

Grief Is A Field

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Abstract

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Painting + Drawing Program

Grief Is a Field investigates how grief ruptures chronology and alters the body's experience of time. Initiated by personal loss, this research considers grief not as a past event but as an ongoing process in which memory, sensation, and imagined futures collapse into the present. I worked with processes that allow memory to appear as unstable, partial, and atmospheric, through large-scale painting, monotype printmaking, material experiments with transparent oil paint, organza, glycerin, wax, and gelatin. By doing so, I explore painting as a temporal field: a place where bodies, landscapes, and remembered fragments remain suspended between becoming and unbecoming.

Introduction

The summer of 2024 before starting my graduate program remains dog-eared in my memory. When I close my eyes I can still trace the outline of it: a worn, leather couch, something murmuring on the television, my phone vibrating with my sister's name across the screen, and an uneasy feeling in my gut because we rarely called each other. I answered to hear that my brother was dead. There was no shock or disbelief, only a suspension of time and reality. Grief placed me both inside and outside myself, as if the boundaries of my body had loosened. Memories of the last time we spoke, fragments of our shared childhood, and our lost future began collapsing into the present. This disruption of time became the point of exploration for my thesis work.

Throughout the duration of graduate school, I kept returning to the question of how a painting might hold the experience of grief without simply illustrating it. I became interested in whether paintings could function as vessels for unstable memory and recall. Could a representational medium hold sensation and vulnerability without



Figure 1. *Going Under*, 2026, 9'x5', Oil on canvas

forcing grief into a linear narrative? In the studio this question began to take form through fragmented bodies, blurred surfaces, and unstable landscapes. Images emerged and dissolved. Through honing in on the process of painting, printmaking, and material experimentation, I began searching for a visual language that could articulate the strange weather of loss.

Content and Research

Grief is a field. It is vast, unstable, and hard for me to leave. It feels like the place I am living in. The past presses into the present, our dead remain near, and the future becomes altered by their absence. Death changes the pressure of ordinary life. The past does not stay behind me. It returns through memory, color, sensation, and place. Grief is not something I pass through once. It is a terrain I keep moving through.

Thomas Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead* helped me articulate the dead as active presences within culture. They continue to shape rituals, objects, places, and the lives of those who remain. In this context my work functions as sites where the dead continue to act on the present. In my work imagery drifts and resists resolution. Investigating ways of depicting memory as something unstable and unfinished. Ocean Vuong describes loss as a compression of time: *"My whole life kind of contracted into two days... today, when they are no longer here, and yesterday... when they were."* (Vuong, 47) His writing articulates memory as something unfinished and inhabitable rather than fixed or complete. Grief, therefore, is both an event that happened in the past and is the field I continue to move through. The dead do not remain behind us.

Process

My paintings hold memory through residue. Drawing from memory and collected imagery, I keep a record of my research through my sketchbook practice. My process begins through research, reading, writing, and remembering. I then translate this first step into many iterative sketches and drawings. I return to these drawings and notes when developing each new work. In my most recent paintings, I work with them on the ground, dragging mops loaded with wet pigment across the surface and letting the color sink in. After the first washes dry, I return with extended drawing tools. Their distance from my hand keeps the marks unstable and loose. I pull images out of the stains then wipe and interrupt them so they begin to sink back into the ground. Oil paint enters later as a slower process. It lets me stain, glaze, and build up areas of the image without fully resolving it.

The gelli plate became a tool for ritual and repetition in the studio. I made my own gelli plates by melting gelatin and glycerin into a large mold to create a soft matrix for monotype prints. Monotypes forced

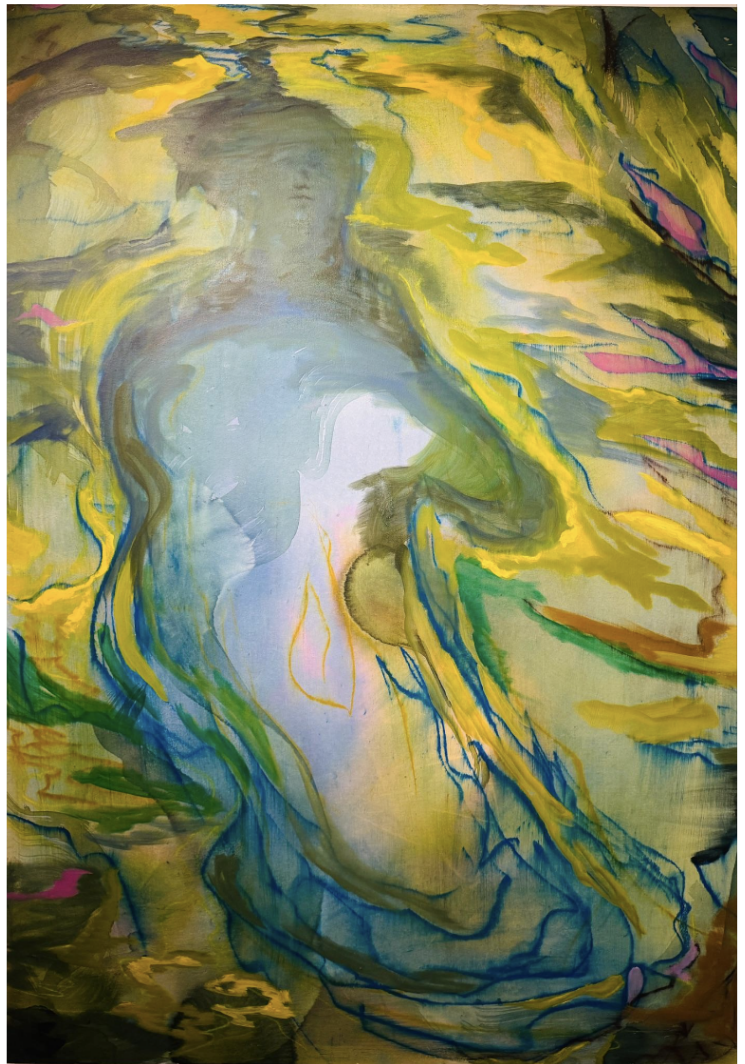


Figure 2. *The Long Soak*, 2026, 6'x4', Oil and acrylic on canvas

me to work more closely with my intuition and immediacy. This became a routine to start my day in the studio. Working with quick, gestural mark-making and intuitive color allowed me to consider abstraction more in my practice. In the past, I relied heavily on figuration and narration to articulate conceptual themes but working more loosely and intuitively expanded the possibilities of the work. Through abstraction I could let color worlds hold emotions and language instead of solely relying on imagery. The matrix became a place of repetition and ritual. The image transfers but never perfectly just like the act of remembering. I could let color worlds hold emotions and language instead of solely relying on imagery.

Didi-Huberman describes the image as a threshold. In the Whitechapel anthology *Time* he writes, "*Whenever we are before the image, we are before time,*" (Didi-Huberman 34) comparing the encounter with an image to standing before an open doorway. My images, therefore, are not a sealed or frozen moment. It is an opening. They can hold multiple times at once, including the history of its making. Consequently, the matrix becomes a place of repetition and ritual. Images transfer, but never perfectly just like the act of remembering

Material as Memory

Over the last two years experimentation and play have become embedded into my practice. Prompted by a studio visit with Carly Sheehan in my first year, I began to examine the material aspect of my work more closely and to investigate how my materials and concept could be in dialogue. How could the physical qualities of my work align with the conceptual? Could the sensations of grief be described by the fragility or vulnerability of materials? These questions sparked my interest in

exploration and elevated my ways of approaching my practice. I investigate instability as both method and metaphor, I work with materials such as transparent oil paint, organza, glycerin, and wax.. Blurring images, staining surfaces, eroding narratives, and translucent atmospheres embody the shifting and incomplete nature of memory.

Likewise, artist Louise Bourgeois' work *Peaux de Lapins, Chiffons Ferrailles à Vendre* (2006) has become important to how I understand memory as something that

can become material form. Her use of fabric and bodily fragments show memory built and reopened through materials. This led me to think of paint, nylons, wax, organza, and glycerin as materials capable of carrying psychic weight. Using pantyhose and wax to layer over vulnerable painted images in *Tender Relics*

(figure 4) and branches stuffed into nylons in



Figure 3. *LadyLegs*, 2026, branches, soil, nylons

Ladylegs (figure 3) created the overall effect of a physical manifestation of memory mediated by time/grief. After these works, the surface of canvas was no longer just a place to build an image. I began treating paint as a substance that I could respond to, a substance that remembers



Figure 4. *Tender Relic*, 2025, 20"x48", oil, wax, organza on canvas

and carries actions. This experimentation allowed me to work with oil paint in new ways to mimic the blur of time and the transparency of the veil that separates the living and the dead.

In July of 2025, I attended The Tropical Labs residency in Singapore. This residency shifted my work away from private grief and toward shared mourning. Working with the local curator, Tamaras Goh, I was guided in research about local burial practices and the Hungry Ghost festival. Rooted in Chinese Buddhist/Taoist beliefs, this festival is observed during the seventh month of the lunar calendar. The belief is that during this month the gates of the underworld open and spirits return to the world of the living. Families and communities make offerings to ancestors and wandering spirits. They are fed, honored, and at peace. It is not a festival in the Western sense but a month of ritual and remembrance. Mourning becomes less private there, it is



Figure 5. *We Heal In The Holding*, 2025, glycerin, silk, and wire

something that was witnessed, felt, and shared. I came to understand remembrance as a form of care and service to community, rather than/in addition to our private/individual processing. Simultaneously, after learning casting methods from Australian sculptor Liss Finney. I melted and poured glycerin into a mold of my hands and face culminating in the work *We Heal In The Holding* (figure 5) for the residency exhibition. This work grapples with an acceptance of my own inevitable death: A self-portrait built from chicken wire, sheer grey fabrics, and a translucent glycerin cast of my face laid to rest on a burial plinth. In the sticky wet heat of Singapore, the portrait wept and encouraged viewers to weep with me.

Back in Seattle, the work *I miss you more than I remember you* (figure 6) was shaped by this experience. I created 40 glycerin hands that hung on the wall with palms facing upwards. Glycerin is an unstable material which clouds, blooms, changes



Figure 6. *I Miss You More Than I Remember You*, 2025, 40 glycerin casts

over time, and dissolves in water. It is a humectant that absorbs the moisture in the air and sweats it back out. I am drawn to this bodily aspect of the material because it can preserve a moment while shifting and changing much like ourselves. Like Bourgeois' piece *The Welcoming Hands* (1996), I am interested in the fragment as a carrier of memory. Hands are not a whole body, but it can still carry so much meaning in each gesture. The work is an invitation and permission to viewers to mourn as a community.

Imagery

In the bodies of work I've made over the last two years I've paid close attention to patterns and reemerging imagery in the studio. Four images that have kept returning are bodies, animals, landscapes, and apertures. Birds and prey animals act as emotional proxies for the self and viewers. They hold alertness, vulnerability, intuition, instinct, and



Figure 7. *We Are Creatures Of This World*, 2025, 8"x5", Oil on canvas

carry the primal knowledge that the body is temporary. In *We Are Creatures Of This World* (figure 7) a herd of larger than life sheep crowd and push together. Their heads are wiped away and smeared to show their movement and unsettled state. The eyes gleam in the dark atmosphere surrounding them. This work is meant to consider how all living things mourn.

Throughout my research of animals I have found birds kept appearing in death rituals and myths. I am most interested in birds as messengers and early warning systems. They announce weather, danger, migration, and change before we can fully see it. In this body of work the birds have become a symbol for the spirit world and traveling through temporalities.



Figure 8. *We Buried What We Could*, 2026, 5"x4", Oil on canvas



Figure 9. *Undine*, 2025, 8"x4", acrylic on canvas

In "Figure/Ground" Mira Schor writes, "*Paintings are vague terrains on which paint, filtered through the human eye, mind, and hand, flickers in and out of representation, as figure skims ground, transmitting thought.*" (Schor 15) This language clarifies what I am trying to make visible in paintings like in *Undine* (Figure 9) and *Shapeshifting* (Figure 10) where the figure is not placed against a landscape but being absorbed by it. Body, ground, memory, and atmosphere move through one another. A figure bends and folds into itself, sexless and unnamable. Another figure sinks into a body of water. Their form dissolves into the surroundings, making grief visible as a loss of boundary.

Landscapes and apertures became ways to make tangible the feeling of being both present and elsewhere. Caves, hollows, and bodies of water appear as openings; I



Figure 10. *Shapeshifting*, 2026, 4'x6', oil and acrylic on canvas

use them to visualize places where the surface gives way: a mouth, a wound, a portal, a grave. I return to these forms because grief often feels spatial to me, as if there are openings inside ordinary life where another time becomes tangible. Indira Allegra's grief-portals help me understand these openings and voids as active spaces. In *Unspooling die Gramgewinde*, Allegra describes the "spaces between threads" as "places of activity for both the maker and the viewer" (Allegra 2021, 511). While my work is rooted in painting, this language parallels how I think about apertures as charged spaces that the dead can move through.

Conclusion

This work began with the impossible fact of a death that did not stay in the past. Painting became the place where I could stay in the present with what was unresolved. My works do not try to recover what is gone but attempt to hold the conditions left behind: the blurred edges of memory, the body altered by loss, the strange closeness of the dead, and the places where portals keep opening. Through staining, casting, veiling, printing, and erasing, I found that grief could be approached sensorily rather than representationally. What I understand now is that grief changes perception. It changes how time feels, how the body moves, how images return, and how materials begin to carry meaning. The paintings do not offer closure. They make contact with what cannot be settled. My brother did not return through the work, but the work gives form to the ways he remains near. It lets loss stay active, unfinished, and present. Painting does not lead me out of grief, but it gives me a way to keep living inside its weather.

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