SULFUR AND SAGE

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 Art

in

The School of Art

by

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This thesis is dedicated to my father, Dan, who first put a fly rod in my hand. And to my mother, Ileana, who I have spent my life struggling to understand and forgive. It’s only now that I realize and accept the struggles and burdens of a life that was far too short. I miss you.
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Abstract

Sulfur and Sage is a body of abstract paintings created out of memories of time spent immersed in the wilderness of the Rocky Mountains and the Yellowstone Caldera during the summer of 2020. The paintings reflect specific places, experiences, and insights, which occurred as I sought solitude by returning to the one place where I feel most at peace with the universe – the woods.

Each painting is augmented by a written vignette, describing the occurrence it is based on. Should the viewer choose to include these short stories as they encounter the artwork, they provide the jumping off point and lend context to the pieces through the eyes of the artist. However, the paintings themselves are intended to communicate the portion of the wilderness experience that I cannot write words to describe. They are the embodiment of intense emotional content, derived from the memories of what I have witnessed and how I responded to the often-sublime phenomenon.

The paintings are created using an artistic process planned to mimic many of the forces I observe in nature. The cycle of life and death is embodied in the process of adding, scraping, dissolving, and redistributing the oil paint over and over again. The final aesthetic is intended to convey a distressed or weathered sensation, communicating a parallel with the effects of powerful natural forces. The careful crafting of the paint’s surface, supported by the overall composition, is intended to visually excite the viewer from the macro to the micro, just as one can find beauty in the texture of a single leaf laying in a larger forest.
Early in the development of this thesis, I made a commitment to intentionally omit and specifically to not address the fact that my summer journey occurred shortly after the beginning of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. My thinking was that I make this kind of trip all the time and my experiences in the wilderness would not be connected to the current events outside of the woods. At that time, I could not have imagined the impact that the pandemic continues to have on our world.

Compounding the pain, suffering, and depression created by the pandemic was the divisive turmoil created by the United States 2020 presidential election and its aftermath. I am a veteran and a patriot. The success of the country that has given me so much opportunity means everything to me. When my country and its society are sick – I am sick. Over the last year, I have witnessed communities, families, and couples torn apart by our failure to overcome the constant stream of media designed to divide us. The political driven events have acted like salt thrown into the COVID-19 wound and have served to weaken our spirit and our humanity.

For the moment, the events of 2020 have culminated to become THE historically seminal period for my lifetime, much like World War II was for the previous generations. The year 2020 has influenced me even more so than the events of 9-11. Perhaps this has served to create a parallel between my artistic practice and the practices of countless early post-war abstract expressionists, whose work was also born out of a dark period in history. To ignore that and self-claim that these most recent events do not influence my artistic work would be foolish.
While I am acknowledging the effect of these events on my work, I am also choosing to limit the discussion of such to these paragraphs alone. Perhaps this will function as just another defense mechanism, where isolating my work from the reality of the time in which it was created will somehow serve to preserve the veil of normalcy in which we all wished we lived.
Into the Woods (Introduction)

On July 15th, 2020, I wrestled the 175-pound rooftop tent onto the rack mounted to my pick-up truck. I Loaded the rest of the camping and fly fishing gear into the bed and the back seat. I kissed my wife goodbye, and I finally took off.

My journey would take me across Texas, into Colorado, up through Wyoming, and into Montana. Eventually I would head south to Utah, back into Colorado, and then down into New Mexico, before heading across Texas again, returning home to Louisiana. I would be gone a total of 32 days and cover over 4,000 miles. Thirty-two...glorious...wonderful days. Thirty-two days to explore nature, to contemplate my life, to emotionally heal, and to prepare to paint.

This trip was going to be a bit different in its purpose. I was finally ready to connect the artwork I was making with something so meaningful and so personal to me that the paint I would be putting on canvas would become an extension of who I am and what I witness. I wanted this trip to fill my memories and etch emotional content into my synapses in a way so strongly that I would have no difficulty recalling the experiences months later. I wanted this trip to become the foundation for a body of work that would give artistic identity to my practice and open the door to my life-long goal of becoming a full-time painter. I’m 46. I’m now in the second half of my life. This trip was going to be the starting point for a new career and a new way of living. Going into this trip I felt like everything hinged on it and the experiences it would provide me.
Little did I know that this particular journey would also give me something else, something even more important. It would provide me with an understanding and an opportunity to accept and come to terms with a part of my past I have long buried. Through the solitude, soul searching, and self-contemplation this past summer, I finally started to understand my need to go into woods. I began to be able to articulate what the wilderness means to me and why immersion in nature acts as a security blanket, wrapping me in warm happiness and taking away the sting of everyday life.

This need to isolate in the woods began when I was a young child looking to escape a broken homelife characterized by poverty and alcohol and drug addiction. I grew up in a mostly blue-collar rural setting in the small coal-mining towns of western Pennsylvania. My parents divorced when I was 7. While my father worked tirelessly to set himself on a straight and successful path, my mother, who had custody of my sister and I, remained locked in the grip of addiction and mental illness. Add to that, my family’s lack of economic status, my skinny and awkward physical presence, and my nerdy demeanor, and the outcome is a somewhat tough childhood. As a result – I spent a lot of time alone…in the woods.

The woods near my mother’s government subsidized apartment were not always the prettiest. Retired remnants of decades of coal mining were everywhere. Remains of rusty metal carts, piles of dirty black slag, and busted brick shells that once were buildings to house the machinery necessary to pull the black gold from the earth, all littered the landscape. To me it was all beautiful.
It was here in my childhood that I had my first relationship with sulfur. Many of the streams where I grew up were completely devoid of life due to the effects of acid mine drainage. Acid mine drainage occurs when water flows through the sulfur-bearing materials in abandoned coal mines. This heavily polluted run-off results in streams that turn a putrid orange color, dangerous and toxic. We had one such stream a stone’s throw from my back yard. We called it the “shit crick” I learned to call it that at the age of five. We weren’t supposed to play in it. But what child can resist playing in the water. I found the “shit crick” to be a beautiful wonder that would eventually help shape my ideal aesthetic and my artistic choices. I would return home for dinner, my skin stained orange unaware of the deleterious effects of the pollution.
As ugly as this childhood wilderness may sound to someone else, for me it was a refuge, a place to hide. My time alone amongst the life-giving trees became the ultimate adolescent coping mechanism. I would hike or ride my bike along miles of trails and dusty back roads, continuously imprinting this environment as a safe place.

Eventually, I would learn to fly fish for trout. Next to breathing, fly fishing is the one activity I consider vital to my survival. Every time I am on the water, rod in hand, my perception of the universe changes, and in a good way. For me just being in the woods is healing, but being in the woods, standing in a stream, my fly line tight to a twelve-inch brook trout - this changes my DNA.
But all of it in the end is an escape. The type of escape we all need. Some people read. Others knit. Today many immerse themselves in a digital reality of gaming and social media. No matter what one does, recognizing it for what it is and learning to leverage those escapes in a healthy way without losing the ability to function and deal with reality is probably more critical now than ever. This summer the woods gave me that knowledge, and as I stepped out of them, I was slightly more confident that I was ready to face the future. This recognition of my childhood escapism was a wonderful gift.

My newfound understanding of its connection to why I spend time in the solitude of the woods is life altering for me and this means that it alters my perception of the artwork I intend to make now and in the future. A failure to acknowledge these personal revelations would be a failure to understand my own painting process and the personal meaning the paintings have for me as I create them. I am out of the woods for now. But the paint I manipulate upon the surface of the canvas keeps me connected. The studio is my refuge now. The paint keeps my memories fresh. The work insulates me and keeps me sane.
Sulfur and Sage (Inspiration)


**Sulfur**

For the rest of my life, there are two smells that will always initiate memories of this summer’s wilderness journey. The first is the smell of sulfur, or more specifically – hydrogen sulfide. Yellowstone sits atop a supervolcano, a natural source of hydrogen sulfide vapor. Traveling across the volcanic caldera, which covers over 1,200 square-miles, the putrid smell of rotting egg lingers in the air, ever present, if even just barely perceptible.

Sulfur is normally associated with powerful destructive forces. In addition to its association with volcanoes, sulfur is a key ingredient in gunpowder and explosives. The hydrogen sulfide and its smell can come from death when plant and animal materials decompose. It’s
what gives swamps and bogs their foul smell. Sulfur is the chemical that produces acid mine seepage and left unchecked can kill every living organism in a river. Sulfur has power. But sulfur is not evil or malicious. It just exists. It is part of the balance and ordered chaos of the natural world.

On the Yellowstone Caldera, that sulfur smell is a reminder of the awesome energy stored just below the Earth’s crust and the destructive ability that comes with it. When the time is right, the supervolcano will erupt again, and all within the caldera, and for thousands of miles beyond, will be consumed or destroyed. There is nothing that man can do to stop it. We have no dominion over this force. It’s a reminder of our human frailty. The smell of sulfur keeps me in my place and humbles me.

**Sage**

Sage is the second smell imprinted within the memories of my summer adventure. But this smell didn’t come from the herb. It came from the sagebrush, a plant almost synonymous with the western landscape. Unlike the olfactory experience associated with sulfur, the smell of sage from the sagebrush is sweet, yet peppery or spicy. The camphor stored within its tiny leaves imparts a coolness to the scent, making it also calming and familiar.

Sagebrush is symbolic of resiliency, defined by its ability to survive harsh dry climates and grow in loose sandy soil. Its efflorescence paints much of the landscape a pale greenish yellow. Many of the sagebrush variants have been used in ancient Native American healing ceremonies and consumed as medicine for thousands of years. Natives and non-natives alike use sagebrush
for smudging, a practice of purifying the air by burning sage and sagebrush bundles and allowing the smokey scent to permeate one’s surroundings.

When I smell sage or sagebrush, my mind is immediately taken to open skies and crystal-clear waters loaded with wild trout. It’s a gateway smell. A smell that calms my mind and brings my thoughts to physical places where I am the most content and at peace.

*Sulfur, 2021, oil on canvas, 93 x 72 inches, and Sage, 2021, oil on canvas, 93 x 72 inches.*
The woods are filled with trees - an absurdly obvious statement. But often as I stroll along on hikes, I fail to really notice those trees and consider their importance. Once I was hiking in the area of Slough Creek in northern Wyoming, and I happened into a small grove of young aspen trees. Suddenly I was reminded of an ethnobotany lesson I had received sometime long ago. It was an hour-long lecture given by a U.S. Park Ranger and it covered the many ways that Native Americans used trees as medicines.
I began to consider how not only the aspens, but also the pinōns, junipers, firs, pines, and spruces all had ancient therapeutic uses. I contemplated how connected to the wilderness Native Americans truly were. The aspen tree contains a compound called salicin, which is an anti-inflammatory and works similar to aspirin. How could they know that?

I’ve never munched on the bark of a tree to cure a headache, but the trees have certainly imparted a medicinal effect on me. Resting in a grove of Quaking Aspens during late summer, feeling the vibrational energy caused by rustling leaves has an effect stronger than any anti-depressant. When I’m eventually required to walk out of the woods, I’m always healthier than when I went in. I think the trees have much to do with that.
The Lewis River Channel runs between Wyoming’s Shoshone and Lewis lakes. It’s found midway during a 12-mile loop hike close to the south entrance of Yellowstone. It is a wide, mostly slow-moving waterway often in view from the hiking trail. Near the channel’s halfway point is a large sweeping bend. A short detour from the main trail takes you to a rock outcropping at the very apex. The ledge looms about 30-feet off the water and standing atop it provides an almost unreal view of the crystal-clear water below.
Large brown trout cruise the enormous back eddy created by the bend in the river. From the high rocky vantage point, you can watch them glide effortlessly up, down, and across the massive pool in search of a meal. I have no fly rod, and even if I did, casting to and landing one of these behemoths was likely not possible. Instead, I spent nearly an hour just observing the underwater world in front of me. Something I don’t really have the opportunity to do when I’m knee deep in the stream, fly rod waving to and fro.

It occurred to me in that meditation, the trout stream is a healing force in my life. I often pick my wilderness destinations based on the availability of running water and density of bug sipping trout. Just being near a stream or lake begins to take away my anxiety and cleanses my mind of the onslaught of negativity that’s forced on it every single day. The sooner I return to the trout stream, the better.
The sun hung low in the sky, just above the hillside guarding the end of this sweeping meadow. It was the golden hour and the whole landscape was warm and vibrating. A narrow stream wound through the tall grasses. It was the Gibbon River, above the Virginia Cascade, and I was convinced that a warry brook trout was sipping caddis flies in the gentle current.

I crawled on my hands and knees to a position about 5-yards downstream. I knew that if I stood up, the trout would bolt and my chance at a final fish of the day would bolt with it. With a single false cast, I dropped my deerhair caddis imitation to a spot three feet up from where I had
imagined that I last saw the surface broken by the trout's rhythmic sipping. The water boiled and I pulled tight. It wasn’t a long battle and soon the fish was to the net. I slid the basket under him and as I lifted, my jaw dropped, and my pulse quickened.

“A grayling!” I exclaimed out loud, only to be heard by the local deer mice and a muskrat I had just recently encountered. The Arctic Grayling is a rare species as far as trout go. There are only a handful of places in the lower-48 where they can be found. I had never caught one before. I never imagined that one would be in this narrow meadow portion of the Gibbon. But why not? A few miles upstream is Wolf Lake, and upstream from that is Grebe Lake, headwater of the Gibbon, and home to an early 1920’s grayling stocking program.

I gently removed the hook from the corner of his mouth, and as I slid him into the water the last of the day’s warm sunlight electrified the pale green scales and purple cast of his unique dorsal fin. And I noticed the tall grasses around me appeared as though they were made of wispy strands of gold. The grayling in his golden meadow, returned to the edge of the current and to the sipping of caddis flies.
Look Closely

Turpin Meadow sits alongside the Buffalo Fork River in the Bridger-Teton Wilderness area. It’s a jumping off point for some amazing hikes. It’s not large for an alpine meadow, perhaps covering less than a square mile in total. It’s at just under 7,000 feet in elevation. Tall grasses in the summer give the meadow an unassuming look as you drive past it on the dirt road leading to the parking area. To be honest, if you are standing just outside the meadow, it’s almost a letdown. I’ve been in some spectacular meadows and this one seemed...meh.

As I began to cross it however, I realized just how wrong I was. At my feet was an amazing carpet of ground cover, so beautiful, so colorful, and so elegant it nearly took my breath away. Pinks, purples, lavenders, greens, and golds – all just out of sight thanks to the tall grasses. It was
as though someone intentionally camouflaged a fine European garden. The plants could only be seen by being directly over them. And they were slightly different than the flowers I normally experience in the higher elevation meadows. Maybe it’s the soil, the proximity to the river, the particular elevation, I don’t know. I’m a terrible botanist. Whatever the reason, the result was a landscape that could only be appreciated by focusing on the details. That is until you turn around.

At the far end of the meadow, I spun to take a final look across the grasses before starting the grueling 1,200 foot climb up the Clear Creek Trail. I was almost shocked by the amazing vista that had snuck up behind me. In the center of this mind-blowing view was the Teton mountain range, and Mount Moran, the only peak in the range named for an artist, was smack in the middle. And suddenly I recognized the parallel between the work I create and the way I observe the landscape. One should take in the vista, but not miss the opportunity to look closely at the ground.
Weathered, 2021, oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches.

Weathered

In 1988 fires ravaged across northern Wyoming. Nearly one-third of Yellowstone National Park was scorched. Hundreds of thousands of Lodge-pole Pines, their roots and lower trunks no longer viable, toppled in the winds of the volcanic caldera. Laying on the forest floor, the altitude and dry air inhibited their decay. Much of the bark is gone leaving exposed the tree’s solid center that once carried sap and water up and down its towering frame. The surface of the long horizontal masses have taken on a silvery cast that can only come from the process of laying undisturbed in the elements for over 30 years. Near the ends of some logs are scorch marks, the
tell-tale sign of the great fire. The logs have taken on a state of being not quite wood or stone.

Dead but not decayed.

The downfall as it is known, covers much of the Yellowstone forest. In places the crosshatch of fallen timber is so thick that the forest appears impenetrable. Man-made trails that cut through the Yellowstone wilderness wind like a river through the thousands of acres of this downfall. A bear can climb across it all with short hops, leaps, and other displays of acrobatic skill. But man is mostly locked out. If not for the chainsaw, no such recreational trails would exist.

For 30-plus years this timber has laid here, and it seems to show no sign of dissolving, disintegrating, or otherwise going anywhere. Perhaps someday the caldera will awaken and spew its ash and mud and maybe in a few million years’ time some of it will eventually become petrified and complete its transformation to stone. Thirty-plus years of lying about – barely a flicker in the span of time.
Epic (Hellroaring Creek)  

With 30-plus years of fly fishing under my belt, I no longer care how many fish I catch in a day. The experience of fly fishing is about more than size or numbers. I just don’t keep count anymore. But this day, I was fishing a place called Hellroaring Creek, and this day was different.

Hellroaring Creek isn’t easy to get to. It starts with a 1,000 foot descent, then you cross a 200-foot high suspension bridge above the Yellowstone River. Then a few more miles of hiking until you reach the creek. It’s in grizzly country. You can’t let your guard down. I knew I would find solitude there and I was right.
The very first cast resulted in a nice sized native cutthroat trout. After its release, I laid down a second cast and once again the water boiled as my fly was snatched. And then it happened again, and again, and again. A while later, I was sitting on a log outside a ranger cabin, having lunch, contemplating the poster warning me of a nearby elk kill, and the grizzly that was likely on it. And I began to wonder just how many cutthroats I had actually caught that morning. It was surely more that than I had ever caught in such a short time before. I suddenly had a desire to know just how epic of a day it was. I decided that after lunch, I would count and keep track of every fish.

The epic fishing persisted, and after a few hours’ time, I was up to fifty cutthroats landed and released. I knew that meant that I had most likely caught well over one hundred fish that day. I stopped fishing. No one deserves to catch more than a hundred fish on a dry fly in a single day. Next to me was a deep pool at the foot of a cascade. I took off all my clothes and swam naked with the cutthroat for a while, thinking about what I had experienced. And then my thoughts turned to the grizzly. “God, I hope I don’t get eaten on the way out!”

Image 6. Sign alongside Hellroaring Creek warning hikers of recent grizzly bear activity.
I’ve seen grizzlies before, but never up close. Just a week earlier, while staring across the Hayden Valley through a spotting scope, I marveled as a massive bear lumbered his way to the Yellowstone River, barely silhouetted in the twilight. He was 1,000-yards from me, but I could sense his power and nobility.

On this particular morning though, I would be treated to an entirely different experience. She was massive, and she wasn’t alone. Two cubs were in tow. I could tell by their size that they
were not newborns, probably in their second or third year. I was so excited, I scrambled to get ahead of them, trying to position myself to finally capture some up-close video footage of a grizzly. I was so distracted by the intensity of the moment that I failed to realize that they were less than 40-yards away. Way too close for a grizzly encounter.

I suddenly awakened to that reality and the hair on my neck stood up. Luckily, mom was totally uninterested in her onlooker and was more focused on leading the playful and easily distracted teen cubs to wherever they would nap their afternoon away. But what I felt in that moment was about as close to the sublime as one could ever achieve – awe mixed with fear, an admiration of this incredibly powerful lifeforce so near to my own. It was August 5th. It was my last full day in Yellowstone. And it was my birthday.
The Cycle of Life and Death (Process)

My process is intended to mimic much of what unfolds out in nature. The many steps in the progression to completion are meant to keep me connected to the places and experiences upon which my work is based. To me, the process by which these objects come into being is as sacred as the buffalo wandering the Yellowstone Caldera.

The process begins with the crafting of the support. Raw canvas is stretched over wood frames, the bracing for which I often cut myself. The canvas fibers are then protected by multiple layers of painstakingly applied gesso. This crafting allows my hand to not only influence the paint, but to also be present in the formation of the foundation itself. I become responsible for as much of the creation process as can be reasonably allowed. I take pride in the quality of construction, and so my process gives me something in return long before the first brushstroke of pigmented paint is ever applied. The canvas becomes the unseen force that gives shape and life to the painted surface above.

That painted surface is composed primarily of oil paint. In the wilderness, I consider the age of the Earth and how the passage of time shapes what I experience in the moment. In the studio I use oil paint because it allows the passage of time to become an element in the composition. With a medium like acrylic, I could work non-stop on a piece until it resolves. The long curing time of oil paint on the other hand, means that the canvases must be set aside, often for weeks between steps. Slowing down the creation process to a period that covers months instead of days has a way of more closely aligning me to the rhythms in nature. During that time
my ideas about the painting have room to evolve and change. Normally this is also accompanied by an evolution of my own understanding of the experience the painting is based on.

I create paintings to foster interest in both the macro and the micro. The overall composition should engage one from a distance, while the closer inspection provides a lifetime of stimulating surface to explore. Layers of paint are added, redistributed, and then dissolved, scraped, scarred, and finally left to cure. The process gets repeated over-and-over again. The layering continues for months, or in some cases years. As each new layer is applied, it is influenced by the layer below it. A history begins to build and gaps in the surface reveal what came before and what is hidden below. The final aesthetic should be characterized by a sense of life, decay, and age all at once. The surface should appear weathered but strong.

Image 8. Detail of Epic (Hellroaring Creek) illustrating the artist’s concept of areas of micro interest.
This progression of layered paint mimics the slow steady evolution of the landscape, where each spring’s new life and each winter’s death and decay contribute to change. The larger composition is intended to mimic the views from a vista, while the textures and surface variations form the individual leaves and grasses. The places where the underlying surface is revealed parallel the ability to read the geology of the land in the face of a cliff. In a few places, the very earliest washes of color are left exposed, imitating the volcanic mud, water, and steam where the crust of our Earth is the thinnest – places where one would smell the sulfur and understand the power of the unseen content hidden below.

Eventually, the paintings reach a point where looking at them triggers the emotional state of mind that can only come from the memory of a particular wilderness experience. Nearing the end of the simultaneous development of a large group of paintings results in an experience much like being in the wilderness itself. When I have several of these paintings on the wall at the same time, my studio becomes an extension of the woods.
Like the woods, my studio is a refuge for me – a place of solitude and contemplation. But unlike in the woods, in the studio I must keep one foot rooted in reality. And so, these objects I create serve a dual purpose. I paint first and foremost for myself. The compositions and surfaces are intended to satisfy my personal needs. The choices I make along the way are made to develop an aesthetic I am familiar with and one that gratifies my senses. Through my process, I am creating a self-serving gateway, keeping my memories and love of the wilderness in the very forefront of my life.

But once complete, the painting takes on its second purpose - that of an object to be appreciated and desired by others. I will make no apology for the fact that I make paintings to sell so that I can support my family. It has been a lifelong dream to somehow combine my love of the woods and my passion for creating in a way that can provide for us. It’s a way of life that so many creatives aspire to, and so few achieve. I am fortunate.

Released into the public eye, the painting is now meant to be interpreted based on the viewer’s own personal experiences and become judged by their own ideal aesthetic. While the memories and the stories which accompany each piece are precious to me, I have no wish to force them upon the viewer. I make the stories available should the viewer choose to want to understand what influenced my hand. But ultimately, all that matters is that viewers can formulate their own connections and read their own stories in the surface of the canvas.
Appendix A. Additional Works from *Sulfur and Sage*

Below are additional paintings which were installed alongside those previously mentioned.

*Mount Moran*, 2021, oil on canvas, 79 x 66 inches.
All that Remains, 2021, oil on canvas, 54 x 60 inches.

The Elemental Plane, 2021, oil on canvas, 54 x 48 inches.
Red and Green, 2021, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches.

Distant Encounter, 2021, oil on canvas, 52 x 70 inches.
The Take, 2021, oil on canvas, 48 x 24 inches.

The Lamar Chase, 2021, oil on canvas, 54 x 45 inches.
*Pocket Water*, 2021, oil on canvas, 60 x 54 inches.
Vita

John Swincinski (b.1974), American Painter, was raised in a rural coal mining community in Western Pennsylvania, where he received private art instruction on a wide array of traditional drawing and painting techniques. He earned a vocational certificate in commercial art and graphic design. After completing his Bachelor of Science in Communication from Norwich University, Northfield, Vt., John then served 22-years as an officer in the United States Marine Corps. In 2018, John retired from military service to New Orleans, La., with his wife Karla Baker. He immediately began his pursuit of a Master of Fine Art degree in Studio Painting from Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La., and anticipates graduation in the summer of 2021. John maintains a full-time studio-based art practice in New Orleans, La.