

FLIP TURN

by

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MASTER OF FINE ART

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Intro.

After smashing the tendons in both ankles 4 times in one year riding a skateboard, I knew it was time to find a new sport. In 2006, I began swimming and playing water polo for my high school team in California. Over time, aquatics took over. I became good....really good. Water polo is a sport played nationally and internationally. It is played by two teams with seven players. Six of those players are field players and one goalkeeper. The game involves swimming, treading water (without ever touching the bottom), and passing the ball while being defended by an opponent. The goal is to get the ball into the other team's net. The net, otherwise known as the goal, is 3ft high from the water's edge and 10 feet wide.

Blocking a hard, brightly colored ball coming towards my team's net at speeds I would rather not think of, paid for my Bachelor's Degree in Art. It also led to a larger conversation and dichotomy in the work I would make in the studio for the coming years.



Sport.

Playing a sport to pay my way through school required me to become obsessed with it. Water was integral to my performance and water became my work. Athletics offer a vast array of imagery: netting, posts, barriers, cones, flags, water, ripples, refractions, and reflections. In many of my works, I utilize the netting and posts as a barrier for the viewer which restricts and simultaneously allows them to weave through the painting. The barrier is also a lens I was trapped in, and through which I viewed my local landscape as well as the world.

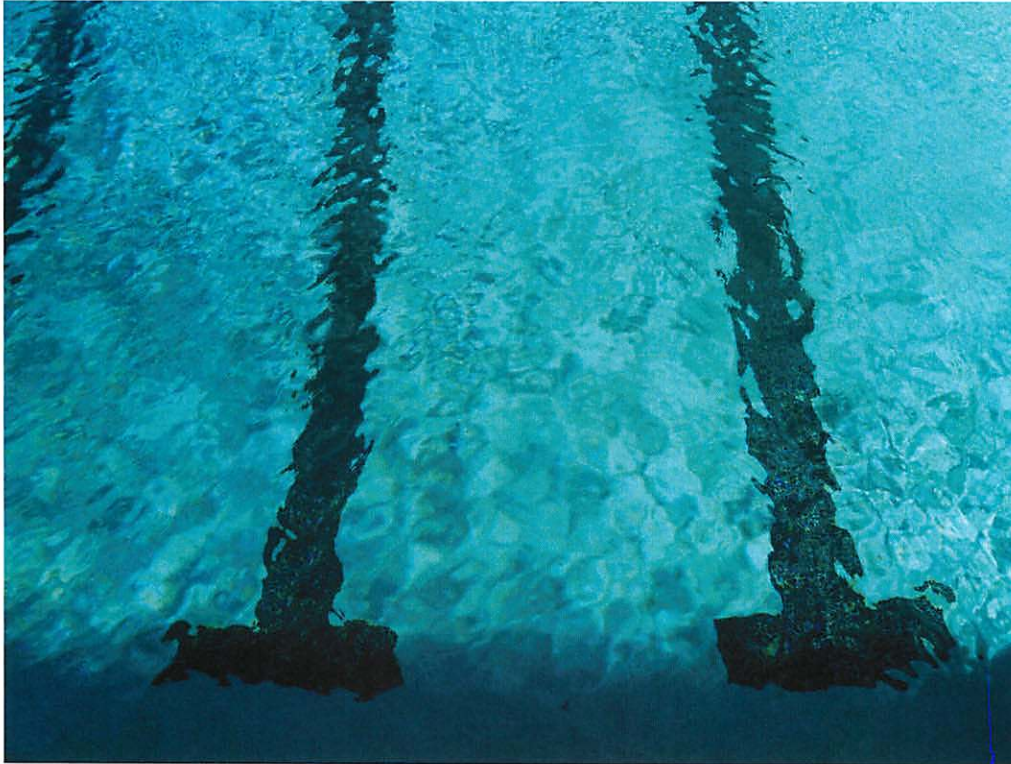
The netting, acting as a barrier, is a representation of the necessity and stark reality of having to commit to something so physically enduring for so long. There are striking colors,



flavors, scents, sounds, feelings and textures associated with being in a pool 5 hours a day, 7 days a week. The use of the physical structures comprised of concrete, tile and netting represent the struggle, pride, and exhaustion as well as the non-stop repetition of forms and instructions of my every day experience. "Artistic discipline and athletic discipline are kissing cousins, they require the same thing, an un-special practice: tedious and pitch-black invisible, private as guts, but always sacred."¹

¹¹ Leanne Shapton, *Swimming Studies* (The Penguin Group, 2012) 226.

Throughout this experience, and making these works, I found the critical element that stitched it all together: water.



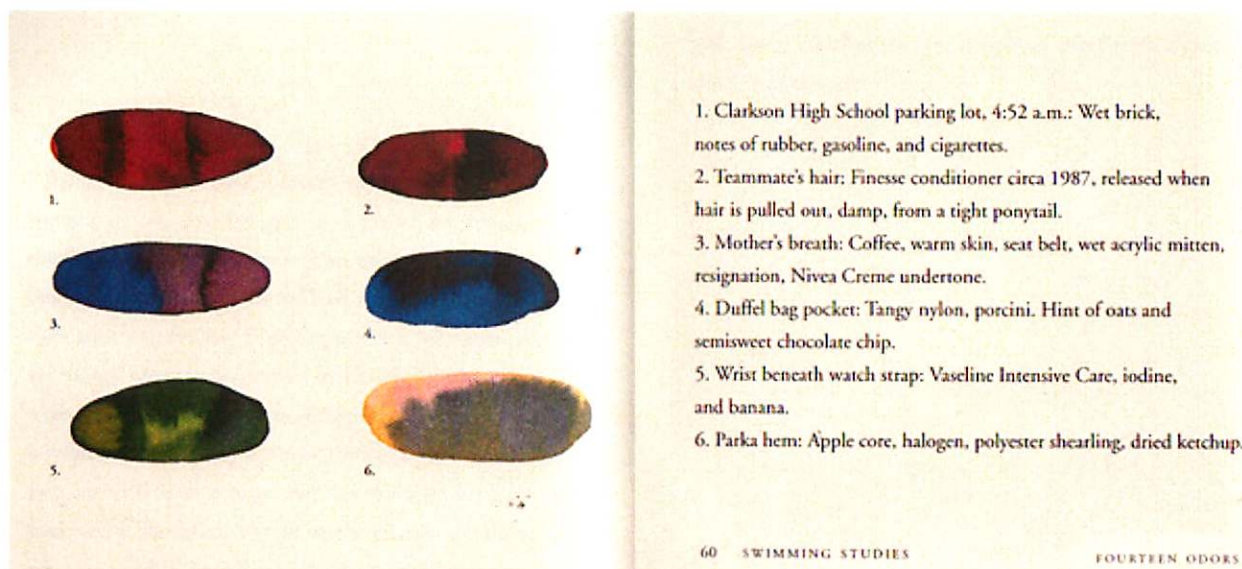
Water.

“Water is elemental, it’s what we’re made of, what we can’t live within or without. Trying to define what swimming means to me is like looking at a shell sitting in a few feet of clear, still water. There it is, in sharp focus, but once I reach for it, breaking the surface, the ripples refract the shell. It becomes five shells, twenty-five shells, some smaller, some larger. I blindly feel for what I saw perfectly before trying to grasp it.”²

Swimming Studies, written by Leanne Shapton, is a “meditative memoir that explores the

² Shapton, *Swimming Studies*, 2.

worlds of competitive and recreational swimming...with an emphasis on the smaller moments of athletic pursuit rather than its triumphs....Her spare and elegant writing reveals an intimate narrative of suburban adolescence, family ties and the solitary underwater moments that now ground her artistic habits."³³ *Swimming Studies* has offered myself and my work a glimpse into my own world that I wasn't sure anyone else had experienced or understood. Shapton highlights the meditative and repetitive moments the way I am constantly grasping for in my work, not only with words, but visually as well. Her series of small paintings titled *Fourteen Odors*, encapsulates the minutiae that is everything swimming, both specific and obtuse, and I can't help but read and imagine each smell in it's context, relating back to my own experience.



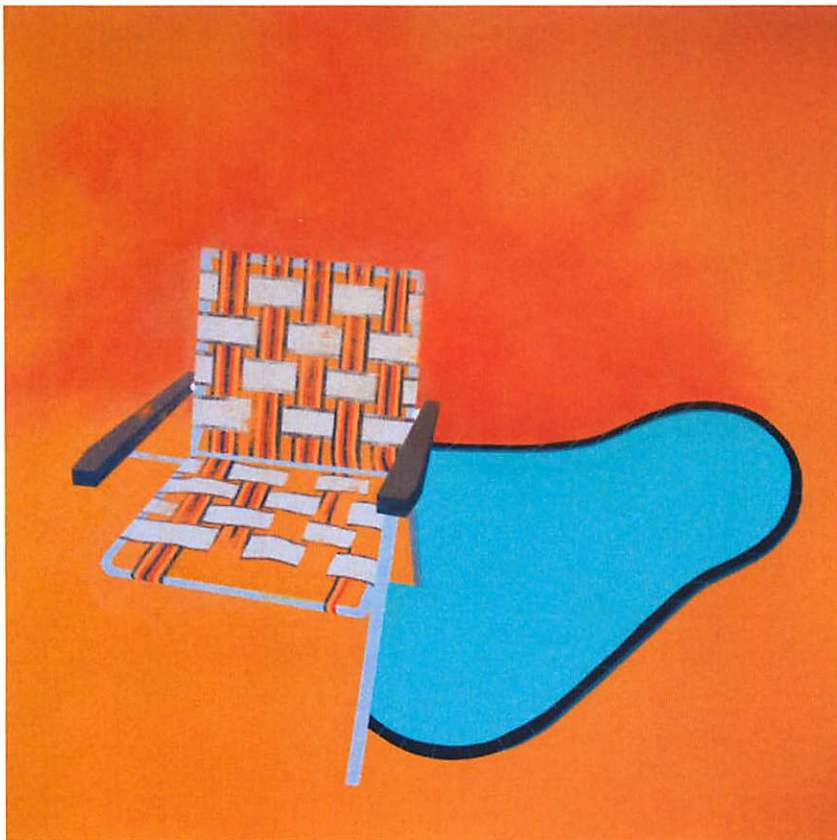
Water, in general, represents my intuition. When I see a pool, I want to document it. A

³ Leanne Shapton, "Swimming Studies," <http://leanneshapton.com/swimmingstudies.html> (July, 2012).

pool is a man made and designed hole in the earth that is cradling this transparent organic matter, which is critical to literally every life form, that we immerse ourselves in to have some sort of experience. Regardless of the form it takes, water is a thread throughout my work, my life and my landscape. It may appear as a crystal clear pool, revealing something else in its depths, or it may appear as an iridescent, toxic sludge that shimmers and glistens and kills everything it touches. Each person on Earth has a different experience with water. For some, water is beautiful; for others, water is deep, or shallow, dark, inviting, water is running out, water is toxic, water is life. Water brings up so many elements of interest and concern for me.

Throughout my paintings, water has come and gone through the environment and the landscape. These topics informed many choices in my work; especially color, form, and texture. I find myself incessantly searching for the perfect pool-water blue, which is constantly changing depending on my perception or the time of day. I am hyper-aware of the negative space created by every single geometric, structural, and aesthetic detail of the pool. For instance, the space between the ladder railings is nothing more than a close-up view of several inches of concrete behind chlorinated water, burning the nose and slapping mindlessly against the wall. However, when I look closely, it is also just as vast, complicated, and overwhelming as several galaxies strung together. That moment in time when I am between those two perceptions, is Infinity. In some of my paintings, you may only notice the glint of the sun on the pool's edge if the time of day and your angle is specific. The literal shape of the pool can dictate the form, identity, and personality of every object around it; so can the experiences of the people interacting with the water within that particular pool. The textures are always hard to pin down as the water is fluid and moving and is constantly both obscuring and revealing everything

within and around it. Feeling the need to explore the texture, I will often dive to the bottom of the deep end to experience how the pool's surface feels when it grazes against my palms and my stomach. In regards to form, however, sometimes the inspiration is as simple as the tile design surrounding the pool's edge.



Landscape.

During my first year of graduate studies, I began thinking about the “how” and the “why” of the landscape I was inhabiting. I was interested in how the simultaneous enrichment and destruction of the environment is influenced by economic and political factors.

This investigation took many forms. It started with the idea of access. What kind of physical access does one have to a certain landscape? At what point does one's economic status come into play? How does community, political policy, and the environment play a role in how we decide what to do with our landscape? To express and explore this, I started with the place I knew best: California.

In 2014, and what seems like almost always, California experienced a record-setting drought – or maybe it was just what the media was deciding to cover extensively at the time.

The drought brings up many decisions on how to use our landscape as well as our resources. One of these decisions led to the activation of abandoned desalination plants as well as new ones being built and utilized along the coast of California. Their purpose is to bring in ocean water, desalinate it, and funnel the potable water inland to local communities. The plants bring in 100 million gallons of ocean water and make up to 50 million gallons of drinkable water per day. With this great concrete structure creating more usable and necessary resources, also comes consequence. Either fossil fuels or nuclear power provide the energy, chemicals are added to pre-treat the water improve plant performance, and the 50 million gallons of water leftover are oversaturated with brine, and then dispersed back into the ocean causing that area around the plant to be highly toxic for all sea life. It also endangers the wetlands and its inhabitants within 14 miles of each desalination plant. In addition, the water intake structures suck numerous species of fish and shellfish, as well as their eggs and their young, into the industrial system where they are killed by heat, physical stress or chemicals.

What captivated me most about making work of this nature was the weight of the subject. There was conflicting lightness and heaviness to it. It felt far removed and distant on a global level and incredibly personal at the same time. There was a level of specificity to this that was just detailed and newsworthy enough that anyone could relate to it under the basis of one essential life need; water. My intense relationship with water was a tale of financial survival, self-discipline, reluctant acceptance of authority, mental and emotional struggle, fascination, beauty, escapism, mutual ownership, and an undeniable obsession with the smell of chlorine. Even today, the scent of a chlorine pool is simultaneously comforting, nostalgic, and familiar, as well as alarming, stimulating, and triggering. My color palette decisions at the time, were often

based from photographs and memories of seeing these landscapes filled with toxicity, or through more current events such as the 2010 BP Oil Spill. It is this combination of these toxic, manmade forms and colors against the natural landscape that I find simultaneously beautiful and disturbing. Trying to force my incredibly personal relationship with water through the lens of a global news story led to a few paintings that were based mostly on research relating to water that was popular and intriguing. I never wanted to create work based on headlines, and these paintings had a lot to do with the trend of environmental, political, “message art” that seems to be the definition of success these days. I felt and still feel somewhat detached from those works, and although I recognize it as a valuable phase of my creative evolution, I am aware that it is like attempting to translate any message in a foreign language. Concrete ideas may be communicated, but you lose the taste, the smell, the ache in your chest, the true lens, the meaning. That is done.

To bring myself back to reality in regards to what and why I wanted to paint, I decided to do the most familiar thing I could; swim. This time though, I took a risk, I signed up for a race in the Hudson River. Open water swimming was something I’d never tackled before. On September 6th, 2015, I would fly to New York City with my wife to swim in a race in honor of the fallen heroes of the September 11th attacks. The race began with a boat ride out to as close as we could get to the Statue of Liberty. It was high noon, there was quite a bit of boat traffic on the river. The sun seemed brighter that day than any other day of the 4 days we were there. It made the Hudson seem less intimidating. I jumped off the boat at 12:35pm. Plunging into that dark green body of water brought me straight back to a quote from *Swimming Studies* that I wasn’t even aware I had read until that moment of total darkness after the plunge. “Being pool-

trained, I'm used to seeing four sides and a bottom. When that clarity is removed I get nervous. As unknown quantities, space and depth are threatening. I get spooked by the open-ended horizon, the cloudy blue thought of that sheer drop—the continental shelf."⁴

I broke the water's surface and quickly found my wife, a safety team volunteer, in a kayak nearby. I'll never forget the way the Manhattan skyline looks from treading water in the middle of the Hudson River; I've never felt smaller. The race horn blew and we were off, 29 swimmers strong. This was my first race in almost 10 years. I had only trained for it in a pool. This was a mistake. The wakes were well overhead for the swimmers as the boat traffic did not ease. There were moments when I wasn't even sure I was going anywhere or making any progress –

⁴ Shapton, *Swimming Studies*, 193.

it reminded of making art. I pushed past those moments into moments of pain, bliss, sheer hilarity of why I ever thought this was a good idea, and moments of complete silence. It became a meditative state. The moment I moved past the pain of it and crossed the mental threshold, I became hyper-aware of my inability to feel my limbs. I was aware of them moving on their own. It was an evolution of perspective and awareness of being in a space between coming versus going.

As we neared the finish, 2.5 miles later, everything changed. The water temperature spiked, I was suddenly hot and it smelt of an intense mixture of fish and gasoline. Pulled out of meditation and a reminder of humanity, I lifted my head and was close to the dock, hundreds of

people waiting and cheering. Each swimmer had to be helped out, the dock was swaying and we were already dizzy from the exertion for the last hour. I ended up 12th place overall, but I had decided that wasn't important before I even jumped in the water.

Memory.

The race brought back vivid memories of swimming, water polo and competition. I had never competed in something without an intent to win until this race. I considered this moment of being in water, without even considering winning, a new use for water and swimming for me. It was serving as more than just an outlet, or a way to get a degree, it was a space to enter to think, feel and remember.



I began to consider memory of a space or a place as an integral and valid element of my work. I came to see and capture the memories as photographs. Sometimes this meant removing the landscape visually and only implying it conceptually or minimally. This form of making without physical, hard-copy reference became nostalgic. There is something so intimate about making something relatable that you may or may not have experienced before. I have to tap into what I am familiar with. Some forms still repeat themselves, and some new patterns have emerged. What I have latched onto is the realization and acceptance that the work I make does not have to be and is not linear. It is open-ended through remembering experiences from different moments in time and deciding on how and when those elements appear in the work. With this consideration, the ideas and concepts behind each work have become more specific and separate of each other because they are not held to the idea of an artist creating a “series” but they still hold a common thread throughout the work of water.

In my most recent work, my memories and their associated spaces are depicted in sharp, isolated moments, vivid and colorful or faded and frayed with time and the absence of progress. It goes back to those non-linear moments of capturing memories and placing them into a composition together. I’ve begun to think back to these memories and place them in compositions together digitally using Photoshop. This has allowed me a way of quickly coming to a composition based on the photograph and/or the memory.

Logging different shapes of pools has become a sort of repetitive and comforting task. These have taken form on glass tiles which I’ve arranged in groups and adhered to panels that I would normally paint on. The shapes of the pools are created visually by spray painting over them and removing the shape therefore creating the inverse. This process allows the glass to be

revealed as water and the spray paint naturally creates a shadow depending on the angle at which the viewer is standing and how the light hits. The tiles are hung closely together horizontally to create a long line replicating the lane line you see at the bottom of the pool while swimming. Finding this process and product has fulfilled my need of simultaneously depicting both the shape of the pool and what is seen at the bottom of the pool while swimming. It acts as two modes of thinking: both seeing and understanding the experience and surroundings.

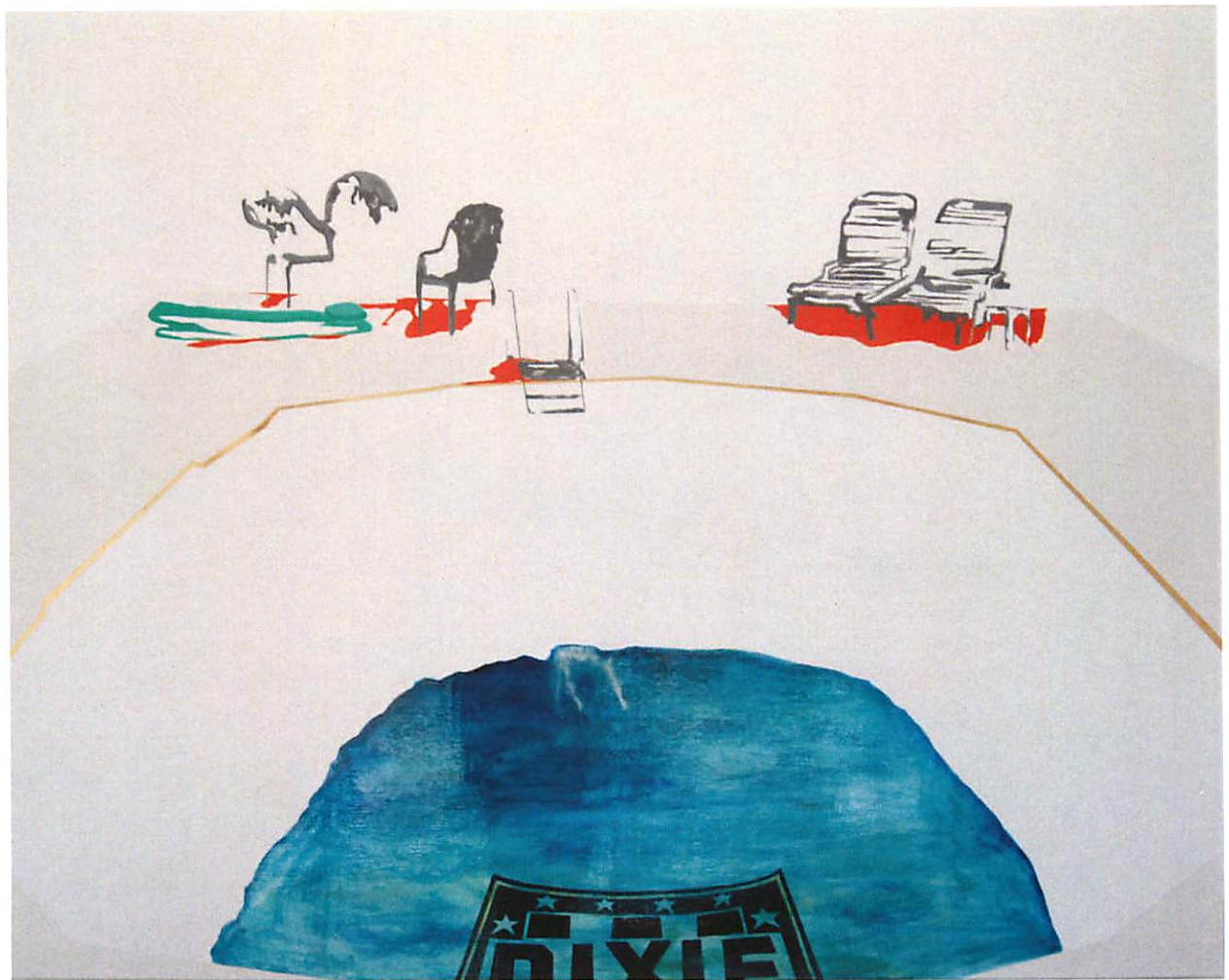
The work in the MFA show encompasses how I define my time at The Dodd. Entering the pool as you witness the first painting *Umbrella Dwellers* which is, ironically, a combination of trips from both the East and West coast, foreshadowing the journey. The first stroke, *Live Bait*, indicates a juxtaposition in perspective, a horizon-less landscape and a new vocabulary. Halfway across the pool, a clear marker of distance and time appears, *We Have Pools*. It's a vivid, crisp and disorienting moment where you're not sure what is up, down or in front. Reeling from the textual repetition, past the threshold with the end wall in sight, *Dixie*, glints and gleams in subtle ways like the sun catching movement in the water, visible for a moment until the position shifts.

There is a critical moment before you hit the wall to make a decision. A wave of anxiety washes over you, magnifying the hard thump of your heartbeat and the harsh, unforgiving scrape of chlorinated oxygen against the inside of your lungs as you push up for your last chance at air and advice. You realize that you have mere seconds to make a decision that may only impact your life for a few moments, or it could be weeks, or it might replay in your head for years. Do you flip turn and do it over, re-immersing your senses in every moment, re-

saturating established colors, diving recklessly into previously accepted emotion and memory, and recalling scents and sounds that risk the discovery of extra layers of memory? Or do you just get out of the pool?

Starting at one end of the pool in California and ending at the other side in Georgia; what happened during that lap across the pool is the essence of the work.





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