

ALEXANDRA TYNG

Paragraphs on all figure paintings in *Brief Window*, 2017

***Brief Window:***

When my grandparents retired they bought a farmhouse with the idea that it would be an ideal place for their children and grandchildren to gather. They commissioned my mother to design an addition to the house that became known as “the ship” because of its unusual shape. It was the first space frame ever built for living. Unfortunately it burned to the ground several years after my grandmother sold the house. Recently I became curious to find the spot where it used to be. To locate the site, I used my own and my cousins’ memories of landmarks and routes, plus research and old photos. The area had changed drastically and the house had been replaced with a 1970s ranch style house. My husband said to me, “I wish I could see the house as it was, just for a minute.” And that is what led me to think: what if we could *actually* see things as they looked years ago, instead of imagining them so hard that they *almost* became visible? The figurative “window” becomes the car windshield that wavers and flickers as the fabric of the present reveals the past. Clues to the nature of this occurrence are scattered throughout the painting.

***The Source***

When I was about eight, my camp counselor told our group of kids, “We’re going on a hike, up the stream to its source.” We followed the course of the stream into unfamiliar woods that became increasingly tangled. After what seemed like a long time, we came to a stone springhouse that had a crack in the lower part of the wall, out of which water was spilling and flowing downhill between some rocks. Behind the springhouse was a shell of a house. It was built on a hill that continued up behind it. Part of the roof had collapsed and the interior was dark and hollow. The whole experience made a deep impression on me. For years after that I had dreams about hiking up the stream, through overgrown woods and, with each consecutive dream, finding the house and the springhouse with the cracked wall became more significant and more exciting. I never actually went back to try to find it until many years later. As I planned this painting the symbolism of my recurring dream became clear. Water is the source of life—literally, “water of life.” The girl is on a journey. She’s climbing uphill from a tamer place to a more tangled, difficult place. She’s going from where the water is visible to where it emerges from the ground into the light. In contemplating the source, she recognizes that the beginning of life, the origin of consciousness will always be a mystery.

***Triumph of Light***

A bonfire at a winter solstice party was the visual inspiration for this painting. I was fascinated by the flames, the sparks, and the warm light shining up on the people’s faces. I took photos and made sketches of groupings of people, but I felt the composition needed an animating figure—a person jumping over the fire. The young man, with his red shirt and long dark hair streaming behind him, seemed like a creature of fire and smoke,

and I thought of a phoenix that is reborn from its own ashes, and how that mythical bird is related to the winter solstice, when Mother Earth gives birth to the Son of Light. Another interaction with the light and heat of fire is represented by the fire salamander. This creature lives in hollow damp logs, and when the logs are burned it emerges unscathed. The figures in this painting are reacting in various ways to the action. Some are cheering the phoenix/jumper, others are in quiet contemplation or conversation. This painting is about light coming out of darkness, and about fire having the power to illuminate, to warm, to destroy, and to bring about change.

### ***Possible Space***

In dreams the house, with its various rooms and aspects, is a symbol of the self, and a shared space can represent the relationship between two people. *Possible Space* revisits a year I spent helping a friend to rehab an old house. In the painting the dilapidated condition of the house and its potential for renewal represent different aspects of our relationship to each other. Several layers of time are represented in this painting. The future is accessible through glimpses that we may not recognize or understand as such. The “painting within a painting” on the easel is a reference to two previous conversations I had with my friend that turned out to be prescient of the particular time shown in the painting. The past is accessible through memory. The picture plane acts also as a transparent surface that adds another layer of time to the painting in two ways. It not only creates a window into the past, but also acts as a barrier, indicating that we cannot go back in time but we can gain perspective on our lives.

### ***The Unseen Aspect***

This painting is about a child discovering that she has the power to see into the future. It is based on an experience I had when I was about five or six years old. My mother told me to go upstairs to get something, and as I started up the steps I “saw” the upper floor of my grandparents’ house in flames and refused to go up. I told my mother the house was going to burn down, though I had no idea why I thought that or where the idea came from. My mother rejects what I saw in my mind’s eye as “ridiculous.” Years later, the house did burn down, on the same year my grandmother and father died. The setting is the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where my grandparents lived. The scene on the beach is not a literal depiction of the actual event. The elements in the landscape—water, erosion, approaching storm, house, boat and footprints leading to the boat—are all “real” things, but here they are also used to signify impermanence and foreshadowing of death and destruction.

### ***Point of Turning***

A few years ago I was visiting my brother’s mother on her island in Maine, and I started taking pictures of her cooking dinner because I was fascinated by the light of the gas flames, and by her shadow on the refrigerator as she moved back and forth. I painted a small study of her and realized it might make a good painting, or part of a painting. Meanwhile, I was developing an idea for a painting of my brother in the same room

watching someone coming through the doorway. Both ideas were missing something. One day I fit the two ideas together in a single drawing, and the eye contact between the mother and son created a whole new dynamic. It showed a middle-aged man looking at his aging mother and realizing that he now had to start taking care of her, and a mother looking defiantly and lovingly at her son as she took care of him as usual by preparing dinner. The painting shows the point at which the tables are turned and roles begin to shift and eventually reverse. The objects on the table all support the concept in different ways.

### ***Perigee***

In this painting I'm exploring the "what if?" of imaginary time that can influence thoughts and actions and lead us down different pathways. The moon is a symbol for the feminine principle, for intuition, and inner wisdom. Its pull creates the tides, and the lunar phases represent the ebb and flow of emotional power. I had the initial idea for this painting during the "super moon" (Perigee) of 2015, when the moon was unusually large and close to earth. I asked myself, "What would my (grown) children do, how would they act, if the super moon encouraged them to let go and express themselves without restraint?" And immediately I saw my daughter dancing with her favorite cat, who was really a prince in disguise, so the moon was having an effect on the cat, too. My son became the mad violinist, playing the music to which she is dancing. I realized the cat and fiddle referred to the nursery rhyme "Hey Diddle Diddle," so I added more details to support that reference like the spoon and dish. On the dock is a musical score of *Moonlight Sonata*.

### ***Event Horizon***

I was thinking about the beauty of our world being overshadowed by the increasing threat of an uncertain future and possible disasters. The scene shows a group of people gathered around a man who is looking through a telescope at the Milky Way. The group has noticed that a black hole has opened up where no black hole is supposed to be. Some people are alarmed, some are puzzled, and some are just becoming aware of it. They are on an island in Maine, seemingly safe from impending disaster, but there is a possibility that the disaster is so great that it will have far-reaching effects. The elements on the far left and far right represent hope. The woman on the left is bringing out a cup of hot tea as if to say, "Just relax and enjoy the moment; whatever happens, live life now." On the right, the constellation of Sagittarius, nicknamed the "teapot," is tipping its spout into the horizon, producing steam that becomes the star-cloud of the Milky Way, so stars, as they are destroyed, are being regenerated.

### ***Birth of an Idea***

I often use this lighthouse tower on Indian Island as a setting for paintings because the shape of the tower, its height, the inside and outside space, the windows, and the relationships between all these characteristics, can imply so many things. In this painting

I wanted to emphasize the state of self-enforced isolation and intense introspection that I need while I'm mulling over ideas for paintings. The struggle to find substance keeps leading me deeper into the idea, reaching a level I think is the essence of something and then discovering yet another, deeper level. When I'm in the middle of this process, I feel energized and frustrated at the same time. There's feeling of being in the light, inspired, but also going through pain and suffering, unable to "give birth" until the gestation of the idea is complete.

***General info:***

**The painting process:**

The planning stage of my figure paintings is very mentally demanding. Each idea is triggered by one or more personal experiences, but I don't necessarily want to paint an experience literally, so I have to figure out what it's about on a deeper level, or a more universal level, before I can really figure out how to make it all work--what has to be there, what is extraneous, how the figures are interacting, until everything comes together and makes sense.

Once I'm painting it's like the final production stage. It must be kind of like an author writing a book for a long, long time and then finally getting it ready to publish. I really enjoy the painting process, and I feel excited and a little nervous worrying about whether it will successfully communicate what I intended to say.