

Confronting the Threshold: Perceptions of a Passageway

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Abstract

Standing before a threshold can be quite stimulating, both physically and mentally. *Confronting the Threshold: Perceptions of a Passageway* represents liminal spaces through paintings and drawings of doors. People often pass through these margins focusing only on their destination. Marginal spaces or thresholds are known as “liminal spaces” and can be difficult to recognize, as they are undefined territory. These short, transitional passes are incredibly significant, as stimulating thoughts occur during the passageway from one space to another. This could be a place where someone is leaving their past behind, eager to find a new beginning. This could be the waiting room, awaiting the next milestone, or an upcoming event in one’s life. On the other hand, it could be when one is indecisive. It may also be as simple as the process of opening a door and crossing a physical threshold. In addition to the more commonly known physical and anthropological contexts, there are spiritual and psychological transitions. These changes were recognized in ancient Rome regarding Janus, the god of doorways, who is often thought to be the god of beginnings and endings. This research will be represented in a series of paintings and drawings: the paintings depict life-size doors; the drawings provide details of door knobs, door handles and other elements. Doorways are excellent physical representations of liminal spaces, and like most liminal spaces, doors are often overlooked. The artworks of Rene Magritte and Andrew Wyeth were influential in the creation of this series due to their comparable styles, subjects, and concepts. *Confronting the Threshold* signifies transitional zones, providing an opportunity to appreciate the beauty and significance of transitions.

1. Introduction

Recognizing a liminal space can be difficult. At times, it is evident that we may be in this in-between region, whether it is physical, psychological, anthropological, or spiritual, yet we often pass through it so quickly due to our fast-paced lives. We tend to focus on the past and what is behind us or what lies ahead in the future. It is rare to think of the marginal transition in which we exist between the two. We are constantly going and rarely stopping to observe our surroundings. We generally neglect to notice the spaces through which we move on a day-to-day basis. Although understandable, this is extremely unfortunate, as beautiful places are often overlooked. Due to their unique historical nature, these areas deserve recognition, second glances, questioning, and an appreciation.

Victor Turner, an expert and writer on liminal spaces largely contributes to this concept. He describes this phase as being an “area of ambiguity” as well as a “social limbo.”¹ This less-defined space is one of uncertainty. It is not an area in which a person realizes their current stance, yet they know where they are headed or where they came from. The space in-between seems miniscule on their current journey; however, it is not so.

Scholar Pam Payne reflects on Turner’s writing and concludes that the transition through a liminal space is not a passive act. Crossing a liminal threshold is only possible to those willing to risk the transformations they will experience from allowing their emotional state to make that transition. The liminal state of consciousness happens when one is completely engaged and aware of what is happening.² Transitions in life are common; however,

recognizing these transitions as a liminal space and being self-aware of when one is engaged in such, is more challenging than not.

2. Research: Defining Liminal Spaces

Arnold van Gennep was the first known individual to explore this concept of liminality as he looked at different forms of rites of passages in life. The word “liminality” is derived from the Latin word “limen,” meaning threshold. The second of three phases that one goes through during a rite of passage is the transitional phase, otherwise known as liminal.³ This phase of life is characterized by an “area of ambiguity” in which one faces a “social limbo.” This transition is not one that is merely a social change but can also be a geographical change from one location to another. “This may take the form of a mere opening of doors or the literal crossing of a threshold which separates two distinct areas...”⁴

Windows and doors serve as excellent metaphors in terms of representing change, whether physical or social. The material of both doors and windows support the manifestation of the concept of a threshold. These divisions of spaces both signify liminality, yet both represent different changes due to their differing nature. Doors are thick and opaque whereas windows are translucent, and fragile. These characteristics are relatable to the psychological process regarding one’s emotions and thoughts when facing a liminal space. Doors are denser and typically reveal less about what is behind them. Psychologically some people approach life in a similar manner as they are more closed off and choose not to share as much about their life. On the other hand, like windows, some individuals exhibit a similar vulnerability and transparency to their own life. Both windows and doors have a relationship between interior and exterior as they both divide the two. However, windows show us both interior and exterior spaces at once and typically reveal more than doors.⁵

Walter Truett Anderson claims that society as a whole is currently in a transitional period in which everything is merging. Beliefs, values, and ideals are all going through a metamorphosis. Beliefs are shifting all over the world as people’s beliefs are altering. This does not just affect what individuals do in life but how they are doing these things as a result of the overall mode of conduct changing due to the emergence of customs. It is purely a component of Postmodernism as this era is characterized by progression and change. Anderson suggests that this societal transition is a good thing; society is headed in a great direction despite the chaos and stress that seems to be going along with it. This Postmodern condition will always be here as it is a significant transition in history. It affects all, though its effect looks different on each group of people. Everyone is emerging from familiarity of our own security in which we blanket ourselves with tradition, religion, communities, and belief systems. Instead, this emergence embarks on a journey in which a global integration is current. Transitions have been taking place throughout history, they are simply rarely noticed. Humans are nearly conditioned to only focus on the future, meanwhile dwelling on the past.⁶

Leslie Bunt and Sarah Hoskyns elaborate on the relationship of liminal spaces with music regarding the Roman god Janus in *The Handbook of Music Therapy*. Janus was god of doorways and was often depicted holding a key. Today, we use a key as a tool for unlocking; however, in ancient Roman times the keystone was also the uppermost stone that kept an arch together. Janus was also considered to be the god of beginnings and endings. This is important because though a liminal zone is definitely characterized by a region between two spaces, it can also serve as a place where a new beginning can initiate as one leaves the past behind them, never to return.⁷

3. Conceptual Development of *Confronting the Threshold: Perceptions of a Passageway*

Many people walk by beautiful, insightful places every day. Individuals often focus on getting from point A to point B and seldom take time to notice what is passed in-between. These “in-between” spaces and/or objects are quite notable. However, people generally fail to notice how powerful and visually attractive these liminal areas really are. With my series of paintings, I plan to take the viewers to an unknown, arbitrary place that will force them to re-configure their location and make assumptions as to where they are headed. Because I want the viewer to look at this threshold as more than just doors, I will paint them with extreme detail, making them appear as realistic as possible. This will allow the viewer to notice all these small details and recognize the naturalistic beauty of these territories. A realistic approach will allow the viewers to feel as if they are actually confronting such a margin. This technique is important to the concept because one can look at these recognizable objects and places and see them as being comparable to the same ones that they have experienced in their own life. Hopefully, before a person would want to

take a step through the door, they would notice the beautiful characteristics such as the cracks from old age that make up the door.

I want to make it appear to be an approachable, recognizable door so that one will see its familiarity and realize that they pass through beautiful, insightful places all the time but fail to take note. The painted textural components of the doors give the impression of age, as much of the detail resembles scars left on the doors throughout its lifetime. These painted remaining traces are important because there is no other context provided regarding the surroundings; therefore, the viewer will look to the textural elements as a way to imagine what the surroundings may look like. Paired with this technique, several of the door paintings have a three-dimensional component to them. Actual hardware, such as a door knob, is added to enhance the idea that these are approachable spaces.

My goal is for the viewer to formulate questions in their mind about the object, such as “where is the location of the door,” “where has the letter been,” or “who once held this door knob or key.” There may be other questions that are prompted in the viewer’s mind and the answers will vary depending on each individual. Whether it is the answer or the question, the viewer will likely base them on their unique perspective and experiences that they have encountered. I do not expect people to know that they are in a liminal space because most people are not familiar with the term, “liminality.” However, people *can* develop questions and they do know the feeling of anticipation or anxiety one gets when opening a letter in the mail, or opening a door to an unknown place. I hope to make people slow down for a minute and observe, to stop and think, to wonder, imagine, and ask questions. This change of pace from the fast speed that our society functions within will encourage thought and observations that they may not otherwise have experienced.

4. Methodology

4.1 Drawings

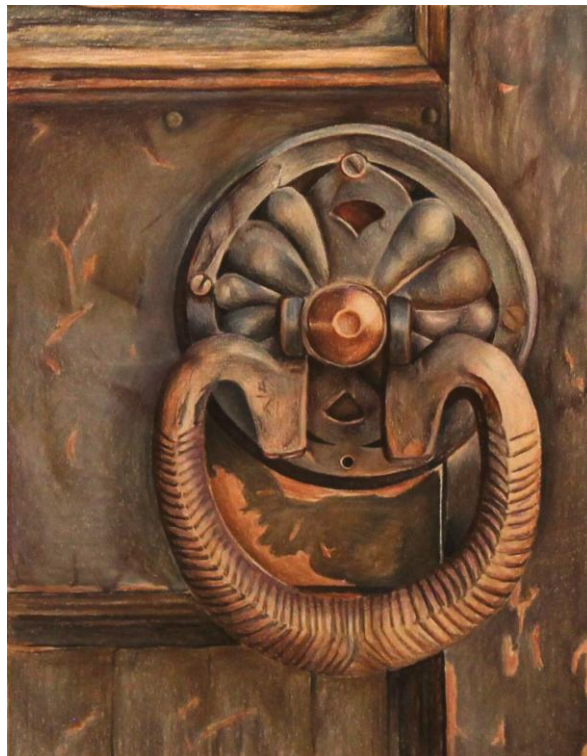


Figure1. Payton James, *Receive Me*, 2015, colored pencil, 8 x 10 inches

The series is split between drawings of details of doors and painted life-size doors. The drawings (figure 1) depict a portion of the door that gives the door its unique character. To begin the drawings, I start by finding photographic references of doorway details. I typically use at least two different photographs per drawing so that I can get the best

representation as possible of the image I am creating. Next, the sketching process begins. I do a line drawing in graphite pencil to ensure that the drawing is compositionally sound and to be certain that the scale is in proportion since I try to make the objects life size. Once I start with the colored pencils, I lightly shade in the colors to get the base colors down. As soon as the foundation is colored, I add several other colors to enhance the color overall and begin using more pressure so that it will appear to be more smooth. I will often blend using a white colored pencil as it seems to soften the colors or I will simply use a blending pencil. I can then draw on top of these layers which allows me to get a finer line; thus, getting more detailed.

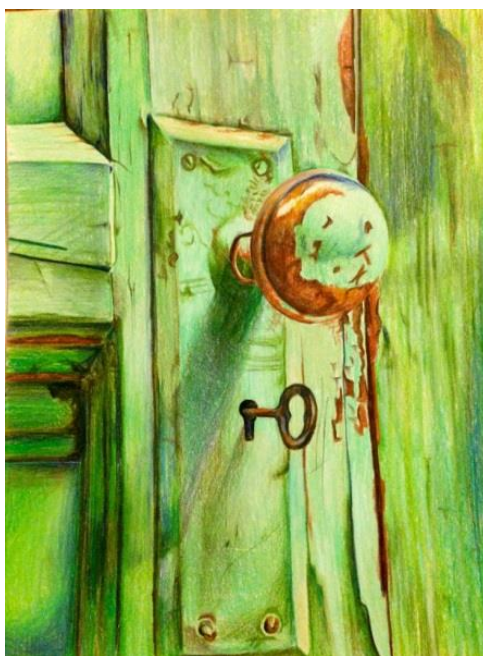


Figure 2. Payton James, *Hold On*, 2014, colored pencil, 8 x 10 inches.

Although the drawings are small in scale, the door “details”, such as knobs, latches, and locks are life sized. This specific cropping allows the viewer to examine the intricate details and want to grasp the doorknob and gently turn it to reveal what may lie behind the weathered door. The doorknob in “Hold On” seems to serve as a means to open the timeworn green door, but is instead an illusion created through trompe l’oeil. The space is developed by zeroing-in on the specific details in this piece of hardware and accentuates the character that the door holds. Line is used to help create form and shapes as well as used in the initial part of the process. Because the door is drawn mostly using straight lines, it is important to get these fairly exact so that the depth is convincing to the viewer. Along with line, value is also extremely important in highlighting the contrast of darks and lights and in enhancing the form of the hardware. This also helps create a believable space. The highlights on the knob as well as on certain parts of the door paneling reveal the light source coming in from the upper right. This gives the drawing dimension so that it does not come across as being flat. I use many colors to add depth to the main color, as green is not just created by using “green” but also using ultramarine, violet, goldenrod, and burnt umber (figure 2). A rust color is added to the door knob to show its age. The juxtaposition of the organically shaped door knob and key to the geometrically paneled door creates a balance that is aesthetically pleasing. All of these elements entice the viewer into the drawing, allowing the viewer to make assumptions about the location of the door, the people who once turned the knob, and why it all matters.

4.2 Paintings



Figure 3. Payton James, Detail of *Abandoned*, 2014-2015



Figure 4. Payton James, *Abandoned*, 2014-2015

The paintings that are created on physical doors begin with the process of collection. I scavenge for flat doors with no panels so that I can later add the illusion of panels using paint. It usually takes several of these trips because people drop off their unwanted items every day. During these trips, I also rummage for door hardware and other unique pieces that could be added to the door or even simply used for inspiration (figure 3). In addition to collecting these materials, I search for several photographs of doors that exhibit a historical quality to them, revealing cracks and dirt that have arisen from old age. I use multiple photographs as resource information to create one painting as it rare that a single photograph can capture all the detail and character that I can with paint in a single painting. Some of these photos are found in the public domain while others I photograph on my own.

Using a variety of materials and mediums is extremely important in the creation of these door paintings because as most materials age, they develop a unique texture such as rust, cracked paint, or splintered wood. Some mediums I formulate on my own, and others are store-bought. Sand, medium matte gel, white opaque flakes, blended fibers, gold leaf, and joint compound can all be found within my paintings. Once I have acquired the door, the paint, and mediums that I wish to use, I measure the dimensions of the implied panels that I will paint onto the door. Sketching and mapping is a very important part of this process because the measurements must be exact in order to emphasize the illusion as well as to convince the viewer that they are looking at an old door.

The first layer of paint or textural medium is applied; this is usually very basic just to get the main color or texture down since it is the base of the painting. The textural medium that is used will enhance the tactile quality of the doors, whether it is by using joint compound and/or the glue method. The next layer of paint will be the color of the cracks; therefore it is typically either a dark brown or white. Once the first layer of paint dries, glue is spread over the door and left to dry until it gets to a tacky stage. Once the glue is tacky, a new color of paint is brushed over the glue in the direction in which the cracks are desired to form. This color will be the main color of the door. It is then left to dry completely and it is during this time that the glue dries, causing the paint covering it to separate, leaving what appears to be a crack in the door.

I use the next layer of paint to enhance the illusion that the door is a paneled one (figure 4). This includes painting in the depth that gives the illusion that it is a solid door with panels. After this is completed, small details are painted to enhance the cracks and more cracks are painted in as well. Glazing is the next step in the process and this is done in order to emphasize the illusion by developing the highlights and shadows further. The physical elements such as a kick plate or doorknob are then added to the door. At this point I typically will do any additional glazing that seems necessary.

The majority of this process is repeated on the back of each door because some of the doors will be installed partially ajar in the gallery. After this is done, if necessary, molding will be added to surround the door and then the door will be attached with hinges (figure 5). The molding will be painted in a similar technique, making it appear to be old and weathered.



Figure 5. Payton James, Detail of *Where You Are*, Acrylic, 2014-2015

The space that is created in the physical doors is characterized by an illusionistic setting that is life sized and painted. This gives the appearance that the doors are actually old, solid and have real panels. Depth is enhanced through the use of value to create shadows and highlights that give the door the appearance of form. By using the natural form and size of a door, it gives the viewer a familiar setting that one is accustomed to rather than only providing a canvas or framed art. Line is very important with the physical doors because the majority of what is painted is linear. Most of the cracks are linear as well as the painted-on panels of wood that are implied through the use of lines. Texture is vital to the success of the doors in order to give them a weathered look. A variety of mediums are used to enhance the texture or the illusion of texture. The illusionistic doors have actual cracks along with painted blemishes made to look as if they are real. Cracks are like scars that tell a story about the life it has weathered. The cracks are important to paint because the history they hold is significant. It is well-known that one should learn from history so that it is not repeated; however, it is also important to simply examine history to appreciate the transition that has happened and observe the beauty within that moment.

5. Influences

My research on artists who have similar interests to my own has been a vital component to the process of studying and depicting thresholds. Andrew Wyeth's (1917-2009) exhibition, *Looking Out, Looking In*, that was held from May to November of 2014 in the National Gallery of Art captures an array of liminal spaces. He immaculately painted images of houses, windows, doors, and other aspects of the home. His paintings were of buildings and spaces local to him. Wyeth's work was largely influenced by his surroundings. He greatly contributed to American

Modernism as well as the concept of Localism, often depicting geographical locations as well as acquaintances from his hometown in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. He desired viewers to sense the emotion he experienced from chance events. Wyeth's pieces were influential in my process as they seem to reveal more by showing a greater context surrounding the door or window (figure 6), or by showing what is behind the door or window (figure 7). His ability to accurately render the details, all while emphasizing the significant distinction between interior and exterior, has been influential throughout my process.



Figure 6. Andrew Wyeth, *Wind from the Sea*, 1948, media, 19 x 28 inches.



Figure 7. Andrew Wyeth, *Frostbitten*, 1962, media, 16 x 23 ½ inches.

Another artist who has influenced my desire to fool the eye and challenge the viewer's idea of space is Rene Magritte. Magritte contributed to the Surrealist movement by offering images that are quite thought-provoking. He wanted to challenge the viewers' minds by making them question preconceived notions of reality. *Treachery of Images* (figure 8) was one of the first pieces of art by Magritte that struck my interest. Magritte painted the words in French, "This is not a pipe." to say that the painting is a mere image of a pipe, not an actual, physical pipe. This piece in particular caught my attention because though I paint doors, I am not *just* painting doors, but rather spaces that signify a deeper context and meaning. These spaces represent more than just a physical door, but the ideas and emotions that a door can symbolize.



Figure 8. Rene Magritte, Treachery of Images, 1928-29, 25x37"

Magritte also painted several images of doors. These paintings also influenced me as he really captured the idea of creating a “space” within them (figure 9). His concept is similar to mine, however the execution is quite different because he desires to create an impossible space whereas I desire to create a known, approachable space. He does, however, paint with a realistic style which makes it appear as if this space could exist. This tight rendering is related to mine, which is advantageous in creating a believable space, yet it contrasts with Magritte’s use of realism to paint realistic-looking impossible spaces that capture a warped reality.



Figure 9. Rene Magritte, *The Victory*, 1939, 72.5 x 53.5 cm

6. Conclusion

Liminality is a term that refers to the space in-between two places. It can be as simple as a threshold between two rooms, separated by a door, or it could be the transitory region between the place an individual is coming from and where they are going. Regardless, this space is overlooked and typically not thought of as being significant due to our innate nature to look ahead or dwell on the past. However, it is during this time that one ought to reflect because a conscious transition allows for an acute awareness of thought, observations and growth. One will consider the way things are and ask questions as well as observe details that have never been noticed before. As a result of this,

combined with the understanding that the individual is in between two places, growth is promoted, whether it is mentally or psychologically.

This concept is depicted artistically by painting doors and drawing elements of doors in fine detail that shows each piece's deterioration from age, bringing in a historical quality that inspires a viewer to draw conclusions by combining the visual aesthetics with their imagination. Through the painting process I hope to reveal that the character of the door is important as it tells the viewer about its history. All the layers of paint imply an element of time. The uppermost layer of paint shows that it was repainted, cracks in the wood show its deterioration over time, and rust on the handle from it being weathered.

These places are significant in part because of the unique history that each one holds. At one point in time, the door was new, free from any blemishes or cracks. Perhaps it was once another color, or once adorned with features that it no longer has. The character of these gateways is notable and worthy of an individual's attention since they are overlooked by many, so I intend to capture the unique historical beauty that is a product of its age. These paintings and drawings will visually implement liminality as they suggest a threshold that serves between two spaces, representing the areas in life that individuals overlook

7. Acknowledgements

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Figure 7. Andrew Wyeth, *Frostbitten*, 1962, media, 16 x 23 ½ inches. Artstor.org
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Figure 9. Rene Magritte, *The Victory*, 1939, 72.5 x 53.5 cm, theartstack.com
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