

Suspended Animation

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Painting + Drawing

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Abstract

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The purpose of this project is to extend the genre of the vanitas still life within painting by merging with the context of contemporary biological and medical sciences. By doing so I hope to challenge conventional distinctions between life / death and spirituality / sciences, and as a result lessen the taboo of death. If a defining quality of being human is the awareness of our own mortality, then would it not be beneficial to contemplate this idea further and as a result, enhance the idea of being human?

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Throughout my experience I have been drawn to the inner workings of the world around me. My father, as an engineer, stressed that the understanding of how and why something functioned permitted a degree of control. This loose introduction to free will and existential responsibility instilled a desire to understand structure. Paired with an upbringing in Catholicism, it seemed contradictory to remain critical with what I saw in terms of physical form and supposed role in systems, as well as accept mythos and spirituality in ways that were by nature unable to be rationalized.

Aside from spending several hours a week beguiled by a highly naturalistic, life-size sculpture of a crucified and emaciated Christ, my early experiences with death began at age seven with the murders of three cousins in separate events over the course of two years. Shortly after, a classmate and her family were killed in a fire and the following year another classmate was lost to cancer. Death seemed senseless and cruel.

During my undergraduate studies the desire to better understand the human structure led me to working in a near-by university's cadaver laboratory. The cadavers offered to me an existential symbol of the human condition.

The essential concepts of my graduate work are an extension of these early questions. The purpose of this project is to extend the genre of the vanitas still life within painting by merging with the context of contemporary biological and medical sciences. By doing so I hope to challenge conventional distinctions between life / death and spirituality / sciences, and as a result lessen the taboo of death.

If a defining quality of being human is the awareness of our own mortality, then would it not be beneficial to contemplate this idea further and as a result, enhance the idea of being human (Mims xiii)?

Humanist philosophies attempt to engage in this question of the human condition. Existentialism is a humanist philosophy that rose out of a war-torn France in the 1940's and was established by the writer Jean-Paul Sartre. The philosophy evaluates the human condition by embracing free will and the responsibility of choice while rejecting theology. Sartre stated that the central tenet of existentialism is that "existence precedes essence," or in other words, form precedes identity. My work seeks to investigate identity through a study of form. I am attempting to examine existence *post* essence.

Prior to focusing my research on death within medical contexts I had tried several other routes towards similar conclusions, ultimately ending with an incomplete picture of what I was aiming for. Early on, I had been interested in the loss of limbs and prosthetics in order to present a metaphor of the human condition. I visited the prosthetics department on campus to learn about the production process, as well as obtained plastic molds of the residual limbs. While scholarly ideas surrounding the topic of extension of human bodies through human efforts was both fascinating and profound I found the subject difficult to work with, as at the center of each of these concepts were the amputees, whose personal sufferings I felt unprepared to use as foundations for broader ideas. My work during this time stagnated and I moved on to the cadavers, whose particular circumstances I felt more comfortable working with.



In my first visits to the laboratories the element that spoke loudest to me was the anatomical aspect. This was the reason for their position in the medical facilities and I felt a universal symbol of humanness. I had done several drawings during this time by means of collage in order to bring hidden aspects to the surface. As my research path twisted and turned I was introduced to uncanny sculpture, such as the work of Robert Gober or Cindy Sherman. These artists were bringing aspects of religion and absurdity to their work that I felt could provide a new avenue for my work. This period was also during a depression I had entered and as a result felt no real affinity towards the subject matter. The work suffered and I had felt I needed to return to a medium more appropriate to my interests.



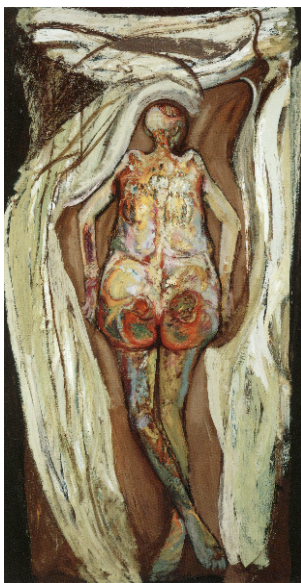
-Influences-

“Death and suffering always have been an artistic theme. Basically it is *the* theme.” –Richter
(Storr 242)

During my research at the University of Washington a particular genre of still life presented the avenue that my work had unknowingly already been traveling. Vanitas is a subgenre of still life that originated and flourished in 16th and 17th century northern Europe, though it had presence in other regions. Vanitas can be seen as an extension of themes explored during the medieval period, such as the Danse Macabre and *memento mori* (Karp xiii). The works were representational, highly symbolic, and were generally associated with moralistic messages. Vanitas can be separated into three types: brevity of earthly pursuits; physical death; resurrection and the afterlife (Petit 17).

The vanitas theme appears less frequently in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – perhaps, as the *Ars Medica* exhibition speculates, due to medical intervention, reduced threat of disease, and increased longevity (Karp 220). The genre has seen frequent experiments by artists throughout the modern and postmodern era, however the subject nearly became a cliché whereas any paintings depicting a skull were assumed under the moniker. The genre can still be seen reflected in other mediums from artists such as Rachel Whiteread and Damien Hirst.

“Each is variously a victim of forces which are hostile to creativity and human love – the paintings are emblems of metamorphosis - as the living organisms which inhabit the body in death transform it into life in another form.” Hymen Bloom (Thompson 35)



The transformation Hyman Bloom speaks of is associated with his Jewish faith. Despite the differing religious views on the resurrection, transformation can be seen as analogous idea. Hymen Bloom’s paintings of autopsied corpses and dismembered limbs (1943 - 1949) became somewhat controversial despite the period ending an unprecedented era of violence (Thompson 44). Bloom was firmly within a tradition of depicting subjects such as these, likening the images to those of Callot, Rembrandt, Goya, and Gericault. He sought to bring something that would make death more “understandable, even more acceptable, more familiar, more knowable. I thought of it as a very positive effort” (Thompson 35).

Catherine Murphy's subjects are often common domestic situations whose draftsmanship and handling are rooted in traditional representation. The work does not seek to challenge representation, but embraces the idea in order to subvert the viewer's skills of perception. Murphy's composition, vantage point, and scale all work in conjunction to abstract what is often a fairly common domestic subject (Naves). This effect slows the reading of her images, causing a measure of discomfiture (Naves). By adopting Murphy's approach, representation can be presented as abstraction in order to achieve similar effects.



Richter's oeuvre largely deals with opposing concepts. His over-painted photographs function to continue this dialogue. Amongst others, Richter describes the dual realities of painting and photography, and the representational and the non-representational (Heinzelmann 198).

Roland Barthes' writings on photography have deemed the medium best fitting for the subject of death. "Death is the *eidos*-the essential form-of photography." He states the moment the picture is taken will always be "the that-has-been", forever suspended and incapable of life (Storr 241). The critic Robert Storr asserts, "...photography does not allow us to contemplate death. In order to do that, durations must reenter the equation..." and reasons this as motive in Richter's work, and in particular his *October* series (Storr 242).

"Every photograph is a dead moment." Botho Strauss (Storr 203)

Through manipulation with paint, Richter imbues the 'dead' photographs with life again. The 'dead' representational portion of the unpainted photograph exists with the 'live'



non-representational element. This latter line of dualities is analogous to the relationship between life and death. By combining this idea with Catherine Murphy's methods to abstract representational space, the intention is to create a way of bringing opposing philosophies together.

Dualities, such as life and death, have influenced my work and thinking. Death itself could be spoken of as a universal phenomenon as well as an intensely individual event.

Through attempts to better understand contradictory ideas, Freud's concept of 'The Uncanny' was introduced. The uncanny can be understood as in-between states or something familiar represented in an unfamiliar way. Earlier definitions defined it as a fear caused by intellectual uncertainty (Freud 2). Through this definition the awareness of our own mortality can be applied.

Saville's large-scale figurative works possess an uncanny appearance. Often set in contemporary medical contexts, her imagery often draws from medical books and plastic surgery operations. Saville's subjects relate to her interest in "sort of state of in-betweenness..." commonly including hermaphrodites, transvestites, carcasses, and half-alive/half-dead heads (Gagosian 124).

-Methodology-

"Drawing is the root of everything." – Vincent van Gogh (Uitert 290)



Drawing is the agency of my process. Drawing serves as a method for creating models to aide painting and as independent works. Ideas start in a series of fieldbooks using an ink pen to draw and write. This method allows for self-reflection and the ability to return to a frame of mind. The basis for this approach is derived from a practice of recording observations taught in an early school science class.

In order to present accurate representations of cadavers and the laboratory environment it was necessary to visit the laboratories. Through the Occupational Health and Sciences department at the University of Washington I was granted access and began visiting the anatomy lab. Directed by thumbnails from studies of the cadavers are done in watercolor and graphite Artificial lighting has also been implemented through the use of portable lamps. These range from color swatches, recording observed details and general notes to enforce memory. The drawings also serve to direct the compositions and



images through trials and additional information. It has been rare that what was desired going in is what is promising upon leaving. A larger scale drawing follows the studies and then is transferred to canvas.

If supplementary information is needed I take photos that mimic situations from the laboratory, such as the fluids on the table surfaces, material qualities, or positions of the body.

Watercolor and Photoshop studies assist to direct color. Particular color schemes are extracted from contemporary film. Films prevalence makes it the vernacular visual language and as a result has incorporated themes favored in my own work, ranging from alienation, redemption, loneliness, loss, etc. Additionally, film provides the advantage of a wide range of contemporary interpretations of those themes. Many of the interpretations use color traditionally associated with death and resurrection. These colors are often the opposite of saturated, life affirming colors such as: darkness / black, warm light / white, mourning colors/ purples and cool hues.

Once the painting begins the working method is both additive and subtractive. In this way the canvas records experiences that are often erased or covered completely. This method is likened to the existential principle that our identity is solely comprised of our experiences (Sartre 9). *Unpainting*, as it is sometimes referred, can be best adopted from Giacometti, whose tonal paintings have been likened to Sartre's existential philosophy (Storr 246). This method was also used by Edvard Munch, who felt it enhanced an empathetic reaction and better portrayed anxiety, and Gerhard Richter, who has used the technique to distance the dead *October* subjects (Buchhart 165, Storr 247)

-Content-

The canvases are presented horizontally, as to avoid a vertical association with life. Their proportions are scaled to an averaged digital photograph in response to some of Barthes assertions. In this way, an image ratio common to contemporary society, that is predictably producing everyday, or at least comprehensible,



images is undermined and presents instead an image brought from societies margins.

The size and scale has been increased, resulting in imagery that is larger than life size. It is the intention to enhance an uncanny experience, empathetic response, and abstract reading of the image. By increasing the size and scale it is also the hope to present a marginalized topic beyond its presumptions.

The idea that death itself is a singular event has been replaced with an understanding that it is a biological process and takes time (Mims 22). Time is the enemy even after death and so the bodies in the cadaver lab have been embalmed. Embalming allows for their continued use without degrading. The preservation of the bodies is an idea that runs parallel to the preservation of an image in paint.

Although embalming slows the decay of the body, the cadavers are still subject to forces that continue to alter their physical nature beyond that which they have been spared.

Gravity's role on the cadavers extends beyond their horizontal nature. While prone



over a year or more, the semi-frozen muscle and flesh sinks low into the flatness of the dissection tables. The weight of bone triumphs over cartilage as their noses are flattened and bent. Similarly the flesh on their hands, if not already removed, swells with moisture, and creases haphazardly enhancing an uncanny quality. Slow events in the 'life' of the cadaver were unexpected and quite interesting, but the

laboratory setting also presented interesting surprises.

Vanitas paintings relay their content through symbolism, with many common motifs (Petit). The symbols used were common in the 16th and 17th century in northern Europe, however are unlikely to be as prevalent or adequate. In order to adapt vanitas, then the language used must be adapted in an equal fashion.

“...the only image that always looks different, and just like a picture it shows something that is not there at all, at least not where we see it.” Richter (Heinzelmann 203)

Autopsy tables can almost exclusively be found in medical facilities, and within the facilities, only where corpses are common. The reflective brushed steel surface possesses a striking similarity to a mirror. While the mirror has debatable meanings, some of the accepted ones are that the mirror can represent truth or, on the contrary, deception. The mirror is a symbol for vanity itself, and can be used as a device to portray fleeting time (Petit 17). Representing brevity is sometimes done through the reflection depicting an aged or already skeletal counterpart of the onlooker (Karp 220). By representing this idea inversely, the cloudy reflected vision of the dead caster can cause an uncanny reaction.

The imagery of the mirror carries an association with the Greek figure Narcissus, whose beauty was so captivating he fell in love with his own reflection; ultimately bound to his visage he was turned into a flower. The story conveys strong themes of vanity and moral consequences. It is also interesting to note Alberti's theory that allegorically Narcissus was the inventor of painting (Baskins 25).

The shroud in Jewish and Muslim burial practice is used to equalize those who died. By doing so the dead lose their earthly status and are equalized in the afterlife. Less distinguished, but more practical, the laboratory blankets are visually parallel to the shroud.



Both the examples of the table and blanket offer factual context based on experience, weighted symbolism, and visually consist of nearly nothing. By doing so, the imagery falls into a field a color, operating in a similar fashion as Murphy's compositions.

“Painting possesses a truly divine power... not only does it make the absent present ... but it also represents the dead to the living.” – Alberti (Baskins 25)

Through the combination of historical influences, contemporary criticisms and contexts I hope to not only establish my work within a model to build from, but broaden my understanding of the conditions I have adapted. Within these conditions I hope to direct my work through to avenues not yet considered and allow it to mature to the fullest potential.

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