

## Introduction

My series of paintings aims to explore the link between an increasingly digital age where social media is utilized to gain power in our social hierarchy, leading to memories becoming detached from objective reality. Through the use of family photos, social media posts and memorable sporting events, I intend to portray this juxtaposition between the memories we hold and these captured images. Photos which are posted to social media in particular, which should represent this objective reality, end up being less reliable than physical photographs and create a fight for recognition online. This constant distortion of our memory and social hierarchy will be contemplated through the use of digital and physical image making processes which mirror the juxtaposition of these memory capturing methods.

## Contextual Discussion

After reading the article “Tyler, Boy Disconnected”, I learned that self-worth can, sadly, be given almost exclusively through social media, which itself is a façade of real life and absolutely not representative of reality.<sup>1</sup> This has inspired my work, among the following resources, to create works that show montaged figures that could never be seen in reality, but are made up of realistic figures and portraits. When his account was removed for whatever reason, Tyler went into a mental spiral, which is something I have aimed to explore through the deconstruction of the physical form into a montage and abstraction of brush marks. He was also obsessed with recognition and “clout”, essentially a search for power, which has inspired me to create pieces that allude to this social hierarchy in the sense that there are more and more highly rendered layers that juxtapose abstracted layers. These abstracted layers represent the deeper aspects of human nature that we hide from society, and they degrade in areas of a composition like a stone statue that gives us glimpses into the figure, this real person that we have already formed an emotional bond with and wish to connect with and learn.

The Notebooks by Jean-Michel (edited by Larry Warsh), and as seen by my work, have always inspired me.<sup>2</sup> This book contains random ramblings that end up becoming full ideas in a finished painting, but show the start of his process. His use of layering with these writings is very interesting in that he will take the ideas from his notebooks and put them onto canvas, forming connections and thoughts on what to add next. The layers never become too precious in that they are continually being erased and painted over, much like how I strive to not worry about creating new problems when solving old ones, as that is part of the creative process. It is partly because of Jean-Michel’s work that I am comfortable with taking a perfectly successful photo montage and creating a painting that forms its’ own contexts and problems to solve, allowing me to indulge in the only thing that lets me escape while still exploring the same concepts, just in a different and usually deeper manner.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor Lorenz, *Tyler, Boy Disconnected* (New York Times, November 29, 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Michel Basquiat with Larry Warsh, *The Notebooks*, (Princeton University Press, 2015)



Above: Untitled (*Pollo Frito*), Jean-Michel Basquiat, Acrylic, Oil and Enamel on Canvas, 60" x 120", 1982



*Alpha, Beta, Omega*, Inkjet print, 11" x 14"



*Alpha, Beta, Omega*, Oil and Inkjet Collage on Canvas, 30" x 36" (Progress Shot)

Daniel Schacter's "Searching for Memory" was very important in the first steps of my project, as he spoke on how episodic memory can influence essentially everything that

we think.<sup>3</sup> Memories are associated with emotions, and the imagery I paint is meant to allow an emotional response from the viewer, good or bad; I want to make them think and give them complex themes and ideas to contemplate. Much like Tyler's experiences with social media, in our digital age the photos we post are not representative of our actual reality, and end up creating this false reality we show to the world.

Colin Chillag is a painter whose work is interesting in the sense that he will take family portraits and distort them in a way that is different from mine, but runs parallel. In a podcast, Chillag expressed his intent to explore distortion through a type of "paint by numbers" approach, which should be completely objective, yet he skews it until the figures are inhuman in a way, which is similar to my process.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to this "paint by numbers" method, I utilize more free motions and brush marks, however these carefully rendered areas inspired me to add those into my own pieces, just in smaller quantities and in places I believe should be of more importance to the viewer and overall concept.



*Portrait of a Man*, Colin Chillag, Oil on Canvas, 36" x 48", 2012

Emilio Villalba creates portraits that are deconstructed to the point that they may be only eyes or noses and then drip off of the canvas, almost like his portraits are melting and showing their true selves. His most recent work deals with the mundane. He will take random

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, (Basic Books, Reprint Edition, 1997)

<sup>4</sup> Jason Seiler, *Face the Truth Ep. 53 with Colin Chillag*, Video Podcast, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQVPK9-uuQk&t=4221s>

objects from his living space and add them to a blank, primed canvas and allow for these objects to take precedent; cigarettes, plants, etc. I find this incredibly inspiring especially because I am dealing with more vivid memories, but with the same process of putting a ground on and then allowing my hand to take care of the entire piece.



*The Constant*, Emilio Villalba, Oil on Canvas, 11” x 14”, 20”



*Family Tree (study)*, Acrylic and Inkjet Collage on Canvas Board, 11” x 14”

Much like Emilio Villalba’s earlier work, Chris Finley dissects the portrait in a way that is similar to cubism. His work has inspired me to think about the aesthetic I am going for and the process I take in order to deconstruct these human forms in order to show the deeper emotions of the subject, which in turn allows for an emotional response from the viewer. His use of color is incredibly powerful, as these colors are able to further the evocation of emotion from the audience, as one may know that the color yellow is connected to happiness while red is more intense and passionate, for example, so the artist can manipulate a specifically intended response. Emotion and memory are large parts of human nature, and form the majority of our personality and what make us, us.<sup>5</sup> The other part would be social interaction, person to person contact, even if that interaction is digital, something that I have been deeply contemplating for the entirety of my process.

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<sup>5</sup> Tyng, Chai M et al. “The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory.” *Frontiers in psychology* vol. 8 1454. 24 Aug. 2017, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01454



*Drool, Snatch, Clean & Jerk #2*, Chris Finley, Sign Enamel on Canvas over Panel, 39" x 39", 2017

Robert Longo has done great work dealing with the social aspects of human nature. His exhibition "Strike the Sun" comments on something I am trying to tangentially comment on: cigarette smoking and the connection to the fact that it will kill you, and how social media is damaging to our emotions and our memories, yet some of us are addicted to it.<sup>6</sup> His use of a horse done in black and grey charcoal made me think of juxtaposing a hyper-realistic black and grey portrait with a full color, deconstructed portrait. This, in my mind, can show the difference between objective reality and the faux fur we wear when interacting with others. His photo of this horse brings about allusions to the tobacco industry and the Marlboro Man, an icon that utilized a pristine and "cool" or "macho" image to sell products that are ultimately detrimental to one's health.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Longo, *Strike the Sun*, Pretzel Gallery, 2014



*Untitled (Black Jack Boot)*, Robert Longo, Charcoal on Mounted Paper, 63" x 63", 2014

During an interview with Kamran Diba, Associate Professor of the Anesthesiology Neuroscience Graduate Program at the University of Michigan, allowed me to learn that my understanding of memory was mostly incorrect, such as my thoughts on associative memory were actually related to episodic memory instead. His explanation of the unconscious associations our brain makes which become the conscious thoughts, feelings and memories we experience made me think more about my process and how I will subconsciously make marks before making very specific decisions with my rendering of the form. I really enjoyed hearing his thoughts on the unreliability of memory, such as how one may suggest that another person's memory is incorrect, causing the first to assimilate, a kind of "speaking it into existence" sort of thing. Throughout the semester and throughout my life I have been unknowingly creating an ethnographic study on memory, as I personally believe we all are. I have created my own associations and emotions from life experiences that I am able to remember vividly, as well as the unconscious memories that can end up bringing about emotions that seem to have no basis or cause. These inform my visual works as I am constantly using imagery that is related, a type of stream of consciousness in a way, in order to give the viewer an emotional experience through the process of experiencing my own catharsis.

### **Methodology**

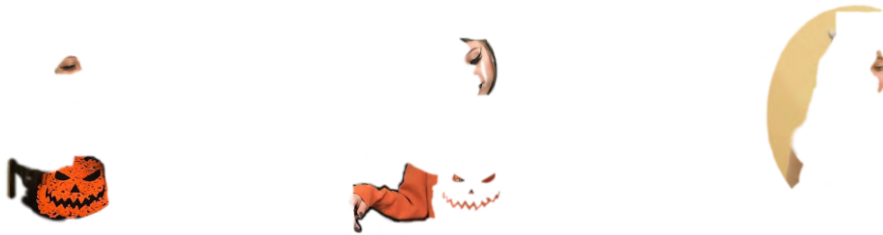
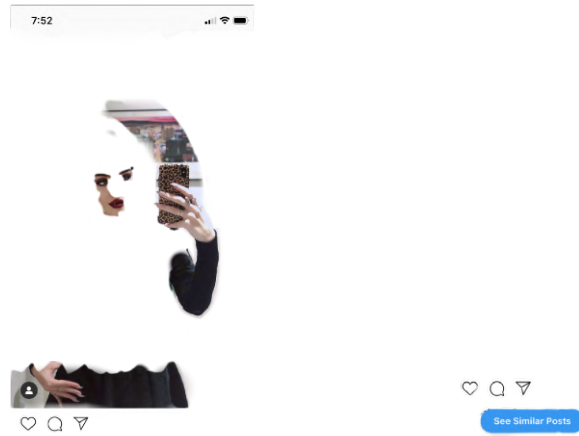
Through my creative process, I am able to identify and connect my own memories with social media's method of masking objective reality. I have been using this process of making for the last few years, forming deeper and more meaningful connections while creating in a more efficient manner the longer I work. I form all of my ideas and associations through continual

searches of digital images on different platforms. These mostly include Instagram and Google Images, however any other source may be used depending on what I am creating. Instagram is the most influential to my process not just because it has such a large selection of imagery, but because it allows me to dive deeper into the concepts of social media I am exploring by connecting firsthand with the app that plays such a large role in my pieces.

I will start by perusing a platform, and when I find an image to be visually appealing, usually through composition and use of color, I will save it to my phone. These images are almost exclusively figure-based, as when working with the human form, one is able to connect more deeply to the viewer and the concepts I am exploring in my thesis. I will do this for an extended period of time and then review all of the images I have collected to form mental associations between them conceptually and compositionally. Once I compile a set of images that I feel relate to each other, I will montage them through the mobile app “Photoshop Mix”.



The final digital montage for *Selfie*



The separate steps taken in each layer of montage to create a final reference photo to be used for a painting

As shown by the above images, I have identified connections between multiple photos that I believe will look nice in a digital montage. I will then take each of them one-by-one and collage various parts into different places, like a puzzle in a way, to form the final image which is seen at the top of the collection.

Once I have the digital montage finished, I will transfer it to a primed, gallery profile canvas. To do this, I will utilize a to-scale printout of the image which I will coat in charcoal on the back. Then I will lay it down onto the support and trace out a line-drawing, which will become less and less important as the painting progresses. The following images show how one painting utilized the digital montage to become something bigger and more complex than the reference photo, while still exploring the same concepts but in a deeper manner.





*Family Tree, Inkjet Print Photo Montage, 11"x14"*



*Family Tree, Oil and Inkjet Collage on Canvas, 24"x36"*

## **Creative Work**

When dealing with the intersection between memory and social media, I have chosen to utilize the mediums and processes that I enjoy the most and adapt them to the concepts I am exploring. The act of applying oil to canvas is meditative to me and is my greatest passion, while creating digital montages allows a complimentary process to provide personal catharsis, and when used to form my final paintings, evokes an emotional response from the viewer through a constantly deepening exploration of my concepts. The use of canvas specifically is done to create a thru-line as everything is on the same type of support, which allows the viewer to contemplate the work in a more straightforward way, not worrying about what role the support may play in influencing the concepts of the painting. The main imagery I utilize is, but not limited to, the male and female figure (as it allows for connections to the human condition), Snapchat filters, Instagram text and symbols, popular culture references, Polaroids, documentation of childhood memories and homes, and events where photos are usually taken such as basketball games and parties. The idea that my work can be seen as appropriative because I create paintings depicting persons that are not straight white males like myself is something I have always been fighting against; it is nearly nonsensical. I can understand a certain amount of backlash if I were using imagery that is not true to other cultures, however after careful and bountiful interactions with persons to assure this does not happen, I believe that I, as most artists, should be more than allowed to create inclusive works. My paintings aim to allow for anyone to have a cathartic experience while identifying, digesting and

contemplating the material to the level that they wish. The juxtaposition of abstracted and impulsive marks with carefully rendered areas of naturalistic imagery is not only freeing and meditative to me, but also furthers the goals I am exploring and trying to achieve. As all of my pieces deal with the same concepts and subject matter, they are all interconnected, creating a non-linear story of sorts which mirrors our memories and social media pages in general.



*Followers, Inkjet Print, 11" x 14"*

As stated before, I will start out my creative process finding reference photos and then montage them into a final image. For this piece, I was thinking about the "ideal" suburban life that many people strive for and the childhood nostalgia that comes with that for a lot of people. This ideal life can also trigger jealousy and darker memories just as social media never fails to do. There is a meshing of the childlike and the adult in that the figure is of a larger scale than the house, which is aesthetically akin to a child's playhouse, while the figure also features a younger type of feeling juxtaposed with a darker reality of the stresses in adult life. The use of anatomical diagrams of kidneys and the basketball allude to the health problems of mortality and a search for the dreamlike and possibly immortal, respectively. As the title may suggest, the text to the left is taken from Instagram and shows how we all follow others in one way or the other, and how that can end up becoming very dangerous in multiple ways. One may lose themselves and become a jumbled mess of a human without a true identity, or even worse, become so obsessed with the idea of "clout" that those around us no longer know who we are and end up leaving us to dwell inside of the dark thoughts that are brought upon by feelings of inadequacy, unachieved aspirations, loss of the self and loneliness.

The painting that this photo montage became, seen below, expands on these themes through the exploration of paint and graphite. The use of a graphite transfer and largely untouched areas is yet another way to dissect the form and the idea of this ideal life, while the checkered background adds a sense of stability and pattern, a metaphor for a stable everyday routine. This routine, however, is not perfect, as evidenced by the wavering lines that form the checkered pattern. The use of stencils to create the grass, this perfect, fresh-cut lawn, and the red car is once again a reference to the ideal, cookie-cutter lifestyle many strive for.



*Followers, Oil and Graphite on Canvas, 24" x 36"*

More often than not, a montage will not become a physical painting, but they all inform my creative process and concepts as I move forward with other pieces. In the montage below, the concept of the immortality that photographs and social media posts allow for us is expanded upon further. This is done through the use of text first and foremost, but also more subtly with the imagery of a birthday cake, wings, and most importantly, Lil Peep's portrait. For anyone who knows the popular culture reference, Peep was a pioneer of the "Emo Rap" music genre and died of an opiate overdose in November of 2017. Even though he is gone, his popularity grows every day. This concept is explored at the bottom of the composition where a

party of sorts is occurring, as inferred by the balloons and many shoes. A Louis Vuitton bag is seen, as well as a heavily montaged Nike sneaker, as the more recognition that one has, the more one is able to afford. This glamorous lifestyle is highlighted by the incredibly bright colors, yet is a slippery slope, covered by layers of imagery that evokes feelings of happiness through the color and various associations to happy events such as a party.



*Live Forever*, Inkjet Print, 7.5" x 15"



*Family Tree*, Oil and Inkjet Collage on Canvas, 24" x 36"  
(Progress Shot)



*Family Tree*, Oil and Inkjet Collage on Canvas, 24" x 36"

The painting *Family Tree* went through many different iterations before reaching its' conclusion. Starting out as a more traditional family portrait (left), the final painting became something that is far deeper and more abstracted. Some elements of this staged portrait are there such as the mother and baby, as well as the child who's happiness is potentially masked, once again alluding to the mask we wear on social media and in society in general. Covering up the layers of the other children and the father figure with more layers of color and this camouflage-like pattern allows for one to wonder what this family is possibly hiding and contemplate what others may, and more importantly, ourselves. The balloons are present in this piece as well, a callback to *Live Forever*, with a repeated hand-print which brings about memories of finger painting in kindergarten. The focal point of the piece is, of course, the father and child. What is at first glance a happy, stock photo-esque type of ideal family is broken down into this reality that the ideal is fictional and impossible to achieve. This is shown mostly through the lack of representational eyes in both portraits and interior mouth of the father, further exploring this type of emptiness that social media causes.



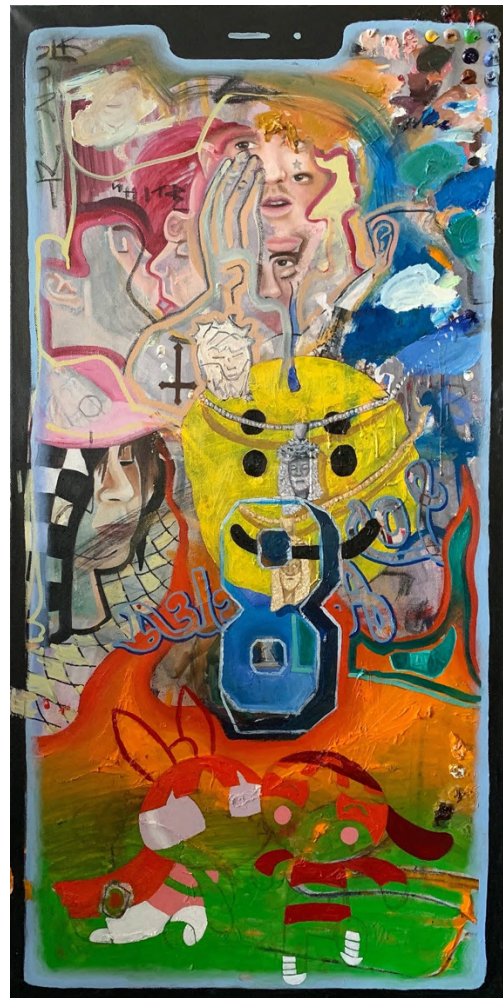
*Alpha, Beta, Omega, Oil and Inkjet Collage on Canvas, 30" x 36"*

Emptiness is almost exclusively an adult emotion and health issue as children are consistently unaware of the “real” world and are filled with wonder, happiness and fun. This painting is inspired by memories of active play time as a child through the use of a ball pit and a basketball. *Alpha, Beta, Omega* takes a modern way of documentation, Snapchat, and juxtaposes the carefree feeling of childhood with the act of chasing “clout”, which is also known as “drip”, while also drawing parallels between the fleeting moments of being a child with the timed images of Snapchat before they disappear. This painting also comments on the social hierarchy that we are all a part of and that a child will soon have to face. The alpha is the child as they are so pure and carefree, the omega is the Snapchat filter’s portrait because they are less carefree but also closer to a childlike happiness than the trials of real life, while the beta is seen as just an arm without a body, without a home and lost in the adult world. The basketball is shown as this orb-like structure with the Moon, Mercury and Venus circling it, bringing about questions of whether it is Earth or the Sun, allowing the viewer to think on the concept and form their own connections. This, to me, shows how play time is one of the only things that matters to a child, and when connected to *Followers*, this can also be seen as representative of childhood dreams and potential. The ball pit and figure is rather representative of reality, aside from being upside down, with the Snapchat filter’s eye and mouth/rainbow vomit showing a removal from reality. The rainbow and sky with rain not only reinforces the concept of “drip” but also allows for more emotional responses regarding the light and dark moments of life as a whole.

The concept of “Drip” is also evident in *iPhone X*, seen below. It plays on the format of a phone screen where some of us have most of our precious memories in the format of digital photos while intersecting the concepts of emotional connection in romantic relationships, references to Kobe Bryant and the everlasting quest for “clout” through three diamond Jesus pieces. Starting with the composition, this piece features the glow and outline of a phone screen, framing what is reminiscent of a Snapchat photo, just deconstructed to the point that it is as removed from reality as the platform can be at its’ worst points. Contrary to the other pieces, this is more social media based and deals less with memory as the references to relationships are at the forefront with the couple kissing and the Powerpuff boy and girl. The latter further explores the concept of nostalgia just as the reference to Kobe’s jersey and Lil Peep’s portrait do. This painting essentially ties in and expands on all of the pieces, acting as a glue in a way.



*Google News, In Progress Digital Montage*



*iPhone X, Oil and Charcoal on Canvas, 18" x 36"*



*Valentine*, Oil and Aerosol on Canvas, 36" x 48"

This painting depicts a powerful, almost queen-like figure which is almost shown mid-dissection in a way as the marks in the middle may be interpreted as internal organs, what is inside of us, while adding the heart and message icons from Instagram to further the idea of an internet façade. Commenting on the connection of relationships just like *iPhone X*, there is this female portrait with male hands being held over a fire, alluding to the trials of keeping up a romantic relationship, which in turn would allow the viewer to think about friendships as well as they are based on the same concept of interaction. The pinks and red add to this concept through the use of color as I have explored throughout the series. In relation to memory, some of the most memorable moments of one's life are shared with others through social events, through a connection with others, and when only two people share a romantic connection, it can bring upon the most vivid and everlasting memories be they good or bad.





*Pink Flamingo Pool Party, Oil and Inkjet Collage on Canvas, 24" x 36"*

Another social event that is rather memorable is a pool party with friends and/or family. Once again using the jersey number as a symbol of power and nostalgia, Jordan spearheads this painting with "Exit Life" in place of his name. Most events we engage in are in an effort to escape from the reality of living and the hardships that may come with it. Through the use of textures, brush marks and limited figurative imagery, this piece allows for a departure from the rest of the series, a breather for the viewer if you will. The use of layering and transparent color further expands upon the idea of the mask we wear to hide our true selves while giving peeks into the aspects that create our personalities. Much like at a party, one may have so much fun that they reveal more than they usually would due to feelings like comfortability, which is also shown through these thin transparent and thick impasto layers.



Selfie, Oil and Graphite on Canvas, 24" x 36"

Finally, we have the painting created from the reference photo that was detailed in the previous section. This piece, *Selfie*, is a deconstruction of one of the most influential types of photographs of the last decade. I used the same graphite transfer and printmaking techniques as in *Followers*, while exploring the concept of power in a similar manner to *Valentine*. The wavering checker pattern is juxtaposed with the stability of the rainbow frame, which itself can show the spectrum of persons on social media, in an abstract way. The figure in the middle is trapped inside of this spectrum and this structure, yet they are popping out in some places, breaking free. The figure is almost a ghost because of its' lack of color and shading, much in the same way that we may all be considered ghostly in regards to social media, being present but never really, physically there.

## Conclusion

With this project, I aimed to deconstruct the relationship between social media and its influence on memory. This is important because we are only becoming increasingly interconnected through the internet and if we are to continue to evolve and adapt, we must understand the impact it has on our lives. Through my research and creative work, I have found that social media is impacting the way we remember things in a way which may be considered negative, but could also be beneficial. Social media is skewing our memories and making them seem better than they really were, as we are looking to be seen in the best possible light amongst our peers. This is beneficial because it increases morale in the short term, but can be detrimental in the long term as it may cause a detachment from reality. As artists, one of our duties is to comment on the times we live in, and through these paintings, I have explored this juxtaposition of the positive and negative, which will hopefully lead to contemplation from those who use social media.

With this in mind, I have become more interested in the themes of identity and nostalgia. Nostalgia can elicit an emotional response in a positive and negative way, which is one of the main concepts I explore in my pieces in regards to the human condition, the positive and pristine image of us and the deeper and darker deconstruction of our personality and memories. We either look back fondly on our memories and feel warm and fuzzy, or a nostalgic trigger will create a longing feeling and bring about questions regarding mortality and possible lost time. These are all individual experiences as we all have our own identity, which is something I aim to also explore, specifically the broadening of different types of identity to make my works more inclusive and relatable. By researching these concepts and deepening my analysis on the link between social media and memory, I will be able to unearth more interesting connections and answers as to what makes us, us.