

swatch

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By
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For Mengesha

Thank you for your patience and understanding.
I love you.

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swatch

“There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life.”

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)

Art has always had a close bond with the world in which it was created—whether as a reflection or an escape attempt—and of course, what that bond comes to divulge over time includes *both* the perspectives of the artist and of individual and collective audience members. Art has a way of revealing “submerged filaments of our characters” (de Botton 121), particularly for the artist. It can reveal our subconscious and, when combined with our thoughts, beliefs, and life experiences, helps us to better understand who we are and where we fit in the world, and in art theory. *swatch* has formed out of a two-year period of transition, reflection and experimentation. Influenced by various artists and writers this exhibition embraces simple pleasures and explores the relationship between surface and symbol, and the latent meanings they can reveal. The exhibition is rich with pattern and colour—aesthetic staples of my work—as I use them to dress up the figures and spaces, in order to energize the surfaces and move the viewer throughout the works.

A swatch of fabric is often used to decide if the colours and patterns will match such things as upholstery or wall colour. My swatches are all of the patterns I collect; they are also my life experiences and my experiments with different mediums (painting, drawing, printmaking, performance/film, stained glass, pottery, photography, and fabric design). All of these elements have the potential to come together in my work and complement one another. Of course there will be successes and failures, but that is why I refer to them as “swatches”.

Gustave Flaubert wrote, “Life is so horrible, that one can only bear it by avoiding it. And that can be done by living in the world of art” (cited in Gablik, 77-8). The world has changed since Flaubert penned those words in the 19th century. However, in the 21st century we seem to have more problems than ever, and with all of our technologies it is even harder to take a break from the “horrible.” The news alone reminds us, hourly, of how flawed the world is. I create the art works that I do as a sort of meditation where I focus on simple pleasures that too often get lost or taken for granted on a daily basis. In my case, these simple pleasures are the ways in which

colours and patterns play off one another. My pieces are bright, colourful and full of patterns, but are meant to be devoid of “ugly” contrasts or references within the works themselves. To me, the world outside the gallery or my studio provides ample contrast to the worlds I create in my paintings and short films. I work hard to aim for the sense of innocence I had as a child, when I thought everything was great; when the glass was half full and I wore rose coloured glasses. However, one cannot ever really regain innocence and as a result there is often a sense of something more provocative beneath the surface as we look at the artwork with a newfound vulnerability.

Another simple pleasure for me is spending time with beloved family and friends, especially at the lake. Spending summers at my family’s cabin in Northern Saskatchewan definitely made me creative. On an island with no running water and electricity I relied on my imagination and taking pleasure in nature. At home it was different. Living on an acreage just outside of Saskatoon and attending a small town school, I always had an insatiable need to somehow try and incorporate art or film into every assignment possible. Thankfully my teachers were relatively open to letting me do so. The hunger for art once back home from the cabin largely had to do with the ideas of change. At the lake patterns existed as pine needles, lichens, and mosses; at home I substituted these with fabrics and objects. I needed to make my hectic life at home more bearable until I could once again return to my island at the lake that was complex in its simplicity, and breathtaking without formal decoration.

Despite my love of art, like many people raised in a smaller center, I went for the vast majority of my life without ever seeing the actual works I loved. It was not until 2010, when I visited Europe that I first saw the actual paintings I had spent my entire life adoring. In my case, I embraced the reproduction; it was all I had available to me for a long time. Seeing the actual works in person, I could not be sure if I was amazed or disappointed, perhaps a little of both. I previously thought Picasso’s *The Dream* (figure 1)



Figure 1. Picasso, Pablo. 1932.
Oil on canvas.
51" x 38".

was quite smooth and that it would lend itself nicely to silkscreen. The same could be said for many other works by various artists I liked. Until I saw them, I had no real sense of their scale or how thickly the paint was applied. I was distracted from the qualities I had fallen in love with via reproductions—colour, pattern, and shape relationships—by the textures resulting from brushwork. I could admire the painterly expression, but I still held on to the flatness and the smooth surface I had imagined and come to know in my encounters with reproductions. Having admired many of my favourite works from a very young age I was not always aware of their symbolic valences or their interpretations by art historians. For example, I completely overlooked the erotic content of Picasso's *The Dream*. I was more interested by the bold wallpaper, use of reds and greens, and the fact the figure had six fingers. It is coincidental that reflecting on my own works, where I had primarily been concerned with the aesthetics of the surface, that erotic, sexual / reproductive symbolism at times seems to present itself.

It is ironic that my very formal taste in aesthetics came from not being able to see the actual works that I loved. Being inspired and taught by reproductions, I feel my move towards printmaking and later towards a hyperrealist style of drawing came naturally because it offered a smoother surface. Over the years I have tried my best to remove the brush stroke. Reductive woodcuts and silkscreens seemed a perfect fit. However, something was missing. It was the flesh. Chalk pastel allowed me to keep a smooth surface but make the flesh look real. I fell in love with chalk pastel because I could achieve a velvety finish with no brush marks, maintain clean colours, and there was no drying time to interrupt the process.

By the time I was introduced to artists such as Audrey Flack, Chuck Close, and Philip Pearlstein, who may have seemed more relevant given my interest in realism, I had already developed a sense of style through smoothing out works by older artists who were anything but realists. It worked for me; rather than being tempted to copy artists whose works may have looked more like my own, I was able to draw inspiration from a wide range of artists and eventually create a style more unique to myself through altering the medium and or its application. At first I learned by imitation, placing myself amongst Klimt's flowers, and eventually compositions that were entirely my own (see figures 2-4, page 4). I realized that seeing one pattern often made me recall others, and then it dawned on me that I could put them together. The first drawings in which I truly explored bringing various collected patterns together were for my BFA exhibition in 2012. However, this body of work focused, primarily,

on memories of people through fabrics. Although the works were very patterned and colourful, they were more about the figure, than the space the figure occupied (for examples see figures 4 and 13).



Clockwise from top left:

Figure 2. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Self Portrait. 2007.
Acrylic on paper.
20" x 26".

Figure 3. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Prelude to a Kiss.
2010.
Silkscreen on
paper.
13.5" x 21.5".

Figure 4. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Arusi (Promised).
2012.
Chalk Pastel and
conté on paper.
27.5" x 36.75".

The main shift that began as I grew through the MFA program came from trying to focus on the space, or place rather than the person. I still wanted the figure, but I wanted the figure primarily as a justification for all of the patterns and colours to exist in a single work. Often the figures look outside the space we see in the drawing; they do not look at the viewer, but rather prompt the viewer to wonder what lies beyond the frame. The first work I created during my

time in the MFA program was *Still Life of a Geranium and Succulents* (figure 5). It was a return to paint, and omitted the figure entirely. It may seem of little importance, but it was the very first appearance of two things in my work: plants and a reflective surface, (which will come up again later.)

Squid Ink and *Disappearing Act* (figures 6 and 7) were started simultaneously, from the same photo shoot, with the intention of comparing different mediums—watercolour versus chalk pastel. I enjoyed aspects of each. With watercolour I found it was easier to keep crisp edges and more control over the finer parts of patterning. However, chalk pastel still had that velvety surface that I had come to love so much.

The idea for this shoot came to me while I was fishing at the lake, when I noticed my pants seemed to dissolve into the towel I was sitting on. Later that evening I noticed the large pink and green sheet hanging over the loft railing and my mind added



Figure 5. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Still Life of a Geranium and Succulents. 2013.
Watercolour on paper. 14" x 21".

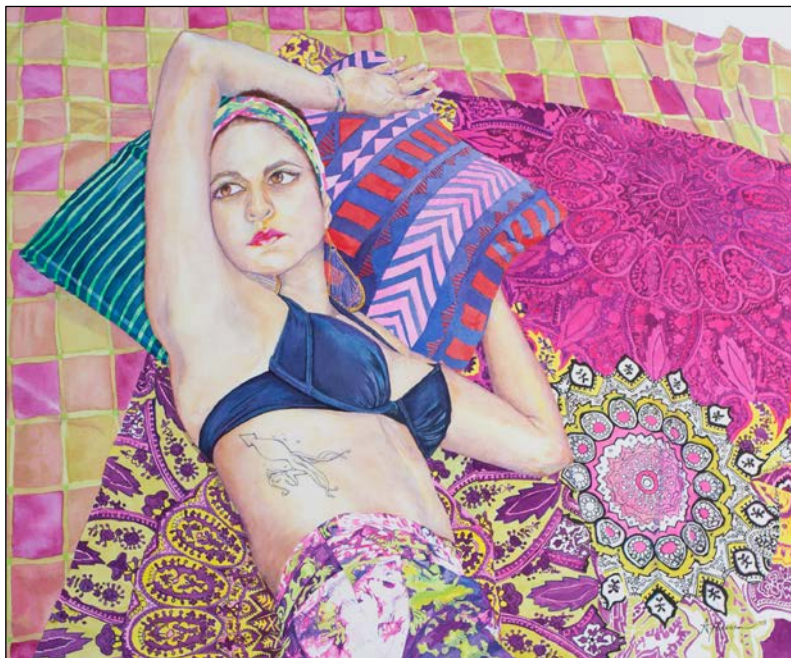


Figure 6. Thiesson, Alexandra. *Squid Ink*. 2013. Watercolour on paper. 22" x 26".

it to the pants and towel. When I left the lake, I physically brought all of those swatches home and added a few more. The pillowcases are actually t-shirts and skirts, and the figure's top in *Disappearing Act* is actually a dress. These fabrics, twisted and taped around other things are temporary; preserved only by the drawing. I stitch the swatches together to form the little worlds

of colour and pattern that exist in each work—I am like a quilter.

These two pieces also served as a shift away from the person and more towards the place/space. *Disappearing Act* did this more successfully because we see only a profile of the figure's face. Even though in *Squid Ink* the figure, my sister, does not look directly at the viewer, we can see her eyes and it serves as more of a portrait. The title of the work references her tattoo, but is also a metaphor. Squid disperse ink as an escape mechanism—a distraction so they can “disappear.” Similarly, as an artist I use patterns, such as the pants and the towel in this work, to create an abstraction, where a sort of camouflage occurs and leads the viewer's eye away from the figure, into the surrounding area, something that happens to an even greater degree in *Disappearing Act*.

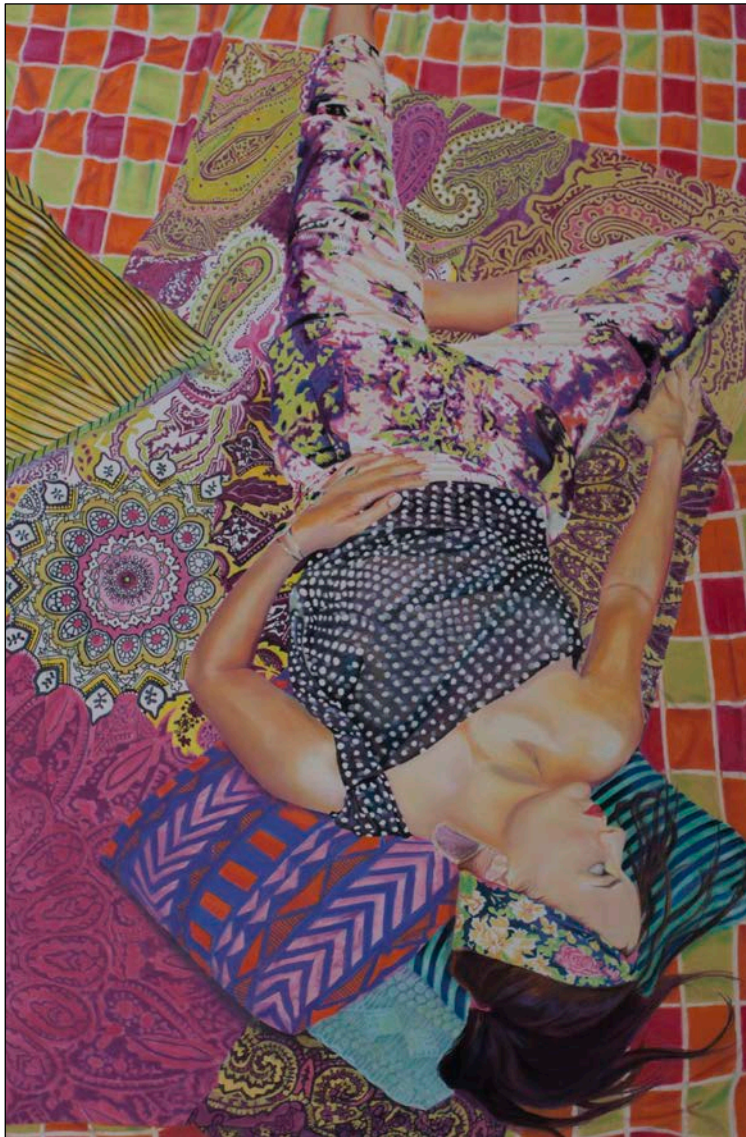


Figure 7. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Disappearing Act.
2015.
Chalk pastel on paper.
45" x 30".

My next work was *Echoes* (figure 8), a set of four small paintings of a single scarf with the brand name Echo. These works, done in acrylic, again deleted the figure entirely. They embraced fabric as an abstract composition in itself, with a personality of its own. I love this scarf, because it is so simple in its pattern, but the colour makes it bold and complex. Finding this scarf amongst my collection inspired *Studio 310* (see figures 9 and 10).



Figure 8. Thiesson, Alexandra. *Echoes*. 2014. Acrylic on canvas. 4 (11" x 14").

In *Studio 310*, a video work, we see a staged performance piece. A human figure, myself, is slowly unraveled from a string of over 100 printed scarves and fabrics. On one hand, it is an inventory of patterns and colours I have at my disposal to incorporate into my drawings and



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figures 9-10. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Stills from video work *Studio 310*.
2014.

paintings; on the other hand it is a metaphor for the endurance, and patience required to work in my chosen style. As well, the repetitive motion speaks to the idea of drawing as a meditation. Keeping my balance while standing on a spinning board was incredibly difficult. I fell a few times, and got a minor concussion and whiplash because I could not break my fall due to bound arms. The fact that I choose to edit out these flaws, speaks to my desire for focusing on what I see as good. The piece is quite long, as is my drawing process, but in the end I get to fall down amongst all of the colour and fabrics and disappear. The intention of my drawings is to provide a world of pure colour and pattern to visit and enjoy

In *The Daydream* (figure 11), like *Squid Ink* and *Disappearing Act*, the figure is completely boxed in by pattern. The world I create is very limited, claustrophobic even. The dress Kari, a friend of mine, wears in *The Daydream* is an old silk one of my grandmother's that always reminded me of a doll with its ruffled collar. In the image she looks doll-like; there but not there. She is in a trance, a daydream, something that I often experience when I stare at my works for long periods of time, as the rhythm of the patterns whisks me away and my mind begins to wander. The large pattern in the background is one that I brought back from Ethiopia. I love how the dress and hanging fabric from completely different places can be so similar and so different at the same time.

The Daydream was also an experiment in a more limited colour palette and in scale. It is not as "rainbow" as some of my other works; warm colours dominate. This is the smallest chalk pastel drawing I have done. For this reason, the largest difficulty I had was the figure's face—I

lacked the space I would otherwise have to articulate the details. I promised myself I would go back to working larger.



Figure 11. Thiesson, Alexandra.
The Daydream.
2015.
Chalk pastel on paper.
27" x 18.5".

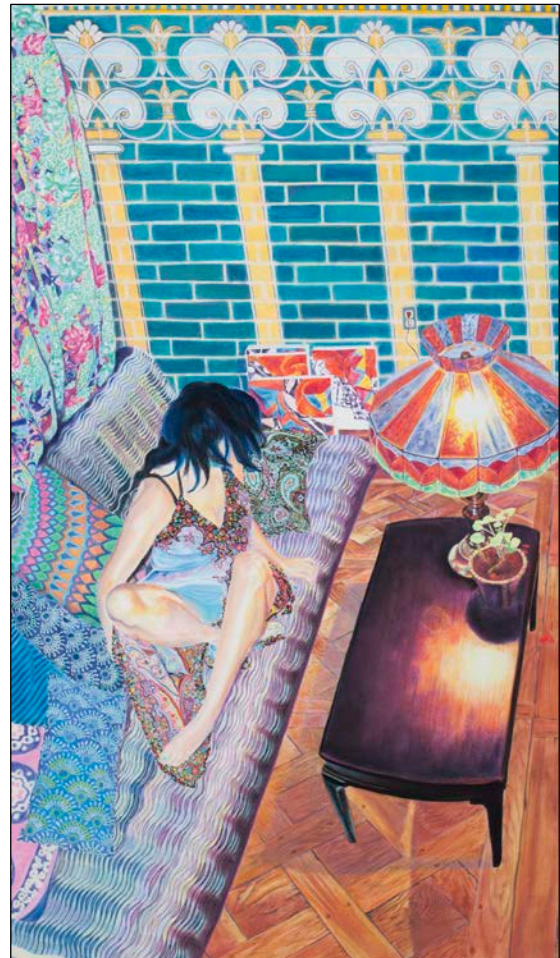


Figure 12. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Here and There.
2015.
Chalk pastel on paper.
45" x 27".

Here and There (figure 12) is definitely larger, but I ran into the same problem I had in *The Daydream*. *Here and There* was my first attempt at photo shopping more than two images together. It depicts my studio on campus, combined with a subway wall from Berlin and a parquet floor from Versailles—a couple of my photographic swatches. What I did not realize at the time was that in order for me to create an actual space, with depth, around the figure—I would have to shrink the figure even smaller. The abundance of small patterns on the left with the figure, in contrast to the few large patterns and solid objects on the right, emphasizes the here

and there—the distance. The floor and wall depicted do not actually exist in my studio; as much as I might like them to, they only exist in my imagination and in my drawing.

I had wanted to use images from my trip to Europe for a long time, but almost none of the swatches I collected there were fabrics. Many were floors and walls—hard surfaces that I had only attempted to integrate once before in *Alexandra Maria* (figure 13), a work in my BFA show.



Figure 13. Thiesson, Alexandra. *Alexandra Maria*. 2012. Chalk Pastel and conté on paper. 30" x 45".

In *Alexandra Maria* I added the tiled floor, a picture I took at the entrance to the Sistine Chapel. The tiles becoming more worn near my grandmother, who had just been diagnosed with her third and last battle with cancer, served as more of a symbol for the transition from life to death, than as a space the viewer might enter. Unlike the layers symbolism that often appears in my work without conscious intention, *Alexandra Maria* was one work where all of the symbolism was very deliberate. I asked my grandmother to do the photo shoot with me after her terminal diagnosis—I was setting out to create a very important memory.

The space that I create in *Here and There* has depth, but it also has a quirkiness because of the angle at which the picture of the floor had been taken. It seems like everything might slide

towards the viewer. I embrace oddities like this because even though the floor is more intricate than anything I would have been likely to use in printmaking, it helps to flatten the image—a quality of my old woodcuts (see figure 14)—by creating a paradox of simultaneous depth and shallowness that I find intriguing, an equivocal space that is both this and that.



Figure 14. Thiesson, Alexandra. *Relax*. 2011. Reductive woodcut on paper. 20" x 29.5".

There is a tension that exists in my work because of illusion versus reality. Often people will look at realist works and ask: why not just show the photographs? The short answer, in my case, is that even though I work from photographs, the final drawings never look like the photographs I work from, just as the reproductions of famous works in textbooks never look like the original. It works both ways. We no longer live in an age where we see a photograph and think, "it must be real." If anything, we often assume the opposite. I am not trying to trick anybody. I do not need or want angles, scale, and light to read as true all the time, just as I do not want my work to look exactly like a photograph. Part of what I love about my work is that it often looks real from a distance, but as one moves closer they can see that it was drawn by hand.

The contrast between the photograph and the hand drawn is important for me. Photographs serve as rough copies, but the hand of the artist is what ultimately unifies and expresses everything. Drawing by hand also takes a great deal of time. I have always associated the investment of time, with creating something meaningful. I like to use the example of an original hand-stitched quilt versus a mass produced blanket bought from a store. My great grandmother was a quilter and her pieces stand the test of time, are treasured and passed down from one generation to the next. Like quilters I want to create works of beauty that are original and handmade that people want to keep and hand down. Philip Pearlstein said that “ ‘most of the people who get involved in representational work or realism...see it as a survival tactic, helping art to survive. They see themselves carrying on a tradition that other wise would be dead by now’ ” (Perreault 49). I agree with this to an extent, I believe realism does convey ideas of tradition and preservation, but I do not think that it will die—rather adapt.

In my short film, *Art & Alexandra* (see figures 15-20), I proffer a glimpse of how I draw, and why I find realism rewarding—that a drawing can seemingly come off the page. I do not show the use of camera, computer, or projector that I use for my initial sketch—I focus on the handwork, which is the more important part of my practice. There are also little hints as to my aesthetic tastes and personality. The images hanging above the shelf are postcards of works by Alex Katz and Gustav Klimt (see figure 16). Katz is known for his clean, commercial, stylish works, where he wants meaning minimized. Klimt’s works, in contrast, are busy, colourful, and often allegorical or symbolic. I believe that works of art can be appreciated solely for their formal qualities, but I also have nothing against conceptual work—I believe the two styles can co-exist, and how we see a work teaches us more about ourselves.

In *Art & Alexandra*, a drawing of a girl (Art) on the floor literally comes to life and explores the actual space outside the drawn image. Set in my studio, the film is a personal rendition of the Greek myth of Pygmalion by Ovid. In this story a sculptor falls in love with his statue. Later, Aphrodite grants his wish for a wife with a likeness to his ivory carving when she brings his art to life. It is important that Art and Alexandra are the same people, not because I am a narcissist and love myself, but because I love that art has a way of revealing things about ourselves that we did not know—the rich inner workings of our subconscious we cannot deduce from looking at a reflection in the mirror.



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

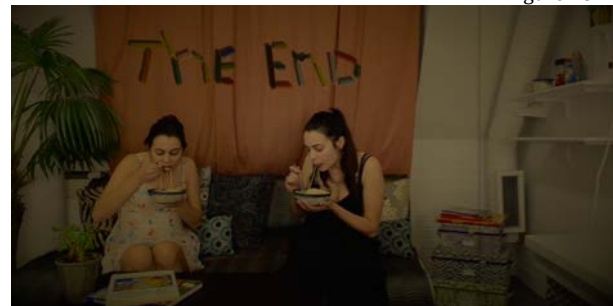


Figure 20

Figures 15-20. Thiesson, Alexandra. Stills from *Art & Alexandra*. Short film. 2014.

Against Nature (figure 21) is the first real self-portrait I have done in a few years. I created *Against Nature* to try and let the viewer know where I was coming from as an artist. My works are not dark because they are created with “rose coloured glasses” on. I combine positive elements, patterns and colour that bring me pleasure, and I create a world that offers what I consider to be the good without the bad—elements I want to sympathize with and embrace. Around this time I had also recently read Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Against Nature*. *Against Nature* is the story of Jean des Esseintes, a man that goes to extremes attempting to create an ideal world within his home, full of art, plants, and books, so that he might escape bourgeois society. “He felt that imagination could easily be substituted for the vulgar realities of things” (Huysmans 16). A parallel to the type of idealisation I aim for in my own work.



Figure 21. Thiesson, Alexandra. *Against Nature*. 2015. Chalk pastel on paper. 27" x 30".

The title, *Against Nature*, of my drawing also speaks simply to the contrast between the warm flesh, rose lips and glasses set against the very cool background that the leaves provide. The appearance of plants in my book of swatches is relatively new. I have always loved plants. However, by the time I found my style and made the works for my BFA show, I had never

incorporated them into my drawings. The prints I used were almost always floral fabrics and I had used fake flowers once, but not actual plants. In retrospect, having heard Zachari Logan speak about his work in November 2014, just days before I went to Ethiopia and started *Against Nature*, I was probably subconsciously more open to incorporating plants. It felt very spontaneous at the time, as all I had initially was a picture of myself wearing sunglasses on my couch.

When I was young, I invented rainbow plants (see figure 22) that were a fantastical product of my imagination. They made me happy and I would long for them to actually exist. On the trip to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia I found that rainbow plant, which can be seen in the bottom right-hand corner of *Against Nature*, and it was a moment of pure bliss and nostalgia. In our yard there are all sorts of plants and flowers I had never encountered—they were exotic and abundant, and I was inspired. The drawing *Against Nature* was an attempt to admire the plants for the patterns that they possess and create naturally. There was an incident when I recognized a flower, but only by its name. I was given a sprig of rue to stir in my coffee. Immediately, having been obsessed with Shakespeare since my early teens, I recalled the scene from *Hamlet* where Ophelia has gone “mad” and is passing out flowers—one of which is rue. Since first reading that play I was intrigued by the culturally specific meanings of flowers. Rue is symbolic for regret in the play, and can be seen in front of my right shoulder.

The memory jog provided by rue and the meaning it carries, added yet another layer of meaning to the piece. I know the world is far from ideal, but I make a decision to put the rose coloured glasses on anyway—to act against my internal nature, which is reinforced by turning the portrait 90 degrees. The rue is one little plant that is vastly outweighed by all of the other flowers and leaves in the work, that are primarily symbolic of delicacy and beauty.

As much as I enjoyed drawing plants, I missed the sense of space in my previous works. I went back to acrylic painting and incorporated the scarf from *Echoes* into a figurative work. The painting *Echo* (figure 24) was set up to focus on the simple pleasure of an encounter with one



Figure 22. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Rainbow Plant.
1996.
Watercolour on paper.
4.5” x 6”.

pattern breaking into another. I went bigger and bolder in my new composition, using the black and white floor to make the skin tones pop. I had been looking at a lot of Philip Pearlstein's work for a research paper and I was drawn to the geometry of the body in relation to the floor (see figure 23). I incorporated this, but what I loved most was the play between the floor, scarf, and dress. The way the pink shoes ended up inverting the pink and blue part of the scarf was a very happy accident—a real simple pleasure within a staged one.



Figure 23. Pearlstein, Philip.
*Hands and Feet and
Linoleum*.
1984.
Oil on canvas.
52" x 67.5".



Figure 24. Thiesson, Alexandra. *Echo*. 2015. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 60".

The final chalk pastel drawing I worked on, *Cat Tail Karaoke* (figure 25), is an exciting and important work for me. Many of the previous pieces became research for this composition. I had a better sense of what worked in the past and what might work better now. This is the largest chalk pastel drawing I have ever done. The size of the paper and the decision to crop the figure gave me the space I needed for multiple patterns to be drawn in detail. It includes many different textures as well as colours and patterns. I especially love the visual alliteration provided by the black and white dress, the cat, and the mirrored coffee table that repeats them both along with the curtains. I used a stronger light source than I normally do and enjoyed the interesting shapes and colour opportunities that the shadows provided. the work has an inviting sense of space. There



Figure 25. Thiesson, Alexandra. *Cat Tail Karaoke*. 2015. Chalk pastel on paper. 42.5" x 53.5".

are two bodies, and they are in motion, which suggests a shared experience—exploring the world of the art with another person. It brings the outside, inside, with its “living floor,” making the viewer question the reality of the space. It also alludes to the idea of the work as a fantasy world,

with the presence of the cat and the teacups bringing to mind the story of *Alice in Wonderland*—a girl in her dream. Furthermore, because of the table’s reflective surface it seems as though it could be the “rabbit hole.” The Cheshire cat in the story is a creature that can defy a “normal” physical presence. It is as though the Cheshire cat has control over every particle of its being and can decide what parts of itself it would like to reveal —only its head or its grin for example. There is a parallel between the Cheshire cat’s control over its particles in the story, and my control over my swatches, as an artist creating new compositions. Paradoxically, however, because of arts openness to interpretation I, the artist, also experience a complete lack of control as various meanings arise from the work. By cropping the image as I did, purely for aesthetic reasons at the time, I emphasise the female figure from the waist down. The black and white print on the one dress seems to highlight the female as a reproductive body and thus provides sexual undertones.

In my last few works I have begun to explore the possibility of mixed media. There has always been conflict between painting and drawing for me. As an artist I started as a painter, only falling in love with drawing later, in university. The trouble is that I like certain qualities of each medium. *Legs* and *Freezer Feet* (page 15) are smaller works, which combine watercolour and chalk pastel. These works are an attempt to capture the best of both worlds from *Squid Ink* and *Disappearing Act*; using watercolour to



Figure 26. Thiesson, Alexandra.
Legs. 2015.
Watercolour, acrylic ground, and chalk pastel on paper. 17.5” x 26.5”

keep crisp patterns, while keeping the flesh velvety by using chalk pastel. I have a fascination with legs which can be seen throughout many of my works; this stems from spending summers at the lake where we did not have a mirror for at least the first ten or twelve years of my life. Without a mirror, the only part of myself I could see was what I saw when I looked down—my legs. In composition, *Legs* and *Freezer Feet* are less complex than *Cat Tail Karaoke*; however they serve as stepping-stones to larger future possibilities.



Figure 27. Thiesson, Alexandra. *Freezer Feet*. 2015. Watercolour, acrylic ground, and chalk pastel on paper. 18.75" x 27".

The shifts in my work over the last two years have occurred slowly, but when working in the style that I do, it takes a long time to take even the tiniest step. Photoshop has helped speed up the process a little, but it is still hard to tell if something will work or not until it is actually drawn or painted. For all of my experimentation, these works are unified in their creation by my hand and in their combinations of my collective inspirations, experiments and experiences. These works are my quilts and each one works together to inform the artist I am today. It is my intention with *swatch* to provide people with a little vacation from the world outside, into a world of art, bursting with colour and pattern, so that upon returning to reality, they might be more inclined to look for and appreciate simple pleasures, whatever theirs may be.

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