

Thesis Proposal

Fionna James

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Introduction-

The idea for my project started about a year and a half ago when I began to feel inspired by my summers spent with my grandparents. The first half of the summer we'd spend with my Dad's parents and side of the family in Chicago playing flashlight tag with the neighbor kids, making forts in the garage, and riding our bikes to the lake. My family and I would fly in from Seoul while my cousins would fly in from Italy. The second half of the summer my parents, sisters, and I would then fly to Washington and spend the following month with my mom's parents and her side of the family. This time would be filled with visits to the coast, trips to the pond, and picking blueberries. When I think of these moments, I feel that childlike part of myself reawaken.

After taking a semester off of PNCA, I returned only to hear that my grandma living in Washington had passed away after several years of worsening dementia. This was very difficult to process, especially at the start of my term and it got me thinking more about the direction I wanted to take my thesis project. I began to think about how objects can hold memories and how in some ways these objects can keep the memories alive. I thought about how both my grandmothers were connected in the ways of collecting things throughout their lives and even though they are very different, they have so many similarities in the same way. When you walk through their houses you can see the richness of the lives they've lived within the objects they chose to surround themselves with. Memories can often sway between being ephemeral/momentary and tangible/all consuming. The textures, patterns, and character of the items in each of their houses illuminates the memories of freedom I had as a child along with who my grandmothers are as individuals and how they relate to one another. Throughout most of my childhood I moved a lot and while it allowed me and my family the chance to live abroad and experience so many new things, it also meant my space was always changing. However, both my grandparents' houses were constant and I knew that each summer I had the familiarity to look forward to.

For my thesis, I will be creating a visual journal portraying portraits of both my grandmothers through memories of summers I spent at each of their houses as a child. The process will be an exploration of how the identities we hold of others are non-linear and ever-changing in nature. The finished work will aim to recontextualize how memory shapes relationships, and hopefully will connect with others reflecting on their own personal histories.

Context-

My grandmothers came from very different backgrounds, my mom's mom was born and raised in California, while my dad's mom was born and raised in France. But through various, perhaps random, instances and choices, their lives became intertwined and I am now a result of the progression of those lives. While all four of my grandparents have significantly touched my life in various ways, I am focusing my project on my grandmothers because of the death of my Grandma Anne. Her passing made me reflect on the similarities and differences my grandmothers had, and the relationship I had and have with each of them. When I go out and engage with the world or create my own space what parts of them am I reminded of, and how does this change how I view their lives and my own?

I am choosing to focus on moments from my summers spent with them as a kid not because this was an isolated time but because this was a foundation for growth for me as a person. These summers feel so vibrant within my memory because they were filled with the worlds created by my grandparents. To have been given the chance to spend an extended period of time in each of their spaces allowed me to fully absorb what was around me. To create portraits of my grandmothers by illustrating objects and scenes remembered from this period of time will allow me to reflect further on my relationship with them and explore what stands out to me now. These portraits won't exclusively represent my grandmothers but will open the pathway of memory to the interconnectedness of all four of my grandparents and my love for them.

Conceptual and Creative Direction-

I will be painting conceptual portraits of each of my grandmothers through the objects that hold memories from my childhood. These portraits will be created through a collective practice of painting and drawing both in and outside of my sketchbook. This won't look like a depiction of their faces explicitly, and instead will encompass a feeling for each of them and their similarities and differences that extends into the time period and pulls together memories. I want to aim for a feeling of nostalgia within the work that can invite the viewer to feel what I felt even though they might not have seen the objects or space being portrayed. The goal is to create a universal feeling of contemplation and reflection when engaging with the work.

The finished piece will be printed and bound in a visual journal format. While there won't be a linear narrative, there will be elements of conceptual narrative when approaching the concept of heritage and the passing of time. Some text components will be included within the work however it will not inherently read as a story. While I am finding inspiration from my own grandmothers, the story that exists is one that has existed since the beginning of human beings. What will anchor the work to my grandmothers in particular will be shown through the objects that I remember being in their houses.

Technical Plan-

The work for the final piece won't be completed in a typical manner with a set number of "finished" works. Instead this process will be more of a stream of consciousness in which I

complete works both in and outside of my sketchbook. The way in which I present this will be both as work on a wall but also in a 48-page 8"x11" printed book, curated from the sketchbooks I fill throughout the semester. I will display some of my favorite pieces scanned from my sketchbook or as originals on loose paper for the final.

During the summer I will begin work on my visual journal. I will do my own sort of research by collecting photos, visiting family and painting from life. Once back at school I will continue my journaling process while also deciding on the specifics of book printing. I will then begin to look over the work I have created and evaluate metaphors, colors used, text fragments etc. By October 15th will conclude the journaling process and start the curation of the book and the book layout. And by November 1st, I will order the books and then begin the exhibition design and presentation. This final visual journal will be a curated and designed culmination of the painting and drawing experiments that I did along the way both during the summer and my final semester.

Influences-

Throughout this proposal process there have been several artists and illustrators that have stood out to me and have given me ideas on how I might approach my project. The common theme throughout them has been that they share a whimsical theme within the work.

Charlotte Ager is an illustrator that has released several visual journal books. She inspires me because of the looseness and abstraction of her work. She also has a very creative way of incorporating text into her work. In the books she has published such as in *Small Pleasure for Big Hearts*, she combines more sketchy freeform drawings with more finished paintings. And amongst these images she incorporates minimal amounts of text that are hand lettered. The inclusion of less text makes those words feel more impactful.

Manon Gauthier is an illustrator that has primarily illustrated picture books. She uses collage to create a lot of interesting and tactile textures. Something about her work feels so engaging to me especially because there is so much to look at. Even though her compositions are often 2 dimensional they are so well designed that they don't feel boring or repetitive. For my thesis project I want to take into consideration how sometimes less is more in terms of composition and to focus on finding the balance with textures and 2 dimensional imagery.

Laura Carlin is another illustrator that I've been inspired by for a long time now. Her use of transparencies in her work is really what has caught my eye. She has such an interesting looseness to her work and uses layering of materials to create dimension and an ephemeral feeling. This makes her work feel so dynamic and yet soft at the same time. I want to try to incorporate this same kind of feeling into my thesis work and experiment with layering of materials to create depth and a transitory feel to lend itself to the theme of memories.

Raoul Dufy is a French painter born in 1877 who worked in mediums such as oil, watercolor, gouache, and printmaking. I've been drawn to his work since I first started seriously

painting and always think of his mark making and vibrant colors. There is such a feeling of spontaneity in his work that also balances his clear understanding of color theory and value that brings everything together. I can sometimes feel discomfort when working in a much brighter color palette but find I am drawn to lots of other artists' work that uses these kinds of colors. With this in mind I will try to push myself with color exploration during my project.

My last main artistic influence is the watercolorist, Moira Frith. Frith works in environmental conservation and this influences her work as she paints mainly organic forms from the natural world. She paints mostly using the wet in wet technique with watercolor and lets the paint bleed into each other. This means giving up control but also meaning that you need to have a deeper understanding of how the paint reacts to water in varying conditions. Throughout my thesis process I hope to gain a similar understanding and appreciation towards my materials and learn how they interact together. I am inspired by the looseness of her paintings and how her work holds emphasis to the elements of the natural world that she depicts.

Throughout my work I have been inspired by two literary influences. The poem, *September Tomatoes*, by Karina Boromicz in which there are probably many interpretations but how I think about it is that the change of seasons will happen regardless of how one might be feeling and how they connect her to her ancestral lineage. The other literary influence is *The Secret Garden*. I have always been drawn to this because of the safety that this garden in the story offers this girl that was not given the safety of childhood. It offers so many things to explore and experience within the overgrown plants that leads to healing throughout the process. The garden itself held memories not just for her but for others in the story to whom these memories were both painful and joyful.

My Work-

For my Visual Techniques class I painted a series of portraits that incorporated mixed media and emphasized media exploration. There was a freedom in this work that I allowed myself because there wasn't necessarily one finished product. In fact, the process itself was more what I viewed as the piece. It was a learning process that I want to incorporate into my thesis project. I want the ephemerality and significance of memory to be held within the painting process because I think this will lend itself to the finished art. I will hopefully be less caught up in minute details being perfect because I know I can always paint another, or paint over it.

During my research within my creative practice class this semester, I've been looking into how the artist's emotions can show up on the finished piece. While this can be moving and impactful, this might not always be what the intentional outcome is. In these moments, it's worth it to take a step back, breathe, and lay the groundwork. Just like you take care of yourself, you need to take care of your artist self. Throughout this semester I've been continuing to learn what this means for me.

An example of this exploration involves our thesis test project in advanced illustration. The idea for this piece came to me after drawing the flowers at my grandma's memorial a few

weeks ago. Flowers have always been difficult for me so I set out to better understand their form. Previously I would get impatient trying to decipher all the individual petals and instead would get distracted by all the gorgeous colors, but I would many times be frustrated with the finished result.

During the process of drawing the memorial flowers, the first seeds of understanding the importance of slowing down were planted. Fast forward to my advanced illustration work in progress critique. During critique I shared that I was feeling frustrated and not liking how the pieces were turning out. I explained that the plan was to create several versions of the same painting to be able to experiment and explore how the materials interact.

During this critique and the feedback I received I was reminded how important it is to lay the foundation. If I am feeling untethered, I should go back to basics and evaluate the shape, form, and value. Taking a pause and breathing can help to better put things into focus and bring clarity to what I need to do. Instead of spiraling into self doubt, I can do some value studies and color studies before jumping back into a finished piece. These reminders reinforced my understanding of how important it is to find an anchor in the work and this is something I will utilize going into my thesis process.

Conclusion-

As people, we all come from generations before us and many pieces had to fall into place before getting us to where we are. These histories can be complicated and can connect us to our past or cause us to forge a new path. To honor the lives that came before us can situate us in the present and make us thankful for what we have. This can be messy and complicated for many and there can be good and bad wrapped up into it all.

For much of my time at PNCA I have often felt unsure of my identity as an artist and have felt pulled between illustration and fine art. I haven't always known where to find balance between some of the constraints involved in illustration and the freeform nature of painting without a specific client in mind. Throughout this thesis experience I am hoping to find my voice as both an illustrator and a painter and to explore how these worlds collide. And within this process I hope to embrace the messiness of it all.

Thesis Defense Speech:

Hello, and welcome to my thesis, Memory Garden. My name is Fionna James and I am a senior illustration student.

I never thought of myself as an artist growing up. I always compared myself to my peers and never felt like my abilities measured up to what I saw those around me creating. I would spend time in my room illustrating short stories I had written and then would go on to charge family members entrance to my library to see them. But I never thought about showing my work to anybody else. However, while I didn't regularly create visual art, I was always involved in music. I started violin at four years old and played for about nine years until I got bored and convinced my parents to let me start piano lessons....that was until I decided I wanted to learn guitar. And while I was always changing instruments throughout my childhood, I stuck with singing. I was always signed up for choir and took classical voice lessons as a first soprano throughout high school. However, as a kid, singing Italian arias wasn't necessarily seen as a cool thing. And so I tried to change myself and my voice in order to fit into a box of what I thought would be accepted by my peers. And yet, through this process I felt like I lost a little part of myself.

After graduating high school I started college at University of Oregon but still felt like I was missing a part of myself. I had this underlying need to create but I squashed it down to appease what I thought was expected of me. I tried many different majors out and always imagined different versions of my life with nothing ever feeling like it fit. As I continued to feel lost, my friends started graduating and moving on with their lives. You'd think that throughout this time I might have considered art but I still never saw myself as an artist.

About a decade passed by of me being unsure of what my path was going to be in life and it was actually my Aunt Lisa who offered to help. Lisa started out her career at NOAA as a geologist but over time she carved out a new role within the organization as a coach and mediator. She helped groups work best together and discover their full potential. And over time she started her own coaching practice. As an artist herself, she offered me a coaching call with her to see if she might be able to help me out of my funk. Through these calls with her she helped to give me the push that I needed to finally put into motion my dream of pursuing art. I signed up for a few classes at Portland community college and felt a drive and sense of direction I hadn't felt before. After a few semesters I applied to PNCA and transferred.

Now it's at this time in the story where one might hope that it was smooth sailing from there but that was not the case. Throughout my time here at PNCA I struggled with feeling out of place as an illustrator. This was in no way due to my phenomenal teachers and supportive friends and classmates, but because I still kept trying to put myself into a box.

Fast forward to my first day of senior year and I received the news that my grandma Anne had passed away as I was sitting in my thesis class. While this wasn't a surprise, it doesn't

necessarily dampen the grief any less. She had been diagnosed with dementia a few years prior and it has been worsening rapidly.

To say watching someone you love slowly lose themselves to dementia is heartbreaking is an understatement. My grandma was the epitome of living in the moment. She wanted to soak up every bit of the world and was curious about everything and everyone. After her death, it almost felt like fate for me to create this body of work inspired by my grandmothers and memory as a whole. It felt important to find these threads that have been woven into me from each of their own histories and explore how they've impacted my life and who I am.

My full name is Fionna Anne Helene James with both of my middle names being the names of my grandmothers. I have always felt so proud of this fact to have parts of them always with me. These names were given to them by their parents and are now passed on to me. My dad's mom, Helene, had us call her Babalene which was a mix between babushka and her name because she didn't want to be called grandma.

While developing this project I wanted to infiltrate this construct I had made up of where my art can exist in the world. I tried my best to depart from the black and white thinking I'd been doing of what is fine art vs what is illustration. I accepted that sometimes when something doesn't fit perfectly in a certain category this can feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar. However, at the same time it can open the door to new possibilities.

What I am trying to say is that like my art can exist transitively within different spaces, this project can as well. The concept for Memory Garden has gone through several iterations. It started out as an idea for a picture book inspired by my time spent at both my grandparent's houses. After my Grandma Anne passed away in January of this year I then narrowed the scope to my grandmothers in particular and focusing on my memories of time I spent with each of them as a child.

During my proposal I stated that I would be creating a visual journal organizing work done in my sketchbook throughout the summer as well as an installation of those pieces printed. However, a comment was made from my panel wondering if the work needed to exist in both forms. I put this thought on the back burner and continued on with my work of collecting and researching in my sketchbooks. I started during the end of spring semester with painting landscapes often en plein air. I would sit in my back yard and study the trees through shape language. I wanted to improve my watercolor technique as I knew this is a medium I wanted to use in my final work. However, I started getting bogged down by too closely trying to replicate exactly what I saw in front of me instead of capturing the feeling and experimenting with materials. After a meeting with Colete, I realized that I could continue to work on my watercolor skills while also incorporating other mediums such as colored pencil and that this did not make me any less of a painter.

Going beyond just focusing on my technical skills I also wanted to further my narrative ability and tried to allow story telling to come together naturally. It felt like such an overwhelming task of distilling down my relationship with my grandmothers into a visual representation when memories feel so transitory to me. I needed to find anchor points

throughout the process that pushed me forward. This manifested in drawing things such as flowers, tea pots, and lots of bugs. And I mean lots...

The question of where I wanted this work to live continued to marinate throughout the summer and grow in momentum. I asked myself what it was that I wanted to gain from this project. With the idea of my sketchbook work becoming final art I started to feel slightly stiff and worried about it needing to be a complete work had me second guessing things. I also started thinking about my own professional practice and hang ups I sometimes have surrounding the thumbnail to finished piece process. I decided it was important to me to be able to strengthen my ability to still create loosely and freely while also sticking to the plan of a sketch. I wanted to be able to feel like myself while also developing skills that I would be able to take with me into the professional world. I felt as though only using my sketchbook work would not serve these goals as well and so I committed to my new direction.

I continued with my sketchbook work throughout the summer and within this time, developed the narrative and the focus of my project. I collected memories and themes that have steered me into a clearer understanding of my direction and representation of my grandmothers. I often have a habit when it comes to my art. I can take things much too literally. This often happens with projects where I get too zeroed in on what I assume my teachers expect of me and a preexisting idea that I might have crafted instead of pushing the boundaries of what things could be. And I feel like throughout my sketchbook process I allowed myself to do this.

I have often found myself being drawn to ecosystems that we either can't see or don't always notice. I realized through my practice that it is small moments and small things that held such significance for me as a child. I can so vividly remember my French Grandmother, Helene, brewing her earl grey tea in the mornings while scraping on some butter and jam or honey. My maternal grandma Anne lived for a bowl of ice cream or any treat sweet or salty. Stories like these began to weave together until I realized that they both have always appreciated small moments and have seen them as the finer things in life. This lives within the same cannon of my fascination with the little things and how micro ecosystems can thrive without being right up in your face. How all these things can exist or go on without being flashy or over the top. This isn't to say that these moments aren't beautiful or momentous because I believe they are.

There is a safety and playfulness within the idea of a tea party. This simple act of sitting down with a cup of tea and perhaps some biscuits is so widely enjoyed at any age whether it is while playing pretend as a kid or while taking a moment to breathe during the stresses of life as an adult. There is something that ties into the everyday rhythms of life and time as a ritual activity. And I think the herbal element and its connection to the earth plays a strong role in the garden itself. I think this is why my creative research kept bringing me back to the imagery of mugs and tea pots as a way to link my grandmothers through symbolism. It is the love and appreciation for the natural world that brings them together. Their curiosity for the small things in life and how they both passed this down for me was an important thread of this project.

There is a type of cicada that only emerges every 17 years. They spend this entire time existing in their nymph stage underground and then finally emerge when soil temperatures reach

about 64 degrees fahrenheit. Previously to last year, 2007 was the last time this phenomenon happened. I had just turned 13 and we were visiting my grandparents in Chicago. The cicadas were absolutely everywhere you walked. The sound of these bugs was deafening and as you'd walk down the sidewalk all you'd hear was crunch crunch crunch with every step. The sole purpose for these cicadas whilst above ground is to mate, lay eggs, and then die. And the results are the noise and many dead cicadas. While this might sound quite depressing to some, I am fascinated that this whole species exists for so long below our surface. We don't hear them or notice them until they are right in our faces. This is such a visceral core memory for me and it channeled my creative research more towards bugs.

To honor my grandma Anne's death, my family and I all congregated at the Oregon Coast this past May, where we rented a beach house for the weekend in order to spread her ashes. We met up with a couple who were close friends with both my grandma and grandpa as they hiked the entire Oregon Coastline together broken up into chunks. When my grandpa died in 2016 they spread some of his ashes in a beautiful lake behind their house in Waldport and so we decided to leave some of my grandmother to rest alongside him. As birds flew overhead and bees buzzed around the vase of flowers on the picnic table, we spent time sharing memories of my grandma and the impact that she had on each of our lives. Some of these memories were joyful and some sad and yet we each still carry pieces of both her and my grandpa. They were both unique people as individuals and every one of our memories is but a fragment of who they were that together makes up a whole. How we each hold different things as being important and how each view of our loved one is its own little ecosystem. These memories might disappear beneath the surface of our subconscious for a period of time but they will reappear later on perhaps when we least expect them to.

During this past summer I made it a priority to visit my grandparents in Chicago a few times in order to immerse myself in these memories from childhood. I sketched and took photos and talked to both my grandparents a lot. During my time with Babalene, she told me about how she spent several years of her childhood growing up in nazi occupied france and how her uncle was a resistance fighter who was sent to a concentration camp. He luckily was able to survive as the war ended. Babalene was sent by her father to live with her aunt in the south of France to escape most of the fighting in the north. She has told me about how her family buried their valuables such as their copper pots and pans underground to keep them safe from the Nazis. These objects such as the copper pans are now hanging in my grandparents' kitchen will forever hold these memories within them and their stories are being passed down.

Another one of the days I was talking with Babalene she had me pull out a book on the Bayeux tapestry. For those of you who aren't familiar this is a 70 meter long embroidered french tapestry created in 1066 and depicting the history of the Norman conquest of England. Babalene and her family are from Normandy which makes this even more special as one of her ancestors even fought with William the Conqueror who was a part of this story of the tapestry. The French took great care to protect this invaluable piece of art from the Germans and kept it hidden in a storage space underground during world war II. The Germans were very interested in

the tapestry's military significance and tasked a team to study it after being taken and sent to Paris. And because of this, the tapestry is deeply connected to the liberation of Paris and was finally returned to Bayeux in 1945.

From an artistic standpoint this monumental piece of art deeply inspired me. Throughout my research I had been trying to improve my ability to communicate my shape language and the bayeux tapestry so effortlessly tells such a complex story in a relatively straightforward way. It uses a strong sense of symbolism and repetition of object, character, and pattern to communicate things.

Fast forward about a month to the start of the semester, it became time to begin my ideation for final work. I decided I wanted to do a series of paintings surrounding this theme but I had no idea exactly how to translate my sketchbook research to larger pieces. I realized that throughout the summer my work has been deeply situated within repetition and symbolism. And when I started drawing out thumbnails these themes made their way into my work rather voraciously. Through my drawings I began to create a miniature world that brought together my work on shape, texture, color, and repetition. These ideas that had been marinating under the surface through the summer months finally began emerging, not unlike the periodical cicadas.

I utilized certain objects and symbols that held memories from the summers spent with my grandparents and those associated with my grandmothers in particular. While in Chicago, Babalene lent me a book about Normandy and I was so inspired by the traditional handmade lace made there. You can see this inspiration within some of my flower designs and particularly within the border of my longer piece with the characters. I also included the rabbits as there was a room in my grandparents house in Chicago that was covered in rabbit wallpaper and had probably been there since my dad was a kid.

To represent my grandma anne, blueberries and strawberries hold significance for me as they had them growing in the garden of their house. During the summers as kids, we'd be sent out to pick them even though I'd probably only save half the berries as the other half I'd have eaten. And yet somehow my grandma still managed to make us blueberry pancakes. The 7x10 piece depicting the bust with flowers coming out of the figure's head was also rooted in inspiration from my grandma Anne. Her mother was an extremely talented ceramicist and left my grandma with several of the pieces she'd done, including busts of my grandparents. Because I didn't include any human representation within my body of work, my goal with this piece was to make it look more statuesque than human.

And more broadly the ties of the, together being anchored in the garden imagery as they both had studied landscape architecture and had some of the most beautiful and ethereal gardens I've ever seen. The butterfly is an anchor point and symbol for their gardens. They can in some ways be seen as the care takers of the garden. They fly from one flower to the next pollinating each plant and keeping everything thriving and having butterflies in your garden is a very good sign. My grandmothers always have made it a point to make their grandchildren feel taken care

of and they cultivated a safe and creative environment for us kids to explore our imaginations. They took care of the earth that we played on.

My artistic process while creating my final images shifted over time. I created a few initial paintings from drawings I had done but while painting them, I felt very uncertain and scared to start. I remember my hands shaking as I was nervous of painting outside the lines. While I don't wildly dislike the finals for these, there was just something that didn't have the same freedom that some of my sketchbook work contained. And during my thesis review this sentiment was echoed by pretty much everyone. I decided I was going to at least try to loosen up even though it felt like quite the scary task. And so I sat down on my bedroom floor with a larger piece of paper and just started painting. I felt no tie to the outcome of the images and so I felt much more relaxed. However much to my surprise I really liked the direction of the image of the butterflies and especially the techniques I had learned during the process. So much so that I started another butterfly piece. This time with a bit more consideration before hand but still while reminding myself I wasn't tied to anything. What I learned is that my process takes time to fully mature a finished piece. There is lots of layering and various materials that goes on until I get to a place that feels right for me. With this new found confidence I revisited the pieces from before where I had felt so stiff and tried them again. I used a large brush and dropped swoops of watercolor onto wet paper, releasing the control for how it might turn out. After the watercolor had dried I started layering up colored pencil and then pastel that I smudged out to combine new textures. I wanted to experiment with how opacities of certain materials might obscure or even enhance the layers below.

What I found is that the first layers are actually the surface. The more I added onto the top of those initial layers is where I found my stride. I thought back to the beach house and how we all had our own memories of my grandparents with every layer building on the other to create a richer view of each of them.

Going through the process of layering each image was like a dance. Different moves or materials would set the tone for the next and the more I added the more depth and interest I would create. Of course, there were many times where things didn't work out. It was in these moments that I would try to continue the layers to see if I could fix the issue. And for some of these they turned out to be my favorite pieces. One of the biggest takeaways of this project was to persevere and to not panic as soon as I did something that I didn't immediately love

My ideological method towards this project was never linear, and just like the concept or actuality of memory it took time to craft these images. Ultimately I wanted to create a moment of time for the viewer to feel something. Perhaps it might invoke nostalgia or maybe something else. But through the collection of these works I aimed to paint a picture of a time or a moment that is represented by these symbols or me but might be different for another.

Since my start at PNCA I always thought that I would do a picture book for my final project. However during my final year I realized that I had been feeling lost with my confidence in creating. I wasn't really sure what my process looked like and wanted to find something that felt both like I was able to push myself while also feeling comfortable. Because of this I decided

that while a picture book would help me with the structure of creating a book dummy it wouldn't provide me with the openness and emphasis on painting itself. I wanted the experimentation of materials just as much a part of my thesis as the content.

In terms of where I might envision this work I think I would hope to build on this project to be able to show in galleries. I plan to add the work to my portfolio in order to start submitting to some open calls. I think while this work could live in the fine art world, everything that I learned and developed within my process could be applied to more illustration based work such as in picture books or more general publishing. I want to find a way to forge my own path and style within the illustration world. And while I am still figuring this out, this project and body of work helped me get more clarity on the direction that I want to move in for now.

During the last few months I can confidently say that I've learned a lot about myself and my art. There have been lots of ups and downs and I've struggled with a lot of self doubt throughout the process. However, there have been sparks of confidence, imagination, and inspiration that have kept me going.

There have been a few times throughout these past several years that I've wondered whether I might have been better suited to pursue my degree in painting. But as I am coming to the end of my undergraduate journey I am more than confident that I have been in the right place all along.

I want to thank my mentor Colete, because without her help during this project I don't know where I would be. She has inspired me throughout this process with her approach to her own artistic practice and with how she navigates both the world of fine art and illustration.

I wanted to thank Laura and Kate. You both have been there to help me through self doubt and make me believe that I can do this. And shoutout to Laura for printing my stickers for me! I want to also thank my boyfriend Josh and my sister Nadia. You have both been here throughout this process and have been my rocks.

Finally, I want to thank my mom, Laurie. I would not be standing here today without your support and love. You have always believed in me and have inspired me to go after what it is that I want in life. Your dedication to your own creativity as well as your resilience throughout life has shaped how I have gotten through this process.

I'd like to close out this presentation by sharing something my grandma Anne wrote in a letter to her mom regarding her philosophy on life. She wrote, "I guess if one thing sums up my approach to life, it is to live for today and have a plan for tomorrow. Anything that happened a minute ago and longer can't be changed. You can learn from it and if it was something that you did to cause harm you can try to repair it. I guess I look at myself as a life taster. Every day is a possible adventure. I won't ever be famous. My face will never grace the cover of time magazine and I don't care. Status is just not important to me. I just like to enjoy!"

Thank you.

Fionna James Artist Statement

Memory Garden is a series of mixed media illustrations on watercolor paper that is inspired by my time spent during the summers at each of my grandparent's houses. After my grandma Anne passed away in January I narrowed in on my relationships to my grandmothers and explored both their similarities and differences with one another.

The concept of a garden ties them together literally because they were both amazing gardeners and they each studied landscape architecture. Throughout the summer I spent time working in my sketchbooks and doing creative research to find common threads between the two of them. The finished work encompasses this research and represents the symbols and narrative that I discovered over the summer.

Throughout my artistic process I strived to loosen up my finished pieces and attempt to embody some of the freedom not only found in my sketchbooks but also my time with my grandparents and the freedom they allowed us to have. Through the mediums I chose such as watercolor, pastel, and colored pencil I was able to experiment with different transparencies and opacities to build on the image and create more depth.

While developing this project I wanted to infiltrate the construct I had made up of where my art can exist in the world. I tried my best to depart from the black and white thinking I'd been doing of what is fine art vs what is illustration. I accepted that sometimes when something doesn't fit perfectly in a certain category this can feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar. However, at the same time it can open the door to new possibilities.

As people, we all come from generations before us and many pieces had to fall into place before getting us to where we are. These histories can be complicated and can connect us to our past or cause us to forge a new path. To honor the lives that came before us can situate us in the present and make us thankful for what we have. This can be messy and complicated for many and there can be good and bad wrapped up into it all.

Fionna James Thesis Abstract

Memory Garden is a series of mixed media illustrations on watercolor paper that is inspired by my time spent during the summers at each of my grandparent's houses. After my grandma Anne passed away in January I narrowed in on my relationships to my grandmothers and explored both their similarities and differences with one another. The concept of a garden ties them together literally because they were both amazing gardeners and they each studied landscape architecture. Throughout the summer I spent time working in my sketchbooks and doing creative research to find common threads between the two of them. The finished work encompasses this research and represents the symbols and narrative that I discovered over the summer. The process is an exploration of how the identities we hold of others are non-linear and ever-changing in nature. The finished work aims to recontextualize how memory shapes relationships, and hopefully will connect with others reflecting on their own personal histories. While developing this project I wanted to infiltrate the construct I had made up of where my art can exist in the world. I tried my best to depart from the black and white thinking I'd been doing of what is fine art vs what is illustration.

Creative Brief -

1. Project Vision

- a. To create a series of mixed media illustrations that represents my time spent with my grandmothers and to explore memories in relation to this time.
- b. To explore mixed media and how work can live in a space between illustration and fine art.

2. Audience

- a. Anyone in the fine art world who is interested in whimsy and playful art. Those that might want to reconnect with their childhood selves or explore memories of their own,
- b. Children's book publishers and children who might be interested in this style of illustration. I think that this work can expand a wide variety of age ranges from both children to adults. Because memory and the style of the work is transitory.

3. Methods & Materials

- a. My work started within my sketchbook where I worked on exploring what themes and symbols showed up through my exploration of my grandmothers.
- b. I then took this information and transferred it to sketches on watercolor paper.
- c. I used many different materials such as watercolor, soft pastel, colored pencil, and gouache. I worked with layering these mediums and playing with opacities and transparencies to enhance the colors and textures.

4. Comparative Media

- a. London: A History by Laura Carlin
- b. The Bayeux Tapestry

5. Marketplace Application

- a. I would like this work to be shown in galleries. I would love to expand on this work and explore the narrative components even further. I would also use these themes to expand on my play with materials.
- b. I could also see this work being applied to children's books or even publishing as a whole. I plan on using some of these pieces to submit to art directors and hopefully one day illustrate a picture book.
- c. Finally, I would be very interested to explore more with my floral designs and pursue surface design. I think it would be very interesting to see how working more loosely and traditionally can be expanded within this space.

Memory Garden Annotated Bibliography

Avery, Milton, and Burt Chernow. *The Drawings of Milton Avery*. New York: Taplinger Pub. Co., 1984.

I utilized this book about Milton Avery's drawings a lot because I love his paintings and am so curious about his process to get to his abstract forms. This talks a lot about how important his sketchbook practice was for his finished pieces which felt very impactful for my own thesis project.

Charlotte Ager Illustration. "An Island Feeling." Accessed May 2, 2025.

<https://charlotteager.co.uk/an-island-feeling>.

I looked at this riso printed book a lot by Charlotte Ager because it is so tied to the land of the place where she was working. This was a residency she did in Ireland where she compiled paintings inspired from the place but also used written Gaelic words from the kids who lived there as well as drawings they did. I am so inspired by how she compiled this into a book that is both narrative and not at the same time.

The Poetry Foundation. "September Tomatoes," April 25, 2017.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56583/september-tomatoes>.

I used this poem as a starting off point for my thesis as I've been inspired by this work ever since I read it at the beginning of last year. This was written by Karina Borowicz.

Carlin, Laura. *London a History*. Candlewick Studio, 2024.

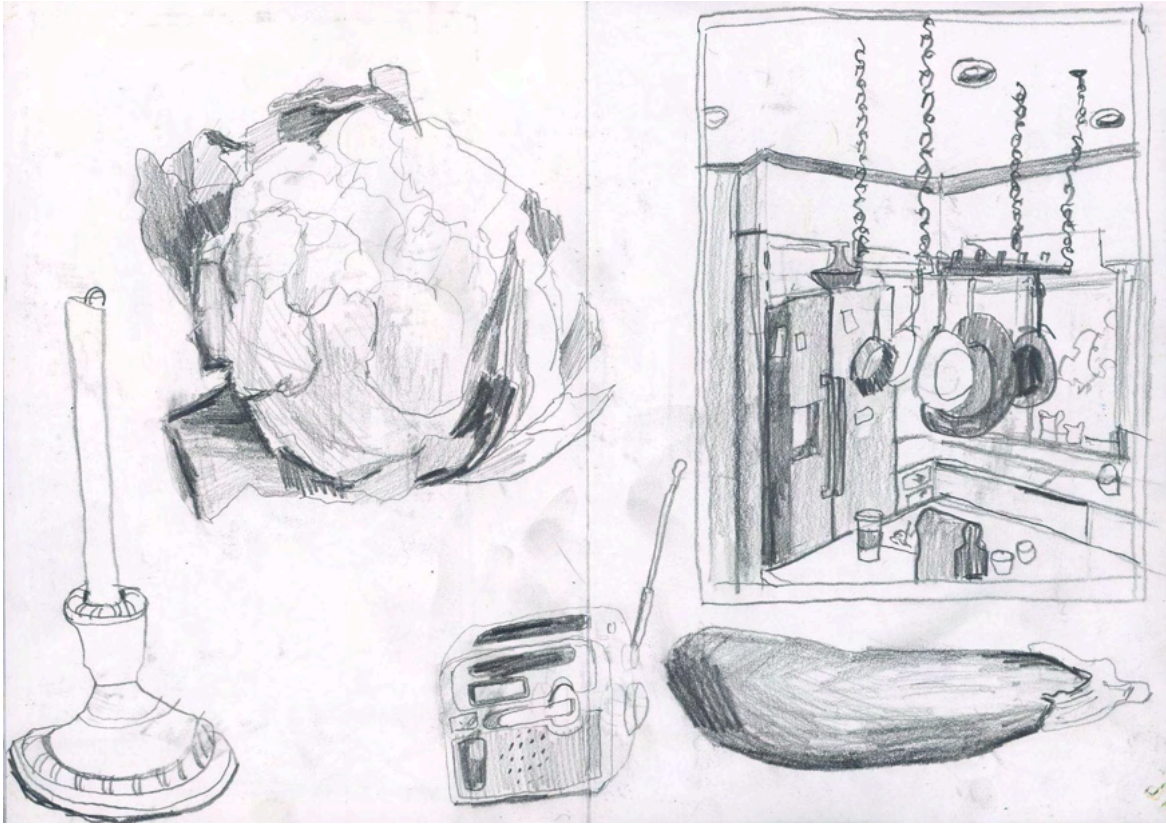
This is a long picture book about the history of London that Carlin illustrated and wrote herself. I used this as inspiration for technique and materials when it comes to transparencies in my own work. This was a great inspiration for me for both line and color as well.

Colman, Eamon, and Brian McAvera. "Between Abstraction and Landscape." *Irish Arts Review (2002-)*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2007, pp. 62–67. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25503539>. Accessed 2 May 2025.

I used this interview speaking with the abstract landscape painter, Eamon Colman, to inform my research surrounding how artists abstract their work specifically with the landscape and the natural world. Colman talks about his process both mentally and on the canvas and how he uses story even within his minimalist abstract philosophy when it comes to his painting process.

Thesis Journal







Thesis Show





