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From Onlooker to Interpreter

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From Onlooker to Interpreter

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
Studio Art

by

Jeff Rinehart

B.A. Eastern Washington University, 2004

May, 2008

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Jeff Rinehart

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30 x 22
mixed media on paper
2. *Grenades*
30 x 22
mixed media on paper
3. *Still from "In Stereo"*
video
mixed media
4. *Upward Swing*
60 x 36
mixed media on paper
5. *Black*
10 x 7
mixed media on canvas
6. *Red*
7 x 10
mixed media on canvas

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Raymond Pettibon
No title (I've often lamented) 15 x 22
2004

Arturo Herrera
When Alone Again
Latex on wall installation
2001

Neo Rauch
Die Flamme
Oil on canvas 63 x 43
2007

Jeremy Blake
Winchester (still) from the trilogy
21-minute video
2002

Abstract

In my artwork, I incorporate narratives, which help me explore relationships and how they exist within the context of the formal imagery on the page. The idea of storytelling highly influences the way I approach and produce art. To hint at a story will entice the viewer to make connections and create a platform on which to further inspect the image. The lines in my work attempt to mimic the way stories and information can loop and intertwine to negate the personal, surround the personal or maybe just provide something that the viewer would have to weave his way through in order to create that relationship between the disparate layers. Through my work, I seek to divert the viewer's expression of an instinctual response, from one that would be expected to one that plays with the idea of the spectator transforming from onlooker to interpreter.

Keywords: storytelling, onlooker, interpreter, lines, layers, narrative

Introduction

Storytelling informs the way I make art. I focus on weathered objects that hint at narratives and then use linear elements that have a visible history to engage the objects and manipulate the existing narrative. This is intended to divert the viewer's expression of an instinctual response, from one that would be expected to one that plays with the idea of the spectator transforming from onlooker to interpreter.

Narratives help me explore relationships and how they exist within the context of the formal imagery on the page. To hint at a story will entice the viewer to make connections and create a platform on which to further inspect the image. The lines in my work attempt to mimic the way stories and information can loop and intertwine to negate the personal, surround the personal or maybe just provide something that the viewer would have to weave his way through in order to create that relationship between the disparate layers.

“Theater should question its privileging of living presence and bring the stage back to a level of equality with the telling of a story or the writing and the reading of a book. It should call for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators”.¹

¹ The Emancipated Spectator, Ranciere Jacques, *Artforum*: March , 2007 pp 280.

Body of Thesis

My interest in art came from an early introduction to drawing and photography. I found freedom in these activities, which led me to escape into a world of experimentation I was comfortable with. In both instances my parents were the ones who used these activities as a way to give my brother and me something constructive to do. I took to these activities because my parents made them seem fun. We had toys as kids but, my parents would also give me and my brother paper, markers, pencils and crayons and tell us to make whatever it was we wanted for ourselves. The first thing I made was a paper machine gun.

As a young boy in the 80's, shooting bad guys was something that television encouraged me to do and I did it with attitude. I loved television, but that was just because I loved stories, and television was like a never-ending story machine. I am especially interested in the way books or television influenced the way I perceived my own environment. There was always a sense of repetition in TV and when I was young everything we'd watch had a positive outcome no matter what happened to the characters in the show. I applied this to my life as a kid. If I did something wrong I expected my parents to react like TV parents, and they never did. I was a romantic at the age of five.

I believe that the 1980's in the United States and romanticism are deeply connected. The 80's were all about a glossy, metallic appearance, the love our country had for itself and Communism which represented a constant, shadowy and evil force that we had to band together

and fight or we wouldn't be able to return to a life of normalcy. This kind of idealism is a subject I manipulate and use as a force in my work.

As children we spent a lot of time on the road. It was always cheaper to drive places in the 80's and since my father was in the NAVY he was always stationed thousands of miles from family. Any vacation time he had centered around getting us in the car and driving across the country to visit family. As we would drive from city to city, I would find myself staring off into space. I would stare at the interplay between ground and sky. The horizon line would move up into the mountains and flatten out on bodies of water. It is a solid constant that I continually return to it as an anchor to give my work depth. The combination of the rhythmic movement of the horizon line as we drove and the fact that I was spending ten hours a day in a car staring out the window led to wild rolling tales that I would daydream, weaving characters from the landscape in and out.

Both my parents were in the NAVY and as a child that meant I had a very regimented daily schedule, which included attending military-related functions every so often. Growing up seeing the majority of the adults I would interact with in military uniform led me to have a skewed perspective of what one does as an adult. Because I would use television as a filter, I thought that everyone around me wearing a military uniform was some kind of superhero. I idolized my father for this even though I am sure he had never personally liberated any foreign countries or anything like that. This is a good example of how signifiers, like the uniform, can embody a narrative and ultimately the many ways in which it translates.

A military dress uniform has many different levels, which will determine the amount of decorations on the uniform. There are hundreds of possible pins, stars, stripes, patches and medals. They range in all kinds of colors and designs and each has a specific definition. The most appealing decoration on the uniform with which I was obsessed with looking at was a rectangular set of pins my father wore on his lapel. It was one big rectangle made up from smaller ones as if he had a pin with all the national flags on them. It was beautiful in the way a still image from a Jeremy Blake piece would be. The uniform my father wore became an example to me of what is perfect. It was never dirty, always taken care of and came to embody power and confidence. When I think about art making, I think about how I can have these same feelings as I am creating work. This has influenced the attention to detail and obsessive compulsion with which I have come to treat my picture plane.

One of the most visually influential aspects of my childhood was being able to spend time on giant battleships during NAVY festivals. When I was a kid they were still using all the old WWII leftovers with the huge cannons and guns coming out of every corner. These stoic, almost mythical floating death machines felt like the world's largest jungle gym. There was always this dichotomy going on, where on one hand you could see that these war ships were important and that they were designed to kill, on the other hand the ships were so large and the guns and satellites were so ornamental that it would be hard to not have fun playing around on them. The NAVY schedules festivals at ports around the country where they let kids do just that. I remember running around on those boats, sticking my hands down the gun barrels and playing hide and seek in the labyrinth of rooms in the ship's interior. My experience on those ships presented a situation to me where I could consider spatial relations and how formal shapes are put together to create this giant ship.

The nature of movement in my childhood and what it took to integrate myself into new situations plays a large part in my interest in storytelling and community and how participation is such an integral part of any creative process. This has to do with my nature to get wrapped up in myself and in the way I romanticize and get carried away with personal aspects of life. I neglect the same interaction and participation that I want my work to have. The work I create exists as a visual duality to create a sense of tension. It refers to the parallel of the theatrical production, taking place in my head, which craves participation and at the same time fears it.

Visual tension is an aspect in my work that is important because it fosters participation between elements and between the work and the viewer. In the past I have created tension by appropriating material that might have a certain shock appeal or could possibly be offensive. Recently, I began working on a series of close-ups where I'm bringing images close to the viewer and then obstructing parts of them with morphing lines that flow around the picture plane. Philip Fisher states, ²“the de-consecration of objects, along with the previously latent or even not yet existent features that might let them now perform within a new social script is fundamental to the possibility that they can undergo silencing. The act of silencing is the other side of the act of bringing features into being that cannot be said to have existed before.” This is how I see the objects I use. This is the basis for my work and why I talk about this newly found tension that develops as something that had not existed before.

² Fisher, Philip, Making and Effacing Art. Oxford University Press, 1991

Tension also develops from my decision making process. I have always been able to simply elaborate on stories and generate ideas. The initial creation of a narrative or situation is something that comes quickly, but when I have to make decisions regarding pivotal points in my narratives they tend to grind on methodically. I like to ponder the decision until I have uncovered every last plus or minus and only then can the decision be made. I feel that this push and pull going on is an interplay between lines, elements and background which sometimes get along and at other times remain separate and slightly distant. A sense of withholding in my work may be related to this. This generates a visual tension that can serve a kind of spectacle for the viewer to enter the work.

Once my father retired we moved to his hometown of Raymond, Washington. My life began to change. It went from this constant state of motion, living in fast paced cities to living in what some might call the most secluded place in the lower 48. It's one of those small towns that no one ever leaves. Sometimes tourists visit in the summer during some kind of festival celebrating logging or oysters, but that's about the only kind of cultural influx the town would see. It's one of those towns where it rains every day for 10 months. This is important because it sets the tone for ten years of my visual inspiration.

The characters I met there were very interesting to me. It wasn't just them as people, but more the way they grew to symbolize different aspects of culture and society, all within the confines of this small community. When I'm working there is always an element to which I am trying to attach meaning and at the same time trying to mask that meaning as a transformation over time. I try to surround myself with these objects and analyze the different pieces that make

each one up. Exploring the way I see characters and how I manipulate them to fit my own set of visual guidelines allows me to have control over the transformation process.

³“Seeing is like hunting and like dreaming, and even like falling in love. It is entangled in the passions-jealousy, violence, possessiveness; and it is soaked in affect-in pleasure and displeasure, and in pain. Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism.”

When my father retired from the navy he thought we would get a good education and not have to worry about the big city schools in Seattle. Property was so cheap that I think he couldn't pass up the fact that he could buy a decent house for 37,000 dollars in 1990. As an eleven year old I was young enough to still meet friends and integrate without having to deal with all that teenage hormone stuff. The only problem is that I was a pretty uptight kid who thought myself to be really funny and cool and it turns out that I wasn't. I thought I was better at sports than I really turned out to be and I really had trouble at first getting along with other kids. I was really green and the others were weathered small town kids. I internalized everything about the situation and it seemed easy to withhold emotions, ideas and anything else regarding outward thinking. I eventually became another sort of person, as if I was playing a part in a movie. I took on aspects of different characters to play different parts in relation to each situation that I found myself in. It was a way to maintain that security I got from withholding which is another aspect of my life that informs my work.

My father helped convince this town to raise money to help rebuild their old turn-of-the-century movie and live-performance theater. He knew booking agents in Seattle as well as film

³ Elkins, James, The Object Stares Back, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

distributors and projector companies from previously working as a public relations official. And so his obsession for running this theater began. This would become my obsession too, not because I wanted it to, but because it had to. I went to work running old movie projectors in this archaic system that used carbon rods with electricity running through them to create a flame that would burn so hot it could illuminate film on the screen. It was actually pretty interesting because not a lot of theaters did this anymore.

The job afforded me a lot of time to create, day dream, night dream, pass out, fall asleep or otherwise pass the time. That time eventually turned into a sort of meditation on the relationship I had with the moving image in front of me. The movies were all mainstream cinema, but that didn't matter. I became focused on the process of spending time with light and color, as it would move around. After I saw a bad movie enough times, I had to find something else to experience. The movie began to dissolve into light and sound and I entered a realm where the things I viewed on the screen became part of a formal and visual meditative process. This experience enabled me to contemplate all kinds of formal abstraction during the meditative process.

Contemplating formal abstraction helps keep a balance with the obsession of the controlled mark making when I'm putting an image together. The surfaces on my old paintings had a kind of frantic obsessive mark making, which creates a wild end product at times and adds to the confusion I described earlier in this paper about decision-making. If I slow my process down and give myself the time to make decisions I believe the work I am making will begin to reflect the intentions in a more appropriate way. This even refers to pieces in collages I have made that show signs of all kinds of image making, but are then cut out carefully and positioned very carefully in relation to the other elements in the work.

I am dissecting my art-making practices in a linear fashion. Examining the process is just as important as discussing the current state. Last year I tried to create tension in my work by blending painted forms with digital photographs. Bridging a gap between digitally manipulated photographs and painted imagery. I was using paint to work into photographs and highlight objects and characters who'd then protrude off the photograph. It provided another way to engage a two-dimensional space and was intended to throw the viewer off. That Idea kind of moved into the realm of negating the photographic image with some very brushy and expressive painting and collage elements leaving bits of the printed image to come through the jumble above. This eliminated the illustrative aspect of the painted forms on top of the photos that looked too separate, but left me with an image with photographic spaces that felt too untouched and immediate. Though the expressive strokes on top were there to negate what was going on underneath in the photograph it lacked the physical marks that help build up space. This method had run its course for me when it came to producing this kind of imagery.

From there I no longer needed to negate my subject but instead I wanted to move around it and show more of my subject beneath. The formal rule of thirds became the starting point from which to manipulate the picture plane. It is such a basic way to think about the formal quality of one's work, but I really needed to tone down the elements in my work or bring them together. This was necessary in order to create that constant visual tension that informs the process of translating the image.

Focusing on the interaction between three visible layers of information helped establish a relationship between the weathered elements I render in the image and the linear elements that obscure the object below. That interaction has opened up to include expressing tension in relationships by creating collage objects that no longer sit below the line but become entwined in it. The tension comes less from the anticipation of what the above white line will do and more from the interaction of the elements in the collage object which almost appear to be connected using flowing linear segments. This gives the object a sense of cohesion as well the possibility of movement.

The imagery I previously used was an extension of the expression of self-obsessive qualities I felt that were dominant in my life. The uses of line and unspecific forms have taken the place of the parts of my work that were having trouble existing in the context of image. This transformation is about the duality of being able to obsess over a piece of art and generate imagery using obsessive tendencies, while all along trying to cover up the mess. A flowing white line, an entangled colored line or underdeveloped lines are all examples of how those tendencies manifest themselves within my work.

My digital works and my drawings are both highlighting beautiful objects. In my drawings I've had to deal with the struggle between negation and interruption and how to interpret the flowing white lines, which have become the onlooker and interpreter. The white lines refuse the intention to obsess over and consume the visual space with which they occupy. I intended for the white line to generate negative space but as I built it up with layers of gesso it became physically three-dimensional. The line turned into a beautiful meandering form that

seemed to hint at being a character. It is completely self-contained and never leaves the page. It wants to be ambiguous and make sense at the same time.

“We only see what we want to look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily within arm’s reach. To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it. We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.”⁴

When looking at any of the white lines I use there is the feeling of an attempt at communication that is still tentative. It’s like the anti-doodle. It’s only a looping white line but it hints at so many things and is so strong on the page that it demands attention.

European cultural narrative traditions, like fables, are an aspect of society that informs the content that enters into my work. The idea of storytelling is something that runs through all the elements in my work to which I have a deep personal attraction to as well. Stories through image are even more interesting due to the meaning that initially existed and how it can be stretched into so many different directions without losing it’s original intentions. Fables were often created to promote common sense, fairness, balance and the positive results of appropriate actions and functioned as a form of communication for the illiterate segments of society. These stories existed for the good of the community, in relation to contemporary society where access to information eliminates the way in which a folk story might evolve over time. “Postmodernism espoused a relativistic view of history that makes it impossible to refute absurd and dangerous

⁴ Ways of Seeing, Berger, John; pp 8,154: 1972, BBC and Penguin books.

ideas like Holocaust revisionism, recovered memory and alien abduction. Its obsession with representation led to an embrace of media that does nothing to counter the narcotic effect of film and television on the public at large.”⁵ The subtle nuances of the evolution of storytelling are lost on a much less impressionable society in general, yet are so rich in relation to the development of previous generations that their impact lingers in a way I intend the objects in my art too.

As a parallel to what I do with my drawings, I create digital still photos and stop action videos that try to utilize the same principles of image making. The digital work utilizes bacon as a subversive tool and focuses on the attractive surface the photo presents. It’s subversive the way the content of the image is veiled from a distance and how tension is generated from the interplay of beautiful composition and the grisly bacon. The bacon in the digital work is evocative of the swirling spectacle that the white line plays in my drawings. As I obsessively take on the creation of the woven floor covering I obsessively utilize the tactile quality of bacon as well as its visceral and unnatural feelings, not to mention the relationship most people have with bacon being one of the most delicious and unhealthy foods known to man.

As my art has changed over time I can point to a number of influential contemporary artists. Some influenced formal aspects of my work and others affected me by speaking about their work and process in a way that helped me understand my work better. Raymond Pettibon has always been an influential artist to me. His drawing technique isn’t especially impressive but his subject matter is so expansive that the basic quality of his, ink on paper drawings, are a perfect fit. He manages to tap into poetic undercurrents, humorous situations, social commentary

⁵ Postmodernism, Heartney Eleanor; p. 8: 2004 Cambridge Press

and personal involvement by juxtaposing image with text. This is the landscape of sources I would like to be able to use within my work and Pettibon is a good example to follow. An unspecified amount of outcomes appear in his work that are informed by how much the viewer knows about literature or the sources Pettibon gets his images from.

“Introducing multifarious personae and complex emotions, the drawings are by no means directly autobiographical. Very much the creations of a voracious reader, they often address the self-reflective and participatory nature of the act of reading. One of Pettibon’s “Scarlet Letter” drawings, for example features a large “A” accompanied by the text, “there is something in my storyteller’s art that wants to put the reader and writer on equal footing in the role of the creator.” Pettibon obviously relishes this open-ended quality of his art.”⁶

Where Raymond Pettibon had a large impact on the way I challenge myself to create a complex standard for the use of content in my work, Arturo Herrera influenced me by showing me that abstraction of known imagery in a subtle way can be very seductive. He uses his childhood relationship with Disney cartoon imagery as a point of beginning. He subverts any relationship he has with the characters by hacking off or covering up personal features on the characters. Often times this is done with large spaces of paint or large drooping kinds of drippy marks. His imagery isn’t complex, but the way he’s able to reference desire and manipulate memory generates tension that helps entice the viewer,

“Herrera's wall paintings made with household latex paint also combine high and low culture: modernist abstraction and vernacular imagery. They reach a balance where the viewer is drawn in by the desirable colors; the rhythmic, repetitive, ornamental dance of forms; and by obsessions and fantasies onto these ambivalent zones where full-blown narrative seems always imminent, just a breath away.”⁷

⁶ Pettibon’s Talking Pictures-artist Raymond Pettibon, Duncan Micheal; *Art in America*: March 1999.

⁷ Hammer Projects: Arturo Herrera, Bakargiev Carly Christov; The Hammer Museum UCLA 2001.

Neo Rauch is a German painter who works in a manner that can be directly connected to specific kinds of image making that took place in East Germany during the early to mid part of the 20th century. One critic said, "Neo Rauch has often been perceived as the painter of the "failed utopia" of the eastern bloc"⁸. His color palette is near monochrome with the way he yellows his palette. The imagery could be described as surrealist in a socialist kind of way. His work involves communal participation in a way that I would like my work to. I feel that if I were German I would be able to interpret his paintings with a more informed understanding. He hints at historical context and political influence without showing his audience too much. That sense of play between the work and the audience will make viewers want to engage his work.

"If Rauch's work is nightmarish, as some critics have asserted, the effect pertains not to its dramas but to their mockery of understanding. They are not mysterious, because mysteries imply solutions. Rather, they convey that we may know plenty but our knowledge is useless. There is a highly contemporary sting in this. Today, we are flooded with accurate information-letting us confidently judge the failures and iniquities of political leaders, for instance – and we naturally feel that such clarity must influence events, but it only amplifies our dismay as the world careens from one readily foreseeable disaster to another. Rauch sets us an example of getting used to it."⁹

Jeremy Blake is a digital artist who animates intense color fields that will, without feeling rushed, roll across the screen absorbing objects and people that get in the way. The work like James Turrin is rooted in the way light moves and is absorbed into darkness clearing away what lies ahead. The atmosphere that Blake is able to produce is enveloping. He embraces bright and saturated colors and animates them in a way where you won't have time to get bored with what you're focused on, because it will be gone shortly.

⁸ Paintings for now, Neo Rauch at the Met, Schjeldahl Peter; The New Republic, June 4, 2007, pp 96-97.

⁹ Ibid

“Blake's DVDs are kinetic collages that mingle film footage, still photography, and painted and digital elements to create layerings and shiftings that feel dance-like, intuitive, impressionistic. The photographic elements—which include fragments of architecture, figures, and faces—will flicker and then burst and then fade. Something familiar—the face of Sam Shepard, a Victorian mansion, a neon sign—will hover for a moment, only to be enveloped in washes of color that move across the screen, saturating or obliterating the photographic images”¹⁰.

His ideas of the importance of tempo and length in short digital video and his use of saturated color and formal considerations are what I'm attracted to in his work. Video can be tedious to watch, which can turn viewers off and he's always aware of that in his work.

“All knowledge, which was in any case limited by the memory of society's oldest members, was always borne by the living. Neither death nor reproduction were understood as governed by time. Time was motionless – a sort of enclosed space. When a more complex society did finally attain a consciousness of time, its reaction was to deny rather than embrace it, for it viewed time not as something passing, but as something returning. This was a static type of society that organized time, true to its immediate experience of nature, on a cyclical model.”¹¹

I believe this quote verbally embodies what I believe is going on in my work. I think it reflects my use of images that for whatever reason have a historic presence in relation to the specific audiences that embrace them as part of their personal history. The meandering line in my work encloses parts of space and appears to swell and thin out, yet it lies there motionless acting as if it is passing and returning all in relation to the image below.

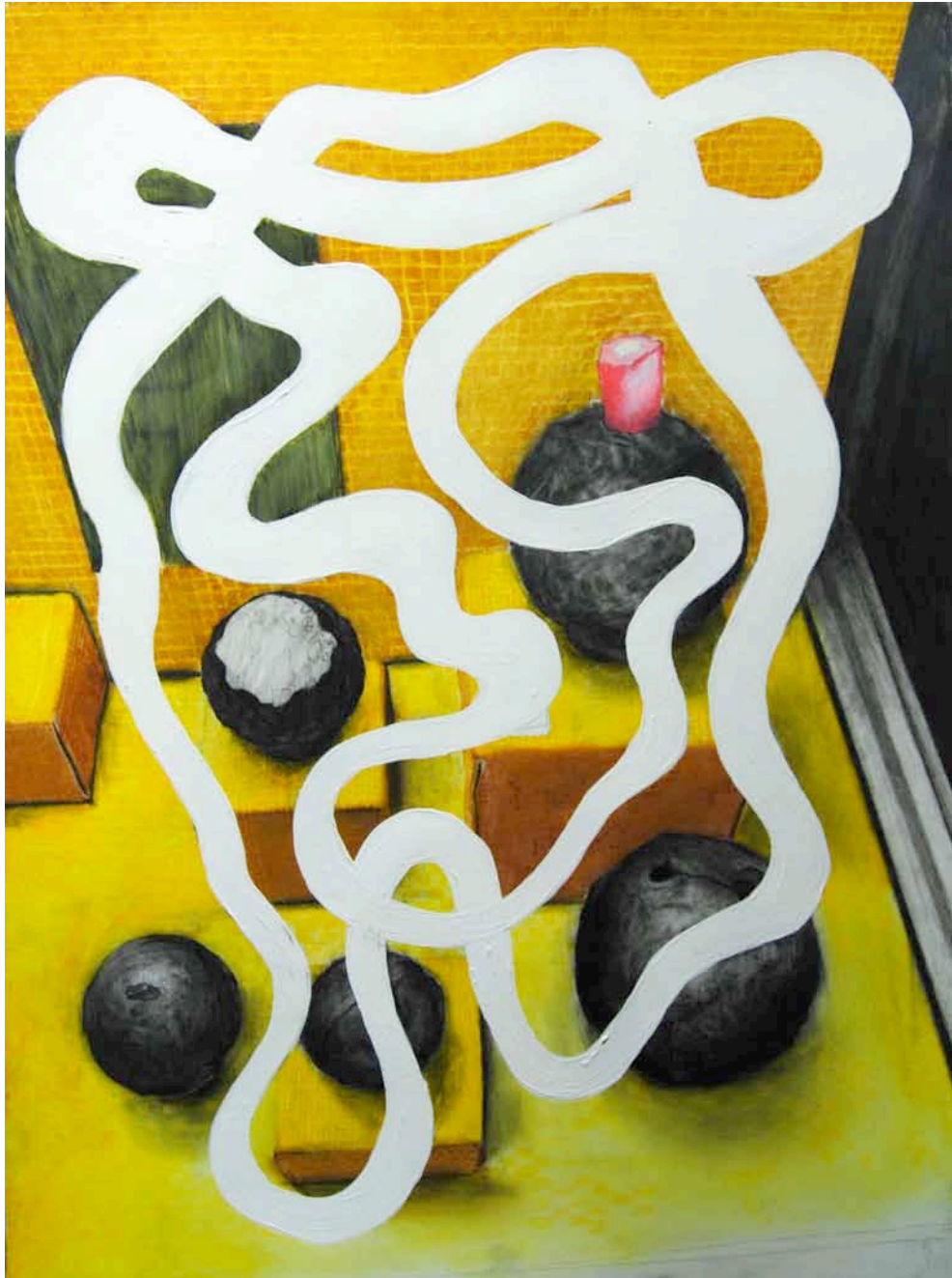
¹⁰ Peep Show for Poets, Perl Jed; **The New Republic**, pp 21-25.

¹¹ The Society of the Spectacle, Debord, Gu; pp 92-93: 1967, Buchet-Chastel.

Images of Work



Jeff Rinehart
Coins
30 x 22
mixed media on paper



Jeff Rinehart
Grenades
30 x 22
mixed media on paper



Jeff Rinehart
Still from "In Stereo"
video
mixed media



Jeff Rinehart
Upward Swing
60 x 36
mixed media on paper



Jeff Rinehart
Black
10 x 7
mixed media on canvas



Jeff Rinehart
Red
7 x 10
mixed media on canvas



Raymond Pettibon
No title (I've often lamented)
Ink on paper
2004



Arturo Herrera
When Alone Again
Latex on wall installation
2001



Neo Rauch
Die Flamme
Oil on canvas
2007



Jeremy Blake
Winchester (still)
21-minute video
2002

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Vita

Jeffrey Rinehart grew up in Raymond, Washington. He received a B.A. in Fine Arts from Eastern Washington University in 2004. Rinehart was the recipient of a graduate assistantship in Fine Arts at the University of New Orleans in 2005. He currently lives and works in New Orleans, Louisiana with his wife Natalie.