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LETS MAKE IT OUTBACK TONIGHT

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LETS MAKE IT OUTBACK TONITE

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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When I was younger, shortly after my father died, my mother bought me a t-shirt that I loved and wore till it was worn out. On the shirt there was an image of a man, strapped into an electric chair, holding pieces of bread in each hand. A sign above him read, “Making the best of a bad situation.” That statement became a mantra I held onto in the early years after my father’s death. It still guides my personal philosophy---humor is key to survival. Particularly a type of humor that celebrates the fact that “shit happens”, while highlighting and delighting in the irrational: who is the doomed man going to give the toast to once he is dead?
Introduction

Until a few years ago I would receive “news”-- mainly through mainstream television media and some local radio and newspapers-- without questioning what I was taking in. I thought the news was factual. With the increasing availability of news sources, mainly via the rise of the internet and its ability to stream radio and video, I have become much more aware of the varied nature of the news we receive. It has also become much clearer to me the way news and media are used to push or pull opinions, to raise fear levels, and to draw attention away from more notable problems. A friend of mine often said that there are three sides to every story: what you experienced; what the others experienced; and the truth of the moment.

Katie Couric---on her first day as the first female anchor woman on network evening news---devoted as much air time to Vanity Fair landing the first pictures of baby Suri Cruise as she did to the War in Iraq. Do we even want to receive the real anymore or are we content to believe/accept what we are told? Reality is now merely a genre that one can choose to acknowledge or leave behind. We seem to love producing a preferred version of it, in striking contrast to hard truths we’d rather ignore.
Previously

I made artwork about Michael Jackson when I was an undergrad printmaker. At the time I thought it really was about Michael Jackson, but later I realized it was more about the society-made myth of “Michael Jackson.” The creator(s) and perpetuators of this myth interested me more than the creation. By the time Michael Jackson reached his thirties he had been a household name for fifteen years or more. His status was almost instinctual to millions of people. On television, in the press, and on the radio we saw, read, heard, and even celebrated Michael Jackson. We enjoyed the media circus that his life became because we found value in watching someone else achieve the fame that many of us dream about. We also found a similar excitement in watching all that we had seen built up around Michael Jackson come crashing down.

The proverbial “watching a train wreck” is as American as apple pie. This excitement at watching the plans and dreams of other people crumble can be seen in various places. From rather innocuous forms, such as America’s Funniest Home Videos, to the very real intrusive and voyeuristic tendencies of the paparazzi, the “train wrecks” are seen and enjoyed everywhere.

Where then does this voyeuristic tendency lead us as a culture, and what does that path say about how we choose to live our lives? I have always made art that deals, at the start, with these thoughts and ideas. I believe that it is the role of the artist to share what we know, feel, see, hear, and think---to look at the world we live in and to share
those observations in a manner, which helps others see from a fresh perspective. Not to indulge in didactics, but to present alternative views.

I still find that the things that elicit a response from me the most come from this area of life; the “news” sharing and media-linked world where everyone is a reporter, for better or for worse, and information flows freely. It has irreversibly changed the way I operate.
**Making the best of a bad situation**

In an artist statement earlier this year I talked about being an “ugly American”. I read celebrity blogs that highlight the nipple slips of panty-less “It Girls.” I play a video game called Conflict Global Terror. Yet, while I am entertained by those things, I realize their ability to deaden my sense of the grotesqueness that they perpetuate. Then the question I have for myself is: How can I combat and reconcile those contradictory feelings?

“The Grand Manner consists in four things: the matter, that is the subject, the conceit, the composition, and the style. The first thing that is required, as the foundation of everything else, is that the matter and the subject should be something lofty, such as battles, heroic actions…” (Poussin quoted in Blunt)

When I was younger, shortly after my father died, my mother bought me a t-shirt that I loved and wore till it was worn out. On the shirt there was an image of a man, strapped into an electric chair, holding pieces of bread in each hand. A sign above him read, “Making the best of a bad situation.” That statement became a mantra I held onto in the early years after my father’s death. It still guides my personal philosophy—humor is key to survival. Particularly a type of humor that celebrates the fact that “shit
happens”, while highlighting and delighting in the irrational: who is the doomed man going to give the toast to once he is dead?
Improvisational Materiality

An essential component of my materials are the ability to quickly manipulate them. My thoughts change and shift as my consumption of media continues and the ideas grow. The easy use of my materials allows me the freedom to respond rapidly to situations and thoughts that arise. In the instance of the Stingray Death Mask (a piece I made in response to learning of attacks on stingrays in retaliation for the death of the Crocodile Hunter, who was killed by a stingray,) I was able to make that piece within a day of hearing of the attacks, and within a week of Steve Irwin’s death. The piece becomes the art equivalent of a Dateline 20/20 special about the tragedy, done just days later while feelings and emotions are still raw. I enjoy the way that type of quick production functions to heighten the sensationalism of the source, giving it weight as something immortalized in art rather instantly.

There is a real economy to my making that I enjoy, with similarities to sign paintings (particularly food paintings) and stage props and sets. There exists in this economy of representation an understanding that if the facsimile version is recognized, the real version will be. It is in this type of representation, the economy of creative action, where I find the most creative freedom and success.
Political Aspirations

I watch the news very regularly and I noticed how the backdrops look fake. I have seen wallpaper printed with tomey looking volumes and dark wood shelves, and have noticed printed images of city skylines, mostly at night. One of the purely visual recognitions of all things governmental is the royal blue floor to ceiling curtains with the oval pendant that says White House, Department of Defense, State Department, Pentagon, etc…. It is a site that is very familiar, and yet it feels very artificial. I realized that anyone with some blue fabric or even a printed blue fabric background and their own oval shaped seal, flags and pedestal could replicate a reasonable facsimile of a Presidential news conference. The type of illusionistic integrity conveyed by those elements interested me as well. These press conferences are essentially branded, and we expect and receive the same product time and time again. I remember hearing some Bush spokesperson reiterating the phrase “stay the course.” That blue backdrop became the stay the course logo at a time when many didn’t want to stay the course. Those press conferences became even more theatrical when one considered what they heard to be lies. I wanted to create my own press conference site and backdrop, but I wanted mine to be overtly a fake, obviously theatric. So I made some curtains and a pedestal. The pedestal is made of missiles, a reference to the escalation of rhetoric and threats from North Korea at the time, regarding their nuclear ambitions. The steam and exhaust from the launching missiles also acts as clouds which allude to the feeling of ethical
superiority and aloofness that felt dominate at the time. Behind the pedestal stands a bloody stump dressed in camouflage. The bloody stump is a reference to one of the main political talking points of the last 4 years, the war in Iraq. Everyday I see images of puddles of blood in the street, dead or dying Iraqi civilians and wounded and/or dead American soldiers, it is unending; unending that is until the commercial breaks.

Commercials during broadcast news show a completely different world--entirely removed from the wars and poverty and strife: Commercials for $6 one-pound cheeseburgers, advertisements for big SUVs, etc. In response I made the pizza paintings. Our obsession with food seems just as American as our government. I wanted to make pizza paintings with all types of toppings to have next to my press conference, as a way of addressing one other element of what it is to be American in
2007. Circular paintings have always interested me, and so has signage, particularly the food signage of multi-lingual communities, which is usually painted on the side of the restaurants or the service trucks that serve them, a visual menu of sorts. The mixing of circular paintings and hand painted food signage felt right in step with the kind of co-optive Americanism I was looking for. The largest of the three pizza paintings has smoked turkey legs, whole gourmet chicken sausages (which have lately become quite a staple in supermarkets of the health conscious) and blueberries (since everyone is so crazy about anti-oxidants.)

Then I turned abruptly back to more news and more explosions; images of them and their destruction had become commonplace in my regular viewing. I was familiar with Liechtenstein’s explosions and war cartoons of dogfights and trench warfare. I was looking for a graphic way of replicating the visuals of an explosion with the same construction from previous projects, which had a homemade quality. I wanted more of a stand in for an explosion than a real one. Could I create a painted explosion that was as seemingly real as the explosions I saw on television— one that elicited the same thoughts of death and destruction of our soldiers and Iraqis, but one that would still be palatable enough to look at during dinner? Could this painted explosion in some ways be entertaining while still reminding you of the war in Iraq?
I wanted to build a monument, a freestanding memorial. The idea of replacing the WTC towers with another tall building and memorial had been proposed and approved. The new tower was to be called the “Freedom Tower.” This “Freedom Tower” got me thinking about what freedoms in fact would be memorialized. What are our freedoms and where are they manifest, in what actions and ways? Maybe even more specifically, how do those who govern us want us to perceive our freedom?

I was aware that there had been foiled terror plots against other symbolic buildings in the US. In LA I lived with a view of the downtown skyline that included one of the spared buildings, the US Bank Tower. Through news channels and other media I was led to believe that those buildings now stood as monuments to our superior society; as reminders that while the terrorists held them as targets we should hold them in our thoughts and hearts as symbols of perseverance. So I made cut outs of the US Bank Tower and the Sears Tower, the other spared building, to use as construction elements in my own Freedom Tower. The third side of my tower is Lindsay Lohan’s hand raised in a clenched fist. I thought it appropriate to put her hand in the freedom fist position (think Black Power salute) because I thought she symbolized and represented a pervasive idea of freedom in this country---fame. Her “freedom,” (i.e. having tons of money), allows her a lavish lifestyle and to hold sway with a captivated public. I finally understood that those freedoms, were the same freedoms that the Bush administration was claiming were under attack—the freedom and permission to live a selfish lifestyle. The terrorists, were challenging our right to live an arrogant life, ignorant of its effects on the rest of the world. We were championing this arrogance. So
I made a monument to arrogance-- a monument constructed of centers of capitalism and a symbol of spoon-fed freedom.

The way my freedom tower is constructed is meant to highlight its structural shortcomings. It’s a hollow building with no real structure, it presents a solid front with multiple looks, but there is nothing really behind it or in its core. At the same time its only structural support comes from the pieces themselves. One part of the tower is reliant on the other two parts to stay up and so on-- structural checks and balances.

The IED (Improvised Explosive Device) was something that I found in the act of making. The freedom tower had a gestation time, and a planning period. The IED was a result of materials being in the studio long enough for me to get a sense of how to interact with them in a way that produced something new. I initially bought a garbage can to use in a different piece, but the can sat around for a while. I was really into the can’s sheen. So bright and fresh, this funny object we put trash into, the quintessential metal trashcan. Having wanted to alter the perfection I stepped on the can while it was lying on its side and instantly started to see the IED, the explosion and the smoke. The lips were added later to heighten the sense of irrationality.
Hollywood Dreams

Returning to my interest with our collective fascination with celebrity culture, I made the Stingray Death Mask figure. Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter, was killed while filming a segment on stingrays. As he swam above one of these creatures it thrust its stinger into Irwin’s heart, killing him almost instantly. Shortly after his death, authorities in Australia were finding dead stingrays on the beaches with their tails, the location of their stingers, cut off. Revenge attacks-- on an aquatic species in the name of a beloved television personality, it amounted to hate crimes. So I made a painting of stingray with its tail cut off. At the same time I was looking at a lot of celebrity gossip magazines and noticed that many celebrities seemed to be going for big pouty lips, Angelia Jolie style. Everyone was getting the injections that made their lips look over inflated as if they had been stung by bees. These celebrity women had fallen victim to the craze that they themselves had created. So I made a huge pair of lips.

I wanted to make a t-shirt that dealt with the rising tide of cyber life. Thinking of heavy metal and gothic band t-shirts worn by the likes of Beavis and Butthead, I chose a black t-shirt. To it I taped a piece of paper that read, “realspace is better.” This comes from being reluctant to join online networking sites like Myspace or Facebook, partially out of feeling like I have missed that boat, but also more importantly because I lament the loss of communicating through letters and on the telephone, both more based in the physical than in the electronic. I realize that the idea of more physically based
communication is rapidly losing sway so I chose to put it on the black t-shirt as a way of implicating the marginality of the idea it espouses.

Looking at some of these elements together (the stingray, lips and t-shirt) I started to envision a figure that could be composed of these elements. I gave it a non-descript torso/body, which I spray-painted winter-night camouflage. I hung the stingray near the top of the torso as a mask, to which I attached the remaining pizza paintings as eyes. The lips were placed below the mask and then the t-shirt below that. Heads of Jessica Simpson, Brad Pitt, and Khalid Sheik Mohammed are littered around the base of the figure like crumbs or leftovers of a conquest. I considered the figure an “alpha consumer,” the perfect consumer, someone who consumes rather blindly.
Keep it Simple, Stupid

“one might reasonably propose that the thrill provided by the work is, quite often if not always, a thrill provided by one’s sense of the work as something which is at once convincing and unreasonable.”- Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe from the essay “Seriousness and Difficulty in Contemporary Art and Criticism.”

At the start of this semester a thought began to make itself clear to me: there was a need to balance out all of the previously made objects and pieces. The work felt dark and pessimistic, and I wanted to round out that pessimism by introducing a foil to those inferences. I set about to make a big slice of Swiss cheese. The impetus originally arose from plans I had to make a platform bed as a facsimile of an open face sandwich. I wanted the bed as a place of soft refuge from the harder edged, both literally and figuratively, pieces. I wanted the cheese to act as a headboard and for the platform part of the bed, I wanted to replicate a processed ham slice. The cheese is made of cut and carved MDF and much larger than your typical deli slice. While the bed had been initially thought of as something soft to add to all of the hard-edged things already created, the cheese lightened the mood all on its own, and so for now the bed idea is at rest.

Besides lightening the mood, the cheese does much more. It was an important step in my work towards a visual simplification. I had finally made something that on its own, without altering stood its ground, and was relatively simple and minimal. The
slice is on a slight slant, which is emphasized when leaned up against a wall. It’s weight and size, suggest and reference the prop pieces of Richard Serra and the works of John McCracken. It is a minimalist sculpture with holes in it. In being what it is, a big slice of cheese and minimal sculpture-- it acted as a foil to the visual frenetic energy created by the earlier more scattered pieces. The balance I was looking for had started weigh itself out.

I made a good luck charm for myself for my 30th birthday. I wanted something new for a new decade, a commemorative object. A symbol, a record of where I had been and where I was going, and a specific reminder of where I am presently. The trash can lid was modeled after one I had seen recently on television. A clairvoyant used it as
a palette, which he would paint from during psychic spells. Well, I wanted one. As a palette it suggests the freedom to create your own situation, your own images of the future. It also references the legions of painters before me and their use of trash can lids as palettes and the basis of their creations, a coat of arms so to speak. It felt perfect for my new decade. The package/gift box portion itself was made shiny but also has scuffs and is marred, not perfect, as in sterile, but somewhat perfect as in flawed but still beautiful. I like the way the lid’s placement acts as a bow to the painted ribbon. Its shine implied the new to me, new everything, new opportunities new challenges. The lid also became a shield, a reference to childhood games and early Guston paintings. I enjoy the idea that this piece would shield and protect me in this new decade of my life.
Shininess was really starting to get a hold of me. I think of chrome as a particularly American obsession going back to cars of the 50s and 60s. I was also starting to realize my attraction to reflection, but particularly a hazy or distorted reflection. The unfulfilled vanity of a hazy reflection was interesting to me because of the similarities to the idea of the unfulfilled and vicarious life lived through celebrities and the desires created through our engagement with that unattainable lifestyle. So I made my first mirror. It was an imitation vanity mirror, circular in shape and about the size of a typical vanity mirror. I was thinking about how people put pictures of loved ones around mirrors. I liked the connection between pasting photos to mirrors and networking sites on the Internet where one can post pictures of their friends and themselves. Vanity mirrors were the Myspace before myspace.com. They acted as a way to remind yourself who you were and what you did and who your friends are.
An aspect of the small rectangular mirrors was they were abstractions among many non-abstract references to real objects places and people. You understand them to be mirrors but they fail to function as true mirrors. They do not show you the true and real reflection of their position, but instead offer a hazy, unfocused, metallic reflection.
of their surrounding environment. They also act as abstract minimalist paintings. The lines in the mirror paintings-- often there are no more than three lines at most-- refer to streaks of light reflecting in the “mirror.” The lines are a way to break up the pictorial space of the abstracted mirror, but the lines also break up the hazy reflection of the chrome painted surfaces. This breaking up of the reflection adds a new layer of obfuscation. The lines are also used to imply what is being reflected, this is done through the use of certain colors and patterns. For instance in some mirrors the “reflection” lines are camouflaged, implying a reflection of our military’s current situation.

Smoke-and-mirror, self-validating and self-inflating tactics common in the media world bring the question of illusion to mind everyday. Only upon further investigation does one realize what information really exists and how it operates. Much like stage props and sets, where the audience sees the trees and the houses, while the actors see the back side, the real side, in the sense that it reveals the structure of the illusion. My allusion to the idea of “smoke and mirrors” is intentional. Smoke and mirrors obfuscate the truth but allow you to see what it is you want to see.

After having a number of discussions with various people I began to notice reoccurring characters in my work, specifically mouths and mirrored or reflective surfaces. They were developing a language that I was beginning to fully see. I wanted to push the works’ limits further, to expand the work’s language and add more characters.
It was around this time I started working on the double-sided mirror fragment. There are a few concepts with this piece which felt like steps forward to me. For one, you can never have the full experience of the double sided mirror fragment from one vantage point, you need to move around it to see all its parts and take it all in. Another aspect of this work I like is it’s physical imposition into the space it occupies. It doesn’t just simply lean against the wall or passively hang, but actively juts out into the viewers space and defines that space on its own.

I carried this idea, of defining the viewers’ space, over into a couple of my next pieces. I had been working on a series of doorways, to alternate spaces or places, essentially doorways to anything different. I made one doorway that was constructed by making an archway from a stretched and back painted shower curtain. I hung this stretched and back painted shower curtain on a wall. Inside the arched doorway of the shower curtain is a painting of a frightened monkey enclosed between a set of teeth. Jutting out from this painting is a billowy column of smoke, which extends toward the viewer and away from the wall about three feet. It acts in a similar manner as the mirror shard mouth fragment. It imposes itself on the space and with its outward thrust it also implies something leaping out at you through the archway of the shower curtain. Because of the material I used, this billowy column, that juts out, has a slight sag. The sag isn’t bad enough for me to replace it with something sturdier, but it adds a pathetic quality to the work that I enjoy.
Another place the idea of jutting out and imposing or asserting itself in the viewer’s space can be seen is in my angry man in a ski mask. With it’s foam core cloud plaque, this piece breaks through the wall instead of just being anchored to it. Like the big double-sided mirror, you cannot get the full experience of the angry man at once. It also toys with the flip between abstraction and representation, with one side looks
simply like a black organic shape emerging from a puff of clouds, the other reveals the angry face concealed behind the ski mask’s openings.

One of the most recent things I made was thought up while watching coverage of the already existing 2008 Presidential race. The media was already picking the contenders words apart and here we are more than 19 months away! You will always upset someone with your opinion. Someone will always find fault with your plans. It is a precarious situation, especially when campaigning in the every man for himself/herself environment of the pre-primary and primary season. Riffing off of the mirrors that I had been making lately I decided to make a mirrored soapbox for the Presidential candidates to stump from. The idea was that this fragile unlikely stump spot would reflect those who came to hear; theoretically it would help the candidate connect with his/her audience through the cheap illusion of having the ability to see themselves supporting the orator. In effect making said presidential candidate appear the most democratic of all candidates.

I feel like I have just started to make the work I knew I was capable of making. As I continue forward with these ideas that have been building, I find that the work continues to simplify itself aesthetically. I am aware of my attempts to give the viewer less than I have previously tried to give. Making an environment in which these pieces can reflect play and bounce off of each other, and how to go about making that space, have become key concerns of mine. Previously I had been of the mindset that more is better for these created environments, but overtime as the work progresses, I am starting to see that sparser installations might work better. With fewer pieces you are forced to
find the connections between the works, and then the oddness of the individual pieces isn’t over whelmed by the whole.

VITA

Mike Erickson was born November 13th, 1976 in Saint Louis, Missouri. He lived in St. Louis with his family until he started college in 1995 at the Kansas City Art Institute. He finished there, with a BFA in Printmaking in 1999. He stayed in Kansas City for the next few years working as a picture framer and gallery assistant, while continuing to make and show art work in local galleries. In 2004, Mike moved to Los Angeles, California, where for a year he lived, played and worked. Working as a printmaker at Gemini GEL he had the opportunity to work with and for artists such as Elizabeth Murray, John Chamberlain, John Baldessari and others. He left LA for Graduate School in Richmond, Virginia in 2005. Shortly after grad school Mike will move to Brooklyn, NY to live with his girlfriend and work on his art.