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over certain undecidedness these heartstring  
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over certain undecidedness these heartstring intimations

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Visual and Performing Arts  
James Madison University

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by Martha May Hemingway

May 2019

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Accepted by the faculty of the School of Art, Design and Art History, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

---

Project Advisor: Susan D. Zurbrigg, MFA  
Professor, School of Art, Design and Art History

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

---

Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,  
Dean, Honors College

---

Reader: John M. Ros, MFA  
Assistant Professor, School of Art, Design and Art History

---

Reader: Agnes Carbrey, MFA  
Instructor, School of Art, Design and Art History

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#### PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at Grace St. Crit. Space Gallery in Duke Hall on March 18-22, 2019.

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**Abstract**

*over certain undecidedness these heartstring intimations* is Martha Hemingway's Honors College Capstone Thesis Exhibition culminating a two-year-long abstracted cycle of textured conversation, internal eye contact, and endless playlist-making. Hemingway's work is based in process-oriented reflections on habitual behavior, manifestation of sentiment, and sense of self. Her paintings draw inspiration from the ways in which we approach and avoid our internal and external routines – how degrees of our subconscious considerations affect how we extend ourselves to others. Individual auditory preferences of different colliding souls have carved a space for her in a language of empathetic abstraction – attempting to elaborate the curious beauty and pain of awareness; confront memory; seek out a more compassionate existence.

*over certain undecidedness these heartstring intimations* is an ongoing attempt to grasp the cadences of the deeply-embedded idiosyncrasies that both distinguish us as individuals and irrevocably link us to one another – a collection of affectionate guesses.

## ***Reflection***

During the week of March 18-22, 2019, sixteen paintings were installed in the first floor critique space gallery of Duke Hall at James Madison University (Fig. 1-18). Loose canvas threads trailing down walls, peering over edges, and cradling words, these paintings were shown as tokens of intensive focus on the projection of internal and external dialogues onto our visible selves.

For years I have been fascinated with poignancy of the uniqueness of personality traits, and more specifically, the behaviors that we collectively, and individually return to again and again. These are undoubtedly compelling when we're aware of them – and especially when we aren't. These uncertain, yet distilled and cemented moments of repeated manners can be found in every moment:

furrowed brows in headlights;

the whistle of a 1990s smash hit;

a laugh that spills forth like carbonated light bulbs.

An element of these that began to direct my hand is the subtle elusiveness of some habitual behaviors (whether physical or buried deeper within). We can find ourselves growing so accustomed to them or so unaware of their significance that we bury the opportunity to know someone for their idiosyncrasies. The works of the exhibition speak to the process of making affectionate and deliberate guesses about what isn't explicitly pushed to the surface. This project has been firmly rooted, above all else, in the desire to make connections with the restraints we take for granted in the souls of the ones we love -

and to recognize there is nothing certain about getting at the heart of how we think about who we are.

My process in all of this has been threefold, based in sound, in word, and in the paint itself. My childhood was spent in a very musical household, and the melodious nature of things has always drawn me in. Maybe due in part to that, I rarely ever paint without listening to music; it opens up something inside of me and puts me into a creative space that I find difficult to compare to anything else. Music has also been something throughout my life that has been heavily influenced and supported by the various human beings I've been lucky enough to meet, and it has simultaneously nurtured relationships of every kind. The reception of music is also something, I've noticed, that is peculiar and very particular to every pair of ears – affectingly in that you feel so tied to the things you like, that when you share your musical interests with another human being for the first time, it feels like you're loosening your grip on one of your tightest-held secrets.

With that personal nature in mind, I wanted to include the individual music preferences of others in my way of working; the music I listened to as I painted often found its way into my paintings. I tuned into the colors that I felt deeply from those sounds, and at times I would literally move my body across, around, on, over the canvas in the way I felt the music moving. Instead of listening to the random and eclectic music I might otherwise paint to, I made my listening choices very specific for each piece. As I focused my energies on an element of behavior from one person, I repeatedly listened to a playlist only of songs that I knew that person would repeatedly seek out. It didn't matter if any of the songs were my own cup of tea or not – and in some cases, they really were not – but that became an

important element to surface in the work, too. I projected, I'm sure, my reaction to any audio bits that perhaps didn't sit well with me, but it became this cycle of continually trying to find the beauty in this thing that another human being is so compelled by, while trying to understand aversion and focusing the rest of my thoughts on only the person.

Words took hold very early on in this progression. The pages of my sketchbook, all but devoid of drawings or doodles or anything traditionally sketch-like, instead have been lined with written notes. The research of these two years has been steeped in observations about noticed quirks and the words people repeatedly say – the words that are so “them” that your heart aches before you even realize you haven’t heard them in years. My own words – often a struggle to communicate verbally – also found a space within the process. A small paper book of poetry was written and presented along with the paintings in the exhibition, and included a page for some words to accompany each piece. Fragmented like my sketchbook and bound in my canvas strings, the words there echo the searchingness and certain undecidedness that drives my practice.

The third large element of this project was the application of the paint itself. Using a variety of media and working in different environments – both within and outside the traditional studio space – visual pieces were created in multiple scales as the process within the studio practice remained malleable. Objects or methods of applying the paint differ but still share a common language: these pieces, like these people, fit together, but are quite of themselves too. Many of the colors used emanated from the textures of the music, but also from certain memories. I’d paint in a furious frenzy for the first coat, and any abstracted imagery involved was very heavily rooted in a specific memory or specific

feeling from a moment, which then got covered by a wash of a mix of remembered moments, music, and impulses. Some shapes emerged from memories, too, but this organic essence that each has to some extent revealed itself as I went because of its relation to how I picture internal essence - the gossamer aura of a coping mechanism.

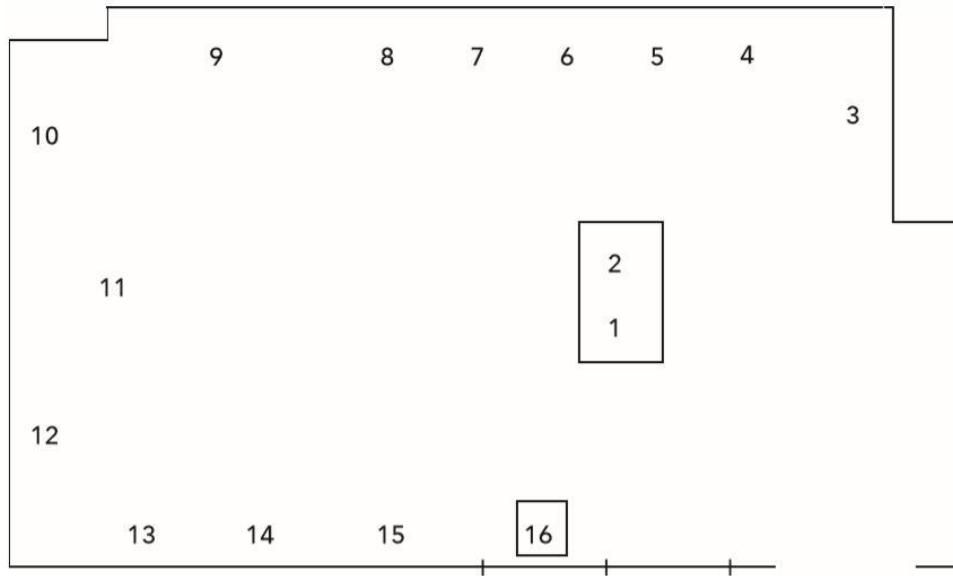
Through every cyclical moment of writing, listening, watching, painting, installing, lighting, speaking, and reflecting, I've come to both understand and question more about the things we are unknowingly stumped by each day. I've been given a chance to learn beauty in things that may be beyond convention's limitations for beauty, or even for happiness. I wanted to carve this dedicated time to confront memory; to dedicate my being to thinking about another human being when they were out of literal sight. As I worked, I became more aware of myself, too, not only in finding through experimentation the ways I am excited about combining certain media and ideas, but also in the realizations of how the complexities of routine affect relationships dear to me.

This project, ultimately, began as an exploration and questioning of little moments – maybe which normally go unnoticed or unspoken. In essence, I've been painting *the* essence, to me, of behaviors of loved ones – sort of enlarged and abstracted portraits of how we are together and apart. The work that came out of that is by no means conclusive. I look at this as more of the start of something. My language for communicating these sort of affectionate guesses about the world around me has been, and will continue to be evolving. The muse for each piece in this project is both the tiniest, most minuscule bit and something larger than even an entire exhibition can dig into and this not the end, nor is it really even a

project anymore, but more a mode of living. It has started a new phase for me as an artist, but also as a human being who is compelled to paint as she is compelled to connect.



Fig. 1 Marketing for exhibition



1. *to a world gone away* 2019, oil, acrylic, charcoal
2. *waits at the window* 2019, oil, acrylic, charcoal
3. *cut, print, check the gate, moving on* 2019, oil, acrylic, glitter, pastel
- [4-8 series] *in fact, i am told that a lot* 2019, oil, acrylic, charcoal, pastel, VHS film, plastic
  4. *of recycled air and years that have passed*
  5. *not ever knowing that i'd never come back the same*
  6. *never face the music when it's dire*
  7. *the irony is teemingly dense*
  8. *i remember when i stumbled in the wind*
9. *i cannot decipher conversation in your head* 2018, oil, acrylic, pastel, metallic paint pen
10. *you are only coming through in waves* 2019, oil, acrylic, charcoal, pastel, ink
11. *if it helps yours beat* 2019, oil, acrylic, pastel
12. *what will the version be when all is said and done?* 2018, oil, acrylic, napkin, wood
13. *maybe if we think and wish and hope and pray it might* 2019, oil, acrylic, tissue paper
14. *meet me by the cul-de-sac on heart attack avenue* 2019, oil, acrylic, pastel
15. *your drapes were silver wings; your shutters flung* 2018, oil, acrylic, charcoal
16. *science of cherry-coloured light and not* 2019, oil, acrylic, charcoal, pastel, coffee grounds

Fig. 2 Checklist for exhibition



Fig. 3 Installation view of exhibition in Grace St. Crit Space Gallery

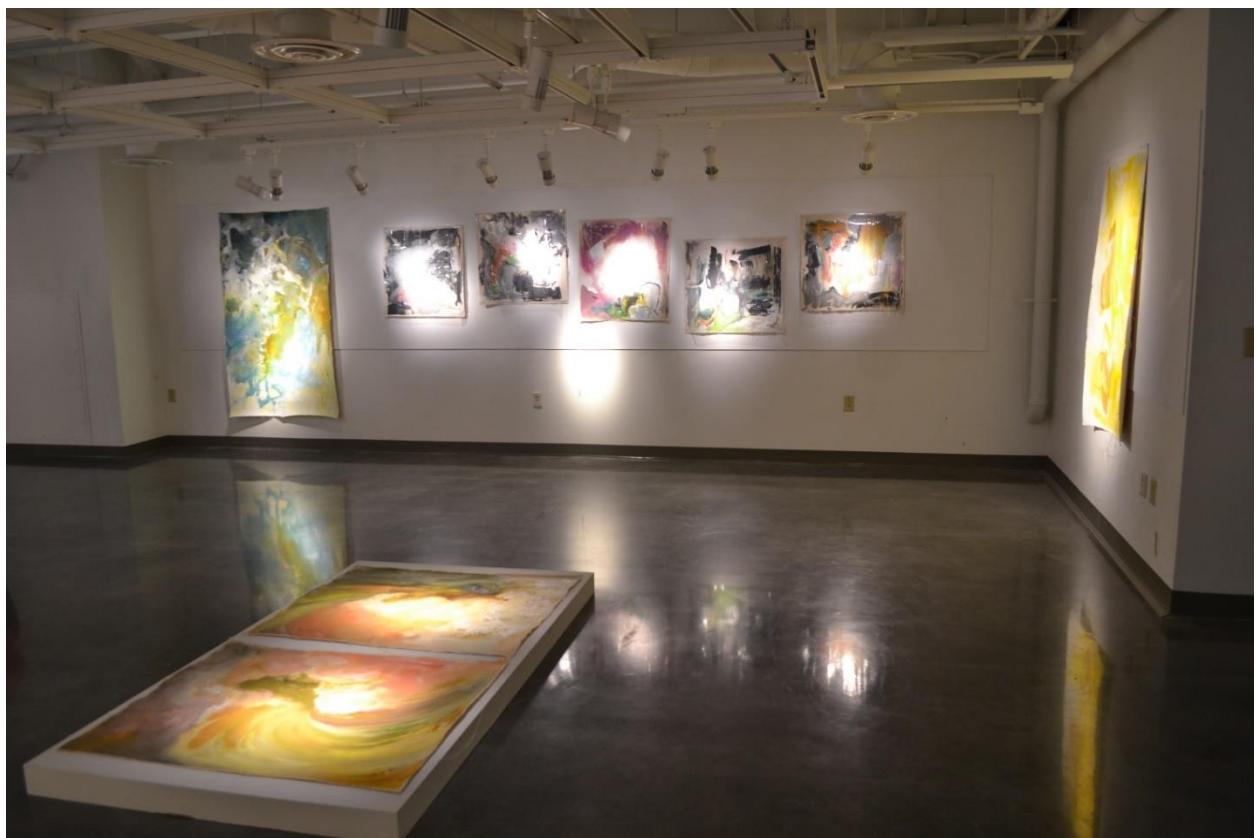


Fig. 4 Installation view of exhibition in Grace St. Crit Space Gallery

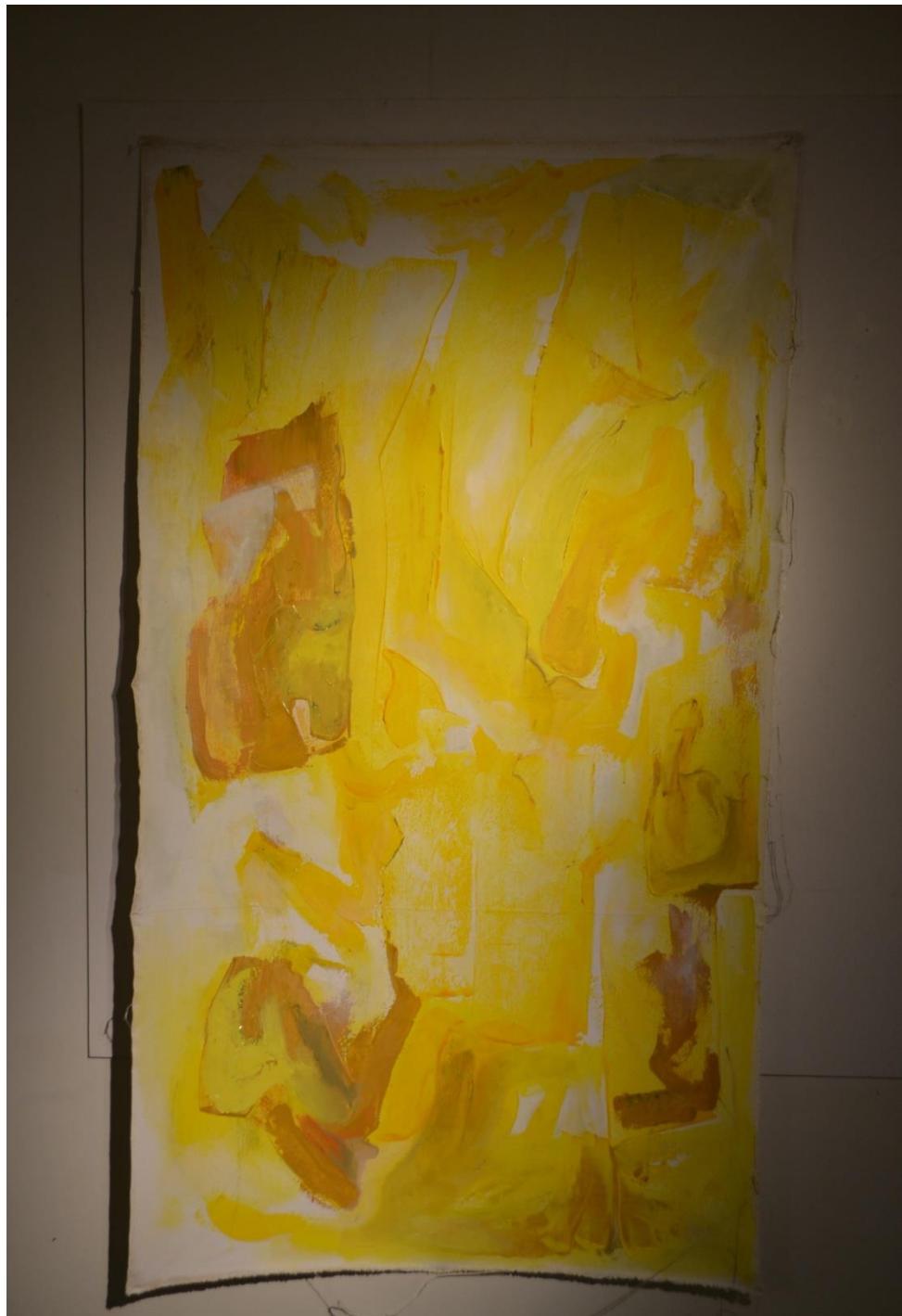


Fig. 5 *cut, print, check the gate, moving on*, installation view

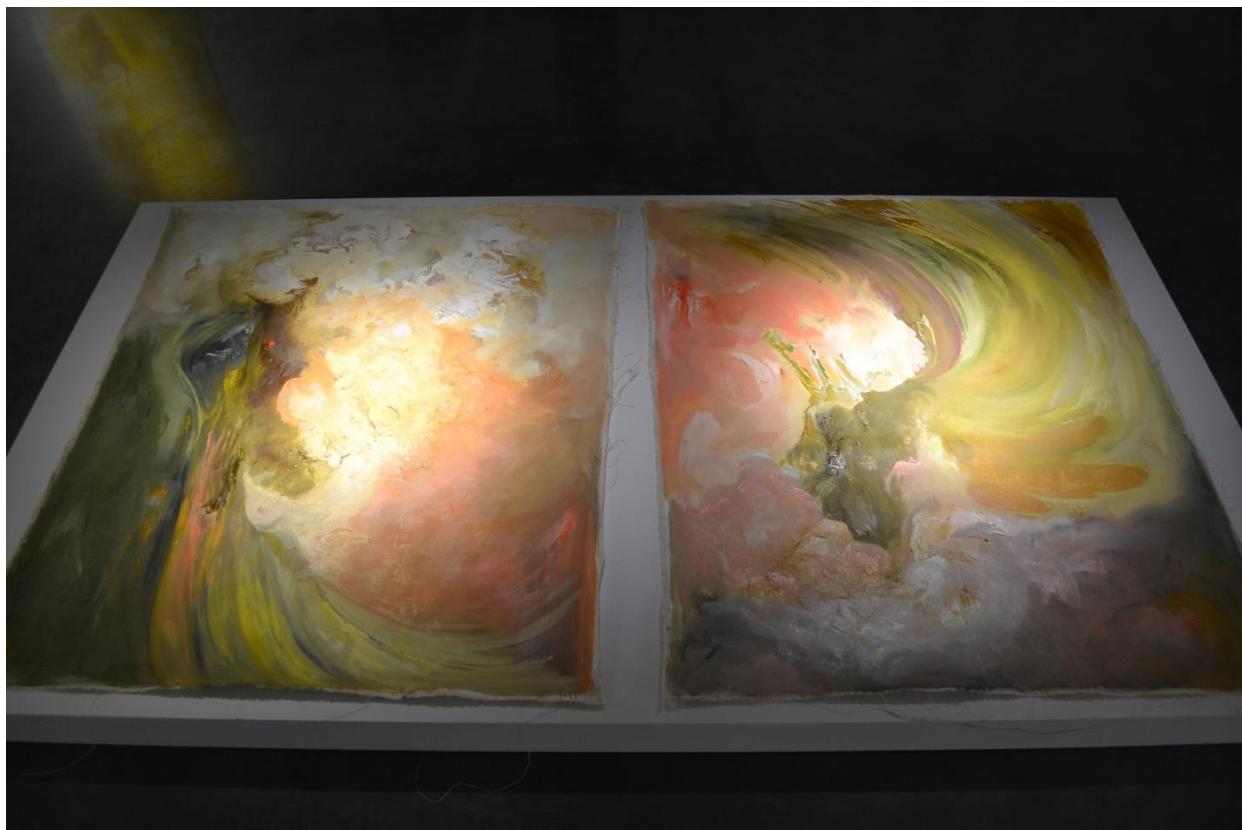


Fig. 6 *waits at the window* (left) and *to a world gone away* (right), installation view

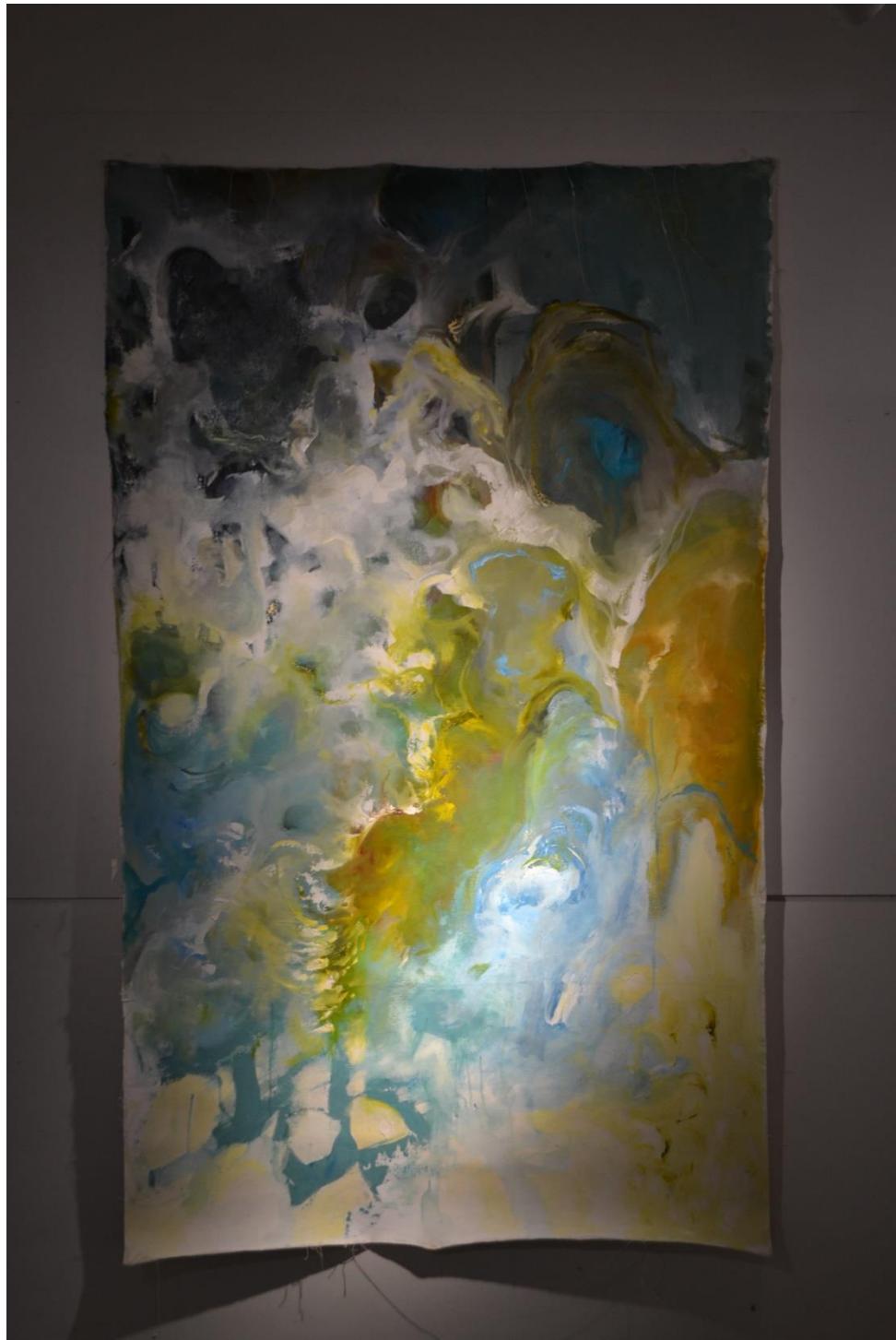


Fig. 7 *i cannot decipher conversation in your head*, installation view



Fig. 8 *in fact, i am told that a lot*, series installation view

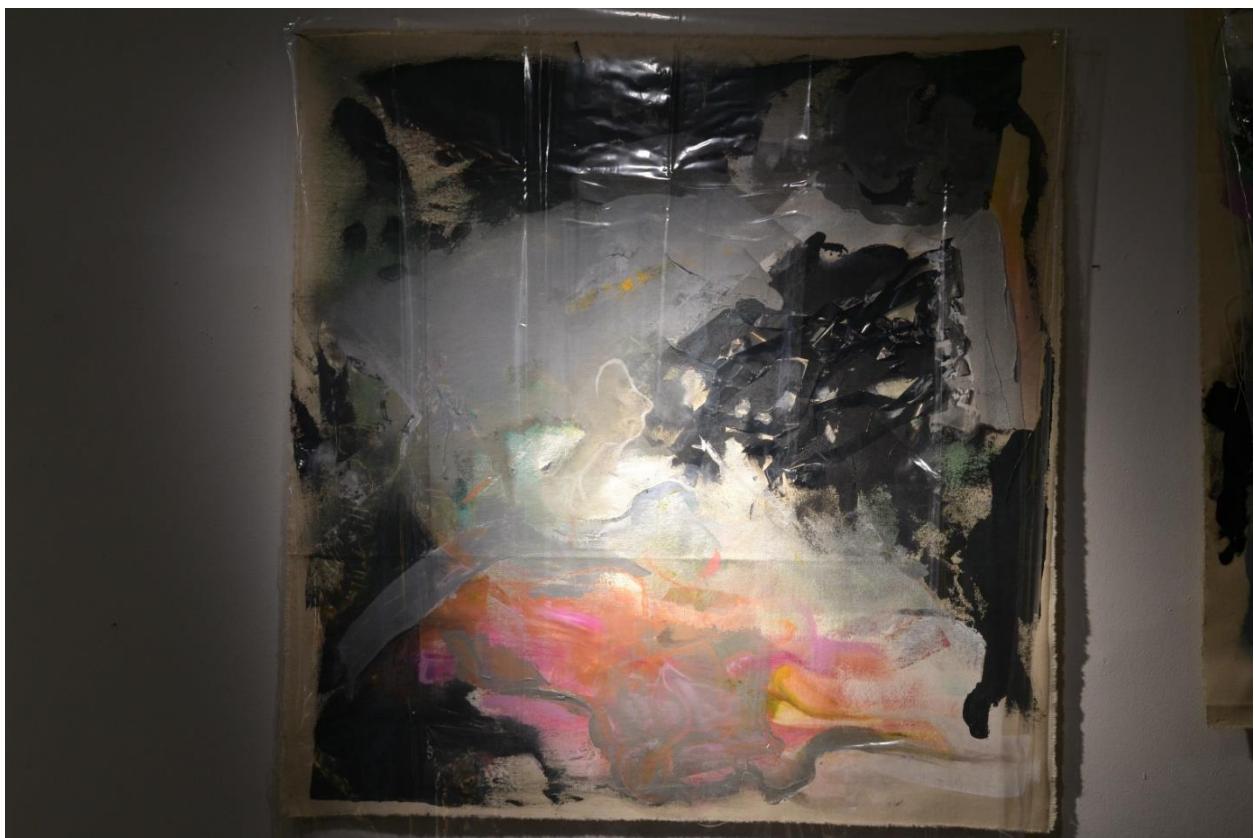


Fig. 9 *i remember when i stumbled in the wind*, installation view

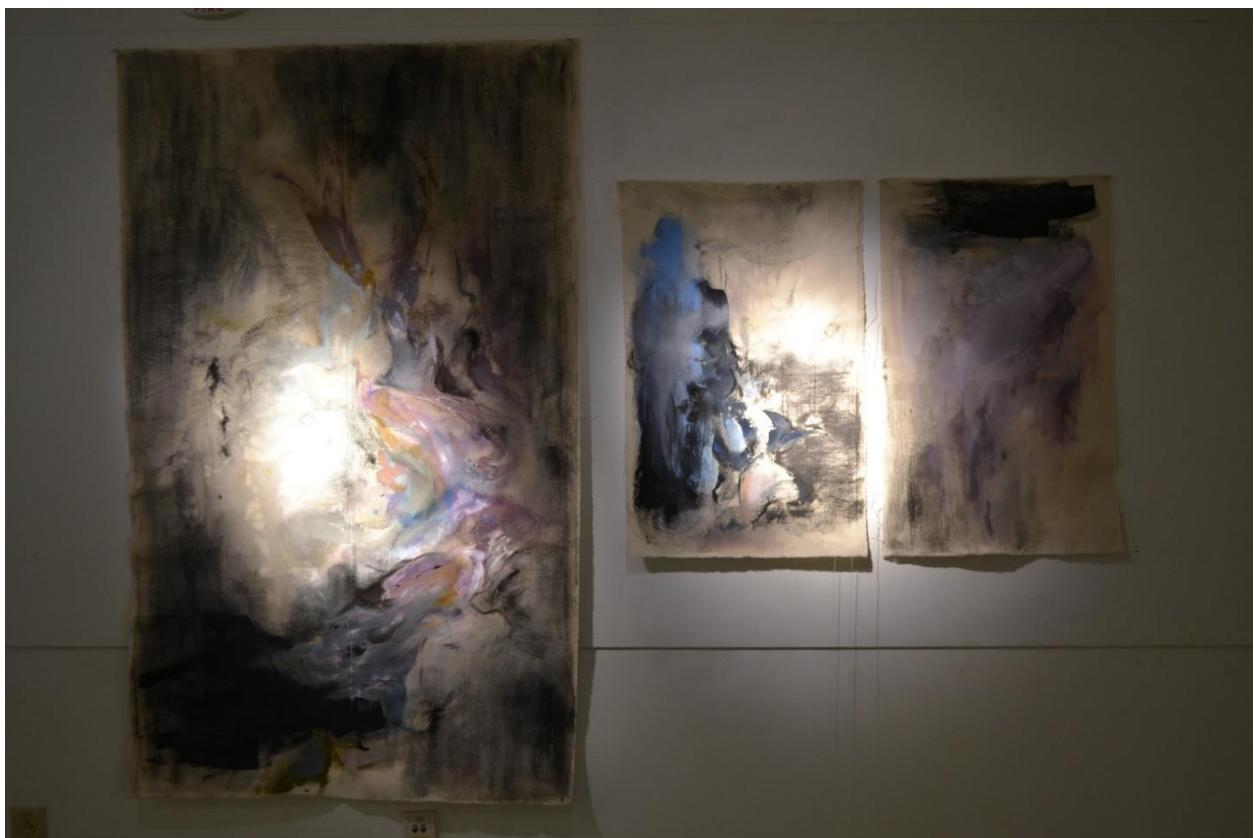


Fig. 10 *you are only coming through in waves (i-iii)*, installation view

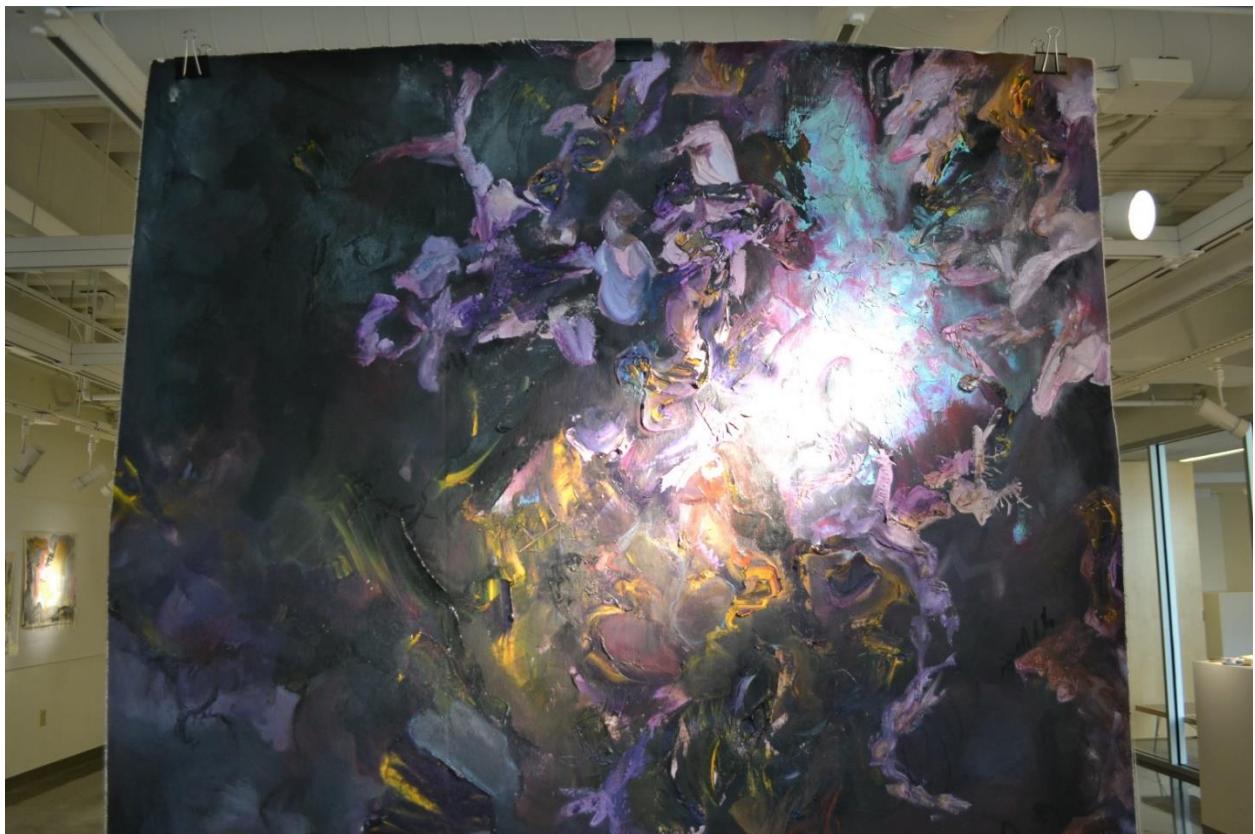


Fig. 11 *if it helps yours beat*, installation view

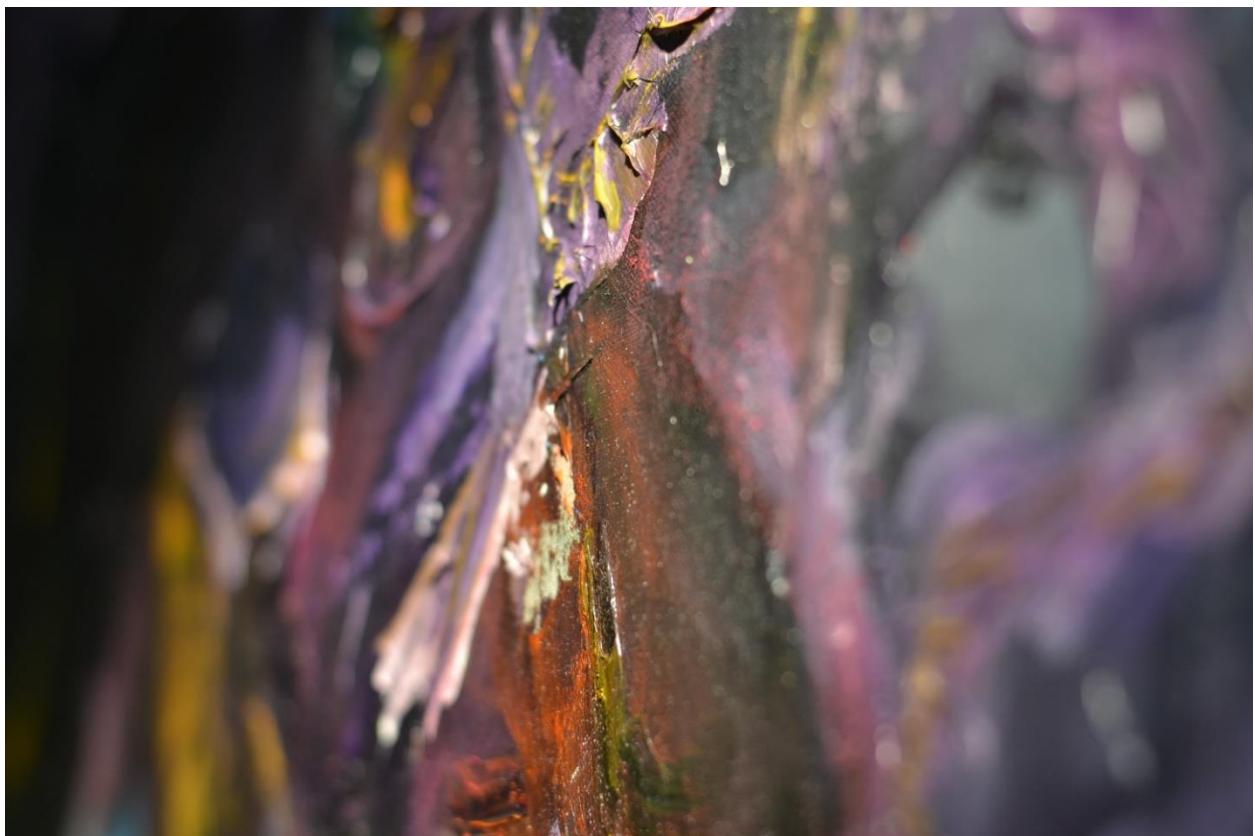


Fig. 12 *if it helps yours beat*, detail

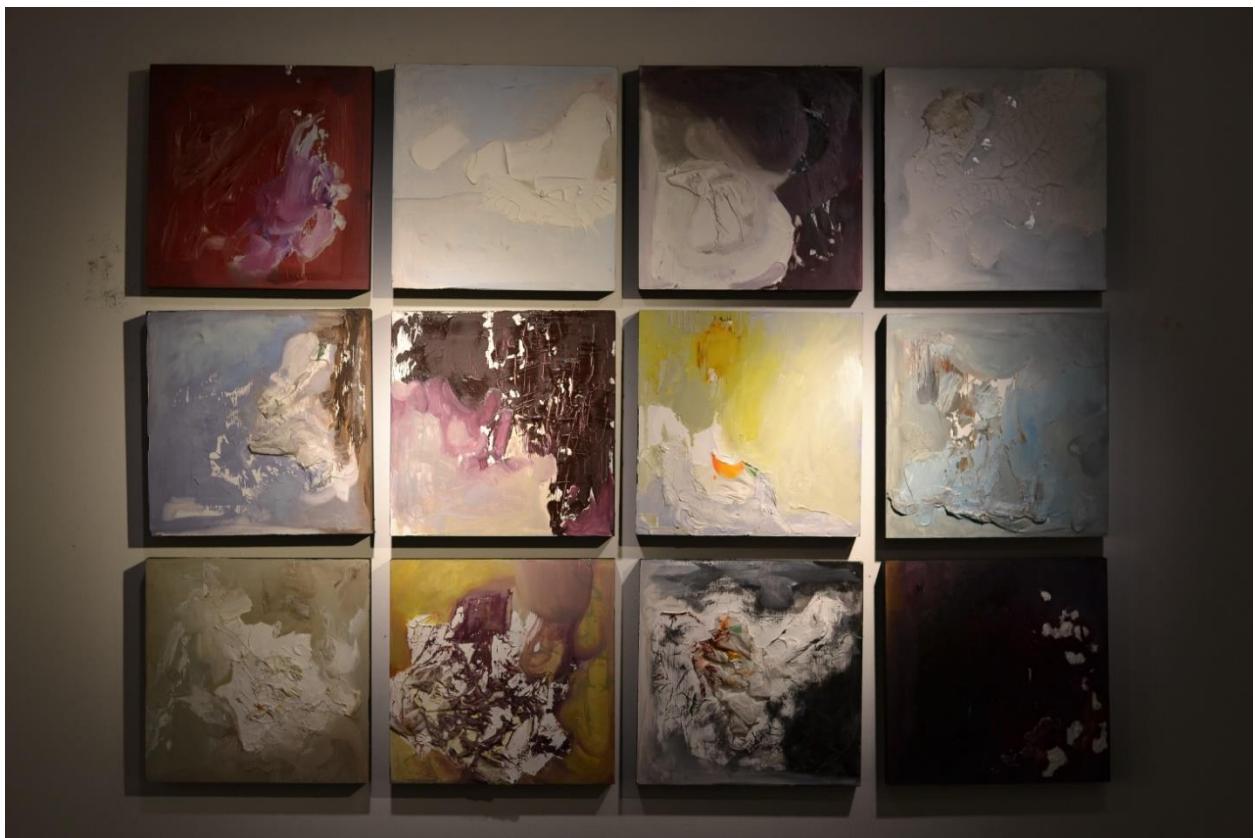


Fig. 13 *what will the version be when all is said and done? (i-xii)*, installation view

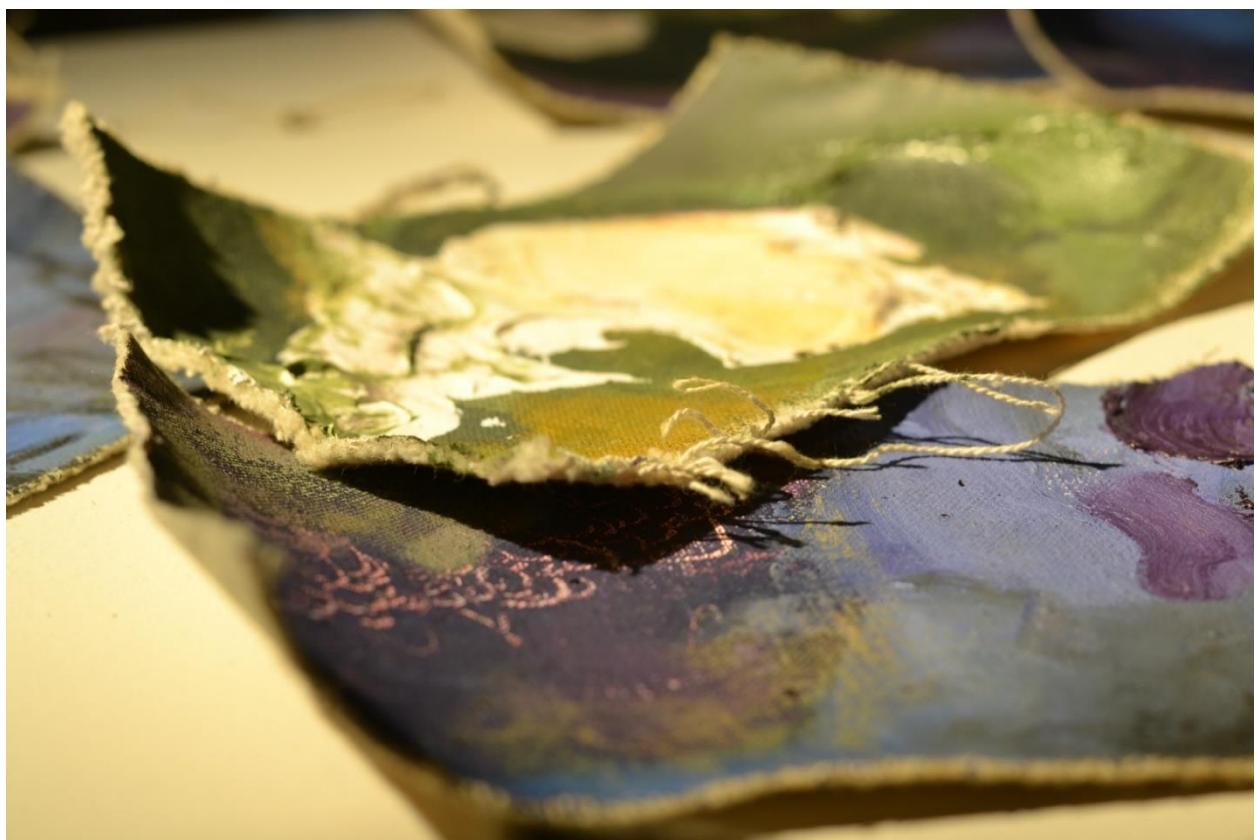


Fig. 14 *science of cherry-coloured light and not*, detail



Fig. 15 exhibition reception March 20, 2019



Fig. 16 exhibition reception March 20, 2019



Fig. 17 exhibition reception March 20, 2019 - during artist talk



Fig. 18 exhibition reception March 20, 2019 - giving artist talk