

Steven Vinson
Statement

This work is about developing and progressing. The work itself is open to the same changes that our man-made structures are exposed to. Just like architecture, these paintings will decay in a period of time that is proportional to the time it takes for buildings to fall apart. I have attempted to catch realism in my imagery as well as the process by which I create work. My work attempts to live like the images they project. The real world is made up of fragments. There are so many variables that we have no definitive absolute way of creating or progressing as a society, which ultimately leads to fragmentation. My work speaks to this fragmentation by using fragments to paint a diverse manmade environment. It might be my nature to operate in fragments because I have always been exposed to an environment that shifts and changes with a large amount of freedom in what gets built and where. You will find this statement is also fragmented because it was written in different places, during different times and in different mindsets. I end this attempt to explain my work with several excerpts from various sketchbooks in an attempt to show a progression in thinking that has occurred since entering art school.

In developing this body of work I realized that my work is a reaction to my existing in our man made environment as an investigation into humanities process of development. Much of my “research” time for this body of work had already been completed in the 27 years leading up to this show, but the last two years has been a very concentrated period in terms of my awareness of our development. Each day I have spent existing within our manufactured environment has been important in the development of my interests. I am a dreamer and a watcher, somebody who likes to view his surroundings as if I’m not actually participating in the flow of our world. I try to see as many angles to our progression as possible. The present state of things is always the easiest to absorb and the past is easier to dissect because hindsight is always 20/20 but the future

is mere speculation. I attempt to view progression through time and develop a painting practice that mirrors the development we constantly pursue. I believe that if the art making practice mirrors the process used by an artist's subject matter it will produce stronger work in the end.

My undergraduate work had simply been about aesthetic, in that I was only focused on trying to recreate the sensations one encounters in our manmade environment. Locations all around us allow a viewer to feel insignificant in our scale but also very powerful in the way we can alter a space with hard work and determination. The urban aesthetic is an amazing example of the ability of such insignificant organisms. I do not, however, view urban areas as a final product or a grand goal of civilization. These constructed landscapes are created as a byproduct of human development. Humans are constantly growing, developing and progressing by combining our previous discoveries with our current innovations. This process of development where past combines with present to create the next stage can be related to the Fibonacci sequence where the next number of a sequence is a combination of the previous and present numbers. After several stages of the sequence we have exponentially multiplied from where we started. This can be seen in great perspective if we compare ancient history to our present world. My work speaks to this process; in the way I capture our present condition. My images are where we are today and these spaces are a result of chance, planning and freedom to adapt.

Within this work I am attempting to capture the sights that can relate to our constant development, whether that be found in our commercial structures, old light industrial buildings, our infrastructure or residential areas. The spaces I paint are chosen intuitively and often readily decided upon when I have a specific formal goal in mind. These goals are based on interests like color, shape, space and balance. While most of the landscapes or structures I paint already have a good starting point in terms of formal interest, I attempt to alter or further stress the design elements at work. My goal is to use my knowledge of design to accomplish a painting that draws

out the sensation I experienced while in that location. Desired results always change from piece to piece but I consistently intend to transition from one piece to the next by trying to progress and develop as an individual, all while maintaining my interest in subject matter and the specific goals for each successive piece.

The paintings in this exhibition are rooted in American Realism but I am fascinated by the idea that they could also be meant to display what has become our new natural environment, a multitude of constructions, a.k.a the city. The majority of people in America have become city dwellers; this idea is discussed in *The New York Times Magazine* article by Jonah Lehrer regarding the research of Geoffrey West, a physicist who has been working on a formula to solve the process of a city.

For the first time in history, the majority of human beings live in urban areas. (The numbers of city dwellers are far higher in developed countries—the United States, for instance, is 82 percent urbanized.) Furthermore, the pace of urbanization is accelerating as people all over the world flee the countryside and flock to the crowded street. (Lehrer, nytimes.com)

This means that the majority of us live in places where the natural environment has been replaced by roads, houses, industries and commercial buildings as well as the exhausting numbers of power lines, water towers and cell phone reception towers. It is with the help of these structures that we are bombarded with constant visual stimulation. Whether old or new, the structures that surround us all add up into a conglomeration of metal, plastic, rubber and rocks that are ever present in our surroundings. I am a product of this over stimulated society, and therefore I am interested in the surroundings that shaped and developed me as an individual. I also try to remain focused on the development that is found in our cities, as well as my development as a painter.

Within the main idea of development that I address there are two major themes I also approach within my art, construction and destruction. The landscapes I paint fall into one or both

of these categories and can sometimes lie in a transitional stage between the two. This could mean that a painting depicts a structure in any one of the various levels of completion or decay, but sometimes I also choose to paint a landscape that depicts the infrastructure or tools necessary to make either construction or destruction possible. Examples include, a newly constructed highway that represents construction, an abandoned warehouse representing destruction/decay, or simply a road that is used to transport vehicles between the two.

I can pinpoint my interests in areas of development to two events I experienced between the ages of 17 and 22. One dealt with the destruction of an object and the other dealt with an objects construction. It was these two events that founded what I would consider my mature interest in the man-made landscape.

Event #1

At the beginning of the summer in July of 2001, there was an event going on in downtown Indianapolis. This event was the implosion of Market Square Arena, the basketball arena that had been replaced by a more modern facility a few blocks away. After stripping the inside and prepping it for demolition, they set a date for the implosion. My friends and I decided to check this out since it's not a very common occurrence in any city. We were able to get as close as the police were letting anyone get, which was probably about four or five blocks away. The charges went off, smoke escaped holes cut in the roof, and then it just crumbled in and onto itself sending a massive smoke cloud in all directions through the metro area, even shattering some windows in nearby buildings. The spectacle only lasted a few seconds once the charges went off, but it was amazing to watch such a large structure be destroyed so quickly.

Event # 2

A few years later while at the Herron School of Art and Design, I took part in another event involving the development of the downtown area. A professor at my school was looking for volunteers to help with a project he was commissioned for. The project was to celebrate the raising of the final beam in the early construction stages of the Conrad hotel in downtown Indianapolis. On each floor, from the fifth to the twentieth, there would be three people on the south face of the building controlling large red umbrellas, opening and closing them at various speeds. The resulting effect was the building having a living quality, almost as if it was breathing. The project was enjoyable but what I really took from the experience was having the opportunity to be on the nineteenth floor of a building that was nothing more than the concrete skeleton a twenty one-story building. Being in such a raw and unfinished structure while being able to look out over the surrounding landscape was essential in cultivating my interest in the urban environment.

Both of these experiences allowed me to know the sublime, as it exists in our urban world. Most Americans that were alive during Sept. 11, 2001 can recognize how an urban environment is capable of producing the sublime.

The landscapes in this body of work are spaces I have encountered during my time in graduate school. The three largest pieces are spaces found in Grand Rapids while the two paintings of a hilly road were inspired by my visit to Maine this July. In visiting Maine I was afforded a vision of the landscape that one of my biggest influences Edward Hopper enjoyed so much. Many of his paintings are set in the New England landscape and I feel privileged to now know what had inspired one of the greatest American Realists. Along with Hopper, the artists that I look to for some of my main influence include Pablo Picasso, John Register, Charles Sheeler, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Rackstraw Downes and Richard Diebenkorn. While looking at

the work of these artists, I feel that they are drawn to the shape of a rectangle much the way I am. Though these artists are dealing with a similar subject matter and interest in shape, they do not necessarily share my aesthetic interests. My aesthetics ground themselves in Picassos collages, the early 20th century Ashcan school in New York, the combine paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, Lee Bontecou's relief sculptures and the work of the Cass Corridor artists in Detroit that found limited fame during the 60's and 70's.

I would consider Picasso to be the patriarch of my artistic family tree and he is also the first to address, using fine arts, the surface qualities I enjoy. By helping to invent collage, Picasso started a method for making art that represents the aesthetics found in urban environments which evolved through the twentieth century to influence my own practices of combining found materials, fabricated objects, newsprint, paint and drawing materials. Robert Rauschenberg is an amazing example of the mastery of this process and has a library of work dedicated to pushing the limits of the materials one can use to create a work of art. These pieces are some of my favorite works of all time and solidly depict the gritty haphazard quality of cities that I enjoy so much. In *Collage: The Making of Modern Art*, Brandon Taylor speaks of the results and implications that come from using found objects,

The material plentitude of large-format painting that erupted in New York- dripped, flung, pasted, spread, poured- by itself echoed the large material endowments of the new American city. (Taylor 106).

This quote best describes the approach I am after. I want this work to be of the city while also trying to capture the aesthetic value and surface texture of the city.

The place where I make the biggest connection with the development of a city is through my creation process. In discussing my process, I feel I should start by mentioning the construction of my surfaces, because like the construction of a city, my work starts with a foundation and develops from there. The paintings start as cradled panels (that I construct myself

using machines and tools), sometimes several panels are used for one piece in conjunction with fabricated or found elements, which are attached at some early point to give myself that solid foundation. This foundation represents the painting's infrastructure and also allows me to represent my interest in urban design and city planning. Without an infrastructure the subsequent layers would not hold together in as a cohesive structure.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* author Jane Jacobs deals with the city as a sum of its parts. She speaks about the functions of individual parts like sidewalks, neighborhoods and diversity, but she also delivers information on how these parts can all operate efficiently together. This is the approach that I try to take with my own work. All the pieces are important as individual elements but they must work together as an effective cohesive final product.

As with any artist there is a strong emphasis on the creative process or construction (additive) element in my process, but the development of my surfaces also implements a strong use of a subtraction. By editing or deleting I am able to excavate through my newest layers so as to expose the earlier underpainting and design of a piece. By maintaining and then exposing the visual history of my surface development, I am able to hint at those ideas of renewal and development found in the combinations of materials that make up a city. I understand that all paintings involve a process of layering and many artists employ addition by subtraction, but I attempt to allow small parts of every layer to show in either texture, color or line work so that the process of development remains visually intact. Some of the materials I use to develop these surfaces include but are not limited to: masonite, concrete, cardboard, paint, plywood, various papers, dirt, MDF, scrap wood from destroyed skids, sand paper; drawing tools like pastel, charcoal, pencil, ink; as well as, spray adhesives, nails, pipes, and road signs.

As an artist, my roots are in American Realism but the process I use is not in an academic traditional style. I always have an idea of what the final imagery should look like but my process is not linear at all. My work is always shifting and elements of previous works are fused with newer works in a frankenstein-esque method. Even as you read this, some of you might be thinking to yourself, “this is all over the place”, but my main goal is always intact. Unification between my imagery or subject matter and the process used to create it. It is this sense of flux and ongoing change and development that I try to infuse into my work so that it mirrors our actual environment. In order to emphasize the change between elements through layering it is important for me to inject the paintings with aspects of time, both in the fragmentation of space which suggests various times of day, and also the actual process of time and how it affects the surfaces of my pieces and the materials involved. Just as our architecture is affected by time, my paintings must also receive a similar wear and tear, which means they will become more accurate depictions of their subject matter with age. The desire to have an aged product is why I do not use a painting process that employs any archival relevance. In conjunction with this process I typically paint on a large format so that the viewer may get a feeling of the size and presence of the space itself. This allows me to translate the sublime sensation I get in a monumental space to the viewer.

My experience in Grand Rapids is documented within these paintings and they represent my aesthetic values being applied to representations of the landscapes I have been provided with. The tools I use to achieve these final results have been influenced by: factories, friends, rap music, steel, rust, trains, cranes, drugs, alcohol, bricks, construction sites, sports, family, vandalism, demolition and traveling.

Excerpts from personal sketchbooks:

Undergraduate sketch book, 2006:

My art is a representation of the aesthetically pleasing parts of traditionally non-beautiful objects/ structures

Statement Vocabulary, 10/14/2009

Cubist Space, American Landscape, Physicality, Texture.....etc.

Excerpt from Aesthetic Discovery Paper, Fall 2009:

The windows had been blown out on several floors on two corners of the building, leaving it with the appearance that a bomb had gone off. You could see right into the floors of the building, metal supports were twisted and hanging out over the street below and papers were continually flying around out and through the gaps in the sides of the building.

Statement, Spring 2010:

This work is for all the lower class straight white males, and it celebrates the environment of, including but not limited to: inner-city kids, hustlers, women, pimps, drug addicts, gays, men, children, homeless, hispanics, blacks, drunks, mentally challenged, moms, sons, grandparents, pushers and any other humans that have been put down and/or marginalized. The places I paint are accessible by all people regardless of gender, race, religion or social background.

Note in sketchbook, 6/28/10 5:15PM

Representative of a link between the way art is created and the way we build our world/ society.

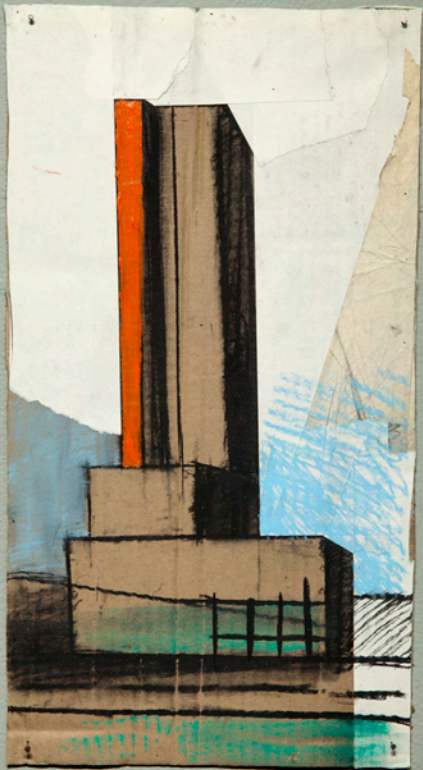
Note from sketchbook explaining use of found materials, 8/1/10

Detour sign acts as base, referencing sculpture, furthering the idea of the painting as an object. Not easily ignored. Stresses mass and power. Exists on our plane, the floor plane.

Statement 8/8/10:

The landscapes themselves that I choose to paint are chosen because of their potential to help create a balanced and intriguing composition through the overall shapes and colors of the structure. The use of space is

very important to me. Illusionary painted space and physical three-dimensional elements are combined to push this sense of space and depth. This helps me achieve the illusion of the constructed space as it exists in our world, and it also allows me to physically create my own space so that the painting exists more as a tangible object. There is also an interest in the interaction between the viewer and the paintings themselves. When we exist within a landscape we are standing on the same plane as the world itself. In order to begin achieving this same sensation I have begun creating ways for the painting to touch the ground and be a part of that same space the viewer is standing on.





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9/26/10 2:40 PM

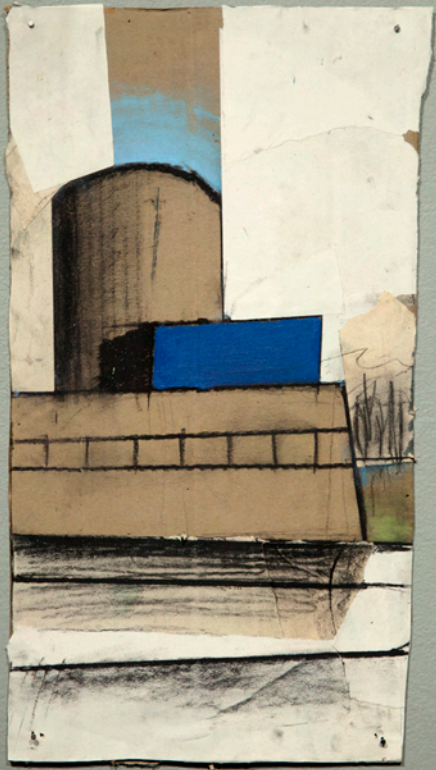
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4:01 PM

8/11















Steven Vinson
MFA Thesis Exhibition
Development

