

## Introduction

*"Like charity, schizophrenia begins at home."*<sup>1</sup>

When I was a third year architecture student, I had an architecture professor, Sambo Mockbee, who suggested I give up architecture. "You need to be a painter, Ms. Terry," he said in his gentle, but booming voice. At the time, I did not have the ability to see the advantages of leaving architecture behind for the pursuit of painting. It wasn't until three months later when I was standing in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy, gazing into Botticelli's "Primavera" that it all made sense. Sambo Mockbee was an architect, a painter, a storyteller, and founder of Auburn University's Rural Studio. For him, the division between art and architecture was not distinct, rather the two arts shared a common space, each filtering into the other's domain. For me, and my work, that distinction has been more of a struggle. For quite some time, I did not see the value of being an artist compared to that of being an architect. Architecture has the ability to cross cultural, political, and racial lines and make a difference in the lives of people. Painting is more exclusive, a personal journey laid out in paint. This conflict parallels one I had about my identity, a Southern white girl burdened by the weight of the South's infamous past. At the same time Sambo was encouraging me to be a painter, I was trying to hide from being Southern, as if that was something of which I should be ashamed. I knew, however, that I would see the world through an artist's eyes even if I never picked up a paint brush. In the same way, my Southern roots ran deep into who I was, even if I tried to pretend I was something else. Hiding doesn't make something true; it only buries it deeper, where its revelation is harder to unearth. It is not coincidence that I grew up to love Southern authors. I lived in the shadows of Carson McCullar's childhood home and ended up studying painting down the street from Flannery O'Connor's home in Savannah. These writers are my silent muses, and their spirits, left behind in words on pages, serve as my guide.

My decision to be a painter is one with which I still struggle. Being a painter means denying that I am something else. And not being something else is more difficult than being who I am. Writer Annie Dillard says, "...and they say of vision that it is a deliberate gift..."<sup>2</sup> and yet, more times than not, I could argue that the "gift" is simultaneously a curse. For me, seeing involves all of the senses, not just sight. To see means also to smell, to hear, to speak, to feel. And once you have seen in this way, you cannot un-see. Painting, to me, means to see within myself, to hear my intuitions and buried thoughts, to speak them in color and form, but most of all, to feel them for the intense residue that they are. That residue is where my paintings get interesting for me, the painter. Like the novels that inspire them, the paintings illustrate the complex relationships between characters, but with color and abstract forms rather than individuals. The paintings are inspired by another source too: the quilts of Gee's Bend. These quilts, created out of need and desire simultaneously, capture in fabric what I try to describe in paint: history of time and place. The quilts are created from used clothes and recycled fabrics; embedded within them is a portrait of everyday life in a poor, black region of the country. In a similar way, my paintings illustrate an effort to accentuate the history of the painting process compressed onto one plane or surface. The paint preserves information that is unique to each layer applied, and those layers build to create a textured surface, filled with mistakes, chances and edits. The resolution of the surface is unpredictable – it is not planned from the inception, rather revealed through layering and removing (an

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<sup>1</sup> Florence King, *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. ?

<sup>2</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), p. 16.

additive/subtractive process), creating a residue that is evidence of the struggle. The residue balances beauty with ugliness, confidence with cowardice, joy with pain. The paintings borrow structure from my study of architecture, texture from the layering of paint, content from my interpretation of the written word, and revelation from what I have chosen to see and un-see, to reveal and conceal. Annie Dillard writes about the pursuit of “the pearl.” She says, “The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise.”<sup>3</sup> The paintings, my paintings, know what they want to be before I do. And I am always surprised.

### **The Literary Landscape**

*“The things that men [sic] see every day are the things they never see at all.”<sup>4</sup>*

The landscape has been a source for painters since the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Dutch masters created paintings that redefined the way people viewed their country. Renaissance paintings framed specific views, or *vedute*, in order to create for the viewer a specific image of a landscape or a city. Christian Norberg-Schulz writes, “In general, the *veduta* aimed at grasping the essence of the place and fixing its quality in one characteristic image. The choice of standpoint is therefore decisive, and the selection of those elements which constitute our memory of a certain place.”<sup>5</sup> Cezanne confirms this struggle by artists to capture the “essence of the place,” writing “I must tell you that as a painter I am becoming more clear-sighted before Nature, but with me the realization of my senses is always painful. I cannot attain the intensity that is unfolded before my senses.”<sup>6</sup> James Corner, in an essay entitled “The American Landscape at Work,” describes the long relationship between painters, writers and filmmakers and the landscape. He suggests that the beauty of the landscape makes it difficult to ignore, writing, “this pervasive quality derives not only from the sheer immensity and physical splendor of the land but also from the multitude of ways Americans have encountered, constructed, and represented it over time.”<sup>7</sup> The painters of the American landscape, like Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, were called “Regionalists” and their images depicted art which “really springs from American soil and seeks to interpret American life.”<sup>8</sup> Benton confirms this, writing about his own work and saying:

Who knows the South? It is a land of beauty and horror, of cultivation and refinement, laid over misery and degradation. It is a land of tremendous contradictions...the South remains our romantic land. It remains so because it is. I have seen the red clay of Georgia reveal its color in the dawn, and the bayous of Louisiana glitter in magnolia-scented moonlight. There are no crude facts about the South which can ever kill the romantic effect of these on my imagination.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> G.K. Chesterton, “The Pessimist and the Door-Knocker,” *Lunacy and Letters*, ed. Dorothy Collins, (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling: On the Way to Figurative Architecture*, (New York, NY: Rizzoli International, 1984), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Attributed to Cezanne in Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> James Corner, “The American Landscape at Work,” in *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*, (Yale University Press, 1996), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Attributed to Maynard Walker in Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 438.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), p. 198.

This romantic depiction of Benton's South is one I understand, though my own South is quite different. I look at the southern landscape and see the memories it holds hostage, and I am drunk on the scent of tea olive as I think, bitter sweetly, about the dichotomy of the South's history: rich and poor, white and black, free and enslaved. But even in the South, in the words of Southern writers, there exists an understanding of the fragility of our ancestors' reputations, and that today, we must accept responsibility for past wrongs. This does not make the South beautiful, but it does make it real, for realness exists where there is beauty and ugliness, where there are rights and wrongs. With respect to the landscape, author Anne Whiston Spirn suggests that no words or images can replace the experience of the landscape. She writes, "Worship, memory, play, movement, meeting, exchange, power, production, home and community are pervasive landscape genre. To be fully felt and known landscape literature must be experience in situ; words, drawings, paintings or photographs cannot replace the experience of the place itself, though they may enhance and intensify it."<sup>10</sup> Benton's description of the South is one which resonates with my own. His words evoke my own experiences which is why the words are so effective. As Spirn suggests in her writings, the landscape cannot be replaced by images, but when memories of place exist, words, paintings and images can trigger those memories and create, for the viewer, a powerful response.

In Benton's quote, he describes the Georgia clay in an almost tangible way. Words have the ability to evoke images, and the best authors are those who have the ability to write words which come alive, to develop characters that you feel like you have known forever, and to create settings that seem as real as what is framed out your window. When Norberg-Schulz writes about the "memory of a certain place," the writings of William Faulkner, Carson McCullars and Flannery O'Connor come to mind. Faulkner created, through writing and framing the landscape, a literary South that evokes analogies to painting. Paul Gray, a noted Faulkner scholar, writes, "Using modernist techniques, [Faulkner] had presented [his stories] in flashes and fragments and from different angles – not unlike a Cubist painter."<sup>11</sup> Faulkner's South has become the South with which most readers identify. Whether it exists or not does not matter; the physical landscape of the South is the embodiment of William Faulkner's writings. One can drive through parts of Mississippi and into the literal landscape of Faulkner's fictitious Yoknapatawpha County. The landscape still possesses the gothic of Faulkner's work, as well as that of Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullars. The landscape depicted in their novels is one frozen in time, a leftover condition created by the South's reluctant progress toward modernity. It is this conflict of Southern identity, the past affecting the present, the history altering the memory, that makes the visual imagery of Southern novels so compelling. The landscape changes, but its history is preserved in the words of writers.

In the Eighteenth century, English gardens recalled the classical landscape, importing follies and situating them in the landscape in order to reminisce about ancient Greece. The classical landscape so revered can be "described as a meaningful order of distinct, individual places," writes Norberg-Schulz.<sup>12</sup> The classical landscape is the result of a formal language drawn from precedents, but in the South, the landscape is dotted with prehistoric elements that are no longer in use. The lack of intention in their arrangement makes their presence that much more prominent. Building skeletons, lone brick chimneys, and kudzu draped shells blanket the rural landscape marking the place that

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Gray, "Mister Faulkner Goes to Stockholm," *Smithsonian*, 2001 p. 57-60.

<sup>12</sup> Norberg-Schulz, p. 45.

once existed. In this way, the landscape is romantic, an impromptu English garden where the solitary brick chimney is analogous to the classical order. Another way to think of these elements in the landscape is found in The Language of Landscape. Anne Whiston Spirn describes landscape in literary terms. She writes, "Landscape is a play with many actors – flowers, people, trees, rocks – who come and go across the stage, some staying a day, a week, a season, others remaining for eighty or two hundred or a thousand years."<sup>13</sup> It is these "actors" that define the Southern landscape that Faulkner captured so vividly in his novels. Faulkner was so fascinated with place that he created his own landscape, complete with a county seat, towns and maps, and he based that structure on the typical Southern, courthouse square. His desire to capture in words the place that is the South is a continued source of inspiration for writers today. Faulkner's counterpart, Eudora Welty remained a fixture of the Southern literary scene until her death in 2000. In an interview with William Starr, Welty was quoted as saying, "I've always looked for the visual. That's how I write. A good writer has good eyes and good ears."<sup>14</sup> For Welty, those "good eyes" often turned to photography, and she is known for her ability to write about, in exquisite detail, the complex relationships of Southern families. Faulkner and Welty have penned the landscape in ways others have not. The impact of both authors on Southern literature cannot be ignored; other authors have written their place in the literary tradition as well. O'Connor and McCullers exist on the threshold between the past and the contemporary as their work borrows from tradition and bridges invention simultaneously.

Contemporary writers of the South, forced to uphold the Southern literary tradition, isolate a different landscape, one still distinctly southern and at the same time, distinctly feminine. Authors like Connie May Fowler, Augusta Trobaugh, and Sue Monk Kidd address difficult issues in a colorful, lyrical and deeply emotional way. Their novels, written after the typical Southern Renaissance of the early twentieth century, deal with many of the same themes as their predecessors. The primary difference in these novels is that the female protagonists are not restrained by the societal roles required of their pre-Southern Renaissance counterparts. Women authors of the early twentieth century were addressing issues like the "reaction against a patriarchal culture, the loosening and challenging of restrictions on women, and the growing independence of women."<sup>15</sup> The women represented in the novels studied are portrayed as strong and independent women dealing with their own cultural baggage, some related to societal standards and others related to internal struggles. The writing of the characters bears witness to the complexity of southern identity, to the expectations of women, and to the looming taboos of race and abuse. Their characters intimately feel the events occurring around them, and as such, those feelings are passed on the reader. In each novel, the main character is protecting a secret from her past or related to her current situation. For the authors, concealing the secrets honors the emotions of the character; revealing the secret is cathartic for the character and reader alike. It is impossible to read these writers and not be affected by their words. For these paintings, the visual imagery is limitless, the power of symbols vast.

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<sup>13</sup> Spirn, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Eudora Welty in William W. Starr's Southern Writers, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey J. Folks, "Southern Renaissance," in The Companion to Southern Literature, eds. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), p. 836.

## A Brief History of the Novels

*I have wells of strength deep within me.*<sup>16</sup>

Thirty novels by a variety of Southern women, black and white, old and young feed the imagery of abstraction in these paintings, and here, landscape is defined in the literary sense, as any characteristic group of intellectual or imaginative features. Though the paintings draw imagery from the literary landscape, typical landscape features like agrarian buildings and the pastoral gothic of traditional rural landscapes are present in these novels. Ultimately, it is the general tone of the novel, brooding and dark, which begins to inform the imagery. The paintings are dark, not to mean sinister or macabre (though that is certainly a tone present in the novels), but instead to suggest the inward focus of myself and the women whose lives have come to be important through my reading. The mystery in these paintings parallels the mystery in the novels. The South is full of ghosts. Ghost: defined by faint, weak or greatly reduced appearances, traces or possibilities of something. My interpretation of the Southern landscape is one which identifies and isolates the captured memories that the South possesses.

Common throughout the novels is the concealing of a secret and the eventual revealing of that same secret. Present in this struggle between what is hidden and what is discovered is a tension reverberating in the interactions of the characters, the development of plot and the resolution of conflict. In many cases, the secrets are rooted in the history of acceptable behavior of Southern women. Alcoholism and mental illness have never been accepted by the Southern myth of manners, and yet many of the characters in these novels are struggling with these issues. In the way the authors veil scenes and characters with words, I use paint to resolve the complexity of layers and their role within the final painting. In a direct way these paintings are an attempt to conceal and simultaneously reveal. The paintings are related to the novels, not in an attempt to illustrate, but in an effort to discover something new through the revelation of the process. The process begins with identifying a specific event from a novel that is compelling visually. The selection of this event is completely subjective on my part; I read until I am convinced of a particular character or event. Often, a single line within a chapter will inspire a painting. I make sketches as a way to begin. The creation of a painting is, for me, an active and reactive process. With an intended event in mind, compositional elements are organized, arranged, rearranged, added and edited to create a balanced composition, where individual parts create an understandable whole.

My work is influenced by the words of Southern women writers because I am convinced that they are better witnesses of truth and better keepers of myths. Collectively, the writers used for this research have created a “mythology” of the South, reinforcing recurring imagery like the veiling of secrets, and have succeeded in convincing their readers that the myth is real. This need for a “mythology” is important in my paintings as well. For me, the authors’ words are a direct link to the tangible images and color I keep within and resonate with my own mythological South. In an essay on Samuel Mockbee’s paintings entitled, “In Praise of Shadows: The Rural Mythology of Samuel Mockbee,” author Lawrence Chua writes, “A painting witnesses too. It safeguards the experience of memory and revelation. The painting shelters what has been seen by the artist. If the artist has been a good and reliable witness, then the painting

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Dewberry Vaughn, Many Things Have Happened Since He Died, (New York, NY: Vintage Contemporaries, 1990), p. 6.

shelters the truth.”<sup>17</sup> For these paintings I equate memory with the words of the authors, that those words have in some way become my own, and revelation as the discovery made through the process of painting.

As a painter, I find working in a series is best because the paintings reverberate off one another; they resonate and inform. The paintings in a series, like the ones from “paradise lost” are not dependent on one another; they can and do exist as separate pieces resolved in separate ways. But they also represent a collective idea. I am always respectful of the fact that no one painting could be created without relying on the ones painted first or the ones painted last. In the paintings, the idea of concealing that is present in the novels is not related to hiding, but instead to the process of layering and to the components which are significant in the making of art about the South. The medium for the paintings is oil, and the length of time required for the paint to dry allows me time to ponder the next move, to give the layer a chance to exert its influence on the final composition. Rubbing out, over painting, and sanding techniques are used in an attempt to juxtapose the language of one layer with the language of the one beneath it. I am not so much saying that the first layer is a mistake, rather I am saying that what is revealed or what appears on the surface is more important. Like the protagonists of these novels, the secret revealed is less important than what is gained from the revelation. The characters struggle with their identity, their role in the lives of those around them, and their significance in life. The process of painting in layers, of concealing and uncovering, is ultimately about the struggle to identify the components that are essential to the composition and to retain the importance of the written imagery I responded to originally. The process of adding or removing layers is a physical and emotional act. The layers preserve brush strokes, overlays, and sanding textures. As a result, the painting surface is a palimpsest, retaining information embedded in the layers. The history of the layers, their emerging or underlying presence, is the catalyst for the paintings. The final composition rests on the support of the layers whether visible or not. Each layer plays a supporting role, but ultimately, the images that appear on the surface are the important ones. Squares of color introduce a positive and negative relationship and create additional visual weight in the paintings. Multiple images and layers create a complexity on the surface. Finding a balance between the complexity of the layers and the resolution of the painting as a whole is the focus of this work.

The paintings are spatial in the way color pushes some planes into the background while others advance to the foreground. While my intention through painting is not to represent spatial conditions or relationships, my use of complementary colors and warm and cool color combinations tends to accentuate the spatial divide. This duality is a reading I accept, but not one which I consciously intend. In the way architecture borrows from place, the site and its residual history, my paintings filter these same conditions. Ultimately, spatial readings in the work are unavoidable; the novels depict and describe specific places, spaces, and their relationships to the characters and landscapes in which the novels are set.

### **Images and their Sources**

*The way those bees flew, not even looking for a flower, just flying for the feel of the wind, split my heart down its seam.*<sup>18</sup>

*Lily in The Secret Life of Bees*

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<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Chua, “In Praise of Shadows: The Rural Mythology of Samuel Mockbee” in Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency, Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Tim Hursley, (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, The Secret Life of Bees, (New York, NY: Viking Press, 2002), p.1.

One of the first paintings completed in the series is *Much Like May*, inspired by the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. The story is told from Lily's perspective, a young girl struggling with the loss of her mother and dealing with her relationship with her African-American caretaker. She clings to a picture of a Black Madonna with the word "Tiburón, South Carolina" scribbled on the back. This picture leads her on a journey, accompanied by Rosaleen. Their destination is Tiburón, but Lily cannot say why she is so convinced that it is there she will find out about her mother. She believes the Black Madonna is a sign. The religious imagery in the novel is one of many Southern themes used: coming of age and race weave together with the religious thread in the story. About the South Kidd writes, "beyond that, the South is not only a geography on the map, but it's also a peculiar region in the mind which haunts, possesses, confounds, and in some cases, exerts an autonomy that you cannot dispute."<sup>19</sup>

One of the earliest images in this novel that resonated so profoundly with me was the way in which Lily was punished by her father: kneeling on grits. She says, "I'd been kneeling on grits since I was six, but still I never got used to that powdered-glass feeling beneath my skin."<sup>20</sup> Reading this provided one of the first images for this painting: the Martha White logo. The way Sue Monk Kidd endears the reader to her characters is one of the reasons this book influenced the first painting in this series. Sketched on lined paper, the early idea for this painting included the Martha White logo, symbolic of Lily's struggle with her father (please see Image #1: Original sketch for the painting once titled *The Martha Whites*<sup>21</sup>). The painting, however, evolved as the novel unfolded. Once Lily and Rosaleen reach the honey farm and came to live with the Daughters of Mary, three sisters who share a house and a Catholic-based unconventional religion, the focus of the painting shifted. One of the sisters, May, was so artfully written that her presence on the page was almost palpable. As the reader, I was drawn to her seeming weakness and simultaneous strength. She carried the burden of the world on her shoulders, and when that burden became too much to bear, she built, intuitively, her own wailing wall where she would tuck away her burdens on slips of paper shoved in between the rocks. The character of May inspired a poem that became the new focus of the painting:

Much like May  
the world sits, perched  
too much to bear  
too soon to fear  
the passage of time is slow

Much like May  
who sings O! Susanna  
too naïve to know  
too wise to fool  
the days compete for meaning

Much like May  
balanced on the Martha Whites  
too tired to live

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<sup>19</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, <http://suemonkkidd.com/journal>

<sup>20</sup> Kidd, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Often painting titles are inspired by single lines, phrases or incidents in the novels. Lily used the term "the Martha Whites" to refer to her punishment in the novel. These words, and the images they evoked, led me to consider naming the painting that. As the painting evolved, it strayed from that original imagery.

too strong to give  
her time is gone, tucked in the rocks  
folded paper, scribbled words  
hidden burdens.  
Much like May.

The painting and reading of the novel happened simultaneously, and as events unfolded in The Secret Life of Bees, so too, did layers occur in the painting. But as the character of May emerged in the novel, the inclusion of the Martha White logo no longer seemed necessary, and a layer of lavender paint concealed its presence. It exists in my memory and in the history of the process and for that reason it is significant. The intense orange in the upper left hand corner of the painting is the only visible fragment of the logo; the logo exists to support other more important aspects of the imagery and the novel. This decision was resolved in another sketch, and the final painting is quite similar to this image (Please see Image #2: Resolved sketch for the painting *Much Like May*).

The composition of the painting exists as two halves: one representing the hope and the resolution that exists in the words and the other, representing the more looming layers in the novel. The balance of these two halves, in many ways, parallels the struggle in the novel to resolve complex issues between the characters without diminishing the importance of the two contradictory issues: life and death. In the painting, and in the novel, the side representing hope and life, consumes the larger portion of the composition. The gravity of the right side of the painting and the haunting imagery of the beehives shrouded in black cloths is balanced by the warm oranges and yellows enveloped in a lavender veil. The warm colors fill the composition and reverberate against the hard-edge imagery of the right side. The presence of the dichotomy of life and death, simultaneously, mimics the novel and life. We understand the daylight because we know the mystery of night. In the painting, the juxtaposition of the flowers and the honeycomb against the shrouded bee hives is a reminder of that opposition.

*It was awful; I felt like she was stuffing us back into the firefly jar.*<sup>22</sup>

Avocet in *Before Women Had Wings*

*Before Women Had Wings* is an incredibly difficult and personal novel written by Connie May Fowler. Told from the point of view of a young girl, Avocet, the novel documents her torturous journey through childhood where she deals with the death of her father and the abuse of her alcoholic mother. Her words, so wise for such a young girl, reflect a deep sensibility and understanding for the world and what it should and should not be. Fowler's graphic descriptions of abuse are told with such haunting imagery the reader feels the pain experienced by Avocet. In one passage, Avocet is so traumatized by the abuse that she can no longer speak; she looks out her bedroom window, sees a raven and believes the bird has stolen her voice. This passage, along with other compelling characters in the book, inspired the painting *Bye, Bye Blackbird*.

An avocet is a black and white shore bird, so it is not by chance Connie May Fowler chose to name the main character in this novel/memoir after a bird; the ability to fly is freeing. The painting began like many others, with a

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<sup>22</sup> Connie Mae Fowler, *Before Women Had Wings*, p. 101.

series of colored layers and marks. Early in the painting, I drew a small bird in a child-like manner, representing Avocet and her stolen voice. Through the painting process, however, the self-consciousness of that mark, trying to make it appear as if it was drawn by a child, subverted the compositional quality the painting was beginning to possess. The childlike bird was covered with a veil of black paint, burying it deep within the layers of the painting. Many layers later, the image re-surfaced, a serendipitous event in the making of the painting. While the child-like bird needed to be concealed, I could not deny the significance of the blackbird scene in the novel. I sanded away several layers of paint in order to capture an area where a larger blackbird would exist within the layers rather than an image sitting on the surface. As I sanded away paint, the child-like blackbird drawn many layers earlier resurfaced. I chose to capture that bird image with a red circle, marking and preserving its presence in the painting. In the resolved composition, the small bird rests above the larger image of a blackbird, rendered in a more precise and accurate contour. This balance of the two images satisfies the composition and the re-presentation of the novel. Through the masking of layers and the unveiling of imagery, *Bye, Bye Blackbird* describes a haunting landscape in both a gothic and romantic way. The framed views of expansive fields against an intensely blue sky suggest an openness within the closed composition. The intense greens and golds give the composition an energy and a palpable heat. The painting, interpreting difficult subject-matter, resonates with compelling imagery and complementary colors. Though Avocet remains in a hopeless situation, she finds solace in a few adult companions who intend to keep her safe. The painting is an attempt to represent that same condition: solace in a dark world.

*"From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom."*  
*Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God*<sup>23</sup>

*Late Bloomer* is inspired by the many images of gardens and landscapes that weave a common thread throughout most of the novels studied. The heat of the South and the fickle ground that offers either great success or complete despair resonates throughout these novels. In *She Flew the Coop*, Michael Lee West writes, "the warm weather has tempted old ladies from their houses and up and down Hayes Avenue. They wobble down the front steps, wearing cotton dusters, and plant petunias in old tires."<sup>24</sup> A character in the same novel who uses gardening as therapy says, "...but between gardening and striving to be meek, I hope I had heaven covered."<sup>25</sup> The garden is a significant component of Southern yards and crosses class and racial lines. It serves as both necessity, in the growing of vegetables and herbs, and aesthetic, creating a signature for the owner. Richard Westmacott, a landscape architect who has studied African-American gardens writes, "...the garden is a peculiar and fascinating combination: a place for survival and a place for spiritual refreshment, a place for both subsistence and ornament, for work and leisure."<sup>26</sup> Alice Walker, in her book *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, confirms the deep commitment to the aesthetic and therapeutic aspects of gardens. Of her mothers' garden, she writes:

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<sup>23</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (New York, NY: Perennial Library, Harper & Row Publishers, 1937), p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Lee West, *She Flew the Coop: A Novel Concerning Life, Death, Sex and Recipes in Limoges, Louisiana*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994,) p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21

<sup>26</sup> Richard Westmacott, "Yards and Gardens of Rural African-Americans as Vernacular Art," *The Southern Quarterly* 32 (Summer 1994): 45.

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms-sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena...and on and on.

And I remember people coming to my mother's yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia-perfect strangers and imperfect strangers-and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art.<sup>27</sup>

The painting captures the magical quality of the landscape, full of warm colors and expanses of blue sky. The composition attempts to use a spatial dynamic; the Echinacea flower frozen in the foreground is juxtaposed next to a framed view of a golden field. The size of the Echinacea relative to the deep space of the field makes the flower seem larger than life, a sort of magic realism reference to the passage by Alice Walker. Walker's "screen of blooms" suggests that the flowers' beauty had the ability to make her forget the difficulties of growing up poor in Georgia. In the painting, a compositional dichotomy exists once again: the left side of the painting ripe with a lush green and fertile field in opposition to the darker, more geometric right side of the painting. While the painting draws from a more general tone of all of the novels studied, it sits squarely in the series in its desire to balance and harmonize diametrically opposed parts. As with the other paintings discussed, the fertile and therefore, more hopeful side, reigns over the darker geometry. *Late Bloomer* reverberates with a controlled passion for wonder, teetering on the edge of a more sinister background.

*Well, blessed is she who expecteth nothing, for she shall not encounter disappointment.*<sup>28</sup>

*Albertine in The Florabama Ladies' Auxiliary & Sewing Circle*

Beginning a painting is a humbling experience, for the blank canvas is so painfully beautiful, one cannot imagine marks upon it that would make it better. For my painting process, layering is a way to build surface and texture while simultaneously allowing the painting to find its identity. Often, sketches or a strong visual image from a literary source provide that initial step, but occasionally, I begin to paint simply for the sheer joy of making marks on the surface. Those early layers do not have to be meaningful, rather they can acquire meaning later in the process as they are concealed or allowed to remain in view. The painting entitled *Carry Me Home* is an ideal example of this process. In the early stages of the painting, my inspiration was a specific quilt from the Quilts of Gee's Bend collection. The two-sided quilt by Essie Bendolph Pettway creates a unique visual dynamic of shifting and stacked squares. The cadence created as a result of the stacking is one which, visually, resonated with the notion of "field," by definition meaning a cultivated expanse of land. While painting on a vertical surface, these squares mimic the way in which a field may be cultivated or divided for planting crops. This shift from the vertical to a horizontal representation plane is, I am certain, a product of my architectural education (see *Carry Me Home* – beginning layer). The burnt umber

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<sup>27</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1967), p.241.

<sup>28</sup> Lois Battle, *The Florabama Ladies' Auxiliary & Sewing Circle* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001), p.34.

layer along with the overlapping and shifting squares creates a palette for the painting, much like the earth provides the nourishment for crops to grow. In the second phase of the painting (see *Carry Me Home* – second layer), a sketch completed in my notebook is overlaid into the existing structure (see early sketch of the imagery). The horizontal bands and the echinacea flowers emerging from them suggest a section through the earth and represent an abundant growth in the field. This reference to the landscape is deliberate for it suggests an expanse in the painting, one that can only be implied. After the insertion of the sketch imagery, the resulting layer was too disconnected; a cacophony of imagery filled the frame. The immediate solution was to bury some of the more complex images, in this case the echinacea field. An orange layer serves as a frame with apertures allowing a few flowers to remain visible in the picture plane (see *Carry Me Home*- third layer). While this gesture buried some of the complexity of imagery, it also fragmented the painting even further, resulting in a 36"x 36" frame containing many smaller compositions. The next layer, taking cues from the one beneath it, connected two areas through the use of a dark sepia and an earthen red. Selected portions of the layers below were framed in an attempt to preserve that staccato rhythm of the quilt (see *Carry Me Home* – fourth layer). In the fourth image, the composition is more cohesive, with only a few areas competing for a place in the final composition.

The fifth layer of this painting reveals a decision on my part to embed a large portion of the composition within a field of light blue (see *Carry Me Home* – fifth layer). The color is a direct reference to the sky, not in a pictorial way, but in an illustrative way, to begin to suggest an expanse. The expansive blue works as a counterpoint to the areas in the composition that are more closed and carefully defined spaces. The openness of the blue allows the elements contained within it the freedom to move, to levitate in the expanse. The floating quality of those figures immediately gave a weight and a gravity to other areas. In an effort to reinforce this, a dark blue layer was added to push the space deep behind the expanse and create a distinct edge between earth and sky, between anchored and floating elements (see *Carry Me Home* – sixth layer). The blue layer did serve as that push into deep space, but ultimately, I felt it detracted from the light blue expanse which was now the focus of the composition. Reluctantly, I buried most of the imagery on the right side of painting in a veil of dark orange. Those components were sacrificed for the sake of the final image. The painting, now complete ((see *Carry Me Home* – final) feels resolved as a composition. The floating elements surrounded by the light blue field possess bird like, or maybe insect like, qualities as they rise from earth.

### **The Sketchbook**

*"...-- for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you --..."*<sup>29</sup>

When I began this pursuit of paintings linked to literature, I was involved in another project that kept me away from the studio for about three months. During that time, I read constantly and documented the thoughts, emotions, and visual images that emerged. The journal, used for recording everything from quotes

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<sup>29</sup> Hurston, p. 85.

to ideas for paintings, eventually became a sketchbook, and has now become a valuable tool for my working process. Collectively, the words and images reveal the way I work, the way I think, and the aspects of the novels that weave a common thread through the work. The first image, drawn over some words that I did not want anyone to read, illustrates my fascination with quilt patterns and quilt stitches. This sketch inspired the original layer for the painting *Inside the Firefly Jar*. The outlined square in the left center of the painting frames that quilt-like pattern created through a series of layers, painted and then sanded.

Most of the sketches that exist throughout the sketchbook do have links to paintings, but occasionally, the imagery seems complete on the sketchbook page. Two images, labeled “Victory Garden” and “The Muses Come to Georgia” have never filtered into final images, though I suspect they will. The value of these sketches and words is that they exist within a collective; like the final paintings which rely on many parts to make a whole, the sketches in the sketchbook have an identical relationship to the research. Their value exists in their making. When I have an idea, but no time to paint, I make a quick sketch. The sketch is referential and immediate. The sketches are precious because they retain an intuitive quality; they are not overworked, layered, sanded, and overpainted like the final images.

One sketch was translated directly into a painting entitled *She Shall Not Encounter Disappointment*. It is rare that a sketch becomes a completed painting, but the sketch image “said” all the ideas I wanted the painting to convey (see sketch for *She Shall Not Encounter Disappointment*). The concentric circles in the center of the painting represent a direct connection to an aerial image of a particular aspect of the southern landscape. The echinacea flower, here, represents the desire to illustrate the passage of time through the life cycle of the flower; one image represents death and the other, life. This painting, completed in oil on linen, did not rely on the sanding process. The immediacy of the sketched image, and the desire to keep the final painting true to that, did not require the kind of layering and history that the sanding creates. Instead, the painting relies on bold colors to divide the composition and burnt umber stains to create the illusion of weathering and time. Additional images sketched on the page reveal the my attraction to the natural world and the many forms it offers. Vegetable images, particularly okra and peas, are common throughout the sketchbook.

The images in the sketchbook are important, but often the written words are as valuable. I record significant passages from the sources that provoke strong images or feelings. Later, the words act as visual prompts, inspiring new images. Phrases like, “Why I Love Birds” and “Give Me Wings to Fly away from Here,” (on sketchbook page 3) reveal a preference for certain imagery and proves valuable in my own understanding of the work. The infusion of religious imagery and themes throughout the novels filters into the words I record throughout the pages. While the painted imagery does not contain overt religious imagery, the influence exists, even if only in my thoughts and sketchbook. In a way, the sketchbook serves as a layer that is valuable to the process of the paintings, but removed from the paintings. Those words and images in the sketchbook are inherent in the paintings.

## **Artist Statement**

I believe in ghosts. Not spirits. Not haunts. Ghosts, defined as faint, weak or greatly reduced appearances, traces or possibilities of something. Defined as a returning or haunting memory or image. The South is full of ghosts, and my interpretation of the southern landscape is one which identifies and isolates the ghosts left behind by things not seen, not heard, not spoken. For those who can see them, the ghosts veil the landscape with an unwritten memory of the place that was before. Ghosts can be found in the shadows cast by the hot sun in summer or in the shells of barns which stand precariously close to the highway that was not there when they were built. Ghosts fill in the blanks of the history of place. Ghosts tell their own version of the truth. One not found in history books. Ghosts are the source for the artists and the writers of the South. Faulkner saw ghosts. Welty did too.

The paintings collected here are ghosts as well. Multiple layers create a palimpsest of the South, where elements are concealed and simultaneously revealed. The paintings are not so much illustrative as they are narrative. They veil burdens of Southern women made manifest in contemporary southern novels. The secrets kept and cloaked are left over vulnerabilities of a place that could not withstand time. The isolation on the picture plane bears witness to this struggle. The paintings have secrets too.

When I was twelve years old I had a friend whose family lived in a 19<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse on several acres of land in central Georgia. I remember that house because of its tall ceilings, drafty windows, and wide central hall. The once detached kitchen was connected to the main house with an enclosed walkway. In the winter, even in the mild winters of Georgia, that house was bitterly cold. One Saturday morning, my friend's mother asked us to go get wood from the wood pile at the back of the property. We put on our coats and walked to the far end of the land, at least 200 yards from the main house. We bent down to collect wood. At the same time, my friend and I looked up to the top of the wood pile, dropped the wood collected in our arms, screamed and took off running as fast as we could. To this day, I do not know what she saw or felt. But I know what I saw. Standing on top of the wood pile was a ghost. A small woman, dressed in clothing of the 1800's. Her hair was blowing in the wind. I saw her as clear as day. I have no proof of what I saw, but that sighting would not be my last.

When I say "I believe in ghosts," I mean that literally and figuratively, but for me, the differentiation is not important. I walk through this world seeking from it the things that most people do not see, or perhaps, choose not to see. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard writes about what it means to be an observer in the natural world. She describes the ways birds and other creatures hide in plain sight, disguised in trees or shrubs or low brush. She writes, "These disappearances stun me into stillness and concentration; they say of nature that it conceals with a grand nonchalance, and they say of vision that it is a deliberate gift...For nature does not reveal as well as conceal: now-you-don't-see-it, now-you-do."<sup>30</sup> As a painter I am forever in search of those "now-you-don't-see-it" moments, when I can capture in paint, preserve in color, the occurrences of daily life that are missed or ignored. I believe my paintings are metanarratives: they are stories about me that provide a view of my experiences. Those experiences are ones unique to my way of seeing the world. Dillard continues, stating, "Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it. It is, as Ruskin says, 'not merely unnoticed, but in the full, clear sense of the word, unseen.'"<sup>31</sup> These paintings represent my way of calling attention to the "unnoticed" and "unseen" in the world around me. The compositions capture those split-second, sacred moments

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<sup>30</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, New York, NY: Perennial Library, Harper&Row Publishers, 1974, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Dillard, p. 30.

when everything is suddenly clear, as if the lenses of my eyes have been washed clean. So yes, I believe in ghosts.  
What is "unseen" is what it truly meaningful.