

Hidden Beneath

by

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2022

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Fort Hays State University, 2017

Submitted to the graduate degree program in the Department of Visual Art and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art, Painting and Drawing.

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Date Defended: 5 April 2022

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Hidden Beneath

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Date Approved: 1 May 2022

Abstract:

Hidden Beneath is an exhibition of fifteen paintings and two drawings. It is an exhibition about change: the uncomfortable and beautiful feelings experienced during a state of transition. I explore growth in both a positive and negative state through landscapes and the human body. The painted spaces originate from observations and experiences altered by time and memory. I intend for viewers to come away with an appreciation for looking and wondering what could happen next. Change is constantly happening; even when it feels still, there is something beneath the surface starting to grow.

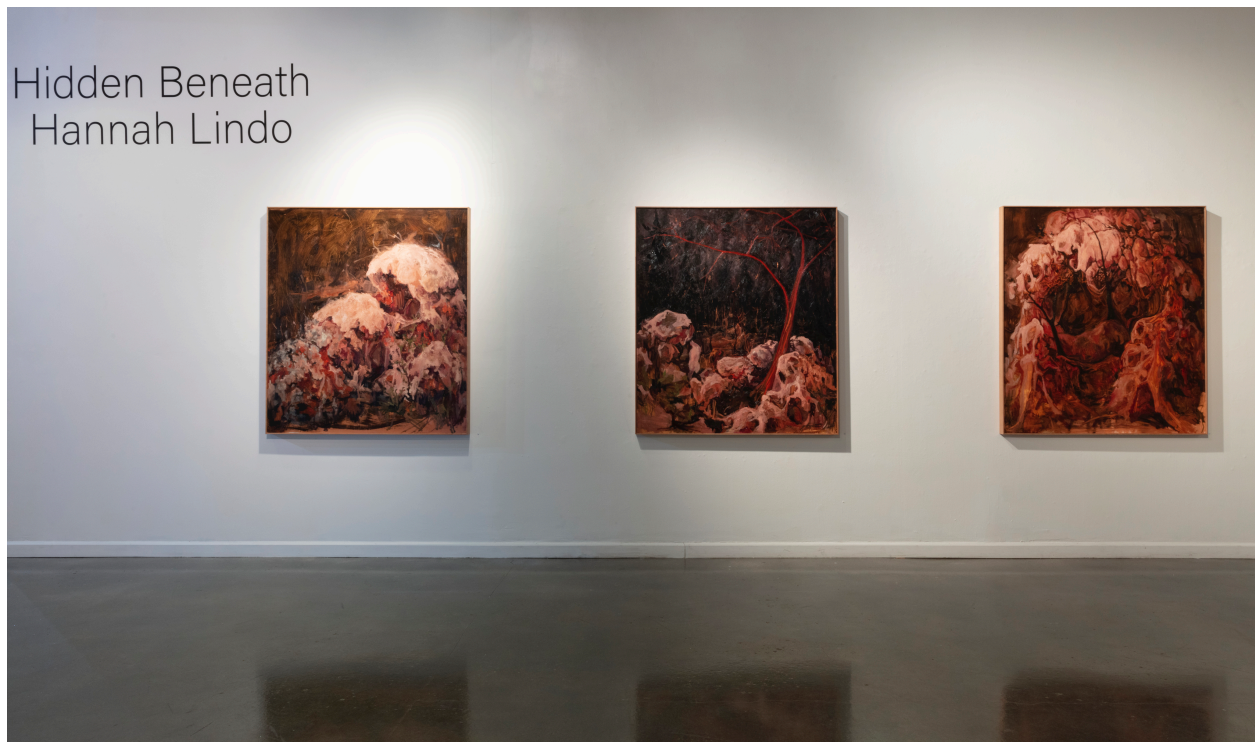
Acknowledgements:

To my thesis committee: Norman Akers, Michael McCaffrey, and Yoonmi Nam thank you for your wisdom, generosity, and kindness throughout my graduate school experience and especially during this last year. You are all inspiring, and I will never forget the encouraging and caring spirit you bring to all your students. To Cotter Mitchell: thank you for making all the superb surfaces for my paintings exist on and always helping me find a creative solution. To my family and friends: thank you for always being so supportive and helping me get through such an important chapter in my life. I could not have done it without you.

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Chapter I:
Transitions of Change: Growth and Decay



(Figure 1: From left to right, *Growth from Decay*, *Reaching Red Limbs*, and *Worry Grows*)

Hidden Beneath begins with a grouping of three paintings; they are warm and curious in nature. Each painting seems to be alive, growing from a mysterious source. But what is growing? Slivers of vibrant red peek through blobs of pink fleshy mounds. Is it bleeding? How do I help it? Can I help it? These paintings explore the connection between nature and the human body, and the growth that both experience.

I noticed how I associated the word growth with only positive connotations. In nature: we see flowers bloom, trees gain height, and colors shift with the seasons. As humans, we experience and witness growth in ourselves and others as we grow taller and change with time. There is beauty and a sense of wonder in seeing things change and become fully formed. But there is a moment in every timeline where growth is not

as gracious. Mold rots away its host, fire destroys whatever it touches, cancer feasts on healthy cells, and anxiety becomes the loudest voice.

I create visual spaces in my work that are in the process of changing and show the duality of growth. These spaces are intriguing yet uncomfortable. There is a sense of curiosity and fear attached to the unknown that I want to explore in my work. I use both internal and external conditions I experience to shape compositions, determine color palettes, and form an overall mood or tone.

My process begins with smaller studies made from observation, where I spend time looking at and collecting visual materials from nature and the human body. I hold on to the shapes, textures, and colors I experience in the moment of observation to use later in larger works. I relive these moments when I work, revisiting how the light cast shadows, how shapes emerged and surprised me, and how space started to arrange itself. I begin to recognize the contours of the forms, and it is as if I remember feeling the shape of or holding the weight of a broken twig. Memory is a meaningful tool for me to incorporate into my work because I want to explore these moments away from the source and through new mediums like paint or charcoal.

For me, painting and drawing come from tenacious curiosity. I am eager to discover spontaneous moments and potential outcomes. There are moments of fear when I become afraid of losing parts of the painting or drawing as it develops. I try to predict an outcome before anything has happened. But the process of painting and drawing is a destructive growth. With every brush mark, carved line, or eraser smudge, I lose what was there before. To create a painting or drawing, I have learned to accept

that I will destroy most of the image before anything can settle. Within the destructive growth of painting and drawing, an accumulation of material, observations, realizations and surprises start to pile up.



(Figure 2: *Beneath the Burls*)

Charcoal drawings grow from the relationship between light and dark. To see a frail white branch extending from a tree, a darker environment of tone or texture needs to surround it. In *Beneath the Burls*, a tree full of burls¹ arches its spine as thin

¹ Burls are woody galls that grow on tree stems, and especially on tree trunks. [Galls are somewhat disorganized growths or tumors that can form on most parts of trees (and other plants). Galls and other tree tumors can be caused by bacteria, viruses, insects, and other organisms.] Kuhns (2021) *Can Trees Get Cancer?*: 1-3

branches could either be reaching out to or pushing away the viewer. The tallest part of the tree is dark in tone and recedes into space, creating a bending movement. I laid down tones of charcoal and erased through them to reveal a mark and create texture. Light focuses on the middle to the bottom portion of the tree, creating a gradient throughout the image. It is important to me, when working with charcoal, to give the viewer enough visual information through the illusion of texture and volume for them to get a sense of weight. I want the viewer to feel the physical heaviness of the subjects I depict from the scale and technique I use. I hope they also sense the emotional heaviness in my hand.

Paintings grow from the basics of drawing with the addition of color. Color evokes emotion, memory, and personal reflection when experienced. I kept a limited color palette throughout the exhibition, leaving room for deeper exploration of what color means to me. As painter David Scott Kastan explains: "Color is an unavoidable part of our experience of the world, not least as it differentiates and organizes the physical space in which we live, allowing us to navigate it"². Color is everywhere and informs so much of our lives, yet you must take the time to look and appreciate what it is saying. Painters like Pierre Bonnard, Doron Langberg, and Jennifer Packer have been insightful painters for me to study. Their color palettes and color relationships within their work produce color worlds I want to live in. Every color feels like it belongs

² Kastan & Farthing (2019) *On Color*: 1

and works harmoniously to convey emotion. Most of their palettes are limited to one to three colors and are explored through their mark-making and handling of oil paint.



(Figure 3: *Congealed*)

Congealed was predominantly painted with a deep crimson red. This deep cool-toned red has strength and fragility in its nature; it is assertive yet wounded. I felt a connection to the rawness of this color. I repeatedly applied and removed the color with a palette knife, paint rag, and carving tool. The removal of paint left behind transparent stains of color layering on top of each other, showing previous marks underneath. In the top half of the painting, there is one layer of paint that depicts the immediacy of my hand, and where a light airy atmosphere seems to dissipate the dark pile of red. The same crimson red color is built up towards the middle of the painting, becoming more solid and delicately handled. Limiting my color palette enabled me to explore the strength and tenderness found in one color.

Chapter 2: ***Piles of Discovery***

While thinking about growth, I noticed different piles of information accumulating within my life and how they were similar but elicited opposite reactions. Piles became the visual commonality between what brought me anxiety and peace. Internally, I struggle to address and share my emotions and become overwhelmed with feelings of frustration and helplessness. Externally, I started to appreciate how comforting the abundance of nature can be and how things naturally accumulate. These reoccurring piles are things swept away by the wind or under the rug, neither wanting to be handled but are unavoidable.

A thought can branch off in multiple directions, become tangled, break off, and grow into something entirely new before you notice it has changed. I felt overwhelmed when the pandemic started during my first year of graduate school. A looming pile of questions and fears began to form and kept growing. As a child, I witnessed growth and decay in family members that had cancer. I had similar feelings then of being overwhelmed, frustrated by the lack of knowledge, and felt helpless in a situation where all I wanted were answers. This moment in my life shaped how I handle change. I fret over all the possibilities and then try to tuck it beneath something as if it is a task I can accomplish later in the week, leaving me engulfed in questions and confused about where to start.

When the pandemic lockdowns began, ended, and repeated, I started going on long walks. Walking was a simple task that got me out of my apartment. It was spring, new leaves and flowers were blossoming everywhere, and the intensity of green was

hopeful. My eyes could not get enough. I started looking with curiosity and not with fear. The time I spend studying nature is comforting. I am walking with the mission of noticing something, anything. It can be the smallest bud starting to emerge. Or the surprise of a giant tree cracked in half from a storm the night before. I have no intentions of knowing where I am going or knowing what I am looking at. I am there to look at and appreciate the moment as it is.



(Figure 4: *Rediscovered*)

I was able to see how piles were my common point in two different areas of my life, and the thread that ran through these piles was mystery. Mystery is both intriguing and frightful. It is the surprise of the unknown that keeps us all looking. I create complicated spaces giving the viewer multiple perspectives to take in.

In *Rediscovered*, a scene of natural debris sprawls across a long horizontal composition. There are many windows of information for the viewer to look through in the negative shapes of the branches. Tops of trees reach off the page, and fallen branches huddle on the ground, where they too start to stretch off the edge of the paper. Having tree trunks and branches extend beyond the edge of the drawing leaves room for imagination and makes the viewer wonder what exists beyond the image.

Chaim Soutine's application of paint and way of creating shapes within his compositions is a huge inspiration to me. In *La Colline de Céret (The Hill of Céret)*, a pile of mysterious forms stacks upward towards a blue sky. It appears to me to be a pile of debris with plant life intertwined. Soutine's brushwork creates edges with how he places different colors next to each other, informing existing shapes and connecting different parts of the image. I am curious to find out what is sitting in this pile and where it originated. I want to look, but I do not want to touch or walk too close to it. When I translate the title into English, *The Hill of Céret*, I realize that the mysterious pile is a hill with a house positioned on top. I am left amazed that I did not see this before; it shifted my entire understanding. The painting and title revealed something I did not notice up close. With space and a simpler inspection, I discovered more within an image than I thought was there.

Sometimes I look out of fear for what might be hiding, going unnoticed. It is a survival instinct as I try to prepare for the unknown. I also hope to be surprised, to discover something beautiful and untouched by the chaos of life. When I go looking, I am never sure what I will find. It could be the worst thing imaginable, or it could be just what I needed to see. I look for the space between curiosity and fear.

Chapter 3: ***Life of Paint***

Oil paint is the most magical mud I could ever play with. It is colorful pigments made from organic and inorganic materials mixed with binders and additives to create memories, emotions, revelations, excitement, fear, questions, and more. I am attracted to oil paint because of its malleability.

Oil paint can withstand so many different needs and wants that painters demand of it. It can be thinned down with drying mediums to create thin glazes of color that move like liquid across the surface. Some paint colors come in a transparent state. They add intensity and character to already existing piles of paint. Other tubes of paint are thicker and more opaque, unlike their glowing counterparts. These colors allow the painter to experiment with the viscosity of the paint body, letting areas build up like thick frosting on a cake. I like to compare each state of paint to a state of life. There are clean beginnings, messy middles, and stopping points.

Glazes of color seem spiritual to me. They have an intensity of color and are full of life but are weightless. I feel as though my hand would go right through them like colored lighting on a smoke-filled stage. In the painting, *Whatever Happens*, I used glazes of colors to build up the intensity and the illusion of volume. The layering of paint suggests that the growing pile of leaves is emerging from the dark drippier shadows surrounding it. The center portion of the leaves appears to be its own light source, illuminating the brightest in the most elaborate areas. While making this painting, I found a new sense of commitment and conviction in accepting that paintings require moments of uncertainty. As Rebecca Solnit, author of *A Field Guide*

to *Getting Lost*, so eloquently states: “That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost”³.



(Figure 5: *Whatever Happens*)

Oil paint begins to develop a body of its own the thicker it is applied. This state of paint is where I hardly use any mediums to alter the paint body; I want it in its purest form. While the paint is fresh and has not begun to tack up, it feels like it has the most potential. Paint can be slapped on the surface, wiped away, mixed into, or gently handled into something entirely new. The paint's most external layer, the paint skin, begins to dry first and protects a wet gooey center inside. For a short moment of time, you can continue to disturb the skinned-over paint. There is still potential for the paint to change once it has begun to dry, but it brings along textures of the past with it. In *Growth from Decay*, I applied the paint in multiple layers, scraping into areas where it started to skin over. This process created a gunky texture of older paint particles clinging to the fresh paint. This state of paint has the most history in it.

³ Solnit (2018) *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*: 6



(Figure 6: *Growth from Decay*)



(Figure 7: *Blushing Skies*)

I believe, like life, a painting also experiences unforeseen circumstances. My paintings go through destructive moments to become themselves. In this way, I offer them the opportunity to remove themselves from my expectations. I do this by removing layers of paint to reveal what is living underneath. While the paint is wet, I can take a rag and wipe it away. Once the paint has dried, I can take a palette knife or carving tool and scrape into the layers. I enjoy agitating the painting because it either reveals the past or shows a new future. In *Blushing Skies*, I reveal every layer of the surface by carving into it and showing each stage of its existence.

Chapter 4: ***Internal and External***

The human body has been an inspiration in my work since I started painting. Flesh has amazed me with its different textures, colors, and abilities. *Fulcrum* by Jenny Saville is one of the first figurative paintings that left me in awe. Three figures layer themselves on top of each other in a long horizontal composition. The lines of the figures' bodies touching create horizon lines, and the fleshy color palette shifts from cool corners to a warm center. The scale of the painting towers over its viewers, and I cannot help but to see it as a landscape painted with flesh. By merging the human external layer with its external environment, I hope to begin depicting my internal state of being.

My color palette originates from my body's ability to change color. I look for where blood rushes to the surface and becomes visible to others, signaling that something is happening within. I often wish I could conceal my nervous or frustrated energies, but my skin cannot hide what I am feeling inside. I use tired purple under-eyes, yellowing bruises, gaping red wounds, blushing cheeks, and shimmering stretch marks as inspiration in my paintings. These external descriptions are results of change happening within the body. Flesh is a protective barrier holding in our internal organs and inner thoughts; it not only shields but exposes.

Three small paintings are arranged together in Figure 8. One is a self-portrait titled *Sunday Shadows*, where my face is cascaded in transparent purple shapes from the shadows of my plants and window blinds. The outer world projects itself on my skin, yet I look off into the distance, unaware of its presence. The other two paintings,

titled *Flesh-scape I* and *Flesh-scape II*, are imagined landscapes residing in a section of flesh. I feel as though I could look at my body and find these landscapes, like discovering a bruise I did not know was there. I am interested in the internal and external because both exist in the same space and time but are not always aware of the other.



(Figure 8: From left to right *Sunday Shadows*, *Flesh-scape I*, *Flesh-scape II*)

The spaces I paint are like inner self-portraits. *Sunday Shadows* is a traditional self-portrait that shows my exterior, the part of myself that others spend the most time seeing. I tend to look at my self-portraits and wonder who this person is or question what they are experiencing. While my internal landscapes show an inner energy that I know best and that others do not always get to see. Both types of paintings share

something personal and leave the viewer questioning if they fully understand what is happening beneath the surface.

Conclusion

I am an introverted person and struggle with knowing what to share. For a long time, I have hated that about myself. I bite my tongue and keep things hidden, becoming frustrated that I cannot share as freely as others. This body of work is peculiar to me because it shares my deepest fears, frustrations, and obsessions and it is relieving. I am starting to accept the parts of myself I dislike, and I see how these parts have made me who I am. I hope to continue making art from an honest place of reflection and remember that nothing is ever one-sided. The worst seed of information can bloom into the most stunning revelation.

Image List

Figure 1: From left to right

Growth from Decay

Oil on panel

54"x48"

Reaching Red Limbs

Oil on panel

54"x48"

Worry Grows

Oil on panel

54"x48"

Figure 2:

Beneath the Burls

Charcoal on paper

108"x80"

Figure 3:

Congeaed

Oil on birchwood

40"x40"

Figure 4:

Rediscovered

Charcoal on paper

44"x152.5"

Figure 5:

Whatever Happens

Oil on canvas

63"x216"

Figure 6:

Growth from Decay

Oil on panel

54"x48"

Figure 7:

Blushing Skies

Oil on birchwood

30"x30"

Figure 8: From left to right

Sunday Shadows

Oil on panel

10"x10"

Flesh-scape I

Oil on birchwood

5"x7"

Flesh-scape II

Oil on birchwood

5"x7"

Work Cited

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