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Artist Statement and Research

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The Bigger Picture

Through my painting, *The Bigger Picture*, I explored milestones of human lifespan development. As an educational studies minor, I have taken a great interest in this area of study. As an artist, I have always been interested in painting portraits and figures from photographs. This semester, I gathered photographs from my life and appropriated them into a large painting that references the timeline and various milestones that everyone experiences throughout development.

In the fall, I was initially concerned with capturing the physical likeness of a person through portraiture. I have been accustomed to painting portraits and figures from photographs. I take photographs all the time and would search through them for an image I wanted to paint. I work from photographs both out of convenience and because there is something I enjoy about painting an image of a moment that I never intended to paint. Photographs present restrictions, however, especially when sorting through photographs taken without the intention to use for art. Moments captured are hardly ever negative and many are staged.

I began to think about how prevalent photos have become via the advancement and accessibility of technology. Because of the increasing amount of digital storage on memory cards and computers, we can take however many photos we like, and we often do. We no longer need to worry about making our film last, or only using it to capture worthy moments. With the ability to take as many photos as

we like, we have become concerned with taking multiples and with capturing the best shot. This presents two problems. First, when we are busy taking photos, we remove ourselves from the present situation. We look back on the experience through stagnant, digital screens. We probably cannot remember what was happening around us when the photo was taken. Second, what happens to the photos that are not considered the best shot?

Many photos are forgotten. They are never posted, never printed, and yet never deleted. They are the “leftover” photos. I looked through my phone to find all of these photos and came across hundreds of leftover photos. All of them were forgotten because I took others that were better. The better photos were worthy of being posted to social media sites, printed, or sent to friends and family. I realized that by taking so many photos, I removed myself from the moment. I do not remember anything that was being said or anything that was going on. I was concerned with taking the photo.

To show the importance we have placed on capturing moments in time through photography, while simultaneously degrading our memories of the actual experience, I painted from one of my forgotten photos. I was not particular about which photo I painted, since I chose from an abundance of leftover photos. I painted the photo six times, each time blurring the image slightly to show the gradual degradation of our memories due to the need to take photographs.

Through this series, *Leftovers*, I asked the viewer and myself to focus and find something meaningful in such a hasty photo. The images gradually abstract, representing how our concern for capturing moments in time is subverted by

devices that actually take us out of the moment. Paintings are typically important commodities. I painted one of my leftover images in order to bring attention to forgotten pictures and lost memories due to the need to preserve. Through this series, I attempted to find meaning in disposable aspects of our culture.

This work did not necessarily convey what I intended without an explanation. I was told that it looked like an exercise in abstraction, and looking back, I certainly agree. I made something visually that would have been more successful had I simply verbalized the idea. The concept is an interesting one, and it is multifaceted, but it was time to look at my interests in a new light.

I started to think about what I find interesting about people in general. I have taken a few psychology courses for my educational studies minor. I loved all of the courses and have since retained and continue to think about a lot of the information I learned. In addition to my education courses, have had a job teaching art to kids of all ages, and plenty of experience observing children. I constantly refer to my lifespan development course. We covered birth through death, and during the stages before early adulthood (where I am now); I used to call my mom to ask what I was like as a baby, how I adapted when my two younger brothers were born, and even discuss her and my dad's parenting styles.

I am always interested in "a-ha!" moments. I can think of a few that I've had myself, like realizing my parents names weren't actually Mom and Dad. I love seeing that moment in someone else when I explain something. I often saw this when teaching young children. I love seeing growth and understanding and I love when

other people see it too. I love being able to spark someone else's memory and drawing a connection between my life and theirs.

With that in mind, I decided to paint about lifespan development, which culminated in a 23'x5' painting called *The Bigger Picture*. To show growth, I utilized my own photographs and experiences to show others about the lifespan. I sifted through my family's photos and memory cards and chose to use pictures that represent iconic developmental moments. My photographs were set in a clearly suburban atmosphere, which led me to research artist Eric Fischl, an American artist born in 1948. I focused on his paintings that are known to be explorations of taboo topics within the suburban lifestyle. Many of these paintings display nudity and other sexual and power-related themes that are presented as moments in time. His work is narrative in that each painting depicts a specific scene in which viewers are able to understand. Even if some of the actions of the figures are obscure, there is enough information for viewers to know that something is happening that is not quite right, that is forbidden. In many ways, these paintings are autobiographical. They are not always representative of events that happened in Fischl's life, however, but rather aspects of the suburban culture in which he grew up.

Fischl usually works from photographs. My work is relevant to Fischl in that I work from photographs as well and I am exploring topics related to development. My intent, however, is not to explore taboo subjects as much as it is to highlight memories and cognitive development. While these topics may sometimes include the discovery of taboo subjects, working from photographs that have already been taken restricts my access to images of a taboo or negative nature. My and Fischl's

approaches to our work are similar in that we utilize photographs as source images. We both casually snap photographs quite often, not always with the intent to paint each one, but often finding source material from photographs we have taken.

Fischl does not paint from events that happened in his own life; rather he creates scenarios of the culture in which he grew up. Because of the nature of painting from my own photographs, I must paint from my life's events. In order to relate to others, I make sure it is not extremely personal. I render images loosely, letting the gessoed canvas show through. If I were to realistically paint each image completely, it would give each moment a permanence that I do not wish to capture. My piece looks like a large timeline of memories that blend into one another. I used watered down acrylic paint and charcoal in order to create a loose, "ghostlike" effect. This references the fleeting and ephemeral nature of everyone's life and everyone's moments.

Through the process of growth and development, we all experience different cognitive, social, and physical changes. Painting gives me the ability to visualize information. By combining the process of painting with the psychology of lifespan development, I am able to personify universal and individual markers of developmental milestones.

For *The Bigger Picture*, I utilized my parents' collection of photographs throughout my lifespan as well as some my own. I did not take most of the photographs. The photos I use capture moments that I was never a viewer of, but rather a participant. Looking at these photos then becomes an "out of body" experience for me, and taboo in the sense that I was not a viewer of the moment

until seeing it in print. This holds true mostly for photographs that were taken before I could remember the experience. We have all been in situations that we have no memory of, but that have shaped us. These photographs connect with Fischl's photographs of models who did not consent to being photographed and painted, and may not even know that Fischl has done so. He has created artworks about a time in a person's life that they were not aware would be used for a different purpose in the future. In a sense I am doing the same thing to myself now that Fischl has done to others. I am using a photograph of myself that I did not know was taken. This is not main concept of my work, but it is an interesting facet of memory related to the lifespan and a bit of a similarity to the way in which Fischl's work is viewed.

I choose from my photographs by focusing on milestones I've learned to identify in my educational studies. One of many examples of development I wanted to identify was learning to care for others. To show this, I used photographs of me caring for a doll, then a younger brother, and then for friends. I show images of taking on responsibilities, such as being a bus patrol and driving.

I organize this information by identifying microsystems of social relationships that can serve as an example for viewers' own relationships and experiences. I identify family members, friends, social groups, and environments where interactions take place. Each image is chosen as a stage marker. The long canvas allows me to capture a sense of time. The entire piece cannot be perceived at once; viewers must move through each moment. I portray a person's life and the changes that take place from birth to the current moment.

When creating this work, I also looked at the work of artist Paula Rego. I depict the idea of awareness in order to identify various stages in the lifespan. For example, as a person ages, his or her consciousness of the ways in which they interact with and affect others slowly develops. In her series *Possession*, Rego depicts the idea of awareness and “coming-into-consciousness” as corporeal (Rosengarten, 2007). My piece is more so about the idea of interacting and affecting others than it is about corporeality. I address corporeality in a scene in which the main figure is gazing upon her hand, perhaps noticing it and the fact that she controls it for the first time. My presentation of corporeality in this scene is factual and unrelated to a narrative. My piece is meant to invite viewers to identify with the figure and each specific point in the lifespan. Rego’s figure is a grown woman whose distressed movements amount to a cognitive awareness and an implied narrative. Rego’s first six panels exhibit personal scenes of a taboo nature, as the solitary and clearly discomforted figure is likely not meant to be gazed upon. The ways in which my scenes are constructed allow viewers to feel immersed in the scene as if it were a memory. In my piece, I welcome viewers to gaze upon the unaware figure before she starts to gaze upon the viewer. Perhaps because of the difference in age, the actions of, and the places that our main figures are seen, this amounts to an extremely different account of the significance of Rego’s and my subject’s cognition.

As mentioned above, Rego draws upon folklore, religious stories, or societal constraints. She has also worked from Renaissance paintings and literature. For example, after reading a short story called ‘Haunted’ by Joyce Carol Oates, Rego used the story’s themes of friendship, jealousy, and love to create a painting based upon

the story (McEwan, 1997). Rego uses the source, and comes up with a visual. My source is the psychology of lifespan development. I use that source and find images from my life to support that source. I work directly from those images, rather than from models, memory, or imagination, as Rego works. Upon first glance, the connection between my work and Rego's is noticeable. There are multiple figures engaging in actions that are descriptive of each figure's place in life. Rego's figures tell a specific story, however. A story that is inspired from a story that Rego has heard. Rego's purpose is to share an opinion and tell a story. My purpose is to identify stages of the lifespan that viewers can connect with. I want viewers to see my piece and apply their own personal stories and memories to the scenes in my piece.

This painting is not just an autobiography. I paint so that others can candidly share their experiences by referencing my own. The experience of looking at an overarching image of development allows viewers to reflect on one's own life and gives a voice to forgotten and unspoken moments. What's interesting about seeing life in this way is being able to finally understand the importance of these moments and contextualize all the ways we've gotten to where we are.

My painting practice was once solely focused on capturing physical likeness through portraiture. Now, my portraiture engages experiences throughout the lifespan to capture more than just a singular likeness. My goal was to inspire introspection. It enables us to reflect on the ephemeral nature of our lives and consider our impact on others. Fundamentally, *The Bigger Picture* painting pays tribute to our lives in all of its stages and all of its complexities.

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