A Search for self

Kristine Greenizen

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A SEARCH FOR SELF

by

Kristine A. Greenizen

April 6, 2011
Chief Advisor: Robert Heischman

Date: ________________________________

Associate Advisor: Luvon Sheppard

Date: ________________________________

Associate Advisor: Keith Howard

Date: ________________________________

Department Chair: Donald Arday

Date: ________________________________
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Abstract

My thesis objective is to explore the development of one’s self image and sense of identity in the absence of the traditional familial role models. Some of what I expect to address is the loss of my mother in my teens and the subsequent impact on my personal development, as well as my father’s disapproval and disparagement of all but my academic successes prior to his first stroke, in my early teens. The work will consist of portrait paintings and drawings of myself and family members, plus figurative paintings and prints based on myself and live models. What I hope for is for the viewer to be able to find common ground with my formative experiences through this visual presentation.

I find that my long-standing emotional and intellectual attraction to Expressionism and subsequent studies into the lives and works of expressionistic painters has played a highly influential role in my personal development as a painter. This long-held fascination with Expressionism has resulted in a great deal of experimentation with color and mark-making as I worked on the pieces for my thesis. My classical study and training provides me with a strong base from which to spring with my expressionistic forays. Use of expressionistic color and form relationships bestows me with a greater range of tools with which to create my own emotional and psychological presentation through the mediums of painting and printmaking.

The content of my work should carry a universality to the viewer. Though the specifics vary, the majority of families damage their members in various ways, both intentionally and inadvertently. This work is meant to incite the viewer into an examination of one’s personal familial experience, thus opening the door to empathize and understand others more fully.

The process of creating this body of work has had the unforeseen result of propelling me into a much closer, more painful examination of my self and my life than I had expected, as well as resulting in the need for counselling to address some of these issues. This thesis has therefore become an integral part of my healing process; through this personal examination arose some uncomfortable realities requiring resolution and acceptance in order for me to come to terms with who I am and the generation of that identity. It is my hope that some of this struggle is apparent in the work, thereby striking a chord of shared experience with the viewer.
Introduction:

The purpose of this thesis has been to explore the nature of familial relationships and their subsequent influence in the development of one’s self image and sense of identity. I have created a body of work consisting of portrait paintings and drawings of myself and members of my family, and figurative paintings and prints based on myself and live models.

The content of my work, though its genesis is in the specificity of my personal life experience, carries a universal message. This work is meant to act as a mirror to provoke the viewer into an examination of one’s own familial experience. The paintings and prints are an attempt to communicate with the universal within us, exhibiting the actualization of commonality without specifically addressing the individual viewer’s uncomfortable realities.

Discussion of Influences:

I am imbued with an overpowering attitude of ‘wanting to know’ as well as being endowed with an aptitude to indulge my need to search for truth. I have therefore studied many artists, ranging from the classicists to today’s conceptual artists, but find myself most drawn to and thus most influenced by Vincent van Gogh and his subsequent Fauve and German Expressionist legacy, up to and including the American Alice Neel. In fact, van Gogh and Neel are the two artists I look to most often in admiration and for inspiration. Additionally, I have been drawn to the large-format portraiture of Chuck Close and Tony Scherman. My interest in Expressionism and its related forms began as an intellectual need to understand my visceral response to this art, finding the variously fragmented forms and imaginative use of color and line to be more visually interesting and emotively stimulating than the formalistic modeling and blending of forms. As the painting becomes more the object, my response also leans to the tactile impulse, enjoying not only the visual effect but also the textural surface, both real and implied.

I often refer to the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh as my spiritual art father: from my first viewing of his paintings in books and museums I have been enthralled by the power of his expression, especially in the portraits he so painstakingly crafted throughout his very short career. In one of his most oft-reported statements (from 1890), he says, “That which excites me the most, much, much more than the other things in my work—is the portrait, the modern portrait... I would like to make
left:

Fig. 1: *The Night Cafe*, 1888
Oil on canvas
British Museum, London

below left:

Fig. 2: *Memory of the Garden at Etten*, 1888
Oil on canvas
National Museum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam

bottom left:

Fig. 3: *The Poet: Eugene Boch*, 1888
Oil on canvas
Musee d’Orsay, Paris

bottom right:

Fig. 4: *Self-Portrait*, 1889/90
Oil on canvas
Musee d’Orsay, Paris
Van Gogh was a pioneer in the choice and use of color for the sake of its emotive possibilities over realistic application. Vincent wrote about his study of these effects in his paintings throughout his lengthy correspondence with his brother, Theo, as well as with other artists and members of his family. In December 1885, Vincent wrote to his brother about his own emotional response to his colors in his palette, “Cobalt is a divine color, and there is nothing so beautiful for putting atmosphere around things. Carmine is the red of wine, and it is warm and lively like wine.”

In regards to The Night Cafe (fig. 1), he writes, “‘I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green. The room is blood red and dark yellow with a green billiard table in the middle; there are four lemon-drop lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most alien reds and greens...’”

Of Memory of the Garden at Etten, (Fig. 2) he writes to his sister Wil, “‘...the deliberate choice of the colour, the sombre violet with the blotch of violent citron yellow of the dahlias, suggests Mother’s personality to me.’” and “‘I don’t know whether you can understand that one may make a poem only by arranging colours, in the same way that one can say comforting things in music... In a similar manner the bizarre lines, purposely selected and multiplied, meandering all through the picture, may fail to give the garden a vulgar resemblance, but may present it to our minds as seen in a dream, depicting its character, and at the same time stranger than it is in reality.’”

Vincent wrote to Theo again about The Poet: Eugene Boch (Fig.3), “‘To finish it I am now going to be the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I get to orange tones, chromes and pale lemon yellow. Beyond the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination the bright head illuminated against a rich blue background acquires a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky.’”

I am endlessly fascinated by the workings of his mind as he discusses his thought processes and creative impulses, and am as captivated by his imagery now as when I first began my studies of his work over twenty years ago.

Figure 4 is one of van Gogh’s most famous images, and one of my favorite portraits for its seeming contradictions: the cool blue and green tints are calming, even
in their contrast with the fiery hair and beard, yet the heavily impasted brush strokes throughout the painting seem to indicate an inner turbulence within the figure. There is a passage in a letter to Theo in early September 1888 that, though not specifically traceable to this Self-Portrait, is applicable nonetheless, and as valid today as in his day: “So I am always between two currents of thought, first the material difficulties...; and second, the study of colour. I am always in hope of making a discovery there, to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colours, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. To express the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone against a sombre background.” He delights in the marriage of apparent contradictory effects, and in the struggle to make them evoke a specific response from the viewer.

Van Gogh’s facility for discussion of his conceptual experiments in his work with his correspondents has left us an unparalleled record, especially one available in popular translation for the latter-day casual or not-so-casual admirer. While there may be other artists with as rich a correspondence, the bulk will be in the native tongue of the artist and therefore less likely to be of direct influence or inspiration to someone other than a specialist or scholar. This freedom of access has been a great resource for me, as I have a predilection for reading the print in the art books as well as looking at the plates, enjoying an interest in the whys and hows as well as the results of the artist’s vision.

My personal study of the modern art movements has progressed more or less chronologically, which has enabled me to build upon previously gleaned information. As such, natural subsequent subjects of interest to my studies of van Gogh have been the Fauves and the German and Austrian Expressionists in my quest to explore the visual language possibilities opened to me so eloquently by van Gogh. “For the first two decades following van Gogh’s suicide in 1890, the patterns of influence are quite clear... His importance in France for those painters associated with the Fauves and, simultaneously, with the German Expressionists, is vivid and profoundly moving, with portraiture playing a central role in these artistic movements.” Very specifically, Henri Matisse, as leading member of the Fauves, provides numerous examples of the sort of arbitrary and unrealistic color use as amply demonstrated by van Gogh. “The link between the work of van Gogh and that of Henri Matisse can serve as a good early example of the rather oblique, yet penetrating, nature of van Gogh’s influence on subsequent portrait making.”

Landscape at Collioure (Fig. 5) is a study for the brilliant Bonheur de Vivre, which
HENRI MATISSE

left:

Fig. 5: Landscape at Collioure, 1905
Oil on canvas
(study for Bonheur de Vivre)
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

bottom left:

Fig. 6: The Green Stripe, 1905
Oil on canvas
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

bottom right:

Fig. 7: Portrait of Andre Derain, 1905
Oil on canvas
Tate Gallery, London
is not published in color in art books. I haven’t seen the study in person, but I have seen the larger painting at the Barnes Foundation in Merton, PA. It’s jewel tones and unrealistic color choices are amply demonstrated in Fig. 5; seeing the full-sized painting was a transformative experience in understanding the potentials of color play and interaction.

The same year (1905) that Matisse painted *Landscape at Collioure*, he also painted *The Green Stripe* and *Portrait of Andre Derain* (figs. 6,7). “The 'arbitrariness' of the colours concerns their relationship to external reality, not their relationship to one another: this was a vital matter, and Matisse described how the choice of two colours committed him to the selection of a third that would harmonize them – and so on.”¹⁰ Both paintings exhibit the same flat, expressive use of color as a painting style that he exhibits in the landscape. As this approach became integrated into the new forms of German painting, it fostered the title of Expressionism for the movement. “Examples abound: already by 1907, in a youthful self-portrait (Fig. 8), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, one of the four principal figures in Die Brucke, seems to have placed himself and his swiftly recorded features into a flattened, broadly stroked landscape, strongly reminiscent of the van Gogh portrait he might already have seen at Cassirer’s in Berlin.”¹¹

Often grouped with the German Expressionists but actually contemporaneous with the generation of German artists following van Gogh’s death is Kathe Kollwitz. I was introduced to her printmaking as an undergraduate in the early 1980’s and was immediately captured by the range and power of her imagery. As a printmaking
right:

Fig. 9: *Seated Female Nude*, 1900
Pastel and black chalk on French pastel paper with a sand surface
29-7/16" x 22-1/16"
Private collection

left:

Fig. 10: *Self-Portrait*, 1910
Etching
10.125" x 18.625"
The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, California

bottom left:

Fig. 11: *Self-Portrait (detail)*, 1924
Opaque white ink with pen and black wash on dark green paper
10.125" x 18.625"
Kathe Kollwitz Museum Koln, Kreissparkasse, Koln
student, I was drawn to the fluidity and expressive nature of her line. Additionally, the poignancy of much of her subject matter, particularly the work concerned with motherhood and death, struck a deep emotional resonance with me, given my personal history with the early death of my own mother. As I have aged and grown into my primary interest in portraiture and figurative work, I find that Kollwitz’s prints still resonate, but I have come into an even greater appreciation for her self-portraiture, which she pursued throughout her life. Figure 9 shows a figure study in pastel and black chalk, a relatively unusual medium for Kollwitz, though a common subject matter. Her figurative work was a great inspiration to me as a young student struggling to master the complexities of the human figure. Self-Portraits, 1910 and 1924, (Figs. 10, 11) are examples of her unremitting eye as cast upon herself: “The proud portrait of the artist in old age, as revered for her years as her talent, becomes in Kathe Kollwitz’s hands a dispassionate chronicle of her ageing self and its despairing response to the horrors of life. Like Rembrandt, she was fascinated by the marks left by time, and even seems to have hastened the process in her self-portraits: after the age of thirty she never looked young again, recording the effect of life on her features...”

As the other most painterly influence in my artistic life, Alice Neel holds the title of “my spiritual art mother.” I have long been fascinated by her ability to connect with her sitters, conveying the essence of their personalities with what seems an incredible economy of line and richness of color. I have looked to her and to van Gogh in my quest to become more ‘painterly’ in my application, admiring their intuitive, instinctual approaches to the aesthetic and technical problems before them. Mine has been a more studied path, at times becoming mired in the problems of technique, rendering me unable to get out of my own way. Neel has helped to open me to the possibilities, especially in how to integrate line into the painting in a meaningful, even lyrical way.

In 1980, Alice Neel painted her first and only self-portrait (Fig. 13). She views herself uncompromisingly, conveying the flaws and vulnerability of advanced age (she was 80 years) as honestly as she had done for her subjects. “In her paintings the female body is more real than imaginary; it is something that is lived in rather than something to be worshipped or desired. In Neel’s painting of herself, as in her paintings of others, she portrays a unique body, a body a person acquires through a combination of genes, age, and experience.” Neel was significant in her handling of the nude figure, male or female, as an individual rather than as an archetype. “Nude portraiture is an area which she made her own...This life-size
right:

Fig. 12: *Self-Portrait*, 1980,
Oil on canvas,
54” x 40”,
The National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institute,
Washington, D.C.

left:

Fig. 13: *Nadya Nude*, 1933
Oil on canvas,
24” x 31”,
The Estate of Alice Neel,
Courtesy Robert Miller
Gallery, NY
self-portrait can therefore be seen as an artistic manifesto, a statement of her belief that nudity helps bring the viewer closer to the sitter. Though she has the air of a soft little grandmother, nothing fits the stereotype, from the strong, young colors to her acceptance of her nudity.\textsuperscript{14} Neel worked with the nude genre throughout her career, often convincing a sitter to disrobe for the portrait experience in spite of initial reticence on the part of the model. She used the nude as a means to find and expose more of the core of the individual. \textit{Nadya Nude} (Fig. 14) is typical of a Neel nude and “shows a woman not as a formulaic long-haired, slim, alluring figure but bulky and self-absorbed. She fascinates not as a flawless object of desire but as a powerful personality embodied in the figure’s sheer mass, in its dark intensity and immodest pose.”\textsuperscript{15} Nadya is an arresting individual, capturing the viewer’s eye with her heavy-lidded gaze.

Neel’s models came from all walks of life, from the fellow denizens of Spanish Harlem where she lived for many years, to the society children from her sons’ school that she would create for fund-raising affairs. She was less interested in painting to please than in locking into the truth of the person in front of her. If Neel found you interesting to look at, you were fair game: the \textit{Fuller Brush Man} (Fig.14) became an impromptu model when he came to her door to sell his brushes in 1965. This is one of my favorite of her portraits; his earnestness practically radiates from the canvas. Coincidentally, before I became aware of this habit of Neel’s, I too would approach complete strangers who I thought interesting-looking to ask if they would sit for me for a portrait. I embarrassed my then-boyfriend on several occasions in this manner. I also had a surprising degree of success in this approach; I even had an occasional nude painting as a result.

One of Neel’s most searing images is of her mother in 1953, \textit{Last Sickness} (Fig. 15). “What is involved when a strong woman paints...her mother? Inevitably, the mother suggests a mirror image, often by physical resemblance and shared...gesture, literal flesh and blood. Yet in most cases, and certainly in Neel’s, the mother also provides a negative reflection: a woman, in this instance evidently intelligent and strong, who has led a sharply limited life. In such a situation, the encounter between the artist and her mother is bound to be accompanied by deep ambivalence, but in \textit{Last Sickness} Neel fruitfully marshaled that ambivalence to create a powerful portrait.”\textsuperscript{16} Given my own history, I can identify more easily with this painting as a visual manifestation of my maternal grandmother, who I did know very well. This picture’s poignancy for me lies in what I’ve missed, rather than as a common experience of the mother-daughter relationship. My mother’s
left:

Fig. 14: Fuller Brush Man, 1965
Oil on canvas,
40” x 27”
Collection of Diane and David Goldsmith, Orinda, California

right:

Fig. 15: Last Sickness, 1953,
Oil on canvas,
30” x 22”
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania
early death at 46 indeed ‘sharply limited’ her life, though there were many other limitations to her personal growth as a human being of which I cannot help but be at least partially unaware, given that I had barely begun to learn who she was as an individual (rather than as ‘Mom’) when she died. Thus, this painting is of all-that-should-have-been, rather than of what-we’ve-shared.

On my personal timeline, I was introduced to Chuck Close as a printmaker at the same time that I discovered Kollwitz. At the time, I was concerned with the acquisition of the tools of my trade and less concerned with how meaningful my imagery was. I hadn’t found much to say as yet, and the uber-realism of Close’s early work was rather more off-putting to me than attractive, though I appreciated his technical acumen. Since re-discovering him in the ‘90’s as a painter, I have come to revere his command of his personal visual language and am clearly influenced by the power of his compositional choices (Figs. 16-20). Of his expressionistic mark-making, he says, “I guess what I’m making are color chords, of a kind. I assign qualities to certain marks by giving them colors. When they’re played together—or seen together—the color chord melts in the mind... They come together to make some kind of color world.’”\(^{17}\) These marks, which less skillfully applied could read as merely decorative, instead optically blend into a very personal palette of color and texture. Of additional inspiration to me is Close’s continuing dedication to various printmaking disciplines and his ability to adapt his evolving visual language to such different technical processes (Fig. 16).

This twenty-plus years study of Expressionism is now subsumed as an integrated, unconscious influence in my own work. Yet I retain a strong respect for intellectual modeling; my feeling is that you must learn the rules in order to break them with convincing impunity. It is the synthesis of both that is of strength in my work. My use of expressionistic color and form relationships empowers me in my quest to express the fears, hopes and ambiguities of life.

Prior to starting my graduate studies, I spent much time on what I referred to as ‘anonymous model’ paintings, as though they were merely still-lifes with a nude who happened into the picture. I realized in Graduate Painting (Fall ‘02) that this was a misnomer, a means of distancing myself from the implications of my choice of subject matter. The figurative work, specifically the nudes, had been a means of going to school to develop my skills, as well as serving as symbolic self-portraits in which I could address various personal and artistic issues from a safe emotional distance. After coming to this realization, I began to look more closely at
Fig. 16: Lyle, 2000
Eight-color soft-ground etching, 18.25" x 15.25",
Edition of 60, Pace Editions Inc., NY

clockwise from right:

Fig. 17: Self-Portrait, 1996, Oil on canvas, 24" x 30",
Private collection

Fig. 18: Georgia, 1996, Oil on canvas, 24" x 30",
Private collection

Fig. 19: Maggie, 1996, Oil on canvas, 24" x 30",
Collection of Maggie Close

Fig. 20: Leslie, 1996, Oil on canvas, 24" x 30",
Private collection
left:

Fig. 21: *Head of the Big Man*, 1975
Oil on canvas
40.9 x 27 cm
Private collection

right:

Fig. 22: *Night Portrait*, 1977/8
Oil on canvas
71.1 x 71.1 cm
Private collection
contemporary figurative painters such as Odd Nerdrum, Jenny Saville, and Lucian Freud. Freud (Figs. 21, 22) especially resonates with me, as he works from live models and works figuratively as well as with portraiture, and in reading about him and remarks by him, I find common ground. “‘When I look at a body I know it gives me choices of what to put in a painting; what will suit me and what won’t. There is a distinction between fact and truth. Truth has an element of revelation about it.’” 18 He has never dictated a pose, because “‘I am only interested in painting the actual person; in doing a painting of them, not in using them to some ulterior end of art. For me, to use someone doing something not native to them would be wrong.’” 19 While during the course of my studies, formal and otherwise, I have occasionally used a model, when I have a choice my preference is just the same as Freud’s; to have the model strike whatever pose or sitting that is natural to them, as that speaks to who they are as an individual. In this manner, even my figurative nudes are more in the nature of portraiture, and at this point I am also conscious of the symbolic self-portraiture implicit in the process. (Even when of necessity I work from photographs as reference, I prefer to take them myself, or barring that possibility, using snapshots taken during naturalistic moments.) Another technique we share is that of drawing the subject directly onto the canvas, “‘without doing lots of little studies for a hand, a neck, a shoulder’, or even a layout for the whole figure: ‘I’d rather it ran off the edges of the canvas than have to cramp the forms.’” 20 This is amply demonstrated in Fig. 22, Night Portrait. The negative space is as interesting as the figure, and yet fresh and uncontrived except for the initial choice in placement on the canvas. It is this freshness I aspire to in my compositions. I am not afraid to make unconventional croppings for compositions in order to focus attention to a particular area of interest.

The last artist I will discuss is Tony Scherman, who I discovered while paging through an art magazine in 2002-3. Immediately, my eye was caught by the large-scale portraiture, lush, rich, and textural, all elements of interest to me in addition to the compositional choice of cropping-in directly on the face. As I read the accompanying article, I discovered that Scherman was working with encaustic paint, a medium I had only recently been made aware of. I sought out a book on his work, Chasing Napoleon, and was mesmerized by his imagery (Figs. 23, 24). I was especially impressed by the luminosity of his flesh tones: “Central to the extraordinary power of these paintings is Scherman’s virtuosic use of encaustic...—a technique in which he is peerless. The paintings’ eroded, encrusted, dripped and scorched surfaces and the layered process of their creation strongly evoke the passage of time. The faces that stare out at us emerge from history, yet their
Fig. 23: *Napoleon: The Seduction of France, Brumaire 1799, 1995*
Encaustic on canvas
183 x 213 cm
Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Conrad Black

Fig. 24: *Charlotte Corday, 1997*
Encaustic on canvas
102 x 102 cm
Private collection, USA
Fig. 25: Artemidorus Mummy, Encaustic on wood with gilding
From Hawara, Egypt/Roman Period, around AD 100-120 A.D.
Collection: The British Museum, London, UK

Fig. 26: Portrait of the Boy Eutyches
Encaustic on limewood
Egypt, c.100 - 150 A.D.
38 cm x 19 cm
Collection: The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York, USA
translucent surfaces glow with physical immediacy.”

I found that I needed to do more research into the use of encaustics than was available in the Scherman book in order to be able to utilize this method of painting, though the richness of the paintings’ color and surface convinced me that here was a medium to approach oils in luminosity and light.

Initial research led me to the Fayum portraits (Figs. 24, 25) and more reading on the mixing and use of the materials. I spoke with the two leading manufacturers of the commercially available brands of encaustic paints, supplies and tools, Enkaustikos and R&F, for further information and purchased a small amount of paints and tools. My research led me to realize that I hadn’t the financial resources to buy ready-made cakes of paint, so I decided to make my own. More study and experimentation enabled me to create my own extensive selection of encaustic colors, which I kept molten on a griddle to apply with regular, cheap bristle brushes and palette knives. I used a heat gun for fusing the layers. I relate this much-truncated version of my work with the encaustics rather than in greater detail as I don’t want to make this all about my adventures in hot wax. Some information is warranted, however, as the process of working with this material has immediate bearing on the image results and is not of the most common usage.

Discussion of Body of Work:

I find that my use of the expressionist effect of textural mark-making varies in intensity according to the media in which I work; my work with oils has more blending than do my encaustic paintings and monotypes. This can be attributed to the slow-drying nature of the oil medium. I have preferred using oils to other paint media, however, because of the luminous color that results from the refraction of light rays through the oil binder. Much of the appeal of encaustics has to do with the similar refractory properties of the wax binder. Using the molten wax, though, eliminates the waiting time required by the oil paint; all the wax paint has to do is cool to make it viable for continued layering without disturbing previous applications. The nature of the super-imposed layering that happens during both of the latter processes is more prohibitive of the smoother modeling techniques. One can blend smoothly with the encaustic paints, but it requires working under a heat source so that the paint stays molten, which tends to do away with much of the textural effects that I enjoy.

My monotypes are created with ‘one press pass = one color application’, an
approach that draws on my many years of commercial printing experience. Any blending between color layers is optical, rather than physical, and also results in brilliant translucent color as the super-imposition of each color is not unlike the effect of glazing a transparent color over another in watercolor.

While portraying someone, I am trying to sense who they are, painting their skin, as though the paint were flesh and blood that I build into layers. It is this approach, this sensing, rather than a painting technique such as chiaroscuro, a manipulation of light out of dark for the sake of creating drama, which enables me to come closer to the subject as an individual, and to ultimately portray the universal in us all.

I found that the thesis process: the preliminary investigations, the search for imagery of ancestral family, and the inner dialogues expressed in the creation of new work, became a portrait of my experiences of my own parents. The resultant finding of connections with people who I never actually met, knew only superficially, or else through hearsay, in addition to the explorations of standing relationships with existing family members, brought me to the point of finding a link with my father on a point so fundamental to my personal worldview that the realization derailed me intellectually and emotionally. I am pretty equally right- and left-brained, and am quite intelligent. I had long been aware of and indeed eager to acknowledge my academically intellectual debt to my mother, though defining myself as an artist, whatever the nature of my employment situation at any given point in time. What I had never done was look at the obvious: if I got my book-smarts from Mom, where did my artistic side come from? I never followed that line of thought to its logical conclusion, even as I openly recognized how creative Dad was in his daily work around our dairy farm. The necessity of acknowledging the debt of my artistic life to the source of so much psychological, emotional and physical pain effectively started me on a descent into a clinical depression, out of which I am only now making progress. Ironically, this depression came about in spite of my having already let the hate and anger go, having belatedly understood that there had been no evil intent, but merely a flawed human being like myself, owning the same clinical depression problem but without access to the treatment options available today.

I have made reference already to the early death of my mother, but it is necessary to elucidate more of my personal family history in order to set the philosophical and emotional framework for my body of work. I grew up in a large family with two brothers and two sisters, a loving and intellectually stimulating mother, and a
depressive, alcoholic, frequently angry and consequently abusive, father. As the fourth child, my experience of my father’s temperament was somewhat different from that of my older siblings. He had a much leaner store of patience, and with his health deteriorating under the trials of hard work, chronic depression, alcoholism, and ageing, Dad’s temper unleashed was an awesome and terrifying experience. His near-constant emotional and intellectual abuse was debilitating; in anger, his corporal punishment was terrifying. I feared him as a child, and hated him for it as a young adult, finding it impossible to reconcile the occasionally good-humored lover of games and jokes with my memories of terror and self-doubt at never being able to do anything right in his eyes. (I had for many years wondered if my childhood memories had blown this aspect out of proportion to actual reality, but had my suspicions of living as a handy scapegoat confirmed by my eldest sister just a few years ago.) He had his first stroke when I was 14 years old and was in a nursing home at the time of my mother’s early death when I was 17, rendering my younger brother and I virtual orphans, as our elder siblings were married or out of the house. This quite cemented my view of my mother as a being who could do and had done no wrong, and from whom came all that I liked in myself. Naturally, anything about myself that I disliked was thus attributable to my father’s influence. This made for a very black and white, undeniably skewed, worldview.

Unfortunately, my father’s parental style of ‘divide and conquer’ meant that there was much infighting amongst us children, thus effectively negating the potential for positive influence and direction from my elder siblings. I went to college in the same town where my eldest sister lived, yet rarely sought her out. It seemed unlikely to me that what was happening in my life would be of interest to her, or to any of my other family members. (Luckily, we have grown closer as we have grown older, concluding that we like each other and enjoy each other’s company in spite of the lingering effects of a turbulent childhood.) This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: as I remain distant, anticipating a lack of interest, that same distance creates an assumption of disinterest on my part and results in what I feared all along. Ultimately, I realize in hindsight that my father instilled in me a lack of confidence in being lovable, or in being worthy of love; as such it is of great surprise to me to find that someone is interested in me or my life. I have to wonder what would have been different had my mother lived; would her influence without his daily presence been sufficient to lance the poison from my wounded self-esteem and allow me to accept my siblings’ affection as my due? Sadly, even with the wisdom of hindsight, I still find that the defenses forged long ago are impervious to clarity of vision. I feel a disconnect with my siblings that is unnecessary, but very real, nonetheless.
I am the only one of non-conformist bent of my siblings and I. In general, I dwell in a more intellectually sophisticated place, and really don’t share many, if any, interests with my brothers and sisters. This contributes to the disconnect that I feel with them. To be clear, this does not mean that I think them unintelligent; we are all very bright and are extremely creatively talented in a variety of ways. More specifically, I am speaking of tastes, interests, inclinations. I believe they think me odd, in point of fact. I prefer to think of my interests as avant-garde, rather.

I am including discussion of some preliminary works as they pave a direct path to my thesis pieces. There are essentially two parts to my final body of work: the family- and self-portraiture and the figurative pieces. Though there is overlap in the
timeline of when the work was being done, I feel the discussion will be more coherent if I address the two parts separately, starting with the portraiture.

I began the encroachment upon the potentially dangerous familial territory of my sibling relationships through the less intimidating territory of their children, thereby easing into the whole “family as subject matter” issue. Kathryn with Daddy (Fig. 27) is a depiction of my niece, drowsy and safe in her father’s (my younger brother, Kurt’s) arms. This is one of my transitional pieces between drawing and painting, and I carefully glazed oils in order to retain the delicate coloring and features of the innocent child. Simultaneously, I worked on the following oil, Adam II (Fig.28), an image of my eldest sister’s boy. This is a more straightforward depiction of an alert, intelligent, possibly mischievous child. There is nothing flashy or particularly challenging about the paint application; I have referred to this painting as proof that I could create a piece my family would be able to appreciate. Interestingly, my elder brother John does not appear in any of this work. He and his son are conspicuous by their absence. In what I recognize as a decision borne of fear and suspicion of the thesis process and of my inability to explain it well, John laid down an edict forbidding me to use Matthew, my other nephew, as a subject. This devastated me, as I could not imagine what horrors he must think of me as a person, and it rendered me unable to even draw John. Ironically, Kurt and Janice
were both delighted when I presented them with their children’s paintings.

Figures 29 and 30 represent my paternal grandparents, whom I never knew, both being gone before I was born. I suppose the other person conspicuous by his absence in this field of work is an image of my father. In actuality, one of the wonderful things about working with the old snapshots from which I painted these was the experience of recognizing physical traits familiar to me in my contemporary family. I was able to see my father in his father, and suggestions of me in Adeline. The only thing I knew about my grandfather John Potter prior to this experience was that he had killed himself. This was the inspiration for the color palette; I wanted to convey something of the somber circumstances of his death without hitting the viewer over the head with it. Also contributing to this effect is the shadow cast by the hat, obscuring his expression and adding an air of mystery. With Adeline, I wanted to suggest the careworn look of a farm wife aged before her time by using a build-up of subtle coloration in the hatched brush strokes, leaving a textured effect, as if the skin were weathered by her outdoor life.

Wilna 1936 (Fig. 31) is of Dad’s youngest sister and my favorite aunt. One of her salient characteristics for me always was her love of animals, which was the reason for my choice of this reference shot. I sought to convey the simple sweet nature of her as she must have been as a child with her pets by use of the pink surround (though the dogs are perhaps too cute to take seriously). I chose the slightly sickly green cast for the shadowed face to hint at a forecast of the not-so-
easy life she had yet to live.

Charlie (fig. 32), my sister-in-law, is as a sister to me. I feel close to her on many levels, sharing intellectual interests in literature and art on a deeper level than with other members of my family. I would choose to be friends with her regardless of family connection by marriage, which is more than many can say about their in-laws. I have tried to show her formidable intelligence and force of personality in the intensity and directness of her gaze and bearing. While the use of color is not especially eccentric, nor the brushstrokes expressionistic, I cropped in the head shot much more closely than I had done thus far in these preliminary works, more reminiscent of a Close. In this manner, I hoped to force an intimacy with the subject of the painting, engaging the viewer in the implied personal space of the sitter.

At the time of painting Marg at 19 (Fig.33) I was somewhat mystified by the appearance of this apparent stylistic one-off amidst the other more conventionally
painted pieces. I realize in hindsight that this is one of my most instinctive and intuitive paintings from that, or any other time. I chose the reference pictures for this piece because of my Mother’s youth and prettiness in them. I was captured by her largely unrealized potential in these simple family pictures. What I actually created was a highly idealized equivalent of a Hollywood glamour shot that speaks to my significantly polarized views of both of my parents. The candy-colored flesh tones, dreamy eyes, and stylized ‘40’s hair are inviting and limiting simultaneously; one wants to approach, but the beauty and brightness appear untouchable, as
indeed my idealization of my mother made her to me.

This previous painting contrasts vividly with the figurative work, *My Mother, Myself* (Fig. 34) on several levels. Though ostensibly the same subject, they are of very different content. While working from a model, I was struck by how I was more familiar with my mother’s adult corporeal presence than with her inner self. The poor woman had minimal privacy in a household with husband, five kids and one bathroom, and many was the time that she couldn’t even have a bath without being pestered by one of us about some trivial matter. Additionally, at the time of this painting’s creation, I had reached an age where my own body, through time’s natural processes, had begun to resemble Mom’s in her early-middle age. I had entered the decade in which my mother had lost her life, and as I drew closer to her actual death age, this became another means of identification with her. These factors combined to create a dual portrait, but faceless, as if awaiting further input. While I have vivid recollections of her corporeal self, I have largely had to invent for myself her personality as an individual separate from her maternal role, as well as to imagine or speculate how much of who I am as a person can be attributed to her influence. This is the mystery inherent in this portrait.
Fig. 37: Madonna II, 09/13/02
Monotype, 18” x 24”
The figure is outlined in a dark green contour, with additional shadowy contours further suggesting the duality of consciousness abiding within the form. The body itself is fleshy, not lacking muscle tone so much as having an insulating layer of fat under the skin. Gravity has begun to loosen the firmness of the flesh, indicating that this is an ageing woman, but one who is not yet aged, as the coloration of the skin is still bright, clean and youthful, in pinks, yellows and orange tints. The space around the figure is indeterminate, the figure suspended in a void of non-information, just as I am with this particular subject.

The two monoprints (Figs. 35, 36) are part of a series of nudes in which I experimented with texture and color, becoming more fluent in the language of each in the new printmaking processes now open to me. I found myself very attuned to working in multi-pass monotypes. The painterly effects available with various ink application methods coupled with the luminosity of color possible from the refraction of light through the multiple layers of resin-based inks gave me the freedom to play with a wide variety of expressionistic effects. This luminosity is clearly apparent...
in *Madonna II* (Fig. 37), one of my first-ever monotypes. I deliberately chose ink colors as close as possible to the CMYK of commercial printing ink separations in order to see what I could get. This print is the first piece of my Thesis Show selection, as its creation opened me to the expressive possibilities inherent in this medium.

This painterly printmaking play in turn helped to ‘loosen me up’ in my painting style, rendering me more able to take advantage of the possibilities of expression in the use of encaustics, as can be seen in *Red Nude* (Fig. 38). This particular painting is a self-portrait and an experiment with encaustics directly applied to paper, used in a collage effort, and an opportunity to become better acquainted with the medium. I was inspired by the freedom and ease with which I could apply the paint, and the ability to layer and scumble without disturbing previous applications, and to be able to do this in what was effectively one sitting. The marks themselves are much freer, less constrained, and empower the image with an energy that is somewhat antithetical to the figure in repose. The figure floats with apparent coolness and self-possession on a hot, seething red bed symbolic of inner turbulence.

The next two images (Figs. 39, 40) are from a concentrated effort at working with monotypes and from the model. In these prints, the relatively faceless female forms are stand-ins for maternal and self-images. The use of the female form in *Untitled II* (Fig. 39) conveys a woman’s response to the traditional exhibition of the nubile female as an object of desire; the supine form suggests vulnerability, but the visual effect of the brush strokes suggesting musculature conveys strength at the same time, and the ability to acquiese or not, as she chooses. *Two Women* (Fig. 40) is an image suggestive of the emerging daughter-mother relationship. The daughter figure in the foreground shares intimate space with and yet shies away from the maternal figure behind her. The classic parent-child dynamic dictates that this should be so; still the duality of the maternal influence remains, whether by positive or negative, conscious or unconscious choice. In my particular case, this is the ghost of the relationship that could-have-been.

The diptych *Green Robe I* and *II* (Figs. 41, 42) is nominally part of the same monotype series as the previous two prints, but is very much a piece with its own identity and place within my body of work. *Green Robe I* was printed in one pass, both colors applied at once. I printed the plate once more without reapplying ink and *Green Robe II* began as a ghost of the first print. I subsequently fleshed out the ghost print with 17 more print passes, some with single color applications, some
Fig. 39: Untitled II, 02/03
Monotype, 18" x 24"
Fig. 40: Two Women, 02/07/03
Monotype, 18” x 24”
Fig. 41: Green Robe I, 02/21/03
Monotype, 18” x 24”
Fig. 42: Green Robe II, 02/21/03
Monotype, 18” x 24”
with more than one color, all hand-registered by eye. Aesthetically, each version has its own merits, and I don’t prefer one over the other. The pair stand metaphorically in relation to my personal growth, as though Green Robe I represents Mom and Green Robe II is me after painstakingly building on the skeleton personality that I received from her. There is something clean and pure about the first print that becomes obscured and is almost lost under the layers in the second. I feel often as though I don’t know any longer what parts of Mom still exist in me, or even if she does in any way.

*Nude, Self II* (Figs. 43, 44) is my final figurative image in the show. This is a self-portrait painted from a photograph of me. With this piece I was able to refine my techniques of working with encaustics on paper. The paper I used is a heavy print-making paper, very tough and very absorbent. Figure 43 shows the underpainting stage with watercolor and charcoal. After working out the basic composition, I began to build layers with encaustic and oil paintsticks, ending with Figure 44.

As a nude portrait, the figure exposes much but shows little, with the most intimate parts cast in shadow as well as the face. This is one of the few nudes with
any recognizable facial features in spite of the shadow. There is tension between the light and dark areas as well as in the near complements of green background and red-orange-ish flesh tones. There is more tension inherent in the physical strain of the pose itself. The painting at first glance seems daring, yet is interestingly self-protective. The paradox is that one might expect that posing nude as the subject would be the ultimate risk in self-exposure for an artist, yet one can legitimately ask which is riskier: physical or emotional exposure? The emotional rawness apparent in the following self-portraits (Figs. 45, 48 and 49) is apparent enough for this painting to feel fairly safe.

Fig. 45: Kristine, 12/03
Charcoal on Paper, 32” x 48”

Fig. 46: Janice, 01/04
Charcoal on Paper, 32” x 48”

Fig. 47: Kurt, Spring 2004
Charcoal on Paper, 32” x 48”
The portraiture pieces in my show are all larger scale, 32 x 48” or 48 x 48” with close cropping to the head and face. I chose to continue to push the scale issues in an exploration of the intimacy of personal space between the viewer and the subject. The next three pieces, *Kristine, Janice, and Kurt* (Figs. 45 - 47) are charcoal drawings, simple contours of the physical features. The self-portrait was worked at the same time as *Janice*, though the demeanors of the subjects are radically different from one another. *Kristine* is visibly stressed, or distressed. It is, in fact, a good record of my state of mind at the time. I was struggling with the various revelations from my work and not yet sure how to feel about them. The ghostly lines left from redrawing add to the atmosphere of uncertainty, echoing the doubts with which I have viewed myself, making me look older and careworn.

*Janice*, a portrait of my eldest sister, is almost beatific in her poise. She and I have taken the opportunity over time to repair some distance between us, and she is
now a source of truth, as are my other siblings. She also carries a goodly share of my mother’s beauty, as well as the longest memories of her. There is less redrawing in this piece, an indication of greater confidence, if not attributable to the subject, then at least to my perception of her essential self.

*Kurt* is a drawing of my younger brother, showing a bright, hopeful young man. I did not actually include this piece in the show because I didn’t feel confident of its quality, though in hindsight I wish I had. His large, expressive eyes are his most recognizable feature and the simple charcoal lines of the drawing let them speak for themselves.

*Self II* (Fig.48) is a similar pose to *Kristine*. Here you see bleak despair, rather than mere uncertainty. This is underscored by the sallow cast to the skin created with greens in the shadow areas, and lemon yellows in the highlight areas. The
linear elements add to the look of worry and sadness. The red for the hair signifies a great deal of underlying unresolved anger. I let the paint application be messy, as these are messy emotions being exhibited. The use of encaustics resulted in a highly textured surface with drips and scumbles, easily enabling the messiness metaphor.

Self III (Fig.49) is the last piece in this body of work. The focus of the work is in the eyes, large and full of emotion and looking straight at the viewer, on the verge of tears. The colors are bright, with the skin tones pink and flushed. This is a woman brought to the brink by the personal inventory of her life. Again, messy subject matter is represented with messy paint. The colors of the surround and clothing in the complementary pair of yellow and violet help convey the agitation and inner conflict.

As I was working from photographs for everyone else’s portraits, I chose to work on those of myself from photos that I shot of myself, rather than to work from a mirror. I wanted the viewing perspective to be the same for these portraits as for the ones of other people in the family. I also chose to work from black-and-white photos when possible, printing out grayscale scans of photos so as to be free to impose my own coloration.

Conclusion:

There are several people whom I have yet to address in this body of work, so I will be continuing this project, but I also have plans to include people who have become acquired family. What is readily apparent to me is that we are all damaged in different ways, and so to some, truths are very different from what seems readily apparent to others; it is all a matter of perspective. I have learned, for example, that among my siblings we all have differing perceptions as to who was Dad’s favorite child among us, and even the sister most likely to win that election will argue the point in true sincerity that she was wholly inadequate at the job. She told me that at one point I was the favorite, and that she had been accused at the age of 5 of inducing Granny Adeline’s fatal heart attack, which makes me gape in incredulity. Whatever the facts are, however, what is true is that perception becomes the reality, especially for impressionable children who are without the social sophistication to be able to pick and choose what should be taken personally and what should be allowed to fall away unchecked. Children are egocentric beings who will internalize input until it becomes their own inalienable truth, or core belief. These core beliefs
in turn become the subject of many a conversation with a therapist. These are the universal truths of my experience, and as the norm of most families is actually varying degrees of dysfunction rather than the Ozzie and Harriet myth of family perfection, the viewer will be allowed to share in the experience in a meaningful way.

Remarkably, each of my siblings and I have found our own paths to healing, rather than wallowing unchecked in the neuroses made available, even inevitable, to us. Some of us are more successful at it than others, though we all have a desire to not repeat history. I have found that anti-depressants helped me but were not sufficient without additional counseling. Depression runs in families, as one of the sources can be a chemical imbalance in the brain, so once I realized that my father’s primary problem was not the alcoholism but the depression with which he was struggling, self-medicating with alcohol, I was able to begin to slough off the anger that had dwelt within me for so long. With the anger dissipating I could forgive, which in turn paved the way to accept the duality of gifts within me, those from both parents, not just from the one that I liked better.

In retrospect, the process of creating this body of work was a necessary part of my healing process; yes, I plunged into a severe depression, but did so as a result of exposing issues that I didn’t even realize I had. I needed to expose those issues in order to address them in a constructive way. It is the buried sliver that festers and begins to suppurate, usually all over whoever is in the vicinity. This is what happened with my depression; those around me suffered the effects as well. Unfortunately, depression is part of my physical makeup, but I am now able to manage it on a daily basis with the proper medication. Also unfortunately, the illness prevented me from being able to approach this body of work in an objective manner until Spring of last year. I had first to hit bottom, realize that that was where I was, and reach out for help with my depression from my primary care doctor. He was wise enough to recognize that I needed professional help beyond his level of expertise, and directed me appropriately. That happened over three years ago, and it has taken me that time to reach the point at which I am now able to articulate coherently about my work and the experience of creating it. Had I not undergone this process, however, I might never had gotten to an acceptance of the entirety of who I am and where I’ve come from. It is my hope that some of this struggle has become apparent through the work and strikes a chord of shared experience with the viewer.
Illustrations

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3. Ibid., letter to Theo from Arles, 9/8/1888; 288-9


5. Ibid.


7. Ibid., letter to Theo from Arles, early September 1888; 287

8. Rishel with Sachs, “Legacy of vG’s Portraits”; *VG Face to Face*, 229

9. Ibid.


11. Rishel with Sachs, “Legacy of vG’s Portraits”; *VG Face to Face*, 234


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16. Ibid., 24


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20. Ibid., 22

21. Tony Scherman: Chasing Napoleon (Cameron & Hollis, Scotland, 1999) Inside front book flap
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10. *Tony Scherman: Chasing Napoleon* (Cameron & Hollis, Scotland, 1999)