



2001

Drawing from Words

Hannah E. Smith
Colby College

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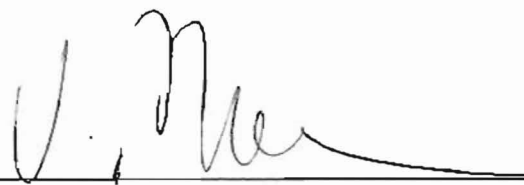
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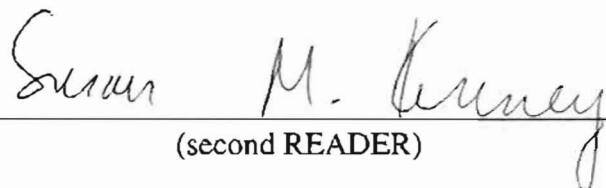
Smith, Hannah E., "Drawing from Words" (2001). *Senior Scholar Papers*. Paper 240.
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(second READER)


(Chair of the Independent Study Committee)

DRAWING FROM WORDS

by

HANNAH E. SMITH

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Senior Scholars Program

COLBY COLLEGE
2001

Abstract

The following report is an account of my growth and exploration as a painter. The project that was the springboard for this exploration was to create a series of paintings inspired by the fiction that I had previously written as a creative writing minor. I felt that writing could be used as a stimulus to create great paintings, and that painting and writing were perhaps more connected than I knew. I wished to pursue this connection through painting because I believed that it might be possible to capture many of the elements of a story on canvas.

I looked to many artists for inspiration: Maxfield Parrish for the vibrancy of his colors, and his techniques incorporating photography; Lucian Freud for his ability to convey psychology through portraiture; Chuck Close because of the large format and directness of his paintings; Max Beckmann because of his strong sense of line; Chaim Soutine for his looseness with paint and the figure; and N.C. Wyeth for his illustration work and sense of color.

I have made several technical advancements and discoveries. I have come to realize how much I enjoy working with glazes and with optical blending. I have discovered that flat stenciling over modeled areas creates interesting spatial relationships while activating the surface. I have become more intuitive with how I gather information for my paintings, and I have found several ways to integrate photography into my creative process.

I also explored the dividing line between fine art and illustration. It is my hope that unlike illustrations, which are designed to support a pre-existing text, my paintings are able to stand as works of art completely independent from the writing.

Because of this project, I discovered many more connections between writing and painting than I had anticipated. I believe that by studying this connection in depth, I have learned a great deal about myself as an individual and as an artist. I will continue to produce fine art in the future. In addition, I have developed a strong passion for illustration, and hope to one-day write and illustrate children's books.

Drawing From Words

My objectives as a Senior Scholar were to create a series of paintings inspired by the fiction that I have previously written as a creative writing minor. I had always seen a connection between writing and painting. Painting had been very literary in content because I thought of each painting as a “small story.” I constantly took into account characters—the figures depicted in the paintings, and the relationship of the viewer to those figures. I thought about the setting I chose to put my characters in, or what landscape I chose to depict, and how that reflected the mood of my characters. I took plot into consideration—what the figures in my paintings were doing, or what “scene” from their lives I was representing. Conversely, as I wrote, I was constantly drawing upon visual imagery. I tried to write scenes that I thought would be visually dramatic or interesting. I visualized the story in my head without the words, and then wrote the words to explain what I saw. I felt that writing could be used as an inspiration to create great paintings, and that painting and writing were perhaps more connected than I knew. I wished to pursue this exploration through painting because I believed that it might be possible to capture the elements of a story on a canvas, whereas I felt it would be nearly impossible to capture the full essence of a painting in writing. As a Senior Scholar, I explored this connection.

This was not an illustration project—that is, I did not seek to create narrative paintings. Illustration requires that the plot of the story be clearly depicted, and therefore makes the illustrations dependent on the story. Illustration does not allow for interpretation on the part of the viewer—it is extremely literal. Although I wished to “illustrate” aspects of my stories, my goal was to create paintings that would be able to stand as works of art, completely independent from the writing. It is my hope that my paintings convey the moods established by my writings, as well as the psychology of the characters, and, at times, the settings portrayed. Relating the plot was of lesser importance. Instead, I tried to use paint as a means of capturing the emotions evoked by the plot (the various ways in which I attempted to do this will be discussed in detail later). I wanted to let the paintings tell their own stories. In

addition, I hoped that my paintings would give a new dimension to my writing, since visual art operates independently from language.

I began my project over the summer with a painting inspired by a story that I had written called *Snip* (fig. 1). The story is about the contrast between the emotions of a poverty-stricken mother who is unable to provide for her daughter, and the innocence of her little girl who has no concept of the gravity of their situation. Before beginning the painting, I rummaged through old photographs in hopes of finding one of me as a little girl that I could then translate into a painting. I have discovered that I enjoy using photographs as a reference. Over the summer I read *Maxfield Parrish* by Laurence S. Cutler, and in it I learned that Maxfield Parrish (an illustrator and painter that I admire very much) also worked from photographs. Some consider working from photographs “cheating” because it automatically flattens the three-dimensional surface for the artist, making it less challenging. Maxfield Parrish, however, felt that there was nothing wrong with letting the camera sketch for him—he used the camera simply as a short-hand means of getting the effect quickly (97). Since I had no toddlers at my disposal, I figured that a photograph would have to suffice. Fortunately, I found one of me on my second birthday that suited the image I had in my head. Most likely the reason that it *did* match so well was because when I was writing the story, I had subconsciously pictured myself at that age. Something that I have come to realize about my writing is that I write about what I know—that is, I draw from my own experiences. Some aspect of me appears in every story that I write (perhaps the setting is like somewhere I’ve been, or a character is like someone that I’ve met). In addition, I feel that I *paint* about what I know, and who I am (I paint myself, people that I know, or things that I have seen). Therefore, it seemed fitting that I use a picture of myself for the child in the story.

It was not a terribly successful painting (in hind-sight I find it a bit too rendered, straight forward, and uninteresting—I am learning that good painting, like good writing, leaves something to be interpreted), but in its failures, I found room for improvement in a later version. The painting proved useful because it gave me avenues for further exploration.

Over the summer, I also read *The Shipping News* by E. Annie Proulx. In the book, Proulx uses vivid visual imagery. For example, "Wavey's little house was mint green on the ground floor, then a red sash. The boy's scarlet pajamas on the clothesline, bright as chile peppers"(183). Her writing stimulated my imagination a great deal, and got me anxious to begin my year of painting.

I began the semester by doing some research on N.C. Wyeth, Max Beckmann, and Lucian Freud (please see attached Bibliography). I also read an article on Lucian Freud called "Freudian Analysis" from *W. Magazine*. The article gave glimpses of his process, which I found fascinating—mainly that he spends hundreds (at times, even thousands) of hours on each painting. Not only is he a master of the figure, but he also manages to monumentalize subtleties, and finds beauty in the grotesque. In addition, I have never come across another artist who captures psychology as powerfully as Lucian Freud does. Every aspect of his paintings are psychologically charged—whether it be the look in his figures' eyes, the unflattering positions of their bodies, the texture of the paint, the colors in their flesh, the perspective from which they are seen, or the surroundings in which he places them. There is a psychological component to all of the characters that I have created in my stories, and one of the goals of my project was to try to convey this psychology through the medium of paint. Therefore, throughout the semester I collected several of his books to look at for direction (please see the attached bibliography).

While researching, I began to paint a second version of the previously mentioned *Snip* painting (fig. 2). I didn't feel that the first version had as much of an impact as I had hoped it would—it did not convey the emotion or psychology that I would have liked it to. As I said before, the painting seemed too straightforward—there was nothing left to be interpreted. In addition, the size of the canvas made the baby seem unimportant, and the painting seem too sentimental. I wanted the *Snip* Baby to have a "voice," and I didn't want her to be ignored. In this painting, I tried to put the viewer in the mother's place—I tried to imagine the way in which her mother would have seen her. In an attempt to do this, I focused in on just her face, and blew it up to 44"x 58". I made sure that her eyes were right in the center of the canvas, and I gave her an intense expression. I wanted the child's face to be

inescapable. I wanted the viewer to feel overwhelmed by the child in the same way that the mother did because of her inability to financially provide for her daughter. In this way, I hoped to capture the emotions in the story, and perhaps even convey emotions that the story cannot. I was challenged by the large format—not only was it difficult to see the painting as a whole, but it took an excessive amount of time. While working on this painting, I looked at the works of Chuck Close. What I admire most about Chuck Close's work is its directness. His figures always gaze out at the viewer, and are rendered with such accuracy, and on such a large scale, that the viewer cannot help but feel the presence of them.

I think very visually when I write. However, unlike E Annie Proulx, I tend to visualize actions more than descriptions. As I mentioned, for me, the images for my stories come to mind first and then the plot. In almost every one of my stories, a substantial action on the part of the protagonist accompanies the climax—whether it's jumping out of a window (as in *Snow Angel*), or standing up on a counter (as in *Donut Holes*). These actions convey thought. This is necessary because I almost always write from a third-person-limited point of view, which prevents the reader from knowing the characters' internal thoughts. The psychology of my characters is therefore largely conveyed through action. My goal this year was not to recreate the narratives in my story. Nor was it to recreate these climactic moments. Instead, I was trying to capture the essence of the entire story and its characters in one painting, by depicting a subtle moment in the story—perhaps the moments leading up to the climax. For it is at these moments that the psychology of the characters is most extreme.

Taking all of this into account, I began to prepare for my next painting (from a story I've written called *Snow Angel*). *Snow Angel* is a short story describing a man going through the motions of preparing himself for suicide—brushing his teeth, combing his hair, shaving, etc. I did not want to illustrate the suicide, itself, but rather this quiet moment before in the bathroom—for it is here, during this moment of contemplation, where the psychology of the story is at its peak. It is this moment—when the man is looking into his own eyes in the mirror—which I felt people would most be able to relate to. Keeping in mind that my viewers will not

have read the story, I needed to find another way to make a connection between the character and the reader, and I felt that one way to do this would be by putting the reader in the protagonist's place. I wanted the painting to be as if the viewer was generating the man's reflection in the mirror—therefore turning the viewer himself (as he stands in front of the “mirror”) into the man. Although the story is told from a third-person-limited point of view, it essentially does the same thing. It allows you to see what he sees, and feel what he feels. I felt that this connection deserved exploration.

I began to draw in preparation for the painting. The protagonist is an older man, so I began to do sketches of various Lucian Freud paintings of old men (*Man in Chair*, and *Portrait of Francis Wyndham*). Figure 3 is a rendition of Francis Wyndham. Then I began to invent my own old men on newsprint paper, and figured out my composition. I deliberately placed the man low in the composition. This large proportion sits above him as a visual weight and contributes to the feeling of him being overwhelmed.

After drawing, I did five self-portrait studies. I painted myself under various light conditions in order to study color effects, and the way that light works on my face. Since I did not have a model to work from, I needed to study my own face in this way so that I would be better able to invent other faces. Once I was familiar with my own face, I used it as a guide for the old man I was creating. I looked at one of my self-portrait studies (fig. 4), and then repainted it with the features contorted into that of the character. Another connection between writing and painting was made for me at this point. As mentioned before, when I am inventing a literary character, the development of that character somehow stems from who I am. This parallel occurred in my painting as well—I contorted my features, and played with the color in order to convey the image of a depressed old man looking at himself in the mirror as he is about to commit suicide (fig. 5).

I felt my painting was looking too “pretty.” The paint application was too smooth and even. Given the depressed situation of my character, I felt the need to make the paint on his face rougher. I added sawdust to the paint in order to do this (I borrowed the idea from Lucian Freud).

I observed that the figure was separating from the ground. To unite the two, I needed the figure and ground to be equally interesting. I experimented in several ways in an attempt to do this. One way was by using translucent glazes to give the painting depth by allowing previous layers of paint to show through. This helped activate the background. Also contributing to this activation was the use of text. I wanted to communicate the feeling of thoughts. The words move in, and around his head, and even over the man's face. In this way, I was trying to relate a feeling of being trapped, the way a man contemplating suicide might feel. I also wanted the words that I chose to imply some sort of meaning; so I picked an excerpt from the text that pertained to the situation I was depicting and repeated it over and over again. I hoped that this would emphasize the methodical and compulsive nature of the character's state of mind (I first tried this on one of my self-portraits—see fig. 6). I also repeated the words "snow angel" again and again, and arranged them so that they implied snow falling on and around the man. It was interesting to think of words as paint and compositional elements, and yet not lose the impact of their meaning on the painting. It is my hope, however, that the words visually effect the viewer independently from the story.

Next, I worked on a painting for *Hidden Treasure*. This is a humorous pirate satire with elements of contemporary angst. In preparation for the painting, I did some light research on pirates—mostly to get costuming ideas. I also watched some old pirate movies for inspiration (given the satirical nature of the story, I thought this was fitting). Before beginning this painting, I visited the Portland Museum of Art and the N. C. Wyeth "Precious Time" exhibit. Wyeth had a successful career as an illustrator, but desired to be a fine artist; "I don't want to be rated as an illustrator trying to paint, but as a painter who has shaken the dust of illustration from his heels" (Michaelis, 23). One of the aspects of my project was to explore the dividing line between fine art and illustration. I have come to the conclusion that illustrations are different because there is a predetermined agenda when they are made. The narrative is of the utmost importance, and illustrations merely add support to a pre-existing text (clarifies it, perhaps). Therefore, an illustration usually cannot work independently of the text, and little room is allowed for interpretation. The goal of the illustrator is to

communicate directly with the viewer. When creating fine art, however, the connection between the artist and his painting is what is most important. In addition, I believe that fine art tells its own story, and that the story is open to interpretation—each viewer receiving the painting in his own way.

The illustrator must also keep in mind the limitations imposed by considerations of reproduction. As N.C. Wyeth noted, “To begin with, an illustration must be made practical, not only in its dramatic statement, but it must be a thing that will adapt itself to the engravers’ and printers’ limitations. This fact alone *kills* that underlying inspiration to create thought. Instead of expressing that inner feeling you express the outward thought or imitation of that feeling, because a feeling is told by subtleties and an engraver cannot handle such delicate matter” (Michaelis, 15, emphasis Wyeth’s). Wyeth concluded that “painting and illustration *cannot* be mixed—one cannot merge from one into the other. The fact is you have to drop one absolutely before attempting the other because the viewpoints of the illustrator and painter are so entirely different” (16, emphasis Wyeth’s). I agree, and it is because I share those sentiments that I tried not to adopt a literal viewpoint as I was creating the paintings for my project. I was not trying to portray the plots of the stories, but rather I was attempting to capture the essence of the stories in paint. It is my hope that the paintings work independently of the text, and create their own narratives (that is, a unique narrative in the mind of the viewer).

The exhibit contained several of Wyeth’s illustrations for the book *Treasure Island*, which were very helpful to me. I loved the brilliance of the colors in the painting for the book jacket, and also enjoyed one that he did in the limited palette of yellow, white, and raw umber. I was surprised by the large format of these paintings, given the fact that they were created as illustrations for a book, but I think that their large size worked well.

Another reference for me while working on this painting was Maxfield Parrish, for both his technique and use of vibrant colors. Maxfield Parrish would first take photos of costumed models, and then cut them out and arrange them on a canvas or board (Cutler, 6). With that in mind, I asked professors Michael Marlais and David Simon, and Bixler employee Gordon Peavey to pose as the three pirates in my

story. They allowed me to take photographs of them (without costumes) for later reference. I then made Xerox copies of the photos, cut them out, and arranged them on paper into the desired composition, adding costume ideas. I chose them for their physical appearance, as well as for their personalities, and although not exactly like the pirates in my story, I do believe that there were similarities of character. Since the story contains hints of contemporary angst (dissatisfaction with the role that one is forced to play in society), I asked the men to keep on their glasses—I wanted them to look like modern people dressed up like pirates, contributing further to the satirical nature of the painting.

As I began the *Hidden Treasure* painting, I once again looked to my writing for a place to begin the process. When I wrote the story, I had thought about my childhood, and how exciting I had found pirate stories to be. I wanted to capture this excitement in the painting by playing with color and scale. Once I had the composition figured out, I transferred it to a 50"x 58" canvas. I chose a large canvas because I wanted the figures on it to be larger than life—as most satirical pirates are, so to speak. And I used saturated colors, because those were the things that appealed to me when I was young. I wanted to make the painting fantasy-like.

My first attempt at this painting seemed rather static. I looked at the paintings of Chaim Soutine for inspiration, and tried to learn from his loose style. I painted six heads on Masonite boards (three imaginary heads, and versions of David—fig. 7, Michael—fig. 8, and myself). These faces seemed more expressive than my previous attempts, and I hoped to use this newfound looseness to improve my *Hidden Treasure* painting.

It is at this point that I had the good fortune of interning with Kevin Hawkes, a children's book illustrator. Over the month of January, I met with Mr. Hawkes periodically. I did research for him, prepared his surfaces, transferred his drawings, and even worked on an illustration for his upcoming book. Mr. Hawkes encouraged me to attempt my own illustrations, he shared his techniques with me, offered me information about the industry, and critiqued my work. I gained invaluable experience and insight from him.

Kevin Hawkes' sense of color is remarkable—his paintings glow with vibrancy. Interestingly, his major influences are Maxfield Parrish and N. C. Wyeth. He sometimes uses a similar glazing technique to Parrish—the building up of thin layers upon layers of paint straight from the tube onto a white surface. This is what makes his colors luminous. Kevin Hawkes also taught me about optical blending. This is a technique that works especially well with acrylic paint (because of its quick drying time). Optical blending occurs when one color is placed on or near another color, causing the eye to blend the two into a third color. Since the two colors should not physically mix, you must apply bits of wet paint next to or on top of dry paint. It is this method that I used when creating my own illustrations for children's books that I have written called *Be Good While I'm Gone*, and *Francine and the Long Red Scarf* (figs. 9 and 10). Mr. Hawkes also created stencils for making wallpaper in many of his paintings. I felt that this contributed to the richness of the paintings a great deal because it made all portions of the painting equally interesting.

As Wyeth had noted, my viewpoint as an illustrator became entirely different. My main priority was to relay the plot of the story as clearly as possible. Although I was applying the fundamentals of a background in fine art, I soon realized that creating a "work of art" was not nearly as important as portraying the story. The paintings (particularly "Francine") do not read as well without the text to support it. "Be Good" works a little better, but this is probably due to the fact that the story is almost entirely told in pictures. I was, however, still trying to capture the essence of my characters' nature, and I was still using action to convey psychology. It was surprising to me how much this internship experience affected my painting throughout the rest of the year.

Once back for the second semester, I began work on the pirates again (fig. 11). I had been looking at Max Beckmann, and his strong use of black line. I tried it on my painting, and only succeeded in making the heads separate from the composition. Although it was playful, and made the colors appear more vibrant, it just did not seem right. I decided that I wanted the pirates to look more realistic—exaggerated, but realistic. So, using the photographs as a reference, I repainted their faces. The costumes, on the other hand, were drawn largely from my

imagination. Although I had done some costume research, I decided to paint them intuitively, and was not concerned with historical accuracy. I believed that this fit better with the whimsical nature of the painting.

Working on such a large canvas, I was confronted by the challenge of keeping the entire surface active. To do this, I decided to create my own stencils (inspired by my internship with Kevin Hawkes). I designed a stencil which I felt was fitting for each character's personality, and then used it all over their clothing, paying no attention to borders, and even overlapping in areas. Then, to keep the stencils from looking too flat, I used Liquin glazes over them in places to give them more depth, taking color into careful consideration. This type of glazing was also a technique that I had learned when illustrating in January.

I wanted the backgrounds to somehow reflect the characters' personalities. For Michael's character (the villain), I made a background of dark jungle. And for Gordon's character (the simple-minded, yet heroic sidekick), I made a bright blue sky with stenciled clouds—something I would have liked as a child. David's character (the unobtrusive protagonist who doesn't want to be a pirate), is sunk down low in front of the other two, in a subordinate position.

The painting does not represent a scene from the story. Instead, I wanted it to feel posed—as if someone had been hired to take their picture. I wanted it to be as if the characters from the story were addressing the audience. Since the story is written in the third-person-limited point of view, the characters never acknowledge the presence of the reader. The reader feels as if he is an invisible observer. In a story, the reader identifies with a character when he can relate to their actions, thoughts, or dialogue. In painting, you do not have words to describe actions, thoughts, or dialogue, so instead you must try to find a way to make the same sort of connection in a purely visual way.

When I was a little girl, I always wished I could meet the characters in the books that I read. So in this painting, I decided to give life to the characters outside of the story. My pirates look out at their viewers—they look them in the eye, and smile (or scowl, as in Scabby's case). Hopefully, this establishes a connection

between the viewer and the characters. I wanted the viewer to feel invited into a fantasy world. In this way, the painting functions in a way that the story cannot.

The last paintings that I worked on were a triptych of the story *Donut Holes* (fig. 12). This is the story about an unusual day in the life of Maurine—a teenage Dippin' Donuts employee. The process for creating this painting was very similar to that for "Hidden Treasure." I began by dressing myself up in a pseudo donut shop uniform. I then got some bubble gum (Maurine is always chewing gum), and had my roommate take pictures of me as I found the part of myself that was Maurine. Next, I went to Dunkin' Donuts, and took photographs of the interior and of an employee in uniform. After that, I cut myself out of the photos, and arranged them on top of the background pictures in order to figure out the three compositions. I then began to paint, adjusting the background elements accordingly, and making my costume look more like a uniform. When visiting artist Barbara Rogers met with me, she had suggested that I begin by creating the ground first (a "nest," as she called it), and then add the figure, in order to better unite foreground and background (a weakness of mine). I tried it for the first time here, and found that it helped a great deal.

These paintings could represent Maurine on any given day—not just the day in the story. Maurine's job at the donut shop is monotonous. I hoped to emphasize this by making a triptych composed of three very similar paintings united by the careful placement of background elements, allowing one scene to flow into the next. Pictorially, this suggests an element of time. Formally, it also unites the triptych, and produces a turning in visual space. In each painting, I also slightly altered the color scheme, the composition, and Maurine's expression. Pictorially, I was attempting to show the different shades of her personality. Formally, I was trying to create interesting rhythms with color and with the placement of Maurine's head (figs. 13, 14, and 15).

Throughout the year, I have had critiques with various professors and artists. These critiques have been extremely helpful in the development of my paintings. Each offered invaluable advice, suggestions, and feedback. Throughout the year, I met with my tutor, Bevin Engman, approximately every other week. She always offered crucial insight and suggestions, and was always eager to help. I am extremely

grateful to her for more reasons than I can possibly list here. I met with Professor Engman and my readers, Professors Susan Kenney and Véronique Plesch, in February. Professor Plesch had not read the stories, so her reactions to my paintings offered valuable insight into the successes and failures of my efforts thus far. Professor Kenney *had* read the stories, so it was helpful to know that she could find visual connections to the texts. Throughout the year, I also had critiques with visiting artists. As already mentioned, Barbara Rogers suggested that I use glazes, and make “nests” for my figures. Barbara Grossman suggested that I look at Soutine, and encouraged me to try and keep the toughness of character in my paintings. I also met with faculty members Maggie Libby (a former Senior Scholar in Painting), and Mark Iwinski. In addition, I attended the lectures given by Barbara Grossman, Barbara Rogers, Maggie Libby, and Robert Engman.

I feel that I have made several technical advancements and discoveries over the course of the year. For example, I have come to realize how much I enjoy working with glazes. Glazing allows for a luminosity that cannot be achieved through mixing alone. To think in terms of the layering effects of transparent color is something new and exciting to me—as is optical blending verses flat single color applications. I have also discovered that flat stenciling over modeled areas creates interesting spatial relationships (stencils flatten modeled areas, and modeled stencils become spatial), while helping to activate the surface. In addition, I have become more intuitive with how I gather information for my paintings. I have found several ways to integrate photography into my creative process; by finding photographs that suit my ideas, by shooting my own photographs for observation and then incorporating elements of invention, and by using photographs as collage materials in order to lay out compositions.

I have realized how strong my passion for illustration is. Although book illustration can be limiting in some ways, I also find it liberating and extremely enjoyable. I would love to continue to explore the dividing line between fine art and illustration, and hope to one-day write and illustrate children’s books.

Throughout the year I have kept a journal recording my thoughts, notes, trials and errors. It was in this journal that I was able to trace my growth, and come to

many of my realizations and conclusions. As I suspected, I discovered many more connections between writing and painting than I had anticipated. To begin with, both are a means of self-expression, and a process of self-discovery. I believe that both writing and painting are about trying to figure out what it is that I have to say, and then finding the way to say it. For me, the goal of both writing and painting is to convey emotion. In writing, emotion is internal, while in painting, emotion can be externally visible. Although these feelings are transferred in completely different ways, it is sometimes possible to convey the *same* emotion in both media. When writing and painting, I think about character development, setting, and scene—in that way, my paintings are literary. Additionally, my writing is very visual in content. A painting tells its own story, and each story paints its own picture—it's a matter of interpretation on the part of the reader. The mark I make is something that I am born with, whether it is a letter or a splotch of paint. The stories that I write are also formed somewhere within me. I know now that, for me, the connection between writing and painting is very real, and that I construct the bridge between the two.

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