

VISUAL REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Thoughtful Making



Professional Master of Education

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Thoughtful Making: Abstract

Balancing my identity as an artist with my emerging identity as a teacher presents an ongoing tension within my practice. Increasingly, my creative labour is directed toward classroom resources and pedagogical materials, reducing time for sustained studio work and raising concerns regarding creative satisfaction and professional sustainability. This reflects established discussions of the artist teacher identity, where practice and pedagogy are experienced as competing demands (Sullivan, 2010). The reduction in painting activity generated concern around creative depletion, forming the central problem of this inquiry.

This project examined my relationship with creative practice and the impact of its perceived absence on my identity. Rather than evidencing decline, the findings indicate that creative practice reconfigures under constraint rather than disappears. Through sustained engagement with poetry and photography, I identified a recurring visual and textual language present in earlier stages of my development. This aligns with arts based research approaches that position making as knowledge generation (Barrett and Bolt, 2014). Honest reflection reframed absence as transformation rather than loss.

The methodology adopts a practice based and visually reflective framework in which making functions as thinking (Barrett and Bolt, 2014), while also drawing on reflective practice theory which positions professional knowledge as emerging through critical reflection on experience (Schön, 1983). Data were generated through iterative cycles of writing, photographing, sequencing, and critical re viewing over several months, allowing patterns of recurrence and thematic continuity to be identified.

Framed through the concept of thoughtful making, the project is structured around the interrelated themes of presence and absence. Five poems are paired with five photographs in a curated book form, where text and image operate in parallel rather than illustration. The sequencing establishes a deliberate conceptual dialogue. This approach draws on Pitts and Robinson's *Home Is Not a Place* (Pitts and Robinson, 2022), where image and text coexist without hierarchy. The photographic treatment of space is informed by Rachel Whiteread's casting of negative space, materialising absence and reinforcing the investigation of visibility and obscurity.

Through sustained and honest reflective inquiry, the project contributes to my development as an authentic reflective practitioner. Recognising how creative presence can emerge within perceived absence strengthens my understanding of artistic uncertainty and adaptation as integral to practice. This insight informs my pedagogical positioning, enabling deeper engagement with students' reflective processes over time. The project demonstrates how practice based inquiry can generate transferable understanding of artistic identity as iterative, responsive, and sustained through critical reflection.

Paper Plates

Fine cut-outs of paper line my floor;
the wristbone presses against the desk,
click of a fabric sock on the seat,
a quiet rhythm of hours in stillness.

Red lips bite, nervously,
light flickering across the corner of my eye,
as fingers trace shapes and slides,
curating what they make, teaching them to curate,
digital thumbnails blooming like small gardens
in miniature gallery spaces.

Keys click, photos frame themselves,
a hundred images arranged and rearranged,
while flowers bloom in memory,
softly, insistently,
as if they were me,
as if they were hope.

I fold their work into spaces,
digital corridors and tiny exhibitions,
guiding hands to decide,
while my own paints rest in silent jars,
bristles curled, colours pressing against the glass,
the studio a quiet garden alive.

I watch the light across the shelf,
brushes catching shadows,
paper edges fraying like petals,
ideas moving between the flicker of the screen
and the pulse of paint on canvas,
no longer divided
but shifting form.

Even in black-and-white corners,
the world hums between screens and shelves,
my hand returns to sketches,
to petals, to stems, to blooms
that grow, quietly,
still mine.



Fig. 1 Heather Barker, *Artificial Blooms and Brushes*, 2025.

Digital photograph, home studio. Captured 8 January in evening light using an iPhone camera. Colour balance adjusted to emphasise saturated reds and greens with slight contrast increase for tonal clarity. Close framed still life of artificial flowers placed beside paint brushes, establishing the recurring bloom motif and colour palette within the series.

Presence and Absence

White wire coils around my fingers,
earbuds press, sore but steady,
each note a pulse beneath the desk,
black-and-white pages humming with green light.

The city pulses through my veins,
pavement, neon, my old self
dancing in corners of memory
I can almost touch between lines of text
and the click of keys.

Music scratches against eardrums,
sometimes sharp, sometimes warm,
green blooms in the shadows of my desk lamp,
not quite healthy, not quite dangerous,
just exactly what I need.

I trace shapes on screen,
a finger brushing the rim of a digital frame,
curating, arranging, teaching them to curate,
all while the soundscape keeps me
twenty-five, alive, irreverent,
fun, uncatchable, a little dangerous.

Shadows shift across shelves,
sketchbooks open like doors I can almost step through,
lip caught between teeth, wrist flexing,
the hum of sound keeping me tethered to me
while I fold their worlds into order.

Even in monochrome, the green flickers,
a heartbeat behind the work,
a thread connecting past and present,
artist and teacher, city and studio,
me, entirely, fiercely, quietly.



Fig. 2 Heather Barker, *Resting Canvases*, 2025.

Digital photograph, domestic interior. Captured 11 January in evening light using an iPhone camera. Minor exposure correction applied while retaining natural light. Overlapping canvases stacked horizontally with domestic light visible in the background.

Early Contentment

I sit in the shuddering carriage of my life,
no timetable, no soft light waiting at the next stop,
just the steady rattle of days I cannot afford
and the blur of things I am meant to outrun.

Still there is a strange ease in the motion,
a calm in letting the tracks decide the direction.

I lean into the window and feel its cold breath,
watch myself flicker in the glass,
tired, alone, yet somehow aligned.

Nothing is mine, not time, not certainty,
yet the movement feels right
and the dark outside holds no threat.

I think of the ones who love me,
their names sparking like small warm lamps
strung along the route.

And in that dim reflection
I see a woman who is not lost,
only travelling
towards a life that is already unfolding.



Fig. 3 Heather Barker, *Garden Vines I*, 2025.

Digital photograph, home garden. Captured 5 January in late afternoon using an iPhone camera. Saturation reduced and contrast subtly adjusted to emphasise dusty pink and purple tones. Potted climbing plant with damp soil framed against a window and wooden trellis..

Seven Classrooms Deep

A2 folders slap against my legs,
rain soaking the hem of my skirt
as I navigate corridors and streets
like a map I am learning to redraw.
Plastic slips of colour peek at the world
and I turn them over, holding gardens
I paint on paper, in hair, on hands
carried with me.

Each classroom a forest of desks and voices,
branches brushing at my sleeve
while I balance markers, plans, and patience.

I steady my step,
the route tracing itself beneath me,
lines of streets and corridors folding
into each other,
the studio humming somewhere
beyond these winding, wet streets,
not distant
but becoming.

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Fig. 4 Heather Barker, *Garden Vines II*, 2025.

Digital photograph, home garden. Captured 5 January in late afternoon using an iPhone camera. Tonal alignment maintained with Fig. 3 with contrast adjusted to preserve leaf detail. Upper section of the trellis with leaves extending toward the light.

Artist Teacher

I tap my kitten heels down the hallway,
each echo a pulse I try to follow,
a rhythm of days folding into one another.
The rain glances off the windows
like applause for a dance I never learned.
I spin between rooms,
voices weaving around me,
A choreography I am only half leading.
Red poinsettias tremble on sills,
mocking perfection, promising nothing,
yet insistently, insistently alive.
I catch my reflection in glass
and the woman who smiles back
wears shoes too small,
hands inked and scratched,
hair lifting like a paused pirouette.
I balance the past on my shoulders,
the studio waiting somewhere
beyond fluorescent light and timetable walls.
Will I stay in this rhythm forever,
or leap into galleries, lectures, exhibitions?
The music in my ears keeps the tempo,
a pulse I can follow,
heel tapping against cold floors,
turning, turning,
learning my own choreography
while teaching them theirs.
where teacher and artist meet.

Red blooms on the desk remind me
that the dance continues,
that even in digital slides,
painted marks, and shared ideas,
art waits, blooming,
and I am both audience and performer.
I fold the day into a neat square,
but the petals keep slipping through,
and I follow them
to the studio, to the page, to the canvas,
dancing, reflecting,
alive between roles,
alive in the half-light



Fig. 5 Heather Barker, *Level Five*, 2025.

Digital photograph, interior building lift. Captured 8 January in evening light using an iPhone camera. Colour grading adjusted to echo the palette of Fig. 1 with metallic tones slightly warmed. Close frame of a hand pressing the fifth floor lift button.

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Image Capture and Editing Process

Images were captured over several days within a consistent time window, primarily late afternoon and evening, to maintain comparable light quality and tonal continuity. Natural light conditions were preserved where possible to retain spatial authenticity. Editing decisions were restrained and applied consistently to sustain coherence across the series. The deliberate sequencing of domestic, exterior, and transitional interior spaces evidences considered curation rather than incidental documentation.

References

- Barrett, E. and Bolt, B. (eds.) (2014) *Practice as research: Approaches to creative arts enquiry*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
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