

introspective fieldworks; the everyday in flux

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abstract

My practice-led research visually explores the fluctuating nature of my everyday through figurative painting. It was activated from a desire to connect to my everyday environment, its conditions, objects, and relationships by observing and being present. I wanted to appreciate the *small things* I had overlooked or taken for granted. When spending time in my most immediate environments like home, I noticed its shifting, transient and fluctuating physical and metaphysical nature; the everyday is not a background, rather it ebbs and flows. Therefore, this thesis examines how the fluidity of paint visually translates the sensation of the flux felt within everyday environments. With a focus on the visual distinction of figure-ground relationships within the field of the canvas, painting becomes a vehicle for understanding the interconnection between bodies and their environment beyond a solely ecological interpretation. Broader ideas such as intimacy, diaspora perspectives on 'home' and the interconnection between past and present have arisen from my painting practice. By foregrounding small everyday matters through painting, this fieldwork calls viewers to introspectively recognise the dynamics occurring in their overlooked environments.

parts of a whole

attestation of authorship.....	3
love and gratitude	4
figure list.....	5
introduction	8
part one.....	10
<i>painting the garden or gardening the painting? a reflection on the symbiotic relationship between gardening and painting.</i>	11
<i>composting an analogy for painting</i>	24
parallels between the colour brown and the soil	31
part two.....	34
small things.....	35
debunking the ordinary as inert	42
layering time	46
a search for an ordinary life	49
part three.....	52
home is a process.....	53
remembering through your stories.....	56
interconnections of past and present	60
narrating intimacy.....	64
introspective fieldworks	67
reference list	69

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 acknowledgements), 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.”

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love and gratitude

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figure list

In order of appearance (right to left).

1. My garden in Pakuranga Heights
2. dias, brunelle. *no title*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.
3. dias, brunelle. *no title*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 24 cm.
4. dias, brunelle. *cherry tree kissing me*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 24 cm.
5. Lee, Adam. *The Flood*. 2013. Oil and Synthetic Polymer on Canvas, 33 x 47cm.
[http://www.adamlee.com.au/works/heart-of-the-sea.html#prettyPhoto\[galAlbum\]/10/](http://www.adamlee.com.au/works/heart-of-the-sea.html#prettyPhoto[galAlbum]/10/).
6. Lee, Adam. *Untitled*. 2013. Watercolour and Ink on Paper, 46 x 36 cm.
[http://www.adamlee.com.au/works/heart-of-the-sea.html#prettyPhoto\[galAlbum\]/19/](http://www.adamlee.com.au/works/heart-of-the-sea.html#prettyPhoto[galAlbum]/19/).
7. Sosa Joseph, *Residual*, 2013, Oil on Canvas, 29 x 122 cm.
<https://www.galeriems.com/artists/sosa-joseph/selected-works#tab:slideshow;slide:4>
8. dias, brunelle. *philippines' restricted aliens*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.
9. dias, brunelle. *pakuranga promises*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.
10. dias, brunelle. *drying lines in burning sky*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.
11. dias, brunelle. *she stops to see rainbows and sunsets*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.
12. dias, brunelle. *no title*. 2020. Henna on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.
13. dias, brunelle. *no title*. 2020. Henna on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.
14. dias brunelle, *seasonal* 2020, Oil on canvas, 120 x 238 cm
15. Sillman, Amy. *TV in Bed*. 2017-2018. Oil on Canvas, 190.5 x 167.6 cm.
<https://www.campolipresti.com/artists/amy-sillman/bio>.
16. Sillman, Amy. *In Illinois*. 2017-2018. Oil on Canvas, 190.5 x 167.64 cm.
<https://brooklynrail.org/2018/12/art/AMY-SILLMAN-with-Toby-Kamps>.
17. dias, brunelle. *rosh hashana dinner*. 2020. Oil on Linen, 148 x 210 cm.
18. dias, brunelle. *winding*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.
19. dias, brunelle. *pakuranga promises #2*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm.

20. Owens, Sikelela. *David (as Olympia)*. n.d. Oil on Canvas, 200 x 160 cm.
<https://www.sikelelaowen.com>.
21. Owens, Sikelela. *School Daze*. n.d. Oil on Canvas, 170 x 190 cm.
<https://www.sikelelaowen.com/6yjyjek9lh6gh3mq63lskusz21of5>.
22. dias, brunelle. *essential workers*. 2020. Oil on Canvas, 148 x 210 cm.
23. Close up of *across the kitchen counter #1*
24. dias, brunelle. *across the kitchen counter*. 2020. Oil on Canvas, 154 x 375 cm .
25. dias, brunelle. *ode to traffic cones and bus rides*. 2020. Oil on Canvas, 198 x 198 cm.
26. dias, brunelle. *no title*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 24 cm.
27. dias brunelle, *the political and the politically correct*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 165 x 180 cm
28. dias, brunelle. *drawing a fish out of water*. 2020. Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 24 cm.
29. dias, brunelle. *red plastic chairs and collapsing gates*. 2020. Oil on Canvas, 100 x 134 cm.
30. Crosby, Njideka Akunyili. *Thread*. 2012. Acrylic, Charcoal, Pastel, Coloured Pencil and Xerox Transfers on Paper, 131.9 x 131.97 cm. <http://www.njidekaakunyilicrosby.com/work/thread>.
31. dias, brunelle. *rekindling*. 2020. Oil on Canvas, 158 x 182 cm
32. Kogachi, Claudia. *The One with the Mosquitoes*. 2021. Acrylic on Canvas, 800 x 1600mm.
https://jhanamillers.com/artists/claudia_kogachi.html#&gid=1&pid=8.
33. Floor sheet of Final Exhibition #1
34. Floor sheet of Final Exhibition #2
35. Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 3 #1
36. brunelle dias. *technicoloured joseph*, Oil on Linen, 2021, 160 x 150 cm
37. Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 3 #2
38. Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 3 #3
39. Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 3 #4
40. Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 3 #5
41. Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 3 #6
42. Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 3 #7
43. brunelle dias. *foreshadow*, Oil on Linen, 2021, 180 x 220 cm

introduction

The heart of *introspective fieldworks: the everyday in flux* is to appreciate my immediate environment. Restricted by the limited parameters of the 2020 lockdowns, inevitably I began to notice my locale with brand new eyes. The things I would often take for granted, those everyday moments, those small, fleeting things, were highlighted when given the time to pay attention to them.

The act of gardening encouraged me to slow down. Gardening moved beyond its material limits in to a philosophical way of thinking about paying attention. “Observe, connect and interact” is the first principle of permaculture design.¹ Prior to implementing change in the garden, the first and most beneficial step is to simply pay attention to one’s environment so as to avoid unnecessary and detrimental ecological decisions.² With an indefinite lockdown, I had time to notice, to observe the things that I had previously missed. My observations did not discontinue at the foot of ranch-slider, the entry of my home. From garden to home, home to garden, I noticed the sunset almost every evening with my sister, the pīwakawaka who hopped around the lime tree, the way my mother folded her legs under the weight of her body as she sat on the sofa and that blackbird who scratched and dug at my compost. Both garden and home were interconnected, neither separate nor superior to one another; both were part of my *environment*. What was seemingly banal, inert, and overlooked became alive, fluctuating and changing with every day spent in my environment.

I have moved out now. What was once my everyday is now nostalgia. Moreover, when leaving home, I did not think I would get teary reminiscing about that welcoming pīwakawaka or even that bothersome blackbird. Simply paying attention to my environment was as much a part of gardening as the act of digging or fertilising soil. In retrospect, simply paying attention became as much about looking outwards at the environment as it was about ‘painting’ fieldworks of introspection. As I looked out at my fluctuating environment, I was looking at my fluctuating self

¹ A key Permaculture Principle. Permaculture is a Isa Fremaux and John Jordan, “13 Attitudes” C.R.A.S.H : A post capitalist A to Z (June 2009): 16. Retrieved from <http://www.labofii.net/docs/13attitudes.pdf>.

² Ibid., 16.

all along. Hence, my environment was not separate to the way it affected me. My fluctuating environment, its conditions, relationships, and its small things were connected to me.

These observations of my relationship with my everyday world will be explored through the fluidity of paint. Through the painterly exploration of the visual distinction of figure and ground, my practice metaphorically expands the idea of interconnection between the human and the non-human. This exegesis charts the roughly chronological growth of my project and reflects on corresponding ideas, key philosophers, and artists. *introspective fieldworks; the everyday in flux* frequently uses gardening analogies for a complex and poetic relationship to my process of painting.

part one

Elongated shadows of streetlamps wave their worshipping arms over the motorway floor. I am sitting in the back seat of the whale.

I have never felt potentiality in its rawest form as I have in the midst of paused traffic.

Then without hesitation, we surge.

I drown in a stream of red; they swim past me with no return. Democracy was not naturally selected.

The evening sky travels overhead, it swallows the seagulls, engulfs the stars, smokes a puff called "cloud." Through the looking glass, shards of reflections collide into reality. A slightly refracted version of the transient world makes a kaleidoscopic vision.

I never thought buildings could move as the mountains have moved me. Light upon light, the dust glows. Streams of every shade of silver and white, flecks of red glide seamlessly pass me. I am transfixed on everything and nothing. Just as I catch a glimpse of a familiar something, a blink, and it slips past me.

I know this is real, I know because I breathe.

Yet I ponder, do ghosts slip through the world? Or does the world slip through me?

My eyes shift involuntarily; I try to keep up to its pace. I give into the flow; I am not wearing a seatbelt anyway. I sway in a sea of Toyota-coloured things. I let the last strands of the sun lick my cheeks.

My eyes shift involuntarily.



Figure 1. My garden in Pakuranga Heights

painting the garden or gardening the painting? a reflection on the symbiotic relationship between gardening and painting.

During the 2020 lockdown, my painting practice had inevitably slowed down drastically, if not come to a complete halt. My paintings are large in scale, which meant my humble home could not host my practice to sustain its usual momentum. Nonetheless, I used the lockdown to work on over-due gardening whilst painting the rest of the time. Almost every day, I flitted between painting and gardening. The synchronicity of gardening and painting created an interdisciplinary and conceptual exchange; I painted the garden and gardened my painting.

Un-static, always in motion, upon reflection, my garden has never felt finished. Even when it came close to “finished-ness,” when it was at its most fruitful, to reduce my garden to its products is to savour the same logic that separates humans from “nature.” Its evolving nature is influenced not only by seasonal changes, growth, and decay but also by its facilitator, the gardener.³ As a (novice) gardener, I chased after my dream garden—a haven of sensory beauty and fruitful abundance. The unforgiving seasonal changes, “weeds,” and “pests” took over my plans and plants. I realised that my “ideal” vision was stunting me from loving the garden for its temporality.

³ Curtis Faville, “Detached Sentences [Ian Hamilton Finlay],” *The Compass Rose* (blog), June 3, 2014, <https://compassrosebooks.blogspot.com/2014/06/detached-sentences-ian-hamilton-finlay.html>.

Like a lover or a friend, regardless of the stage it was in, in birth, maturity, sickness or death, I gradually learned to appreciate the seasonal changes of the garden. A relationship is not stagnant. It grows, it can get stale, but when mutually reciprocated, it can be refreshed. Wearing a kinder heart by gardening both intentionally and being open to diverse outcomes, I realised I became more involved, attuned, and interested in the process of gardening than the object outcome of the garden. As a friend of the garden, I intended to simply grow with, learn about, observe, and spend time with it.

When switching mediums, I naturally carried my newfound gardening sensibilities into my painting practice. Like my gardening process, my painting process is open to fluid possibilities too. My constructed images are the product of deliberate and happenstance painterly decisions. As a gardener responds to emerging growth, I respond to surfacing marks, colours, forms, and the overall composition within the canvas *ground* in a progressing painting. My process is a cycle of actions and deliberations, responding to such referents, regardless of their coming-about. Before pulling out a weed or painting over a surface, I observe and then interact.⁴ My painting process is not fixated on following a predetermined plan; rather, it relies on the guidance of referents through which the painting digresses before it “progresses.” Hence, this considered approach has led me to manifest fluidity in both my thinking and painterly outcomes.

What I perceive to be inert, absolute, and unchanging has often been contested by painting. Paint's fluidity holds a double trajectory in both its materiality and its potential for representation. Thus, resisting fluidity is futile. Paint has refreshed, revived, and regenerated my exhausted perspective on daily encounters, which I often connotate as banal and therefore static. Fluidity has been a founding concept, method, and mindset within my practice. I surrender to paint's malleability in order to be in touch with the specific nature of a painting.

Earlier works from *introspective fieldworks; the everyday in flux* explored the idea and materiality of fluidity through paint's varying liquid consistencies. I worked with watercolours, gouache, and acrylics separately and simultaneously to grasp each medium's fluid potentiality. Unlike oil paints, watercolours have an immediacy about them. They are less forgiving than

⁴ A key Permaculture Principle. Isa Fremeaux and John Jordan, “13 Attitudes” C.R.A.S.H : A post capitalist A to Z (June 2009): 41. Retrieved from <http://www.labofii.net/docs/13attitudes.pdf>.

their counterparts. Watercolour's rapid drying time and translucency hold mark-making accountable. The virtue of using this medium lies in the user's embrace of the unfamiliar by being grounded by the here-and-now. The following figures are my response to painting which manifests the sensation of fluidity through the medium's materiality.



Figure 2. brunelle dias, *no title*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm

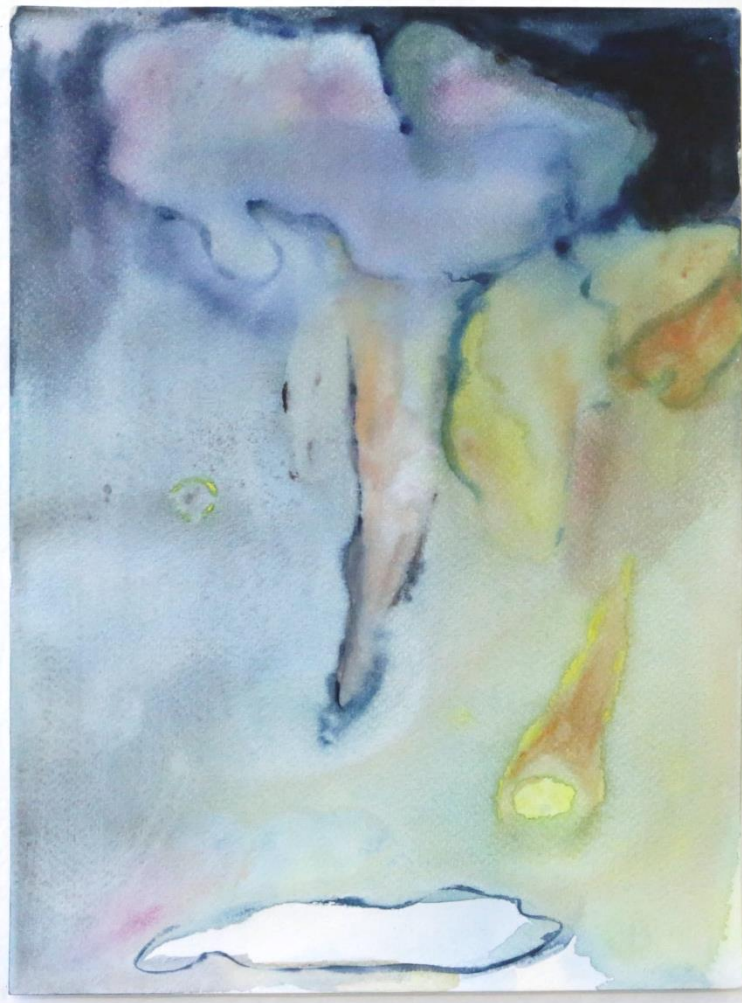


Figure 3. brunelle dias, *no title*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 24 cm.

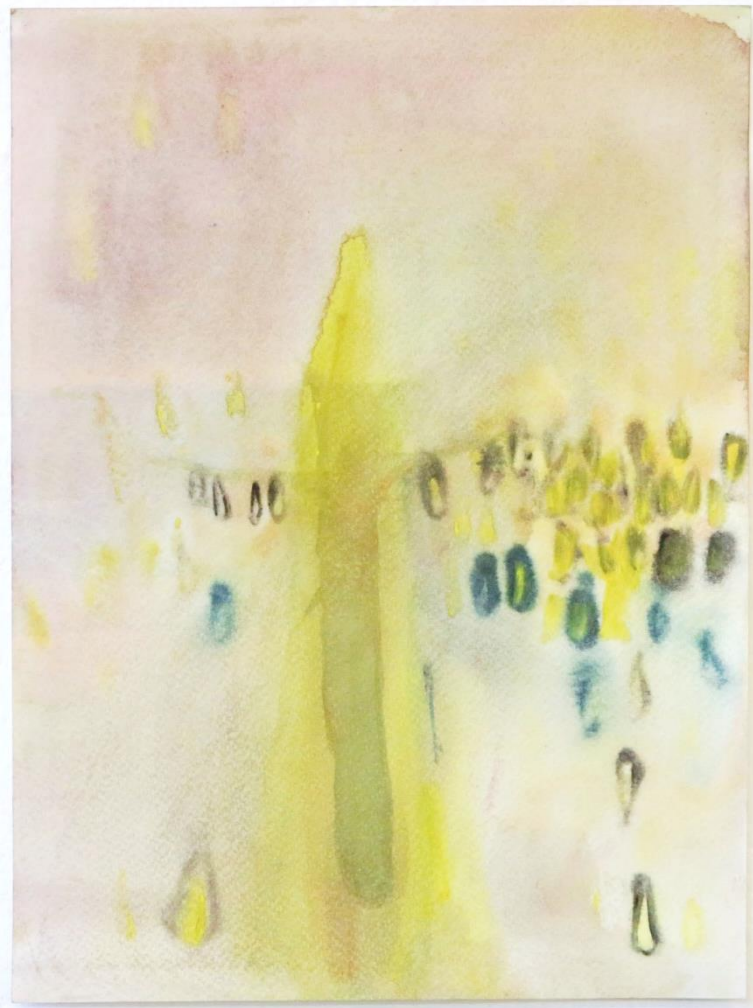


Figure 4. brunelle dias, *cherry tree kissing me*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 24 cm



Figure 5. Adam Lee, *The Flood*, 2013, Oil and Synthetic Polymer on Canvas, 33 x 47cm.



Figure 6. Adam Lee, *Untitled*, 2013, Watercolour and Ink on Paper, 46 x 36 cm.

I looked into the works of Adam Lee, who also flirts between watercolours and oil paints. In his water-like paintings, ambiguous characters float between background and foreground. My practice has been interested in the way he works with watercolour to create these fluctuating worlds. His process is described as:

A symbolic gamble that ascribes a purpose to a process and outcome that is only decipherable with contemplative meditation on the composition of colour and form without a guiding key chart. Navigation is both an exercise in referents and a surrender to intuition.⁵

Regardless of the medium he uses, both oil and watercolour works have a similar visage. This can be observed in the two paintings shown, *The Flood* (2013) as well as *Untitled* (2013). Translucent layers of paint are layered on top of each other to create a complex image. Aspects of the composition are untouched, which, in comparison with the rest of the imagery, gives the illusion of luminosity. For example, in the watercolour work, *Untitled*, (2013) two bodies are depicted in the foreground of the image. Yet the closer one looks, one figure's face is darkened, immediately blending into the darkened foliage of the background. The thin, layered paint is translucent, and figures and ground bleed into each other. Working with the negative space, Lee confuses the viewer, as some shadows are lightened, and highlights are darkened. For example, looking at the blackened face of the figure on the right, his eyes and falling shadow around them are lightened while the rest of his face remains dark. This technique further abstracts the figure into positive and negative space. The composition becomes a kaleidoscope of colours, and my eye is unable to settle on the figure, which is usually dominant as foreground subject matter. In Lee's paintings, foreground and background are interdependent to each other.

⁵ Kent Wilson, "Reflecting on Monolith and Its Networked Nature," Adam Lee, accessed February 5, 2021, <http://adamlee.com.au/texts/reflecting-on-monolith-and-its-networked-nature-by-kent-wilson.html>.

In my practice, I became interested in the co-dependence of the visual distinction of figure and ground. As lockdown settled me into my home, I naturally looked into my immediate surroundings at home, and I referenced my everyday life in my paintings. Due to my lack of preciousness about what I deemed “banal” subject matter, working quickly resulted in abstracted figuration with fluid narratives. When working on *restricted aliens of the philippines*, (2020), figure and ground bled into each other and pools of unexpected colours emerged in the composition. The natural inclination of watercolours is inevitably to break out of the visual distinctions of figure and ground. This creates a flattened perspective, which brings aspects of the foreground and background into unison. My painted figures, usually bodies, become abstract and slip into their surroundings and vice versa. I have become increasingly interested in how subject matter slips into the ground of the canvas and slips back out. Like threads that interconnect themselves into other figures and the “rest” of the background, the resulting image feels unfixed, as though it is in the process of weaving. Therefore, working with watercolours became a catalyst for visualising this sensation of flux felt within my day-to-day.

Oil paint, however, varies in material fluidity more than most of its counterparts. Depending on the complementing medium one uses with oil paints, it metamorphoses between translucency and congealed opacity. In general, its viscosity engaged me to work more viscerally but in slower deliberation, which was possible through its slower drying time. I use both watercolours and oil paints for different painterly outcomes. The methods and processes I use for each medium are interchangeable. However, through the sedimentary process of layering oil paint and then recovering aspects of figuration, I can “decompose” and “recompose” figurative matter to create a fragmented, fluctuating, and transient image.



Figure 7. Sosa Joseph, *Residual*, 2013,
Oil on Canvas, 29 x 122 cm.

Artist Sosa Joseph's oil paintings are a vision of fluidity. Her created images feel transient and in a state of flux. Like Lee's paintings, Joseph's figures and ground slip into each other; the foreground and background merge. While figures can be distinguished from their painterly environment, due to her overall muddy palette, figures, usually bodies, do not feel like they are of superior visual significance compared to the rest of the composition. While Lee works noticeably with positive and negative space to break down the visual distinction of figure and ground, Joseph works predominantly with a murky palette to integrate the binary distinction.

The integration of body to environment within the painterly field of the canvas, creates a sense of dynamism; a reflection of Joseph's interest in the lively nature of the public arena of her neighbourhood in Mattancherry.⁶ In her work, *Residual* (2013) the image depicts a street in a skewed omniscient perspective. The walls of the street are made of painterly bricks and the viewer is presented to domestic animals and birds residing within the cocooning of the path. The image feels ephemeral, like a micro-episode of Joseph's everyday experiences of her locale.⁷ Highlighting the transient nature of the everyday, Joseph uses a murky colour palette with a delicate hand in colour. For example, pinks, yellows, blues and purples are semi-resurrected from its grey-brown ground.⁸ Figures, like cattle and birds, are well integrated into the composition through using the same colour palette of their surroundings. The blurry haze of brown reflects the hum-drum bustle felt in busy Indian streets, in which colours, sounds, smells, slip past the pedestrian. Fluidity in *Residual* is felt substantially through Joseph's use of muddy colours which explores the sensation of fleeting moments.

⁶ Sherry Paik, "Sosa Joseph: Artist Profile, Exhibitions & Artworks," Ocula, 2018, <https://ocula.com/artists/sosa-joseph/>.

⁷ Deepak Ananth, "Mattancherry Mix, An Excerpt," Sosa Joseph, 2014, http://sosajoseph.in/news_articles.html.

⁸ "Sosa Joseph," Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://www.galeriems.com/Exhibition/Details/Sosa%20Joseph%20>.



Figure 8. brunelle dias, *restricted aliens*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm



Figure 9. brunelle dias, *pakuranga promises*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm



Figure 10. brunelle dias, *drying lines in burning sky*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm



Figure 11. brunelle dias, *she stops to see rainbows and sunsets with me*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm

composting an analogy for painting

Composting is a naturally occurring phenomenon mimicked by gardeners on a condensed scale to cultivate fertile soil. As a novice gardener, I was fascinated by the regenerative cycles of composting, and over time this came to hold conceptual fertility for my painting practice. Gardening, growing food and composting have become an important part of trying to lower my everyday carbon footprint. Naturally, this extended to my painting practice, where I experimented with biodegradable pigments such as henna and handmade paper, which would decompose with little effect on the environment. I also worked with natural vegan gesso, painted with pigments that were within my vicinity, and repurposed domestic textiles like bedsheets and tablecloths as “canvases” to work within my limits. In this process of being ecologically conscious in my practice, I began to understand “composting” as an analogy for my painting process, which visually manifests the fluid nature of my everyday life.

As organic matter decomposes in the compost pile, my (oil) painting process is fluid and can be described as a breaking down of figurative “matter.” The canvas becomes a “ground” for figurative matter to simulate the cycles of compositing: figurative composition, decomposition, and re-composition.

In the work, *seasonal* (2020), I drew the first layer of figuration, colours, tonal values, and linework over one another until the “ground” became a chaotic pile of figural elements. Painting's fluidity broke down the binary of figure and ground and background and foreground to create a dynamic, unfixed composition. Within the canvas, represented bodies, spaces, objects, and concrete surfaces slipped into each other, suggesting the instability of life, challenging my static perception of it. I worked on aspects of figuration while leaving others unfinished, which resulted in a semi-abstracted, fluctuating, slippery, and yet holistically unified image. In this way, my painting process mimics the cyclic nature of composting: figurative composition, decomposition, and re-composition.

Some elements of the painting seem self-contained, and others are more dependent on other factors within the image. Each mark, trace, and hue work symbiotically. Furthermore, some paintings seem more in flux than others. Each composition calls for a distinct consideration to the

personally derived subject matter I use. What started as a mere gardening practice bearing no relationship to my painting soon became an analogy that best represented my painting process and the slippery nature of (my) surroundings.



Figure 12. brunelle dias, *no title*, 2020, Henna on Paper, 24 x 32 cm

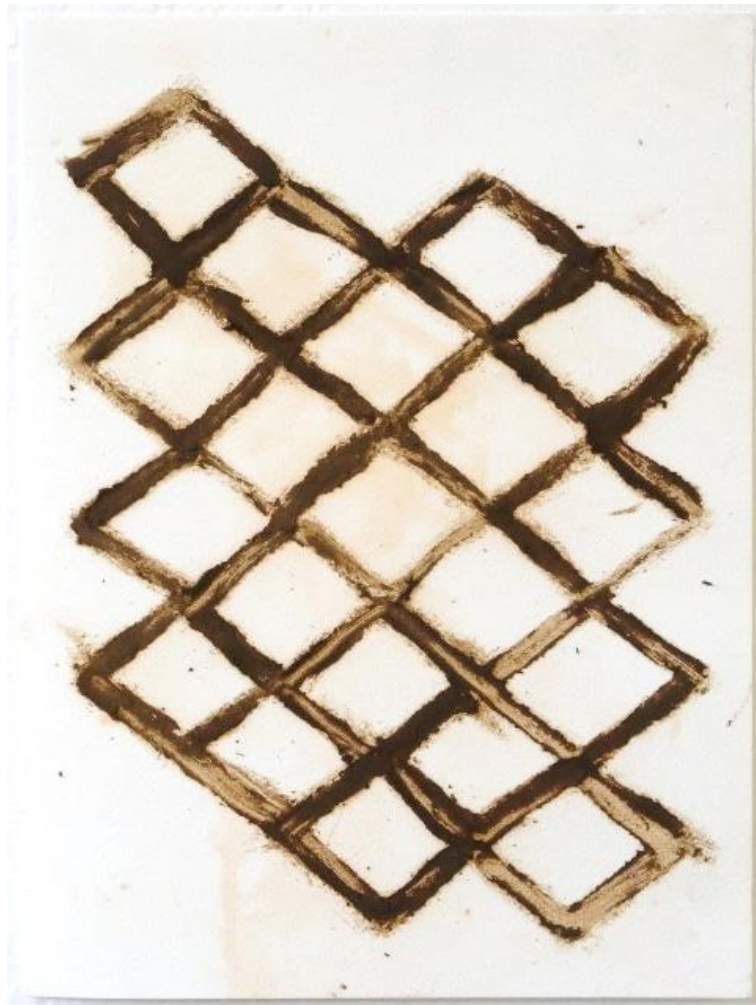


Figure 13. brunelle dias, *no title*, 2020, Henna on Paper, 32 x 24 cm



Figure 14. brunelle dias, seasonal 2020, Oil on canvas, 120 x 238 cm



Figure 15. Amy Sillman, *TV in Bed*, 2017-2018, Oil on Canvas, 190.5 x 167.6 cm.



Figure 16. Amy Sillman, *In Illinois*, 2017-2018, Oil on Canvas, 190.5 x 167.64 cm.

Figurative painter Amy Sillman exercises paint viscerally; in her paintings, figures emerge from thick paint and taut horizons in muddy pinks and browns. Under the weight of the layered paint, her figures reflect a kind of purgatorial experience. They seem held between resurfacing resurrection and being buried. Sillman's painting process is in constant motion, where over weeks and months, surfaces are worked, abandoned, and returned to until her final painting equates to a sum of all destructions.⁹ This repetitive action of layering is akin to my painting process.

Sillman's emerging figures are a result of continually pushing figurations into the canvas ground, to the point of collapse, before recovering them.¹⁰ What is left are fragments and traces of bodies, some more recognisable than others.¹¹ These fragmented images vary depending on the tempo of the process. Like Sillman, my process involves moving quickly and destructively without an ideal “taste” or “good” aesthetic in mind.¹² I aim to adjust my tempo of making according to the progressing needs of each painting; at times, working violently with little attachment to the outcome; other times, working intentionally and considerately. This varied painting process reflects the inconsistent rates of deterioration of organic matters within the compost. The resulting image is unfixed, in-process, fluid, abstract, yet recognisable. Martin Clark, director of Camden Art Centre, writes,

To speak of them like this feels entirely appropriate, for, in all Sillman's canvases, there is not just a sense, but more accurately a process of archaeology. All her paintings are long and often

⁹ Martin Clark, “*Figure and Ground*,” Camden Art Centre, September 2018, 2. Retrieved from https://www.amysillman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201809_Landline_Camden.pdf.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

arduous exercises in accumulation and excavation, aggregation and erasure, coalescence and collapse.¹³

In the cyclic nature of compost, the idea of the “return” plays a significant role in regeneration. I am as interested in the renewal of (figurative) matter as I am in its decomposition. The sum of what decomposes eventually fertilises new growth. Personally, decomposition, within a painterly sense, is simply a step towards metamorphosis: a cycle of constant renewing where the image is unfixed and fluid in both the process of making and the viewing of the final work.

Fluidity is unfixed; fluidity does not wait, fluidity spreads, it cannot help itself. Painting has allowed me to *grasp* fluidity through its materiality. I often make negative connotations from the idea of fluidity because my experience with it has been unsettling. When painting, I am reminded that change is inevitable. Change, fluidity, or slipperiness holds a dual trajectory of sensation. I feel connected with the world around me whilst also in a state of instability as the world incessantly evolves. Hence, the visual distinction between figure and ground within the canvas represents my juxtaposed relationship with my environment. Figures in their environment are intimately connected, woven into each other, and influence each other symbiotically. Yet, because the figures are disintegrating into their environment, they feel unstable. This contradictory dilemma lies at the core of fluidity's nature: to be open to flexibility and to feel drowned by uncertainty at the same time. Hence, interconnection calls for a balance between growth and groundedness.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

parallels between the colour brown and the soil

When gardening, I could not help but notice the reciprocal relationship between plant and soil life. Plant health depends on soil fertility, which depends on both living and dead organic matter. I understood that “death” was not the end but merely a part of the regeneration cycle through gardening. Hence, finality, in a linear sense, *is* inorganic. I realise that treating life as independent from soil health follows the anthropocentric logic that thinks humans are separate from, and dominant over, their non-human environment.¹⁴ In my practice, I became increasingly interested in the idea of reciprocity through interconnection, especially between humans and non-humans. Author, farmer and philosopher, Wendell Berry speaks to the idea of interconnection manifested through the soil in the book, *The Unsettling of America*. To Berry,

The soil is the great connector of life, the source and destination of all. It is the healer, restorer and resurrector by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life...If a healthy soil is full of death, it is also full of life.¹⁵

My painting practice borrows Berry's understanding of soil or composting to conceptually unpack the idea of interconnection through the relationship between the visual distinction of figure and ground. In the process of composting, organic matter deteriorates at different rates. Half-eaten, rotten-but-recognisable, or slowly-fading-away matter lives within this purgatorial space. Similarly, in my paintings, figural matter is distinctly recognisable yet feels part of its background or connected to something else.

For example, in my work, *rosh hashana* (2020), I use complementary colours to paint figures and their (back)grounds. When painting, the general rule of thumb is that mixing two complementary colours creates variations of brown. To “dissolve” or deteriorate aspects of a figure into their background, I often paint parts of a figure one complimentary colour, and its immediate surrounding ground its partnered colour. When painting wet on wet, both colours create a murky brown hue. I subtly flesh out one colour of a complementary pair from the depth of the murky

¹⁴ Margaret Killjoy, “Take What You Need and Compost the Rest,” *Strangers In a Tangled Wilderness*, 2013, 1. Retrieved from <http://tangledwilderness.org/pdfs/takewhatyouneed-web.pdf>.

¹⁵ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 10th ed. (Counterpoint, n.d.), 90.

composition whilst leaving the rest of its surrounding area brown. This creates an overall impression of an in-betweenness, submergence, and emergence. Figures feel connected to their surroundings and vice versa. Like soil, the brown coloured *substrate* holds the life and death of *figural* matter.

The colour brown is popularly given a negative reputation due to its connotations of excrement, waste, and pollution. But I am fascinated by murkiness as much as I am by vibrant colour. For in a garden, out of the murky, “dirtiness” of soil, grows marigolds and geranium, and in due course, marigolds and geraniums make soil. Similarly, aspects of my paintings are vibrant; however, the murky browns within a painting operate like soil for figuration to grow and decompose into. Brown is the visual symbol of the oxymoronic quality of soil: full of life and death.



Figure 17. brunelle dias, *rosh hashana dinner*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 153.5 x 137.5 cm

part two

Bodies make bodies, eat bodies, excrete bodies. Bodies walk on land, pass through the land, inhabit the land, which makes bodies. The land runs through blood, slime, water, and moss. Neither autonomous nor separate, I figure, bodies cannot live without the land, its environment, as the land needs its bodies.

small things

The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Could it be? Could it possibly be? ¹⁶

In this passage from *The Greater Common Good*, author and activist Arundhati Roy critiques systemic dualism that places men over women, rich over poor, and in short, *big things over small things*.¹⁷ “Big things” are known to overlook or skew the complex stories of unofficial, unimportant, small, or marginalised people. In her heartfelt novel, *The God of Small Things*, she extends this dualism through semi-autobiographical accounts to highlight the extensive, multifaceted way systemic injustice affects small, subaltern and ordinary people. Roy's novel challenges representation by disclosing “small” people's complex stories for a plural discourse. She highlights the “small things,” the personal accounts of run-of-the-mill characters, against the backdrop of “big things,” the official public and political narratives often run by the government and media.

My practice borrows the phrase “small things” for understanding personal hierarchies in my life. Smallness, to me, is about the things I take for granted, specifically in my most immediate environments. Ironically, recurring and frequently visited spaces are overlooked the most in my life. Everyday experiences include known people, objects, patterns, and memories embedded within my day-to-day life. The active participation of being immersed or present in my environment draws me closer to it.

The definition of the environment in this practice extends beyond a bucolic understanding. The “environment” could be recognised as “circumstances, objects (living and non-living) and conditions by which we are surrounded by.”¹⁸ Hence, the environment is immersive; there are no

¹⁶ Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good,” *Common Dreams*, March 7, 2002, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2002/03/07/greater-common-good>.

¹⁷ Youngsuk Chae, “Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, June 30, 2015, 524, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1070010>.

¹⁸ James Morrow, *Where the Everyday Begins: A Study of Environment and Everyday Life* (Bielefeld Transcript Verlag, 2017), 15.

set divisions between living and non-living, human and “nature.” In this practice, I specifically refer to my environment as my most immediate arena, my everyday. In my painting practice, I am interested in the visual and conceptual notion of immersion, which is comprehensively understood in (traditional) theories of the “environment.” By adopting the metaphorical label “environment,” my practice aims to understand the significance of being in connection with one's surroundings—be it with family members, close friends, any living or non-living bodies which are part of my micro-geography. By bringing my everyday spaces into the foreground of my practice, I aim to extend my understanding of the environment to recognise interconnection within all areas of my life, starting with my most immediate *field*.

In the text, *A Mundane Manifesto*, Wayne Brekhus argues that the “everyday” is also treated as a background for sensationalised narratives to take the stage.¹⁹ By bringing the everyday environment into the foreground of my awareness, I intend to challenge my perception of conceptual “backgrounds,” which I often connotate as statically fixed in separation from me. Brekhus discloses that the study of social life favours the extraordinary over the uninteresting (the mundane or the everyday).²⁰ He argues that social life itself is rarely “eventful,” and yet there is a lack of research on ordinariness, mediocrity, and everyday life.²¹ To his argument, he presses that backgrounding the mundane's interest whilst foregrounding sensationalism is comparable to the visual (psychology's) distinction of figure and ground. The focal point of sensationalism is like the “figure” while the rest, the unimportant ordinary lives, becomes the “ground.”²² While this distinction is often used within visual psychology and painting to describe subject matter interplay, its conceptual application holds value to our non-visual, mental perception of the world. The protruding figure, much like the sensational aspects of our lives, heightens our awareness, while our ordinary lives seep into our interests' background. From personal experience, my lack of presence in my everyday makes days feel seamlessly woven to the next, until a melodramatic something stubs my toe, immersing me into my surroundings. By intentionally taking notice of my surroundings, I bring the everyday into the foreground of my awareness. (My) everyday

¹⁹ Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 16, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=574568>.

²⁰ Wayne Brekhus, “A Mundane Manifesto,” in *Everyday Life: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Ben Highmore, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2011), 106.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²² *Ibid.*, 108.

becomes the “figure” amid the hum of statistical generalities. Therefore, my diaristic practice holds space for the *small* aspects of my everyday life, as it holds *bigger* implications, both personal and political.

By bringing the *small things* into the foreground of my awareness, I realised that the everyday, like the environment, is not an object nor a backdrop; if its conditions change, so do its living and non-living inhabitants. The more immersed and observant I became within my everyday, the more it appeared to fluctuate. What was ordinary one day was extraordinary another day.²³ *Many small things accumulated to big, hard-to-explain things*. Hereon, my practice recognised the shifting nature of (my) *environment*, regardless of its banal topicality. The figure and ground distinction within the pictorial plane metaphorically explored the concept of fluidity or flux between the interconnection of the body(s) and the environment.

²³ Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 18, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=574568>.



Figure 18. brunelle dias, *winding*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm



Figure 19. brunelle dias, *pakuranga promises #2*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 24 x 32 cm



Figure 20. Sikelela Owens, *David (as Olympia)*, n.d., Oil on Canvas, 200 x 160 cm.



Figure 21. Sikelela Owens, *School Daze*, n.d., Oil on Canvas, 170 x 190 cm.

Painter Sikelela Owens understands the “everyday” to be with her most intimate known people. Hence, Owens paints using subject matter derived from her vernacular life. Like my figurations, her painted bodies are often in conversation, resting or deep in thought. In my painting practice, I too work within the vernacular limits to personally and liberally engage with the images of familiar visages.²⁴ In this regard, the “small things” could be as simple as observing family members get on with their day. Owens creates supple bodily landscapes to represent her everyday life. Within the pictorial plane, she blends figures seamlessly into their surroundings. Figures are recognisably distinct yet part of the background. Her brushstrokes are soft and broad, which blend out vivid details. The viewer is left with a landscape of tonal values of skin against muted coloured backgrounds. The resulting images are comparable to the visual sensation of looking through a curtain mesh or struggling to recall definite details from a dream. Likewise, my painting practice is interested in using the visual distinction of figure and ground to create a transient sensation representing my relationship with my everyday environment. For example, I blend similar colours used within the background and foreground to create a flat perspective. This stitches aspects of the figure and ground together. A figure usually a body, appears to slip into and out of its surroundings. Or are the surroundings swallowing the figure? Regardless of the perception, the resulting image feels fluctuating and in the process of transforming. Painting allows me to visualise my seemingly inert everyday environment as fluid and unfixd. It challenges the complacent thinking that the everyday is fixed, and therefore considered a “background” topic that does not affect, or worse still, is of no importance due to its lack of worth to human artifice.

²⁴ Emily Steer, “Sikelela Owen Paints Intimate Moments of People at Rest,” ELEPHANT, March 22, 2019, <https://elephant.art/78819-2/>.



Figure 22. brunelle dias, *essential workers*, 2020, Oil on Linen, 148 x 210 cm

debunking the ordinary as inert

The garden is not an object, it is a process, and so is the everyday.²⁵ Therefore, as habits, dogma, beliefs, traditions, and seemingly monotonous things can attest to changing perspective, albeit gradually, over the course of a lifetime, these changes can be microscopically felt within our day-to-day. By noticing nuances in my everyday, I immerse myself in my perpetually fluctuating reality. Highmore explains that the usual can become unusual or regular.²⁶ Furthermore, he reiterates that “small things” like internal conversations, feelings, and thoughts set the tone for a day. By this logic, no two days can feel the same, even if they look the same. I wonder then, is the label, “everyday” itself redundant, seeing as it represents monotony?

The everyday is the accumulation of small things that constitute a more expansive but hard-to-register “big thing” ...a mood, a rhythm, a feeling provides a stage on which the ordinary events and happenings of the everyday unfold. It is a field of experience constantly in flux: I was calm, but now I am anxious; I was happy, but now I am sad; I was daydreaming, but now I am just bored; I was frustrated, but now I am indifferent.²⁷

Therefore, our perception, influenced by various environmental circumstances and internal states of wellbeing, changes our day-to-day outlook. In this way, the everyday can be understood as our relationship with our immediate surroundings.

I reflect: On some days, my everyday feels like it has no beginning or end if I am not “present.” I find myself waking up to another routine drawl of 9–5 only to find myself slouching on the couch, asking myself, “what's for dinner?” One day slips into the next, and before I realise it, I have entered the wrong date at the top of another to-do list. Yet, other times when I have *intentionally* noticed my surroundings, and while the world around me still feels slippery, it is slower to unfold, and I recognise nuances of change that would otherwise slip past my awareness.

The everyday is unfixed; as my perception changes so does my outlook on the everyday, and as my surroundings change, so does my perception. I recognise this reciprocal relationship between

²⁵ Jessie Sheeler, *Little Sparta: A Guide to the Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (United Kingdom: Francis Lincoln, 2003).

²⁶ Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 18, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=574568>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

myself and my (immediate) environment is what the everyday is made of; an ongoing conversation with the world around me. By intentionally immersing and observing my surroundings in the present tense, I practice gratitude, to not take my most immediate environment for granted.

Author and Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart uses the still life painting genre to re-think our notion of the everyday. Another way to describe everydayness is to compare it to the painting genre of still life. Traditionally, European still life painting depicts mundane objects such as fruit bowls, jars, or clothing items, as symbols of pensive themes like melancholia, death, or femininity. Hence, within the pictorial plane, still objects are seemingly inert on the surface, but they vibrate with potential energy, be it sentimental or political. Stewart extends beyond the painting genre of the still life to draw upon similar qualities in the nature of the everyday. The stills of ordinary life seem inert on the surface, too but “caught between platitude and transformation, ordinary life holds a double trajectory.”²⁸ It may spend most of its time lurking in the background of my attention until an unexpected knock on the door has me questioning the “cocooning of home.”²⁹ On the other hand, the still-life-like, the ordinary, holds the sensation of spent energy after a satisfying vitality,³⁰ like the drive back home as the natural progression of a day well spent. This double trajectory of ordinary life is a notion I explored in the painting, *view across the kitchen counter (2021)*.

²⁸ Kathleen Stewart, “Home Alone” In the essay, “*The Perfectly Ordinary Life*,” *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 2, no. 1 (2003): 9 <http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/ps/stewart9.htm>

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.



Figure 23. Detail of *across the kitchen counter*

across the kitchen counter is a *still* of an ordinary Saturday morning at my home. A conversation between two family members takes place at the dining table. I observe the morning unfold whilst I sit on the kitchen counter facing the dining table. Immersed in the ecology of what Saturday mornings are made of, at my peripheries I hear fried eggs spit; the fruit bowl balances bananas; the sunlight melts into the Pohutukawa tree in the front yard; suddenly, a shift in attitude is felt. A glance is exchanged.

This painting represents an aspect of ironic uncanniness felt within my ordinary. In the painting, transiency is reflected by the figure's translucency, especially the partially fleshed-out green bodied figure—elements of the figure blend into the background. Beyond the grid of the French doors, the perspectival background fades, starting from right to left into abstract formations, and bringing the background and foreground into a flat perspective. Aspects of the image feel more fixed, others in a state of transformation. Amid a domestic setting, a woman forces the viewer to hold her gaze. Suddenly the supposed neutral background of the ordinary feels uncomfortable and foregrounded. Ironically the most “still” or fleshed-out aspect of the painting is the visage of the woman. Does her gaze hold melancholia? Is she aggravated? Or is she indifferent? Her anything-but-fixed gaze represents a subtler fluxing sensation felt within my everyday.



Figure 24. brunelle dias, *across the kitchen counter*, 2020, Oil on Linen, 154 x 375 cm

layering time

Like a palimpsest, in some of my paintings time is overlaid; traces of the past and present are recorded within a single image. To attain this sensation of “slippage,” I observe my surroundings’ unfold, like gestures made by bodies: subtle changes of light, movements of shadows, a change of affectual sensation or moving bodies. I often record photos of these moments to reference them in the painting field. I morph small shifts of movement within an image, usually generated by bodies, to create a seamless interlocking of time where the past and present reside visually. The resulting image holds layers of the past and present to create a stop-motion-like sensation. Figurations, usually bodies but not limited to them, become alive and animated.

For example, in the closeup above of *view across the kitchen counter*, a woman in pink is duplicated. In one position, the figure stares broodingly back at the viewer. In the other position, her head is hooded, and her expression seems at ease, as is her body language. Both positions of the character morph into each other, conjoint at the arm. In the same painting, a woman in green sits at the end of a perspectival-tipping dining table. Next to her is her doppelganger, who seems to be walking. Perhaps she is taking her seat, or maybe she moves around the table; regardless, the walking character leads the viewer’s eyes towards the mass of golden yellow on the painting’s right. Is she fading into the end roll of a film photograph?

The elongated canvas has a stop-motion quality, binding traces of the past and present into one frame. The characters are painted as though they are moving at a slow shutter speed. Holistically, the resulting image holds an unclear indication of chronology. This visual representation of layered fragments recreates my non-linear experience of time felt within my day-to-day. Time is relative to my situated environment. Therefore, my painting practice is interested in the felt experience of time instead of factually universal measured time. Some figures in the pictorial plane are in the process of shifting, moving or blurring. In the paintings above, the layered accumulation of moments, pressed on top of each other, ironically provide a holistic narrative of a “still,” even if aspects of the image seem unclear, erased, or underdeveloped.

Writer Madhu Benoit analyses the structure of the novel, *The God of Small Things*, in which Roy deconstructs linear time into a fragmented, achronological order. Fragmented time is superimposed; each chapter provides a part of the plot, confusing our perception of the whole.³¹ “Thus, the past is always in the present, and the present is always shaping the future. The fluidity of time deconstructs chronological temporal sequences.”³² I was fascinated by the idea that structuring time affects our perception. For Roy, fragmenting time is a means of deconstructing cultural narratives that rely on chronological time. While she tells a story, her lack of linearity frustrates the reader, who often expects to be spoon-fed information.³³ However, Roy's story is small and big, personal and political, and more importantly, shockingly real. The reader is obliged to uncover each layer of the plot and then weave back its fragments to understand the whole plot. This structure encourages the reader to take the time to hear the narrator's raw, fragmented, “unofficial,” and personal experiences. In the same way, in my paintings, the layered time represented by accumulated moments incrusting into an image provides the viewer with a multitude of perspectives to access the whole narrative. However, my non-linear structure of layering means the viewer is unable to decipher the chronology. Instead, they experience the narrative in a fragmented way, a glimpse into my own everyday experience. Here plurality, as represented by fragmented time, “encourages (viewers) to actively criticise rather than passively accept the doxa.”³⁴

Layering traces of time in a painting moves beyond an aesthetic decision; it becomes a political act, an invitation for outsiders to reconstruct my narrative through the prism of their perception. Here, “the act of imagination” is shared as the reader recreates the deconstructed painting.³⁵

³¹ Madhu Benoit, “Circular Time: A Study of Narrative Techniques in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” *World Literature Written in English* 38, no. 1 (January 1999): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449859908589315>.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.



Figure 25. brunelle dias, *an ode to traffic cones and bus rides*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 198 x 198 cm

a search for an ordinary life

Stewart discloses subtle sensations within the everyday in the text, “The Perfectly Ordinary Life.” She sets the *ordinary* within the scene of “home” or the familiar, a universal space with various attachments.

Home is where the heart is. But take one foot out of the frame, and things get sketchy fast... At the unwanted knock on the door or the sudden ring of the phone at night, we can feel the uncanny resemblance between the dazed state of trauma and the cocooning we now called home.³⁶

Stewart questions the notion of home; how, within moments, ordinary spaces can transform into something extraordinary. As I have been taught, home is a sanctuary for the living to take refuge in—a place to *house* our deepest secrets with the potential safety of our company. Home, in actuality, has made me feel alien. Considering that home is the space in which I let my guard down, when home presents me with newness, uncertainty, or insecurity, I reconsider another micro-geography, a symbol, a memory, a person, or object as refuge. In this way, I am interested in the idea that like the everyday, home is not a fixed situation nor an architectural structure or even a recurring notion. Small things, small glances, a shaft of sunlight, a broken light bulb can shift our perspective on the cocooning we call home. With an intentional consciousness of my surroundings, ordinariness—or home—can feel perpetually different within two given moments, let alone two days. Personally, ordinariness or home has failed to deliver what it connotes: a repetition, stability and ready availability.

I often catch myself striving for home. Especially as a young Indian migrant, in previous years I was fixated on an ideal life, influenced by narratives shared by close company, memories of old photographs that pointed towards “a better time,” and the wishful thinking that migrating to a foreign land would quench this yearning. For the longest time I was drawn to an idealistic future without recognising that this goal was a fantasy projection far from the reality of my current situation. Idealistic thinking, in terms of yearning for a better life, had caused me to ignore my

³⁶ Kathleen Stewart. “Home Alone” In the essay, “The Perfectly Ordinary Life,” *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 2, no. 1 (2003): 9. Retrieved from <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/ps/stewart9.htm>

present. Therefore, *introspective fieldworks* arrived from a desire for groundedness to the land I am on. The very crux of this project is to make peace with the idea that as part of the Indian diaspora, home is a fluid notion in Aotearoa. *introspective fieldworks* accepts that a fluid mindset is a means to stay in touch with my present. By working with my everyday, I demystify the pursuit of an ideal, inert, and static notion of home. My painting practice documents the process of my present home, of people, much like a photo-album or tapestry. However, unlike realistic images, my semi-abstracted images reflect my evolution of home. In this way, “home,” like the garden, is a process.



Figure 26. brunelle dias, *no title*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 24 cm

part three

I assume the dining table makers had a formal criterion of its function, sitting and eating being the crux of its purpose. Like most, my family have surpassed this standard function, welcoming an array of possibilities for the “raised platform” that have developed over the years.

Our dining table is linked to our citizenship; a permanent resident with a small possibility of being moved out.

A platform sitting in between the lounge and the kitchen, true to her nature, she hosts the comings and goings of strangers, guests, and family members.

She houses transitory items too.

Bank envelopes, bobby pins, international currency, speeding tickets land on her platform; a podium for my household members to peek into the happenings of the other’s life whilst sifting for their own.

The semi-centre of the table displays seasonal fruit which carefully balances in an over-enthusiastic glass bowl. Crouched underneath the weight of the new, the forgotten fortnight-old matter flashes mouldy sighs and puffs—a stubborn weekly attempt to revive passionate appetites for real, wholesome matter.

Among non-committal cups of half-drunk tea on the table, wryly lie the “no junk mail” mail, empty glass bottles and assorted recyclable items—passive-aggressive reminders for the recycling chore-duty person.

Semi-imprinted from zealous homework written on single sheets of refill paper, and mysterious residues of tape stuck on her sides, our dining table holds archives of our residency.

Her shape is oval curved, sturdy, extendable and flexible; she has pragmatically squeezed in the surprise visitor. With no edges and no sharp turns or a beginning or end, the tail sits next to the head of the circle.

home is a process

Home, as iterated, has been a personally losing pursuit. Looking back to move forward, I have realised that home has become a sort of verb, a sensation that arrives as swiftly as it leaves my body. Hence, home is an idea that could live in a physical location, a place, a person, object or feeling. My longing to meet my extended family, my longing for a known land and a spiritual relationship with the *One* whom I owe my gratefulness are all ideas connected to my lack of knowing my “environment.” From a diaspora perspective, home is a reconstructed, fragmented, and evolving ideology.

Traversing continental borders, the diaspora carries a few items in their luggage: folded memories, bottled traditions, and crinkled faith amongst spiced pickles. The rest is left behind for the others to pick at, to share, to hold onto with guilty hope of their return. For some time, relative to every migrant’s experience, they live between worlds. Some fly backwards and forwards between homelands and homes. The rest of us look back at our past within our present everyday, and aspire for an idealistic stability, a permanent residency.³⁷ Not ready to give up our old citizenship yet, we refuse to reduce our culture, socio-political status, heritage, and ancestry to a stamp on a passport. However, residing between worlds is not an option in bureaucracy, we have to make a choice. Dias or Diaspora? But where are you really from? Here or there? Some say, “here, and there,” others, “here,” others still say, “there” and the rest, “neither.” We said “both,” eventually, reflecting on the way our bodies had adjusted to new temperatures and temperaments. I made peace with inner conflicts, my heart settled *here*, we are learning to show gratitude to the ones from there who got us here, and the ones who lived *here* long before anyone of us *settled*.

Susan McDonnell, author of the sociological article, “Narrating Homes in Process: Everyday Politics of Migrant Childhoods” discusses the idea that diaspora communities and often young migrants identify home as a process. When adapting to their new environment, the balancing struggle between assimilating and withdrawing completely is something most migrants slip between. In order to reconstruct home and thus identify with it, they adjust between longing for

³⁷ Susan McDonnell, “Narrating Homes in Process: Everyday Politics of Migrant Childhoods,” *Sage, Childhood*, 28 (2021): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568220961138>.

their old relationships in their homeland and aspiring for a better life in their new land. McDonnell explains, “migrant family practices and narratives then, symbolically created and re-created homelands, speaking of fluidity of belongings, although resting on different political and classed variables.”³⁸ Furthermore, reconstructing home is a transitory action, and the isolated migrant (family) must replace family with new-found nurturing relationships.

The older I get, the more I feel “settled” *here*. I have learnt to appreciate the people around me in my everyday, as part of my fluid construction of home. The fluid construction of home is open-ended and reflected in my imagery. My subject matter ranges from family to objects, as they are both symbols of “homeliness.” At other times, friends and flatmates may become the subject of my everyday. As my life evolves, so does my everyday and hence my relationships that reconstruct my perception of home. In retrospect, like a photo album, these paintings function as an immersive time capsule into different aspects of my home.

The fluidity of making home is a something that all humans can relate to, not only migrants. Making home is relative to the circumstances of each individual’s experience, can range from subtle to drastic. Furthermore, as political, cultural, and environmental climates change, so do our relationships with homes and the things that exist within them. By recounting the process of my home through painting, I feel grounded to the reality of my environment.

³⁸ Ibid., 124.



Figure 27. brunelle dias, *the political and the politically correct*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 165 x 180 cm

remembering through your stories

I never knew my grandfather as most kids would. He, like most men in my family, had the habit of disappearing without communicating his whereabouts. Like a traveller, he left and then re-appeared but without acknowledging the breadth of time he had vanished for. When I was a child, I often thought he resided in some cave where time stood still. Perhaps it was the energy he exuded, a sort of timelessness, a Liam-Neeson-ness; a quiet assurance and deep integrity.

His features often felt like they belonged in a noir film. Slicked black hair—not a trace of white, a tall and lanky structure, his mouth hidden beneath a coiled moustache and a plume of smoke. A greenish-black sickle and hammer bled into his forearm. He was a man of few words, my mum often repeated.

I did not interact with him much, we didn't play-fight or talk for hours. He may have told me a few stories, but I don't recollect them either. I had an observer relationship with him. I learnt more about him through my mother, his daughter, than actually knowing him. I was far too shy to sit on his lap or hug the old man. My presence was reluctant around him as he reluctantly visited us. He seemed more like a legend from a fictional world than an actual human. Perhaps that's how I viewed the men in my family, namely my father. My father was not remotely brooding or seemingly dark as my grandfather, but his lack of physical presence made me feel he too was part of a legend. The stories that my mother shared about these two men felt akin to the stories she would tell us about her grandparents and aunts, who are long gone. Like smoke, the stories of my father and grandfather, two of the most unlike people, linger in my mind. They are the best stories, I know.

I love them both dearly. I wish they stayed here longer. One of them is said to have died in a tsunami in Japan at an under-ripe age of 34, the other vanished off the face of the earth after my family migrated to Aotearoa. I think their obscure “departures” add to the fantastical quality of their legend. As I never actually saw their bodies wither, I often let my thoughts wander; perhaps they returned to the transit world they resided in, in the first place.

My mother is the messenger, the storyteller, the communicator who is the stability that reinforces the weight of the men in our life, for them to continue to live in our world. She was the bridge between the worlds, theirs and ours. Like astronauts floating in outer space, lost in a mission, like Tom Hanks deserted on an island, many relatives, like my father and grandfather, seemed to be MIA. My mother's stories were the anchor weight that stabilised our inquisitiveness about, and queries of, the men who fell overboard and never came back. She traversed continents, bringing in their news and stories bound with her own memories, thoughts, and experiences of them to us children. The knowledge we have of our father, grandfather, and other magicians other than our own experiences with them, have been tightly bound to my mother's knowledge and experience with them.

While some may argue that her subjectivity may have tainted our "true" perception of them, without my mother's stories, these legendary men would remain, what a rationalist would pronounce, dead. By talking about them, we exercised our memory of them, and in this way the dead live through our day-to-day lives. With her stories, the life breathed into these men, we have resisted encountering them as strangers.

My mother would reminisce back to her dreams of working as an airhostess so she could travel the world. After three, mostly unexpected, pregnancies and one horrifying departure of my father, she did what she does best. She clipped her wings and ran with us children to safety at the bottom of the world.

I like to think she has fulfilled her dreams of flying. She may not have worked as a flight attendant, but our father's departure only furthered one of the most significant roles she engaged in.

She piloted us to the other side of the world whilst maintaining connections with the departed through her stories. I can't help but think of these stories that live with me and my siblings. These stories, experiences, and memories of my people have breathed life into our dead knowledge, have taught me lessons of the past, have given me a stature amongst the unknown. Stories function as a legacy and a life-carrier.



Figure 28. brunelle dias, *drawing a fish out of water*, 2020, Watercolour on Paper, 32 x 24 cm



Figure 29. brunelle dias, red plastic chairs and collapsing gate, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 100 x 134 cm

interconnections of past and present

My paintings represent both past and present narratives of my everyday. In the past, I used to think that my present everyday was detached from the past. In retrospect, I realise that the past and present were connected. Past everyday makes appearances in my present life through memories, flashbacks, and stories. Hence, as the past lives in my present, no two everyday are the same, no matter how repetitive they seem. As Elsa Sacksick discusses the narrative structure of *The God of Small Things*,³⁹ experienced time is not a “horizontal line projecting into the future,” rather time loops backwards, crossing the past as it moves forwards.⁴⁰

My painting practice seeks to be present within the “environment” I am currently residing in. However, as a migrant who has ties to another environment, I cannot help but feel a current pull away from my present. Nostalgia, memories, and stories embedded in my *here*, create a fluctuating state of presence. While I am *here*, I sometimes feel I am *there*, hence I have been told I am elsewhere. This practice is about recognising these *currents* as much as I notice my immediate surroundings, as the past is part of my present. In this way, I challenge the idea of being present. While being present often connotes noticing the immediate world, I also explore the idea that being present could mean being immersed regardless of the state one is dwelling in. In this way, I do not ignore my past in my present, nor the dreams or stories that connect me to a prior everyday, like my childhood. These *currents*, once thought of as being a deterrent from being fully present, can be nurtured by recognising their significance to my present life. Hence my practice appreciates that the present is not a fixed state, but one that ebbs and flows. When all my paintings from this project are viewed together, they disrupt chronological linearity.⁴¹ I came to realise that no individual painting is separate from the others, rather, they make up a holistically singular multifaceted story.⁴² This story-in-process resists the confinement of chronology, or a clear-cut narrative that “efficiently” communicates to the public.

³⁹ Elsa Sacksick, “The Horizon in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy: A Poetics of Lines,” *Commonwealth* 33.1, n.d., 82.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴² Cassies Davies, “Interview with Njideka Akunyili Crosby,” *The White Review*, 2016, <https://www.thewhitejournal.org/feature/interview-njideka-akunyili-crosby/>.

In each painting, as in my everyday, there are recurring motifs, and signs; they take the form of painterly marks, subject matter, and figurations and colour. These painterly referents metaphorically echo the intrinsic connection between the past and the present. Representative of my experience of my day-to-day, these flashbacks and flashforwards in paintings are a way of reorganising my narrative according to the meanderings of my memory.⁴³ Furthermore, by following a non-linear narrative pattern in my painting practice, most viewers experience (my) time, not fully aware of which moment is my “past” or “present,” as both can be present within the everyday.



Figure 30. Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Thread*, 2012, Mixed Media on Paper, 131.9 x 131.97 cm.

I looked at the works of Njideka Akunyili Crosby, whose paintings are the home of liminal time, place, identity, and culture. Raised in Nigeria and migrating to the United States, Crosby holds citizenship in both countries.⁴⁴ Therefore, identifying as both American and Nigerian, Crosby’s large-scaled paintings reflect layers of her childhood (in Africa) in conjunction with her Western present. In her words, she wishes to “invent a new visual language that represents (her) experience—which at times feels paradoxically fractured and whole—as a cosmopolitan Nigerian.”⁴⁵ On the surface of her paintings she collages photo-transferred Nigerian political, pop-cultural, and traditional imagery. The collage is partly hidden and revealed underneath the weight of her painted personal everyday narrative. For example, in the painting, *Thread* (2012), the artist depicts herself and her husband in an intimate scene. Instead of genes, cells, blood and brown skin, her body is made up of collaged cultural imagery derived from her roots in Nigeria. As she kisses the back

⁴³ Elsa Sacksick, “The Horizon in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy: A Poetics of Lines,” *Commonwealth* 33.1, n.d., 82.

⁴⁴ Nicole Cohen, “MacArthur ‘Genius’ Paints Nigerian Childhood Alongside Her American Present,” *WBFO*, February 1, 2018, <https://news.wbfo.org/post/macarthur-genius-paints-nigerian-childhood-alongside-her-american-present>.

⁴⁵ Cassey Carsel, “Njideka Akunyili Crosby Biography,” *Ocula*, 2020, <https://ocula.com/artists/njideka-akunyili-crosby/>.

of his spine, it seems she transfers this “information” to him. Effectively the imagery, her skin or surface, leaks into his own Caucasian body, starting with its darkest tonal values, the shadows. In the intimate scene of *Thread*, Crosby depicts consummation as a metaphorical understanding of her “Nigerian American hybridity or union between two cultures.”⁴⁶ More so, her Nigerian culture negates being understood as a sterile memory or “past life,” rather her culture is constantly reinvented in her present, even in her most intimate everyday moments.

⁴⁶ Simone White, “Skin, or Surface: Njideka Akunyili Crosby,” *Frieze*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.frieze.com/article/skin-or-surface-njideka-akunyili-crosby>.



Figure 31. brunelle dias, *rekindling*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 158 x 182 cm

narrating intimacy

Intimacy is a recurring theme that is drawn out of the humdrum of everyday activities I depict. In my paintings, intimacy is a two-way stream. There is a clear connection between figures in the painting and an intimacy between the viewer and the subject matter. Intimacy in my painting can be seen most immediately through the bodies depicted. In my painting, *rekindling* (2020), two bodies lean into each other, naturally folding themselves into comfortable seated positions. Draped on one body is a patch-work blanket, and around them is a cosmos of imagery, references of organic matter like leaves, an evening sky—or is it a sunrise?—and a fire-like form hovers above the blanketed figure. The blanketed figure plays the guitar, the other turned figure seems lost in her thoughts. Based on observations of my family, this painting explores my perception of the interpersonal dynamics between my sister and my mother. When little is said between individuals on ordinary days, interconnection can be loudly felt through small gestures. What seems like the most ordinary of moments, observing my sister and mother on a sofa together, resting in their thoughts, was actually a moment of reconciliation. It may have been a fleeting moment, as with most parent-child dynamics, but recognising such extraordinariness within the ordinary was to acknowledge common sacredness. The painting, *rekindling*, explores the idea of ordinary intimacy through painting devices that reflect the energy I felt in that transient moment. I painted the figures in warm colours amidst the cool-coloured edges of the painting, like a hearth amid a lousy winter evening. Their bodies are not made of skin, but magentas, multi-coloured patches, complimentary colours, and saturated tones. These colours reflected my perception of their double-trajected relationship and perhaps mine too. Our matriarchal intimacy holds a fiery potential. Like a fire, nurtured relationships can warm the bluest of toes, but if neglected, relationships can burn the most cherished of homes.

The fragmentary nature of my paintings, like *rekindling*, extends the idea of flux beyond its aesthetics. In *rekindling*, I explore the sensation of flux felt within my interpersonal dynamics. This fragmented image metaphorically addresses my ever-changing and inconclusive mother-daughter relationship. The fluid image is the product of using composition-decomposition

painting devices. For example, the visibility of the image's bones or underdrawings, incompletely coloured areas, and linework that is drawn over figurations, holistically creates an unfinished and untidy image. Colours bleed out of borders and aspects of figuration seem incomplete. The blanketed figure holds what I know to be a guitar, yet in the image it is not clear. Representative of the transiency of everyday life, but also its seasonal relationships, "fluidity" as a recurring aesthetic holds a multifaceted conceptual representation of (my) everyday life. My paintings invite the spectators to complete the image from the prism of their own experiences.

My practice is autobiographical like Aotearoa-based painter Claudia Kogachi. Kogachi taps into the personal; she represents her immediate family members, and in recent works she has also included her partner. Her figurations are exaggerated, comical, awkward, often caught in recreational activities within domestic settings. The images metaphorically explore Kogachi's interpersonal dynamics and emotional state with her close kin.⁴⁷ Because she often represents herself within her combative scenarios as an outside speculator, I am unsure whether I am trespassing into the artist's personal affairs. I reflect on the dilemma; autobiographical work is both necessary to debunk generalities but is also vulnerable to oversharing. Without a fixed answer to this predicament, it is imperative that a practice like Kogachi's continuously flirts between the blurred lines of what she values as private and public knowledge. In the painting, *The One with the Mosquitoes*, Kogachi and her partner are harassed by mosquitoes in bed. Symbolically, these mosquitoes are said to represent the artist's, "...anxieties and frustrations that she has experienced recently, in the context of individual relationships and as a consequence of issues affecting broader communities such as the local art scene."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Francis McWhannell, "Spectacular Catharsis: Claudia Kogachi's It Is What It Is," Francis McWhannell, 2021, <https://francismcwhannell.com/?p=1341>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.



Figure 32. Claudia Kogachi, *The one with the mosquitoes* (diptych), 2021, Acrylic on Canvas (framed), 80 x 160 cm.

Metaphors, be they represented by irritating mosquitoes or the combative wrestling arena, invite the viewer to resonate with their own interpersonal dynamics. A simple yet comical gesture resonates with me deeply; *what and who keeps me up at night, like those damn mosquitos! I think of a few irritants*. Needless to say, Kogachi does not share the precise details of her intimate narrative though she “amps the intimacy in other ways,” as her represented figures include “personal features, like freckles and tattoos.”⁴⁹ In this way, she boldly depicts herself the way she wants to be perceived by the public without narrating any of the gossip; a crafty method to veer off outsiders from her intimate life while maintaining her personal integrity. I infer the artist’s position of privacy through a passing comment made by a friend, “Those in the know, know.”

⁴⁹ Ibid.

introspective fieldworks

While I am not represented in my work so far, my paintings are self-portraits. Although my paintings look outwards at my environment, they are introspective because they reflect my perception of the world. My literal lack of presence in my images is not representative of my disconnection from my encountered everyday. Rather, my paintings are necessary observations, a visual fieldwork that scopes out conditions, objects, bodies and relationships in my present. My paintings hold a multifaceted understanding of interconnection; they reflect my relationship with my everyday environment and that within the canvas.

An openness to a fluid painting process has led me to generate unfixed and fluctuating imagery, representative of my perception of my immediate surroundings. Furthermore, through fluidity, visual linear paradigms like figure and ground decompose; the figures become part of their painterly grounds. This indistinct visual relationship of figure-ground metaphorically reflects the interconnection between humans and their environment. Like soil, the canvas is a dynamic ground for figuration to be composed and decomposed.

The garden is not an object but a process.⁵⁰ Like a garden, my paintings are reflective of my ongoing relationship between myself and my environment. As gardener and writer Georgina Reid puts it, “It’s a relationship that changes every second, every hour, every week and every year.”⁵¹ Therefore, each painting is but an introspective part of my ever-evolving everyday.

Like a gardener, I am tending to a point that never arrives.

⁵⁰ Jessie Sheeler, *Little Sparta: A Guide to the Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (United Kingdom: Francis Lincoln, 2003).

⁵¹ Georgina Reid, *The Planthunter* (Australia: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 3.

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installation view

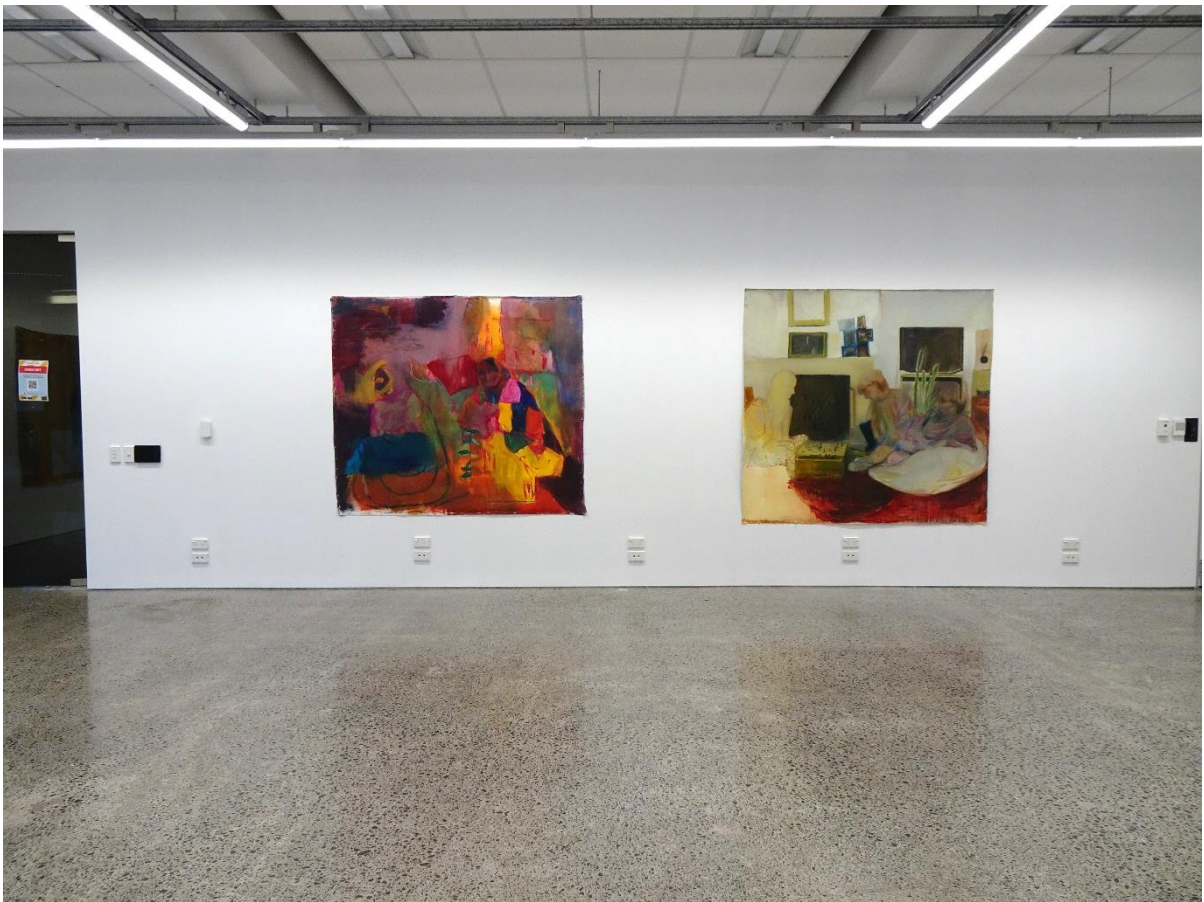


Figure 35. Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 3 #1



Figure 36. *technicoloured joseph*, Oil on Linen, 2021, 160 x 150 cm

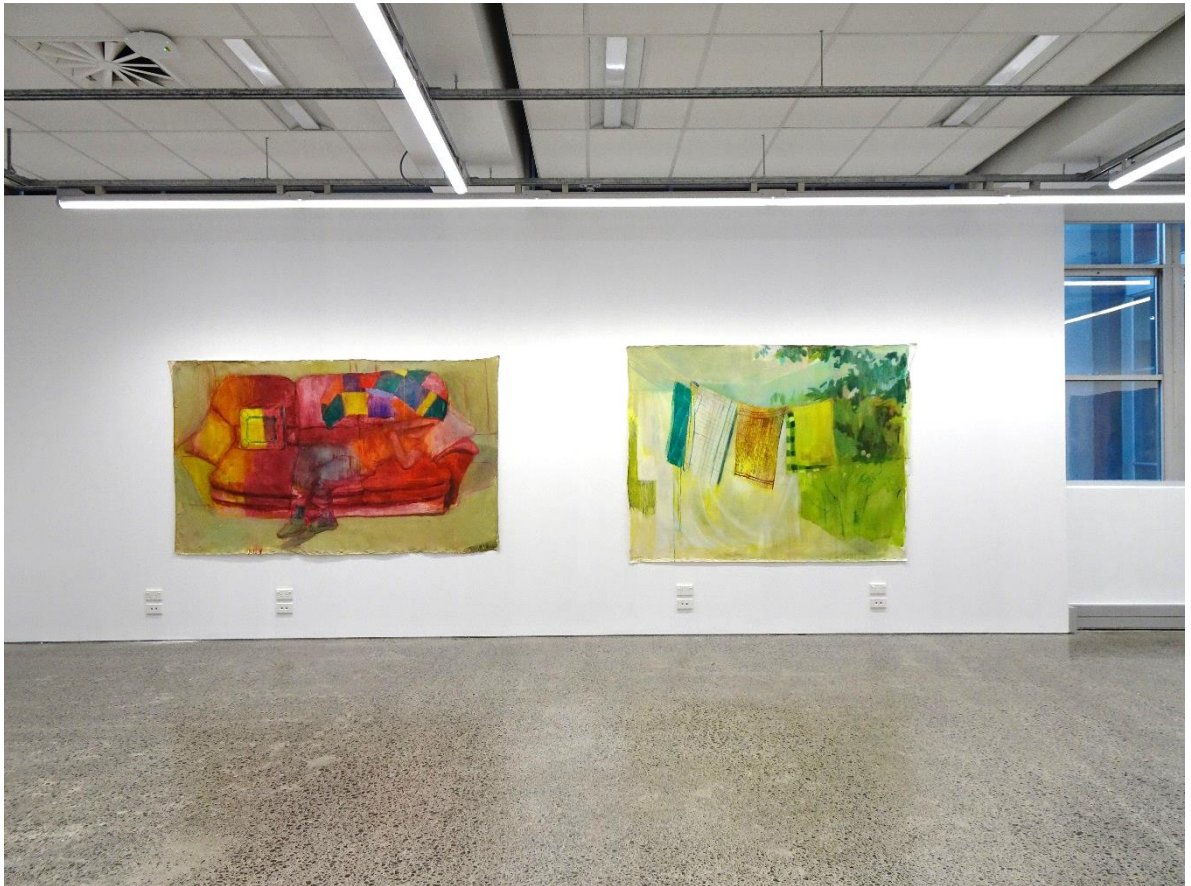


Figure 37. Exhibition installation, St Paul st Gallery 3 #2

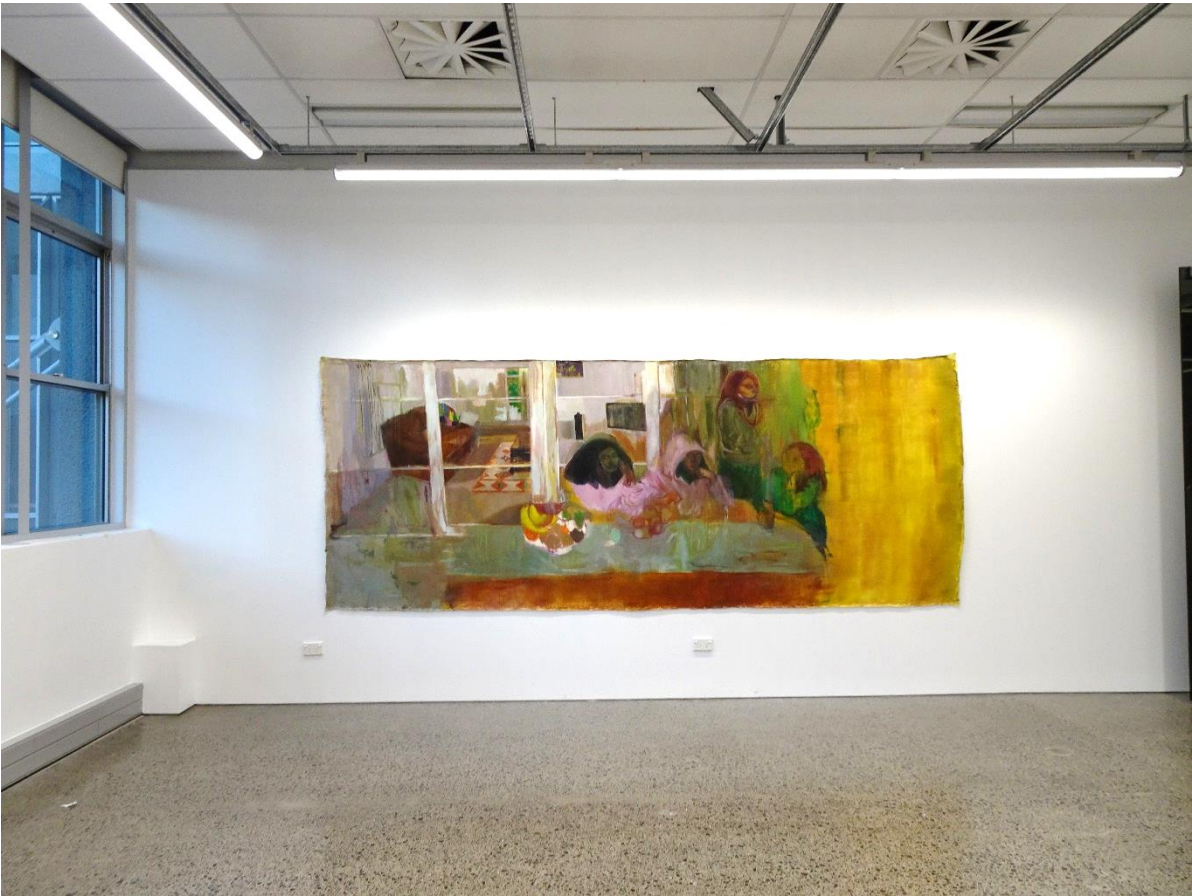


Figure 38. Exhibition installation, St Paul st Gallery 3 #3

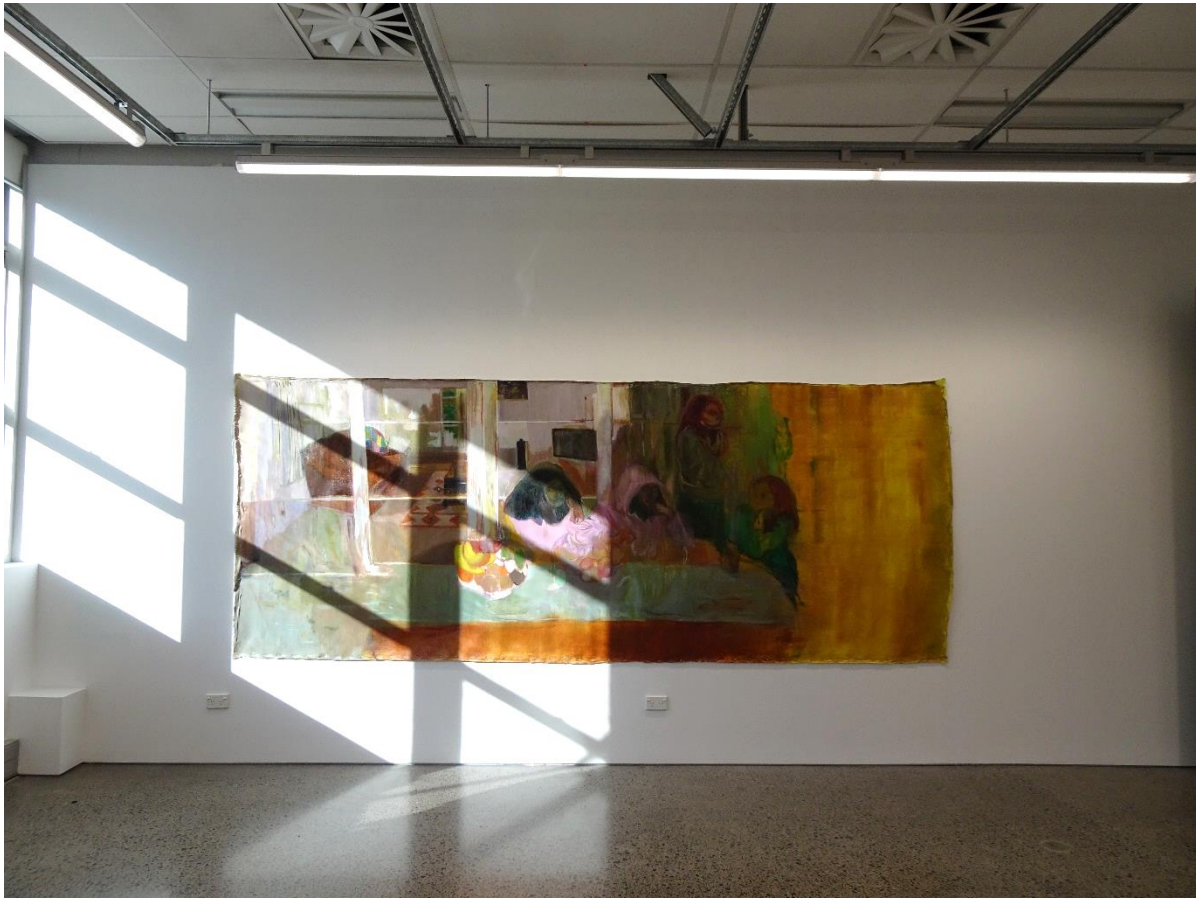


Figure 39. Exhibition installation, St Paul st Gallery 3 #4

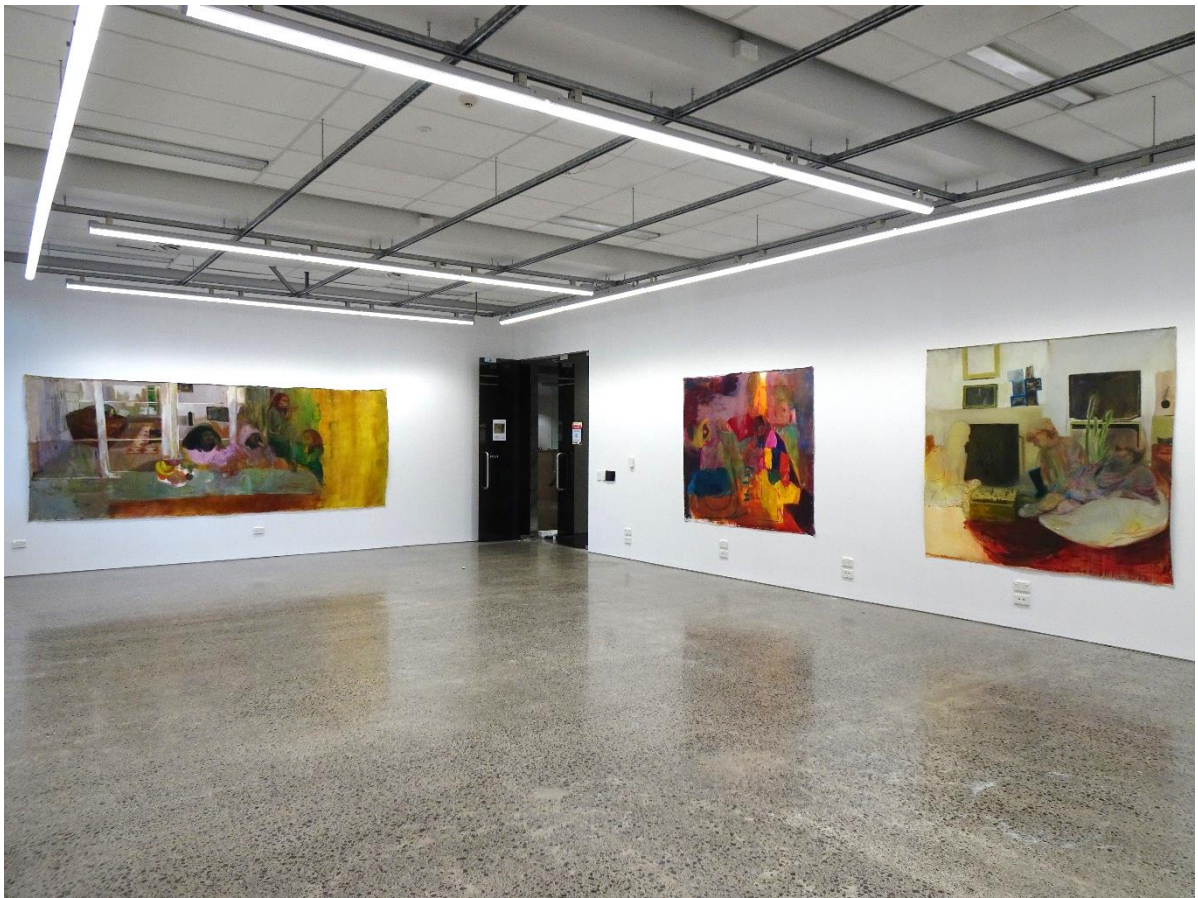


Figure 40. Exhibition installation, St Paul st Gallery 3 #5



Figure 41. Exhibition installation, St Paul st Gallery 3 #6

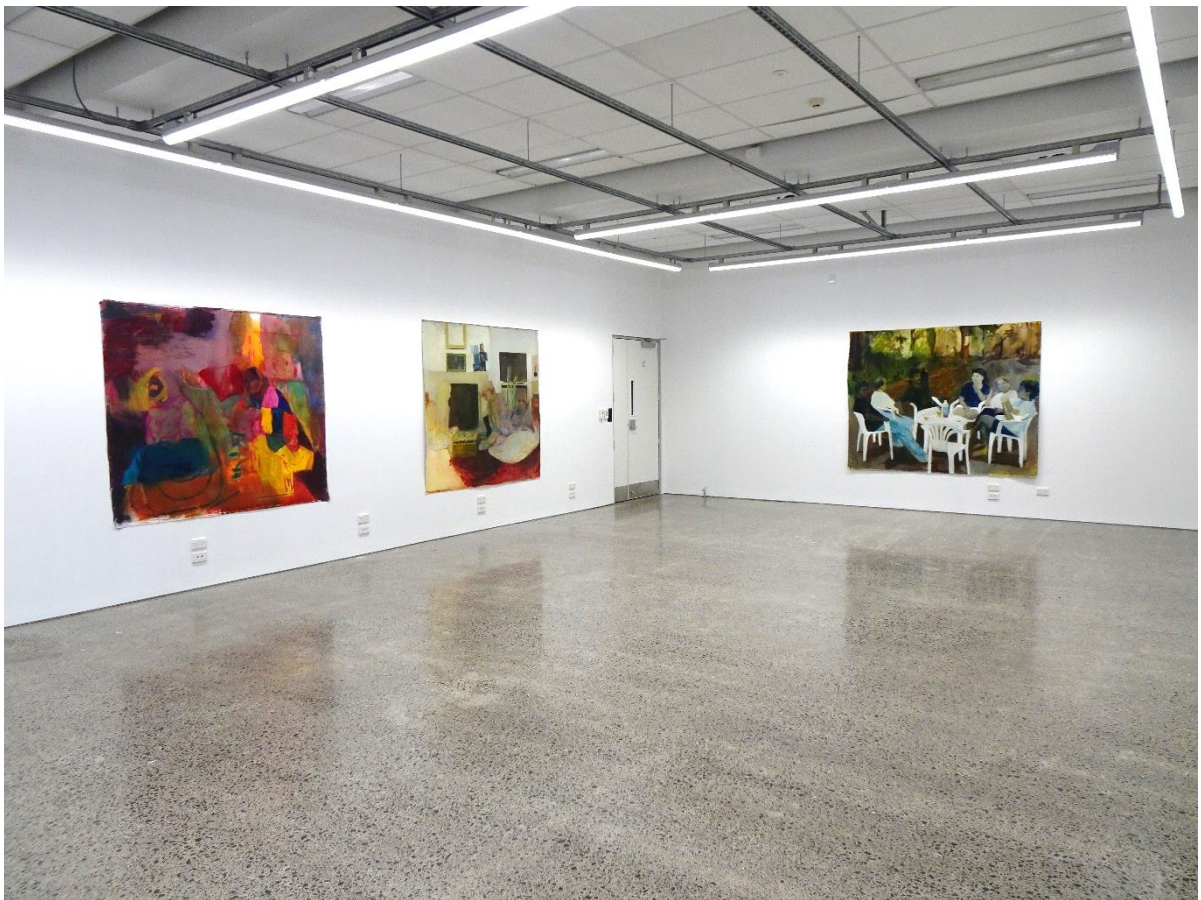


Figure 42. Exhibition installation, St Paul st Gallery 3 #7



Figure 43. foreshadow, Oil on Linen, 2021, 180 x 220 cm