

As a painter, I use a playful attitude to tackle themes of mental illness, such as anxiety, eating disorders, and dreams becoming memories within my work. I am particularly interested in how memory is affected by mental illness and realization of one's own (queer) identity. Moreso, this work celebrates identities and concepts of humor and joy itself, especially pertaining to these themes and presenting things like food in ways to share laughter and color in a way that is accessible for all, but particularly aimed at a younger audience. In fact, I could see this body of work translating well into children's literature. Joy and nonsense are coping mechanisms, expressed through illustration, optimistic and bright color choices through an unexpected, almost rainbowed "gallows humor" in depictions of stressful or perilous situations.

As an artist with an anxiety disorder who desires openness to reduce stigma, it feels natural to express this by creating atmospheres of unsettled discomfort or chaotic overstimulation, yet with an overtone of exuberant joy and optimism as my coping mechanism. This approach results in overstuffing the composition of many pieces of many mixed mediums like colored pencils, markers, watercolors, acrylics, oils, and collaged paper. The anxiety is a joining thread that runs through all my work like a potent virus infecting a blooming magnolia tree. It is the driving force and function of much of my work and especially tends to be felt throughout food-themed pieces, particularly in *Weed Eater* or *Birdsgiving*. Overabundance and overindulgence are major themes within my work, primarily pertaining to food, personality, and patterning, manifesting within panic-stricken compositions. Lavish scenes depicted in towering grocery stores or dinner plates piled high with unfathomable roasts are both seen in mixed media pieces like *Birdsgiving* (bottom right) or *Grocery Boy* (above right).

Food is another recurring motif that packs a punch. In the beginning of my explorations of my thesis, food was a natural starting point, especially



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with its direct ties to body image and viewing oneself through a distorted lens, leading to wild results. Early on, digital collage became more than just a preparation method for my larger paintings, but as a means of making finished pieces, resulting in works like *Mmm Poster* (following page, on right), *Club Advertisement*, and others. I use food as a device for increasing the element of nonsensical fantasy, as **uncanny food** is quick to make a scene seem “other” or alien. This is the main idea behind my



collaged zine *Meats and Wildlife*, which mashes up wildlife photography with vintage cookbook vernacular and imagery. (seen above) These feelings of otherworldliness play the important role of capturing a few key feelings related to my anxiety but not entirely dependent on it: 1) a desire to escape the common world, and 2) a need to express what it feels like to dissociate from your surroundings and have panic or anxiety in a situation that might appear fairly calm or regular at first. This dissociation is connected to feelings of the uncanny, which Freud has defined loosely as when something that should be familiar is slightly off or strangely unfamiliar. Using food to display that dissociation seems to be hugely universally effective, as every human alive that can eat can understand when a food looks off or wrong. I'm particularly intrigued by foods that oscillate between appetizing and repulsive, like cooking show fails or irregular food memes, as even

the worst of foods seems to spark desire and vaguely exemplify decadence that simultaneously repel and invite viewers to look and feast. Visually, this translates to functioning as a colorful visual device to direct the viewer throughout each piece, with depictions of greasy wads, to my sculptures of literal “food dupes”, such as my Booklava altered-book project (consisting of layered paper brushed with paint and honey, then baked for 20 minutes at 300 degrees). When food is in the picture, human nature pulls viewers back in for a second look at terrible, beautiful temptations.

“Improper” depictions of food, or food associated with danger, **ties together more figurative pieces about body image**, such as the *Goo Portrait*, to more illustrative perilous pieces like *Pool Day*, because ideas of unhealthy or distorted bodies AND feelings of fear about food both reflect ideologies of eating disorders, a type of mental illness I’ve struggled with ever since I was a young and impressionable teen. I explored this specific fear through the previously discussed means of digital collage of found and original images, but mainly through traditional drawings and paintings, which felt the most honest and authentic way to express my vulnerabilities.

In many pieces containing food, I have rendered it to seem sickly poisonous, especially with unnatural and inedible colors to depict such foods. This is reflected especially in *Soggy Subway*, with bits of shrimp and rice floating through a train car filled with tears, or the *Pool Day* piece (right), food is exactly where it shouldn’t be, swelling around living creatures and their boiling soup-filled swimming pool. Spicy flavors simmering amongst rippling patterns suggest an element of danger lurking beneath the surface this unassumingly sweet pool-day scene. The bursting volcano in the background serves as visual metaphor for the doom of the pool patrons, directly connecting and emphasizing the juxtaposition of the characters and foods in a fantasy world .

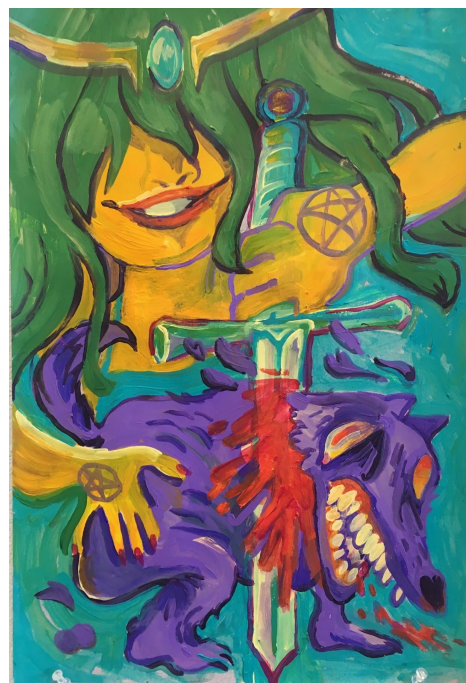
Despite much of the doom and gloom underlying much of my work, some critics find these ideas surprising, because the idea of celebration, and/or whimsicality seem to largely eclipse those shadowy themes. The brightness and high saturation of colors in much, if not all of the work, harkens back to the festivity of a kid’s birthday party, cartoon, or toy store--- all situations that invoke fun and happiness. Even more so along these lines, my packed compositions full of mysteries to uncover are



reminiscent of a MAD Magazine comic or Richard Scarry book illustration. We see such whimsicality especially in the mural entitled “SK80s”, whose playful color scheme, lackadaisical characters, and overall massive scale embrace the subject of rollerskating in a fantastical environment, one with its own rules of time and space, and a dreaminess that can be felt throughout much of the other works.

Another central theme I chose to utilize is that of family and domestic life. As someone with a fair amount of childhood trauma that ultimately caused the mental health struggles I deal with today, I found hope and health in making work about it. Connecting it back to the previous paragraph, I began with a piece using food as the cultural foundation that allows viewers to recognize an atypical rendition of American family during suppertime, with the large colored pencil and collage piece, *Birdsgiving*. Anyone familiar with the idea of a forced gathering at the table for a lavishly prepared and vaguely healthy (or wildly decadent) meal as cooked by a matriarchal figure can understand the situation depicted at its core before attempting to digest the rest of the chaos within the nonsensical scene of swollen fowl viewed from a “birds-eye view” surrounded by grocery-hell wallpaper. This also connects the afflicted piece with the recurring theme of domesticity and the unstable household as the mother figure is of a vaguely threatening nature, the largest and most prominent on the page and highlighted thusly as being the one in power, with the other bird-figures maliciously gleeful or miserable. The bird figure comes back in the all-markers piece *Kindergarten 1 (Suddenly Beef)*, a distorted and dreamlike take on a photo taken on my first day of kindergarten. Thought my mother is the one taking the photo, her omnipresence is reinstated by her appearance as the bird in the backseat of the waiting four-door car.

Using this piece as a jumping-off point, I continued to characterize a motherly-type figure as a malicious bird, sneaking her into pieces such as *Kindergarten 1*, or ambiguously celebratory in the watercolor *Free The Queen*. Such depictions helped me characterize my mother throughout my childhood as an omnipotent and inescapable force causing destruction in my life, and led me to outright depicting her finally as a humanoid that’s still rather beastly in the larger painting. Playing up her scale as well as cramming the composition full of solidly-painted chunky furniture makes the dilemma of the “protagonist” (smaller figure



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at the bottom through whom I channeled my viewpoint) feel insurmountable and hugely hopeless, in spite of a playful attitude in my choices of bright saturated colors and cartoonish drawing style.

The distortion of time and space as experienced when dreaming, or even after a nap when awake and feeling the haze of sleep inertia, is the type of mood and atmosphere many of my pieces strive to achieve, like the previously mentioned *Kindergarten 1*. Through bizarre depictions of friendly and approachable cartoonish characters in recognizable postures like cutting/slicing/swallowing/hiding/crying, such as in the small piece *Royal Manners* or the large irregularly shaped *Nut if I Cut* piece, and in basically all pieces before and after that. Using a gleeful and lackadaisical escapist style as my constant throughout all my works serves as the coping mechanism that connects all my pieces both in spite of and alongside the constant anxiety and sense of uncanny that they all present.



Where can this work take me next? Such a question seems to lie in the hands of fate, one's own hormones, and the amount of luck that may or may not befall my emotional state. I try not to make emotional decisions in life, and instead let them filter into my work as such has been described in this paper. What lies ahead for the work can only be determined by the winds of time and how I deal with my anxiety throughout, but a further exploration of food's glory and possibility will be further delved into as I make new discoveries in life as well as uncover and remember the repressed memories of my tumultuous youth.

Below: *Soggy Subway*; *Nut If I Cut*, *Chipotle Dupe*, *Goo Portrait*, *Club Advertisement*



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