

“They had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday. Kids were getting headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths. A teacher rolled on the floor and spoke in foreign languages. No one knew what was wrong. Investigators said it could be the ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electrical insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by micro-computers, the asbestos fireproofing, the adhesive on shipping containers, the fumes from the chlorinated pool, or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things.”

Don Delillo, *White Noise*

Resident Threshold

Pete Smith

Preface

“The Atlantic was born today and I’ll tell you how.”

Benjamin Gibbard, *Transatlanticism*

The MFA Thesis Support Paper is a tough gig. There are three main reasons for this. The first is that the paper itself occupies an unusual stylistic structure that must blend together other more familiar forms. It is part formal essay, part autobiography, part manifesto and part artist statement. It must negotiate these forms in order to bring to light a deeper facet of self, wherein practice becomes praxis. The second inherent difficulty lies in the nature of memoir itself. The opening paragraph of *David Copperfield* points clearly to this problematic:

“I Am Born.

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life, with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o’clock at night.”¹

Although Dickens’ classic introduction provides a paradigmatic illustration of the problem, it is certainly not restricted to this instance. The famous opening to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*², wherein the narrative begins at the dawning of consciousness in the child’s mind, likewise confronts this quandary. Stated quite simply,

¹ Charles Dickens. The Personal History and Experience of David Copperfield the Younger, New York: A. L. Burt, 1910, pg 1.

² James Joyce. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, London: W.B. Huebsch, 1916, pg 1.

where does my story begin? For a story this surely must be and I its narrator. Like a guide taking you on a double-decker-tour I will point to the sights and elucidate their context. There are parts of this town, however, that this bus no longer travels. There are others, of course, that I've never been to myself.

The third problem is the most complex and although it may be easily stated, it cannot be easily resolved. What purpose does or should the artist statement serve? As a didactic declaration of intent, what relationships do such assertions have with meaning? In literary criticism, artistic intent has been excluded from discussions of quality and meaning since the 1950's. The New Criticism, propelled by such luminaries as William Wimsatt and Beardsley Monroe, held that the work of art must stand on its own outside of the author's intent. Meaning must exist within the work itself.

“One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.”³

Furthermore:

“The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it.) The poem belongs to the public.”⁴

³ Monroe C. Beardsley and William K. Wimsatt, Jr. “The Intentional Fallacy”, The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky, 1954, pg 4.

⁴ Ibid, pg 5.

Beardsley and Wimsatt further held that failure on the part of the artist to manifest her or his intent within the work could not be used as a means of judging the overall success of the work. After all *Kubla Khan*, according to Coleridge, was an incomplete poem. In painting, artist's who strove for the Sublime generally fell drastically short of their lofty ambitions, yet we certainly would not say that *Monk by the Sea* is a failed work of art. In contrast, to discuss *Lavender Mist* solely through the narrow lens of formalism is to deeply undercut its accomplishment. By Beardsley and Wimsatt's model, the work of art has the profound capacity to constitute both a less and a more than the sum of its authors intent. They rightly state:

“...to insist on the designing intellect as a *cause* of a poem is not to grant the design or intention as a *standard* by which the critic is to judge the worth of the poet's performance.”⁵

The values proposed by the New Criticism were highly influential and far reaching. In his seminal lecture on meaning in the work of art, *Painting as and Art*, Richard Wollheim puts forth a similar proposition. For Wollheim, meaning exists as collaboration between the artist and “a suitably informed and sensitive spectator.”⁶ Meaning is the slippery permutation of transmission and reception, existing as its own autonomous entity. In this model, Rauchenberg's famous decree that “this is a portrait because I say so”, is partly false. According to Wollheim, it is only a “portrait” if a reasonably sophisticated audience can recognize it as such, beyond such vocalized interjections.

⁵ Ibid, pg 4.

⁶ Richard Wollheim. Painting as an Art, Princeton: Princeton, 1987, pg 8.

Yet if the artist statement cannot be taken as a vessel for meaning, what purpose can it serve? Can the artist statement exist as a form of criticism? Northrop Frye suggests that if the artist can serve as the *first* critic of their work, she or he cannot be seen as a particularly *authoritative* one. He pointedly states:

“Wordsworth’s *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* is a remarkable document, but as a piece of Wordsworthian criticism nobody would give it more than a B plus.”⁷

Yet perhaps too the answer to our conundrum is likewise contained within Frye’s multifaceted *Anatomy*. He proclaims that artist’s writings function as documents that run parallel to criticism for the purposes of critics.⁸ It is here that my intentions for this document, my MFA Thesis Support Paper lie. It is not an essay, in Montagne’s original usage, in that it is not “trying” to convince you of anything. I am not arguing meaning, but am rather reporting on intention. The following paper will take you on a guided tour through the processes of thought that have shaped the development of this work. It is a journey through theory, history and experience rendered in shapes, textures and colours. This paper will tell you this story. Whether I shall turn out to be its hero, the following pages must show.

Description of Program of Work: A Personal History

“Ideas come from everywhere in the world to die in Toronto. We are a cultural compost heap, a rich metropolitan humus in which, if we can only control the expressway barbarians, greatness might just grow.”

Harold Towne

⁷ Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton, 1957, pg 5.

⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 6.

I graduated from York University in 1998. I made my first ‘mature’ work in the fall of 2001. That it takes three years out-of-school to start producing “real” art is a cliché. In my case, however, the stereotype was entirely accurate. I had left University a representational artist and over the next three years became an abstract painter. I often refer to this as “my slow descent into abstraction.” Over the next five years my work, as well as my understanding of issues that surrounded it, grew and expanded. At first, I worked entirely intuitively, using forms and colours that, despite a perilously awkward formal sensibility, somehow managed to function. Inspired by artists like Richard Tuttle and Eva Hesse, I wanted to find an idiosyncratic and personalized formal language. After reading the complete writings of Donald Judd, and in particular his seminal text *Specific Objects*, I wanted these works to blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture. I started sewing and stuffing eccentric forms and painting them. Exhibiting these sculptural forms with more traditional rectangular paintings, I drew no distinction between them.

In 2002, I started attaching those sewn and stuffed forms to traditional canvas supports. These forms would bulge out from the surface. Thick layers of paint concealed their stitching. They became truly bizarre forms, and I became fascinated with the ‘uncanny’ nature they seemed to possess. Their abstract conventions made them familiar, yet their physicality made them strange. I began to think of them as alien. I was painting the alien landscape. This led me to research conspiracy theory and UFO culture. Although initially influenced by contemporaries like Mathew Ritchie and Inka Essenhigh, I started to reinvestigate Surrealists like Miro, Matta and Tanguy. Making my grounds more representational and spatial, the forms became more modeled. I liked the idea of bringing

space back into abstraction, literalizing its metaphors: “working space” became outer space.

My 2003 exhibition, *Extraterrestrial*, was critically well received, and I had the good fortune to have several texts written about the work that provided new insight into my practice. Kim Simon, Otino Corsano and Catherine Osborne all discussed, in different capacities, my use of abstract conventions and quotations placed within a bizarre pulp-fiction, sci-fi context. These weren't paintings. They were paintings of paintings.

Catherine Osborne went as far as to claim that they were ‘cartoons of abstract paintings’. I found this notion fabulously enticing. The writings of Peter Halley became important to my thinking and I looked closely at 80's appropriation art and neo-abstractionists like Ross Bleckner, Jonathon Lasker, Larry Pittman and Carol Dunham. Mike Kelley's essay *Foul Perfection*, about Pittman and Dunham and the use of caricature in 80's art was also deeply influential. *Foul Perfection* talks about how the work of these artists uses the language and conventions of Modernism towards subversive ends. Kelley states:

“The historical reference to reductivist paradigms here is only a legitimizing façade, concealing what is, in effect, a secret caricature – an image of low intent masquerading in heroic garb.”

I revisited much of the key Post-Modern and Post-Structuralist thinkers like Barthes, Baudrillard and Foucault. I also became interested in the contemporary conversations that surrounded abstract painting in Canada. The work and thinking of David Urban, John Kissick, Anda Kubis, Alistair Magee, John Brown, Peter Dykhuis and Monica Tap began to influence my work as did Canadian painters from the past such as Harold Towne, Jack

Bush and William Ronald. I began writing about contemporary painting in Canada because I wanted to directly involve myself in the eloquence of these conversations. Kelly Mark posted these writings on samplesize.ca. Agreeing with David Urban and others (most notably David Foster Wallace) that irony was tiresome and dangerous, I wanted to make works that reflected a critical self-awareness but avoided an easy cynicism. I was comfortable with the fact that I was making cartoons of abstract paintings, but deeply admired the Modern artists that I had been unknowingly critiquing. Making fun of Modernism seemed deeply anachronistic, like making fun of your grandparents for being politically incorrect. So if I was making cartoons, what was I parodying?

One day in a conversation about painting, a friend mentioned the expression 'heroic gesture'. It brought back a flood of memories from the darkened lecture halls of my undergraduate slide lectures. I began to think about the role of heroism in painting: the heroic gesture, heroic scale, heroic themes and, of course, the heroic artist. I started to relate my cartooning of abstract painting to the cartooning of comic books: hero became superhero. The most important technical process that I adopted was the paint drip. Perhaps the most copyrighted technique in art history, I found a way to make it personally compelling. I would drip the paint, allow it to dry and then paint over the individual drips. By modeling and shading the drips, I would make some recede and others jut forward. They were given a black outline to draw a connection to the cartoon. The most (seemingly) wild and expressive gesture in art history became tight and refined, like Lichtenstein's brushstrokes. I would also cut off chunks from my paint palette and

stick them onto the surface of my paintings. They were readymade abstract gestures. The works were titled after comic book superheroes. As much of a parody as the works seemed to exemplify, there was also a sense of whimsical nostalgia. The idiosyncrasy of their forms seemed to carry with them a sense of pathos. There was a tragedy in their comedy. These were fallen heroes. I titled the show *Achilles Heel*.

It was upon the merits of these works that I started my graduate studies. Although I was pleased with the work I had done, I came to Guelph with the hope of trying new things and going to new places. I wanted it to be a laboratory of self-discovery. In my first year, I experimented with several different forms and styles, imbuing them with varying degrees of critical significance. It was tough sledding, and so for the first time in ten years, I took a break from painting, not lifting a brush for the three month duration of summer holiday. Instead I thought about painting extensively, in particular, what kinds of paintings I would ideally like to make. This is what I came up with:

In my studio work, I have traditionally been an abstract painter wherein all of the gestures, shapes and forms within my paintings were drawn from the depths of my imagination. While always acknowledging that my interior condition is not virginal terrain, that the forms from within us are always filtered through the lens of both memory and experience, the specific gestures were always of my own invention. They worked from the inside out, modified projections of a mediated interior. My recent work approaches image making from the opposite perspective. They are outside in. These works are drawn from a variety of external sources: digital photos of billboards, paint

spills, graffiti tags, subway ads, comic books, magazines and television stills. These things constitute the noise of our culture, graphic interruptions into our everyday. I then trace and project these images, forming dense layers of imagery and thus also dense layers of meaning. These works are post-historical and encyclopedic. They translate, remix and hybridize various aspects of the social landscape into a personalized material response.

All of the titles from the works come from found sources. I like the thought processes involved in found texts. It is one of interpretation rather than creation. If there is a discernable/readable text contained within a finished painting, usually from graffiti, then that becomes the title (as in *Arm Your Desire*.) The other titles are taken from the subject headings of spam email. These words and phrases are chosen because they seem to have some form of connection with the work. The title for this exhibition, *Resident Threshold*, is taken from spam. As the frame for these works, it presents an enticing proposition. Each of these works aspires to reach the maximum visual capacity of its own individual operating system, the very last point of relative stability before collapsing back into the undifferentiated chaos of misfiring signs and signals.

The Grand Historical Narrative: A Conspiracy Theory of the Twentieth Century

“One of the most interesting aspects of recent painting is that artists have stared “tradition” in the face and said “That’s for me, but only my way.”...It’s a matter of accepting the fact that one is working with a set of conventions; the point is to get the maximum out of those conventions. Rather than trying to predict or outrun history, and rather than pastiching or “critiquing” history, such work takes historical precedents and techniques more or less in stride and uses them to a particular purpose.”

Robert Storr

I must admit to being somewhat of a conspiracy theory enthusiast. In Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, he aptly describes the conspiracy theorists activities as "finding patterns within the surface accidents of history." In essence the same could be said of other more informed narratives such as art history. The art historian must also search for these patterns, connecting the various dots through history until shapes begin to emerge in its clouds. Lifetimes of research are amorously spent searching for its various "grassy-knolls". I am not an art historian. I'm a painter. To my mind, however, the task of the artist is to form an insightful understanding of their particular cultural moment. This is not an art historical-guessing game of sequential progression. It is about trying to capture the tiniest fragment of a specific time and specific place. No one can firmly understand the now without being grounded in the past. I am not qualified or inclined to offer a history of art in the Twentieth Century. I am, however, perfectly qualified to offer a conspiracy theory.

I never really bought into Clement Greenberg's history of Modernism. This is mostly because there are large gaps of important work for which it cannot account. Can Modernism, possibly the most important artistic epoch since the Renaissance, really be reduced to a march towards flatness? Were Picasso, Matisse, Pollock and Newman merely progressivist lemmings dropping off the bone-dry cliffs of formalist reductivism? Despite his much touted shortcomings, Clement Greenberg was a great critic. He was bold, audacious and self-righteous, but he was also quite often right-on-the-money. Abstract Expressionism may be the best painting of the Twentieth Century and Greenberg had the capacity to recognize it as such. The real problem however, was that

his history could not encapsulate some of the most important Modern Art. Where was Dada? Where was Duchamp? Greenberg's *Modernist Painting* is the lone-gunner theory of art history, and Marcel Duchamp is its 'magic bullet'. Ursula Meyer's seminal text, *The Eruption of Anti-Art* seemingly offered a grassy-knoll. Dada wasn't art. It was anti-art. I've always felt, however, that this was a weak idea. Duchamp himself hated the suggestion. I agree with Thomas McEvilley's suggestion that Anti-Art is really just art because it is in dialectic with art. No art can be anti-art. That's just absurd.

According to *The Theory of the Pete*, Greenberg was right when he claimed that the central task of Modernism was philosophical self-definition. The central question of Modern painting is "what is painting?" This is as true of Picasso and Matisse as it is of Newman and Ryman. Greenberg's failure was his inability to recognize how Duchamp (and later Warhol) was asking a different version of the same question. The fundamental question poised by Duchamp is "what is art?" They are two sides of the same coin. Both Abstract Expressionism and Dada are fundamentally concerned with ontologically investigating the nature of art. Modernism isn't over in this regard. Some contemporary art is still largely concerned with challenging notions of "what is art".

Fortunately for the sake of this paper (and my academic reputation), *The Theory of the Pete* largely coincides with a similar theory proposed by a better regarded intellectual. Arthur Danto's *Art after the End of Art* lays forth a similar claim. According to Danto, in the late nineteenth century photography and painting, in relation to their representational verisimilitude, had "played themselves to a tie". The advent of moving pictures, however,

trumped painting in this regard and thrust it into an ontological crisis. Thus painting, and later sculpture in response to the changes that had occurred in painting, had to form a new approach to its being. As Greenberg rightly states, Modern Art was “self-definition with a vengeance.” Duchamp and Warhol were as much a part of this process as Picasso and Pollock. According to Danto, Modern art found its definition somewhere in the mid-1960’s. Danto’s description of this definition is this: “Anything goes with anything in any way at all.” For Danto, as stated in the rather grandiose title of his essay, art ended when it found this definition. Perhaps more accurately, if less glamorously, Modern Art ended (or stopped being contemporaneously relevant) at this moment. *Art after the End of Art*, according to Danto, is art that has no philosophical mandate for its existence. There is nothing that must come next. Philosophically, one thing is as good as the next. Anything goes with anything in any way at all. My work is post-historical in this sense.

An Encyclopedic Impulse

“Exuberance is beauty.”

William Blake

In a wonderfully concise and surprisingly touching passage of literary scholarship, critic

Harold Bloom describes his notion of the “American Sublime”. Bloom says:

“We all carry about us our own personal catalogue of the experiences that matter most – our own versions of what they used to call the Sublime. So far as aesthetic experience in the twentieth-century America is concerned, I myself have a short list for the American Sublime: the war that concludes the Marx Brother’s *Duck Soup*; Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*; Wallace Stevens’ “The Auroras of Autumn”; nearly all of Hart Crane; Charlie Parker playing “Parker’s Mood” and “I Remember You”; Bud Powell performing “Un Poco Loco”; Nathaniel West’s *Miss Lonely Hearts*; and most recently, the story of Byron the light bulb in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*.”

Bloom's Sublime is not one of primordial terror or colossal upheaval, but rather is rooted in the intimate and personal relationships that we have with the creations of others. His is a secular sublime: the human capacity to amaze other humans, those rare moments of wonder that "touch on the limits of art". Although much of my "personal catalogue" would vary quite drastically from Bloom's, it does include *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is the most enviable piece of artistic production that I have ever experienced. To say that this 760 page novel is labyrinthine is to undermine its mind-bending complexity. There are over four-hundred named characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* that are all interwoven through dense layers of metaphor and literary reference. As critic Maureen Quilligan rightly states, it is a "vast exfoliation of patterns, plots, counterplots, paranoia's and possible leaps of faith through an interlacing web of connections between characters." The most remarkable aspect of *Gravity's Rainbow* however, and what separates it from Pynchon's previous efforts, is the richness of its prose. Every sentence is wrought and overwrought with the seduction of its own intelligence. Every word appears perfectly selected. They wash over and you are drowned by their decadence. I want to paint like Pynchon writes, not through narrative, but through a similar use form.

Thomas Pynchon is the most significant writer to *deliberately* occupy Northrop Frye's "encyclopedic form". In his study of thematic modes of fiction⁹, Frye categorizes Western literature into five historical epochs: Pre-Medieval, Romantic, High Mimetic, Low Mimetic and Ironic. He then breaks down fiction into three modes: comic, tragic and

⁹ Prose and poetic

thematic. All of these modes have corresponding moments/works within each historical epoch. In the comic mode, the author is speaking as someone integrated into society. In the tragic mode, the author is speaking as someone isolated from society, and in the thematic mode, the author is speaking as a spokesman of society. The tragic tendency, related to lyric, Frye calls “episodic”. The thematic social spokesman, related to epic, he calls “encyclopedic”. There are encyclopedic works from all of the historical epochs. It includes *The Bible*, *Paradise Lost*, *Finnegan’s Wake* and *The Waste Land*. The main theme of the encyclopedic form is “the comparison of an instant with the vast panorama unrolled by history”. It offers “a sense of contrast between the course of a whole civilization and the tiny flashes of significant moments which reveal its meaning.” Characterized by “discontinuous forms”, it is intermittent, lacking continuity in space and time. For Frye, the encyclopedic form is the highest form of art. Frye says:

“The encyclopedic form requires a conception of a total body of vision that poets as a whole class are entrusted with, a total body tending to incorporate itself in a single encyclopedic form, which can be attempted by one poet if he is sufficiently learned or inspired.”

Later scholars, such as Edward Mendelson, have taken up the notion of the encyclopedic form. Mendelson, focusing on Frye’s observation of discontinuity, contends that:

“...encyclopedic narrative offers a robust depiction of the knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while at the same time exposing its underlying ideological orientation. In this endeavor such narratives assume a polyglot dimension, since their ideological analysis is contingent on a broad understanding of linguistic variety, and they assimilate various generic protocols as a way of integrating linguistic perspectivism into their structures.”

I feel that my works are encyclopedic in Frye's sense. They are discontinuous and polyglot. They aspire to speak about our time and place within the "vast panorama unrolled by history".

On Translation

"No special knowledge is needed in order to distinguish between the masterpiece and the counterfeit; the second resembles the first only as a corpse resembles a living body."

Quentin Bell

Painting is a language, a set of conventions. Although my work is rooted in the conventions of abstract painting, it is fundamentally representational. I am representing abstraction. My use of photographic sources of outside graphic stimuli wherein the images are traced and projected clearly points to this notion. By bringing these disparate voices into the language of painting it is my hope to slightly shift the character of that language. In *The Task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin says:

"The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, manifest; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language informs his work."

Furthermore (in a passage of Rudolf Pannwitz's quoted by Benjamin):

"The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue."

The polyglot character of my works aspires to alter and absorb the divergent dialects of contemporary visual culture into the language of painting. In enacting this process, however, I realized quite early that I could layer these forms endlessly. I wanted to find an architecture upon which these shapes could perform the varied gradations of their reenactment. In the paintings of Willem de Kooning, I found this architecture.

I must admit that de Kooning was somewhat of a late addition to my “personal catalogue”. It’s not that I didn’t like his work; it’s that I liked other Ab-Ex’ers better. I was quite immediately drawn to the chaotic-baroque paintings of Jackson Pollock or the lugubrious melancholy of Rothko. De Kooning was tougher for me. What has drawn me to de Kooning later in this life of paint is the fact that his work is so deeply rooted in the history of Western painting. His work draws upon the conventions of the nude, still life and landscape and then turns those conventions upon their heads, tearing them apart from their insides. The entire history of painting unfolds in de Kooning: inside-out. And so it was de Kooning that I looked to for answers in my paintings.

In my previous body of work, I looked to his “Urban Landscapes” of the late 1960’s. The stable-Modernist-grid of de Kooning, where everything is contained within its edge, is placed over top of the baroque explosion of my paintings under-layers. The works in this show are based upon works of de Kooning from 1977 and borrow de Kooning’s colour schemes as well. This is relatively easy because most of de Kooning’s colour mixing occurs on the canvas rather than the palette. His hues are immediately recognizable. Like

an abstract Arcimboldo, I would take shapes and forms from the outside world and place them into a predetermined structure.

Arcimboldo was Maximilian's portraitist, but above all he was an entertainer. His famous heads were, in essence, a parlor trick to amuse the courts. The fundamental trick of Arcimboldo, however, is a linguistic one. Roland Barthes describes this relationship:

“One might say that, like a baroque poet, Arcimboldo exploits the “curiosities” of language, plays on synonymy and homonymy. His painting has a linguistic foundation, his imagination is poetic in the proper sense of the word: it does not create signs, it combines them, permutes them, deflects them-exactly what a craftsman of language does.”

Furthermore:

“In his way, Arcimboldo is also a rhetorician: by his Heads, he throws a whole bundle of rhetorical figures into the discourse of the Image: the canvas becomes a true laboratory of tropes.”

Like Arcimboldo, my work also takes pre-existing shapes and fits them into a predetermined structure. In both cases, this “trick” is rhetorical. Signs are harvested and translated, coded and encoded. In Arcimboldo, the identity of his subjects is not as apparent as the structure of the head. Although even a de Kooning scholar would not recognize the specific identity of the works that my paintings make use of, the allover structure is immediately recognizable as Modernist. Like Arcimboldo, mine too is an “art of forgery”. My paintings are the corpse to de Koonings living body.

On Remix

“What’s interesting is this idea of people using as their materials things that are not neutral. More and more, artists are working with materials that are already culturally charged. That’s different from, say, squeezing out cadmium red from the tube: what you’re doing is squeezing out Cezanne from the tube. You’re squeezing out something that already has loads of cultural resonance to it.”

Brian Eno

The forms that I appropriate from the outside world are then remixed into a predetermined architecture. Although the integrity of each form (or shape) is always maintained, they are juxtaposed with other forms and their interiors modified and altered. My process is akin to that of the DJ who samples, remixes and distorts, speeds-up and slows down, fades and cross-fades. Nicolas Bourriaud describes this working method as “Postproduction”. Bourriaud claims that the works of Postproduction:

“...although formally heterogeneous, have in common the recourse to already produced forms. They testify to a willingness to inscribe the work of art within a network of signs and significations, instead of considering it an autonomous or original form.”

For Bourriaud, the central notions behind these strategies are:

“...how to produce singularity and meaning from the chaotic mass of objects, names and references that constitute our daily life? Artist’s today program forms more than they compose them: rather than transfigure a raw element, they remix available forms and make use of data. In a universe of products for sale, preexisting forms, signals already emitted, buildings already constructed, paths marked out by their predecessors, artists no longer consider the artistic field a museum containing works that must be cited or “surpassed”, as the modernist ideology of originality would have it, but so many storehouses filled with tools that should be used, stockpiles of data to manipulate and present.”

This “culture of use” is distinctly different from earlier appropriationist moments. Critique has been replaced by criticality. Value is established in this model by the richness and complexity of the navigation through pre-existing signs and signifiers.

Bourriaud says:

“This recycling of sounds, images and form implies incessant navigation within the meanderings of cultural history, navigation which itself becomes the subject of art practice.”

On Hybridity

“There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art... That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, and therefore we habitually defined its ingredients and its limits. But painting is ‘impure’. It is the adjustment of impurities which forces paintings continuity.”

Philip Guston

In the 1999 episode of *The Simpson’s* titled “E-I-E-I-(Annoyed Grunt),” Homer Simpson accidentally cross-fertilizes a tomato plant and a tobacco plant with a pinch of nuclear waste. Homer calls the wildly unlikely yet highly addictive fruit of this union “tomacco.”

In 2003 an Oregon farmer named Rob Baur, inspired by the famous cartoon, grafted a tomato plant onto the roots of a tobacco plant. This seemingly ridiculous matrimony was in fact genetically possible because both plants are members of the same nightshade family. Baur’s creation produced fruit, one of which was donated for scientific analysis, another to the writers of *The Simpson’s* and the rest sold on E-Bay. The “tomacco,” which looked like a regular tomato in appearance, was found to contain trace quantities of nicotine. The people who ate the hybrid fruit, however, reported no ill effects. My paintings, like tomacco, are also hybrid forms. I translate shapes from the outside world and then remix those shapes on the surface of the canvas in order to create a hybrid

painting form. Blending together disparate elements of visual culture, these paintings are intrinsically impure.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha, proposes that the opportunity for a cultural hybridity exists as a place of resistance within the apparatus of a dominant singular culture. These “borderline engagements” of difference challenge conventional assumptions and distinctions in the realms of high-versus-low and public-versus-private.

Bhabha states:

“What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”

Bhabha embraces hybridity because it “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.” A hybrid art does not merely imitate and negotiate past models, but revitalizes and “interrupts the performance of the present.” For Bhabha, hybridity is not merely a secondary act of cultural reunion but is rather the primary force in social evolution. “Hybridity carries the burden of the meaning of culture.”

Citing Bhabha’s notion, Daniel Grassian uses the term *Hybrid Fictions* to describe the surfacing of “Generation X fiction.” Grassian argues that the works of David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Richard Powers, Neal Stephenson, William Vollmann, Douglas Coupland, Sherman Alexie and Michelle Serros represent an actualized departure from

their Postmodern predecessors. These authors occupy a hybrid space between Modern and Postmodern writerly strategies. Whereas the Postmodern fictions of Pynchon and Delillo presented popular-culture motifs as critiques of Modernist elitism, the *Hybrid Fictions* of Wallace and company present these motifs merely as fact. In offering a fiction that is “pertinent, socially valuable commentary about late 1980’s and 1990’s culture” the use of popular culture motifs is, in fact, essential.

In 2001, the Tate Gallery in Liverpool mounted the *Hybrid* painting show. Curated by Simon Wallis and David Ryan, this influential exhibition featured the work of Franz Ackerman, Inka Essenhigh, Fabian Marcaccio, Beatriz Milhazes, Sarah Morris, Monique Prieto, Fiona Rae and David Reed. According to Wallis, the Hybrid painting is one that “develops and reinterprets given historical boundaries by reflecting contemporary concerns and attitudes to the organization of visual experiences.” Citing Guston as its pivotal historical figure, hybrid work “demonstrates that traditions of any sort are a resource and offer the conditions of possibility for developing a practice.” According to Ryan the formerly ‘monstrous’ hybrid:

“Once denoting ‘exotic’ or radical displacements, such maneuvers are now integrally part of the fabric of our lives. Surrounded, as we are, by cut and paste edits, as well as seemingly homogenous products which traverse media, temporality and location, objects are no longer reducible or readable in relation to their ‘pure’ basic components. The whole question of ‘pure’ forms or ‘origins’ now seems misplaced.”

The Social is the Personal: Nine Meandering and (Largely) Independent Considerations

“How we wish that all disappearance was accomplished with gesture alone, so that pointing at birds would erase us. Simply by walking toward each other, we would make it possible for ourselves not to exist. How many of us would rise from our chairs if such a thing were possible, strap on our shoes, and head for the door, looking

for those other person-like targets of oblivion to disappear against?”
Ben Marcus

1. The thickness of the arctic ice pack has decreased by 40% since 1970.

American painter Peter Halley claims that Abstract Expressionism emerged out of the United States as one of a number of responses to World War II. He reasons that the Second World War constituted a “natural disaster” that disenfranchised people from the social world insofar as it “tore asunder the seamless web of signs that constitutes modern civilization”. Halley argues that “pure” abstraction emerged in the post-war U.S not out of a perceived historical positivism but rather out of a relativism played out by individuals with “a profound capacity for doubt”. Abstract Expressionism, he argues, emerged as a rational response to an irrational environment.

2. Three cast members from the movie “Predator” have run for governor in the United States and two of them have won.

How many bits of colour are in real life? What is the maximum resolution of my eyes? How many bites of information are stored in my brain? How fast do I process information? What is my maximum storage capacity?

3. In 2002, the hole in the Arctic ozone layer swelled to a record 10.8 million square miles.

Being apolitical is fundamentally different from being politically apathetic in the same manner that spoiling a ballot is different from not voting. These paintings are spoiled ballots.

4. Seventy pairs of shoes filled with butter were found on a mountaintop in Sweden.

I’m playing artist. She’s playing dealer. They’re playing audience. Later we’ll all get drunk at the Cedar Bar and have great stories to tell.

5. It was recently reported that an elevator to outer space was under construction and could be operational within 15 years.

When I close my eyes I see colour, blues and pinks and purples and greens, blurring, bending and smearing. Making out shapes and trying to focus. Blotches of light peek in through the darkness, radiating something warm.

6. It has been recently observed that Pluto is getting warmer even as it moves further from the sun, which would seemingly violate the laws of physics.

When Dr. Bones finally addressed the crew everyone was shocked by his words:

“It seems that Captain Kirk has abandoned ship. He took Scotty and Spock with him. Nobody left on board knows how to fly this thing. Cast adrift, we are only able to feed on each other, like that famous painting by Gericault.”

7. Five U.S. States do not use the word “evolution” in their public school science curricula.

The act of painting, as an act of cultural production, is permeated by the conditions of economic exchange that determine the value of the cultural object.

8. G.I. Joe sales have increased by 46% since 2001.

Good art has always been a reflection of the social or the “real” world. But what happens when the social is absurd? What happens when the real world is void of meaning?

9. The American government is currently funding a project to develop genetically engineered trees that will change colour in the event of a biological or chemical weapons attack.

When I was 16 years old I got into a fight. I got my ass kicked. The first punch broke my nose, blood all over me. A screaming kind of hurt. My eye’s watered. My knee’s buckled. I fell to the floor and the punches kept coming. My left ear. My right eye. Arms. Legs. Ribs. Spine. THUMP. FUDD. THUMP. Gradually, however, the pain

subsided. It was replaced by something else.

On Materiality

“But a painting is a painting and not words describing the artist or the place it was made or the people who commissioned it. A painting is made of paint – of fluids and stone – and paint has its own logic and its own meanings even before it is shaped into the head of a Madonna. To an artist, a picture is both a sum of ideas and a blurry memory of ‘pushing paint’, breathing fumes, dripping oils and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing.”

James Elkins

In all art production, there is meaning in materiality. These are the first acrylic paintings that I have ever made. Acrylic paint is plastic. It is the liquid state of your shower-curtain, your Christmas sweater and your fake fingernails. It is an inherently contemporary and social material. Oil paint is a lovely and romantic material, but it is also an anachronism. It can only reference the history of its own activity. In his equally lovely and romantic book *What Painting Is*, the nostalgic critic James Elkins devotes a mere two sentences to acrylic paint. Elkins says that:

“Acrylics could only be successful in the twentieth century, when painters are more likely to be impatient. In past centuries, acrylic would have seemed to dry far too quickly.”

As Elkins rightly shows, acrylic paint is made to accommodate attention deficit disorder. As a synthetic, it approximates paint more than it is paint. It is fake paint for a fake world, part of a better life through plastics. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard* is the story of a fictional Abstract Expressionist named Rabo Karabekian. Rising in prominence with the other Ab-Exers, he made one giant mistake. He made his paintings with a really bad type of acrylic. Within five years all of the paint slid off of his canvas and Karabekian became

the laughing stock of art history. Karabekian explains:

“It was a postwar miracle that did me in. I had better explain to my young readers, if any, that the Second World War had many of the promised characteristics of an armageddon, a final war between good and evil, so that winning would do but that it be followed by miracles. Instant coffee was one. DDT was another. It was going to kill all the bugs, and almost did. Nuclear energy was going to make electricity so cheap that it might not even be metered. It would also make another war unthinkable. Talk about loaves and fishes! Antibiotics would defeat all diseases. Lazarus would never die: How was that for a scheme to make the Son of God obsolete?

Yes, and there were miraculous breakfast foods and would soon be helicopters for every family. There were miraculous new fibers which could be washed in cold water and no need for ironing afterwards! Talk about a war well worth fighting! Well, the whole planet is now fubar with postwar miracles, but, back in the early 1960’s, I was one of the first persons to be wrecked by one – an acrylic wall paint whose colors, according to advertisements of the day, would ‘...outlive the smile on the Mona Lisa.’ The name of the paint was Sateen Dura-Luxe. Mona Lisa is still smiling.”

Like Vonnegut’s comical character, my paintings are also made with a post-war miracle.

Their plasticity makes them contemporary. I am using plastic to talk about plastic.

If Conclusions are Possible, Why Do I Feel So Empty?

“To denounce or “critique” the world? One can denounce nothing from the outside; one must first inhabit the form of what one wants to criticize. *Imitation* is subversive, much more so than discourses of frontal opposition that only makes formal gestures of subversion.”

Nicolas Bourriaud

This MFA Thesis Support paper is not to be mistaken for a declaration of meaning. It is, however, a declaration of intention and my intentions are these:

These are not paintings, nor meta-paintings. They are not good paintings or bad paintings.

They are cartoons of paintings, robbed of their authenticity. Not meant to rise above the context of their creation, they are meant to embody it. The references to Modernist

paradigm's generally and de Kooning in particular are not meant as a critique or parody of those paradigms, but rather as a critique of our current moment. They point to high Modernism as a moment when notions such as unmediated expression and experience, while possibly naïve and misguided, at least seemed possible. These paintings are bursting with the desire to escape the confines of their structures. This is the tragedy that underscores the comedy of their performance.

I realize, of course, that these are unpopular sentiments. We must, after all, seek out pleasurable ways to live in the world. Art can seemingly offer such a possibility. I fear, however, that we have come to enjoy our cage: if we can't escape it, at least we can decorate it. In this sense, my paintings are not ironic because I deeply, truly, utterly and sincerely mean what I am saying. To do otherwise is to paint in denial, or worse, to live that way.

When I was nine years old our class made time capsules. Each of the students was given a mid-format Tupperware container to fill with the various things that really mattered. Most kids buried some (former) favorite toy along with an assortment of trinkets. I buried my drawings, paintings and stories. Perhaps taking the task a little too seriously, I regrettably buried my Luke Skywalker action figure. The rest of my capsule's contents have been blurred by the forgetfulness of time and memory. We were supposed to come back twenty-years later, as a class, and dig up our capsules. What things would we learn about ourselves? How would the years have changed us? What would we have become? Twenty years has come and gone and, as of yet, no return date has been scheduled.

Everyone has probably forgotten that sandlot promise. I've often thought about going back to that playground with a shovel to search for that buried treasure. For some reason, however, I think that my capsule is better left buried: discovered by another kid in another playground.

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