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There is Someone in This Dress, George

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018
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Abstract

THERE IS SOMEONE IN THIS DRESS, GEORGE

By Michael Sean Royce, Master of Fine Arts

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Major Director: Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking Department

Questions surrounding queer subjectivity—including shame, the closet, and celebration—are at the core of my interests as a painter and image maker. Mining the history of religious iconography, including annunciation paintings, scenes of the crucifixion, and other notable works of this ilk, my paintings seek to explore the intricacies of sexuality and the workings of shame and celebration at play in the life of the queer-identified.

The Goat and the Swan

I'll get it out of the way: Catholicism lingered in the corners of my household. We went to church on Sunday, but it was something we never talked about much as a family. Our Sunday morning routine was perfunctory, my siblings groaning at having to sit through something so dull, my parents seemingly motivated by a sense of obligation to rear their children with a moral compass. Around the time that I came out to myself, I sat in the high school auditorium that we used as a temporary church and heard resoundingly of the perversion of the homosexual from the priest in his sermon. This scared me shitless. The homosexual was discussed under the umbrella of "sexuality gone astray" including sex workers, child molesters, and the like. This condemnation was crippling for a thirteen-year-old, the proliferation of body hair and sexual urges already throwing my sense of stability out of whack. I would flush deep red when these subjects were broached, lock my eyes in front of me, and try very hard not to swallow too loudly as my mouth suddenly filled with saliva. I was very reasonably under the impression that my urges were perverse.

For myself and others who grew up in similarly repressive religious environments, this message of sexual deviance left its mark. I lived for a decade in the state of knowing that I was gay and simultaneously knowing that people in power in my life found this to be a morally dubious or downright evil way to live. The aftermath of the AIDS crisis helped to further cement the notion that this persuasion was somehow linked to death, an impossibly dramatic idea, had it not been based in fact. It cannot go without saying that I received an enormous amount of support and love from my family and friends as I began to slowly come out to those around me.

This period of my life, however, after coming out to myself but living essentially in the closet, is perhaps the origin of my interest in the confluence of sexuality, shame, power, and religion.

In the summer of 2017, I spent a few months in a residency outside of Florence, traveling around the area, witnessing the history of the Catholic imagination laid before me in all of its often awkward, opulent splendor. From town to town, the life of Christ was etched into my retinas, from the annunciation to the crucifixion, remade with ever increasing advancements in pictorial representation. I was interested in the subject as an ex-Catholic, but primarily as a painter, and did not consider the degree to which these paintings had so firmly implanted themselves for a second time on my psyche. Imagine my surprise, then, to find the works in my thesis exhibition to be none other than an annunciation, a Madonna and Child, a crucifixion, and a resurrection of sorts, although heavily remixed and reconfigured. The cast of characters here is not stable; Christ is played at once by a kitten and SpongeBob, the Madonna is envisioned as *Star Wars*' Darth Vader. The Angel Gabriel of the annunciation is played by a swan plummeting through an open window, and the Virgin Mary in this scene as a silhouetted man on all fours. These substitutions and transgenderings seek to break open the historical religious images into sites of play and re-imagination as an irreverent reclamation of agency lost under the order of the church. Intermixed with this Catholic imagery are references to *Leda and the Swan*, a story originating in Greek mythology but remade countless times in the history of painting. Taking cues from the many iterations of this image (painted by artists as disparate as Michelangelo and Otto Dix) the painting's most salient thematic reference outside of my own experience comes not from the history of visual culture, but from contemporary theater.

Edward Albee's 2002 Tony Award-winning play *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia; Notes Towards a Definition of Tragedy* examines the ways a singular family is forced to reckon with kinds of desire outside of those codified by centuries of sanctified heterosexual relations. Albee initially began writing a play about a successful doctor who, in attempt to understand the suffering of his patients and the stigma that often comes with illness, chooses to infect himself with the HIV virus. Although Albee decided not to follow through with this idea, he pursued it in a different guise, shifting the primary metaphor of the play to the central character Martin Gray's love affair with a goat named Sylvia.¹

Gray is an architect in his prime. At the outset of the play he has just received news of winning a major prize in architecture, and is about to begin work on another large project in middle America. He lives with his wife Stevie and his teenage son Billy, in what seems to be relative happiness and mutual understanding, aside from the requisite teen dramas. Martin's fate begins to unravel as an old friend comes to interview him about his recently won prize. Through a stilted conversation Martin finally concedes the fact that he is in love and having sex with a goat he calls Sylvia. Martin, although racked with guilt by his admission, remains startlingly at ease with his love for Sylvia, somehow at peace with the object of his affection and his desire for her.

The play combusts at this point; Stevie and Billy both reckon wildly and violently with Martin's admission, throwing vases and words with the vitriol and hurt that might seem natural in response to such an impossible reveal. Twists and turns of tone continue to arc through the play, as the comedic and tragic intermingle, arriving finally at the play's ultimately tragic

¹ Edward Albee, *Stretching my mind* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), 259.

conclusion. Stevie, in her inability to deal with Martin's simultaneous love for her and the goat, finds the beast and slays it. In a moment of unbelievable agony and revenge, Stevie enters the family home, carrying the limp corpse behind her. Martin, in his stupor, murmurs an empty apology to both his son and wife, as the play draws to an end.

I have tried to fill my paintings with the intensity and directness in Albee's play. Most notable are the examination of questions surrounding tolerance—who and what we are culturally given permission to love—and how that affects those around us. The animals in my paintings, not unlike Albee's goat, act as stand-ins for objects of desire that are deemed out-of-bounds within certain social parameters. In Stephen Bottom's *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, the author, recalling John Berger, states, “‘the life of an...animal becomes an ideal, an ideal internalized as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire.’ That Martin should act on that desire through bestiality literalizes his extremity of alienation and longing.”² Albee's use of the goat compresses the repressed object of desire into something so vulgar to Martin's family that it becomes an abstraction. Albee contends directly with the difficulty of existing in the world with these “perverse” desires (for human males in his case, and not female goats), with the corresponding desires cast as aberrant, vulgar, *shameful*.

Albee's play criss-crosses many other taboo subjects in addition to the central bestial transgression. Martin's son Billy is coming to terms with his own homosexuality, and through Albee's unsubtle naming of this character he becomes another, perhaps even more charged source for examining the unwieldy and unpredictable nature of longing. The characters in *The Goat* seem to get wires crossed in the realm of desire and love — familial, romantic, and sexual

² Stephen Bottoms, *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 209.

love all intermingle and cross-pollinate. The play takes on the most violent and painful public slandering of the homosexual: that we are so wildly sexually deprived as to lust after animals or children, even our own.

I attempted, unsuccessfully, to make artworks that deal directly with the shame caused by the internalization of the public depictions of the perverse homosexual, wallowing in it, perhaps you could say, in an exercise that proved to be unproductive. The paintings made in this vein seemed only to reproduce the discomfort around shame, without offering catharsis for the knot lodged there. In working through this subject, it became clear that in a further attempt to make paintings that delve into this line of inquiry, and the possibility of reclaiming some of the space that has been taken by this shame, there needed to be lightness and humor for the subject to be at all palatable. Animals that populated the images became charged in another way, as conduits for thinking through means to picture this supposed aberrance in the realm of love. Swans, so often depicted as a duo with their long necks forming a heart in an image of sanitized romance, become sexual actors in a scene in which a lone male character indulges in a moment of transgressive pleasure. There is not only pleasure, however. The paintings occupy a space that is absurd, humorous, flamboyant, and simultaneously, through the disappearance of and lack of rendering of the figures, remains receding, evasive, undisclosed. I link this alternating tonal register to an emotional oscillation in which queer people, or many, must constantly patrol their outness within different contexts. In a gay bar, as an example, one can be as flamboyant as one likes, perhaps even *perform* flamboyance; on the street in a conservative town in broad daylight this may be a different story.



Annunciation (Backwards), 2018, Acrylic on Canvas, 60 x 85 inches.

Eve Sedgwick in her essay *Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel* explores connections between shame and queerness, and the way in which the affect shame can be both transformed and transformative. Sedgwick perceptively binds together the affect shame and queer subjectivities. “Queer, I’d suggest, might usefully be thought of as referring in the first place to this group or an overlapping group of infants and children, those whose sense of identity is for some reason tuned most durably to the note of shame.”³ Sedgwick, fascinatingly, does not join shame and queerness in a causal way as I assumed, that one’s queerness *causes* one to feel shame, but rather, that these two qualities, for whatever reason, often exist together. Here she offers no evidence for her claim outside of the

³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 63.

anecdotal. I can speak for no one else, but as a queer ex-catholic my sense of identity has for much of my life been tuned to this note.

Sedgwick dives into psychological research on the subject, exploring early experiences in relation to shame. Recognition, or lack thereof, seems to be at the core of this affect, when “the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child’s face and the caregivers recognized face...is broken: the moment when the adult face fails or refuses to play its part in the continuation of mutual gaze; when, for any one of many reasons, it fails to be recognizable to, or recognizing of, the infant, who has been, so to speak, ‘giving face’ based on a faith in the continuity of this circuit.”⁴ The shame-humiliation response then occurs when emotional feedback is absent, producing feelings of isolation that must be relieved despite being in the presence of another.

Untitled (Kitten), an image of Darth Vader as the Virgin Mother breastfeeding a cat, hyperbolizes this play of stunted communication, literalizing the lack of emotive facial movements in Vader’s cold, metallic helmet. The Holy Mother, miscast in this scene as a violent father, engages in a moment of life-giving tenderness with the animal, despite his robotic and armored body. My image breaks apart the perfection of the traditional Madonna and Child, inserting into the tableau another moment of intimacy across species, an arrangement that must exist by choice and outside of the biologically determined. The image recalls other notable cross-species relations, remarkably similar to the image of Koko, the western lowland gorilla, who kept as a pet an orange cat named Lipstick. The image of Koko is of relevance here, aside from its striking formal resemblance, as an instance in which longing for intimacy and companionship overturns the allegedly natural order. The painting equally takes on dated,

⁴ Sedgwick, *Touching feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 36.



Untitled (Kitten), 2018, Acrylic on Canvas, 16 x 22 inches.

disproved notions about the causes of homosexuality, namely that an overbearing mother and a distant father are to blame for this supposed aberration. *Untitled (Kitten)* mashes and parodies these ideas, the distant father hyperbolically removed, and yet simultaneously an overbearing, engulfing feminine force. (I should point out here that this particular painting emerges from research conducted by theorists and psychologists, synthesized by Sedgwick into theories surrounding shame, and not the autobiographical.)

“The forms taken by shame are not distinct ‘toxic’ parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised;” Sedgwick continues, “they are instead integral to and residual in the process

by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation.”⁵ The act of painting and image making itself then becomes a conduit for the exploration, and potentially transformation, of the closet and shame. At the outset of the making of these images, I hoped somehow that the paintings would cause a shift in my internal compass, that through their creation, something could be excised through public address. The works contend with shame but also *caused* shame in me as a maker, a complex set of emotions that I have tumbled through over the course of the semester in preparation for the companion show to my MFA thesis. To tackle a subject that has caused emotional turbulence in such a public forum has unsurprisingly continued to cause more discomfort. It was difficult for me to make these paintings, and continued to cause some sense of dread as the exhibition date drew nearer. Vulnerability, and the sharing of difficult experiences could be healing in some contexts, and certainly seems to be encouraged within art schools. I am unsure at this time whether these paintings have functioned as a vehicle for healing or further distress. (I will admit that this portion of the writing was completed before hanging the exhibition. Once the works were in the space, fear about their public reception seemed to have vanished.)

As a result of this uncertainty, I find myself all the more fortified by a practice such as Albee’s. A friend of mine mentioned working on a production of *The Goat* while we were in college—I was shocked, and elated frankly, to hear that someone was willing to discuss in public something I was barely able to think through myself. The possibility that my work could

⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 63.

function in a similar way that Albee's did for me for another person makes the discomfort feel worthwhile.



Kerry James Marshall, *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, 2012, Acrylic on Canvas, 108 x 158 inches, Birmingham Museum of Art

My task of picturing queerness in all of its myriad parts particularly shame, celebration, and the closet—subjects which have not often been explicitly addressed within the history of painting—have been heavily inspired by the pictorial sophistication and social ambition of Kerry James Marshall. Marshall's practice attends to the lack of representations of blackness in the history of painting, rectifying a heavily skewed canon with a deftness and intelligence as a painter that feels to me unparalleled in this particular moment. Marshall's project of representing

blackness within this history requires that the work is made of the highest quality, that the paintings can sit alongside the visual mastery, to use Marshall's term, of the most skilled practitioners.⁶ The level of accomplishment in his practice is not quality for quality's sake; the paintings must be made with excellence for the subjects represented there to exist with a "beauty and dignity where it had long been denied."⁷ Painting and blackness are equally centralized here, his project an impossibility without both the richness and the omissions of the history of the genre.

Marshall's approach to his subject and painterly tendencies are both points of inspiration for my practice. I cannot make the claim that our aims are in too strong a parallel given my privilege as a white male artist—I do hope, however, that the space given to picturing queer experience could in some regard mirror Marshall's ambition in picturing blackness. I look to his images as points of validation in presenting experiences that exist towards the margins of representations in dominant culture, especially outside of the history of the painted image. The larger political aims of Marshall's practice have certainly been instructive, although perhaps more of an influence is Marshall's relentless pursuit of painting. Marshall has stated that he wanted to know how to make paintings first, and art second.⁸

This ambition to know painting first is evident in the huge range of visual possibilities alive in Marshall's images. His richly black figures almost fade into abstraction, the articulation of their bodies the subtlest modulations of grey. Chunky impasto, highly illusionistic renderings,

⁶ "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry," The Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://www.moca.org/exhibition/kerry-james-marshall-mastry>

⁷ "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry."

⁸ Kerry James Marshall, Terrie Sultan and Arthur Jafa, *Kerry James Marshall* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2000), 9.

gestural brushwork and delicate alterations of surface all grace Marshall's canvases. Vision itself is often highlighted, as seen in *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture*, pictured above. An anamorphic image of Disney's Sleeping Beauty is rendered as if a tangible entity in the space, its flatness and physical impossibility comedically highlighted by a small child looking under this image of white female beauty. Seen in sharp perspective, the princess stands as a potent counterpoint to the beautification of black female bodies in the lively salon pictured in the scene. The mediated history of looking, here specifically at notions of beauty in relation to race, are so complexly articulated through Marshall's inventive decision making. Realism appears to be a kind of scaffolding, where visual twists and turns complicate the image, veering in and out of predictable illusionistic space, into more complex concerns outside of the painting, through painting.

It is my hope that when imaginative and painterly liberties are taken on my behalf, the decisions could resound with a similar clarity and logic that underlies Marshall's thinking. In *Annunciation (Backwards)*, as mentioned above, I have articulated the central figure as at once a void and a solid, both subject and background. This decision, which embraces a painted logic over any possible "real" situation, engages larger issues surrounding sexuality and the closet. The image proposes something that is said, but not said, a direct address but simultaneously covered. It is this that I glean from Marshall's modulated realism—an embrace of conventional pictorial space as an armature that can be toyed with and elaborated on to address larger concerns off the canvas.

The Painted Image

The medium of painting can do a few things very well. I am particularly interested in the internal construction of images, and the way that meaning can be made through attention to this internal construction. Carroll Dunham and Fra Angelico, two vastly different painters to be sure, have both created images that rely on relationships made within the confines of the canvas. They use this play to more deeply and complexly convey ideas around the sexualized body and Catholic symbology respectively, two areas of inquiry at work in my studio.

Dunham's Bathers

Carroll Dunham's paintings have long titillated me in a profound way, with an accompanying sense of embarrassment, perhaps shame, at this love. Dunham's paintings combine rigorous compositional strategies with the off-handed doodling of a stoned high schooler, endlessly re-inscribing a phallus into the back of a composition notebook, or scratching a dirty word into a desk. The combination of these divergent qualities—a raucous libidinal energy and a tightly controlled diagrammatic impulse—give his paintings their peculiar, often uncomfortable charge. These battling impulses repeat throughout his oeuvre, with increasingly complex parameters as compositional strategies and subject matter collide in remarkably jarring ways.

Dunham's paintings seem to be meta-paintings, a quality which especially reveals itself in the Bather series. As the history of painting is so loaded with images of men painting women, especially nude women, especially bathing women, I think of Dunham's paintings as



Carroll Dunham, *Large Bather (quicksand)*, 2006-2012, Polyurethane and pigment and pencil on linen, 96 1/8 × 119 1/4 inches, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

psychological X-rays of countless Cezannes and Renoirs, in which he lays bare in his cartoon versions the desire for sexual congress, or perhaps conquest of women's bodies. The women no longer occupy the space of an object to be lustfully looked on, but are active, enormous, powerful beings extending fully to the support on which they are imaged.

That is not to deny that there is something revolting in Dunham's paintings, something deeply perverse in his logic. I often wonder looking at his paintings: should this be allowed? Questions of representation in image making are discussed with renewed vigor in this era in

which Trump, Black Lives Matter, and the #MeToo movement occupy more and more public debate. The Bather images in particular question who is culturally given permission to make what kinds of images, and who grants that permission. The answer is in this case Dunham himself, who is obviously willing to delve into subject matter that many shy away from. Dunham's women are all white, all sexualized (or at least have their sexual organs centrally displayed) and are usually faceless, their bodies often fragmented. Dunham's oeuvre could certainly be placed on a watch list, although I think his paintings are too complex to be merely dismissed as having bad politics. This belief is difficult to substantiate concretely, but Dunham does provide some, albeit brief, assistance in this area: "I started focusing on the female body and women in nature as a viable subject right about the time my older daughter finished school. I was very interested in the idea of female empowerment;" this, however, by no means closes the topic.⁹ In a recent public interview given by Dunham, the question and answer portion of the event was closed by Dunham's wife Laurie Simmons asking "What's with all the female genitalia? Are you a pervert? Are you a feminist? What's going on?" Dunham here gives an inconclusive reply, but Alexi Worth in his article *Carroll Dunham: Eyes Wide Shut* may provide some more illuminating revelations. Worth points out the ways that the branches of the trees dispersed throughout the paintings, the potential phallic components of the images, have mostly been sawed off into stumps, rendering the visually masculine elements of the painting inert, powerless. The paintings then could be read as woman-centric worlds, with the intervening presence of men literally cut down.¹⁰ There is of course, though, a man at the center of the

⁹"It's a Toxic Soup of Ego and Higher Callings': A Talk With Carroll Dunham," Last modified December 7, 2015, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/12/07/bill-powers-talks-with-carroll-dunham/>

¹⁰Alexi Worth, "Carroll Dunham: Eyes Wide Shut," *Brooklyn Rail*, November 1, 2016, <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/11/art/carroll-dunham-eyes-wide-shut>

painting, Dunham himself, very clearly assembling the picture in all of its parts. All of these varied interpretive possibilities mingle to create paintings that actually cause discomfort in me as a viewer, some of the only contemporary paintings I know to cause such a complex and visceral response.

My interest in Dunham lies in this discomfort that he creates, and the way his formal concerns as a painter help to achieve this. The most grandiose of Dunham's bather series, *Large Bather (quicksand)* and a painting several years more recent, *Horse and Rider (My X)*, exemplify Dunham's obsession with *how* these bathers and their environment are formally depicted on the canvas. Each pictures one woman, seemingly inhabiting the space of the broader landscape, nearly tree-sized, rather than on a human scale. These woman have been carefully rendered in relation to the frame of the canvas, and in relation to the surrounding landscape. In *Large Bather (quicksand)*, the pictorial logic of the image seems initially to cohere, but upon further examination, quickly begins to fragment and lose spatial logic. The bather's left leg, for example, is partially obscured by the stump of a tree, and disappears where the leg should continue on the other side. The sand similarly converges instantly to ocean water surrounding this same stump, rendering the shoreline completely invisible. Certain elements of the painting seem to dictate other compositional decisions: the breast of the figure rests on the horizon line; the sun fits precisely into the frame made by the combination of bather's arm, tree, and ocean; the trees under the bather's arm fill only their allotted space and nothing more. The bather's exposed anus, rendered as a perfectly circular black dot, occurs at the absolute center of the painting. In *Horse and Rider (My X)*, this compositional gesture is re-articulated through the visible residue of diagonal chalk lines that Dunham snapped to locate the central point of the

canvas, with other compositional elements, such as the bather's arms, similarly following these diagonal guidelines. This particular gesture of Dunham's, that of placing the perfect black dot of the bather's anus in the direct center of the painting is so perverse, at once sophisticated and juvenile. Beyond these simple binaries, this placement points literally to a world in which, to borrow Worth's phrasing, "sex and shit are central facts." It would be easy to read these images and decisions as merely gratuitous, and in some sense they certainly are. What's enlivening about the paintings, though, is the degree to which they point to the fact that we live each day insular, isolated, and covered. To reveal ones self to this degree, or to even have a highly-stylized representation of that act, feels to me to be an act of intense vulnerability, although complicated by Dunham's insistence on only painting women in this particular position. The degree that the paintings are read as gratuitous in my perception is in direct relation to the way we understand our bodies and their functioning as vulgar. In that sense I think the paintings could be in a generous reading a shameless celebration of the complexity of our bodies and our relationship to them, placing "shit and sex" into the center of the painting unflinchingly. I am constantly torn between thinking the paintings are legitimately vulgar and distasteful, and the possibility that they are incredibly complex investigations of the body, painting, and empowerment.

Dunham has stated that the paintings aren't symbolic, but rather lavish in the particular pictorial and optical qualities that only painting can provide. With such jarring and explicit subject matter it is hard to believe that his decision making could be *only* formal. And although Dunham's intentions for the images are not totally congruent with his briefly stated ideas about the works, it is clear that the paintings' high-voltage charge comes from his obsessive attention to

the ways these forms relate to each other and to the canvas. Dunham's paintings require the viewer to engage in a certain kind of painting and visual logic—you must really *look* at them, slowly, to unearth their peculiar and perverse thinking.



Fra Angelico. *Noli Me Tangere* (detail). About 1438-50.
Fresco. Florence, convent of San Marco, cell 1.

Stigmata and Flowers

Although the content of Dunham's paintings and Fra Angelico's fresco *Noli Me Tangere* could not be further apart, I have been thinking of these images in concert. Fra Angelico's

fresco, painted into a monk's cell in the Convent of Saint Marco,¹¹ depicts the risen Christ and Mary Magdalene in a meadow speckled with flowers. Christ lightly shoulders a shovel; Magdalene reaches toward him, but he indicates that they cannot touch. Angelico paints the meadow where the figures stand with a simple flatness. The plant life of the meadow falls into a delicate abstraction with only two shades of green to indicate the vegetation that surrounds the figures. In a manner similar to something like wallpaper, Angelico speckles the ground with red and white dots, eschewing the technical ability he has clearly displayed in other images for a flat, unmodulated abstraction of the subject. In fact, Christ's stigmata and the group of flowers that surround his hands and feet are rendered with the same unmodulated red dots, lightly articulated, seemingly with a single gesture. Georges Didi-Huberman in his book *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* argues that in this rhyming representation of both the flowers and the stigmata "there is a displacement of the iconic value and hence an equivocal representation."¹²

My thrill in seeing this visual decision is in the discovery of the incredible formal rhyme that Angelico makes, rendering the bottomlessly symbolic wounds of Christ and the flowers of the field with the same simple marks, which in my reading appears to be a moment of camp

¹¹ In the summer of 2017, between my first and second year of graduate school, I stayed in a small studio in the town of Montespertoli, just outside of Florence for a little over a month. The house was mine to take care of, and was left at the time of the owner's death in very good condition. As the residency progressed so did my social isolation, and I gradually began to partake in a series of not unfamiliar compulsive behaviors. I began to wonder — had the stainless steel always looked this way, slightly streaked, irregular? What was the status of the cutting board before I cut my very hard bread on it? Do tomatoes usually stain wood to this degree? I found myself spending more time than I care to admit looking up cleaning techniques for refinishing cutting boards and polishing stainless steel, finally working my way down to the terra cotta floors. Having lived all my life in America where these particular brand of floors were never in my living spaces, I had no idea how to tend to them, or the particular ways in which they aged. I began to obsess over the irregularities in the coloration in the area under the dining room table where I ate my meals. Had I spilled something there without noticing? Does water stain terra cotta floors? I would scrub them, mop them, with no real understanding as to how this would help, if there was actually anything that needed to be fixed.

When I visited the monks' cells in Florence, as I passed through room after room of frescos, I couldn't help but notice —these floors looked similarly irregular in their coloration and wear. But these floors, for all I knew, were from the 15th century, looking alright considering their age. I found a strange solace in the stained and aged floors, some discolored from the places a monk seemed to have paced over and over again in the small confines of his cell. The frescos were also incredible.

¹² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance & Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 20.

sensibility from the fifteenth century. To paint the stigmata and the flowers with the same dots throws each one into question: are we to understand the flowers of the field as having been upgraded in symbolic weight? Or could we read this as a lessening of importance of Christ's wounds? Within the context of my own relationship to Catholicism, there is a sense of release and play in seeing the holiest of holies' most symbolic wounds made a visual equal to something as dainty as the flowers at his feet. In Didi-Huberman's insightful exegesis he describes the way the red blotches in the painting signify "between the flower and the stigmata, creating the notion of a relation above all—no longer has anything to do with the way the story delivers its very recognizable meaning."¹³ Didi-Huberman's analysis points to one of the facets of two-dimensional representation that is so dear to me as an image maker: the possibility for slippages in representation through abstraction.

Shouldering, modestly, the weight of Dunham and Angelico, I would argue for similar formal concerns in my painting, and in fact towards ends that are very similar to Angelico's in a certain sense. In *Swann's Way*, for example, many formal strategies are used to complicate and abstract the scene depicted, especially through color, flatness, and form. The male character featured centrally in the composition is painted with a reduced number of signifiers for his body, most notably nose, nipples, and genitals. These few parts are all painted a vibrant cadmium red, as are a number of the flowers surrounding the scene. Some of the flowers are cookie-cutter flower shapes, while others morph into more ambiguous forms. Some become remarkably like the shape defining the male character's genitals, producing visual rhymes across the canvas. Quite like Fra Angelico's flowers and stigmata, here we have the genital form and flowers

¹³ Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance & figuration*, 21.



Swann's Way, 2017, Acrylic on Canvas, 22 x 30 inches.

depicted in the same manner, producing a kind of equality among the forms. The sweet, sanitized, design-like flowers occupy the same formal space as the genitals, collapsing boundaries in the oft-perceived valence of these two objects. Flatness in these images become a site for abstraction; because many of the forms are rendered only in a single color they become *flexible* as to what exactly they are depicting, rendering them as Didi-Huberman describes, *between* objects. Things in the paintings that are directly nameable and those that are more ambiguous slip and slide off of each other, creating an experience of viewing in which decisions must be made about how to read various passages within the composition.

The language of painting itself is always a kind of subject in painting, and this certainly holds true for my approach to the medium. I sometimes think that the subject of the images are merely containers to make painting in. Although this is not truly the case, the disjunctures in



Cornu Espersum, 2017, Acrylic on Canvas, 48 x 60 inches.

pictorial logic that can exist only in two-dimensional forms are the bread and butter that keep me interested and active in the studio every day. *Cornu Espersum*, for example, pictures two snails on and next to a leaf, the leaf casting a shadow on the ground that one of the snails walks on. What makes the painting worth engaging with is the formal illogic of the depicted space. The background has been treated with a thinned out and stained color, producing an out-of-focus, blurred space. The leaf pictured, obviously at the forefront of the image, is masked off and retains this atmospheric texture that also depicts the background. One of the two snails sits on

top of this leaf, about to slide down and off. The image is then a kind of impossible picture; the central leaf on which the subject rests is in fact a void, purely insubstantial. Reading the painting requires the viewer to make a flip in perception, both understanding the physical fact of the image and the contradictory pictorial proposition it simultaneously suggests.



Lari Pittman, *Transfigurative and Needy*, 1991, Acrylic and enamel on wood panel, 82 x 66 inches, Private Collection

Not Knowing

Molesworth: *I often feel as if the painting is exceeding my capacity to take it all in, to make sense of it, to process it, to interpret it.*

Pittman: *But I feel the same way. I have the same relationship with the work. I have no privy understanding of them.*

Molesworth: *I could imagine for some people that must feel really frustrating, like you aren't doing your job. I mean if you don't have any privy understand of the paintings, what the fuck am I supposed to do? (Laughter)*

Pittman: *Exactly. Then fuck you.*

Molesworth: *Right. (Laughs)*

The excerpted conversation above conducted between Lari Pittman and Helen Molesworth on the occasion of Pittman's exhibition *A Decorated Chronology* reveals a shocking element in Pittman's densely elaborate paintings—that of not knowing. It is nearly inconceivable that Pittman's paintings of such extreme complexity are made without prior drawings, or indeed without many ideas of what the painting will contain from the outset. There are guiding parameters in Pittman's work—he refers to them as sensibilities—but the paintings accumulate without a roadmap. Pittman allows himself to swim in muddy and uncertain waters as the images announce what they will become and how they will be articulated. This tendency as a maker emerges simultaneously with Pittman's reluctance for his work to have a clear use value: “I think that reluctance is related to a perception I have that if something is seen as useful, it has been demeaned. If I get a whiff of usefulness about what I'm supposed to do as an artist, I rebel... I am more interested in the possibility of complete and reciprocal freedom being grounded and nurtured in uselessness. Uselessness is a really scintillating idea for me... I don't want to be conceptually useful.”¹⁴

In a moment in which “useful” art is called on more and more readily to shift the tides of a difficult political circumstance, uselessness does indeed become a scintillating idea. The paradigm that Pittman argues for is one in which the artist's intention for the production of meaning is not the final or only reading of the work, creating room as he describes for “reciprocal freedom” for both artist and viewer to produce meaning. The content that Pittman produces is slippery; I feel perhaps the way that Molesworth feels, that I am unable to concisely state what the painting does or what the artist's aims in making the painting are. And I

¹⁴ Lari Pittman and Kelly Shindler, *A Decorated Chronology* (Missouri: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2013), 60.

particularly *like* that about the paintings. The paintings are boisterous, noisy, sexy, violent, declarative, receding, coded, visually stunning, imaginative spaces that can be entered into without explicit verbalization to produce a meaningful experience in viewing.

George Saunders, the short story writer and novelist, discusses a similar approach in his trajectory in developing his process of writing. Now known for his singular voice, simultaneously harebrained and heartfelt, he traces a long period of his own output as a writer during which his fiction was not flourishing. “When you are a young writer you’re concept heavy... you kind of usually participate in some version of the intentional fallacy—which is, your job as a writer is to pull up the big shit truck of meaning, or theme, and get the reader to just sit there and *baaam (mimes lever dumping movement)*.... you know it’s a fundamentally condescending view. I think most of us when we are young artists we have the idea that you’re a good artist to the extent that you are conveying something, .. [a] theme.”¹⁵ Models of artistic success, especially within the university setting do in my experience often use the intentional fallacy as a kind of rubric for artistic integrity. The success or failure of an artwork is determined by the one to one congruence of intention to output, where the clarity of preconceived meaning about what an artwork does is infused in the object. What is lost here, potentially, is a plurality of interpretive possibilities, the ability for an artwork to contain multiple and contradictory resonances, some of which are outside of the artist’s intention.

This leaves the artist in a sticky situation. Without a fully realized notion of how a work will hold meaning, where does one begin? Saunders continues: “I had a kind of breakthrough

¹⁵ “George Saunders ‘Tenth of December’ I Talks at Google”, last modified February 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmKKofJOyAE>

where I realized that in order to be in that kind of intimate relationship you have to be in with your reader, you have to commit to not being sure about what's happening. In other words, come in as low concept as possible and kind of feel your way through it by watching the energy coming off of the prose... I'm imagining an intelligent, engaged person right over here who is smart and a little skeptical, and is watching me to see if I'm going to pull any tricks."¹⁶ Of course the process of writing and the process of painting are quite different, where procedural and material questions in the development of a painting come with an entirely different set of physical and affective registers; I do, however, find that allowing myself to enter the world of the painting the way Saunders describes entering the world of his stories makes for encounters and discoveries in the process of working that surprise me and in turn, I hope, surprise the viewer.

(I recently had a studio visit where the visitor mentioned that the paintings feel slightly suffocated—how are you making them? I responded that I make drawings and then project the drawings onto the canvas to scale them up. That's it, she said. Something was lost in translation. You've sleepwalked through the nuance that's in the drawings. You're not alive in it. I think she was right.)

This of course does not mean that there is not rigorous thinking in place on the part of Pittman and Saunders, that the work is not highly edited and shaped over time. Saunders discusses editing as perhaps the defining element of his practice, hundreds of obsessive drafts slowly steering the direction of his prose. The quality of the work comes from a scrutinizing look at the reality of what is being displayed before you, without too much projecting onto the work private intentions that exist outside of material form. I similarly rely on a somewhat compulsive

¹⁶ "George Saunders 'Tenth of December' I Talks at Google"

relationship to the crafting of paintings; large swaths of color or general forms are laid in, and only through slow looking and an even slower accrual of formal decisions do the paintings become alive and the worlds the characters inhabit become fully active.

Without the physical proof offered by Saunders and Pittman and many others, it would be difficult to argue for a position that seems quite so open. What this working methodology allows for, and the joy and surprise that is in Pittman's and Saunders' work, is the feeling that the works were discovered in their making, made richer through creation.

This endless push and pull between ideas and material processes is heightened within the context of the academic art institution. Painter Helen Johnson in an article *Is the research your practice, or is the practice your research?* published by Un Magazine in 2011 further elaborates the intermingling of ideas and materials in processes, particularly in the confines of the institution in which the intention for the work is considered on an equal plane as the work itself. "I have long held the belief that if an idea for an artwork can be fully articulated in writing, one must question whether the work needs to be made at all. This is not to draw a hard line between writing and practice, but it is to say that a successful work of art, though it may engage language, requires something more than language too. Kant describes this elegantly, saying that art 'enlivens the cognitive faculties, and with language, as a mere thing of the letter, combines spirit.'"¹⁷ Specifically in the context of painting, the plasticity of the medium allows for periods of editing and reworking, to play in the discomfort of not knowing. I don't believe in arbitrary decision making, (I have a t-shirt my friend made which was supposed to read "Arbitrary is

¹⁷ Helen Johnson, "Is the research your practice, or is the practice your research?," *Un Magazine*, July 2013, <http://unprojects.org.au/magazine/issues/issue-7-1/is-the-research-your-practice-or-is-the-practice-your-research/>

Fiction,” but was accidentally misspelled “Arbitrary is Fiction.” The error seems to be too good to be true.) but I do believe in a kind of art practice that relies heavily on intuition, gut feeling, that which can’t be totally articulated in language at the outset. In my mind, the “spirit” that Kant refers to could point towards following ideas and desires for art making that exist, at least initially, outside of the consciously known.

My initial move towards art making had to do with a yearning for this open, interpretive space, where the production of meaning could be fluid, shifting, mysterious, *developing* as the works emerged. A part of this pleasure was the ability to engage with material processes, in which the making of the work led to the discovery of its content. For years I would generate imagery through drawing, where free-form doodling marks would slowly morph into animals, objects, figures. I-as-maker became I-as-first-viewer, reading the artwork as if for the first time, in a manner very similar to that described by Saunders in terms of his own prose. There have been on many occasions images and objects which, in retrospect, speak of a very particular set of ideas, or perhaps emotional spaces, of which I could articulate nothing at the time of their creation. Only through the filter of time could I see that the work made without any verbalized explication, either internally or externally, corresponded in a startlingly specific way to my own conceptions of the world and the ways I maneuvered within it. A recent and, to me, illuminating example, is the circuitous way my thesis exhibition came to fruition. I had understood the works in their making as two sets of only slightly interrelated paintings, two images that use characters from popular culture, and two that explore human/ animal sexual relations. My shock at realizing quite late in the game that I made a cycle of paintings that correspond to canonical

paintings in the Catholic tradition depicting the life of Christ, was made without my conscious intention. It is this kind of slippage and surprise that brings me to the studio again and again.

Even when I have more fully articulated notions about the content of images and bodies of work as a painter, there is still the lingering feeling that something could very possibly *leak* out, as in the example above. This potential is both thrilling, but also frightening, that the contents of an artwork subliminally telegraph deeper or more complex relations than I am aware of. This feeling, perhaps related again to the impulse towards shame, still haunts my process of image making. I will return again to Pittman's conversation with Molesworth, who summarizes this idea succinctly:

I think we're all leaky. Things leak out and cannot be controlled. In that sense we are psychologically incontinent. When I look at the work, it's that terror or that horror of looking at it. So even with all the aspirational attempts and ambition to manage meaning through aesthetics, at the same time there is the possibility that things have leaked out. And I think the viewer is aware of that in the work. They're aware that, even in this party atmosphere, as you describe it, the joy, the flowers, the exuberance, the whatever—that there is always some subtextual reading to that exuberance. But since it leaked out, I cannot totally recognize it. That something has leaked out amidst this carnivalesque experience means that there is something that cannot be managed, ever, in human nature.¹⁸

¹⁸ Lari Pittman, *A Decorated Chronology*, 55.

There is Someone in This Dress, George

Musical theater has long been considered trivial, a source of light entertainment. A stereotypical (and fading) calling card of the gay male identity, a love of this flamboyant tradition seems to equate the two—frivolity and gay men often go hand in hand in popular representations. (One only has to think of Nathan Lane in the *Birdcage* to call up the image.) Despite the showiness of the genre, extreme forms of closetedness exist within the history of the musical; identification, if it exists, necessarily comes from the mind of a primed viewer—queer characters rarely existing explicitly on the stage in the vast majority of the productions. This simultaneous flamboyance and closeting in the musical exist in parallel to concerns of mine within the context of painting.

The Closet

Stephen Sondheim, known for his densely crafted and rhythmically captivating musicals such as *Into the Woods*, *A Little Night Music*, *Company*, *Follies*, and *Anyone Can Whistle*, embodies both of these qualities: a closetedness on the one hand, and through a more nuanced and careful reading, an arch, witty, flamboyance on the other. Perhaps the queerest thing about Sondheim musicals is the conspicuous lack of gay characters in them—the sensibility is in fact most palpable in its indirectness. Sondheim never wrote a major part for a gay character; his musical *Company*, though, in many interpretations does not function without the underlying understanding that its central character Bobby is deep in the closet. He moves into middle age, unable to find a person with whom he can meaningfully spend his life. Flitting from fling to fling, he struggles to find intimacy in a lasting way, to let someone into his interior world

completely. While this struggle for intimacy is certainly not exclusive to the homosexual, “it has special import for gay men, educated within their own families that they are doomed to loneliness and unhappiness. [*Company*]...was particularly powerful for gay men brought up in a time when blackmail was a distinct possibility and exposure brought ruin. If you didn’t dare trust anyone, how could you love?”¹⁹

From a direct vantage, canonical musicals do not seem to provide much fodder for interpretations or sensibilities outside of the heterosexual. Sondheim’s musicals, as with many others aside from the most recently written, require the constant need to read across, over, or through the productions to uncover their distinctively queer charge. Through wit, wordplay, and the overall sense of theatrical exaggeration, the musicals don’t point to queerness directly, in terms of characters or plot points, but rather embody certain aspects of it. (Perhaps a part of this magnetic charge towards the theatrical in some points to the heightened awareness of the performed nature of gender itself, often highly apparent to the queer-identified.) These musicals were routinely created by a string of closeted men in all aspects of production, from performance through design. Although for decades the creators of this work were never out nor their sexualities directly expressed, the output was often saturated with this energy. D.A. Miller states that no one “who saw the closet at work on the musical stage, least of all ourselves, failed to witness this double operation: not only of ‘hiding’ homosexual desire, but also of manifesting, across all manner of landscapes, an extensive network of hiding places—call them latencies—

¹⁹John Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 1999), 215.

apparently ready made for the purpose.”²⁰ John M. Clum continues this line of thinking: “Like the doors in a French farce, the closets of gay America, the sexuality they hid, and that aesthetic that, for many, accompanied that sexuality, were visible in the musical for all who were able to see them. We all know that some of the defining aspects of past musicals were gay created and were expressions of that fictional entity ‘the gay sensibility,’ which might better be called ‘mastery of the closet,’ accompanied as it was by the impulse to keep the subject matter of the musical closeted, a reflection of American society’s hatred of homosexuality and homosexuals.”²¹

The space of the closet, so described above by Miller and Clum in relation to the musicals of the recent past, plays out in a remarkably similar manner within my evolving studio practice. In my time in graduate school I have often used language surrounding queerness as a way to locate my work as a painter, although the human form has only entered the paintings quite recently. I used indirectness in the articulation of this subject matter—or maybe I should say that I used indirectness out of a sense of fear of a direct address of this subject. Dogs, rabbits, birds, and cats have populated my paintings as fairly oblique stand-ins for questions surrounding relationships outside of the heterosexual.

Window, for example, pictures two swans, nuzzling into one another in an undisclosed outdoor space, seen through an open window. Inside of the domestic space is a cat who has its hair bristled up in a state of agitation or fear at the sight of the nuzzling birds. The painting’s loosely-coded language suggests the looking at queer love with disgust or revulsion; the image

²⁰ Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture*, 2.

²¹ Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture*, 2.



Window, 38 x 49 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2017

itself consists of simplified, palatable characters, while the physical human bodies that are implied never appear on the stage of the canvas. The images in this series remain painfully digestible, the cuteness covering over any vulnerability which I feel is required to make a meaningful impact.

I came to understand that the work I was making such as this one so obliquely referenced queer sexuality that they actually *reinforced* the space of the closet. Out of a need to directly and fully address the subject at hand, I felt as though the figure must appear in the paintings, and questions surrounding sexuality be referenced directly. It was as if I was living in a repressive regime, forcing myself to heavily code my subject matter to pass the censors.

This is of course not to say that coding or subtextual readings are of no interest—in the musical, for example, it is precisely this coding that interests me as a viewer. The issue at hand

with the “closeted” work has to do with the fear of the direct address of topics surrounding sexuality. Now with these subjects broached in a public forum, the possibility of reintroducing a sense of subtextual coding feels again like a fertile area for exploration.

Lightness

Aside from Sondheim, the classics of the American Songbook, particularly the oeuvre of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s, are of special interest. *Entertainment* appears to be at the historical core of the genre—often flimsy plots put together for stars to sing show-stopping numbers, or a group of toe-tappers that keeps the audience humming out the door.²² The popular belief that the musical is exclusively a site for light entertainment, as they so often are, primes the audience for an experience of trivial enjoyment. What interests me about the form is the ability for there to be real feeling, complex emotional states depicted *through* the guise of triviality. Or perhaps it is the possibility that these two registers can exist simultaneously, at once frivolous and profound.

The opening scene of *Oklahoma!*, as discussed by Todd Purdham in regard to his book *Something Wonderful: Rodger and Hammerstein’s Broadway Revolution*, explores this set of expectations and the ways in which it can be skewed to startling effect.

Almost all musical comedies of that era opened with a big choral number to satisfy late comers...They'd have a display of pulchritude across the footlights with dancing girls and boys singing a big ensemble number. But ‘*Oklahoma!*’ began...with a woman churning butter on the stage and a cowboy singing offstage in the wings. And it was quiet. And it was so quiet that it landed like a bomb. It was revolutionary. Nobody could believe that a musical comedy would open in such a naturalistic way. Then it proceeded to unfold. And the story's very simple. As I said, it's

²² Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture*, 78.

about which of two guys is going to take a girl to a party. But it involved real characters and real people with real emotions and not some cartoonish figures that were strung together just as an excuse for having some wonderful songs.²³

What Rodgers and Hammerstein exploit then, is the expectation for the production to be unserious, a flamboyant play in the footlights—only for the audience to be struck by the full complexity of lived experience depicted on stage through song and dance.

This play with the alternating register of frivolity and a heavy-handed sort of seriousness comes to fruition most clearly in my practice in *Crucifixion*. The image pictures the often-reproduced SpongeBob SquarePants crucified on the elongated nose of a larger, maniacal SpongeBob (I avoid saying this too often, but like Jasper John’s *Flag*, the image came to me in a dream). SpongeBob as a character appears to be trivial to his core—the frantic, frenetic, buoyant character and television show seem to embody the frivolous. The show and the character, though, are imbued with a queer sensibility that has been noted on many occasions, both in praise and condemnation. The program premiered in 1999, in a cultural moment that coincided with higher visibility of gay and lesbian-identified characters on television such as *The L Word*, *Queer as Folk*, *Will and Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. A number of conservative blogs proliferated concurrently, condemning the show for its advocacy of the “gay agenda,” listing instances in which clear moments of homoeroticism occur between characters, or remarking on the abundance of rainbows on the show.²⁴ I am uninterested in any unobtrusive

²³ Todd Purdham, “How Rodgers And Hammerstein Revolutionized Broadway,” interviewed by Terry Gross, NPR, Fresh Air, April 9, 2018, audio, 43:47, <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/09/600818943/how-rodgers-and-hammerstein-revolutionized-broadway>.

²⁴ Daniel Spielberger, “Queering the Sponge: The Transcendent Queerness of ‘Spongebob Squarepants’” *PopMatters*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.popmatters.com/queering-the-sponge-the-transcendent-queerness-of-spongebob-squarepants-2495410105.html>



Crucifixion, 2018, Acrylic on Canvas, 60 x 68 inches.

moments of homoeroticism or rainbows; the show's real potential lies in the actual flexibility the characters have in thinking through ways that we take on gendered or sexual roles.

Patrick: *Oh! I wanna be the mom!*

SpongeBob: *I don't think you can be the mom, because you never wear a shirt.*

Patrick: *You're right. If I was your mom, this would be kinda shocking. Just call me daddy!*

David Spielberger in his essay *Queering the Sponge: The Transcendent Queerness of 'SpongeBob SquarePants'* unpacks this quick pseudo-familial exchange:

By explicitly mocking the performative nature of sexuality and gender, the act of trying to understand these characters' actual identities collapses, making space for an exploration of SpongeBob and Patrick's utopia. Patrick starts the conversation with wanting to be "mom" and then ends with screaming, 'just call me daddy!' These roles have profound significations above water, and yet for SpongeBob and Patrick, they can easily be disregarded and rearranged. Soon after agreeing on their gender roles, SpongeBob throws on a colorful dress and Patrick starts sporting a suit and tie; in Bikini Bottom, drag shows start instantaneously.²⁵

What is notable is in fact the slipperiness of boundaries and the ease with which roles are rearranged in the world of the show, a more culturally destabilizing notion than mere homoeroticism. In *Crucifixion*, then, the possibility of the porousness of these gendered and sexual dynamics are squelched—Spongebob as a container for all of these ideas literally crucified, Christ's death in this case for the lost possibility of polymorphous relations to oneself and others.

It cannot go without comment that this crucified figure is repeated as the base of the crucifix itself, the veiled SpongeBob crucified on a larger, perversely gleeful SpongeBob. This display of the fractured and doubled self points in many directions, perhaps referencing back to shame and its mirror affect, self-aggrandizement or hubristic pride. The picture is then a visualized narcissism, "an emotional disorder—a result of excessive pride and shame," where each one of the fractured selves exemplify pride and shame in relation to the other.²⁶ In this

²⁵ Spielberger, "Spongebob."

²⁶ W. Keith Campbell and Joshua D. Miller, *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Treatments*. (Hoboken, New Jersey, 2011), 330.

disorder, and this painting “the self is both the evaluator and the evaluated; thus, they require self-awareness, or attentional focus directed toward one’s self-representations.”²⁷ This play of the split self is visualized clearly with the evaluator and evaluated played by one and the same character, a manifestation of internal states through the unlikely character of SpongeBob SquarePants.

Like the musical, the painting announces itself in some respects as frivolous, through its use of cartoony forms, colors, and, of course, the unmodulated representation of a cartoon character. Through the set of maneuvers outlined above, however, I believe that the potential for the image to carry greater weight in its play with splits in representations of a stable self complicate the apparent superficiality of its central character.

Light Surface

This interest in apparent superficiality is equally articulated through the surface treatment of the paintings. What makes an attention to surface superficial? The delight I take in surface decoration could be understood as referencing a historically feminized labor, an outdated model of thinking to be sure, but one whose resonance I think is still relevant.

Heavily inspired again by Lari Pittman, the surface of the painting acts as an important site for the making of meaning. Pittman, in charting his own trajectory as an artist, knowingly took on the history of devalued arts typically done by women, inspired by the feminist art history program at CalArts:

²⁷ Campbell and Miller, *Handbook of Narcissism*, 332.

Craft has always been an ideological component in the work because it's about a type of focus and social comportment that usually isn't expected of a male. There's a dutifulness that historically has been referenced or attributed to females, so I've always seen my devotion to craft as a type of protest...But this kind of fussiness, lavishing this type of almost picky detail on a very big painting, just isn't always attributed to what men do. For me, from very early on, that attention to really fine craft was a way of temporarily transgenering. I like that feeling. I don't know if I can explain that, but maybe it's an enculturated transgenering—not some sort of essentialist idea of gender.²⁸

This enculturated transgenering that Pittman speaks of has been a helpful way for me to conceive of my own attention to surface and decoration. References to the history of various craft traditions—early American quilting, embroideries, and hand-made textiles to name a few—often recur throughout the images. These simplified, graphic forms carry with them for me both the feminized history of their labor, and the “fussy,” “dutifulness” similarly ascribed to women through these practices, as described by Pittman.

Visual pleasure, especially produced through slow incremental ornamentation, has long interested me as a maker and viewer. Before I turned my attention fully to painting, I experimented with a kind of crocheting that allowed me to weave images into the structure of the fabric, similar to intarsia knitting, though simpler. These blanket- or tapestry-sized works would take me months to produce, carefully following patterns set out at the beginning of the project. This time consuming and pleasant process of making the fabrics, stitch by stitch, was deeply soothing; sometimes, in fact, I felt that I only made them so I could revel in the process. Row by row, the image would gradually appear, this slow time embedded in the objects in a very clear sense, an understanding of the timeline of making evident in the resulting textile.

²⁸ Lari Pittman, “Craft and Influences,” interview by Art21, <https://art21.org/read/lari-pittman-craft-and-influences/>.

Though I have momentarily put aside these fiber based practices, the impulse to decorate through incremental units has transferred to the most recent paintings. In every image there are passages with many small marks articulating the texture of a shag rug, the fur of a cat, the pattern of a distant sky, and so on. I consider the ways that the surfaces are attended to in their minutiae as portals into the painting, places where the image can be interacted with and enjoyed as purely visual phenomena. Through this pleasure in looking, there is the possibility, I hope, of enticing the viewer towards a more sustained attention. This is particularly evident in *Swan Stack*, in which attentive rendering of flowers, rabbits, and birds act as conduits for visual engagement, only to be struck by the returning awareness of what exactly is being displayed in the depicted scene. The sexualized content in some respects plays against the decorative aspects of the painting, making a visual space that sits in-between registers; or perhaps, and more interestingly, the physical pleasure that the male figure is experiencing could be *equated* to the erotic act of looking at the decorated surface.

Returning briefly to shame and the very particular Catholic guilt, I am thinking through a sumptuous, visually pleasurable surface as a counter to broader aversion to pleasure. Even beyond the sexual, the paintings act in protest in some way against restrictions on enjoyment—as the comedian Adam Ferrara has said, a very Catholic maximum is: “If it feels good, stop.” Pleasure, in all of its myriad embodiments, are central to the driving concerns of the paintings. Embodied both in the act of looking, making, and in the equally complex landscape of physical and emotive pleasure pointed to beyond the canvas, the paintings seek to restore a sumptuous sense of gratification against the barriers erected to curtail it.



Swan Stack, 2018, Acrylic on Canvas, 32 x 85 inches.

Conclusion

What happens to the repressed? I have lately been thinking about Douglas Crimp's essay *Mourning and Militancy*, his response to the varied tactics in contenting with AIDS activism and grief. Crimp describes how he consciously avoided mourning the death of his father, and the bodily effect this avoidance caused. "My left tear duct became badly infected, and the resulting abscess grew to a golf-ball sized swelling that closed my left eye and completely disfigured my face. When the abscess finally burst, the foul-smelling pus oozed down my cheek like poison tears. I have never since doubted the force of the unconscious."²⁹

What is not processed consciously will be processed somehow, bodily, in Crimp's case. The paintings made in the past several months maybe something similar to Crimp's foul-smelling pus—a release valve, unclogging corners of myself that I was unwilling to fully face in my own life interpersonally, but that I could contend with in the studio. Anxieties are played out on the stage of the canvas, perhaps in preparation for their full digestion into lived experience.

Images begin here, but quickly dip and dive into flights of fancy, material processes, the history of the medium, the possibilities of the visual. It is through these engagements, picking through the nitty-gritty questions of pictorial representation, that the paintings can leave the realm of solipsism, and enter into a broader dialogue with the history of painting, and the complexities of looking.

²⁹ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October*, Vol. 51 (Winter, 1989): 4.

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