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Painting and Stuff, LOL

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Painting and Stuff, LOL

By

Sopearb C. Touch

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Art
of Washington University in St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Committee:

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Jamie Adams

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Kelly Shindler

At my opening exhibit a guy asked me what my art was about.

I told him it was about

whatever I wanted to do,

when I wanted to do,

how I wanted to do,

if I wanted to do.

It was the most honest answer I ever gave concerning my work.

He then asked me if I was a rapper.

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ABSTRACT

Our own human experience is a distinct realm which can never be precisely duplicated in another lifetime. It frames our whole view of existence and, as artists, affects our art making process. The theory of the Tabula Rasa functions as the inspiration of my work and this writing examines my personal view of growing up in the internet age and America, and how my view of life, as well as artistic practice, is shaped by a consumerist culture that has gone global. Additionally, as a figurative painter, I create a context with other artists who create work about their own experience such as Liu Xiaodong, Jan Steen, Kehinde Wiley, Patrick Martinez, and Roger Shimomura. This paper ties many facets of culture together, along with my personal reflection, to ultimately examine its effect on my art.

INTRODUCTION: TABULA RASA

We all start as blank slates (blank minds), and are filled, or inscribed, as we experience life. No two human experiences are identical. Potential preexists, but our knowledge of anything is attained through exposure to the world – through ideas, experiences, interactions with material things and people. So we, as human beings, develop and become both a compound and a mirror of our experiences. As we continue to live, we emit what we have learned, reacting to the world around us, which in turn constantly creates more for us to learn and inscribe on our tablet. The result is a human—a biomechanical organism—capable of perpetuating only what s/he perceives to understand.

Just as a feral child exists in an animal state, doing what is necessary to survive, a person who exists in society learns how to function as a citizen. The feral child observes nature and learns how to navigate the wild—the citizen does the same but has to learn man-made laws and structures. Both start out as children, learning the limits of the body, and exponentially increasing their intellect each day through interaction with reality. The feral child explores the chaotic nature, soaking in information generated through his/her encounters; the citizen does likewise in the concrete jungle. Erling Eng comments on John Locke's *Tabula Rasa*,

Locke uses this figure to introduce his view that all ideas finally derive from experience:

How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and boundless Fancy of Man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of Reason and Knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, From Experience. In that, all our Knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives it self. Our Observation employ'd either about external, sensible Objects, or about the internal Operations of our Minds, perceived and reflected on by our selves, is that, which supplies our Understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the Fountains of Knowledge, from whence all the Ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.¹

In my painting series, *Tabula Rasa: The Space Born*, I adopt this theory to describe the life of a space-born figure. I reference my own human experience to create a narrative about the life of this figure, who resembles a human but is distinctly different by its celestial skin, suggesting how we are all actually space born beings in the universe, but this figure literally has starry flesh. In the narrative, I deal with issues from my own life such as religious and societal conflicts (in *Flight of the Prophets*), sexual experiences (in *The Tempest*), and deciphering the esoteric from exoteric (in *Lesson of the Neophyte*).

What is human identity? Our name is just a sound, a spelling, used for identification. Our knowledge is recycled, our actions just rote memorization. We are the embodiment of our intellect and retained information, which ultimately creates the human existence that we know: our filled slates.



Sopearb Touch, *Flight of the Prophets*, 2014



Sopearb Touch, *The Tempest*, 2014

CHAPTER 1: PAINTING FOR THE PAINTERLY PAINTING PAINTER'S PAINTING SAKE

I think about painting a lot. A really lot. It is the core of my artistic practice to such an extent that I am engaged in painting even when I'm not painting. I trouble-shoot problems, arrange colors, build themes; I consider anything that contributes to painting other than actually painting. In a sense, I paint with my imagination and memory. It is a crucial component of my practice that appears frivolous until paint is actually laid down.

I also take a lot of notes for painting. I list possible series of works, jot down ideas about composition, and sketch. Sometimes I create titles of works before the works have been made. As I work, I am able to reference these notes and ponder certain ideas to transmute into larger projects. Some days I don't use anything for reference, and just paint from this urge inside me—my ether—that won't be satisfied until some pigment is flung upon a surface. I continue to paint from life—including plein air landscapes and portraits of models or myself.

Painting has become so habitual to me, I often can't explain why I paint or the techniques and subject matter in my work. I paint simply *because*. I paint because it fills a necessary void. Painting actually makes me feel as if I'm working and playing at the same time. Making something "good" isn't even the point—I paint just to see what stuff looks like and to trouble-shoot painterly issues. The most important part is that I enjoy it. If you don't enjoy your work, it shows—luckily, I always enjoy it. It's like an impossible arithmetic problem that I don't try to solve but just try and refine.

Aleister Crowley, the notorious occultist, coined his infamous phrase; "Do what thou wilt, love is the law love under will."² I paint what I want to. With painting I can create any type

of environment, theme, or mood. I use figures to represent people I have been exposed to in my life, whether in fact or in my imagination. I can't reference a person I've never experienced. The same can be applied to every other aspect of my painting; I can only reference what I know. It's like the idea of the Tabula Rasa: I use my tablet of knowledge, my mind, as my resource for painting. As I reference my personal body of knowledge, I touch on a unique personal experience that becomes the basis of my paintings.

My painting method is simple: do whatever it takes. *En plein air*, from imagination, pictures from the internet—all of these approaches give me a huge resource bank, but I only use what I feel will capture my idea. After painting, the work sits in a limbo of possible completion or incompleteness—the judgment period. If complete, then it's deemed either good or bad and thrown into a pile of other completed paintings; if incomplete, I contemplate what about it needs finishing—or I just abandon it. The judgment period is the longest part of my process and varies with each painting.

Being of the internet age and living in the U.S., the great melting pot, heavily influences my work. The stream of information I'm able to access via the internet allows me to reach beyond my locale, extending to global sources of information, but it is still limited to what I search for and what I chose to expose myself to; the limitations of my own experience extend to my use of the internet. Information on the internet is heavily regulated. So, while the internet provides substantial data, it is still far from objective truth. My work reflects the information that is accessible, but also reflects all the misinformation that pours out of media outlets. The result creates an absurd environment of truth vs. frivolity that the seeker has to discern. While the internet is a great source for material, we must understand that it isn't always accurate. and that we must look at who is creating and disseminating this information.

You Don't Need Anything and *But You Want Everything* are two paintings that strongly capture the essence of my recent body of work. The former is a surreal landscape of various types of housing, while a dominant Sikh man stands in the foreground and G.I. Joe action figures rain down on the composition; the latter has an abstract colorful background in front of which a Lucian Freud model poses on a couch, and Barbie Dolls and blobs of color precipitate. Both pieces pave the way for my recent paintings, which contain a juxtaposition of imagery and humor about living in an internet- and consumerist-driven global society. The work portrays ideal and realistic figures, all seamlessly floating in the same world or dimension. The floating aspect references the invisible information transmitted around us that we can't see, but which constantly dominates our lives through media and the internet; it also reflects our lofty idolatry of consumerism and corporate culture.



Soppearb Touch, *You Don't Need Anything*, 2013



Soppearb Touch, *But You Want Everything*, 2013

CHAPTER 2: HUMOR

Humor is that priceless amusement that fills a certain void in all of us. We all have a sense of humor, no matter how bone-dry. Humor is one of our most fundamental liberties, as well as a celebration of the absurd. Just as we are all unique individuals, so are our senses of humor: none is identical, only similar. Our personal sense of humor is influenced by our own experiences, culture, and location. While one may view slapstick as very entertaining, another may prefer Shakespeare's comedies. But there is one thing we all can agree on about humor: no, not that the scene of somebody stepping in dog poop is funny (even though it is), but that humor is a super-sensory emotion bestowed upon us from a higher power to liberate us from the mundane or serious aspects of life.

Roger Shimomura often incorporates a sense of cynical humor in his work, frequently portraying stereotypes juxtaposed with pop imagery. In his piece, *Different Citizens*, Shimomura illustrates a very racist cartoon-style portrait of an Asian man to the left, while a self-portrait of him sits to the right. The artist highlights the racism in America during the post-World War II era, where there was much hostility towards non-whites, especially the Japanese population. Shimomura turns the joke on the creators of the slant-eyed, obnoxiously yellow-skinned caricature of Asian men and ultimately displays the ignorance of people who perpetuated these stereotypes.



Roger Shimomura, *Different Citizens*, 2009

John Currin's painting, *Park City Grill*, features a couple, man and woman, enjoying a glass of wine. The woman, with her elongated neck reminiscent of a giraffe, laughs wholeheartedly with her pearly white teeth glistening, while the man has a more toned-down grin. It's a scene of high-brow leisure. The woman, rendered laughing in a dog frequency pitch, reminds us of an obnoxious person laughing too hard at a terrible joke, while the man trying to contain his composure is probably doing whatever it takes to woo the woman. Currin, never one to stray away from humor or shock, parodies the atmosphere of a bourgeois dinner party. Elegantly painted but distorted, he captures a moment that most can relate to: of entertaining a guest and laughing at terrible jokes for the sake of appearance.



John Currin, *Park City Grill*, 2000

I frequently incorporate my own sense of humor into my work. While it may not be blatant, it's there and very personal. Never one wanting to expose the joke for the joke's sake, my painting is an outlet for an Andy Kaufman-style of bad comedy, such as his bad impersonations through his character, Foreign Man. Exploring the themes of racial humor and stereotypes, I created the paintings *Short Round* and *Mr. Miyagi*. Reflecting on how Asian males were depicted in the movies I watched as a kid, I noticed that most of these characters were either used for comic relief, as wise eastern philosophers, martial arts masters, or as villains. In these works, I wanted to highlight the absurdity and the small box Asian males were placed in, ultimately zooming out and making my own joke about the people (and society) that created and disseminated these views, similar to Shimomura. I frequently incorporate my own sense of

humor into my work. Never wanting to expose the joke for the joke's sake, my painting is an outlet for an Andy Kaufman-style of comedy, similar to Kaufman's bad impersonations through his character, Foreign Man. Exploring the themes of racial humor and stereotypes, I created the paintings *Short Round* and *Mr. Miyagi*. Reflecting on how Asian males were depicted in the movies I watched as a kid, I noticed that most of these characters were either used for comic relief, as wise eastern philosophers, martial arts masters, or as villains. In these works, I wanted to highlight the absurdity and the small box Asian males were placed in, ultimately zooming out and making my own joke about the people (and society) that created and disseminated these views, similar to Shimomura.



Sopearb Touch, *Short Round*, 2013



Sopearb Touch, *Mr. Miyagi*, 2013

My use of G.I. Joe action figures and Barbie dolls (notice the two different characterizations of the same type of toy) focuses on childhood idols existing in a more realistic world. These toys have a full backstory behind them, so taking them out of their original context and putting them in an unfamiliar environment highlights the absurdity of their identity. For instance, G.I. Joe is taken out of his war-riddled context and placed in a regular domestic scene in *The Dining Room*. In *Untitled*, Barbie isn't surrounded by her pretty pink house or drop-top sports car; instead, she's seen staring aimlessly from the painting's background, while a G.I. Joe figure sits on the floor, and I myself appear as a character amidst them. The bad humor continues in *Sacrifice at the Temple of Molech*, where both Barbie and the G.I. Joes are active participants in an orgy scene. Who knew they both enjoyed gang bangs?

Painting has always been an outlet for mood and emotion, so humor fits in perfectly with this tradition. Artists are constantly incorporating into their work their own ironic views of life.

From Jan Steen to John Currin, humor in art has been prevalent for centuries. The hard part is deciphering whom the joke is on.



Soparb Touch, *The Dining Room*, 2013



Soparb Touch, *Untitled*, 2012

CHAPTER 3: THE INTERWEBZ

The fantastical sport of painting in which only the finest human beings participate can be traced back to the dawn of man. There has always been a practice of rendering imagery for another specimen to visually experience. This multi-century practice has crashed, along with every other aspect of human society, headfirst into the fast-paced direct injection media outlet called the internet—or, the interwebz, for the initiated. Instantly a vast majority of painting history is available at the click of a mouse. One could survey web sources on the topic of painting for a lifetime. This plethora of information is one of the most interesting aspects of the internet. Add to this communication and visual resources, and the internet has become the almighty gold-plated Swiss Army Knife for painting.

But are painting and the internet an ultimate alchemical marriage? Has the internet completed the transmutation? The internet has certainly influenced a new generation of painters. The last time an impact of this magnitude rocked the painting Richter scale was when photography and mass duplication of imagery (printing) were invented. Every artist studio you visit now includes a computer connected to the internet. It's rare to walk into a critique group without seeing a painting that references a visual source from the internet. It's everywhere: internet-sourced pictures edited into a Photoshopped painting that an artist plans on starting, someone uploading their step-by-step painting process onto their blog, a brief history lesson of postmodernist painters by an overly eccentric fan boy, an instant link to an online portfolio, uploaded images of the most recent painting show at the MOMA, "wow, this work is amazing!! it looks so casually painted but the space is so well constructed. really, really great. makes me think of peter doig and wayne thiebaud."³, an artist emailing a to inquire about a gallery show, a person lambasting an artwork from a concealed standpoint—internet culture has created this

alternate realm for painting that mitigates against actual interaction of people, but still enables us to focus on the subject of painting. This is the new reality of painting.

The internet also permits instant access to international culture. While this is a cheap knockoff from actually experiencing a culture, it's the closest thing to it, like a fake Gucci bag. Before the internet, film and books served this purpose; now the internet provides all of this and more, with its ability to host writing, blogging, and real-time interaction (video chatting). So, unlike the prehistoric age of TV and newspaper, we are now able to get insights into other cultures from actual people rather than controlled media outlets. While older media are still prevalent, the internet has become numero uno. During the turmoil in Iraq, for example—in George W. Bush's era—information about the conflicts were relayed through limited-access footage and one-sided pro-American stances. But, a person had the alternate resource of the internet and was able to see a different view of the war, such as unreleased footage and interaction with people actually in Iraq. This is how crucial of a utensil the internet has become, especially in the case of cultural identities. Anyone can learn just about anything about Iraq, now—what lead to the war, their favorite food in Iraq, and even popular Iraqi sex positions.

French Romantic painter Jean Leon Gerôme was celebrated in his day for his exotic paintings of Eastern culture. His paintings popularized an ideal Orientalism and provided an avenue that gave viewers an insight into different cultures way before the internet. In his painting, *The Carpet Merchant*, lavish carpets are displayed and sold at a souk. Was that how everybody in the "Orient" bought a carpet? How would anyone who'd never been there know what a souk looked like back then? Gerôme idealized his exotic subjects with handsome figures in turbans and perfectly luminous light. If that painting was created today, it could easily be

slandered for its stereotypical depictions, quickly aided by actual pictures of the region and its people.



Jean Leon Gerôme, *The Carpet Merchant*, 1887

The internet is the global super-highway; better yet, it's a teleportation system with a guaranteed one second travel rate. Artists are able to reference many cultures at the click of a fingertip, but with that access also come a duty (or hindrance): to beware of cultural stereotyping. For, as much information as there is on the internet, there is equal an amount of

whistle-blowing Neanderthals (high-minded intellectuals) ready to enforce “politically correct” regulations. In *I Hate Mondays*, a painting by infamous street artist Banksy, a scene reminiscent of Save-A-Child infomercials of children rummaging through trash is depicted. At the forefront is an African child in a tattered “I Hate Mondays” T-shirt. The shirt alludes to the spillage of consumerist culture, as the shirt references the Western 9-5 work week. How the shirt found its way to this child, probably from a donation of unwanted t-shirts, is the painting’s key irony.



Banksy, *I Hate Mondays*, date unknown

In another piece by Banksy, *The Rickshaw Kid*, two fat white tourists taking selfies on their cell phones are carted in a rickshaw by a distraught youth from an unknown 3rd world country. While Banksy uses combined imagery of different social classes to display marginalization, he stereotypes all youth in 3rd world countries as impoverished and forced to labor in menial jobs. Additionally, he creates an image of Westerners as carefree people too consumed in their personal 1st world affairs. Paintings such as these that cross-reference different

cultures and social classes reflect a well-traveled man or somebody with internet access. Gerôme was ostensibly able to reference his “Oriental” culture through personal travels; Banksy, on the other hand, creates a more complex critique through the leisure of the internet.



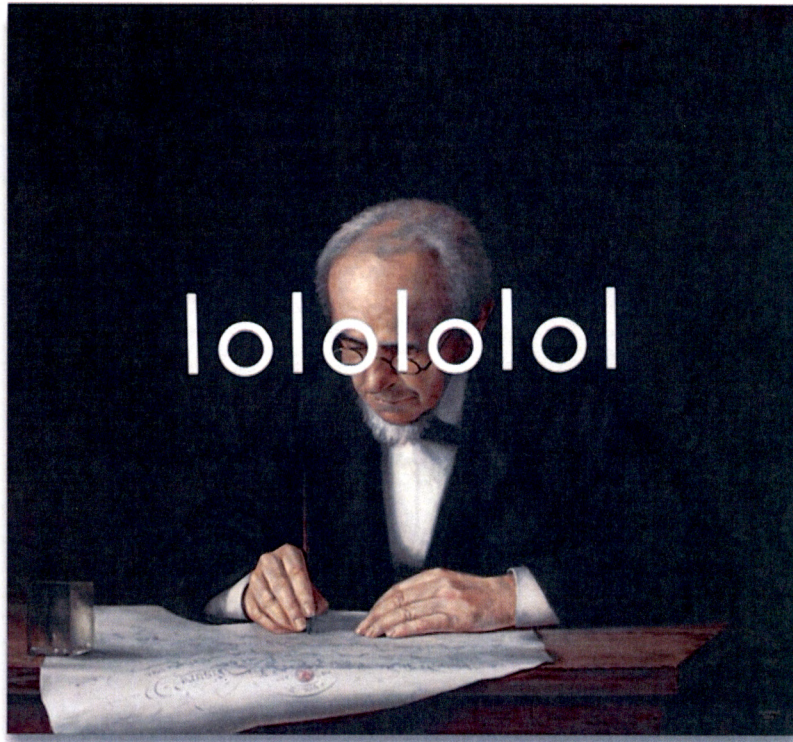
Banksy, *The Rickshaw Kid*, date unknown

The union of the internet and painting has also created a love child that blatantly resembles both: paintings about the internet. While the internet has become a popular assistant among people who create, it has also generated a new subject matter within itself. The information platform is now content for painting. Painting the subject of the internet allows a vision of personal interaction, as the artist is allowed to reflect upon their individual experience with this ever-evolving medium. John Aycock writes about how art worms (computer viruses) are used to create paintings, “An art worm is a new type of computer worm that turns infected

computers into active participants in an art work; effectively, the entire Internet becomes the artist's canvas."⁴ Contemporary artist Shawn Huckins paints classical scenes of the American Frontier juxtaposed with internet slang from social media, such as "twerkin lik a boss" and "lolololol".



Shawn Huckins, *The Jolly Flatboatmen: Twerkin Lik A Boss*, 2013



Shawn Huckins, *The Writing Master: Laughing Out Loud Laughing Out Loud Laughing Out Loud Laughing Out Loud*, 2013

While Aycock and Huckins are examples of referencing the internet through art and painting, I use the internet as a magic hat from which I can pull out any rabbit I choose, and reflect that in my work by blatantly referencing imagery that is out of my reality (i.e. the Sikh man in *You Don't Need Anything*). This method allows me to capture an ambiance of a global society reliant on the internet for information. And, continuing the theme of the Tabula Rasa, the internet has become a big component of our slates, ultimately affecting how we we even perceive knowledge. A prime example is my painting, *The Parade of Queen Sheba*, in which a procession takes place and a variety of characters are referenced from the internet to create a flattened reality in which they all cohesively exist and create a humorous commentary on a world that can be forged with the information from the internet. The painting is a visual metaphor about the internet; it's a visual medium where a variety of incompatible information has the same

accessibility and the user chooses where to navigate, over which a consumerist queen presides (advertisements, pop ups, etc.).



Soparb Touch, *The Parade of Queen Sheba*, 2014

So, while the internet, with its endless stream of data, has ushered in a new age of information exchange, it still faces similar problems to previous media outlets—such as deciphering truth, reliable sources, stereotyping cultures, and providing misinformation. The most interesting facet of internet is its size; it's every media combined on the most potent steroids and still growing. Even more interesting is the fact that most of us have only accessed just the tip of the iceberg. Keep clicking.

CHAPTER 4: THE CONSUMERIST AGE

Similar to the internet, consumerism has become omnipresent in our daily lives and creating our value systems and dominating culture. The marketing and imagery of persuasion all play a role in our increasingly capitalistic conscience. Everyday people are the prey of consumer hawks (advertising). Electronic media sell products to and control populations, while corporate conglomerates spend billions of dollars on finding new ways to lure potential customers. It is a global phenomenon that now directs society and the way humans live. Consumerism is lava that engulfs anything in its path. As Peter N. Stearns states in his book, *Consumerism in World History*,

Consumerism describes a society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or for traditional display. They become enmeshed in the process of acquisition – shopping – and take some of their identity from a procession of new items that they buy and exhibit. In this society, a host of institutions both encourage and serve consumerism, from eager shopkeepers trying to lure customers into buying more than they need, to product designers employed to put new twists on established models, to advertisers seeking to create new needs.⁵

The consumption of market-made products and desire-inducing marketing symbols is essential to consumer culture, yet this system is perpetuated by the apparent exercise of free will in everyday life. Identity becomes more mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflexive and subject to change. Social emulation is a big factor in determining identities. Consumers actively rework symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements and material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their lifestyle goals. Eric Arnold and Craig Thompson describe this phenomenon:

Consumer culture theorists have turned attention to the relationship between consumers' identity projects and the structuring influence of the marketplace, arguing that the market

produces certain kinds of consumer positions that consumers can choose to inhabit.

While individuals can and do pursue personally edifying goals through these consumer positions, they are enacting and personalizing cultural scripts that align their identities with the structural imperatives of consumer-driven global economy.⁶

Consumerism offers archetypes for people to follow but don't necessarily have to precisely fit. From this perspective, the market provides consumers with an expansive palette of resources from which to construct collective and individual identities. Identification is still relatively fixed and limited, though the boundaries of possible identities are continually expanding.

Kehinde Wiley's paintings of African American males recreating poses of popular European paintings have always portrayed the figures clad in the latest fashionable (then contemporary) attire. Throw back jerseys, \$500 Bape hoodies, New Era fitted baseball caps; though not the primary focus of his work, through the lens of consumerism, the figures' dress code defined what was cool among young black men. These paintings also reflect how a particular subculture believes it's defining itself through consumer products.



Kehinde Wiley, *Portrait Bust of Cardinal Richelieu*, 2009



Kehinde Wiley, *Kofi Graham Study*, 2011

Creating a particularized identity is a function of the modern definition of individuality. In his book *Media Culture*, Douglas Kellner writes, "In the consumer and media societies that emerged after World War II, identity has been increasingly linked to style, to producing an image, to how one looks. It is even if everyone has to have their own look, style and image to have their own identity, though, paradoxically, many of the models of style and look come from consumer culture, thus individuality is highly mediated in the consumer society of the present."⁷ Consumerism and globalization have encouraged a dominant attitude of radical individualism determined around an ongoing quest for personal distinctiveness and freedom in lifestyle choices.

In our contemporary society, goods are abundant to match the ever growing desires of consumers. Every person has a want or desire that can be fulfilled, but then another arises, which is the perfect setup for our consumerist society to thrive. People are constantly manipulated by glittery ads for new products and projected lifestyles in cinema or other forms of mainstream media that create a basis for these desires. And there is plenty of evidence to suggest that human beings in all cultures are capable of developing addictions. Colin Campbell, from *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, writes, "...the modern consumer is characterized by an insatiability which arises out of a basic inexhaustibility of wants themselves, which forever arise, one phoenix-like, from the ashes of their predecessors. Hence no sooner is one satisfied than another is waiting in line clamoring to be satisfied; when this one is attended to, a third appears, then subsequently a fourth, and so on, apparently without end."⁸ This endless wanting can be attributed to a revolution in rising expectations, which occurs when societies undergo the process of modernization.

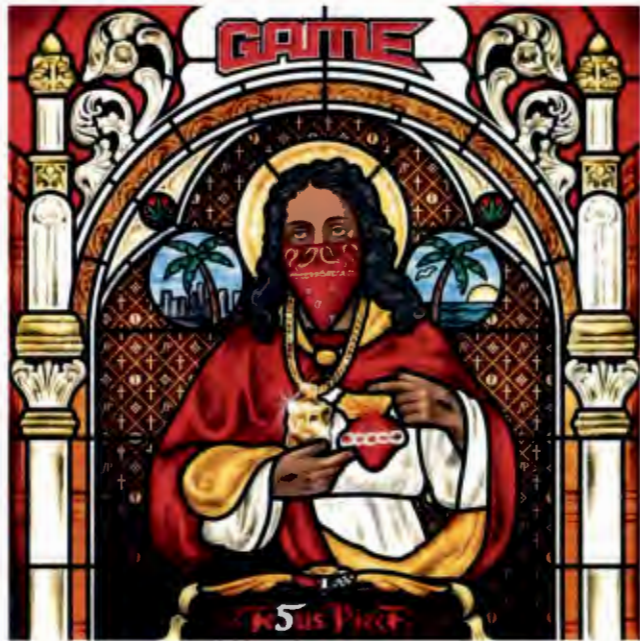
Technology has played a huge role in the advancement of consumerism by offering new products for the consumer as well as a fresh outlet for influence and the advertiser. In the United States and Europe, television significantly increased the impact of advertising. By the 1980s, commercial TV had gained ground rapidly, resulting in TV and advertising going hand in hand. Also, consumer demands on the part of children went up thanks to television. Society has now become defined by the phone, computer, and internet. This aspect of consumerism has been spurred on by the advent of newer, faster, and better technological gadgets, which have expedited globalization and hyper--influx of communication. We now strive to constantly keep up to date with this technology, and in turn, technology provides new ideals for us to live up to. While these new advancements may seem to ease our lives, they also come with a price; constant commercials, ads, and market ideals our set forth for consumers to continually follow. New technology creates alternate pathways for products to be disseminated to customers. Catalog sales and purchases from the internet further expanded the consumerist urge. One can now shop from the comfort of one's own home, twenty-four hours a day.

My paintings, *You Don't Need Anything* and *But You Want Everything*, investigate the topic of identity in America, as well as its absurdity created by consumerism. The G.I. Joe action figures reference ideal macho American patriotic men while Barbie is an ideal American princess with a "perfect" body and a fabulous care-free life of leisure. Who is the targeted demographic for these products? Children. By using this capitalistic talisman on the youth, corporations plant a seed that continues to grow in us until we die. They create a consumerist pathway for us to follow how to live, how to be "true" Americans (as well as how to be men and women), and ultimately how to keep shopping to achieve our identity.

Consumerism has even infiltrated religion, which is a subject I adopt in the painting #1 *Stunna*. While the title makes no reference to religion, the popular image of a white Jesus is depicted. Around his neck are gold chains with three medallions—“Jesus pieces,” popular jewelry piece that originated in hip hop culture but has now become a mainstay with rich people who want to show their belief in Jesus (and Christianity) by buying stuff. While the savior blatantly flosses the pendants of himself to show his faith, the painting criticizes the worship of material things over spirituality and religion, as well as how acquiring these material things that represent religion become superstition that replace faith and become nothing more than carrying lucky rabbit feet on your key chain.



Soparb Touch, #1 *Stunna*, 2013



Left: Kanye “Yeezus” West wearing multiple Jesus pieces. Right: Rapper The Game’s album, blatantly titled “*Jesus Piece*”

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(DIAMOND EYES)**
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made in gold
Hand-detailed to
perfection.



Advertisements of Jesus Pieces from jewelers IFANDCO

Patrick Martinez created a series of paintings about the most enjoyable thing about consumerist culture, unhealthy junk food in the most conspicuous bright packaging that

marketing can buy. In his paintings, *Los Angeles Grocery* and *Fresh Produce*, the artist sets up the composition reminiscent of still life paintings and continues the theme of the commodification of old European masters (i.e. Wiley's appropriation of master paintings and my use of Jesus). But rather than flowers or fresh vegetables and fruit, he renders bags of Cheetos, soda, rotten fruit, condiments, and 40oz's, and accentuates the pieces with illuminating neon signs. The works represent the attractiveness of the consumer-driven advertising that aims to entice people into buying these unhealthy products. While the foods are tasty, the cynicism of the paintings is shown through the unhealthy lifestyles that are generated by too much consumption of these products. I linger on this topic in my painting, *Supper Break at McDonald's Because Kali Wanted a McFlurry*, where the Hindu goddess Kali is shown leaving a McDonald's with a burger and drink in place of the traditional religious artifacts usually in her hands. Additionally, making a humorous commentary of the power of McDonald's, the piece views the fast food restaurant as a force that even gods and goddesses must succumb to.



Patrick Martinez

Left: *Los Angeles Grocery*, 2014; Right: *Fresh Produce*, 2010



Sopearb Touch, *Supper Break at McDonald's Because Kali Wanted a McFlurry*, 2013

A byproduct of consumerist and capitalist culture is plastic; plastic bags, plastic tags, plastic packaging, plastic products, etc. Plastic packaging assures us that what we buy is brand new and safe, and it can be found on all the products we consume, from food to clothing. But the plastic becomes discarded when the product is used, leaving waste management to handle the rest. Plastic is so abundant and cheap that it can even be used as a resource for making art at a low cost, which is the case in my use of plastic in replacing canvas and as a framing device. I've adopted plastic sheet as a painting surface when I work with acrylic paint (another plastic product), as in *Regime Change* and a majority of my works within the past two years. This untraditional method reflects our consumerist culture, but ironically shifts the expendable use of plastic into the main focus of my art making. I continue the use of the disposable commodity by creating frames out of them. While there may be a stigma on what is classified as fine art (which

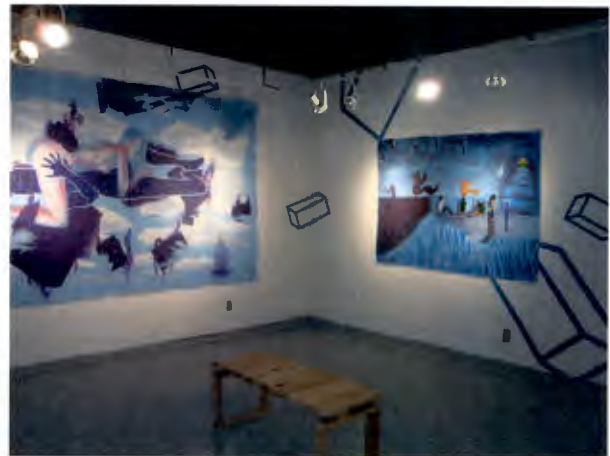
I have experienced), I view art as transcending any materials used, so the use of plastic in my work reflects it's cheap and abundant quality, as well as my personal practice of appropriating anything I can get my hands on for creation. The use of cheap products is magnified in my installations with the addition of tape, creating a consumerist wonderland of crap that I can easily throw away, similar to the plastic packaging and products we constantly use on a day-to-day basis. While my use of these products may contain cynical undertones regarding our consumption of these products, it's also a celebration of thrift and resourcefulness, as well as our "plastic" culture.



Sopearb Touch, *Regime Change*, 2013; a painting done on plastic sheet w/plastic frame



Sopearb Touch, *Procession*, 2013



Sopearb Touch, *Installation Shots*

Love it or hate it, American culture is defined by consumerism and capitalism. Our consumption of products has influenced a global transformation. It has become the new age of humanity and has effected old and new old generations. Technology and marketing continue to contribute to the growth of this cultural organism.

CHAPTER 5: NARRATIVE FIGURE PAINTING

Narrative offers insight into an author's mind, regardless of the medium. Through narratives, the creator pours out their story to capture a personal view of a human (or non-human) condition. While viewers or readers of narrative work may not necessarily translate everything in terms of the author's thinking, they're able to engage with a story they can empathetically decipher on their own terms. Similar to the theory of the Tabula Rasa, the narrative is an impression in a person's understanding and reflection.

A painting also consists of combinations of what the viewer previously knew about the painting's content and what the painter depicted on the picture plane. Our understanding of a painting is always subjective. Our sight is altered by previously stored information; to some extent we see a painting as we expect to see it, our questions determining our answers. Of the visual depictions available to the painter through historical convention, direct observations, and intuition, the painter selects those that are dominant in his or her world view (often tempered by cultural and social beliefs). These idiosyncratic choices as well as the possible responses these idiosyncratic choices elicit from the viewer, are reflected in my work by vignettes or subplots. I have found the viewer's response often as valid as the artist's intent in ascribing meaning to any painting.⁹

Narrative painting is a well-examined practice that has been the most prevalent visual art form throughout history—providing centuries of rationale for humanity's existence within the universe. What can't be done with writing and dialect has been done with pictures. What is interesting about the practice of narrative painting is the individual view of the artist. An artist has the ability to choose from a Pandora's box of utensils to create their vision: color, form, mood, subject matter, symbolism, metaphor, etc. These tools that the artist chooses create a distinction of style. The artist Paul Pratchenko describes his process as:

My paintings and drawings are reconstructions from memory (about remembering) or constructions from the imagination (about how I think I see). My images are metaphors for my process of visual perception, my understandings of the world that result from

these perceptions, and the way new information influences the evolution of this world view.¹⁰

Jean Robertson and Craig Mcdaniel, in their essay *Resuscitating Painting*, discuss painting as:

[...] painting is a language—a system that embodies symbolic meaning. Painting is not only a collection of techniques (craft) and design principles (formalism); it is a language with material, technical, formal, and cognitive components, all of which enable students who know the components to "speak" thoughts, perceptions, and feelings in paint.¹¹

Figurative painting provides the artist with an opportunity to create a description of the human condition. Using figures is a direct way to create a relationship among people. Figurative subjects create a realm where the viewer is able to identify with cultures and histories, but also reflect on what the artist finds interesting about people and how they choose to express it through technique.

Narrative figurative painting combines all of the previously mentioned tools to tell a story. Figures become the characters, and the composition, the set. Just as historical painters captured their own temporal essence, present-day figure painting offers a glimpse into the unique individual consciousness of contemporary artists and human beings.

The 17th century Dutch Golden Age painter, Jan Steen, is a prime example of an artist who utilized figures in his work as a storyteller.

Steen [...] stands apart for his wry and humorous view of the world. He is best known as a comic painter of dissolute households, quack doctors tending lovesick women, boisterous holiday gatherings, and rowdy tavern scenes. Yet Steen also produced portraits, and biblical and mythological histories that vary remarkably, from the quiet and intimate to the grand and melodramatic.¹²

Steen had his own unique style that was distinguished by his humor, and thus is viewed as a comic painter. He frequently used himself as a character in his narratives, often playing different roles in his painted scenes. H. Perry Chapman says of Steen, "In a period where artists

customarily individualized their styles and many painted self-portraits, Steen personalized his art to an unusual degree, infusing much of it with his wryly comic personality.”¹³



Jan Steen, *Celebrating the Birth*, 1664

Contemporary artist Liu Xiaodong captures intimate commonplaces of his home country in the physic landscape of China. The scenes he selects for his paintings are ordinary to the point of being mundane. But the people in his paintings provide social realism: children playing with BB guns, common workers, prostitutes. Unlike the idealized social realist paintings of the Mao era, Xiaodong’s paintings offer a sincere glimpse into a Chinese culture the artist experienced personally.

They are unlike the heroic caricatures—handsome soldiers, rugged factory workers, rosy-cheeked peasants, patriotic children, and great glowing leaders—who paraded across the canvases, banners, and posters of Chinese socialist realism during the era of Mao Zedong. The pedestrian faces and prosaic postures of Liu’s subjects instead testify to a China filled with hope, ambition cunning, bewilderment, anger, indifference, longing, and despair. They are the old faces of new China, and they embody the weary countenance of history.¹⁴



Liu Xiaodong, *Fat White Boy and His Dad*, 2001

Xiaodong and Steen create a personal ambiance by constructing their own view of daily life. Both artists capture scenes of banal day-to-day activities but crucially use figuration to relate to the viewer, ultimately inviting them to experience their world. Through these methods, the artists capture the unique time and space of their own reality while their different painting styles ultimately create distinct visual languages. My work is similar to both artists in regards to this. While these artists' visual style is based more in a grounded reality, my work may stray to the dark side of abstraction and a complete disregard for dimension. The painting, *American Wedding*, depicts a traditional Cambodian wedding where the bride and groom sit on the floor during the ceremony, as a Monk blesses them while friends and family encircle them. While this

is a traditional wedding, it occurs in America, not native Cambodia. The ketchup packets float in space over the whole scene, disrupting the dimensions of the composition and providing a celebratory confetti effect. The traditional wedding scene depicts an immigrant culture, while the ketchup packets are reflective of an American culture. Viewing the piece as a whole, the painting reflects a completely new American immigrant culture in the consumerist age. Similar to Steen and Xiaodong's works, the painting captures a common scene to which we all can relate—going to a wedding—but the addition of the ketchup packets breaks the dimensional plane and creates a sensation that differs from the former artists.



Sopearb Touch, *American Wedding*, 2013

In the series, ...*Search for the Emerald Tablet*..., I investigate the search for spirituality and illumination in the internet/consumerist/global age through a humorous eye. This body of work is centered around characters, fictional and non-fictional, who attempt to find the emerald tablet of Thoth (Hermes Trismegistus), believing that it will provide illumination and happiness. The group thinks that the tablet is tangible and actually exists, but don't understand the metaphorical aspect of the writings. Still determined, nonetheless, they find themselves in very odd scenarios while attempting to find this text. The first painting in the series, *All Men Know What They Want, Few Know What They Need*, shows two figures in a food court setting watching a tagger hanging from a rope deface a Cobra (the foe from the G.I. Joe series) propaganda poster. Hermes Trismegistus, standing in between the tables, blatantly points to the Emerald Tablet but the two figures are too preoccupied with watching the tagger. The whole scene is a commentary on the distractions of reality that may hinder our goals. The series continues with *Supper Break at McDonald's Because Kali Wanted a Mcflurry*, where the Hindu goddess, Kali, is a member of one of the search parties but the search is halted when she demands supper at a local McDonald's. More wacky adventures occur in the painting *Arrival @ the Island of Dr. Doom*, in which a fleet of men and beasts are seen arriving close to an island. Three men are on a boat while two are swimming alongside them. The animals in the fleet include a white tiger, a crocodile, a hippopotamus, an eagle, and a whale. The scene captures the feeling of finally getting close to something, but not actually achieving an accomplishment. The final painting in the series, *Sacrifice at The Temple of Molech*, captures a sacrificial orgy scene at an altar of the god Molech. In the foreground are two shadowed figures, peeping toms, watching the scene while one is recording the sight on their cell phone. Throughout the whole series, I tried to capture a personal search for spirituality, as well as bringing to light the problems of

trying to decipher spiritual texts, which can be very archaic and are hard to align with our current lifestyles. This narrative body of work makes several references to contemporary culture, such as cell phones, politics, and consumerism. The juxtaposition of imagery creates an absurd story in which I pose problems that occur through the process of personal enlightenment.



Sopearb Touch, *All Men Know What They Want, Few Know What They Need*, 2013



Sopearb Touch, *Arrival @ the Island of Dr. Doom*, 2013



Sopearb Touch, *Sacrifice at the Temple of Molech*, 2013

CHAPTER 6: PYRAMIDS OF LIFE

Forrest Gump was wrong; life is like a pyramid, at least in its social construct. We all start off at the base of the pyramid, a leveled playing field, where we're all simply looking to survive and sustain our species. Then, we advance up the pyramid through a variety of ways. We take a step up to distinguish ourselves from other humans—whether through gender, race, religion or career; anything that will set us apart. Each step brings us to a new exclusion. Through these exclusions, we learn different things and gain an esoteric knowledge that isn't available on other levels of the pyramid. We constantly try to move up to gain more of this esoterica—and further exclusions ensue. The end goal is tip of the pyramid, the all-seeing eye. Who knows what goes on at the top? There's only room for a few. At the top, the overseer becomes gatekeeper, doing anything they can to stay on top. Once we reach the top, we then hop onto another pyramid, and the cycle begins again. Life is a conglomerate of pyramids that we climb. Just as a craftsman learns his trade, a boxer moving through the ranks, a Freemason passing through his degrees, a priest learning the priesthood, the goal is to climb pyramids, learn a certain knowledge or gain rank, and to conceal what you have learned from others—the profane—only exchanging ideas with those in the know.

Each level of the pyramid contains an exclusive set of information. But what is exclusive information? Isn't it just a hidden or alternate meaning? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines esoteric as “information only taught to or understood by members of a special group”¹⁵. While esoterica may not always be true, it's certainly exclusive. Each person perceives information in terms of their own experience. So, while this esoteric knowledge is perpetuated through pyramidal levels, we must look at the original source, which is every person's discrete

perception. What defines perceptions special enough to be perpetuated? In art school, students learn a special craft and set of theories; this information may not be limited to just art students, but it is certainly more accessible in that environment. Not many people on the street are frantically searching for, say, Baudrillard's essays or the perfect mixture for the color green. But on this level of the art school pyramid, students are exposed to and sometimes even forced to learn this kind of information. This is one way esoteric perception is perpetuated and disseminated. Students exposed to this knowledge may accept it, reject it, or get thrown into the abyss, but the sheer exposure makes this knowledge indelible and the initiation concludes.

This pyramid represents the perfect condition for the seed of separation to sprout. Marginalization may be drastic or mild, but a separation nevertheless occurs. Each level of the pyramid provides a new opportunity for distinction, and as a person climbs the pyramid they are both more intimately included and marginalized by their new experiences and knowledge. Since others on the lower levels will no longer understand or relate to them while they ascend, the person will seek peers on their level or above to confide in.

In my painting, *The Lesson of the Neophyte*, I make a commentary on how information is perceived, perpetuated, and translated. Based on Plato's allegory of the cave from *Republic*, and an engraving of the same name by Jan Saenredam, a scene of a cave dwelling and a puppet show is depicted. There are figures watching the casted shadows on the bottom left, while the puppeteers, separated by a wall, are elevated higher and have a source of light, a hanging fire, which creates the shadows for the puppet show. A pathway leads out of the cave to a sun-lit green pasture outside, juxtaposing the fire-lit cave dwelling. Two figures in the foreground, a man in a basketball jersey and a celestial starry figure, converse; the man in the basketball jersey hand gestures lead the viewer to believe he is talking, while the other figure listens with its arms

crossed. Through my perception, the allegory of the cave is a metaphor about information dissemination, its source and how we all individually perceive and understand it. The fire in the cave represents how man controls information exposure; the puppet show and puppeteers represent how this information is projected onto an audience through a medium by certain people who have the power and resources to do so; the exit from the cave leading to the pasture represents man's option to experience the world and nature for himself if he can make it out of the cave. The two figures conversing in the foreground represent how we critique this scenario of exchanging information between society among humans, but also how we each observe and explain our own personal perceptions.

What's this got to do with pyramids? Nothing. No wait everything. The audience, the puppeteers, and the conversing figures represent people on different levels of a pyramid. People who are on the receiving end of media and information, people who control media outlets, and people who critique the system are on different levels of society.



Sopearb Touch, *The Lesson of the Neophyte*, 2013



Jan Saenredam, *Plato's Allegory of the Cave*, 1604

CONCLUSION

Painting is so old that it has endured everything that any human has experienced. Regardless of the arguments if painting is dead, it still lingers around us everywhere just as air does. No matter what's hot in the art world, painting can play the side dish or the main course. Everybody has their own view of what painting is and what makes it good or bad. While it's impossible to erase painting's history, I still attempt to substitute its massive amount of baggage with my own experiences. My work is a testament, a biography, of what it is to be a painter in 2014—capturing the ambiance of the global and consumerist age through the lens of my own life.

America is an interesting place. It's the land of the free imprisoned by capitalism. It's where you can be homeless but still live better than those in a 3rd world country. It's the land of plastic crap and shitty health care. It's the most diverse melting pot on the earth tainted by never-ending racial tension. It's where equality is preached but not fully practiced. It's where the internet started. It's Steve Jobs. It's Martin Luther King. It's Bruce Lee. It's Monica Lewinsky. It's Wal-mart. It's the busted housing bubble. It's the land of loans. It's the Bohemian grove. It's overcrowded prisons. It's Sour Patch Kids. It's prescription drugs. It's the war on terror. It's Facebook. It's the American Dream. It's what I know. It's what I love. It's what I hate. It's what I am.

My whole human experience has been from an American standpoint. Yes, my parents are immigrants, but I have no idea what their home country was like. I pledged allegiance to the American flag every morning in kindergarten and asked my dad to buy me Tommy Hilfiger t-shirts. This American stance is translated into my work, from Barbie to the internet, and ultimately reflects a psychological ambivalence. While my paintings may be viewed as a critique

of American culture, they're also brazen celebrations of it. America is a deeply conflicted place: from the government to its citizens; consumerism versus transcendentalism; the media versus the wild frontier. All that said, it's also a place that provides unique opportunities to highlight these inner conflicts. My work is a mirror held up to the face of our country that can only be viewed through my personal binoculars. America is inscribed on my Tabula Rasa.

So the union of painting and the internet has provided tremendous opportunity for artists to create on a level that reflects the exponential influence of the internet. The internet is mass—mass that's constantly growing with any shit you can think of. It's the newest (and last) frontier and the gunslingers are the internet subscribers, the expedition sponsors are the corporations, the NSA. My art tells the story of a painter in the internet age.



Sopearb Touch, *Self Portrait*, 2013

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End Notes

¹ Eng, 134

² Aleister Crowley, Book of the Law, Book 1 page 40

³ Quote from the comments section, <http://www.booooooom.com/2014/01/28/artist-painter-andrew-patterson-tutschka/>

⁴ Aycock, 112

⁵ Stearns, ix

⁶ Transcript from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/426626>

⁷ Kellner, 233

⁸ Campbell, 36

⁹ Pratchenko, 2

¹⁰ Pratchenko, 2

¹¹ Robertson, 27

¹² Chapman, 7

¹³ Chapman, 11

¹⁴ Liu, 9

¹⁵ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/esoteric>