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Vision and Contemplation: An Exploration Within the Medium

Mica Y. Pillemer

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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VISION AND CONTEMPLATION:
AN EXPLORATION WITHIN THE MEDIUM

A Thesis Presented

by

MICA YORAM PILLEMER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of Art
VISION AND CONTEMPLATION:
AN EXPLORATION WITHIN THE MEDIUM

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MICA YORAM PILLEMER

Approved as to style and content by:

____________________________________
Richard Yarde, Chair

____________________________________
Robert Sweeney, Member

____________________________________
Pat Lasch, Member

____________________________________
Shona Macdonald, Graduate Program Director
Studio Art Program
Department of Art

____________________________________
William T. Oedel, Department Chair
Department of Art
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INTRODUCTION

Before I arrived at the University of Massachusetts Amherst my primary background was in drawing, not painting. I approached drawing primarily from the concerns of a sculptor. My chief considerations were form and lines of rhythm. Some of my studies focused on painterly considerations in drawing. I had taken painting courses and workshops at numerous schools but had never been able to translate that experience into concrete understanding. My first real steps to get a grip on painting took place during the year I spent in Italy after getting my bachelors degree. I spent this time studying master works, going out landscape painting and executing still lifes.

My time there was invaluable, however not all of these efforts were equally successful and none produced clear principles that I could advance and articulate. The area where I had the most success was with still lifes. Working on them helped me to get a handle on simple accuracy with value, shape and color. Unfortunately, this did not translate into larger ideas about painting. My time studying the master works gave me a vague sense for some of the considerations in composition, but not what came first in that process, what must be included and what can be left out. After all my efforts, I had developed my capacity to execute simple paintings of objects without broadening my understanding of how to make a painting work as a whole.

The only thing I knew with any absolute certainty was the subject on which I wished to focus my work, the human figure. The human figure was and still is the most important subject for me. It is what and who we are. It is the most fascinating and beautiful thing in existence. We can interpret a tilted head and slightly parted lips more
eloquently than any words. I have always been fascinated by the physicality of our appearance and its translation into emotion, and I have always been struck by the beauty of light on form. Working with the human figure allows for focus on both.

When I arrived at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for graduate studies, there were critical issues I needed to resolve. Unfortunately, it was not fully clear at that point what issues needed to be wrestled with. I knew that I needed to discover and resolve these issues. I was unable to determine with any certainty what the primary elements for constructing a painting were, and how you went about using them. I could paint light on form, and from my previous research knew there were issues like line and value, but how they applied to and could be used for composition was not at all clear. I could not identify out of all the potential basic principles what was essential and what could be left out. And certainly, without that, I could not know how to play with them to produce desired effects.

There were a few starting points. One was color. Color has always mystified me by its beauty and complexity. I had worked to push the intensity of color in my landscapes while in Italy but without any real success. Getting a grip on how to think about color had escaped me. While executing my still lifes, I had some success keeping the relationships between my colors and values close to what I was seeing. This was satisfying and helped me train my eye but it left me with matching color as the only avenue. In the end, while I had the ability to see color relationships more accurately, I had no clear conception of how color operates, how to think about it, and what to look for. I had no general principles about color.
Leading up to thesis year, I worked to confront these issues. My thoughts on color were directed towards avoiding trying to match colors, and instead focusing on conveying the relative temperature of the light. To facilitate this, my palette was scaled down to make color matching impossible. These limitations led to large steps forward in my understanding of how to think about color.

Another issue that called out for attention was how to arrange the image on the picture plane. During my initial two years in the program, this was concentrated on the placement of the figure and arrangement of the lines that break up the picture plane. Placement of the figure seemed one of the obvious issues involved in making a painting. What was less obvious was how to use line.

While studying master works in Italy, one thing that became apparent was that the masters organized and grouped elements in their paintings. They found ways to make things unite, connect or have harmony. One way that they did this was through line. Master artists would make the contours of objects and lines within objects connect and form tangencies. This causes the viewers eye to flow across the image connecting one form to another, and leading the viewer to the points of interest. These lines were also used to augment the feel the artist wanted the image to have. Bernini’s sculptures are terrific examples of this. Discovering how to compose with line seemed to be another starting point in my investigations.

Over the course of the first two years in the program, I had not progressed far with linear composition. Most of my solutions were superficial. Environments were still secondary considerations without clear working concepts that I could play with. This
weakness became more apparent as I transitioned to constructing environments in my images. Attempts to conceive more full environments, primarily city scenes with a single figure, were much less than successful. This was due, in large part, to a lack of understanding concerning what elements make up the primary visual structure of a painting and how to play with them. It was also too ambitious of a shift, from isolated objects in no conceivable space to realizing a figure in an environment. The attempted step forward was too large and undirected. And that is where I found myself when I transitioned to my Thesis.

One of the things I have learned along the way is the importance of working in baby steps to achieve real progress. Leaps forward are most often followed by falling backward with frustration. It is easy to progress stably in small, manageable, digestible steps. My thesis work was an attempt to make these small but significant steps forward towards a fully realized painting.
CHAPTER I
AT WORK IN BED

Figure 1. At Work In Bed. Oil on canvas (2008)

The first consideration I faced when composing this image was how to deal with a figure on the picture plane. My idea for the space was that it would serve as a limited stage for the figure, which would be the principal subject. When positioning the figure within the picture plane my goal was to create a sense of tension with a reclining image. To achieve this, I thrust the figure high onto the picture plane as if it were close to a ceiling. This placement created a claustrophobic pressure. The viewer is immediately aware of the difference between the space below and the space above the figure. It was my goal to create the impression of a cool light source and for the values to be very simply stated.

The lines at the top of the image are bent inward to reinforce the sense of the pressure of the body on the bed. The bed itself is created with two simple planes, the flat
of the bed where the figure rests and the plane of the bed facing us. While the stage itself has a sense of depth, it does not exist in context to any larger space and has no clear anchor to the environment.

The color concept I used was a cool light, warm shadow dynamic. I had some difficulty with establishing the temperature of the light as cool. Mainly this was due to the bed being a warm yellow grey. To solve this I painted two layers. The bottom layer was warm and the top later was cool. The idea behind this was to make the physical nature of the paint reflect what was happening in reality. In addition, my intention was that this warm/cool variation would cause a visual vibration that simulates the impression of light. Local color was subordinated to temperature, which helped to hold things together. Unfortunately, I was unable to make the color of the cool light appear consistent. In particular, the blue hitting the wall, the light hitting the figure, and the light hitting the bed are not of the same color family. The result is that they do not gel.

The values were kept fairly simple to aid the clarity of the read. The goal was for the value zone to take place in the middle range, never going all the way to high contrast.

While working I noticed a stiff quality in the painting and after some experimentation I came to the realization that what it needed was two things. Looser paint application and strokes of various different colors next to one another within masses to take a bland area and make it sparkle. I went around the painting roughing it up, making the strokes less smooth and noisier. The most successful area was in the pillows, where I kept the value of the color shifts closer together and popped in more chromatic spots of color to activate the rest of the areas.
Certain things disturbed me about the results of the process. The largest issue was the lack of a center of focus. There is no single area that requires more complex drawing or naturally stands out as most important. The next biggest issue was a lack of a connection between the figure and the environment. I was also concerned that the color usage was relatively even all around and as such, there was no strong color contrast or dynamism. Lastly, all the drawing in the painting was loose. There should be variety in the sophistication of the drawing. Nothing in this painting called for tight execution, and that, in the image as a whole, I perceived as a flaw.
In this painting, I sought to resolve some of the deficiencies of At Work In Bed. To establish a center of focus I turned the figure around. The head and hands serve as the center of interest and secondary areas of interest respectively. I dramatically changed my approach to color from the last painting by shifting the emphasis. In At Work In Bed my focus was showing the temperature of the light in a world of yellow, green, blue, and purple. In Yearning, I made my color idea color in light versus colorlessness in shadow to create stronger contrast and dramatic interest. To establish the connectedness between figure and environment lacking in At Work In Bed, I massed and merged the values in the dark areas.

To reinforce the center of focus I pushed the light and shadow further apart from one another in value. This was done in addition to making the shadow areas much less
colorful than the light areas as I mentioned before. All this conspires to pull the eye
directly to the colorful light areas.

I had envisioned a figure emerging out of darkness, half in and half out of
shadow. To pull this off, I set the figure in an all dark environment of a leather couch
within a nebulous dark space. The figure is wearing a black dress to facilitate merging
the values of the dress with the couch and background. There is light and dark on the
dress, however I intended it to all read as connected to the dark zones of the painting. I
worked to make this happen by describing light and dark shifts with changes in color and
temperature rather than in value. Making the values the same created a sense of harmony
and unity. The changes in color mold the form without contradicting the larger
impression.

One visual idea that I wanted to convey in the painting was softness and
smoothness. To accomplish this I made the edges between pieces of paint, especially in
the figure, soft and hazy, except for a few select areas on the periphery of the form in the
light. Diminishing the contrast where some pieces of paint met and allowing others to
have full contrast helped to further reinforce where I wanted the viewer to look. This
helped establish what was of visual importance.

To further hold the various areas together I used the same color tone in multiple
places. For example, the highlights on the hair are the same color tone as the highlights
on the couch. While the color of the light is not clear, there is a general impression
created of a cool light source and warm shadows. The color of the light is secondary to
the idea of the light possessing color and the shadow being virtually colorless in intensity.
The face is by far the richest area with a few exceptions. These exceptions include the shadow of the thumb which is extremely colorful compared to its surroundings and the point where the first finger of that same hand meets the other arm. To make the legs attract less focus they are painted with less color than the rest of the figure. They are also painted with soft lost edges conveying a nebulous smoke that does not hold the viewer’s attention.

In this painting, I experimented slightly with paint application. The idea was to use the application of paint to create more than just interest and noise. I experimented with how wet or dry the paint was when applied. I used this idea to create the impression of the different textures, from flesh to cloth to leather. The forms of the figure in the light were applied the wettest and thickest. Within a few months, the paint on the surface thinned considerably and so a great deal of this difference has diminished.

The heavier paint application in the light was meant to do two things-reinforce the contrast between dark and light and create a sense of sculpted form. I would judge the work as successful in the first and unsuccessful in the second. One of the most important things concerning the texture was keeping the dark areas thin so that there would be no contradiction between shadow and texture. In retrospect, this difference was not taken far enough.

The pose was selected to convey tension and yearning. The space is only partially realized. Like the previous work, the figure exists within a simple stage. It is meant to be a dark murky mass. Nothing indicates a location. It succeeds in this but exists too much between two worlds, two visual ideas. It is neither completely engulfed in a mass
of shadow, nor in a realized space with a definitive light source. This, ultimately, is its biggest weakness.
CHAPTER III
FROM DARKNESS

Figure 3. From Darkness. Oil on canvas (2008)

Since the painting Yearning is in between ideas, I needed to make a choice. My choice was to take the idea of the figure coming in and out of darkness a step further, to express the idea in total, rather than half way. As such, the space is completely ambiguous, being nothing more than a dark mass and the figure coming out of it. In this work, I pushed the concept of soft edge even further than in Yearning, aiming for a sense of a figure emerging out of a dark mist. The complete lack of context has added an air of mystery. The pose, the extreme contrast and the simple palette help make it an evocative image.
The paint buildup is thickest right where the light meets the shadow. This was done to drive the contrast further than it had been in Yearning. The paint application on the lips and chin was done looser and thicker to give a juicy sense of texture. Elsewhere in the painting, edges where the pieces of paint meet were used to convey how the form is moving in space and the quality of the surface. The painting is dominated by two edges, the cast shadow on the left side and the form shadow on the right side. These edges are in contrast to the virtually lost edges in the hair and on the dress.

From Darkness is a strong statement, with intensity and depth. However, those elements have been brought out without really resolving the issue of the figure relating to a space. While the figure is connected to the dark mass around it there is no environment to speak of. My next challenge was to address this issue directly.
The critical issue in my work at this point was how to create and realize a full context in which the figure can exist. It was no longer sufficient to create an ambiguous plane floating in space that the figure rested upon, or a simple mass of mist. This required a bold leap forward to an image of a figure, outdoors.

To construct the space I used an environment with a foreground, middle ground and background. The foreground contained a figure, the middle ground a body of water moving backward in space, and the background was a city. The first determination I made was that the amount of information could not be equal in all three areas. One area had to have the most information. This would logically be the foreground. Naturally, the farther back the image went the less information would be distinguishable. Optically the background would have the least detail. However, in this work I chose to juxtapose the
background with the foreground and thus eliminated almost all information within the middle ground. I attempted to push the dynamic of the opposite ends of the spatial environment.

The two things I needed to accomplish were to make each area read as separate from one another and yet hold together separately as masses. My solution was to mass the values within each area extremely close together and push the relative values of the different areas apart. To connect foreground and background I pushed the face of the figure to roughly the same value as the background of the city. This was only partially successful as a bridge.

Exploring paint surface and texture was much more important in this painting. It was also important to me that my painting was more colorful and have clear color ideas at work. If there was anything troubling about the color in Yearning and From Darkness, it was that the color was too stark. Going through the process of creating this work, however, brought many more issues to the forefront. Primarily, how do you take the various, relatively even, tonal areas and make them lead you to the center of focus? Secondly, how do you adjust the values within each area to create a sense of mood? Lastly, how do you make what is essentially a large area without a great deal of information visually interesting. The solutions I reached combined the use of linear patterns, gradients, subtle plays with temperature contrast, and a strong variety in texture.

To create order and connectedness between the various areas I made their linear patterns mirror one another. For example, the pathway of stones in the foreground echoes the direction of the cloud pattern in the sky. These linear designs are curved to
create rhythms to lead the eye. Out of all the solutions created, this one had the least impact.

More effective was the use of gradients. Gradients are areas that gradually transition from one range to another, both in value and in color, i.e. light to dark and purple to yellow. Gradients aid in creating focus and a sense of dramatic impact. I made the gradient in the middle ground get lighter and move towards yellow as it gets closer to the figure. Focusing the gradient like this made it seem that the center of the gradient, the figure, was the culmination of the image.

I made the gradient in the cityscape get lighter and cooler as it moves from the left to the right. This achieved a few things. Firstly, it makes the buildings have a stronger contrast the closer they appear to the sun helping make the sun appear brighter. Secondly, by making the color graduate towards warm as the cityscape approaches the sun, the intensity of the spot of color used to indicate the sun seems stronger. At least that was the idea. It did not work at all. Thirdly, cooling and lightening the buildings as they move to the right makes them appear to melt into the atmosphere.

The gradient in the background is not a smooth homogenous transition. The building shapes within the transition are described by a series of simple plane changes. These changes are minute in value and in color, so as not to disrupt the larger tonal identity of the background. These plane changes follow the principle that a plane facing the sun is warmer and a plane facing away is cooler. The color world that these tones existed in was a grayed red versus green respectively. The difficulty and emphasis while painting the cityscape was to balance these variations in tone while ensuring that the
entire area massed together as a whole. All the tones fitting within that zone were critical to making the background congeal as one entity and recede in space.

The texture manipulation was a slightly more complex problem to solve effectively. The key issues were the justification for the buildup, what qualities it should have, and why? To come to some reasonable solution I studied a variety of sources. I examined the paint surfaces of Monet’s landscapes and Jules Bastein-Lepage’s pastoral scenes. The idea I was most interested in was making the buildup and texture reinforce the gesture of the environment and situation. To that end, I aimed to make the buildup of the surface create the movement of the water, the sense of the clouds flowing, and the rocky sporadic nature of the ground plane. The sky and water were also devoid of a great deal of information outside of the gradient and a little bit of cloud versus sky, and so it was up to the texture to keep these areas from seeming empty and uninteresting. Moreover, the areas where there was constant movement happened to be the sky and water, and so it seemed logical to make those the principal focus of the buildup.

Most interesting and pleasing were the solutions I came up with in the sky. I made the texture spiral around the sun to create an oscillating movement, adding to the simulation of the vibration of the sun. I aimed to convey the churning of the air in additional spiral patterns in the sky around the power plant.

As I worked, I discovered some of the things that need to be considered when building up paint. Texture has to serve not only a purpose but has to have sufficient variety. Repetition creates a sense of order, but with too much similarity the texture looks boring and formulaic. If there is too little repetition or ordering in the pattern of
buildup, it becomes chaotic and thoughtless. Another issue with texture is selecting where it occurs, where it is thicker, and where thinner. If the buildup is thick all around it loses its distinctiveness. After a couple of months the paint shrunk in from its initial height, and so I have learned that you should build more texture than you think you need as you will end up with less. However, the amount of texture must be balanced with flat areas or the texture loses its value as an area of difference. The same is true about the type of stroke and regularity of the surface where it is built up.

To keep the foreground together the range of values on the figure is limited to the lower range. This is consistent with the silhouetting effect you see when viewing objects in front of a bright light source. The value range is also kept from the full range of darkness so that there is room to have more clear hue shifts. The form within the figure is executed with only the most minute shifts in value and larger shifts in hue, or temperature.

Another idea I introduced in this painting that I was interested in pursuing was the creation of a light source within the picture plane. I would say that in this regard the work fails to achieve the intended result. While the sun is radiating color into the surroundings, it fails to be convincing as a source of light. The question that I failed to understand was why and what I needed to do to remedy this. It was clear that it was not merely the painting of that area, but its relationship to everything else, which was at issue.

In summary this was the most ambitious and complex painting I had attempted up to that point. While it enabled me to wrestle with a series of new issues such as the
representation of a light source, use of gradients and a large expansion on the idea of paint buildup, it failed in its principal task, the development of a working environment as a context for the figure. I was not satisfied with the relationship between the figure and the environment. The three separate zones may connect to one another but they do not connect the viewer to the space. There is nothing leading the viewer into the image. As a result, there is a space within the picture but it reads as flat and does not pull us in. If evaluated strictly on those merits the painting could be considered a failure. Instead of making a step forward, I had stepped off the map. I knew a different direction was required.
CHAPTER V
THROUGH THE DOOR

What I needed at this point was to take one step backward and consolidate what had been working in my previous paintings. From there I could then take one smaller step forward towards making a space that led the viewer into the picture plane. The two things that made the works, prior to Transition effective were the creation of the work along a diagonal as in At Work In Bed and a clear and strong separation between light and shadow in Yearning and From Darkness. The elements most effective in Transition
were the use of clear consistent color gradients and the play of textures. I combined these ideas in Through The Door.

To create the space I broke things down into a series of simple planes, the diagonal wall plane and the ceiling plane. This device, very different from the ones used in Transition, had the effect of making the viewer travel into the space along the wall plane. To enhance the sense of depth and space I included a doorway with a figure moving through it, effectively implying the space behind and in front of the wall plane.

While working on this painting a new understanding about how to structure a picture suddenly made sense to me. It is critical to have three areas of tone that you play against one another to make your painting. Arranging and designing these tones are more important than anything, even the use of different planes to lead you into the picture. They do more than simply generate the space. They are the tonal structure of your image. Put simply the three areas are the light, the half tone, and the shadow. Boiling down all information into these three areas and playing with their range is essential. How you design these three elements determines the impact of your painting. To that end I kept the intense light to a minimum so that it would appear bright due to its relation to the other tones. I also pushed the half tone closer to the shadow than it actually was to reinforce the intensity of the light.

In Transition, I learned that clear color gradients give strength to a painting and help create mood. In Through The Door I came to understand how to play with this idea in a more clear cut way. To make color gradients work you need to single out two complementary colors that make up your light to shadow relationship. To keep the color
gradient consistent I came up with the concept of purple and green, the light leaning more
to purple and cooler, and the shadow leaning more to green and warmer. The gradient
shifts in tone and hue from the upper left to lower right and has the same impact on
motion as the diagonal of the wall plane.

Applying what I learned from Transition, I made the paint application looser in
some areas, the wall and ceiling, and smoother in others, in the values of the head.
Applying what worked in the initial paintings I kept the darkest areas, especially the
doorway, fairly colorless, but with a strong temperature, to serve as an anchor for the rest
of the colors. In addition, as had worked with the pillows in At Work In Bed, I popped
more saturated color inside areas of the light. I created a small variation on this by
focusing the more intensely chromatic colors around the contours of the light shapes.
This made the light look more colorful and created an interesting vibration. It helped add
some of that oscillation of light hitting the eye. This painting was in essence a successful
combination of what was working in all the previous paintings but taken a step further in
leading the viewer into a space within the picture plane. Over all it was a success.
CHAPTER VI
SOCIAL SOLITUDE

Figure 6. Social Solitude. Oil on canvas (2009)

After Through The Door I took one more step forward in the construction of a space or context within which the figure exists. I did this by adding an additional plane, in this case a floor plane. Aside from the importance of tonal structure I was now certain that it was the playing of these larger planes, like looking at a cube from the inside, that create a working space within the picture plane. The placement, arrangement and design of these planes and the relationships of entities to them are what create the visual read of the space. The angle relative to the viewer that these planes are placed at is a critical factor in determining the emotional intensity of the read. To reinforce the drama of the direction of the wall I designed the couches to reinforce the diagonal and kept the surface detail focused on strictly reinforcing the direction of movement.
The end goal of constructing a space is to be able to do it while conveying a sense of drama or intensity. Ultimately, every tool has its own way of contributing to the effect of mood or drama. If understood well and used correctly, each element contributes to and reinforces the emotion or mood intended. If used incorrectly they will contradict each other. It is my ultimate aim to be able to understand these things completely so that I can use them all in concert to bring out mood and human emotion.

In Social Solitude, I chose to revisit the idea of a light source within the picture plane. Light has intensity and feeling. It is something I wish to be able to conceive and manipulate to produce the emotive effects I desire. In Transition, I had been unable to come up with a satisfying solution to the problem. I intended Social Solitude to be a venue to explore the idea further by making it a secondary area of interest and making all the other tones in the painting dependent on the value read of the light source. I was also interested in pushing the idea of a figure coming out of a moody mass of darkness, and this internal light source served as an opportunity to advance this conception as well.

The value scheme was pushed into high contrast to make this idea work. To play up the brightness of the light value, the mid tone was pushed closer to the shadow. That value structure carried the impact of the interior light source the strongest.

The color theme of the work was central to selling the mood I intended. In Through The Door I used purple and green. In Social Solitude, I made the color theme purple versus yellow/orange. As I worked, the colors had a tendency to float around too much, neither identifying with one color family or another. It became important to have one or two virtually pure notes of color to serve as a foil for the rest of the painting.
Once I did this I could also see how much more intense the rest of the painting could be, and how drab it had been up until then. These colors could neither be the same as the overall scheme, nor be in total contrast to it. It was important that they would not disappear through similarity, or become too important through too great a contrast. I decided on a green and red sub color theme and chose to make red the purest color.

I also intended to play with paint buildup and texture in a much more controlled way than previously. I was never very satisfied with the paint buildup in Transition. My first thought was to limit where there was texture but to make those areas very distinct. To come up with a simple rationale I chose to have the buildup in areas of extreme light. In previous work I had noted that creating buildup in the light helped to reinforce its contrast to the shadow. In the case of Social Solitude that idea was even more important as I wanted the pieces of paint to read as beaming with light.

Creating the illusion of a light source is difficult because of the nature of paint. It is static and flat. It absorbs and bounces back light, but can never equal the brilliance of a light source. So the question became what are the optical effects of a light source in a dark environment? To figure this out I walked the campus during the night, and watched what happened abstractly as I walked toward and away from lamps. What I saw was that around every source of light in a dark environment is a corona of color. This corona has at least three distinct stages. As you get closer to a light source the first stage of the corona around the light source gets brighter and clearer in color. Also the closer you are the more indistinct the edges around the light source become. From far away the edges around a light source are clearer and the difference between the stages of the corona is smaller. The closer you get the more distinct each of the stages appear. I did this over
and over until I had the principle clear in my mind and then applied it to the painting. It is probably the most successful element in the work.

One of the more difficult areas was the treatment of the frames. They are meant to reinforce the direction of the wall. In addition, since the frames had vivid golden highlights they were excellent opportunities to play with the paint buildup. Unfortunately, the buildup and the intense value and color shift caused them to compete for attention with the candles. The solution was to lower their value while retaining their texture. To knock down the frame highlights I dry-brushed and glazed in darker values. Even with this, the raised texture had the effect of making the highlights appear brighter than they actually were.

The figure was curled into itself the way one would if they were alone seeking comfort. The head was tilted to imply an internal reaction to something. The value of the dress was massed into the shadows behind so that the figure convincingly appears to come out of the mist. To push the figure back from the light sources, the edges around the body, with the exception of a few key areas, were made extremely soft. The contrast between that and the closest light source helped reinforce the depth.

A large problem with the painting is how the space relates to the figure. The diagonal wall plane conveys a sense of mood. However, the eye moves right past the figure as it follows the diagonal along the wall. The couch fails to be a sufficient stopping point. This results in some visual confusion. So while the environment is more realized and tangible it does not completely focus us in on the subject.
CHAPTER VII

WINDOW REFLECTION

Figure 7. Window Reflection. Oil on linen (2009)

In Window Reflection, I organized the composition to solve the problem with how I arranged Social Solitude. The goal was to make the space lead you to the center of focus so that no matter where you looked at the painting you would be lead to the center of interest. I accomplished this by placing the figure where two wall planes met. No matter which wall plane you follow, you end at the figure. The light shape of the window frame moving you around the window from the left and down the right side was designed to accomplish the same goal; leading you to the center of focus. This was deliberately emphasized by simplifying the values and information both in the light shapes and the
shadow shapes in these areas. All the lines and planes lead you directly to the center of interest. This is repeated over and over again in the lines within each area.

The other idea in this image is a phantom extension of the wall plane on the right. This is created by the reflection in the window of the light shapes around the door jam. This phantom wall helps to project the viewer into an environment where the diagonals, otherwise, would be somewhat understated.

I also chose to play off of the lines in Through The Door. In Through The Door, the lines echo and play off of the shape of the picture plane. I wanted to approach that again in this image, but more boldly and directly this time.

My goal in thinking out the color for this painting was to combine my two earlier conceptions. Separately they were color to colorlessness, and a clear color contrast scheme, purple to green or purple to yellow/orange. In Window Reflection I combined these two into one. There is a slight modification. The relationships between the colored and the colorless areas are similar in dimension; however, the intensity of the color in the lights has been raised substantially. This allowed me to make the formerly colorless areas more colorful, but only less so in relation to the light, or color areas.

The overall color scheme is orange to purple as in Social Solitude. The primary difference from the arrangement in Social Solitude is that the middle tones are lighter in value, more or less directly between the light and the dark. This was critical to being able to push the intensity in the painting as a whole to the maximum.

I continued using the idea of the figure connecting to its surroundings through use of massing, but this time I made some areas separate slightly and others disappear into
the darker mass entirely. The pose of the figure is of reclining backward in contemplation. It is a variation of the bundled up figure in Social Solitude. The idea is to feel that tilt backward into the wall behind his head. I specifically merged the values there to make his head seem as though it is sinking into the wall. To complement this movement to the right, the floor plane is tilted to the left. The idea was to play the one movement off of the other for impact.

Gradients were used all throughout the image. I wanted the eye to careen from the top left to the bench and then across to the figure. The gradients were designed to reinforce this motion. The left side of the window and the wood at the left side gets increasingly lighter and more intense as it moves down. To help encourage the viewers eyes to move along this arc the ridges on the window get increasingly distinct as the window moves down, and then increasingly brighter and clearer as they move to the right. That leads you into the next gradient. This is the bottom of the window, the wooden bench and the floor. The same motion towards the light and towards intensity takes place there, left to right. On the right side these gradients go in reverse, getting lighter and richer as they move to the top. At which point a couple of light shapes peek through the wooden boards pulling you back to the window. Then the transition down to the head takes place again.

If anything about this image seemed like it called strongly for improvement it was the thrust of the diagonal and the entry into the space.
CHAPTER VIII
ALONE AT TABLE

Figure 8. Alone At Table. Oil on canvas (2009)

When composing this piece my concern was to up the dramatic intensity of the movement into the space and to lead the viewer more effectively from the outer world into the picture plane. Window Reflection created an effective and convincing space. The lines of the surroundings and the values and intensity shifts led you to the center of focus, and the wall planes converging on the subject helped it to stand out as the most important element in the painting. However, the lead in from our space into the picture plane still was lacking.

I decided to continue with the idea of constructing a space with three planes. In Window Reflection the wall plane facing us is the largest so its impact on the image and its direction is dominant. Because it is a passive angle, the impact of the image is diminished significantly. In Alone At Table the plane directly facing the audience is compressed so that the force of the diagonal has a greater impact and longer delivery. It
is a step forward from Social Solitude in that it uses the wall plane, behind the figure and facing us, as an exclamation or stopping point. That back plane contains the eye and allows the viewer to clearly determine where the important information is. In Social Solitude, the open space around the figure and the continually receding wall plane created a movement past the figure. This resulted in an open swing of the eye and an uncertainty of where the visual importance is within the scene. It seemed to be the figure but the environment did not confirm it. In Alone At Table I sought to punctuate it with the back plane, while still having the long diagonal as the dominant movement.

Repetition of an angle or direction was slightly overstated in Window Reflection. The repetition was included but reduced in Alone At Table.

Increasingly I understood the importance of pushing the intensity of the color in the light. But this led to another realization. It is important to make sure that every area in your work identifies as being of a particular color family from the color wheel, even when grayed. I realized that the various notes of clear color are the melody of the painting. In music a melody is a series of notes in key that repeat with simple variation to produce a theme. It is the same with color notes in painting. The color melody of Alone At Table is yellow green and purple.

Within the large color notes I added sparks of other colors. Around the hands of the figure there are strokes of bright red and orange, intense green on the table, and orange and blue around the light at the top of the image. The sparks of color give the painting more activity and vivacity. However, these sparks should not be arbitrary or too plentiful. It should be color or subject appropriate and only slightly pushing the
chromatic level toward intensity. These bright sparks of color, when too plentiful tend to lose their impact.

Another thing that I learned in working on this painting is that color intensity can be used within two areas close together in value to create the appearance of light and shadow. An example of this can be seen on the floor and wall on the left of the image. This effect is created both with the intensity and hue shift.

Also more apparent as I went on was the importance of the quality of brush stroke. Each visible stroke has its own quality, or in other words, its calligraphy. Throughout the painting I worked to give the various areas an interesting and varied type of stroke. This idea was difficult to grasp and apply. It never really came to fruition much as the play of texture in Transition failed to utilize its potential in a distinctive or compelling way. Over similarity in stroke reduces the distinctiveness and quality of a stroke just as too many sparks of strong distinctive color lose their beauty. Like eating your favorite food repeatedly, the flavor loses its appeal.

Finally, I realized the importance of putting clear strong color around the edges of shapes. When people look at elements in a painting, their eyes go to the edges of the shapes present as they attempt to grasp what they are seeing. Placing your intense color there causes the area to be more colorful overall without expending your intense color on the entire form, which is likely to result more in overkill than success.

Gradients were used heavily in Alone At Table, in every area and object. The most refined gradient is in the mirror behind the head of the figure that transitions from
dark at the top to light at the bottom, all done to push your eye toward the head as the center of focus.

To reinforce the movement towards the figure, objects closer to the figure are more resolved and as they move away from the figure are less resolved. The chairs on the side of the table closer to the viewer have a larger range of value from light to dark. The chairs on the far side of the table go neither as dark nor as light as the closer positioned chairs. To make the far side of the table draw as little attention as possible, the value differences between light and dark are reduced to small increments. Shifts in form are indicated with larger shifts in intensity and hue and smaller shifts in value so that nothing in the area pops forward. This can be seen easily in the value of the chair legs and the shadow underneath the table.

In summary, this painting was a large step forward on many levels. The use of diagonals is far more effective. The supporting plane and shapes behind the figure help punctuate the diagonal. Repetition is used more tastefully than in previous works. Values are being manipulated more subtly and effectively to focus the viewers attention and control the impression of depth. The color is more active than in previous works. And I began to see the similarity between structuring your painting in value and structuring your painting in color. Unfortunately, it is precisely the color structure of the image that I find less than wholly satisfying. The visual melody made up of clear color notes is slightly harsh and unsympathetic. It does not gel or build to a mood and the play off of one another does not create an interesting or appealing melody. In addition, the color notes do not emphasize the mood of the figure or the diagonal. Instead of these elements working together to reinforce the impact of the image, they are moving in
different directions. Visually this makes the painting disjointed. Therefore, while there were critical steps forward, one extremely important aspect is not up to speed with the rest.
CHAPTER IX
THE CIGAR SMOKERS

Figure 9. The Cigar Smokers. Oil on linen (2009)

This painting was an attempt to play with the very color notes that were lacking organization and centrality in Alone At Table. The environment is more implied than constructed. The direction of the space is suggested by the angle of the colored light shapes. They form a long diagonal with three shifts in direction. Spatial considerations have been subordinated to the color shapes. The picture is composed out of a series of light notes of color in a dark mass. Within each area, I paid far more attention to the calligraphy of the strokes. Each stroke has its own design and quality. This has been combined with larger paint buildup to make the quality and flow of the strokes more apparent.

The range of color against colorlessness has been pushed to the extreme. The lights behind the figures are close to pure pigments. I chose to use lead white paint in the
light areas. This choice was made because lead white paint tends to affect the intensity of paint less so than other whites do. In all the previous paintings, the white had been either titanium white, or a mixture of titanium and zinc white. Titanium white tends to rob a color of intensity. To make the color notes as strong as possible, it became essential to replace the white with something that would read better. In many cases, within the light shapes, no white was used at all. This had the effect of creating areas that had richer color intensity than in previous works. In hindsight, I took this too far. The result is a sickly sweet over saturated series of color notes.

The Cigar Smokers may be the least fully realized work in the thesis project, but the complexity of the image and variety of colors and strokes gives the painting many interesting qualities. The ambiguity of the space creates mystery, but leaves the image without an effective sense of depth and believability. The color notes and lushness of strokes are vivid and create a strong impression, but could be more effectively handled. The relationship between the mass of the environment and the color shapes is too harsh and abrupt. While disconnected ambiguity is interesting, it was not my aim and not something I care to pursue at this stage. Rectifying this problem will have to take place in my next painting after my thesis is completed.
INFLUENCES

I am not strongly influenced by one or two artist that I wish to emulate, but instead admire particular things about numerous artists. I admire the play with texture and brushstroke of Claude Monet and the way he simplifies masses of tone, the control of values and brush strokes of John Singer Sargent, the complexity and beauty in the color theory of Joaquin Sorolla, the value composition and use of surface texture of Rembrandt, the design of Rubens, and the drawing and gesture of Michelangelo. While these are some of my influences, my own work proceeds along the lines of the questions that are relevant at that moment. I do not attempt to make hybrids of the solutions of other artists, but instead come up with solutions most relevant to my current project, while looking at the works I admire for guidance.
CONCLUSION

Having assessed each individual work within the chapters, I will conclude by stating what I have learned through my process, and my conclusions. The end of my thesis is not the end of the journey. The result of this process is a series of working ideas that will be further developed and will grow as I do.

The principal task of the painter is to refine and explore their process. The subject of the painting is relevant as a focusing mechanism but is secondary to the execution. What makes Michelangelo’s Last Judgment such a great work of art is not that it is an image of the last judgment. It is not what Michelangelo painted but how he painted it. What makes Sargent’s portraits such incredible works of art is neither the subject, nor that it is a portrait. It is how he painted the subject that made his images some of the greatest paintings ever created. What made his work great was the tremendous skill with which he executed and articulated the basic building blocks of a painting.

There is concern that in viewing art as such the artist becomes no more than a craftsman. This places a negative value on the very craft within which the artist works. It is a fatal contradiction to be a painter and think that the craft of painting is lowly or without anything less than supreme merit. It is essential that an individual recognizes the inherent overwhelming importance of whatever craft they practice.

While the story or verbal theme of the subject in the image is largely of lesser import, what is not incidental is the source of reference, the visual world. It is impossible to communicate visually without referencing what our eyes receive. It is the point from
which we understand all around us and it is the only way in which we can be visually understood.

Sight is not automatically accurate or clear. It grows according to its development. The difficulty in making progress in painting is determining what abstract aspects of perception need consideration and refinement. That takes an understanding of the range of options and some instruction as an entry point. It is difficult to determine where to focus to move the process forward, because the range of your perception stifles your perception of your own deficiencies. Moreover, this limit is determined by your skill in the key concepts in painting. It takes the perception and guidance of someone far more advanced in at least one of the skill sets to make significant advances and course corrections.

Otherwise it is a process of rooting out the understanding from master paintings and from sensitivity to what is working within your own work, things that you may not understand, but can with time come to see and comprehend clearly with a great deal of effort. The difficulty is seeing what is working and understanding why it works.

As your skill increases, your perception clarifies and strengthens; as it decreases, your perception weakens and becomes less focused. If before having neglected them, the painter had developed these skills to a significant level of control then an echo remains that can be rebuilt, but it takes the rebuilding to bring one’s perception back to full clarity.

To complicate things, your skill is never equal to your perception. It lags one step behind as your perception strives forward. Then as you step onto that new level of
understanding, another layer of depth unfolds in front of you. It is this constant growth process and continual unwrapping of the visual world that makes painting such a rewarding adventure both technically and philosophically.

Each attempt at an image is a dialog about the visual world, and the construction of the image within the picture plane. The degree of understanding influences the veracity of the conversation. The conversation begins with a question, what is happening? Then, how do I make this into a picture? How can I play with what I am seeing to reinforce the impact and yet stay true to the character of the subject? Each decision is an evaluation of the principles one selects and can account for. As one’s command of the elements is internalized, another question is added on top. That is how my work progressed. It is an ever expanding and refining question, followed by a clue to the answer.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION

I used a combination of cotton and linen surfaces. The cotton is standard portrait grade quality. The linen is Belgian, and was purchased from Zecchi’s Art Materials in Florence, Italy. I like to use a variety of priming, both gesso and oil priming. Each has its own distinctive qualities. The cotton is all primed with acrylic gesso. Two of the three linens were oil primed and the other has traditional gesso priming. Gesso tends to absorb paint while oil priming is more resistant. As a result using gesso makes it easier to get your paint where you want it right off the bat. When a painting is started on oil priming it tends to slip and slide around, making it difficult to establish your initial layers. I find that because the paint never really soaks through the surface the paint tends to fog out less on oil priming once you have four or five layers.

All canvases are stretched on kiln dried stretcher bars from Utrecht Art.

The brushes used were a combination of Bristle and Sablette all from Utrecht Art. I prefer Utrecht brushes because they tend to be thinner on average and hold their shape well. They have a good balance between flexibility and stiffness in their bristle. They also tend to take a great deal of punishment without falling apart immediately.

My preference is for flat brushes over filbert, though I use both. The sizes vary from 1 to 16 in flat and filbert, and 1 to 8 in round. My round brushes are strictly Sablette. Fifty percent of my painting is done with each type of brush. The beginning is always started with bristle, and as I need to draw more carefully and exert greater control, I shift to Sablette. Sablette tends to produce a hard edge on a stroke of paint, providing better clarity, while bristle brushes tend to create strokes with softer edges.
My paints are picked according to a series of criteria. I make my choices based on hue, clarity, tinting strength, density, and by how the brand interacts with the other pigments. I use a variety of manufacturers including Michael Harding, Maimeri Puro and Artisti, Old Holland, Robert Doak Associated, Blockx, Mussini, Rembrandt, Utrecht Art, and Windsor Newton.

Maimeri Puro is by far my main choice of paint. Made in Italy, it has some of the purest paint in a commercially available tube. According to them they use strictly the pigment and medium with no filler. They are extremely expensive, but worth the money. Next to them other paints tend to look foggy or pale. Maimeri Puro tends to be dense and stiff, though not as stiff as Old Holland, which is just a touch stiffer. Both brands also tend to dry in a day due to the lack of extender.

My palette will vary depending on the project, however my basic palette is:

- Titanium White
- Flake White (Lead) with Mica
- Cadmium yellow
- Lead-Tin Yellow
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Orange
- Cadmium Red Medium
- Permanent Alizarin Crimson
- Translucent Violet
- Indigo
• Sap Green
• Burnt Sienna
• Burnt Umber
• Ivory Black

From this list I will add or substitute as the painting demands. The primary changes would involve cobalt blue for indigo, raw umber for burnt umber, transparent sepia for ivory black, cadmium lemon for cadmium yellow, and an addition of earth tones including raw sienna, sinopia, and terra rosa.

With the exception of Yearning, the mediums used in all the paintings are a combination of Gamsol for the under layers and Neo-Meglip and Galkyd Lite for the upper layers. All these mediums are from Gamblin. Having used a wide variety of mediums, I have found the ones produced by Gamblin to have the greatest consistency of quality and result.

For Yearning, I used a medium called black oil. Black oil is linseed oil cooked with lead. It is probably the most satisfying medium to use. It dries on the surface within an hour, and has a sheen that brings out the color of the paint. While it has pleasing results, the toxicity of the medium makes it less than ideal. It is also much harder to find as it is only manufactured by individual specialty paint makers.