

“I Can’t Seem to Cope So I Paint”

A Personal Loss

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My love for painting and drawing started very early on in my life - as soon as I was able to hold a marker and a crayon. As I started to experience sadness and traumas in my life, I would specifically rely on my art. Art has been an outlet that has been instrumental in helping me express my emotions. When I paint, I attempt to re-create memories of the past, re-invent settings that no longer exist, and focus on my life's past experiences. When I draw, I focus on capturing moments where - like a camera - I am not a part of the interaction but rather an outsider who is looking in.

Being adopted into a white family, I have always struggled with feelings of belonging. I recall a time when I was five years old realizing that I was "brown." I was in Las Vegas with my moms. We took a photo together, and the next thing I knew I was shouting and crying about how my two mothers were white and I was brown. My moms, of course, did all they could to reassure me that I was "their child" and expressed their love, but it was still a realization that had a significant impact on me and my outlook on "belonging." From that time of "realization," I always seemed to feel out of place. Everywhere I looked I would see a sea of white people. Whether it was in my school, or with my family, I knew I was different. I have memories of being in a school where my peers would use racial slurs against me, and I remember feeling so small sustaining that abuse.

Aside from my moms, two members of my family who eased my struggles with belonging and who always made me feel accepted and unconditionally loved were my grandparents, Phyllis and Larry (now deceased). Growing up I always looked up to them. I have such wonderful memories of always being at their house, spending time together, and having fun. My grandmother would teach me how to catch butterflies, while my grandfather worked in the yard. We would sit together, and watch shows like "Judge Judy", or "The Price Is Right." And

when I wasn't staying at their house, my moms and I would be spending time with them taking them for dinner, going on vacations, and engaging in other fun family activities.

At eight years old, my grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. While at that age I didn't know what that meant, I would soon realize something was seriously wrong with his health. As the years went on, we still saw each other all the time, but my grandfather was slowly disappearing. Although still in good spirits, I could see my grandmother suffering because of my grandfather's illness. She was always tired caring for him as his Alzheimer's continued to impact his ability to function on his own. As my grandfather's health continued to decline, my grandmother began battling with her own illness. She was diagnosed with COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) which made it difficult for her to breathe. Battling with her own illness, my grandmother was not able to continue caring for my grandfather and several years later he had to be confined to a hospital facility for Alzheimer's patients. My grandmother was left to live alone. Four months after being placed in the hospital facility my grandfather died. I was there with him the night before he died. It was Karaoke night at the facility. As my grandmother and my mom were putting away his clean clothes, my grandfather and I sat in the hallway together. He just sat there, slumped over, staring at me. I then started to hum him a lullaby and he stared back at me as if he understood. The next morning, he died.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother and I were never the same. We both battled depression and leaned on each other for support. And, as time passed, my grandmother's COPD worsened. But through it all, and even though she was not feeling her best, we continued to laugh and travel together. Whether it was going on a cruise to the Caribbean islands, driving to Florida together, or a simple trip to a restaurant, we continued to enjoy and cherish our time together.

Around the end of 2018/start of 2019, life took a turn. My grandmother's health declined such that she began going in and out of the hospital. Eventually the COPD got so bad that she was placed in a rehabilitation facility. At first it wasn't so bad. I got to see and talk with her every other night, but then I got busy, and she was placed into hospice care. When she was in hospice care, I could not bring myself to visit because I knew that was the last step before her death. When I did visit, I would find her hooked up to all these machines with wires coming out of her – it was very difficult to see her this way. It scared me. She just laid there as if she was already deceased. Two weeks after being placed in hospice care my grandmother died. Again I was there the night before my grandparent's death. I remember the night vividly. I had just gotten out of rehearsal for a play I was to be performing in, and my mom and I went to pay my grandmother a visit. I remember sitting with her and staring at her hand. It was all wrinkly and black and blue from the wires inserted into her. I still don't know if she was aware that I was even there. My visit consisted of silence. After my mom and I arrived back home I could overhear my parents talking about how my grandmother was going to die soon. The next morning my grandmother she died. She died on her wedding anniversary. I like to think that my grandfather was in heaven waiting for her and she purposefully waited to die on that day - waiting for the right time.

After my grandmother passed away, I felt so alone and helpless. I had now lost my two "best friends." While my two moms did everything they could to comfort me, there was this hole that just couldn't be filled. It impacted the way I began to see the world. A world that was once so beautiful and warm with my grandparents in it, had now gone grey and cold. As the years passed with both my grandparents gone, I continued to struggle, mourning their death. And that is where art saved me. Art helped fill that hole - the emptiness I was feeling. Art helped provide a "voice" to the anguish I was feeling.

I started to paint the grief I was feeling, and as I did so, I realized that I was also healing in the process. I began to feel the weight I was bearing from my grandparents' loss come off my shoulders. As I healed through my art, I knew right away that the healing qualities art provided me was something I wanted to share with others. I began looking at career paths that would allow me to blend my passion for art with helping others heal from their own traumas and anguishes. That is where I came upon art therapy as a career choice. It was exactly the career path I knew I wanted to pursue and so I set a plan in motion to achieve that pursuit as soon as I began my college studies. That plan would eventually lead to my majoring in Painting and Drawing and pairing that major with a minor in Psychology.

I often use my art to capture the grief and disconnect I feel – re-creating memories and capturing moments that remain a fixture in my mind – a camera re-playing life's past experiences. I typically start my paintings with a base color. This color is usually tied to the mood I am trying to portray in the painting. For instance, if I am trying to portray the mood of confidence, I start with a pale purple. Once the base color is set, I plan out the painting by doing a rough sketch with a darker color of the base. Upon completing the first sketch, I examine the layout and decide on where each line should lie. I start with a new color and either shift some parts or make certain parts bigger. Once I have the layout I desire, I incorporate the lights and darks. At the point where I feel there is enough contrast, I jump in with color. I start with simple colors and then build up the paint. As I paint, I wipe out sections that could be re-worked. For instance, in the painting "I Have to Tell You Something" you can see where I wiped and left some of the underpainting. I try not to spend a lot of time in one section of my paintings but move fast and use my whole body to fill in the entirety of the painting. The painting I plan in my head almost never mimics what I initially anticipated.

When I draw, the process starts with a photo taken from a camera. As I experience high emotions in my life, I often pull out my phone and take a snapshot to capture what is triggering the high emotions. Some of these emotions include love, loneliness, and dissociation. For example, in the drawing “A Conversation,” I chose this image to represent the feeling of loneliness. As I was experiencing this moment, I realized that I was no longer a part of the conversation.

Once I have captured a moment that stirs a certain emotion, I grab my projector, set up the paper, and outline what I think should stay and what should be removed from the photo image captured. As needed, I will move the projector around, as if I were in Photoshop, and manipulate the size and placement of objects in the image. Once I have a basic line drawing, I take down the projector and begin to add simple hatching to my drawings. I go back and forth from the picture to my drawing to see where certain shadows lie but I primarily rely on my instinct. In my drawings, I will choose certain objects that have meaning to me. If I am drawing a person, I will focus on objects that define or represent them. For example, in the “Phyllis and Larry” drawing, I focused on the scarf my grandmother, Phyllis, is wearing because I still have her scarf and it is an object I identify my grandmother with. In the drawing “Dynamic,” I focus on identifying objects associated with my parents - for example, papers that surround my one mom (a college professor), and the kitchen that identifies with my other mom (the “cook” in the house).

My artwork is inspired by several artists including: Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Joan Semmel, and Clarity Haynes. These artists do an excellent job capturing emotion and body figures as they age.

In Van Gogh's drawing "Worn Out," Van Gogh captures the straining feeling of a day's work, effectively presenting that emotion to the viewer through a man's distressed positioning of the body. In the painting, "Vestibule in the Asylum," Van Gogh captures an interior scene of emptiness through his use of a limited color palette with his underdrawings peeking through the paint. His directness is a quality I work to employ in my art.

Edvard Munch is an artist who can capture emotion in a "semi-realistic" way and is one whose art I also look up to. I have never strived for "realism" in my artwork, and that is why I am attracted to the work of Munch who doesn't have to rely on realism to express emotions. In his painting, "Jealousy," for instance, although the title may present the feeling of the painting, the way Munch captures the emotion of "jealousy" in this painting through his mark making is a quality I am drawn to and also strive for in my work.

Joan Semmel's work has influenced me in the way she captures "the figure" in her paintings. The way Joan manages to capture her aging body with a sense of abstract and hyper-realism and pride is something that really inspires me. In "Red Hand" and "Self-Made," for instance, Joan's ability to mix different types of brushstrokes is something I try to include in my artwork.

Clarity Haynes, a feminist artist, has been a major inspiration in my art creations. When I began my studies at Purchase College, I focused my painting on body figures and themes of sexual assault. I strive to be an activist painter, and this is the manner in which Clarity has painted. She started with various subjects like people's breasts, or alters, and she now focuses on birthing stories, which further exemplifies her feministic approach – an approach that I, too, often take in my own paintings.

While I may not technically paint like these artists, their ability to capture and express emotions, as well as the body figure, are qualities I continually strive for in my own artwork.

Music also inspires my art. Depending on what I am going to paint, I will play certain songs to help me get into the mood of that painting. For example, if I want to focus on the emotion of confidence, I'll play songs that remind me of female rage like "Brutus" by The Buttress, or music that makes you feel sexy like "Woman" by Doja Cat. If I want to express emotions of exhaustion, or a sense of loss, I play songs like "Nothing's New" by Rio Romeo, or "Bruno is Orange" by Frances Quinlan. I also have a specific playlist that reminds me of my grandmother. The songs range from those by Frank Sinatra to Adele. Although there are only a few songs on that playlist, listening to them repeatedly brings this sense that my grandmother is still by my side watching me create.

Another playlist that has helped me with my artwork creations comes from an album called "Portals" by Melanie Martinez. This album has had a major influence on my outlook of dying. For instance, when my grandparents passed, I had such a bad outlook on death. I was afraid that there was nothing after death, and that I'd never see my grandparents or my loved ones (including my moms) again once they eventually died. But after listening to "Portals," my outlook on death became one of rebirth (which is the theme of this album). Even after experiencing so much personal loss, I am still able to create positive memories in my artwork as influenced by the music on this album.





“I Got Love in My Tummy”, Oil, 24” x 36”, Spring 2024

This painting is a memory of when my mom would drop me off early in the morning at my grandmother’s house before heading to work. It reflects my perspective of the bowl of cereal my grandmother made for me as I looked on at her empty dining room. A recurring symbol includes a peeled orange. The orange is a representation of another memory (undisclosed) that occurred a decade later.



“Smothered”, Oil, 12” x 12”, Spring 2024

In this painting, I am grasping tightly onto my mother, as she does the same to me. This is based on a memory of hardships my mother and I faced together. While we have had some ups and downs to our relationship, we can’t seem to let go of each other, whether the relationship is overbearing or not.



“Casino”, Acrylic, 18” x 18”, Spring 2024

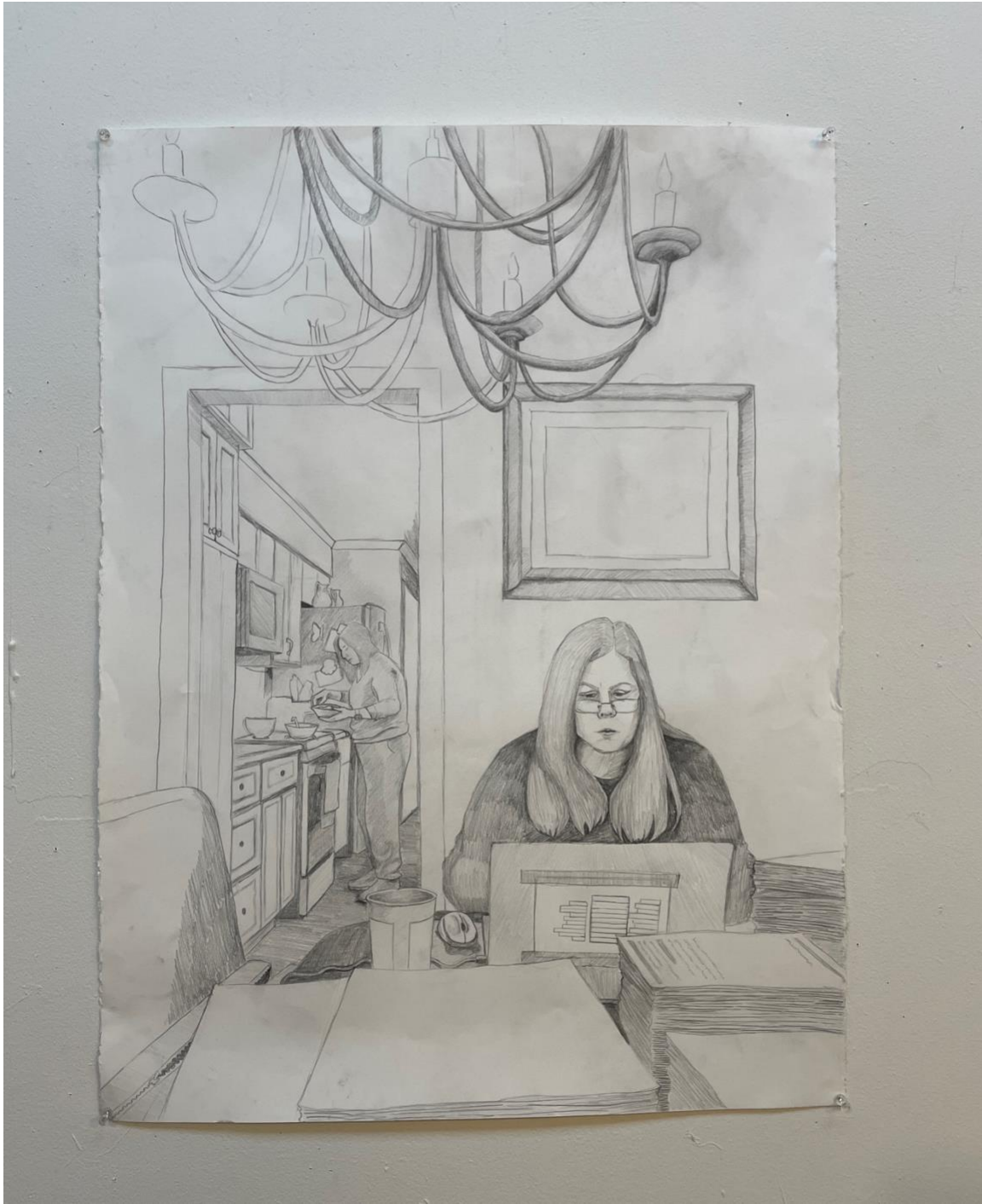
This painting represents the letting go of one grandmother and accepting the other into my life. This is based on memories of my grandmothers loving the casino – a common “hobby” they shared. It is also a representation of my bonding to the grandmother who is still alive.





"I Have to Tell You Something", Oil, 36" x 48", Fall 2023

Based on the memory of my mother having to deliver the news that my grandfather died (in 2014) and when my grandmother died (in 2019). The backpack is a representation of the baggage I still carry with this memory; it also represents my time in high school (when my mom delivered the news to me about my grandmother's passing).



“Dynamic” Pencil, 18” x 24”, Spring 2024

A representation of my parents tending to their busy lives as I am stuck watching from the outside. Watching their internal dynamic - one working and the other cooking - unable to escape this repetition.



“Kitchen”, Oil, 48” x 56”, Fall 2023

Based on memories of my grandmother’s kitchen that no longer exists. Added oranges and butterflies to represent myself and my grandmother (the butterfly is a metaphor for my grandmother as we used to spend time chasing butterflies together). The openness of the kitchen recreates a feeling of someone missing and needing to fill the space.





“Phyllis and Larry”, Pencil, 24” x 24”, Spring 2024

A recreation of the love between my grandparents, Phyllis and Larry. I watched my grandparents’ love for each other for 16 years – a relationship I look up to and hope to have in the future.



“I Am Woman”, Oil, 48” x 66”, Spring 2024

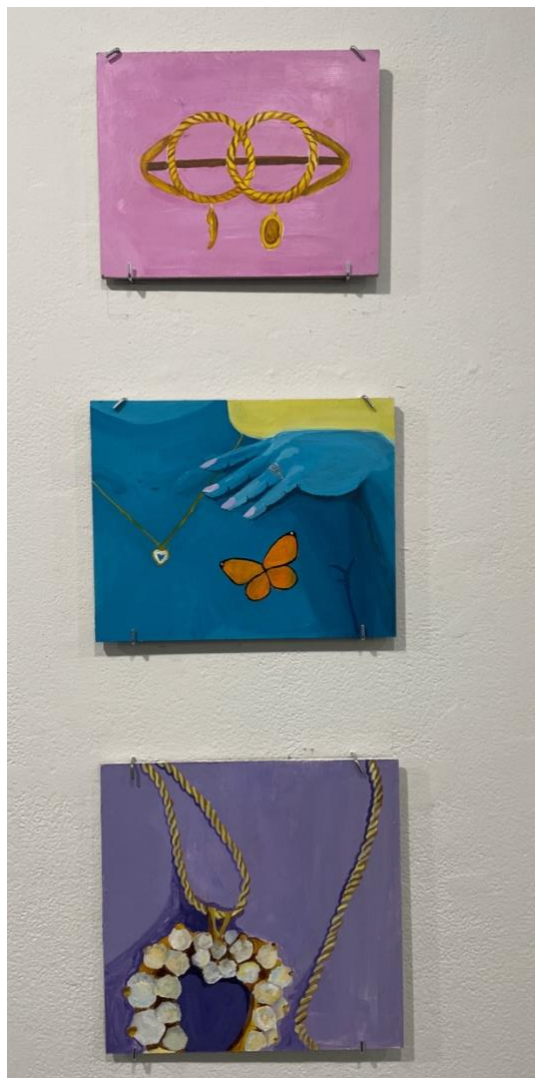
This painting is a representation of how I have grown into the woman I am today, but still unable to let go of the death of my grandparents. The skull represents death. I hold on to death with a calm face as I find peace in not letting go.





“A Conversation”, Pencil, 18” x 24” , Spring 2024

This drawing is a representation of my feeling out of place. As my parents have a conversation, I am left alone to look in without input.



“Passed To You”, Acrylic (all), 8” x 10” (top), 10” x 12” (middle), 10” x 10” (bottom), Spring 2024

All paintings are representative of my deceased grandmother’s jewelry that was most coveted, and the jewelry unwanted by my family. It is also based on a memory of how my cousins would fight over a special piece of jewelry – my grandmother’s diamond necklace. But also reflective of how my grandmother pulled me aside and said she was leaving the necklace to me. The ring (at top) was unwanted for its size. It was too small for other family members, but it fit me perfectly almost as if it was made for me.



“Living Room”, Oil, 12”x18” , Fall 2023

A re-creation of the living room in my grandmother’s house. The painting is fixated on the emptiness of the room and the sense of someone missing.



“Family”, Yarn, and Found Objects, 36” x 36”, Spring 2024

A conversation about the difference between me as a Guatemalan adoptee and my white mothers. While I might not look like them, we are still intertwined and united in our circle together.





“What A Disrespectful Man”, Acrylic, 18” x 24”, Spring 2024

A memory of an assault against my mother. The birdcage is a representation of being stuck watching the event and not being able to step in during the altercation. The chair represents the stillness after the event and a symbol of waiting for someone to step in and address the altercation.

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