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Translating Between Paintings and Sweaters

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Abstract

My art is the process of translating non-visual phenomena such as emotions and memories into a visual language built from shape, form, and, especially, color. The visuals draw from places rich with personal history. I first explored this through painting and drawing, but in January my material understanding, and the works’ broader implications were reconstructed after tearing my ACL. I discovered knitting first as a form of therapy, then soon after as a material that brought new meaning to my artistic endeavors. Knitting taught me lessons about gesture, gender, color, and craft, that then led me back to painting.

My BFA in Studio Art Thesis is an account of translating my work into three sweaters, and then rediscovering painting. Its goal is to further my pursuits of finding a most fulfilling visual strategy for expressing emotion.
Introduction

My art is a process of translating non-visual phenomena such as emotions and memories into a language of shape, from, and, most of all, color. I first did this through abstract paintings and drawings, but after tearing my ACL while skiing in January, I found myself working within a new world of restrictions. Through coping with that shock, I discovered a new medium that was accessible and profoundly relaxing—knitting.

Knitting became everything. I committed to the idea of making three sweaters that followed the same approach as my other work: making images out of color and shape, but instead the mark-making is done through fibers. Suddenly, the work became soft, caring, and gestural. Because the pigment is embedded in the fibers themselves, the textile material has a richer and deeper body of color as opposed to simply applying it to a surface. As hand-knit objects, the sweaters also address the gendered history of craft versus fine art and what gets the privilege of being in a gallery. The lessons learned from the sweaters led me back to the canvas. I
put the sweaters in conversation with a new collection of abstract paintings, and asked the questions: How does making a painting wearable change the work? Can I create the same color richness of textile in paint? In what ways does a painting capture life more accurately than a sweater, and vice versa? *Translating Between Paintings and Sweaters* is an attempt to fill the space between those questions in pursuit of more fulfilling work that expresses emotion through the visuals of everyday life.

![Figure 2. Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VIII*, oil on canvas, 55.1” x 79.1”, 1923](image)

**Color as Emotion**

I remember, in high school, learning about Wassily Kandinsky and his paintings that were inspired by music. As someone who already held strong associations of color and map-like formations with numbers, letters, and calendars in my head, it was compelling to learn that this was something being explored in the cannon of abstract painters. Color Grapheme\(^1\) Synesthesia is when a person experiences color when viewing written letters or numbers, usually with

\(^1\) The smallest unit within a system, such as a letter or number.
particular color evoked by individual grapheme, which is the smallest unit of a language system.² My experience with synesthesia led to my interest in associating color, shape, and form with non-visual experiences; however, the art itself is not a direct depiction of my synesthesia. I am instead drawn to manufacturing my own visual strategy of that translating experience into visual art. Using colored pencils in my sketchbook, I started developing my own visual language that ties shape, line and color to different aspects of emotion and memories. A particular person might become the outline of a purple rectangle placed in an awkward pink cloud with disruptive green lines creeping up from below. Maybe there is a set of blue circles representing a clique of people off to the side and packed close together with a thick yellow line separating them from the distraught rectangle. Yet despite this division, a cool grey atmospheric form hovers over them in this confusing tense scene. The drawings were private and sensitive, and after making them I felt a sense of relief and more clarity about whatever situation I was trying to convey. Years later, I tried bringing this idea to larger-scale oil paintings, but found it felt completely different. Trying to fill a canvas with depictions of what I was feeling was too forced. The medium was bold and decisive, whereas my internal experiences felt malleable and soft. I needed an aesthetic that allowed for more ambiguity.

After recognizing that oil paint limited my ability to convey my personal experiences in a way that felt appropriate, I shifted my inspiration from my internal experiences to the

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external world. I found that places rich with my personal history already held sources of deep visual inspiration.

This personal, on-going project titled *Color Pallets from Memory* is constructed from pallets made using Adobe Color that I associate with experiences growing up in a small, rural town: Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. Each pallet holistically has a mood, a temperature, and an environment. While the individual colors typically reference nature, they are also homes, objects, memories and emotions – much like my early drawings. Titles are their only form of explanation, varying from straightforward visual descriptions such as “Top Soil,” to more emotive and personal suggestions like “my mom’s name is Susan II.” The purpose of the pallets is not to tell stories, or to commemorate a specific event—it is simply my personal exploration into understanding different aspects of my surroundings, both present and past, accessed through memory.
Material Holds Shapes

Part of turning my attention to the external world involved taking slower, more intentional walks. As I walked, simple, visual relationships in my everyday surroundings captivated me. A dark brown tree trunk contrasted light, and luminous green leaves wafting in front of a crisp, blue sky leaving me awestruck. After drawing inspiration from visuals on walks, I created a piece titled, *Walking Through the New Usual*, based on my commute from my new apartment to school.

I selected six different locations along the walk where I would stop and take in the colors and forms that characterized that place. Then I would go into my studio and create a composition working from my memories of these places, while also synthesizing those images with the lines and shapes of wood grain already present in the surface. I wanted the wood grain to be more than a background. The negative space in the paintings provided an opportunity to incorporate the color and texture of the natural material, allowing it to dictate major elements of the composition. The result was an image that was reminiscent of that specific place, but also something entirely new.
Continuing to work with the existing material pattern in wood panels and drawing inspiration from my surrounding color environments, I created another series of paintings titled, *Improvised Wood Paintings*. Here I worked primarily from the grain already present in the wood and tried to find something familiar, landscape-like, within it. I focused on the approach of building images through single-color organic shapes that could be found in nature, but are not direct references to specific forms such as a tree trunk or a leaf. Once again, the paintings created new environments built from color and shape, as well as the existing material.

![Fig. 5. (left). Eliza Caperton, *Improvised Painting on Wood Panel no. 1*, oil on wood panel, 3' x 2', 2020](image1)

![Fig. 6. (right). Eliza Caperton, *Improvised Painting on Wood Panel no. 4*, oil on wood panel, 2' x 2', 2020](image2)

*Yarn is Soft*

When I started making sweaters, I applied this same approach. Instead of painting the colorful shapes, I knit them out of vibrant, synthetic yarn, then sewed them together into a sweater. The sweaters do not come from a pattern, as I, in fact, still have no idea how to follow a knitting pattern and have no real desire to learn. The first sweater I made sticks to a more conservative approach. At that time, I was still mastering the technique, so I stuck to knitting
rectangles to see if it was possible to construct them into something wearable. After succeeding in that venture, I broke out of the rectangle and started knitting irregular forms for the second sweater.

Figure 7. Eliza Caperton, *Three Sweaters from December to April*, yarn, 2021

The shapes in the second sweater looks similar to those in the *Improvised Wood Paintings*, as seen in the images below. Having mastered the technique in the first sweater, I felt confident pushing the boundaries by having curved edges and asymmetry throughout the form. Then the third sweater pushed boundaries of structure even further. While still being wearable, that sweater incorporates negative space and more ambiguous sleeves. For all three sweaters, the colors of the yarn are inspired by the scenery in my hometown, where I was while recovering from the early stages of my ACL injury. They capture the rich orange of clay, green of pine
needles, and blue of the sky, or distant mountains, or the place where they start to become one. It is the pallet I grew up with and thus it has settled in my subconscious, and manifests through my work.

Figure 8 (left). Eliza Caperton, *Improvised Wood Painting no. 3*, oil on wood panel, 1’ x 1’, 2020
Figure 9 (right). Eliza Caperton, *Sweater no. 3*, detail, 2021

Figure 10. (left). Eliza Caperton, *Sweater no. 3*, detail, 2021
Figure 11. (right). Eliza Caperton, *Sweater no. 1*, detail, 2021
While making this wearable art I was looking Pia Camil’s piece *Wearable Paintings*, shown at Art Frieze, New York, 2015. Camil made hand-stitched ponchos out of recycled textiles and gave them away to viewers for free at the show to be worn at the gallery, then taken home.\(^3\) The piece sparked questions like: How does the work change when placed on a person? What does it mean now that interacting with the work means interacting with another person? Further, the way the poncho folds over the person, and sways with their movement and gestures gives the “paintings” a constantly changing composition. By creating my work through sweaters, there is both an inherent gesture to the garment and a space reserved for the body within the work.

\(^3\) *Conversation: Pia Camil, YouTube* (YouTube, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQmhZnkolyQ&t=2112s.
Unlike Camil’s *Wearable Paintings*, my sweaters imply the body while not physically involving it. I’m more drawn to studying the garments as art objects. In contrast to two-dimensional work, the sweaters always carry their own topography whether it be from the body, the way they lay on the ground, or their slight folds over a hanger. Instead of exploring that on the human form, I would rather there be a more stagnant experience that allows people to think less about who is wearing the garment, and more about the garment as an art piece that ties to place, a cultural context, and/or a form of labor.

Feminist artists of the 1960’s and 70’s took to fiber sculpture as a means of questioning what type of art was seen as worthy of being in a gallery, and the gendered implication therein. Painting and sculpture have always been considered “fine art” and carry values of large, stoic, masculine intensity, whereas knitting, crocheting, and embroidery were considered craft, and not worth of being recognizing at the level of fine art. Jenelle Porter writes, “Because fiber art was associated with the-female-spheres of domesticity and intimacy, often taking the form of wearable works and interactive environments, feminists seized on it to unravel gendered politics.” In 1972 Faith Wilding created *Crocheted Environment*, an installation built from

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5 Ibid. p. 19.
crocheted web of fibers filling and softening the corners of a room. The piece debuted as part of *Woman House*, an exhibition from the first feminist art school located in Fresno, CA led by Judy Chicago.⁶ Faith Wilding wrote that her piece, “…both wanted to pay homage to women’s useful economic and cultural work while at the same time producing a piece that was useless (non-practical) to demonstrate the falseness of the traditional distinctions between art and craft.”⁷

*Crocheted Environment* is an intricate hand-made installation, often described by viewers as womb-like. The form is airy and soft, yet it has enough weight that it drapes over the viewer into the space, making the crocheted material part of the environment. Because of this, it still is an immersive environment despite all the negative space. By bringing crocheting into *Woman House*, Wilding added to representations of women’s experiences through craft and further the mission of recognizing the experiences as valid and worthy of being seen in an art space.


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⁶ Ibid. p. 19.
⁷ Ibid. p. 240.
Craft and Care

The sweaters I knit are created through the mastery of a domestic craft, but they have provided me with more than just a new skill—they have shown me care. They are soft. They connote warmth, comfort, and protection. Knitting was therapeutic when healing from my injury. I would sit on my bed and reach a meditative state while repeating the same specific motion for hours. Each stitch represents a moment of rest, processing, and hope. As a collection of stitches, they represent a record of time spent working on both physical and psychological healing. After finishing the first sweater I felt a deeper personal connection to it than anything else I had ever made. They got me through an especially challenging time, and I wanted to put that sentimentality on a pedestal in an art gallery. *Three Sweaters From December to April* is a visual manifestation of the emotional labor of coping with an ACL injury.

![Image of Sheila Hicks's Pillar of Inquiry/Supreme Column](image)

Figure 17. Sheila Hicks, *Pillar of Inquiry/Supreme Column*, fibers, 2013-14
Another major take-away from working with fibers was realizing how well the material captures color, and this was furthered by understanding the work of Sheila Hicks. Sheila Hicks is known for generating vibrant color through dyeing textile. Hicks created fiber sculptures and installations with hand-dyed pigments that “make us want to touch color.”8 In 2014 Hicks created Pillar of Inquiry/Supreme Column, to be shown in the Whitney Biennial. Hanging in the center of the gallery, Hicks intended the piece to be a counterpart to the Color Field forms in a of Morris Lewis painting and the latex work by Lynda Belgis.9 Hicks’ work brings color into a space and allows viewers to interact with their surroundings in a new way.

Figure 18. Eliza Caperton, Sweater no. 3, detail, yarn, 2021

Soak Stain

In response to the criticism that painting is simply applying color to a surface, and thus limiting its potential as an element within the work, Gauthier explains: “A number of painters from the Color-Field, particularly Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Lewis, who were both at their

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9 Ibid. p. 28.
peak when Hicks started out tried to overcome this hurdle by using acrylic, at times even dilutes, as it impregnates the fibers of the canvas more effectively than oil. This led paint in the direction of dyeing.”

This technique in question is called “Soak Stain” and it was developed by Helen Frankenthaler in the 1950’s. It is done by mixing paint with paint thinner and pouring it over an unprimed canvas. The technique allows paint to directly bond with the material while also creating shapes as a result of splattering, pouring, and chance. Thus, it directly represents movement and viscosity in the natural world. Studying the work of Frankenthaler and the interaction between color and fiber is what brought me back to painting upon returning to my studio and regaining some mobility. Somewhat intentionally and somewhat coincidentally, I worked with colors that are also found in the sweaters, because I wanted them to exist in dialogue with each other. But I also feel I consistently drawn to similar colors that I attribute to home, likely emerging from my subconscious. The soak stain technique gave my pallets a new vehicle to express themselves.

Figure 19. Helen Frankenthaler paintings with her Soak Stain technique
Figure 20. Helen Frankenthaler, Mountains and Sea, oil and charcoal on canvas, 1952

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10 Ibid. p. 28.
For the first time I could not control the shapes. I tried, but they never turned out exactly how I intended, and I was forced to respond to their decisions. I could only control mixing and pouring the paint—the way they dry, fade, and settle happens naturally. I left a large sheet of canvas out on my studio floor and over the course of a few days re-applied pigment, darkening some areas, and trying new application methods, like pouring over scraps of yarn, and paint thinners on others, all with the intention of complicating the composition. What I ended up with was a mysterious image embedded in the side of the canvas opposite of the side I was working with. It was lingering on the back between the material and the floor. The folds in the canvas created their own shapes as they soaked in the paint accumulated and drying on the floor.

![Image of Spill, 2021]

After discovering this, I treated the canvas more like a textile than a hard surface. When I laid it on the floor, I intentionally crumpled it. Like a sweater, it had its own topography—mountains, valleys, streams, and planes. The topography partially controls how the colors travel
and settle along the surface. Like water, they rain, run-off, and percolate into ponds, puddles, and rivers. The canvas and the color need time to sit together and workout their relationship. That process continues until I feel the composition is interesting enough, then I flatten out the surface and stretch it over the frame, and it becomes a painting. When looking at the work, one can recognize that there is a history in the process, but as it is flattened its nature becomes unclear, leaving viewers to speculate how the whole thing happened. Finally, I learned how a painting can show ambiguity.

Figure 22 (left). Eliza Caperton, *Sea*, oil on canvas, 53” x 53”, 2021
Figure 23 (right) Eliza Caperton, *Spill*, oil on canvas, 53” x 53”, 2021

The result: *Spill* and *Sea*. Similar to my pallet studies, the names come from associations I make between the resulting images and memories. The painting, *Sea* reminded me of the sapphire blue of the Mediterranean Sea I swam in two summers ago. *Spill* is a reference to the process, as well as this tension between both child-like play, as well as color saturation, and the chemical toxicity that is required to complete the soak stain process.
Placing the sweaters in conversation with the paintings has no clear objective other than to show a contrast and similarity across mediums. The sweaters are slow. They took a lot of time to make, and it was that time itself that helped me feel healed and relaxed within an overwhelming situation. The paintings happened quickly and settled through their own materiality, not my touch, which led to more mysterious shapes. While a sweater does not hold the same ambiguity, it’s clear that they are knit objects that took time, and hold a different weight to them that is connected to the amount of time it would take to make them.

My work is about understanding how feelings, experiences, and emotions connect with the visual world. As circumstance brought me to knitting, I found a culturally charged medium through which I can bring more nuance to my making. Lessons learned in knitting bore new discoveries in my original medium, painting. The next step of this work is to start dyeing my own yarn using plant materials that come from personally significant places, such as my home in West Virginia, while also continuing to experiment with the painting process. I will take the lessons learned through this work and push for deeper connections between material and place as I continue to express emotion.

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