

Love Letters

A STUDY OF DAPPLED SUNLIGHT
& THE NATURE OF HOME

Rose Gallogly

STUDIO ART SENIOR THESIS

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ARTIST STATEMENT

These paintings are love letters to the places I have called home, and to the moments in which I experience that relationship most deeply. I begin by taking pictures of my neighborhood, and then I sit with the moments captured in those images for hours at a time, translating the photographic detail into oil on canvas. Their small size is both a reflection of the closeness I feel with these places, and an opportunity for me to re-enter my relationship with them in one meditative sitting. This process pushes me to delve deeper into the nature of home, and to examine how and why a thick tangle of electrical wires or a dappling of late afternoon sun feels so meaningful to me in these landscapes.

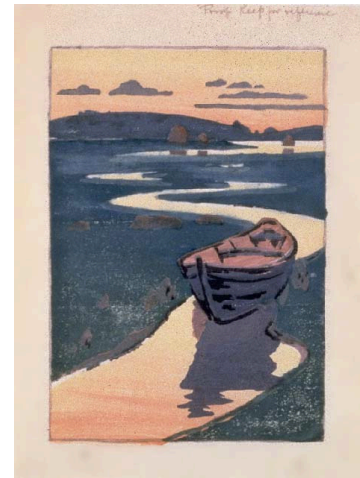
INTRODUCTION

This body of work began in a cold, brightly lit studio space on a rainy hillside in Ireland. In the spring of 2015, I spent a semester studying at Burren College of Art in Ballyvaughan, County Clare, which is to say that I spent four months trying to figure out who I was as an artist, and what it was to live in a place without sidewalks or streetlights. Before that semester, I had spent my whole life comfortably rooted at home—between the Boston neighborhood of Roslindale in which I grew up, and the landscape that I have experienced for the past four years in Worcester, the environments that I have called home have been largely familiar and unquestioned. Though I only lived there for four months, the experience of waking up every morning to the sound of baaing sheep in the field next door instead of the comforting hum of nearby traffic was a shock to my system. Both during those month and afterwards, I have come to see how

that environment shock has had a deep impact on my understanding of my relationship with my physical surroundings, and my extension, my experience of home. These perceptual changes have been informed by studies as a Geography major, and by the in-depth exploration of artmaking that a semester at an art college afforded me. The culmination of those studies and explorations is this series of paintings, my love letters to home translated into oil on canvas.

INFLUENCES

The style and artistic language of *Love Letters*, though produced intuitively, has been cultivated within me by a variety of outside influences. Just as the landscape I grew up around is ingrained in me, the range of visual art I was exposed to at a young age deeply informs my own practice. This is particularly true of my relationship with late 19th and early 20th century Massachusetts-based painter and printmaker Arthur Wesley Dow. Dow is a distant and non-direct ancestor on my mother's side of the family, and because of that connection, my family has had the privilege of inheriting a number of his works. The extent of this privilege has only been fully evident to me recently, as I've reflected on the basis of my own artistic language. A number of Dow's prints have been hanging in my house for as long as I can remember, becoming part of the backdrop of my family's domestic life. Because I have experienced Dow's artwork in that intimate context, I have grown up absorbing his visual language in an intuitive and instinctual way. Dow, who worked primarily in his hometown of Ipswich from the 1880s through the 1920s, spent an extended time in his early life traveling to Japan and studying with the many masters of printmaking in



The Derelict (The Lost Boat)
Arthur Wesley Dow
1916, color woodcut on paper

that country. He took this knowledge back to his small, rural town on the North Shore of Massachusetts, and used it as a way to translate and explore the landscape of his home. Similar to the Impressionist painters that were his contemporaries, he had a particular fascination with light: he would create print after print from the same woodblock cut, varying only the color composition as a way to explore how the changes in light throughout the day affected the character and substance of his landscapes. His works are quite small, often not more than a few inches across, and their dimensions allow the viewer to have an intimate and poignant relationship with the split-second moment of time and light that he captures.

Though I have never worked in printmaking, and there are many stylistic differences between my work and Dow's prints, I see a deep resonance between our approaches to art making and our fascinations with the landscapes we experience. It is for that reason that I would name him as my biggest artistic influence, despite having never studied his work or life in any formal context. Like so much of the inspiration for this series, his work is instead embedded in the fabric of my childhood and in my relationship with home. In that way, I see my own connection to Arthur Wesley Dow as deeper than my connection to any artist that I have studied in a museum or classroom setting.

That being said, a number of the historical artists that I have encountered in more formal settings have also had formative influences on my own work. The most significant of these artists is Claude Monet, and I feel particularly affected by Monet's early, representational work. Through countless family trips to view his collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Monet's paintings are also woven into the fabric of my childhood.



The Dory / Near the Wharf
Arthur Wesley Dow
1895, color woodcut on paper

Monet was, of course, a master painter, and his works strike the perfect balance between photorealistic representation and impressionist abstraction. He too had a deep fascination with light and its effect on landscape and perception, and that fascination is evident from the groundbreaking painting *Impression, Sunrise*, to his end-of-life obsession with the water lilies in his own garden. Though I do not have all of the same conceptual fixations as Monet, his work has been deeply inspirational to me as I have developed my own style and visual language. My paintings also seek to strike a balance between representational accuracy and a painterly exploration of a single moment of light and time; it is Monet's work and broad cultural influence that has given me the tools with which to pursue those intentions.

As noted previously, I also see my studies in the field of Geography as having a strong influence on my work and conceptual leanings. Geography, which I would describe broadly as the study of human-environment interaction, is something that I have been drawn to since the very beginning of my time at Clark. After my second semester here, I decided to pursue Geography as a second major, not because I particularly saw myself following a Geography-related career path, but because I was taken by the way of thinking and learning that courses in that field offered me. I have always seen strong connections between my two majors, but have often struggled to articulate those connections; with the creation of *Love Letters*, I have finally brought together my two fields of study in a concrete way. I have a deep fascination with place, and am taken with the complexities of society-environment relationships of all sorts. In Geography I am able to delve into those relationships through the study of history and social policy, and in Studio Art I explore them with oil paint on canvas.



Impression, Sunrise
Claude Monet
1872, oil on canvas

PROCESS

My painting process, as I describe in my artist statement, begins with a camera. I walk around my neighborhood—or, sometimes, around my house, as I attempt to capture the views directly outside of my windows—and look for moments in time and space that hold some part of the neighborhood's character and beauty. In the past few months, I have had a particular fascination with photographing just after sunrise or before sunset, when the growing or fading light lends a kind of magical energy to everyday places. Photographing these moments allows me to capture a split second in time, and then returning to the photographs in painting them allows me to sit with and in that moment for hours at a time. That two-step process is deeply meditative for me. Painting these scenes feels like a re-entry into my momentary relationship with them, making that relationship feel much more real and solid than the original, fleeting experience.

My semester in Ireland gave me a new understanding and appreciation for my environment, and it also introduced me to oil painting, a medium with which I initially struggled, but have come to love. As I discovered after fumbling my way through a month or two of painting assignments, oil paint's greatest assets are its long drying time and its sculptural potential. I began to see those two qualities as assets and not frustrations as soon as I started working at a small scale, around 8.5 by 11 inches or smaller. That size, I found, allows me to complete a painting in one sitting, when the paint is still wet and can be blended and molded to create the scenes in my reference images and in my mind's eye. The wet paint also becomes sculptural as it builds up and sits in globs on the canvas, giving these paintings a

satisfyingly tactile quality. When I began working on this series this past Fall, I knew that small dimensions would be a fundamental part of my own working process; as the semester went on, I discovered that their size had also become an important part of how others view and understand their content. As I have experienced in Arthur Wesley Dow's prints, small dimensions offer the viewer an intimate relationship with a work of art, forcing them to come physically close to the work itself, and in doing so encouraging a more focused and contemplative viewing of that work. The moments that my paintings portray are intimate in content, and so I see their size as an aid in communicating that intimacy to the viewer.

Another aspect of the intimacy I feel within and communicate through these paintings can be found in their emptiness. Every step of my process, from the initial photography to the hours I spend painting, I carry out in solitude, and each individual landscape is intentionally empty of other people. The solitary nature of my working process and the scenes themselves does not come from a place of loneliness, and is not intended to communicate any lack of human connection in my relationship to my neighborhoods. Instead, I see both as creating the conditions for these paintings to be a place of internal reflection for myself and for the viewer. One's relationship with place, though informed by social connections, is experienced on an internal and individual level. In these paintings, I have described moments of solitude through a process of solitary creation, and in doing so hope to provide the viewer with the sense that this could be their own private moment watching a sunrise or enjoying the afternoon shade, just as it has been my own.

REFLECTION

I have brought my time at Burren College of Art to the forefront of this reflection for all of the reasons described thus far, but also because I see that as the time in my life when I first grew confident in the idea of being a painter, or in fact, of being a fine artist at all. My focus as a Studio Art major and my intended career path has always been graphic design—the work of combining type, images, and colors is my primary creative mode, and I would still categorize myself as a designer first and a painter second. At the beginning of my semester in Ireland, those two identities felt in conflict with one another, and I went through many phases of feeling as if I would eventually have to abandon one way of working for the other. What I came to by the end of the semester, however, was an appreciation for the way that my multiple creative pursuits inform and enrich one another, and how I could, in fact, pursue both at the same time. In many ways, I approach painting as a designer, seeing my subject material as a palette of colors with which to form a pleasing composition. And I have brought much of what I have learned through painting back into my designs, able to sink both into the craft of graphic design and into more conceptual and exploratory design work.

The choices I have made in this exhibition of *Love Letters* showcase the peace I have found at the intersection between my creative pursuits. Though the paintings themselves are the clear focus of my wall, I have also included a hand-lettered snippet of my artist statement for the series. This lettering is my attempt to highlight the conceptual focus of my work, but also to bring in my love of typography and the craft of my design practice.

CONCLUSION

I have called this series *Love Letters: A Study of Dappled Sunlight & The Nature of Home* because these paintings are fundamentally concerned with both the places that they represent and specific moments that they capture. By their very nature, those moments are as fleeting as they are poignant. As my time in college comes to a close, the solidity of place that I have experienced in Boston and in Worcester is very quickly becoming a thing of my past. I hope that these paintings serve as a record and reminder of the love I have felt for those places, and for the moments in which early morning sunlight and titling telephone poles feel like the manifestation of all that it means to be home.