

DIGITAL DETRITUS: DOOMSCROLLING AS STUDIO PRACTICE

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Abstract

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INTRODUCTION



brainrot, 2025

Brain rot (n.) Supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as a result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging. Also: something characterized as likely to lead to such deterioration.

— Oxford English Dictionary, Word of the Year 2024

My thesis begins with this word not as a critique of others, but as a self-diagnosis. "Brain rot" feels like consuming the McDonald's of visual stimuli. The images are cheap, addictive, predictable, and designed to keep attention moving at all costs. Brainrot is the new-age proverbial childhood mascot Ronald McDonald. Like fast food, the slop online leaves behind

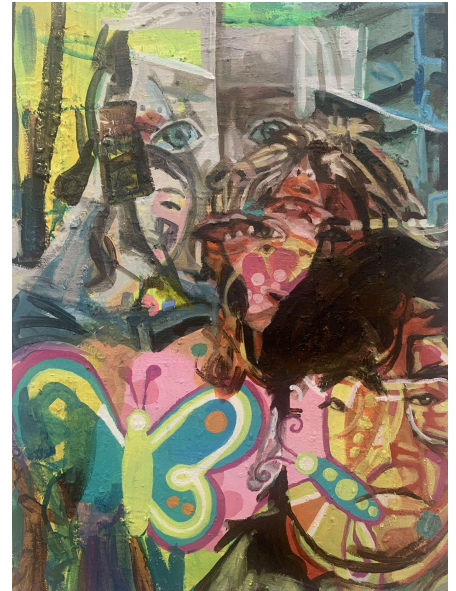
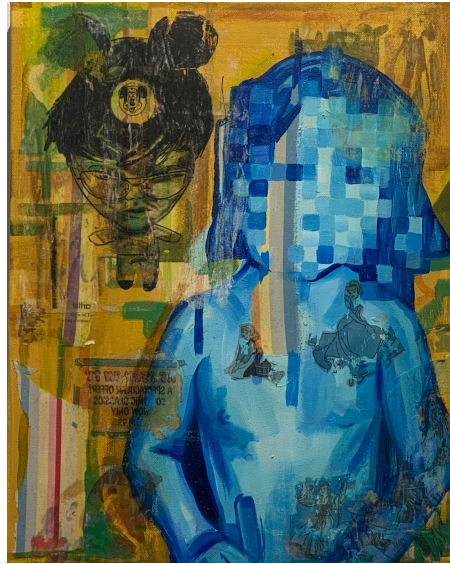
a strange physical exhaustion, a sense of overstimulation mixed with emptiness. Online, this attention has become a form of currency, and the feed rewards whatever keeps people scrolling longest. Around this time last year, I woke up and began scrolling TikTok before I was fully awake. Between ordinary videos, a sponsored recipe for cinnamon rolls, clips of *Family Guy*, and other drivel that I can no longer remember, I saw blurry footage of Charlie Kirk's assassination uploaded less than an hour earlier. What unsettled me was not only the violence of the image, but how seamlessly it existed beside everything else. The feed flattened tragedy, humor, advertising, and distraction into the same emotional register. My work begins inside that collapse. One minute I watch a video of an old woman dancing to Darude's *Sandstorm*, and the next, a news clip announcing the Supreme Court's move to unban conversion therapy. The simultaneity of joy, cruelty, and distraction defines how I experience day to day life.

Painting interrupts the speed of scrolling. It doesn't fix or moralize, but it holds the flood still long enough to examine what floats to the surface. Each canvas becomes a sediment layer of digital life. It is a place where memes, AI-generated fragments, and discarded screenshots are buried and fossilized in paint.

These paintings are in conversation with my earlier bodies of work. They are not simple collages, but anchored to art-historical compositions—*The Birth of Venus*, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, and Dada collages—that act as stable references inside the chaos. The "high" culture of art history is consumed, digested, and then literally shat out with memes, UI elements, and internet detritus. In an age of AI image generation, the physicality of a hand-painted surface feels somewhat radical. It is a human pace inside an inhuman speed.

This thesis asks: **What does it mean to paint in an age when information and images are disposable and instant?** Painting allows me to exist within that contradiction. It allows me to make something slow in a culture that demands acceleration, to find sincerity inside irony and to love the waste.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



experiments, 2025

My practice developed from a process of searching for discarded images. In my Winter quarter of my first year, I worked with physical collage. I cut up thrifted children's books, family photos, and *Playboy* magazines. Those fragments carried nostalgia but not honesty. They weren't my world. The physical collage felt disconnected from the online visual culture I actually live inside. The breakthrough came after visiting Derek Tyler Franklin's studio where he described his paintings as "screens" layered like theater sets. I realized that I could manipulate images digitally and project them back into painting, allowing everything—memes, icons, screenshots, classical references—to happen at once.



M.A.M.A series, 2025

Since then, my imagery has evolved from self-portraiture and identity-based collage to a fully digital archive. My "MAMA" paintings, ninety-nine versions of my mom's Facebook profile picture, marked a significant turning point for me. The source image was native to the internet, it existed publicly and was begging to be iterated upon. In fact, since our estrangement (big sad), I unfriended her on Facebook, and she would haunt me from the "People You May Know" section of the friends list. Those works opened a permission structure, if my mother's pixelated smile could be a subject, then so could the icons, glitches, tragic text messages, and jokes that fill my daily feed.

I see this collision everywhere. It is not just a distraction, but a moral weather system that governs how we feel. I see this collapse everywhere. It's in videos of violence next to ads, memes about depression beside lifestyle content, and fears of AI next to a completely machine made tiktok. I wanted my paintings to feel like that, to produce the same dizzying empathy gap. To the casual viewer, they might read as chaotic or excessive, but for those who share my visual vocabulary—the chronically online generation—there are

breadcrumb trails of reference and personal symbolism. They are multi-layered, funny, despairing, and coded.



i <3 big tech, 2026

Legacy Russell writes in *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* that "the glitch is a refusal of the body to perform as expected" (14). I see my paintings as staging that refusal, not through the body but through the image itself. Historical painting begins to malfunction. It refuses to behave and remain respectable. The glitch becomes an act of rebellion, a way to reveal the seams in both classical art and the seamlessness of the digital feed.

This collapse takes place within the broader condition of the internet. Taylor Lorenz in *Chronically Online* describes the change as "[...] everything around us: who we know; how we meet; how we work; how we date; how we play; who gets famous; whom we trust; what we want; and who we want to be." (6). That statement captures how digital experience has become the atmosphere of my work. I think of the internet as a toxic guardian. It introduced me to queer identity, fandom culture, roleplay, and ways of imagining myself that did not exist in my immediate environment growing up. At the same time, it exposed me to shock content, grooming, conspiracy culture, and the rise of ironic alt-right rhetoric

in the mid-2010s. As a teenager consuming gaming content online, I brushed against spaces where racism, misogyny, and cruelty were framed as “just dark humor.” This was around 2015-2016, at the height of an online social media war that is way more important than you might think. 4chan (degenerate breeding ground) vs Tumblr (degenerate fandom breeding ground, *but* predominantly female and LGBTQIA+). Two online clashing cliques that represented a large group of young Gen Z. I didn’t want to be seen as those overly sensitive users that were mocked on Tumblr, and just that small hesitation opened my algorithm to feed me this edgy content.. Looking back, that black-and-white thinking shaped how I understood both myself and other people. Similarly, Lorenz’s idea of “visibility fatigue” mirrors a film behind the eyelids after hours of doomscrolling. The painted surface becomes that residue.

Within this environment, humor and irony take on a specific function. Angela Nagle writes in *Kill All Normies* that “irony has ceased to be a subversive weapon and has become a shield against criticism” (112). This helped me recognize that the “trash culture” I’m drawn to is not neutral. My humor is not detached; it often operates as a cover for something more serious. Like a John Waters film, the work embraces the rot even as it exposes it. I’m drawn to the awkward sincerity of images like “buff white Jesus” or an “am I gay?” quiz. These fragments feel stupid, embarrassing, and strangely holy at once.

Hito Steyerl’s concept of the “poor image” helps frame the material condition of these images. In the manifesto, *In Defense of the Poor Image*, she describes them as “compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed” and circulating through digital networks at the expense of their original quality. Steyerl also refers to the images as “the debris of audiovisual production,” the trash that accumulates within digital culture. (1) This directly aligns with my interest in collecting and reworking internet imagery. The images I use are often already low-resolution or detached from their original context. Instead, I treat their compression and distortion as part of their meaning.



stills from *the ringmaster*, 2026

Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle in his book *Society of the Spectacle* expands this condition into a social framework. He writes that "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation", and that the spectacle is "a social relation between people that is mediated by images." (2) The images I use are not neutral; they already exist within systems of circulation, attention, and consumption. My paintings take this condition seriously, building compositions where representation overtakes direct meaning and where images organize attention rather than simply illustrate it.



say poochrist and society goes wild, 2026

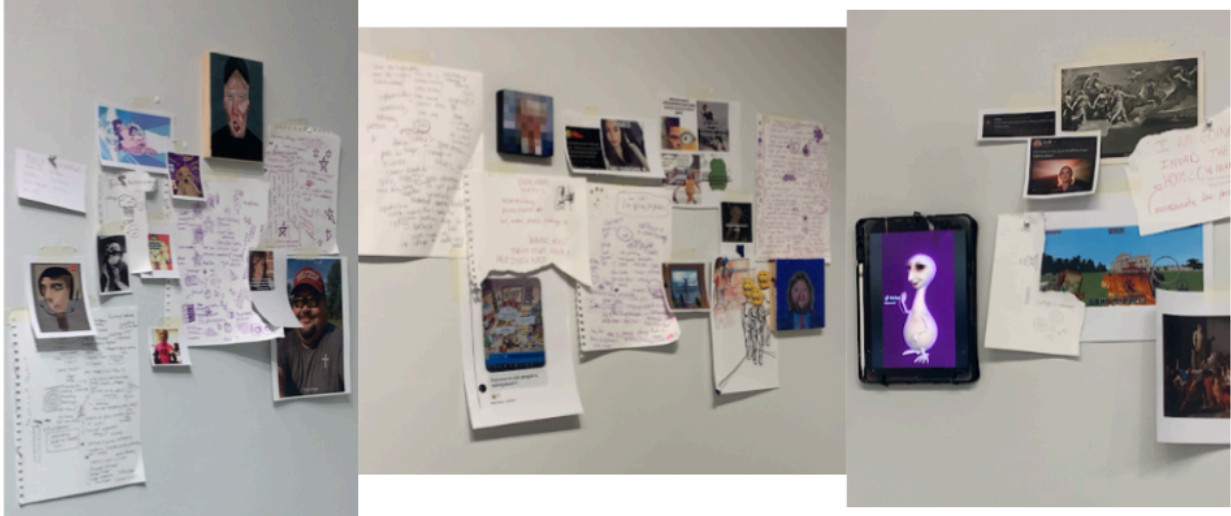
Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg in *A Cyborg Manifesto* offers a way to think through the instability of identity within this system. She describes the cyborg as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction".(1) The figures in my paintings are not purely human; they are constructed from fragments, references, and digital interfaces. Haraway's emphasis on "the pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" (2) resonates with my approach to layering and distortion. My work allows identities and images to remain partial and constantly shifting.

Adam Aleksic's writing in *Algospeak: How Social Media Is Transforming the Future of Language* shows how even language is shaped by these same systems. He describes algospeak as a set of linguistic adaptations developed to navigate algorithmic moderation, where users alter words to maintain visibility and circulation. Communication becomes filtered and indirect, shaped by platform logic rather than purely expressive intent. This dynamic parallels the way images function in my work. Just as language becomes coded and

distorted, visual culture becomes layered and unstable. The images I use carry this same condition, shaped by systems that prioritize circulation over clarity.

I'm drawn to images that are excessive, embarrassing, or difficult to look away from: AI-generated biker graphics, Christian hypermasculinity, cringey furry fan art, obsessive fictional crushes, adult cartoons, and conspiracy content designed to provoke outrage or confusion. I love the authenticity of this trash, and the boldness of people throwing images into the churning aether of the internet without restraint. Online, a baby cousin's birth announcement can exist beside Osama bin Laden's manifesto, porn ads, and a crunchy meme reposted thousands of times. That collision feels absurd, horrifying, and deeply honest about contemporary attention. Painting introduces friction to hold that chaos still, or at least make the mess visible. If the digital feed produces constant collapse, the studio becomes a space of slow resistance where images are rebuilt from fragments and allowed to exist outside the speed of circulation.

PROCESS AND MATERIAL PRACTICE



studio notes from *Studio Explosion!*, 2025

My studio is rarely quiet, but it's not filled with music either. While I paint, I listen to hours-long video essays: *The Horrors of North Korean Internet*, dramatic REDDIT *STORIES* and *minecraft to fall asleep to*, *Sydney Sweeney and the Outrage Machine*. The projector whirrs on; its glow spills across canvases and piles of acrylic tubes. Printed screenshots pile beside glitter, hand-cut stencils, porn ads, cheap acrylic paint, doodles, scraps of found paper, and notes scribbled in the margins of image boards. The walls and tables become crowded with overlapping references waiting to be pulled into a painting. Then, the studio feels halfway between a workspace and a desktop with multiple tabs open, windows layered and thought fragments waiting to be merged. Even when I'm away from my phone, the visual language of the screen lingers in the studio through fragments of text, UI elements, and compressed images that slowly migrate into the work.



im so tired's image board

My image collection process begins with a strange online phenomenon or meme thread that I can't stop thinking about. For example, I became fascinated with posts where people joked "can someone just do it already" or "how it'll feel reading the headline," a covert way of inviting someone to assassinate President Donald Trump. That recurring joke made me think about the way we aestheticize violence, humor masking aggression, and a group feeling of helplessness. I remembered the historical drama *The Assassination of Julius Caesar*—all those serious men in their robes with knives—and wondered if anything has changed? Power still looks theatrical, corrupt, and absurd. Around the same time, I was also playing a lot of the sandbox building/survival game *Minecraft*. Online, people often soften conspiratorial or taboo statements by adding "in Minecraft" to avoid sounding unhinged (ex. "The FBI killed Martin Luther King Jr, *in Minecraft*."). I visited a one-to-one recreation of the White House in-game, placed TNT across the lawn, lit it, and took a screenshot the moment before the explosion while holding a Totem of Undying. "What is the legendary Totem of Undying?" Someone reading this might be asking if they are unfamiliar with the mechanics of the game. The Totem of Undying is a rare object you hold in your offhand that prevents you from dying after taking fatal damage. In the painting, it shows that whoever is placing the TNT (me) is aware of the risk, and has taken precautions

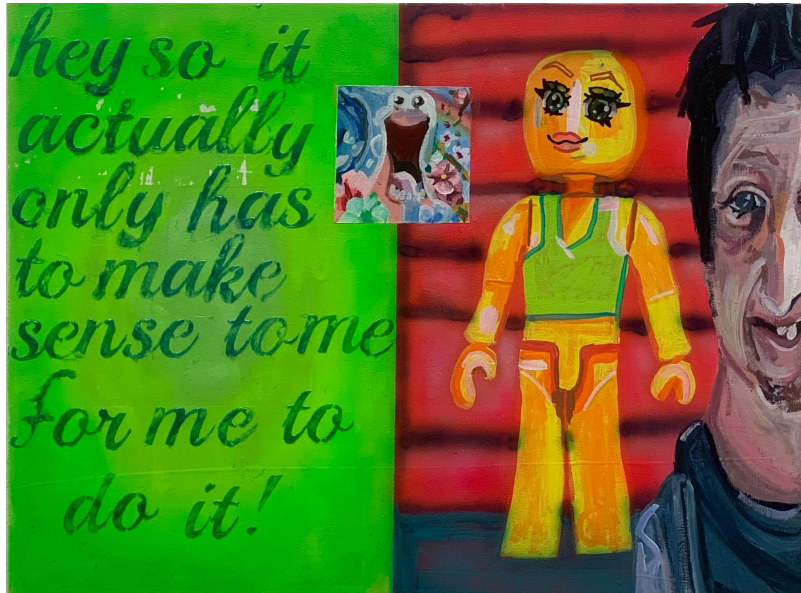
to prevent it.



im so tired, 2025

Often the digital idea comes first—a meme, a phrase, a game reference—and I find its art-historical counterpart later. Other times, it starts with a canonical image that I want to contaminate. More recently, there hasn't been a painting to corrupt at all. I build digital mockups that take days of moving layers, adjusting opacity, and collaging screenshots, text, and icons with historical paintings. When a composition starts to hum, I trace key structural lines and text skeletons onto canvas. As I paint, I project and overlay images to test how they merge or fall apart, constantly toggling between precision and blur.

Each painting pushes and pulls: keeping traces of painterly tradition while incorporating digital clutter. The translation process introduces errors. The images blur, overexpose, stretch, or pixelate into unrecognizable forms. I become meticulous about recreating certain fonts, symbols, and text fragments because they carry the authority and familiarity of the screen. Repainting or hand-cutting them slows those visual cues down and forces me to physically reconstruct them. I paint exclusively in acrylic because it feels both futile and fitting. Acrylic is the cheap, synthetic version of oil: a plastic medium for a plastic culture. Its immediacy and flatness parallel the disposable nature of the digital image.



and i don't feel like explaining it to anyone else, 2026

My color palette borrows from UI design: bright blues, greens, and reds rubbing against the muted umbers and ochres of classical painting. The plastic colors interrupt the illusion of depth; they vibrate on the surface, creating tension between the sacred and the synthetic. I treat each canvas like a teetering scale. I add, subtract, scrape, and repaint until the chaos feels balanced.

The larger the painting, the more room the composition has to breathe, but also the more it overwhelms. Monumental scale turns internet noise into something almost reverent. It demands attention that the feed never does.

I approach each work like an architect following a plan, yet the plan constantly mutates. Control becomes part of the performance, the need to make order out of digital entropy. In that space between planning and collapse, between code and gesture, the painting comes alive.

INFLUENCES AND CONTEXT



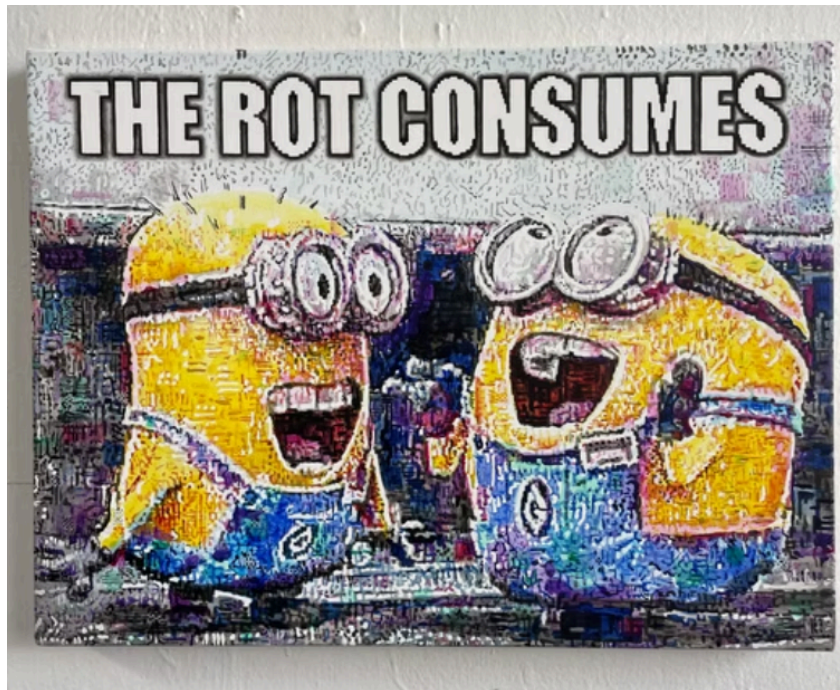
still from John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*

When I think about the history of painting and collage, I see a direct connection between Dada and the way contemporary internet culture processes the world. Both emerge from political instability, media saturation, and a collective disbelief in the systems surrounding everyday life. The fragmented imagery, absurd juxtapositions, and dark humor that defined Dada feel newly relevant within the logic of the feed. Pop Art gave me permission to pull from mass culture and visual trash, but Dada gave me the reason: the collapse of meaning as both protest and pleasure. A contemporary equivalent exists online in formats like "corecore," a genre of video montage that combines irony, despair, beauty, and overstimulation into a single emotional register. It feels like Dada accelerated through algorithmic culture. My paintings operate within that same tension, moving between sincerity to absurdity and humor to anxiety, often within the same image.

While internet culture shapes the conceptual framework of my work, I look most closely at painters and artists who embrace excess, grotesque humor, and unstable imagery. Tala Madani's distorted male figures and absurd performances of masculinity resonate strongly with my own interest in Christian nationalism, hypermasculine imagery, and the strange instability of male identity online. Her paintings are humorous and uncomfortable at the

same time, allowing comedy to become a vehicle for anxiety and social critique. Similarly, Peter Saul's chaotic political paintings embrace vulgarity, satire, and visual overload in ways that feel deeply contemporary. Paul McCarthy's work also informs my approach to grotesque excess, especially his ability to collapse comedy, violence, and cultural symbolism into something simultaneously funny and disturbing.

I'm also drawn to artists who treat vernacular or regional imagery with sincerity rather than distance. Trey Abdella's paintings feel especially important to me because they engage directly with American visual culture, masculinity, humor, and folk aesthetics without separating themselves from the communities they depict. Roger Brown and Fred Stonehouse similarly use stylized imagery and narrative language to construct uncanny, emotional spaces that feel theatrical, symbolic, and psychologically charged.



Deep Fried Minions , Christine Tien Wang

Among contemporary painters, Christine Tien Wang's meme-based paintings come closest to my own engagement with internet imagery. I admire the way she translates digital jokes and online references into paint, though my own work pushes further toward density and accumulation. Rather than reproducing a single meme or image, I build layered compositions where fragments collapse into one another.

I think of my approach as finding sincerity through absurdity rather than using irony as distance. The paintings attract viewers through excess, humor, and visual confusion while embedding more personal or unsettling references beneath the surface. I want the paintings to feel overstimulating, contradictory, and emotionally unstable in the same way contemporary digital life feels. I want the work to sweat, stutter, and laugh at itself.



Outdoor Cat, Trey Abdella



kinkadian rhythm, 2026

While my paintings speak most directly to people who grew up online, I hope their chaos remains legible beyond that experience. For some viewers, the work functions as a mirror of digital visual literacy; for others, it becomes an uncanny field of partially recognizable symbols and cultural debris. I am not trying to moralize or romanticize the internet. Instead, I want to reflect what it feels like to think, scroll, and emotionally process the world through the conditions of the feed. Painting allows me to slow that experience down and translate digital overload into something physical, excessive, and materially present.

FORMAL ANALYSIS



my dr. says something is wrong with me, 2026

my dr. says something is wrong with me stands six feet by six feet. The scale is important because I want the viewer to feel absorbed rather than detached. When the work is smaller, it begins to feel like a screen. At this size, it becomes a field that surrounds you. You cannot process everything at once. Your eye has to move across the surface.

The composition is built from layered digital images: a flaming skeleton riding a motorcycle, a hyper-muscular Christ figure, bald eagles, a howling wolf, patriotic flags, and references to *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, (1851). These images come from different spaces such as Google image searches, meme pages, and art history. I overlay them until they begin to compete with each other. There is no stable hierarchy. The skeleton biker becomes a loose center, but even that feels unstable. I was especially interested in painting that image because I suspect it may have been AI generated. Repainting it by hand slows it down and makes it material.

Color drives the intensity of the work. I use red, white, and blue, but they are not clean or patriotic. They are burnt, oversaturated, and dirty. I push orange against blue so the surface feels heated. Small brushstrokes move throughout the painting so the eye never fully rests. Certain figures appear clearly from a distance and dissolve up close. I want the image to feel like it is shifting depending on how you stand in front of it.

Text is embedded into the surface rather than placed on top. The phrase "BROTHER I PISS RED, I BLEED BLUE, AND SHIT WHITE" is partially obscured and only legible through contrast. I did not want it to dominate the composition. It operates as another loud voice within the image. Like the imagery, it sits between irony and sincerity. The work accumulates until it becomes almost incoherent. That overload reflects the feeling of cultural noise and spectacle that I am trying to translate into paint.

I am interested in what happens when historical painting is placed in dialogue with digital life. Scale, layering, and the collapse of spatial depth are consistent strategies. In one painting this produces a field of spectacle and overload; in the other it produces a site of memory and self construction. The difference in content reveals the flexibility of the same formal system.



anyways enjoy the kitteh :3, 2026

anyways enjoy the kitteh :3 is six by eight feet and is even larger than the previous work. I use scale to shift digital memory into something physical and immersive. What begins on a screen becomes something you stand in front of and move across.

The historical anchor is Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, (1485–1486), but I replaced Venus with a bipedal wolf from the online game *Animal Jam*. He dances in a pose that loosely echoes Venus, and a speech bubble above him reads, "party in my den! looking for a girl! :)" This references how I used to dress my avatar as a boy wolf to roleplay with girl wolves before I understood I was transgender. I remember dressing my *Animal Jam* avatar as a bluish wolf wearing a spiked collar, tail armor, and a feathered headdress. He doubled as my *Warrior Cats* OC (or original character created based on the children's book series *Warrior Cats* by Erin Hunter), a deputy in IceClan who fought in roleplayed battles on Mount Shiveer while players jumped across cracking ice. After exhausting days in elementary school, those servers felt immersive and strangely important. At the time, roleplaying as a male character began partly as a joke or performance, but slowly transformed into something more personal. The anonymity of the internet allowed me to

experiment with identity in ways that felt both exciting and secretive. Online, I could become a different person every day without carrying the consequences of that experimentation into my offline life. Botticelli stages a mythic birth. I use the structure of that painting to stage a personal one that happened through online roleplay and digital space.

I borrow earth tones from Botticelli but push them into saturated oranges, yellows, and greens drawn from early furry fan art and digital drawing. The surface feels warm and slightly artificial. Acrylic allows me to create that tension between hand painted and screen-like. Text and interface fragments are layered throughout the composition. Google searches such as "am I gay?," YouTube titles, roleplay messages, and pieces of game UI are partially buried in the image. They flicker in and out of visibility.

Compositionally, I let Renaissance depth collapse into a flatter digital plane. The sea and figures from Botticelli are still faintly present, but they are interrupted by text and interface. The painting holds sincerity and embarrassment at the same time. It is personal, but it uses the same formal strategies as the previous work. I build through accumulation and layering, and I collapse historical painting and digital culture into the same space. Instead of spectacle and nationalism, this work focuses on identity formation and memory within early internet environments.

CONCLUSION / REFLECTION



i am overstim, 2026

When I started this program, I didn't really have a practice or even an idea of what a practice was. My understanding of painting was narrow, confined to what I'd been shown before. I didn't have access to the contemporary. I thought of painting as something serious, heavy, and historical. Over the course of this MFA, I've been learning to unlearn that, to confront the distinction between "high" and "low" culture, to let the noise in. The internet cracked that open for me.

I love to paint, and I love to look at paintings. I also love to look at my phone. Those things don't feel contradictory anymore. My feed has become both mirror and muse, an infinite source of found imagery and emotional weather. Scrolling is part of my research process. Doomscrolling becomes conceptual gathering. Every absurd video, meme, comment, or digital relic has potential.

As I move forward, I want my thesis exhibition to invite people to loosen up, to (hopefully) laugh, and to see their own screens reflected back at them. I hope viewers recognize something familiar in the chaos—maybe something they've scrolled past or forgotten—and realize that even the trivial can hold emotional weight. This way of working still excites me. It feels endless. There's so much space inside it for humor, despair, irony, and sincerity to coexist. It lets me move freely between the sacred and the stupid, between classical painting and digital detritus.

At its core, my work is about the feeling of being alive online: to feel too much and nothing at once. Painting helps me hold that contradiction still for a moment, long enough to look at it, laugh at it, and maybe even understand it.

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