

5-2023

Reading the Room: Memory, Dwelling, and the Everyday

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Reading the Room:
Memory, Dwelling, and the Everyday

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

By

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B.A. University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2016

May 2023

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Abstract

In any space, there is a residue that coats the present with a patina of memory. Creating layered imagery in dream-like paintings and prints, I use the domestic realm as a metaphor for the internal world of the mind, memories, and private thoughts, including them in compositions with symbols like the boundaries of windows, doors, and gates. These metaphorical structures also portray outward identities, which guard inner emotions. The conceptual aspects of these compositional elements weave together memories of the past and places of the present into a unified whole.

I began graduate school at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I often found myself observing different dwellings within and outside of my personal spaces. My intention is to show the connection between our dwellings and minds and how the environment can influence a mental state.

Introduction

My work focuses on the connection between memory, mind, and place. I create oil paintings and woodcut prints that explore and investigate my surroundings and how the physicality of places where I have built memories are fundamental in shaping who I am. Within the compositions of my work, I create surreal, dream-like worlds based on my own recollections and sense of place. When referring to place, I utilize a definition from Jocelyn Donlon in *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture*, as “...an area controlled by the prevailing culture’s identity” (Donlon 2002, 25). Sitting, observing, and synthesizing the surroundings I occupy prompts me to create densely layered images of everyday life. I like to see how far I can push and pull viewers' eyes—having areas that fade out of existence or that form from nothing. The dwellings in my life are emotional vessels for holding recollections, secrets, and daily rituals. My images evoke the complexity, fluctuations, and enigmatic nature of lived experiences.

I was born and raised in New Orleans. Moving away from New Orleans for my bachelor's degree and then moving back nearly ten years later, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, gave me a new appreciation for my hometown. I had the opportunity to reexamine simple moments like sitting on my porch and feeling the hot, sticky night air thick with conversation and humidity. Moments like these connect and weave together the past and the present to create a deeper understanding and appreciation of my environment. I choose locations I am strongly connected to, and my work expresses the collection of settings that have a unique sense of place. By arranging these images I find commonality in seemingly opposite structures of the physical world. This discovery of heterogeneous elements triggers even more memories to resurface, creating a cycle of recovery. This cycle of witnessing an object, area, or feeling from the past and connecting it with my present feeds my desire to dive deep into the mind.

My paintings stem from my fascination with the everyday. I like being an observer in other people's homes and seeing what I can learn about an individual from observing the areas they inhabit, the items that they choose to display, and the way I move through the space—if there is flow, if there are areas that seem awkward—responding to the nuances of the dwelling. In these moments when objects, light, or architecture stand out to me, I document them with photographs. Using these images, I create layered compositions.

I use these collaged environments as a starting point for paintings and woodcuts. I am drawn to the sensation of recalling: seeing things I remember from childhood as an adult which creates intricate memories. Simultaneously recalling the past while experiencing the present moment allows me to create a new experience, which can only be described through my own contemporary version of *trompe l'oeil*. Contemporary *trompe l'oeil* references the true experience of memory and presence, not the accuracy in which paint is applied (Wade 1999). I choose to use oil paint as my media due to the illusion of space that can be created and manipulated into these dream-like images. I am recreating the mirage that exists in my own mind. The different ways I apply paint to canvas suggests the intensity and complexities of the individual memories. For distant remembrances, I apply a transparent glaze over these spaces to suggest the idea of the past slowly washing away or being altered by the imagination. This can be seen in *Way Through* (**figure 1**) the rocking chair in the lower left corner being washed away by the siding of the house. Also, in the painting we see my self portrait lounging in an armchair, when painting the chair I decided to allow the paint to drip and disappear, while my self portrait is very solid. This suggests to the viewer that the world that is dissolving and fluctuating between absences and presences is all in my own mind.



Figure 1. *Way Through*, 2023. oil on canvas.

Investigation of Space and Collage

At the heart of this body of work is an investigation of the illusion of space in painting. I began this work at the same time that the entire world was at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a society we were stuck in our homes, which simultaneously acted as both a place of safety and of loneliness. During this time, I developed a unique relationship with my home and the zones I was allowed to occupy, or as Gaston Bachelard describes, “We diminished the entity of the outside world and experienced all qualities of intimacy with increased intensity” (2014). At the peak of the pandemic, it did feel as if the entire world had disappeared. We were baking bread and becoming more acquainted with our quarters and with ourselves. Due to this concentrated and intense time I came to a greater understanding of “home.” I began observing my limited surroundings. I noticed how different spaces evoked certain memories and emotions. I then documented these reactions and took photographs of these locations, grouping together different images to set about creating layered imagery and complex emotional compositions.

In *Grandma’s Kitchen* (**figure 2**), I took images from my grandmother’s kitchen from multiple angles, each image displaying a different part of the whole kitchen. Layering each image suggests movement within the room. This activation of movement was inspired by David Hockney and his *Joiners* series, which sets about creating a flat image that is closer to the way we truly see (Hockney and Joyce 2008). Hockney joins hundreds of images shot from different angles and collages them together to create *Desk*, 1984, (**figure 3**) which mimics how we perceive the desk; using memory to reconstruct and understand the desk (Hockney and Joyce, 2008).

At the beginning of this series, I wanted to incorporate the act of seeing everything at once, recreating the act of our eyes darting around a room. In doing so, I do not completely

disregard traditional perspective; however, I use it to create a more complex image that can both push and pull the eye in new ways. This collaged effect created densely layered compositions invoking a sense of overwhelm.



Figure 2. *Grandma's Kitchen*, 2021. acrylic and oil on canvas.



Figure 3. *The Desk*, David Hockney, 1984. Collage of chromogenic prints, 48 x 46.5 in.

In the book *Hockney and Art*, Hockney states, “Collage is the key to breaking traditional perspective rules” (2008). Hockney studied Cubist collage to help him build his *Joiner* series. I use the method of collage as a starting point. In the spring of 2022, I began concentrating on building layers that recall different structures with similar functions, as in the function of the object or area or what they could represent to the viewer, i.e. porches and stairs act as liminal zones, while beds and sofas act as places to rest. In *Barriers I*, (**figure 4**) I combine images of barriers and other objects that act as partitions. In this work, I explore the idea of properties and ownerships of collective regions. Many in the United States value their individualized properties and put up fences and barriers to demarcate land from neighbors thus, giving more power to the individual than the collective. Using collage as the visual language with which to initiate this conversation, I am able to synthesize different types of demarcations for space and boundaries.



Figure 4. *Barriers I*, 2022. Woodcut print.

I use digital photography to capture these common place moments. I then combine these photographs in a digital collage to create these densely layered compositions which allows me to intertwine time into each layer of my work. Often, I use images taken at contrasting times of the day and in different locations. I exaggerate these differences when painting, by adding in harsher and more dream-like shadows to emphasize the idea of time. Applying the concept described by Jacques Rancière, collage gives me the freedom to incorporate images from life by removing their familiarity and bringing these images to an imagined world (2009).

Memory: Deterioration and Mending

I represent the creation and deterioration of memory in my work with architectural forms that appear and vanish from the background. I build, destroy, combine, and re-imagine recollections with this subject matter. My work creates dream-like environments that bear witness to the formation and destruction of memories. I represent these acts of change within the recollections by allowing architectural forms—remembered interiors and exteriors—to overlap and dissolve into the background while forming new structures. I create different portals that are then layered to construct a fractured image of the environment.

In *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bouchard meditates upon the concept of “epiphanic dwelling,” referring to a dwelling that is connected to a moment when we suddenly realize something important (2014). My work references these moments of epiphany through the weaving of symbolic subject matter. In my process, I am constantly interacting with my environment, searching for spaces that trigger memories. These recollections range from the happy and mundane - walking in the neighborhood I grew up in- to the heart wrenching evocations of losing a loved one and having their favorite chair sit empty. Imagination aids and fills in the gaps of memory, which in turn acts as a way to mend and develop the recollections further.

While working, I often collect photographs to begin the collage process, which allows me to experiment before putting paint on canvas and frees the possibilities for composition. When I begin to apply paint, I use my memory, the emotions beneath the surface, and visualizations to build out my inner world from my original collage. Using paint to create the illusion of depth allows this work to remain in the mind. I use glazes and drips to represent the impermanence of these memories, while using textures and saturated brushstrokes to imbue my paintings with a

sense of presence. The act of using recall and imagination alters the original digital collage, as does the translation into paint, much like the actual act of trying to remember the past alters the instance itself. In these moments, I am rebuilding evocations of memories in a new way, and by calling upon this mental exercise in my artistic process, I am able to create a more enigmatic image. Twentieth-century avant-garde artists also used memory and collage to depart from realistic images. According to Michael Chapman, members of both the Surrealist and Dada movements used memory, recall, and architecture to dismantle and reconstruct the everyday (2012).

In *Rocking Chair* (**figure 5**), I use paint sparingly to give the impression of objects fluctuating between presence and absence. The viewer decides for themselves whether the images are being constructed or are deteriorating. I used the motif of the rocking chair to pay homage to my hometown of New Orleans and our love of porches, community, and extending our intimate dwellings past our front doors. Using a surreal color palette and value to suggest the subconscious mind, I intend to convey the sense that there is more of this world that cannot be seen within the frame of this painting. My use of shadow is a nod to Giorgio de Chirico—whose work in metaphysical painting also uses familiar architecture in an unconventional way to set a stage for the mind, as in *Gare Montparnasse* (**Figure 6**) (Morris 2007). Utilizing similar themes as de Chirico, I create familiar yet foreign environments in each painting. Using multiple points of perspective like Hockney, I make paintings and woodcuts that unfold as the viewer spends more time with them.



Figure 5. *Rocking Chair*, 2022. Oil on canvas.



Figure 6. Giorgio de Chirico, *Gare Montparnasse*, 1914. Oil on canvas.

Liminal Zones

In *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation, and the Everyday*, Imogen Racz describes liminal spaces such as doors, windows, and stairs as representing the boundary between the private and public (2019). Liminal zones are places of transition, either physically, mentally, or metaphorically, that embody the idea of being close to or in the midst of change and not knowing the outcome (Blanchfield). In many of my paintings, I intend the front door to act as a demarcation between the private interior of the mind and memories and the public outer persona, the image of self that is projected to the world.

Donlon states in *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture* that porches also act as liminal spaces (2003). In *Rocking Chair* (**figure 5**), I depict my own porch which acts as an “in between” that shapes my individual personal identity and the identity of my community at large. In this work, I represent structures that provide a place for community and for privacy. Different viewpoints within the painting enable the viewer to see the interior of home and the exterior of the neighborhood. The eponymous chair in *Rocking Chair* (**figure 5**) acts as a transitional zone.

In *The Storm I* (**figure 7**), there is a partly open door within another door, representing the multiple boundaries between the inner mind and the outer self. The atmospherically stormy setting happening in the home contrasts against the sunlight streaming through the bars of the partially cracked door, symbolizing the outer world affecting the inner self.

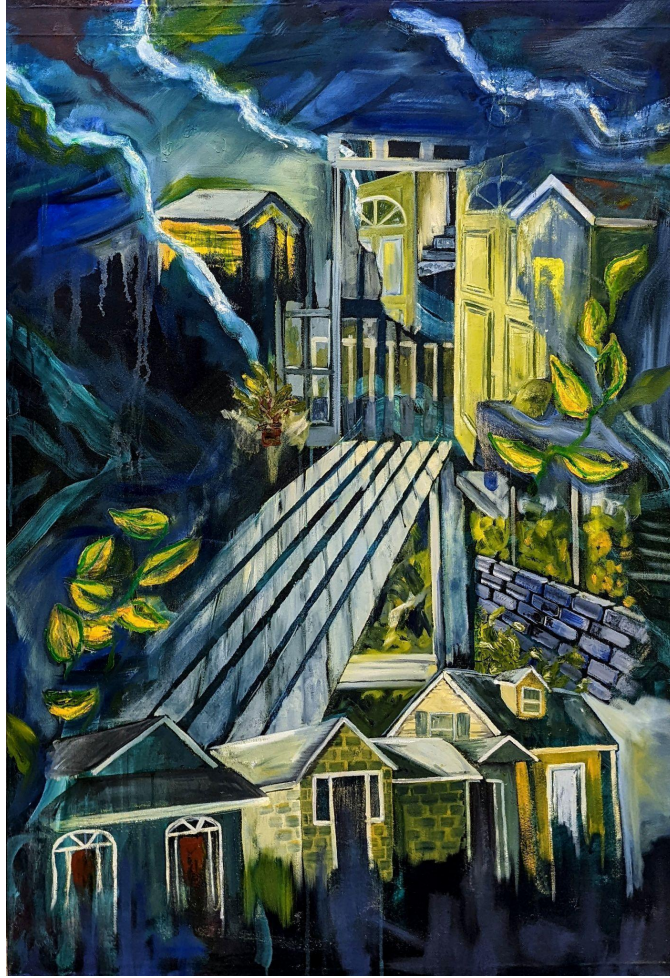


Figure 7. *The Storm I*, 2021. Oil on canvas.

Entrances and exits mark a change in emotional and physical engagement. Walking out the door means entering the public realm, leaving the intimacy of home. In paintings like *Habits* (**figure 8**), I capture daily moments like gazing out of a window, or the changing perspective of moving up or down stairs; these moments show fluctuations between one moment and the next. The instances occurring between the public and private realms are fascinating because they represent the liminal moments in our lives, much like the moments between childhood and adulthood, where growth and self-exploration occur. Thriving plants in my work symbolize this development, their growth acting as a visual transition between the architectural structures.

The Path (**figure 9**) visually depicts growth and clear demarcation between the fenced areas and a continuation of space on the other side. These visual elements of barriers or portals into new environments act as a metaphor for stages of development. This painting expresses clear boundaries between the interior and exterior and the growth that happens when moving through these liminal sectors.



Figure 8. *Habits*, 2022. Oil on canvas.



Figure 9. *The Path*, 2022. Oil on canvas.

Windows are liminal zones, defining the limits of what can be seen from the inside to the outside or vice versa. In the book *Framing Consciousness in Art*, art historian Gregory Minissale, references a similar use of windows as prompts for the viewer to explore the

interaction of frames within consciousness and the material world (2009). Windows act as portals that allow the viewer to look out while also framing the viewer as the subject. In *Habits* (**figure 8**), the viewer sees in and out of painted illusions of windows and mirrors. Such structures, which are a part of everyday experiences, act as metaphorical portals into different parts of the subconscious and also incur questioning about what is and is not being seen.

In my process, stretching the painting aligns with the idea of framing conscious recollections. The physical edges of the painting demarcate the metaphysical world to be entered by the viewer; this echoes the situational context in which memory is encoded. The framed boundary corresponds with a mental state and enables the viewer to experience the depicted world in a cooperative and empathic manner.

Topophilia

Topophilia is the love of, or emotional connection with, place or physical environment. My work strives to represent my attachment to the locations I paint. All these glimpses into different realms are personal and familiar to me, and I choose to represent places that hold an emotional weight. My work encompasses a collection of settings I feel have a strong sense of place, which also connects to my cultural identity. My hometown of New Orleans is most prevalent in my work. After hurricane Ida in 2021, I began to see my paintings in a different light— as the mental aftermath of living through a hurricane. While our lives can be flipped upside down, there is the need to continue to function as life moves on despite the devastation.

I am also drawn to the traditional, and familiar, shotgun houses built in southern Louisiana and I use the motif of the shotgun house in several paintings. *Unveiling the Light* (**figure 10**) signifies a representation of the ways we see different qualities of light in New Orleans. In this painting, light streams through a porch, in between telephone wires, and through the window. I find this light enchanting; very dream-like. Having these ethereal qualities triggers the imagination and creates connections to evocations of memories. This imagined and manipulated sky shows the interweaving of time and space, bringing together different times of the day and entangling the past and the present to become a new and revived connection.



Figure 10. *Unveiling the Light*, 2021. Oil on canvas.

My studio, a place where I spend most of my time, is filled to the brim with emotions. I was inspired by Amer Kobaslija's studio series (**figure 11**), in which he uses a birds-eye view to show the reality of the studio: the mess, the grime, and the paintings waiting to be displayed. This vantage point affords a glimpse into the artist's mind; we get to see where the creative process takes place (Rodriguez).

I have a similarly intimate connection to my own workspace. In *The Studio* (**figure 12**), I layer images of my graduate school studio to convey my love of the grime, and the cockroaches, and the reality of the workspace I inhabited for three years. This room represents my own inner, private world. I chose to paint myself within the space as a nod to past painters, like Courbet in *The Painter's Studio* (**figure 12**), who reflected back on seven years of his painting career. My iteration of *The Studio* is a reflection of my time in the U.N.O. M.F.A. program. This work is a combination of past wins and losses within the studio and a celebration of the act of creation itself.



Figure 11. Amer Kobaslija, *Jayne's Studio*, 2013. Oil on Plexiglas, 12" x 14"



Figure 12. *The Studio*, 2022. Oil on canvas.



Figure 13. Gustave Courbet, *The Painter's Studio*. Oil on canvas.

Conclusion

This thesis describes the role of memory in a conversation between an external place and an internal, subconscious world. Beginning with an investigation of dwellings and the concept of place, I reflect back on what effects certain spaces have on my own emotions and psyche. This then extends past my own evocations of memories into a wider construct. I use familiar structures and common household motifs to impart a sense of relatability. I then rebuild these architectural forms in the painting process, reconstructing the three-dimensional physical environment to create more dream-like, two-dimensional compositions, representing the areas of remembrances intertwined with the imagination. This act of layering, particularly as I utilize collage, combines the past and the present to create a more holistic experience for both myself and the viewer. My paintings hold tension between past and present, public and private; between the boundaries of the interior world of thought, self, and the external persona which guards our emotions .

Engaging with these concepts, I came to understand how place intersects with memory, which led to an exploration of the self and the human mind. I plan to further investigate the concept of recollections, which seems to be leading me into concepts about perspective and the unconscious mind. I am experimenting with layering woodcut prints beneath my oil paint to create ghost images behind the paintings. The under-image gets smudged and washed away leaving an imprint of the forgotten space. I am choosing to combine the two media to contrast the line work of a print with the expressive color and brush stroke of the paintings. I hope this leads to a deeper understanding of oil paint as a medium and memory as a concept. I plan to reflect upon the feminist perspective within this current series of works, dive deeper into the connection between this work and the psychology of memory, and explore the attachments we can have to

our everyday surroundings. These works allow me to explore my own memories, experiences, and places, leading to a deeper understanding of the ways the human mind functions.

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Vita

Sara Hardin is a New Orleans-based artist and educator. Her work consists of oil paintings and wood cut prints in which she explores the connection between the mind, memory, and place.

Hardin earned her B.A. in Art Education from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2016.

She is currently pursuing a graduate degree in Fine Art at the University of New Orleans in Louisiana.