Scholarship Visual Arts 2025

93306 Painting

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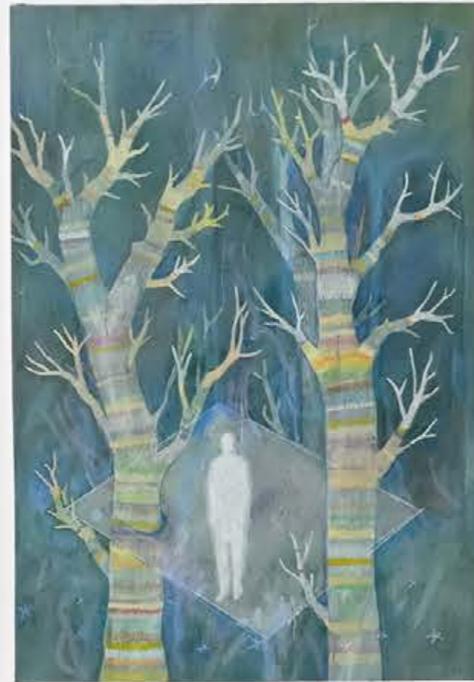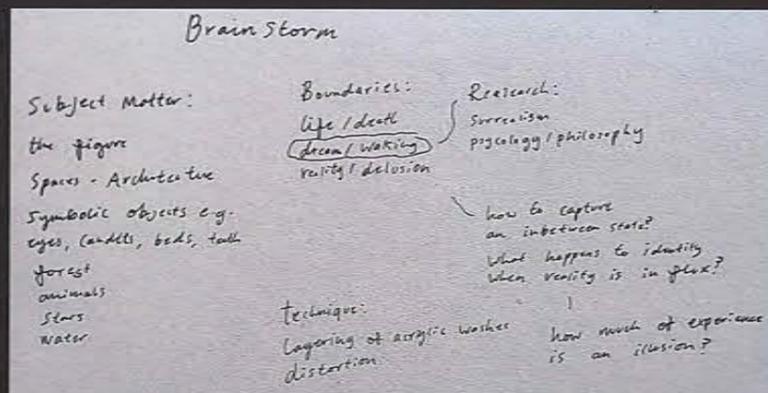
Dreams and the Subconscious

Dreams & the Subconscious

Proposal

Being human means existing in two worlds at once — the physical one we share and the invisible one inside our minds. I've always been fascinated by how we experience life through both perception and imagination, and how dreams blur the boundary between the two. For my painting portfolio, I aim to explore the subconscious mind and how it shapes our understanding of self and reality.

The aim of this body of work is to translate the experience of dreaming and perceiving into visual form — creating paintings that feel like psychological landscapes, where fragments of the mind materialise and dissolve. I want the viewer to sense something familiar yet unreachable, as if they are seeing into a memory or thought of their own. I am interested in how these inner experiences can be externalised through visual language.

Initial Brainstorm

The Nightmare, 1781, Henry Fuseli

Art Movement Influences

The Surrealist movement, which began in Paris in the 1920s, sought to unlock the creative potential of the unconscious mind. Influenced by Freud's ideas on dreams and psychoanalysis, Surrealist artists aimed to move beyond logic and reason, expressing inner thoughts, fears, and desires through dreamlike, symbolic imagery. They often used techniques such as automatism — creating without conscious control — to access subconscious ideas. Artists like Salvador Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, and Leonora Carrington, explored irrational, poetic worlds where reality and imagination merged. At its core, Surrealism celebrates intuition, symbolism, and the power of dreams as a way to reveal deeper truths about the human mind.

The Surrealist movement inspired me to explore dreams, symbolism, and the unconscious. Moving beyond conventional depictions of reality to explore the depths of the human mind.
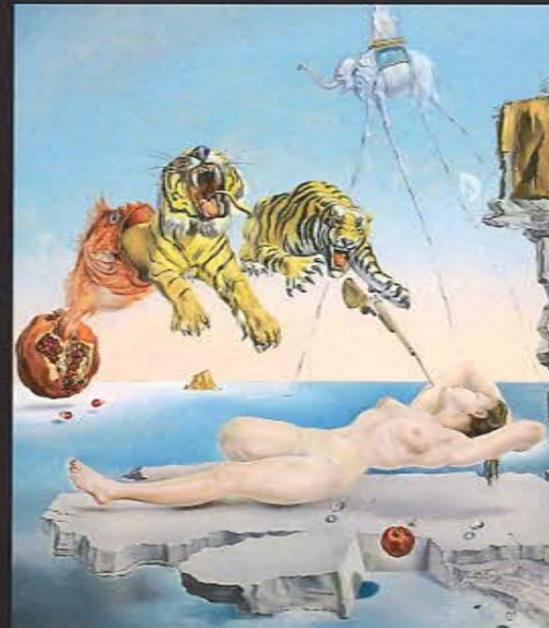
Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate One Minute Before Awakening, 1944, Salvador Dali

"There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception."
— Aldous Huxley

Psychological Influences

Psychology, particularly the study of dreams by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, has played a significant role in understanding the subconscious. Freud believed that dreams reveal repressed desires and unconscious conflicts, often disguised through symbolism and distorted imagery. He saw dreams as a pathway to understanding hidden emotions. Jung offered a different perspective, viewing dreams as a window into the collective unconscious, filled with archetypes and universal symbols that connect individual experience to broader human themes. Together, their ideas suggest that dreams are both deeply personal and part of a shared human experience, rich with meaning and symbolic potential.

These psychological theories influence my own artistic practice by encouraging me to explore the subconscious through symbolic and intuitive imagery.
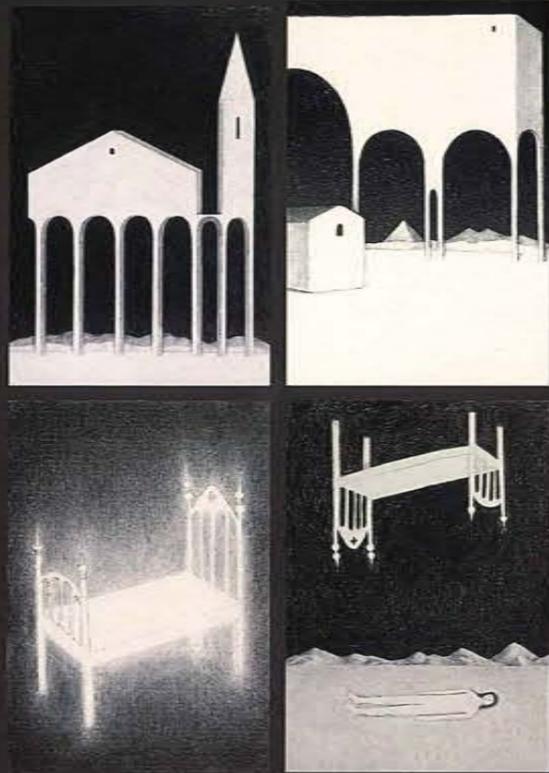

David Lynch often used dream sequences in his work.

Andrei Tarkovsky often Referenced the subconscious.

First Idea & Development

First Drawings

These four pencil works explore surreal architectural forms and floating beds as symbols of the unconscious. The beds began to emerge as recurring dream motifs — suspended, glowing, isolated — suggesting the vulnerability of the sleeping body and the threshold between waking and dreaming. By beginning the board with a bed, it acts as a literal and symbolic gateway to dreams, mirroring the very beginning of sleep and introducing the viewer to the central themes of my work.

Giorgio de Chirico

I was influenced heavily by Giorgio de Chirico, a Surrealist artist who uses simplified structures, deep shadow, and static compositions to create a sense of unease and silence.

The Enigma of a Day, 1914
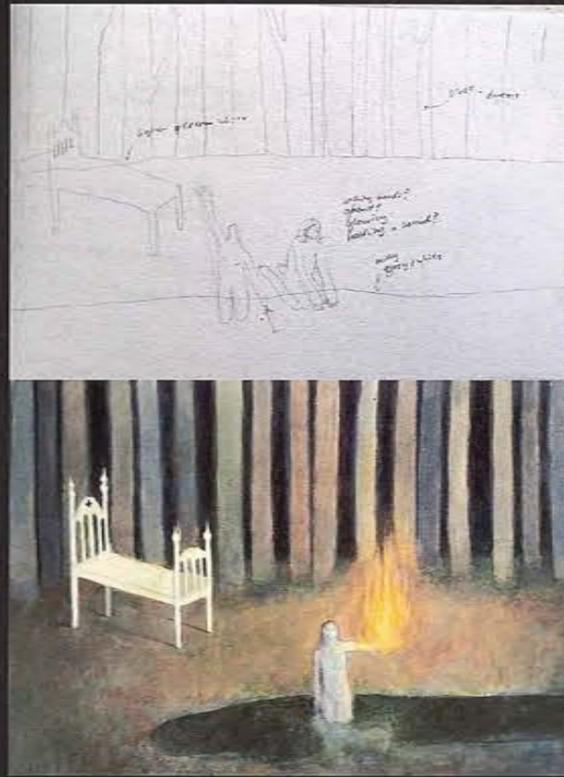
In this painting I've carried forward the bed motif but placed it in a more narrative, emotionally charged context. The bed in the forest introduces an archetype, almost mystical landscape — the figure with the flame becomes a symbolic presence. There is now more movement and mood. The tree mirrors the structure of the vertical pillars in my architectural drawings.

Here I try something new. In the triple-faced figure painting, I've shifted away from physical spaces towards more internal, abstracted forms. The eyes are scattered and misaligned — suggesting fractured identity, shifting perception, or altered consciousness. This marks a new direction where the subconscious is represented less through location and more through psychological presence.

Colour

The colour palette is muted, this adds to the dark moody tone of night and brings the focus to the tonal shifts between light and dark.

Process

Across both paintings, I've embraced a more fluid, painterly approach, replacing the crisp pencil shading with softened, layered glazes and slightly more muted tones. I'm interested in how these visual shifts reflect deeper understanding of dreams as fluid, unstable, and emotionally resonant.

Technical Focus:

I employed layered painting techniques to create soft edges and ambiguity, mixing acrylic paint with glazing medium to build up depth.

Contrast

A recurring motif that I developed in these early works was vertical black and white lines. In my initial drawings these appeared as architectural pillars, inspired by Giorgio de Chirico's use of classical structures. As my work progressed, I carried this idea into my paintings, transforming the pillars into trees. I was drawn to the idea of what is hidden in the subconscious versus what is revealed in the conscious, and I felt that this contrast could be symbolised through the alternating black and white stripes.

Developing the First Board

Symbolism

Symbolism is an art movement of the late 19th century that sought to express inner emotions, imagination, and the unseen rather than external reality. Symbolist artists used dreamlike imagery, myth, and personal symbols to communicate ideas that couldn't be explained logically.

Symbolism marked a shift away from literal representation and towards the psychological and spiritual, which later influenced Surrealism. Artists like Odilon Redon, and Félicien Rops created imaginary worlds filled with recurring symbols that reflected the human condition.

The Eye like a Strange Balloon, 1882, Odilon Redon

Pornocrates, 1878, Félicien Rops

Like the Symbolists, I use imagery as a metaphor — recurring motifs (archways, trees, stars, dot eyes) represent thoughts or inner states rather than literal scenes. I'm interested in how objects in dreams take on meaning, e.g. the dot eyes represent the consciousness self, the trees and the arches represent the contrast between wake and sleep, and the thin lines represent thoughts.

Developing My Own Symbols

In this painting, I began exploring how I could represent what is happening inside a person's mind, rather than just the outer dream scene. I used the figure as a vessel, illustrating fragments of thought around them — fleeting memories, dream symbols, and subconscious associations. This marks a shift in my approach: instead of just 'what does the dream look like?', 'what does the dreamer think and feel?'.

I kept elements from earlier works — particularly the black dot eyes, which have appeared throughout my paintings. They suggest a mask: a still, unreadable conscious self. But surrounding that stillness is an overflow of subconscious imagery. I layered fine white line drawings across the surface to express these thoughts — a continuation of my interest in contrasts between stillness and psychological activity, structure and fluidity.

The grid of arches within the figure's torso directly references my earlier graphite works, where classical architectural forms represented empty, dreamlike space. Here, they reappear inside the body, symbolising an internal architecture — the structures we carry within us, consciously or not.

In the second painting, I returned to a sparse, dreamlike landscape like those in my early compositions. I've layered delicate white drawings, echoing the symbolic marks from earlier works, but now more abstract. The illuminated figure stands alone, devoid of any details, alluding to the idea that identity can become emphemeral in dream states.

Tree Motif

I developed the tree motif from my earlier painting, now the trees are covered in horizontal coloured strips. This is something I experimented with while trying to capture how the ordinary becomes fantastical when dreaming.

Love school, 1999

Séraphine Pick

At this stage of the board I introduced Séraphine Pick as an artist model. Her use of layering, ghostly outlines, and dreamlike symbolism inspired me to think differently about how to represent the subconscious. I was particularly drawn to how her figures often seem emotionally present, but visually obscured — surrounded by delicate, fragmented imagery. I experimented with ethereal white lines to echo this idea of mental overflow, mapping fragments of thought over a quiet surface.

Pick's approach also encouraged me to embrace ambiguity. Rather than planning every element, I allowed some shapes and lines to surface gradually — just as memories or symbols do in dreams.

Deepening the Concept

The Next Stage

These four works mark a key development in my practice. My focus shifted away from painterly precision towards colour, layering, and abstraction, inspired by Leonora Carrington. Through this, I enanbled myself to explore absurdity and the surreal.

Throughout the series, I constructed dreamscape spaces where the external world mirrors inner states of vulnerability and memory. In my first work I continued my recurring motif of striped trees. In the first and third paintings the house appears mirroring my old architectural drawings, but they're less classical and more ambiguous.

Coloured Square Motif

As the work developed, I began experimenting with a new pattern. Previously I had used whispy drawn lines to illuminate the ephemeral nature of dreams, but here I start using coloured squares to illustrate the fragmented and glitch-like nature of memory within dreams.

Technical Development

Here, I started experimenting with a new technical process, layering acrylic and coloured pencils to create a drawn quality within the paintings. This blending of mediums allows me to balance structure and spontaneity, mirroring the tension between the conscious and subconscious that underpins my whole portfolio.

Colour

My use of colour has evolved, moving from dark muted tones to more vibrant, layered shifts in hue. This was inspired by the bright colours of the glitch motif, and also the change in technique enabled me to add colourful highlights in pencil.

Operation Wednesday, 1969

Leonora Carrington

At this point in my portfolio I introduce Leonora Carrington, a British-Mexican Surrealist painter, as an artist model. Rather than directly referencing her formal style, I was drawn to her themes and process — especially her intuitive approach to painting and her interest in dreams, myth, and the subconscious, which are central to my work. Like Carrington, I aimed to lean into the unknown, allowing meaning to emerge gradually through layering and the surreal relationships between figures and setting.

Exploring Pattern

In these works, I explored how the patterns we see and imagine connect to the mind's internal systems — the visual noise that forms when we close our eyes, or the flickering dots that appear when we stand up too fast. I'm interested in how these biological and psychological phenomena mirror the patterns of dreams and memory — fragmented, shifting, and often illogical. These patterns become a bridge between the physical body and the subconscious mind, translating invisible mental processes into visual rhythm.

Building on this, ideas from psychology and philosophy provide a framework for understanding these phenomena. Gestalt theory explains how the brain instinctively finds pattern and meaning even in randomness, shaping how we perceive and organise visual information. Hypnagogic imagery describes the fleeting visual fragments that appear in the transitional state between wakefulness and sleep. And phenomenology considers how perception and consciousness shape our experience of the world. Together, these ideas help frame my work as an investigation into how the mind perceives, constructs, and organises visual information, and how these processes relate to dreams and the subconscious.

My Experiments with Pattern
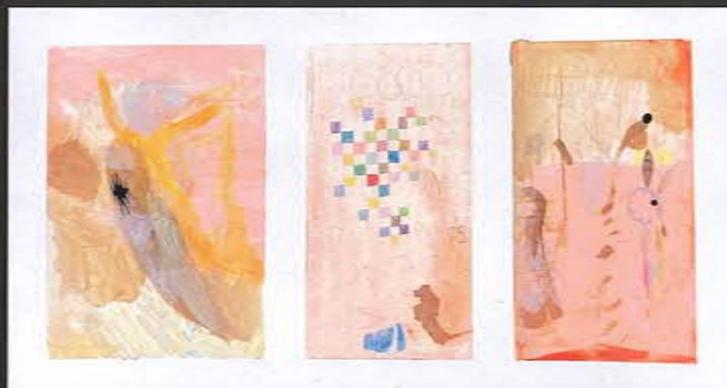
Here I layered paint and coloured pencil to explore different ways of mark making. I experimented with larger forms and the repetition of smaller marks and felt that the smaller marks represented the fractured feeling of dreaming most accurately.


Incorporating what I've Learnt

Pattern has shifted from a surface element to a conceptual one, representing the rhythm of thought, memory and emotion. Through repetition and variation, I visualise how the subconscious reconstructs images, reflecting how perception fragments reality — much like the brain processing light, shape, and emotion simultaneously. Pattern has become both a visual and philosophical metaphor: a structure that represents the order beneath chaos, the way consciousness organises the abstract.

This work builds on my previous ideas, further exploring the relationship between memory and perception. I reintroduced the stripped tree motif from earlier paintings but placed it within a more ambiguous, interior setting. The coloured square motif becomes more dominant, transforming from a surface pattern into the very structure of the image — like fragments of recollection or shifting pixels of thought. The translucent layering of acrylic and coloured pencil allows the image to flicker between solidity and dissolution, echoing the way memory and identity are inseparable from the spaces we inhabit.
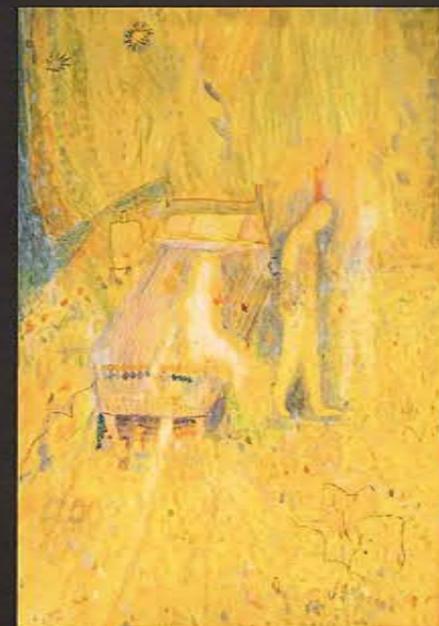
Here I pushed pattern and abstraction further, painting a figure as it moves through a yellow room. The three silhouettes represent the non-linear way time unfolds in dreams. The coloured square motif has evolved into smaller, more fluid marks, which express movement and free up my hand. This approach was inspired by my studies of pattern, and I feel like these marks reflect the ways the mind interprets and distorts sensory information.

Pink Snow, 1991

Ski Jacket, 1994

Peter Doig

As I became more interested in pattern and motifs, I started looking at Peter Doig's work. He layers paint in thin washes, creating texture and pattern. His work is just as much in the realm of dream and memory as in reality.

Doig himself notes that he looks for "an image that is not about reality, but one that is somehow in between the actuality of the scene and something that is in your head." (Doig, *The Guardian*, 2013). In much of his work the subject seems to traverse not simply a landscape, but an interior, psychological terrain. This quality has inspired my own practice, where I use pattern, colour, and abstraction to explore the spaces that exist between perception, dream, and thought.

Automatism

Automatism in surrealism is a technique where an artist bypasses conscious control to allow the unconscious mind to guide the creative process, producing spontaneous and uninhibited art. The core principle is to tap into the subconscious as a source of creative inspiration. Artists achieve this through methods such as automatic drawing where movements flow without planning, censorship, or rational interference. The goal is to reveal the "actual functioning of thought' and express unconscious psychic forces. Surrealist artists like André Breton and Joan Miró practised automatism to create works that were instinctive, dreamlike, and rich in subconscious meaning.
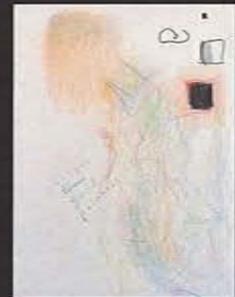

Head of a Catalan Peasant, 1925, Joan Miró

Exquisite Corpse, 1930, André Breton

Instead of sketching out the composition for my paintings like I'd done previously, I began by sketching some automatic drawings in coloured pencil to explore this new way of working.

I started with some very loose sketches on A3 paper, I let my hand move around the page without thinking, letting line, shape, and colour emerge as I went.

Then I moved onto A4 pieces of paper and I slowed down, I drew shapes spontaneously without censorship, then I coloured them in methodically, switching from pure automatism to more controlled, critical reflection. This process worked well for me as I felt I could let myself draw without judgment while still controlling the outcome.


Integrating New Ideas

In these paintings I delved into abstraction, shifting away from recognisable dreamscapes toward expressing the fractured sensation of dreaming through shape, colour, and pattern. I had already begun exploring these ideas in earlier works through motifs like coloured squares, surreal figures, and a growing focus on colour and form, but here I've allowed those elements to take control of the composition.

In this work, I focused on shape and colour. I built the composition around circular and triangular structures. Figures appear faintly within these forms, dissolving into the geometry. The reccurring coloured squares link back to earlier works but now act as structural anchors, holding the composition together while implying mental fragmentation. The silhouette of the angel and devil implies the moral contrasts in the mind: light and dark, good and evil, awake and asleep. This is something my work has explored throughout my portfolio.

Here, I completely leaned into intuition, bringing the theme of the subconscious directly into my painting process. I sketched a face using blind contour, allowing the image to unfold without interference from conscious control. I then extended the colour pattern motif, exploring how it could represent the fractured mind — the scattered pieces of memory and thought that surround us, in-between tangible reality and abstract fluid thought.
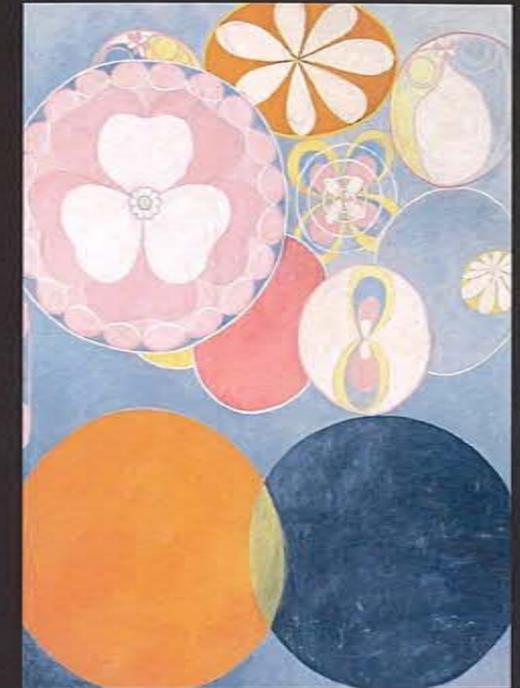
Childhood, 1907, Hilma af Klint

Hilma af Klint

I introduce Hilma af Klint as an artist model for these final works as I was looking for an artist who explores abstraction and the subconscious. Her use of geometry, colour, and symbolism to express spiritual and psychological ideas strongly connects to my own exploration of the subconscious. Hilma af Klint described her process: "The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brush stroke." I felt like my process was moving towards intuition, and she inspired me to abandon all preconceived notions of what I was going to paint and just start.

Exploring Process

Final Synthesis

Shifting Goals

Across my portfolio, my focus has shifted from trying to accurately depict what dreams look like to expressing how they feel. Early works were carefully planned and structured, but as I moved forward, my process became increasingly intuitive — reflecting my theme of the subconscious. For this final piece, I wanted to bring this development full circle through a self-portrait that ties together my exploration of process, perception, and identity.

The self-portrait felt like a natural conclusion to my investigation into the mind, as it allowed me to turn inward and reflect on how these themes exist within myself. I was particularly interested in the fracturing of selfhood — how memory, dream, and perception each hold a slightly different version of who we are. This idea of multiplicity runs throughout my work and comes together here as a visual exploration of identity as layered and unstable.

Process

I wanted this work to encapsulate what I've learnt throughout my portfolio, especially regarding process. I've had to unlearn my previous expectations of what a "successful" painting process should look like to fully engage with my theme of the subconscious. I wanted the way I made my final piece to reflect this journey from rigid to fluid.

I began conventionally, with a thumbnail and a stylised sketch, before painting the face and layering coloured pencil and acrylic paint. Here, I stepped away from my old routine and implemented what I'd learnt about intuition. I allowed the image to unfold instinctively, adding blind contour fragments, layering multiple sketches of my face on top of each other. Each layer represents a performed version of self — drawn without control of correction, guided only by intuition. The final result captures both the subject and the act of searching for it — a mirror of the subconscious itself: shifting, layered, and in constant flux.

Identity in the Digital Age

These days, finding a solid sense of self with all the information that is being pushed onto my generation feels increasingly difficult. In this digital age we have the opportunity to be constantly consuming media via scrolling. Our identities become curated and performed, existing as projections rather than realities. This creates a split between who we present ourselves to be online and who we are internally. With this constant bombardment of information and the constant need to perform, there is no time to simply exist in silence with yourself. and I feel that on a subconscious level this is fracturing our attention, distorting our emotions, and fragmenting our sense of identity.

I wanted to touch on this idea in my painting: the subconscious layers of performance that are all pulling in different directions. The self becomes a multiple, shifting and unstable — a collage of thought, influence, and expectation. This idea connects back to the wider themes in my portfolio — the fragmentation of perception, the subconscious, and the search for authenticity beneath the surface image.

Thumbnail

Sketch

Painting of the Face

Blind Contored Layering

Beyond the Board

Scale

In parallel with my portfolio, I've been exploring larger-scale works inspired by Hilma af Klint who used large canvases to explore colour, geometry, and symmetrical form. Working at this scale has allowed me to loosen up and engage my whole body in the painting process, using movement as a creative tool. I've found that painting physically — with sweeping gestures and intuitive mark-making — deepens my connection to the subconscious themes that underpin my practice.

Moving forward, I want to continue working on a larger scale to further develop this sense of physicality and intuition. I'm interested in how scale can shift perception, creating immersive spaces that reflect the expansiveness of the mind and dreams.

*Orgy For Ten People In One Body, 2022*

Sculpture

I'm interested in extending my exploration of the subconscious and identity into sculptural form, inspired by the work of Isabelle Albuquerque. Her series Orgy for Ten People in One Body uses cast figures and surreal materials to explore emotion, embodiment, and transformation. I'm drawn to the way her sculptures feel both intimate and uncanny — a physical manifestation of psychological states.

Like my paintings, her work blurs the boundary between inner experience and external form, translating feeling into tangible shape. I'd like to experiment with how body-like structures, organic textures, and translucent materials could express the fragmented and layered nature of dreams. The process of physically constructing a form — rather than painting it — could become another way to access subconscious imagery through touch and material.

In future practice, I'd like to create small-scale experimental sculptures that reflect the symbolic language I've been building in my paintings — such as figures dissolving into pattern, architectural fragments, or suspended elements — exploring how the subconscious might exist within three-dimensional space.

The Dreamers, 2014
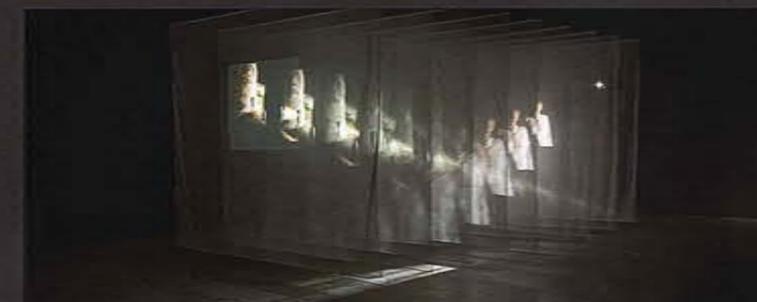
The Veiling, 1995

Video Art

I'm also interested in developing my practice through video and time-based media, inspired by Bill Viola's immersive video installations. His slow, meditative use of movement, sound, and light explores emotion, spirituality, and transformation — ideas that align closely with my own focus on the subconscious and dream experience.

What draws me to Viola's work is how he uses time and atmosphere to create psychological space. His videos feel like living paintings, where emotion unfolds gradually and the viewer is invited into an altered state of perception. In my own future work, I'd like to experiment with video projection, layering, and sound to evoke the sensation of drifting through a dream — using motion, rhythm, and light as expressive tools rather than relying on narrative. This would allow me to extend the visual language of my paintings into immersive, sensory experiences that mirror the shifting states of consciousness I explored through abstraction.