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Beyond the Classroom: Building Professional Skills with the Flyaway Mural

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Graphic Design

Examination Date: November 7, 2022

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ABSTRACT

In April of 2022, I completed a collaborative mural at Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Reflection Riding hosts a radio antenna connected to the Motus Wildlife Tracking System, which studies animal migration routes through North, Central, and South America. Working collaboratively with artists Rondell Crier, Tyus Allen, and Professor Derek Witucki, we designed and installed a mural that would communicate the Motus research to their visitors in the absence of a Reflection Riding employee. The project was funded by various grants awarded by ArtsBuild and The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and organized by budgets that fluctuated throughout the project. This thesis will discuss my research into the Motus system and local murals in Chattanooga. I will walk through my creative methodology and installation process and conclude with lessons I have learned through this project. By conducting research, honing painting and installation techniques, navigating professional relationships, and advocating for myself as an artist, this experience provided a critical foundation for my artistic career and taught me invaluable lessons that I could not have learned in the classroom space alone.

INTRODUCTION

As a student in The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) Graphic Design program, I have spent the last four years developing my artistic style, setting me up for a career as a designer. I also started to recognize my love for murals, and I have since been anticipating a career in mural painting. From 2021–22, I was part of a team who took part in a long, winding process to paint a collaborative mural in my hometown of Chattanooga, Tennessee. By conducting research, honing painting and installation techniques, navigating professional relationships, and advocating for myself as an artist, this experience provided a critical foundation for my artistic career and taught me invaluable lessons that I could not have learned in the classroom space alone. In April 2022, I completed a mural with Reflection Riding, a nature center in Chattanooga, Professor Derek Witucki, artist and designer Tyus Allen, and local muralist Rondell Crier. I conceived the idea for this mural during a Professional Practices class I took as a part of my BFA Graphic Design curriculum at UTC, taught by Prof. Witucki in collaboration with Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center.

Reflection Riding is a local non-profit dedicated to research and conservation of the Tennessee forests, specifically in Chattanooga. On site, Reflection Riding hosts a single antenna connected to a vast network of research through the Motus Tracking System, which serves to study migratory patterns of birds and insects.¹ This project demanded I conduct research on Motus itself and the animals it tracks, as well as studio research for the design. I wanted to have a thorough understanding of the Motus tracking system, as well as search for visual strategies that artists in my area were already successfully employing. Reflection Riding received an artist relief grant to fund the project from the city,² and Prof. Witucki also received a research grant from UTC.³

In the classroom, we as students are able to learn to work collaboratively with our peers, get a feel for design practices, and even in the Professional Practices class, we were able to gain experience working with an organization to fulfill needs. However, once the mural project—which I started as a class

¹ “Home,” Home – Motus Wildlife Tracking System, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://motus.org/>.

² “About PubArtCha,” About – Public Art Chattanooga, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://publicartchattanooga.com/about/>.

³ “Faculty Grants,” Faculty Grants – University of Tennessee Walker Center for Teaching and Learning, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.utc.edu/academic-affairs/faculty-engagement/faculty-grants>.

project in Professional Practices—diverged from the classroom, I soon experienced what it means to have a long-term professional relationship with people, especially amongst disagreement, and how it feels to be an artist in a culture that often devalues art as work. In addition to this, I was finally able to gain an understanding of compensation, payment, budgets, grants, and how to navigate a grant-funded project and the relationships that come from such a project.

The project came with many twists and turns, artists in and out of the project, and a complex budget. In this paper, I will be discussing my various methods of research and how they informed my process—from design to installation. I will discuss some of the mistakes and successes throughout the project, and conclude with lessons I have learned, and ways I have already been able to apply these lessons to my practice.

BACKGROUND: REFLECTION RIDING & THE MOTUS SYSTEM

During the spring of 2021, as part of a junior-level Graphic Design course called Professional Practices, my class worked with Reflection Riding Nature Center and Arboretum, a non-profit nature center and botanical garden with over 300 acres of land in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Every year the UTC Art Department offers this class to third-year BFA Graphic Design students. The professor initiates a partnership with a local organization or company that has graphic design needs, and students take on their first professional design project, working as a team to support the organization.

On a site visit in February of 2021, Tish Gailmard, the Director of Wildlife Conservation showed my cohort and I through their Wildlife Sanctuary and identified their major design needs.⁴ She noted their largest need was new signage for the sanctuary—mostly just to update it, but also so that visitors could learn about the animals in the exhibit even if there was no Reflection Riding employee present.

After we finished up in the sanctuary, Mark McKnight, the CEO of Reflection Riding showed us other various design needs throughout the site. He took us to the Visitor’s Center where he brought us to the back of the building. There was a large antenna standing about one foot in front of a large, unassuming, dull gray wall. McKnight explained that the antenna was part of the Motus tracking system, an international research network that tracks animal migratory patterns.⁵ Researchers from the United States and Canada are working together to install as many antennas—and tag as many organisms—as they can throughout the world to get a clearer picture of where different species of birds, bats, and insects are going when they migrate. The species Reflection Riding was most interested in at the time was called a yellow-billed cuckoo, a small species of bird native to the Chattanooga area that migrates down to South America in the winter.⁶

⁴ “Wildlife Conservation,” Animal Ambassadors – Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://reflectionriding.org/wildlife-conservation>.

⁵ “About,” About – Motus Wildlife Tracking System, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://motus.org/about/>.

⁶ “Description of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo,” Description of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo – Birdzilla, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://www.birdzilla.com/birds/yellow-billed-cuckoo/description.html>.

The Motus system deploys automated radio telemetry, which uses “receivers that automatically record signals from radio transmitters.”⁷ It is utilized in a wide variety of ecological applications, particularly for tracking migration of small animals, or for defining fine scale temporal information about movement or behavior. Researchers studying animal migratory patterns can go through a training where they learn how to safely capture and tag species (any kind of bird, bat, or insect, including butterflies) to be added to the database. As the bird flies throughout the US, Canada, and wherever else it may end up, the tag sends out radio signals, which are automatically picked up by nearby Motus antennas, and their location is recorded in the database. As researchers continue to tag birds, the number of test subjects greatly increases, leading to more information about animal migration.

For scientists researching birds, they set up bird netting in areas known to have a lot of resident species and wait for birds to fly into the net. Once caught, the researcher will weigh and measure the bird, recording all the information in the Motus database. Usually they take the body height, wing length, fat content, and estimate the bird’s age. They will then put an aluminum tag around the bird’s leg, record the number written on the tag, and then let the bird go. The Motus website makes it clear this research is a team effort. This knowledge can only be acquired through a network of people working together to tag birds, install antennas, and record data. As people continue the research, they input the data into the Motus database, accessible to the public via the Motus website. Researchers put new birds into the database as they are captured for the first time and update previous data from birds that were already tagged.

After McKnight finished explaining the network to us, I realized I had walked by this very antenna several times during our visit without giving it a second glance. But there was a whole world of research being conducted through this one metal structure. This presented an opportunity and a question: how could Reflection Riding communicate this research to their visitors without an employee physically there to explain it? From here, the class began our discussions on mural design for this space.

While my classmates and I identified the overall needs of Reflection Riding and started dividing tasks amongst ourselves, I immediately had my sights set on the mural project. Though I had experience

⁷ “About Radio Telemetry,” About Radio Telemetry – Motus Wildlife Tracking System, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://motus.org/telemetry/>.

painting murals, my projects thus far were either service projects in which members of the community assisted in the painting process, or the murals were designed by someone else and I painted them. Because of this, I researched other possibilities for artist collaborations—including Rondell Crier, who I had known through previous projects and is a mentor of mine—with the intention of passing off my design to them for execution.

RESEARCH

Chattanooga Murals

To begin my research, I toured Chattanooga to identify similarities and themes between the local murals, looking both for inspiration and visual strategies for my own design. While I knew most of my inspiration would come from the birds and the tracking system itself, I always feel more equipped to start a project when I have done some basic research into what others are doing with the same media. Looking specifically for features of each mural that I thought were working well and could be applied to my own design, I noted colors, painting style, use of shapes, and how each artist was treating the subject of each painting versus the background.

I started at the intersection of Holtzclaw and McCallie, a busy intersection in the neighborhood of Highland Park, a large neighborhood in Chattanooga which has become more popular in recent years for its low housing prices and close proximity to the downtown area. At this intersection, there are about 10 murals clustered together. McCallie Avenue, a busy road that runs through downtown Chattanooga, hosts mostly businesses, doctors' offices, and stores, as well as a series of murals on many of the buildings. These murals were painted as part of The McCallie Walls Project, run by Rondell Crier with youth participants in an effort to create the first-ever drive-through art gallery.⁸ The work from this project featured a wide range of content, from two murals of various planets to a large piece of a Native American chief. Not only does this variety mean reaching a larger audience—as individuals with different tastes can all find something for them—it also is a great way to promote the artists painting these murals, as it gives them new opportunities to have their work seen by the public.

Several of the murals surrounding the McCallie Walls murals, including *Four Horsewomen* by Hollie Berry,⁹ and *Mural McCallie Ave (3)* by Vagrant One,¹⁰ utilized certain techniques that give the illusion of light. *Four Horsewomen* uses various shades of bright reds, blues, and yellows in the background to make the stained-glass windows appear lit from behind, which adds a great deal of depth to

⁸ Teal, "McCallie Walls Mural Project," McCallie Walls Project – Glasshouse Collective (blog), November 25, 2014, <http://www.glasshousecollective.org/mccallie-walls-mural-project/>.

⁹ Hollie Berry, "Four Horsewomen," 2014, Mural.

¹⁰ Vagrant One, "Mural McCallie (3)," n.d, Mural.

a completely flat, opaque surface. *Mural McCallie Ave (3)* also uses color (though more subdued) to imply light: the use of the vignette shadow around the edges contrasts with the highlights in the center of the piece. The artists' use of color to add light and make the piece more visually engaging was a noted point in my research, as I knew at this point that I wanted to ensure the birds were the focal point of the piece, while still having a background that added dimension and color.

The most popular muralist in Chattanooga, The Artist SEVEN, has murals throughout almost every neighborhood in the city. Brainerd, the neighborhood I grew up in, is a largely residential and diverse part of town that hosts a broad range of incomes, housing prices, families, and lifestyles. SEVEN's pieces in Brainerd include: *Dimensional Evolution* (Figure 1), a piece with three overlapping triangles and three multicolored beta fish; and *Goddess Maya* (Figure 2), a painting of a woman playing a harp, amongst others.¹¹ As I began my studio research, I knew I was looking for examples of how artists used shapes, color, and painting style—all elements that stuck out to me about SEVEN's work. The majority of these pieces employ stylistic choices that point back to the classic “graffiti look”: over-exaggerated features of particular design elements, large geometric shapes in or acting as the background, vibrant and high-contrast neon colors, and the use of spray paint as the primary media.

¹¹ “Muralism,” Muralism – THE ARTIST SEVEN, accessed August 23, 2022, <https://theartistseven.com/muralism/>.



Figure 1. *Dimensional Evolution*, by The Artist SEVEN (date unknown) depicts 3 fish swimming through geometric shapes. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. *Goddess Maya*, by The Artist SEVEN. (Date unknown) depicts a woman playing a harp surrounded by flowers and geometric shapes. Image courtesy of the artist.

Another neighborhood of Chattanooga known as the South Side, which is becoming increasingly popular as more business owners open breweries, bars, and night clubs in the area, also hosts a large variety of murals. The most famous of which is the mural on the side of Koch’s Bakery, displaying deliciously painted doughnuts along the side of their wall. After unveiling the mural in the summer of 2014, Koch’s received mostly praise from the public, until the City of Chattanooga tried to have it removed because it was considered “illegal advertising.”¹² This sparked a large debate in Chattanooga, with hundreds of people signing a petition to keep the mural on the building, resulting in local politicians questioning the lines between advertisement and art in public spaces. This petition ended up enacting real change in Chattanooga, with city councilman Chris Anderson moving to reform local laws around advertising in 2014 as soon as the petition was released. Later that same year in November, with loosened restrictions, Crier and his team of youth participants started the McCallie Walls project.

The abundance of murals in Chattanooga—over thirty-five and counting by The Artist SEVEN alone—contributes to the city’s growing public art scene. Having public art displayed in communities promotes support for artists, creates opportunities for businesses who host these murals, and gives

¹² WDEFAdmin, “Hundreds Sign Petition to Save Doughnut Mural in Chattanooga,” Hundreds Sign Petition to Save Doughnut Mural in Chattanooga – WDEF, June 19, 2014, <https://www.wdef.com/hundreds-sign-petition-to-save-doughnut-mural-in-chattanooga/>.

members of the community to connect and work together who would not have otherwise.¹³ This creates a sense of visual identity within the community, and has also been proven to decrease delinquency and improve school performance in the area.¹⁴ In Chattanooga specifically, organizations such as Glasshouse Collective, Public Art Chattanooga, and ArtsBuild play an active role in promoting the creation and installation of public art in our area, especially with youth participants and young artists.

This research was heartening, as it showed me Chattanooga makes art a priority by putting it in public spaces. Though this is only a small portion of the murals in Chattanooga, I was able to find visual strategies I wanted to use in my own work. SEVEN's use of vibrant neon colors—especially to replace or enhance natural colors of the images he is painting—was inspiring, as well as his use of geometric shapes to create backgrounds, which gives each mural a sense of depth and dimension. Through this research I was able to draw inspiration from my own community to then contribute my own work to this local network of murals.

Motus Wildlife Tracking System

Because this project was about creating an educational mural intending to teach large audiences about the Motus Tracking System, it required more than studio research alone. In addition to the Motus research I shared earlier, the next step of my research process was to find more detailed information about the Motus system in order to build my understanding of the science behind the mural's premise. From the beginning, I was most interested in the animals being tracked, rather than the routes the animals were taking or other processes within the Motus system.

In addition to Reflection Riding's research being conducted through the Motus system, other scientists in the area are also utilizing the antenna for other research. Dr. David Aborn, a local scientist and professor of Biology at UTC, uses the Motus antenna at Reflection Riding—as well as other Motus

¹³Joshua Guetzkow, "How the Arts Impact Communities: An Introduction to the Literature on Arts Impact Studies," *Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies*, June 8, 2002, pp. 1-11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

antennas in Tennessee and Georgia—to research the Wood Thrush’s migratory patterns.¹⁵ Working closely with Reflection Riding, Dr. Aborn is one of few scientists in our area with the authorization to catch and tag these birds with aluminum bands that send out radio telemetry signals. He has also used their Motus antenna to track Sandhill Cranes, Tree Swallows, and several types of Warblers—all different types of birds that migrate through Chattanooga.¹⁶

Because it was so challenging for me to visualize the creatures being tagged at Reflection Riding, I wanted any viewer to not only understand how the research is being conducted and data gathered, but to also connect with at least one of the animals that researchers were tracking. When McKnight shared information on Motus with us during our site visit, he emphasized Reflection Riding’s research on yellow-billed cuckoos, a species of songbirds native to Chattanooga. These birds are on the endangered species list, which is a large reason Reflection Riding is tracking these birds in particular. This is what motivated me to use these cuckoos as my subject matter.

Yellow-billed cuckoos are a small bird, similar in size and shape to any other songbird, with a tan-gray body and a white belly. The bottom half of its short beak is yellow. In the midsection of the bottom of the wing, there is a light orange color, which fades into white the closer to the stomach it gets and turns to a darker brown on the tip of its wings. On the top side of the wings, the tips are still a dark shade of brown, while the midsection is a deep red color. Their tails often alternate between black and white feathers. Though many species of birds have very distinct features between males and females, yellow-billed cuckoos all look very similar.¹⁷ This told me that any visual differentiation between each bird in the mural would be up to me as the artist to create, as opposed to simply finding reference photos of physically unique cuckoos.

Together, the various forms of research served to give me a deeper understanding of the conceptual elements of the mural, while also helping me gather some visual strategies that I wanted to be working with. Similarly to how one would write a paper, it is not wise to be conducting research along the

¹⁵ “David A. Aborn,” David A. Born - Biography (UTC Department of Biology, Geology, and Environmental Science), accessed November 13, 2022, <https://www.utc.edu/directory/hjt747-biology-geology-and-environmental-science-david-aborn/hjt747#Biography>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Birdzilla, “Description of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo.”

way, having to plug in bits of new information in awkward places. I wanted to have all the research completed ahead of time so that instead, I could pick and choose from the information gathered to see what aspects of the Motus system were most important—and most feasible—to include. Having the visual strategies I gathered from my mural research to back it up, I was able to begin the sketching process with a sense of direction. This sped up my individual drawing process tremendously; I knew that I wanted to accentuate the birds above all else, so to begin, I focused on what the birds looked like and how to enhance them for a mural using what I had just learned from my original research.

PRELIMINARY DESIGNS

I began sketching right after I finished researching the birds' appearance, utilizing the scientific reference photos I found in my research, as well as visual strategies I learned from my drive through Chattanooga. I was drawn to how SEVEN used color in ways that are not natural to the figures in his murals. I knew I wanted to keep some of the natural coloring to make the birds recognizable as cuckoos, but still oversaturate and add some brighter tones to grab the viewer's attention. It was certainly a delicate balance to be doing a creative project with saturated colors while still maintaining the factual, educational aspects of the birds' anatomy.

In my original research, I noted the geometric shapes and patterns in many of SEVEN's pieces and how they were utilized in or as the background often makes the subject stand out a little more by adding some perceptual depth. Drawing inspiration from this use of color and shape, I created these elongated triangles for the background of my own sketches as a reference to rays of the sun throughout the sky; they also functioned to create contrast between the birds and the background. Figure 3 shows my completed first draft.

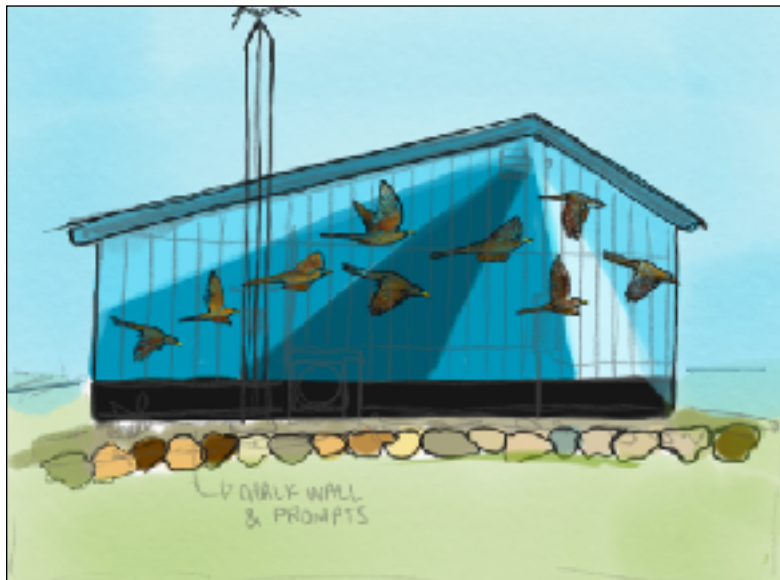


Figure 3. The first design for the mural, including 9 yellow-billed cuckoos on a blue geometric background. Image courtesy of the author.

I also wanted to add an interactive component to encourage further engagement from visitors. In the sketch, I designated the bottom strip of the building to be painted with chalk board paint, which would have a writing prompt on it (e.g., where do you think the birds are right now?). Visitors would be able to

use nearby sidewalk chalk to add their own contribution to the piece. This was perhaps what I was most excited about because it forged yet another connection between the viewer, the science, and the mural. Not only was this project creating more accessible public art, but it would also be providing educational learning opportunities to any participating viewer.

As this project began as a class assignment, I submitted my sketches for the mural and then took a step back from the project as the Professional Practices class came to a close in May of 2021. However, I still had several lingering questions about how the project would turn out: who the artist would be, how the design would change, and when it would be completed.

Before the semester had come to a close, Professor Witucki told me that he and Reflection Riding were both working toward applying for separate grants to fund the project. We found out in July that Prof. Witucki was awarded an undergraduate research grant from the Walker Center for Teaching and Learning at UTC, an organization which promotes student engagement on campus. The Walker Center awards faculty grants to professors engaging in research and creative projects.¹⁸ Since my official role as a course requirement had come to a close, Prof. Witucki had picked up this project where myself and my peers left off, and also began working in collaboration with local artist Rondell Crier. In doing so, he had also designed another draft for the mural (Figure 4).

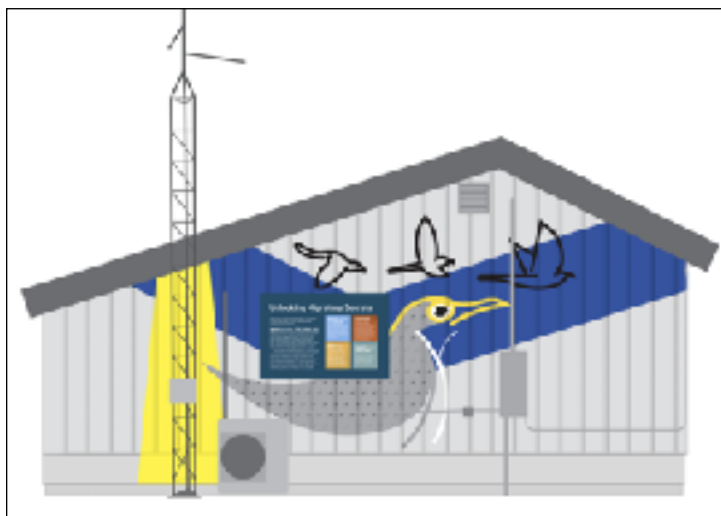


Figure 4. Professor Witucki’s mural design, featuring one large bird and three smaller birds in the background with geometric shapes. Image courtesy of Derek Witucki.

¹⁸ “Walker Center for Teaching and Learning,” Walker Center for Teaching and Learning | University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.utc.edu/academic-affairs/walker-center-for-teaching-and-learning>.

Prof. Witucki's draft (see Figure 4) utilized some of the smaller birds I had already designed for my first draft, but there was a much larger bird in the center. In the background, there was one large navy blue arrow shape, creating a mirroring effect between itself and the point at the top of the wall. On the left side, directly behind the antenna, would be a large yellow shape, highlighting the structure itself. I found the way the long yellow shape accented the antenna to be effective, as the whole point of the mural was to draw attention to the Motus network. However, the block of text in the middle of the wall seemed oddly placed and created unnecessary tension with the birds. Overall I thought it was a successful design, it just struck me how much the mural changed in the hands of others, getting further away from my own intentions and goals I set for the project.

In August of 2021, Reflection Riding received the artist relief grant they had applied for. Soon after, Prof. Witucki and Crier both separately reached out to me to see if I was interested in being back on the project. In Crier's message, he said that he had just realized that I was involved with initiating the project that he and Prof. Witucki had been working on, and that he liked my design and wanted me back on the team. Crier made sure I was aware that this was a paid opportunity, and that I would be welcome back on the project at any level of involvement. He explained that they had cut large bird shapes out of marine-grade plywood to paint and be installed later, and that my contribution could be as simple as "doing my creative thing to [the birds]" and giving them back for him to install later. I was very excited to be back on the project, so Crier, Prof. Witucki, and I agreed to proceed collaboratively between the three of us, and Crier sent me his new design for the mural for review.

Instead of the nine birds on my original sketch, or the one giant bird on Prof. Witucki's, there were two birds in Crier's design (Figure 5). As Crier was expecting me to "do my creative thing to it," the bird cutouts in the sketch were completely blank. However, the background utilized elongated rectangles that extended up the piece, stopping at various heights. There were 11 different colors included in the background, various shades of yellow, orange, green, and blue, which all came together to create a gradation effect between the colors.



Figure 5. Crier's mural design, featuring two bird silhouettes and geometric shapes of various colors in background. Image courtesy of Rondell Crier.

The three different approaches to this mural shows more than just the variations in artistic style between Prof. Witucki, Crier, and myself. Though we all focused on birds as the main subject, each design used dramatically different color schemes and interacted with the surface and shape of the wall in different ways. The wall of the Visitor's Center, where we were set to install the mural, was ribbed with these long slats of wood the same height as the wall itself. Though both Prof. Witucki and my designs included these slats, our designs intended to simply paint over and around them as though they weren't there. However, Crier's previous experience with mural painting told him that it would not be wise to try and paint directly on the wall and around the slats. Instead, he created a design that incorporated the slats into the design, and then allowed for bird cutouts to be installed separately. This would both make the painting process significantly easier, and allow me to work on the birds regardless of weather conditions, daylight, or Reflection Riding's working hours.

Understanding the logic behind Crier's design told me that experience is key. Despite my confidence in my original sketch, my lack of experience in mural painting meant I was thinking about this as a digital design, where material was less of a concern. Crier's experience told him that it would be impractical to paint directly on such a surface, and he was able to create a design that would both incorporate the slats on the wall, and allow us to still paint something detailed for the space. Seeing that I was already learning new lessons about how to design and plan for murals, I was excited to move forward to the next stage of the project.

ARTIST RELIEF GRANTS & BUDGETS

We were fortunate to have two separate grants that funded different parts of this project, despite funding often being the most difficult part of creative projects to secure. Materials can be expensive, paying the artist fairly adds up, and there are always unforeseen circumstances that require more money than budgeted. When a project is funded by a grant, the team behind the project creates a budget, which breaks down how all the money will be spent. A budget details how much money will need to be spent on materials, how much will be used for paying artists involved in the project, and in this case, how much will go to each artist.

One of the grants was a faculty grant from the UTC Walker Center for Teaching and Learning for \$2,500, awarded to Prof. Witucki to support undergraduate research through a student assistantship. The other grant was an artist relief grant, awarded by ArtsBuild and Public Arts Chattanooga, to Reflection Riding for \$10,000 to pay for the mural. Having no prior experience with grants, this project was a unique learning opportunity because each grant operated independently of each other, required separate budgets controlled by each organization, and utilized varying decision making processes. The artist relief grant proved to be the more complex of the two: having a great deal more money, it was more important to organize spending ahead of time to ensure there would be enough money to cover all our needs throughout the duration of the project. Additionally, ArtsBuild and Public Arts Chattanooga were large stakeholders in the project as a result of awarding this grant, so they had a certain level of control over how the money would be spent. This means that, instead of making small changes to the budget at will like we could do with Prof. Witucki's grant, we would need to coordinate and seek approval for these changes from three different organizations: Reflection Riding, ArtsBuild, and Public Arts Chattanooga.

The UTC research grant gave me access to a studio, full of supplies I would need throughout the project. Prof. Witucki already had some things in there: a couple easels, several sawhorses, paint containers, rags, paint brushes, and more paint than I thought I would even be able to get through. Over the course of several weeks, we brought in additional furniture, and Prof. Witucki told me that should I need anything else during preparation for the mural, all I needed to do was ask. This grant also paid for interpretive signage conceived, designed, and installed by Prof. Witucki for the adjacent wall. I have been a part of projects in which all the materials were bought as we went, meaning parts of the project had to

be re-engineered and possibly omitted all together due to funds running out. This approach takes longer to complete projects, as well as making the project more difficult and frustrating than it needs to be. Prof. Witucki's attention to the accessibility of this studio and all the resources provided within it made this project run incredibly smoothly, and as a result, the project as a whole was better for it.

The artist relief grant, in contrast, had all funds locked into a budget, and accessing these funds was not as easy. When Crier received Reflection Riding's budget from their artist relief grant, he attempted to make some adjustments that would better fit the design: the amount of time it would take to paint the wall, the time it took to cut out the birds, the materials and time needed for installation, etc. As he put it in his email reply to Reflection Riding: "We kept it within the same budget total, but rearranged the line items to more suitably fit the latest design, production, and personnel structure."¹⁹ Upon their team's deliberation of Crier's proposed changes, Reflection Riding noted there was only \$5,500 to pay all the artists and Reflection Riding employees involved due to the need to cover "their staff time, as well as all supplies, landscaping in front of the mural, alterations to the cutouts to make them usable, and hours working with our funders at the city."²⁰

At the time, I found it unclear why less than half of the artist relief grant would be going to the artists involved, and also paying Reflection Riding employees.²¹ Specifically the landscaping costs being included in the budget for the mural seemed misplaced to me, and as I was actively painting the bird cutouts at the time, I knew they did not need any further alterations to "make them useable." I just kept assuming the elements of the budget that I did not understand were there for a good reason, and I was not aware because I was not consistently involved over the course of the project. I was also hesitant to ask any questions. Living in a culture where we are expected to simply be thankful for having any work at all, especially as an artist, I did not feel it was my place to ask. With this in mind, I replied back accepting the budget as it was. Upon later reflection, I recognize that I should have done more research before this point, and I definitely should have been more willing to ask questions.

¹⁹ Rondell Crier, email to Reflection Riding and collaborators, January 13, 2022.

²⁰ Charlie Treichler, email to mural collaborators, January 14, 2022.

²¹ It was not until months after the completion of the mural, and days after completing this paper, that I discovered that this funding would cover not only the artists, but the Reflection Riding employees' time as well.

Where I met this email with slight confusion, however, Crier’s response was more direct and visibly frustrated. It began with asking for explanations around the same questions I had: wanting to know why the landscaping was being included in the budget and why funders from the city were being paid separately from the Reflection Riding staff money. He then pointed out there was too much money set aside for supplies and explained why he moved the supply money around to instead contribute to the funds paying for the artists’ “time and involvement.”²²

Crier concluded his email by telling Reflection Riding his plans for moving forward. He said adjusting the budget is “very necessary to achieve the final design plan,” and as a result of this, he would be backing out of the project, leaving it to Prof. Witucki and I. Lastly, Crier wrote: “Conceiving this whole awesome project constitutes [Gus’s] value and payment. . . . If you feel any discomfort in valuing Gus in that way, I will relinquish any payment and defer it to Gus. Let me know your thoughts on that.”²³

I had no idea Crier was considering leaving the project at all, and it sounded like this was also unplanned for him. I remember feeling incredibly validated. I knew that Crier was a great mentor and that I could come to him with questions about anything at any time, but for him to leave this project to ensure my work was valued—to ensure *I* was valued—as well as be compensated for my work meant more to me than he could have known at the time. Up until that point, I felt like Crier was the only one on the team who knew how to manage an art project budget and how to spend an artist relief grant, because as far as I knew, he was the only one that had worked with one in the past. The thought of doing this on my own from that point forward was worrying. But again, I knew I could contact Crier with any concerns, and Prof. Witucki was still actively on the team supporting me, so I felt comfortable moving forward.

Though Crier was not directly involved in the project at this point, we still had a few helpful meetings behind the scenes. In one of these meetings, he gave me a little more information about artist relief grants. I learned they were meant to be a partnership between an artist and an organization to give the artist opportunities to make art and get paid, while in return, the organization would receive some kind

²² Crier, email, January 13, 2022.

²³ Ibid.

of art project or “product” in return. A certain percentage of the money should go to the artist, and a small percentage of that grant money would also go to the organization.

The most important thing I learned from Crier about artist relief grant budgets—or any budget for an art project in general—is that the budget should never be finalized before a design is finalized. To make a budget for an art project that cannot be changed or redistributed in any way is like putting the carriage before the horse. If you have a design, you can estimate how long it will take you to complete it, all the materials you will need, and you can plan where the rest of the money goes from there. If you start with only the money and no design, you would be guessing at every aspect of the project. You would not know how much paint you would need for the space, if you need installation materials, and you would have no way of knowing how complex the design will be, or how long it will take. This was exactly what Reflection Riding had done; they had organized and solidified where all the money in the grant was going before there was a finalized design.

In the weeks after Crier left the project, Prof. Witucki and I continued budget discussions with Reflection Riding. We concluded that, because the structure of the budget was non-negotiable, some of the work left on the project would need to be redistributed. I had already started painting on the bird cutouts from Crier, but they were not yet finished, and the hours I had worked on them were adding up fast. We also had not yet started to think about how long the installation process would take.

In order to make sure that I did not provide a great deal of free labor, Crier suggested to me bringing in another artist. Just as he had predicted, the budget total for materials was far too high, so we had extra money in the budget. Crier ended up joining the design team and Reflection Riding on a call one last time to talk through this idea. Crier, Prof. Witucki, and I explained to Reflection Riding it was either this route or that money would be sent back to the city and I would be working the rest of the project for free. This helped put things in perspective and we all agreed the best option would be to continue with another artist coming in to help with the project.

Because I had started this project with my class, I knew I wanted to bring a classmate back into the project and immediately recommended Tyus Allen. Though he is primarily an animator and designer, I had seen some of the mural work he had previously accomplished and knew he had the skillset to be a

strong contributor. Because the extra money from the supplies budget was now going to Allen for his painting, bringing him in ensured that we would both be fairly compensated.

Attempting to limit the time we would spend when it came time to install, as well as following Crier's feedback, I simplified the design further. The first thing I did to simplify the design was to cut the number of colors we were using in half. Figure 6 shows the final design submitted to Reflection Riding in late January 2022.

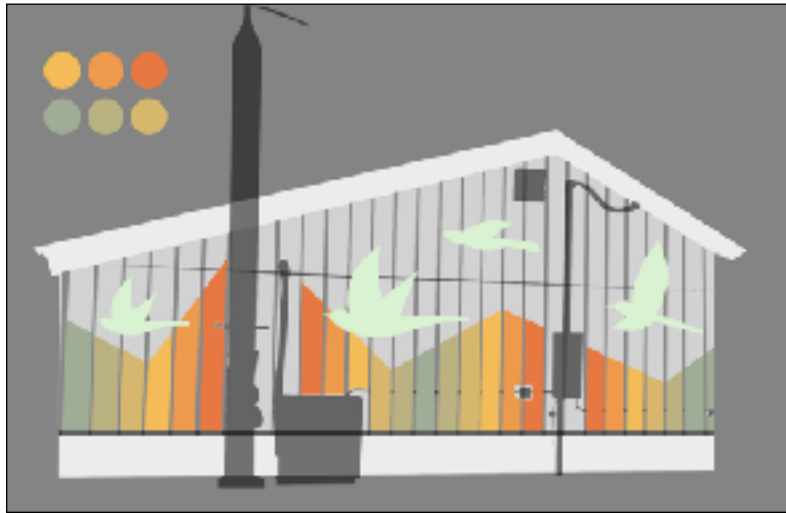


Figure 6. Final design for mural, featuring four bird silhouettes, and geometric shapes of a warm color scheme in background. Image courtesy of the author.

Working through this process with Reflection Riding, I was able to learn many practical lessons about working in the art world, including how to navigate the relationship with Reflection Riding, including the disagreements. Though all of these experiences were completely new to me, I was given the perfect hands-on scenario to teach me important things I needed to know before entering the professional world on my own. I better understand how to budget for an art project and how to advocate for myself when I am not in control of the budget. Seeing Crier in action simultaneously calling out Reflection Riding's problematic budget distribution while maintaining composure and professionalism with all parties involved was something I had never witnessed before. His further explanations and support behind the scenes also contributed to my being able to walk away from this project with more confidence in navigating self-advocacy in art projects and working through disagreements in a professional, respectful manner.

CREATIVE METHODOLOGY & EXECUTION

This mural required I change my perspective and process: not only was I incorporating research into my art in a way I had yet to do, I was also painting at a much larger scale than what my previous experience afforded. Up to this point in my artistic career, the vast majority of my work has been either small detail-oriented drawings and paintings, or digitally created. In contrast, Crier's previous experience was primarily in 3-D work and mural painting, which turned out to be invaluable. Though there was still a lot of trial and error throughout the installation process, Prof. Witucki, Tyus Allen, and I completed installing the mural in two days.

My combined research efforts culminated in painting the birds, which I painted in the studio space. Because I knew that yellow-billed cuckoos were mostly fairly dull colors, I was able to take the visual strategies I gathered from The Artist SEVEN's work to make them more visually engaging. What little color the birds naturally have—deep reds and oranges on the wings—I exaggerated by making the wings' bright oranges and yellows fade into scarlet-red tones.

After having seen the Visitor's Center wall, Crier knew it would be impractical to paint directly on it because of the slats and the texture of the wall itself, which was very coarse, rough wood. Instead, Crier had arranged with Mark McKnight to use some of the spare wood from what was used to make the slats. Prof. Witucki and I placed them on the wall under where we wanted the birds to go—a process that took hours of trial and error—and attached flush-mount hangers to the wall and the back of the birds. To then hang the birds, Prof. Witucki would have to stand in between the scaffolding and the building and hand each bird to me over his head.

The installation process took longer than we thought. There were a couple instances where measurements were slightly off and we had to restart the process, but the more we did it, the better we got at it, and the faster it went. Figure 7 shows the finished mural.



Figure 7. The final mural at Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center (2022). Image courtesy of the author.

The trial and error process throughout this whole project—whether it was trying out different budgets or different heights for the wall mounts—helped me learn a lot from this experience. Seeing Crier’s attempts to compensate for the texture of the wall taught me that the first thing to look for in a mural project is information on the surface you will be working with and considering how it will interact with paint. Had we moved forward with my original design, the entirety of the mural would have needed to be painted on-site, on and around each slat individually, and it would have taken weeks. Instead, installation only took a total of two days, and it would have taken even less time if Prof. Witucki and I had more experience with installing work like this.

POST-INSTALL & PUBLICITY

The work that went into this project left everyone involved feeling differently about it following installation. Reflection Riding had a new mural to showcase to their donors and other guests that taught about their research, and they were very excited to show it. Prof. Witucki, who, in addition to helping Allen and I paint and install, also installed a related, but distinct, project onto the adjacent wall. Allen, Prof. Witucki, and I were all exhausted from two days of installation. Prof. Witucki received no money from Reflection Riding's grant however—only funds from his own grant from the Walker Center at UTC. Though Allen had an important role in the project, he had not been involved while we were discussing the budget, and accordingly was confused as to how and why he ended up in the project at all. As excited as I was to have my work up and completed, Crier and I were both still frustrated with how the budget was broken down and spent, feeling that our work had been devalued and we were not compensated fairly.

Crier and I had a final meeting after the project had concluded to reflect on how the mural turned out, and he shared how his work with Reflection Riding began. He said when he received word from Reflection Riding that they had received an artist relief grant for \$10,000, he and Prof. Witucki started meeting to discuss the design. On one occasion they met, Crier made a comment about including students in the project, and Prof. Witucki told him that, in fact, there already was a student involved. As Crier knew who I was, when Witucki told him I was the student, he sent me a message inviting me back onto the project.

It was the next several meetings with Reflection Riding that brought Crier to the realization that the project did not come about how he thought it had. Crier then went back to review the grant and realized it was his name they had put on the grant. They had neither informed Crier they were planning on applying for an artist relief grant, nor had they asked for his consent to use his name on the grant. Crier theorized Reflection Riding wanted better odds at receiving the grant, so they put an already-established, professional artist's name on the grant to increase their chances of being funded versus utilizing a student artist's name with less recognition.

Though at first glance even I thought applying with a professional artist was a sensible move, Crier disagreed. He acknowledged that it was strategic on Reflection Riding's part, but reminded me that an artist relief grant was designed to give artists an opportunity to make art and make money. It was

meant to be a partnership between the artist and the organization, who would each get something out of it. Instead, we agreed, Reflection Riding turned it into something that devalued and exploited the artists involved: the original artist on the project was not the one listed on the grant, and the artist who was on the grant was introduced without his knowledge or consent.

While Crier reminded me that devaluing and exploiting artists is, unfortunately, very common, I was already aware of this fact, as we had discussed this and how to set personal and professional boundaries in the classroom. It was not until this point, however, that I felt the true impact of what being devalued and having my work exploited felt like, as this is not a lesson that can be learned in a classroom. Many do not see art as work, but instead as “doing what we love,” which contributes to a culture that normalizes devaluing artists’ work.

This is why, when I asked for feedback on how I handled the project, Crier answered that the biggest thing was that I have to know how and when to advocate for myself and value my work more. He encouraged me to think about the idea alone as valuable, and I needed to realize that my labor had added value on top of that. As much as I did not want to let Crier’s perspective on this project take anything away from it, I understood what he was saying.

The mural’s unveiling press event was expected to be followed by a donor event, and these events reinforced to me what Crier said. As I walked around a formal outdoor event, I was surrounded by older men and women, Reflection Riding’s donors, drinking wine and eating cheese. I assumed that, since we were there for the mural, some people would have some questions for the artists or about the project in general, however there were two separate occasions where I had to tell someone that there had been a mural installed.

When McKnight got up to speak, he told the audience that Rondell Crier started this project, and though he was no longer working on it, Prof. Witucki and “one of his students” had picked up the project to finish it. He did not mention Tyus Allen. McKnight then turned to me and asked if I would say something, and without really knowing what I was going to say, I stood up next to him to start sharing.

I began with a joke, saying this whole project started because I “told Mark he had a boring wall,” and when everyone laughed, I continued to briefly describe my interest in the Motus research, and wrapped up by saying how thrilled I was to have worked with Prof. Witucki and Allen, and thanked them

for their hard work. While this surely sounded contradictory to the audience to hear me talk about my involvement in this project from the beginning—along with others that were not mentioned at all—I felt the need to advocate for myself and share a more complete story of how the project happened.

While we were installing the mural, Reflection Riding hired a videographer named Pate Russell to take some footage of our process and to interview Prof. Witucki and I. Russell's final mini-documentary, *MOTUS MURAL*, also included an interview with Dr. Aborn about his work with the Motus research.²⁴ He was able to provide insight as to why Reflection Riding specifically is a good location for the Motus antenna to be placed and some of the risks that these birds take while they are migrating. Russell's final mini-doc also omitted Prof. Witucki's interview, and only showed him in the background of a few shots. Despite having Allen in the video for even less time, the ending credits, which named all the artists, did not name Tyus Allen. Instead, the artists listed were myself, Prof. Witucki, and Crier. Though Russell reached out to me asking about the spelling and crediting the artists, he did not release a corrected version with Allen's name on it.

The publicity that followed was bigger than I thought it would be. Local papers such as WDEF,²⁵ *The Chattanooga Times Free Press*,²⁶ *the Chattanooga*,²⁷ *UTC News*,²⁸ and the *UTC Echo*,²⁹ a campus newspaper, all wrote pieces on the mural. Both the UTC papers mentioned all three of the artists

²⁴ Pate Russell, *MOTUS MURAL*, directed and edited by Pate Russell, Vimeo, May 17, 2022, mini documentary, 2:08, <https://vimeo.com/710846291>.

²⁵ Hannah Bullard, "Art and Science Come Together at Reflection Riding with Motus Wildlife Tracking Station Mural," WDEF, April 7, 2022, <https://www.wdef.com/art-and-science-come-together-at-reflection-riding-with-motus-wildlife-tracking-station-mural/>.

²⁶ "'Reflection Flyaway' at Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center," *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, April 7, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220408032652/https://www.timesfreepress.com/galleries/albums/12516/>.

²⁷ "Art And Science Come Together At Reflection Riding With The Motus Wildlife Tracking Station Mural," *The Chattanooga*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.chattanooga.com/2022/4/7/446730/Art-And-Science-Come-Together-At.aspx>.

²⁸ Shawn Ryan, "Students, instructor create nature artwork for Reflection Riding," *UTC News* (blog), April 26, 2022, <https://blog.utc.edu/news/2022/04/students-instructor-create-nature-artwork-for-reflection-riding/>.

²⁹ Caroline Colvin, "UTC Art Students to Unveil New Mural in April," *University Echo*, March 29, 2022, www.theutcecho.com/features/utc-art-students-to-unveil-new-mural-in-april/article_e0f904f6-ac5d-11ec-b1f8-4f9acd438744.html.

correctly. *The Chattanooga* article included all three of us, but reversed Allen's name to be "Allen Tyus." The WDEF article did not mention any artist names at all, and the *Times Free Press* article has since been deleted.

Reflection Riding also released their own article on their website about the project. In this article, they state that the mural was created by "Gus Gaston, Derek Witucki, and Allen Tyus." Each name has a link attached to it: mine was of an outdated portfolio I had not touched in years, and Allen's, in addition to being the second article that reversed his first and last names, linked to a paper he wrote the year before on UTC Scholar. Prof. Witucki's link went straight to his website.

This information may not feel relevant, but it exposes the same theme that Crier pointed out, which goes back to the beginning of the project: we live in a culture that normalizes devaluing the artist, especially the student artist. Crier was mentioned correctly despite not being on the project. Prof. Witucki was cited and his website was linked, however, Allen's contribution to the mural was known only by the team and him, as all the publicity had either gotten his name wrong or left him out completely. The link to my name went to a four-year-old, mostly empty portfolio. If the person that wrote the Reflection Riding article had looked into Allen and I as artists—or reached out to us and asked for our information—as opposed to reducing us to students, they would have found both of our websites full of art and several other murals. It is the same logic that got Reflection Riding's grant awarded for a non-consenting artist.

CONCLUSION

Aside from lessons learned through this project about artistic style, collaboration, budgets, and installation, I also walked away from this project with a lasting interest in animal migration and art that serves to educate. It has changed the way I think about the function of a mural, and how I can use a mural as a tool to teach others, communicate complex ideas, and create a sense of community identity. This mural project alone brought together UTC students and professors, Reflection Riding staff, Rondell Crier, ArtsBuild, and Public Arts Chattanooga. Seeing this large scale collaboration as a lesson, I am moving from this project knowing how many people can be brought together through art, and what it means to collaborate with people from different fields. Now that I have this experience behind me, I can proceed learning from both the failures and successes of this project.

Primarily, I have come to realize by biggest personal struggle through this project was my hesitancy to ask questions. I ask myself often, had I simply reached out to the Artist SEVEN himself as I was doing so much research on his work, how could that have changed the appearance of this mural? How could it have affected my practice as a whole? How might the design have changed if I had reached out to Dr. Aborn, the local Motus researcher, before beginning the sketching process? How might the relationship between Crier, Reflection Riding, and myself had changed if I had asked my questions about the grant they received and how they budgeted it? How could the installation process have gone faster had I asked more questions about combining the existing structure of the Visitor's Center with new materials?

Though I will probably never have concrete answers to these questions, I see having to ask them as a lesson in itself. Now that I have had this experience, I know to reach out to artists and other people involved in the project. I know to look through any grant written for a project, and to ask any and all questions that surface while making budget-related decisions. I have realized that dwelling on the 'what if's' and 'should have's' of a project will do nothing of use if I do not reflect on and learn from them, and then apply them to subsequent projects.

Another significant lesson I learned is that running a successful mural project—or the ability to run large-scale projects in general—comes down to having experience. Crier's experience with mural painting told him not to try to paint over the slats on the wall (something both Prof. Witucki and I overlooked) which saved us both hours—if not days—worth of work, trying to paint such complex

designs on a sponge-like wall. Prof. Witucki's experience with grant writing and working with the Walker Center made the studio and materials that much more accessible, making the project run smoother. Though at times I felt insecure about my lack of experience, I have learned to accept that I don't have the experience yet, but I will get there. My experience is not of lesser value, I just have less of it.

Despite not reaching out to Dr. Aborn at the time, since I have finished the mural, I have taken his Natural History of Animal Migration course at UTC and have been able to further study migration patterns in the field and watch him tag birds and butterflies. Though I had already done so much research on the Motus system, the class has provided a deeper understanding of how scientists have collected all the data I was using as inspiration for the mural. When I started the project, I knew that I was linking the science and research world with the art world, but I had no idea how big the Motus network was, or how important the research being conducted is. The project cultivating a lasting interest in animals and their migration patterns was an unforeseen bonus to the other lessons I have learned and begun applying to other projects.

Several of the technical lessons I learned about installing and painting murals I have already applied to other mural projects. One mural I have created since the completion of *Flyaway* was a commissioned mural for Kristy Godbout, a colleague of my mother who owns an Air BnB.³⁰ Noting that the biggest challenge throughout the Reflection Riding project was managing the budget, we left the structure of the Godbout's budget as open as possible, which proved helpful further into the project as we started adding elements to the design. Additionally, one of the first things I did was assess the fence surface that I would be painting on, which was similar to the Visitor's Center wall. Because of this, I started by sanding down the fence and putting a white base coat on it before adding anything else. Because I did this, the painting process was easier—the wood did not soak up the paint, the colors appeared brighter, and the process as a whole took less time.

Having a greater understanding of my process as an artist and how I create work in collaboration with others makes me feel better prepared for the professional world. The classroom collaboration being closely followed by a professional collaboration showed me the various ways of navigating different

³⁰ Kristy Godbout, "Godbout Getaway," Facebook page, May 2022, <https://ms-my.facebook.com/godboutgetaway/>.

types of relationships and what is valued in each. For example, even the way we speak to people changes in various contexts: the way relate with my peers—whether it is a simple conversation or discussing a disagreement—is not always appropriate in a professional environment or relationship. Skills such as this cannot be taught in a classroom, as it requires actively being in a professional setting. Similarly, learning to not shy away from asking questions, and gaining confidence to advocate for my work and myself as an artist are lessons that can only be learned by experiencing it for myself. From intangible lessons about budgets and professional disagreements to technical lessons around painting processes and materials, I can already feel the impact and influence on my practice, and I am excited to see where I go from here.

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