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Nocturne Series

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NOCTURNE SERIES

Jessie Kirker
Painting Thesis
Union College Visual Arts Department
May 30, 2022

Artist Statement:

My oil paintings explore the mingling of interior and exterior space. Each work in this group focuses upon nocturne scenes with the inclusion of reflections. Inspiration for my work comes from photographs I have taken while walking around at night or from the windows of the space I am in. I have also layered images to develop my own created spaces. Surrealism has played a prominent role in the development of these artworks. The elongated canvases reference the human form and the presence of the viewer in front of the work. With the size of the canvas in mind, I included the human figure in several of these works. The idea and feeling of isolation are present throughout each of my artworks. My hope is that the color palette, the inclusion of the figure, and the size of the canvas will evoke an emotional or visceral reaction from the viewer.

Over the course of my academic career as a studio art major, I have been exposed to several different artists and art movements. The courses I have taken, artists, and movements have been highly influential in the inspiration for my artwork and my process of creating work. All of these elements have allowed my work to evolve over time to be in the place that I am currently at for my senior thesis project.

The subject matter for my work comes from the inspiration of other artists. An artwork that significantly struck me when I saw it in person is Cyprien Gaillard's *Nightlife*, 2015. *Nightlife* is a fifteen-minute 3D film shot entirely at night in varying locations and the sound that played during the film was a recurring portion of "Black Man's World (aka Black Man, White Man)" by Alton Ellis. This work is one that I consistently find myself coming back to and referencing in my artwork. Gaillard juxtaposes nature and an urban setting all within an enveloping 3D experience. He also includes drone shots of fireworks. The clips used in *Nightlife* all occur at night and are lit by artificial light. The slow movements of the plants in the film, along with the lighting of them, give them a life of their own. The palette used in this film deeply impacted the way I used color in my series of paintings. The cinematic quality of this piece is another aspect that I have drawn on when considering how to approach my paintings. This work has been one that has been present in the back of my mind throughout the studio art courses I have taken.

I was drawn to dramatic lighting and nocturne scenes when taking photography I and II. I also frequently found myself photographing reflections within windows. These reflections create a new world and space that is intangible yet present visually. When using photography to gather reference material for paintings, the photographer Todd Hido became an artist that I consistently refer back to. Hido captures unmeasurable amounts of beauty in simple mundane spaces by

having a keen eye for artificial light at night. Hido's photographs are ominous, and the spaces he photographs are ambiguous as they could be anywhere. I have tried to create ominous and ambiguous works in my paintings as I do not want my paintings to have a clear interpretation or narrative. I achieved this by finding areas that included reflective elements, specifically windows. Aside from photographing windows at night, I also layer nocturne images upon one another, adjusting the opacity in order to create reference material for my work.

A dominant factor in my work is the color palette that I work in. Cool tones with flickers of warmth are consistent throughout my work. The palette that I use is influenced by the colors of the night, as the paintings include varying blues and purples. However, to create depth within this palette, my paintings begin with toning the canvas with burnt sienna. I also focus on developing the lights or moments of brightness in the artwork with warm tones that contrast the overall coolness of the works. My choice of color palette was not only influenced by the colors of the night itself but also by Susanna Coffey's *Night Paintings*, the works of David Reed, Tony Shore, and James McNeil Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold*. Susanna Coffey's *Night Paintings* and James McNeil Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold* were highly influential on my work. Both of these artists developed night scenes with a tremendous amount of depth and variation in such dark compositions. Coffey and Whistler also express a great understanding of color theory in their works that influenced how I paired colors and the placement of colors in my paintings. David Reed's palette is electric and magnetic. The color use in his work and its effect on the viewer is what I wanted to achieve in paintings. To achieve this effect, I kept my colors saturated and paid close attention to the viscosity of the paint. Lastly, Tony Shore is a master at creating drama with his use of light and darks. Shore's works have a cinematic quality of immense depth and intensity. With a focus on nocturne scenes, it was vital for me to look at

Shore's work and how he is able to utilize strong points of contrast to elevate the drama and the scene being portrayed in the painting.

As I continued working on my paintings, I began to include the figure in my work. Painting the figure was a different experience for me as I typically had not thought to include or attempted to include a figure in my work. However, I felt that the inclusion of the human figure would add another dimension and layer to my work that helped portray a particular emotional effect. Jenny Saville is a figurative painter that I gravitated toward as a source of inspiration for painting the figure. Saville's figures have an intense quality that causes a feeling of discomfort for the viewer. She also does not use typical colors to depict the figure in some of her works. I felt that I could maintain the color palette I had chosen when painting figures in my work. The painting *Intertwine* by Saville directly influenced how I decided to depict the figures in my works. In *Intertwine*, the figures possess a ghostly and transparent quality as if they are physically there but not entirely. I felt that painting my figures in a similar way would maintain my theme of reflections as well as evoke a visceral reaction for the viewer.



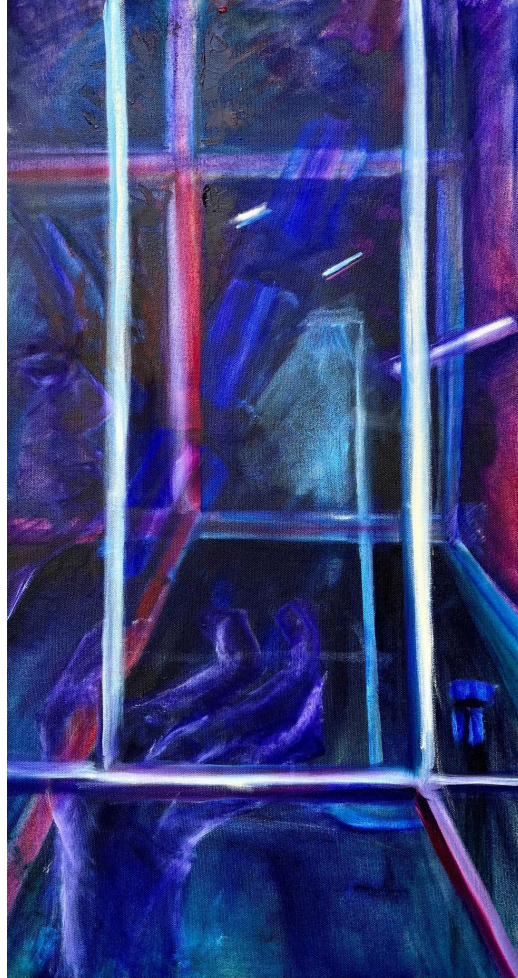
Saville, *Intertwine*, 2011-2014, oil on canvas

Aside from these specific artist influences, the Surrealist movement significantly impacted my work. Each piece in this series has a dreamlike quality reminiscent of Surrealism. As I continued to paint and work on each piece, I found that Surrealism started to manifest itself within the works. The following quote by the French writer André Breton's *The Manifesto of Surrealism* had an impact on the way I approached my work,

To reduce the imagination to a state of slavery – even though it would mean the elimination of what is commonly called happiness – is to betray all sense of absolute justice within oneself. Imagination alone offers me some imitation of what *can be*, and this is enough to remove to some slight degree the terrible injunction; enough, too, to allow me to devote myself to it without fear of making a mistake (as though it were possible to make a bigger mistake). Where does it begin to turn bad, and where does the mind's stability cease? For the mind, is the possibility of erring not rather the contingency of good?¹

This section of Breton's theory on Surrealism summarizes how an artist can and should approach their work. At the beginning of working on this series, I attempted to remain faithful to my references to an extent. I experimented with color the most, but for the most part, remained focused on developing an accurate depiction of the scene or photograph before. However, as I continued the process, I began to allow my imagination to take the lead and used the reference material as a base or a loose outline. Breton's idea of letting oneself surrender to their imagination without fear of making a mistake inspired me to create more imagined scenes or entirely made-up scenes. Moving away from the reference material allowed the works to escape from a strict structure and become more abstract and surreal. Each piece in this series contains elements that are entirely made up, and *Nocturne #5* is a wholly imagined scene. Being able to express and physically represent what is occurring in one's imagination is crucial to evoking emotion through artwork as one's imagination is unique to them and thus includes a level of the subconscious.

¹ (Harrison et al. 447)



Kirker, *Nocturne #5*, 2022, oil on canvas

My process of painting this series included many aspects and several iterations of preparatory drawings and photographs. The physical shape of the canvas itself was crucial to this series and plays a large role in how these works are interpreted. In a painting course I had taken, the class did a project modeled after Abstract Expressionism, it was during this project that I began to consider the effect the size of a canvas can have on the work. For this assignment, I built a canvas that was my height and the width of my wingspan. Painting on a canvas of this size allowed me to utilize my whole body while painting. This was an experience that I had never had before. Working in this manner and having a more physical connection with the

canvas provided more opportunities for spontaneity. This painting style was a process that I wanted to continue to explore with my work.

During a painting course in 2021 was when I first experimented with painting nocturnes. This course was also an online course during the COVID-19 pandemic therefore I was working in my bedroom at home. While working in this space my window became a frequent source of inspiration for my paintings. After completing a nocturne painting of my window, painting from life, I decided to work on a nocturne diptych with a more unconventional-sized canvas. The canvas I painted were both 50" x 22" giving them proportions that relate to the human form as they were tall and narrow. Painting on canvases this size allowed me to paint with my whole body once again. Due to the unconventional size of the canvases, I was able to create a composition that was more abstract and create more of an abstract approach to painting the window from life. These two paintings were pivotal in determining the route I wanted to take with my thesis work.

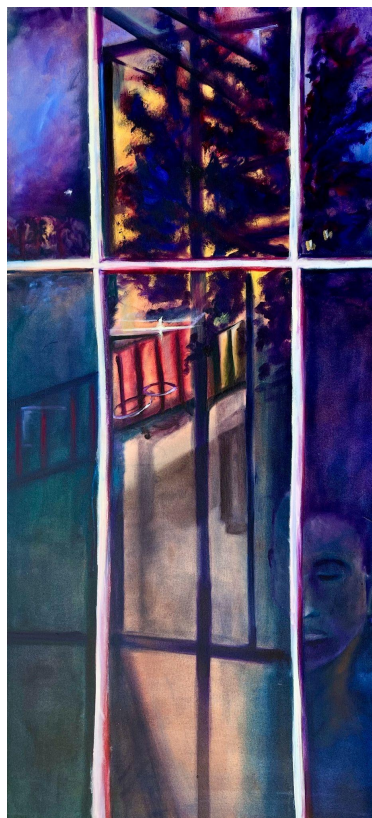


Kirker, *Untitled #1*, 2021, oil on canvas Kirker, *Untitled #2*, 2021, oil on canvas

In the fall of 2021, I was able to work in the art studio on campus for a painting independent study. I continued to work from life and would spend time painting in the studio at night looking out the window in my studio space. As I began to pay close attention to the windows I started to become hyper-aware of the reflections in the glass. I immediately felt that it would be necessary to include reflective elements in the paintings. *Nocturne #1* and *Nocturne #2* are the two works that I began to push the idea of reflections and they became the focus of the paintings. Both of these paintings are 56" x 26". These are slightly larger than the previous two works I discussed allowing me to have a greater physical presence when painting.

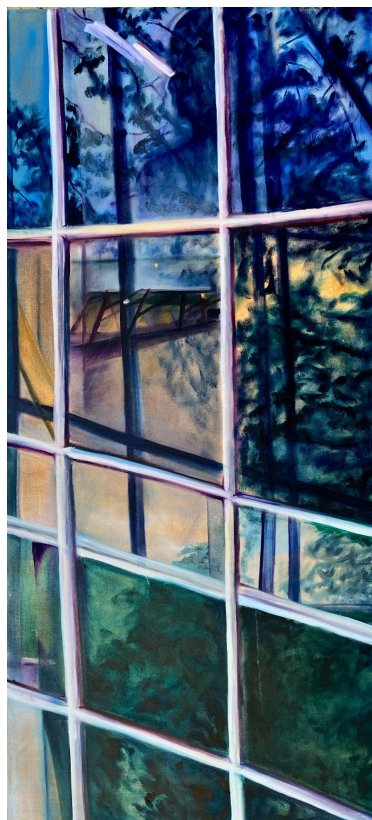
I actually painted *Nocturne #2* first and began by toning the canvas with burnt sienna. After toning the canvas I began to develop my palette by mixing and testing colors. Dioxazine purple became a base for my palette and I continued to work around that color as I felt that cool

dark purple was what I wanted to be the dominant color of the work. I also did a few quick thumbnail sketches in charcoal in order to work out the composition of the work. Once I had the composition figured out I began laying in color. Throughout the process, I looked at the same window picking out elements that felt important to include, while excluding what felt unnecessary. After a while, I began mixing as I went along painting exaggerating the colors I saw through the window. The face in the bottom right of the composition was an addition that occurred later in the painting. Constantly staring at the window I became aware of my own reflection and decided to include a thinly glazed face to read as a reflection. The inclusion of this transparent portrait brought another layer of depth to the painting that could be read as a landscape in a sense.



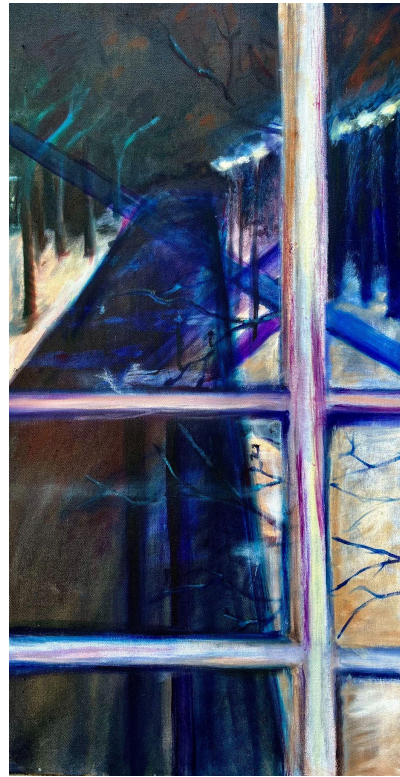
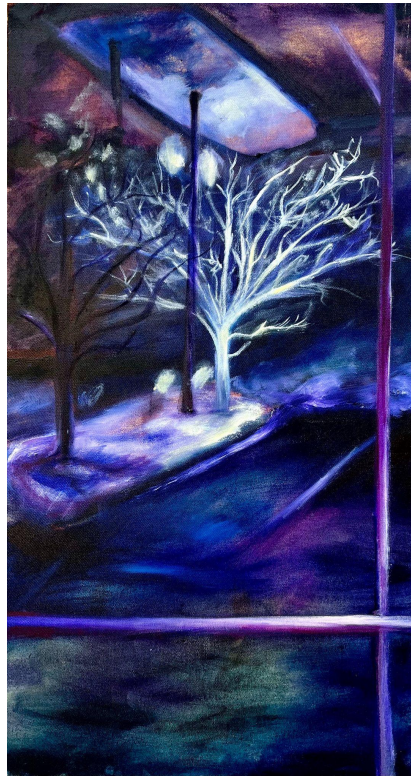
Kirker, *Nocturne #2*, 2021, oil on canvas

In *Nocturne #2* I had experimented with phthalo green and phthalo blue and wanted to continue to push the use of those colors in *Nocturne #1*. When mixing the palette for this painting Prussian blue, ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, phthalo blue, and phthalo green dominated the palette. As they can be such saturated colors I decided to include warm tones and allow the tone of the canvas to show through. This piece includes a more window-like quality as it has more window panes and includes several reflections that abstract the scene occurring out the window. The figure does not have a strong presence in this piece. The only hint of a figure in this work is the silhouette of a head in the top middle of the painting. I wanted this painting to include the figure but in a different way. Having the silhouette strategically placed allows for it to be incorporated into the artwork and not overwhelm the piece.

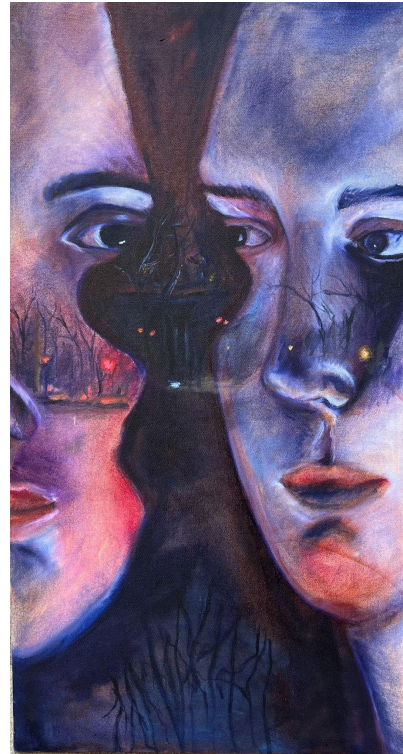
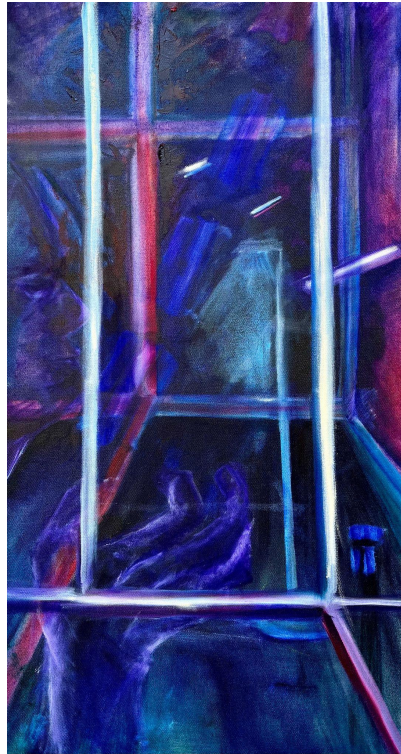


Kirker, *Nocturne #1*, 2021, oil on canvas

After completing *Nocturne #1* I took a different approach with the next four paintings. Rather than having large elongated canvasses I decided to make four smaller elongated canvasses. I felt that variation in canvas size would aid in perpetuating the theme of the window once all the artworks were hung in the gallery. With these four works I moved away from painting from direct observation of the window. Instead I took photos at night to use for reference and also look at photographs that I had previously taken. *Nocturne #5* is essentially a collage of certain parts of nocturnal photographs placed in an imagined space. *Nocturne #4* is based on a photograph with the window panes and the branches on the bottom right imagined. *Nocturne #3* and *Nocturne #6* are based on prints of photographs I had taken about two years ago. The photographs I looked to for references for *Nocturne #3* and *Nocturne #6* contains a very surreal quality that fight perfectly within the series.



Kirker, *Nocturne #3*, 2022, oil on canvas Kirker, *Nocturne #4*, 2022, oil on canvas



Kirker, *Nocturne #5*, 2022, oil on canvas Kirker, *Nocturne #6*, 2022, oil on canvas

Nocturne #6 inspired *Nocturne #7* as I felt that the presence of the double-face created an intense effect and strong composition. After finishing the four smaller works I decided I wanted to go larger than any of the other works in the series and built two canvases at 62" x 28". This size is very close to my height and shoulder-width so it really pushed the idea of the human form in relation to the canvas itself. With that in mind and wanting to include a figure that would dominate the composition I moved out of the window and created an interior space where the window sits more in the background. The interior space is entirely imagined and the exterior space in the window is a collage of nighttime images with the facial reflections being imagined as well. When painting this piece the figure was the main focus however I still wanted to maintain a sense of transparency and ghost-like quality of the figure. To achieve this I used paint that was thinned out by medium and allowed for the architectural elements of the window and the floor to protrude through the figure. When sketching and painting the figure I did not

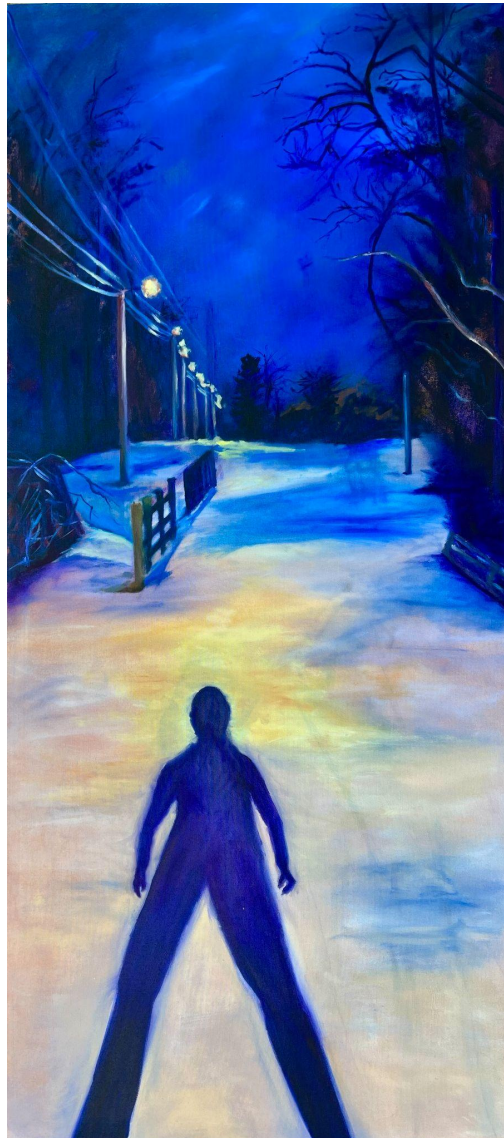
maintain proper human proportions. The figure has an enlarged head and elongated neck. Having the proportions off creates a feeling of obscurity and discomfort for the viewer.



Kirker, *Nocturne #7*, 2022, oil on canvas

In *Nocturne #7* the figure has moved to an interior space and in *Nocturne #8* the figure has moved to an exterior space and is not present within the painting. The figure is represented as a shadow within the snow. For *Nocturne #8* I kept the canvas the same size as *Nocturne #7*, 62" x 28". Having the canvas this size and including the shadow coming up from the bottom of the work facilitates a connection between the viewer and the painting as the shadow could be coming from the viewer standing before the work. The landscape scene is based on a photograph

I had taken at night because I was struck by the intensity of the blue in the sky and the way the light danced off the snow. When painting the sky I used varying blues and blue mixtures to create depth within the sky. My intention with the piece was to create a scene of deep space to pull the viewer in. I also wanted to maintain the cohesiveness of the series while also exploring a different setting for the artwork.



Kirker, *Nocturne #8*, 2022, oil on canvas

When I started working on this series I knew that I wanted to paint nocturne scenes and did not want to have a specific narrative or try to convey a specific meaning or emotion to the

viewer. As I continued to work on the pieces the inclusion of reflections began to develop and a feeling of isolation and calmness started to show through the works. COVID-19 impacted my artistic process and how I see the world around me as I became much more aware of the spaces that I was spending my time in. I feel that the pandemic is what caused the feeling of isolation to become a prominent theme in my work. I had no distinct goal of trying to evoke the feeling of isolation within this series, I believe that it happened organically and subconsciously.

Ultimately my goal with this series of works is to evoke any sort of emotion from the viewer. My intentions with these artworks were not to be strictly technical, but to utilize color, size, and subject matter to provide an immersive and visceral experience for the viewer. I want these artworks to relate to the human form and connect to human experiences through the beauty and simplicity of scenes from our everyday lives.

Works Cited

Harrison, Charles, et al., editors. *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*.
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