

Things That Cannot Be Seen in Any Other Way: Painting the Third Space

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Abstract

This practice led research explores how painting can construct a third space that holds lived experiences of identity, home, and family. It is grounded in my position as both Māori and Syrian. The project responds to the difficulty of locating identity within a singular cultural framework. I position identity as something formed across and between positions. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'third space', I explore how an Oasis can operate as a conceptual and material framework for world-building within painting. Oasis acts as a constructed environment where memory, culture, and lived experience coexist in flux, resisting singular definitions of identity. My research questions how painting can make visible these lived experiences whilst allowing them to remain partial and not fully resolved. The project is methodologically grounded in everyday encounters of home and family, which function as both method and subject. Beginning with diaristic watercolour sketches and translating into large scale oil paintings, symbols and figures emerge through lived encounters and work as a visual language that holds experience without fixing it. Informed by Édouard Glissant's ideas concerning the 'right to opacity', full transparency is resisted allowing meaning to remain partially hidden. Utilising installation strategies, I explore how paintings can function as thresholds that must be physically navigated. Viewers are invited to enter a space yet not fully grasp it.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature

Armani Reynolds-Hatem

7th May 2026

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Preface

I've spent a long time with this degree. Dare I say it has been challenging and confronting. I've been confronted by my lack of knowing, mostly within this academic sphere, but at times, it was cultural too. It took me awhile to pinpoint what I was wanting to research. I knew it was going to be about me as most of my practice has been but I didn't know how to research into that. Up until I started this project I had not had to consciously face or adapt to the idea that I did not fit within a singular framework. When attempting to culturally frame my work, I felt as if I wasn't fully a part of something because my two cultures, Māori and Syrian, left me struggling to fit within a singular definition. This is not to say that I experienced a lack of belonging. I have always been affirmed in my identity and who I am through my parents and siblings. My identity was never in question and my sense of self has largely been held within my family. This shared reality has meant my identity feels understood within that space. However when attempting to translate this experience into a framework for my project I encountered the limits of that certainty. It was not that I was not a part of something, but it was that I couldn't easily locate myself within a single cultural framework.

Of course no one sat me down and specifically said “*you must fit into a single cultural framework*”. But the instinct to do so came from a perceived need to position myself early within academic research. It's not inherently negative, and definitely can provide clarity and direction, but it assumes that such a position is already known and readily definable. At the beginning of this project, this was not the case for me. I was attempting to situate my work within a cultural framework before I had fully understood what my own relationship to culture and identity was. The framework itself remained unclear to me, I knew it had something to do with culture and identity, but I did not yet know how, in what way, or through what structure. This uncertainty created a tension for me, and an ambivalence to do the work. I was being asked to define and locate something that was still unfolding; something I had not yet developed a way of articulating that aligned with my lived experience. In this context “singular” does not simply

refer to one culture over another, but to a way of positioning that is clearly defined. I imply that singular means a framework that already exists and can be named, rather than one that is developing through lived experience. The difficulty then was not in choosing between cultures but in trying to translate a relational and familial way of living into a form that required early definition. This pressure to locate myself became a key point of tension as my understanding of identity only began to take shape through the process itself. In attempting to give my project a framework I started to realise something deeper. It was somewhat confronting, but was also indicative of how I had always lived my life. I do not only have one way of being. It felt invalidating. Not because of my cultures, but because it felt wrong to ground my research solely within only a Māori framework or only a Syrian one. To choose one felt like a reduction, a flattening of my experience, because in my reality my cultures live in overlap. It is not one or the other. To choose one would mean losing a part of myself, and in turn losing the integrity of my own lived experience. It would also mean choosing a way of working that didn't really align or explain the workings of my respective cultures. This realisation was confronting because it made me question the validity of my own position with respect to my identity. This tension became visible for me in the context of home where my cultural positionings are not separate. I eat halal food that my father brings home from the shop. I watch my mum practice kapa haka in front of the TV to get her steps in. I hear my older brother's call to prayer notification go off on his phone as he leaves the room to complete his five daily prayers; and my younger brother sits beside me leaning on his right arm marked with a full tā moko sleeve. For me this is my cultural framework. A space where these moments are tied to a shared reality where both cultures are present at once.

There were times I was teetering on grounding my project in only a Māori framework but that felt like a cop out. Not because the content was insufficient, but because it didn't fully encompass the complexity of my lived experience. To choose one alone would mean sidelining another part of myself that is equally present even if it is expressed differently. It would ignore the way that these cultures inform one another in my daily life and the way my identity has been shaped through their coexistence.

Through this inner turmoil I turned inwards. Everything I wanted to say is already within me. Everything I know exists there too. What I know is enough, I already possess knowledge through my experience of being. Trusting that inner wisdom became a way forward, not toward a fixed answer, but toward a method of working. I can accept myself as I am, not divided, but multiple. Through acknowledging that what I was looking for externally was already present within me the project began to shift, and is positioned through my being both Māori and Syrian, and the everyday realities that shape my sense of self.

What I know is enough.

Introduction

This project is a painting based inquiry that draws on my experiences of home, family, memory, and the everyday moments that shape how I understand myself. The paintings act as a way of holding and expressing these moments rather than to explain or resolve them. The project asks how my lived experiences can be held and made visible through painting. The paintings construct a space in which these experiences co-exist and remain in flux. These experiences include memories of growing up, significant events for me and my family, moments formed through direct experience, and observing the lives of family around me. The paintings are informed by my relationships with my family, as well as my connection to culture and religion, which continues to shape how I understand and locate myself. It considers how identity can be expressed when it does not sit within a singular cultural framework, but instead exists across, between, and through spaces at once.

At the center of my research is the question: How can painting construct a symbolic ‘Oasis’ as a third space, through symbolic forms, that makes visible my lived experiences of identity and home, whilst allowing them to remain partial, relational and not fully resolved?

My lived experiences operate as both the subject and the method of the project. I am interested in how ways of knowing are not something applied from the outside but are formed through, for this project, my embodied experiences. These ways of knowing come from my relationship with family; they are felt and lived rather than fully articulated. Within my project these experiences begin to take shape through my development and use of a symbolic language. My symbols do not function as fixed representations instead they emerge from my lived experience and operate in relation to one another.

The first chapter, ‘What is Infinite’, discusses the philosophical notion of “third space”, which Indian philosopher Homi K. Bhabha defines as a place in-between

that enables other positions of culture to emerge.¹ I extend this concept by reframing third space as a mode of world building which I term ‘Oasis’. I use this theory to develop my painting practice so that Oasis becomes a material representation of an in-between space and existence. Within this space I explore intersections of family, home, and wider cultural influence as they shape my lived experience. As a result, Oasis is a space where the complexities of my cultural identity can coexist and begin to work themselves out. Oasis is a site that reflects the fluid and evolving nature of home and identity, rather than fixing them into static and opposing categories.

This chapter also engages with the work of Palestinian philosopher Edward W. Said, and his theory of Orientalism, to address how cultural identities are shaped and constrained through systems of representation. Said critiques the ways in which Western discourse constructs the “East” as a simplified and exoticised other, which is relevant to my use of the term Oasis and its history of romanticised and colonial imagery. Through Said’s thinking, Oasis is positioned not as an exotic symbol, but as a site of contestation, where inherited meanings are questioned and reworked through lived experience. The chapter also introduces liminality as a way of understanding space not as fixed, but as transitional and relational.

The second chapter, ‘A Love Letter to My Family’, explores my methodology which is grounded in embodied knowledge and relational experience. I focus on home and family, and how these lived contexts influence the symbolic language used in my paintings. This idea extends into my project through painting. I take my preliminary watercolours, and translate them to large unstretched canvas, where their scale demands a more physically engaged process. I look at Martiniquais philosopher Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (1990), in particular his idea concerning “the right to opacity”.² Here Glissant argues the right to opacity as the refusal of reduction into a transparent explanation, which

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Third Space,” interview by Jonathan Rutherford, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211.

² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.

asserts the legitimacy of embodied knowledge and what cannot be fully known. I use opacity as both a conceptual and a painting method, drawing on the word opaque, as I play with the transparency of oils to mimic layered experience.

Chapter three, 'Painting the Oasis', focuses on my process through which the conceptual framing is realised in practice. Beginning with small diaristic watercolour sketches, I explore how symbols emerge through observation, repetition and relational interaction across images and sketches. These sketches act as sites of the in-between – a space where identity is not fixed, where meaning is developed through their accumulation instead of predetermined compositions. These works are then translated into larger scale oil paintings, where they expand into immersive environments, figures, symbols, and spaces that co-exist. Through a shift in scale and material, painting becomes a method of world building, where my identity is constructed through the interactions of my forms.

And lastly, chapter four, 'On Access', discusses how the ideas of opacity and scale are extended into installation. The Oasis is not only constructed within the paintings, but through the installation of the artworks. The installation operates as a threshold, where viewers must physically enter the Oasis to encounter the paintings. This entry does not grant full access to the works meanings, their access remains partial, shaped by opacity and their own capacity to resonate with what is encountered. Drawing on Glissant's idea of opacity, and Meyer and Land's concept of threshold knowledge, this chapter explores how access is both enabled and limited.

Chapter 1: What is infinite

My research project needs its own kind of space, which is one where I can allow my identity to exist, and unfold; where memories of growing up, relationships with my siblings and parents, culture and religion can be held by how I have lived and perceived these things. It is a place where things exist the way I see them. With this need, the idea of Oasis became a significant methodology. Post colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) introduces a key idea of third space, where meaning and identity are produced through a sense of in-between-ness – in my case between my Māori and Syrian cultures. Within my project the Oasis becomes a way of working with Bhabha's third space, materialising it as a constructed, symbolic environment, making the in-between visible through painting.

1.1

Defining Oasis

To begin, I must define what I mean by oasis. According to the Cambridge dictionary an oasis is “a calm , pleasant place in the middle of somewhere busy and unpleasant”³ it suggests a place of rest, refuge, the mind goes to such a place. However the term also carries a weight of colonial imagination. A romanticised site of an exotified purity, escape, and exotic difference particularly with relation to Western fantasies of the Middle East. Left unexamined, the use of the term risks reproducing the reductive image that this project aims to resist.

I turn to Edward W. Said and his theory of *Orientalism*. Said argues that the “East” is not simply a geographical location, but a construct shaped by Western imagination.⁴ Orientalism, he writes, is “a style of thought” that rests on an “ontological and epistemological distinction” between “the Orient” and “the Occident”.⁵ The East therefore becomes a site of difference, defined as opposite

³ Oasis,” *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed May 5, 2026, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/oasis>

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 2–3.

⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

to a rational and dominant West.⁶ These representations are not neutral but function to justify systems of control and maintain power imbalances. This critique becomes particularly relevant to my project. The word “East” has always existed within my lived experience, not as an abstract concept, but as something embedded in everyday life. It exists simultaneously as a direction, a place, and a cultural signifier. Throughout my research I use the term Oasis without reinforcing a distant, imagined East, when my own experience of it is grounded in relation.

My project reframes Oasis as a conceptual space rather than a fixed geographical or culturally decorative image. Oasis aims not to function as a symbol of escape or purity, but to be understood as a constructed environment of coexistence. By redefining it as a lived space, instead of an exotic symbol, it becomes a site to hold identity. Within Western representations of the East an oasis acts as a place that is easily palatable, something luxurious and separate from the people of the land. At first, I was also under the mirage of this colonial idealisation. When I began calling my painted environments oases, I was drawn to their sense of refuge, softness, water, trees, and peace. The term fits because my paintings contained such lush environments and places of shelter for my subject matter. In doing so, I was overlooking the lived reality of these environments, where communities have long used oases as part of everyday life. I then began to question whether I was unknowingly contributing to a romanticised image of the “East”. Was I accepting oasis into my project as a decorative and exotic image, even though my paintings held living beings, my personal experience, and cultural complexity? This conflict became clearer when looking at colonial writing about oases⁷. Here oasis is not simply a place, but a space mediated through colonial authority that works to flatten lived complexity into something othered. Understanding this history makes it clear to me that the term oasis is not neutral.

⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

⁷ For further discussion, see Hugh John Llewellyn Beadnell’s *An Egyptian Oasis: An Account of the Oasis of Kharga in the Libyan Desert* (London: John Murray, 1909).

There is a conflict between inherited colonial images of oasis as an exotic site of escape, and my own lived engagement with it as a space shaped through personal experience. It is within this conflict that my use of Oasis shifts. Rather than abandoning the term I retain it as a site of contestation. I rework Oasis to operate as a third space in alignment with Bhabha's position concerning a space where meaning is not fixed, but negotiated, and where new cultural positions can emerge. Oasis therefore becomes an extension of home. It is not the homeland, and it is not a fantasy of return. It is a space I construct to hold what shapes me. My identity is political, especially in my case when it is shaped by cultures marked by colonisation, migration, and displacement. Aotearoa has been colonised, and my Syrian identity is also shaped through distance, as I have never been to my father's homeland. As a result my understanding of self has not come from a singular place of origin, but has been formed through my family home. Within my Oasis, identity does not need to be fully defined in order to be real.

1.2

The Third Space

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) introduces the concept of the third space⁸ as a way of rethinking how cultural identity is formed. Rather than understanding identity through "originary and initial subjectives"⁹, Bhabha argues for a shift toward the processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural difference. What emerges is the idea of a third space: an "in-between" site where meaning is not inherited, but actively negotiated.¹⁰ Within my practice Oasis emerges as a material articulation of this third space, translating Bhabha's in-between into a constructed visual environment. Within this framework identity is not something stable. It is produced through encounters with difference. These in-between spaces become the terrain for what Bhabha

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space," interview with Jonathan Rutherford, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, 211–12.

⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1

¹⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2

describes as “strategies of selfhood” that generate “new signs of identity”.¹¹ Identity does not belong to one culture or another, one opposition to another, but is formed through the movement between them. Bhabha locates cultural meaning within “interstices”, the overlaps and displacements between domains of difference.¹² Here identity is formed through negotiation rather than fixed cultural boundaries.

For Bhabha, identity is inherently relational, shaped by the presence of difference within and outside of it. He suggests that identity involves hybridity, however not as just a combination of two original identities, but the emergence of something new through their encounter. Because identity is created through these encounters, it refuses to be traced back to singularity. This shift is important as it moves away from understanding identity as something that can be traced back to fixed origins. Rather than tracing two original moments, he positions the third space as the condition from which new cultural meanings are produced.¹³

Although I align with Bhabha’s idea of third space, and my project’s aim is to create a space in which identity is fluid and in process, I do not interpret this hybridity as a complete detachment from its cultural origins. Rather I understand it as a process of negotiation that remains informed by the context in which my identity emerges. My project does not seek to dissolve these influences, but allows my influences to inform this newness, giving authority to the places of culture in which myself emerges from. The third space therefore operates as a site of both collaboration and contestation for identity. It enables a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. This theoretical framing is central to my project because the third space provides a way of understanding my own position not as divided between two cultures, but as something produced through ongoing negotiation. It allows me to move away from an expectation of cultural purity or singular belonging, and instead locate my project within a space of becoming. From this position, Oasis is not conceived as a fixed place, but a

¹¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1

¹² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2

¹³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1

constructed environment that operates as a Third Space, one where identity, memory, and cultural forms are continuously made and remade through their interaction.

Through Bhabha and Said's theories the chapter positions Oasis as a conceptual method for challenging identity categories and the political nature of cultural classification. Said critiques the structures that fix and simplify culture, whilst Bhabha provides a framework through which new hybrid forms can emerge. Together these positions support my argument that a mixed identity exists not as a division but as dynamic in-between space that is continually negotiated.

1.3

World Building

If the third space describes the conditions in which identity is formed, then this project asks how that space is made visible. Rather than remaining as just theory, my practice engages third space through the construction of a world. World-building becomes a methodological approach: a way of materialising the in-between as a lived and spatial condition. Within my project, world-building begins through the accumulation and interactions of my symbols, figures, and environments that are drawn from my lived experience. Whilst these forms do originate from my lived experience, placed in relation to one another, their meanings shift dependent on their positions. Through this world-building, I construct a space of negotiation where meaning is continuously formed and reformed through their interaction.

To extend the way space operates within the Oasis, Bhabha's description of "liminal space" as a site of transition between fixed positions is relevant; as is the architectural practice of Renée Green. In her work *Sites of Genealogy* (1990-1991), (see Figure 2) Green refuses the idea that identity is something already formed and then simply represented. Instead identity emerges through spatial and

relational processes.¹⁴ This understanding of liminal space as site aligns with my approach to world-building where meaning is produced between the relations of symbols within the work. Space becomes active rather than passive. Writing in response to multicultural frameworks and representation that simplify difference, she questions the idea of identity as fixed, stating that she has, "...trouble with thinking of all these things as monolithic fixed categories."¹⁵ World-building shifts away from constructing a unified or stable "world" and instead becomes the staging of conditions where meaning remains open and in flux.

Green describes her installation as: "The stairwell became a liminal space, a pathway between the upper and lower areas..."¹⁶ Here space is not a container but a process defined by movement, passage, and relation. This understanding of space informs my own project. Like Green's stairwell, my world-building environments work as transitional spaces. This idea of liminality is important to my project, not through liminality itself but through the world I construct not being defined by its boundaries, but by the movement within its constructed space, the overlaps, and negotiations between elements. In this way liminality shifts my approach to world-building to a transitional space. As Bhabha writes, "being in the 'beyond' ... is to inhabit an intervening space".¹⁷ This idea provides a way of understanding multicultural experience not as divided between two positions, but as lived in-between. My world-building therefore constructs a space where identity exists through this movement.

In my paintings new meanings can emerge through the changing relationships between symbols, figures, and their environment. This occurs through forms that are placed in relation to one another, their meanings shifting dependent on their position. These ideas can be seen in *Untitled (Oasis)* (see Figure 1) where a large koru with eyes sits at the edge of a lake, with another koru emerging from it. The koru is commonly associated with new life and growth, but is placed within a sparse and unsettled environment. Three date palms sit at the opposite side of the

¹⁴ Jess Chen, "Don't Look Back: Renée Green's Present Tense," *Momus*, December 14, 2021, <https://momus.ca/2021/12/14/dont-look-back-renee-greens-present-tense/>

¹⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 3

¹⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 4

¹⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 7

lake, separated from the koru. Through this separation the meaning of the koru becomes unstable. Rather than clearly being a symbol of growth, its isolation introduces a sense of uncertainty. Meaning held in the symbol is turned into something different through its relation to its environment.



Figure 1 Armani Reynolds-Hatem, *Untitled (Oasis)*, 2025, oil on canvas



Figure 2 Renée Green, *Sites of Genealogy: Loophole of Retreat* (installation view), (1990 - 1991).

Chapter 2: A Love letter to my family

this is for nomads,
moving between and arriving
merchants of imported middle eastern goods
trades by day, parents by night
20-year-olds hitching rides over maunga,
and planes over moana
motu to motu
passing culture through patterns on rugs
and shapes of pounamu
for siblings with tā moko
inked language of family
for sisters with long braided hair
and brothers trying to grow it back
for two less fingers
still feeding the community.

(Poem by the author, 2026)

Family sits at the center of my project, not only as subject matter within my paintings, but as the foundations from which I come to understand my experience in the world. This chapter positions home and family as sites where knowledge is formed through lived experience. This connection occurs through the development of my symbolic language that speaks to my connection to them. Beginning with home as a space of return and familiarity, this chapter discusses how everyday interactions shape my understanding of self. I draw on Édouard Glissant's ideas concerning a right to opacity to explore how these familial ways of knowing can be shared without being reduced.

2.1

On Home

In 2022 I moved out of my family home, yet I find myself always coming back. Every Sunday I visit for family dinner, or sometimes just to come back to a space where I can feel like a kid again. Growing up I always felt a need to leave. When I did leave, though it was probably a necessary thing for me at the time, that departure had altered my relationship to home. I now return to it by choice. Home hasn't really changed, but my understanding of it has. The very structures I was attempting to rid myself of are what I find myself crawling back to. They are familiar, and they make sense. As a kid I would yell out the window that "I want to join the red head family!" - this is a story my sister will never fail to tell friends or partners of mine. Funnily enough, although both my parents have black hair, it is me and my brothers who are red-headed. In retrospect, this moment reads differently. It feels less like a rejection of my family and more like an unconscious need to belong; was a younger Armani calling out to a future me to return to this place of home?

Home is where my dad says he's going to teach me how to cook, but then only lets me crush up the garlic. After tea my mother brings me sliced fruit. Home is sitting at the table with my older brother cracking jokes till an ungodly hour, whilst my sister is on Facetime, returning home through her own mode. It is these small, but repeated gestures that define home. These repeated gestures, and

my layered experience of home are then represented by the layering and repetition of symbols within my paintings, they accumulate into what is foundational in my life and my work.

My return to home in my early twenties has become significant. Although I no longer live there, I continue to operate through it. My thinking, habits, and my ways of relating are still grounded in the environment of home. Home is not just a place I visit, it is a structure that continues to shape how I understand and move through the world: it is the center of my ways of knowing. The knowledge I work from in my project is not external, but made through embodied and relational experience within my family. It is my understanding that is lived rather than taught. This way of knowing is felt, situated, and specific to my upbringing. Through painting moments drawn from my environment – family, home, cultural symbols that exist within them - these ways of knowing are translated into visual form, allowing home to not only operate as subject matter but as a methodological ground where meaning is made.

2.2

The Right to Opacity

The ways of knowing created through home are not always fully visible or easy to articulate. They are shaped through lived experience, and cannot be entirely translated into fixed meaning, which raises a question within my project: how can my experiences be shared without being reduced or over explained? It is through this tension that I turn towards Édouard Glissant's concept of the right to opacity.¹⁸ His concept connects to how my paintings resist direct interpretation. Glissant challenges the assumption that understanding is necessary for relation, he argues that systems of transparency often function to reduce individuals into forms that can be categorised and controlled.

¹⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

As Glissant argues, transparency operates as a system that seeks to reduce positioning identity as something that must be clarified and made legible.¹⁹ In contrast, opacity is both a condition and a right, where identity can exist without being simplified. He insists that “the opaque is not the obscure... it is that which cannot be reduced”.²⁰ Opacity does not mean withholding meaning entirely, but refusing its reduction into a singular, fully knowable form. Opacity is not positioned as a barrier to relation, but as its foundation. Glissant writes that “the right to opacity... would be the real foundation of Relation”²¹, thereby suggesting that meaningful engagement does not depend on full comprehension. Rather it requires an acceptance of difference that cannot be fully grasped. His critique extends to the act of understanding itself. Referencing how the French word *comprendre* (to understand) comes from the Latin *comprehendere* “to seize”, he suggests that understanding becomes an act of capture “a gesture of enclosure if not appropriation.”²² He then proposes “the gesture of giving-on-and-with,”²³ an alternative mode of relation which allows meaning to remain open rather than be possessed. In this way, opacity operates as a form of protection, not through concealment, but through the refusal to be simplified. The viewer is not positioned as someone who can fully grasp the work, but as someone who encounters it relationally, in proximity to my meaning, without possessing it.

Artist Firelei Báez explores these ideas of opacity in her paintings. For example, *Untitled (Drexciya)* (2019) is a large, immersive painting that appears to take place underwater (see Figure 3). The surface is filled with flowing, organic shapes and layered patterns that resemble currents, sea plants, algae, and strands of hair drifting through water. The paint is applied in fluid, poured, and gestural ways, creating a sense of movement across the entire canvas. Human forms begin to appear, but they are not clearly outlined. They are partially hidden within the surrounding patterns, blending into the background. Parts of bodies can be glimpsed, but they are fragmented and difficult to isolate, as if they are

¹⁹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

²⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.

²¹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

²² Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

²³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

emerging from or dissolving into water. The work draws on the imagined underwater world of “Drexciya,” a fictional society said to be formed by the unborn children of African women who were thrown overboard during the transatlantic slave trade.²⁴ The work does not make history fully visible or accessible, but holds it in a state of complexity. Meaning is encountered, but not possessed.

Báez’s approach to opacity provides a way of understanding how identity and history can be engaged with without being reduced to a fully knowable form. Her use of layering and partial visibility is done to resist the demand for clarity. In her works opacity acts as a way that enables the viewer to have alternate forms of relation. Within this relation, opacity works as a conceptual and methodological framework for thinking about how knowledge is produced. It challenges the assumption that understanding must rely on transparency. Báez describes opacity as an “assurance of a fuller self” withholding legibility is not a lack, but a form of autonomy.”²⁵ Her work resists the demand to make identity transparent, instead allowing it to remain complex. This approach directly informs my development of an Oasis. Like Báez’s layered compositions, Oasis becomes a constructed environment in which identity is not fully disclosed, but encountered through symbols that remain somewhat partially withheld and operate as a protective space, where meaning is held rather than explained.

²⁴ Firelei Báez, *Untitled (Drexciya)*, 2020, James Cohan Gallery, accessed May 2026, <https://jamescohan.viewingrooms.com/artworks/22649-firelei-baez-untitled-drexciya-2020/>.

²⁵ Cosmo Whyte, “Firelei Báez: The Poetics of Opacity,” *ART PAPERS*, Spring 2021, <https://www.artpapers.org/firelei-baez-the-poetics-of-opacity/>

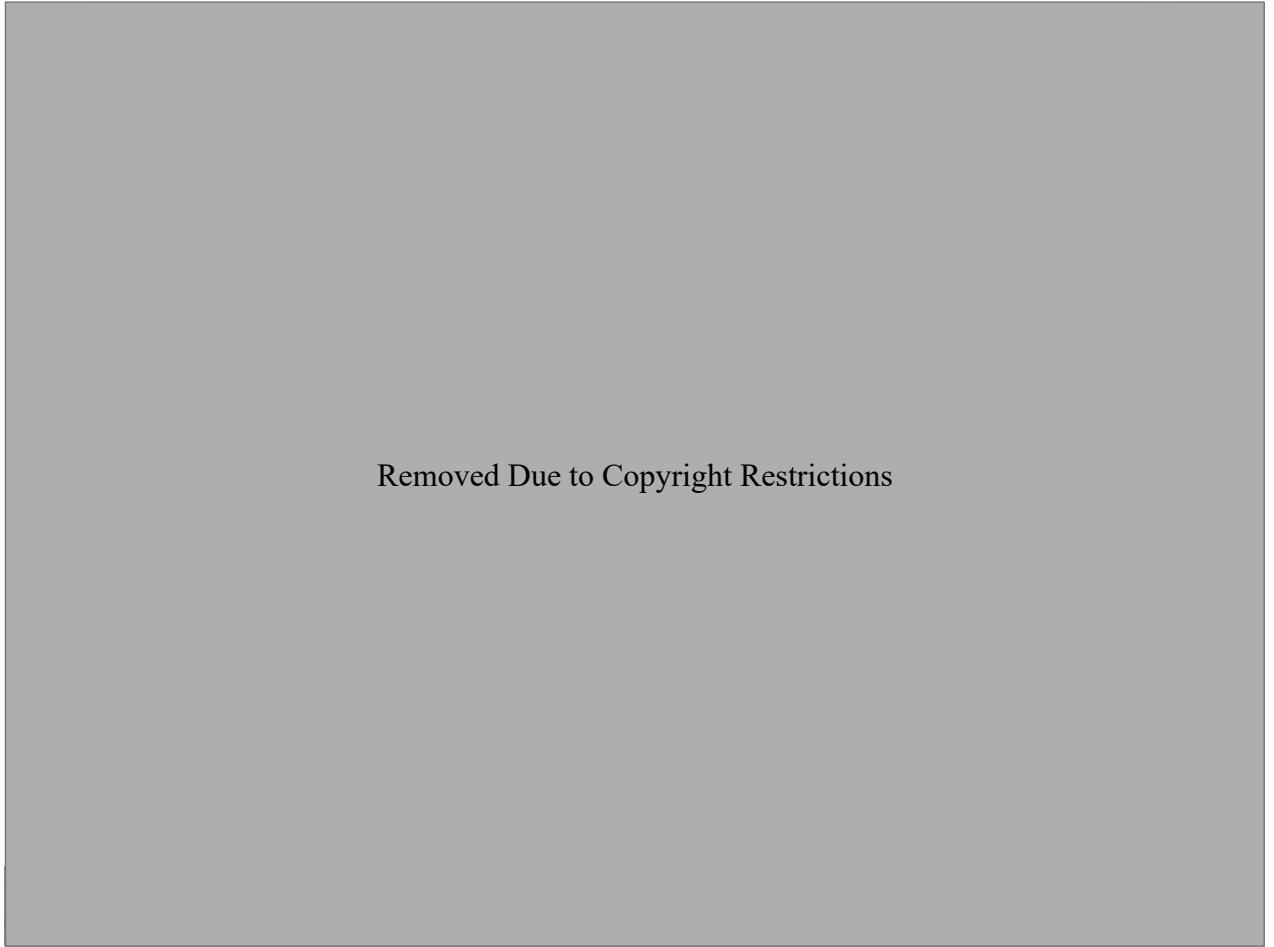


Figure 3. Firelei Baez, *Untitled (Drexciya)*, 2020, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 228.6 x 291.5cm

Chapter 3: Painting the Oasis

This chapter asks how painting can operate as a site where identity is formed through relation. Beginning with diaristic watercolours, it investigates how symbols and forms emerge through process. As these works develop, meaning shifts from individual images to the relationships between them, positioning painting as a way of world-building. Drawing on Bhabha's third space, the Oasis is understood as an environment where identity is produced instead of fixed.

3.1

Water Colouring The In-Between

I begin with small watercolour paintings in my sketch book. They are diaristic in the sense that they are made without the intention of resolution. At a time when I had lost confidence in my ability to paint at a larger scale, watercolour became the only medium I felt comfortable working with. The shift in material and scale reflected a shift in my state of mind, one that is slower, more withdrawn, and not concerned with producing a finished outcome. Within this state, symbols began to surface. As the individual watercolour sketches accumulated, relationships began to converse across their pages through figures/themes that were repeated. Meaning was no longer located only within a single sketch, but generated through their interaction. As a result I started questioning how meaning can operate when it is created between images rather than contained within them.

My questioning aligns with Bhabha's conception of third space, where meaning is produced through the articulation of difference rather than fixed cultural positions. The watercolours do not present resolved identities, but instead hold forms in a state of transition. Like identity itself they remain in process – shaped by my feelings and relationships, which shift across each watercolour. The sketchbook is a site where images negotiate with one another, allowing identity to emerge relationally. The sketchbook is a site of the in-between, as if it were the birth place of these symbols, a ground where they are formed through their negotiation with one another across the pages.

I started to think about how painting can function not only as representation, but as a space in which identity is actively formed. As my sketchbook works were eventually translated into larger scale paintings, their ability to communicate with one another expanded into a spatial condition. What had been contained within the pages of the sketchbook became environmental within an Oasis, where figures and surroundings began to coexist. My Oasis is therefore not only conceptual, but materialised through the painting process itself. As a result, I started to consider at what point this accumulation of relations can begin to constitute a world. It is within this transition that a sense of Oasis emerges. The paintings do not depict a pre-existing place, but construct a relational environment in which culture, and embodiment interact. Oasis works as a visual manifestation of Bhabha's third space, a world where my different cultural references are held together anew without being resolved into a singular identity.

The work of painter Star Gossage provides a key methodological precedent for my approach to how space can remain open and generative, rather than stabilising into a fixed image. In *Kauri Project (Ngakau 2, 2016)*, the trunk of a kauri tree doubles as a human face, with roots forming a downward gaze, embedding the figure within the land (see Figure 4). The foreground and background merge, and the subjects slips in and out of their environment. Similarly, in *Sea Shells She Sees (2021)*, the figure merges with a marine environment, her arm transforming into a tentacle-like form as her body dissolves into the surrounding space (see Figure 5). These paintings resist clear boundaries between subject and ground, instead constructing identity through their communication and transformation. Gossage "paints people from memory... often as hybrids of herself and others,"²⁶ which shows how identity emerges through their experience rather than fixed individuality. This emergence of identity through relation occurs through her layering where multiple references - self, other, and environment – are combined within a single figure. The figure becomes a site of convergence, shaped by its relation to its references. A mode of painting in which identity is not located within the figure alone, but

²⁶ Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, "Star Gossage: *He Tangata The People*," accessed May 2026, <https://tewharetaonga.nz/whats-on/exhibitions/star-gossage-he-tangata-the-people/>

distributed across its environment and suggested relationships. Gossage's use of fluid brushwork, and often unresolved mark making further supports this condition. Her figures are not fully rendered, allowing them to slip in and out of their environments. This lack of fixed detail redistributes meaning across the painting, where atmosphere, material, and gesture carry equal weight to figuration. Gossage's methods provide an understanding for my project of how identity can be constructed relationally.

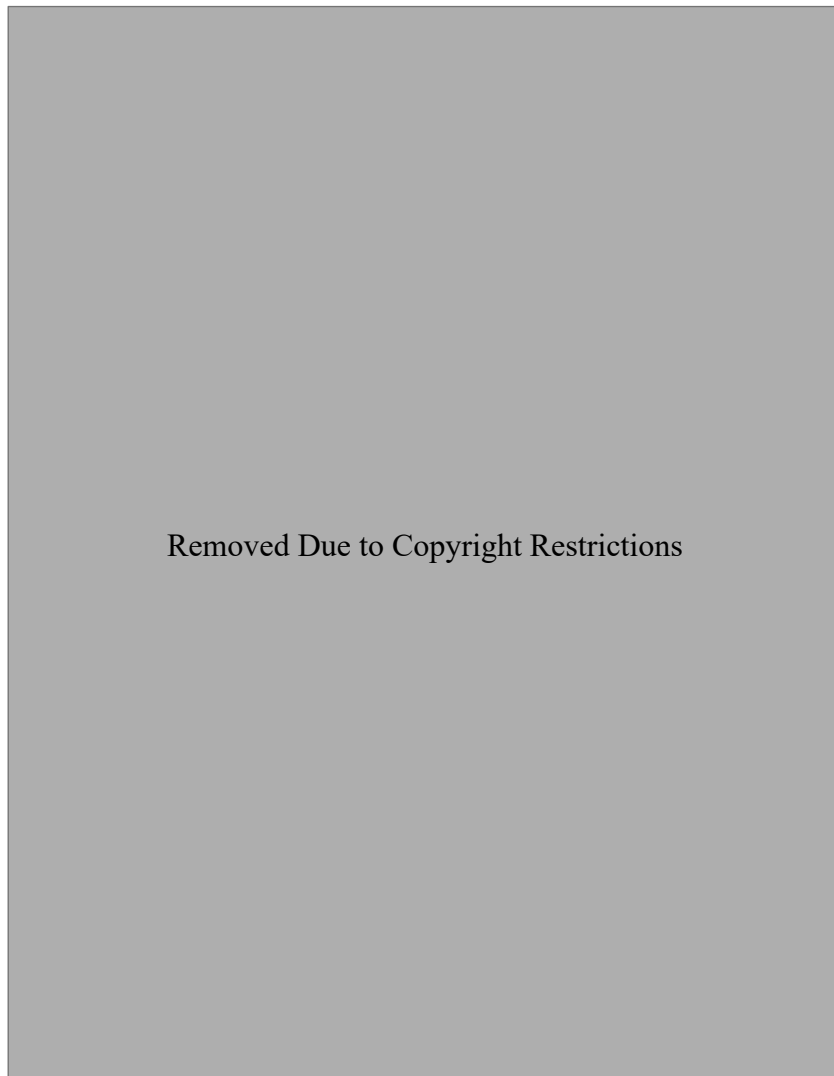


Figure 4. Star Gossage, Kauri Project (Ngakau 2), 2016, acrylic on paper, 565 x 435mm

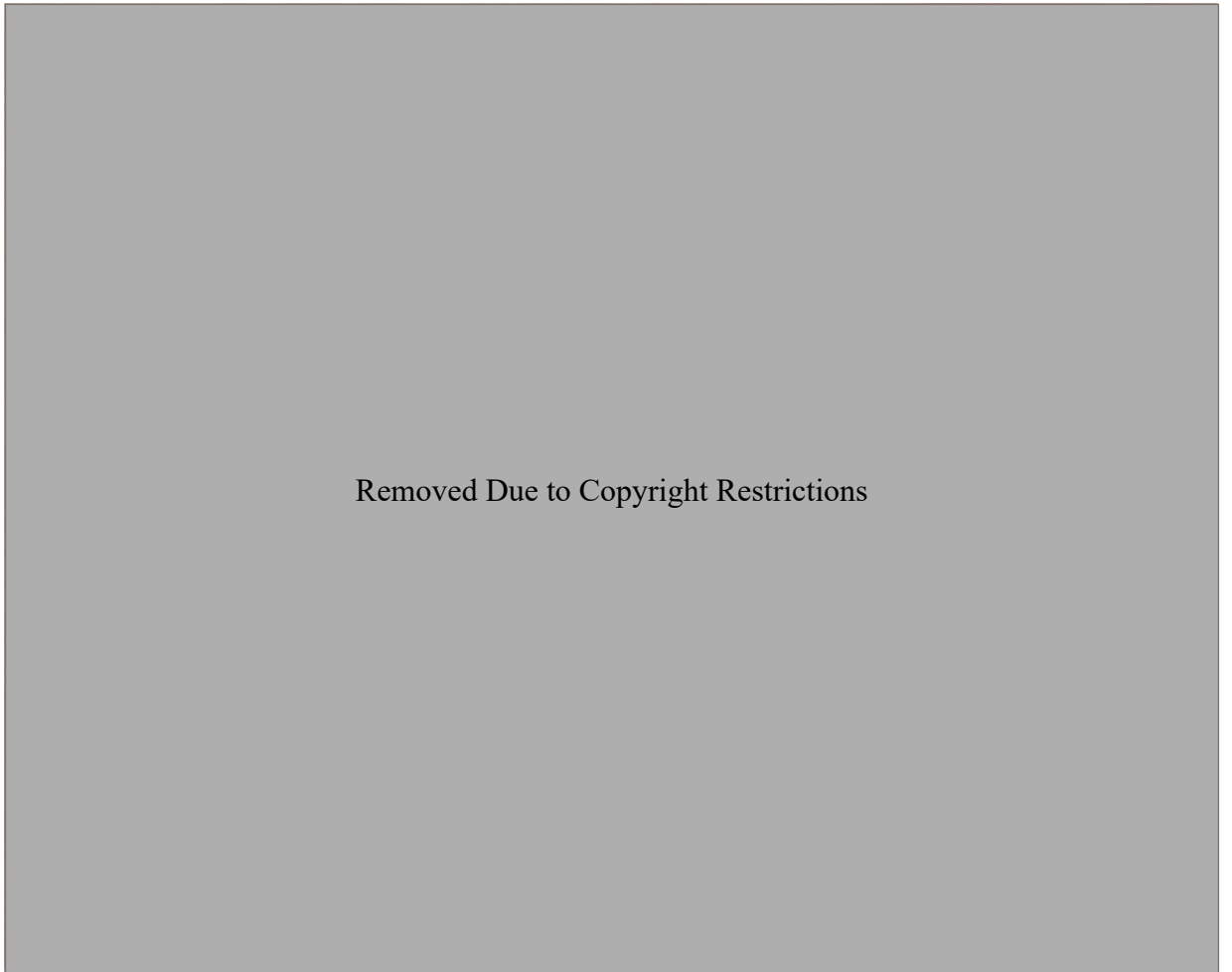


Figure 5. Star Gossage, *Sea Shells She Sees*, 2021, chalk, pastel, conté and oil on paper, 760 x 950mm.

In my own watercolours figures emerge gradually through the act of painting. I begin without a fixed composition, allowing forms to surface through washes and layering. At times a mark will suggest a figure, which I then respond to, extending or reshaping it throughout the painting. This is a process of responding and negotiating to, rather than planning, which allows my figures to develop over time. As a result, figures similarly merge with their environments. In *Mum* (2025) (See Figure 6), a body transforms into a koru-like plant, with four smaller koru growing from it. The figure is situated within a landscape that draws on my specific cultural references, such as kōwhai flowers and the coastal environment of Moeraki, which embeds my whakapapa within this artwork. Identity here is not described directly, but constructed through visual relationships between these references.

What's going on here (2025) (see Figure 7), extends this relationality, where the composition is built through the layering of separate moments. A central tree trunk divides the composition while multiple scenes unfold across it. Figures emerge partially from the environment, one blending into branches, another faintly appearing in the background, suggesting a state of instability and transition. These fragmented but connected spaces begin to operate as a single environment, where different aspects of identity coexist. The watercolour sketches therefore operate as both process and proposition. Though at first diaristic, they provided a space to process identity, and relationships. Meaning of the full image is not decided at the beginning but develops through the layering of images and the relationships that are created between forms as the work is made.

Within these watercolour sketches, the imagined world becomes a space where the complexities of my cultural experience can exist and begin to figure themselves out. As they developed, their symbolic qualities began to suggest a shift beyond representation and toward world-building that incorporates my Syrian and Māori identities. Through their accumulation and eventual translation into larger works, they construct a space that exists between lived experience and imagined form: third space is materially realised through painting.



Figure 6. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, *mum*, 2025, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



*Figure 7. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, **whats going on here**, 2025, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 28 cm.*



Figure 8. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



Figure 9. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



Figure 10. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.

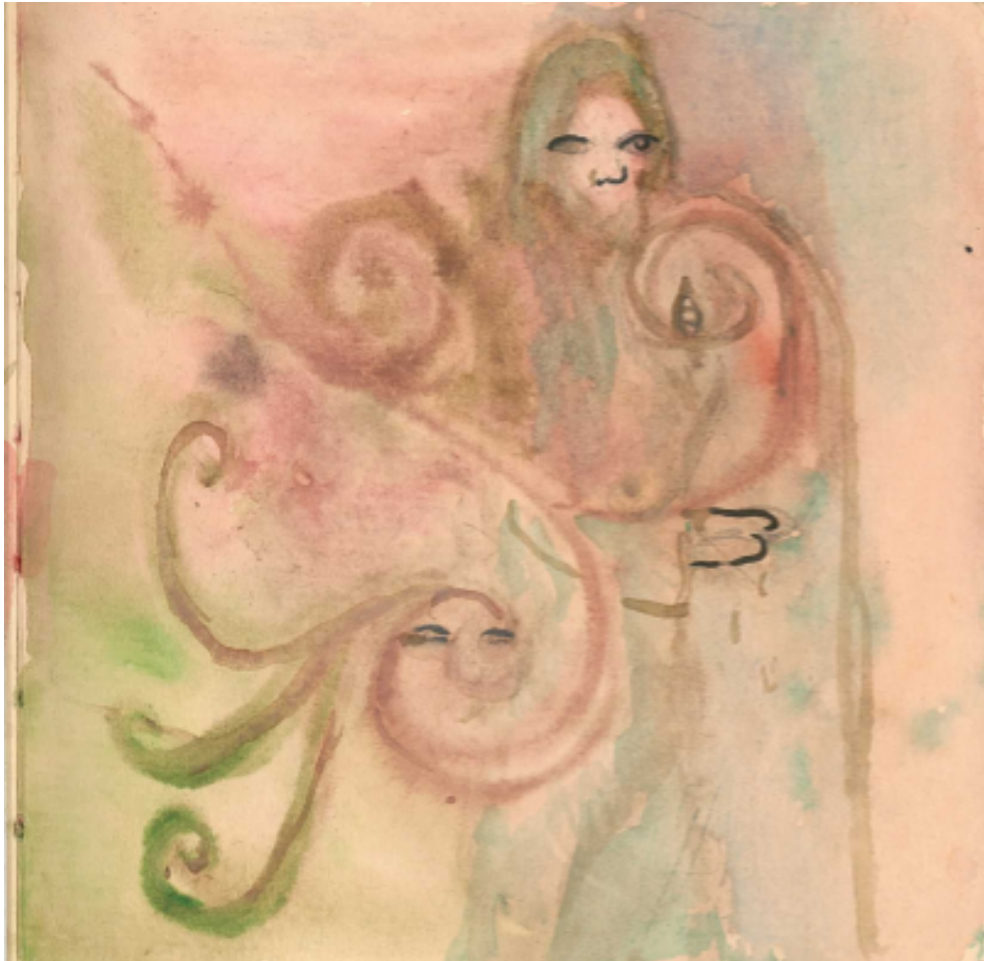


Figure 11. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



Figure 12. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



Figure 13. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



Figure 14. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



Figure 15. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



Figure 16. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.



Figure 17. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, scan of watercolour on paper, 14 x 14 cm.

3.2

Symbols

Symbols within my project operate as a form of visual language. They show things that cannot be said or are hard to say right away. They are developed from my own lived experience. As such, I ask how symbols can carry lived experience without fixing them to a singular meaning. This questioning informs my painting *I watch you move through it* (see Figure 18), which was painted after our Taua's half-brother passed. In the painting, two figures are positioned on either side of the canvas, one in the bottom left, and the other in the top right. The bottom left is black and white in colour, folding inwards, cradling itself. The top right moves to approach this figure, its right arm extending and gradually turning into a bone as it approaches. The mountain in the background, initially representing belonging and ancestral connection, is symbolically suggestive of returning to the land through death. Ornamental pieces on the top left and bottom right reference tiles from a Syrian mosque mosaic, leading to questions about faith and what is to happen in the afterlife.

The eye is a recurring symbol across my project. This symbol connects to my Syrian heritage, referencing the evil eye. This symbol functions as a form of protection against harm and negative energy. Growing up, this symbol existed throughout my everyday environment, hanging from rear view mirrors, placed at the entrances of my auntie's house, and worn as jewellery gifted to me as a child. By repeating the symbol it becomes embedded with my understanding of home and protection. Grief as represented within this painting is not held as a singular experience, but as something of a shifting nature, through the way my symbols are communicating.



Figure 18. Armani Reynolds-Hatem, *I watch you move through it*, 2025, oil on canvas. 124.46 x 124.46cm

A similar process can be seen in *Back and forth* (see Figure 19). This painting depicts three figures, which are various versions of me. They are engaged in a game of catch, with an eye-like form between them. The eye here is transformed into a ball, shifting its meaning from just protection into something playful. This symbolic shift introduces a reference to childhood, where the act of playing becomes a way of engaging with myself across time. Although the figures appear as adult bodies, their interaction with the symbol places them into a transitional state, where age is not fixed. The surrounding environment is sparse and somewhat ambiguous, which allows my figures to exist within a space that does not fully situate them. A single line can be seen running through the figures, to create a connection between them.

American philosopher Susanne Langer writes that representation is concerned with "...creating individual forms in visible relation to one another" where familiar objects function as a means of constructing "...connections...and the space between them."²⁷ The symbols within my paintings work as elements that establish relationships across the work. Meaning is not contained within only one symbol, but across the interactions. "The image, be it a representation or a mere design, stands before us in its expressiveness: significant form" meaning that my symbols don't require translation into language and knowable forms in order to hold meaning.²⁸ Meaning is present within the symbolised form itself, and then furthered by its relations.

²⁷ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 76.

²⁸ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 84.



Figure 19. Armani Reynolds-Hatem. *Back and forth*, 2025. Watercolour scan, 20 x 20 cm.

3.3

Scale and the Body

Scale within my project is closely tied to my experience of home. I think about this photograph of myself taken on Eid day (see Figure 20), standing in the backyard of my family home. I had just come back from the mosque and was still wearing my abaya. Behind me a date palm, grown from pits my dad threw into the garden, reaches out over the lavender bushes my mum planted. I include this image not just as personal documentation, but as a way of understanding how home operates as a layered and relational environment. This photograph holds multiple parts of my life at once: religion, family, and memory. Like the garden, the home is not a static environment, but one that continues to grow and shift. This is important to my project as it shifts my approach to home away from representing it as a singular image, and towards its construction as an in-between environment. Through scale I attempt to recreate this sense of overlap and immersion.



Figure 20. Me squinting on Eid day, 2024.

When I began working at a larger scale I realised I wasn't trying to represent the exact physical space of my family home, but to recreate something of how it feels to be in it. I was interested in how an increase in scale could allow a sense of Oasis to be more immersive, where forms within my paintings extend outward and fold back into one another, echoing the way my home operates. Oasis then becomes less like an image, and more like an environment that can be entered.



Figure 21. Photo of me in my studio space. 2025.

As seen in a photograph of my studio space (see Figure 21), I am physically enveloped by the scale of my work. The paintings are not encountered from a distance, but surround and exceed my immediate field of vision, requiring me to move with and across them. Through this movement, embodied knowledge is not only translated into the artwork, but enacted through it. As I stretch, reach, and shift my position, the symbols are extended alongside these movements. They are not applied from a detached viewpoint, but formed through my body's negotiation of space. The gesture of the arm, the limit of reach, and the duration of contact all begin to shape the placement and form of the symbols themselves. This reciprocal relationship suggests that my body and my paintings are not separate entities, but operate in tandem.



Figure 22. Photo of test installation. 2025

The scale of the canvas (see Figure 22) demands a bodily response, and in turn the symbols shift in relation to that response. In this sense, the symbols do not remain as static forms carried over from my sketchbook, but become activated through the conditions of their making. This can be seen in the large unstretched canvases within the test installation. Organic figure like forms expand across the surface and bleed into one another. They extend along and beyond my bodies immediate reach, requiring me to move across the canvases to complete them. Symbols are placed through my movement with the work. Their enlargement is not simply a change in size, but a transformation produced through the body's engagement with scale. Through this process, (Figure 22) holds traces of movement, reach, and physical presence, reinforcing the idea that knowledge is not only conceptual, but lived and enacted.

Working on large, unstretched canvases requires a different bodily engagement. My body determines the length or direction of brushwork and the pressure of my hand effects the opacity of the paint. Painted marks and layers, and their outcomes, are all dependent on my position in relation to the canvas, which is shaped by the movement and limitation of my body. Scale is not simply a formal

decision, but an extension of embodied knowledge of the operations of home. As discussed earlier home operates as a layered environment; working at a larger scale enables this sense within paintings by constructing a space that must be physically navigated. It allows the artwork to be experienced physically, by myself in the process of painting and by viewers in their encountering. This physical engagement is significant as it shifts painting away from representing experience to enacting it. Embodied knowledge holds trace of my active physical engagement of my experience. The act of painting makes me think of the physical relationship I have to my references. How praying requires a ritual of movement, and driving to my family home enacts the journey of return, movement operates in relation to the canvas and life. Painting becomes a space where body and space converge, allowing the Oasis to be constructed as an embodied environment.

Chapter 4: On access

Throughout my research the question of who is allowed to enter the space of Oasis has arisen. This chapter discusses how access is constructed within the installation of my work. In installation my paintings are hung off the ground, positioned side by side, creating a continuous wall like structure, that conceals the painted surface. The viewer does not encounter the paintings at first, but has to move around them to enter my Oasis. Knowing is not immediate but requires the viewer to step inside. In this chapter I discuss how my artwork act as a space between threshold and opacity. I explore how access is enabled and limited, and meaning is encountered but not fully revealed.

4.1

Installation as Encounter: Between Threshold and Opacity

When entering someone else's home, I often find myself asking: do I take off my shoes? Should I ring the doorbell, or knock on the door? These small moments of hesitation shape how I move within a space, positioning myself before I have fully understood it. In my artworks, paintings are suspended off the ground to create a barrier through which a viewer must enter (See Figure 23). To encounter the paintings a viewer must enter the Oasis that I have created. This arrangement deliberately delays visual access, positioning the viewer at a threshold, where they must decide to enter and move past passive viewing to active navigation of the space, thus creating a threshold. A threshold is a point of entry. But it is also defined as the "point at which you start to experience something."²⁹ Therefore a threshold, like an Oasis, acts as a space in-between. It is a barrier, but also a place where movement, encounter, and transformation can occur, where viewers shift from looking at paintings to encountering an Oasis and thereby my experience. It is a physical barrier because the arrangement of paintings blocks direct visual access, the viewer stands outside.

²⁹ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "threshold," accessed May, 2026, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/threshold>



Figure 23. Test Installation. 2025



Figure 24. Backs of paintings, Test installation. 2025.

Ideas of opacity are also explored through my installation decisions. Specifically, the backs of the paintings (see Figure 24) are the first surfaces viewers encounter. Traces of paint that have seeped through the canvas function as marks that suggest something beyond what is immediately visible. This sense of suggestion becomes significant within my installation as it introduces opacity as a material and conceptual condition. The seepage of paint exposes the process of making, a form of my own vulnerability. In this way I am reaching towards viewers, allowing them to enter through partial glimpses into my experiences that the artwork holds.

When developing this sense of a threshold condition I draw on cultural spaces from my life, namely the marae, where one removes their shoes before entering, and the mosque, where entry is by specific forms of conduct and intention. These spaces are not entirely freely accessible, but entered with awareness, respect, and purpose. Accordingly the threshold operates not only physically but culturally in relation to the artworks. This happens by the viewer first encountering, then having to physically enter the space, shifting from passively viewing the paintings to actively navigating the space.

Theorists Jan Meyer and Ray Land describe threshold concepts as “conceptual gateways” or “portals” that lead to “previously inaccessible...ways of thinking.”³⁰ Passing through a threshold involves a transformation in perception, where a “new way of understanding, interpreting, or viewing something” emerges. This process is not immediate or stable, involving what they describe as “troublesome” knowledge where familiar ways of seeing are unsettled before new understanding can form.³¹ This framework is foundational to understanding my installation methods. Through this threshold, potential and risk operate together. The viewer is in a state of partial access, where what is visible is not fully revealed and what is withheld remains present. Access becomes a balancing act between what is available to know and what remains uncertain. My project

³⁰ Meyer, Jan H. F., and Ray Land. “Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge (2): Epistemological Considerations and a Conceptual Framework for Teaching and Learning.” *Higher Education* 49, no. 3 (2005): 373-74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25068074>.

³¹ Meyer and Land, *Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge*, 374.

works to share personal experience while maintaining a level of privacy through partial concealment, which results in a questioning of if the viewer allowed to enter at all.

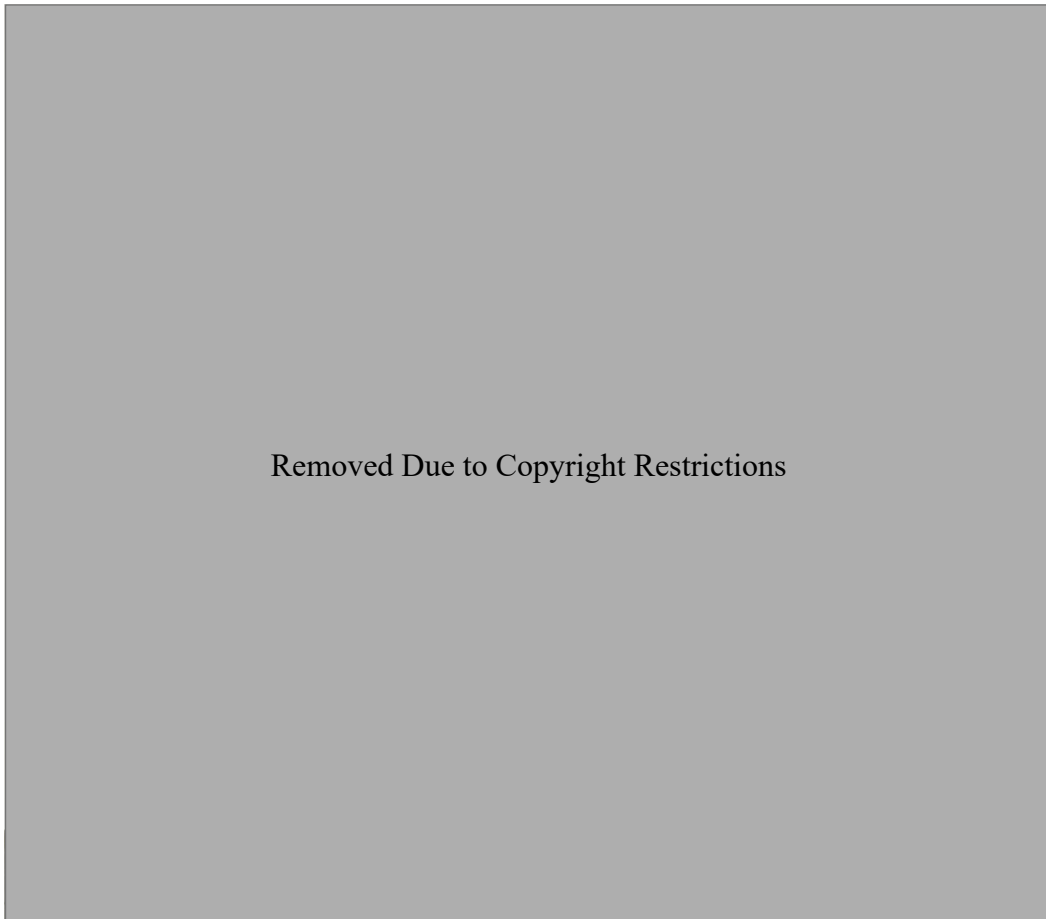


Figure 25. Igshaan Adams. *Threshold*. 2019. 272 x 232 x 5 cm

These ideas of are similarly apparent in artist Igshaan Adams' *Threshold* (see Figure 25). This artwork depicts threaded beads that are typically hung between the rooms of houses. The artwork invites viewers to imagine looking and moving through domestic passageways, thereby positioning *Threshold* as an in-between space. However, any sense of looking and movement is not neutral, which is a result of the artwork's delicate nature and personal cultural references. These aspects introduce a sense of care, hesitation, and awareness in how one would approach something unfamiliar.

Although *Threshold* is installed onto a wall, there are connections to my own installation methods. Like Adams' veil, my work constructs a space that must be approached and negotiated, rather than just entered. Viewers are invited to enter my work spatially. However, although the installation enables physical entry into the space of Oasis, it does not guarantee full access to its meaning. Rather this access remains dependent on viewers' own experiences and their capacity to relate to what is encountered. I am not asking viewers to fully understand, instead, they are invited to stand at a threshold of knowing and equally unknowing. They can observe, and encounter the work from their own perspective without needing to completely grasp or define it.

Each of us sees the world through our own eyes, shaped by our own histories and experiences. Through testing my installation I began to understand the threshold as something that actively shapes how the work is encountered. The initial positioning of the viewer outside the paintings creates a moment of hesitation, where it is unclear where to look, move, or enter the space. We grow up learning to observe, to watch, listen, and understand the spoken and unspoken rules of the environments around us. This awareness mirrors the experience of navigating different spaces, negotiating expectations, seeking belonging, and searching for validation. In my installation, this threshold of knowing is an encounter for viewers and I alike. It is a symbol of change, the point between one state and another, not fully inside or outside, knowing and not knowing. Within this threshold viewers come into a position of watching, meaning an awareness to observe carefully, to understand how to exist within a different environment. As a result, the edge between external and internal identity begins to transform. What once felt like a precipice, something unstable or uncertain, becomes a threshold. The threshold opens onto a space where seeing is enough, a space of encounter, reflection, and possibility. It is where identities, and experiences meet without turning into sameness. It is a space that invites presence, awareness, and transformation for both the viewer and the work itself. They only need to stand at the threshold and see.

Conclusion

Understanding myself and my lived experiences is not something I have arrived at through this project, but something I have come to sit within. They are both layered and multiple, continuously shifting as I move through the world. I have realised identity is not fixed, but is something I am constantly negotiating. It is shaped by who I have been, who I am becoming, and the relationships that exist between those states. I exist in an in-between, where all my experience, past and present selves remain in conversation.

This project set out to investigate how painting can construct a sense of symbolic oasis as a third space, capable of making visible my lived experience of identity and home, whilst allowing them to remain not fully resolved. Through this research I have demonstrated that painting can operate as a method of world-building where identity is actively formed through symbols, figures, and environments. The Oasis emerges as a constructed space where meaning is continuously negotiated, aligning with Bhabha's Third Space.

This project became a space where I could explore my experience of identity through painting. It has allowed me to work through experiences of home, family and memory without needing to resolve them. Through my painting methods, beginning with diaristic watercolours and translating into large scale works, that constructed an Oasis, I have created an environment where these experiences can coexist as something relational and shifting. Throughout the process I found myself returning to moments from my everyday life, such as small interactions, memories, and home. These aspects continue to shape how I understand myself. As I painted, these experiences did not appear clearly or fully formed but surfaced gradually through symbols figures and environments.

Through this project, I have come to understand that what is most significant within my artworks is not always directly visible. This understanding developed through my use of opacity, conceptually and materially. By working with transparent and opaque layer of paint, and through the partial visibility of forms

and symbols , my paintings resist full legibility. Like the wind, a reaction that cannot be seen but is understood through its effects, my paintings do not present experience in full, but hold its traces. As a result, my paintings act as evidence of something beyond what is immediately visible, meaning they hold something that is felt, remembered, and lived. Through this Glissant's concept of the right to opacity is a theoretical framework and a painting method that allows meaning to remain unresolved and complex.

The role of the body has also been central to my findings. The shift to large scale unstretched canvas required a physically engaged process. This embodied method positioned ways of knowing as something enacted. Extending into the installation, where a threshold is met that must be physically navigated.

Reinforcing the relationship between third space and opacity, where access does not depend on full understanding, but on the capacity to remain in relation to what cannot be fully seen. Reflecting on this project, I recognise the Oasis' strength in its ability to hold an identity in flux. This has led me to think about what the work might feel like without the presence of a threshold, where access was no longer mediated, and if meaning was not hidden through opacity but instead open to full understanding. Would the Oasis leap from negotiation and relation, to being more about clarity and exposure?

My title *Things That Cannot Be Seen in Any Other Way* started this project, and has stayed with me till the end. It speaks to the limits of language and understanding, and to the capacity of painting to reveal something beyond it. I have learned that not everything needs to be fully articulated in order to be understood. It is enough to allow things to exist as it is to hold them in relation rather than through fixed definition. Painting makes visible things that cannot be seen in any other way.

Installation and Exhibition



Figure 26 Exhibition view of entrance to 'Oasis', image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 27 Exhibition view of 'Oasis', image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 28. untitled (Oasis) 1, image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 29. untitled (Oasis) 2



Figure 30 . untitled (Oasis) 3



Figure 31. untitled (Oasis) 4, image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 32 Exhibition view of 'Oasis', image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 33 Exhibition view of 'Oasis', image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 34 Exhibition view of 'Oasis', image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 35 Exhibition view of 'Oasis', image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 36 Exhibition view of 'Oasis', image taken by Paul Chapman



Figure 37 Exhibition view of 'Oasis'

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