

Raylee Heiden

BFA Thesis Proposal

Pacific Northwest College of Art

2024

Concept:

As a shy person, I have always been an observer and I've found myself enamored with people who are often less visible or overlooked. For my project, I want to explore the less visible person, learn more about them, and paint their portrait. These portraits will depict the subject and who they are based on a conversational interview I will conduct. I want to explore how to portray the relationship between power and portraiture, how to give recognition to these subjects through portraiture, and how to depict who they are as a person. From working at Starbucks in downtown Portland, I have found my subjects, my coworker Alie, and two regular customers, Stan and Tracy.

I have chosen these subjects because I am interested in the relationship between power and status in portraiture. I find the most interest in people that are working class, who may be overlooked, or live a quiet life. From an outside perspective these people may seem ordinary or invisible, but to someone else they may be their son, their daughter, their husband, their mother-their whole world. I am interested in who they are as a person and their life that I otherwise wouldn't know and the world would not know. As I paint these portraits I hope to give recognition to the people I depict. This is especially important because these subjects are not in positions of great power as they are of modest socioeconomic status, are working class, and have a small social footprint. I want to celebrate, elevate, and draw attention to the working class and the overlooked. I want to show the world these people that have rich lives and stories but are often overlooked.

I am hoping and expecting to learn more about my subjects with this project. Since working at Starbucks is a social job, I feel like a sense of community or connection is often

formed with regular customers or coworkers. These connections are currently surface level such as only having casual conversations about work or the weather, and I only know basic information about them such as their name, where they work, and their age range. The act of painting portraits creates intimacy, connectivity, and mutual visibility and I want to explore these spaces of interaction and connection and develop them during this project.

Artistic Context

Kehinde Wiley is an American portrait painter famous for recontextualizing classical portraiture into a modern lens. Wiley uses these classical paintings that hold a lot of historical power and status to give power and status to ordinary Black individuals. Wiley's work interests me because of the way he gives power to people through portraiture. Similarly, Wiley's work aids in the conversation of power and status in portraiture and my understanding of how to give power and recognition to someone through portraiture. Wiley's use of heavy ornamentation, patterning, and relation to classical wallpaper and motifs in his backgrounds also inspires me.

Agnes Hjalmarsson is a portrait painter who has recently gained a lot of attention on social media for her painting series, *Stammis*, a project in which she painted portraits of the regular customers that would visit her place of work, a grocery store. She found great interest and satisfaction in interacting and connecting with the regular customers. Her work resonates with me because it is similar to what I want to do, which is painting people at my place of work. It also resonates with me because of her connections with her customers and finding interest and satisfaction interacting and connecting with her regulars.

Mark Laita is a photographer and videographer, he runs the YouTube channel, "Soft White Underbelly." On Laita's YouTube channel, he interviews people from all types of backgrounds and walks of life and photographs their portraits. While he interviews all sorts of people, he often focuses on the less fortunate or people who have gone through hardships in their lives. Common themes in his interviews include drug use, drug dealers, crime, prostitution,

and mental illness. Laita's work particularly interests me due to his subject matter of depicting the less fortunate, his interviewing process, and giving a platform of the subject's stories that might otherwise be untold and unheard.

An important text is Shearer West's *Portraiture* which features a chapter on the relationship between portraiture and power and status. This text is important to my project in order to understand how power and status has been given to people through portraiture, particularly throughout history. This text has helped inform my decision to depict individuals that are not traditionally in a place of power instead of depicting people that are already in a position of power. This text also informs my decisions for visual elements such as the choice to depict my subjects in a full body, standing pose. I am considering the ways in which important figures like rulers have been painted in the past. In this chapter, West talks about the full figure, standing position that many rulers and people in power have been painted. A notable quote in this text explains, "The full-length portrait of rulers has had a remarkable longevity... The poses chosen by portraitists to portray rulers have been remarkably consistent and convey as much about the authority of the subject as the inevitable accompanying symbolic trappings."¹ The main reason I want to paint full body, life size, standing portraits is to portray that power and use the historical context to my advantage.

Another important text is "Working-Class Cast: Images of the Working Class in Advertising, 1950-2010." In this text, the authors explore how the working class has been portrayed in advertising and how those images shape perceptions of the working class. The authors found that the working class has been significantly underrepresented but when they are shown, they "...are mostly related to the happiness, cooperative nature, and assuredly nonthreatening stance of the working class."² Similarly, the authors state, "...the one temporal

¹ Shearer West, "Power and Status," In *Portraiture*, (Oxford University Press, 2004), 73.

²Erika L. Paulson, and Thomas C. O'Guinn, "Working-Class Cast: Images of the Working Class in Advertising, 1950—2010," (*The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644 (2012): 50–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23316142>,) 66.

change that we observe in the actual character of the representations is a move to nostalgic portrayals of the working class as those same jobs disappear from the American scene.”³ This text is important to my project to understand how the working class has been represented and shown to the world and how those representations and images have affected the way society views the working class. This is important to consider in my project because I want to make sure I accurately represent the working class subjects I am painting.

Imagining Everyday Life Engagements with Vernacular Photography is a book that focuses on how ordinary people have been photographed throughout history. The authors talk about overall representations of the working class and ordinary people, stating, “What appears increasingly significant about these ordinary photographs is precisely the complex social functions they enact, how they serve as vehicles for subjects, and viewers, to assert or investigate issues of personal identity, family affiliation, gender identification, class status, national affinity, or community membership- sometimes in conformity with societal norms but often pushing firmly against them.”⁴ This text is important to my project because it informs my ideas and thoughts about how to depict the working class. This book gives me information, background, and context to the portrayal of the working class through a fine arts and amateur lens.

Materials. Processes. Techniques

My current method of working starts with formulating an idea then finding a reference photo or physical reference for the idea. From there, I sketch my idea out onto a piece of paper utilizing the reference photo. For paintings, I transfer the sketch onto the canvas using graphite or charcoal transfer paper. After that I start mixing my paint on my palette and start painting, keeping the reference photo in mind, opting for a more observational approach to painting. I

³ Paulson, O’Guinn, “Working-Class Cast: Images of the Working Class in Advertising, 1950—2010,” 66.

⁴ Tina Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis, eds, *Imagining Everyday Life Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, (The Walther Collection, 2020), 18.

typically use a naturalistic palette and style that represents the reference, utilizing techniques like smooth blending and glazing. Depending on my idea and intent behind the painting, I will either situate the subject in physical space or an imagined space, but the subject is typically the central point of the painting. I like to let the painting sit for a few days and come back to it to evaluate what I need to change, improve on, and so forth. I either paint over the parts I need to fix or use glazing techniques to add onto the painting.

Project Description and Materials

The final rendition of my project will be three life size full body portraits of my subjects, Alie, Stan, and Tracy each on a 36"x72" canvas. These portraits will be realistically rendered with smooth blending techniques, glazing, and a realistic color palette. I will use a more naturalistic approach to painting my subjects to represent who they are as a person instead of an idealized version of themselves. I will accomplish this naturalistic approach by incorporating all aspects of their visual appearance including wrinkles, pimples, and so on. I believe this choice will better show the world who the subject truly is.

I will be taking inspiration from Kehinde Wiley and his use of backgrounds. The conversational element will be primarily represented in the background which will be depicted in a more design oriented way that represents who the subject is as a person, rather than placing the subject in a specific place or environment. For example, while developing my ideas, I have practiced painting my boyfriend, Zack. In one of the practice paintings, I used the conversation we shared to paint a detailed and design oriented background consisting of a circuit board and small weed plant symbols.

My artistic process will first start with the interviewing process which includes audio recording the interview, taking photos of my subject while we talk, and transcribing the interview into a written format. I will ask my subjects the same or similar questions, but I expect the conversations will follow different paths and different questions will arise from that. I will probe

my subjects with follow up questions and conversations based on their answers. From there, I will start painting the portraits with the conversations from the interviews in mind.

I would like to present these portraits in a space where the viewer can take a step back and fully look at them in their entirety. They will be hung on a wall next to each other with some room between them. The life size scale of these canvases I hope to create a feeling of recognition, realism, and connection to the viewer.

Summary

In summary, I want to portray my subjects, Alie, Stan, and Tracy for who they truly are and display that to the world. I will accomplish this by painting life size, full body standing portraits of them with detailed backgrounds that relate to who they are as a person and the conversations we share. From this project, I want to learn more about my subjects, build a deeper connection and understanding with them, give them power through portraiture, and display who they are to the world.

Annotated Bibliography

AgnesHjal. "Stammis." Accessed October 30, 2024.

<https://www.agneshjalart.com/kopia-p%C3%A5-movie-posters>.

Artist's website, project statement, explanation, and documentation of Hjalmarsson's project, *Stammis*.

Camp, Tina, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis, eds. *Imagining Everyday Life Engagements with Vernacular Photography*. The Walther Collection, 2020.

Shows and talks about how ordinary people have been photographed. It also talks about amateur photography.

Kelly, Simon, and Hannah Klemm. *Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis*. Roberts Projects, 2019.

Discusses Kehinde Wiley's general artwork and his artwork that was shown in the Saint Louis Museum of Art.

Overachiever Magazine. "Agnes Hjalmarsson." Accessed October 30, 2024.

<https://www.overachievermagazine.com/creators-club/agnes-hjalmarsson>.

Includes artist statement and interview discussing Hjalmarsson's artistic journey and process.

Paulson, Erika L., and Thomas C. O'Guinn. "Working-Class Cast: Images of the Working Class in Advertising, 1950—2010." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644 (2012): 50–69.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23316142>.

Discusses images of the working class in advertising and how the working class has been represented.

"Soft White Underbelly (YouTube Channel)." In Wikipedia, October 28, 2024.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Soft_White_Underbelly_\(YouTube_channel\)&oldid=1253928636](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Soft_White_Underbelly_(YouTube_channel)&oldid=1253928636).

Discusses the work of Mark Laita on his YouTube channel and the overall topics, themes, and subjects of his work.

Tsai, Eugenie, ed. *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*. Brooklyn Museum, 2015.

Discusses Kehinde Wiley's overall artwork, artistic process, and the themes and concepts he works with.

West, Shearer. "Power and Status." In *Portraiture*. 71-103. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Portraiture discusses the history and context of portraiture. The chapter, "Power and Status" discusses the history and relationship between power and status and portraiture.

Future Bibliography

Hitchcock, Peter. "They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation." *PMLA* 115, no. 1 (2000): 20–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/463228>.

VANNEMAN, REEVE, and LYNN WEBER CANNON. "Who Is Working Class?" In *The American Perception of Class*, 53–100. Temple University Press, 1987. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv941wv0.10>.

Work Samples



Wiley, Kehinde, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, Oil on Canvas, 2005



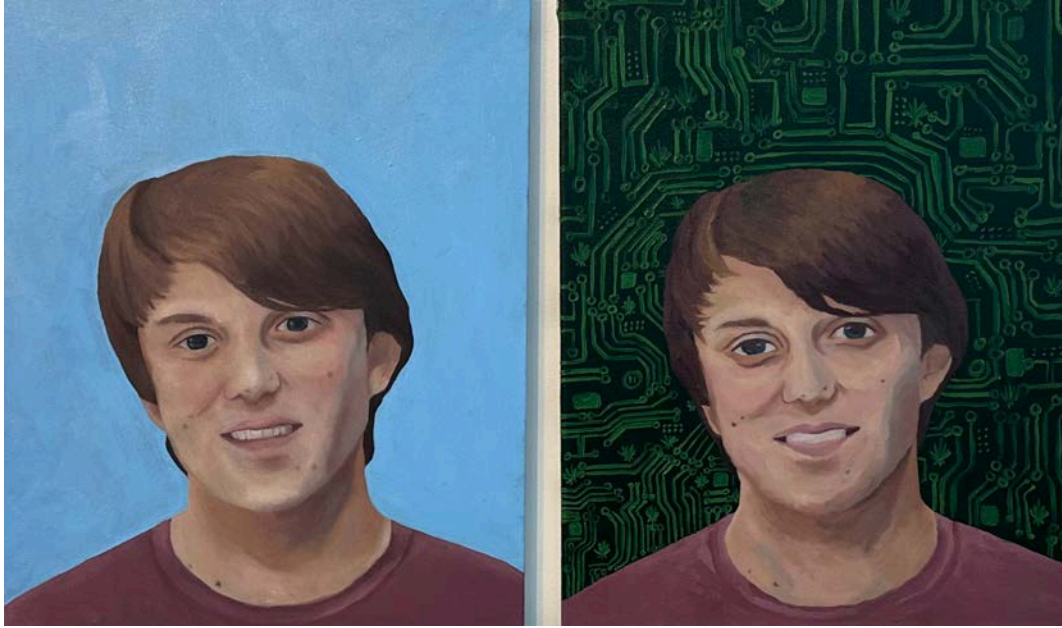
Hjalmarsson, Agnes, *Mahmoud*, Oil on Paper.



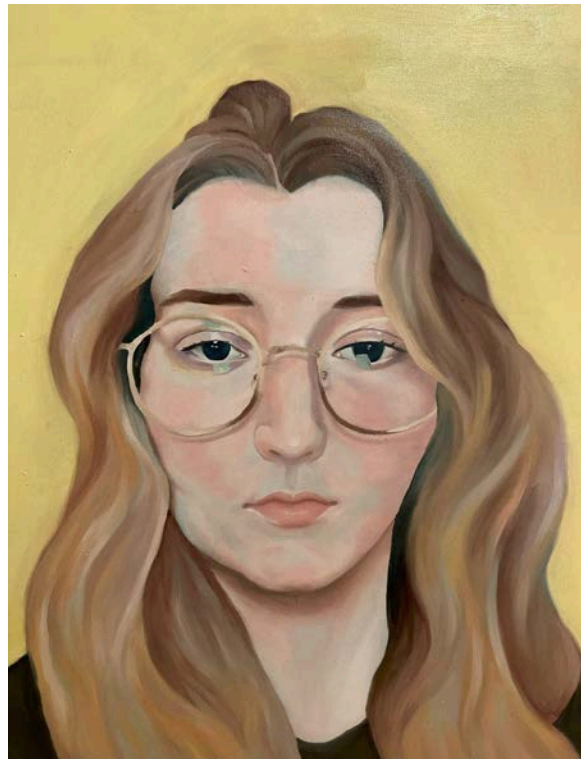
Laita, Mark, *Brianna*, Digital photograph, 2024.



Heiden, Raylee, *Zack Work in Progress*, Oil on Canvas, 2024.



Heiden, Raylee, *Zack Studies*, Oil on canvas, 2024.



Heiden, Raylee, *Self Portrait*, Oil on canvas, 2023.



Heiden, Raylee, *All Consuming*, Lithograph Print on paper, 2023.



Heiden, Raylee, *Oh, Venus*, Oil on Canvas, 2024.

Project Budget and Timeline

- o Canvas is about \$70 each
 - Will research cheaper options such as making my own canvases.
- o Oil paints will be roughly \$75
- o I will work on each portrait at the same time to allow time for drying, layering, etc of oil paint. For example, I will start one portrait until I need to let it dry then I will work on the other portrait. This will also help the portraits be cohesive and function as a body of work together.
- o After the proposal presentation, I will start with the interviews. I believe each portrait will take about 4 weeks to complete.

Timeline-

(This semester)

Week 14- Gather materials. Revise, edit, improve, etc. based on feedback from focus week and class!

Week 15- Schedule/ start interviews.

Week 16 and winter break- Interview, start painting process.

(Next semester)

Week 1 to 4- Continue painting portrait #1, start portrait #2, revise, meet with mentor, finish up portrait #1, etc.

Week 4 to 8- Continue painting portrait #2, start portrait #3, revise, meet with mentor, finish up portrait #2, etc.

Week 8 to 12- Continue painting portrait #3, revise, meet with mentor, finish up portrait #3.

Week 13- Present during focus week!

Raylee Heiden

BFA Thesis Artist Statement

Pacific Northwest College of Art, 511 Gallery

April 15, 2025

Artist Statement

Raylee Heiden (she/they) is a multidisciplinary artist with a focus on figurative oil paintings. She has been pursuing her Bachelors of Fine Arts at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon, and will graduate in May of 2025. While attending PNCA she majored in General Fine Arts which has shaped her senior thesis, *Beyond Appearances* that takes the form of two 36 by 72 inch acrylic and oil painting portraits. This roughly six month long project explores two subjects and the realm of personalities and stories beyond their appearances.

Raylee Heiden

BFA Thesis Oral Abstract

Pacific Northwest College of Art, 511 Gallery

April 15, 2025

Beyond Appearances

Introduction

My name is Raylee Heiden, I go by she/they pronouns, and I am a general fine arts major and I'm primarily a figurative oil painter.

Beyond Appearances is an exploration of two subjects, Alie and Stan and the realm of personalities and stories beyond their appearances. This project takes on the appearance of two life size portrait paintings.

Description

What you see today are two 36 by 72 inch acrylic and oil paintings. Each respective painting is aptly named after its subject, Alie and Stan. These paintings are primarily done in acrylic paint with oil on top. The areas with the most oil paint are the backgrounds, some areas of the figures, and the color on the figures. In Alie's portrait, you can see pink dahlias and blue salvias. In Stan's portrait, you can see pink dahlias and ferns. Each portrait consists of negative space floral designs and bright, vibrant colors that form a more abstracted composition and scene.

Line of Inquiry

My three major themes are power and recognition, appearances, and the language of flowers.

Raylee Heiden

BFA Thesis Oral

Pacific Northwest College of Art, 511 Gallery

April 15, 2025

Beyond Appearances

Introduction

Hi there and thank you all for coming to my thesis oral defense! If you don't already know me, my name is Raylee, I go by she/they pronouns and I am a general fine arts major and I'm primarily a figurative oil painter. Alrighty, let's get into this thing!

Beyond Appearances is an exploration of two subjects, Alie and Stan and the realm of personalities and stories beyond their appearances. This project takes on the appearance of two life size portrait paintings.

Description/Progression/Themes

I'd like to start this discussion with a brief description and introduction into my thesis project, what it looked like when I gave my thesis proposal in the fall, what it has become today, and the major themes of my thesis.

First off, what you see today are two 36 by 72 inch acrylic and oil paintings. Each respective painting is aptly named after its subject, Alie and Stan. Very creative- I know. These paintings are primarily done in acrylic paint with oil on top. The areas with the most oil paint are the backgrounds, some areas of the figures, and the color on the figures. In Alie's portrait, you can see pink dahlias and blue salvias. In Stan's portrait, you can see pink dahlias and ferns. Each portrait consists of negative space floral designs and bright, vibrant colors that form a more abstracted composition and scene.

Theme one: Power and recognition

When I started my ideation process and when I gave my thesis proposal in the fall, I was really quite enamored with the idea of projecting power onto individuals through artwork. I was thinking a lot about power in terms of structures of systems, societal power, historical power, and economic power which led me to think about the working class, ordinary individuals that are often overlooked.

This is what led me to finding my subjects Alie and Stan. Since I knew I wanted to depict ordinary people that I didn't know very well- I turned to finding my subjects at my job working at Starbucks. My job requires me to be very social and meet and talk to lots of people every day. Alie is my coworker at Starbucks. I chose them for this project because I was interested in getting to know them better. I had seen how they had interacted with customers in such a way that both of them would leave the interaction with a smile and light airiness about them. Alie also fit my criteria for being a working class ordinary individual as well. I also met Stan at Starbucks and he became one of my favorite regulars (don't tell the others). During the first time I served him coffee, he read my palm and gave me an emotional spiritual reading. When I was thinking about this project, he immediately came to mind. I was so interested in getting to know him better and learning about his life, stories, and experiences. While Stan holds rather exceptional gifts, he is a perfect example of how rich, complex, and beautiful these ordinary, working class people I wanted to depict truly are.

From an outside perspective these individuals may seem ordinary or invisible, but to someone else they may be their son, their daughter, their husband, their mother- their whole world. I am interested in who they are as a person and their life that I otherwise wouldn't know and the world would not know. This became one of the biggest themes in my thesis. I wanted to explore how to portray the relationship between power and portraiture, how to give recognition to these subjects through portraiture, and how to depict who they truly are as a person. I wanted

to celebrate, elevate, and draw attention to the working class and ordinary individual. I wanted to show the world these people that have rich lives, experiences, backgrounds, and stories.

I was reading texts like “Power and Status,” in *Portraiture* by Shearer West, *Imagining Everyday Life Engagements with Vernacular Photography* by Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis, and “Working-Class Cast: Images of the Working Class in Advertising, 1950—2010,” by Erika Paulson and Thomas O’Guinn. These texts gave me a lot of insight into how working class and ordinary people have been depicted in portraiture, photography, advertising, and art and society as a whole.

These texts also helped me understand how to project power onto my subjects. For example, In Shearer West’s chapter on power and status, he makes an important distinction that the poses in portraits of rulers are often portrayed in a full-length standing position and the seated pose. This consistent pose and depiction of rulers created a sort of canon of how to depict and recognize a powerful individual. Basically, this type of pose holds a lot of historical power and context behind it. The main reason I painted full body, life size, portraits in both the standing and seated position is to portray that power and use the historical context to my advantage.

I also wanted to make sure I accurately portrayed my subjects. I noticed in the photographs of ordinary people I was reading about, all these photographs primarily just showed how ordinary and working class people existed. These photos functioned as proof of existence of the ordinary person simply existing and living their complex life.

On the other hand, I was reading about how the working class has been portrayed in advertising and how those images shape perceptions of the working class. This has been important to my project to understand how the working class has been represented and shown to the world and how those representations and images have affected the way society views the working class. Historically, the working class has been underrepresented in the media, and when they are represented, they are shown in a stereotypical, nostalgic representation that

leans towards more blue collar jobs. This has been important to consider in my project because I wanted to make sure I accurately represent the working class subjects I am painting. I wanted to make sure I showed my subjects simply existing rather than at work or tied to a specific stereotype.

Overall, these texts helped inform my decision to depict people who are not traditionally in places of power and how to successfully project power and recognition onto them.

Throughout my entire thesis project, I've been looking at artists such as Kehinde Wiley, Agnes Hjalmarsson, and Mark Laita.

Kehinde Wiley has been a pretty big inspiration for me during this project. Wiley is an American portrait painter famous for recontextualizing classical portraiture into a modern Black lens. He uses these paintings to discuss themes of race, gender, and representation. The paintings he appropriates and recontextualizes hold a lot of historical power and status. Through his recontextualization of these paintings, he gives power to the subjects he paints. I am interested in his work because of this power he projects onto his subjects. His work aids in the conversation of power and status in portraiture and has helped me understand how to give power to someone through portraiture.

Agnes Hjalmarsson has also been a big influence of mine during this project. She is a portrait painter who has recently gained a lot of attention on social media for her painting series, *Stammis*, a project in which she painted portraits of the regular customers that would visit her place of work, a grocery store. Hjalmarsson did not like working at the grocery store and found it to be very depressing, however, she found great interest and satisfaction in interacting with the regular customers. She found that her job allowed her to connect with the customers who are unique and loveable individuals. Her work resonates with me because it is similar to what I have done, which is painting people at my place of work. It also resonates with me because of her connections with her customers and finding interest and satisfaction interacting and connecting with her regulars and uplifting them by painting their portrait.

Mark Laita is a photographer and videographer. He has a YouTube Channel called “Soft White Underbelly.” On his Youtube Channel, he interviews people from all types of backgrounds and walks of life and takes their portrait at the end. While he interviews all types of people from various backgrounds, he commonly features the less fortunate or people that have gone through immense hardships. Laita’s work particularly interests me because of his subject matter, his interviewing process, and giving a space and a platform for his subject’s stories and life to be told that otherwise might go unheard.

This idea of power and projecting power onto people made me think a lot about my role in this project. I hold a certain type of power here- I attend a private art school where I have the opportunity to spend a few months working on a body of work and presenting it to an audience, to the world. I’m really quite privileged to be here today, so my goal was to take this privilege and power and use it to uplift my subjects, Alie and Stan.

Theme two: Appearances

But what does my thesis look like now?

While projecting power and uplifting the working class and ordinary individual is still very integral to my thesis, this semester a new and perhaps larger theme emerged. This theme is appearances. The title, *Beyond Appearances* encapsulates the overall theme, ideas, intentions, and meaning behind my thesis. My subjects are much more than their appearance. They are a son, a daughter, they are a husband and a wife, they are wonderful friends, they are fighters, they are advocates, they are mental health warriors, they have come from difficult backgrounds and prevailed, they remember every detail you tell them, they are spiritual guides, they are helpers and givers, they are smiles and warmth, they will always give you the time of day, they will make you the best damn coffee, they are kicking cancers ass (!), they are the light in so many people's lives and so so much more. Ultimately, they are Alie and Stan, and my entire

goal for my thesis was to show the world who they are and how important they- and ordinary people just like them are too.

Theme three: Language of Flowers

The last theme that also emerged during this last semester is the language of flowers. The language of flowers is a symbolic way of communication that gives flowers specific and intentional meanings and messages. Each flower type and color has its own meaning tied to it. I knew I wanted to use the language of flowers as symbolism in my thesis because it gave me a defined image that directly relates to a meaning which allows the audience to effectively understand the symbolism and meaning. While not everyone will know each individual meaning behind all the flowers, the language of flowers is common enough for it to be more accessible to the audience compared to creating images with my own personal symbolism behind them. It is also easier and more digestible for the audience to understand and relate to compared to abstracted images that give the *feeling* of my subjects personality and stories for example. The language of flowers is much more concrete and direct instead of vague and abstract.

Putting it all together

My thesis is all about uplifting Alie and Stan and the people that might go overlooked. It's all about showing the world a glimpse into who these people are beyond their appearances. It's about giving these people a certain power and recognition.

But how did I achieve this goal? How did I work with the themes of both power, appearances, and the language of flowers?

I knew I didn't want to paint them photorealistically, I mean it wouldn't work for gaining deeper insight to who they are beyond their appearance. So I painted them in a more expressive and thoughtful style. I used looser brush strokes, bigger brushes, I watered down the acrylics and left portions of the figures semi transparent, and I was less concerned about

achieving this perfect image of my subjects, but rather I wanted to create an image that gave insight into who these people are. I let the paint be paint and drip down the canvas and naturally blend together. I painted over portions and layered paint on top to create a sense of depth and luminosity. This more expressive style of painting also relates to the idea of power and recognition. While I didn't shy away from creating a true image of my subjects, this looser, more expressive style of painting shows not only their flaws but also their beauty. It shows that perceived flaws deserved to be seen as well. It acts as proof that their appearance and existence in all forms is valid and important. It also focuses on the other aspects of their appearance such as their fashion, the way they hold themselves, and their true character. It uplifts them beyond their physical appearance and highlights their stories and their personalities as well.

The language of flowers and the negative space floral designs act as a through line throughout these portraits. This through line brings these portraits and subjects into the contemporary, rather than it just being a portrait for portrait sake. The language of flowers is a vessel for my other themes, it ties it all together. The symbolism in the language of flowers highlights Alie and Stan's character, personalities, and stories. It brings the focus away from their physical appearance to their emotional, intellectual, and true inner appearance and being. The language of flowers also relate to the theme of power and recognition because the symbolism uplifts the life experiences, stories, and character traits that are important to who they are as people.

Overall, these three themes simultaneously function as separate and connected themes. They all exist at the same time and are equally important to this project.

Process/Symbolism

I started this project by interviewing my subjects individually. I asked them the same set of initial questions which branched out into more individually specific questions based on their

answers and the direction the conversation went. I audio recorded the interviews and took pictures of them after our conversations. I selected the photos I used for references for these paintings based on how well they captured the subject and their personalities. Before I did any work on the paintings, I listened to the audio recordings and noted the common threads in our conversations and important aspects of who they are as a person.

In Alie's interview we talked a lot about their life, their difficult background, mental health, and interactions with people and customers. Since Alie is my coworker, I was privileged to some more basic information about them already and I already knew a little bit of what they were like. Something I brought up in our conversation is how they interact with customers and people in general. I have seen Alie talk to customers for over thirty minutes while working, making drinks and tending to other customers. Even though they are busy, they still always pay attention and actively engage in meaningful and oftentimes deep conversation with customers and regulars. This was one of two of the biggest themes we talked about, always showing kindness and wanting to be a light in everyone's life. Another theme that emerged in our conversation was memory and remembrance. Alie told me that one of their biggest goals in life is to make sure the people they interact with, their friends, family, and loved ones will always be and most importantly, *feel* remembered. This is where the language of flowers comes into the picture... Pink dahlias which you can see in Alie's portrait represent kindness and the blue salvias represent friendship and remembrance.

Since being a light in people's lives is really important to Alie, I wanted to show that in this painting. I chose bright vibrant colors and used lots of yellows in the background to reflect the ever present light that Alie holds. I paid attention to how light reflected off their skin, clothes, and body in the reference images to create a feeling of light and luminosity in the figure as well.

In Stan's interview we talked a lot about his background, his life experiences and stories, his experiences as a spiritual medium and guide, and his difficulties with his health. Similar to Alie's conversation, Stan talked a lot about being kind to people and wanting to help people. He

told me that his purpose in life and the reason he's still here today is to help people in any way he can. Another important theme that arose was resilience. Without exposing Stan's whole life story and information that he chose to share with me in confidence, Stan's life has not been easy, he has gone through immense hardships and struggles and- *boy-* has he prevailed. He has never stopped fighting and he is perhaps one of the most resilient and strong people I know. Using the language of flowers, I once again used the pink dahlias to represent his kindness and desire to help others. I also wanted to use pink dahlias for Stan's portrait because it helped the two portraits connect to each other and work as a functioning body of work. For the theme of resilience, I painted ferns that represent resilience and new beginnings.

One aspect that is present in Stan's portrait that isn't featured in Alie's portrait is the stool that Stan sits on. In the reference photo I took of Stan, he is sitting on a stool with his arm resting on the table next to him. I decided on including the stool in the painting because I knew I needed something to ground him in the composition. Without the stool, he would feel like he is floating. I chose to keep the stool white because I was worried that if I had painted the stool a different color, or the color that is true to the reference image, it would fall too far back into the composition and make him feel like he is floating. I feel like the white stool doesn't stand out too much but it doesn't fall too far back, it is the perfect happy medium. As for the table that was in the reference image, I decided to not include that in the painting because I felt like it would stand out too much, not make sense compositionally and conceptually, and it would be too distracting for the viewer. Instead, I painted a negative space floral underneath his arm to act like the table without being too distracting and still working conceptually and compositionally.

Similar to Alie's portrait, Stan's portrait has a lot of similar bright and vibrant colors which show his bright personality and spirit. In this painting, he looks at us with a slight smile and a welcoming expression on his face. To me, it feels like he is just about to strike up a conversation with you and perhaps even give you a spiritual reading.

My work in context/Audience

My thesis and these portraits are intended for people to see them. Ideally, they would be in a space like a gallery that is welcoming and open for anyone to walk in and see them. The gallery space not only gives people a place and avenue to view them, but it also relates to the power and recognition I am trying to project onto my subjects. The gallery holds a certain power behind it. It is a formal, well maintained, intentional, and oftentimes restrictive space that not everyone has access to to display their work in. This does create a power that the gallery holds and the pieces and subjects that are shown in it. To be displayed in a gallery is a privilege and I want to use that privilege and power for the benefit of my subjects. With these paintings being displayed in a gallery, that alone projects power onto my subjects.

That being said, I think it would also be interesting to see these paintings in a more accessible way. I mean, part of my goal is to show the world who these people are. Due to the size and scale of these canvases, it can be hard to find more accessible spaces for them to be seen, but I do plan on displaying these portraits on a website and social media for people to more accessibly see them and learn about Alie and Stan in a much easier and more digestible way.

Similarly, I feel like my audience is anybody. Anybody who is interested in looking at these portraits and learning about the people I've painted. My work is not tied to any specific demographic or audience, I really just want these people to be seen and for their existence to be known.

My work exists primarily in a historical and social context. For one, I have used a lot of historical information and backing to my work. I have read a lot about portraiture and the depictions of the working class. I have used this historical background knowledge to inform my decision making such as the choice to depict my subjects in the full body standing and seated position. Similarly, a big reason I wanted to depict the ordinary, working class individual is

because they have been underrepresented in history. Overall, my thesis has definitely been informed by historical contexts.

My work also exists in a social context. The themes of power, recognition, and appearances are inherently social. In my work, I am challenging social expectations and customs. I am asking you as the viewer to look beyond their appearances. I am asking you to consider who they are, what the flowers mean and how they relate to the subject. I am asking you to take a moment and recognize these individuals not for their appearances, but for their character, their life experiences, and their spirit. I am asking you to recognize and uplift these ordinary, working class individuals. From this, I hope you leave this presentation today and think about the ordinary, working class individual. I know you didn't come here for homework- so let's talk about how my thesis has changed from my proposal to now in the technical and visual aspects.

Changes from proposal to now

My thesis has changed a bit from last semester when I gave my proposal. I was originally going to create three paintings instead of two. I narrowed my project down to two portraits because I wanted to be able to focus on creating strong pieces. If I had made three, I wouldn't have the time and energy to dedicate myself to these two paintings.

My original plan was to have an acrylic underpainting but have these paintings be mostly done in oil paint. I ended up mostly painting with acrylic for a few reasons. Admittedly, I was nervous to add the oil paint on top. If there was something I didn't like, it would be a lot harder and more time consuming to change it with the oil instead of acrylic. I also appreciated how fast the acrylic dried which allowed me to use a lot of layering in my painting process. Similarly, I felt like the acrylic paint helped me loosen up which has been really integral to these portraits and my thesis as a whole.

Self critique/ levels of meaning/ interpretation

I think the hardest part of making artwork is always determining if a piece is done or not. For this project I definitely struggled with that. I wanted to keep these paintings loose and expressive, but I didn't want them to be void of content or be boring to look at. The biggest criteria for completion and success for me was if I was able to see my subject in the painting. And I don't mean if I was able to recognize who they were- I mean if I could *see* them, if I could see their personality, if I could see their spirit and their light. Nearing the end of my painting process, I would often step back and look at my paintings, and I would ask myself, "is this Stan? Is this Alie?" I made changes accordingly, changing aspects like the reflections in their eyes, the upturn of their mouth, or the light that reflected off their skin.

For the background, I wanted to make sure I kept it more expressive, loose, and a tad abstracted. Originally, I wanted to paint the backgrounds in a sort of floral wallpaper design, but it just felt wrong. The wallpaper idea was good in theory, but it didn't work for what I wanted to accomplish. So, instead I thought about the backgrounds more compositionally. I knew I wanted to include the language of flowers and the imagery of the flowers in the backgrounds, so I started mapping out areas where the flowers I had chosen would fit well compositionally. Then I decided to create these loose, almost graphic-like floral shapes that spread all over the composition because I knew it was too empty and I needed something more than the same flowers repeated all over again otherwise it would be boring and too repetitive. I chose to make some of these flowers and floral shapes overlap the figures because it helped ground the figures in the composition. I chose to make the floral shapes into a more negative space design because I felt like they are a good place for the eyes to rest.

Future directions/questions

In the future, I'd like to do more work similar to this. I want to keep working with people and painting full body life size portraits. I want to keep thinking about people and how

appearances aren't everything- I want to keep exploring how I can depict people in ways that show their true personalities and character. I also want to keep exploring how to project power onto people and uplift them. I'd love to do this project with complete strangers and see how I can get to know them and how I can capture their true self in an accurate way. Next time, I want to work more closely with my subjects and make this project more of a collaboration. This was basically my first time working this big so now I have a little experience with this size and scale, I know it'll be easier and turn out better in the future.

Conclusion

I don't think I can express enough how integral Alie and Stan are to my thesis. Yes, I painted these portraits and I made many, *many* decisions and spent countless hours working on them, but at the end of the day, this is about them. My thesis would not be the same without them. Alie and Stan are truly wonderful and beautiful people- beyond just their appearances. And I hope I have accomplished my goal to depict who they truly are and uplift them. From this project, I have learned more about my subjects and built a deeper connection and understanding with them. Alie and Stan are important people, and I want the world to be able to see them. I want the world to know they exist and cherish their existence and who they are, just as I have come to do. They make me smile every time I see them at my silly little job of serving people coffee, and I hope they make you smile as well.

Raylee Heiden

BFA Thesis Annotated Bibliography

Pacific Northwest College of Art

April, 2025

Annotated Bibliography

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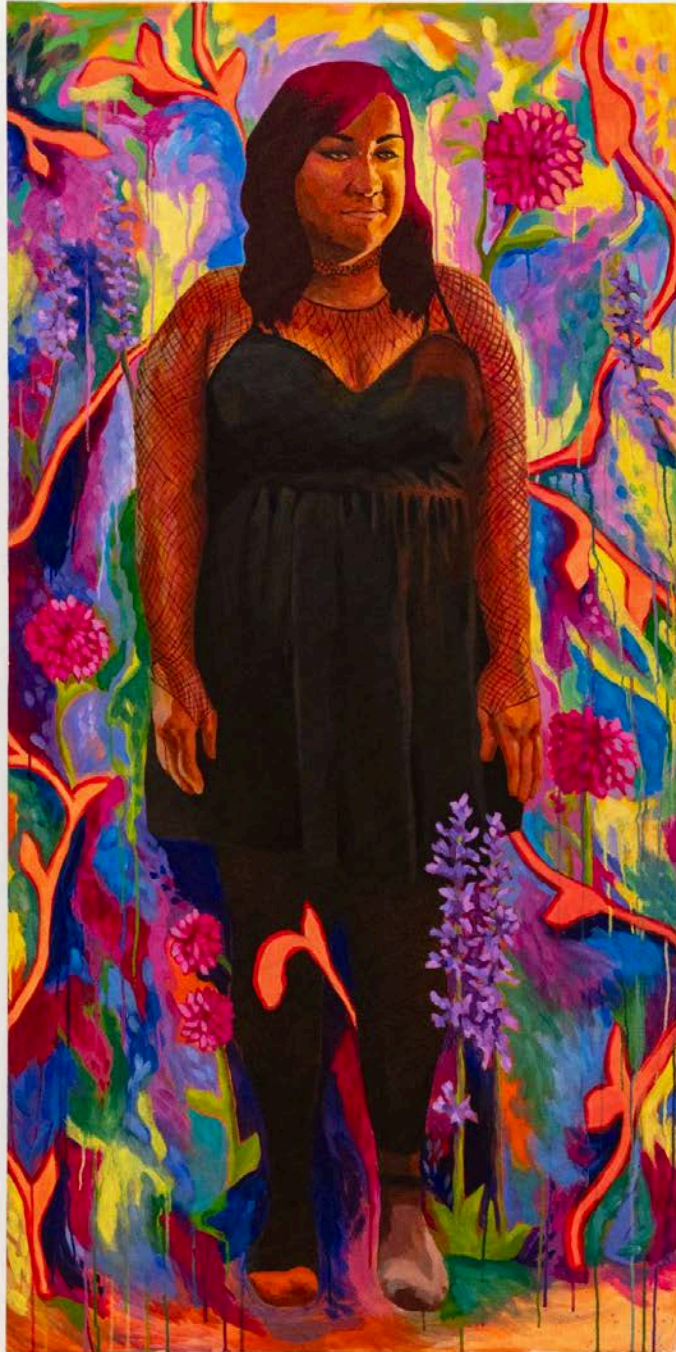
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