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# Interpreting the Theater of the Absurd: From Stage to Still Image

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# **Interpreting the Theater of the Absurd:**

## **From Stage to Still Image**

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### **Abstract**

This paper outlines my practice this semester, in which I attempted to interpret the Theater of the Absurd into the still image. This project relied heavily on research, both into the Theater of the Absurd and into specific artists, both past and present, who are in conversation with it. Here, I detail the work of these artists, their connections to theater, and connect it to the work I made in the process of this project.

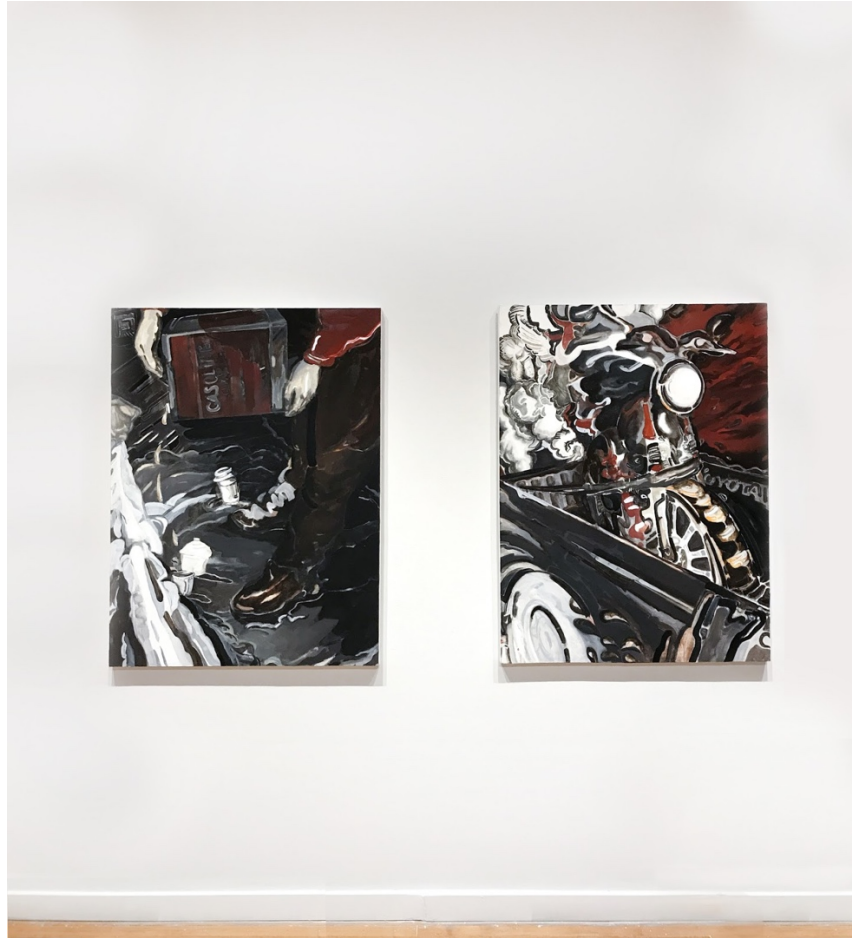


fig. 1: Clement Stanback, *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1* and *2*, 2018

I began with these two paintings, entitled *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1* and *2* but they are really the culmination and end-point of my practice this semester. Given the title of the paintings, it can be inferred that my practice has thus centered around an interest in the Theater of the Absurd. However, here I would like to also put a strong emphasis on the presence of ‘Interpretation’. It was the idea of interpretation that originally interested me and which truly acts as an umbrella, blanketing my exploration this semester. On the contrary, my interest in the Theater of the Absurd followed, becoming a doorway with which to actively explore the concept of interpretation.

The subtlety embedded within the definition of ‘interpretation’ is not usually perceived, and often is mistakenly equated and interchanged it with its counterpart, ‘translation’. Yet, while translation can be likened to quoting or imitation, interpretation has a level of inherent freedom greater than this, and, in contrast, can be likened to paraphrasing. This freedom forms a void in the act of interpretation; an empty space that lies in the midst of the action, a place upon which the artist or interpreter can wield their license.

Interpretation is often thought of as occurring within the confines of one discipline, such as the interpretation of one language to another while still remaining in the sphere of the written or spoken word. However, interpretation can also occur between disciplines, and can cross the boundaries of different art forms, say theater and painting, which I explore here. I find the space that exists amidst this kind of translation particularly intriguing. I believe studying this gap can shine light on an artist’s thought process and uncover both the careful and conscious decisions and unconscious reactions that went into the making of a painting.

Thus, my work this semester was centered around my own interpretation, from theater to painting. However, my practice also relied heavily on investigative and explorative elements, with which I looked both directly at the Theater of the Absurd and at other artists who have interpreted or been influenced (whether directly or indirectly) by the Theater of the Absurd.

The term ‘Theater of the Absurd’ is a designation for a group of plays made primarily in the late 1950’s. Samuel Beckett stands as the movement’s most iconic playwright, with *Waiting for Godot* being his best known work, however, also associated with the movement are Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Arthur Adamov, to only name a few. These playwrights wrote with WWII heavy on their mind, and thus their work is largely an evaluation of humanity and comment on the meaning of life, or lack thereof. Running through the work of the Theater of the

Absurd are strong ideas of existentialism, which gave the work its dark and nihilistic tone.

(Esslin)

I felt as though the structure of the Theater of the Absurd made its potential for interpretation particularly interesting. The movement is defined by specific themes, such as futility and isolation, and specific characteristics, such as anti-narrative and anti-character. (Zhu)

The specificity of these two groups provided me with a palpable structure on which to build an image. However, the philosophical veins and existentialist thought that underpinned the Theater of the Absurd are just as important in its interpretation. These give it its unique tone and tendencies, such as its dark humor, confusing plots, anxiety and sense of impending doom. My goal was to preserve these deeper, more abstract, layers of the Theater of the Absurd in the process of interpretation as well.

The first step I took in the construction of images, however, focused on the theme of futility. Futility is at the core of The Theater of the Absurd, and is the focus of *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus, the philosopher who first coined the term ‘absurd’. In this essay, Camus tells of the legend of Sisyphus, who angered the Gods and was punished for eternity. His punishment is the essence of futility; he was tasked with pushing a boulder up a mountain, and, upon reaching the top, it would roll down again, and the process would continue in a circular manner. (Esslin)

Like the legend of Sisyphus, I wanted to place futility as the images’ heart, as if a story had been boiled down to a simple, yet never ending action. When considering how to approach this I looked to the work of Dana Schutz, in particular *Smoking, Swimming, Crying*.



fig. 2: Dana Schutz, *Smoking, Swimming, Crying*, 2009

Illustrating the simultaneously nonsensical and futile attempt to smoke a cigarette while swimming, this piece captured both a level of futility and absurdism in a clear manner, placing the action large and central in the composition. I was drawn to the work both for its simplicity, and for the fact that it managed to retain both humor and tension despite this.

With this work in mind, I created a series of digital collages constructed using my own photographs, found images and digital manipulation. Each is based on the themes and characteristics of the Theater of the Absurd, for example, each piece is built with a futile action at its core.



fig. 3: Clement Stanback, *Digital Collage (#1-6)*, 2018

Illustrated in the images are:

1. A biker whose motorcycle is stuck in a truck
2. A girl attempting to hide when she is being watched from all sides
3. A man pouring gasoline into a teacup on a windy day
4. A girl juggling precious items while laying on a stove burner
5. A man trying to light a cigarette with a fan too close beside him
6. A boy trying to eat ramen and it instead falling nonsensically



Although the work has thematic similarities, my digital collages diverge from *Smoking, Swimming, Crying* in one fundamental way. Dana Schutz emphasizes the figure in her work by centralizing its face, and thus the action only exists in relation to the character and its emotions. Considering the Theater of the Absurd, I instead obscured the figure, never showing its face. By doing so, I intend to deny each figure depth or detail beyond their form and current action, thus making futility the true subject. This decision was in consideration of the Theater of the Absurd and the ‘anti-character’. This refers to the lack of characterization throughout many plays in the genre, which was accomplished by use of incoherent, detached language and actors’ unpredictable personalities on stage. The ‘anti-character’ played a part in both the lighter, comedic side of the Theater of the Absurd as well as accentuating the genre’s darker themes, such as isolation resulting from a lack of consistency and connection. (Zhu)

Nicole Eisenman, another artist who can be regarded as a contemporary ‘absurdist’, employs a similar lack of characterization at times. This can be seen in her work *Long Distance*, in which she has painted a couple communicating over a screen.



fig. 4: Nicole Eisenman, *Long Distance*, 2015

While half of the figure's face on the screen is visible, the figure who sits in front of it has their back turned completely away from the viewer. Not only does this create isolation between the viewer and the figures, it also emphasizes the isolation between the figures themselves that has originally been introduced by the screen. It can also be said that by obfuscating the figures, the painting is no longer about them but simply about the act of communicating over a screen.

By conflating isolation and the screen, Nicole Eisenman tactfully presents isolation through a contemporary lens as well. (Smith) The inclusion of modern day objects and technology strengthens Eisenman's work by stressing the temporal side of her reinterpretation and making the theme of isolation more relatable to today's audience. In *Digital Collage #2*, *#4* and *#6*, I attempt to relate to the viewer in a similar vein with the inclusion of present-day items

that reference pertinent areas of discussion in America today. For example, the drone in the upper right corner of *Digital Collage #2* comments on surveillance and privacy in our culture today. However, the influence of Nicole Eisenman can be seen most directly in *Digital Collage #4*, in which I have illustrated a girl whose face is half hidden by the remote she holds, signaling her simultaneous reliance and control over the screen. Her isolation is not simply the result of technology, but a product of her own volition.



fig. 5: Clement Stanback, *Digital Collage #4*, 2018

There is a comedic and mocking tone to Nicole Eisenman's work as well. Yet, in works such as *Long Distance*, the humor is not inherent to the scene or act portrayed. Rather, it is her absurdly simplified, cartoonish way of representation that creates this reaction. Likewise, it is

often Dana Schutz's unique, animated style that creates her tone, which is so essential to the work. With this recognition, I realized my collages needed a level of removal from reality, one that only comes from the hand of the artist and their reinterpretation.

I began to draw and redraw select colleges, trying different illustration methods and levels of simplification in mark. I experimented with the styles of specific artists as well, such as Albrecht Durer, Martin Disteli and Thomas Rowlandson. I believed illustration could help my work diverge from the rationale of reality and bring it into its own absurd world. Although not wanting to fully enter the realm of the cartoon, I wanted to adopt some of the characteristics often associated with it, such as an unnatural curvature and exaggerated sense of momentum and movement.

These sketches vary in size, level of completion and medium. I experimented with graphite, ink, charcoal, watercolor, acrylic, as well as re-sketching many of the collages digitally using Photoshop. Below are pictured a selection of my sketches from this semester. While these can be considered as some my most finalized sketches, they maintain a range of mediums, mark-making and sizes.



fig. 6: Clement Stanback, *Untitled (Digital Sketch)*, 2018



fig. 7: Clement Stanback, *Untitled (Sketch #1)*, 2018





fig. 8: Clement Stanback, *Untitled (Sketch #2)*, 2018



fig. 9: Clement Stanback, *Untitled (Sketch #3)*, 2018



fig. 10: Clement Stanback, *Untitled (Sketch #4-6)*, 2018

It is my interest in illustration and the cartoon and their convergence with painting that directed me to Philip Guston. Guston was said to look towards the cartoon Krazy Kat for inspiration for his paintings, which, in his later years, took a dramatic turn and delved into their own cartoon aesthetic. (Ashton) The role of the ‘cartoon’ in Guston’s paintings is a curious one. Although his bulbous, often infantile representation of figures and objects can be seen as humorous in one light, there is also an undeniable darkness in their expression. Guston’s mark making is brute, seemingly charged by frustration or anger. The emotion behind his hand combined with his choice of caricature and animated forms gives way to a dark humor that is paramount to Guston’s body of work. A similar conflation of comedy and tragedy is essential to the Theater of the Absurd as well. (Lavery)

Further connections can be drawn between Guston and the Theater of the Absurd when looking closer at how Guston chooses to represent himself. Below is shown a self-portrait by

Guston entitled *Painting, Smoking, Eating*, a painting Dana Schutz directly references with the title of her piece *Smoking, Swimming, Crying*.



fig. 11: Philip Guston, *Painting, Smoking, Eating*, 1972

While I chose to simplify my figures by removing the heads, Guston here has chosen to reduce the figure to solely a head. The head, as well, is simplified, and maintains a bulbous and exaggerated quality that is constant throughout his work. It has simply become a sphere with one eye, an eyebrow, and the idea of an ear. While such simplification is present in comics, it also can be connected to the work of Samuel Beckett. In the play *The Unnamable*, the narrator is unsure of the nature of his embodiment and, yet, characterizes himself as almost a featureless



sphere. When describing his head he says, “no, no beard, no hair either, it is a great smooth ball I carry on my shoulders, featureless, but for the eyes, of which only the sockets remain”. (Fifield)

Gustons’ work, even with its strong connection to the ‘comic’, does not beg to be read in the same linear nature. Although characters and symbols often remain present from one painting to the next, the paintings are contained within the frames of their canvas, and each remains as a moment or situation distinct from its predecessor. (Ashton) Through the repetition that he does include, Guston builds a new world and language with which that world operates, yet there is no attempt to form sequential events, and thus his body of work can be likened to the Theater of the Absurd and its ‘anti-narrative’ nature:

The Theater of the Absurd is a theater of situation in contrast to the more conventional theater of sequential events. In traditional theater, a clear beginning and ending is recognizable. An Absurdist play, however, starts at an arbitrary point and seems to end as arbitrarily. The primary concern is not to tell a story, to narrate the adventures of fate of characters or to communicate a moral, so the action does not go from point A to point B but there is rather a gradual unfolding of a complex pattern. The Theater of the Absurd is rather concerned with the illustration of one individual’s basic situation; it presents a pattern of poetic images and shows the situation into which man is ‘thrown’ – hopeless and without resort. Nothingness, unresolved mysteries, emptiness and absence are characteristic features of Absurdist plots. (Kroger)

*Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, perhaps the most iconic work of the Theater of the Absurd, epitomizes this endless situation. The play revolves around two characters waiting for

the unknown Godot, a hopeless act as he never comes, and thus the play can be seen as static in its state. Similarly, the artist Francis Bacon stresses situation over narrative in his work. In an interview on the exhibit *Francis Bacon: Invisible Rooms* at the Tate Liverpool, Francesco Manacorda, the museum's former director, speaks of Bacon and narrative:

He abhors the idea of narrative in painting — being able to describe something taking place. Even when I talk about theatricality, there's this tension of theatricality without resolution. There's never a dramatic development. His works are almost like a stop-frame image from a film — a teaser — that doesn't let you see what's going on. (Waters)

Looking at Francis Bacon's work overall, specific aspects of his paintings' construction remain constant, and he continuously presents a figure or form within the confines of a suggested stage. The stage is built using simple lines, and they often become eerie, empty spaces only hinting at an interior or domestic space. However, not only does the work of Bacon suggest the stage or theater, it can be directly linked to the movement of the Theater of the Absurd and the work of Samuel Beckett:

Both Bacon and Beckett have chosen a remarkably similar subject matter for their 'impossible' works, as if they were convinced that none other is possible for today's artist: that of the living reality of human beings, unadorned portraits of the human presence. More often than not, these figures are presented alone, and they are frequently situated in a room. Most of them do not seem to be undergoing any specific, identifiable crisis, yet in their stark solitude they all seem beset by what Henry Geldzahler has

identified (in Bacon's work) as "a haunting series of circumstances, dire and non-specific." (Hale)

Francis Bacon was a contemporary of Samuel Beckett, both working simultaneously and completing the majority of their known works in the mid 1900's. (Hale) While the dark atmosphere of the time and recent occurrence of WWII shaped the work of both these figures, creating similarities in theme and representation between them, their work also comes together in an even more specific and tangible manner.



fig. 12: Winnie in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*



fig. 13: Francis Bacon, *Studies of the Human Body*, 1970



fig. 13: Clement Stanback, *Digital Collage #6*, 2018

The first two images pictured above are a triptych by Francis Bacon, entitled *Studies of the Human Body*, 1970, and a picture from a performance of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* in which the main character, Willie, smiles as she holds her umbrella despite being buried up to her waist and immobile, a predicament that stretches across the play's plot. It is clear that visual elements remain constant between the two, such as the umbrella central to the composition, depiction of desolate landscape, and the deconstruction of the figure. While Beckett denies Willie a lower half to her form, Bacon obscures the head of his figure in the center panel using the umbrella.

Although I depict a vastly different scene in *Digital Collage #6*, which is an image and situation of my own making, I also chose to use an umbrella as a key component of the piece. Like Beckett and Bacon, I use it to alter the portrayal and interpretation of my figure. As previously discussed, by hiding my figure's head, I deny them a personality or depth beyond their form.

In my final works, *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1* and *2*, I attempt to go beyond simply portraying the general themes or characteristics of the Theater of the Absurd, such as the 'anti-character' and 'anti-narrative'. Instead, I focused on capturing its more abstract qualities, those that manifest in the viewer's experience, such as its suspenseful tone, dark humor and purposeful confusion.

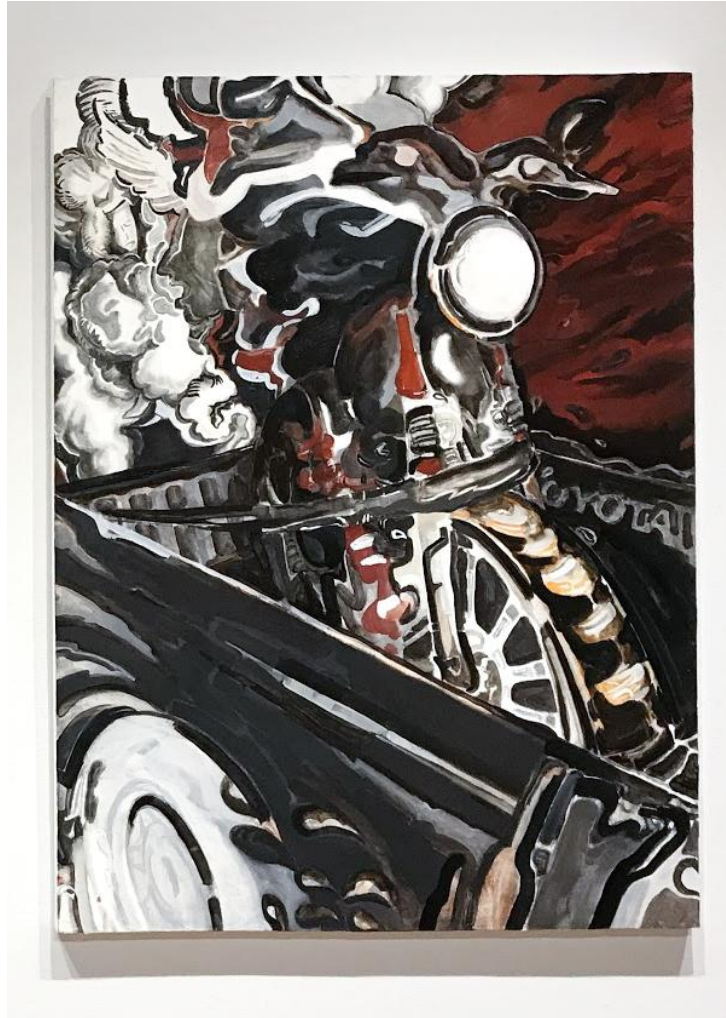


fig 14: Clement Stanback, *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1*, 2018



fig 15: Clement Stanback, *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 2*, 2018

*Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1 and 2* depict the same scene as *Digital Collage #1* and *#3*. However, I believe they have begun to greater capture these abstract qualities as they have moved away from these original, source images. Like many of my sketches, these paintings were made only in reference to previous sketches, not in reference to the original collage. This allowed me a greater freedom in my paintings, and I changed them in significant ways to more closely align with the Theater of the Absurd.

For example, I chose a darker palette for these two paintings that reflected the dark, apocalyptic atmosphere associated with the Theater of the Absurd. Greatly influencing this palette was my use of black and preservation of the black line that was the construct of my

sketches. My sketches are also preserved by the variety of marks present in the paintings, many of which were carried over from specific sketches experimenting with different mark-making styles. For example, you can see in both *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1* and 2 that some marks are deliberately loose and organic while some remain small and more precise. In addition, the rendering of the smoke in *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1* was greatly influenced by sketches I had done exploring line in the etchings of Albrecht Durer.

The different treatment of areas within each painting also helps me further abstract the original image and cloud the action and scene it portrays. Besides mark-making, I chose to use values of high contrast when rendering specific areas or objects. The areas or objects with which I do this are often unexpected or irrational, such as the back tire in the lower left corner of *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1*. If I had approached the image rationally, the back tire would be rendered in a darker value as it sits back in space. However, here I only sparingly rendered the canvas, leaving it almost pure white. The spatial dislocation, density, and variety of marks come together to create a chaotic composition that captures the confusion of the Theater of the Absurd.

The claustrophobic compositions of *Interpretation of the Theater of the Absurd 1* and 2 can be likened to the work of Max Beckmann, specifically *Acrobats*, on display at the Saint Louis Art Museum. While Beckmann largely uses a myriad of figures to build density and anxiety in his work, this is also done through his complication of the physical space and, at times, irrational construction of setting. (Smee)



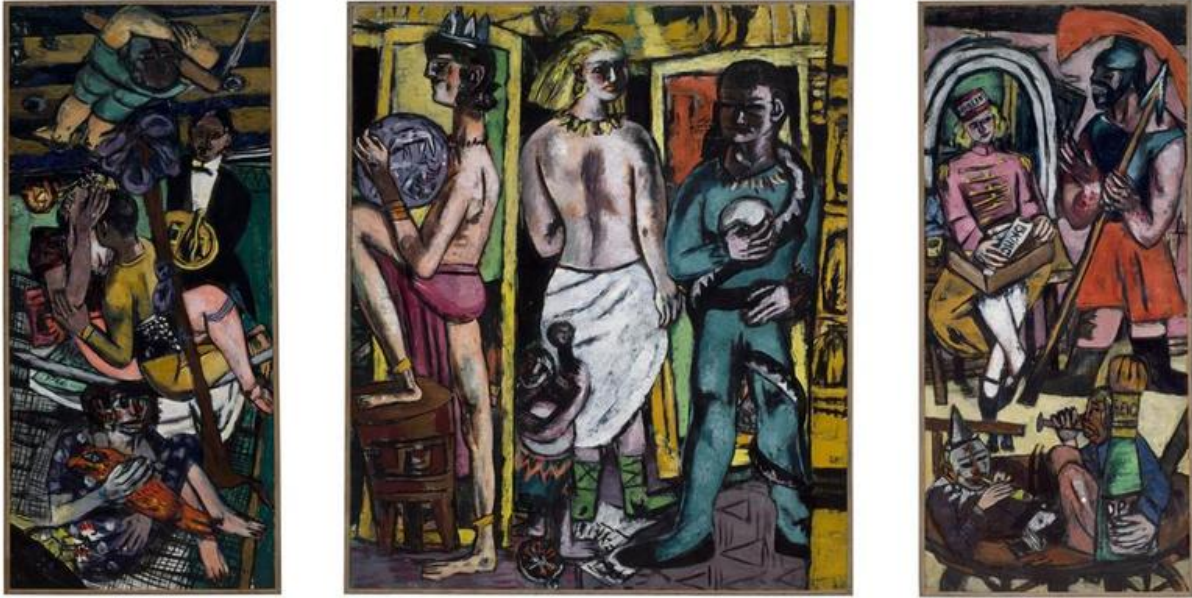


fig. 16: Max Beckmann, *Acrobats*, 1939

In this triptych, Beckmann portrays three different scenes from multiple different perspectives, each occurring in a different frame. While the viewer looks straight on in the center panel, the left panel looks down on the figures portrayed. Even as the birds eye view here suggests depth, the space in this panel, like the others, manages to remain flat. It is as if Beckmann is painting figures upon a stage, and his characters have been pushed up into one, front plane, the construction of space behind them acting only as a facade. The connection between Beckmann and the theater is well noted. An exhibition of his work, entitled *Max Beckmann: World Theater*, was on display even this past February in Germany at the Kunsthalle Bremen. (Dege)

Similar to my work as well, Beckman uses both a dark underground and black outlines overtop, as if from a drawing. Again, this upsets the rational depiction of space as black is so

dark in value and usually is kept to depict the recession of space. Thus, it is also often used only in one area, such as the background, and not overall in the composition.

While the Theater of the Absurd is a movement somewhat resigned to the past, its plays continue to be reimagined and restaged. With each new rendition, life is breathed into this 'old' movement and it continues on as a movement of the present. Similarly, the work of Dana Schutz and Nicole Eisenman are reshaping the absurd within painting, giving it a contemporary twist and relevance. Looking to both past and present artists, I hope to extend the conversation of the absurd as well, while also emphasizing the rich conversation that occurs between art forms, such as theater and painting. Although not always acknowledged, artists, writers and creatives continue to influence each other across the boundaries of their respective disciplines, and there exists a quiet but rich exchange of ideas in the webbing.

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