

A Thesis in Seasons

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Abstract

A personal take on a thesis. Alyson Davies uses narratives of her rural Albertan upbringing to position her art practice and experience in Emily Carr University's MFA program. Davies painting primarily based in autobiographical narratives, is also met by supplementary practices across other media where seasonality and nature direct the subject of the works. The thesis paper aims to contextualize Davies' artworks along other artist's work, and within the physical and inner worlds the work exists in.

Acknowledgments

This work was created on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples. I acknowledge and give humble thanks to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and Selílwitlh people for their ongoing work in protecting this land. The work would also not be possible without the Indigenous peoples who have and continue to enriched the lands of my home in Treaty 6 Territory, the home and meeting places of the Nêhiyawak, Anishinaabe, Niitsitapi, Métis, Dene, and Nakota Sioux.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Fallow
3. Sow
4. Tend
5. Harvest
6. Exhibition
7. Conclusion

1. Introduction

This paper may be unconventional. Perhaps if I'd been in the MFA program this two years ago, this paper would parallel those you those are accustomed to seeing but these are unprecedented times, so academic offerings and deliverables follow suit. I view this document as a chance to unpack this experience of an MFA during a time of a global pandemic, in a season where things have not been easy. I offer something personal and contemplative, it attempts to give context to the way that my work through the program has shifted towards being an honest reflection of my experiences.

My classmate, Mollie Burke, compared our cohort to little plants growing through the cracks in concrete. As one of these plants I make no sweeping statements. I uncover no big research. What I do and have done, is rear my heart towards the sun. Dig my feet deep into the crumbly foundation and spread my arms out to hold my companions as as they have held me.

As a plant in a crack, I know that my time is short. I haven't been pruned for perfection. I present to you the sums of what I've been given. A humble plant cannot give pretences. This support paper is personal and lyrical it comes to you in in four parts divided into seasons. If papers were not linear devices. I would have liked the sections to be consumable in a cyclical nature.

Within this paper, I discussed the work of several artists whose lives/work are interesting to me. I use storytelling to discuss home sickness, family, personal histories and my art practice. I discuss some of the paintings I have made, alongside my other practices.

2. Fallow

At home, behind the house, our blood is hot from the exhilaration of the fast downhill ride and the exertion of climbing back up the hill. My sister, cousins and I lay in a pile at the bottom of the ravine. Our quick toboggan was halted by a dip into the creek bed and by the tall grasses, golden and stoic in their winter stand in the sylvan wetland. My body is supported by the thick snow. We remain frozen with heavy breaths. A slight breeze moves through the branches above, framing a dark skied midday moon through the swaying branches. The dry grass leafs slither against the snow crust. I can hear my blood in my chest. It's slowing. I feel the warmth of those next to me and the cool of the frozen landscape moving through the layers of the green snowsuit that used to be Grandma Hansen's. I noticed small entries into the snow used by mice who live comfortably in the well insulated grasses below. I take a mitt-full of snow. My tongue is refreshed by the coolness and surprised by the the metallic earthiness. We look at each other. Our faces are bright red from the cold and exhilaration. We watch for white patches that indicate frostbite, but with such warm hearts and hot soup up in the house the chances of this are low this New Year's Day.

Home is Treaty 6, somewhere where the northern lights visit and bison once stood. A environment kept pristine by the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Métis, Dene and Nakota Sioux. Home is the aspen parkland, an ecotone somewhere between a true prairie and the boreal forest. Home is land, cultivated and harvested. Home is my large family, generations who collaborated with land and seasonality in the new and old worlds. Home is the incredible dance of distinct seasons. I have belonging in community and familial warmth, but not land. The old countries, those that bore my grandparents, will not claim me, as a Western European mixed granddaughter who is without her mother tongues. My ancestors of Scots, Irish, Welsh and English were poor farmers used as pawns in a colonial government's scheme. My Danish grandpa, Grandpa Hansen came to Canada to exchange his physical labour in house construction for a life outside of a post war tragedy. My Gramma Davies (nee Jonker) was a middle child in a family who had been ostracized out of their community in rural Holland during WW2, the entire family, refugees to Canada (Gramma said she was bullied in school in Canada for being a D.P. - a

displaced person). We were assimilated into this country built on stolen land. Someday the land will have my body, meanwhile my heart searches for connection with nature. My longing for belonging with the land feels awkward and complicated as I position myself as 3rd, 4th, and 6th generation Canadian, as well as a settler and a child of refugees.

On November 12, 2019, winter started early: the car struck me into the darkness, isolation and quiet of the season. Twice that night I left. Once by the impact of the car hitting my body or by the sudden stop of my head on the pavement, I'm not sure which. The second time — I requested to leave, as my battered and shocked mind couldn't fathom seeing with waking eyes my mangled right wrist be aggressively forced back into a straight line. I'm not sure where I was in those moments, I wasn't home — in my body. I was somewhere, somewhere where time didn't fold, somewhere where the trauma wasn't traumatic. That self, the self that was gone, has been with me in the year following the day I was hit off my bicycle.

That winter I was pushed. Bedrest was marred with attending to schoolwork. In my fledgling beginnings in healing, Grandma Hansen began in the opposite direction. Winter was healing and dying, learning to orchestrate a funeral while making visits to the surgeon. The season is regarded in Pagan traditions as a time for unexpected visitors to arrive. Grandma came to her funeral reception. We drank to her, I saw her standing just outside the kitchen, she was secretly smiling and trying not to draw attention to herself. Was it also her sitting on the chair of the funeral home? Mom secretly brought her urn to Christmas parties, placing her behind the couch so others wouldn't be uncomfortable. Auntie Lisa says that she wishes that we had got the urn with the flowers on it. Grandma's urn is golden brown metal with three engraved wheat stalks. I suppose this is where I took the inspiration to start working with the motif of wheat. When I was home I drew comics with my non-dominant hand in the moments of waiting. [figure 1]



Nov 25 2019

I park my sister's car.
This November is brown + old.
Mom calls Grandma isn't
waking like she did yesterday.
They've taken her off the
drip.

Fig.1

Alyson Davies

Off the Drip, ink on paper, 8"x6", 2021

This year, 2020, winter is different, without frequent family visits back to the cold Central Albertan prairies. Without deep freezes or snows my agrarian body does not recognize this time as winter. The cues of leafs on trees and the rains signify its still autumn, time for gathering stores, for nourishing mind and body in preparation for that which will hopefully come. I feel myself longing for the true death of the season. I am exhausted. My naturopath says my adrenals are drained. I just want to retreat. Pandemic protocols, travel bans, rising numbers and the fear, feed anxieties— my home of the dry prairie air is out of reach and far beyond. I fear that without experiencing the deep winter that the seasons of my soul will be in longing for another year. I feel trapped in this city, where I am an uninvited guest, where the rain soaks through my winter coat in a way snow never would.

My artwork reflects the seasons as my body does. The darkness leaves my skin pale and translucent. My hair darkens as to match deep nights. My hands push needle and thread through the heavy layers of material of the forming quilt [figure. 2]. Its warmth is a comfort, the time required to stitch the hundreds of raised threads harmonizes with the early nights and time spent in search of cozy warmth. Paintings become barren and reflect that which nature is doing. Heading towards the dark solstice, my practice turns towards domestic arts. I research, prepare, build, cook, bake, sew, create, and share in preparation for festivities. In the later part of the season I plan for growth. Preparations are made to seeds and gardens are planned. The season orchestrates the creative output.

My artwork is influenced by seasonal shifts. I sow seeds, and tend to seedlings on my kitchen table. I photograph and sketch the garden as it grows and dies. Seeds are saved or consumed. This embodied practice or real world research slips into every moment. Harvested choke cherries become jam which becomes a painting. I live for those moments where time slips away and the noticing of something small consumes the day.



Fig. 2
Alyson Davies
Together Quilt, mixed fabrics, 7x9', 2020.

Ancestors' hands, deft at their trades, created gorgeous craft works. I research Dutch woodcarving traditions, as Opa Jonker (my paternal Great Grandpa) has passed and can't tell me about his influences. My grandmothers' needlework, quilts, knits all from a lineage of knowing and passing. I imagine that their muscle memory is within my hands. In the year of the pandemic my spirits are low as I approach a year devoid of seasonal familial encounters. I take solace in thinking of my ancestors moving through times of discomfort and take strength from them. I built a quilt because my GG (maternal Great Grandmother) quilted— she was the mother of my Grandma who just passed. I comfort myself as GG would have comforted Grandma. Over Thanksgiving I mended one of GG's quilts. She made it from her curtains. The fabric is cream and blue and aqua and has slivers of silver threads moving through like waves. The work is an embodiment of history and lineage, of quiet moments of contemplation and revelry and connection with nature. On my own quilt, hands two hands encircle a shaft of wheat, the wheat from Grandma's urn, or from when Dad used to tell me to chew the raw grains until it turned into chewing gum in my mouth, or from my community which knows by touch the weight of a bushel.



Fig. 3

Alyson Davies

Ground Swimming, paper stop motion animation, 1 minute 47 seconds, 2021

I created the puppets and photographed a stop motion animation called Ground Swimming [figure 3] in the very early days of the pandemic. This was before my living room became a painting studio, before anything had normalized. I started by doing a pencil crayon drawing of myself. I was longing to go swimming. I have a lane swimming practice and had just been allowed back at it after my injury. The pool was closed, as were all things. I wanted the drawing to move, with the weightless buoyancy of being underwater. The drawing, with some help of scissors and string, began to move, and I was inspired to create a story. Paper me in swimming gear dives beneath the snow line and moves through an emotional subterranean adventure which takes place in my parents backyard, the piece was shot in front of the balcony window, where the daily shifts in sunlight draw attention to how time has felt during the pandemic. The storyboard was just one sketch encompassing the first few scenes, the rest of the story unfurled itself to me as I moved the puppets bit by bit. The paper props were made as the direction of the work unveiled itself. Ten months after shooting. I edited the photos and amassed them into the final piece. Music was serendipitously found via YouTube's sound library.

3. Sow

Past the tanks of purple gas and beyond the garden, the farm's yard had several hog barns, a corral, a chicken coop and an off building which held a loud hopper machine which spewed out chop. We would fill buckets and head out to the end of the yard where a gate held the cattle in pasture. As we passed through the gate Grandpa Hansen would holler "COBOSS-COBOSS-COBOSS". Later I learned that through his Danish accent he was saying "come boss. The cattle would come with a joyous canter, eager for food and to see their beloved.

On a walk to school, I was listening to the Fair Folk Podcast (Boyce). This episode was about the historic folk singing of Scandinavia, designed to communicate to cows, sheep or other humans over far distances. The singing is called kulning, and when I heard it a rush of familiarity came over me. The pitching and movement of the songs in the podcast were incredibly like Grandpa calling his cattle. The tradition had been passed to him growing up in Denmark during the war years. Through the sounds of kulning I feel connected to the traditions of my ancestors and to the part of my family that exists an ocean, a continent, and a generation apart. Since his passing, I have stood on the edge of pastures calling "COBOSS" to cows, kulning to an audience which stares at me and chews.

When I was a teen my cousin's grandmother had me come to her house. She was an artist who started painting in her adult years. I remember showing her my preteen sketchbooks full of pencil drawings of hobbit houses, anime and cartoons. She brought me to her library and showed me a figurative painting book. She told me that I should stop drawing those cartoons and make art like this— she pointed to a painting of a young girl whose hair of hung over her downturn head. I tried to stop drawing cartoons, undergrad tried to push them out of me. After graduating, they came back. As a kid, I loved comics. I took every compendium of For Better or Worse and Zits from the library in town. Our neighbour, a farmer who lived on his generational home, had a shelf full of his and his sisters' collections of 1960s and 1970s comics, Beetle Bailey, Richie Rich and a lot of Archie. My sister and I would fill grocery bags full of comic books to borrow and devour. The words helped my literacy, the drawings formed part of my visual

language. Together these forms facilitate storytelling. These days I find myself most interested in autobiographical or diarist comics, like those of American Artist, Meredith Park. I see Park using comics as a tool to understand her positioning. Her comics are less a series of events, and more so a reflection of her inner world and the small everyday moments she finds herself within. I find her comics resonate with the way I approach my work.



Fig. 4
Alyson Davies
Honger Winter Tulips, ink and watercolour on paper 4"x4", 2019

I drew biographic comics [Figure 4] for my Gramma. When I asked her about her childhood during World War II in Holland she cried, telling me about the moments which catapulted her family across the world, looking for a life free of persecution. Opa was forced into a German work camp due to his knowledge of carpentry. Oma kept the children clothed. I feel it's important for me to know the stories and to keep them and share them; but I see the cost it takes for Gramma to relive them. During the war Gramma would look through the pages of her Opa's wallpaper sample books [figure 5]. I think about my family— their craft practices are not separated from their lives. Craft is their afternoon downtime sure, but also can be their ability to continue living.



Fig. 5
Alyson Davies
Wallpaper, ink and watercolour on paper 4"x4", 2019

I aim to have a practice which flows with the seasons of life. I view my painting practice in the same part of my life as my practices in sewing, ceramics, and gardening. Other professionals talk of having a work-life balance, I strive to have an art-life balance, a life that is full of creativity and beauty. I look to the legacy of English artist Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) and specifically her home, Charleston House.

Bell decorated Charleston in a way that surpasses typical home decorating. She painted the house's surfaces, walls and furniture. Figurative motifs cover fireplace, cupboard doors and lintel. Bell's painting and drawing practices oozed off of her canvases and surrounded her daily life. I see Bell as a champion of living an artistic life— a life filled with art. Her practice didn't stop at the door of her studio. When looking at the rooms decorated by Vanessa Bell's hand, I think of the quilt I made. I want to create art which encompasses life, and a quilt which nurtures and holds. I imagine my grandchildren caring for the quilt as a tangible link to me. Other domestic based projects I have done recently include refinishing a dresser and vanity and painted a stepping stool with roses. I consider these pieces to be a part of my practice as much as the paintings are.

Bell's paintings tell a very personal narrative of the people she knew and the spaces she inhabited. Charleston has a garden surrounding the house. This garden was important to Bell's work. The garden was a communal endeavour, and Bell was involved in choosing the types of plants that were grown. She also oversaw the transition between the garden being a practical space for food production during the first world war and the post war garden which primarily focused on florals as seen in the restoration plans. The garden was in full view through Bell's studio window and featured in many of her paintings. For example the collaborative mural created with Duncan Grant for the Berwick Church features as described by Bell's granddaughter:

Dutch garden designer, Piet Oudolf. Oudolf uses traditional media in his plans which look at first glance to be abstract drawings, the plans are undulating in form. In the physical, Oudolf's gardens celebrate each season of the garden. His plants are allowed to grow seed pods and exist in their glorious deadness throughout winter, which is contrary to traditional gardening practice which expects plants to be cut down when not growing. I plan my gardens with undulating forms and celebrate the beauty of the seasons.

Bell decorated the bedroom by painting directly onto its surfaces, as seen on the footboard of the bed frame. Bell renders a still life surrounded by a painterly frame, the still life features items common to a domestic space and souvenirs from her garden. A tight bouquet sits on the surface and beyond in the reflection of the mirror is seen a vase holding red poppies. I also have painted poppies [figure 7]. In my work poppies and other plants from the garden sit in a vase. Just like the bed painted by Bell, my flower arrangement sits in a domestic space. The work is a capturing of a specific moment in the seasonal garden.

My interest in Bell's work is primarily her relationship with her creative practice, the next artist I will discuss has my interest due to the work that she makes. Mary Fedden devoted herself to still life. The subject she painted was not accidental, nor disinterested. Motifs repeat within her catalogue— poppies, shells, jugs, cats. Colour is used to set tone and build up the surroundings. Fedden uses tried and true colour combinations, complements yellow and purple in *Thistle* and analogous hues in *Still life with quail eggs and jug*. The pigments are strong and full of energy. The paintings are seductive and intimate; they de-



Fig. 7

Alyson Davies

Baseboards and Poppies, oil on canvas, 36"x48", 2020

mand attention.

In my painting, *Kitchen Floor Composition* [figure 8], I complement a pure cadmium green next to a slightly whited cadmium red; the two colours vibrate. The effect is calmed by the purple rug, which operates in its own world of swirling textured marks and docile arrangements of grasses and flowers. Pinks speak to light greens, the blue jar sings with its timid orange flowers. The colour theory is basic but effective. The consistency of detail in my work changes between areas. This is somewhat different from Fedden's work as she seems to handle her paintings with consistent intricacy. There's a degree of world building in the painting where landscapes are abstracted, changed, and built upon. The world she creates is emotional, and magical. I can almost imagine how she set up her table with objects in her studio, which she paints as a likeness, then past that, in the background of the work she imagines and creates a space, an alternative world, an interior world.



Fig. 8
Alyson Davies
Kitchen Floor Composition, oil on canvas, 30"x36", 2020

There's a theatricality to her paintings as seen in *Thistle*, where the players are lit by a strong light source shaping their character. The thistle, tall in the small vase, frames the main scene and also acts as an architectural focus; a set piece. The setting is completed by the green grass of the space— it acts again as a framing device but also as a supporting character. This green collar surrounds the players and with its strong horizon line shows what is the stage and what is the scenic background. I consider the stage often when painting. Looking once more at *Kitchen Floor Composition*, the objects as players are not competing for stage time. They are arranged in levels as not to bore your eye. Their costumes are played the same mind, but are treated differently to complete the character. Forced perspective, unsure of itself, uneases the audience; they are brought into the stage and also pushed out. This painting differs from that of Fedden's as the players are rendered flat. The side stage lights are out and only the front lighting is offered to this audience, no shadows cast. This painting along with others were all created during the spring and summer of the first covid lockdowns. My life narrowed to two spaces: my garden in a neighbourhood traffic circle and my apartment. I moved between the two ecosystems, growing, snacking, painting, sleeping. I would gather flowers, arrange them and paint them. There was meditation in the practice. I am not completely interested in vanitas traditions, or the relationship between still life painting and my Dutch heritage. I painted flowers in vases because that's all I could do at that moment. These pieces take place in domestic spaces as that is where I was spending most of my time. In retrospect I see this period of still lives to be of experimentation, and in time spent looking.

4. Tend

Home is the aspen parkland. We call the aspens— poplar. Black poplar grow in my grandparents yard. In the early summer the trees produce and drop their buds which land on the ground and stick to your bare-feet. White poplar sway in colonies, my family has quit mowing parts of our lawn so that the poplar can come closer to the house. The encroaching saplings feel like friends returning. It is the prairies, mostly because the trees were cleared by settlers. It's the prairies because in late summer the fields are ripe with canola, hay and wheat.

Once an astrologer told me in a reading that I would spend the rest of my life trying to recreate the feelings of my childhood. This yearning for a time before seeps into my work. The manifested work comes as I meditate on memories of my rural raising: Yellow days, late summer, stacking hay bales or laying in the sun warmed soil between rows of peas, snacking on the crisp shells.

I was raised in a large and encompassing family. I am of the first generation to not grow up a farmer, though I grew up on a lot of farms. My dad's career in building and renovating, and fixing, is embossed on my body in muscle memory and scars, my grandparent's farming and craft practices are forged into my heart and imagination. I work with my hands as it is what we were raised to do. Hands are present in my work because I can't stop thinking about how we connect through them.

After my older cousin's, my BFA was the second degree earned in the family and the MFA will be the first advanced degree. An education which often makes me feel more apart from my family than I'd like it to. I grew up driving tractors, running in the long grasses and participating in family butcherings. The artwork on my family's walls are largely cross stitches done by Gramma, aunties, Mom and now my sister.

In the forest behind our house sits a broken down combine, as a child I would see it through the trees it looked ominous the great dark shape, maybe a small house or shed. When I was older it became a friendly space, like a rusty metal tree fort. The machine is hemmed in by trees, the grow through and around the bars and grates, the combine is part of the forest.

On top of the combine's hopper I lit candles and wrote my intentions. In the same summer I organized hide and seek in the woods near the church for the younger children attending Vacation Bible School. I was baptized into the Ardrossan United Church, the same as my mom. Church was one of the social centres in my community, I loved the church, the activities, the smell, the people, the pies for sale at the annual Ardrossan Picnic and Parade. Girl Guides was held in the basement and theatre rehearsals too. I never thought of church as being religious. The greatest lessons were those in taking care of community. Once I started university I stopped attending church. I was busy and growing and critical. And honestly I was embarrassed, as I had started crying during every hymn.

As a teenager I also developed a practice in paganism and witchcraft. Church was a place for intergenerational coming together and my circles were a place for nature and creativity. I have always been a spiritual seeker. I partook in pilgrimages in 2015 and 2019 where Catholic imagery became solidified in my internal lexicon. Sometimes I call myself a culturally christian witch, sometimes spiritual, sometimes agnostic. I can hold all true in my heart or none depending on the season. Remembered hymns from my childhood seep into my head as I move through tasks in the studio. Do their words have resonance in the world I am creating? At church we sang a song that went "Turn the world upside down, wear your clothing wrong side round, put your feet in the air and your head on the ground we're turning the world upside down".

On a bike once more, this time armoured in a high-vis helmet. I was mountain biking on single-track. I stopped, waiting for companions to catch up. Chatting and laughing I stood straddling my bike. Looking backwards I shifted my stance the frame's weight or height swayed my bal-

ance. I felt myself fall. Down the precipice, headfirst on my back. "Go limp, go limp", My brain reminded me. I tumbled six feet through the fronds and salal, landing on my shoulders on the smooth bark of a fallen tree. Thankfully I missed the portion of the tree where broken branches stick up with aggressive points.



Fig. 9
Alyson Davies
Another Fall, oil on canvas, 48"x60", 2021

The moment was short, I was bruised but okay. The moment followed me into the studio and coalesced into the piece *Another Fall* [figure 9]. In truth I think I decided to paint the moment while it was happening. I sketched a thumbnail of the composition. The initial drawing on the canvas went through some modifications and was marked in various colours of oil paint.

The canvas I have been using lately is a light linen-cotton blend. I'm honestly not sure if I'll continue using the material once I've used up my stash. It feels a bit loose for my liking, though it could be an opportunity to try glue sizing. I really like the smooth surface which doesn't have the dips and bumps of a higher duck canvas. Once arriving at the composition I painted the back ground in Persian Pink by Williamsburg Paints, which was a test in their quality as usually I use Gamblin or Windsor Newton paints. To hide or disguise all of the unnecessary line work within the figure, I took zinc white to the body. This treatment caused an area of washy, rainbow-y colour which initially I intended to allow to dry and then cover, but after some time I realized I really liked what was happening in the sweater and pants and hardly touched it. The foliage was partially remembered, partially reference from online images and also studied from fronds I picked from the campus landscaping. The saturated pink creates a vibrating backdrop for the greenery. The original intention for the painting was more subtle. But as it emerged I found it is quite energetic and feels akin to the psychological state of the figure. The face and head were painted quickly and are lacking detail. The detail is in the hands, where one is in contact with the forest floor and the other reaches with the fall. The painting does not show the action of the fall, as much as the discombobulated moment of impact, with legs like pretzels.

Landing upside down, I was thrown from a bike again. I've taken some of my worst falls while in Vancouver, there are more besides this and being hit by the car. I've concluded (maybe esoterically so) that I am ungrounded in displacement and/or homesickness.

I chose to move to Vancouver because it was close to home. The closest of the options I had. The flights are quick, and they disguise the true distance between. I didn't want to admit homesickness. I was embarrassed to miss home, a region criticized for conservatism and extraction, a place of long winters. Central Alberta is not a tourist destination like Vancouver. It doesn't tout Olympics, or rainforests or an ocean view. I cling to my redneck/blue collar home with such intensity. Frequent visits home allowed my soul to cope, but the pandemic has closed travel. Home is really more than a thousand kilometres away and barred by health advisories. Homesickness feels like a childhood affliction, but historically it came as a medical diagnoses. Quoted from Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia... is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy".



Fig.10

Alyson Davies

How Many Days in the Summer? AKA, Homesickness, oil on canvas, 36"x30" 2020

Homesickness is a supporting character in my work, *How Many Days in the Summer? AKA, Homesickness* [figure 10]. On the table in the oil painting sits a vase in the tradition of Dutch ceramics, blue and white, depicting a traditional rural scene, pastoral landscape, cow, trees, windmill. Royal Delft decorates Gramma and Grandpa's kitchen. For some these are souvenirs, but for our family they are objects of identity. The vase holds a bouquet of aromatic curry bush flowers. Two other vases and bouquets litter the painting, vases become temporary homes for sprigs and blooms. Behind the curry plant is a figure. The woman's face is partially obscured by the steam of the kettle held in her hand. Her gaze is elsewhere, she is not in the world of the painting. Her other hand holds a ceramic mug decorated with the stripes of the Hudson Bay Company. Her snack of cheese and crackers waits on the table. She is me. I feel awkward in using self portraiture based work, it feels cringy and self centred, lacking in humility and shameful. I take refuge in the work of Australian artist, Anita Klein.

Klein centres herself in her paintings and prints. Her subject is her own experience, as she exists in nature, domestic spaces and within her family. She paints herself in small moments with a knowing serenity, and arms which are often embracing others. "I knew as a very young child that I could take nothing for granted, and my work is a kind of counting my blessings for my peaceful and privileged life." quotes Klein in an Instagram post. Her paintings radiate love of self and for others. "Ravel said he wanted his music to be complex, but not complicated. Anita Klein might say the same of her art. There is a grand simplicity to her works..." Anita Klein's website quotes John Russell Taylor (Klein). While not a visual artist, I think of Canadian Author, Sharon Butala as she writes about her life in *Perfection of the Morning*. Butala writes about her experiences in rural Saskatchewan centering herself in the short grass prairie. I think both Butala and Klein make self portraits are are so full of grace, it leads me to believe that I just need to get over my discomfort in it. I also look to German figurative painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907). The painting *Reclining Mother and Child* (1906) is built using an unconventional composition in which the side laying figure takes up the majority of the horizontal canvas similar to *Another Fall's* composition. It is evident that the artists I align with are what American artist/ writer Amy Sillman in "Further Notes on Shapes" calls "B-list" artists, "...the "off-

modern,” the knight’s move, the not-quite-right, the great ones who never got credit.” And Sillman’s editors (Charlotte Houette, François Lancien-Guilberteau and Benjamin Thorel) take this thought one step further, contrasting artists who are “...bound to the notion of the masterpiece and that painfully seek meaningfulness... [versus those outliers that Sillman embraces who] are marked by a sense of the present and self-involvement.” Outside of these “B-list artists I am interested in English artist David Hockney’s use of colour in his landscapes beginning in the 2000’s. Of more recent works I am drawn to his iPad drawings for their immediacy.

Behind me in *How Many Days in the Summer? AKA, Homesickness*, is a two paned window, each showing the same Albertan prairie landscape, but as though it’s a stereoscopic image but without the stereoscope to view it as one. In the other room the door opens onto a west coast scene, water, mountains, sky. The multiple suns speak to the passage of time.

This painting was first drawn as a thumbnail, then scaled in pencil crayon onto the canvas. Colours I choose may refer to a specific piece of clothing worn, or the colour from a memory, others are chosen intuitively (which may only be partly true as I cannot negate the weight of an art school education in colour theory upon my practice). The multiple perspectives of windows and the view out the door are chosen in a surrealist vein. A manifestation of my head-space, occupying both the coastal city space of Vancouver and the openness of home. Multiple suns in the painting, nods at time.

I painted vases, vases and other vessels made appearances in my paintings as objects which held the flowers or whatever I was painting, but they’re also attended to as I also work within Ceramics. Ceramics is a new media for me and most of my work is explorative and in educating myself and are projects in experimentation. Working in ceramics forces my brain to work three dimensionally, The working back and forth allows my brain space to recalibrate between pieces. Within the program when I’ve shown the ceramic works, they have always been within the context of the paintings, in critiques we’ve discussed that the ceramics are perhaps object/symbols shlepping off the paintings [figure 11]. As though the ceramic pieces are a

physical representation of objects in the paintings, their physicality gives the viewer a more thorough understanding of the world of the painting. While the two mediums at this point are not cohesive completely. I can imagine an integration in the future à la the later works by American artist, Betty Woodman. Her ceramic and painting worlds collide in theatrical scenes where, "Each work became a domestic drama (or comedy)" (David Kordansky Gallery). My works made over the summer of 2020 were heavily based in the domestic due to the conditions of the pandemic. However, my more recent works have pivoted, focused emphasis on the domestic and direct influence of Woodman feels farther away.



Fig. 11

Alyson Davies

Hand with Flower, Hand with Wheat, cone 6 ceramic, glaze, underglaze, multiple sizes, 2020

5. Harvest

I ran across the field— the golden days of the harvest were filtered by the dust in the air. My dad slowed the combine and my small body climbed the immense steps into the belly of the machine. I rode in the cab with Dad, listening to the crackling AM radio, CFCW, playing old country music. It's the same radio station my grandparents play in their kitchen on Sunday mornings. We ate egg salad sandwiches and breathed in that thick smell of harvest. The linear plantings gathered towards us, I watched the rows disappear beneath the header. I felt like I was in a ship, staying on course through yellow waves. The window into the hopper showed the gathering grains, densely packed in their not quite dry state. The steel guitar on the radio punctuated the long days and nights. As a teenager I cried when my parents auctioned off Grandpa Hansen's Massey Ferguson tractor at Uncle Willie's sale. The tractor was painted creamy white and when Grandpa lived he would put a piece of foam on the seat and let me drive.

In using Instagram for sharing artwork, I've been introduced to the internet aesthetic of Cottagecore. It's inspired by a romanticized interpretation of agricultural and rural life and has been described as "arcadian simplicity which promotes environmentalism" (Slone). Cottagecore is populated by images such as cottages, gardens, calves, meadows, and pies. It is consumed as an escapist fantasy for urban individuals. My current circumstances as a displaced rural person make me much alike the other consumers of the aesthetic, but different in that I do have experience with country living.



Fig.12
 Alyson Davies
Trowel Under the Moon, oil on canvas, 60"x48", 2020



Fig. 13
 Alyson Davies
Blue Bird Orange Calendula, oil on canvas, 48"x36", 2020

My relationship with a cottagecore-like dichotomy is explored in my painting, *Trowel Under the Moon* [figure 12] where after an unexpected collision with my kitchen window a little brown bird met its untimely death. The bird bounced off the window, landing on my neighbours' balcony. I knocked at their door. He spoke of how its body looked as though life could come back to it, but he as a retired minister was not God and did not have that power. He blessed the bird and I took her home. That night I laid her in a straw basket and we walked to my traffic circle garden. I picked calendula and marigold blossoms and lined the small hole I had dug. When laying in the hole she was radiant. The orange blossoms vibrated in the just dark of city night, I thought of a halo. I worked with this story a second time in the piece *Blue Bird Orange Calendula* [figure 13], focusing on the moment when I lowered the bird into the grave. I wanted the orangeness of the blooms to be more apparent so I painted the bird blue. The perspective in this painting is from my own experience, *Trowel Under the Moon's* viewpoint is that of the viewer. In both iterations I paint myself in blue collar clothing, or what I sometime think of as my rural Albertan person uniform. This uniform is also seen in my painting *The Gleaner (Sheafs)* [figure 14]. It is usual for me to bury animals, our cat Henrey is under the elm, there's a robin off the East side of the creek. I laid the two pieces of a blue and white and green broken bowl (that someone had gifted my garden) over the freshly filled grave. Around the ceramic covered grave I made a small fence of bamboo and twigs. Cars drove by, apartment lights flicked on and off. It felt strange to be doing this ritual in the city, something that feels so sacred, surrounded by dog walkers and headlights and the sounds of the port. I am used to having sight of the stars at night, with coyotes as company, somewhere where you can feel the wind, and the sensation of quiet fills you. Perhaps I am not a typical consumer of Cottagecore, as such a person would watch this burial online. I suppose I am just trying to be a rural person in the city, whatever that looks like.



Fig. 14
Alyson Davies
The Gleaner (Sheafs), oil on canvas, 36"x48", 2020

I have begun to recognize that my choices to leave the country for the city were not true choices. The ongoing urbanization of rural people is a trend that's been happening across the country for generations. My grandparents retired from farming in the 1990's, the last decade in which a small family farm could expect to sustain itself (Fletcher and Knuttila). Large agriculture reigns these days— it seems only farms with thousands of acres can make their living farming. Small farmers lease out their fields or worse sell to large agro (Patterson) and get work elsewhere. I think about my parents, raised on small farms that eked out livings. I think they both wanted an easier life for themselves. After a stint in town they bought an acreage, a plot of land which felt rural but asked for a yard work commitment accessible for a couple working full-time. The acreage is now threatened by suburban sprawl. Urbanism doesn't just pull, it also swallows. Soon our family's 1.5 acres will no longer be rural, the combine in the woods is slated to be removed and in its place a multi-use pavement trail, lined with those trees which still have their plastic name tags and who are held to the earth with stakes and wires,

Grandpa Davies used to yodel, out on the field, a way to pass the long days. Dad says he was quite good, but now in his 80's Grandpa no longer yodels. This year I traced my genealogy. On Samhain I visited a new found Great Great Grandmother's grave, took a swig and poured wine onto the roughly trimmed grass. At the garbage-can I found a purple flower on the grass. Thank you Grandmas.

6. Exhibition

This section was written after the rest of the paper, circumstances have changed and editing into text where Grandpa Davies is still with us is too difficult and fresh right now. This section is meant to be a reflection on the thesis exhibition. I set up the paintings on two opposing walls one wall had the three orangey/ autumnal paintings the other, four paintings in winter and spring colours. Beside the orange paintings hung the quilt, and nearby, on a plinth a ceramic vase. In truth I contemplated pulling down the quilt and taking out the ceramic piece. I felt the paintings were doing enough on their own. But if I suppose for the sake of the show being a cumulation of the course of the grad program, it feels suitable that the craft pieces would be included. In discussions since I've come to realize which paintings in the body of work are working better than others. I'm also considering if the paintings and craft works do have different audiences and therefore, differing locations for showing. The exhibition will be going online and It will be interesting to see how the artworks work in the digital context. I have begun making new paintings that sit within the shown body of work, and look forward to continuing this series of paintings. An insight that came through the defence process is that I may consider deconstructing this text, collecting the areas of personal narrative and perhaps creating a memoir type work, which may be a graphic novel/ comic or perhaps a written work with illustrations. I'm not sure at this point what this would look like, but in the coming weeks I may start the process and see where it goes.

7. Conclusion

This document gives context to how I go about creating my work. Expressing details of the process of how pieces are conceived and manifested. Due to being a multi passionate person, my practice moves between media. Specifically during this program, between painting, ceramics, printmaking, stop motion animation and quilting. I have outlined artists who inspire me and whose practices I can draw parallels to my own. In my work I do not aim at the canonical, instead I am invested in personal moments and reflections. I have written about how feelings of homesickness have intensified during the pandemic and how that influences my work. My practice is activated by seasonal shifts in the natural world, where gardening also plays a major role. My work expresses narratives based on personal experiences and is an act of storytelling.

List of Figures

1. Alyson Davies, Off the Drip, ink on paper, 8"x6", 2019
2. Alyson Davies, Together Quilt, mixed fabrics, 7'x9', 2020
3. Alyson Davies, Ground Swimming, paper stop motion animation, 1 minute 47 seconds, 2021
4. Alyson Davies, Honger Winter Tulips, ink and watercolour on paper, 5"x4", 2019
5. Alyson Davies, Wallpaper, ink and watercolour on paper, 5"x4", 2019
6. Alyson Davies, Garden Plans, ink on paper 4"x6", 2020
7. Alyson Davies, Baseboards and Poppies, oil on canvas, 36"x48", 2020.
8. Alyson Davies, Kitchen Floor Composition, oil on canvas, 30"x36", 2020
9. Alyson Davies, Another Fall, oil on canvas, 48"x60", 2021
10. Alyson Davies, How Many Days in the Summer? AKA, Homesickness, oil on canvas, 30"x36", 2020
11. Alyson Davies, Hand with Flower, Hand with Wheat, cone 6 ceramic, glaze, underglaze, multiple sizes, 2020
12. Alyson Davies, Trowel Under the Moon, oil on canvas, 48"x60", 2020
13. Alyson Davies, Blue Bird Orange Calendula, oil on canvas, 48"x36", 2020
14. Alyson Davies, The Gleaner (Sheafs), oil on canvas, 36"x48", 2020 Works Cited

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