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**DISPLAY**

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Department of Painting and Printmaking at the  
School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

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By  
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## **ABSTRACT**

I will discuss six art works that have a range of characteristics, but can all be unified through the notion of surface, both physically and conceptually. I will investigate how ideas of taste, assumption, collage, façade, figure/ground, display and value can all be seen through this lens. Much significance and symbolism is imbued in such a thin layer and I am actively aware of this as I work. The way I construct and render my subjects and the space in which they reside determines how they are viewed, perceived, considered, and judged by others.

“Depth must be hidden. Where? On the surface.” -- Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Each painting in my body of work speaks to a unified message, but only offers a few sentences at a time. By examining six paintings I will cover the topic of surface, both physically and conceptually. Physically speaking, the application process of paint varies within each work. At times I fastidiously render, paying close attention to how paint lays and reacts to the canvas weave, working towards likeness and substance, layer upon layer. Other times I paint in a very fast and direct manner with no patience for labor or likeness. Within both painting modes, I investigate transparency, opacity, and the application of thick and thin paint. These different ways of working and their temporal variations create the visual history or pentimento that I am interested in. Combining fast and slow moves allow for a place that time can exist in a frozen, two-dimensional state. These different temporal approaches are especially apparent when comparing the detailed hand versus the quickly smeared background of *Manicured*.

Beyond the physical side of surface I investigate concepts like superficiality, judgment, façade, taste, and value. We often judge other people by their exterior and assign value to objects based on appearance. The world is made up of billions and billions of people and items that contain mass, shape, and texture. All these things have a surface to consider, admire, hate or just look at. *Joints* and *Manicured*, two paintings that depict hands, involve ideas of judgment and taste. *Erin* and *Jessica*, two graphite drawings, comment on issues of youthful attitudes regarding appearance and image. *Pedestal Display* speaks directly to notions of value based on how various recognizable and unrecognizable art objects are arranged in the same space. *Pasadena Pool Side*, the

last painting I will cover, addresses vision and the challenges of viewing things objectively. We cannot help incorporating our previous experiences and associations onto recognizable objects. I will provide a unified definition of how I see and relate to surface using *Pasadena Pool Side* and the five other previous mentioned works.



*Manicured*, Oil on Canvas, 18"x24", 2012

In *Manicured*, two different renderings share the same space: a smeared non-representational plane and a detailed, almost realistic hand. Varied connotations and

associations arise for these two painted surfaces; perhaps one being a more “expressive” gesture while the other seems “reserved” in comparison. Is one way of painting more appreciated, sophisticated, or respected today?

Realistic representation in painting has been both praised and deplored at different stages in art history, trading reverence with non-representational imagery. Like fashion, what is “cool” or sought after in painting can quickly change, and is cyclical. What may be a hot buy at auction one year can be overlooked the next. Spending the patience and energy painting something realistic is a sign of skill to some, while others find abstract marks evidence that the artist is not merely “copying”, but has an intelligent mind of their own. Combining differing levels of representation speaks to the fluidity of taste.

Certain judgments begin to form when contemplating *Manicured*. What type of person is this? With the hand positioned in an inspective manner, it is uncertain whether the person is vainly admiring herself or anxiously creating the scratched ground on which her hand rests. With only the hand showing, this character remains ambiguous. The nails jump out and scream, “fake!” One the other hand, perhaps they are real and the person who grew them is extremely smart. Maybe her profession is a cashier, who whenever typing, makes the customers cringe at the sound of plastic on plastic. She could possibly be a suburban mother of four or a fashion conscious neuroscientist...



*Joints*, Oil on Canvas, 20"x24", 2012

As a way to overthrow the rational world, the Surrealist painter Magritte, would introduce objects into his paintings with no apparent connection, freeing them from fixed spatial relationships and creating a new story or interchange. Collage offers a retreat from logic and reason, transforming the familiar into the strange and the fantastic. What excites me about painting is its ability to take something out of its normal, everyday context, and place it in a realm where it can be considered in a new light or seen from an unfamiliar angle. How things are juxtaposed, composed, or rendered only heightens the narrative.

When thinking about my work words like substitution, separation, contradiction, and augmentation come to mind. The figure-ground relationship is very important and considered. How the figure relates to the background often references collage and Photoshop. A pasted quality exists where the figure seems to be placed on top of a seemingly unrelated backdrop. However, observing my environment, I see millions of dissimilar objects coexisting. In certain places today, you find a twelfth century cathedral down the street from modern architecture. Not only are these buildings from different eras, they have different textures that give us various haptic, visual, and emotional responses. It makes sense to me, as a painter, to consider each subject in its own way. I do not paint bricks the same as wood or flesh. As I paint, I pull from the previous memories and experiences of the textures I have touched, smelled, and viewed.

The placement of both the hand and the arm in *Joints* is awkward and uncomfortable. Being a cropped image with only certain parts available makes the space and the distance between the hands and brick puzzling. The multiple light sources increase the unlikely environment. Compared to the previous painting, these hands do not have fingernails; instead, the bricks and nails are one in the same. At times, the bricks act as surrogates, filling in the empty nails. Other moments, the bricks point out the obvious; that the hands are completely missing their nails.

Suggesting and pointing to the two-dimensional surface is a key element in the work of Jasper Johns. He said that he got the idea to paint *Flag*, one of his most famous works, from a dream in which he was painting one.<sup>1</sup> The idea to paint a basically two-dimensional object such as a flag, which is really pigment on fabric, onto another two-

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<sup>1</sup> Yau, John. *A Thing Among Things: The Art of Jasper Johns*. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc. 2008. Print.

dimensional surface (canvas) is an interesting idea to me. Doing the unexpected and almost too obvious, he fused the two into one. Clement Greenberg believed that painting's most important goal ought to be a self-reflexive one. At the end of the day it is paint on surface and Greenberg believed that painting should acknowledge this. In many of Johns' works, the figure/ground relationship is inseparable. Newspaper clippings adhered to the canvas is apparent and legible, but was also cut and composed to form an image, sending the viewer into multiple associations simultaneously.



Jasper Johns  
*Flag*, Encaustic, oil and collage on fabric mounted on  
plywood. 1954-55



*Erin*, Graphite on paper, 9.5"x12.5", 2011



*Jessica*, Graphite on paper, 9.5"x12.5", 2011

Beyond the physical aspects of surface lays another, often negative, definition: superficiality. I have meticulously drawn *Erin* and *Jessica* using a mechanical pencil, an essential implement for the high school student. Experimenting with the fine detail that a .05 pencil can achieve, I zoomed in and focused on certain parts of the sitters. Similar to sixteenth century Mannerism, my subjects, although rendered in a realistic manner, possess certain subtle distortions. The bulbous forehead of *Jessica* and the eerie and disturbing smile of *Erin* is unpleasant to look at, especially when they possess such confident gazes. Teenagers are extremely concerned with their outer appearance and will go to great lengths to maintain an appropriate exterior. High school students are constantly judging and making character analyses based on outer appearances. The right clothes and make-up are the best tools to succeed for the high school girl. Attempting to make “the perfect” drawing speaks to the challenge of creating a public façade.

Some may see and appreciate the likeness or craftsmanship of these “generic portraits”, but upon closer inspection there are certain idiosyncrasies. For example, the silk dress *Jessica* wears is drawn in a more real and substantial manner than her face. The skin does not seem flesh-like or human, but is more closely related to chiseled stone or some other smooth and inanimate material.



*Pedestal Display*, Oil on canvas, 69"x96", 2011

Most of my paintings address ways in which the subject can be presented or displayed, whether it is a sculpture on a pedestal or a person posing in front of a camera. In

*Pedestal Display*, eleven different sized, shaped, and colored pedestals exhibit an array of objects. The size of the canvas is 69” x 96”, which mimics a display window presenting artworks. In this red void, an aged seashell is shown with a Brancusi head, a sculpture of Venus is fading into or emerging from the background, and the overall perspective and shading of the pedestals and objects goes against logic.

The bright red cadmium backdrop competes for attention in order to not be viewed as a less significant element. Standing in front of this painting, it is hard to stay focused on any one object without the constant awareness of the background. Similar to *Erin*, *Jessica*, *Manicured*, and *Joints*, this painting also alludes to space without fully describing it. Equivalent to what you would find at a JCPenny portrait photo center, *Erin* and *Jessica* have a textured backdrop that lacks depth. Like Jasper Johns’s *Flag*, it is a patterned plane that hangs flatly behind them, creating a somewhat suffocating distance. Again, in *Joints*, the textured bricks thrust forward even though it is the hands that are placed in the forefront. The bricks become more life-like, with their weathered and gritty veneer, than the smooth, stiff hands.

There is a particular hierarchy within *Pedestal Display*, due to how the artworks are displayed and arranged. While painting and making decisions, I consider myself a politician of sorts. Attempting to be somewhat diplomatic, I give a stronger voice to those that are often neglected or overlooked. Elevating certain objects, like the seashell or the modernist wooden sculpture, I want to level the playing field where value distinctions become distorted and dubious.



There are hundreds of different dog breeds today and this number continues to grow in order to fit peoples ever changing ideas of beauty, loyalty, and utility needs. Man's best friend is the number one animal in America that has undergone more extensive manipulation by humans than any other creature. From purse dog to guard dog, selective breeding has resulted in a wide range of sizes, colors, builds and behaviors, enough to meet all the human personalities of the world.

The Doberman Pinscher in *Pasadena Pool Side* sits proudly staring straight ahead like a solid statue and is yet another living being made into an inanimate object through my hand. It is unclear whether he is waiting for a command or patiently protecting his home environment. He looks as if he has been pasted into this environment because he casts no shadow and seems to be floating or hovering over the ugly gray tiled floor. He could be a projection of some sorts or a cardboard cutout hovering in the foreground that the owner positioned to maintain authority and scare off burglars. Containing contrasting visual clues, the viewer is asked to interpret the domestic space in uncertain terms, and is not able to easily describe the subjects or relationships within the painting.

In his book *The Object Stares Back*, James Elkins talks about the complexities of vision. He references the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and his theory that vision is a “reciprocal process” where inanimate objects have a “certain presence”:

“Vision becomes a kind of cat’s cradle of crossing lines of sight, and Lacan thinks of the whole scene as a kind of trap: we are ‘caught’ he says, ‘manipulated, captured, in the field of vision.’ As I lie awake in my bedroom, feeling the force of vision everywhere in the room, I am entering into a complicated game. Objects (and also my cat, if she isn’t only an object) are no longer just things out there to be seen but also places where I can think about seeing and being seen. Each object has a certain force, a certain way of resisting or accepting my look and returning that look on me.”<sup>2</sup>

Thinking about vision in this way is very interesting to me. Depending on the mood I am in on a particular day, I view objects and others through this filter. As I look around I am projecting my feelings onto every single item I come in contact with. This makes viewing things objectively a complicated, perhaps impossible, notion. Even the way I engage and consider my work changes from day to day depending on how I am feeling. Our wants, desires, and needs change over the years as we mature and continue to learn

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<sup>2</sup> Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. Print.

and view things differently. I hated Francis Bacon's work five years ago whereas today I think extremely highly of his paintings, so who knows what another five years of experience will do. While the objects in our lives may not change, we do. This alters the entire dialogue of perception and making the path of vision a twisted "cat's cradle."

The way the subjects are represented in my work alludes to Elkin's notion of vision. You cannot look at my subjects without feeling their presence projected back on you. When interacting with my work a moment occurs when the viewer becomes self-aware of their scrutiny and snap judgments. This is the emotional arc we go through in our daily lives when confronted with new people and situations, a process often left unrecognized.

The topics in my work relate directly to my life, for like most people I have felt judged too quickly, tried to fit in, and generally felt overlooked and underappreciated at one moment or another. The collaged elements make unlikely scenarios and unusual combinations that speak to the fact that things are not always what they seem and people are not always how you see them. This also refers to ideas about knowing others. I often wonder how well I can ever really know someone else and visa versa. I can have a situation or feeling described in unabridged detail, but will never fully understand what it felt like for someone else to go through it. I can guess how a friend will react, and get it right. I can relate and empathize, but am unable to escape my own thoughts and opinions. Being an individual precludes truly knowing someone else.

Although a range of concepts have been used to discuss these six works, a unified thesis can be found. Ideas of taste, assumption, collage, façade, figure/ground, display and value all relate to an idea of surface. There has always been a human desire to change our outer appearance. Make-up, masks, clothes, accessories, tattoos, piercings,

plastic surgery, wigs, and grooming are all ways of reforming our exterior, in order to define our interior on some level. These examples of manipulation show how much significance and symbolism is imbued in such a thin layer, both in human form and on the canvas. These ideas are active as I work the surface of the painting. The way I render my subjects effects the way they are viewed, perceived, considered, and judged by others.