

Magical Realism

Christopher Ian Brownlee

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Committee:

Ann Gale
Zhi Lin
Helen O'Toole
Sangram Majumdar
Carly Sheehan
Kuldeep Singh

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Abstract

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Chairs of the Supervisory Committee:

Ann Gale & Zhi Lin

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My recent paintings explore the potential of magical and nonsensical imagery to evoke states of mind. I have studied mythology from many cultures, seeking to understand their non-rational logic. I apply that method of storytelling to narrative paintings, in the hope of capturing complex emotional states. My background is in realistic painting, but that no longer suits the work I'm doing. I seek an expressive mode of mark-making that better complements my non-linear approach to storytelling. I have applied this same myth-based method of organizing and presenting information to the writing of this thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Painting gives form to feelings that are difficult to put into words: the weight of a father's death, the disillusionment of a breakup, the ache of a warming planet, the dissonance of contradictory emotions. This thesis investigates the role of personal mythology in my process, tracing how grief can be transformed through image-making, and how myth offers a means of reimagining one's place in the world. In this body of work, I explore how mythological and non-rational imagery can evoke complex psychological states.

DREAM A LITTLE DREAM

It's a wedding painting, but it isn't *my* wedding. I created these people, so I am responsible for the fate of their relationship. The canvas became a space where optimism and pessimism fought over the couple's odds of staying together. I felt the weight of this burden because I'd been through it, myself.



Dream a Little Dream
oil and acrylic on canvas
72x60"

I woke to the thought, *She and I will never split up. No matter our differences, we'll work through them and come out stronger.* Then I remembered that we'd broke up a year ago, and we'd just finalized our divorce. Despite my efforts, our relationship unraveled, just as my parents' did. Maybe we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes because time is cynical. (I mean cyclical.)

I spent a year of my life trying to save a relationship that couldn't be saved. When everything fell apart, she went diving in the Caribbean and I stayed behind, screaming at the bare walls of the house we'd just bought. I felt myself ripped apart, vulnerable to the elements, in need of some kind of protection.

The creature can only be killed by stabbing it in the heart. But it is cunning. It has moved its heart from its chest to another part of its body. I will hide my heart, too—maybe in my leg. Or my hand. If you are lucky, a mouse or a bird will tell you where it is. If that happens, you'll find it, and you will destroy me.

I thought I had moved it. But my heart is still in the same place.



Hurry
oil on canvas
25x35"

In the past, I had painted from photos—tight, realistic renderings of figures and spaces. But I began to get the sense that realism was no longer suiting the non-linear narratives I wanted to create. The ideas were becoming more unusual, and that needed to be reflected in the way they were painted. I searched for ways to draw that conveyed emotion rather than a simple likeness. I studied the drawing in contemporary art, American folk art, and medieval art from Europe and Asia. I began drawing from imagination. Slowly, the figures I had known only through feeling began to emerge on the page. My paintings grew more playful and more personal. It might seem contradictory to paint painful subjects in a playful way, but these paintings are about navigating contradictory feelings, so perhaps that's appropriate.

The color for a knot in the stomach is orange.

MYTHS AND DREAMS

“We must lead all these beings to the ultimate nirvana so that they can be liberated.” —Coyote

Why study myths, which are surely old and irrelevant? Myths are ancient, but they are the bedrock of all stories. Despite the strangeness of myths, they're familiar to us today because they are written in the same language as dreams. My own approach to storytelling is closest to magical realism: a literary genre where the impossible quietly coexists with the mundane, like a ghost doing dishes. Magical realism does not ask if the miracle happened; it asks what the miracle meant. It embraces the irrational as a truth that the rational has forgotten.



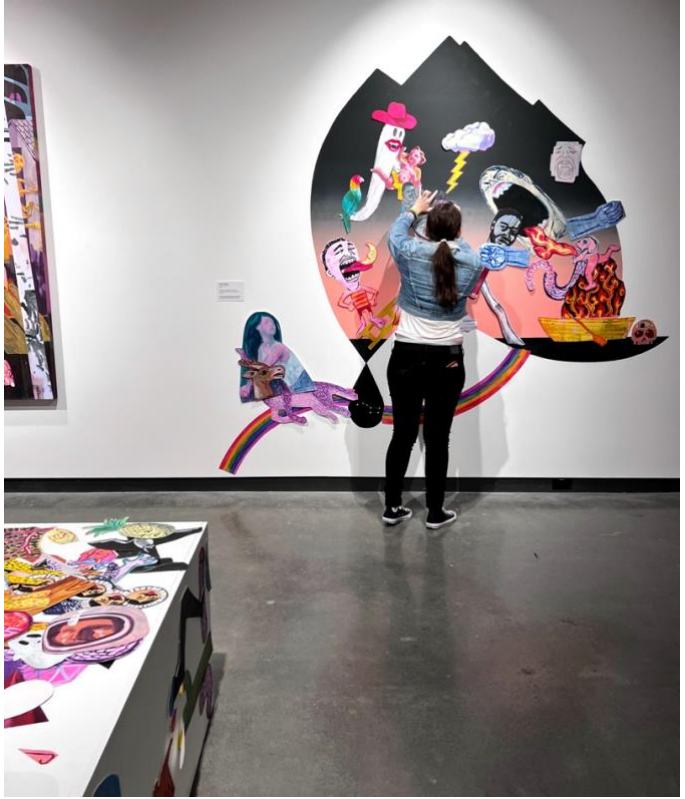
Get it Out
acrylic on panel
42x42"



Boxed
acrylic on panel
11x14"

I have a friend named Bran. He's built like a boulder, all black clothes and soft eyes. One day he told me I was too exposed, said I walked around like a bag of raw nerves. "You need protection," he said. I thought he was offering to be my bodyguard. But instead, he placed a firm hand on my shoulder and said: "Here's what I want you to do: cut off my head. Bury it outside your door, facing east. No one will be able to touch you after that." I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was deadly serious. I didn't want to let him down, but I just couldn't imagine cutting anyone's head off. I told him I'd think about it.

Wonder (n.)
a feeling of surprise mingled with
admiration, caused by something
beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar,
or inexplicable. (Oxford
Languages, 2025)



Interactive Collage
acrylic on paper on wa
Dimensions variable



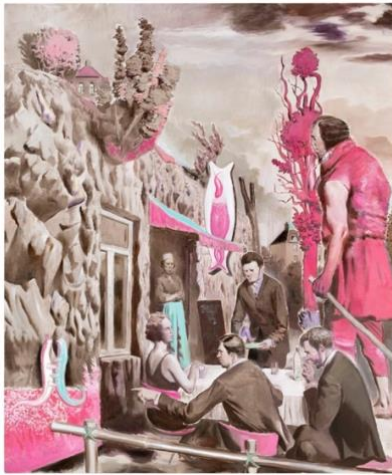
Moving Mountains
Kelly Sinnapah Mary



Lying With the Wolf
Kiki Smith



The Infidels
Marcel Dzama



Der Felsenwirt
Neo Rauch



Glade
Rosa Loy

With mythological narrative, I am working within a tradition that goes back to the beginning of Western art. In contrast to earlier artists, who painted Classical or Biblical scenes, contemporary artists use the grammar of myth to tell new stories about the world today. Some artists I admire include Kelly Sinnapah Mary, Kiki Smith, Marcel Dzama, Neo Rauch, and Rosa Loy.

I hope that when someone stands before one of my paintings, they understand some—but not all of it. That uncertainty is a doorway, not a wall. If they can rest inside that partial understanding, a sense of wonder may emerge. Wonder is not escapism; it is a vital component of resistance. It allows us to imagine that the world can be different, that transformation is possible.

**The color for dreaming is yellow.
Its direction is north.**

TIME

*Now it's my turn to be young.
Now it's my turn to be grown.
Now it's my turn to be old.
Will I get a turn to be young again?*

I can tell you that prayers work. When I was a kid, everything was unraveling—my parents split and my grandfather died. My mom visited him in the hospital every night while my sister and I sat in the lobby reading comic books. I started having nightmares, so I prayed: *God, if you won't stop the dreams, at least let me forget them.* It worked. Except for the occasional fragment, I haven't remembered a dream since. I miss them. Maybe I paint to reclaim my lost dreams.

A lot of my dreams are set in my grandparents' home. That makes sense—we moved constantly, but my grandparents lived in the same house all my life. They were stability. When they died, I inherited their photo albums. No one else wanted them. I couldn't bear the thought of all those memories vanishing.



The Curse That Haunts My Family
oil on paper on panel
30x22"

In one photo, my sister and I are at a family gathering, each wearing a dead crow around our neck like some macabre necklace. It was a family tradition linked to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." In the poem, a sailor killed an albatross, which was considered bad luck. The other sailors forced him to wear its dead body around his neck as punishment. Ours symbolized everything we'd inherited: love and loyalty, but also addiction and mental illness.

**The color for the passage of time is brown.
Its direction is south.**

DAD'S FUNERAL

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." -John Muir

Next, I find a photo of my father as a teenager, circa 1970. Gas was cheap, the sky was bluer, and the carbon count a sustainable 325 parts per million. He's smiling—sunlit, full of youth. There's a tilt to the grin, like something secret kept behind the teeth. I wonder if the anger had already arrived by then, if it slept in him like a fault line, waiting for the slightest trigger to erupt.

The 1815 eruption of Gunung Tambora, an Indonesian volcano, blacked out the sky, causing temperatures to drop in what was called the *year without a summer*. The soot-stained skies allowed J.M.W. Turner to paint the most beautiful sunsets ever seen.



Sunset
J.M.W. Turner

In 2020, the sky was blue again—for a moment. Planes had stopped, cities paused. My sister and I each got a call. Our father had checked himself into a hospital and he didn't expect to walk out. The carbon count was now 412 parts per million. In the fifty years since that photo, global animal populations had fallen by 73%. One man's life, measured in loss.



How To Fight Loneliness
oil on panel
10x20"

We flew to Las Vegas to visit him in the hospital. Despite the COVID restrictions, they let us into his room. He didn't have COVID; he had something much older. He was unconscious. His chest rose and fell mechanically, the ventilator making his body breathe like a bellows. Fifteen minutes. That was the time we were given. We spoke to him as if he could hear. We thanked him for the lives he'd given us, though whatever we said felt inadequate. He had once told us he wanted Elton John's *Funeral for a Friend* played at his memorial, but this was the height of the pandemic: there would be no funeral. So, in that fluorescent room, I played it from my phone. The tinny speaker was too small for grief. It was the best we could do when people had to mourn six feet apart.



Dad's Funeral
oil and acrylic on canvas
72x60"

I was angry with him for dying. I know how unfair that is. But without a funeral, without formality or fire or flowers, I was left holding the heat of that anger. So, I painted him a funeral. One big enough to hold all his contradictions. All his ex-wives, his friends, his ghosts. Elton John at a baby grand. His Dodge Challenger lowered into the earth like an offering.

The painting isn't just about my father's death, it's about the ways that death fits into, and affects the wider world. It's an ecology of grief: each figure in the image caught in their own orbit of mourning, connected by invisible filaments to a larger cosmology. A painting of this scope requires many figures, arranged in a complex composition.

Contemporary artists to whom I look for guidance in composition include Nicole Eisenman, who incorporates different styles of painting, and Kerry James Marshall, who re-interprets themes from Renaissance paintings in a modern context.



Another Green World
Nicole Eisenman



Studio
Kerry James Marshall

The color for grieving is viridian.
Its direction is west.
Its symbol is the lowered fist.

SCARS

Scars form in three stages: inflammation, proliferation, and maturation. Blood, then fibers, then something like skin. Once injured, the skin is never quite the same: mammals heal by repair, not regeneration. The goal, after an injury, is not to be the same as before, but to keep going.

In the 1480 painting of Saint Sebastian by Andrea Mantegna, the saint is tied to a pillar and pierced with arrows. He's the man who was shot with arrows but didn't die.

I freed myself from the pillar, but the arrows are still there. It hurts, but you get used to it. I walk around with the arrows sticking out of me like a pincushion. People see them but they pretend not to notice. "How are you doing?" they ask, but they look away as I answer.



Saint Sebastian
Andrea Mantegna

I painted a figure splitting open with flames, and another drowning in a flood of his own tears. I meant them as portraits of anxiety and despair—but others saw rising seas, wildfires, melting ice. They weren't wrong. The interior and exterior bleed into each other. Mental health, environmental health: just different names for the same wound.



Burning Up
oil on paper on panel
11x9"



Cry Me a River
oil on panel
11x8"

The meaning of a work of art is slippery; if it is fixed in place it will wither. A painting should flicker between what it is and what it might become. I paint not to finish, but to stay unfinished. I want each painting to remain open, in-motion, ever-likely to transform into something else. A work of art is the product of a dialogue between an idea and its execution. An artist I look to for inspiration in this is Amy Sillman. She paints layer upon layer, each a response to the one it covers. Often faint traces of earlier lines show through, like an injury through scar tissue. It's healed over, yet the past shows through.



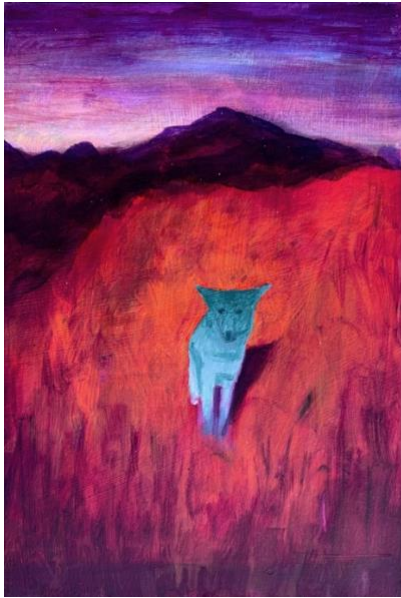
Friend
Amy Sillman

“That foot into depression...gives us a sensitivity to the preciousness of life, the beauty of it, and work that needs to be put in to maintain it.... So, it's sad but beautiful.” -Alana

The color for “the experience of sadness allowing a heightened appreciation for the preciousness of life” is purple.
Its direction is east.
Its symbol is the night rainbow.

CLOSURE

“Once upon a time... there was the simple understanding that to sing at dawn and to sing at dusk was to heal the world through joy. The birds still remember what we have forgotten, that the world is meant to be celebrated.” - Terry Tempest Williams



Encounter
oil on panel
12x8

My recent paintings explore the potential of magical and nonsensical imagery to evoke states of mind. I have studied stories from many cultures, seeking to employ the logic of myths and dreams. I am especially influenced by Buddhist visual traditions, which use figuration to externalize inner experience. In contrast to my background in realism, I am searching for expressive ways to draw and paint. I want my paintings to be open-ended, both in their storytelling and the way they're painted. I am in the early stages of this process: still learning to leave a painting unfinished, still learning to communicate something personal in a way that others can relate to. When someone steps into one of my paintings, I want them to feel as if anything is possible: that the world is still being made and that they have a part in it.

The color for peace is green: bright, new-spring-growth green.
Its direction is center.
Its symbol is you.

POSTSCRIPT

According to stories that went viral on the internet, the Mayan calendar predicted the end of the world in 2012. That didn't happen, but few people know why. Here's how it happened: The 2012 football season was a good one for the Westside Patriots (my high-school football team.) They'd won every game, and the newspapers predicted they would make it to the state championships. Then, during an afternoon practice session, a crack opened in the field near the twenty-yard line. Out came demons, breath smoking, eyes like cracked lava. They were here to end the world. Like knights of old, the Patriots sprang into action and charged the Hordes of Hell, armed only with helmets and shoulder-pads. Despite the loss of many valuable players, the Patriots proved themselves to be true American heroes. This painting honors their victory and their sacrifice.



Facing My Demons (Westside Patriots vs. the Hordes of Hell)

acrylic on panel

118x168"

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