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Truth and Magic

Kylie Adkins

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Truth and Magic

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis

Louisiana State University

College of Art & Design

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the Upper Division Honors Program.

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To me Mum, who let me hang out in the library instead of making me go shopping with her, and for gifting me with my first Harry Potter books, the door to my obsession with storytelling. To my Daddy, who was always there to talk to me about the Hulk, X-Men, etc, as if they were serious matters for discussion, and for doing the racecar missions for me, because I am quite terrible at them. To my Pat, for breaking me out of school for movies and laser tag and birthdays, for making sure to show me there is more to life than studying. To Cindy, who makes my father happy. To my big Sister , who is always there, my built in best friend. To the rest of my family, for being my personal cheerleading squad. To Denyce, for saying the words “Studio Ghibli” in a critique. To all of the teachers I have ever had, who have impacted me so very profoundly, and helping to make me who I am. And last but never least, thanks be to Sean: my very best friend, high school sweetheart, and true love, who everyday helps me to believe in magic, laughter, and myself.

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ABSTRACT

The work that I have created over the past year is a culmination of every story I have ever read, played in, or imagined. It is more than just inspiration from another's written word or game. Every story, every protagonist, has changed me and influenced me, has altered my perceptions of the world, and also of myself. Fantasy, fairy tales, and myths, are all about hope. This is the hope that through some force, be it magic, love, or spirituality and belief, one person can make an impact on the world around them. This is a theme that refuses to die off with time and knowledge and science, and it is an important one.

I have taken all of my experiences as a reader and observer of the world, and even my dreams and my anxieties, to create a series of works meant to inspire those who look upon them to look around their world and to see the magic that cannot be beaten back by the florescent lighting of a modern age.

Truth and Magic– The Work

I have always been preoccupied with stories and the fantasy genre. I want few things more than to someday be a concept artist, to be paid to have my overactive imagination, to paint dragons that will then destroy me when I got to find them in a videogame, to create worlds and showcase the magic to be found in this one. I came to LSU in the fall of 2010, I found myself in opposition to many of my teachers on the matter of my subject. I ended up becoming very disillusioned with what I thought art making meant to me, I was insecure with my choice to pursue art as a life choice, and in every critique I was apologetic about what I had done. I felt utterly hopeless, and escaped ever more into my books and video games. I owe much to these teachers. These experiences forced me to really think about what I was doing, why I was doing it, and how I could enchant others with my works, how I could enchant *them*. So I started to really focus on place and atmosphere in my works, instead of just the characters that were to live in them.

In the summer of 2013, I was blessed to go to Ireland, where with my own eyes I was able to truly experience the beauty and magic that this world has to offer. Ireland had a profound effect on me that I will never be able to shake. Everything there seemed much more “real” and present and solid. It felt like truth. It felt like magic. This trip, as well as all of the stories that I have ever had contact with, with all of the technical skills and advice given to me by all of my teachers, formed the foundation for all of the works of this series.

The first painting is of a female someone (Fig. 1) completed in fall of 2013. It was the first time that I confidently went forward with not only creating a compelling character, but an interesting and engaging background. While hiking in the woods of Ireland I came across a small

clearing with a tree stump in the center surrounded by rocks, moss, and other trees. It had this feeling of a meeting place, or a waiting place. It exuded the impression that one could sit there forever, shielded from the rest of the earth. This inspired the idea of a person who would be sheltered here from life, unchanging and secluded. But I wanted to give the impression that change would happen around her, even if she refused to. So I sat her in this clearing, eternally young, while the wood and wild continues around her. Everything around her is very green and earthy and has a movement that she does not, adding to her stationary nature in the center of what is constantly transforming. My medium was oil, and I worked in layers, making this painting the most tedious of my works, but the reward came in the realism of the woman. I wanted to try and capture the woman as accurately as I could, and was inspired by the works of David Palumbo (fig. 3) and Karla Ortiz (fig. 11), who let the background play a supporting role to the main event.

The second piece in the series (Fig. 2), also completed in fall of 2013, was an endeavor in multi-figure composition. This time, instead of trying to make sure that I had created a background, I focused on making an *environment*. I focused on making the figures a part of the composition, rather than being the focus of one, but technical accuracy in figure painting still remained an important consideration in this painting. This scene came from the Cliffs of Moher, and a line from the book The Two Sisters of Bamarre by Gail Carson Levine: “when the timid march forth with the strong”. This line was supposed to refer to an epic poem within the book, that spoke of the end of a magical plague that would only come when the fearful went and fought alongside the brave. The main character was a demure and somewhat cowardly woman who found her courage for the person she loved most in the world, her sister who was dying from said magical plague. It is a line that has always stuck with me. While in Ireland, I learned that in

Celtic culture, women also went forth to battle with the men. Men and women were viewed as partners, and a woman had just as much to lose in war as a man, so they went forth with them. This vision of equal partnership delighted me, so I wanted to express it in a painting that also would show what someone might fight for, their home and land. I wanted a weary male warrior being lead back to battle by his friend lending him courage; the timid marching forth with the strong. Color-wise, nature continues to be a force yet again, with the vibrant greens found in the Irish landscape.

It was after my second painting that I decided to switch from oil to acrylic paint at the suggestion of my teachers and peers, and it was a decision I am pleased I made. When I painted with oil, I became very meticulous. It was slow moving, and inhibited my ability to make works that were more intuitive in nature, since I was so wrapped up in the technical aspects.

My third and forth work (fig. 4, 6) were the first acrylic pieces I had done that year. The third became a hand bound book with a long panoramic painting that features an excerpt of W.B. Yeats' poem, *The Stolen Child*. This is the first painting of the series that did not have any figurative elements, solely landscape. It showed me that magic need not be restricted to a person, it can simply be a place. The image came from ruins that I came across in the forest, again in Ireland, and it stirred a strong sentiment of loneliness and of being forgotten. In Irish Fairy tales, there is a common theme of being "carried off" by the Fairies for various reasons. When a person is stolen by the fairies, a changeling takes their place and soon dies, leaving the family heartbroken over their dead loved one. Over the years they are forgotten, lost to time. This scene is marked by the same forgotten ambiance as the fairy stories. It was also exciting to put this into a book format, putting the viewer into a state of storytelling. The book can be read normally, or

can be pulled apart to create a whole work of art. It was important to me for it to be able to be read in the usual way, to make it more intimate and personal. As far as the technical aspects of the painting go, I was very much influenced by Studio Ghibli films, particularly Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (fig. 5), who create magic in their landscape without actually necessarily needing the vibrant characters that inhabit them. This became a very important theme for some of the other paintings in this series, trying to make magic without making the character absolutely necessary.

On my next painting, the first large scale acrylic painting, I decided to continue on my theme of the magical sense of place, and did a close up of one of the pages of the book sans text. I was then pointed by my teacher Denyce towards Cy Twombly (fig. 7), in particular his green paintings that have a very natural and organic feel without needing obvious visual restrictions and boundaries. This was a very exciting turning point in my paintings, the last painting of fall 2013, and was also the quickest painting to be completed yet. I was surprised to find that the speed at which I was to work did not detract from the piece, but actually enhanced it, since I was forced to stop being so meticulous and to let go, which made the painting a lot more intuitive, and conveyed a feeling of the unexpected and magic much more effectively. This painting was an important milestone in the series, it helped me to apply the same magic to my figurative pieces, allowing me to loosen up and express.

The fifth piece was a true culmination of everything that came before, my "Persephone" piece (fig. 8), the first work of Spring 2014. I was enraptured with the idea of a person not made from flesh, but from flowers. This piece took the longest of all of the paintings, despite the fact that it was done in acrylic, because I fell into the same old trap of trying to meticulously get

everything right. I spent a ridiculously large amount of time trying to make hundreds of perfect little flowers to make up a whole woman. After a while, I chose to abandon her, since she was failing to live up to my imagination. So I moved on to my three-part “*Twist and Twine*” piece (fig. 9). These paintings were like the last painting of 2013, square paintings that were zoomed in portions of a sea of vines that put together create a wall of vines. This painting was influenced by the story of sleeping beauty and my own feeling of being trapped and anxious. It is very dark and compressed. I toyed around with the idea of letting them be separate and also together as a way of looking at problems in life. They are several and varied, but they come together and create the whole that is the cage that must be cut through to find out what is waiting on the other side.

After I worked on the vine paintings, I returned to “Persephone”. Doing the vine paintings helped me to complete her. I darkened her shadows and decided to let go of perfect flowers and allow them to naturally flow from the brush. Surprisingly, letting them become slightly more abstract actually allowed them to read more as flowers, proving that magic will come if you just stop thinking so hard about it.

The final work of the series is a sort-of self portrait, “Poison”. This piece is Snow White inspired. It is an image I had been holding on to for quite some time, one with rather stark colors and tones. Karla Ortiz’s *Sleeping Woman* (fig. 11) helped me to recognize that a lack of a background can be just as compelling, heavy, and telling as having one. The lack of an obvious space helps to play on the same isolated motif as the previous paintings, and exposes the darkness within. The magic of this painting comes from the play of gravity within the piece. Her hair floating up gives an impression of either falling or floating, while the blackness of her eyes,

nose, and mouth, is pulled downward. I really wanted this painting to be disconcerting to the viewer, and the play of gravity does that job nicely.

This series had me drawing from many different avenues of inspiration. I have many different artists who I look at and inspire my work aside from those previously listed. After seeing a Caravaggio in Dublin, I was greatly inspired by his attention to detail and dark tense-feeling atmospheres. I endeavored to attain a similar tension that can be found in his works. The art of Brom, a fantasy artist/ author, has also had quite the influence on me, with its dark tones and illustrative quality. And naturally, all of the artists whose medium is the written word have contributed so much to what I do: Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson, and W. B. Yeats.

Figures



Figure 1

Kylie Adkins, *Waiting*, oil on canvas, 24x36in, 2013



Figure 2

Kylie Adkins, *March Forth*, oil on canvas, 24x30in, 2013



Figure 3

David Palumbo, *The Watching Trees*, oil on panel, 30x40, 2013



Figure 4

Kylie Adkins (Poem by W.B. Yeats), *Stolen Child*, Hand bound book, acrylic on paper, 2013



Figure 5

Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli, scene from *Princess Mononoke*, animation, 1997



Figure 6

Kylie Adkins, *Forgotten Corner*, acrylic on canvas, 24x24 in, 2013

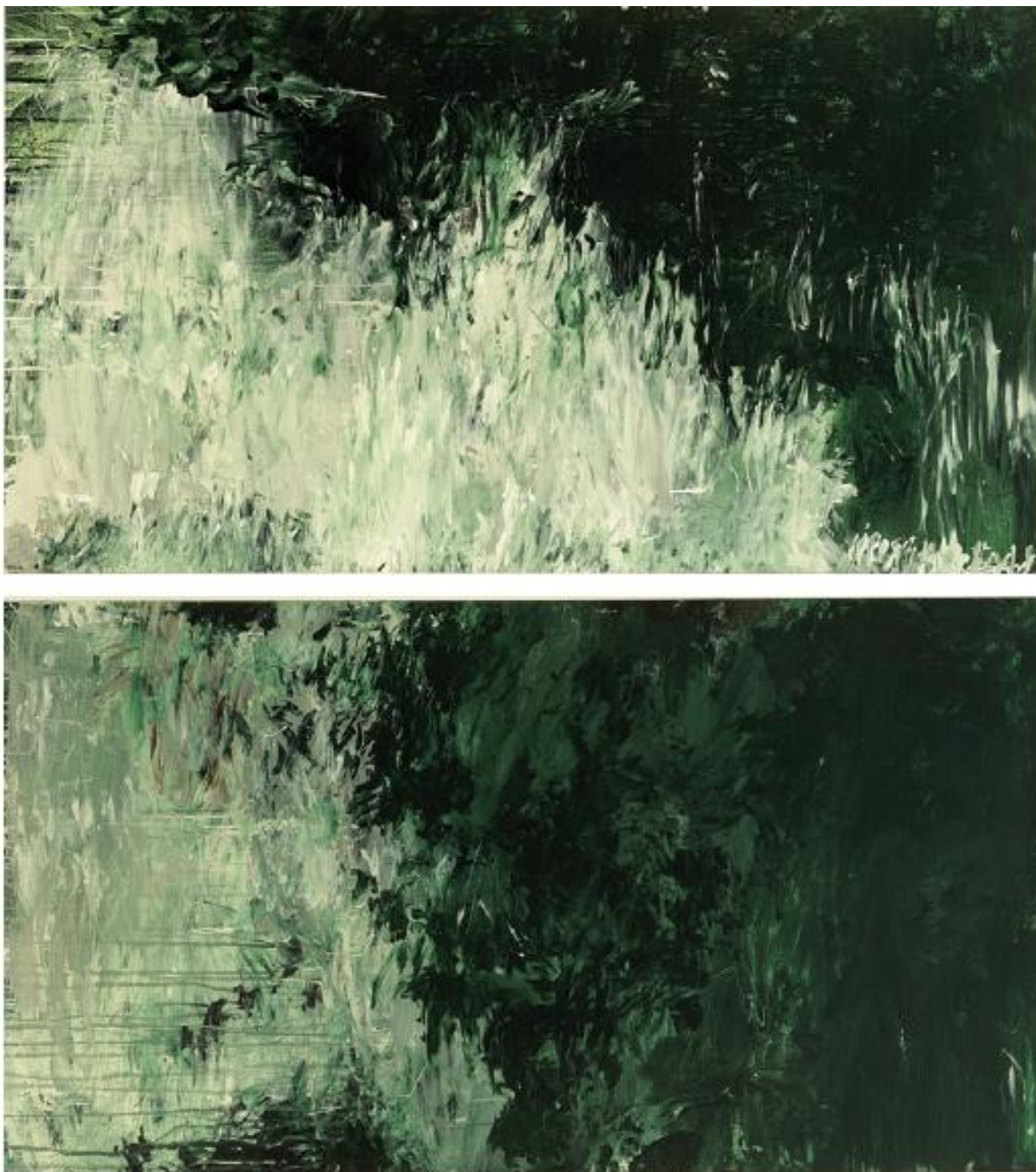


Figure 7

Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, acrylic on wooden panel, 1988



Figure 8

Kylie Adkins, *Persephone*, acrylic on canvas, 24x48in, 2014



Figure 9

Kylie Adkins, *Twist and Twine*, acrylic on canvas, 24x72in (three 24x24in paintings together), 2014

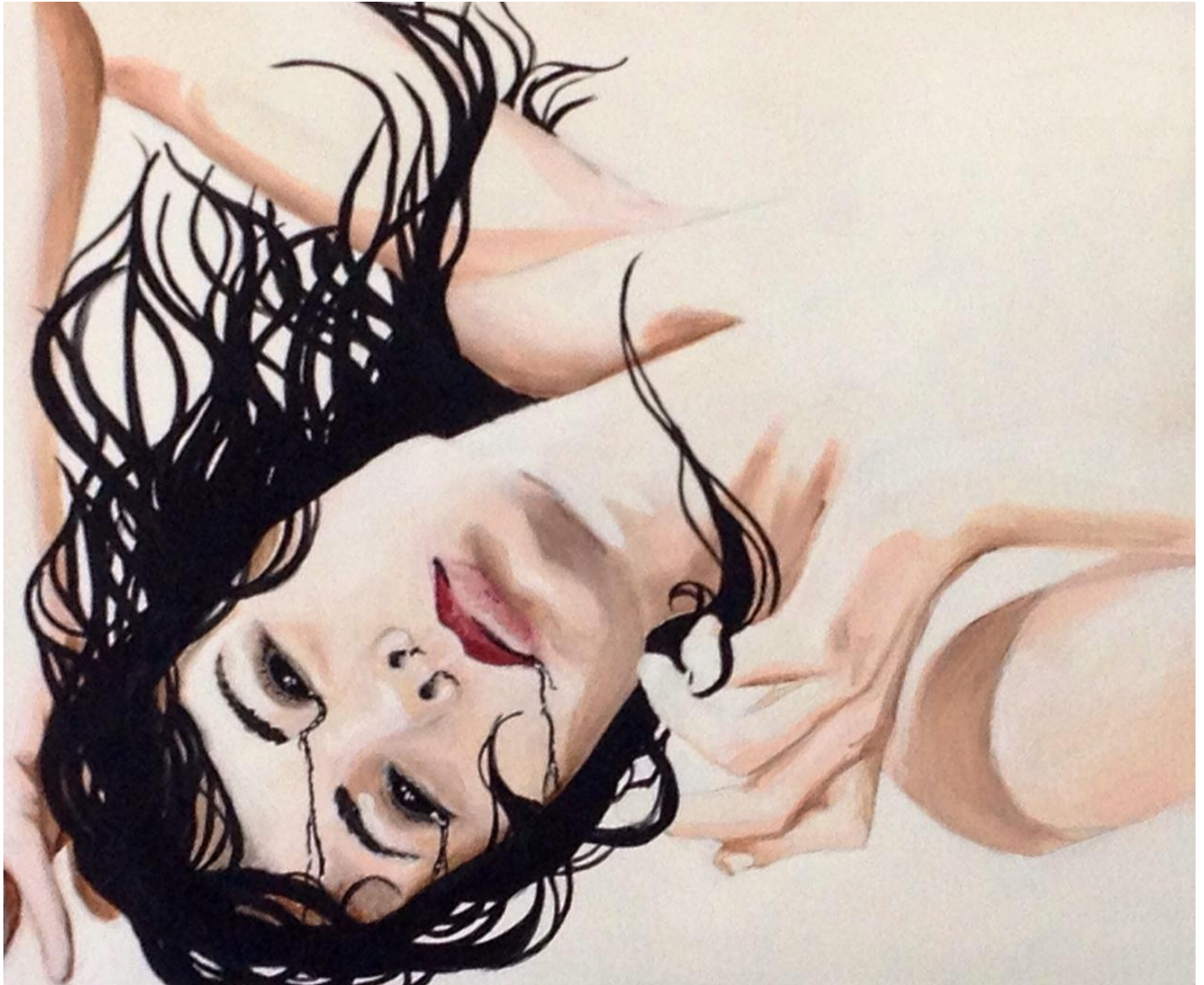


Figure 10

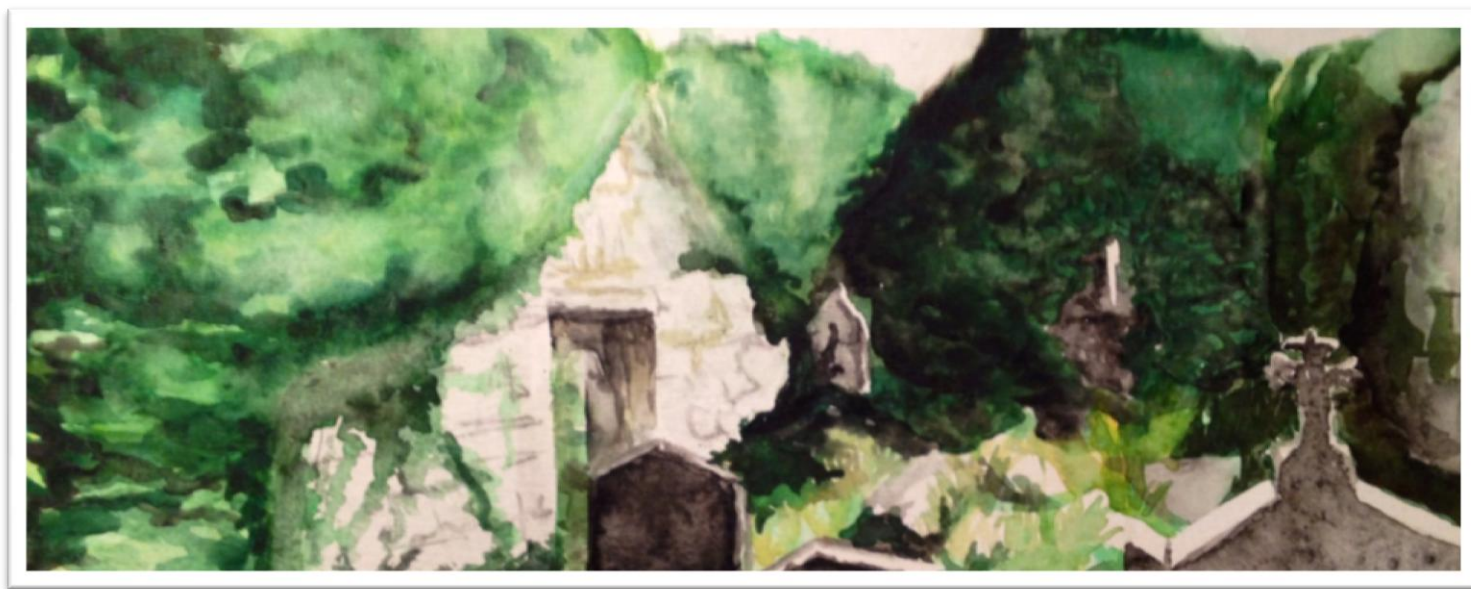
Kylie Adkins, *Stillness and Poison*, acrylic on canvas, 20x24in, 2014



Figure 11

Karla Ortiz, *Woman Sleeping*, graphite on paper, 18x24in

Appendix: additional drawings and paintings



Kylie Adkins, *Graveyard*, watercolor, 2013



Kylie Adkins, *Forgotten Places*, watercolor, 2013



Kylie Adkins, *untitled*, pen drawing, 2014



Kylie Adkins, *College of Art*, watercolor, 2013



Kylie Adkins, *Breakout*, watercolor/acrylic painting, 2014



Kylie Adkins, *Lilybell*, watercolor and silver leaf, 2014



Kylie Adkins, *self-portrait*, pen drawing, 2014



Kylie Adkins, *untitled*, pen drawing, 2014



Kylie Adkins, *flowers*, pencil drawing, 2014



Kylie Adkins, *Into the Green*, watercolor, 2013

VITA

Kylie Adkins was born to a military family in Omaha, Nebraska. She was raised in many different locations and places, before returning again to spend most of her primary school years in Nebraska. She first started to consider art making seriously when she was in her freshman year of high school, where she took two introductory art classes and was nominated for an award at her school. The rest of her high school years consisted of every art class that her high school offered. She never won an award in high school higher than an honorable mention, which only served to make her work harder and made her even more stubborn. The decision to move far away from home and pursue a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts was a difficult decision made easier by her being awarded the Golden Oaks Scholarship from LSU. She came expecting to study high school art education, but upon finding out LSU no longer offered the program, had to create a new dream. It was then that she realized that she had put aside what she really wanted in the hope of finding a more lucrative creative career, so she decided to pursue her passion: fantasy concept art. She then spent her undergraduate years practicing and learning the skills for her craft. In the summer of 2013, Kylie was able to travel to Ireland with Louisiana State University to work on watercolor paintings and to take in the Irish culture.

In May of 2014, after four years at LSU, she will graduate with Upper Division Honors Distinction. She will then take a break from academia so that she can focus on enjoying what she does again, before moving to Seattle and perhaps pursuing a graduate degree.