

His Story: Reconciling the Old-Young Man

Peter Barbor

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2017

Committee:

Doug Jeck

Amie McNeel

Jamie Walker

Ivan Drpic

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Art

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University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Peter Barbor

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Associate Professor Doug Jeck

Art

The history and mythology of the male form is a central concern to my practice. How it repeats and manifests throughout time fuels my work. Through a menagerie of plastic materials, stories and sculptural motifs, my research has parsed what I refer to as the old-young man.

Strongly related to the Jungian archetype of the puer aeternus, or eternal boy, my work has been an attempt to locate my own identity in a larger continuum of figurative sculpture. Whether organizing my work with attention to material or narrative, the strategies employed in my studio relate to what I identify as two forms of time.

Acknowledging linear time, I embody the shadow of the puer, the senex. Grappling with cyclical time, I assert that the structure of myth points to an eternal narrative repeated generationally. My efforts throughout my study attempt to resolve the dissonance between both. Story serves as much as a material as clay, plaster, or wax, and when utilized in the present, can condense time reaching as far back as antiquity.

The problem rests with time. Since the sculptor's ambition coaxed one foot of his creation in front of the next, a narrative of linear progress has unraveled from ancient Mesopotamia into the present. The walking man learned to smile, to mourn, to ride horseback, and to stoically embrace defeat. In the West, a self-selected legacy privileged Adonis and his stock over Gilgamesh or Enkidu. Embracing a figment of the past, a whole host of works were built off the cold white marble body of the old-young man.

In my studio, I am not reinforcing a neo-classical project, but instead, interrogating what I love about the legacy of the past. Rather than assert the idea that history solely moves forward, I would prefer to observe its habit of repeating itself. In his essay, "Senex and Puer: An Aspect of the Historical and Psychological Present," psychologist James Hillman aptly points out that we are closer in time to the thinkers and makers of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century than those of the 19<sup>th</sup>.<sup>1</sup> While Hillman locates the senex-puer problem at the crux of our age, I would like to propose it is eternal. In Latin, puer means "boy" while senex was a title reserved for the respectable elder man. Hillman built his concepts from a foundation of Jungian psychology, where the individuation of the archetypal puer aeternus, or eternal boy, allowed it to manifest as its opposite, the senex.<sup>2</sup> While Hillman characterizes our age through the senex-puer problem, I wish to utilize it at a smaller scale, infinitely stretched through time. It is an engine, a generator of hubris, ambition, and individual growth. Where one may see the walking man approaching the future, perhaps he is fixed in the present, just walking in place?

As I have grappled with the subject of the male form, I have employed numerous mercurial strategies in effort to embody and parse the old idea of the young man. Although my earliest

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<sup>1</sup> James Hillman, "Senex and Puer: An Aspect of the Historical and Psychological Present," in *Puer Papers 1979*, ed. James Hillman (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1979), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Frith Luton, "Puer Aeternus," *FrithLuton.com: Jungian Dream Analysis and Psychotherapy*, June 6, 2017, <http://frithluton.com/articles/puer-aeternus/>.

memories of art come from the Carnegie Museum of Art's Hall of Sculpture in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, (fig. 1) my hand has never ventured to replicate the cold marmoreal qualities of their plaster copies from antiquity. Rather, my protean sensibility finds itself instinctually absorbing and responding to their narratives. While I have referred to my practice, at times, as picking at a corpse, this sentiment implies that history is dead or, at the very least, inert. The challenge I face in my work is recognizing time's ability to exist both in a linear fashion and cyclically. I believe my work exists on a continuum, which implies history's eternal march into the future, while simultaneously engaging the repetitious, psychological trials of the senex-puer problem. Moving towards the future and through the discoveries made in my studio, I embody the puer; looking towards the past, I act as a hierophant, respecting a lineage of art and culture that informs my present.

In my first work in graduate school, *Bayeux Bois*, (fig. 2) I clumsily negotiated the intersection of past and present. The work borrowed from a scene in the original Bayeux Tapestry that depicts the death of King Harold, allowing William to inevitably conquer England at the end of the Battle of Hastings. William's conquest has lasting repercussions today; the English language radically transformed when the Norman conquerors infused an Anglo-Saxon language with French. My fascination with the original tapestry lies in the method in which it unfolds narrative, and the visual style in which it depicts its key players. The Bayeux Tapestry possesses a serious conceit, yet it is depicted in a way that today could be seen almost as cartoonish. Its embroidered figures are loosely stitched with little regard to anatomy or specific attention to likeness. This inattention to detail contributes to an important moment of ambiguity that drew me to the panel I wished to reconstruct three-dimensionally (fig. 3). Although Harold dies, it is unclear which character is specifically him. One figure receives an arrow to the eye, while another is struck down

by a broadsword.<sup>3</sup> Because the tapestry was used for centuries in an active cathedral, it has many repairs. The literal fabric of its construction is interwoven with a story of use and ritual.

In my rendition of this crucial scene from the tapestry, I chose to format my composition in the guise of a parade float. I restructured the original along three linear tracks, which were supported by wheels. This was the first time the wheel emerged in my practice, and its ability to levitate a work of art and to offer it no fixed place in space seemed important in regards towards my sentiments on history. The parade float could be recognized as an appropriate mechanism to celebrate a martial victory, such as the Battle of Hastings. At the same time, a float of campy, crude, brightly colored figures would be as equally welcome in a pride parade. I believe this work never reconciled the space between these two disparate possibilities, but it awakened me to the latent potential of conjuring imagery from the distant past and filtering it through my hand and psyche. In one object, time suddenly could be flattened, contorted, maybe even perverted. Simultaneously I had summoned to my midst a band of marauding Anglo-Saxon warriors and translated thread and cloth into a barrage of paper, plaster, wood, and wire. Now, William's march on England could exist in more than one place in time.

Where dictation ends and invention begins, however, is an important question for an artist devoted to historical references. Like a Byzantine icon painter, my attention to the Bayeux Tapestry depended on its prototype. Invention emerged where the hand failed, as even proportions between work and copy were modestly considered in my effort. How could I draw from a historical narrative without only parroting another work of art? Classicist Jocelyn Penny Small approaches the problem of narrative structure in her article "Time in Space: Narrative in Classical Art" by examining how inflected languages express meaning differently than in English's strict adherence

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Foys, "Shot through the eye and who's to blame?" *History Today*, October 3, 2016, Accessed June 6, 2017, <http://www.historytoday.com/martin-foys/shot-through-eye-and-who%E2%80%99s-blame>.

to a sequential organization of thought.<sup>4</sup> Her research investigates how potters in Ancient Greece often depicted narrative through what Small refers to as “spatial-time,” an organization of visual elements that depict multiple parts of a story in one visual plane. Small illustrates the spatial organization of time with an image from the interior of a Laconian cup (fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> The image depicts a scene from the *Odyssey* where Odysseus and his men blind Polyphemus. The cyclops can be seen devouring one of Odysseus’ unfortunate party, while simultaneously being blinded. Two different moments of the episode appear in the same frame, but a contemporary of the cup would understand their sequence in the story more than an uninformed viewer today.

Digesting Small’s investigation on narrative in classical art, I began to work on an equestrian statue, later titled *Another Pale Rider* (fig. 5). The sculpture’s base was again supported by casters, while an image of horse and rider stretched across a skeleton of found and reclaimed wood. The horse, composed of clay and straw, appeared as if it were emerging from the earth, forming itself while also disintegrating. The equestrian statue can be traced to before our current era. It is ubiquitous across the old world’s many plazas and not uncommonly manifests in American mythologies concerning revolutionary heroes or admired figures of the Civil War. In my work, I wanted to not only evoke a ghost we can find in Marcus Aurelius’ famous equestrian statue (fig. 6), but also call attention to the mount, the horse. Although *Another Pale Rider* did not fully approach spatial-time as Small defined it, I wanted to examine how things located in different places in time could coalesce in one moment. Through my menagerie of eclectic materials, from animal skins to mattress foam, and the format of the equestrian pose, I proposed to condense time. How many times had a horse supported the weight of a king or warrior? How many times had it fallen, a bloodied vehicle for the drama of men? While not eluding convention, I bent its arm and

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<sup>4</sup> Jocelyn Penny Small, “Time in Space: Narrative in Classical Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 4 (1999): 565.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 567.

invented a horse and rider who materially and compositionally turned a continuum of objects inward on itself.

My lexicon of materials rarely excludes touch. As an artist trained in ceramics, my work is always a call and response with material. I treat most materials as if they were plastic and capable of embodying the intent of my hand. If *Another Pale Rider* merged matter with different personae of the equestrian form, could history itself be plastic? Does it bend to an individual's understanding of his or her very small place and present location in time? Approaching the body of work that would culminate my thesis, I wanted to construct sculptures that embodied, more than before, an intersection of myself with the histories that influenced my work. Although I am far from the throes of adolescence, in my menagerie of figures *Puer Play* (fig. 7) I depict four eternal boys that cumulatively represent different faces of the puer aeternus. I take an oppositional approach in *Antiphon* (fig. 8), building a tomb that is as much an image of artifice as it is a nod to late medieval tomb sculpture or the archetypal senex. Both works are principally composed of plaster and wax. Paring my work down to fewer materials tamed my oft maximalist impulses while holding onto an essential core sensibility. Wax could allude to flesh and fat or the skin of a youth. Fiber soaked plaster and skins of cooling wax built bodies not entirely dissimilar from our own material make-up.

In *Antiphon* material points more to history than in *Puer Play*. Wax casts of hands could read as much as a baroque encasement of the tomb as they could a peculiar accumulation of votive offerings. The shrouded body displayed on top of the sculpture describes more of an object than animated boys of *Puer Play* who evade specific categorical entrapment and occupy the same physical space as their audience and a psychic space between themselves. The tomb sculpture quite literally is a call and response to history. Although wax has been used for centuries as a plastic

material par excellence to create images and to beseech the divine for intervention, it also possesses an unwieldy vernacular from carnival booths to cosmetic shops.<sup>6</sup> *Antiphon* establishes a two-way highway in history. It recalls the format of a late medieval tomb sculpture, but makes little effort to escape its materiality that suggests a stage set or prop. The tomb's frontality lends itself to the idea that it is an image. Guardian like angels and a chthonic foreboding interior forge a parallel structure between mythologies of the afterlife. The tomb levitates ever so slightly above the ground; it gains gravity by the wax hands that in its corners approach the floor plane. Here, wax nearly anchors the piece. Scholar Georges Didi-Huberman asserts the plasticity of wax, "signifies it is spontaneously devoted to the fabrication of images."<sup>7</sup> The material's association with preparatory work or votive offerings pushes it from the limelight of art historians and ethnographers, as it is often regarded as tertiary to bigger concerns of art or faith.<sup>8</sup> Wax is a material of mortality; even the glance of the sun can return it to its amorphous state, but in its ability to assume form and take on a likeness, it becomes a sculptural material most connected to the psyche. A child is born not innately knowing he will die; similarly, upon learning of his mortality, he may not remember when he came to fear death. Between its brittle plaster skeleton and wax votive borders, *Antiphon* may most successfully operate as a memento mori.

In *Antiphon's* oppositional work, *Puer Play*, wax evades a blatant historical anchor and principally occupies psychic space. Four glittering bodies could suggest flesh or marble, but most successfully connect to their gestural and dramatic context in an interstitial space of cognition. Each figure represents a face of the puer aeternus. Icarus offers a face of rebellion (fig. 9). Peter Pan represents a spirit of escapism (fig. 10). Narcissus suggests a malignant vanity (fig. 11). The

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<sup>6</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, "The order of materials: Plasticities, malaises, survivals," in *Sculpture and Psychoanalysis* 2006, ed. Brandon Taylor, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 199.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, "Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time," *L'Esprit Créateur* 47, no. 3 2007, 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Good Shepherd proposes the promises and potential of renewal and youth (fig. 12). Each are transported from their own stories, but face inward towards a unifying core principle. Unlike the tomb of *Antiphon*, time operates only on a mythological frame in *Puer Play*. The internal trials that every living boy experiences as he approaches maturity exist throughout all human history. They repeat generationally, and are not unique to an individual like a body or face. Peter Pan may come from Edwardian literature, the Good Shepherd echoes from an archaic past (fig. 13), but what all the figures of *Puer Play* point to is the eternal cycle of life and death. Mortality is the crux of the myth. The liturgical cycle that begins with Christmas and ends with the resurrection never ends, but our linear lives move through it. A child's elation at Christmas matures to recognize the fulfillment of the Good Shepherd's promise as the cycle folds in on itself to repeat.

A malignant manifestation of the puer aeternus traps an individual forever in boyhood. This is most evident in Icarus or Narcissus, whose vanity and hubris forbid their maturation. A positive exhibition of the archetype, however, links renewal with the hero. Peter Pan may never grow old, but in Neverland, his altruism protects his comrades and neighbors from the machinations of Captain Hook. The Good Shepherd bears the weight of humanity, but does so with grace and resignation. Myth remains vital in the present because it does not wholly depend on history as a buttress. By utilizing it in my final work, I believe I ironically reached a point of maturity in my artistic practice from embracing what it means to be a boy. My sophistication with material never relied more on simple belief. I worked feverishly but only to a point of establishing an image, a phantom of the puer aeternus and a persona of myself as a maker. By believing in "make-believe," I accessed a mythology that re-emerges through linear time, but ages not at all.

In my experience of attending Russian Orthodox funerals, I have encountered the phrase, "memory eternal." A sentiment that means the deceased will be forever accepted into the kingdom

of heaven, I like to believe the phrase can extend to all forms of belief. The human project is one of plurality, and our beliefs often return to a similar foundation. As I acknowledge what my gendered experience does as a catalyst to myth and history, I accept that my story is his story. It is shared. In the studio, I will always be a boy grappling with unwieldy materials and alchemies. As I age, my history will merge with the larger continuum. What is unique to me will only flourish a larger tale, an odyssey that knows no end, but continuously springs from rebirth.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1. Hall of Sculpture. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA. From: The Clio, <https://www.theclio.com/web/entry?id=27252> (accessed June 6. 2017).



Fig. 2. Peter Barbor. *Bayeux Bois*. 2015. Mixed media. 113" x 42" x 83".



Fig. 3. “King Harold is killed,” *The Bayeux Tapestry*. From: History Today, <http://www.historytoday.com/charles-h-gibbs-smith/death-harold-battle-hastings> (accessed June 6, 2017).



Fig. 4. "Blinding of Polyphemus" Laconian Black Figure Cup. Circa 540 BCE. From: Columbia College <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/blinding-polyphemos-laconian-black-figure-cup-c-540-bce> (accessed June 6, 2017).



Fig 5. Peter Barbor. *Another Pale Rider*. 2016. Mixed media. 112" x 36" x 101".



Fig. 6. Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius (replica, 1981). Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome, IT.

From: <http://arcipelagoadriatico.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/12926103-Marcus-Aurelius-in-Piazza-del-Campidoglio-in-Rome-Stock-Photo.jpg> (accessed June 6. 2017).



Fig. 7. Peter Barbor. *Puer Play*. 2017. Plaster, Wax, Mixed media. Dimensions variable.



Fig. 8. Peter Barbor. *Antiphon*. 2017. Plaster, Wax, Mixed media. 8' x 4' x 4'.



Fig. 9. Peter Barbor. *Icarus* (from *Puer Play*). 2017. Plaster, Wax, Mixed media. 5' x 4' x 6'.



Fig. 10. Peter Barbor. *Peter Pan* (from *Puer Play*). 2017. Plaster, Wax, Mixed media. Dimensions variable.



Fig. 11. Peter Barbor. *Narcissus* (from *Puer Play*). 2017. Plaster, Wax, Mixed media. 56" x 48" x 52".



Fig. 12. Peter Barbor. *The Good Shepherd* (from *Puer Play*). 2017. Plaster, Wax, Mixed media.

26" x 22" x 75".



Fig. 13. *The Calf Bearer*. 570 BCE. Greece. The Acropolis. From: fine art america

<https://fineartamerica.com/featured/the-moschophoros-570-bc-calf-bearer-everett.html> (accessed June 6, 2017).

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