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## People Like Ourselves

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People Like Ourselves

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

Harper Hair  
B.F.A. Kansas City Art Institute, 2010

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## Abstract

The thesis writing here is an effort by the artist to identify his motives in creating, and his aims for the audience, and to communicate this to the reader in a clear and truthful manner.

Section 1 focuses on introducing the ground of the artists' thinking, discussing his ideas of the body and culture identity, and how they motivate his work. Section 2 goes into greater detail about the manner his thought process evolved through the course of a number of works. In Section 3, there is an ever sharper focus in the works towards the isolated and inscrutable individual. The theme that runs throughout is that, although it's difficult if not impossible to fully communicate with another, the effort is worthwhile.

Keywords: Harper Hair; fine art; People Like Ourselves; art; limited body

## **Section 1**

At this time, it is expected that one discuss oneself, and think about oneself, in great detail. This is a dicey matter. I have found myself reflecting on what I really can and can't say about my art. The things which I can't say are numerous.

Certainly, I have focused on painting and drawing, in traditional formats- rectangular compositions, gouache paint, and pen-and-ink are mainstays of my craft. I have engaged in animation, which allows for new creative possibilities beyond painting, too obvious to need explanation. And I have focused on the figure, and especially portraiture.

Portraiture has a long history. Anybody can see that. An artist looks at a sitter, and it is hoped that the portrait can reveal something about the sitter. An artist creates a self-portrait, and it is expected that this will reveal much about the artist. I am not bound by the format of the portrait, and I frequently do work with all types of compositions. Yet my most successful work seems frequently to come back to this format. I believe, to a large extent, that my work is about the impossibility of the task of knowing another, and the titanic difficulty of knowing ourselves. But it's also about the necessity of making the effort.

I often reminisce on a timeless period in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when I took daily walks with a bamboo walking stick. As I left my teenage years and saw my peers go off to college, I began picking up "credit hours" at the local community college, and when those ran out, some at the University of Tulsa. This activity was just an excuse to take time for reflection, since the courses didn't take up much of my time.

Actually, I was addicted to walking, and to the sense of contemplation it brought. Virtually every day, I trekked to an area coffee shop. Here I would spend a few minutes drinking and reading whatever book I had been able to fit into my pocket. After this, I would walk out again, often spending over an hour strolling before I finally returned home.

I had a broad range of reading. The philosophy of Nietzsche and myths/folk tales became two favorites. Here is an excerpt from Nietzsche that I think casts a light on this formative time period. These lines are found at the end of his “Gay Science”-

Then like troubadours in riches  
we shall dance 'tween saints and bitches,  
dance our dance 'tween God and Earth!<sup>1</sup>

Let me give you some context for them. They are found in the very last poem of the “appendix of poems” which concludes the book. This poem is called “To the Mistral. A Dance Song.” The “Mistral” in question is a strong, cold northwesterly wind which blows through Southern France and out into the Mediterranean. Its name means “masterly.” The dance being described is a dance performed by Nietzsche and the Mistral. The pair will create a wreath together, made in their own honor. Then, blustering onward in mad ambition, they will hang it on a star- an eternal monument to joyous, unshakable will.

Actually, the translation says “saints and bitches”, doubtless to keep the rhyme, but Nietzsche’s original German has “Heiligen und Huren”<sup>2</sup>- saints and whores. In the stories of the troubadours, as in other folk stories, there is no hesitation about treating earthy material right

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Bernard Williams, Josefine Nauckhoff, and Adrian Del Caro. 2001. *The gay science: with a prelude in German rhymes and an appendix of songs*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812088>, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich and Paolo D'Iorio. "Nietzsche Source – Home." Nietzsche Source – Home. Accessed October 24, 2017. <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/FW>.

alongside more revered subjects. But a cultural condition has taken over in which the purported high and low, the subject matter of “saints” and “whores,” tends to be sharply demarcated. Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin puts this change within “the last four hundred years” (from the time of his writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,) and describes it thus-

The new bodily canon, in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface and the body's "valleys" acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world. All attributes of the unfinished world are carefully removed, as well as all the signs of its inner life. The verbal norms of official and literary language, determined by the canon, prohibit all that is linked with fecundation, pregnancy, childbirth. There is a sharp line of division between familiar speech and "correct" language.<sup>3</sup>

How and why did this take place? These are questions for dedicated researchers. In our day, it seems that everyone considers themselves the authority on every topic that they know anything about. But we can read stories, see images, experience culture etc. from before a certain point, and from after a certain point, that roughly corresponds to the time Bakhtin gives for the rise of this “new bodily canon” of propriety, without much trouble.

I refer to the result of this “new bodily canon” as the “limited body.” I’ll try to give an idea of what I mean when I say this. Take, for a counterexample, the figure of King Arthur in medieval folklore. Arthur is among the strongest warriors of his time, and the leader of the

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<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 320



strongest. He is also at the moral head of his generation. This is not an expression of “might makes right.” His wisdom and his great health are not dependent on one another, but they are complementary parts of the ideal that is King Arthur. This is just like countless other folkloric heroes throughout the world. The body is a source of unmitigated pride for Arthur and his ilk, as is the mind.

But in an honest assessment of contemporary culture, we see a difference in ideals. On the one hand, we have the genius of high culture, the “Einstein,” the intellect who takes little stock of the physical body. On the other we have the muscular clown, the “Rock” who discards the mental to focus on the pursuit of strength for the sheer pleasure of it. (These are, of course, male examples, since that’s what’s furnished for us in greatest abundance, and where the cultural emphasis lies.) This cultural shift, this “bodily canon,” creates a type of physiological-mental existence in which the individual feels a strange tension, a need to deemphasize the body, to mask it, when one engages in “higher” mental activities- or to over-emphasize the body, but in an exploitative way, in pursuit of purely physical pleasure. This is the state which I use Bakhtin’s language to describe as the “limited body.” And we can see differences between the before and the after, in the way the body is viewed and limited, at about the time that Bakhtin points them out.

In those differences, in the sense of restrictive propriety in official, “high” culture that entered the secular world, I feel a great *wrongness*. What motivates me is this feeling of wrongness. It’s not that low culture is to be considered uniformly more vital than high culture, though it may often be. The wrongness is in the sharp distinction between the two sides of culture, and likewise, between the strictly physical and the strictly mental. Why has this condition of propriety taken hold of our culture, and of our psyches?

When Nietzsche describes the high, he invokes “saints”, and for the low, “whores.” This is clearly gendered language, which calls to mind the shaming of women. I think the history of the limited body and its invasion of secular culture is certainly tied to the history of sexism in the West. However, male chauvinism in varying degrees goes farther back in time, and across many cultures. The “limited body” I refer to is a much more specific phenomenon. I think it is connected to sexism and the discrimination of women, particularly in our culture. But even if we could get to the bottom of the limited body, it wouldn’t necessarily mean getting to the bottom of sexism. While it seems likely that Nietzsche is thinking of women when he says “whores,” men can certainly engage in prostitution, while there are many woman saints. The gender discrimination takes place in the mind of the reader, via our language.

My horror at the limited body is expressed in many works, past and present. But a key direction the program at UNO has taken me is to try to focus on the alienation of the limited body- the “entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body” which “does not merge with other bodies and with the world.” *Dictionary.com* gives its first definition of the word “grotesque” as “odd or unnatural in shape, appearance, or character; fantastically ugly or absurd; bizarre.”<sup>4</sup> To Bakhtin, the grotesque stems from folk culture. I have often reveled in depicting the grotesque as it’s conventionally thought of. But it is my growing sense that there’s nothing more odd, unnatural, ugly or indeed bizarre, than the limited body. This is the deep hypocrisy I feel at the center of our ideas of cultural propriety- that what is called proper, is secretly grotesque. I’m reminded of the words of Jean Baudrillard, a famous French cultural theorist, discussing his

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<sup>4</sup> grotesque. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/grotesque> (accessed: February 20, 2017).

theory of the modern world- “Everything is metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be perpetuated in its purged form.”<sup>5</sup>

A good illustration is “Visage” (image 1.) This was a successful experiment- a painting of a small sculpture I’d made. The sculpture was of flesh-colored sculpey, which hardens when heated in a conventional oven. The painting was acrylic on wood. At 30 x 40 inches, the work is relatively physically imposing, dwarfing the original sculpture. The sculpey allowed me express myself, normally a maker of very flat works, in a tactile manner. In the painting of the sculpture I placed the head in an abstract black space. I made the visage recognizable as a face, but completely cut off from contact with the outside, not through external blinders, but by its own smooth surface, free of any orifices- an impenetrable facade.

Let me give an example of a work made shortly before, to give a contrast- the panoramic, near-monochrome drawing “Hells Bells” (image 2.) The drawing has been divided into a top half, more abstract and expressive in content, and a bottom half, more figurative and cartoony. In the bottom half, cartoon saints come along with cartoon demons, though demons are the primary inhabitant. Three prints have been pasted whole to the paper. On either side sit two woodcuts, one of a smiling face and another of a frowning face. This echoes the smiling/frowning masks that are the dual symbol for a dramatic production. In the center of the work, the focal point of all the activity, sits an etching of a rather fanciful “whore house” (clearly labeled as such on the building,) with strange cartoon creatures in the windows. The work is irreverent in tone, and seeks to antagonize viewers expecting a sense of seriousness and propriety from fine art.

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<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, and Mark Poster. *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. 2nd ed., rev. and expanded. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 180.

I was excited to finally combine so many elements in a single work. But in the cacophony of themes, I think some emotional intensity was lost. Viewers enjoyed creating their own interpretations of the work. But often, having little to grasp onto, they would mistake these interpretations for intention on my part. Amid the symbols and cryptic suggestiveness, my perspective was getting lost somewhere along the way, creating misleading confusion.

Of course, when you look at “Visage,” you don’t immediately see my perspective. But when you look at Van Gogh’s peasant shoes, you don’t see that he was such an impassioned preacher that he was removed from his position for over-zealousness. It’s the emotion that’s the focus. In “Visage”, I’m musing on the horror of the limited body’s impenetrable façade. The realization of the limited body, more than just an intellectual realization, allows me to conceive the work. Without such emotion, there is no impetus. My hope was that by returning to a simpler format, there would be less to distract from the emotion. It could then come to the fore in a way that’s hard to accomplish with a busy, visually distracting work like “Hells Bells.”

There is no humor here, but I was not refuting the humor of my previous work. The contours are essentially like those one might find on the head of a typical grotesque figure, with a nose that protrudes a bit. But nothing erupts- nothing makes contact, and the world the visage sits in is a blank void. The potential for life goes unrealized- it is trapped within.

It’s true that I would like my work to be able to be enjoyed on an emotional level, without reference to intellectual writing. My mentioning of Bakhtin’s link of a specific point in the history of the West, in which our current sense of high-versus-low cultural propriety developed in the secular world, may seem arbitrary to such enjoyment. Worse yet, it may seem like I’m searching for a “root of all evil” that I can lazily make my foil. Why get worked up over this “limited body” buzzword when there are more than enough real problems?

But when one has been born into and grown up in a cultural condition such as this, that has persisted for some 500 years, even if one were to read all of Bakhtin and many more pertinent things besides, and become a renowned expert on all pertinent subjects, the thing itself- the need to limit the body, to separate the cerebral, high culture and the bodily, low culture- will still seem perfectly natural. When one is raised in a certain environment, that environment seems natural, no matter how false such an impression may be. To point things like the horror of the limited body out from the natural, day-to-day horrors of life can be nearly impossible. There's too much horror to keep track of it all.

The topics at hand constantly insist on further elaboration. But giving into this command only leads down a rabbit hole that takes us farther and farther from the artworks to be discussed. Yet without bringing such matters up, how can the work be discussed at all? The fact is, the limited body is something that, for whatever reasons, I *feel* acutely. It may be that we all feel it at one time or another. Perhaps, to some degree, we feel it at all times. It is a dismal dread in the pit of the soul. And it is not inherent or necessary. It is very specific, and it is very viscerally real. It is very possible to know it and feel it without being able to define it intellectually. Nor is it possible, by any sort of exact scientific means, to slice out a moment of fear and dread and say- "This fear, this dread, is caused primarily by the horror of the limited body, and not by other factors more inherent to human life." How can we have such assured knowledge of our own feelings and motivations? On this point, I steadfastly refuse to deceive either myself or others. We are always in a condition of uncertainty- this is my personal philosophy. I wouldn't foist it on my readers, but I do believe it. But for art, certainty is not necessary.

At about this point, one might note that there are countless examples since the 20<sup>th</sup> century of fine artists utilizing low culture to create vital products. I love many of these works.

But please remember that the issue is not with the perceptions of individual artists, but with a prevailing cultural trend. I am in perpetual admiration of Andy Warhol. But nobody believes that his work doesn't fall under the heading of "high art" because he used images from popular culture. The fact that so many brilliant people have attempted the deconstruction of the distinction between high and low culture, apparently to no avail, only shows the distinctions' strength. Nor do I suppose to do away with it myself. But it's an important part of the perspective from which I make work.

In art, by sharing our perceptions, the viewer's overall range of perceptions can be broadened. It's a matter of the difficult task of gaining the ability to perceive the subtle factors in our lives and the life of our culture which lead to our way of seeing things, and to not take the power of perception for granted. Being freed from the tyranny of the perception of need for bodily propriety, even for a moment, can lead to tremendous pleasure. But this is not the selfish pleasure of wanton crassness. It even might be called a spiritual pleasure. It's with hope of such pleasure, for myself and others, that I make work. My hope as an individual artist is simply to allow you the pleasure of experiencing something new, however you might want to define it.

## **Section 2**

In "Solid State Survivor" (image 3), I brought many "limited" bodies together. But these bodies are not limited in the same manner. The "Visage" is a sort of monster. Actually, it may be that many of the figures in "Solid State Survivor" are simply oddly shaped, but otherwise human, people. I've made the work on a long piece cut from a roll of drawing paper. On this, I drew the contours of the figures using water-based paint markers of various sizes. Then I went into the white space of the figures with a light wash of black ink, applied with a watercolor brush. Even the lightest of the figures is in shadow in contrast to the pristine white background.

1. Visage



2. Hells Bells



3. Solid State Survivor





4. Guston, "Friend – To M. F."



5. Techno



The figures are in a line, some facing directly forward as in a mugshot, others with heads slightly to the side. The impression is of having barged into a gathering location, such as a dive bar or a park at twilight. All heads turn at once to face the viewer. There is the immediate, psychic understanding that an outsider has infringed upon the grounds of the community.

These bodies are “limited” by the shadow. Even when they may be missing some facial features, it is really the mystery of the shadow that is their defining characteristic. It’s our lack of knowledge which limits them for us. But it may be that this is reciprocal- that they also lack knowledge of us. From the attitude of the figures, we might be said to be in shadow for them. Thus, we too are “limited” in this way. Both groups, “us” and “them,” are “limiting” one another by their/our lack of perception, which is due to their/our inability to penetrate the shadow. It gives a regularity, an impenetrable façade, to what it’s cast over.

The figures in the work have a rather cartoonish quality. This, combined with the blocky solidity of “Visage,” points to the influence of Phillip Guston. Many examples could be used to illustrate this, such as his 1978 painting “Friend – To M. F.” (image 4.) This portrait is a portrayal of estranged friendship, with Guston’s former friend, contemporary composer Morton Feldman, turning from view. He is so near, yet so far away.<sup>6</sup> The visual similarities with my work are abundant, and I’m perfectly happy for the comparison.

In Guston’s work, there’s a pattern of wear and tear on the figures. They appear to me as bodies limited and defined by their vices. We see heads with cigarettes in place of mouths. Empty beer bottles litter many works, and figures are veiny and downcast, as from lack of sleep. Their vices seem to be zapping their senses, wearing them down. Philip Dodd, the head of

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Guston: Friend - To M.F. (1978). Accessed October 24, 2017. <http://www.cnvill.net/mfgustn2.htm>.

London's Institute of Contemporary Art, said that "...in his late work he is willfully tasteless, but this was not a man who would do anything as obvious as setting out to shock. He understood that he had to make a new kind of art that was about flesh as meat and meat as flesh."<sup>7</sup> The characters seem to be caught in the tyranny of their flesh.

In Buddhism, there is the concept of the Pretaloka, or "World of Hungry Ghosts." When those who are consumed by satisfying physical desires die, they are reborn as creatures which inhabit waste places, always hungering, never able to satisfy their appetite. I find the Pretaloka to serve as an apt metaphor for how I see the world depicted in Guston's later paintings. There's a sense of insatiable appetite, a lonely roaming through spaces of desolation.

The figures of "Solid State Survivor" are much like the preta, the "hungry ghosts." They give the impression of inhabiting the fringes, of being spectral, forlorn, desolate. But there is no evidence of physical consumption, as is often in Guston's works. The hunger might lie in their gaze, and its disquieting mystery. What does drive them?

The Pretaloka is a fascinating concept to me. Another "realm of rebirth" I find especially interesting is the Tiryagyoni-gati, or "animal realm." This is the world of rebirth/existence as an animal. The belief is that animals are driven by instinct and live in ignorance, and rebirth as an animal is actually less desirable than rebirth as a preta. I see the two ideas as being very connected. The bottles and cigarettes littering Guston's world can be seen as evidence of animal desire, their endless pursuit a pursuit driven by instinct. Guston had an interest in the imagery in

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<sup>7</sup> O'Hagan, Sean. "The everyday genius of artist Philip Guston." *The Observer*. January 11, 2004. Accessed October 24, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/jan/11/art>.

Zen writings, beyond the influence of Zen painting seen in his abstract expressionist work.<sup>8</sup> I imagine my interpretations wouldn't seem too strange to him.

“Animal desire” is a strange concept, positive to some, negative to others. People often have need of losing much of their inhibitions, in order to move forward and grow. This makes me view unnecessary inhibition, purely social inhibitions that could be done without, in a negative light. But, of course, we need to practice self-discipline, in order to grow, as well. We cannot live on desire and instinct, existing purely in the “World of the Animal.” You could say that self-discipline is almost an ultimate form of inhibition, if not the origin of it. But I think that frivolous social inhibitions and prudery are brought forth by desire. In a desire to make a good social impression, perhaps even attract a potential mate, one might wear fashionable but uncomfortable clothing that constrains the body, or go on a fad diet that actually diminishes one physically. The desires of the body can cause it to take actions by which it limits itself.

The Japanese Buddhist monk Ikkyu shares an interesting perspective on the nature of the body in his 1457 sermon “Skeletons.” Here, he talks about how, sleeping in an abandoned monastery he's wondered into, he dreams that he comes upon a group of skeletons versifying on the transience of things. (Many of the figures in “Solid State Survivor” have skeletal qualities.) As he spends time around these skeletons, he begins to relate to them.

When are we not in a dream, when are we not skeletons, after all? Male and female forms exist only as long as these skeletons are wrapped up and put to use inside five-tone flesh; when life ends and the body bag breaks, there are no such forms- neither are high or low distinguished. Under the

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<sup>8</sup> Guston, Philip, and Clark Coolidge. 2011. *Philip Guston: collected writings, lectures, and conversations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 237.

flesh which you now care for and enjoy, this skeleton is wrapped up and set in motion; you should acquiesce to this idea- in this there is no difference between high and low, old and young.<sup>9</sup>

I earlier mention the darkness over the figures of “Solid State Survivor” as “limiting” their bodies, in the sense of limiting our knowledge of them. But in another sense, the shadow does just the opposite. It merges all bodies with one another, and with anything else caught in its darkness. The equalization of darkness and death doesn’t allow bodies to stay in a closed individuality. The dark of “Solid State Survivor” obscures, but it also merges.

“Pantagruel”, the second book of Rabelais’ “Gargantua and Pantagruel” series, has a chapter which expresses much the same sentiments as “Skeletons,” in a more comic way. Panurge, the protagonist Pantagruel’s second in command, heals their companion Epistemon of his recent decapitation. Epistemon then brings back tidings from the afterlife- that is to say, from Hell. He starts out by praising the devils as “excellent fellows and jovial company,”<sup>10</sup> and then goes on to say that the social situations of Hell’s citizens are reversed from what they had been in life. Those who had the highest positions of authority in life, now do the most menial tasks for paupers’ wages. Alexander the Great, for example, darns hose. But “philosophers and such as had been needy on this planet became puissant lords in the inferno,”<sup>11</sup> where poets are allowed to abuse kings to their hearts content.

It is easy enough to apply this kind of thinking to others, and have a good laugh at the expense of those who were once our superiors in some form. But I’m also made to think of the

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<sup>9</sup> Cleary, Thomas F. 1978. *The Original face: an anthology of Rinzai Zen*. New York: Grove Press, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Rabelais, François, and Jacques Le Clercq. 1936. *The five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel in the modern translation of Jacques Le Clercq*. New York: Modern library, 272.

<sup>11</sup> Rabelais, François, and Jacques Le Clercq. 1936. *The five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel in the modern translation of Jacques Le Clercq*. New York: Modern library, 277.

attitude I have towards my past self. When I think of that time in Tulsa, which I referred to at the beginning of this writing, I often feel as if I'm viewing a different person, an outsider who society has disdain for. I'm certainly glad I'm not the same person I was 10-12 years ago. That would be stagnation. But, more and more, I've had to ask myself, can I really say that I'm so much better than the listless 20-year-old who walked the paths of Tulsa? What justifies my feelings of authority over this person, who's me, but not me?

This was what I was beginning to think when I made "Techno" (image 5), though these thoughts weren't fully formed yet. It started as part of a series which used acrylic paint on flat wooden square boards, in an attempt to convey different tones of flesh in an interesting manner. While this project failed, it would grant me valuable insights on color and materials. The board on which "Techno" is made was the first I began as a flesh tone painting, and in these terms I hold it in no particular esteem. The funny texture of the wood, almost fuzzy in places, made me think it might be interesting to add more tactile variety. What if I were to glue or tape an object to it? A flat ID card seemed perfect to go along with my vague idea of subtle depth and texture breaking an almost monotonous flatness. This is a minor preoccupation I have, seeing how subtle a sense of depth can be without becoming invisible. I had been keeping around my old Tulsa Community College (TCC) ID card for a while. The idea came upon me to use it as a "collage element," to create a sort of "readymade" self-portrait.

A character I had been inspired by previously was "Torpedo Boy," a creation of the artist Trenton Doyle Hancock. The character is a self-deprecating alter ego for Hancock, wearing a comical vintage style of superhero costume and drooling often. In the story of "The Life and Death of #1," found in Hancock's book "Me a Mound," he's tasked with protecting Mound #1, the great being of this fictional world, from the "Vegans," a race of goblin-like underground

dwellers that subsist on cubes of tofu. However, after stealing the vegan's tofu and making it back to the surface, Torpedo Boy comes upon a prostitute. He cuts a deal with her to do "anal exploration", utilizing hardware tools, in exchange for two cubes of tofu. This (combined with a stop to eat meat in Hancock's real-life hometown of Paris, Texas) prevents Torpedo Boy from arriving in time to prevent the Vegans from murdering Mound #1.<sup>12</sup>

The work I've been creating is not narrative-driven, but the purpose of reciting all of this is to give a sense of the emotional background for Hancock's satirical self-depictions. It's this spirit of self-examination, highly critical without losing humor, which inspired me. Hancock says of Torpedo Boy that "...he's super strong except he has an inflated ego. And his pride and all of his other human emotions get in the way of him performing his duties. So, he's very limited by his flesh."<sup>13</sup>

I had been thinking of "limitations of the flesh" as I attempted to create flesh-like tones on wood. And although that series wasn't a success, I continued to think in this manner as I put the community college ID card in the center of the board. It was a much more general thought pattern than Hancock's narratives. There, he goes into great detail, in writing and painting, around the death of Mound #1, as well as the killing of "Mounds" in other episodes. The "Mounds" are literally mounds of flesh covered in fur. My boards were their own sort of flesh-entity, and there was a vague notion of mortification I attached to them. But unlike Hancock's wonderful illustrations of the "Mounds," they were lifeless on their own. There needed to be something more.

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<sup>12</sup> Hancock, Trenton Doyle. 2005. *Me a mound*. [New York]: PictureBox.

<sup>13</sup> Art21 and Hancock, Trenton Doyle. "Storytelling-Characters and Colors." Art21. November 2011. Accessed October 24, 2017. <https://art21.org/read/trenton-doyle-hancock-storytelling-characters-and-colors/>.



I decided to affix the ID card to the board with double-sided tape. Not only does this material pick up all sorts of detritus that comes in contact with it. It shows evidence of every fingerprint. But as the tape is layered, fingerprints get smudged, blur, blend in with the dust and grime they've been pressed up against. This created much the feeling of gross accumulation that I unsuccessfully tried to create in paint, on the board itself. For me it became a metaphor for memory. Memories seem to layer, blurring and smudging the older memories they sit atop. At some point, one might ask if one is fit to judge the person one once was- now only an unreliable memory.

There had been a pattern that I hadn't noticed at first. In "Visage," the figure has no eyes. In "Solid State Survivor," the eyes are either covered in shadow, covered by sunglasses, or cartoonishly alien and stylized. In some cases, they seem absent here as well. And in "Techno," my eyes, already ill-defined due to the poor resolution of the photo on the ID card, have been fully obscured by a haze of double-sided tape. In no instance in any of these images of faces can be seen a clearly defined, clearly human eye. The closest to having normal human eyes is probably the very center-most figure of "Solid State Survivor," sandwiched between a character with giant stylized alien "Y" pupils on the viewers left, and a series of characters wearing sunglasses on their right. However, the even these eyes are in shadow, indistinguishable from the folds of his face, and they have something of an alien quality. In every instance, it had simply seemed natural to me to avoid displaying clear, recognizably human eyes. It went right along with the theme of limitations both of and on the body. The "windows to the soul" are cut off, disallowing access. But the scrupulous way I had observed this "No Eyes" policy seems, in retrospect, mildly fanatical. Yet I never gave it much thought- I had been following it for such a long time.

At around the same time as I did all this, I was creating an animation<sup>14</sup>, which I call “Cavalcade of Shame.” The principle meaning of “cavalcade” is a procession of riders, as in a parade. The old-time word has a carnival feel to it, as shown in its use by Hollywood star Jackie Gleason in titling his 1949-52 television variety series, “Cavalcade of the Stars.” In the short work, the figures of “Solid State Survivor” pan by, scrolling at slightly different speeds to add an illusion of depth. At intervals, quick sequences of moving imagery pop up. The images in these sequences can be divided into two types.

One type is animation. With a single exception, added only for variety, all of these have been hand drawn. All of them show demonic forms in dissolution, with varying degrees of violence. In two instances, two figures are shown in combat, but even the victors experience dissolution.

The other type is live action. Though the background changes, from a dark room lit by strange light to a seaside setting, all of these images are of a hand squeezing one or two darkened rubber duckies, which then spurt out dark fluid. Sometimes this is directed at the camera. At others, the duckies direct their spray at one another.

For the sound background, I collaged a few different recordings I enjoyed, to create an atmosphere that felt right for the piece. The most prominent of these is a field recording of a merry-go-round, somewhat slowed down and distorted, but still easily recognizable. At the end, one of the characters of “Solid State Survivor” yawns. While I was pleased with how the sound

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<sup>14</sup> Logus57. "Harper Hair's Cavalcade of Shame." YouTube. September 05, 2017. Accessed October 24, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UuQ1y-AZBk>.

turned out, for the gallery showing of the video, I felt that sound would be too much of a distraction for the space. This was based largely on my own personal experience, perusing galleries in similar circumstances. I felt that headphones would be an unwelcome distraction. And because I was sharing the space with a fellow graduate, it didn't seem right to play the sound from speakers, which would then set the mood for the whole space. I decided the proper way to let the sound sink in is to view the short on one's own device, when one isn't occupied with a slew of other visual stimuli.

There are non-alien, if cartoonish, eyes in the hand-drawn animations of "Cavalcade of Shame." They pop out of the sockets of violently disintegrating devils. These devils, unnamed and anonymous, join a tradition that I have of portraying traditionally intimidating archetypes with a childlike eye. This was also seen in abundance in "Hells Bells." The demons could be said to possess a quality of innocence. In contrast, the rubber duckies, normally an innocent plaything, are strange and crude, constantly spitting, their forms obscured by a layer of black acrylic paint. I was meticulous in covering their surface, but was actually pleased when small bits came off after multiple dunkings in ink-water. I found the raggedness of this effect made their appearance even more strange and disquieting.

I readily admit that the scenes with the duckies may be one of the most puzzling and cryptic artistic decisions I've ever made. A direct inspiration was Little Richard's rendition of the famous song "Rubber Duckie," originally a purely children's song on the "Sesame Street" program.<sup>15</sup> This is clearly only meant to be a cute piece of children's entertainment, by an aging artist who's entered mainstream respectability long before. But Little Richard's fanatical

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<sup>15</sup> "Little Richard- Rubber Duckie [Music Video] 2017." YouTube. March 05, 2017. Accessed October 24, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwJN7YDfnVE>.

intensity brings what should be pop garbage to the level of Rock n' Roll. For me, the "Rubber Duckie" becomes a fetish object that sits beyond dualistic perceptions of innocence and experience.

The key to "Cavalcade of Shame" is not merely shame, but dualism. A cavalcade is a celebratory time, a time to show off. For century upon century, the horse was the symbol of nobility, of pride. A parade of pride – a Cavalcade of the Stars. But can there be a Cavalcade of Shame? The innocent with the guise of experience parade alongside the experienced with the guise of innocence, confusing viewers. It's not only about "transcending duality." The meshing of the opposites, far from obliterating the characteristics of one another, makes these characteristics stand out in a strange new light.

### **Section 3**

After I completed "Cavalcade of Shame," I found myself more inspired than ever by film, as if making a "movie" had given me a new level of access to the "movie world." During the Halloween season, I found myself absorbing as much vintage sci fi-horror as I could possibly stand, in the hope of entering a seasonal altered state. One film that very much impressed itself upon me was "Carnival of Souls." It was made in 1962 by industrial and educational filmmaker Herk Harvey during time off. The film uses haunting imagery of an abandoned amusement park Harvey came upon. Many shots struck me, but one (image 6) especially stood out.

It's my understanding that the actor is Harvey himself, in the capacity of "main ghoul"<sup>16</sup>, but I'm not entirely sure. This "ghoul" is lying under a shallow pool of filthy stagnant water,

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<sup>16</sup> "Carnival of Souls." Wikipedia. October 22, 2017. Accessed October 24, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnival\\_of\\_Souls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnival_of_Souls).

6. still from "Carnival of Souls"



7. From a Still of Carnival of Souls



8. still from “Diary of a Madman”



9. From a Still of Diary of a Madman





10. Eye Visage 1



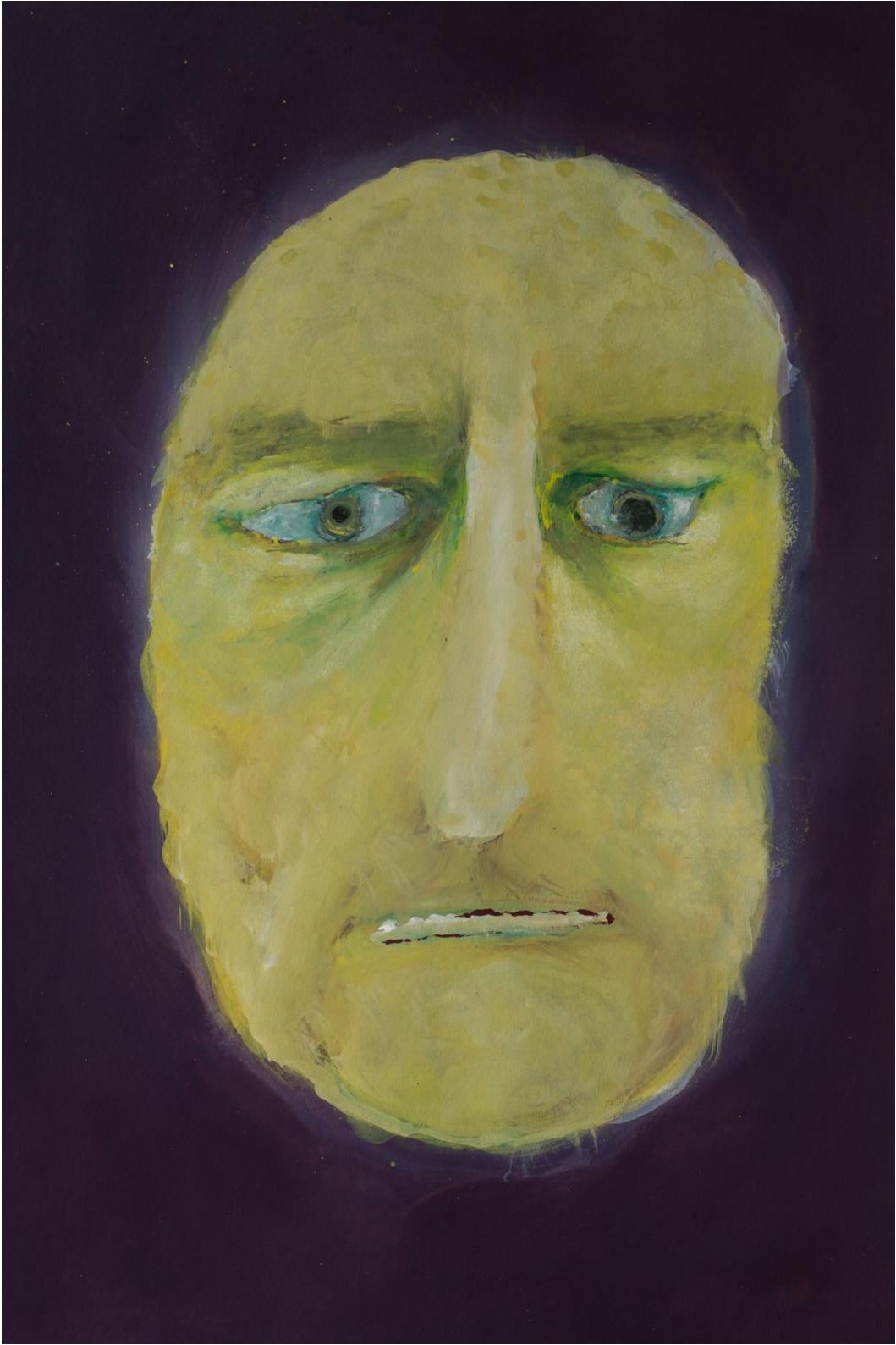
11. Eye Visage 2



12. Eye Visage 3



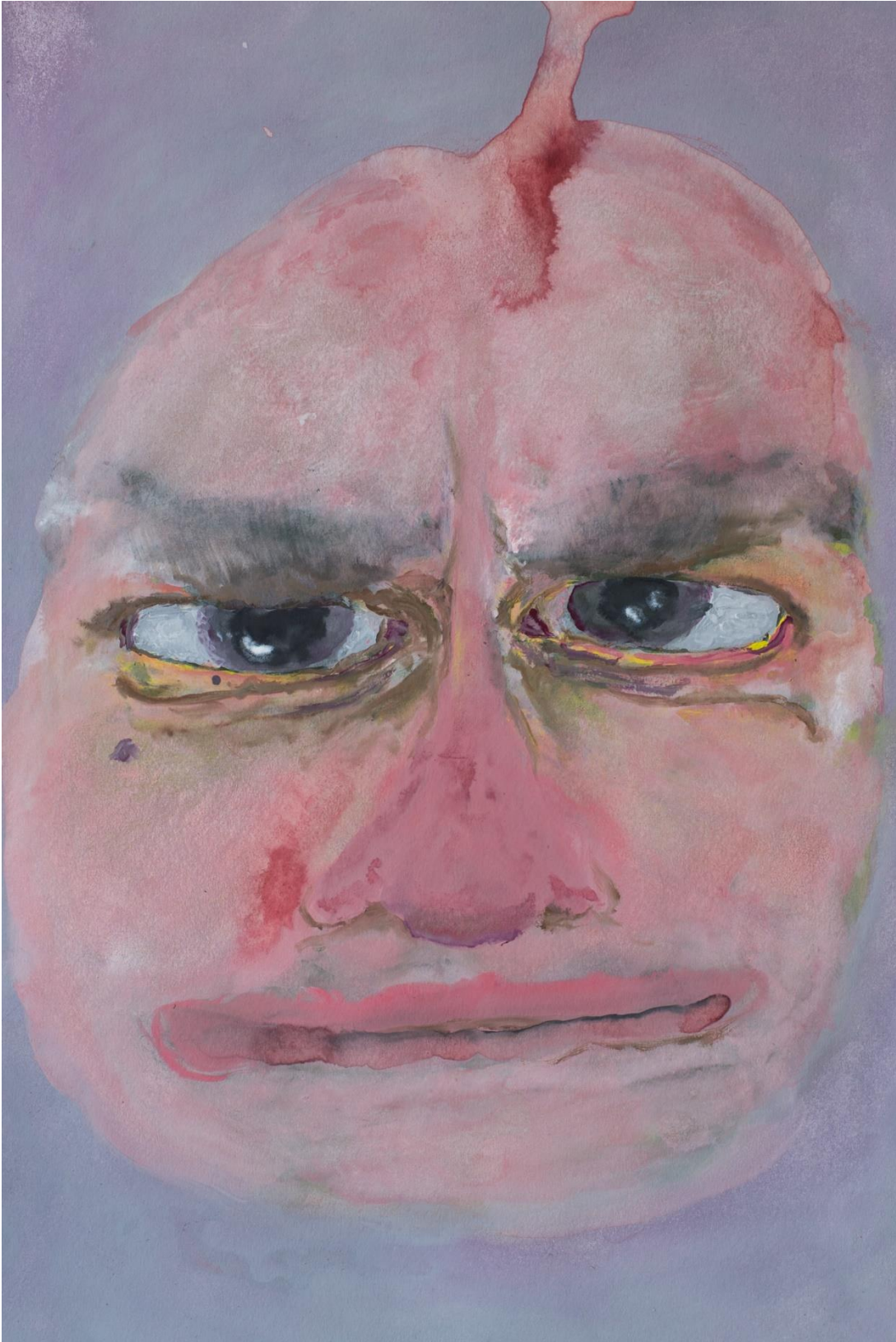
13. Eye Visage 4



14. Eye Visage 5



15. Eye Visage 6



16. Sean Landers, "Alone"



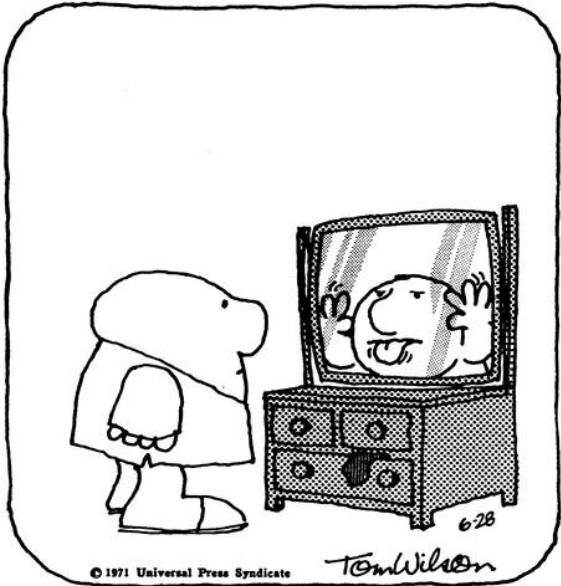
17. Tom Wilson, "Ziggy" strip A



18. image of Tom Wilson from Wikipedia



19. Tom Wilson, “Ziggy” strip B





20. Portrait of Tom Wilson



decked out in an equally filthy suit. The obscuring qualities of the low-resolution online video, plus the black and white antique film, allowed my imagination to compound the filthiness, making it almost as if everything was being seen through failing eyes clouded with dust and cataracts. On the “ghoul’s” face rests an enigmatic expression, serene, yet containing mischief.

The study I ended up making of this image, called simply “From a Still of Carnival of Souls” (image 7,) takes liberties with its source. It was never intended to be a faithful copy. This much is clear from my use of orange construction paper as the surface, whereas the original image is black and white. The choice of such a cheap material has been slightly contentious. The uniform orange is part of what gives the work its identity. The paper is visibly more faded where light has come into contact with it longer. This fading is what I find so intriguing about the material. Its time-worn quality makes it a natural fit for the scene, even if orange is not usually considered a “spooky” color. Of course, it also has the association of children’s crafts. And with this, comes the association of memories. In the future, I might veer away from using such a wildly non-archival material before exhausting all other possibilities. Nonetheless, I think my decision made sense.

As I painted the portrait, the sense of uneasy calm remained for the most part, but the undercurrent of mischief from the source material was replaced with an aura of discontent. The neck and head began to bulge. I would describe the final product as having the expression of a businessman sleeping on a late/early flight, in a cramped coach seat. The head rolls disconsolately, the mouth wears a frown that spells out “sour.” It is past time for aspirin, for antacids, for a quick and efficient dose of alcohol. This ghoul is not merry, he is not a dancer like the ones in “Carnival of Souls.” His filthiness is a source of discomfort. His flesh betrays

him. Here is the Limited Body as we see it in our daily life. It is parading around with one of its spokespeople.

The films of Vincent Price, with their perfect combination of comedy and terror, hold a natural fascination for me. I found myself taking many images from these films for inspiration. One of these was a still of actress Nancy Kovack (an alumna of Jackie Gleason's "Glee Girls") in the role of Odette Mallotte, campy femme fatale, in popcorn horror pro Reginald Le Borg's "Diary of a Madman." The film is a 1963 adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's story "The Horla." It's not the best Price film. Le Borg gives it a good try, but can't maintain the colorfulness of Price and Roger Corman's "Poe cycle" films. However, there are lots of high points, and Kovack is one of them. The willfulness with which she throws herself into an obviously flat character has a defiance which entranced me.

The source image (image 8) is clearly very different from the study I made of it, called "From a Still of Diary of a Madman" (image 9.) In fact, the defiance that entranced me is gone. Instead, there is a goofy smile, eyes that are timid and far apart. This was never my intention- far from it. But when the painting started to take this direction, I allowed it, not wanting the work to be constrained by its source material. Could I have been under the influence of subconscious chauvinism, making me more comfortable with a tamer female figure? I doubt it. But then again, neither can I disprove it.

I'm depicting a character with the clear appearance of a woman, which is rare. Usually my figures are sexless, though often deemed "masculine" due to their ugliness. But in films, people tend to be beautiful unless they're some kind of villain or comic relief. Perhaps even more rare is the depiction of the eyes. Both are fully visible, neither are cartoonish- though they

can certainly be called stylized- and both are normal in appearance. However, their distance apart and the odd angle at which they sit on the bulging face makes them more grotesque.

The ghoul of *Carnival of Souls* looks closer to life than many of my images, more like a stylization of an actual person than a full-blown freak. The character from *Diary of a Madman*, who is perhaps the less disturbing of the two, looks like some sort of octopus-human. Her grey-green hair, the same color as the skin of her face, falls in unctuous streams, like strands of seaweed or tentacles. This strange color-texture combination might have to do with the fact that in the scene, Vincent Price, in the role of the hero Magistrate Simon Cordier, is busy sculpting a bust of Odette. I neither consulted an image of this magically ridiculous piece of art, nor planned to make my study more sculptural. But the thing obviously had some kind of effect on me, because the color I ended up with on the face is almost exactly that of the bust in the movie. The face was formed from wet, slimy clay. Perhaps the cold sculpture and the warm human became meshed in my mind. The body I ended up painting is limited, or an attempt is made to limit it, by the desire of another. This might also explain the alteration of the expression- from the mocking reality, to a reflection of the desire of the fictitious male sculptor. I'm happy with how the painting turned out. But despite my best intentions, in the end it seems like it might be just another piece of art about male desire. I prefer to think of it as an octopus-human!

When the two pieces were completed, it was immediately obvious they went together. I had decided to paint stills from films I loved, without regard to the events of the film, and taking the source as only a loose outline, which I creatively added upon. This simple exercise now bore an unanticipated fruit. The two images appear as a deliberate parody of a monstrous society couple who had their portraits made to enhance the image of their respectability. The cheap construction paper material furthers the idea of a parody along with the much less cheap gouache

on top of it. But it is the way this effect came, unanticipated, from simply following a loose painting exercise that pleases me most. I saw these images, and I felt a great inspiration. There's a sense of assurance in these works, but it's with the value of this inspiration. When I conveyed it, it made what feels like a couple that's been stripped of their veneer.

At this point, if not earlier, it was suggested to me that I set out to make a series of works. However, I had no ideas that I found compelling enough to carry through multiple pieces. It was then that, looking at my recent work, someone asked, "Why are there no eyes?"

Nobody asked specifically for a series of works that focused on eyes. The idea was a natural a combination of the suggestion, "make a cohesive series," from one person, and the question, "Why are there no eyes?" from another. I always try to give special attention to whatever feedback jumps out at me, as a means to sorting through it all. I find that if one tries to take all feedback in at once, one often fails to give proper attention to anything. Because these two bits of feedback jumped out at me, and because I was already attempting to focus more efficiently, the two merged easily. The thought sprung up, "Why don't you make a series where there are eyes?" I was afraid that if that was all I went in with, it might come out feeling trite. It's not as if eyes have never been a focus in art before. Still, the idea kept tugging at me, until I gave in.

I decided to make a series of portraits in which the eyes were more fully resolved and detailed, and the rest of the face, more expressively rendered. I would use a photo from life as a source image for the eyes. However, I would not be so constrained on the rest of the portrait. The works would all be on the same size of paper, and would be neckless heads floating over

colored backgrounds. In this way, I made a simple pattern that tied the works together, but allowed for meaningful variation. I decided that it could at least be a worthwhile exercise.

For the eyes, I quickly found my model. I realized I could simply snap a close-up “selfie” of my own eyes with my cell phone. It made for a good study of the anatomy of the eye. The end-product wouldn’t be obvious as a “partial self-portrait.” It allowed me control of the angle and closeness, so that I didn’t need to comb through google images to find just the right source. Doing this right took only a small amount of practice, and I found that it made for a great image to study from. I deleted my old eye selfies and made new ones for each new image, so that all the eyes wouldn’t be viewed from the same slight angle from portrait to portrait.

I simply named the works in the series “Eye Visage” 1-6. In “Eye Visage 1” (image 10,) the nose and mouth have a general shape seen in many animals, but the contours of the eyes are human. The odd cranial shape, angular and square on one side, was a half-accident. At an earlier phase, before my concept of the series had fully solidified, I was possessed to add text above the originally, smaller head. That this was a poor fit for the work was immediately obvious. I adjusted the shape of the head to fully cover the text. But before I made the two sides match in shape, the strange clunky quality caught my fancy. It seemed appropriate for the chaotic face. Now I had made a piece which isolated and brought forward my feelings on animality in human behavior, on the “World of the Animal.”

It’s easy to take an interest in the intersection of human and animal. Even when one claims to view humans entirely as “just another kind of animal,” one is still likely to battle with what can be called one’s “base instincts.” Animals don’t appear to have this struggle. “Eye Visage 1” looks more than a little pained. The eyes do not smile, and the mouth could be letting out a howl of sorrow. But I don’t think “Eye Visage 1” has the same feeling as a human/animal

monster from something like the H. G. Wells story “The Island of Doctor Moreau.” This is not an abomination that was never meant to exist, some half-human half-animal freak cooked up in a mad scientist’s lab. In my view, the being seems natural. The sorrow feels relatable.

“Eye Visage 1” has eyes, and they are like our own, except for the odd color. I was surprised by how new of a viewing experience such a simple change made, over previous pieces. This is a case where the pictures convey something that words can’t. Emotion is front and center. I think a lot of that emotion comes from the visages being so strange, yet relatable.

The title “People Like Ourselves” can evoke very different responses. The experience of finding those who we consider similar to ourselves can bring relief, approval or even trepidation. How one reacts says something about the person. An important part of this is how wide of a group one considers “like ourselves.” It may be only those of a certain social standing, with certain tastes, a certain body type, etc. Others may view all of humanity as “their people.”

The group of “Solid State Survivor” appears to share a lot of commonality. They are “people like ourselves” to one another- a community. But in the couple I had just painted, and the series of six I was starting on, the individuals were isolated on the picture plane. This is a convenient way to work, because of the simplicity of the composition. But that’s not the only reason for it. It allows for different types of grouping, and for isolation.

In the series of two, it’s very difficult, once seen, not to imagine the pair as a couple. They both have a similar formality. This creates an air of humorous pomposity in the female figure, which a faithful aspect of the scene in the film it was taken from. For the male figure, the formality is stiff and threatening. In this also, some of the spirit from the original scene comes

through. The pair could be an illustration of the negative aspect of “people like ourselves.” Those unlike us are blocked out.

In this new series of six, there’s another arrangement. The picture plane is claustrophobic, particularly on the sides, where the heads are often pushed up against the edge. There is no body, no clothing. All heads face directly forward with eyes open. There are no background patterns, no ears, and no hair. The eyes and their area of the work took up around half of the painting time on each one. The degree of anatomical strangeness varies from one to the next, but none of these look like someone you’d likely meet in life. I didn’t shy away from novel eye coloration, to give the works more expressiveness and variety. These characters are strange to us, and they’re isolated. But they have a gaze like our gaze. Here, I wanted to bring the viewer to the human gaze, without distraction. The gaze brings a sense of familiarity. Perhaps these people are not so different from us, after all.

In the second in the series, “Eye Visage 2” (image 11,) I decided to focus yet more on the eyes by putting less light on the rest of the face. The eyes possess conspicuous bags under them. The impression is of an evening scene, perhaps of an insomniac. “Eye Visage 3” (image 12) takes the lighting strategy to its logical conclusion. The eyes are in bright light, the face fades rapidly into dark green, and the background is completely black. The green skin gives this face a reptilian character. This is enhanced by the tapering chin, which has a shape like the snout of a snake or lizard. This may be the most alien-looking piece of the series.

Having gone very far down the path of highlighting the eyes and obscuring the face, in “Eye Visage 4” (image 13,) I made everything perfectly clear. While the colors feel bolder and



more vibrant than in the previous 3 works, the expression of the face shows timidity. In this one, I think I desired to present an image of nervousness, in an accepting way. “Eye Visage 5” (image 14) feels more like the cause of nervousness than its victim. A giant, yellow, grinning round face, it’s like some demented Man on the Moon. This visage is the only visage in the series that smiles. I didn’t set out to create a gloomy series. But in hindsight, I think this shows my musings on the constraints of the limited body. The visages were more expressive with eyes, but they were still confined. Perhaps they weren’t happy about it. “Eye Visage 5” looks all-too-happy, however, with a mammoth red smile. But there are giant bags under the eyes. There’s a mischievous feeling in the eyes which I find infectious.

After deliberating, I decided the series had room for one more. The skin of “Eye Visage 6” (image 15) is almost identical in color to my own. The elements of familiarity are off-putting. I saw that when the image as-a-whole felt too alien, the viewer could have a comfortable distance, even when features like the eyes had recognizable qualities. I think “Eye Visage 6” is the most affecting in the series, because the off-putting familiarity added by the human color scheme lessened this comfortable distance. The image is certainly not relatable to what one sees in everyday life. But I think it has a strange kind of pathos, that might be lost in a more exotic-looking visage. It could be a being who’s only fretting over mundane concerns.

The completed series was satisfying to me. Shown in a row, they seemed to represent different possibilities, strange and hidden potentialities of humanity. I’m fascinated by the way that we conceive of playing a part in the course of our future evolutionary development- of shaping ourselves in our own image, actually engineering ourselves. In a sense, I was using my imagination to engineer possible humans. It’s little wonder, since two major inspirations of mine

were very concerned with the topic of shaping the direction of human development. I'm referring to the Italian Futurists, and the writer William Burroughs.

The Italian Futurists were early proponents of the radical transformation of humanity to something they saw as better. Their philosophy was crafted by the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who was always extorting artists to be more radical and forward-thinking. Unfortunately, the group's visual art almost never reached the level of militant hysteria seen in Marinetti's writings. In his 1910 manifesto "Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine," he informs us-

...it has to be acknowledged that we aspire to the creation of a nonhuman species in which moral anguish, goodness, affection, and love, the singular corrosive poisons of vital energy, the only off-switches of our powerful, physiological electricity, will be abolished.

We believe in the possibility of an incalculable number of human transformations, and we are not joking when we declare that in human flesh wings lie dormant.

The day when it will be possible for man to externalize his will so that, like a huge invisible arm, it can extend beyond him, then his Dream and his Desire, which are now merely idle words, will rule supreme over conquered Space and Time.

This nonhuman, mechanical species, built for constant speed, will quite naturally be cruel, omniscient, and warlike.

It will possess the most unusual organs; organs adapted to the needs of an environment in which there are continuous clashes.

Even now we can predict a development of the external protrusion of the sternum, resembling a prow, which will have great significance, given that man, in the future, will become an increasingly better aviator.

Indeed, a similar development can be seen in the strongest fliers among birds.<sup>17</sup>

This passage does a good job at conveying the dizzying combination of the fascinating and the block-headed, the brilliant and the idiotic, that was the early years of Italian Futurism. When it's at its most inspired, I often find myself having a hard time separating the two sides. There's something profoundly sympathetic to me about the way that Marinetti always seems to fear tempering his most grandiose viewpoints with any amount of sense or decency, as if that would be "backing down." It's debatable whether many of the participating artists bought into many of Marinetti's notions. In later years, Marinetti became a minor cog in his one-time friend Mussolini's fascist state, and he died at the age of 67, in 1944, of cardiac arrest. Those artists that survived both world wars went on to fairly unremarkable post-war careers.

Another groundbreaking dreamer of possible future humans was William Seward Burroughs, an American author known as the literary father figure to the "Beat" movement in American arts and letters. A forebear of the psychedelic movement as well, Burroughs searched South America for the psychoactive brew "ayahuasca" or "yage," a hallucinogenic concoction which he believed had some sort of telepathy-promoting property. When he finally found what he considered the perfect brew, his mind was opened to the cultural potentialities within humans. In his writings, such as his popular quasi-novel "Naked Lunch," the following of these potentialities takes humans in directions of unparalleled strangeness. In 1953, in a letter to his good friend Allen Ginsburg, he speaks of his revelation-

Yage is space time travel. The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion. The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian and new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized, passes

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<sup>17</sup> Marinetti, F. T., and Günter Berghaus. 2006. *Critical writings*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, p. 86-7.

through your body. You make migrations, incredible journeys through jungles and deserts and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valleys where plants grow out of your cock and vast Crustaceans hatch inside you and grow and break the shell of your body), across the Pacific in an outrigger canoe to Easter Island. The Composite City, Near Eastern, Mongol, South Pacific, South American where all Human Potentials are spread out in a vast silent market.<sup>18</sup>

Though Marinetti talks of “an incalculable number of human transformations,” his vision amounts to one of monotonous unceasing war. Now, instead of the invention of new militarily superior humans, we have a marketplace of ideas for genuinely different directions, brought about not through cold medical engineering, but by the comingling of cultures. Despite a lifelong struggle with opioid addiction, Burroughs lived to the age of 83, dying in Lawrence, Kansas in 1997.

In spirit, the eye visages are closer to the conceptions of Burroughs. But I think they owe a lot to Marinetti. Marinetti wanted to create the Man of the Future, on his own terms. In his blatantly anti-woman tract “Against Sentimentalized Love and Parliamentarianism,” Marinetti says, “We’ve even dreamt of one day being able to create our own mechanical son, fruit of pure will, synthesis of all the laws the discovery of which science is about to hurl down upon us.”<sup>19</sup> The sadness in many of my creations is partly due to reflection that this sort of thinking is our heritage. I find us today to be the reality of Marinetti’s Man of the Future, a weary people who has subscribed to the idea of “self-invention,” of creating ourselves from the ground up. But when you create yourself, you destroy yourself. The parts of ourselves that we don’t want are often not just unhealthy extraneous habits, but vital vulnerabilities that shouldn’t be glossed over. The methods of this glossing may include “positive thinking” or self-flagellating fitness regimes,

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<sup>18</sup> Miles, Barry. 2014. *Call me Burroughs: a Life*. New York: Twelve, p. 239.

<sup>19</sup> Marinetti, F. T., and Günter Berghaus. 2006. *Critical writings*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, p. 59.

rather than Marinetti's biotechnology. But I find Marinetti's overcaffeinated techno-worship to be a poetic example of the kind of thinking that pushes us into, and keeps us in, such wearying behaviors. Though the aesthetic of the eye visages is more that of a Burroughs character, I owe Marinetti some for the fact that, except for the frantic addict-high smile of "Eye Visage 5," they all look like they're suffering from that relatable ill, the caffeine crash.

These two voices were groundbreaking, and so was Rabelais. I think the parallels are interesting. Speaking on the Renaissance origins of Humanism, Bakhtin Talks about "a completely loud, marketplace frankness that concerned everyone. Thought and speech had to be placed under such conditions that the world could expose its other side: the side that was hidden, that nobody talked about, that did not fit the words and forms of prevailing philosophy."<sup>20</sup> This idea of a "marketplace frankness" fits with Burroughs' "vast silent market," and it helps to situate its Rabelaisian humanist lineage (though Burroughs might like to attribute it to drug-fueled psychic powers.) Instead of attempting to replace one type of Limited Body for another, to simply create an engineered man with greater material capabilities, Burroughs seeks to escape limitation and discover the universe of potentials. Perhaps "yage" gave him something external to latch onto, in order to have the courage to express remarkable ideas.

A problem springs up. Burroughs invented many cultures in his writings, but in this pivotal revelation, he references existing cultures and ethnicities. Burroughs really believed in the magical thinking he espoused in his writings. How does one do a drug, and then simply know exactly what it's like, not only to be a member of one other culture that one may know a little about -but to actually understand any and all existing cultures on the planet, and have an

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<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 271

idea of their combined potentialities in a global mix-and-match game? Absurd as Burroughs' vision is, he's not the only one who's had a desire to know what it's like to be a member of another culture. Nor is it a problem that can be solved through multiculturalism- though we should never take for granted the enormous value of access to voices from other cultures. Each culture has its own biases, and many cultures around the globe have insular tendencies. The ambitious question that the reverie of Burroughs brings up is- How can one understand the potentialities latent in cultures, when it takes a lifetime to understand the culture/s of one's birth?

Though such questioning is relevant to my thinking, I certainly don't profess to have an answer. It's really a background of musing, upon which my art is partly conceived. In the Eye Visages, I use a method for creating possible humans that I often go back to, and which can also be seen in "Visage." The format is like that of a tribal mask. A great many cultures use this format, and each mask type is as unique as the culture, but the format remains much the same- a face. However, my works are not, after all, masks, but only paintings done in the perspective of masks looked at from the front. And the work is not a commentary on tribal art, but simply takes some of the approach used by many cultures, and the property of humanity rather than any one group. The hope is that the viewer will empathize with the face in a way similar- though obviously not identical- to the experience of putting on, and "becoming," a mask. But the pieces still belong to the culture I grew up in. All I've done is to reduce what I might call "cultural noise," so that the emotion of the piece can be front and center. Instead of adding a "tribal element," I'm attempting to limit the amount of cultural elements overall, to produce a more primeval type of cultural creation. It's a "back to basics" feeling.

When Bakhtin talks about "a completely loud, marketplace frankness," he is saying it with the works of Rabelais in mind. Rabelais mentions other cultures, both real and invented.

But at the core of his writings is a joyful parody of his own contemporary European culture. Rabelais, Marinetti and Burroughs were all groundbreaking conceivers of human possibility. Marinetti wanted to violently reshape humanity and its cultures. Burroughs wanted to explore the endless possibilities of culture, while on the run from his own culture. Rabelais conceived of imaginary cultures and types of humans in a joyful, humorous and witty way, with firm grounding in existing folk culture. Bakhtin argues on the very last page of his book on Rabelais that “We cannot understand cultural and literary life and the struggle of mankind's historic past if we ignore that peculiar folk humor that always existed and was never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes.”<sup>21</sup> At some point in Western history, the concept “folk,” as meant here, seems to have detached from “future” and placed firmly in “past.” But Rabelais, at the genesis of Humanism, is using “folk humor” to envision, even to shape, the future.

This “folk humor” isn’t something that can be mix-and-matched between different cultures for a desired result. It runs through Culture, and is at its core. And it refuses to be limited. Bakhtin insists, “All the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people.”<sup>22</sup> When the “troubadours” are truly successful, they are simply transmitting the dreams of this chorus, whether or not they realize it. Burroughs doesn’t really know what it’s like to be Polynesian, and Marinetti wouldn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground. But they are transmitting hopes and dreams. In this way they are “predicting the future,” and are called “groundbreaking.” Though contemporary artist Sean Landers may be thinking primarily in personal terms when he portrays himself as a clown, in paintings such as

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<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 474

<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 474

“Alone” from 1996 (image 16,) I think he also hits on something broader. The place of artists, strutting about as if we own culture, is truly that of clowns.

Sometime after the completion of “Eye Visage 6,” I became enamored with Tom Wilson.

Wilson was an ad man skilled at character marketing, and invented the successful Care Bears and Strawberry Shortcake franchises. But he’s best remembered as the cartoonist responsible for the character “Ziggy.” Ziggy is an archetype of the “loveable loser.” He’s honest and earnest, but fails at everything and has bad luck. In grade school, Wilson would get called last for everything, due to the first letter of his last name being later in the alphabet. However, one day a new student arrived with a last name starting with “Z.” This gave Wilson the idea of an absolute last-in-line character.<sup>23</sup>

The comic strip has been produced with monotonous regularity since 1971. Wilson’s son Tom Wilson Jr. took over in 1987, in a transmission so seamless even aficionados didn’t spot the shift. Wilson passed away in 2011, age 80. Even by comic strip standards, “Ziggy” is fairly anonymous. Ziggy’s own anonymity is sometimes the butt of the joke. The strip that really struck me is one very near the beginning of the character’s life (a period which I have the most knowledge of, since I haven’t read all the strips, nor plan to.) In (image 17) we see Ziggy against a pitch-black background. He declares, “i never realized how empty and hollow my life was... ..until one day I coughed... ..it echoed!!” While many strips show Ziggy as a loser, this one seems to indicate clinical depression on the part of the ‘toon. As I sat in that state of late-night delirium familiar to anyone who’s ever done aimless internet research after midnight, the picture

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<sup>23</sup> Sheeran, Thomas J. "'Ziggy' creator Tom Wilson Sr. dies at age 80." [www.ohio.com](http://www.ohio.com). January 01, 2001. Accessed October 24, 2017. <https://www.ohio.com/akron/news/ziggy-creator-tom-wilson-sr-dies-at-age-80>.



of Tom Wilson on his Wikipedia page (image 18) began to intrigue, then almost transfix me. Who was this man?

Ziggy can be thought of as a portrayal of the limited body as it views itself, with insecurity. The character's shirt-robe masks all bodily contours. But the bottom seems only just long enough to cover everything, creating the eternal threat of exposure if care isn't constantly taken. Ziggy's large nose is his most defining feature, and also his most comical. His prominent protuberance is an eternal marker of the shame of his very existence. But Ziggy's surface is smooth. Talking to the Washington Post, Wilson Jr. recalls his father's advice, as he was being tutored to be his successor-

“Occasionally, he would point out that Ziggy's got a softer quality and a line less hard and a rounder nose,” the son says.

“I want people to want to pick Ziggy up and hug him,” Wilson Jr. recalls his father saying. “The message was: ‘Let's keep Ziggy round and lovable.’”<sup>24</sup>

A popular theory in the intellectual artistic climate of today is 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist Jacques Lacan's “Mirror Stage.” Without pretending to have an above-average understanding of the subject, I'll try to summarize it. At some time in an infant's life, which he puts at around 6 months, it's able to recognize itself in the mirror as an external object. This gives rise to the ability to conceive an “ideal self,” to image oneself as one thinks one ought to be, rather than as one is. And, as we experience, this “ideal self” rules over us for the duration of our lives.<sup>25</sup> I mention this as a preamble to (image 19) -the second Ziggy strip. The first simply has Ziggy

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<sup>24</sup> Cavanaugh, Michael. “ZIGGY'S GIFT: How the artistic son treasures his father's creative inheritance.” The Washington Post. September 28, 2011. Accessed October 24, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/ziggys-gift-how-the-artistic-son-treasures-his-fathers-creative-inheritance/2011/09/20/gIQA6UU34K\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/ziggys-gift-how-the-artistic-son-treasures-his-fathers-creative-inheritance/2011/09/20/gIQA6UU34K_blog.html).

<sup>25</sup> Lacan, Jacques. 1977. *Écrits: a selection*. New York: Norton, p. 75-

telling us “hullo” and introducing himself. In image 19, the first strip with any real content, Ziggy looks at his reflection in a mirror. The reflection, looking back, simply sticks its tongue out and wags its fingers in mockery. It’s thus that Ziggy is born.

The question that haunted me was, What sort of emotional connection does Tom Wilson have to his creations? As a highly successful ad man, who was expertly able to market the Ziggy imagery he created, he had every financial motive to create characters that people could emotionally relate to, regardless of his own level of attachment to the creations or the audience. But the focus is not actually on Tom Wilson the man, who we will never know. It’s really only an exercise to facilitate musing. The musing is on the seeming unknowability of others. The Washington Post article states of Wilson’s grooming of his son to take over the strip, “As their relationship grew through art, Wilson Jr. underscores, his father was no ‘stage parent’ with a pen.”<sup>26</sup> One is forced to ask- How can Wilson Jr. be so certain of this? Who really knows Tom Wilson’s motives? Who is unbiased? I ask this not only rhetorically, but with sincerity. I want to know how we can know others, if we can know others.

In this spirit, which I found, not discouraging, but even exhilarating, I made (image 20)– “Portrait of Tom Wilson.” I used the same basic material set as the Eye Visage series and many others, gouache with some watercolor, on slightly larger watercolor paper. I allowed myself to be expressive and not hold to the exact lines of my source. But I did consult the source, which is of course the image of Wilson on Wikipedia, more closely and more often than I did when making the construction paper couple. As a result, though there are many strange spillings and

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<sup>26</sup> Cavanaugh, Michael. "ZIGGY'S GIFT: How the artistic son treasures his father's creative inheritance." The Washington Post. September 28, 2011. Accessed October 24, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/ziggys-gift-how-the-artistic-son-treasures-his-fathers-creative-inheritance/2011/09/20/gIQA6UU34K\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/ziggys-gift-how-the-artistic-son-treasures-his-fathers-creative-inheritance/2011/09/20/gIQA6UU34K_blog.html).

poolings and the figure is bent and hunched in unusual ways, with an odd nose that curves like a banana in the opposite way a nose normally would, there is still a slight facial resemblance to the source. The source image is in black-and-white, like that of “From a Still of Carnival of Souls.” I decided I would be imaginative with the color, but in parts, particularly the clothing, the color is subdued. I played with warm yellows on the face, contrasting with the cool yellows of the background, and made bold coloration for the hair that drew attention to Wilson’s magically ridiculous wig.

The end product joins “From a Still of Carnival of Souls” in reminding viewers of the famous Donald Trump, who should need no introduction. That piece unintentionally accomplished this through the orange background and lack of hair, thus creating the sequence “orange/hair” in the viewers’ mind. In “Portrait of Tom Wilson” the unintentional parallel feels even more appropriate, because it’s the style of the hair itself, as well as the odd faux-blonde color, which makes it. Again it was unintentional, but now it hardly seems miraculous. Trump’s excessive use of toxic hair spray is a throwback to the era from which Wilson hails, and which Trump desires to bring back with his commitment to “Make America Great Again.”

I never intended to talk about Trump with either of these pieces. There’s more than enough art about that already. But the old chestnut holds true- the viewer has the final say. Trump appears, but not in the tiresome way he would if I had made the work about him. Rather, the liberal political leaning of the audience, combined with the twice-in-a-row interpretation when I’ve done portraits of guys in suits, makes me believe it’s really the Boogiemán, from the depths of the unconscious mind, that’s rearing its head.

To my mind, this Boogiemán is the direst threat, even though by itself it’s only comedic and helpless. Think of the old “Mummy” villain of early monster movies, who shambles about

and can't catch up with anyone. This is the perfect precursor to the businessman monster, a pathetic creature that yet has an uncanny hold on our minds. It's the most frightening being because its existence points to the weaknesses in our own culture, in our own values. It peers over our shoulder, inescapable, reminding us of our weaknesses and our inability to tackle them.

Perhaps that's more frightening than death. Death is, among other things, a release. Death ends responsibility. The responsibility of acknowledging and acting upon the weaknesses in our values does not fade with time. Rather, if unmet, it only ends when the last shred of our way of life is ground into fine dust. And the destruction wrought by this weakness on our part, will outlive us. Our ability to meet such a challenge could even help determine whether we're able to go to our grave peacefully, or with sorrow and trepidation. Is there anything better designed to cause anxiety than an image of the weakness of one's own society? This, I think, is what the word "Trump" means to many educated Americans, rightly or wrongly, on an unconscious level at least.

There's another association with Tom Wilson, that viewers are more likely to have once they know who they're looking at. That is Ziggy. Looked at more closely, this parallel seems much more appropriate. Wilson built a career marketing empathy, whereas Trump built one marketing self-aggrandizement. Wilson has the friendly face of a Ziggy who has been able to grow up. But in a way, Trump is very like Ziggy. And in the same way- though I was not consciously thinking of him when I made the work- Trump is a fitting subject for the musing, "How can we know anybody?" Tony Schwartz, the co-author of Trump's book "The Art of the Deal," said, "From the very first time I interviewed him in his office in Trump Tower in 1985, the image I had of Trump was that of a black hole. Whatever goes in quickly disappears without

a trace.”<sup>27</sup> Michael D’Antonio, a Trump biographer who interviewed him extensively, said, “What’s kind of tragic about Donald is, he doesn’t know himself and he really doesn’t want anyone else to know him... ..even (his former wives) say that they’re not quite sure that they get this guy.”<sup>28</sup> Like Ziggy, Trump is distinguished by superficial characteristics, but is ultimately anonymous. He’s unknowable.

Bakhtin talks of the “impenetrable façade” of the Limited Body, and refers to “verbal norms of official and literary language” by which its “new bodily order” operates. What if one were to superficially assault the norms of official language and decency, while in truth maintaining an impenetrable façade- to appear to rebel against the status quo, while actually strengthening it? At the time Rabelais was writing, there would presumably have been no motive for such behavior. Power was maintained simply by openly endorsing the status quo. But as Baudrillard said, everything in today’s world has been “metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be perpetuated in its purged form.” And I’ve found that the more subtle I make my works, from the construction paper couple, to “Eye Visage 6,” to “Portrait of Tom Wilson,” the more genuinely grotesque they seem to become.

The limited body has morphed into its inverse, into the media carnival which deceives the people into believing it represents their own voices. But the carnival is without substance. It is impenetrable. All points of entry into its inner workings are closed off, yet it’s totally transparent. The representatives of this order, our leaders, must themselves be modeled in this

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<sup>27</sup> Schwartz, Tony. "Perspective | I wrote 'The Art of the Deal' with Trump. His self-sabotage is rooted in his past." *The Washington Post*. May 16, 2017. Accessed October 24, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/05/16/i-wrote-the-art-of-the-deal-with-trump-his-self-sabotage-is-rooted-in-his-past/>.

<sup>28</sup> Barbaro, Michael. "What We Learned From Five Hours of Trump on Tape." *The New York Times*. October 26, 2016. Accessed October 24, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/26/podcasts/what-we-learned-from-five-hours-of-trump-on-tape.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>.

manner, showing no signs of inner life. This is our daily world, the “new normal” which dominates our minds. Ad men like Tom Wilson were the architects of this world. But the story Wilson tells is very different. He seems to be trying to reach the victim of this world. But he does so in the most superficial and commodified way. Did he feel the compassion his comic strip promotes? When looking at his unreachable face, one can see the Saint, or the Boogiemán.

The viewer decides what the viewer sees. It is the “chorus of the laughing people” who has the final say, and not any artist or intellect. And it is impossible to really see through the eyes of another, to know exactly what motivates another. But I have to try. I have to find the places of commonality, where bodies and minds merge with the world and with each other. We call this “grotesque,” and it has the flavor of death. But that’s not the end of the story. The grotesque is where death and life meet. In Rabelais’ story, when Pantagruel is born, his large size causes the death of his mother, Badebec, wife of Gargantua. In explaining this scene, Bakhtin says, “Birth and death are the gaping jaws of the earth and the mother’s open womb.”<sup>29</sup> This doesn’t sound like an appealing (or sanitary) place. But it’s the place we have common ground on, where “there is no difference between high and low, old and young.”

A lot changes over the years. I’m not the recluse that I was ten years ago, wondering around Tulsa and whiling away the days. But I think I’m on much the same quest as I was that day long past, when I set out back home from the coffee shop after reading those lines of Nietzsche-

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<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 329.

Then like troubadours in riches  
we shall dance 'tween saints and bitches,  
dance our dance 'tween God and Earth!<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

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## Vita

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