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May 25, 2004

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NARRATING FRIENDSHIP:
THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN J.B. CHILDERS AND MYSELF

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Developing J.B. Childers

For the past ten months I have explored the life of a deceased artist named Joseph Barley “J.B.” Childers. In the graduate catalog Gregory Volk summarizes Childers as:

an alienated Korean War Veteran, who took up painting as a refuge from his troubles, and who also doesn't exist. Childers who is naturally right-handed, painted everything left-handed because of a war wound, and so Engelmann, who is left-handed, painted with his right hand, which is quite a limitation.¹

Of course, there's more to the story than that and the writings that follow will explain many of my reasons for pursuing this project.

The Childers project has grown and changed since its conception nearly a year ago. It began with one rule and two underdeveloped goals. The rule was that all of the work I made under the name of J.B. Childers would be made only with my right hand. As a left handed person this was certainly debilitating and I was forced to relearn many of the art techniques that had long since become automatic in my left hand. Consequently, I hoped to encourage the development of a new style that would adapt to this handicap and become a merger between my artistic knowledge and new found lack of ability.

The first goal was to use the concept of a character to avoid being restricted by a thesis, an idea, style, technique, or my own history. Since Childers was my character, his work could look like anything. I imagined, quite incorrectly, that I wanted to produce art

free from restrictions and responsibility and that this project would allow me to do just that. The second goal was a response to the powerful role that biography plays in shaping our understanding of art works. By constructing a false history I could not only alter the relationship between the viewer and the work, but my own relationship as well.

Additionally, the false biography held the promise of creating the sense of permanence and seriousness that comes with age.

The Childers character went through many alterations and his solidification was not easy. I first saw J.B. Childers as a loner, disliked by his peers. He was a self loathing art dabbler, insecure and moved by fashion to grab the newest trend. Childers's art would be a collection of second rate versions of art movements from the 20th century. Perhaps something good would emerge from seeing it all together - perhaps not. In this initial conception, he was a schlock Pop artist, a lazy Minimalist, an arrogant Conceptualist. Childers became the worst artist that I could imagine.

During the summer of 2003 I organized a series of staged interviews with the hope of filming a fake documentary about J.B. Childers. I told the interviewees, who were actors and friends, that Childers was dead and that they should feel free to say whatever they thought about him. Of course, since they didn't know Childers, I also had to explain who he was and the nature of their relationship. The more I told the interviewees about Childers's dubious art career, the more negative the interviews became. Eventually, "Bill" who played Childers's younger brother Donald began to feel that if there was nothing good to say about someone then the best thing was to say nothing at all. Merle who played one of Childers's fellow artists, gave a two hour interview about J.B. Childers's "poor manners"

and how he would try to get grants and recognition just to avoid having to work. This seemed to make a great story, J.B. Childers as a despised artist who could only be enjoyed in death. To complete the project, I began painting the pictures that would constitute the bulk of the show.

It proved to be nearly impossible to intentionally paint the bad, derivative work I envisioned for Childers. In addition, as a character he was so dislikable that I could not understand him or his motives. I do not know if this is an indication of weakness as an actor or an author, but I can say with certainty that this vision of Childers became untenable. I soon reached a point in which Childers wasn't a painter at all. He was someone else, a regular guy, with regular ambitions. He began to resemble the people I interviewed. None of them were "artists", but many engaged in activities I can only describe as art. I thought of Jim, a missile designer and an avid builder and pilot of remote controlled airplanes. His airplanes are very large, often with wingspans in excess of six feet. Many of them are only covered with transparent cellophane, their inner supports fully revealed. When seen from below his planes glow like gemstones. Another interviewee was Merle, a floor supervisor in a steel mill who writes poetry for his labor union's newsletters. In addition, he has been memorizing poems by Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson and Carl Sandburg. He can recite from memory, hours of poetry without notes and often performs in parks for free, taking requests.

Jim and Merle pursue these passions, not as careers, but for other reasons. We could dismiss the activities as hobbies, but that is unfair. Certainly, most artists do not make careers from selling art, yet we would not call their activity a "hobby." What Jim and

Merle do goes far beyond personal amusement and becomes evidence of dreams, ambitions and fears as well. Their work may never be part of *our* art world, but it functions as art in other worlds.

Childers took on these characteristics partly because it fit his character and partly because it fit my character. Of course, this is a romantic vision of an artist, but it was one in which I could invest myself. Childers became a reflection of me, a vision of myself in another life. I no longer needed to pretend to be him to make his art. Childers *was* me with a different past, but a past that I knew and understood.

By this point, I had given up all thoughts of producing art free from the restrictions I listed earlier. On the contrary, I started to embrace the restrictions. I found that I could not make Childers's paintings unless I defined his character. Once defined, I had to accept the range and limitations of his artistic expression. Channeling my energy into the constraints of the Childers character became a technique for attaining focus.

In addition to functioning as a lens, Childers also functioned as a mask. When I wore the mask, I could become mired in whole sets of emotions and concerns that I am not interested in expressing in my everyday life. Remove the mask and I could happily return to being "Jimmy-James." By creating a character I found a way to connect with my own experiences, without personalizing the connection or resorting to autobiography and self-revelation.

Even more significantly, I isolated my social personality from the paintings and allowed myself to make work that reveals fear, fragility and nostalgia without resorting to ironic sanitation.

Certainly, the entire project could be seen as an ironic disguise, but that is a misreading. I am very serious about these paintings, and even though I resist claiming authorship, it is not because I am interested in misleading the viewers about the source of the paintings. More precisely, the paintings are the materials that create an image of the author. This show is an intimate self-portrait restrained by the limitations of J.B. Childers.

Influences

Developing and exploring fictional characters is one of the traditions of literature. As readers, we are trained not to mistake the voice of a character with that of the author. Additionally, as readers we know how to believe in a fiction, become engrossed in it, yet retain the power to put the book down and return to reality. The presence of art objects claiming to be artifacts changes the balance of this equation. We are not accustomed to participating in fiction that involves relationships between physical objects. It is often assumed that an object is either “real” or it is a fraud. How then does one use objects to create an engrossing, fictional experience that does not rely on the audience’s ignorance of fiction? To find an answer to this question I first turned to Christopher Guest’s “mockumentary” movies such as *Spinal Tap* and *Waiting for Guffman*, Peter Schickele’s satirical composer, *P.D.Q. Bach* and David Wilson’s *Museum of Jurassic Technology*.

Spinal Tap is a fictional film about a touring rock band shot in a documentary style. The filming and the acting is done so well that many people did not (and still do not) realize that the film is fictional. To further the spoof, Guest and the other “members” of the band later toured as *Spinal Tap*, playing rock venues and selling records in stores. Even though it is widely understood that *Spinal Tap* is “fake” the very fact that they exist as a real band, obliterates the separation between fact and fiction. Guest, along with co-writer Eugene Levy, has written other fake documentaries in which the sense of artificiality

is more obvious. Yet, even in these the acting and writing is so convincing that Guest and his actors become personally transparent, revealing only the apparent dimensions of their fictional characters. Guest does not make any efforts to reveal the artifice to his audience, nor does he make efforts to hide it. Yet, understanding that the films are an illusion is one of their most enjoyable characteristics. Guest relies on a knowledgeable and attentive audience, who are either familiar with his past work, have learned about it from someone else, or will notice details like a camera recording an inaccessible event. Understanding the films as fiction is solely the responsibility of the audience.

The composer Peter Schickele has made two distinct careers for himself. In one, he is a modern composer and music professor, in another he continues to “discover” compositions by P.D.Q. Bach, an obscure 18th century composer. P.D.Q. Bach, however, is fictitious and everything about him including the elaborate documentation that arrives in the form of musical scores, bizarre period instruments, contracts for performances and even receipts for hotels and taverns is invented by Schickele. The compositions that he makes in the name of P.D.Q. are very clever musical satires that, although indisputably funny, are often very interesting as compositions in their own right. Although, I am not making a satire, I cannot help, but to at least try for a bit of humor. I imagined that J.B. Childers’s paintings might be able to maintain a dual existence being funny, as well as serious and contemplative.

David Wilson’s *Museum of Jurassic Technology* is a museum experience that offers both fact and fiction woven together. Though the exhibitions are too numerous and complicated to comment on directly, the *MJT* serves as a critique and celebration of

museums and the power that that style of presentation holds over our imaginations. One exhibit described an attempt to catch a very small, never before captured bat using an array of giant lead sheets. The story was completely bizarre, yet the details were so precise that I questioned my own judgment. Several months later, I read an article that described a device used to detect neutrinos. The description matched Wilson's bat trap in every detail. Though Wilson presents everything as certain fact, some of the exhibitions seem so outrageous that they must be fiction. Ultimately, it makes little difference. What is interesting is that he uses the museum experience as a medium for fiction.

These all seemed to be logical ways to present fiction through artifacts. I decided to approach Childers as an actor approaches a role, acting with enough veracity to achieve Guest's degree of personal transparency while backing it up with Schickele's outlandish documentation and Wilson's eye for museum affectation. As I continued on the project, my ambitions gradually changed, however. Although acting and stagecraft are still important in the project, I became more interested in the space that existed between J.B. Childers and me. When he became an altered reflection of myself, the previous obsession with his personal characteristics was replaced with a generalized interest in the nature of my relationship to fictional experience.

Viewing a painting involves the superimposition of any number of fictive experiences. The sense of space inside a picture plane is one such experience, the perception of art history surrounding a painting is another. Diverse experiences and sensations coexist around the same physical object. I sought to manipulate the peripheral layers of fiction that affect paintings. Peripheral layers such as, the premise of the show,

stories that surround the objects and the biography of the artist can be constructed by curators, critics or the artist themselves. Even titles have the ability to establish some of these layers.

Of course, there is nothing new about artists trying to manipulate peripheral space. Andy Warhol, Joseph Kosuth, Julian Schnabel, et al., have all used various techniques to instill their work with narrative and to control its' critical reception. Arguably, my manipulations are different since they are not the result of a strategy for self-promotion, but instead are my primary tools for exploration and creation.

To examine my relationship to painting and fiction, I turned to the work of Ilya Kabakov and Komar & Melamid. Both artists are involved with an exploration of painting focused outside of the painted surface. In a sense, their paintings are props, but they are more than that because, they are not generic or fungible. In fact, the paintings are quite memorable in their own right. Even though these artists are skeptical of painting, it is still an important and desirable practice for them.

Kabakov's installations involving fictional artists obviously have direct parallels to my own project. In installations like, *He Went Crazy*, *Undressed*, *Ran Away Naked* and *The Artist's Despair, or the Conspiracy of the Untalented* Kabakov denies and claims authorship simultaneously. In a foreword explaining *He Went Crazy*... Kabakov writes:

All those paintings have been created not by Kabakov, but by his invented protagonist. Since the invention of the latter, he has drawn over 30 paintings of his own. Presence of a narrator that can't be considered as one with the author is a method widely explored in literature, but in painting its usage may seem somewhat new.²

Kabakov goes on to describe the protagonist, his life, his ambitions and how he ultimately went crazy. Like *The Artist's Despair...* this is presented in the form of an installation. Paintings are stacked on top of one another, the area is marked off with a rope or a gate and specific pieces of furniture are added in front of the work. In the case of *He Went Crazy...* it is clear that we are seeing a recreation of the communal apartment in which the artist lived. *The Artist's Despair...* is different. We see a series of paintings behind glass. The glass has been shattered, the paintings severely damaged. As the story goes, the artist himself rushed into the gallery broke the glass and damaged his own work. When others tried to clean up the mess and fix the paintings, a young art critic interpreted the artist's actions as an attempt to create an installation. Accordingly, he told everyone to leave the space alone and he preserved the entire scene by placing a rope around the area.

In this fiction, Kabakov plays the role of the artist who damages the work, the critic who interprets it as an installation, and the author who records the events. Though there is no doubt that Kabakov is responsible for the whole assembly, by dividing the actions between different characters he indicates his skepticism of painting, installation and writing. He does not want to claim that the work comes from a unified body of thought; instead it is the result of conflicting interests and understandings. Kabakov's empathetic treatment of his characters implies that they are extensions and expressions of himself, in the same way that Childers is an extension of myself.

Though I drew conceptual connections to Kabakov's work, I decided early on to move away from creating an installation. I was not comfortable with the work relying on the power of the art gallery for its potency. I felt it to be a much more challenging goal to

create paintings that have enough power to stand outside the gallery, outside of the art world and outside of my fabricated narrative. Part of this ambition came from, J.B. Childers who would never have intended for his work to be seen in this manner. The other part was simply a personal challenge to make, under the circumstances, the best work possible.

Working with someone, even if it is your own alter ego, requires a method for collaboration. Komar & Melamid speak of themselves as collaborative artists - not just with each other, but the entire society. *The Most Wanted* and *The Most Unwanted* series of paintings base their content, style, size, etc., on the results of a questionnaire. This polling was conducted around the world with enough people to make the results as accurate as professional political polls. Once the polls were tabulated, Komar & Melamid made paintings conforming to the majority's "most wanted" choices and "most unwanted." Of course, this shields the artists from taking responsibility for the paintings. Instead the artists take responsibility for the poll. What intrigued me was that Komar & Melamid could have conducted the poll and quit. The results would have been interesting and informative. Yet, they go out of their way to produce a painting based on the polling results. Their project goes beyond a conceptual investigation and becomes a real exploration into collaborative art making. In a 1994 interview, Vitaly Komar described their polls as a, "search for new co-authors." He went on to profess, "Everyone+ works collaboratively. That is why society exists."³

In no way can I claim that my interviewing / acting process was a form of polling; there were no statistical process used whatsoever. Yet, the Childers project is a

collaborative one. I have said that Childers became an altered reflection of myself, but the mirror that produced that altered reflection is an assemblage of collaborators. I do not believe in the artist as a, “solitary creator”⁴. To that end, I used J.B. Childers to make a form of collaborative art that preserved the traditional studio practice that I find personally rewarding while incorporating the imagery and motivations of others.

My Relationship with Narrative

Story telling is an old tradition in my family and it was ingrained in me as a child. Sometimes the stories that we tell each other are true, sometimes they are not. In practice, however, the difference is immaterial. It is understood that even the most outlandish tales, are just real stories in different clothes. Our understanding of narrative involves the belief that story telling is a form of self-realization. They are used to create meaning and continuity from personal experiences. Stories, in effect, create the storyteller. In terms of painting, I would contend that the narratives that a viewer knows or imagines to be connected with an image control most visual understanding.

Narrative has had a two-fold application in my project. On one hand, I have used it to create external information meant to shape and distort the viewing experience. On the other, I have used it to externalize my own creative forces. Self-analysis is difficult for any artist and I am no exception. My previous work as an abstract painter involved a reactionary and reciprocal practice, in which I developed certain sets of actions, colors and applications of paint, executed them, and then reacted spontaneously to the results. These improvisations were built from the same library of forms that created the foundation. Since I am also a musician, I naturally drew connections to jazz improvisation in which an established tune is rehearsed and played, and then a series of improvisations are built on top of that form. I can describe the events that contributed to the construction of the

improvisational moment, but there is no way to adequately describe how the improvisation actually works. The net result was that I had complete control over the composition that formed the foundation of the painting and no control over the improvisation built on top of it.

By externalizing creativity into the voice of an invented author, I gained the power to partially define and limit the improvisational aspects of painting. Since I am the author of the narrative I know things about Childers that he would never know about himself. For instance, I know when and how he died, I know what happens to his paintings and I know that he gets to have a retrospective. Certainly, he did not know these things. Using the full weight of this information allows for a completely artificial and omnipotent power of preparation and planning. Yet, the reality of making the work requires that I, the author, leave and let Childers take over. He is unpredictable; I do not know what he will do or why he will do it. He is all things that are unknowable about creativity and he is not afraid to alter any aspect of my composition. After all, it is his life. Of course, I still do not have “control” over this aspect of painting, but through J.B. Childers, I can define its parameters.

Though the wording may be peculiar, I do not believe that the process that I am describing is actually any different from the process that most artists follow when producing art. We all have moments of clarity, confusion and second-guessing. And we all have limits to our abilities to self analyze. To metaphorically paraphrase Heisenberg, we may be able to describe what we are doing, or where we are going, but it is impossible

to know both with certainty. Practically, J.B. Childers was an externalization of the aspects of my own art production that I either could not or did not want to understand.

I do not expect the audience to see the intricacies of this relationship from looking at the work in this show (although there may be some who surmise it). Nor do I want to provide a didactic experience that instructs a viewer to believe in the narrative and recreate the paths I have followed. I have left the Childers narrative accessible in the form of a brochure, but there I no emphasis to require people to read it. Even that material has been left slightly vague and unclear with the hope that it will help to create gaps between the narrative and the pieces themselves. The audience is allowed to investigate as much or as little as they like, providing for the possibility of seeing this show, and its artwork, inside a collection of removable and interchangeable frames connected through various narratives.

One of the narratives for these pieces involves a fictional character who never attended art school, another is a story about being in graduate school and trying to be creative and simultaneously self aware, another is about painting deer and wilderness, and yet another involves physical handicap. As I continue to work as an artist, it is unclear how I will relate to this series of narratives in the future. Even the artwork in this show will have a life beyond the walls of the Anderson Gallery and some of the issues that have fueled the production of these pieces will lose relevancy when removed from this space. Like my working relationship with J.B. Childers, I cannot fully predict the outcome, but I am looking forward to seeing the results.

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List of References

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