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Extra Ordinary

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

By

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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

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Abstract

EXTRA ORDINARY

By Lana Waldrep MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Major Director: Christine Gray, Assistant Professor, Painting and Printmaking

The title of this thesis *Extra Ordinary* is intentionally ambiguous. Depending on how you read it, it can refer to either the very ordinary or to that which is outside of the ordinary. The works described within these pages functions similarly. From person to person and with time they move from the ordinary to beyond and back again. How can something be both mysterious and understood at the same time? How can I as a painter create a space where diametrically opposed forces can coexist and what is the effect of viewing such an object? This thesis addresses these issues with personal anecdote and through description of artwork and the art making process.

I.

The neighbors living behind my childhood home had a yard that could easily be described as untended. It was overgrown with weeds and thick with invasive bamboo. The swimming pool was filled with impenetrable black water which could have easily been the source of the mosquitoes that bit me so often. As an adult, I understand my former neighbor's property to have simply been an aberration from the social norm of lawn maintenance. However, as a child, it was a treacherous swamp inspiring many stories shared between my brother and me. It has been a decade since I last peered over the fence into that terrifying piece of real estate, but it still holds a powerful place in my imagination.

A nearby funeral home had a minor fire and went out business around the time I was born. It was located between a bank—first a First Texas Bank, then First Gibraltar, and finally a Bank of America—and a shopping strip which featured a locksmith and a Mrs. Baird's Bakery resale shop. It was the site of a number of speculative attempts to look inside and catch a glimpse of a ghost, a dead body, or even just a casket.

We dug up a rock from the backyard, unusually heavy relative to its size; it must have been a meteorite that fell to earth long, long ago. It was similar in shape and size to the ear of my grandmother's chosen presidential candidate—Ross Perot. It was a prized, precious object.

One street over, construction supplies and large concrete forms appeared mysteriously overnight. The site became a playground; the materials left behind became forts.

The most ordinary places and things were wonderful and important. So much was left unexplained or poorly understood. I was unencumbered by all the dull facts and usually had no where particularly important to go. Now that I am older and have firmer grasp on reality I find that I must consciously suspend my disbelief every once in a while so that I can conjure up this sense of excitement in the mundane again. It helps me to notice and appreciate the spaces in between my destinations.



Figure 1

II.

Several years ago, around the middle of college, I was taking a black and white photography class. I began taking pictures of the area around where my parents lived. We had moved to suburbs when I was in high school, and going back to visit as a college student the terrain was still very foreign to me. The houses under construction stood like skeletons. They began to quickly eat up the north Texas prairie. The photos

were initially made out of simple disgust, but in black and white the images were far more weird and complicated.

Although I enjoyed going out on an “expedition” and snapping pictures, I admit I was never very interested in making black and white photography—the lab was always cold, smelled of pickles, and I could never seem to remove all of the dust particles from the film. By that time, I also knew that I had an undeniable and unshakable attachment to painting. On a deeper level, there was something unsatisfying about how ready the association was between the image in the photo and the object or place in the world. Painting provided an extra permutation and some much needed space in that moment.



Figure 2

Interested in seeing how the lens of the camera had changed how I saw things, I later went out and purchased an old Polaroid camera from the Goodwill. It cost me \$4.98. The film, now discontinued, was significantly more costly. It satisfied my desire for an immediate, physical image—something that both traditional film and digital lack. It distorted reality even more than black and white film.

Each Polaroid picture, in its 3"x 3.125" frame was like a little painting—wonderful in its imperfections and distortions. Watching the image slowly appear from within a plasma-like goo was similar to the act of faith and curiosity that is involved when you start a painting—sure, you have an idea of what the finished product will look like but the particularities are still uncertain. The condition of the resulting images was all over the map. Sometimes they were grainy. The



Figure 3

color tends toward the extremes in value and temperature. The quality of that color could be very temperamental. Sometimes you get a pack that would totally wash everything out. Take a pack through the X-Ray machine on the airplane, every resulting exposure will have a weird, purple-blue cast.

These tiny objects became not only the source imagery for my paintings, but the foundation of the way I think about and approach color, paint application, and image choice. Being restricted to sources of such small size and such varying levels of information, I became forced to learn to invent, trust my intuitions and to exaggerate. At over a dollar an exposure I became very picky about which images did and did not deserve to make it into my database of images.

In February of 2008 it was announced that Polaroid 600 film was to be discontinued at the end of the year. At this time I began to transition on to other sources—though still predominately photographic. During this time of transition I realized that after working with this particular kind of film for so long, the way I thought about representing my subject matter changed. The added steps of recording a place or an object and then analyzing it put extra distance between me and the original. There is a sense of remove in my work—a kind of coldness that is leftover from my time working with the Polaroids.



Figure 4

There are approximately five hundred Polaroid images in the collection that I keep in a shoebox. Many with spots of paint or gooey linseed oil smudges. I am sure that there are a couple hundred more scattered in various places.

Although the acknowledged use of photography in making paintings has been around since the middle of the last century; admitting my use of photos still feels almost like a shameful confession to make.

There is a connection to and between photography and the ordinary. Perhaps, it is because of the relative ease of its creation. A camera is easily taken along. It

captures the spontaneous. It freezes the momentary. It traps the ephemeral. There is no need to conjure, prepare, or prioritize. This is a capacity that is conducive to the nonhierarchical. A camera is ready and willing to back up your memory—to transform the forgettable into the unforgettable, to make a document of everyday life. This is something that many photographers and other artists associated with the camera have picked up on. It is something that has and continues to influence me.

The first photographs I ever really found myself interested in were those of Bernd and Hilla Becher. I first saw them when I was at the end of high school. The Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art had recently reopened in its new building designed by Tadao Ando. The museum has in its permanent collection several of their photographs of water towers. Seeing several of these water towers in black and white quietly occupying the center of their respective picture planes, I noticed the differences in the shapes of these objects, how odd they were, how sci-fi they were. They seemed too anomalous to simply disappear into the background of the towns and country sides where they resided. They were greater than their utility.

The pop artists—those notorious for their love of the low and the ordinary--were among the first to really openly embrace photography and “mechanical reproduction” as a means to an ends and not just an end unto to itself. Ed Ruscha’s famous gas station paintings and the photographs associated with them particularly stand out to me as influential. In the same way, I have always really admired David Hockney’s swimming pools.

The choice to work with your own photos, shot with your own terrible camera is a significant one. It adds something of the personal without resorting to the sentimental or

the cliché, but more importantly the resultant photographs are usually of such poor quality that they are of no interest to anyone else—at least not as photographs, maybe as objects (probably not). How terrible would it be if the source was more interesting than the product!

Switching from imagery obtained with a crappy film camera to imagery obtained with a crappy digital camera is significant as well. Each exposure loses its preciousness to a great degree. What was once so finite is now bound only by the room on a memory card. Priorities change. Digital also carries with it a new kind of flexibility, editability. In his book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, William J. Mitchell introduces the idea of the post-photography. In the post-photographic era, photography and truth become further unaligned due to the easy manipulation of digital images.¹ Although I had never been a slave to my source material,² I found myself becoming much less truthful to actual light. The whole issue became less important. The light stands outside of time and environment, it is arbitrary and doctored like a photo shopped image. This aspect of something subtle being off, not quite real, not quite right is the way that much of our images are presently consumed. You need not look further than the magazine covers at the grocery store check out stand. While this issue does not take precedence for me—it is another layer to the work. It is one more way in which I am considering my source, the history of it, and my relationship to it.

¹ Mitchell, William J., *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1994)

² I have always been concerned with my paintings primarily as paintings. In order to make a good representational painting, it must also work as a good abstract painting.

III.

My work places viewers in the position of the outsider—the one who is watching uninvolved, analyzing uninvested. There is a loneliness in each of my paintings. This is intentional. It serves as a subtext that subverts the beauty sitting on the surface. There is something quiet, cold, removed in each of my works. This is an attitude that suggests a withholding, a bit of the unknowable, and consequently provokes introspection.

Visiting family when you have grown up is always a strange experience. You have changed, moved on. Patterns and priorities in lifestyle and point of view are glaringly unaligned. This is why the holidays can be so stressful. You belong, but you don't. The places are familiar, but you see them differently than you used to. There is the capacity to feel like an insider and an outsider at the same time.

This duality is something that I bring to my work. I see my paintings as both representations and abstractions. They depict the banal and the ubiquitous but it's not enough for me to just stop there. How something can, like my neighbor's neglected lawn, be both mysterious and understood at the same time? How can I as a painter create a space where diametrically opposed forces can coexist and what is the effect of viewing such an object? This creates moments of anxiety in my studio. How much information do I give? How much do I exclude? When and how do I exaggerate color or form? Most of the time these questions are made intuitively and then I choose consciously to commit to them.

I present my viewers the ordinary without the aid of context to assign it its ordinariness. I like to leave my viewers with themselves. An empty, broken sign placed in front of an empty sky is more curious than an empty, broken sign in front of an empty

store, lining a busy street, between a used car dealership and a Krispy Kreme donut shop. The sign has no function. Being broken, it is no longer functional as means of attracting attention. Being isolated from an environment, the sign no longer fulfills the role of being a string of contingent information. The sign is almost entirely outside of the world of function³. Being close to this outside it is capable, at times, of escaping its read as a representation of the utilitarian and to be seen as minimal form and shape. This creates a kind of oscillation that I find to be ideal.



Figure 5

³ The sign is similar in way to Heidegger's broken hammer. A functional object is not often examined. Should it break—no longer be ready-at-hand—that all changes.

IV.

A common thread connecting the conceptual content with the formal is slowness.

There are moments of quixotic discovery, wonder, curiosity, confusion on any street that anyone passes any day. However, when driving we tend to be preoccupied with getting where we need to go. Worse still, our minds might actually be over thousand miles away—talking on a cell phone. There is this



Figure 6

entire dangerous, new phenomenon of texting while driving. This is true, to a lesser extent, to when traveling by foot or bike. However, when I consciously decide to slow down I begin to notice what is typically confined to my peripheral vision—a precariously stacked tower of pallets; a row of rooftops that, like distant mountain peaks, seem to extend far beyond the horizon.

These moments happen most when traveling, when far from obligations, deadlines, and normal routines. On long, cross country road trips the sense of urgency disappears and the mind begins to wander while in the passenger seat. When I am walking around a city I have never been, I actively look for the novel. I might find this novelty in the pattern of the sidewalk or in the design of their public restrooms. At home,

I like to take mini vacations and recreate these experiences in my everyday life. These trips are a little bit of Situationist *dérive*⁴ and a whole lot of slow movement slow⁵. My most interesting finds tend to come from these events that take place in my most well-trod stomping grounds. There is a sense of delight that occurs from seeing what has been seen on dozens of occasions. It hearkens back to way that I previously had so effortlessly experienced my home, my backyard, and the surrounding blocks.

My paintings are made slowly. They are built up in layers. They are intended to unfold upon multiple viewings. Craft, therefore, is inextricably tied to the content of my work.

There is a freedom from working within given parameters. It allows for inventiveness elsewhere. Painting for me, especially the fact that it is oil paint, is incredibly important. I use it as a default setting. There is no question about what materials I am choosing to use—I already



Figure 7

know. Consequently, material choice does not dominate the conversation surrounding

⁴ Guy DeBord, in his essay “Theory of Dérive”, says of *dérive* that it is when “one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.”

⁵ Carl Honore’s *In Praise of Slowness* and Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma* constitute most of my knowledge of this movement

my work. There is a difference, however, between material choice and materiality. I use a variety of types of paint application—brushing, layering, scumbling, scraping.

Materiality, however, is always means to a specific end. It is never an end unto itself. A scummy looking hunk of concrete is not going to be painted with small, pristine brush strokes. Rather it will be layered and scraped and dripped until it not only looks scummy but *feels* convincingly scummy. A sky should be made of seamless layers; something about the whole thing should just dissolve suggesting that it is a passable space.

The benefit I feel I receive from working within parameters has also led me to work within a predetermined shape or size on several occasions. The shape I pick is almost always a square. As a painter I am preoccupied with the front. I acknowledge that there is one. I acknowledge that there is a way that I want my work to be viewed. In my paintings, I take the imagery typically relegated to the periphery and I bring it to the front. My compositions are constructed to confront. Working with the format of a square heightens this sense of the confrontational. This is something that I noticed with my Polaroids. While a Polaroid is not a perfect square—the width is 96% of length—most would be forgiven for thinking otherwise. The Polaroid image still maintains a sense of squareness. Looking at an image within the confines of a square you are subconsciously aware of the fact that there is a point in the center that is of equal distance to each of the four sides and vertices. Nothing about the shape of this plane itself is pulling you away. As a viewer you are centered, confronted.

V.

Success is sometimes arbitrary and definitely overrated. It is never as thrilling as it is supposed to be. After achieving the given metric of success, there is an initial happiness; but in time it can leave you feeling empty, devoid of direction. Success can feel like an end point.

Failure is really quite inevitable. It is something that to a certain extent cannot be controlled. This is not intended to sound negative or nihilistic—"lets all just give up." Failure is often positive. Failure is what happens when you try. Someone who always, usually, or even half the time succeeds is probably suffering from a gross lack of ambition. Execution doesn't often live up to the idea—doesn't mean to quit having ideas. Ideas sometimes don't live up to their hope—doesn't mean to quit hoping. Failure is a spectrum. The goal is to fail a little less or least a little bit better. Failure and the recognition of failure give you a point to push off from; they help to create a sustainable studio practice.

I made several paintings in my first two semesters that I would place on that far end of the failure spectrum. They were something I had to get out of my system. Some, I had to make so that I could understand just what was so disinteresting about them and the ideas around them. In some cases I was trying to push an okay idea too hard into a format that could not even begin to hold it.

This is the case with my untitled black paintings. I call them that for the simple reason that upon the realization that there was no future for these paintings I never bothered to give them actual names. They were interpretations of the gasoline rainbows

that show up in puddles in parking lots. The problem was that they were too interpreted. They ended up looking and feeling much too similar to black light posters or something. I don't think that there was any way that I could have made these paintings not feel that way. Gasoline rainbows are much more interesting in parking lots, and maybe then it's only me that's interested.



Figure 8

rocks that had been smashed open by a caterpillar machine. Smashed open, they revealed glittery quartz-y interiors. I took them back to my studio and was able to mostly reconstruct four of the small rocks. I think I knew from the start that failure was going to be, at least in one way or

another, involved in this piece.

It was a real act of futility trying to find which bits went with which rock and how. I glued the pieces back together using standard craft

I like to think that my rock project is a little bit less unsuccessful (I am probably wrong). This is one of my only attempts at sculpture. I went out to a parking lot that was undergoing repaving and collected pieces of



Figure 9

glue. In putting the pieces back together I wanted to experience the sense of futility involved in saving nature from the destructive force of mankind—like with our half-assed attempts at cutting carbon emissions relative to the amount of energy each of us demands/consumes daily. I was also hoping to deny my viewers the pleasure of seeing the rocks' attractive insides. The boring and the ugly would have to suffice. The success was that I was able to put so much of the pieces back together again. It failed in the sense that I was never able to figure out what to do with these rocks past their gluing.

Made toward the end of my first semester, *Pit A* was a turning point. It was based off a few photographs that I had taken staring down a pit used in the construction of a manhole. From that point of view the pit inspired wonder, curiosity, confusion, and a bit of anxiety—all things that made it easy to forget the utilitarian nature of the object. This was something that I really wanted in my work. In constructing the compositions for these paintings, the key was what was left out. The image is cropped. It is a view of the hole from above with no information provided from ground level. From that



Figure 10

angle it is even difficult to tell if you are even staring down something—is the object concave or convex? The garbage and other items left from the workers are also not provided. The only real contextual clue I provide is a single orange chord. It was an extension chord. While that easily recognized shade of orange would point you in that direction the fact that I did not over render it made it possible to think other wise. If it is definitely an extension chord than the scale is easy to understand, but if there is any doubt than the pit could be either tiny or enormous.

Lessons learned from *Pit A* are present in each consecutive painting. I use restraint and editing in presenting contextual information to create compositions that are often ambiguous, thus demanding further investigation. There is a delicate balance between what is revealed and what is concealed and left open for conjecture. This contextual tweaking also serves to shift the attention away from the particularity of a place in order to highlight the ubiquitous nature of these environments. It allows for the focus to remain on the experiential. Attention and priority are given to the formal aspects of the environments portrayed—their physicality, tactility, and color—over their functions. This diminished emphasis on essentiality allows for speculation on behalf of the viewer.

VI.

I am a sixth generation Texan. Texas is a part of my identity that I have only recently begun to fully embrace. This is partly because of the hyperbolized image of Texas and Texans in popular culture (the stereotypes) and partly because of the fact that I had never lived anywhere other than Texas until less than two years ago--I had

never been around enough non-Texans to begin to question it and thus integrate it into my identity. Horizontality, open spaces and a big open sky are Texas clichés. It is difficult to deny their validity though when you are southbound on I-35 or westbound I-10. To this day I get a seasick- uneasiness from being denied a clear view of the



horizon for too long. I played up this sense of anxiety of catharsis denied in the work I completed for my candidacy exhibition.

Untitled (Box) depicts a large, square culvert under a road. The space in the center of this culvert, however, has been replaced with a field of multi-

Figure 11

tonal blacks (ala Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt)—

an abstract painting inside of a representational painting. This is something I have done on multiple occasions—the “stripe painting” in the upper and middle right corner of Pit A, the squeegee painted walls on *Untitled (Box)* and other earlier works, the large plane of the roof tops in *Slopes*. Arthur Danto notes in *After the End of Art* that contemporary artists do not see museums as being full of “dead art but with living artistic options”. What is changed is “the spirit in which [things are made].”⁶ This is something I relate to when I am purposefully citing formalist abstraction to representational ends. This

⁶ Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1997) 5

painting inside of the painting functioned mostly as a way of denying viewers the line of the horizon and a clear footing. *Lump* is just that, a lump. It is a largish concrete lump sitting in front of a dirty, concrete wall. The subject matter is particularly hum-drum and there is a heavy emphasis on formal processes—dripping, scraping, smearing, excavating. A slumping, curving shape sits in front of (?) a large and a small rectangle, perhaps this composition functions ideogramatically? Both *Untitled (Box)* and *Lump*, along with the *Pit* paintings also included in my candidacy temper wonderment with anxiety by closing off all obvious routes of escape.

Monument Avenue in the Fan here in Richmond is lined with monuments to confederate generals. They stand or sit astride their horses alone and high above you as you walk or drive past. Their aloneness and their size imply their specialness. After candidacy, I noticed that my best paintings tended to focus on a single thing. Their singularity provided their sense of presence—this was true of *Pit A*, *Lump*, and *Untitled (Box)*. During my second year I began to borrow some of these aspects of monumentality.



Figure 12

I made *Mesh* thinking more consciously about monuments. I was initially attracted to this long stretch of black, mesh fencing because it reminded me of a monument I already knew. To emphasize the length of this fence, I deviated from my typical square format and made a large, panoramic-style diptych. I situated the panels on two intersecting walls, meeting together in the corner situating the viewer inside of the painting. The composition was kept simple—the fence below and open sky above. Unlike my earlier paintings I decided not only to not deny a view of the sky but to allow it to remain clear, open, and to put it into a place of prominence. Ultimately, I decided against returning to this format of diptych—in part because I was scared that it would feel too much like a gimmick or could become some a rut that would prove limiting. I did however, come to find a lot of promise in this new embrace of the sky. Although the sky in *Mesh* was not nearly as successful as the sky in the paintings to come, it showed me just how much potential is there.

Flats, *Sign*, and *Slopes* tapped into this potential further. In all three of these large paintings the sky occupies a large portion of the composition. The sky in each is more than just the inverse of land; they are more than simply beautiful. Behind this fondness for the large, uninterrupted expanse is something more substantial. This kind of sky has the ability to imply boundlessness—a frequent association with the American West. This association of the West is not unmixed (“light out for the Territory”⁷), with each note of hope there is an undercurrent of darkness. This sky looms large. It has the ability to function as character acting out of benevolence, malevolence, or something in

⁷ This is a part of the famous of the final quote from Mark Twain’s *The Adventure’s of Huckleberry Finn*. It connotes the West with adventure, possibility for a new life, but more importantly escape. The opposite of this hope is the reality of what Huck was escaping—a *civilization* that embraced slavery and intolerance of all kinds and did not seem *civil* in the least.

between. It has the ability to function as a void, an escape route, or more interestingly it can further lock you in. The sky in *Slopes* functions in the latter mode. It is a subtle gradation from blues to greens to blues again and violets behind and on top of a row of receding rooftops. The roofs are solid, heavy, and demanding. The tendency in such a situation would be to look to such a sky—which occupies much more space than the roofs. This escape, this transcendence is denied. The viewer is left with the cumbersome.



Figure 13

VII.

The places between destinations are hidden in the shadows of peripheral vision by a determined stride and a preoccupied glare. A temporary embrace of aimlessness opens up these gaps between point A and point B.

There is something telling in the fact that *commonplace* and *boring* are both listed as synonyms for *banal* in the thesaurus.⁸ James Elkins, in the introduction to his book *How to Use Your Eyes*, aptly notes that “the most common things... tend to be the

⁸ Microsoft Encarta Thesaurus: English (North American)

most overlooked”.⁹ Boring—like beauty—is in the eye of the beholder, though.

The title of this thesis *Extra Ordinary* is intentionally ambiguous.

Depending on how you read it, it can refer to either the very ordinary or to that which is outside of the ordinary. The work described within these pages functions similarly. From person to person and with time they move from the ordinary to beyond and back again.

I recently emailed a copy of this paper to my sister as I was beginning to wrap up. After looking at it, she asked if my brother and I really played near that old funeral home. I was kind of surprised that she didn't know that. She said she had seen and knew of it but never gave it a second thought. Being nearly five years older than me, an eternity at age 10, she understandably didn't really involve herself with us “little kids.” She had never thought that it might be an interesting place to visit until she read about it so many years later.

⁹ Elkins, James. *How to Use Your Eyes* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2000) VIII

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- Figure 1. *Natural Reclamation on a Small Scale*, oil on canvas, 18"x30", 2009
- Figure 2. *Polaroid*, Polaroid photograph, 2007
- Figure 3. *Polaroid*, Polaroid photograph, 2007
- Figure 4. *Polaroid*, Polaroid photograph, 2007
- Figure 5. *Sign*, oil on canvas, 96"x96", 2010
- Figure 6. *Flats*, oil on canvas, 96"x96", 2010
- Figure 7. *Lump*, oil on panel, 48"x48", 2009
- Figure 8. *Untitled Rock Project: Before*, bits of rock, digital photograph, 2008
- Figure 9. *Untitled Rock Project: After*, bits of rock and craft glue, 1"x1.5"x1", 2008
- Figure 10. *Pit A*, oil on panel, 48"x 48", 2008
- Figure 11. *Untitled (Box)*, oil on panel, 48"x48", 2009
- Figure 12. *Mesh*, diptych, oil on canvas, 2 panels each 48"x84", 2009
- Figure 13. *Slopes*, oil on canvas, 96"x96", 2010

Vita

Lana Waldrep was born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1985 where she lived until 2000. She graduated from Mansfield High School in Mansfield, Texas in 2003. She earned her BFA in Studio Art from the University of Texas at Austin 2007. Upon graduation she worked at the Blanton Museum of Art until moving to Richmond in the fall of 2008 to pursue her graduate studies. She is a 2009 recipient of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship.