5-20-1994

The Hiding house

Michele Lynn Vavonese

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

The Hiding House

by

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May 20, 1994
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is as much of you in this work as there is of me. And I want to say thank you for that. The only way that I can accurately describe the sometimes intense amount of support that I received from this person is to relay a story about him. And about me. I love you Dad.

Story as told by John Gerald Vavonese:

"You know when Michele was little, I don't know we're probably talking around three or four. . . I uhh. . . I walked into her bedroom and found her drawing with crayons all over the white wall. And do you know what I said? Laughs. I told her that, that was her wall and she could draw whatever she wanted on it."

I also would like the Feeni's to know that their place in my heart is large. And man it's funky. Elizabeth dances in the forests.
To those of you who have offered support I promise to do the same.
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BOOK I: Behind the House

Chapter One, Origin

Exploring myself was the key to suggesting endless possibilities to my art.

Deciding that life was too complex a struggle, myself and a friend of mine opted to avoid it. We did this by compulsively eating and overfamiliarizing ourselves with the daily television line-up. Our days began to consist of lies to our professors about missing classes and assignments. Followed by a pooling of our money for a daily trip to the grocery store to restock our chips and soda. We did this all while staying in her apartment. It was quite a comfortable situation. But the more we stayed in, the harder it became to desire to do activities outside of the house. We evaded most responsibilities and the stimulation of new experiences and people that go along with that. At twenty years of age dodging life was at times enjoyable and exciting to me. In the same instance, my capability for irresponsibility and avoidance of the many issues then clouding my mind, frightened my sensible side. Within a matter of months I transferred out of that college and into the one that I would eventually graduate from.

It was at this college through the support of a group of tremendously kind family, friends and a dedication to my art that the Hiding House Series began.

The first painting was done in response to a writing. This writing was directly related to the issue of not being able to comfortably leave my friend's house, the apprehension that this could happen to me again and the understanding that I had been having these fears of isolation since early childhood.

Because these concerns had been with me for so long and I could see the importance that they were taking in my work, I was compelled to find out what the root of
the problem was. In short, after much attention was given to these matters and talking with both my physician and counselor, it became readily apparent that the reason I had been acting this way was because I sustained the characteristics of Obsessive - Compulsive Disorder. As explained in the text, Abnormal Psychology, by David L. Rosenhan and Martin E. P. Seligman, Obsessive - Compulsive Disorder is defined in this way:

Obsessions are repetitive thoughts, images, or impulses that invade consciousness, are often abhorrent, and are difficult to dismiss or control. Compulsions are the behavioral responses to obsessive thoughts. A compulsion is a repetitive, stereotyped, and unwanted action that can only be resisted with difficulty. So, in this particular instance my obsession was with the idea that I would become vulnerable or lack total control of my situations if I ventured outside and the compulsive action taken in order to hinder these thoughts was to simply avoid leaving the house. Dr. Mary Jackson further explained to me that O.C.D. was a physiological disorder and that I was probably genetically predisposed to it, as other members of my family clearly exhibited signs of the disorder too. She said that everyone is inflicted with this malady in some form just as everyone is vulnerable to an occasional bout with depression. A combination of strong family support, friends, medicine, and of course active participation in communicating my feelings through art, have been how the situation has been resolved, and how the Hiding House was created.

Hiding House, secret place
lethargic thinking rules my pace.
Early morning rise and wake,
try to go to sleep again.

A thousand caverns in my mind
holding thoughts of a time gone by.
Within a house that echoes with
a constant hold of its safety grip.

Start to get up, shower, eat.
What to wear and how to look.
nothing makes me feel quite good.
But staying in this little world.
And now it's happened once again.
A day's gone by, no saving it.
Try tomorrow once again.
Getting good at staying in,
people just think that I'm sick.

Michele Vavonese

Summer 1991
This writing exhibited the contrast of what a house had come to symbolize, and that was a combination of things. First of all a house offers protection and safety, but this is consistently contrasted with house as an inhibitor to daily living and a mental jail of sorts. The painted characters in the Hiding House series became an isolated exercise in decision making. Do I stay in? Do I go out? What are the consequences of each? If I stay in what am I going to do? Many chairs, window's, doors, sofa's, and different rooms were explored. Windows and opened doors keep a constant eye on exterior surroundings and offers the option to leave. Chairs and sofa's symbolized areas that I could choose as my personal space. These ideas were some of the underlying themes for all of the paintings within the series.

It was important that the first painting of the Hiding House have two characteristics. Foremost was that it should be shown from the outside to signify that a bright cheerfully colored house does not always contain what may be assumed. And secondly the houses needed to be rigorously defined as individual structures. Because each place contains different people and therefore, multiple circumstances. This was done by outlining the various forms in a thick line of Dioxazine Purple. The outline created a defined space for each dwelling and also gave an impression of visual unity to the painting. The color, shape, and positioning of the drapes also creates a sense of a seeable totality to the piece. Subtle variations of mustard and yellow give each house similar colors, alluding to the idea of cognate fashion tastes amongst the owners and perhaps other perceptions that are akin since they are living in the same environment. Another function the drapes served was to determine just how clearly the viewer could see in or the inhabitant could see out of their windows.
Chapter 2, Personal Space in the Painting

There are many strange things in this world and as children I think it is fairly common to start understanding this notion by visiting another person's house. For the first time you are thrust into these bizarre surroundings for substantial periods of time, and there's no escaping it. This is not comparable to when you are in the confines of your own dwelling, there you can go to your own bedroom or down to the den. In an unfamiliar area you lose these subtle freedoms of evasion from unattractive situations, or the ability to move freely to comfortable areas. And whose foreign house is a child usually introduced too, but also have a minimal amount of freedom to openly explore? For me it was my grandmother's house. Here that comfortable, familiar feeling of being in my own territory was lost but, I could quickly replace it with an intense surge of curiosity for these new surroundings. Here I was faced with a decision. Either reject the notion of adapting myself to this change of habitat or find out a way to fit in. Adjusting was what I ended up doing. I then comforted myself while away from home by claiming my own personal area at my grandmother's.

The desire to claim and maintain personal space is instinctual for every human. That is because it offers an element of control and security in an often unsure world. It is easy to apply this philosophy to a primitive tribe who must protect their private expanse, which would for example be a hunting ground, for the welfare of their community. But now how does that translate to a five year old girl who is visiting her grandmother's house? For me it interpreted in this manner; instead of finding large areas to claim in this strange environment, I needed to find niches within her house to dictate as individual territory. Two places were found. One was the bathroom, which would always and still is a sanctuary wherever I find myself. The reasoning simply being that bathrooms are one of the only places on Earth where you are justifiably left alone. Any violation of this
understanding and the embarrassment of several hundred social taboo's would be forced upon the intruder. The bathroom makes itself very noticeable within the painting. It is colored in light tones and the objects are outlined in all fair blue - green tones which for me gives it a calm approachable feeling. The dark blue walls with the intricate spiral designs that surround the lavatory offer a separating element of the bathroom from the rest of the picture.

The second place I claimed as mine, was her red velveteen sofa. This was a place to watch television, talk on the phone, have conversations with my family and friends, and at night it became my bed. Many, many hours were spent on that couch and it became for all relative purposes my personal space.

In the Red Sofa painting the couch is emphasized. The sofa becomes a dominant object, floating in the air on the right side of the painting. It's animated nature suggests to the viewer that perhaps it would be difficult for them to sit on it and be comfortable. The image questions the viewer, would you try to sit on this? As the painter I'm giving you a reason not to, by tilting it up and; therefore, allowing me to keep control of my area.
Chapter Three, Up in the Bedroom

A deeper study into these first themes; dealing with your own house as an obstruction to everyday functioning, and having to be faced with the idea of adapting to unfamiliar environments by claiming personal areas of your own, suggests another equally important idea that would come from the awareness of the confitions of this house. That is, that art was now being used to aide in my understanding of these intimate uncertainties.

It was now that personal dilemmas were unraveling and different anxieties were making themselves apparent, that I was left with some decisions on how to handle these questions. This process of being aware of a problem, outlining possible solutions, picking a justifiable response and then acting on it, describes what to do when making personal decisions and narrates what my definition of art process is. Art process includes the awareness of an issue, a clear innate understanding of the subject, a plan to relate these ideas through visual mediums, and the implementing of this plan, ending with a final physical result. Therefore, the construction of these paintings both technically and conceptually became an apparatus to helping me understand my problems in a clearer fashion. Not only did they offer a tool for realization but they were imperative in that the work became a legitimate device in expressing these anxieties in a positive fashion.

Marc Olivier presents an in depth study of the benefits of concentrating on the house as a form of self actualization in his book, Psychology of the House. He derives these conclusions not through the study of architectural journals but by the discovery of different cultures that he experienced on his frequent travels. The culmination of Olivier's judgment also includes the research of primitive peoples and what I consider to be our most valuable resource, children's view points.
Excerpts from Marc Olivié's *Psychology of the House*:

*To build a house is to create an area of peace, calm and security, a replica of our mother's womb, where we can leave the world and listen to our rhythm: it is to create a place of our very own, safe from danger. For once we have crossed the threshold and shut the door behind us, we can be at one with ourselves...*  
*...When a child draws a house, he never refers to an outside model. His use of the environment is limited to those elements alone which help him express a truth he senses within himself...*  
*...He draws in order to express himself, and the irregular and more or less concentric lines he draws first of all are just as expressive and significant of his state of being as the house he later draws will be...*  
*...The child uses the language of symbols, whose meaning we have lost, the primordial, essential language which is the means of communication of the child, the primitive, and the sage...*  
*...By means of his drawings, the child becomes a magician in the manner of primitive man, exteriorizing interior situations the better to experience them. He is reborn through his pictures and liberated from the inevitable anxieties which haunt him...*

As mentioned, my grandmother's old house on Spring Street while at first was a cause for anxiety, it eventually became a place of discovery during my childhood years. Since the *Hiding House* was being based primarily on introspection, memories of the visuals from her house became a natural source for my depictions.

Confronting the frightening issue of what is at the top of gramma's winding stairs was the subject of *Up in the Bedroom*. I can clearly remember starting to walk up the mysterious steps and wondering what ghost lay hidden around the wooden bannister. It would only take a second to fly away from that view of my grandmothers bed on the other side of the door, but it took several minutes for me to work up the courage to climb those steps. Again, the subject matter is related to the original writing on the *Hiding House*, in that it talks about contrast. As a child I wanted badly to go into that room at the top of the stairs by myself but scary thoughts of ghosts made me decide not to.

Color is one of the strongest elements of contrast that I use within paintings. It is through the placement of different hues on the canvas's that the importance to sections of
the work or to the objects in the piece are able to decipher themselves. Up in the Bedroom was a piece that used colors both to give the viewer an idea about opposing ideals and to set a mood for the scene. Variations of light and dark greens upon the print of the wallpaper and walls gives the eye a comfortable surface in which to travel around. This interesting yet relaxed journey of texture and detail is stopped by two bold stark areas of solid color. The solid gold walking area gives the reflections of brush strokes and therefore, reveals the artist's hand. But I chose to keep the interior of the bedroom all smooth and neutral allowing that part of the painting to rely on simplicity of its subject matter, which is the corner of the bed exposed from behind the opened door. The relevance of using the gold paint for the hallway floor was to give a sense of preciousness and value to the scene.

The stairwell plunges into a dark blue and purple abyss. This helps identify how at seven years of age, standing at the top of my grandmother's bedroom staircase seemed miles away from everything that I had known before taking that journey up the stairs.

Another painting that brings forth the issues of personal space and discovery is called, The Purple Hallway. Here I've depicted my own bedroom hall from when I was a teenager. The door is a symbol of my freedom of choice. I had two options, either stay in the room or leave it. And since this was my personal terrain I usually opted to stay in the room where I controlled my surroundings. I further exercised this control by keeping the door closed. It stands, however, a towering figure within the piece. Not because it was protecting me from outside issues but because it was also acting as a visual barrier, consenting to those already ill - gotten fears of leaving my personal space.
There were, however, ways of keeping busy if I did decide to reside in my bedroom. These alternatives were as obvious as playing my organ and looking through my wardrobe. Both organ and closet are prominently displayed. Or I had the option of doing what I usually did, involve myself in more intellectual endeavors such as reading, writing, and art. The room is painted in dark purples and greens to signify that its night time and all of the lights are out. Their is an element of playfulness within the scene, when you look at the animated way in which the scene is drawn. The opposing planes of the walls never exactly meet or coincide creating also an element of fantasy. This room could never structurally contain itself, and yet it defines itself clearly enough to be visually understood.
Chapter Four, Playing with the Rooms

So far the motivation for the making of the Hiding House Series seems to be based on primarily serious personal issues. A realization that occurred by focusing sober attention toward both my insights and my life was that an element of humor and playfulness had to be added to these scenes. Humor is the major tool I used and still use in perceiving and dealing with life. I also believe it was an important element in these autobiographical descriptions because it offered a gentle masking of the underlying problems to the viewers. Paintings paralleled everyday life. Because it is normal for people to use humor or whatever other masquerade they need in order to deal with or impart privacy of their circumstances. These lively visual elements allowed me free reign to use the work to become even more intuitive. The paintings became true self portraits revealing how I was choosing to view my surroundings.

Francis Bacon also used a masking element in his work. He referred to this masking element as a "shield" and this "shield" was not humor but savagery of the paint. He said that he used paint violently in order to project "personality and everything else."

In the following excerpts from Brutality of Fact with Interviews of Francis Bacon, by David Sylvester, Bacon discusses his contortion of form and the shield that conceals apparent violent meanings. It is in his words that my use of spacial distortion gives further explanation to an honest perspective of my surroundings.

Excerpts from David Sylvester's, Brutality of Fact with Interviews of Francis Bacon:

"What I want to do is to distort the thing (person) far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance... ...Well, I think that the difference is that an illustrational form tells you through the intelligence immediately what the form is about, whereas a non-illustrational form works first upon sensation and then slowly leaks back into the fact. Now why this should be, we don't know. This may have to do with how facts themselves are ambiguous, and therefore, this way of recording form is nearer to the fact by its ambiguity of recording..."
...We nearly always live through screens - a screened existence. And I sometimes think, when people say my work looks violent, that perhaps I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two veils or screens...

(On his paintings appearances) ...It's concerned with my kind of psyche, it's concerned with my kind of - I'm putting it in a very pleasant way - exhilarated despair...

With the humor component added to the essence of the paintings I still focused on my most natural visual resources. These were houses, dwellings and surroundings which I had been exposed to from both the past and present. This not only lent itself to my original intentions of using these images to describe the first writing and the many issues involved with that, but it also gave me a perpetually unlimited supply of notions on which to base further paintings.

Visually, my humorous side began to warp and obscure the forms of common domestic scenes and items. Also, an active use of bright and unusual household colors suggested the presence of spirited rooms.

Chair #3, is an appropriate example of distorting a common household item to increase it's interest visually. This painting which features one of my own living room chairs, consists of three main parts. The first is the seat, which is located on the left side of the piece. It's elongated form takes up most of that side. An odd combination of colors, and design combined, create a light and playful effect on the cushion of the chair and therefore, the portrait. A second primary part involves the long wall to the right of the chair that falls far back into the third main visual issue, which is the white ground.

Another aspect that gives this composition a spirited mood is the application of brightly colored flowers in the wallpaper. These blossoms dance and spring to life on the 2-D surface. The manipulation of the constantly changing sizes of the flowers in relation to the walls deep perspective offer an element of allusion that asks the viewer translate this print with the understanding that it is deliberately devised to be a fictional depiction. The
repetition of the flowers, in this painting and others, directly relates to and symbolizes the obsessive thoughts that a person with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder typically experiences. The variations in size and distortion of shape also correlates with the varying degrees of importance and seriousness that obsessive thoughts maintain.

Another canvas that agrees to describe its subject matter in a humorous fashion is The Hallway. Here I wanted the hallway to be a bright and cheery rendition of a passageway that could be found in anyones house. This piece had been constructed from the many sketches drawn of my own apartment corridor. The rounded edges of walls, doors, and windows along with the vivid tones of the paint implied a childlike innocence to the depiction. Viewers were meant to see this piece in a positive and fun way. All in all, the image was still dealing with how I was choosing to view my surroundings, but again applying a different perspective to them.

An ulterior motive for lending a sense of ambiguity to the forms was so that viewers too could become part of the decision making that was occurring within the succession of the series. This allows the audience to cast their own insights and associations onto the paintings. In both The Chair and The Hallway, subject matter was distorted enough so that people could apply their own knowledge of what they believe a chair or a hallway that they are familiar with, should look like. This allows the painting to become more personalized with each changing onlooker.
As the series began to expand and more interpretations were circulated on the paintings, I began to let go of some of the visual limitations I had set up for my work. Some of these restraints were that I had a limited cast of characters to work with. Up until now scenes were painted only from the house on Spring Street, my childhood homes or my own apartment. I felt that many interesting images could also evolve in the series by basing the works on different inspirational writings.

The last three paintings discussed are a result of stimulating writings that brought *Hiding House* scenes away from semblances strictly rooted in memory into a different creative realm that combined innovative compositions with a familiar list of characters from the previous paintings. Some of these symbolic characters were described earlier. The significance of the windows, doors, or bathrooms, all spoke to me about different notions. These characters were then transposed into these conceptually and/or visually altered pieces.

The first writing that suggested a *Hiding House* image to me was in the form of a song produced by the Indigo Girls with Michael Stipes:

*Pain from pearls*
*Hey little girl*
*How much have you grown?*
Pain from Pearls  
Hey little girl  
Flowers for the ones you've known.

Are you on fire?  
From the years?  
What would you give for your kid fears?

Secret Staircase  
Running High  
You had a hiding place

Secret Staircase  
Running low  
They all know now your inside

Are you on fire?  
From the years?  
What would you give for your kid fears?

The whole idea of the Blue Corner painting was to create an image that combined the mood and strong mental pictures the writing inspired with the style and visual language that I was experimenting with in the series. The strongest reference in the writing was about the "secret staircase". Here a great perspective is referred too. The stairs are both running high and running low. Therefore, the staircase not only became the central element in the diptych, persuading the eye to move from one corner piece to the next. But it also creates the interesting visual aspect of a staircase that can be seen looking up at, or down at. The viewer is placed somewhere in the middle of these tilting steps.

The air flowing into the house through the open windows and under the billowing drapes, symbolizes exterior forces making their way into this private dwelling. The participant of this room may have a certain amount of control over this interior, but the reality of outside influence is ever present. Not being able to control your situation totally and at all times is a legitimate anxiety. The song's title Kid Fears perfectly fit into my
understanding of a child's viewpoint on having to adapt and make decisions in whatever environment they find themselves in.

The overall tone of both the song and the piece is calm with a controlled portion of distress. The reason this anxiety can be controlled in the poetry is because it is written in retrospect. The past has been lived through and now the question of, "are you on fire?" can openly be asked. Again color is used to describe conceptual contrasts. The bulk of the diptych is layered in washes of blue. This creates an element of calm, but the drapery rods, recessed room and second floor are all done in warm hues. The bright yellows emphasizing the intrusion of a varying mood within the painting. While the relatively thin line of the second floor is doused in reds. Red symbolizing a passionate or dangerous emotion. Fear is then masked within the painting by having a limited visual involvement. To further disguise this emotion all the objects are drawn in an animated or childlike fashion. A style in which people do not usually associate uncomfortable emotions with.
BLUE CORNER: Hiding House Series, by Michele Vavonese, 1993. Dyptch, left side; three feet by five feet. Right side; three feet by six feet. Acrylic on canvas.
Chapter Six, My Window

Poem written by, Dorianne Laux,

For days now a red-breasted bird
has been trying to break in.
She tests a low branch, violet
blossoms
swaying beside her, leaps into the
air and flies
straight at my window, beak and
breast
held back, claws raking the pane
Maybe she lunges for the tree she
sees
reflected in the glass, but I'm only
guessing
I watch until she gives up and
swoops off.
I wait for her return, the familiar
click, swoosh, thump of her, I sip
cold coffee
and scan the room, trying to see it
new,
through the eyes of a bird. Nothing
has changed
Books piled in the corner, coats hooked
over chair backs, paper plates, a cup
half-filled with sour milk.
The children are in school. The man
is at work.
I'm alone with dead roses in a jam
jar.
What do I have that she could want
enough
to risk such failure, again and
again?

This writing initiated a conceptual change in the next depiction. Here Window #7, is based primarily upon my own apartment corridor, because I like the use of real objects to enhance the believability of the subjects within the composition. I let the conceptual
judgments of color choice describe the emotional mood of the writing by Dorianne Laux. Working from an actual scene allows me to sometimes pick up on details that my memory may have omitted, thus adding a more natural effect to the painted setting.

The most important image that jumps out at me from this writing is the vision of the window. The reason for this is that the window seems to be for both bird and woman the object where any final decision making will take place. To describe this more clearly let's look at the bird's actions and it's judgment making. Here the bird for whatever reason is determined to get into this kitchen. However, the window impedes its plans. The woman then has to decide whether or not to open the window. All decisions lay within that piece of glass.

There are obviously many emotional issues happening within this piece of writing. They set the mood for both written and painted works. There is a very down to earth feel to the woman in the writing. She is aware of just what is happening around her, but she realizes that there are can be different motivations for this bird, for this living creature, for trying to get inside her house. This makes her readily ask what the bird would want with her?

To answer the honest and earthen mood of the writing I chose to work in mostly greens, adding the bright contrariety of red in the radiator to depict the notion of how decisions can sometimes contrast the wanted result. Here the bird smashing its body against the window may not be the most effective decision for itself. But it has been the one made. Green to me is the dominant color when thinking about nature. It's emotional tone also evokes a sense of clarity. In the way that blue has a calming effect and red refers to anger, green reads as a rational color that does not provoke extreme emotions. Since the women's thoughts on her situation were very clear, green was used to set the mood for the painting.
Chapter seven, Using the language

Excerpts from Ron Hansens', *Mariette in Ecstasy*

*Window drapes of Chantilly lace flush and deform on the breeze...*

...*Weak rain is easing down the cellar window panes, and two frail bulbs hang from green electrical cords woven through the joists ahead.*

The approach of this painting was more of an illustration of the writing as opposed to the conceptual or physical depiction of the piece. The words were so strong that I immediately saw a mental image of these cellar windows accompanied by the two lightbulbs.

The style and exaggerated perspective that was a basis for the *Hiding House*, was then transferred to Window #24. This was done in order to add the element of drama and fantasy to the image. This scene was applied on wood. Where I allowed some of the design of the pine itself to come through the varying washes of paint. The lightness of tone from the pine added to a brightness in those particular areas.

The drapes that line the top half of the page blow high in the air from the strength of the external wind. This again talks about windows as openings to what lay on the outside. And how even exterior forces can always find a way in.

The *Hiding House* series is a tool that for me aides in the process of introspection on decision making. I use it to examine the present and past, and in doing so am constantly molding my future. As described the different objects that appear and reappear in the series contain their own symbolic meanings. This has created a unique and unlimited visual language that will be the source for prospective work.
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