

Breaking Through

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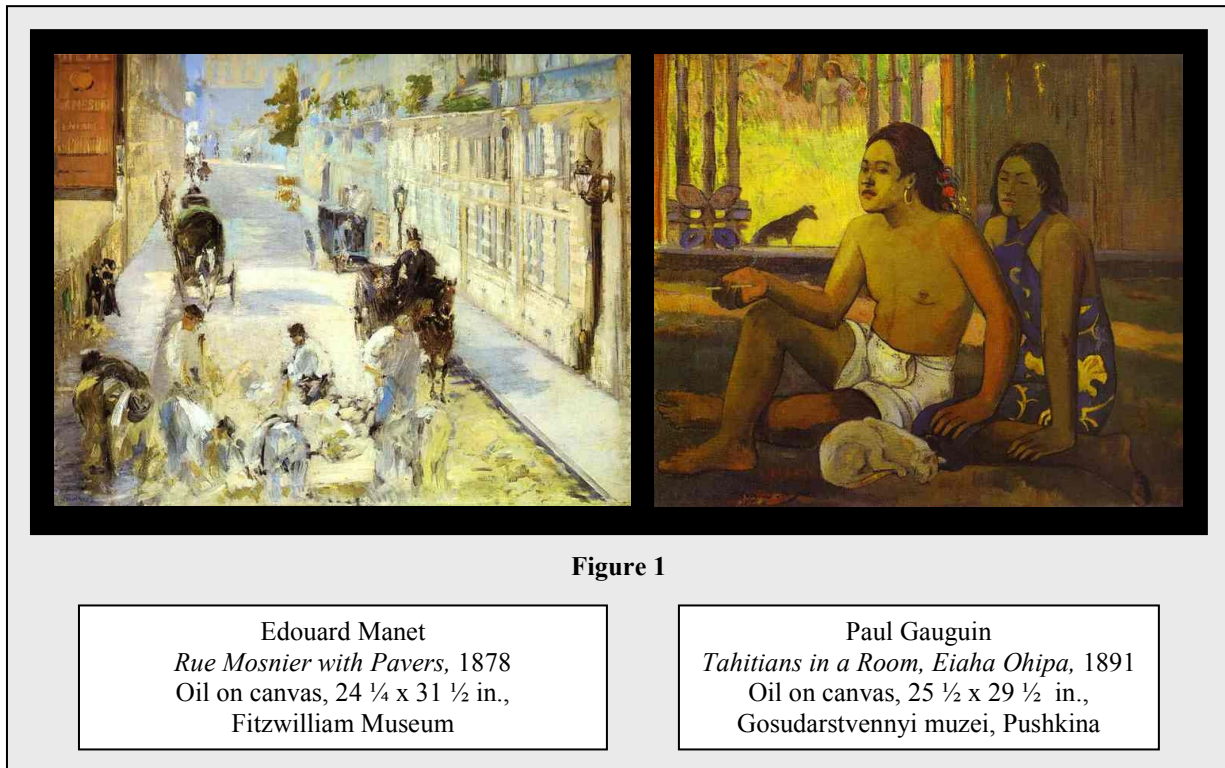
**Art History 366
Professor: Dr. Loren Lerner**

Breaking Through

Breaking through in an artistic context refers to any attempt to move past or beyond where we are as artists. This is what an avant-garde artist does. But how does one do this? How difficult is this to do? It has been argued that as children, we spend our early years and perhaps formative years in a family environment essentially becoming a product of that environment. Our models are our parents, so we become our parents. Eventually however, we challenge this environment searching for who we are in an attempt to establish ourselves as independent from that which was our beginning. As artists, we aspire and wish to do the same thing. Understanding and accepting where I have come from, what formal and informal training that has made me who I am as a painter, I feel this increasing need to be something different, something different from the beginning. Although the title of this short paper "*Breaking Through*" implies success, in fact, it is much more than that. Referencing 2 paintings that I have completed for this assignment, this paper will look at where I have succeeded in breaking through, where I feel I have not and the challenges of even making the slightest changes in where we have come from. For the purpose of this study and to challenge myself even further, I have chosen a diptych approach not only in the resulting oeuvres but also in my attempted painting styles and my source subject matter.

To begin with, let us first look at my mentor artists and the source subject matter for my paintings. The 2 mentor impressionist painters that have influenced my painting styles for this assignment are Edouard Manet and Paul Gauguin. The reason why I have chosen Manet is because in many ways he bridges the gap between Realism and Impressionism which from a

style perspective I feel I need to mirror. Manet was interested in painting a contemporary realism; a realism using contemporary subjects in contemporary settings. Manet unlike so many artists before him wanted to show modern life as it really was. If life was ugly and unfair then that is what he wanted to paint. The painting I chose from Manet for my study was *Rue Mosnier with Pavers* (see Figure 1).



The painting is of an urban construction scene on a street in Paris. The group of men in the foreground are presumably street workers repairing and repaving the street in a true to life setting. As the men work everyone else continues on their daily routines. We see people on the sidewalk, the unloading of a covered wagon and several horse and buggies heading in both directions. The perspective in this painting is very strong and our vantage point is somewhere above the men working. We are drawn into the perspective towards this vanishing point which disappears down the street and into the distance. The painting was most likely started with an

imprimatura (coloured ground) of raw sienna which was typical of that time. The palette range is small but with a large tonal range of mostly light cooler colours (browns, yellows, a few greens, and a few cooler blues). There is not a large contrast between the lights and darks. The first layer of paint would have been applied very quickly and thinly allowing Manet to capture the immediate impression of the moment. Next, thicker impasto layers to give texture and finally a thinner last layer of paint to ensure the freshness and spontaneity of the original moment. The brush strokes are loose but intentional. Up close the men disappear into a street of flat brush strokes. At a distance the whole scene takes form as our eyes reconstruct the multitude of colours and forms.

In contrast to Manet's painting from the same impressionist period I chose Paul Gauguin's painting, *Tahitians in a Room, Eiaha Ohipa*, (see also Figure 1) to complete my diptych source of painting styles. Unlike Manet who was interested in depicting modern society as it was, Gauguin was interested in depicting the beauty of native life. Gauguin saw modern society as destructive and the Tahitian way of life as something to be admired and something to return to, a life more natural and pure existence. This painting is a rural scene of a Tahitian couple in their hut. The man and woman are both sitting on the floor of the hut and there is a cat curled up in front of them. The man is smoking with his right hand and is propping himself up with this left hand which rests on the leg of the woman. Although there is a sense of perspective created by the lighted scene outdoors in the background, the painting in general feels very flat. This flatness is due to the lack of depth created for each object (ie. lack of shadows and highlights to create form) and to the outlining of the figures and other objects in the painting. There is also a brutish awkwardness to the figures as if they were drawn by a child that also adds to this sense of flatness. As with the Manet painting the palette used was small but the tonal ranges are all in the

darker ranges. The colours are predominantly dark, warm earthy colours (umbers, siennas, ochers, and greens). Similarly to Manet's painting, this painting would have started with the raw or burnt sienna imprimatura. Gauguin's brush strokes however, are much less evident and everything is painted for us the way Gauguin wants us to see it. While Manet painted exactly what he saw allowing our own eyes to take in all the luminosity, colours and forms to reconstruct the scene so that we could see what he saw, Gauguin using a very different impressionistic style wanted us to see simpler forms. He wanted us to see "how" he saw things versus "what" he saw. He wanted us to see the beauty of the simple native life versus the contemporary modern life that he no longer felt a part of.

Switching now to the diptych source of my 2 paintings, I decided to work from 2 photographs taken while my wife and I were doing humanitarian work in Pakistan after the earthquake on October 8th, 2005. This very sad and unfortunate event in a region of the world that is constantly being impacted by violence and natural disasters, killed approximately 80,000 people and left over 3.5 million people homeless. These 2 photographs (see Figure 2) were chosen for a variety of reasons. First of all, they are similar to the images just discussed by Manet and Gauguin and at the same time I felt they were conducive to the two impressionist painting styles that I was hoping to imitate. In *Pakistan earthquake, Image #1*, we see a man amongst the rubble of several houses after the earthquake. Although this photo has been taken in a remote area of Pakistan, it is set in a mountain village. There is a sense of modern living with the houses in the background along with the doors and masonry blocks in the foreground. This is a contemporary subject in a contemporary setting showing the harsh realities of the aftermath of the earthquake. There is also a feeling of construction and the impending repair that will soon take place, repair that as we saw in Manet's painting was taking place.



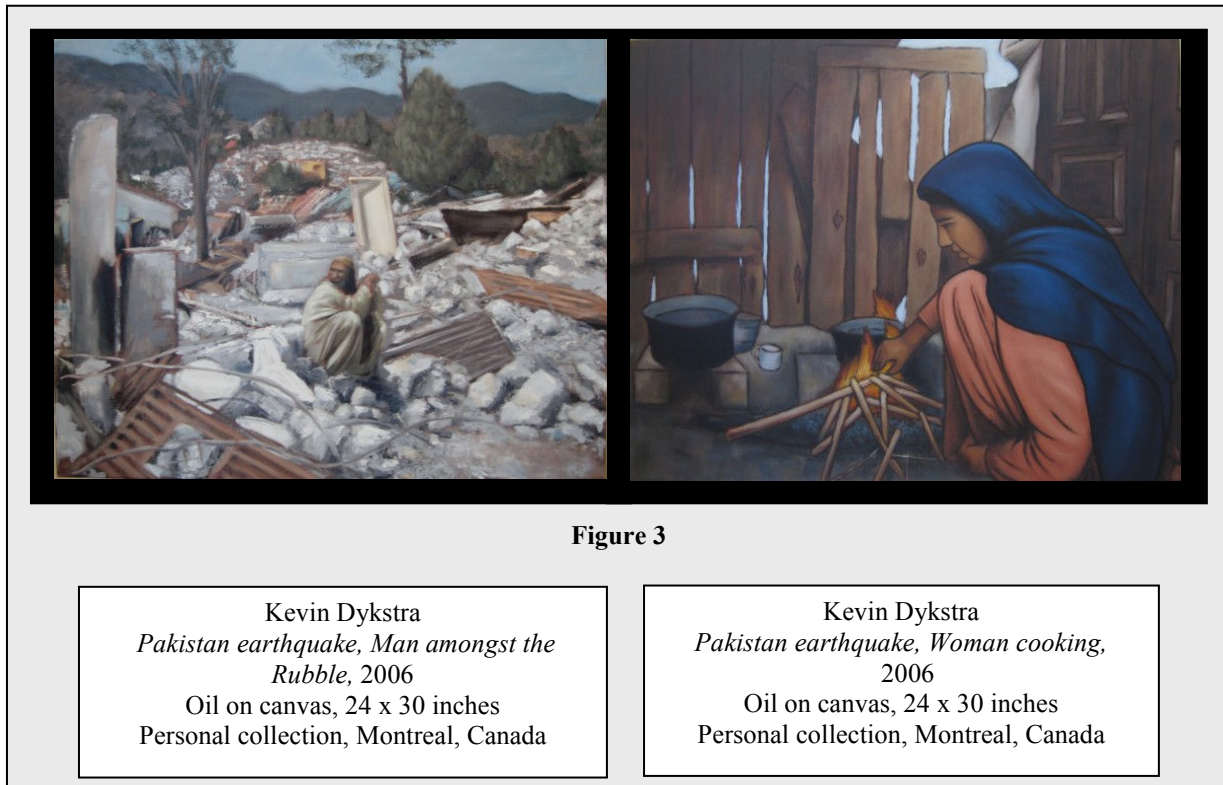
Figure 2

Pakistan earthquake, Image #1,
October, 2005
Photograph,
NWFP, Pakistan

Pakistan earthquake, Image #2,
October, 2005
Photograph,
NWFP, Pakistan

The second image from Figure 2 is that of a woman cooking. This is a domestic scene and similarly to Gauguin's painting this has a more native and simple feeling to it. We can tell by the crude kitchen that it is a rural scene in Pakistan. What I like about these 2 photographs is that they were both taken at roughly the same time and in the same general area of Pakistan. One reminds us of the devastation of the earthquake, the other reminds us that life must go on. In both images it is hard to escape the feeling of sadness and despair. In *Image #1* there is still a sense of shock of what has been lost as well as the overwhelming task ahead of reconstruction. In *Image #2* while the woman appears to be thinking of other things (most likely the loss of family and friends), she can not take time for reflection, she must focus on the task at hand which is to ensure that her family is fed. What is also interesting about both of these images and what draws them together is that the man and the woman are sitting or squatting in the same way, and the make-shift hut that she is cooking in looks like it could have been constructed with the debris that is lying around the man in amongst the rubble.

Finally, let us now look at the 2 paintings that I have completed for this assignment. Both paintings are the same size and similar to the size of the paintings by Manet and Gauguin. Both paintings were started using a very thinly applied imprimatura of raw sienna and burnt sienna mixed together. Using thinned burnt umber and a medium sized round paint brush I quickly sketched the predominate objects in both paintings to get the right perspective and general forms. I worked on both paintings simultaneously painting one while allowing the other to dry.



From this point forward the similarities begin to disappear. In the painting *Pakistan earthquake, Man amongst the Rubble*, my approach while painting was to think about the style of painting that Manet used while looking at Image #1. I thought this would be easy but in fact, since my own painting style is much more realistic than impressionistic, it presented a difficult challenge. Although there is a natural perspective to this painting with the mountains in the background, what I was hoping to achieve was a certain flatness created by using one painting style on the

same plane. Simply put, I was trying to use brush strokes and multiple tones of colours that look like blobs of colour close up but would take form the further you stood away from the painting. I knew this would be a challenge for me so I purposely chose to use bigger brushes and a palette knife to avoid the temptation to add detail. I started by using quick, thick brush strokes and a thin layer of paint to give my first impressions of the scene. I then used a palette knife with many tones of warm greys to create the affect of the rubble around the man. Versus using the traditional schooled approach of starting a painting with the background before the foreground and the dark colours before the light colours, I tried to build up the foreground first and add colours when and as I saw them. A good example of this is the sky. Normally, I would have finished the sky first before finishing the trees to ensure the feeling that the trees are closer to us than the sky. What I did in this assignment was that I created a base colour for everything first including the sky. I did not come back to completing the sky until much later and in fact I finished the sky after I had completed the trees. Up close you can see this is what I did. From a distance however, your eyes reconstruct the scene knowing that the trees are in front of the sky and you cannot tell which elements were painted first.

Where I feel I succeeded in this painting is in a couple of areas. A close up view of the rocks and masonry stones (see Figure 4) shows a myriad of colours and brush or knife strokes that appear random and flat. However, when you stand back from the painting they all take the form of the rubble around the man. Similarly the man himself sitting amongst the rubble is just a series of quick brush strokes with very few details and yet from a distance he looks real. I like the affect of the mountains in the background that feel distant and soft. As I mentioned above, I also like the fact that my approach of finishing the sky last actually works. In fact, it works better because it appears that the sky light is coming through the trees. Where I feel I did not

succeed in this painting is that it does not look as flat as I had hoped. This is most likely due to the fact that I used different painting techniques for various different elements and objects of the painting. So for example, the various doors and the trees were painted with a brush versus a palette knife. If I had used a palette knife for everything in the foreground, including the trees, then the overall painting would have felt much flatter and perhaps even appeared more spontaneous and impressionistic. I do like the affect of the multiple different textures but it changes the feeling of the painting and in mainly ways makes it look too realistic which is what I was trying to break away from.

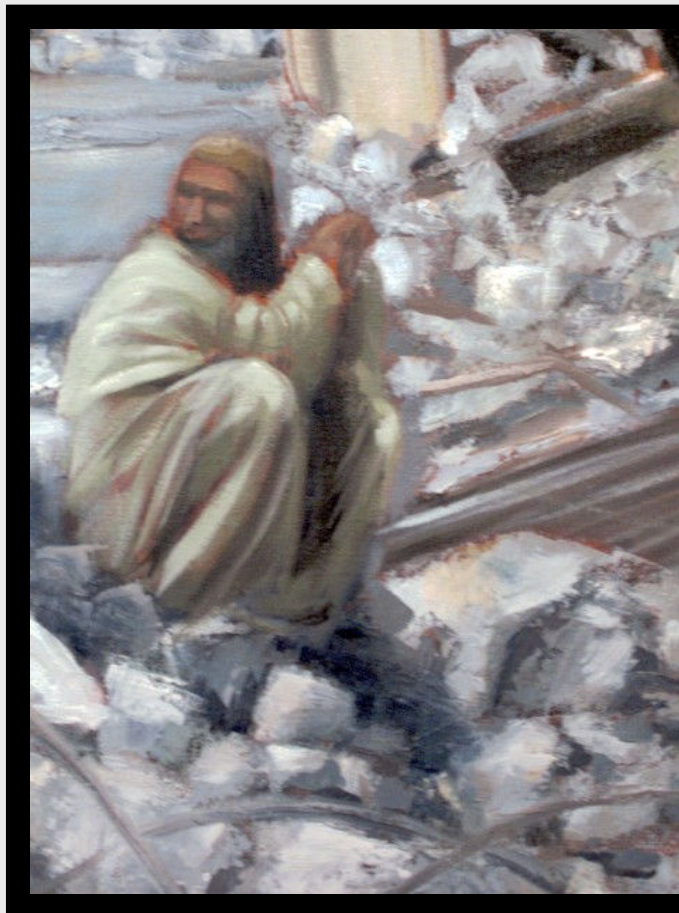


Figure 4

Kevin Dykstra
Detail of the Man amongst the Rubble,
Oil on canvas,
Personal collection, Montreal, Canada

In the painting, *Pakistan Earthquake, Woman Cooking*, I used a completely different approach than I was using in my other painting in an attempt to break through my past training as a painter. In this case I worked from Gauguin's painting while thinking about the actual photograph, only occasionally going back to the photograph for details. This sounds harder, and yet in many ways it was much easier than the other approach. There was much less temptation

to add additional detail because the detail was only in my memory. And what I was using as a visual source was in fact the style I was trying to copy. As in the other painting, I did not worry about painting the background before the foreground or the dark colours before the light colours. I first outlined all the images using a small round brush and thinned burnt umber paint. Then using a large flat brush I brushed in all the major colours all in one sitting as if I was completing

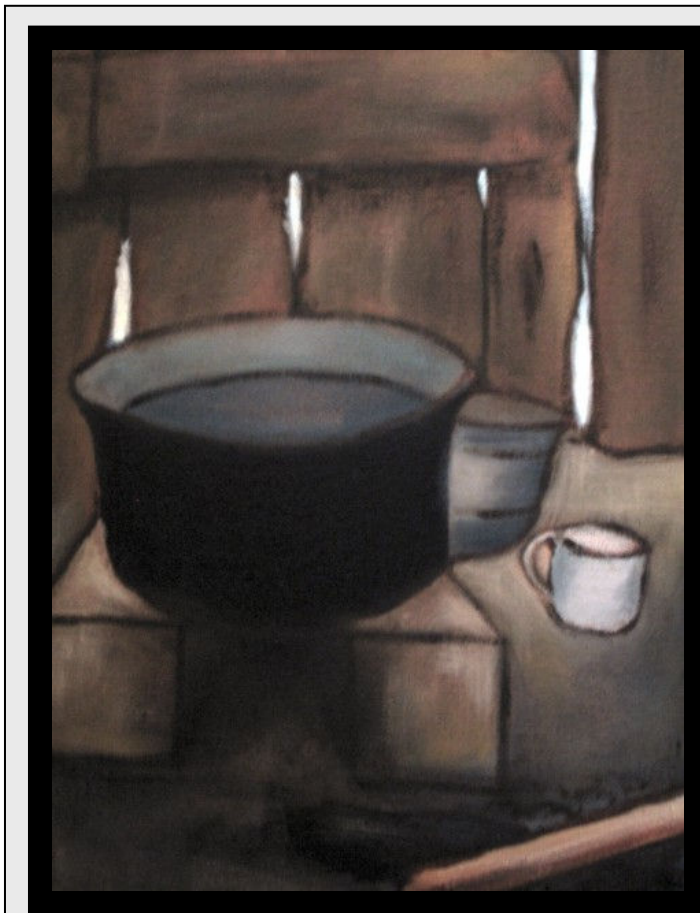


Figure 5

Kevin Dykstra
Detail from the Woman Cooking,
Oil on canvas,
Personal collection, Montreal, Canada

a colouring book. All the layers of paint were thinned with solvent and all the brush strokes were fanned out to give the painting a softer feeling similar to Gauguin's style. I continued applying thin layers of paint, mostly in the warm earthy tonal ranges, to add soft but flat texture to the painting. Next, to strengthen the flat appearance, I then returned to each object in the painting and retraced the outlined forms with a small round brush with raw umber and black paint. Learning from my other painting I then completed the sky last and the light coming in from behind the make-shift shack.

Where this painting is successful is certainly in its flatness. The brushed-out colours, the outlined forms and the limited highlights and shadows all add to this appearance of flatness. Unlike in my other painting, I used only one textural approach and thus everything appears on the same plane. I really like the many colours in the foreground around the fire and pots and cup off to the left side of the painting (see the detail in Figure 5). They are not perfect in form, perspective or depth but there is something comfortable about them. Perhaps it is due to the fact that they are simple and somewhat child-like in form. Again, I also really like the affect of painting the light coming through the boards last as it gives the appearance that not only is the light behind the shack but it is literally coming through the boards. There are a few areas in this painting where I feel that I was not as successful as I would have liked. Most of what I don't like has to do with the colouring. I feel that I should continue to go in and add additional layers of flat colours into the boards in the background. I tried multiple times to get the right colour for her shawl. Using the colour from the photo did not appear to give the affect I was looking for and using the colour of blue from Gauguin's paintings was too bright. I tried multiple different hues and tried to tone it down a little but it is still not the colour I'm looking for. The same can be said for the colour of her Shawal Kameez. While very similar to the colour in the photograph I find that it does not work for the painting.

Having looked at both my paintings from the perspective of approach, technique, what worked and what did not work, I will now turn to what I found the most challenging. Breaking through from an artistic perspective is much more challenging than it may sound at first. It is not just as easy as using a different painting style. First it is important to place myself in the context of all other painters of today. Many painters today and for the last century, paint using an impressionistic style. It is not uncommon. In fact it is very common. So while painting in this

way may be different for me, it doesn't feel different because there are so many other painters that currently and have in the past painted this way. Figure 6 provides an example of the realistic style of painting that is my past. So from that perspective, this would add to the feeling that I have not pushed this far enough when in fact, if all other artists painted the same way I do then my current studies for this assignment would be considered a break through. It is also much more challenging to paint my own source material using a different style then it is to just copy or reproduce another artist's oeuvre by painting it brush stroke for brush

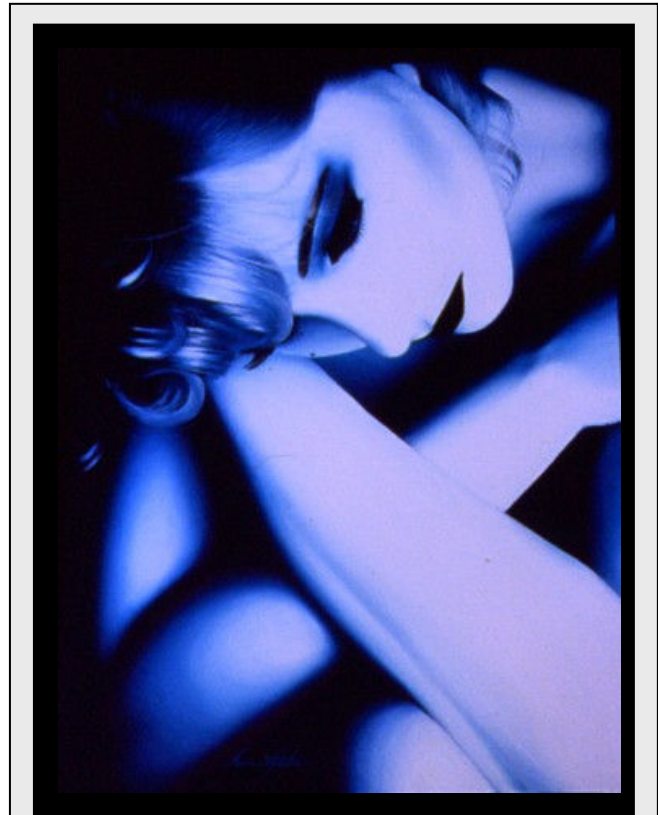


Figure 6

Kevin Dykstra
Feeling Blue, 2000
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches
Kelly Kimel Collection, Toronto, Canada

stroke. In the same way it takes enormous effort to change who we are, it takes a lot effort to undo years of painting using one style to now paint differently. If you study how the impressionist painters from the 19th century accomplished this you realize that it was only after repeated trial and error that they succeeded. They would paint more than 50 paintings in a year all in an attempt to capture the affects that they were looking for. Often they would return again and again to the same painting until the desired affects were achieved. In many cases they destroyed their early attempts and even for the ones that they kept they were often unhappy with them. This is exactly how I feel with my paintings. It is not possible to make this kind of drastic change in painting style in just one attempt. While it is clear that I have made an effort to break

though my own painting history and training, it does not feel like I am there yet. In every painting I learn something and these latest paintings are no exception. Overcoming the fear of not painting things in the order I was taught is probably my biggest break through of this exercise and an important one. Understanding the effort required to change my style is another. This last one is the area I feel I need to focus on the most. I know I am a perfectionist. That does not mean I have to be a realist. And while technically many of my paintings and drawings are nice and may appeal to the many people, I still feel they lack the feeling and depth I am looking for. Clearly the only way I will get there is by dedicating myself to this effort. With trial and error together with constant practice and repetition, I will be able to make changes to my style. And only through understanding of my past and an ever present awareness will I be able to break through.