Submersion

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Submersion

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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Abstract

The artist discusses the influence, concept, and process behind creating a cohesive body of work and accompanying show, *Submersion*, for the completion of her Bachelor of Arts degree and undergraduate research for the Fine and Performing Art Scholars branch of East Tennessee State University's Honors College. The show is to be held May 1st through May 7th of 2014 with its reception on May 3rd in the Submarine Gallery located on ETSU campus. The artist explored themes of the unknown, subconscious, and memory, using water as a reoccurring symbol. The works include five large portraits and two small to medium underwater landscapes in oil paint completed between Fall of 2012 and Spring of 2014. Three large-scale charcoal drawings completed in the Spring of 2013 relate to this body of work as part of a further exploration of the concepts of interest, but will not be included in the *Submarine Gallery* show and were instead presented as part of the B.A. Senior show in the Fall of 2013. Influences on the artist's work come from artists Jeremy Miranda, Alyssa Monks, Bill Viola, Susanna Majuri, Andreas Franke, and the work and techniques of the Old Masters.
Acknowledgments

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My mother and father, Ruth and Edward Harper, my sister, Mary Chad Harper, and my boyfriend and best friend of many years, Dylan DePonte,

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Introduction

In my undergraduate research, I have utilized oil paint and charcoal as materials to communicate the concepts I have been developing over my four years at ETSU: revealing what hides beneath the surface, whether it be in reference to the Freudian subconscious or to memories buried in our brains not forgotten but safely tucked away from the outside world. I have always been inclined towards the process of making art and the physical manipulation of materials. I think part of what interests me about two-dimensional art specifically is the aspect of story telling and the control that comes with that role. I am setting up a scene. Although everyone sees the world in their own way, while they view my artwork I determine their visual perspective. Art making is a practice of, paradoxically, both control and complete, unbounded expression.

In my work water holds symbolic weight that is both personal and universal. Water as a classic signifier for the subconscious represents personal fears, anxieties, and uncertainties about the future and concerns about lack of control and preparation for what it ultimately holds. I find that the emotional response to the stress of the unknown is a far more complicated matter than it at first appears. Although people may feign understanding of their own actions and behaviors, their perception of themselves and those they interact with is just beginning to scratch the surface of far more complicated layers of desires, fears, and motives.

Water takes on a less conventional meaning as I approach the topics of memory and perspectives on time. My figurative paintings are heavily based on nostalgia and the act of revisiting memories. In them I use an underwater environment as a metaphor for my past. An underwater environment is one completely different from our own on land.
People can swim in water and dive underneath the surface, but they cannot survive and do not truly belong. I see water and the experience of diving and swimming as a parallel to revisiting memories in a specific time and place. I can hold my breath to explore the depths, but I have to pace myself and eventually return to the surface to face reality. Alone, my figurative paintings are less illustrative of this concept and read almost exclusively as portraits, but when put in the context of my smaller fantastical underwater landscapes they too begin to hint at the idea of revisiting memories. By recreating these images with paint, I am able to hold onto something that is otherwise intangible.

The images I use as references when I paint and draw are from a variety of sources: photographs I have taken of my close friends underwater, real and imagined childhood memories, and loosely from pictures online, especially those from a flooded valley known as The Green Lake in Austria. Whether separately or in conjunction with one another, each source works as a means to completing a painting. The first paintings I began working on steadily were the underwater portraits. I believe I was initially interested in painting these images not only because they were of people whom I love, but because the underwater element of the portraits presented a challenge that I hoped to learn from as I tried to recreate them on canvas with a sense of fidelity to the photograph. The life-size and larger than life-sized scale of the paintings plays an important role in the viewer's interaction with the grouping of portraits as a whole. When the portraits are all hung up together, I intend for them to give an appearance not unlike an aquarium. I have purposefully put these pieces of my memories on display, and this would not read as well if the portrait paintings were of a smaller scale. Formally, I am interested in the play of lights and darks against the submerged bodies as the water's surface reflects off of their
skin. The veil of water creates an atmosphere that is unattainable on land. Everything appears weightless and subdued; in rivers the surrounding environment becomes a cloudy display of colors and deep darkness.

I began expanding my body of underwater work from the portrait paintings first with an underwater landscape and figure, then with my series of large charcoal drawings portraying fantastical river monsters. After the drawings I returned to painting where I worked simultaneously on the large portraiture and smaller underwater scenery with an interacting figure or figures. With each piece I strived to convey the atmospheric and photic qualities unique to the underwater world.

**Personal Significance of Paint Over Photography**

Photographs and photography inadvertently became an irreplaceable tool in my painting process. Although each portrait painting references an underwater photograph, it is important to emphasize that the painting, not the image it is derived from, is the finished art object. This is in part due to the importance that I place on the act of painting. When I paint the portraits and scenes that have come to embody my interpretations of the importance of water, it is in many ways a form of meditation. The time and energy I put into each
painting allows me to not only ruminate on the subject matter, but to simply have time with myself. Painting and image-making, even in the form of partial replication as found in my figurative paintings, is important because it is my opportunity to leave an impression, no matter how small or how short-lived, on the world. Although I work from photographs in my portraits, photography does not satisfy this need in the way paintings do. Each stroke of paint is a physical mark left by me alone, not an exact copy of the captured photographic moment.

Alyssa Monks (1977-), an artist whose work I have long admired, also seems to have built a relationship between photographic representation and the need to make her mark, so to speak. Monks creates huge beyond-photorealistic paintings of figures, most often women, who are in some way interacting with water. Some are partially submerged, some covered in oil or Vaseline that makes the water on their skin cling to itself, and others appear distorted behind glass made foggy from steaming water, sometimes pressed up against the glass, further distorting the figure. Although Monks faithfully recreates the photographs she has taken, when these large paintings are observed closely, the artist's brushstrokes can be clearly seen in
thick white highlights against the skin. The beautiful and frequently titillating nature of Monks’ subjects may have attracted the viewer’s gaze, but these distinguished brushstrokes left as evidence of the artist’s presence hold their attention. My own paintings differ greatly from Monk’s, but I too am interested in marrying some level of photographic representation and evidence of the artist.

**Image Gathering**

As I do always work from photographs to some degree, the collection of images was a fundamental part of my painting process. With the exception of *Elizabeth (2014)* and my self-portrait, *Selkie (2013)*, which were taken before I began attending ETSU, all of the underwater portrait pictures were taken by me with the intention of using them for inspiration in my artwork. I became interested in the idea of taking pictures underwater and using them as references early in my sophomore year, but it wasn't until the end of the school year that I acquired the means to do so. As much as I’d love to have a high-quality camera built specifically to go underwater, financially that simply was not an option. So I took the, relatively speaking, less expensive route and purchased an underwater housing
from Ikelite for my Canon SD 1200. Even though it doesn't produce the clearest photographs, I've been pleased with the results; it has suited me well.

Orchestrating underwater photo shoots proved to be a difficult task. I managed to get a number of pool images during the summer of 2012 and I used these pictures as references for my paintings *Dylan* (2012) and *Marta* (2013). Distance, the weather, the cold, and general demands from my friends’ and my life at school were constant obstacles to overcome. Although I did not complete as many photo shoots as I would have liked, I managed to collect a stockpile of images from pools and rivers that provided me with enough material to paint the portraits in this body of work.

In my more fantastical pieces, such as the river monster charcoal drawings and the oil paintings of underwater landscapes, I relied more on my imagination. The river monsters are composed almost entirely from my vivid childhood imagination with the exception of referring loosely to a stockpile of images from the internet of crocodiles, alligators, fallen trees, and partially submerged branches. These I acquired almost exclusively from the internet. Although parts of the underwater landscape paintings are also drawn from my imagination, I primarily based them on an online source I came

Screenshot from video of the Green Lake courtesy of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJ-7WD5VdWs
across on YouTube. Videos from the Green Lake, a valley in Austria that becomes a strikingly beautiful underwater world when it floods with melted mountain snow each spring and summer, became a wealth of inspiration for my underwater landscapes. I took screen captures from my favorite videos and used each as a platform to create my underwater worlds. I applied some level of abstraction and used my own discretion when deciding to eliminate or alter certain features in the scenery.

In my underwater landscape painting, *Surface Musings (2013)*, I used not only imagery from the Green Lake, but also studio shots taken by a friend during class. When I first began working on the figure, I was trying to use stock images found on the internet to achieve something close to the pose I had envisioned. This was not going very well, and finally my painting professor, Mira Gerard, suggested that I have someone in the class take a picture of me as I posed the way I wanted my figure to be. After several attempts while balancing precariously on studio furniture, we succeeded in getting a variety of shots that I could use as references for the figure in my painting. Taking time to actually get the right images is essential to creating a successful painting. The origin of the reference material is not important, whether it is

![Screenshot from video of the Green Lake courtesy of https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJ-7WD5VdWs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJ-7WD5VdWs)
from the artist's mind, floating about in the endless source of information we call the
internet, or yet to be created, as was the case with the reference for the figure in my
painting, *Surface Musings (2013)*. The most important point to remember when
collecting images to use for any kind of artwork is that the references must be in
agreement with the direction the artist wishes to take their creation.

**Water and Memory as a Separate Realm**

My interest in water is one that seems to span generations, from my grandfather
leaving his small, land-locked town in North Carolina to join the Navy to my dad's
lifelong passion as a hobbyist of water exploration. My dad has a real love for the water
and whenever he loves something he always wants to instill that same passion into my
older sister and me. While I was growing up, he frequently organized family trips to the
river with my mom, sister, and me, for kayaking, canoeing, snorkeling, or just swimming.
As a bachelor, he enjoyed these activities alone, so it seemed only natural to try and pass
on the joy he felt to his family. I'm not sure what prompted his decision to become
involved in SCUBA diving, to be honest, the only strange thing is that he didn't already
do it, but around the time I was ten he and my older sister took a class to become certified
SCUBA divers. As soon as I was old enough, my dad made sure I was granted the same
opportunity. So, by the time I was twelve, I was already able to see and experience water
in an entirely different way than many people ever would.

Eight years later in college at ETSU as I began developing the basic concepts of
my undergraduate research and knew I wanted to continue working with underwater
elements, I understood the importance of considering the influence of diving on my
artwork. In my experiences diving, when I am underwater time passes more slowly;
while the sounds I am accustomed to above ground are muted, the water surrounds me with alien white noise: the whisper of the current, pebbles knocking against the rocky bottom, and the steady sound of my own displaced breathing. This is a constant reminder that I am only a visitor and do not belong beneath the surface.

Through this realization I grew to have a new understanding of the connection between water and my artwork. The figures are submerged and frozen in time underneath the water's surface. In the paintings they have become part of the water, and now, unlike the viewer, belong in this environment. The figures exist in a glowing painted world with currents and unusual patterns of light and dark, still and yet preserving a sense of the slow, rhythmic movement of their watery surroundings. As I am a visitor in the rivers and quarries where I dive, anyone who sees my underwater portraits gets the chance to visit slices of my past and the frozen likenesses of the people I became close to while growing up in East Tennessee.

In the river paintings such as Jill (2014), Elizabeth (2014), and my self-portrait Selkie (2013), the women's bodies are captured in a state of motion. The light dances over the surface of their skin and penetrates through the water, bathing everything in a
golden green splendor. The women's faces are all obscured to varying degrees by the veil of water and shadows resting untouched over their features. In these paintings, movement is particularly important due to the nature of the water in which the figures are submerged. Unlike the figures in the pool paintings, which despite their dynamic gestures remain relatively static, the river women reflect the movement of the water itself. The way their hair flows with the current and the position of their limbs all help to achieve the illusion of the flowing water inside the still framed canvas.

Through my own exploration, water has come to represent not only the subconscious, hidden from sight, but the physical manifestation of a place where my memories lie. By their nature, if memories exist, it is in the past. Although I can revisit my memories, just as I can dive beneath the water's surface, I cannot truly belong to the same world as they do. I am a visitor. Constant fixation on the past is as detrimental as trying to breathe underwater and leads to a sort of mental drowning. An experience that I am unfortunately, all too familiar with.
My fixation on my past memories brings to mind a quote most commonly attributed to the ancient Chinese philosopher, Laozi (6th BCE).

"If you are depressed you are living in the past.
If you are anxious you are living in the future.
If you are at peace you are living in the present.

When I first read this quote it resonated very strongly with me. I always aim to live in the present, but as one of the many people who has dealt with depression, and as a habitually anxious person, if I'm not obsessing over all of the uncertainties of my future, then I am preoccupying myself with the past, clicking through page after page of Facebook pictures that captured fond memories growing more and more distant. I know it isn't healthy and yet I find myself repeatedly diving back into a world of nostalgia and memories. I can visit this world briefly, but I cannot survive extended periods underneath the rising water.

I have found several conceptual parallels at the base level between my own work and that of video artist Bill Viola (1951-). Viola recognizes the dangers of water and yet, like me, has a deep-rooted respect and fascination for it. When Viola was interviewed by Christian Lund of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, he described a profound childhood near-death experience in which he fell into a lake only to be rescued by his uncle. He described it as a "kind of paradise," with beautiful colors, plants, and displays of lights. Looking back he felt that in that moment he discovered that "There's more than just the surface of life. The real thing is under the surface" (Viola). Viola seems to fetishize this childhood memory. He is drawn back to this near-death experience by the
beauty that accompanied it. In the same way I find myself yearning to be a part of a world that no longer exists and has passed on beyond my reach.

In 2007 Bill Viola presented an installed video piece called *Ocean without a Shore* that in many ways relates to my interests in divisions between life and memory. Like much of Viola's video art, *Ocean without a Shore* (2007) features the interaction between human figures and water. Installed in three large altars in the Church of San Gallo in Venice, Italy, each of Viola's three corresponding videos shows the grainy image of a person standing in the dark behind a clear veil of water. As the figures step forward, into the light and through the water, the video quality increases until they appear to step into the viewer's space. He described it as a piece about humanity and the "fragility of life . . . the borderline between life and death is actually not a hard wall . . . it's actually very fragile, very tenuous." The people who are emerging from behind the wall of water are meant to be seen as the dead visiting loved ones who are still alive. Of course the models whom Viola worked with are living, not dead, and they had their own stories about
coming to the church to visit their dead loved ones (Viola). I found this idea of passing through the veil of water that represents the divider between the world of the living and dead closely paralleled my own concept of visiting past selves and memories. In many ways people's past and memories are simply dead pieces of themselves and can be mourned as such. As people grow, they are constantly changing. I am not the same person I was four years ago when I began working on my undergraduate degree, and I am certainly not the same little girl I see in family videos at her sixth birthday party. That little girl is gone. People experience their own death gradually long before it actually occurs.

The Evolution of Painting Technique and Intentions

I created my first painting for this body of work unknowingly in my intermediate painting class. I painted Dylan (2012) on a whim; I wanted to challenge myself by painting from an underwater reference. The picture shows my boyfriend, Dylan, underwater in a reclined odalisque-like position smiling at the viewer. The image not only captures his impish personality, but turns the concept of the male gaze on its head. While working on this painting, I had a tendency to apply thin layers, spreading the paint as far as I could in
an effort to conserve the precious and pricey material. In several places I left hard lines where they did not exist in the photograph giving it a more illustrative quality. At its completion, I was pleased with the painting, but it did not have the underwater illusion I intended in part because the image I used was taken with the flash on which flattened the colors and also because of the prevalence of hard lines instead of smooth transitions. My painting Marta (2013) also followed a similar aesthetic, though perhaps with a greater quantity of paint at Mira Gerard's insistence.

After my first two figure paintings, I took a break from underwater portraits and painted Surface Musings (2013), the first of my underwater landscapes. With this painting I worked on a smaller scale and less closely from photographs, although I did use a picture of myself and a screenshot from a video of the Green Lake as references. I think in part because of the small scale and in part because I felt less bound to the imagery, I worked more freely with this painting. The painting has a more expressive quality than my first two portraits with looser, more evident brushstrokes.

My first river painting was the self-portrait, Selkie (2013). This is where I began a more dramatic change in style and technique. Of all of my portraits, and perhaps my underwater landscapes too, Selkie (2013) took the least time. I had a studio visit with painter, Michael Ray Charles just days before completing the painting where he encouraged me to work faster. This resulted in the use of more paint, and more pronounced brush strokes, with fewer layers of color, much like the approach I took to my first underwater landscape. I applied some aspects of this technique to my painting Elizabeth (2014), but did not incorporate the same speed at which I completed Selkie (2013). While painting Elizabeth (2014), I continued to face issues getting the form just
right and creating a sense of movement by blurring the figure's hand. I eventually set the painting aside to work on others.

**Learning from the Masters**

In the fall semester of my senior year, I enrolled in the special topics in art class, Old Masters' Historic Painting Techniques. Going into the class I knew it was bound to have a dramatic impact on the way I approached painting. In this class, Mira Gerard taught us the different technical skills of applying glazes and scumbles through the Venetian and neoclassical techniques. We worked diligently trying to recreate the sense of glowing light and inky darkness seen in the paintings by masters such as Caravaggio, Vermeer, Albrecht Dürer, and Titian. During the course I worked on two different copies, one still life by Adriaen Coorte (c. 1660-aft 1707), *Gooseberries on a Table (1701)*, and a section of Pierre Auguste Cot's (1837-1883) saccharine painting of star-crossed lovers, *The Storm (1880)*. Our final was a composition of our own making. I recreated an underwater pool picture I had taken of a friend during her pregnancy using the neoclassical style. The first step was to paint an ornate, monochromatic under painting with white and a half tone. I chose permanent rose oil paint which resulted in a vibrant hot pink. The finished painting was a psychedelic version of the original image,
and the first of my underwater paintings to be produced with any real consideration for scumbles and glazes. The work was tedious and labor-intensive, but through it I gained invaluable knowledge and skill. I began applying my new-found understanding of scumbles and glazes to my own work, returning to my original tendency to apply thin layers, but this time with purpose. This enabled me to better represent a true sense of light and depth found in the underwater world. The influence of this class can best be seen in my pieces Jill (2014) and Regression (2014).

**Water, Childhood Memories, and Hidden Dangers**

For the past year and a half the influence of water imagery has permeated the surface of every canvas and sheet of paper I begin working with. Even before this time, I was unconsciously drawn to images of water in my early work. One painting I completed in my introduction to painting class is especially telling of what would soon turn into a body of work. This painting, titled *Look Before You Leap*, was part of the class's "tiny worlds" project in which we first built snow globes (sans snow in many cases) filled with whatever we wished and then set our props up with the appropriate backdrop and light to paint. The scene in my snow globe
was that of a young boy about to jump from a rock into the water where a large lizard-like lake monster waited under the surface prepared to gobble down its dinner. Although the image seems quite dark, the painting itself appears very light-hearted with darker undertones. My paintings and drawings involve concepts that I take seriously, but through some manifestation of my personality they always seem to have a certain carefree quality about them.

The idea for this particular piece came from a memory from kindergarten or first grade. As I recall, we were in gym class and had to watch this American Red Cross water safety video with a talking cartoon whale named Longfellow and staged scenarios of what to do in any given dangerous watery situation. In one particular clip, two boys are hanging out by a lake or river. One of the boys is preparing to jump in the water when the other boy stops him saying "Wait . . . You don't know what's under the surface."
What if there's something there that you don't know about?" The camera then pans into the water to reveal jagged rocks and sharp fallen branches. I remember thinking that one of these branches was not a branch at all, but looked like some kind of eel or monster. Longfellow the whale's alliterative catch phrase, for this particular situation was "Always remember to LOOK before you LEAP!" (Longfellow). For whatever reason this image has stayed with me and although I realized the connection to this memory while working on my "tiny worlds" project," I didn't realize at the time that it and other similar memories would continue to influence my work.

In the spring of 2013 I began to further explore themes of the unknown and subconscious through the symbolic lens of water. At the time, I was enrolled in advanced drawing with Professor Andrew Scott Ross, a primarily self-driven class with guidance from the instructor. I was also in advanced painting that semester and had been toying with the idea of creating paintings from a specific childhood fear. I had made two small watercolor studies based on this idea,

*Dawn, Charcoal on paper, 2013*
but decided to continue painting underwater portraits in my painting class and explore this new idea in my drawing class. For our first critique I turned in a charcoal drawing of a creature that resembled both a crocodile or alligator and a log half submerged in water surrounded by woods. The imagery was based on a very specific, but repeated event from my childhood. When visiting large bodies of water with my family I was always reluctant to enter the water whenever there were submerged tree limbs nearby.

*Daybreak, Charcoal on paper, 2013*

To my young mind, many of the logs resembled predatory crocodile heads bobbing in the wakes of passing speed boats. During boat rides on the lake my dad would tease me, pointing to floating bits of wood and saying, "Look, Hannah. A gator." It was never a terrifying experience, but for all my rationalizing, I still felt uneasy getting into the lake,
especially alone. My drawing depicted what a creature such as the ones from my imagination might look like if it actually existed. My professor was intrigued by the idea and challenged me to produce similar work on a much larger scale than I had previously attempted in either painting or drawing. Over the course of the semester I finished three large-scale charcoal drawings ranging from 5-7' by 5' all featuring this creature of my own invention based on my childhood fear of the unknown. It is always partially submerged in water and distinctly resembles both tree and crocodile. There is never any real indication that this creature will actually attack, or for that matter even move, but its potential for action remains threatening.

The first drawing, *Dawn*, was the smallest of the three and an almost exact recreation of my original drawing. In the larger context of its grouping, it came to represent the genesis of my creatures. The second and largest drawing, *Daybreak*, showed what may be a family of three log creatures basking in the sun with their heads just breaching the water's surface as small birds fly around them building nests in the creatures' exposed branches. Unlike in the first drawing, the viewer cannot see what's going on under the water. Because of this, of all the images this one is the most deceptively successful concerning the creatures' ability to appear as just another submerged log. Nothing is revealed. The family of creatures and the birds building their homes work together in conveying the drawing's overall theme of life, adaptability, and survival. The final drawing, *Dusk*, again shows the creature alone. This time it is seen only under the water with the ends of its branches just breaking the surface and disappearing from sight. It is curled up on the bottom of the river dead or sleeping with algae growing on and fishing line tangled in its branches. Everything is revealed. The
creature makes no attempt to cross over into the world above, its head no longer breaches the water’s surface and is fully submerged, becoming a part of its underwater environment.

By the time I completed the final drawing, it was evident that this deviation from my other underwater pieces had taken on some of its own meaning. Ideas about the subconscious and unknown that were carried in with the original concept persisted throughout the drawings, but they came to collectively represent a metaphor for the journey from birth to death. The creature that emerged from my childhood fear of the unknown had evolved into something else entirely: another fellow organism, misunderstood and trapped between two worlds unable to survive in either of them if fully exposed.

Selkies, Merfolk, and Nymphs

Discovering the personal connection between the river monsters and me was not the first time I identified with a creature of two worlds. During high school when I would go swimming with my friends, be it at the pool, the ocean, or the river, I was always the first to get in the water, no matter how icy it felt. Because of my enthusiasm and
apparent disregard for the cold, we would joke that I must be some sort of river nymph or mermaid. I took these memories into consideration when I titled my self-portrait, *Selkie (2013)*, both a play on the slang word for self-portrait, "selfie," and after the seal-women from the Scottish folklore of my ancestors. When I began really getting into my research, selkies, among other part-human water-dwelling creatures were the subjects I was most excited to pursue.

One of the first articles I came across concerning selkies had several startling coincidences with the artistic decisions I had made and dialogues I was having with myself, including this idea of drowning in water and memory. In his article, "The Seal In the Folklore of Northern Europe," Martin Puhvel discusses the origins of seal-people myths. In one such myth from the German Baltic island Riigen and Iceland, seals were believed to be a race of their own that had descended from people who had perished in the water (Puhvel). This struck me as an amazing conceptual coincidence paralleling my work and the mythology of seal people. Not only could drowning in water or memories be associated with perishing, but also a literal or metaphorical process of dehumanizing oneself and becoming disassociated with
the world of people. Staying submerged too long could actually result in losing one's human identity. The once human selkie would belong to the water and only occasionally shed its seal skin to visit the land (Puhvel).

Like selkies or mermaids both the women from my river paintings and the figures in my underwater landscapes seem to belong to their environments. Although they are human in form, there is no indication of stress below the surface. There is no telling if these people are at home in their natural environment or if it is simply too late for them to return to the world above. My series of log monster charcoal drawings also alludes to the idea of becoming part of the environment.

Apart from their fantastic appearance in relation to our own reality, the log creatures do not seem misplaced in their environment. However, they are not merely creatures of the water; rather they require both air and water. The last drawing, Dusk, hints at a sort of reclaiming by nature, as the sleeping or dead creature lies curled up underneath the water with vegetation growing on its branches and fish swimming by indifferent to its presence.
Susanna Majuri (1978-), an artist based in Helsinki, Finland who combines photographs she has taken to create fantastical underwater images, also incorporates women as creatures of water in her work. All of Majuri's photographs feature girls in watery forests giving them a definite mermaid-like quality that I am interested in. When looking at these images, especially *Forest* (2009), it is impossible not to think of *Hamlet's* Ophelia and her frequent appearance in paintings.

John Everett Millais' (1829) 19th century *Ophelia* (1852), perhaps one of the best known renditions, clearly resembles Majuri's contemporary photograph. Both Majuri's figures and Millais' figure float, limply with arms slightly extended.
in a pool of water near the woods or simultaneously part of the woods. Having already identified my own artwork with that of Majuri's, I could not deny the connection my paintings also had to the Ophelia iconography.

Ophelia has long been associated not only with nature, nymphs, and mermaids, but also with metaphorical conversion from living land-dweller to this drowned creature of the water. Much like the aforementioned Icelandic seal legends, Ophelia's water-induced death is a transformation into another being. This is especially telling in the play when the Queen reports Ophelia's death to her brother, Laertes.

When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element; but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. (Hamlet, IV.vii. 167-84)

In her article, "The Iconography of Ophelia," Bridget Gellert Lyons suggests that throughout the play Ophelia is depicted as a goddess covered in flowers, innocent and child-like existing in a reality of "political intrigue and sexual danger" (Lyons 71-72). Through drowning, Ophelia escapes into the unknown otherworld of water. She is only one in a line of characters from literature and film who seek this escape. Edna Pontellier
of Kate Chopin's (1850-1904) novel, *The Awakening (1899)*, overwhelmed by her life's recent events wades into the Gulf of Mexico where she drowns (Chopin). Carl Jung's (1875-1961) *Man and His Symbols (1964)* discusses the French film *Crin Blanc (1953)*, or *White Mane*, in which a wild horse and the boy whom it has befriended jump into the sea rather than be captured by their pursuers. Jung suggests the film's symbolism is that of an escape from reality into the unconscious (Jung 175). This classic interpretation of water as the unconscious or subconscious escape in the film can easily be applied to the fate of Ophelia and Edna Pontellier.

The symbolism associated with Ophelia in many ways works as a bridge between my paintings and drawings. As primarily female figures in water, my portraits are irrevocably tied to the Lady of Denmark and her associations to mermaids. The figures above and in underwater landscapes also share the iconographic characteristics of Ophelia as they are either becoming or have already transformed into creatures of water. Lastly, the river monsters who live in the water, but require air, only in their final stages of life retreat entirely into the water, just like the drowned Ophelia.

*Surface Musings, 16" X 20", Oil on canvas, 2012*
Storytelling, Fairytales, and Fantasy Worlds

In all of my artwork, the river monster drawings, my more fantastic underwater scenes, and even the portraits, when the mythological element is considered, it is impossible to ignore the influence of fantasy worlds and fairytales. My paintings and drawings often have the association of a narrative with them, even to the point of riding on the border between a clean-cut painting or drawing and a form of illustration. I've neither turned away from nor fully embraced the illustrative quality of my work, but rather accepted it as a natural tendency and have continued creating paintings and drawings which may very well follow an unwritten narrative in my mind. By contrast, my underwater landscapes are separated from the above world by a wavering line that I think, while not true to nature, shows a more gradual transition between the two worlds, as if they are worlds within a world.

My paintings of underwater landscapes share an aesthetic similar to those done by the artist Jeremy Miranda (n.d.-). Miranda frequently uses water imagery and creates split scenes, sometimes in juxtaposition to one another resulting in spaces that are simultaneously familiar and fantastical. After painting my first underwater landscape, Surface Musings (2013), I came across his painting, Searching (2012), and was intrigued by

Jeremy Miranda, Searching, 18' X 24", acrylic on wood panel, 2012
their shared characteristics: the canvas split between the waterline, rocky outcrops, a solitary figure, and an implied narrative. In other paintings ladders lead from one landscape to another impossible landscape placed on top of the first as seen in *Ladder* (2012). I am interested in the way Miranda forces an interaction between two spaces and in doing so creates impossible, dream-like imagery. Miranda emphasizes the separateness of the environments with crisp, geometric, straight edges.

While the work of Andres Franke (n.d.-) does not literally depict two separate worlds as Jeremy Miranda's paintings do, Franke's photography certainly contains elements of an unworldly fantasy land. Andreas Franke, a Viennese artist who has had great success as an advertisement photographer, working with clients such as Coca-cola, Visa,
Heineken, and Ford, also has a passion for SCUBA diving. While I am drawn to many artists working with water as a central element, I found the importance of SCUBA diving in Franke's process to be especially alluring. *National Geographic* photography aside, I do not often see a form of art and SCUBA diving sharing the same space. When I first came across these photographs, I could not help but feel a bit giddy, as if two close friends had finally begun to see eye to eye.

Franke combines his passion for photography and SCUBA diving in his personal projects, known collectively as *The Sinking World*. Each individual project shares the name of the sunken ship from which the photographs were taken. In addition to the underwater photographs, Franke takes studio shots from which he transposes figures and objects into the ghostly atmospheres of the sunken ships. The juxtaposition of the people and commonplace activities they are partaking in on the bottom of the ocean creates a surreal underwater world, reminiscent of some long-forgotten past with a story waiting to be uncovered. While discussing his work Franke said, "With my photographs of sunken shipwrecks, I want to pull the spectators into unreal and strange worlds. Mystified scenes of the
past play within a fictional space. Dreamworlds you can get lost in or that you can identify with. This creates a new and unexpected atmosphere."

The idea behind Franke's work is perhaps a bit straightforward, but the captured moments taken from his "dreamworlds" read as pieces of the past lost deep underwater. The photographs from Franke's project Mohawk even depict sailors similar to those who would have been aboard the World War II USS Mohawk, "Mighty Mo." The sailors appear tussling onboard the ship, getting tattoos, and going about their daily chores; even the sailors' daydreams of the women whom they left behind become the subjects of the photographs (Franke).

Conclusion

If asked four years ago what artwork I envisioned myself creating in the coming years of undergraduate school, I am confident that paintings discussing ideas of the subconscious and memories through water symbolism would not have been my first, second, or third guess. What began as a whim in my junior year evolved into a body of work that I never anticipated. Although we as humans need water to survive, we also
have an innate fear of the dangers that it harbors. Instinctually we know that it is not safe. Anything could be hiding beneath the surface waiting to pull us under, and yet we are drawn to it out of necessity. The subconscious and unknown, like water, are equally captivating and terrifying.

Analyzing my own subconscious in search of the driving force behind the reoccurring theme of water in my paintings provided its own wealth of material. Researching the themes of the subconscious, memory, and forms of escapism throughout art, psychology and folklore, has given me new perspective on myself. I have always struggled with anxiety and its effect on my life. Since leaving home and coming to college I have holed myself in, trying to fill the perceived void of my present with memories from my past. I shift constantly between the fears of my uncertain future to the comforts of the life I remember, rarely having moments of clarity and existing in the reality I have found myself in, drowning. Previous to this realization, I knew I wasn't in a good place mentally, but after finding ways to express the feeling in a more tangible way, I think I better understand how to keep myself from going under.
References


