

The Gray Market: Over-manufacturing, Art and the Rural/Urban Divide

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to memory and memories.

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Abstract

THE GRAY MARKET: OVER-MANUFACTURING, ART AND THE RURAL/URBAN DIVIDE.

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This is the written component for *The Gray Market*, a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art thesis exhibition and project. It provides a detailed description of the concept and body of work in the exhibition. The writing connects the work and artist to historical theories, artists, art movements and forms. Additionally, the paper reflects on the experience as a whole and poses new questions that have arisen in the process.

KEYWORDS: Community, Economics, Rural, Sustainability, Thrift Store, Art, Pop Art, Memory, Pandemic, Otaku.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 What is a Gray Market?

The term GRAY MARKET is borrowed from a few different sources. It relates to each in concept, but does not coincide or intersect in actuality except by happenstance.

1. Black Markets are those in which illicit, illegal, fake, and stolen goods are traded.

Black Markets represent a huge part of our economy; the data we have for how much is almost certainly incomplete, but our best estimates are that on average global black markets are about 31.9%ⁱ. A white market is the legal, sanctioned market for goods and services. The white market also has its own inefficiencies and dysfunctionality. It also generates a ton of waste. A Gray Market is a marketplace, event, person, group, or gathering where second-hand, salvaged, upcycled, locally produced, or meaningfully niche-filling goods are offered. In some cases, they are goods and services that are not readily available to their community through either the white or black markets. In some cases, they are set up as a function for the community, such as estate cleaning and liquidation, a tool library, public gathering space, or to support a local non-profitⁱⁱ.

2. The term “Gray Water”ⁱⁱⁱ is an architectural term that means waste water from home systems that is not potable, but still safe to use for many applications. In modern architecture, gray water is always flushed with the rest of the waste. However, if we are to venture into space, nay, if we are to survive on Earth with more and more neighbors, we must find local, zero-sum solutions to waste systems. Some radical thinkers have been able to design homes and systems that incorporate gray water, bottle waste, trash, used tires, and all of the leftovers of modern life.^{iv} This is a wonderful metaphor and model for how we must rethink our economic systems, and perhaps more simply, our behaviors towards existing systems.
3. Gray is the color of rain clouds; gray is the color of memories erased. Gray is the color left over when it all burns away.
4. There is subversive language here and it’s meant to be cheeky. The site of the installation is a converted cattle-milking building on a famous Civil War skirmish battle site. Although I have a high sensitivity and aversion to the way naming conventions have honored Confederate generals, in places such as monuments, school names, highway and street names, town and city names, and the like, I am encouraged by the removals that the last few years have seen. The Gray Market is a play on words for the notion that it is not an urban “white-walled” gallery. It is on a site of warfare, death, fire and destruction. In many ways the front line that the train tracks provided for the Union during the Civil War here in Catlett, VA, feels like a contemporary front line. We are on the edge of suburbanization, expansion and population growth; we are in a riparian/watershed buffer zone that is environmentally

protected. Only in the Gray Market can the expansion be negotiated. The things that once were protected are no more, we have burnt them all down to ash gray. We spend a lot of time thinking about how to live without trees; we have paved and built in grayscale. In some ways I reclaim the phrase Gray Army to evoke a more contemporary, thoughtful meaning and idea.



Figure 1.1: The color gray

5. One of the main colors featured in the paintings, sculptures and other components of the thesis show is gray. So, literally gray. The colorful paint that is cleaned off of my brushes into a jar with all of the other colors from the painting process tends to turn to gray. I like to think this is also how memories can work. We have once colorful

memories that are mixed with others into a slurry of warm gray feelings of memory.

We lack clarity in our recollection.

6. A gray area is a subject that is either a touchy subject or one that may need more research or inquiry to understand or define. It could be an emerging market. The Gray Market is a conduit for exploring gray areas in ontology, cultural value and economics.

There is a political discussion to be had around how we address the legal, illegal and aftermarket flow and sales of goods. We have missed opportunities to make a solid civilian infrastructure. We have failed to mandate practicality in commercial development as it relates to human development. It seems to me that things in a “developed” country should be more and more accessible and less and less expensive for the average person, but we seem to have accepted that things just become more and more expensive and exclusive over time. That’s indicative of a society that has failed to plan for population growth, and is reactionary in its management of already depleted natural resources. That’s corroborated by a massive stream of waste, including the newest built-in challenge, microplastics. One thing you will see very little of in a gray market is packaging.

1.1.1 What is The Gray Market?

Elements of The Gray Market

The Gray Market is the synthesis of a number of different elements of my work and life.

There are a few main components which are the building blocks for The Gray Market.

1. The Gray Market is a retail thrift store which features nostalgic, odd and hip items. Products include: used and vintage clothing with a focus on mid-to-high-end graphic tee-shirts, about 50,000 sports cards and collectible cards, retro games, sneakers, VHS tapes, trucker hats, cups, mugs, mixers, vintage kitchen tables, a victrola, signs, wooden crates, necklaces and jewelry, wrist watches, sunglasses, old cameras, a set of waders, a few primitive antiques, Disneyana, stuff about the movie *Home Alone*, Beanie Babies, vintage jeans, women's clothing, knits and sweaters, a Jamaican flag from a very old ship, sports jerseys signed by the athlete, a few books, select furniture, collectibles, art, and around 400 different toys.
2. The Gray Market is an art gallery which will show art.
3. The Gray Market is my MFA Thesis project and exhibit. I have created a body of artistic work that is housed in, and includes, the gallery and building itself.
4. The Gray Market is a place that I hope people from my community gather.



Figure 1.2: The Gray Market Outside

The Gray Market is located in a converted cattle-milking facility at 9221 Elk Run Road, Catlett, VA 20119. The façade of the structure was painted to look like a horse stable and is fairly recognizable from the highway. The building has been converted to primitive retail with simple carpeting, paint and lighting. I have made some simple enhancements and updates, and cleaned up the site.

Table 1.1: Goods

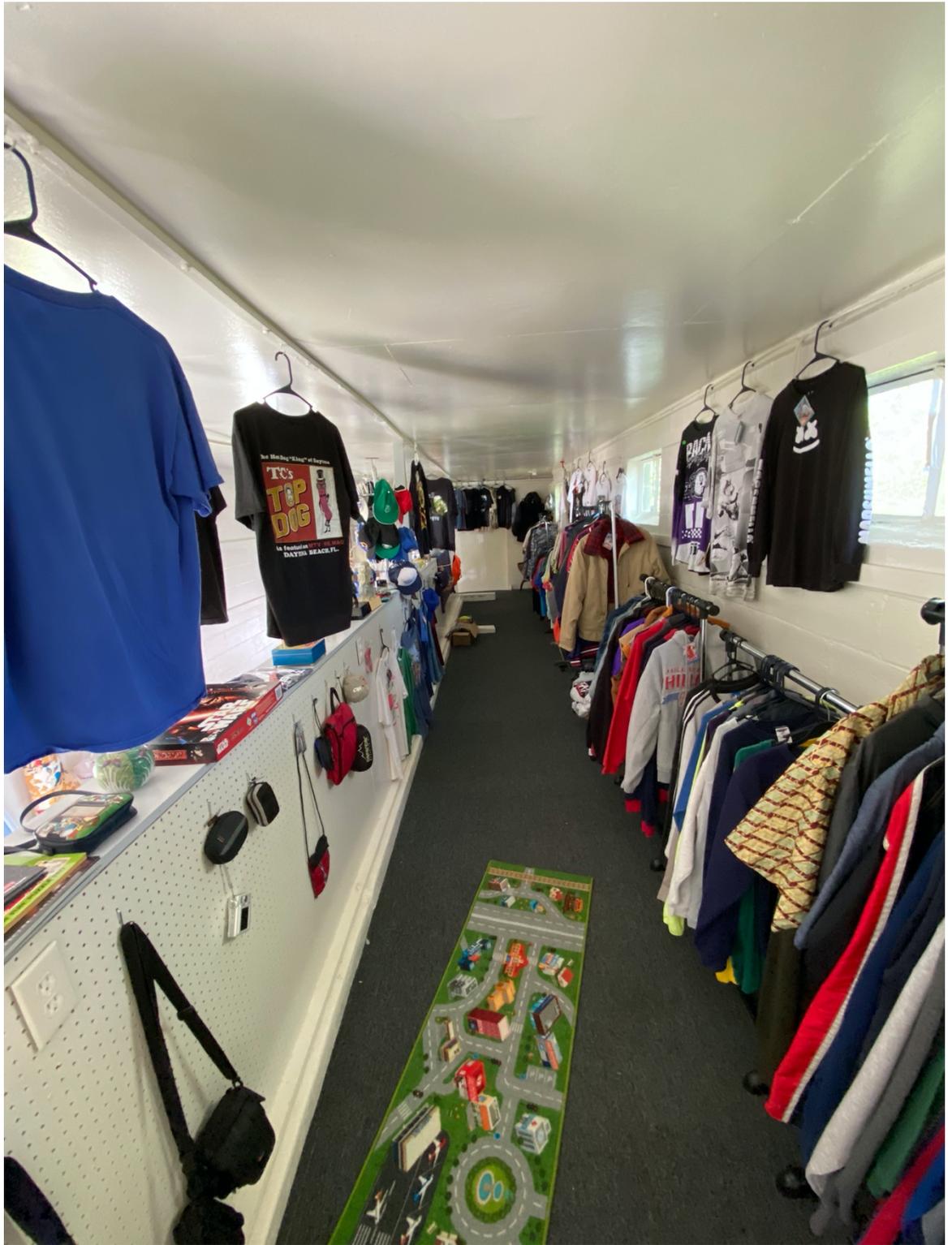
Art	Clothing	Toys
Cards	Tools	Snacks
Disc Golf	Records	Antiques

In the process of creating a space and curating it with objects to sell, I have started to carve out a small niche within the market of both antique shoppers and vintage clothing enthusiasts. There is a target market for all of this, but I aim to have a universal appeal. The objects in the store are largely comprised of items dating from before 2000. When assembling a collection of objects from this period, I am creating a setting for my generation to relive moments from our childhood. This is an intentional aesthetic as well as very in-line with the theme of the art work that I am showing in my gallery. In dealing with memory and how we interpret memory, I find joy and special moments in watching other people uncover memories, reliving the joy and melancholy that these objects trigger.











Figures 1.4 – 1.10 - Images from Inside the Store [Pages 8 – 12].

I have included a set of these images as a reference point to the volume and type of arrangement I have. My inventory constantly in flux, but the central components and thematic connections remain.

Initially, as I was starting the series of paintings, I was relying on my sense of memory and my sense of value. As I continued the series, I was compelled to ask about and include the memories of my friends, students and family. I would often ask questions such as, “What character or cartoon from your childhood stick out as most vivid in your memory? Why?” or, if they were a bit more familiar with my work, I’d simply ask, “What would you like to see me paint?” This is the case with two of the pieces and some may have been influenced in this manner less explicitly.

The Gray Market is also an art gallery. The rooms of the facility are physically separated by a wall with a small window in between. This is the window between parallel worlds. The gallery side of the building is brighter and more open. It is a simple rectangular room with faux hardwood floors covering the once rough floor. In the gallery there are four large windows and four walls and a front door. It sounds larger than it is because of the reflections of sound in the sparse space. It is a huge contrast to the thrift shop room next door in its sparsity and organization. This is a place to sit and reflect. It is a great place to gather, show and enjoy art. It might also make for a good small music venue.

The work of my thesis project is both the physical artwork, such as the paintings, sculptures, and other works detailed in the catalog, and the building, thrift shop and business itself. Many artists pursuing their MFA in visual art will show their work for a few days in an on-campus gallery. However, for a number of reasons, I have decided to take an alternative approach to the exhibition and the work itself.

I have always been interested in developing and transforming locations through juxtaposition, so this project is a natural continuation of some of my previous work curating and showing in agricultural structures. I am bringing a modern spin on art and commerce into a rural landscape and town.

I also have built upon my skills as a collector to incorporate a variety of materials and resources, which will be detailed in the next chapter, *Processes, materials, and methods*. The art installation has been an ongoing process since October 2021, will culminate in a launch party April 22, 2022, and has an indeterminate ending.

Many elements come together in the physical space of the futuristic general store, but the art gallery seems to be the place people like to sit and talk. I have hosted a number of “studio visits” and interviews from Youtubers, professors, peers, and family in the gallery. It is a place that encourages laughter. Through all of the times spent visiting and sharing my work, I have had the feeling that so much more can come out of this project than a simple show to satisfy the final requirements of a degree program. I believe that the impact of this space will reach many more going forward, but it is important to mention the ephemeral nature of both the show and the building itself. There are not many good uses for most of these buildings, and the entire property is up for sale as “shopping mall/commercial/light industrial.” I am on a month-to-month lease, so there is a chance that, at any point, my lease will be cancelled and I will need to move out.

I have done a lot of work and invested my energy and other resources to create a place for people to gather, shop, use the internet and do other activities. My community

is sorely lacking this type of space for people to sit and hang out in a low-pressure environment. To put it into some context, our town has one stop light, and ten churches (and a Buddhist monastery). The current businesses to shop in are: a BP gas station, a dollar general store, an antique mall, a bank and a post office. There is one picnic table near the parking lot of a now defunct (because Dollar General moved in) mom-and-pop store to sit and hang out. I haven't seen any one sitting there in years.

The nearest public Wi-Fi is at the Nokesville Public Library, in the next county over. It takes about 15 minutes driving to get there. The next closest public Wi-fi is probably the McDonald's in Bealeton, a solid 20 minutes south in a car, and you have to buy something to use it. I plan to install a Wi-fi system that can be used while at my shop, no matter what you buy or if you intend to buy anything. If you need an update, to work remotely, to compete in a mobile game, or just to skype your friend, you may. I believe that this will be a huge attraction in and of itself, and will generate leads for sales that I would not generate through traditional advertising. It adds value and is a simple example of how private businesses can and should support or subsidize civil infrastructure. It seems super irrelevant in today's modern age, but the label of Internet Café has popped up more than once. People would use it. I am currently planning a pop-up event with vendors, music and food to coincide with the Launch Party. It is my hope to continue the momentum of this event and open up to possibilities for other artists and groups to use the space.

The ultimate fate of the market is up in the air, but those who have been through the place will certainly have something to remember, and perhaps a story or two to tell someday.

Chapter 2: Processes, Materials, and Methods

The world has enough. It has enough of everything. The world has enough stuff that we don't really need to produce much new stuff. There are certainly some things that we need to be new, or in new condition, but for the most part we have enough.

Artists are consumers. When I started this degree program, I felt an overwhelming pressure to create shiny new works with the finest materials. Many of those works were created in a weird bubble, which burst around 2020. I haven't seen artists change trajectory quite as quickly or fervently as my work did when the pandemic hit, and my life changed dramatically. The visual language, subjects, color palette, as well as conceptual foundations all changed.

The source materials for my new art are the things around me. I work with more attention to the things I already have, and focus on being a good steward to them. I source materials for artwork that are second-hand, used, thrown away, beyond their functional life, or otherwise bound for the landfill. I create witty, subversive, or otherwise editorial cartoons on (and over) junk shop giclee prints, other people's oil paintings of shitty landscapes, canvases that were once used to advertise in stores or displays, motel wall paintings, and other two-dimensional stuff from junk piles, flea markets and dumpsters. I

work with raw materials, build frames and stretch canvas. I sew and have been working with textiles.

A large collection of vintage toys, piggy banks, cookie jars, mugs, figurines, bubble bath bottles and squeaky toys have all been repainted by hand, completely in grayscale. I have been collecting and converting these for almost two years now. The collection is also highly revealing when put together into different arrangements. It is a macabre menagerie of shady characters, a weird Twentieth Century terracotta army. They are individual pieces, but make up a body of work. They share the same tones, the same lines and curves. They share the familiar smiles of our memories.

“The way you painted them makes it look like you cast them yourself.”- Artist Josh Spivack, 2022. To some, they share a similar origin story.

When confronted with this new space to fill, the need to build this army was a matter of sourcing plentiful amounts of pseudo-toys to repaint. I believe that the market for these once throw-away things has gone up in my region since I started to purchase them. I have no proof for this, because at the same time, the overall market for collectibles has gone up. The objects themselves are fairly strong individually, and will be sold alone, in clusters, or as a group. I liken them to an army of volunteers, who disperse once their mission is accomplished or their fight has been fought. This is their battle, but then they go home. They feel better there.

Converting these objects from their original colors to gray scale is a very important functional and symbolic component of the installation. The removal of color from these

little things of our past is a gesture to point at how we are manipulated, partly through color, to remember things and ultimately buy them. This is especially true with the images that we are force-fed as children. The bright colors of a friendly clown match the wrappers, and all of the food gets a character of its own. What is important to remember is that color instills a deep sense of meaning. Color has played an important role in expression to so many artists^v. The McWorld that is as wholesome as the apple pie trees that line its orange drink rivers is innocent, but ferociously antagonistic. These worlds are created in order for children to drive their parents to the local fast-food place for some very cheap, convenient and unhealthy habits. The same methods are used to push us to buy toys, behave in certain ways, and follow crap fads that no one ever needed (all the way through our lives). The same methods are used to over-manufacture, Uniqlo^{vi}, and push out art. If you have ever been to an art fair or expo, it is likely you have seen this first hand.

I blot it out, I paint over it, I gently erase the symbolism of the primary color combinations. I redo the process once done by man or machine at the factory, with more care. I am building an array of possibilities within the sea of memory. I am building a body of bodies. I am Optimus Prime assembling.

The primary medium I have been using for a lot of the figurines is Montana acrylic ink combined with Krink inks. I have been using Krink since the early 2000s, and it is known for its permanence and bold tones of silver, chrome and black. The silver tone I have been using is from around 2004.



Figure 1.3: Silver Krink Ink circa 2004

The new shinier chrome tones were released Fall/Winter 2021. They produce a nice contrast with the older silver tones. Black ink has been around for a while, but I have been using a few different types of black including India Ink, Black acrylic ink, Black Krink Ink, and Sharpie black. In addition, there are a number of gray scale tones that I made by combining the Montana Ink color “Iron Curtain” with different levels of “Shock White” and “Shock Black.” The Montana Acrylic Inks and Krink inks have also worked their way onto the canvas in this body of work. The flow and coverage, as well as palette, are all

well suited for the themes. I have also used Montana Spray paints from the Black and Gold lines with both fine spray and fat tips. When I am painting on canvas, the colors are both from traditional acrylic paints and mediums from Liquitex and Golden, as well as water based-acrylic inks from Montana.

When the mood strikes me, I can really find a rhythm in painting. I have been recording time lapses of most of my paintings and share them regularly via social media. I plan to have these videos available or playing during the exhibition, and some of the videos will be linked in the works' appropriate catalog entries. I work to create less and less evidence of brushstrokes, incorporating some Superflat^{vii} methods to achieve a higher quality mark. Similar methods are commonly employed in cartoons, 2D animation, and traditional printmaking. In some pieces I have done a better job at hiding handiwork than in others. Some colors are just hard to layer without streaks. Some memories are hard to fade.

Although I am rescuing most pieces from the waste stream, I am sensitive to the intellectual property (IP) rights of the original artist. When it comes to reworking other people's art, I am following in a long-standing tradition of recontextualization of public figures, brands, characters and other IPs within a new paradigm, subjugation, juxtaposition, visual treatment, or twist of humor for art's sake. This genre or method, commonly referred to as pop art, and other stylistic connections to the historical context of my work will be covered in more depth in the next chapter, *Resources and References*. I believe that the work instigates a discussion about the value of art, and this is a wonderful starting point to

synthesize the understanding of memory. Parody and humor, combined with cartoons, are easy entry points to otherwise tough, deep topics.

The imagery of our childhood is our lingering innocence manifest in a symbol. It is a unifying flag for those in a state of nostalgia. We live at the intersection of warm, happy memory and the melancholy of the sad reality that those memories may never be repeated.^{viii}

The Pandemic, which arose in 2020, was a collective trauma that very few were untouched by. When exposed to trauma, society and people resort to infantile, child-like, or previous habits.^{ix} In line with these trends or tendencies, our society saw an explosion in the value, time, and care spent on things from our past during and after the pandemic hit. Sports cards, toys, vintage clothing and emerging collectibles markets all have seen recent explosions in market cap, and record setting sales.^x

I liken this movement to what happened in Japan after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it's a new American Otaku.^{xi}

Chapter 3: Resources and References

This guide is a window into the influences, research and historical context of The Gray Market.

It is an attempt to explain the synthesis of elements in my life that are converging in this body of work. I originally wrote this section as a piece of software that can be explored by clicking through each subject in a never-ending set of floating pop-up windows and connected thought bubbles. I have done my best to encode the connections in concepts, art movements, artists, mediums, economics, technology, rural/urban divide, and sustainability.

“The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” -Sol Lewitt

Sustainability and civil commons are recurring themes in my work. I value a person’s right and responsibility to live close to nature; I value a person’s right to be cutting edge. Technology, after all, is natural. Wafers for microchips are made of the same mineral as sand. However, we need to look at the way that we use technology now, in order to understand how we may better develop sustainable habits alongside it.

“We sell our souls for a grain of sand.” -Dr. Thomas Stanley^{xii}

What Dr. Stanley observes is this societal disconnection from nature and affinity towards microchip technology. The mutual gravitation toward one mineral is unnatural. Silicon dioxide alone is not a true representation of the wide array of minerals in nature, it has simply stolen the thunder of all of the other minerals. It shape-shifts. Technology, AI,

swarm robotics, data centers built over native meadows, drones, an army of delivery drivers have all been finely tuned to serve our propensity to sit on our butts, shop online, and consume data. The personal, continual data stream is peak lunacy. Tablets and data have become our Au Pairs, personal trainers, teachers, social centers, dating, lifestyle coaches, news sources, connection and access to financial services, food suppliers, and sex partners.

Technology plays a role in how we store and recover memories now. We even call computer storage “memory,” perhaps in a way to give it some personhood. On old episodes of *Star Trek*, the crew would address their central computer only as “computer.” Now, we have names for our devices, proprietary blends of human personality A.I.s that help us shop and know things like the weather and math.

We store our warm memories alongside our mundane data in the same manner, with no reverence. All we get is a short burst of nostalgia, if or when we recall them. It is not enough to do something great anymore, you have to be really great at documentation. Being great is a myth now, so it is really all about the record or documentation as artifact and perception of greatness. You don’t have to be great at anything, you just have to be prolific about megaphoning it out to the world that you are. For example, an athlete has to be at the top of their sport *and* have a huge followship on social media in order to attract the best sponsorships and contracts. Of course, there are some exceptions to any example or rule, but I see veteran artists struggling, needing to hire social media teams, PR firms, content makers to manage their public channels.

There are artists who display great prowess and sensitivity to make the world a little more beautiful. I'm willing to bet that it correlates to how meticulous their sketch books are. Daniel Arsham is a great example of how to use a sketch book. He is amazing at drawing and scale. He has a keen eye for observation. His recent sketchbook was published by Gallerie Perrotin in PARIS. His NFTs (non-fungible tokens) are visionary and have interesting elements of decay, modulation and duration that other artists and schemes simply lack. I tend to use large sized graph paper to sketch out my ideas. I have also used the iPad with the Procreate app to do digital mockups and drawings for many of the paintings in my thesis.

NFTs are a really important trend to speak about in many contemporary art-practices. People are buying virtual goods at record setting numbers and in massive scale. All of that stuff that used to be so prized and important to hang on our walls, turns out to be to some people, not important at all. The digital world and remote work experience augmented how we value analog goods and real-life experiences. Analog goods are becoming this magical thing that the digital world is preoccupied with documenting, mocking and synthesizing. There are great and multiple examples of using NFTs, cryptocurrency and similar technology to mimic the real-estate market, recreate and archive sports experiences, or to upgrade in game status and clout with unique looks or items. Digital goods can be viewed by the beholder as décor, customization of experiences, status symbol, and/or investment, in entertainment and other categories.

The use of NFTs as simple economic machines (to pump and dump) is not very interesting to me, nor do I believe that it operates in a sustainable way most of the time. It

is a bad way to take advantage of hype. However, many artists have created novel NFTs that use time, location, and other factors to influence how the art looks. It evolves! That is a cool way to do digital art, but I'm not convinced that the blockchain components are all that important without careful consideration from the onset of an artwork's planning.

Digital art has existed, without the need to be an NFT. Great examples of this include persistent-state worlds like MMO games, Video art installations, interactive works, and even phenomenology in the same manner of OBEY (see Artists: OBEY/Shepard Fairey). Digital art has been bought and sold without it, and can be created to evolve just like any NFT could. So, it seems to me the NFT has simply served as a new way to sell art, a new label and storage system that taxes the artist and the audience for their digital assets, creating another layer of service fees and charges for the validation of the idea or image. They are stored in digital "Wallets" where they sit, yearning to be clicked.

I minted a few NFTs of my physical works and I intend to use these as chain of custody and proof of provenance for a piece of art. For a long time, we have relied on human memory, collectors, dealers, auctioneers, and those otherwise in the know, to remember who owns what piece of art, when they got it, how much was paid for it, and other pertinent information to a piece's history. Now, artists can use NFT and blockchain technology, or a digital ledger, to keep records of the artist selling it to the first customer, the first customer selling it on the aftermarket, and so on and so forth to infinity. Another cool feature of this technology is the ability for the artist to now share or exert control over the second-hand sale of their work (in a way that was previously more difficult to manage)

via smart contracts. An artist can collect a share of revenue if the artwork appreciates in value and is sold, where in traditional markets the collector/dealer would take on all of the risk and reward of the arts' sales. It is up to the initial contract at the first sale as to what extent that is managed or exerted.

In an ideal world, a simple set of instructions to pass on the NFT in a certain manner would be included with the artwork. So I have created NFTs to act as digital custody markers for two of my physical paintings (see catalog entries *One*, *Tahoo*, *Threese* and *Vitamin/Friend/Self*). I have also created NFTs of purely digital works that, when sold, will fund a physical work via commission agreement (see: *The Disappearance of the Rural Landscape #1* and *#2*).

This technology is emerging in many other markets like sports cards or collectibles to keep track of authenticity and ownership, and to assert or imply rarity/value. It is slowly being combined with UV Ink, RFID, and other tech to create a true, point-to-point tracking system. Anything that needs to be authentic to retain its value can now be verified in a physical way and a digital way.

The new technology is capable of keeping track of both physical and digital properties and does not discern between the two. In many cases, contemporary artists are creating works that blend the physical and digital worlds. Paintings that are reflected as NFTs are a common sight. Sculptures that are made in real life are also made in a digital world and released as limited editions. Many investors of physical artwork even opt to have it stored securely from the time they purchase until they sell it, never physically

possessing it, to completely avoid tax/import duties. The physical possession of the object is “insured” but not in the same way money in a bank is. At least with NFTs, you can possess them in a hardware wallet, and verify your ownership via the network you used to get it or create it.

There are questions that arise from all of this is. Are we selling the soul of art for the digital representation of art? Is it a similar effect to the questioning of the value of art, when art became reproducible with high-fidelity (in such mediums as photography for example)? What is the difference between a work of art and a work of art that has been extensively documented? Why does visibility of art matter, and how does public art such as graffiti fit into that equation?

The rural community which I am a part of, my growing up in the suburbs, and my lived experience of city life give me a unique cosmopolitan overview of the community’s place in time, development, nature and economy. We are a farming, working-class community with a single commuter corridor running through the center. We are a one-stoplight town. Blink and you will miss us. The trains don’t even stop here anymore, they simply slice through our landscapes with no real local function outside of moving blue stone from the quarry. Commuters on the train get a glimpse into the unincorporated town as they go through the railroad crossing; we get a glimpse at the graffiti of the city. The train hi-jacks our cell tower signal as its riders talk to friends, watch video, and download this paper while riding through. It is a good way to visualize what happens with culture and knowledge in a town like mine.

Even with our full attention, the economy of knowledge is hard to access here. This is true from both a physical and intellectual sense. We do not have infrastructure such as: running water, sewers, police, library, town council, mayor, or any other similar things that many urban and suburban places have in place. In fact, now that we are finally developing the sewer, it resembles a poorly executed thirty-year-old plan that (surprise, surprise) did not account for population growth, suburban sprawl, and industrial spill-over from Northern Virginia. In pointing out our current conditions, I highlight the elements that are missing in regards to information and services. It isn't my hope that my community is immediately submerged in the well of modern society. It is my hope that we can have equitable access to the means and tools for self-improvement. It is my hope that we have same opportunities and information as the next county over. The infrastructure for acquiring material goods is only a small part of the issue.

To a community like ours, there is little to no intrinsic value for a purely digital token, we lack the tools and sometimes know-how to possess one; furthermore, many would not know what to do with it. In this town, public works of art and community events are more relevant. We hold bake sales (don't miss), antique sales, yard sales, and most of our ten churches have an annual rummage sale. Similar to our town's lack of infrastructure, we also lack opportunities in commerce, partly due to the lack of infrastructure. You couldn't open a restaurant here, there is no municipal water or sewers. The local grocery options are: Farmer's market on Saturday mornings from dawn until noon, Dollar General Store, BP Gas station/Champs Chicken. The nearest grocery store is seven miles north of here; it is not uncommon for me to see people from my town on

their bicycles along this route, going for groceries and medicine that we do not have here. I'd list the other things our community lacks in terms of infrastructure, but it might go on for a while. As a very important note, what we lack in infrastructure, we make up for in natural beauty, tranquility, privacy and colloquial charm. There are no HOAs here.

Artists who have influenced the work

Virgil Abloh – The late Virgil Abloh has an influence on me in a number of ways. First, I admire his drive and ambition. I admire his vision and his ability to achieve breakthrough positions in the fashion industry¹, where he maintained an honest, rooted approach to design with elements of whimsy and dreaminess. Virgil worked extremely hard all the way up until his passing from an aggressive form of cancer. He had plans and saw them through. His was a beautiful case of never setting limits. I am sad to see him go.

Daniel Arsham - Arsham Studio is one of the coolest ateliers out there. Arsham is able to weave memory, cultural value, quality, minimalism, with beauty and abstraction. He has an amazing sensibility for the qualities of light. His talents are incredibly diverse, and his works range from traditional mediums, such as painting and sculpture, to full-on industrial automotive design. He has designed Porsches that are one of a kind, he makes crystal Pokémon, he has a way to age things that are new. His art evokes memory and fuses ancient pasts with potential futures for our present. It is a beautiful world to work in. A crystalline matrix formed on a Nintendo Game Boy is a beautiful thing to envision.

¹ Virgil became artistic director at Louis Vuitton in 2019.

There is a great future where our past is omnipresent; this is a great opportunity to create our own adventure. Like me, Daniel is an artist working with a variety of artifacts from his memory, childhood, fantasy or wild imagination to create a mystical voice and visual style that will surely influence artists for generations. I WISH I could afford a couple of his pieces! Maybe one day. I rank his influence high on my charts, but I can't claim to be anywhere near his level in visual beauty, but his concepts resonate strongly.

Nigo is an amazing artist, designer, creator and archivist collector. He has created a seemingly obsessive collection of vintage clothing that he uses to draw inspiration from for his brand "Human Made." His designs are evocative of simple joys, beauty in the materials rather than adornments, and functional awareness. Nigo has famously collaborated with musicians and crossover talents from multiple areas of industry.

Obey (aka Shepard Fairey). Started out as a RISDE student/street artist. His initial work consisted of massive wheat-pasted murals in high visibility locations. He is a legendary street artist in his use of iconic graphic styles and use of characters such as Andre the Giant and Richard Nixon as a form of phenomenology. Obey has evolved from a street artist, using the world around him as the canvas and megaphone, to an influential streetwear brand with charitable and activist leanings. He has collaborated with many left-leaning political organizations and has used his art for many charitable causes. I was an early member of his street team when I lived in Boston. He would mail us these intense kits to spread the Obey style throughout. Some of the best street art campaigns are handled this way. Teamwork makes the dream work, or so they say. I am still a huge fan of his iconic visual style, which to me evokes pop art and, to a large degree,

typographic/language artists such as Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, especially in the vein of public art.

KAWS is an artist who has roots in both street art and in commercial art. He has connected thematic materials with his iconic visual style and characters. He is yet another example of an artist who is able to create a small universe of possibilities around his work. He paints, sculpts, ideates and pushes the boundaries of the physical and virtual artwork. His adoption of VR as a medium for his art has broadened the visibility and reach of the technology. This makes the art widely accessible simultaneously. I'm inspired by KAWS in both visual style and influenced by the VR concepts and technology that he has used.

Damien Hirst has worked in many different artistic mediums. Works from his catalog inspire me due to their conceptual strength, ironic(cheeky) humor, personal touch, and sheer scale. He has a great way to explain each series and has a good social media presence. It seems he has a publicist that deals with most of this stuff for him, an extension of the atelier process. I appreciate the diversity and fluidity of mediums in his work. He uses anything and almost everything to show off these impressive moments. His recent work as a painter is a more playful version of his early formal dot paintings and represents a freedom of movement in his artistic practice.

Takashi Murakami is the godfather of Japanese Superflat. In his atelier, the emphasis is on forming the perfect image. Brushstrokes are not evident, largely being replaced by the silk-screening process to achieve a perfect finish. Many who see the art for the first time assume it is digital. In a similar manner to American comic books, the

colors were bold and bright. In a uniquely Japanese manner, the playful childlike imagery of Murakami reflects upon their recent collective national trauma. The bright child-like characters and world that they live in help the audience let their guard down and provide an entry point for viewers to empathize or feel the subject in more depth.

Mr. (Pronounced “mister”) is a master of Chaos and form. He has bridged a cultural feeling and identity into a visual style that is both relatable and relays information about the culture in deep and significant ways. The centerpiece of one of his first museum solo exhibition *Live On*, is a room-sized caterpillar made of trash surrounded by galleries of his meticulous painting. He brings forth Anime as a fine art, transforming, transmuting and communicating Otaku culture to the world. He is the first artist to fully embrace being an Otaku.

“I am the first artist to fully embrace being an Otaku.”- Mr.

Jeff Koons has one of, if not the, largest ateliers in the world. He manages to attract a lot of interns and employees from the finest art schools. He creates works that are seamless. His work speaks to me about the value of plastic culture. The scale of his works is also important in that respect. I enjoy both the small and large sculptures, of which each have distinct characteristics. I find the act of this sort of scale in art activities a double-edged sword. On one hand, an artist doing this is obviously extremely prolific and can achieve new scale and reach. On the other hand, is the artist even making art at that point? How many pieces do their hands touch? Was it even their idea in the first place? Jeff Koons blurs this line in a way that others don't.

Banksy is an artist who has roots in defiant street art. He used large stenciled murals with careful consideration of placement to create a public awareness or conversation around simple concepts. His works in the public sphere often have a social justice component, or point at the hypocrisy of modern life. His career as a fine artist has always remained edgy, and he has exerted legal action against people attempting to profit from the sale of his public art. Largely influential on my visual style, he has reworked thrift shop canvases with subversive or political messages^{xiii}. To address a contemporary theme, such as the refugee crisis, he added washed-up life jackets to a triptych of Mediterranean Sea coastal paintings^{xiv}. The heaviness of the image on deeper exploration is initially masked by the approachable nature of hotel room or cheap restaurant wall art. He created a subversive, dark, Disney parody art exhibition at an actual theme park and called it *Dismaland*. It was a convergence of many invited artists, many of whom I have mentioned in this section^{xv}. Despite his persona as a mysterious figure who operates under the guise of a pseudonym, he manages to sell an extremely limited amount of his original work and manage communication, authentication and paperwork through the Pest Control Office. I like the clarity of boundaries that Banksy establishes for the viewer. You are either seeing an original Banksy exhibition, or you are seeing a completely unauthorized secondary or tertiary pile of crap that has (maybe) nothing to do with Banksy^{xvi}.

Jeff Gillette is one of the artists who participated in the *Dismaland* exhibit, at the invitation of Banksy's team. His paintings were a thematic juxtaposition of Disney characters and icons with dystopian, dark, twisted, or lightly psychedelic themes. That *Dismayland* series has a strong influence on my conceptual references. While my works

certainly have a layer of darkness, I choose to focus on humor and lightness to construct a low barrier to entry for viewers (or perhaps for them to let their guard down) so that I can address heavy topics. In a very similar manner, the backgrounds of many of his works are in a traditional oil painting style.

Artistic styles

I have been influenced by, and explored, the following artistic styles. I am not defining each style herein, but I may provide details to explain why I am interested in it, or how it influences my work. This is a short list of influences that specifically influence this body of work and not a holistic list of influences on me.

I owe much of my early development in painting to abstract expressionism. Freedom of movement and spontaneous brushstrokes allow me to dial in color palettes, and unconventional combinations of textures emerge through an additive process. In viewing abstract expressionist art, I like to see how elements are broken down, then built back up. In the search for meaning, abstraction in art often requires some explanation or contextual references to make sense of the concept. The moral of the story, so to speak, is implied not explicit. In exploring this style, I found myself leaning toward more representational work.

Minimalism in my work shows up in certain elements, such as a limited color schemes or lines, but is much better represented in some of my earlier work, such as the *Reduced Landscapes* series of paintings that I did between 2011 and 2013. These acrylic paintings used color field analysis of photos of a landscape to generate blocks of the

“average” color of each cell. The resulting painting consists of horizontal-block lines of colors. This series certainly helped me develop even further in the area of paint mixing for color, color theory and mark-making. The current visual language of my paintings doesn’t reflect much on this method, but it may have a subtle undertone in the manner that I treat backgrounds, textures and color choices. Much of my work in creating computer games and digital art relies on minimalistic graphics and mechanics. This is partly due to searching for what I like to call, “elegant solutions.” Others might call it, “simplest way to do it”, or “the easy way out”. I think that true minimalism is hard to achieve. It is occasionally hard to pin down the function or context of a minimalist work. However, there is a certain beauty in ambiguity and simplicity.

Dada and Surrealism are heavily responsible for my playfulness, humor and unrestricted approach to materials and methods, overlapping, non-linearity, and general tone of some of my attitude as an artist. If I was going for a catchier name for the exhibit, it might have been *Ceci N’est Pas une Thrift Shop*. Dada and surrealism taught me that things can be taken literally and/or metaphorically. There are certain pieces within these artistic movements that point out the absurdity of reality, while utilizing perspective and form to shift our perception. Dada and the art of nothing is analogous to the atonal music of Schoenberg and the early 20th century; it is a pure rejection of formal structure, centeredness, and expectation. The art of nothing allows for art to be formal or formless, and allows for the art to have meaning (and importantly to not have meaning). Some visual aspects of Surrealism work their way into the visual rhetoric of my art, mostly in the form of forced perspectives, abstract scale, and fantastical ideas or worlds within the

art. I feel that these artistic movements opened up many possibilities and were heavily responsible for some of the other important movements in the latter part of the 20th century and even to this day.

Pop Art (and other derivative artistic movements) forced questions of value, reproduction, commercialism, and consumption into the overarching artistic discourse. Everyday items are pictured not as still life, but as main subject. Celebrities and public figures images were mirrored in this way, manipulating, juxtaposing, repeating them until we question them. The use of printing methods and other commercial technology for manufacturing the art expanded the accepted constraints of the atelier. Artists chose to work with industrial manufacturers to mimic the printing processes used for advertisement and other mass-produced items. Materials and imagery borrowed from commerce, such as price tags, sign graphics, cartoon strips, and labels, all went on display in the context of an art gallery. This heightened status of object as subject puts a spotlight on our modern life as consumers. It puts into question the value of ownership, the ephemeral nature of material possessions, and the fleeting joy that accompanies the life-cycle of single use items. Of course, artists prior to Pop Art had used artifact objects to collage, rework old works, reuse canvases, and otherwise rework sculptures and icons. However, this new Pop Art was obsessed over the glorification of object/subject, further blending the space between commercial design, consumerism, the gallery and visual art. From my perspective, this art movement calls into discussion the sustainability of mass-production through focused attention on microcosmic examples (and often their heightened status

through scale, repetition, colorization, method or placement within a certain context). It has influenced my art in both visual and conceptual ways.

Fluxus is an artistic movement largely comprised of conceptual works or sets of instructions for performative art. In some ways, the overall structure of the thesis project is an act. I've set up a sort of framework for the drama to unfold, I've created a non-linear experience for the audience to have multiple entry points and exit points to access the underlying theme. Fluxus workbooks sometimes read more like poetry or insanity. Fluxus artists were able to push far beyond what many were comfortable calling art. It was in the formalization, in the text documents, the photos and videos of performances, and the shock value of some of the concepts that the underlying artistic magic is revealed. I appreciate the notion that an act of chaos, dereliction, insanity, danger, or craziness can be formalized and understood. Not everything in life is rosy, art mimics life, we need art to be honest, and it takes courageous acts in the face of darkness and humility in the spotlight to truly mimic the harmony of the spheres. Fluxus and other performance-based artwork opened the doors to lots of possibilities in my life. I have always enjoyed performing, even going so far as chasing a career as a performer, but until I witnessed performance art in Boston during my undergraduate years, I was not aware of the broad spectrum of possibilities for expression and communication of ideas, emotions, and concepts.

Street Art and graffiti, along with their residual relationships with streetwear, sportswear, hip-hop culture, media, and modern music all heavily converge in the visual structures of my work. The marks, styles and materials of these genres converge in my work. I use inks and paints from brands that are well known for their use in street art, such

as Montana Paints and Markers, Magic Ink Markers, Krink Ink, and other (in)famous mark-making devices such as sprayers, pens, sponge tips, traditional rollers and paint brushes. I enjoy seeing artists who work in multiple mediums with a unified theme. A highly versatile street artist should be able to work with a simple black marker on a small piece of cardboard, do a quick bomb or tag, all the way up to doing a large mural on a building or train car. Most street artists become well-known because they're prolific and relentless in their pursuit to "get up." This same mentality tends to lead the top street artists to branch out or graduate to become fine artists, commercial designers, and many view fashion and other forms as another blank canvas or wall to transform with their unique visual identity. Street artists are sort of legendary and magical in that they are in all of these different places at once, but also can't be traced and keep a low profile.

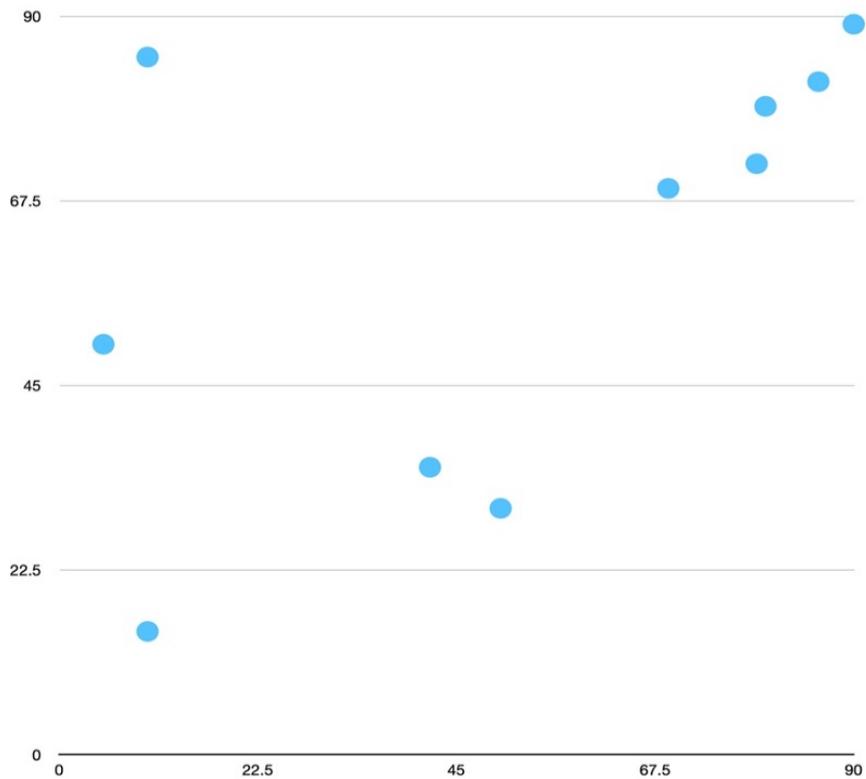
Table 1.2 A Visual Map of Influences

X Axis- Influence on VISUAL style

Y Axis-Influence on theory or underlying motivation

A Visual Map of Influences (On a Scale of 0-100)

Artist	Influence on VISUAL style	Influence on Theory or underlying motivation for my work.
Picasso	10	15
Virgil Abloh	50	30
Takashi Murakami	42	35
Warhol	5	50
Basquiat	5	50
Jeff Koons	10	85
Nigo	69	69
Damien Hirst	79	72
KAWS	86	82
Daniel Arsham	90	89
Banky	80	79



Chapter 4: Exhibition Simulation

The exhibit is set in a small but very long rectangular building inside the Thrift Shop space, about 40x16, and within the 16x20-foot, light-filled gallery space at The Gray Market in Catlett, VA. The Address is 9221 Elk Run Rd Catlett, VA 20119.

The Opening occurs on April 22, 2022 from 4-9 PM and it will be open to the public through May during normal business hours. Three of the four white walls have paintings hung. Some are framed, some are raw and shoved into things in the wall to hold them up, or taped. There are assorted elements of *The Gray Army* (see catalog) scattered throughout the gallery, on the floor, on tables, and on the window sills.

Some of the books that I drew resources, language, inspiration, and quotes from are in the room to be explored. I have also included a few small benches and chairs to sit and reflect or just to use the space. The gallery room is contrasted by the other half of the installation/building which is a thrift shop full of used stuff. Lots of vintage clothing, toys, fashion jewelry, housewares, antiques and collectibles line the split-floor layout. My rent is month to month, the entire property is currently for sale ¹, so the show/shop/gallery/installation is truly ephemeral. The entire complex used to be a cow-milking facility. It will one day be a fast-food place, a 7-11, or a little strip mall or gas

¹ <https://www.brightmlshomes.com/commercial-for-sale/9223-Elk-Run-Road-Catlett-VA-20119-309921975>

station. For now, it is the Gray Market. You could buy the entire thing, with all of the art and stuff intact, if you really want (I'd just go for the art if I were you).

When confronted with the space, the general public assumes it is a store. They are correct in a sense, but for the most part, profit is not a particular object of this place, but the interchange of memories and moments through commerce and cultural interchange. The rural setting of the gallery brings in a variety of people. It is located next to an auction house, as well as an antique mall. Other nearby businesses include an auto repair shop, veterinarian, and fire station. The building is parallel to the train tracks which run from Alexandria to Orange, VA, and beyond to Fredericksburg. Our largest industry in the town is concrete followed by agriculture. We are home to many farms and are in a riparian buffer zone.

Our community, for all of its charm, has very few gathering places. It has very few places to meet, to talk, and to shop. Many of our small shops have closed and we have a Dollar General Store that came in and replaced them. The Gray Market is a place to gather, a place to meet, and a place to have these interchanges that are so important to a sense of community.

For the Launch party (see Image before Catalog), some of the coolest vintage clothing, toys, and others nostalgic dealers and artisans will assemble to have a pop-up in front of the shop. This should create a pretty big scene, as many have large social media followings, and the locals will notice a gathering on a Friday night. It is somewhat themed toward Earth Day, so I aim to have an extremely low impact event with minimal or zero

waste. Some of the vendors focus on sustainability in their business, such as The Cozy Experience, who weaves textiles with tee-shirt and denim fabric waste. I have created a social media presence on Instagram and Depop to promote. A DJ, VJ, and light refreshments will be served. The installation will be up for the duration of May 2022. After that date, the space will transform into a gallery for other artists and artisans, with flexible event uses along with general buying, selling, and trading. I already have event proposals from other people and it is exciting to imagine the next steps.

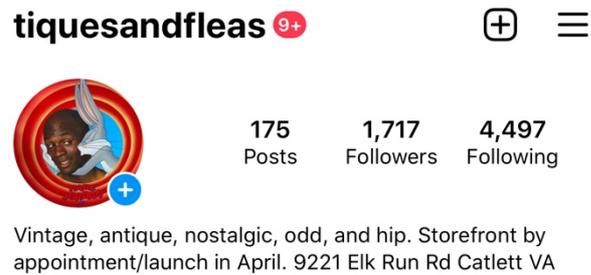


Figure 1.12- Instagram Profile

Chapter 5: Reflection

Many of the people who have been a part of my life understand that I am a musician by trade. However, for the last many years my focus has been the visual arts. I embarked on this journey for a better understanding of my art and its context within the greater artistic landscape. I sought to develop my observation skills and hand-eye coordination, and to have an open-minded interchange with other artists. I was also in search of a language or syntax to describe my complex artistic works or interwoven ideas in a clear way. I have developed enough experience in the field of music that I am really comfortable with the language used for music. I have developed an extensive vocabulary around it. I have spent the better part of my lifetime devoted to it in one way or another. As I have developed as a musician, so have I developed friendships with visual artists. I inadvertently have become a collector of my friends' art. I will admit that it is a great pleasure to have personal connections, stories, and memories attached to art in a home or collection. I have collaborated closely with visual artists in many different configurations and enterprises. In this part of the journey, I have filled that role. I am now in a phase of my work and career where there is a thin line between the categories of what I "do." I have a musical past, with an audio-visual future.

The academic community, with all of its ups and downs, is a place where I have spent much of my professional career. I have worked in many different positions based around this idea that the dissemination and convergence of knowledge and ideas are valuable. I have always worked for and with others, with just a rare stint as a private music teacher. I believe that without the academic community, I would produce fewer new ideas. I am encouraged that there is a strong desire from all generations to continue digging for knowledge, context, and understanding. I am thankful for the bright examples of artists that I know from before and during this program. The individual and group dynamics in and around the program were unique, and my cohort are all going to be rockstars. However, I do believe that without the proper structure and support, even the most ambitious and talented (perhaps ESPECIALLY the most ambitious) learners can't succeed through a program without some sense of suffering.

In some sense, that happened to my college's graduate students in a weird way. When I started this degree, my application, acceptance, catalog, and accredited degree that I was seeking was called, "MFA, Art and Visual Technology, New Media." At some point, and without a public announcement to students, our Graduate programs started to lose accreditation due to enrollment, budget, staff and what seems like a general neglect for a graduate culture within the college. Now the degree that I am getting and the actual catalog entry are different. I am now a candidate for a blanket college-wide MFA degree labeled, "MFA, Visual Art." I lost the "concentration in new media" part of it. In almost no way did that change my work or class load, but it did change how this degree made sense within the context of my background as a digital scholar. It also changed whom I was interacting

with. I am not sure if it is for the better or worse, but this new program was inclusive of all graduate students in the entire College of Visual and Performing arts. Instead of interacting with a focused group of artists with topic specialists as faculty, we were asked to interact with a diverse group of people including artists, but many who did not identify as artists. A special part of the conversations was lost. The magic was replaced with discussions about form. Professional artists who have spent their entire life teaching early career artists in one field, were given the complex task of suddenly teaching all five disciplines under a conceptual umbrella. Some homework that was given made no sense whatsoever for some of the students taking MFA in Graphic Design, Theater, etc. In my opinion, courses and faculty need to be program and topic specific to be effective and engender camaraderie. I respect the streamlining process that took place, and much of it was probably unavoidable, but I wonder how well it was communicated, what voice the students had in the process, and the transparency of the process in specific to the program that I am graduating from. No one program is perfect. I just miss my concentration being attached to the degree that I am earning. It made things clearer.

Many people going through an MFA program display all of the work or a selection of work they have done over the course of their degree program for their thesis. The best shows that I have seen have made entirely new works specific to the show, installation site or thesis exhibition. I made the decision early on to create an entirely new body of work for the thesis, but it wasn't always entirely clear what sort of art that would materialize as. My work has been in flux for a long time, and I often change styles or visual guidelines,

often coinciding with radical shifts in my personal life. Experiences, interactions, observations, as well as the collective traumas of the pandemic and political turmoil, changed our behaviors, our outlooks, our emotions, language, and the overall vibe. For a while I thought I had lost everything. For a moment, I thought I had it all.

The process of making the art has been a joy. I have made many connections and interesting images and the gathering of “supplies” via shopping at flea markets, junk shops and antique stores led to great conversations, learning moments, and intersections of culture and art. I can now connect the people I am sourcing toys, canvas, etc. from, with the art that I produce with it. It gives them a sense of joy to see something that has been ignored in their shop, given new life. At the opening, a worker from one of the antique shops came with their friend. It is nice to see the things go full circle.

In some sense, I have come full circle. I feel fairly confident that regardless of the visual style I choose to work in, and independent of the medium, now I have a strong sense of how to contextualize and explain it. I still believe that some art loses its *je ne sais quois* when we force the artist to talk about it, especially when the artist is more skilled than eloquent. I’m not entirely sure where my balance between those two is, but I’m sure different people would have very different things to say about it. Memory, after all, is a fuzzy delight we use like a drug. Sometimes it is a depressant, in the form of melancholy, sometimes it is a stimulant in the form of happiness/Serotonin release. But it is almost always twisted, marked with erasures, censure, injected with the indulgences of fantasy, and used to persuade self (and others). Memory is our source material for self-contextualization.

In some ways, my hope is to make analog representations of memory. I hope that the concretions and final layers of acrylic sealer somehow hold the memory truer than I can. I hope that my houseplants and positive contributions can outlive me. I hope my trespasses into the halls of nostalgia and my return from the deepest caves with the elixir provide a deeper meaning to the audience and that the lightness of the images is not confused with, but highlights, the fact that it was produced during one of the most trying times of my life personally and what has become known as a paradigm shifting event for all human-kind.

Once I have shown the work for a month or two to the public, I will be faced with the transition of my gallery space to new work. I can surely create more work in the same style. In fact, a few pieces were sold at the opening, and the gallery already looks incomplete. I may paint a few new paintings to replace them for now, but long term I see myself shifting roles. I'm okay with showing occasionally there, but prefer to graduate myself, so to speak. I'm excited at the prospect of the space becoming a place for artists to exhibit in a different type of gallery. It has a formal feel if it wants to, but it dresses down most of the time. People enjoy the outdoor component of the space a lot, and I plan on developing that to be more expansive and developed, without losing scope of the nature of my lease.

I have new ideas for what I will do in my next exhibition proposals, and I will be using this as an experience that pushes me even deeper, to use even more materials to explore the world and its accounts of memory and emotion. I see my visual styles going more minimal in some senses such as material, color, theme. I also see my projects

becoming a bit more formal, organized as a business, and doing larger scale projects than before. I have received a number of commissions and requests in the styles that I have developed and will continue with fine art and design work at the professional level.

While I am pushing myself to be professional in my visual art, I'd also like to continue teaching for a while because it keeps me encouraged to be a life-long learner. Studying in this program has been a wonderful reason to be a learner. I find that my students rely on me and my ability to stay current in the field of game design. I am thankful for both my teachers and my students.

I am also thankful that all good things come to an end. This act of my story is closing alongside many other chapters in my life. I liken what has happened in my life (and maybe you can relate), with a forest fire that kills all of the undergrowth in a forest, but that fire has helped boost the healthy habits and species native to the zone. It has had the effect of reducing the amount of toil in my life so that I can focus on what I perceive at any moment as actionable meaning.

I have no one to tell me no anymore. I do so much more than I can fit into this paper (without a media aide), I am capable. I believe my next biggest challenge is how to incorporate art with my community service in a more visible way.

I also seek for better solutions within the space of commercial enterprises, as time allows. But the ultimate question that has come out of this is a little less concerned about memory, and more about our lived experience in the present; it relates to our ability to observe. A big question of inquiry I am investigating is along the lines of, "How do we

objectively measure fun (without affecting our ability to have it)?" I am engaged in research and I am teaming up with subject matter experts to find out more about that.

I would like to continue to work on more publicly facing art projects such as signs, murals, games, toys and clothing. Most of these projects will be notoriously self-satisfying. I have learned how to say no.

Lastly, throughout the last two years or so, I have recorded 17 songs, which I will be releasing soon, probably under a pseudonym. I'm looking forward to having a bit of fun in my return to sonic playfulness and the search for lyrical wit. I'm enjoying the process of applying what I know about visual art towards new music videos, and hope to place an emphasis on conceptual clarity in those. I'm not sure if a phoenix comes crawling slowly out of the ashes of a fire, or if they are more likely to explode out of it with the force of a comet, but either way, they emerge proudly in their new form.



**Launch Party AND
MFA Thesis Show**

Matt Nolan
April 22, 2022
4-9 PM
The Gray Market

9221 Elk Run Rd
Catlett, VA 20119

IG@tiquesandfleas
703_986_9547

Save the date for a celebration of the launch of my first solo brick and mortar store! The Gray Market is a thrift store with (antiques and things all the way up to about the millennium), art gallery, and gathering place in picturesque Catlett, VA. The remains of an old cattle barn and dairy shed, have been converted to provide a unique space for thrifting, events, art, and catching up with friends.

To celebrate the launch of the store, we will have vendors, free food, drinks, and music. Vendors or music acts interested can still get a spot. Please text or DM for more info.

The launch of the flagship store coincides with the opening reception to my MFA Thesis Exhibition. This is my second Master's degree, but I have changed my area of study from Music to Fine art and visual art. Don't worry, I still do music. However, I have been working diligently on a series of paintings and sculptures for you all to enjoy. The show has pop art that deals with memory, how we value memories, and a new post-pandemic american otaku. Works are available to purchase by visiting the gallery or through contact online.

Figure 1.13 Launch Party

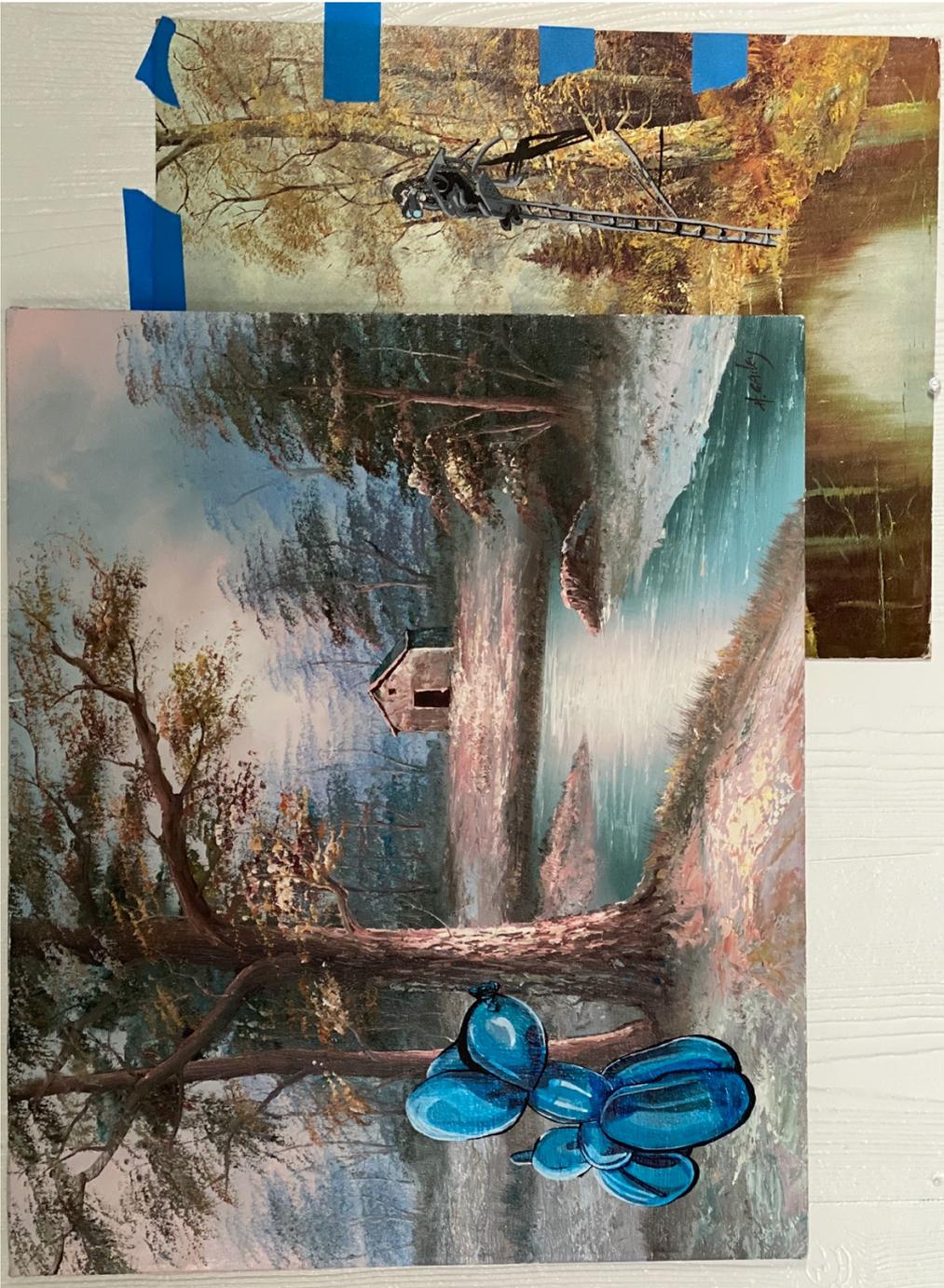
Appendix A: Catalog of Works

This is a catalog of the works included in the exhibition.

The format is: Image of the work, title, medium, dimensions, date, comments.



Watering Hole, Acrylic on canvas board, After Robert Wood, 24x18, 2021. Private collection of Chewy Lu @thecozyexperience.



Left: *Pastorale*, Acrylic on Canvas Board, After H. Gailey, 2021.

Right: *Jeff Koons in a Tree Stand*, Acrylic on board, 2021.

Jeff Koons hunts balloon animals in the wild. I find the idea hilarious that he actually just goes out into nature with binoculars and finds them. It takes masterful tracking skills, plenty of planning in the off-season, all of the right permits, just to get a glimpse at one of these beauties. Of course, it costs a fortune to get one stuffed and taxidermized, but they can sell for millions of dollars once it is all said and done. Mr. Koons has cornered the market on the licensure as well as the weaponry and local guides to secure such a trophy.



[From previous page] *The Art Mill*, Acrylic on Canvas Board, After Robert Wood, 2021.

This painting is a reflection and question on the value of the factory atelier¹ process for highly successful artists. It uses the parody of the balloon dog sculpture being made by a deified robot under duress from the buyer to point out some of the fundamental ridiculousness of the art market. The juxtaposition over an old grain mill adds to the question of value. One can't eat a giant metal sculpture; we can't hold an NFT. We have gotten so far removed from shelter, clothing/fire/warmth, food that it is hard to imagine all of the things we have that we don't actually need.

¹ Atelier refers to a workshop used by an artist. In this era, some artists use a massive and diverse network of interns, specialists, consultants, movers, staffers, and factories to produce their art. The notion of a single workshop artist is rare but exists. The scaling to a factory level is a late twentieth century phenomenon, following closely or even borrowing languages and efficiencies from industrial processes. See Warhol's "Factory" where prints were cranked out in an efficient manner. Defects of mass production such as registration offset sometimes became features of the works. Artists started working with Industry as the medium, not the means.



***Lighthouse*, Acrylic on canvas, after Rick Mundy, 24 x 24, 2022.**

Commission/Private Collection of @Dallas4president, Manassas, VA.

The albino balloon dog sculpture gets its rare colorless coat from industrial waste combined with its diet of sand dollars, sea oats and pure sunshine.



Eine Besondere Überraschung, Acrylic on wood, 12 inches round, After P.Braun, 2022.

A special surprise almost always comes with strings attached.



Über die Schwere der Kunst, Acrylic on Canvas, After Carver, 2021. Private Collection of Fernando Martinez @sosick180.

This painting portrays the isolation of the pandemic with the isolationism and silo effects of intellectual property and exclusivity in modern art. Many can only afford a

picture, or a picture of a picture of certain artists' work, when ironically the artist may have started as a free-for-all street artist. In an effort to curtail this, massive corporate structures and manufacturers are set up to provide affordable options. Their shirts wind up in Salvation Army, dumped into bales on the third world, or worse they end up in landfills. They have collaborated with brands that did their friends dirty. They have collaborated with literally everyone. They have run out of storage space in their workshops and warehouses, so they needed to make it fly, take it to space¹. Companies are pushing artists, the market shapes paradigms, which may or may not be good. Depends on whether you like hot air balloons. I'm a fan.

¹ The artist KAWS sent a sculpture of his famous companion character to space. They also made a hot air balloon ride experience, which users could pay in crypto for, and would be issued a unique certificate. It is only a matter of time until space travel is combined with this artist branded, pre-in-after-flight care package.



Vitamin/Friend/Self, Acrylic and Ink on Canvas, 12x12, 2020

Sometimes, self-love is the best medicine. In this classic image, Fred Flintstone hugs himself in life-sized vitamin form. Most people from my generation connect with this image. The Flintstone vitamins were a huge part of our childhoods. Behind the characters, the tag, “FEED” lingers. In the early days of the pandemic, I pushed pretty hard towards an online print-on-demand clothing line, which was both time-consuming

and an energy suck. After learning my lessons through trial and error, with a few nice successes along the way, I pivoted to a more sustainable approach to clothing. Incorporating some memories and echoes of my previous work is a good reminder of how far I have come and how far I have yet to go.

This piece and one or two others in this series have also been minted into NFTs using OpenSea. I plan on using the NFT as a chain of custody or ownership of the pieces, to track the painting's ownership. In the future, you ought to be able to see a chain of ownership, starting with me, passing to the buyer, the next owner, with all of that information stored on the blockchain to verify that ownership lineage if there is ever a question or inquiry on provenance. One can use this technology to statistically analyze the gain or loss in value of the artwork over time, which could inform art investment strategies, or reveal hidden needs or wants from investors that fine art may not be addressing.



One, Tahooo, THRRRREEE, Acrylic, marker, ink, and highlighter on canvas board, 9x12, 2020.

Also an NFT...*How many Licks Does it Take to Get to the Chocolate Candy Center of this NFT?*



An Evaluation of Memory, Portal. Acrylic and Ink on Canvas, 16x 22, 2020.



Home for the Holidays, Acrylic and ink on canvas, 16 x 24, Fall 2020.

This is a reflection on the study-at-home phenomenon during the pandemic. An entire generation may have psychological baggage as a result of isolation during key

developmental phases of their life. Normal, “A” students failed online. Educators and school systems were not prepared, but the students were punished for it. Many people also had breakdowns in personal, professional, or interpersonal relationships during the pandemic, as demonstrated by “the great resignation.”¹

This piece was selected for and shown in an adjudicated show, “40 [artists]under 40”, at the Shenandoah Valley Arts Center in Waynesboro, VA, April-May 2021. ²

¹ Record numbers of people resigned from their jobs in 2021.

<https://www.thehrdigest.com/the-great-resignation-of-2021-explained/>

Record rates of divorce and break-up during the pandemic

<https://www.stewartslaw.com/news/why-have-divorce-rates-increased-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

² <http://www.svacart.com>



Only Fans, Acrylic on canvas. 16 x 9, 2021.



Elmer F.U.D. (Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt), Acrylic and phosphorescent green on Canvas, 24 x 16, 2021. Elmer sells all of his cryptocurrencies out of fear, just before the market exploded in growth (then quickly retracted in the first half of 2021). The screens glow in the dark, UV or black light.



Scarface Study, Acrylic Ink on Canvas, 12 x 12, 2020. This is a black and white study for a full color, larger scale commission. I like the quality of the rendering. Private collection of Joshua James @ JJVinty.



Scarface, Acrylic, Ink, and Phosphorescent green on canvas, 24 x 24, 2020. Commission for/ Private Collection of Joshua James @JJVinty.

A full color rendering of Scarface the rapper, with phosphorescent green glow paint in the background. His chain spells out “Houston”.



BO Knows Vinty, Baseball cards, magazine covers, packing tape, stickers, acrylic, and Ink on MDO board, 36 x 24, 2022. Private Collection of Joshua James @JJVinty.

Bo Jackson played football and baseball and was a real GOAT. JJVinty and I both have a massive admiration for the man and his achievements. This painting was commissioned

and it incorporates colors from his college years at Auburn, and his professional career with the Kansas City Royals, and the Raiders football team.



The Gray Army, Assorted Toys, Cookie Jars, bubble bath bottles, dog toys, piggy banks, lamps, and figurines overpainted in Grayscale and silver tones with acrylic and ink. Approximately 100 pieces created in total, all will be signed/initialed on the bottom or similar spot before being sold, various dimensions from 2 inches tall to 18 inches tall, 2019-2022.



**The Disappearance of the Rural Landscape, NFT #1, Digital Photo and painting
2020**

This NFT will fund an actual mural on a silo. The owner of the NFT will have first peek.



**The Disappearance of the Rural Landscape, NFT #2, Digital Photo and painting
2020**

This is another NFT to physical painting project. The purchase of the digital work will fund the painting of a mural to match this concept on a silo in rural Virginia.

End Notes and Works Cited

- ⁱ Medina and Schneider, IMF Working Paper, Shadow Economies Around the World: What Did We Learn Over the Last 20 Years? 2018
- ⁱⁱ www.fauquierfoodbank.org
- ⁱⁱⁱ Greywater or Gray water is all water from a building except from the toilets.
- ^{iv} Michael Reynolds- Earthship Bioteecture - www.earthshipglobal.com
- ^v “Color directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposively, to cause vibrations in the soul.” Wassily Kandinsky
- ^{vi} Uniqlo is an online company who provides affordable, mass-produced clothing and items with designs by famous artists. While there is nothing inherently wrong with Uniqlo, it is an extension of the mega-atelier or artist as monolithic commercial entity. We are one step removed from Walmart Banksy prints and Target Kaws Dolls. Things are weirdly coming full circle. Large art auction houses are selling anything or everything that has a buzz. Yes, I am using it as a verb here.
- ^{vii} Superflat is a method employed by Takashi Murakami and the style is indicated by bold colors with no evidence of brush strokes, or human touch. See Influences and historical context for more information on Superflat.

^{viii} This is especially true as we age. Normally, we associate nostalgia with happiness and warm memories. There are many sentences that we can use to describe the sadness or longing that accompanies nostalgia, but perhaps the Portuguese word Saudade comes close. A longing for or deep emotional state over something that one loves. Saudade implies or specifically incorporates a musical mood or poetic mood as well.

^{ix} Brandi Jones, “Theories About Age Regression and Trauma”.

^x Tommy Beer, “EBay Reports Increase of 4 Million Trading Cards sold in 2020”.

^{xi} Otaku is Japanese nerd-culture

^{xii} Thomas Stanley, “It’s After the End of the World Already (Didn’t You Know That Stupid?”). Book Release talk, George Mason University, 2013.

^{xiii} *Happy Choppers*, and *Study for Happy Choppers*, Banksy, Spray paint on found framed oil painting, 2003.

^{xiv} Mediterranean Sea View, Banksy, reworked oil paintings in artist’s frames, in three parts, 2017.

^{xv} *Dismaland*, Banksy, August 21-September 27, 2015

^{xvi} www.pestcontroloffice.com

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- [1] Medina, Leandro and Friedrich Schneider, *Shadow Economies Around the World: What Did We Learn Over the Last 20 Years?* International Monetary Fund Working Paper, 2018. Accessed electronically April 11, 2022.
- [2] Stanley, Thomas “It’s After the End of the World Already (Didn’t You Know That Stupid?” Book Release talk, George Mason University, 2013.
- [3] Kandinsky, Wassily, and Michael Sadler, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. **London: Tate, 2006**. Print.
- [4] Jones, Brandi “Theories About Age Regression and Trauma”. Verywell Health, 24 January 2022, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/age-regression-therapy-5212676>.
- [5] Beer, Tommy “EBay Reports Increase of 4 Million Trading Cards sold in 2020”. Forbes.com, 11 February 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2021/02/11/ebay-reports-increase-of-4-million-trading-cards-sold-in-2020/> .

Biography

Matt Nolan graduated from Robinson Secondary School, Fairfax, Virginia, in 2001. He received his Bachelor of Music in Music Synthesis from Berklee College of Music in 2007. While earning his degree, Matt developed extensive experience in the music industry. At this time, he was a member of a development team that created and presented ground-breaking software. He was then hired full-time as an administrative faculty, and additionally, as adjunct professor at George Mason University in 2009. He is a co-founder of the computer game design BFA program at George Mason University. He received his Master of Music in Music Composition from George Mason University in 2012. He has been an assistant professor at Mason since 2014. Matt has additional experience as a freelance artist, musician, game designer and consultant.