

August 2020

Untitled

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Abstract:

This thesis is a product of my attempt to discover why I make art. The intent is not to define a specific work or body of work, but rather to explore the personal context that informs my decision-making process. The writing style and tone are as much a reflection of my artistic inclinations as are the actual topics I have chosen to address. Much of this thesis is not serious, because much of the time I am not a serious person. A portion of this thesis is quite serious, and I hereby formally apologize for that fact.

UNTITLED

By

Eric Mowen

BA, Mary Baldwin University, 2015

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts

Syracuse University

August 2020

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I think my art is dumb. I think my art is boring and I don't want to look at it. One good thing about a painting is that when it's finished you can turn it around so it faces the wall. One bad thing about a painting is that you have to wait for the paint to dry before you can turn it around. It's strange to me, the idea that anyone would want to look at their own work once it's finished. And that's the beauty of making flat pieces, as I do. They all only have two sides, a front-side, and a back-side. The front-side is important because it's where the image is, and the back-side is important because that's where the image isn't.

The whole point, I think, of having a front side is that if there's a front there *has* to be a back. And my favorite thing about my paintings is the backs of them. The reason I prefer the backs to the fronts of my paintings is that when I look at one of them, I always feel like I'm looking at myself looking back at me, and I don't like that feeling. I don't enjoy looking at myself in general. I don't hate it; I'd just rather look in other directions.

We all have a short amount of time on earth. Really, really short, when you stop and think about it. And I do think about it. I think about how Greenland sharks might live for up to five hundred years.¹ And about how Charles Darwin's tortoise, Harriet, was one hundred and seventy-five years old when she died. I think about how every living thing on the planet, aside from humans, will go its entire life without seeing itself in a mirror. I bet Harriet didn't once, in any of those one hundred and seventy-five years, think to herself, "boy I sure do like hanging around in this zoo, but I'd be a lot happier if I could look at myself every once in a while." I'd bet

¹ John P. Rafferty, "Greenland Shark," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica inc, April 4, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/animal/Greenland-shark>

anyone a million dollars that that thought never entered the mind of Harriet the tortoise, and I'd also bet that she wasn't any worse off for it.

The contemporary Art World is a mystery to me, with all its magazines and galleries and so, so many people who have names I can never hope to remember. And it's always so busy and cutthroat and everything is moving so fast it's a mystery to me that it doesn't fall to pieces. The Art World doesn't fall to pieces, though, or at least not the important parts. Magazines come and go but the need for them sticks around, I suppose. It's like an alligator, or better yet, a lobster. Alligators and lobsters are immortal, they say, and only die when they run out of food or eat so much and grow so big their legs can't support the weight.² The Art World is like an alligator that always has enough food to stay alive, but not enough to kill itself.

Anyway, this business with the crustaceans and reptiles is my way of saying that the Art World is not a place I would choose to live. I catch glimpses of it at show openings, where all the Art People mingle, doing something called "networking" that sounds like talking but feels like political maneuvering. Whatever it is, I know the only way for me to survive is to engage in something I like to call "tactical drinking", which sounds like drinking and feels like getting drunk. The Art World is a place wherein I try my best to hide from anyone who might know me because I'm afraid if I'm seen I'll have to say something. Saying things is difficult for me at the best of times, but when I'm in the Art World it may as well be impossible.

² The declaration, "Alligators and lobsters are immortal", may not be scientifically accurate, and is not intended to be a statement of truth in the academic sense.

I've been making attempts, on and off, to figure out how the dance is done. The dance that begins with "Hi, my name is Eric. It looks like everyone is expected to talk to one another right now, and if I'm to blend in I guess I ought to do likewise". Or maybe a better opening would be "Hey, it's nice to see you here. You may not remember me, but you and I have suffered through one or two awkward conversations before, and unless one of us finds an excuse to leave immediately we're likely to have another right now". At which point my brain is so preoccupied with finding an excuse that I don't hear the question you asked, so I nod and grunt in what I hope is an agreeable fashion. Smiling is a suitable substitute when grunting is not effective and tends to project a more energetic and outgoing persona. Typically, there are only two conditions under which my persona is energetic and outgoing: 1) I am around people I know well and am comfortable with, or 2) I have been engaging in a bit of tactical drinking. Don't get me wrong, I love people, I just haven't quite gotten the hang of being a person.

One good thing about art is that there aren't any true rules about how one has to go about making it. Another good thing is that there are also no rules about *why* someone makes art.

On a related note, I once read an article about a community of Frenchmen who lived in a cave called Lascaux some seventeen thousand years ago. This article was very exciting to me for a few reasons. The knowledge that Frenchmen were around seventeen thousand years ago was exciting in itself. Far more interesting, however, were the enormous number of paintings that decorated the walls of their cave home. I was excited also to learn of the sophisticated

techniques employed by the Paleolithic artists. Archaeologist Annette Laming-Empeaire and her student, Claude Couraud, studied these Magdalenian painting methods:

Experiments demonstrated that the pigments had been prepared by mixing the ground mineral powders with cave water, which has a naturally high calcium content that ensures good adhesion and great durability. Further experiments showed how the pigments were applied to the rock surface. Laming-Empeaire and Couraud made paintbrushes by macerating the tips of twigs and by binding bison hair in small bundles. They applied powdered pigments directly to damp stone surfaces and also used fragments of ocher as crayons for initially sketching out a painting.³

It also excited me that we can tell from their artwork what sorts of animals the Frenchmen regularly interacted with. Sadly, the animals themselves were not exciting. The Lascaux paintings appear to indicate that the fauna of prehistoric France was composed mostly of bulls and horses. I was devastated to discover not even a single saber-tooth tiger. In my view, if there weren't any saber-tooth tigers in France at the time, the local artists ought to have invented one. Horses? Really? There isn't a more boring creature than a horse, and that's a fact.⁴ I really can't stand horses, truth be told, and don't appreciate seeing depictions of them on any kind of wall, especially cave walls. If I were to run for office my platform would be mostly focused on horses and how best to get rid of them.

Another exciting fact about the Lascaux cave paintings is their age. Seventeen thousand years is nearly impossible for us as humans to imagine, but I've found that it helps to use the Greenland shark as a unit of measurement. As has been previously discussed, the Greenland

³ Arlette Leroi-Gourhan, "The Archaeology of Lascaux Cave," *Scientific American* 246, no. 6 (1982): pp. 109-110, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24966617>.

⁴ The statement, "There isn't a more boring animal than a horse", is an opinion and not a fact in the academic sense.

shark might live for up to five hundred years. If this is so, it is, hypothetically speaking, possible that there are as few as thirty-four Greenland sharks separating a contemporary artist from our French cave painters. An amazing possibility, indeed.

This brings us back to the question of why someone would choose to paint, given that there are no rules in artmaking. When people have been doing a thing for seventeen thousand years, what could anyone hope to add to the tradition? My answer to that question is that I wouldn't be bothered in the least if I never added anything to the tradition of painting, and it seems unforgivably arrogant to assume I'm talented enough to do so in the first place.

One good thing about making art is that I can invent my own process. Another good thing is that my process doesn't have to make sense to anyone, including myself. This is important to me personally because most of what I do in life doesn't make sense to me in retrospect. For example, I often put off going to the grocery store until I am completely out of food at home. Sure, it makes sense in the moment. Why would I drive all the way to the store when I still have three *entire* apples? "Apples are healthy", I say to myself, "and I'd only buy junk food if I went shopping now. Plus, I'd have to drive there, and I don't have my electric car yet because, apparently, I'm not allowed to buy a Tesla with student loan money, which means I'd be burning fossil fuel, which is harmful to the environment. Don't I care about the environment?". All of these are perfectly logical and acceptable arguments in the mind of a man with three apples.

Now, this is the crucial point at which the senselessness of my food acquisition process is most similar to my art-making process. Caught up in the ecstasy of not having to go grocery

shopping, my consciousness ascends and I enter a beautiful, alien, space wherein I am bombarded with new and tantalizing possibilities. What if I never had to go to the store again? Is there some way I could make that happen? And if there is, can it be done by a person who only has three apples?

I empty my mind of cares and worries, thoughts are joyfully discarded, one after another, until all that remains is a single question: *How?* My skull is an empty room. I whisper the question and it echoes, flying from one wall to the next, and the next, and the next. The question buzzes and vibrates, it pulses, growing louder with every repetition. So loud it sets my ribcage rattling. So loud it hurts. And through the pain I understand that it doesn't matter anymore what the question is, and the answer matters even less, because I can sense a beginning. In this moment all I can feel is a deep, overwhelming need. Life has grown unbearably dull and suddenly I realize it wouldn't be that way if I could solve this puzzle.

None of that made any sense, did it? I was worried it might not. Luckily, I've devised a backup plan for just such an eventuality. Prepare to have all your questions answered in...

Part Two of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Boredom

The short story titled “An Afternoon at Sherando Lake” is set in the year 1993 (or ’94, I can’t remember), and takes place at a small lake in the Blue Ridge Mountains, called Sherando. At the time, the future artist is 5 (or 6) years old. He is already capable of performing a myriad of difficult tasks. He can tie his shoes. He can read a clock. He can even read words. He is interested chiefly in digging holes in the backyard, sword fighting, and saber-tooth tigers. The future artist has been taking swimming lessons at the local YMCA because his mother is worried he will drown in a lake. “An Afternoon at Sherando Lake” is written in first-person limited perspective and features excessive amounts of *Internal Dialogue*. It opens with the future artist standing on the shore of said lake, pondering an island that lies at its center.

An Afternoon at Sherando Lake

I bet there are saber-tooth tigers on that island. Could I swim all the way there? There’s a line of buoys I’m not supposed to cross and the island is far beyond them. It might be dangerous. It would be a lot safer if I went back to looking for salamanders with Frederick. No, salamanders aren’t an option. I love Frederick dearly but the fact of the matter is that earlier today he proved himself to be the better swordsman. And boxer. And wrestler. The shame of

being bested by my little brother in the fields of both fencing and hand-to-hand combat is too much to bear. I'm bored of salamanders anyway. And I'm bored of building sandcastles, too.

There's a need in my heart. It's strong, too strong to ignore. I haven't felt right recently and I can now see why that's so. It's because I needed a goal, a task to accomplish.

Understanding hits and all that remains is a single question: *How?*

My skull is an oven. I pop the question in and bake it like a birthday cake. Oh, what a cake it'll be! Full of sweet, sweet mischief, delectable adventure. When it's done, I'll ice it with a big, fat, saber-tooth tiger. Two seconds in the oven is all my question needs, and when the door is opened, I can't help but laugh. It wasn't a cake after all!

I'm always quiet. No one will notice me swimming until it's too late to catch up.

Full of that confidence unique to young children who have never been truly hurt, I throw a stolen inflatable doughnut over my head and step into the water. Urged onward by fear of parental capture, no effort is made to conserve energy as I paddle on toward the line of buoys that mark the border of "safe" and "unsafe", so by the time I reach them my stamina is running low.

Not too tired. Not too tired.

I throw my doughnut over the rope, quickly duck under it, and use most of my remaining energy resituating myself inside the unwieldy nuisance. Breathing heavily, I look toward the island and try to judge my progress. *It must be further out than I thought because it doesn't look any closer than it did from shore. I should go back. I'm going to go back.*

Dejected, I make an about-face and take a moment to catch my breath. Just when I feel I might be ready to traverse the rope blockade, Mom sees me and frantically shouts something about the water being too deep. *She thinks I can't handle swimming out past the buoys. That's wrong. I can swim wherever I want, and I'll prove it.*

Arms up, legs straight, through the doughnut hole I go.

Glancing down, I think to myself: *That was not a good idea.*

I think: *The water didn't seem so murky when I was above it. Why can't I see the bottom? Why can't I see anything?*

Sinking. *Too fast. It's getting colder.*

Why is it getting colder?

Does anything live down here?

Only a monster could live in a place like this, and if it wanted to eat me, I would never see it coming.

What if it's looking up at me right now, waiting?

Terror. *It will start with my feet. I will have to watch it chewing.*

Panic. *Have to get out have to get out have to get out. I'll do anything. Give it my leg, I don't need two of them.*

Sinking. Feet touch sand and with the desperate strength of a cornered animal I launch myself back to the surface. Arms flailing uselessly, neck craned so far back it's nearly breaking, one breath of air. Sinking.

What is that moving towards me? Huge, and almost human in appearance, but no human can swim that fast. The monster is coming for me.

The saber-tooth tiger was an ambush predator. Ambush predators hide in a concealed location and surprise prey animals that wander too close. Slimy tentacles reach out. *I am prey.*

The monster lunges, constricts with deadly appendages, but I'm no easy meat. Before I die, I swear I'll have the satisfaction of making this predator suffer. Eyes closed, lest its hideous visage cause my resolve to waver, I lay into my foe with tooth and nail, fang and claw.

"Stop fighting, you're all right now!" *Huh?*

Eyes open. There is no monster, only a lifeguard. Strong arms carry me back to shore.

After emptying my stomach of dirty lake water, I sit myself down on a beach towel to spend the rest of the afternoon recuperating. It isn't fun to almost drown, and that's a fact.⁵ Surviving an almost-drowning, however, is quite fun. It doesn't bother me that I still haven't solved the puzzle of how to reach the island in Sherando Lake. Even the newfound knowledge that I'm actually a pretty bad swimmer isn't too hard to bear. Life didn't feel *right* before I decided to go for that island, but now it does.

⁵ The statement, "it isn't fun to almost drown", is an opinion and not a fact in the academic sense.

Intermission, or, What was the point of that story?

Once, in a graduate critique class, I was asked to name my greatest fear. I replied, “boredom”, but wasn’t able to articulate why. The problem was one of translation. When I say, “my greatest fear is boredom”, what I’m referring to is a specific kind of boredom I consider to be an existential threat. It isn’t “I’m tired of looking for salamanders”. It’s “if I was trapped in a burning building, I’d rather be cooked alive than rescued by a salamander”. It’s a feeling that every option, every possibility I can see before me is so boring I can’t find a reason to do anything at all. Faced with this feeling my impulsive reaction is, “I must change my condition immediately, at all costs, and with no regard for personal safety or well-being. It was this impulse that drove me to seek the island at the center of Sherando Lake. It is also the impulse that drives what I call (for the purposes of this paper only) Stage One of my painting process.

I’ll be honest, impulse control isn’t one of my strong suits. It may, in fact, be my weakest suit. One good thing about Stage One, however, is that because I was acting on impulse when I invented it, I have to act on impulse during it. Stage One, known to dull people who don’t appreciate medical references as “underpainting”, is a process of incessant, senseless change. Here, it’ll be easier to explain it in third-person perspective:

The artist is adamant that he not put brush to canvas unless he is certain he does not have a plan. Once he is sure he hasn’t a clue what he’s doing, he begins to cover the canvas with a multitude of meaningless lines. Gradually, these meaningless lines are joined to create ever more complex and meaningless forms. The artist frequently uses opaque paint to cover over portions of the canvas, negating hours of work in order to provide clean ground on which

to paint more meaningless forms. Onset of Stage Two of the painting process occurs when, and only when, the artist is too emotionally and physically fatigued to continue.

Chapter 2: Damage Control

The short story titled “A Notable Evening” is set in the year 2003 (or ’04, I can’t remember) at a hotel somewhere in the state of Virginia. At the time, the future artist is fifteen (or sixteen) years old and is afflicted with an outrageous and debilitating case of *Internal Dialogue*. It is hardly possible to coerce him into performing even the simplest of tasks. Despite being unapproachable in almost all social settings, he has convinced someone to be his girlfriend. He is interested primarily in playing bass guitar poorly, his girlfriend, and skipping Spanish class to go driving in the mountains. The future artist has heard of a place called “rock bottom” and is currently on a personal quest to see what it looks like. “A Notable Evening” follows him as he takes a step toward his goal.

A Notable Evening

How often does housekeeping clean the bathrooms around here?

There’s a door to my left. Outside the door is the hotel room I’m currently sharing with some of the other guys on my high school swim team. There is no one out there right now. I know there’s no one out there because I checked fifteen seconds ago, which was ten seconds after I checked the first time.

Has it been fifteen seconds, though? How long have I been staring at this sink? It wouldn't be out of character for me to get distracted by a sink for five minutes. Or half an hour. The sink is exceptionally clean, though, so it's understandable that I'd get distracted. Housekeeping must have been in here recently. I wonder if they clean the bathrooms for each new guest. That'd be a lot of work. You know, the housekeeping staff at hotels really ought to get more respect than they do. Imagine, having to clean up after a whole swim team's worth of teenage boys! The girls are here too, of course, but they aren't gross like we are. Take, for instance, the thing I'm going to do in this bathroom. Oh right, that. Okay, time to get started. Wait, I've been staring at the sink again. But for how long? Better give the room another once-over to make sure no interlopers sneaked in while I was focused on the sink.

Beds: empty. Closet: empty. Behind the curtains: empty. Under the beds: Empty, and surprisingly clean. Okay, room's clear, now for the hallway. What would happen if someone saw me searching for interlopers in the hallway? They'd be suspicious, that's what. Alright, instead of searching for interlopers I will simply open the door a crack, pop my head out, look to and fro, this way and that, and hope for the best.

Excellent, the coast is clear. Everyone must still be at the shaving party. I wonder why they started calling it a shaving party. Probably because they thought it'd make it less weird that they're all shaving one another's legs. I doubt smooth calves will make them swim faster. Or maybe it will. The pros do it, so my teammates do it, and I'm utterly indifferent on the subject.

It's a real stroke of luck that I'm not expected to join the party. I've got the perfect excuse. Here at the state championship meet my role is strictly supportive. *Besides, even if I had qualified, they wouldn't want me shaving. No one will let me handle sharp objects anymore, so when I need one, I have to get creative. Not tonight though.*

Back to the bathroom, lock the door, make doubly sure not to let the sink distract you. Alright, first thing's first. Is the equipment in order? Stolen medical tape: check, stolen gauze: check, stolen disposable razor: check. Next, carefully break open the razor to free one of the tiny blades. Lastly, wrap one end of the blade with tape to prevent nicked fingertips.

A year ago, I made myself an arm warmer out of an old black sweater. It isn't much to look at, just a tube of fabric, really. Part fashion statement, part necessity, it goes nicely with my pink nail polish and glittery eye shadow. One good thing about a tube of fabric is that it can go nicely with your nail polish and eye shadow. Another good thing about a tube of fabric is that no one can see what's underneath while you're wearing it.

Feels good, being able to take the damn thing off for once. Having to wear it all day every day is a real pain, but it's either that or long sleeves. How many scars does it hide now? Dozens, at least. Looks like some lunatic is trying to build a ladder from elbow to wrist one red rung at a time. Almost out of room on this forearm. If I can't stop this bullshit I'll have to move up to a bicep or the other arm. If that happens it'll have to be long sleeves forever.

My skull is full to bursting. I scream a question and it's lost in the chaos of thoughts and worries: *How?* How can I make it all stop? Even if it's only for a little while. I've never wanted to die; I just don't want to *feel* anymore. The question thrashes and writhes, it gnaws and tears. It

marks another beginning, another overwhelming need. Life has become washed-out and gray, but I know how to change that. The solution is right here. I'm already holding it.

Don't go too deep, don't hit that vein there. Can't go too shallow either. Shallow doesn't work as well as it used to. Be fast. It won't hurt as bad as you think.

When it's done, I glance down and think to myself: *That was not a good idea.*

I think: *This one isn't like the others.*

What is that yellow stuff? Fat? It can't be fat, I'm too skinny for it to be fat. The sink isn't clean anymore, housekeeping won't like that at all. Don't be afraid, don't panic, you know what to do. Wrap wound in washcloth to staunch bleeding. Keep pressure on for a few minutes, lift cloth, inspect damage. Yep, definitely fat. Never expected it would be yellow. Can I tape it shut? Nope. Alrighty, medical tape isn't as strong as one would expect. It's fine. It'll be fine. Wrap in gauze and use the arm warmer to hold it in place. I'll try duct tape when we get back home tomorrow. If duct tape doesn't work, then I'll tell somebody. Maybe.

Intermission 2: A Sequel, or, There had better be a damn good point to that story

I know, I know, that was gross and uncomfortable, not to mention devoid of artistic subject matter. If someone came to me and said "hey, you, that story was extremely unpalatable, and I don't appreciate at all that you made me read it", I would sympathize because I, too, strongly dislike that particular story. I disliked writing it. I dislike that I'm sharing the contents of it with other people. I dislike that it's a true story. Frankly, I'm embarrassed. If I

didn't have to address Stage Two of my painting process, I'd just end it here. The rest of this chapter has been written mostly in third-person perspective because the artist would like to distance himself emotionally from the subject matter.

I once read an article written by a comedy critic. In the article the critic gave a detailed, in-depth analysis of a well-known joke told by a famous comedian. The joke was broken down and dissected, its constituent parts sectioned off and meticulously catalogued. The critic even found it necessary to explain why the comedian emphasized certain syllables when delivering the punch line. I learned a lot from that article and enjoyed reading it. Anyway, here is my impression of that critic explaining Stage Two of my painting process:

The artist enters his studio, glances at the work-in-progress, and expresses, either verbally or through hand gestures, that the situation has gotten out of hand. He inspects the piece, wishing it didn't feel so much like looking in a mirror. He wonders, for an instant, if the haphazard brushstrokes were a kind of unconscious reenactment. An inward violence redirected, say.

Next comes a sequence of activities one might appropriately call "Damage Control". This is a period of recovery, a time to identify what, if any, parts of the image are salvageable. A period of healing. The chaotic tangle of line and form is simplified by combining or eliminating disparate elements, and a final composition is reached.

Great care is taken, and considerable time spent, in selecting and mixing colors. The artist favors muted colors of similar value, ensuring one cannot overpower another. Paint is

applied with a palette knife one color at a time in order to achieve a relatively smooth and even surface throughout.

Chapter 3: Terminal

Stage Three of my painting process is called *Terminal*, and it's my favorite. I love it so much I put it way back on page 1. Everything you need to know about Stage Three can be found in sentence 3 of paragraph 1.

Epilogue

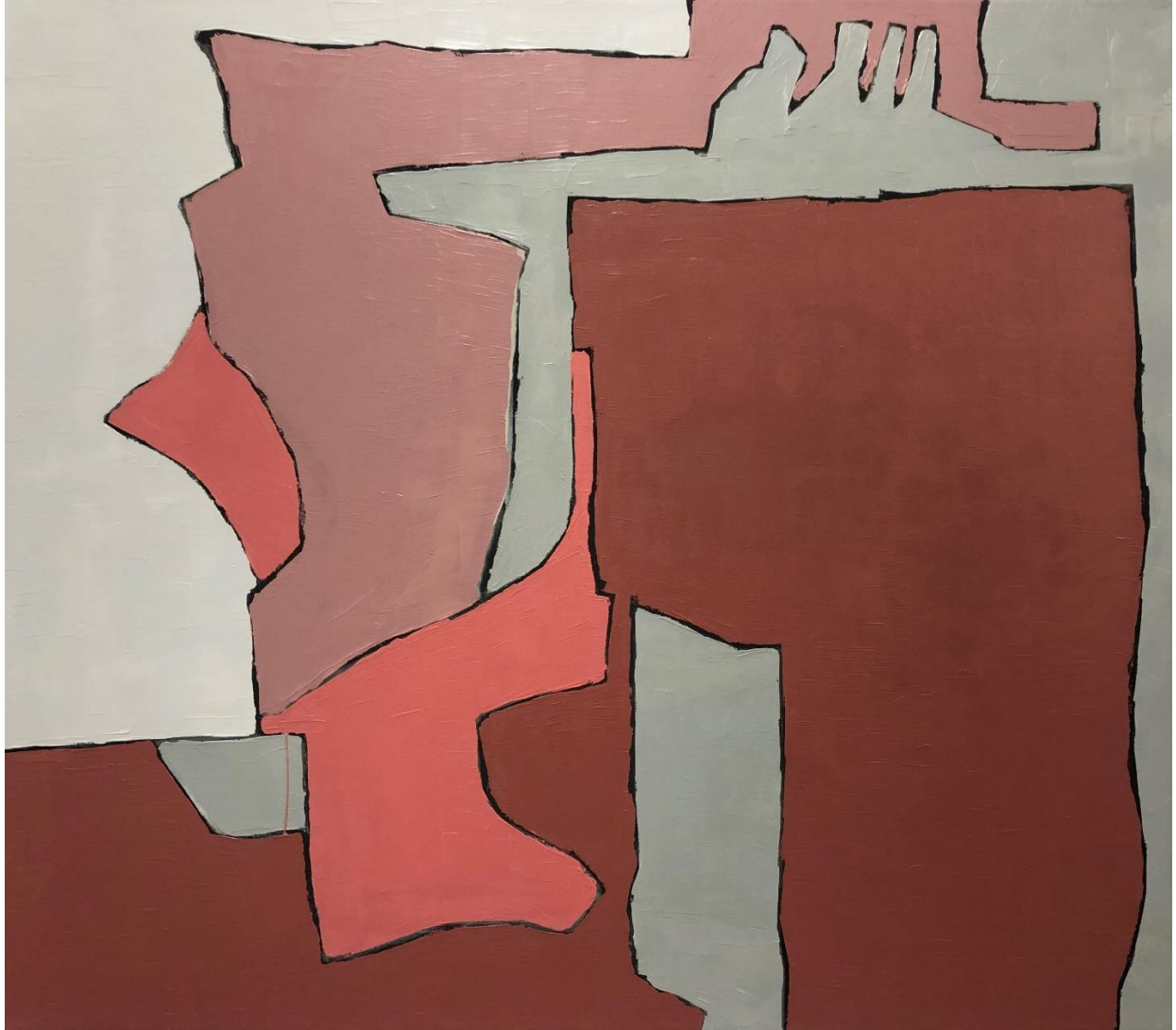
I think about Greenland sharks and alligators and whether or not robots will enslave mankind someday. About how good it felt walking out of that hotel bathroom sixteen (or seventeen) years ago, and how much better it felt to walk out of a hospital a few months later. Most of all I think about how time can and can't change a person

I've spent half of my relatively short life trying to forget about the kid who once hurt himself in a hotel bathroom. I'd think: *There's no way that could've been me. No sir, I'd never do a thing like that. And even if I did, it was a long time ago, when I was a different person. There certainly isn't anything I have in common with that kid!* Wrong.

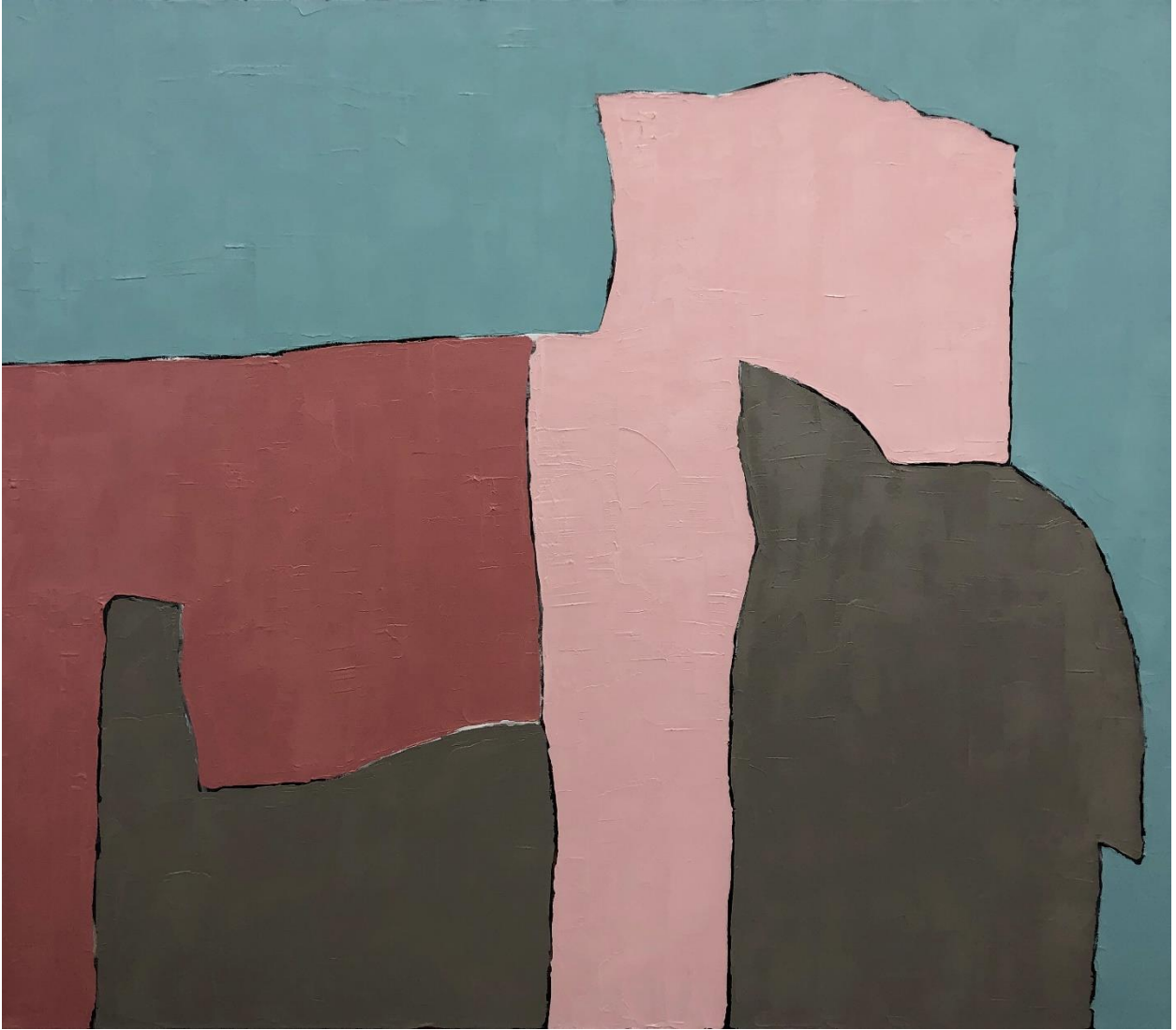
One good thing about art is that the making of it can provide a fellow with a good reason to stay alive, if he's in need of one. I make paintings for the same reason I tried

swimming to the island in Sherando lake, and I did that for the same reason I put three-hundred-and-something scars on my body: to survive. Because if I sit still too long, I start to forget that the world is full of color and life. I forget about how good it feels inventing a silly story to get a laugh out of a friend. I paint because I know that if I keep painting, I'll never have to be that kid again.

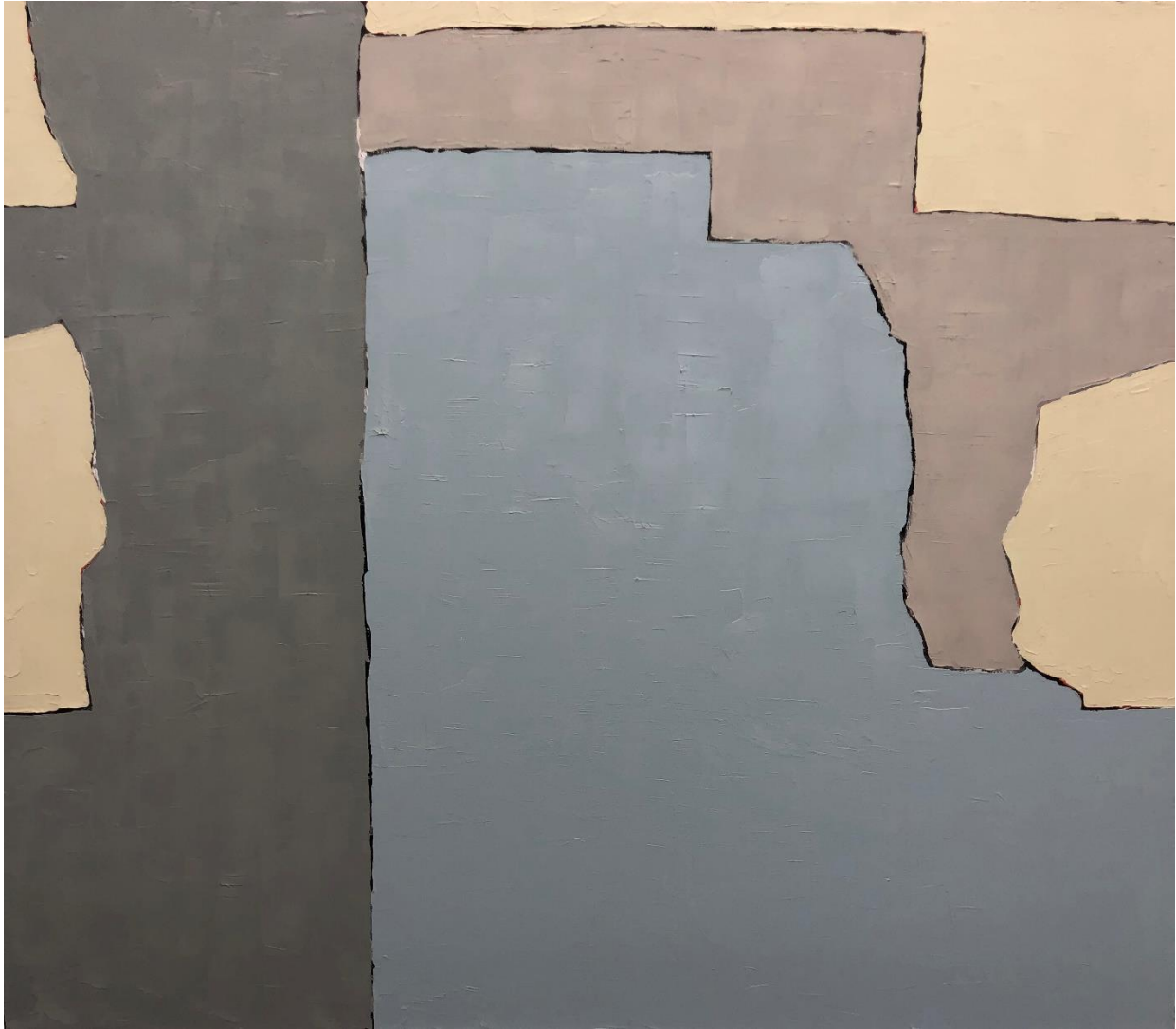
That having been said, it is my ultimate goal to enter the world of politics. The transition from artist to politician will occur gradually, over the course of many years. At the outset, my platform will be carefully crafted in order to appeal to the greatest number of voters. When I sense the time is right, however, I will steer my campaign rhetoric toward the topic of equestrianism. Little by little, I will convince the general public (whose unquestioning love and admiration I have previously secured), that human society would be far, far better off without horses. Because there is no logical counterargument to this claim, scientific experts from around the globe will rally to my cause. Once said experts have had time to deliberate, they will undoubtedly present to me a recommendation for a suitable island on which to exile all of horse kind. This done, I will terminate my political career and return to a life of art.



Untitled, 2020, Oil on canvas, 40 x 46 inches



Untitled, 2019, Oil on canvas, 40 x 46 inches



Untitled, 2019, Oil on canvas, 40 x 46 inches

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