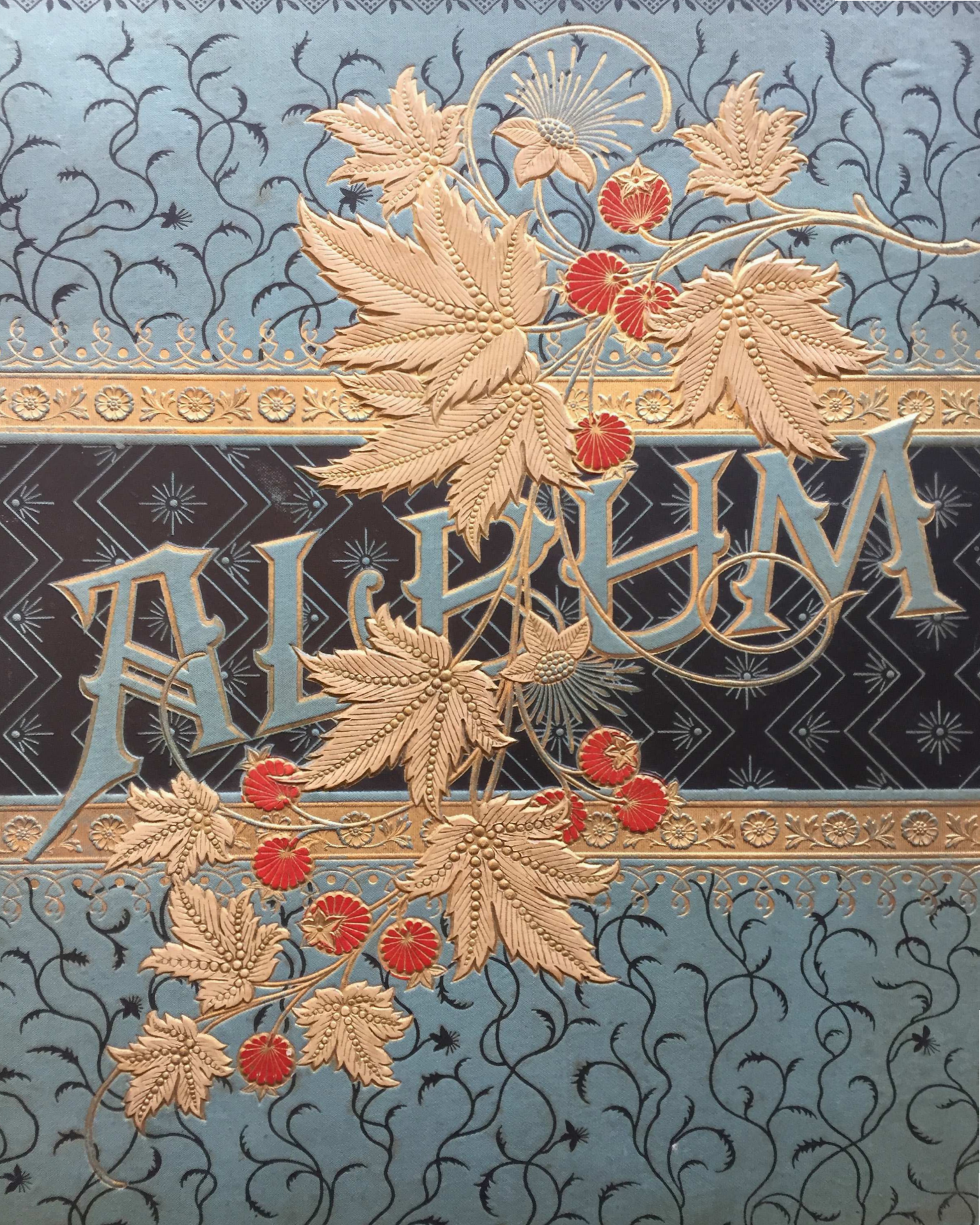
ALBUM

Album

Rima Grad

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art Program
at Vermont College of Fine Arts on July 13, 2017.

Faculty Co-chair _____

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Dedication

This Process Paper is dedicated to the unfinished lives of my Grandfather Abraham Grad, my Uncle Bernie Markowitz, my cousin David Rothman, and my mother Estelle Grad. But most of all I want to honor my husband Neil Selinger, who continues to influence my life and enrich everything I do.

Your name was Abraham Grad and you were a husband, a father, and a grandfather. You died in 1947, 11 days before the birth of your grandchild, my brother, Arnie. They named him after you. You had a degenerative disease that kept you away from your family, your wife Julia, your daughters, Miriam and Sadie, and your son, Irving, my father. Nobody seemed to know what was wrong with you. This picture of you and Julia

Huppert was taken on your wedding day, January 3, 1915. My grandma Grad, as we called her, lived into her 80s. When she had a stroke in 1962, I was a little girl. My father took me with him one day to visit her on the Lower East Side. My aunts were taking care of her, helping her do the things she could no longer do for herself. They were feeding her just before we left. As we were walking down the stairs, my father, who was not a man prone to quoting platitudes, said to me, "You see Rima, life is not a bowl of cherries."

Acknowledgements

To the faculty advisors and artist teachers who have guided me through my research and studio practice, thank you for your invaluable time, attention, and inspiration: Cauleen Smith, Suzy Spence, Salome Chasnoff, Susan Bee, Marie Shurkus, Michael Cloud, Mario Ontiveros, and Greg Kessler. To my Vermont College of Fine Art community, faculty, staff, co-chairs, fellow students: It has been an honor to be in your presence these past two years, to learn from you and thoroughly enjoy and celebrate your being. To my cohort, my VCFA posse, I love you and cherish each and every one of you. Thank you to my friends and family for your encouragement, your positive feedback, and your sewing expertise. And last but certainly not least, to my daughters, Emily and Julia. You inspire me every day with your intelligence, your wit, your zest for life, and your resilience. I am humbled by your unstinting support.

Your name was Bernie Markowitz and you were a son, a brother, and an uncle. You were brilliant and incredibly handsome, a wonderful caring brother, and a fantastic athlete. You wanted to go to City College and work in a camera shop to help support the family. In 1936, when you were 21, you had a nervous breakdown. You were never the same after that. Some say your mother Mary, my grandma, pushed you to work at her uncle Joe's coffee factory, forcing you to abandon your plan of going to college. She wanted you to be a successful businessman and Uncle Joe promised to move you up. You bagged coffee in the basement for two years, and that drove you mad. You always blamed your father, Willie, for not standing up for you. Your mother, to her credit, found a psychiatrist who said you could be cared for at home instead of being institutionalized, as was the custom with mental patients back then. Your sisters, my aunt Rhoda and my mother Estelle, were devastated by the loss of you, the person that they knew and loved passionately. I was so confused about you when I was little. We visited Grandma and you every week. You were not like the other grown-ups I knew and I did not understand. No one did a good job of answering my questions about you until I was much, much older. You slept all day, worked at night, never got out of your pajamas, and lived with your parents until your father died in the late 1950s. You lived with your mother until she died in 1973, and then alone in the apartment. As I got older, you would happily join us at family functions. You died in 1991 when the building super discovered that you were dead in the apartment.

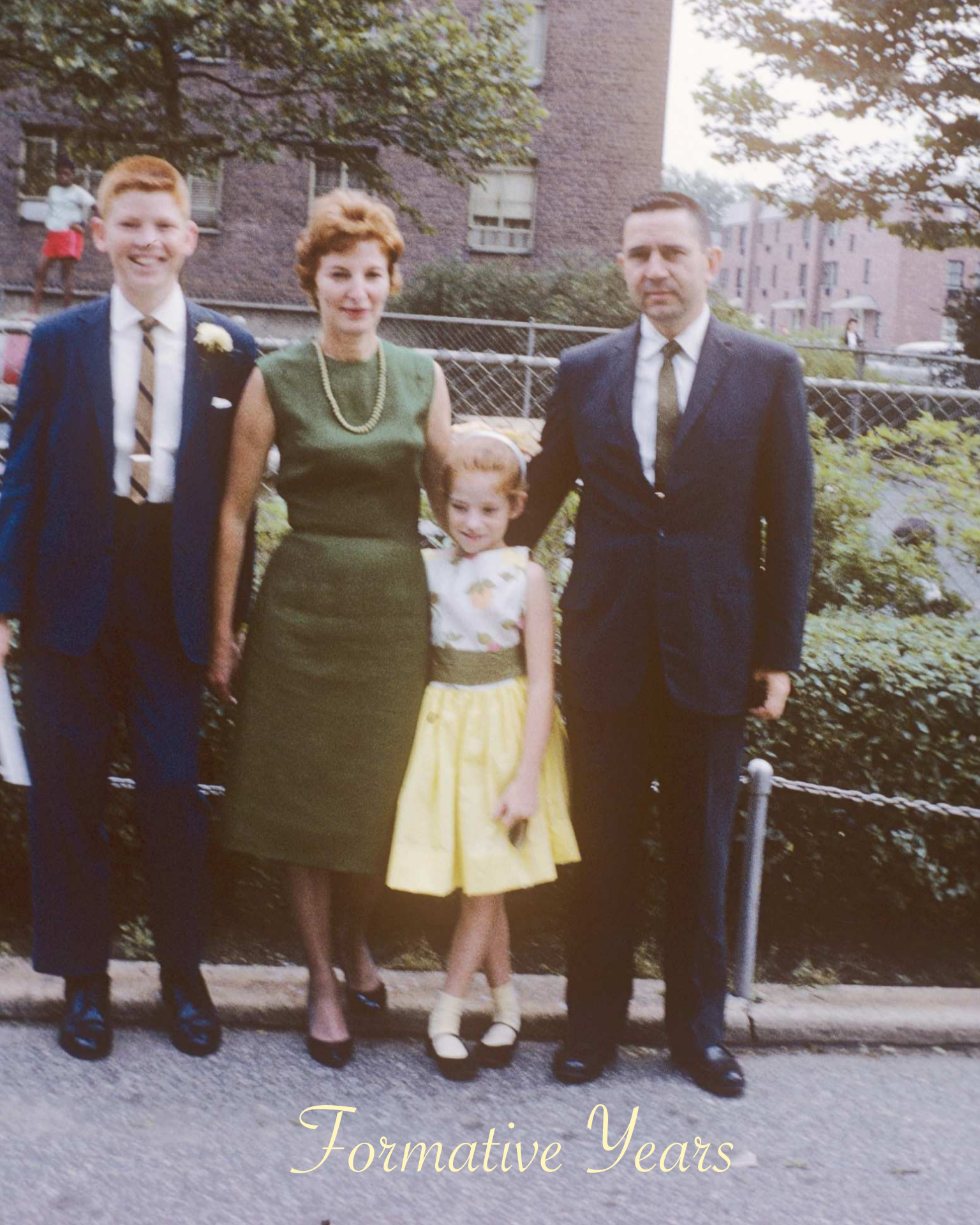
Introduction

While driving home one evening in November of 2014, I listened to a woman, a mystery writer, tell a story on "The Moth Radio Hour."[1] She was talking about the trajectory of her life in her late sixties, after a traumatic loss. She and her mother ran a Bed & Breakfast on the island of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts that catered to writers and poets. When her mother died at 99, the woman was understandably at loose ends, and a friend suggested that she go back to school and get a degree in creative writing. That is what she did and she has since gone on to publish a dozen books in her seventies. She spoke about reconnecting with someone from her past and finding love and companionship with that person. While that part of the story was interesting to me, I barely heard it. A switch had gone off in my brain and I was on my way. I had a couple of friends who had been through the Masters of Fine Arts program at Vermont College. That is where my search began and ended.

Like the woman on the radio, I too was at a crossroads in the fall of 2014. The ultimate driving force in my decision to get my MFA was the loss of my wonderful, brilliant, funny husband, Neil Selinger. He died in July 2011 after a horrendous two-and-a-half-year ordeal with ALS, a disease that attacks the motor neurons and eventually renders one literally unable to move a muscle. By early 2015 I had been a widow for over three years which, in the scheme of things, is a blip in time. My daughters were out of the house and on their own, my dog had died, and I was coming out of the exhaustion, the shock, the acute sorrow. I was just beginning to comprehend what it meant to be alone and to be "me" in my relatively new state of being— no longer us. I was at once moving on with my life and returning to an earlier time when my choices did not

1 The Moth Radio Hour: Humorous, heartbreaking, and true stories told live on stage. No script. No props. Just a microphone, a spotlight and room full of strangers. Produced by Public Radio Exchange.

center around family life. I asked myself, Who am I now? Where do I want my life to go and who am I without him? In a sense, I could reinvent myself while at the same time be the personality that I once was; I could take my knowledge and my experience with me and start where I left off while continuing to grieve the loss. My experience at Vermont College of Fine Arts began in this space of unanswered questions. As this MFA journey ends and a new one begins, some of my questions have been answered and I have made new discoveries about the variety of methodologies and strategies in which we process life and loss.



Formative Years

I grew up in a working class home. My parents were the children of Hungarian immigrants. They were high school graduates and hard workers who were culturally, politically, and socially curious. Through them, my brother Arnie and I were exposed to art, music, and left-wing politics, as well as the ubiquitous pop culture of the fifties and sixties. My childhood was a happy one. We were fortunate by most standards. Stable and secure, we lived in a small and comfortable apartment in a public housing project replete with the wave of post-war families starting new lives. My brother and I found endless joy and discovery in the playground. Our building was a vertical small town; we knew everyone.

I was a sassy, artistic, and inquisitive child. I liked to draw and paint and make things and was encouraged to do so with frequent trips to museums and galleries. When I was 12 I took classes at the Art Students League, eventually drawing from the nude figure— quite a challenge and thrill for a young teenager. I loved being there; the sights, the smells, and the artistic activity that hummed up and down the corridors moved me. But the minute I complained about getting up early on Saturday morning, my parents curtailed the classes. I pursued mostly academic courses in high school with thoughts of becoming a teacher or a psychologist, but I always found a way to include elective art classes in my curriculum. In college, I spent my first couple of years exploring areas of interest while secretly dreaming of becoming an art major. I finally decided to prepare a portfolio and made a jubilant announcement to my family only to be flatly discouraged by my mother. “What are you going to do, work in an art supply store for the rest of your life?” I saw her repudiation as a lack of trust in me and my ability, even my talent. I prevailed, but my

Budding artist, circa 1957

confidence was shaken and the value of my choice was constantly put into question, not just by my mother, but also by my own internal dialog of self-doubt.

I got my BFA in 1975, specializing in printmaking, specifically etching. As much as I was interested in getting my MFA, it eluded me for a

variety of reasons over the course of the next 40 years. I consistently made art during that time but never achieved the level of engagement that I craved. I had day jobs as a graphic designer, I was a full-time stay-at-home parent, a part-time caregiver to my aging father, and eventually a full-time caregiver to my dying husband. But it was not merely employment and family responsibilities that kept me from achieving this goal. There was an unspoken, unacknowledged level of fear at play in my avoidance. Would I have the confidence, the energy, the stamina, the time? Would I be thick-skinned enough to handle graduate school? Was I intellectually up to the task of real engagement, the likes of which I had not experienced on an academic level in college? In my BFA program we did not discuss issues or intentions surrounding the work that we made. Art history and studio rarely intersected, if ever.

A true commitment to life as an artist was scary, and in the mid-seventies I did not see many if any women choosing that career path. The artists that my professors talked about were men. The slides of masterpieces that we viewed in darkened Art History lectures were painted by men. Needless to say, there were no women teaching studio art, and my feminist friends and I never questioned or noticed this blatant omission. My mother's concerns about my future were actually realistic and perhaps even ahead of her time. She wanted to know that I was going to be self-sufficient and independent. And possibly there was a bit of jealousy in her admonition. She came from a home environment that did not value education or intellectual accomplishment. The Depression and World War II figured largely in her choices. She spent her entire life working as a secretary, and while the rest of us appreciated her

intelligence, her striking wit, her elegance and sense of style, she did not have the opportunity to use those strengths in her working life and I know that was disappointing for her. I would never refer to her as spiteful, but we don't always know what festers beneath the surface and how that manifests in our actions. Although I came from a happy home, there was a constant undercurrent of anxiety; my mother was a worrier, always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Bad things happened in my family. I grew up in a culture of loss that, much to my frustration, was not discussed. My curiosity was insatiable but answers were withheld for a variety of reasons. There was no way to account for a tragedy. Or the situation was too difficult to explain to a child, or it was too painful and terrifying to talk about. If we don't discuss it we can pretend it isn't happening, or that it never happened at all. You might say that, inadvertently, I used drawing and making to express the unspoken and perhaps to relieve some of the angst around me. I have been doing that for my entire artistic life: narrating an autobiographical journey.

Block Party, 2007 Collage with drawing on paper 29.75 x 8.5 inches

In the late ‘90s and early 2000s I was working with old family photographs, making mixed media collages. I found images that “worked” compositionally and narratively without giving much thought to what that narrative was. I was setting a scene for the viewer to interpret. I used instinct and intuition to guide me. I was also bound by my circumstances; I had a small work space and demanding family responsibilities. Just getting to make work felt like a luxury. Actually researching and thinking about my intentions was beyond my scope at the time.

Our Beautiful Bed, 2011 From the series *Not What I Had In Mind*
Graphite, colored pencil, and crayon on paper 8.5 x 9 inches

While my husband was sick there was a shift in the work. I had even less time to spare, and so the work got smaller with less room for experimentation. And the narrative shifted from personal history to one of emotional necessity. I made a small self-portrait every day for a month; I did a series of 12 works, "Not What I Had in Mind," about Neil's illness—literal and specific observations of his ALS decline; and after he died, I did a series entitled "The Monster" about the demons that I was living with in the aftermath of his death. My monster was a greenish cartoon figure and it was everywhere—in my computer, in the dark, on the phone. Simultaneously, I worked on a separate series of daily self-portraits using an outline matrix to do whatever I felt like on a particular day. It was a form of self-care.

The Monster is Green With Envy, 2014 From the series *The Monster*
Graphite, colored pencil, crayon, oil stick, and collage on paper 10 x 10 inches

Before I entered the program at VCFA, I was making narrative, figurative, mixed media works on paper. The largest was 22 x 30 inches. I used flash vinyl paint, collage, and crayon and colored pencil to tell a story. The figures varied in size and were not hand-drawn or painted. They were predominantly found collaged photographs. There were often dot patterns and geometrics in the work. In addition to a career in Graphic Design that spurred a tendency to use pattern to enable composition, my parents were interested in mid-century modern design and our home showcased that decor with geometric patterned fabrics and wall units. I continue that affection with pattern in my own home. The figures in the work seemed to interact but their relationship was vague. I tended to intimate a situation without being clear about what was actually going on. Again, I wanted my audience to figure it out. I wanted to draw the viewer in and have them find their own story in the work.

As I segued to these larger, more expressive works when I was done with my Monster series, I thought I was ready to tell arbitrary stories about the lives of imaginary folk. I was finished with my personal narrative, over my trauma, and ready to play. But when I look back at this work, sometimes I perceive a foreboding, mouth open, storm brewing quality. One of the reasons why I pursued graduate school at that time was because I wanted to clarify what I was saying with my work. When I came to visit the program in January of 2015, I heard this question in a critique and it resonated with me: What is the conversation you want to have with your work? It was suddenly important to me to be able to answer that question.

What Did You Say? 2015 Flashe vinyl paint, oil stick, crayon, colored pencil, graphite, and collage on paper
30 x 22 inches

Body Language / Selfie Nation

Semester One

Experts say that the death of one's partner is the most profound type of loss, second only, when quantified, to the death of one's child. The expectation that the life that I anticipated—that my husband and I were going to grow old together—was not going to happen was too much to fathom. That realization was maybe the most difficult and wrenching part of the process. Who am I without him? How do I envision a different future, a different life, for myself and for my daughters?

In my struggle to cope, I did not spend a lot of time and energy thinking about my own similar history. My mother died when I was 23 after a six-year ordeal with breast cancer. Although I was hardly cognizant of it at the time, I was loathe to acknowledge that she was dying and that I would live the rest of my life without her. I barely knew who I was at that point in my life. Who would I be without my mother? At the same time, my father had to figure out how to navigate his life without his partner. Little did I know at the time that he would become an exemplary role model for life after widowhood. In his quiet way, he figured out how to negotiate his new world while simultaneously making sure that my brother and I were okay. There was not a lot of talk about the trauma of the loss, the pain, the longing—not many questions about how we were feeling. Such conversations would have been helpful, but lengthy heart-to-hearts were never his strong suit. Or maybe I deflected his attempts. I will never know. In any case, my father showed up in our lives. And that was incredible—amazing, really, when I think about it now. He was such a wise man, always assuring us by his presence that we still had a loving and caring parent. That would eventually serve me in my relationship with my own children.

In retrospect, it is not surprising that I was anxious to make and research self-portraiture in my first semester at VCFA. It was a two-pronged exploration: I wanted to search for self-discovery in my future and a coming to terms with my past. At the time, however, I wasn't sure why self-portraiture in particular had struck a chord with me. I had made self-portrait series before but I didn't know why. My tactic for figuring out my motivation this time was to look to the work of others. If I could identify why other artists, particularly women, made self-portraits throughout history, then maybe I could find my own reasoning for doing so. I wanted to find out where I fit in; what were the benchmarks of the genre, and was I part of that dialog? I researched women's self-portraiture, finding the perfect resource in a book by British art historian Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits*. She writes that the complicated language of self-portraits ranges from "this is what I look like" to "this is what I believe in." In general terms, there are several reasons why artists paint themselves: to show one's skills, to emulate past masters, to publicize one's artistic beliefs, and to showcase one's wit. These reasons have evolved over the years to engage more with identity and body politics, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

When Borzello began her research, she discovered that the language of self-portraits and the reasons for making them differed significantly between those done by men and those done by women. For women, the need to represent themselves was more pressing; self-portraiture functioned as an assertion (and physical proof) of existence and identity. From the 12th to the 16th centuries, female self-portraiture, with its frequent

stress on maternal themes, differentiated greatly from male self-portraiture. Additionally, self-portraits done by female artists were more likely to depict the artist showcasing her artistic or musical talents. But for the most part these differences had to do with the place of women in society in general and their practically non-existent place in the artistic community. According to Borzello, we should not take these works for granted; the fact that so many examples of women's self-portraits exist is reason enough to consider them a distinct genre, one she dates back to the 12th century. The works are autobiographical in their ability to tell us about these women and the times in which they lived.

I became acquainted with the names of women who have been making self-portraits for centuries, such as the Italian Renaissance painter Sofonisba Anguissola, who did court paintings in addition to self-portraits; Italian Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, famous for her depictions of mythical and Biblical women in positions of strength and suffering alike; and Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, the 18th century French painter who was recently the subject of an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. My studies also led me to discover more contemporary artists who I was not aware of, including Frances Benjamin Johnston, whose photographic self-portraits (or proto-"selfies") explored gender roles in the 19th century; the 20th century artist Claude Cahun, whose work undermined traditional gender roles; the contemporary photographer Catherine Opie, whose work largely emphasizes sexual identity; and painters Jenny Saville and Paula Rego, who are making groundbreaking work in the field of self-portraiture today.

If I was, in a sense, "shopping" for a reason to explain my interest in making self-portraits, reading Borzello's academic understanding of the genre did not provide me with a magical explanation. Unlike my self-portrait-inclined forebears, I was not exploring maternal practices, the body, or gender-based issues. It is true that I was an available model, but that was not a sufficient reason for my exploration. It was not until I began to see the genre as a boldly feminist statement that I found meaning in my own self-portraiture. I am a woman painting in the 21st century; I came of age in the throes of second-wave feminism. I have freedoms that were not available to my forbears or even to me 40 years ago. That in and of itself is a meaningful and profound statement. I am saying something about who I am just by virtue of that process. Women have always struggled to make themselves heard. It took courage for these women to prevail in what was a hostile and often dismissive environment. I did some research around that, reading art historian Linda Nochlin's pioneering 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists" about the male genius. The text is essentially a treatise on the institutional roadblocks that have prevented women from being part of the canon. For the most part women were not taken seriously, were not esteemed members of the academy like their male counterparts. And yet, they persisted. Sound familiar?

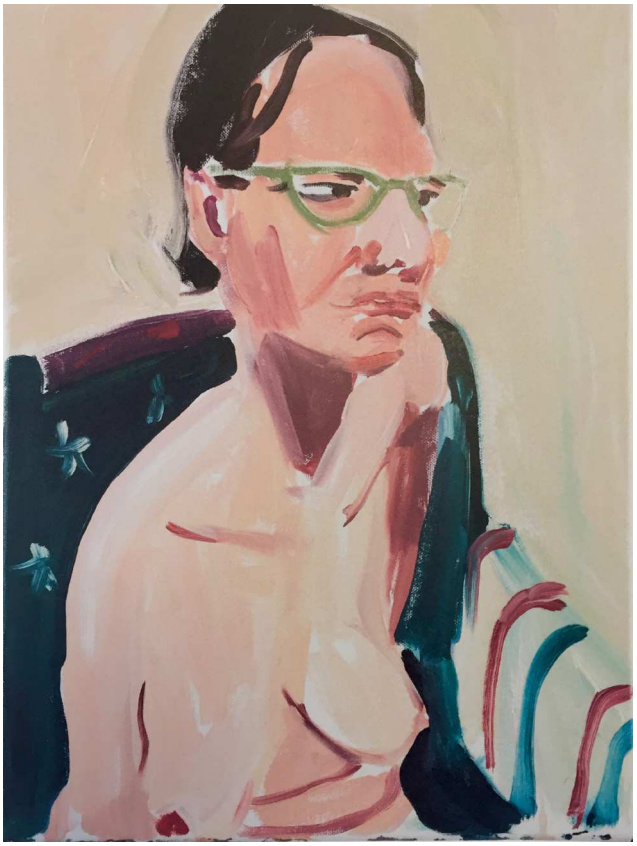
Following my newfound appreciation for self-portraiture as a vehicle for feminism, I dove into the studio work. One of my goals for my studio practice was to learn about painting, and I decided that graduate school was an appropriate time to attempt what would be a new medium for me. I read the artist, writer, and educator Mira Schor's 1995 essay,

"Painting as Manual" from her compilation, *Wet*. I wanted to know more about the state of the medium. Is painting dead? Does it make sense to start painting now? I looked at other artists who painted portraits and self-portraits. I had always responded to the paintings of Alice Neel, so I did some research about her work and her personal life. She was predominantly a portrait painter, but it was valuable to see how she represented her subjects and the psychology of her style—the way you know who they are in their soul when you look at her portraits. My Artist Teacher at the time, Suzy Spence, suggested other self-portrait painters for me to look at, such as contemporary painter Susanna Coffey and the late Maria Lassnig. On her recommendation, I went to see a show of Chantal Joffe portraits and discovered a catalogue of an earlier show of her self-portraits. I read what she had to say about her practice and how she felt about painting her aging body:

> I wanted to paint where I am, however hard that place is, and being middle aged…my body has changed, not in a way I particularly like but it's quite fascinating visually for me in an almost Egon Schiele-ish way. So I thought okay I want to paint those things, those are new things I can paint and if I paint them, I'll own them, and I'll be them, and that will make it okay? …the sheer excitement of painting them was transformational…I don't find myself ugly, I find myself pretty compelling to look at, like everybody finds themselves if they're honest, because we only have ourselves so we're of course riveted…

All three of these artists are women of a certain age coming to terms with the inevitable process of growing old. It resonated with me and actually

started to show up in my work. Initially, I did not make the connection, but their work incited a sort of self-discovery in the intent and subject matter of my own work.



Chantal Joffe *Topless Self-Portrait in Reading Glasses,* 2014
Oil on canvas 16 x 12.125 inches

My plan was to use oil-based media that I was uncomfortable and unfamiliar with; to let go of the control, as I perceived it, that had previously dominated my work; and to "recover" from my graphic design background. I was going to make self-portraits from my imagination. I yearned, always, to work from the information in my head but

had consistently found a way not to. I simply didn't trust myself. And this situation was no different. I quickly discovered that I could take pictures of myself on my iPhone and paint from them. It was fun—certainly different from any work I had done before—and decidedly modern. Technology was my medium and I became interested in the convergence of old and new media: photography or photography manipulated with paint vs. paint alone. The relationship between photography and paint piqued my interest. What does painting have that photography does not and vice versa? What are the art-historical situations surrounding these media and how do I use that knowledge to inform my own artistic choices? These questions would become the basis of my research in my second semester.

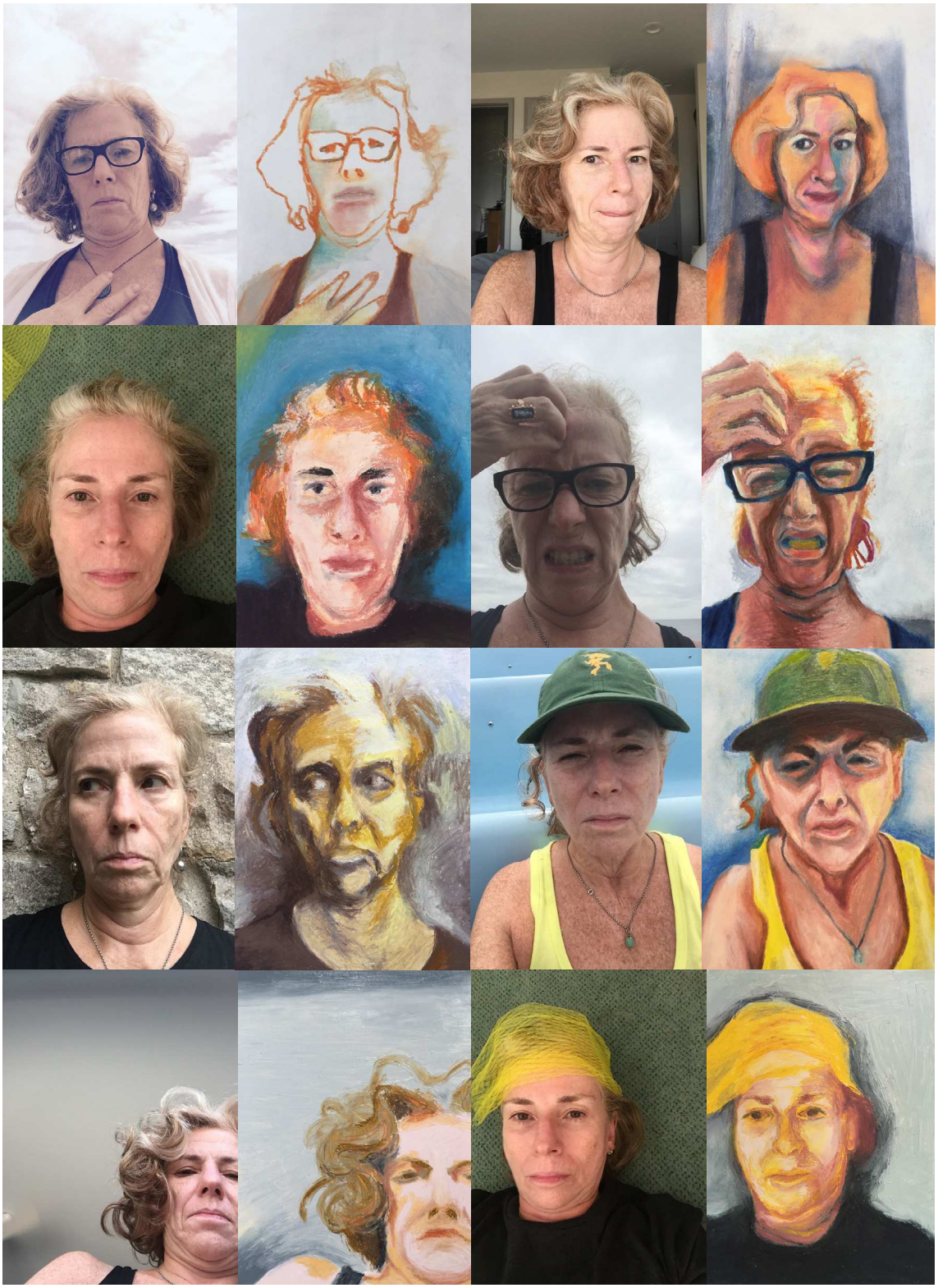
In addition to raising a wellspring of questions that would inform my studies, my new, technological approach to self-portraiture incited my interest in researching visual analysis and semiology. What is the viewer's relationship with what they are looking at? How do we come to conclusions based on our viewing of that image, and what can I do as an artist to affect those conclusions? I discovered that I could orchestrate or even manipulate a particular reaction by the viewer and yet, in other ways, there was so much about this relationship that would not be about me at all. Everything is significant, even the conditions over which I have no control.

I was fascinated by the information about signs and signifiers and how they determine our perception and comprehension of images. Does non-verbal communication exist? What can you "know" about a self-portrait in terms of visual analysis? To answer these questions,

I looked to *A Handbook of Visual Analysis*, a textbook edited by Carey Jewitt and Theo van Leeuwen, and Roland Barthes' *Elements of Semiology*. I researched how much of that knowing has to do with the artist's intention and facial expression as well as what we bring, with our own psychology and language, to our perception of the work. What did my self-portraits say about me based on signs and signifiers – color, facial expression, position, accessories, environment, brush stroke?

It is curious to me that while I was interested in semiology, it was difficult for me to apply that research to the work I was making, I did not identify the specific strategies that I was deploying to communicate the self. It can be valuable to look at the experiences of others and find areas of similarity that can bring meaning to your own practice. However, in a sense, I put the cart before the horse. I looked out instead of looking in. It never occurred to me that my path in the studio was a recreation of self. I was starting over and I needed to figure out who I was to do that. It is my tendency and one of my favorite pastimes to think about the motivations behind our actions from a psychological and behavioral point of view, but I can often be oblivious to my own. It was not until I heard people respond at the residency that I realized what I was saying about myself with my work. I was so focused on technique that I minimized the intention or existence of my content.

I showed my self-portraits at the next residency. I made a slideshow of the selfies and the paintings to demonstrate the transition from photograph to paint, to discover whether the painting brings the photograph to life,



A sampling of 8 x 10 inch iPhone selfies and painted selfies Semester 1 Fall 2015 Oil stick and oil pastel

and to let the viewer participate in my process. Various audiences at the residency viewed the slideshow, which is about a minute and a half long. It starts with the photographic selfie and segues to the painting of that selfie and keeps going through approximately 17 works, 34 altogether. These were head shots, from the neck up, some with indications of background, others without background. I wasn't aiming for extreme likeness between the photographs and the paintings, just a sensation of personality and thematic uniformity to unite the works. Not only was the response predominantly positive but it was also enlightening for me. Even if I didn't plan on creating the works to explore identity issues, my viewers perceived my slide show—and all my work of the semester, really—as a window into my identity. People reacted to the honesty of my appearance; I did nothing to embellish my looks. I was serious and wrinkled and middle-aged. It occurred to me that with this work I was dealing with issues of identity surrounding the aging process.

Once I had made quite a few 8 x 10 inch straight-forward paintings of selfies, I decided it was time to move the process to a new level. I printed selfies on letter-sized paper and painted lines and dots and patterns on top of them to interrupt the image, to introduce a different element to the selfies, to create a screen. Again, I did not consider the subconscious intent of the newly-inflicted marks until my peers pointed out in critiques at the residency that perhaps I was hiding behind the mark-making. After I experimented with manipulating my paintings with marks, I set out to accomplish a more ambitious goal (one that had, in fact, been an unrealized objective of mine for quite some time): painting life-sized figures. So, I turned the iPhone on my whole body—not an easy feat—

and made paintings of them. The first painting was straightforward, and, admittedly, not very interesting. But it was an important place to start. I did some experimenting with the second piece, which was cropped in an unusual way.

Standing Self-Portraits Semester 1 Fall 2015 Oil stick, oil pastel, and crayon on gessoed paper 54 x 26 inches

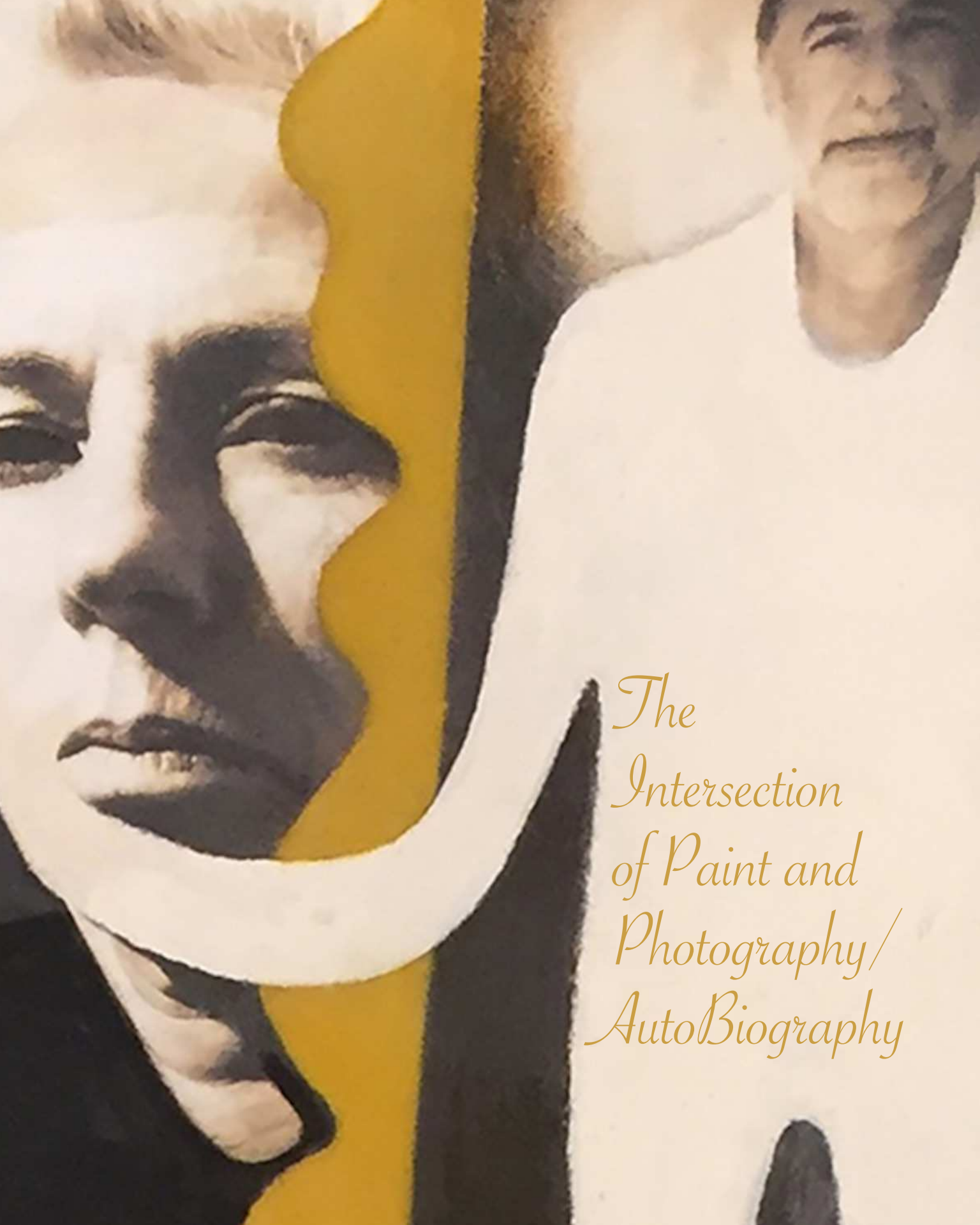
As I began exploring my life-sized self-portraits, I was inspired by *Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists*, a documentary that had been

recommended to me by my Faculty Advisor at the time, Cauleen Smith. The Chicago Imagists consisted of several groups of artists that came together in the mid-1960s and 1970s. Most of them were twenty-something natives of Chicago who had attended or were enrolled in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Their world became their muse. They looked to comic books, neon signs, architecture, body parts galore, personal fantasies, show business, quirky collections, trash treasures, local music, and outsider art for inspiration. The subject matter of their work was "low" culture at its best. Nothing was out of bounds; nothing was sacred. I was inspired by their freedom and the personality of their work. As a result, I introduced strange and mysterious patterning, a wig, and ghostlike images of a man and a dog into my second self-portrait. The third and final work of the semester was a really confusing and distorted image made from a selfie. I held the phone up in the air in front of me and created a selfie that was mostly head and torso, adding some patterning around the head. I started to feel as if I was onto something; I was particularly intrigued by the symbolic imagery in the second self-portrait and I wanted to continue with an exploration into personal iconography. What are the symbols that are personal to me? What can I pull from my world that is meaningful?

One of my critters, as we call critiquers at VCFA, referred to me as the love child of Alex Katz and Alice Neel. I'll take that. Everyone has an idea and a suggestion about how to move forward, and I discovered how challenging it is to synthesize that advice while staying true to myself, my intentions, and my aspirations. The same questions came up time and time again: Why self-portraiture? What do you want the world to know

about you? Do you have to be in the picture to call it a self-portrait? Why paint or why photograph? Why do you look so sad and serious? I struggled to answer those questions, and that struggle led to more questions. Was this work about identity, body image, technology, aging? Did I paint myself because I was an available subject or because I didn't know who else I would want to represent? Was this work a feminist statement? Was the self-portrait just a vehicle to experiment with a new medium? Most of those questions could probably be answered in the affirmative. Nevertheless, I yearned for more clarity.

Untitled Self-Portrait Semester 1 Fall 2015
Oil stick and oil pastel on gessoed paper 10 x 10 inches



The Intersection of Paint and Photography/ AutoBiography

Semester Two

I wanted to continue my exploration of self-portraiture. The question that came up during the previous residency kept haunting me: What do you want the world to know about you? I was still unsure about my transition to painting and the role that photography would have in my process. This conflict between photography and painting has been going on for centuries, and I decided to make that the core subject of my research for the semester. What was the history of photography and how did that history impact painting? In my studio practice I planned to dig deeper, experiment with what a self-portrait can be, and search for symbols and iconography with which I could communicate. My plan was to lose the photographic reference in the work and use mirrors and memory as my tools as opposed to an iPhone because, as a critter told me, a painting of a photograph will always be a painting of a photograph. I think she was trying to get me to think about other things that paint can do that differentiates it from photography. Buffeted by the response to my selfie slide show and inspired by my research about the history and theoretical philosophy of the medium, my plan was to further my exploration into what I referred to as new media. I planned to make work with a trove of digitally converted slides from the early '60s when my father was constantly documenting our lives with his camera. I wasn't sure whether to refer to this work as a slideshow or a video.

The history of photography is fascinating; the medium is singular in its efforts to record the specificity of a moment in time. I was expecting to see a clear divide between painting—the medium that had previously been used to capture a moment—and photography upon the latter's inception in the mid-19th century. It wasn't unthinkable that photography

would become the de facto medium of choice, rendering painting obsolete. Of course, it didn't happen that way. The two media are, for the most part, incomparable. Thanks in part to this immeasurable difference, I became immersed in the world of photography—the history of the medium and the critical theory surrounding the viewing of a photograph.

In my exploration of photographic theory, I was particularly taken with Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, the theorist's 1980 treatise on photography. The ways in which we view and categorize the image are complex and personal. I am always drawn to the personal, and Barthes' humanity in this book, particularly when he talks about a specific photograph of his mother that moves him, is evident. He is grieving her recent death as he writes this book and coming to terms with his own eventual demise. Barthes divides the way we perceive the photograph into two categories: the *studium*, or casual cultural interest that is available to most viewers, and the *punctum*, that which "pricks" us and is poignant to us. The latter interrupts our complacency. He concedes that the punctum is a subjective element in the photograph. He also speaks to what makes an ideal portrait. The photograph must show the truth, or as he refers to it, the "air" of the subject or referent. This element of truthfulness is the quality that reveals something moral about the individual being photographed. If it is not there, the photographer has failed, either because he lacks talent or he was unlucky. Another quality is the *noeme*, or essence, in photography—what Barthes refers to as the "that-has-been." Not every photograph moves us, but "every photograph is a certificate of presence." In a sense, then, the text is as much a eulogy as it is a work of critical theory.

Another text that proved integral to my understanding of photography, and specifically its relationship to painting, was an essay by contemporary art theorist Joanna Lowry, "Putting Painting in the Picture (Photographically)." The essay is about three artists who directly interacted with the intersection of paint and photography. One artist, Melanie Manchot, went so far as to recreate the 1594 painting from the School of Fontainebleau, "Gabrielle D'Estrees and the Duchess of Villars," into photographs to find out what new information (if any) we could glean from the photograph that was not available to us upon viewing the painting. Lowry's study points to the life inherent in the photograph—that while the painting is stuck in time, the photograph indicates a stop in the action. We can imagine the movement taking place before the click of the camera and after. This led to my realization about the relationship between painting and photography. The latter didn't render the former obsolete, nor is a photograph merely a stagnant document. Rather, photography has the capacity to bring the paitning to life.

I interviewed a local painter, Patty Horing, who makes expressive realist,

Patty Horing *Lament for the Nuclear Family,* 2012 Oil on four panels 40 x 96 inches

figurative paintings working from photographs. She eventually loses the photographic quality through the composition, drawing, and painting process. She brings her photography to life through painting. My research altered my perception of the two media and how they could interact; I was beginning to see the life in the photograph.

In addition to reading the texts by Barthes and Lowry, I also researched the works of Käthe Kollwitz and Cindy Sherman. Kollwitz was a German artist who produced paintings, prints, and sculptures throughout the first half of the 20th century. In addition to making self-portraits, Kollwitz was interested in the struggle of the human condition, particularly from an anti-war point of view. While studying Sherman's work, I came across an article by Blake Gopnik, "Ready For Her Close-Up," that was fortuitously in the *New York Times* during my second semester. In the article, Sherman discusses her most recent body of work. She articulates realizations that she has come to about her artistic intentions through a more mature lens.

Inspired by my research about photography, painting, and semiotics, my plan for my studio was to paint from a mirror or memory and to come up with a language of symbols and visual iconography. I longed to trust my voice and intuition, to paint what came into my head—the world that lived in my imagination. I asked myself, "What are the patterns and symbols that have meaning for me and what is their place in my work? Perhaps these symbols will communicate something about myself to the audience." But once again, I was seduced by the camera. My research and my close study of my father's photographs were tantalizing and I couldn't resist.

As I oscillated between painting and photography, I became aware of the genre of the painted photograph. It was not only a reaction to the limitation of black and white soon after the camera was invented in the mid 19th century, but it also cropped up as a popular form of portrait photography in 19th century Asia and East Asia. Furthermore, painted photography remains a contemporary genre. I looked at the modern painted photographs of Duane Michals and was attracted to the idea of altering my selfies, which I had begun to experiment with in the previous semester. I went back to the selfie, intensified my expressions, and worked to include my personal environment, such as the patterns that exist on my walls and upholstery and woodwork in my home, as well as a photograph of my husband. I wanted to ground myself in an environment. Inspired by the study of early photography, I removed the color in Photoshop, created a variety of sepia tones, printed them, applied clear gesso, and painted them. In highlighting my own environment and memories, it seemed to me that I was giving the audience a glimpse into my psyche.

Work in progress, Semester 2 Winter 2016 Oil on altered photographs

I saw a lot of art during this semester, but one of the most impactful exhibitions I went to was a show of self-portraits by Mira Schor at Lyles and King Gallery on the Lower East Side of New York City. In December 2015, I had the opportunity to meet with Mira Schor to talk about my self-portraits and it was a thrill for me to see hers. Upon entering the large gallery space, I was riveted. The space seemed to be designed specifically for Schor's mixed media paintings. There were approximately 25 of them, 45 x 24 inches each, and they surrounded the viewer. The works were on pale colored tracing paper and the background was basically untouched. These were full body, standing, in your face, glorified stick figures. What was most striking about them was the heads—skulls, actually. Some were adorned with silver hair and glasses, just like Schor herself. There were breasts and balls and books and words such as "flesh" written in script. The works were striking in their abundance, in their scale, and in their differences and similarities.

Mira Schor *Death Is a Conceptual Artist,* Installation shot Lyles and King Gallery March 2016

I immediately decided that my self-portraits would be more than head-shots. I would combine three images—a head, a mid-section, and legs—to create one work that measured 8 x 30 inches. The head shots would consist of recent selfies, but I determined that the midsections

and legs would either be recent selfie shots or components of old photographs of my mother and myself that I was working with in my video/slideshow. Once I made decisions about which three sections would fuse to become a single work, I painted them and added imagery to some of them: a dog, a dot screen, a picture of my husband, a head piece, and a lot of patterning. They resembled “exquisite corpses,” a technique that the Surrealists used to collectively assemble words and images by several artists. That said, I did not consider the pieces to be a part of the exquisite corpse lineage. The elements of this work were all made by me, but they maintained a disjointed or awkward quality to them that appealed to me. It was as if there was another voice at work in the process.

Work in progress, Semester 2 Winter 2016 Composite standing self-portraits Oil on altered photographs

As I created my disjointed self-portraits, I was simultaneously working on the video/slideshow. It never occurred to me that it would be referred to as a screen saver on more than one occasion when I was showing it at critiques during my next residency in Vermont. I paired photos of my mother and myself that were taken in the early sixties. I had so many

questions about these photos: Why were we posed in this way, staring at the camera, together or apart, dressed up? Whose idea was it to take the photos? Although my father, as the photographer, wasn't in the photos, his spirit was there in his apparent adoration of us, the subjects. My relationship with my mother could be contentious, yet we look happy in these photos. As I thought about Barthes' *punctum*, I cropped the photos to zero in on the section that stirred up personal poignancy. I added and edited music to the slideshow: Doris Day singing the '50s classic, "Que Sera," and then I discovered a version by Sly and the Family Stone—much more my genre.

Stills from *Que Sera* *Semester 2* July 2016

While I spent my second semester reading about photography, working with the photos taken by my father, and making my self-portraits, I started to scratch the surface of what I wanted to talk about—what I was processing in the work. There were two things going on. For one, I was thinking about my mother, our relationship, our resemblance, my father's presence in the photos, and a specific time in our lives, the early sixties. I was beginning to focus on the loss of her, certainly not for the first time, and the way mourning works in our lives; it comes back again and again. Secondly, I was making composite self-portraits: using selfies of body parts that I took on my iPhone as well as portions of the photographs my father took to create full bodies. From these pieces the world would know that my relationship with my mother was significant, that we were close and resembled each other, that I grew up in an urban environment in a specific time in history, that we spent time in the country. My self-portraits were, in my mind, all composites of myself. I thought I was telling the world everything they needed to know about me. Well, maybe not everything about me, but enough. I like color and pattern and dots, I have a sense of humor, I like dogs. Oh, and I miss my husband.

I made eight self-portraits that I would hang on one wall. I decided to paint the wall a greenish-grey to create an environment for these portraits, for them to be seen more as one work as opposed to individual pieces hanging on a white wall. The piece that seemed to resonate most with viewers is the one with Neil. I also had the slide show, and at some point I added 2 x 3 inch photographs from the video printed on cardstock sitting on the pedestal next to the monitor. So many questions came up in critiques. Is this one work or three? Why are these cards here—are you

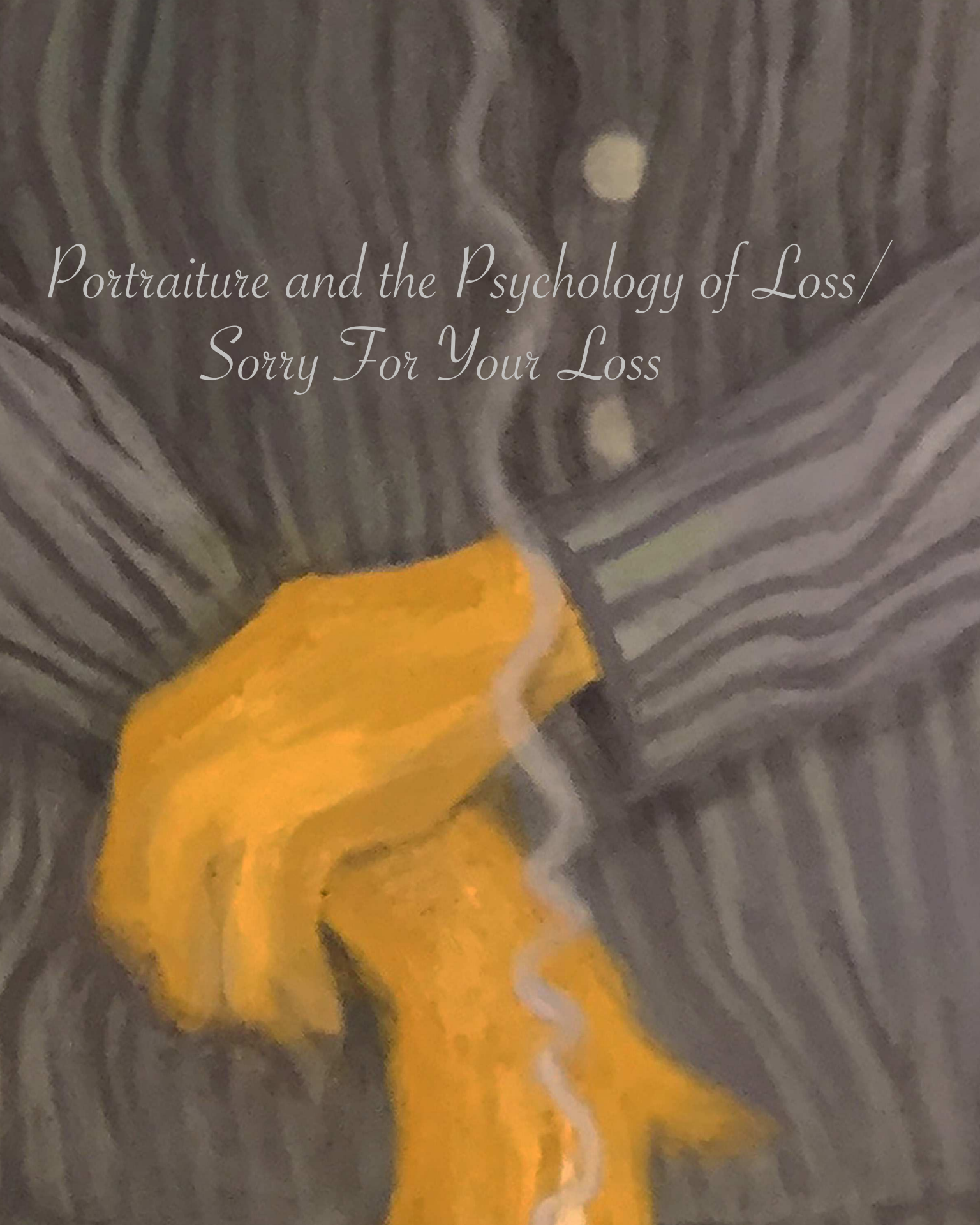
giving them away? Is this a video or a slide show or a screen saver? It looks like a screen saver because it is playing on a desktop computer. Why haven't you done research about screen savers? The self-portraits look cartoonish, like photobooth portraits. Why haven't you researched that? But I didn't think of the video as a screen saver and I didn't think of the portraits as photo booth portraits. How can I research what I am not seeing? The deluge of questions and criticisms was dizzying. It took much soul-searching and discussion during the residency to realize what was lacking in my presentation. I had not thought through my strategies, my learned experience from making the work, or about my place in the art community.

It seemed as if the volume of the whys got louder during my second residency. Why are you making this work? What did you learn from making it? Finally, in my last critique of the residency, I was discussing my work with David Warner, a classmate, and Viêt Lê, a faculty member. Viêt kept asking me what I was really interested in. It may have been obvious to the others, but it was so difficult for me to articulate. Viêt pushed me so that I was finally able to say LOSS. I want to talk about loss and grieving. We all agreed and hugged at the end. It was quite a scene. An "aha" moment.

I learned so much at this residency. Armed with strategies for moving forward in an intentional way, I made plans to to write about the work and think about the learning in the process of making. Embracing self-reflection and intentionality would become an integral part of the conversations at the next residency. It was important to me to be able to

answer the deafening “whys.” Making these concrete plans empowered me. Although my intentions seemed clear, it was a struggle to articulate what I wanted my research to be about, and I got waylaid a couple of times. During the residency, when I mentioned in a research group that I was interested in working from my imagination and memory in my studio practice, the group went off on a tangent that had me researching visionary and outsider artists. I expressed a fascination with loss and psychology and Freud and psychoanalysis kept coming up. My inability to articulate my interests and desires with my faculty advisor resulted in my leaving decisions to her which, in retrospect, was a mistake. In the end I explored loss and memory, in spite of the detours. It seems as if I am constantly being reminded of the importance of being my own advocate, in graduate school and in life.

Installation shot from 3rd residency, July 2016 *Where Winners Are Made*
Oil on altered photographs 8 panels Overall size: 30 x 85 inches


Portraiture and the Psychology of Loss/
Sorry For Your Loss

Semester Three

Prior to pursuing an MFA, I often hid beneath the cover of vague narratives. There's certainly comfort in being deliberately vague, in letting the viewer find her own meaning and dialog in the work. Leaving a work entirely open to interpretation isn't always a bad thing. But this technique of putting interpretation solely in the hands of the viewer can be a crutch. "Then," that artist may tell herself, "I don't have to commit myself to a specificity." But what if said technique reveals a lack of clarity and intention? Or fear? Upon entering graduate school—and particularly in my third semester—I resolved to stop hiding. I needed to grow and face my fears and be uncomfortable. I needed to be the one to drive the conversation. While it is okay to visit one's comfort zone from time to time, there must be ways to maintain a challenge. Again, it is about the why. My plan was to once and for all leave the photographic reference behind. To face the fear of the unknown and get lost in that space. To follow my instincts and do what comes up in my head. This is still and will always be a work in progress. That is a good thing.

This new work was going to be a response to much of the critique that I heard at the residency: that I was hiding, that I was being vague, that the work did not explain why. There was an implied expectation that I would take more risks, more leaps instead of baby steps. I was also going to get closer to making the work that I wanted to make. Finally, I had been thinking a lot about the losses in my family—how I processed my curiosity and grief at the time and how that process continues over decades. What is the part that memory plays in that process? The memories surrounding the death of my husband may haunt me but they are fresh in my mind. There was no ambivalence—no secrets about his

illness. It is hardest to grieve when communication is withheld or misunderstood. Sometimes we don't have the language or maturity to articulate what is in our hearts and minds. Where do those feelings go and how can we express them when it feels like it is too late?

I researched portraiture, visiting an extensive exhibition on the subject at the Whitney Museum twice and writing about what I saw there. Reading about Andy Warhol and the "crisis of portraiture" and the role of the referent in his work changed my perception of what a portrait can be and what the purpose of the referent is in that process. In her essay "The Warhol Portrait: From Art to Business and Back Again," Candice Breitz writes:

> The portrait has long been held to lay bare the essence of its subject. Traditional readings of portraiture have founded their claims for the commemorative dimension of the genre on the assumed transparency of the relationship between the portrait and its sitter.

We can attribute whatever we like to the monumental, gun-slinging, sexy twin Elvis's that I saw in the exhibit at the Whitney, but that was not Warhol's intention. From his perspective, Elvis and the Campbell Soup cans are interchangeable aspects of commodity culture. Warhol obliterated the concept of transparency in his portraits and transformed the genre into a state of opacity. He had a reputation for being indifferent towards the sitter. I cannot say the same of my work; I have a personal relationship with all of my subjects.

To further my exploration about portraiture I turned to Sandy Nairne, an English historian and curator and Sarah Howgate, Contemporary Curator at the National Portrait Gallery in London. They published two books

about 21st century portraiture, *The Portrait Now* (2006) and *21st Century Portraits* (2013). They broke their research down into specific categories, several of which inspired me to anchor my work in the genre and clarify my intentions. One such category, reinvented portraits, are portraits of people who don't exist or whose appearances have been altered in such a way that we are confused about what we are looking at. Observational portraits are those that explore what it means to be a critical observer and what we see when we really look, born out of the art of patient observation. Social portraits are an artist's way of integrating our contemporary society and its social conditions—such as gender, pop culture, consumerism, memory, and modern history—into a collective representation. Body portraits make up traditional and non-traditional strategies for representing the corporeal.

The other category that intrigued me in regards to these new portraits was self-portraiture. It occurred to me during the time I spent working on this project that while I was making "reinvented" representations of my dead relatives, I was also painting them from my point of view, in my image of them. The documentary photographer Dorothea Lange, best known for her Depression-era portraits of Dust Bowl families, once said:

> Every image [the photographer] sees, every photograph he takes, becomes in a sense a self-portrait. The portrait is made more meaningful by intimacy – an intimacy shared not only by the photographer with his subject but by the audience.

Can this be true of the painter as well? I believe so. While I was not painting from life but from memory, I had an intimacy with these subjects. Moreover, my experiences and memories were wrapped up in my

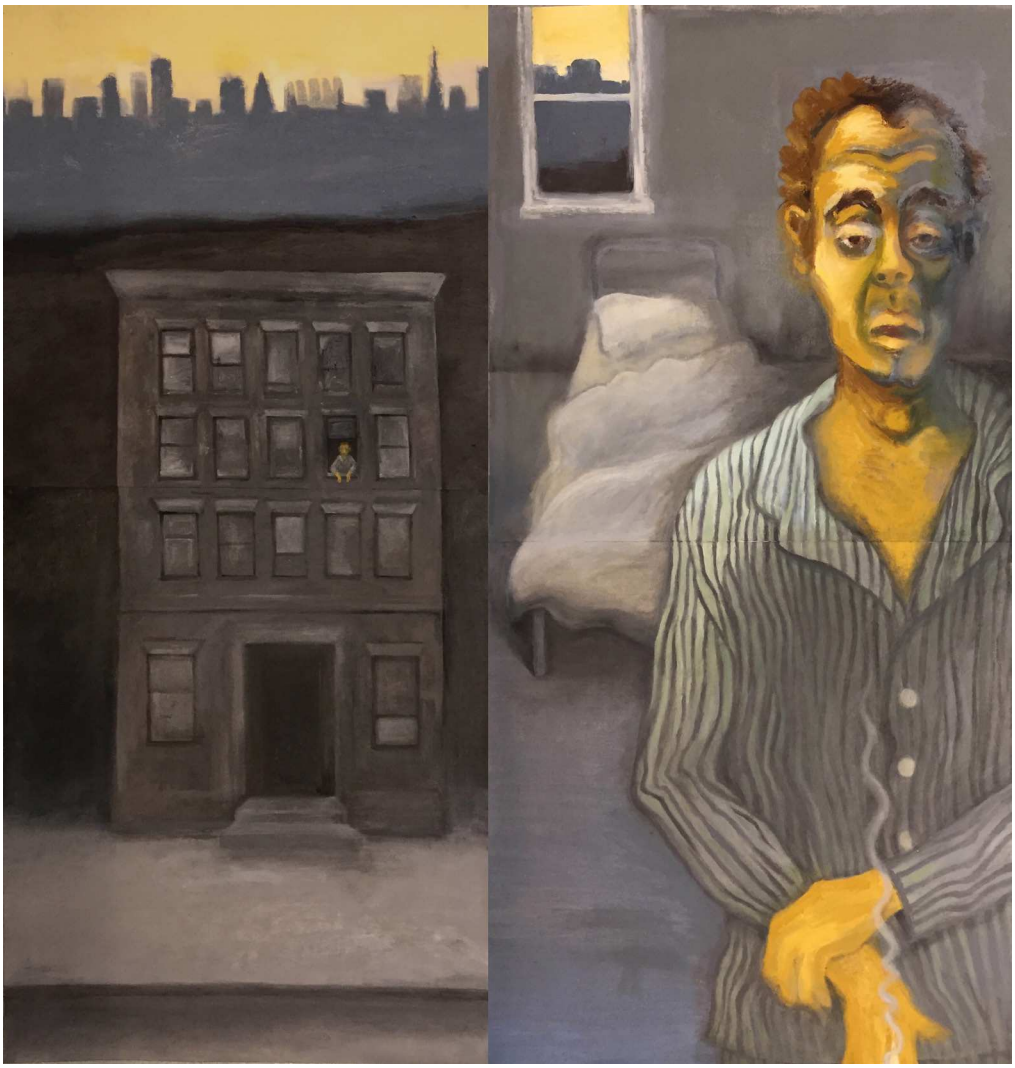
depiction of them, causing me to acknowledge that my works existed somewhere between portraits and self-portraits.

I explored Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere's psycho-analytic theories about children, their unconscious minds, and the primary motivational instincts of hunger and love. This discussion was fascinating but it was Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," his 1917 essay about the natural process of mourning and the pathological characteristics of obsession in grief that exemplify melancholy, that had more resonance for me. Freud spoke to my own life experiences with grieving. In the work of Ida Applebroog, I discovered an artist who was clearly dealing with her own mourning and melancholy. The documentary *Call Her Applebroog* was the perfect vehicle for this discovery. Through interviews with Ida by Beth B, the director of the film and Applebroog's daughter, other archival interviews in which the interviewer is not identified, and in her conversations with her studio assistants, the film afforded me a glimpse into Applebroog's interior life, her subconscious, and her expressed and suppressed emotions. Her description of her harrowing childhood and the traumatic unintegrated loss of her sister provides significant insight into her motivation and creative output.

The final phase of my research was about memory and mourning rituals in contemporary art, which felt like an appropriate culmination of the work I was making in the studio. Although the essays I read on the subject by art historians Kira van Lil and Lisa Saltzman were about artists dealing with social and political loss and displacement such as the the tragedy of wars, gang violence, and the trauma of forced immigration, I felt that

the artists' more generalized feelings of loss connected to my exceedingly personal work. I was painting my dead relatives. I wanted to focus on portraits, and the work was a reckoning with the loss that had plagued me and my family for decades. I began with my Uncle Bernie, who had a nervous breakdown at the age of 21 in 1936 and was never the same again, segued to my mother who died of breast cancer when she was 59 in 1977, and finally painted a death mask of my husband, Neil, who died of ALS in 2011. He was 57.

Death Mask (detail) Semester 3 Winter 2017
Oil on canvas 48 x 24 inches



Uncle Bernie Semester 3 Winter 2017 Oil on canvas 50 x 53 inches

Estelle in the Shower
Semester 3 Winter 2017
Oil on gessoed paper
91.5 x 15.5 inches

I wanted to explore the "culture of loss" that seems to plague my nuclear and extended family as a strategy for coming to terms with the past while also delving into the related topics of mourning, survival, ambivalent loss, and unexpressed empathy. That was my exploration for the semester—an attempt to uncover and exorcise the trauma of loss through painting. The process began with location. It was place that anchored the people in my memory, strangely not the other way around. In my dreams, locations are strikingly specific and detailed; they're either a conglomerate of various childhood spaces or the likes of a movie set that I have never seen. Once the geography was in place—the red brick buildings, the grey shades of the tenement—then the figure took form and expanded. I needed to add additional panels to accommodate my widening vision. These portraits or personal narratives translate as somber, whimsical, mournful, comedic, and dramatic. In my world humor and sadness coexist. Life is hard and at times tragic. We can't cry all the time. We must find the joy and wit in our lives. The alternative would make for a miserable life. Although I was looking at the tragic and at times ambiguous loss of my past, the work coaxed out something in me, like I was seeing these "remembrances" for the first time.

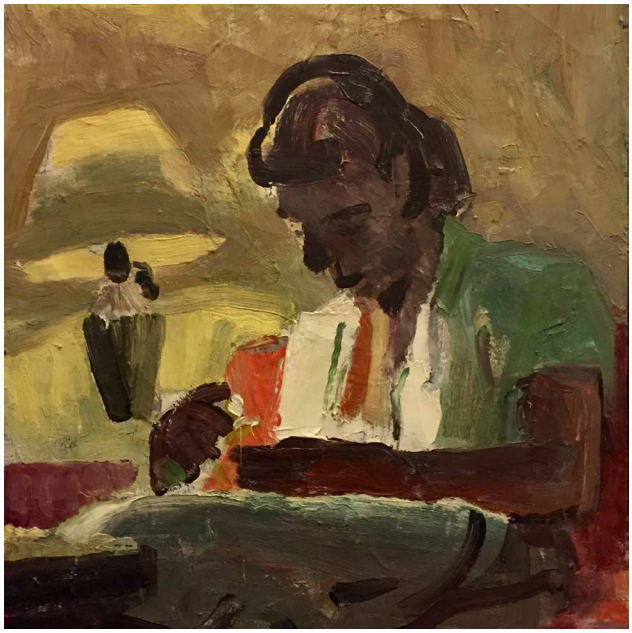
There is a ridiculously long German word, vergangenheitsbewältigung, that means coming to terms with the past. Germany, as a nation, has been doing this since World War II ended, attempting to make sense of and atone for their collective sins. Susan Bee, my AT from my second semester, a painter and feminist writer, has used the word to describe her practice, and I find that it speaks to this new work that I am making.

Album Coming To Terms

Semester Four

My time at Vermont College of Fine Arts is winding down. I am working on my Process Paper and creating a 17½ foot scroll that will be installed on a wall in the Main Gallery for my graduate show. It is hard to believe and yet, as I go through the process of closely examining my journey, I realize, with great satisfaction, that I have come a long way. I am making a giant oil painting that includes figures, animals, and symbols in various interior and exterior locations. That is amazing—a fantasy come to life! I am working with a medium that has eluded me for years, probably since I took painting in college with the ever discouraging Mr. Berlin at SUNY Buffalo, and in a scale that I could never imagine when I was making much smaller work.

My studio practice this semester is activated by the work of various expressionist figurative painters. I respond to the freedom and the experimental color palette of the Bay Area Painters of the '50s and '60s, such as David Park, Joan Brown, and James Weeks. The environments of German Expressionist Max Beckmann intrigue me and spark my curiosity, as do those of contemporary painters Kerry James Marshall, Katherine Bradford, and Rose Wylie. I saw a show of Marsden Hartley's paintings of Maine from the early 20th century at the Met Breuer. His lively and complicated surfaces and compositions inspire my process. An exhibition entitled "A New Subjectivity: Figurative Painting after 2000" of work by five women working currently place my work in a contemporary context. Their work makes use of personal narrative and allows for sophisiticated mark-making, improvisation, and mistakes to occupy the same space. I aspire and attempt to express that kind of personal freedom in my own work.



David Park *Portriat of Lydia Sewing,* 1955 Oil on canvas

Max Beckmann *Party in Paris,* 1947 Oil on canvas

Kerry James Marshall *Slow Dance*, 1992-93 Mixed media and acrylic on canvas 75.25 x 71.25 inches

Katherine Bradford *Mother Knows* Acrylic on canvas 12 x 16 inches

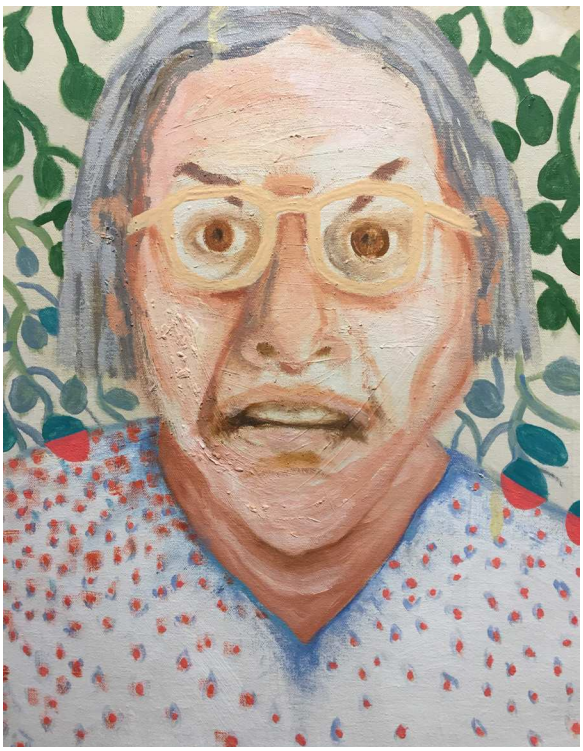
Rose Wiley *PV Windows and Floorboards*, 2012 Oil on Canvas 181 x 334.5 cm

I am continuing to engage with research that informs my work. My exploration of loss and memory persists. I am reading novels, personal essays, and memoirs that predominantly deal with these issues: the loss of one's family, one's country, haunting memories, a near death experience, feeling unloved. Some of my recent reading includes *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald, *Sula* by Toni Morrison, personal essays about death, illness, and memory by Cynthia Daum, a memoir by the British writer, Jeanette Winterson, and the masterpiece by Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking,* which I have read several times.

It is not that I am learning new concepts as much as I find that the reading encourages me to go places in my thinking that I have not gone before. My thoughts investigate imagined memories of unintegrated loss and lives cut short. I have so many questions. Who were my relatives that I have no or little memory of? What is their place in my life? The unfathomable outcome of our recent election and its frightening repercussions for undocumented immigrants has me thinking about my grandparents. They came to this country as young people around the turn of the century, mostly from Hungary, escaping the persecution of Jews in their homelands. They were children who came with their parents or, in the case of one of my grandmothers, totally alone at the age of 15. My curiosity about them is manifesting itself in my paintings. I have a grandmother whose husband was disabled, and she lived without him for most of her life. I feel bonded to her in a way I never have before. It feels like I am bringing their stories to life on canvas.

And those that I do remember, what is their place in my life? It is the

relatively recent death of my husband that compels me to constantly stuggle with questions about how I process loss and the various forms my grief takes. I think about my relationship with the dead because there is no doubt in my mind that when someone dies, your connection to them continues. It evolves in a surreal way. I have been living without my mother much longer than I lived with her, and yet she is a constant presence in my life. Is that because I have worked to keep that connection alive? My mind is active with thoughts of her. Do I mourn the person that died 40 years ago, or do I miss the idea of her? The answer, in the simplest form, is yes and yes. These are the thoughts that engage me while I'm painting.



Coming to Terms (detail) Semester 4 Spring 2017
Oil on canvass 210 x approx. 60 inches

Coming to Terms (work in progress) Semester 4 Spring 2017 Oil on canvas 210 x approx. 60 inches

I am a linear and literal thinker. I remember specifics. I dream in technicolor. My decision to make a horizontal scroll about family, memory, and imagination is an appeal to the viewer. I invite you to take a walk in my mind; take it all in from a distance, or move along and read it like a film strip. The panels interact in mysterious and unpredictable ways not unlike the tableaus of my dream life, moving seamlessly from place to place, situation to situation. My paintings are not meant to commemorate; they are snippets of time, vignettes, moments remembered and imagined. This is my way of bearing witness to the past and keeping it present.

Conclusion

My time at VCFA was transformative. I have learned an immeasurable amount these past two years—wonderful life lessons. I feel as though my goals have been achieved. I wasn't looking for professional credentials when I came into the program at VCFA. They may be available to me now, but that was never the intention for my studies. It is the level of engagement that excites me, the intellectual perspective that enables me to see things differently, and the community that envelops and feeds me. I am a 21st century subjective painter narrating the personal and therefore the political.

I will continue this conversation about loss, mourning, and memory and how they intersect. My nuclear and extended families have suffered more than our fair share of tragedy in what I categorize as a culture of loss. I am not asking or answering the question, "why me?" This work is an attempt to bear witness, to reckon, to experience unexpressed empathy and sadness, to make memory matter. I produced the work not so much to honor my subjects' being, but rather to come to terms with their all too brief existence, their deaths, and the process of mourning and remembering. I am, in a sense, giving myself permission to continue the mourning process in this work with the hope that it will encourage others to do the same. I want to encourage my audience to get in touch with their own unintegrated loss. We live with a "get over it" mentality that is not always healthy or helpful. As Judith Butler says, I am undone:

> When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restora-

> tion of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose 'you' under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I without you? We are undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.

Judith Butler's words remind me of the constancy of grief that I came to acknowledge through my journey at Vermont College. I take comfort in knowing that the people I have lost are and will continue to be an integral part of my being.

Your name was David Rothman and you were a grandson, a son, a brother, and a nephew. You were my first cousin, the son of my mother's sister, my aunt Rhoda. In 1969, when you were 21 years old, you were living in London and attending film school. You always did things that way; you were independent and brave and adventurous. One day you were out walking with a friend, stepped off the sidewalk, and were hit by a car. Your injuries were fatal. This was an incomprehensible loss to your immediate and extended family and friends. I answered the phone call that evening. We were eating dinner and my seat was closest to the phone. It was a normal Saturday. I was in my senior year in high school working on a research project and spent the day at the Donnell Library in New York City. I came home, took a nap, and then the four of us sat down to dinner. It was a family friend who called; I said hello in a chipper fashion. She asked to speak to my mother who took the phone and started to wail. My father ran to the phone and broke the news to us. I had never seen my parents fall apart like this. Never. Your aunt Estelle, my mother, was particularly shaken by this unspeakable tragedy. I was 16 at the time, and I was haunted by your death for many, many years. When I was in college, a couple of years after your death, I used to imagine that you would appear through the trees in a secluded spot on campus where I would sit and contemplate life. My fantasy was that you weren't really dead. You had chosen me to come to first, and that I would be the one to spread the good news, pulling everyone out from under the dark cloud of your death.

Epilogue

When I returned home from my first residency at Vermont College, I decided that I must acknowledge the inspiration that got me to this amazing place, the woman on the radio. I searched the Moth Radio Hour website and combed through their extensive collection of previous episodes until, finally, I found her: Cynthia Riggs. Upon a quick perusal of her website, I discovered something that pleased me to no end: She got her MFA in creative writing at Vermont College! The world works in mysterious ways. We exchanged emails and she was delighted to learn that I had embarked on what she hopes will be the life-changing experience that it was for her. Her closing line to me in her letter encapsulates the journey perfectly: "You never know what might be around the next bend."

Your name was Estelle Grad and you were a daughter, a sister, a wife, an aunt, a friend, and my mother. You were diagnosed with breast cancer in 1971 and died on April 28, 1977 at the age of 59. There was a lot of secrecy around your diagnosis, your disease, and your death. Although you were never told directly that your cancer was no longer treatable, you must have known that you were dying for some time. The inconceivable thought of leaving your wonderful husband Irving, your 29-year-old son Arnie, and your 23-year old daughter was terrifying and tragic. Despite the secrecy, you may have tried to engage me in a conversation about what was happening. But I couldn't—or wouldn't—engage, and so I rejected you. But when I was on my own with my thoughts, I would imagine you in the shower, alone with your body and your terror and feel your pain. I guess you could say I experienced a harsh empathy. You taught me many wise things. If an otherwise intelligent person was acting mean spirited, you would recite your signature saying that has stuck with me: "Just because you're smart on page 32 does not make you a good person."

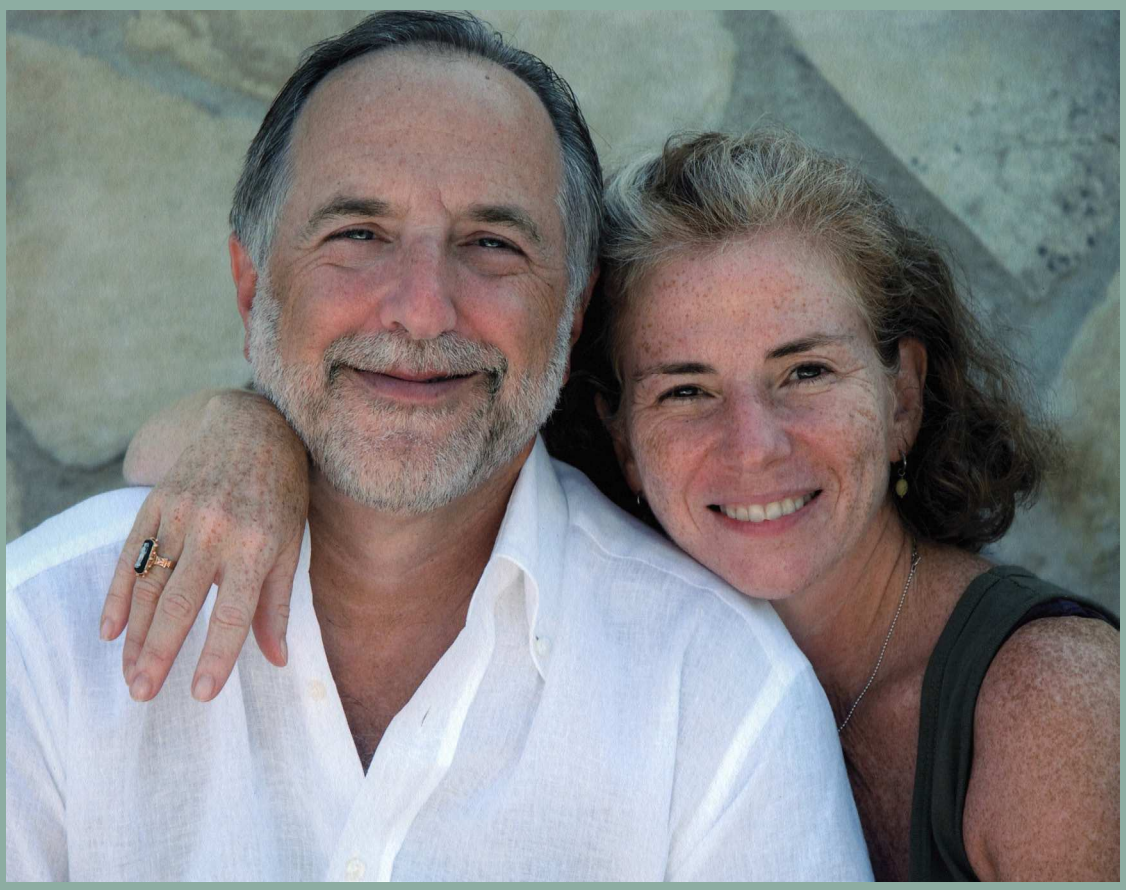
Artist Statement

Personal narrative and the role of memory and imagination, particularly as it relates to family, loss, and place, is what drives my practice. In this intimate exploration, I am able to investigate and comprehend the significance of the personal as it relates to a broader, more inclusive context. My narratives translate as whimsical and somber, joyous and mournful, comedic and dramatic, much like the hallmarks of human nature.

Most recently I have been making portraits of deceased family members, not so much to commemorate them, but rather to come to terms with their all too brief existence, their deaths, and the process of mourning and remembering. I am, in a sense, giving myself permission to continue the grieving process in this work with the hope that it will encourage others to do the same. We live with a “get over it” mentality that does not serve our health or well-being.

I begin with a place; I paint a specific location that I conjure from my particular geography and add the individual as I remember or imagine his or her presence in that locale. I refer to photographs as reference periodically, but for the most part these images come from my head, my reminiscences. The imagery grows out of a scene that develops slowly as I work, and that gradual connection between place and person becomes a painting.

Your name was Neil Selinger and you were a son, a father, a brother, an uncle, a cousin, and my husband. In the fall of 2008 you started experiencing some strange and disturbing symptoms that were difficult to diagnose. You had recently retired from a successful but unfulfilling legal career and you were finally involved in activities that made you happy and gave you a sense of social purpose. You were working on a memoir about your wacky extended New Jersey family, tutoring at the local high school, and volunteering with a neighborhood food pantry and Habitat for Humanity. In the spring of 2009, at the age of 55, the unthinkable happened. You were diagnosed with ALS, a degenerative motor neuron disease that precipitously robbed you of all movement. Eventually you lost your ability to control your body and your life; you made the decision to refuse further intervention. You always said, from the very beginning, that you never wanted to be more machine than man. You found a way to say goodbye to all of us—myself, your daughters, friends and relatives—by writing letters on your Tobii machine, a computer that read your eye gaze and typed and spoke for you in a horrible technologically generated voice. Somehow, with your marvelous sense of humor, you found a way to be funny through a computer. You handled this challenge in a way that was truly miraculous. In July of 2011, two months before your youngest daughter, Julia, was to leave for college, your beloved Columbia, you died. You were 57.



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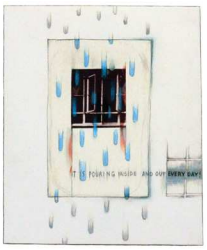
Application Images



It Is Pouring 2010
From the series *Not What I Had In Mind*
9.5 x 8 inches
Graphite, colored pencil, crayon, and collage on paper

Our Beautiful Bed 2011
From the series *Not What I Had In Mind*
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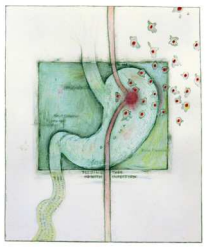
Graphite, colored pencil, and crayon on paper



Feeding Tube 2010
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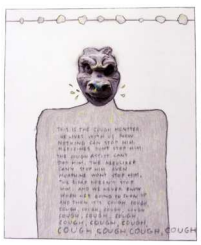

Cough Monster 2011
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The Ashes 2012
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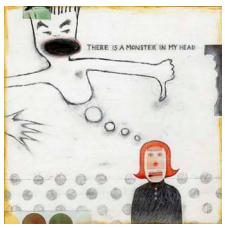

There Is A Monster In My Head 2013
From the series *The Monster*
10 x 10 inches
Graphite, colored pencil, crayon, oil stick, and collage on paper

There Is A Monster In My Computer 2012
From the series *The Monster*
10 x 10 inches
Graphite, colored pencil, crayon, oil stick, and collage on paper

The Monster Is Green With Envy 2014
From the series *The Monster*
10 x 10 inches
Graphite, colored pencil, crayon, oil stick, and collage on paper

There Is A Monster On The Phone 2013
From the series *The Monster*
10 x 10 inches
Graphite, colored pencil, crayon, oil stick, and collage on paper

The Monster Is Seeing Red 2014
From the series *The Monster*
10 x 10 inches
Graphite, colored pencil, crayon, oil stick, and collage on paper

Body Parts 2 2014
15 x 22 inches
Flashe vinyl paint, oil stick, crayon, graphite, and collage on paper

Body Parts 3 2014
15 x 22 inches
Flashe vinyl paint, oil stick, crayon, graphite, and collage on paper

Body Parts 4 2014
15 x 22 inches
Flashe vinyl paint, oil stick, crayon, graphite, and collage on paper

Body Parts 5 2014
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Body Parts 6 2014
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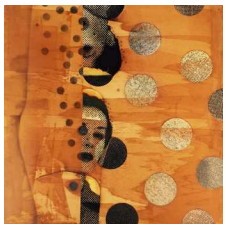

Tete a Tete 2014
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A Heated Conversation (diptych) 2015
15 x 30 inches
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Hand Talkers (diptych) 2015
15 x 30 inches
Flashe vinyl paint, oil stick, crayon, colored pencil, graphite, and collage on paper

Blue in The Face (diptych) 2015
15 x 30 inches
Flashe vinyl paint, oil stick, crayon, colored pencil, graphite, and collage on paper

Not Quite Daily Self-Portraits 10/2013 to 5/2015
7 x 5 inches each
Graphite, colored pencil, crayon, oil pastel, flashe vinyl paint, and collage on paper

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