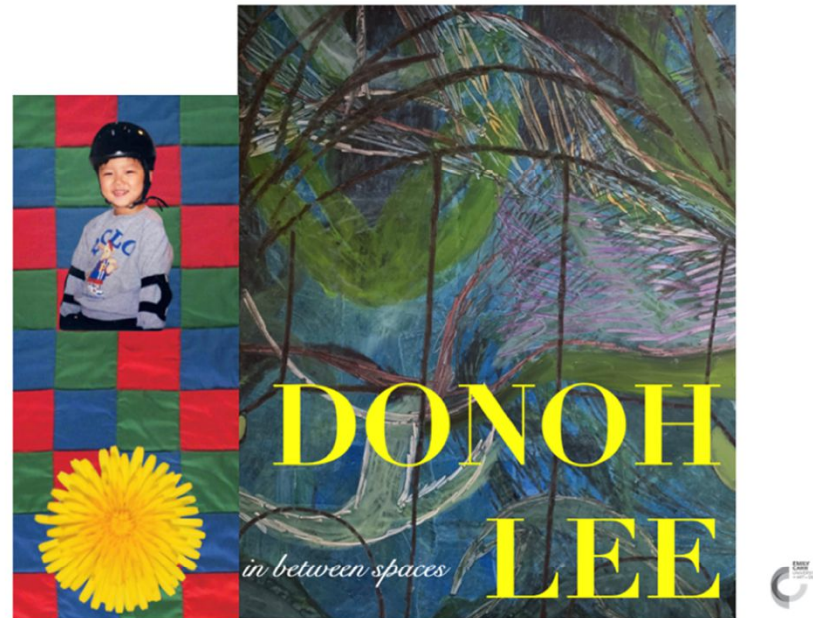




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Fig. 1: Family Photographs, 1998. Dundarave, John-Lawson, West Vancouver.

“마음 잡고 가는 사람 절대 못 저.”

“If you set your heart and mind on something,
You can never be defeated.”

Dedicated to
My mother, Mihyang Kim

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ABSTRACT

Painting allows me access to the autobiographical, enabling me to both configure and reconfigure my relationship with the spiritual realm. How these methods may pertain to the ways I encounter abstraction is through the alchemical experimentation, altering time, space, memory, and trauma as a transformative process, co-creating from my internal well, symbolically expressed as the holy spirit. Shaped by my identity as a first-generation immigrant and Korean-Canadian, I use painting to inquire about the magic, serendipity, and experience existing in-between worlds as a transformative and malleable process of the work. Tracing back to moments of childhood, nostalgia and recollection that work their way in an interdimensional claim, reconsidering the affects associated with the metaphysical and Flow-State as to how they inform the ways I make co-creating with God.

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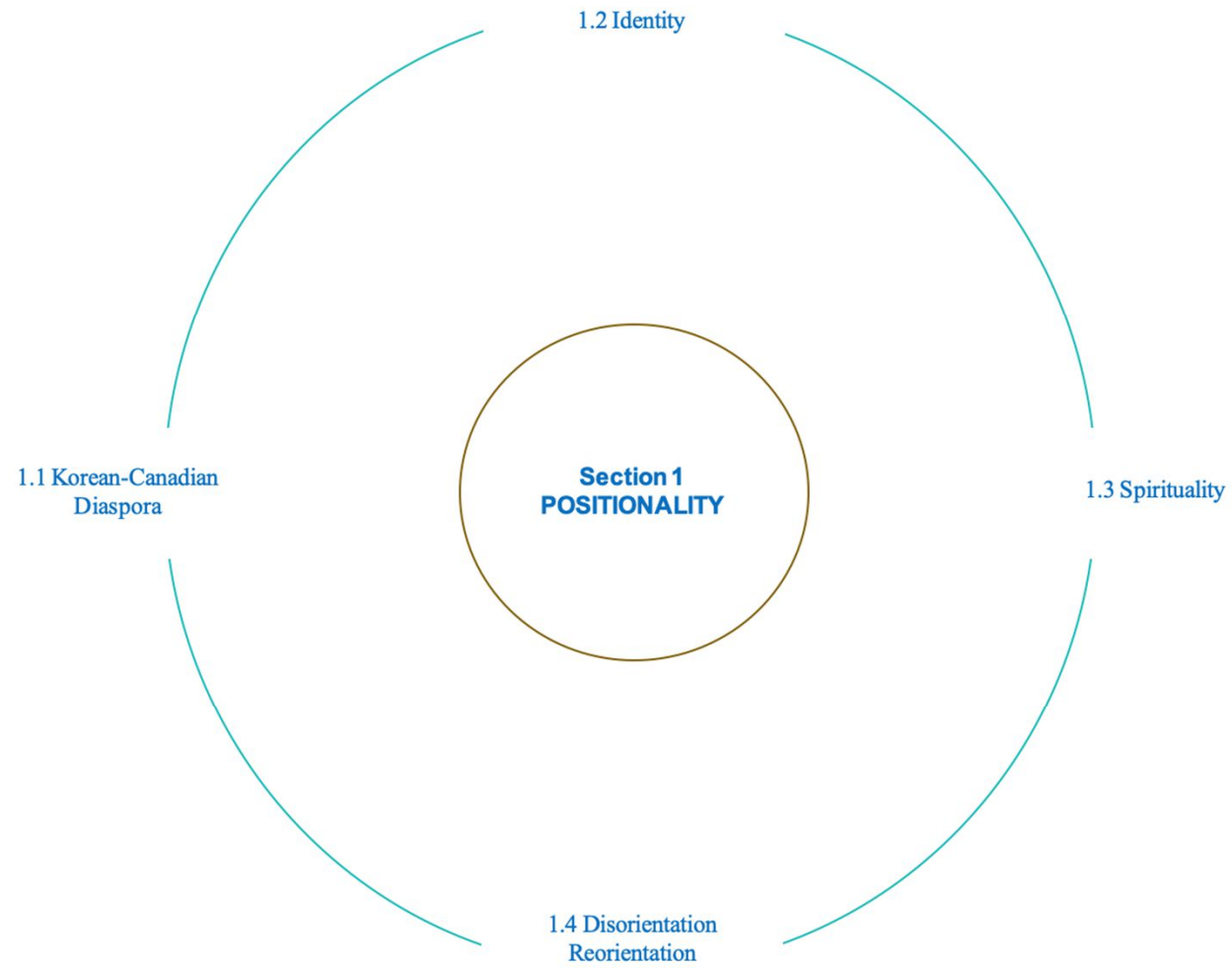
INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will be exploring the concept of flow and how it has been inspiring to me in my understanding of how painting or the act of painting enhances my understanding of spirituality and magic. I will share my diasporic Canadian identity, autobiography and describe painting from an autobiographical approach reflecting on personal storytelling. In my practice, I prioritize my own revelatory experiences of painting without expecting the viewer to have a similar experience. Through practicing painting in a state of flow, I hope to create representations of liminal spaces and images and symbols that invite the viewer into a state of wonder. My paintings are created in this state of flow, existing in the continuum of abstraction and representation, and I hope to invite the viewer to experience this wonder and magic that exists beyond what is physically tangible. Throughout the following document, I will be describing and introducing my perspective, cultural background and how it informs my painting practice, also how these concepts of colour, metaphysics, and composition relate to my practice as a painter. Finally, at the end of the thesis, I will describe individual paintings I've created during my degree, which relate to the ideas of my research. Exploring liminal symbols, spaces, and memories as they emerge.

Christianity and intergenerational trauma are central to my practice. I recognize that my discussion and representation of these issues are deeply personal. My experience and perspectives on these subjects are informed by my personal and familial history, as well as my identity as a first-generation Korean-Canadian. This thesis examines how I explore and process my experiences of trauma through painting. It is a personal journey and, therefore, although it may resonate with others, it is not intended as a general statement about the impact of painting on people experiencing trauma.



Fig. 2: Childhood Photo (1999). Memorial Library, West Vancouver.



1.1 Korean Canadian Diaspora

For Koreans, the transnational family generally takes one of two forms. One is the *parachute* child, or children who migrate alone without their parents and are placed with legal guardians in another city. A second form is the *kirogi gajok* or “wild goose family”: one parent remains and works in Korea, typically the father, while the mother accompanies the children, who acquire student visas. For Koreans, this term is heavily imbued with cultural connotations, as wild geese symbolize family loyalty and martial harmony. ¹(Pg. 13) Unlike the traditional South Korean transnational family structures, my entire family immigrated to Canada together when I was two— my mother, father, sister, and I. My mother made this decision, courageously leaving behind a stable life back home to adapt to the uncertainties of immigration. My parents chose to relocate to Western Canada and build a new foundation there because of their love for family. My parents’ aspirations were selfless, but they were not the typical “wild geese family”, as discussed in the paragraph above, driven by faith and perseverance. They worked hard to rebuild our future toward a brighter one in the vast land of opportunity. However, my parents came up against many challenges as they rebuilt our life as a family. These setbacks primarily stemmed from racist frameworks related to how Asian minorities are perceived in the dominant cultures of the Western hemisphere. I remember my Dad facing language barriers and a kind of systemic discrimination that caused him to underestimate his qualifications. Canadian employers encouraged him to believe that the skills he had developed in South Korea were not transferable to Canadian contexts. When immigrating to Canada, my parents’ experiences informed me. As a child, when I would hear about my parents’ experiences or when I was subjected to racial slurs or white folks egging our car, I experienced a kind of visceral trauma. These are just a few examples of the kind of racist hurdles that members of my family encountered. Such experiences manifested in my household as a sense of alienation, glass shards or invisible fractures that scar the spirit. This visceral trauma exists as tension within the body. It is an internal rupture, which I experience as disorienting. Won Moo Hurh was a Korean Sociologist who analyzed the effects of migration on Korean diasporic communities in North America following the 1950-1953 Korean War. He determined that though many were able to achieve economic stability, “[p]sychosocial problems such as ethnic identity, generational conflicts, and political participation remain[ed]” ¹ (Hurh, 1998) Another Korean Sociologist, In-Jin Yoon says, “Korean Canadians are still working in the initial stage of settlement since their immigration history is considerably shorter than that of Koreans in the United States” ²(42). According to Yoon, immigrant

¹ Korean Immigrants in Canada. Edited by Ann H. Kim, Marianne S. Noh, and Samuel Noh
https://www.google.ca/books/edition/Korean_Immigrants_in_Canada/0WJ_zD4LQCQC?hl=en&qbpv=1&pg=PA3&printsec=frontcover

² Korean Immigrants in Canada. Edited by Ann H. Kim, Marianne S. Noh, and Samuel Noh
https://www.google.ca/books/edition/Korean_Immigrants_in_Canada/0WJ_zD4LQCQC?hl=en&qbpv=1&pg=PA3&printsec=frontcover

communities in the early stages of settlement often experience economic difficulties including unemployment, and discrimination in the labour market. (42) One might also argue that communities in these first stages lack social networks/supports and are often pressured to assimilate in ways that harm their sense of identity and cultural heritage. This was the case for my family. We often felt that, as much as we tried to assimilate or become “Canadian,” we never had a full invitation. When my parents restarted their lives midway, coming to Canada, this process of assimilation caused a lot of complex emotional disruptions. I believe the landscape of cultural inequities caused mental health and health problems within my family. These visceral traumas within my family dynamic live within my body; I use painting as a means for transforming these traumas.

1.2 Identity

I experience tensions within my hybrid identity as both Korean and Canadian. These tensions impact my thinking and behaviour as I navigate the legacy of imperial histories of the past and the white, Western-dominant spaces of Canada in the present. My lived experience and that of my family, as immigrants and members of a non-dominant community, continues to inform who I am, how I think and feel and what I do. My parents taught me the importance of a strong education—a way to transform hardships into lessons that I can learn from. I also learned this from my Grandfather, who exemplified the Korean ethic of 노력 (nolyeok) where hard work embodies aspects of the divine. I also think about my identity as having two interconnected parts, one internal and one external. These are intrinsically linked to the fact that I am Korean-Canadian, but they are also personal and distinct, representing my way of understanding my being in the world. First, there is the internal *well* that houses my spirit. Metaphorically, I visualize this internal well as a body of water that holds thousands of unperceivable minerals that dwell within my spiritual kingdom. The minerals represent memories, past experiences, the holy spirit, and my imagination. Some of these “minerals” create significant disruptions, impacting the health of the well. Even though they are not visible or physically tangible, they are still able to cause fractures in my sense of physical and mental well-being. The second part of my identity is external, physically seeing, moving, adjusting the body, and reorienting my bodily observation. I use the act of painting as a restorative methodology that brings these two aspects of my identity together. As I move my body, the magic of this spirit well is engaged in preserving positive and parsing negative pieces of these fleeting memories and experiences.³ Looking in the mirror, I see my parents’ and grandparents’ spiritual gifts embedded in me. Their perseverance and resilience — the spirit to pursue goals with heart, despite

³ My painting practice might be understood as resembling aspects of somatic therapy. Somatics is a “broad term [that] focuses on body movement as a means to improve mental health.” Somatic therapy focuses on the connection of mind and body and uses “mind-body exercises...to help release pent-up tension that [can] negatively affect “a person’s physical and emotional wellbeing. (www.psychologytoday.com/ca/therapy-types/somatic-therapy)

enormous efforts and seemingly endless challenges- informs me and my choice to pursue painting. In the next section, I will discuss my relationship to God and my spirituality.

1.3 Spirituality

My approach to painting is linked to my Korean-Christian upbringing. My Christian values were inspired by my Grandmother; as a child, when I saw her pray and embrace her notion of the holy spirit, my perspective changed. Seeing my grandmother pray every morning for 3 hours in solitude raised a deep curiosity in me. When she closed her eyes to pray, it seemed as if she was in another dimension, in communion with the teachings of the Bible. In the Korean church I attended growing up, we spoke Hangul, the Korean language.⁴ As a child, this community was essential to me because I was surrounded by other Korean Canadian immigrants speaking and singing in my first language. It was an opportunity to share and connect with people experiencing similar challenges with assimilation and marginalization in a Canadian context. It opened my mind to the possibility that there is a God. Therefore, my understanding and definition of God is grounded in Christian beliefs, adhering closely to those espoused by Catholic and Protestant denominations. My grandmother was a practicing Catholic in Korea, and the Korean Canadian church I attended in Vancouver was Protestant.

My relationship with God attunes me to my inner world—past, present, and future. I believe the Holy Spirit⁵ dwells in my consciousness and guides my painting process, moving the paint in miraculous ways. Connecting with God feels like lightning — intense, transformative moments that allow me to confront fear, trauma, and anxiety through painting. The Spiritual Diagram (Figure III) represents this experience: a horizontal brush pierces through memories and dimensions, channelling the Holy Spirit onto the surface. My physical and spiritual energies merge in the act of painting,

⁴ Hangul: The [alphabet](#) is traditionally ascribed to [Sejong](#), fourth king of the [Chosŏn \(Yi\) dynasty](#); the system was made the official writing system for the Korean language in 1446 by one of Sejong's decrees. The script was generally known until the 20th century by the name Sejong gave it, Hunminjeongeum (Hunminjeongeum; loosely translated, "Proper Sounds to Instruct the People"). Because of the influence of [Confucianism](#) and of Chinese [culture](#), Hangul was not used by scholars or Koreans of the upper classes until after 1945. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hangul-Korean-alphabet>

⁵ Holy Spirit: In *the School of the Spirit*, written by Thomas Merton, an American monk and scholar, draws from the idea of a contemplative state, where the holy spirit is described "drawn into unity with the will and directly moved by the infused light and power of God, it receives a supreme perfection of wisdom and understanding. (Pg. 12) <https://merton.org/itms/annual/10/Merton5-34.pdf>

where emotional focus sparks light within, transforming both the work and myself. The brush becomes a conduit for divine lightning. I do not, however, solely define my practice as Christian. For me, the act of painting is magical. Painting activates a journey into the depths of who I am that transcends my physical perception of reality. In other words, painting enables me to access what I describe as the metaphysical or supernatural qualities of lived experience.

1.4 Disorientation and Reorientation

Sara Ahmed, a British-Australian scholar and social theorist, has explored the impact of experiences of migration on communities of colour. Born in Australia, she is the daughter of a British mother and a Pakistani father, and she migrated to England as a young child, at a similar age to me when I migrated to Canada from South Korea. In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, she describes migration “as a process of disorientation and reorientation...bodies “move away” as well as “arrive” (Pg. 9) when they inhabit new spaces. Ahmed states that when one inhabits new spaces during the process of migration, it can be a bit like switching dimensions at times. She says in “such moments when you ‘switch’ dimensions [it] can be deeply disorienting...They are moments in which you lose one perspective, but the “loss” itself is not empty or waiting... [it is] thick with presence.” (Pg. 157)⁶ When a person migrates, they carry their feelings, sensations, and sense of identity with them from their places of origin. Our memories are present with us even if they are not immediately tangible. These feelings and memories accompany us as we reorient ourselves in relationship to new places. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*⁷, Ahmed emphasizes how emotion can shape both our relationship to the present and our relationship to the past. For me, memories often spark other memories; they emerge one after another, and it sometimes feels like I am moving through portals in time and space. In this way, objects, symbols, ideas, and memories from or about the past can trigger a sense of disorientation. Disorientation can cause disruption, but this disruption does not have to be harmful. If we have strategies for engaging with these ruptures in safe, mindful and reflective ways, they can offer opportunities for reorientation. I use painting as a strategy for engaging with disorientation and creating opportunities for reorientation.

Ahmed states that one can have a memory of something and experience feelings or emotions in relation to that memory; in other words, one's feeling is shaped by contact with the memory and in turn, the feelings we experience shape what we remember. (Pg. 7) When I paint I strive to enter a state of disorientation by listening to ruptures in my consciousness. I work to enter a mindful state where I am physically and mentally attuned to

⁶ Queer Phenomenology <https://www.thequeermathematicsteacher.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Ahmed-Queer-Phenomonology.pdf>

⁷ Cultural Politics of Emotions <https://pratiquesdhospitalite.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/245435211-sara-ahmed-the-cultural-politics-of-emotion.pdf>

voices, images, and memories trickling in from other times and places. Staying receptive and open to these slippages of time and space, sparks emotional responses where the painting unfolds following my intuition⁸. One emotional response may spark a kind of fracture or entry point into delve and dig toward the trauma rather than avoidant where the unknown unfolding of inquiry from mind and spirit does not terminate the feeling, but rather leads direct and toward exploring and speculating through the surface by concretizing the paint from an internal compass, led by faith. A gut feeling of high energetic anticipation, or wonder, comes over my spirit and I am able to explore these ruptures, what they mean, and how I might represent and/or navigate them. This process re-grounds my perceptions creating opportunities for hope and reorientation.

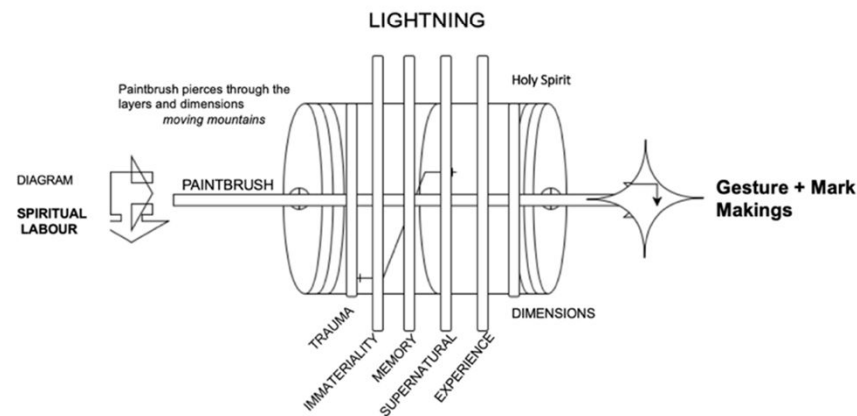
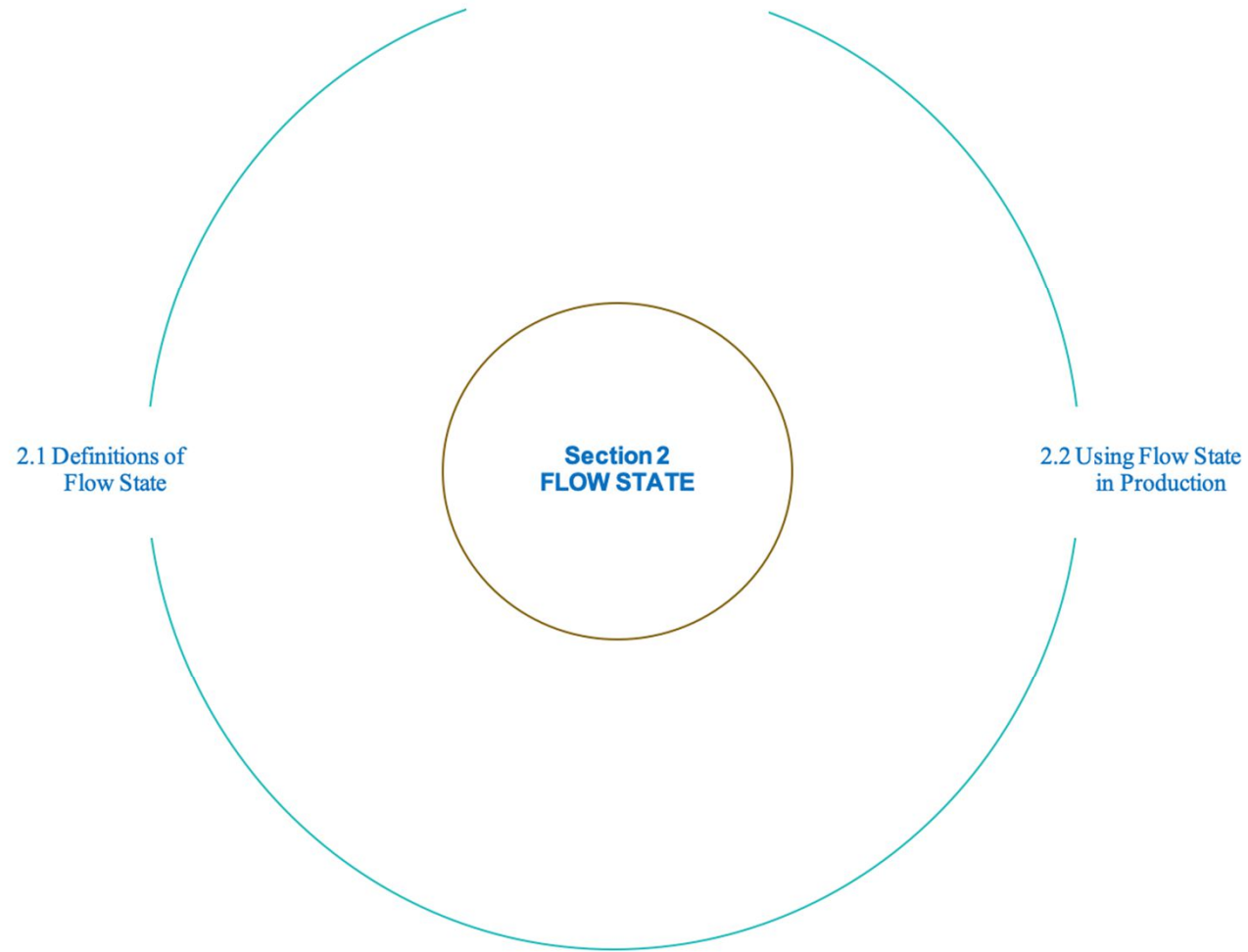


Figure 3, *The Spiritual Diagram*, Process of Painting 3:32 AM (2025)

When I am attuned and listening to my gut, I imagine I am like a submarine navigating the black sea. I enter the depths, and lights come on from inside my body. What follows is guidance from the holy spirit. A visceral reverberation is triggered like lightning. It penetrates the haziness and activates intuitive gestures.

⁸ By Intuition I mean: the ability to understand or know how to proceed in a creative process immediately based on feelings in the moment. Many artists have discussed using intuition as a way of guiding their creative practice.



2.1 Definitions of Flow

How I define and experience Flow echoes the work of psychoanalytic scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Hungarian-American Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is known for coining the term *flow* to describe “a highly focused mental state conducive to productivity” (Csikszentmihalyi).⁹ Csikszentmihalyi writes about how flow allows us to let go of inhibitions and use intuition to inform our actions. Our conscious thoughts are often constrained by sociocultural expectations and beliefs that may discourage people from attending to subconscious feelings or sensory perceptions about lived experience. According to Csikszentmihalyi, these constraints reinforce a divide between our conscious and subconscious ways of knowing. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he states, “Flow leads to integration because thoughts, intentions, feelings and the senses are focused on the same goal. After a flow episode, one feels more together than before, not only internally but also in respect to other people and the world.” (Pg. 3) Csikszentmihalyi began researching flow after studying how artists would get so immersed in their work that they would lose track of time.

Jackie Wang, a poet and professor of American studies and ethnicity, also discusses how connecting to the subconscious can allow us to reframe our understanding and engagement with the conscious world. Wang has described using her own dreams as sources of inspiration in her poetry. She often describes creative processes as including moments of magic where artists enter highly focused states. In the anthology *Magic* (2021), Wang describes how, during the creative process, magic waxes and wanes. She quotes British psychoanalyst Marion Milner: “Creativity is a dialectical and cyclical process that includes periods when the subject descends into an ‘incommunicable world,’ punctuated by states of focus” (Pg. 222). Wang and Milner’s descriptions are consistent with Csikszentmihalyi’s findings about flow. Wang describes magic arriving like waves in the ocean; we are swimming in the ocean surrounded by this magic but its revelations are only accessible when the waves break into our consciousness so they are fleeting and hard to grasp. Wang states, “the artist must oscillate (swing back and forth) between different modes of perception and awareness because the oceanic state, like dream states, resists signification” (Pg.222). It is not that I am resisting signification, rather, I am not pre-planning particular images or outcomes, instead, I’m guided by intuition. For example, similar to Wang, my spirit oscillates entering and exiting

⁹ Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience https://www.researchgate.net/publication/224927532_Flow_The_Psychology_of_Optimal_Experience. Also see these other definitions: The King James Bible Dictionary defines flow as “to move along an inclined plane or descending ground, through the operation of gravity, with a continual change of place among the particles, parts, or fluids.” <https://av1611.com/kjbp/kjv-dictionary/flow.html>

memories and imagined spaces spontaneously. Moving back and forth in this way prompts a shedding of spiritual turmoil and enables a kind of revelation to occur through intuitive mark making.

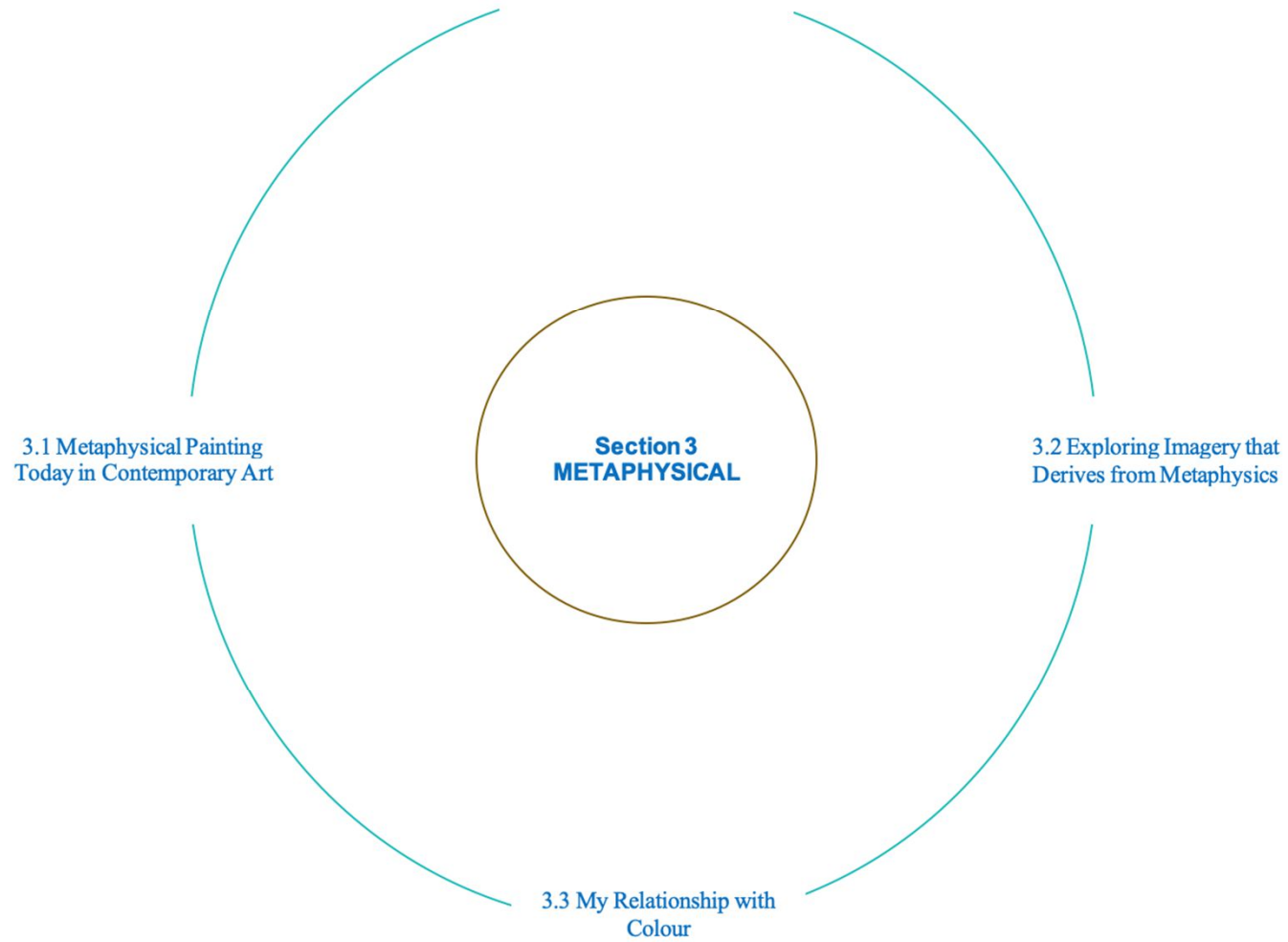
2.2 How Flow Informs My Practice

I gaze at the painting from a distance and notice an energetic light glistening in the foreground of the canvas. The longer I observe this phenomenon, the more my focus shifts away from physical reality into a more nebulous kind of perception. I feel unmoored from the physical realities of my immediate space and time, and I am attuned to invisible energies, guided by a holy spirit. I feel like a conduit with various spiritual energies, influences, and animating forces emanating through me. I am in a flow state. I transport these immaterial substances drawing them out into marks that come alive on the canvas.

Each night before I fall asleep, I observe that when I close my eyes, thousands of blue particles float in the black negative space, hovering and reshaping into various liminal forms. These particles which I observe also seem to stare back at me. Hovering and roaming energetically, I invite them as forms of a greater holy energy that I am able to access. Flow-state allows me to work from within, coming into a deeper awareness of representing and expressing the energy that exists between different beings in the current moment as well as residues of the energy from past relationships and interactions. This energy is always present even though we are not always aware of it. Being in a flow state allows me to perceive and interact with this energy.

African American feminist scholar, bell hooks frequently wrote about arts and culture and how they represent or intervene in social and political systems and relationships. She suggests that the arts can challenge our assumptions and perspectives about identities and ways of being. She also describes how her chosen art form, writing, can be a source of personal transformation. In her book *Remembered Rapture: the writer at work* (1999) she discusses how she enters a flow state when she writes. hooks describe writing as a “transformative force” and way to “experience the ecstatic.” She states, “The root understanding of the word ecstasy — “to stand outside”— comes to me in those moments when I am immersed so deeply in the act of thinking and writing that everything else, even flesh, falls away. The metaphysics of writing has always enchanted me.” (hooks, 1999, p.35) Similar to hooks, flow gives me a sense of stability amidst uncertainty. I use flow to flatten or smooth over the shards of doubt that may encumber my painting process. Being in flow as I paint allows me to express my thinking and feeling and move past hesitations. I let go entirely and

trust without expectation of an outcome, entering a flow that allows magic to happen. In the following section, Selected Projects 1, 2, and 3 (Pg. 26, 30, and 35), I discuss how entering a flow state allows me to render the metaphysical in specific artworks.



3.1 Metaphysical Painting Today in Contemporary Art

The term metaphysical is borrowed from the Latin word *metaphysicalis*. Early on it was used to refer to philosophical thinking about that which is immaterial or incorporeal. As early as 1590 the term metaphysical was used to describe that which “is above or goes beyond the laws of nature; belonging to an operation or agency which is more than or other than physical or natural; supernatural.”¹⁰ In philosophy, the metaphysical is understood or described as things that are not empirically verifiable.¹¹ In other words, one can’t provide physical evidence of metaphysical phenomena or elements. In this thesis the metaphysical is present in the content of my paintings and in the processes I engage when I make them. The metaphysical has a rich and varied history in both Korean and Western painting traditions. In Korean art, spiritual and natural worlds are often intertwined, with landscape painting evoking harmony between the visible and invisible. In the West, metaphysical painting emerged through figures like Giorgio de Chirico, whose dreamlike imagery conjured alternate realities, while Hilma af Klint used spiritualist practices such as séances to channel abstract forms from beyond. Similarly, Max Ernst explored unconscious and irrational states through techniques that gave shape to otherworldly and psychological dimensions. These artists shared an understanding of painting as a medium for engaging immaterial realms — where intuition, abstraction, and symbolic form become tools for revealing the unseen. Building on this lineage, I turn to contemporary artists such as Bob Law, Carmen Argote, and Hanna Hur, whose work explores the metaphysical through material, spatial, and affective means, and informs the context in which I situate my own practice.

Bob Law uses abstract, simple forms and the relationships between positive and negative space in his compositions to push and pull or play with a viewer’s perceptions. In the exhibition catalogue *Bob Law Paintings and Drawings* (1959-78), reflections by the artist are cited. Law states that many artists and poets use flow as a means to represent the unrepresentable in their work, “[W]ith our bits and pieces we can construct purely intuitively toward and around those elusive and treasured seconds when we feel sublimely elevated - those moments that give one the whole essence of life and yet say nothing” (pg. 10). Law is concerned with representing what he calls “inarticulate reality images” which he describes as intangible and elusive images or ideas that make up our being and inform how we live. Law’s works are an example of how the present moment can be reordered or reframed through painting. When one looks at some of his field paintings, one cannot tell where or when the subject it is depicting is situated. The longer one looks at his works the more one might perceive different ways of understanding or interpreting them. For example, the simple blocks of

¹⁰ Oxford English Dictionary

¹¹ Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy

colour in his painting "Two Dogs in One Field" (footnote) feel timeless. They are relevant to the ancient past but also to the present or even the future. Law says that the meanings in his painting are not absolute and not necessarily explicit. Instead, the paintings' appearance may encourage the viewer to interpret it based on feelings rather than logic, "the beholder feels the way the painting looks" (pg. 9). The meaning of the painting is inconstant or mutable and dependent on the viewers' interaction with it in each moment of encounter. Law's description of meaning as emerging in relation to how a viewer experiences it, echoes how I perceive meaning in my own practice — what you see, or feel, in response to a composition, changes as you change.

The work of **Carmen Argote**, a painter from Guadalajara, is another example of metaphysical painting. She uses intuitive mark-making and describes entering a type of flow-state to represent aspects of embodied presence that transcend time and context. In *Arrangement of Wares*, a large-scale oil-based series of paintings, she is inspired by her memories of encounters with street vendors in public markets — how they use space to place their stalls in the market as well as how they display their wares in ways that create an aesthetic environment that compels buyers. She states "I am interested in organizing a composition outside of the western conventions of painting...drawing inspiration from the ways street vendors compose as it relates to the body." In this series, Argote uses a flat, two-dimensional approach to composition. She makes prints using pieces of potato dipped in paint and then stamped onto the canvas. Multiple, repeating shapes that vary in opacity are layered together in groups resembling an aerial view of bodies buzzing around a marketplace. Even though the paintings are abstract and two dimensional, they capture the energy of her market memories. Argote also aims to capture her own presence on the canvas through hand-made gestures. She says, "[I] position the "objects" in relation to my body, making sure that each mark maintains the relationship of an object to the hand. Potato prints in this case allow me to literally place the mark onto the canvas." ¹² In this way, Argote imagines that the mark also provides the viewer with access to traces of the artist, herself. So, the marks embody both the energy of the street vendors and the energy that Argote brings to the making process. In her painting *Arrangement of Black Wares*, layered, repetitive, monochromatic shapes seem to blur and vibrate with energy, evoking the visual texture of an echocardiogram. An echocardiogram uses high frequency sound waves to create live images of a heart and how it is functioning; they permit viewers to see things that are hidden but also powerfully present. Likewise, Argote uses layered, rhythmic marks to reveal hidden currents of memory and bodily presence — invisible but palpable.

¹² Arrangement of Wares by Carmen Argote <https://carmenargote.com/series/potato-print-paintings/>

Hanna Hur is a visual artist of South Korean Canadian descent whose paintings function as portals — spaces for contemplation, transmission, and ritual — that welcome ancestral spirits (Mizota). Grounded in Korean shamanic practices, Hur's work explores repetition as both a formal and spiritual device. Similar to Law and Argote, entering a flow state is an integral part of her practice. She describes her painting process as a "mind-emptying discipline of image making as an act of submission" ("Landscapes"), that allows imagery to surface intuitively. In *Angel ii* (2023), black-and-white checkerboard patterns are locked in a grid, with red lines aligning the center vertically and horizontally, drawing the eye toward an energetic core ("Hanna Hur"). These visual structures emerge through a careful and repetitive labour that evokes ceremonial gestures rather than compositional planning. Hur describes her painting as a kind of invocation — "a petition of gods for the image to come near" ("Landscapes") — in which the act of repetition clears space for something beyond the self to arrive. In this "self-composing" process, a painting composes itself through her rather than being composed by her. The gestures and images are channeled by the body, but not solely from it. For Hur, mark making functions as a spiritual and bodily practice, rooted in Korean shamanic traditions that are dedicated to ancestral ceremony. Although Hur draws on Korean shamanism, rather than the Korean Christian traditions in which she was raised, her experience of the painting process closely mirrors my own.

3.2 Exploring Imagery that Derives from Metaphysics

The metaphysical is reflected in my painting practice through gesture and mark-making. I channel memories, dreams, and emotions, transforming these intangible, metaphysical aspects of my experience into visible marks and images. I experience this as a kind of alchemy—a transformation of memory into matter. The materiality of the paint is bonded to a non-physical essence. Rather than narrating a singular story or moment, I move between abstraction and figuration. In Section Four: Selected Projects I will articulate how three different paintings reflect ideas of metaphysics and flow.

Although our motivations and the subjects we explore may be different, I find that artist Amy Sillman's descriptions of her practice sometimes echo the ways that I think about or experience my painting process. Sillman describes abstraction as a memory process, stating, "[the] process of making something go away from 'realness' to abstraction seem[s] like a big memory-diagram, things seen and then registered in the mind's eye undergoing a process of being stripped clean, or becoming a bit tattered and distorted." Here, Sillman explains the dissipation of form from realness to abstraction and how it echoes the way in which memory can function. Remembered feelings and experiences may come as invited or uninvited images in the mind and then leave again. They are fleeting and ephemeral, yet they often trigger emotions or physical sensations that are intertwined with both

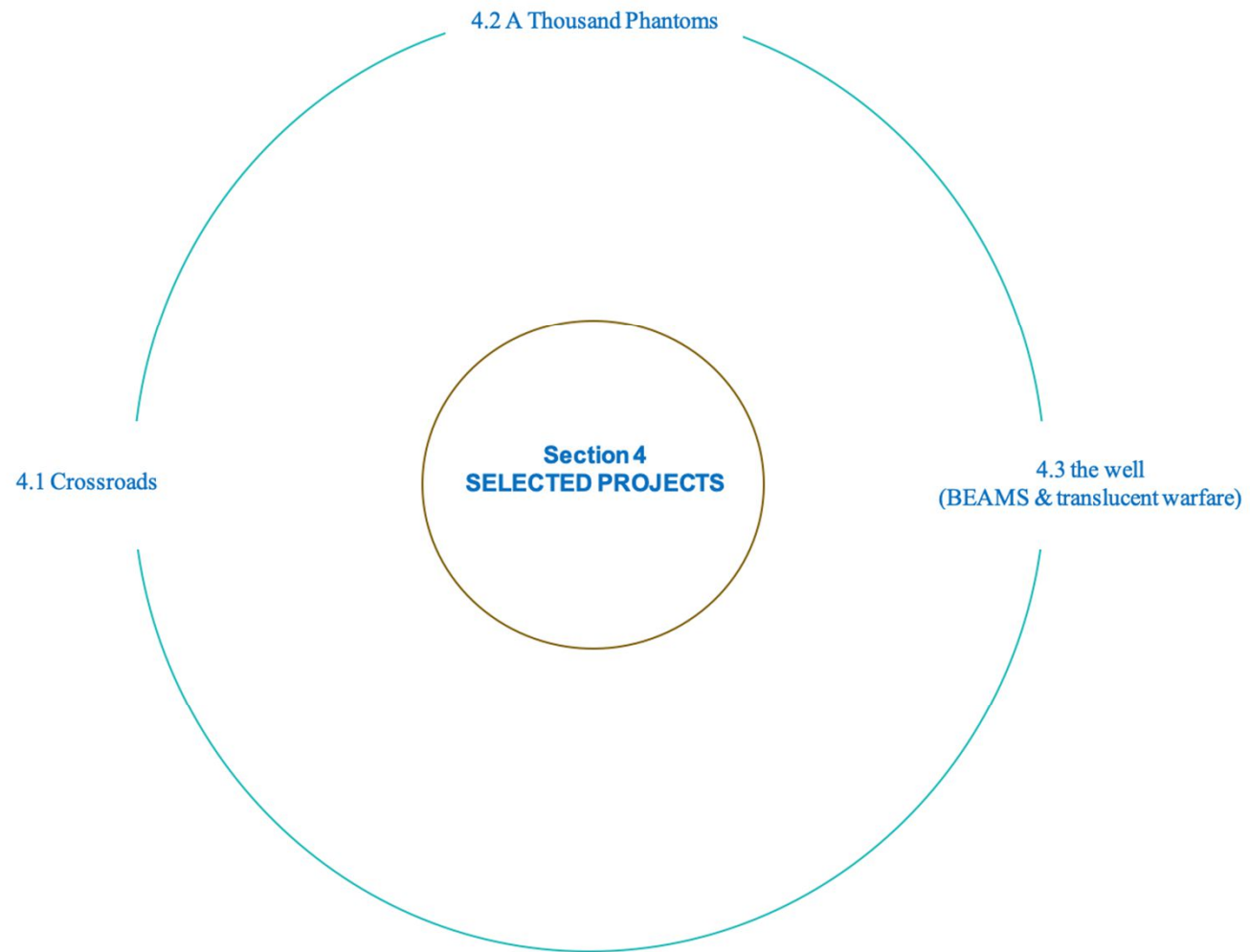
the past and the present. Realistic representations of everyday life may appear to be accurate depictions of the material world, however, like Sillman, I argue that moving between abstraction and figuration can make visible what is hidden or inaccessible in realist representations. Sometimes, images that are true to life are not authentic to one's life experiences. I do not aim for realistic representations that aim to depict or capture the world as a photograph might. For example, a childhood photograph may document a moment in time, but it cannot reveal the full emotional and contextual layers of that experience. Shifting intuitively between abstraction and figuration allows me to give form to how memory is felt and experienced, rather than how it appears. My imagery may be connected to past moments or places, or it may be symbolic of particular feelings or concepts.

3.3 My Relationship with Colour

Similar to imagery, my use of colour emerges intuitively, in response to the creative moment as it unfolds. For me, colour is emotional and often transformative. For example, I may use colour to convey sadness or as a bright, penetrating force that disperses dark thoughts and feelings. Sillman describes colour as more than just a technical component that enhances or adds meaning to the content of a composition; she argues that colour itself can be the focus or subject of an artwork. Sillman states, "Colour as subject arches over everything like a rainbow, from cosmic rays, to minerals in the earth, to what happens inside your eyes, from religious symbology to philosophical problems, from phenomena to noumena" (Sillman 105). She is suggesting that colour is powerful, touching all aspects of existence, the physical world as well as the realm of ideas, emotions and spirituality. Sillman's description holds true to my relationship with colour. The colour palettes that I often use stem from my Korean cultural heritage; they are *Obangsaek* – The Five Colours. The colours consist of black, blue, yellow, red and white. In South Korea, *Obangsaek* are deeply rooted in traditional cosmology and philosophy. Each colour corresponds not only to a cardinal direction—north, south, east, west, and center—but also to one of the five elements in *Eumyangohaeng* (yin-yang and five-element theory): black (north, water), blue or green (east, wood), red (south, fire), white (west, metal), and yellow (center, earth). These colours are associated with balance and harmony in the universe, and with virtues such as wisdom, integrity, vitality, righteousness, and compassion (Choi 55; Kim 23).

Obangsaek are frequently used in ceramics, paintings, and textiles, including the traditional *Hanbok* garments that I wore as a child. Whenever I revisit family photographs from when I was a boy in South Korea, around the ages of 2–5, *Obangsaek* colours are present. While traditional meanings assign black to wisdom, blue to integrity, yellow to wealth or stability, red to passion, and white to selflessness, my own connection to these colours is more intuitive and emotionally felt. There is also a secondary chart of colours called *Obangjapsaek*, including green, light blue, pink, plum red,

and beige. When I use *Obangsaek* or *Obangjapsaek* colours, I experience intense emotional responses. However, my responses to these colours often diverge from their traditional symbolic meanings, reflecting more personal and intuitive associations. Revisiting childhood memories deepens my emotional connection to *Obangsaek*, linking these colours to a sense of innocence and belonging. When these memories resurface, they open a kind of spiritual gateway through which I experience colour as an embodied memory.



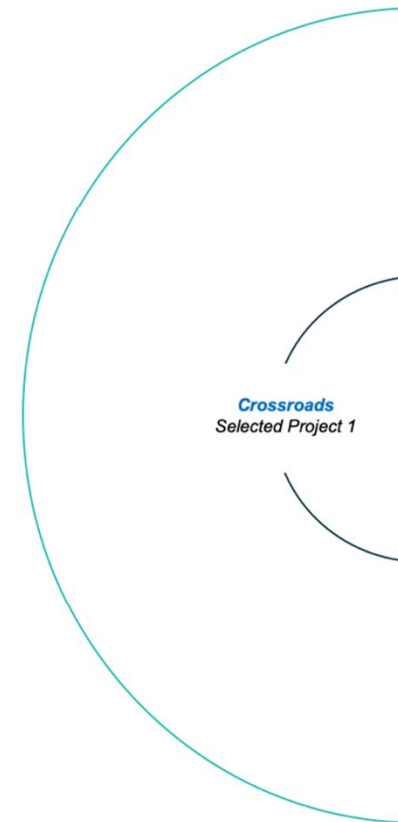




Figure 4 - Crossroads 50 x 88". Oil Painting, Mixed-Mediums (2024)

4.1 *Crossroads*

Amy Sillman states, "Art can be a psychic X-ray, allowing us to peer through surfaces into regions where the mashed-up, inchoate layers of thoughts and feelings entangle." What Sillman describes as this psychic experience resonates deeply with my painting *Crossroads*.

Crossroads (Figure 4) is an oil painting composed of shapes and lines that attempt to create an interlacing tension between the physical and the metaphysical. *Crossroads* references my personal history, growing up in West Vancouver. In elementary school my friends and I spent a lot of time playing in a tree in the corner of a grass field beside a silver chain link fence. We would stand in the tree's large branches during recess and lunch breaks. This space offered me a safe place where I would dream, imagine and view the world from a different perspective. For me, the painting functions like a window into these past moments bringing them together and offering a new perspective on them.

The painting depicts a tree as its central subject; behind it is a car and a yellow-green grid on a textured white background. The yellow-green grid pattern symbolizes the chain-link fence of my memories. It acts like a web that catches symbols from different times in a kind of interdimensional space. The grid and tree trunk use simple lines without complex shading, colour and texture. This flatness brings all the elements onto the same plane implying a flattening of time. In other words, the flatness represents how the painting functions as a portal where time and space are collapsed and different moments and places are experienced simultaneously. The simplicity also aims to give the viewer agency to complete the picture for themselves., which may be different each time they encounter it. What you see changes as you change.

The white shapes in the green of the tree, depict windows and doors in apartment buildings that I walked past on my way to school in the morning, as well as, windows in my childhood home. These windows felt like opportunities to witness other worlds. I could glimpse other perspectives from afar while sometimes feeling observed from these places. As a Korean-Canadian child I felt an alienation from the environment around me. The car represents both travel such as the journey that I had taken to come to Canada from Korea and the journey I was on to develop my sense of self in what sometimes felt like a hostile context. The car is both a means of transport and a safe space. It offers protection often amongst family or friends. I think of it as symbolizing a kind of cocoon within which I can grow and transform reinventing and armoring myself against colonial realities.

Flow & the Metaphysical

Crossroads is a prime example of how flow and the metaphysical intertwine in my making process. I worked spontaneously in response to both my immediate context and the materials, as well as emerging emotions and memories. Crossroads is a large canvas (dimensions), but the space in which I created it was very small and somewhat hectic. I was surrounded by many of my other paintings, and I did not have a lot of room to maneuver. This sense of enclosure echoed the kind of tightness I feel when experiencing trauma or traumatic memories. Countering this sense of enclosure was part of what motivated my gestures and thoughts as I worked on it. Initially the canvas held a previous painting that I didn't like. I decided to make a new start by priming the canvas with multiple layers of gesso and white acrylic paint. I also chose to work vertically, leaning the canvas against the wall. The canvas became a space where I could work out my sense of discomfort creating an opening into a new mental state by evoking and reworking imagery from past experiences. After the original image was masked by the white paint, I started building the dark blue lines that formed the trunk of the central tree/ladder. When building the lines, I dipped my brush so that it was thickly coated with paint allowing me to trace heavy, smudgy lines onto the open field of whiteness. Once the lines were in place I was able to get a sense of space. The lines acted like a skeleton and from there I began fleshing out the different figurative elements. The process of painting created an opportunity for emotional transformation; the finished painting holds traces of how I enacted this process but may be interpreted differently by viewers.



A Thousand Phantoms
Selected Project 2



Figure 5 - A Thousand Phantoms 48 x 48". Oil Painting, (2024)

4.2 *A Thousand Phantoms*

A Thousand Phantoms symbolizes a mending of home and family. The painting is about surpassing the inhibitions that manifest in my family's experiences of migration and integration in Canada, as well as our struggles to maintain connections to South Korean family and traditions. As newcomers and people of colour in Canada, we have many invisible scars. It is like wearing a metaphorical backpack filled with weights that makes interpersonal relations, navigation of social and economic systems, and even psychological interpretations of lived experience, a bit heavier and more difficult. The painting is a symbolic ode to my family, recognizing the impact that carrying this weight has had on all of us, as well as our collective resilience. I draw on these hardships and difficulties as fuel to motivate my art making; I use painting as a means to help make sense of, transform and heal these hidden wounds.

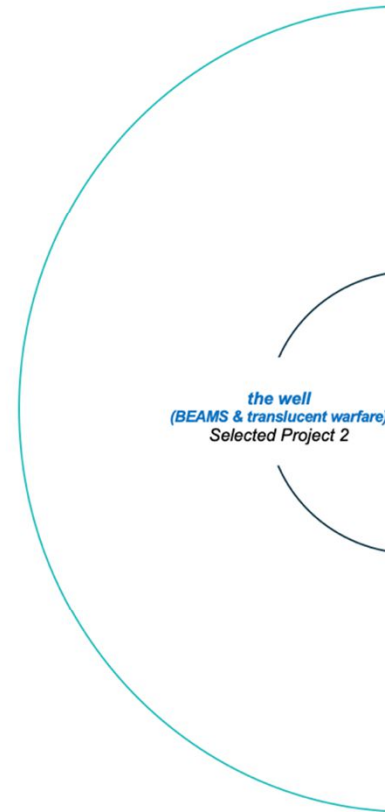
A Thousand Phantoms (Figure V) is an oil painting of a panther in a forest, featuring various shades and tints of blue and thick layers of paint. In addition to the panther, shapes (circles, polka dots, and lines) have been scraped into the surface, revealing underlayers of white-grey paint and contrasting textures. The blue is reminiscent of water, and both water and panthers are adaptable and malleable. The forest in the painting represents the forest or ocean of life with its ever-changing tides and challenges. The painting symbolizes the wonderment of divine healing, recovery, and fluidity, resilience, and the courage to reinvent oneself through faith.

Flow & the Metaphysical

One can experience a state of flow both in the process of painting and with each new encounter with an artwork. In the top left of *A Thousand Phantoms*, light green paint outlines dream-like shapes in light and dark blue tones that have many possible interpretations. Consistent with my discussion of *Crossroads*, what these shapes are; may be interpreted differently depending on who encounters the work and when they encounter it. For example, sometimes I imagine the shapes as representing clouds; at other times, the roof of a house, a figure swimming in water, or even bananas. Each of these interpretations may be connected to particular memories or emotions that I am experiencing in the moment. Behind these shapes, multiple dark blue, fingerprint-like circles appear in the top-middle. These marks were painted quickly and spontaneously, reminding me of painting as a child, pressing my thumb covered in paint onto the surface of an artwork. When I paint, I often aim to recapture that sense of joy and innocence in my mark-making — embracing and responding to the moment.

A Thousand Phantoms is another example of how the materiality of a painting, its symbols and the process of its making, allows me to access the metaphysical. For me, the circles that appear on the body of the panther are not the spots of a leopard as some might assume. Instead, I imagine them as shrapnel piercing the body, allowing light to shine through an otherwise opaque surface. When making the spots I pushed the metal of the brush into the surface to create indentations as well as dabs of paint. The larger circles that scatter over the panther and below it, were created in a similar way, carved in to reveal underlayers. These larger circles are reminiscent of when, as a child, my grandparents would give me coins to play the claw machine, trying to capture toys or stuffed animals. I remember watching the metal claw pick up the animal as I maneuvered the joystick. As an adult, revisiting this memory is like moving through time or different dimensions in my mind and spirit. I am trying to recapture the sensations of my younger self, moving my paint brush in place of a joystick. I use the physical process of painting to pierce through invisible barriers and reconnect with an internal well of resources that I think of as my internal kingdom. I sometimes think of this as a kind of spiritual warfare where the physical gesture sparks a kind of psychic response metaphysically shifting the surface from my view.

The panther in *A Thousand Phantoms* symbolizes my grandfather. He was a pioneer in our family. He served in the military and saved up so that he could attend university and build a successful career, moving our family out of poverty. I was reminded of his faith and determination after watching a National Geographic documentary about panthers in the wild and all of the determination and persistence that they need to survive and support their young. In Korean culture, sacrificing for one's loved ones is called *shin-nyum*, meaning *faith*. Two years ago, my grandfather passed away, and I remember walking into my grandparent's home and seeing the apartment nearly empty. It forced me to reckon with my memory of that space as one that was lively and full of activity. I closed my eyes and remembered different scenes. I saw the spirit of my grandfather smiling and waving at me. I recalled shared experiences with him in Korea when I was a child, such as walking in a park and enjoying home-cooked meals. When I opened my eyes, I fleetingly glimpsed his spirit. *A Thousand Phantoms* symbolizes how his legacy shapes my conviction to move through life with faith, remembering him as a courageous, righteous, and kind figure. My choice to pursue painting — a path that is risky yet brings me joy — is inspired by my grandfather's *shin-nyum* and serves as a way to contribute to my family's healing. This painting, in particular, is part of my own healing, a way to feel my grandfather's spirit alive and present. Though no longer physically here, he remains with me — protecting and guiding our family on the earthly plane.



the well
(BEAMS & translucent warfare)
Selected Project 2



Figure 6 - the well (BEAMS + translucent warfare)
50 x 50". Oil Painting, (2024)

4.3 *the well* (BEAMS + translucent warfare)

the well is a mixed-media painting on canvas consisting of oil markers, acrylics, and oil paint (Figure VI). The top and bottom halves of the painting form two distinct sections. In the bottom half, diamond-like shapes in multiple colours, and small green polka dots pierce the black foreground. This area represents a *well* that holds my internal kingdom – a collection of memories of lived experience, trauma, and resilience that act as a kind of spiritual fuel. I draw from this well to fuel my compositions. For me, painting often acts as a form of catharsis; it allows me to symbolically express and transform trauma while connecting with a higher spirit. A light blue horizontal line creates a border in the middle of the painting. This blue stripe serves as both a boundary and an aura surrounding my consciousness. As I brushed the blue onto the canvas, I imagined it indicating a kind of magnetic force or reverberation, the transference of the living space within me manifested into physical form.

In the top section, a white wave-like presence emerges from the middle and flows in two distinct directions. This shape is overlaid with a diffuse, repeating grey pattern of watery smudges. I experience it almost like feathers or clouds, leaving me with the sensation of being watched or protected by a guardian angel. I created this effect using a rubber tool with a honeycomb pattern on its surface. I pushed the tool into the canvas as it leaned against a wall with paint dripping down its surface. This created indentations that smudged the paint. Simultaneously, the paint was exposed to intense sunlight from a window nearby which caused it to dry rapidly. The indentations caused by the pressure I exerted on the tool, the dripping caused by gravity, and the heat from the sun all acted together. This process of mark making is similar to how waves leave patterns on beach sand; it includes repetition and is influenced by forces that are ever present (some natural and some human) but at the same time it is serendipitous and ever changing. I think of the wave as a living aspect of God or nature and this image is a representation of the spirit of the wave — a kind of exposure, where the inside is coming outside. Perhaps it can even be understood as an attempt at revealing my own spirit within the wave.

Flow & the Metaphysical

When making *the well*, once again, I entered a state of receptivity or flow where I was able to channel energy from within myself and from the world around me. In this state, I picked up on all the frequencies, vibrations, and transfers from my memories, experiences, and the sensorial world. I felt a sense of calm and I was able to follow my intuitions. My hand glided upward, piercing through the layers of paint. I circled polka dots with my green oil pastel. I felt uncertainty and faith at the same time and this allowed me to conjure fleeting images in my mind's eye. Every night when I close my

eyes to go to sleep, I see blue molecules glittering like stars, the light from outside that remains within me. I experience something similar when painting in a flow state; the light from within me re-emerges from my physical body onto the painting in front of me. My movements pick up, absorb and then depict these transitory particles – moving and gliding, shifting and reorienting, picking up the paint, shaking the canvas. When I experience this sensation, it occurs in my waking psyche, in the sense that I perceive what is invisible.

the well is a visual representation of how a flow-state allows me to make visible things that are normally opaque or inaccessible when I seek them too directly or explicitly. As previously stated, I define these “things” as metaphysical or supernatural aspects of experience. The veil that shrouds my subconscious becomes more transparent and elements of the self and the world, the past, present and future, are illuminated. I often feel very small in the real world, squashed down and inhibited by human systems and expectations; but, when I paint I feel infinite, like a giant or a phoenix. I am unblocked and filled with a sense of agency. These moments enable me to transmute past experiences and alter trauma. *the well* is both an articulation of this experience in general and a reference to particular memories and traumas.

The top half of *the well* evokes family memories, representing emotions and traces of sensations from my younger years after immigrating to Canada. For me the white wave also resembles the tail of a fish cooking in a frying pan. It brings to mind memories of my mother preparing home-cooked meals for my sister and me. The wave/tail symbolizes the presence of family and loved ones who have since grown older and diverged into separate paths as time unfolded. Some of my family members have experienced chronic illnesses relating to both physical and mental health. I have often described my response to these challenges to be similar to carrying a weight of sadness and pain around with me.

In the bottom half of *the well*, the almond shapes in different hues vibrate in relation to one another, reminding me both, of one of my sister's childhood birthday parties at a laser-dome, as well as informal Korean-community get-togethers. Such moments offered a sense of communion and belonging that countered the feelings of sadness and isolation which sometimes circulated within my family home. Painting the well offered me an opportunity to transfer the weight of sadness and pain onto the canvas and transform it into something luminous. I aimed for the shapes in the painting to inspire feelings of playfulness, movement, and excitement. The shapes below symbolize a spiritual restoration and the wave above, a force that has the potential to cleanse trauma or misfortune.

Concluding Statement

Reflecting on and analyzing the three paintings, *Crossroads*, *A Thousand Phantoms*, and *the well*, has shifted my understanding of them and helped me to identify patterns in my creative practice. When writing this conclusion, I spent time examining a picture of the well while my written analysis of it was read aloud to me. As I listened, it brought me back into pockets of memory, both of the making of *the well*, as well as the memories that originally inspired it. Initially, I found myself critiquing the composition, wanting to change parts of it. This sense of dissatisfaction was somewhat resolved as I was drawn back into my memories. As these were read aloud, it was as if the memories and the image together were weaving a new story. This new story helps me to re-engage with past experiences and learn new ways of conceptualizing or relating to them. In this way, critical analysis of my work allows me to identify feelings that shape and motivate my practice. It also allows me to deepen my understanding of how I learn and relearn through painting in ways that are intrinsically linked to the multiple systems, contexts, and relationships in which I am embedded.

I have used the concept of the metaphysical as a way of describing and understanding my practice throughout this thesis. In the last few weeks, I have been introduced to the concept of transcendent learning. This concept uses neuroscience and educational theory to explore human development and learning in ways that resonate with my practice. I have explored how painting allows me to tap into threads of emotion and memory across time as a means of healing. Transcendent learning theorist Mary Helen Immordino-Yang (2024) suggests that human development and life satisfaction are dependent on learning opportunities that support interconnection between emotion and cognition. She compares lifelong learning to the weaving of a cloth: “the twists and knots of different threads are interwoven.” She suggests that these different threads represent “multiple interdependent biological and psychological developmental systems within and across people on multiple time scales.” Immordino-Yang recommends that we reconceive how we understand and organize processes for learning. If emotion and cognition are interdependent, then learning

opportunities that support learners in a holistic way, acknowledging who they are and how they feel within and beyond the immediate learning context, may be more fruitful. This kind of learning, according to Immordino-Yang is more attuned to how human biology and psychology function.

I see connections between Immordino-Yang's theories of transcendent learning and my painting practice. My painting practice allows me to weave and reweave my story across time and contexts. It allows me to engage in learning that supports my whole self. My notion of the metaphysical embraces the concept of transcendence. Painting allows me to transcend the boundaries of many social and cultural systems that limit my sense of agency. What makes painting special for me is how it enables me to make a meaningful contribution to my world. I sometimes feel that every time I make new work, it needs to be better than what I made before. But this is not a good mindset, because each painting represents a different moment in time and offers insight. I do not want to sacrifice my past self for my future self; instead, they feed one another. Transcendent learning theorists argue that "learning is not a single, sequential story, thread, or trajectory, either within individuals, within groups, within settings and systems, or across time (Immordino-Yang, 2024)." My painting is both a learning process and a representation of my learning, co-created with my present and past selves as well as the individuals, groups, and contexts that I have and continue to live with and within.

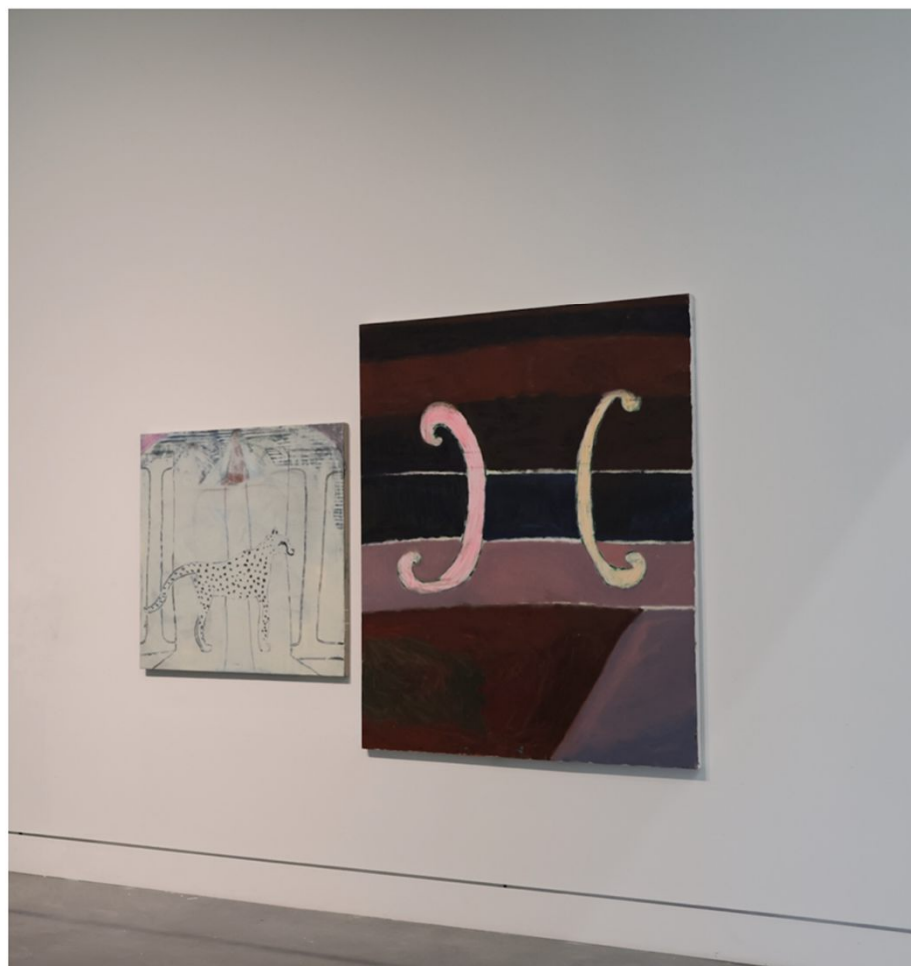


Figure 7 - In Between Spaces, Thesis Exhibition (2025)









Final Reflections

My thesis exhibition and defence provided me with many insights. Presenting and discussing my work in a shared social context and public setting offered opportunities for personal growth. Initially, I presented my entire body of work all on one wall salon style¹³, so they were somewhat randomly scattered and climbed high up onto the wall. I then painted the wall itself a bright cadmium yellow. The effect was intense. On recommendation from faculty who felt that the yellow and the number of works might be overwhelming for viewers, I restarted the process, painting the wall back to white and working with digital maquettes of various combinations of paintings. Ultimately, I reduced the number and developed a series of smaller constellations of paintings. Faculty encouraged me to consider different types of affinities that the paintings might have with one another, even though they may have been created at very different times. I realized that part of being a painter is more than just the creation of paintings; it is also important to engage with them once they have been physically completed. Their presentation, interpretation and reinterpretation continue to develop in an ongoing process both for me as the maker and for potential audiences.

During the past two years, I tended to make five to eight paintings per month, and I perceived these series as one body of work because they were made in the same time period. However, exhibiting allowed me to see the work in different ways and that my paintings may resonate with one another and work well together, even if they were made at different times and not consciously created to be seen in combination. I learned that work can evolve and shift through grouping and regrouping. The context of presentation and the relationships that this creates between works may be just as significant as the content and form of each individual work on its own. Presentation can change other people's perceptions of the work and my own perceptions and relationships to it.

¹³ Refers to a hanging style, arranging paintings on the wall from 'floor to ceiling' presentation, having originated from Parisian artisans.
<https://www.gallery.ca/salon-hanging/>

The social qualities of exhibiting and defending my thesis echoes how important the social aspect of learning has become for me. Putting my faith in others in whom I have trusting relationships allows me to be more open to consideration of their suggestions and interpretations. It allows me to see and understand my work in new ways. I realized that although painting can sometimes feel solitary, I do not have to pursue my practice in isolation. I'm not alone; there are others who are willing to help, and through these relationships, I can grow personally and professionally.

During my defence, I was asked how do I want audience members to experience my work. This is a tricky question to navigate. I have hopes for how the paintings might be perceived. For example, I hope that they might have a healing effect by provoking people to consider aspects of lived experience that are intangible and to connect to spiritual elements. But I have realized how the audience experiences the work is somewhat beyond my control, and that's okay. In fact, alternate interpretations from what I may intend have the potential to change my own thinking about and experience of my paintings. I want engagement with my paintings to be reciprocal. I want them to feel alive and to create a sense of sharing and communication between myself and viewers. But I am comfortable with their open-endedness.

Moving forward, I intend to work with scale, especially emphasizing larger works. I want to experiment with how paintings that physically surpass the scale of the human body might enable a more visceral affect, where one can feel enveloped in the field of the painting. I am also seeking opportunities to work in different social and cultural contexts. I am interested in learning how these kinds of environmental shifts may influence me and emerge within my process and production.

Thank You

I want to thank my supervisor, the internal and external members, and the committee who participated in my defence. It has been a privilege and an excellent opportunity to showcase my research, work, and progress over the last two years while pursuing my Master of Fine Arts degree. I am incredibly grateful for the growth and support from the faculty, the university community, and my special and unique cohort. I am also thankful to the Graduate Department for their remarkable support in assisting students like me with educational funding, scholarships, and stipends during my studies. I am deeply happy and appreciative of everything I have learned, and I will carry this research forward to enhance my life as a painter and create a brighter future. Thank you, everyone, for your love, support, and kindness. It has been an essential and formative chapter in my life.

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