



2014

Anti-Heroics, Modesty, and Bad Taste

Philip Hinge

Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/3436>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Anti-Heroics, Modesty, and Bad Taste

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

by

Philip Hinge

Hilary Wilder, Committee Chair

Gregory Volk, Committee Member

Javier Tapia, Committee Member, Thesis Advisor

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA

May 2014

Abstract

ANTI-HEROICS, MODESTY, AND BAD TASTE

Philip Hinge, Master of Fine Arts Painting and Printmaking

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

My thesis work revolves around investigating painting's relationship with "bad taste" and heroism. By comparing my paintings to illustrative depictions of "heroism", artists who turn bad art good, ideas concerning modesty, humor, and invention I will contextualize my stance towards "heroism" and bad taste. By establishing my relationship to the aforementioned examples I will trace the growth of my work over the past few years and discuss how its role within contemporary painting has changed as well as how it interacts with various cultural references.

Table of Contents

i. Abstract

1. Years Leading Up to Grad School, 2009-2011.....	1-4
2. BLACK METAL.....	4-8
3. Defining Terms: Modesty/Heroism/.....	9-17
4. Figuration.....	18-29
5. A Sincere and Cynical Edge; Notes on Spectacle.....	29-41
6. Bad Taste, Humor, and Invention in Image Making.....	41-45
7. Image Dissemination; Animation and Jpegs.....	45-50
8. Conclusion.....	50-51

Years Leading up To Grad School 2009-2011

My work before graduate school followed a rigid set of self-imposed formally motivated rules that explored figurative painting. Between 2009 and 2011 I dealt with a set of familiar objects and figures that related to suburban backyards, a pleasant sunny-day “veneer” with an ironic and cynical edge. Compositional games focusing on patterns, figures and spatial relationships were interrupted by rude, often abject, treatments of the painting’s surface which resulted from my opposition to scrapping, sanding, or doing anything to defuse the history of my marks. This resulted in a thick, crusty surface which I now realize at its core was stemming from a deep seeded mistrust of modernist trends. Sarcasm and irony became a way to mask my growing concern towards my complicit perpetuation of “male gaze” stereotypes. At its worst the work during that period stunk of misogyny, placing female figures on equal standing with the furniture surrounding them; at its best the work served as a critical response to painting heavily invested in modernism and formalism, painters like Balthus.

Between 2009 and 2011 I was heavily invested in Balthus. What interested me (and continues to interest me) is Balthus’ use of color, pattern, and figuration which tried to disguise a



disturbing sexuality. I was introduced to Balthus in a slide-talk by a drawing teacher at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where I earned my BFA in 2010. The instructor had taken it upon himself to give the class a crash course in styles and techniques used by twentieth century figurative and still life painters. The lecture started with some nice

paintings by Vuillard, Bonnard and deChirico, followed by Giacometti, and Morandi, before eventually touching on Lucien Freud and Jacob Lawrence. The ambition and scope of his lecture, although helpful, was overwhelming. The slides changed and the momentary black screen was replaced by a beautifully crafted painting of a young girl reclining on a couch-arm while another, equally young girl, was bent over on the floor intently reading a book. A table separated the two figures and a piano on the right side of the canvas angled from foreground to back, creating a hallow field. At first I took the painting at face value, in my dismissive and tired mind I lumped the picture in with other “little girl” paintings I had seen. As I cross-referenced these thematically similar paintings, by the likes of Degas, Cassatt, or Hogarth, I came to the realization that something stranger was happening. I had always fancied myself above “that” kind of painting, the kinds of painting with that certain old timey domestic interior look filled with old timey



objects and costumes, but there was something was wrong here. The instructor interrupted my thinking with the phrase, “Balthus was a pedophile”. Our lecturing professor didn’t buy the hype as it were, but did reveal the sexual formalist game taking place in the painting. I learned if you moved the lower girl up to occupy the table’s space in the middle ground it lined the head of the reading girl to the crotch of the reclined figure on the couch (who’s glazed over, sleepy expression quickly turned into a pleased one). All at once I started to understand the possibilities of painting while being equally baffled by the absurdity of the endeavor.

In the two years before my entry into graduate school I cultivated a simple cast of characters comprised largely of female figures in varying levels of dress (usually bathing suits) with cameos by nude men, dogs, and the occasional great white shark. I felt it was important to choose subjects that were art historically relevant, quoting figures from across history. Their activities usually consisted of over-dramatic or theatrical acts; faux suicides with water-hoses; surprise explosions with water-sprinklers etc. The scenarios usually pointed towards anxiety and repression. The content eventually became second fiddle to the handling of the paint, which operated within a Greenberg oriented sense of paint surface. I considered myself a figurative painter by default, depending on the implicit psychological implications of the depicting humans. This isn’t to say that narrative wasn’t important; it functioned under the banner of “melodrama” (highly theatrical interpretations of events that have a tendency towards exaggeration) in which I could exploit the obvious gap between the sunny locations and the conflicted figures which inhabited them.

For a long time the figures in my paintings were isolated, one figure per canvas, and were surrounded by “props”. I was thinking very contextually when selecting the objects that locked the figures into place with an inert reluctance to include objects in the paintings that I felt were

too personalized or wacky. The chairs, tables, glasses, and blankets in my early paintings arrived as compositional necessity and had little regard for enhancing the content of the work. The colors had a similar repetitive/recyclable nature. They were saturated, bright, and straight out of the tube. The figures were either a shade of reddish pink or sienna/ochre, and the landscape they reclined in was made up of magnesium blues and chromium greens. Each painting had the feeling that it picked up right where the last one left off. This kept the work incredibly linear and made relationships between the canvases easy to spot.

After my applications to graduate school I felt like I had said all I had to say about the suburbs. Applying had allowed me to see the entirety of my work in a concise chunk, and I started to feel detached from what I was seeing. I needed to find a way to interject myself back into the work. It was time to merge my long time love of Black Metal with my new love, painting.

B L A C K M E T A L

The first wave of Black Metal originated in the United Kingdom in the early eighties. Fast rhythm guitars, blasting drums, over the top costuming and overtly anti-Christian imagery and lyrics defined the genre. Bands like Venom, Bathory, Celtic Frost, and Hellhammer sought to make metal more aggressive and primal than Hair Metal, the



accessible and predominant form of metal in the eighties. Venom released the genre-defining

album in 1982; the album cover had a white goat head on a black background with the words “Black Metal” scrawled underneath. This record proved to be the catalyst for a new wave of music that, admittedly, spiraled out of control over the next decade.

In Norway a small group of teens had digested what was started in the UK and raised the stakes, taking it farther than anyone would have expected. The satanic imagery was heightened in accordance with the aggressiveness of the music, which had the intentions of starting a war against conformist culture and Christianity. In the early nineties they burned down churches, committed murder and killed themselves, sparking instant controversy and soon becoming a widespread media phenomenon. As the frequency and severity of crimes increased, so did the news coverage. The term “Satanist Terrorists” was coined by the media to describe the group of teens who were wrecking havoc across Norway. Everything came to a head when the bassist of “Mayhem” and creator of “Burzum”, Varg Vikernes, murdered the guitarist/creator of “Mayhem”, Euryonymous, by stabbing him in the head and body over twenty times. Amidst all the violence and media hype, the original goals of the movement were temporarily lost.

The originators of Norwegian Black Metal wanted to revert back to the Paganism of the Norse religions by embracing Satanism as the primary means to combat Christianity, which had become as much a part of Norwegian culture as “lutefisk” (traditional Norwegian fish dish). Bands competed to be the most extreme, the most “raw” and the most anti-Christian, priding themselves on their elitism and exclusivity. Many bands used the cheapest four track recorders available, embracing the horrible sound quality by labeling the static buzzing as “necro” sound. The atmosphere was enhanced by the raspy, harsh vocals, cold guitar sounds, and drums that echoed like machine gun volleys. The “tremolo” guitar patterns, which were traditionally found in Scandinavian folk music, attempted to incorporate the cultural roots of the region into the

music. Lyrically the songs explored Tolkien's fantasy, darkness, depression/suicide, Satanism, frozen landscapes and anything else "cold", "evil", or atmospheric. After the initial media frenzy subdued the music found its' self at an impasse; either to continue with the same militantly "anti" direction or question some of the genres original parameters. Bands began experimenting with clean vocals, ambient passages, symphonic compositions, progressive song structures, melodic overtones, and avant-garde sensibilities, expanding the network of Black Metal.

The costuming of the musicians is just as extreme as the music, including spikes, gauntlets, pentagrams, upside-down crosses, blood (pigs and human), tight black leather, swords, clubs, and corpse paint (white face paint with black paint used to highlight the mouths/eyes, giving a "dead" look). The purpose of the flamboyance is to bring out the performers inner demon and get them in touch with the darkness that pervades their message. The music is as much, if not more, about self-destruction as it is about lashing out. Per Yngve Ohlin, self named "Dead", buried his clothes for months before a show and would dig them up to wear on stage so he could smell like earth and decay. It is also rumored that he was buried alive before a show so he could have the stench of death under his eyelids. Ohlin consistently mutilated himself on stage, cutting his wrists and scarring his body to escalate the theatricality and drama of the performance.



*“This is the genesis of a traumatic voyage
As you fall into a deep sleep
Beyond the point of no return
Once you have looked into the abysmal darkness
You carry it with you as a legacy for the rest of your life
The sky is a lonely place, an endless consuming space
Embrace the silent waves of cosmos
As the astral oceans rise in high tide*

*A magic flame inside of me
Burns with lust and desire
I watch a dying sun
As it fades into the horizon of crimson fire
The paranormal darkness is now descending
Invasion of my mind, heart and soul
As reality shatters around me
I feel the changing
The metamorphosis*

*The night belongs to the predator
To the one who dares crossing the threshold
The axis of dreams and wonders, and black miracles
I see myself in the mirror of your eyes
A dark star on the celestial beautiful midnight sky
Release the inner radiance of what you have become*

Brighten the night with your sacrifice

*I have returned to life to speak of clairvoyance
I am the voice from graveland memories
Life can be only an illusion and death a temptation
A final destiny
A cosmic funeral of memories*

-Limbonic Art, "A Cosmic Funeral of Memories"

Black Metal is a genre that, despite all of its heavy-handedness, demands to be taken seriously. The spectacle of the performers and the music refuse to be ignored, flaunting song titles like, "Grand Declaration of War", "Pure Fucking Armageddon", and "A Misanthropic Spectrum". In their attempt to be taken seriously there is also an unintentional humor that arises from titles like "Deathtrip to a Mirage Asylum", "Suicide Commando", and "Funeral of Death", which are hard to read out loud without cracking a smile. The overtly juvenile nature of a good portion of Black Metal music becomes its own undoing, transforming the threatening expressions of corpse painted performers into cosmic clowns with little sense of agency. The intentions are sincere but the execution gets complicated.

What made me interested in incorporating the visual language of Black Metal into my work was this idea of "imposed seriousness" which is ultimately hollow; a threat with no danger of fulfillment. As a long time fan of the music I felt I could take ownership of translating the music and lore into my own work, giving me a figure I could use to enter my own work; a critical tool to poke fun at the elitism of painting and Metal alike. Putting Black Metal figures into a painterly world directly connects them to modernism's white male history and the male gaze, implying both a menace and an oblivious pathetic quality.



Defining terms; Modesty/Heroism

Painting, on a simple spectrum, can be placed between two points; modest and heroic. By fluctuating between these two points my work comments on the complicated nature of labeling or satisfying a niche within contemporary painting.

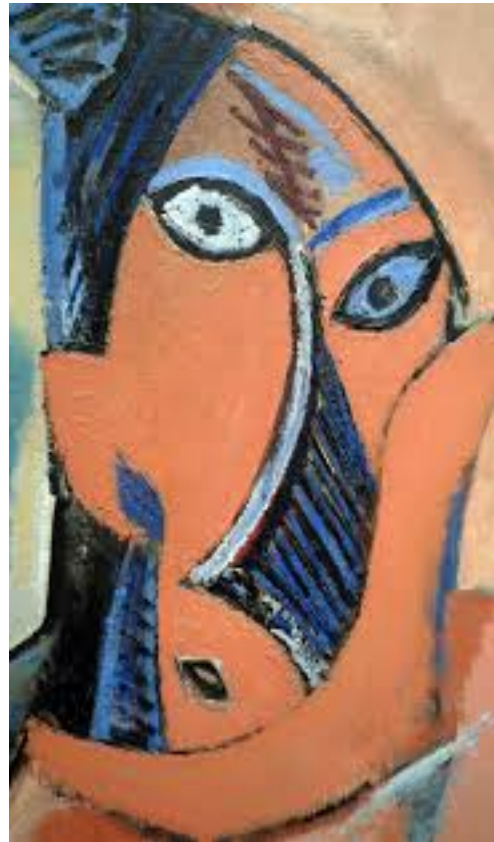
With the rise of 24,000 square foot “mega-galleries”, the Rubell residency which recently birthed Oscar Murillo’s giant canvases and the Brant Foundation’s showings of Josh Smith and Julian Schnabel, the contemporary painting scene is anything but modest. In Mira Schor’s,

“Modest Painting”, she defines an area of painting that doesn’t call attention to itself. “Modest painting doesn’t aspire to historical importance through the psychological domination of the viewer or the room in which is it placed” (Schor, “Modest Painting”, *Art Issues*, 18). This is the counterpoint to the prominent art cliché, “bad boy installation”, an area of contemporary installation that Jerry Saltz enjoys trashing and praising (i.e. Bjarne Melgaard’s last show at Gavin Brown Enterprise). Schor goes on to elaborate that in the tradition of Western art, medium-sized paintings garner market value while large paintings are an assertion of ambitious, historical, and cultural importance (Schor, 18). Small paintings, according to Schor, have often been aligned with aesthetic genres, which are seen as “second class” to their larger counterparts (still life and portraiture falling by the way side of historical and religious paintings) (Schor, 18). When taking the museum into consideration, this statement can be seen as true. A giant painting by Peter Paul Rubens, which has little to do with Rubens’ personal touch but more with the craft and labor of his workshop, is sure to be featured more prominently than say, a small painting by Morandi (which holds more significance in relation to painting’s development). Schor clarifies that “modest paintings are not necessarily small, and small paintings are not necessarily modest” (Schor, 19).

I’ve spent a lot of time in front of Susan Rothenberg’s painting at the VMFA, which is inexplicably adjacent to a large David Salle. When it comes to scale and touch, the Rothenberg wins, exercising a minimal use of line and form when compared to the neighboring Salle. Most of the surface in Rothenberg’s painting, which is a pale bluish-gray in color, is dedicated to a thick texture that appears to be the results of the searching and discovery that preceded the final composition. The surface is interrupted only by the outline of a “glove”



shaped form at the center of the canvas, which doubles as face. The painting has a certain unassuming quality that is reinforced by the way in which it was painted, simple and complex at the same time. While this image is reminiscent of other paintings by Rothenberg, particularly the horse paintings, it lacks the monumental edge those paintings exhibit. The neighboring David Salle painting features two large female figures, one nude standing with her back to the viewer and one in a bikini facing the right side of the painting. Over top of the female figure, which is painted in monochrome red scale, is a crudely painted tribal mask. The pairing of these



two images references modernism's fascination with both women and the appropriation of cultural objects. The painting also very literally seems to paraphrase "Les Femmes d'Alger" by Picasso, which has a similar, albeit more integrated, combination of similar

influences. This gesture by Salle appears to have lofty aspirations towards exhibiting a reflection of the history of Western art, and therefore is not modest by means of its grandiose statement (Schor, 18).

“The modest painter may submit painting to a ruthless criticality that precludes virtuosity for its own sake, and in so doing risks getting less attention than a painter with fewer scruples about the meaning and integrity of each stroke” (Schor, 19). In making a painting I exercise dozens of different variations of the same image in hopes of stumbling across a combination of form and content that resonates more than the others. In an age where there are other accessible means of visual communication, there is something that happens in painting that motivates me to chase that fleeting moment of clarity and confusion. “...admitting the futility of the effort to paint in the face of more spectacular media, may be the truest painterly expressions possible in the contemporary life” (Schor, 21) While this statement by Schor can be seen as bordering on self righteousness or self indulgent, it also can be interpreted as a form of personal heroism in painting; a catch-22 where the act of opposing heroism parallels complacency to it.

When I think of the term “heroic painting”, the first painting that comes to mind is “Washington Crossing the Delaware River”, by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze. Washington stands sternly at the front of the boat looking off triumphantly into the distance. Next I think of, “Napoleon Crossing the Alps”, by Jacques- Louis David. In the painting Napoleon sits confidently on a rearing horse, cape flowing in the mountain wind while soldiers climb in the background. Despite the frantic expression on the horse, Napoleon looks self assured, pointing to the sky with the same confidence displayed by his expression. The size of Napoleon in relation to the soldiers in the background references the hierarchical scale relations used in religious medieval paintings (the most important figure being the largest). The grandiose nature of these

paintings precedes them; without knowing their scale the viewer still gets the distinct feeling they're large. It is no mistake that these two paintings are history paintings, as "heroism" is often associated with historical achievements and moments of bravery. Of course both these examples are incredibly literal/illustrative and fairly simple interpretations of the term "heroic". When



thinking through the history of painting the term adjusts its intentions according to the time.

Non-historically themed heroic painting has all the same bravado as its more illustrative counterpart, but is made up of the sweeping gestures and the personal heroism of the individual painter. When I think of "heroic" non-representational painting I think of the abstract expressionists, Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell. (I've

left out Guston on purpose. His career as a whole had little to do with heroics, especially his ab-ex work). Here was a group of painters that staked a bold new claim to abstraction by making big, messy, aggressive, and hard-to ignore pictures. All in all, "modesty" becomes the negative condition of "heroic" and neither term is as black or white as initially considered.

"If modesty is an instinctive as well as an intellectually and morally based turn away from the limelight, contemporary art's focus on objectness or the pathetic can be read as a reaction

formation to the artist's awareness of the difficulty of painting in the limelight, during a time when getting the limelight seems for man the only excuse for making art in the first place"

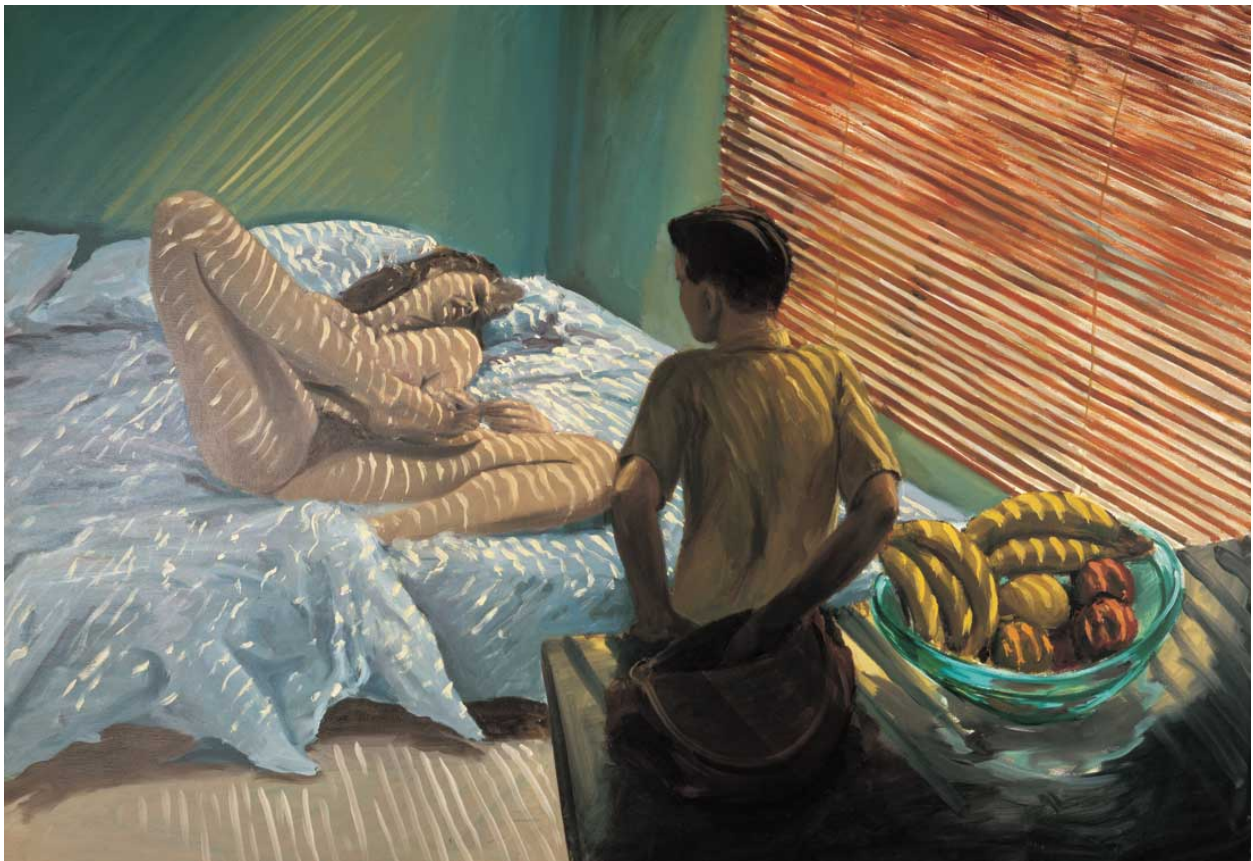
(Schor, 21)

To actively oppose heroic painting without pursuing modest means you can be left with "anti-heroic" painting, or painting which through its imagery and formal elements opposes the grandiosity of historically heroic work. My work strives to operate within this area, willingly choosing subjects that are oblivious or ambivalent to any perceived lack of authority. Anti-heroism sometimes associates with anti-aesthetic, which is an area that I am less interested in exploring. Work that is willfully anti-aesthetic, Merlin Carpenter, Jonathan Meese, or Bjarne Melgaard, operates within a closed loop, as if to say, "You're not supposed to enjoy looking at this so it's ok if you don't like this".

Carpenter's work runs the risk of being so "anti-heroic" and "anti-aesthetic" that it becomes heroic. Being the only artist that is brave enough to blatantly spell it out like it is, "Die Collector Scum", or "Kunst = Kapital", Carpenter can be seen as painfully and needlessly "heroic", a martyr of his own message.



Eric Fischl attempts an “anti” approach to image making in a different way. Fischl mixes imagery that is often offensive or vulgar with a paint handling that aspires to virtuosity. While Fischl’s formal craft can, at times, leave a lot to be desired, there are moments where he displays an adept understanding of how to lay down paint. In, “Bad Boy”, a nude woman lies splayed across a bed, bathed in the bright light that cuts through the window blinds. Her genitals face a young boy in the foreground who is attempting to steal from her purse. The striped light that enters the room is done with an immediacy and intentionality that both counters and enhances the overtly offensive nature of the image. Simultaneously Fischl is commenting on painting’s long standing history of trying to emulate divine or natural light while also embracing light as a way to heighten the drama of the image. Fischl’s decision to dilute the directness of the image by giving the viewer a device by which they can become entranced complicates the read of the



work, as if Fischl isn't screaming, "This is fucked!" at you, but telling you in an approachable, low tone.

Hiding behind impeccable craft to make an "anti" statement is, to me, as closed off as the artist's who intentionally make work that resists attraction. John Currin and Tom Sanford are two painters that bury their loaded imagery in thin, unassuming layers of glazed paint. The result, in my opinion, is stunted by its binary relationship the viewer has with it, which is usually prescriptive. You (the viewer) look at the usually offensive picture, then the quality of the physical craft that compiles it, then sit with it a minute to muse at the dichotomy between the two, smirk and move on. This doesn't go without exceptions, but in my work I tend to lean towards confusing the read of the work in a way that identifies more "decorative" aspects of painting and pairs them with areas that appear more slap-dash or neglected. Different modes of handling paint are put into close quarter with each other, creating a visual push and pull that fluctuates between passages of modesty and patches of what could be labeled as anti-aesthetic. Ultimately the initially quick read of the work is complicated by passages of the painting that are more contemplative and loaded than their first glance lets on.

Figuratively Speaking; Figuration



“Old styles never die, they just continue to permeate the substrata of American art, lurking under the radar of the mainstream art world” (Mira Schor, “A Decade of Negative Thinking”, 215). While I don’t necessarily subscribe to the term “style”, Schor brings an interesting point to light because technically it can be argued that we are in a phase of painting when everything has been done. David Joselit wrote about the shift he saw in work since Kippenberger declared, “...to hang a painting on the wall and say its art is dreadful. The whole network is important!”, describing a performance by Jutta Koether in which she attempts to connect herself to the history of painting by combining installation, historical painting, and performance (David Joselit, “Painting Besides Itself”, 1,2). It could be argued that this awareness of the connectedness of things is simply a visual representation of post-structuralism. Resurgence of “style” (mode of thinking or working) has also met critical acclaim with the rise of Provisional Painting. When Raphael Rubinstein wrote, “Provisional Painting”, in 2009, it seemed fresh, but there was nothing inherently new about it. Joan Miro’s late burnt canvases and Giacometti’s persistent working and reworking are two examples of prior “provisional” endeavors. “Christian Phillip Muller asks, “How far removed into the past does an artistic style need to be in order to obtain this bonus of being recycled?” (Schor, 215).

To further distinguish the word, “style”, Schor writes, “I am using style in the broad sense, which includes the formal, representational, and narrative codes of each major “ism” of modern and contemporary art history, as well as a variety of more recent tropes that may not neatly fit into the confines of the terms *style* or *material* or *genre* but are nevertheless also fully encoded” (Schor 218). Being a painter that has borrowed and quoted various modes of thinking and working in painting, I see this distinction of style less about content and more about an arrived at visual vocabulary. As Schor admits, in regards to viewing work on a jury panel, artists

get pigeonholed into camps based on their visual cues (Shcor, 217). While Schor does not come out and say that content is rejected because of a superficial understanding of the work, it is certainly implied. The references in my painting have less to do with “style hopping” and more to do with the previously mentioned idea of a networking art historical moments into my own work. This awareness and employment of painting’s history attempts to question the present condition of painting. Compositional references to past paintings allude to different eras of painting; a way of paying homage to moments in history that has been crucial to my personal development. Originality in contemporary painting comes from the way these moments are cross referenced with each other, and most importantly the artist’s personal touch and interpretation. A cynic could say that quoting other moments in painting contemporarily is a way to validate one’s own work, in essence making an air tight painting because of its quotidian dependence. The danger of heavily quoted or paraphrasing painting’s past is that you may invoke nostalgia for nostalgia’s sake. “Hey, remember German Expressionism, I do, here’s something like that.” Further danger comes when not only the visual means of painting is used exclusively for look, but also for lack of originality or “having something to say”. “Originality” is also a vague term; I’ll define it as the idiosyncratic tastes and tendencies of the individual. The argument can be illustrated by Outsider Art, which became popular and viable in the art world to the point where contemporary non-outsider artists started to operate within the vernacular of the group they have no real connection to. Outsider Art hinges on the unique set of circumstances that brought the individual to understand their surroundings in a very specific way. For Henry Darger it was the fact that his whole adult life was spent living between his apt and his janitorial job down the street. Darger was an introvert who had only one real friend, as well as an unhealthy understanding of prepubescent girls (who he insisted on drawing with male genitals). For

someone else to simply quote that vocabulary would be insincere, as it wasn't lived or understood, just seen.



“Custer Mustard” is an overtly political picture and, in retrospect, was influenced heavily by its’ geography (large monuments of Southern civil war era leaders paired with contemporary pro-confederate picketers makes the political dichotomy of the South hard to ignore). As the title suggests, the painting draws its characters from “Custer’s Last Stand” (which happened in Little

Rock towards the end of the Indian War). There are countless illustrations glorifying a defiant Custer, as he stands amongst the dead, sword raised, ready to fight until the very last. It would later be determined through eye witness accounts that Custer may have been one of the first to die, hence the “chicken without its head” chaos that ensued. Previous depictions of Custer are located almost exclusively in kitsch, glorifying the heroic plight of Custer as he and his few remaining men are surrounded by the hostile Native Americans

The political tone, large scale, and posturing of the figures in my depiction of Custer draws connections to the work of Leon Golub, whose work comments on the absurdity of humanity and its depictions within the canon of western art. “His subject was “Man with a capital “M” – as a symbol of social and spiritual ambition, often irrational and destructive, depicted in paintings of monumental scale” (Holland Cotter, NY Times). Golub’s early career utilized Greek and Roman mythology to portray this, most notably in “Gigantomachy II” which depicts a large group of nude male figures in combat, frozen mid-action. The work is reminiscent of Greek friezes; both in the posturing of the figures as well as the “heroic” narrative they depict. In his mid-career Golub shifts his aim from a critique of Western art with a distinctly classical flair to a critique of America’s involvement in Vietnam. Golub’s critical sight widened as his career continued, focusing next on “Mercenaries... (which) focused on images of military and paramilitary violence, suggesting that this had become the global condition” (Cotter, NY Times). In this series Golub depicts mercenaries, whose demeanors range from manic to bored, casually torturing both men and women. Their victims faces are often obscured (often they wear bags which conceal their faces or barely poke out of the trunk of a car). Who has the power in these paintings is clear, by means of stance and focus, and they are not quietly exploiting that power.

In my painting of Custer's last stand I employ a hierarchy that takes cues from Golub's work. The dominant, upright figure is the one with ultimate authority. Custer stands on the right side of the canvas with his head bent down in such a way that his yellow hat conceals his face; effectively becoming a surrogate head. At his feet is a dead Native American whose feet face the viewer. This figure references the dead Christ painting by Mantegna, a painting notorious for Christ's foreground feet, which are unusually small (as spoofed by John Currin).



In my painting the Native American assumes the role of the Christ figure, except that instead of small feet; the feet are exaggeratedly large, bordering on cartoony. Here I will address my decision to employ the racist cliché that Native American's are "red-skinned". Spending time in Richmond, you become immediately aware of its' biased politics, white marble monuments to white men run abound. In this mode of thinking, it seems appropriate to draw attention to potential ignorant stances built into the framework of American myths. In certain kitsch

depictions of the event, the American soldiers all have the same uniform, the Native Americans have a likewise generic costuming, and Custer is highlighted by way of his independent actions. The painting becomes an effort to describe the farce of the heroic male and the gap in perpetuation as it pertains to American history as well as paintings history.



“It Takes Two to Tango” is a painting of a two-person horse costume. The front half of the horse is located on an abutting canvas to the back end of the horse, reversing the usual left to right read of the costume. The costume has a dated, vaudevillian flare. The costume in itself is the representation of a coupling dynamic (the front end gets to stand erect while the person in the

back end is bent over and blind; say for the great view of the front end's butt). This power relationship alludes to the relationship between artist and viewer (the viewer is usually being left to the whim of the artist). In my painting I switch the two sides so the front is chasing the back, in effect subverting the established hierarchy imposed by the costume. Formally this move creates a "skipping", which references animation or a film frame repetition, opening up two possibilities; either there is a continuation or sequence of these costumed figures or the single horse is split apart. The seam of the joined canvases imitates wallpaper that doesn't quite lineup, establishing a patterned motif of a landscape (a crude outline of a mountain and two trees). The "stamped" effect of the mountain/trees has drop shadows that allude to a shallow depth. The generic quality of the landscape suggests the artificiality of a background usually associated with photo booth backdrops.



The horse calls back to equestrian portraiture, battle scenes by Paolo Uccello, Picasso and Rothenberg (amongst others). My relationship to Uccello's horses is superficial; who's rendering of horses was volumetric, plump, and exaggerated. In Picasso's, "Guernica", the horse, in my opinion, is the most emotive figure in the painting, exhibiting a strained neck and open mouth with piano-key teeth protruding, in an expression of anxiety and grief. To me Rothenberg's horses seemed like a formal excuse; a shape that becomes abstracted but never truly gets away from itself. Equestrian portraiture is the most superficial of the bunch, an exercise of craft and ego, a reminder of the possession. My depiction of the horse aims to take all these aspects of the horse as a figure into consideration, becoming a mascot for the farce of the horse as a representable image.

In my painting, "Dino Crisis 2", a caveman, with flimsy legs than would support his body, rides a dinosaur with thick clumsy legs. After the initial, more fantastic read of the image, the two figures start to reveal they may be part of a costume (the caveman wearing the dinosaur around his torso). The costume plays on the flaws of practical deception and concealment while the caveman signifies several other things, from painting's beginnings in caves 30,000 years ago to a representation of clumsy male artist, bumbling through painting's present by means of excavating paintings' past. The stance of the dinosaur in relation to its rider calls back to the previously mentioned "Napoleon Crossing the Alps", instead of a scared horse the dinosaur is threatening, teeth shown and claws raised. The thick tree-trunk legs demobilize the dinosaur, dissipating the threat.



“Dino Crisis 2” adapts the narrative of St. George and the dragon, both by means of religious myth as well as basic components. Contextualized by some contemporary religious sects, a caveman riding a dinosaur is a historical fact, as early man was supposedly coexistent with dinosaurs (if this was true it is hard to believe that humans, a small thin skinned species, could stand a chance against giant carnivorous lizard/birds). St. George and the Dragon follows equally simplified terms; an iron-clad hero, a damsel in distress, and a viciously scaly adversary.

Some depictions of the event (namely by Fra Angelico and his contemporaries) feature a dragon that poses little to no threat, in which the damsel seems in minimal need of rescue. The damsel is usually in such close proximity to the dragon in these situations that there is no logic behind her not being mauled. In other depictions the damsel has the dragon on a leash, completely changing the relationship between the three by criminalizing the knight who essentially becomes a pet murderer. In my adaptation I chose to leave the damsel out, as the real conflict is between St. George and the Dragon. By replacing St. George's steed with the "dragon" they become one and the same, each sharing a like agenda.

Historically, my awareness of dinosaurs in paintings has been primarily relevant to eighteenth and nineteenth century illustration (Jules Vern and the like), but in recent decades dinosaurs have not been strangers to non-illustrative painting (Albert Oehlen and Josh Smith have had Jurassic themed stints respectively). In non-painting media dinosaurs have been constantly evolving, weaving in and out of kitsch culture. In the eighties Topps Cards released "Dinosaurs Attack!", which was an ultra-violent bubble gum trading card set that was a send up of the their 1950's "Mars Attacks". Both of which were met with extreme opposition and outrage for ultra violence aimed at children. Dinosaurs reaffirmed their kitsch stance with movies like 1969's "The Valley of Gwanji" (in which unsuspected rodeo cowboys discover a rift in time and enter a land of dinosaurs) and 1959's "Journey to the Center of the Earth to Shame" (in which dinosaurs live in the Earth's core).



Dinosaurs took the backseat for a while until 1993's "Jurassic Park", which attempted to lift

dinosaurs out of kitsch by contextualizing them with plausible science and facts. “Jurassic Park” manages to spawn several high-grossing sequels which keep dinosaurs alive in the imaginations of a whole generation of people. Shadowing the movies was Capcom’s, “Dino Crisis” video games, which aimed to capitalize on the buzz created by Spielberg’s blockbuster. This leads to a recent phenomenon, “dino-rotica”.

In 2013, Christine Sims nineteen page, “Taken by the T-Rex” hit the digital market, a self-published story focusing on a passionate encounter between a lusty cave-woman and a telepathic T-Rex. Suffice it to say but the story is very graphic. I bring Sims’ literary anomaly up because it raises several questions about intentionality, taste, and sincerity. The cynic in me wants to believe that she is exploiting a hole in a niche market. However, after reading it, there seems to be a core of genuine interest in the subject, and from a certain point of view it makes



sense. It can be argued that when considering Hollywood’s over the top, fetishized portrayal of dinosaurs being accompanied by the ever present dino-curiosities exhibited by Natural History Museums and children’s books, it was only a matter of time until someone was brave enough to publicly fantasize about what Creationists dare not speak of.

Ultimately it is important to consider the associative content surrounding a painting; each in some way being defined by

its cultural moment. Taking other forms of visual/literary material and examining it alongside the historical roots of painting's past and present expose the full frame of a painting's reach.

A Sincere and Cynical Edge; Notes on Spectacle

Paul McCarthy and Paul Verhoeven present work that on the surface seems shallow, but upon prolonged viewing reveals itself to be deeply thoughtful and nuanced. Both artists are preoccupied with the subversion of depicting would-be heroic subjects; Verhoeven depicts the would-be personal heroism of individuals in war and McCarthy depicts the artist as heroic figure that is demeaned and pathetic. By examining Verhoeven's, "Starship Troopers" and McCarthy's, "The Painter", I'll examine the idea of the veneer; both examples make use of a cartoony spectacle aesthetic to mask a deeper contemplation on art and humanity.

Spectacle is a viable means of communication for video artist Paul McCarthy. In McCarthy's 1995 video, "The Painter", he masquerades around his studio as an anxiety ridden painter/clown, embodying a comically tragic archetype. The artist structures his work around a loose narrative framework which allows room for invention and exploration of contemporary themes surrounding solitude, ego, dystopia, and various mental disorders. McCarthy simulates these issues in "The Painter" by establishing tight parameters which occupy an orchestrated and costumed environment. By examining the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche, Erving Goffman, and Roy Porter I will unpack issues surrounding cynicism, sincerity, vanity, text, and madness in relation to McCarthy's 1995 work.

The work of Paul McCarthy operates in the currency of exaggeration. On a superficial level this excess provides nonstop stimulation. In McCarthy's work, "The Painter", the artist dons a bulbous flesh-colored clown nose and giant cartoon hands that put Mickey Mouse's to shame. McCarthy referred to as "Bill" (deKooning assumedly) in the video, is dressed in a pale



blue hospital smock (*fig20.*). “Bill”

stands on an open set that consists of a bedroom, a hallway, and a studio which contains three large canvases. The layout mimics the sitcom perspective; the rooms remain open at the front, transforming the spaces into a receptacle and allowing the audience full access. This creates an air of familiarity and at seems oddly comfortable. Over the fifty minute duration of the video McCarthy saunters from room to room providing a smattering of anxiety ridden gibberish, complaining about the hardships of making while he paints. McCarthy’s surroundings are as selectively cartoonish as his costume is. The grandiose scale of the canvases is matched by equally large tubes of paint and brushes. In addition to the extremely scatological paint, McCarthy also uses processed condiments, namely a Costco sized jar of Hellman’s mayonnaise. At various interludes the studio scene is broken up by conversations with “Bill’s” dealer and interviews with collectors on faux art talk programs. The video deals heavily with endurance, both on McCarthy’s and the viewer’s part, as the performance suggests a very well executed improvisation stretched over a loosely structured narrative. McCarthy takes full advantage of the painter as a self-declared, and self-fulfilled, figure of comic tragedy with an implied danger and

recklessness that suggests an agency which, until halfway through the video, is unfounded. At around twenty-seven minutes the external expressive and painterly violence in the studio becomes self-reflexive as McCarthy starts playing five-finger-filet with his absurdly clumsy hands. He starts out well and then starts to get sloppy, hitting his fingers more than he misses them, escalating quickly into McCarthy hacking at one of his large fingers with a meat cleaver (the extended duration of the sharp metal edge slicing through the bleeding rubber appendage is the real visceral tension of this section). This dismembering act forms an analogy with Greek myths and Freudian psychology, referencing the tragic hero and a form of Oedipal castration .



To determine the nature of spectacle in McCarthy's work, I will first examine issues of sincerity and cynicism as it relates to his portrayal of "Bill", the painter. In Erving Goffman's essay, "Performances: Belief in the Part One Is Playing", Goffman establishes the boundaries of cynicism and sincerity in performance. "When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them" (Erving Goffman, "Belief in the Part One is Playing," 61). By this introduction we, as an audience, are meant to believe anything presented to us with conviction is truth. Goffman notes that the audience has an inherent trust in the performer's intention to act "for the benefit of other people" and that if the performer, if convinced by the reality she/he is fabricating for audience as actual reality, is perceived as sincere (GOFFMAN 61). On the opposite side of the spectrum, if the performer takes "a gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something that the audience must take seriously", we can, by Goffman's terms, label that performer a cynic (GOFFMAN 61). The first impression McCarthy gives the audience in "The Painter" is misdirection. The jarringly over the top cartoony nature of his initial image and surroundings distracts the audience from the serious undertones of the work, which would lead us to think that McCarthy is cynical over sincere. However Goffman continues by asserting that a cynical individual may intentionally "delude" his content for the benefit of the audience (GOFFMAN 61). As we trace forward into "The Painter" we can object to McCarthy as a cynic due to the fact that he is not pulling any punches; not subverting his content's message for the sake of the audience. As the serious tendencies towards self loathing, antisocial behavior, and manic depression come up in the work McCarthy hides nothing and as an audience member you get the distinct impression that McCarthy is starting to believe in the reality of his character "Bill".

Goffman further adds that each stance, cynic or sincere, has “its own particular securities and defenses” (GOFFMAN 62).

Nietzsche plays a healthy thematic role in McCarthy’s “The Painter”. In “Beyond Good and Evil” Nietzsche talks about the perplexing nature of vanity to the human being. “The problem for him is to imagine people who seek to create a good opinion of themselves which they do not have of themselves – and thus do not “deserve” – and who nevertheless end up believing this good opinion themselves” (NIETZSCHE 208). McCarthy creates an analogy for this sentiment in the scenes where he interacts with the faux-sophisticated, high-class, “liberal” art consumers philosophize over the genius of “Bill” while being treated to deep breaths of the artist’s asshole. How can an artist live up to a projected image and thereafter projected worth? McCarthy reflects on the delicate balance of the artist’s relationship to the public. The artist “always *waits* for an opinion of himself and then instinctively submits to that – but by no means only a “good” opinion; also a bad and unfair one.” (NIETZSCHE 209) Ego, both projected and personal plays dueling parts in “The Painter”. These poles form a binary which compels the artist towards manic and disturbed characteristics.

McCarthy tackles issues of mental disorder/anxiety by turning the painter character “Bill” into a contemporary interpretation of the classic “fool”. Specifically McCarthy draws parallels to characters associated with madness in plays and mythology. One point of reference is the Shakespearean character Edgar from “King Lear”. At various points in “The Painter” McCarthy develops different mantras, the most memorable being when he spins in circles chanting “deKooning” in a falsetto coo. In “King Lear” Edgar sings a song which panders to an exterior audience’s expectations of his madness (PORTER 62). This operates in a similar way to McCarthy’s chant of “deKooning” which brings in the audience’s contextual knowledge of art

history. While Edgar chants, “I’ll bark against the Dog Star, I’ll crow away in the morning, I’ll chase the moon till it be noon, and I’ll make her leave her horning”, (SHAKESPEARE, KING LEAR) McCarthy chants “deKooning”. In Roy Porter’s, “The History of Madness”, Porter traces and expands upon society’s relationship to fools and folly (PORTER 62). “In jokes and on stage, the insane have standardly been depicted as strange and disheveled –as “wildmen”, with straw in their hair and their clothes threadbare, ripped or fantastical”. (PORTER 63) McCarthy embraces this “wildman” trope at twenty minutes into the video when he drops to all fours and starts acting like an animal terrorizing his dealer’s office. This draws an immediate parallel to another myth of madness. In the Old Testament’s “Nebuchadnezzar” the main character is punished for his hubris when “the Lord punished (him) by reducing him to bestial madness”. (PORTER10) A person acting in the manner of a dog is also points to madness’ connection to lycanthropy, bestial possession known as “wolf-madness” and depression and Satan being referred to as “the black dog” (PORTER 12).

Later in the scene McCarthy orders his dealer around and positions a chair on the desk. He proceeds to sit in the chair, elevating himself above the female dealer (who is trying to lord her “PHD” over him) and posturing himself as a tyrant king, asking over and over, “where’s my money? How much money do you owe me?” This gesture inverts the relationship of the dealer/artist and visualizes it in terms of monarchy (a role reversal between jester and king). It is important here to note the physical appearance of these characters again. Porter notes the perpetuation of the fool character as it evolves into “(a) portrayal as disfigured by a stone protruding from his forehead, the “stone of folly”. (PORTER 64) McCarthy, keenly aware of this association, positions this “stone” on his nose. Unlike the traditional portrayal where the fool is an isolated character, everyone in McCarthy’s video shares this trait. The art world microcosm in

“The Painter” sees patrons, critics, dealers, and the painter himself all having the unifying “fool” physical feature. However “Bill’s” hands still distinguish him as a person of importance. This is the physical feature that makes the aforementioned role reversal have more weight, establishing him as a person of physical distinction and allowing him to become king of the fools for that segment of the video. Over the duration of the video, the audience experiences the painter’s descent into madness as he collapses under the weight of his own image. If we consider “The Painter” as a fallen-hero narrative, several things come to light. Traditionally madness is “usually a fate or a punishment” in early biblical stories and mythology. (PORTER 10). The madness can be a sign of possession conjured by mantras and speech acts (PORTER 12). The chanting of “deKooning” marks the downward spiral into frustrated sexual dialogue. After the utterance McCarthy penetrates one of his canvases with a large brush and then proceeds to enact physical violence on him while weeping. “Wild disturbances of mood, speech and behavior were generally imputed to supernatural powers” (PORTER 12). Later in the video another phrase of possession take over McCarthy. “If the women could see me now me boy, if the women could see me now, whoop goes the weasel”. While he repeats this phrase over and over he is grinding a large canvas against a table. The table tears the canvas and McCarthy proceeds to penetrate the canvas with the table. The phrase itself “whoop goes the weasel” is at first nonsensical and holds continuity with his superficial character as fool but is actually quite layered, in the same way that Edgar from King Lear is aware of his pandering to audience (he fulfills their projected image of him in hopes of obtaining the audience’s charity (PORTER 62). Here McCarthy brings reference to the destruction of “easel” painting (using weasel as his surrogate word). If abstract expressionism was the last vestige of modernism, which began with easel painting and the

pursuit of a utopia, it is fitting that McCarthy is literally sodomizing those notions in a gesture akin to dystopia.

Bill, “The Painter”, is a perpetuation of the fool archetype from traditional literature and mythology. McCarthy carries out his portrayal of this character by embracing the spectacle that is natural to these circumstances, making use of exaggerated painter tools and props as well as costuming himself in a ridiculous fashion. The humor associated with his being a fool is disarming. The audience is caught off guard by the desensitizing and overt absurdity of the material and unaware of the artist’s motives in the work. As the material progresses the humor is undercut with more and more commitment. Although this work comes out of a cynical place I believe there are moments of sincerity coded into the cynicism which keep the audience off kilter. By these means McCarthy keeps an air of discomfort in his work as he never allows the viewer room to catch their breath without bombarding them with the next iteration of his spectacle.

Paul Verhoeven celebrates absurdity through the display of hyper violence, full frontal intercourse, and a perverse sense of humor. Verhoeven’s career has ranged from thrillers based on freedom fighters in Nazi occupied Holland to a coming of age story about a young, scrappy, “in it to win it” showgirl. Verhoeven grew up in Holland during the later parts of World War II and tuned his cinematic craft making documentaries during his time in the Dutch Navy. Nineteen ninety-seven’s “Starship Troopers” came at the apex of Verhoeven’s Hollywood career, at which point he had been responsible for a handful of immense blockbusters (Robocop, Total Recall, Basic Instinct were all high grossing pictures).

Verhoeven’s spinoff of Robert Heinlein’s book, “Starship Troopers” (which was released in 1954 and became famous for its Machiavellian ideals concerning militant citizen run society)

went further to challenge audiences than any of his other films. “Starship Troopers” spurred immediate controversy for its excessive violence and supposed Nazi overtones, described as “spiritually Nazi, psychologically Nazi (coming) directly from the Nazi Imagination, and (being) set in the Nazi universe” (Janet Maslin, “No Bug Too Big for this Swat Team”, NY Times). Other major critics and publications panned the movie similarly, musing, “Starship Troopers is what Star Wars would have looked like if Germany had won World War II”. (Ty Burr, Entertainment Weekly”) While the movie has come to be accepted as a satire of pro-war propaganda films, it brings to light various issues about how we, as an audience, interpret the intentions of an artist.

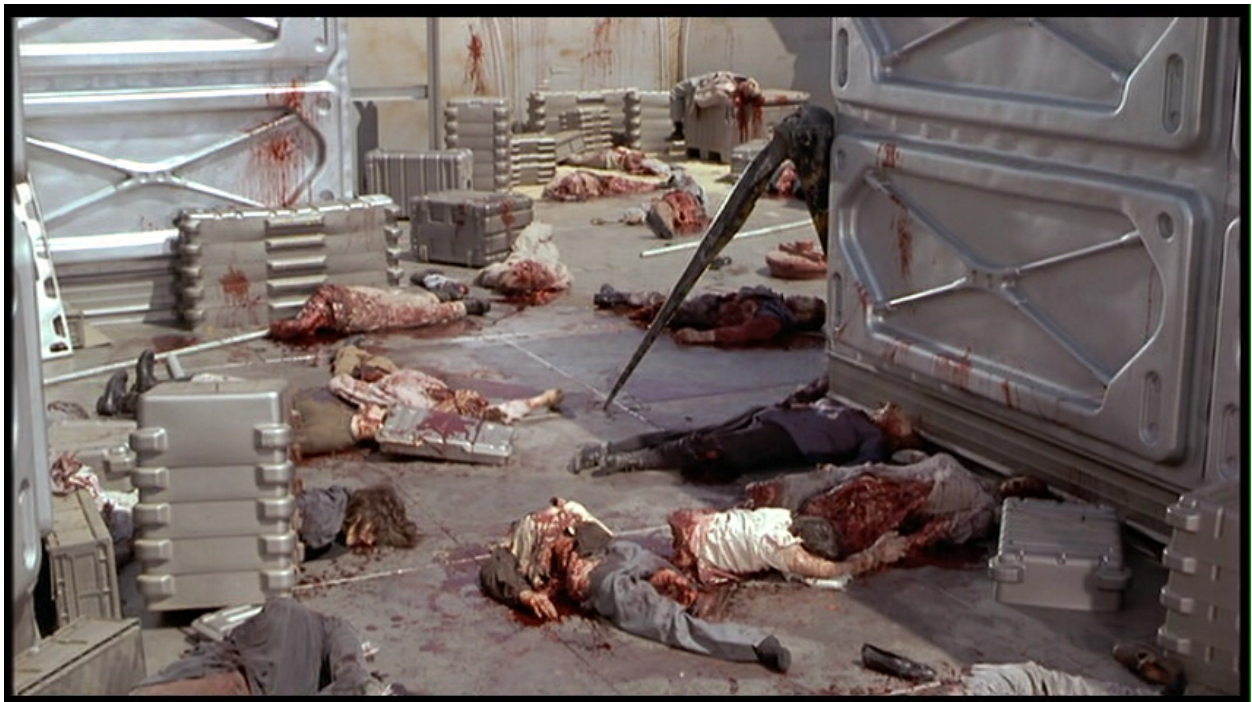


“Starship Troopers” draws visual parallels to Leni Riefenstahl’s, “Triumph of the Will”. The movie starts on a black screen as militant drumming swells over the opening credits; at the height of which a logo for “Join Up Now” fills the screen. In the background there are well organized rows of fully costumed soldiers (a direct quote of Riefenstahl’s film) followed by

close-ups of individual troopers faces declaring, “I’m doing my part”. After a few troopers repeat the line, a child in uniform comes from around a corner and declares, he’s, “doing his part too”, a line that is received by the other troopers with laughter. This whole section is openly cynical, making a joke of the blatant tactics of military/national propaganda. The costumes in the movie support the anti-propaganda agenda, baring a similarity to those of the Third Reich. The initial suspicion of the fascist designs subsides and the movie continues, bombarding the audience with different scenes of war and “do your part” propaganda segments. At the beginning of act three we are shown the funeral of one of the main characters, Dizzy, which ends with her coffin being comically shot into space. When Carl, a character that has been absent for the past hour of film, reappears he is in a full-length black leather Nazi officer uniform. This scene reminds the audience, “See, this is what happens when you blindly and unquestioningly submit to the whims of propaganda”. The overwhelmingly optimistic tone of the movie as a whole is perhaps the biggest giveaway that is in fact jaded. After witnessing her boyfriend’s brains being sucked out, as well as herself being impaled, Carmen smiles and confesses that she believes “when they (the main cast) stick together everything’s going to be ok”. The movie ends with one final bit of propaganda, “They’ll keep fighting, and they’ll win”.

Citing several incidents of violence in “Starship Troopers”, it can be determined that Verhoeven is aware of the effect and tone of violence in his own films. “Total Recall” and “Robocop” both bask in the spectacle of violence as entertainment, under the guise of “action movie” or “blockbuster”. In both movies there are severed limbs, bodies exploding under gunfire, huge body counts, all with the consistent Verhoeven humor. In Robocop a robot, ED-209 shoots an executives body with high-caliber shells for nearly thirty seconds, the violence becomes Looney Tunes-esque in its excessiveness. In “Total Recall” Arnold Schwarzenegger

shoots his wife, Sharon Stone, in the head and declares, “consider that a divorce”, sending up the barbaric nature of the Hollywood one liner. In “Starship Troopers” the first scene of violence is presented to the audience through a news “live report”. Numerous people are cut in half; others are impaled, all uncut. As the movie progresses the Federal Network demonstrates how dangerous the bugs are by letting one go to town on a cow. A giant “censored” sticker quickly covers up the evisceration of the farm animal. Immediately after the Network shows us images of the consequences of humans (“Mormon Extremists”) colonizing bug-territory. What follows is a montage of dismembered, decapitated, wet piles of body parts scattered over a metallic, futuristic compound. It seems obvious that Verhoeven is in control of the satiric nature of how he’s using violence to comment on the media’s ham-fisted denial and endorsement of graphic violence. Verhoeven also demonstrates violence in humanistic terms. We follow the troopers from boot camp to their first battle, upon which a good deal of them gets killed. When we, as the troopers, experience the first death, one exclaims in a close up, “Oh my God, let’s get the hell out of here”. This sequence is devoid of music allowing the audience to fully experience the same horror. Near the end of the second act, a man is crushed by a dead bug; all that remains of him is a bloody smear on the deck. Upon witnessing this one trooper starts to laugh. This decision to transform the way the characters react to violence in their world, while commenting on their loss of humanity during a war, also makes the audience aware of the way they’ve been experiencing the violence (almost simultaneously saying, “is it ok to laugh at now?” and “has the nature of the violence changed from the beginning?”)



Some of the criticism surrounding the picture, I expect, comes from xenophobia. Here comes a Dutchman whose movies for the Dutch Navy could be misconstrued as propaganda films in their own right. He has successful box office records and a history of subversion, famously satirizing the privatization of the police department amidst a dystopian vision of “how much of my humanity do I retain if I am a Robocop?” It is this history of Verhoeven’s tendency to hide

political statements in what are supposed to be mindless Hollywood blockbusters that makes him dangerous as a director. Now (in 1997) Verhoeven releases a film that has visual overlaps with “Triumph of the Will” as well as a “no guts no glory” attitude, and everyone gets a little uncomfortable. The characters in the movie are good looking, young, and vapid (most of the cast being culled from the likes of “Melrose Place” and other daytime dramas) and the story is straight forward in its militaristic vision of citizenship. This questioning of what is done cynically and what is done sincerely is what makes the movie interesting. “Starship Troopers” manages to be simultaneously ridiculous, critical, entertaining and heartfelt.

What ties the aforementioned film and video to my work is the excess, humor, and spectacle act as both veneer which, upon investigation, signifies historical precedents as an attempt to comment on contemporary issues concerning absurdity and humanity. Both McCarthy and Verhoeven also have a heavy investment in the portrayal of the abject, often portraying things in the ugliest way possible, operating within the realm of “bad taste”.

Bad Taste, Humor, and Invention in Image Making

“Terminal Vacation” is an eight-foot square painting of an island sunset. The sky is streaked with yellow, orange, and magenta stripes of solid color. A chubby palm tree/ oversized pineapple sits on the right hand side, painted in a slap-dash fashion with dark muddy color as a thick mesh grid delineates the surface of the tree/fruit. The water disintegrates into a flurry of individual color strips that wash up against the red-mud beach where three coconut bowling balls sit, peering skeptically away from the sunset towards the viewer. Everything becomes a subversion of an expectation as objects become stand-ins for themselves while also dealing with kitsch on a monumental scale.

“Bad taste” is a difficult term, often associated with an opposition to the appropriate way of doing things; a counter-intuitive response to “right” decisions. “Spectacle”, “excess”, “ugly”, “blunt”, “clumsy”, and “crude”, are a few terms that come to mind when I think of the role of “bad taste” within my work. While I have introduced “bad taste” through a discussion about Black Metal, Verhoeven, and McCarthy, I am interested in a more nuanced interpretation of the term. Unlike the three previous examples, I tend to stay away from using overtly offensive or violent material when constructing my work in relation to bad taste. Making a picture with overtly offensive content, on top of making garish choices regarding form, paint surface/handling, and color becomes too much. I’ve found that it is much better for me to confuse the read of my work by not subscribing to all of the expectations surrounding “bad taste”.

I am much more interested in the camp or kitsch side of bad taste, the subjects coming directly from sub-culture and “dumbness”. I use “dumbness” in relation to my work not as a defensive term or as a way put myself down, but to describe what I think are generally “dumb” ideas for paintings, including but not limited to pictures of sunsets, Black Metal parades, and cavemen wearing dinosaurs. What I find attractive about these images is their urge to fail as serious paintings. Choosing subjects that want to elude serious analysis also puts me in a place where I need to focus on invention by subverting expectations of how certain areas or objects are handled. When a painting can succeed on some level in spite of the dumbness encoded in its’ DNA, that is when I feel like I’ve accomplished something meaningful.

“Self Reflective” is probably my most literal interface with bad taste. The painting focuses on a toilet bowl surrounded by a tiled pattern. In the top right corner is the side/back of a head that is directing his attention at the fragmented reflection in the teal toilet water. Initially the

painting was going to be much more about vomiting, frankly, a reaction to writing this thesis. I was planning a goopy mess of a painting that would live up to everything people would expect from me saying, “Hey I’m doing a puke painting”. That seemed too easy so instead I decided to spend time emphasizing the organic shapes that would result from the refractions in the water. The picture became a much more pointed successor of the Narcissus myth, except the extreme vanity is replace with the self deprecation associated with trying find yourself in a toilet.

“Self-Reflective” demonstrates two key components of my research in painting; humor and



invention. My involvement with “bad taste” usually has to do with finding a less obvious path around making the image I intend to make, which keeps the pictures feeling less “arrived at” and more “found”. My surfaces usually start with a vague idea of what the final form will be without being planned too much. By keeping these early stages

open I allow an organic relationship between the canvas and myself to develop which allows me to flesh out ideas while finding the most direct way to express an idea. Working in this way

associates a more intuitive means to images making, not uncommon to abstraction, and incorporates it into figuration, allowing both to exist in a single image.

To me painting is inherently embarrassing, even the most cryptic imagery in a painting blatantly tells at least some of a truth about its' creator. Then, if it's good enough of a painting to be noticed, it stands front and center to a judgmental, ravenous public. As a teen I drew only small pictures. My biggest drawing for many years was four inches by six inches, and the figures filled only a fraction of that page. I liked the intimate scale; I could very early hide these pictures. If I was drawing when I was supposed to be doing homework I could conceal them at a second's notice. I was a good draughtsman and chose to hide any content behind technical proficiency. People are sometimes easily distracted by craft, and sometimes are willing to overlook difficult subject matter if it is done well.

When I started painting I made the decision to aim for directness; big canvases and bold pictures that don't deny what they are. Initially I used bright colors to try and disguise my lack of painting chops but over time I was able to control colors, but kept them saturated because of how much they vibrated within a picture. If I was going to make paintings, I was going to try to be paintings that make abrupt statements that were reinforced by the scale of the paintings; whose confrontational and physical nature hinders the painting's ability to hide in plain sight.

Humor is a funny thing; it can be defensive, provocative, mean-spirited, dismissive, complex or simple. Humor becomes a way to enter the work; it initially disarms the viewer and, hopefully, allows them to then think about why they think it's funny. Is it worth laughing at? Or is it uncomfortable laughter? Putting it simply, I think of humor on spectrum with "The Three Stooges" at one end and "Seinfeld" at the far other end. One is total slapstick, focusing on instant gratification gags involving physical, cartoony, violence while the other is layered, accumulating

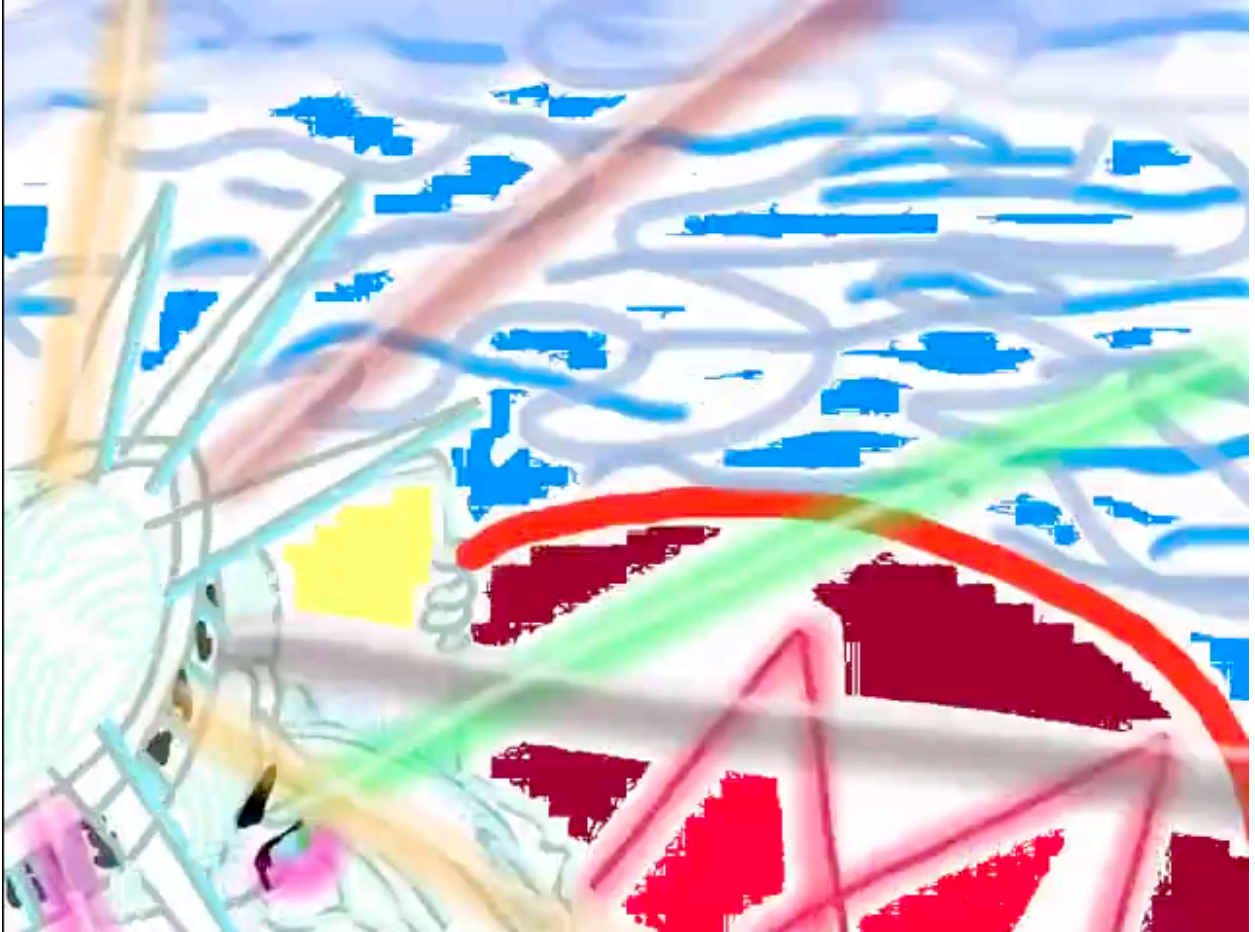
and unfolding until a definitive payoff at the end of a twenty two minute episode. It boils down to superficiality and sophistication, and being able to readjust the work on different points in that spectrum so that they each operate slightly differently.

Guston's humor is self-deprecating, as his portrayal of strained cyclopes and hooded figures engaging in generally comically charged situations suggest that he, himself is deeply embedding in the absurdity and plight that they strive towards. In Guston the laughter doesn't resonate, instead the response to his pictures de-crescendos into a muffled, uncomfortable air that starts to mirror the failure Guston paints. Trivial events like eating, sleeping, smoking, driving, or painting succumb to the existential weight of the banal/everyday occurrence.

Image Dissemination; Animation and Jpegs

Animation became a natural extension of my painting. The themes of the animations (spectacle, cynicism vs. sincerity, kitsch, etc.) serve as supplementary material to my physical/tangible work. Painting, traditionally, is a metaphor for windows and doorways, the iPad extends this metaphor to computer and tablet screens. Contemporarily, painting is primarily experienced as jpegs on the internet (I don't need to point out that this is not the right way to experience a medium that is all about micro/macro, surface, and mark). Digital tours of galleries i.e. James Kalm or Contemporary Art Daily give an impression of the space while lacking in tactility and first hand experience. Transversely, digital animation is made in the same area in which it is exhibiting, non-tangible ethereal space that is accessible through any internet connected computers.

My original interest in working digitally started with drawings I would do on my iPad when I had finished at the studio for the day. I lived about a half hour walk from campus and didn't have a bike so I usually spent around eight to ten hours at the studio and would call it





quits. More often than not I would get a second wind once at the apartment, and instead of going back, would sit around drawing. The digital format allowed me access to a nearly inexhaustible combination of marks, opacities, and colors. And, practically, this means no hassle with mess, materials, or surfaces. After a few months of investing time in single digital images I began to explore the possibilities of sequencing drawings into animations. The first attempts were unintentionally crude, despite their clean digital design. After getting over the initial thrill of making moving pictures I chose to embrace the crudeness. I began emphasizing the clean lines and edges of a digital brush mark by pairing it with vibrating images of an aggressive nature.

“Eye See Through You” is an animation of the Statue of Liberty as a globe vomiting, corpse-painted, Anti-Christ Automaton. The narrative starts centered on a blue eye. The view

pulls back to show the exterior of the American monument. Over the next sequences the viewpoint begins to swirl and spiral in accordance with the increasing digital debris. Around the middle of the animation the sequencing becomes visually exhausting. What appears to be random chaos is actually syncopated to various drum rudiments (most of which are common to the music that scores the animation, Mayhem's, "I Am Thy Labyrinth").

"Selfie-Loathing" consists of a stationary selfie. I stare blankly at the camera from my seated position. Selfie's are dumb but unfortunately they are also here to stay. I felt that if these animations use the internet as their primary interface, then they should interact with and critique a phenomenon spawned by the internet (while also being self-critical of the general "pay attention to me" quality of being an artist with a website). My face, which has been digitally







corpse painted, slowly opens and closes its' mouth while Carpathian Forests, "I Am Possessed" plays over the top. Over the course of the next forty two seconds, the consequences surrounding the head transition between a few scenarios, "Selfie at Gunpoint", "Selfie as Suicide Star", "Selfie as Dickhead", "Selfie as Militant", "Selfie as Antichrist Superstar", and "Selfie Watching Disaster Porn".

My iPad has become another studio space, a compact portable endless space to grow and create. I see animation and digital work as being responsible for a major shift in my physically painted work. Through animation I tuned my understanding of spectacle in art, variety of marks and viewpoints, the real freedom of invention associated with image making, and the importance of speed of image conveyance

CONCLUSION

By choosing subjects that have a pathetic or dumb aesthetic, I aspire to a criticality of painting's history with depictions of the "heroic". Starting by questioning the inherent privilege of modernist painting through the pairing of Black Metal and painting, and then moving past that loaded imagery to painting that questions the sincerity of the paintings intentions, I make paintings that fluctuate between modesty and anti-heroism. Color dictates the general flamboyance or bravado of a picture, boldly asserting its existence within a space while the painting hanging next to it might be attempting to coax the viewer in, rather than to force itself upon them.

Image dissemination by means of animation expands the conversation of visual "bad taste" to a digital arena, allowing for a more accessible experience in the way that Paul Verhoeven's films do. "Starship Troopers" presents itself as a farce, shaking off initial attempts to imbue the film with seriousness while also retaining a deep-seeded skepticism of conformist citizenship.

McCarthy demeans the personal heroic narrative of painter's painting by embracing cartoony spectacle filled with an abundance of literary/mythological references. My own stance on humor as a means to disarm or provide an entry point to the viewer clouds my intentions behind the creation of each picture, existing on a point which lands on the spectrum of sincerity and cynicism. Much of what I identify with in the film, art and music parallels my joy of subverting the essential elements of "taste" to manipulate or lure a viewer into a slightly-off, painted reality. Ultimately my research explores painting's ability to connect disparate cultural references while mediating a conversation between anti-heroism, modesty, and bad taste.





© Philip Hinge 2014

All Rights Reserved

List of Illustrations

1. “Almost Again”, 72”x70”, acrylic on canvas, 201, pg. 1
2. Balthus, “Le Salon II”, 1942, pg 2
3. album cover; Venom, “Black Metal”, 1982, pg. 4
4. Limbonic Art album cover, pg. 7
5. “Ravishing Grimness”, 72”x70”, acrylic on canvas, 2012, pg. 9
6. Susan Rothenberg, “Blue Face”, installation photo at the VMFA, pg. 11
7. David Salle, “Good Bye D.”, 1982, pg. 12
8. detail of; Pablo Picasso’s, “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon”, 1907, pg 12
9. Jacques-Louis David, “Napoleon Crossing the Alps”, 1801-1805, pg. 14
10. Merlin Carpenter, “Kunst=Kapital”, 2011, pg. 15
11. Eric Fischl, “Bad Boy”, 1981, pg. 16
12. Leon Golub, “Gigantomachy II”, 1966, pg. 17
13. “Custer Mustard”, 96”x96”, acrylic on canvas 2012, pg. 20
14. Andrea Montegne, “Lamentation of Christ”, 1480, pg. 21
15. “It Takes Two to Tango”, 84”x106”, acrylic on canvas 2013, pg. 23
16. Example of 19th century equestrian portraiture, pg. 24
17. “Dino Crisis 2”, 90”x70”, acrylic on canvas 2014, pg. 26
18. Still from, “Valley of Gwanji”, 1969, pg. 27
19. “Dino Crisis I”, 70”x50”, acrylic on canvas 2012, pg.28
- 20-21 stills from Paul McCarthy’s, “The Painter”, pg. 30-31
- 22-24. stills from Paul Verhoeven’s, “Starship Troopers”, pg. 37, 40
25. “Self-Reflective”, 66”x68”, acrylic on canvas 2014, pg. 43
- 26-28. stills from, “Eye See Through You” (duration 2 min. 4 sec.), pg. 46-47
- 29-32. stills from “Selfie-Loathing” (duration 0:42 sec.), pg. 48-50
33. “Terminal Vacation”, 96”x96”, acrylic on canvas, 2014, pg. 52
34. installation at, The Depot, Richmond, VA, pg. 53

Bibliography

Cotter, Holland, "Leon Golub, Painter on a Heroic Scale, Is Dead at 82", New York times, Thursday, August 12, 2004

Goffman, Erving, "Performances: Belief in the Part One is Playing". The Performance Studies Reader. Second Edition, Routledge, New York, NY, 2007.pg. 61-65

Joselit, David, "Painting Beside Itself". MIT Press Journals, October 2009

Nietzsche, Friedrich, "Beyond Good and Evil". Random House Publishing, November 1989. New York, NY

Maslin, Janet, "Starship Troopers: No Bugs Too Large for this Swat Team". New York Times, November 7, 1997

Porter, Roy, "Madness: A Brief History". Oxford University Press, 2003, New York, NY.

Schor, Mira, "A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life". Duke University Press Books, January 2010

Schor, Mira, "Modest Painting", pg. 18-21, Art Issues, January/February 2001

Shakespeare, William, "King Lear". Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare; Third Ed., 1997