2015

Blundered by the Borrower

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Blundered by the Borrower

A Thesis Presented
by
EBEN KLING

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

M.F.A. in Studio Arts

May 2015

Department of Art
Blundered by the Borrower

A Thesis Presented

By

EBEN KLING

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ABSTRACT

BLUNDERED BY THE BORROWER

MAY 2015

EBEN KLING, B.F.A., MONTSERRAT COLLEGE OF ART

M.F.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Directed by: Professor Shona MacDonald

Blundered by the Borrower attempts to illustrate the potential loneliness and anxiety that is experienced by the individual working in the studio, amidst the contemporary and panicked social climate, domestically and globally--using the mediated jetsam of everyday life, violent entertainment and the disarming characteristics of cartoons to better understand and possibly illuminate a chronic lack of empathy in American society and popular culture.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter &amp; Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. VIOLENT MEDIA AND RECONFIGURATION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CARTOONS, PLASTICITY, AND TRAUMA</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. INVENTED LANDSCAPE AND NAVIGATING THE METAVERSE</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. PAINTING THE DELUGE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Flee</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Night Moves</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>The Studio</em> by Philip Guston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Photograph of Philip Guston’s studio in the early 1970s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Up All Night for Late Night</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Sochi Head 1</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Ski Disaster 1</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Andy Capp</em> by Reg Smythe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>Fold Figure 2</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>Fold Figure 3</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Officer E. Doodit</em> by Jim Nutt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>Her Face Fits</em> by Jim Nutt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>Pffft</em> by Jim Nutt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>Black Painting no. 4</em> by Gladys Nilsson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>Phantom Plus</em> by Gladys Nilsson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>Death of a Mound</em> by Trenton Doyle Hancock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>By Matt Furie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>By Austin Lee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Painting by Taylor McKimens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td><em>Reality Television Sinkhole</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Google Street View image by Jon Rafman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Google Street View image by Jon Rafman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Google Street View image by Jon Rafman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Google Street View image by Jon Rafman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Google Street View image by Jon Rafman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Google Street View image by Jon Rafman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Google Street View image by Jon Rafman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Still from Second Life tour by Jon Rafman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td><em>Untitled</em> by Ahmed Alsoudani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td><em>Untitled</em> by Ahmed Alsoudani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td><em>Untitled</em> by Ahmed Alsoudani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td><em>Floating Cluster-Fuck</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td><em>N.Y. Dose 1</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td><em>N.Y. Dose 2</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td><em>N.Y. Dose 3</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td><em>Untitled</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td><em>Untitled</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td><em>Untitled</em> by Eben Kling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Drawing, painting, image making of any kind, with my hand--my physical, real hand--has always been the most comfortable way to process events, people, experiences (personal and interpreted), history, trends, and culture. I am skeptical of our superfluous digital age: drawing and painting act as a bastion for the physical interpretation of both the world that I inhabit and a world that’s superficially constructed. The images I make attempt to illustrate my anxious relationship between societal discontents and their technological mediation that showcases American and global disasters on a sliding scale of severity. I am not exclusively interested in the study of media literacy, but the relentless flow of morally perverse images and behaviors that batter us daily. Cell phone addiction, police overreach, binge drinking, mimes, internet trolling, bent advertising strategies, general misrepresentations of beauty and confidence, reality television, violent and oversexed pageantry: negligence of the “real” by means of the artifice. These examples, thoughtless dung frequently presented as entertainment, shallowly prescribed and consumed through various sources of popular media, elicit a critical response requiring modification of the material: to color these social phenomena in a way that excavates and reveals their absurdity.

I draw with my hand; a cosmology has developed. Figures waft around, inflated and indifferent, described by physics that are cartoonish, plastic and brutish, wandering an obscure landscape in a perpetual state of ambivalence. They bend, accentuate and exaggerate, humiliate, celebrate and relate to each other in a way that is familiar, confrontational, and processed by my hand into something palatable. Humorous and traumatic: something is wrong, and we are implicated. These are images that evoke a
moral response, not an ethical solution. They are not *moralizing*. Tempered by humor, they remain troubling. When slapstick goes awry, tangled shoelaces meet gravity and it’s *sobering*.

The figures and grounds in this work illuminate a conundrum and are as convoluted as the condition of being *alive* in the United States today. They exist in a space that seems as indifferent to them as they are to each other.\footnote{The motif of stars in this work presents, in someway, a far painted (flat) backdrop, one that you could seemingly blow over with ease and yet it simultaneously maintains a detached celestial indifference. The universe is bigger than your party, bigger than your tragedy. It pulls the rug out from under you, whatever is happening matters *here*, but relatively speaking, it doesn’t matter. To recall the lyrics of Dave Davies:}

\begin{verbatim}
Big Sky looked down on all the people looking up at the Big Sky.
Everybody pushing one another around
Big Sky feels sad when he sees the children scream and cry
But the Big Sky's too big to let it get him down.

Big Sky too big to cry
Big Sky too high to see
People like you and me

One day we'll be free, we won't care, just you see
'Til that day can be, don't let it get you down
When I feel that the world is too much for me
I think of the Big Sky, and nothing matters much to me.

Big Sky looked down on all the people who think they got problems
They get depressed and they hold their head in their hands and cry.
People lift up their hands and they look up to the Big Sky
But Big Sky is too big to sympathize

Big Sky's too occupied
Though he would like to try
And he feels bad inside
Big Sky's too big to cry

One day we'll be free, we won't care, just you wait and see
'Til that day can be, don't let it get you down.
When I feel that the world is too much for me
I think of the Big Sky, and nothing matters much to me. (see fig. 1 or 2)
\end{verbatim}

I can only describe with marginal authority the experience of being American; its nuance is slippery. Its blinding exceptionalism, pride, and hegemony, and distractions are frustrating to experience and, more so, bitter as I attempt to reconcile myself with this culture. Maybe I was raised “too
good a catholic,” but the “appropriate” humility of living in this country, its transparent contradictions, double standards, and skewed ethics, require frequent response and critical examination. It can be deafening and the impulse (sometimes I describe it as a responsibility) to discuss this anxiety and instability is paramount. Its benefits and inspiration act as a morally exhausting double-edged sword.

Whether the example is *Guernica*, Goya’s *Disasters of War*, George Groszs’ criticism of pre-war German bourgeoisie, H.C. Westermann’s print suite *See America First*; civic and social turmoil has the tendency to infiltrate my studio in a way that is emotionally exhausting and tyrannical. Philip Guston attributed his distance from abstract painting and the “New York School” to the torrent of political assassination and the first televised war, Vietnam. While Guston ironically rendered himself as a racist hobbyist, casually painting a self portrait in the confines of the studio, through the window the world seemed to crumble. In referencing Philip Guston’s iconic painting “The Studio,” its illuminations of societal angst and its purpose of social criticism and debunking, Craig Burnett writes:

> Despair and Anxiety allowed him to change the rules, motivating that desire to play in a comically serious way – an antidote to the quasi-religious rhetoric of the era. By creating an idiom of brusque, cartoonish figuration, he donned a hood and readied himself to play Mickey Mouse, a bigot, a dandy, a flagellant, a dunce. (25)

By dressing himself up like a member of the KKK, Guston allowed himself an awkward and empathetic buffoonery. This gesture is one that simultaneously transforms the artist into the subject they critique and allows them to co-opt or hijack the icon, rendering it absurd and robbing it of its sinister intent, driving the boat *right* into the barrier reef or crashing the plane into the mountain, all the while keeping it goofy (see fig. 3).

This role playing and thievery, while somewhat over dramatic, romanticized, and
steeped in monomania, is still a method I adopt shamelessly. Selfish as it may seem, when followed, anxiety and melancholy caused by popular social disasters lead to satisfying personal assimilations in the studio that relate to a world that is not simply mine, but composed of collective societal anxiety. Allowing the “comfortable” glow of the television into the studio yields work that references a condition of commonly unchecked apathy, negligence, and exploitation--conditions that unfortunately are too frequent in American popular culture.

The choice to maintain this process of art making (specifically, object making), alone in the studio, the personal Sinai, cannot effectively enact immediate social and political change. The sentiment that direct physical actions can (the space in which social practice typically occupies) is one I am just as skeptical of. The theoretical and pedagogical pissing contest between the new and the old, the traditionalist and the progressive seems to me, a tired argument. Fatalistic it may be, but regardless of the preferred method I find solace in the potential of art making as conversation starter, not a means to an end, and not an answer. Despite the contentious state of effective and appropriate response in critiquing culture my bias is maintained; the impulse to create narrative drawings and paintings that reflect current social absurdity and events remains.

The fact is, our engagement with static, two-dimensional images is so common that we are wired to experience them quickly, taking them for granted without applying much ideological scrutiny. This commonality can be exploited to serve a subversive agenda, one that illuminates the critical lapse we experience as consumers of media, saturated by it’s presence. The homogenization of disparate media by methods of drawing and painting provide a lens in which to criticize and consider the more troubling aspects of popular image culture as well as encourage an opportunity to slow down and
view these considered constructions differently. Familiarity with flat images yields an effective, discursive potential, allowing me to move between subjects, unfettered by their intended purpose or placement. I would hope that my work does not attempt to answer questions or serve as blatant, propagandized condemnation, but instead reflects and reorganizes my experience as a citizen of the U.S. by use of distorted figuration, familiar/generic environments, and references from 20th century western painting, its history and traditions, popular culture, and a bottomless social network feed.
CHAPTER 2
VIOLENT MEDIA AND RECONFIGURATION

I feel helpless at times when I try to responsibly interpret the images I see daily. To simply condemn or accept the presence of mass invasive media without more in-depth scrutiny seems passive. Utilizing this endless reservoir of images and attitudes in response to a media “white out” seems like a more constructive way to engage with mass media and entertainment. The rewiring and reconstitution of its material—to obfuscate, borrow and undermine—gleaning from the new inverted primordial soup: this is the way I exploit these images. The distinction between reference and appropriation is becoming obscure.

Taking images likened to those of advertisement, reality television, violent entertainment (and also their inferred attitudes) provided by the onslaught of (social) media and, rather than ignoring them, using them; turning them into avatars that reflect our own lives: In a society characterized by overstimulation, what can be considered a distraction (especially from making art) is, through the process of selection and execution in creating that artwork, upcycled and given meaning within a canvas. The subject matter is aware of its own superfluity and is intrinsically valued by my placement—this placement functions as a reaction to people and events rather than informing people or events. In that way, my creating these kinds of narratives acts as a mirror or vessel in which to pour my own societal anxieties.

To quote a friend of mine, “The work is already made, you just need to find it.”

Another way of putting it, maybe, is how Guston articulates his sudden shift from abstraction in the late 60’s:
I got stuck on shoes, shoes on the floor. I must have done hundreds of paintings of shoes, books, hands, buildings and cars, just everyday objects. And the more I did the more mysterious these objects became. The visible world, I think, is abstract and mysterious enough, I don't think one needs to depart from it in order to make art. (Guston 49-56)

Guston draws inspiration from his banal physical environment. It’s through these obsessive renderings of everyday objects that they become uncanny, a semiotic phenomenon occurs: they begin to lose their meaning and intended purpose. The piles of shoes, studied and seemingly harmless, applied in many paintings quickly begin to conjure memory of the Jewish Holocaust, its reckless hate and titanic loss of life. These objects move from being domestic to highly charged. The white sheet of the Klan member; the empty shoe; the burning cigarette; the fumbling, dopey hand; the hanging, singular light bulb (which begins to resemble a noose): Guston’s mundane surroundings become frantic, melancholic, and menacing (see fig. 4).

Admittedly, the sources I choose frequently lack the banality of shoes, books, hands, etc., and the resulting compositions are not exclusively meditations on those “strange” objects, but I have to believe, at times, the impulse to select imagery is similar. The banality of background televisions, pervasive advertisements, Muzak, and game shows is present. (see fig. 5) This kind of media that exists in our world is meant to be ignored, it’s expected to be ignored, but its presence is pervasive and impossible to avoid. I am interested in reconstituting violent and frivolous images portrayed in the media, intended for entertaining the “lowest common denominator” by recycling that doesn’t explicitly satirize its source, rather gleaning from its very existence a gesture or perspective that is familiar and recognizable. Through this collage sensibility, using mediated social “trash imagery,” I want to talk about a larger state of societal pathos, violence, and selfish exceptionalism.
This sentiment is also evident in the work of Leon Golub. His practice of appropriating snapshots of NBA wipeouts and chummy behavior in turn provides reference for Salvadoran death squads and police brutality. It produces terrifying narratives. His work is not about the NBA, rather, through his use of this reference, its content shifts to that of hegemonic male power struggle and violence. These photographs were borrowed and bent with incredible intention to a potent end.

I had not expected to experience a state of confusion, melancholy, or the absurd from this onslaught of media saturation, yet the urban fallout of the Sochi Olympics, the blood in Ferguson, a daily rag like the New York Post, sidebar advertisements, late night TV at the bar, early morning TV at the coffee shop, murder at Charlie Hebdo have all provoked the development of an ineffable ideology present in my work. How do we navigate this deluge (see fig. 1) of cultural disasters on a sliding scale of severity, seeping into every daily activity and movement: on the bus, in the waiting station, on the sidewalk?

You can’t leave your house without being confronted by tabloid and calamity. In fact, don’t leave your home! Watching a television program depicting car wrecks and police chases is a common pastime. If that makes you uncomfortable, change the channel, watch someone almost choke to death when they bungee jump, feel redeemed as a little girl captured on CCTV narrowly escapes a drunk driver plowing through the storefront of a Family Dollar.

This happens at 8pm.

The ratings for the Walking Dead climbed when the cast killed humans in a Lord of the Flies style pecking order rather than the scourge of, well, walking dead who were no longer the primary menace. The drama of humanity, desperate and compromised is far
more amusing than the simple threat of something clearly evil and inhuman.

I watched COPS growing up. I didn’t know better, and it was amusing.

Human tragedy as entertainment is nowhere close to a new idea or practice, but I firmly believe that it’s moved into a landscape of exceptional brutality and acceptance; it’s not easy to distinguish blood from drama. “Real” tragedy and entertainment have become uncomfortably confused. Using highly articulated video games as a recruitment tool for the American Military may be the most chilling example of this detachment.

I was born into a groundless generation, a generation that takes pleasure in the screen where all of humankind as we know it will be annihilated; it won’t be snuffed out from an alien invasion, or a large lizard, but from the sun burning out, from global warming and disasters caused by our panicked selves.

We are celebrating our own nightmares.

This is a disconcerting time to be a spectator; violence is a king with a capital K, and endless access to information, images, and skewed realities complicate and dull our sensitivities. The moral response to violence in the media has seemingly atrophied.

My work criticizes violent entertainment. Using the expectancy of such media provides the potential for a Trojan Horse approach to new image making. Exploiting media familiarity and experiences typically taken for granted, I’ll re-engineer its function to upend its initial intent.²

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² This practice is evident in my work following the Sochi Winter Olympics. Buzzfeed shamelessly posted images of skiers crashing violently attempting to forge a new a profane entertainment from the photographs (they scream WIPEOOOUUUUTTTTT!!!). Additionally they shared (along with many other popular “news feed” blogs), collages composed of the expressions of figure skaters landing some incredibly difficult maneuver and celebrating, or, inversely, depicting a tense visage illustrating their physical strain. These expressions were then conveniently placed on the bodies of individuals eating cereal: a quick, cheap joke that undermined physically demanding achievement. This gesture on the part of media outlets encouraged a criticism of the individual that seemed unfair. It undermined their commitment. I am not a sports fan in the traditional sense, but this gesture was disturbing to me. It calcified a suspicion that the
CHAPTER 3
CARTOONS, PLASTICITY, AND TRAUMA

My grandmother—god bless her heart—raising me as a small child plopped me down in front of the television quite often. In the years of afternoons after school, and summer vacation my affinity for cartoons swelled. Their plasticity and unfamiliar physics were mesmerizing. I began to draw them.

I had no interest in comic books. Marvel, DC, Darkhorse: I never liked the way they were drawn. They took themselves too seriously; big muscles, big guns, big breasts, big egos; hyper articulated, trying to cram as much information into every tiny panel as they possibly could.

I preferred the funny paper, slapstick and subtle humor, no action; mild tragedy, a lot of space. The banality of a Garfield strip, a small existential crisis illustrated by Bill Waters. Andy Capp fighting with his wife when she comes to pick him up, devolving into a cloud, floating around the bar, limbs occasionally protruding while it wafts around looking for the exit. This was, and still is my affinity. My tendency to misguide limbs, glances, physical gestures, and the rest is partially derivative of that “comical” domestic dispute. (see fig. 8)

The plasticity and exaggerated physics of cartoons provides a recognizable, accepted lexicon of tragedy and humor. It’s a graphic language that can treat public and public would rather see others fail than achieve.

It’s a new coliseum.

I was able to take the images of skiers crashing into the earth, contorted and wrenched, isolate them on a page, sensitize them through the scrutiny of my hand and remove the sidebar ads, the flattened spectators and comment section. Lifting this commercially processed veil allows an opportunity for new empathy. Additionally, with the heads of figure skaters placed on the bodies of people eating breakfast, I isolated them again, these images given a step backwards and liberated from their new and cheap predicament. I suppose I was trying to save these individuals in some semi-private way, trying to re-humanize them. (see fig. 6 or 7)
social dilemmas and instances of “real life” conflict and violence palatably and comprehensibly, and so has the capacity to encourage an empathy that is discouraged by the rapidity and frequency of violent images. It may seem cowardly to sugarcoat such severe and sobering violence with slapstick, but fixed, unanimated images illustrating trauma quickly shift into the realm of the grotesque and seem horrifying. They are surprising. 3

Watch Daffy Duck get hit by a truck and not get up.

Imagine Buster Keaton lacking agility while in the path of the impending locomotive.

Under the tutelage of Tex Avery, animators at Warner Bros. were instructed to animate the after effects of violence in their productions by making the characters seem drunk. A crack on the head and eyes are spinning, seeing birds and stars. 4 Exhibiting no visible effects of trauma, these characters would shake themselves sober and go on with their business. When you bend this method slightly, let it linger, and fix these interim effects of violence it becomes terrifying, and an effective way to infiltrate spectators’ comical expectations.

My adolescent interests in cartoons developed and began to mature. I became fixated on the underground comics of the 1960’s that dealt with larger psychological issues: Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar to name a few. In years since, certain aspects of Crumb’s work, particularly his misogyny and masturbatory narratives,

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3 This tendency is present in these crumpled figures that occupy my work. Drawings and sculptures (cardboard), lacking any kind of structural integrity, folded over on themselves, debilitated by their own weight. Without the canned sound potentially produced from their bodies resembling a bellows they seem pathetic. Though the response to this work occasionally recalls surrealist or geometrically experimental sensibilities regarding the figure, it references (strongly) the immediate after effects of the anvil falling on Wile E Coyote, transforming him into an accordion as he walks away. These figures of mine are incapable of helping themselves or changing their predicament. (see fig. 9 or 10)

4 Or pink elephants, i.e. delirium tremens.
seemingly untethered to any kind of larger collective sensitivity, have become troubling to me. I do not revere them the same way I did as a naïve, sensitive, and miserable teenager with my own “women problems” and lowly image of myself. It was important for me at the time, however, to commiserate with an artist who seemed to understand the expressive devices inherent in cartoons that could be employed to discuss more emotionally difficult afflictions. In the case of Spiegelman, the cultural impact of *Maus* stands as one of the most important examples of using the cartoon lexicon and its illustrative benefits to discuss a deeply troubling and horrific historical reality.

Then, I went to art school, yeah?

The Hairy Who’s use of cartoon imagery is one of superior magnetism. I’ve identified strongly with the Imagists of Chicago during the early 1960’s: Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Art Green, Jim Falconer, Karl Wirsum, Suellen Rocca.

As unpopular as their work may have been outside of their immediate circle, it seemed to me a relevant and sobering backlash to the reductive tendencies of modernist painting while maintaining a distinction from pop art practices developing in New York and L.A. at the time. While Warhol, Rosenquist, Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, and others played with notions of expectation, consumerism, and comfort, in Chicago it was simply debased (and quite unapologetically). The Chicago Imagists’ proclivity to assimilate seemingly disparate sources of visual and cultural contexts, their obfuscation of the figure and interest in darker, as well as humorous, reconfigurations of the human body and psyche are all practices of incredible interest to me.

Collectivism aside, the diversity of the work produced by this group of artists is compelling and nuanced.

Jim Nutt’s paintings reflect an anxiety, composed of visages misshapen and
maimed, illustrated using iconographic casualties of modern experience. Garish and flattened by his “reverse painting” technique, the objects themselves, encased behind synthetic plexiglass, resemble a widely distributed commercial product. Still resonating very much today: the buffoonery of Officer E. Doodit (see fig. 11), the cosmetic disasters of Her Face Fits (see fig. 12), a sex obsessed culture illustrated in Pfft (see Figure 13). Among many others, these images provide a didactic response to American culture and the blues therein.

Gladys Nilsson, however, while using a similar visual lexicon inspired by cartoons, made images that were formally very different and more subtle while still concerning themselves with anxiety and popular cartoon and psychedelic iconography. The distortion of the figure is similar in this work, but it doesn’t employ the same loudness and commercial sensibility of something produced by Jim Nutt or Karl Wirsum. While images like Black Painting No.4 (see fig. 14) and Phantom Plus (see fig. 15) are “quiet” in relation, their subtlety effectively shrouds countless human forms hopelessly entangled: androgynous and indifferent, a convoluted composition that’s inflated, seemingly optimistic, and crowded beyond comfort. Reminiscent of a sardine can, they could compel a fire marshal to count heads.

Following in the tradition of the Hairy Who, my contemporaries continue this tradition of the cartoon lexicon—the incredibly thorough creationist myth and its conflicts developed by Trenton Doyle Hancock (see fig. 16); the nauseatingly referential paintings of Matt Furie (see fig. 17), which summon the memory of Saturday morning cartoons (sugary cereal and “clikerr”); the regressive “digital paint” paintings of Austin Lee (see

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5 Images like Very Worldy and Inside the Ship ooze recollections of the Yellow Submarine blatantly.
fig 18); and the hairy, unsavory, sweating, neon figures of Taylor McKimens (see fig. 19), candy-coated and maintaining some semblance of bedraggled humanity. They all continue the tradition of cartoons as buffer, cartoons as a tempering agent. They keep the language of cartoons relevant and encourage a continued relationship with it in my work. It allows me an access point, to “grow up” and be an artist while remaining in the cozy confines of my grandmother’s living room, watching TV and drawing with crayons. They exist as a compass, vitalizing a practice that may have withered years ago due to it’s “childish” or insignificant repute.

Such is the history of cartoons, I suppose, constantly on the ropes.6

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6 Maybe with the exception of Matt Groening and Seth Macfarlane who are really quite rich and popular.
CHAPTER 4

INVENTED LANDSCAPE AND NAVIGATING THE METAVERSE

One reason I borrow from cartoons is because of their familiarity and massive dissemination. In addition to an interest in cartoons, their flexibility and potential to describe traumatic events, I have to believe that my interest in co-opting images mediated through the Web is, to a certain extent, symptomatic of a “latchkey” kid childhood lousy with video games and a TV nanny as well. The compulsion to think about media critically stems from this early development as well as the advent of the Internet in the domestic context, being a part of the last generation who remembers the home before the computer, before the network, before unfettered access. Memories before the privilege of being able to ask the “ghost of Steve Jobs” who Harry Truman was previous to his vice presidency, how to temp out a steak, what the hell a “cronut” is (how it’s trending), or, in a domestic context, talk to someone in Shanghai real time are rapidly becoming extinct.

Navigating the Internet to glean source material and repurposing images into new images are practices I utilize frequently.

Google-image search the term “confident person” and you’ll summon numerous pictures of nameless individuals looking satisfied and standing certain. These are the same people on the daily news, selling you a car, or having marriage problems due to the dysfunction of their “unmentionable” regions. You see them every day; they are potent stock to juxtapose next to the more frantic and contorted figurations that frequently occupy my compositions, figures that exist in an environment that is emotionally and physically disjointed in contrast to the world of the talking head or advertisement avatar. There is an immediate tension created by this juxtaposition of television and internet-mined generic material and a rendered, studied drawing hand. This mixture and eventual
assimilation of images into artwork reflects my experience as a consumer of information, social conditioning, entertainment etc., their dizzying and rapid intervention into our daily lives; I am trying to utilize their ubiquitous presence.\(^7\)

Two artists in particular push their way to the forefront when I begin to consider the possibilities of resituating and reconfiguring the way in which we see and hear popular images and media--its complications and its tendency to isolate, their sinister presence and benefits are the expansive explorations of Jon Rafman, and the paintings of Ahmed Alsoudani.

In an essay for *Art F City* regarding Google Street View and his project *9-eyes Ongoing*, an archive of images collected from following in the footsteps of the indiscriminate Google photographer, Rafman states:

> This very way of recording our world, this tension between an automated camera and a human who seeks meaning, reflects our modern experience. As social beings we want to matter and we want to matter to someone, we want to count and be counted, but loneliness and anonymity are more often our plight.

The emergence of the Smartphone and social media have provided a framework for the reinvention of one’s own image in a massive way. The contentious state of truth in photography has a new backdrop, facilitated by the apparatus in every hand, users of social media networks (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) utilize them in order to construct favorable self-images and project them out into the world.

*9-Eyes Ongoing* illustrates the epidemic of the mediated hyperreality provided by a camera in every pocket, 24 hours a day. Use your iPhone camera to graphically

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\(^7\) This practice would, and did yield an image that is likened to that of the cast of a reality television show, congregating at their block party. These “confident” people provide a prescribed cast of nameless individuals, aware of the camera, but not of the figures they trample on the bottom of the sinkhole/blackhole/manhole they occupy, placed at the end of the cul-de-sac. Unaware of their peers slipping away, and unaware of their own peril, their gaze is fixed on the camera and you, the consumer of said entertainment. (see fig. 20)
illustrate the arc of your life, or your character will seem disingenuous. Google employs
the Street View project to describe our communities and, essentially, the planet in a
homologous way. This engineers a similarly skewed photographic reality.

*9-Eyes Ongoing*, this collection of Rafman’s, consisting of hundreds of
photographs gleaned by endlessly perusing the earth’s crust via Google Street View, has
produced a body of images that vary in content and severity, but always invite the
narrative impulse despite the indiscriminate nature of the camera affixed atop a white
van, cruising around the planet, seemingly automated. The dissonance between the
indiscriminate nature of the camera and the severity of particular images (gruesome car
wrecks, police brutality, figures who seem to be captured or in bondage, escaped
convicts, desolated urban landscapes, etc.) is staggering. Google, pointing to its own
copyright in the corner of each photograph, enforces a complete lack of empathy, the
viewer just as indifferent as the camera.

Rafman’s editing of his collection seems, however, just as varied and
encompassing as the action of the camera itself. Striking images of “beautiful”
landscapes, an idealistic black stallion rearing in the sun set, the absurdity of an alien
lounging in a beach chair covered in tie-dye, the thrill of action shots taken during a drag
race, a line of red-faced baboons lounging in a hot spring, a haunting image of two old
men in matching outfits walking down a rural road, no sign of of anyone else around. The
beauty and narrative constructions such a tool can provide, the complexity of the Google
world, and the systemic voyeurism that it enforces, is a perfect example of our societal
detachment from notions of real humanism and empathy. *9-Eyes Ongoing* provides a
benign moral dilemma, one that we are implicated in because we live and share in this
“real world” that’s being photographed, archived, and utilized. (see fig. 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, or 27)

In addition, the Second Life tours provided by Jon Rafman, or rather his avatar, reveal another kind of exploration in the constructed universe. Second Life, an online virtual world commonly likened to that of a MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) is a digital platform developed and released by Linden Lab in 2003. Linden Lab, however, makes the distinction that Second Life is not a game as it lacks distinct objectives; it only supplies the users (or residents) with the means to construct a virtual reality, untethered from the responsibilities of specific and directed tasks. You, the user or resident, are “free” to wander, construct, play music, get a job, build a house, open a cat house, raise a family, lounge on the beach, whatever your avatar’s heart desires, indefinitely--restricted only by income and Second Life currency (referred to as Linden Dollars).

In line with notions of distance and loneliness in this landscape, his chosen avatar, that of the iconic Kool-Aid Man, creates another degree of distance regarding the effects of the Second Life physics and the behaviors of its other users. The off-putting physique of the Kool-Aid Man, and his fixed, smiling visage (one that admittedly “terrifies” Rafman at times), limits his movements and capacity for inclusion within the larger “SL” community, a great metaphor for the sobering physical distance of the user emotionally invested in a virtual reality but physically limited by the artifice. (see fig. 28) In these tours, similarly to 9-Eyes Ongoing, he can wander endlessly--the metaverse created, engineered, and cared for by hundreds of thousands of users--through landscapes and social components, happenings that exist in a realm that is free from the constraints and weight of a ‘linear’ history. Rafman has described the labyrinthine world of Second Life
as “Supercharged Tokyo and Dubai combined”.

Second Life is the perfect playground for a generation who has spent the majority of their lives gradually sifting through an onslaught of images and experience; a blizzard of media representations and expectations, unfettered accessibility and obsession. The opportunity to project your *personal* expectations onto an avatar in a “second life” would seem to satisfy the angst caused by the inundation of idealized images.
CHAPTER 5

PAINTING THE DELUGE

In a way that is similarly dizzying and ambiguous, Ahmed Alsoudani offers a different interpretation of media saturation, data as fact, and data as narrative. A recent study and analysis by IBM recently calculated that since 2003, humans currently generate as much information in two days as human beings have produced from the beginning of recorded history (Rieland). The omnipresence of such information can be tyrannical, debilitating, and impossible to navigate. It seems right on to me, that in such an unprecedented time of accessibility and data, your hand would be governed to hopelessly react to this.

Ahmed Alsoudani’s work captures this torrent of information and ironically juxtaposes the jetsam of everyday life: celebrity television and the horrifying footage of ISIL execution videos, for example--their expedited presentation via television, internet, tablet, etc. crystallized by the seemingly anachronistic practice of painting. Dramatic as it may sound, it functions as one last physical mainstay of critical response in a time of an ephemeral, digital avalanche. While Alsoudani’s work clearly responds to atrocities of war, industrialization, and tepid entertainment through disfiguration and trauma, it also directly references historical painting: Francis Bacon, Phillip Guston, De Kooning, Pollock, Picasso, and in a few classicalist examples Archimbaldo (the harmless fruits and vegetables which populate his eccentric and carefully constructed portraits, however, are referenced by Alsoudani through his use of googly eyes, military garb, light bulbs, hardware, chain link fence, botox, and a carefully placed ape masturbating). Archimbaldo functions as an appropriate metaphor for the reservoir or junk pile of information and images, co-opted and bent to serve a new purpose, one of perversion and hedonistic
surplus as opposed to the heavenly bounty, borrowed and bludgeoned, re-purposed to exemplify a new, horrific, and timely purpose while maintaining a formal and historical relationship with painting (see fig. 29, or 31).

Guston knew about this. While addressing a group of students, he mentioned that “Painting and sculpture are very archaic forms, it’s the only thing left in our society where an individual alone can make something with not just his (her) own hands, but brains, imagination, heart maybe” (“Philip Guston” 66).

It is through this “archaic” practice that Ahmed Alsoudani assimilates the broken floodgate of media source and tradition into narrative, “stories” that are distorted and not fully legible, an action that reflects the experience of encountering images relentlessly, resisting the state of passive listener, viewer, voyeur or bystander, as well as maintaining and progressing a tradition of abstract painting.\(^8\)

There is a simple irony in crystallizing this surplus of liquid data through painting. There is, however, a deeper irony present, exhibited by utilizing a specific abstract modernist method of painting, undermined by the addition of representational imagery floated amidst forms, fields, and gestures that echo the unattainable access of the “color

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\(^8\) I apply similar strategies in my work. You can dust off historical touchstones; Modernist, Futurist and Cubist tendencies can be attributed to describe the simultaneity, and whirring experience of the contemporary digital life and spectatorship. It’s bittersweet to appreciate modernist painting for its cultural and formal gravity while accepting its “pure” purpose and specific former function as widely extinct. Reconciliation with this historical causality can only really be attained by the attribution of its formal properties and self-conscious application to moments of contemporary appropriation. The “chaos” of *Autumn Rhythm* no longer maintains the same kind of sublime presence in the overstimulated digital age. Every angle of the Cubist “still life” can be co-opted to describe the figures of a crowded dorm room, filthy and neglected; they are figures levitate around the interior, balled up and negligent of their confined interior. Unaware of each other, and unaware of the figure sprawled out on the floor (that figure only allowed to occupy a singular vantage point)(see fig. 32). The simultaneity of Cubism can be adopted to describe a modern state of overstimulation, a product of the expansive digital age. Instead of progressing a visual language like Cubism to reveal the full physical interpretation of the *object* in 2015, it seems more appropriate or better suited to describe the whirring reality of the information age. These additional vantage points in our contemporary climate however do little to illuminate much of anything as the resulting work get’s posted on instagram ands to the jetsam of daily life in the network, creating a convoluted picture that reveals little to nothing--just piles it on like your plate at the Panda Express Buffet.
field”, rejecting a phenomenological response altogether. Placing a googly eye in the middle of *Autumn Rhythm* would seem blasphemous, but this gesture simultaneously critiques a white male hegemonic tradition of painting--tired, stubborn and exclusive--while also gleaning from it properties that can be attributed to a contemporary practice of painting to describe the whirring and ambiguous role of the data consumer and socially conscious individual. Alsoudani equalizes this obelisk of historical painting by placing it adjacent to the garbage of modern life and excess (see fig. 30). Using this tradition of image making provides a historically sensitive lens to view a totemic painting tradition without depending on it fully, progressing it while neglecting its “purity”.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The Second Life user’s eager acceptance of the metaverse, the forging of identity through Instagram, the NY Post reader’s defense of its legitimacy, complacent spectatorship, the trumping of reality with opinion: this action/inaction is deeply disturbing and complicated to me. I cannot escape a reality in which I am implicated on the same level of voyeurism and complacency. The lack of empathy and critical engagement in America is symptomatic of the first televised war: Vietnam. The comfort of being able to change the channel when you became bored by conflict has had significant consequences on the way we understand violence and tragedy. It has flattened and distanced calamity, making it palatable and unreal. Susan Sontag in regard to an American Slavery museum, or the lack thereof:

To have a museum chronicling the greatest crime that was African slavery in the U.S.A. would be to acknowledge that evil was “here”. Americans prefer to think that evil is “there”, and from which the United States – a unique nation, one without any certifiably wicked leaders throughout it’s entirely history is exempt. (88)

Americans prefer to think that we live in a nation that exemplifies values of high humanitarianism. The reality is that abject poverty among the majority of children in the U.S. (the current statistic is one in four), the swelling issues of racial injustice and

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9 My fascination with the New York Post, its transparent reputation as a smear rag, and yet, enduring political and cultural influence compelled me to read it this summer, drawing out of it daily, and assembling my own scrambled version. By rearranging and essentially collaging these stripped elements I was able to construct my own non-news, liberating curious images from the shamelessly slanderous schmatte. Maybe it was a way to consciously recycle printed drivel into an object of slightly more significance; or simply a way to disarm potentially libelous material consumed for self conscious entertainment, legitimate news or other. I wanted to render it more moot than it already is. Similar to semantic satiation, repeating these images and headlines in a graphically similar context they start to lose their intended meaning and become different, but still absurd. Completely reordering its intended publication makes little difference in its perception and I find that remarkable, disturbing and hilarious. (see fig. 33, 34, or 35)
murder, living in a police state, the NSA tapping the phone lines of its citizens, the
deporation of immigrants and thus the destruction of families, a colossal class and wage
gap, assassination of U.S. citizens without a trial: this is where we live. Despite the
disasters occurring daily in the U.S. the sentiment that evil is elsewhere in the world
endures.

Revealing that more people have been married to Kim Kardashian than have
perished from the Ebola virus in the United States remarkably does not check our
national paranoia and denial. Believe it or not, we are not invincible, we are not perfect,
and we are actually susceptible to disaster, tragedy, and poor judgment. This is a
terrifying thought for us. Penance, informed criticism, and personal scrutiny is not our
strong suit.

There is a tradition of immediate commentary on the contemporary state of
political, social, and technological madness that is present in every generation. My work
has not always been engineered to serve social commentary and satire, but I have reached
an emotional threshold of sorts and am constantly distracted and troubled by the current
popular American psyche, the lapse of moral response, and the state of national identity. I
feel directly connected to this. Pure formal endeavors, art that references history in an
exclusively anachronistic way, this is unsatisfactory.

Examples of this shift in conscience are described by the Disasters of War,
Guernica, whistleblower leaks, such of Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and John
Kiriakou; Phillip Guston’s move from abstraction due to the torrent of assassination and

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10 John Kiriakou was just recently released from a 30 month sentence for attesting to practices of
torture performed by the CIA, specifically at Guantanamo Bay in addition to various, undisclosed CIA
prison camps. Though he had implicated himself in these methods of “enhanced interrogation”, he was
ironically sentenced for the leak.
the swell of the Vietnam War, Ahmed Alsoudani’s paintings depicting an expanding
digital surplus; Jon Rafman forging a new frontier in the metaverse, the impulse to
comment on conditions of despair, loneliness, excess, perverse entertainment etc; it
becomes increasingly difficult to retreat into the studio without conscience. Questions
begin to emerge regarding the “selfishness” of art making and the responsibility one has
to be a conscious reflecting mirror. In times of civic unrest I find it hard to simply “have
a conversation with my materials”. In an essay by Fred Licht regarding Los Desastres de
la Guerras:

Goya, and those artists of the 19th century who belong to the avant-garde of their
ePOCHS, deal less and less with the authority of their own artistic imagination and
more and more with conveying the sense of an obsessively urgent reality which
stimulates their fantasy but lies beyond their rational control. (135)

This notion is one that resonates with me. The “authority” of the artistic imagination can
compromise the relationship and responsibility that an artist can have within a larger
social structure. I would like to believe that an artist’s job is to reflect the situation and
time in which they live. To be introvertedly governed by the ego, this self-serious and
self-applicated authority, can lead to unapologetic, insular, monomaniacal behavior. I am
not sure that painting police overreach and aggression, the superficiality of the late night
show photo op, or cutting up the the New York Post is going to radically shift our
collective moral paradigm, but it can’t hurt, right? And maybe at least I’m trying?

My privileged life fills me with debilitating guilt and spurs me to tepid action.¹¹

¹¹ The murder of Michael Brown and the events that followed in Ferguson, Missouri provoked a
change in the studio; it dwarfed my formal, exploratory interests prior. Though the resulting drawings
shared characteristics with earlier works, administering formal and stylistic decisions, my hand was
governed to move towards the images coming out of Missouri as if I no longer had a choice. They shared
figurative sensibilities, convoluted gatherings, bent limbs, and the garish color pallet that typically
describes drawings I make, but seemed photographically verbatim. They didn’t take the same kind of
liberties, they were not invented, they were pseudo-journalistic. It’s optimistic to think that this choice
would act as a personally cathartic gesture: rather, it only helped to temporarily satisfy a superficial
I struggle with a moral balance in the studio, juggling my cloistered, eccentric interests and the responsibility to look out the window every once in awhile--to be aware of popular culture, despite its commonly toxic presence; to be aware of larger societal discontents and downright disasters; to simply be aware of what happened this morning. These moral concerns may make an interest in Second Life, Tex Avery, Jackson Pollock or Kim Kardashian seem frivolous when measured against the union picketing outside of McDonalds for a marginally higher wage, when individuals are deprived of the right to marry as a result of their orientation, when another journalist loses their head or is thrown in jail. There’s a very real, very deep-seated distraction that creeps through the door when I sit down or stand up to make pictures in the hermetic environment of my studio. I need to allow these distractions into my studio and into my work, they satiate (maybe superficially) a nagging guilt that prevents me from being exclusively interested in color theory, geometry, formalism, this-ism, that-ism, or any other generally unshared “ism” outside the academy.

What is really important today!

Empathetic death is the “authority of their own artistic imagination”; the artistic imagination is ostracizing; it should just be another individual in the room or member of the crowd; it should be a means to converse, reflect, make light, or condemn, socially and extensively--not a means to your cloistered end and certainly not the prophetic “genius” on the hill. I admittedly feel righteous in my proclivity to work with American media and American popular culture regardless of its emotionally exhausting nature.

I am stuck in a loop of criticizing American culture. I think we are the way we are...
because we don’t pay attention and I think we don’t pay attention because of the way we are.

“We’ll keep them well fed with our poisonous crumbs”¹²--I would hope that my work does not push an overt agenda and does not function as an answer to the discontents and tribulations of our immediate modern society, but rather points to the conditions in which we are trapped.

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¹²

I went fishin’ with a hammer and sickle
And a bone crusher attached to a pickle
I snuck into the nest, pulled a pin from my vest
Started suckin’ on that juicy little trickle
Why should we change this world today?
(Those soft fragile eggshell minds)
When we can smash ’em at will or let ’em decay?
(Those young fragile eggshell minds)
We’ll keep them well-fed with our poisonous crumbs
(Those soft fragile eggshell minds)
And they’ll keep their heads up our ass to see where our shit comes from
(Those young fragile eggshell minds)
We’re gonna make ’em read!

We’re gonna make ’em seed!
I chopped the head off of Mother Goose
Let the jailbirds all out on the loose
Oh so pretty and young and so very well hung
When they’re swayin’ on up there in the noose
Let’s give ’em an inch and then take a mile
(Those young fragile eggshell minds)
And plant buck on the teeth of their naive smiles
(Those soft fragile eggshell minds)
We’ll explain it away as a new disease
(Those young fragile eggshell minds)
As we genetically create nodding heads that say please
(Those soft fragile eggshell minds) (Sun City Girls)
Figure 1. *Flee* by Eben Kling, 2014. Acrylic on canvas.
Figure 2. *Night Moves* by Eben Kling, 2014. Acrylic on canvas.
Figure 3. *The Studio* by Philip Guston, 1969. Oil on canvas. (Burnett)
Figure 4. Photograph of Philip Guston’s studio in the early 1970s. (Burnett)
Figure 5. *Up All Night for Late Night* by Eben Kling, 2015. Acrylic on canvas.
Figure 6. Sochi Head 1 by Eben Kling, 2014. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 7. *Ski Disaster 1* by Eben Kling, 2014. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 8. *Andy Capp* by Reg Smythe. *GoComics*, Universal Uclick, 29 Apr. 2006, Web.
Figure 9. *Fold Figure 2* by Eben Kling, 2014. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 10. *Fold Figure 3* by Eben Kling, 2014. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 17. By Matt Furie. Mattfurie.com, 2008. Web.
Figure 20. Reality Television Sinkhole by Eben Kling, 2014. Acrylic on canvas.
Figure 21. Google Street View image by Jon Rafman. 9-eyes.com, n.d., Web.
Figure 22. Google Street View image by Jon Rafman. 9-eyes.com, n.d., Web.
Figure 23. Google Street View image by Jon Rafman. 9-eyes.com, n.d., Web.
Figure 24. Google Street View image by Jon Rafman. 9-eyes.com, n.d., Web.
Figure 25. Google Street View image by Jon Rafman. 9-eyes.com, n.d., Web.
Figure 26. Google Street View image by Jon Rafman. 9-eyes.com, n.d., Web.
Figure 27. Google Street View image by Jon Rafman. 9-eyes.com, n.d., Web.
Figure 32. *Floating Cluster-Fuck* by Eben Kling, 2015. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 33. *N.Y. Dose 1* by Eben Kling, 2015. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 34. *N.Y. Dose* 2 by Eben Kling, 2015. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 35. *N.Y. Dose 3* by Eben Kling, 2015. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 36. *Untitled* by Eben Kling, 2014. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 37. *Untitled* by Eben Kling, 2014. Watercolor on paper.
Figure 38. *Untitled* by Eben Kling, 2014. Watercolor on paper.


