

Lance Moon

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### Artist Statement

In the past I have always enjoyed ruminating on big ideas. Semiotics, Simulationism or even Ethics were topics that I devoted time to just because they were fun and interesting to me. In 2003 I had put a fair amount of contemporary theory into my undergraduate work. The work had been well received. I had been lavishly praised for essentially illustrating some fairly rudimentary concepts pertaining to the topic of Semiotics. When I was accepted into the graduate program, I figured I would continue along this path. It seemed to me that contemporary art was really pretty easy to make once you understood the institutionally acceptable hierarchy of contemporary topics. The merit of a student's artwork was judged, in large part, by his or her choice of topic. If I simply picked a topic such as identity, politics, the body, technology, gender identification, or reflexive art (art about art history), knew and alluded to some of the prominent historical symbols that illustrated these ideas, and paid enough homage to the thinkers that professed these concepts while still managing to avoid overly didactic illustrations, I would, no doubt, fit right into the institutional system. I would easily garner the same praise from my peers and professors that I had come to know throughout my earlier studies. I have no doubt that I could have followed this plan and it would have worked too.

However, as luck would have it, the same day I received my acceptance letter into the graduate program at Kendall College of Art and Design, I found out that I was going to be a father. This unexpected news both excited and terrified me. I had never seen myself as the fathering type. In fact, whenever my mother might broach the topic of grandchildren I would launch into a long diatribe about the moral and ethical ramifications of bringing a

child into an already overpopulated world with dwindling natural resources, melting polar ice caps and a deteriorating ozone layer.

As an artist I had always operated comfortably within the world of abstract ideas and symbols. Symbols and ideas are nice material to work with because they are there for the mind when the mind wants them. They are not tangible. I do not have to believe in them in order to talk about them. I can think about them or not. Furthermore, I can do no real damage to an idea. My ruminations on contemporary philosophies are of no substantial consequence to the world. They are safe, much like my life and artwork had been up until the day I received the news.

A baby isn't an abstract idea. A child isn't a symbol. A child is real, and rearing a child is as real as it gets. I couldn't put my daughter away and then pick her back up when I felt like it. My actions and my ideas, all of the sudden, mattered. They had an instantaneous and lasting impact on the life of this tiny being. Moreover, this little person reflected back to me my own identity in a way that I can only describe as unequivocally visceral but somehow completely uncanny. I could quite literally see myself in her. She represented so much. Though she was very much in the present, within her I could also see both the future potential of a life yet to be realized, and the line of my people back to the very beginning. To damage to her was to damage to myself and to damage myself was to damage her. During the months leading up to her birth and the years that followed it, she was all I could think about.

A few months before she was born, I went to the parenting section of a local bookstore looking for books on fatherhood. I found an entire library of books dedicated to prenatal care, postpartum care (and depression), breast-feeding, belly time, how to juggle working and mothering, etc. Without fail, these books were written to and geared for the

rearing of a child by the mother. On the topic of fatherhood there was only a couple of old dusty books written three decades earlier by Bill Cosby. It occurred to me then, that within popular culture, the relationship between child and father had gone almost completely unexplored and undefined over the past 30 years. During this time there had been a radical shift in the societal role of women and mothers as they redefined the identity of the female within our culture, but men had really failed, thus far, to redefine themselves in the face of the changing social landscape.

I started wondering about the conflation between fatherhood and motherhood, masculinity and femininity. Were the terms father and mother appropriately defined by gender alone? Or was it possible that when the words mother and father leave our lips, what we are really signifying is a symbol representative of an old mythology. It seemed to me that if mothers had taken on many of the traditional roles of fathers that it is likely that fathers needed to adopt many of the traditional roles of the mother. Within this new social model, sex had very little to do with a woman's capacity to provide for and protect her children or a father's capability to nurture and care for his progeny. It finally occurred to me that family-dynamics, something so simple and seemingly outside of the spectrum of important contemporary thought (yet at the forefront of my mind), might be exactly the topic that I needed to address in my artwork.

I started researching Sally Mann and *Immediate Family* with some fervor once I decided to use my own daughter as fodder for imagery. Mann's photographs represented the most obvious precedence within contemporary art for the ideas that I was about to explore. My template was set. I knew what sort of work I needed to do. The work was to be from the male perspective, but required the same unflinching, honest attention to the truths of family and growing up. As Mann put it, "We are spinning a story of what it is to

grow up. It is a complicated story and sometimes we try to take on the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty. But we tell it all without fear and without shame.”

There had always been one particular image of Sally Mann’s that had stuck in my mind when I thought about children within the context of fine art. One photograph that I had seen many years prior at the UICA of Grand Rapids. It is rare that an image or an artist sticks with me for any amount of time, but this one had. The



image was *Damaged Child* from Sally Mann’s *Immediate Family* portfolio. This image became my initial inspiration. It is a simple enough image and the title that Mann gives it, does nothing more than to describe exactly what has been documented. I was surprised to find out that this particular image of the damaged child was the image that had unlocked the entire body of work for the artist. It was the first image in what would become *Immediate Family*. As Mann tells it in the documentary What Remains, “One day Jesse came home with a gnat bite on her face and it was all swollen up. Actually it had bruised. It really looked like she had been beaten up. Up until that point I had thought the children were snapshot material, but she was so striking that it occurred to me that right here, right under my nose, was a picture. I mean a real picture. I just put her up against the wall and documented it. So that’s how I started. As soon as I realized that there was art right under my nose that I was missing, I started seeing things differently.”

Mann was right. There was something intrinsically beautiful about this damaged child—something striking, something true. But what was it? Why was this image so arresting?

Many years ago I asked one of the finest professors I have ever known, “what one thing, more than any other, makes a really good piece of student art work”? My professor thought about it for a moment before replying. “I think the most exciting thing for me, is to see when one of my students learns how to make art that asks a question as opposed to professes an answer. Good art asks good questions.”

If there is any one lesson that I has resonated with me through the years, it was this one. I began thinking about the image in an entirely different way after that conversation all those years ago. I began to ask myself, how does an image ask a question? What questions does my artwork ask? How can the viewer be seduced into taking the time to question? Moreover, what is the good of asking questions that have no apparent correct answers?

I have, since then, set myself to the task of making art that asks questions. This body of work specifically asks questions about what it is to grow up, both as a child in the face of a parent and a parent in the face of his child. Both grow and change simultaneously. Making art like this, however, can be frustrating when the viewer asks for a straightforward reading of my images. When someone asks me, what does this image mean? I can only reply, yes. It means exactly that. It means for you to ask.

There are two methods, I have found over the years, to elicit this questioning effect. The first is through decontextualization of the symbol. That is to say by removing some necessary information from the apparent narrative. I liken this method to the gestalt principle of closure. The principle of closure essentially exploits the human mind’s capability to close off visual structures that have been left open. Closure suggests that if a circle is drawn on a piece of paper, and then a small portion of that circle, say 30% is erased, the viewer will still understand it as a circle. Their mind will fill in the necessary

information. Interestingly, the artist's hand cannot draw a perfect circle, but the viewers mind can. I hope to do the same thing with structures of meaning through careful editing. I have spent countless hours in front of my computer removing extraneous and relevant information from digital photographs in search of the right visual enigma. In essence, I give room for my viewers to find their own narrative by closing the meaning for themselves.

The computer also allows me to quickly and easily employ a second, and slightly more complex strategy of visual questioning. This strategy is one of combining seemingly disparate symbols into a singular image. It remains a curiosity of mine that when I am awake, I must order all of my symbols and images. I must tell myself, this is the way the world is, this is who I am, this is why I must act in this way, so on and so forth. However, when I dream, these rules of meaning do not apply. I can fix a lawn mower with my neighbor while on a raft in the middle of the ocean and never once question why. Humans have, in their waking lives, an insatiable desire to order what has been disordered. We strive to find meaning and objective truth, to tell ourselves stories that help us navigate the inevitabilities of our lives. When we see something or something happens that we can't immediately make sense of, our brain immediately goes to work in an effort to reason some sense back into the object or situation. If, for instance, an artist puts an apple next to a cinderblock, the viewer instinctively tries to find connections between the two images (assuming that the image is sufficiently seductive).

In the case of my work, in addition to placing disparate symbols next to one another, I also try to use symbols that inherently have layers of meaning. Not only is the viewer asked to question the relationship of a baby to a snake, for instance, but they are also asked to reconsider the symbol of a snake in relationship to a caring gesture. The

snake inherently carries with it a perplexing confluence of meaning. From a mythological perspective, because it sheds its skin, the snake usually represents the continuation of life cycles. The snake is constantly born and reborn into a new body as it grows. All the while it still maintains its original patterning. However, the snake is also predatory and associated with danger. We instinctively know that a snake is capable of killing and ingesting that which it comes into contact with. Furthermore, the snake can easily be associated with both the male and the female body politic. It is likened to the male because of its shape and predatory disposition, but also to the female because of its connection to life cycles and physical malleability (throughout art history, the female body has always been seen as more malleable than the male counterpart).

Another example of this confluence of meaning within disparate symbols can be found in my usage of the bull. The bull is traditionally a very masculine symbol, however because of the inherent strength of the symbol, it was important to undercut the physicality of the bull by laying him down, making him vulnerable. In essence, I tried to make him submissive to the image of the child. I further worked to confuse the traditional reading of the bull symbol by reordering the space. The body that is too heavy to float becomes buoyant. It is unclear exactly in which space the bull and the child exist. They are simultaneously in the water, on the water and on land. In spite of their seemingly close proximity the two symbols may also be operating worlds apart from one another. There is also a traditional mythological reading of the bull that is associated with the female dating back to depictions of the goddess Artemis of Ephesus who is adorned with bull scrotums and Isis the Egyptian goddess of motherhood, magic, and fertility who wears a headdress of bull horns that frame a sun disk. The bull's horn shape also harkens to the crescent moon, the moon being strongly associated with female menstruation and thus reproductive cycles.

It is really not important to me that these images have exact meaning. In fact, I purposefully make use of free association, dreams, images from both personal family albums and Internet search engines (the collective social image archive) and digital collage to ensure that I can't control an exact meaning when I compose. For me, it is the ambiguity that images can generate that is so seductive. However, it is also important to me that the viewer be arrested by the images long enough to consider what the drawing is asking of them. Not everyone is seduced by ambiguity; in fact, a lot of people flat out dislike it. Reordering that which has been disordered and being cajoled into asking questions that have no definite answers can be hard work for the viewer. That is why it is of utmost importance to me that my craft be so controlled.

When a viewer stands in front of one of my drawings I rely on the craft to seduce them. I want there to be no doubt in a viewer's mind that every square inch of that drawing has been rendered with the highest degree of professionalism. At no point should the viewer feel that I let myself get careless. Every line must be deliberate and every tonal shift considered and measured to ensure the symbol is imbued with maximum impact. It is also my hope that the viewer is aware that they are seeing something that cannot be reproduced. Part of the charm of graphite is its resistance to accurate reproduction. Because of its reflective qualities there simply isn't a good way to translate a graphite drawing into an ink reproduction. What the viewer sees is the original, the only authentic, singular image in the world. Hopefully this furthers the seductive experience.

The other day my daughter and I were intently watching a movie. At a certain point the protagonist started crying. My daughter asked, "Daddy, is that man sad?" I replied, "Yes honey he is." My daughter then quipped, "Why is he sad?" I suggested that he was sad because he could no longer be with the person he loved. She thought about it for a



minute and asked, “Why can’t they be together?” I responded confidently, “Well because forces outside of the man’s control have made it impossible for them to be together.” Unsatisfied by my answer she continued her line of questioning. “Well why did this happen?” Now slightly annoyed I had to take a minute to think about it before I again responded. “It happened because the writers, producers, and directors of this movie felt that the characters needed to struggle against the forces that conspired to keep them separate.” She asked again, “Why Dad?” Now slightly intrigued by the fact that I was running out of answers I retorted, “Because they believe that is what the audience wants.” Again my daughter asked why. This time I had to finally admit that I simply did not know. My daughter was understandably dissatisfied with the final answer. I was slightly embarrassed to be so unraveled by a four-year-olds overly simplistic line of questioning. What became clear to me in that little exchange was that it does not matter what the topic, if one questions long enough, one always ends up in the ether. For the longest time, whenever I bumped into this unfortunate truth, I was quickly enveloped in a circle of relativism and almost immediately seized by nihilism. As it pertains to my own artwork, an artwork that I have predicated on what I refer to as the questioning-effect, a new question inevitably arises. Why bother? The answer to this all-important question only recently became clear to me.

The answer is implicit within the context of my daughter’s questioning. To question, to search out, to hope for some truth, is a fundamental and quintessential aspect of childhood. To be a child is to know and accept (without question) that you do not know, to know that you are small in the face of life, but to greet the world with an eagerness for growth and deeper understanding. My daughter constantly reminds me that she is growing up, as she puts it, getting bigger.

By entering into a dialog with a piece of art that is asking a question (which is exactly what I do when I create these drawings) we embrace our childlike nature, we grow smaller (yet another strange confluence), acknowledge that we do not know, and revel in the enthusiastic pursuit of a truth. In so doing we create our own truths that can serve and last for a time. By questioning we recognize our own capacity to still grow. I find it particularly moving that we, as adults, living in an agnostic age, are relentlessly willing to question and search out meaning. We, in fact have no choice. This speaks to the human spirit, which is the child in all of us.

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| 01 |    | Atonement<br>21" x 16" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009           | 11 |    | Exquisite Preceptor<br>30" x 22" - 40" x 36" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008          |
| 02 |    | Atonement Detail<br>21" x 16" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009    | 12 |    | The Hold<br>30" x 22" - 40" x 36" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008                     |
| 03 |    | Patriarch II<br>20" x 16" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009        | 13 |    | The Hold Detail<br>30" x 22" - 40" x 36" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008              |
| 04 |    | Patriarch II Detail<br>20" x 16" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009 | 14 |    | Suffocation Incubo I<br>8" x 10" - 30" x 34" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008          |
| 05 |  | Progeny<br>16" x 20" - 30" x 34" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009             | 15 |  | Suffocation Incubo II<br>30" x 22" - 40" x 36" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008        |
| 06 |  | Progeny Detail<br>16" x 20" - 30" x 34" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009      | 16 |  | Suffocation Incubo II Detail<br>30" x 22" - 40" x 36" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008 |
| 07 |  | Patriarch I<br>20" x 16" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009         | 17 |  | Curiosity<br>10" x 8" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008                     |
| 08 |  | Patriarch I Detail<br>20" x 16" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009  | 18 |  | Bearing Separation<br>10" x 8" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008            |
| 09 |  | Predominance<br>20" x 16" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009        | 19 |  | Malformation Incubo<br>8" x 10" - 30" x 34" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008           |
| 10 |  | Predominance Detail<br>20" x 16" - 34" x 30" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2009 | 20 |  | I Hear You Dream<br>10" x 10" - 30" x 34" Framed<br>Graphite on Paper<br>2008             |











































