

Seen not spoken

By

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Renee Springer

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Abstract

Seen not spoken is an exhibition that investigates the technology of pop culture (via the screen) and its influence within contemporary art and painting. The notable collapse of the separation between physical and digital/screen space that is becoming more and more integrated into contemporary life has become a key point of interest to me. This specific body of work explores the kinds of images and behaviors that reflect our relationship to digital space, and how those relationships manifest in day-to-day life.

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Introduction

T'was the night before Christmas and all through the house, I could feel the
absence of one certain spouse.

Her stockings are gone now, and so is her flair. She left without warning, not
a moment to spare.

The doggos were nestled all snug in their beds, with hopes that their mama
would come back to them.

But I had to tell them with 'tip of my hat, please don't hold your breath kids,
she's not coming back.

While deep in my heart there arose such a clatter, how suddenly we all did
not seem to matter.

Away from her family, she flew like a flash. And left in her wake quite a
terrible gash. The hurt in my eyes, an unfortunate show, for all of my
feelings are bared on my soul.

When what to her wandering heart should appear, but a version of me with
less substance I fear.

With my keen intuition, I knew he was slick, but never on Earth had I thought
was a dick.

My eyes are now open, and though it's a shame, I'm honest enough to find
all 3 to blame.

On KARMA! On DHARMA! And now that I'm lucid, I must quick to reckon my
quarrel with cupid.

To the meat of the matter I beckon the call! But run away, run away, run
away all!

As hearts without brains will abandon to try, to act without thinking
leaves reason to lie. So now that my loneliness has space to stew, I find my mind
willing to ponder anew.

And then in an instant, with instinct as proof, I know I am able to handle the
truth.

As I wade through this emptiness, hopeless and down; I won't let this
senselessness turn me around.

For she is my wife, and although we're ca-put, I know that her soul has yet
to take root.

Inside of us all there's a place we regret, that sadly she just
hasn't visited yet. Her eyes! How they're perfectly able to see; are not quite developed,
unfortunately.

Her beautiful mouth, like a soft petaled bow; has often deceived words that
needed to grow.

And I, unaware of the truths in its keep; awakened to all of the silence it
speaks.

She has a veiled self, that she hides in her belly; that likens her visage
to monster's of Shelley.

Our marriage it seems, she has placed on a shelf; left to wither like winos
will dry out their health.

In a blink of an eye, and a turn of my head; she was gone as if hell itself lay
in our bed.

So now here I stand, like an old-fashioned jerk; my wife left her home
and she claims it was work.

And now I can know from my head to my toes, I can't be quite sure of how
anything goes.

The thoughts in my head will lay hedgehogs to bristle. They burst and
explode like a nuclear missile.

Please don't forget me, my nuptial blight. You haunt me, the ghost of my
cold Christmas night.

A poem by Julian Bemi, as published on his public Facebook Profile account.

When I first came across this poem, I laughed, and immediately read it a second time. I laughed again. I remember thinking it was simultaneously hilarious and sad; pathetic emotion-whoring on the internet for any and all to see. As someone who has a personal pact to never blast my sorrow and depression into the social media sphere for commentary, I deigned myself above this stupid attempt that simultaneously grasped with desperation for pity, praise, and of course, “likes.”

When I reread the poem a third time, mocking its high school level of expression, I started to feel a little guilty. I went back further in this man’s public post history to see that not only had his wife recently left him, but had left him for someone else. There were several months worth of posts, equally as cringeworthy as the poem, where Julian clearly fluctuated between publically begging his estranged wife to call him, and flaunting his hotness, composure, and overall desirability despite losing her. It was bizarrely engaging in a way I hadn’t anticipated. It was a complete train wreck, but I couldn’t look away. For all of my disdain over my perceived inappropriateness of the message embedded in this medium, I certainly was spending enough time pouring over it as my finger continued to scroll down the screen to see the next monstrosity of social media status meltdown. I found myself completely swept up in the voyeuristic sense of superiority that only this window into someone else’s world could allow for. This poem, and my own response to it, is an example of the precise thing I am exploring in this exhibition.

Seen not spoken investigates the relationship between the technology of pop culture (via the screen) and its influence within contemporary painting. The notable collapse of the separation between physical and digital/screen space that is becoming more and more a part of contemporary life has become a key point of interest to me. I’m exploring the kinds of images and behaviors that reflect our relationship to digital space, and how those relationships manifest in day-to-day life. The work is a visual investigation that questions and critiques the continually evolving relationship between humans and technology, as well as ways that technology affects our relationships with one another as connected individuals.

Screen culture has produced a new way that people express and identify themselves. Initially this separation from self that a computer screen offered allowed an internet persona to have elements of anonymity hidden behind a catchy screenname. However, as the internet continues to evolve, authenticity (or something like it) has become the new ideal for an online presence. This particularly holds true for various social sites like Facebook and Instagram, where Melissa Gronlund notes in her research on identity online that “Users tend now to perform themselves, rather than assuming other identities . . . users attempt to create the closest possible match between the online presentation of their persona and what they believe to be their true personhood” (Gronlund 150).

The overlaps and intersections of physical, social, and digital space affect our methods of self-representation, or even preservation, and lead to the questions I am asking through *Seen not spoken*. We are living an experience of culture that is shaping the way our experiences, memories, and identities are displayed, received, and documented. Screen culture has brought about new ways to consider things like portraiture, through the arrival of selfie culture, as well as new spaces to consider the distinct differences in user experience formed by differences in gender. This work intends to connect distinct moments in time and space to more fully realize the relationship to the contemporary self and digitalized culture for the viewer, but also for myself as the artist.

Themes of the Exhibition

One of the first things encountered when entering the gallery space is a small indicator stating: “In order to fully experience the work in the show, it is recommended that you download the free Zappar App from either Google Play or the App store.” A key component of this exhibition is the viewer participating with the work through the use of their cell phones. Several pieces within the show have indicators inviting viewers to view the physical work through an app on their phones that activated an augmented reality component of the work. The digital component, activated by the screen, remained unseen by those who chose not to use the app. This single component to the work created a variety of experiences for viewers. Some viewers were annoyed they were being asked to contribute to their

experience of the work, and others who never downloaded the app were frustrated by a lack of understanding the physical work seen in the gallery. I found one such frustration particularly funny during a lecture when a student asked why there was no visible artist statement to read in the gallery. When I asked the student if they had downloaded the app she promptly responded with a no. Already there were varying opinions on the quality of the work based on the use of a screen.

Once in the gallery, there is a wall with 8.5” x 11” laser-printed selfies of me, the artist. At first glance, the images appear to be the typically represented selfie many people are familiar with. Upon closer examination, however, a viewer finds a series of images that are atypical of the traditional selfie format. All of the images are taken from an unflattering angle shot lower than the face, while I am looking down at the screen. Through the installation of over 700 unique selfies, patterns begin to emerge as you see familiar backgrounds and locations repeating themselves.

Since the beginning of my graduate career I have been interested in portraiture within painting. Amid discussions of identity construction, politics, and painting I started to question the role of the subject in figurative expression in an age of social media culture. This contemporary moment in the established history of painting serves as the backdrop “to convey our viewed and experienced relationship to the contemporary self and digitalized culture” (Kirszenbaum 80). Selfie culture possesses a demonstrably feminine influence. Kate Durbin, an artist who explores expression of teenage girl identity, affirms that selfies have become linked to feminine identity in no small part due to screen culture. Selfies have often been associated with female vanity, narcissism, and self-indulgence. Durbin performed a work titled *Hello, Selfie*, in which female performers take selfies for an hour straight wearing white sports bras and underwear, addressing the girl gaze that seems to epitomize this idea of narcissism. The work became the target of misogynist critique and commentary, which Durbin challenged.

“It was ridiculous because girls are objectified from the time they’re very young. They’re taught to be so aware of their appearance and how they look to others and yet, they’re being criticized for looking at themselves and being aware of themselves as objects . . . The girl gaze is like a

fuck you to the male gaze because she's looking at herself and she's aware of the male gaze, but she's refusing to cater to it . . . it's your conversation with yourself and your own image” (Barukh 3).

Early in the development of this piece I debated the importance of the actual object material. As an artist who began my graduate career as a painter, I was forced to ask if physical paintings are necessary to discuss selfie culture? Admittedly they are not essential in that specific conversation. Digital experimentation with selfies brought me to the conclusion that, while I am interested in the selfie culture that I am a part of, I am also interested especially in the way it relates to ideas of portraiture within contemporary art. The wall of selfies in *Seen not spoken* are a visual investigation of this ongoing discourse surrounding selfies. With a shallow misunderstanding of the selfie dominating the cultural conversation, I wanted to explore these gendered expectations of the selfie. What happens when a portrait uses a self-objectified subject, without cynicism, to thoughtfully consider the implications of a shift in autonomy and perceived gaze from viewer to subject? What happens when the gaze is no longer from viewer to subject, or even subject to viewer, but from subjects to themselves?

While this installation doesn't literally use paint in its execution, there are striking parallels formed between painting and screen culture. In Achim Hochdörfer's essay *How the World Came in*, he describes painting as a medium that has historically held close ties to subject theory. “Painting was the singularly privileged medium of self-reassurance” (Hochdörfer 15). Similarly, contemporary screen culture is an evolved medium of expression that also serves as a measure of self-assurance for the privileged individual of today.

“The multilayered implications of the painterly gesture had been found to provide an ideal metaphoric vehicle for analyzing the complex relationship between mind and body, eye and hand. The canvas, having been touched by the brushstroke, had become the site at which the individual met society and collective experience—even while hosting a lament over its own loss” (Hochdörfer 15).

This passage speaks of painting, but is also an excellent description of how people use their cell phones to document themselves and their experiences. We live, and simultaneously frame, distinct moments in time that demonstrate our relationship between our own minds and bodies, eyes and hands. The screen, having been captured by a click, becomes the site at which individuals meet with greater society and collective experience, and some lament when through comparison their own experiences or images are lacking. More on that comparison element shortly.

In 1967 Guy Debord called for gestural techniques to be mobilized in painting to combat what he perceived as the rise of *spectacle*, “not limited to “new” media influences like television, or today, the internet,” or even more recently, the screen (Hochdörder 28). Rauschenberg began staging this dialogue within his own work in his 1962 Silkscreen paintings. The works demonstrated “a programmatic confrontation between traditional, expressive painting and the surge of media imagery” (Hochdörder 16). The dominate expression found in the another painting by Rauschenberg, *Barge*, was an over thirty-foot-wide painting created as part of a painting performance for CBS. In the middle of this enormous painting, a silkscreen print of Venus admiring herself in a mirror is surrounded on all sides by seemingly disparate images and objects. “As ciphers of an increasingly technologized world, these images impinge not just on Venus pondering her own beauty but also on viewers looking in the mirror” (Hochdörder 15).

Painters have been admiring Venus for centuries, but it is the act of Venus admiring herself that transforms her from muse to spectacle. Even within the initial surge of media imagery brought about through television, male painters have made a point to include women’s autonomy as just more visual noise. Women are spectacle objects within painting, and many would be content to keep them within such a frame. However, recognizing this established history of the female as object, in the selfie wall installation I choose to use my own image, side by side and through a process of accumulation, in acknowledgment of the perceptions surrounding selfies. I simultaneously acknowledge and reject those perceptions by reclaiming autonomy over my image through the image itself being the mark. I am the artist and also the expressive mark of authorship within this work.

Moving from the wall of selfie images, viewers encounter a deconstructed painting hanging with a second painting resting inside the frame. An icon indicates for viewers to use their phones to interact with the app. What pops onto the cell phone screen is also a painting, but this painting only is visible through the augmented reality app. Seeing the deconstructed painting on the wall before them, viewers look at their screens to see in place of that painting, there is a painting of a “dick pic.”

I mentioned previously that a part of painting signifies a connection to comparative experiences. I could not make a body of paintings addressing screen culture without calling attention to the polarized difference in digital experience based on my gender. Identifying as a woman, my experience with screen culture exposes me not only to the regular dismissal of my expressions within it as shallow, but it also aggressively calls attention to the entitlement of men to use the screen as a weapon of harassment. Unsolicited dick pics are a part of screen culture that many women experience. Even in seemingly benign social digital spaces, like Facebook, dick pics can appear in a message with no warning (or explanation).

This painting serves as an opportunity for a viewer to experience what happens when an image like a dick pic shows up on your phone. There is no way to control where or when you receive dick pics, particularly because they are often unsolicited. What happens if you look at it and someone sees? What if you look at it and you are with someone else? What if you see it, but then don't exit out of the picture fast enough? All those questions are parts of the conversation around dick pics. It's a warped version of intimacy that is one sided – imposed onto the recipient whether consent was given or not. This gendered experience of digital culture is suited to painting as the expression of medium precisely for the way in which painting historically has examined the *spectacle* brought about through technological innovation.

The *Samstag* painting also has an augmented reality component that invites dialogue surrounding points of comparison for experiences. Viewers see a flattened, awkwardly posed painted portrait that is transformed through the screen into a video of curtains softly wafting in a gentle breeze. Viewers become privy to an intimate, private moment within a public place. This gesture again calls into question ideas of voyeurism, as well as intimacy, in the context of the screen. In this work, as well as in others in the

exhibition, the screen becomes a method of abstraction. It is a simultaneous presentation and denial of authenticity. Do these moments captured and displayed represent authentic moments of our lived experiences? Are they accurate representations of intimacy when shared? What fuels our desire to attempt to experience what others are seeing, and see it how they contain it within the frame?

Further investigating the questions brought about by framing our experiences with our screens, the installation *All the pictures on my phone* also seeks to bridge the disconnect between digital and physical space. I have been endlessly cataloguing moments of my daily using the camera on my phone. The images range from pictures from a life-changing experience in Europe last year to the random moldy object that resembled a potato that I found on a walk with my dog Louie. My method of gathering imagery and photographic sources through selfies or social media is not unlike the way Elizabeth Peyton works. “Peyton looks for more candid records of life’s small details” (Tscherny 102). This installation, which is still in progress, continues to grow as I paint each picture from my phone onto a physical canvas. This process not only documents candid moments, but also actually records the documentation process itself, and allows that process to become a part of the work. Highlighting a growing habit of taking pictures to later share, I wanted to experiment with what happens when every shot moves beyond a quick attempt at display into an obligation. If you can capture and delete moments in time via your phone endlessly, how does the value of those moments change when I am forced to spend time re-examining the image and putting it to paint?

The installation was displayed and organized in stacks according to the date they were taken. Viewers could only see the volume of the images, and the painting on top of each individual stack. It was only through accessing the augmented reality component that viewers were brought to an Instagram account where each painting has been scanned and uploaded. Viewers could scroll through the account to see the images through their phone individually or via the gridded setup of the Instagram layout. Just as painters in the 1960’s experimented with how to “integrate and appropriate both the techniques and the motifs of contemporary image production,” I continue to use painting in this installation to examine the

contemporary methods of image creation, production, and display that are continually evolving alongside the cultural uses of technology.

Ernst van Alphen's essay *Looking at Drawing*, which was a prominent influence of my early graduate career, presents the idea of marks on surface as "claiming" or reclaiming of space. I started investigating what claiming space means within screen culture to better understand how individuals, primarily women, go about claiming, presenting, or representing their identities. The works in *Seen not spoken* examine new forms of this claiming of space; an alternative, social, non-physical space. Whether process oriented, figurative, or conceptual, my body of work is interested in how individuals go about claiming space, and how that claiming, which was formerly communicated in painting through marks and abstraction, has now turned into a new form of gesture that is somewhere between figurative and abstracted. The screen creates a shift in media that is born from a desire to claim space, yet remains confined to a limited environment that is accessible only through a device. The continuous flow and exchange of information we have through social screen culture, however, establishes the possibility for images to become expressive marks that are elevated into gestures of authorship of the digital self.

The final work in the exhibition consists of two large painted black panels covered in resin. They are seemingly solemn objects in comparison to the other works and their stillness is only interrupted by the reflections of viewers passing in and out of the edges of the glossy surface. While the other works capture moments in time, this last work offers a glimpse of now. An acknowledgment of the influence screen culture maintains to build and shape culture moving forward, the shape of the panels themselves nods to the familiar form most of our screens now inhabit. Screens have transcended beyond our individual possessions, and have become near to sacred objects in how they have become a gateway that opens up entirely new dimensions of expression.

Conclusion

Art historian André Rottman describes the shifting landscape of painting as “marked by a notion of constant transition rather than stasis. Instead of constituting self-contained entities, painterly works explicitly establish relations to the broader social, technological, and economical networks within which they come into existence and circulate” (Rottman 9). The ability of painting to remain relevant in contemporary art hinges on its ability to engage with methods of practice that expand beyond the frame and media specificity. Engaging with depictions of everyday life through the surge of social media imagery is a new plane of existence for painting to reexamine its own perceived limits. As art historian and critic Isabelle Graw brilliantly puts it, “Painting has long since left its ancestral home – that is, the picture on the canvas – and is now omnipresent, as it were, and at work in other art forms as well” (Graw, 45). Graw also discusses the way in which painting serves as a social index. When you consider the ways in which screen culture also serves in this capacity, the work of *Seen not spoken* successfully examines our relationship with digital culture through the language of contemporary painting.

Seen not spoken combines a variety of elements from painting, installation, and digital media to question and critique the images and behaviors that demonstrate our relationship to screen culture. I invite viewers to consider their own involvement with, and within, digital spaces to explore how these spaces within the screen manifest physically in our day-to-day experiences. How we choose to engage, display, and view experiences, as well as identity, invites us to question perceived authenticity as a method of abstraction. There is an undercurrent of resistance to conformity within the work that also indicts myself, the artist, being a willing part of the system I’m attempting to critique. Screen culture offers unprecedented opportunities of voyeurism, intimacy, ego, and exchange. It erodes the boundaries between public and private. Digital culture has transformed the way we approach capturing and cataloging images. The work of this thesis serves to document these themes as I continue to navigate cultural shifts as an evolving painter within a deeply rooted, and long standing tradition.

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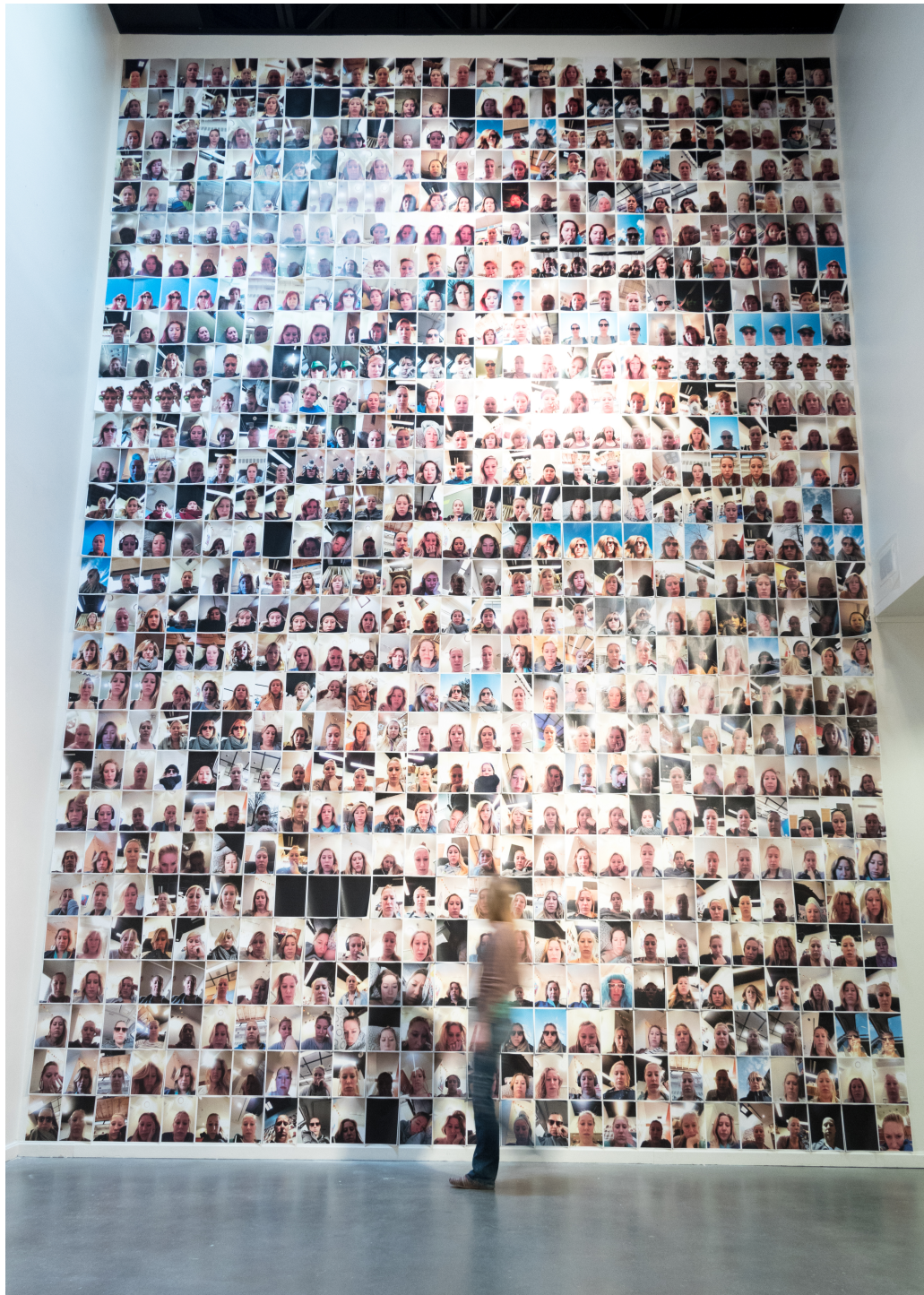
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Image Index



"Feed Me" Laser Copy Paper Installation. 11'x 26.5'. 2018 (ongoing growing installation)



"Untitled" Oil on Canvas with Augmented Reality component. 24"x40". 2018



"Untitled - detail" Oil on Canvas with Augmented Reality component. 24"x40'. 2018



"Samstag" Oil on Canvas with Augmented Reality component. 24"x40". 2018



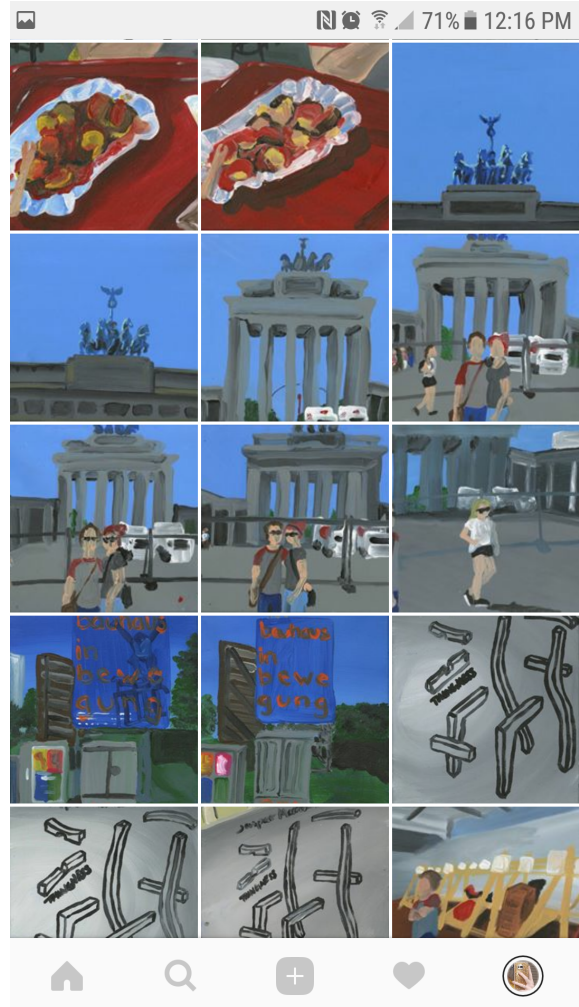
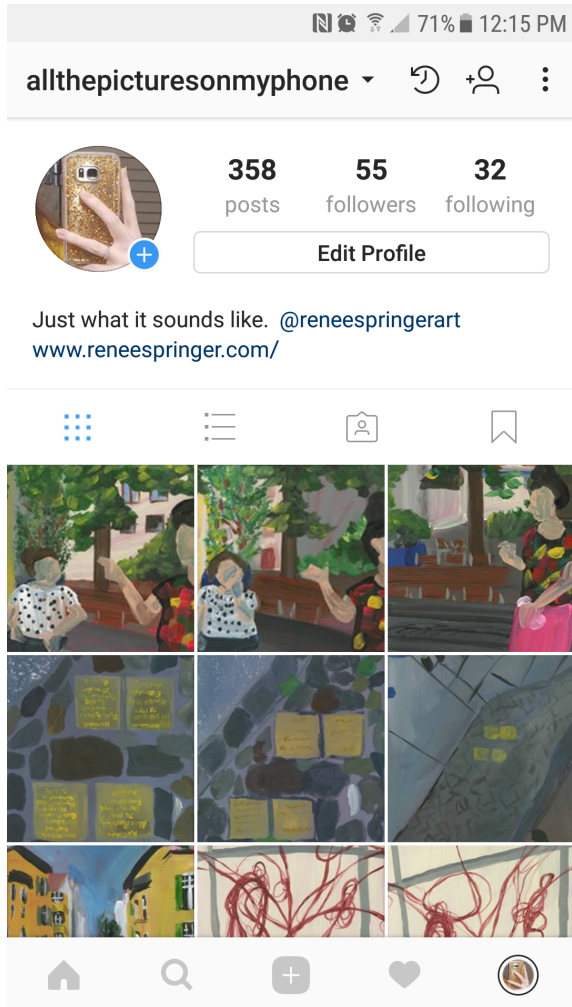
"Samstag - detail" Oil on Canvas with Augmented Reality component. 24"x40". 2018



"All the pictures on my phone" Acrylic on Canvas with Augmented Reality component. 9"x12" canvases stacked (x9). 2018



"All the pictures on my phone - detail" Acrylic on Canvas with Augmented Reality component



All the pictures on my phone – detail of linked instagram account via AR component



"Untitled" Acrylic on Panel. 34"x54"(x2). 2018