

Living on Death

David Gress

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Committee:

David Brody
Ann Gale
Philip Govedare
Denzil Hurley
Zhi Lin
Helen O'Toole

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University of Washington

Abstract

Living on Death

David Gress

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor Zhi Lin
Associate Professor Helen O'Toole
Painting + Drawing

My work pertains to notions of documentary. The slaughterhouse and events that transpire within constitute the untouched, given center of my work. Within these limits I am free to interpret, recreate and compose such events. Interest in the subject arises from my experience working in my father's slaughterhouse and the profound impact it had on me. This exposure combined with my current research into aspects of death and violence has brought about my present working process. Through a variety of means, from image collage and manipulation to model building, I reconstruct the realities of daily life within the walls of an abattoir.

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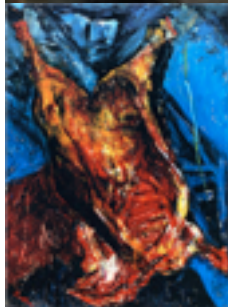
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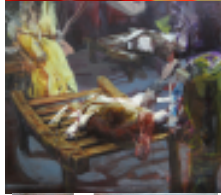
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My work pertains to notions of documentary. The slaughterhouse and events that transpire within constitute the untouched, given center of my work. Within these limits I am free to interpret, recreate and compose such events. Interest in the subject arises from my experience working in my father's slaughterhouse and the profound impact it had on me. This exposure combined with my current research into aspects of death and violence has brought about my present working process. Through a variety of means, from image collage and manipulation to model building, I reconstruct the realities of daily life within the walls of an abattoir.

As a child, witnessing animal slaughter on such a mass scale evoked recognition of my own mortality and an awareness that death is something violent and real. Even so, after spending nearly a decade in such an environment, I became conscious of how the violence that once deeply affected me became banal and routine. Early exposure to the violence inherent in modern meat consumption and a desire to understand my own complex relationship with the issue have motivated my efforts to approach the subject through painting.

The long tradition of representing slaughtered animals in painting and parallel themes of brutality in Catholic art, have provided an opportunity to study technical and stylistic developments in the depiction of flesh and evolving concepts of death and violence in art.

Prior to Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* (1665) (Fig. 1), animal carcasses symbolized Christ's sacrifice and death. However, in Rembrandt's painting, religious themes become less overt, rather the work becomes a meditation on the flesh and carcass itself (Craig 1983). By carefully building up layers of paint and texturing them to take on the physical intricacies of flesh, he then glazed and wiped over the surfaces leaving color in lower spots, emphasizing the texture and creating the color of flesh (Wetering 2009). Rembrandt's developments in representing flesh, apparent in *Slaughtered Ox*, inspired a new generation of painters in the 20th century to take up the subject.

Most notable is Chaim Soutine, who after seeing Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* in the Louvre proceeded to produce a number of works portraying carcasses (Fig. 2). Using a similar approach, Soutine not only built up textured layers of paint, he sculpted and manipulated it, transforming the substance of paint into that of flesh. From a frenzy of marks recording gestures and movements, not only of the paintbrush, but brush handle, pallet knife and his finger tips, all of which he used to apply and remove paint, Soutine's frantic process suggests a certain chaos and violence (Kleeblatt and Silver 1998). The breadth of marks from fine lines to broad smears, glazing to impasto, and use of drips, runs, and splatters achieves the appearance of a freshly slaughtered animal with its pearlescent glow, still writhing and twitching attempting to escape the fate its already met.

As William de Kooning famously said “Flesh is the stuff people are made of...the reason why oil painting was invented” (de Kooning 1951). Taking an approach similar to that of Soutine, de Kooning placed higher emphasis on experimentation with techniques and materials. By manipulating paints and mediums, working wet on wet, and varying how thickly paint was applied he was able to create complex textures and color mixtures, exploiting the properties of paint. As a result of the unconventional materials and processes employed by de Kooning, the layers of paint sag and wrinkle, achieving a true sense of flesh (Fig. 3) (Elderfield and Coddington, 2011).

In the same way Rembrandt, Soutine and de Kooning provided a stylistic and technical foundation from which to approach the subject in my initial attempts, concepts of death, violence, and suffering in catholic art and modern reinterpretations of such ideas shifted my focus from depicting carcasses in my studio (Fig. 4, 5) to conveying my experiences in the abattoir. It is through the paintings of Francis Bacon and writing of Don Delillo that this change in my work occurred.

Detailed representations of extreme violence and pain expressed in Catholic art (Fig. 6) were intended to strengthen a shared belief in the prospect of divine salvation. These gruesome images are answered with images of resurrection and redemption, restoring beauty and harmony with spiritual salvation. By believing in God’s promise one could not only bear the hardships of this life, but would be freed of them in the next. Through a variety of techniques both Bacon (Fig. 7) and Delillo, force iconographic readings onto images of modern violence. A strategy that leads to a reversal of original meaning, showing that the Christian narrative cannot be upheld in modern society (Arya, 2012). If religious paintings depict violence and death as a reminder of salvation, then depictions of modern violence read as religious images are reminders that there is no salvation or resurrection. Images of violence and death then do not reinforce the idea of the end of this life and the beginning of another, but permanent death with no meaning, death in our time (Schneck, 2007).

George Franju’s documentary *Le Sang des bêtes* inspired the incorporation of model building into my working process as a way to acknowledge the lie being created. Speaking on *cinéma vérité*, literally truthful cinema, a style of documentary filmmaking, Franju notes:

There isn’t any *cinéma vérité*. It’s necessarily a lie, from the moment the director intervenes or it isn’t cinema at all. You must recreate reality because reality runs away; reality denies reality. You must first interpret it, or re-create it (Franju 1971).

In his documentary *Le Sang des bêtes*, Franju acutely portrays the realities of modern meat production. The film jarringly juxtaposes a matter-of-fact, clinical documentary style with the visceral horrors of a Parisian slaughterhouse resulting in something truly sublime. The documentary expertly balances beauty and violence, pain and pleasure, and the mundane with extraordinary, presenting an honest insight into the daily activities of an abattoir. What makes the film most unsettling is that it does not convey a clear moral message; it simply depicts life as it exists in a slaughterhouse (Lowenstein 2005).

When I make a documentary; I try to give the realism an artificial aspect... I find that the aesthetic of a document comes from the artificial aspect of the document... it has to be more beautiful than realism, and therefore it has to be composed (Franju 1971)(Fig. 8).

The artificiality that Franju speaks of, accounts for my further interest in traditional Catholic art. The overt artificiality present in such work more clearly and intensely conveys ideas and attains greater splendor than reality alone could achieve.

Through continued visits to slaughterhouses and butcher shops, I have accumulated sketches, photographs, and additional insights into the process of animal processing. However, due to restrictions in place by the USDA and the necessity not to impede on work, capturing desired material has turned out to be quite difficult. For this reason, procuring dead animals, animal parts, and cuts of meat to study in the studio have proven invaluable. The use of fetal pigs, normally for biological dissection, has provided an opportunity to “butcher” animals in my studio. By carrying out the process of skinning, decapitation, and evisceration, more meaningful observations can be made (Fig. 9). Furthermore, by working in the studio I acquire control over variables typically left to chance.

The photographs and studies that result, along with images gathered from literature, art history, and film become the source material for my paintings. These references are then compiled and manipulated through digital and traditional means to distort and fragment; a process that corresponds to the outcome of slaughter itself. The procedure also allows for the compression of time, blending different stages of the process into a single image, achieving a more comprehensive view of reality (Fig. 10, 11).

Next, utilizing my background in drafting and architecture, in addition to my current research into stage design, I use the manipulated images to reconstruct scenes by building a scale model, which assists to restore a sense of space and form back into the event. Model building dually enables arrangement and composition of the scene. Because the sources are from a variety of times, places, viewpoints, and conditions the model returns a unity to the matter (Fig. 12, 13).

Recently, I have constructed paintings in a similar way. By first structuring the space and mapping out desired relationships between forms, perspective and geometry can be employed to further order and compose the image. While organizing a painting, I attempt to abide by the rules that govern documentary filmmaking. Working on large canvas allows for a space that relates to human scale. Using a standard eye level with a wide-angle view creates an aesthetic of objectivity because of its presumed ability to more faithfully mirror the event-in-context (Minh-ha, 1991). The importance of objectivity arises from my desire not to comment of what takes place within a slaughterhouse, rather to use it as a means to explore aesthetic solutions that align with my own experiences with the subject (Fig. 14)

The techniques of Rembrandt, Soutine, and de Kooning have proven not only useful in building up forms such as the carcass composed of many different layers of tissue, but in depicting a sequence of actions. By using a combination of opacity and transparency to gradually develop the paint surface, alterations and changes remain partially visible through subsequent layers. The process creates a history within the painting, with forms and figures seeming to move in and out a focus, giving rise to a sense of time and movement. The degree of transparency, ways in which the paint is applied, and to what extent the image is being changed can describe a certain quality of the action or moment. (Fig. 15)

Only through ongoing research and a willingness to experiment with methods and materials, have I began to understand my own complex relationship with the subject. These insights paired with countless unsuccessful attempts have gradually given way to a more coherent vision of how to aesthetically depict such events. Although I choose not to eat meat, I accept the process by which animals are slaughtered. After all, like any animal that eats flesh, we too must kill in order to consume meat. The work of a butcher is violent and messy yet dull and repetitive but one that is necessary for our way of life. It is the dichotomies and contradictions that arise in such work that interest me most. How we become desensitized and indifferent to violence and how one can be conditioned to sing and joke while killing.

Living in a post-domestic society, we are largely numb to the realities of modern meat processing and with many states criminalizing unauthorized documentation within animal facilities, it is a process that will further be hidden, concealed, and ignored. I only hope to visualize the process by which we acquire meat, because there are real consequences of our consumption. Through the use of objective aesthetics and constructing the image by artificial means, I hope to restore a sense of strangeness to what has become commonplace to myself as a way to discover what is poetic beyond the everyday violence inherent in modern meat processing, in order to give it another sense. (Fig. 16)

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