Query: how does the never to be differ from what never was?

Robert Scott Whipkey
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Query: how does the never to be differ from what never was?

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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May, 2013
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01. Cocaine (1917), Gottfried Benn.

The disintegration of the self, sweet, yearned-for,
that you give me: my throat is already raw,
already the foreign sound has reached
the foundations of the unmentioned structures of my ego.

No longer at the sword that sprang from the mother’s
scabbard to carry out an act here and there,
and with a steely stab: sunk in the heather,
where hills of barely revealed shapes rest!

A luke-warm flatness, a small something, an expanse
And now the Ur arises for breaths of wind
Rolled into a ball. Those who are not its
Quake, brain-spectators of crumbling transience.

Shattered self – O drunk-up ulcer!
Scattered fever – sweetly burst open weir
Come forth, O come forth! Give
blood-bellied birth to the misinformed.

02. Sketches On/Of Drugs & Utopia. At the outset of this, my written thesis, I wanted to open with a poem about narcotics for a specific reason. Poetry, like visual art, attempts to express the inexpressible. The feeling of a narcotic cannot be put to words, just as the sensation one receives from her or his favorite artwork is impossible to record. Equally, both these delicacies of modern existence must be sought out. And while both are tangible and physical products, neither can ever really be obtained: in the sense that no one person, in 2013, could ever own Gericault’s, “The Raft Of The Medusa,” for instance, or an endless supply to free cocaine. In both examples, the person in question only gets a tiny taste and must therefore keep coming back for more. Utopia may be an unrealistic construction of culture, but I would posit the idea the both narcotics and art strive to give us just that – however tiny a taste.

03. Notes On Sugar & Self Destruction. As I will explain in more detail in the following sections, early in graduate school, I wanted to work with a material that would be both sensuous and disgusting. Sugar not only served this purpose but was also a material I could get a great abundance of for relatively nothing, thereby initiating a subtle but important critique of consumption.

My initial relationship with sugar began before entering graduate school as a specialty sculptor, fashioning flowers and garlands to adorn event cakes at my partner’s boutique bakery in New York City. This connection was then automatically tethered to the originators of these delicacies in the 16th Century French Court. Coming out of that specific history, sugar was originally only available to the
aristocracy. Through its ubiquity, it has evolved into something that only society’s elite can afford to avoid.

While sugar serves a number of different metaphors in my work, foremost is the sheer mystique of the substance. As an ingredient, we consume sugar and it magically transforms into part of our body – it physically becomes us. In dealing with sugar as an aesthetic material for making art, once dry, the substance sparkles in front of the viewer’s eyes. This glittery flirtation perhaps mirrors the dazzling allure of narcotics in contemporary pop culture – thus, for me, setting up a beautiful and somewhat dangerous metaphor of self-destruction. The suicide of the material is encoded at the outset – its self-destruction initiated at conception.

**04. March Into The Ocean, or: A Summary Of A Work Never Made.** Over the past year I have been making drawings and installations loosely inspired by the mythologies and conspiracy theories surrounding the death of Kurt Cobain, front-man for the 1990’s rock band Nirvana. One of the most fascinating elements I’ve found in my research is a “pilgrimage,” of sorts, completed by devotees of Cobain when they turn 27 years old, marking Cobain’s age at death. Like an inadvertent holy shrine, an ordinary bench in Viretta Park, adjacent to the rock star’s former estate in Seattle, has become a site of worship. For nearly two decades, since his death in 1994, the palimpsest scrawls of, “I love you Kurt,” as well as various quotations from Nirvana lyrics, have been stained and etched into this bench’s wood by tagging markers and pocketknives. I am not necessarily infatuated with the bench as a quasi-religious icon but rather the devotees who have transformed it: those teens and pre-teens who looked to Cobain as a father-figure and now equal their spokesman in age as they themselves turn 27.

Late last year, I proposed a grant to spend 4 full days with the bench. While on site I would do a number of architectural drawings, take measurements, and document the surface topography with graphite rubbings of the physical bench, as well as conduct interviews with the pilgrims as they arrive. My research would eventually culminate in a life size replica of the bench, cast in household refined sugar and carved from the observational drawings and rubbings made on site.

While I did not receive a grant to complete this project, the idea is something that has stayed with me. The work itself was originally conceived in 2011 and a fair amount of my artistic output, over the last year and half, has been tests in some capacity, attempting to make an object relatively similar. At the end of my second semester, in 2012, I completed a work entitled, “Barricade Pirouette,” where I cast and bonded sugar in an identical process to how the bench would be constructed (see fig. 01).

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit Olana, Fredrick Church’s home estate, in the Catskill Mountains. While the house is relatively traditional in it’s European architectural planning, its façade is adorned in a sort of Disneyesque understanding of Persian design – even so much as to have “welcome” misspelled in Arabic script above the home’s main guest entrance. The onsite historians at Olana attributed this misstep to Church never actually going to Persia, but rather attending the Persian Pavilion at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City.
That accidental voyeurism that Church is perhaps guilty of is certainly not lost on me, as much of my research is conducted over the Internet. As tragic or heroic as it may sound, going to the physical site in Seattle and having an actual, somatic relationship with this bench and its surrounding is wholly important to this project. There is a kind of wry understatement in the act of making the pilgrimage myself only to copy a kind of religious relic that others, in turn, would possibly seek out. Like a replica of Vatican City outside of Miami or a life-size reproduction of Mt. Rushmore in Shenzhen, the copy takes on a power in-and-of itself. The oddness of the object is amplified by its very existence – in the absurdity of making such a replica.

**05. The Work Of The Artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres.** One of the most influential figures in my studio practice, Gonzalez-Torres had a particular ability to perfectly combine loss and tragedy with beauty and intelligence. He was able to channel his personal suffering and turn it into something wholly universal. For me, this is great trial for art. If an artwork can transcend the multitude of interpretations an audience will bring to any given work, that – I would argue – is the function of art: the representation of what is utterly unrepresentable.

I sometimes think of Gonzalez-Torres’ catalogue compressed into three works: “Untitled (Perfect Lovers),” two synchronized wall clocks with the impossible task of staying in perfect harmony until, perhaps, society’s collapse when the power finally shuts down and the two slowly perish together; “Untitled (Ross Laycock),” a pile of individually wrapped colored foil candies that are consumed by the audience over the course of an exhibition, mimicking the weight of his partner as he slowly disintegrated from AIDS; “Untitled,” a monochrome billboard of an unoccupied, yet unmade, bed completed shortly after the death of his partner named in the parenthetical title of the previous work just described.

While many critical interpretations of Felix Gonzalez-Torres revolve around the idea that these works, due to the process they undergo over the length of an exhibition, are to be read as a metaphor of dying, I have always found these readings relatively macabre. The reoccurring visual vocabularies in the artist’s oeuvre – paper, light bulbs, and candies – are overtly intended to be replenished. While private loss is certainly something the work is concerned with, I would argue that a certain kind of celebration (the continuation of one’s life after death), is a more delicate reading for a viewer in 2013. Art, perhaps, embodies a desire to live forever,
in that the object will remain long after the artist’s death. What Gonzalez-Torres manages to accomplish is a delicate relation of private loss publicly – we are invited to share in his mourning.

06. The Implication Of The Viewer: Pop Art, Minimalism & Barbara Haskell. One of the seminal texts in my schooling is a book from 1984 entitled, Blam! The Explosion of Pop and Minimalism, by art historian Barbara Haskell. Through her work, I have found a critical trajectory to view my studio practice – utilizing the foundations of Conceptualism without simply reinventing the work I so deeply admire.

According to Haskell, the central tenet of Pop in its infancy was to, "bring art back into contact with the concrete and the everyday." In my studio practice, I always look to popular culture when attempting to frame or contextualize conversation. As I explained in Section 4, it was sugar’s ubiquity across the American body politic that initiated my interest. And while it was not a critical device in the work’s inception, because I don’t simply want to recreate objects in sugar, I certainly would not argue with a claim that I am expounding on the literal translation of Haskell’s, “everyday” assertion.

While the everyday is interesting – as well as an integral aspect in my practice – it is not my intention, in any way, to attempt a disintegration of art and life. In a similar way to Claes Oldenburg’s early installation of the Ray Gun Manufacturing Company, the work generates from pockets of subculture that tend to lean toward the bleak, my ultimate goal is to adopt that austerity and yet make work that is ebullient and sensual. As Haskell explains, "[Jasper] Johns’ earlier appropriations of two-dimensional subjects ... paved the way for the Pop artists’ subsequent appropriations of another kind of flat imagery – taken from the media." Following that lineage, the Pictures Generation, beginning in the late 1970’s, took the baton of the media, in general, as a subject. In my practice, I am interested in the critical discourse that immediately followed. Essentially, I am concerned in how we, collectively, navigate cultural trauma. My work is an extension of this overall investigation. I want to implicate myself in the work’s inherent voyeurism while acknowledging my own part in a culture that both rallies against the media’s complicity in “disaster capitalism,” yet ogle the very same horror over the Internet.

07. The Removal Of The External: Barbara Haskell (cont.). The presumed binary oppositional relationship between Pop and Minimalism has fueled my obsession with both art historical movements. If Haskell is correct, and I would argue that she is, then the central question of Pop Art was the relationship between painted image and real image: Is this a painting? Or is this a painting of an advertisement? As a counterpoint to those questions, Haskell contends, the central question in Minimalism was whether it was possible to remove all external signifiers, "eschewing all aesthetic deception & illusionism, and insisting on the obdurate physical presence of their objects." The question was not the difference between painting thing and real thing – rather the thing’s role as thing.

What I have always found so profound in Minimalism was the proposition of a new kind of subjectivity: one that didn’t rest on the artist’s gesture. When I speak
of “implication,” I want that conversation grounded in art history. Early forays into Conceptualism really transferred subjectivity to the viewer, forcing the audience into a more decisive role in determining the image’s meaning – as Frank Stella once said, “what you see is there is there.” I don’t mean for this to be an obfuscation of my responsibilities as an artist, however, I am truly interested in an engagement with my audience – one that doesn’t rest on the clichéd trickery of participatory art.

While my work is "minimal" in appearance, in my color choice and material, the central tenets from which the concept is conceived is anything but "elite" – as Minimalism would come to be known. While a small coterie of initiates may be familiar with the spectacle surrounding Kurt Cobain, for example, his place as a spokesman, I would argue, intrinsically allows him to act as an allegory. Rather then hold Cobain to a kind of specificity, I want my work’s audience to form their own interpretations first and, importantly, foremost. Work that relies on a story ought to be that: a story. I do not want to create a narrative about Cobain. I want to create a physical space for reflection – the story is imbedded in the making. It is something for the viewer to excavate, rather then for me to initiate.

08. Junk Record, 2011-2012. I began using ordinary, household refined sugar in my studio practice late in 2011, during my first semester of graduate studies. (As I mentioned in Section 03, I worked for my partner before entering an MFA program, sculpting sugar flowers and casting small objects in a food grade silicone for wedding and event cakes around New York City.) At the time, it was interesting to me that I could make an object that was entirely edible – an object that teetered so close to edge of kitsch that given a different context it wouldn’t be art at all (it would be food). Using the same techniques I used in cake design, I cast a vinyl single and fabricated the piece solely in sugar (see fig. 02).

"Junk Record," was cast from Nirvana’s first 7 inch single. The 45 rpm record has become something of a unicorn among devotees of the band, sometimes selling for as much as 5,000.00 USD for an authenticated original at auction. While the culture of record collecting is somewhat lost on me, I see this as a very deliberate attempt to capture a physical and tangible piece of Cobain’s legacy. Similarly to the copies purchased by collectors, my record too would never be played and would never be held. Like a ghost of an idea, the object would simply record the story of its making.
The initial idea for this work – which is probably evident in the title – was to cast the record in heroin. Narcotics, as one might imagine, are expensive. However, the more I sat with this piece, and the more I realized how sad and pathetic it looked, the more I understood that it needed to have no function – that if consumed it could actually induce physical harm. While the second cast of this work (in drugs) will not be shown in my thesis exhibition, it marked the beginning of body of a work – a body that I would like to explain, in detail, in the following sections (09-26).

09. Bloom: Notes On A Lost Love. I wanted to begin, at the outset of this project, with a title, rather then my usual way of working. My artistic process up until this point was relatively rudimentary: I would have an idea for a work, I would make that work using a medium I thought could somehow reify the content of the piece, and when I was finished I would title the work with some form of descriptor.

While I wasn’t certain how this new method would affect the outcome of the works to come, I could foresee it shaping my internal dialogue as the works were being made – even while they were being conceived. Because I tend to work in series, this was intriguing, as a title would modify my language throughout the entirety of the project. “Bloom,” served two functions in this sense: it was both subtly sexual, the blooming of a flower being rife with metaphor (something I will expand on later), and nominally descriptive as the characteristic of something blooming could range from a gunshot’s impact to a flowering plant.

Flowers have begun to function as a meditation on loss and death in my work due to their inherent duality. Both a symbol of immense tragedy, as in the wreathes and bouquets that accompany a funeral, and an emblem to celebrate life, as the marker of an anniversary or the greeting of a newborn, flowers function in a similar capacity to the extremes of the blooming action I just described. As a gesture, it is the beckoning of something either sweet or something severe.

As I mentioned in Section 4, it is not so much the idea of a memorial that is intriguing to me conceptually. Rather, I am interested in the kind of spectacle of accidental memorials – memorialized spaces that were never meant to serve such a purpose. With this mind, I wanted to make an ambiguous work that would carry an aspect of the lore surrounding Cobain, as well as create an artificial dedicatory from something entirely banal.

In the only official photograph of Cobain’s dead body, the singer is lying on a generic, beige linoleum floor tile. The pattern, when presented as a painting, becomes something of a religious icon by way of stained glass in a medieval Christian cathedral or Islamic tiling. Bloom, in this instance, initially attracted me to the linoleum design as it references a kind of minimalist flower-form in shape – the design physically exploding from the center (see fig. 03).

10. Bloom, 2012 [ver. 1]. The first Bloom painting was a large grid, 72 x 96 inches, rendered in oil on a gesso ground, with each “tile” stenciled over the vacuous white expanse of the canvas. When I referred to some of the Bloom works being generically Islamic in appearance, I was specifically speaking to this painting – each geometric line following into the adjacent “tile.” With each inset referencing the size of an LP, the work was laid out in a lattice, 8 tiles tall and 6 tiles wide.
11. Bloom, 2012 [ver. 2]. Associationism, in my understanding, is a term that came out of the mid-19th Century in Romantic literature as a way of resisting Neoclassical ideals of structure and rigidity. At the risk of over-simplification, Romanticism championed the idea that nothing could be studied (text, painting, poetry, etc.) without an understanding of the connotations specific to the individual at that very moment. The profundity of this realization has stayed with me throughout my career as a student.

Religious iconography is something I never intended to reference. However, those associations were obvious and overt. As a result, I tried to make the tile into a singular, ambiguous image. I am interested in how symbols shift in culture – evolving as our experiences with those symbols change over time. Functioning in a similar capacity to a symbolic gifting of flowers, any particular icon has very different meaning depending on an individual’s association with it.

As a singular image, I increased the scale slightly, enlarging the tile to a 30 in. square, with the hope that would read more as cult symbol, its ambiguity cloaking any overt references. In this sense, it could read more as a band logo – its ubiquity masquerading as nonsense. This was also the first iteration to be fabricated in graphite and face-mounted to reflective glass. The viewer becomes a kind of benighted Narcissus – implicated in the myth, as she or he cannot view the work without viewing her or his own reflection. While conceptually the work achieved a certain ambiguity, the obfuscation seemed too deliberate and I was concerned it simply fell flat.

12. Bloom, 2012 [ver. 3]. The third attempt to dislodge this tiled symbol from obvious associations combined the previous two approaches. Also rendered in graphite and face-mounted to glass, in this iteration, I dissected the tile into four quadrants and referenced that delineation by repeating the action four times (see fig. 04). Similar to how physical linoleum tiles are manufactured, each of the sixteen pieces that comprise this work are identical in design and scale. The “flowering” shape is formed as they are arranged on the wall – the bloom originates from the flower’s broken center.
13. Bloom (small), 2012-2013 [ver. 4]. There is a frustration and anxiety in the reflective glass of the previous two works described in Sections 11 and 12 – a kind of corporeal relationship that is intended to broach the Freudian principal of the Uncanny. If the viewer of Art is principally concerned with the act of looking, these works negated, unintentionally, that central tenet. While this infinitely opened further investigation, there was something relatively cumbersome in “how” exactly the works were being fabricated. Specifically, I could never fully articulate how the graphite marks left by the pencil functioned. Was it conceptually relevant to showcase how the works were rendered? Or was it simply a condition of fabrication that could be softened, but never eradicated?

I needed the frame – both as a conceptual device that physically “framed” a relic taken from a real world thing and as practical solution to “frame” drawings that were face-mounted to glass. The frame also served as a tool of delineation, leaving
the white of the wall behind the works to play off the look and feel of recessed caulk when installing such a tile in one’s home. However, it was important these works were as seductive as possible. I wanted to physically draw the viewer in and create a direct dialogue between object and subject: a voluntary implication that embraced the painting’s reflectivity.

In my late teens I briefly worked as a window painter in Chicago and vividly remember the effect of enamel paint on glass: when reversed, working from highlight backwards, the surface appears palpable, almost wet. And while I had avoided the use of this technique in fear of bordering a cliché, it seemed an obvious method of amplifying the genital and reproductive elements that were becoming more and more interesting as I continued with the project (as I will expand on in Section 19). Loss and longing are central to these works and as such, I wanted to move away from the making identical pieces that could be interchanged. In the final two paintings, the two most successful to me, I wanted each part to be integral – the loss of one collapsing the whole. In this work (as in the next) each part has a specific location and is awkwardly dissected, deliberately, to ensure that.
14. **Bloom (large), 2013 [ver. 5]**. Eliminating the “white” in the tile pattern and concentrating on slight tonal shifts in the geometric shape allowed me to construct a large black mirror with the flower, physically embedded in the glass, its materiality as confounding as the image itself. With that in mind, I wanted to extend this form and cover the entirety of a wall. This final iteration was fabricated specifically for the back wall in my thesis exhibition and stands just over 9 ft. square: 112 x 112 in. overall (see fig. 05).

15. **Bloom, An Exhibition Overview**. As I described in Section 09, I initially wanted a title to serve as a point of departure throughout this project. Similarly, I wanted a single piece in my thesis to ground the exhibition and for each piece to play off this work, like a kind of codex or cornerstone – giving context to the surrounding works. “Bloom (large),” serves as that text: offering a forlorn flower to a lover that was never known. Similar to Warhol’s serial depictions of disasters the very repetition of the images reflects the horror of such events – entirely incomprehensible and neutralized by consistent exposure in newspapers and on television.

16. **Love Songs In The Afterlife, 2013**.

This drawing is meant to echo the contradictory nature of flower gifting that I described in Section 09. The reference is deliberately obfuscating, but I am intending that in context it will hold a far more poetic undertone (see fig. 06). The image is derived from a Xerox study I made by continually re-photocopying a botanical illustration of a dandelion. After reducing the image to a duo-tone, the final product was cut down the image’s center, collaged on top of a second, reversed in the Xerox machine, and mirrored in its pairing. As it’s rendered, the weed masquerades as a luscious, exotic flower.

There is a distinctive romance imbued in the very nature of a dandelion I want to reference this piece. As it disintegrates, though its form and composition are unrecognizable in physical appearance, the plant still retains an element of life in the retention of its name. Growing up in the Midwest, the end of summer is marked by the weed’s return to seed. Dandelion, thus, serves as a metaphor of a beginning and an end – to both life and death.

From this singular image I plan to make an entire body of work, all entitled, *Love Songs In The Afterlife*. Similarly to the various iterations of *Bloom* (as described
in sections 10-14) each piece will be arrived at from the previous recapitulation. In this way, each work will give something to the next - a kind of imbued maternal knowledge of itself.

17. Peony, 2013. This work initiated from a tiled painting that is described in Section 12. In this piece, the *bloom*, again, comes from the wall behind the frame: exploding out from the work's center. Hung just above centerline, the piece is intended to hold that explosion just above eye level – seducing the viewer to gaze up, into it's center. Devoid of any image, the work evolves and shifts depending on the viewer's orientation in the space. This piece is also meant to directly reference salon style hanging installations, popular in the serial images of early 19th Century painters such as Thomas Cole.

18. Sweet William, 2013. As a kind of sister work to the piece just described, “Sweet William,” takes the initial form of a traditional landscape painting. Bisected at its center, the *break* is intended to reference the horizon line of a 19th Century Romantic panorama (see fig. 07). In particular, this piece appropriates its dimensions from Fredrick Church’s monumental painting, "The Heart Of The Andes (1859).” The longing illustrated in the landscapes of Romanticism for a past that never existed mirrors my own interest in Cobain. In the romantic tradition, the artist paints nature as she or he desires, constructing a false narrative that is echoed in the mythos constructed around the front-man's suicide: *nostalgia* in the truest sense of the word.
The landscape artist often grounds the picture with a figure that has her or his back is to the audience. We, the viewer, are meant to imagine ourselves in the landscape as the figure – looking out from the picturesque vista. This work is meant to play off this idea, reflecting the physical landscape of the exhibition space that surrounds the viewer.

The reflective quality of these works is also a nod to my ground, art historically speaking – as I explained in Sections 8 and 9. However, the question for me lies between representation and re-presentation. I want to focus on this difference while discussing 19th Century Romantic landscapes because, in a way, these works could also be seen as an extension of the Claude Glass – a pocket “mirror” that was popular among wilderness tours in the mid-1800’s. Vacationers would hike to a cleared vista, turn their backs to the landscape, and view the scenery through this oval shaped, darkened mirror – turning the landscape into a foreboding paradise. (Instagram in 1813.) The paintings in my visual thesis, in this sense, are more like objects – directing the viewer to question whether it is a mirror or a painting.

19. The Broken Bell, 2013. While researching various paintings for references to use in March Into The Sea (see fig. 10 in sec. 22), my inquiry began to heavily lean toward French rococo painters such as François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. I began to incessantly sketch the flowers I was looking at in the margins of books and on bar napkins. Fragonard, in particular, has a fantastic installation of bouquet paintings executed directly on the wall of the Frick Collection. I would frequent the gallery, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, as often as I could before moving to Richmond. I became fascinated with the idea of making a delicate and whimsical Fragonard painting as a sugar sculpture.

At the risk of sounding heroic: one evening I had a dream that I was taking a tour of Cobain’s former estate. (This, of course, is an impossibility ... as it was sold soon after the singer’s death as residential property and has never been open to the public.) In the living room was a wallpaper design, mirrored over-and-over-and-over to form a kaleidoscopic relief that was at once representational and yet hallucinatory (see fig. 08). From afar, the drawing evokes vague representations of a reproductive orifice a la the veiled depictions of female genitalia in the flower paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe.
The casual listener of Nirvana will be familiar with Cobain’s own fascination with the entire birthing process: from the multitude of references to water as embryonic fluid to a winged and pregnant, see-through Madonna that adorned both the band’s final LP cover and accompanying live tour for the album *In Utero*. In a sense, I suppose I wanted to make a work that I thought Cobain himself would love and have in his home. This too is the first of an entire series I plan on completing once I leave graduate school – in a similar fashion to my description in Section 16. Each of these works will be entitled *The Broken Bell*, derived from the flower most commonly painted by early American landscape artists – the bell flower.

20. *Clover, 2013*. This painting takes its title from the common plant of the same name. When approaching the work, facing either panel, the diptych initially appears to have a third – as the panel opposite the viewer is reflected in the adjacent painting. In Christian Irish folklore the common variety of the clover (the shamrock) was used as a symbol for the Holy trinity, by St. Patrick. (Christian iconography has been underplayed but prevalent in my research – equating Cobain to a kind of Christ-like figure for his devotees as I detail in Section 04.) When viewed from the middle, the reflections of the two paintings appear to be *perspectively* bursting from the corner: mirroring, once again, the blooming I referred to Section 17 originating from the gallery wall.

21. *So Goes My Something, 2013*. The title of this piece is meant to make reference to a kind of ambiguous 19th Century *poeticness* that one would associate with Byron or Yates. Carved onsite, each “brick” is cast from approximately 10 lbs. of ordinary refined sugar. While this work was initially conceived as a sister work to the piece just described, once I physically got into the space I knew I wanted a framing device to lead the viewer into the exhibition. The work has no specific height that it attempts to achieve (see fig. 09). And if in fact I were ever asked to make the work again, a second iteration would be determined by exhibition space itself. Though I am hopeful it is evident in the title, I wanted to make specific reference to the paintings’ scale as ubiquitous romantic landscape formats. In this way, “So Goes My Something,” is intended to be the kind of picturesque ruin, omnipresent in so much of the early American landscapes I’m bringing into the dialogue.
22. March Into The Sea, 2012-2013. The final work in the exhibition is a small plinth, entirely fabricated out of sugar, with a mirrored piece of glass inlaid at the top (see fig. 10). Upon the plinth rests a small glass container holding an ornate bouquet of sculptured sugar flowers. Positioned low to the ground, the bouquet is viewable from nearly every vantage point in the exhibition space, as each wall houses a large mirrored painting – a final gifting of flowers from me, a memorial to nothing. “March Into The Sea,” is intended to be a kind of bi-polated farewell: an order to leave shrouded in an offer to stay and reflect.

I would now like to briefly explain four pieces that were not shown in my visual thesis yet were incredibly important while developing the exhibition.

Cast entirely out of sugar, each sweet mortar stone also weighs approximately 10 lbs. – identical to the piece described in Section 21. Made up of over 200 individually cast pieces, the work is deliberately austere. The work is intended to be paired with one of the various mirrored paintings. Looking away from the piece into an exhibition space, the viewer is forced to engage her/his physical presence, as the large reflective glass piece envisages both the viewer and the wall of sugar – the memorial never leaving the viewer’s periphery.

There is an elusive power I continually find in the mythos of Cobain’s death – a haunted memory that has inspired suicides and, still to this day, motivates pilgrimages. That powerful mystique is something I anticipated to surround, “So Goes For Waiting.” It is intentionally confounding in material investigation and yet, upon closer inspection, its weight is almost palpable – its presence acting as a metaphor for the very intangibility of the event itself.

23. So Goes For Waiting, 2012-2013. This piece is designed to have a physical and corporeal presence: just wider then a viewer’s body and just taller then her or his height. The tension in the work stems from the idea that a viewer cannot look either around or over the work. What is awaiting the viewer on the other side is just out of sight.

Fig. 10
24. Dead Men Run, 2013. While the obvious reference in this drawing (the Suicide King in a deck of playing cards) runs the risk of being thudding and heavy-handed, I want a kind of poetry in this piece to emanate from the work’s softness: a quiet and meditative work one can closely engage.

My initial attraction to the lore surrounding Kurt Cobain’s death was a rash of copycat suicides committed by devotees of Nirvana in mid-1990’s. A teenager committing the ultimate act of worship was and is horrifying in its simplicity. In a sense, I suppose I saw it as fashionable in some perverted way. “The King,” in this work, is meant to contemplate that macabre celebration while also drawing a relation between Cobain and Jesus Christ. As stigmatics would brutally beat themselves to near death in passion plays so too are these teens worshiping at the altar of their Christ.

25. Canterbury Bells (The Bell Flower), 2013. As a sister piece to “The Broken Bell,” drawing I describe in Section 19, “Canterbury Bells (The Bell Flower)” is intentionally hung low in an attempt to directly engage with the viewer’s physical presence. Trisected into equal segments, the top piece rests just at eye level. Upon confronting the work, the viewer’s reflection is clutched between the three panels: reflecting a ghostly specter of one’s own body, broken in three by the frame’s edge.

26. Empty Bottles, Broken Hearts / Broken Bottles, Empty Hearts, 2013. One of a number of drawings I made as a response to the Bloom theme developing in my exhibition, the work plays off the veiled orifice metaphor described in Section 19. The title refers to a popular punk anthem, ubiquitous among the West Coast scene before and after Nirvana, and is meant to alternate, back-and-forth, in a similar way to the drawing itself. Initiated from a single perspectival point, this 62 x 40 in. drawing alternates between blooming to life and receding to the center, continually imploding and exploding, over-and-over (see fig. 11).
27. Of Such A Utopia Narcotic.

RICHMOND
BOBBY SCOTT WHIPKEY
Anderson Gallery (Virginia Commonwealth University)

Given the deluge of images we are confronted with daily, it seems more difficult than ever for a photograph to develop a point of view that is fresh and startling enough to stand out. Yet Bobby Scott Whipkey, a Midwestern native who moved to Richmond, VA by way of New York in 2011, has managed to make just that – not in any kind of radical fashion but in a quietly mysterious, subtly subversive way. In fact, the works in reference are difficult to be labeled photographs at all.

Entering the exhibition space, one is immediately confronted by something the white cube of the gallery does not often provide so dramatically: a reflection of one’s own image. Four of the six “paintings” in the show are executed with an industrial grade enamel on the reverse of recycled automotive glass. The effect is blackened mirror – crystal clear in its reflection, yet as if dramatically darkened using a contrast filter. Its difficult to name exactly what it is one’s looking into: painting? Photograph? Sculpture? Whipkey himself talks about the works drawing a quietly colored shadow around the blackness where the lacquered aluminum frame meets the cool white gallery wall.

Flanking the viewer as they enter, two tall crumbling white columns cast of household sugar flanked the entrance, forming a picturesque stage set to stare at oneself in the black mirrors. Referring to the picturesque, two of the paintings, Sweet William and Peony, both from 2013, appropriate specific Hudson River School painting’s dimensions. All these form a backdrop to centerpiece of the exhibition, an overflowing bouquet sculpted, too, of sugar that seemed to leap out of a Jan Brueghel the Elder still life.

Differences to some of the artist’s earlier work were immediately present. While the palette remains the same – Whipkey has continually worked in black and white since earning a BFA in 2007 – the references that generate the artist’s images are far more subdued. Perhaps this is why the slightest haze of purple or blue that I described delicately dancing around the frames of the mirrors has become so important in this exhibition.

Despite the strength of many individual works, the show did have its weaknesses. A number of the works seem to suggest a larger narrative but without context those motivations are lost. Whipkey has stated outright that he is not concerned with the audience having excess to his motivations. However sincere that may be it does sometimes appear as a not so veiled copout. Those concerns aside it’s hard to deny the oddly compelling desire of any viewer to continually gaze, literally, into this luscious and seductive installation.

– R. Scott