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### Moments with Sitters: A Year Working from Life

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Hannah Smith  
Studio Art Honors Thesis 2023



# Moments with Sitters: A Year Working from Life

Hannah Smith

**Moments with Sitters: A Year Working from Life**

Studio Art Honors Thesis 2022 - 2023

Department of Art

Connecticut College

First Reader, Senior Advisor: Katherine Du

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To my loving parents, Carl and Laura,  
who raised me on art and Joni Mitchell.

I will never be able to thank you both enough for the  
endless support and love I've been given.

It is because of you two that I paint.

## **acknowledgements**

To all of my sitters for your generous patience, support, and willingness. Without you all, I wouldn't be able to make this work.

To my boyfriend Sam McCormack for always being there to sit for me when no one else would. Your sense of humor got me through hard days laughing.

To my wonderful advisor and mentor throughout my time at Connecticut College, Chris Barnard. Your endless encouragement and guidance have made me a better artist. It is impossible to step into the studio without your words "happy painting" in my head.

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To Katherine Du for always inspiring me with new perspectives and ideas. It has been such a pleasure being able to work with you this past year.

To the Studio Art and Art History Department at Connecticut College, the impact that my peers and professors have made on me is profound. To Joseph Alchermes and Christopher Steiner for making me love learning about art as much as I love making it.



*self-portrait (detail), oil on unstretched canvas*

## introduction

I have always gravitated towards painting people who were in my immediate circle. Friends, family, and the boys that I thought I was in love with all fell subject in my early oil paintings. I like the ability to capture my world or rather the people in my world in a permanent state. Paintings have always felt like permanent declarations to me. By creating paintings, I communicate my own understanding of the visual world.

Being exposed to paintings, specifically portraiture in museums made me believe in the permanence of an image in paint. I still think this holds true to how I feel today.

I have had a twenty-two-year-old love affair with museums. I grew up going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art most weekends with my family. My parents, being art lovers, felt that the Met was the best place to take two young children, as it's a visual playground that tries to encapsulate the entire world within its imposing 5th Avenue structure. It gave me the gift of time travel and the freedom to let my imagination latch on and create stories of the past.

Each of my family members had specific stops that we'd have to make during each trip. For myself, it was always mandatory to stop at the Impressionist galleries. It was nearly impossible for my parents to contain me, as the sheer awe that came over me often led me astray. I think that the seduction of oil paint, the depth of its saturation of color, and the contrast often comes across at the beginning of this relationship.

Portraits of figures in their intimate worlds of bedrooms at dusk, quiet hallways, or shared moments between partners were all I ever wanted to look at. A rather unusual choice for a child, but the close attention to observing everyday life resonated deeply with me. The way in which artists captured a moment that could feel familiar to me, without my living it.

I would walk piece by piece and daydream about the people in the paintings and create lives for them. I would associate them with people from my own life, like neighbors, teachers, or distant relatives I had only seen in photo albums.



## introduction

I liked to create lives for these people I didn't know – people who predated me by hundreds of years. Reflecting on the things I've gravitated towards making, pictures of people have always been an interest from the start of my creative life. This has brought up the big question: Why have I always been interested in and continue to be depicting figures in my work?

There is an aspect of a person that can come across through paint that is really special. I am unsure of the precise way to pinpoint this, as it comes through in the brushstroke, color choice, or temper of the artist when creating the work. The variables are endless and impossible to understand fully. A figurative painting is simultaneously an accumulation of painterly decisions on a canvas and the actual body and presence of the person being depicted.

My own experience as a painter lends itself more to the articulation of my interactions with a small group of people with whom I have an intimate bond. These are captured in paint. They show the intricacies of my personal connection to the people I care about. Like conversations that relay stories of my most intimate relationships, my paintings act as declarations or proof of their existence.

The work that I have created are Odes for the people in my life. Like love letters, hugs, or long phone calls, I hope that my paintings articulate my admiration and examination of specific relationships, not only to the individual being pictured but to myself.





*senior studio work in progress*





*studio portrait of artist*





**artistic influence:**  
the weight of those who  
painted before me

How I've developed my own artistic style comes from countless hours of artmaking. My younger years were spent with some type of art material compulsively in my hand, creating for pure pleasure. Now, being able to grapple with the materiality of oil painting as a medium. Pushing paint in terms of viscosity, color, and brush strokes all give me the same sense of gratification, as experienced in my youth.

An important part of the evolution in my work comes from observation of particular artists that have deeply resonated in my life. These artists have come to me in different ways and at different points in my life, yet all have heavily influenced the way that I both create and think about artmaking. Two figures that loom large for me are Alice Neel and Alex Katz.

Alice Neel is one of the biggest inspirations for me as a painter. I discovered Neel during my senior year of high school from one of my painter friends who was in love with her work. I looked up images of her work online and was incredibly intrigued by the unique style of her work. I felt a sort of kindred spirit to her as an artist as she was a woman painter in New York City, painting a very familiar landscape to me.

Neel's portraits were incredibly specific to the sitter. The close proximity of the artist to the sitter created distortions that felt as if you were looking at someone with your faces pressed against each other. It was a type of closeness I had never seen before in painting.

I first saw her work in person at the retrospective exhibition Alice Neel: People Come First, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2021. The influence of that show weighed heavily on me. Each painting felt incredibly present, focusing on capturing the exact moment in time. Aspects of Neel's paintings that felt new to me were the outlining of figures that broke the illusion of realism, often seen in portraits, creating a type of shorthand for articulating human features.

This outlining is often seen in how she paints hands and feet, creating a deeper level of specificity in the various individuals she paints. While simplified at times, the confident outline of how an individual's toes curl or how one grasps the arm of a chair builds on this feeling of closeness in her work.





*Nancy and Olivia*, Alice Neel c. 1967

**artistic influence:**  
the weight of those who  
painted before me

Neel worked primarily from life, something that comes across strongly in her work. In *Close-Up*<sup>1</sup>, I learned that Neel would paint physically very close to her subjects, so close that she could reach out and touch them. This resulted in a type of distortion of closeness that comes through very clearly in the paintings. The sittings would also be a rather social event, where Neel would engage in conversation with the people she painted (saying people make this more personal). Her subjects would range from family, friends, neighbors, and peers - although her relationship with each of the subjects seems to always shine through the work itself.

Neel often worked on portraits of mothers or pregnant women, painting these women with great closeness and attention, in a way that hadn't been shown before in the history of oil painting. These paintings showed bulging stomachs, swollen breasts, and a sense of nervousness on the faces of these women that I can only imagine new mothers might be feeling. As a viewer, these paintings make me feel closer to humanity.

The in-the-moment quality of Neel's paintings is enhanced by illusions of space through washes of paint or abstracted flat planes created around sitters at times. There is more attention shown through physical painting to particular areas of sitters or environments that make the viewer understand what she was focused on.

Moments of untouched canvas in her paintings build on this feeling of reality within a painting. Paintings that get at the feeling of a specific person or feeling through the language of paint are rare to find. Using painterly qualities of opacity, color, and brush strokes, Neel creates more of an understanding of the sitter than is commonly seen in traditional realism. There are many ways that paint can articulate much more about an individual than any other medium. In painting, you build a form through a substance that feels like building skin, and flesh, and if done successfully, it articulates the personality of the individual. It's almost as if the painter has a kind of power to articulate humanity through their own understanding of what that means.

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1 Theodora Vischer,, et al. *Close Up*, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Lotte Laserstein, Frida Kahlo, Alice Neel, Marlene Dumas, Cindy Sherman, Elizabeth Peyton. Hate Cantz Verlag GmbH & Co KG, 2021



*Hartley*, Alice Neel c. 1965

**artistic influence:**  
the weight of those who  
painted before me

Alex Katz is an artist that I grew up knowing through my dad's insistent nature of frequenting his work whenever we visited a museum with a piece in their collection. Growing up, I was so attracted to the lushness of oil paint and these wonderful depictions of people done by Impressionist painters, that I did not get the appeal of Alex Katz. The flatness that comes across in his work seemed rigid, impersonal, and simple.

Throughout my own journey of understanding portraiture and making it my own, I've begun to understand the work of Katz. I now understand the ways in which paintings can exist with different visual rules than our own world.

Flatness was something that began to interest me, and how this distortion in the sense of body, space, or environment can be used as a painting tool. I began to study and return to Alex Katz after years spent thinking about him only as an artist of my dad's liking. During my Thanksgiving break from school, I visited the Alex Katz retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum. I was completely enthralled by the way in which he was able to articulate figures with feelings of intimacy through his notable stylistic flatness. In particular, Katz's older works from the 1950s showed how he was playing with flatness and the creation of motion through line work. This work resonated with me. I really like the way in which motion is created in the feet or edges of the body – they somehow radiate a sense of vibrancy. Katz makes the paintings feel alive despite having them existing on a flat plane.

I often think about the ways in which my artistic influences have both informed and hurt the way in which I go about making artwork. As a lover of artists, like others my own age are lovers of football teams, movie actors, or indie bands – I study their histories, brushstrokes, and lives as if they were celebrities. I hold the work of my influences as a sort of playbook for image-making.

I collect artist catalogs in my studio to refer to in solving artistic issues of my own, like how to paint fingernails or the edges of walls around figures.

The weight that my influences hold in my own work has become increasingly challenging to navigate. The "greatness" that has come before me in the capacity





*Irving and Lucy*, Alex Katz, c. 1958



*Ada, Ada*, Alex Katz, c. 1958



**artistic influence:**  
the weight of those who  
painted before me

of the figurative painter is endless. Painting seems to  
invent and reinvent itself to a level of exhaustion.

**Where does that leave me?**

**Why should I paint?**

**How do I develop my work as an artist to be my  
own?**

Once you leave the era of fundamentals, the develop-  
ment of painting is not - so linear. How do you imple-  
ment a vast amount of knowledge into something that  
feels unique? There have been many moments where I  
wish that I knew absolutely nothing about the history of  
painting so that my own path could feel unburdened.

That pressure has at times felt crippling. At first, I  
thought that this discomfort came  
externally from others' expectations of me to create  
something important, from harsh critiques or having to  
restart a painting. Although the biggest critic of my work  
has been myself. An endless yearning to make some-  
thing "better" than the last thing created. Because of  
this, I have often found myself in the past year sitting in  
my studio not knowing how to proceed.

**When did making "important" work become an issue  
to address through my creating?**

**What does "important" work even mean?**

I have put a lot of thought into the way in which artists  
today go about making their work. Through conver-  
sations with others, I have discovered an overarching  
sentiment that artmaking can often be fueled by an  
overtone of the artist's legacy.

**What does this work say about one's stance on the  
current climate of the flawed world in which we all  
are living?**

This is an impossible ask for an artist to articulate in  
a few pieces of work. I have come to terms with the  
fact that each work of art that I make is merely a small  
glimpse of a moment in time in which I am coming to  
terms with the world I am living in. More often than not,  
the work I'm making creates more questions than leads  
to answers or declarations of truths.



4am (former yellow interior), Alex Katz, c. 1959

**artistic influence:**  
the weight of those who  
painted before me

The activity of painting from life is time spent looking closely at the reality of your present and processing it through paint. It selfishly allows an artist to absorb what type of environment is their reality and to literally rebuild it through their own lens and the medium of paint. There is no better way to come to terms with your world than that.















*family portrait (detail), oil on canvas*



*family portrait (detail), oil on canvas*





*early to bed*, oil on wood panel

roommates (detail), oil on wood panel



**painting people:**  
working from life

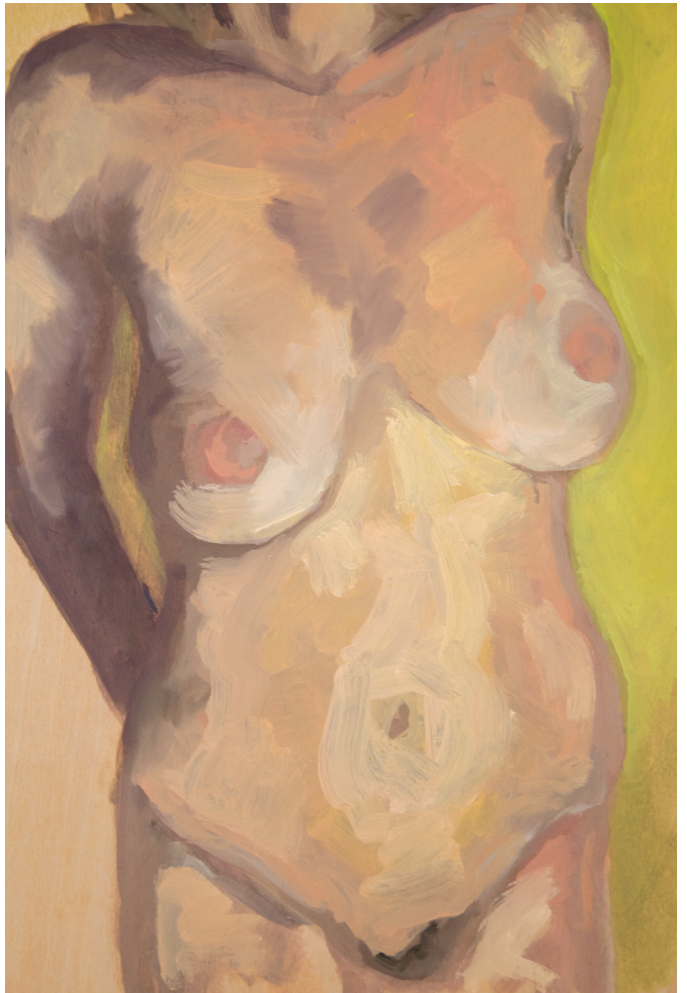
I have always wanted to paint people. When I was young, I would often depict the people in my life in some type of fantastical story or backdrop. Family members, classmates, and my best friend from childhood Lutèce were illustrated in colored pencils in my sketchbook. I liked to show the specifics of their outfits, and I thought about my drawings more as illustrations for stories that I could tell. I thought of myself as more of a storyteller than an artist for most of my young life.

When I started to evolve as a painter during my time at college, I noticed a pattern of wanting to depict people saying this differently. By painting people I'm close to, I feel as if I'm learning about them in new and strange ways. The appeal of close looking is that it defamiliarizes what I think is already familiar. The act of painting people in the realm of semi-realism is mostly a close observation of the person being painted. The intimacy that arrives from hours of close looking is surprising. This takes form in understanding the ways that shadows fall on a friend's under eyes or how their fingers interlock with each other. Small details that go unnoticed before this close investigation are suddenly revealed to you. I find this process very exciting. It's as if you're meeting someone for the first time again.

The dynamic of portraiture presents a paradox: you visually represent the body of someone else, and yet, you can never remove aspects of yourself from the painting since it is entirely from my own perspective. I was told that each portrait you make is somewhat of a self-portrait because it is being produced by your own hands. There is no way to separate oneself from the work. I keep this in mind often while thinking about how subjective my paintings are.

I like being able to have the company of familiar faces in my studio. The process of painting is lonely and often filled with unexpected frustrations. I find it oddly comforting to be making work whose subject is people I know, and who would often be there to support me in matters outside the studio.





*nude self-portrait, oil on panel*

**painting people:**  
working from life

I started doing observational sketches from life during my time studying abroad in Rome, in the Spring of 2022. I had never seriously worked from life prior to this drawing course, which took a small class to various locations around Rome. This was more of a challenge than I expected, as working from life poses a host of new challenges than working from a photograph. These challenges made me incredibly frustrated at the beginning period of the class. I wanted to draw what I assumed the scene or figure to be, as opposed to what I was actually seeing. This conflict continued for a while until I began to let go of these assumptions and just began to draw what I saw in front of me.

The practice of keeping a sketchbook is important, and I learned that the more you draw from life, the more you understand what you're seeing. I took drawing classes at the Arts Student League in New York City, to help prepare myself for my honors thesis. In these courses, I became very comfortable with drawing figures from life and saw the beauty and importance of working from life as opposed to a photograph.

The way in which light interacts with figures from life is completely different than in photographs. There is a loss of energy when painting from a photograph, that is not present when working from life. The photograph is a mediated image made by someone else that diminishes that depth of atmosphere I've come to admire when working from life. The goal of perfection or photorealism that comes through when working from photographs seems inevitable – and uninteresting for the way in which I'm interested in painting.

The time restraint in working from life is important in creating a sense of immediacy in my portraits. Linework on unfinished areas in a figure – the outline of a hand or foot creates this sense of momentary observation. The surrounding environment the portrait inhabits fades away or is described through a shorthand that gives a feeling of being an afterthought in the hierarchy of the painting. The figure comes first. This also creates an interesting psychological feeling of honing in on the figure as the subject, and that the environment around them develops to the degree that the subject allows it to.

Through my own relationship with painting portraits and figures, I have more deeply understood how portraiture can take form by exploring the medium of paint in different ways I think that once I started to think about painting in terms of a tool to show mood, expression, or feeling of a figure, I began to understand the ways in which portraiture could be more powerful when straying from the narrative of classical realism. Figures existing in the realm of paint can be more impactful to me.



*sleeping sam*, graphite on paper



*sleeping sam, oil on canvas*



**artist as the sitter:** an  
exercise in empathy

As I've been having those close to me sit and model for my paintings, it became increasingly important for me to understand what that process feels like. While I've always been in creative circles in terms of personal friendships, I've never been observed from life and drawn by someone else.

My first opportunity to experience this came when I was asked to sit for an introductory drawing class of around fifteen students. I had thought very little of it – I expected to somehow feel completely comfortable in the position of the model. I thought I understood the process of working from life, from countless sessions of my sitters coming in and being settled under my control.

This was very different. I felt completely unbothered by the prospect of being a model until I was sitting on the podium. A wave of anxiety washed over me, as I situated myself into a “comfortable” position on the stool. It felt dizzying to have many people watch me closely and try to represent my form on paper. It was interesting to hear the frustrations of the students, as they struggled to translate my proportions onto their drawings properly. They complained to the professor about what was too large or long on the form. I heard them talk about what they felt was “incorrect” about my form through their articulation.

### **How can it not feel personal?**

I sat to be drawn for two sessions of thirty minutes, by two classes of unfamiliar students. The longer I sat, the more uncomfortable I felt. The discomfort of being looked at and perceived by many people made me feel off balance. I kept on feeling like I would move a limb, fall forward, or have the impulse that my body would start to shake. It felt vulnerable to have others observe and then recreate an image of me in their own hand.

This was a helpful way to empathize and understand how my own sitters feel when I am depicting them. While the relationship between artist and sitter is different in my own thesis work, as I am close to my subject relationship-wise, the way in which it feels to have a person observe and then depict you is unnerving.

**an exproation in paint:**  
the process

The more time I spend painting, the less I feel I know how to paint. I understand this sounds rather contradictory, but as I reach the end of my time at college, and potentially the end of studying painting in a traditional academic setting – I feel the most confused as to how to paint.

During the first two years of college, I felt confident in my skills and identity in being a “good painter.” And by good, I simply mean having the knowledge and skill to render with proportion and accuracy through the medium of paint. This perception of good began to melt away as achieving technical skills became less important in the art-making process.

I can very clearly remember during a critique my advisor asking me the question “What is your work about?” and then following up with the hard-hitting “Why do you paint people?” This question seemingly took me by surprise as I had little to no idea of how to answer it. I had spent countless hours on my paintings, yet what they were about, and why they were created seemed completely lost to me.

I didn’t have the words or the space from the work I was making to be able to answer in a coherent way. I remember responding by stating “I like painting familiar people. They are important to me.” A semi answer to a much deeper question I was not prepared to answer. It truly made me frustrated at my advisor for revealing a gap in my self-awareness of my paintings and at my own emotional response to the fact I could be so disconnected from why I was making the work.

These two questions were something that I’ve held with me throughout the year of making this work. Coming back to them each painting, trying to get closer to an answer.

**What is your work about?**  
**Why do you paint people?**

There seems to be an intuitive component to art making that can remain not understood for some time. I gravitated towards making most of my paintings with sap green during my sophomore year and only realized this when my paintings were hung up together in a show. I think that there is a gap between the conscious and unconscious components of painting that sometimes only reveal themselves over time.

This is what can make art making a very special practice. It allows the artist to communicate something that comes from an unconscious part of themselves. In return, something is revealed to them through their creation. How special that we artists get to learn about ourselves through the work we make.

I have learned this lesson about myself through the people that I've painted. This might seem like an obvious choice of choosing my subjects because of the sense of closeness I feel with them. This is partly true, but I think it has more to do with an interest in better understanding the relationships between myself and each of my subjects, because of the value they hold for me. It gives me the opportunity to keep learning new things about a relationship that is seemingly otherwise set in a mutual understanding of intimacy.

I've seen this through the process of painting my mother, who I have never known to speak often about her insecurities about aging. Yet, through the process of my painting, she has become more vocal about her self-awareness of aging. Often remarking, "God, don't I look old?" or "Don't look too close." It reminds me of how vulnerable the process of being painted can be. Insecurities that are either invisible or visible to the artist are all fair game to be depicted, even highlighted at times. Portraiture often acts as a mirror into someone else's perception of self – something that is not always easy to face.

**an exproation in paint:**  
the process

The other spectrum of this sentiment of vulnerability is the work I've done with my boyfriend, Sam McCormack. He has been my most reliable sitter, as we spend most of our days and nights together. The closeness in our own relationship of sharing and conversing has made it easier to translate that into the paintings. He finds himself unbothered by my asking him to sit for me, as it's become routine at this point. A level of softness and comfort in being perceived through my paintings reflect a lot of the softness we have with each other.

My hope is that viewers begin to recognize the sitters in the paintings as glimpses into particular moments. I hope that they gain a sense of familiarity and understand the unique mannerisms of the sitters that are expressed through the work, a clenched right hand, squinted smile, or tilted head.





*Lu*, sketch graphite on paper





*Lu*, oil on canvas



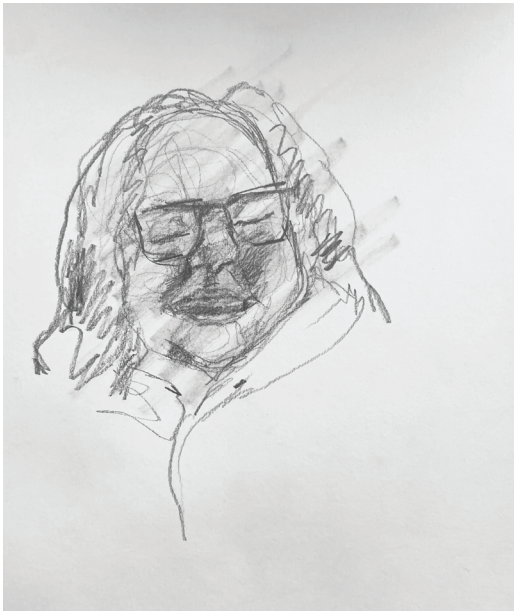






*mom*, oil on canvas





*megan's face sketch graphite on paper*



*sam and megan sketch graphite on paper*



*roommates, oil on wood panel*





sam (detail), oil on canvas







sam, oil on canvas

**the self-portrait:**  
seeing myself

It has become a habit to draw or paint myself from life, whenever I'm not working on a bigger project. I was told early into this work, "You are your most reliable sitter." This is inevitably true. On days when my sitters canceled, I'd create studies of myself. This practice has forced me to better understand who I am in my own paintings.

I find self-portraits to be very intimate because they are the artist coming to terms with how they are perceived through their artistic practice. It is the representation of their image, but also their perception of self in that image. While you can never separate the artist's hand from a portrait, it can sometimes be forgotten in the depiction of another figure. With self-portraits, it is both the artist's image and their hand in the work.

I have made many self-portraits that are quick, unrecognizable, or unresolved. I think that it's particularly hard to create a self-portrait that you're fully satisfied with when you're still learning how to be satisfied with yourself. Both in external and internal ways, spending time looking at myself in an observational way is hard. I aspire to paint myself truthfully, even if it's unattainable.

Self-portraits are brutal mirrors of reflection. They are a way to learn about oneself in a mindful way.

The self-portrait has helped me become more vulnerable with my work. I better understand the line between my self-image and the image before me.

There is a small fortune of my self-portraits in my studio. They capture a collection of different hairstyles, moods, and environments that surround me. I refer back to those paintings often to understand where I was in time during the process of painting. Often, they were done in the in-between periods of figuring out the next works. They capture a special point in the creative process of searching.



*early to bed (detail), oil on panel*



*self-portrait, oil on unstretched canvas*

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