Truth and Doubt in Representation

Mathew Gasparek

VCU School of the Arts

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TRUTH AND DOUBT IN REPRESENTATION

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

By

Mathew Gasparek

MFA, Painting and Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 2016
BFA, Painting and Drawing, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 2012

Thesis Advisor: Ruth Bolduan, Professor, Painting and Printmaking

Committee: Ruth Bolduan, Holly Morrison, Peter Baldes

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ABSTRACT

TRUTH AND DOUBT IN REPRESENTATION

By Mathew Gasparek, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015.

My work deals with the connection between the act of representation and conceptions of truth in the contemporary image-mediated social environment. This thesis details elements of my paintings in exchange with methods and ideas from artists and writers in order to position my aesthetic and conceptual sensibilities within a historical and contemporary framework.
What do we assume about truth in images today? What is the relationship between reality and the contemporary images that construct our social lives? It is no longer reasonable to assume that an image is an objective depiction that corresponds with an external referent based in reality, but rather a carrier of information that is the result of multiple transformations and mediations. Foucault says reality is constructed by the way each era represents the world to itself. The contemporary image does not merely represent reality but is a surrogate for it - influencing and altering it.

Our social lives are being increasingly lived in the arena of spectacle. “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”¹ Spectacle implies skepticism towards the superficial, towards the appearance of things. We are in a society built upon the unstable foundations of spectacle in which “truth has become up for grabs”² Curators Laura Phipps and Elisabeth Sherman, describe a current emergence of contemporary representational painting in this situation:

“Today, the virtual hyper connectivity of our daily lives masks a disconnect from the physical world, leading to a yearning for the tactile. Representational art answers this desire to be tethered to reality at a time when the world around us feels so insecure.”

“More than simply a categorical style, here representational implies a designation, characterization, or stand-in for reality that intimates a certain falseness. In a society at once fascinated by and suspicious of the concept of “truthiness” —

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¹ Debord, Guy. Aphorism 4
² Merriam-Webster president John Morse defines “truthiness”
a visceral belief that something is true despite an absence of evidence—it is not surprising that the veracity of representation would be regularly undermined.  

The Colbert Report – Pilot Episode 2005

REPRESENTATION AS SUBJECT MATTER

What is the role of representational painting in this situation? Good paintings point outwards, investigating issues in the world outside of itself. Equally, painting will also always be about itself, dealing with issues of form, space, color, etc. As a medium that has always been about illusion, understanding the act of representation is inherent in the nature of painting. Doubt is running rampant in our society built upon illusions, and it seems like no better time to be a representational painter questioning the integrity of representation.

Marcel Duchamp has taken up the credibility of representation as subject matter. In 1918, Duchamp bid adieu to canvas painting with his work Tu’m, in which the play of representational conventions results in an allegorical account of his views on painting.

3 From On Unstable Ground, the catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition Flatlands at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2016
Through a dialogue between abstract compositional elements and conventional methods of representation, *Tu’m* can be interpreted to reveal meanings and relationships between representation and reality. The color chips floating from the upper left to the middle of the canvas allude to both linear perspective and color (hue, saturation, value). On the right side are lines representing Duchamp’s *Three Standard Stoppages*, drawn using axonometric perspective. Hand painted shadows made from projections of a bicycle wheel, corkscrew and hat rack refer to indexical marks, alluding to photography as another form of representation. A bottlebrush protrudes out from the middle of the canvas, playfully acknowledging the difficulty of photographic documentation of an artwork. A pointing hand is painted in the middle of the composition, reminding the viewer that representation is always an act of pointing away, implying an absence of a thing. The painting trivializes methods of representation as mere conventions, demonstrating Duchamp’s skepticism towards the veracity of representation in what he called “retinal art.”
Rene Magritte is another artist whose work takes on problems of representation as subject matter. The semiotic character of Magritte’s oeuvre is known for playfully revealing relationships between the world and the modes of representation (signs and surfaces) we use to inhabit it. His painting, *La Trahison des Images*, famously reveals latent assumptions in image interpretation. The painting consists of an image of a pipe, set against a plain yellowish background. Under the pipe is the text “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*”, French for "This is not a pipe."

The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it’s just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture 'This is a pipe', I'd have been lying!\(^4\)

Magritte was clearly thinking of the distinction between the representational imagery and a real pipe, but the painting goes a bit deeper into the play between signs and signifiers. It is assumed from Magritte’s statement above that the “this” is referring to the image of the pipe above it. It makes equal sense to assume the word “this” could be referring to itself, asserting that the word or phrase itself is also not a pipe. Magritte traps the viewer within the closed circuit of references, which fold in on each other, to reveal that what we can know for certain is that nowhere is there a pipe!

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The paintings in my thesis installation *Morgan*, suggests a type of falseness or problems in representation today. The installation consists of 12 depictions of, ostensibly, the same figure, which shift slightly in appearance, altering any definable characteristics of the figure. The entirety of each painting, from the expression, age and gender of the figure to the colors used, become ambiguous and fluid. Through this representation of an ambiguous figure, these paintings acknowledge the problem in assuming a stable source as well as the contemporary image as a transmitter of reliable information.

In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates argues that everything in the world is mimesis, commonly translated as representation, copy and imitation, of an original form. Known as the Theory of Forms, this theory can be seen as a response to the changing of
appearances, and an epistemological question in regards to what is and what is seen. The pre-Socratic philosophers noted that appearances change, prompting the question of what the thing that changes “really” is. They concluded a distinction between an underlying and unchanging substance and the changing appearance of a thing. The relation between the appearance of a thing and the substance of a thing then comes into question. The Theory of Forms attempts to provide an answer to what a thing “really” is through establishing universal concepts, which correspond to the substance of a thing. This provides a basis for understanding the world through modes of categorization.

According to Plato, reality consists of two realms. First, there is the empirical world, which we all exist. A shared reality we access through our senses. Second, is the realm of the Forms, which is immaterial and atemporal. Forms seem to exist in another dimension and serve as ultimate reference points for all objects in the physical world. Magritte’s *The Two Mysteries* illustrates this concept. A framed image of a pipe with the text “this is not a pipe” sits on an easel as a larger, ethereal pipe hovers above.

![Rene Magritte, *The Two Mysteries* (1966)](image-url)
Plato’s view was that all of reality was representation, which accounted for the changing shapes of things, and that all of reality was ontologically inferior to the ideal Forms, or the true substance of things, which were unattainable to humans. In The Two Mysteries, Magritte depicts the framed image of the pipe, as Plato would think about reality, as a representation. Magritte depicts the framed pipe with more ontological dignity, questioning the validity of Plato’s view of the inferiority of the empirical world.

My painting, Plastic Eraser is a work that questions the ontological status of a thing in regards to its substance and its appearance, through the use of painting materials to create a painting that questions what constitutes it as the type of object it is. Made of acrylic gesso on foam core, the veneer of the painting materially matches the object it represents, in fact the painting functions as a plastic eraser, picking up and smearing graphite. The piece can hang on the wall of be displayed on a table. It changes roles, categories and functions. The malleability in modes of display and function destabilizes the ontology of the object and questions how it is defined.

Plastic Eraser, Acrylic and graphite on foam, 2015
ESSENTIALISM

Plato’s theory sets up a system of universals rooted in essentialist thought, which establishes an ideal above all else. Essentialist thought is a belief that things have a set of characteristics that make them what they are, or an essence, which is prior to existence. This essentialist thinking is engaged when one thing is evaluated to be “better” than another, for instance, when Plato asserts that a physical table is inferior to the Form of “tableness” and a painting of a table is even more inferior, being a representation of a representation.

My painting 100 is a contemporary response to residual essentialism still prevalent in image interpretation through social media. 100 is a depiction of American idealized masculinity, particularly strength, aggression and confidence. The figure is decorated by a network of veins, common in bodybuilders, which appear to sit on top of the figure’s body. The veins visually mimic the network which supports mediated public life, and a sense of suffocation but also decoration ubiquitous in public life. The 100 symbol is an allusion to social media messaging as well as caricature through the concept of the ideal. Caricature - from caricature, to load, as in loaded portrait, caricature seeks to discover a likeness through deformity, “it comes nearer to truth than does reality.” Caricatures parallel is in idealism; both are rooted in the idea of inner truth or essence. The caricatured figure, the 100 symbol and the image of landscape all point toward a Platonic conception of truth, beyond problems of representation.

5 Mike Kelley Notes on Caricature
As well as an image of the grotesque nature of a prescribed ideal, this painting depicts the claustrophobic space of an expanding social life. While the centered and confrontational positioning asserts dominance, the power dynamic is subverted through the open-mouthed expression, caught off guard, as an exposed object of the viewer’s contemplation. The colors in this composition clash and cram the shallow space within the canvas. The contrast between the postured pose of the figure and the dumbfounded expression represents the tension between the interior and exterior life of the contemporary subject.
In Book III of *The Republic*, using the alternative narration of first and third person accounts in Homer's poetry as an example, Plato defines mimesis as impersonation. Plato argues that impersonation leads to the individual taking on the characteristics of the role, fostering the behaviors of the impersonated. This argument establishes an interesting circuit between reality and representation, in which each has influence and effect on the other. The etymology of mimesis, found in Plato’s *Republic* connects pictorial representation to impersonation, affording a metaphorical relationship between the medium of painting and the subject matter of contemporary portrayals of the subject.
My *Sadboy* paintings raise the issue of public and private self in an expanding socially mediated world. They depict public figures that signifying contemporary characteristics of masculinity in the media. The comically tragic figures are represented as inward looking and contemplative. I was thinking of the relationship between contemporary masculine protagonists in television dramas, such as *Dawson’s Creek* and the dramatic depictions of the artist as tortured genius, such as the self-portraits of Van Gogh and Courbet. I’m interested in how the ways in which we define something is carried and disseminated through culture. The text on top of the image can be read to signify the interior space of the figure, pointing at distinctions between interior and exterior spaces, and the problems in representation these two spaces present.

Gustave Courbet, *El Desesperado* (1845)

**AUTHENTICITY**

Problems between representation and reality and public and private life are issues that arise when the lives of normal people become more like that of celebrities and everyday life becomes more like reality television. *Candid Camera* first appeared on television in 1948 and is considered a prototype for today’s reality show. The show
secretly films ordinary people in absurd and staged situations, such as a new father who is learning to change a diaper on a baby doll but grows increasingly frustrated by repeated squirts to the face. The situations escalate until the victim(s) inevitably lose their temper and the joke is revealed, with a cast member announcing, “Smile, you’re on Candid Camera!” This moment, commonly referred to as the “reveal,” is the punch line of the skit. It is the moment when the victims realize they have been watched, which throws them into self-awareness, which supposedly, alters the way they act.

The shows originally began as a G.I. radio show in 1947, in which the shows creator Alan Funct would interview military personnel about their experiences. Realizing his guests spoke more guarded and unnaturally when the microphone was on, he
began leaving the microphone on after the guests thought the interviews were finished. This developed into the long running television show that exploits the distinction between the public and the private self, turning the banality of normal conversation into spectacle and catering to the voyeuristic impulses in the American public.

The satirical Instagram account socalitybarbie uses the idealized and impossible subjectivity of Barbie to illuminate the artificial and idealized character of our social lives.

When public displays of the “private” lives of people begin to resemble images in fashion and travel catalogues, authenticity becomes a relevant topic. Derived from Greek authentikos ("principle," "genuine"), authenticity is associated with the concept of the original.² Authenticity is commonly understood as conforming to reality and

² http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic
therefore worthy of trust, reliance, or belief, and it’s questioning is an inherent problem in representation.

The paintings in my thesis installation *Morgan*, point towards an assumption of the possibility of authenticity in representation. The installation consists of 12 depictions of, ostensibly, the same figure, which shift slightly in appearance, altering any definable characteristics of the figure. The entirety of each painting, from the expression, age and gender of the figure to the colors used, become ambiguous and fluid. Through this representation of an ambiguous figure, these paintings acknowledge the problem in assuming a stable source material and the belief in an authentic source becomes problematic.

*Morgans (Installation view) – MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2016*
The portraits are all painted in the same, tightly rendered and artificial style. The faces are bright orange shells. The hair is painted as one large inflexible object placed on top of the head. There is a dissonance between the compositional elements within the picture. The painting style is artificial. The background and suit color are desaturated to a point of becoming nameless. The colors are as ambiguous as the figures expressions. These portraits feel like caricatures but the moment something appears definable it slips away, and any notion of truth or authenticity becomes irrelevant.

CONFRONTATION AND REMOVAL

In my work I try not to prescribe any beliefs through my work but rather pose questions or interpretations through reflecting what and how I see and presenting it from a removed position. This position motivates me to make work that is challenging. The Morgans have an aggressive quality. They are confrontational and challenging, which has ties to the concept of artifice. Painting that is challenging has a moral component in that it demands of the viewer to think for oneself, cultivating a disposition of a responsible member of society. Art should present questions that are unanswerable in any simple or definitive way.7

Roger Fry describes his view on the moral element of painting that relies on “that disinterested intensity of contemplation, which we have found to be the effect of cutting off the responsive action.” According to Fry, art must stir the emotions in a way that does not drive a physical effect in real life, but must only excite the imaginative life in order for a moral contemplation, detached from the physical response of the nervous

7 This position is heavily inspired by Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe’s Seriousness and Difficulty in Art and Criticism
system. This differs from Aristotelian theater in which the goal is to achieve an absorptive quality in which the audience can live out the drama of life through the characters in a cathartic experience. This technique and moral perspective is one I try to adopt in my paintings, and is akin to the work of German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht.

Brecht believed the Aristotelian view, that theater should provide the audience with a cathartic emotional experience, left viewers complacent. Instead he developed the concept of Epic Theater, which he hoped would invoke rational self-reflection. Using techniques that reveal the infrastructure of theater, he hoped to remind the viewer that reality, just like representations of reality, are constructed and thus changeable. This technique is a method in art known as breaking the fourth wall.

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Game of Knucklebones* (1734)
The early discussions of Duchamp’s *Tu’m* and Magritte’s *La Trahison des Images* are examples of breaking the fourth wall in painting. They can be framed in opposition to the idea of illusionistic painting as a window from the Renaissance to the type of 18th century French painting Diderot championed as containing a persuasive quality of absorption in which figures are depicted in activities of total absorption and thus the closed illusionistic system is enhanced and the artifice of the medium is reduced (see figure above – Jean-Baptiste Chardin). Diderot saw the ability for a viewer to become fully absorbed into a painting as a morally correct act, placing higher moral value on concentration and dignity over self-reflection.

The outward glance and smile with exposed teeth are depictions of the figure that point towards a self-conscious awareness of being looked at which breaks the illusionistic system, drawing attention towards the methods of representation, i.e. a photographic source. In a Brechtian manner, the outward, smiling glance accentuates the artificiality of the painting style and color choices away from an illusionistic and absorptive experience in the viewer, towards one of removal and reflection and a conscious awareness of the constructed nature of our contemporary social reality.
The surfaces of these paintings are smooth, which support the artifice of the illusion through Robert Smithson’s distinction between an expressionist painting and a mannerist picture. Comparing Rembrandt’s *The Artist Laughing* with Parmigiano’s *Virgin of the Long Neck*, Smithson describes the connection between the illusionistic quality of the image and the factual materiality of the paint. Rembrandt’s portraits are textured and lumpy, with attention to the sensuous quality of the paint. Smithson refers to Rembrandt’s humor as “rustic and down to earth” and the “expressive character leads directly to the artist's sense of individualism,” whereas Parmigianino’s characters are not physical manifestations but abstractions, which derive from the mind over sensations. The flat surface of the pictures reinforce the logic of the artifice, where the attention of the viewer is drawn away from the physical and away from the individual toward abstractions and systems of illusionary representation.

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8 Smithson, 64
This sense of individualism associated with the expressionist mark is antithetical to the subjects I depict. The figures in my paintings are non-individualistic, but rather animated concepts of subjects. My figurative works depict subjects either trapped or struggling to break out of the Platonic realm of the concept, which the very nature of representation implies. The humor I attempt to invoke is psychological and abstract, more akin to the mannerist picture, as opposed to a type of visceral humor associated with the factuality of personal expression.

\[\text{Morgan, Oil on canvas, 2016}\]

HUMOR

I employ humor in my paintings to play off of established tropes in representation, such as in the \textit{Sadboys}, and an uncanny quality that derives from a place of discomfort, such as in \textit{Morgan}. The type of humor in \textit{Screech} (below) has to do with the incongruity between the text and the image. The text is sourced from Kierkegaard and the image is sourced from \textit{Saved by the Bell}. The discrepancies between the two emphasize
similarities and differences regarding the dramatic nature of both sources, producing an amusing effect.

But where does this amusement get us? If the revelation of artifice is intended to bring about self-reflection, is ironic humor then a productive quality? David Foster Wallace has demonstrated the problematic nature of ironic distancing after its masterful incorporation into mainstream television:

“All U.S. irony is based on an implicit "I don't really mean what I say." So what does irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it's impossible to mean what you say? That maybe it's too bad it's impossible, but wake up and smell the coffee already?”

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The ironic humor in Sadboys fits Wallace’s description above. The paintings are representations of contemporary maleness, depicting male subjects as self-involved and superficial caricatures. The text and painting style are both ironic in the way that the true intentions are unclear. Are these bad paintings by a good painter or good paintings by a bad painter? Does this text come from a sincere place or is it mocking that place? The irony functioning in these paintings establishes them in an unclear position, resulting in an inconsequential and acquiescent critique.

There is a difference in the type of humor at work in the Morgan paintings. This humor is not derived from the deliberate absurdity in incongruous propositions, but rather is generated out of a sincere discomfort in ambiguity. With these paintings it becomes less clear what the position of the artist is and what kind of response the work is meant to evoke. The paint handling is awkward yet meticulous, in the sense that the cohesion and specificity in the painting style communicates sincerity and intent. The type of humor in the Morgan paintings is confrontational and generates from a place of
discomfort within the viewer, as opposed to the humor in the *Sadboy* paintings, in which the humor is derived from an intended joke that is shared between the artist and the viewer.

**CONCLUSION**

My work is concerned with the unreliable nature of representation and its role in contemporary society, particularly the image mediated realm of spectacle, i.e. mainstream and social media platforms. I take inspiration from artists such as Duchamp and Magritte, who explore the inherent qualities and conventions of representational painting in order to examine larger systems of how we operate within the mediated world. I strive for a moral position within my work that does not attempt to persuade viewers of my personal beliefs, but rather invites a space of personal reflection within the viewer. This position is supported by the aesthetic method of emphasizing the constructed nature of representation, which is employed through subject matter and the stylistic choices such as pictorial space, color, surface, etc. I make work that is
confrontational and challenging and offers its audience a sense of the intellectual and aesthetic rewards I gain through its making.
REFERENCES


