Fun House

Stephanie Cobb

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FUN HOUSE

A Thesis

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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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in

The Department of Art

by

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ABSTRACT

The expression “fun house” seems empathetic and joyful, but has potentially melancholy connotations. Fun houses are participatory. They allow guests to move freely through their colorful halls. At the same time, they do not organize guest’s experience. Usually, we are thoughtful of all possible contingencies that make the world so unpredictable. We prefer certainty to doubt and try to avoid risks. However, reason and order have limits. To feel alive, we must take risks. The connotation of the paintings in Fun House may imply either a sunny mood through tenderness between figures or a tense ambivalence that lingers in their expression. This hazy territory separating certainty and improbability gives room for an artist to construct ambiguity into narrative.

The paintings in Fun House function as representations of figures in personal and domestic environments. They are private moments made public and the subjects are closely tied to personal experiences. Only closeness between artist and model allows for intimacy in a portrait. The hope is to evoke with clarity our closeness, or our distance.
CHAPTER 1. DISTANCE

At Rest

*At Rest* (Fig. 1), influenced by Manet’s *Dead Toreador* (Fig. 2), depicts the cropped figures of two people lying on the floor. The woman in the bright yellow shirt has her hair pulled away from her face. Her calm expression indicates a moment of rest. The man lying beside her has turned away from the viewer and his arm rests on his chest. The pair lie next to each other on a patterned red rug. The room seems empty and the back wall is painted in a light blue.

The narrative was born from my experiences with failed friendships, meaning friendships that were once great, but came to an impasse or disagreement, and dissolved from a refusal to compromise or mend. The two figures in the painting lie next to each other, but a profound feeling of distance separates them. They gaze away from each other and away from the viewer to emphasize this distance. Their communication, if any, is devoid of emotion.

The painting investigates too-close-for-comfort relationships and the complicit way the viewer tolerates them. The figures are in the same room, but profoundly distanced. The viewer knows and tolerates this, perhaps seeing these figures representing people in their own lives who are bound together but still apart.

There is a doctrine in Roman Catholicism called transubstantiation, which denotes the a supernatural conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The basic concept is that an object, through means surpassing understanding, becomes alive. Relating this concept to art, a painting is an object that hangs on the wall. The materials we use rest on its surface. A phenomenon, much like transubstantiation, occurs when intimate meanings are transmitted
through this lifeless object. This concept of mystical exchange describes the process that I am seeking in the act of painting itself. I do this best with models that I know and that are close to me. The figures in the paintings are not strangers. Conversely, I hint at the painting as pure object through the figures’ recumbent pose. The two people are emotionless and still, but the painting itself is charged with life.

Fig. 1. *At Rest.* Oil on canvas. 36” x 42 1/2”. 2020.

Fig. 2. Édouard Manet. *The Dead Toreador.* 2’ 6” x 5’. 1864.
Fiction and Authenticity

Authenticity is often conflated with truth, and the search for authenticity is often based on a skeptical attitude towards the world, towards other people, and towards oneself. The search calls in question genuine emotion. For Nietzsche, authenticity relies on seeking truth without use of virtue. Authenticity in Romanticism involves introspection on one’s true self and private thought. In our digital age, authenticity can seem like a performance which requires an audience anonymous behind a screen.¹ We want to believe that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine meaning and emotions, something outside of shallow consumer culture and above derivative art, but we are left asking what makes our feelings genuine?

Baudelaire, writing on painting in 1846, said that there are two ways of understanding portraiture: either as history or as fiction. As history, portraiture sets forth the expectation of rendering the model faithfully, severely and formulaically. This does not exclude idealization, which, for enlightened Naturalists, consists of choosing the model’s most characteristic attitude that best expresses their habits of mind.²

As fiction, portraiture requires an exaggeration of important details which accounts for the subjective and the psychological. These exaggerations are not necessarily as rational as in a formulaic Old Master painting, but better capture an aspect of verisimilitude, or true internal likeness, in figural works.

The idea of authenticity settles on artists like a fog, referring to everything and nothing.

Even if fiction is described as a battle between the authentic and inauthentic, we still must reckon


with the power of experiences of self and of relationships that fiction brings to light.

Representation can act similar to a certificate of authenticity, but fiction brings life. Allowing space for invention in painting brings a certain amount of truth from the art, the artist, and the viewer.

*Amanda* (Fig. 3) is a small portrait of a woman. The background is patterned, suggesting the blanket where her head rests. Her hair is short and practical. She is looking downwards, eyes half open. Her unawareness of us offers a license to examine her, to feel that we can become intimate with her and the method of the painting’s creation. I have left areas thinly painted, scraped, or sanded away. Brushstrokes are facts that can lead to illusion. A lick of paint is simultaneously a shadow on the jaw and pigment. Invention and ambiguity allow paintings to lift the veil and show their truth and the mechanisms that create their illusion.

Fig. 3. *Amanda*. Oil on canvas. 10” x 8”. 2021.
“You are Alone in the Way You Feel”: Tension and Isolation

Almost all of my models told me about their own relationships and the ways that particular people were similar to or different from them. Sameness could be an explanation for why they are close, but so could difference. When a problem arises in a relationship, differences can give each person a greater understanding and appreciation for the other. As friends or partners negotiate and evaluate the ways they are the same, they inevitably also are measuring ways that they feel equal and ways they fear they don’t measure up.³

There is a profound disconnect between the figures in The Garden (Fig. 4). An extraordinary silence seems to enwrap them radiating through their postures and the painting’s color palette. The two men appear isolated, vulnerable, and unapproachable. Each is enclosed in his own solitude, even though sitting next to each other. The plant forms spill into the foreground of the composition, springing up vertically on the right of the image and streaming out horizontally across the figures. All of the elements wrap and flow into the next to form in a continual flicker of movement, revolving around the young men quietly seated. The profile of the figure on the right becomes the focus the painting, as if the scene was his vision. The figure seated on the bench is seen in shadow. He conceals one foot behind the other, hinting at innocence or vulnerability.

Sometimes, a friend with whom you share a history has experienced those events differently. Their assumption that having had the same experience makes you the same can create distance or disapproval. Feeling more isolated can also result if others display, or seem to seek, evidence that they are not going through the same experience as the other. When the models

posed for me, they had resolved an argument before I arrived, but the tension lingered. Both were hurt by the other and they each felt alienated. As they posed, they asked each other some questions in attempts to understand what the other was feeling, but these questions were also designed to deflect further hurt. Questions like “are you still angry with me?” sounded like attempts to reassure themselves that could be translated to “I am different from you, so I am safe from being hurt further, and therefore, you are alone in the way you feel”.4

Distance between the two men is felt, but a level of trust toward me as the artist existed too. Being a voyeur to this intimate moment allowed me to reflect on my own similar experiences and memories. They allowed me to observe them and to translate what appeared to be a vulnerable truth of their humanity. Both desire to have support from the other, but in their posture lingers a resistance to accommodate the other’s wounded pride. Their interaction hints at the longing for reconnection to take them from feelings of isolation.

Relationships of any kind require a back-and-forth, a continual negotiation and renegotiation, of sameness and difference. The two men had already recognized an emotional need for each other prior to this conflict which enabled them to reconcile while they posed for me. Instead of being angry with each other, each eventually expressed his love and fear of the other being hurt as they modeled for me. Reconciliation born from respect produces the sweetest reward and causes distance to dissolve.

4 Ibid.
Fig. 4. *The Garden*. Oil on canvas. 78 x 64 inches. 2020.
CHAPTER 2. CLOSENESS

Memory and Likeness

I met with Brianna Cairney, a frequent model for my paintings and my friend, at her lab in June 2019. Brianna is a clinical psychologist and a PhD candidate at Louisiana State University. She had invited me to her lab to participate in a clinical trial that she created. It tested whether semantically descriptive hand gestures enhanced mental imagery for the participant. In other words, Brianna was studying memory. Brianna put an electroencephalogram cap on my head and asked me to sit in front of a computer screen. The screen displayed word pairs with hand gestures which resembled the semantic meaning of the word with which they were coupled. A video of hands clapping would be shown with the word pair “hands clapping.” Word pairs were at times nonsensical, like “green mourning,” and were coupled with videos of hand gestures that were less recognizable, such as beat gestures which do not convey logical meaning but are usually woven in conversation to highlight importance. Some words pairs did not accompany hand gestures. The task of the participant of the trial was to watch the pairings, imagine the meaning of the word pairs, rate how easy or difficult it was to imagine them, and write down as many of those word pairs as possible.\(^5\) \textit{Ars memorativa} is a system of set images or words constructed to aid in remembering another such set. Likeness, or similarity, often reigns in remembrance and shared experience.

Maybe it is not a coincidence that the word “like” means both “similar to” and “having affection for” or that the action of showing approval is identified as “like”. We are drawn together as friends by having shared experiences that may visually cue sameness, such as sameness in what we wear, ethnicity, or familial backgrounds. Sameness makes you close and sometimes difference can make you close. The nuances, overlaps, and clashes of sameness and difference are all elements of the magic of friendship. Maybe all of our explanations about why we are friends, including a catalogue of how we are similar and different, are just ways we make sense of something that has nothing to do with reason, but how we connect with another’s spirit. That connection can be strengthened by commonalities but not created by commonalities.

Capturing someone’s likeness in a painting does not have to attenuate a person’s character into something supernatural or spectacular. Character and friendship can be implied through something as simple as sitting quietly and enjoying time spent together.

_Brianna_ (Fig. 5) captures an awkward impatience, as if caught in the moment of sitting down or standing up, similar the viewer’s point of view in Neel’s _Ginny in a Striped Shirt_ (Fig. 6) or Degas’ _The Tub_ (Fig.7). The furniture acts as an important design foil for the shape of the model. The blue, red, and green striped fabric covering the couch contrasts against the cadmium red dress. The curving forms of the fabric pattern give structure to and echo the rhythmic arrangement of the figural form. The couch acts as a frame, but it isolates the anxious nestling of Brianna, who wants to simultaneously pull herself forward, or retreat into a seated position in the couch.

The models used in _Fun House_ are always close friends. There is no need to insist on achieving a likeness which translates as photorealism. It is assumed that likeness will emerge
naturally and that it can be caught in as much as a pose or gesture. Essentially these paintings arise from memories built over time and create an urge to deepen contact with other people. Likeness in a portrait is about capturing the model’s humanity.

![Fig. 5. Brianna. Oil on canvas. 36 x 36 inches. 2021.](image)

![Fig. 6. Alice Neel. Ginny in a Striped Shirt. Oil on canvas. 60 x 40 inches. 1969.](image)
Painting as Surrogate for Self

I try to paint models as they appear to be, but when as I am working with them, an unconscious element develops within the work. Each painting has traces of expressions of myself, feelings that I have about the sitter, and forces me to analyze what it means to have a relationship with the sitter. Figurative art is a means for dialogue between the artist, viewer and model in the work. The artist invokes a feeling and communicates to the viewer the feeling to be experienced by means of signals in images, so that others can experience the same feeling, given their individual interpretation. It is too little to say that a painting only captures the essence of a subject. The painter uses the entirety of body and mind in creation. The mind lends the body to the world and the artist changes the perceived world into paintings. The enigma of the body is that it simultaneously sees, is seen, and is aware of being seen. But the body’s animation is not just an assemblage of its parts, nor is it only a question of mind or spirit. There is a human body when, between seeing and being seen, between mind and body, between touching and being

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touched, a blending takes place.7 Paintings naturally become an extension of the artist who must dictate and project what is seen within them.

A Note about Emma

Kara Zona, a friend from college, recently purchased the painting Emma (Fig. 8). Her words about the painting best capture what I had intended:

I just keep thinking about this painting. Although I do love how there are areas that are lightly touched and flat, I have to say, that pillow is incredible. It is great to see how little it takes for you to express shape and form. I love your exaggeration of contrast and color.

This painting resonates the present moment. I’ve been seeing that a lot in your work. There is a distinct perspective coming through and I think you’re being really effective in expressing the moment in time. This painting really speaks to me. There’s just something so 2020 about it. I feel like your work has such a familiar feeling to it. There’s like a seriousness or depth in a lot of your compositions. A lot of it is your balance of hot and cold colors. I can see you gaining confidence in your brushstrokes and I think your work is inspiring.

This painting for me, I feel like was a breakthrough, granted in only privy to what you post online, but I think your hard work is really coming through. As you know, art is a journey and you just need to trust your instinct. Your work has a great personal touch to it that’s unique. My sister was saying it reminds her of Fredric Lord Leighton, and I agree. You have a great painterly perspective. I think why your work has really touched me lately. I feel the gaze of your portraits like a deep breath. Almost as if I can hear the background noise, the silence, the end of a sentence. It has that mood to it.

7 Ibid, p. 419.
Fig. 8. *Emma*. Oil on canvas. 62 x 46 inches. 2020.
The painting *The Habit of Being (A long goodbye)* (Fig. 9) narrative was born from experiences dreading loss of friendship when moving away. The monumental scale and the perspective of the composition gives the viewer a downward angle into the scene of two people engaged in conversation in a domestic environment. A domestic environment was important. The place where people typically end their day is home. One way to transform your friendships into family is to simply share your home. What makes it feel familial isn’t only the nature of the friend’s home, but the ease in which you operate inside their home, how you are welcomed, and how you can be vulnerable as if in your own home.

The scale and perspective invites the viewer to be a part of the scene, but at a distance. The figures in the painting are engaged with each other and not with the viewer. This distance allows the viewer to question what is being discussed and if we are invited into the conversation.

Often the prospect of the loss of a loved friend fills us with a sense of dread. That feeling is usually associated with a life partner or parent, but a connection to a friend can be as deep. As with a romantic partner, losing a friend means losing a language. No one else can understand the particular meanings of words that you shared, what made you laugh, or references that helped you understand something with clarity. That friend moving on, or the friendship dissolving, means that a hole is left that is palpable everyday and can only be filled with communication.

Though friends, like family, can sometimes cause grief, they can also provide comfort and solace in troubled times, and for all times, a precious sense that we are not alone in the world.

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Fig. 9. *The Habit of Being (A long goodbye)*, Oil on canvas. 96 x 64 inches. 2021.
CHAPTER THREE. NOTES ON PROCESS

The paintings presented in *Fun House* were created through painting from memory, direct observational painting and drawing, and photographic referents. *At Rest*, one of the first works completed, was completed indirectly in a studio in Texas during a residency, far away from the models and at the peak of isolation during a global pandemic. Observational drawings and photographs became essential.

Photography has changed image making since its invention, but it saddles you with a problem: only the present exists, not the past or future. A photograph, once taken, only captures the past. The photographic referent led to question a level of objectivity of the models that could be construed as indifference. Photography, like memories, fill you with a full range of emotions, but leave holes for interpretation. A combination of observation styles became important tools to charge the image with life.

My paintings are often born from reading. Southern Gothic authors and writing such as Toni Morrison’s novels or the short stories and letter correspondence of Flannery O’Conner have a place in the ideation stages of my painting. Their treatment of friendships and relationships in their stories include deeply flawed or ambiguous narrative stemming from alienation and desire for connection.

At times, the impulse to paint is simply an ambition to grow my skill in painting. Growth as a painter means willingness to change and to gamble with process and art making. By dint of

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manipulation, brushwork, smears, and deposits I can discover how to make new and exciting things appear.

*Brianna* heralds a new practice, the use of an orbital sander during a painting’s creation. The concern for the impact of the model’s expression persists but is now married to an allowance of destruction and reparation. Attention is now drawn to the subject as observed reality and the fabrication of the image as memory. The surface qualities of the paintings are varied. I draw with a variety of brushes and a palette knife, constantly shifting, scraping, and wiping away marks. The figures are buried in color and shape, without sacrificing the expression or their posture, to allow multiple paths for intimate viewing. Painting is a continuous field of investigation. Style should not be imposed on the painting, but should simply be one tool available for use.
CONCLUSION

I have always been painting for myself, even when I did not know any other painters in history or as acquaintance. Image making allows me to make sense of my personal experiences and relationships. Painting validates my need to believe in me, for me, during the years between now and what is to come. I have realized that it is not possible to become a painter until you decide to shed the role as student, and decide you are an artist.

Fig. 10. Fun House installation. 2021. Photographed by Charlie Champagne.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Stephanie Cobb (b. 1992, Bowling Green, Kentucky) is an M.F.A. Candidate at LSU College of Art + Design and received her B.F.A. in painting from Savannah College of Art and Design. After graduation from SCAD, she focused her professional experience in museums and for nonprofit organizations in the art and science fields.

Cobb’s work has been exhibited in Masur Museum of Art in Monroe; Baton Rouge Gallery in Baton Rouge; Intersect Arts Center in St. Louis; Giles Gallery in Richmond; Crane Arts in Philadelphia; 859 Gallery in Louisville; Sulfur Studios in Savannah; SCAD’s Open Studio event in Lacoste, France, among others. She has had solo exhibitions at Glassell Gallery in Baton Rouge and the Arts Council Gallery in College Station, Texas. Cobb has attended residencies at the Burren College of Art in Ireland, Kentucky Foundation for Women in Louisville, HOME in Philadelphia, and with the Arts Council of Brazos Valley in Texas.

Her work has been published in the 23rd issue of Create! Magazine and the 154th issue of New American Paintings.

Currently, Cobb is working as an Instructor of Record at LSU College of Art + Design in Baton Rouge, LA. She plans to receive her M.F.A. in August of 2021. After her anticipated graduation, Cobb will be working as an artist in residence with the Kentucky College of Art + Design during the summer of 2021 and will be relocating to Maryland where she will act as Exhibit Specialist with the Annmarie Sculpture Garden.