

“Finding Value & Cutting Up Meaning”

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I am allowing this written thesis to act as an explanation of my concepts and personal journey through the University of Washington's Graduate Drawing and Painting MFA program and through creating my thesis work, a series of black and white photo collages. I will explain the evolution of my artistic and cultural influences, outline my process and working method, and describe the concepts involved in a few of the pieces shown in my Thesis Exhibitions.

Influences

A constant influence in my personal art pursuits has been the paintings of Lucian Freud (Fig. 1). It has been a long time, years. Over time I have come to realize that it is not the figures, nor the studied way he observed the models, that I respond to. Personally, I feel his concept in the work, looking and looking and looking, is something that I would never be able to do, nor would particularly want to. I come from a generation of the impatient. Anything I would want to make would have to come to fruition much, much faster. Over the years, I have come to realize that I love two things about his paintings: the thick texture made by stacking up layers and layers of paint, the grossness of it; and the unusual asymmetrical shapes he found in the bodies of his models. I almost never cared about the whole image. When looking at one of his paintings, I was stuck on a shape, or staring sideways at a paint blob, enjoying the thickness of the strokes and the subtle relief created by the differences in application.

This scene of viewing is quite similar to the experience I had while visiting New York in 2009. I had no idea who Leon Kossoff was at the time, but the group I was with stumbled into a gallery full of his paintings. Unexpectedly, I stood before them, entranced and sniffing. One of the professors I was traveling with walked over to me and asked incredulously, “You *like* these?” But I really, truly did. It was another situation where I was less concerned with the large image contained in its rectangle. I liked the way the dribbled, thick swaths of paint pooled together on the surface of the canvases and that the colors were not all beautiful. The color was very indicative of the British painters of Kossoff’s time. There would be layers of gross browns and flesh colors and then a swipe of lime green or deep magenta. It worked for me. I had no interest in the subject matter. I just liked the visceral texture of the paint application (Fig. 2).

What was learned in this analysis was that what I always thought I was interested in, figures from observation and light, and a cooked up concept about an elusive story that the viewer was forced to try and crack, wasn’t really what I wanted to talk about. What I have been truly interested in is texture, form, shape, and space, mixed with a desire to make things both beautiful and ugly, both pointed and humorous.

I saw Joe Forkan’s *Lebowski Cycle* paintings in Jacksonville, Florida in the winter of 2012 (Fig. 3). I responded to them immediately because I know the film well and the images are beautifully painted. Forkan ties his paintings to classic masterworks, taking something modern and playful and tying it to imagery from art history. These works allows the viewer to enjoy nostalgia of the subject and the pleasure of identifying the

scene from which each painting is taken. This allowed for some personal investment in the piece, as if the viewer was looking at a painting of a friend, or someone they know well. When we watch movies, we empathize with the characters involved. We feel for them when they struggle and live with them through their heartache. I knew from these paintings that this is something I wanted in my own work. I wanted to offer a feeling of familiarity, to utilize imagery and personas that the viewer may already have been exposed to, and allow the meaning in the work to come from how I presented and manipulated those images.

Another artist I enjoy that dabbles in allocation art is Young British Painter, Glenn Brown (Fig. 4). He pulls images from Art History and occasionally pop-cultural sci-fi imagery. He does not directly author the subject matter. He simply takes what he is inspired by and funnels it through his hand as an artist. Though the source material is still recognizable, the imagery is transformed into masses of illusionistic sappy paint. I'm attracted to the beauty of the colors, the smooth almost trompe l'oeil painting technique, but more over, I am fascinated by the gross visceral paint-like texture he imposes on everything in his images.

Formally, I have noticed similarities between my own work and the later sculptural work of Frank Stella (Fig. 5). His relief elements, swooping shapes, and grayscale tones appeal to me. In this body of work, he does all the things I want my collages to do formally: lead the viewer's eye around dynamically, have impact and

texture, etc., but what he accomplishes in abstraction, I would like to capture with careful manipulation of popular cultural themes.

Apart from my artistic practice, I have always been an intense film viewer. Characters within films become very important to me as I watch them over and over, empathizing with their problems. Often I use an event that takes place in a movie to justify my feelings about something taking place in the real world. For example, “I’m having this problem with x boyfriend. It’s just like in that movie where this happened!” I realize this is a dramatized idea, but I do not believe that this notion is uncommon. We make films that reflect life, that provide some version of it. What creators put into films has a great deal to do with our collective social psyche. We want to see things, what we, as viewers, will relate to. At times this connection with characters is not unlike the attachment we would feel with a real person.

Because movies and popular culture are so integral to my personality, no matter what I planned in the studio, it seemed that the media I was exposed to would creep into the work. First it was one persona, the “Spock” character, but continually, little blips of interest in other media showed up. For example, *Game of Thrones*, *Grumpy Cat*, *David Lynch* films, *Jim Croce*, *Zelda Characters*, *M*A*S*H*, 70’s musical group: *Peter, Paul and Mary*, *American Beauty* and *The Golden Girls* all found their way into my paintings, mashed up with images from my everyday life. (Fig 6, Fig 7.) From this point I began to question if it was worthwhile to spend the time rendering these famous faces by hand, when I could manipulate the content far more easily as photographic information.

Process

I have found a new process though making my Thesis work. I enjoy painting and I will definitely return to it. For these pieces, however, I am using images pulled from the Internet and directly from various entertainment mediums. It is important that the images I use are not my own. Personally, I do not care to be behind the lens of a camera. I would much rather experience the world directly. By pulling images taken by other people, I am able to grasp at this “world view,” this “popular” view. I can critique and comment on the world using images captured by a variety of people living in that world. It is a method of compiling information from sources other than myself, of pulling a great number of perspectives all at the same time, and funneling them into situations where they can tell the story I want to tell.

Given my way of allocating photographs, reducing the color information to a grayscale provides a sense of unity between the images and allows for easier invention during the arranging and juxtaposing process. I personally enjoy Laser prints as they can provide a very deep sense of space with how dark the toner can become, but also retain the ability to really flatten if placed in a particular context.

In most of my pieces I used scale differentiation as a method to help create the illusion of space. Used in tandem with that are organic shapes the cover the borders of the forms. I have been using a rectangular format for so long, it is important that these collages are able to burst out and occupy their own unusual form. Repetition has become very useful in making the collages appear cohesive when so many different kinds of images are being used. I am careful to select and place images that are going to play off

of each other. Often, repetition of form has been the way to make that happen. Since I am so attracted to textures, the images tend to have a lot of surface texture, particularly in *Fresh Fish*.

Concepts:

I am interested in a lot of things. There is no “one stand” for me conceptually. I am interested in the kinds of things people create for the masses and how the public responds. I enjoy the nature of meaning, the way that delivery and implications can alter it. I am very fond of language, and using literary ideas and phrases. I also like to have fun with my work. I create ridiculous, ironic, and weird things within my pieces that provide some lowbrow fun, while still reinforcing my intended meaning. Art has this way of taking itself too seriously. I would like to stray away from that. My work has been operating in cycles. Each cycle explores a somewhat different concept. We will begin with the piece installed in the Henry Art Gallery.

-The Trouble with Tropes I

The *Trouble with Tropes* (Fig. 8) is a large cloud-shaped piece that hangs at an angle, tipped toward the floor. The large (13feet wide x 9 feet high) shape with its freeform jig-sawed edges is filled with images from over 250 movies, mainly spanning the last 30 years. Each image captures a scene where a character was forced to hang off the edge of a roof/cliff/ladder/train, etc. while holding on by their fingertips for dear life. I noticed this trope while watching a movie, and realized how many times I had seen it before. Making this piece became a way of questioning why we as an audience are

attracted to this. Why is this threat of falling something that we understand and return to time and time again? How does this trope function within the greater role of the plot? Is there a villain above ready to take advantage of the character's vulnerable state? Or, is another character commanding, "Hold on! Give me your hand!" attempting to pull this vulnerable person up to safety with one dramatically extended sweaty hand?

While I wanted the sheer quantity of images to present the excess of the trope use, I wanted to maximize the notion of this scenario as a platform for interaction between characters. Therefore, it was very important that the figures interact within the imagined space in the piece. For example, in Figure 8 the fox from Disney's *The Fox and the Hound* stares up in horror, from his place hanging from the end of a log, at Pierce Brosnan who is having his fingers stepped on from his place hanging off the end of a ladder in the James Bond film, *Golden Eye*. I wanted them to be in this struggle together, looking to each other, when neither is in a position to help. This interaction seemed necessary for the characters to retain their vulnerability in the collage. This placement of images also allowed me to add some additional humor into the work. Figures are hanging on to each other's hair, or seem to be making faces in reaction to nearby people.

The fact of the matter is that this trope is absurd. It is commonly used, but in a logical sense, most individuals in the world today could not hold themselves up if forced onto a roof's edge. Whose sweaty panicked palms could grasp on to a sandy cliff? What person would be able to pull up someone else's entire body weight with the grasp of one single outstretched hand? It is ridiculous. That is what I want my viewer to question.

Why does this happen so much? And why are we so okay with accepting this as a plot line in our stories when it is so far fetched to consider in real life?

-Idiom Lens I-

My grandmother and great-grandmother moved in with my family when I was nine, and I was often the receiver of unusual wisdom in the form of proverbs and idioms. I find them charming, and am also entertained by how removed they are from modern life here in 2014. For example, the phrase “till the cows come home,” while we all know the implied meaning, uses words that have no literal meaning to any modern individual not involved with livestock. We use these phrases, we take their wisdom, but their words do not apply to this newer generation.

For this piece, I borrowed an image from recent popular culture, the “selfie” photo taken at the 2014 Oscars where Ellen Degeneres rounded up a group of celebrities to be in the photo with her, taken by an iPhone during the awards show. The audience present gawked at large LCD screens, watching something entirely mundane take place at a famous award show. I offer a commentary (Fig. 9) on this strange and awkward goings on, by juxtaposing thumbs over every person’s head. I chose an image that also contained the audience so that they could be included in the conversation. I have done some photo manipulating to turn all of the figures in the 2014 Oscars “selfie” into thumbs, to express my view of these kinds of encounters, and moreover, what it feels like to be the one watching these staged smiles and directed photo gazes, parodying the “you’re all thumbs” idiom, meaning that one is “awkward or clumsy.” I collaged this piece half by hand,

printing and pasting the thumbs over faces. I then photographed it and edited the piece in Adobe Photoshop, applying a filter that adds great visual appeal, and bows its head to Salvador Dali and oil painting.

In the coming *Idiom Lens* series, I intend to continue to merge outdated sayings with relevant recent events, casting a critical eye on the occasion, while entertaining amusing idioms to do so. Typically what the situation would literally look like if you applied the phrase.

-Terms of Endearment I and II-

Growing up in the southern United States, and working retail customer service for all of my working years, use of terms of endearment became pivotal in my everyday life. Still, I recall as a kid being confused when my mother called me “Sweet Pea.” “Sweet Pee?!” I thought, entirely unaware that a sweet pea is a flower. This series, playing with the literal meaning of terms of endearment is intended to explore just how non-endearing these terms can be if you think about them past their first definition. In *Terms of Endearment II* (Fig. 10) I explored variations of what the words “Sweet” and “Pea” could look like, Pretty things like piles of sugar and cake, and aggressive things like feet covered in sores from diabetes, and tipsy college students peeing in unusual places. From a distance, the collage, like the term, seems very pleasant. The exterior edge creates a rough rounded heart. The less attractive aspects reveal themselves slowly.

Terms of Endearment I (Fig. 11) operates in a similar way, but is not as graphic in its imagery. Different visual depictions of both pumpkin and butter are juxtaposed to

create a dense organic form. The most pointed, critical image in this piece is rotting pumpkins. However, what I believe it lacks in content and exploration of meaning, it makes up for in formal appeal. This was the first piece of mine that broke free from the rectangle and branched out to make an organic form. I found the visual weight of it, and drama of the compositional balance to be very compelling. Both of these pieces exemplify my interest in things both attractive and repellant. Many of the butter images are pleasing, but the dark pumpkin gut images are visceral, invoking the idea of internal organs.

-Fresh Fish-

The *Fresh Fish* collage (Fig. 12) is now 12 feet high and approximately 8 feet wide at its largest point. The piece is predominantly long and narrow, creating a slice of landscape that our figure, Bea Arthur, is forced to navigate through. The space is in part the Dead Marshes from *The Lord of the Rings* and part fish display counter. Stacks of barnacles are layered up next to ice chips and fish bodies, creating a deep landscape. In this piece, I wanted the figure to be trapped within the imaginary space, in that way that people are often trapped by stereotypes or what is expected of them within society. I have been a major *Golden Girls* fan since childhood, and through watching that show, I began to admire Bea Arthur as a representation of progress for women. *Golden Girls* and *Maude*, were some of the first feminist shows on television. Bea herself was politically involved with the P.E.T.A. group during her lifetime, and one of the few to get an abortion even before the passing of Roe vs. Wade in 1973. This collage is meant to discuss one of the main topics covered in her television shows: sexuality. There is this

idea that women are no longer desirable after a “certain age” or at some point they dry up and are no longer involved in the sexual arena. Bea is juxtaposed next to piles of fish on ice, caught and dead, cooled to keep from spoiling. The images, the oysters, barnacles, fish heads, etc. were chosen for their seductive nature and somewhat crudely sexual reputations. They continue to flirt that line between beautiful and repellant.

She fights through this landscape the way she fought through what was expected of her, but ultimately gets buried in the crags of oysters, barnacles, and octopi, in a situation that would be both physically uncomfortable and would literally stink. The last image of her that is at a much larger scale, in the middle/ foreground of the piece, gives the viewer a knowing look, as if she always knew she was never going to make it all the way out.

I bend perspective in this piece. The background ,the imagery was intentionally chosen to make it seem that space recedes forever. Lower in the piece, what just starts to feel like the space contains a floor surface, perspective dips down, and the viewer is confronted with trio of dark fish heads facing straight on. This piece has some relief elements also contributing to the feeling of dense space. Certain areas project off of the wall to subtly bring this environment into the viewer’s physical space.

Overall, I’m proud of the progression of the work and excited to make more. My journey through the MFA program has been a rocky one, trying to decide which direction I would turn. The kind of artwork I enjoy looking at has changed dramatically, now that

I'm starting to peer out of the world of just painting. I have come to understand my own tastes to a more exact degree, that I personally respond more to considerations of space, texture, and shape than I had ever previously considered. I realize more now that I am more interested in taking something that is known and captured by the world and modifying it to represent my ideas, than authoring something directly and expecting a viewer to have a connection to it. Graduate School has been quite a journey and I'm excited to continue on the path that I've found.