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Effloresce

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EFFLORESCE

By

REBECCA LEE SCHNELLER, Bachelor of Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2019

EFFLORESCE

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REBECCA LEE SCHNELLER, Bachelor of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

*Effloresce* is a series of oil paintings and charcoal drawings containing the human figure and natural imagery and forms. This pairing represents the intersection of the inner realm of human emotion and spiritual experience with the external realm of nature and the world.

Both contemporary and historical painting and drawing traditions serve as inspiration for this body of work, particularly the natural symbology found in Medieval and Renaissance Art. I employ painting techniques inspired by contemporary painters Alex Kanevsky, Mia Bergeron, Helene Delmaire, and Zoey Frank, as well as historical painters John Singer Sargent, Joaquin Sorolla, Rembrandt Van Rijn, Lucian Freud, and Vincent Van Gogh. Each of these artists utilize the tactile nature of the painting medium as part of their personal style and artistic vision, allowing the painted surface and mark making techniques to contribute to the depiction of light, form, and emotion.

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## INTRODUCTION

Two important concepts have grounded my life for as long as I can remember: beauty and faith. Some of my earliest memories involve experiencing both beauty and faith in art, nature, books, music, and the church. This drive to find and capture beauty has fueled my artistic pursuits. As a core element of my life, faith has also provided an impetus to create art as an outer expression of those inner beliefs and experiences. I find the intersection between beauty and faith clearly in nature, where the variety of created life and the sensory experiences draw me into deeper contemplation of my life and relationship with God. Reflecting on and interacting with the outside landscape impacts how I express my internal landscape of thoughts, emotions, and life experiences. I see parallels between nature and my faith journey particularly in the cycles of growth and regeneration as evidenced in plant life. Plants hold the potential for growth and renewal, as well as death and decay. This cycle corresponds with a similar cycle in the faith journey, which contains times of stagnation, doubt, or fear, as well as growth, trust, and peace.

*Effloresce* explores these different postures of faith and accompanying emotional states. Nature serves as an outward expression of inward communion with God and an ultimate movement towards hope and growth in both faith and life.

## WORKING METHOD

### Lighting Up: Plants and the Figure

One of the challenges in creating a painting is choosing the best lighting to use on the subject matter. For this group of paintings, I decided to use light to construct a narrative. In doing so, I sought a solution that would entail the use of consistent lighting, especially for painting directly from a model or foliage.

Reading an interview with still life painter Harold Reddicliffe helped me to consider the best approach to lighting both the human figure and plant life. In the interview, Reddicliffe says of his still life setups: "It's all done with incandescent light. I don't use natural light, at all, so I can control what's going on. I use one spotlight for ambient light to paint in and another one focused on the setup" (Groff, "Interview with Harold Reddicliffe"). I realized that I needed this kind of control over the lighting in my paintings, so I began bringing plant specimens or artificial greenery into the studio and lighting them with one to two light sources. This working method allowed me to focus on the symbolism of a few plants and the interaction of the figure with those natural elements.

Artificial lighting also opened new possibilities with lighting the human figure. By using only one or two light sources, I was able to control the direction and intensity of the light. Playing with the interaction of light on the model led me to consider how a narrative could be implied with what the light reveals or conceals. Both plants and humans need light in order to thrive. Without light, plants die, and without the “light” of hope, people wilt as well. Through experimentation of lighting, I began to see light as an overarching theme for the body of work, a metaphor to communicate an overall trajectory from darkness to light, and from doubt to hope.

### Painting Process

Part of the appeal of working with oil paint is the rich history and tradition of the medium, as well as the ability to create a variety of effects and expressive mark-making through thick and thin layers of paint. Using a palette knife as a painting tool allows a painter to emphasize process and medium, creating a textured, almost sculptural effect that draws the viewer’s eye into the painting.

Building up the painting with an assortment of marks creates an active surface that expresses the variety of color and texture found in human skin as well as the three dimensionalities of the human form. Whether in a narrative painting or portrait, this approach to painting the figure naturally creates an emphasis on the figure, on light and dark, gesture and movement. The figure becomes integrated into the rest of the painting, simultaneously coming forward in space and flattening out.

Each painting goes through a multi-stage process from the conception of the initial idea through several revisions into a final work of art. Often an image, word, phrase, or a compelling theme sparks the initial concept. The idea grows in specificity as I move through multiple versions of sketches and value studies, photography sessions, and eventually color studies and surface preparation for the final painting. My planning process facilitates testing the best compositions through initial concepts before committing to one idea. Once the final composition has been worked through, I determine the necessary scale of my painting surface and spend time on that preparation before moving on to the actual painting.

One method of painting preparation that I explored for this show was starting with a charcoal or graphite drawing on the stretched, gessoed canvas, and then working through a monochromatic underpainting in raw umber. I found that this approach (Figure 1) allowed me to gain an understanding of the range of

values in the painting, particularly the figure. Preparing with an underpainting is a classical painting technique used by artists such as Rembrandt who “at least sometimes [...] began in transparent browns, working in monochrome to establish the design of the picture, attending to the masses of dark and light” (Elliott). This technique gives the artist a sort of map to follow for the full color painting.

From the underpainting and surface preparation, I move on to using full color and thicker paint, first blocking in the forms with bristle brushes, and then beginning to build up the surface of the painting by using palette knives as painting tools. At this stage in the painting process I tend to work on both the background and foreground of the painting, switching between both as needed. I consider a painting finished when it accurately represents a combination of reality and my personal vision.

## Drawing Technique

Through charcoal drawings, I further explore some aspect of the paintings, either foliage or part of the figure. By taking a reductive drawing approach in charcoal, I highlight the dichotomy between dark and light. I use vine and compressed charcoal in each drawing to create both stark contrasts and subtle gradations in value. After first covering the paper with an even layer of charcoal, I work reductively with the kneaded eraser to pull out highlights before additively drawing in the darker values and details. This method of drawing is very similar to the additive and subtractive rhythm of painting. In addition to using both vine and compressed charcoal, I also utilize charcoal pencil to sharpen and refine detail. The combination of soft and hard lines creates an intriguing landscape of mark-making and texture.

In some drawings I focus solely on an aspect of the figure, while in others, I prefer to emphasize the foliage. In the drawing entitled *Annunciation Hands* (Figure 2), I highlighted the gesture as an echo of the hand position in the painting entitled *Metanoia, A Turning* (Figure 3). The hands all reflect some version of Mary's hand gesture in the Annunciation, with the gestures either appropriated from or a modified version of Mary's hand position in historical

Annunciation paintings. For the drawing entitled *Into the Light* (Figure 4), I represent the value transition between dark and light in the foliage of holly bushes, referencing a plant's tendency to grow towards a source of light. This drawing is also a study for *Metanoia*, one that emphasizes the light rather than gesture. I also render foliage in my drawing entitled *Entangled* (Figure 5), where the thorny rose plants entwine together, only producing evidence of life and beauty as they reach the open air and light.

## BACKGROUND

### Artistic Influences

I am inspired by a wide range of artistic influences, styles, and approaches to painting. My main influences include painters that range from historic (John Singer Sargent, Joaquin Sorolla, Vincent van Gogh, Rembrandt van Rijn) to contemporary (Helene Delmaire, Zoey Frank, Mia Bergeron, Alex Kanevsky). Representing a variety of approaches to painting, they all share a common commitment to realism, the human figure, and a painterly use of the medium. Some of these artists influence my choice of content far more than they do my approach to painting, but regardless of their style, I have an appreciation for the timeless elements of their paintings that keeps their work fresh. The contemporary painters who particularly influence me utilize an element of abstraction into their work. They incorporate some of the background into the foreground of the painting, a method which both unifies the painting and calls attention to the surface and painting medium. In today's art world, I think it is particularly compelling when painters highlight the use of their painting medium, rather than concealing brush stroke or process. In an age of easy access to

digital images in the form of photography and graphic art, painterly techniques slow the viewer down and emphasize the act of artistic creation and question the nature of perceived reality. What I have learned most through looking at the work of other painters, whether historic or contemporary, is that a version of reality can be constructed through both a careful, detailed working of an area in paint as well as through a single brushstroke or paint blob. Each painter carefully lays the foundation for their paintings while allowing the plastic nature of the medium to continually shift and challenge their working methods.

### John Singer Sargent

The 19th century American portrait artist John Singer Sargent has long influenced my approach to painting. His approach to the oil painting medium, portraiture, and nature has continually inspired me, establishing him as one of my earliest painting heroes. His fluid brushstrokes and Impressionistic rendering of both figures and landscapes demonstrates a beautiful use of paint and the way to create rhythm and movement in a composition through color and mark-making. Sargent's brushstrokes vary with his forms, from describing the human figure, to the folds of clothing, to nature as evidenced in his beautiful painting *Carnation*,

*Lily, Lily, Rose* (Figure 7). His gentle treatment of the girls' faces contrasts with the slashing, rapid marks that he uses to describe the grass in the garden and delicate brushstrokes seen in the soft whirl of the roses. I admire this mastery of brushstroke, and the ability to use just enough, and not a bit more in Sargent's work. Sargent's paintings have cemented my appreciation for the oil painting medium— its fluid properties, and its capacity to portray beauty and be beautiful in its own right.

Sargent's portraits, which make up the majority of his work, represent a likeness while clearly remaining painted surfaces. The facial features are sometimes painted with great care and thick paint, while at other times Sargent suggests features with no more than a brushstroke as the image breaks down into a rhythm of shapes. Sargent's approach to painting the human figure, using a harmony of warm and cool colors, color complements, and delicate highlights and shadows, have fed my interest in painting the human figure. In looking at the way that Sargent approaches portraiture, I see the power of a well-placed touch of green to bring out the red of the mouth or mauve to highlight brown eyes. Sargent uses color subtly so that it has a very natural appearance. The suggestions he makes in his paint strokes are not "natural" in the sense that they are true to nature, but certainly true to the art of portraiture. Sargent was one of my earliest teachers in seeing the world through the eyes of a painter and translating that vision into an expressive use of the oil painting medium.

## Joaquin Sorolla

Joaquin Sorolla, a Spanish painter and contemporary of John Singer Sargent, influences my painting technique and appreciation for painting the human figure in nature. Sorolla's brushwork is fluid, expressive, and Impressionistic. Most of Sorolla's paintings involve the human figure in a natural environment, particularly the coast of Spain, where he often painted. Sorolla found an endless source of inspiration in the Spanish coastline and its inhabitants, from workers in the fishing industry to beloved family members. In a letter to his wife Clotilde, Sorolla wrote that "painting, when you feel it, is the greatest thing in the world; no, I'm wrong, it's nature that is beautiful" (Peel 78). His passion for paint was rivaled only by his love for nature and his drive to depict it as he saw it. Sorolla painted on location, "working for ten hours in the open air, defying the ferocious sun..." (Peel 79). His resulting plein air work overflows with patterns of color and light and emphasizes the activity of the figures rather than their individual identity. Sorolla's painting methods makes the figures feel as alive as the landscape surrounding them as he depicts the continual shift of movement and light in the environment.

Sorolla defines his forms while retaining a similar brushstroke style throughout the painting. In his painting *The Wounded Foot* (Figure 7), Sorolla's

brushstrokes become abstract shapes in the background of the painting, with the bodies of the children in the water suggested by only a few energetic marks. Sorolla used his striking painting technique only after completing extensive preparation for each painting: “The execution of each work was preceded by a period of preparation in which, by making numerous studies of design and colour, both of details and of the whole composition” (Peel 79).

Sorolla’s working method, his emphasis on the human figure, and dynamic brushstrokes have influenced my approach to painting. His vigorous painting techniques demonstrate a passion for paint and for depicting the world around him. This inspires me incorporate the figures that I paint into the natural environment around them.

### Rembrandt van Rijn

One of the most instantly recognizable aspects of Rembrandt van Rijn’s work is the stark contrast between light and shadow. He uses chiaroscuro to create and heighten the drama in his paintings and effectively convey his subject matter. Rembrandt utilizes both light and shadow to subtly illuminate some aspects of a painting and sublimate others. Rembrandt “seems to have felt that

light and dark are magic elements which the painter can employ to veil or to reveal, to create drama and mood, to open the spectator's mind to unknown depths of vision and feeling" (Rosenberg 308).

*Self-Portrait 1628* (Figure 8) is one example of Rembrandt's striking use of light and shadow. In this portrait, Rembrandt highlights only one side of his face and a part of his neck and shoulder, leaving the rest of his face and figure in shadow against an illuminated background. The shadow conceals Rembrandt's full facial expression, leaving his attitude ambiguous. The shadow on his face suggests Rembrandt as a remote observer of the world, perhaps emulating how he viewed himself as an artist at that age.

Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro also made his figures both emerge and merge with the background of the painting. In his work *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Figure 9) for example, the face of the father figure stands out clearly in the light, while part of his cloak begins to recede into the darkness of the doorway behind him. The figure of the elder son on the right also merges with the dark background, displaying his unwillingness to participate in his brother's homecoming. Not only does Rembrandt's language of light and shadow create beautiful effects, but it also heightens psychological drama and is used effectively as a storytelling device.

I seek to emulate some of Rembrandt's lighting techniques to imply a narrative, even in a portrait. In my painting entitled *Every Common Bush* (Figure

10), the light is shining up from below the figure, highlighting the figure's open hands and the blackberry on her palm. Lighting a figure from below suggests mystery, and in this case, revelation. Just as Rembrandt makes use of the dramatic, narrative power of light, so I seek imbue my paintings with mystery and a spiritual quality.

### Vincent van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh is well known for his expressive paintings and accompanying personality. He painted with integrity, allowing both his hand and heart to work together. Van Gogh's expressive painting style was a result of years of hard work, a commitment to mark-making in painting, and use of color. Van Gogh used Michel Chevreul's color theory of "simultaneous contrast" in which colors opposite one another on the color wheel were placed next to each other to create an effect of "greater brilliance or luminosity" (Helvey 18) to make his colors appear to vibrate next to each other. Van Gogh was well-versed in the art of his day, and was particularly inspired by his contemporary Paul Gauguin, with whom he attempted to establish an artist's colony at one point. Both van Gogh and Gauguin "referred to themselves as Impressionists in the later 1880s"

(McQuillan 98), though their work has been since considered Expressionist as both concentrated more heavily on emotional expression than on the representation of forms as they saw them. It is evident in looking at van Gogh's work, though, that this admiration for and contact with the Impressionist work of his day largely influenced his own use of mark-making and paint handling.

Van Gogh's mark-making and use of thick paint and surface texture, particularly on the human face and figure influences my use of oil paint. Van Gogh's self-portraits, such as *Self-Portrait 1889* (Figure 11), demonstrates his use of brush strokes to describe both the coloration and underlying bone structure of the face. Van Gogh's marks also convey the three dimensionality of the form and interweave the cool color palette of the background into the skin tone itself. The surfaces of van Gogh's paintings feel alive with marks and color as he uses paint to its best advantage, utilizing its tactile quality and color combinations. I seek to approach my painting in a similar manner, allowing the paint to function distinctly as paint in my application methods. Like van Gogh, I find that this method of painting activates the painting surface, particularly emphasizing the importance of the figure. In allowing marks to break the boundaries of the form, I connect the background and foreground in an interplay of marks and color. Van Gogh's method of paint application, especially to the human figure, has inspired me to explore similar painting methods which embrace the oil painting medium and use it to its best advantages.

## Helene Delmaire

The paintings of contemporary French artist Helene Delmaire are rife with images of typically feminine subject matter: the female body, flowers, fabric, and fashion, yet her work contains a seriousness, as well as mystery, that I am drawn to. Delmaire communicates an intriguing narrative through only a patch of light or a part of the human body, as well as her use of high contrast, dark backgrounds and plant life. In Delmaire's words, she seeks to "display strength through fragility; to explore man's relationship to the natural world as a symbol of his own inner world [...] I want to give fragileness and so-called "feminine" elements such as flowers and pastel colours an intensity; to transform the infantilizing cliches they have come to represent into something meaningful and powerful." Delmaire accomplishes this through her emphasis on light source and unusual compositions, as well as through her painterly style. Delmaire clearly appreciates the texture of oil paint, and she draws attention to the medium itself to both obscure and emphasize her subject matter. Sometimes she thinly applies the paint, and at other times Delmaire builds up a thick texture, such as in her "eyeless" series of paintings in which the women's eyes are obscured with smears of paint. In some of Delmaire's "fleurs-plantes" paintings, such as *Still Life with Flowers VI* (Figure 12), she treats the flowers in a similar manner,

highlighting the texture of the peonies and allowing the paint to smear into the background, connecting the foreground and background.

The contrast between darkness and beauty that Delmaire portrays in her work inspires me to recognize and capture the strength and hope that plants and flowers convey, as well as their capacity to outwardly express inner emotions. Delmaire's use of lighting in her compositions demonstrates the power of suggestion as even a touch of light will create an interesting narrative. Like the work of Rembrandt, Delmaire's paintings display a careful consideration of the language of light in a painting and how it can simultaneously reveal and conceal her subject matter.

### Zoey Frank

Contemporary painter Zoey Frank builds up layers of paint in her process, with the resulting paintings containing traces of modifications that the painting has undergone. Frank's technique shows the history of the painting surface and creates passages of abstraction and fragmentation within her work. Frank's approach to painting the human figure is based on a combination of classical atelier training and contemporary painting influences (Groff, "Interview with Zoey

Frank”), which translates to a painting approach that is based in realism, but also contains areas of abstraction within the composition.

Frank’s figurative paintings are particularly interesting as patterns and reworked areas of a painting often become a part of the figure’s skin, which incorporates the figure into the background. As a result, some of Frank’s paintings become a conglomeration of pattern, color, and texture. One of Frank’s recent paintings, *Wedding* (Figure 13), displays Frank’s method of painting to great effect. The layers of colors and textures and the varied positions of the figures create an overall composition that feels both real and imagined, like a dreamscape.

Frank’s approach to painting, her layered remnants of marks and patterns that overlap and create complexity and depth in the painting surface, is a technique that I admire. She uses paint layer buildup to her advantage, with the resulting paintings containing a balance of cohesion and variety. In her technique I have found inspiration for my own method of painting to build up layers of paint and allow these layers to add to the narrative of the painting.

## Alex Kanevsky

Alex Kanevsky's paintings reveal his process of building up thin layers of oil paint as he strives to create an image that satisfies him. His paintings contain traces of each painted layer, which creates both history and abstraction in the work. Kanevsky describes his process of painting as "The layers are sort of like Swiss cheese - they have holes through which in right places you can see the previous layers. Eventually there are enough of 'good holes' and also, because of all the repeated attempts, I manage to do a good top layer" (Andersson). Kanevsky's figure paintings are particularly interesting as the figures appear to be caught in motion through the layers of paint and repetition of colors between foreground and background. Works such as *L.H. in the Dark Pond* (Figure 14) demonstrate how Kanevsky's figures are integrated with their surroundings as a fragmented whole. I appreciate Kanevsky's working method as he allows his paintings to change and grow throughout the work, leaving room for mistakes and errors, and even embracing them as a part of the process.

From researching Kanevsky's painting methods, I better understand the value of flexibility within the painting process, the willingness to implement major changes in the work, throughout the creation of a painting. Allowing modifications to become part of a painting's development not only creates an interesting

buildup of paint layers and fragmentation of imagery, but also leads to an atmosphere of exploration and experimentation within the artist's studio and freedom in working method.

### Mia Bergeron

Mia Bergeron's painting method involves a gradual process of refinement from loose, thick brush strokes and palette knife work to detailed painting over the under layers of the work. Bergeron says of her painting method that "I found myself sanding the surface of this thick paint, then started to paint with a brush slightly more refined skin tones. I repeated this same process over and over again [...] I think what is so satisfying about this method is it really goes with my personality. I have always been a fast "starter," and this allows me to look for big effects and color notes without getting bogged down by smaller details at the beginning. The effect is that I sort of creep up on the details, something that I really enjoy" ("Intimacy of the Unseen"). This method, like that of Kanevsky and Frank, highlights the importance of the painting process and the use of the oil painting medium as tools to inform the direction of the painting.

I find that Bergeron's method of painting is particularly effective in her figurative work as it creates a soft atmosphere surrounding the figure and allows parts of the background to show through the skin. One of my favorite Bergeron paintings, *Evensong* (Figure 15), has an intimate, haunting quality precisely because of her method of working. Both the moths and the figure fade off into space and abstraction, leaving the figure's expression as a main point of connection with the viewer.

Bergeron's method appeals to me as it is a combination of looseness and precision, with emphasis on detail in specific areas of the painting. This technique charges the space surrounding her figures with mystery, energy, and possibility.

## Art and Faith

In my life, the intersection of faith and art is a natural one, an overflow of both my worldview and heart grounded in faith. Navigating this junction has been a challenge for artists of faith for many years. The intersection of Christianity and

art has a long and complex history, complicated by the ambiguous categorization of “Christian” art, the history and political impact of the church, and the creation of Christian themes by non-Christian artists. However, I believe it is within the history of Christian art and faith tradition that Christian artists understand their place in the world of art and create out of that faith.

The earliest Christian art is traced back to Roman catacombs where expressions of faith are evident in sculptures on sarcophagi and paintings on catacomb walls (Dillenberger 40). These works of art were hidden in the catacombs because early Christians faced threats of persecution under the Roman government. When Christianity was established as an official religion under Emperor Constantine in 312 AD, Christians began to openly create art for spaces of worship (Dillenberger 46). Christian art then became a means of displaying the divine attributes of God and relating hagiography and Biblical narratives in a pictorial form.

As style and specific religious themes changed throughout the centuries, Christian art became about personal as well as religious expression. As Gene Edward Veith points out in his book *State of the Arts: from Bezalel to Mapplethorpe*, “the Renaissance exaltation of the human point of view dovetails with the Reformation’s insistence on a *personal* relationship with God and the *individual’s* relationship to the Bible” (65). With a new human-centered perspective came a personal approach to artistic creation. As subsequent post-

Renaissance artistic styles demonstrate, the personal aspect of art became increasingly important as art was made for purposes other than for the church or funded through church sponsorship.

Christian artists today work in the junction between the influence of their faith and the history of art and the contemporary art world. For many artists, approaching art-making from a Christian perspective does not necessarily entail using explicitly Biblical themes, but grounding themselves first in their faith and allowing the work to naturally flow from that identity. For many artists, there is no fracture between art or faith, as both are about understanding the world. The writer Madeleine L'Engle, in her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, points out that faith and art are linked: "I learn that my feelings about art and my feelings about the Creator of the Universe are inseparable. To try to talk about art and about Christianity is for me one and the same thing, and it means attempting to share the meaning of my life, what gives it, for me, its tragedy and its glory" (16).

The artist Mary McCleary, in an interview published in *Objects of Grace: Conversations on Creativity and Faith* says of art and faith that "It takes a certain amount of faith to start any work of art [...] An artist never knows if the work will be successful or even if it will be completed. Art has to have a little mystery" (63). Creating art is an act of faith for any artist, and for the Christian artist especially, this process is an opportunity to exercise that faith. As L'Engle writes, art-making

is an incarnational activity as “God is constantly creating, in us, through us, with us, and to co-create with God is our human calling” (81). An artist is open to the work of God in their lives, willingly vulnerable to the pain and joy of the creative process. The role of a Christian artist is to recognize the need to co-create with God, to be open to His leading in their art, and then to do the hard work necessary to bring that vision to fruition, trusting in God’s role in the process.

For me, the history of Christianity in the arts is an abundant resource on which to base my artistic research. The quality work that faithful Christian artists have done in the past and the way that their faith has impacted the content has led me to reflect on how best to incorporate such an important part of my life into my art while maintaining artistic integrity and clarity of truth.

## Gesture

As I began to develop the overarching theme for the thesis exhibition, I knew that hand or arm gestures would play a part in the formation of the paintings and drawings. I am drawn to the symbolic language of hand and arm

gestures in Medieval and Renaissance era paintings. Medieval and Renaissance artists used hand and arm gestures to communicate emotion or reaction in a way that facial features alone could not. The language of the hand varies in these works from gestures that indicate speech, as seen in the angel's gesture to Mary during the annunciation, to gestures that indicate mood or emotion, even deep sadness, such as the hand on a cheek ("Gestures of the Hand"). These gestures reveal the deep emotional response of the figure to an outside event or divine presence. I find such gestures fascinating as they communicate much about the emotional state of the figure's inner world and their response to the outer one without relying on typical facial cues.

By intentionally deemphasizing the significance of facial expression in my work, I accentuate instead the significance of gesture and body language. For some of my paintings and drawings, the body language is based on a personal gesture, whereas for others, I draw inspiration from classical paintings and subject matter. The arm position in the painting entitled *Evergreen* (Figure 16) is a gesture that represents an attempt to cover or conceal a vulnerability, a protective gesture. The figure's shoulders are bare, and the pine branches intrude into her space, appearing to simultaneously embrace and scratch. The arm gesture in the painting entitled *Metanoia, A Turning* (Figure 3), is derived from the Virgin Mary's arm gesture in Annunciation paintings, specifically Botticelli's *Cestello Annunciation* (Figure 17). In Botticelli's painting, Mary's hand

is open to the angel Gabriel as “The two protagonists meet in a supernatural exchange realized within the void shaped by their two right hands, each raised to the other— a feminine equivalent of the spiritual charge imparted by God to man in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* some years later” (Blum ch. 5). Mary’s gesture reveals her openness to Gabriel’s message and her willingness to accept God’s will. Similarly, the figure in *Metanoia, A Turning* (Figure 3) has her hand open, palm facing the light. Caught in a moment of transition, she is turning towards the light while still contemplating the darkness surrounding her. Her hand position indicates her gradual turning away from the dark, or as the Greek word *metanoia* indicates, she is facing a moment of spiritual conversion and repentance.

## Flower Painting

Seventeenth-century Dutch flower paintings have impacted my work, particularly the aesthetic qualities, symbolism, and botanical specificity within these works. The chiaroscuro or muted backgrounds in these paintings

emphasize the beauty of the flowers and connote their cycle of life, growth, and eventual decay. Dutch flower paintings often reminded seventeenth-century viewers of the ephemeral nature of life as “One of the most common similitudes of the seventeenth century was the comparison of the brief life of flowers with the brief life of man” (Taylor 43). Within this context, flowers represent both the beauty and richness of life as well as the imminence of death. Flower paintings often were meant to glorify beauty in a way that also pointed towards eternity and the need for moral living in the interim. Individual flowers within a painting were sometimes associated with a specific moral message. For example, the rose or lily were Marian symbols from the Catholic church (though they were also associated with secular meanings as well) which represented Mary’s virginity, purity, and sacrifice (Taylor 62). Other flowers, such as the peony, represented “a perfect emblem of voluptuousness” which once again pointed towards the transience of life (Taylor 70).

The botanical specificity in such paintings was an important part of the paintings’ value: “Seventeenth-century Dutch floral still lifes are notable for the extreme accuracy and exquisite detail of their style [...] It is impossible not to think of this as an attempt to give the viewers their money’s worth” (Taylor 16). These paintings functioned as a way for their owners to have a permanent enjoyment of the beauty and elegance of their gardens, as well as show off their

wealth and power. Painters intended viewers to recognize the flowers, their value, and in some cases, their symbolic associations.

The aesthetic qualities of such paintings have also impacted my work. The chiaroscuro highlights the color and liveliness of the flowers and plants. The painting techniques that these painters utilized, and their attendant symbolism, is evident as each flower stands out in relief, highlighted by the darkness surrounding them. In Dutch art theory, this chiaroscuro originates in a technique called *houding* which harmonized a composition through the placement of tones and colors: “Light tones and strong colours tend to advance to the eye, whilst dark tones and weak colours tend to recede” (Taylor 213). The dark backgrounds of many flower paintings can be understood in that “the use of contrast is an extremely important element in the production of *houding*: backgrounds must be carefully balanced against the colours of the objects which stand before them. (Taylor 217). The contrast created a beautiful arrangement of tones and colors which complimented the subject matter. In my own work I make use of contrast in a similar manner to indicate the moral implications of darkness and light.

## The Garden and Christianity

The dichotomy between life and death is at the heart of my Christian faith and a common theme in Christian art. One of the images that so powerfully represents this contrast is the Eastern Orthodox icon *Christ's Descent into Hades* (Figure 18), which depicts a newly resurrected Christ trampling down the gates of hell and death while lifting Adam and Eve from their graves. This image reflects Christ's victory over death and the hope of renewal and resurrection for all believers. This same theme is present in annunciation paintings, such as Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (Figure 19), as the angel Gabriel extends the greeting and announcement of Christ's impending birth to Mary. Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden is in the background of this painting, reminding the viewer that Gabriel's greeting is a source of great hope as a solution to the problem of sin and shame that Adam and Eve faced. In the midst of suffering is the promise of regeneration.

Such regeneration is also represented in Christian art through gardens and natural imagery. The garden is depicted as a place of both exile and expulsion, as well as of homecoming and resurrection. Massaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (Figure 20), while not directly depicting a garden,

implies Adam and Eve's removal from the garden, a place of delight, and into the wasteland of life separated from God. On the other hand, Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (Figure 21) from the Ghent altarpiece uses a lush, natural setting to frame the lamb of God, or Christ, and his sacrificial position as the lamb. These depictions of natural imagery line up with the concept of the garden that is woven throughout Biblical accounts, from Genesis to Revelation.

This centrality of the garden and the natural world in Christian art and the Bible has impacted my use of the garden and nature in my own work. The garden represents a place of joy and beauty that cannot be fully attained or perfected on earth, reminding me simultaneously of the hope of an eternal home and resurrection as well as the in-between state of displacement and loss. Drawing on these common uses of garden imagery, I have reduced the symbolic meaning of the garden to specific plants as symbols of that theme.

## Plant Symbolism

In Medieval and Renaissance art, the spiritual symbolism of the natural world related to specific symbols, including plants, animals, birds, and insects. These symbols were often associated with Biblical stories or moral messages. For example, the oak tree was associated with the tree of life or salvation (Impelluso 62), and carnations were symbols of Christ's passion (115). This symbolic language added a layer of richness and depth to the meaning of the works of art.

Likewise, I incorporate plant symbolism in my paintings to indicate the human figure's encounter with spiritual realities and the intersection between the spiritual and natural world. In the painting *Metanoia, a Turning* (Figure 3), I use the dark foliage of the holly bushes as a representation of suffering, darkness, and passion, as holly, "because of its thorny leaves, is regarded as a symbol of Christ's crown of thorns" (Ferguson 32). The combination of thistles and flowering plants towards the left side of the canvas represent suffering ("The thistle is the symbol of earthly sorrow and sin" (Ferguson 38)) mixed with hope, as the flowers reach towards the light for sustenance.

I am inspired by other sources of plant imagery aside from Renaissance paintings. In the painting entitled *Every Common Bush* (Figure 10), the image of the blackberry comes from a quote in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh*: "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God, But only he who sees takes off his shoes; The rest sit round and pluck blackberries" (Book 7). In this instance the blackberry is a symbol of potential fruitfulness within the midst of thorny circumstances, as well as having a receptive attitude towards circumstances and God's leading.

Thorns and thorn bushes are a motif in this body of work. I am interested in thorns and thorny plants as symbols of trials or suffering, as in the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, as well as in other common fairytales or folktales. Thorns often represent an impassable blockade that must be overcome for the protagonist to flourish and grow. In the painting entitled *Nothing Like Eden* (Figure 22), the rose bushes are devoid of any signs of growth or life except for a single rose. These thorns form an impassable barrier behind the figure, beginning to entangle her as she reaches to touch the fading rose blossom

## CONCLUSION

Efflorescence of the human spirit and faith can occur in a variety of circumstances, whether during times of trial or through encounters with joy. The core of Christian belief is that nothing is beyond repair. There is always hope. Yet humans often struggle, both in faith and emotionally to find this hope and flourish during difficult circumstances. This strain is mostly internal, often externally unnoticed. In expressing this struggle, metaphors of nature and light connect a physical experience with the metaphysical, making the intangible concrete. Ephemeral elements such as foliage, flowers, and light convey glimpses of the eternal. This body of work is an acknowledgement of that unseen reality and how individuals encounter and respond to it in their lives. Through encountering the natural world around us, we come to understand the world beyond us.



Figure 1, Underpainting for *Metanoia, A Turning*, 2018, Oil on Canvas,  
52" x 66.5"



Figure 2, *Annunciation Hands*, 2019, Charcoal on Paper, 26" x 40"



Figure 3, *Metanoia, A Turning*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 52" x 66.5"



Figure 4, Into the Light, 2019, Charcoal on Paper,  
26" x 40"



Figure 5, *Entangled*, 2019, Charcoal on Paper, 26" x 40"



Figure 6, John Singer Sargent, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885-86,  
Oil on Canvas, 5' 9" x 5' 1"



Figure 7, Joaquín Sorolla, *The Wounded Foot*, 1909, Oil on Canvas, 43" x 39.25"

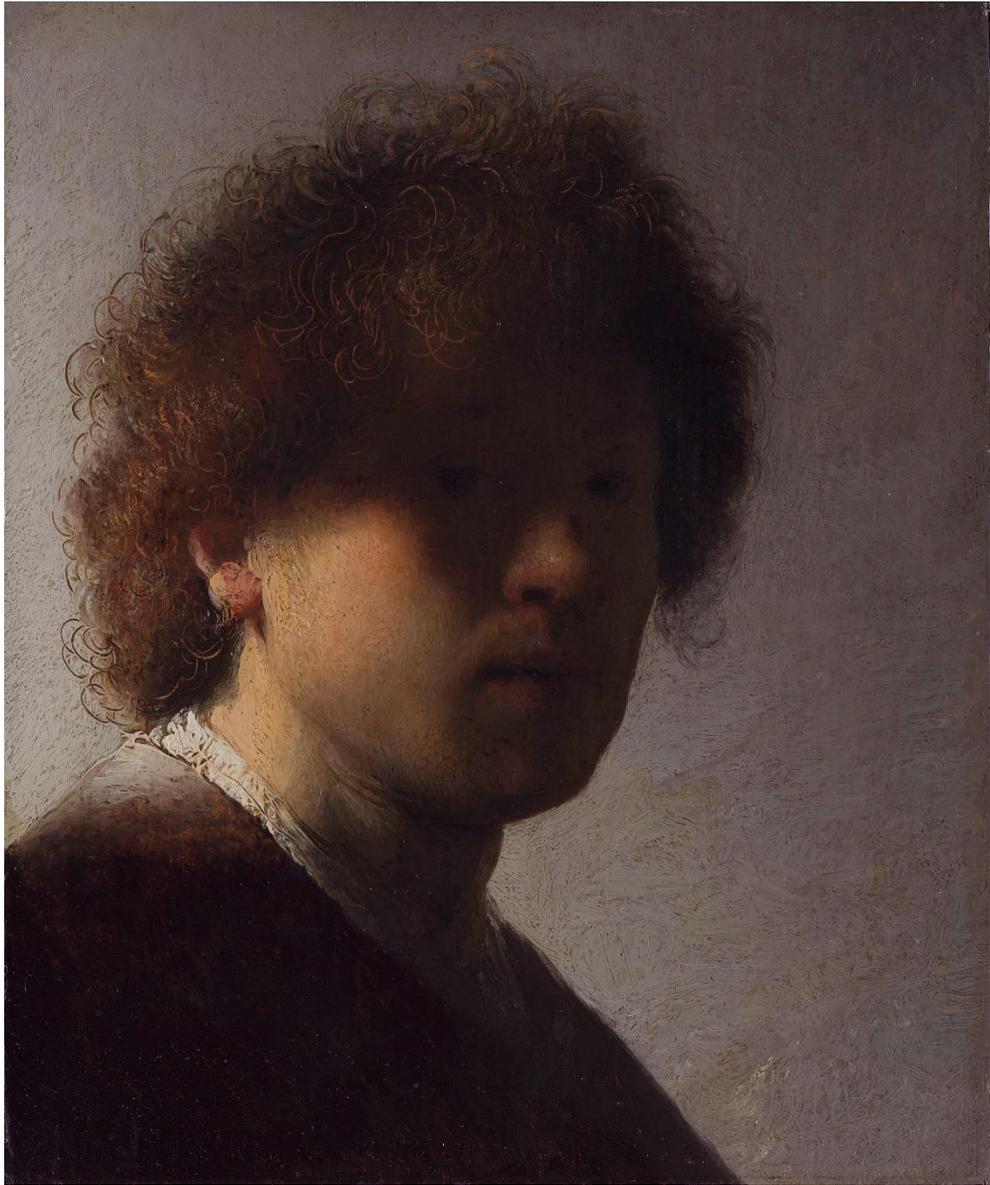


Figure 8, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self Portrait*, Oil on Canvas,  
22.6 x 18.7 cm



Figure 9, Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*,  
1663-69, Oil on Canvas, 262 x 205 cm



Figure 10, *Every Common Bush*, 2018, Oil on Canvas,  
32.5" x 42.25"

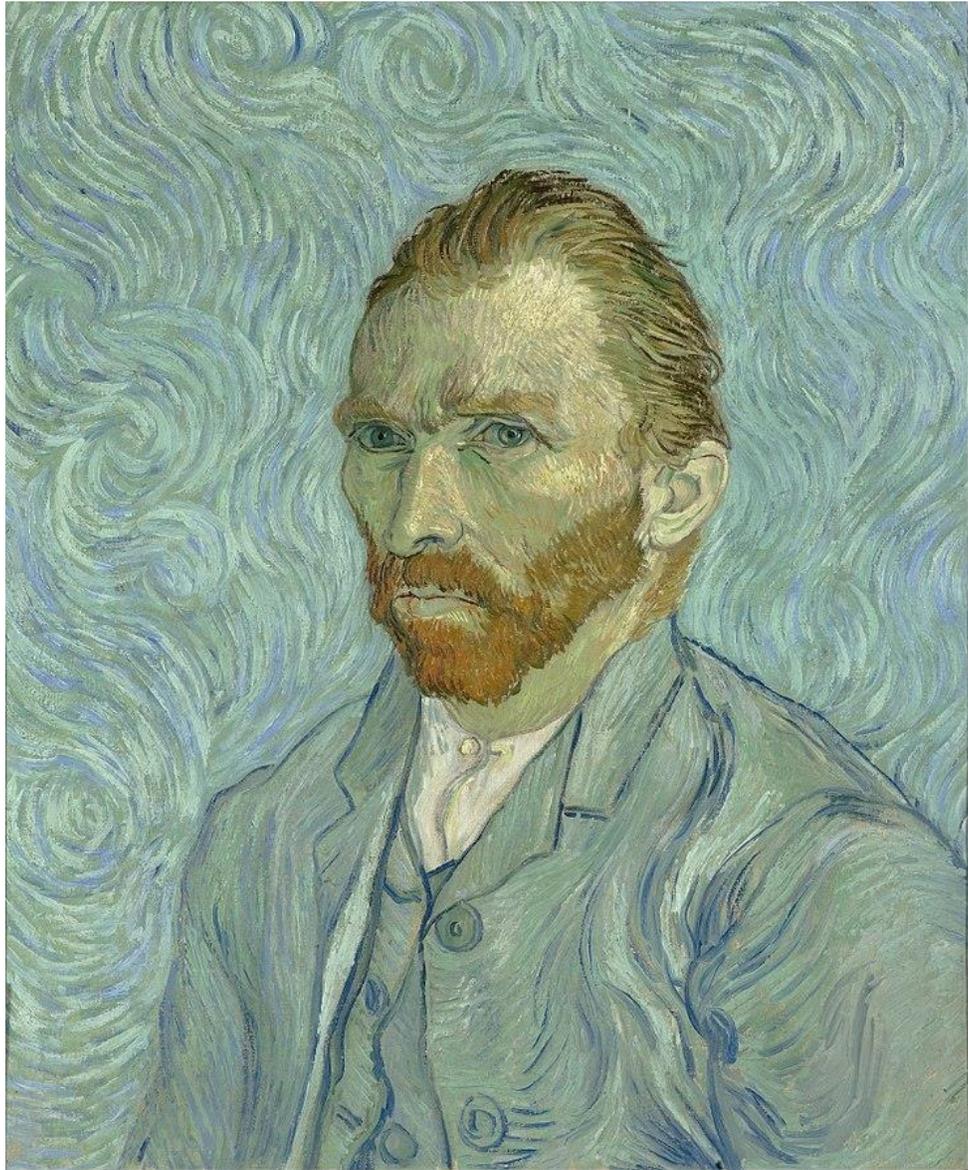


Figure 11, Vincent Van Gogh, *Self Portrait*, 1889, Oil on Canvas, 26" x 21"



Figure 12, Helene Delmaire, *Still Life with Flowers VI*, 2016, Oil on Canvas,  
50 x 30 cm



Figure 13, Zoey Frank, *Wedding*, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 96" x 140"

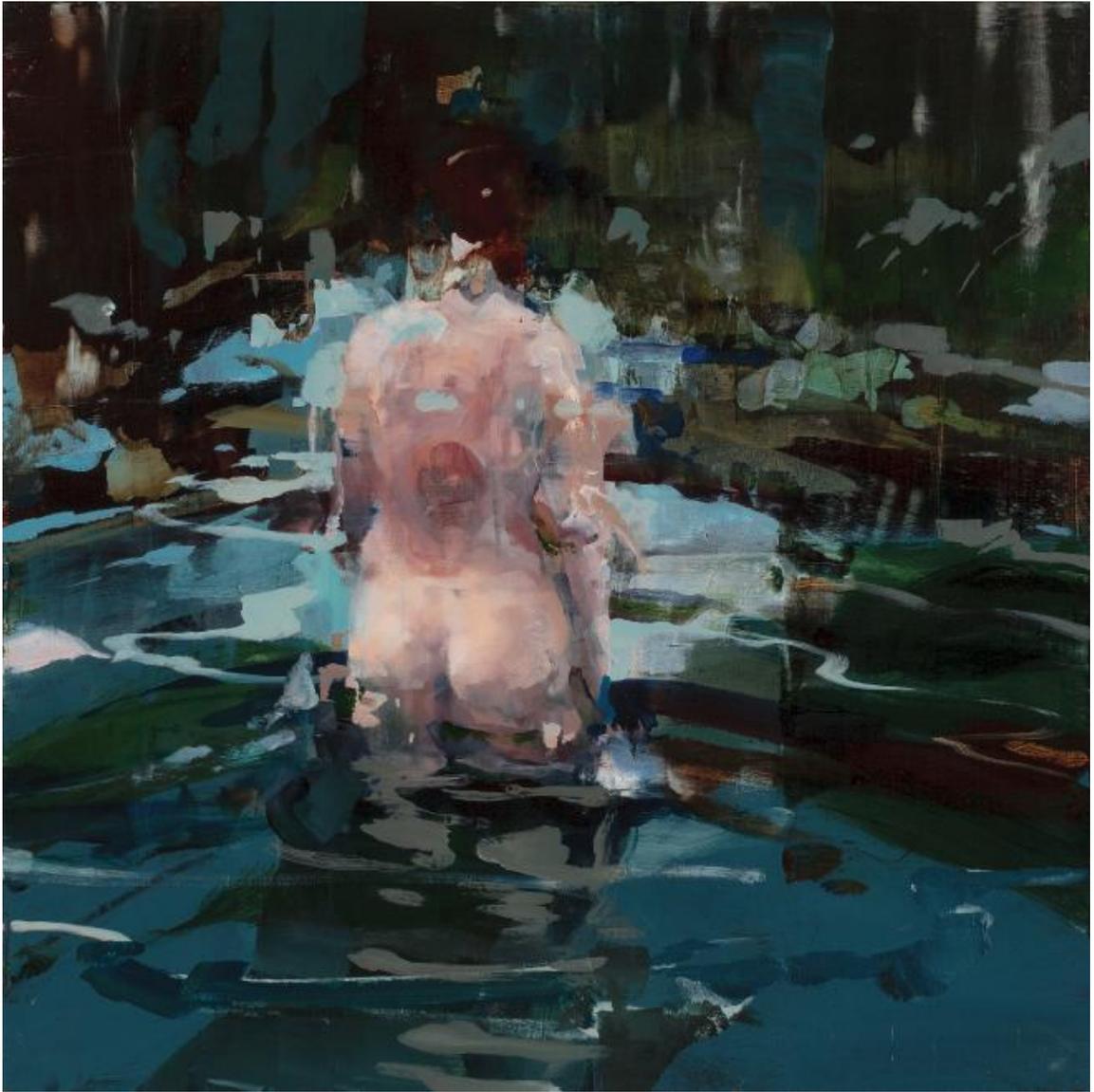


Figure 14, Alex Kanevsky, *L.H. in the Dark Pond*, 2017, Oil on Wood, 18' x 18"



Figure 15, Mia Bergeron, *Evensong*, 2015, Oil on Panel, 20" x 24"



Figure 16, *Evergreen*, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 27.25" x 32.5"



Figure 17, Sandro Botticelli, *Cestello Annunciation*, 1489, Tempera on Panel,  
59" x 61"



Figure 18, *Christ's Descent Into Hades*, Tempera on Panel, Orthodox Road Blog



Figure 19, Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, 1437-46, Fresco



Figure 20, Masaccio, *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*,  
1425, Fresco



Figure 21, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, 1432,  
Oil on Panel, From the Ghent Altarpiece



Figure 22, *Nothing Like Eden*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 55" x 68"

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## VITA

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