The Hospitality of Doubt

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The Hospitality of Doubt
Ian Grieve

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Abstract

This paper discusses the last two years of research toward a Master of Fine Art in Studio Art. I mainly address my painting practice, but while in the program, I have worked in collage, ceramics, intaglio printmaking, and sculpture. My paintings are thick, multilayered, and often contain ambiguous narratives.

The pictures develop through engagement, openness, and response within the work. I seek and embrace connection with viewers of the work. The spectator ‘completes’ the art and enhances or alters the artworks meaning by observing it and applying their individual perspectives. I seek to incorporate a sense of nostalgia and familiarity. Though mainly figurative paintings, the worlds created are not beholden to the physical laws of nature in our world. I am also exploring ways to depict time through aged surfaces, reclaimed materials, and the panoramic form.

I further discuss existentialist and post-structuralist philosophies around meaninglessness and individual freedoms related to a process-driven art-making practice and life. By embracing uncertainty, I remain open to the search for meaning. However, all things are transient and mutable. Embracing ephemerality brings comfort and an ideal space to create. By leaning into ideas of constant change, I can react to what the painting ‘needs’ to flourish.

Beyond these conceptual concerns, I describe my process, including research, working with oil paint on wood panels instead of canvas, and using palette knives in addition to brushes to produce highly textural artworks.
The Hospitality of Doubt

Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go. – Rebecca Solnit¹

Our connection to things. The stories they remind us of, and the past places and times they make us land in. Time travel. Connection. Shared stories… But without a story yet shared. Things that make anywhere feel like somewhere.
– Warren Ellis²

A grey box with worn metal corners sits on a shelf in my closet. I have filled it with small keepsakes throughout my life. As a child, I collected rocks, bottle caps, and insects, but as I grew older, my collection evolved. Now, I am drawn to rusty and chipped objects that hold a sense of nostalgia and forgotten memories – things left behind on the roadside or unknowingly dropped from someone's pocket.

Once I tuned in to the little peculiar objects, they seemed to be everywhere. There was a mannequin finger in the grass. Outside a nunnery above Franklin Boulevard, I found a statue of St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, face down on the sidewalk. Over next to the gas station was a test tube half filled with little plastic letters cut from an old Dymo embossing label maker. Into the box went bones, a pressed flower. I wondered about their stories. Who had held them? How had they been utilized, and for what purpose?

As I gathered these seemingly disconnected items, tenuous ligaments formed between these disparate wanderers. I dreamed up little stories for them about their history and significance. Those stories necessarily changed when they came together with the other objects. Proximity linked them, but so did their fractured surfaces and broken bits that showed deep use. These fragments of interrupted purpose formed a curious new relational story that begged fresh open-ended questions. There is wonder waiting among the overlooked. Situations change and shift, developing new meanings. I enthusiastically travel through life, accumulating my own chipped edges and absorbing varied ideas, reordering them to find my own collected meanings that continue to evolve (Fig. 1 and 2).

¹ Solnit, A Field Guide to Getting Lost.
² Ellis, Nina Simone's Gum.
On regular late-night walks around Los Angeles, I also began to find old snapshots. On notable occasions, I would find a photo of a birthday celebration, a first date, or a handful of nudes torn and scattered. Like the physical objects in my box, the photos seemed to be abandoned memories, either forgotten, misplaced or intentionally left to fade. I filled a book with them and then started another. It was easy to forget that the lives depicted once held nuanced significance. Many of those photographs, once reconfigured, now form source materials for my current work.

The collections mentioned above are relics of a broader history of the city and now of myself. When they are brought together or rearranged in different settings, their story shifts. They are fragments of an allegory. My thoughts, memories, and imagination come in disjointed fragments that build upon each other but may have indiscernible links. My work is about transitory but sometimes dissonant pieces coming together to form a whole, and fragmentation of sensation toward internal and external connections.

1.

In an ancient fable by poet Attar of Nishapur, A king mourning the death of his wife and first-born son asks his advisors to produce a ring bearing a vital inscription. The engraving needed to evoke a feeling of happiness when its bearer was sad while simultaneously conveying that all conditions, including contentment, are temporary. After lengthy deliberations, they finally presented the king with a ring inscribed, “This too, shall pass.”

Painting is about maneuvering spatial impossibilities and the folly of attempting to render a descriptive image. It is the struggle to fix a representation of a moment, memory, the quality of light, or simply an emotion in place. I apply a mark and let it go. At the moment of its creation, the mark means everything, the entirety of my story, but as the brush, palette knife, or fingers lift from the surface, I know it is imprecise and flawed. So I lay another mark over it, near it, or scrape some of it away, moving closer to understanding. But the second action is also lacking. And so it goes. Apply, adjust, and scrape away until I find a place where the physical accumulation of my search comes close to my intention.

2.

Many French existentialists describe the ridiculousness of being born with an innate desire to find meaning in a world that cannot provide any. It is natural to desire understanding, but meaning is elusive and transitory. As soon as some understanding is obtained, additional questions bubble up, and the search forks and broadens. Meaning is individual and helps make the vast mystery of existence palatable. Sartre posits that

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we are endlessly free and must choose what meanings to assign to our life.\textsuperscript{4} On the other hand, Camus encourages embracing the absurd and accepting that the universe is a place one can never fully comprehend.\textsuperscript{5}

This is not a hopeless set of conditions but an invitation to live fully by seeking a unique purpose and the freedom that entails.\textsuperscript{6} Individual choices made have the possibility of far-reaching change and connection. An artist's freedom of personal choice opens endless possibilities for aesthetic pleasure, with the artwork serving as a connective link. The openness of exchange between the artists’ internal imaginings and the manifested art is crucial.

The direction I insert into the figure may retain a high degree of indeterminacy and yet steer the viewer toward a particular field of possibilities, automatically excluding other ones. – Umberto Eco\textsuperscript{7}

3.

Meaning often reveals itself, not at the outset of making a piece but develops as the art is created. I do not begin from the vacuum of an empty mind with nothing guiding my way forward. Instead, my understanding of the work develops throughout the process. Meaning and narratives change as the work progresses, forcing pictorial changes.

I do not see uncertainty as a burden. It is instead a borderless valley of possibility. My wonder is derived from looking over a precipice at all the paths open; then stepping down into the unknown. I accept that my work is flawed and mutable. I remind myself that a mark is undoubtedly not the last. Uncertainty, though a possible cause of discomfort, is an asset that encourages curiosity and innovation in my life and art-making practice. There is satisfaction in solving a jigsaw puzzle, but for me, the process of disentanglement and ordering of pieces is where the pleasure dwells.

The post-structuralist Gilles Deleuze discusses the freedom obtained through change, difference, and interconnectivity over time. Differences in repetition create newness. Repetition of thoughts, for example, allows for reorganizing concepts that lead to advancement and change. Still, new experiences and information are being introduced simultaneously, further affecting forward development and new connections. Flowers change through the repetition of seed production, but differences in soil, location, and temperature produce marked differences.\textsuperscript{8}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{4} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}.
\textsuperscript{5} Camus, \textit{The Myth of Sisyphus}, 51–55.
\textsuperscript{7} Eco, \textit{The Open Work}.
\textsuperscript{8} Deleuze, \textit{Difference and Repetition}; Jasper, \textit{Deleuze on Art}, 1–2.
Knowledge, like all things, is transitory. Science constantly amends itself, overturning or expanding previous discoveries to give way to deeper understanding. I must not stand still but embrace what is provisionally known and further acknowledge the gulf of mystery before me. If I cling too tightly to the buoy when I’ve fallen overboard, I may be forever lost there, adrift. There is a time to acknowledge and build upon understanding, but in my work, it is often best for me to let go of the buoy and allow the currents to take me, striving to be open to new adventures. The lessons the buoy represents are not lost, but I need not let them anchor me in place. Within my work, I seek a place of surrender, releasing myself to be responsive beyond preconceived expectations. I often fail. Then I scrape away or apply a new layer and try again. I am flawed and animal. I sometimes try to coax my hands and the paint to do things they are incapable of and grow frustrated. But when I embrace the paint’s nature and my own, I am rewarded with strange images and personal revelations that often surprise me.

The extraordinary predicament is that everything in life is in flux, including emotion, psychologies, and philosophical beliefs. I embrace change and accept that ideas and physical conditions are destined to shift. What is radical today may filter through culture and, in time, become the soundtrack for tomorrow’s cruise ship commercial. 9 This is simply the nature of time and memory which, like shards of glass tossed by ocean waves, have their edges worn smooth, and their transparency goes opaque.

Is that all there is?
If that’s all there is, my friends, then let’s keep dancing.

- Peggy Lee10

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9 In 2003, over scenes of a nuclear family horseback riding and snorkeling, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines used Iggy Pop’s “Lust For Life” in their commercial. The song is about living a drug fuel life. It’s opening lines are, “Here comes Johnny Yen again, With the liquor and drugs, And a flesh machine, He’s gonna do another striptease.”

10 Lee, Is That All There Is?
4.

My process is exploratory. As I work, I am committed to remaining flexible and open to possibilities rather than restricting myself to a single path. The more I can keep questions in front of myself instead of firm answers, the more I thrive and remain engaged.

I paint on found or reclaimed wood with varied surfaces and patinas. Working on wooden surfaces provides resistance to the physicality of my approach to painting. I am painting on panels of various sizes, joined to form one scene (Fig. 3 and 4). Unlike a puzzle, the panels can be rearranged, discarded, or expanded to reacquaint the narrative (Fig. 5). In the work’s initial configuration, I have purposely left the narrative ambiguous to invite visual questions and engagement (Fig. 6). As the work expands through new layers and future panels, its potential grows.

Fig. 3. Ian Grieve. What We Know is Provisional. 2023. Oil on panel, 72 x 58 inches.
Fig. 4. Ian Grieve. *When I First Learned to Swim, They Laid Me on the Shore*. 2023, Oil, latex, colored pencil, and mixed media on wood. Variable dimensions. Currently 247-1/2 x 25-5/8 inches.

Fig. 5. Ian Grieve. *When I First Learned to Swim, They Laid Me on the Shore* (Reconfigured). 2023. Oil, latex, colored pencil, and mixed media on wood. Variable dimensions.

Fig. 6. Ian Grieve. *When I First Learned to Swim, They Laid Me on the Shore* (detail). 2023. Oil, latex, colored pencil, and mixed media on wood. Variable dimensions.
After sketching ideas, I slowly build up many deep and inconsistent layers of paint, searching through the mud for forms. New layers are applied not to eliminate or obliterate those beneath. Each new layer intentionally allows glimpses of those beneath as I work to bring a form forward. Like science and the pursuit of understanding, I do not cast away the knowledge I once held but encourage the paint to some greater truth.

As the painting develops, I embark on many searching adjustments, corrections, and additions, each leading to multiple cycles of modification. The process of deterioration holds equal significance to that of creation. I scrape, chisel, and sand down large and small sections. Removing hours or days of work can be emotionally challenging but ultimately liberating.

By utilizing a palette knife in addition to brushes, I intentionally lose some control over minute details. The knife can be highly inaccurate, causing small fractions of paint to be misplaced (Fig. 7). A rough and blemished surface forms through building up, scraping, and sanding away. Evidence of earlier layers shows through adding depth to the highly textural surface. By not smoothing out or blending the paint, a slight visual movement is produced on the surface of the paintings, similar to static on an old television. I leave this vibration and visual noise to indicate deterioration, degradation, and fragmentation. This is meant to embody the fleeting nature of memory and the impact of time in the final work (Fig. 8).

Fig. 7. Ian Grieve. …But I’m Holding On. 2023. Oil and wax on wood. 12 x 12 inches.
Fig. 8. Ian Grieve. *What Are You Waiting For?* 2023. Oil and wax on wood. 20-1/2 x 14-7/8 inches.
I am also interested in ways to depict time within the artwork. In the visual arts, time is free to bend and fold back on itself, which I believe is also how humans truly experience time. For example, research shows that memory is beneficial to aid us in future experiences. Recollection of the past helps us to make crucial decisions about the future. D.H. Ingvar pioneered the research into "future memory."  

11 We save information about our experiences as they happen. We then recall pertinent memories as we enter new situations or make decisions about future actions. Various scenarios based on lived experiences are rehearsed in the frontal/ prefrontal cortex before deciding how to proceed.  

12 These rehearsed scenarios about possible future outcomes are also remembered. Thus humans can recall those memories of future possibilities by innately relying on ambiguous connections from discordant recollections.  

With some well-documented exceptions, memory can be fallible and unreliable. There may well be a chess player who can beat grandmasters while blindfolded, but there are many cases of witnesses' accounts with opposing descriptions of the crime in addition to voluminous research around the fallibility of memory, both short and long-term.  

15 As memory is distorted and swallowed by time, even recollections of a monumental nature may mix, bend, or be lost altogether. Time and distance from an event can cause past loves or regrets to grow soft around the edges and push so firmly against each other that they can merge. What was the name of that candy you loved in elementary school?  

I paint ambiguous narratives describing situations nestled in a place that looks like our world but is not necessarily beholden to its physical properties (Fig. 9). These works are partially a depiction of what my memory can feel like. Fleeting figures merge in impossible scenarios. I work to imbue a sense of nostalgia. Part of the allure of painting is that it can describe our world, moments of tenderness or deceit. It can also reach beyond the banality of the day-to-day, offering psychological and philosophical questions (Fig. 10). Art can represent and evoke emotion, desire, and defeat. The potential is vast for the real or imagined.

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12 “The frontal/prefrontal cortex handles the temporal organization of behaviour and cognition, and the same structures house the action programs or plans for future behaviour and cognition” Ingvar, 127.  
13 Dennett, Consciousness Explained, 144–45, 176–79.  
14 Barden, “Grandmaster Plays 48 Games at Once, Blindfolded While Riding Exercise Bike.”  
Fig. 9. Ian Grieve. *When I First Learned to Swim, They Laid Me on the Shore*. (detail) 2023. Oil, latex, colored pencil, and mixed media on wood. Variable dimensions.

Fig. 10. Ian Grieve. *Everything will be Alright (Someday)*, 2020. Oil on canvas. 24 x 18 inches.
6.

There are several ways that I attempt to describe time, figural repetition, paint application, and fragmentation of the surface and materials. Some figures repeat at different points in the paintings, suggesting multiple events that occurred at different times coincide in a single scene. The Bayeux Tapestry (Fig. 11), is a continuous narrative depicting the events from 1064 to 1066 culminating in the Battle of Hastings. It is 19.5 inches wide and 231 feet in length. Its key figures are repeated several times in crucial scenes as if they are happening simultaneously.

Synoptic narrative is another historical approach that utilizes characters repeated in multiple events in a single image. Synoptic narrative has been broadly used in many cultures worldwide, including Chinese post-Han period artworks, ancient Assyrian art, and throughout the Italian Renaissance (Fig. 12, 13, and 14). Synoptic and continuous narratives, as well as the panorama, can create a sense of ambiguous time.

Fig. 11. Bayeux Tapestry, est 1075. Unknown, pos. designed by Scolland. Wool thread embroidery on linen cloth. 231 feet x 19.5 inches. © 2023 Bayeux Museum

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16 Heslop, "Regarding the Spectators of the Bayeux Tapestry."
Fig. 12. Shows Confucius twice in a single scene. At right, he is seated in discussion with Duke Ling of Wei, and at left, he is returning to his ox-drawn cart to resume his search for an enlightened ruler. “Duke Ling asks about military array and Confucius departs from Wei”. From The Life of Confucius. 16th c. Album leaf (formerly section of handscroll), ink and color on silk. 33 x 70 cm. Cultural Relics Bur, Qufu, Shandong.

Fig. 13. All of the moments of this battle are shown simultaneously rather than in sequence. “Attack on an Enemy Town.” From the Central Palace of Tiglath-pileser III at Kalhu (Nimrud), 730–727 B.C. Gypsum, 43 1/8 × 83 1/16 × 5 in., left side: 36 7/16 in. British Museum [1880,0130.7 and 1848,1104.4] [1880;1848]. Image © The Trustees of the British Museum.
The panoramic form acts as a timeline and encourages viewers to move along its length, encouraging them to spend time reflecting on the scenes depicted as they physically walk its distance. Simonetta Moro reverses the physical interaction generally associated with the panoramic form. She draws cityscapes on long panoramic scrolls, which are then set in motion by a machine designed to automatically unscroll the drawing (‘the Panorama Box’).17 The viewer can stand in one place as the scene scrolls by. Her work is compelling and elicits an anticipatory reaction as the drawing rolls by. I am interested in the physicality of my panorama occupying space along the walls in a room and the viewer moving along its form. They need not wait to reveal its content but may encounter it at their own rate.

17 Curci, “Interview Simonetta Moro.”
Fig. 15. Simonetta Moro, “Panorama Viewing Box,” 2013. wood, plexiglass, metal. 17 x 16 1/2 x 3 inches.

Fig. 16. Simonetta Moro, “Roma,” 2001. Ink, graphite, and pastel on tracing paper. 12 x 180 inches.
The Fayum funerary portraits from Roman Egypt exemplify the human need to memorialize and visually solidify memory (Fig. 17, 18, 19, and 20). These naturalistic portraits were created on wood or linen using encaustic or tempera paint. They are portraits of middle-class merchants, priests, soldiers, and athletes intended to be attached to mummified bodies before entombment. According to John Berger, they served as “identity pictures” for the dead as they journeyed to Osiris’ kingdom of the afterlife.\textsuperscript{18} Berger compares the anguish of losing a loved one to attempting to repair a shattered jar, “Eventually, the jar is reassembled, but it is not the same as it was before. It has become both flawed and more precious….The Fayum portraits touch a similar wound in a similar way…more precious because the painted gaze is entirely concentrated on the life it knows it will one day lose.”\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{mummy.png}
\caption{Mummy with an Inserted Panel Portrait of a Youth. Date: A.D. 80–100. Egypt, Fayum, Hawara. Human remains wrapped with linen and mummification material; panel portrait: encaustic on limewood. Mummy: 66 9/16 x 17 11/16 inches. Panel as exposed: 15 x 7 1/16 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{18} Berger, “The Fayum Portrait Painters,” 7–12.

\textsuperscript{19} Berger, 11–12.
I see a thematic connection between the Fayum paintings and my own, namely those of impermanence, the cycle of life, and memory (Fig. 21, 22, and 23). My determination to build in the sense of time and age through paint application also connects to the Fayum paintings’ degraded condition.20 In some ways, more importantly, I am influenced by the natural world and the suggestive patterns found there. The human brain inherently orders patterns and makes sense of chaos. An example is facial recognition performed by the fusiform gyrus within the brain. I am interested in and am inspired by tuning into pareidolia, seeing familiar objects or patterns in otherwise random or unrelated patterns. Wood grain, swirls within a stone, or clouds coalesce into recognizable figures and forms.

Fig. 21. Ian Grieve. *The Heads XVI*. 2022 Oil and wax on wood. 12-3/4 x 10-3/8 inches.

Fig. 22. Portrait of a Woman, 55-70 AD. Encaustic on lime wood. 35.80 x 20.20 cm. The British Museum.

Fig. 23. Portrait of a man. 200-250 AD. Encaustic on lime wood. 7½in x 11in. Greek private collection since 1960s.
8.

The painter can do no more than construct an image; he must wait for this image to come to life for other people. When it does, the work of art will have united these separate lives; it will no longer exist in only one of them, like a stubborn dream or a persistent delirium, nor will it exist only in space as a colored piece of canvas. It will dwell undivided in several minds… – Maurice Merleau-Ponty

There is profound connective potential between artist and viewer. A spectator 'completes' a work of art by processing what they observe through the personal filters of their lived experiences. Through the simple but essential act of observation, a viewer defines a personal and unique meaning around the art. The viewer's observational participation is a vital connection to the artist. The link may span contextual shifts across broad swaths of time.

Even purely non-representational works may fill with meaning according to each viewer’s distinct past experiences. Meaning is impermanent, personal, and transient. Consider Joan Mitchell’s *August Rue Daguerre*, 1957 (fig. 24). A memory of being on a Parisian street was her inspiration. She painted about an emotional reaction to remembered scenes. Her work is full of openness, allowing access to anyone who spends time with it. When it was painted, the world was just twelve years from a brutal war and still rebuilding. Mitchell’s work would have been received differently in 1957 than someone viewing it now, with the benefit of greater temporal distance from the historical context. By not locking or insisting on a strict meaning in my work, I strive to keep open its potential and communicate as Merleau-Ponty suggests across time.

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Painting was the way you send out your signal, plot your course through precarious waters, navigate toward other vessels, other shorelines, other people. You steer that little square, and its unstraight lines, as it rises and sinks, and that’s how you try to save your own life. - Amy Sillman$^{24}$

I propose that doubt is an asset, uncertainty a strength. Making, for me, is about engagement and response, searching, and trusting in the process. It is about dwelling in openness and seeking meaning. It is about carefully laying down breadcrumbs to guide me safely out of the forest and then calling out to a flock of birds to consume the trail. Being lost in the woods can produce triumphant insights, total collapse, and every combination of branching tendrils that stretch between.$^{25}$

I am compelled to paint to seek an understanding of my place in a chaotic and heartbreakingly beautiful world. My work is grounded in the struggle to accept universal transience—my drive to create is as strong as my impulse to deteriorate. It is about gathering disparate thoughts, situations, and figures and juxtaposing them to build new connections, narratives, and meaning. It's about pushing against what a painting or art 'ought' to be while acknowledging that I am not isolated from artists, thinkers, and adventurers that came before. Historical and contemporary artworks, varied cultures, travel, music, and every thread of fragmented phenomenon that draws my reverence and delight play an influential role in my work's evolving state.

$^{24}$ Sillman, “Unstraight Lines: Louise Fishman (1939–2021).”

$^{25}$ Sara Dotterer throughly discusses rhizomatic connection in her thesis. Dotterer, “Eco-Interoception.”
When I began writing this paper, I had no idea where to begin. I write about my work regularly, but rarely academically, and certainly not for public consumption. I usually write in a ridiculous, dramatic, fragmented, and emotional way. I write to break open what is lodged inside to help me understand my art, myself, and often just to make myself laugh. I have torn this essay apart over and over, reordered it, and rewritten it from the ground up in the final hours, twice. I agonized about being too poetic. I woke up today, the day this beast is due, and realized that I still do not understand my work. I am emotional about it, and I know now why I cannot pin it down. Everything is in flux. I am using this space to tell you that I am letting myself off the hook. I hope you will do the same for yourself if you’re ever up against something similar. I stand by the essay, but it is, in many ways, incomplete. It could not be complete if I were to work on it until I close my eyes for the last time. And that’s a good place to be. The following five stanzas are my true thesis.

I hope I never fully understand.

I make because it feels like I ought to
I want to make things that move
and breathe fire

I want to make things that feel
like they’re the back spoon in winter,
wrapping you up tight

but full of questions
we can answer together
tender but holding a hammer

that are familiar
as your lover’s teeth

But as novel as
the first record you bought for yourself
or the first time you tasted lychee

Ian Grieve - 2 May 2023

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26A: Lou Reed, “Transformer” from a $2.99 bin because the cover looked so incredible. “Who is that?” The content was better still.
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