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Camping Out

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

by

Mike Linskie

BA, Temple University, 2010

MFA, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Director: Peter Baldes

Associate Professor of Painting and Printmaking

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

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Abstract

CAMPING OUT

By Michael Robert Linskie, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major Director: Peter Baldes
Associate Professor of Painting and Printmaking

This thesis explores my personal mythology, and its relation to all things found not only in my studio practice but the work itself. Biographical anecdotes are shared as well as ideas on drawing, home décor, collecting, craft, art history, storytelling, and camp. Camp provides the space in which all aspects of my practice and work reside.

Snow Cycles

*And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return we can only look
Behind from where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game
Joni Mitchell, *The Circle Game**

1:30AM: It was snowing and I was on my way home from the studio. I decided not to go home yet and continued my walk. After spending the previous several hours working in the studio, I needed to clear my head before going home. I needed the crisp air, the snow, something outside of the studio. As I walked I listened to my iPod, Bjork's *Post* album. This walk seemed special so as I neared my apartment door, again, I decided to go back around the block.

I began to look for the footprints that I had put down previously and followed them as closely as possible. I knew the footprints were mine, since they were the only ones, but I found it difficult to fit exactly back into them. It would be a total of four times that I circled the block before finally going home.

As I prepared to go to bed, I reflected on what had transpired. Why had I decided to walk in the snow and for so long? Why did I try to follow my own footsteps? I was retracing my steps but they were going to be different prints no matter how hard I tried to match. Walking in the snow reminded me of Gregory Crewdson's viewpoint: "I feel very strongly that every artist has one central story to tell. The struggle is to tell and retell that story over and over again, in visual form, and try to challenge that story. But at the core that story remains the same. It's like the defining story of who you are" (*Gregory Crewdson-Brief Encounters* 74:44-75:23).

My work revolves around a core of interests that fuels what I make: drawing, the home, collecting, craft, art history, personal mythology and camp. By continually returning to the studio to make work, these interests all reveal themselves in new ways.

NEXT MORNING: I woke up to the radio playing unfamiliar music. After the song finished, the radio host announced the composer and title: Claude Debussy's "Footsteps in the Snow."

Leaving Marky Marks Behind

*Snake! Snake! Shed
your skin And go
away*

*Leave behind your shadow's memory
Leave me, this is your day
Antony and the Johnsons, Ghost*

While I was growing up, my family moved frequently, relocating seven times before I had turned fourteen. As a child, I could not fully comprehend this nomadic relationship to place, which I later understood as a function of my father's career. In all this relocation, I found drawing. It provided me with comfort; my family could have moved another hundred times, but a piece of paper and a pencil would always endure the move. I could draw wherever or whomever we were leaving behind, or wherever we were heading towards. Drawing gave me the freedom to construct the world I wished to see or remember; worlds with their own rules and logic. Now, more than fifteen years later, drawing serves a similar purpose in my studio practice.

Drawing has, in the last thirty years, gained traction as a viable medium in its own right, not just as a preliminary product for future work. In Emma Dexter's discussion of the rise in popularity of drawing in the 1990s, she states that it was a medium artists could use to accomplish work more easily and affordably as studio rent rose in cities. She states "It was art that one could make in a bedroom...All that drawing requires is imagination, creativity, and skill" (Dexter 8-9). Drawing provides a space in which an individual can visualize his/her world and in doing so reflect upon said world.

Whether it is through representation or abstraction, drawing also communicates a record of the artist's existence. In "The Euphoria of the Everyday," Anthony Dubovsky states as soon as one picks up a drawing material they "become a part of the stream of living form" (72). When anyone engages with the act of drawing he/she acknowledge that he/she is alive. In a more technological and Internet-based culture, the hand perhaps seems old fashioned, but my work is personal so I insist on making drawings that include the remnants of my touch.

Dubovsky continues:

The drawings of the horses and bison on the cave walls of Altamira and Lascaux—still among the most powerful that we have—remain an absolute demonstration of what it means to give form. Each hand-drawn line has a uniqueness—a sense of personality—that corresponds to the person who makes it. (74-75).

My idiosyncratic sense of the world is present in the drawings. Each "hand-drawn line" leaves a record behind for future generations.

Home Décor and more

*The journey home
Is never too long
When open arms are waiting there
The journey home
Is never too long
There's room to love and room to spare
Akaash, Journey Home*

*I'm meeting people, they all seem friendly.
So I don't need to feel as lonely as I feared.
That girl who stopped to help me has a beard.
I want to go home.
Josh, I Want To Go Home*

My main interest in the home is in the objects and images that decorate the interior – maybe it was all the time I spent watching reruns of *This Old House* with Bob Vila with my dad or *The Christopher Lowell Show* with my mom as a child. I developed an affinity for things like furniture, window treatments, wallpapers, and decorations but what I enjoyed most was seeing the ability to create a space that represented the dweller’s personality through the arrangement of domestic objects.

I tend to think about decorating while making, in order to create calm out of chaos. In Encarna Castillo’s *MXM: Maximalist Interiors* he describes that “Interior design is the result of the interaction between the personality of whoever lives in a home and pure expression, be it through assimilation and imitation or through complete rejection of the current era...” (1). Castillo resumes, “Maximalism is a personal rebellion against the uniformity and standardization of the formulas proposed by minimalism— which has been elevated to a canon of beauty—and a demand for other ways of understanding space and the individual’s relationship to it” (3). Challenging expectations of beauty or questioning a viewers taste in beauty is valuable to the

work I make. This deconstructing of hierarchical attitudes towards good taste versus bad taste opens people up to appreciating and valuing differences in all aspects of life.

My second interest in the home is due to its connotations of warmth and safety. Sadie Benning is an artist that I relate to in terms of the content in her work as well as her practice. Her earliest works were videos made with what she had—a Fisher Price Pixelvision video recorder given to her as a gift from her father. Benning was resourceful and found making videos using this inexpensive video recorder to be a means of expression. She discusses in an interview with Linda Yablonsky that, “...the world is not safe, my bedroom is. It’s my space and all my things are mine, and there’s no one there, passing judgment....When you’re out there [outside the home], you’re sucking up experiences in your soul. Your experiences become embedded in you” (sec. 23, 25). I have arranged my items in my studio so it exudes a sense of hominess. I want it to be comfortable for me while also making sense of the world outside the studio because it is the space where the work is generated.

Gotta Collect It All

[The] Process of collecting is like the idea of buying the prom dress when you don't have a prom to go to right a way. It's about holding on to or collecting objects or materials and then when you kind of find the right moment to use them or you can find the perfect kind of space to apply them then that's when you use them.

John Faught, artist

Moving so many times throughout my childhood caused my family to constantly reevaluate what objects, artworks, and furniture would make the move to the next home, each time consolidating the stuff that surrounded us. This examination of things at a young age has kept my interest all these years. Collecting objects and materials is a significant tool in generating work in the studio because I use it as a form of research and inspiration. The potential for transformation in materials is incredibly satisfying to me. Most of the time the work stems from ideas with very specific materials; however, I allow chance encounters with materials to enter the work as well.

[To]...Randomize is the next best thing to accessorize. I don't search for specifics, I browse wander, cruise, poke and pick through...bump into friends rather than targeting them. Accidents happen, and I love them. Bring on synchronicity, coincidence, and conspiracy. Such is the stuff of spirit, awe, and wonder. I have laughter and amazement, not search results. I have unexpected longings, not hierarchical ratings (Scott 10).

This allowance for randomness and synchronicity is a part of how I go about collecting. D. Travers Scott's statement is a critique of online profile applications where one is presented with pre-determined drop down menus; to his point, many aspects of culture are not as easy as selecting from given choices. I feel this way about my work; as I start to accumulate, I have one specific idea as to what I am going to make but as I continue to amass images or objects, what I may have originally had in mind changes.

For example, I have been collecting carnival chalk figurines for the past four years. These objects are small molded chalk figurines that were given out as "...carnival prizes" (Carter 132). They were "...Mass-produced by novelty companies and enterprising individuals in their garages, the individuality came mostly from the choice of spray paint colors and sparkly glitter used to finish them off" (132). One can find similarly cast dogs, birds, elephants, horses, or characters such as Porky Pig, The Lone Ranger or Donald Duck but never the same paint or glitter application. I relate to these objects because of their uniqueness and their persistence in their individuality.



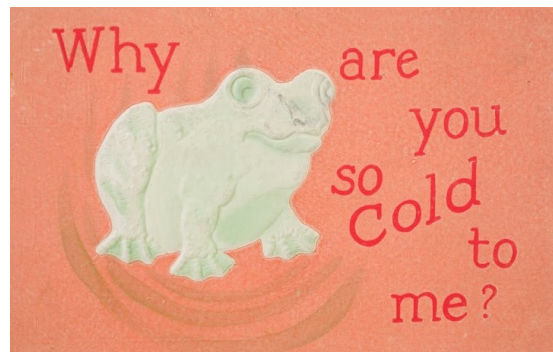
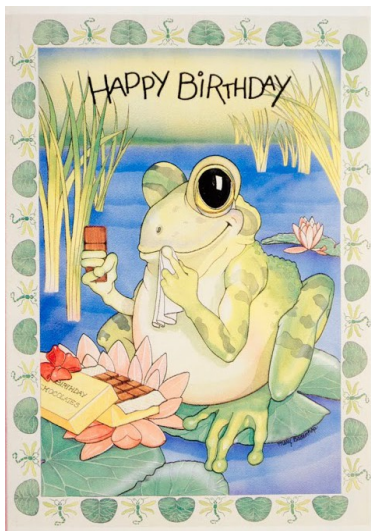
Carnival chalk dog, three variations of The Lone Ranger, and Donald Duck

These objects then inspired paintings made in the fall of 2013 where glitter and a variety of colors were applied to the surface with the look of spray paint.



Hall of Kaleidoscopically Feeling, sand and oil on canvas, 48" x 72", 2013

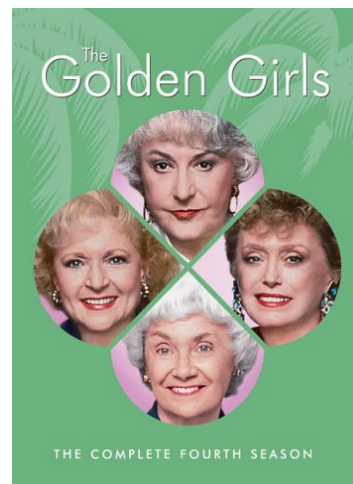
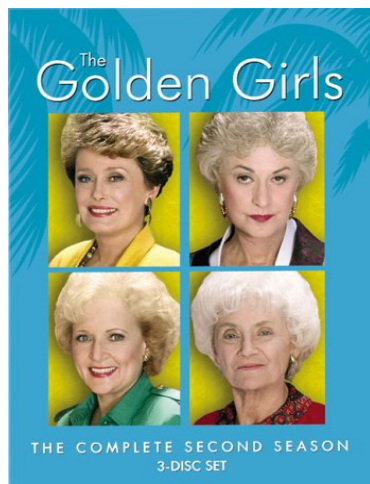
Postcards are another type of item I have started collecting. In the fall of 2013 after trying to understand why some artists that I admire, Martin Kippenberger and Mike Kelley, made works involving frogs I started to think of my own association to frogs. I immediately thought of the Brothers Grimm's fairytale, *The Frog Prince*. As I began reading more about this story, I started to collect frog postcards after seeing so many at antique malls. There, in numerous boxes, was an entire image bank. I became a curator of sorts, picking through hundreds of postcards to find the ones with frogs on them. I was fascinated by the representation of animals, and how we as humans use them to express our feelings; in this



Happy Birthday and Why are you so cold to me? 4" x 6" postcards

anthropomorphism, "...the human projects all of his or her uninspired and unexamined conceptions about life and living onto animals, who may actually foster far more creative or at least more surprising modes of living and sharing space." (Halberstam 33-34). We have used frogs to share our love for one another, to apologize, to wish someone a Happy Birthday, or just to say hello. I find it quite lovely that we have and continue to do this with frogs – like little green surrogates filled with our emotions.

Outside of objects like the carnival chalk and frog postcards, I recently started collecting the different seasons of *The Golden Girls* because I wanted to see all of the episodes from the beginning. As I began to watch, I fell in love with all the characters again, especially Bea Arthur's character Dorothy Zbornak. Her strength, quick wit, and loving nature are personality traits that I admire in her and I began making watercolors in January 2014 in honor of her.



DVD box sets of *The Golden Girls* seasons two and four

My attraction to Dorothy and the rest of the characters on *The Golden Girls* is because they were, “Four friends, thrown out by their families, taunted and rejected by their peers, once alone and misunderstood, now together and blessed, circling a table with a cheesecake and holding hands while smiling with tears in their eyes — lovingly singing, "Thank-you for being a friend" ” (Miller sec. 49). *The Golden Girls* represent a group of women who overcome adversity with strength, intelligence and humility in a way that gay men can relate to. Gay men also treasure the series because of the characters’ acceptance of queer people. In one episode, when Dorothy asks her mother, Sophia, her opinion on how she would react if she found out

one of her children were gay she responds with: “I’ll tell you the truth Dorothy, if one of my kids was gay, I wouldn’t love him one bit less. I would wish him all the happiness in the world!” (“Golden Moments Part 1”). These are the words I know I liked hearing when I came out – to be loved the same, especially by family and friends.

Whether it is carnival chalk, frog postcards, or *The Golden Girls* DVDs, I am gathering cultural objects that have been used and tossed aside. These objects deserve to be reexamined and understood as our culture continually evolves. Daniel Harris, author of *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism*, describes the “gourmand of garbage” as someone who “recharacterizes his materialism as an activity of a higher magnitude, not a selfish act of purchasing a product but a custodial one of salvaging the past, the conscientious work of a dedicated folk archeologist who excavates forgotten windfalls...” (33). Art can be about that; a record of history of how our society or culture thought and felt about life in a particular time period. This is why it is important to start gathering the above-mentioned objects before they disappear—they are to be preserved and stored safely.

Crafter's Delight

When I think of craft I think of:

The handmade and Cracker Barrel Restaurant Gift Shop. I think of Grandmother.
I think of macaroni camp projects, yarn, Popsicle sticks and god eyes, and googly eyes.
I think of the fun and the making. I think of beaded geckos and utility vs. decorative.

When I think of craft I think of:

Hand made cards, Love, and time. I think of heart and music. I think of landfills with
burned out glue guns and glitter.

When I think of craft I think of:

Transformation. Anything is possible!

The craft aspect to my work tends not to focus so much on the time and execution of a well-learned skill, but rather the craft associated with stores such as A.C. Moore and Michaels—scrapbooking, stickers, glitter, artificial flowers, and decorative items. I use the craft store as a place to gather materials and inspiration.

Lydia Matthews, writer and curator, argues for a new understanding of craft and ridding the term of its stereotypes in her essay “Homespun Ideas: Reinterpreting Craft in Contemporary Culture.” Matthews states:

...Many of the objects made within this tradition [craft] are functional, eye-pleasing, humorous, tasteful, even inventive...Such work is often critically dismissed because it fails to deliver a significant conceptual punch or kind of rigorous social critique demanded by many contemporary culture aficionados (7).

Craft can be a reprieve from art that is entirely conceptual and has no emotion or personal touch. I use craft because it is, as Matthews suggests, “...comfort food spooned into a brown-glazed earthen ware bowl” (8). I use craft to question what designates an object as a painting. I approach painting using a crafter's sensibility and a sense of humor but I'm very serious when using materials like glitter, stickers, and beads.

I also look to LJ Roberts, artist and critical writer, to understand my use of craft. She discusses how craft could create critical theory around the discipline by looking to queer theory as an example. I feel that there is something inherently queer about craft. Both cultures have had a history of being pushed to the margins of the dominant culture, left to fend for themselves. Queer theory's approach to deconstructing labels, boundaries and classification systems could be applied to craft.

An example for craft is utilizing what the Gay Liberation movement started after the Stonewall riots; the liberationists were looking to accept themselves with a positive attitude and to celebrate their identity. Rather than hiding and trying to slip by, they chose to be present and vocalize their existence (Sullivan 29). Roberts succinctly states that:

...By using the tactics and strategies of queer theory, craft could gain purchase by deliberately asserting an identity that defies fixed or historically prescribed boundaries in relation to its use of materials, processes, or formal vocabularies. This radical, critical position would relocate craft as an aesthetic category that embraces an enormous range of multiple and seemingly contradictory practices, as well as an agent to challenge existing systems that define materiality and makers (247).

Craft's range in practices and materials opens up conceptions of what work I can make and how I explore my ideas in painting. Queers attempt to defy "fixed" boundaries and so could craft. This allows me to make a painting with faux fur one day and then paint on novelty fabric or traditional canvas the next. I work in the fluidity of craft potentials.

Welcome To The Pantheon



The Pantheon



RACHEL HARRISON

BORN: 1966 -

MAYBE I'M STARTING TO THINK THAT ARTWORKS NEED TO UNFOLD SLOWLY OVER TIME IN REAL SPACE TO CONTEST THE INSTANTANEOUS DISTRIBUTION AND CIRCULATION OF IMAGES WITH WHICH WE'VE BECOME SO FAMILIAR.

It is Harrison's ability to collage contemporary objects or products with handmade sculptural components that draws me in. Her sense of humor and playfulness with materials is stimulating. By combining painted sculptures and everyday materials like Mr. Clean products, celebrity magazines and NASCAR trashcans, she brings to mind Robert Rauschenberg's work. While most of Rauschenberg's combines are painting-like, Harrison has moved away from the wall and focuses on three-dimensional forms in which paint and objects are applied.

FUN FACT: RACHEL HARRISON RECEIVED HER BA FROM WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY IN 1989 AND NEVER ATTENDED GRADUATE SCHOOL.



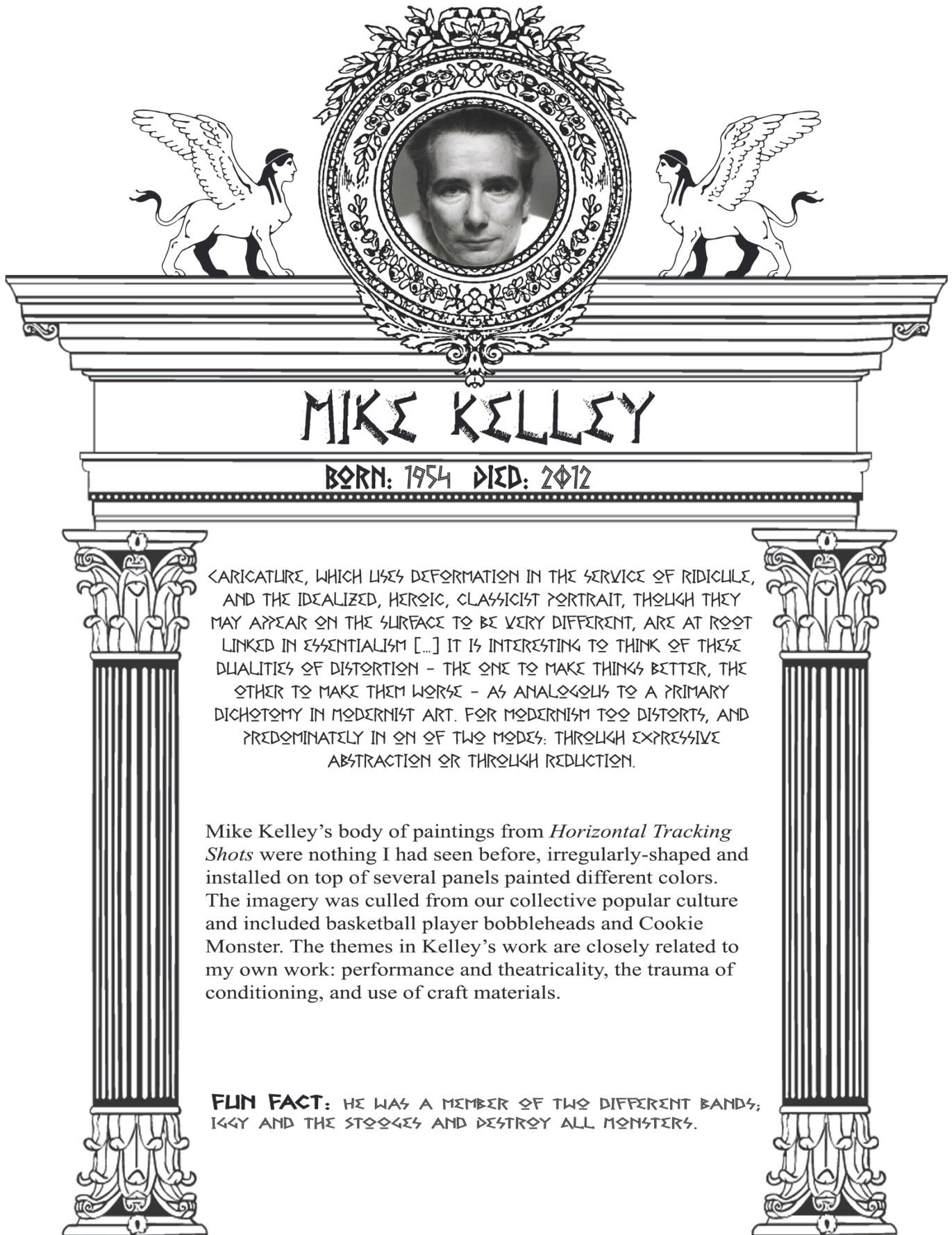
RICHARD HAWKINS

BORN: 1961 -

AS A KID I WAS HEAVILY INTO PASTING TOGETHER MY ULTIMATE FRANKENSTEIN/DRAacula SCRAPBOOK-FRANKENSTIEN BECAUSE HE'S CLIMSY, SHY AND MISUNDERSTOOD, DRACULA BECAUSE HE'S DANDYISH, NOCTURNAL AND MISUNDERSTOOD-WHEN I BECAME INFATUATED WITH VINCENT PRICE AND BARGED OFF INTO A WHOLE SERIES OF PLAY-DOH SHRUNKEN SCULPTURES OF VINCENT'S HEAD. THE POINT IS THAT ONE FASCINATION CHARGES YOU UP AND THEN GETS CIRCLIMVENTED BY THE NEXT. OVER TIME THEY ALL GET CONNECTED, SOMEHOW, SINCE THE DIFFERENT WORKS SEEM TO BE THE SAME THEMES BUT DIFFERENT APPROACHES. I'VE ALSO NEVER KNOWN HOW TO MAKE THINGS WHEN I ALREADY KNEW WHAT THEY MEANT OR EXACTLY WHAT THEY MIGHT DO. MAYBE THAT'S JUST OF HALF-A-MIND SIMULTANEOUSLY.

Not only do I relate to Hawkins' content but also his studio practice. He talks about making what he called his "ultimate Frankenstein/Dracula scrapbook" out of a fascination with the famous characters. Also I think that my practice is similar in the sense that I delve into one obsession until some other fascination takes over. One body of work bleeds into the next. Eventually the work accumulates and expresses the larger themes or interests.

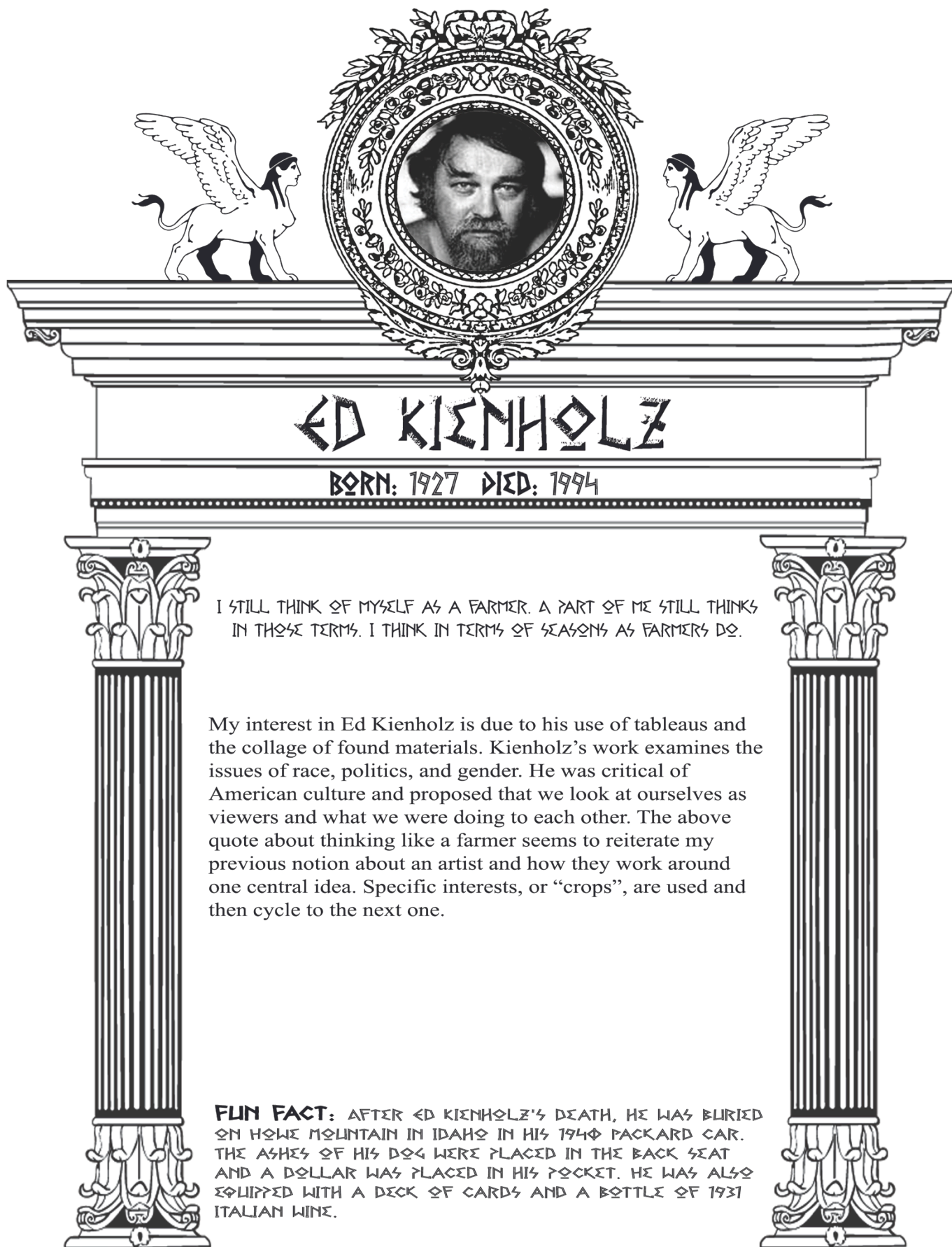
FUN FACT: AFTER RECEIVING HIS MFA FROM THE CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS IN 1988, HAWKINS WORKED AS A SHORT STORY WRITER.

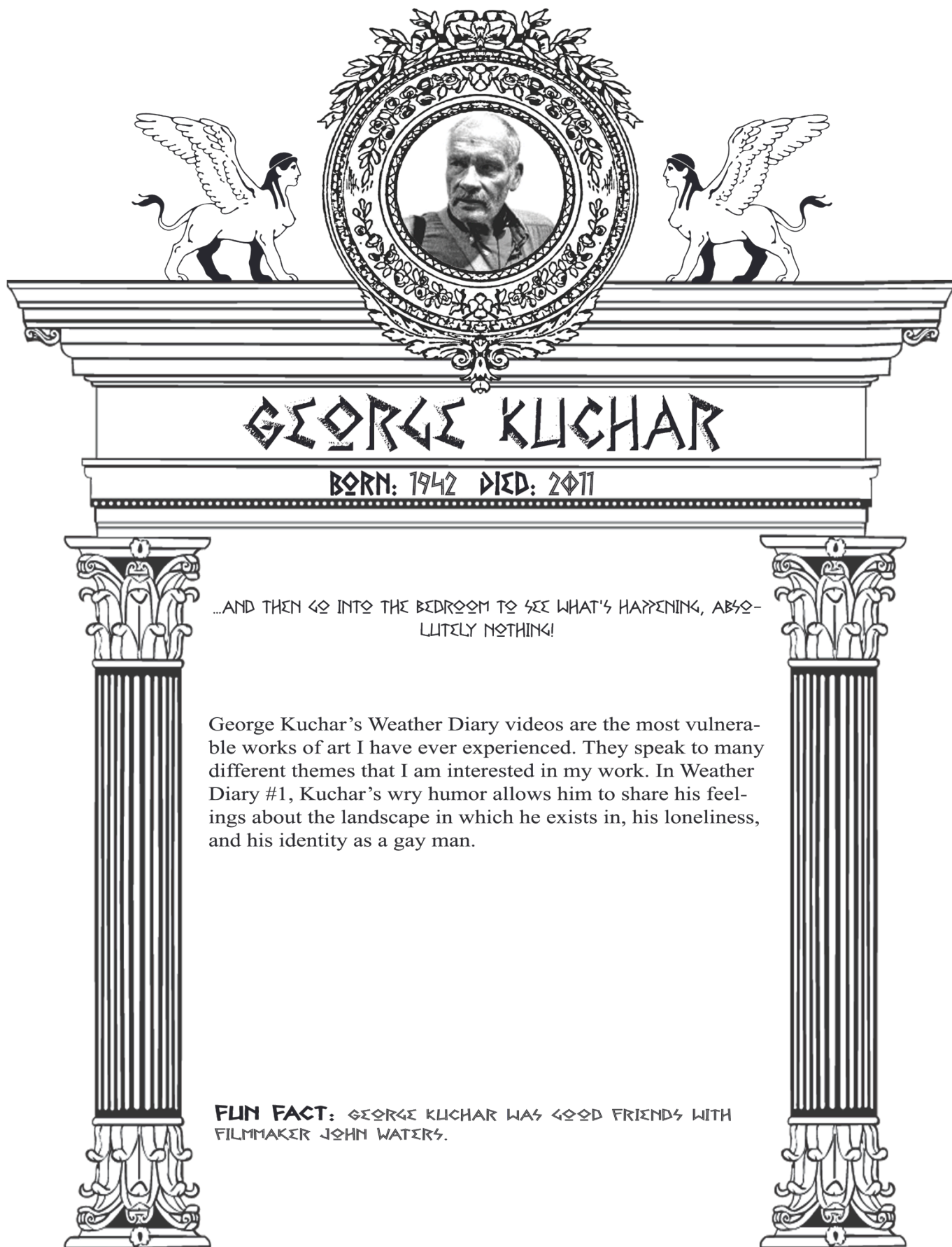


CARICATURE, WHICH USES DEFORMATION IN THE SERVICE OF RIDICULE, AND THE IDEALIZED, HEROIC, CLASSICIST PORTRAIT, THOUGH THEY MAY APPEAR ON THE SURFACE TO BE VERY DIFFERENT, ARE AT ROOT LINKED IN ESSENTIALISM [...] IT IS INTERESTING TO THINK OF THESE DUALITIES OF DISTORTION - THE ONE TO MAKE THINGS BETTER, THE OTHER TO MAKE THEM WORSE - AS ANALOGOUS TO A PRIMARY DICHOTOMY IN MODERNIST ART. FOR MODERNISM TOO DISTORTS, AND PREDOMINATELY IN ONE OF TWO MODES: THROUGH EXPRESSIVE ABSTRACTION OR THROUGH REDUCTION.

Mike Kelley's body of paintings from *Horizontal Tracking Shots* were nothing I had seen before, irregularly-shaped and installed on top of several panels painted different colors. The imagery was culled from our collective popular culture and included basketball player bobbleheads and Cookie Monster. The themes in Kelley's work are closely related to my own work: performance and theatricality, the trauma of conditioning, and use of craft materials.

FUN FACT: HE WAS A MEMBER OF TWO DIFFERENT BANDS, IGGY AND THE STOOGES AND DESTROY ALL MONSTERS.

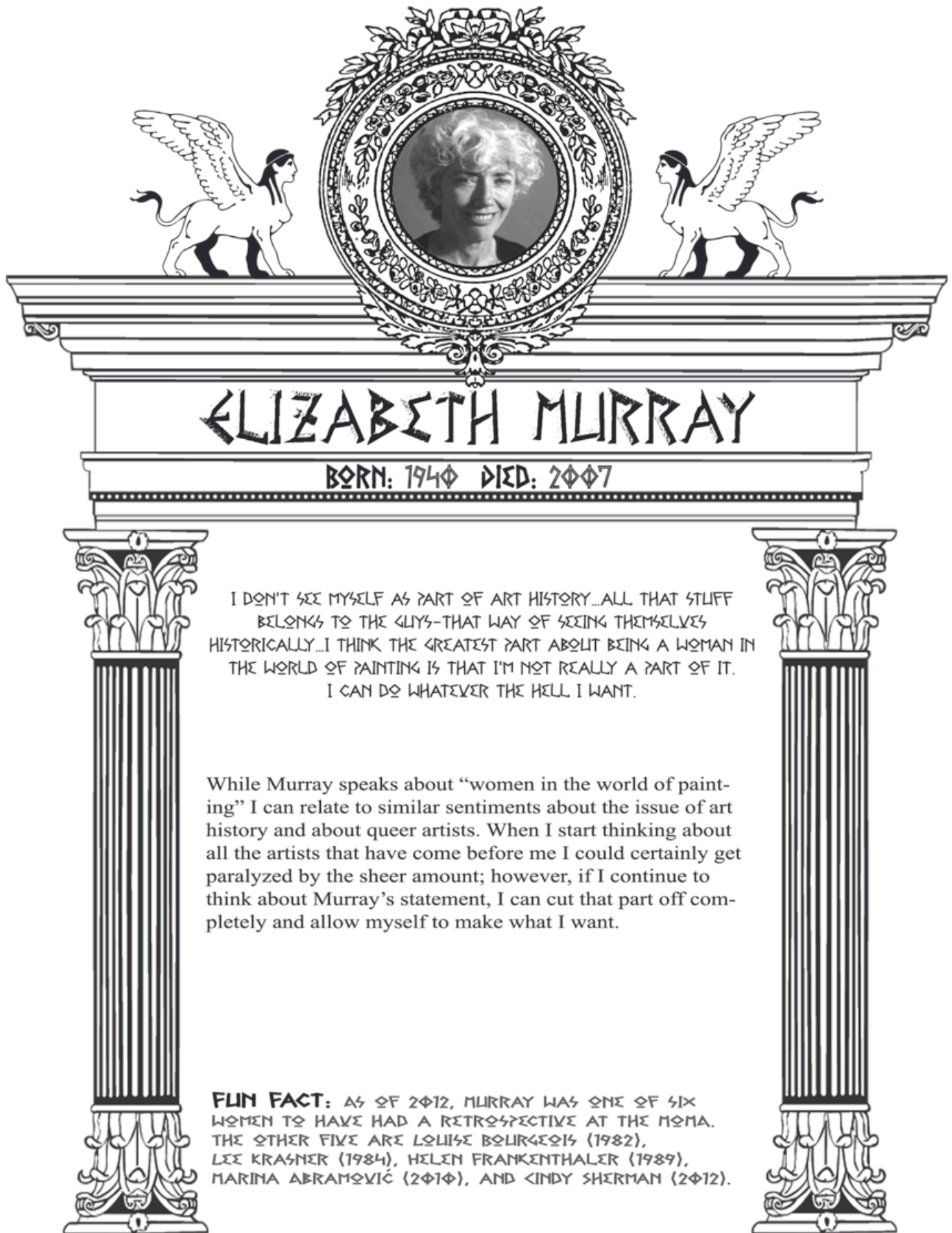




...AND THEN GO INTO THE BEDROOM TO SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!

George Kuchar's Weather Diary videos are the most vulnerable works of art I have ever experienced. They speak to many different themes that I am interested in my work. In Weather Diary #1, Kuchar's wry humor allows him to share his feelings about the landscape in which he exists in, his loneliness, and his identity as a gay man.

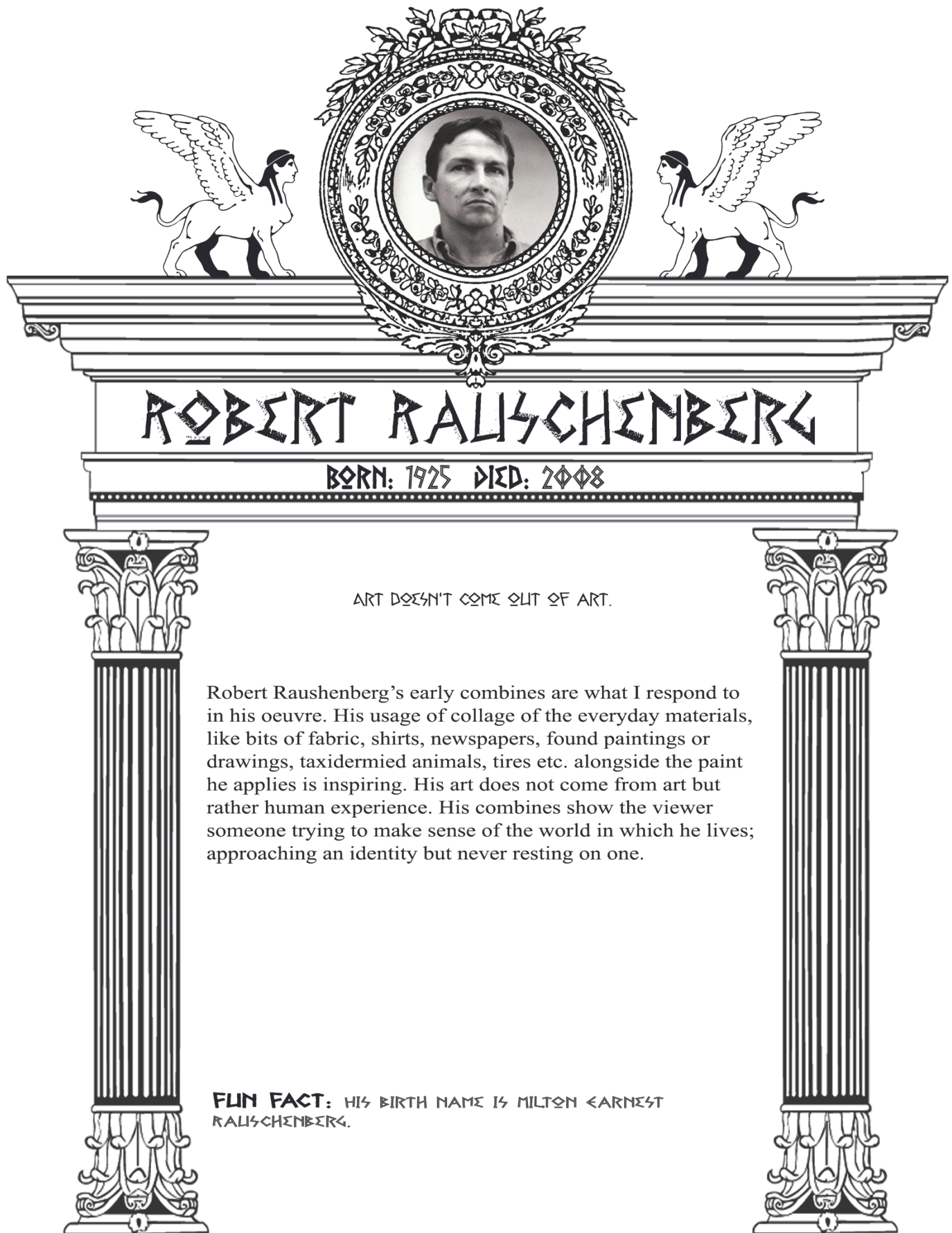
FUN FACT: GEORGE KUCHAR WAS GOOD FRIENDS WITH FILMMAKER JOHN WATERS.



I DON'T SEE MYSELF AS PART OF ART HISTORY...ALL THAT STUFF
BELONGS TO THE GUYS--THAT WAY OF SEEING THEMSELVES
HISTORICALLY...I THINK THE GREATEST PART ABOUT BEING A WOMAN IN
THE WORLD OF PAINTING IS THAT I'M NOT REALLY A PART OF IT.
I CAN DO WHATEVER THE HELL I WANT.

While Murray speaks about “women in the world of painting” I can relate to similar sentiments about the issue of art history and about queer artists. When I start thinking about all the artists that have come before me I could certainly get paralyzed by the sheer amount; however, if I continue to think about Murray’s statement, I can cut that part off completely and allow myself to make what I want.

FUN FACT: AS OF 2012, MURRAY WAS ONE OF SIX WOMEN TO HAVE HAD A RETROSPECTIVE AT THE MOMA. THE OTHER FIVE ARE LOUISE BOURGEOIS (1982), LEE KRASNER (1984), HELEN FRANKENTHALER (1989), MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ (2010), AND CINDY SHERMAN (2012).



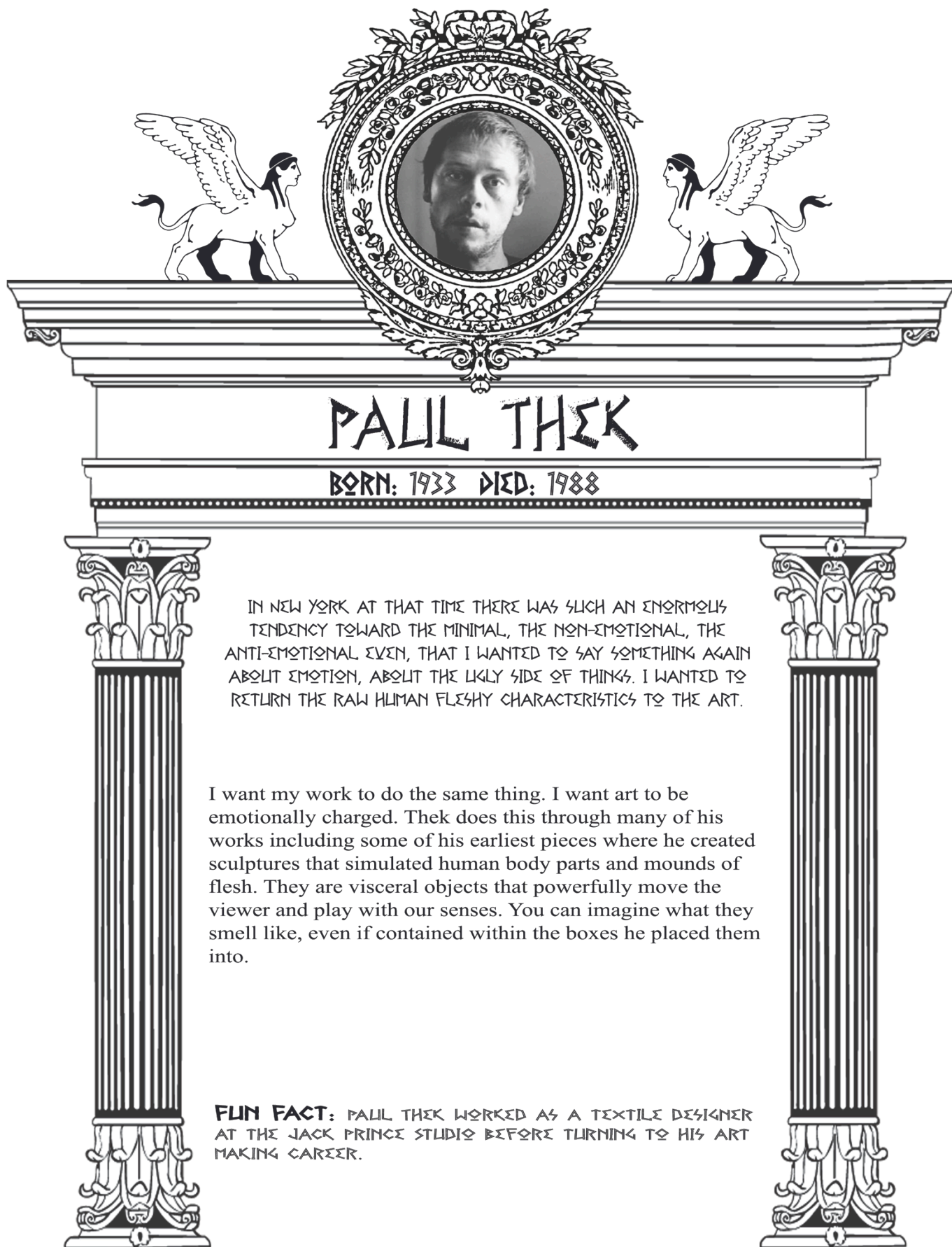
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

BORN: 1925 DIED: 2008

ART DOESN'T COME OUT OF ART.

Robert Rauschenberg's early combines are what I respond to in his oeuvre. His usage of collage of the everyday materials, like bits of fabric, shirts, newspapers, found paintings or drawings, taxidermied animals, tires etc. alongside the paint he applies is inspiring. His art does not come from art but rather human experience. His combines show the viewer someone trying to make sense of the world in which he lives; approaching an identity but never resting on one.

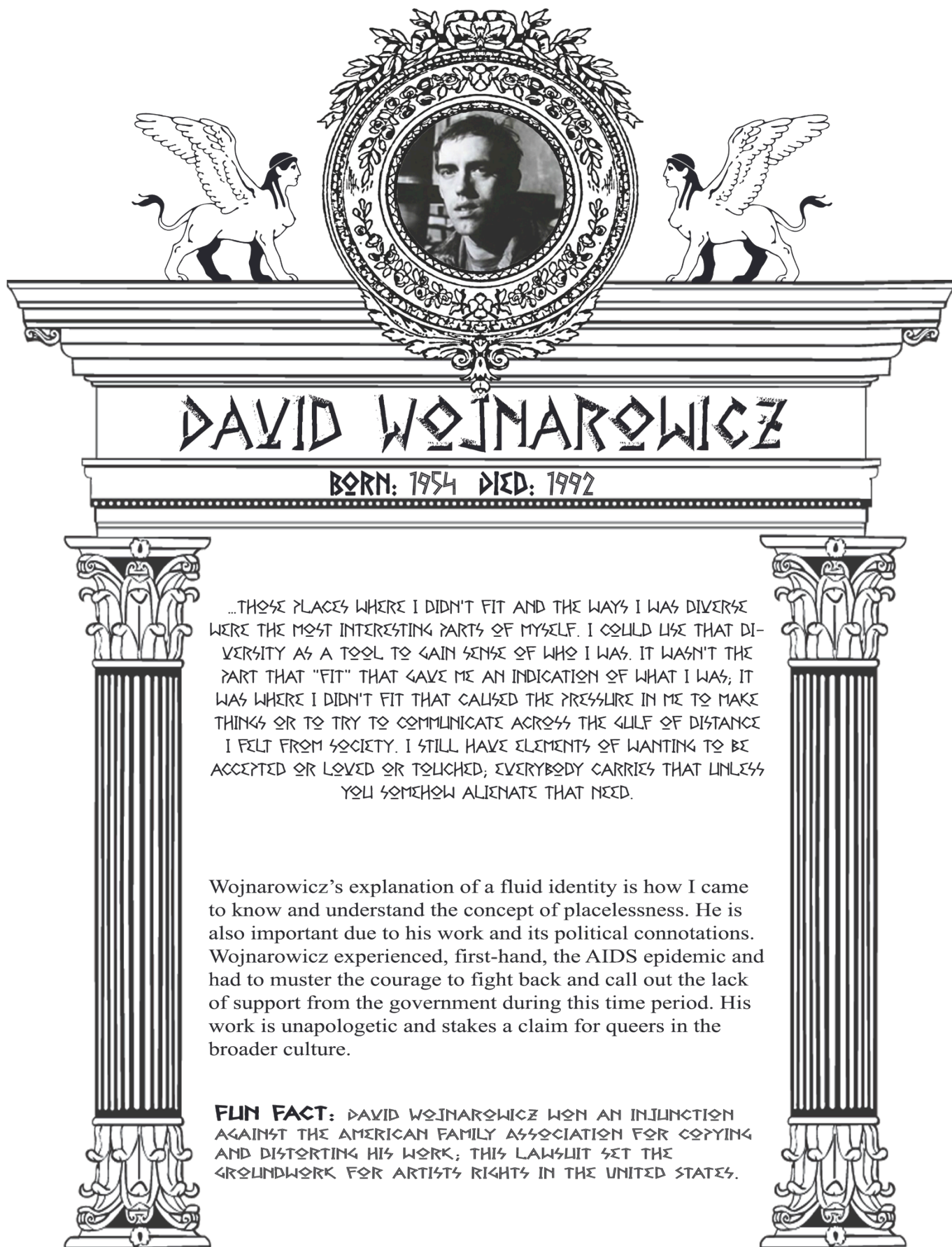
FUN FACT: HIS BIRTH NAME IS MILTON EARNEST RAUSCHENBERG.



IN NEW YORK AT THAT TIME THERE WAS SUCH AN ENORMOUS TENDENCY TOWARD THE MINIMAL, THE NON-EMOTIONAL, THE ANTI-EMOTIONAL EVEN, THAT I WANTED TO SAY SOMETHING AGAIN ABOUT EMOTION, ABOUT THE UGLY SIDE OF THINGS. I WANTED TO RETURN THE RAW HUMAN FLESHY CHARACTERISTICS TO THE ART.

I want my work to do the same thing. I want art to be emotionally charged. Thek does this through many of his works including some of his earliest pieces where he created sculptures that simulated human body parts and mounds of flesh. They are visceral objects that powerfully move the viewer and play with our senses. You can imagine what they smell like, even if contained within the boxes he placed them into.

FUN FACT: PAUL THEK WORKED AS A TEXTILE DESIGNER AT THE JACK PRINCE STUDIO BEFORE TURNING TO HIS ART MAKING CAREER.



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

BORN: 1954 DIED: 1992

...THOSE PLACES WHERE I DIDN'T FIT AND THE WAYS I WAS DIVERSE WERE THE MOST INTERESTING PARTS OF MYSELF. I COULD USE THAT DIVERSITY AS A TOOL TO GAIN SENSE OF WHO I WAS. IT WASN'T THE PART THAT "FIT" THAT GAVE ME AN INDICATION OF WHAT I WAS; IT WAS WHERE I DIDN'T FIT THAT CAUSED THE PRESSURE IN ME TO MAKE THINGS OR TO TRY TO COMMUNICATE ACROSS THE GULF OF DISTANCE I FELT FROM SOCIETY. I STILL HAVE ELEMENTS OF WANTING TO BE ACCEPTED OR LOVED OR TOUCHED; EVERYBODY CARRIES THAT UNLESS YOU SOMEHOW ALIENATE THAT NEED.

Wojnarowicz's explanation of a fluid identity is how I came to know and understand the concept of placelessness. He is also important due to his work and its political connotations. Wojnarowicz experienced, first-hand, the AIDS epidemic and had to muster the courage to fight back and call out the lack of support from the government during this time period. His work is unapologetic and stakes a claim for queers in the broader culture.

FUN FACT: DAVID WOJNAROWICZ WON AN INJUNCTION AGAINST THE AMERICAN FAMILY ASSOCIATION FOR COPYING AND DISTORTING HIS WORK; THIS LAWSUIT SET THE GROUNDWORK FOR ARTISTS RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES.

Michelangelo, a Ninja, and a Turtle Walk Into a Transformation Chamber

*Every individual is part and parcel of a great picture of society in which he lives and acts,
and his life cannot be painted without reproducing the picture of the world he lived in.*

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Olde Time Folks*

My dad would tell my brothers and me bedtime stories; they were not just quick five-minute stories, but were epic and spanned weeks. One of the first ones he told us was *Triad*. It was a story about two boys who went on an adventure with a sea creature they found in a cave on the beach. It was filled with other creatures like giant tiger shrimp, which I always imagined were like some experiment gone horribly wrong. This adventure ended like most others where the main characters obtained what they were searching for but had learned so much more about themselves and their friendship in doing so.

Another story told to us was *The Fox Hole*. This also starred a boy on an adventure; however, he was teamed with a British fox adorned with a vest and a tea set. Other characters that joined their journey were a rabbit sporting a leather jacket, sunglasses, and a motorcycle, and a wimpy lion. One of the most memorable moments within this story was a battle between the four protagonists and goats that rode chickens. I realize now that the stories he told us were a sampling of others. He was borrowing from stories like *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, *Alice and Wonderland*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. They all emphasize on the Oedipal journey of self-discovery.

My attraction to storytelling and imagination come out of these experiences. Only recently have I begun to consciously make work based on stories. The work in my thesis exhibition is based in and around the world of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. It is important to think about this and other fairy tales in relation to my work because, as Halberstam states,

Fairy tales have always occupied the ambiguous territory between childhood and adulthood, home and away, harm and safety. They also tend to be as populated by monsters as by "normal" or even ideal people; in fact the relations between monsters and princesses, dragons and knights, scary creatures and human saviors open doors to alternative worlds...(45)

By working through *The Wizard of Oz* and its characters, I am trying to find characteristics that are not specific to just me but to everyone. Each one of the characters that Dorothy encounters longs for something they feel is missing: brains, heart, and courage. These are traits that not only I strive for but others as well, and in the end what one learns, like the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion, is that we already have them.

Outside the realm of fairy tales, all of us have our own stories or mythologies that express our experiences. David Wojnarowicz talks directly about the idea of all of us creating a mythology:

I've created myth in my identity and what I project to people, my memories mixed with my fantasies, mixed with the things that supposedly happened which I can look back and say, 'Those things happened.'...Is that myth? Is that the creation of a myth? ...It is all either real or non-real; it doesn't matter. For me they have real substance because I remember them. ...I think we create myths endlessly (Lotringer and Ambrosino 163-164).

My work is a visual representation of the personal mythology I have created. As I started to explore my gay identity, I looked to television shows like *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace* for recognition of who I was. Not knowing any gay or lesbian people, I had to turn to television.

Maybe it's narcissistic of me to try to see how I am reflected in our culture but what I found was not appealing to me. I wasn't going to clubs every night and I wasn't as flamboyant as Jack McFarlane. Eric McCormack's character Will Truman, on *Will and Grace*, was perhaps the closest thing to what I was like, but it terrified me to see how his gay friend Jack treated him and made fun of him so much about superficial things like his hair, face, and weight. Being shown that to be gay is to be promiscuous, drug addicted, self-deprecating, and superficial were uninviting.

Camping Out

*I don't walk on coals,
I won't walk on water:
I am no prince,
I am no saint,
I am not anyone's wildest dream,
But I can stand behind
And be someone to fall back on.*
Jason Robert Brown, *Someone to Fall Back On*

It has been fifty years since Susan Sontag wrote “*Notes*” on *Camp*. This seminal essay laid the foundation for the subject of camp and brought it to a new level of critical consideration. Recently, J. Bryan Lowder, assistant editor for *Slate*, wrote a collection of essays entitled *Postcards from Camp*. In it, he tries to correct some of the misconceptions of camp, specifically the difference between camp and the campy:

Unfortunately, the majority of “Notes on Camp” —past the part where Sontag rightly defines camp as “one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon” —is actually concerned with what I’ll distinguish as *campiness* or *the campy*. Campiness, as a style and sensibility, comprises a set of widely appreciated characteristics: frivolity, the celebration of the “so bad it’s good,” the overwrought, the histrionic, what Sontag calls “failed seriousness” (There’s a big difference between *camp* and *campy*) (sec. 2).

My attempt is to synthesize both Sontag and Lowder’s findings in a quick and understandable guide to camp. Making an updated set of notes came out of paying homage to RuPaul, drag queen, actor, model and recording artist. In RuPaul’s book, *Lettin it All Hang Out: An Autobiography*, she describes her practice as a performer:

The point about pop culture is that so much of it is borrowed. There’s very little that’s brand new. Instead, creativity today is a kind of shopping process—picking up on and sampling things from the world around you, things you grew up with. That’s very much my *modus operandi*. If you knew all the references, you could deconstruct one of my performances and place every look, every word, and every move....I really see myself as a sampling machine...a kind of Frankenstein’s monster—a collage made up of bits and pieces from old television shows, copies of *vogue*, magazine, and advertisements (64).

The following notes on camp embody all aspects of my practice and work. All the chapters up until this point have led to this one. My Frankenstein notes, “New Now Next Notes on Camp,” took, “The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument)...,” just as Sontag stated about her work.

New Now Next Notes on Camp

Red text is Susan Sontag

Blue text is J. Bryan Lowder

Orange text is Wayne Koestenbaum

- So much writing about camp has had a certain dreamy quality, both in its imagistic richness and tendency to trail off into incoherence as the subject slips out of focus.
- ...the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.
- For Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content.
 - * My interest in painting and surface supports this. Both the paintings that utilize sand and gesso and the newer work that employs faux fur are evidence of this. No longer am I solely invested in image but more preoccupied by the “sensuous surface.”
- It is the love of the exaggerated, the “off,” of things-being-what-they-are-not. The best example is in Art Nouveau...Art Nouveau objects, typically, convert one thing into something else: the lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants...
 - * Larry Knopp describes the relationship of place to queer bodies:

Queers are actively engaged in processes of personal reinvention that intrinsically entail examinations of ourselves and our surroundings. We are keenly aware of the hybrid nature of our existences, and of the highly contingent nature of both our power and the constraints on it. Hence our ambivalent relationships to place and identity, and our affection for placelessness and movement (129).
 - * It is in camp where identities are fluid and flow back and forth serving multiple purposes and acting as different things. Camp is where there are no labels or boundaries. Camp circumnavigates boundaries.
- To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.
 - * Camp is Paul Williams’ musical entitled *Phantom of the Paradise*.
- Wayne Koestenbaum, a cultural critic, poet, and contemporary acolyte of Barthes, explains the master’s relation to nuance thusly:

“Barthes had one lifelong mission, a messianic thread that connects his disparate ventures into the analysis of fashions, texts, and temperaments: the fight against received wisdom, obviousness, stereotype [...] His gentle mission was to rescue nuance. What is nuance? Anything that caught Barthes’s eye. Anything that aroused him. Nuance—a shimmer beyond good and evil, beyond detection, beyond system—enjoys the privileges of a satiated passivity: it never combusts.

Nuance offers not a substantive destination but a murmuring: ‘errantry does not align—it produces iridescence: what results is the nuance. Thus I move on, to the end of the tapestry, from one nuance to the next (the nuance is the last state of a color which can be named; the nuance is the Intractable).’ ”

- The nuance exists in opposition to “received wisdom, obviousness, stereotype”
- But camp is not itself the nuance; rather, *it is the pleasure that seizing upon the nuance evokes*...Camp is the thrill of a whisper...unlike the campy, which has been mass-produced and played out to near death, camp—the pleasure of the nuance—is always fresh, forever sparkling in the eye of the beholder.
- **And the relation of Camp taste to the past is extremely sentimental.**
 - * Sentimental Camping is the extreme longing for the nuances. The desire felt in between moments of finding trivial miracles or culture.
 - * Sentimental Camp is listening to David Bowie sing “As the world Falls Down” from Jim Henson’s *Labyrinth*.
- When we experience the camp rush, the delight, the savor, we are making a private airlift of lost cultural matter, fragments held hostage by everyone else’s indifference. No one else lived for this gesture, this pattern, this figure, before: only I know that it is sublime.
- The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious.
- ...even when it reveals self-parody, reeks of self-love.
- Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. Camp doesn’t reverse things. It doesn’t argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different – a supplementary – set of standards.
 - * Camp is watching *Killer Clowns from Outer Space* on repeat.
- ...among the great creative sensibilities is Camp: the sensibility of failed seriousness of the theatricalization of experience.
 - * Camp is listening to the critically acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful Jason Robert Brown musical *Parade*.

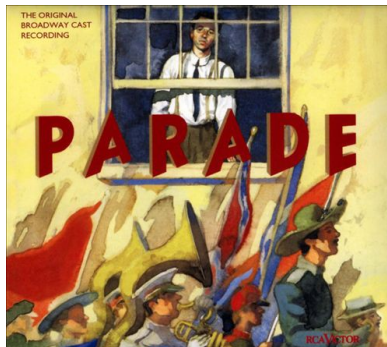


Image of the cast recording of *Parade*

- Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world.
 - * Camp is listening to Joni Mitchell's song "Hejira" from *Travelogue*. Listening to and experiencing Joni rework the song on an album with the London Orchestra almost thirty years after its original release.
- The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new more complex relation to "the serious." One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.
- One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that "sincerity" is not enough.
- Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment.
 - * Camp is a way to detach from identity. While in the moment of splendor with a camp moment, one can escape labels and expectations of what one is suppose to be and act like; a momentary lift off from reality.
- ...homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience – of Camp...Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.
- Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste....The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating.
- Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy...What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures.
- No, camp doesn't do moral judgment; however, it does extend to the camper an essentially limitless authority to judge. And this freedom, the privileging of reception over intent, is camp's true superpower.
- Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of "character"...Camp is a *tender* feeling.
 - * Camp is claiming Bea Arthur as your grandmother like Rufus Wainwright, singer-songwriter does in his song "California."

- The savor is all about complicity, the sly sense of satisfaction that comes when you remember that you are special for having camped, that not everyone is blessed with such rapture, that you are a part of a small but illustrious family of those who “get it.”
 - * Camp is surfing Eartha Kitt on youtube. Videos like, “I Don’t Care,” “I Love Men,” and “Where is My Man”



Eartha Kitt as Old Lady Hackmore in *Earnest Scared Stupid*

- ...campers are looking at the world from an askew point of view.
 - * Camp is a Scottish pop/rock band named Texas.
- To the camp-attuned eye, these “fragments” clearly deserve the utmost reverence and appreciation—lavish retrospectives and month-long festivals, really—even though society at large couldn’t care less. Deep down, camp wants to conserve.
 - * My postcards with buttons are about conserving; an object that is a direct experience of the camp nuance. These objects are about identity and also a longing to be somewhere else.



Lost, buttons on postcard, 2013



Halloween Town, buttons on postcard, 2013

- Camp slows reality down long enough for you to consider its most minor components...For its practitioners, camp is a retreat, a respite from overbearing ideologies, preapproved narratives, and, above all, the fascism of *usefulness*.
 - * Camp makes up for what has been tossed aside through capturing images, saving objects and materials that are consumed. That's where camp comes in as the cleanup crew, or as gleaners....campers pick through and find the little moments that are worth remembering.

Goodbye Yellow Brick Road

*And goodbye until tomorrow
Goodbye until the next time you call
And I'll be waiting
Goodbye until tomorrow
Goodbye till I recall how to breathe
And I have been waiting
I have been waiting for you*
Sherie Rene Scott, *Goodbye Until Tomorrow*

The work in my thesis exhibition revolves around the transformation of characters from L. Frank Baum's *Land of Oz*; Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion are all represented. I explore ideas of identity through these characters that are continually cherished from generation to generation; as such, they connect the personal to the larger audience. Proposing alternative versions of known narratives is important to my work, as is the exploration of identity in a multitude of different forms.

In my construction of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, the main protagonist, is not Dorothy Gale but rather Dorothy Zbornak from the sitcom *The Golden Girls*. As described above, Bea Arthur's appeal to queer audiences is of interest to me and by allowing her character, Dorothy Zbornak, to trade places with Dorothy Gale, I retell and configure a story that we thought we already knew. This expands an understanding of what it means to be Dorothy. The switch, one Dorothy for another, speaks to a fluidity in identity. In terms of the installation, I wanted the representation of Dorothy to be one similar to my own experience of her when watching reruns of *The Golden Girls* on TV. The watercolors were made from observation while watching the show. The intimate portraits of Dorothy Zbornak recall the television screen and having three rather than just one presents the character episodically, much like the sitcom. The blue metallic frames shimmer and reflect the light as if the watercolors were glowing like a TV screen; they

also allude to the shimmer seen often in Dorothy Zbonrak's wardrobe – shiny and iridescent materials that catch the eye and mesmerize.



Dorothy's Back, Snarling Dorothy, and Cheesecake Dorothy, watercolor on paper, 11" x 14", 2014

Resting Scarecrows, is a grouping of pillows made of different found fabrics with scarecrows printed on them; the fabrics range in age from 1930s feed sack fabric to 2000s cotton. These soft sculptures, or soft pillow paintings, assert themselves merely as pillows that one might use to decorate for autumn; however, reducing the traditional scarecrow object to



Resting Scarecrows, found fabrics and pillow forms, dimensions variable, 2014

pillows gives a better understanding of the scarecrow and his people. More than just an object that is used and then thrown away after it serves its purpose, whether actually scaring animals away from the crops or acting as decoration, the scarecrow needs rest. I wanted to provide a place where the scarecrow was not being asked anything from us but was allowed to gain a much deserved respite from the duties we ask of it year in and year out.

Frog Oil For The Heart, is a take on the Tin Man. In the story of the frog prince, the prince needs to convince the princess to give him a kiss so the spell cast upon him will be broken and he can return to his human form. In relation to the rest of the work, I brought the frog prince



For The Heart, various materials, 36" x 72" x 18", 2014

into the world of Oz by casting him in the role of the Tin Man. I found the frozen state that the frog prince was in to be similar to that of the Tin Man, needing Dorothy and the Scarecrow to oil him so that he can move and come back to life. Both Frog Prince and the Tin Man were in search of attributes of the heart, a romantic kiss or an actual heart for feeling emotion. Not only is the figural sculpture in the exhibition frozen like the Tin Man, he also has been changed into a frog – a double locking that requires assistance of someone else to undo both. The cloak the figure is wearing was made from the same pattern that was used to make a medieval prince Halloween costume of mine.

The last character Dorothy encounters on her way to the Wizard is the lion. After reading about Henri Rousseau and looking at his work, I was taken by his jungle paintings. I wanted to utilize Rousseau's lion in place of the Cowardly Lion. While his jungle paintings were mostly about the struggle between industry and nature, I shifted that struggle to the one found in those dealing with issues of identity. The lion in L. Frank Baum's world struggles with having to live up to the expectations of being the brave king of the jungle but he finds that's not necessarily always possible; he is more complex than that. He has heart and bravery but needs to realize that he can be both. In my work, the lion is represented with a tri-color faux fur and is broken down into two paintings with one being the body, adorned by beads, and the other focused on the head of the lion. The beads take the place of paint, and act as formal play with color, texture, and material on top of the faux fur. The face is more straightforward and contains a painting with fabric ears and a mane made of the same faux fur as the body. The wall onto which these works were hung was stretched with a fabric pieced "quilt" with a variety of different jungle vegetation patterns. This, and the fake vines and flowers that rest on and beside the wall, allude to the multitude of plant life within a Rousseau painting.



Lion, beads on faux fur, 45" x 56", 2014 *Lion II*, oil on canvas with fabric and faux fur 25" x 30", 2014

All of these works embody various aspects of my interests. Camp is where I have located my ideas of drawing as a record of existence, a sense of identity through decorating a home, the act of collecting the discarded as a duty, the elevation of craft into the fine arts, and fluidity in identity.

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Vita

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