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Confrontation: Endeavors in Futility

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CONFRONTATION: ENDEAVORS IN FUTILITY

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

by

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Abstract

CONFRONTATION: ENDEAVORS IN FUTILITY

By Gabriel Lashley Balow, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Paul Thulin
Coordinator of Graduate and Visiting Artists Programs

Abstract

This paper is intended to compliment and describe the body of work that has been produced within the time I have been enrolled as a graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University’s Photography and Film department. The paper will include information on both my MFA candidacy presentation as well as a description of the evolution of my artistic endeavors. The main focus of this document is to discuss my formal examination of performance based video works pertaining to the absurd as
described by Camus, and later expressed by Samuel Beckett, also the role of the masculine body’s physicality within ritualized actions.
An Evolution of My Studies:

Investigating Masculinity in a Void

Initially I began making series of nude images of my body that focused mostly on concepts surrounding gravity and obesity that I titled “Impacted Void”. *Impacted Void* consists of five 30”x30” photographs depicting an overweight nude body contorted within the frame. The body appears before a black background with a strong white light cast on it. In form, these photographs undermine idealistic notions of ideal bodies and their social place within a society inundated with imagery of men with perfect six pack abs and women wearing size zero jeans. The images reveal a body appearing to be falling in a void, as if it had been cast down from high above, just about to impact the ground. The intention was to create a sense of anxiety and anticipation. The form that they took on as photographs falls short. The images appear to idealize the form, the body instead of confronting the viewer it pulls them in and instead of creating an air of anxiety the blackness of the void seemingly acts as a womb, a space of comfort. In addition, the images are uncomfortably derivative of the late photographer John Coplans. Coplans, who in his final years alive, produced a series of photographs titled “Self Portrait” in which he presents his nude body in front of a white backdrop. In the photographs his body appears worn, by time and self-inflicted abuse. These images also attempt
to challenge the viewer to confront their notions of the ideal body. By stripping his body of all trappings these images become both confrontational and confessional.

\[ \text{John Coplans from the series “Self Portrait”} \]

\[ \text{Gabriel Barlow from the series “Impacted Void”} \]

\textbf{Resonating Impact}

As a response to the conceptual failure of “\textit{Impacted Void}”, I then began to record the process by which I was making these images with a video camera. Videotaping the process of throwing myself onto the ground spoke more clearly to
the idea of weight and the effects of impact on the body. The outcome of this undertaking has become one of the cornerstones for my work.

The video/performance piece “Physical Tone Poem” that I produced at the end of the second semester is a three-channel performance video. In the first channel (moving from left to right) the viewer is presented with an image of a grey floor and an off white wall as the background. This image is disrupted by my nude body falling face first onto the floor and then pausing (for varying intervals), before lifting myself up off the ground.

In the second (middle) frame the viewer is confronted with a fairly typical portraiture setup. The frame consists of a stark white backdrop held up by opposing stands on either side of the paper. A simple table sits in front of the backdrop. The action within this frame consists of me slowly climbing onto the table’s surface, making my way across it, and jumping off (feet first) onto the backdrop. The impact shakes my body intensely. Interestingly, unlike a traditional portrait, where the frame is cropped into the edges of the backdrop exposing only the action, this framing exposes the boundaries dictated by the backdrop, the stage often excluded from the ideal, the setup. Leaving the sides exposed gives the audience a view of the act as it begins and ends outside of the traditional (pre-70’s photographic studio works) modernist frame. This allows for the questioning of the nature of framing an ideal body.
In the third frame the background is similar to the first except my body appears to fall limply on it’s side exposing a different view for the audience.

In “Physical Tone Poem, all three frames, are slowed down dramatically from real time so that not only the violent impact on the body and, the way it responds to this act are emphasized but also the sound which simultaneously can function as an explosion and a tone poem (operating in a mode similar to sound artist John Cage’s work). This directs the viewer’s eye to the action sequences and ear to the silences that exist in between each explosion. Like Sisyphus, in Greek mythology, this masculine body repeats seemingly meaningless but determined acts over and over, creating an atmosphere of futility and compulsion. The viewer, engaged by slowed movement and amplified sound, is hyper aware of the moments of rest and the cyclical nature of the action.

Gabriel Barlow “Physical Tone Poem”

Artist Jemima Stehli, used a similar aesthetic in her series “Strip”. She asked several writers, critics and art collectors to photograph her as she stripped for them. Within the image is a simple solid color background with the sides exposing the invited “guest” who is seated facing the artist and the camera. As she strips for them, the “guest” decides when to expose the film thus exposing themselves at the same time as she reveals
her body back to them. By revealing her body she is also providing a confrontational situation, forcing the guest as well as the viewer into a discourse about how they view the form in the frame. In many ways my work had taken on a new form and conceptual foundation, delving into notions about confrontation, motion, masculinity, momentum and physicality all at once.

Two other artists influential to the creation of “Physical Tone Poem” are performance artists Pope.L and Marina Abromovic. Both artists are heavily invested in the use of the body to express their underlying concepts. One piece, in particular, performed by Abromavic that motivated my works is “Rhythm 10”, described by the artist:

Preparation:

I lay a sheet of white paper on the floor. I lay twenty knives of different shapes and sizes on the floor. I place two cassette recorders with microphones on the floor.
Performance:

I switch on the first cassette recorder. I take the knife and plunge it, as fast as I can, into the flesh between the outstretched fingers of my left hand. After each cut, I change to a different knife. Once all the knives (all the rhythms) have been used, I rewind the tape. I listen to the recording of the first performance. I concentrate. I repeat the first part of the performance. I pick up the knives in the same sequence, adhere to the same rhythm and cut myself in the same places. In this performance, the mistakes of the past and those of the present are synchronous. I rewind the same tape and listen to the dual rhythm of the knives. I leave.

-Abromavic

Marina Abramovic “Rhythm 10”

This work is of particular interest in reference to “Physical Tone Poem” because of the implementation of ritual and physical endurance. Also, similar to my work, it emphasizes the emotive power of the body to confront and compel a response from the viewer that produces a dialogue about both the body of the artist and the ritualized action performed.
I Stumbled…

While I was rehearsing the “Physical Tone Poem” performance, in one early attempt, I used a different table than usual to jump off of. As I climbed onto the table and moved towards it’s edge the table began to teeter. I lost my balance, tried to brace myself against the studio wall, and eventually fell catching myself as I impacted the floor (this piece was later titled “I Stumbled”). This unscripted moment, basically a mistake, allowed me to understand the power of interrupting a presumed performance event. The “accident” undermining the intended narrative structure of the performance actually brought validity to the work and challenged the audience.

As performances are often rehearsed several times before they are viewed by the public, it is important that they appear seamless so that the concept is clearly conveyed. When an accident occurs within the performance the intended narrative is broken and the performer is exposed to unknown and improvisational acts. Often this sort of accident can create a moment of humor for the viewer and within that moment the viewer is confronted with what both makes them laugh (the object) and why they laugh (their motivation). In this instance I’ve provided the viewer with something that most would find uncomfortable (an overweight nude man) and placed them in awkward situation by losing control and falling.
Pope.L, has stated (also referencing an interview with Amiri Baraka) that: “the “darky” is perfectly poised to present black humor, and was, “at his most human excursion into the main-stream of American society,…a comic figure.” The “darker” or black man (for black women have historically been invisible), is the proto-type for the grotesquerie associated with “black” humor whose devices are that of tragic farce.” ”For what is more extreme and ludicrous than a human being driven to douse himself in liquor while sitting on the curb?”(Pope.L p.39). While Pope.L is speaking directly to the social plight of the African American male and it’s history of ridicule, I personally believe that this statement removed of it’s references to African American men can be replaced with “fat white man and still draw similar conclusions. In many comedic scenarios, it is the fat man who often plays opposite the “graceful and sophisticated ideal man” providing both a physical and often verbal comedic target.
Pope.L is influential in understanding and implementing another aspect found within my work which is the need to present myself in a position other than vertical, most often horizontally. With Pope.L’s “crawls” he places himself in a horizontal position, a position that is often considered submissive but in this case it acts to subversive and undermines that which is vertical. Andre Lepecki states that through Pope.L’s position on the ground “it is simply about understanding what happens once one gives up the privilege of the vertical and enters into a different relationship to effort and mobility” (exhausting dance). “Physical Tone Poem” presents myself in similarly exposed manner.

Lepecki’s understanding of the nature of presenting oneself in a horizontal position is derived mostly from critical theorist and performance artist Paul Carter’s statements where he endeavors to understand the politics of the ground as it relates to “the colonial experience”. He states that:

“Western philosophy has in this respect operated little differently from the tunnellers, the earth-movers and the bulldozers: its first priority has always been to clear the ground of accidental impediments to peg out its definitions and lemmata. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a philosophy, and more than a polis, founded on uneven ground, on ground that shifts or which already, by virtue of its natural obliquity, furnishes an infinity of positions, poses, points of rest to anyone prepared to traverse the ground in different directions.” -- (Carter, 1996)

Carter’s statement is focused to examine the source of Western/Colonial culture’s need to present itself in an upright or vertical position. From this position it views horizontality as a form of power presented by either the object or the performers
position and often in conjunction with one another. In addition the horizontal position presents the viewer with an expression of futility.

“Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. … Yes, yes, it’s the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it’s always the same thing. Yes, it’s like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don’t laugh any more.

-Samuel Beckett

In this statement Beckett presents us with a contemporary take on Camus’s notion of absurdity that permeates an individual’s life.

“Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of the habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering”

—Albert Camus

Directed Impact

After “I Stumbled” I chose to construct what I perceived as a minimal object, a tower built to be the exact height as myself but much thinner (titled, “Towers”) One of the primary problems presented within the work is need to use physicality to disrupt the scene.

Play write Richard Foreman writes that
...the way to confront the object is to allow it to have its life - let it grow its own shoots in directions that do not reinforce its being-in-life for use as a tool, but that suggests a compositional scheme not centered on useful human expectations. So, let the chair that is for sitting have a string run from it to an orange, because if chair was just “chair for sitting” we would not “confront” as we non-confront kitsch because we are too close to the chair, it’s meaning is too much OUR meaning; but now chair connected-to-orange is and “alien” chair that we must CONFRONT….

(Huxly, Witts p.195).

Now rather than tie an orange to my “minimalist sculpture” I decided to change it with my body. In the piece, the viewer is visually presented two painted drywall towers. They remain fixed in the moment by keeping the frame static for several seconds as the viewer begins to understand the towers and their formal relationship to the environment. In this stillness, he viewer begins to develop a quiet but definable relational moment with these balanced modernist forms. Occasionally, this moment is humorously interrupted with a sense of foreboding by a shadow falling upon the towers coupled with the sound of thunderous footsteps. In an instance, my body enters the scene unexpectedly and impacts the towers, flattening them. By suddenly impacting and flattening them, the disruption of the body alters the entire scene both formally and tonally in a single unexpected, humorous, “accidental” moment.
Gabriel Barlow “Towers”

Confrontation: Endeavors in Futility
In my thesis piece “Confrontation: Endeavors in Futility” the viewer is presented with the view of eight foot by six foot black frame on the grey concrete floor of an empty white room. Within the frame is a bright white surface being illuminated by a single bare bulb. The first evidence that this calm environment will be disrupted is when the viewer hears a dramatic grunt coming from off screen. I then move into the space (nude) carrying a five-gallon bucket filled with sand and commence to covering up the white space within the black frame in a slow and dramatic manner. The action is further dramatized by slowing the speed of the video. All-of-this dramatization is used to undermine the traditional masculine role, a role that often portrays the male in a physically dominant role. This action is repeated until the whiteness of the surface is completely covered by sand. I then begin to smooth the surface of the sand with a short 2x4. Once the surface is sufficiently level I stand at the end of the box, pause and throw myself into the box leaving an imprint of both my body and the impact created by my body. All of the materials used to create this piece are materials that you would find among working class job sites. These materials were also used in the construction of my own studio. The studio is traditionally a sanctuary, a place where the artist can construct and create virtually uninterrupted by the outside world. Within this space, the absurd and futile actions of the artist are confronted and expressed only by the artist. To expose the artist acting within the studio is to observe an endeavor in absurdity and brings a certain awareness of this futility to the viewer thus disrupting their active and unconscious participation in the absurd. In the gallery installation, a video of this performance is projected over a relic of the actions contained within the studio. By projecting this video over the relic it provides evidence of the action
for the viewer. On the opposing wall of the gallery another video is projected titled “Reducing the Studio”. The video shows a dark room with a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling directly behind the bulb is a large white column next to the column is a roller, paint bucket, and a pan for the paint. Entering the scene I pour the black paint into the pan and begin to paint the column frantically (once again using melodrama to develop the drama). As the paint begins to cover the whiteness of the column it causes the column to recede into the shadows. Once the column is completely covered I dramatically move off screen for a moment until I run back on screen throwing my body at the column knocking it over. “Reducing” acts in many similar ways as “Towers” does in that the impact provides a moment of lightness and humor within a violent act. All of these actions performed present the viewer with an overly melodramatic atmosphere. Like “Towers” melodrama is used to activate the humorous elements in this piece as it undermines the masculine element by mocking the physical presence of the performer. These actions also present the viewer with a sense of the absurd and futility in a mode similar to Sisyphus. In the gallery, this video piece also projects over a relic of the impacted columns.
Gabriel Barlow “Confrontation”
Gabriel Barlow “Reducing the Studio”


VITA

Gabriel Lashley Barlow was born on October 27, 1977, in Berea, Kentucky. He currently lives in Richmond, Virginia in the United States of America. He received his Bachelors of Arts from Virginia Intermont College in Photography, and Masters of Fine Arts From Virginia Commonwealth University in Photography and Film.