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WHAT COMES AFTER LONGING

By

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, Clemson University, Clemson SC, 2013

Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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Master of Fine Art

What Comes After Longing
Chairperson: Valerie Hedquist

What Comes After Longing is a collection of artifacts from my research exploring the desires and haunting motivations of the human experience. Is all life longing for something, some place, somebody, some time? That is the question I pose.

What is the purpose of longing? Is it meaningless to long for something if you're longing for something that's not real? We filter our experience of the world through this longing. Longing is the filter through which we survive, and my research and work explores whether we can get past this, or whether all life is a series of these longings.

The film, music, poetry, and paintings in this body of work stand testament to the way we digest and come to terms with tangible reality through our own internal filter. Referencing portraiture and landscape scenes and scenarios both old and new, true and untrue, the work is a catalyst for a possibly futile attempt to answer a question that has no answer but remains in a nebulous location such as most endeavors in life.

Longing Is A Lemon

I hear it in the long drones of an undefined note
Just texture and timbre are its form
In the moments between punctuation, the residue of ghosts
I do not see it but I know it is there
In those long breathing spaces
Lifting the trunks of its leaves to reveal a squash the color of innocence
I rut around the dirt but I cannot find it
Dipping into the current of a strange woman's perfume
It's memory remains
It comes to me, unexpected, but often
It's ways are mysterious but after a lifetime of
Chance encounters and late night visits
The touch is familiar
Why do you haunt me?
Til I desire you In all things
What comes after longing?

What comes after longing? It's not a question that I formulated over some laborous thought or manifested as a product of research. Like waking up and your vision slowly converting soft forms into definition the question materialized from the ether. It was the summer after my first year in grad school and I had spent it hiding from the world. I left my apartment only to get food and wouldn't sleep until I saw the sunlight begin to peer through my window. That summer I never picked up a brush. Something had to change, I had worked myself creatively and physically into a stalemate. No sooner did I make a decision to do something I already countered it with a reason why it couldn't happen. All the while the question echoed in my mind, what comes after longing? I've felt the dull burn of longing for as long as I can remember. I needed direction, something I hadn't had in some time I needed to go somewhere so I used longing as a vehicle.



Longing is a lemon. It reminds me of my first car, an 86' Acura Integra. The paint had faded and chipped off in a way that left something reminiscent of a skin graft as its shell, the heat and air controlled by a clothes hanger that ran through the steering column, and clutch worn down until it couldn't make it out of first gear. Regardless of the heat being stuck on year round, a single working speaker, and not being able to drive a stick, I loved that car like anyone else's first. It may not get me where I want to go but

it just might get me somewhere, and somewhere is freedom. Longing is like that, it won't get me where I want to go, back to faint remembered memories or forward to an unknown future but it will get me somewhere and the first place it took me was back to the beginning. I had to start at the beginning and trace my way back in order to move forward.

I grew up in the foothills of South Carolina in a small mill town called Newry, population 200. My grandfather had moved there while it thrived, my dad lived there while it died, and I grew up there while it was dead. A condemned mill, broken seesaw, and World War II memorial was the backdrop to my growing years. Newry was what I would assume walking the streets of Chernobyl to be like, rusted and dusty remains of life and industry with no one to bear witness. There was no one my age left to play with and do expected kid things so I amused myself drawing and making everything a weapon. What a wonderful place it was to come of age, I grew up ignorant to expectation and proper behavior and the world consisted of five streets. The residue of that place will always be with me.



My dad has been a butcher for longer than I have been alive. One of my strongest nostalgia triggers is the smell of hugging my dad when he came home from work, the smell of blood, meat, and sanitizer. Anyone who has worked in a meat department

knows it, its a specific smell and it reminds me of my pa. I often would go to work with my dad, and I loved it. Because the grocery store had magazines. Down the magazine aisle of the grocery store I found my first artistic influence, the video game magazine. The video game magazines were the only things on the rack I could relate to at such young age, and page after page was an invitation to another world. Each game was a mystery, a different hero, a different world. I would imagine what it would be like to be in these worlds, I would read the articles describing the exploits of heroes for hours, studying every detail of armor and landscape in the images. I would sit in the magazine aisle for hours imagining these strange places then go back to the meat department to draw my own adventures. After I exhausted the month's magazines I would walk next door and listen to music at the music store, anything, everything was a new experience and there music became intimately linked with making art. So much of how art became an integral part of my life stems from those childhood years spent in the grocery store. I learned how to live through my art, how art could be a vehicle for transportation, and that would become a skill I relied on for my entire life for better or worse. I spent increasing time in my own world, disconnected from the moment. Like an astronaut drifting from its station I went beyond my tether's allowance and I can't get back. Im at all times just out of reach.

I can't speak about my growing up without devoting some time to church. My family was strictly and rigorously Christian. We were in church no less than three times a week, often times more. The music we listened to was Christian, the television monitored for content, and my friends came from a pool of twelve or so my age from church. Those many years in church have shaped me as an artist more than anything has and likely ever will. By the time I was old enough to have my own thoughts on spirituality and worship I had already cultivated a substantial ability to disconnect from reality and into an in-between space while making art. So I drew and drew and drew. While the choir was singing, the preacher preaching, grown adults pouring their hearts out in front of me I drew. I observed and I escaped, a foot in two worlds. There is feeling of sitting amongst the throngs of faces desperate for reprieve to feel God and be ok I will never forget. I'll never forget surrounding elders and praying over them while others touched my shoulders and arms and did the same. I'll never forget the feeling of my dad crying and washing my feet telling me I just have to try, try and be better. I had just learned to button my pants and tie my shoes just a couple years prior. I wasn't ready for this world, and I am still not.

By my teenage years I developed a thorough and detailed other place. A temporal location where I had agency and constructed a reality that had meaning to me. It was not realistic or rational, nor did it need to be. But it was believable and consistent and served and still does as my sanctuary. I picked the flowers of living and planted them in myself, memories real or imagined, desire and affection, trauma and turmoil, it was all there. There are memories I've lived for so long when I lay in bed, I could never put words to.



I took to running, when I felt like I would never been able to interface with the world, find my place, my people, I just ran. I self-sabotaged and sought solace in a cabin in the middle of the woods where I lived and sowed my wild oats. There I never picked up a brush. I've never been able to stay away from art for too long, it's how I interface with the world. I returned to school and pursued an art degree. I wanted to learn how to bring that other place I can't articulate into this world and I did. I learned how to make things come to life on the canvas, frozen in a moment but I can feel it breath. Teasing the spirit out of a painting is the closest I feel to God. I can understand why God creates; you aren't alone anymore.

After getting an undergraduate degree I worked for three years with my dad in the meat department. I had no great aspirations to become a blue-chip artist I just wanted the tools to make what I needed to make. That was enough for some time but I can't escape knowing that I'm meant to do something else, I don't know what that is, but it pushes me forward. I have to return to the world. I decided to go back to school for what I thought would be one last adventure and leave behind all the density that was my companion. Before I became a butcher or factory worker and spent my days wondering what happened, I would go to some far-off place. That place became Montana and it

has been very good to me. But I brought all the toil with me and I learned there are some things that distance can't escape.

There is no perfect,
No perfect place
But there are places
That loose the density of it all
And with the grace only afforded
To those so haunting and divine
Snow drifts into the river



I paint my deficiencies, something to love me and something to love. I paint flowers because there are none to tend in my life, painting family because I can't articulate my gratitude for them any other way, knights because I have lost my spark of adventure, beauty because I yearn for some tenderness in the flow of darkness around. I am fortifying myself in the studio with the things I need to make it, to feel like things are going to be ok. I haven't changed all that much from the boy I was, yelling into the void of the abandoned mill, or imagining I was on a quest, riding a horse through foreign meadows with a purpose, listening to secret music with my headphones on, and you can see it in my work. I keep vigil and stand watch in my own time. My thesis was my vesper. I lay in the meadow with everything. Adjacent walls reflect the density of a moment of thought.

I use oil paint and encaustic as my mediums because of their preservative properties. The paintings I create will last long after I am gone and the subjects I am painting. I use photographs and film as references for the work and extend the memory of those places and people. Where photographs and film degrade over the course of decades oil and encaustic will remain for hundreds even thousands of years. It is a futile attempt none the least to preserve the memories of the past and our present but knowing that I can create something that goes beyond me is comforting.

There is a coarseness and decay to the work, it's the visual residue of coming to grips with living. Lacking in resolve and finish, the work is caught in the tension of struggle to hold on. As long as my work is unfinished it stays with me. As soon as I finish a piece the ghost that was with me dissipates in the wind. To finish a piece feels like loss to me and loss hurts. I can't protect myself or ignore what's happening just outside my studio door and my work, from pencil drawings as a kid to the oil paintings as an adult knew that long before I ever did. There is a desperation present in the scraping and scrubbing. I want to be ignorant. I want to surround myself with empathetic treasures and never crack a window. I want to be ignorant and a coward....but I can't. The charge of the artist is to be a mirror to their culture, to show the masses what is happening with cunning and unwavering reality. The world is foreign to me, the culture a stranger. I am not a mirror to the world I am a mirror of myself. I aim it at the world hoping someone might see me and I might be understood, there must be a place for me out there. I never fit in but I've always wanted to. How I wish I could be singing Come Thou Fount amongst the others and mean it or enjoy a night with friends without my haunts beside me at the table. I still listen to vespers in my studio and I still love my friends, I am trying.

We are all trying in the best way we know how. You may not know the figures in my paintings or the locales, and that's ok. Some of them I don't know either. The particulars don't matter. The imagery is simple and universal, a flower, a picnic, a candle. We are not so dissimilar and I learn that through the work and it brings me back to the world. I can't relate to the particulars but I can relate to the feeling of seeing the porch light on welcoming you home, or the smell of a stack of wood. It's simple and at times mundane. I don't shy from sentiment.

Though contemporary art tends to reject sentiment, there is a precedent for it and artists of the past and present tap into in their own ways. I find sentiment in the way the German Expressionists such as Anselm Kiefer digest personal experience and the way they grapple with reflection in their work. There is a grit to their work that evokes the strife of living and the environment we are born into without choice, but within the agitated marks and visceral application of paint there is an element of love for one's origin. You can see sentiment in the way Keifer uses actual dirt and grasses and other physical elements from the places he is depicting. Suffering and struggle can be seen throughout but interstitched between the course edges is an affection for these places. The magical realists also tap into a sentimental reflection in their work. Peter Doig's paintings of ski slopes and canoes, people enjoying their surroundings are steeped in a

longing memory for another time. The way the paint obscures and injects unnatural elements into the depictions give the viewers an ability to enter into the paintings through the scene presented and exit into a place of their own reflection. I take direction and influence from these artists and how they integrate and digest human experience.

I don't aim for a particular subset of people for my work, nor do I try to corner a certain market. My work is a launching point for reflection into the viewers experience. It may seem contradictory to create work that depicts personal narrative but through others we can come to understand ourselves in a way we can do otherwise. You may not know the particulars and nor do you need to, you only need to enter into the work through the depiction presented and exit into your own narrative. I am not calculated in my approach to audience I am only grateful that there is one at all.

I could go on at length about the choices I made in my work during my tenure as a student. The interaction between film and painting, the place of realism in contemporary art, nostalgia and simulacra, but that's not the testament I want to leave behind of what I learned here. Frankly, I don't think much of my place in the contemporary art conversation. I don't think of Baudelaire or Greenburg. That is not to be taken as disparaging the importance of being informed, it's just at the end of the day, I am not there yet. I'm not stable enough. I can't let go of everything. I still feel the hurt

of my grandpa tearing the blanket from me and telling me to get my own. I can't let go of not telling him I loved him before he died. I miss my dog.

I never intended to take it for my own
Laying fetal, beside you
Slowly, inch by inch
Stealing your warmth
Laying, fetal beside you
It left a scare that I trace to this day
When you told me to get my own
I hid in the back of the house
Hidden from your gaze
Laying fetal alone

I have so much still to learn and process about this experience but what I have learned is longing is a vehicle. I can't make amends with the past, I can't right my wrongs, but I can take them with me. Longing is the vehicle, it's not a place or feeling it's the impetus to go. It's not the wanting of, it's the vehicle to. Back to those places, people, and forward to hereafter. I don't know what is going to happen when my time as a student comes to a close but I know the time I spent here will go with me as well and it too will become a part of the silhouette cast across the road as I roll out of town. And eventually the load will get lighter. I'll be able to drop some things off at their proper place and smile as i watch it wave from the rearview mirror. I will make new paintings,

paintings free of this laborious navel gazing. I will find my place. Nothing comes after
longing because longing isn't a destination. Living is a load and longing is a lemon.

It's the quiet that lingers
Sticks to you like a seed
After hiding in the tall grasses
Hiding from me
Some things don't go away
Only make you forget
Until I saw you cast across the snow
You became my silhouette
Now it's hopeful dear
But I never lost the haunt
Of the amber light
Glowing through the night
Knowing it's all I want
And someday I too
Will forget about you
And further still
I fear I will
Lose you passing through
Strangers in our own time
I lost you on the way
And further still
I fear I will
Lose your silhouette