





***Can Paintings Dream?***

by

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## Abstract

My thesis research investigates how the physical and material processes of painting can elicit memory and dreaming. Through the material research of painting, this thesis explores what memory could look like and how it behaves. Painting for me becomes a mode to access personal memories and imagine alternative realities. My physical studio space becomes a dwelling place for dreaming. Mixing acrylic paint, engaging with colour, building shaped canvases and putting brush to canvas all encompass a process-based approach to research within my thesis. In the large-scale shaped canvases, imagery of doorways and windows from my previous homes function as a place of origin. Memories, even those unremembered, line the walls of the spaces we grew up in, they are embedded and woven into its architecture. This imagery is used as a space to hold and embrace playful mark-making and colour application. While their reference to home architecture is rooted in real spaces, my paintings are also imaginary. Moments spoken and movements made in these spaces are transformed into form and colour. The painted mark traces memory; with liveliness it manifests into a visual representation of daydreaming.

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I would also like to acknowledge that place, whether imagined or geographical, is important in this work. At Emily Carr University, I am doing this research as an uninvited guest on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh nations. I would like to also acknowledge that the two homes from which the work is inspired are located on the traditional and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan People and the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut’ina, the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations, and the Métis Nation.



## A Note to Readers

Throughout this thesis support paper, you will notice coloured text that has been *italicized*. These words come from titles of paintings and/or refer to memories from my childhood and/or the process of painting. Take time as you read through this paper to pause on the poetic words. They are intended as extensions of the memories reflected in the paintings.

This paper explores four paintings titled: *The sounds never escape me* (Reverie and Memories of Home sections), *Now They Live Inside My Mind* (Canvas and Stretcher section), *I Hold You, You Hold Me* (Acrylic Paint section) and, *Removed, stained, embraced. It's in the structure of my bones* (Painted Marks section). The research and findings discussed here are not only tied to these specific paintings but can be applied to all the paintings I have made during the MFA program. This thesis has allowed me the opportunity to establish a research methodology for my entire painting practice that I will carry out after this degree.

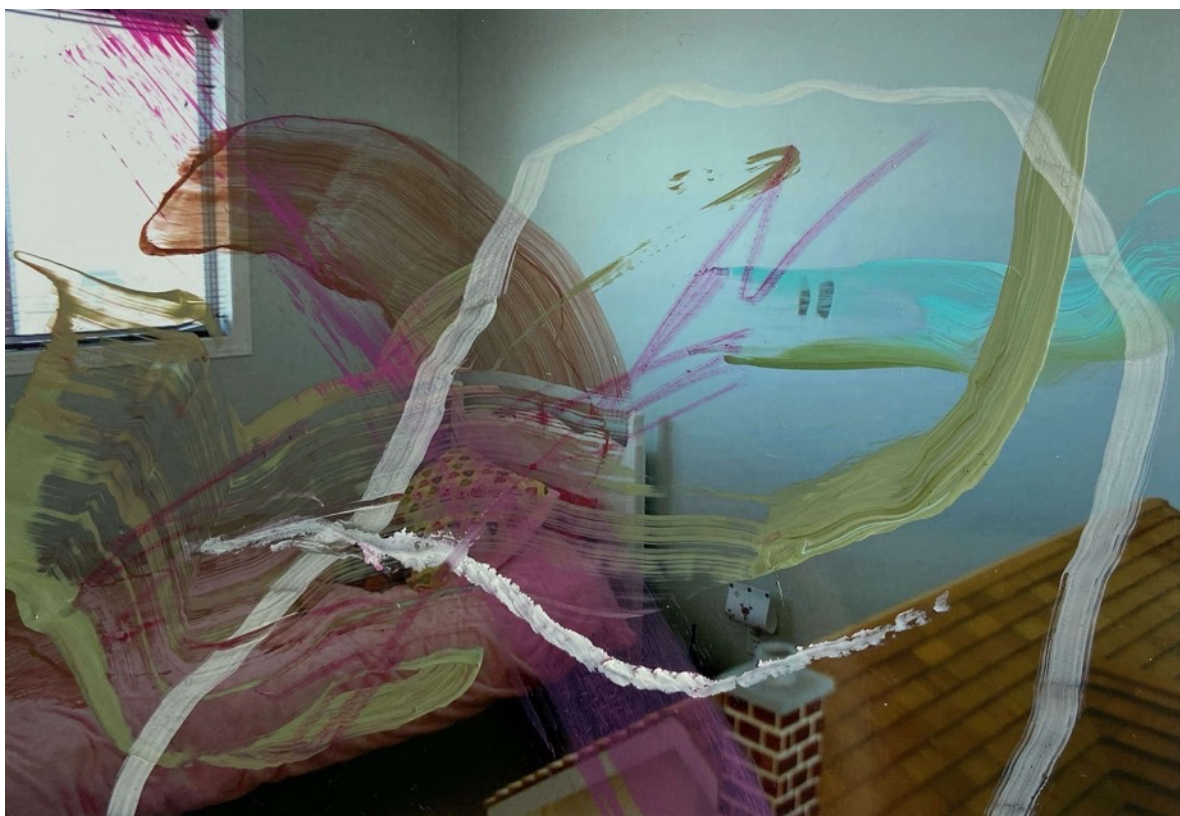


Fig. 1. Aiden Kirkegaard. *Painted Home Study*. 2022

## Introduction

*I'm always surprised by how small my childhood room feels when I go home to visit my parents. Funny how things aren't always the same as we remember them. It always smells the same though. These are the random memories that I have. Bits and pieces of my life strung together. I don't remember the colour of the kitchen walls when we first moved in, but I do remember the smell. Those walls could have been pink for all I remember (probably not though). Our names are all still etched into the kitchen doorway. Our ages and heights marked out over the years. Even now as I sit in my studio, I can still place myself in my old bedroom. Its turquoise-coloured walls I got to pick myself. I think they're grey now, or maybe yellow, either way, that room isn't mine anymore.*

Through the material exploration of painting, this thesis explores what memory might look like and how it behaves. This research is rooted in memories of two childhood homes. These homes were places that elicited dreaming and wonder as a child. I remember countless times being sent outside to play with my siblings in the backyard. We would come up with all kinds of imaginary worlds to live in. Playing pretend was a part of our experience of growing up. Now as an artist, I play pretend in my studio with my paint. As this thesis has developed, the paintings have become less about the representation of real space and more about referencing familiarity through fictional painted space.

In this paper, I will discuss the concepts/theory of my thesis project, my process/material explorations and then my relationship to the art discipline of painting. In each of these sections, I discuss one painting that was created out of ideas of reverie (daydreaming), memories of home and the exploration of painting materials. Each painting holds memories of their own...the past, present and future held within their canvas "body."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word "body" here to describe my canvas stretcher structure. This is discussed more in the section "Canvas and Stretchers" page 21 in reference to the writing of Tonya Davidson. At other times I will also use the word 'body' to refer to the artist's physical body.



## Positionality

My father is a painter and so is my Oma (grandmother). Painting in our family is a lens through which to view the world, a process to collect and hold on to memory. I believe that I have a deep understanding of my painting material. This knowledge and relationship with acrylic paint, oil and canvas continues to influence my inquiries about the structure of a painting and the ways that it can hold the memories of childhood and the painting process.

I think a lot about my physical body and the way it moves in the studio. I am grateful for the way it moves and manipulates paint. The characteristics of my body affect the way I make and the kinds of decisions that get made around my paintings. Often these paintings are larger than me, measuring up to 8 ft long and often 6-7ft in height — I am 5 ft 3". My arm can only reach so far so innovation of mark-making tools is important to the way I make. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa writes about this relationship between body and work by saying, "I become my work. I cannot perhaps intellectually analyze or know what is wrong with my work during the design or writing process, but my body knows it as feelings of uneasiness, distortion, asymmetry, pain, and a curious sensation of incompleteness and shame. I know that I have arrived at an acceptable rendition of the work only when my body feels relaxed and balanced; the body gives its signal of approval. The sensation of shame turns into a feeling of calmness and satisfaction" (Pallasmaa, 124). I relate Pallasmaa's words to the painting process that constantly challenges the body's ability to reach, pull, stretch and mark the canvas surface. This physical experience is evident in the works of other female painters who have inspired me - artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell who made paintings that were deeply rooted in material exploration.

## Research Methodology

This thesis project investigates how the physical and material processes of painting can elicit memory and dreaming. How can paintings become vessels for holding memories tied to home? To explore this question, my thesis takes a process-based approach to research. This type of research is grounded in the physical act of making and the relationship I have with my materials. Mixing acrylic paint, building shaped stretcher frames and putting brush to canvas are just one aspect of the labour and physical research that happens in the studio. A large part of my reading investigation has come out of a need to understand how memory works in relation to thinking about domestic space and architecture. What does memory look like and how does it behave? Questioning how memory behaves in relation to how paint behaves and interacts with the canvas structure is important to my inquiries. Many of the answers to this work continue to come from a place of reflection on process. I start with an image of home, using a family photograph that allows me to enter a state of daydreaming in the studio. From there, the act of building shaped canvases out of wood, applying paint to raw canvas through modes of staining, brushing, pouring and wiping become the next step in bringing the act of daydreaming out of my mind and into the rest of my body through physical movements. Afterwards, the analysis of painterly decisions comes in the form of journaling and reading theorists who think about how we hold on to memories and recall our childhoods. Through these processes, the discovery of new ways of using acrylic paint becomes a way of holding on to play and imagination in the studio which is tied to this investigation of memory and dreaming. The daydreaming process leaves the studio when the work is installed in the gallery, allowing the viewer to experience the paintings viscerally, igniting a daydreaming space for them to get lost in.



Fig. 2. Aiden Kirkegaard. *The sounds never escape me.* 2023



*These walls used to feel bigger.*

## Reverie

In the painting *The sounds never escape me* (Fig. 2), the doorway, ceiling corner and window become a place for daydreaming and a reflection of the spaces I go to in my mind. Doorways and windows are parts of domestic architecture that allow for movement through space. When we allow ourselves to enter into a state of daydreaming, our mind often wanders to places we remember. This being said, not all of our daydreams come from a place of truth. Often our memories through the process of daydreaming mix with imagination, our mind blending both the real and imagined together. In this thesis, I ask, how reverie enters the studio and into the painting process. I define the word reverie through the writing of author Jenny Helin: “daydreaming can be seen as a special kind of act; an aesthetic process that creates newness and multiplicity of previously non-existing images that build up a will to act” (Helin et al, 66). By this definition, reverie is a type of musing and daydreaming. In the painting process, daydreaming becomes a way to reimagine and process the layers of memories held within the spaces I grew up in. It is in the studio where I connect with my playful and fantastical mind from my childhood. Gaston Bachelard<sup>2</sup> in *Poetics of Space* reflects on the philosophical concept of phenomenology<sup>3</sup>. Here he explores the way that imagination impacts space and in return, the way spaces have the potential to evoke feeling and memory. At times our memories

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<sup>2</sup> While I use Bachelard as a resource to only speak to my personal experience of domestic space, I also acknowledge that there has been critique of his phenomenology surrounding a universal definition of the experience of space. Architecture-based writer and feminist Jos Boys, who addresses issues around disability in architectural design, writes that Bachelard’s view of sense experience often “obscures other understandings of material space, most crucially as a site of complex, contested, and often inequitable everyday encounters and relationships; that is, as an uneven mediator of difference, not an expression of archetypal sameness” (Boys). While part of Bachelard’s ideas resonate with my reflections on reverie, I am by no means articulating his reflections on space to be universal to all human experience.

<sup>3</sup> “Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

return to us in small ways where “even the slightest odor, can create an entire environment in the world of the imagination” (Bachelard 2014). These ideas around a sensory experience of memory and architectural space speak to the way I think about the painted marks in my work. There is complexity in the experience of home and memory, and thus the painted mark includes the spectrum of gross, loud, harsh and rough handled etchings, all reflections of those that might exist in home spaces. It is through the abstraction<sup>4</sup> of my childhood homes, that I bring the “reveries of childhood back to life” (Bachelard 1989). In *The sounds never escape me* (Fig. 2), each painted mark on the canvas wanders through the constructed space I have imagined. The painted marks become pathways that flow and inhabit the painted doorways and windowsills. A blue brushed mark and pink paint blob travel along the wall and ceiling of the painting, something I once imagined my own body being able to do as I stared up at the ceiling from the couch as a child (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Aiden Kirkegaard. *The sounds never escape me* (detail). 2023

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<sup>4</sup> I use the word abstraction here to describe the way I am breaking down the architectural references in my paintings. I am not concerned with a realistic depiction of space so the imagery of architecture comes through simplified geometry and planes of colour.

In a study titled *The Power of Daydreaming*, Helin looks at the life of a woman named Birgitta and her experience with daydreaming. I bring this research forward as it relates to the way I process and daydream through the physical acts of painting. In their interviews, they found that the act of daydreaming is not simply an activity done only in the mind, but it can for some individuals involve the engagement of the whole body. They note that “as she is moving her arm up and down, painting a window frame, she starts to see imaginative films in her dreaming. Thus, in the repetitive vertical movement, in touch with the materiality at hand, it is as if she breathes the dreaming through her body.” (Helin et al, 74). Similarly in the studio, it takes not only thinking about the walls I grew up in to start daydreaming but also the physical act of painting them allows my reveries to deepen. Through process, I get to re-explore and re-imagine the way I move about the homes of my childhood. In this way, painting has opened up the world of dreaming to me.

*Footsteps above and below you...*

*That old smell, it was turquoise blue*



## Memories of Home

The concept of home is often referenced through a simple representation of architecture, colour and pattern. This representation of home becomes an anchor in the mnemonic remembering process that happens while painting in my studio. In her writing *The Role of Domestic Architecture in the Structuring of Memory*, sociologist Tonya Davidson considers how our childhood homes become “second bodies” for storing memory in the same way our bodies accumulate and hold memory. Her words ring true as I have been thinking about how memories are accumulated within domestic space. “The house as a home is only possible through these repetitive acts, and movements through time. These everyday movements that act to create a home leave traces like stains and pencil etchings of children’s heights on a wall, and worn paths in carpets. Etches in the house are the scars on the house-as-body, marking and insisting remembrance. The residues of these gestures make the house a structure that marks and remembers in specific ways” (Davidson 339). In bringing these thoughts into the context of the studio, each paint stroke, pencil mark and stitch becomes a trace of movement and senses. They become traces of my body working in the studio, my movements evident and documented through the kinds of marks left on the canvas. These marks allow the painting to become a type of vessel or “body” of its own that remembers, the same way a “home-as-body” remembers the movements and moments of its inhabitants. If our childhood homes are built on the inhabitant’s movements through space, how do movements in the studio impact the paintings? The painting becomes an object that reflects my body’s movements and the way I inhabit the studio. This kind of marking doesn’t only come through the painted marks but also through the titles of the paintings written out on the sides of the canvas (Fig 4). I see these words written out like etchings into the body of the canvas, the titles further tracing memories, documenting thoughts as I paint. This act of marking on canvas

becomes a kind of marking of time and memory in the same way that my parents penciled out our heights on the kitchen doorway (Fig. 5). Homes are charged spaces filled with complex memories. Domestic architecture can hold abuse and trauma, that history also etched into its structure. This being said, my work is not focused on the trauma that domestic space can hold, but focuses on the imaginative experiences I have of home.

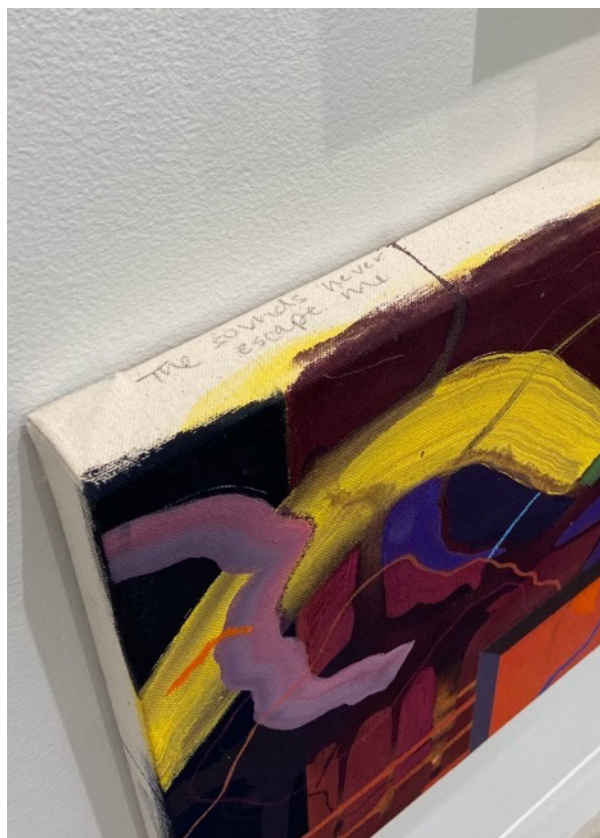


Fig.4. Aiden Kirkegaard. *The sounds never escape me* (title detail). 2023

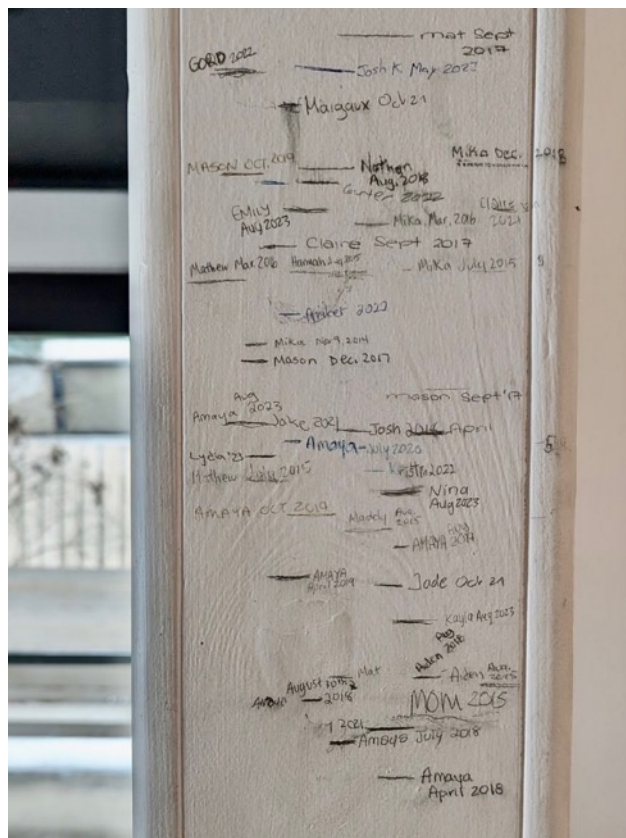


Fig.5. Names marked on doorway at home

Diving into these ideas around the concept of home, I've looked at the work of Becky Suss, an American painter based in Philadelphia. Her large-scale paintings depict domestic spaces where the imagery is informed by memories of her childhood home and grandparent's home which has now been demolished. These homes are spaces of comfort and a source of imagination for her work. Although the subject of home and memory is personal, due to the

painting's interiors and decorative touches, they have a familiar quality to them. For the viewer, Suss's work evokes a sense of nostalgia through her use of colour, architecture and home objects which all feel connected to the 1980s and 1990s. This body of work not only looks at personal memory but also generational memory as Suss feels a deep connection to the generation of women who went before her who were homemakers without recognition. For Suss, this work aims to question our relationship to domestic space which is often private and gendered (Suss). In writing about her show *Greenwood Place* at Jack Shainman Gallery, Suss says, "What resonates is how a dwelling, despite its rigid physical structure, can adapt, welcoming the day-to-day histories, eccentricities, and impressions of the people who move between its walls." (Suss). While her paintings appear to be depictions of spaces she once



Fig. 6. Becky Suss. 8 *Greenwood Place (my bedroom)*. 2020

inhabited, the work also draws on a tension between real and imagined space. For example, in the work *8 Greenwood Place (my bedroom)* (Fig. 6), the sense of depth and perspective are shortened and exaggerated making the space feel fabricated. The longer you observe the work, the paintings begin to feel like a theatre stage or a dollhouse version of her bedroom rather than the real thing. This creates a surprising tension between fact and fiction. This tension directly connects back to her subject of memory and how memory is constantly changing and being transformed. The details of home ground our paintings in a specific remembered place and yet there is also room in the imagery for imagination.



Fig. 7. Photo of laundry room

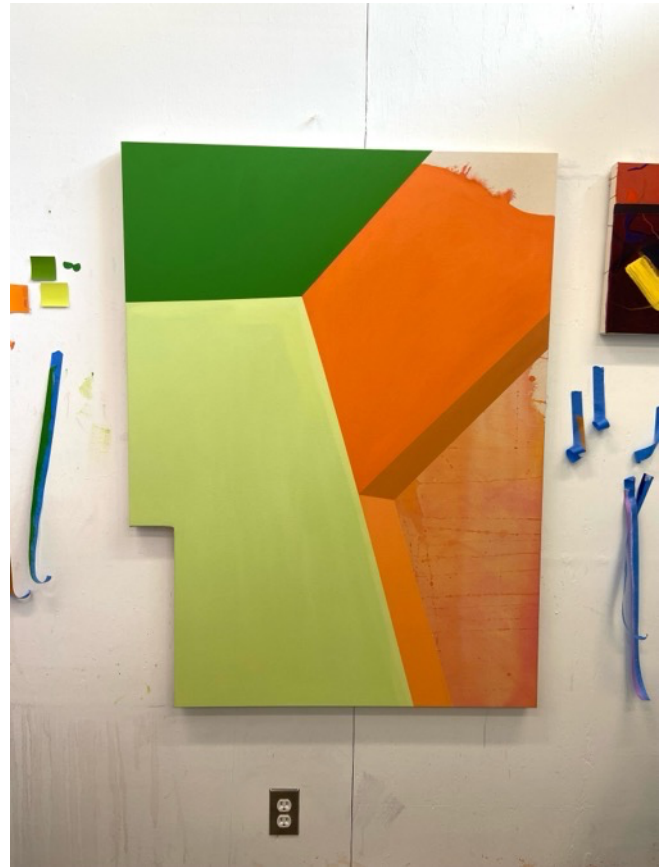


Fig. 8. Aiden Kirkegaard. *The sounds never escape me (beginning stages)*, 2023

In my paintings, the corners of doorways and window sills become a specific detail referencing home (Fig. 7). Each architectural reference in my work is taken specifically from a photograph of my childhood home. In *The sounds never escape me* (Fig. 8), the orange doorway is distorted and changed so that the space is flattened. On the bottom right, the area which in real life is walled off, on canvas is an orange-washed surface, a space that seems to neither reference indoor or outdoor space, but somewhere beyond. Memory becomes the foundation upon which Suss and I play with what is imaginary space and what is real. As I am making, I like to ask questions about how I can change the way this perspective is understood. What if the window was twice its normal size? What if the floors and walls were gone...what would the space look like then? A large part of the way I am working is rooted in experimenting with scale and perspective so that I can create an interesting composition that allows for play<sup>5</sup> and imagination.

*Our house was always filled with noise. It moves through the walls, constantly in the background so you barely notice it exists and yet it surrounds you.*

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<sup>5</sup> The use of the word 'play' in regard to my process comes from a definition by Educator Laura Warner who writes "Play comes in a variety of forms, and can be defined as self-managed, creative, light-hearted, and spontaneous, involving rule making and breaking." (Warner 1). The process of painting is fuelled by playing with materials to learn new techniques, loosening up my mark-making and sparking joy in making.





Fig.9. Canvases after being stretched

## CANVAS AND STRETCHERS

For many painters, the canvas serves a practical function. It is a structure on which their painted imagery exists. The stretcher and canvas are considered separate from what would be defined as the “painting” — simply referencing the imagery on the surface of the canvas. As I have continued to ask how my paintings can become vessels for remembering, the role of the stretcher frame — what I think of as the canvas’s body — is important to answering this question. In thinking about this, Rebekah Goldstein a San Francisco-based painter and sculptor comes to mind. I am particularly interested in her work due to the use of shaped canvases and her thoughts behind them. For Goldstein, the shaped canvases become an exploration of “colour, form, and structure and their relationship to the human body and the

built environment” (Goldstein). In speaking about this work, Goldstein says “I’m interested in images that can be interpreted in multiple ways that shift the longer you look at them. This type of visual language allows the viewer to situate themselves in reference to the piece and consider their own orientation to the surrounding environment” (Goldstein). The shape of the canvas can be understood from farther away as an abstracted human figure, possibly one that is sitting or bent over. At the same time, when experiencing close-ups, the coloured surfaces reference floors and geometric architectural space. In her process, Goldstein constructs space through painted gestures.



Fig. 10. Rebekah Goldstein. *My Reflection in the Water*. 2021

In the piece, *My Reflection In the Water*, the formal elements in the work; the lines, shapes, colours and brushwork all become a type of visual lexicon that she builds (Fig. 10). Something important to note is that these works are rather large and close to human scale. Here the canvas becomes a reference to a body, which is the way I think about my canvases. For Goldstein, this interest in the canvas becoming like a body started during the artist's first pregnancy as she experienced how the female body changes and grows. The shape of the canvas here seems to almost become more important than the painted imagery on the surface of the canvas material. The blocked-out areas of flat and brushed colour serve as reinforcements to the shape, giving the edges definition and three-dimensionality.

*Now they live inside my mind.*

*This place takes me somewhere else.*

*It's not mine anymore.*



Fig. 11. Aiden Kirkegaard. *Now they live inside my mind.* 2023

In this thesis project, the physical structure of the stretcher frame references home and reinforces the experience of architecture in relation to the human body. In the painting *Now they live inside my mind* (Fig.11), the shaped canvas becomes an extension of the painted architecture. The top canvas stacked on top of the bottom one creates a fragmented understanding of the painted space. Perspective also shifts and is distorted from one canvas to the next. The shaped canvases activate the gallery walls where the floor of the gallery becomes a floor for the painted space (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Aiden Kirkegaard. *Installation Image*. 2023

In 1963, American painter David Novros developed a concept called “painting-in-place” where he would install his shaped canvases to reflect the angles and geometry of architectural space (Fig. 13). At that time, Novros was interested in the reclaiming of space and gaining



control of architecture through his paintings (Colpitt). While many of the painters with whom I share a common interest are women, I wanted to note Novros' work for how his canvases impact and take over the gallery space. As was discussed in the section *Memories of Home*, domestic space has a history of being gendered, where the labour of women is what "makes a house a home." In the way that Novros work takes up space, my paintings likewise respond to this gendering of space through their scale. Scale becomes a tool in which to take up space, to create a visual impact on the viewer's body. Through the shape of the canvas, these paintings extend into the gallery space allowing for an altered experience<sup>6</sup> of that space.

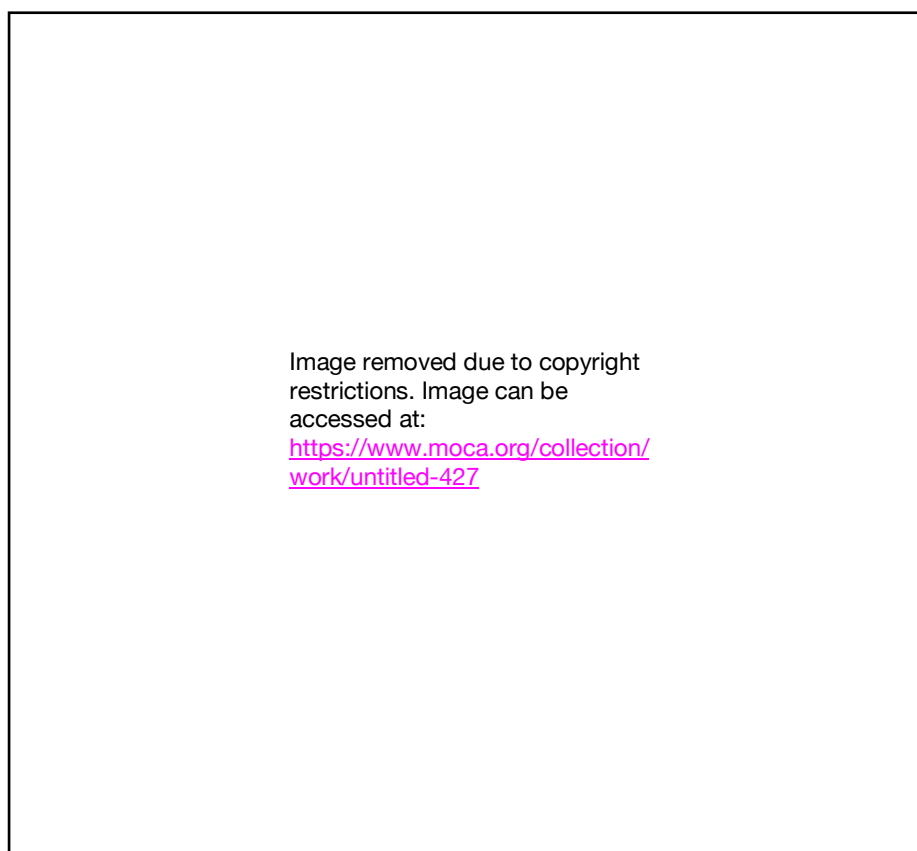


Fig. 13. David Novros. *Untitled*. 1968

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<sup>6</sup> "Spatial experience can be physical, sensory, and mental. The term "experience" itself emphasizes the body as a medium for interacting with objects and space, generating emotional aspects" (Lee). I have found this definition of spatial experience important to thinking about the way the shaped canvas interacts with the gallery walls and how this may affect a viewer of the work.



Fig. 14. Aiden Kirkegaard. *I hold you, You hold me.* 2023

## ACRYLIC PAINT AND COLOUR

Once the canvas stretchers have been made, the next material exploration involves paint. Acrylic paint as a medium provides a way to work quickly. It can be watered down to act as a type of stain when using raw canvas, while you can also add different mediums<sup>7</sup> to make it thick and fluid. When you have glossy and matte surfaces interacting with each other, depth is achieved based on the way the light hits each surface area of paint. It's these subtle, yet playful shifts in the paint's finish, texture, viscosity and colour that fascinate me and drive my material research forward. I learn a lot from simply playing with my materials, as a kind of knowledge and painterly language is created through this playful exploration. Rachel Jones speaks about the intelligence of materials in "On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again and Letting Be". For Jones, "matter actively delimits the forms it can take, and participates in the processes of making. If we are willing to listen, the materials we work with will tell us which forms they can hold and sustain, and which they cannot" (Jones 6). 'Matter' here references materials used in making. In the studio, my canvas and paint speak to me. The canvas tells me when it is being pulled too hard as it is being stretched around a frame. It tells me when it cannot hold any more paint as it allows the excess to seep through the back of the canvas and onto the floor. I often wonder what is it like to be a painting, to be pulled and pushed, painted all over. By re-learning how to listen to my materials in this thesis work, I've gotten to explore what it means to allow paint to be paint. To let a drip happen and to not cover it up. In the work *I hold you, You hold me* (Fig.14), I had to let go of control when it came to how the paint dried. As I was working on raw canvas, this meant that paint would be absorbed into the fibres of the canvas more than it would on a gessoed surface. Allowing canvas to stay in raw form meant mark-making became harder to control and predict. Colours

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<sup>7</sup> Golden Gloss Medium, Golden GAC 500, Golden Matte Medium, Golden Regular Gel, Golden Clear Tar Gel

dried darker and paint dripped and poured differently. When I think about materials, I like to think of it all like a dance between the two of us, the paint and myself, the canvas and myself, working together to create the work, working to bring the memories I have alive.

Fluid acrylics and mediums have provided flexibility and flow in the painting process. They have the same kind of colour intensity you would find in other acrylic paints while having the viscosity of heavy cream. This kind of viscosity allows for a more ‘fluid’ —liquid— paint application. In *I hold you, You hold me* (Fig. 14), acrylic paint is used to achieve many different types of layers. Here you’ll see, a stained and washed acrylic background, a watercolour-like architectural space painted with many layers of different colours. The marks that flow through the space vary in their paint thickness, opacity and colour saturation. The gloss medium added

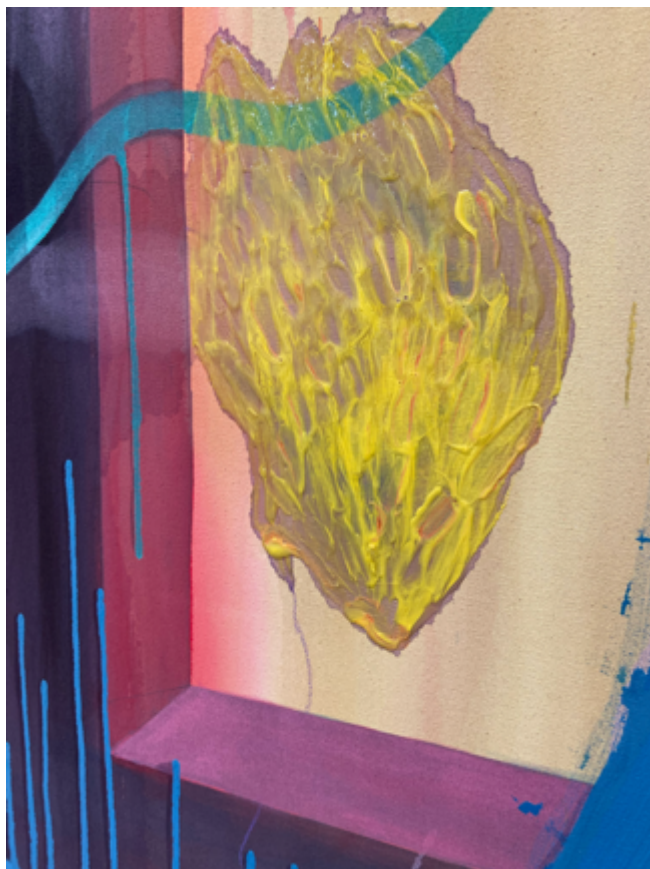


Fig. 15. Aiden Kirkegaard. *I hold you, You hold me* (detail #1). 2023



Fig. 16. Aiden Kirkegaard. *I hold you, You hold me* (detail #2). 2023

to the thick pours allows the marks to become alive on the canvas surface (Fig. 15 & 16). Here, the marks play with your senses, conceivably creating in the viewer a potential desire to reach out and touch the glossy marks. There is a suggestion of movement that comes from the texture and application of a mark like this. It feels, if you were to look away, the mark may move and slide right down the canvas.

As I am working, I look at many artists who use different kinds of brush strokes and manipulate paint in vibrant ways. Recently, the work of London, UK based painter Fiona Rae has been impactful in my making process. For many years, Rae has been creating large, vivid abstract oil paintings in which she is interested in expressing energy through her mark-making. For her, the painting process is always about pushing how close you can get to suggesting something without straying away from abstraction. At times while looking at her work you may

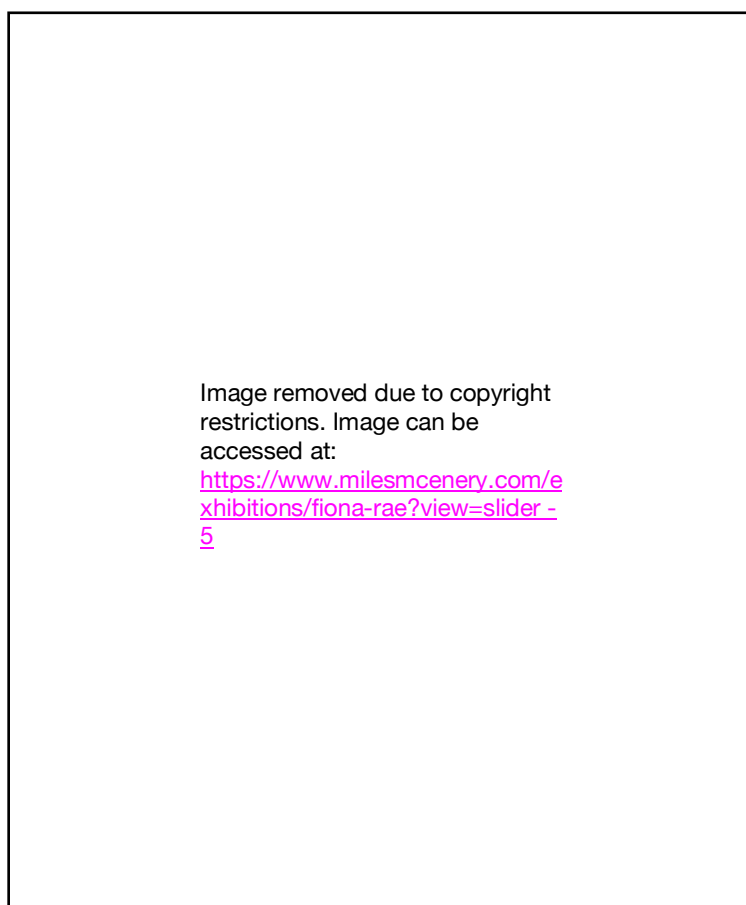


Fig. 17. Fiona Rae. *Then whets, and combs its silver wings.* 2022

see a figure and at other times you may be simply drawn to the painterly marks and the materiality of the paint on the canvas. As a painter, Rae is deeply invested in the material exploration of oil paint. This dedication to materials and exploring paint's ability and characteristics is something that I resonate with as a painter. In the piece *Then whets, and combs its silver wings* there is an intentional quality to the placement of the brush marks and the composition (Fig. 17). While the brush strokes flow, twist and turn, they are also fixed in space. This creates a tension between the marks hinting at movement through their brushstrokes and form while at the same time, being very neatly placed in a singular spot on the canvas. I admire Rae's playful approach to colour and materials, emphasized through her use of a brightly saturated palette, that evokes a whimsical quality.

Colour can be used as a tool for communication. Amy Sillman discusses colour in this way by writing: "colour is a primary tool for negotiation in my work—colours that block each other out or contradict each other, and are mixed in an archeological-dialectic of continual destruction and reconstruction" (Sillman, 115). Similar to these strategies, I am continuously adjusting the relationships that colours have with one another during the painting process. The process of working with colour is relational. Artist and educator Josef Albers, speaks of this relativity insisting that "In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is – as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art" (Albers, 1). In this sense, colour is constantly changing and being perceived differently. Dependent on the viewer, an environment and time, "colours present themselves in continuous flux, constantly related to changing neighbours and changing conditions" (Albers, 5). An example of this can happen when an orange painted colour is rather saturated and thus it pushes forward or a purple mark is a desaturated cool-tone, behaving like a type of blue sitting back in space. All of these negotiations affect the way that depth is created in the paintings and how the marks convey emotion, energy and rhythm. The inspiration for the paintings comes from taking in the colours



of my surroundings. Colour also goes beyond describing visual experiences but can represent sounds, emotions, smell, feel and movement. Kandinsky writes that “colours have been described as rough or sticky, others as smooth and uniform, so that one feels inclined to stroke them...some colours appear soft (rose madder), others hard” (Kandinsky, 25). As described here by Kandinsky, colour has an animacy, a lively energy that is a powerful tool the painter uses to describe a multi-sensory experience.

*My memories of home are filled with colour.*

*The soft glow of the evening sun still warms my face as I think about playing outside in the  
backyard, biking up and down the streets.*



Fig. 18. Aiden Kirkegaard. *Removed, stained, embraced. It's in the structure of my bones.* 2023

*Your warmth is a pillow where I lay my head.*

*May angels watch me through the day and night.*

## PAINTED MARKS

Each mark on the canvas becomes a trace of movement in my studio, each a documentation of an action once made by my body. I have found my painting practice to be quite a body-intensive form of making. Wood must be measured, cut, glued, and stapled, a surface made for the canvas to be stretched over. Then the canvas gets ripped, folded and stretched over the wood stretcher frame. I use my body weight to pull the canvas tight, often walking away with blisters forming on my fingers from the rubbing of the raw canvas material against my skin.

Paint is squeezed out of the tube, mixed, swirled and stirred to create the colour I am looking for. In the work *Removed, stained, embraced. It's in the structure of my bones*. (Fig. 18), I had to do most of my painting on a ladder or crouched on the floor so I could reach the bottom corners of the work. Layers of paint went into the purple doorway, the process of painting reminded me a lot of painting a wall in a house. After hours straight of working, my brush becomes an extension of my arm and with the flick of my wrist, a small mark can be made. Muscle memory often kicks in as I paint. The canvas shows me where my last movements were through the marks it holds. In this work, these painted marks not only reflect the movements of the artist but also echo movements and memories tied to home as they float through the painted architecture. In *The Thinking Hand*, Juhani Pallasmaa writes, "The painter's hand does not only reproduce the visual appearance of the object, person or event — observed, remembered or imagined — the hand perfects the impossible task of recreating the object's very essence, its sense of life, in all its sensory and sensual manifestations"

(Pallasmaa, 85). My paintbrush and hand work together to not only depict light, colour and form, but it is through their actions that the essence of a well-loved and lived-in home comes to life. A painted drip becomes a trace or leftover of a body running down the stairs, while also being a remembrance of the tilting of the canvas that was done by my body to make the paint drip along the canvas surface. Sometimes the marks are based on the scratches in the floor or the long crack in the bathroom ceiling (Fig. 19 & 20). In *Removed, stained, embraced. It's in the structure of my bones.* (Fig. 18), I had planned out the blue mark initially on my iPad, using Procreate to decide the general placement and colour of the mark (Fig. 21). Once the blue mark was translated into real paint and out of the digital platform, it changed. I had to navigate how to make something with a digital brush where I am not restricted by scale, my body or materials into a physical space where the scale of the painting, the size of the brush, the amount of paint I've mixed all factor into the kind of mark that gets made.



Fig. 19. Scratches on the floor at home



Fig. 20. Crack in the bathroom ceiling





Fig. 21. Procreate sketch on iPad.

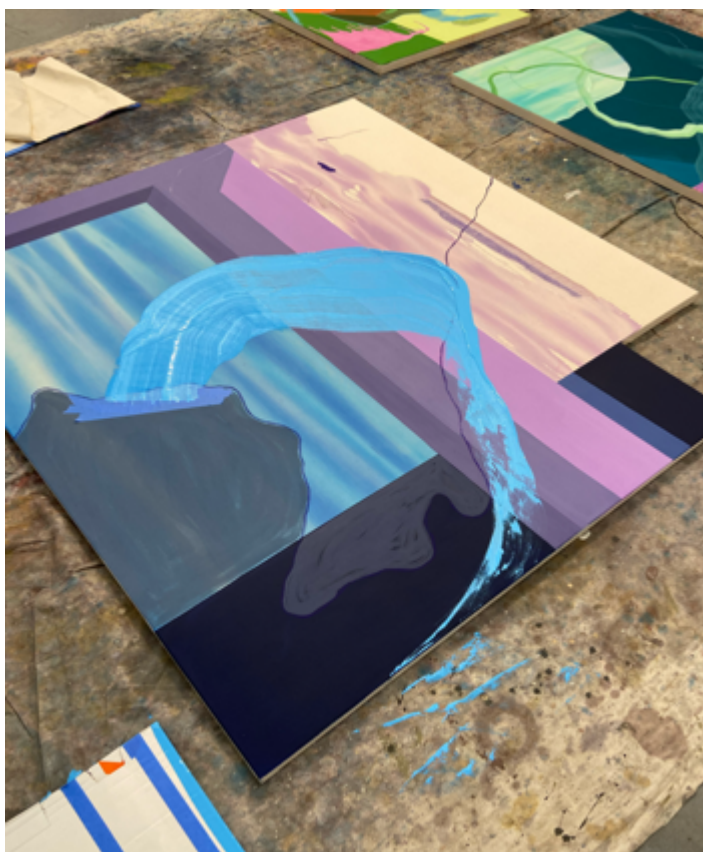


Fig. 22. *Removed, stained, embraced. It's in the structure of my bones* (in progress image).

I didn't have a brush big enough to make this large of a mark, so I improvised and found a scrap piece of cardboard, cutting it down to the size I wanted. This allowed me to push the blue paint across the surface of the canvas, the cardboard acting like a squeegee (Fig. 22). Digital sketching can only carry these works so far. Procreate on my iPad is a utilitarian tool for the beginning stages of painting as it allows my imagination to flow freely without restrictions around paint supplies. As the making continues and the initial marks are made, the process becomes one that is responsive. Amy Sillman perfectly describes this reactivity by saying that "the art-making process is a recording of these restless interactions between subject and object on a par with one another, locked together. In fact, really, improvisation is about working between subject and object; the object is merely a place through which questions are addressed" (Sillman, 150). As one mark is laid down, that mark decides what happens next, what area gets painted in or highlighted. And on and on this kind of rhythmic dance continues, until the painting tells me it's done.

Making painted marks is an important part of my process and it is not only rooted in the work of contemporary painters but also in the movement of Abstract Expressionism in New York from the 1950s. I find myself drawn to the relationships painters such as Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell, had with their medium (Fig. 23 & 24). Paint was an instrument used to describe movement, emotions and colour. In their work, the materiality of paint directly informed how a painting was developed. With this movement in art, comes an aim of pulling away from a form of representation, to have the works become expressions of self, rooted in emotion and chaos. Gestures become an important element in this kind of painting. Gesture references not only the expression of paint and what it can do as a material, but it also reflects the movements of the artist, their body's actions during the creation of a painted mark or pour.





Fig. 23. Helen Frankenthaler. 10/29/52. 1952



Fig. 24. Joan Mitchell. City Landscape. 1955

*Each paint stroke soaks into the fibre of the canvas. It stains it. Another mark, made with a smaller brush barely touches the surface of the canvas, its trace becomes a faint residue of blue paint left behind. Some marks pour heavy, they take my whole body to make. Some feel like ribbons, floating and twisting and turning across the surface. Other marks disappear, blending into one another so much so that you no longer see where one might have begun and the other ended.*

## Conclusion and Final Reflection

Every painting starts the same. My studio becomes a dwelling place for dreaming. I imagine walking into my childhood bedroom or the kitchen while sitting in my studio chair. This remembering process is often accompanied by photos I have of home. These are the places of comfort I enter, places I like to dream about. Memory is an integral part of the process of making this thesis. Childhood memories set the foundation on which the work exists. I've come to realize over this time of research that while the work is built around memories, it is also about exploring how paint moves and works. As a painter, it is important that the marks still show their materiality. I am using paint to depict paint as alive and having agency on the canvas, just the same way memories are alive and always rushing through our brains.

This work has allowed for a greater understanding of my connection to the walls that I grew up between. Painting becomes a way of gaining knowledge about materials while exploring how memory and imagination affect process. In many ways, I see this practice as a cyclical one. I go back to the same memories, the same spaces in my mind. Reaching and expanding my view of them through painted marks. By returning to memories through old paintings, I trace previous understandings of home through the marks made and the new marks I will make again. The exploration of memory and painting are intertwined. These paintings have become a new home, new vessels that hold my memories outside my physical body and yet they are infused with traces of the way my physical body remembers. Paintings can dream. They will continue to dream and remember even after I no longer do.

*Worn out and faded,  
it's roughness envelopes me.  
Measured and considered is my time spent with you.  
A faint whisper stuck between walls.  
This place takes me somewhere else, it's not mine anymore.  
Sorrows and splendour swirling in my mind.  
There before me, is a world left behind.*

*I hold you, you hold me.  
Reimagined between the shadows,  
wonder held in the light.*



Fig. 25. Aiden Kirkegaard. *Reimagined between the shadows*. MFA Thesis Exhibition Installation. 2024

As I reflect on the installation of my work in the Thesis Exhibition *Kindred*, I am captivated by the transformation that can happen to a painting when it is brought out of the messy studio space and into a clean gallery setting. It was important in this installation that the architecture in both the paintings and the space were highlighted. I was excited by the moments in the install where a plane of colour or line in the painting would match up with the architecture of the space, providing a moment where the two spaces could become one. As I watched others observe this exhibition and through my own experience, I found that most people stood back to take in the work. This action of stepping back I believe highlights a desire

in wanting all the works to be connected, creating a moment in time where all the spaces in the paintings are linked, and one can drift through one painted doorway or window into another. Through the making of these final paintings and preparing to install, I discovered the concept called 'plasticity'. While I am still learning to engage with this topic, I would define plasticity through the words of French philosopher Catherine Malabou as she states that this concept is based on "how structures and forms of life previously considered rigid are in fact 'plastic' and in constant mutation and transformation" (Dalton, 238). In the context of my work, plasticity functions to describe the way that both paint and memories are not fixed but can be easily shaped, molded and transformed. As the research started in this MFA program progresses outside Emily Carr, I see the questions I have around memory and paint continuing. I would like to further read, reflect, and research about the phenomenological relationship I have to paint and memory and how that experience is translated through the work and installation of future paintings. How does paint help us orient ourselves within imaginary spaces and how does this experience of space through paint change us and our memories?

I have been so grateful for what I have learned through this program and the research this thesis took up. I titled this thesis *Can Paintings Dream?* with the intention to discover more about paint on a technical and conceptual level. In the studio is where memory, dreaming and the process of painting all become intertwined. I do believe that paintings can dream. This thesis has indulged in my fantasies of home, and through paint I have gotten to imagine and explore a world beyond my memories.

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## Appendix I: Documentation of Thesis Exhibition *Kindred*

Installed in the Michael O'Brian Exhibitions Commons at Emily Carr University

March 25-April 9, 2024

*Reimagined between the shadows* (a series of twelve paintings)

Acrylic and oil pastel on shaped canvases

2024



