

17

MFA Thesis Catalogue

James Madison University
School of Art, Design, and Art History

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

College of Visual and Performing Arts

Dr. George Sparks, Dean

The Graduate School

Dr. Jie Chen, Dean

School of Art, Design and Art History

Dr. Katherine Schwartz, Director

Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art

Gary Freeburg, Director

SADAH Graduate Program

Dr. Cole Welter, Director

THESIS COMMITTEES

Ben Wailes Cole Welter, *Chair*
Aderonke Adesanya
Ken Szmagaj

Mengjiao Wang Sukjin Choi, *Chair*
Rob Mertens
Lisa Tubach

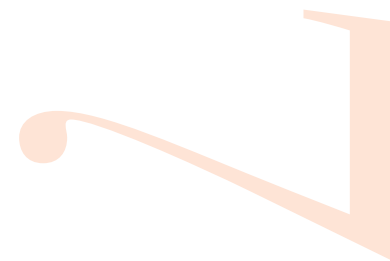
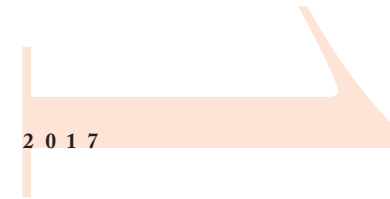
Nathaniel St. Amour Lisa Tubach, *Chair*
Mark Rooker
Kathryn Stevens

Ellen Reid Lisa Tubach, *Chair*
Greg Stewart
Corinne Diop
Bill Tate
John Casteen



JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

School of Art, Design, and Art History



MFA Thesis Catalogue

CONTENTS

4 **Letter from the Director**, School of Art, Design, and Art History
Dr. Katherine A. Schwartz, Professor of Art Education

5 **Letter from the Graduate Program Director**
Dr. Cole H. Welter, Professor of Art

MFA CANDIDATE WORKS AND STATEMENTS

6 Ben Wailes

16 Ellen Reid

26 Mengjiao Wang

36 Nathaniel St. Amour

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR,
SCHOOL OF ART DESIGN AND ART HISTORY
DR. KATHERINE A. SCHWARTZ

Welcome to the 2016–17 MFA Graduate Exhibition within the beautifully renovated Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art at James Madison University’s School of Art, Design, and Art History. This inaugural catalogue documents the final thesis exhibitions of our four MFA graduate candidates: Ellen Reid, Nathaniel St. Amour, Benjamin Wailes, and Mengjiao Wang. The MFA exhibition represents a commitment to excellence in programming while also inviting viewers to contemplate questions of our humanity and contemporary society.

Ellen Reid demonstrates a passion for poetic metaphor by creating sculpture related to the experience of quenching. Incorporating a weather balloon, paracord, polypropylene, industrial steel, forged silver rings, salt, saltwater, sound and poetry, her work addresses the questions: What does it mean to quench? What is the relationship between quenching, freediving, and our human relationships to water?

Nathaniel St. Amour demonstrates how he finds meaning and purpose in the virtual world in a combination of paintings and video technology. His work challenges viewers to consider the relationships formed in virtual worlds, addressing the questions: Is one reality more real than another? Can one exist in an ideal environment? Is inner turmoil a necessary condition of what it means to be human?

Benjamin Wailes created hundreds of photographic images to document the passage of time. His work challenges viewers to consider the connections between time, aging, and seeing everyday objects as metaphors,

addressing the questions: How can aging objects inform us about personal transitions and transformations? How can photographic images help viewers to connect with the journey and intentions of the artist?

Mengjiao Wang uses repetition with ceramic forms to reconstruct fragmented memories from childhood. A full wall of ceramic pin wheels is positioned to appear as if they are blowing in the wind; ceramics cast from her feet walk endlessly up and down a wall on a vertical staircase; ceramic paper airplanes are suspended in a curving cluster; and ceramic teeth are hung as if falling into a cluster below. Her work addresses the questions: How can art connect the past to the present? Can working in clay capture our human memories?

The themes of poetic metaphor, human relationships, virtual reality, mortality, memory, and artistic expression in this Graduate Exhibition demonstrate the School’s commitment to cultivating excellence in the making and understanding of visual art. Appreciation is extended to Professor Cole Welter for initiating the momentum to create the catalogue, Assistant Professor Carissa Henriques for the catalogue design, and to Karen Gerard for managing the budget to make this project possible. And to the graduate faculty, for your enormous passion for art and energy for our students, thank you.

Katherine A. Schwartz, Ph.D.
Director, School of Art, Design, and Art History

LETTER FROM THE GRADUATE PROGRAM DIRECTOR
DR. COLE H. WELTER

This exhibition catalogue documents the stimulating work of four outstanding artists; Nathaniel St. Amour, Ellen Reid, Ben Wailes and Mengjiao Wang. Their artwork and statements published in this catalogue represent the partial completion of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at James Madison University.

At JMU a distinguished graduate faculty of practicing artists and scholars is dedicated to exemplary teaching and research, and to the professional growth of each student. This catalogue bears witness to that commitment, and to the creation of a supportive environment of personal artistic practice and individual inquiry.

The result of this supportive environment is made manifest in the four distinct voices in the MFA exhibition. Collectively, these voices are expressed in a range of media and methods of visual research that engage viewers in diverse forms of inquiry, and new ways of understanding...hallmarks in the creation of all knowledge, and the principle charge of a university.

As a nationally recognized graduate program, the JMU Master of Fine Arts degree was the first terminal degree offered by the university.

This catalogue documents the 35th year of JMU bestowing the MFA degree. Continuing support for the MFA program would not be possible without the active contributions of many individuals, starting with the MFA Thesis Chairs and Committee members who worked closely with the four exhibiting artists. Recognition is also owed all members of the JMU School of Art, Design and Art History’s graduate faculty and support staff, and to the school’s director, Dr. Kathy Schwartz. I am especially grateful and extend a special thank you to Dr. George Sparks, Dean of the JMU College of Visual and Performing Arts, and to Dr. Jie Chen, Dean of The Graduate School, for their continuing attention to the program’s needs.

Cole H. Welter
Director, Graduate Program



Untitled #1
Mississippi, 2017

Ben Wailes

Transitions: Through A Painter's Eye

The genesis of this work for the exhibition at Duke Gallery in Harrisonburg Virginia comes from a very personal place. As I have aged, I have started to seriously think about my own mortality for the first time. This led me to contemplate the passage of time, and the transitions that all human beings go through. Things that seem so important at certain times of our lives become trivial when we look back on them years later. These transitions ultimately layer themselves over time, one on top of the other. Eventually, the sum of all these transformations become the tapestry of our lives.

While I initially thought of taking photographs of the human body aging over time by photographing different people at various stages of life, this did not seem to be exactly what I wanted to focus on. As an artist who had been working as a painter, I thought about how I could look at

transformations through an independent lens. This realization helped me see in a different way so that I could better understand the life process, and this in-turn led me to using everyday objects as a metaphor for the passage of time. Vernacular objects show their age naturally, and as a result are a good way to show an honest examination of the passage of time and things in transition.

The subjects I chose to examine in this body of work include construction sites, small businesses, trains, tires, stacks of bricks and other items. Construction sites are going through transformations through both the destruction of what is there, and the creation and rebirth of the new. Small businesses are going through changes in the physical property relating to the sales, assets, and liabilities that fluctuate according to the ebbs and flows of the local and global economy.



While I am not aware of the former histories of these everyday places and objects, the fact that they have a past adds a richness and depth to them, and the changes these objects have undergone intrigue me. They document a huge impact on the transition of human beings as well. Hospitals, grocery stores, and other buildings are constructed and knocked down, impacting the economy, the availability of vital goods, and social nourishment.

I do not use any fancy lens' or elaborate camera maneuvers to make these photographs. The places and objects are part of ordinary life, yet I have traveled widely to collect images that

transcend the place they were taken. I want the images I've captured to speak of the human experience. I want the work to look "everyday" and accessible in the hope that they share, in a humble and modest way, a vision that allows viewers to connect with my journey.

Left:
Untitled #10
North Carolina, 2016

Top:
Untitled #26
Virginia, 2016





Previous pages 10–11:
Untitled #13
Virginia, 2016

Above:
Untitled #3
North Carolina, 2016



Untitled #5
Alabama, 2017



Untitled #23
Mississippi, 2017



Clockwise from top left:
Untitled #27
Virginia, 2016

Untitled #25
Pennsylvania, 2016

Untitled #12
Virginia, 2017

Untitled #2
Mississippi, 2017

Ellen Reid

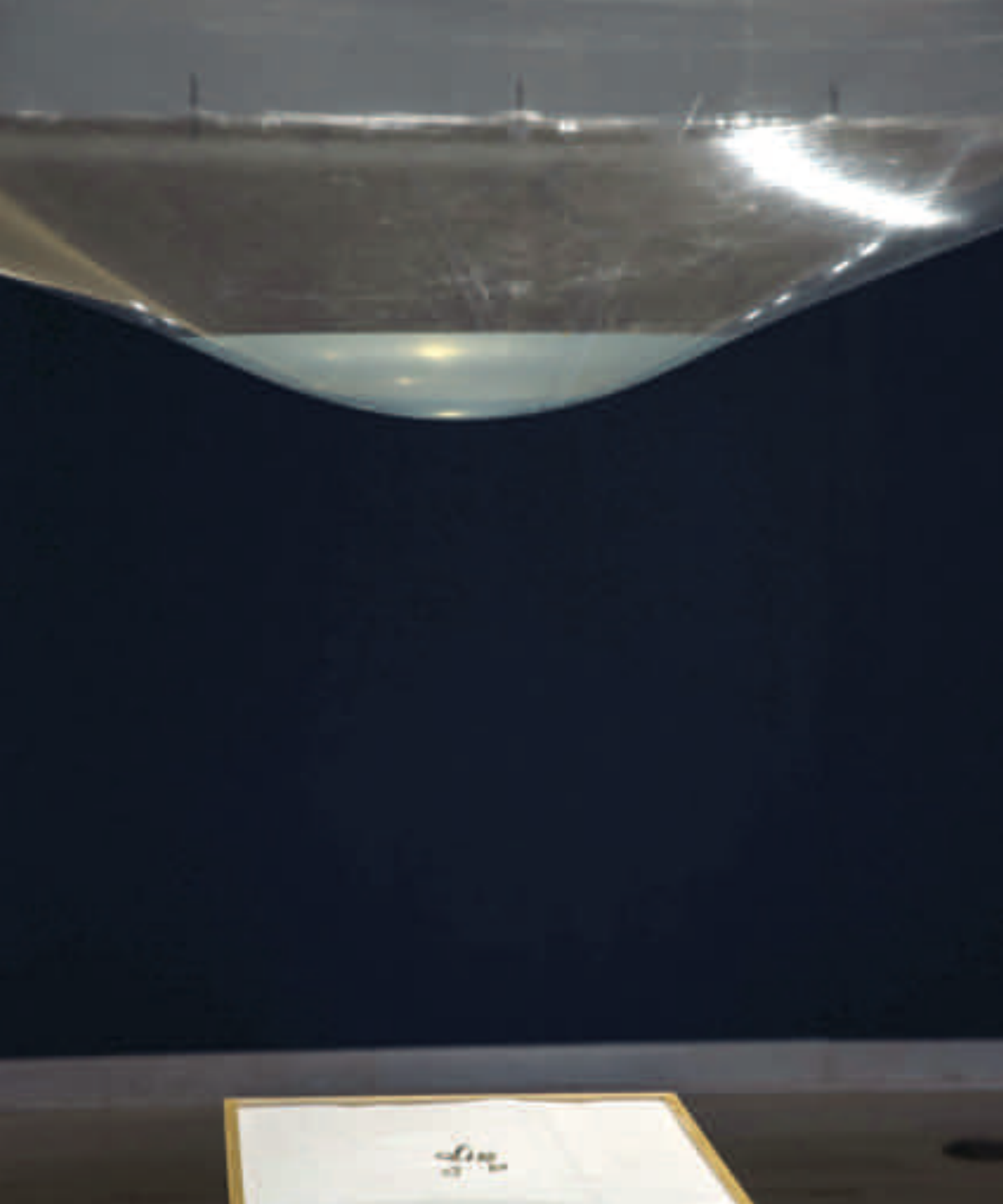
I awoke as it
became too
dark to see

quench: /kwɛn(t)SH/

- a: put out, extinguish
- b: to put out the light or fire
- c: to cool suddenly by immersion
- d: to cause to lose heat or warmth
- e: to bring to an end typically by satisfying, damping, cooling, or decreasing
- f: to relieve or satisfy with liquid

This is often how projects begin, a haunting idea, word, or experience inundates my consciousness and sub-consciousness. How could the body directly relate to an experience of quenching? This provoked the idea of the extreme sport: freediving. To adequately depict the definition of quenching, any ordinary depth would not suffice; it required being the world's deepest dive by a human. Danger aside, the world record unassisted freedive would be the purest example of an experiential quenching imagined. After contacting William Trubridge, a world record holding freediver, the consequential physical dangers became secondary. In order to successfully execute his dive, it is imperative that Trubridge reaches an extreme quieted state of mind before and during a dive. Below the surface, at a maximum depth of three hundred and thirty four feet, he cannot allow physical stress or mental disturbances arise. He cannot waste the oxygen that such a heightened state of awareness burns. The mastering of this mental focus and such a profound state of calm is overwhelming.

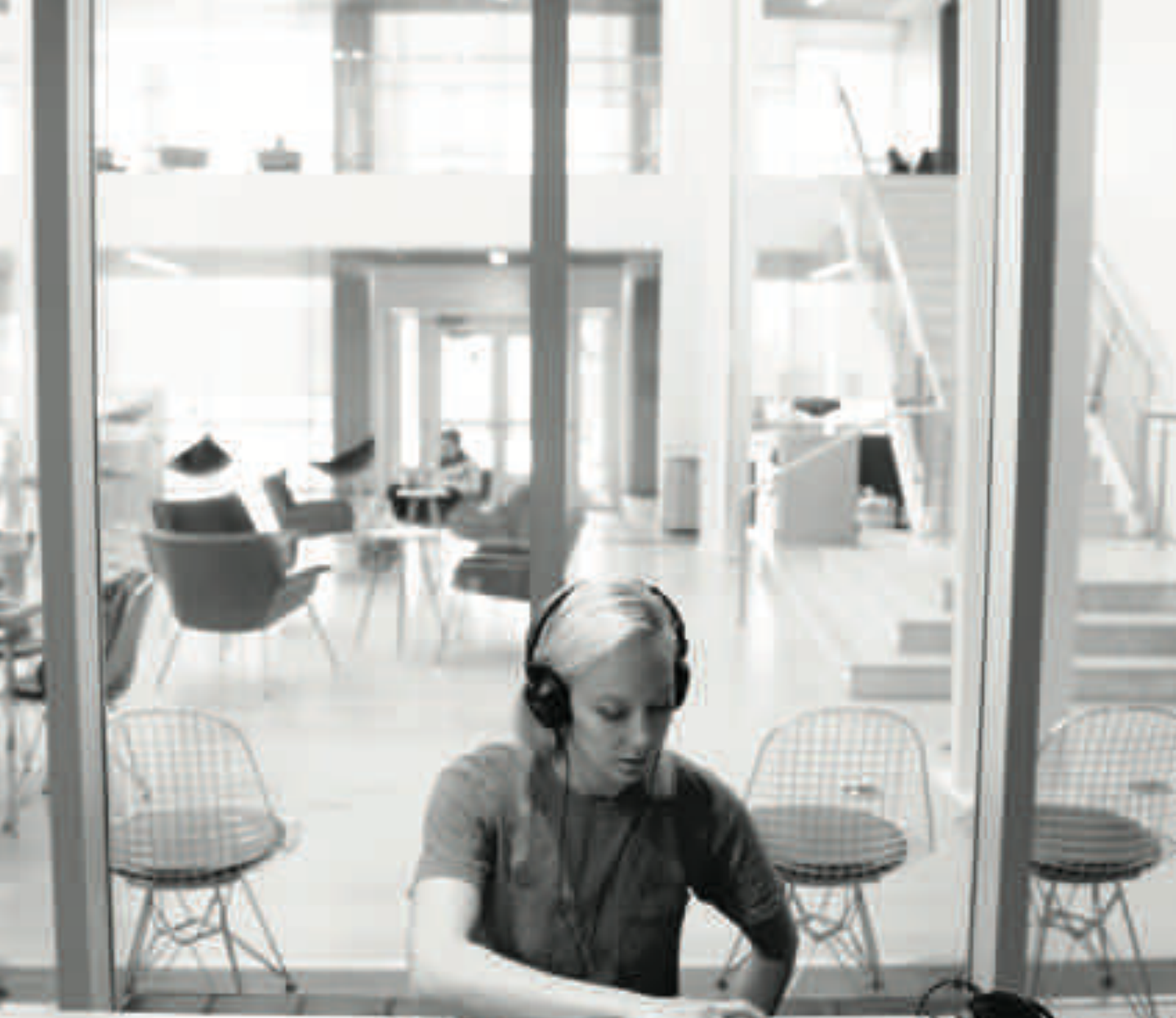
Rings are worn by William Trubridge during various depths of freedives, 2017
Reticulated .925 silver, oxidized .925 silver, salt, clear polypropylene, steel, salt water



*"At three hundred feet, we are profoundly changed. The pressure at these depths is nine times that of the surface. The organs collapse. The heart beats a quarter of its normal rate, slower than the rate of a person in a coma. Senses disappear. The brain enters a dream state".**

All of the components of a work are imagined as facets in a constellation. Continuously connecting one aspect to another, which might seem disparate allows for an exponential evolution of associations. The work is consistently larger than I am, and has capabilities to know more than I know. Gathering and choosing materials becomes an elaborate, idiosyncratic, and highly deliberate system. Ultimately, through my art, I am encountering ways to be affected. I am watching constellations expand into universes.

*Email correspondence between an individual and the current world record holder of unassisted free diving is transcribed onto a weather balloon, which floats 668 feet above the surface of the Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean, 2017
Weather balloon, paracord*



Sibilances are extracted from a recording of the Navy Hymn, "Eternal Father Strong to Save" and are available for manipulation, 2017
Mixer, headphones, speakers



Quench

What am I to do now with my hands
after the mouth stings of sumac,
the way a split fish shines in its uncooperative ways.
Bones suddenly stark of scales: a secret that is the entire story.
This too shows a kind of pretend.
These terms of deserving and not deserving play an omen and a stray
animalistic, unnamed.
I believe there is no false ache, and no vowel held delicately in the mouth;
bereft from the choice to veer towards or to retract from.





Mengjiao Wang

Growing Process



The ceramics pieces in my thesis are inspired by many occurrences in my life, and are especially influenced by my childhood memories. The artworks represent my loneliness and how I face and solve problems, which helped me mature as an adult. This series of work explore the shift and thought process in different life stages.

I use objects to connect to my body and soul in order to express my feelings. Paper airplanes, feet, teeth and pinwheels are the ordinary objects we can always see around us. While making, those objects bring me back to my fragmented past. They may seem as if they are normal things, but each object carries different memories with them; they always remind me of the occurrences that happened to me.

Using repetition in my work is a way to revisit my unrepeatable moments in my life. While producing the same objects, it seems like I am rebuilding the fragmented memories that no longer exist. Traveling to my past will not help in making my imaginations be clearer, but it supports to memorize my history and to record my growing process. Repetition resembles a bridge which can connect the past and reality; it lines up what I have been through and keeps my mind depicting my time and memories.

I join a long tradition of ceramic production in China by using clay as a meaningful material. The process of making a ceramic work is to make the structure by hand, which will always leave my finger prints on the clay, like a memory. Letting the clay become bone dry is a process of loss. Firing clay is a process of rebuilding. All of the stages make me think of the process of growing: making memories with people, losing people, and transforming.

I think back to times from being a kid and an adult, those roads remind of me of how difficult growing alone is and the moments in time that no longer exist. I had pain and joy, gains and loss. Even though I miss my childhood paradise, I still want to keep maturing. There is no ending in the journey of growth. As a traveler, I carry all of the responsibilities and expectations from my family; and through my work, I keep exploring and keep recording my painful, lonely and happy moments.



Left:
Cycle, 2015,
Porcelain, underglaze and soil

Above:
Wander and Direction, 2017
Stoneware and underglaze



Above, pages 31–33:
Message to... 2015,
Porcelain, underglaze and decal paper







Pinwheels, 2016
Porcelain and glazes



**Nathaniel
St. Amour**

Remembering
Virtual Worlds
Through Painting



You Saved The Village 4 Times
Oil paint

My work is about finding meaning and purpose from the virtual world. Large modern contemporary video games ask the player to mentally reside within the worlds they create, to forsake reality. These can be fantastical, realistic, or dystopian, but each environment is compelling and immersive. Each game also shares the quality of making the player feel as if they have accomplished something worthwhile. This can take the form of saving a village from dragons, or saving the universe from invasion. These worlds make us forget about the drudgery that is everyday life. They compress a lifetime of accomplishment into a single weekend. In contradiction to these thoughts, the virtual world is also disappointing in its intangibility and promise of personal enlightenment. No matter how many dragons you slay or virtual rewards you win, life outside of the game stays the same. The gamers in my paintings are weary of their virtual achievements. Many are tired and pallid while simultaneously smiling. They often exist within an idealized environment at odds with their inner turmoil. Their skin marks the time spent with the screen, while their bodies or scenes around them show the rewards they

have received for their virtual efforts. Items like armor, treasure, and badges symbolize virtual accomplishment, while surrounding scenes show grateful villagers celebrating the player as a god-like figure.

Painting, as used here, is used to memorialize scenes that the progress of technology will eventually make un-experienceable. In comparison to a digital file, a painting is ever-present, and not subject to technological antiquation. It is also not easily destroyable or packed away when compared to other forms of image making. Eventually these paintings will be looked upon as encapsulation of experiences and virtual worlds long since lost to future humans. It functions as a memento for my own experiences, and since it references a mass-produced product, a memento for millions of others. Painting is the most archaic way of image-making, and thus references humanity's concerns over a long timeline. By painting virtual worlds, I am effectively weighing their importance next to all other historically painted subjects, from scenes of mythology, religion, to everyday life. Such automatic comparisons intrinsic to



narrative painting have the potential to create a dissonance between the old and new. Since many virtual worlds, such as any medieval-inspired game like *The Elder Scrolls*, reference romantic styles, paintings of them can appear to be falsely anachronistic. The amalgamation

of old and new in this way has the potential to create quirky, sometimes comical, scenes when the out-of-place is introduced, such as a figure with a t-shirt in a period piece.

Above:
You All Built Your Dream Homes
Oil paint



Right page:
You Helped 6 Villagers
Oil paint



Above:
You Acquired A Suit of Plate Mail
Oil paint

Right page:
You Explored 18 Different Worlds
Oil paint





You Built Your Dream Home
Oil paint



You Built Your Dream Home II
Oil paint



Left page:
You Failed
Watercolor

Clockwise from top:
You Acquired Special Armor
Watercolor

You Are Distinguished
Watercolor

You Helped The Queen
Watercolor

Printer: Branner Printing, Broadway, Virginia
Printed on Chorus ART Digital 80# Silk Text, 80# Silk Cover

Catalogue Design by Carissa Henriques, Assistant Professor
of Graphic Design, James Madison University

Photos of installed work by Amelia Schmid



20