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# Studying Light and Color in Tuscany

Marissa Stanton

*University of Connecticut - Storrs*, [marissa.stanton@uconn.edu](mailto:marissa.stanton@uconn.edu)

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Marissa Stanton

Senior Honors Thesis, 2015

*Studying Light and Color in Tuscany*

I first had the opportunity to travel to Florence during a study abroad program in 2013. The time spent outside of my native culture began to shape my life and creative work. While in Florence, one of my classes took place outside in the gardens, where my classmates and I struggled to capture the intense Tuscan light and color through the medium of painting. When I left the program, I felt that I was just starting an important new period of study and practice, and I was keenly inspired to return to Florence to continue my research.

In spring of 2014, I applied for and received the University of Connecticut's IDEA Grant and the Greene Art Travel Scholarship, which enabled me to return to Florence for an intense summer of painting, drawing, writing, and research. Alone in my *monolocale* apartment, I was my own professor, supervisor, and timekeeper. No matter what the circumstances, I created. I visited Renaissance and contemporary museums and galleries, and began to enter the dialogue between the old masters and new thinkers in the context of the pluralistic Italian culture. In order to learn more about the process of capturing light and color in a specific atmosphere, I created over thirty oil landscapes and documented the process in a notebook of poetry. The majority of these *plein air* landscapes reflected my struggle to contain the hot sunlight and velvety shadows through the muted ability of my oil paints. The brightness of paint cannot be keyed highly enough to represent sunlight; the necessary response is to lower the pitch of every other color, so that the compositional relationships might capture the atmosphere without literal color matching.

Once I returned to the U.S. in the fall of 2014, I started to explore the concepts I'd developed while painting in Florence for the Senior Thesis project. During my time in Florentine museums, I had researched medieval *predella* panels, where one large image is composed of several smaller panels. This format inspired me to transpose particularly luminous sections of my paintings onto smaller Masonite boards, and simultaneously break my poetry into pieces that each captured a highly specific moment. The goal was not to make a puzzle-like series, but

rather, to reduce each work into the essence of the atmosphere through [a reduction](#) of color and language. I found that I had enough distance to further distill these color relationships into simple, abstracted paintings. These abstract works still strongly evoked a sense of sunlit Tuscan landscapes without demarcating objects like trees, hills, or buildings.

When I first started the small works, I was copying vignettes from the larger paintings, but as time went on, I started to do the paintings from memory—mixing colors and choosing compositions based on my experience and nostalgia. Simultaneously, my poetry started to break into pieces that each captured a highly specific moment from my time in Italy, without revealing the whole picture. In that way, the paintings and poems came together, and also started to become a sort of metaphor for the way we remember things in a series of very specific, individual moments. My paintings changed from a student struggling to capture hot sunny landscapes into an exploration of memory and the way the human brain remembers things that matter.

The culmination of this project was my first exhibition in the VAIS Gallery at UConn. As the process of organizing my first solo show was an essential experience; I had completely underestimated the amount of pre-planning, materials, and time that were necessary to a project such as this one. Throughout the entire process, I had the unwavering support of several faculty mentors, without whom I'd have been completely lost—especially Professors Ray DiCapua, Laurie Sloan, and Sean Forbes. As the show began to come together, I recognized another aspect of my research that I had not yet discovered. Because of my decision to display the paintings on a series of shelves at about eye level around the room, I had to make decisions concerning placement and order. Before that moment, my poetry project had begun to drift away from the painting project, but as I placed the paintings at different orders and intervals around the room, I realized the similarity between the placement of paintings on shelves and words or line breaks in

a poem. Each process was remarkably similar; the order of words or colors, when changed, begins to suggest a different meaning. Additionally, one painting or word by itself does not have the same impact as the collective.

This realization helped me to organize the paintings and poems in an extremely effective way. My decisions were confirmed when students without prior knowledge of my subject matter asked if the paintings came from a Tuscan landscape. Their words, coupled with other observations on the dreamy, somewhat nostalgic quality of the paintings, furthered my interest in the idea of color relationships as having some sort of visceral quality that can recall specific moments.

The conclusion of my Senior Thesis project is that it has not been concluded. Because of my distance from the landscape where I initially conceived the paintings, I've found that the memories are beginning to blur more and more. I have applied for a residency in Florence for this coming fall, in which I will continue my research into the qualities of color and light in painting and poetry, and learn more about the ways that certain combinations can imply specific memories, places, and sensations.