

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS
ART DEPARTMENT

Liminoid Artifacts

BFA Degree Thesis Exhibition Report

Presented to the BFA Degree Committee:

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I have always been an artist. I spent many of my days as a child drawing animals on every scrap of paper I could find. When I wasn't drawing, I was reading and filling my mind with as much creativity as I could get my hands on. I was born right before the turn of the century, so I grew up with the internet being an integral part of my life and development. I was using a computer by myself before I turned 8. I very quickly discovered art communities on the internet and the joys of digital art through MSPaint. There were a couple of different websites that I browsed frequently to find art, and I soaked up everything I saw like a sponge. I wasn't a huge TV or movie fan; my preferred media was YouTube, web comics, and online games.

Online art communities had a huge impact on the way I see art and the techniques that I use. In those communities. Art is seen as both purely self indulgent expression, but also as entertainment for everyone who follows you. You must be genuinely yourself at all times, but your "self" must also be interesting enough to continuously get likes.

I made drawings just to keep myself busy, but I rarely posted them online or showed them to many other people. My art was a deeply subjective means of self expression, each piece existing in it's own bubble and unaffected by the pieces around it, like diary entries. I found it difficult to share and expose myself to the demands of social media, so I never built a following online.

When I started college I had all but given up on the idea of being anything more than a hobby artist. However, after my first year as an engineering student, I was really struggling with feeling motivated to continue school. My advisor at the time asked me what I liked to do, and I confessed that I really liked drawing, even though I hadn't drawn

anything in a year or two. She convinced me to give art classes a try before I dropped out. After that first drawing class everything changed. My grades improved, my morale improved, and I felt a sense of clarity that I hadn't ever had before.

My love of art grew to a fever pitch when I started taking art history courses. Those classes changed everything I knew art to be. No longer was art just a thing people on the internet did for fun; it was a tapestry of meaning, color, and love that was started back before history began, and I could feel my heart connect to everyone who had come before me. I felt like I was part of something so much bigger than myself, and that made me want to dedicate my life to creating and learning about this rich history.

As much as I loved history, I had a drive for creation in my heart and I decided to study studio arts. At first I found it pretty difficult to adjust to using materials like charcoal and acrylic paint, which I had never really used before. I was used to pens, pencils, and digital art, but I was dedicated to improving in every medium presented to me. As I slowly developed my own techniques for those materials, it became clear that my internet background was guiding my hands. My style is very graphic, with bold swaths of color and geometric forms dominating the compositions.



Valentine's, Aerin Troxel, 2021

I think my biggest holdover from digital art is seeing art pieces in layers. In a digital painting, you are often working with layers that do not “touch” or impact each other, but which form one visual whole. I still view art this way; I put down colors in layers and rarely return to a color after I have finished the layer. I view light as a semi transparent layer of color, which results in my signature painting technique of using dozens of thin washes of watered down acrylic paint to shadow and highlight things.

When I decided to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts, I was still unsure of my artistic identity and what I wanted to showcase. I was having trouble communicating my ideas to other people, which made it difficult to pick a thesis topic. In addition, I wasn't sure which medium to use, because I liked so many different mediums. In addition, my work tends to look very different depending on the medium.

Around this time, I was assigned a cityscape painting and I chose to paint a colorful rendition of a photo I had taken of my apartment building's parking lot. When I showed it to my classmates, something finally clicked. This moody, dreamy painting with

bright colors also felt bittersweet to me. As I considered that painting and why it made me feel so comfortably sad, I began to understand what I wanted to say with my thesis.

I have always found cities beautiful. When I moved to Fairbanks from my rural hometown, I spent a lot of my time walking around the streets. It was my main source of transportation, but it also became a meditative time for self-reflection. Due to my busy school schedule, I was often walking early in the morning or late at night. I often found my path illuminated by street lights, surrounded by artifacts of people but empty and sleeping. This quiet, transitional time between one place and another grew into its own space, with its own distinct personality.

I was 19 when those walks became a staple in my life, and I was still trying to figure myself out. I was in a weird in-between stage and I felt at home on those walks. I fit in. I realized that by paying such close attention to the environment I was in, I could also understand a lot about myself - the way I see things, what's important to me, and what's beautiful to me.

When I started describing myself through those empty spaces in landscape paintings, suddenly other people could understand what I was saying. Other people could see themselves in that empty space too. It was perfect for a thesis.



2019, Aerin Troxel, 2020

I worked on the paintings one at a time, coming up with a composition and working through it all the way to the end before even thinking of what the next painting would be. My technique improved steadily through the collection of 17 paintings. My vision for the collection became clearer with each new piece. Each piece needed to focus on electric lights and empty space. As an ode to the strange blend of natural and artificial elements that characterize Fairbanks, each painting had unique settings; exploring the many combinations of nature and concrete. That clarity in what I wanted the collection to be allowed me to be more purposeful with the way I collected inspiration; I began taking hundreds of photographs of the roads I drove for errands and

I began following plenty of contemporary cityscape painters, such as by Cody Heichel and Christopher Burk.



Summer Dusk I, Christopher Burk, Unknown

At first I used acrylic because it was the only paint I had experience with. However, as I experimented with techniques I came to depend on the water solubility of acrylics. It was quick drying, which was a huge time saver considering the layered approach I take to painting and how large my pieces can get. Acrylics are also easy to remove if you react quickly enough, since you can generally get it off with just a damp towel. Most importantly, I was able to add water to acrylic paints to thin them out and make them transparent. I would then use the watered down paints to create shadows and highlights, which gives the piece depth and luminance.

I developed a color palette consisting of mainly oranges, greens, and blues. These three colors are foundational to the cityscapes I make. The blue stems from water, which gives both the sky and the snow a reflective blue hue. The shadows in my paintings are nearly always a deep blue which makes the piece appear shadowy without being muddy or dark. The association of blue with nature contrasts with the color of the artificial lights and contributes to a balance much like the balance between natural and urban settings. Occasionally I swap the blue out for a purple, inspired by the orange light pollution that makes the sky appear purple in certain cloud conditions, and gives homage to the multitude of shades the sky can take on.

The oranges and greens come from my interest in sodium and mercury vapor street lamps. These are both types of lamps that utilize glass tubes of vaporized gas (mercury for green and sodium for orange) to create cheap, long lasting light sources that are best suited to lighting large spaces like streets or parking lots. Vapor lamps have a lot of character to them, the most obvious being their monochromatic light output. However, while the bright colors are charming, they're not great for night vision and the lamps are also slightly more expensive long-term than white LEDs. In most places vapor lamps are slowly burning out and being replaced with LEDs, making vapor lamps an endangered species.



2020, Aerin Troxel, 2021

I always loved the way vapor lamps reflect off snow and blanket the entire area in one color and my interest only grew when I learned that they're on their way out the door. Now, when I look at them, I think about how I may be in one of the last generations that grows up knowing the comforting orange glow of a lit up section of the road. I am in the middle of this transition from orange and green to white light. There's something about being in the "in between" that makes it more special.

As with the walks, the street lights invoke a sense of in-between, of transitioning. In the beginning of this series, I didn't have any better words to express the specific "thing" I was trying to capture. Luckily, through one of my humanities classes, I ran into the word that summed everything up in one neat bow.

In anthropology there is a concept called "liminality". A liminal space is that time inside a transition, where you are on top of a threshold, having left one side but not yet transformed into the next one. Liminal spaces are often associated with ritual, like a graduate during the graduation ceremony. They have not actually graduated until the end of the ceremony, but by beginning the ceremony, they're no longer students. For that brief piece of time, they're in neither group, just in a liminal space.

In the post-industrial revolution world, the way that we approach rituals has changed a lot, and there are far fewer traditional liminal spaces. There are still transitional spaces but they're not transformative, and these sort-of liminal spaces are called "liminoid" spaces. For example, an airport can be considered a liminoid space, a place that you only see while in between other places, a place that doesn't feel like it is anchored to regular life. You're not someone new when you leave, but you are somewhere new.

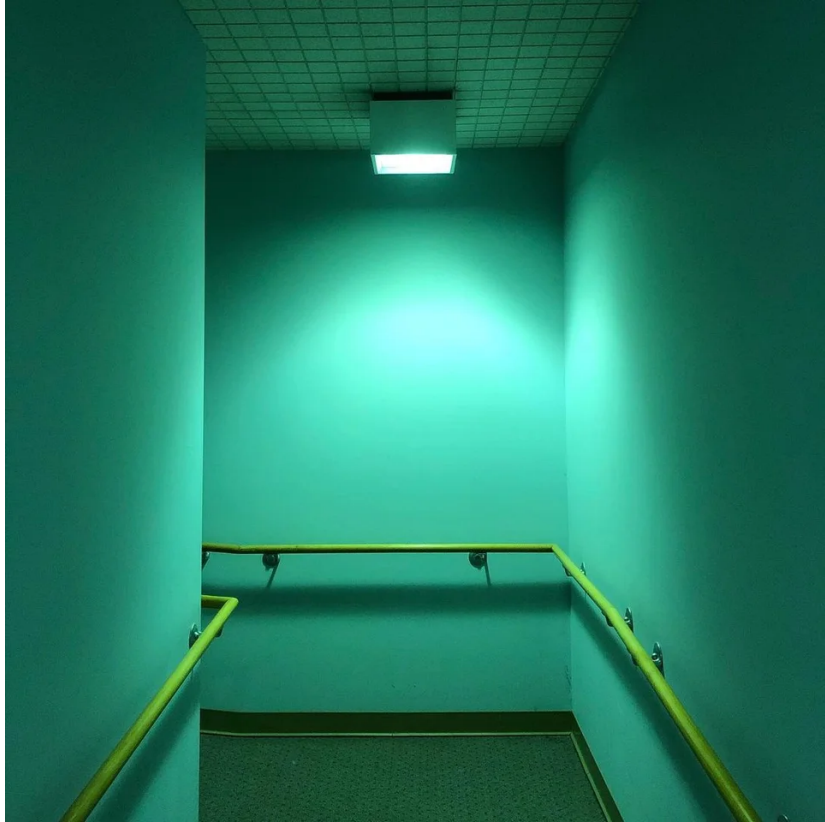
The term "liminal" also has a unique meaning in internet subcultures. Liminality is somewhat associated with Vaporwave, an internet subculture I have dabbled in before. It's primarily a musical subculture, but it has very strong visual aesthetics as well. Vaporwave focuses on bright colors, neon lights, and the explosion of capitalist and hollow consumerism in the '90s and '00s. Vaporwave has a political ideology behind it, critiquing the degeneracy of consumerism while also glorifying the aesthetic that so

many people are nostalgic for. Vaporwave gives a soul to objects that were created with nothing but profit in mind. I was deeply influenced by that true love for overlooked cultural detritus.



Art for a game I'm working on, Hiemsvenit, 2018

Liminality, in the internet subculture sense, grew out of a writing project, namely, a story called “The Backrooms” which was written by an anonymous 4chan user. The original aesthetic was primarily focused on large, empty office building rooms, with the intent of exploring how unsettling it can be to interact with a normally person-filled space when you're the only one there. The aesthetic grew into its own entity, beyond “The Backrooms”, and expanded to include abandoned buildings, empty malls, and basically any urban space, especially an older or retro looking one, that is inexplicably empty. There is always an undercurrent of unease with liminal spaces, the feeling that you're not supposed to see this.



Around The Corner, Nicolastkyo, 2021

In order to create this collection, I was drawing inspiration from everything I've seen. In addition to vaporwave and liminal spaces, I have a particular fondness for surrealist artists and American realism painters. Andrew Wyeth, Rene Magritte, Edward Hopper, and Giorgio de Chirico are all artists that I feel a connection with. Some of these artists favor empty compositions like me, or urban architecture like me, but the primary thing that draws me to them is the tone of their paintings. I am so intrigued by these artist's because the mood of their work is lonely, unsettling, and quiet to me. I was absolutely making work to capture this same mood, which is quite similar to the way that a lot of vaporwave and liminal space works make me feel.



The Enigma of a Day, Giorgio de Chirico, 1914

While my paintings visually fit into liminal aesthetics and into the concepts of liminality, I also found myself emulating that sense of wonder and love for objects that weren't made to be loved found in Vaporwave, especially through my color palette of bright oranges and green, blues and purples, as opposed to the dingy yellows and greys that are more common in liminal spaces. When choosing a title for the show, it didn't feel right to call my work liminal or vaporwave, due to the idiosyncrasies of my work, but I wanted to reference those subcultures. I chose "Liminoïd" since the paintings often depict streets, which are places of transition. "Artifacts" references the vaporwave influence and love for objects of cultural interest. "Liminoïd Artifacts" felt perfect.

Titling each painting was even harder than choosing a name for the whole collection. Honestly, I am not great at choosing names, and for a long time I only referred to the paintings descriptively, like “the one with a car in it” or “the one with a water tower”. However, this meant I could name them all at once and make sure all the names matched. At first, I kind of wanted to name the paintings after house numbers but I decided that would be too confusing. One of my friends suggested a naming scheme based on time, and that really appealed to me.

As much as this series is interested in space and environment, you can never separate space and time. Especially for an exploration of streets, colors, and light; time is a vital aspect of that. My paintings are specifically about night, and most of them are from fall or winter months as well. Naming the paintings after times made total sense. There are 17 paintings, so I used 5 hours as titles, 3 years, 3 parts of a day, 4 months, and 2 holidays. Some of them hold meaning in the title, but some of them are just titled the way they are to fit the theme. For example, *2019* is titled that because that painting depicts a section of the road that led to the home I moved into in 2019. However, *March* is only named that because it needed a title.



March, Aerin Troxel, 2020

Sorting out the administrative end of this show has been every bit as challenging as learning how to paint was. I paint the things I don't have words for, and the process of writing about my paintings forced me to understand myself in a new way. This process also made me think about how I wanted to present the paintings, and all of the little things surrounding a painting that changes how it looks. At first, I assumed I would have an in-person show. However, 2020 forced me to reconsider that.

Of course, the social isolation and empty streets that the pandemic of 2020 brought on seem to fit perfectly with the themes of this show. I began work on this collection before the pandemic started, but the message became a lot more poignant and pointed as the year progressed. I was ruminating on the concept of isolation quite a bit, and I was able to gather tons of inspiration since there were less people around.

The biggest effect, however, was that social distancing meant that it would be difficult to have an in person show in the way I had been imagining.

Restrictions on travel and room capacity meant I had to choose whether it was more important to me that the show be accessible to a wide range of people or that the paintings be displayed in the most flattering way possible. Although my paintings are probably best suited for in-person viewing, due to their size and intense coloration, I opted for an online show because I wanted my far-ranging friends and family to be able to attend.

I created a website that is open 24/7 and easy to navigate, allowing more people to appreciate my art than would have with an in-person show. As an online show, I was also able to personalize it in ways that wouldn't have been possible for an in-person show. I was able to set up the layout just the way I wanted, able to choose the colors for the "walls" of the exhibit, and most excitingly, I was able to make much more information available. The gallery of my website is set up in a way that allows people to get as much information as they want. The paintings are available to view, even if one never wishes to read the artist's statement or thesis. However, if one wants more information, it is available with the click of a button. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to share these pieces in such an accessible way.

This collection of paintings is my expression of love and hate for Fairbanks, and cities in general. I hate the long dark winters, the piles of garbage that slowly build up under the snow, and the feeling of unbearable sadness I have felt while walking home to my empty apartment. However, for every moment I hated my environment, there was also a moment of heart aching beauty and appreciation. I can't help but love the delicate

reflections on asphalt, the coziness of a line of orange streetlights accompanying my walks, and the ever shifting hues of the sky above me. While deeply personal to me, there is also a universal recognition of these liminoid spaces that I have depicted. Everyone has felt comfortably lonely under streetlights in the night, and I have celebrated that. There is beauty even in utilitarian light fixtures, if you look for it.



Midnights, Aerin Troxel, 2020

I was given a chance to choose a degree that engaged my passions and I am so glad I took it. Creating a solo exhibition has been challenging, exciting, and fulfilling. I have learned so much through this experience. I was not a painter when I started this journey, but now "painter" is the first thing that comes to mind when I try to describe myself. My technique has improved with every painting; the glowing lights getting brighter in each new scene. My eyes became sharper through my constant observation

of my environment, looking for new inspiration. I spent day after day in the studio making art for hours, which was a much needed bright spot in the difficult year of 2020.

These paintings poured out of my fingertips and I had to decipher what they truly meant, which led me to reflect deeply on my aesthetic inspirations and passions. I thought so much about what matters most to me, which led to growth of who I am as a person. I am so grateful to have had this experience, and I see this as more of a beginning than an end. I am not going to stop painting now, right when I have finally found my voice. I will take the lessons I've learned and continue to build on them for as long as my hands can still hold a brush.