

Terrible Dreams

By

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Submitted to the Board of Painting and Drawing

School of Art and Design

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

May 2020

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In my work, I want to illustrate how pain and sorrow can abstract us from reality. As life goes on, we tend to ignore physical and mental pain by using distractions and masking. I believe that “masking” behind idealized versions of ourselves is a part of how we cope with pain and emotions. My work reflects my own experiences with tragic events and my response to death and depression.

Masking is a type of human behavior that binds us to moral rules and maintains social functions. It helps us to cope in life by helping us to “forget” our unpleasant experiences and feelings. Sigmund Freud’s theory of repressed emotion discusses repressed memories, the idea of “a second self”, and how we have defense mechanisms that helps us to protect ourselves and our self-image. His concept of unconsciousness contains basic instinctual drives such as sexuality, aggressiveness, self-destruction, traumatic memories, unfulfilled wishes, childhood fantasies, thoughts and feelings. As much as I wish to forget my unpleasant experiences, I am eager to pursue my work in response to the tragic events and in search for my own second self.

Death of a Friend

In July 2019, my friend Andrew hanged himself in his room. The last time I saw him was at Walgreens, Tarrytown. He was trying to get a late-night dinner at McDonalds. He told me that he had been hospitalized a few times after high school. He was suffering from severe depression and had to come back home from college. I couldn’t believe depression would be an issue for a person as smart and bright as him. During the conversation, he mentioned that he was getting better and he was looking forward to life. I was devastated when I heard the news of his death. I wish I could have been there for him.

In light of Andrew's death, I started to reflect on my own emotions and habits. I can still vividly remember the day that I felt that things would be better if I weren't alive. It's often inevitable for me to become self-destructive during stages of depression. These thoughts haunt me like an invisible beast that threatens to swallow me at any time during this process. I often wish I could sharpen an invisible knife to kill this beast.

Interests in Tragedy, Grief and Masking

I can't help myself from falling in love with tragic stories. I find that a good tragic story can lead to a close empathetic connection between the characters and the viewer. When viewing stories like this, I feel like I am the one experiencing the tragedy, misery, and pain. The feeling of "I could be him/her" exhibits an emotional connection between the viewer and the story. It often triggers the most sensitive part of the viewer's emotions, often leading to self-reflection of loss and grief in one's own life.

This connection through empathy is important to my work. I am using imaginary characters to participate in fragmented dream spaces to express my feelings about death and tragedy. I use my dreams and nightmares as references in my *Terrible Dream* series. I find dreams fascinating because they can expose subconscious emotional expressions and experiences through a scene that sometimes makes no sense at all. I would record my dreams in a short paragraph to summarize the subject matter, specific objects, and emotional moments. I then would try to analyze the scattered memories that I had left of the dream. In *Terrible Dream I*, I see the characters in my painting themselves as a reflection that reveals my anxiety, helplessness, fear of death, and my inability to have my own agency.

I often bounce back and forth from using reference photos and my imagination as my main reference sources for my paintings. In *Terrible Dream and Me and Your Stomach*, a character tries to put a tiny band-aid on a body that is falling apart and filled with fungi and pieces of machinery. It all started with a sketch of a figure hugging a body. In this painting, I am trying to portray a sense of the arm almost touching the body while hovering in mid-air. The quality and the tension of this action draws the viewer to interpret the gesture in their own way.

The process of this painting involves spontaneous thought processes and making connections between different fragmented memories, ideas and subjects. The constant battle between the canvas and the artist is where all arguments and ideas clash and evolve. Painting is alive during this process; it will construct and self-deconstruct. The process of a painting and its subject matter constantly evolves throughout this conversation. I often use automatic drawing and doodling as a tool to start my works. It is a way to react and respond to existing marks. The unpredictability and spontaneity create harmony and synthesis between layers and marks for me. Using this method helps me to relax, have fun, and not restrict myself to a perfect painting ideal. Jane Jacob once said,

“There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder, and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served.”

what I took away from this is that life is a path full of unpredictability, where there is no such thing as a perfect plan for the future. There is no such thing as a perfect painting. Its imperfectness makes it interesting to look at and meaningful. By allowing oneself to loosen up during the painting process and accept imperfections, one allows thoughts, feelings and impulses that would normally be restricted into the work. As my senior mentor says, “Make a bad painting!”



(Untitled, Tetsuya Ishida, Acrylic on canvas)

Discovering Tetsuya Ishida's painting, *Untitled*, shocked me. I could not believe a painting that I feel so able to connect emotionally towards could exist. His idea of painting “self-portraits of others” critiques social identity, the human condition, and gives a glimpse into the modern psyche by representing figures meant to express social issues. He would paint his work with obsessively fine detail. His paintings have a quality that describes the relationship between humans and objects and reflects the dire living conditions of modern Japan.

Tetsuya Ishida successfully painted a “mirror” to reflect the viewer. I can connect and empathize with the insignificant, mundane and miserable half-human half-machine beings that he describes in his paintings. To me, he is telling us that we are just like one of these characters in his paintings.

I am interested in establishing an emotional connection through allowing the viewer to make discoveries in my unknown spaces. Mark Rothko is an artist that influences me in this way. His work contains unique characteristics and provokes unique expressions, working almost like a reflection. His paintings are composed of several shapes of color in simple constructions. His paintings invite me to reflect and have a conversation with myself about how I feel about the compositions. Often I find myself just wanting to stay in front of his paintings since they open up a self-revealing and reflecting process.

Emotional Connection through Uncertainty

Uncertainty creates beauty. I would never know for sure what the end product of my works looks like or feels like. This opens a door of experimentation and expecting unexpected results. Sometimes the meaning of a painting comes only when the viewer finds one. Dana Schutz explains how a painting's meaning can evolve through time.

“I think paintings are special because they can turn off. They are different every time. They are different with every viewer; they are different even with yourself when you look at them at different times and different places and I think they often say more about us than they do about them.”

I believe a painting can carry ideas and remain relevant throughout different times and for different people. I want my paintings to reveal things about each viewer.

Conclusion

These works of mine were made as an attempt to find my second-self. I want to explore my own unconscious mind through my subjects and my painting processes and to make my viewers feel free to feel and interpret my works however they find relevant.

Citation:

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Figure 1 "Terrible Dream; Something is Wrong With me" Oil on canvas, 2020



Figure 2 "Untitled" Oil on Canvas, 2020



Figure 3 "Terrible Dream I" Acrylic on Linen, 2020



Figure 4 "Untitled" Oil on Linen, 2020



Figure 5 "Normative Statement I" Monoprint on BFK, 2020



Figure 6 "Terrible Dream II" Oil on Canvas, 2020



Figure 7 "Self-Cannibalism" Monoprint on BFK, 2020



Figure 8 "Untitled" Linocut on BFK, 2020

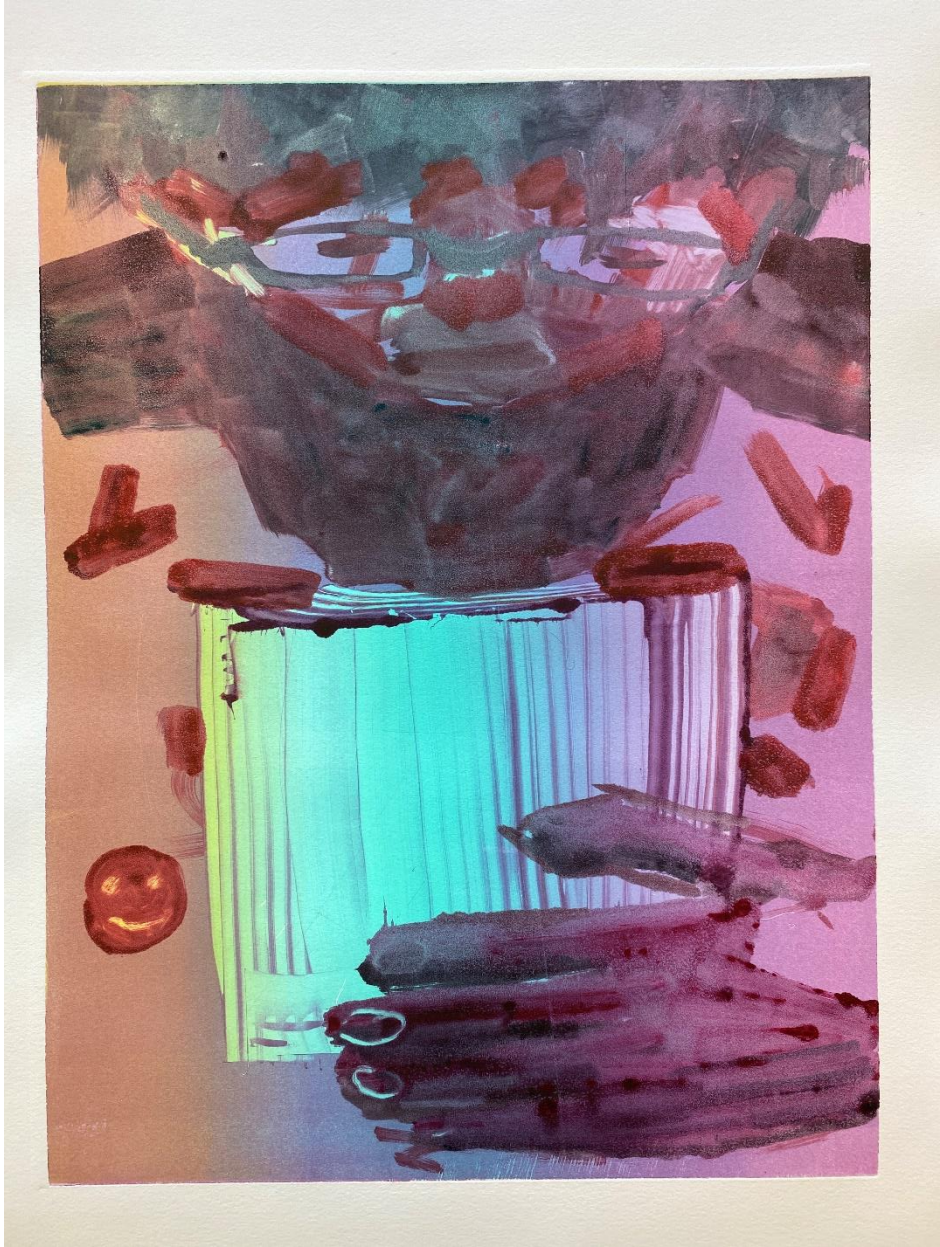


Figure 9 "Untitled" Monoprint on BFK, 2020

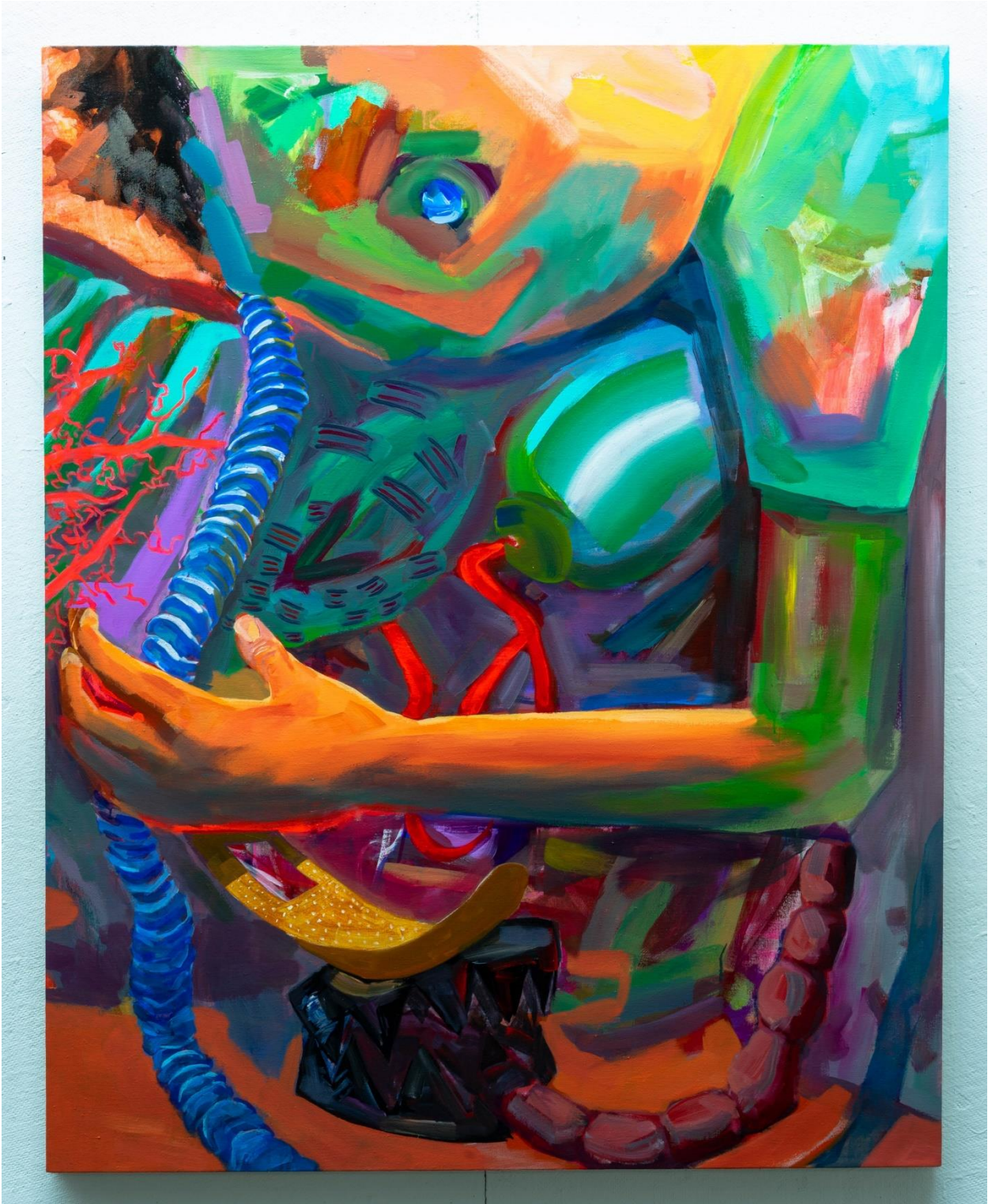


Figure 10 "Me and Your Stomach" Acrylic on Linen, 2020