

HEAVY LIQUID

Good Morning.

Thank you all for being here. My thesis, *Heavy Liquid*, takes its name from a Stooges album, a title that evokes both blood and paint—thick, gooey substances that are constantly shifting and transforming. Liquid, by its nature, is unstable, always falling apart and coming together. To me, *Heavy Liquid* suggests the sensation of trudging through a river of thick syrup or being engulfed by a primordial ooze. This instability, this constant state of change, is central to my paintings.

Over my time at PNCA, my practice has evolved from rigid structures to embracing experimentation and unpredictability. These paintings reflect my fascination with the visceral and the surreal—places where abstraction and reality meet and dissolve into one another. Today, I'll share how these ideas came to life, along with the challenges, influences, and discoveries that shaped this body of work.

When I came to PNCA I was drawn to printmaking because of the studio facilities here. I was really interested in making prints of my drawings. However, I found a lot of printmaking to be very rigid because it requires you to adhere to a certain amount of meticulous control. Which often reduces opportunities for unexpected results. Things like monotype printing became a lot more interesting to me because they always felt like experiments and I started appreciating the mistakes and imperfections.

Painting attracted me because it felt much more volatile and expressive. I realized I wanted there to be room for happy accidents that I could respond to.

Working on a painting feels like trying to make sense of the unknown. The possibilities are open-ended and without a preconceived outcome. An aspect I like about oil paint is the ability to develop or completely change things on the fly. When I'm painting I really like to work wet into wet in order to blend soft gradients. The qualities of oil paint feel more animated in comparison with acrylics, because of their slow dry time and ability to lay dormant for days and still be malleable. I also enjoy using Galkyd as a medium while painting. It gives the paint a thick syrupy body and speeds up the drying process. When something's not working in a painting I like to find spontaneous ways to disrupt the composition by either adding or subtracting elements. I learned early on in painting that if you don't like something to just paint over it. Philip Guston has had a significant impact on me as a painter. When talking about his studio practice, Guston describes the moment that an idea takes hold as "All your forces, all your feelings, somehow come together and it's got to be unloaded right then-- there are no cookies for the next day at all. There is no next day." This quote is in reference to how Hemmingway would leave ideas to pick the following day while writing. Guston's approach is opposite that. He would work around the clock, most of the time at night if he had to. He claimed not to understand what goes on in the process of working out ideas, and said that there was "something death-like in a finished painting". The way Guston talks about the process of painting feels as mystical as it does apocalyptic. Embracing both creation and destruction as equal forces.

I learned a lot of things about painting over the process of making this work for my thesis. I struggled with a lot of formal aspects of it as well as personal ones, including

overcoming creative burnout. Over this semester I wanted to find ways to change my artistic habits and step out of my comfort zone.

Earlier this summer I was feeling really stuck with painting and decided to take a break from it to reconnect with drawing to work out ideas. I started drawing on the backs of loose leaf paper almost every morning while I drank coffee in the groggy state between slumber and the onset of caffeine. Something about using non-precious paper made me a lot less concerned about what I was putting down.

Drawing has always been at the core of my practice. Since I was a kid, it's something I've always enjoyed doing. I'm always trying to get back to that feeling of drawing with no sense of rules or risk. I still think of drawing as a form of play. When I think about the fundamental characteristics of what it means to play, I see it as being led by motivations outside of reality. One of the things that first attracted me to surrealism was the notion of the unconscious mind as a hidden space you can visit and transmit images from. Although there's a lot of mysticism around the methods for accessing this state of mind. I see the pursuit of an altered state of consciousness as stemming from a desire to steer away from pre-condition habits and to break out of the conventional reality in order to gain a new perspective. This same desire is what drew me to psychedelics in the first place.

When I started experimenting with LSD, it almost felt like a chemical-surrealism. Where the cloak between worlds seems to melt away. I enjoy the experience of drawing on hallucinogens. The process becomes much more fluid and playful. The self-induced restrictions of the mind seem to lift, allowing for new pathways to be explored like a fresh layer of snow on a sled hill. You'll start drawing one thing and it ends up morphing into five other things.

Over the course of this semester, my practice has increasingly moved towards deconstruction and reassembly in an attempt to loosen my approach to image making. I wanted my work to reflect a sense of instability in the structure of forms and the representation of space. When making preparatory sketches for these paintings I was looking for ways to disrupt my usual habit while drawing. I started photocopying things out of my sketchbooks and dissecting them into collages. Which helped to break down my imagery into fragments. However, I wanted things to overlap and distort further. So I experimented with drawing on paper with my eyes closed. This technique acted as a viable form of Automatic drawing, by creating a tangible disconnect between my eyes and my hands. As a result the lines and forms in my drawings began to tangle, separate, and dissolve. Creating images that are both familiar and fragmented teetering between recognition and obscurity.

My interests have always leaned towards things that are off-kilter, crude, and kitschy. Underground comix, cartoons, and Horror films, which tend to explore the lowbrow scuzzy side of America, laid the groundwork for most of the imagery I think about in my work. For years I've had an obsession with collecting vintage toys as well as books and movies. I see collecting and consuming media as part of the system which feeds my practice. Everything that I collect becomes possible reference material and part of the soup that I pull from. In that sense my work functions as a way for me to process and distill all of the cultural and visual influences that swirl around in my head.

While Working on my thesis, I was frequently revisiting my favorite horror films like John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Ridley Scott's *Alien*, as well as *The Fly* and *Videodrome* by David

Cronenberg. These films all fall under the genre of cosmic horror which marks an intersection with themes from science fiction and Gothic literature. Cosmic Horror tends to revolve around aspects of the human condition and the fear of the unknown. These films often contain some type of extraterrestrial entity or otherworldly presence which can only be caught in unstable glimpses. A common trope of Cosmic Horror is the transformation of the body in unsettling and metamorphic ways. This aspect of Cosmic horror is something that separates itself from other genres of horror like Slasher movies, which usually have more to do with violence and gore as shock value. I'm interested in the concept of metamorphosis and mutation because of how the body and flesh are unstable and constantly changing.

This first painting is titled *Engorged Exit*. Like the rest of these paintings, while I was working on this, I was thinking about flesh and abstracting the body. My interest in flesh as a subject matter came from the depictions of bodily metamorphosis in films like *The Thing* and *The Fly*. Part of the reason I decided to paint flesh as a subject matter comes from this visceral response I have to blood and gore. When looking for more reference material, I looked at images from a surgical textbook of organs and entrails. I wanted the bodily forms to feel juicy as if pulsating with blood. Something I liked specifically about the images in this book was how highly saturated they were in color.

I have a weird relationship with color. I'm red-green colorblind, which mainly affects how I perceive colors when they're next to each other. I tend to struggle more with colors that are less saturated or mixed together. I lose any sense of what a color is unless I know exactly what went into it. Because of this, I like to use a lot of bright colors in my work. At one point, everything I made went through a phase of being highly saturated. One of my habits in painting

is to use colors straight out of the tube, only occasionally mixing a pink or a lighter shade of blue.

At the beginning of the semester, I experimented with fluorescent acrylic paint, which reacts under UV lighting. I was drawn to the acidic, sun-scorched oranges and pinks because they reminded me of psychedelic posters in smoke shops, featuring wizards and *Alice in Wonderland* characters. However, I eventually moved away from using so many bright colors. The palette felt too overwhelming, and I realized fluorescent colors are a common trope in psychedelic art. While much of my work is visually inspired by psychedelic ephemera, relying on those colors felt impersonal and gimmicky. I wasn't trying to make psychedelic art in a graphic sense. Instead, I wanted my paintings to convey the feeling of an altered state, like the experiences induced by LSD or dimethyltryptamine.

To achieve that, I started shifting my focus to creating darker, murkier atmospheres. I began mixing dozens of different grays using colors like Raw Umber, Dioxazine purple and Mars black.

My choice in colors was heavily inspired by painters like Philip Guston and Willem De Kooning. Guston's later cartoon paintings look like fleshy bloated piles of objects. I especially like his triptych, *Red Sea; The Swell; Blue Light*, for their highly saturated pink forms and deep mars black backgrounds. This influenced my decision to use Cadmium red and Titanium white to mix my pinks. Similarly, I was looking at de Kooning's *Woman* series as examples of figurative abstract. Although I consider these paintings as being figurative, the bodily forms are meant to be abstract.

Of paintings I made for my thesis, *Engorged Exit* has the most representational element out of the three. I got the idea to add this giant spider after finding a bunch of dead wolf spiders left around my house my cat killed. Before I added the spider, I was at a frustrated place with the painting. It felt bland and mushy. The decision to add a strong graphic element on top not only created a new spatial plane in the composition but also grounded the painting into a narrative. Which is something I wasn't trying to do in this work. I was thinking a lot about this phobia people have about bugs crawling under their skin—the concept of an organism or parasite living inside the body gives me a visceral disgust and fear. This painting was originally oriented differently, but when I flipped it upside down, it gave the fleshy form mass by sitting at the bottom of the canvas. This also gave the effect that the spider was emerging from the body like a snake sheds its skin or even burrowing into the flesh. This orientation and new narrative make a direct reference in my mind to the chestburster scene in the movie *Alien*.

This large painting is titled *Cavity Search Jungle* and measures x by x. This painting went through countless changes during its creation and seemed to be in a constant state of flux. When I first stood in front of the canvas I felt extremely daunted by its scale. I started to mix larger amounts of paint in recycled cat food tins to use as containers. When I started, I was painting smaller and to match the scale of the canvas, I began painting larger forms that took up more space. In all of these paintings, I was very conscious of extending things off the edge of the canvas to suggest space beyond the boundaries. Out of all these paintings, *Cavity Search Jungle* felt like a constant battle to determine how forms occupied space. I made many revisions to the composition, even painting over entire sections with gray and disrupting the space with bold graphic elements on top.

What largely inspired me about cosmic horror films like *Possession* and *Alien*, was their ominous atmospheres where familiar boundaries dissolve, and ambiguity thrives in the grotesque and unseen. As I watched these movies, I began drawing visual connections between them and surrealism. When I look at some of Arshile Gorky's late paintings, like *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb* or *One Year the Milkweed*, his abstractions, drenched in heavy solvent washes, dissolve forms into space, melting the separations between subject and environment.

The reason I chose to work on large-scale canvases was to engage with the physicality of moving around while I worked. Each painting took up almost an entire wall of my studio, which sometimes made working feel claustrophobic and disorienting. On some days, I found myself standing so close to the surface of the painting that it felt as if the rest of the world didn't exist. My studio is cluttered with paint supplies, and trash. Something about the environment of a studio space reflects the work being done while also informing it at the same time.

When I work, I tend to make a mess, caught up in the process. I like to listen to music and watch movies while I paint, and I keep reference materials on hand. I also smoke cannabis to create an atmosphere. When I'm working, I'm often cut off from the outside world and prefer to have everything I need with me, like a fallout shelter stocked with supplies.

During the pandemic I spent a lot of my time hunkered down in my basement bedroom with art supplies, watching movies and flipping through art books. There's a discussion in modern art around this idea of the "first painter," an artist who exists unburdened by art history, former rules, or the knowledge of other artists. But conceptually, I've been thinking a lot more about the idea of the "last painter." Someone working with a full awareness of art history and pop culture and in lack of an audience. The concept of a last painter feels very apocalyptic to me.

Thinking back to quarantine when I first started taking psychedelics, I remember the feeling of sensing strange subtleties in my environment which felt supernatural at times. The fall and winter in the Pacific Northwest brings an eerie atmosphere with its moss-covered trees and foggy overcast skies. Something about these seasons feels very Lynchian to me, often reminding me of the show *Twin Peaks*. There's this visceral feeling of something lurking beneath surfaces which breathe and drip with moisture. While eyes watching you from carpet patterns and leaf piles.

This last painting is titled *Putrid Corruption* and explores themes of nightmares and the supernatural. When considering where I wanted the two forms to sit within the spatial plane, I aimed for them to feel both heavy and as if they were levitating in space. The graphic lines in the bottom left suggest the surface of a bed or sofa, grounding the forms in an ambiguous yet familiar environment. In some ways, I think of these forms as tumors or ghosts haunting the space—lumps of calcified matter and flesh, containing putrid gas.

There's something invasive and ominous about the corruption of flesh. Lately, I've been thinking about things like cavities, tonsil stones, and kidney stones—byproducts of consumption. They're like the table scraps of the body, gunk in a garbage disposal: waste materials that linger, fester, and refuse to disappear.

As I reflect on the creation of work for *Heavy Liquid*, I realize that painting is as much about the process as it is about the final result which is just a byproduct. These paintings embody my fascination with the bodily metamorphosis of cosmic horror film, instability, and the act of play as a way to dismantle conventional ways of seeing. But they also mirror my tumultuous

personal journey of overcoming creative blocks, embracing imperfections, and cultivating a deeper connection with the materials I use.

My intention behind *Heavy Liquid* is to evoke in viewers a sense of the strange and the unknown—a visceral confrontation with the familiar made unfamiliar. Thank you for taking the time to engage with my work and for allowing me to share the thoughts and processes behind it.

Reflecting on my time at PNCA, which began during a global pandemic and culminates now with this thesis, I feel an immense and unexpected sense of gratitude. This journey wouldn't have been possible without the incredible support system of friends, family, and mentors who have guided me along the way. Before this semester, I don't think I truly understood what it felt to be part of a creative community, and I'm extremely thankful for these folks.

I'd like to express my deepest thanks to my mentor, Roy Tomlinson, for his invaluable guidance throughout this process and for encouraging me to step outside my comfort zone as a painter. This experience has been both challenging and rewarding, and I'm excited to carry what I've learned here into the next stage of my artistic journey.