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Constant Motion

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master
of Fine Arts in Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by
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Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
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Abstract

CONSTANT MOTION

by Daniel Rower, BFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013.

Major Director: Pamela Turner, Chair, Kinetic Imaging

This thesis contains my writings and concept development, as it relates to personal history, time and animated art. This is explored through various methodologies, including short story and Zen meditative writing. As a companion to my recent thesis exhibition, this paper looks to make logical, emotional and spiritual connections between my art practice, ritualized cultural tropes and contemporary views of mortality.



fig 1. The artist at ages three and twenty-eight, 1987-2013

Introduction

In the following pages, I will show the development of my art practice through investigation into its foundational links with my own personal history and the history of the human condition as I have witnessed it. I hope to illustrate the sources of my work; images, content and trajectory, but I mean also to expose the unresolved logical connections within the content of my work. Much of what you are about to read is the result of an unreflective outpouring of memory and ideas, some of which I have yet to fully understand. I refuse to accept my self-ignorance as a weakness of the work, and

instead see it as a necessary mechanism in the inner dialogue and self-criticism that fuels my practice.

I believe that life will pass me by without its nature ever being fully known. Anxiety, confusion and fear are the foundation of the human experience, and if my art ever worked to pacify these feelings, rather than explore them, I would miss the beauty and terror that defines humanity. From birth to death, I have been cast into a world that never stops and gives me no second chances. Caught in constant motion towards the grave, I seek answers I know aren't there.

My Studio Practice

My approach to animated art making is both a studio practice and personal philosophy. I have found that the term “animation” comes, for many people, with a set of social and economic associations, which I see as antithetical to my own engagement with the method. It is possible to see animation as a form of filmic language, as developed by Disney or Warner Bros., a delivery system for products that is illustrative and surreal. However, an animated film is essentially an industrialized algorithm in service of a text and product line. If the “work” of the thing is in the development of story, creation of color and design elements meant to mesmerize, or placement of celebrity voices to drive attendance, then one could say that the animation is there only as an optional layer, something one simply looks at. The image is no longer animate, that is to say living, but instead becomes an expensive means of dressing up a radio play. I find it difficult to define my view of animation without devolving into listing what it isn’t. Animation isn’t story telling. Animation isn’t filmmaking. Animation isn’t drawing. Animation isn’t communication.

Animation is the composition of visual motion through the construction and combination of individual moments. Each image I produce is representative of an amount of time, a duration through which the next moment is arrived at. The work, as it were, is in the construction of this sequence, the drawings or images are there as a lattice upon which I support the span of time. The sequence is the primary goal, completely separate from drawing, designing or dramatization. The result of the animated work is a more direct, less mediated, translation from the thoughts that gave

birth to it. My more direct method has come with a necessary stripping away of the usual trappings of animated work. I actively avoid forethought and planning in the engineering of my work. Characters are not designed, stories are not written and storyboards are not blocked out. Working from my creative impulse, I move directly into the animated sequence with a fluid framework and space for improvisation. My goal isn't so much to communicate a carefully plotted concept, but to work and play with my creativity as I externalize it. My aim is to reevaluate the creation of synthesized motion outside of its industrialized state as an intimate and ritualized practice.

Besides my focus on an increasingly ascetic, secluded animation practice, and the difference that attitude has on the objects I produce, is a personal investment in the cognitive effects of the medium. For moving images to be produced consciously, one must redirect his or her thinking about time itself. Each fraction of each second is lived in for minutes, sometimes hours. This isn't a weakness in the productivity of my animation but, as I see it, a meditative and mind-expanding benefit of the practice. One must think through moments, project forward and back, carefully consider how the image they make in that five minutes will appear as a component in a sequence. As moments become sequential, and sequences built into scenes, time can begin to feel malleable and indefinite. As someone who makes work often exploring mortality and anxiety, this time-out-of-time modality has become the light, or the spirit, in the center of my work, fighting against and questioning the hopelessness of a potentially empty existence. The act of animating, the technology of it, suggests the hidden layers within our perception of time and questions the linearity events.

There have been animators before me to explore the malleability of time. My most profound experience with the medium came when I first saw the work of Georges Schwizgebel, specifically his 2006 film *Jeu*. Before that point, I had a very distant relationship with animated art, seeing it as a means to a commercial job, but watching *Jue* was the first time I considered animation as a self-contained medium for expression. Not only did Schwizgebel create a masterwork of time and motion, he worked nearly alone. The work isn't perfect, but it is unique and personal. In the years between, I have tried to take on the lessons of Schwizgebel's individuality and exploration into the inner workings of the moving image.

What I saw in *Jue* was the hidden potential of animated images. Within each of the short cycles, one or two seconds, the action is composed to exist for varying lengths of time. By inwardly replicating patterns, some figures move in much longer cycles than others. This method isn't Schwizgebel's invention, but his work exposed me to this alchemical potential of the medium. The play of time and perception in *Jue* is important to me, not because it stands apart from linear animation or how we understand cinematic time, but because, for its contradictory expression of time and space, it exposes the solubility of linear experience.

Koan Zen Meditation

An important part of my conceptual development in the last two years has been the introduction of Koan writing meditation by artist and Kinetic Imaging Professor, Semi Ryu. The meditation is carried out through the extended, repeated contemplation of a word or phrase, called the *hwadu*. After prolonged exposure to the ideas evoked by the *hwadu*, one writes for equally as long without editing or stopping. Professor Ryu, as a reaction to the content of my work at that time, chose these *hwadu* for me, with the explicit intent to evoke doubt and confusion. Through the repetitive contemplation of these *hwadu* texts, I worked to dislodge myself from the habit of comfortable intellectual paths and patterns. While I might have typically hidden behind metaphor or dissociated myself from the content of my artwork, this Zen practice marks the beginning point in the confrontation, and artistic incorporation, of my fear, anxiety, and childhood trauma. Although Zen meditation must be an ongoing process, it has provided me with an increasingly fluid conception of my art practice, in which confusion and doubt are seen as crucial building blocks.

The imagery, emotional tonality and spiritual attitudes I discovered through writing meditation are now integrated into my art practice. This integration is sometimes a direct reference to the writing and at other times is expressed as an undertone or subtext. The meditative writing and my art practice are in a constant dialogue, building on one another to dig deeper into my subconscious.

The following passages are the product of this meditation process, presented first with the hwadu word or phrase. These texts represent the edited, or contextualized, versions of much long, less coherent meditative writings.

“Past”

The past is always growing. The events of what we used to live are building up behind us. We forget most of what happens. We only clearly remember the things that made the largest impression, not what we pick and choose. Sometimes the least pleasant event is most clearly remembered. Does that make it the most real piece of the past? Sometimes we remember events wrong, change details, and alter the meaning of what happened. There's no way of knowing how much of what we think has happened is true, how true it is, or if it ever happened. If memory is the only way to know the past, and the brain's physical structure contains those memories, what is my childhood now made of? I suppose it's in pieces of brain, scattered through the world, living in the heads of my witnesses- changing as the brains they are made of change and decay. Could I take the memories out of all the minds that hold them and look at them? Where are my dad's memories?

The Hubble telescope takes pictures of galaxies 13 billion light years away. This makes the images we know to be only 800 million years older than the universe. We hold the images in our brains and computers. We are the Universe's memory. We contain the images, colors, sounds of its origins, and we get it a bit wrong, and we continually reevaluate it's meaning. Maybe other parts of the universe remember it

differently, but we have our take on how it was, and we're partially right- as right as I remember my first pair of shoes.

My family remembers my early childhood for me. They tell me how it was for me to be a baby, from their perspectives as adults at the time. I have flashes of sights and sounds, cribs and step stools, rules and rooms and food I liked to eat and food I didn't like to eat. My memory is incomplete in so far as it feels incomplete to me. I don't recall as much sense and thought data as I expect to have in, say, an average day now. Does that mean I forgot details, or was there just less detail back then? Was the Universe a simpler place 800 million years after it started? Are we the grown-ups trying to tell what it was like back then, or are the flashes of light and matter impossible to understand looking backwards?

We know what happened in the past because we can look into the past of places sufficiently far away. Should we back up far enough, would we see our own past? 27 light years away, is a meteor looking at me as a baby? I wish as a baby I looked into a telescope to a place 27 light years away, so that in writing this I can say, "my mom has a picture of me looking at a place that is only now looking at me looking at it."

I would always bring my lime-green lunch box to summer camp. It had an ice pack in it, to keep my juice cold. The added benefit of the ice pack is that I would partially freeze the peanut butter of my fluff sandwich and the condensation would make one of the slices of bread slightly wet. There isn't a name for this kind of sandwich. It isn't a fluffernutter; those call for dry, unfrozen bread. Sandwiches were never the high point of my day at the time, I don't think, but it's the only clear memory I have of that whole summer. The rest is in fragments, impressions and flashes, but the mostly

frozen, slightly wet, peanut butter and fluff sandwich is what is complete in my mind. The flavor, texture, temperature are all there- as is the way it made me feel, the way it made my lunch box smell just a bit like peanuts and wet sugar. From the sandwich I can expand out, feel my way through the past- the gazebo we ate in, the clamor of hungry kids, the playground I could see from the table, the time I fell off the swing set, the geodesic climbing frame, the horse stables past the tall grass, the short cuts through the property, listening to the Beatles on my Walkman. But it all comes back to the cold sandwich, for whatever reason, that was the anchor for every other experience I had in that summer. If I could look back from deep space now, would I even notice the sandwich?

“Objects Dying”

I sit waiting in the hot car. The seats burn the backs of my knees. It smells like fruit, reminds me of the candy I got in Florida. There are crumbs and sand in the cracks of the hot plastic seat. Everything is sticky and I can hear nothing but a ringing in my ears. Looking through the window to the dim orange sky, I can see shapes dancing around- or I can see how they move, but can't see them. My shoes are white and hot. I'm still waiting to leave in the car, but no one has come out of the house. I can see the little thing on the center console, the metal thing that heats up. I click it in; the sound makes me feel like I've done something complex and mature. After a moment I pull it out, the rings of metal are shadowless and orange-red, they look wonderfully dangerous. I click the lighter back into its holder, wait longer, and click it back out to inspect the rings of hot metal. In a moment of inspiration I press the lighter into the sole

of my shoe. It sinks into the rubber and fills the car with an acrid and distinctly enticing smell, much better than the sweet fruit candy smell, which reminds me of horseshoe crabs clustered on an immense beach. Circles are scorched into my shoe and it's ruined forever. It's ugly and I regret doing it. I click the lighter back into the console, anticipating the punishment that might result from what I'm doing. Waiting a moment I remove the lighter and, without taking time to admire the heat of it, press it hard into the dashboard. Then again, and again until the heat has left and five or so rings are burned into the dash and it's ruined forever. I feel proud of my discovery.

My teeth started falling out. I was told to put them under my pillow. It was a game and I would be rewarded for growing up, growing a new smile. I didn't want the money. I wanted my body to be left alone. I wanted to keep my teeth even if they were useless to me now. They didn't need to chew for me, they just need to stay with me.

The Tooth Fairy is a stupid idea that is purely deceptive and explains nothing. The experience of buying into an idea like this made me feel duped and victimized. Either there's a force so powerful it will rip the bones away from my body, promising some unwanted reward, or the loss is just a meaningless process that my parents chose not to explain and replaced with a meaningless fantasy.

In the end, my mom had to be honest. There was no big secret, nothing out of the ordinary, no tooth fairy. As I experienced the disintegration of my child-body, I faced for the first time the truth about my objective existence. My shell was finally acting like itself and crumbling under the weight of time. I could no longer feel completely safe as

a thing; I had to change and would continue to change until the process ran out of material.

Annihilator is made of purple and orange plastic. He came with a helicopter jetpack that I either lost or never had. He was a bad guy and you couldn't see his face. He was my favorite GI Joe; he had the best head shape and color pallet. Alley Viper was a close second, ever since I lost my silver masked Cobra Commander.

Annihilator broke in half a long time ago. The rubber dried out and he split in the middle. His hips and legs detached, the screws loosened and made his joints floppy, the purple chipped in places and made the ridges in the plastic show through. His gloves are chipping too. He has been with me as long as I can remember. I can't ever stop loving the shape of his mask, or the color of his body. I still keep him, the back of my closet, in a small box with the two remaining Dino-Riders (both bad guys, one partially chewed by a dog), the last Muscle Man, the rock with an eagle painted on it from Seattle, a bullet casing from southern California, and a clam fossil I found behind my school.

I don't think about playing with him anymore, or even fixing him, but I'll never choose to get rid of him, or neglect his memory long enough for it to disappear.

"Uncanny, Fear"

Driving through the mountains, a mix of dead things in the grass, we kept a count of dead deer and dead raccoons and dead tires. Peering with giggling curiosity at dead

towns and old shops that no one goes to anymore. Everything was useless and dirty and the people looked spent and we thought it was funny at the time.

The Eat'n'Park served a white cream at the salad bar. We didn't know what it was, but everyone was eating it. We were sure that it was something we wouldn't understand and we thought it was disgusting. The hefty, wobbling purulent atrophic people choosing to eat a nondescript mass of fat or sugar or both, made us feel at once superior and excluded. And the shirts were too expressive.

The BBQ place we found never had a name and we were the only customers. There were pieces of onion and pepper in the meat. We agreed that it was "good", we enjoyed it, but there was no other distinct impression it made on us and we immediately forgot which town we had been in.

The Blue Comet Diner had a smoking section. The distressed waitress looked as though she had stopped making important judgments years before we sat in her section. The menu had to have been designed by someone: it looked like a half forgotten copy of a big chain menu- blue, light blue and yellow with small pictures of possible breakfasts. Scrapple was on the menu as a side option, but the pictures of the food didn't show scrapple. We had never heard of it. We couldn't guess what it was. Asking the waitress what it was, we were told that it was 'the scraps of the pig', as if he was supposed to know which pig and which scraps. Oh, I'll have that. The grey slab of not-a-vegetable was brought out late, something was wrong with the range. Well, it goes down real easy.

Before we left for our trip, my Dad stopped being able to swallow solid food. During meals he would jump up and run into the kitchen. One of us would usually follow

out of concern, only to be quickly shooed away in a cloud of gagging and spitting and gasping and retching. It went on for months without anything being done about it. It made me sick to hear it. It made me sick that he didn't fix it. It seemed so wrong to allow yourself to live like that. The noises were unbearable, and his half baked explaining away of the problem was frustratingly and obviously misinformed.

After we returned from our trip, he went to see a doctor we all found out what the problem was. Acid reflux can cause scarring in the lower esophagus, slowly developing into a constricted ring. As a result, food gets stuck when swallowed, resulting in (at worst) discomfort. There was a simple procedure available to correct the problem.

Looking back, I should have understood more of what I was seeing. My father was a man, so overcome with responsibility to his family, that he felt a need to ignore himself. I wish he had known we didn't want that for him. On account of his own negligent and depressed parent, he was made to raise his siblings, cooking meals and organizing the family. This must have carried over into his adult persona, the silent guardian, the selfless provider. He would never consider his own needs, so when the cancer came back, no one knew until months after it was too late. I used to wonder what he'd attribute the pain and weight loss to. Where as the choking problem made me upset, the cancer left me baffled. How could his focus be so far from himself?

The only thing my father ever did to hurt me was to let himself suffer in silence so the rest of us wouldn't worry. He never cried in front of me or showed any sign of despair. The first time I saw him after his diagnosis, he hugged me and told me I would be okay.

Animal Heads and Person Bodies

My life before middle school revolved around the collection of plastic figurines. These were mostly from product lines like G.I. Joe, Dino Riders, and Battle Beasts. Every birthday and holiday was dedicated to expanding my collection. Though I was always interested in lines that featured some human characters, I avoided them at all costs. The human faces made me uneasy and ruined the fun. Their hair and eyes and expression did nothing for me, whereas the animal-headed or masked figures held an almost hypnotic allure. Battle Beasts grabbed me because of their compact size and color design. Standing at about two inches, they were all painted two tones over a single-color rubber base and featured heat-sensitive patches that revealed their “power element.” I would trade nearly anything to other kids to get Battle Beasts since they had been discontinued



fig 3. Battle Beasts, Takara Co., Ltd., 1987



fig 2. Anihilator, Hasbro Inc., 1989

years before I knew about them and were exceptionally hard to come by. My collection of Battle Beasts only made it to seven, but I would obsessively count them before putting them away or going to bed to make sure they were all accounted for.



fig 4. Dino Riders, TYCO Industries, Inc., 1988

Dino Riders stood apart from all these other preoccupations. They were a nightmare for me; I needed them. Where as with other toy lines I might find myself in a dubious trade, sacrificing masses of Transformers for a single two-inch rubber aardvark, for Dino Riders I would lie and steal. My mom caught me leaving a friend's house with a plastic ankylosaurus up my sleeve. We've never discussed it since, but I'd like to think it was a worthy first major lapse in character. Dino Riders set me apart from myself, whipped me into a frenzy, they were all I cared about for years. Again, it was only the bad guys that did it for me and I would avoid the heroic toys like a disease. I needed to closely inspect the colors, the bizarre animal head designs and the stub-toed boots they all wore. At one point I lost the figure of the main villain (frog-headed) and looked for him for years, intermittently overturning rooms and closets, sure that I was about to find him.

This love of images combining human and animal forms feels to me like a constant and inseparable element of my being. Since maturing beyond toy collecting, this obsession has filtered into my art making. As an image, the animal headed (more particularly bird-headed) figure has become an anchor point for my creative process, something like an avatar or imaginary friend. My animation often begins with these bird-headed bodies, through which I have freedom to explore and invent and feel almost guided to new and unfamiliar places. There are many mythologies through human history that have used animal-headed figures as avatars for the godly or transcendent,

but, beyond a vague knowledge of these things as Egyptological clichés my consciousness has never been conditioned to incorporate these figural symbols as a spiritual conduit. Where my understanding of my distant forerunners, these anonymous ancient, comes from is Saturday morning television, cartoons and action shows and plastic toys. As deeply into my creative mind as these images have cut, they are still relegated to a place of commerce and popular culture. Through an alchemical melding of popular media into spiritual expression, I look to understand humanity as both spiritual entities and transcendent animals.

My most recent work, *The Bird Cult*, is an investigation through my own history, the spiritual realities expressed in human culture and the fabric of the planet's ecological system. Guiding me, and embodied by me, the birdmen work towards linking myself, my culture and the essential spirit of humanity.

Rediscovering Religion

I make art to explore the inexpressible sensation of living. I want to translate the reality of being earthbound into images and movements, to see them laid out, separated into parts, in order to come to terms with the control these factors exert on me, and the ways in which they enrich my existence. My art looks at the difference between a pebble and a person, the contrast and connections between modes of being in the world. I work to dislodge my own humanity from the world and society around me, to see my being as a piece in itself within the Universe and to feel my infinite connections to everything I've known and seen. I indulge in moments of spontaneous creativity (pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic flashes of meaning) as my primary driving force. The images in my work are products of the flashes of feeling and meaning in my mind that I can explain only through the externalization of them. This process of realization could be immediate, or after years of living with the images or ideas.

I've been thinking about the birdmen for a long time. The first time I ever thought about this specific image of a writhing human figure with a bird head was in 2008. I had just finished college, and was working overnight shifts at the front desk of a hotel in Portland, Maine. At this point in my life, somewhat isolated, poor and massively sleep deprived, I began keeping a constant outpouring of any screwball, dreamy image that would pop into my head while sitting in the hotel lobby. Of course, a lot of what I would write or draw would be garbage, the product of a mind in atrophy, but it was at this point I doodled my first birdman. The images were just simple nude figures with long, slightly

grotesque beaked heads. After a short while of preoccupation with the image, many a couple of weeks, I started to draw the birdmen circling a bed, where a man lay dead or dying. I have no specific memory of the first time I drew this, but I still continue to idly jot it from time to time like a nervous habit.

I began to think of these birdmen as some kind of mythology of my own making. They seemed like spirit guides or something similar, but I never thought much about them in a broader context. It wasn't until early in 2013 that I decided, for no particular reason, to search Google for any references to a "Bird Cult." What I found were bits and pieces about a cultural tradition on Easter Island, called the *Tangata Manu*, or Bird Men. Though the people who carved the giant Moai head sculptures seem to get more attention¹, at least I've been more exposed to their work, the culture of the Tangata Manu speaks to a more humble, personal kind of spiritual exertion. A Wikipedia article² stated that each year, several of the tribe's men would be elected to compete in a race, transporting a tern egg from a neighboring islet, cross a channel and up a cliff face to the main village. Some of the competitors would die during the race by falling from the cliff or being attacked by sharks.

Much of our understanding of the Tangata Manu is the account of a few European visitors, but the overall concept of their culture is what intrigues me. I think there's a connection between my drawing and these men who risked their lives (swimming through shark-filled water and free climbing, presumably one-handed) in the service of nothing in particular but to prove that they could. In any case, that's my spin

¹ Since beginning *The Bird Cult* project, I have read more about the indigenous peoples of Easter Island, specifically those who carved the Moai heads, in the work of Terry Hunt and Carlos Lipo, and found similar conceptual links to my work with the Tangata Manu. Hunt, Terry L., and Carl P. Lipo. *The Statues That Walked: Unraveling the Mystery of Easter Island*. New York: Free, 2011.

² "Tangata Manu." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 05 Feb. 2013. Web. 09 Mar. 2013.

on it. My concept of death has always been as a fearful thing we put off, to be avoided for as long as possible and never worth risking. But now, it seems to me that to reconcile the fear of death, the possibility of its absolute finality and the exhilaration of extending one's body past limits, one would benefit from ritual, cultural habits, that come very close to being fatal. I notice this all the time, really, the more comfortable people get in most of their lives the more they seem to get caught up in dangerous pastimes, like bungee jumping and sky diving, or scaling mountains. When we are not faced with death, actual death and not its dramatization, we lose perspective on our limitations, how temporary we are. Suddenly, comfort isn't a relief, but a pretense that drags against our natural momentum towards the brazen and ridiculous. It's a freedom from comfortable artifice that the actual birdmen of Easter Island communicate to me, and, in learning about them, I can see how the birdmen avatars of my invention act as my conduit towards a new way of being.

As the birdmen from my dreams were a kind of honor guard for the dying, I decided that the bird men of Easter Island should be the focus of the work I hoped to make in response to the two year mark of my father's death. The work would be deeply spiritual (in a spirituality of my own contriving), celebratory and as connected to nature as it would be to my own life story. My goal became a series of works, which would express the varied and conflicting states of my own grief, spiritual life and place within the natural world.

The Bird Cult is a multimedia installation comprised of four interconnected works in video, animation and objects. Each piece illustrates a dimension of the Bird Cult

imagery, mixing and mingling with images and ideas pulled from my own life as well as each other. Through the pursuit of visual and emotional linkages, the works contain an internal narrative structure lacking any clear beginning or end. The initial concept (an investigation into the recurring imagery of the bird men) has been cross-referenced and culturally cheapened through Internet assembled pseudo-historical philosophy and Amazon paperbacks. The product is meant to approximate a genuine expression of my experience in the world, confused, immediate and deeply mediated by technology and pop culture. The spiritual or religious implications are muddled and unclear, fashioned as an ironic placeholder in lieu, perhaps, of either honest nihilism or spiritual enlightenment. I'm still unsure if the desperate synthesis of imagined meaning at the heart of my work is a path towards truth or simply whistling in the dark to cope with the bewildered panic just behind each moment of my experience. The psychological tension between complacent faith and active disbelief has become the critical hot zone of my artistic development.

Religion, or more specifically religious ceremony, has always left me feeling disassociated from the truth of mortality. When I frame my concept of life and death in a mystic or spiritual construct, I lose the ability to confront the truth in a meaningful or psychologically healthy way. The world of the spiritual suggests a mediating layer between us and the rest of the Universe, ignoring the clearly observable singleness of our bodies, minds and world. Through the creation of my artwork, I look to find my own non-religious and non-spiritual context in which to live and contemplate life. Not so much as a means of arriving at truth, but a struggle to stop ignoring reality and find my place in the rhythm of all things.

I want drums and fire, the kinds of wailing the darkness that invite ancestral memories to dance and drive away nightmarish jungle predators, and I want to cast off the Styrofoam-padded complacency of Christian modernity. I feel dethatched from and ashamed of my natural, inarticulate confusion, and I believe more each day that the desperate need for constraint and mediation is ruining the human animal. But I see no open passage for primal nature to be in my life. Even if I could dislodge myself from the Internet, or debit cards, or Tylenol, what I'd be living would be my own cinematic cliché of nature. And I just can't see myself permitting the expansion of hippy nonsense ("organic" stamped on the side of a ketchup bottle) and so far I've taken no meaningful step towards creating my own spiritual or natural reality.

Growing Up

My dad lost weight fast. He was always quite chubby, but every time I'd come to visit from Boston, he'd look like a totally different person. When he started his treatment, my family worked around the clock trying to get him to eat. It was impossible to understand how he could be starving and yet unable to eat, we tried everything. Some days he'd finish his breakfast, but after a while that was too much to ask. With chemotherapy, the plan is to go through a few months of a treatment type, then wait to see what it did. If it seemed to help, you do it again, if it didn't you try something new. When you run out of things to do, you go home and a nurse comes by each day to check up on you. After the first round of treatment, my dad showed no change. Since it was neither good nor bad, they put him back on the bio-chemicals and tried to think of something else. The first round was extremely hard on my dad, the second was much

worse. His body was ground down to skin and bones; his only mass came from the tumors in his abdomen. He was always sweating and freezing, he couldn't keep food down, and would hallucinate constantly. He would try to play banjo or paint, but he didn't have strength enough to lift a brush.

At this point, he was put into hospice care, or end-of-life nursing; there was no other option for him. His pastor would come over to speak with him about funeral arrangements. My dad had at one point been tested for a genetic marker, one that would make him a candidate for an experimental treatment. The drug had a long, strange name that my dad later shortened to "lpy", for the first three letters in its name. If I remember, he wasn't an ideal candidate for the trial, but a chance friendship between his doctor and the one running the test in Boston gave him the push he needed to get into the program. Every few weeks from then, my mom and dad would drive to Boston for lpy infusions, a five-hours process that left my dad feeling terrible. After a few times, he was scanned and evaluated. It looked like the tumors had stopped growing, and were possibly smaller. He was kept on the trial from January until the end of the summer.

All of that summer I was working a temp job, holding back debt until the next school year. I would get up to Maine when I could, but my workweek was irregular and never left more than a day off at a time. It was around this point that my dad's weight problem became extremely dire. Even though the treatments seemed to have a positive effect, we were told that if he didn't get his weight up quickly he'd starve to death in less than two weeks. I returned home to help my family find a solution. We decided simultaneously, and totally out of the blue, that my dad needed marijuana. The

only person who could help us do this was my middle brother, who had known where to find the stuff about seven years earlier. He placed a few calls, then my mom drove him out to the University campus, gave him some money, and he bought weed for my dad. With help from a family friend with an interest in herbal medicine, my mom made a marijuana-butter to put on my dad's English muffin. Of course, it worked immediately. His appetite returned and he was able soon to cut back on anti-anxiety medicine. That was especially important because the anxiety meds caused nausea, necessitating anti-nausea meds. So, with one illegal act, we managed to get my dad eating again, plus scrapped his appetite inducers, anxiety meds and nausea meds.

I had been back at work for a week or so, when my mom asked me to come back home. This had always indicated a massive decline in my dad's condition. By now I had not truly spoken to my dad in months, we'd talked but he'd been mostly incoherent. When I got home, my mom led me into the living room, where my dad sat facing away from me. My dying father, for the first time in almost a year, moved under his own power and swiveled towards me. "Oh, hi." He said. He had gained something like twenty pounds and was back to eating normally. "Look at this, I've got a new trick" And he stood up.

My family spent the fall doing everything we could together, camping and cooking out and parties and playing music. My dad taught me the ukulele and built me an animation table I could stand at, an idea we'd had before he was sick. He started new paintings and was playing guitar and singing with The Brakemen again. We sat up one night when my mom was out, and I watched as he worked out how to play Blue Violet Waltz.

It wasn't until I asked that my mom told me the trial drug wasn't being continued. At his last scan, there were clear signs of new growth, and in new regions. There was no specific explanation for my dad's apparent recovery, but it was guessed that the first dip in his health was made worse by the initial treatments, and his improvement was more to do with their negative effects wearing off. It could be that either treatment had helped a little, but we'd never really know. By the end of December, my dad's weight dropped again. They briefly considered starting a new round of chemo, but it wasn't long before a scan showed tumor growth in his brain. He was re-enrolled in hospice care. Everything happened much faster this time. Within weeks he was mostly unconscious, or talking as if in a different place or time in his life. Instead of his sons carrying him up and down the stairs, he was now totally confined to his bed.

The night before my dad died, I helped my mom lift him off the bed. He couldn't control his bladder any more and had wet himself. She had to cut him out of his boxers while I held him. She then went to get a wet towel. In the last moments I spent alone with my dad, he stared up at me with misty eyes, naked. He mouthed words at me, but couldn't make sound anymore. I don't know what he said. I tried to tell him I loved him, but I'm pretty sure I couldn't, I don't clearly remember. I called for my mom, and she rushed back in. She covered him up and we sat for a minute. I remember her taking off his wedding ring and putting it on. She said she didn't want anyone else to do it.

My mom woke me up the next day around six thirty to tell me he'd died. My middle brother was on his way, taking the overnight bus from New York. My oldest

brother and I picked him up at the Grey Hound Station, and had to tell him in the parking lot.

When we got home, we sat with my dad for a while. At some point, everyone had gone downstairs and I was alone with him. I remember walking around him to the stereo to play Blue Violet Waltz. I listened to the song and screamed until my lungs hurt at the foot of his bed. When the song was done, I looked up at him. His eyes had turned from white to black; I didn't know that would happen.

Men came and carried him out in a bag. My family paid for a cremation, but not an urn. We had a memorial at the house and a funeral a few days later. The Brakemen played, then after the service, a band my dad had known played Bluegrass in the church social room. We scattered some of his ashes from a pier he liked to fish from, then the rest at the sandbar he liked to walk on.

My dad's gone forever and some day the same thing will happen to me. I think we try to make this okay, keep daily life going with myth and religion, but it's all junk. The more we believe in spirituality and mysticism the further we get from the truth- we are meat that's not dead yet and we aren't special in the universe. We're not visitors here, destined for a palace in the sky, we're just one little piece each of the world. Through my work I want to say, 'sure we're all dead soon, and maybe its all meaningless, but I can choose how to value my time as a being in this world. If I have imaginary friends that I think will transport me to an ethereal plane of consciousness,

great, but I won't never forget that I'm bound to the dirt and worms and that'll always be what I really am.'

The Bird Cult

I wanted to create a body of work with linking visuals, context and content, but a range of attitudes. Some of this work is funny, some of it serious, some parts are embarrassing, and all of it mingles and shifts between emotional valences.

This is art that springs as purely from my own experience as I could manage. I'd like to think that it isn't self indulgent, but instead works towards being self-revealing. The anchor point of this work is an acceptance that plurality of experience is the essence of truth in nature. There is meaning in the combined and conflicting views of the people of Easter Island, myself, and the Wikipedia contributors that brought us together. Our connection, in terms of direct communication, is cheap and corrupted my monetization, and there is a deep sickness in the core of how history has been simplified, westernized and sold for advertising space. It's therefore an irony for me to create these Technicolor extravagances, to invoke the old culture of a distant island, and claim it as a balm for my own grief. I hope that it is, nonetheless, successful in honoring the people that came before me, and that I am forgiven my modern habits of excess and self-interest.



fig 5. *Drowning Bird Man*, 2013, multi-media sculpture

Drowning Birdman is an animated projection, presented here within a painted pedestal and plaster headstone. On the pedestal and carved into the plaster are various glyphs borrowed from carvings and body paintings from Easter Island.

The projected image is a bird headed man, holding an egg, swinging his limbs around in a chaotic pattern. The image is produced through the composed animation of each limb as separate pieces, coming together with logical and unintended relationships. The affect is such, that the man seems sometimes to be running, swaying lifelessly, or somewhere in-between. On rare occasions, his legs and side

burst or tear open, spilling out viscera and flesh, suggesting his fatal narrative- only to begin running again.

Here sways a brave corpse. When he was young, he dreamed of marrying and giving his children a rich and fulfilling development, so that, as adults, they would appreciate him, but not rely on him. He was an okay cook. He fell from a cliff and broke his ribs. The blood attracted sharks; his trashing called attention to his legs, which the sharks ate.

What should his son say? He never dropped the egg.



fig 6. *Tangata Manu*, 2013 three channel video installation

Tangata Manu, a video installation, depicts three birdman characters running, each with one egg. Three video monitors rest on three dis-upholstered chairs. On each monitor is the image of each running birdman, forever cycling through one half step, and above each monitor the corresponding bird mask is mounted to the wall. Each runner wears thrift store bought costumes painted with Easter Island glyphs. The images evolved from my imagined version of the previously mentioned Tangata Manu race, but

rather than presenting the event as a whole, I show only the runners trapped in constant motion. The images are simple and vibrant, painting the birdmen as colorful and admirable, yet locked into a position of helplessness.

The three birdmen are my brothers and I. Trying to get the eggs home is trying to make peace with our own experiences with loss. The painted shirts show how we are building our lives, especially these new parts Dad won't see. The chairs were a gift from my mom.

Vin, the eldest, is the Greater Petrel Bird Man. He is aloof and brooding; he worries about his children. Pat, the middle brother, is the Greater Frigate Bird Man. He is proud and self-conscious; he worries about his appearance. I, the youngest, am the Tropicbird Bird Man. I am introverted and attention seeking; I worry about my future.

We spent years in dizzying dread, each of us thinking we had found a way to cope.



fig 7. Final Moment, 2013, single channel animated video

Final Moment is a cycling animated video, with duration of two seconds (or 48 images). This piece evolved from the cobbling together of images in my writing about the day my father died, particularly the time spend walking from the guest room of my parents house to the room in which his body lay. The sequence shows a pair of figures walking down an endless hallway, with a succession of doors all opening to the same room. In a corner of the frame, a walking stick is tossed back and forth in a shallow tide. The two walking figures face a man's body propped upright in a bed being circled by egg carrying birdmen.

It's the old man's time to go. The room he died in is behind every door and unreachable. Birdmen guide him on the next step in his journey, in a never-ending

parade. The walk from the guest room to his body didn't take a moment; it's taking every moment of my life at once.

I think about the scared, anxious kid I was and how much I feared death and losing the people I loved. He was too nervous to speak his mind and too confused about the limits of mortality to ever ask. The younger me was afraid that if he gave voice to the bottomless mire of terror and doubt, he might finally have to see the truth, to know what death really is and what comes after. I think about how desperately I still need those answers. If, maybe, I somehow could; I would take the scared child by the hand and take him to see his father.



fig 8. Sky Burial for My Dad's Armchair, 2013, performance video documentation

Sky Burial for My Dad's Armchair is a performance, presented as video and sound documentation. The performance is a funeral service for an armchair, which

used to belong to my dad. Using a sharpened piece of wood and my bare hands, I pulled the upholstery from the chair, mimicking the way birds will strip a corpse in nature. During the burial, I wore a mask fashioned after the color and shape of the sooty tern, the bird most prized by the people of Easter Island, and the object of the Tangata Manu ritual. In addition to the main camera documenting the performance, there was a device in the mask to record the sounds of my breathing. My aim was to exemplify what I believe to be a healthier attitude towards death ritual³, to sacrifice a prized possession to my art, and to finally give a fitting end to my dad's presence in my life. This piece represents the culmination of my meditation and research, thus far, and marks my most personally exposed point in my art practice.

He asked us to burn him. I hadn't done well at my grandfather's wake; he noticed that. I was told later that he made his decision to be cremated mostly to spare my feelings. Not the rest of the family, but me.

He did a lot for me in his life. He was endlessly kind and patient, much more so than I ever was. I suppose that's how fathers and sons are, unequal, but it doesn't take the sting out of all the nasty things I said to him or anytime I looked past his best qualities and secretly wished for a more interesting dad. We spread his remains in the ocean at two of his favorite places, and while I can believe that it's basically what he wanted, I often drift back to thinking he was trying to spare me my cowardice.

³ The sky burial concept was largely informed by scientist and author Bernd Heinrich, especially his work on birds' function in recycling the remains of large mammals. Heinrich, Bernd. *Life Everlasting: The Animal Way of Death*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

Maybe, when we see a thing or a place that is completely tied to someone we've lost, so much that we can't think of it and them as really being separate, the weight that drops through our chests into the deepest parts of our beings is the pain of seeing part of what was and, more clearly, what it won't ever be. The potentials that were cut off jump for a moment into the present and we fully experience how much our lives now lack them.

My mother gave the red chair to my dad, and when he died I was allowed to take it with me to Virginia. I thought it would be nice to have a piece of his property, to have his life carried on through mine. But I'm too desperate to keep him here, and he's not here anymore. His body was burned to dust, all the parts of him taken from the world without sentiment or pageantry, just strangers operating a machine. To accept that he carried me as far as he could, and that I will be the person bereft of his guidance for the rest of my life demands that I finally let his memory pass beyond the events of my life, and exist as the unshakable foundation on which I build myself, safe from corruption and valuation.

My father, now deceased, deserves to have his exhausted occupancy of this world extinguished by the people who loved him most, so that the minute, eternal core of his existence can be untethered from artifice. I would like to think I owe him as much.

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Vita

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