

A Senior Honors Thesis

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As human beings, we define ourselves by our relationships to other people. I am a daughter, best friend, co-worker, and neighbor. I am surrounded daily by family, friends, strangers, and acquaintances, who judge, support, or otherwise define who I am. But what happens when these definitive relationships fail or become meaningless? Who are we when we feel cut off from the rest of humanity, even those who we should be closest to?

My artwork explores this question of marginalized existence, which almost everyone finds to some degree throughout their lives. Especially in contemporary times, the questions of isolation and social identity become ever more pertinent. Communication and connection define our lives in the twenty-first century, yet we can go through an entire day of interactions without ever responding to an actual human voice or seeing a human face. Ipods and cell phones, Blackberries and the internet allow us to be eternally “connected,” but we may never speak to individuals who are physically within inches of us. Increased mobility and an urban lifestyle allow us to reinvent ourselves, perhaps to live in anonymity if we choose. Such situations raise unprecedented questions about the nature of human relationships and individual identity.

Despite the new complexities raised by twenty first century technology, isolation hardly began with the encroachment of the digital age. Like love, hate, or hope, isolation is an experience that generation after generation has encountered as a facet of human existence. Everyone has had the displeasure of being the odd one out in a group, or of walking completely unnoticed in a crowd. In these moments, we realize that to be human is to be isolated. No one else can understand us completely at all times. No else can fully comprehend our individual emotions or thoughts. The ramifications of isolation have new pertinence now in a modern age, but this subject echoes throughout universal human experience.

In my series of oil and egg tempera paintings, individuals go through the motions of life--dancing, walking in crowds, having coffee—but always in a distant, disconnected way. The pedestrian in a crowd feels that her fellow walkers are only streaking blurs; the dancer perceives that the partner who holds her so closely might as well not be in the picture, for all the connection they feel. I capture these little moments of disconnect and rootlessness because they so eloquently question human connection both in contemporary times and in a universal sense. Does the ability to be continually connected by technology cause us to lose touch with what is human? More broadly, how much of human existence is characterized by desire for connection—which is unsatisfied?

A thorough understanding of my work involves the ways I arrange my subjects, manipulate the paint, and find resources to paint from. In describing my work throughout this paper, I elaborate on technical and compositional concerns, the artists whose work I have become fascinated by, and the meanings I hope come through in the works. First of all, though, I must begin with why I am concerned with this topic in the first place.

Why Isolation?

Pablo Picasso described painting as an “exorcism,” (MOMA) a way to come to terms with a troubling issue by recreating it in art. It is true; we often paint what we fear, what disturbs us or haunts us. It seems that painting a topic allows us to distance ourselves from it. I paint isolated figures because I spent a great deal of time alone as a child, and I cannot escape my fascination with the emotional state of a solitary existence. Though my life now could hardly be described as an isolated one, that imprint of solitude remains sequestered somewhere in the back

of my thoughts, and to an extent, my art making process has developed from this state of mind. The journey from childhood loneliness to current art was not a straightforward path, however.

I was homeschooled from a young age while living on a farm, so I did not have the typical child's experience of school and neighborhood friends. Rather than steady playmates, I found instead a world that consisted of books and solitude. However, this lack of human interaction deepened rather than subdued my interest in human relationships. Deeply curious about the complexity of human social behavior, I was fascinated by the why and how of connection or disjunction between people. Art was another constant throughout the early years of my life, though at the time, I had no idea that the two would eventually connect. I recreated landscapes or copied pictures I saw in magazines or books with little concern for a possible message in what I was creating. I knew that I enjoyed the process of painting and creating, but put little thought into what kind of questions I might want to provoke in viewers of my artwork.

When I was about seventeen, I began to move out of my isolated existence, starting college part-time and becoming involved with theatre. As I moved away from my solitary life, I began to see it not as the defining aspect of my life but merely as a past experience. Especially when I began college at Brockport, interacting with other people and starting to build strong relationships, I found the solitude of my childhood and early teens starting to fade. My interest in the isolated human existence did not fade, however, though it took a while for this to translate into my artwork.

As I began a rigorous study of art, I first focused primarily on figurative work. For my final project in Drawing II, I created a drawing of a figure amid tumbling columns and flames; in Painting II, I created a collage of figures that suggested different tension-filled narratives. I knew that I was fascinated by human experience through these works, but did not yet see a focus within

this topic. In Painting III, I produced three works on the subject of teenage motherhood, based on the experience of a young relative. I was interested in the story of someone separated from the normal course of teenage existence, though for a different reason than my own. In Painting II, I created another self-portrait as well as a narrative collage, and in both of these pieces, human figures predominated. Concurrently, I began investigating an initial idea for a thesis, on the effect of violence on inner city Rochester children. As with the teenage mother series, I was again interested in a marginalized group which no doubt experiences some distancing from the rest of the world.

The common denominator between all of these finally revealed itself during the end of Painting III. Looking through the journal of references that I had kept, I realized that what drew me to many of the artists I enjoyed was their depiction of people in solitary, separate environments. Aware of this interest, I understood that the sense of isolation was the common thread among the painting subjects I had already explored as well—individuals distanced from others, or from a typical social existence. Looking back, it seems odd that I did not realize immediately what I was interested in, but it is also true that I had put my experience behind me and hardly comprehended how much it still remained with me. Having found at last the underlying concern of my work, I became preoccupied with exploring such a specific experience. Yet the struggles were hardly over at this point; faced merely with the nebulous theme of isolation, where was I to begin?

To Paint Isolation...

Few artists are interested in simply painting an objective reality, and thus there is the problem of imbuing the objects and figures of a painting with abstract emotions and ideas. Such transcribing can be done through many different manipulations of color, painting style, and

arrangement of elements. The challenge is to find the best combination of techniques to communicate the concept of isolation without seeming either overly vague or too obvious. Finding the best solution is an ongoing process, and only educated experimentation leads to answers. I have experimented with many different approaches since I found my theme, some with more success, others less.

In the Beginning: Isolated Environments

Initially, I simply tried to recreate the sensations I had experienced while growing up. The first semester after I realized isolation was my focus, I painted a series of close-ups of my face, the *Between Us* trilogy. As a solitary teenager, I often felt that my world was shrunken and narrow, hence the small sections of my face. During those years, I also felt the desire to avoid other people and possible embarrassment, despite the continual longing for more interpersonal interaction. From these conflicting feelings I created works depicting an eye peeking out from behind various barriers, such as a fence or a door. I wanted to capture the ambivalence of both desiring and fearing interaction, represented as a partially obstructed connection with the viewer. For example, the figure whose face is mostly obscured by the door longs to leave a place of seclusion, yet is afraid to come fully out into the open.



Between Us, (trilogy). 2009. 16 by 20 in. (each) Oil on canvas board.

Pushing the idea further, *Distance* states the isolation idea as starkly as possible: a single hand reaches towards a crowd of faces, prevented from connecting by an unseen barrier. Faded

by a glaze of white, the unconcerned crowd is set in distinct contrast to the single hand, whose desperate existence is etched in the harsh curves of purple and blue paint.



Distance. 2009. 18 by 24 in. Oil on canvas board.

From these somewhat abstracted depictions, my paintings became more realistic and specific, featuring individuals posed in environments devoid of other people. Works that fall under this category include *Café* and *Window*. Each features a single individual seemingly lost in thought or gazing longingly out at a world they cannot quite enter. Each of these works also involve windows, which serve both as ways to move the eye around the picture plane and as suggestions of isolation. Indicating separation from another world, windows effectively suggest distance and an alternate yet unattainable existence.



Window. 2009. 9 by 12 in. Oil on canvas.



Café. 2009. 16 by 20 in. Oil on canvas.

These works capture the feeling of the quietly desperate person, longing for interaction yet unable to find it. The downcast gaze of the figures and the rather stark surroundings of each add to this sensation. While growing up, I found many sensations connected to my solitude—fear, anger, embarrassment—at the realization of what might be a more normal existence which I was not experiencing. In a sense, this experience is the heightened realization of how much we need other people, paired the understanding of how much pain others can cause. The figures in the solitary compositions represent these conflicting emotions—both the desperation of their isolated existences and the fear of leaving them.

Does a modern lifestyle—with constant interaction, stimulation, and demands—take away something that we had in a quieter time? Has all the accumulated knowledge and pressure become too much for some, so that it is easier to withdraw than to face the world? The figure in *Window* looks out at a suburban setting, while the figure in the café stars out a blank window. As much as these figures may want interaction, have the demands of modern life made them hesitant to leave?

More Layers

I soon became frustrated by the limitations of painting in this way, however. How many subjects could I paint staring out of windows? Soon after this, I had the opportunity to study in France for a month. While there, I decided to take as many candid photos as possible, of real-life situations that spoke of isolation. One of these photos depicted a crowd scene; the photo accidentally came out with some figures blurry, others in sharp focus. At first, I was disappointed; then I realized this image had great potential. What better way to show isolation than by making some figures so blurry they immediately stand out from the others? This realization was significant to my entire approach to painting. I finally comprehended that it was

the way in which I painted that was key, rather than a specific subject or environment. A subject who is painted uniquely is distanced in a much more interesting way than a subject in an empty café.

Crowd and *Periphery* were the results of this thought. In *Crowd*, the isolated figure is blurred, while the surrounding figures are painted in crisp detail. Such a difference immediately reveals this woman's feel of distance from her fellow walkers. *Periphery* follows the same idea, though it utilizes a slightly different technique. In this image, a figure is painted in translucent glazed colors, so she fades into the solidly painted figures behind her. These figures are immediately differentiated, yet the fact that the separation is indicated through technique rather than environment suggests that this isolation is an emotional state.



Crowd. 2009. 16 by 20 in. Oil on canvas.



Periphery. 2009. 16 by 20 in. Oil on canvas.

I continued to push various compositional approaches as well. The figures are no longer simply alone, situated in a somewhat clichéd depiction of isolation. The subjects of these next paintings, including *Crowd* and *Periphery*, are physically surrounded by people. However, the composition still indicates that there is emotional distance despite proximity. In *Crowd*, all the figures surrounding the isolated figure are moving away from that figure, though they are so close they are almost touching. *Periphery* portrays one figure moving sideways across the picture

plane while the remaining figures face front. In these paintings, composition works to show separation in a different way, as a result of emotional isolation rather than of physical isolation.

I reached the understanding that the deepest tension of an isolated experience is not always simply being alone, because there remains the thought that with others around life would be different. Instead, it is when we are surrounded by others, yet still feel desperately alone, that isolation truly dominates. This sensation is no doubt as old as humanity, yet it is even stronger now in a modern world. Not only are there more people on the earth than ever before, but we are more aware of each other's existences than in the past. Armed with knowledge of our own smallness in a fluidly altering, unstable world, we may walk in a crowd and wonder who would notice if we simply faded away. Surrounded by people, yet unnoticed, lost, separate—is this what it is like to be part of the swarming masses of modern urbanity?

More Aspects to Isolation

Trying to push the idea of isolation despite close proximity, I came up with the concept for *Dancers*. In this work, a couple dances, yet the female gazes off into space while the male's face is cropped out of the picture. Such a composition reveals that there is still enormous distance between these two intimately posed figures.



Dancers. 2009. 8 by 12 in. Oil on canvas.

This aspect of isolation is not necessarily the lack of social relationships or physical contact with others. It is the realization that, no matter how close we can get to another person, on some level we are always alone. No one else can breathe for us, or see for us, or experience the world in exactly the same way. Because of this, there will always be disjunction and misunderstandings and incomplete comprehension—isolation. In this way, we are isolated not externally but internally, as we become aware of the questions and ideas that each of us must ultimately answer alone. The female dancer is held close by her partner, presumably someone she knows very well, yet she appears to have just realized that for all their physical closeness, and perhaps knowledge of each other, there still remains a deep divide between them.

Up to this point, my approach to the idea of isolation had been primarily negative, but I knew that this hardly captured the whole picture. For example, in *Dancers*, I had considered the inevitable distance that exists between individuals as an unfortunate fact of life. However, the other half of this view is that we alone truly define ourselves, a condition of freedom. *Opposing Currents* and *CityScape Mirror* hint at this idea of positive isolation.



Opposing Currents. 2010. 10 by 40 in. Egg tempera on panel.



Cityscape Mirror. 2009. 16 by 20 in. Oil on canvas.

The figures in clear detail are those who are isolated, raising the question of whether isolation can bring positive introspection and contemplation. In *Opposing Currents*, the isolated figure is facing forward, while the other pedestrians are uniformly facing away from the viewer. Such contrast adds a layer of interpersonal distance to an image that otherwise might seem communal. In *Cityscape Mirror*, only the figure that is isolated is painted in full color and in detail; the figures walking by are painted flatly and simply. These contrasts—reversing the ideas of *Crowd* and *Periphery*—also present a reversal of the negative connotation of isolation, and raise questions of modern society.



Pause. 2010. 10 by 40 in. Oil and egg tempera on panel.

Such an idea also appears in *Pause*, as a single figure faces the viewer, while her fellow pedestrians are formless blurs of color. Does someone who stops for a minute of contemplation appear so strikingly different from the rest of the rushing crowd that they can be seen as the only clear face in a mass of blurs? When we are surrounded by the hustle and bustle of daily life in the twenty-first century, by demands and needs, we rarely stop to question our purpose and reason

for existence. But in random moments of discord—when struck by our anonymity in the midst of a crowd, realizing the gap between our thoughts and another’s-- we are removed for a few seconds from the immediate into the essential. In this deeply personal space, we are each ultimately alone, because no one can answer the questions that we may have: Why am I living this particular life? Who am I apart from the relationships I have?

To some degree, the times when we are isolated are the times when we are most ourselves. We are so often defined by others that we may not truly know who we are without these definitions. In this sense, the small moments of isolation are the times when we explore our humanity and what gives each of us meaning and purpose. At the core, the question of who am I, or where do I belong, is the question of what it truly means to be human.

Cityscape Mirror hints at the isolation of the modern urban landscape; I wanted to push this idea further, and returned to an image that I had started in the summer of 2009, *Musician*. Originally, the painting was a realistic depiction of a man alone on city street, playing a clarinet. I had started to block in other figures at one point but eventually set the painting aside. Returning to the piece, I decided to explore the idea of isolation through the contrast of monochromatic and saturated colors.



Musician. 2009. 20 by 16 in. Oil on canvas.

In the altered image, a man finding joy in a simple instrument is completely ignored by his fellow pedestrians, who are far more in tune with iPods and cell phones. The single figure playing the clarinet is recreated in grayscale, contrasting sharply with the surrounding figures painted in vivid color. Does technology distance us from each other—from truly connecting with each other—and make us lose touch with the little pleasures of life?

In a country and century of individualism and globalism, we are perhaps more aware of each other than we have ever been before. With computers, cell phones, and iPods, it is possible to be “connected” in a sense, around the clock. Yet when so much is available to us—so much information, so much to demand our attention, perhaps we feel more deeply than ever before the fact that we are still, individually, alone. Indeed, the personal, human-to-human contact that previous generations had—conversations and nights of singing or playing instruments—are often superseded by recorded music which we listen to individually, never to actually meet the person who creates the music. What does this do to us as a culture? *Musician* is an attempt to raise these questions.

How Does a Painting Emerge?

Even with a solid concept for a painting, it is still necessary to have visual references to work from, and to know the details of how to affect certain techniques. I use photographs as visual sources for my paintings, and rely heavily on the technical properties of both oil and egg tempera to create various effects. In oil, glazes and painting mediums are instrumental to creating a blurred or faded image. Works in egg tempera are reliant upon manipulating many layers of semi-translucent paint. From initial idea to finished painting, method is key to my work.

First comes the specific idea. Although I start out, of course, with a set theme— isolation—there is still the need to find a specific situation to work from for this topic. I have the

memories of my past, yet if I am to make my work relevant to a viewing audience, it must consist of more than my personal memories. Hence, coming up with an idea takes some work. Sometimes I “free-sketch,” or draw randomly whatever comes into my mind, which helps me to find specific compositions. Other times a specific moment of isolation in my everyday life triggers a prospective painting. Sometimes I take candid photographs from life to capture possible ideas.

After an idea comes to me by whatever method, I work out rough sketches for a composition. At this stage, everything is still fluid and subject to change. After taking pictures, I may like an unintentional composition which differs from what I had originally intended. At this point, I may find a friend to recreate a specific pose for me. Occasionally I supplement the pictures I take with images found on the internet if I know I do not need a great deal of detail or representation in the image. I may use an image mostly as I have shot it or I may collage numerous photos together to create a new image from which to paint. Alternately, I simply work from different pictures without pasting them together.

From this point, the processes for oil and egg tempera diverge. When working in oil, the use of a glaze, or paint thinned with oil, is essential to recreating the image on the canvas or board. Thinning the paint with mixtures of turpentine, damar varnish, and stand oil allows much greater manipulation than if I simply used it as out of the tube. Thinned paint fits differing painting styles; it facilitates flat, faded images, and also allows the detail necessary for contrast with this style, particularly evident in the painting *Crowd*. Contrasted with figures painted in thicker unmodified paint, subjects depicted with glazes are distanced and separated.

In egg tempera, the painting process differs considerably. Because egg tempera is a quick-drying medium which it is more difficult to alter, I must have a more detailed sketch

planned before I start painting. This means that I spend more time executing the outline of the image than I do with oil, both in the final sketch and when I transfer the image onto the painting surface.

Oil paint can be made partially transparent through manipulation with mediums, but egg tempera is thin and translucent by its very nature. This characteristic means that all effects are created through juxtaposition of alternate color and value in successive layers of pigment. I will sometimes start with the color I eventually want, or will other times use a contrasting color which will be altered by the layers of semi-translucent paint which will follow it. The single head painted in egg tempera in *Pause*, for example, was rendered in the latter fashion. In the shadow areas, I first painted a layer of green, followed by red. Because of the translucent nature of the medium, these two complements combined to form a dark brown.

Egg tempera dries within seconds of its application to a panel, and thus it cannot be blended as oil paint is. Because of this, color shifts are created through buildup of individual strokes. Because the medium is very light, the surface of egg tempera is always quite smooth, and the delicacy of egg tempera allows for very detailed, precise effects, which I find adds to the sensation of isolation.

Influences

Even with a set theme in mind, my work certainly did not develop independent of other artists and artworks. A number of artists are standouts in terms of the influence they have had on my artwork. I look at these artists when I am stumped for ideas, or for techniques to support an idea. Andrew Wyeth and Edward Hopper are influences for theme as well as composition and painting style. In the work of Gerhard Richter and Alex Katz, technical aspects have been of greatest interest to me.

Andrew Wyeth

Andrew Wyeth has been unquestionably my oldest and most significant influence; he paints quiet, isolated figures in rural settings. I remember reading an article about his painting *Christina's World* when I was about ten or eleven, and I have been intrigued by his work ever since.

Andrew Wyeth was born in Pennsylvania in 1917 (Duff 33). As I was, he was predominantly educated at home, in the rural setting of Chadds Ford (Corn 120). His father was the illustrator N.C. Wyeth, and Andrew was exposed to art from an early age. He began his career in watercolor, and was an established, successful artist by the age of twenty (Duff 39). His father was his sole teacher; Wyeth never studied at any school (Duff 38). His father's death in 1945 in a car accident impacted Wyeth's art significantly; he felt the need "to prove that what he had started in me was not in vain—to do something serious and not play around with it, doing caricatures of nature" (qtd. in Duff 42). He began to use darker colors, and to emphasize the bleakness of the figures, landscapes, and objects he painted. He used both watercolor and egg tempera, and continued painting for the rest of his life in the rural locations of Chadds Ford and Port Clyde and Thomaston, Maine (Duff 42). His subjects reflect his thorough knowledge of these locations. He was impacted by a statement of his father's: "a man can only paint that which he knows even more than intimately, he has got to know it spiritually. And to do that he has got to live around it, in it and be a part of it" (qtd. in Duff 43). He died on January 16, 2009 (Lacayo 26).

I keep coming back to Wyeth's work for several reasons. The first is composition, which has deeply influenced my own arrangements. His stark, deliberate organization of form creates a

bare and silent environment, in which solitary figures contemplate their world. In *Christina's World*, for example, the composition is pared down to the figure of Christina, the house, barn, and two small outbuildings. Such a stark composition creates a striking sense of isolation, as each element seem to be in its own isolated bubble. It further creates a bleak, raw world in exquisite detail.



Christina's World. Andrew Wyeth. 1948. 43 ¼ by 47 ¾ in. Egg tempera on panel.

I am also influenced by Wyeth's limited color palette, though mine is of different hues. Wyeth uses a significantly limited palette, favoring earth tones and subdued hues, adding to the subdued mood created by his composition and lighting. His greens are as much brown as green and the color of his pine trees often runs to black. Such a limited palette lends strength through simplicity to his work, and helps to reinforce the subdued tone of his work. My purple and blue emphasis indicates a mood of isolation and melancholy.

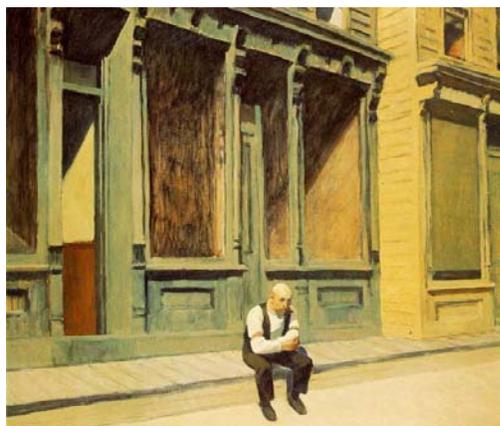
Edward Hopper

Edward Hopper is my second influence for many of the same reasons that Wyeth is. His works feature solitary individuals, though usually in urban rather than rural settings.

Edward Hopper was born July 22nd, 1882, in Nyack, New York, into a middle-class

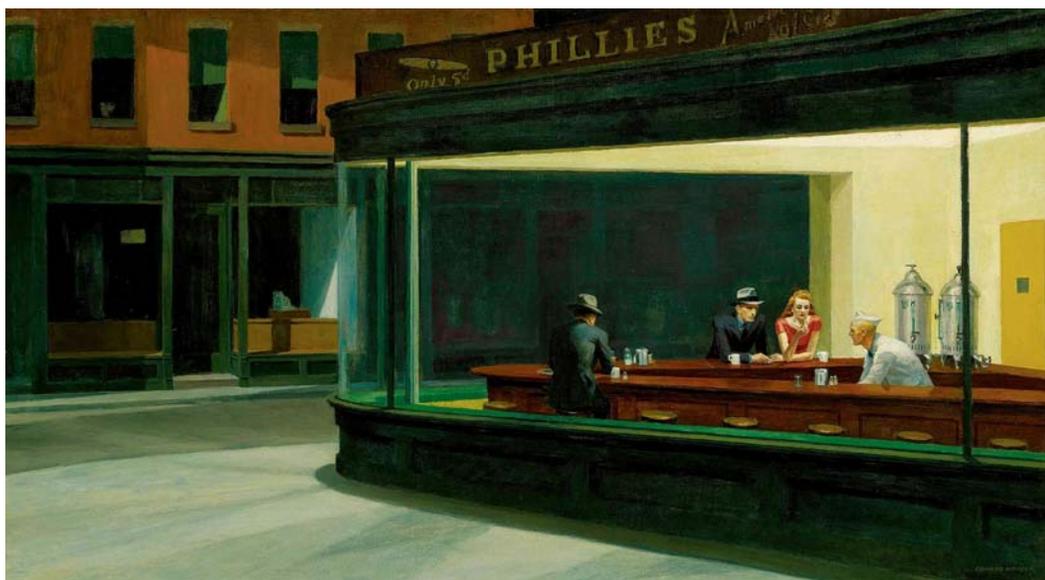
family.(Levin 7) A shy individual throughout his life, he spent a great deal of time reading, and was introduced to art through his mother (Levin 7). After high school, he studied at the Correspondence School of Illustrating in New York City, and traveled to Europe several times over the next 10 years while working as an illustrator (Levin 10, 23). The influence of French painting continued throughout his life, especially that of Degas (Hobbs 23, Levin 37). He achieved success gradually; it was not until his mid-forties that he was independent as an artist. He achieved his mature style at around the age of forty, painting primarily scenes of urban life, with isolated, contemplative figures in often stark surroundings (Levin 39). He died in 1967 (Hobbs 146).

His paintings also feature simplified compositions, though less so than Wyeth's, and strong lighting which often emphasizes the emptiness of a space. *Sunday*, for example, features light slanting in through empty store windows, highlighting the fact that they are deserted and barren, and accentuating the loneliness of the figure seated on the boardwalk. When his paintings were described as having a feel of "profound loneliness," Hopper said, "It's probably a reflection of my own, if I may say, loneliness. I don't know. It could be the whole human condition" (Levin 69).



Sunday. Edward Hopper. 1926. 29 by 34 in. Oil on canvas,

His use of the gaze is also a major influence on me. In his famous *Nighthawks*, for example, the figures are seated near each other, yet their gazes indicate that they are all lost in personal, private worlds, not connected with each other. In many of his works, the gaze of the figures indicates that they may attempt to connect yet cannot, or that they do not want to. In a particularly urban sense, Hopper seems to be exploring the contemporary American experience, or the isolation which persists even in seemingly the most typical lifestyle.



Nighthawks. Edward Hopper. 1942. 33 3/16 by 60 1/8 in. Oil on canvas.

Alex Katz

Alex Katz is fascinated by the life of the middle and upper class urban individual. His large scale paintings feature crowd scenes and individuals, painted flatly and quickly, sporting fashionable clothing. His figures are stylized and somewhat distant and detached.

Born in 1927 in New York City, Alex Katz attended Cooper Union, a college of art, architecture and engineering in Manhattan (Fiz 234). After graduating, he spent a summer studying at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, an experience that impacted him

deeply (Ratcliff 56). Katz fell in love with the immediacy of painting outdoors; the attraction of this experience gave him “a reason to devote my life to painting” (Ratcliff 56). Returning to the New York art scene, he made friends with many of the innovators of the time, such as Larry Rivers and Fairfield Porter (Fiz 234). As a figurative painter at a time when abstract was valued, his first five shows were financial failures and he struggled for a number of years (Ratcliff 71). However, he gradually found success as he continued to work. Katz continues to live in New York City, but spends his summers in Lincolnville, Maine (Fiz 236).

Katz’s scenes of crowds share numerous touch points with my scenes such as *Crowd* or *Periphery*. I have incorporated some of his painting methods as a way of showing contrast and distance. In his work *Place*, there are numerous figures in the picture plane, yet they seem unaware of each other’s existence. Moving in separate directions, they seem each in their own personal world while in close proximity to others. Such a composition is similar to the way I have arranged *Crowd*, though I have added further technical aspects to suggest the specific idea of isolation.



Alex Katz, *Place* .1977. 108 by 144 in. Oil on canvas.

I have adopted aspects of Kat’s flat, stylized technique to show the contrast between figures; *Crowd* and *Periphery* feature some flatter images, some with more detail, indicating separation and distance. *Opposing Currents* shares similarities in form with many of Katz’s

longer works such as *One Flight Up*, in which extensive spread of faces are painted on individual shapes of aluminum. The long expanse of figures helps to indicate the isolation of the single figure who is positioned differently.



One Flight Up, detail. Alex Katz. 67 ¾ by 180 by 47. 1968.

Gerhard Richter

Gerhard Richter could be said to be an artist of great contradiction. He has painted in a variety of styles, from complete abstraction to near photographic realism.

Born in Dresden, Germany, on February 9, 1932, Richter attended Dresden Academy, a long-established art academy (Nasgaard 34). Here he gained a solid grounding in skill, although in a very traditional manner, surrounded by an atmosphere of Social Realism (Nasgaard 34). On a two year scholarship in Dusseldorf, Richter was exposed to numerous avant-garde art movements such as Pop Art, Art Informel, and Flexus (Nasgaard 34). However, his first major works were in many ways rejections of the various movements he had been exposed to (Nasgaard 40). Painted from everyday photos, the images are blurred or streaked depictions of portraits or families on vacation. During this time, Richter also painted straightforward, representational landscapes.

From the late 60s to the mid-70s, Richter painted in an astounding number of different styles, creating images a series of portraits as well as numerous solid grey paintings and landscapes (Nasgaard 74). He worked with enamel paint, creating simple squares and rectangles of different colors; he formed aggressively hatched and linear abstractions in monochromatic oil paint (Nasgaard 76, 78). In 1976 Richter turned more exclusively to abstraction (Nasgaard 106). Brightly colored and vigorous, with large aggressive strokes overlying washes of color, the images present a striking contrast to his early works from photographs.

The works that I am most interested in are something of a combination of these two extremes; those in which he blurs a recognizable image, slightly or into near obscurity. This effect is similar to what I have done in paintings such as *Crowd* or *Pause*.



October 18, 1977. Gerhard Richter. 1988. Oil on canvas.

For example, his work *October 18, 1977* shows the distancing that this technique lends to an image. The figure gazes at the viewer, yet it seems as though she is distant, perhaps a memory fading all too quickly. In my paintings, this distance indicates the isolation that the figures feel from the other figures that are painted differently.

From Here...

Creating artwork is similar to driving a car when lost—one might know the general direction that is desired, but not if the current route will lead there. As I have explored the theme of isolation, there have been many times when I have wondered if I was going in the right direction or not. It is safe to say I still have not arrived at my destination, and probably never will.

But there is truly no right answer, just a richer depiction of an emotional state that touches every individual at some point. I don't seek to either condemn or affirm particular social situations. Having completed a body of artworks focused on isolation, I am no closer to an answer about what the right amount of social interaction is, or the appropriateness of a non-typical childhood. However, isolation is the filter through which I learned to see the world, and I have been able to transform my experience into images that others can relate to and wonder about.

Although I initially attempted to express my own particular emotions associated with isolation, I am now more concerned with raising broader questions about a universal human solitude. From my own experience of isolation, I have come to wonder about the degree to which isolation defines every relationship. Recalling the way that I sometimes felt invisible, I question the role contemporary society might play in rendering individuals insignificant and distanced from each other.

As I continue to explore the theme of isolation, I know that I am creating art to ponder situations I may never have answers for. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of these questions, and their relevance to others, reaffirms my own experience. It is the ability to question, and to imagine alternate existences, which defines us as creative human beings. After all, is the purpose of art to answer questions---or to raise new ones?

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