

IRRATIONAL SOLUTIONS

A Thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

By

Joseph Allen Martin

Director: Tom Ashcraft
Distinguished Professor of Visual Arts

Committee Chair: Ron Laboray
Committee Members: Susan Martin, Tom Ashcraft, Nathan Perry

May 2025

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere appreciation goes out to the many people whose guidance and support have been instrumental in my academic and artistic growth. This list is extensive but not exhaustive:

Thesis Committee: Ron Laboray, Susan Martin, Tom Ashcraft and Nathan Perry

Administrative Support, Beth Moore

Bardo Arts Center and Fine Art Museum

Staff and Faculty of the Belcher College of Art and Design

The students of the MFA program: Daniel Schwendinger, Jeannie Reagan, Yuwen Renjie, Holly Hill, Lynne Hudson, Brooklin Routt, Reese Routt, Elijah Cormier, Victoria Jones, Staj Noell, and our guest students Naomi Berger and Meredith Grissom

Visiting Artist Julia Gartrell and Ceramics Fellow Flor Widmar

Librarian Cara Barker

Artist mentors: Mark Poteat, Luke Alsbrook, and Robin Bias

The late Nancy Northrop, an author who gave me encouragement and opportunity through the illustration of her books

My parents: Jeff and Lorie Martin, my sister, Megan Martin, my aunt and uncle, Tonya and Mike Smith, and my girlfriend, Hailey Austin, for their genuine love, support and encouragement

This thesis is dedicated to my sister, Megan.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Absurdism.....	1
Chapter Two: Artist Influences.....	2
Dada and Surrealism.....	3
Charles Burchfield.....	3
Neo Rauch.....	4
Jean-Pierre Roy.....	4
Margret Curtis.....	5
The Hudson River School.....	5
Chapter Three: Process and Materials.....	5
Chapter Four: Irrational Solutions.....	10
Debbie was a Bullfrog.....	10
The Elephant and the Rider.....	12
Holy Water Treatment.....	14
Appalachian Hero.....	16
Conclusion.....	18
Works Cited.....	20

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.....	6
Figure 2.....	6
Figure 3.....	7
Figure 4.....	8
Figure 5.....	9
Figure 6.....	12
Figure 7.....	14
Figure 8.....	16
Figure 9.....	18

ABSTRACT

IRRATIONAL SOLUTIONS

Joseph Allen Martin, M.F.A.

Western Carolina University (May 2025)

Director: Tom Ashcraft

In my paintings, I invite viewers to engage with layered narratives which distill the absurdity of contemporary life, environmental degradation and the irrational solutions to these concerns.

Nature, in its vast scale and intricate beauty, serves as a central inspiration—both as a source of awe and wonderment and as a subject of human hubris. Through the lens of personal observation and experience, I create new worlds which serve to illustrate our misalignment with nature, while maintaining threads of humor, beauty and hope. These environments are created through the process of blending intuitive mark making with figurative imagery, employing a warm, classical color palette and contrasting contemporary subject matter to form a critique of the way we solve problems.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing has always been a primary medium through which I could process and make sense of the world; understandably so, as one of the fundamental aspects of drawing representationally is learning to truly *see* things as they are. Over time, technical skill overlapped with an enthusiasm for discovery, especially in biology, philosophy and psychology, which continues to shape and inspire the work I create today.

Now, in my twenties, I find myself confronting existential questions, taking a step back and analyzing what was once accepted as given, and attempting to build a more personal, meaningful framework for understanding the world. The journey is both deeply personal and, in some ways, a universal rite of passage. It is not my intention to be hyperbolic or fatalistic. To counterbalance the weight of these topics, I see humor as an essential tool, both in my paintings and in my perspective on life, allowing for a more approachable dialogue which invites reflection without taking itself too seriously. As part of this exploration, I've found the concept of absurdism to be a compelling philosophical framework. While it is by no means an exhaustive worldview, it is one which I find confronts reality with honesty. It provides a meaningful way to navigate existential concerns while staying grounded in persistence and acceptance.

CHAPTER ONE: ABSURDISM

In my work, I frequently use the word *absurd* to describe the contemporary problems surrounding the shortsighted and often contradictory ways in which humans respond to the crises

they've created, particularly in relation to the environment. In this case, this interpretation of absurdity is synonymous with words like *ridiculous* or *senseless*.

Although the emphasis differs, this understanding of absurdity intersects meaningfully with the philosophical absurdism articulated by Albert Camus in his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus defines *the absurd* as the tension between the human desire for meaning and understanding and the universe's apparent indifference. While Camus' *absurd* is metaphysical, mine is largely material and systemic, but the emotional and existential implications are similar. Both involve a confrontation with meaninglessness, disconnection, and the limits of logic or control.

What continues to resonate with me most in Camus' writing is not the diagnosis of the absurd, but his conclusion: that recognizing absurdity is not a cause for despair, but a call to embrace life with greater awareness, creativity, and defiance. His metaphor of Sisyphus, condemned to endlessly push a boulder uphill, becomes not a symbol of futility, but of persistence and conscious rebellion. "*One must imagine Sisyphus happy,*" Camus writes, suggesting that meaning is not something to be discovered, but something to be chosen and created (Camus, 123). In this way, my work does not dwell in nihilism, rather, it seeks to find humor, harmony, and small acts of meaning within the uncertainty.

CHAPTER TWO: ARTIST INFLUENCES

Engaging with the longstanding tradition of painting, I am drawing inspiration from historical movements like the Hudson River School and Surrealism, while also positioning my work within a contemporary context, influenced by artists such as Neo Rauch, Margaret Curtis

and Jean-Pier Roy. Though my visual style may not directly mirror these artists' work, their approaches to narrative and symbolism have significantly shaped the evolution of my practice. These are just a few among many whose work continues to inform and inspire my development as a painter.

Dada and Surrealism

The Dada and Surrealism movements have been a key source of inspiration, both in my earlier work, which explores the subconscious through stream-of-consciousness drawing and painting, as well as providing historical context for how absurdity can function in art as a tool to reflect and resist the conditions of their time.

The Dada movement, which emerged during and after World War I, was born out of disillusionment with the structures that had led to war and mass destruction. As a form of rebellion, artists turned to embracing nonsense, irrationality, and rejecting traditional logic and aesthetics (Mann).

Surrealism followed Dada, but with a different tone and goal. While the Surrealists were also reacting to the chaos of the modern world, they were more interested in unlocking the unconscious mind, shifting focus toward dream imagery and psychological inquiry (Mann). While my latest work is not as drastically fantastical as some surrealist paintings, the influence is clear in my juxtaposition of disparate objects and free-association approach to drawing. In a way, my use of art as a response to irrationality follows suit with many of their sentiments.

Charles Burchfield

Charles Burchfield is a mid-20th century American watercolor painter who has helped to shape how I think about nature and abstraction. Throughout his entire life, Burchfield retreated into nature as a source of solitude and curiosity. His work is certainly more stylized than my

approach to painting; conceptually, however, Burchfield's synesthetic approach—visually illustrating sound, vibration, heat, and motion within the landscape—mirrors my interest in exploring and depicting the vitality and ubiquity of the natural world.

While Burchfield's consideration of the Divine was complex, his beliefs (at least conceptually) often bordered on that of Animism, where nature and spirit are intertwined (Townsend, 72). While not a formal religion, Animism involves the belief that there is autonomy and agency in all things, possessing spiritual essence. This isn't a view that I hold in a literal sense; however, being mindful in this way invites a more reverent and cooperative perspective on the environment which is deeply lacking today.

Neo Rauch

Neo Rauch's ambiguous narratives, rooted in political, historical, and dreamlike spaces, have helped me understand how to embed layered symbolism in my own work without prescribing specific interpretations at first glance. I'm also very fascinated by his fragmentation of space, filling the canvas with a handful of disorienting perspectives all at once, complicating any attempt to make logical sense of what is being depicted. His ability to construct psychologically rich worlds filled with unresolved tension resonates with my own interest in absurdity.

Jean-Pierre Roy

Jean-Pierre Roy is a contemporary painter whose works often operate within the realm of "speculative fiction," portraying crumbling structures, human figures and unnatural phenomena through hyperreal landscapes (Jean-Pierre Roy). His work closely aligns with the concepts that I grapple with in my paintings, exposing the absurdity of humanity's relationship to the natural

world by juxtaposing beauty and destruction. His work also playfully envisions potential futures and solutions. Both of our works employ critique as well as reflection in this regard.

Margaret Curtis

Closer to home, Margaret Curtis, a North Carolina-based painter, has influenced my understanding of how painting can merge personal and political narratives. Her ability to confront complex social issues with layered imagery, psychological nuance, and humor is particularly relevant to my own engagement with environmental degradation and cultural absurdities.

The Hudson River School

Finally, the Hudson River School and the American landscape painters are awe inspiring for their technical skill, dramatic compositions, and use of light to convey grandeur and presence. While their work often celebrated untouched wilderness and the promise of expansion, I use a similar visual language to explore a contemporary world shaped by human impact where the sublime exists alongside signs of exploitation or artificiality (Cooper). This subtle dialogue between past and present adds another layer to the absurdity I explore, situating it not only in psychological or philosophical terms, but also within a historical continuum of how we have seen and used the land.

CHAPTER THREE: PROCESS AND MATERIAL

The following will be a brief chronology of my work during graduate school, expanding on the evolution of my process and approach to painting, culminating with the way it has influenced my most recent body of work.

For years preceding graduate school, I developed a practice of stream-of-consciousness drawing in which I would start with preliminary marks, scribbles or stains and then render the forms that I see within the chaos—not unlike the way one would find imagery in clouds or read a Rorschach inkblot. These drawings were usually small pen drawings on paper. I found the immediacy of this process to be very useful, allowing me to jump into a new piece quickly and without hesitation.

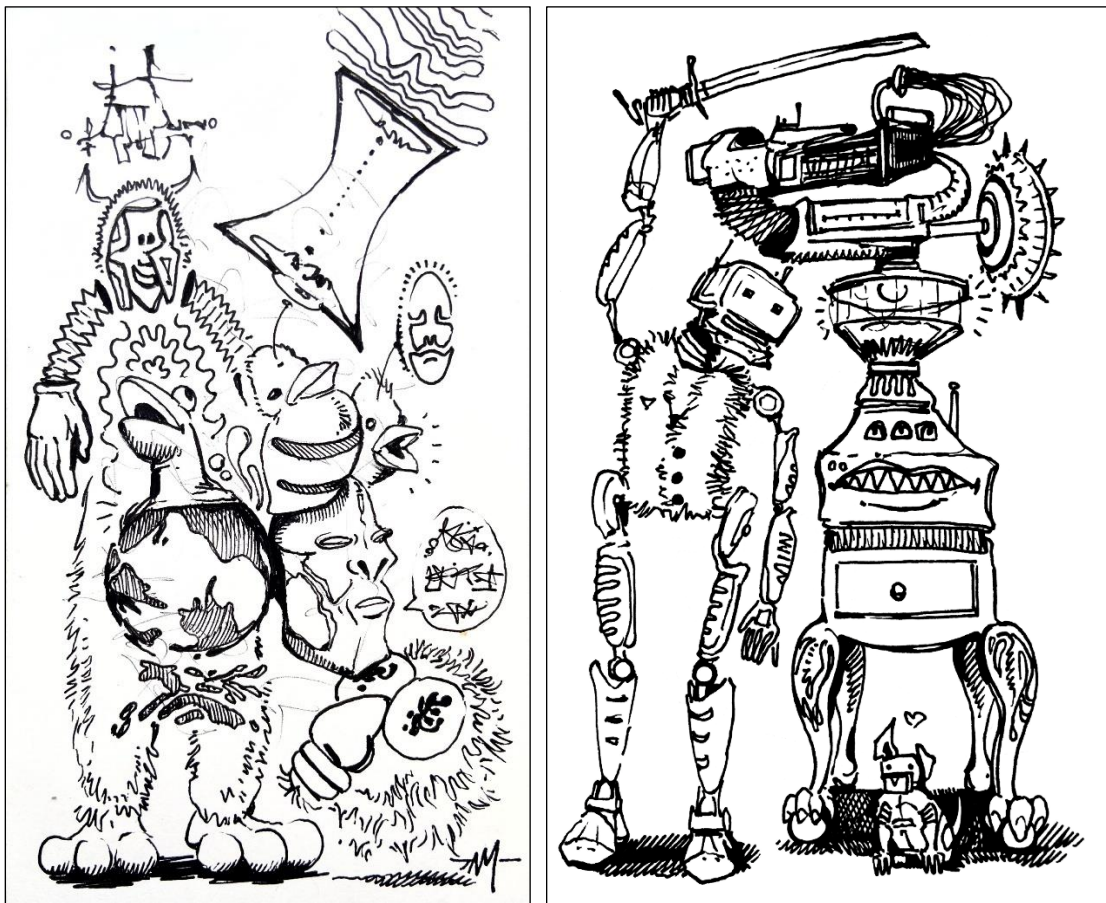


Fig. 1 (left): Joey Martin, *Untitled*, pen on paper, 3”x5,” 2022.

Fig. 2 (right): Joey Martin, *Untitled*, pen on paper, 3”x5,” 2022.

The first series of paintings I made when I entered the program employed a similar stream-of-consciousness approach, but the slower, loose handling of oil paint versus pen or pencil resulted in much different subject matter and was essentially void of graphic linework.

The subject matter in these paintings manifested as abstracted landscapes with perceived gravity, visual tangibility and plausible light sources.



Fig. 3: Joey Martin, *Reconning*, oil on canvas, 24"x30," 2022.

In my second year, I moved from abstracted landscapes to abstractions of nature, which typically began with macro-photography of insects or plants as an initial source image. I would then manipulate the imagery, either through sketching or utilizing photo editing software to aid in distorting, overlaying and experimenting with color combinations, prior to beginning the painting. The emphasis in this work was primarily texture, atmosphere and luminosity.



Fig. 4: Joey Martin, *The Animist Expanse*, oil on canvas, 30”x36,” 2023.

Following this series of paintings, further experimentation brought me to consider the potential in trying to merge this sort of atmospheric painting with the graphic line quality of the smaller, free-association type drawings. While I found some success in these new works, the material and scale shift proved to slow the process down quite a bit, creating an awkward tension in the process.



Fig. 5: Joey Martin, *The Face of the Deep*, oil on canvas, 24”x30,” 2023.

Most recently, I found myself wanting to create work with a more intentional and meaningful direction beyond simply exploring the subconscious. I wanted a way to bring together the disparate, surreal-like imagery in a deliberate, structured way, resulting in a more representational, narrative-driven approach. Following this thread of nature as a core source of inspiration, I found I could start with personal experiences and observations within the specific topic of nature’s grandeur, while constructing a commentary on humanity’s misalignment with the environment.

Returning to representational painting required a great deal more research and reference sourcing, often relying on online image searches, personal photographs, or self-modeling. Most of these images served as inspiration rather than direct sources. With stream-of-consciousness as a familiar part of my process, constructing environments and placing objects or figures within believable spaces and lighting scenarios felt intuitive and enjoyable.

The painting process itself remained consistent with my previous work. All of my canvases are handmade and stretched; the four paintings in the thesis exhibition each measure 3'x4'. To minimize fumes in the workspace, I typically begin with a thin acrylic wash of a neutral color to begin blocking in major portions of the composition, allowing for the underlayer and vine charcoal linework to introduce nuanced moments. From there, my paintings simply build up through layering and increasing the application of oil paint. I use palette knives nearly as often as brushes, and Liquin, walnut oil or linseed oil as my medium of choice. The work in the thesis exhibition was created using this same process.

CHAPTER FOUR: IRRATIONAL SOLUTIONS

What follows is a closer look at the conceptual development behind each piece.

Debby was a Bullfrog

This painting marked my change in process away from stream-of-consciousness and into the more narrative driven approach. I came into the studio with the intention to paint a dramatization of an experience which I found potent with symbolism. Shortly after hurricane Debby passed through the east coast in August of 2024, my family and I arrived at our beach house rental to discover that the car port was flooded, swimming with hundreds of tadpoles. The

house hadn't suffered any water damage, but as my dad worked to redirect the water, my concerns were to relocate the tadpoles from their shrinking habitat. Over the course of the day, the water was receding and as the tadpoles grouped into peripheral puddles, I used the blue plastic shovel featured in the painting, along with the help of my dad, to scoop them into a bucket and walk them to the standing water near the beach access. While the task was meditative and almost enjoyable, it called to mind familiar emotions which track to larger concerns surrounding personal responsibility in relation to nature; where can and should humans intervene with the cycle of life? Especially considering the harm that is already done in the wake of environmental exploitation.

The painting is composed of humanoid frog-parents, gesturing as if to suggest a state of gratitude and thanks as a figure representing myself works to transfer their tadpole children to safety. The palette is warm and dramatic. An oppressive sun breaching through frog eggs suspended in the sky illuminates the desolate, dry landscape. This classical palette is contrasted with bright primary colors seen in the blow-up pool, the blue shovel and the waterpark in the distance.



Fig. 6: Joey Martin, *Debbie was a Bullfrog*, oil on canvas, 3'x4,' 2024.

The Elephant and the Rider

Set against an otherwise calm American landscape, this piece depicts an elephant carrying a monkey on its back as the two task themselves with creating a new, albeit precarious structure out of the debris sourced from the river which flows into the foreground. Their undertaking may appear, to some, as an absurd effort, an impression heightened by the metaphor behind the piece.

American psychologist and writer Johnathan Haidt introduced the analogy of “the elephant and the rider” in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis* which describes two aspects of the human mind. The elephant represents humanity’s emotional core—the powerful, instinctual

force that largely dictates our actions—while the rider, representing conscious control, attempts to guide it (Haidt). In this painting, the rider is reimagined as a monkey, reinforcing the idea of our limited control over the deeper, more primal forces that drive us. The work reflects the modern struggle to construct new frameworks of morality, politics, and mythos from the remnants of dismantled ideologies. It speaks to the reality that much of American culture and conventional wisdom today is largely driven by emotional responses rather than rational deliberation. This endeavor carries profound real-world consequences, particularly in an era where the fragmentation of shared belief systems has left many grappling with a sense of meaninglessness, often manifesting in numbing behaviors such as addiction, compulsive scrolling, depression, and anxiety. The painting ultimately captures a broader estrangement, both from the Self and from our innate connection to the natural world.



Fig. 7: Joey Martin, *The Elephant and the Rider*, oil on canvas, 3'x4,' 2025.

Holy Water Treatment

This piece was inspired by my research on the Ganges River in India, a sacred site of ritual bathing and spiritual renewal, now contaminated by industrial waste, untreated sewage, and other human activity (Russel). The contradiction is stark; people seek physical and spiritual cleansing in a river that has become contaminated. The chemical foam which often shrouds the waters, resembling natural phenomena or even soap bubbles, adds to the unfortunate irony even further.

My research into this disheartening and peculiar instance coincided with a time when contaminated flood waters became relevant at a local scale as well. In Fall of 2024, hurricane

Helene devastated Western North Carolina and surrounding areas, leaving the water toxic with waste, chemicals, runoff and debris for weeks. Unfortunately, these two events certainly aren't the exception. In response to the real-world concerns as well as the metaphorical connotations of "contaminated spiritual waters," I composed a painting which illustrates the absurdity of the rate and scale of pollution and the physical, spiritual and psychological repercussions of contaminating important aspects of the environment and culture.

The painting features the toxic, foamy waters resembling the Ganges, with figures faithfully bathing in the river despite its health risks. To the right of the painting, and unbeknownst to the bathers, a crumbling brick wall and hedges conceal a convoluted water filtration system, consisting of a water wheel in the distance and a pipeline to a large vessel supported by a decorative structure in the foreground. The structure's siphon, which pumps water into the top tier of the filtration tower, resembles a mechanical elephant head – both a sacred symbol to the culture surrounding the Ganges, as well as a metaphor of animal and environmental exploitation writ large. The continuity of subject matter from *The Elephant and the Rider* painting also contextualizes the elephant as a symbol of humanity's unwieldy emotional core. The tiers of stacked filters culminate with four groups of three figures, standing upon each other's shoulders as a means to support the structure and to collectively hold taught the bottom three layers of cloth filters. Finally, the purified water is collected in a decorative basin. While the system manages to create purified water, the river itself remains toxic. The ridiculous and exploitative contraption reflects humanity's often shortsighted, irrational solutions to the problems they create, rather than solving them at the source.



Fig. 8: Joey Martin, *Holy Water Treatment*, oil on canvas, 3'x4,' 2025.

Appalachian Hero

This final piece of the series presents a figure engaged in a game of *Guitar Hero*—a rhythm-based video game popular in the mid 2000's which simulates playing an electric guitar. Players use a specially designed plastic, guitar shaped controller with five colorful fret buttons, a strum bar, and a whammy bar. The objective of the game is to hit the correct notes in time with the music, following an on-screen note highway that scrolls toward the player. While this endeavor is assumedly an indoor activity, the painting takes the experience outdoors—specifically to the Tuckasegee River which flows through Western Carolina University and, at

the time of writing, directly behind my apartment. The mountains and river depicted in this piece are largely inspired by this personal perspective.

Standing knee-deep in the river, the figure faces the flowing water. A looming mountain in the background is illuminated by evening light, with much of the foreground contrasted with cool shadows. Instead of a screen and console, the river itself delivers the notes, sending the glowing fret buttons drifting downstream toward the figure, strumming in sync as they reach him. The painting also features the HUD (heads-up display) from the game in the left and right corners, showing the point system and note counter. This piece leans a bit more lighthearted in comparison to the other paintings, suggesting hope through the medium of music in a playful way. The figure finds harmony not just within the timing of the game, but within nature and the river itself.

Adding to the symbolism in the work are the cairns—rock stacks which, in this case, are arranged in humanoid forms along the riverbank. Traditionally, cairns have been used to mark trails, graves, property and hunting boundaries (Williams, 15). Their presence in the painting suggests themes of navigation and self-discovery, while humorously serving as an audience for the musical performance. The precarious stacks of objects have also become a recurring motif in many of my paintings, further illustrating the fragility of the systems humans rely on.

Rhythm and harmony are not exclusive to structured, human-made systems, they exist all around us in nature. By blending the language of gaming with the organic movement of water, this piece suggests that perhaps the challenge of "finding our way" in the modern world isn't about choosing between technology and nature, but rather about learning to play along with both.



Fig. 9: Joey Martin, *Appalachian Hero*, oil on canvas, 3'x4,' 2025.

CONCLUSION

This body of work is personal and meaningful, representing the beginning of a visual language and conceptual approach that I feel committed to. Like Camus, my interest lies not only in recognizing *the absurd*, but in exploring what comes after it. Rather than respond with despair or detachment, I choose to meet these important concerns with curiosity, imagination, and humor. Humor softens the edge of critique while illuminating the surreal nature of our responses to crisis. Through this lens, my paintings aim to not only mirror the irrationality of our time, but

to create space for alternative ways of seeing, questioning, and ultimately, envisioning potential futures.

WORKS CITED

- Burchfield, Charles. Charles Burchfield's Journals: The Poetry of Place. Edited by J. Benjamin Townsend, NetLibrary, Inc, 2000.
- Camus, Albert, and Justin O'Brien. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Vintage International : Vintage Books, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018.
- Cooper, James F. *Knights of the Brush: The Hudson River School and the Moral Landscape*. Hudson Hills ; Art Books International, 2000.
- Haidt, Jonathan. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. Basic Books, 2006.
- “Jean-Pierre Roy.” *Second Street Gallery*, 2024, www.secondstreetgallery.org/jean-pierre-roy.
- Mann, Jon. “What Is Surrealism?” *Artsy*, Artsy Writer, 23 Sept. 2016, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-what-is-surrealism.
- Russell, Alex. “Connecting India’s Hindu Past and Present with the Ganges River during the Kumbh Mela.” *Letters and Science*, 5 Mar. 2025, lettersandsciencemag.ucdavis.edu/self-society/connecting-indias-hindu-past-and-present-ganges-river-during-kumbh-mela.
- Williams, David B. *Cairns: Messengers in Stone*. Mountaineer Books, 2012.