Beautiful Misery: 
*The Art of Painting Picturesque Suffering*

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Introduction:
Within moments of suffering, beauty emerges and manifests itself into forms that we do not fully recognize. We become willful, dependant, and most of all the accepting of our human frailty. I choose to present portraits that represent this idea of suffering as being human and unique. I do not seek to overwhelm my viewer with sadness and despair, but rather to open my viewer’s eyes to what suffering may reveal. As a society, we are generally numb to the tragedy that may befall others. Some apply an invisible shield and a mask of glamour to conceal what they believe may resemble suffering and defeat. Our natural inclination is to present to each other an image of our own perfection, as stable and immortal beings. In reality, we analyze ourselves and recognize natures defeat every day when we look in the mirror. Great measure is taken to conceal any sign of aging, stress, personal ailments, and the inevitable death. My models represent this struggle with life, yet without any concealment. Their troubles are laid before the viewer, as human as they may be.

There is something is to be said about the way we react to emotional and physical misery. We tend to respond either sympathetically or empathetically. Within my work I present this dichotomy and separate it into categories of emotional pain and visible physical ailments.

My paintings of people with emotional discomfort are infused with subjectivity so that my viewer may respond empathetically. They represent feelings that we can affiliate with, feelings that we can comfort and control, emotions that can be internalized. In contrast, my paintings of people with physical dermatological ailments are looked at with a more objective viewpoint. The viewer will be sensitive and sympathize with the
distress, however take a step back and not fully understand the dilemma’s complexity and experience. These paintings represent life’s situations we cannot control or hide, external visible signs of nature’s defeat over mankind and our fears of physical death.

The idea of struggling with life’s complications is a perspective that is unique to each individual. No matter if the person suffers emotionally from a certain distress or are horrified with a physical ailment, all are struggles that we can easily overcome. I find that beauty exists within any type of conflict, as our strength is tested and our knowledge is expanded. We rid our disguises and become a real mortal being.

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Representation of the human body is evident in all cultures. “The human form has played a central role in the quest to deal with the great issues of birth, life, humanity and death to the transcendent reality of the divine”.¹ Whether or not images of the body are merely an attempt to explain what our purpose really is, most can agree that as humans, we are naturally drawn to observing the human form for no other reason than affiliation and belongingness. We study one another in an attempt to interpret emotion through gesture. We study one another to find out what drives us. We study one another simply because humans are interesting to look at, a visual curiosity.

My recent work begins with my curiosity in the human form. It is an investigation of the psychological aspects of people, both viewers and models. I find it most appealing to capture these themes in the form of realistic portraiture. Most of all, the portraits I paint are of people who are in an abject state, cast down in spirit, or rather, suffering from some physical or emotional condition.

¹ Kemp, 15.
Within this paper, I will discuss my motivation for creating portraits, and techniques that I have utilized along the way. I will mention artists from history that have influenced my work. I will describe my work in relation to its content and express current ideas that place my work in a contemporary context. Additionally, I will highlight concerns of contemporary painting trends and where I feel my work exists among them. I will discuss my past work, and how it has led me to make decisions within my current body of work. Lastly, I will focus upon the series, *Silence*, that I believe expresses my ideas within content and technique to the fullest degree.

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A wide variety of mediums have been used to create likenesses of people since ancient times, including wax, wood, stone and paint, and a variety of materials in the modern age. The Egyptians used stone and clay to create busts of their aristocracy, and the Romans molded wax over the faces of the dead to insure detailed recordings of public figures. During the Renaissance in Europe, portraits were painted of people to be read like biographies that portrayed their wealth and importance in life. In all, portraiture has changed over time in its technique and motivation. Aside from just recreating the visible details of a person, portraiture can be thought to capture one’s expression and personality. Thus portraiture can also become abstract, capturing the subject’s psychology. Examples of distorted line and color in abstract portraits are read as signifiers of a certain emotion (Figure 1). We read portraits visually to capture the essence of a persona, in attempts to gain some message that may be reflected within our own lives.
In addition to changes in media, the way a portrait is created has changed greatly over time. In the early twentieth century, there “were limited categories of image material”.\(^2\) An artist would create a portrait from a model who sat for them. As time moved on, photography changed portraiture because painters could create a photographic likeness; hence, photo-realism emerged.

In contemporary culture, painting exists as one of many ways to create an image. Schwabsky states in his essay, *An Art That Eats Its Own Head*, “there could be a realm beyond the image [in painting] that the artist might have otherwise have elected to access”.\(^3\) He further suggests in his essay that “painters use the many images as a reference point for their reality”\(^4\), instead of viewing actual reality and trying to interpret it.

The vast majority of my work is realistic portraiture. “In ‘normal’ portraiture, a tacit agreement between the painter and subject allows the sitter to mask himself and project this mask- of success, of dignity, of beauty, of role- upon the world”.\(^5\)

I seek to expose my models as real and vulnerable, without the aid of a social mask. It is only within my series, *Silence*, that I allow the viewer to see the model’s social mask within the final painting. The first two paintings portray the model as unaware of any audience; you are allowed to view the differences in character without the feeling of someone gazing back at you. The last painting in the series presents the same

\(^2\) Schwabsky, 9.
\(^3\) Schwabsky, 9.
\(^4\) Schwabsky, 9.
\(^5\) Hughes, 7.
Figure 1. George Grosz, *The Best Years of Their Lives*. c. 1923. Watercolor. 62.6 x 49.5 cm.
model, but he is aware of an audience and addresses the viewer with this gaze. This creates a feeling of confrontation between the subject and the viewer.

I portray my models in real life situations, whether unaware or conscious of any audience. I render them realistically and seek to capture all visual details and characteristics. "A commonplace requirement of portraiture is that the artist penetrates the character of their sitter, recording all details down to the peculiarities". These characteristics and peculiarities are what make each of us unique visually. Within much of my work I go beyond merely recording what looks accurate to what is observed visually. I seek to add their personality and at times abstract and distort areas within the paint to better convey mood and expression. Some characteristics are exaggerated, while some features are better if not described at all.

My work can be traced historically through artists who drew and painted the figure in a systematic and "academic" way. For example, Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci have greatly influenced my work in terms of technique and rendering. In order to achieve a likeness in the character of a person, I believe that an artist must know basic anatomy and proportion of the human figure. During the Renaissance,

"theorists and artists came to insist that it was necessary for the artist to acquire mastery of the body as a functional system of motion and emotion. This understanding, in the hands of more intellectually-inclined practitioners, included not only the muscular and skeletal mechanisms, but also those aspects of the human constitution that resulted in outer signs of character and emotional expression".7

Knowing the muscular and skeletal makeup of the body enables me to draw and paint visible physical appearance. It also allows me to create believable distortions in structure of the face or hands that can help convey gesture, expression, and further highlight

6 Hughes, 7.
7 Kemp, 13.
personality traits. Natural expression and "micro" expression were important to artists during the Renaissance as many believed these subtle details were what contributed to uniqueness. For example, subtle movements in muscles can change the expression on a person's face. The mouth uses the same muscles for smiling and frowning; in most cases when someone is not smiling, the corners of the mouth are turned down. A simple stroke of the paintbrush can change this subtle gesture, or rather micro expression. I pay close attention to these details when painting a portrait.

Aside from academia, I am influenced by the Expressionist works of Egon Schiele. Harsh contour line, arbitrary color, and structural bodily distortion portray some sort of misery in Schiele's *Seated Male Nude (Self-Portrait)* (Figure. 2). The misery is evident in the color of the flesh: is the artist alive, in pain or is he dying? Through the color choice, line work and distortion a certain psychological presence is observed. We see that the figure is troubled. This type of exaggeration, important to the Expressionists, is essential to my own work as well. Within my work, I distort facial features, such as making the face a deeper shade of red or pink in the cheeks to convey the weight of gravity and a hint of pain.
Figure 2. Egon Schiele, *Seated Male Nude (Self Portrait)*, 1910. Oil and Gouache on canvas. 60 x 59in.
More importantly, I have been inspired by contemporary figure painters such as Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville. Both artists highlight the physicality of paint within their work, using the medium alone to convey structure, volume and mass. Freud’s work presents a sense of living flesh upon a two-dimensional plane (Figure 3). Color choice of the flesh is accurate to reality and reveals details of age. His models are not like those of traditional portraits; they seem unaware of any audience and lack any connection with the viewer. They are displayed for you to observe their every detail.

Saville’s work by contrast is similar in physicality of paint, yet her subjects appear to be beaten, mutilated, or suffering from some unknown assault. This connotation in her work Arises from her color choices. Saville’s work is monumental compared to standard sizes in portraiture. The models are usually the size of a wall, making an extreme, if not overbearing, impact upon the viewer (Figure 4).

Her brushwork is aggressive, reinforcing the idea that these figures have been through some sort of trauma. In Hybrid, “like Picasso, Saville breaks the figures down into multiple planes to capture every vein and crevice”.8 This fragmenting of space upon the canvas suggests a sense of time and movement. The negative space within the picture plane is almost minute. The subject appears to be squeezed in the plane, giving the feeling that they might burst free of the frame. The contemporary notion of crowding the picture plane is where my work contrasts with Saville’s. I seek to have a vast amount of undefined space to surround my subject to stress importance upon my model.

Both Freud and Saville use the texture of paint to their best advantage. I incorporate this idea as well within my work and will further explain when I discuss my technique. Their

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8 Cape, 206.
Figure 3. Lucian Freud, *The Painter’s Mother Resting II*, 1976-77. Oil on canvas. 26 x 40.6 cm.
Figure 4. Jenny Saville, *Hybrid*, 1997. Oil on canvas. 108 x 84in.
color choices have helped me determine my own palette when painting the figure. Both the content and the painting style of my work can be linked to French Romanticism. Artists such as Theodore Gericault painted realistic images of misery on canvas to depict people in states of conflict, strife and insanity. French Romanticism was more dramatic and intense than the harsh and cold opposing style at the time of Neoclassicism. “One feature of Romanticism was its exploration of reason and madness. Like the doctors of the time, the Romantics believed that the effects of mental illness could be read in the face of the sufferer”.9 “Gericault painted a series of ten portraits of the insane known as Monomaniacs”.10 Within these portraits he focused on details and subtle gestures in the face that signified that the person was mentally ill (Figure 5). Suggestions of illness are seen in the clothes of the sitter, the gaze and brushstrokes from the artist’s hand. The portraits appear to be a clinical study of the insane, yet are individualistic. Gericault’s paintings “testify to the typical Romantic search for the truthfulness based on careful observation of reality”.11

The content of my current work is similar in a sense that I search for truthfulness by paying careful attention to the reality of what is seen. My work is primarily introspective and represents the human figure in state of suffering. This downcast spirit is conveyed through gesture and expression in the subject’s face, hands or other parts of the body. The conditions that I present are representations of life in its most fragile form. I do not want to paint an image that represents life in its prime happiness and utmost beauty. From my experience, this does not even remotely resemble reality.

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9 Louvre.
10 Louvre
11 Flemish Art Collection.
Figure 5. Theodore Gericault, *Woman with Gambling Mania*, 1819-1824? Oil on canvas.
Rather, I want to paint an image of picturesque misery that represents the struggle of life. I find a different kind of beauty within the idea of suffering. From what I have learned, struggle manifests itself into strength after the conflict is over. This strength to me equates to beauty, even when we do not fully recognize it during our dilemmas. In my work, suffering is evident in the individual’s expression. In many works, the subject does not appear horrified, but rather a subtle detail in the micro expression of the subject will reveal to the viewer that this person is in some sort of quiet pain.

I seek to create a beautifully painted image of misery. My technique is extremely relevant in how the image is to be interpreted. Approaching the subject with delicacy in the very beginning stages of the painting and continuing through the final layers suggests intimacy. Having this idea of a gentle hand conveys to the viewer that this is delicate subject matter. Through careful execution in drawing and attention to detail, the fragility of life is exposed.

My portraits are rendered realistically with subtle abstractions occurring in areas that are somewhat out of focus. These figures are set on a plane of negative space and appear to be either engulfed by it or emerging from it. The paintings range in size from 24” x 36” to 80” x 30” (Figure 5).

I begin with an acrylic layer of paint that will function as the negative space. I choose the color of this space to be a pale and chalky pastel, usually a subtle pink. Many of these colors reference the walls of hospitals and institutions, and are used for their calming effect on visitors and patients. I do not use the colors for the same effect; I choose them because of their association with the places only. The subtle pink appears often within my work and functions well with flesh tones and at many times will function as middle and
light tones within the subject to blend positive and negative space and create a lost and found contour effect. After the color choice is made, the figure is then drawn out traditionally in sepia pastel chalk. I prefer to create a tight structural drawing including all values and subtle details. This drawing is then glazed over with oil paint in a variety of flesh tones. Areas of the lightest value are covered thickly with paint and highlight areas of focus. Shadow areas remain as thin areas of paint, and in some instances the under drawing is still exposed. This idea of leaving areas of the under drawing exposed creates a blurred line between positive and negative space too, and helps to convey the message that the figure is engulfed within a dreamy and surreal void. The lack of context within the negative space allows my viewer to concentrate upon the subject and presents a mystery as to what may be causing the discomfort (Figure 6).

Space and size of the support is crucial to the subject. Many supports I have used for the paintings are generic closet doors measuring 80" x 30". The size of the painting bears significance as being a possible portal into the unknown. The subjects that exist upon the plane are life size or slightly larger. This creates a natural connection with the viewer and becomes believable. The placement of the figure upon the plane is also important to the meaning of the work. Most exist right below the natural eye level, creating a hierarchy between the viewer and the subject, which reinforces the idea of the subject being in a lowly state. The vast amount of negative space produces a surreal effect.
Figure 6. Natalie Boyer, *Scalped*, 2007. Oil on panel. 24”x 36”. 
Some appear to be emerging from the space, as others seem to be dissolving into it. This ambiguity leaves the viewer with a choice on which way to interpret the subject’s constitution.

I have explored various techniques to create paintings that include glazing, visible under drawing, viscosity, color relationships and applying thick final coats of high gloss resin. I have found that for this recent body of work, glazing best suits for the portrayal of the skin. The transparency of the layers of paint mocks the layers of the flesh and further coincides with the negative space in which the flesh dissolves. Tension lies between the texture of the background space that surrounds the figure and the figure’s texture of the skin. The background is matte and chalky, while the subject’s flesh is satin and reflects light. I enjoy this tension, as it helps to reinforce areas of focus.

My past work has greatly influenced my current body of work. In the past I focused on the idea of beauty as a trade and the magnetic connection between glamour and repulsion. To represent these ideas, I used female clothing and morphed it into what looked like actual “skin” garments. These garments would be presented to the viewer upon a brightly colored panel that looked like a gift. I focused on how people, particularly women, represented themselves. I felt that many women presented an image of sexuality housed within a glamorous package, and in so doing they reduced themselves to being valueless commodities similar to consumable items bought at a grocery store. These women highlighted their best attributes and complimented it with their clothing. When this clothing (or package) was removed, it revealed tasteless characteristics. In short, I was communicating to the viewer that people wore an appealing disguise or social mask.
When that mask was stripped, qualities that we do not find attractive in a personality would surface.

These past ideas of how people present themselves to others are still evident within my work. Instead of focusing just upon women, I have included both men and children. Concentrating upon the idea of a social mask has caused me to deepen my subject matter. I have focused more on the idea of why someone would “wear” a social mask and what issues have contributed to that. I have abandoned ideas of social impact from the media such as sexual appeal and focused more on what is going on inside the person. My past work in comparison to the new was loud, eye catching and screamed attention from the viewer (Figure 7). My current work is more quiet and contemplative. I wanted to abandon “shocking” my viewer with something disgusting. In this respect I have chosen to deal with the figure more sensitively and focus on details.

I still enjoy looking at what can be considered “disgusting” subject matter and painting it, but I want to go beyond that. With my current body of work, some models have a visible skin disorder or have visible emotional pain that can be considered uncomfortable to view. Before, motivation for displaying my “morphed skin clothing” just flashed in the face of the viewer that I, as a woman, was angered by being looked at as a piece of meat. With my current paintings, my audience can view them with little discomfort but walk away from them knowing that the artist has a sincere concern for the misfortunes that befall others.

My work has become more personal as well. Most of my models are my family and I have focused on our personal problems and made them public. For the remainder of my
Figure 7. Natalie Boyer, *A Pair of Pantyhose. (Unfinished)* 2005. Oil on panel. 24”x 36”.
work that is to come, I plan to focus on my entire family more, somewhat like a diary. I plan to include more portraits similar to the ones I have talked about.

In the three-painting series, *Silence*, I have chosen to use my father as the model. I observed a single moment in time: my father holding his head down in pain, and then turning and looking at me. The first painting consists of him holding his head down as if he were in slumber, unaware of any viewer. The gesture of his mouth is subtly rendered in what could be a half smile, or half frown. Most would read this as a smile if just focusing on this area of the mouth. It is not until you look at his closed left eye that you realize it is wincing from pain, thus now the viewer interprets his smile as a frown. This subtle micro expression is important in the later two paintings as well. The second painting in the series shows my father with his head turned more toward the viewer, but his eyes are still cast downward, still unaware of another’s presence. The right side of his face is more apparent to the viewer and the right eye emerges from space. It is the presence of this side of the face that signals to the viewer that something is wrong. Gravity is evident, as it pulls this right side downward and his right eye droops and appears swollen. Vivid pinks and reds are used in the mid section of his face and around his eyes to convey pain. His mouth is an apparent frown and misery is observed in both eyes.

The third and final painting in the series presents a different viewpoint for the audience. My father’s head is turned slightly more toward the viewer and he is looking at him/her. His eyes are larger and brighter and he appears to be about ready to smile. The only indication of suffering still resides within the right eye and right side of the face. His face
is still flushed from pain, but his expression makes you think otherwise. This painting highlights previous ideas I have suggested within my thesis. Within this painting my father is wearing his social mask when he confronts the viewer in attempt to hide his pain. In reality, when he actually looked at me, it appeared that all visible signs of pain in his face were wiped away and he chose to present me with a smile, a more pleasant confrontation of stability and happiness.

This series is not a picturesque moment, nor a reflection of agony. It is a quiet statement about pain and how one chooses to deal with pain. My father chooses to suffer in silence, and when he confronts you, he will try his hardest to conceal any indication of suffering (Figures 8 & 9).

Figure 8. Natalie M. Boyer, Silence, 2008. Triptych. (Second Panel) Oil on panel. 24” x 36”.
In conclusion, my current body of work consists of portraits of my family in distress. I refer to this body of work as a diary of family conflict. In the past three years, my family and I have struggled with the cancer of my mother and father, severe depression and attempted suicide of my sister, and the mental illness of my youngest niece. The conflicts seem to hit back to back, and at times, I believed we were cursed. The constant threat loomed in the back of my head that my entire immediate family could easily die right before my eyes and I was powerless to stop it. I felt helpless and insecure, and the least I could do was pretend to make them well. My paintings in respect are this pretended effort. They symbolize a frozen moment of pain, anxiety and suffering. Subjects float upon a plane of dreamy negative space where the future is uncertain. In turn, they represent strength and beauty and how one can overcome obstacles in life.
They represent therapy for myself, where I can compulsively paint and float off into an imaginary world where suffering exists no more. Most of all, these paintings are a tribute to the strength my family has, what we have overcome and how our relationships have deepened. We may have been through hell on earth for several years, but now we are stronger, happier, and best of all, well.
Selected Bibliography


