The End of Histories

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THE END OF HISTORIES

A Thesis Presented

By

JOSHUA FIELD

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2012

Department of Art, Architecture, and Art History
THE END OF HISTORIES

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By

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ABSTRACT

THE END OF HISTORIES

MAY 2012

JOSHUA FIELD, B.F.A., MARYLAND INSTITUTE COLLEGE OF ART

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

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This M.F.A. thesis paper and exhibition explore the ephemerality of relationships as they are redefined by contiguity and recontextualization. My work derives from an investigation of alternative interpretive structures while retaining an overarching sense of narrative. This approach to painting relies on the human propensity to create organization in order to contend with chaos or overwhelming amounts of information. Traced back to curiosity cabinets or wunderkammers and forward through museums and encyclopedias, the organization of knowledge in both its diachronic and synchronic forms serves to collapse time and space. Geography and chronology become obsolete as relationships between images and objects gain new contexts. This recontextualization is not momentary but continual, as objects and images move through time and are replicated, appropriated and assimilated.
Particularly in this digital age, that distance from the original is expanded in such a way as to make relationships truly ephemeral. A painting that derives from a print-out of a JPEG, which was beamed across the globe after being digitized from a photograph of an object already taken out of time and geography by those who placed it in a museum is extraordinarily distant from its original context. The ensuing abstraction changes the image irrevocable; it is a new thing entirely and only an echo of the former context remains. These paintings are filled with echoes but the true narrative is that of the ephemeral relationships that are fixed on the page for just a moment and then disappear into the continuously shifting stream of context.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

My work is grounded in the simultaneous exploration of contiguity and incongruity. The establishment of relationships through the nearness of one thing to another and the consequent disregard for the readily recognizable spatial construct attempts to transcend the familiar scenic in favor of a less prosaic structure. Organization and relation become the predominant framework and one begins to recognize a dream-like process of engagement that requires a suspension of expectations. This liminality that lies between the conventionally portrayed image and one that is somehow peculiar is an opened space for interpretive dialog.

While a variety of media offer this opportunity for image displacement, the language of collage is the predominant language in my work and the core of my practice. The intuitive assembly of images over an extended period forms the basis for the collagist approach to despite their final presentation as unified surfaces. The collagists world view deals in both a desire to reassign meaning and the an acknowledgement of the unfixable nature of meaning in our infinitely mutable human context. As Robert Cooper suggests in his essay Interpreting Mass: collection/dispersion, collage may use the tangible object as its building block but it is about the ephemeral nature of relationships:

Collage undermines the conventioneer perception of the human world as a collection of naturally stable and reliable things which are either already there or can be adapted for use
and ease of living. Collage tells us that things come together and then fall apart, that relations are ephemeral, even ghost-like, events we cannot physically see or touch, that possibilities rather than actualities constitute the fabric of our world. (Cooper, 2001)

This ephemerality of both objects and relationships defines the Sisyphean task of the image assembler. In many ways it is the building of a house of cards in the momentary eye of a hurricane of entropy. Every assemblage of images will inevitably be reconfigured to create another set of relationships by the viewer despite even the most static formal elements. For example, even the most obvious hierarchy as defined by scale may be overridden by a multitude of external references so that the largest component of a painting may seem insignificant to the viewer whose attention is captured by a particular moment of recognition. Invariably the painting changes and the viewer also changes as their reference is usurped by the new relationship presented in the painting. The resultant meta-dialog reflects the “the endless collection and dispersion of things, their continuous combination and permutation, in the play of mutability that is the special feature of mass.” (Cooper, 2001)

The language of collage is distilled in early collages, assemblages and later Robert Rauschenberg’s “combines” but it is rooted in the much broader practice of appropriation. While the term appropriation is most often used when referring to the internal relationships within the bounds of artistic practice, the more general usage is to “take for oneself” or to “take possession of”. Appropriation implies a lack
of change applied to the thing one has taken possession of; it is not a reflection, a
reference or a representation of the thing but the thing itself. In this way, the
collagist is the ultimate anarchic appropriator, taking possession of images without
regard for societally imbued ownership. This practice, in its anarchic fashion
reinforces the unfixity of things and the ephemeral nature of relationships. What
was once located in a generally accepted frame of reference is now displaced and
renowned.

In this body of work, images are taken from their original context and
redistributed with complete disregard for their origin. They are new images when
they are pasted into my sketchbook and they are again new when they are painted
on the canvas. The coyote is no longer the hunted animal and instead becomes an
encompassing field from which the woman fires her weapon. The relationships
twist and contort into a fluidity that mirrors the strange capriciousness of wet paint.
This inconstancy is the nature of images as they move between contexts, shifting for
the maker and the viewer.

Nowhere is this fluidity of image relationships more demonstrable than on
the Internet where the transfer of images is instantaneous, and those images are
often seen independent of context. Search engines aggregate and sort images
algorithmically based on murky meta-data resulting in myriad miscategorizations
and the spontaneous creation of unforeseen relationships. These connections
formed by recontextualization reach beyond the traditional associations that viewers might ascribe to a given image.

The human mind is hard-wired to create meaning even as we are presented with information that does not map easily to our experienced context. This inclination of the mind toward creating order from chaos is fundamental to our survival reaching into history far beyond our settled agrarian state. The ability to differentiate a stump from a mushroom in the charred landscape after a forest-fire was the difference between hunger and plenty. Perhaps more importantly, the adaptation that allows identification of the Gyromitra Esculenta mushroom (Figure 1) and the very similar Morchella Esculenta mushroom (Figure 2) is the difference between an agonizing death and a delicious meal. This ability is not verbal or textual; by description both mushrooms are nearly identical but their visual appearance once seen is easily differentiated. It is the visual experience of the object that creates the ability to differentiate.

This same hard-wiring is at work when we encounter optical illusions as our brain attempts and fails to correlate a visual phenomenon with past experience. Reconciling visual dissonance is part of the endless work of the human brain in its efforts to bring order to an often chaotic environment. In these paintings, one must
contend with line that is both the outside delineator of an object, its internal descriptor, and a structural component. This rule breaking challenges the perceptual clarity and results in a scenario that forces the brain to confront questions about beginnings and ends, foregrounds and backgrounds.

And so it is with the rapid jump from dissociated images to narrative structure. Narrative has long been associated with the organization and transmission of complex information. Epic poems or folkloric songs rely on highly structured information in order to transcend the problems of mechanical memory. In much the same way, our propensity to compile even the most remotely related components into narrative when presented with an array of information is a mechanism for ordering chaos.

As with the ephemerality of both corporeal human beings and our relationships, the painting, as a product of human collection and dispersion is ephemeral in terms of both the relationships within the painting (subject matter) and the components of the painting (object matter). But are we therefore, “lost in an endless exchange of meaningless representations, divorced from their referents and from all fixity of meaning” (Deepwell, 2000) as Katy Deepwell suggests in her analysis of Baudrillard’s notes on simulation? While it may seem a futile activity to build the aforementioned house-of-cards if the desire is to fix their state, the act of building and the act of exchanging regardless of “fixity” is the very essence of communicative dialog. Indeed, both written and verbal language is imprecise, relying on broader
context to communicate ideas. As socially motivated beings we revel in the act of communicating as much as the raw translation of information between individuals. My practice reflects a similar ecstasy in the act of communicating while at the same time declining the fixation of meaning.

How does one measure the distance of the invisible thread that connects one idea to another and at what point does that thread snap, becoming a refutation of construed meaning? This basic lingual concern is one that haunts my work and is in many ways the underlying fabric of its concern. These mutable relationships, be they formal or subjective are central to considering the work. However, the work does not set forth to create a mere equation but rather a highly variable cascade of associations.
CHAPTER 2
TEMPORAL TOUCHSTONES

Time is of the essence. This phrase, commonly used as a contractual clause indicating that certain tasks must be completed quickly, can be ascribed with very different connotations to the importance of time in these paintings. The appropriator’s endeavor, because of its recombining of components taken out of context can be seen as collapsing time. The contemporary may intersect incongruously with the ancient in ways that call into question just how one locates the work in time. And yet, in many ways it is of a particular time by virtue of the very act of appropriation. Perhaps in no historical time period has appropriation been as accessible and predominant as our digital age. The vast and immediate information network of the internet has collapsed geographies and in many ways contextual time as well.

One has simply to plug a term into a search engine to be presented with a multitude of images from an endless variety of sources. For example, a search for a term as nebulous as “discontentment” using the Google image search engine returns 28,700 images in .19 seconds. The resultant images are the result of meta-data that is loosely associated with the image itself, often from a context that is obscured from the viewer as they are confronted with an odd assortment of disconnected associations. A pill, a stormy sky, a painted mannequin, a hotel bedroom, a woman overlooking a desert vista, a dilapidated dock, a gift, a piggy bank. All of these
elements are presented without any context and only their spatial relationship is left for us to interpret. Yet the human brain cannot help but make a narrative where none exists. The elements that don’t fit into the story become far-reaching metaphors for things that more readily conform.

Figure 3: Google image search for the term “Discontentment”

This aggregation is also a refraction. The plethora of images that almost immediately appear in our field of vision with a few keystrokes and the click of a button sometimes illuminate but more often obscure, shattering a single concept or search term into tens of thousands of shards, each reflecting a different association
or context. In many ways this reflects the human condition in this new digital age where information is both abundant and diffuse. Where once the challenge lie primarily in finding a single source of information (imagine the difficulty of walking into an analogue library in search of an image to represent “discontentment”), now the challenge lies in the sorting and filtering the wealth of information that has been gathered from the corners of the globe in an unseemly mass.

While the sheer magnitude of disassociated images produced by a contemporary internet search engine are astounding, the act of gathering together disparate objects and images reaches far back into Western history. One need only look to the pseudo-scientific practice of collecting natural curiosities in the 16th and 17th century to see a prime example of the collection of seemingly disparate objects under a broad rubric.

The Wunderkammer, as it was known in eastern Europe, was a collection dictated not by any rigorous canon but rather a whimsical assortment of objects that spoke to the collector. As art critic Roberta Smith describes it in her review of the Museum of Modern Art’s 2008 exhibition *Wunderkammer: A Century of Curiosities*:

The wunderkammer was a free-form collection of all things rare and marvelous: small works of art, exquisite objects made of precious materials, natural specimens, unusual rock or crystal formations, scientific instruments. Although ancestors of today’s museums, wunderkammers were more capricious, with a broader mandate: the goal was to gather knowledge and explain the world — not just art — through its wonders. (Smith,
In these early collections one sees the disparate gathered together in ways that are both unnatural and charged. In one of the most famous early collections, Ole Worm displayed both hard natural evidence and pure fabrications. His wunderkammer (Figure 4) purportedly included the mythical Scythian Lamb, (Figure 5) a plant which produced lambs as its fruit. This “capricious” bringing together of objects, and in the case of the Worm the actual hybridization of objects, becomes the basis for collected knowledge in Western culture. The museum and the encyclopedia both derive their format from these eccentric early collections and despite a solidification of format, still share these juxtapositions.

The museum and the encyclopedia both derive their format from these
eccentric early collections and despite a solidification of format, still share these juxtapositions. The museum was initially strictly a place of study, a sort of tangible encyclopedia or library of culturally significant objects. As museums became more focused in their mission, other entities emerged dedicated to the display of objects that fell outside of the museums' mission. The World's Fair, whose “midway” was the precursor to the sideshow, came to host these objects. Even P.T. Barnum’s travelling exhibition was initially called “Barnum’s Grand Scientific and Musical Theater”.

Regardless of the overarching nominal umbrella of a collection of objects, the resultant experience is a collapsing of time and space. Historically, moving away from the chaotic all-over arrangement of the wunderkammer, museums adopted a diachronic approach to display with objects illustrating a grand historical narrative. These recontextualized narratives told from a predominantly western point of view and arranged with a particular agenda were reinterpretations of historical narrative presented as fact. More recently, museums have begun to present work synchronically, re-collapsing time and space. This collapsing is evident in my work. As images are plucked from their original time and place and placed alongside those that are chronologically distant, a narrative construct emerges. And like the museum’s fabricated narrative, the emergent narrative is reflective of the painter as author.
Ever present in my work is the influence of the tiny, chaotic history museum in St. Petersburg, Florida where, as a child, I encountered objects from the far reaches of the globe stacked from floor to ceiling in no discernable order. An Egyptian mummy in a Victorian-era wooden coffin was juxtaposed with World War II relics and an unidentified enormous leg bone. Shrunken heads and a two-headed calf (Figure 6) were displayed with no differentiation from a Greek amphora. Describing the museum in a 1989 article, the staff was apparently aware of the odd nature of its displays: “a chaotic world of stuffed fowl of various species, unidentified portraits, a variety of dolls, various other bric-a-brac and the stars of the show, a two-headed calf and an honest-to-goodness mummy.” (Baal, 1989)

The museum displayed just about any treasure or oddity that the aging population of the sprawling retirement city bequeathed to it upon their passing. Jumbled together in tall glass cabinets with little or no supporting signage, the museum of my youth was a direct descendant of the wunderkammer. Wandering
among the narrow aisles between cabinets endlessly packed with objects both wondrous and mundane, time and space collapsed and strange narratives emerged. Perhaps more accurately, my adolescent brain struggled to order the chaos and utilized narrative for that purpose. Narrative became the connective tissue between the fragments of history, allowing for fabricated connections where none were otherwise possible. The more disparate the objects, the more involved the narrative and consequently, the more poetic.

This experience mirrors another descendent of the wunderkammer; the illustrated encyclopedia. Because of their alphabetical arrangement and the extraordinarily broad swath of knowledge represented by their narrowly curated content, the illustrated encyclopedia juxtaposes incredibly disparate images. In particular, children’s encyclopedias which are rich in imagery and fairly anemic in textual prose provide a correlative experience to the wunderkammer in that they present a breadth of images in a variety of styles with very little context. The volumes’ authors seemed aware of their connection to the wunderkammer as the Golden Book Children’s Encyclopedia covers were designed to mirror this aesthetic. (Figure 7) I was endlessly fascinated by these illustrations and just as I had in the St. Petersburg Historical Museum, I wandered through these books for hours on end. The disparity of imagery placed in strange contexts only added to their intrigue.
My work reflects this early experience and in many ways, continues to explore the extraordinary wealth of possibilities for interpretation that so engaged me. The museum, the encyclopedia, the collection of “bric-a-brac”, all expand greatly beyond the bounds of their original intention. Their inherent chaos begs for narrative structure and becomes an opportunity to reevaluate relationships. As a painter, I am no longer forced to imagine how an object might change if moved to a different place in the museum. The amphora can become a hat or a crown for the two-headed calf, if placed in its new context. The soldiers of wars past can be resurrected to do battle with the antique pottery. In short, it is a world where anything can be plucked from the familiar and made to perform a strange and alien dance on the stage of the canvas.
CHAPTER 3

SUBJECT MATTER, OBJECT MATTER

The objectness of these paintings is enhanced by their collage origins and their isolation from scenic context. This isolation and hence recontextualization raises the question of the importance of the individual object versus the role it plays in its new scenario. As noted, the image once appropriated and placed in a new context is not the original image. It is changed irrevocably, if only just by its removal from its original context, much as the eating utensil from antiquity or even a foreign culture is instantly converted to from utilitarian object to cultural artifact when placed in the museum. The objectness of the images found in these paintings is in some part due to their removal from their original context, be it magazine advertisement or documentary photograph. The image is mutable; it changes in my sketchbook and again once in the painting and still again as the painting is worked to completion. It even changes when moved from the studio wall to the gallery wall, no longer an active investigation but instead a record of that activity.

The subject matter of these paintings is inherently different from the “object matter” or their “factual” nature. While images can be broken down into individual components or analyzed as paint applied to fabric or paper, the internal or subjective nature of the paintings resides squarely in the ephemeral relationships and the desire for fixity. As Barnett Newman describes it:
The central issue of painting is the subject matter. Most people think of the subject matter as what Meyer Shapiro has called “object matter”. It is the “object matter” that most people want to see in a painting. That is what, for them, makes the painting seem full. For me, both the use of the objects and the manipulation of areas for the sake of the areas themselves must end up being anecdotal. My subject is anecdotal. An anecdote can be subjective and internal as well as of the external world, so that the expression of the biography of self or the intoxicated moment of glowing ecstasy must in the end also become anecdotal. (O’Neil & Newman, 1992)

The work is at once internal and external. Relationships emerge from the murk of the internal universe of the subconscious and yet are subject to interpretational scrutiny during their making. They are anecdote; a record of my selection of objects and “manipulation of areas for the sake of the areas themselves”. Those selections and manipulations give the painter the momentary bliss of fixing the ephemeral but ultimately, that fixity is temporary as

Figure 8 Joshua Field, Flaws of Recollection VI, 2012. Mixed Media on Paper, 11 x 14 in. Collection of the Artist.
those images continue to shift and breath. Like a summer fling, they give the impression of being the essence of monogamy by virtue of their unbridled infatuation but soon reveal themselves to be the essence of promiscuousness. Do not, however, mourn for the artist who is complicit in this promiscuity. There is always another image, another mark, another painting around the corner and were either the artist or the image faithfully monogamous, the making of paintings would all but cease.

Repeated forms create echoes within the work. A begging peasant lifted from an antiquated etching can be found in the same composition as a figure opening bending to open a door. Both figures share the same posture and relationship to the viewer despite their disparate sources. Even the technique with which they are rendered suggests individuation and yet that underlying gesture and their shared gender suggests sameness. And the mind seeks out that similarity of shape,
making it a predominant feature of the composition. The specific identity of the figure becomes secondary and instead the figure becomes simply a man engaged in an activity. Individual fixed identity is abandoned, opening the door for interpretation as metaphoric object.

Ephemerality and unfixedness reign and this subject matter is supported by the object matter. The object-ness of the images in the paintings is likewise supported by the disparate treatments used to render each. The resultant reinforcing of the separateness of objects despite their integration within the picture plane serves to call into question the connectedness of the world around us and highlights the illusory nature of the fixedness that we perceive in our everyday lives. It is this desire to fix the unfixable, to see the fluidity of paint frozen midstream, to somehow thwart the inevitability of death that haunts these paintings. As paintings so often seem to be, they are self portraits of a sort. It is the woman trying to hold at arm’s length the violence of the missile, the shadow horsemen. But the gesture is futile and it is just beyond the domesticity of home that an inevitable fate awaits. Figure 9 The figure contemplates the Don Quixote’s windmill, that “hulking giant”, considering some impossible future battle with a foe whose indifference is absolute.

But this battle is also happening right now and I am also Don Quixote. Indeed, what could be more like the arms of the windmills of de Cervantes’ novel than these wooden structures overstretched with fabric. I was reminded of this while
transporting these paintings on a windy day. As they wrenched my arm away from my body, I became the windmill and simultaneously Don Quixote. It is both sad and humorous to imagine the painter with brush in hand like a sword, preparing to do battle with the always ambivalent windmill. The clock cannot be stopped or turned back, no matter how deep the well from which that desire springs. The images appear on the canvas and the paint ceases to move and yet the images are ever changing. I cannot save the ones that I love, I cannot save myself, I can only find solace in the Sisyphean effort to solidify the images that remain forever fluid.

Figure 10 Left: Joshua Field, Revolution and the Return to Blissful Nowhere, 2012. Mixed Media on Woven Polymer, 34 x 62 in. Collection of the Artist.

The gesture serves as narrator in these paintings, moving the story forward and propelling the viewer through disjointed time and space. In Refusal to Acknowledge Inevitability Figure 9 the gestures become signposts indicating a clock-like forward motion. The direction is interrupted by the lone missile that erupts the right. It is the propulsion of that inevitable event toward her, she obviously cannot stop the flight of a missile with a gesture. On the left, she is resigned to her fate as
we all are. The blindfolded figure tilts the chair in a gesture that can only end in her being pushed from the picture, just as we will all be pushed from the picture.

These struggles with the inevitability of demise are perhaps more overt in Revolution and the Return to Blissful Nowhere and Travails and their Terminus. The carnival swing, the windmill, and the circle of arrows all serve to pinwheel the viewer through the composition. The canine figure is both a silent directional indicator and a symbol for deeply felt loss. It was the weekend that I embarked on this graduate degree that I held my companion of fifteen years in my arms as he was euthanized. It was a loss so profound and so personal that it felt insurmountable. Coming on the heels of the loss of a close friend to cancer a year before and another to a drunk driver two years prior, the loss of my dog is a trauma that I do not expect anyone to comprehend, but it remains present in the work. And so the man whose blood is stanched is me, is my dog, is the coyote caught in a trap in a YouTube clip for whom I wept. The figure labors with a wheelbarrow full of wood, the proverbial squirrel hoarding to survive winter, but the long winter is not survivable. Then again the comfortable banality of a domestic interior serves as an Sisyphean interlude, labor will not prevent loss.

The objects rely on the context of the contiguous imagery but also on their visual handling. The flat outlines can both flatten an image when highly contrasted with the ground and can create subtlety and complexity when in a color and tone similar to the ground. The variability of approaches, culled from a variety of sources,
allows objects and components to fluidly change the spaces that they inhabit. The figure with the wheelbarrow is connected to the domestic interior by virtue of contiguity but is simultaneously of another world as indicated by the hard black line with which it is rendered. Likewise, male figure in *Revolution and the Return to Blissful Nowhere* is strongly connected to the reclined figure in *Travails and their Terminus* despite disparate rendering approaches, which indicates that the rendering is descriptive rather than objective like different adjectives applied to the same noun. Figure 10
CHAPTER 4

ART HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

What first attracted me to Manet’s *Le Dejeuner Sur L’herbe* [figure 9] was the its obvious “wrongness”. While Manet’s contemporaries would have been struck by the scandalously nude figure staring out at the viewer, my attention was immediately drawn to the sense that the figures do not inhabit the same space. The bathing figure would tower over her dining compatriots were she in their plane. It was not until I was introduced to Marcantonio’s 1515 Judgement of Paris [figure 10] that I recognized that what made Dejeuner so fascinating was that the figures not only fail to inhabit the same space, they are also plucked out of time and thrust together.

This early example of appropriation and its apparent disregard for integration results in a space that, while almost believable, calls our attention to the subtle visual dissonance that results from recontextualization. The wholesale appropriation of secondary figures becomes a shadow in the recreation of the myth, with Paris and Hermes sharing lunch with one of the three goddesses while the other bathes in the spring of Ida; a pastiche that for all intents and purposes appears to the now omniscient viewer simultaneously despite taking place in a different time and location.

“Le Dejeuner foreshadowed that counter-genre of the 20th century, appropriation art, in which modern art explains, to those who had hitherto failed to grasp the fact, that artworks address not the world but themselves, and are derived not from the world but from other artworks”. (Julius, 2003)
While early appropriations serve to challenge perception of space and time, the visual shift is confronted much more directly by in early cubism. In particular, we see the integration of physical elements from different spaces and the dramatic
transformation of perception based on that integration. These collages not only considered multiple points of view, indicating simultaneity, they also integrated pre-rendered objects. The result called into question the authority of source. Take for example Georges Braque’s composition *Bottle, Newspaper, Pipe, and Glass*, 1913 [Figure 11], which integrates collaged elements and extends those elements into the picture plane using charcoal. The pictorial space illusion of the table in space is flattened by the collaged frame and then shattered into a multitude of fragmented viewpoints. Unlike Manet’s appropriation which leaves the viewer with an uneasy feeling that something is vaguely out of place, Braque’s appropriation is anything but subtle. The viewer is left struggling to establish planar dominance as the line of the bottle is intersected by the dark rectangle surrounding the pipe. Even the title makes no differentiation between the rendered elements such as the “bottle” and the collaged “newspaper”.

These early collages dismiss the idea of reference in favor of the direct integration of content from a variety of sources. Authorship is no longer the unifying factor that forms a comforting umbrella over the disparate appropriated elements. The dissonance is unavoidable. The newspaper in particular squarely addresses the question of time specificity and is inescapably a daily historical archive. This is

![Figure 13: Georges Braque, *Bottle, Newspaper, Pipe, and Glass*, 1913. Charcoal and various papers pasted on paper, 48 x 64 cm. Private Collection, New York.](image-url)
reflective of the painting as a record of historical actions. We see each stroke of Braque’s charcoal and recognize that this collage represents a period of time in which a series of actions were taken and yet that time is collapsed when we are presented with the collaged element which may hail from a different time and place entirely.

The dissonance of multiple points of view and multiple moments in time, presented in a single frame of reference are evident in my work. Often present is the intentionally shallow space of cubism and its rejection of a single natural vantage point. Much as early cubism transitioned from one vantage to another with a dreamlike rapidity, my work speaks a language more common to memory than direct observation. A series of moments stitched together form an experience that rejects the singular view through a familiar window and instead invites the viewer to view the scene through a fragmented mirror.

The artist as an appropriator capable of transcending the constraints of time and space through appropriation is increasingly evident in the nineteenth century, leading to what might be considered the consummate act of appropriation in early twentieth century with Marcel Duchamp’s “readymade” sculptures. Every-day objects were transformed simply by the changed context.
bestowed upon them by the artist. Arguably a more influential historical period for my practice is the time just before appropriation reached a fever pitch with the pop art movement in the 1950’s. This collision of pop’s wholly unadulterated appropriation of the external with abstract expressionism’s unprecedented focus on the internal is the big bang that resulted in the refraction (and postmodern rejection) of art-making approaches apparent in contemporary art practices.

Despite this ultimate refraction, it is the brief overlap of abstract expressionism and pop that remains a strong influence in my work. From Willem de Kooning’s integration of collaged lips into his sweeping abstraction paintings to Robert Rauschenberg’s dripping brushstrokes that undermine the structurality of his collage-like screen prints of newspaper clippings, the charged intersection of these two seemingly opposed movements illustrates a desire for integration rather than the rupture so often highlighted in art historical terms. For de Kooning, the collaged element at the focal point of the mouth serves to reconnect his paintings to the figure, to ground them as representations. Conversely, in Rauschenberg’s integrations, paint becomes a glue that binds elements together and sometimes defines hierarchy by creating areas of attention.

![Figure 15: Robert Rauschenberg, Bed, 1955. Combine Painting, 74 in. x 31.5 in. x 6.5 in. Mr. And Mrs. Leo Castelli, New York.](image-url)
Much like Braque’s and Picasso’s earlier appropriation of the familiar object into a flattened composition, Rauschenberg’s Bed, 1955 [Figure 13] confronts the audience with a vertically oriented bed that has been dripped with strategically applied paint. The paint does not cover the entirety of the bed but rather just the space that a person would occupy. These expressionistic marks peek out from behind geometrically patterned quilt representing the top layer of the bed metaphor. The resultant integration of the obviously found and the obviously fabricated results in an uncomfortable dissonance that is a keen metaphorical portrait. The abstract expressionist, ruled by the subconscious dreamer is wrapped tightly in the formal. The geometric forms of the quilt are the structural equivalent of Josef Albers’ Homage to the Square paintings.

Rauschenberg studied under Albers at the Black Mountain School and Albers is reputed to have despised him in later years. Rauschenberg considered Albers “the most important teacher I’ve ever had, and I’m sure that he considers me one of his poorest students.” (Tomkins, 1962) He received the quilt from a fellow student at Black Mountain and used it to cover his station wagon until he moved to his New York loft where he decided to paint on it when he ran out of canvas. The paint failed to adequately transform the quilt and so it was that it became part of bed. The piece was often perceived as violent and might be read as a reaction to the structural constraint of Albers. Yet, according to Rauschenberg nothing could be

![Figure 16: Josef Albers, Homage to the Square: Confident, 1954. Oil on Masonite, 24 x 24 in. SFMOMA. Gift of Mrs. Anni Albers and the Josef Albers Foundation. 79.123](image)
farther from the truth. “I think of Bed as one of the friendliest pictures I’ve ever painted,” he said. “My fear has always been that someone would want to crawl into it.” (Kotz, 1990)

Far from reactionary hostility, Rauschenberg was a dyed-in-the-wool assimilator. He reconciled the structural formality of Albers from his time at Black Mountain in much the same way that he would assimilate the raucous whimsy of abstract expressionism.

Simultaneously Willem de Kooning was assimilating the language of pop collage into his fraught paintings of women. While abstract expressionism served to externalize an intensely internal focus, pop was attempting to internalize the external, to digest the tangible world around it. These polarized positions are bridged by de Kooning and Rauschenberg who were integrative forces rather than divisive ones. This openness is illustrated in de Kooning’s willingness to not only welcome Rauschenberg into his studio but to give him a drawing with the full knowledge of his intention to erase it.

His painting Woman Figure 15 breaks with the abstract expressionist purism not only by re-introducing the figurative but by giving a clearly representational element a central focus within the composition. Unlike earlier work where the collaged
elements were happenstance and often the result of extending paint fluidity by adding newspaper, here collage takes center stage and the viewer is forced to reconcile the juxtaposition of two disparate strategies. The result is much more akin to figurative expressionism than pure abstraction.

Arguably, it is this integration of approaches and subsequent disintegration of boundaries that leads to the postmodern anti-structure employed by contemporary artists. In this way, the shared language of collage might be seen as central to postmodern anti-structuralist strategies; a collapsing of approaches and techniques, a blurring of the once hardened lines that delineated movements and materials. My work benefits directly from the integrative outlook established by the art-historical integration of collagist strategies. The precedent lays a substantial groundwork for the strategy of assimilating disparate elements, techniques and approaches.

Likewise, an integrative strategy allows the collapsing of time and space to work not as a jarring experience but instead it becomes an intimately familiar way of viewing the post-cubist world. In an increasingly fragmented visual environment where multi-tasking is the norm, video is consumed in split-second edits, and communication is measured in 140 character “tweets”, the art-historical approaches that once befuddled the viewer are now practically prosaic.
CHAPTER 5
CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

The integrative and assimilative strategy of collage is representative of our time. It is a world-view reflected in the comingling of images with disregard for source, the constant shifting between illusory space and surface, between ground and figure, between the window of the figurative and the wall of abstraction, a listless shifting through chronological time. My work abolishes the hard-edged directness of the chronological narrative or equation in favor of indirect language of metaphor and simile. It is a strategy that recognizes the ephemerality of the image and engages in the fixing of meaning only momentarily. It is like jumping from one stone to the next in the constantly moving river of the subconscious; each stone upon which one lands inevitably dictates the possible choices for the next step forward.

This paper will not tackle the hotly debated and obviously assailable position that “painting is dead” which, despite being championed by a few pedantic theorists and Arthur Danto, is an assertion that dates back to the invention of the 1839 invention of the Daguerreotype. Painting is an obvious continuum and both its provenance and the relative strength of contemporary painting as one of the many splinter practices to result from the cataclysm of pop and abstract expressionism is enough to dismiss the aforementioned position as being a rabbit’s hole not worth exploring. Instead, let us consider painting as both a well-mined vein that continues to yield extraordinary results and an approach that has assimilated the best of many of the adjacent splinter practices that resulted from the aforementioned “big bang”.
My work is no exception in its shameless assimilation of aspects of neighboring practices, collage being chief among them. This body of work also borrows heavily from surrealist or magic-realist strategies as well as from a variety of illustrative approaches. Increasingly, the formerly uncomfortable line between visual illustration and fine art is being broken down. Neo Rauch is a primary example of a contemporary painter whose work incorporates that visual language associated with illustration so strongly that he is sometimes called an illustrator, despite being shown at world-class galleries and museums.

Rauch’s work, while reminiscent of a variety of illustrative approaches, assimilates these styles casually. The duotone printing used for inexpensive reproduction is applied to certain elements in *Pfad*, 2003 [Figure 16] and in contrast, bright primaries define the figures in their awkward ascent. These two illustrative references reinforce the selection of disparate sources and their assimilation into the same painting. Rauch says that is characters dream-derived, the playing out of subconscious dramas. This adopted surrealist strategy suggests a relinquishing of control and yet his compositions are carefully crafted, structurally sound, and obviously considered. His paintings are the descendents of the drama spelled out in Rauschenberg’s painting

![Figure 18: Neo Rauch, Pfad, 2003. Oil on Paper. 100 3/8” x 78 3/8”. MoMA. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift. © 2012 Neo Rauch / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Germany. 2854.2005](image)
Rauch doesn’t struggle against Albers’ formalism, he wraps himself in it. It is a security blanket under which the subconscious of the surrealist and the expressionist slumber. The wild sleep of the self wrapped tightly in the security of the formal.

Far from an isolated example, the integration of the illustrative can be seen in works ranging from Roy Lichtenstein to Sigmar Polke. While the former appropriated with a directness typical of High Pop, the latter created complex scenarios that share many of the strategies that both Rauch and Rauschenberg exploit. The reclusive Polke often referred to the alchemical, a metaphor that applies equally to his use of layered images and to his unorthodox approach to materials. An obvious connection to Polke’s paintings on translucent fabric can be seen in my work. In his more transparent compositions, the stretcher creates an underlying structure that is inherently part of the composition. The result is a gridding and bisecting of the composition and a breaking down of the window illusion commonly perceived in paintings. The assimilation of appropriated images from illustrative sources gives these paintings the feeling of collage despite their large scale.

Even outside of painting, contemporary artists are regularly engaging in assimilation and assembly strategies that derive from the Wunderkammer and the museum. Fred Wilson’s engagements with the institution of the museum, much like collage, take elements from the institution and restructures them in space, often
resulting in a critique of the institution itself. The elements, taken out of previous context (but not their original context, for they were recontextualized first by the museum) and reassembled, create new political and historical narratives that call into question museum practices.

My work pulls from an available history of images and through the act of recontextualization, raises questions about the nature of those images and the fluidity of meaning in light of constant recontextualization. Questions arise regarding authorship, authority and the change in meaning as a result of simply changing context.

Shared with all of these artists is a affinity the perceptibly historical, even if that history is recent. Distance forces narrative. We often refer to an older object as having “character”, a term which can be read as having an apparent history or belonging to a time and place that is outside of our contemporary experience. This distance serves to more readily invoke metaphor and simile as interpretive possibilities. It is the “story” in “history” (in Middle English, there was just “story” and it is not until the late 15th century that we see the delineation of history as official story).

My work is not a presentation of linear historical fact but rather the collapsing of all history into an omnipresent where linear time becomes a ball of yarn and events play out on the picture plane. It is an integration and assimilation of

Figure 20: Fred Wilson, *Aftermath*, 2003. Installation View. Dimension Variable.
elements gathered from far reaching times and places, assembled to briefly dance to a fleeting tune.
CHAPTER 6

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

This body of work integrates a variety of traditional and non-traditional media, surfaces, strategies and techniques. The ephemerality of images and relationships is reinforced by the use of a translucent material. The attraction to the surface characteristics stemmed from a series of drawings done on vellum. To simulate that surface effect while maintaining a durable support for the paint, a woven polymer fabric is stretched similarly to a traditional canvas over wooden stretcher bars and then coated with matte polyurethane in a method similar to fiberglassing. The end result is not entirely transparent but allows light to penetrate the painting and then bounce back from the surface of the wall and the painted surface. The result is a luminosity but also an ephemerality.

The application of paint decreases transparency and the way that these paintings are developed is more akin to watercolor where one has to carefully maintain the white of the paper as the lightest area of the painting. This approach creates a more cautious dynamic where the option of “painting out” an area that is not working is simply a matter of applying more paint. Painting out an area in these paintings means contending with an unintended area of opacity where light will not travel to the wall and back to the viewer’s eye unimpeded.

This approach also reflects the artist’s desire to fix the unfixable, to stop the transmutation of images if only for an instant. While the unfixable nature of images and relationships results in a knowingly quixotic endeavor, the act of fixing is a compulsion. Paint, as a medium illustrates gives me the false sense of fixing. The fluid paint dries on the surface creating the illusion of permanence and yet too much
solvent will lift paint from the urethaned ground. As noted in previous sections, the
images are changed the moment a new component is introduced, and again when
the painting leaves the studio, and yet again when it is seen by an audience. The
fixing is an illusion, just as the portrayal of dimensional spaces are an illusion.

The smaller works on paper, which sometimes hover in the space between
painting and drawing, are arguably intimate not simply because of their size, but
also because of aspect ratio and the selection of materials. They become book-like in
their aspect ratio, reinforcing narrative. While the paintings are panoramic and
therefore feel as though one is peering into a larger space, the smaller works
approach the familiar dimension of the picture book. This forces an interpretation
that tends toward the illustrative.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The quixotic desire to grapple with images, relationships, meaning and time, to encase them in glass, to make them immune to entropic inevitability, drives the Sisyphean task of making pictures. The labor of rolling that boulder up the hill only to helplessly watch as the images and relationships that have been coerced onto the canvas mutate into unfamiliarity the trauma of that knowledge is only made whole by finding fulfillment not in product but in process. I am compelled to bring these images together and form relationships in the same way that I continue to form personal bonds with my fellow beings, knowing fully the pain associated with the inherent impermanence of those connections is an inevitable consequence.

The illusion of permanence is pervasive, from mythologies surrounding life after death to simply saying that something is “forever”. We employ the misnomers of “permanent” to adhesives and markers, but one need only ask an art conservator about the actual staying power to discover just how ephemeral they are. Indeed, we live in an age where knowledge is perhaps more tenuous than ever. We once treasured the collected correspondence of important individuals whereas now the vast majority of emails and text messages have been obliterated by an automated background task on a server. My work exists in the space between the desire for permanence and the knowledge that such a goal is ultimately unattainable. Walking through the studio door requires the willing suspension of disbelief.
My work reflects not only this struggle with, and acknowledgement of impermanence, it also seeks to collapse time and space in a way that allows tenuous connections to become alternative narratives. These narratives emerge not from direct illustration but rather from the hallmarks of narrativity. Composition, scale, and repetition all mirror traditional narrative formats. Recurring characters, stage set or filmic aspect ratios and proportions, imagery culled from historical sources, and distance from specificity and cry out for narrative interpretation. However, the fleeting, dream-like, disjunctive nature of the emerging narrative creates a scenario that mandates active interpretation and as a result the ephemeral nature of those relationships is reinforced.

These paintings are inescapably collections, which stem from a series of increasingly broader collections. They are a form of curation, both conscious and subconscious. There are distinct similarities to the role of museum curators who mine a vast warehouse archive in order to create or reinforce narratives. Simultaneously, it is the untidy collection of the hoarder whose amassed detritus becomes an intuitive and unintended portrait. Like those early cabinets of curiosities, whose collections were as much the result of compulsion as intention, I greedily consumes images. It is a promiscuousness that derives from the constant awareness of the ephemerality of the relationships that are formed. It is the desire to playact permanence, to connect once more, before it is too late.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


PHOTO OF THE ARTIST AT WORK


