

Taylor Evans  
Thesis Deliverables  
Spring 2022

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Pacific Northwest College of Art  
Willamette University

## Artist Statement

Taylor Evans is a 24 year old emerging artist who currently lives and works in Portland, Oregon. Her studio work is multimedia. While she has primarily worked as a painter, she is currently exploring new and unconventional mediums. Evans has previously used her practice to explore the abstraction of biological forms, focusing mainly on flora and fauna. She is currently investigating her experiences with synesthesia and sound visualization using non-traditional mediums. Evans creates compositions that depict the ways in which she visualizes specific genres of music. She has chosen to use unconventional materials in her work as an alternative to mediums that had previously been negatively impacting her health.

## Thesis Project Abstract

### An Exploration of Synesthesia and Sound Visualization Through The Use of Non-Traditional Materials

I have placed one of these non- traditional materials on each seat. I invite you to see and feel some of the objects I have been working intimately with for the past 5 months. You are welcome to keep them.

This body of work explores the ways in which I experience the colorful world of synesthesia. Synesthesia is a fancy word that describes when you experience one of your senses through the other. I experience a form of it that causes me to visualize sounds.

During the COVID 19 pandemic I spent much more time listening to music than I have any other period in my life. This led me to experience synesthesia much more frequently. It began to serve as a coping mechanism for all of the chaos that was happening in the world. I felt that recreating my sound visualization experiences in my thesis project would offer me an outlet to better understand the way my mind processes auditory and visual information.

I decided to create works that depict the 3 music genres that are most visually stimulating for me in terms of color; music of the string family, music with deep bass and high frequency electronic music. These pieces are accompanied by a playlist that contains some of my favorite examples of these genres.

## Thesis Proposal Final Draft

For my thesis I propose to create four medium sized mixed media wood panels (approximately 24"x 18" in) using found objects and recycled materials. I will be using all found materials to create abstract expressions of how sound can be visualized rather than heard. The mediums I am working with include antique microfilm, vintage beads, old eyeglass lenses and magazines. For years I have been creating artwork, specifically paintings, that are environmentally unfriendly. I am using these recycled objects to explore how I can shrink my carbon footprint and to invite others to consider how they impact the environment. I have chosen to use these mediums to depict the visualization of sound because I feel that sound is highly subjective to the individual experiencing it. Found and or recycled objects are also highly subjective to individual interpretation, what one person views as trash can be another person's treasure.

I have been collecting various types of scrap objects to use for materials in this project. The items that seem to be forgotten are the ones I am most interested in using. I use these to create an abstract collage of fluid shapes and connecting forms. I am examining artists who have incorporated found objects into their work, such as John Cage and Louise Nevelson etc. I am specifically researching how these found mediums have been used to create a piece of art that could be considered fine art. This means I must also investigate what fine art is and who decides what qualifies as fine art. My research has strongly emphasized the influence that popular culture has on the ways in which societies label art.

I am choosing to arrange these materials in an expressive way, much like I would with an intuitive painting. Allowing myself to use the intuitive process encourages abstraction in the ways I am investigating sound. I am not creating flat collages, I am creating dimensional works that explore melody and pattern. These shapes are intended to represent the rhythm of sound and sound vibrations as I experience them. Sound is unique to the individual that is experiencing it, each person hears and interacts with sound differently. I feel that reclaimed items also stand out to some people more than others, making them subjective to viewer response. What one person has regarded as junk can be another person's treasure.

While the execution of this work is intuitive, I am still conscious of how the found materials will be noticed/read by the viewer. When you approach the work with a closer look, the intricate detail in the film and records etc is apparent. These details become the most beautiful aspect of the work, they are not the details I created, they are the details that live within these discarded items. The small words and photos captured within the film, the reflection in an old lens and a sentence from an old magazine can all be seen upon a closer look. These could have easily ended up in a landfill or incinerator, yet they are here on this canvas. I have used them to create a space where they can live on and encourage others to notice the detail in the most seemingly irrelevant objects.

Oral Defense  
25 April, 2022

- **Begin with land acknowledgement**  
Portland, Oregon lies within the traditional homelands of the Multnomah, Oregon City Tumwater, Watlala, and Clackamas Chinooks

and the Tualatin Kalapuya Peoples who were relocated to the Grand Ronde Reservation under the Kalapuya etc., 1855, ratified treaty (also known as the Willamette Valley Treaty, 1855). Today, these Tribes are a part of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. The Grand Ronde people continue to maintain a connection to their ancestral homelands and maintain their traditional cultural practices.

## ● Introduction

- Hello and thank you all for coming to my thesis presentation.
- **Introduce myself** - My name is Taylor Evans and I am a second semester senior here at PNCA. **My senior thesis project explores my experiences with synesthesia and sound visualization through the use of non-traditional materials.**  
*\*I have placed some of these non- traditional materials on each seat. I invite you to see and feel some of the objects I have been working intimately with for the past 5 months. You are welcome to keep them.*

**I would like to start by providing some background information as to why I chose to explore synesthesia and these materials for my project.**

- When I began gathering inspiration for my thesis project in the early fall of 2021, I was still feeling out of whack from returning to in person learning after the long remote break due to the pandemic. Like many of us, I had a difficult time adjusting to distance learning. All of the time I spent alone really encouraged me to savor the hobbies I have developed throughout my life- music is one of my favorites. When I listen to music- I don't just hear it- I also see it- this experience is known as synesthesia.
- **Synesthesia** is a fancy word that describes when you experience one of your senses through the other. Its name derives from the Greek, meaning "to perceive together"  
**The US National Library of Medicine** defines Synesthesia as -"A piece of music (sound event) could be considered sweet (sense of taste), rough (tactile) or brilliant (visual)."
- New studies with Modern brain imaging and molecular genetic tools have allowed researchers to better investigate this strange phenomenon. A recent study from the American Psychological association suggests that around 1 in 200 people are synesthetes.
- Women are up to 6 times more likely to experience synesthesia than men and- Strangely enough, it has also been tied to genetic factors- Synesthesia can run in families.
- It can take on multiple forms- For some people as they are listening to my speech now- every word might have its own color. I personally experience a form of it that causes my auditory responses to often be experienced through my visual responses. For me and

many other synesthetes, Music is a visual experience- not just made up of colors but of movement and shapes.

- When I listen to music, each type of sound has its own visual identity- imagine violin notes are bright curvy lines and drum beats are dark heavy undulating circles. Each type of sound illicites a unique visual experience- some being much more colorful than others. It is a kaleidoscopic world of vision, movement and light.
- I was blessed to grow up in a family of musicians and music enthusiasts. My mom and I have bonded over music throughout my entire life. Some of my earliest memories are of her singing lullabies to me as she played her cherry red electric guitar. She would put me on her lap and let me watch her play. Sometimes she would turn her amp all the way up until she was quite literally shaking our entire house. When she wasn't playing her guitar- she was down in the basement banging on her drums. If she wasn't playing music herself- she was playing one of her thousands of CD's and records. While my mom was a single parent and I am an only child- our house was rarely quiet - Music continuously filled our home with light and love.
- Inspired by my mom- I started begging for violin lessons when I was 7. It was during this time that I first began experiencing synesthesia. I started visualizing each note with purple and pink streaks that would fade in and out as pitch would fluctuate. I would almost get so overstimulated by the colors that I saw that I had a hard time focusing in my lessons. To this day- I vividly remember the way my violin teacher Ms. Murphy laughed when asked why the violin made purple noise.
- As I grew up, I started to visualize most all types of music I heard. I felt that experimenting with new instruments would offer me ways to further explore my colorful visions. Throughout middle school and highschool, I learned to play the guitar, the flute and the drums. I feel that learning to play all of these instruments has made me more attuned to what specific sounds cause my brain to experience the most vivid and intense sound visualizations.
- During the COVID 19 pandemic I spent much more time listening to music than I have any other period in my life. This led me to experience synesthesia more frequently and intensely. It began to serve as a coping mechanism for all of the chaos that was happening in the world. I felt that recreating my sound visualization experiences in my thesis project would offer me an outlet to better understand the way my mind processes auditory and visual information.

**When I began thinking about the medium I wanted to use in this project-I knew I wanted to experiment with non-traditional materials.**

For years I have been creating artwork, including paintings- using materials that were negatively affecting my health. Last year I reached a point where I did not feel it was sustainable for me to keep using mediums that constantly made me sick- I had to start thinking about the long term consequences these mediums could have on my health.

My dear friend Veronica suggested that I check out Scrap PDX- a craft store that sells quirky odds and ends for creative reuse. Everything is second hand -it's easy on the environment and the art student budget.

When I first went to scrap, I noticed that some objects had begun to pile up. It was obvious to me that some items were more popular than others.

I was particularly interested in the overstocked items such as the 35 micro film, eyeglass lenses, buttons and beads.

I started thinking about how I could use these objects as a non-traditional medium for my sound visualization work. I felt these scrap items would be a really fun and playful medium to use for this subject.

## **In November of 2021, I presented my Thesis Project Proposal**

I proposed to create 4 pieces of work that explored my experiences with synesthesia and sound visualization. I proposed to make these pieces using the non-traditional materials that I gathered from the scrap store.

I planned to arrange these objects in an intuitive way. I wanted to listen to music while creating the work- allowing my ideas and thoughts to flow freely into my compositions.

**Over the past 6 months- I worked diligently to create 5 pieces of work- each one is unique in its shape, size and color palette.**

**I decided to create pieces of work that depict the 3 music genres that are most visually stimulating for me in terms of color- they are Music of the string family, music with deep bass and high frequency electronic music. I curated a playlist to accompany these pieces that contains some of my favorite examples of these genres.**

**-It was Russian Artist Vasily Kandinsky who introduced me to the concept of isolating specific sounds.** He used his experiences as a synesthete to create paintings that explored the ways he visualized specific colors through certain sounds. When he painted, he listened to music- allowing himself to intuitively project his colorful visions into his work. When explaining his process He wrote- *“Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key to another, to cause vibrations in the soul.”*

- As I started this project- color was something that I was really excited about. It is the most profound element of my synesthesia experiences. The way that Kandinsky isolated certain sounds to depict their colors and shapes fascinated me.

He inspired me to investigate the ways that I could use this project to create work that explores the types of music that are most visually stimulating for me.

- **First panel-** I named it titled *String Serenade*. This panel is 24 x 18 inches and it is composed of scrap materials including- Vintage 35 mm microfilm, scrap paper, eyeglass lenses, beads, buttons and various pieces of scrap plastic. I assembled each piece with hot glue, nails and pins. This composition depicts what I visualize when I listen to music primarily composed of string instruments - When I made this piece I listened to various types of music with instruments from the string family. Some of my favorite examples of this music include artists like Pearl Jam, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Muddy Waters and The staple singers.
- I often visualize the sounds of instruments such as violins, guitars, and cellos as black gelatinous blobs that calmly morph in and out of each other. I will start to see flashes of pinks and purples that fluctuate in sync with the notes I am hearing. The bright shades will swim through black shapes to form unique, random momentary bursts of color. I feel that the black forms I experience in these visuals are what make the pinks and purples appear particularly vivid and bright.
- Since I chose to work with a new and unconventional medium, I struggled with constructing this piece until- I found Louise Nevelson. She was an American sculptor who used found objects to create monumental, monochromatic wooden wall pieces. She would gather her found materials from the urban areas surrounding her studio in New York. While there are many artists who work with found objects- I was particularly fascinated by the way Nevelson came up with new and innovative ways to assemble her materials. Her processes were experimental yet meticulous. She really took the time to be hands-on with each and every object she used in her pieces and she spent time considering the ways in which each object would interact with the next.
- A quote by Henry Foster, The Director and Chief Curator at the Rose Art Museum in 1967 wrote “Nevelson was fluid in her approach to sculpture. In contrast to the structure of the pieces themselves, her decisions were dramatic. She turned things upside down, cut them in half, and put parts in other parts. This aspect of her practice functioned almost like a heart transplant, offering new life to an old form. She composed “sentences” of forms into paragraphs that became installations.”
- I found her sculpture *Sky Cathedral* Created 1958 to be particularly unique in terms of material use. This piece consists of boxes, stacked sideways against a wall. Each compartment is filled with wooden scraps of furniture parts, moldings, dowels and spindles.

- Even though she primarily composed her sculptures with wooden objects, I was captivated by the ways in which Nevelson made her materials interact so beautifully with one another. It encouraged me to think critically about unique and clever ways to assemble the materials I was working with
- I found that the 35 mm film was particularly difficult to work with as it tends to form tight natural coils. I experienced a lot of frustration trying to get it to create the fluid, wavy shapes I wanted to form- I started using small screws to create points in which I could wrap the film around. Once I had it in the shape I wanted- I would glue the edges down to the surface of the panel.
- I wanted to use the eyeglass lenses and beads to create the random bursts of color within this piece. After a lot of tinkering- I decided to wind the film around the beads and lenses to suspend them at different heights. Some are sunken to the base of the panel while others sit at the surface-
- Overall I am very proud of how this piece turned out. I spent countless hours placing thousands of individual pieces of film and paper into the composition. I learned to conquer my frustrations and practice patience with myself and my new materials. This piece also strongly informed the ways in which I chose to approach my material processes in my other compositions.
- **The Second Panel I created is titled Subwoofer**
- This piece is a 24 x 48 inch wood panel composed of old film, vinyl, paper, knitting needles, marbles, beads, eyeglass lenses, board game pieces, buttons, acrylic scraps and plastic scraps. I assembled each piece using hot glue, screws and t pins. This panel depicts what I visualize as a syntheit when I listen to music with deep bass- My favorite being hip-hop. When I created this panel I listened to music by artists such as Nas, Digable Planets, Goodie Mob and A Tribe Called Quest.
- When I listen to music composed of heavy bass I tend to visualize black and blue circles ungliating in sync with the beat. The blue colors will transition from light and dark hues as the rhythm of the bass fluctuates-When the tempo gets fast -the blue forms start vibrating and moving together-morphing the circular forms into onblonged tentacle like shapes. Depending on the depths in which the bass reaches, I will occasionally see dashes of warm colors popping through the surface of the blue.
- This piece was really fun and cathartic for me to make. I particularly enjoyed creating all of the circular forms in this composition. I created most of the black circles by gluing rolled film strips onto the panel. I then filled them with more tightly wound pieces of film- allowing each one to uncoil inside the next. I used

eyeglass lenses, marbles, game tokens and buttons to mark other black and blue circular shapes throughout the composition.

- **For my third piece, I created A sculpture to depict how I visualize High Frequency Electronic Music**
- This piece is roughly 48 inches long and 30 inches wide. It stands about 2 feet off the ground at its tallest point. The primary substrate in this sculpture was created out of an abstract shaped foam board (The board was actually a small part of a foam mascot for a beer company). The other materials include film, beads, dice, marbles, slinkys and various other plastic items- I assembled it with pins and hot glue. I chose to create this sculpture because electronic music gives me the most vivid, weird and chaotic visual stimuli of any music genre. When I created this piece, I listened to high frequency music by artists such as Chromeo, Liquid Stranger, and Little Dragon.
- When I visualize these types of sounds- black clusters will vibrate against a body of pink and green shapes. They swirl together to create one large abstract, pulsating form. As the frequencies increase, sections of color will shoot upwards creating elevation. When the frequencies get lower- the shapes swiftly sink back down. The shapes climb up and down to create a colorful, chaotic 3 Dimensional Landscape.
- Since I wanted this piece to depict my most vivid-chaotic synesthesia experiences- my mentor constantly encouraged me to be unapologetic with the weirdness in this piece. They pushed me to start looking for more playful, obscure objects to incorporate into the composition. I started going to scrap more frequently to dig around for materials- I chose to use the slinkies, cactus and backscratcher to enhance the sensation of chaos and randomness.
- Constructing this piece was really fun but it was also quite a challenge. I had to assemble it from multiple angles -shifting it around as I worked on each side of the structure. I created a slight slope with the foam board using a long knitting needle and 3 small acrylic trash bins to form supports. The trash bins are filled with marbles to ensure that the elevated section of the sculpture is able to support weight. Because the substrate is made of foam, I was able to use pins to secure most of the paper, film and buttons. All of the random objects in this piece were really fun to work with-I look forward to making more, strange whimsical works like this one.
- The two small panels I made were created with leftover materials I had from creating my two larger pieces Subwoofer and Siren. The small blue panel is 6 x 6

inches and the pink and green panel is 8 x 6 inches. I felt that scaling down in size would allow me to explore how I can use these materials to make smaller compositions. I am very pleased with how these little pieces turned out. My mentor called them tiny bouquets of color.

- **I want to conclude by sharing where I started this project-**

- When I began the process of creating these pieces- I was anxious knowing I had to share the conceptual framework of my pieces with the public. This is the first time I have decided to explore my sound visualizations in my artistic practice. Like many synesthetes- I have always felt vulnerable and embarrassed sharing about how I see sounds. When I first started meeting with my mentor- I struggled to talk openly about my synesthesia experiences. V helped me to see my ability to see sounds as a gift- one that I should not feel nervous about sharing. They reminded me that art is an outlet that allows us to explore our most intimate emotions. In one of our first meetings V told me “If you aren’t somewhat embarrassed-it probably isn’t art.” They have continued to remind me of this throughout our time working together on this project.
- **They also recommended that I research Contemporary artists who explore synesthesia in their work** - I found artist Melissa Kraken to be particularly intriguing. She is a Missouri based artist that translates her sound visualizations into vibrant splashes of color on canvas.
- While her paintings are stunning-I most admire the ways in which she talks about her synesthesia and how she experiences it. She describes her ability to see sound as a gift- and she uses her artistic practice as an outlet to offer others a chance to experience her vivid, saturated world of color. She states “Basically my brain is cross-wired, I experience the wrong sensation to certain stimuli. Each letter and number is colored and the days of the year circle around my body as if they had a set point in space. But the most wonderful brain malfunction of all is seeing the music I hear. It flows in a mixture of hues, textures, and movements, shifting as if it were a vital and intentional element of each song.”
- Krakens work and the language she puts behind have really inspired me to be unapologetic with the ways in which I approach talking about my synesthesia. I also admire the ways in which she uses her work as a window that invites others to see how she experiences her world through color

**Overall, I am very pleased with how this body of work turned out.**

Each piece depicts a unique window into the ways in which my mind perceives certain sounds through colors. I feel that the decision to create individual works for individual music types challenged me to really think critically about the ways in which my brain translates auditory and visual information. I chose to accompany these pieces with examples of the types of music that I listened to while creating these works because I strongly feel that the music itself is a medium. It

directly informed the ways in which I approached each composition. I also felt that including the specific types of sounds that I was depicting would further invite viewers into my colorful world of sound.

Using these non-traditional mediums has allowed me to prioritize my health. I did not experience any negative health consequences from working with these objects. Using these materials really taught me a lot about myself as a creator. Working with a medium that I had never used before seemed like a daunting task at first - but one that proved to be highly rewarding. I had to practice patience and resilience as I experimented with different ways to form each of my compositions. Working with each of these scrap materials has given me a new perspective on how I view even the most mundane everyday objects in my life. I am reminded that one person's trash can indeed be another person's treasure.

**I created these pieces of work with the intent of displaying them in a gallery space.**

I consider these pieces to be contemporary works of art. I feel that they are experimental and innovative in terms of their conceptual and material design. Displaying these pieces in a gallery setting will invite others to experience my vivid world of synesthesia. I feel it will also spark questions about the ways in which non-traditional materials can be used as alternatives to traditional art mediums.

**I will be leaving Portland next month to start an exciting new chapter in my life. I will be pursuing my masters degree in museum studies and digital curation at Johns Hopkins University.**

While my future will be primarily focused on building a career in museum studies- I plan to continue my studio practice as an emerging artist.

I feel that my synesthesia work has completely changed the scope of my artistic practice. These pieces are the most vulnerable and personal works of art that I have ever created. I feel that each one is a true extension of myself.

I really look forward to making more work that depicts my visual experiences with music in such a fun and whimsical way. I am particularly interested in exploring new types of non-traditional materials - Louise Nevelson's work has made me curious about going out and salvaging my own materials from urban areas. I am interested in what sort of visual and tactile aesthetics that found debris would bring into my work.

I am very curious to hear any suggestions or recommendations from my audience about ways I can search for & use more non-traditional materials.

**Before I conclude- I again want to thank my mentor V for all of the time and patience they gave to me this semester. I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to work with them and learn from them.**

**I also want to thank my painting professor Michelle Ross. I have been taking her painting classes for nearly 2 years now and I am sad to see our time together come to an end. She has been beyond supportive throughout my entire time at PNCA but especially during my**

**thesis project. She spent her own time helping me troubleshoot new ideas to fix hiccups with my materials. She also offered me kindness and compassion in times I was experiencing high levels of stress. In many ways, I also see her as a mentor.**

**Thank you so much for listening to my presentation.**

## Thesis Annotated Bibliography

Tillyard, Virginia. "Louise Nevelson. New York, Guggenheim Museum." *The Burlington Magazine* 128, no. 1004 (1986): 853–853. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/882733>

An Article discussing the compositional themes of Louise Nevelson's sculpture. How Nevelson selected and gathered the found materials she worked with

Bragança, Guilherme Francisco F, João Gabriel Marques Fonseca, and Paulo Caramelli. "Synesthesia and Music Perception." *Dementia & neuropsychologia. Associação de Neurologia Cognitiva e do Comportamento*, 2015. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5618987/>  
Information about synesthesia- what it means- how it is experienced. Describes the multiple ways in which synesthesia can be experienced- sound to taste, taste to touch etc.

"Jon Lodge." Art Mobile of Montana, December 30, 2020.

<https://artmobilemontana.org/jon-lodge/>

Bio and writing by Jon Lodge- describes his material approaches and several of his conceptual methods. Also includes writing about Jon that is specific to the works he has made in Montana- Missoula Museum of Art

Tate. "Readymade – Art Term." Tate. Accessed November 9, 2021.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/readymade>

Information about the origin and history of the readymade- Marcel Duchamp  
The impact that mass production had upon Duchamp's decision to use readymade objects.  
How have other artists used found objects to comment on the overproduction of consumer goods and increased amount of waste.

Tate. "John Cage 1912–1992." Tate, January 1, 1984.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/john-cage-845>

Information about the life and career of John Cage- American composer and music theorist.  
Highlights the transition that cage made from composing music to creating visual works of art that were intended to depict music.

"The Biggest Environmental Problems of 2021." Earth.Org - Past | Present | Future, August 17, 2021. <https://earth.org/the-biggest-environmental-problems-of-our-lifetime/>

This article describes the ways that trash and debris rates from humans have impacted the natural landscape. Also describes how humans have threatened the habits of other living species and organisms. The damage that humans have created with waste is irreversible and steps must be taken in order to preserve the natural landscape.

"Sheila Hicks | Moma." Accessed November 15, 2021. <https://www.moma.org/artists/2631>

A look into the life and career of textile artist Sheila Hicks. Describes her primary influences as a creator, how happenings in her childhood shaped how she creates her work. The salvaging of materials, usually textiles and various fibers- used to create a variety of sculpture and installation work on a wide size scale.

Miller, R., 2022. *Wassily Kandinsky's Symphony of Colors* | *Denver Art Museum*. [online] DenverArtMuseum.org Available at: <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/blog/wassily-kandinskys-symphony-colors>> [Accessed 6 May 2022].

A glimpse into the colorful realm of Kandinsky. Discusses how he quit his job as a lawyer to join the symphony.

WebMD. 2022. *How Do You Know If You Have Synesthesia?*. [online] Available at: <https://www.webmd.com/brain/what-is-synesthesia>> [Accessed 6 May 2022]

Definition of various types of synesthesia experiences. Valuable statistics and information regarding medical testing.

## Thesis Supporting Materials

### Line of Inquiry

I am currently exploring the ways in which I can use found materials to depict the way sound looks. What if I could show you how music sounds without playing anything at all? I am intrigued with the concept of visually representing what music sounds like and how it is felt. I am using a variety of found materials such as paper, vinyl, vintage film and beads. I feel that the use of found materials alters the conceptual meaning of the work. Using recycled materials encourages the abstraction of forms and shapes. Found materials also create unique happenings within the work that cannot be mimicked. The way human beings interpret and feel music is purely subjective. I feel that found materials also encourage a similar type of subjectivity.