2013

Firing the Canon

John M. Byrd

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/theses

Part of the Art Practice Commons

Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/theses/1024
FIRING THE CANON

A Thesis Presented

By

JOHN MICHAEL BYRD

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

APRIL 23, 2013

Department of Art, Architecture and Art History
FIRING THE CANON

A Thesis Presented

By

JOHN MICHAEL BYRD

Approved as to style and content by:

______________________________________________________
Shona Macdonald, Committee Chair

______________________________________________________
Sandy Litchfield

______________________________________________________
Jeanette Cole

______________________________________________________
Shona Macdonald
Graduate Program Director

______________________________________________________
William T. Oedel
Chair, Department of Art, Architecture and Art History
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to all those who have shepherded me to this point. Your wisdom has provided invaluable guidance, and I wish I could thank you all by name. Know that I stand on your shoulders.

Kelli Scott Kelley, Melody Guichet, Michael Crespo and Amelia Gracia, you taught me what art is and how to find it. I can never repay you for this eternal hunger.

Thank you Shona Macdonald, Jeanette Cole and Sandy Litchfield. You are truly my blonde dream team. You three have truly shown me how to be great artists, mentors and friends. For that, I will always be grateful.

Thank you to the UMASS, Amherst faculty, especially Mario Ontiveros, Jerry Kearns, Loretta Yarlow and Pat Lasch, for helping me to realize what is and isn’t important in the life I have chosen.

Thank you Lisa Furtek: The Happy Gatekeeper. You pave your way to heaven, one person at a time.

Thank you to my father for always making sure I stamp out ignorance, to my mother for reminding me to follow my dreams, and to my family for always reminding me to keep my feet on the ground.

Thank you Amanda Briggs, Charla Spell, Corey Bilbo, Kenny Kuchta, Rodney H Hart, Andre Francois and Kim VantLeven. You are my pals and my confidants [see: The Golden Girls]. You always listen, counsel and console my spirit, and make this existence a little more tolerable and fun.

Thank you Jane and C. Ray Pilant. Your continued support has made this journey possible.

Thank you to my students. You inspire me more than you will ever know—dream big and work with rigor. I’ll be watching.
Thank you Lauren Pleviche, my fellow Southern belle and exhibition cohort. We transcend all things and will be forever linked through our mutual tastes, candor and southern cooking.

Thank you Courtney Cullen, my cosmic twin. Thank you for going through the minefield before me. You have shown me how to be an artist with grace, wit and flare. You always make me laugh when I need to. We’ve met in many lives before this and will in many more to come.

Most Importantly, thank you Christopher Pilant. You are my love and my life. You are my equal and my goddess of war and wisdom. I couldn’t have taken this Willy-Wonka-styled-canoe trip without you, Minerva.
ABSTRACT

FIRING THE CANON

APRIL 23, 2013

JOHN MICHAEL BYRD

BFA, LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

MFA, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Shona Macdonald

Firing the Canon is written in conjunction with its namesake exhibition, prepared as a culmination of work leading to the master of fine arts degree. In an attempt to help viewers better understand my body of work, I discuss herein: events contributing to my personal narrative, major themes and their origins and pertinent sources of artistic and non-artistic inspiration.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................................ iii
ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................. v
LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 1
2. LUNAR TIDES ................................................................................................................. 2
3. THE FEMINIST MAN ..................................................................................................... 5
4. THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL ..................................................................................... 7
5. REGIONALISM .............................................................................................................. 10
6. EROTIC .......................................................................................................................... 12
7. CAMP AND HUMOR .................................................................................................. 18
8. EFFEMINACY ............................................................................................................... 20
9. PAINTING AS TALISMAN .......................................................................................... 22
10. THE REALLY REAL ................................................................................................... 24
11. THE ARCHIVE .......................................................................................................... 27
12. LABELS AND NAMING ........................................................................................... 29
13. THE VULGAR CRAFTS THROUGH A QUEER LENS .............................................. 31
14. AN ERECT ARGUMENT FOR A FLACCID GROUND ............................................. 35
15. THE FAMILY TREE .................................................................................................... 40
16. AN “ARTISTIC” FAMILY TREE ............................................................................. 42
17. TOONS ........................................................................................................................ 44
18. MATERIALS ............................................................................................................... 50
19. CONCLUSIONS ........................................................................................................... 51

WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................. 53
PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST AT WORK ........................................................................... 55
FLOORPLAN ..................................................................................................................... 57
FIGURES ........................................................................................................................... 59
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Backfire</em></td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Backfire</em> (Detail No. 1)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Backfire</em> (Detail No. 2)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Butt Salad</em></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(30 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Firing the Canon</em></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(30 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <em>Firing the Canon</em> (Detail)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(30 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <em>Grey Matter</em></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(60 x 69 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <em>Grey Matter</em> (Detail No.1)</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(60 x 69 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <em>Grey Matter</em> (Detail No. 2)</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(60 x 69 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. <em>Institutional Purge</em></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2013)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. *Institutional Purge* (Detail No. 1) ................................................................. 69
   (40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2013)

12. *Institutional Purge* (Detail No. 2) ............................................................... 70
   (40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2013)

13. *Institutional Purge* (Detail No. 3) ............................................................... 71
   (40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2013)

14. *One If by Hand Two If by Sea* ................................................................. 72
   (48 x 60 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)

15. *Pink Passage* .............................................................................................. 73
   (26 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)

16. *Seed Bed* .................................................................................................... 74
   (18 x 24 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)

17. *Seed Bed* (Detail) ........................................................................................ 75
   (18 x 23 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)

18. *Shona Thought My Abyss Was A Radiator* .............................................. 76
   (60 x 60 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2013)

19. *Shona Thought My Abyss Was A Radiator* (Detail No. 1) ..................... 77
   (60 x 60 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2013)

20. *Shona Thought My Abyss Was A Radiator* (Detail No. 2) ..................... 78
   (60 x 60 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2013)

21. *Shrinking Rose* .......................................................................................... 79
   (18 x 24 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
22. *Shrinking Rose* (Detail) .................................................................................................................. 80

(18 x 24 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)

23. *Through the Sinkhole* .................................................................................................................. 81

(26 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2013)
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“We spend so much of our early lives trying to figure out who we really are . . . and . . . the rest of our lives preparing ourselves to let it go.”

– John Cameron Mitchell

My work is, at heart, confrontational. My continuous search for resolution between feeling, observation and creation drives me, and what I read, watch, consume and discover in that vein cannot help but affect my making (consciously or otherwise). Through the process of breaking down personal, political and metaphorical assemblies, my goal is to transform disparate materials into works of art that straddle the canonical intersection of object and image. My re-framing of words and images is key, while I try not to loose sight of the basic given, that the lenses of the viewer and maker filter content and reception.

---

CHAPTER 2
LUNAR TIDES: THESE PEOPLE ARE CRAZY!

Experience and input always feed craft. Most recently I’ve found myself reading about lunar tides’ effects on deviancy. I hate the word ‘deviancy.’ However, it is by far the only descriptive term to encompass a certain straying from social norms that continually comes up in my work – even normalcy is a questionable term. Who defines normal anyway? White male heterosexual hegemony, that’s who!

Let’s step back a bit to the definition of the word ‘lunatic.’ Whether you use the first definition from the New Oxford American Dictionary: “a mentally ill person,” or you cite the second: “an extremely foolish or eccentric person; an absurd,” we tend to think we know what a crazy person is. But, as I continued to read the word’s Latin meaning, which roughly translates to moon, my curiosity was piqued (Why would lunacy be linked to the moon?).

Throughout my childhood, I remember people saying, “it must be a full moon tonight,” when confronted with strange situations or eccentric individuals. I never really gave the expression much thought. Having been called a few choice synonyms of lunatic myself (maniac, fool, eccentric, nutcase or fruit loop), this whole idea of the moon having anything to do with “wild” behavior intrigued me. I also started to think about how this connects to the work I make.

Astrology adherents question how the moon can have such a substantial effect on water and no subsequent effect on human beings. I wouldn’t necessarily count myself among the true believers, as scientists have debunked this theory
many times over. However, it does pique my interest. From the Assyrians to the Babylonians to contemporary followers of astrology, the moon has played a key role in the mystical explanation of behavior and predestination. The full moon has been blamed for increased admittance of mental patients and linked to ovulation peaks in ancient women and higher conception rates in the general populous. It has even been blamed for higher documentation of domestic violence. These observances have failed to gain much traction in the scientific community. Yet, the associations persist.

Personally, I connect the tides to making and unmaking. The ebb and flow of tidal patterns parallels my own art-making process. I paint with a visceral touch, transcribing an internal storm of making; a breaking down of ideas into painted surfaces. I want my work to feel upended and volatile (Figure 8). I am interested in how irrational perceptions beget meaning; how misunderstanding can create ‘truth’ in a person’s consciousness as much as understanding.

Dr. Arnold Lieber’s book, The Lunar Effect: Biological Tides and Human Emotions, notes a comparable correlation between lunar phases and psychiatric emergency room visits and fatal traffic accidents. These findings are based on 13 and 15-year periods of study (respectively) on homicide records kept by coroners in Florida’s Dade County and Ohio’s Cuyahoga County. Dr. Lieber speculates that a possible mechanism of these correlations could be linked to the amount of currents

---


and forces the moon enacts in our bodies: “I believe the gravitational force of the Moon, acting in concert with the other major forces of the Universe, exerts an influence on the water in human body—in you and in me—as it does on the oceans of the planet. Life has, I believe, biological high and low tides governed by the Moon.”

References to tides are apparent in much of my recent work. I employ wet looking surfaces with ‘currents’ of marks and marred, built up areas with dried edges (Figure 9); I add images to my archive directly pulled from nature: volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, floods and mudslides, particularly in highly populated areas; I emulate watermarks with lines and forms ebbing away from and flowing towards one another to create larger structures. And, I utilize more unconscious drawing as a way to unify chance moments in painting.

This may all seem like superstition, but that’s beside my point. There will always be believers and non-believers. And, there are those that believe so strongly, their perceptions become real – in correlation to the relationship between viewer and artist.

---

CHAPTER 3

THE FEMINIST MAN:
CLAIMING EROTICISM, PORNOGRAPHY AND THE SELF

In addition to lunacy, my work explores my relationships to gender, identity and Feminist theory. Judith Butler once said, "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself." I am thoroughly convinced by this idea that there is no original gender; rather, that we create our own.

Through much of the Feminist/Queer theory I have examined, one could almost always insert a homosexual male for the gendered female. This can be attributed to the modeling of the queer liberation movement or that of the First-Wave Feminists. However, it could also be attributed to the idea that women, along with queer people, have to validate their identities against the white male heterosexual hegemony. In this way, I am attempting to create new meaning by connecting these threads of feminist discourse with my identity as a gay man. I am enthralled by how this position enables me, as a feminine man/artist, to pose questions of authenticity and hegemonic under-representation of the feminine.

Artist Marlene Dumas has been, for me, both an intellectual and artistic role model for many years.

She writes, "I paint because I am a woman. (It is a logical necessity.) If painting is female and insanity is a female malady, then all women painters are mad and all male painters are women." Dumas equates the act of painting to the feminine and posits that in order to be a male painter, you must be female. If Dumas is correct in this statement, then I am both female and crazy. But, more to the point, I think she is encouraging us to question how we place ourselves in history according to self-identification.

In order for me to make successful paintings I must have a good sense of my own politics and my own stance on authenticity. My sexual preference and gender obviously play a huge part in this, but my aesthetic preoccupations connect here as well. Consequently, I think of my work as simultaneously masculine and feminine, and this duality is what gives the work its sense of openness (though it remains quite Feminist in thought {Figure 15}).

---

CHAPTER 4

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Everything you would imagine about growing up gay in South Louisiana is probably true; it’s difficult, at best. With little refuge to be found, my childhood was an amalgamation of bad TV, Bible verses and strong Southern women – a gulf between decadence and repression. I eventually left home, stronger, more aware, and with a lifetime of characters and experiences in tow. But somehow, it has never left me. And though my childhood doesn’t define me, it and the residual emotional stains certainly inform my life as an artist.

Part of the content of my work is portraying figures with ambiguous identities. John Currin and Robert Mapplethorpe both produced similar representations of the body. Like them, the objectified body is central to my practice, though I align myself more with feminist artists. Unlike them, I am not merely objectifying. I objectify and simultaneously glorify the body (Figure 4). I think about the figures as embodying both the objective and the observant mind. In addition, my work is concurrently embodying me as the maker, the viewer and the subject being viewed. I take direct ownership of these figures as self-representations.

One might also think about my work in relation to Blanchot’s Two Versions of the Imaginary. “The ‘real’ is that with which our relationship is always alive and which always leaves us the initiative, addressing that power we have to begin, that free communication with the beginning that is ourselves; and to the extent that we
are in the day, the day is still contemporary with its awakening.” The spaces between the absolute beginning and end of any discourse/image are what create meaning. Signifiers and signs (more specifically, signifiers ending but signs living on) are what constitute reality.

In that regard, sign/gender isn’t the meaning. It’s only a placeholder. The sign/gender can dissolve, but the thing/meaning continues on—reality is based on naming. “... images became vitalizing negation, the ideal labor through which man, capable of denying nature, raised it to a higher meaning, either in order to know it, or to take pleasure in it through admiration.”

I think about the figures as embodying both the objective and the observant mind. Meaning: we are the sum of our conscious and unconscious minds and our physical experiences. What is physical is also psychosomatic. I intend my work to concurrently embody me as the maker, the viewer and the subject being viewed. I am but one representation of a maker, viewer and subject. This makes my work different from those artists that claim the true authentic singular answer. Mine is but one facet of a much larger dialog of identity.

Growing up in an extended, southern family, the balance of power was heavily tilted towards the matriarchs. Accordingly, I have always associated women with a certain sense of influence and versatility – anything but the stereotype of the meek and weaker sex. Given that my paintings are essentially concerned with exposing emotional undercurrents, I think this early experience with feminine

---

power (real or perceived) has had a fundamental impact on my work. This duality of power and conformity is a fascinating societal anomaly, and painting offers me a unique opportunity for commentary on this distinctly feminine subject in a distinctly masculine voice.

Ambiguity is an important element in my work. It implies an end to an unending thing or non-thing. In naming the infinite or seeking intimacy in consciousness, we are questioning the limits of our own reality. We are accepting our own passivity. Ambiguity is essential to understanding or to put it as Blanchot does, "...misunderstanding is useful to comprehension, it expresses the truth of the understanding that one is never understood once and for all."9

I loved art as a child. I had many creative people in my life: my mother painted, my grandmother painted seriously, and my dad took photographs. But aside from that, there weren’t a lot of opportunities to see fine art in my hometown. So, any chance to see real art was always a treat. What I always remember so vividly, though, were museums and galleries in New Orleans that didn’t separate their disparate objects.

A perfect example of this is the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. A Newcomb pot could be displayed right across from a hand-woven basket, next to a Bo Bartlett painting, right down from a Clementine Hunter painting on a piece of drift wood—folk art mixed with craft and “high art’. This was my exposure to fine art. High and low were presented equally. And, I erroneously assumed that to be the status quo.

Art was silver service, handmade cups, embroidery, quilts, folk altars, voodoo totems, family snapshots and children’s art. I never really lost that sense of the decorative being equal to high art. The fluidity with which these artisans moved their work from one plane to another, not defining himself or herself as painter, sculptor or crafter, was amazing. They were just making what needed to be made. They were workhorses for creative impulses.

Growing up, The New Orleans Museum of Art, bursting with Fabergé eggs, French court paintings and art from Africa and the Asian Subcontinent equally impressed me. In it all, there was a unified sense of work ethic. These artisans made
work well because it was their profession. This serious work ethic has remained with me.
CHAPTER 6

EROTIC?

Audre Lorde’s Uses of the Erotic is essential to understanding the framework of my paintings. She writes: “There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female or spiritual plane. Firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.”

Through the distortion of power via pictorial erotic representations, Lorde sets pornography and the erotic at opposite ends of the spectrum. Society represses the erotic.

Much of my source material is derived from pornography. The erotic nature of which implies overt objectification. But, I think it also hints at our innate need and capacity for catharsis. I use this dissolution of boundaries as a conceptual tool to remind viewers that in order to restore humanity, we must first acknowledge and define objectification (Figure 14). Lorde states that the erotic is a “…source of power and information…” She further states that the two are often confused or misused.

---

“But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasized sensation without feeling.”\textsuperscript{12}

I align my work with the rubric of feminist reclamation of power through the use of the erotic. This is not only referring to the female gender but also to those like myself, who are a distrusted feminine force on the spectrum. Lorde writes that:

“...we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge...but the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman [or man] who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.”\textsuperscript{13} In this speech she goes on to address measuring of self and feelings stating that: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves...For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing”\textsuperscript{14} For art makers like myself, revelation isn’t feared. It is embraced. If I wanted reality I wouldn’t paint.

I regard my (non-generic) identity as a gift. Like any other minority, understanding my own oppression is key to moving past it and thriving. Nina Simone once gave a great answer when asked about why she insisted on stressing

blackness in her songs and style. She said: "...I have no choice over it in the first place...My job is to somehow make them curious enough or persuade them, by hook or crook, to get them more aware of themselves and where they came from and what they are in to, and what is there—to bring it out. This is what compels me to compel them and I will do it by whatever means necessary."15

Like Simone, I try to entice viewers and ‘othered’ people to be more self-aware – enticing them by what we fear most: ourselves. The greatest tenet of many contemporary social movements, Women’s, Civil or LGBTQQ rights, is for these othered people to acknowledge and admit to owning the marginal space to which they are confined. By outlining that space, hopefully, boundaries can begin to be breached.

Like many artists, I utilize pornographic imagery in my work. But, I make every effort to take the images to a more spirited, erotic space. Again, according to Lorde, “There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual ... it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical.”16 She touches on the idea that we define worth in terms of profit rather than human need. The functioning of the erotic is defined by the emotional components we call for. She underscores that a major taboo of the erotic is that it connects to the function of our capacity for joy. “That self-connection shared is a

measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling.”\(^\text{17}\) This capacity is one reason we fear the erotic. She writes that “for once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand for ourselves and for our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of . . . a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.”\(^\text{18}\) In extracting the erotic from the pornographic, my hope is to touch more on the joyous aspects of us rather than the mechanically voyeuristic. The viewer that is perturbed by these images is so done because of their questioning, not of their sexuality but their universal joys.

In short, the erotic has the ability to debase reality. Lorde proclaims, “We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those, which do not enhance our future, lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women.”\(^\text{19}\) In another passage she identifies the problem of living outside our own realm of limits. I’ll call it the ‘land of no’s’. “When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from


our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual’s. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.”

I like to think about my work in reference to her statement, that in misrepresenting ourselves through misnaming we need to “…give rise to that distortion which results in pornography and obscenity—the abuse of feeling.” She also hammers home the idea that if we can't be authentic with ourselves we can’t meet the needs of others. She explains, “…we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however uncomfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the

---

experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.”

Which leads to my next point.

---

CHAPTER 7
CAMP AND HUMOR

The use of pornography in my work hints at a strong current of humor and camp. Susan Sontag notoriously penned in Notes on Camp that “camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration (Figure 1). And, Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques.”\(^2^3\) Camp “typically, convert(s) one thing into something else... (is) strongly exaggerated, and camp sees everything in quotations marks.”

In my paintings, I embrace the unnatural and the exaggerated. I convert images, through artifice, from one use (titillation or entertainment) to another (new representations). Because of this, images function in quotations. Their original sources provides a base note of meaning (a private code) that functions differently from its initial intentions but has signs that hearken back to the original, tipping off the esoterically inclined viewer. This is very camp.

But, to acknowledge camp is to denounce it. Camp objects never acknowledge their campiness. In this sense, my paintings are less camp and more about insubordinate humor. I transform found images that translate into exaggerated emotional content. Everything the work is about is veiled or metaphorical. On top of this, I diffuse seriousness with humor; the ultimate subversion. The work isn’t Camp because I can name what Camp is. I can put my

finger on it and name it. The strong connection to humor that the canons of pornography, religion and art have are remixed though these disparate images, all veiled, transferred and mocked to my humorous end. John Waters, eat your heart out!
CHAPTER 8
EFFEMINACY: HEAVY IS THE HEAD THAT WEARS THE CROWN

"Gay men who play by the rules of straight society and conventional masculinity, and who don't aspire to belong to any other way of life, are more acceptable, to themselves and to others. The last obstacle to complete social integration is no longer gay sex or gay identity, but gay culture...and yet gay culture is not just a superficial affectation. It is an expression of difference through style — a way of carving out space for an alternate way of life. And that means carving out space in opposition to straight society."24

- David M. Halperin

Ever mindful of my upbringing, I maintain a keen interest in masculinity and it’s inevitable deviations. Traditional society places tremendous impetus on the idea of the masculine and manhood, and as a gay man, I don’t particularly identify with these ideals and personifications of men. I’m male, but perhaps I’m not a “man.” The idea of manning up, being strong and emotionally stunting myself is very foreign. It is very difficult to live up to unemotional, machismo-ripe and chauvinistically masculine histories.

While I use the male body as a subject, my aim is to break down the God-like representations of art history and instead depict new re-presentations of maleness. I am diametrically opposed to the flotsam and jetsam of machismo and modernist aesthetics. My work can be seen as a critique on a culture of which I remain perpetually outside. This is a culture of rigidity, of absolute male arrogance and the infallible, male artist leading an unquestioning flock, by taking the spiritual highroad as only a man can do. I rally against art that has to control the viewer in this way and that is obsessed with a singular, formal aesthetic.

Through my work, I define and redefine what it means to be a feminine man in a patriarchal society (Figure 18). I express my feelings of inferiority and entanglements of power, unlocking these essences through the labor of making. This is illustrated by the blurred boundaries between hard abstraction and expressive figural representation.

Acting against legitimacy is frowned upon in our patriarchal world. In response, my practice revolves around the boundaries of masculine and feminine, embracing aspects of each through figural representation. This is no easy task: Giving up a birthright as a man, the traditional provider, and taking on the role of the traditionally passive receiving and negotiating female is the ultimate defiance in our society.
To Christians, acknowledgement of the supernatural is essential to their faith. Snakes talk, divine beings intervene on humans’ behalf, and even the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ. The idea of metaphor is lost. The events in the book of Revelations are real. The spirit world affects the human world and vice versa. The devil is out there and coming for you— a supernatural essentialism I was raised to believe in unquestioningly. These supernatural notions (hostile or otherwise) continue to permeate my work. Like the animated broom in Walt Disney’s 1940 film *Fantasia*, my work is brought to life through creation, magic and consciousness to do the bidding of the artist (me, that is—not Mickey Mouse).

These notions of material and imagery as spiritual tools are also prevalent in Louisiana-bred Voodoo. New Orleans Voodoo is a hybrid of many African and Haitian spirit religions’ rituals, combined over time with the canon of Catholicism. The spiritualism of both religions fused to produce a religious practice in which Saints govern the same domain as familial sprits. This animism is also invested in objects that can have great spiritual power, casting energy across circumstances to create change. For instance, salt can protect from harm, hair brings good luck and gris-gris amulet bags can be made to bring good fortune.

My paintings can be seen as visual spells. I take materials gathered from near and far and fuse them together in a series of actions (rituals) and imbue them with intentions (spells) that will hopefully yield their intended purposes. In a sense, the
idea of the Talisman is alive. The supernatural transubstantiation\textsuperscript{25} of paint to image highlights instances in which inanimate objects become animate, and the body’s transferrable and malleable energy shifts from state to state.

The alchemy of painting is a reappearing footnote in the work. “Like alchemists, painters are bound up in hypostatic contemplation: paint seems irresistibly to mean, as if the littlest dab must signify something. It never speaks clearly because—as any sober scientist or humanist will tell you—every meaning is a projection of the viewer’s inarticulate moods.”\textsuperscript{26} Knowledge of the interaction of materials helps create complex harmony and discord in my work. The quarreling of the disparate surfaces help to highlight the disjointed atmosphere of these mythical occurrences (Figure 7). The idea of transforming something common into something uncommon is really at the core of alchemy. The process is mysterious and difficult to grasp, but that holds my interest. The unknown is why I continue to paint. I’m often much more interested in asking questions than solving them. If I really wanted concrete answerers, I would be a scientist.

---

\textsuperscript{25} Transubstantiation is the miraculous change by which, according to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox dogma, the Eucharistic elements, at their consecration, become the body and blood of Christ while keeping only the appearances of bread and wine.

CHAPTER 10
THE REALLY REAL

"Real isn’t how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real…It doesn’t happen all at once…you become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand."27 -The Velveteen Rabbit

One might also think about my work in relation to ideas of reality. In Maurice Blanchot's Two Versions of the Imaginary, “The ‘real’ is that with which our relationship is always alive and which always leaves us the initiative, addressing that power we have to begin, that free communication with the beginning that is ourselves; and to the extent that we are in the day, the day is still contemporary with its awakening.”28 The spaces between the absolute beginning and end of any discourse/image are what create meaning. Signifiers and signs (more specifically, signifiers end; signs live on) are what constitute reality.

In that regard, sign/gender isn’t meaning. It’s only a placeholder for it. The sign/gender can dissolve, but the thing/meaning continues on – our reality is only based on naming. Blanchot states “…images became vitalizing negation, the ideal labor through which man, capable of denying nature, raised it to a higher meaning, either in order to know it, or to take pleasure in it through admiration.”

The question of how ambiguity manifests itself is perfect. It implies an end to an unending thing or non-thing. In referencing naming the infinite or seeking intimacy in consciousness, we are questioning the limits of our own reality. We are accepting our own passivity. Ambiguity is essential to understanding or to put it as Blanchot does, “…misunderstanding is useful to comprehension, it expresses the truth of the understanding that one is never understood once and for all.”

Similarly, Jean Baudrillard formulates his discussion in Simulacra and Simulations around the idea that culture is dependent on signifiers and models, and we have become so reliant on them that we lose sense of what is real and what is not. Imitation is threatening the “real”. My work (of collecting, archiving and remixing images) attempts to understand and define the tangible in relation to fantasy and superstition.

In the queer, drag queen world (in which I cut my eyeteeth), there is an oft-used term: realness. Realness describes how well you pass into a category of society. The term can be traced back to the ballroom scene of drag culture, where

---

participants ‘battle’ each other for titles in which they are expected to showcase appropriate realness. Skills of attitude, “voguing,” dancing and dress also apply. If you are real enough, you can ‘pass’ as a biological female or as a ‘masculine’ man.

One can assert that ball culture is a constructed unreality. A construct purposely developed to glorify blurring perceptions to prove you can be what you imagine. In the perception of participants who, in many cases, have very little sociological and political agency outside the ballroom walls, this is their chance to be something. This is the moment to embody and fully realize a character projected onto oneself that can give you status as one of the legendary children.31

The really-real dwells in our minds. The infinity of cognitive space is more livable and digestible to those with the ability to embrace the unknown. But in order to do this, we must stop our incessant search for finite answers.

31 A Legendary Child is an iconic presence in ballroom circles. A legend can be a house mother/matriarch of an alliance of performers or simply a person that tends to win in drag queen competitions.
CHAPTER 11

THE ARCHIVE: DEAD PILES OF STUFF SITUATED IN SPACE

The dead are moved to a morgue. They are piled in, tagged, stripped and placed in a holding pattern. Later, they are given a whole new postmortem identity.

When I was in middle school, my dad began working as a sheriff’s deputy. At that time, he was the person responsible for photographing crime scenes. I remember asking him if he was ever really bothered by seeing dead bodies. He told me that when he was in college, he worked at a local funeral home and that dead bodies didn’t really faze him. They were just like seeing an inanimate object on a shelf. He would amuse us with stories of eating his lunch while he talked to the mortician embalming bodies and listening to football games while driving in the funeral procession. I always found these stories absurd, yet totally believable, if you knew my father.

When dad would return home from photographing a crime scene, he would file the contents of his photo dossier from the day’s shots into a huge file box of images. The box was a morgue in which the dead images would rest before being moved to the sheriff’s office. Of course, my sister and I would sneak in at the first opportunity and look at the pictures. Some were banal: traffic fender benders, found stolen items. But, some were much more menacing: drownings, fires, battered women, etc. The whole experience was exhilarating and sublime.

When I was older, I began to collect images: shots of friends, things I was interested in, items I wanted to buy. This carried on into college, where I began to
collect images to replicate in a theatre makeup class. Eventually this process of photographing and collecting evolved into my current ‘image morgue’.

I appropriate images from high culture references, such as paintings and mythology, but I also pull from found snapshots and various other media; coloring books, web images etc. I collapse each image into a new (de)construction that, hopefully, has more potency than the original. Many of these images deal with difficult and complex subjects. I clip and I collect both traditional and digital images; I look at them for a while; sometimes they’re used quickly; sometimes they languish.

Using found images instead of live models allows me to remove the specificity from the figure. It alleviates the historical attachment of figure to the portrait and allows me to fully focus on the paint rather than the sitter.

Working from found images furthers my distance from, and my interest in these as ‘collective signs.’ These spectral images are waiting to be reanimated like Frankenstein’s monster, stitched together to form a strange new ‘monster.’

I throw more and more things on the shelves of the image. The piles get higher and higher, and, through this act of re-contextualization, images are switched from one pile to another, transferring meaning and remixing.
I've been called many things: too gay—not gay enough. I’m too fat to be thin, too thin to be fat; too Southern and not Southern enough. My work begs the same questions. It’s wild and too ridged, too loose and too tight. The paintings are too abstract to be figurative and too figurative to be abstract—everything from overt to benign. And, all the labels sink in, eventually.

Human beings have an innate categorizing drive: everything, from people we see to inanimate objects to animals, feelings, families, and natural taxonomies. If it is out there, it has a name and a place to be filed away. We named it to avoid an unfamiliar sign. By nature we want to align ourselves with the familiar and avoid the unnamable. Observing and categorizing is soothing and a way to make conceptual ideas materialize. More simply, we take the ordinary and give it extraordinary emphasis (or vice versa).

I’m interested in categories because, like so many others, I don’t fit very neatly in one or another. Labeling and clustering of unlike things draws attention to ‘same’ and ‘different.’ This uncanny process causes confusion that bring with it new complexities and new meaning.

We deny and destroy things we don't understand. The key to labeling work in a positive manner is to not just see the label but to understand why the label is there. To look between the categories for meaning is to utilize the negative to bring about the positive. The mind wants to figure things out, but sometimes embracing
unknowing brings a better understanding of all things. Givens become stale over time. Though in clustering known and unknown, exciting things can happen.
CHAPTER 13

THE VULGAR CRAFTS THROUGH A QUEER LENS

Like so many Southerners craft festivals were always a hotly anticipated annual ritual. Picture: a stall with bending, painted, polka-dotted bloomer-clad, wooden ladies next to popguns and cowboys in silhouette (ad-hockery, ad nauseam). Bootlegged Disney characters, faces slightly askew, clothespin art, tole-painting, macramé, knitted cozies, every manner of flat-flaccid figures, laid end-to-end in a parade of wacky camp. From Sesame Street to baby Jesus, it seemed to a kid like everyone and everything in the world was connected and crafted. All roads were paved with felt and pipe cleaners, and everyone had a Christmas tree, re-decorated for every holiday.

My established code of aesthetics was cobbled together from a very different type of visual literacy. Instead of merely adopting the vocabulary of the high canons of Art (with a capital "A"), I have always, in some form or another, clung to this initial rudimentary lexicon. The polarity of "high" and "low" were so close that they vibrated from the interstitial tension.

In art school, I was taught that crafty ideas were vulgar. These ideas were sung as singularly vulgar verses, only to be defined as queerly crafted taboos. Which is, strangely enough, what held my attention. There is a visual phenomenon that happens in these overblown, unmentionable representations, that isn’t necessarily accurate to life. But, somehow, it pushes with such visceral force, that one can’t ignore its charm. In this regard, I find inspiration in the work of Mike Kelley. Cary
Levine writes: "... [Kelley's craft works] represents a diverse range of iconic male types, manly but ham-fisted. The apparent creators of Kelley's contraptions try to be macho, but are mired by inadequacy. Again the artist dislocated gender by portraying it as a reenactment of a socially prescribed role—as itself a form of "drag." What he presents in all of this craft works is not really gender bending but rather a sort of gender nullification, triggered by the grotesque misrepresentation or misperformance of its components—both the "feminine" and the "masculine...Kelly exposes the limitations of certain feminist practices, as well as the paradox of being a male artist enlightened by just such practices...Kelley's gender works are essentially caricatures of men trying to make art in the wake of feminism....the objective is not a rescue regressive gender identifies in jeopardy, but rather to offer a broad deconstruction of the bankrupt categories upon which such identities are founded."  

This canon of naïve and folk art is fascinating in its visual language. These are radicalized and othered art forms, often labeled as acts of barbarism by ignorant and arrogant on-lookers. From my point of view, they are hyperbolic entities that are hyper-realized visual movements in themselves. The orientalization of these, and even dowry crafts, became fodder for a gay kid looking to pool resources with similarly oppressed groups.

33 Dowery crafts-meaning traditional domestic skill based crafts learned by young girls, to make them more desirable for courtship and marriage: including but not limed to; fabric based applied work i.e.: weaving, embroider, textiles quilting, spinning, sewing crocheting and knitting; basket weaving; watercolor painting and hand-painted pottery.
Through an adult lens, children’s art may seem like a nonsensical or provocative smattering of observations. However, spending any amount of time with any child, one can note that a break in their language, words or codes doesn’t mean they have a break in thought. Their minds seem to work more like a cognitive tree, straining to branch out. They haven’t lost the ability to observe and keep moving as they have yet to be stunted by that great pit of self-questioning.

Judith Halberstam so succinctly projects that: “children are not coupled, they are not romantic, they do not have a religious morality, they are not afraid of death or failure, they are collective creatures, they are in a constant state of rebellion against their parents, and they are not the masters of their domain. Children stumble, bumble, fail, fall, hurt; they are mired in difference, not in control of their bodies, not in charge of their lives, and they live according to schedules not of their own making.”

Halberstam frames children as the ultimate example of the personification of queer aesthetics in a normative heterosexual taxonomy.

Children are often poets, despite not knowing figures of speech. This absence of self-consciousness censoring children’s visual language makes foreign the normative impotence on the logical, the decipherable and the relationship to the familiar. This can also explain why children’s cartoons, movies and television shows don’t have to explain why and how Spongebob Squarepants lives in a pineapple under the sea. Kids don’t question the absurd. They want to live in a pineapple too!

This is not to say that children are masters of all domains, as queer entities. They are, however, (like queer people) united against a common hegemony: their

---

parents (or traditional, heteronormative societal structures). Furthermore, both are master manipulators of the few things they can control: their bodily functions, their imagination and their abilities to see through fraudulent behavior. Kids, like queer people, may seem silly, but are in fact quite sophisticated and organized.

One can even draw a correlation between kid speak and gay speak. There is a necessity to use ones’ language to speak in code against your dominator. Queer people also try to differentiate themselves, like children, from others. Children have yet to be jaded; queer culture also maintains some of this innocence. Queer people enjoy what is new and fun because they don’t always have full access to everything that the straight world does. This keen ability to collaborate with the similarly oppressed is a cornerstone in these queerly vulgar verses of the outsider.
CHAPTER 14
AN ERECT ARGUMENT FOR A FLACCID GROUND

“All art is erotic.” - Gustav Klimt

In conversation, John Waters pontificates to Bruce Hainley that:

“Contemporary art is sex. The artists, the cute kids working in the galleries, the paperwork from the galleries, the crating and shipping, all the young ‘hangers-on’ crashing the openings—it’s all about sex.” To which Hainley added, “Sex is a prime motivator for making contemporary work, even when the art seemingly doesn’t have anything to do with sex or nudity. Making art—especially if it’s interesting art—is a sexy occupation.”

Many decisions in my practice are based on and around that ever-present elephant in the room—sex; hard and soft marks have implications. Most art historically is phallocentric—concerned with or having a preoccupation with the phallus as a dominating entity. In my work, I struggle to find new ways to undermine the shadow of the monolithic phallus (Figure 16). Arguments against phallocentric work are very complex. So for clarity, here, I focus on material phallocentrism and how Modernist work has a tendency to trend in this fashion.

In the canon of Modernist painting, particularly with the Abstract Expressionists, everything is about measuring the ego and, therefore, the proverbial member of the artist; it’s all ‘dick-measuring,’ if you will. Everything has a tendency to be big, ridged, humorless, monolithic, phallic and dripping with bravado. Sometimes, these drippages, in the case of Jackson Pollock, even go so far as to be ejaculative, emanating from his organ of a paintbrush. Pollock, a long-established man’s man, ponied up to the tape measure to prove artistic virility through his member. He urinated in Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace and exuded the live-hard machismo that this midcentury wave washed over the art landscape. Even Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner, as first-rate Abstract Expressionists themselves, adopted the machismo actions of their male peers, in an effort to measure up in a man’s man’s art world. Internalization of these tenets of the ‘boys club’ by the feminine, to feel powerful, is still prevalent today. The idea that we must play the part of the masculine to be valid is absurd. This patriarchal construct maintains: in order to be legitimized, one must dictate and control rather than negotiate with the viewer. I seriously question why we continue to succumb to this outmoded idea.

We still live in a masculine driven, patriarchal society much like post-World War II America. The conventions of the Abstract Expressionists and their insistence on a rigid, stretched canvas plane still hang over our heads. I battle constantly for alternatives, pushing through to continue a legacy of non-phallocentric, structural bravado, to remind the viewer that these are objects as much as they are images.

Queer artist Robert Raushenburg’s *wall combines* began to make inroads by melding the disparate vernaculars of painting and sculpture, thus blurring
expectations and softening the interminably affected rigidity. Artists having conquered the confines of the plane include: Nancy Spero’s printing on banners, Leon Goleb’s tacked and grommeted skins of canvas and Elizabeth Murray’s latticed cartoon shapes—all deforming that traditional hard edge to the delight of this viewer. The deflations of Claes Oldenburg’s strangely phallic and brash floppy objects collapsed and thus released the content of the original forms. Kiki Smith printed and drew on soft tissue-like papers and even newer generations of artists like Anna Betzbe tackle the floppy ground, presenting a collapsed, economical rug-like form that speaks to the patois of painting and floor works as well.

What differentiates us today is that our voices, as women, as queer peoples, as ‘others’ outside the good ole boys club, have created a dialog amongst ourselves in a much more open manner than was present in the decades of Pollock and Mitchell. We are form and content-driven rather than being merely formally conscious.

It’s a simple idea with complex implications. What we do not discuss in regards to the dissolved matrix is our propensity to equate floppy with sadness, the limp with virility, the loose with flexibility and deflation with release and collapse of content. Frankly, what it is equated with is the feminine and thus a sense of ‘otherness.’ The credit or currency universally withheld from ‘soft works’ relies totally on our availability to recognize our reduced acclaim for the malleable and the passive – the minority.

Strangely (or not), I love Abstract Expressionism. I was reared on it and have studied the artists exhaustively. Nevertheless, an entire generation of makers,
minorities and women particularly, find it difficult to associate their experiences with the rigidity of the canon. Amy Sillman expounds on my observations of the lack of openness to alternatives to rigid modernist accords: “this up and coming new approach to a dialog with these ridged works of the AbExers is that artist like myself... seek not just to mimic or dismantle AbEx, leaving it as a sardonically deplete trace of itself, but to engage it in a dialectical conversation, with a sense of inquisitiveness, openness, and even the risk of actual delight—not undoing but redoing, if from an oblique angle. Even now, as we pass into a time when pencil smudges themselves are an increasingly eroticized thing of the past, the world is till tactile and material. To touch is to know it.”

Sillman and I, like many other painters reared on the tenets of the mid-century painting gods, are driven by the pleasure of making. We are not simply measuring our own virility to shore up the status quo through painting. The dialog is not about deleting the past and replacing it with the new but discussing the new using and subverting the methodology of the old.

The virility of the painting canon (the medium itself) is always under attack. I think painting offers, on one hand, the most brilliant, most conceptual form of art-making. While on the other, it is ridiculously absurd. The trend toward “new media” has captivated the art world. Consequently, as painters, we are often viewed as antiquated or out of touch. But, that is why I am a painter. It has an incredible history that I can pull from and use in a pluralistic fashion, while allowing me to maintain my fluidity within the genre.

Ultimately, the argument in favor of a rigid ground seems to be that everyone else is doing or has done it. The floppy, deflated, unprotected and informal presentation of the un-stretched canvas lends itself a non-doctrinal air, in direct opposition to the above-mentioned works. From my perspective, a crumpled, creased and creviced ground holds meaning, causing the object/image to collapse on itself.
CHAPTER 15

THE FAMILY TREE: A SECTION ABOUT LINEAGE AND VALIDATION

“Storms make trees take deeper roots.”
- Dolly Parton\textsuperscript{38}

As an artist, I look to the past in an effort to trace my artistic lineage. Traditionally, biological, theological, national and cultural “families” have renounced queer people. Displacement of these fundamental signifiers can be jarring; queers are forced to “adopt” people like ourselves, thus we bond through our otherness in order to survive. Below, I discuss the nomenclature of this adopted ancestry as a means to place oneself in an historical and cultural lineage.

The Giving Tree: My maternal grandmother is an amateur genealogist. She makes it her personal responsibility to know where she came from, how her family got where it did and what they went through in the process. Anyone married into “the family” is a relative, no matter how distant. Ancestors are referred as though they were just in the living room, sipping ice tea. In her mind, history is very much alive and actively inserting its influence into the present.

She is hardly alone. The canon of genealogy runs deep in the South. Public libraries have entire rooms and staffs dedicated to the pastime. Amateur historians

take virtual pilgrimages with website subscriptions in order to leave a legacy of documentation for their future descendants.

My upbringing was, for better or worse, heavily focused on a clan-mentality. My mother’s childhood home is across the street from my childhood home. Two of my mother’s sisters lived directly behind my grandparents. We could walk to each other’s homes just as easily as we could phone or even shout out the window. Cousins were more like siblings. Aunts, uncles and grandparents were like pseudo-parents. It was like living in a working-class Kennedy Compound (with less sailing . . . and money). This inescapable togetherness brought an emphasis on bloodlines and family bonds. In this sense, the concept of charting and connecting a heritage or pedigree comes rather naturally.

Like the family clan, validity of lineage is implicit in the art world. Pedigrees are still phantoms, connections are empowered, and how you are aligned in visual culture is eminent. Nevertheless, adopting lineage or marrying into a clan is still possible. Like all those amateur genealogists, I seek out my ancestral visual culture, and question how my forebears affect my present and future work.

How does my work fit into the broader canon? What does one do if the marriage is less than “valid?” Does the family tree fork? Does that render me an artistic “bastard?”
CHAPTER 16

AN “ARTISTIC” FAMILY TREE

(IN PROGRESS)

Though I look to various other artists for many different reasons, my work is firmly rooted in painting. Artists such as Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Arturo Herera and Ida Applebroog tussle with notions of the archival, appropriation and repurposing. All four mine history and pop culture, creating intensely apprehensive hybrid worlds. All four have adopted alternative forms of installation: Goleb’s un-stretched matrixes; Spero’s figures printed directly on gallery walls; Herera’s dissolution of the planes of collage; Applebroog’s use of canvas as sculpture in the round.

In figurative work, I am influenced by Betty Goodwin, Susan Rothenberg, Egon Schiele, and Jenny Saville. These painters deal with the traditions of figurative work by subverting the human body. Goodwin smears her figures, thins the skin and breaks down the nomenclature of acceptable representation. Rothenberg disembowels forms and tilts the viewers’ vantage points. Schiele breaks tradition by depicting the male nude in submissive terms, harkening to traditional poses like the odalisque or the disrobing goddess. Lastly, Jenny Saville represents the figure with a terse dictum: paint = flesh and flesh = paint. She best articulates my interest in animism through paint.

On a purely materialist level, the female Abstract Expressionists, Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell brought new strategies to the canvas:
absorptions, staining, cutting, stabbing and daubing their surfaces. Also, artist Lynda Benglis, in the tradition of Krasner, et al uses the language of painting dimensionally, to create puddles of color bursting through 2D and 3D realms.

Conversely, I connect as well with the cartoonish and illustrative quality of works by Elizabeth Murray, Dana Schutz and Trenton Doyle Hancock. Murray animates objects crucified to a lattice in her works. Schutz mal-forms and goofs up her figures, highlighting absurd dismemberment and dissections of figural forms. Hancock simply pokes fun at the ways we look at ourselves in an erroneously valid way. He takes his work very seriously but himself, less so.

Inevitably, other queer artists have helped shape my work. While David Hockney’s depictions of men have them urinating and showering mid-coitus, he, like Robert Mapplethorpe, has a very matter-of-fact attitude toward his figures that I strive for in my own work. And, though Francis Bacon can be more veiled than Hockney or Mapplethorpe, all three depict the glories and anxiety of their own homosexuality.
Those growing up with few depictions of their social breed can often be found distorting the representations that are available to more closely resemble their own self-image. These figures stand in as surrogates for their own truth/reality.

Queer people (gay men particularly) have had a long love affair with this tactic to gain social agency. The pantheon of those projected upon is large: Saint Sebastian, the mythological Narcissus or flamboyant screen goddesses such as Bette Davis, Judy Garland and Joan Crawford. All share a similarity of non-queerness, but all are effigies of agency that expand the adopted self-iconography of their oppressed spectators. The brashness of these sirens gives voice to the repressed, and these truth tellers become kindred spirits to queers in a time where they could only dream of such brazen expression. A contemporary example of popular art unabashedly aping queer experiences for its own gain can be found in the HBO series, Trueblood. In which the imaginary plotlines of nonhuman vampires struggle for human acceptance in a non-vampire friendly world.

In my case, the social agent was a sleeper hit of the late 1980s. Who Framed Roger Rabbit is a 1988 film noir pastiche directed by Robert Zemeckis. Met with much critical acclaim, the film masterfully utilizes animated and live action. Literary critic for The New York Times, Janet Maslin wrote, upon the films release: “Although
this isn’t the first time that cartoon characters have shared the screen with live actors, it’s the first time they’ve done it on their own terms and made it look real.”

Other films of my childhood employing live action and animated characters onscreen include: *Song of the South* (1946), *Mary Poppins* (1964), and *Pete’s Dragon* (1977). These previous efforts were all Disney projects like, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Though what drew my attention to this particular film was that, unlike the others, its narrative undertones can be read allegorically as an exploitation of queers and queer culture for heteronormative financial and cultural gain. In the movie, animated characters can be read as an analog representation of queer people. They are repressed, ghettoized and subjugated to the role of minstrels, workhorses and cultural moneymakers.

Roger Ebert sets the scene well in his 1988 review of the film: “The Toons live in Toontown, a completely animated world where the climax of the movie takes place, but most of the time, they hang out in a version of Hollywood that looks like it was borrowed from a 1940s private-eye movie. The plot revolves around the murder of a gag-gift mogul, and when Roger Rabbit is framed with the murder, private eye [Eddie Valiant] gets caught in the middle of the action. As plots go, this one will be familiar to anyone who has ever seen a hard-boiled ’40s crime movie—except, of course, for the Toons.”

---

40 Although *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* was a Disney Feature, Touchstone Pictures, one of several film companies under the Disney umbrella, distributed it.
The characters are, of course, at the forefront and begin to tip clues in deciphering queer analogs in the film. The happy, sappy queer: Roger Rabbit is the loud, youthfully innocent titular character. His cohort, Eddie Valiant, initially painted as an alcohol-soaked skeptic, through the course of the film, finds himself rehabilitated by the ever-affable Roger and his merry gang.

Baby Herman, Roger’s on screen film partner, looks like an angelic baby, but is, in actuality off camera, a womanizing, Archie Bunker-like curmudgeon. Their relationship is built on the adult-simpleton contrast—that is, Roger’s character reversed on screen for comic relief. Their duality sets them up as quintessential queer subjects—serving purposes that are vastly opposed to their physical status.

Darkening the scene, Judge Doom, a Joseph McCarthy-era lawman is determined, throughout the film, to eliminate any legacy or agency of the Toons. His tool of capital punishment is a concoction called The Dip, which stands as an overt normalizer and othered annihilator (incidentally, all ingredients in the dip are paint thinners). In the climax, it is revealed that Doom is actually a Toon himself; specifically, the one that killed Valiant’s brother. Having taken the guise of a human to gain financial and political clout, one can liken Doom to the closeted anti-gay politician legislat ing against gay citizens (read: the “fag-hating fag”). He also represents the sad legacy of the pathetic, killer-gay archetype in literature and film. He is the quintessential sad queer character. While the two businessmen in the film, Marvin Acme and R.K. Maroon, represent the quintessential duplicitous benefactor. Although they ostensibly protected the Toons, they did so in service of their own livelihoods—ultimately protecting nothing but their bottom lines.
The queerest character of the lot must be Jessica Rabbit. She steps in as the iconic drag queen performer in a traditional gay nightclub. She is a caricature of the feminine: a brazen gay icon like Joan Crawford, Bette Davis or Veronica Lake. She epitomizes the exaggerated, secondary sexual characteristic employed by male drag queens. Her attributes are utilized comically, as weapons, throughout the film. Of all the Toons, she is her own best agent.

Film sets carry as much narrative weight as the characters acting upon them. Among the most memorable sets, Roger Rabbit’s domain is no different. ToonTown is the vibrant, colorful city where the animated Toons live. It stands adjacent to Hollywood, California and exactly represents the queer world: the West Hollywood of cartoon characters, the gay ghetto (but nonetheless, a nice place to live). It represents a narrowing space for queer culture, and the normalizing world, pushing othered people onto otherwise undesirable parcels of land. Yet these othered people manage to thrive.

Los Angeles, in direct opposition, is the societal norm. The character of LA is aligned with the biological, the actual, and the traditional roles of identity. It is a place dependent on the energy of its Toontown neighbors. From my point of view, it is the narrowing of queer culture down to the level of banality.

Many of the Toons perform in the Ink and Paint club, a setting emblematic of a fundamental queer space in LGBT history: the club. In this case, human characters inhabit the space with ease, yet the Toons are all in positions of servitude. Cigarette

---

42 The character of Jessica Rabbit has been taken up, since the release of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, as a popular character illusion by female impersonators all over the world, most famously by Erica Andrews.
girl, Betty Boop even comments to Eddie: “Work’s been kinda slow since cartoons went to color, but I’ve still got it, Eddie”. Commenting on her own agency, Boop is marginalized in the film because of her color (or lack there of), underscoring the inequalities between Toon and human characters.

The most significant gesture in the film, though, must be the ‘The Wall.’ It is the barrier between Toontown and the real world. The wall is the intersection between the normal world and the queer world. It is an ambiguous space, though it serves as the rupture point for political ambiguity – eventually proving more easily penetrable than initially thought.

Many visual queues from the movie can be found in my work. For example: The character of the abyss — the Acme Portable Hole—recurs in varying forms, depicted as a large slashed hole with objects protruding or figures being drawn in (Figure 20); Judge Doom’s amorphous demise parallels the dimorphism occurring in all my figures; the fantastical mutations of my figures directly shadow the relationships between Toons and humans in the film; the use of monochromatic figures in some works, in direct opposition to more saturated ones harkens to Betty Boop’s quote, above.

The basic narrative of the film is simple enough. Though hopefully, one can now appreciate the implication of the story in a much richer, diverse, and darker frame. In dissecting Roger Rabbit, my key aim is to highlight the multifaceted array of representations that I consult in my own practice. Many of which come from sundry and unexpected places. I appropriate and re-present many of these structures and characteristics within my paintings. The original intention of ‘Roger
Rabbit’ was not as an allegory or queer-exploitation film. However, through my lens, it can be seen as a curious insight into the long-utilized narrative of heteronormative financial and cultural gain over queer realities.

These surrogate images help to re-present and retell the story of those, like myself, who are similarly marginalized. These moving images, like many representations from my archive, are translated through my work, to enact contemplation on these parallel, unequal realities.
My painting is material driven. Composed of both traditional and non-traditional techniques, Firing the Canon’s, primary body of work is composed of water media based. I utilize both watercolor and acrylic paints (artists acrylcs, craft paint, spray paint and interior and exterior paints), acrylic mediums (tar gel, retarders, stand gels, pouring medium, gloss and matt mediums, granulation medium and spray clear acrylics) and plastic grounds as well as traditional papers. I work by building up surfaces, beginning with contours, either done freehand or from projected images. I then orient the work horizontally and begin to dissolve the images with water and medium—puddling watercolor that eventually evaporates over many hours. The effects I try to achieve are: slow dries, puddling, bursts, flat opaque washes, linear marks, scratches, smears, drips, erasures, wet on dry, dry on dry and over-painting.
When my graduate experience began, I felt incredibly out of place within my discipline and my practice. I found myself in constant battle to reconcile my methods with competing standards, which never seemed to align with my quirky sensibilities. I relied too much on intellect and ignored intuition. But, in the span of three years, I have managed to overcome that sense of loss-of-self. The rigor of making, reading and personal experience has enabled me to work through insecurities, in fact synthesizing my practices into a greater, sustainable whole.

In time, I began to focus on spreading the joy and conciseness that one can only find through self-exploration. I told everyone that would listen (and more than a few who wouldn’t): I am a gay soothsayer; I divine my future. I’m the grand priestess of the cult of wild boys. And, I am my own oracle.

In addressing ghosts of my personal and historical past, it occurred to me I would have to reconfigure how I use their language. This is realized through my performance of collecting and the physicality of my painting. But, the challenge continues to be pushing beyond all those dead souls with my own, unique brand and process of making.

I spend a great deal of time talking about societal structures, particularly those we seem incessantly to measure ourselves against. But, there is no common yardstick. The canon is the thing we all have in common. It is our frame of reference—our common jumping-off point. In that, we all begin with a standard, but
at a certain stage, we must decide which parts to keep and which to let go—hence the name of my show: Firing the Canon

This has been both a humbling and an invigorating experience—an extraordinary journey to find my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; tunneling through a mile of rubble to find freedom, and, to no great surprise, that new and interesting challenges lay on the other side.
WORKS CITED


PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST AT WORK
FLOORPLAN LEGEND

A. *Shona Thought My Abyss Was a Radiator* (See: Figure 18)
B. *Grey Matter* (See: Figure 7)
C. *Institutional Purge* (See: Figure 10)
D. *Backfire* (See: Figure 1)
E. *Seed Bed* (See: Figure 16)
F. *Firing The Canon* (See: Figure 5)
G. *One if By Hand Two If By Sea* (See: Figure 14)
H. *Shrinking Rose* (See: Figure 21)
I. *Butt Salad* (See: Figure 4)
J. *Through The Sinkhole* (See: Figure 23)
K. *Pink Passage* (See: Figure 15)
FIGURES

Figure 1: Backfire

(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 2: Backfire (Detail No. 1)

(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 3: Backfire (Detail No. 2)

(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 4: *Butt Salad*

(30 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 5: *Firing the Canon*

(30 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 6: *Firing the Canon* (Detail)

(30 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 7: Grey Matter

(60 x 69 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)
Figure 8: Grey Matter (Detail No. 1)

(60 x 69 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)
Figure 9: *Grey Matter* (Detail No.2)

(60 x 69 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)
Figure 10: *Institutional Purge*

(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2013)
Figure 11: *Institutional Purge* (Detail No. 1)

(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2013)
Figure 12: *Institutional Purge* (Detail No. 2)

(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2013)
Figure 13: *Institutional Purge* (Detail No. 3)

(40 x 50 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2013)
Figure 14: *One If by Hand Two If by Sea*

(48 x 60 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)
Figure 15: *Pink Passage*

(26 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2012)
Figure 16: *Seed Bed*

(18 x 24 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 17: *Seed Bed* (Detail)

(18 x 24 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 18: *Shona Thought My Abyss Was A Radiator*

(60 x 60 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2013)
Figure 19: *Shona Thought My Abyss Was A Radiator* (Detail No. 1)

(60 x 60 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2013)
Figure 20: *Shona Thought My Abyss Was A Radiator* (Detail No. 2)

(60 x 60 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2013)
Figure 21: Shrinking Rose

(18 x 24 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 22: Shrinking Rose (Detail)

(18 x 24 inches, watercolor and acrylic on mylar, 2012)
Figure 23: *Through the Sinkhole*

(26 x 40 inches, watercolor and acrylic on polypropylene, 2013)
FIRING THE CANON
INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPHS