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Between-Space: Bungalows and Shadows of Spanish Town

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BETWEEN-SPACE: BUNGALOWS AND SHADOWS OF SPANISH TOWN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art

by

Anna Carey Aldridge
B.F.A., Mississippi State University, 2011
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In loving memory of:
“Mama Wade”, Olive Wade,
who *still* remembered me.
and “Paw-Paw Ray”, Ray Armand,
who *a/ways* stood beside my Memaw.

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Abstract

In Spanish Town, the fabrics of the patterned streets are cross-stitched with roots of mature trees providing an airy canopy to the neighborhood below. I live in a space on the second floor of a cubed structure situated only a few steps between a small one-way street and a row of unkempt brush imitating a flowerbed. With its relationship to the street, the house seems to stand above the surrounding pitched roofs of one-story rectangles. Behind the house, you will find a light blue-gray staircase ascending to a small porch floor mounted in the trees. There is something warm and restorative about living on a staircase of trees in the oldest neighborhood in Baton Rouge.

One characteristic of Spanish Town is that newly renovated houses in the neighborhood stand next to other crumbling ones. In a sense, the neglected houses are reminders of the rich history of the neighborhood. By painting cross-slanted shadows, I am representing mystery associated with my memories of the neighborhood. In Belinda Thompson's book *Vuiliard*, she described how Edouard Vuillard had a rare ability to evoke the atmosphere of space, to get beyond the superficial, and approach the mysterious core of reality (Thomson, 7). In most of my paintings, there are examples of hiding places, or "holes." These spaces are normally indentations in the architecture of the neighborhood, such as windows and doors, the crawl-spaces under the houses. This body of work shows the beauty of shadows and holes when combined with exaggerated light and color contrasts. A home is a geometrical site, a conventional hole that we furnish with pictures, objects and wardrobes within a wardrobe (Bachelard, Jolas, Stilgoe, 27). These mysterious places in the paintings are examples of the term "Between-Space". Another example of the term is the literal space between foliage where you can see the sky as negative space. I focus on these pockets of light and space when I'm painting trees and plants. My paintings focus on the unique character of the neighborhood as well as the scale of the individual. They portray a preservation of my experience as a resident of Spanish Town.

Uniqueness

Inside of my house, the windows serve as punched-out holes on one side of the building, spilling yellow light and drowning the divided spaces on sunny days. The front room is a wall of windows facing the street that looks toward a row of rooftops in progression to the top of the Louisiana State Capitol. Spanish Town is distinct in this way, because of its relationship to downtown and the Capitol. The streets are small and one-way. When you stand in the streets, the spaces feel intimate. Because of the tight knit architecture and the grid of the streets, the neighborhood is convenient for a pedestrian-dominant lifestyle. The close proximity of houses encourages community and is unique to Baton Rouge. When the weather is nice, there are always people walking their dogs or sitting on porches and the patio of the neighborhood market. Spanish Town is located close to the Mississippi River, the Governor's mansion, and Arsenal Park. In 1978, the neighborhood became listed in the Historical Preservation Registry for Baton Rouge. New structures in the area must blend into the existing architecture and building materials, protecting its history (Barro, 5). The houses are raised up a few feet off the ground. Most of them are on concrete blocks, allowing air circulation under the houses. Those spaces are mysterious, because the holes are ankle high, and only bending down would allow a person to see what could be hiding inside. An example of this would be how several stray cats live in the neighborhood, and one sleeps under my house in this crawl space of the architecture. When these spaces are shown in my paintings, they act as the Between-Space. They are literally spaces between the concrete blocks that support the structures of the homes in Spanish Town. More examples of the holes in the physical structure of the houses are doors and windows.

When you pass people on their porches in Spanish Town or walking by, you feel obligated to speak. Strangers approach other strangers to have conversations. This type of interaction, "The Spanish Town Haze", as it has been fondly nicknamed by residents in the neighborhood, particularly fits because of the stalling of time that happens as a repercussion of socialization. Spanish Town's layout is similar in this way, to neighborhoods in New Orleans, but this characteristic is fairly unique in Baton Rouge. Also, unique to the city, is the Mardi Gras Parade that the neighborhood hosts each year. Since the mascot is a Pink Flamingo, pink plastic yard flamingos and large fluorescent wooden cut-out flamingos can be found year round on the houses and porches.

A house, as a structure, responds to its environment, and its materials are modified over time. The life and character of the inside-space is born from occupancy; the spirit of a place drifts away with abandonment. *The Poetics of Space* explains that a house that has been experienced or lived in is not

just an inert box: "Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (Bachelard, Jolas, Stilgoe, 47). The owners of a lot of houses in the neighborhoods rent them out, which makes Spanish Town a revolving door of residencies attractive to students and people that work downtown. In that case, a lot of people move away, but some inhabitants become part of the landscape by never leaving. The neighborhood seems timeless; not only because of its history, but also because of convenience that makes living simpler. A shelter asks to be lived in simply with all the security that simplicity gives (Bachelard, Jolas, Stilgoe, 50).

Process and Observation

I work from photographic references. This allows me to take a lot of photos and easily choose which images I want to reference and which ones I feel a connection with. Edvard Munch used his memory often when painting. He explained by saying, “I do not paint what I see, but what I saw” (Langaard, Revold, 6). I also use my own abstracted memory of the spaces to intensify perspective of place while pushing contrasting colors and heightened light and shadows.

In my studio, I reference the photos to draw with oil or acrylic paint directly onto canvas or wood panels in large, emotional, flat shapes of color. There is certain geometry to how I set up my paintings. I block the whole painting in, because I’ve learned that the whole surface needs to be covered before you can really see the composition and adjust things. I render looser somewhat arbitrary colors at first. Those color choices are focused on whether it should be warm or cool and dark or light. My palette is set up in the same order, which helps me in my color choices. The paintings get a little tighter and more color conscious as I add layers of paint. This allows me to eventually create a focal point after several layers of paint.

Impressionism influences the way I observe space in simplified spots of color. For instance, Paul Cezanne’s emphasis was on using color to turn the whole work into a harmony of color and light. He would reduce reality to a two-dimensional composition, and then reduce it even further into a system of colored patches, or spots (Nordland, 16). At the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and also on my visit to The National Gallery in London, I found myself connecting with Impressionist paintings because I understood their thoughts in the organization of simplified patches of color to focus on light and space.

I build up my paintings structurally focusing on reaching the most contrasting part of the painting: the chiaroscuro, the part that brings the painting to life. Bungalows and shadows become lifelike. When I study the light shining through trees with the wind blowing, the patches of light on the ground seem to dance. The patches are brightest where gaps in the trees are the largest. I find myself focusing on those gaps in the branches. I want to capture not just a moment, but also a longer length of time, by personifying the Bungalows and shadows of Spanish Town, the “holes” in the paintings, and the patches of light, as the Between-Space.

Shadows

I allow myself to intensify characteristics such as shadows and light while simplifying images of reality through my memory of the between-spaces in Spanish Town. Artists such as Edvard Munch learned to look at things in a less realistic angle. He found this as the means of expressing truthfully and clearly in pictorial form his feelings and ideas (Langaard, Revold, 13). There are many opposing forces that are similar to the comparison of light and shadows, like good and evil or life and death. The opposing shifts of light and shadows are a way to create drama in paintings and can be seen in the American realist work of Edward Hopper. The spaces he creates become theatrical and animated. Lighting and shadows have the ability to set certain moods. Richard Diebenkorn mentions Edward Hopper's use of light and shade. He explains how the atmosphere of the paintings seems drenched and saturated with mood and austerity. He viewed Hopper's work as the kind that was made for him (Nordland, 11). In my paintings, I explore those two opposing forces: light and shadows. For me, in this dichotomy, light is representative of things that are comforting, while shadows represent mystery. Houses elicit a human character when shadows play a role. Houses become animated because of the hidden nature of shadows.

In the *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard gives houses human qualities. The main difference for me, in houses and people, is that houses stay in one place. They are built and must remain in the eye of a storm. The house has become a natural being whose fate is bound to that of the waters that plough the land (Bachelard, Jolas, Stilgoe, 24). When a house is inhabited, its residents also apply a sense of personification to it. In my paintings, I push the intensity of contrasting colors in order to further animate the house by giving it a more personal autograph of colors.

A person's residence is not only a shelter from the weather, but it is also a place for intimacy and solace. A house is a place to retreat, where you feel safe, like a hiding spot. Drawers and chests are also in harmony with intimacy, and with all the other hiding places in which human beings, great dreamers of locks, keep or hide their secrets (Bachelard, Jolas, Stilgoe, 74). The between-spaces that I use in my paintings can also be interpreted as hiding spots used as a place that your eye can rest. Those spaces I describe can be literal: windows, doors, and under the house. They can also be negative space, like the space between trees, where skylight shows through. Lastly, they are also seen in the shadows. The canopy of trees in Spanish Town creates patterns of light and shadows.

Light

The comforting nature of light is used in my paintings as an opposition to shadows. I catch the afternoon light when the sun is slanting above the horizon and casting shadows in the area. I focus on late afternoon when there is the most tension between these two forces, and shadows stretch long-slanted across the neighborhood as night approaches. These shadows lend a layer of mystery only describing objects around their edges, but the sunlight is still warm and still feels safe. At this time of day, mystery and security intermingle with light and shadows. Light is a classical study for many artists. "A key preoccupation for Vuillard seems to have been the study of light effects, the silhouette of a figure in a doorway, reflections of shop windows on a wet pavement, or the halo of brilliance around a lamp in an interior" (Thomson, 12).

Since Baton Rouge is on the Mississippi River, it is very fertile and has a very reflective light. Instinctively, I found myself exploring my local landscape through my art. I get inspiration from the regional light and colorful neighborhood, while keeping an energetic style of similar color palettes in the paintings. Sunlight produces energy and can be restorative. I focus on patches of light in contrast with shadows. These spaces are descriptive of the timelessness of Spanish Town. The late afternoon light in Spanish Town has a luminous, romantic quality, as though it came from back in the old classic times.

Color

The color in my paintings is exaggerated and dramatic. “Paul Serusier explained that by exaggerating the colors and simplifying the forms seen in nature, and by making use of memory, the artist could overcome the problem of being no more than a copyist” (Thomson, 18). I use heightened color to further animate the energy produced by light and give the paintings and use a similar color scheme in all of my paintings in order to give it an autographic style of my own. Munch’s pictures are painted with rhythmic life and intense colors, which lend them an expressive significance, evoking a mood or expressing a feeling. His use of color creates a pure, light-filled harmony by using flat areas of color with a feeling of space. (Langaard, Revold, 14, 30). The colors in my paintings express a harmonic mood in the spaces by using complementary contrasts and high value shifts. While I was visiting London last spring, I saw a Henri Matisse exhibit at Tate Modern. In his Fauvist work, especially in his painting of “The Red Room”, he uses extreme complements. The red is in high contrast with the green seen outside of the window. The color contrasts help to achieve depth. I mix dark colors to use in the spaces described as “between”. The sky spots of the trees, or holes in the trees, are blue or white to portray the sky.

Scale of Individual

My paintings become portrayals documenting my time spent as a resident in Spanish Town. Belinda Thomson described Edvard Vuillard's paintings as balanced, simplified, and charged. She goes on to call them fascinating documents of the past. His range of subject matter was largely confined to the near at hand, the familiar, the modern, and the everyday. He saw this not as a limitation, but as a commitment (Thomson, 7).

The tight knit street structure encourages community and can be observed walking through Spanish Town's canopy of trees. I've created scenes looking up streets, alleyways, driveways, and lots, empty, with only birdhouses. I use the vantage point from the street often. I decided to push the paintings to larger area advantages. Instead of standing on street level, I wanted to paint the area from a view from the top floor of Spanish Town Market, looking towards the Louisiana State Capitol. From there, I went to the most extreme view of the neighborhood from the observation deck of the capitol, showing Arsenal Park over to Spanish Town. This painting is a topographic reinterpretation of the area from an artist's point of view. I want the viewer to identify with the different scales of the spaces. For me, the street views are small moments that are unique to a resident or visitor of the neighborhood. I also included more intimate views looking off of my porch and out of a window in my kitchen. The scale of the individual relates with the holes in the spaces, because of the human scale of the houses that I portray. The doors and the windows of houses are familiar and let the viewer know what vantage point they are seeing.

Conclusion

I use the uniqueness of Spanish Town's history and architecture to portray the mysteriousness seen as a resident of the neighborhood. The between-spaces in the physical structure of the neighborhood are windows, doors, and the crawl spaces under the houses. They create literal gaps in the architecture. Through process of my work, I focus on the negative space in the trees that not only create spots of sky light, but the trees also cast patterns of light onto the ground. The shadows are important in contrast to the patterns of light that dance between the branches of the trees. The light that is seen through the shadows animates the paintings. The energy and warmth of the colors brings the paintings to life. Finally, the scale of the individual plays another role in the uniqueness of the neighborhood and the different vantage points seen by its residents and visitors.

In my paintings, I heighten afternoon light verses shadows. Johan Langaard mentions these opposing forces in his description of paintings by Edvard Munch. He sees the pictures as portrayals of life as well as death. He goes on to say that the paintings are scenes not only of the forest that gets its nourishment from the dead, but also of the city that rises beyond the tree-tops. I think here he describes how death is part of the circle of life, and rising beyond the treetops is mentioned as an ethereal example. Finally, he adds how Munch's paintings are a portrayal of the powerful forces that carry life along (Langaard, Revold, 23).

My paintings are not detailed. They are simplified, yet contrasting, energetic documents of my time spent as a resident in Spanish Town. "Truth does not lie in the detail, but in the expressive whole" (Langaard, Revold, 6). My paintings have progressed, but are all together one body of work branching into different scenes. They do, however, contain a layer of mystery, from my description of the between-space found in the neighborhood.

Images



Kitchen Window
Oil on canvas
2015



Backyard Roofs
Oil on canvas
2015



6th Street Light
Oil on canvas
2015



University Walk
Oil on canvas
2015



Neighbors
Acrylic on panel
2014



Market View
Oil, acrylic on panel
2014



Capitol View
Oil on canvas
2015



Lakeland Birdhouses
Oil, acrylic on canvas
2015



Backyard Light
Oil on canvas
2015



Lucilla Lane
Acrylic on panel
2014



Spanish Town Road
Oil, acrylic on panel
2014



Costello Lane
Oil, acrylic on panel
2014



6th Street
Oil, acrylic on panel
2014



Spanish Town Road
Oil, acrylic on panel
2014



University Walk II
Oil, acrylic on panel
2014



Bungalow Lane
Acrylic on panel
2014



North 6th Street
Oil, acrylic on panel
2014

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Vita

Anna Aldridge received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Mississippi State with a minor in Architecture, where she was on the Dean's Council and had an internship documenting and hanging William Pittman Andrews' (currently director of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans) work at Mississippi College for Women. During this time she had work accepted into the Mississippi Collegiate Art Competition, and later showed her work in an annual exhibit with other artists from Panola County, in Como Mississippi.

Anna has taught Two-Dimensional Design for two semesters, worked in the Graphic Design Mac Lab, and also in the College of Art's Design Shop. She's shown her work with fellow graduates in an LSU Graduate Show and most recently had five paintings in an exhibit titled "Paint" in Mobile, Alabama on Spring Hill College's campus. Four of her Spanish Town paintings hung in the President's office during her last semester of graduate school before her Thesis Exhibit in Glassell Gallery, in downtown Baton Rouge (April 29th – May 6th).