

Eric German

MFA Thesis

04/22/12

*The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation...The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification...The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.*

*-Guy Deord, The Society of the Spectacle*

Writing an artist statement is risky. It seems that the work should be enough on its own, and that writing about the work creates an image in the viewer and reader's mind before she can create her own. The statement always already mediates the work for the viewer. Or the statement and the work will fail to match up; one or the other will go too far or not far enough in encapsulating the real ideas that are at issue. However, my artwork allows for many avenues of entry. Hopefully this statement will open some of these while not closing off other possible ideas about what the work is about.

Generally, my work is about form invention and world creation. It is about constructing imaginary spaces, and decorating and populating these spaces with soft, volumetric structures. I work in different projection methods including perspectival, isometric, and flat ornamental spaces, and fill these spaces with extruded rainbows, iconographic clouds, volumetric view-screens, flat pop-monsters and obsessive vines and patterns. The work is mostly drawing on paper but has been moving towards sculptural form, low relief, and three dimensional collage and constructions.

If I had to pick one thread that has been constant in my work at Kendall it would be the ongoing process of learning how to represent three dimensional form on a two dimensional plane. The particular forms, figures, shapes and scenes that I have been developing function more as props or scenery in a project about perspective and space than as the principal actors. My investigations into representing volume and space “wear” my particular forms and figures.

When I say the work is about creating worlds I have two conceptions in mind. By worlds, I mean not only the ground and "buildings" the invented forms inhabit on the paper, or the environments that the invented forms group up to create, but also, and just as importantly, the projection methods that all my forms find themselves cast within. I am creating worlds that are at times flat and ornamental, referencing graphical language, glyph, and adornment. At other times I use perspectival space (almost exclusively one point); this type of space alludes to Renaissance painting and drawing and all the religious and art-historical baggage that comes attached to that sort of space (as well as many, many other types of images that use one point perspective – early arcade games, landscape photography, architectural renderings, etc). I also utilize parallel projection, where the vanishing point has dissolved and given way to an infinite, technical-diagrammatic-video game space. The type of space I use for each drawing brings with it historical associations, allusions, references, and visual analogies. So the "worlds" I am working on are not just what is on the paper, but *how* the things on the paper are drawn. The method of presentation (perspectival, ornamental) indicate worlds just as much as the “scenes” I draw.

Can an art practice sustain itself simply by investigating different ways of representing space? It probably could not; the results at least would not be very interesting. This is why, running alongside my “space and volume” thread I also have a “form invention” thread. My

work over the past three years has been about inventing a language of form and also discovering how to present this evolving language.

The foam-pop-monsters, soft rainbows, rainbow-robot-jellyfish, rounded stars, Bladerunner-meets-Tron-meets-Hello-Kitty type of forms are of course vitally essential to the work. They are what all these other issues of projection, representation and modeling hang onto.

It is easy (and useful) to make visual analogies between my art and similar types of graphical work out there “in the world.” Drawing visual comparisons is important and useful; it contextualizes the work. Depending on their particular background and visual education viewers will recognize the influence of video games, science fiction concept-art, early 20th century avant-garde soviet design, Pop and Op art, children’s media, paper-craft monsters, and pre-Columbian Mexican artifacts and painting. In my first year or two at Kendall I was mining a large, diverse body of visual material to remix into the drawings. I picked up new forms, adapted, shifted, and evolved them; I took these invented forms and welded and mashed them onto ones I had worked out the week or month before. Other forms I rejected, leaving them discarded in a forgotten flat-file. New forms found their way into my work growing out of the dead and ossified forms of the past. The philosopher Richard Rorty describes language evolving much the same way; new words and meanings enter into language as essentially invented metaphors. Eventually these new metaphors lose their metaphoric meaning and become the calcified structure that we use for everyday language. The process repeats itself and we experience an ongoing evolution of meaning. Fresh metaphors and new ways of analogizing things in the world with meaning are built upon the hardened metaphors of the past.

My most repeated forms become fetishized; I redraw them over and over, always

returning to them while very subtly augmenting them through each iteration. Eventually I sort of forget where, for example, this rainbow-arch-buttress form originated; I just know it needs to have a star in the center. I can indicate that the scalloped trim form was gathered from architectural ornament (for example on the houses in my neighborhood), but cannot with certainty tell you where the rainbow jellyfish idol came from.

What does it mean to say my work is about “world creation”? Superficially, I understand that by meaning I am drawing pictures that represent buildings, landscapes, environments and an “ecology” of form. But I understand worlds to mean more than just the figures and structures on a ground. A world houses everything that is in it. Language, value, systems of signification and meaning; these are the things in a world that are at once not superficially “in the landscape,” while at the same time only understood by their particular instantiations in that landscape. The Rainbow Robot Jellyfish Empire comes to us as an artifact of a world that has lost its actors; all we have are objects, colors, representations and an indecipherable collection of images. In some respects I am not creating worlds as much as creating their detritus, their graphical artifacts. Being a creator comes with it the fact that your creations move beyond their original intent.

There is an element of escapism in the work. I am drawing these (seemingly) huge imagined worlds that allude to lost civilizations; I am filling them with pyramids, platforms, view-screens, graphical markings and statues. However there are no inhabitants in my worlds. Rather we are left with their statues, idols and projections.

We spend so much of our time in virtual environments and mental spaces (video games, films, Internet and other media). A great deal of our lives are spent looking through screens. An immense amount of our experiences are mediated -- through television, advertising, and web

browsers. Painting and drawing are the historical precedents for the contemporary view-screen; the frame and the canvas are the scheme while the image is the content. Much of my work deals with folding this scheme / content division in upon itself. This is why in a few cases in this thesis exhibition the framing devices are more interesting, and certainly visually louder, than the pieces that they are framing.

A lot of the work (especially my prints) take more inspiration from branding and logo design than “traditional” studio art practices. In other works I create pyramidal drawing factories, whose isometric soft-robotic structures print image after image after image for an invisible audience or consumer.

Much of the work depicts structures that are cut-outs and stage settings; the newer view-screens are related to this idea of staging. I am making connections between media, branding, staging, and designing puppet-box theater facades with the process of image making and world creation. I want these worlds to look cool and seductive, and to pack them densely with pop-monsters and robot architectural elements. At the same time I am making them hollow and unpopulated. In a sense all of this work is more about facade than building. It is more about presenting and re-presenting than it is about the drawings themselves.

So now we have an understanding of my work as neo-pop form and environments that “talk” about how they are being presented, projected, and drawn. But there is another element in the art that has been working quietly under the surface and that now is really beginning to percolate up towards the forefront. The work has been graphically describing environments for some time; but now I am actually building (and printing) models, and the cut-out stage props are finding realization in foam-core and craft constructions. My first two and a

half years at Kendall were devoted to working up the blueprints, engineering schemes and design diagrams. Now I am getting to work making these into “real” objects.

My foam constructions and 3D prints are the very nascent gestures that I hope will soon become totalizing, enveloping art spaces. I am envisioning fun-house sized installations with rainbow robot jellyfish graphics, soft glyphs, blue and pink wall ornament and obsessive vine relief. The LCD screen piece in this exhibition serves as a mock-up for banks of 60” LCD screens endlessly projecting my archive of work. I have all the plans right in front of me for building real human size spaces.

Previously I have tried to insert a type of vibrational, overwhelming quality into the drawings, a type of totalizing effect brought about by obsessive line and detail. This exhibit functions as a portent into what is possible with my work -- a 360° environment of Eric German. Is this plan that far removed from the notion of Debord’s spectacle, where images and reproductions of images serve to absolutely construct environments of representation?

In the rest of this paper I will talk about how different parts of my coursework here at Kendall have influenced my studio production. It is obvious that the studio practice does not happen in a vacuum. Instead it is nourished by scholarly research and by learning other art making techniques. To a large degree my work has been influenced by an active visual collection of images. As viewers in the 21st century we are endlessly receiving visual information, like a never-ending tumblr feed. A survey of what I have researched and how that has affected my art should inform my discussion of what my art is about.

The Kendall drawing department has a very distinct "look and feel," owing partly to the foundation programs. These programs stress observational drawing and technical perspective.

Coming into Kendall I had a background in figure drawing and could draw from observation (fairly) competently. However I had no real working understanding of perspective, theoretically or practically. So I taught myself rudimentary techniques of perspective under the guidance of Deb Rockman, and would later investigate other sorts of projection methods. Much of my work at Kendall about learning different sorts of projection methods and how to represent volume on paper was influenced by the type of work on the walls on the sixth floor, and to a smaller degree the type of graphical production coming out of the fifth floor design departments.

In Dr. Eberle's Art & Politics seminar I researched Mexican painted books produced by pre-Conquest Aztecs, and how this type of art practice changed under colonialism. This research project had two effects on my studio work. First, I started making work that looked like Aztec and Mayan art. I took these primary sources and remixed them with the pop-monsters and soft cloud forms I was working with already. Second, I concluded that methods of representation were culturally loaded. In the primary sources I was looking at one could easily chart how Western perspectival space and "realism" overwhelmed and subsumed the indigenous Mexican way of re-presenting the world. My summer study in Florence reinforced this idea, where perspectival painting and realism in sculpture were inextricably linked with the power of the church (and with the power of the art historical canon). This summer trip also planted that seed that would encourage me to build totalizing semi-sacred spaces.

In Professor Zeeuw's New Visual Studies class I researched cellular automata. Cellular automata are rudimentary computer programs that lay out simple rules that, when iterated over many generations, create startlingly complex systems. My studio work began reflecting these types of ideas. I was producing forms that were mechanical and organic, that were built out of

very simple component bits, but, when drawn over and over, resulted in large drawings that created complex patterns. Diane described my work at this time as being like "an 8-bit computer generating Mayan video games." This research topic became a metaphor for my work, in that simple rules can create complex work, and that the products of these rules cannot be determined by the rules themselves.

In Professor Zeeuw's Visual Ethics course I researched the media critics Marshal McLuhan and Guy Debord. This project looked at how our contemporary world is constructed through information and image transfer through media and advertising. The main idea I brought out of this research was that our worlds are constructed not simply by the content or messages we transmit to one another, but rather by the methods of transmission themselves. In McLuhan's famous aphorism, "The media is the message." This research project provided me with a theoretical language to talk about how my work deals with breaking down the scheme and content, or frame and picture division.

Slightly before and during this class I started adding "tele-screens," billboards, and view-ports into my work. Projected onto these screens were many different views and scenes of the worlds I was making; suddenly the drawings were re-presenting themselves to themselves. I was making drawings that were projecting other alternate parts of other drawings to themselves. Last fall I was making screen prints; I was designing the images in Adobe Illustrator, and suddenly my hand-drawn robot jellyfish had found themselves in the digital world. These prints looked "computer generated;" the precise medium dictated their form. Next, they began to put up television screens, and the extruded cloud forms had transformed into information transmitting conduits. My worlds had discovered hyper-realities.



My work with Professor Renato and digital modeling has really shifted what is possible. The ability to work in a full three dimensional environment has created a unique set of problems and solutions. Much of my work up until then had been about how to render volume and space on a two dimensional plane, with the particular forms and figures to put on that plane being secondary. Now my forms are really being fore-grounded as the virtual modeling environment exponentially increases my ability to represent three dimensional space. This new computational tool revisits the Renaissance question of whether drawing or sculpture is the “higher” art. Of course neither is essentially “better;” they are each just different methods for executing different problems. I think I was fortunate in taking this digital modeling course at the end of my MFA; I already had a vast library of forms and concepts from which to draw on for my 3D models, renders and prints. I felt a similar elation when I took printmaking in the fall; my printmaking practice developed on the efforts of my drawing-factory images, as I became a sort of human image assembly line. In the same way, I feel the work in the digital modeling course has transformed me into a human-mediated-by-computation sculptor. There is a real sense that the 3D prints I have been producing are products of their particular media; they look technical, robotic, and precise.

My work in the Kendal library has probably had the greatest generative effect on my studio practice. An MFA program ought to be primarily self-driven; we are outlining our own problems and finding, with the aid of our advisors and peers, our own solutions. The library served as my primary source. The stacks of design and illustration annuals, painting and sculpture monographs, and current and back issues of contemporary art and design periodicals (and the advertisements that drove much of these) were all at my disposal. It was in the library that I discovered Archigram, Buckminster Fuller, Japanese floating world paintings, El

Lissitzky, The pre-Columbian Codex Nuttall, Paolo Soleri's Arcologies, Ettore Sottsass and his Memphis design group and Franz Sales Meyer's *Handbook of Ornament*.

It is hard to draw one to one correspondences between my source material and my production. It is not the case that I take a Buckminster Fuller geodesic sphere and simply place it in a drawing (although I have tried). The sources work their way into my work much more through a type of visual osmosis, or through two or three levels of mediation through production and augmentation. It also might be the case that I recognize in my drawings inflorescence's from architecture, design or art history that others do not. The important point here is that when I started this project of inventing worlds, I recognized the importance for gathering a great deal of source material. Of course, it might have been the other way around; being overwhelmed in the world (and the library) by the sheer volume of visual material, I had to start building worlds to organize and schematizes my response.





Eric German  
Interactive model of the artist's career  
penicillin, 3d screen, 128 binding images, beam  
and paper stage















