FORESTERIA

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by

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The Undersigned, Appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, Have Examined the Thesis Entitled:

FORESTERIA

Presented by Colleen Francis Smith
A Candidate for the Degree of MFA

Hereby Certify that in Their Opinion it is Worthy of Acceptance

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This thesis is dedicated to:

My Family:

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Abstract

In the human imagination, the forest has functioned as the stage of myth and folktale, and as a place where we can both seek shelter and fear for our lives. Even though the forest has been such an integral part of human history, it has become othered and romanticized as humans have moved away from nature and into communities of industry. In this distancing, the forest has also become a place of mystery, an environment from which we draw symbol and meaning, but fail to completely understand. We go to the forest to feel safely lost, to run away knowing that we will be found again.

In this collection of paintings, inspired by my daily walks through the local trails of Columbia, I reconcile our loss of connection to the forest and use the forest to connect to a feeling of being lost. Using the forest as a psychological platform for journey, the figures in these paintings escape their daily worlds by wandering down pathways and tripping over tree-roots, chasing after something they cannot name. My female-centric paintings are populated with wandering women and oblivious men amidst a landscape that becomes a character of its own. In these landscapes, the Pre-Raphaelite notion of femme-fatales is flipped into homme-fatales– featuring a manipulative man who drones on and on in a condescending manner (*The Dinner Party*), a stubborn one who refuses to take action (*Slippage*), and the emotionally unavailable and aloof one whose life work has finally begun to take over so much so that he cannot give attention to anything else (*An Unfamiliar Forest*). The female characters, on the other hand, are the ones who are forging ahead, nudged by curiosity and disillusionment. They are

venturing out to a party and later choosing to leave; one is gingerly making her way across a creek, testing out the slick rocks with her toes; another balances on a tree limb, positioning herself to peer down into the space that she might jump across.

In seeking to understand the allure of the densely wooded landscape and the desire to paint it, I have been lead down a winding path of folklore, myth, botany, and symbolism that has caused me to look deeper than just the forest itself. It has implored me to explore the question of why such a space- a space of isolation, wilderness, and quite possibly, danger is so attractive and what that attraction means. However, such a space as the forest trails that I walked all summer for hours on end is not completely isolated, wild, or dangerous. It is tamed by trail markers and beaten down dirt paths that stray away from the main trails which leave the evidence of humans so that it is quite impossible to stay lost. Psychologically, it is an “in-between” space─ a place where one can simultaneously choose a path that leads to an unknown destination, and one from which the way home can be found again. The forest that connects my paintings is not a wild and unadulterated one, but one which human intention has been imprinted upon. It winds through backyards and fantastical spaces, and seamlessly shifts the narrative from being grounded in reality to being consumed and trapped by one’s own perception and imagination.

Introduction

Like many children, I was captivated by the wooded landscape. Although the woods that I knew as a child in New Jersey suburbia were not fully wild because they wound through subdivisions and sat on the borders of other people's yards, they still existed to me as a limbo-esque zone that existed outside the rules of home. Shrouded by trees and brush, the woods were a space in which I could hide and invent my own world while being within earshot of my mother's voice. Because I was so small and my imagination so active, this was enough for me to feel like I had true freedom, but as I got older and more aware of my surroundings, this feeling changed. I began to realize that the woods could never exist in the same way to me again. If I was not far enough out from any traces of people, I could not obtain that sense of freedom and solitude that I felt as a child. However, if I found myself unquestionably alone in the woods as an adult, that sense of freedom could quickly turn into hysterical fear, especially if I became lost. It is this mental conundrum that turns the forest into a contradictory place, for the solitude I seek as an adult can only be obtained at the threshold of fear. In the paintings, the forest character exists as something both strange and familiar, encapsulating the figures as they move deeper into it.

There is a wooded area that sits behind my grandmother's house that I remember as being particularly enticing and catalyzing. My cousins and I would beg our aunts and uncles to take us on walks through this suburban forest that

was overgrown with wisteria and littered with broken beer bottles and other human detritus. Because they were either our parents or young adults, our aunts and uncles didn't always want to be bothered with taking a bunch of curious rambunctious children on a guided tour through the woods. But once in awhile, they would take us, and then suddenly we were not only being allowed into this great expanse of human-infested nature, we were being *taken* into it. We were allowed to experience its fleeting magic for a specific amount of time that was not up to us, and only under the watchful eyes of one of our guardians. These constraints, of course, made us want it even more, and so we would constantly ask to go, and every time we were told no made us want it more than ever before.

To remedy this, my grandmother made up stories to deter us from the woods─ that of the Dingle-Dangle-Doogle and the Headless Motorcycle Man─ my first "fairy-tales," if you will, for they were meant to scare us into being good, as fairy tales so often are. The Dingle-Dangle-Doogle was a man that you could not see, but who could see you and wanted to eat you, and who obviously lived in the woods. The headless motorcycle man was my grandmother's modern reincarnation of the headless horseman, although we didn't really believe in either supernatural beings' existence. However, we weren't confident enough in their nonexistence to venture into the woods by ourselves, especially when we heard the vroom of dirt-bikers on the trails as the sun was setting.

My memories of these particular woods are hazy and filled with images of my mother showing us patches of wild strawberries, jumping across creeks that

seemed like ravines, the smell of “skunk cabbage,” a plant that grew in the marshy areas, the two enormous trees that marked the main entrance to the woods, and the “dead end” which sat at the end of the street, marking the border of the woods and also the place where people in the neighborhood would go to play basketball, drink, hangout or sell drugs. This borderland was also off limits, and therefore coveted by us— the woods on the other side of the “dead end” wall always seemed the most interesting. Its creek was filled with shopping carts and abandoned basketballs; its terrain deeply carved from rainy spells that would send water rushing to the sewer pipe. I believe that my fascination with the forest and my decision to use the wooded landscape as the stage of my paintings comes from these early memories of the woods, especially the forbidden nature of the one behind my grandmother's house. Like those woods in Deptford, NJ, the forests in my paintings feel like uncharted and curious territory, but only if you embrace their unfamiliarity and allow them to morph into the wooded wonderland we longed to enter as children.

The Forest Character

Two things in particular have fascinated me about the woods: the way it functions as an organism concerned only with itself, and the way which we imagine it to function both in our reality and our individual minds. A forest is nothing more than a dense landscape populated mainly with trees and undergrowth. In our imaginations, the forest is a liminal space. It is an arena of possibility and trial that manifests in literature and myth; an endless dimly-lit place that seems to glow from the inside and coerces you into letting it swallow you whole. In myth and literature, the forest is where rites of passage take place, where darkness is confronted, and where secret beautiful places are discovered. It is the realm of fairies, nymphs, elves, centaurs, witches, and hidden princesses, of wolves, bears, and hunters. In the human imagination, the forest has housed the most extensive spectrum of archetypes, where every being exists in a moral gray area and where our deepest hopes, fears, and perversions are projected onto trees or given shape as mythical beings.

In this body of work, the forest slowly takes over the first half of the paintings and then shifts from lush greenery to apocalyptic ruin until the last painting, where the figure is completely obliterated and the viewer is able to imagine themselves entering the archway of trees into the dark wood. In *Trained to Bear Fruit,* the forest is almost non-existent, and is substituted by an espalier apple tree growing behind a log that the figure is standing on. Beneath the girl's feet is forest undergrowth that asserts an untamable nature that juxtaposes with the tamed, pastoral narrative of the rest of the painting. Combined with the approaching

storm clouds, the unruly plant life suggests an inner wildness that is being suppressed by the expectations put on women by patriarchal society.

In *The Dinner Party,* the forest exists on the edge of the property where three people have chosen to enjoy a lavish evening. It is in the background, beginning from about one third into the painting from the left, growing in size as it creeps across the picture plane. In the foreground, there is a swath of roses that seem to grow from where the viewer is standing so that it gives the impression that the viewer is peering through someone's backyard. In this painting, the cultivated suburban nature of the garden is still very separate from the forest, which looms behind the party-goers, creating a lush screen of green between their party and what lies beyond the confines of the property.

The forest becomes interwoven and more assertive in the third painting of the series, *Follow It Down*, where the cultivated and wild nature are blended into a glowing environment. The party-goer who has chosen to leave sits crouched in a creek, destroying her party dress and looking over her shoulder as she contemplates following the glowing light coming from the leafy green tunnel under the spiral staircase. To the left of the painting there is a more naturalistic tunnel that exists on the edge of the garden to suggest that she is caught between two different paths– one that is cultivated and predictable; the other wild and uncertain. A tree has grown around the spiraling staircase, alluding to the fact that she is still very much close to home, but that the domestic constraint of home is being overtaken by nature and the thirst for wildness. The roots of the tree have begun to encroach upon her space, giving the forest an

anthropomorphic and slightly sinister quality. This painting is the pivotal point that decides the rest of the narrative- the girl is positioned towards the glowing portal and her hand disappears into the branch of a pear tree as she begins the process of foregoing expectations and forging her own unique path. She is opening herself up to the wild as it opens itself to her.

The roots lead into the next painting, *The Careful Cautious Kind*, where a young woman makes her way across a forest creek, stopping where a ripple forms in front of her. The bank to the left is covered with bright green moss and features a treehouse, an uprooted tree, a red sapling, and a hollowed tree that hides a whiskey bottle. The forest to the left is not quite a forest– it seems to exist on the edge of it. There is no undergrowth, just an unnatural bright green moss that covers the entire ground while trees at varying life stages grow, some of which support a dilapidated treehouse. The intermingling of wild and human presence on this bank suggests a battle for control, as humans attempt to control the forest, or, more importantly, how humans fight their own instincts by adhering to the expectations that society puts upon them. The hidden whiskey bottle and the neglected treehouse reference lost youth alongside the marked sapling which looks naive and out of place. The uprooted tree suggests that things once hidden are coming to the surface and that transformation is afoot. The right bank still contains human elements like worn stairs, but nature has worked further along in its course to take over. The small amount of traffic this particular area of the forest experiences is evidenced in the tree that has been chopped down, leaving nothing but its stump and exposed root mass, which protects an animal tunnel

and protects the river bank with a root that stretches all the way back to the horizon line. The right bank implores the viewer to follow the projected direction of the figure into the wilderness which has been explored by others who have disappeared into its riotous shelter of foliage and unknown trappings and graces.

The lush woodland fills the picture plane of the next painting, *An Unfamiliar Forest*, where the figure is thoroughly encapsulated within the woods, his eyes resting on a hyper-realized plant that competes with him for the viewer's attention. He steadies himself on a tree root from which a glowing sprig of greenery grows. In this painting, the forest environment is at the same level as the figure, close to the ground and invested in what is there. Like his imploring glaze towards the plant that suggests curiosity and a quest for knowledge, the roots of the tree glide down the mossy forest floor digging into the ground and searching for sustenance. Whether or not the man is there is of no consequence to this group of trees. By having the figure compete visually with the various vegetation in the painting, the hierarchical scale is tipped in favor of the plant life, where the highly rendered mundane plant becomes the centerpiece and the glowing sprig the interloper between the man and the object of his curiosity.

The landscape of the fifth painting in the series, *Slippage*, twists and falls as it opens up into a void that the female figure is positioned to jump across. The rest of the forest is clouded by blue fog, suggesting that our own mental forests- the intricacies of our past experiences and belief structures– are always present, even as we make conscious leaps into new chapters of our lives. The forest here is once again invaded by human presence, evidenced by the figures and the

couch. The couch is inserted into the landscape to call back to the safe, domestic space, as if an unpredictable forest has sprung up in someone's living room, reasserting that this body of work employs the forest as a psychological platform.

In the final painting, *Foresteria*, the forest is the central character and does not struggle with any competition from the presence of a figure. Instead, the focus is completely on the trees with all of their strange glowing neon light, which form an archway to gently coerce the viewer to enter. Positioned next to *Slippage, Foresteria* becomes what lies below the void, where the female figure from *Slippage* might jump.

The Mythical Journey through the Forest

The forest has always carried with it a sense of awe and supernatural wonder that humans find spiritual. It is for this reason that it has become the stage on which Greco-Roman gods and goddesses live out their dramatic lives (Porteous 57), and also where pagans worshipped the cult of the tree (Porteous 160). Groves that were populated with olive trees, laurels, cypress, and myrtles became sacred places of worship to gods and goddesses in ancient Greece, the trees of which were imbued with the meaning of specific myths such as the flight of Daphne from Apollo, and the homes of lesser, rustic beings such as Pan and Faunus (Porteous 57). The idea that beings of mystical realms can be present in the forest connects to how the human imagination projects into a landscape— how we are tied to it through memory, nostalgia, and the personal events of our own lives that we play out through morphing trees, root tunnels, and pathways.

Allusions to myth and how it is integrated into our daily experiences are depicted throughout the paintings. *Beginning with Trained to Bear Fruit*, the apple is used as a metaphor to talk about the training of fruit trees, and therefore the controlling of nature in favor of production. Its symbology of knowledge and fall from grace as tied to womankind is also referenced here, as it is positioned next to a girl who is on the brink of adulthood and therefore set to gain knowledge that will take away her innocence. In *The Dinner Party*, the figure to the left of the painting hides her face from the viewer as if she does not want to be photographed, while she sips a cocktail and picks apart a pomegranate which alludes to Persephone's time forever divided between heaven and hell. They are both women who

reluctantly inhabit a space out of necessity, not joy. A hedge of roses graces the foreground, reminding the viewer of the pursuit of beauty and fleeting desire that is evident in the social interactions of humans. The man supporting himself on a tree root in *An Unfamiliar Forest* calls back to the myth of Daphne and Apollo as he kneels as if following the trail of prey and witnesses the tree go through a magical transformation. Viewing the forest through myth is important because it morphs mundane organic matter into narrative devices that guide the viewer into more imaginative and psychological interpretation. By seeing the world through myth, we are better able to cope with reality.

In *Imaginary Landscape*, William Irwin Thompson explores how the human imagination and myth has been tied to how we understand the world, specifically the earth and how it functions. Before the advent of science, human understanding of the world was put into metaphor, such as formulating the story about Persephone's descent into the underworld and how her absence from her mother's side is the reason that we have winter and fall. Overtime, these myths took shape into more scientific narratives that satisfy the human need to categorize and explain everything around us in a way that can be proven with experimentation and reason. Taken from James Lovelock, Thompson tells us that, "a myth is an imagistic rendering of events that are more precisely understood when they are translated into the conceptual language of science," (Thompson 50). He goes on to describe how, since humans were not present for the creation of the earth, we first learned to understand it through storytelling and

how that storytelling has evolved into what is called “scientific materialism,” as coined by A.N. Whitehead.

Thompson draws out this idea in his analysis of the fairytale of Rapunzel, where he draws connections between fairy tales and old world knowledge that technological and scientific advancements have taken us away from. “Our fairy tales also have their roots in this prehistoric darkness, and the hidden geometry that survives in them is not simply the obvious stuff of phallic symbols and devouring maws, but a lost cosmology of correspondences that connect the flowers to the stars,” (Thompson 4). The idea that there is a “geometry that survives” in fairytales leads one to suppose that ancient myths and legends are much more than stories that our less intellectually advanced ancestors used to explain the world around them. They are so much deeper than that– they are old stories in which kernels of wisdom and connections to ancient human history exist.

As the fairytale is very old, it comes out of a time when people were deeply connected to plants and earth, and so it is no surprise that the tale is also a metaphor for a plant’s reproductive strategy. When the “Rapunzel” plant, or rampion is trying to seed, a column rises up to attract insects to pollinate it, but if no insect visits, it splits in two halves which curl like braids (or Rapunzel’s hair) in an attempt to capture pollen and draw it up to its reproductive organs.
Just as the sexual narrative of Rapunzel is reflected in the rampion plant, the sexual narrative of the paintings is narrated through the notable plant life that runs through *Foresteria*. Fruiting trees and flowers are seen in the first half of the

paintings, alluding to fertility and consumption. The two youngest girls in the series– the female figures in *Trained to Bear Fruit* and *Follow It Down* are paired with fruit trees, one standing in unison with the espalier tree and the other pushing through and partially disappearing into the pear tree. In *The Dinner Party*, a flowering rose bush suggests sexual openness and availability that is evident and somewhat expected at celebratory gatherings. As the paintings move to the right, flowering and fruiting plants are replaced by the lush green of the forest and tangled roots that iterate verdant life and the intricacies of finding and maintaining nourishment.

This understanding is gleaned from using the landscape, and quite literally, the ground that we stand on, as a mirror for our own human experiences. Interestingly, the landscape is also the keeper of history, and I believe that the slightly eerie feeling one receives when entering and unknown place such as a forest is due to the fact that it has "seen" things that humans may have not witnessed. Alexander Porteous writes in *Forest Folklore, Mythology, and Romance* that, "the tree seems to have stood among us and to have witnessed the ever-changing panorama of human life, and we know that it has been itself an object of notice, and has ministered some pleasure in past ages to eyes long quenched in dust," (Porteous 150). Trees often live longer than humans and therefore hold the memories of the dead. When visiting a very old tree, such as Columbia's big oak tree, the feeling of participating with something that can "remember" things long ago comes across immediately. I remember feeling as if I

was sitting on the lap of a grandmother figure when I would go out to visit the big oak tree this summer and sit on its roots while I contemplated how far its shadow drew across the soybean field it neighbored. In her book, *Silent Witnesses, Trees in British Art (1760-1870)* Christiana Payne states, “There was a particular tendency to see the tree as an individual, analogous to a human being… (regarding) trees as the most companionable of inanimate objects, which make music as they rustle in the wind, adapting their tones to the mood of the listener...they are ‘instinct with human feeling, “ (Payne 22). In a forest, especially an ancient one, where there are many trees, we may often feel like intruders, respectful of the house we are about to meander through. This notion appears in Ancient Greece, where “sacred groves” that were thought to be the haunts of gods, goddesses, and other mythical beings. In these groves, it was important not to disturb anything, as that disturbance could come across as disrespectful and therefore end in injury or death to the intruder (Porteous 61). This mentality lives on, embodied in how we enter forests– we are conscientious of how much of a trace we leave and take care to disturb the landscape as little as possible.

In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama explores the concept of the landscape as a place which human history and emotion in imprinted upon. He speaks about the Lithuanian forest as being a place where Jews would hide during WWII, and how it became a safe haven for such a fringe society that could exist only in hiding. Furthermore, in becoming a place of hiding, it also becomes a place that exists outside the law, where loose localized governing tactics are in

place beside uncharted territory where anarchy exists. Christiana Payne states that, “Forests and woods were contested spaces, representing both authority and resistance from the earliest of times,” (Payne 15). Here, she is literal in her rendering of the forest as a “contested space,” as a forest, though it may be entirely or partially sprawled onto a specific person’s property or “owned” by a community, is still perceived to be a free space for humans. How often does one see “no trespassing” signs near trails, and how often are these signs ignored? Seeing the woods as a free space allows us to push boundaries, both literally and figuratively. Walking on the trails this summer, I could not help but notice how sometimes they would lead right into people’s backyards, and how strange this seemed to me. I would suddenly feel like I was in two different places of imagination while still being rooted to the very physical bit of ground that I stood on. I felt like I was both trespassing and also in a free space.

Like the woods behind my grandmother’s house that I enjoyed as a child, the forest of *Foresteria* is not entirely naturalistic, but has been acted upon by humans. Six out of the seven paintings depict human interaction with the forest, and there is not one painting that simultaneously speaks to virgin land and naturalism. The forest is presented as a place through which many have trekked, as evidenced by the many pathways and other signifiers of human presence. The most naturalistic painting of the series with no sign of human society except for the figure itself is glazed in ethereal blues and greens and gives the impression that the figure has suddenly discovered he is lost. There is nothing besides

himself connecting him to the middle class society that he comes from, made apparent by the clothes he is wearing.

The literal representation of the liminal space of the forest– as a place that is both not fully isolated in nature and certainly not a leisurely park– is further asserted by how it is painted. Certain plants are rendered to full capacity while others are summarized and left with just enough information for the viewer to piece together what is in front of them. Water is represented as murky transparent glazes layered on top of each other through which one can see paint drips from when the solvent layer was applied, reaffirming that these paintings are illusions of reality and not meant to be taken literally. By showing the materiality of the paint throughout the paintings, the viewer is constantly reminded that the depicted scenes are imagistic constructions of an inner world that is based in, but does not accurately represent, reality. The figures navigate these unknown, visually strange spaces that mirror the strangeness of everyday life, as the warped scenery calls to our own warped perceptions of reality.

The male and female figures of these woodsy narratives travel through the forest in different ways. In literary depictions of these fringe areas, we often find our heroines wandering through the trees in search of a wise witch, led astray by a human-like animal, or desperately trying to go deeper and hide. Rarely do we find heroes in such a predicament, as heroes do not participate with the forest but rather conquer it, making their way out of it and onto more important quests

like slaying dragons. Men that live in the forests are often bandits or mythical creatures like Pan and centaurs. Their female counterparts are usually wood nymphs, although sometimes there is a princess, and if no princess, certainly a witch.

However, in *Foresteria*, the difference between how men and women travel through such a forest is very different from fairy tales and much more tied to my own personal experience of men and their aversion to intimacy and dealing with emotional upheaval. It is for this reason that they are always facing to the left and therefore away from the forward progression of the paintings, as opposed to the women, who are positioning themselves to forge onward, with the exception of the woman on the far left side of *The Dinner Party*, who engages with the viewer by shielding her face to keep from being identified. The man in *The Dinner Party* gestures wildly, cutting off the central female figure who is clearly trying to speak, pointing her hand in his direction and therefore into the next painting. The male figure in *An Unfamiliar Forest* has his gaze to the ground, blocking out his entire environment except for what is in front of him, while the man in *Slippage* sleeps soundly on the couch, propped up and away from the plant life at the foot of the couch while the ground below falls away and the female figure stands atop a tree branch, plotting an escape plan.

The Feminine Journey

Within the heroine's journey, there are two variants: the Aletis Journey and the Descent (Persephone).Described in full in her book, *Jane Eyre's Sisters*, Jody Gentian Bower explains that in the Aletis variant, the woman must first overcome the conflicts and struggles at home and then go out into the world to forge a new path which culminates in her success as being revered for who she truly is. The Persephone path is slightly different for its protagonist is often someone who longs to escape a place of safety and comfort in search of the darker part of herself. This shift often happens in conjunction with a traumatic event such as an abduction in the case of Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* and in the myth of Persephone and Hades, where Persephone is captured by Hades and taken to the underworld to be his remorseful queen.

But perhaps these paths– the inward and the outward– are not so distinct and cross each other in the lives of women– where we must first be Persephone and then the Aletis. Perhaps the Aletis is the girl who skips over the Persephone narrative entirely due to a traumatic childhood that predisposes her to the archetype of the wandering heroine. The only real difference between the two paths is the timing of the trauma. At the point the trauma is in the past, and therefore part of one's origin, the woman is transformed into an Aletis. Perhaps a Persephone takes on Aletis traits after she gets thrown off track of her perfect life, as Lewis Carroll's Alice does after she sees the white rabbit. Her family is well-bred enough to afford her a governess and a pet cat named Dinah as she spends her days playing with flowers instead of listening to her lessons. Bored,

and curious, her mindless flower-picking, like Persephone's, is suddenly interrupted by an invitation to an alternate realm, although Persephone's experience is much more violent. She is now a Persephone-Aletis hybrid, for she chooses uncertainty and darkness without having a reason to run from her current privileged situation other than her own boredom and lack of direction. She follows the rabbit into an underworld of absurdity in which she encounters the worst parts of herself– her childishness, selfishness, and clear lack of planning skills. She also encounters fantastical renditions of the insane, murderers, swindlers, and drug addicts, mean and snobby women, and condescending men. Traumatized, she only longs to go home, and when she finally is home, she recounts her experience to her governess who tells her it was all a dream and reprimands her for falling asleep during her lesson. A similar thing happens to Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*– she goes through a traumatic and important journey only to have everyone tell her that it all took place in her head when she finally returns home. Of course this is a form of gaslighting, a device of emotional control that is often used in relationships to absolve an abusive partner. It discredits an individual's account of an event, and it is interesting that it appears in well-loved stories such as T*he Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland*, where the female protagonist's perception of reality is cast in self-doubt.

The women of my paintings trust their perceptions of what is in front of them, and are at different stages in their journeys, each archetype showing traits of the other, on their way to a wholesome understanding of their individual lives. The

girls on the brink of womanhood that appear in *Trained to Bear Fruit* and *Follow It Down* echo *Little Red Riding Hood* and Alice Liddell in their looking or motioning towards new and uncharted territories in their lives. Likewise, the woman trekking across the murky waters in *The Careful Cautious Kind* embodies the Aletis as she embarks on her lonely journey through the wilderness. The women featured in *The Dinner Party* are both dealing and contesting with their present realities in the lavish garden in which they are passing time, evidenced by the stubbed out cigarettes in the potted plant on the left side of the painting. One shields her face as if to indicate that she would rather be somewhere else as the other wears an annoyed expression as she fights for a say in the conversation. In wanting to keep the figures as relatable as possible, not a single one is tied directly to a specific archetype but are instead kept grounded in their environment that mimics twenty-first century life. The symbology is subtle and the morphic landscapes they are immersed depict places that could exist in our realities but which also feature imaginative alterations.

The Reclaiming of Beauty

Like the forest itself, my landscapes are liminal spaces that exist somewhere between the physical and metaphysical, places that are almost believed. The paintings take on the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, which often feature fantastical forests full of beautiful flowers and greenery populated with valiant men and languid women waiting to be rescued or mischievous ones threatening to lead their male counterparts astray. Drawing from the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic has been a sort of reclaiming experience, as the Victorian women featured in the paintings of John William Waterhouse, John Everett Millais, Carlo Fornara, Giovanni Segantini, Dante Gabriel Rosetti, Arthur Hacker, and Gabriel Guay (to name a few) are depicted as dangerous, beautiful, and degenerative as their bodies shape-shift in response to water, trees, and wind. They are representative of nature and their posed bodies mimic tree roots, clinging vines and swirling leaves (Dijkstra 229). The ideal Victorian woman is a fascinating and impossible creature of male fantasy for she is beautiful, linked to nature, and dangerous, but submissive to the patriarchal culture that has sought to tame her. The femme-fatale characters of Medea, Circe, and Ophelia are the ones whose uncharted emotions have won, giving them the unfortunate lives of women who can only keep men through hard manipulation and guilt– otherwise they spend their time alone or dead. Life has made them bitter.

Despite these dark sexual undercurrents and wholly misogynistic depictions of women, the paintings remain incredibly beautiful and intriguing to art lovers today, especially to women. How often does one see an Alphonse Mucha poster

in a girl's college dormitory or yet another female figure painter creating modern Ophelia paintings of women submerged in bath tubs? As women, we seem to love creating and presenting these images over and over again. So it makes sense to speculate a connection. Perhaps, in these darkly beautiful images, we are repeating the collective trauma of womanhood in order to understand and overcome it. Perhaps this is why we can feel Circe's burning jealousy as she poisons the sea in Waterhouse's *Circe Invidiosa* or the witch's conviction as she declares her boundary-lines from the spirit world in his painting, *The Magic Circle*, or Ophelia's white flag when she collapses into the river from grief and madness. We can hold these woman in both abhorrence and reverence, simultaneously sympathizing with the powerful woman who has had it with her lot in life and shaming the manipulative, vengeful bitch we are in danger of emulating if we lose control.

Despite the negative connotations of these archetypes, it is them, not the men, who are able to commune with supernatural powers and survive both the underworld and life on earth. They exist as mediums and keepers of magic that they themselves may not fully understand. But despite their lack of complete understanding, they are still one step ahead of the men because at least they know *something* about the dark wood the knight has stumbled into. These men are now in a mysterious land that seems to be well-charted by women. In these dark feminine territories, they struggle towards the enlightenment, afraid to be pulled back into the murky waters of the feminine natural world, like Hylas being coerced into the lily pond by several nymphs. They are forging ahead, trying

desperately not to be seduced by the woodland nymphs that spy on them from behind trees (Dijkstra 227).

This rift between what my eyes wanted and what my brain was intrigued and repulsed by needed to be reconciled through the narrative nature of my paintings. The women needed to be **strong in their vulnerability** and **composed in their struggle** to navigate the less savory aspects of themselves. In representing the women in my paintings, I sought to embody glimmers of these Pre-Raphaelite heroines in order to show how they can manifest power instead of weakness, while not posing a negative threat. The women in my paintings are on the edge of possibility– looking forward, about the follow a mysterious light, on the verge of falling, or about to jump across a chasm. Their cunning resolve and sharp focus on something beyond the picture plane is reflected in the expressions of Medea, Circe, and Ophelia. They are not concerned with the viewer because they are preoccupied with their own life trajectories and have more important things to be concerned with.

In the conceptually problematic Pre-Raphaelite paintings I love, it is more of the beautiful tragedy of the Pre-Raphaelite heroine than the beauty alone that I responded to as a girl, and now as a woman. It was the dramatic surrender of these women to their darker natures that attracted me to these paintings– their duality. But I did not want to paint modern femme fatales and women who cast themselves into rivers or prey on men. I wanted to portray them as relatable women who hold pieces of Medea and Ophelia within themselves.

In trying to create these narratives for the last few years, I left men out entirely because I was so afraid to cast them as perpetrators, but as I worked further into these narratives, I realized that so much of a person's experience in life is based off of their relationships with those to whom they are attracted. Being a straight white female, I approached this dialogue from the straight white female lens that is blurred by my frustration with modern relationship dynamics. As paintings made during the age of shallow dating apps, the year of the "me-too movement," and the most misogynistic presidency in my memory, my men are characteristic of their times. They are the homme-fatales that I know will only bring heartache—there is the charismatic man-splaining man who will eventually make me feel small and inconsequential (*The Dinner Party*); there is the emotionally unavailable and aloof man who will ignore me (*An Unfamiliar Forest*); and there is the man who refuses to compromise and will suck me dry of all my pity and love (*Slippage*). The women in my paintings stand in stark contrast to these men, refusing to give into their demands, deciding to leave, or not be there altogether. In addition to navigating the forest, the women must also navigate situations that are attached to their sexuality and the presence of men (or lack thereof).

But of course there are more to these women's experiences than just their relationships with men. Romantic interests were of no consequence to Alice and Dorothy (which is why they are often the aim of psychosexual attention, as the absence of something is often stronger than presence), and they are quite possibly of no consequence to the figures in *Follow It Down* and *The Careful Cautious Kind*. In these paintings, one can suspect that the women have

undergone some sort of romantic tragedy, but there is nothing indicating specifically that, and they seem to be more concerned with what is right in front of them in the here and now. There are other things afoot in these paintings– the disintegration of childhood and the call for danger and adventure that stems from boredom, and perhaps the absence of childhood.

There is a trail of references to loss of innocence that runs throughout the first half of the paintings. Beginning with *Trained to Bear Fruit*, there is a notable distance between the girl and the house near the horizon land which is implied to be recent, considering the girl's youthful attire. In *The Dinner Party*, cigarettes are stubbed out in a potted plant, destroying a living thing's home, while a cat has trampled over the decadent spread and has now ruined the man's whiskey by drinking it. Because everyone is distracted by the social drama of the party, nobody seems to notice that the scene has begun to unravel. In *Follow It Down* and *The Careful Cautious Kind*, water has seeped into their dresses as they traverse the river. The old treehouse on the left side of *The Careful Cautious Kind* is a direct reference to a past and possibly abandoned childhood, and is situated between a hollowed tree hiding a whiskey bottle and an uprooted tree.

The Beautiful and Untamable Forest

The forest itself makes for the perfect environment to use as a psychological platform for journey because it, like both the real and mythical creatures and plants that inhabit forests, are not fully understood– and because the forest not fully understood, it is othered and shrouded in suspicion and ethereality, much like how humans push the darkest and most complicated elements of their individual psychologies to the depths of their personalities. This entanglement and depth is represented in the paintings through interwoven roots, glowing plants, and mysterious holes through which different perspectives of the world can be accessed. Like the forest that trails through *Foresteria*, the physical forest is a very complex ecosystem that relies on the protection and intelligence of trees and how they work together to create the landscape. Trees, the most anthropomorphic beings of the plant kingdom, relay messages through chemicals and an underground internet of fungi known as the wood-wide web (Wohlleben 10). Groups and species of trees have been discovered to actually migrate, although at a much slower rate than animals. “Mother trees,” the oldest trees in the forest and the ones who have survived more and are therefore the “wisest,” show favoritism for their own offspring in that they streamline messages and nutrients to the saplings that came from them, as opposed to cousins that came from a different “family” of trees. Notable trees such as the Fortingall Yew or Columbia’s “Big Tree” have been given celebrity status as they have become recognized as respected elders of the human communities that have sprung up around them. They have been here longer and have therefore “seen” more,

although what they have seen can never be communicated to us because we do not experience the world the way they do and have no common language to figure any of it out.

Anyone who has spent any real time in a forest can certainly buy into this scientific theory of how forests operate, because it really does feel like we are stepping foot inside something else's home when we walk through the woods. It is quite apparent that the wood exists as a separate territory that is open to all and that favors no one. Except for the catastrophic damage that humans have done to forests worldwide, the existence of humans is of no consequence to the society of trees. In the forest becoming a more and more central character throughout the paintings, the human figures become less central as they cede to and participate with the forest instead of controlling it by keeping separate from it. They go deeper and deeper into the forest as it begins to overtake them. It is what Gaston Bachelard calls the intimate immensity which gives us the "always rather anxious impression of 'going deeper and deeper' into a limitless world." He continues saying, "Soon, if we do not know where we are going, we no longer know where we are," (Bachelard, 185). As the figures go through the imaginative forest of *Foresteria*, they become lost in their experience with it, culminating in the final painting of being confronted with just the forest itself with no signs to point the way back home to safety and comfort. But usually, we do not find ourselves in these types of situations in the forest, for we often don't stay long enough or stray far enough from the trail to become lost. However, one does not have to stay in the forest very long at all to have that feeling of "going deeper and

deeper into a limitless world," as the path behind us becomes obscured by the fading light, and even though we can find our way out by remembering turns at specific trees and rocks, the woods often still feels new enough to give us the uncanny impression of being an intruder, having only oneself for companionship and one's own inner monologue and knowledge for finding the way through and hopefully out.

The Installation of Foresteria

The *Foresteria* paintings are meant to hang in sequential order and read right to left like a text. Originally, the paintings were designed to hang in a linear format so that each right edge leads into the left edge of the next painting. This would enable the viewer to walk through the forest with the figures and meditate on each painting both as a separate entity and a slice of a greater narrative. In order to make the viewer feel almost immersed in *Foresteria*, all of the paintings were constructed at four feet tall, and some of the figures rendered almost life size. The perspective shifts force the viewer to assess each painting separately and is key to how the paintings are working, reminding us that we may feel empathy towards someone else's experience, but we can never truly understand it. Related to this is how some of the figures themselves are not fully integrated into their surroundings, which mimics the collage aesthetic and reminds the viewer that not only do these figures feel out of place in their surroundings, but that the paintings are also an imagistic rendering of the forest gleaned from linking the forest landscape to emotional trauma and awakening. The relationship between humans and the landscape is seen in how the figures do not always seem to fit into the world perfectly– they almost do, but they are separate from it, as is hinted at by the red line on the side of the girl's leg in *Trained to Bear Fruit* and the disappearing arm in *Follow It Down*. To further push the imaginative quality of the work, elements of the landscape morph into fantastical wonders, where root masses become possible portals and staircases emerge from tree roots. In *The Dinner Party* and *Follow It Down,* the forest looms in the

background and encroaches on the window ledge to remind the viewer that our own personal psychodrama is always present, and that eventually we must go inward, and into the forest to explore it and overcome it.

In order to fit the gallery, the intended installation of *Foresteria* had to be altered, and while the connectivity of the edges was lost, what was gained through hanging the paintings in a circular fashion was far greater. Hung in order, and threaded together by color and form, the paintings still held to the sequential narrative that was intended. However, now in a circular format, they interacted with each other through adjacent and opposite walls, and grouped themselves into three visual chapters.

In the first “chapter”, hung on two adjacent walls, the girl in *Trained to Bear Fruit* looks towards the suburban development of the yard where *The Dinner Party* is being held if the painting continued outside of the canvas. In *The Dinner Party*, the male figure gestures diagonally outward to the girl in *Trained to Bear Fruit,* indicating a potential relationship between the two figures. On the central wall of the gallery, *Follow It Down, The Careful Cautious Kind,* and *An Unfamiliar Forest* hang in unison to form the “second” chapter and speak to the notion of getting lost in order to be found. The solitary figures of *Follow It Down* and *An Unfamiliar Forest* position themselves inward, directing the viewer towards the figure in *The Careful Cautious Kind*, triangularly framed by two trees, one of which makes its way into *An Unfamiliar Forest.* The girl in *Follow It Down* is at the point of deciding whether or not she would rather go back to the party or fully commit to exploring the depths of the mystical forest which she is on the

edge of. The woman in *The Careful Cautious Kind* has embarked on her journey and is in the process of knowingly getting lost, while the man in *An Unfamiliar Forest* has surrendered to the mystery of where he has found himself and is investigating the strange space in order to better understand it. In chapter three, where the void in *Slippage* mimics the possible rift between the two figures, the viewer is implored to follow the woman's gaze downward into the void and out of the painting into *Foresteria*, where glowing trees beckon the viewer to enter into the unknown wild. The first and third "chapters" hang opposite each other and enable the viewer to form a connection between *The Dinner Party* and *Slippage*- the act of performance in social situations such as lavish parties, and the rift that such performance can create within oneself if one does not believe in that lifestyle. If the paintings were hung flesh against each other as they were intended, the communication between the paintings would have been diminished and the narrative not as complex. The circular format also fosters the sense of enclosure within a forest, giving more life to the landscape and a greater sense of autonomy to the landscape.

Conclusion

Foresteria is an exploration of how the psychological, internal world can be externalized in paint as a liminal space where the viewer is taken from the cultivated landscape of the garden to the strange wildness of the forest. The figures in the paintings mirror specific moments in shared human experience as they make their way through the forest, escaping from the reality of the everyday in pursuit of a deeper sense of self. The forest is chosen as the metaphorical space for such a personal investigation because it, like our past experiences, complex belief structures, and deepest yearnings and secrets, has been kept at an arm's length by humans. It is a place that we both fear and love- a place that is filled with life but also danger that is both imaginary and real. This concept is reflected in how society at large views the forest– as something into which we can only go so far before we long for the familiarity of home. In crafting the forest into the platform for a psychological narrative, the landscape became a character of its own, grounding the figures into strange environments specifically rendered to fit each one's current experience. The promises and disillusionments of womanhood, the longing to leave others' expectations behind, the search for self, moments of self-critique, and giant leaps of faith are present in *Foresteria* because the figure and landscape have been used together to create the narrative- they are dependent on each other and would not function in the same way if the other was not simultaneously employed.

I came to making these paintings as a young woman in her late twenties, and as someone who has spent a great deal of time feeling nomadic and lost, so

it is no surprise that the women of *Foresteria* are at pivotal points in their lives where everything feels both malleable and fragile. In a direct rebuttal against the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic that is used throughout the paintings, the women move against the men and forward into the forest, as opposed to mimicking plant-life that trips and clings to Pre-Raphaelite men as they make their way through the underbrush. When installed sequentially in a circular fashion, the paintings gesture to each other and create new narratives within the work, as our own life experiences influence our perception of the future and recollection of the past.

Foresteria

Figure 1
Colleen Francis Smith
Trained to Bear Fruit
Oil on Linen
48” x 24”

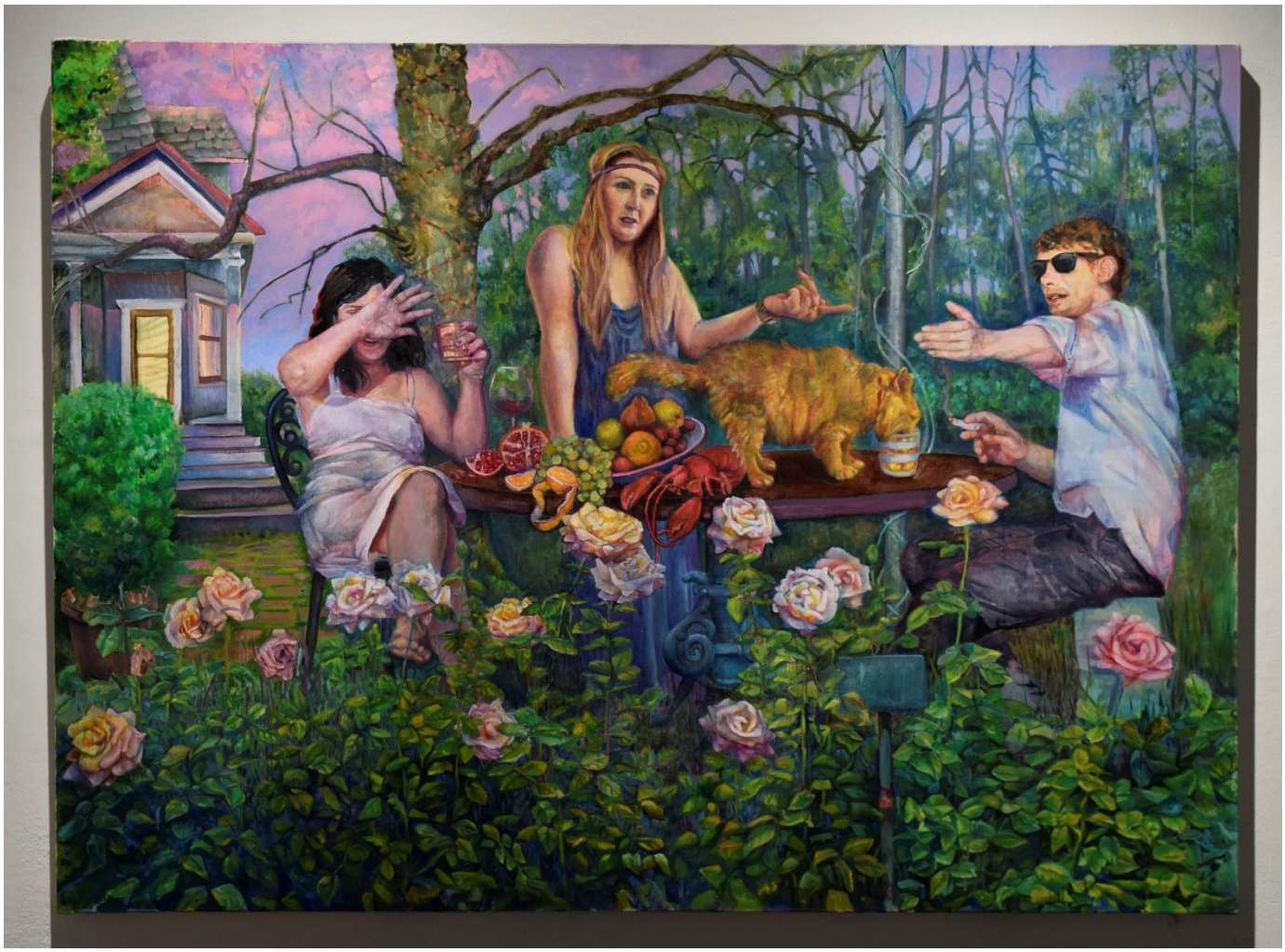

Figure 2
Colleen Francis Smith
The Dinner Party
Oil on Canvas
48” x 65”

Figure 3
Colleen Francis Smith
Follow it Down
Oil on Linen
48” x 48”

Figure 4
Colleen Francis Smith
The Careful Cautious Kind
Oil on Canvas
48” x 78”

Figure 5
Colleen Francis Smith
An Unfamiliar Forest
Oil on Canvas
48” x 48”

Figure 6
Colleen Francis Smith
Slippage
Oil on Canvas
65” x 48”

Figure 7
Colleen Francis Smith
Foresteria
Oil on Canvas
48” x 24”

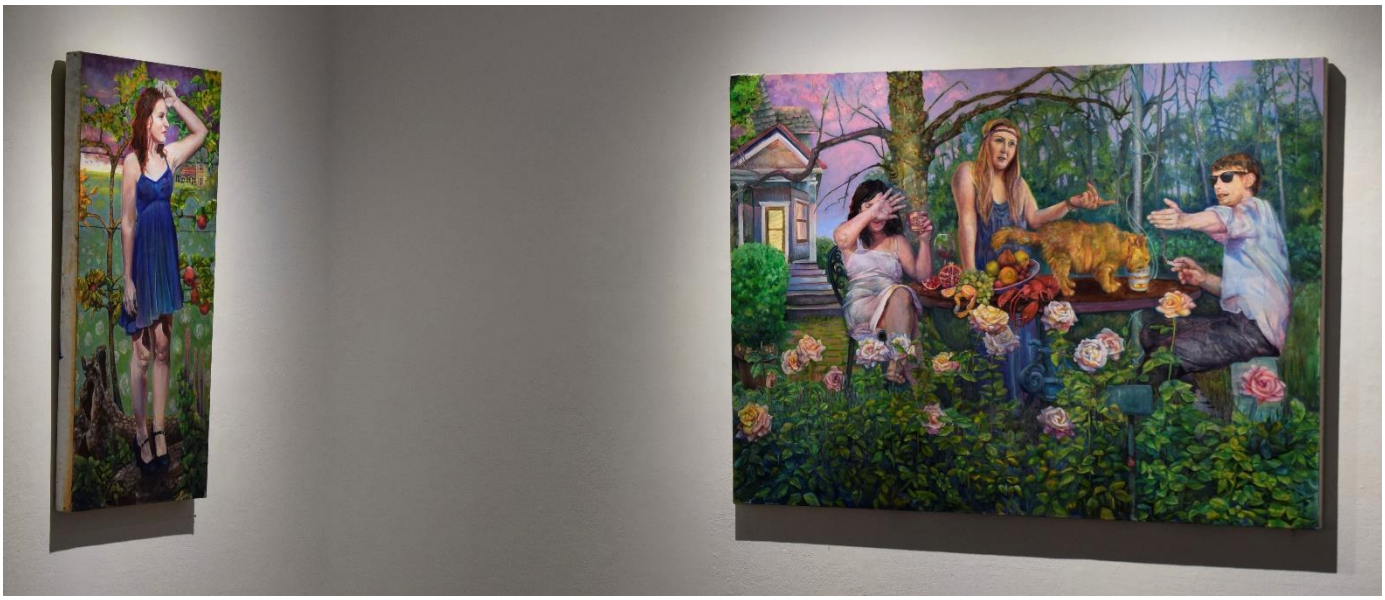

Figure 8
Colleen Francis Smith
Foresteria Installation
(Chapter One)

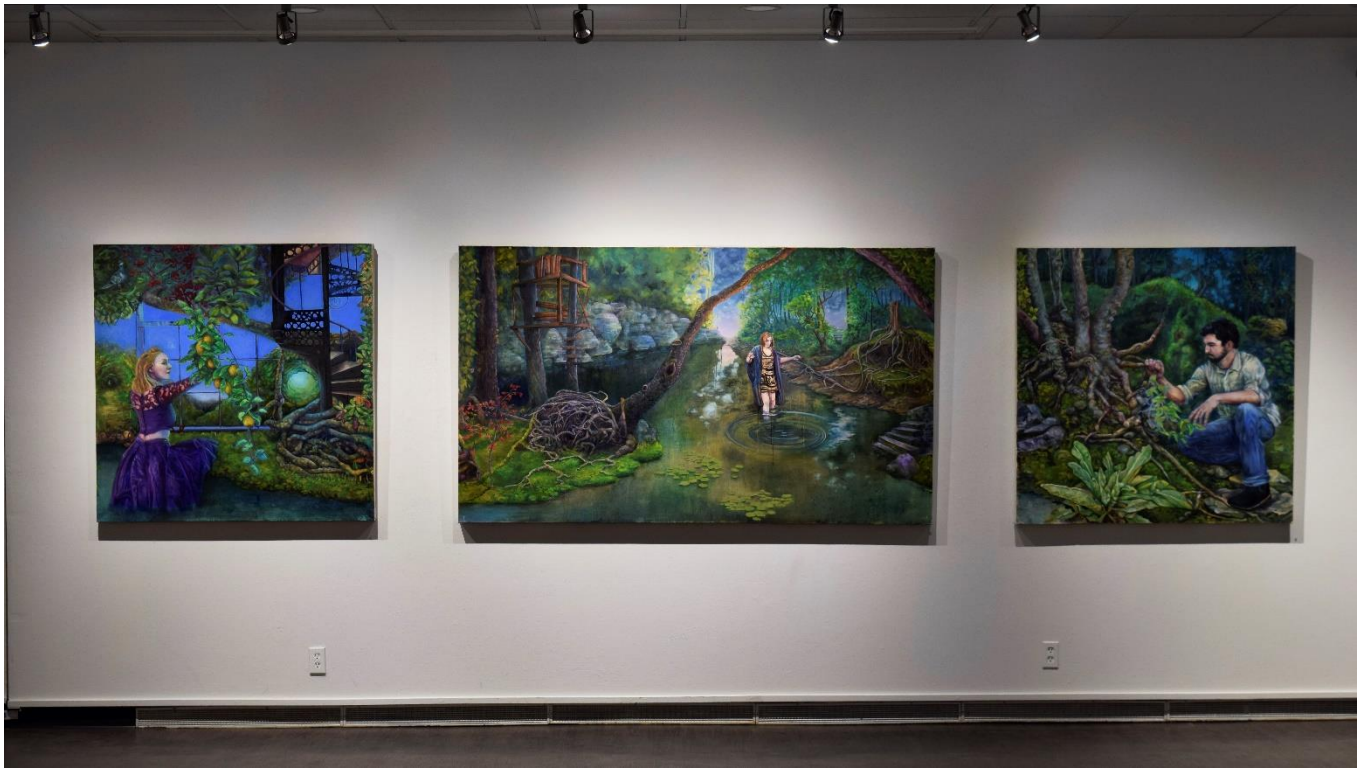

Figure 9
Colleen Francis Smith
Foresteria Installation
(Chapter Two)

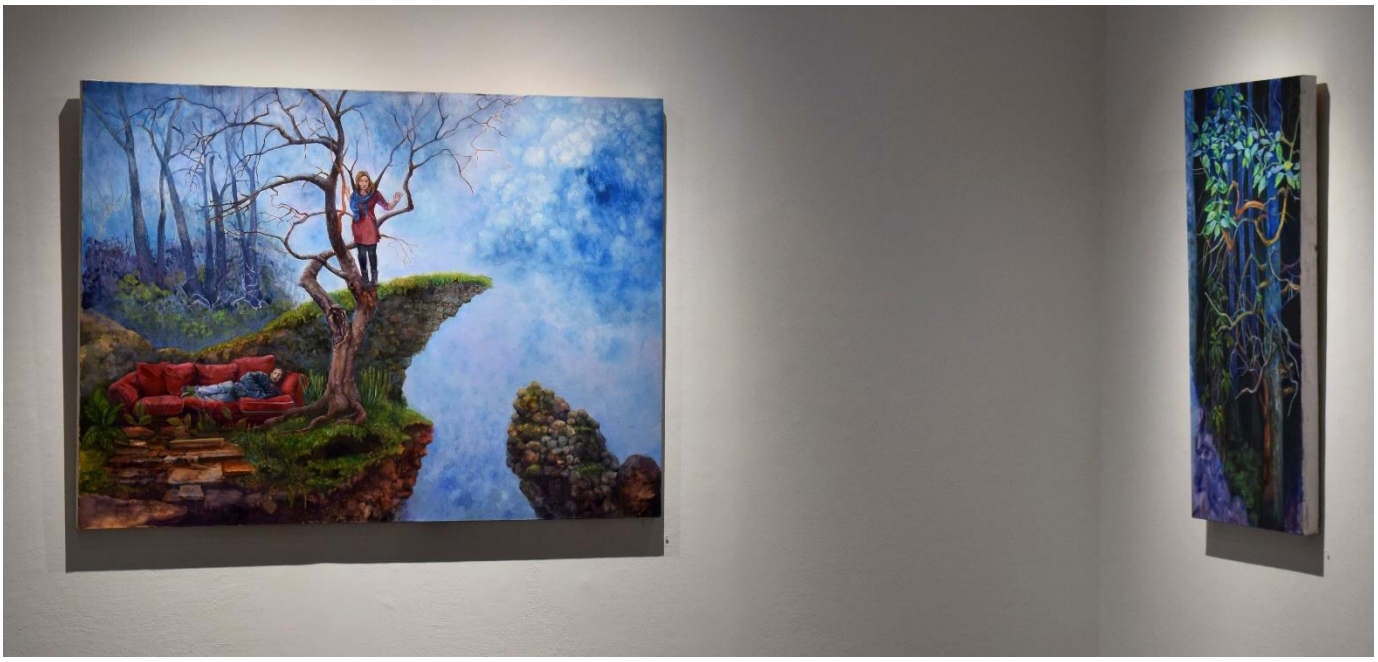

Figure 10
Colleen Francis Smith
Foresteria Installation
(Chapter Three)

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