

THESIS

EXPERIENCE AND THE REALITY OF ILLUSION

Submitted by

Cassidy Garhart Velazquez

Department of Art

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY CASSIDY GARHART VELAZQUEZ ENTITLED EXPERIENCE AND THE REALITY OF ILLUSION BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate work

Committee Member [REDACTED]

Committer Member [REDACTED]

Adviser [REDACTED]

Co-Adviser [REDACTED]

Department Head [REDACTED]

ABSTRACT OF THESIS
EXPERIENCE AND THE REALITY OF ILLUSION

In my paintings I strive to reconcile ambivalent illusions in search of the reality in my own experience. My paintings are narratives about perception and how perception is the product of synchronized inner imaginings and physical experiences. Paint is the perfect medium for this investigation as it allows me to move fluidly between *trompe l'oeil* and abstract renderings. Both painting approaches are ambivalent in that they represent only themselves and at the same time, in my work, are symbols for something else. In my paintings, *trompe l'oeil* imagery symbolizes the physical experience and emphasizes how easily perception can be deceived while elements of abstraction attempt to give substance to the inner experience. In between these poles of extreme illusion and non-illusion, I explore the endless realm of referential representation. It is my intention to craft images that function, ambivalently, as both windows and mirrors. As windows, my work offers me, and hopefully others, an ulterior understanding of reality. As mirrors, I endeavor to create, for me and my audience, compositions that echo, literally and metaphorically, the hard and soft edges that also compose a thought-filled life.

Cassidy Garhart Velazquez
Department of Art
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523
Fall 2008

The work documented in the following pages could not and would not have happened without the unconditional support of my family. My achievements are dedicated to,

My husband, Enrique, el es mi media naranja y con el todo es posible.

My parents, Cynthia and Martin, who always encourage me to dream big.

My brother, Carson, whose invaluable insights have helped me unlock my inner reality and lift the veil of illusion.

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In my paintings I strive to reconcile ambivalent illusions in search of the reality in my own experience. I have always been captivated by ambivalence. I desire to construct images that address the ability of something to inhabit two realities simultaneously. My paintings are about the way in which human perception is the product of synchronized inner imaginings and physical experiences. It is my intention to craft images that function, ambivalently, as both windows and mirrors. As windows, my work offers me, and hopefully others, an ulterior understanding of reality. As mirrors, I endeavor to create, for me and my audience, compositions that echo, literally and metaphorically, the hard and soft edges that also compose a thought-filled life.

I am greatly intrigued by the perception of reality. In the last decade my artwork has grown alongside my practice of yoga and study of Vedic texts. My union of art and yoga is the most blatant in more recent paintings such as *Split Compliment* (plate 1) and *Between Maintenance and Creation* (plate 5) in which the composition relies heavily on figures in actual *asanas*, or, yoga postures. Through my study of art and yoga I have cultivated a curiosity about the illusions we perceive and accept as reality. In Vedic scripture this is called *maya*. Maya is the idea that our entire universe is an illusion- the world of form and change is a fantasy. Maya is the veil that allows us to believe the illusion that our physical world is the only reality. Buddha said, “all that we are is a result of what we have thought.” Our reality is a result of our perception. Yet, every experience consists of an outer, physical reality along with the inner, thought-induced reality and it is the combination of these realities that then determines our perception. I explore this relationship between physical reality, inner reality and illusion specifically in my paintings *Maya/Veil of Illusion* (plate 2) and *We Are What We Pretend to Be* (plate

13), but in all my paintings I ponder whether one reality, or illusion, can be more or less real than another.

In my work I make an effort to balance diverse illusions in hopes of understanding the realities garnered from my own experiences. My perception of reality is often dominated by either the outer reality or the inner reality, but when I paint the divisions evaporate, inner and outer realities align, and I gain insight into the experience as a whole. Yoga has encouraged me to act and behave differently in response to my perceived reality, but it is painting that has moved me to *think* differently about it. Painting has challenged me to question the authority of my perception.

Paint is the only medium that allows me to move fluidly between *trompe l'oeil* and expressive abstraction. This freedom is necessary for me to fully explore my fascination with reality. It enralls me that *trompe l'oeil* has more in common with formal abstraction, and likewise expressive abstraction, than with illusion. Both *trompe l'oeil* and formal abstraction ask the viewer to believe only in what they are and not what they represent. The only difference is that *trompe l'oeil* is a deception and formal abstraction is not. All imagery in between is merely an illusion. *Trompe l'oeil*, formal abstraction, illusion, and the relationships between them become, in my work, symbols for reality, conception, and perception and form the foundation of my work both visually and conceptually.

If I can create illusions with simple manipulations of media that can deceive my viewers, then it stands to reason that I can just as easily be deceived by the physical world and its manipulations of form and change. Painting offers me a platform to explore this deception and, through this the opportunity to reevaluate my perception. In my

explorations I take representational imagery out of context and reassemble it to reflect a new reality, for example, *Nourishment*, plate 8. I use symbols from the physical world to give substance to the inner reality as in *Between Maintenance and Creation*, plate 5. I use the energy of the inner reality to attribute colors and textures to the outer world as in *Split Compliment*, plate 1 and *Beyond the Bee*, plate 3, *Lost Charm, Found*, plate 4, *Counterpoint*, plate 6, and *Whisper*, plate 7, and to a lesser degree in all of my paintings. In each instance, my attempt to confront the validity of the physical reality mandates that I draw on recognizable imagery from within the worldly realm. It is these familiar, mundane representations, organized in surprising scenarios with which I attempt to breathe life into the narrative aspects within my work.

Narrative is the best way for me to express my ideas. Conceptually, my work deals with aspects of the human condition and as such my themes benefit from the kinds of symbols and metaphors found in the telling of a story. I paint landscapes, figures, animals, and still life collaged together on the same surface with the formal, visual elements of line, shape, value, texture, form, and color to create symbols and fabricate metaphors that all relate to the human experience. My use of landscapes, figures and still life almost always represent some aspect of the physical, human body and are metaphors for the outer reality of this experience. The animals, primarily the hare (plates 9-10, 12-13) and the bee (plates 2 & 6), and formal, visual elements, such as the gestural mark-making and surfaces of *Whisper* (plate 7) and *Mostly Alone* (plate 9) and color, as in the muddy yellow that turns to true yellow, symbolizing truth in *Lost Charm, Found* (plate 4), signify the inner experience and provide concrete symbols for an otherwise tenuous actuality. My favorite formal, visual element is the combination of hard and soft edges.

The use of abrupt edges in conjunction with vague, overlapping peripheries occurs, to some degree, in all of my paintings.

In my compositions the hard and soft edges function as significant symbols within the story. The soft edges, the place where one illusion seamlessly morphs with another, are symbols of ambiguities or inseparable dualities. I address the morphing of imagery directly in *We Are What We Pretend to Be* (plate 13) as the painted cloth literally changes into a hare as it folds around the edge. In other instances the transformation is less obvious as in *Mostly Alone* (plate 9), *July* (plate 10), and *Bound* (plate 12). I envision these as the ambivalent borders between inner and outer reality that take shape when mind and body function as one. In several of my paintings these soft edges are indiscernible except for a, sometimes subtle, shift in perspective between the imagery (*Split Compliment*, plate 1, *July*, plate 10). In other instances painted trompe l'oeil niches collaged with other trompe l'oeil elements produce the very real illusion of an invented space that accentuates the flatness of the picture plane (*Maya/ Veil of Illusion*, plate 2, *Beyond the Bee*, plate 3, *Lost Charm, Found*, plate 4, *Whisper*, plate 7). In yet other examples the flatness of the painting surface is highlighted by illusions that extend out from the plane, seemingly, into the physical space of the viewer (*Counterpoint*, plate 6, *Mostly Alone*, plate 9, *A Place to Start*, plate 11, *Bound*, plate 10). Sometimes these soft edges govern an entire painting, other times they are juxtaposed with hard, uncompromising edges as is demonstrated most effectively in *Mostly Alone* (plate 9).

The hard, linear perimeters separating illusions represent a stark division between inner and outer reality. These areas are indicative of an intensified disparity between realities and draw attention to situations in which I have struggled, with varying degrees

of success, to integrate my inner and outer reality (*Nourishment*, plate 8). Habitually, I try to keep my inner reality, the life I lead inside my head, my thoughts and emotions, from escaping into my outer, physical reality. *Whisper* (plate 7) is prime example of this scenario. In contrast, my physical reality, my body is always trying to influence what is going on in my head and situations like this are exemplified in *Counterpoint* (plate 6) and *Mostly Alone* (plate 9). Finding the reality in my experiences means striking a balance between what ought to be united and what should not. Instead of using my paintings to “fix” my experiences by combining inner and outer realities, I use the rigidity of hard edges to focus attention on, and ask why I succumb to these separations. Through the implementation of hard edges, organic edges, and multiple perspectives I wish to create thought-provoking compositions that reflect not just the way I approach my paintings, but also the way I approach my life.

In my pursuit of a creative life I attempt to establish equilibrium between action and meditation. My search for balance is addressed directly in *Split Compliment* (plate 1) and *Between Maintenance and Creation* (plate 5). For me, painting itself is the perfect allegory for this effort. A well-crafted image is a flawless confluence of its execution and its concept. I deliberately use a square format for all of my compositions to accentuate the meeting of physical feats with mental cognition. The square is the oldest symbol of analytical and metaphysical thought and thus, for me, its manifestation is the ultimate symbol of human perception.

Perception, however, does not always represent reality. I demonstrate this frequently by fabricating trompe l’oeil depictions of boxes and pyramid-like structures that highlight the fact that in spite of, or because of, our strong capacity for conceptual

comprehension, our perceptions can easily be deceived (plates 2-7). When I offset these structures with landscapes, figures, and trompe l'oeil still life I address perception through multiple points of perspective. Perception is increasingly confused when I juxtapose trompe l'oeil with tactile surface texture (plates 6 & 7) or three-dimensional canvases (plates 8-13). The shadows cast by tangible surface relief coupled with the painted shadows of illusory formations renders the boundary separating reality and perceived reality truly ambiguous.

Painting excites me more than any other medium because it offers me the opportunity to transform a viscous, amorphous pigment into what ever I dream possible. Not only that, but with extreme economy of paint I hope to fool and deceive my audience into believing that it is not paint at all, but the actual *thing* that has been painted. I love the patient meditation it takes to master this kind of illusion. I crave the Zen-like moments when the hand and eye work in unison. I feed on calculated observation and precise muscle memory to massage the picture plane into 3-D. Tirelessly, I seek occasions to rouse and fold uncultured colors into distinguished situations. And sometimes, I let the paint stir me.

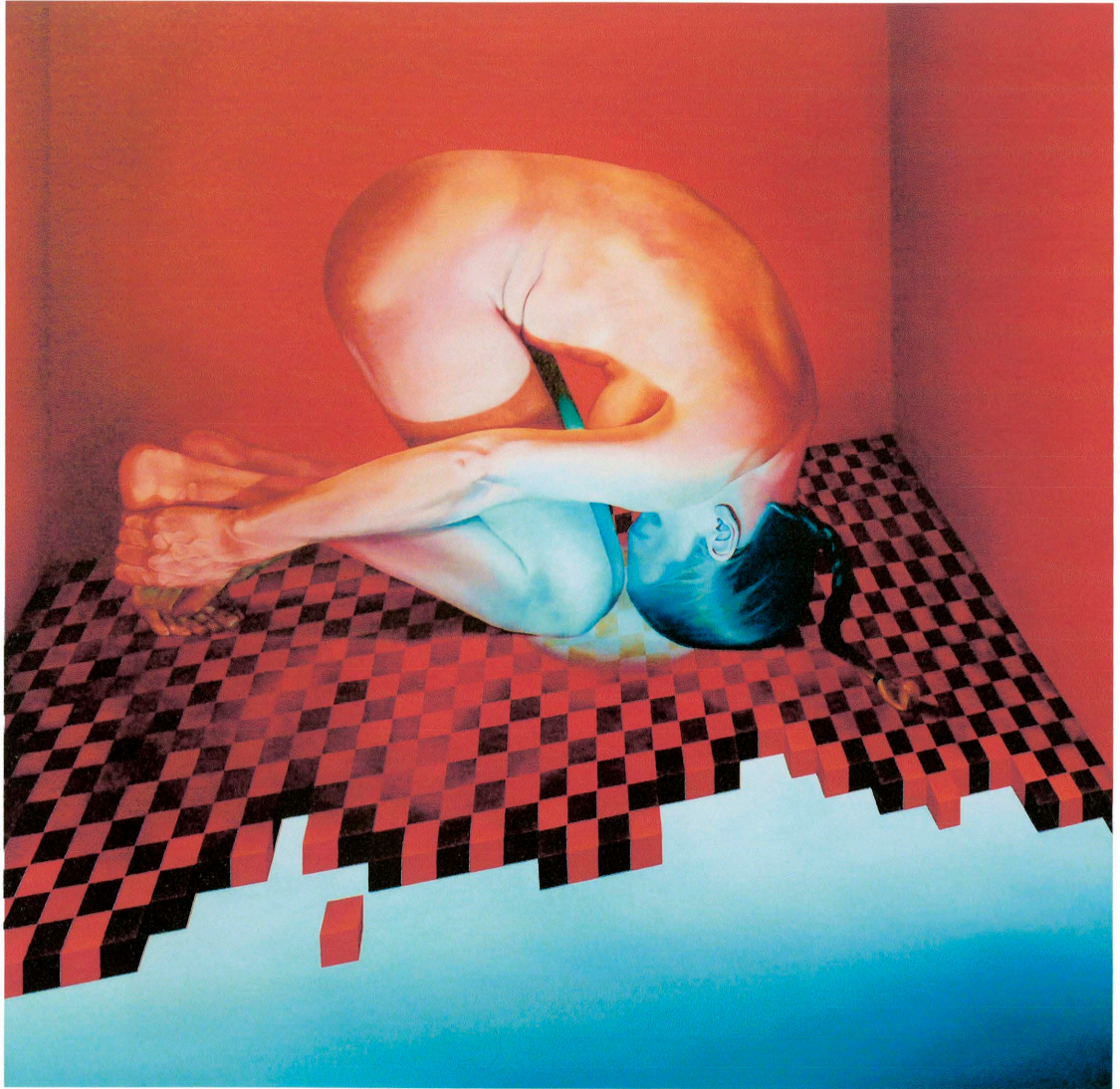


Plate 1. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Split Compliment*, 2008, Oil on panel, 42" x 42".



Plate 2. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Maya/ Veil of Illusion*, 2008, Oil on panel, 12" x 12".



Plate 3. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Beyond the Bee*, 2008, Oil on panel, 12" x 12".



Plate 4. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Lost Charm, Found*, 2008, Oil on panel, 12" x 12".



Plate 5. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Between Maintenance and Creation*, 2008,
Oil on panel, 42" x 42".

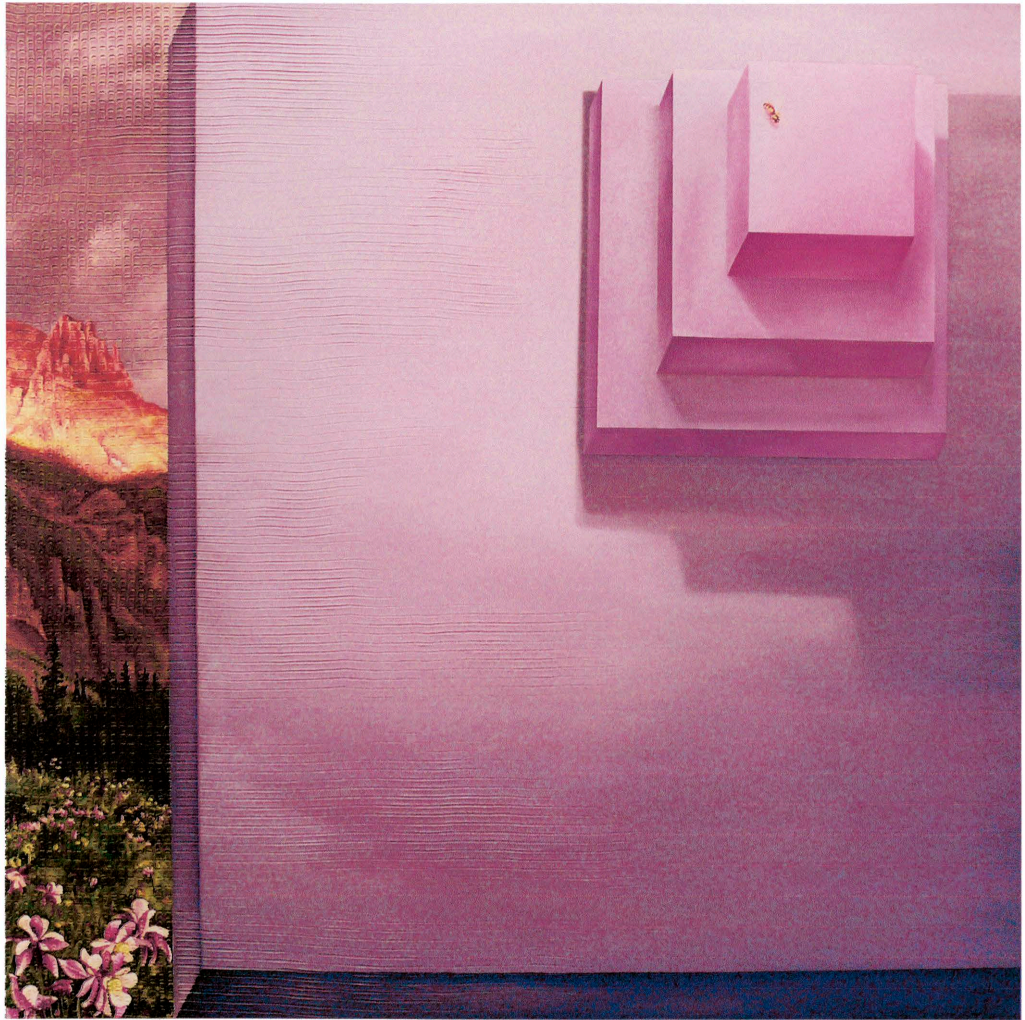


Plate 6. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Counterpoint*, 2007, Oil on panel, 36" x 36".



Plate 7. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Whisper*, 2007, Oil on panel, 42" x 42".

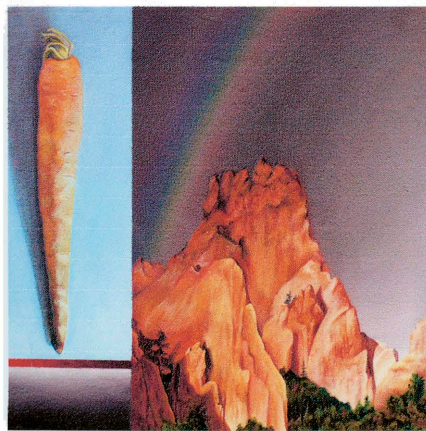
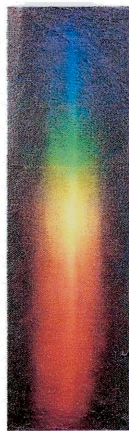


Plate 8. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Nourishment*, 2008

Oil on canvas, 12" x 12" x 3.75".

Top: Side view.

Bottom: Expanded view.

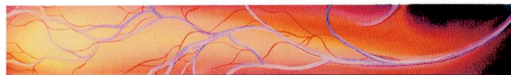
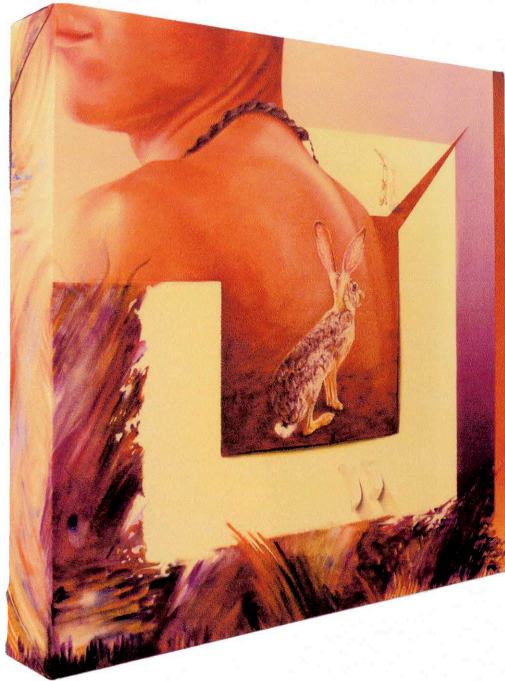


Plate 9. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Mostly Alone*, 2007,
Oil on canvas, 24" x 24" x 3.75".
Top: Side view.
Bottom: Expanded view.

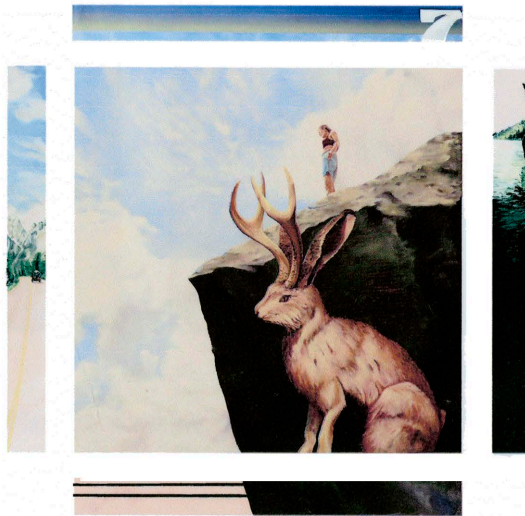


Plate 10. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *July*, 2007
Oil on canvas, 30" x 30" x 3.75".
Top: Side view.
Bottom: Expanded view.

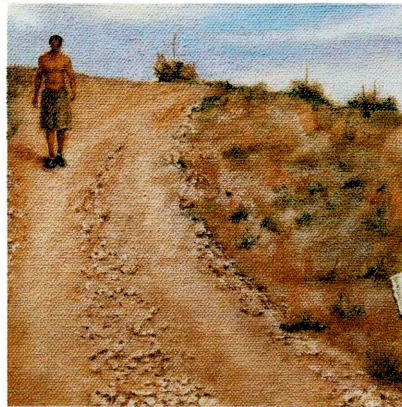
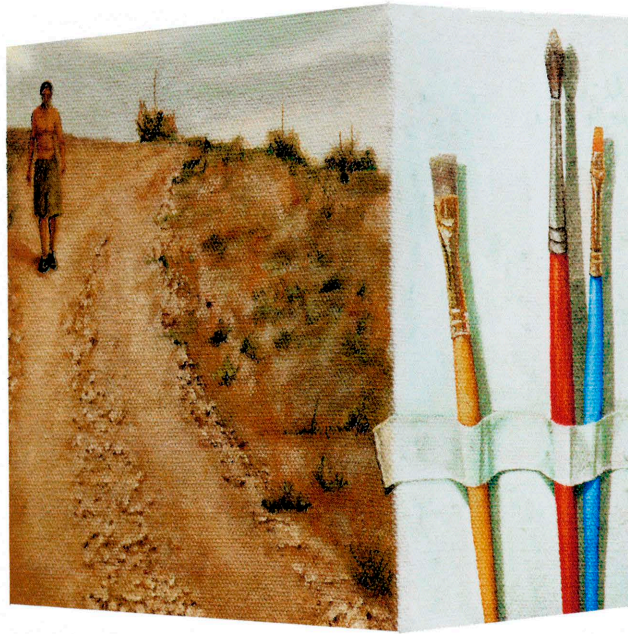


Plate 11. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *A Place to Start*, 2007
Oil on canvas, 6" x 6" x 3.75".
Top: Side view.
Bottom: Expanded view.



Plate 12. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *Bound*, 2006
Oil on canvas, 24" x 24" x 3.75".

Top: Side view.
Bottom: Expanded view.

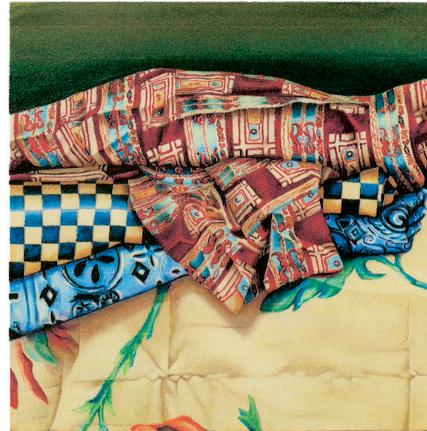


Plate 13. Cassidy Garhart Velazquez, *We Are What We Pretend to Be*, 2006, Oil on canvas, 24" x 24" x 3.75".

Top: Side view.

Bottom: Expanded view.