

# WORDS ON CANVAS

Harn Museum of Art

## WRITING COMPETITION



Whether art is experienced individually or collectively, the meaning of a painting, sculpture or photograph remains incomplete until it has been viewed, discussed or written about. In sharing what we see when we look, we can learn more about art and ourselves. *Words on Canvas* exists to facilitate this shared understanding, offering the opportunity to look beyond the surface of an artwork and to share another's perspective for a moment. We hope you enjoy this year's winning *Words on Canvas* entries.

Feel free to take this booklet with you into the Harn's galleries and see what stories emerge and inspire you during your visit.

2022 WINNERS

We wish to thank the *Words on Canvas* judges DR. Derek Burdette and Dr. Carol McCusker who devoted their time, expertise and interest to the challenging task of selecting winners from among the many, many fine submissions by the students at the University of Florida and Santa Fe College.



**Derek Burdette**, PhD, Assistant Professor of UF Art History  
**Carol McCusker**, PhD, Curator of Photography, Harn Museum of Art

Our appreciation goes out to all those who participated in *Words on Canvas*, looking closely, writing carefully and gamely submitting their writing. Congratulations to each of you for your fine efforts. Watch for next year's competition at [harn.ufl.edu/wordsoncanvas](http://harn.ufl.edu/wordsoncanvas)

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**Olivia Edwards** (UF Applied Physiology and Kinesiology)

### **Eternal insentience**

Do you think the trees ever wonder what a short life is like?

Or does the ocean ever wish away the night and its ruling governess  
Does it wish that it could be small,  
less intimidating,  
less important

Do the rivers ever wish for rest  
to stop for just one small moment to catch their breath  
to calm their racing thoughts

Do the clouds above wish that they could stop fading into nothing-  
ness and does the grass beneath wish it could be held lovingly in  
someone's arms rather than crushed by someone's feet  
For even just this once

Does the waning moon ever feel cold and without  
Does she wish she had a favorite colorful sweater, like mine,  
something familiar and owned  
Does she feel alone, and does she envy the rush of fresh atmos-  
phere that fills our lungs when we laugh and hold hands  
Do you think she's jealous of the warm sun,  
the everlasting star of our transient show  
Every time it rises and falls on the same horizons  
And all the little things stop and stare as he does nothing at all  
Does she sigh

Does the sky wish it could be one of us  
just as much as we wish we could live forever beyond it?

Inspired by William Morris Hunt. *View of the St. Johns River. 1874,*  
see cover.

**Sofia Bringas Correa** (UF Psychology; English)

### **Still Life**

There are still life pieces all down the museum halls.

My dad says the only thing that elevates those stiff fruit from  
street graffiti  
is the canvas that separates them from the wall.

I think I've seen every time of day in a museum.

I don't need any windows  
and I can make time stop if I want to,  
or for however long my feet allow.

My dad says I should've worn better shoes.

"Who wears those boots on a day meant for walking?"

The woman beside us is wearing yellow heels with her dress.  
She smells of lavender or eucalyptus, she fits with the  
landscapes and fields.

As far as my dad is concerned, she's overdressed.

A museum can be a zoo if you want it to be.

I think that it's better, safer.

Here the animals take shape in front of you in various poses,  
teeth bared, eyes wide,  
and they're good-looking, at least someone thought it so.

I ask my dad what makes an animal worth making again.

I say wood must have been valuable back then.

And I think of cave art, of the hands in reds and browns on the wall,  
Reaching out as if to say "I was here,  
I breathed, I conquered,  
remember me, I existed once,  
I want to exist forever."

I ask my dad if cave art is still life,  
or graffiti.



Inspired by: Bamileke Artist. *Buffalo Mask*. Mid 20th Century.

**Karen Zhang** (UF Accounting)

### **In God We Trust**

The heads of giants roll in an urban desert like  
little gods, their dead-eyed worshippers following

with hands outstretched and mouths wide open.  
The first quarter of the 21st century reeks

of blood, sharp and rusty, like stale dreams  
folded and tempered into something bitter

enough to bite into. All the pews in the churches  
are empty. We seek divinity elsewhere now.

In this golden age we have turned from prophets  
to profits in a blink of an eye. Don't all sinners see

themselves as saints? To be crushed by the weight  
of coin is every white man's dream and

you are no different from your forefathers.



Inspired by Roberto "Yiyo" Tirado. Untitled.

**Maricarmen Torres Medina** (UF M.A. Latin American Studies)

### **Sombra**

Dicen que mirar es una actividad pasiva.  
Pero mirar es abrirse a la conciencia del órgano del ojo,  
a la posibilidad de desbordarse de todo lo sensualmente inasible.  
¿Un escamoteo cerebral?  
Un estar.

Pero mirar es el torbellino interno  
de un intelecto atosigado por sistemas de clasificación:  
lo simbólico, lo imaginario, lo real.  
La mirada narrativizada.



Inspired by Myrna Báez. *Visión*. 1988.

Mirar es tanto verdad como mentira. Y a veces es el reojo.  
Es esa sombra que contrapuntea con la luz refractada del reflejo,  
es el conflicto de saberse toda sin tener la más mínima idea de lo  
que se es.  
Es definición y abstracción.

Mirar es entramparse en el descubrimiento,  
guiado por unos ojos que reconocen, cuestionan, repudian y aman.  
El duelo de siempre es no dejar de mirar -ni de mirarse- aunque  
canse.  
Para los momentos de mayor desasosiego miremos:  
el ahora,  
allá afuera,  
al color,  
a la forma.  
Creamos en:  
la ambivalencia,  
el miedo,  
la flor,  
el roce,  
el otro,  
en el nosotros.  
Miremos co(m)pasivamente.

### **Shadow**

They say that seeing is a dispassionate activity,  
But to see is to be open to the consciousness of the eye,  
to the possibility of being flooded by all that is sensually intangible.  
A cerebral swindling?  
A type of being.

But to look closely is to see that internal whirlwind  
of an intellect harassed by the classification systems:  
the symbolic, the imaginary, the real.  
The narrativized gaze.



To see is both true and false.  
And sometimes to see is also to look from the corner of one's eye.  
It is the shadow that measures itself against the refracting light of the reflection,  
it is the conflict of believing that you know yourself without having the slightly idea of what that means.  
It is definition and abstraction.

To see is to deliberately trap yourself in the action of discovery, guided by a set of eyes that are able to recognize, question, condemn, and love.  
The struggle is to keep seeing -and to see yourself- even when you feel tired.  
For the worst moments, redirect your gaze to:  
the outside,  
the color,  
the form.  
Put a little faith on:  
the ambivalence,  
the fear,  
the flower,  
the touch,  
the others,  
on ourselves.  
Let's look with (com)passion.

**Hannah Lazar** (UF Political Science - International Relations)

### **If Lemons Were Wrapped**

“What is it,” Jem asked, pudgy fingers tracing the wrinkled image printed over the can label. He was crouched on the floor of an old cellar, a single swinging lightbulb illuminating the small space. Other cans, stripped of their labels laid strewn about his bare feet, tin exteriors glinting like artillery shells.

He had taken them down from steel shelves that lined the walls, years of dust settling over his green overalls and fine golden hair as ash. It tickled his nose, but beyond that he didn't mind. He had been born to a world near razed to dust after all. What was a little more? Anyways, it was his job to find food, and he was already running behind. That was why Ryker had come to find him.

“What's what,” Ryker snapped, standing with his arms crossed on the last stair. He couldn't quite make himself step completely into the cellar and abandon the buttery slice of light the doorway offered at the top of the stairs. Still, hungry shadows beckoned to him, making the blue of his jeans a washed-out gray and the red in his flannel dull to a ruddy brown. The color of rust after a rainstorm. Of old blood.



Inspired by William McCloskey. *Florida Lemons*. 1889.

Jem made the choice for him, picking his way carefully through the minefield of canned goods to present Ryker with the object in question. He snatched it from him, bringing the can inches from his face. The watery blue-green of his eyes were beautifully fragile. The pale flower petal color harkening back to a lost world that used to be a growing, living thing. His eyesight, like that world, was losing, soon to be lost. It was why he hated the dark. He could almost feel the cool metal radiating towards the crooked tip of his nose, reminding him of the colder bite of boot buckles belonging to a man that had broken it a few years prior. Ryker breathed out harshly, dust scattering in his wake and taking memories of cold metal and the man with it.

“The yellow thing, Ry,” Jem whined, wanting to point again but having enough restraint to know that Ryker didn’t like Jem obstructing his already limited vision.

“S’hard without good light, gimme a sec,” Ryker grumbled.

The “yellow thing” was pale, a faded blob resting on green smudges that were probably meant to be leaves. A thin white sheet was bunched over and around it, making it a twin of his own sickly sun that had been shrouded in a perpetual haze after the first bombs dropped. He had been too small to remember much, and Jem hadn’t even been born, but they were both alive for a lot of the after. Under a large block of little black scribbles, a small yellow wheel, veiny and filled with seeds winked back at him. Where had he seen that before? The man flashed before his eyes again, sneering at him as he sat back in a beat-up recliner with a dark bottle of something that smelled foul, he had just traded their last bit of food for. A hairy thumb pressed a thin yellow wedge into the narrow glass neck of the bottle, the liquid fizzing as soon as the wedge broke the surface.

“Its a lemon,” Ryker whispered, the can falling from his hands with a thud. It bounced off the stair ledge and rolled past Jem,

who diligently went to chase it. He sat down hard on the stairs, curling his long legs into his chest, and wrapping his arms around them like he used to when he was Jem’s age. Jem reappeared from the shadows like a ghost pulled from a grave. He squeezed himself besides Ryker, the narrow stairs framing them in a picture.

“Whatsa lemon,” Jem asked, leaning his head against Ryker’s shoulder. He wasn’t sure what had upset Ryker. Maybe it was from the time before Jem. Ryker hated talking about that time and Jem would never push, he didn’t much like his time before Ryker either.

“It’s a sour food that bubbles when it gets wet,” Ryker replied, letting his grip loosen as Jem looked up at him. He didn’t want Jem to see him like this. Panicked and trapped. He kept talking, letting Jem’s attention devour his words. “People used to wrap ‘em in colorful tissue to keep ‘em from rotting.”

“Did not,” Jem retorted, bumping his knee into Ryker’s leg. A crooked tooth smile split his face as Ryker nudged him back, resting his own head gently over Jem’s.

“Did too. Before electric power burned holes in the sky. They had to travel slow without cars and the lemons only made it wrapped in paper.”

Jem narrowed his eyes, grey slits radiating skepticism as he twisted the can in his hands. It was hard for him to imagine this world, different from his. Without the black smoke that clouded skies and poured from rockets that blew mushrooms bigger than skyscrapers from the earth in a wrath of heat and fire and chemicals. Jem clutched the can closer, idly tracing the yellow oval that was meant to be a lemon.

“Hey Ry,” he whispered into the dark.

“Ya,” Ryker echoed, his breath stirring dust from the gold threads of Jem’s hair.

“Whadya think the world woulda been like if we still

wrapped lemons in paper?”

Ryker was silent for a moment, thinking of little lemons wrapped like candy in pastel tissues. They were shiny golden suns, protected and untouched from dust and smoke and dark beer bottles. He felt his throat tighten and pretended it was the sour tang of a lemon instead of his own bitter tears.

“I dunno,” he rasped, swiping at his eyes.

“I think I woulda liked it,” Jem said, gently setting the can down on the cellar floor. The shadows ate it.

“Me too.”

**Ian Jackson** (UF Business Administration)

## **Spirit of Turpentine**

The beaming sun, the sounds of distant birds, sweat trailing down the back, the rough tree beneath fingertips. The heaviness of the axe, the smell of the pines, the weight of meeting the next quota.

Take your axe and chop through the tree, strip the bark around the desired area, attach your collection bucket, and funnel the resin. Repeat.

*Chop with axe, strip bark, collect resin.*

Eight of us work diligently in our borough. One group works to the North, close to the train tracks that lead into town. Another group works to the West, moving round the river. A third to the East, closest to the coast. But this spot in the South is our place, this area belongs to the eight of us.

*Chop with axe, strip bark, collect resin.*

The company employs us workers to collect resin to make into turpentine – the country’s lifeblood.

*Chop with axe, strip bark, collect resin.*

Over and over, tree by tree, day after day. The company is our bond – every worker is here because of their debt. Each tree we tap is money in the company’s pocket. Every day our bills become greater and we work to stay even. Like bondage, our dues keep our group working, keep us harvesting. We’ve traded cotton for turpentine.

*Chop with axe, strip bark, collect resin.*

Our boss stands over us, always out of frame, watching to see who falls behind – to see who doesn’t meet their quota. Somedays he





Inspired by Ellis Wilson. *Pulling Turpentine*. C. 1944.

sits patiently on his horse, so quiet we forget he's there. On days when the heat embraces us, he makes himself known, throwing insults, as well as injuries, our way. We've exchanged the title "master" for "boss".

*Chop with axe, strip bark, collect resin.*

We glance sidelong at one another, sending silent signals. Sympathetic support when the boss yells at us for moving too slow. Cocky confidence when one of us finishes their work before the others. Days go by where no words are spoken, but we share a connection nonetheless. We'd much rather work the trees than hang from them.

Weeks and months pass, sometimes new faces join as old ones leave. Always eight remain. We work pine after pine, moving across different fields. It never ends. We finish one area and move on to

the next. Carving through bark, collecting whatever nectar the trees leave us.

*Chop with axe, strip bark, collect resin.*

Blurry faces because our identities have no purpose, denim overalls to soak up the sap that's left behind, hats to block out the unforgiving sun – our great enemy. Trees surround us, barrels at our feet, grass softening the firmness of the earth.

*Chop with axe, strip bark, collect resin.*

Summer. Our busiest time of year - bigger quotas, less time, the boss watching closer than ever. The sun burning our skin, sweat dripping down our brows, less time to sip water – times like these, we mutter to ourselves.

We convince each other, our families, and ourselves, that we'll find something better. We chant in our heads, over and over, that someday we won't have to tap trees – but we know this isn't true.

With each day the sun gets hotter, the trees get stronger, and the boss becomes viler.

With each day that passes, our identities become fainter, our clothes become more stained, our barrels heavier, the grass harder.

With each day that passes, it becomes apparent that there isn't any escape from this life. This is our people's past, present, and future.

*...Chop with axe... Strip bark... Collect resin...*

### Image Credits:

Bamileke Artist. **Buffalo Mask**, Mid 20th Century. Gift of Rod McGalliard.  
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Myrna Báez. **Visión**, 1988. On loan from Hector Puig. L2019.2.6

William McCloskey. **Florida Lemons**, 1889. The Florida Art Collection, Gift of  
Samuel H. and Roberta T. Vickers. 2020.18.1095

William Morris Hunt. **View of the St. Johns River**, 1874. The Florida Art  
Collection, Gift of Samuel H. and Roberta T. Vickers. 2020.18.139

Roberto "Yiyo" Tirado. Untitled. On loan from Hector Puig. L2019.2.11

Ellis Wilson. **Pulling Turpentine**, c. 1944. Museum purchase, funds provided  
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## Words on Canvas, 2022



HARN MUSEUM OF ART

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA