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Information Session

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

Jessica Bizer

B.S. Boston University, 2001

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Introduction	1
Interaction of Disparate Materials as a Source of Drama	2
Narratives Created by the Hierarchical Compositions in my Work	10
Connection to 19th Century Romanticism in Contemporary Painting.....	16
Conclusion	17
References.....	18
Vita	19

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1 Ryan Trecartin, video stills from, *I Be Area*, 2007.
- Fig. 2 Jessica Bizer, *That Was the Weird Part*, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 2009, 80 x 80 in.
- Fig. 3 Kristin Baker, *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold*, acrylic on acrylic with powder coated steel, freestanding structure, 2007, 96 x 360 in.
- Fig. 4 Jessica Bizer, acrylic, fabric and foam on canvas, *Love is a Serious Business*, 2008, 50 x 50 in.
- Fig. 5 Lisa Sanditz, *The Road to Decoration City*, acrylic on linen, 67 X 86 5/8 in. 2008.
- Fig. 6 Morris Louis, *Alpha-Phi*, from the *Unfurled Series*, acrylic on canvas, 1961, 180 x 10 in.
- Fig 7. Fred Tomaselli, *Airborne Event*, mixed media, acrylic paint, resin on wood, 2003, 84 x 60 x 1 1/2 in.

ABSTRACT

My work concerns the divergent narratives created by fusing varied, often conflicting, textures, colors and fabrics, into a tenuous order. I intend for these otherwise clashing materials to create drama that is simultaneously enthusiastic, epic and ambiguous. While this media's formal properties are an important component of my work, the material's cultural and art-historical associations are also a critical ingredient.

In this thesis, I will explore the use of the varied collage material, hierarchical compositions and contemporary influence of 19th Century Romantic themes as they relate to forming a variety of distinctly contemporary narratives in my compositions. I will investigate how my artistic point-of-view is informed by art-history, irony and the work of contemporary painters. Finally, I will discuss how my work engages a contemporary version of the Sublime.

Keywords: Painting, Contemporary Sublime, Romantic, Fred Tomaselli, Lisa Sanditz, Kristen Baker, Morris Louis, digital, mixed-media, collage.

INTRODUCTION

"My hope is that the viewer will, like me, become engaged in a struggle between viewing a static fiat accompli and feeling as if they were participating in a series of contradictions and narratives that come to no settling conclusion. I feel that my work both experiences and argues for the necessity of both." - Jessica Stockholder1

I love the theatrics that result from creating a relationship, however absurd, among otherwise clashing materials. My work is driven by the drama of fusing varied, often conflicting, textures, colors and fabrics, into a tenuous order. The formal properties of these elements play a decisive role in the overall appearance of the work. However, the optical qualities of the imagery are only a partial feature of its identity. The media in my work is also defined by the associations gathered from its use in the art and popular culture of the 20th and 21st Centuries. This issue is a necessary feature of the visual language I have inherited. In my work, I compound a material's art-historical and cultural it's formal characteristics, resulting in multi-layered, complex and vacillating narratives. I condense these themes into highly hierarchical, but fantastical landscapes. This compositional structure balances the tangle of sensations expressed by the material, but is consistent with its energy. My goal is for these scenes to represent personal fantasy worlds, where a variety of visual elements simultaneously play and conflict, forming enthusiastically divergent narratives. I agree with how Massimiliano Gioni, the director of special exhibitions for the New Museum, illustrates this

issue. Gioni uses the multilayered complexity of Ryan Trecartin's video art (fig. 1), and the work of the artist's peers, as a reference. According to Gioni, the distinctly contemporary theatrics in the artist's work, "is a reflection of the world they have inherited, drowning in information and images. It's as if information is speaking the characters rather than the other way around."²



Fig. 1 Ryan Trecartin, video stills from, *I-Be Area*, 2007

The vocabulary of my work and the contemporary art that I admire, reflects this reality. In contemporary painting, even the most basic stylistic ingredients, such as a specific brushstroke, color or pattern have art-historical and cultural associations which compound its purely visual characteristics. In the first section of my thesis, I explain how specific qualities of particular materials feed my paintings' rambunctious drama. In the second part of this paper, I discuss how the theatrical interactions among a work's ingredients are intensified by their hierarchical, landscape-inspired organization. I am

interested in exploring such themes through a contemporary adaptation of a 19th Century Romantic point-of-view. I address this idea in the third section. I am particularly influenced by contemporary artists, such as Lisa Sanditz, who apply the exaggerated themes of Romantic landscapes to contemporary settings. Hudson River School painters, such as Frederick Church, are a major influence on her work³

The Romantic concept of the sublime also informs my artistic point-of-view. I discuss this issue in the conclusion of this paper. Traditionally defined as an overwhelming emotion resulting from a viewer's simultaneous experience with the vastness, beauty and danger of the natural world, the 19th Century Romantic idea of the sublime has a contemporary equivalent in the mysterious experience of viewing images on computer screen. I am influenced by contemporary artists, such as Fred Tomaselli, who engage this theme.

BODY OF THESIS

Interaction of Disparate Materials as a Source of Drama

I use a visual language in which even the most basic stylistic forms, such as specific brushstrokes, colors or patterns, are often loaded with art-historical and cultural associations. When I integrate artistic elements with one another in such an environment, I intend for their disparate formal and cultural properties to collide and conflict. The resulting activity is a critical source of action in my work. This issue is demonstrated by the expressive orange brushstrokes and hounds-tooth fabric in *That Was the Weird Part* (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Jessica Bizer. *That Was the Weird Part*, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 2009, 80 x 80 in.

The activity created by the orange loops of paint and black and red fabric at the top-right composed of celebratory, optimistic colors and attractive smooth textures. My goal is for the whirlwind's overall energy to be positive, but slightly disordered. This area of the canvas receives some additional chaotic sensations from the squares of hounds-tooth fabric, located towards the bottom-left of the orange loop. These patches of fabric are formally incongruous with the brushstrokes and are in danger of existing only as superfluous collage material. However, I intend for the fabric's specific angle to contribute to the whirlwind's outward energy. Additionally, the red paint stained on the squares' left edges convincingly, if tenuously, integrates the pattern into this area.

Based on this passage, I intend for the fabric squares have a comically absurd, rather than pointless role in the piece. While this scene contains some feelings of anxiety, communicated by the potentially threatening dark sky or the pattern's lightning bolt like design, the work's luscious formal qualities substantially outweigh its negative emotions. There are additional sources of anxiety in the work, contributed by the turbulent art-historical past of expressive brushwork. These forces do not affect the piece drastically enough to overcome the scene's exuberance, but they do intensify the composition's sense of energy and conflict. For a present-day audience, a contemporary gestural painting often references major expressive painting trends of the 20th and 21st Centuries, such as Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 50s, Neo-Expressionism of the late 1970s and mid-80s, and early 21st Century revivals of gestural painting⁴. While each of these movements represents a distinct conceptual goal, these styles share many historical and critical concerns. Given this background, I intend for an audience to compare the goals of a present-day expressive work, such as *That Was the Weird Part* (fig.2), to the history and critical opinion concerning previous gestural art. Expressive painting often engages a turbulent range of point-of-views. These critical perspectives can influence viewers' experience with the painting, and contribute to the theatrics occurring in the piece.

One of the primary reference points for this issue is early Abstract Expressionism. During that era, many artists desired to rid painting of illusionistic and symbolic space, reducing an artwork's subject to the formal exploration of materials. At the beginning of the movement, many viewers believed the style represented a revolutionary advancement in non-representational painting⁵. Knowing this,

contemporary viewers may think that the marks of *That Was the Weird Part* (fig. 2), demonstrate literal reverence to the goals of Abstract Expressionism. However, gestural painting has experienced vacillating critical opinion since then. The turbulent past of this style may lead an audience to bring both negative and positive associations to a contemporary expressive work. For many viewers, these conflicting ideas may increase the tension and drama they sense in such a painting. A primary reference point for the degraded opinion of expressive work is the mid-1950s. By this time, many viewers believed the style's once fresh sensibility had become mundane and irrelevant. Given the tendency for many contemporary artists to appropriate outdated styles for ironic purposes, a viewer of *That Was the Weird Part* (fig. 2) may believe that the work's expressive style is satirical or sarcastic. The painting's suggestions of irony are deepened by the negative opinion surrounding a more recent expressive movement, Neo-Expressionism. This style was a revival of gestural painting that occurred from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s. Adherents of Neo-Expressionism sought to revive personal expression in an art world that, in their perception, wrongly favored a more somber, conceptual aesthetic. Like Abstract Expressionism, the style was initially regarded by many as an intrepid development in painting. However, after several years of popularity, Neo-Expressionism experienced a downgrade in critical opinion. As with earlier expressive work, many viewers of Neo-Expressionism were "fed up with all the heroic, high-ticket posturing" associated with the style. Given this critical demotion of gestural painting, audiences may believe that I am defiantly indulging in now cliché, mid-century tastes. However, viewers may assume that I am naive of the expressive mark's art-historical associations of the canvas is dominated by an enthusiastic,

luscious formal quality. It is mostly, and am using gestural marks for strictly formal purposes. But, most critically, recent negative opinions regarding expressive painting may further viewers' perception that I am using gestural marks for ironic purposes.

While I do sincerely enjoy the formal appearance of expressive marks, my attraction to them is also based in irony. These marks have the potential to appear dated and archaic when used in a contemporary painting. I enjoy exploring this risk in my work. It is my intention for such marks to contain a potential for failure. Such an issue increases the level of tension in my compositions-- necessary foil for the piece's dominant celebratory characteristics. I agree with how this issue is explained by Susan Sontag in *Notes on Camp*. In this essay she describes the appeal of "camp", a stylistic element that knowingly does not conform to contemporary good taste. "Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style-- but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the "off", of things-being-what-they-are-not."⁶ I am influenced by contemporary artists such as Kristen Baker, who address such issues in their work. Much of the action in her 200⁵ painting *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold* (fig. 3), concerns the conflicts created by her use of an expressive style. This issue compounds the anxious, exploding energy, already provided by the formal aspects of her work. For instance, viewers of the work may sense friction between the buoyant primary colors and burdensome black shapes and grey background of the piece. Additionally, the blast of sharp-edged shapes gives the composition a sense of chaotic, possibly dangerous energy (the blast is inspired by a car crash, as are many of her paintings, however there is not enough recognizable imagery in the piece for this subject to contribute to the work's sensibility). While these formal features help contribute to the work's overall

seductive, faceted feeling, a major part of its negative emotions comes from viewers' potentially inconsonant feelings regarding expressive painting. Due to the negative opinions attached to two of the most crucial recent expressive painting movements, Abstract Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism, an audience may be surprised to see a contemporary painting that is both successful and relevant, and fearlessly demonstrates an expressive style.



Fig. 3 Kristin Baker, *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold*, acrylic on acrylic with powder coated steel freestanding structure, 2007, 96 x 360 in.

This is a contrast to many paintings by artists of the 1990s, such as Laura Owen's⁷ Her work represents a painterly point-of-view, but lacks confidence to demonstrate that the artist is committed to the style. Viewers of this piece could assume that Owen's expressive intentions are ironic. Unlike Owen's work, Baker's *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold* demonstrates expressive brushwork with confidence and vigor. This issue may challenge an audience who would otherwise assume Baker's expressive

style is ironic. However, the expressive strokes in Baker's work represent more than a simple reverence for gestural painting. She uses expressive brushwork in a manner that conflicts with much of 20th Century art's conceptual goals. This element gives the piece a fresh and relatively unconventional feeling. For instance, despite its prevailing nonobjective style, *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold* has a deliberately glossy surface that enthusiastically embraces illusionism and sensation. The smooth and reflective texture of the piece maximizes the suggestion that the composition depicts an explosion bursting with light. Additionally, the canvas is bent at the center of this activity, further emphasizing the illusion of a space filled with exploding material. Baker's indulgence in theatrics and illusionism bring the work into conflict with the traditional strict formal goals of abstract painting. Also, this issue clashes with the objectives of much 20th Century art. Work at this time often deliberately avoided or subverted reference to the outside world⁸. This issue plays an important role in creating the narratives of *Flying Curve, Differential Manifold* and much of Baker's other work. I am inspired by her distinctly contemporary use of grandiose emotion and illusion. These items are used in an enthusiastic manner, but they are made more engaging for the conflict they introduce to the piece. If her style were presented in a straightforward context, it would not have the same power.

While irony plays a major role in contemporary art, the issue is also a critical component of present-day popular culture. The ironic appreciation of otherwise distasteful material (such as celebrity gossip magazines or failed clothing trends), allows people to embrace cultural products they would otherwise ignore or reject. For a broad population, including myself, this sensibility is often a default response to the content of

mass media. The camp perspective is so pervasive, that many cultural products with ironic appeal were sincerely created to attract sarcastic reactions. I agree with Todd Gitlin's explanation of the idea in his 2003 book, *Media Unlimited*. He states that irony "began as a defense against the clutter that is the sum of all the image makers' attempts to break through the clutter composed of all the other attempts," and has become "itself a style that clutters the media system."⁹ Such an environment contains a limitless potential for instability and absurdity. Such a setting is a significant influence on my artistic point-of-view.

Narratives Created by the Hierarchical Compositions in My Work

Another important feature of my paintings are my work's hierarchical, but fantastical compositions. Most of the time, the structure of my work is based on a landscape. I intend for this organized compositional format to provide a balance to the painting's exaggerated emotions. The resulting multi-layered landscapes are settings in which a variety of visual ingredients simultaneously play and conflict, forming enthusiastically divergent narratives. Additionally, the anachronistic quality of a landscape-style composition adds another layer of tension to my work. This hierarchical, illusionistic structure conflicts with traditional modernist ideas regarding representation¹⁰. The hierarchical structure of one of my paintings, *Love is a Serious Business* (fig. 4) both balances and exaggerates the fantastical nature of the work. This painting concerns an ambiguous, but epic event composed of diverse and exuberant streams of energy. For instance, the red and white lines blasting from the top of the canvas could represent a variety of events. Among other scenarios, this scene could illustrate a vivid sunset occurring on horizon that is composed of some kind of bubbling

gas or liquid. Additionally, the red and white blast could represent a massive explosion occurring in the distance or directly on top of the fabric. It is also possible to imagine the oval-shaped material as a source of energy for this explosion. Or, this fabric could represent a horizon that is completely separate from the blast. The slope of this activity suggests even more possibilities for the work. For instance, viewers may believe these angled images are a fantastical landslide or avalanche, occurring either on top of, or behind the red, orange and blue collage material.



Fig. 4 Jessica Bizer, *Love is a Serious Business*, acrylic, fabric and foam on canvas, 2008, 50 x 50 in.

Among other scenarios, this scene could illustrate a vivid sunset occurring on horizon that is composed of some kind of bubbling gas or liquid. Additionally, the red and white blast could represent a massive explosion occurring in the distance or directly on top of the fabric. It is also possible to imagine the oval-shaped material as a source of energy for this explosion. Or, this fabric could represent a horizon that is completely separate from the blast. The slope of this activity suggests even more possibilities for the work. For instance, viewers may believe these angled images are a fantastical landslide or avalanche, occurring either on top of, or behind the red, orange and blue collage triangles below. These examples illustrate just a few of the varied narratives that I intend for audiences to imagine. Without the organizing structure of the landscape, viewers may imagine infinite events generated by this exuberant spectacle. However, I intend for the scene's structure to limit such possibilities. There are three primary layers in the work; the collage of foam shapes at the bottom, a collection of fabric ellipses in the middle and a top composed of a tri-colored explosion. This traditional landscape-inspired composition creates decisive borders for the work's fluid and ambiguous activity. The painting's three layered organization suggests there is a sequence to the work's epic drama. If the explosive activity of *Love is a Serious Business* was presented in a random, rather than hierarchical manner, the work would lose many of its fantastical associations. In this case, the painting would only be read as a generalized field of activity, rather than a sequence of epic events. I also intend for the landscape format to introduce illusionistic themes to the work.

This feature introduces additional conflict to the painting, given that the art historical inspiration for much of my brushwork originates from Abstract Expressionism

and Color Field. Both of these movements that avoided reference to the outside world in favor of formal exploration. For instance, the burst of red and white lines at the top of the canvas references the personal, intuitive style that characterized much abstract painting from the late 1940s through the mid-50s. Additionally, loose bands of paint at the bottom of the composition are often associated with the fluid and crisp appearance of much Color Field painting, a movement of the early and mid-1960s that similarly limited its subject matter to formal concerns¹¹. For instance, the field of foam shapes, located at the bottom of the composition, is a source of intense visual activity. The interaction of yellow and green, in the center creates tension in the work by simultaneously expressing movement and frozen forces. Additionally, the smooth character of these marks and pastel bands of color, vividly contrast with the collages' erratic and fragmented sensibility. This strongly non-representational energy for *Love is a Serious Business*, conflicts with the painting's landscape structure. The piece's composition suggests that its formal activity is occurring in an imaginary setting, such as a planet, horizon or atmosphere. *Love is a Serious Business* simultaneously combines two traditionally clashing artistic motivations. For many viewers, these opposing feelings are an additional source of spectacle in the composition.

Additionally, I intend for the blankness of the painting's abstract forms to heighten the work's mysterious and fanciful nature. For instance, if the composition's mosaic-like pastel section contained descriptive landscape forms, such as trees or buildings, the piece would suggest a more narrow range of narratives for the viewer. However, I intend for the emptiness this area to present viewers with the freedom to imagine more possibilities than representational imagery could offer. The abstract elements of

Love is a Serious Business are a fundamental source of the work's mysterious sensibility. I am inspired by contemporary painters, such as Lisa Sanditz, an artist who depicts hierarchical abstracted landscapes in a similar manner. Her compositions, luscious and fantastical scenes that often depict industrial or commercial architecture, contain a powerful tension between sprawling formal exploration and representation. She "conveys less in literal quantity than in scintillating panoramas of unfurled paint and perspective."¹² The "unfurled" color of her paintings, described in a *Modern Painters* review, connects Sanditz's work to the strictly formal concerns of Morris Louis's series, also titled "Unfurled" (fig. 5). This issue demonstrates how strongly Sanditz's work references the purely visual activity that composed much mid-20th Century abstraction. *The Road to Decoration City* (fig. 6) is one painting by Sanditz that powerfully represents the dramatic potential of combining formal exploration with a traditional landscape format. For instance, the brown and green bands that run diagonally across the work have distinct formal qualities that contribute to the painting's narrative. They contain a vibration between frozen and active activity that energizes the composition through pure visual effects, rather representational forms. However, Sanditz uses these bands to construct the illusion of mountains and roads. I am interested in how she combines the traditionally incongruous worlds of abstract and representational art. Additionally, the relatively blank nature of these undulating bands increases the potential interpretations of In *The Road to Decoration City*. I am influenced by how Sanditz uses this abstract device to create additional possibilities for the work. For instance, the wavy green bands ambiguously suggest that a road or highway is crossing the mountain range. Or, these stripes could also be interpreted as an additional horizon,

or range of hills that divides the land. Whatever the scenario, the vibrating energy of these bands suggests this path continues infinitely. I am inspired how the non-representational blankness of these stripes actually creates more potential narratives in *The Road to Decoration City*, than if the bands of color contained additional realistic information. Had these stripes exhibited representational details, such as trees or cars, viewers would be influenced by these clues. This audience would have restricted space on which to project varied narratives. Rather than simply exist an empty space, the abstract forms of *The Road to Decoration City* are fundamental to the work's sense of mystery and fantasy.



Fig. 5 Morris Louis *Alpha-Phi*, from the *Unfurled Series*, Acrylic on canvas, 1961, 180 x 102 in.



Fig. 6 Lisa Sanditz, *The Road to Decoration City*, acrylic on linen, 2008, 67 X 86 5/8 in.

Connection to 19th Century Romanticism in Contemporary Painting

I intend for the fantastical and epic nature of my compositions represents a contemporary adaptation of the 19th Century Romantic point-of-view. The Romantic artists of the 1800s explored the potential for extracting grandiose themes from their everyday environment, which was dominated by the natural world. Many artists at the time perceived this landscape as mysterious and uncontrollable ¹³.

Superficially, the content of Sanditz's work , and my own paintings, has little in common with threatening imagery and often religious intentions of traditional Romanticism. However, there are important similarities between the two worlds. Like the wilderness of the 19th Century, the contemporary aesthetic universe has many sources of complex and conflicting associations. Sanditz finds these overwhelming

sensations in the landscape of Chinese factory towns. These cluttered and densely packed landscapes, are often a subject for her work. The artist cites Hudson River School painters, such as Frederick Church, as an important inspiration for constructing such paintings. For Sanditz, the grandiose style of American Romantic painters, such as Church, has a contemporary application. According to Sanditz, such a compositional is appropriate for condensing the "the fractured way we experience things- going to a place and then revisiting it through photographs of that experience or seeing it on a Web site or flying above it?I'm trying to get all the different angles that we access things into one space."¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The contemporary adaption of Romantic themes extends to present-day artists' engagement of the Sublime. The 19th Century view of the Sublime is traditionally defined as an overwhelming emotion resulting from a viewer's simultaneous experience with the infinite terror and beauty of the natural world. The world of digital imagery contains a contemporary version of these feelings. This characteristic of modern life has a major influence on my work.

With no reference in the physical world, the existence of digital imagery, such as the text and images that appear on a computer monitor, necessarily engages the realm of imagination. Interacting with this fantastical universe is a necessary ingredient of my everyday experience, and is a vital source of the imagery I superimpose on my work. However, for all of their ethereal qualities, digital graphics are grounded by a sense of

seamlessness and completeness. Such a setting provides a fertile ground for the vibrating drama communicated by my paintings' brushstrokes and collage material. I agree with Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's explanation of the idea in his 1999 book, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*. He says "a contemporary sublime might, then, have to engage an environment in which multiplicitous signification...is not only the norm but the model, and where the issues are not the incomplete and the rough, but the intersection of differences."¹⁵

These "intersections" are the subject of my work and much of the contemporary artwork that I admire. I am influenced by how Fred Tomaselli's work, such as *Airborne Event* (fig. 7) engages this issue. The work is fanciful and kaleidoscopic in a manner that references the fantastical and sublime nature of the everyday visual environment. The glowing and smooth quality of the individual collage items references the completeness and seamlessness associated with digital imagery. This sensation is deepened by the impersonal but luscious nature of the painting's glossy surface. Viewers could imagine the substantial fields of black shiny space as the magical, but passive presence of a computer screen. The work's condensed perspective also contributes to this idea. While there are some references to nature in the work, such as the collage material that pictures birds, leaves and flowers, these images have more in common with the digital world than the natural environment; they represent nature from the point-of-view of digitally mass-produced stickers, rather than actual references to nature. Additionally, the vast volume of these images suggests that they are an ordinary part of experience, rather than each existing as a unique product of nature. The images represent an ever-expanding epic event, connecting it with the traditional idea of the

sublime. However, the aesthetics of the scene relate more to the blankness¹⁶ of a computer monitor than the vastness of a Romantic landscape. The suggestion of empty digital space is a defining property of the contemporary sublime¹⁷. This element is mystical and otherworldly, but is also grounded in the everyday experience of viewing images and text on a computer screen. I agree with Tomaselli's belief that his "paintings are windows to another world, as a way to lose self in the 'oblime' an experience formed by a mix of the oblivious and the sublime."¹⁸

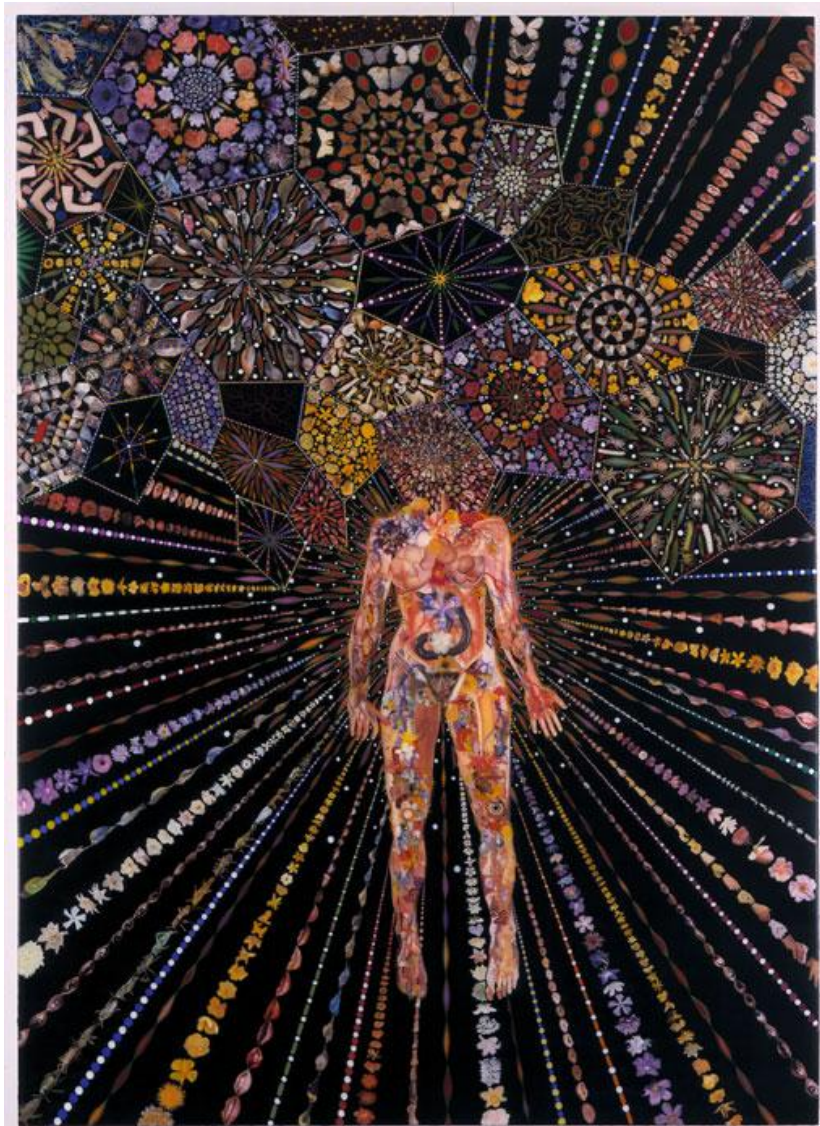


Fig. 7 Fred Tomaselli, *Airborne Event*, mixed media, acrylic, resin on wood, 2003, 84 x 60 x 1 1/2 in.

This issue motivates me to contain my exuberant, imaginary-based scenes within efficient, compact compositions- a configuration in which the physical and imaginary worlds are infinitely engaged in a playfully epic battle over the viewer's consciousness.

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VITA

Jessica Bizer (Rosin) was born in Seminole, Florida in 1979. She received her B.S. in Journalism from Boston University in 2001. Bizer took studio art classes at The City University of New York, Hunter College from 2003-2005, concentrating in painting. She is a member of the Good Children Gallery in New Orleans. Bizer currently lives and works in New Orleans with her husband Andrew.