

Painted Relationships: Reconstructing the Lens of Childhood

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Abstract

My childhood was full of wonder and imagination; it was carefree and joyful. My project has arisen from my own experience; it explores how childhood is recollected. I am interested in the processes of recollection, and how painting can physicalise the significance of childhood memory. This painting project places me back behind that lens of my childhood, immersing me in a process of recalling memories from ages seven to thirteen. As time passes, memories fade and specific moments and objects blur, but the feelings from those experiences remain, forming the base upon which my thoughts, beliefs and behaviours, and by proxy this project, are built. This practice-led research project examines the invisible emotional ties that bind one to childhood. Adopting an autoethnographic methodological framework, I aim to reveal the unseen relationships between people, objects, and places. The resulting paintings situate recollection of childhood within a psycho-social space where they can be recognised and appreciated. This project aims to develop specific painting methods that can initiate conversations about childhood and the inevitability of growing older. My paintings bridge connections between my personal narratives and those of viewers.

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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 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.

Signed

7th May 2026

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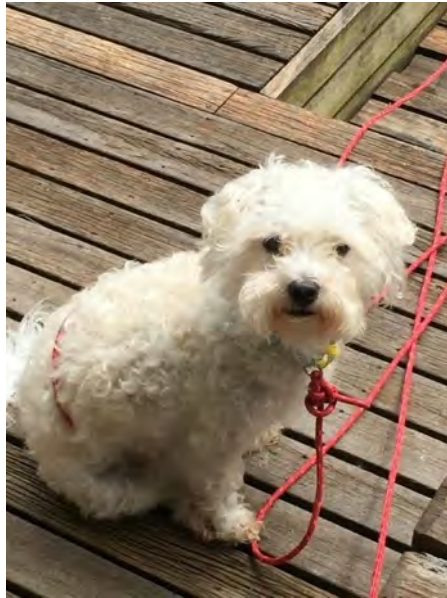
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Sebastian the cat



Snowy the dog



Franklin the pug

Introduction

Every so often I have the urge to remember. I will peel back the lid of a large container at the bottom of my dad's wardrobe, usually buried underneath a pile of clothes; which is perhaps a way of protecting what is inside, or of forgetting their presence. The container holds hundreds of photographs of people, some I recognise, some I don't. These photographs were taken purely for my family, a personal collection of intimate domestic moments from birthdays, school photographs, and trips. I gravitate toward photographs of myself, eagerly searching for moments from my childhood. There are not nearly as many as I hope for. Baby photographs are abundant, but the older years are scarce. I continue to sit with the photographs, sorting them into piles of recognisability, in an eagerness to connect with these memories that have passed. These images of familiarity are something I always yearn for; they represent a sense of childhood that everyone is destined to outgrow; something that I am not ready to accept just yet. I have realised my enthusiasm to remember these moments stems from the fear of losing and even forgetting them.

I am consumed by thoughts of my childhood, striving to grasp at something that is already so far out of reach. My project has arisen from this experience; it explores how childhood is recollected. Through painting I focus on creating a space that encapsulates the feeling of childhood through familiarity. This drive to create a potential space for viewers to reflect connects to my research question: How can painting processes be used to create a space that serves as a portal back to feelings of childhood wonder? This question has led me to explore how far painting processes can be pushed to express emotions and perceptions of childhood. My methods of translating memories are built upon a process I have named 'filling in the gaps,' which looks at the gaps in memory that occur through recollection. I explore the materiality of oil paint, playing around with transparency through glazing. The thickness of oil paint is also significant as it allows to build up layers of paint to emphasise key motifs. My project direction pointed me towards the method of collage, it opened the possibilities of combining multiple motifs from different periods of my childhood. (see fig. 1)



Figure 1. Neve Gresswell, *I'll Be Waiting*, oil on canvas, 2026, 900mm x 700mm

Throughout this project I acknowledge my own ways of composing my paintings through my recollections. In doing this I broke free of the constraints of pressure for an accurate representation of a memory and opened myself up to the wondrous freedom of painting. This project is structured around my own childhood memories, which I navigate via an autoethnographic methodology. By establishing an autoethnographic framework I can draw on my own childhood memories as research material. An autoethnography framework allows recollection to become both method and material, allowing my emotion to guide the research. Understanding that childhood memories can distort through recollection, I use painting and sketching to examine the distortions and gaps that arise. By questioning why I recall childhood memories, I am pushing my research deeper into self-analysis, which occurs through the process of revisiting childhood photographs. I am analysing the objects, places, and people within them, connecting the dots between my surroundings and the influence they had on me. Through my own approach to reconstructing childhood memory I am able to access a space where memory, childhood, and wonder can be explored. I do so by developing compositional method of merging motifs, allowing them to float and exist freely

with one another. This aligns with artist Philemona Williamson; I draw on her methods of blurring the boundaries between race, gender, and emotion to more deeply explore adolescence, identity, and memory.¹ In my instance I merge my childhood memories and use motifs as a way to access the wonder of childhood.

Chapter One: Unpacking Childhood discusses the literature that situates this project. I position myself in the field of childhood and memory, laying the foundations for my own investigation. I unpack research from the three-part documentary series *Myths of Childhood* (1997), and align my research with theorist Robert Davis's understanding of adults' desire for childhood.² This led me towards the idea of painting as a way of reconstructing and reconnecting with childhood. I deepen the research in this chapter by discussing my interest in the inaccuracies of recollection, which builds on child psychotherapist Lisa Miller's claims that, when a child remembers, the influence of experience and perception guides the memory.³ I also draw on Davis and Miller's research to expand on how I situate myself within the field of childhood and memory. I further unpack the inaccuracies of reconstructing childhood memories within the second section of this chapter, expanding on the slippage between real and unreal memory. Psychologist Daniel Schacter's discussion of how memories can become distorted when guided by prior knowledge informs this section.⁴ This chapter demonstrates how I adopt my own understanding of this method of recollecting, using it to my advantage, allowing my current self to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood. I argue that inaccuracies arising from recollection allow imagination to seep in, returning focus towards the wonder of childhood.

Chapter Two: The Logic of my Smaller Self builds on the previous chapter by discussing how I access childhood memories, perceptions, and emotions through my autoethnographic framework. I explore how autoethnography allows me to use my own memories as research that informs my paintings. My concern lies with how my process can best emulate the reconstructing of memories without copying them from a photograph. This chapter dissects how I capture memories; my main method is through my sketchbook for remembering things. This method of utilising my sketchbook aligns with my discovery concerning the balance of intellect and memory. The last section of this chapter explores how I use familiarity as a means of connection. I explore the importance of objects and my need for familiarity, which

¹ "Philemona Williamson," Philemona Williamson, accessed March 18, 2026, <https://www.philemonawilliamson.com>.

² *Myths of Childhood*, directed by Sarah Gibson (National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, 1997), 2H 40M, <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/myths-childhood-innocence>.

³ *Myths of Childhood*.

⁴ Taylor Beck, "Making Sense of Memory," *Harvard Gazette*, August 16, 2012, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/08/making-sense-of-memory/>.

links back to my aim of how these paintings can bridge the gap towards recreating the feeling of childhood.

I adopt Andrew McLeod's understanding of 'attentional arrangement'⁵, merging it with my own methods of reconstruction through a child's lens. In this way I reinvent how I balance decision-making through my adult lens, whilst letting my child's lens slip through. This chapter argues that by using an autoethnographic methodology to my advantage, through accessing and using my own childhood memories as research material, I can create a bridge from my childhood into the paintings. By using my sketchbook to remember things, I am able to record how memory is recalled. I demonstrate this process of recollection through painting and sketching of my motifs and compositions. This exploration seeks to answer how I can create a space that holds the feelings of childhood wonder.

Chapter Three: Remembering Freedom focuses on how I am approaching the reconstruction of my childhood memories as an emotional and psychological translation of what childhood felt like. This chapter discusses how colour operates in my paintings, specifically the colours yellow and purple. I emphasise the importance of these colours as a way to navigate my memories. This can be seen within my exploration of the colour yellow as a background colour (see fig. 2).

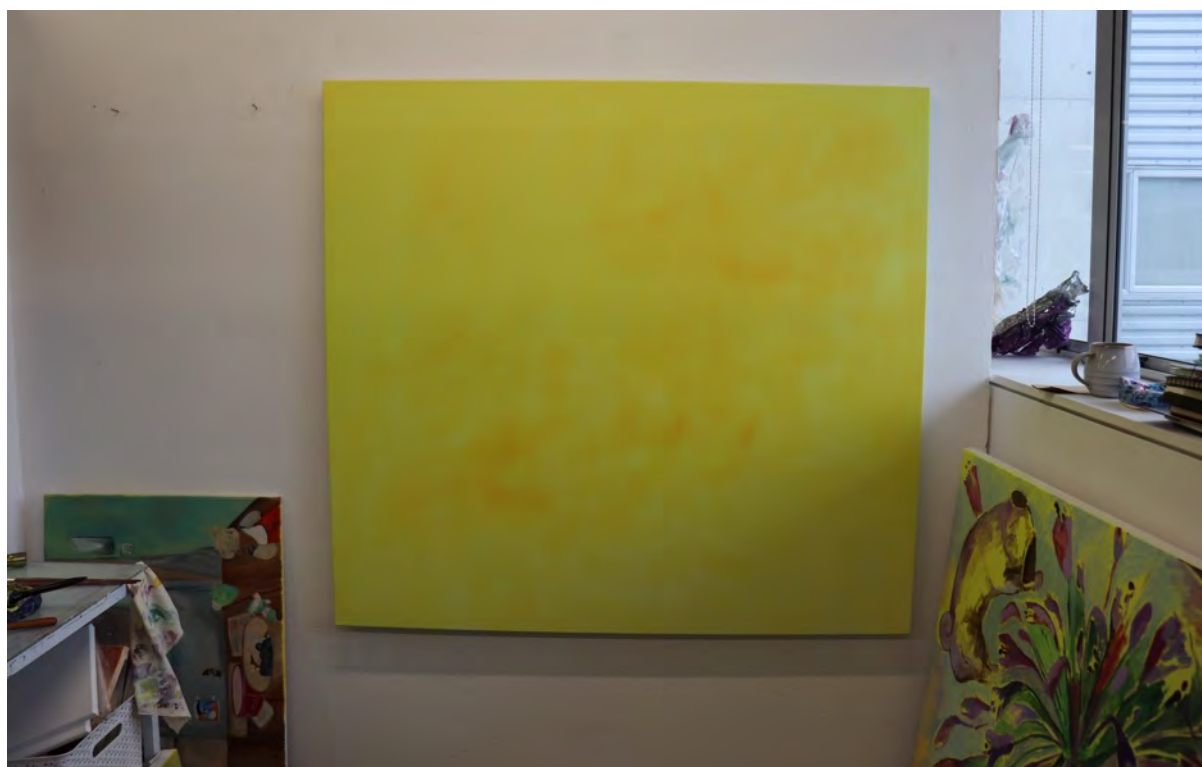


Figure 2. Neve Gresswell, *Studio image*, 2026.

⁵ The Good Oil, host, "Andrew McLeod," podcast, episode 31, *Conversations with Aotearoa Painters*, Spotify, April 13, 2025, 1h 8m, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4zdPZS1odE4GD31ZT9v1CW>.

Drawing from the work of artist Séraphine Pick, I align my use of motifs with her process. I discuss how my motifs operate as cues that mirror child perception, introducing the idea of psychosocial paintings, where my motifs float. In the second part of this chapter I discuss how the childhood freedom I am trying to grasp can be accessed through the freedom of the painting process. This chapter demonstrates a pivotal moment in this project where I compare my most recent work with earlier work; through analysing my paintings I pinpointed the moment when my process began to resonate more accurately with childhood.

This chapter argues that through the adaptation of enhancing freedom and the fantastical, the project pivoted towards a more refined questioning of how childhood wonder can be remembered and reconstructed. The overall trajectory of this project is to find a way to become immersed in the feelings of childhood. I am interested in exploring how painting processes be used to create a space that serves as a portal back to feelings of childhood wonder. Throughout this exegesis I demonstrate the processes I adapted through recollection, and how I used them to create a space in which childhood wonder could be accessed. My resulting paintings are for viewers who are also longing to remember the feeling of childhood and escape the inevitability of growing up.

Chapter One: Unpacking Childhood

This project uncovers objects, places and people that live within my childhood memories. My memories are central to this project; they have played a crucial role in shaping my identity. As time passes, memories fade and specific moments and objects blur, but the feelings from those experiences remain, forming the base upon which thoughts, beliefs and behaviours are built. I am interested in the processes of recollection, and how painting can physicalise the significance of childhood memory. My methods of translating memories are built upon a process I have named ‘filling in the gaps,’ which looks at the gaps in memory that occur through recollection. This chapter lays the foundations for the research. I argue that childhood experiences shape and guide how recollection becomes constructed. I uncover the slippage between the real and unreal within recollection. This chapter demonstrates how I adopt my own understanding of recollection. I discuss how I approach the reconstruction of my own childhood memories, whilst acknowledging the inaccuracies that arise through remembering.

1.1 Yearning

Theorist Robert Davis describes childhood as a magical space, elevating it to a privileged position and making it something to be admired.⁶ Davis states that it “makes the adult perceive the state of childhood as one which is lost in time and in the structures of adult desire. The adult views the child with a mixture of care and envy”⁷ This yearning for childhood is something that adults have created. When I refer to childhood, I mean a time when there were no worries or constraints. Children see the world differently and perceive objects and people with a curiosity. “Childhood is an invention, a social construct, made possible by society as it increased in sophistication and resources. Above all, childhood is a privilege.”⁸ It is not a new phenomenon that childhood is always looked back on when challenges arise.

I am surrendering memories of my own childhood through painted objects, aiming to trigger viewers to reflect on their own. This approach allows me to uncover how the recollection of childhood is triggered. Childhood is often idealised as a time where children are exposed and vulnerable, possessing an untainted, pure perception of the world. Children are constantly

⁶ Robert Davis, quoted in *Myths of Childhood*, directed by Sarah Gibson (National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, 1997), 2H 40M, <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/myths-childhood-innocence>.

⁷ *Myths of Childhood*.

⁸ Janita Crow and Robert Leonard, *Mixed-up childhood* (Auckland Art Gallery, 2005).

experiencing new things, which are crucial to the development of their identity and character. In the three-part documentary film series *Myths of Childhood* (1997), child psychotherapist Lisa Miller notes that when children are young, they take in experiences and assimilate; it is important that information is absorbed and perceived.⁹ This emphasis on assimilation implies an active process of interpretation, which suggests that childhood experiences are shaped by perception rather than passively absorbed. This idea reinforces my own approach, which understands memory as a reconstruction. I adopt Miller's understanding of how information can be guided by perception, and I embed it in my paintings by prioritising the perception of a memory over its accuracy, reconstructing how the memory was internally experienced. Parent-infant psychiatrist Daniel Stern furthers this discussion by explaining how perceptions of experiences in children are sorted and filtered through the brain, which can lead to new narratives. "In the telling, you create a version of what happened, and progressively, the version that you tell of what happened becomes the official, remembered version."¹⁰ Miller and Stern's understandings both come into play within the recollection process; perception and narrating can both alter memory, causing what is real and what is unreal to become mixed, as a result the line between them fades.

1.2 An inventory of Remembered Things

This project combines methods of perceiving objects with narrating my own childhood memories into a physical form through sketching and painting. Objects are always patiently waiting to be remembered; in this project I aim to remember them, to use them once again. The objects I paint stem from my childhood; they are domestic, mostly consisting of houses, chairs and tables. My interest resides in specific objects, from ages seven to thirteen. I chose to focus on this specific age range because of the connection to the memories; they are among the most vivid in my mind, and I recall them better than memories from before age seven. Thirteen is also a key age in adolescence; it marks the transition from childhood into young adulthood. Exploring this age lets me relive memories from when childhood started to feel out of reach. Artist Philemona Williamson explores similar ideas surrounding memory during adolescence. Her paintings blur the boundaries of race, gender, and emotion, enabling her to explore adolescence, identity, and memory (see fig. 3). Williamson's paintings feature figures set within psychological landscapes of coming-of-age; she combines her autobiographical memory with a universal allegory. "There isn't an upside to growing up; [children] become wiser, but they will always have the exuberance of youth, the hopefulness

⁹ *Myths of Childhood*.

¹⁰ *Myths of Childhood*.

of youth and the curiosity that youth brings.”¹¹ Williamson discusses her figures as representing that intersection of innocence and experience. Similarly, my projects sit within this same intersection; instead of figures, I utilise objects.

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Figure 3. Philemona Williamson, *Mother's Lap*, 2023, oil on canvas, 60 × 72 inches, <https://www.philemonawilliamson.com/>.

The objects that I paint act as vessels for my process of remembering; they provide grounding for my experiences and memories of childhood. Objects are powerful vessels for holding memories and can serve as revival cues for recalling them. This is why I use objects within my project: to foster a sense of familiarity. “Whatever the subject of a painting, viewers make use of plotted language to explain its meaning to themselves and others.”¹² My paintings

¹¹ Whimsy, *For years she hid her past. In her paintings, she's ready to talk.*, 2023, 06:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PF52L0I_Okw.

¹² Peter Heehs, “Narrative Painting and Narratives about Paintings: Poussin among the Philosophers.” *Narrative* 3, no. 3 (1995): 211–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107057>.

lack a specific overarching narrative; instead, they contain mini narratives that are personally and emotionally tied to my childhood but remain unknown to viewers unless explained. My interest lies in how my paintings can be perceived and used as a space for viewers to encourage their own recollection. Philosopher Maurice Halbwachs argues that our physical surroundings bear the imprints of ourselves and others. "Furniture and its arrangement, room décor, recall family and friends whom we see frequently within this framework."¹³ My understanding of Halbwachs's statement is that objects in isolation do not trigger recall; instead, it occurs through their responses to their environment. In my paintings I deliberately disrupt this logic by allowing objects to float and to be removed from their fixed frameworks. Rather than guiding viewers through a stable environment, my floating compositions destabilise recall and encourage fragmented and non-linear responses. Through this process, the paintings demonstrate that memory is not dependent on a coherent or understandable spatial order. But instead, memory can emerge through emotional resonance and motifs. This exploration deepens my research by positioning painting as a site where memory can be actively reconstructed.

Daniel Stern discusses the process by which a memory is triggered within the three-part documentary series *Myths of Childhood* (1997). Stern explains that recollection is built around the present context in which it is remembered, stating that when something is remembered, it is reassembled and reconstructed in a different format each time because it is remembered in a different context.¹⁴ Stern's perspective focuses on when and where remembering occurs and how it is situated. My project explores Stern's thinking by merging multiple memories of my childhood objects. In having all of these memories on one plane, I open up a psychosocial space in which time overlaps, intertwines, and becomes irrelevant, and where emotion can be acknowledged. This decision is key to my research because it positions memory not as linear, but as a layered experience. My paintings explore how memories are recalled through feeling rather than chronological order. I demonstrate that emotional resonance can structure the recollection of a memory better than factual continuity.

Writer Roger Shattuck deepens this discussion in *Proust's Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition in A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* (1983), stating that: "A fuller grasp of the object comes only when all images, including the closest, have been brought to rest on a uniform plane"¹⁵ Shattuck's analysis shows how Proust uses shifting perspectives to transform experience and memories towards the understanding that in order to full

¹³ Maurice Halbwachs, "Space and The Collective Memory," in *The Collective Memory*, Internet Archive (Harper & Row, 1980), 1, <http://archive.org/details/collectivememory00halb>.

¹⁴ *Myths of Childhood*.

¹⁵ Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition in A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton University Press, 1983), 48.

understand you must gather all available perspectives regardless of whether they conflict. Shuttack argues that memory is not linear, it requires looking at events from multiple angles and times all at once. My understanding of this proposition resides in how an object is viewed over time; it could break, deteriorate or become something new. I adapt Shuttacks analysis, bring my own childhood motifs together, allowing them to exist all together within the paintings.

1.3 The Real and The Unreal

Through this project I have come to understand the extent of slippage between what is real and what is unreal in processes of recollection. There is a constant play between the two that I only identified through a pressure to recall. I aim to place myself and viewers in a space of remembering, where it's impossible to distinguish what's real from what's not. Instead of trying to correct what is known and unknown, my project aims to uncover how the slippage happens in the first place. I am interested in exploring how far this slippage of recollection can be pushed, regardless of whether the memory is real or unreal. This aim becomes important because it shifts the focus away from factual memory and instead allows emotion to guide the paintings.

Like Stern, psychologist Daniel Schacter also explains how memory can become distorted through the processes of remembering. Schacter uses an example of cooking to contrast with the recollection of memory: it starts with a recipe, and as the food is cooked, new information is added, which could include past cooking experiences and prior knowledge.¹⁶ In this way, memories are not recorded but reconstructed by incorporating pre-existing and new information. I align my project with Schachter's and Stern's claims about how memory becomes embedded with inaccuracies, because it treats distortions not as a failure of memory but as an essential part of it. It informs how I approach layering and reconstructing imagery within my paintings. My oil painting, *Death Stare* (see fig. 4), depicting the repetition of a floating cat within a garden scene, demonstrates this approach. This painting reveals how I have adapted their claims and further experimented with the slippage of my current memory. *Death Stare* shows how I have incorporated my perception of the memory in the present through my cat Sebastian. The intention isn't to accurately represent my memories, but to allow them to be guided by my feelings and recollections of my present self. I push the play of real and unreal, in hopes of mirroring my process of remembering as accurately as

¹⁶ Daniel L. Schacter, et al. *Psychology/ Daniel Schacter, Daniel Gilbert, Daniel Wegner, Bruce Hood*. Third European edition.(Red Globe Press, 2020), 198.

possible. This mental journey back to childhood offers a second chance to recognise and acknowledge significant moments.



Figure 4. Neve Gresswell, *Death Stare*, oil on canvas, 2026, 1400mm x 1300mm.

Artist Pierre Bonnard acts similarly within this realm of memory. Bonnard's painting process starts from an experience of a place. Bonnard views painting from life as a distraction, as the ever-changing light leaves him stuck on the details of painting the object.¹⁷ In protest, he created his own way of seeing and remembering. Bonnard's process of sketching in his daybook enabled him to encapsulate his surroundings through sketches and notes that described the weather, temperature and colours at that time. These served as visual cues for when he would paint them in his studio. Bonnard's *Preparatory Sketch for The Bowl of Milk*

¹⁷ Dita, Amory, *Pierre Bonnard: The Late Still Lifes and Interiors* (Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2009), 14.

(see fig. 5) shows just how immediate he was in his sketching, caring only about getting the initial lines down, allowing his experience to guide the work's later development. Art Historian and critic Joseph Masheck noted that Bonnard's sketches do not act as a specific blueprint and "are less like renderings than like the notational sketches of a designer, perhaps with the name of a colour written right in."¹⁸



Figure 5. Pierre Bonnard, *Preparatory Sketch for The Bowl of Milk*, 1919, Tate.

My method of sketching in this project builds on Masheck's understanding of Bonnard's sketches. They are not an exact guide to copy from, but they are embedded with emotion and colour cues. Bonnard's methods eliminate the pressure to produce a spatially accurate painting, valuing the emotions that arise from experience over the accurate translation of visual landscapes or objects within them. My paintings aim to do the same. I focus on the feelings associated with childhood, aiming to mirror them in my paintings, and prioritise affect over accuracy; through this approach I challenge the notion that memory must be factually coherent to be meaningful.

¹⁸ Joseph Masheck, "Bonnard Drawings," *Artforum*, December 1, 1972, <https://www.artforum.com/features/bonnard-drawings-209925/>.

Artist Christian Boltanski situates his own practice within his memory. Stating that “you can tell the truth more truthfully than with the truth itself.”¹⁹ Throughout his exploration within his practice he uncovered some implications of recollection. He stated in conversation with art historian Tamar Garb that, through the consistent lies he had told about his childhood, he revealed he could no longer distinguish between his own memories of it and the universal narrative he had created, thus rendering his childhood a fiction rather than a reality.²⁰ My project delves into these gaps in memory, much as Boltanski does.²¹ I, too, believe that I have created a false childhood, layered on top of experiences that I think I have undergone. Through my experience of recollecting I have noticed that the childhood memories I keep returning to are those with strong emotional attachments; I return to the happy ones within this project. Through this process I acknowledge the influence of imagination. My memories become sugar-coated and are changed based on how I associate with them now; with this realisation I recognise that each time I return to a memory, it is altered. This project aims to identify and expose these altered gaps, not to rid myself of them, but to acknowledge their existence, to paint them into reality. I do so through my sketching and painting methods. These sketching and painting processes reveal the key points at which objects are remembered, which can be evidenced, for example, via simple overlapping lines or colours. This reconstruction of real and unreal memories is then woven together through a constant back-and-forth of adding and removing objects and filling in gaps. By showing this interplay between the real and the unreal, I aim to evoke the influences that surround adults and children. My paintings create a space that allows viewers to have a second chance to appreciate and remember childhood and all the wonderful moments that come with it.

Through this chapter I have established my childhood memory as a process of continuous reconstruction rather than a retrieval. Drawing on Schacter’s and Stern’s discussions of memory distortions, as well as the practices of Bonnard and Boltanski, I have argued that the space between what is real and unreal is not fixed. It is instead constantly negotiated through the process of remembering. In my paintings, this negotiation is made visible in works that prioritise emotional resonance over factual memory. This understanding is significant to this project because it shifts my work’s focus away from representing childhood, and towards how current emotional states reshape it. The following chapter extends this thinking by moving from theoretical to methodological exploration. It examines how my autoethnographic methodology positions me as both the subject and researcher within the

¹⁹ Sarah Moroz, “Christian Boltanski: The Artist Counting the Seconds till His Own Demise,” *Art and Design*, *The Guardian*, October 26, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/26/christian-boltanski-interview-faire-part-marian-goodman-gallery>.

²⁰ Ian Farr, ed., *Memory*, Documents of Contemporary Art Series (MIT Press, 2012), 11.

²¹ I acknowledge the major differences between my childhood and Christian Boltanski’s childhood as he was born in 1944 and endured his own fight for survival during the holocaust.

project, discussing how my methods of 'filling in the gaps' mirror memory and recollection. I discuss how I balance intellect and memory, claiming my current adult lens whilst also uncovering my emotional child lens. It extends and tests what I have discussed by exploring how these conceptual conditions are created through making.

Chapter Two: The logic of my smaller self

This project began with a personal impulse: a desire to return to a childhood I have not accepted is gone. My eagerness to relive my childhood feeds this research. This chapter delves into how an autoethnographic methodology enables me to use my memories as research material. I discuss my childhood memories by exploring the slippage of intellect and memory. Lecturer Mike Hayler notes that: “The links between the stories we tell ourselves about our ourselves and our own identities seem clear, but the power of narrative memory comes not from precision or accuracy but from how we relate to our constructions and reconstruction of the past.”²² This chapter focuses on how the methods and methodology of autoethnography enable me to navigate the reconstructions of my childhood. Like Hayler, I believe that precision and accuracy are not the glue that holds memory; rather, it is the process itself of recollecting a truly significant memory that is important. I discuss how my methods have shifted throughout this project, and how I arrived at my current sketching and painting methods. I also delve into how familiarity and autoethnography sit alongside each other to inform my research’s central inquiry.

2.1 Autoethnography as Methodology

To work within the field of autoethnography I position myself at the intersection of autobiography and ethnography. “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005).”²³ This positioning allows my personal recollections of childhood to function simultaneously as lived experience as well as a site through which social and cultural influences can be examined. Autobiography includes writing about oneself, often drawing on memory and reflection on experience through the examination of texts or photographs.²⁴ These reflections are then heightened through personal narration to translate the experience. Ethnography is where participation and observation collide. It means writing about a cultural experience, in my instance childhood. The combined processes and practices of autobiography and ethnography inform how autoethnography operates.

²² Mike Hayler, “Autoethnography: Making Memory Methodology,” *Research in Education* 3, no. 1 (2010): 5.

²³ Carolyn Ellis et al., “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (138) (2011): 273–90.

²⁴ Tony E. Adams et al., “Autoethnography,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011>.

In this project autoethnography positions my childhood experience as my primary source of research material. Instead of treating my childhood memories as a factual source, autoethnography allows emotion to guide the research. Working within this framework allows recollection to become both method and material. In this way, it allows my memory to be treated as a process of reconstruction, which guides decisions on scale, repetition, distortion, and form. This can be seen in a close up of the painting *The Table Remembers* (see fig. 6) Through this approach the paintings become more than documentation of childhood; they function as reconstructions of my own lived experience.



Figure 6. Neve Gresswell, *The Table Remembers*, 2026, 950mm x 750mm.

By drawing on my own memories, I aim to make a space where viewers can connect through a shared understanding of childhood. I acknowledge that no childhood is like mine; childhood is individual and unique. Autoethnography allows me to use my memories as a tool in my paintings; they help me investigate and analyse my childhood. “Insider knowledge does not suggest that an autoethnographer can articulate more truthful or accurate knowledge as compared to outsiders, but rather that as authors, we can tell our stories in novel ways when compared to how others may be able to tell them.”²⁵ I acknowledge these paintings may not resonate with others; my main intention is to express my own experience, but my hope is that viewers will connect with the paintings.

I continuously question how and why I recall memories; in doing so, I am allowing my paintings to move beyond nostalgia into an examination of my own remembering. Theorist Tony Adams wrote that: “Given the focus on personal experience, autoethnographers also describe moments of everyday experience that cannot be captured through more traditional research methods. Doing autoethnographic fieldwork allows what we see, hear, think, and feel to become part of the field.”²⁶ I support Adams’ statement; using my memories as research material enables me to explore more deeply how I incorporate emotional attributes within my paintings. This project explores how autoethnography operates as a bridge between childhood and a painted psychosocial space. This space can invite viewers to recognise the importance of their own childhood and to reflect on it.

2.2 The beginning of my methods

This project started by viewing photographs from my family’s collection (see fig. 7).²⁷ I mainly looked into the ones that I couldn’t remember, because I am interested in the unknown, the time that I have forgotten.

²⁵ Tony E. Adams et al., “Autoethnography.”

²⁶ Tony E. Adams et al., “Autoethnography.”

²⁷ This collage of photographs is included only for the examination context. It will be removed post examination and before the final exegesis is submitted to AUT Library's Tuwhera.

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personal privacy reasons

Figure 7. Neve Gresswell, *Family photographs*, 2025.

My process of capturing the significance of childhood memories involved copying these photographs. I aim to paint these childhood moments, to remake and relive them, offering a second chance to acknowledge and appreciate them. The unfamiliarity of these photographs is what intrigued me, the sections of not knowing but wanting to find out. Through painting family photographs, I began to notice that the people and objects in them were more significant to me than the photographs themselves. This realisation shifted my focus to the objects and people in the images. I found that masking and obscuring them highlighted their absence within the painting (see fig. 8 and 9).



Figure 8. Neve Gresswell, *Say Cheese*, 2025, oil on canvas, 900mm x 600mm.



Figure 9. Neve Gresswell, *Jars*, oil on canvas, 2025. 600 x 510mm.

I deliberately masked the figures to draw attention to them. I wanted to mask the figures to spark a conversation about importance, raising questions of why they are covered. To continue this push of absence and masking, I adapted a collage method, cutting and chopping pieces from my family photographs. In doing so I allowed myself to fill in the gaps of what I did not know or could not remember. Through the repeated process of painting from my family's photographs, I realised that my lack of connection to the imagery was restricting me. I want my paintings to be connected to my childhood, and I cannot represent it accurately if I cannot connect or remember the moments within the photographs. This thought prompted me to gather different childhood photographs, specifically those from ages seven to thirteen. I can draw on these images and my own memory more easily because the time was not too long ago. This shift allows me to draw more from my memory than from the photograph. My interest in the process of remembering began to develop at this point in the project, when I finally let go of my fascination for the accuracy of a childhood memory. Within this exploration I made a series of four paintings each with a time limit of a day to paint. (see fig. 10, 11, 12 and 13)



Figure 10. Neve Gresswell, *Day Painting One*, oil on canvas, 2026, 450mm x 650mm.



Figure 11. Neve Gresswell, *Day Painting Two*, oil on canvas, 2026, 450mm x 650mm.



Figure 12. Neve Gresswell, *Day Painting Three*, oil on canvas, 2026, 450mm x 650mm.



Figure 13. Neve Gresswell, *Day Painting Four*, oil on canvas, 2026, 450mm x 650mm.

My one-day paintings aimed to pull me away from the confinements of accuracy that I placed on myself. I believed that I had to replicate the image in order for it to best transcribe the memory, but through this exploration I uncovered that this attempt at accuracy was holding me back from truly accessing the emotions embedded within my memories. Letting go of accuracy became a key shift in this project; it pushed away the constraints of perfection. I started letting go of making the paintings perfect, detailed, and realistic, and instead focused on the process of recollection. I allowed this shift because I began to acknowledge that objects and people can be incorporated into paintings without being fully rendered. This letting go of accuracy prompted the pivot away from masking figures and more towards the objects surrounding them. In focusing on the objects I lost sight of their surroundings. I decided to let them float within these scenes, not worrying about their original physical context, and to just let them exist. The focus turned towards objects and how they had no reason to float, but they still did. It is from this process that the idea of psychosocial spaces originated.

To encapsulate all my emotions and perceptions from my childhood memories I describe my paintings as psychosocial spaces. This is not to be confused with psychological space, which “mainly refers to the mental and emotional state. Psychosocial, on the other hand, involves the way that an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are influenced by and influence the social contexts in which they occur.”²⁸ In the paintings objects are not isolated forms; they carry traces of the environments and interactions from which they are derived. In my case the objects I incorporate derive from childhood; they are associated with family and home, rather than a universal condition of memory. This floating allows them to break away from constraints of a specific narrative, and into a fluid space where they don’t have to make sense, a space quite similar to childhood. As a result, my paintings resist linear narrative and instead become nonsensical, relying purely on the idea of a fantastical childhood.

2.3 Balancing Intellect and memory

A significant factor in my inquiry lies within the processes by which I reconstruct memory. As my research question states, I aim to expose the distortions that are inherent in processes of recollection. I use my sketching method to explore distortions in memory, this method starts by drawing imagery from my childhood into my *Sketchbook to help me remember things* (see

²⁸ Hasa, “What Is the Difference Between Psychosocial and Psychological,” *Pediaa*, January 8, 2023, <https://pediaa.com/what-is-the-difference-between-psychosocial-and-psychological/>.

fig. 14), and I use childhood photographs to support them, filling in the sketchbook's blank spaces with my own reconstructions of what I remember.



Figure 14. Neve Gresswell, *Untitled Sketch*, 2026, pen on paper, A5.

Through repetitive drawing I discovered an interest in specific motifs, such as family pets, toys, and my childhood home. I utilise the sketchbook as a way to remember; I let go of the constraints of perfection when composing a painting, instead I just get lost in the sketching of my memories. In doing so my motifs begin to detach from their source images. Rather than functioning as representations, they are released from their fixed contexts and allowed to exist freely, no longer confined to a specific narrative. The process of working within this sketchbook allows me to be more responsive to memories that may not immediately be remembered. Rather than being fully forgotten, these memories exist as fragments within the sketches and paintings. Through sketching these fragments begin to surface and expand; it is not only a way for me to record memories but also to activate them. During this method, there is a slippage between intellect (my own decision-making) and memory (my child lens). It is through this slippage that my imagination overruns my forgotten memories. I start making things up, letting my imagination take hold. The sketch becomes distorted as I try to fill in the gaps of what I cannot remember. Memory becomes unstable, and the sketch moves away from accuracy, pushed further by the emotions I hold within those memories.

This slippage between intellect, memory, and imagination continues through the painting process, but develops differently. Through the process of painting I am making many decisions as to how these objects are being painted, as well as the negative spaces between them. My autoethnographic methodology remains throughout this process, allowing me to build on my fragments of these memories. An example of this process is shown in the initial stages of the painting *Death Stare* (see fig. 15).



Figure 15 . Neve Gresswell, *Underpainting Death Stare*, 1400mm x 1300mm, oil on canvas, 2025.

At First, I only painted my dog, Snowy, but as I revisited my memories of her, I kept thinking of my cat, Sebastian. His insistence on being included in the painting was evident; this recollective process resulted in five versions of Sebastian appearing within the painting, mirroring his continuous invasion of my memory (see fig. 4).

Objects overlap and become covered; remnants of outlines and colour are all that remain. There is a constant back-and-forth of subtraction and addition of detail, guided by remembering and forgetting. This process is not only guided by what I recall, but also by what becomes increasingly irrelevant whilst I paint. Certain details are reworked, enacting a form of active forgetting that mirrors the instability of memory. Through autoethnography I

am able to stay grounded in my past experiences and memories. By harnessing my childhood self's perception through my current adult lens, I deepen my connection not only to who I was but also to who I have become. As a result, I realised that instead of viewing the distortions of recollection as a negative, the paintings are exploring the intrigue of how imagination fills them in. This collision of memory, imagination, and intellect reveals that recollection is an active process transformed by the present. Through autoethnography, I situate my childhood experiences within my present-making process and examine how they continue to change.

2.4 Still Familiar

Autoethnography underpins this project by positioning my childhood memories as the primary source of research. I create a strong connection between myself and the objects I include from childhood. My interest specifically lies in familiarity. Comparably, artist Andrew McLeod speaks about the arrangement of attention within his practice. Through methods such as composition, layering, and brushstrokes, he is able to create a push and pull between what is noticed and what isn't. I adapt this method of an arrangement of attention through my adult lens, but I still allow the perceptions and memories of my younger self to influence the reconstruction alongside my adult lens of the painting. McLeod gives an example: "if there's a cat in the painting, you'll notice that quickly, but if there's a bucket in the foreground, you won't notice it, because you're not trained to notice buckets in your daily life."²⁹ McLeod's painting *Claire and Giotto* (see fig. 16) overlays objects and figures into intricate, intriguing eye-spy-like settings; even though these objects are placed in odd places, and are disproportionate, they still feel familiar. The artwork successfully enables viewers to connect through common domestic objects. My objects aim to operate similarly to McLeod's. I deepen this idea of familiarity by introducing familiar objects alongside unfamiliar ones. By doing so, I am able to deepen my understanding of the instability of recollection. This method of mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar points viewers to notice the ambiguity and fabrications that can arise through recollection. The coexistence of objects enables this approach; it disrupts the reconstruction of logical memory, making the objects feel both recognisable, but out of place. This process reflects how recollection often blends real fragments with imagined and distorted elements, which strengthens my intention to create a space that represents childhood; not through accurate representations, but through recall and invention.

²⁹ The Good Oil, host, "Andrew McLeod," podcast, episode 31, *Conversations with Aotearoa Painters*, Spotify, April 13, 2025, 1h 8m, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4zdPZS1odE4GD31ZT9v1CW>.



Figure 16. Andrew McLeod, *Claire and Giotto (detail)*, 2024, oil on linen, 1900mm x 2800 mm, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland.

Artist Michael Craig-Martin pushes the idea of familiarity further. He calls it “imagery of familiarity,” noting that viewers must connect with the object through existing knowledge of it.³⁰ “The arrangement of objects in Craig-Martin’s paintings is often ambiguous, inviting viewers to reach for their own narratives and, in doing so, look at familiar things with fresh eyes.”³¹ Both McLeod and Craig-Martin utilise viewers’ existing encoded knowledge, employing it as a participatory attribute in their practices. By adapting the methods of an arrangement of attention and imagery of familiarity, I can direct attention to reside within the objects, which may serve as catalysts for viewers to reflect on their own childhood memories. To achieve the psychosocial space in my paintings, I combine familiar and unfamiliar motifs. This decision is best seen in my painting, *Where I Return Without Arriving* (see fig. 17), where the objects float within a field of yellow.

³⁰ Ben Luke, host, *A Brush with... Michael Craig-Martin*, podcast, episode S23, E1, The Art Newspaper, July 30, 2024, 58m, <https://podcasts.apple.com/nz/podcast/a-brush-with-michael-craig-martin/id1525997434?i=1000663857560>.

³¹ David Trigg, “Seven Questions with Michael Craig-Martin,” Art UK, October 6, 2022, <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/seven-questions-with-michael-craig-martin>.



Figure 17. Neve Gresswell, *Where I return without arriving*, 2026, oil on canvas, 1400mmx 1300mm.

These spaces are not physical perspectives, but instead are felt and remembered spaces. I construct these psychosocial spaces to allow my objects to operate within a field that is shaped by memory and emotion. The paintings operate as a psychological container, where spatial relationships are deliberately constructed through my adult lens. While the compositions appear unstable, this disorientation is intentionally composed. The familiar and unfamiliar motifs in the paintings carry both personal and shared psychological meaning for viewers and for me. My motifs bridge my personal childhood memory with a collective understanding of childhood. The motifs are painted through repetitive reconstructions within the process; they form a visual language that mirrors the instability of remembering whilst creating a recognisable experience of remembering in the paintings.

Within this chapter I explored how autoethnography can be situated within my project as a means of accessing my childhood memories as research material. I discovered how this methodology is viable for this project in bridging the gap between childhood and my paintings. I found out the importance of isolating motifs within a psychosocial space, creating an environment where the real and unreal intertwine. Chapter three delves deeper into how I utilise colour, motifs, and application of paint to provide emotional and structural grounding within the paintings.

Chapter Three: Remembering Freedom

Within my project I allow colour to reconstruct my childhood memories. Within this chapter I argue that colour is a key tool for my process of reconstruction. I discuss how I utilise the colours purple and yellow, and how they have developed into more than mere symbolic links to my childhood. This chapter focuses on the analysis of my specific material decisions during painting; I clarify how painted processes do not only reflect memory but actively participate in its construction. Through discussions and comparisons of my paintings, I examine how the use of colour has developed towards a more embodied, affect-driven visual language. By exploring the development of yellow and purple, I show how these colours operate as recurring systems that hold and reconstruct memory within the painted surface.

3.1 Purple Room

As a child colours appeared brighter and more alive; colours such as yellow, purple, and green surfaced constantly in my daily life. Yellow is a happy colour; it is generally associated with warmth and is the lightest colour on the spectrum. I consistently start my paintings with it; I am urging it to stay with me and assert its importance. The colour yellow reminds me of my childhood. Throughout my work I use this colour as more than a symbolic association. Through the repetition of yellow within my paintings, it becomes a tool that enables me to reconstruct the feelings within my childhood memories. By establishing a consistent routine of starting my paintings with yellow, I can create a space where fragments of my recollections can float. My approach to using yellow allows me to situate my childhood experiences whilst demonstrating how recollection is constructed. As a result, memory is not a fixed archive, but a malleable, iterative process shaped by my painting decisions.

The underpainting colour did not start out as yellow. At the beginning of this project I explored a range of colours for underpainting: blue, pink, and purple. For example, the initial sketch for *Bugsy* illustrates these experiments with an orange underpainting (see fig. 18).



Figure 18. Neve Gresswell, initial stage for *Bugsy*, oil on canvas, 1400mmx1000mm, 2026.

I settled on yellow after a conversation I had with my dad. At the beginning of my parents' relationship, my dad invited my mum to paint his bathroom yellow, as an excuse to hang out with her. There was no reasoning behind the colour yellow; it matched the tiles already there, so why not? This conversation sparked my interest towards the colour yellow; the underpainting colour moved away from something arbitrary into something symbolically influenced. I acknowledge that my connection to the colour is not apparent from just observing; however viewers may gain a sense of this symbolism through the repeated use of this colour.

When I continue to remember significant colours from childhood, purple always comes to mind. When I was old enough I painted my bedroom entirely purple, it covered every inch of the wall. Purple encased me every day from when I woke to when I fell asleep. Although viewers will not know the personal significance of the colours I use; how they operate within the paintings provides cues that communicate these intentions. For example, in the painting *Where I return without arriving* (see fig. 17) objects such as houses, family pets and flowers float within yellow spaces, whilst purple structures anchor them.

Purple operates as a research tool through which I test how memory can be visually organised. By deliberately using it as a shadow and motif outline, I create relationships between otherwise fragmented motifs. This process reflects the way memory itself works within my inquiry; recollections do not emerge as coherent wholes, but as fragments. Purple allows me to articulate connections between memories even when they may appear chaotic. Purple's repeated presence advances my autoethnographic inquiry by showing how colour can function as a mechanism for holding together fragments of childhood memories. While I have my own connections to these colours, I am aware that others carry socio-cultural associations that go beyond my own childhood experiences. These broader associations can influence how they are read within the paintings. Instead of trying to control the different ways my paintings can be interpreted, I let colour remain open in the work, so viewers can connect with my paintings however they choose.

A contemporary painter whose thinking aligns with my project's inquiry is Séraphine Pick. Her oil painting *Sound* (1995), (see fig. 19) consists of multiple domestic objects, including beds, a mirror, a balloon, and a chair.

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Figure 19. Séraphine Pick, *Sound*, 1995, oil on canvas, Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Pick's artworks construct dreamlike scenes in which objects and figures exist within emotionally guided environments rather than in accurate settings.³² *Sound* is no different, it blurs the boundaries between memory and the process of remembering. This can be seen through Pick's altered motifs, their scale, composition, and form is distorted. This merging of imagination, memory, and lived experience inhabits her painting, creating an intriguing space of coexistence. My processes of incorporating my own motifs of familiarity and unfamiliarity align with Pick's. In *Sound*, there are repeated motifs of paper-bag faces; these are her imagined motifs. They sit within the scene, alongside the familiar objects; they are viewed equally, and they are all allowed to be there regardless of whether they are real or not. My approach towards motifs aligns with Pick; I am also not aiming to replicate individual moments, but to expose feeling as evoked through colour and motifs. Through the use of colour and motifs in my paintings I am inviting viewers to reflect on their own childhood memories, highlighting how colour and motifs can make internal states visible across time.

When I first start my recollection process I use my childhood photographs as cues to remember. I then select specific details and sketch them using my own childhood memories.

³² Felicity Milburn, *Séraphine Pick* (Christchurch Art Gallery, 2009), page number.

Rather than attempting to reconstruct a memory exactly as it occurred, I allow emotion to direct which elements can become forgotten, altered, exaggerated, or emphasised. The application of paint becomes a tool for translating the instability of memory. When starting a painting I am not worrying about how it looks; I am only concerned with rough outlines. This method allows me to approach the canvas with a curious, childlike perspective. This approach is visible in the painting through loose mark-making, shifts in form, layers of paint, and glazing. An example of this approach is in *Death Stare* (see fig. 4), which uses the thickness of oil paint to enhance the memory of movement and the fluffiness of my dog Snowy's fur. This enhancement of her fur is important because it highlights the childhood memories I associate with her. My memory of her fluffy, wild hair is translated through paint, bridging my memories of her, with the emotions they evoke within the painting. Another approach I use is the method of repetition, as in *Death Stare* through the cat, Sebastian. Through repetition I have been able to over emphasise his stare, making it unavoidable, and compelling viewers to give him their attention. This approach differs from the one I used with Snowy, but it yields a similar result. Sebastian's stare also evokes memories; his stare evokes a slight fear and discomfort, and repetition intensifies not just his stare but the memory of it as well. These approaches translate emotions from my childhood memories into the paintings.

I have continuously included repeated characters to highlight the hierarchy of significant objects from childhood. These characters are generally solid, recognisable, and rendered in a way that matches how I remember them, whilst other elements may be smaller and less detailed because they carry less emotional weight. Childhood perception is not governed by linear perspective or adult logic. The compositions in my paintings reflect emotional importance; figures such as my childhood pets are enlarged and centralised, while surrounding elements may appear fragmented and flattened. This imbalance reflects how childhood memories prioritise what feels most significant at a given time, rather than what is spatially accurate.

Childhood perception centres on what matters emotionally; it resists control and structure, and favours exaggeration. This perception enables my paintings to embody how a child inhabits a space, looking into the expansiveness of childhood. When I am adding to, or disrupting the form of the objects, I am reconstructing how accuracy collapses, and how a child's perception can break through. This distortion becomes a visual manifestation of the slippage between memory and intellect. I understand perspective, but I choose to destabilise it, and ground it in my own experience and perception. In doing so I am allowing imagination and emotion to take hold of memory, bringing back the feeling of being a child again in a world full of endless possibilities. My use of colour and repetition enables me to align my

childhood freedom with the fantastical; a space where things don't add up or make sense. These methods reflect a childlike acceptance of the fantastical, where imagination and reality intertwine. These combined methods are significant to my project, constructing a space in which logic is irrelevant. The paintings enable the freedom to invent and reimagine experience, be it mine or that of viewers.

3.2 Fantastical Freedom

Opening up my paintings to freedom has allowed my imagination to take hold, as it did when I was a child. This pivot in my work brought me closer to my aim of reconnecting with the emotions of childhood. As well as harnessing the idea of childhood freedom whilst I paint, I also work with the idea of fantastical freedom. The word fantastical describes something as imaginative or fanciful, wonderful, and remote from reality. This sense has arisen within my paintings. By exploring the incorporation of my imagination within this project I open the door for the fantastical to seep through. "Fantastical, ethereal, and enchanted elements in art reveal a sense of deeper purpose, a supposed 'what if?' scenario associated with familiar subject matter reshaped and refabricated to represent an alternate reality, which places focus on metaphor and symbolic meaning."³³ This idea aligns with my own process, as I take familiar objects from my childhood and reconstruct them within a psychosocial space, that favours symbolic meaning and emotional resonance over an accurate image. The motifs in my paintings have begun to detach from reality; the objects float, and the space becomes psychologically grounded rather than physically grounded. In this way, I use the fantastical to visualise how childhood is remembered rather than how it was experienced.

The painting *Where I Return Without Arriving* (see fig. 17) holds the memory of one of the first homes my family lived in when moving from England to New Zealand. This painting is a pivotal point within this project; through critiques and discussions I realised that my objects did not necessarily need to be grounded in a specific background, and I discovered that objects could speak for themselves. Simply letting objects exist within a psychosocial space was enough to evoke a sense and feeling of childhood. *Where I Return Without Arriving* demonstrates a development in how I apply paint: it is applied with immediacy. This approach first arose from my method of sketching; I was able to harness my memory through the immediacy of quick sketches. I started exploring how memories could be translated into the painting process. Immediacy became key within the painting process, allowing me to focus

³³ "Fantastical, Ethereal, & Enchanted Elements in Contemporary Art," *Titan Contemporary Publishing*, May 31, 2025, <https://titancontemporary.substack.com/p/fantastical-ethereal-and-enchanted>.

on getting the most important information down first. These first lines of the suggestion proved significant. I wanted to keep the initial lines visible because that is what I remembered first. By keeping these lines visible in the final painting, I can preserve the journey of my recollection process.

Comparing *Where I Return Without Arriving* with an earlier work *Bugsy* (see fig. 20), reveals significant differences within my methods involving colour and freedom.



Figure 20. Neve Gresswell, *Bugsy*, 2026, oil on canvas, 1400mmx1000mm.

Bugsy was painted before I established my sketchbook as a key method for recollection. This artwork focused on merging specific photographs and objects in a collaged fashion. *Bugsy* starts to hint at my interests by allowing certain objects to float and avoid being constrained by a specific narrative. However, this painting is too reliant on the specificity of memory and photography. It does not convey the feelings I intend to express from childhood. It feels heavy, and the painting feels cramped. Through this process I realised I wanted to move away from this collage method and instead explore ways to give objects more space to exist without feeling constrained by specific narratives. By allowing my motifs to float, I open a space for them to literally float. This links back to my research question: creating a space that serves as a portal back into childhood feelings.

After *Where I Return Without Arriving* I painted *Bloom* (see fig. 21). This painting shows an agapanthus in the centre reaching out; this central composition is enhanced by a dog lying around it. This painting further explores freedom and the fantastical. Childhood holds a sense of freedom that, as an adult, I wish I could regain. *Bloom* and my new painting *Secret Garden* (see figs. 21, 22) explore an open approach to painting that mirrors this freedom. Unlike *Bugsy* these artworks are emotionally fueled, they are less overworked and more vibrant, which allows them to resonate more with the wonder of childhood. The newer works are less heavy, and are more alive and active. Through gestural and intuitive mark making my paintings open up a space that is reminiscent of childhood wonder. *Bloom* has a sense of movement from the centre of the agapanthus outwards, but it also features a central composition via the pug's body. Originally, this composition arose from a drawing in my sketchbook, mirroring how I would normally start a sketch in the centre of a page. *Bloom* introduces an intuitive dimension to my process, where decisions are crafted through intuitive responses rather than preplanning. Through this process I allow colour and form to arise in my painting and sketching. The decisions involve responding to marks as I paint, which embody a sense of freedom inherent in the process of painting itself. As the painting is not confined to a specific outcome, it can evolve through continuous, responsive acts.

Within *Bloom* I begin to push this intuitive dimension, exploring the idea of childhood freedom and how it can be realised. I fill in sections between the branches of the tree with different colours, layering indigo and magenta, green and blue. I emulate how my memory recalls the agapanthus blooming, pushing fantastical, emotionally driven, intuitive decisions. There is a freedom within painting; it is full of possibilities. I channel this freedom and the intuitive dimension while painting, playing with the transparency of oil paint, layering, dripping, and flicking the paint onto the canvas (see fig. 23 and 24).



Figure 21. Neve Gresswell, *Bloom*, oil on canvas, 2026, 1300mm x 1050mm.



Figure 22. Neve Gresswell, *Secret Garden*, oil on canvas, 2026, 1400mmx1300mm.



Figure 23. Neve Gresswell, *details of Bloom*, 2026, oil on canvas.



Figure 24. Neve Gresswell, *details of Bloom*, 2026, oil on canvas.

Painting allows for freedom: things do not necessarily have to add up or make sense. Establishing the influence of freedom in the paintings allow me to play with paint in more open and bolder ways. *Secret Garden* builds on this discovery by scratching paint onto the canvas (see fig. 25, 26 and 27). This method emerged as I recognised the importance of immediacy; the roughness of certain paintbrushes that left behind marks that appear immediate, and in motion. These marks interest me because they are similar to how my sketches appear. This discovery is significant to my research inquiry as it allows me to preserve the spontaneity of initial childhood reconstruction. Maintaining these marks demonstrates a freedom in my mark-making, revealing how I embrace the immediacy of the painting process.

This chapter has discussed the conceptual shift from descriptive representation of childhood memory to a process-driven approach to painting. By using colour as a structuring device, alongside repetition and intuition I have developed a visual language that conveys an emotional connection to childhood. The emergence of fantastical, psychosocial spaces is a pivotal point in this project, as it allows memory to operate without constraint.



Figure 25. Neve Gresswell, details of *Secret Garden*, 2026, oil on canvas.



Figure 26. Neve Gresswell, details of *Secret Garden*, 2026, oil on canvas.



Figure 27. Neve Gresswell, details of *Secret Garden*, 2026, oil on canvas.

Conclusion

Throughout this practice-led project, I kept my childhood at the core; my eagerness to remember has sustained it. My aims within this project were to explore how painting physicalises feelings associated with childhood. I aimed to uncover the importance of recollecting and remembering childhood through objects, places and people. As such, this project has argued that accuracy is irrelevant when attempting to grasp at and remember childhood. My paintings have demonstrated a sense of breaking free from the constraints of trying to accurately reconstruct childhood memories. This freedom holds similarities to both my childhood and my painting processes.

Throughout this project, my painting processes have developed non-illustrative means to create a space that serves as a portal back to feelings of childhood wonder. Sketching became a key method within this project as I used it to distance myself from my photographic source, thereby creating a space for memory and feeling to enter my paintings. Through sketching, I was able to create floating compositions. My decisions about composition are then led by memories and feelings rather than by my photographic sources. As a result of this method, my motifs have developed and I devised modes of repetition and enlargement to emphasise their significance. In addition, I freed colour from being a descriptive function to better express my childhood memories. Through loose brushwork, I was able to suggest forms rather than clearly defining them; they functioned as metaphors for the experience of grasping for memories. This development of my painting methods allowed my memory to operate as something fragmented that was actively reconstructed through the act of painting. I was able to let go of the need for precision with respect to memories and their recall.

I discovered throughout this project's development that accuracy constrained the feelings of childhood. This discovery prompted a shift in my methods towards immediate, intuitive processes, where gestural brushwork became central to connecting with feelings of childhood. This shift allowed the paintings to become emotionally fueled and resonated more closely with the wonders of childhood. I discovered that my motifs do not have to be fully rendered to be recognised or understood; certain lines and colour can insinuate forms. By pivoting the project towards more intuitive and memory led processes I was able to establish a psychosocial space in which the feelings of childhood wonder are held. Many new ideas can enter and combine within this space, changing how it is perceived by viewers as well as myself. I'm eager to continue to expand on how form can become manipulated within this space, whether motifs stretch, break apart, or combine with others. I intend to continue to harness this intuitive dimension, letting colour and forms be suggested rather than fully

rendered. This directionality will allow me to better hold the feelings and wonder of childhood through painting.

As I conclude this project, I have realized that it did not resolve my desire to return to childhood, but instead reframed it. The act of yearning is not positioned as an escape from the present but as an outcome of remembering. Through painting this yearning becomes productive, a force that allows the wonder of childhood to be continually reimagined.

Installation and Exhibition

St Paul Street Gallery Three



Figure 28. Exhibition View, St Paul Street Gallery Three. Image by Paul Chapman



Figure 29. Exhibition View #2, St Paul Street Gallery Three. Image by Paul Chapman



Figure 30. Exhibition View #3, St Paul Street Gallery Three. Image by Paul Chapman



Figure 31. Exhibition View of *Secret Garden*, St Paul Street Gallery Three. Image by Paul Chapman



Figure 32. Exhibition View of *Spotted*, St Paul Street Gallery Three. Image by Paul Chapman



Figure 33. Exhibition view of *Over the Hill*, St Paul Street Gallery Three. Image by Paul Chapman

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