The conscious and subconscious in dreams

Senior Thesis Paper ~ Tania Madhalam

My work exists in a space shaped by memory, identity, and femininity, grounded in the movement between the places that have molded me. I was born in New York City, spent my early childhood in Tirupati, India, and then grew up in Jersey City before returning to New York at eighteen. Living between these environments has shaped how I understand memory, not as something stable or fixed, but as something that shifts, softens, and reforms over time. It behaves more like a feeling than a record. As a painter working primarily in oil, with occasional use of printmaking and textiles, I approach my work through both material exploration and emotional instinct. My process begins with a colored gesso, often a bubblegum pink or a pale teal, which sets a tone before any image begins to form. From there, I slowly build the surface through underpainting, thin washes, and eventually thicker, more gestural layers of paint, allowing the work to have dimension and build up.

For my senior thesis, I focus on dreams as both a conceptual and visual language. I am drawn to the space between the conscious and subconscious mind, the place where thoughts drift, distort, and reform into something unfamiliar yet deeply personal. This interest grew out of a period in my life when my relationship with sleep felt unstable. During the day I would catch glimpses of things that did not fully exist, shadows in the corner of my eye, figures that dissolved as soon as I tried to focus on them, sensations that felt real but were impossible to hold onto. As time passed and my sleep began to return to normal, those experiences shifted into vivid and specific dreams that lingered long after I woke up. They stayed with me in fragments, in feelings, in images that refused to fully leave. Returning to this period through my thesis allows me to sit with those experiences again, not to explain them, but to understand what they might have meant. Through a feminine lens and a sense of nostalgia, my work explores how dreams blur the boundaries between reality and illusion, fear and comfort, control and surrender.

Dreams exist as a psychological space where logic dissolves and emotion takes shape. What draws me to them is their ability to hold contradiction without needing resolution. They can feel grounded and impossible at the same time, familiar yet disorienting, comforting yet unsettling. In my work, I am interested in how the subconscious communicates through fragments, distortions, and unexpected pairings of imagery. My dreamscapes move between the personal and the collective. Many of the images come directly from my own memories and dreams, but I also pull from common experiences that many people share, the sensation of falling, floating, being submerged, or being unable to fully grasp reality. These shared moments create a space where the viewer can enter the work and project their own internal experiences onto it, making the work feel both intimate and open.

There is a constant duality in how I construct these spaces. Some paintings feel as if they are forming on their own, unfolding in ways that I cannot fully control, while others are more intentional, more carefully structured. This balance reflects the experience of dreaming itself. Dreams can feel chaotic and uncontrollable, yet there are moments where they seem to follow a strange and quiet logic. I try to hold both of these sensations in my work. Certain elements feel deliberate and placed, while others dissolve and blur

into uncertainty. Translucency becomes an important part of this process. Through layering and washing paint across the surface, I create spaces where forms appear and disappear, echoing the way thoughts surface and fade within the subconscious.

My process is deeply connected to these ideas. I work primarily in oil paint, beginning with a colored gesso that sets an emotional foundation for the piece. I then create an underpainting using either diluted oil or acrylic, depending on how quickly I need the surface to dry. From there, I build the painting through thin washes, allowing colors to bleed into one another and settle into the surface before introducing thicker, more opaque layers. In the early stages, I blur and buff the paint into the canvas, creating a soft and atmospheric base that feels almost weightless. As the painting develops, my marks become looser and more expressive, allowing the surface to carry a sense of movement and energy.

I am drawn to distortion and abstraction as a way of destabilizing what feels familiar. I often begin with a recognizable form, most often the human figure, and then allow it to shift, dissolve, or become partially obscured. The figure acts as an anchor, something the viewer can hold onto, while the surrounding space begins to slip away from clarity. In some works, the figure feels suspended or even trapped, caught in a space that resists resolution. This tension reflects the feeling of being aware while still being immersed in the subconscious. My process mirrors this as well. I usually begin with a loose plan or image, but as I continue working, I move into a more intuitive state, allowing the material to guide me. It becomes less about control and more about response, less about knowing and more about feeling. This shift reflects the act of dreaming itself, where intention fades and instinct takes over.

My work is influenced by both historical and contemporary artists who explore perception, memory, and the physicality of paint. I am drawn to the expressive surfaces of Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, and Cecily Brown, particularly in the way their marks remain visible and alive within the painting. There is a sense of presence in their work, a reminder that the hand is always there. At the same time, I am influenced by the surrealist approaches of Salvador Dalí and Frida Kahlo, especially in their engagement with the subconscious and the emotional weight of imagery. However, I am not interested in creating highly realistic dream scenes. I want my work to feel more atmospheric, more impressionistic, focused on sensation rather than clarity. I take elements from these artists, their use of material, their engagement with the subconscious, and bring them together in a way that feels personal to me. I am less interested in illustrating a dream and more interested in creating the feeling of being inside one.

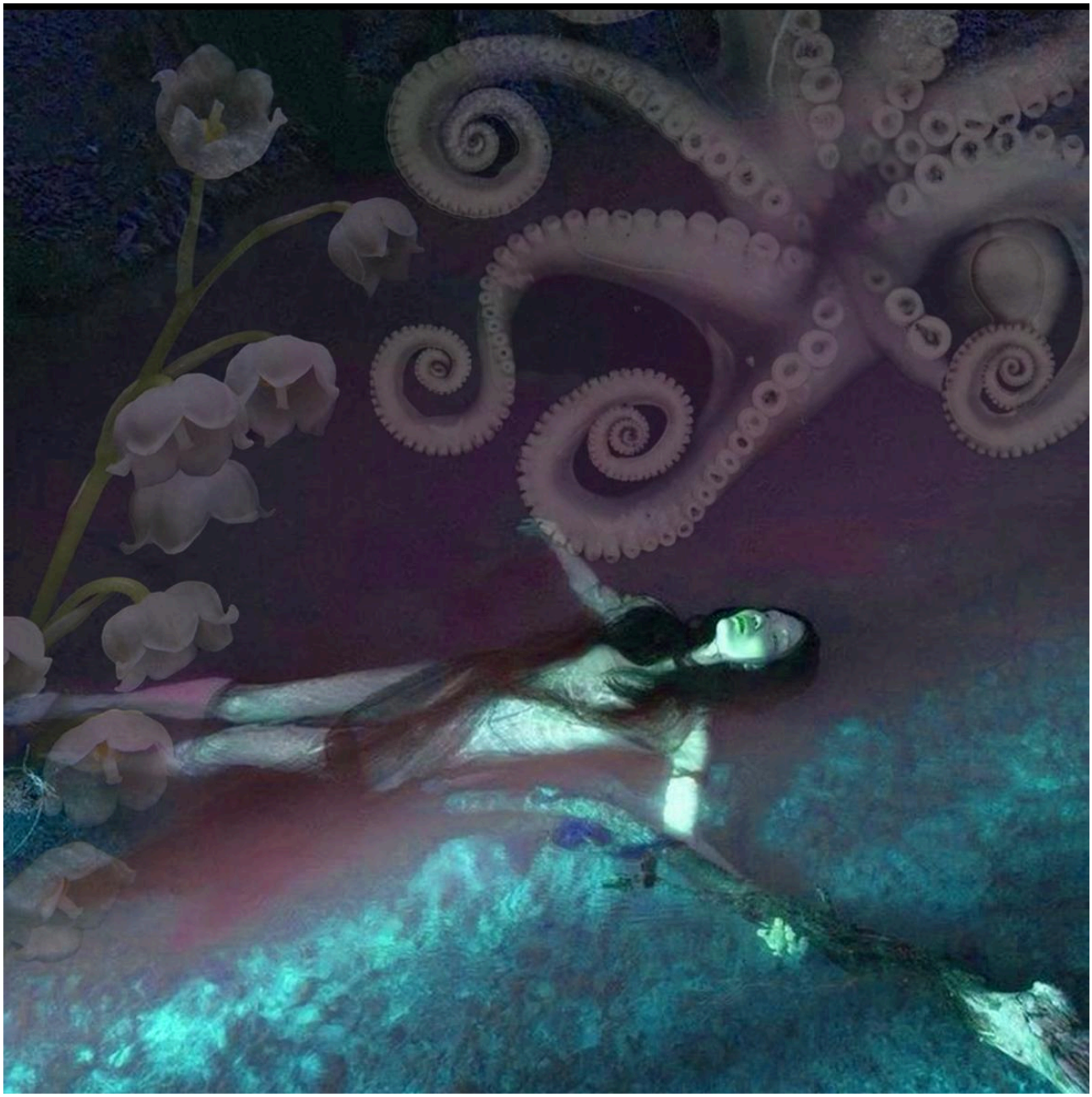
Theories of dreaming, particularly those of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, also shape my thinking. The idea that dreams carry symbolic meaning from the subconscious resonates with my own experiences, even if those meanings are not always clear. I am not trying to decode dreams in a literal sense, but I am interested in how they hold emotional truths that are difficult to access in waking life. My work becomes a space where those emotions can exist without needing explanation, where ambiguity is allowed to remain.

In my painting *Submerged*, I depict a woman submerged underwater, her hand reaching upward toward the surface. Light filters through the water, reflecting tree branches and leaves, creating a layered and shifting sense of space. I began this piece with a light pink gesso on a large cotton canvas, slowly building the image through washes of oil paint before introducing thicker and more assertive marks. The water acts as a

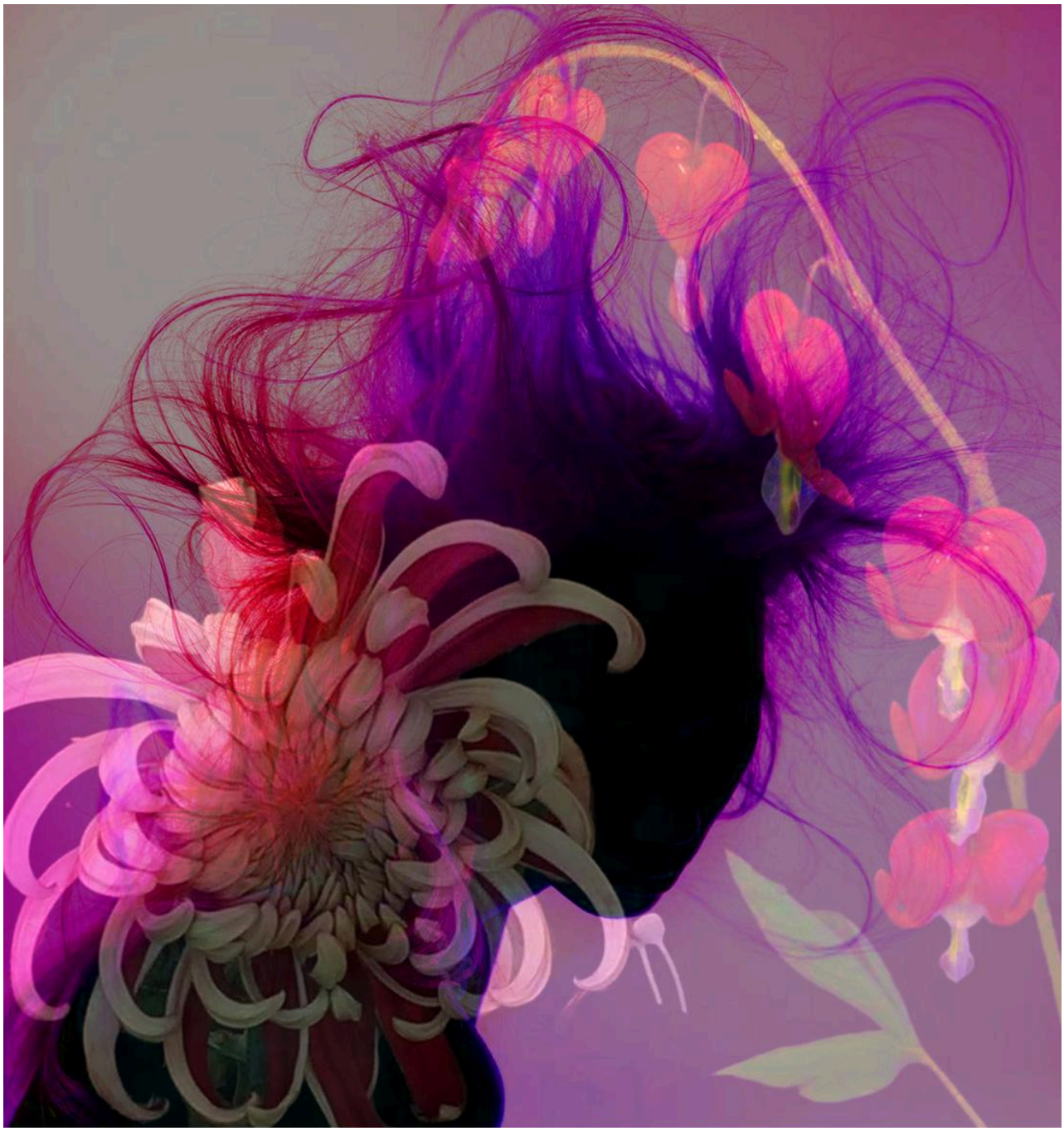
threshold between the conscious and subconscious. The figure's hand reaching upward suggests a desire to return to reality, yet her body remains below the surface. There is a quiet tension in this moment. She is running out of air, yet she appears calm, almost at peace. The reflected light and the presence of leaves introduce a sense of warmth, something nostalgic and familiar, as if memory is filtering into the scene. This piece holds the duality that runs throughout my work, a balance between comfort and unease, between clarity and distortion.



In *Here nor Gone*, a smaller painting, a female figure floats underwater, holding onto a branch or vine. The palette is dominated by blues and purples, with layers of thin washes creating a sense of depth and softness. A lily of the valley emerges near her feet, while octopus tentacles enter the frame from above. This piece exists in a space of uncertainty. It is unclear whether the figure is alive, conscious, or suspended somewhere in between. The branch she clings to suggests a need for grounding, a connection to something stable, while the surrounding elements begin to complicate that sense of stability. The lily of the valley, delicate and beautiful yet poisonous, reflects a tension between attraction and danger. The tentacles introduce a sense of being pulled deeper, a feeling of being consumed by the subconscious. There is a quiet anxiety in the piece, a sense of being lost within a space that cannot be fully understood.



In *Gentle Unease*, I move further into abstraction. A face is present, but it is completely blacked out, obscured to the point where identity disappears. Over this surface, bleeding heart flowers and a chrysanthemum emerge through layers of transparency. The background is a soft pink, creating a contrast between warmth and emptiness. The absence of facial features introduces a sense of unease, a confrontation with the unknown. The flowers, though delicate, carry an intensity that draws the viewer in while also creating tension. There is a quiet push and pull between comfort and discomfort, between beauty and something more unsettling. This piece reflects the way dreams can hold both fear and softness at the same time, how something can feel inviting and threatening all at once.



Across all of these works, I return to the instability of perception and the fluid nature of internal experience. My paintings resist clear narratives. They ask the viewer to move through them intuitively, to sit with uncertainty rather than resolve it. This openness reflects the structure of dreams themselves, which rarely follow a linear path and often exist in fragments that shift and overlap.

Ultimately, my work lives in the space between clarity and ambiguity, mirroring the shifting boundary between the conscious and subconscious mind. Through layered surfaces, distorted forms, and dreamlike environments, I create spaces that invite reflection and introspection. Nostalgia plays a quiet but persistent role in this, not just as a longing for the past, but as a way of reimagining what stays with us and how it continues to evolve. Looking forward, I want to continue pushing the scale of my work and exploring new materials, possibly incorporating textiles or more immersive elements that extend beyond the canvas. As I move beyond my thesis, I am interested in going deeper into this exploration of the subconscious, continuing to create work that feels both personal and open, spaces where reality and dream remain intertwined, never fully separating, always shifting.