painting it in such a way that some of its psychological dominance over the composition decreases. A figure is “lost” when the boundary between two forms is obscured and “found” when a boundary is clarified. Boundaries can be obscured by decreasing the contrast of one or more elements between the forms. For example, the edge between an illuminated forearm and a light background wall might be obscured by bringing the two forms (wall and forearm) closer together in value, thus decreasing the contrast between them. The smaller the contrast becomes, the more the figure merges with the wall and is lost. Heightening the contrast between elements – perhaps even painting a line between arm and wall where there is none – separates the figure from its environment, and I would consider this an act of “finding” the figure. When the figure is lost, the viewer may still look at the figure first, but its gravity is lessened: the viewer feels free to look elsewhere and explore the composition without feeling constantly drawn back to the figure’s face or body. “Lost” figures may actually be more true to a visual experience than more illustrated figures.

The lost and found effect can be manipulated using a variety of techniques, not just those I mentioned above. In addition to adjusting the contrast and similarity between forms (as in the
example of the forearm and the wall), the artist can also use the position of the figure within the composition; the interaction between patterns on or around the figure; cropping of the body; even distortion of the figure. These are just some of the ways an artist can choose to draw attention to or divert attention away from a figure. I purposefully allowed myself free range over all of the possible techniques I could use to lose my figures in order that I might cater the technique to what was appropriate for each painting.

One of my intentions in choosing to challenge myself thus was to improve my technical and compositional ability. Therefore, while lost and found was the thematic goal among these paintings, another goal of the project was overall technical improvement. However, I could not achieve one without the other; that became undeniable as I painted through the year. Since the theme of lost and found in this project is so inextricably linked to my development as an artist, I will present the works below in roughly chronological order, grouped with similar works. One painting, *Morning Rituals* (figure 1) will be discussed both in the early portraits and the later portraits because I worked on it continuously from October to April, and its transformation is representative of my artistic transformation over the year.

**Early Portraits**

In the fall of 2017 I began my exploration of the lost and found figure in earnest. With such a range of ways I could obscure the figure to choose from, I was overwhelmed, and my initial paintings were unsuccessful. The more I thought about my thesis and focused on the parameters I had set, the worse my paintings became. The worse my paintings became, the more I worried and overthought my process. By October, I was so sick of this cycle that I decided to do something drastic. I stapled some canvas to a large piece of cardboard and began inventing a
multi-figure painting which later would become *Morning Rituals* (figure 1). At first, the scene was bright and the figures were presented on a flat plane interwoven; arms, elbows, legs all pointing around the composition (figure 10). I had recently become interested in Scott Noel’s paintings, specifically *Playground in Manayunk, The Iliad* (figure 12). The way his figures stand so solidly on the ground, clearly belonging in their space is beautiful, and even more impressive is the way he leads the viewer around the composition through the angles of the figures’ limbs. Any line one can follow in the composition is sure to lead to a point of interest. I wanted to do that with *Morning Rituals*. Once I realized that the way the bodies move the viewer around the composition was important to me, I focused on that and reimagined the space. What I thought needed to be flat and graphic at first felt too compressed, and I started to move the figures around so they could convincingly exist in the same room together while still directing the eye around the painting with their bodies. I covered the canvas with a dark grey wash of paint in order to dampen the brightness of color as well, which helped to deepen the space, as bright colors tend to pull forward in a painted space. I continued to work on the painting over the year, but the true change did not occur until I started using the palette knife more, which will be discussed in the section on later paintings.

Around this time, I made the two quieter portraits, *Sumner* and *Peyton* (figures 2 and 3). They are quieter because while the figures in *Morning Rituals* seem to confront the viewer, the figures in *Sumner* and *Peyton* look away and sit calmly. These two portraits were a reaction to the challenge and discomfort I felt when working on *Morning Rituals*. They were “safer” paintings, meaning they fit more solidly within my experience and skill level. The paintings were observed from life instead of imagined as *Morning Rituals* was. They were also painted in a familiar technique using thinner brush application and less decisive color. The first portrait was
of Sumner, prominently situated in the center of the composition, but nested in the background, the shadows on his skin harmonizing with the couch and the wall behind him. Peyton similarly blends in color with the chairs behind her, and the sinuous movement of her limbs and the arms of the chairs not only unites the composition, but seeks to attenuate the distinction between object and figure. By comparing Peyton’s and the chairs’ limbs I am remarking on the similarity between them, which lessens the uniqueness of the body. In both paintings, the still life elements in front of the figures are carefully observed and painted in order to heighten the sense of depth and compete with the face for the viewer’s attention.

Soon after Peyton and Sumner, I painted Kitchen Christmas (figure 4). Compared to the previous two portraits, Kitchen Christmas was larger and had a heightened sense of narrative; however, my tactics in losing the figure were the same. One tactic was to create passages where the color and value of the figure merged with those of the figure’s surroundings. I also placed still life objects in front of the body to push it back into space. The strange oven lighting in this piece obscures features more than in the last two, and allows the dish towels and kitchen appliances to compete more strongly with the figure.

The early portraits are grouped together because they were all started in the fall semester but also because of the brushy quality of the marks of which they are comprised. They were all painted primarily with brushes and thin layers of paint. While the method of painting may have resulted in color that is not as clear as it could be – for example, the wall behind Peyton could be reduced to a bigger plane of peach instead of scrubbed in with blue and grey – I think it creates a soft, hazy result that effectively loses the figure. Beyond the immediate visual impact, the figures in the early portraits are lost in thought. None of them return the gaze of the viewer, and their
postures and expressions all indicate they are mentally far from the scene. In this way the figures are also lost to the viewer, their thoughts inaccessible.

**Still Life Paintings**

Starting the following semester, spring of 2018, I began a series of still life paintings with my own self-portrait embedded in each. The still life paintings were a different approach to the lost-and-found idea than the larger portraits: they were smaller, more object-focused, and the body was often cropped. I set up each painting with objects from my own life because I found them interesting to paint, and I also liked the way they created a narrative simply through the objects I chose and the way I arranged them in front of me. Erin Raedeke is a painter who creates narratives from objects of her daily life, and her work influences mine, especially in the selection of objects. In looking at Raedeke’s painting, *Are You Afraid of the Ax* (Figure 13), I can see where I might have become interested in including photographs in my setups as I did in *Wintry Mix* and *Vogue*. That also sparked my interest in including reproductions of other artists’ paintings in my own still life paintings as I did in *Vogue* and *Farmers Market*.

The self-portraits embedded in the still life paintings never include the full figure. I intentionally used cropping to obscure the figure. Cropping, along with the way I set up the mirrors to reflect myself, prevents the viewer from immediately finding and fixating upon the figure. It is not a viewer’s first instinct to assume an image is from another’s point of view, and without the still life set up in front of her, she may have to pause before realizing the face in the mirror would have belonged to the artist standing where she is now. Cropping the body also emphasized the similarity between objects and figure: when the head is the same size as a cup – as in *Farmers Market* – it is easier to conceal. In the still life portraits, I tried to lose the figure
among the objects, striving to create an image in which the objects were just as important as the head.

The first of the still life paintings was *Wintry Mix* (figure 5). I heightened the contrast between object and figure, but reversed the usual hierarchy, with the objects prominently and colorfully displayed – the major compositional elements – while the figure blurred into the background, muted by the reduced saturation of a reflection. Other figures hovered around the periphery in a photograph, blurred almost beyond recognition. *Wintry Mix* retained the brushy quality of the early portraits, which aided in pushing the figure back into the mirror.

The second still-life, *Vogue* (figure 6), is a dramatic departure from *Wintry Mix*; I might even consider it a turning point in my work. Tired of the non-committal brush-strokes that started to inhibit my other paintings, I began painting *Vogue* with a palette knife – a tool like a small putty knife with angled edges. Using a palette knife requires that I mix all colors on the palette before applying the paint, resulting in thicker application when compared to using a brush. Using the palette knife created more clarity in the color and structure of objects. It felt more appropriate to the subject matter in *Vogue* to use a palette knife, as I was able to better record the highly saturated colors in the setup. I had initially planned to desaturate the portrait in the mirror, tempering the color to a more neutral grey, but I decided against it, letting the face exist cartoonishly in the same world as the highly edited magazine photograph. There is a tension in how the portrait pushes to the front plane of the painting as the overlay of the magazine attempts to keep it in its place. It’s part of how the figure is lost in this piece; not only painted a little more broadly than before and cropped to a minimum, but flipping between flatness and depth. It is the focus of the painting but as I look at it, it is repeatedly lost as the other figures and elements fight for dominance.
Though I brought the self-portrait down to a neutral tan in *Farmers Market* (figure 8) the color still seems as confident as in *Vogue*. I continued to paint with a palette knife, and it helped me create confident color – the planes of hue that are seemingly un-nameable (as in the color of the painting behind the orange flowers) but appear observed and accurate. The bright jumble of objects is undeniably the focus of the painting, and the figure – reduced to five or six shapes – quietly waits in the background. The figure is quieter than the figures in *Sumner* and *Peyton*, but in *Farmers Market*, the figure’s form has more confidence. *Farmers Market* contains the most “lost” figure – if lost is measured on a spectrum. With *Farmers Market* I had finally created a still life containing a portrait and not the other way around.

**Later Portraits**

While painting *Vogue* and *Farmers Market*, I realized that in order to truly lose the figures I would have to change the way I approached the paint. I began to predominately use the palette knife, and this is when I started *Blue Chair, Greenhouse* (figure 7.) Painted directly on wood, this painting felt different from the beginning. The size and odd proportions of the painting surface forced me to truly consider the composition at large, and while using the palette knife, I let go of the pickiness observable in my previous paintings. In *Blue Chair, Greenhouse* it finally feels like the objects and figure are treated equally and belong in the same space. The body still dominates; however, that dominance is tempered by the application of paint and the way the torso almost completely disappears into the chair as the forearm and hand are equated with the wall.

At the time I was looking at Gustav Klimt’s work, especially the long vertical compositions such as *Water Serpents I* (figure 14). The way Klimt’s figures fill the paintings and
direct the eye with their contorted limbs was relevant to the way I was trying to paint my portraits. I was also inspired by his intense use of pattern to both unite the composition and dissolve the figure, which can be seen in the flattening of the patterned hair against the diamond background and the similarity of the scales on the tails as well as the leaves of the seaweed in *Water Serpents I*. I was thinking of Klimt when I painted the winding scarf in *Blue Chair, Greenhouse* that reins in the legs and connects environment to figure. I also increased my attention to pattern: the plaid on the scarf, the diamond carpet, even the repetition within the leaves and the drape behind the figure are working together to create a graphic sense that disputes the depth I have created in the painting. It is similar to the tension of the self-portrait in *Vogue* but perhaps more subtle.

I further increased my use of pattern in *Enthroned* (figure 9) with the blanket that wraps around the figure’s body. I was trying to obscure the figure not only by hiding it behind another object, but by enveloping it in the environment. The still life objects are not simply placed before the figure as they were in previous paintings, but wrapped around the figure, touching her. Every object is physically connected with another, and they are all eventually connected to the figure. The physical connection serves to equalize the figure and objects. The equality of object and body is heightened by the use of the palette knife – the broad planes of color in the blanket pattern are a similar size to those in the shadow behind the towels or in the left arm. As the figure is buried, uncovered, buried, and uncovered by the blanket, she is revolving between lost and found, lost and found. Parts of her visible body are also lost to the environment by decreasing the contrast in color and value between them and their surroundings. The technique is present in the right forearm, neck, and left shoulder.
After finishing *Enthroned*, I returned again to *Morning Rituals*. Use of the palette knife was a revelation for this painting (figure 11.) The still life elements finally came into clear view, upstaging the figures themselves (figure 1). The Scope bottle on the right draws attention as the figures stand in the background, their features ambiguous as if pulled from memory. With the palette knife I was able to re-assert the figures that had almost dissolved too far into the atmosphere of the room behind them, but I abandoned one figure to the mists. Though still an important compositional element – her arm leads to the arm of the figure in pink and the way her body leans counters the symmetrical lean of the shower curtain across from her – she needed to be muted to deepen the space and retain the sort of unreality I had been seeking for this particular piece. *Morning Rituals* is a sampling of the variety of daily activities that could be viewed through the bathroom mirror, all together at one time. I want the viewer to believe that all of the figures could be in that space simultaneously, but doubt that it is true: that is what is meant by unreality.

I knew when I started painting *Enthroned* that it would be my last painting for the project, but I was still working on *Morning Rituals*, the first painting of the collection. I wanted the two to meet in some way, to create a sense of closure or finality – if not obvious to the viewer then at least to myself. That is why I made *Enthroned* the same dimensions as *Morning Rituals* and set them both in my bathroom. Though they feel very different, they are both explorations of the lost-and-found figure. Even narratively they bear similarities: both are a stark but somewhat humorous depiction of a moment in a day when the body is present but the mind is fixated elsewhere.
Conclusion

Creating lost and found figures in my painting was initially only a struggle for improved technique. When I began the project I did not expect that I would not just finesse my existing tactics but alter the way I approached painting. I began scrubbing thin layers of paint onto white canvas with a brush, and ended laying thick layers of paint onto darkly toned canvases and boards with a palette knife. In this way, the project became even more about technique than I had expected. When I began, I anticipated that I would be manipulating a variety of components listed in my proposal as “color, tone, softened edges, pattern, foreground objects, distortion, lighting, and body position.” I thought that I might choose one component per painting – like a scientific experiment – altering one variable at a time to observe its effects. However, I was surprised by how often I used them together and how subtly. If I had pictured my future paintings when I began this project, I would not have expected Enthroned, in which I used pattern, color, tone, softened edges, and foreground objects together in such a way that one must make a conscious effort to identify each component as a tool for losing the figure.

The most unexpected result of my honors thesis was the progression of narrative. As the figures in my paintings became more obscured and enveloped in their environments, they became less accessible to the viewer. Is the figure in the background of Farmers Market watchful or relaxed? Why is the figure in Enthroned seated so stoically next to her toilet? The more the figure is lost, the less easily the questions are answered. The narrative ambiguity serves alongside the formal technique to lose the figure within the painting. Through this project I finally learned that every action has a consequence, and every formal artistic decision has a narrative result.
Figures

Figure 1 Morning Rituals
Figure 2 Sumner
Figure 3 Peyton
Figure 4 *Kitchen Christmas*
Figure 5 Wintry Mix
Figure 6 Vogue
Figure 7 *Blue Chair, Greenhouse*
Figure 8 *Farmers Market*
Figure 9 *Enthroned*
Figure 10 Early Photograph of Morning Rituals
Figure 11 *Late Photograph of Morning Rituals*
Figure 12 Scott Noel, *Playground in Manayunk, The Iliad*, 1995-1997 oil on three linen canvases
Figure 13 Erin Raedeke, *Are You Afraid of the Ax*, oil on board, 12 x 16, 2013
Figure 14 Gustav Klimt, *Water Serpents I*, water- and gold-colors on parchment, 1904