Untitled and Unsung

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In one of her most famous paintings, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) painted herself as two people that were separate but connected by a vein that ran between their hearts. Kahlo located the origin of the *Two Fridas* (1939) (Fig.1) in a childhood game where she would breathe on a windowpane, draw a door and enter a world where she met an imaginary girl. The *Two Fridas* were the underpinnings of all her work—she painted her afflictions, desires, trappings, and sentimentalities onto this “other,” which was inextricably linked to her own experiences. The imaginary girl and the window were with Kahlo throughout her entire life.¹

Like Kahlo, I paint images taken from my experiences at a window. When I was fifteen, my bed was under a window that was slung above my neighbor’s rose garden. My neighbor was an eighty-year-old woman who had a hoarse smoker’s voice, three dead husbands, and a porch she sat on at night. There, she spoke with Ralph, her favorite dead husband, and smoked. Her voice drifted through my window and lulled me to sleep. On Saturday mornings, she came to my window and woke me but she was so short that when I looked up from my bed, I saw only the curls of her silver hair like a half-moon floating above the sill.

This experience as well as many others like it, has carried over into my work. I use the formal qualities of the window and its potential for metaphor in order to transform it. My use of the window is an attempt to go beyond my own memory and its locale, to separate that memory from its original meaning so it can exist as something entirely new. To this day, the stories I hear, the people I meet, the personalities that capture me, and the places I encounter them are transformed into

¹ Zamora, Martha. *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish*, pg. 22
something fabricated—an imagined place where conflicting elements between reality and memory, anonymity and recognition, and humor and distress come together in the medium of painting.

Instead of looking out of the window like most teenagers, I went to the window to listen. Today, in a similar way, I go to the canvas to listen; painting itself is a way of listening. What I have heard and listened to, I record on canvas, the window to my imagination. In turn, I listen to the image as it develops, reacting and editing the different ideas that come up in the process of painting.

My work is about the state of listening and the act of transformation: I make everything into a window, through image, material, or shape. I use the window and transparent surfaces such as glass and tracing paper because I love all things fragile yet malleable enough to survive. The stories and the characters I am interested in have this quality—somewhat doomed, yet redeemable through humor or some other element. The images I paint are mainly portraits, but they change into communities, landscapes, and sandwiches, among other things. They are meant to be still lifes, portraits or landscapes that are alternately funny, sanguine, oppressive, imbalanced and serene.

My work also investigates the curtain, the ledge and the window and their hold on artists throughout the centuries. The use of the curtain and the support of the window ledge were used frequently through the Renaissance, markedly by Titian (c. 1488-1576). Other Renaissance artists such as Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), Roger Van der Weyden (c. 1399-1464) and Jan Gossaert (c. 1478-1532) used the ledge as a platform to display a person's wealth and education. By contrast,
during the 1900’s Henri Matisse (c. 1869-1954) used the window as a metaphor, and in the 1970’s, Mary Heilmann (b. 1940) decided to turn towards the window and ledge and balance it between minimalism and abstraction. In all these paintings, the artists used the frame of the window, ledge or curtain to reveal, conceal, or transform their subject.

In Titian’s *The Venus of Urbino* (1538)(Fig.2), a curtain shields Venus from the outside world shown on the right-hand side of the canvas. On the left-hand side, the curtain reveals her to the viewer. The curtain serves as a theatrical device, framing the painting as if it were a stage and turning the viewer into a participant. The curtain cordons off the world and holds the viewer within the world of Venus. At the back of the painting, a small window directs the viewer’s gaze to two maids rummaging through Venus’s marriage chest. In a symbolic gesture, Venus holds a cluster of flowers in her right hand while her left hand frames her vulva. She looks directly at the viewer with a gaze of recognition. Her head does not rest on the pillow, but seems to be in the middle of beckoning her viewer to lie by her side. By painting the curtain as a framing device, Titian deliberately draws the viewer into the scene, as if he/she was the object of Venus’s affection.

Other Renaissance Italian and Dutch painters used the lower edge of a window as well to highlight the character and class of the sitter. Some ledges were made as backdrops for texts or dates, while others were supports for hands, arms and accoutrements. In Jan Gossaert’s *Portrait of Man Holding a Glove* (1530-32)(Fig.6), the arm of the man spills over the ledge towards the viewer. It is as if the conversation he has had with the viewer is over, and he is collecting his gloves while
listening to the last bits of conversation. In Portrait of a Man (Count Lupi) (1560-5)(Fig.7), by Giovani Moroni, the ledge is made of marble in order to reveal the class and education of the sitter. His dress and posture are impeccable, and the text on the granite ledge testifies to his illuminated mind. These ledges produced a way to display wealth, manner, and education through gloves, dress, and posture. Ledges were painted to construct a portrait and narrative of the sitter.

By contrast, Matisse's French Window at Collioure (1914)(fig.9) uses the window in a more metaphorical way. In this painting, the window opens onto a blackened void and is unlike most of his richly patterned windows; it pushes towards a darker interpretation.2 The edges of the window are framed by black demarcations that recall curtains or shutters, although it is not entirely clear. This shadowy window caught the attention of poet Louis Aragon in the following manner:

“When we note its date, 1914, and it must have been in summer, this mystery makes me shiver. Whether or not the painter intended it, and whatever that French window once opened onto, it remains open. It was onto war then, and it’s still onto events to come that will plunge the lives of unknown men and women into darkness, the black future, the inhabited silence of the future.”3

Matisse uses the black as a visual metaphor that both recedes and advances towards the viewer in a rush: he turns the minimal space between the shutters into a void that makes it hard to tell whether the window is looking out onto the world or into a vacant house. As a result, the painting can be interpreted as a piece about absence. Matisse does not fill the window with his usual vibrant street life and

2 Myers, Terry. Save the Last Dance for Me, pg. 70.
3 Myers, Terry. Save the Last Dance for Me, Pg. 71. Quoted Hilary Spurling who quoted Louis Aragon.
flowers, but instead he empties out the frame of most of its color and leaves a feeling of foreboding. He turns the window into a symbol of tension and fear.

In a similar fashion, *Save the Last Dance for Me*, (1979)(fig.10), Heilmann uses window-like shapes to distance image from their meaning. The viewer is unsure at what he/she is looking. Heilmann also draws from memory, reviving minimalist tradition with emotion. Three pink rectangles that float in a black background recede in size as they move towards the right hand side of the painting. The first assumption is the black has been painted over the pink. But then it becomes noticeable some pink paint has spilled on the black, as if the pink is freshly applied. It makes the pink rectangles look as if they are in mid-action, sliding towards the back of the painting. Heilmann does this by making the edges of the “windows” uneven. They slip, lose their shape, and recede towards an invisible horizon line.

But unlike Titian, who gives the viewer clues to the story, Heilmann disassociates the objects from their meaning by painting shapes that do not hold onto one concrete meaning. The viewer questions whether the rectangles are windows, ledges or lights that spin around a dance floor. Heilmann makes the viewer find his/her own code of meaning.

Each of these artists use the frame of the window as investigative territory—making the frame itself as important as what is inside it. This is where I position my work. I am interested in the formal qualities of the window, but also the

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4 Myers, Terry. *Save the Last Dance For Me*. Pg.7.
slippage of meaning—creating the potential for the viewer to find his or her own code in a painting.

In order to engage formal qualities of the window and varied metaphorical interpretations, I am remembering the time when many of my friends would come to my window and shake me awake in the middle of the night. In the anonymity of the darkness and the separation the curtain afforded us, they began to tell me everything on their minds. I felt as if I were the town priest. I was left with the impression not necessarily of the individuals who befriended me, but of the window, with its bevy of arms and hairdos resting on the sill. These images in my paintings merge with backdrops so thoroughly that figures sink into their supports, arms turn into still lifes, and windowsills become the landscape of my yard I had to cross in order to get to school—a bright green suburban demarcation that transforms itself into a window ledge.

In *Blue Arm* (2009) (Fig. 11) and *Tied* (2009) (Fig. 12), it is not exactly clear what the hands are doing, why the smoke or cloud has covered the action, why one arm is blue, or whether the ledges are window frames or landscapes. My use of the formal elements of the window, curtain and ledge put them in a location that seems familiar but has never been visited. The images create a tension between being funny, disquieting, awkward, and harmonious. Like Titian, I frame the scene with curtains in order to conceal and provide some dramatic theater. In the same way that Matisse uses his window as a metaphor, I use the arms, legs and other objects to give an abstract, emotional tenor of joy or foreboding to the image through color. Like Mary Heilmann, I divorce the meaning from my original experience by using
images that do not give a lot of information and provide space for the viewer’s interpretations.

A second series represented in this thesis originates in found images from newspapers, and uses the formal quality of the frames and columns of the newspaper. For example, I collect images of CEO’s pressing their palms together, a praying gesture that seems to say that they have listened carefully to what was said and know what their superior mind plans to do. This gesture can also be seen in the window painting in Renaissance artist Dieric Bout’s _Portrait of Man, Fragment_ (1470)(fig.13). I further transform the CEO in _Men Who Pray (2009)_(fig.14), by giving him unrecognizable hair and lips. His gesture becomes highlighted, humorous, his role questionable, and his supposed words even more curious. This also completes my act of listening because it as if the CEO has come to my window with something to say and I am hearing him out.

With each of these works, I love what is problematic. Ultimately, what I listen for in everything and what I seek in painting is how to find elegance in awkwardness, peace in imbalanced compositions, and humor in not-so-funny situations. Frida Kahlo suffered most of her life from a terrible crash when she was sixteen. She had to go through many operations, often recovering in bed for months at a time. During these long recuperations, she often summoned her imaginary twin to her window, where they would laugh silently together.\(^5\) I shared a similar experience with the people who came to my window. This is why I waited at my window when I was younger and why I have been a listener all my life: the act of

\(^5\) Fuentes, Carlos. _Diary of Frida Kahlo_. Pg. 12
listening takes you away from yourself. I could tell these stories that I have collected, but I would rather stand in front of my canvas and listen.
Figure 1: Frida Kahlo, *Two Fridas*, 1939.
Figure 2: Titian, *The Venus of Urbino*, 1538.
From left to right:

Figure 4: Giovannii Bellini, *The Doge Leonardo Loredan*, 1501-4.

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Figure 8: Alvise Vivarini, *Portrait of a Man*, 1490.

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6 Hockney, David. *Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. Pg. 80-1. All portraits on this page were taken from images in this book. The portraits are the collection of the National Gallery of Art, London.
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