

Painting and Drawing: Mitigating The Space Between the Internal and External

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Abstract

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The topic of my thesis is about the “extra-relational” characteristics of rhetoric, poetry, and visual artsⁱ. Painting from my point of view is a form of natural philosophy with very deep roots extending back to the beginnings of civilization.

I don't intend to compose a survey of art history but it is important to understand that from its inception painting and drawing has played an important role in our cognitive developmentⁱⁱ. The sociologist Michael S. Gazzaniga points out that the “inventive interpretive mind” is perhaps humanity's greatest invention. He argues that technology is not just comprised of physical objects but also social constructs. The most important invention of our ancient ancestors was the ability to translate the individual story into a group narrative. Throughout my thesis I will explain my techniques and process, their historical significance, and their relationship to my content.

Illustrations

1. Chinese Horse with Symbol, (detail of mural from Axial Gallery at Lascaux), 15,000 BCE, paint on limestone, L 56"
2. Caravaggio, Madonna di Loreto, 1604-1606, oil on canvas, 100"x59"
3. Bryan Robertson, Branded III, oil on canvas, 52"x108"
4. Bryan Robertson, Branded I, 2015, oil on canvas, 52"x36"
5. Francisco Goya, The Sleep of Reason Produce Monsters, 1799, etching aquatint dry point and burin, 8 ^{7/16} x 5 ^{7/8}
6. Bryan Robertson, The Ism-Scape, charcoal on paper, 12"x18"
7. Bryan Robertson, The Ism-Scape, charcoal on paper, 12"x18"
8. Neo Rauch, Leporello, 2005, oil on canvas, 100" x 84.5"
9. Bryan Robertson, Old American Songs: The Dodger, 2015, oil on board, 48"x24"
10. Bryan Robertson, Branded II, 2015, oil on canvas, 52"x36"

Introduction

The topic of my thesis is about the “extra-relational” characteristics of rhetoric, poetry, and visual artsⁱⁱⁱ. Painting from my point of view is a form of natural philosophy with very deep roots extending back to the beginnings of civilization.

I don't intend to compose a survey of art history but it is important to understand that from its inception painting and drawing has played an important role in our cognitive development^{iv}. The sociologist Michael S. Gazzaniga points out that the “inventive interpretive mind” is perhaps humanity's greatest invention. He argues that technology is not just comprised of physical objects but also social constructs. The most important invention of our ancient ancestors was the ability to translate the individual story into a group narrative. This allowed humans to navigate both personal life and social existence. The “cognitive explosion” was the moment in history when the interpretive mind allowed for greater organization between living humans, their ancestors, and their descendants^v.

One of the best places to study the beginnings of a standardized human interpretation of the world is in the cave paintings at Lascaux France (fig 1). While many of these images are representational depictions of animals, nearly one-fifth of the images are symbols^{vi}. The presence of these symbols is important because it meant that our ancient ancestors were in some way categorizing their work^{vii}. The separation of symbol from imagery is noteworthy because it signals the beginning of written communication. I argue that this shows there are ancestral links between visual language and syntax.

From my perspective the Renaissance painters are not all that far removed from these cave painters, making work in a more sophisticated manner nonetheless. Yet, they were still essentially converting an inner spiritual experience into the codex of a communal one. My thesis will examine Caravaggio who not only pioneered realism in the sense of bringing everyday people and events into his work, but also employed perspective and paint handling techniques that have been heavily influential on my own work. I will talk about Goya who with the aid of the Enlightenment developed a distinct individualism into his oeuvre that has heavily influenced how I think about ideas in a visual way. Finally, I will discuss the contemporary painter Neo Rauch who with a deft touch of post-modernism collapses history into the present, creating work which reads more as an abstract dictionary entry than a decipherable story. Throughout I hope to explain my techniques and process, their historical significance, and their relationship to my content.

Influences: Caravaggio, Goya, and Neo Rauch

To understand why Caravaggio is so important to my work I must first give a brief overview of Alberti's concept of the *historia*. This is important because the rules and guidelines Alberti established for painting were symmetrical to the structure of rhetorical prose. For Alberti painting was composed of surfaces that formed members, members that formed bodies, and bodies that formed the *historia*^{viii}. Post-Alberti painting became a theatrical event, more than just a mere illustration or compliment to written language. Caravaggio was well situated to take advantage of painting's enhanced role in counter-reformation Italy. During this time the Catholic Church needed artists who could portray an intense realism, showing the world as it actually is and persuading people of the immanence of the sacred in their everyday lives^{ix} (fig. 2).

Caravaggio achieves the intensity of his realism through the use of absorption. In his work the subject of the painting is so engrossed in their own emotion that they are unaware of anything else around them^x. Absorption is a major component of realism and quantifies it as a technological achievement in the history of art. The art historian Michael Fried argues that absorption becomes a narrative quality common to multiple visual works for up to 250 years after Caravaggio. This is an idea I explore in my painting *Branded II* (fig. 3). In this painting the people are endowed with an emoticon-esque sensibility but nevertheless are absorbed within the atmosphere of the car; hermetically sealed off from the viewer and the rest of their surroundings.

Caravaggio also first understood that diverse optical trajectories invited the viewer to look at the picture from multiple angles^{xi}. This diversity encouraged active participation by the viewer and opposed the static nature felt by viewers of single point perspective. This multi-point perspective technique is evident in my own work especially in *Branded I* (fig. 4). No longer were paintings merely a window onto a scene, they were an entrance into a scene. The viewer becomes part of the drama as it folds out on the stage before them.

Goya unlike Caravaggio achieved a degree of autonomy from religious and state institutions. Ultimately he would use realism to dovetail individual expression with social satire. In many ways his life and the artworks he produced were an outgrowth of the Enlightenment's call for liberty. Similar also to Enlightenment ideals Goya employs a scientific inquisition to his process as he searches for truth in all his subjects. This manifests in religious paintings devoid of sainthood, paintings of peasant life, paintings of the horrors of war, and his *Caprichos*' (fig. 5) that reveal the excess and frivolous nature of the society in which he lived^{xii}. My earlier drawings (figs. 6 and 7) riff on this notion and depict contemporary problems such as overwhelming consumption, media driven narratives, and the segregation and homogenization of ideology. Another consistent motif in Goya's work is the transformation of human bodies into puppets, marionettes, and automatons^{xiii}. This is evident in my current work but had its origins in my earlier drawings, where birds, letters, and devices of technology often symbolically represented human actions and priorities.

What makes Goya a major influence on my own work is the mystery and drama he shows us in a world transitioning from his own point of view to that of the participant and spectator^{xiv}. This is important to consider because it shows an immense filtration system where the outer world penetrates the inner world only to be digested and put back

out into the world. This personifies what I mean when I say that painting and drawing exists between the internal world and external worlds, and I love how Goya crafts that space in an infinite amount of ways.

Today Neo Rauch is making a case for his own ability to blend the internal world with the external world. His works combine recognizable imagery with flat areas of color, hovering in the liminal space between figuration and abstraction^{xv}. This is a direct confrontation between conscious awareness and subjective imagination. Rauch says, “The underwater currents (of the soul) manifest themselves very directly (in painting), whether I want them too or not”^{xvi}. Rauch is a painter of memory who collapses the distinction between imagery and abstraction much as memory itself does^{xvii}.

Rauch seems to use a word or phrase or cultural icon as a departure point for the metastasizing nature of his compositions. For example the painting *Leporello* (fig 8) references a character from the opera *Don Giovanni*. Yet the painting itself is ripe with contemporary and mid-century references of nuclear shelters, roads to nowhere, Cabana club décor, and dislocated figures absorbed into a quixotic narrative. In my painting *Old American Songs: The Dodger* (fig. 9) I use an old American folk song as a reference point. Using Rauch’s techniques this painting shows absorbed and dislocated figures with their backs to the audience watching a scene of chaos unfold in front of them yet protected from its advances by whitewash and the silhouette of a gas-masked proletariat.

Rauch’s work goes past mere absorption or multiple-point perspective in order to entice the viewer into the wider world of his paintings. His illustrative vignettes are complex and capture our imagination in a way that forces us to try and hook them up to a wider context that itself is not present. We are haunted by as much as we see as by what we don’t see^{xviii}. These techniques present disparate events accumulatively and simultaneously, something only painting can pictorially accomplish^{xix}. Everything exists in one single space and in one presence, there aren’t a whole lot of things that can do that^{xx}. These are the major advances Rauch brings to his work, a defiance of linear time and an embrace of the circular metaphorical nature of life only pictorial representation can offer^{xxi}.

Methodology

The artist Robert McCann says “I approach the canvases with a sense of role-playing, where character within the image competes with that of the paint itself. The paint returns to the image, it returns to the grid, it returns to some primordial smear”. This quote is important because it hints at the inherent tactile qualities of paint that give it as a substance its own metaphorical heft. Physical engagement with material has a direct relationship to storytelling and critical thinking^{xxii}. One thing that makes Caravaggio, Goya, and Rauch so exceptional is their ability to find moments when the paint becomes tangible. The meta-painting or painting within the painting allows it to function on multiple levels^{xxiii}.

The prolific nature of photographic imagery in daily life has meant that the way we remember and think about the world is increasingly photo-realistic^{xxiv}. As a society images undulate in and out of our lives at a pace never before seen^{xxv}. Learning how to use photographs well when painting and drawing has been a central part of my methodology. A 3D effect is important to my work because my internal world is similar to the 3D effects a painting can produce; it exists in the 2D space of the mind but feels as though it can be walked through.

When using photographs as source material the first thing to understand is that a camera has one eyeball and is different from the way humans see with two eyeballs. This problem can be overcome by over and under exposing the same photograph and transitioning between 4 or 5 different versions of it while painting^{xxvi}. This is similar to the way contemporary 3D images are made. In the case of red and blue 3D imagery a blue image and red image are placed slightly apart from each other. The red part of the glasses let you see the red image and the vice versa with the blue part of the glasses^{xxvii}. By working with a variety of exposures and angles of any given image a painter can create the optical shifting between layers that allows for a 3D effect to occur^{xxviii}.

I generate my paintings by submitting phrases from poetry, media articles, and thoughts into Google searches and begin the process of seaming together my internal vision. In order to achieve a cohesive effect between collage layers I use a Renaissance glazing technique. The traditional process as outlined by Max Doerner is one in which white tempera paint is embedded in between layers of colored pigment. The main purpose of this technique is a division of labor where the main forms are laid down without any concern for color^{xxix}. This is essential to my process as I figure out how to control the imagery going into the final product. Tempera paint allows for editing and a draughtsmanlike appearance. The chromatic character of the final picture can easily be achieved in oil over tempera by means of a shortened alla prima technique^{xxx}.

This allows the work to become far more about the narrative than about how the work was made. In fact the craftsmanship and dedication to the slow meditative process is the how^{xxxi}. The meditative aspect of the way I work is extremely important, I need time to absorb the imagery into myself before I can distill it and put it back onto the canvas in a painterly manner. This process of oscillation between subject and reality interlocks presence with absence^{xxxii}. Therefore the *sfumato* or the blurring of edges and the strengthening of edges creates tension between the seen and the unseen^{xxxiii}. This is most clearly evident in my painting *Branded II* (fig. 10).

Furthermore, the image object and the image subject differentiate the illustration from the physical object. Color, form, etc manifest the subject but it is something that has never existed or never will exist again. Mimesis becomes lost in the meta-painting even if a work is representational^{xxxiv}. Ultimately my process uses formal characteristics of shape and color to push the narrative. For me figure-ground relationships represent the translation process of taking something from the mind to the world and then back to the mind again. This becomes physically evident as I work from thin washy layers of imprimatura painting towards thick juicy alla prima layers. I am looking to create a tension between the figure and the ground, as a metaphor for the relationship between the self and the community^{xxxv}.

Content

While I have already discussed a large portion my work's content in relationship to its formal elements, color and shape, figure and ground, internal world and external world there are a few more specific points to discuss. My work assumes that social constructs like money, religion, politics, and personal preference, are abstract conceptions that find meaning in a collective understanding^{xxxvi}. As Michael S. Gazzaniga says, "As the novelist captures the personal, the historian captures the social story within which most of us are embedded and uniquely thrive." Quotation becomes a necessary component of communication as the personal self attempts to relate to the group. Quoting is an inevitable component in all acts of communication it is what makes communication possible^{xxxvii}.

In my work I use quotation to search through the various levels of symbolism that allow for expression between individuals to occur. As Thomas McEvilley says, "through quoting the process of representation is simultaneously acted out and criticized... there is a great cultural dexterity to this – to seeing ones delusion while one is still deluded by it^{xxxviii}". I want to use this philosophy as a guide to move the viewer towards a "neutrality of information", an achronological structure that subverts temporal succession and instead is defined by an atemporal image-cluster^{xxxix}.

Quotation is more relevant today than it ever has been before. Today's world is unique in the sense that technology driven media capitalism has created a global village of ideas. This "global village" has no sense of place and is atemporal existing in between shared regional histories and larger global histories like the Enlightenment^{xl}. These networks and spheres of influence have connected the world. The world has become so interconnected that there is no more free space; everything is influenced by everything else. The global village is a living-breathing organism, impacted by all of our collective actions^{xli}. The sociologist Arjun Appadurai describes this in terms of the "ism-scape" a homogeneous global narrative that all cultures are effected by. The past has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios a temporal central casting, to which recourse can be had as appropriate.^{xlili}

The world of networks and spheres today is a virtual world with no limit to its size. In essence contemporary life existing inside the network puts the individual just as close to his neighbor one house away as he is to a jihadist in Syria. The ability to take away the physical space of nature and connect us to other spheres of influence is a contemporary force that consolidates disparate ideologies into new larger ones. This leaves us with the idea of the surrogacy, the anonymous nature to which online activities has crafted our existence^{xliii}. This world goes beyond mere quotation as quotations can be stand ins for other quotations and their original sources become lost in the digital fray. These facts situate contemporary painting in a world where the narrative gives way to the dictionary^{xliiv}. This is ultimately how I view the content of my work, as a place where very different motifs come together, and stand coherently only in the sense of their disjointed relationships.

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- ⁱ Hollander, Stacy C. "Art + History = Folk Art Changing Perspectives: Self-taught Art and The Museum Model." (Presentation at the College Art Association Conference, Washington, D.C., February 2nd – 6th 2016).
- ⁱⁱ Bondy, Barb. "The College Studio Practice, Academic theory, and the Tactile Experience: from Margin to Center". (Presentation at the College Art Association Conference, Washington, D.C., February 2nd – 6th 2016).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hollander, Stacy C. "Art + History = Folk Art Changing Perspectives: Self-taught Art and The Museum Model." (Presentation at the College Art Association Conference, Washington, D.C., February 2nd – 6th 2016).
- ^{iv} Bondy, Barb. "The College Studio Practice, Academic theory, and the Tactile Experience: from Margin to Center". (Presentation at the College Art Association Conference, Washington, D.C., February 2nd – 6th 2016).
- ^v Michael S. Gazzaniga "A Road Trip to the Origins of Our Species," *New York Times* New York, NY, Feb 22nd, 2016.
- ^{vi} Curtis, p. 97, 2007
- ^{vii} Curtis, p. 6, 2007
- ^{viii} Greenstein, p.286 1990
- ^{ix} Mulcahy, p.133 2011
- ^x Fried, p. 69, 2010
- ^{xi} Wilson, p. 1060 2012
- ^{xii} Hartlkey, p. 208, 1903
- ^{xiii} Robertson, p. 61, 2007
- ^{xiv} *ibid*
- ^{xv} Eisman, p. 244, 2012
- ^{xvi} Eisman, p. 246, 2012
- ^{xvii} Halle, p. 118, 2003
- ^{xviii} *ibid*
- ^{xix} Russ, Sabine. "Neo Rauch: Bomb Artists in Conversation." *www.bombmagazine.org*. December 12th 2014. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/57851210/neo-rauch>
- ^{xx} Denzil Hurley (Professor at the University of Washington), studio critique, January 8, 2015.
- ^{xxi} *ibid*
- ^{xxii} Palmer, Erin. "The College Studio Practice, Academic theory, and the Tactile Experience: from Margin to Center: *Perceptual Experience/Physical Engagement Teaching from Direct Observation*." Presentation at the College Art Association Conference, Washington, D.C., February 2nd – 6th 2016.
- ^{xxiii} Michael Stone-Richards (Professor at College for Creative Studies), studio critique, January 29, 2016. 01/29/16
- ^{xxiv} McCann, Robert. "The External Idea Space of Painting." *www.robertmccannpainting.com*. Last modified February 2015. <http://www.robertmccannpainting.com/#!about>
- ^{xxv} Phillip Robinson (Professor at the University of Missouri St. Louis), telephone conversation, January 11, 2016.
- ^{xxvi} Zhi Lin (Professor at the University of Washington), studio critique, March 15, 2015.

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- xxvii "3-D Film." www.wikipedia.org. Last modified February 20, 2016.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3D_film.
- xxviii Ann Gale (Professor at the University of Washington), studio critique, April 20, 2015.
- xxix Doerner, p. 241, 1934
- xxx Doerner, p. 239, 1934
- xxxi Paul Lajeunesse (Professor at the College of St. Scholastica), telephone conversation, January 3, 2016.
- xxxii Kruger, Klaus. "Rethinking the Rhetoric and Force of Images: *The Evidence of Images*." Presentation at the College Art Association Conference, Washington, D.C., February 2nd – 6th 2016.
- xxxiii *ibid*
- xxxiv Suthor, Nicola. "Rethinking the Rhetoric and Force of Images: *Why Phenomenology Matters*." Presentation at the College Art Association Conference, Washington, D.C., February 2nd – 6th 2016.
- xxxv McEvelley p. 84, 1993
- xxxvi Michael S. Gazzaniga "A Road Trip to the Origins of Our Species," *New York Times* New York, NY, Feb 22nd, 2016.
- xxxvii McEvelley p. 99, 1993
- xxxviii McEvelley p. 92, 1993
- xxxix McEvelley p. 104, 1993
- xl Appadurai p. 2-3, 1990
- xli LaTour, Bruno. "Spheres and Networks: Two Ways to Interpret Globalization." A lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, February 17, 2009.
- xlii *ibid*
- xliii Denzil Hurley (Professor at the University of Washington), May 15, 2015.
- xliv Milenko Prvacki (Professor at LaSalle College), February 18, 2016.

Images



Figure 1. Chinese Horse with Symbol, (detail of mural from Axial Gallery at Lascaux), 15,000 BCE, paint on limestone, L 56"



Figure 2. Caravaggio, Madonna di Loreto, 1604-1606, oil on canvas, 100"x59"



Figure 3. Bryan Robertson, Branded III, oil on canvas, 52"x108"



Figure 4. Branded I, 2015, oil on canvas, 36"x52"

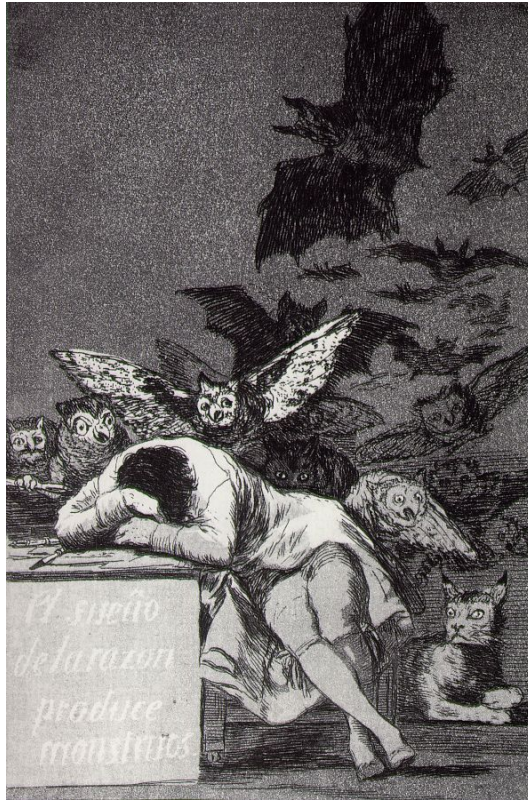


Figure 5. Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produce Monsters*, 1799, etching aquatint dry point and burin, 8 ⁷/₁₆" x 5 ⁷/₈"



Figure 6. Bryan Robertson, *The Ism-Scape*, charcoal on paper, 12"x18"



Figure 7. Bryan Robertson, They're Great!!, charcoal on paper, 12"x18"



Figure 8. Neo Rauch, Leporello, 2005, oil on canvas, 100" x 84.5"

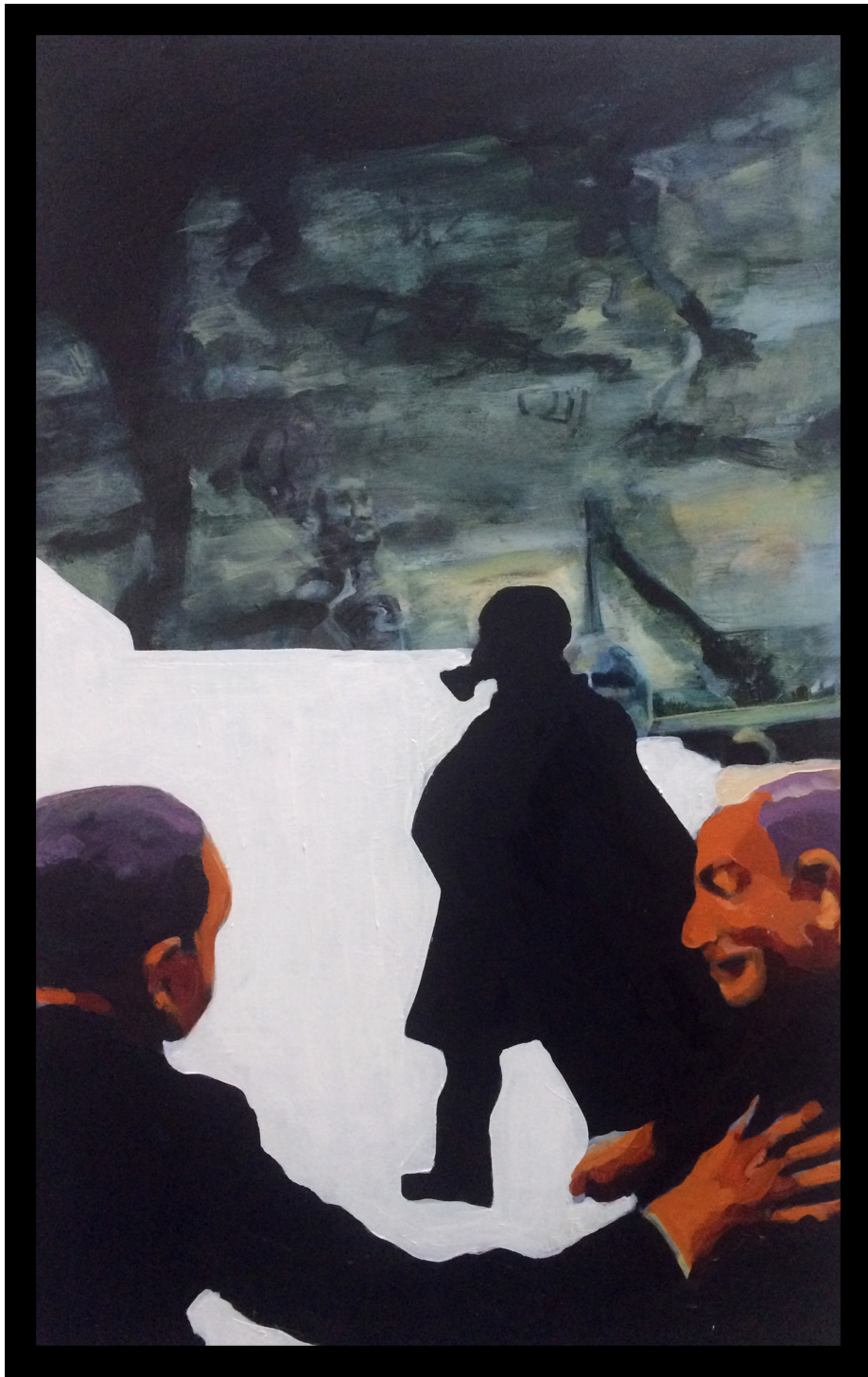


Figure 9. Bryan Robertson, Old American Songs: The Dodger, 2015, oil on board, 48"x24"

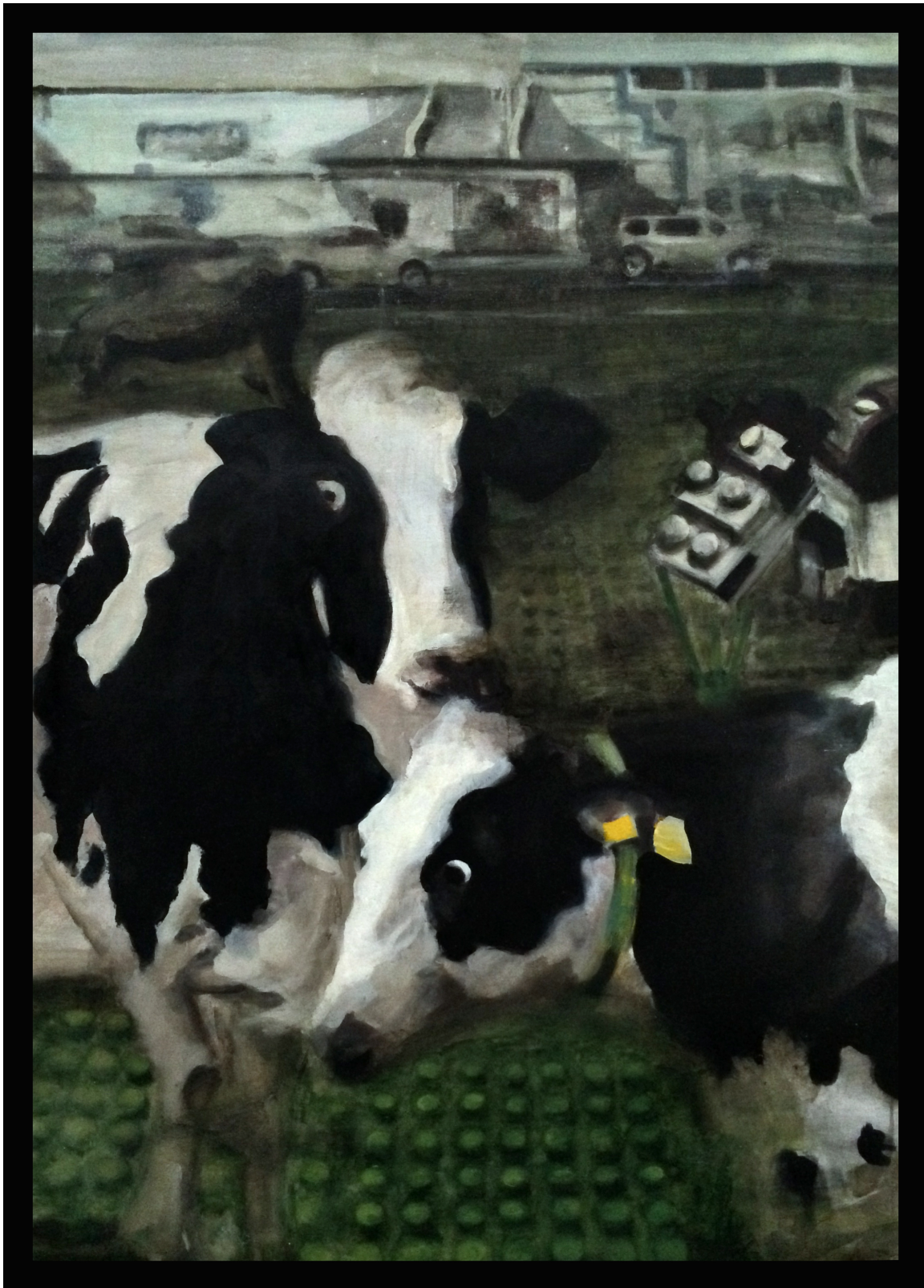


Figure 10. Bryan Robertson, Branded II, 2015, oil on canvas, 52"x36"

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