

Proposal for Senior Honors Thesis

HONS 497 Senior Honors Thesis

Credits 3 (2 minimum required)

Directions: Please return signed proposal to the Honors Office **at least one week prior to your scheduled meeting with the Honors Council (or by November 15 if you are a senior)**. This proposal must be accepted by Honors Council the semester before presentation. (2-3 pages)

Student's Name: Rebekah Helsius

Primary Advisor: Steve Hansen

Secondary Advisor:

Thesis Title: "Where Painting Meets Poetry: Visual Interpretation of
Contemporary Poems

Local phone:

Email:

Expected date of Graduation: December 2009

Goals and brief description of your project or research.

Outline your methodology. **Please be specific.** How does this achieve your goals and how reliable is it?

In what sense is your project original, unique, or beyond normal senior expectations? How does it relate to current knowledge in the discipline?

Include a **substantive annotated bibliography** of similar or related work

A statement of progress to date.

This student's performance in his/her major field is acceptable and I understand the plans to graduate with honors.

Dept Chair (signature) _____

I have read and support this proposal: Primary Advisor (signature)

I have read and support this proposal: Secondary Advisers (signature)

Goals and Description

Communication is the core of all fine art; most artists wish to transcribe something of themselves or how they view the world through their chosen medium. As an artist my desire to create is deeply associated with my desire to be known; my human need to reach out and make an impact on another's life or way of thinking. The art pieces which I find most impacting - whether they are paintings or works of literature - are those that speak to me of the creator's humanity. I believe that through interactions with art our understanding of the world is broadened. Of written art forms, poetry especially has the power to give intimate insight into another's world view.

Painting has long been used as a vehicle to explore and examine poetry and literature. Probably the most extensive occurrence of paintings about literature - more specifically about poetry - came during the Symbolist and Romantic Movements. Painters such as John William Waterhouse, Edward Burne-Jones, and John Everett Millais chose to paint scenes from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, many of Shakespeare's plays, Dante's *Inferno*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Waterhouse also illustrated poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Herrick. The interest that painters showed to poetry continued into the Avant Garde Movement of the twentieth century. Artists such as Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg each created several pieces inspired by contemporary poets. The difference in their approach to poetry is notable. Where Edward Burne-Jones and the other Symbolists chose to understand the poetry through figurative illustration, Motherwell, Johns, and Rauschenberg reacted to the poems and expressed them visually by whatever methodology they felt captured their own feeling - predominantly abstraction.

With my senior exhibit I will seek to visually analyze works of poetry; my further goal is to create an intellectual space where multiple points of view can be considered. By visually illustrating and interpreting selected poetry I hope to make the poems themselves more approachable to an audience who might not otherwise take the time to read and consider the poetry. My goal is to add to this tradition by creating a series of ten mixed media paintings which allow me to emotionally interpret the poems as well as illustrate their thematic content. I have chosen poetic works that resonate deeply within me - my spirit, my belief system, and the things that I value and love.

Initially I had planned on creating oil paintings only; however after the first three attempts, I found that while the paintings had merit in their own right, they did not effectively communicate the essence of the poem. Instead of being poetic and tapping into poetry's almost intangible beauty, they were too literal. Through my research into different styles and mediums, I have found that mixed media techniques have somewhat nostalgic qualities which lend themselves well to this project. Just as the essence of a poem is not completely in its literal meaning, mixed media paintings allude to more than can be seen on the surface; memories the viewer didn't know they had.

Methodology

As my senior thesis is a creative project and adjunct to my Bachelor of Fine Arts senior exhibition, the bulk of my research is in the creative process itself.

While my process sometimes varies from piece to piece, I have planned out the steps which will guide me in creating a cohesive and successful series of paintings.

To begin I choose one of the many poems which I have read over the past year or so. I have taken into consideration the kind of poems which seem to regularly attract me - predominantly ones with strong nature imagery. The selection thus far has been rather arbitrary; I choose poems which stand out to me either in content or feeling. I read the poem several times and take notes in a journal as to which words, phrases, or images stand out. Because I want to create an image about my reaction to the poem and not one that is purely illustration, I mainly work from my notes when constructing the composition. I write out the basic components of the landscape or scene; if there is a figure, who it will be, in what season does it take place, is it outdoors or inside, what striking imagery from the poem will find its way into the finished piece?

My goal is that while these paintings will be illustrations, they will also be highly personal reflections on the poems themselves. To make them as personal and emotional as possible I have chosen to use only people that I know well as models. This brings me to the next and most time consuming step in my process: collecting reference material. While my paintings will have a strong element of abstraction in them, I will also employ realism. Therefore I need strong visual references to create figures and landscapes which will be realistically believable. I work mainly from photos which I have taken, though if necessary I also use stock images.

From here I prep the support - canvas - adding whatever texture I find will contribute to the communication of the poem. Once that is completed to my satisfaction I transfer to the canvas the drawings/tracings I have previously created. I then apply the paint, using the technique which I feel will most accurately transcribe my feelings about the poem (such as glazing with thin washes of paint, or an impasto - thick application - of paint). As I work I will add texture or text as needed to complete the design.

The multimedia techniques which I will employ are as follows: photography, drawing, gel medium image transfers, painting, tracing, and calligraphy. I will use the following mediums to successfully achieve these techniques: graphite, acrylic gel medium, acrylic paint, interference pigments, molding paste, gesso, oil paint, and ink.

Accompanying this creative project will be a research paper with two major components: a study of art historical precedent and an analysis of the completed series.

How does my project go beyond normal expectations?

I believe that my project is unique in that it is interdisciplinary; involving both written works and fine art. I feel that while Fine Art students are required to do extensive work on their senior exhibit, I am going beyond what is traditionally required in completing more art historical research and in paying closer attention to my creative process. My background in the Honors program has prepared me to think about my senior art show from an artistic as well as academic perspective. As an Honors student, I am adding to the tradition of senior research

projects by completing a thesis paper as well as a series of paintings. In the research that I have done thus far, I have noticed that while many artists in the past have from time to time created paintings about or inspired from poems, these occurrences have been little studied by the artistic community. In my examination of current American artists, I have found only one - Kenneth Procter - who has created drawings inspired by poetry (Rilke's Duino Elegies). It is of course probable that there are others interested in the link between poetry and painting which I have not yet discovered. However, I feel that at this point I am one of the few to be studying the correlations between poetry and painting throughout history, as well as adding to the tradition.

Progress to Date

At this point I have completed a ten page paper on my thesis for a required BFA thesis course. I will be expanding upon this paper for this project (the agreement with my advisor has been 12 - 15 pages). In addition I have nearly completed three paintings, and have four more canvases in preliminary stages. I am currently enrolled in an advance painting course, and my BFA exhibition independent study. Both of these courses facilitate me with studio space and scheduled time to work. Furthermore I am enrolled in a mixed media class which has already been beneficial in teaching me new techniques and approaches to my work. I am studying several art historical books on the Symbolist Movement and am planning to study the development of illustration as well.

Annotated Bibliography

Bahr, Bob. "At the intersection of Poetry and Drawing." *American Artist*. 69, no. 757 (2005): 19-23

Bob Bahr's article featured in *American Artist* examines artist Kenneth Procter's *Duino Suite*. The suite - so called because it was more loosely created than a series - was inspired by the poem "First Elegy" by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Procter's charcoal drawings which have a mysterious quality to them are not direct illustrations of the poem, rather each drawing is an interpretation of a specific line. I chose this article because, while it is short, I have yet to find another artist who works so closely with poetry. My decision to create paintings about or in response to poems came before I found this article, but I was surprised and excited to realize that Procter's ideas about the relationship that poetry and art can have are similar to mine.

Doty, Mark. *Source*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2001.

Mark Doty has received many awards for his poetry, among them the National Book Critics Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the 2001 Lambda Literary Award for Poetry. In addition Doty is the only American poet to have won Britain's T. S. Eliot Prize. Doty's sixth book of poetry, *Source* is an examination of what selfhood means. Doty's poems are rich in natural imagery and deeply emotional. I chose to illustrate his poem "Lily and Bronze" because of its emotionality and his discussion of statues in Venice which I have personally seen.

Fineberg, Jonathan. Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000.

Jonathan Fineberg's textbook on art since the 1940's is unique in that he does not attempt to be objective about the development of the Avant Garde movement. Forthright from the beginning that this book is his personal viewpoint, Fineberg individually examines each artist and their motivations behind creating. He establishes a thesis at the start of the book and sets out with the goal of understanding how each artist was shaped by their time period and personal interests. I would not have included this book as a reference except that Fineberg's work gives valuable insight into each artist's influences and personal reflections on their work in an accessible format. Also, it was through this book that I learned of Motherwell, Johns, and Rauschenberg's works reacting to poetry.

Frost, Robert. Seasons. New York: MJF Books, 1997.

Robert Frost is considered one of America's most beloved poets and *Seasons* is a compilation of his most popular poems about nature. While Frost is not one of my contemporaries, I chose two of his poems because of their significance to me personally; Frost's poems were some of the first I read when I became interested in poetry at the age of thirteen. "Reluctance" and "Bereft" have been two of my favorite poems for many years. Additionally, I chose Frost because the subjects in both illustrations, my grandmother and my grandfather, have enjoyed his poems in the past.

Harrison, Holly. Mixed-Media Collage: An Exploration of Contemporary Artists, Methods, and Materials. Beverly, Massachusetts: Quarry Books, 2007.

Holly Harrison's book is a compilation of techniques and mediums used in mixed media art. Harrison gives many helpful hints and step-by-step instructions on how to achieve specific looks within your own work. I have found this book beneficial as I explore new ways of working within my discipline.

Hass, Robert. Time and Materials. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2007.

Robert Hass served as America's Poet Laureate 1995-1997. His book *Time and Materials* won him the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2008. I chose his poem "The Problem With Describing Trees" because I appreciate the idea that it is almost impossible to capture the true essence of a living thing in words; the same is true for painting. I believe the greatest struggle for a painter is to capture the ever elusive spark of life.

Hicok, Bob. Plus Shipping. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd, 1998.

An associate professor of creative writing at Virginia Tech, Bob Hicok has published five collections of poetry; *The Legend of Light*, *Plus Shipping*, *Animal Soul*, *Insomnia Diary*, and *This Clumsy Living*. Hicok's poem "Other Lives and Dimensions and Finally a Love Poem" when compared to the other works of poetry I have chosen contains the most abstract concepts and writing. However,

like the other poets Hickok uses imagery from the natural world. I chose this poem because of its complex beauty and the challenge that illustrating it presents.

Loomis, Sabra. House Held Together By Winds. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2008.

House Held Together By Winds, Sabra Loomis' third book rich with natural imagery, is a collection of poems examining her childhood. Sabra Loomis has received awards from the Artists Foundation, the Yeats Society, and the British Council. Loomis' poem "In Mary Hoban's Garden" describes a beautiful, almost transcendent, moment the day of a gardener. I chose this poem because it reminded me of my mother and because the emotion and images Loomis expresses are very familiar to me.

Oliver, Mary. Red Bird. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

Mary Oliver has published six books of poetry and six books of prose. In 1984 Oliver won the Pulitzer Prize for her collection *American Primitive*. Her book *Red Bird* takes the reader on a journey throughout the natural world as she examines the meaning of life, death, transcendence, God and love. I chose her poem "Swimming, One Day in August" because the ephemeral qualities of it feel familiar to me.

Pavelka, Jeffrey J. Artist as Narrator: Nineteenth Century Narrative Art in England and France. Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Art Museum, 2005.

Jeffrey Pavelka's book outlines the important developments in narrative art during the nineteenth century. Pavelka focuses on six major trends in narrative art: paintings about literature; about Greco-Roman mythology; depictions of religion and history; rural life; new urban subjects; and prints on a variety of each of these themes. The sections on paintings about literature and Greco-Roman mythology have been greatly beneficial in exposing me to a variety of artists interested in illustrating literature and mythology. This book has been instrumental in my research into the foundations of the illustration of poetry.

ten-Doesschate Chu, Petra. Nineteenth-Century European Art. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 2003.

Petra ten-Doesschate Chu's book is an extensive overview of the progress of Western art in the nineteenth century. In addition to the text, the wealth of visual imagery revealed the prominence of poetry and literature based works in the Symbolist and Romantic movements.