

What is at Play?
Reflections on the Natural Obscurity of Desire and the Play-Element

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Abstract

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This thesis is a written accompaniment to a series of 10 paintings that were created in partial fulfillment for my degree of Master of Fine Arts. The paintings depict a variety of living things dogs, daffodils and humans. The settings they occupy are commonplace, for example, parks, domestic interiors, backyards and unspecified locations in a patch of road verge or against a fence. Despite the everyday elements, the resulting pictures are strange or funny in tone, I am interested in scenes that allow me to explore notions of psychological, physical, and spiritual freedom as they relate to desire and play. This writing serves as a record of my research regarding these themes and my process. I discuss my work in two themes desire, and play. I highlight cultural and artistic influences and share personal anecdotes that relate to my research, and explore theory and concepts relative to my painting practice.

What is at Play?

Reflections on the Natural Obscurity of Desire and the Play-Element

I paint a variety of living things recently things, dogs, daffodils, and humans to name a few. The settings they occupy are commonplace, for example, parks, domestic interiors, backyards and unspecified locations like a patch of road verge or against an old fence. Despite the everyday elements, the resulting pictures are strange or funny in tone, I am interested in pictures that allow me to explore notions of psychological, physical, and spiritual freedom as they relate to desire and play. I consider play a fundamental element of human and animal life that disrupts the monotony of everyday existence. Play is critical to my work in the process and formal elements as well as thematically.

The Obscurity of Desire

“A dog that chases its tail will be dizzy”

“Why must I be like that? Why must I chase the cat?”

– George Clinton

In George Clinton’s famous lyrics from his Parliament Funk band’s (1982) single “Atomic Dog”. He points directly to something I have been preoccupied with, namely, ‘the natural obscurity of desire’. His song functions as a seminal text for one the major themes in my thesis, desire. I have been interested in ways of making pictures about the curious nature of desire, its powerful force on behavior and its natural obscurity.

The dog chasing its tail as subject re-emerged in my first quarter of the MFA program at UW. The point of view presented in the circular painting, *Street Dog* had shifted from my previous iterations

but the circular, nonsensical, perennial struggle continued. The shadows cast beside the dog by a pair of luxury car headlights stretch across the sidewalk forming rhythmic shapes that allude to a multiplicity of the self, and the obscurity of the internal motivations at work. The emphasis on the complex shadow also relates to Carl Jung's concept of the shadow. According to Jung the shadow is what we do not know about ourselves. It consists of unconscious repressed and suppressed content including whatever a particular culture considers as unacceptable. I find the dog very effective in evoking a psychological tone. Dogs have been popular in works of art as far back as ancient times. I am most influenced by Rufino Tamayo and Paula Rego's use of the dog because of the intense psychological power of their works.

In *Street Dog* I invented and constructed the scene in response to the internal geometry of the circular frame emphasizing a grid-like angular internal matrix. The physical appearance of the dog references personal memories of my childhood family dog Grover. My Dad named him after our hometown because he was a street dog. Dad met Grover at his friend Donny's house. Donny was a neighborhood weed dealer. Grover (the dog) was presumably there for the same reason my Dad was, to buy some weed, socialize, smoke a joint and hang out with Donny's cool pack of down low Dachshunds. Grover's appearance as a mut is important to my picture. His ambiguous and unknown genetic make-up reminds me of myself and my friends. Even though we carried on cultural values from our family histories we didn't think of each-other as defined by the color of our skin or by the name of our ancestral country. We were all dawgs, we continue to use the term as an endearing way to refer to our long-time friends.

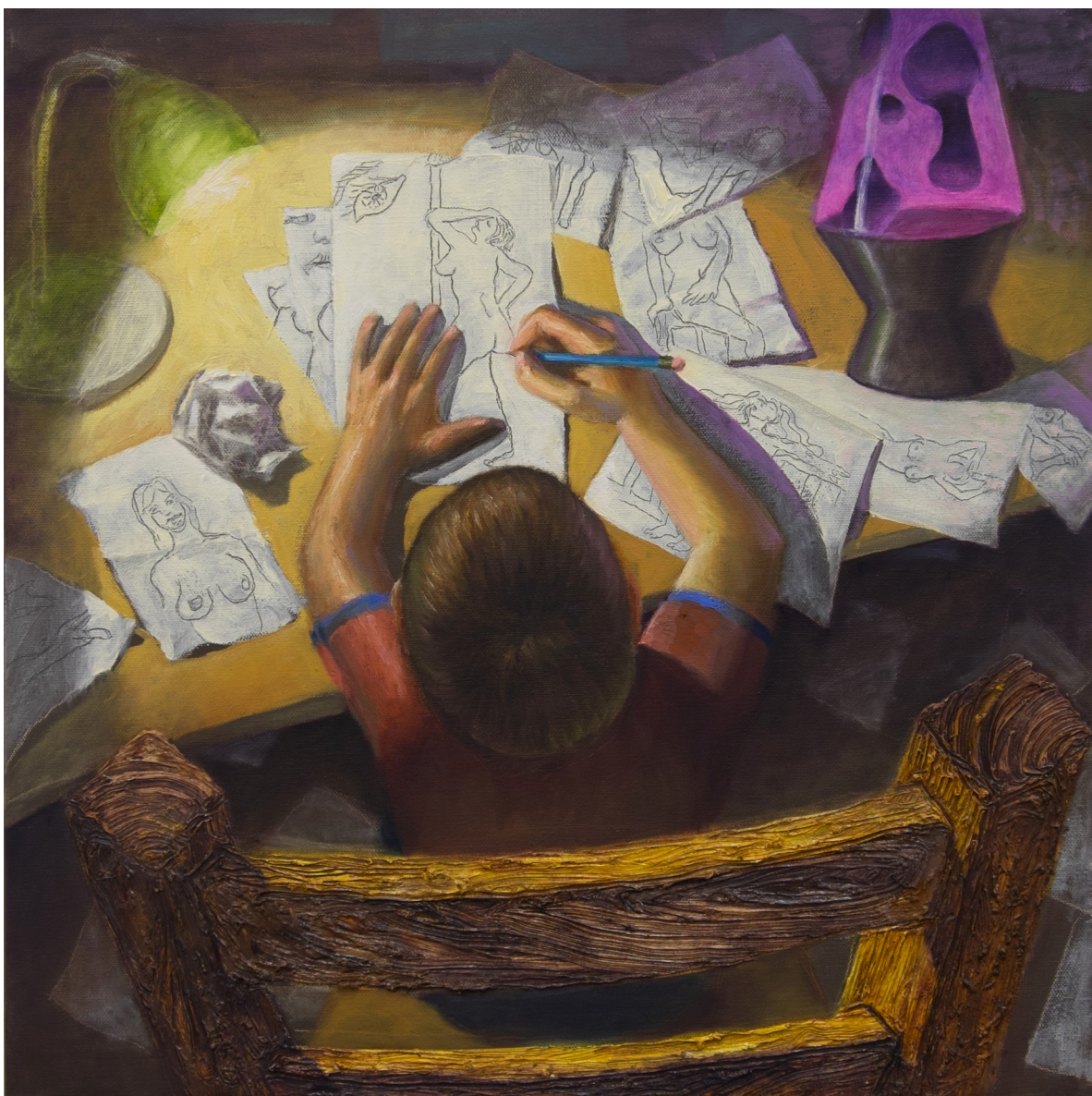


Street Dog, 2024, oil on panel

I would not have made “Street Dog” if I hadn’t been ever heard *Atomic Dog* by George Clinton, or read Bouleau’s, *The Secret Geometry Of Painting*, nor without the childhood memory of staring at a reproduction of Hiroshige’s, “Mallard Duck and Snow-Covered Reeds” in my parents’ bathroom every time I sat on the toilet. Clinton’s psychedelic funk masterpiece has always been a favorite of mine and his ad-libbed lyrics at the beginning of the record sparked a vision in my mind’s eye of a dog caught in a loop. This tireless circuit alludes to our own behavioral loops. These looping behaviors lead to the realization that the desires fueling them are often illogical, absurd, and futile. Bouleau’s diagrams about the geometric armatures of different rectangles and circles in painting prompted me to use abstract structures to play off of during the organization of compositions, and early exposure to non-western art forms like the prints of Hiroshige and other Japanese woodblock prints exposed me to axonometric perspective, an alternative to the otherwise dominant monocular linear perspective taught in Western

art schools. The latter is an example of the way my pictures come about, a lot of things, I've seen, felt, and internalized all mix together and emerge semi-unconsciously through an interaction between my hand and my loosely associating mind. I strengthen the unconscious/conscious connections through, drawing, listening to music, reading, riding my bicycle, abstaining from social media over-stimulation, and generally practicing being presently minded.

In a subsequent painting, *Tits R 4 Kids*, the theme of desire is again present. This time the subject is a person, a child who is seen from above obsessively drawing nude women on scrap pieces of paper. There are countless sheets of white paper scattered on his desk and onto the floor. This work is clearly playful in its title and subject but also a bit unsettling perhaps concerning the behavior of the child. Similarly to how the dog chasing its tail vacillates between playful and sinister, *Tits R 4 Kids* straddles the blurry line between innocence and experience. I draw a connection to works of the English artist and poet, William Blake. Particularly his poems on "the contrary states of the human soul." He illuminates these contrary states in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* from 1794 in which a clod and a pebble define and re-define love, and a fly teaches man the transience of life. The contrary states of the soul are related to the natural obscurity of desire. Our wants are often hidden, complex, driven or bound by others, and sometimes contradictory, requiring inner work. The obscurity of desire is directly related to the collision of innocence and experience.



Tits R 4 Kids, 2024, oil on canvas, 20" x 20"

In the Spring quarter I drew and painted in an effort to express that incomparable joy that spring invites. Eventually the season itself became a gesture, “a bounding toward light” I instilled a dog with this simple gesture and I looked at plants and animals alike, noticing how they all yearn for light. In

Untied Dog in a Telematic Society and *Search*, the light becomes central to the tone and subject of the paintings. Obscurity becomes more prominent and the longing is not negative, or perverse, the warm light in *Untied Dog* is celebratory, and in *Search*, the tone can be interpreted as hopeful. Around the time I was making these paintings I was listening to Shoshana Zuboff's book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* in it she argues that surveillance capitalists (such as Google and Facebook) aim to "transform the natural obscurity of human desire into scientific fact". This line seeped in to the paintings and caused me to re-evaluate the obscurity of desire and cherish it rather than question it. This marked an end of my interest in desire as major theme. I found myself still drawing dogs so I decided to continue with them and see what came of it. Without the subject of desire I found I was still interested in dogs tendency to play.



Parking Lot Daffodil, 2025, oil on canvas, 8" x 10"



Spring In The Winter Time, 2025, oil on canvas, 62" x 62"

Untied Dog in a Telematic Society, 2025, oil on canvas, 72" x 51"





Search, 2025, oil on canvas, 63" x 56"

The Play-Element

“The play concept is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness.” - Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*



Playing Frisbee at Magnuson Park, 8" x 10" oil on canvas, 2025

There has been a playful tone to my paintings for some time but during the program began thinking more critically about the play-element I am interested in play as a primary and significant aspect of the human/animal experience. The play-element functions in my work on different levels, formal/compositional play, games or playful activities as subject, and play as concept or impetus for a work. I am particularly interested in the complex overlaps of play, “bad” behavior, and structures/rules/roles that modify behavior.

While working on the painting *Fairplay*, my thoughts and convictions about play as a concept began to crystallize. The dog motif had not been exhausted so I continued with it. In the planning of *Fairplay* I drew from photos I found on the web of disc dogs; competitive flying disc catching dogs. I found delight and beauty in their physicality, rhythmical movement, and contorted bodies. I was picking up on what the cultural anthropologist Johan Huizinga claims in his book, *Homo Ludens*, “Play tends to assume marked elements of beauty, mirth and grace adhere at the outset to the more primitive forms of play. In play, the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith. In its more developed forms it is saturated with rhythm and harmony.” He says “human body” but it applies to all animals. Using tracing paper I shifted the arrangement of the dogs I had sketched trying out different ways to organize the composition. It grew to be full of entangled figures. This choice was influenced by my travels in Cambodia over summer, I spent long hot days at the Angkor Wat temple complexes in Siem Reap and encountered an incredible relief that spanned around one of the temples. I became fascinated with the crowded figures repeating, the echoing of forms, and the rhythm of the contours. The frieze format is closer to music in that it is chronological, time becomes a factor because you cannot see the entire composition at once you have to experience it in movements. When we speak of someone making music we say they are “playing music”. As I became increasingly interested in abstract compositional choices and terms like repetition, rhythm, echoing, rhyming, and intervals I began

thinking more in terms of play. Huizinga describes different forms of games and one category he calls “patience games”, characterizes them by their tension and uncertainty and gives the example of a puzzle. I posit that painting fits into this category of solitary game. Especially in the process stages when parts are doing major shifting, colors are changing and everything is in relationship and “at play” it is a lot like a puzzle and I am trying things, wondering if it will ever come together.



Detail of stone wall relief frieze at Ankhor Thom, Siem Reap, Cambodia

It was while freely shifting the disc dogs within the composition they overlapped and appeared to be colliding and biting onto each other rather than catching plastic discs. As result of the free movement of forms I found a playful twist to the subject itself.

Fairplay, 2026, oil on canvas, 78" x 63"



In the painting *Juego* I continued with the subject of play, this time using human figures. And drawing on a personal memory of throwing knives at Nopal cacti with my childhood best friend. Continuing with my formal interests I was looking to artists whose work had a complex puzzle-like interlocking of shapes. I looked both to contemporary and historical influences to shape this painting. The monumental figures and blocky compositions of Piero Della Francesca, the bold simplicity of Frank Walter and the puzzle-like organization of Jackie Gendel all played a role in the outcome of the painting. I draw a connection between the central mother figure and Piero's Virgin Mary in The Annunciation c. 1455. Piero's Mary towers over angel Gabriel. I wanted to make the mother in my painting "*Juego*" appear monumental like mothers are to children so that the viewer could enter the scene on the level of the mischievous kids.



Cropped section of Piero Della Francesca's
Annunciation, c.1455, St. Francesco, Arezzo



Juego, oil on canvas, 2026, 78" x 54"

I had considered making this painting several times before but had not yet found a suitable approach. It all clicked for me after seeing digital reproductions of Frank Walter's painting, *Tropical Plant*, and Jackie Gendel's, *Architect's Daughter VI*.



I decided to place the viewer behind the cacti so that it would create a repetition of shapes all over the picture partially obscuring and abstracting the scene. The result is the viewer sees through the openings, that they are in, under, and sort of caught in the precarious spiny cacti pads like the children are caught playing a naughty game.

Continuing with the youthful and playful theme I made “*After Forever*” a picture of adolescents jumping a chainlink fence to skateboard an empty pool in the private yard of a southern California home. The central figure skateboarding references a photo of my Dad from the early 1970’s when he was a sophomore in high school.. I composed the rest of the scene around him inspired by the story he told my sister and I from his memory of that day. Painting about my dad’s experience was different

than working from my own memories. I used thin paint and layered washes of color to make the inside of the pool atmospheric alluding to the distance over time. I was time-traveling and reviving a moment that only existed in part through the faded and wrinkled photograph. I playfully consider it a history painting, it displays heroic actions and functions in part by using the past to teach the present. It glorifies physical play, going outside, adventure, athletic youth, rebelliousness, and free spirited fun as a highly esteemed attribute of culture. Collective and integrated play unites rather than dividing or splintering like isolation. In making this painting I felt a new optimism about the utility and promise of human made images. The symbol of the fence reappears as a passable obstacle relating to last years dog paintings. A similar tone of light, free, flying feeling and the satisfaction of breaking through the ordinary and the monotonous into the creative play-sphere.



Detail of *Untied Dog*, 2025



Detail of *After Forever*, 2026



After Forever, 2026, oil on canvas, 80" x 96"

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