

Nathan Heuer

Artists Statement

“Most people encounter the dilemma of fallen empires and lost cities in casual reading, or in a school course. The image is troublesome to all, not only for the vast human endeavors that have mysteriously failed, but also for the enduring implication of these failures” (Tainter 1). My drawings are concerned with the enduring implication that Tainter suggests: that the courses of action that have led to the demise of one culture can, if not understood in the context of history, lead to the demise of subsequent cultures. This danger can even be understood to apply to our own modern industrialized society, for at the height of any empire, Greek or Roman, Mayan or Aztec, it is considered to be a modern state. It is only time and decay that shift a society’s image into one of antiquity and desertion. By projecting our society into that realm of antiquity and desertion, it is my aim to open up a renewed dialogue with history and to create an understanding that the events of the past can greatly inform how we understand the events of the present.

Initially it seemed to me that visual art would prove an impossible conduit for studying the demise of complex cultures. Traditionally such investigations have existed in the realm of exacting sciences only, like archaeology, anthropology, and sociology. In the landmark work *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, however, Joseph Tainter defines a benchmark of societal collapse in terms of “less investment in the epiphenomena of complexity, those elements that define the concept of civilization: monumental architecture, artistic and literary achievements, and the like” (4). By defining societies in such a way, Tainter (who is doggedly scientific as a scientist can be) makes it clear that the arts play a key role in our understanding of the vitality of a society. The most

identifiable “art” that we associate with deceased civilizations is their monumental architecture. Who when the subject of ancient Rome is brought up does not think of the Colosseum or the aqueducts first? Can a general discussion of ancient Egypt arise without at least some acknowledgement of the pyramids? Likewise, our most engrained image of Mayan society is the ruins of their cities surrounded in dense jungle.

We do not understand our own architecture to be an enduring representation of our society, however. There has been a long precedent in Western society of elevating the classical and diminishing the achievements and success of most Western culture thereafter. Oswald Spengler, author of the classic *The Decline of the West* speaks directly about this phenomena:

There is a type of scholar whose clarity of vision comes under some irresistible spell when it turns from a frock-coat to a toga, from a British football ground to a Byzantine circus, from a transcontinental railway to a Roman road in the Alps, from a thirty-knot destroyer to a trireme, from Prussian bayonets to Roman spears – nowadays, even, from a modern engineer’s Suez Canal to that of a Pharaoh. He would admit a steam engine as a symbol of human passion and expression of intellectual force if it were Hero of Alexandria who invented it, not otherwise (Spengler 30).

This celebration of the remarkable societies of the past is often seen in museums, books, and educational programs. When one begins to consider the underlying purpose of the archaeologists, scientists, and other professionals who provide the broader public with such institutionalized information, however, Spengler’s point becomes clear. The true mission of studying history is to learn from the past and then to apply that knowledge

to the present. Yet if we elevate the Colosseum above a modern stadium, for example, then there is a failure to fully see how these structures met a parallel need for societies at very different points in human history. By extension then we would have to ask what other parallels exist between Roman society and contemporary Western society. Will both societies face similar concerns over resource management, for example? Both the Colosseum and a baseball stadium require tremendous amounts of precious resources (the New Yankee Stadium, for example, cost more than one billion dollars to construct). Eventually any questions comparing a collapsed society with our own lead to the same question: will we make the same mistakes and fail to exist as a civilization, too?

It is a broad question that is difficult to answer, but one that I think artists have some advantages in attempting to address. Historians, archaeologists, and other scientists who study past societies are encumbered by a number of limitations that often prevent them from seeing the “big picture.” Foremost among these is the specificity of their knowledge. An archaeologist may spend years collecting exacting data on the pottery shards of a specific ancient culture in order to gain a doctorate that gains him or her sufficient standing in the scientific community. At the end of this process, however, their knowledge of other disciplines or even other similar societies is insufficient to make informed comparisons. This is part of a general shift in how contemporary society defines knowledge. Up to and through the Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries scholars were often able to operate as masters of multiple disciplines. This allowed for a greater individual synthesis of information. In the last century, as knowledge of disciplines has become increasingly complex, specialization has become increasingly necessary, however.

Art, though, is a field of knowledge whose practitioners can operate without specialization. Discussing the relationship between art and science, artist Mark Dion explains:

One of the fundamental problems is that even if scientists are good at what they do, they're not necessarily adept in the field of representation. They don't have access to the rich set of tools, like irony, allegory and humor, which are the meat and potatoes of art and literature (Graziose Corrin 11).

This way of defining the role of art has become the foundation of my drawings. My aim is to use the visual language of art to address my interests in archaeology, sociology, and architecture. As an artist I have the ability to synthesize the research of many specialists into a visualization of how societies decay. My focus has primarily been on the monumental architecture that Joseph Tainter identified as one of the hallmarks of civilization.

There is a remarkable pattern in the history of architecture where the form and function of one society's structures often parallels the form and function of another society's structures. This statement begins to assume greater significance when it is seen as indicative of other similarities between cultures. Going back to the comparison between the Colosseum and a modern baseball stadium, it is easy to see how this is true. Because of their size and grandeur, both structures represent massive commitments in terms of time, resources, and finances. Such ability to apply resources to a structure that is not strictly utilitarian speaks volumes both about the Romans and about us. Monumental architecture can imply the power and prestige of a culture, but also its decadence and lack of foresight. Many of the materials used in the Colosseum could

have been applied to the maintenance of roads or the creation of adequate housing for all Roman citizens. The same could be said of the billion dollars worth of resources that has been poured into the creation of the new Yankee Stadium in New York. Such mismanagement of resources was an indisputable factor in the eventual demise of the Roman Empire. Why then should it be any different for our own society?

It became clear to me once I started focusing on architecture that structures could be indicative of much more than simply the technology behind their construction. Instead, the contemporary ruins that I draw allude to the numerous concerns that both drive the creation of a society and eventually can also lead to its destruction. This point is most easily made by finding a parallel between an ancient structure and a modern one, as is the case with the Colosseum and the stadium. Other similarities that have been explored include that between the Roman baths and a modern public swimming pool, and the similarity in form of modern freeway supports with the post and lintel forms of Stonehenge.

I have mentioned that monumental structures require a massive investment of time and resources for the societies that create them. An effort is made to parallel this investment when I decide on a particular subject matter to draw. Although I make several "field" visits to places where there is crumbling concrete, rusting metal, and other decaying construction materials, I do not typically draw from direct observation or from photographs. Instead, I use mechanical perspective to "construct" ruins largely from my imagination. In this way I am able to acquire a greater understanding of the complexity of the structures that I am trying to depict. It is a humbling process that has forced me to interface with the basics of disciplines as far ranging as engineering, masonry, available

construction materials, and geometry. In the end the drawing has to feel convincing, and this can be difficult to achieve.

It is important to not only understand that the structures that I draw are projections of our society as it could exist in the future, but also how such ruins would be understood by scientists and archaeologists. These specialists are the filter through which we experience ancient cultures. One day such specialists will also interpret our culture through our ruins, garbage, and debris. They will bring to their interpretation their own biases and assumptions. I think it is safe for us to expect that not all of these biases and assumptions will produce an image of our society that is entirely accurate.

The drawing/installation pieces *Recurrences #1* and *Recurrences #2* are designed to investigate how specialists filter historical and archaeological information. Process assumes greater importance in these pieces than the actual drawing. Each installation consists of a drawing with a box of artifacts presented in front of it, mimicking a natural history museum display. To create the installations I visited specific “sites in the field” – usually remains from former industrial facilities in and around Grand Rapids. I deviated from my normal process, taking photographs, making sketches, and collecting artifacts to mimic the activities that would characterize an archaeologist of the future if they were investigating the remains that we have left behind. The translating and editing of the field information when it ends up in the drawing is meant to indicate how we do not get direct information from scientists investigating history. The few artifacts that are displayed also show how little of the full information about a collapsed society actually reaches us in the museum setting. Because our only way of understanding the past is often through objects, it is important that such historical editing is recognized.

It was important when I created the *Recurrences* installations that I engage with several disciplines rather than define myself as an artist that draws exclusively. By tackling several disciplines I hoped to avoid the problems of specialization that I have discussed earlier in this statement. The German artist Joseph Beuys once said “I’m not here to speak about the particular problems of artists” (qtd. Davis 2), and this statement resonates with my own philosophy about art. I do not have to simply master a knowledge of drawing technique and art history, but rather whatever discipline I believe will be necessary to develop a meaningful examination of society. I can better understand and critique the work of an archaeologist if I attempt to do the type of work that they do myself. In the same way, I can only begin to understand the thought and investment that a society puts into a monumental structure if I attempt to design and engineer such a structure myself.

In a greater sense, though, it is only when I engage in multiple disciplines that something meaningful occurs. It is at this point that there is a synthesis of information. Assuming the role of an archaeologist, I have been able to observe the ruins that our society is already leaving. By consistently reading about history I possess enough knowledge to observe the similarities between the ruins of the past and the ruins of contemporary society. I am also able to compare trends that have led to the demise of societies of the past with trends in contemporary society that may be similar.

Also like Joseph Beuys, my drawings focus on a specific set of materials to convey an individual visual language. For Beuys, felt, fat, and honey were symbolic materials that he associated with healing and human compassion. According to him, these materials (allegedly at least) were used by Russian Tatars to heal him when he

crashed as a German pilot during World War II. Although Beuys' materials seem silly at best, the general idea has the possibility of being sound. In the case of my drawings, concrete, rusting metal, and other aged construction materials are used as a recurrent symbol of the demise of societies. Fragments of such materials also conveniently can become objects much like the type of objects that encapsulate peoples of the past in our public museums. The *Recurrences* drawings are a reflection on how objects can become devices that tell an incomplete story of a vanished society. In these drawings, building materials not only symbolize the key components that we have used to construct lasting evidence of our civilization, but also how the evidence that will remain will be incomplete and narrow in its narrative.

In order to proceed as a society, I believe that it is important to not only understand that one day our particular brand of civilization may not exist, but also that another society will eventually attempt to understand us according to the ruins that we have left behind. If our society should fail, there will be an excessive amount of ruins left. We are a consumer culture as no other society has been in history. That landfills grow to the size of small mountains, useful structures stand vacant and decaying, and that other structures are built, destroyed, and replaced in the space of a decade is evidence enough of our excessive consumerism. Although environmentalism is not the primary interest of my artwork, its concerns seem unavoidably bound both to my drawings and to the eventual success or failure of a society. Above all else, my readings have underscored the fact that civilizations exist because of successful and effective management. This can mean management of jobs, people, religion, or a variety of other factors. But it is management of resources that allows a society to manage all of these

things. In this way the broken concrete, rusting metal, and other materials that appear recurrently in my work assume a significance beyond their seeming simplicity.

Joseph Tainter suggested that there is an enduring implication in the ruins of ancient civilizations. Many of these ruins are commonly familiar to us, and yet we often fail to see the “enduring implication” that Tainter suggests. No less familiar to us are the ruins of our own abandoned architecture that inhabit the fringes of many of our most populous cities. Like even the most ancient examples of monumental architecture, these structures represent a significant investment of resources, technology, and design. What they often fail to represent to us, however, is a mirror image of more ancient ruins. Yet mirror images they are. It would be a mistake to believe that our own society does not face the possibility of ceasing to exist as has happened to so many others.

If any essential principle can be gleaned from these drawings I would hope that it is that the lessons of the past are essential to any informed understanding of the present. As I have discussed previously, I believe that artists (if so interested) possess a unique ability to see the “big picture” that can so easily elude more academic specialists. Artists can, in a general sense, assume several roles, and this unique ability can allow a synthesis of information that is not possible within the constraints of the extremely focused world of scientists, archaeologists, sociologists, and a number of other highly specialized intellectuals.

I do not, of course, possess the typical qualifications to address these issues. It is difficult to refute the connotations of a contemporary structure visually projected into a state of ruin, however. Such loaded imagery reinforces Mark Dion’s assertion that artists addressing issues outside the world of art possess, at times, a visual language more potent

and immediate than any application of written language. The final analysis of each drawing is left to the viewer, who I sincerely hope walks away reconsidering not only the permanence of the society that they exist in, but also how they can engage with the world in a way that will leave a positive image of our society for future generations as they examine our actions.

Works Cited

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