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# Staging Modernism

# A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Fine Arts

by

Jason Derouin

B.A. McGill University, 2003 B.F.A. University of Ottawa, 2006

May, 2011

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# **ABSTRACT**

This thesis, which supports an exhibition of visual art, develops from Jean Baudrillard's philosophy of seduction. I have focused on the representation of the bachelor and his pad in American men's magazines from the mid-twentieth century. During this period, magazines such as *Playboy*, *Escapade* and *Rogue* created features on modern living to reassure an independent and affluent man that a dwelling with style and taste would ensure a happy bachelor life and facilitate intimacy. My photographs and collages add complexity to this portrait by framing this unique space as a stage where an unmarried man encircled by his lusty decor acted to entrance a woman.

Bachelor, Jean Baudrillard, Collage, Design, Mid-twentieth century, Modernism, Photography, *Playboy*, Seduction

## INTRODUCTION

This essay, which supports an exhibition of visual art, develops from Jean Baudrillard's philosophy of seduction: "For [it] to occur an illusion must intervene and mix up the images; a stroke has to bring disconnected things together, as if in a dream." The problem is to achieve this law or rule. Few sleights of hand surprise anymore. In our world of ready-made satisfactions, a thwarting of expectations is difficult to achieve. I propose that there existed a space where this activity occurred: the modern bachelor pad. The tricked dwellings presented in men's magazines in the 1950s and 60s were designed to seduce. Readers of *Playboy* were encouraged to enrich their spaces with modern furniture and artwork. If the reader followed instructions on interior decoration – layout and lighting, for example – women would submit to the hypnotic power of such expressions. Seduction was the strategy, intention and destination of *Playboy*'s imagined reader, and the magazine filled the role of authority on its execution.

Baudrillard's "illusion" or "stroke" inspires my creative practice. I have focused on the representation of the bachelor and his pad in American men's magazines from the mid-twentieth century. During this period, magazines such as *Playboy*, *Escapade* and *Rogue* created features on modern living to reassure an independent and affluent man that a dwelling with style and taste would ensure a happy bachelor life and facilitate intimacy. Armed with a gadget-laden pad and an understanding of the "feminine mystique," a man was certain to realise his primal desires. I want to add complexity to this portrait by framing this unique space as a stage where an unmarried man encircled by his lusty decor acted to entrance a woman. I shall attempt to decipher this spectacle and answer how its effects worked and what "illusions" they conjured up for the participants. A detailed visual analysis of the bachelor pads from issues of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Seduction*. Trans. Brian Singer. (Montreal: New World Perspectives CultureTexts Series, 1990), 103.

aforementioned magazines will help to apprehend the design of these spaces and the artwork I
created.

## PART 1: THE MODERN PERIOD BACHELOR AND HIS PAD

# **Emergence of the Modern Bachelor**

My approach to the notion that a carefully composed bachelor space has the potential to seduce begins by critically assessing the conditions for bachelorhood to flourish. According to sources dedicated to the topic, unattached men and women constituted a significant proportion of the population in many American communities in the mid-nineteenth century. They "raised consternation among their families, instigated disorder on the city streets, and provoked admonitions from clergy and educators." The male component of this group attracted the most attention. The bachelor was considered an anomaly. He was presumed to be perverted, reverting to his baser urges and renouncing a traditional family life. Or he was pathologically abnormal and unacceptable to women as a marriage partner. His existence was suspicious, inviting at once curiosity and contempt. His bachelorhood was considered to be symptomatic of an emotional or mental disturbance.

Reaction to the modern age unmarried man did not improve. The bachelor is affected by the sexual values of his time. In 1949 and 1953, Alfred Kinsey published reports about the sexual behaviour of American men and women, "thrusting sex to the forefront of the national consciousness, [pointing] to a vast, clandestine world of sexual experience sharply at odds with publicly espoused norms of probity, fidelity and heterosexuality." According to Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*, during the 1950s "there was the firm expectation […] that required men to grow up, marry and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Chudacoff, Howard P. *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Osgerby, Bill. "The Bachelor Pad as Cultural Icon: Masculinity, Consumption and Interior Design in American Men's Magazines, 1930-65." *Journal of Design History 18.1 (2005)*: 103.

support their wives. To do anything else was less than grown up, and the man who willfully deviated was judged to be somehow 'less of a man'"4.

## The Masculine Consumer

During the 1950s the 'breadwinner' archetype was circulating widely in a variety of popular magazines, films and TV shows, but other important shifts registered in the American middle class at the same time. As ideals of the family-oriented man were promoted, so did other constructions of masculinity. The post-war consumer boom included an unlikely source of revenue: the pockets of single, career-minded men. This convergence of consumerism and spirited careerism benefited the bachelor. Publicly he was still reviled, but he was acknowledged as an important player in national financial betterment. In his article, *The Bachelor Pad as* Cultural Icon: Masculinity, Consumption and Interior Design in American Men's Magazines, 1930-65, Bill Osgerby describes the counter-effect of post-war consumerism on prevailing conservatism: "the traditional gendering of consumption as 'feminine' retained influence – hence a degree of suspicion still surrounded the consuming male's claims to 'manliness' – but, within the culture of the new middle class, masculine identities posited on a consumerist agenda were increasingly revered."5

New magazines emerged as torchbearers for the masculine consumer. From the outset, *Playboy* magazine promoted the bachelor lifestyle. Its ideal reader was unattached and cosmopolitan. He was from the new generation of male consumers: invested in his career and wanting to luxuriate in his success. From its inception in 1953 through the 60s, articles in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ehrenreich, Barbara. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. (Garden City: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1983), 11-12. <sup>5</sup> Osgerby, "The Bachelor Pad as Cultural Icon": 104.

*Playboy* rarely mentioned a man's wife or family. The *Playboy* reader was liberated from the responsibilities of family life.

#### The Bachelor Pad

The carefully composed space of the single man is frequently interpreted as vulgar. Parodies of the bachelor show a pleasure-seeking rake luring a woman to his lair where he performs a dance to woo. He whirls and gyrates, pressing buttons to tune his pad to the right romantic level. A prominently displayed Pollock is lit from overhead, a bookcase revolves to reveal a bar, a fireplace is ignited automatically, and a round rotating bed starts to turn. In *Structures of Interior Design*, Jean Baudrillard describes the trend whereby the use values (or functions) of furniture objects were being supplanted by organizational values (or atmosphere). Objects embody moves in a game.<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon is observed in the modern bachelor pad. Consider, for example, the first 'Playboy Bed'. In November 1959, *Playboy* published an artist rendering including dimensions of a rectangular behemoth bed. With its wraparound frame, the object measured approximately 10-feet wide and 8-feet long. The accompanying text illustrates Baudrillard's statement:

*Playboy* contends that a gentleman's bed is much, much more than a place to placidly assume a supine position after a wearying day at the office. It is, or should be, a major furnishing in any well-appointed bachelor's diggings [...]. In addition to the solid comfort of the bed itself, he should have fingertip control of what goes on, and off, in his pad [...], plus a convenient, functional setup for assuaging his basic entertainment and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. "Structures of Interior Design." *The Everyday Life Reader*. Ed. Ben Highmore. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 312.

gustatorial needs [...]. A 22" expanse of open shelf space permits you to conduct your own exhibition of *objects d'art*.

The 'game' is seduction, and the Playboy Bed embodies the 'move'. The gargantuan bed is meant to extend the living room, the usual entertainment space. With access to sensory delights like a hi-fi stereo system and a gallery to display art, a man might move seamlessly from casual conversation at the bed's edge, to an erotic encounter on the expanse of bedding behind him.

# **Interior Decoration and Seduction**

Illusion is paramount. "For seduction to occur an illusion must intervene and mix up the images; a stroke has to bring disconnected things together, as if in a dream". 8 The *Playboy* method of seduction relies on a psychological response to design. The decor must be creative, fantastic, to conjure a dream-like response. Design within the bachelor pad must have the effect of suspending belief:

Seduction has two simultaneous moments, or two instants of a single moment. [A woman's] entire character, all her feminine resources must be mobilized, and simultaneously suspended. It is not a question of surprising her in the passivity of her innocence; her freedom of action must be in play. Because it is by this freedom, by its movement – and by the curves and sudden twists imparted to it by seduction – that she must, seemingly spontaneously, reach that point where, unbeknownst to herself, she will be lost.9

So it is not enough to surprise; the object of the bachelor's desire must engage with the illusion he invents. If there is a mythology to the bachelor pad it is because its elements are frequently

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> "Playboy Bed." *Playboy* 6.11 (1959): 66. <sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 103.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ibid., 107.

fantastic, unbelievable. Many of objects promoted by *Playboy* magazine were unrealized. They were proposals to spark the imagination of the reader determined to enjoy his bachelorhood. The 1959 version of the Playboy Bed was not available for purchase. Dimensions were provided in text, with advice to find a skilled carpenter. The man who was ambitious enough to commission its making would benefit from the engagement it promised. Top-of-the-line technology was supposed to be built into the bed frame, including an intercom, speakerphone, and buttons to control surrounding lighting. Shelves overhead could hold a library of books and, as indicated earlier, a small gallery of artwork.

# PART 2: CREATIVE PRACTICE, PROCESS AND INFLUENCES CREATIVE PRACTICE

The works appearing in my thesis exhibition – a survey of three years of creative practice – do not illustrate the modern-period bachelor pad: they develop the bachelor pad-*form*. Architectural details from mid-twentieth century residential and commercial buildings were recreated in miniature, arranged as different tableaux, and then photographed. The one-twelfth scale model objects are presented in photographs as *illusions* of life-size. "Iron" filigree gates, "concrete" wall blocks, "pine" bookcases, and "mineral" clusters are arranged like props before "plywood" walls (Figure 1 & 2). The action of staging canonical designs from the modern period was important; the process was critical to my understanding of Baudrillard's rules of seduction.

I have heard this statement applied to my artwork: "This is not seductive." It is true: my photographs and collages do not exhibit mechanical, orgasm-centered sexuality. They are noticeably lacking sensuous strokes. The human figure is not represented. There is no phallus, no chasm. And obvious stand-ins were avoided: I did not build a tiny Playboy Bed. The gestures that provoke enticement are refined. I tried to create perfect artifice. The "iron" gates and "concrete" wall blocks were cut with a laser to resemble filigree and tracery. The "mineral" clusters were composed of folded paper, glued and gilded. The "plywood" panels were made of museum board with a "veneer" of scaled wood grain. These details are in many ways seductive.

In *Seduction*, Baudrillard poses the question, what is the characteristic of the seducer? The answer would define my approach to art making. "The scenario of seduction is […] spiritual. It demands a certain spirit in the eighteenth century sense, that is to say, intelligence, charm and refinement, but also in the modern sense of the Witz or stroke of wit". <sup>10</sup> There exist two types of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Ibid., 102.



Figure 1
Bookcases and Screen Blocks (#4)
Inkjet print on Stonehenge
8.5 x 11 inches
2010



Figure 2
Wall, Bookcase and Yellow Gate
Archival inkjet print on fiber paper
12 x 12 inches
2011

seducers: the pure and the impure. The pure seducer is endowed with features already mentioned – intelligence, charm and refinement. The impure seducer flies from one sexual conquest to another; he seduces for pleasure without attaining the "spiritual" dimension of seduction. 

Playboy spoke to the "pure" type of seducer. Within a single issue of its magazine, readers were presented with articles about modern living, politics and philosophy. Nudity comprised a very small portion of each issue, and, generally, readers' attitudes to women lacked a misogynistic component. However, I do not want to diminish or ignore analyses of *Playboy* that indicate an oppression of women.

The modernist dialogue of art and design has its particular set of gender biases: it privileges the masculine. I mean to be careful with feminine signifiers in my work. I want to make a provocative contribution to our understanding of male space, but I do not want to add to a discussion that subordinates women. Do my collages of furniture with skirts offend? (Figure 3 & 4) The conjunction of masculine forms and feminine dress was conceived as a proposal. I wondered: What would a heterosexual man knowledgeable about design own to fill the space of a woman? What would be a satisfactory substitute for real feminine presence? There exist material sexual surrogates, like silicone vaginas. What would *Playboy* suggest?

The magazine promoted designers Charles and Ray Eames, Florence Knoll, George Nelson, Jens Risom, Eero Saarinen, and Edward Wormley, to name a few. Their simple geometric furniture was considered suitable for male space: they were stripped of the loft and embellishment of female-inflected decor. Chairs, with their arms and legs, present as analogues to the human form, so I responded by dressing them with skirts. Paper folded into pleats, some with masking tape stripes, were tucked into incisions on prints of chairs, desks, tables and chests.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Beggan, James K. and Scott T. Allison. "What Sort of Man Reads Playboy? The Self-Reported Influence of Playboy on the Construction of Masculinity." *Journal of Men's Studies 11.2 (2003)*: 194.



Figure 3

Jens Risom Striped Side Chair with Skirt (Small)

Collage
8 x 10 inches
2011



Figure 4 *George Nelson Executive Desk with Skirts (Small)*Collage
7 x 11 inches
2011

The collages are open: they have multiple meanings. They are a reaction to readings about bachelor pads, and they engage with broader topics of modern design and sexuality.

The skirt treatment may be viewed as a disguise: a scaled back slipcover intended to soften the stark silhouette of the seats and surfaces and ease their transition into the home. Or it is a gesture, a Baudrillardian "stroke," to queer the mannish furniture.

## **PROCESS**

My early photographs were supposed to be translated into drawings and paintings – creative expressions that were familiar to me. I had experience with photography, but did not plan it to become the primary medium of my practice. A lot of the activity of photography is out of the control of the artist. Printing is particularly unpredictable: printer model, its technician, and many other variables influence it. When my first series of photographs received a favourable response, I had to find a printing process responsive to my vision.

I aimed for an effect to resemble the offset printing of early *Playboy* magazines. The concept relied on a toothy surface, but my home-use printer – an Epson Stylus C120 – was not designed to accept heavy weight paper. Additionally, there do not exist computer programs, known as "drivers", for printing on untreated cotton fiber. However, I obtained phenomenal performance from my economy model by altering its feed mechanism and manually calibrating for drawing paper. The 'hills' and 'valleys' of coarse paper interrupt the inkjet dot pattern and yield a noticeable loss of clarity. Undesirable traces of my hand – a ragged cut, a drop of glue, some untrimmed tape – do not appear in the final prints. The tint of the paper helped conceal my hand, too, although it complicated the four-colour system of the printer. Compensating for an overall cream or grey cast was challenging (Figure 5).

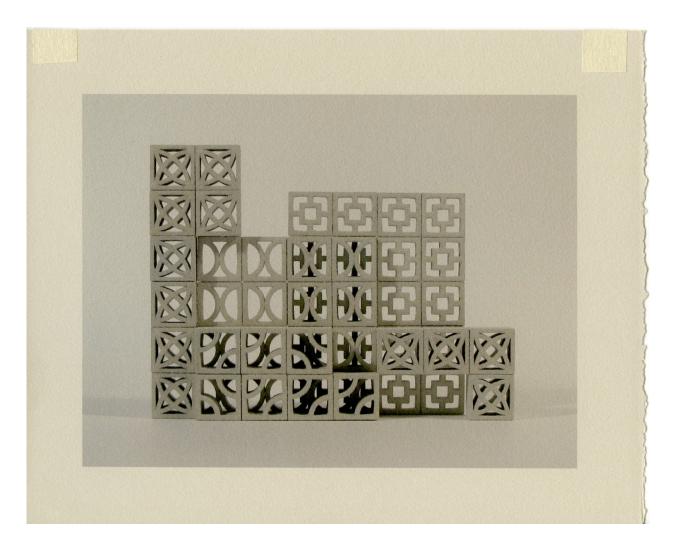


Figure 5
Gates and Screen Blocks (#3)
Inkjet print on Rives BFK
8.5 x 10 inches
2010

The prints' diminutive size – most are eight-and-a-half by eleven inches – relates to the home-use printer and business correspondence. The dimensions suggest 'casual' and 'throwaway.' However, the numbers of prints that compose a series, and their specialised surface, oppose such an impression. The small scenes seem intimate. They invite close viewing.

#### **INFLUENCES**

The architectural model is generally a proposal, a speculative offering or a pitch resting between sketch and actualization. Some well-known artists work in this territory. Dutch photographer-sculptor Thomas Demand photographs life-scale models of culturally or politically charged scenes. *The Clearing* (2003), which shows daybreak viewed through a cluster of thousands of leaves, is an extraordinary example from his oeuvre. Demand's paper and cardboard reconstruction is wholly seductive. The image, which is about sixteen-feet wide and six-feet tall, suspends a sublime moment of mist rising in response to the first rays of the sun. *The Clearing* is a beginning or apocalyptic end.

Demand's only record of his installations is the photography. In contrast, I maintain an inventory of props to pluck from. I delight in making an archive of modern bric-a-brac, however, like Demand, I am opposed to their presentation. The illusion of scale and secrets of construction become exposed and the attempt at seduction fails.

I frequently consult the work of American photographer-sculptor James Casebere, whose architectural models illustrate a standard of finish I want to achieve. Furthermore, as a consequence of excluding figures and accessories, Casebere's photographs are formally similar to set designs – an architectural type I explore in my practice.

## CONCLUSION

A second version of the Playboy Bed appeared in the April 1965 issue of *Playboy* (Figure 6). This object is a particularly good example of design being programmed for seduction. Above all, it profits from the power of geometric forms. In Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design, author Ray Crozier considers the view that there may be something inherent in the form of objects that produces a positive emotional response. There seems to be something pleasing about simple, geometric forms.<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic triumph of the 1965-version of the Playboy Bed lies in its roundness. It is a round bed capable of rotating 360 degrees. It is an architectural analogue to a bird's nest.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard presents a phenomenological meditation on the issue of roundness. The declaration 'being is round' is accepted but unsubstantiated. Bachelard employs the metaphysician's way of arriving at proof by enriching the statement with examples. In the chapter "The Phenomenology of Roundness," Bachelard summarizes the lure of round objects:

If we take them in their suddenness, we realize that we think of nothing else, that we are entirely in the being of this expression. If we submit to the hypnotic power of such expressions of roundness, suddenly we find ourselves entirely in the roundness of this being, we live in the roundness of life.<sup>14</sup>

Round objects bear the mark of primitivity: they are evocations of intimacy and refuge. 15 It is as if we are congenitally predisposed to like round objects. The bachelor with his round bed circling around him is at an advantage, then.

15 Ibid., 233.

<sup>13</sup> Crozier, Ray, Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design, (New York; Manchester University Press, 1994), 74.

14 Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 234.



Figure 6 The Playboy Bed 1965

Further on the 'nest' image, Bachelard devotes a whole chapter to its examination. The daydreaming that is prompted by seeing or considering a nest stems from the remarkable industry of birds:

possible to do better, so entirely do they surpass all masons, carpenters and builders; for there is not a man who would be able to make a house better suited to himself and to his children than these little animals build for themselves. This is so true, in fact, that we have a proverb according to which men can do everything except build a bird's nest. 16 However, Bachelard is careful to dissuade any human association with nests. He writes, positively speaking, there is nothing more absurd than images that attribute human qualities to a nest. [...] The ridiculous nature of this image would become evident if the cosy "little nest," the warm "little nest" that lovers promise each other, were actually compared with the real nest, lost in the foliage. Among birds, need I recall, love is a strictly extracurricular affair, and the nest is not built until later, when the mad love-chase across the fields is over. [...] In short, in literature, the nest image is generally childish. 17

The enterprise and skill with which animals make their nests is so efficient that it is not

In design, though, the nest image is effective and a legitimate form for comparison. Considering its capacity to entice, it is understandable why so much of the design promoted by *Playboy* after the mid-60s was round.

The works *Destroyed Space (A)* and *Destroyed Space (B)* (2011) (Figure 7 & 8) are expressions of nesting. Here, an imagined bachelor has heaped up elements of modern architecture to surround his beloved. The *Destroyed Space* duo illustrates the end of bachelorhood. The "mad-love chase" is over.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ibid., 92. <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 93.



Figure 7

Destroyed Space (A)

Inkjet print on Stonehenge
8.5 x 14 inches
2011

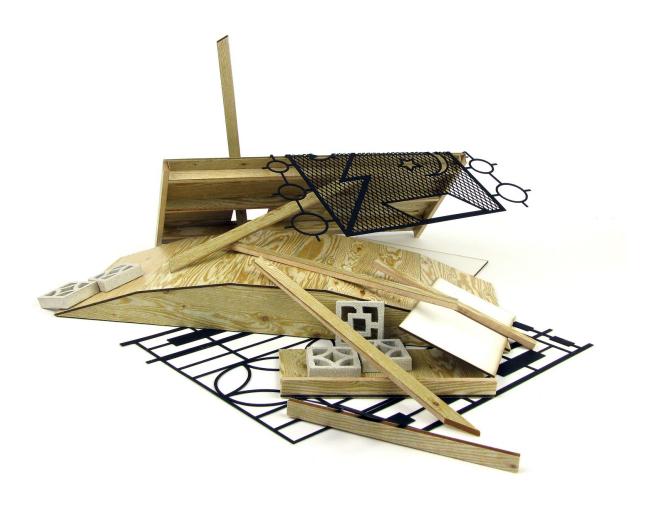


Figure 8

Destroyed Space (B)

Inkjet print on Stonehenge
8.5 x 14 inches
2011

Inspired by the Kinsey Reports and enabled by post-war prosperity, *Playboy* magazine attracted and retained a unique demographic and guided them through their bachelorhood. The intergenerational passing of *Playboy* from fathers to sons makes sense when the magazine is viewed in this manner. A program of seduction, as imagined by *Playboy*, is destined to succeed. A man's fate is to be married, it seems. This view is echoed in Baudrillard's examination of *The Seducer's Diary*, by Søren Kierkegaard:

None of the seducer's calculations, none of his manoeuvres fail. It all unfolds with an infallibility that is neither real nor psychological, but mythical. The artifice's perfection, the apparent inevitability that guide's the seducer's actions, simply reflects, as in a mirror, the perfection of the girl's innate grace, and the inexorable necessity of her sacrifice. This doesn't result from any specific person's strategy. It is fate, Johannes being only its instrument and, therefore, infallible.<sup>18</sup>

Baudrillard's philosophy on seduction is noteworthy, especially for its opposition to Kierkegaard. In *Seduction*, Baudrillard warns of the inevitable failure of programmed seduction: "Doesn't the seducer end up losing himself in his strategy, as in an emotional labyrinth? Doesn't he invent the strategy in order to lose himself in it? And he who believes himself the game's master, isn't he the first victim of strategy's tragic myth?" Obviously, this is a sentiment not shared by *Playboy*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Baudrillard, Seduction, 100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Ibid., 98.

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"Playboy Bed." *Playboy* 6.11 (1959): 66-68.

"Playboy's Patio Terrace." *Playboy* 10.8 (1963): 71-76.

# Vita

Jason Derouin was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, in 1976. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Ottawa (Ottawa, ON, CAN), and a Bachelor of Arts degree from McGill University (Montreal, QC, CAN), where he studied Mathematics and the Social Studies of Medicine. Jason joined the University of New Orleans in 2008 to pursue studies leading to a Master of Fine Arts degree.