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Beating Back Babylon

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Beating Back Babylon

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

My processes and techniques are driven by the need to explore and to understand my own hesitations and convictions about our world. Initially, I began addressing these needs in my artwork using acrylic paint and sandpaper. This led me to investigate a variety of media including ink, transfers, and oil-based paints, as well as different solvents, cleaners, and varnishes, all to create or remove layers. Through this variety of media, I have come to discover that what matters most to me is the physical process of art-making. Each decision I make is done with regard to the additive elements of the media and what may be revealed through the subtractive processes later.

Through my artwork, I continue to explore what I can only describe as the façades of the world as I see it. My work is often driven by cynicism and derision, and the media and processes I work with allow me to investigate and understand those aspects of our culture which I perceive with suspicion.
Beating Back Babylon

Introduction

Midway through my freshman year of an engineering curriculum in college, I realized that the success I was having in my elective drawing class was due in large part to my overall enjoyment at being immersed in art, if only for six hours each week. By the end of that first year I had switched from engineering to art education, and quickly found uses for my skill set and interests.

After completion of a teaching certification program I was hired to teach high school art in Stafford, Virginia. I suffered through a lot of challenges at first as I failed to understand that the motivations for taking a high school art class are entirely different than the motivations for enrolling in an art curriculum in college. However, over the course of my first few years I came to enjoy more and more my interactions with students.

However, what still troubles me about the education profession is the degree to which expectations and standards are lowered, both by parents and students as well as the educational system itself. The very ideas of complacency and conformity that are perpetuated in public schools run contrary not only to the history of our once dynamic culture, but to many of the themes found when studying the production and function of art around the world. We study artists and their works because they are exemplary in one way or another. An artwork or its creator may have changed the way in which we view the world, or simply the way in which we use a media. In a profession where there is special emphasis on maintaining the status quo, the pursuit of understanding in art seems to be little more than a formality.
I had been teaching only five years when I realized that what really drove me to create was an intense interest in the dichotomy between the honest, forthright subject matter that I taught and the illusory, pretentious context in which I taught it. My own career and sense of self quickly became the subject of my derision. Fortunately, my enrollment in Virginia Commonwealth University’s Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) program has given me the perfect opportunity to explore, understand, and create as I continue to struggle to find my place in two seemingly different worlds.

**Influences**

Before I graduated from college Francisco Goya’s (1746-1828) work had caught my attention. His images were always forthright and he spared no subject, royal or plebeian, from his keen and unrelenting observation. I remember being first exposed to his painting *Saturn Devouring His Children* (1820-23), a violent and horrific image even by today’s standards. It struck me as utterly out of place for the time and location in which Goya worked. I quickly came to identify with his aggressive but calculated approach to both life and art. His muddy palettes and reliance on energetic shapes of light and dark as opposed to heavy contours instilled in me an appreciation for realism of life both as we see it and as we live it. Additionally, the investigation of his own life and times has guided me to an understanding of what it means to be a principled person, confident in my own quest for understanding through my artwork.

In addition to Goya, I also had the opportunity to study the early Christian and medieval periods of art history. It was here that I was introduced to religious iconography. I quickly came to realize the genius of using bold, simple shapes to draw attention to an artwork that was created
primarily to relay information and attract people to the church. Additionally, I noticed that the use of a limited color palette and bold shapes, used in earlier art, was echoed and still highly effective in the propaganda art of the twentieth-century. Through these influences, I have come to identify with the use of more generalized shapes, color, and form, which help to quickly garner attention and express an idea. The implementation of efficient form and clear, concise content is something I seek for my own work.

Media

When I first began the MIS-IAR program, I was content to “play by the rules” and I rarely sought the integration of outside media or even ideas from other disciplines. I was primarily concerned with learning a new technique or process, which often resulted in thorough but boring work. I began my evolution of process through my exploration of ceramic surfaces. While I have never desired to be a ceramicist, the opportunity to focus on the surface of ceramic pieces was intriguing. Without the pressure of having to make functional ceramic pieces, I was able to concentrate on creating varied surfaces using different combinations of glazes, slips, and chemical add-ins, such as lithium, to alter the final appearance of a color or texture. Through my work with ceramic surfaces and their treatments, I discovered that process and exploration of media were both very important to me.

Soon thereafter, I began to experiment with various transfer techniques. The wide variety of transfer processes and techniques were overwhelming at first, but I quickly gained an affinity for the potential to first layer and then reveal semi-transparent images. Using various transfer processes, I found I was able to layer, mask, and even alter the color of printed images from any
source. Specifically, I enjoyed using packing tape transfers, in which an image is stuck to a piece of clear packing tape and then soaked in water in order to remove the paper backing. The resulting image is a semitransparent version of the original. The processes I was discovering were akin to a manual version of what image altering computer programs can do, in which each alteration is made according to a specific layer and with respect to how the finished product will be viewed.

Eventually, some transfer techniques began to seep into my paintings as I attempted, for one of the first times, to merge several media into one finished image. My first few attempts with multiple media were visibly forced, but my willingness to experiment was growing greater and I was able to see more clearly the potential in working with mixed media.

Subject Matter

As I worked on diversifying my repertoire of media, I was also striving to find a subject matter that was uniquely mine. For a while, I worked exclusively with human skulls because they were simple and recognizable. Those two characteristics alone allowed me to concern myself more with the media and processes. At the time, I was reading books that offered viewpoints on the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, U.S. foreign policy, and any number of domestic issues that millions of Americans are affected by every day. Naturally, images related to these themes began to appear in my work, starting with my manipulation of the well-known World War II poster featuring a stern Uncle Sam imploring you, the viewer, to join his military ranks. In my piece, *Uncle Hero and His Fine Harangue* (Appendix, 1), I reduced the figure of Uncle Sam to a single color, and edited the text to reflect a more succinct and contemporary view
of war. This early work prompted me to investigate the juxtaposition of pre-existing text and imagery more frequently. For example, in a piece titled *Nearest Recruiting Station* (Appendix, 2), I appropriated the last line of text from the iconic Uncle Sam poster, which reads “Nearest Recruiting Station”. Using acrylic gel, I transferred each word of a three-word phrase onto individual strips of raw canvas which I then placed below a black and white image of human teeth that had been transferred onto a piece of cardboard. The image and text are centered on a mottled gray ground. I painted the area surrounding the text on canvas with a fleshy pink color. I chose this color to use with the teeth, instead of the traditional patriotic reds and blues of the Uncle Sam poster, to conjure thoughts of open wounds, decay, and ultimately death.

These two works, more than any others, seem important to the development of my work. First, by using familiar images and recognizable text I was able to focus on the technical processes and the formal aspects of composition and content. As I became more and more comfortable working with acrylic gel on glass and the various transfer processes, I was able to produce larger, more complex works. Additionally, these works expressed my true sentiments regarding the travesties of war. In many ways, the pieces done with skulls were vague in their content and, to a degree, allowed me to avoid dealing with expressive elements in my work. After *Nearest Recruiting Station* and *Uncle Hero*, I felt more emotionally liberated and therefore able to pursue whatever subject matter and content I wanted without hesitancy.

**Artworks and Processes**

Initially, I focused on skulls because of their simplicity and the fact that as an object they were innately loaded with historical and cultural meanings. In the acrylic painting *Stars In*
Their Eyes (Appendix, 3), a line of skulls appears to advance toward the viewer, each one is illuminated by an atmospheric spotlight from above. In building this image, the images of skulls were first transferred onto the surface of a gessoed medium density fiberboard (MDF) panel. They were later painted over as I unified the foreground and background. After I painted the areas of light that descend from above, I heightened the contrast within the skulls to increase the perception of illumination, and to reinforce the idea that the mass above each skull was somehow responsible for its subsequent radiance. I wanted the skulls, a remnant of life and vessel for our minds, to be seen as being acted upon by a separate entity that is completely outside of their control. In other words, I wanted to portray them as vulnerable and open to external influences.

In another piece, titled The Voyeur (Appendix, 4), I used only a sponge to wipe acrylic paint onto the canvas and then made slashing marks with the side of the sponge to create surface texture. The composition, an image of a skull and its reflection, was simplified by my use of a reduced palette. Shades and tints of these limited colors, as well as a blue-gray hue, were added for accents on the surface. In this piece, I focused on composition and the balance of positive and negative space to create contrast and a sense of movement through repeated colors, shapes, and mark. The formal approach to this piece allowed me to further exploit subject and surface in support of content, a tactic I was able to emphasize in future works as well.

As a result of my acrylic painting and the resulting need to clean my glass palette, I discovered that dried layers of gel medium and paint could be peeled from glass surfaces in plastic, film-like sheets. It was this discovery that led to my ongoing series of what I call “acrylic skins”. This painting process began with three to five coats of transparent acrylic gel medium on a sheet of glass. Each layer was given time to dry completely before the next was
applied. These layers of medium, when dry, became the substrate for the painting, with the intent that the layer or medium closest to the glass would be the front of the finished image. The entire time an image is being built, the thick layer of clear gel medium remains on the glass. Therefore, each work is built from the back as opposed to traditional paintings which are worked up until the finished image is on top of any previous painted layers. However, by keeping the image mounted to the clear glass I am able to view it from both sides as I work.

An image can be created in several different ways. Sometimes, I painted directly onto the gel. Other times, I cut shapes from the medium and then inlaid these cut-out negative spaces with paint, transfers, or fabric. When the image on the glass surface is complete, I coated it with several more layers of clear gel medium. I did this to ensure that the final work will be thick enough to peel from the glass without tearing. Then, the entire piece is peeled from the glass and mounted onto a wood-framed porch screen using a two-part epoxy resin. By mounting on a screen the viewer is able to view both front and back. The mesh of the screen itself does not interfere with the image, and has a negligible impact on the viewer’s ability to see the environment surrounding the piece.

The first painting that I completed in this style, *Afterimage* (Appendix, 5), shows two high-contrast images. One side is the positive and the other a negative of the Virgin Mary, which was inspired by Michelangelo’s sculpture, *Pieta* (c. 1498). First, the entire left side of the piece was painted white, while the right side remained as clear layers of gel medium. Then, the positive areas on the left were created by cutting shapes out from the layer of white paint. These cut out white shapes were then re-attached to the clear right side, creating a negative of the image on the right. Evidence of the removal and inlaying of color in these shapes can be seen in the
reverse view of *Afterimage* (Appendix, 6).

Other features of the image include the stylized starburst of lines emanating from the top right side of both images. These lines were appropriated from a portrayal of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe commonly seen in Mexican *retablos*, or religious icons. Next, I cut out a column of nine small rectangular sections from the left side of the image and transferred in their places sections of a newsprint photo of the American flag. Once the transfers had dried, I painted over the backs of them with metallic gold. The gold shows through the image to the front in the more transparent parts of the transfers. I included these rectangular sections of the flag on the positive image because they strip the icon of some of its religious power. Instead, the image of the Virgin is recreated as more of a pop culture icon ready for any number of uses except that of its original intent.

In another acrylic skin titled *Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!* (Appendix, 7), I again borrowed an image from art history, Auguste Rodin’s *Burghers of Calais* (1884-89). My title is a common distress call among seafaring vessels and planes, repeated three times to avoid any confusion of the words being spoken. It originates from the French phrase *venez m’aider*, which means “Come help me” and is used only in cases of imminent danger. I chose the text, which can be seen more clearly in the close-up image (Appendix, 8) because through its repetition I was able to establish a sense of alarm or urgency. However, in my composition and the choice of text I do not specify any individual event. Over the text, I drew the contours of a man whose hands cover his head as he looks downward. To emphasize the form more clearly and to enhance the downward glance, I added large purposely place shapes and drips of white paint. Lastly, I toned the entire image with a very subtle brownish-gray wash to decrease its clarity. The decrease in
clarity affected the viewer’s ability to clearly distinguish the image’s background which, in turn, placed the entire piece in a very ambiguous space.

All of the line work, the text, and the white shapes were drawn onto the back of the image. Unlike *Afterimage*, this piece contains no inlaid shapes of color, all marks exist on the same layer. The remaining areas that show as brownish-gray in the photo are semi-transparent. Therefore, the environment the work is presented in becomes visible through the work itself. For example, a viewer on one side could witness a viewer’s reaction to the piece from the other side, or simply see the surrounding space behind the painting.

**Mixed Media Processes**

At the same time I was exploring the techniques and processes of acrylic painting, I was also investigating the possibilities of combining both printmaking and transfer techniques. The majority of my early work in this process emphasized the use of monoprint techniques and packing tape transfers. However, in lieu of packing tape I began to use clear contact paper, which proved to be more durable and allowed me to work with larger images. In the first piece, *The Oracle* (Appendix, 9), the background was first painted with oils on a plastic printing plate. Then, the painted image was printed onto canvas by a flat-bed press. While the oil paint dried, I transferred images onto contact paper. For this piece, I selected images from art history and architecture books. These images allowed me to create illusionistic and fictive space by altering the visual cues of linear perspective and relative scale. The figure placed at the vanishing point was further emphasized as the focal point by the addition of concentric circles, which themselves had been enhanced by adding color to the back of the transparent transfer.
As I progressed further into my investigation of merging transfer and monoprint techniques, I also began to apply other media to the image. For example, in the work titled *Caryatid* (Appendix 10), I first glued a piece of brown paper towel to the canvas. Then, I printed small shapes of yellow and brown tones to the bottom and top of the format using the same process when creating *The Oracle*. Then, I applied newsprint text in various directions by using a gel transfer process. Once the gel transfer had dried, I brushed on a thin layer of white acrylic gesso. At this point, I placed a packing tape transfer of a classical ionic caryatid column on top of the gesso. When everything had dried I added a pastel drawing of an ionic column to the right of the caryatid, and a line drawing of a nude male figure in the upper right-hand corner of the piece. Finally, I placed transfers of ionic capitals, centered at the top and bottom of the image, to accentuate its vertical format.

After completing a series of works investigating the possibilities that lay in combining printmaking and transfer processes, I began to focus strictly on the acrylic gel transfer process. I also rediscovered my interest in using text as subject matter but my concern no longer lay in the literal use of text. Instead, I used text from books or instruction manuals that I would later combine with unrelated images. In this way, I was changing the context of both the text and the image. For example, to create the piece *Endless Series of Hobgoblins* (Appendix, 11) I used part of a quote by writer and journalist H.L. Mencken (1880-1956). In his day, Mencken was widely recognized as a critic of politics and religion, and their inherent hypocrisies. The altered text was layered over an image from a *Time Life Magazine* of a Judas goat leading a flock of sheep up to the slaughterhouse. A Judas goat is trained to lead sheep to the slaughterhouse by functioning as a member of the flock. By spending time with the members of the flock, the Judas goat earns
their trust, which it in turn betrays in order to lead the sheep to slaughter. The full quote from Mencken suggests that politics exists only to keep the populace anxious with imaginary monsters, thereby desiring the safety of its government. I altered the text, choosing to focus primarily on the phrase “endless series of hobgoblins” and I changed the punctuation and character spacing of the text to affect the speed and rhythm with which it is read. I also included part of the definition of the word “series” to further distance the text from its original source. As the viewer read this text, I wanted them to stumble over the words and be unable to create a cohesive understanding of the text. This altered text was then placed over an amorphous white shape and the transferred image of the Judas goat and its flock. The gel transfer process allowed me to produce a final image with a high degree of transparency. This was beneficial because, as the viewer’s focus shifts between parts of the image, different layers are emphasized while others become seemingly unrelated. The full meaning of the quote is never revealed, and I was able to avoid merely illustrating the text. Instead, the meaning is derived by the viewer from their own interpretations of the text and image.

Later in the same series, I began to repeat and layer text in order to create movement through changes in values. This process is typified in the piece titled, *Martial Law* (Appendix, 12). After first preparing the ground with layers of gesso, and metallic gold paint, I used acrylic gel to transfer a silhouette of an electrical tower and power lines. On top of that image, I transferred repetitions of the phrase “martial law”. Before the transfer, I was able to manipulate the text digitally so that all of the text was transferred at once, as opposed to having to transfer each phrase one by one. Transferring the text this way allowed me to keep the placement of the text more deliberate. After the entire surface was dry, I used my finger to apply black chalk
pastel over the painting. This helped to amplify otherwise invisible surface contours. I used the chalk more deliberately over the text to enhance the illusion of vertical movement.

As I progressed through this series, I came to realize that what I loved most about working with text was its capability to create surface and atmosphere through layering and changes in the proximity of letters and words to one another. I was guided through the process of the work by the opportunity to establish mood or tenor through manipulation of the text. In that way, the final product was more about using text as a mark with which to build surface and convey expressive properties.

Some of the smaller pieces, such as Martial Law, had the potential to elicit such strong emotional responses that I expounded on the idea of using text to create atmosphere in some larger pieces as well. I wanted to create work that not only pulled a viewer in through its surface but was physically imposing as well. At the same time, I began to consider working on found surfaces because they so often have an inherent character that I felt would complement the surfaces I was creating.

When I had worked on the smaller pieces from the previous series I was able to print and transfer text and images from typical desktop printers. However, working on larger surfaces required larger text and my transfer processes simply would not have worked on such a large scale. Instead, I decided to create a silk screened image of the text that I would need to repeat and layer. The process gave me an exact repetition of the chosen text, just as the transfers had done. However, instead of being able to apply all of the text in one print, I had to cautiously register the position of my screen before each pass in order to print the text exactly where I needed it. In a way, this process harkened back to the work I had done in combining printmaking
processes with transfer processes but instead of only printing once, as I had with the monoprints, I often needed hundreds of passes to achieve the final product.

One of my large-scale pieces, The Fine Line, (Appendix, 13), was created on the gridded surface of a discarded paper cutter. The surface was approximately 38” x 46” in size with a blond color that had been mottled by paint, ink, and other media from its days of use. I began by printing the word “entertainment” once on each line of the surface. Next, I printed the word “war” directly after each, with no space in between. Then, I simply continued the alternating printing of words as I gradually filled in all the spaces on each line with an even, predictable repetition of the two words. Then, working from the center outward I began to layer more text. Sometimes, words were offset, other times words were completely unaligned, and still other times they were right on top of one another creating the appearance of boldface letters. The variety in my approach was important as I worked to build up a nearly opaque mass of text in the center of the panel. The further into the piece I worked, the less I tried to control the media, opting instead for the appearance of inadvertent smears and misaligned text. Periodically, I would step back to make sure that the distribution of the words was balanced across the piece. At the same time, I felt it was important for me to not get too involved with monitoring placement of the text. I felt it would influence me to exercise more control, which could have had an adverse affect on the ambiguous and dense tone I was attempting to create.

The creation of these undefined dense layers of text eventually led me to explore the use of non-representational mark as a means of building a surface. At first, I did not abandon identifiable subject matter altogether but rather I focused on energizing the surface of the subject and its negative spaces through layering and removal of different media. In the diptych New
Millennium (Dawn and Dusk) (Appendix, 14), I focused almost exclusively on the negative shapes created by an electrical pole and its accoutrements. After first outlining the subject with graphite, I used vibrant orange and green acrylic inks to stain the negative shapes. I was intentionally loose in my application of the inks so that in spots the color seeped into the positive forms of the electrical pole. After all of the negative shapes had been stained with the ink, I covered the entire panel with Shaeffer’s Ink®, a blue-black ink that is susceptible to bleach. After the ink dried, I stood several feet above the panels and poured bleach onto them. As the bleach contacted and splattered over the panel, it revealed the ink beneath but in varying tones. I did this so that it would appear as though the electric pole was rupturing, resulting in intense light and color. I continued to pour bleach over areas until I felt that some balance had been achieved between the light and dark areas. This also ensured that the natural movement, created by the directions of the lines and shapes within the forms, was still apparent.

Once the bleach dried, I began to work up the surface of the painting using chalk pastels and spray paint. Spray paint was applied first to the top left and bottom right corners to enhance the darker values. I then began to loosely follow the outlined shapes with chalk pastels. At first, I used only colors that were analogous to the orange and green I had used to originally stain the panels. However, I quickly realized that in order to energize the surface the addition of complementary colors would be beneficial. The more I worked the pastels, the more I let my mark be influenced by the direction of the bleach splatters as well as the outlined forms. This interaction between subject matter and surface allowed me to activate the image in new ways. Each layer, from the surface on down, was both hiding and revealing another part of the image.

My interest in this sort of activated surface continued in my final piece, titled One
Motive, No Conscience (Appendix, 15). In my planning for the piece, I decided to abandon representational imagery all together and focus instead on creating a dense but dynamic surface through non-representational design. The composition, which is painted on four aluminum panels fastened together, is built around sections of concentric circles. All four panels were worked simultaneously side by side. The circular shapes were lightly painted on first using a semi-transparent ink wash. Later, a light and dark rhythm was established through very general mark making with a 4B graphite stick. Once I had established general areas of light and dark, I used a plastic mesh with a hexagonal pattern as a stencil and selectively spray painted to create a wiry, almost snakeskin-like texture into some parts of the image. Then, I covered all four surfaces with Shaeffer’s Ink®, the same blue-black ink I used to create the New Millennium diptych. Since the graphite marks showed through the ink, I was able to selectively apply washes of diluted bleach to reveal the concentric circles. Diluting the bleach with water decreased its ability to activate the ink. The results were varying shades of orange. These differences in tone helped to amplify the spray painted texture as well as some of the graphite markings underneath. I let the surface dry and sealed it with a very thin coat of matte fixative.

After the fixative had dried I began to work up the image using compressed charcoal and washes of blue, orange, and white acrylic paint. A point of emphasis was created on the second panel from the left by including the only full circle in the piece, and by avoiding the addition of either blue or orange tones. I also manipulated the darker values in the bottom of the panels in order to establish a foreground for the circles, while the lighter values at the top helped to establish a more infinite space behind. Throughout the latter part of this process, I also allowed myself to scrub previous layers away with a rag to reveal marks, textures, and colors underneath.
For example, in the bottom left corner of the first panel, the texture from the spray painted stencil is visible just outside the edge of the outermost ring. That surface had been wiped away, then recoated with a semi-transparent wash of ink that allowed the texture to show through slightly. This back and forth process allowed me to create a composition that has an overwhelmingly flat space to most of it, despite the variations in size of the concentric circles and the dense values at the bottom.

The evolution of my work, from images of skulls, to unorthodox uses of text, to non-representational surfaces has been very gratifying. I think that over time I have expanded my repertoire of media and techniques, which in turn has helped me loosen up enough as an artist to create work that is reflective of my interests and level of understanding. I can easily see myself continuing to work in similar fashion to some of my later pieces, which require more attention to surface and mark than just subject matter and media.

Conclusion

If it is true that confidence is only gained through preparation, then certainly this MIS-IAR program has offered me significant opportunities to prepare myself and gain the confidence necessary to move forward. From Francisco Goya I learned the importance of setting standards for my work and for myself as an individual. I believe that those standards, as long as they are upheld, will continue to guide me towards an understanding of the world around me. At the same time, my current body of work has been inspired by the many dynamic individuals I have met, both teachers and students, during my tenure in this program. I can now confidently say that the light I show is merely the many reflections of those around me.
My exploration of media and subject matter has led me to feel more comfortable with the creative process than I have ever felt and I plan to pursue further education still. These pursuits, done ostensibly in the name of art, have led me to a deeper appreciation for myself and my capability to assess and understand that which confounds me. If, through my own challenges and edification, I can inform even one person to affect a positive change for humankind, it will have all been worth it.
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