

THOUGH TO NOTHING FADING

A THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY OF APRIL 2014

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

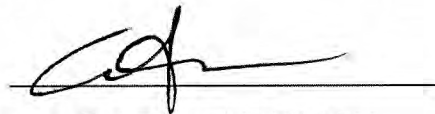
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'C. Henderson', written over a horizontal line.

CALEB HENDERSON

APPROVED:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ronna S. Harris', written over a horizontal line.

Ronna S. Harris, MFA. Advisor.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Adam Mysock', written over a horizontal line.

Adam Mysock, MFA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Aaron Collier', written over a horizontal line.

Aaron Collier, MFA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Srdjan Loncar', written over a horizontal line.

Srdjan Loncar, MFA

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To family and friends who have already become part of the unknown, both those whose memory thrives and those forgotten.

Adam Mysock and Aaron Collier for always being willing to enter a student's headspace and discover what is living there.

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“The life of the dead is set in the memory of the living.”

- Cicero

In my youth, I was plagued by two contradictory thoughts. First was the idea of eternity. Fueled by weekly Sunday messages, I undertook to imagine myself existing forever after death—this was what I took “eternity” to mean. This was perhaps my first brush with the uncomfortable absurdity of infinity and I found it impossible. My mind could not grasp the concept. No amount of mental gymnastics allowed me to get any purchase on the idea, as the time frame was just too vast, too *infinite*. Second, and the apparent opposite of the first, was non-existence, a state of complete nothingness, the lights going out, the curtains falling, and then oblivion. I could no more imagine this state of affairs than the first and found myself at a loss. I was facing not the already frightening *unknown*, but the perplexing *unknowable*.

There are, however, some things I can reasonably claim to know. I can remember my parents. I am lucky enough to be able to talk to them at our mutual convenience. I can remember my grandparents. I have lost them all, but memories linger like a fruit easily picked; no replacement for their actual presence, but a presence of sorts nonetheless. I can dimly remember a few great-grandparents. Snippets of half-formed images play at the periphery of recall, entering my mind at times unbidden, intermixing with the imagined and the un-nameable. Of my great-greats there can be no memory, but only story. They are there in our family

histories, with brief descriptions of lifetimes and a few anecdotes. Their names will not come to me without reference to the records, and I cannot recall a relevant fact about any of them. Beyond the great-greats there is nothing. No influences, no stories, no bonds. Beyond them, all ancestors have faded so that their own progeny no longer remember their names.

Knowing that this has been the fate of most, and will likely be my own, what is to be done? Will I chase the spectre of legacy until I have finally exhausted my energies? Will I cling to the comfort of denial? What does it mean to find purpose in the face of purposelessness?

These are the driving questions behind my recent works and the impetus for the thesis exhibition title "*Though to Nothing Fading.*" Informed as I am by naturalism and materialism, my process touches on two partially exclusive propositions. The first is that by scrutinizing something at increasing levels of detail we can come to better understand it. The second is the necessity of accepting inevitable change and the willingness to let go of what has grown on us.

Preparing my own canvases and panels establishes my first connection to a particular piece, and this step is vital. The beginning of a work is very much about crafting and covering a canvas, getting rid of the blank-canvas anxiety and opening up to the activity of painting itself. It is a time for enjoying the attributes of the medium without the added burden of control that inevitably follows.

I begin painting major shapes, laying in their hue and value, increasing the detail in subsequent layers. Then I start to change things. I add to the image from

observation and memory, but in an unnatural way, intuitively shifting proportions and deconstructing what has been achieved thus far. This forces me to confront my desire to safeguard those things I have become attached to, as I intentionally mutate them. The process hurts, but simultaneously opens up space for the work to grow. By leaving gaps in each layer that partially reveal what has been covered, I allow the work to exist as more than just surface effect. The work suffers the pains of adolescence, and retains the scars of accident and mistake, even as it matures. Acceptance of that change is built into the very nature of how each painting is made, with new layers covering old ones, but ultimately dependent upon them for their own existence.

In *Preservation* and *Shift*, the spectre of death is written on all-too-human faces. These faces cling like masks, devoid of expression, but laced with hidden intent. They are not angry, sad, happy, or nervous. They are neutral, and they are *present*. Relaxed expressions elicit ideas of acceptance, meditation, death, and gentleness. The layers of paint used to build these faces, layers that normally contact and influence each other directly, are now separated, stratified, and locked in resin, forever preserved independently, yet still visually interacting one with another. Gaps in the paint reveal the previous layers, giving information even as they steal it away, complicating the forms and disrupting continuity. The gaps allow a glimpse of lower strata, but at the cost of the coherence and visibility of their own layer. These works hang like specimen cases, jewels, artifacts; preserved remains of the forgotten.

In *Terminus*, a single, faint visage emerges from a field of intense darkness. Almost lost, this guardian sits motionless and unresponsive, he is the last faint sight before the darkness and has already half-succumbed to it; beyond his borders lies only the unknown, the unseen. It is to this paradoxically bold and subtle presence that all other images in the room are subservient; it drinks the light that they reflect, sinks where they float, and refuses to yield to the same scrutiny that the smaller pieces invite.

Together, these works fill their space in the back room of the gallery with an enveloping stillness. It is heavy, close, and self-reflective. It is a waiting room of sorts, a quiet antechamber, a last stop. I have made a silent family, a company of reminders that now is the time and here is the place. They are anonymous portraits of the non-existent, memorials to the mass of humanity that has led to me standing there. I can look upon them and remember my connection with others and those who have already passed. I can see myself in their calm and silent gaze. Our self-fascination stretches back to when we were first looked at “others” and saw ourselves looking back. We tried to work out their thoughts and feelings as we wrestled with our own. We still strive for ever-increasing understanding, and painting reflects my own part in this struggle.

In answer to the morose nature of the works in the back room, another set of works has emerged. Born out of guided accident and chance, they mirror a different aspect of my experience—rejoicing in the face of uncertainty.

From random and intuitive beginnings, these non-deterministic drawings echo the vitality of metabolic activity, evolution, and the emergence of complex forms from random and simple beginnings. Each step of the process is brimming with variables, probability and chance, with the final form being comprised of all previous layers working together. These drawings are made in much the same way that they are seen. New discoveries are constantly being made as the eye tracks the shifting terrain.

In *Evolve*, major forms stretch upward against gravity, undulations coalescing and folding in on themselves in viscous flux. The mass reaches out, its extremities swirling and recombining as if tugged by competing forces. It is difficult to determine whether this is a mass in the potent first stages of formation, or the throes of a final dissolution.

In *Transfer*, two elastic and shifting forms are tethered by a multi-layered umbilicus, the potential for communication between the distinct entities still palpable. A single, thin stroke floats gently from one to the other almost as an afterthought, a whisper carrying its faint message through the intervening space.

The continued use of observation throughout the process lends structure to each piece while not being beholden to an original plan. I'm consistently referring to the "real" world as a source, so that the process of seeing and recording is ongoing. Even when I'm distorting, covering, and shifting proportions, the images keep the ring of observation about them, even if they are just remembered observations, or imagined ones. The works invite us to create ordered systems out



of the randomness, to satisfy our need to find structure in chaos. Apophenia feeds information to the viewer, like images in the clouds, or stellar constellations, new interpretations flowing through the mind, just as myriad forms flow in and through the work. Without this process of meaning-making, ordered progress disintegrates into muddled chaos. These works give a glimpse of the primordial, some activity outside of our time; they make us witnesses to an apocalyptic beginning, a moment of formation laced with destruction.

Science used to be called “natural philosophy”, and the old name carries important associations. The name invites us to consider how an understanding of nature affects us as human beings. How can striving for a fuller understanding lead to a better overall understanding of ourselves? How can this understanding influence our actions? What problems does *progress* invite? These questions, to me, are an invaluable part of the search for knowledge.

We must be willing to revise our thinking in the face of change, progress, and new discoveries if we wish to develop an accurate understanding of our world. There is a thread connecting us all, whether we will acknowledge it or not, and whenever we deny our ability to investigate and question, we yield up a part of what makes us human, and compromise the connection we all share. Certainty pits us against each other even as it is lauded, while doubt and inquiry are too often branded with scarlet disdain.

Painting carries with it a backlog of history so full and long-lived, that to attempt anything within it is to flirt with (or outright marry) redundancy; so whence

its captivating power? My painting practice is a personal approach to understanding, an acceptance of things as they are, and an honest attempt to make sense of myself and the world. By painting something, I can bring it to life, but only in a fixed and limited way. Even the most energetic painting hangs there like a static specimen to be scrutinized. We as painters resurrect our subjects to a new kind of death, giving them life, but simultaneously denying them the potential that life implies. It is in this limbo that the most poignant questions flourish.

In this thesis exhibition I wrestle with the particular questions of mortality and meaning. Half of the exhibition wallows in the inevitability of death and being forgotten, making what it can of an otherwise difficult thought. Subjects are spared their immediate dissolution, preserved as they are, encased in resin. The other half of the exhibition provides an answer, the best I can give it at the moment, of where the meaning in life can be derived. This half celebrates motion and vitality, action and potential, tempered by a thread of destruction, but present *now*. Though to nothing we may fade, still our lives are ripe with the meaning we make for them—full of experience, triumph, love, loss, and potential.

## Biography

Caleb Henderson was born in 1982 and raised in the west under the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Being brought up in a heavily conservative and religious climate has exerted its effect on his work and thinking, though probably not in the way it was intended to. He received a BFA degree in Illustration from Utah Valley University in 2008 and lived in Uganda from 2009 to 2011 doing service work in the U.S. Peace Corps. He lives with his wife and daughter right next to two cemeteries.



*Forget and Move On, 2014*  
Charcoal on paper



*Awakening, 2014*  
Charcoal on canvas



*Escape, 2014*  
Charcoal on canvas



*Transfer, 2014*  
Charcoal on canvas

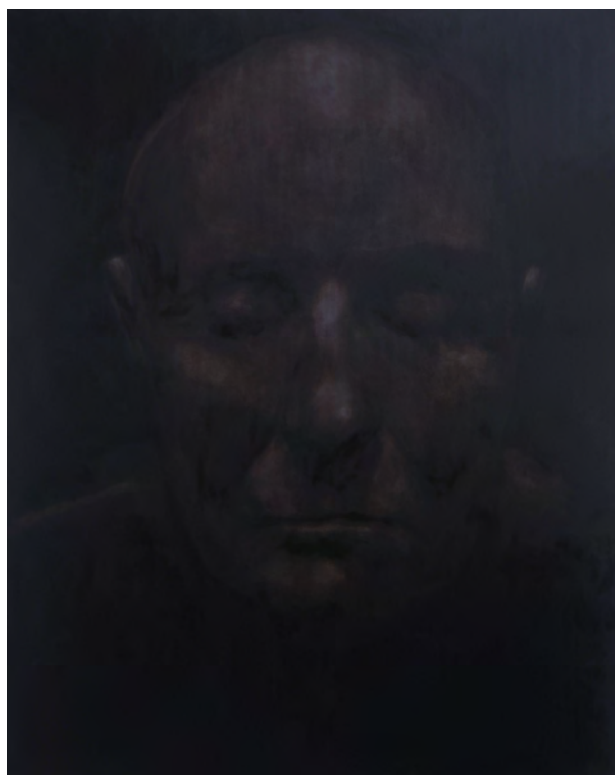


*Evolve, 2014*  
Charcoal on canvas



*Progenitor, 2014*  
Charcoal on canvas





*Terminus, 2014*  
Oil on canvas



*She, 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel



*He, 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel



*Rewrite, 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel





*Preservation, 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel



*Shift, 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel



*Finished, 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel



*Finished (detail), 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel



*Bloodshot, 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel



*Peeling, 2014*  
Charcoal, oil, acrylic, resin on panel





*Install Front Gallery*



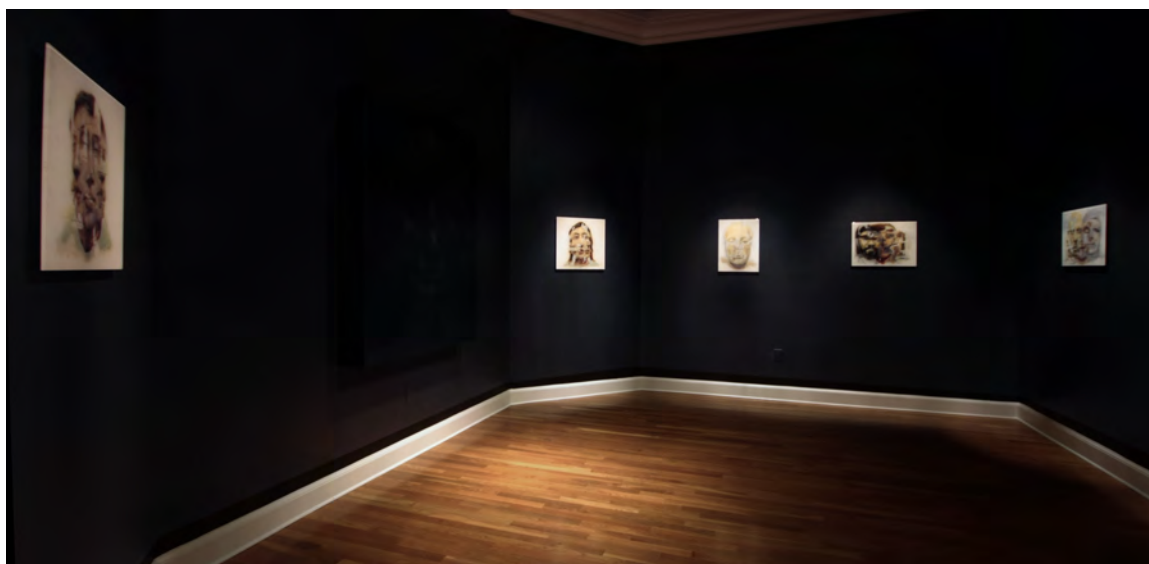
*Install Front Gallery*



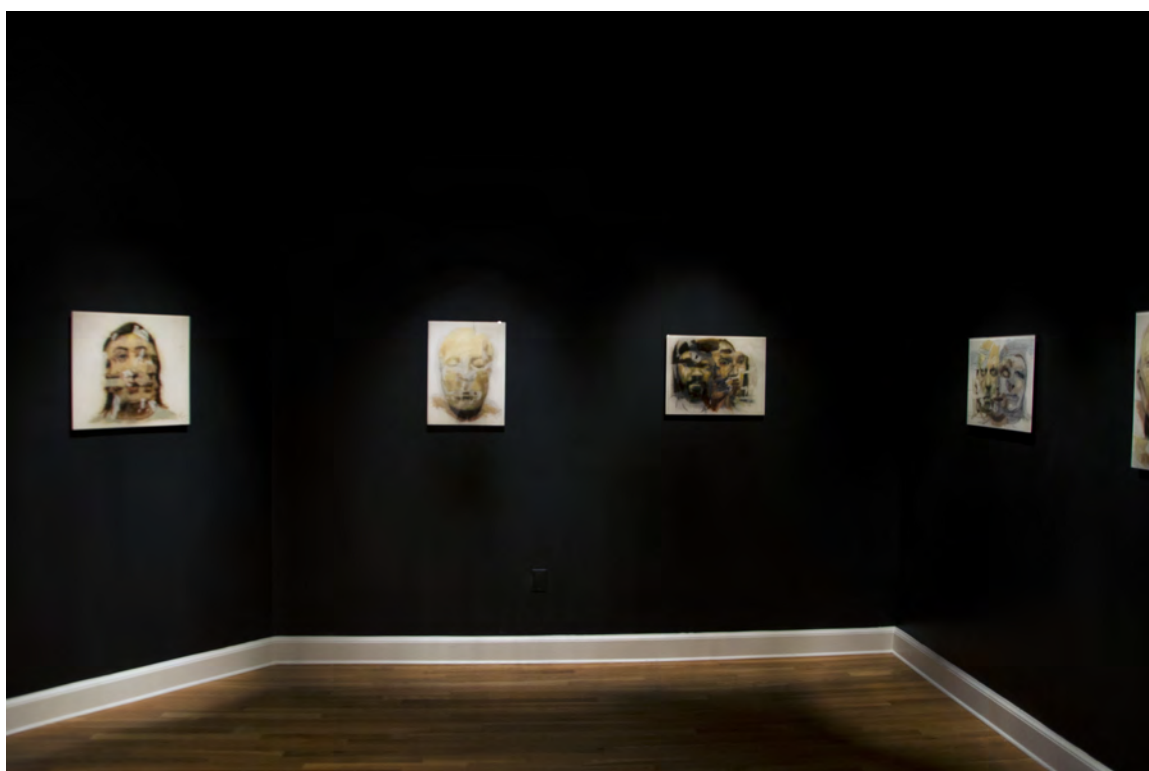
*Install Front Gallery*



*Install Front Gallery*



*Install Back Gallery*



*Install Back Gallery*