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Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)

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Supervisor: Glabush, Sky, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

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Abstract

Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be) is a Master of Fine Arts project that consists of this written thesis and the thesis exhibition at the artLAB Gallery from September 5th to 26th, 2024. This dossier is composed of three chapters, and a curriculum vitae. The first chapter is an extended artist statement, which explores the beauty of everyday life, the overlooked nature of coloured pencil as a fine arts medium, and my experience coping with the passage of time and viewing the world with childlike wonder. The second chapter consists of documentation of my practice. The third chapter is a written case study on Margaux Williamson's *Interiors*, exploring the comfort of isolation, nostalgia and memory, and the desire to simply exist.

Keywords

Drawing, Coloured Pencil, Realism, Mundane, Reflection, Imagination, Memory, Isolation, Childhood, Existence, Time, Margaux Williamson

Summary for Lay Audience

Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be) is a Master of Fine Arts project that consists of this written thesis and the thesis exhibition at the artLAB Gallery from September 5th to 26th, 2024. This dossier is composed of three chapters, and a curriculum vitae. The first chapter is an extended artist statement, which explores the beauty of everyday life, the overlooked nature of coloured pencil as a fine arts medium, and my experience coping with the passage of time and viewing the world with childlike wonder. The second chapter consists of documentation of my practice. The third chapter is a written case study on Margaux Williamson's *Interiors*, exploring the comfort of isolation, nostalgia and memory, and the desire to simply exist.

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Introduction

Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be) is a project that found its beginning during my time as a student at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has grown into the basis for my thesis exhibition and writing, which I have completed during my two years as an MFA student at Western University. *Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)* explores the beauty of everyday life, seeking to bring attention to moments, objects and spaces that are often overlooked.

This dossier comprises three chapters. The first chapter is my comprehensive artist statement, divided into four sections. The first section details the origins of my practice, from the influence of the pandemic to the present. In the second section, I convey the importance of coloured pencils in my work and argue their underrated status as a fine arts medium. The third section explores the beauty of overlooked, mundane spaces. Finally, in the fourth section, I express my experience of being at a consistent transitional point in life and how my drawings of the quotidian reflect this, viewing the world with childlike wonder.

The second chapter consists of photo documentation of my practice, including works from my thesis exhibition in the artLAB Gallery. The third chapter is a written case study on Margaux Williamson's travelling retrospective show, *Interiors*. Through her work, I explore the comfort felt in isolation post-pandemic, how nostalgia affects our memory and well-being, and the desire to exist without worry.

Chapter 1: Comprehensive Artist Statement

Comforting. Ethereal. Content. Hopeful. Pleasant.

What do you think of when you hear these words?

Perhaps the imagery of an idyllic landscape. Lounging by the sea, watching the waves lap at the shore, and drinking in the sound of water with seagulls overhead, the setting sun twinkling on the horizon. You may be picturing a vast field, the most brilliant shade of green you have ever seen, grass swaying in the breeze. Or maybe an interior setting is what you think of; is it your bedroom? A living room? A studio? Are you alone in this space?

Now, imagine you are on that beach again. A child has left behind a small shovel, once used to build a sandcastle. Something about this object intrigues you, and makes you feel a bit sad. What was once a tool used to create joy lies abandoned; its use spent. There is no more creation of joy, and now it is subjected to a life of slow deterioration, buried by the sand or dragged out to sea. In this moment, as you acknowledge its existence and its fate, you question why you have paid it any attention at all. Giving this inanimate object a life of its own, an element of humanity, you now grieve for it. The setting sun still glows over the horizon, and the sky is a vibrant pink and orange. It has never looked more beautiful, yet you cannot take your eyes off the forgotten shovel. There is nothing pretty about it; it is plastic and dull. It is incredibly cheap looking, and a tacky shade of hot pink that has been faded by exposure to the sun. It is broken down in some places through the

rough handling of the child that held it last. The more you stare at this shovel, it becomes more vibrant; something new and unique. The setting sun fades to the background. Who knows how long it will remain lying in the sand? There are still many possibilities for this shovel, but for now all that matters is this specific moment. No one else is around. Time stretches out for an eternity. You decide that you will remember the shovel, to give it more importance than it was ever intended. You will make the present moment permanent in the best way you know how. Comforting. Beautiful. Hopeful. Instead of the beach, you now envision that little shovel.

The scenario described is my thought process when encountering the subject matter for my work. My drawings are a catalogue of memories, made up of moments I have encountered that have struck me. The process is intuitive; I do not plan or stage my compositions, or actively seek them out. I rely on the chance of naturally encountering scenes that stand out to me in the moment. I have no set criteria for what might make the perfect moment, but it often has to do with how I am feeling at that time, instances of light and reflection, or something ordinary, yet out of the ordinary. In this comprehensive artist statement, I will first introduce the origins of my work, outlining my gradual development of composition and material, exploring any artist influences along the way. I will then write about how my work is a way for me to find comfort in isolation, to connect with the imagination of my child self, and to cope with the inevitable passage of time.

1.1 Origins

Edward Hopper once wrote, “In every artist’s development the germ of the later work is always found in the earlier.”¹ It was through my early responses to Hopper’s work that I found the “germ” of my current work. During my undergraduate studies at the University of Guelph, one of my art history classes was dedicated to discussing the works of Edward Hopper, notably *Automat* (Figure 1) and *Nighthawks* (Figure 2).

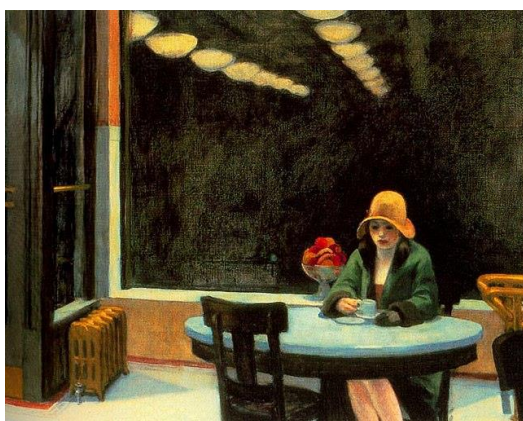


Figure 1
Edward Hopper, “Automat”
Oil on canvas
1927



Figure 2
Edward Hopper, “Nighthawks”
Oil on canvas
1942

Hopper’s paintings have a sense of isolation highlighted by his flat colours and compositions, placement of subjects and use of light as a physical barrier. I was immediately captivated by his paintings, though at the time I could not explain why. Reflecting on it, I believe I saw myself in the girl sitting alone in *Automat*. My years in

¹ Rolf G. Renner, *Edward Hopper: 1882-1967: Transformation of the Real* (Los Angeles: TASCHEN America, 2015), 11.

Guelph were marked with extended periods of isolation. I coped with this loneliness by exploring the university campus. My focus was to find a consistent change in scenery – seeking out places that felt secret or out of the way. Looking at *Automat*, I felt an overwhelming sense of comfort. I pictured myself settled in some hidden study area on campus, late at night with no one else around. I was inspired. In that same term, I had the opportunity to create an independent painting project. I knew that I wanted to create a painting inspired by Hopper’s work. Unfortunately, this was right as the Covid-19 pandemic began. Classes were cancelled, and the painting project was replaced with a written assignment. Even though I no longer had a reason, I needed to complete the painting. Taking inspiration from the now abandoned campus, I painted a scene looking in at myself looking out of a window. I used a similar composition to *Nighthawks* in setting the scene, and painted myself in a pose of deep introspection, iconic to the figures in Hopper’s paintings (see Figure 3).



Figure 3
Hannah West, “Unprecedented Times”
Oil on canvas
2020

During the lockdown, I could not paint with oils in my apartment due to lack of proper ventilation, and acrylics did not give me the preferred results. My solution was to return to the practice that always brought me comfort: drawing. To keep myself motivated, I

would draw something every day, no matter how simple. These would typically be sketches of my surroundings, whether specific objects or entire spaces. However, I missed the enjoyment of colour mixing with painting, and graphite pencil was not holding my interest. I switched to using an old set of coloured pencils. It was during this time that I was introduced to the work of Mary Pratt. I was fascinated by her realism, but I did not immediately connect to her work, until I had my own experience with the beauty of the mundane. I was taking dishes to my kitchen, and the sun was shining directly through the window above the sink. When I bent down to open the dishwasher, I looked up to one of the most beautiful scenes I had ever witnessed. The sunbeam was hitting a bottle of Dawn dish soap, making the blue liquid inside sparkle. The light also fell on a bright red popcorn bowl, and an empty can of soda water. So many colours were reflecting and blending, and I was completely in awe. It was such an unexpected, rare moment of beauty, and I understood what Pratt was seeing when she referred to her jars of preserves as “jars of light.”² The scene became a reference for the first of a series of drawings I completed over the course of that year in isolation. What began as quick sketches had evolved into fully rendered drawings using coloured pencil, focusing on how lighting and time of day can drastically change a scene. *7 Days a Week* (Figure 4) was a series of 7 drawings, where I actively sought out mundane scenes with the intent of giving them extra consideration. I took ordinary objects, such as my bathroom sink, or a coffee mug, and emphasized them using odd angles and perspectives, as well as focusing

² Anne Koval and Mary Pratt, *Mary Pratt: A Love Affair with Vision* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 2023), 131.

my attention to detail on instances of lighting and reflection. This body of work was my first cohesive, independent project that explored the themes that inspired me.



Figure 4
Hannah West, “Dawn”, from the series “7 Days a Week”
Coloured pencil on toned paper
2020

At the start of my graduate studies, I was determined to start painting again now that I had the space to do so. However, when I picked up the paintbrush, I found that I did not feel the same enjoyment from painting as I did from drawing. This came as a surprise since it was a source of enjoyment in the past. But the act of painting felt like a chore. My first term was an uncomfortable period of repeated failed experimentation. I felt awful, and this feeling stuck with me. It was not until an impromptu studio visit, where I was asked about my coloured pencil drawings. Why had I abandoned a practice that was so therapeutic, for a practice that caused me grief? It was then that I realized just how much the act of drawing improved my mental state, and how empty I had felt without it. It was an immense relief to resume working with my preferred medium.

1.2 Coloured Pencil as an Accredited Medium

In *The Coloured Pencil: Key Concepts for Handling the Medium*, Bet Borgeson writes that a unique feature of coloured pencil is its potential for expressing two drawings in one. She continues,

“The first is the drawing that projects across a room, its subject and large shapes of colour engaging the viewer. The second, more intimate drawing becomes apparent only as the viewer moves in close enough to see the nuances of subtly layered, juxtaposed, and textured colour for which this medium is becoming best known.”³

When creating my drawings, I prefer to work on a smaller scale, since it encourages an intimate experience with the work that reflects the intimate experience I was struck by. You are pushed to get closer into the work’s space to see all the small details. In my experience with drawing on wood panel, I have found that the surface produces a certain ambiguity as to the medium used. Coloured pencil has a fuzzy look to it, even when used to produce realism. However, on the wood surface, there are no instances where you can see the rough linework that is iconic to coloured pencil. The properties of the wood create a three-dimensional effect where the pigment seems to sit on top of the surface. The panels also have the effect of making the pigment appear incredibly vibrant. I found that when drawing on toned paper, the drawing had a very dull tone to it, sacrificing the vibrant quality of the colours. The more I have worked with coloured pencil on wood

³ Bet Borgeson, *The Colored Pencil: Key Concepts for Handling the Medium* (New York: Watson-Guption, 1983), 12.

panel, the more I realize how similar it is to paint; although with a lengthier, more detail-oriented method of achieving results. When painting, a palette is mixed prior to starting, preparing a colour before applying it to the surface. With coloured pencils, this must be done directly on the surface. Borgeson writes,

“It stresses a colourist approach to drawing, which means that colour is a key consideration from the very beginning of a drawing – an aid to the construction of form and space, not something tacked on later as decoration.”⁴

Colour is something to be considered alongside a composition, rather than before. There is not as much room for error compared to painting. This means that to achieve the exact colour needed, it is essential to create multiple layers of colours directly on to the in-progress drawing. Layers can vary; sometimes, it only takes two or three, and other times, it takes at least ten. When I was working on toned paper, there was even less room for error. The paper could only take so much layering before the surface degraded beyond use. On the other hand, the wood surface is sturdy and can withstand a limitless amount of layering.

I have found that many who view my works often try to compare them to paintings in some way. My drawings have either been mistaken for paintings, or it has been said that they are “painting-like.” Some go as far as to suggest that I should refer to the works as paintings, despite the medium used. However, I hesitate to do so. Drawing, especially coloured pencil, is an overlooked, ‘minor’ medium, whereas painting is a ‘major’

⁴ Borgeson, *The Colored Pencil*, 7.

medium. Drawings are often seen as supplementary material rather than a finished, major influential piece, for example, sketches or mixed media works. Coloured pencil can often be seen as childish, for beginners, or for “dime-a-dozen” commercial art. The only drawing medium that comes close to being taken as seriously as painting is pastels. To categorize my works with painting would be submitting to the bias that drawing cannot stand on its own and that this medium has no place in fine arts or that it cannot be considered equal to a major medium such as painting. I hope to prove otherwise; this is an up-and-coming medium that more artists are now embracing. It is also worth mentioning that in my pursuit of capturing the mundane, I would prefer to use the ordinary, minor medium that is coloured pencil rather than the major medium that is painting. The overlooked medium compliments the overlooked scenes that I capture.

1.3 Ugly Spaces are Beautiful Spaces

In an interview with *Border Crossings*, artist Margaux Williamson was asked what she finds attractive about “ugly stuff.” She responds,

“Emotionally, I love to think there are atoms all around us; I love to think of the atoms in a crumpled-up piece of paper, or in a rose, and I want us to know that the paper is there as much as the rose is. I’m not sure if that’s ugly or not. I like to look at the world, even if it’s made carelessly or thoughtlessly, and I like to see what kind of order there is. The way I’ve been painting for the last five years is I don’t make any plans. I paint one thing and I paint the next thing and I reconcile each

new thing on the canvas. There's no planned harmony, but there's a respect for an equalness to everything."⁵

In parallel to Williamson's sentiment, I do not believe that any space is truly "ugly."

Williamson's comparison of the rose and the crumpled paper perfectly illustrates this;

every moment is worth attention, no matter how little care or thought was intended. One

of my drawings, *Night Shift* (see Figure 17), was inspired by a space that I am sure most would consider ugly: a dirty assembly line within the Ford Oakville assembly plant.

However, I associate that space with my memory of working there, a job that I enjoyed.

Earbud in one ear, shutting my brain off and performing a repetitive task where I could meditate on my thoughts for eight hours a day. For me, it was a dream, so I cannot

consider it ugly. There are many overlooked mundane spaces that, despite being boring

or ordinary, can be viewed as something beautiful. Taking shelter at a bus stop when it is

raining and seeing the way water trickles down the glass, relaxing to the sound of it

hitting the shelter roof. A public bathroom stall where you can often find graffiti, some

humorous, some tragic – glimpses into the minds of people you will never know – but

they were here. They were present.

Of all the spaces we pass through, however, stairs seem to be given the least

consideration. In *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, Georges Perec writes,

⁵ Margaux Williamson, interview by Robert Enright, "The place between me and a friend, the place between me and a painting," *Border Crossings*, volume 42, no. 162 (2023): 115.

“We don’t think enough about staircases. Nothing was more beautiful in old houses than the staircases. Nothing is uglier, colder, more hostile, meaner, in today’s apartment buildings. We should learn to live more on staircases. But how?”⁶

There is nothing pretty about a plain, ugly, concrete set of stairs, yet this makes them even more compelling. No one gives these spaces a second thought. They exist to be passed through, and because of this, I find that it is more likely to encounter something out of the ordinary. When I am struck by something, it stands out more in contrast with an ordinary environment. My work, *DIA Stairs* (see Figure 23), was inspired by witnessing the way the sun shone through the windows of a stairwell, creating a liminal, geometric spectacle. Another drawing, *Area Not Maintained* (see Figure 24), was inspired by a set of stairs I had passed by for weeks without any thought. Until one day, I stepped out of a nearby building, sat on a bench to make a phone call, and looked up to see these stairs juxtaposed against the most beautiful sky I had ever seen. The clouds were perfectly formed into patterned lines, and the sky was a light blue, pink and yellow.

There is a quote from Linda M. Montano that I found relevant in describing my intentions with focusing on these mundane spaces. She writes,

“Artists have found that the best way to direct their energies, learn hidden information about themselves, and face hidden fears is to pursue the relationships of space, form, colour, texture, size, mass, and direction in an obsessive way.”⁷

⁶ Georges Perec and John. Sturrock, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London; Penguin, 1997), 38.

⁷ Linda Montano and Jennie Klein, *Letters from Linda M. Montano* (London: Routledge, 2005), 111.

This is very true; through my practice of obsessively capturing and rendering moments encountered in these overlooked spaces, I have learned things about myself that I never would have considered. I have felt lonely for a long time, but it was my experiences with isolation that moved me to where I am now. It allowed me to connect to Hopper's paintings, to form a practice where I anticipate the next moment I will inevitably be struck by.

1.4 Transitional Spaces, Existential Dread

I have mentioned that many of my drawings are scenes taken from ordinary transitional spaces; stairwells, washrooms, and transportation. My interest in these spaces is reflective of being in a transitional point in life. Stuck in an odd limbo between youth and adulthood, my mind has been frozen in pre-pandemic time. Age has become a confusing subject. I do not feel conscious of my age. In my experience over the past two years, my perception of myself, and my age, has resulted in isolating me further. Sometimes I feel as though I am expected to know things that I don't. I feel like a child who has projected herself into an adult's body, going through the motions and hoping no one catches her in the act. Everyone is an authority figure that I need to do my best to meet their approval. My thoughts are concise, but when I speak aloud, they are awkward and clumsy. So much of adulthood so far has been anxiously waiting to be "found out." That someone might see right through me, all my thoughts or lack thereof, and finally give me the confirmation that everything I have done so far was a complete fluke, a lucky streak now broken. In a strange way, where words have routinely failed to express myself, my drawings succeed. I was drawn to spaces that are often overlooked because I feel that I

am overlooked. I felt that giving these spaces attention and care was a way of saying to myself, “It’s okay; you exist; you are meant to be here.”

I was interested in my relationship with these overlooked spaces. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes, “All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home.”⁸ He continues,

“The imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build “walls” of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection.”⁹

Bachelard refers to inhabited interior spaces, but I understand his writing to mean that any exterior or interior space can bring comfort reminiscent of home. In capturing these overlooked spaces, I was not just connecting my own experiences with feeling overlooked; I was trying to find a sense of shelter and of home. I have been exploring the practice of using my imagination to find beauty and protection in unlikely places.

Through this, I am briefly reconnecting with childhood, gazing upon these scenes with the wonder of a child. Childhood instills a dreamlike existence filled with odd memories. A child’s mind is too underdeveloped to process experiences, so the gaps are filled in abstract ways. By experiencing these moments, I am finding a temporary home in them, relating back to childhood memories. I made this realization when I learned about the

⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by M. Jolas. [New edition]. (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 27.

⁹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 27.

photography of Gregory Crewdson. His photos go through a tedious process of staging, with a full production crew similar to a movie set. The results are incredibly cinematic images of quiet suburban streets and interiors. They are dramatic and psychologically charged, and I find that they sometimes have a balance between cozy nostalgia and the surreal, slightly uncanny.

In the documentary *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*, Crewdson talks about how his father was a psychoanalyst, his office being in the basement of Crewdson's childhood home. As a child, his knowledge of what his father did was a mystery, and he considers that a metaphor for his practice as a photographer, trying to project the fantasy of something forbidden.¹⁰ The childlike wonder he felt about the mystery of his dad's profession is reflected in his practice, where brief, ordinary moments are presented as something mysterious. The difference between Crewdson's work and my own is that his photographs are rooted in surrealism, whereas my drawings are rooted in realism. Our takes on ordinary subject matter may be different, but the intent behind the work is similar: to find beauty in a single ordinary moment. Crewdson manipulates ordinary scenes to appear fantastical, creating a dream world. My work, however, aims to capture moments exactly as I experienced them in the moment. There is no manipulation that happens to the scene to evoke any sense of fantasy. Instead, the fantasy is left to the imagination. This is where I find that surrealism and realism are not so different; an equal amount of wonder can be found in either scene. So much of childhood relies on the

¹⁰ Ben Shapiro, director, *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*, (New York, New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2012).

imagination as a form of healthy escapism. To find a sense of wonder and escapism in the mundane, I think, is key to finding an endless supply of creativity as an artist. There is an abundance of the mundane; it does not exist for the purpose of providing us inspiration, yet the inspiration we might find in it is incredibly rewarding. While describing the everyday activities performed by different people, Georges Perec writes, “An idealized scene. Space as reassurance.”¹¹ This single sentence stuck with me, because that is what the moments I encounter in these spaces do for me. They reassure me of my existence, of my place in the world. I find reassurance in the fact that I am occupying this space, that I am just another person with her own experiences, thoughts, and memories. Yet, I am the only one being struck by this moment. By focusing on the present, the past and future do not matter. My practice and drawing process revolves around the immediacy of the current moment: I am always making art even when I am not performing the act of putting colour on panel. Life itself is my muse, and I never run out of subject matter. I am viewing the world through the eyes of a child, experiencing things for the first time, full of wonder.

1.5 Conclusion

My journey through undergraduate and graduate studies has been long, marked with isolation, imposter syndrome, uncertainty, and dread for the future. However, these experiences have allowed me to form a practice where I can process these feelings and find enjoyment in the small things life has to offer. I think of my drawings as a catalogue

¹¹ Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 15.

of memories, both good and bad. Every instance of light, colour, or reflection that is portrayed serves to reflect my thoughts and emotions. I see myself in the way light bounces and reflects off a surface. I see myself in the abandoned shovel on the beach, and my inner child urges me to “play” with it, to give it purpose and capture it in all its cheap plastic glory.

Chapter 2: Practice Documentation



Figure 1
Blue Glass
Coloured pencil on toned paper
11" x 14"
2022



Figure 2
Void
Coloured pencil on toned paper
11" x 14"
2022



Figure 3
Kitchen Light
Coloured pencil on toned paper
11" x 14"
2022



Figure 4
Respite
Coloured pencil on toned paper
11" x 14"
2023



Figure 5
Rise and Shine
Coloured pencil on toned paper
11" x 14"
2023



Figure 6
Forgotten
Coloured pencil on toned paper
11" x 14"
2023



Figure 7
Afterglow
Coloured pencil on toned paper
11" x 14"
2023



Figure 8
EXTREME AIR
Coloured pencil on toned paper
11" x 14"
2023



Figure 9
That First Sip Feeling
Coloured pencil on toned paper
18" x 24"
2023



Figure 10
Limitless
Coloured pencil on toned paper
18" x 24"
2023



Figure 11
Silent Sleet
Coloured pencil on wood panel
12" x 12"
2023



Figure 12
Positive Garbage
Coloured pencil on wood panel
12" x 16"
2023

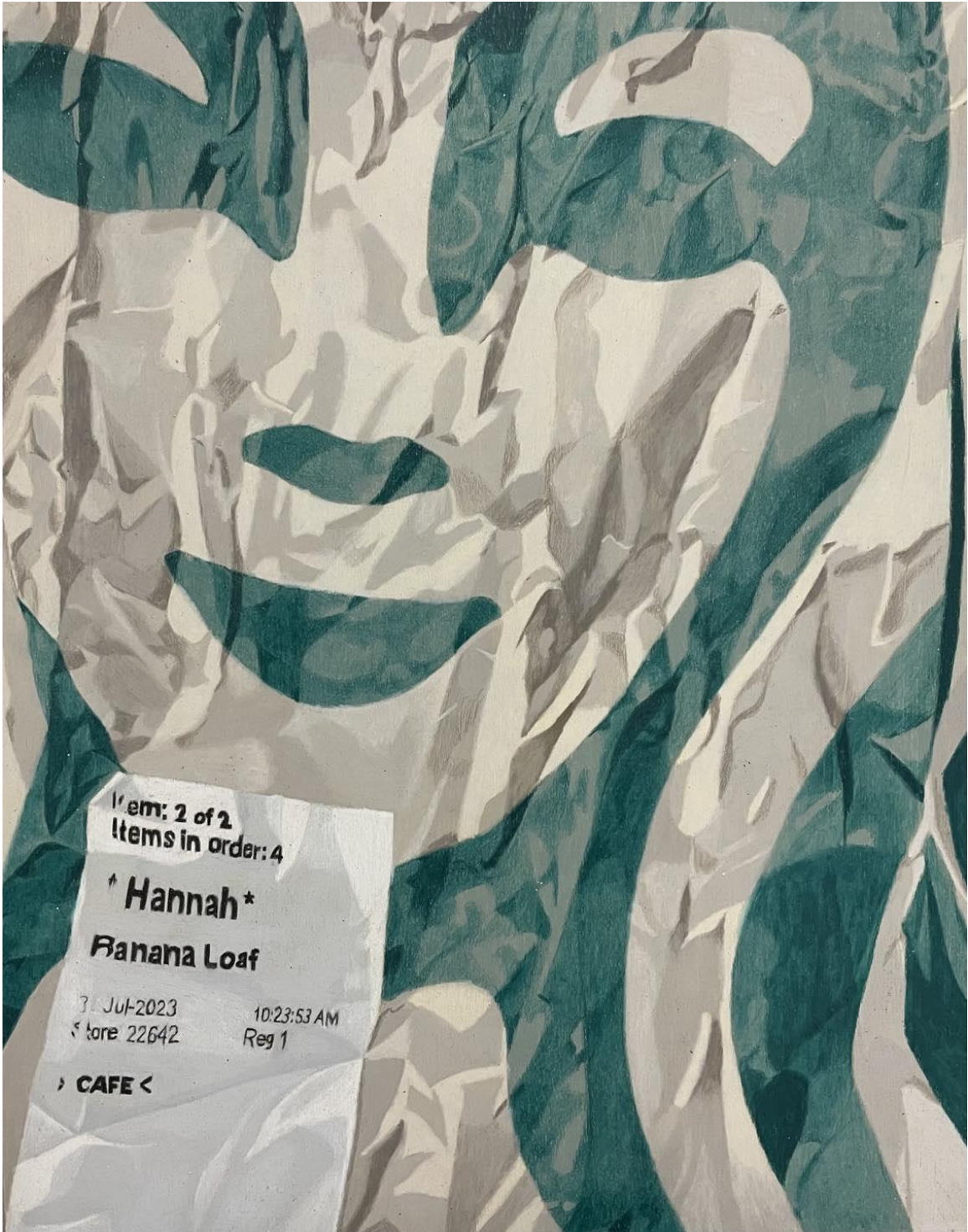


Figure 13
Hannah Banana Loaf
Coloured pencil on wood panel
11" x 14"
2023



Figure 14
Evening Train
Coloured pencil on wood panel
11" x 14"
2023



Figure 15
On the Threshold of a Nicer World
Coloured pencil on wood panel
12" x 12"
2023



Figure 16
Basement
Coloured pencil on wood panel
12" x 12"
2023

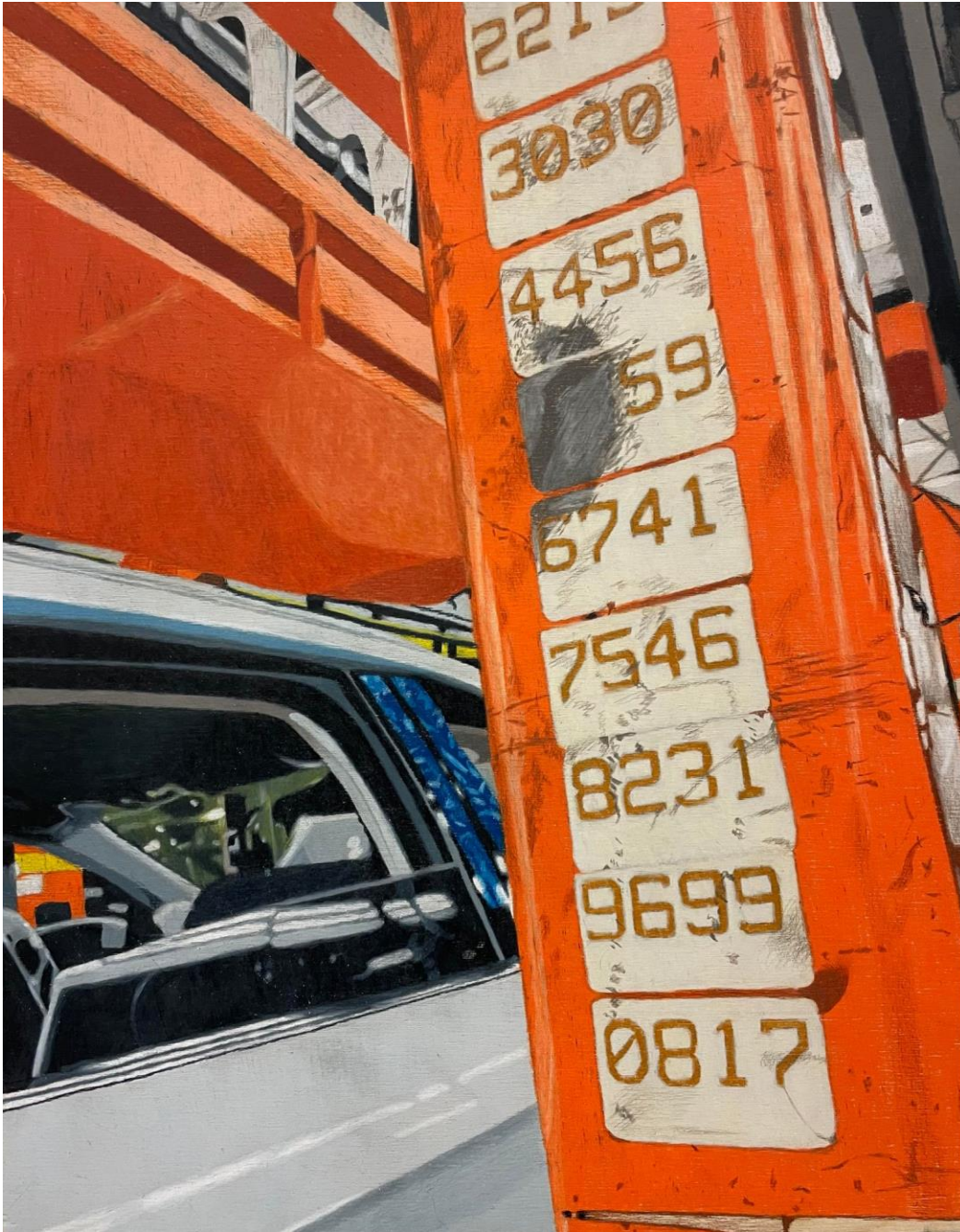


Figure 17
Night Shift
Coloured pencil on wood panel
11" x 14"
2023



Figure 18
Sequins
 Coloured pencil on wood panel
 8" x 8"
 2023



Figure 19
Broken Faucet
 Coloured pencil on wood panel
 8" x 8"
 2023



Figure 20
Glow
 Coloured pencil on wood panel
 8" x 8"
 2023



Figure 21
Stop Requested
Coloured pencil on wood panel
11" x 14"
2024



Figure 22
Sauble Beach Bench
Coloured pencil & pastel on wood panel
20 x 12"
2024



Figure 23
DIA Stairs
Coloured pencil on wood panel
9" x 12"
2024



Figure 24
Area Not Maintained
Coloured pencil on wood panel
11" x 14"
2024



Figure 25
Satellite
Coloured pencil on wood panel
11" x 14"
2024



Figure 26
Chipped and Worn
Coloured pencil on wood panel
11 x 14"
2024

Chapter 3: Written Component – Margaux Williamson Case Study

In recent years, isolating to avoid encountering the COVID-19 virus became a necessity and forced many to remain indoors. However, it appears as though living through the pandemic has changed our perception of isolation. The idea of staying home and avoiding social interaction is comforting. There is a trend of romanticizing the mundane, but a thin line exists between harmless escapism, and what could be considered an unhealthy lifestyle. Margaux Williamson's retrospective, *Interiors*, captures this concept perfectly, her paintings hovering between comfort and the uncanny. I was hesitant to mention the pandemic in this case study, however I think it is unavoidable when considering *Interiors*. Reference to the pandemic in any context is very tiring to the general public, but the consequences are still very much alive. It is assumed that our lives are "back to normal," since we are no longer in lockdown, and social-distancing and mask-wearing rules have been lifted for some time. However, things are most definitely not "back to normal," if normal refers to reality pre-pandemic. In this case study I will be exploring how *Interiors* seems to touch on the comfort felt in isolation. The way nostalgia can manipulate our memory, and how viewing things through rose-tinted glasses can affect our mental well-being.

Interiors was a touring exhibition organized by the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and curated by Jessica Bradley. Starting at the McMichael in 2021, *Interiors* travelled to Museum London, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, and ended at Esker Foundation in April

2023. The show included a collection of Williamson's paintings, most of which were completed during the pandemic. These paintings featured a variety of interior spaces, "both literal spaces, somewhere comfortably familiar, and places of imaginative interiority where inanimate subjects are brought under the spell of her anarchic treatment of space."¹² Usually, with "still-life" painting, a scene revolves heavily around a specific focal point, something Williamson avoids in her work. There is a lot of care placed into the objects present in her spaces, yet they do not command all our attention. Her spaces are often messy and cluttered, featuring an assortment of objects such as bottles, books, glasses, and leftover food. Yet across all the works included, the contents of her spaces only work to activate the spaces they inhabit. This could be because of the way she handles paint since I read the brushstrokes themselves as objects in a scene. An example is *Desk* (2020) (see Figure 1 below). Multiple objects are present in this painting, such as a laptop, some glasses, a plate, books, and a plant. None of the objects appear to hold more importance over another. The desk itself is painted in such a way with constant changing brushstrokes and textures that each section is its own object given just as much attention to detail.

¹² Jessica Bradley, "Margaux Williamson: Interiors – Esker Foundation: Contemporary Art Gallery, Calgary." *Esker Foundation / Contemporary Art Gallery, Calgary*. accessed 28 August 2023, eskerfoundation.com/exhibition/margaux/.



Figure 1
Margaux Williamson, “Desk”
Oil on canvas
2020

Alongside the paintings are fragments of writing, photographs, magazine cut-outs, illustrations of existing artwork, and drawings. Williamson calls these fragments “text-sketches,” and they are a great influence on her finished paintings.¹³ Her interest in time and perception is evident in her collage-like way of building a composition. Each one of Williamson’s scenes feature objects and areas of the space that appear to have been captured at different times of the day. An example of this is *Cup* (2021) (see Figure 2 below), as Jessica Bradley writes, “day and night are elided in this work. A glass jar is rendered crystalline as it had once caught bright daylight from the window, while the darkened corner with shelves is softened in the penumbra of evening.”¹⁴ Objects in Williamson’s paintings are rendered as she saw them in the moment, without a worry for continuity or realism. The result is a painting that doesn’t seem to exist within a single point in time. Mark Mann writes, “it feels as though she compresses an eon into a single

¹³ Bradley, “Interiors.”

¹⁴ Margaux Williamson, Jessica Bradley, Ben Lerner, and Sarah Milroy, *Margaux Williamson: Interiors* (Kleinburg, Ontario, Canada: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2021), 28.

instant – like looking through into the prehistoric world while also remaining squarely in the present moment.”¹⁵



Figure 2
Margaux Williamson, “Cup”
Oil on canvas
2021

In an article written for the *Toronto Star*, Ruth Jones comments on the illusion of intimacy present in the works. She writes, “We’ve seen a lot of interiors in the past few years, in the backgrounds of meetings and television interviews that never used to be given at home. At first it was fun and maybe a bit transgressive trying to parse details of inner lives from the titles on a bookshelf. But these glimpses into other people’s interiors rarely get us closer to them. They give the illusion of intimacy but give nothing away. Maybe this is comforting. It’s uncomfortable to put your messy, lived-in floor on display. It’s easier to put up a background of a tropical island or loft office or settle into that familiar grey blur.”¹⁶ It’s true that this illusion of intimacy is comforting. This sort of

¹⁵ Mark Mann, “‘I Think I’m Really Enjoying Painting’: Margaux Williamson’s New Work.” *Momus* (Montreal), May 12, 2021.

¹⁶ Ruth Jones, “The homes of others: Margaux Williamson’s brilliantly disordered ‘Interiors’ at McMichael are a rare glimpse into people’s inner lives.” *The Toronto Star* (Toronto), April 3, 2022.

quotidian imagery pushes people to make assumptions about the creator. I experience this with my own work, since it relies on my own lived experience, and yet it never says anything particularly deep about who I am as a person. Scenes of everyday life, no matter how abstracted, are going to be relatable. The viewer is guided to project their own lived experience onto the work, their assumptions about the artist coming from somewhere personal. Williamson is painting spaces that are clearly from her own personal life, yet I don't feel that overwhelming sense of vulnerability or intimacy from looking at them. Instead, I am brought into those spaces and existing within them. I am detached from the personal connections the artist may have, and I project my own personal connections instead. This could be because people are not present in her work, something Williamson has stated just feels "wrong."

I think it is impossible to fully consider *Interiors* without viewing the works through the lens of the pandemic, especially since the majority were painted during that time. The paintings show deep consideration for the mundane, which seems to resonate with a lot of people. We take the time to appreciate these spaces because in our confinement there was nowhere else to go. The pandemic forced us to pay attention to the interior spaces we spent so much time in. I feel an overwhelming sense of nostalgia when viewing the work in *Interiors*, however, I'm not sure if this is a feeling of comfort. This may be because I am feeling a nostalgia for the exact time many of these paintings were created, during the pandemic. Nostalgia can be a strange thing, compelling one to ache for a time that may not have been all that great. However, your mind only faintly remembers that time, highlighting certain moments that stand out, such as a song you may have listened to frequently, or a small activity or routine you performed. These are my feelings associated

with the pandemic. It was an uncertain and scary time, and all the while I just wanted things to be how they were before, where I could be social again. I had just started my second year of university, and just when I was getting settled in as a student, it was all yanked away. At the same time, I had just signed a lease to live in a new apartment for the remaining two years of my degree. The place was not the most looked after, and definitely had a bug problem, but I can remember vividly the late nights with my roommates watching bad television, ordering takeout, going for quick walks on the nearby trail between online classes just to have an excuse to go outside. It was an uncertain time, but it was my first time experiencing adulthood, and while I was inside, I gained an immense appreciation for anything and everything around me. In a strange way, it was the most depressing time of my life, yet it was also when I was the happiest. Williamson's work makes me think of this nostalgia and my vague memory of this time. The spaces and objects are painted with strange, flat shapes and odd angles that bring a sense of the uncanny. Sarah Milroy writes, "She paints the role of memory in selecting, in deleting, within these strangely dimensionless mindscapes."¹⁷ I can relate her paintings to how one might try to recall a scene from memory. Her use of unnatural perspective and flat colours mixed with occasional extreme detail results in an imperfect memory, slightly warped, some things remembered in better detail than others. The paintings remind me of my time as a student, sitting in front of my desk cluttered with papers, coffee cups and leftover dinner. They are things I associate with stress, not getting enough sleep, overworking, not a very healthy lifestyle. Yet, I am nostalgic, because nostalgia does not

¹⁷ Williamson, *Interiors*, 13.

care about the bad days, it only remembers a vague sense of your overall feelings at the time.

I view Williamson's work as a portrayal of the mind of someone who wants to escape the outside world or block it out entirely. Sarah Milroy writes, "We titled this show *Margaux Williamson: Interiors* because her rooms often feel sealed off from the outside world, hermetic, with the objects, textures, and colours discovered there providing the premise for her (and our) roving visual inspection. These are the inner spaces of the home, the bar, the artist's studio, and of the mind."¹⁸ There are two paintings that stand out to me in this sense: *Fire* (2021) (see Figure 3 below), and *Table and Chair* (2016) (see Figure 4 below). *Table and Chair* seems to be a central piece in this collection, featuring an overhead view of a table and chair with an assortment of objects piled on top, such as a glass, a flask, and some stacks of books. Although we are looking straight down at this table and chair, the objects are not painted from the same perspective. Some appear to have been painted from a lower angle. Most strikingly, the window across from the table is painted as if we are facing it head-on. The window is the most compelling aspect of the painting. The other side of the glass is pitch black, not providing any suggestion to what may be on the other side. Williamson uses her brushes to drag this dark colour out from the window, bleeding into the table. In reference to this, she says, "The escape is not outside. All of the depth and darkness and possibility of that beautiful abstract night had

¹⁸ Williamson, 13.

to be in the table.”¹⁹ There is nothing to be found beyond this room; instead, what is “beyond” has merged with the room itself. When windows are present in a work, one might imagine what lies beyond the space they occupy, but by bringing the “outside” into the kitchen, effectively merging them, the kitchen becomes the outside as well as the interior. Nothing exists beyond this room, yet everything exists within this room.

Williamson’s painting goes beyond simple tricks in perspective, of painting objects and angles on the same plane. She paints abstractly what may exist beyond the kitchen on the same plane as the kitchen itself. This world within her painting is both restricted and self-contained, yet also limitless.



Figure 3
Margaux Williamson, “Fire”
Oil on canvas
2021



Figure 4
Margaux Williamson, “Table and Chair”
Oil on canvas
2016

Fire has a similar feel to *Table and Chair*. In his review of *Interiors*, Tyler Muzzin made an interesting comment on *Fire*. He wrote that of the many paintings included in the

¹⁹ Sophie Weiler, “How One Painter Captures the Wonder of Ordinary Spaces.” *The Walrus* (Toronto), June 19, 2020

exhibition, the few paintings that featured exteriors feel more claustrophobic and unnatural than the interiors.²⁰ Despite the abstractions, there is still a sense of moveability within Williamson's interior spaces, and yet her exteriors are incredibly restricted and condensed into a small area. *Fire* displays the scene of an abandoned fire pit, lighting up a small circular area surrounded by three chairs. Surrounding the fire pit is a solid black void, imitating interior walls. When viewing an outdoor scene, we perceive it to be more open rather than a closed in space. I get the impression that nothing exists beyond this fire pit, mimicking how this is suggested by the dark void in the window in *Table and Chair*. This scene looks as though it has been pulled directly from someone's memory of a fire pit, which would truly make sense that nothing exists beyond. It is unsettling, and claustrophobic, because we can envision ourselves within an interior that Williamson portrays, and while envisioning ourselves within that space we can only assume there lies a world beyond the interior. In an exterior scene, there is a reluctance to envision ourselves within a space where we know nothing exists beyond it. Behind the fire pit, there is a second light source, coming from a streetlight that seems to lure me into the distance. Although, with the way Williamson paints, it is possible the streetlight could be closer to the fire than it appears. The glow of the streetlight illuminates what could be the tips of a tree, but the texture of the paint is very similar to the fire. I imagine existing within this space and travelling beyond the fire pit just to be met with the same fire pit I started at. I feel that this work has an illusion of freedom. Of the three chairs surrounding the fire, two of them have blue cushions. The contrast is like day and night, the blue

²⁰ Tyler Muzzin, "Margaux Williamson at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery." Akimbo. November 9, 2022.

cushions reminding me of a clear blue sky, something one might associate with freedom. I wonder, is it more freeing to attempt to escape the fire pit, to wander eternally and find that nothing else exists? Or is it more freeing to accept your fate, to sit and stare into the flames on the sky-blue cushions, freeing your mind of all thoughts? The illusion of freedom is at the expense of ignoring our own reality, pretending our problems don't exist, and fooling ourselves into thinking we are free of them. However, they still linger in the back of our mind, never going away unless confronted. Leaving the chair by the fire and wandering into the dark, uncertain if we are throwing ourselves into a repeating cycle, or if we will finally find a solution, a way to face our problems or responsibilities.

I believe *Interiors* speaks to the idea of isolation, of one shutting themselves away from the world. The pandemic caused a familiarity with this type of experience, yet it also promoted issues with mental health. While observing these paintings. I start to think that the merging of the “beyond” with the interior is intentional, reflecting the mind of the one isolated in this space. The outside starts to bleed into the interior, and it feels as if nothing else exists, the interior space becoming your whole world. Williamson says, “I realized that even if I can't see anything, I can see what's right here. And I felt a bit of joy from that,”²¹ The interior space is manageable, and much less complicated than the reality of a huge unpredictable world filled with activity.

²¹ Mann, “I Think I’m Really Enjoying Painting.”



Figure 5
Margaux Williamson, “Tree”
Oil on canvas
2019

Finally, this takes me to the painting *Tree* (2019) (see Figure 5). It is different from some of her other works, where instead of illustrating a space, the viewer is prevented from entering the world within the canvas by a blue spruce tree, its branches forming a soft but unbreakable wall. Ben Lerner states that it is like your sense of self dissolves, distributed across what you are seeing. He writes, “I am the tree seeing, the tree seeing me.”²² There is something very powerful about *Tree*. Mark Mann writes, “If you want the beauty of the tree, you must accept its lack of specialness. If you reject the tree for its obviousness, you lose a ready source of wonder. But all this negotiating takes place on the human side; on the tree side, there is only unmitigated presence.”²³ I wonder if *Interiors* portrays an attempt at becoming the side of the tree. No negotiating, just the simple act of existing. The same can be said about the objects present in the spaces in Williamson’s work. Some may remain the same, some may move slightly, but overall, they simply exist. It is

²² Ben Lerner, “Ben Lerner on Margaux Williamson’s Hard-Earned Magic.” *Frieze* (London), September 11, 2020.

²³ Mann, “I Think I’m Really Enjoying Painting.”

possible that within *Interiors*, the observer of these spaces is attempting to become an object as well, something that does nothing but exist. What begins as an appreciation for the mundane, leads to the loss of self, the self now becoming the object. *Interiors* is a powerful exhibition, portraying an eternity yet no time at all, nothing existing yet everything existing, the interior as a prison or the interior as an escape.

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2021

The University of Guelph, Chosen by Juried panel for Art in the Bullring by the Central Student Association
2020

**Exhibitions
(Solo)**

Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)
ArtLAB Gallery, London, ON
2024

What Has Been and What Will Be
10C Shared Space, Guelph, ON
2023

**Exhibitions
(Group)**

A Beautiful Life – Still Life Exhibition
Summer & Grace Gallery, Oakville, ON
2024

HOOP-LA
Necessary Arts, Guelph, ON
2024

Artist Project – Untapped
Toronto, ON
2024

Eternal Now
Satellite Gallery Space, London, ON
2024

static unearthed
ArtLAB Gallery, London, ON
2023

Imagine – Student Book Art Exhibit
D.B. Weldon Library, London, ON
2023

Waiting for my Imagination
Boarding House Gallery, Guelph, ON
2022

Check Your Baggage
Boarding House Gallery, Guelph, ON
2022

Exquisite Corpse
Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, ON
2021

**Professional
Experience**

Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2022-2024

School of Fine Arts Building Monitor
University of Guelph
2020-2022