

I DREAMED I LEFT THE DOOR OPEN

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art, 2013, Brigham Young University

**An MFA Thesis Statement**

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Texas Christian University

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**Master of Fine Art**



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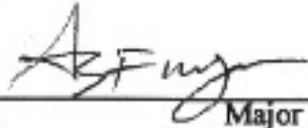
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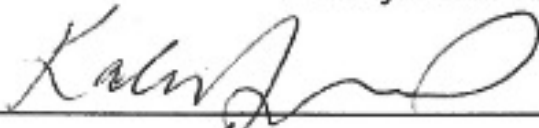
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Thesis approved:



Major Professor





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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## Introduction

My Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *I dreamed I left the door open*, examines the metaphysical space that lies between separate environments of mental responsibility. The processes of layering, removal, and retrieval all investigate the constant push and pull between the caretaking environment and other settings in the outside world. Using translucent scenes and sounds to pull the viewer back and forth in the emotional in-between, the resulting work considers the invisible workload, anxiety, and hope within daily life.

The title, *I dreamed I left the door open*, is a reference to the dreamlike quality of the paintings in the exhibition, with scenes that reside between reality and illusion. Additionally, the title references an external anxiety; questions such as “Did I leave the window open? Did I remember to lock the door?” are followed by greater concerns and the consequences of unfinished task. The mental tug to consider what one might have missed approaches the emotive and thematic elements of this exhibition, which focuses on finding a balance between competing roles. Personally, this elusive balance has centered between the roles of full-time artist and caretaker.

My artistic practice over the last three years paralleled my recently becoming a mother. The viewpoint that I came to see life through shifted to frequently considering two places at once. The process of balancing many obligations weighs on caretakers’ minds and bodies. The assumed societal role assigned to mothers leaves an increasing list of considerations to remember and manage, creating what has been coined by researchers as the “invisible workload.”<sup>1</sup> Even when parenting in an externally equitable partnership, women, or those socially designated as the “primary” parent, often carry an additional cognitive and emotional load. Researchers have also

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<sup>1</sup> Lucia Ciciolla and Suniya Luthar, “Invisible Household Labor and Ramifications for Adjustment: Mothers as Captains of Households,” *Sex Roles* 81 (2019): 467-486, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-1001-x>.

referred to the “invisible workload as “mnemonic work,” finding that the labor is greatly assigned to memory and the mental tracking of multiple places, events, and people.<sup>2</sup>

In my life, I have learned that this cognitive division creates a new framework wherein I must mentally straddle multiple environments. I approached my thesis exhibition, considering this new duality and its ramifications. Such a division can exist outside of caretaking as well, wherever a mental non-locality has been created— meaning where one entity or setting may affect another at a distance.<sup>3</sup> Looking back, I see and acknowledge the cognitive changes I have undergone over the last three years. This exhibition grew not out of a consideration of motherhood specifically but rather a desire to acknowledge, remember, and more fully understand this new framework required to mentally consider two spaces continually.

The painted works in *I dreamed I left the door open* physically and visually weigh this shift between two spaces, overlapping interior and exterior considerations. In the vernacular of painting, the “push-pull” theory is often used to describe a specific aesthetic where imagery, color, or other elements are overlaid, creating the feeling of being both pushed out from a space, and pulled back into it.<sup>4</sup> Throughout this exhibition, layers of paint and imagery push and pull the viewer within the work, echoing the lens that results from the constant mental hum of motherhood management.

This paper will address key elements across the body of work, including landscape and layered scenery, soundscape as a point of entry, treatment of the painted surface, and the inclusion of the mother child relationship as an archetype for stewardship.

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Ahn, Elizabeth Haines, and Malia Mason, “Gender Stereotypes and the Coordination of Mnemonic Work within Heterosexual Couples: Romantic Partners Manage their Daily To-Dos,” *Sex Roles* 77 (2017): 435-452 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0743-1>

<sup>3</sup> George Musser, “Where Is Here?,” *Scientific American*, Springer Nature, November 1, 2015, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-einstein-revealed-the-universe-s-strange-nonlocality/>

<sup>4</sup> Rose Frederick, “A Painter’s Playlist,” *Southwest Art* 38 (November 2008), 6: 88.





Fig. 1 Installation view of *The Shadow Draws Me Back* (left) and *Call me when you get home* (right, Photograph by Raul Rodriguez)



Fig. 2. Installation view of *I dreamed I left the door open* (Photograph by Photograph by Raul Rodriguez)

## **Landscape as Metaphor**

*I dreamed I left the door open* explores a tension between domestic or “indoor” settings and the outside world. Moments of landscape act as an important metaphor for an invasive environment, with weeds crawling around, through, or over interior spaces, as well as an element of undergrowth lying in the lower painted surface. The contrast built between the settled domestic environment and the permeating natural landscape allows the paintings to form a new psychological landscape. Translucent scenes balance between the expectations of landscape painting, and the systems of architectural painting. Works discussed hereafter will highlight this dichotomy and visual cues that allow for portals between the interior and the exterior, tugging the viewer into a psychological liminal space.

Points of ingress also form critical points of visual iconography. Physical doorways and windows, as well the illusion of light or shadows cast from passageways repeat throughout the body of work, casting doubt on whether the viewer is inside or outside a dwelling. The lure between contrasting settings questions which space holds power over the other.

These visual cues allow for an emotional connection to meaning while permitting any specific visual metaphor to remain flexible. The installation of this body of work creates a dreamlike setting to meander, while avoiding a specific narrative. These more open, non-linear connections to metaphor allow the viewer to thematically wander through an investigation of joined experiences, with visual motifs linking the works back together. Similarly, the layout of the exhibition was critical in creating this experiential feel. Rather than grouping scenes thematically, specific settings were spread out within the gallery, running threads of thematic connection without forming into one specific story. Intimate, interior viewpoints such as *The Shadow Draws Me Back* were placed next to contrasting, more open compositions, such as *Call*

*me when you get home* (Fig. 1). These juxtaposed perspectives allowed the viewer to wander in and out of environments, echoing the push and pull within the work.

In *Folding Together* (Fig. 3) the forest and its respective undergrowth form a base under the translucent interior space, while the focal point of a window seems to look out on that same inter-woven exterior. To the upper right of the painting, the trees of the exterior seem to break the top layers of paint, coming back into the dappled light of the interior space. This uncertain layering is even more prevalent in *An Unraveling of Here and There* (Fig. 4), where the point of egress is neither determinately outside nor inside. The undergrowth seems to permeate all points of the scene, with vagueness around a possible sun or light reflection furthering the question of location and denying whether the viewer is assuredly outside or inside.



Fig. 3. (Left) Installation view of *Folding Together* (Photograph by Leavitt Wells)

Fig. 4. (Right) Installation view of *An Unraveling of Here and There* (Photograph by Leavitt Wells)

Similarly, the vantage point of the viewer is ambiguous in both *Call me when you get home* and *It Sits With You* (Fig. 6). The closeness of some of the houses makes it unlikely that the viewer is looking out at the suburban landscape from a far hilltop, but the point of view is also not determinately a window. The ambiguity questions whether the viewer is in an external setting looking in on a suburban area or whether the viewpoint is from a domestic setting, looking out to an overgrown outside world. The overlay of the two ecosystems weighs what is unlikely against what is impossible.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *It Sits With You* (Photograph by Leavitt Wells)

*I dreamed I left the door open* considers the effect of separate spaces on one another and the ramifications of duality. The overgrowth throughout the works in the exhibition can allude to overload and anxiety, but it also acts as a stand-in for one space seeping into another, a point of intersection that is not always negative or fearful. Though the imagery referenced for the natural world was almost always pulled from native flora or “weeds,” the ambiguity of the silhouetted

foliage also allows the growth to be read as a forest or garden. Moments of light and shadow provide similarly “positive” or “negative” emotional points of egress between worlds. Light reflected from the sun into interiors or dappled through exterior trees or weeds could conversely be reflections of sun flares from a memory recorded as a photograph, lamps, or lit passageways. These points of light can unburden the ambiguity of an in-between space, and provide points of hope to the melancholy. These interchanges of light with the points of ingress create portals between the interior and exterior space, but also into the psychological landscape created across the paintings in the exhibition. Sound can act as an entry point to this mnemonic world, cuing the viewer emotionally or through memory.

### **Sound as a Doorway**

In *Neither Here Nor There* (Fig. 6), the viewer must pass through a soundscape to both enter and exit the exhibition, acting as an additional point of ingress to the psychological environment of the painted works. Pausing at the point of entry acts as a prelude exhibition experience, with the viewers entering the exhibition through a single door and coming into a soundscape housed by two white walls. There is no imagery in this space, just a white pedestal that holds the gallery map and list of works, presenting an opportunity for the viewer to pause before one the bare gallery walls.



Fig. 6. Installation view of *Neither Here Nor There* (Photograph by Leavitt Wells)

Each wall has been wired as a directional speaker, with exciters emitting the sound directly through the front of the wall that faces the viewers. This effect allows the soundscape to be much louder within the entry space while fading throughout the rest of the exhibition. Sounds echo field recordings taken over the past years from my personal work, studio, and home environments. These aural indicators become part of the iconography of the show, if only presented visually within the viewers' minds. The field of sound ebbs and flows between the two white planes, creating a range of scenes in stereo that converse with one another. The sounds tug between interior and exterior routines: a child humming or being bathed, sanding, scraping paint, and more ambiguous noises: evening nature sounds that could be outside or recordings from a window. These recordings deconstructed the scenes I was painting, creating an important process of listening back and re-entering these memories as I worked through surface considerations in the work.

My own voice arises, distorted through the drywall, as I read a book to my son. Apart from that moment and my child's voice appearing through the recorded tasks of caretaking, all other persons have been removed. *I dreamed I left the door open* considered a responsibility rather than a specific relationship. Like the painted works, the soundscape includes multiple objects and scenes of responsibility in looping focus, avoiding one singular, constant environment to which viewer returns.

As the viewer enters the full space of the exhibition and spends time with the painted works, the soundscape continues to provide cues to better access the environments and visual metaphors throughout the body of work. The sound further emphasizes the space between the painted works and the wall they are hung in front of. Pieces closer to the soundscape slightly move and react to changes in volume, conversing back with this audio intro and recalling how it permeates all the spaces between.

Visitors often will move through the soundscape quickly at the beginning, becoming more aware of its presence as they move throughout the show. The soundscape remains audible throughout the gallery, though quieter, humming in the background as a reminder to the viewer that there is something they still need to get back to.



Fig. 7. Installation view of *Look, look up* (Left, Photograph by Raul Rodriguez)

### **Surface as Memory**

In addition to the visible, clear responsibilities of studio practice, work, and caretaking, the hidden or “invisible” demands of motherhood led me to experience a sense of mental non-locality. The works in my thesis exhibition allude to this psychological phenomenon, with “non-locality” defined as “action at a distance.”<sup>5</sup> This process considers “the ability of one entity to affect the properties of another entity across spatial and temporal distances.”<sup>6</sup> This concept is used in general psychology to consider the abilities of one event or entity to affect another across a physical or psychological distance. As a full-time graduate student seeking to be immersed in

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<sup>5</sup> George Musser, “Where Is Here?,” *Scientific American*, Springer Nature, November 1, 2015, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-einstein-revealed-the-universe-s-strange-nonlocality/>

<sup>6</sup> Denis Klyak and Jeppe Oslen, “Exporing Non-Localilty in Psychology,” *Human Arenas* 5, February 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-021-00189-z>.



my studio practice, I became deeply aware of the many emotional and cognitive workloads that can pull me away from that practice. Having a young child, especially during a global pandemic, complicated my practice over the past three years. While painting or researching, I prefer to be completely shut away from other aspects of life. However, the issues of home murmur in the background of my studio escape. Alternatively, studio demands mentally draw me away from time with my child. This mental tug of war is a collective problem, not unique to caretaking. While I see the extra demands on memory and cognitive energy as my impetus for moments of non-locality, I recognize that this is a circumstance that could be caused by many types of mental overwhelm, including trauma, displacement, anxiety, etc. While my thesis research began as a visual investigation into the “invisible workload,” it quickly became a desire to visually connect with the more collective issue of non-locality, duality, and division.

This mental tug of war is demonstrated in *I dreamed I left the door open* through the visual iconography previously discussed, which distills the language of distant entities and actions into a series of layered images. In addition to overlapping environments as content, the treatment of surface throughout the painted works was critical to the formation and retrieval of much of this imagery.

The painted works on paper begin with a series of colorful washes, assigned to coincide with a specific emotive tone that I’m seeking from the work. Color is built through contrasting washes until the surface begins to show obvious “interruptions” or areas where the washes catch and begin to create forms. These forms start to become part of the undergrowth and visual “white noise” of the imagery. Artist Maja Ruznic speaks about a similar process in her work, explaining, “I have a clear image in my mind of a mood, and the mood is usually connected to a color. And so, I start by staining the canvas, putting almost random marks. I like to improvise from the

beginning to the end, and I think that allows for really strange forms.”<sup>7</sup> The impact of reconsidering color assumptions is also discussed in the figurative work of Marlene Dumas; “What [her] works have in common is a conscientious use of colour, which intermittently stresses the sovereignty of the painterly image and alludes to public preconceptions, for ‘once you change the color of something, everything changes.’”<sup>8</sup>

Although my work still holds ties to sketches, plans, and a reserve of imagery I hold, I tried to begin new pieces in this body of work through a looser process of improvisation. After the initial stages of washes, I begin looking for natural forms and patterns before deciding which environments or figures to overlay. Once more specific imagery is added, I return to experimentation through wiping away, interruption and sanding to pull back out or emphasize hidden forms of the previous layers. Rather than discovering figures, as Ruznic’s work so expertly does, I try to disrupt and bring back the natural forms and colors of the washes, allowing fortunate “visual noise” that may have occurred to become the undergrowth or overgrowth of the invading ecosystem.

Ruznic’s partner, Joshua Hagler describes these methods of discovery in both his and her work, an idea which influenced my own process in retrieval as I built the body of work for my thesis study; “We’re both waiting for something to be revealed to us... We’re not in total control of the situation,” he explains. “It’s almost like you’re opening a gate and then they appear and you’re like, ‘Oh, pleased to meet you!’ And then they introduce themselves.” Ruznic goes on to

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<sup>7</sup> Theo Schear, “Juxtapoz Presents: Maja Ruznic and Joshua Hagler in Roswell, New Mexico,” *Juxtapoz* video, 6:44, December 14, 2018, <https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/studio-time/juxtapoz-presents-maja-ruznic-and-joshua-hagler-in-roswell-new-mexico/>

<sup>8</sup> Dominic van den Boogerd, Barbara Bloom, and Mariuccia Casadio, *Marlene Dumas* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 70.

add, “The greatest pleasure of painting is not knowing what the hell it is for a really long time.”<sup>9</sup> Letting go of any final image in my plans has been critical to maintaining a visual interest and sense of freedom as I built the work for this exhibition. The push to eventually abandon all plans as the imagery progressed led to risks and combinations that I would have never taken previously. Conceptually, the process of building each work developed into a literal push-and-pull relationship that ultimately became as important to me as the resulting product.



Fig. 8. Installation view of *The Shadow Draws Me Back* (Photograph by Leavitt Wells)

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<sup>9</sup> Theo Schear, “Juxtapoz Presents: Maja Ruznic and Joshua Hagler in Roswell, New Mexico,” *Juxtapoz* video, 6:44, December 14, 2018, <https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/studio-time/juxtapoz-presents-maja-ruznic-and-joshua-hagler-in-roswell-new-mexico/>

In this process, color created emotional significance and varied the surface quality and translucency of the paintings. Additionally, color became a critical tool for considering space in this body of work. The painted works on paper were hinged on thin wooden ledges, painted to blend in with the gallery walls, giving the appearance of a work on paper that hovered over the traditional white box. This installation aligned with the ethereal qualities of the exhibition but also created a physical distance from the gallery to the place of content. The back of each work was painted in consideration of this in-between space, allowing the hue to glow on the wall behind it and activate the shadow, turning the painting into a fictionally “flat” space. Utilizing this back color allowed further emphasis of a specific mood and helped create a base environment for the hovering substrate to reside in.



Fig. 9. Detail view of *An Invisible Load* (Photograph by Raul Rodriguez)

## The Figure as Archetype

Throughout the exhibition, a domestic object often acts as a stand-in for a person. A chair, the kitchen table, or a nearby lamp indicates an unseen presence or absence (Fig. 10) before the viewer. This use of metaphor represents a variety of meanings but are mostly important as emotive indicators, referring to the home environment and responsibilities of those that reside there. These stand-ins exist in the soundscape as well, with references to brushing teeth or washing dishes, without any person directly being heard.



Fig. 10. Installation view of smaller series of works in *I dreamed I left the door open* (Photograph by Raul Rodriguez)

The inclusion of the figure disrupts this use of domestic objects as a metaphor. Images of a woman and child are observed in different states: breastfeeding, sleep training, tended play, etc. As with *It Sits With You* and *Call me when you get home*, the viewer's point of perspective to the

figurative paintings always suggests an observer, sometimes directly interacting with the figure. In both *Sometimes they are the same thing* and *Look, look up*, the viewer is set in near-direct eye contact with at least one figure. (Fig. 11)

This interaction creates direct tension. Even in scenes where the viewer seems to be standing as an observer, the perspective may create voyeuristic tone, recalling the aforementioned safety concerns or perhaps a vague memory where details are transient.



Fig. 11. Installation view of *Look, look up* (left, Photograph by Leavitt Wells) and *Sometimes they are the same thing* (right, Photograph by Raul Rodriguez)

The inclusion of the figure was a choice to emphasize additional roles. In many of the works, a large portion of the figure is hidden, disrupted, or muted. This balance of covering/uncovering negates identity. Anthea Gordon, speaking of the works of Marlene Dumas,

addresses the idea of figure as archetype, and the lack of an individual identity in figurative work. “They are portraits which cannot be pinned down to a singular meaning, nor can they be used to represent one particular state, whether disease or emotion. Arguably, they cannot even be seen as representing individual people but rather ‘Dumas’s ideas, associations and experiences in relation to the depicted figures.’”<sup>10</sup> Again emphasizing the role of the child as a motif, rather than a specific identity, Dumas recalls, “Once, in North America, someone was interested in these smaller paintings of a naked young girl and asked, ‘What is the age of the child?’ I said, ‘It’s not a child, it’s a painting.’”<sup>11</sup>

In *I dreamed I left the door open*, the inclusion of my child acts as an archetype for various ideas: responsibility, caretaking, labor, and/or concerns for the task I must return to, rather than a record of my relationship. I am able to use my relationship as a tool to better understand mental bandwidth and non-locality, to represent social and personal expectations, and then to disrupt those environments.

## **Conclusion**

Through *I dreamed I left the door open* I created a framework to better understand the mental outlook through which I view my roles as an artist, researcher, and caretaker. This consideration allowed me to examine my own experiences of mental non-locality, and by releasing those experiences into visual form, I was unburdened of the question of which environments held priority or power. Speaking of her work, Amy Bessone remarked, “My work does not pledge allegiance to a dominance of sincerity over politics, or intellect over sensuality or emotion. It rather creates a haven for these things to coexist, to be intertwined. It's not a

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<sup>10</sup> Anthea Gordon, Classifying the body in Marlene Dumas’ *The Image as Burden*, *Medical Humanities* 44, no. 1 (2018): 66.

<sup>11</sup> Artspace, “Miss Interpreted: Marlene Dumas on Why Artists Should Embrace Ambiguity If They Want Staying Power,” accessed May 2, 2023, [https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/book\\_report/marlene-dumas-interview-phaidon-54094](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/marlene-dumas-interview-phaidon-54094).

dynamic of dominance and submission. I'll hold this space so that we can all be into whatever we're into."<sup>12</sup> In my work I have found balance in the intertwining of multiple roles, and in sitting with the ambiguity of life's fluctuations.

Considering the invisible work of so many mothers and recognizing how it affects my own practice and mental presence has built relationships of empathy and admiration for others in my community. It has allowed for a more curious relationship with my practice, where I am able to lean into the cognitive growth and ramifications of being a caretaker. I am more devoted to expanding the conversation around caretaking and the artistic practice.

Building this body of work, I have developed more trust in intuitive decision-making, a greater devotion to risk, and an energy to further research sound as a companion to memory, surface, and the push-pull relationship between environments. My enthusiasm for these points of investigation is ongoing and will continue to provide pathways and questions for future work.

*I dreamed I left the door open* investigates the psychological space between these multiple environments of responsibility. The resulting work considers the principles of non-locality, emotional memory, and labor, with the final work showing how separate worlds eventually all color one another.

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<sup>12</sup> Simmons, "Misplaced Empathy: Amy Bessone Interviewed by William J. Simmons."



## APPENDICIES

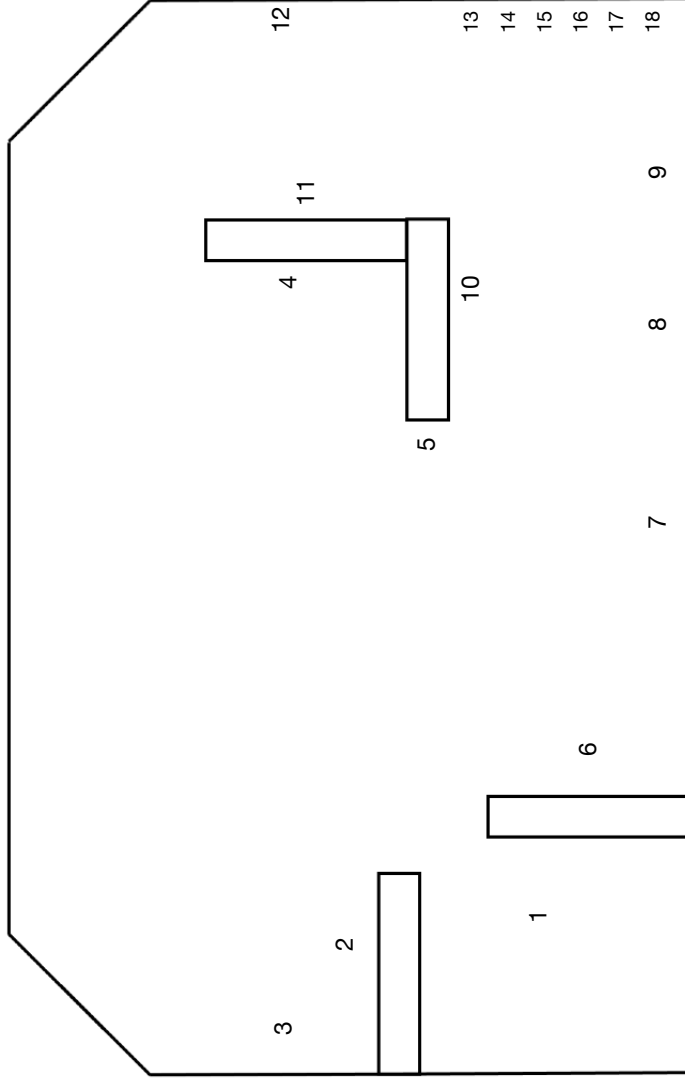
### *I dreamed I left the door open*

Sarah Theurer Hunt

MFA Thesis Exhibition

Moudu Gallery  
2805 S University Dr  
Fort Worth, TX 76129

April 10 - April 15



1. *Neither Here Nor There*, Two-channel sound Installation, 2023
2. *The Shadow Draws Me Back*, oil on paper, 14" x 11", 2022
3. *Call me when you get home*, oil on paper, 72" x 51", 2022
4. *I dreamed I left the door open*, oil on paper, 72" x 51", 2023
5. *Look, Look up*, oil on paper, 8" x 6", 2023
6. *A Practiced Space*, oil on paper, 60" x 42.5", 2023
7. *An Unraveling of Here and There*, oil on paper, 42.5" x 30", 2022
8. *Sometimes they are the same thing*, oil on paper, 42.5" x 30", 2022
9. *An In#visible Load*, oil on paper, 11" x 14", 2022
10. *Folding together*, oil on paper, 42.5" x 30", 2023
11. *Traveling the boundary*, oil on paper, diptych, 20" x 14" each, 2023
12. *It Sits With You*, oil on paper, 7" x 5", 2023
13. *Let him stay*, oil on paper, 7" x 5", 2023
14. *In the Undergrowth of Things*, oil on paper, 7" x 5", 2023
15. *The Compulsory Split*, oil on paper, 7" x 5", 2023
16. *My Shadow Self*, oil on paper, 7" x 5", 2023
17. *Who has the time*, oil on paper, 7" x 5", 2023
18. *The Sum of Being(s)*, oil on paper, 7" x 5", 2023

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## VITA

Sarah Theurer Hunt was born in Salt Lake City, Utah. She was raised in Wilbraham, Massachusetts and Layton, Utah. In 2013, she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art with a second major in Art Education, from Brigham Young University. Theurer Hunt has worked as an artist and arts educator in Utah, Arizona, Virginia, and Texas. In 2023, Theurer Hunt earned a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art from Texas Christian University. While at TCU, Theurer Hunt received a graduate fellowship and also served as a gallery technician, a teaching assistant, and an instructor of record in Drawing I.

## ABSTRACT

I DREAMED I LEFT THE DOOR OPEN

by

**Sarah Theurer Hunt**

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art, 2013, Brigham Young University

Adam Fung, Associate Professor of Fine Art—Painting

In my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *I dreamed I left the door open*, I examine my own experiences of mental non-locality by pushing the points of tension between interior and exterior, forming a new psychological landscape. Access to this mnemonic world is built through recontextualizing the landscape as a metaphor, soundscape as a point of entry, and the figure as an archetype for stewardship. Layers of paint, sound, and contrasting imagery push and pull the viewer within the work, echoing the lens that results from the constant mental hum of motherhood management, and negating the importance of prioritizing one environment over another.