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## Interiors imagined and remembered

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# INTERIORS IMAGINED AND REMEMBERED

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School 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  
Andrew Brown  
B.A., Towson University, 2005  
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## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

My paintings are about the concept of home and how this notion constantly evolves with each successive experience, changing how I perceive and experience interior spaces. The imagery in my work is limited to common forms such as cardboard boxes and shelving, as these are elements that are easily related to, and that speak to everyday experiences. Color, space and form are manipulated to work within and at times subvert the implied narrative of each painting. Although memory remains an active part of my process, imagination and the exploration of paint's physical and expressive possibilities have risen to the fore. In each painting one is never completely certain what has or will happen, and this ambiguity allows the viewer to imagine multiple isolated moments within a single piece.

## Introduction

The paintings I now make began at an early age, I suspect, and though each work existed only within my imagination, its driving force was not so far afield from what I now create. The richest moments were during that time between school and dinner, my brother off with his friends, father tucked in his studio, and my mother in the kitchen, busily cooking. The soft hum of the evening news and the clatter of pots and pans was the backdrop for my hour or so of uninterrupted time. As with most evenings, I was contentedly seated underneath the dining room table. A red tablecloth hung low, effectively creating my own personal, isolated space; it was only in the confines of small private spaces that my mind felt free to wander. Some evenings it would be blocks and others a pad of paper with whatever art supplies I could scrounge from the adjoining room.

I remember clasping in my hands whichever items I had that evening, and would conjure in my mind a starting point for my continuous narrative. The memories of each narrative, its list of characters, the undoubtedly heavy-handed plot-twists, and rushed conclusions when Mom peeked through the tablecloth to announce dinner have faded to catches of memories. As I remember the shift from my imagined world to the reality of dinner preparations, setting the table, filling the water glasses, fetching my father, a quote from 1Q84 by Haruki Murakami comes to mind when the main character is forced to leave her home “Goodbye, she murmured, bidding farewell not so much to the apartment as to the self that had lived there.” The space under the dining room table was my personal space, my home, and the worlds I created had to be let go.

My paintings are in many ways a continuation of the conjured worlds of my adolescence. Although it required no real magic, to say conjured seems wholly fitting, as there was always something undeniably magical to me about the process before and to this day. The development of each work remains an interior one, plumbing memory for images of home as a point of departure. Such images of home have been cleansed by time, reduced to their most essential form and washed of all moments or elements contrary to the character of the memory. Each piece is an amalgam of remembrance and fantasy. It was a willful temporary loosening of my present reality’s reasoned mooring for the purpose of reinvigoration. In fact, it was Marcel Proust that said in *The Captive*, “The only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another...”

Each new painting I create is a work of serious play. Much in the vein of Carl Jung’s conversation about inventing the new, “The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with objects it loves.” There is a convergence of this playful, imagined world with more grounded memories of interior spaces I have inhabited over the years. Such are the spaces and objects I have grown to love, and they engender my interior process with a sense of nostalgia and a desire to recapture lost

moments, or more specifically a sense of home. These temporal constructions never fully relinquish their specificity of space, though in their reimagining, not all questions posited are answered.

## Artist Influences

Early influences such as Joseph Cornell, Giorgio Morandi, and Jerome Witkin remain significant formally and conceptually. Cornell had a unique sense of spiritual order and a way of organizing the world into his immense self-described dossiers. He lived a life of relative seclusion, conversing through correspondence and surrounding himself with a “constructed” world. This logic-based method influenced how I contemplate my own paintings. Work from undergraduate school and what followed after has always been in some ways a logical process, part narrative and part symbolic. Cornell’s shadow boxes, or memory boxes as they are often developed around a singular item, person, or theme, with elements chosen specifically for their evocation of the selected subject. It is a highly personal language of objects and imagery, not always understood. As with my own work, though the language is an interior one, the imagery chosen bears visual and narrative force in its arrangement and chosen commonplace elements. In these everyday objects lies part of Cornell’s surrealist influences, a visible influence on my own work, and as Dali said when discussing the two seemingly opposing goals of surrealism “...the possibilities of a growing relation to everydayness” and how such objects were taken out of their expected context and function to be given a new purpose or meaning.

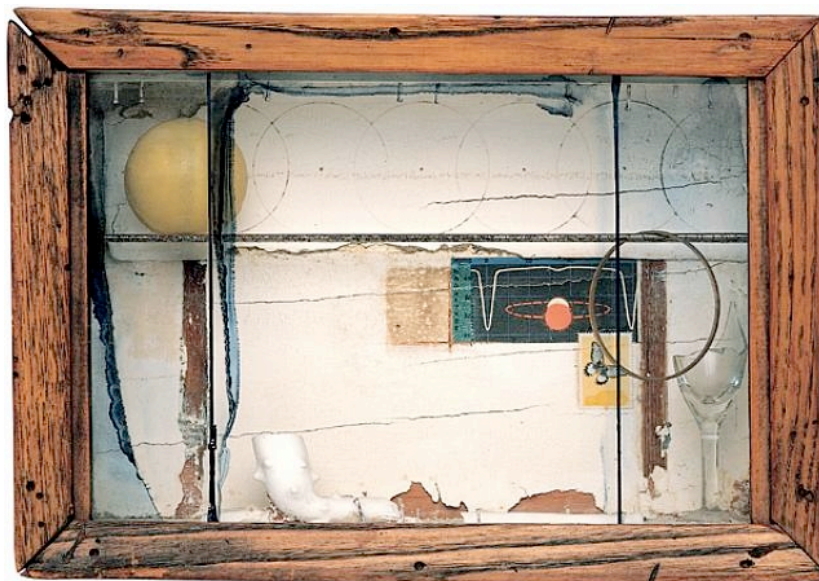


Figure 1. *Soap Bubble Set*, Joseph Cornell, 1960

Morandi’s work is seemingly a world apart from my own. They are small and unassuming. Unlike my paintings, the American critic Peter Schjeldahl said about Morandi “He is a painter’s painter, because to look at his work is to re-create its feeling in your wrist and fingers the sequence of strokes, each a stab of decision which discovers a new problem.” What we did and still do share is a love of Renaissance spatial constructions. And from that love a subversive impulse to “...Reverse the thrust of [his] beloved early-Renaissance inventors of perspective.”



As Morandi's still-life objects jostle for dominance, resting somewhere between eyelevel and just above, an ambiguity of space develops from his love for surface and the permeability of form.



Figure 2. *Natura Morta*, Giorgio Morandi, 1956

The viewer must work for his or her understandings of each painting produced and take the necessary time to develop an individual consideration of what they see. Each painting I create requires a similar investment as a result of spatial or planar ambiguity, and a cubist language of multiple vantage points.

Jerome Witkin is one of the earliest artists with whom I became familiar. Growing up I only knew his work for its scale, visceral impact and dynamic imagery. His work is monumental in size and purpose, tackling issues such as the holocaust and homelessness. In observing his paintings as a young man, especially in person, one could recognize a kind of faith; some might say an antiquated one, that the art image could have a discernable impact on society. In speaking of his work during an interview, he said, "...the painter in most societies, Asian or Western, tends to be a kind of prophet of sorts, who we expect him to tell us how we lived. Our zeitgeist for our time." Now in a society inundated by images the singular stationary picture no longer carries such weight. As a professor some years ago once asked me, "Who in this day and age spends long periods of time staring at a singular image?"

One might argue that a contemplative moment standing before a painting or other art form, because of its rarity, has become an increasingly important opportunity for reflection. Such speculation about current society aside, art images remain a prominent fixture and as I see it, a form of reflection for both artist and patron.



Figure 3. *A Nuns Decision*, Jerome Witkin, 1985

## Sources of Imagery

Memory and imagination have played an integral role in the temporal construction of my interior spaces. Such rooms are a reconstruction of experiences, not actual space, and specific in how it conveys my personal memory in its original context. Without imagination, such recollections would be insufficient to recreate interior spaces and the memories they house. In The Poetics of Space Gaston Bachelard wrote "...memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening. In the order of values they both constitute a community of memory and image. Thus the house is not experienced from day to day only, on the thread of a narrative, or in the telling of our own story. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days."

With memory as an aid in rediscovering interior spaces, every room in which I have dwelled becomes a starting point in the creation of a composed reverie. The home and the memories housed within enrich each floor, cornice, and wall with an oneiric quality, allowing a simple room such as a pantry to expand or contract, shift in color or light to suit the character of the space during that remembered moment. With the passing of each year memories stack one upon another, changing how the same space is experienced, adding ever more nuances. With this, time is lost in the transfer to memory in that its perceived linear quality falls away, placing all on an equally accessible plane, lacking in clear duration. In my painting titled *Bathroom Area*, the interior space becomes both close and expansive, brightly lit while shadows encroach, encompassing the character of the space experienced over time. Sharp, long shadows suggest early morning or late afternoon, yet the time remains ambiguous. *Just after Dinner* establishes in a distant window that the sun is no longer up, and yet a soft light touches the ground and house. Inside the room an unknown light source casts a harsh glow suggesting sunlight. My intention is not to subvert time, but rather bring together the amalgam of experiences my memory proffers. Siri Hustvedt wrote in Mysteries of the Rectangle, "Hours may pass but a painting will not gain or lose any part of itself. It has no beginning, no middle and no end. I love painting because in its immutable stillness it seems to exist outside of time in a way no other art can." I can think of no better means by which to express the interaction between memory and space.

Imagination functions to lend greater personal truth to my remembered spaces and as a means of searching. A kind of searching meant to capture the essence of a space experienced through time. In *Glass and Tables* the same coffee table from a family member's office repeats and overlaps. Mental images of the same object, in this instance the glass coffee table, overlay in my mind with each successive experience. The tables shift in prominence and angle, character and purpose, as a representation of both its varied role within the room in how it occupies space over time, but also as a surrogate for its possessor; each table represents the person with whom I associate it and his varied role in my life. In memory time collapses and loses some of its linear clarity. It was Einstein that wrote in a letter to his friend "The distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn

one.” He was speaking to the elasticity of time, but his statement speaks to my own experience of time. The distinction between past, present and future is often unclear in my daily life and in my memories, in that as I experience the present, I remember the past and anticipate the future. They are convenient linguistic devices, but not so easily parsed or organized, and my work addresses this fact.

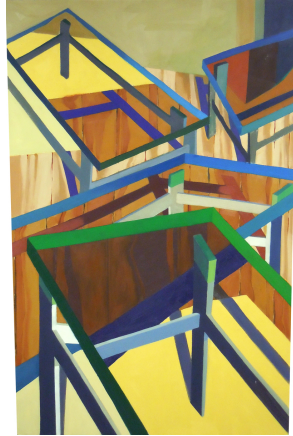


Figure 4. *Glass and Tables*, 2012.



Figure 5. *Just After Dinner*, 2012.

## Color and Space

The relationship between color and space in my paintings is one that shifts from agreement to diametric opposition. At times color functions as an aid in the creation of illusionistic space, while at other times it acts in opposition. Light and color may play across each object's surface in a suggestion of surface illusion and defined space. However, other objects are reduced to a fully flat shape challenging those elements striving to establish their respective positions in the constructed environment. *Semi-flooded* portrays an underground interior or basement, ripples of water flooding the surrounding space and reflecting the rafters above. The box in the foreground is painted with subtle gradations that suggest light shining on a cardboard box, supporting the illusion and welcoming the viewer. Proceeding back slightly into the composition one encounters a second box with color shapes that serve a dual purpose of flat plane and planar device. In so doing the illusion of space is temporarily suspended or perhaps questioned. Although the color shapes continue to serve as a designator for the object it represents, much in the vein of Jastrow's rabbit/duck, the viewer may only acknowledge one side of the dualistic function.



Figure 6. *Semi-Flooded*, 2013.

In the painting *At Home*, color shapes play a more dominant role in their agreement and separation from perspectival space. Illusionistic surface is primarily discarded in observance of the geometric planes that comprise the composition. Objects retain a sense of their local, expected color, but with a much greater saturation. A light source is suggested in the use of warm and cool, with a singular errant shadow, yet color saturation creates questions. In the instance of the intense blue shadow beneath a flap of the foreground box, the blue pushes forward, challenging the brilliance of a saturated orange hue, concurrently questioning the solidity of form and dimensional planes of the cardboard box. In this play the elements jostle to assert themselves as a representational form or abstract shape and in so doing, will at times invite and others obstruct the viewer from entering the depicted space.

## Subject

The home has consistently been the subject of my work over the last few years. However, what was originally a discussion of my own home, its place and significance, has become more a question of home. In discussing what is a house in The Poetics of Space, Bachelard wrote “A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability.” My earlier work centered on such a body of images, where I reveled in their variety and complexity. I explored memories of each room, corner or crevice in an effort to depict how my experience of them altered their outward appearances, which lead to the discovery of a visual essence often divorced from physical reality.

Recent work has left behind the visual specificity of remembered interiors in previous homes. Experiencing the same space over time alters how I receive and perceive it. My first house embodies the notion of home, but I have lived in a number of residences over the last ten years. Interiors have become more important in how they are experienced, than whether it is a bedroom or pantry of a certain address; the moments I tie together possess a similar character and emotion, which allows interiors separated by time and space to join together, constituting a greater personal understanding of the home. In *Office Revisited*, as the title suggests, an office from years ago is the primary source. However, more central to my interest is the connection between experiences within this office and altogether different locations. In this painting the office is joined by an old kitchen and living room, patched together and unconcerned which room it represents. Indeed it embodies all rooms that have stood for me as a place of refuge, a shelter from outside elements. Yet home is not necessarily about inviting rooms filled with plush furniture and a warm hearth. In the awkward vantage point and forceful diagonals of *Office Revisited* the viewer is confronted by a decidedly unwelcoming interior. The expanse of the glass table provides a physical barrier and visual opening; an invitation is part given and denied. This uneasy invitation continues in the contradictory perspectival arrangements, the cardboard box occupies a different plane than the humanoid form, and in a subtle skewing of the panel itself.



Figure 7. *At Home*, 2013.



Figure 8. *Office Revisited*, 2012.



Following my interest in the home as a haven and its antithesis, paintings such as *Moving His Office* draws from houses, or rather those that call it home, in transition. W.H. Auden wrote in About the House from the poem titled Down There, “The Rooms we talk and work in always look injured, When trunks are being packed, and when, without warning, We drive up in the dark, unlock and switch lights on, They seem put out.” Cheerful colors and scribbled lines speak of something joyful, yet the house, the home, is being left behind. In a sense one might say the memories are being packed away, but the retainer for my memories is abandoned. What remains can be worked through in a pseudo-Proustian fashion, in careful reminiscence. In this painting, the excitement of new beginnings is paired with the inevitable loss that follows such ventures. This pairing explores the similarity between excitement and anxiety, two processes that are somewhat similar physiologically. Perception, not reality, determines how I respond to the body and mind’s excited state, as adrenaline and cortisone works it way through. In looking back at a combination of leaving-home memories, this painting questions that perceptual distinction without a clear answer.

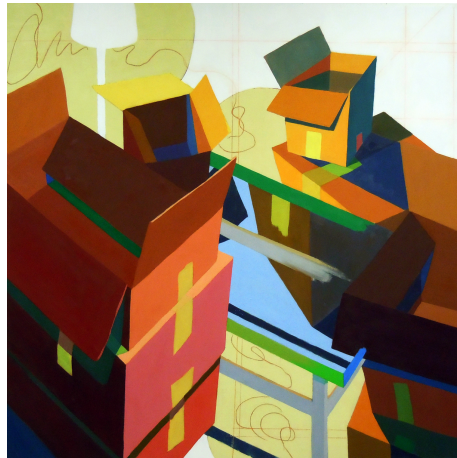


Figure 9. *Moving His Office*, 2013.

## Conclusion

Over the last few years my work has changed significantly from having an overt narrative function to a greater interest in formal investigations. In earlier paintings such as *Bathroom*, toy-like houses originally occupied specific spaces from my past, isolated inhabitants, yet not exactly participants in their forced environment. As I have let go of specific memories and the house as surrogate, the narrative is no longer of primary importance. This has allowed for a freeing in my exploration of space, color and paint as surface.

I have relinquished the clarity and designed function of each room, as they are apt to have, focusing on the play between form and space. Shape as a flat, physical form now comes into conflict with its dual function as an illusionistic element. An early painting that initiated this shift in my work is titled *Before the Move*.



Figure 10. *Bathroom*, 2011.



Figure 11. *Before the Move*, 2012.

As a result, tension that was once found in unsettling rooms, strident color chords and an implied, seemingly voyeuristic narrative now resides in a subversive use of color and space.

Through these developments in my work the home as concept remains in the forefront. An exploration of the home through memory with imagination as an aid was once my guide to composed narratives in early work. Recent paintings now concentrate on narrative as defined by or one that works in concert with my increasingly painterly choices. I have retained a sense of something unclear happening, but with an additional questioning of how one experiences space. One might suggest that the narrative is now derived from the constructed space itself. Instead of before, when interiors primarily served as a stage for houses and other elements to act out their part, the viewer now searches his or her way ponderously through.



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## Vita

Andrew Brown was born in Maryland in the summer of 1982. Dorothy Brown and Webster Dorsey are his mother and stepfather. Daniel and Barbara Brown are his father and stepmother. He spent his formative years in Baltimore. He received his Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Painting from Towson University in 2005. After spending several years in China, Andrew entered Louisiana State University's Master of Fine Arts program in 2010. He intends to graduate in May of 2013.