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# Painting Down

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# **Painting Down**

Claire Stankus

B.F.A., Syracuse University, 2012

A Project Statement

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

At the

University of Connecticut

2018

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2018

APPROVAL PAGE

Master of Fine Arts Project Statement

**Painting Down**

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University of Connecticut

2018

## Acknowledgments

I am deeply appreciative of my committee who provided constant stability but also gave me the space I needed to find and follow my own voice. Specifically, I must thank Barry Rosenberg for his wisdom and ability to see what my paintings were doing, and their potential before I could see it myself. I am grateful for Kathryn Myers' kindness and positive energy. She always made time to talk about the process of painting and making, and was able to turn my frustrations into solutions. Many many thanks to Alexis Boylan for always speaking her mind, and inspiring me with her brilliant attitude and sense of humor. In addition, my cheerleaders, Deborah Dancy, Janet Pritchard, and Alison Paul knew how to see through all my bullshit. Their intimidation and tough questions pushed me to take bigger risks and work harder.

I would not be the artist I am today without my fellow peers: Kaleigh Rusgrove, Erin Smith, Kelsey Miller, and Jelena Prljević. They brought me the most joy during these three years, supported my ideas, put up with my jokes, and most importantly became my role models. I have utmost respect and admiration for their loyalty, passion, empathy, and endurance.

Lastly, I must extend immense gratitude toward my family for their love, understanding, and encouragement.

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## **Artist Statement**

Tidy piles of studio scraps, flowers on the floor, puzzle pieces, and birthday cakes are recurring features in my work. I collect seemingly banal and discarded objects and paint my daily encounters with them; suggesting that even a pile of junk is worth painting. While some paintings are made directly from observation, others start from photographs of quickly passed moments. I use casual marks, flattened fields of color, and invented line and shadow to break down the recognizable into something ambiguous yet familiar. The remaining abstraction is where we may find unexpected humor or joy. I want each painting to become something odd or sweet and give viewers a second chance to spend more time with the ordinary.

To understand how I arrived at this point of reflection and how I communicate my perspective through paint, I must first lay out my interests, personal history, and influences. Here are some lists to get started.



## Lists

### Some Things I Like:

lists

boston cream pie

running (sometimes)

odd numbers

even numbers

jokes

shapes

repetition

gifts

the title "Good Will Hunting"

### What Makes Me Happy:

the movie *Selena*

most 1980's top hit ballads

remembering my past memories

popham beach

my grandmother's Facebook posts

running (sometimes)

the time I bought those two cacti

Things I Look At:

plants

plates

tennis balls

shapes

light reflections

the rug in my apartment

leaves

shadows

What I Save:

movie stubs

lists

paper scraps

that flash card Kelsey gave me

soap

~~studio trash~~

rocks

money

leaves

Mildly Hated Things:

celery

grad school?

haircuts

## Very Short Stories

1. My mom took hundreds of family photos, mostly of toddlers playing on the beach, chaotic holiday gatherings, somewhat successful vacations, and birthday cakes. She organized them in large, fat albums stored on the top shelf in the family room closet. They were never really brought out to look through unless I initiated the act myself. Almost ritualistically, I would spend time with albums spanning my childhood years from 1988–1999 and albums from my parents' young adulthood. I was fascinated with revisiting these memories in hopes to relive them or make them more permanent in my mind. Even the photos and moments that were not mine, I turned them into a memory by looking at them repeatedly. There was a nostalgic aspect to this, but it led me to question why these photos were taken but very rarely looked at. I made it my job to give these photos a reason to exist. I continued to look, and have been trying to tackle the concept in my artistic practice ever since.
2. In my undergraduate program at Syracuse University, I focused on figurative painting and drawing. I compiled old and recent photographs that captured mundane activities revolving around the family and routine. I noticed repetition in body language from different decades, and when people shared similar mannerisms simultaneously. I liked that these figures acted as a still life—merely objects standing and sitting around, not interacting with one another. I made work about this isolation within company. At a certain point, my paintings shifted focus to my father in particular, who was captive to our home due to illness, pain, and depression.

After graduating, I spent three years living at home and observing what it is like to be confined to the inside of your house or, on a good day, to the end of the driveway. I was absorbed in a lifestyle defined by recurring instances of pills left out on the counter, bananas slowly ripening in their designated bowl on the kitchen island, and watching a specific schedule of syndicated television shows. I was gaining a new perspective of the outside solely from the inside, gazing out of windows, seeing the light change and cast long shadows of the pine trees in the backyard, but never stepping on that shadow. There was a lot of time to notice these things, even more time for my father. I truly appreciate and care about these small moments because they can evoke a person or a day.

3. I recently finished re-watching the American television series *The Office* for the second time. The last line in the show is, “There’s a lot of beauty in ordinary things. Isn’t that kind of the point?”<sup>1</sup> I find this an especially nice way to describe the end my final semester.

4. *We tend to get obsessed with language and the information that can be carried by language. But I think long before men spoke, certainly before they wrote things down, they had a visual language and understanding of the world. A certain color meant a certain kind of weather was coming, a broken branch meant lunch just walked by. Or even—this is one that always gets me—you’re standing on a street and you’re looking three blocks away and there’s this little moving dot and somehow you just know it’s your best friend. There’s no way you could see enough to know that, but somehow by the*

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Daniels, writer, “Finale” *The Office*, dir. Ken Kwapis. NBC TV Network. May 16, 2013.

*presence of this dot in the world, you can read it. I think that's our deep understanding of the visual of the world.*<sup>2</sup>

–Thomas Nozkowski, interview on ARTnews

I love that the painter Thomas Nozkowski has so simply touched upon the complexity of how our brains can judge and recognize something as basic as a dot. Our minds search for clues and turn generalizations into meaningful narratives. This is how I want my art to function. Finding and sharing visual associations, codes, and inside jokes are the strongest way in which I make connections with others. I rely on people's abilities to recognize something out of the simplest color, composition, or mark.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Real Question Is, What Do We Desire?": Thomas Nozkowski on Art, Consciousness, and Endurance.” Interview by Robin Scher. ARTnews. March 21, 2016. Accessed March 4, 2018. <http://www.artnews.com/2016/03/21/the-real-question-is-what-do-we-desire-thomas-nozkowski-on-art-consciousness-and-endurance/>

## Painting Things

1. Things I see every day—what I stumble upon frequently
2. Things that are there everyday but I usually miss—household things
3. Things that happen once and I only see once
4. Things repeated by coincidence

I paint from observation of objects in my studio like scraps of paper, stools and chairs, collected and found pieces of material or receipts, game pieces, and old candy wrappers. I naturally pick up and save little things as I find them and eventually they accumulate in my studio, enough so, that they become what I look at the most. I also paint from photos that I have taken of things such as a strange light cast on a wall, a dying plant, a random arrangement of shoes, or leaves on a floor. These are pictures I will take with my iPhone; little moments that I almost miss, and that I imagine others pass by, or walk over, or do not spend enough time with. I think about how beauty is captured in those quieter moments too. Maybe it is a shadow made by a mailbox, a bunch of tiny ketchups, or even older paintings hanging on my studio wall. For the most part, we acknowledge these occurrences even though it is not the first thing that comes to mind. Those are the moments that are in reach, that call my attention, and what I feel may be undervalued. I make paintings that speak to a relatable ordinary moment but also illuminate the humor and joy that paint and abstraction can communicate.

## Painting Influences

Photography has played a huge role in my painting process. It is the way I collect visuals, and also how I sketch. I have a book titled *Around the House* by Robert Adams sitting on my coffee table. It holds many photographs of similar scenes I am drawn to look at and point to: documentations of plants, food, and laundry that are commonly found in a home or during daily routines. My paintings stem from that initial act of pointing. John Szarkowski, MoMA Director of Photography, compares the art of photography to the act of pointing much more eloquently by saying:

*As a way of beginning, one might compare the art of photography to the act of pointing. All of us, even the best-mannered of us, occasionally point, and it must be true that some of us point to more interesting facts, events, circumstances, and configurations than others. It is not difficult to imagine a person--a mute Virgil of the corporeal world--who might elevate the act of pointing to a creative plane, a person who would lead us through the fields and streets and indicate a sequence of phenomena and aspects that would be beautiful, humorous, morally instructive, cleverly ordered, mysterious, or astonishing, once brought to our attention, but that had been unseen before, or seen dumbly, without comprehension. This talented practitioner of the new discipline (the discipline a cross, perhaps between theater and criticism) would perform with a special grace, sense of timing, narrative sweep, and wit, thus endowing the act not merely with intelligence, but with that quality of formal rigor that identifies a work of art, so that we would be uncertain, when remembering the adventure of the tour, how much of our pleasure and sense of enlargement had come from the things pointed to and how much from the pattern created by the pointer.<sup>3</sup>*

—John Szarkowski on the early 20th C. French photographer Atget

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<sup>3</sup> Szarkowski, John. *The Work of Atget Old France, Volume I*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981.



I second the thought of visual artist Man Ray, “I paint what cannot be photographed, and I photograph what I do not wish to paint.”<sup>4</sup> If I am looking at objects or things that are ambiguous and peculiar enough on their own, I photograph them—the subject operates the best in that form. These are the images I will post to Instagram. I use Instagram primarily for posting photographs as opposed to paintings, mainly because photographs are better suited for a digital screen and I would prefer viewers to experience them not in real life. That is what my paintings are for. A photograph has a harder time transcending its subject, than painting has.<sup>5</sup> It is crucial to see painting in real life as its surface, luminosity, and mark application presents an additional feeling. When a photograph is too legible I decide to make a painting of the image’s most appealing features, or to conceal information and exaggerate shapes. I paint when I need to communicate something differently.

The painters Edward Hopper, Fairfield Porter and Richard Diebenkorn have been significant influences starting from an early age. I blame this in part on my older brother Joe, who first introduced me to their artworks. I copied most of his interests, especially the ones in art or film. I am thankful because it brought me closer to learning these painters’ use of color and light, depictions of a slow space, attention of isolation or routine. Fairfield Porter’s work also centered itself around the home. Often depicting scenes of nothing, or rather convincing viewers there was significance to “nothing”.<sup>6</sup> I

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<sup>4</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. 186.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>6</sup> Wilkin, Karen. *Fairfield Porter: Things as They Are*. New York: Rizzoli, 2016. 33.

eventually learned I was not copying my brother's interests, but that we were sharing a similar sensitivity to these artist's perspectives.

A more contemporary artist I look to is Eleanor Ray, whose work I was very quickly introduced to when I was painting many small paintings. A lot of painters, if not all, have a desire to revisit certain spaces and document different times of day and light. Ray's paintings helped show me how a slow pace can alter a viewer's perception.

I have an awareness of shape and minimal form that is also similar to contemporary painters like Rebecca Morris and Thomas Nozkowski. I am taking a few or many liberties of painting and responding to each mark or pattern I make. Rebecca Morris speaks about the abstractions in her paintings as looking more like things even though they are not representational, and the mark making that she repeats in her paintings become recognizable as a reappearing language.<sup>7</sup> I am finding that process comparable with my images translating from the representational to abstract form. When I have painted an object a few times in different paintings, by the time it makes into the fourth painting, the object has been reduced, so now the viewer can assume what it is, but also can make newer associations.

This reappearing language also lives in the spaces I spend a lot of time in. Like in VARC, the Visual Arts Research Center where the graduate studios are located. It is nice to be around other people's junk. Their stuff lying around is a language I pick up on and translate and there is dialogue forming without actual interaction. Besides my

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<sup>7</sup> "Rebecca Morris." Interview by Zachary Cahill. ARTFORUM. September 6, 2013. Accessed March 5, 2018. <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/rebecca-morris-speaks-about-her-latest-exhibition-42928>.

findings and the objects I bring in to collect and study, there are always visual collections happening by someone else or a combination of people. Sometimes chairs in the critique rooms subtly rearrange into strange formations, or my studio-pod mate makes piles of all the free stuff he found on the street. In VARC, there are so many closets and corners of stuff: functional materials, sheets of glass, a bag of blue pens. I like walking through and passing collections of things that were not intended for me but offered ideas—ideas to stack or organize or build, thoughts of how collections come to be “collections”. VARC offered a place to stumble upon the same scenery quite often. I became familiarized with most of its possessions while enjoying many evenings watching the wind and light make tree shadows dance on the wall.

## Painting Games

I like when I have paintings lying on my studio floor and they themselves become a point of interest and inspiration. They just sort of collect themselves there unknowingly. I reference my work frequently by using it as a subject. Sometimes I make a painting of a painting and that last one becomes the stronger one, or sometimes it just kills the whole idea all together. But mostly I am sharing how my mind works, painting inside jokes to myself that maybe others are picking up on too.

By referencing other paintings of mine, or repeating certain objects that get looked at often, I am giving the viewer a few clues into what paintings are depicting. It simultaneously gives them an opportunity to connect paintings together, and sometimes they even act as a scavenger hunt. I look a lot at the paintings of Henri Matisse in books and museums. He frequently returned to a subject to paint it again, or worked in pairs of contrasting abstract and representational versions.<sup>8</sup> I use similar tricks, for instance, when I add a stool into a new painting because I know it is in an older painting. Each object is a character I recast, and eventually viewers learn to recognize them.

Going back to that Thomas Nozkowski quote, Vik Muniz also speaks about the power of recognition. Art started with the ability to recognize the form of one thing in something else. “The moment you recognize the similarities between two things, you have created a symbol, you have learned how to use language.”<sup>9</sup> All visuals can be language and powerful devices used for illusions, and trickery. When thinking about

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<sup>8</sup> Blum, Shirley Neilsen. *Henri Matisse: Rooms with a View*. New York: Monacelli Press 2010, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Muniz, Vik. *Natura Pictrix: Interviews and Essays on Photography*. New York: Edgewise, 2003. 53.

scavenger hunts in my paintings, I also think of maps and codes, and how many games fueled by visuals come to mind.

The visual perception game *SET* is comprised of 81 cards with symbols on them consisting of four varying features: shape (oval, diamond, squiggle), number (one, two, three), color (green, purple, red), and shading (solid, striped, open). The goal is to find sets of 3 cards that have either all the same, or all different characteristics of each of the four features. A set could be 3 cards that each have 3 green diamonds on them with all different shading, or 3 cards with all different numbers, and colors, but all matching shading and color. I am conditioned to view my surroundings like I am playing this game. I identify similar patterns in real life and want to link them together as sets. It also influences my painting decisions. This game defines the way I arrive at certain compositions or mark making layers in my paintings. Thinking about the balance within one painting but also extending that thinking to groups of paintings. I can mix and match abstract and representational paintings together knowing the overall grouping can give each painting more context—they work individually but can support one another.

## Painting Application

The catalyst of my work becoming more abstract was sparked by Deborah Dancy's Experimental Drawing class. Painting depictions of everyday scenes became too effortless for me, which made my paintings look bored or obvious. Deborah's assignments, readings, and magic helped me think more conceptually and minimally. I started breaking down the elements of my initial paintings and photographs to focus on formal elements of color, line, and shape. Once I pushed toward the other extreme my paintings and how I was applying paint greatly changed. I saw how visual relationships changed once I was dealing with less value contrast, or adding inventive marks, or making impulsive and intuitive decisions. I was able to discover what I wanted my paintings to look like by experimenting with those opposite qualities.

I will make a painting over a few days or few weeks and let the paint build layers over that time. Letting those layers dry and my mind rest in-between, has given me more opportunities to see how the surface can change and how I can respond to new colors or lines. With that being said, I do like to leave a lot of the initial quick and casual marks showing. I even erase sections with rags or a large brush soaked in paint thinner. These sort of loose gestures and flat spaces of color give a resting place to compliment another mark that is busy or detailed.

Even though I am painting from observation or a reference, I re-imagine the colors, form, and space to transform the information I see. Hopefully that way parts appear to be somewhat familiar but ambiguous enough to have to work a little hard to interpret. I

really enjoy that balance of ambiguity and the recognizable. Like when you know what something is but can't exactly name it.

Looking at artists like Raoul de Keyser and Rebecca Morris and many others that have been pegged as “provisional painters” by Raphael Rubenstein makes me contemplate where my paintings align in this regard. I see the reason to only paint the basics—to not allow the viewer to see my painting skill, to make the viewer fill in a lot of the blanks. Rubenstein mentions the impossibility of paintings and how younger painters have rejected a sense of finish in their work.<sup>10</sup> I see this happening with my work as well. I will allow my dumb marks to show and make lazy decisions that fit into the surface. What I am looking at is worthy of looking, and my paint marks along the way are worthy too. It is an acceptance of painting's genuine and intuitive nature. I am trying to suggest a painting does not always have to be labored.

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<sup>10</sup> Rubenstein, Raphael. “Provisional Painting.” *Art in America*. May 1, 2009. Accessed October 12, 2017. <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/provisional-painting-raphael-rubenstein/>.

## Painting Flat

I have a strong sensitivity and response to oil paint as a medium. I let the paint be paint, and each stroke be left as it is most of the time. Not only is the subject matter and content important to my work, but how it is painted too. It is both a serious and fun process. I pick this medium for its stubborn nature and ability to transform a surface into anything thin, thick, or flat.

3D objects quickly get translated into 2D. I like shape and color and the process of flattening them makes their other elements pop out. Abstracting usually generates some sort of flatness. Although it is harder to read and perceive forms without depth, the flatness gives one a chance to notice the shape and line and formal qualities of paint. It provides a place for the ordinary to live without knowing what it is. Again, I will engage with this trickery or perception to activate space in paintings such as pulling or pushing the planes in different or opposite ways than they are perceived or assumed, or reversing the positive and negative spaces.

I do not usually limit my color palette, but I have been noticing how many neutrals and greys I will make with only bits of bright colors. I believe this has to do with real life observations. My colors imitate the colors that are all around us. A lot of what we see is made up of neutral colors but we really only remember or focus on the bright, contrasted, or saturated moments.

My paintings range from six inch squares to twenty-four inch squares. Because I am not working terribly large, I wind up painting flat on a table instead of a wall, which again, is imitating the way I am looking in the first place, usually down or at something.



The panel or canvas becomes a surface that is very much in the activated space of what I am observing. I am also noticing how many paintings I leave propped up against the wall as opposed to hanging at eye level. It is like I do not want them to be where someone would expect them to be. This scale is extremely flexible for me because they can still be painted fast if I choose, and their squareness makes for an unexpected tight and contained composition. I have more versatility in rotating the square around, as it is neither a portrait nor landscape orientation.

## Painting Future

My paintings are intended to be a little sweet, maybe funny, serious and stubborn, kind of like me. I hope my paintings can speak to a variety of viewers that also appreciate ordinary experiences, have an awareness of their surroundings, or share a similar sensitivity to the language of paint—all to give them an excuse to look a little bit longer.

The act of looking at my surroundings is a great springboard to really dig into shape and paint. My future paintings could potentially turn into anything. Maybe they will become more playful, and maybe not about the everyday directly, but about color and pattern. For example: I painted a lot of wrappers from candy buttons. Growing up I hated how difficult they were to peel off the paper and I wound up eating tiny bits of this paper. Spending more time with them now, I find the paper to be the most interesting part: stained with food coloring, a grid of appealing pink, teal, and yellow circles on a wide scroll. As an object it is recognizable to most, but at its basic elements it is a pretty intriguing formal composition of color and shape and pattern.

Currently I have been making a lot of paintings of the stuff that gets left on my rug in my apartment. Each consists of a lot of circular forms on a gridded pattern, and that is giving me a lot to work from formally with proportion and spatial relationships; addressing the tension between figure and ground. I am using the moments I stumble upon and then running with them, but trying not to prevent anything from happening.

When I am asked what I want from my paintings, or perhaps what my ideal artist statement would be, I usually joke “I don’t care what my paintings are doing, as long as they are having a good time”, but the thing is, as much as I joke, I am also being pretty

honest. They can be weird, sweet, funny, cheesy, ironic, odd, quiet, or silly but also be serious and honest. (A “good time” in this case means, they are sure and confident in whatever they are feeling or looking like. And if they are feeling “unsure”, then gosh darn it, they better be doing that really well.) A lot of my work, unsurprisingly to others but a little surprising to myself, imitates who I am as a person, this ironic combination of joking around and being completely genuine. I like that in my life and my painting’s life there is a distinct balance between worlds of the real and abstract, and languages of the sincere and comedic.

## Illustrations



Figure 1. Claire Stankus, Studio door, 2018.



Figure 2. Claire Stankus, Studio shot, fall 2016.



Figure 3. Claire Stankus, *Two Pairs*, 2016, Oil on panel.



Figure 4. Claire Stankus, *Sink Plant*, 2016, Oil on panel.



Figure 5. Claire Stankus, *35 Cake*, 2017, Oil on panel.





Figure 6. Claire Stankus, *Drying Jacket*, 2016, Oil on panel.



Figure 7. Claire Stankus, *Linoleum*, 2016, Oil on panel.

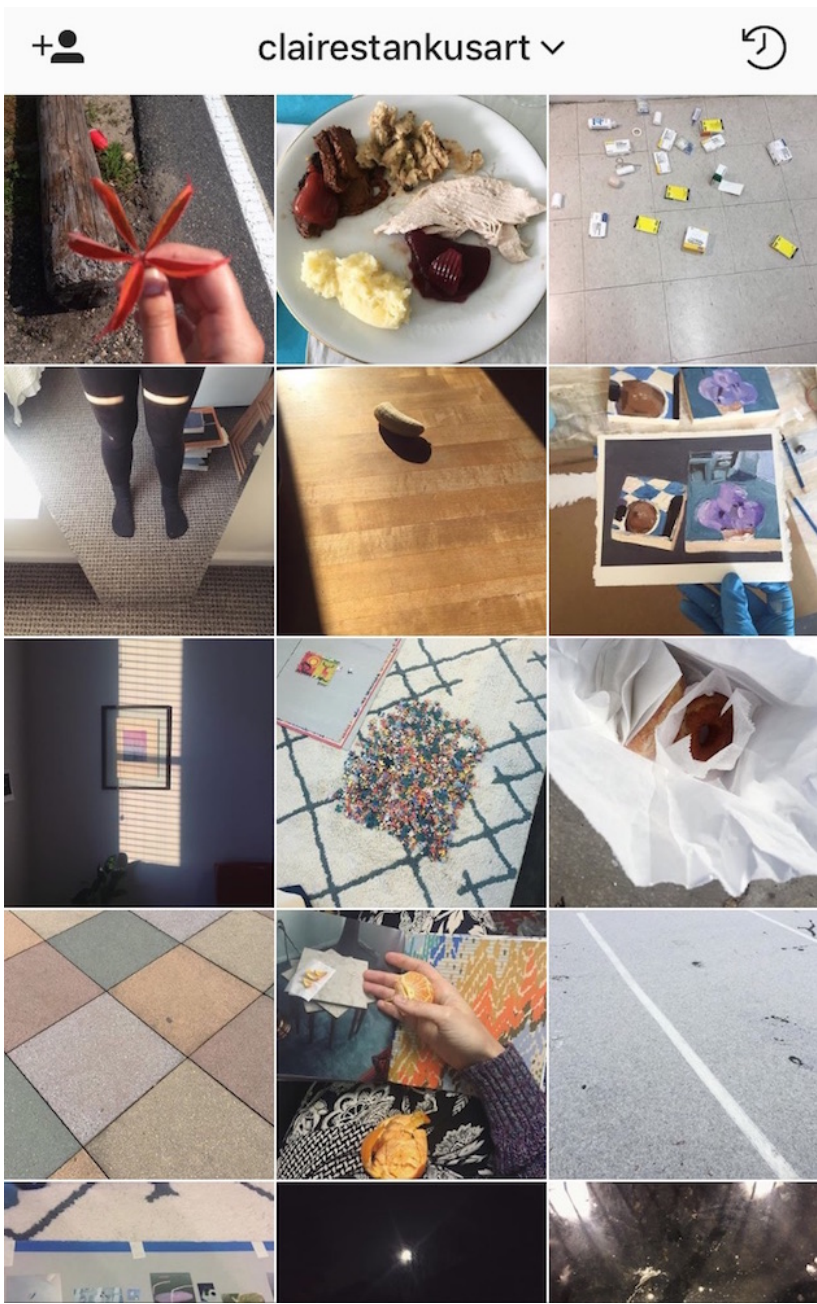


Figure 8. Claire Stankus, Instagram screen shot, 2018.



Figure 9. Robert Adams, *Astoria, Oregon*, 2014.



Figure 10. Fairfield Porter, *Flowers*, 1955, Oil on canvas.



Figure 11. Claire Stankus, *Feet First*, 2016, Oil on panel.



Figure 12. Claire Stankus, *Little Markers*, 2018, Oil on panel.

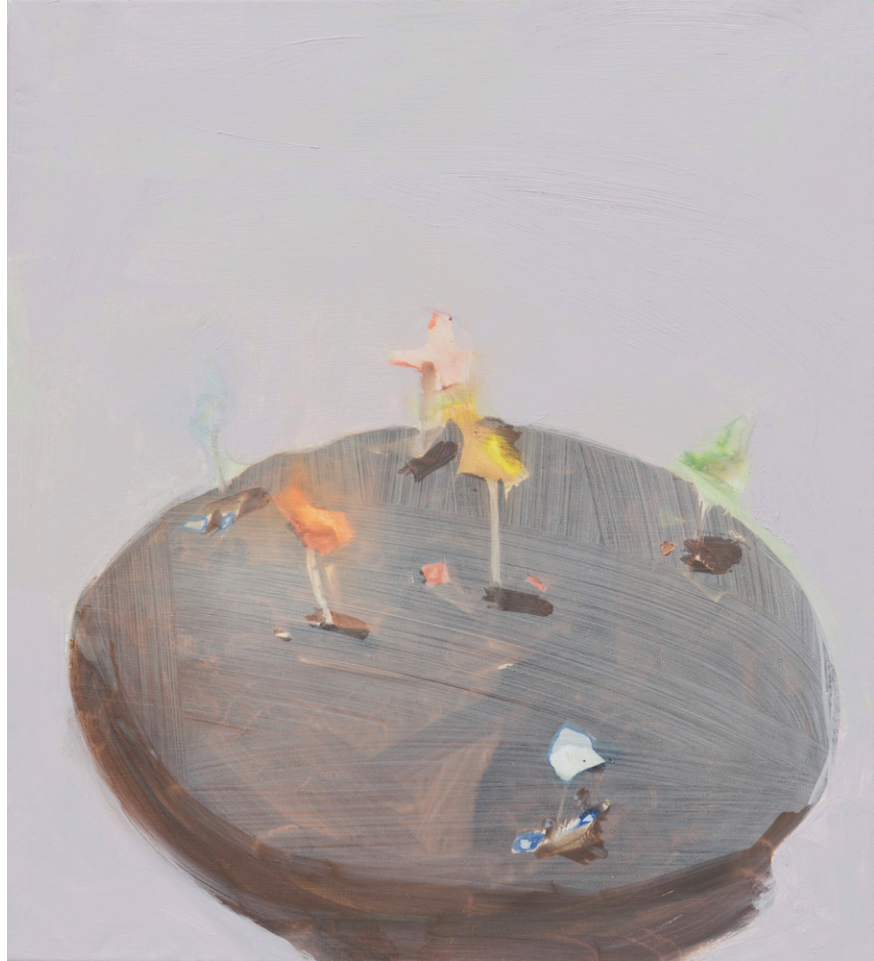


Figure 13. Claire Stankus, *28 Cake*, 2018, Oil on paper.





Figure 14. Claire Stankus, *Petals*, 2017, Oil on panel.



Figure 15. Claire Stankus, *Blue Tile Leaves*, 2017, Oil on canvas.



Figure 16. Thomas Nozkowski, *Untitled*, 2009, Oil on paper.



Figure 17. Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (08-10)*, 2010, Oil on canvas.

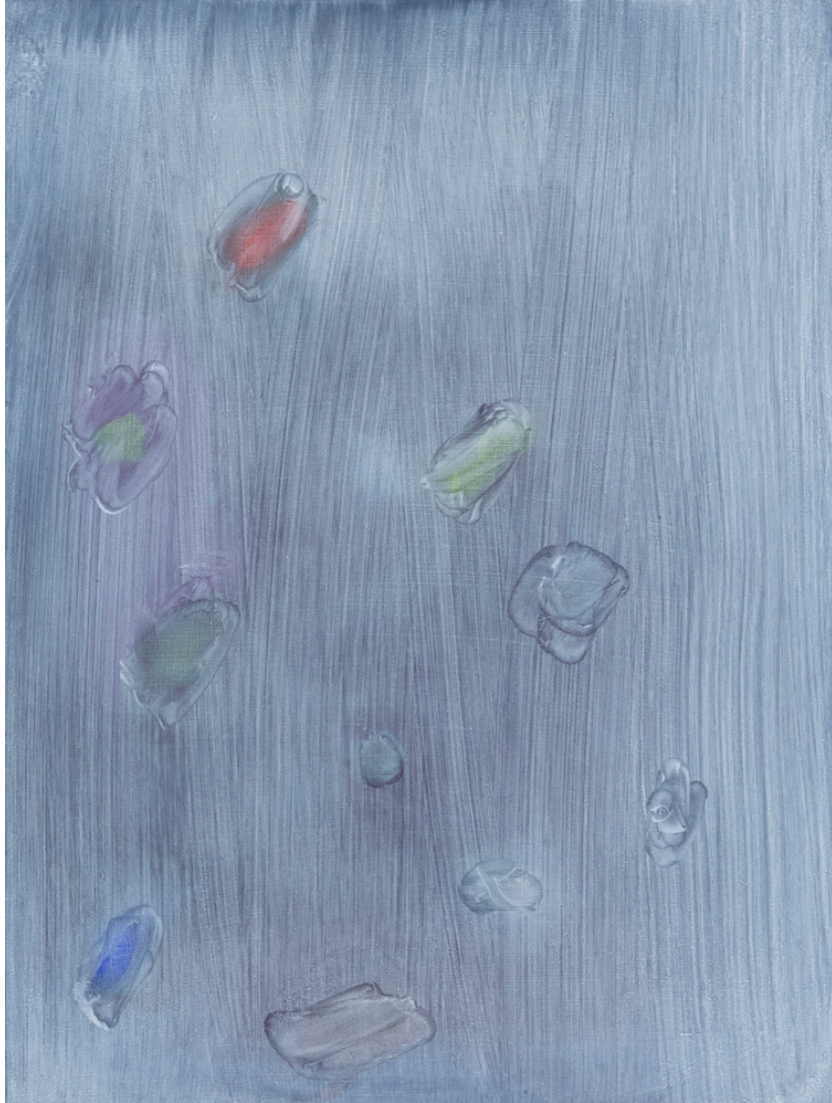


Figure 18. Claire Stankus, *Untitled*, 2018, Oil on panel.



Figure 19. Claire Stankus, *Island Plant*, 2018, Oil on panel.



Figure 20. Claire Stankus, *Paint Isle*, 2018, Oil on paper.

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