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All Thanks To You

Introduction and Overview

My painting is a celebration of vernacular culture augmented by playful color, imagery, and composition. Hopefully my viewers will find such a playful approach refreshing given the current political climate's constant messages of inevitable doom. For me, painting is a way of depicting incidental everyday life and the way in which memories transpose upon experience. Through structural breakups in shape, imagery, and arrangement, I am building a solid stage for a more improvisational performance. Antonin Artaud, an early contemporary thinker who wrote *The Theatre and Its Double* suggested "a call for communion between actor and audience in a magic exorcism; gestures, sounds, unusual scenery, and lighting combine to form a language, superior to words, that can be used to subvert thought and logic and to shock the spectator into seeing the baseness of his world."¹ For Artaud, shock is not meant as throwing a bucket of cold water at someone, but to allow the audience to receive the world around them in a way that transcends normalness. Though I am not looking to *shock* my audience, the language of my painting engages the viewer with open narratives.

Methodology and Process

¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Antonin Artaud*. 9 February 2009. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antonin-Artaud>. Web.

There is a sense of directness to my methodology. A studio practice should be active. I am often working on a few different things at once. Through this active approach, there is a certain playfulness and experimentation with materials and application. Different works sit side by side in communication with each other, revealing their nature in different and unexpected ways. I will turn works upside down and sometimes cut them into different shapes. This serves as a constant reminder to look at these works from different perspectives. My pallet is currently comprised of pre-mixed commercial house paint. The paint was mostly acquired from working different music festivals throughout the country, or picked from the “oops” section at big box hardware stores. I use what is available to me. Resourcefulness is important because it forces my hand. Constraint is liberating because it allows for truly organic thoughts. Through these self-imposed restraints, something happens.

Structural breakups between color, shape, imagery, and arrangement inevitably impacts traditional devices of perspective and composition. As far as how a piece comes together, I usually start with a quick pen drawing on scrap paper, or jot down an idea in a notebook. From there, a smaller painting is developed on paper. The smaller paintings live in the studio—usually in a big pile.

I approach space within each painting spontaneously: bouncing shapes off one another, piecing together a puzzle as a ground layer, thus opening up different areas to add, overlap, and fill with imagery, pattern, or more shapes in the steps that follow. This approach reflects the disorganized memory of events that often happens while trying to remember stories or pictures from the original concept—a catalog of different feelings, events, and ideas. This process is always in flux until the painting feels finished. Lately,

there have been a few art practices: painting in my studio, experimenting with printmaking techniques, drawing outdoors, utilizing the woodshop, and collaborating with my partner, Bob Holzhausen. I incorporate these practices together in order to construct a larger body of work. Although this way of working requires more planning than the intuitive approach I have used in the past, it allows me to reflect more on what I imagine the final piece may look like. When collaborating, Bob and I use creativity to entertain ourselves while working through memories both good and bad. Even at our most divergent, it's difficult to not see common threads connecting both our collaborative work and individual practices.

Multistability

In an episode of *Abstract: The Art of Design*, illustrator Christoph Neimann describes how he is "constantly trying to reinvent [...] image making, how [he] approach[es] storytelling, because the audience changes all the time, [and he] change[s] all the time."² This rings true in any art practice. In order to keep things interesting, I approach image-making with the idea of multistability. W.J.T. Mitchell describes multistability as:

the shifting of figure and ground, the switching of aspects, the display of pictorial paradox and forms of nonsense. We might call this the 'wildness' of the metapicture, its resistance to domestication, and its associations with primitivism, savagery, and animal behavior.³

² *Abstract: The Art of Design, Episode 1: Christoph Neimann, Illustrator*. Morgan Neville. Netflix Original Documentary Series. 2017. *Netflix*. Web. 2017.

³ Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago, Illinois. The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London. 1994. Print.

In my work, for example, a shape may look like a vase or a goofy necktie. The dog may look like a cat. The two figures may look like they're hugging or choking each other. I approach these images in a playful way, intrigued by what my audience may see differently. I gravitate toward the slippage between being ambiguous and discreetly overt at the same time.

Narratives take on a sense of multistability in my work, too. There are compositions within composition, narratives tucked in with other narratives. Piece to piece, I incorporate a lot with the same imagery and patterns, but in different scenarios. The multiple narratives do not employ linear time, they unfold instantaneously. The longer one looks at the piece, the more intertwined stories they may find. As the painter, I appreciate this sense of control within a "hide and seek" approach: not pointing toward the answers. In other words, the autobiographical approach is not too revealing.

A Personal Motif: the Generic "Cattle Dog"

The image of a three-legged dog is utilized within my current body of work as a stand-in character relaying an autobiographical narrative. Contemporary artist Pia Stern's use of animals in her work serve "as some kind of reflection for different aspects of [her]self."⁴ Stern's ideas coincide with the image of the dog in my work. There is something in the idea of engagement and disengagement between myself and the dog that makes for an interesting composition. It also allows for different interpretations from the audience.

⁴ Rosenblum, Robert. *The Dog in Art from Rococco to Post-Modernism*. New York, NY. Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated. 1988. Print

Historically, the dog was used as a working partner—for hunt, transportation, herding cattle, etc. In *Animals in Art: Zoo*, author Edward Lucie-Smith pinpoints the Industrial Revolution as a turning point for dogs. He writes, "as more and more of the population moved into cities, as rural occupations like farming became mechanized, humans lost their sense of intimacy with the animal world because they were no longer using many species as working partners."⁵ Lucie-Smith goes on to state "this led to a shift in emphasis. An animal within the human sphere was no longer a partner, but a pet—that is, a creature kept for the pleasure of its company rather than its usefulness"⁶

The dog in my work acts as a constant companion. The particular breed of the dog is supposed to reflect an Australian Cattle Dog, a herding breed, known for the constant need for routine—for a job to do. The dog image routinely shows up in my narrative. The relationship between the dog and myself is a necessary one, as it demonstrates our co-evolution over time. Moreover, "Dogs," as art historian Robert Rosenblum states, "continue to play roles that mirror most closely the activities and needs of the humans they live with".⁷

In my current body of work, the dog may be seen as an onlooker, the main character, under stress, or may even be subtly obstructed from view (figures 1, 2, & 3). Sometimes the dog is depicted as doing something that an animal is physically and

⁵ Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Animals in Art: Zoo*. New York, NY. Watson-Guption Publications. 1998. Print. p 96.

⁶ Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Animals in Art: Zoo*. New York, NY. Watson-Guption Publications. 1998. Print. p 97-98.

⁷ Rosenblum, Robert. *The Dog in Art from Rococco to Post-Modernism*. New York, NY. Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated. 1988. Print. p 10.

mentally unable to do. Celebrated animal painter, Philip Reinagle's *Portrait of an Extraordinary Musical Dog* (figure 4) comes to mind. In it, there is a dog playing the piano, looking directly at the audience. In *The Dog in Art: From Rococco to Post Modernism*, Rosenblum writes "Reinagle's painting unforgettably records the extravagant extremes of empathy that could be projected upon dogs and other animals."⁸ The dog character used in my work is a constant thread depicting the everyday incidental. Dogs are our companions, and perhaps more importantly, dogs are a whole lot cooler than humans. They greet you after a long day, encourage us to venture outside despite the weather, do not express strong political opinions at holidays, and keep the kitchen floor spotless at all times. The image of a three-legged dog is utilized within my current body of work as a stand-in character relaying an autobiographical narrative. The dog alternates roles: sometimes subject, at others object. This variability adds nuance to interpretation.

Carnavalesque

In the last year, my painting has extended beyond the canvas. Instead of staying within the confines of a two dimensional surface, I have continued to spread paint from canvas to wall, wall to floor, floor to standalone pieces or structures, and have even gone so far as painting readymade objects such as a television, door, bottles, and miscellaneous items. Doing so creates an immersive environment, but I continue to use a flat application. For instance, included in my thesis show, *All Thanks To You*, are five boots on top of a small stage-like structure. The face of each boot is a flat cutout shape

⁸ Rosenblum, Robert. *The Dog in Art from Rococco to Post-Modernism*. New York, NY. Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated. 1988. Print

with a simple brace attached to the back so each boot can stand on its own. I enjoy the lack of dimensionality as it relates to set design and hints at a specific thing or place or situation, but they remain flat and static. It's playful, humorous, and shows the simplicity of construction. I kept Eleanor Antin's photo project, *100 Boots*, in mind while making the boots (figure 5). There are five boots, signifying that complete pairs are not as important as the significance in number.

My thesis show takes on a constructed environment that at first glance may be an overwhelming, but playful space—similar to the likes of 1990's Nickelodeon game show sets like *Figure it Out*, and *Double Dare*, *Peewee's Playhouse*, and various cartoons of the 90s. The walls of the gallery are covered from floor to ceiling with painted plywood sheets full of faux bricks, and two arms extending out on opposite walls—almost as if they are offering a big hug. This larger than life application reminds me of a carnival. Though carnivals can be traced back all the way to Medieval times, I'm nodding at the more contemporary carnivals we used to go to when we were kids—the wide open mouth you walk through, human-sized hamster wheel, bright colors, and smell of elephant ears and corndogs that stick to your clothes for days. In *Carnavalesque*, an exhibition catalog by Timothy Hyman and Roger Malbert, they describe the carnival as “invok[ing] nostalgia for an authentic popular culture, spontaneously creative, communal, and steeped in tradition.”⁹ The carnival is a place to escape the normalness and routine of everyday life. It travels to different towns and predicates its message of inclusivity. Malbert goes on to say, “carnival, like art, is authorized transgression, framed by the surrounding order in time and place. When the

⁹ Malbert, Roger. *Carnavalesque*. London, England. The Beacon Press/Hayward Gallery Publishing. 2000. Print. p 75.

frame constricts, the crowd may rebel, but the essential impulse of Carnival is positive, regenerative, a seasonal excess of high spirits.”¹⁰ In addition to the covered walls, many paintings are hung throughout the gallery. It’s a playful space, where all of the paintings are in communication with one another through repeated imagery, pattern and color. They work well together, but are also visually strong on their own.

Influences

My aesthetic took a turn when I saw the Matisse retrospective at The Art Institute of Chicago during my undergraduate studies back in 2009. Matisse's use of color, shape, perspective, and line struck something in me: painting from life does not have to be proportionally correct. One can celebrate the ordinary in the way they approach the canvas.

Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (figure 6) is an influential piece. His style, playing on form and shape in his own peculiar way (Cubism), comes through as he depicts a portrait of the pain and horror of war. I often borrow and reinterpret such stylistic tools, and sometimes in my work, the narratives also take on a more uncomfortable feel. For instance, in *Backyard Beers* (figure 1), the character on the left-hand side may be dancing, falling into the kiddie-pool, or too drunk to stand up. The color palette and use of shapes and cutout forms adds a playful feel to an otherwise awkward situation.

One can see the influence of Jim Nutt's use of pattern, flatness of composition, and quirky characters in my work, too. Nutt's color palette conceals grotesque subject matter, and his use of pattern does not qualify as pretty or decorative in the general sense.

¹⁰ Malbert, Roger. *Carnavalesque*. London, England. The Beacon Press/Hayward Gallery Publishing. 2000. Print. p 75.

Wayne White changed the game for me as an artist, but also as someone who has apprehension toward being an artist figuring out his *place* in a pretentious art world. After getting a sense of who White is, what he does, and how he does it in his documentary, *Beauty is Embarrassing*, I felt empowered to make work that was interesting to me, rather than to fit in a certain style or aesthetic. White sticks to his principles, creating honest and unapologetic work. In a review for *Slant Magazine*, Elise Nakhnikian mentions White's use of humor in his work and how through humor, White can tackle the harder or more serious stuff. Nakhnikian writes, "watching White gaze at a giant papier-mache LBJ puppet he made while psychoanalyzing the man, you sense how his puppets help him dilute the power of the people—Southern patriarchs, mostly—he's felt oppressed by, defeating his demons through humor. 'I'll settle for laughter any day,' he says. 'Laughter is a deep thing.'¹¹

David Hockney created a handful of set designs that really captivated my eye when someone recommended them to check out. Hockney, a notable painter, expanded his creative catalog with different set designs, but continued to keep a similar style and color pallet we find in his paintings (figure 7). This is an idea I am trying to push further—creating an environment that places the viewer within that space.

More contemporary artists have influenced me too. One of the many wonderful aspects of technology is accessibility. Instagram is a surprisingly helpful platform for discovering a network of different artists around the world including @georg_oskar, an artist living and working in Iceland painting beefy, skewed portraits; @dominic_musa, a

¹¹ Nakhnikian, Elise. "Review: Beauty Is Embarrassing". *Slant Magazine*. <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/beauty-is-embarrassing/>. Web. 2012.

graduate student in the painting program at RISD, uses an airy yet bold application of paint that suggests the moment right before something significant happens;

@thomasslater, an illustrator based in London, has incredible MDF laser cuts that he paints using bright and bold colors. They act as stand-alone sculptures. Painting is more accessible than ever. Because of social media outlets, painters can connect with other painters. Whether it acts as a reassurance mechanism or not, the double tap of the screen (indicating you like a piece) helps to foster camaraderie with one another and motivation to keep creating. The same thing can be said of surrounding yourself with a community of other makers and thinkers. It is essential to living and working as artists.



Figure 1. Franks-Holzhausen, Egan. *Backyard Beers*. 36 x 46 in. 2017



Figure 2. Franks-Holzhausen, Egan. *Rinkidink*. 5 x 6 ft. 2016.



Figure 3. Franks-Holzhausen, Egan. *April Fool's*. 4 x 5 ft. 2017.



Figure 4. Reinagle, Philip. *Portrait of an Extraordinary Musical Dog*. 1803.



Figure 5. Antin, Eleanor. *100 Boots*. 1971.



Figure 6. Picasso, Pablo. *Guernica*. 1937.



Figure 7. Hockney, David. Set design for *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.



Figure 8. White, Wayne. *LBJ*.



Figure 9. Oskar, Georg. *High & Dry*.

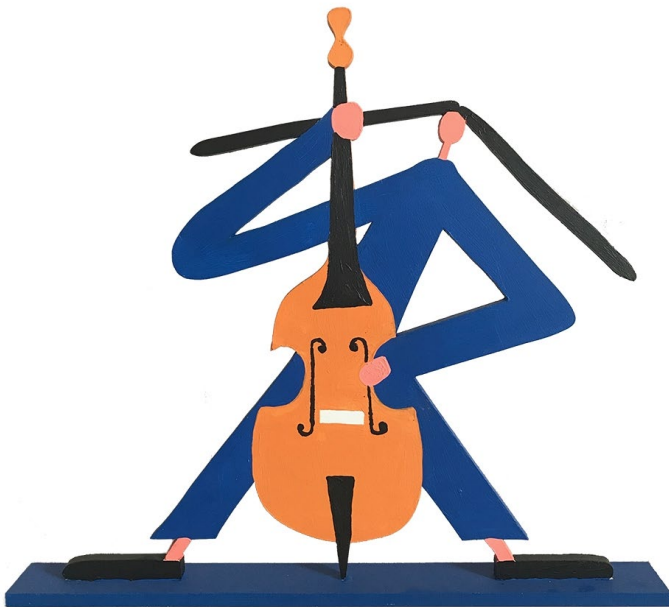


Figure 10. Slater, Thomas.

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