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**Blind Spot**

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Blind Spot

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
Paige DeVries

B.F.A. Rhode Island School of Design 2013

May, 2024
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Abstract

The subject matter for my paintings and photographs comes from observing the suburban landscape of my New Orleans neighborhood. My work contends this seemingly mundane environment teems with beauty, the sublime, and interactions between the human world and nature. My paintings use vibrant colors and unexpected light sources to challenge the viewer’s relationship to the plants, animals, houses, and fences we see every day. Some of the photographs I take are the source imagery for my paintings and other images are reserved for my book of photography. The book, like my paintings are images taken from when I am out walking my dog. What I see and record is a story that can be simultaneously ordinary and odd.

Places like our neighborhoods, though utterly familiar, can be alien and contain great wonder when seen with fresh eyes. I believe these places can tell us something about ourselves and how we impact our environment. This body of work is my attempt at conveying this idea.
Introduction

My artwork depicts things that have been seen so often that they frequently go unnoticed. The paintings and photos I create start with simple observations of my middle-class neighborhood: the fences, home exteriors, plants, animals and trees that make up the suburban landscape.

I believe domestic spaces, like the exterior of a home or yard, have the potential to reveal intimate portraits of humanity and the environment. I first make a photograph, and then choose particular scenes to render in oil paint, other times keeping them in their original photographic form. The paintings use unconventional color, distorted light, and familiar imagery to blur the line between what is banal and what is sublime in my New Orleans neighborhood.

When making photos, I look for subtleties in the landscape which point to how people inhabit and affect the environment. Though people are not the explicit subject of my work, the impact of the human “hand” on the habitat is always present. My work contends people are intrinsically connected to both the nature they cultivate and the nature that adapts, creeps in, and asserts itself back into the spaces around us.

The concepts I capture in the photographs evolve into painted imagery through the act of pushing oil paint around, layering, obscuring and color manipulation. I work in a variety of ways, fast and slow painting, detailed and loose to help create unity within my
work but also to reflect the way I feel these suburban spaces are treated: sporadically
cared for and loved, and then in turn forgotten and neglected when things get too busy
in our personal lives.

This combination of ways of working yields results that are usually quite unexpected,
and to me, reveal something different about the subject than was originally captured in
the photograph. The photos that do not become paintings turn into a collection of
images that reflect my sense of humor and surprise at discovering something striking
that has been right under my nose all along. The images individually insist on their
ordinariness, but taken together, they become a patchwork of human, animal, and
environmental commonalities, oddities, and symbols for how people exist in their day-to-
day lives.

My body of work posits that the difference between something being viewed as ordinary
or extraordinary is also a function of exposure: how often is something seen by a
person, once in a lifetime, monthly, daily? This challenges whether something should be
rendered less remarkable because it is tightly woven into the fabric of our lives. I look at
how these ideas manifest themselves in my own life. Commonplace spaces in my
neighborhood I normally overlook I now attempt to see with wide-open eyes. My
paintings and photographs contain an urgent desire to be witnessed by the viewer, seen
anew, and regarded. They are my personal attempt to understand beauty, nature and
the uncanny where I am, living in a relatively ordinary landscape so familiar to many of
us.
Walk with me

My art practice evolved from something I enjoy doing every day: walking my dog. I have never been one to sit down and meditate, but my daily walks through my Algiers neighborhood are the closest I get to being “in the moment” and appreciating my immediate world. The photos I make, and the paintings I ultimately create, are personal and diaristic. These works examine the humor, care, and sometimes futile effort often employed to control one’s immediate surroundings and express ideas of beauty and order. For me, these concepts manifest themselves in the most ordinary of scenes: the checkerboard pattern of freshly laid sod, an ambitiously large spider web, or a colored fluorescent bulb illuminating a window. The paintings and photograph groupings ultimately resulting from these moments are familiar and beautiful, but become strangely funny, uncanny, and self-reflective when separated from their original environment.

In creating this body of work, I’ve looked to the paintings of Lois Dodd. Her intimate representations of the quotidian, painterliness, and earnest approach to her subject are things I strive for in my own paintings. Like Dodd, my sources evolve from walking through my neighborhood and recording the interface between the man-made and nature, devoid of actual people. My work places the viewer in my footsteps, viewing a scene from my vantage point, as a witness and creator.
Faye Hirsch writes in her book, *Lois Dodd*, of Dodd’s window paintings: “There is a sense in these lonely windows of an optical consciousness that places the artist within them by default. And more than that, it establishes an implicit relationship with the viewer that is often quite intimate. In Dodd’s windows, we are positioned in her place- as the eye that is both artist and viewer, maker and receiver”\(^1\). Dodd uses her windows as the framework for both the artist and viewer to converge and enter the picture plane. Similarly, I structure my paintings with up close, frontal, views of windows, home exteriors, fences, and plants. Like many of Dodd’s works, my paintings almost always contain an element of obstruction. The subject that invites the viewer into the image is also the thing that obscures one’s ability to see the scene in its entirety. It is this obfuscation that allows for mystery to enter and dwell in my work.

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For instance, in my painting *A Room with A View* (Figure 2), the viewer is thrust within inches of a brick wall. The bricks create an almost abstract grid within the painting that their viewer must look through to piece together glimpses of the lawn, brick home, and a slightly drawn back window curtain that lays beyond. The brick obstruction conveys mystery and a sense of voyeurism.

For me, the prospect that what we consider familiar can still contain great mystery is very exciting and lives throughout my paintings and photos. Yau John’s Hyperallergic article talks about Dodd’s similar ability to sift through her environment, and reframe modest, commonplace objects to be seen anew (2016)². My work is an invitation for the viewer to reconsider their own home, neighborhood and beyond as places rife with mystery and are multi-dimensional in how we relate to them. This element of mystery, challenging our relationship to the familiar, also allows my work to appear uncanny at times. I want to surprise the viewer into seeing the many faces of something that looks otherwise banal, to share the same sense of wonder that I experience.

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The Sublime

*Sublime*

transitive verb

1) “to elevate or exalt especially in dignity or honor”

2) “to convert (something inferior) into something of higher worth”

Adjective

1) “tending to inspire awe usually because of elevated quality (as of beauty, nobility, or grandeur) or transcendent excellence”

-Merriam Webster³

These selected definitions closely align with how I view the sublime in my body of work. My artwork attempts to elevate something from the ordinary into the realm of awe and wonder. I want to believe the spaces, places, and things around me possess the kind of power to make me stop, admire, and question. This body of work is an outgrowth of my desire to discover beauty, connection, and belonging where I am in an environment that is both suburban and slightly wild. How I interpret and depict the sublime in my work can be traced back to the 18th century German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich’s paintings focus on the sublime (and less the picturesque or

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pastoral) branches of Romanticism. Distinctly, many of Friedrich’s paintings depict human-made constructions in nature to evoke a sense of the sublime. In my own artwork, I too am interested in the interaction between human-made construction and the natural environment to activate for the viewer what is sublime among us.

Many of Friedrich’s works also use various methods to “place” the viewer in the painted scene. While looking through Joseph Koerner’s book, *Casper David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (1990)⁴ I discovered two paintings that did just that. In Friedrich’s painting, *Cabin in the Snow* (Figure 3), *Bushes in the Snow* (figure 4), the viewer

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becomes the “traveler” coming upon these ordinary scenes, depicting a specific place, though where exactly is not identified.

My paintings, like *Mud Puddle* (Figure 5), similarly attempt to transmute the viewer into the traveler, coming upon a scene that is ordinary but transcends its ordinariness. The mud puddle becomes precious through the painting process and glows with saturated colors and rich details.

For example, I lovingly rendered the painting *Mud Puddle*. By painting it, I hold it in high regard and in doing so I ask the viewer to deeply consider this subject as well while also recognizing it is simply a mud puddle. With this idea in mind I also think of M.C. Escher’s woodcut print, *Puddle* (Figure 6), a work I saw at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston two years ago. This work initially appeared to be an ordinary mudpuddle. But its meticulous craftsmanship, and its strange elevation of the lowly subject make it a fascinating work of art. Along with the final print each wood block was

Figure 5. *Mud Puddle*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 11”x 9”

Figure 6. M C Escher, *Puddle*,1952, Woodcut on paper, 12”×16”
on display showing the elaborate process it took to craft his simple subject. Escher’s subject was mundane, but it also felt extraordinary because of the lengths he took to create it and the beauty of the finished product. That feeling of dedication and reverence is what I hope to bring to my own work.

An important element in my work that is different from Friedrich and M.C. Escher is my sense of humor. Humor and wonder are subtly intertwined throughout my paintings and photographs. I take all my subjects seriously, but I also take mischievous delight in them.

In photographs like *Barking at the Moon* (Figure 7), there is something absurd about peering through the hole in the curl of a furry tail. I balance the silliness of the idea with the beauty of the photo’s composition and the beauty of the light as it sets aglow a million strands of fur. Like *Mud Puddle*, the work is silly and serious. Neither photo nor painting are immediately funny, but the humor reveals itself when the viewer sets aside the craftsmanship and realizes what the work is asking them to do: consider ordinary, small delights with serious attention and awe.

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Figure 7. Barking at the Moon, 2024, Framed digital print on archival paper, 14"x17"
Nature

I was born and raised in Anchorage, Alaska. My upbringing there has impacted who I am and how I view my environment. I do not believe that in Alaska, New Orleans, or anywhere else nature observes a line between what is wilderness and what is urban. Growing up, every spring I saw moose calve in my backyard and bears lumber down the mountain into the city to eat them. My life experience tells me plants and animals go anywhere they can to survive and thrive.

While New Orleans isn’t Alaska, the region’s nature creeps in and makes its home in my neighborhood and our city. The other morning, after two days of rain, I was cleaning out my gutter downspout and three garter snakes came tumbling out. They writhed for a moment then slithered off into the garden and I thought, “my home is literally their home too.” It is this sentiment that is an undercurrent throughout

Figure 8. *Nothing in Nature Pretends to Love You*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 18”x24”

Figure 9. *Hello Stranger*, 2024, Framed digital print on archival paper, 14”x17”
my book of photography in pictures like Hello Stranger (Figure 9) and paintings like Nothing in Nature Pretends to Love You (Figure 8). These paintings and photographs reflect my interest in how people attempt to make domestic order and assert their aesthetics in a verdant, resilient southern environment that has its own will. Through my images I attempt to shift the common perspective that the natural world is distinct and separate from our city and suburban dwelling lives, because it is not. I believe we all have a relationship to nature regardless of where we live and whether we are aware of it.

To better understand my own relationship with nature in my work, I find writer Ada Limón’s collection of poems, The Hurting Kind (2022)\(^5\) articulates some of my own feelings. I appreciate her interest in the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. She uses nature as both the subject of her work and a tool for delving into her interior world. In Jeevika Verma’s article about Limón’s poems for National Public Radio she reiterates these ideas. Verma writes, “The poet often directs this attention back to herself — learning from nature how to interact with her feelings, her reactions and her memories. The power of attention, Limón conveys, is in finding out just how an individual's experience might fit into the collective experience.”\(^6\) Her poems allow her personal observations to seamlessly shift into expansive associations

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and emphasize experiencing wonder as important in and of itself. I relate to these goals in her work and see them reflected in my own painting and photography.

Like Limón, I think drawing inspiration from nature and creating artwork goes hand in hand with the desire to be both witness and be witnessed by the world around us. Her poem *Sanctuary*\(^7\) articulates this relationship and desire for acknowledgement. She writes of the need to not just perceive the world, but that the world also regards her back:

**Sanctuary**

> Suppose it’s easy to slip
> into another’s green skin,
> bury yourself in leaves
>
> And wait for a breaking,
> a breaking open, a breaking
> out. I have, before, been
>
> tricked into believing
> I could be both an I

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and the world. The great eye

of the world is both gaze

and gloss. To be swallowed

by being seen. A dream.

To be made whole

by being not a witness,

but witnessed.

In *Sanctuary*, Limón refers to herself as "made whole by being not a witness, but witnessed" (Limón, 6). For me, this statement has two impacts. It first speaks to how I feel when I observe and record something I see on my daily walks, because I am seeing and feel seen by the world; I become a part of my environment by being fully present while appreciating my surroundings. Second, I am witnessed and made whole in a different way by my peers and others who view my work, when I create and display the work made from these encounters.

This connection from my subject to myself and myself to the viewer through the image is very important to me and is reflected in how I construct my images. I create my photos and paintings with a first-person perspective so that the viewer looks upon the

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imagery as if they were walking in my footsteps and pausing to observe. I glean a feeling of belonging and an ability to reflect from these daily encounters with my surroundings. By creating work in the first-person, I hope my viewers do too.
Light and Color

I use color to challenge the viewer’s relationship to my subject matter. Color is like the boisterous friend I invite to the party because they bring unexpected joy as they teeter between being delightful and crass. Sometimes, when I view my finished painting, I am both seduced and repelled by the colors. They glow, demanding outsized attention and complicate the imagery. This is evident when I use naturalistic colors mixed with fits of highlighter yellow, cadmium red, and cinnabar green. Many compositions flourish in a world of complementary colors. My color choices introduce something unexpected and unfamiliar to the scenes they depict, much like Henri Matisse and the Fauvists, or contemporary painter, Matt Bollinger, from whom I draw great inspiration.

My relationship to color, like the Fauvists, is derived from my connection to the nature depicted in my work. Through his use of sun kissed pink and orange in Matisse’s 1905 painting, The Open Window (Figure 11), I feel the warmth of the breeze coming in from the balcony. The salty light blue, green, and purple pull me into the experience of watching the boats clink side to side in the water in this southern French town. As Marcel Giry describes in his book, Fauvism Origins and Development (1982)⁹, Matisse and the Fauvists employ painting color as an exciting conduit for experience of the environment. It is the way Matisse paints what it feels like, and not what it looks like that interests me, and in this I see parallels to my own work.

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In my painting, *Forever Always Elsewhere* (Figure 12), I employ color in a similar way. The cool, dark purple and blue convey a strange, cave-like eeriness. The yellow drenched tree at the painting’s center is over ripe and static with the mid-day’s heat. In this painting, like Matisse, I use color in an aspirational way: to reach past what was originally seen and into a place of feeling and imagination.

In other works, my use of color is less polite. Color throbs out of the painting, glowing and burning. In the piece, *Red House* (Figure 13), the cadmium red of the painting
radiates, creating a cinematic world, foreboding, and eerie. Similarly, Matt Bollinger’s painting, *Cicadas II* (Figure 14), uses unexpected baby pink and blue to depict the football players. The colors perfectly fit the scene and are also completely incongruent with the figures’ masculine stances and football mythology. It is his cinematic use of color; creating a world parallel to our own, just similar enough, but different in a fundamental way, that is akin to my own work.
Color also helps create my work’s pictorial space. My color choices sometimes flatten the image, so painterly brush strokes and spontaneous mark making can come to life and contrast tighter, more defined areas. Other times, color is the way I express light in my paintings.

In my work, light comes from three main sources. The first is the natural light I observe and record as I am out walking. The second is light created by my iPhone camera as I take a picture of the scene I am trying to document. Sometimes strange distortions happen; phantom light, ethereal halos, or alien-esque light streaks occur as seen in the painting Dancing Lights (Figure 15). I introduce a third light source during the painting process. Sometimes light is transmuted through a bright paint color; other times washy brush marks allow the white of the canvas to show through and create a subdued glow that radiates through the paint. Taken together, these three ways of depicting light build a world through which I create, distort and portray my subjects.

Figure 15. Dancing Lights, 2022, Oil on canvas, 48”x60”
Contemporary painter Claudia Keep, when interviewed in the Revue Eclipse and asked about her relationship to depicting light said, “I enjoy painting it, and it also represents an effort to capture the various ways that light shapes, distorts, and illuminates the world around us. The first time I painted light sparkling on the water, it was kind of a personal joke and challenge—I thought it was kind of “too pretty” but then I became sort of obsessed with it. Light can be so many things—it can be soft and dim, violent and intrusive, pleasant, or oppressive”\textsuperscript{10}.

I see how my own relationship to observing and creating light in my work is mirrored in this interview. Through painting light, I become an alchemist and editor, pulling the viewer’s attention to certain areas, and obscuring others. Light manipulation is key to how I reframe my subject, taking it from a peripheral view and into the spotlight.

Photography

My photography is diaristic. It is equal parts a chronicle of my neighborhood, my humor, observations of what is growing, what has been felled, pruned, neglected, and what is strange and beautiful. I currently make these photos on my iPhone, but in the past, I used digital cameras, manual film cameras, and experimented with Holga and Polaroid cameras. Ultimately, my phone’s camera is what made the most sense for me and this body of work: it is direct, easy to use, and doesn’t take me out of the experience of observing my surroundings.

The choice between what stays a photo and what becomes a painting is mostly instinctual. Sometimes I get it wrong. These instances, in which I’ve taken a beautiful photograph and turned it into a mediocre painting, have taught me a lot. In making this body of work I’ve realized the pictures that become successful paintings are sometimes not the best or even very good photos. They pale in comparison to what I’ve witnessed, which is a good thing. When this happens, I am freed from the image and can use the photo as a tool. This distance between what I saw and what the camera recorded allows for freedom in my painting process to invent and alter as I search for a new way to approach my subject.

Within me, there is always a desire to take a successful photo and make it into a painting because that has been my primary medium of expression for 15 years. Pushing back against this desire, considering the photograph as a complete
work of art by itself, or within the collection of my book of photography, has expanded my practice and how I view my subject matter.

Studying Todd Hido’s photography has been formative in the way I view my collection of photographs. Like my own work, Hido’s photography centers on the suburban environment. He takes nighttime photos of homes and neighborhoods that convey a surreal, still-life quality of the everyday. As Justin Berton describes Hido’s various photo projects in the article, Art of Darkness: “If Rockwell convinced us that home was a comfort zone, Hido flipped the wisdom on its head. Through his lens, suburban dwellings were cold places where secrets were kept, lies were told, and terrible things
occurred — especially at night.”

My artwork’s content is similar to Hido’s monograph project of *House Hunting* (2001), but I incorporate more levity and humor than Hido does in his subjects. I think these suburban environments are inherently mysterious and serious places for self-reflection on lifestyle, values, and the middle class, but they also hold beauty, humor, and absurdity.

My book of photography is a scavenger hunt. From page to page I challenge the viewer to find similarities between the subjects of the photos, either with content, formal choices, or both. In pairing the photos *Felled Trees* (Figure 20) and *After the Freeze* (Figure 19), the subjects might not seem like a traditional match. But when the viewer takes the time to study the two images, there are clear similarities: both are images of dead or dying plants, mound-like in shape and referential of how people landscape their yards and plots of land.

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In other images there is only the implied connection between the subjects and nothing visual explicitly connecting them. In some photos I return to the same exact place or subject and photograph it in the morning and evening or from a different perspective. The resulting photographs live in different parts of the book, maybe to be discovered by the viewer, or perhaps go unrecognized. Similar to my paintings, my photos seek to challenge how the viewer interacts with the imagery, rewarding the viewer with subtle details the closer they get and more time they spend looking. Both bodies of work are diaristic, first person perspectives intended to draw the viewer into the world they already inhabit.
Conclusion

This collection of paintings and photographs grounds me to my environment and documents the passage of time. In this way the work is deeply precious to me. This preciousness is reflected in each picture’s content and intimate size of the paintings and photographs. Each piece within this body of work has been selected because it has an inherent duality. The imagery is specific to my experience, but it is also relatable to almost any viewer. I take my subject matter, the suburban environment, its landscape, homes and creeping wildlife, and reinterpret this familiar place through the proverbial magnifying glass of my paintings and photographs.

My work is also a deep investigation into ideas of beauty, humor, the sublime, and how these concepts dwell in the most ordinary of places. The subject matter I choose and the way I paint are directly related to these interests. My use of imaginative color and light act as a hook and lure as I draw my viewer into intimate scenes of life, simultaneously mundane and extraordinary. In making this work I have learned about my own magnetism towards these three subjects but especially my idea of beauty. It is my own desire to correlate beauty with meaning that keeps driving me back to seeking out beauty right where I am.

This work has also connected me back to my upbringing in Alaska in an unintended way. Decades later, thousands of miles away I observe wildlife ensconcing itself in the homes and yards around me. I explore these wild hybrids in my paintings and
photographs and how we are reciprocally affected and connected. My paintings and photographs celebrate and find subtle humor as man-made order is thrown slightly off kilter by nature’s inherent disorder.

Through this process I became a better painter. I took risks with color choice and mark making, yielding works that surprise myself and challenge the viewer’s relationship to the familiar. I also used this time to realize a long-standing goal of mine: making a book of photography. Creating this body of work has ultimately been a joyful experience. By sniffing out the small gifts hidden in the grass, trees, and fences I gave myself permission to believe my little corner of the world matters in ways much larger than its geographical footprint.
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VITA

The author was born in Anchorage, Alaska. She obtained her Bachelors of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2013. Since moving to New Orleans in 2013, DeVries has been an artist-in-residence at the New Orleans Museum of Art, her artwork work has been featured in New American Paintings, shown at the Ogden Southern Museum of Art, and the Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans. She is also an upcoming artist-in-resident at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans. She joined the University of New Orleans’ fine arts graduate program in the fall of 2021 to further her painting practice and teach at the university level.