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THE ILLUSION OF ART: MY AMALGAMATION OF ILLUSTRATION AND CONTEMPORARY ART

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 1997

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Art
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Drawing on archetypical aspects of human characteristics and personalities, I create images that illustrate our connection to memory, media, and culture. My work is informed by pop culture, including television, movies, cartoons and comic books as it relates to characters in our own physical world and society. The grid is used to represent both childhood games and the frames of a comic strip, where each panel equals an exact moment of time.

For Me-Linh & Lucas and Mom & Dad

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I would like to thank my family for their incredible support and patience over the years, particularly my beautiful boy, Lucas, and my parents, Victor and Carmen.

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INTRODUCTION

The three (*four*, actually) years of graduate school have been a time of learning, creativity, and self-discovery. It has also been time of frustration, resistance, and self-doubt. Going into the program, I considered myself foremost an illustrator and graphic designer. That is what I do for a living, and that has been what I have done all my life. I never had any aspirations of being a contemporary artist whose work hangs in Chelsea, nor did I have any desire to be an artist whose work relies mainly on concept. Usually the reason people enjoy my work is because they like the way I draw– they enjoy looking at how I construct figures and objects using pencil, pen, or the computer. And I was okay with that. I still am.

Once in the program, however, I was exposed to the world of contemporary art and a variety of artists and works, many of whom I had never heard of. I was introduced to the toothpaste paintings of Tom Friedman; the breast-milk-squirting anime girl of Takashi Murakami; the self-inflicted gunshot wound of Chris Burden; the TV set creatures of Nam June Paik; the smooth, reflective sculptures of Anish Kapoor; the freaky films of Matthew Barney; and the creepy projections of Chris Oursler. I found myself roaming the streets of Chelsea and reading a book by Jerry Saltz. So, had my mindset changed? Somewhat.

I approach this thesis as a monograph of sorts, chronicling my time and work in the graduate program. I will highlight some of the works I created as a graduate student and explore the choices I made along with the reasoning behind them. Hopefully this

will give the reader, and myself, a glimpse into my development as an artist, contemporary or otherwise.

INFLUENCES AND INSPIRATIONS

I am the youngest of four and the only son in a Puerto Rican family. My American friends consider me Hispanic, and my Hispanic friends consider me Americanized, so it always seems as if I am on the outside of both cultures. I have never been the outdoorsy type, nor have I ever been particularly athletic. While my friends were outside playing soccer or baseball, I spent most of my childhood by myself, hunched over a drawing lapboard in front of the television or reading comic books. I was never really into imageless novels but I have always been interested in the story-telling mediums such as cartoons, movies, and graphic novels. The fantasy worlds of Jedi knights and caped heroes fueled my imagination. My first drawings were of Superman, Spider-man, Disney cartoons, and space ships. The illustrations of Jack Kirby, John Romita, Jose Luis Garcia Lopez, and Dan Decarlo would enthrall me for hours on end. I would even create my own comic books inspired by the characters I loved.

These habits have not changed too much in adulthood. While I am somewhat more outgoing and physically active than I was as a kid, I still spend much of my time watching movies and cartoons, reading comic books, or hunched over the same drawing lapboard. So it is understandable that my art is inspired and reflects what I immerse myself in: movies, sequential art, animation, celebrities, technology, and music.

Having a background in illustration and design, illustrators and designers play a large part in the pool of artists from whom I draw inspiration. Artists such as Gary Baseman, Tim Biskup, and Chris Ware, who have smudged the lines between editorial illustration, graphic design, and contemporary art, are big influences on my work.

Contemporary artists such as Laylah Ali, Marcel Dzama, and Yoshitomo Nara, as well as graffiti artists such as Barry “Twist” McGee and Keith Haring, also serve as great sources of inspiration.

Like me, each of these artists’ works is rooted in popular culture. Bright, colorful creatures and masked humanoids are commonplace as subject matter. Laylah Ali’s pieces are full of masked, round-headed, cartoonish characters wearing capes, flying, or breaking chains. Marcel Dzama’s drawings bring to life costumed avengers intermingling with cowboys. Yoshitomo Nara’s work often consists of a little girl character inspired by the female fans of The Ramones.

However, while on the surface the artwork may look simple and childlike, each artist uses these simple images to create a more convoluted world that echoes the complex world we live in: Ali’s round-headed figures speak of racism and oppression; Dzama’s characters, while steeped in Canadian folklore, resonate today’s violent society; and Nara’s cutesy characters give insight to an oftentimes troubled youth culture.

EARLY GRADUATE WORK

The year before I entered the graduate program was one of my most successful years as an illustrator: I had just completed illustrating several children's books for a major educational publisher, I designed and animated several interactive games for a high-profile multi-media company, and I became a published author after the release of my first book on the subject of creating graphic novels. I was receiving a steady flow of work and I began to be associated with a particular aesthetic style. The bulk of my work graced products geared towards children and young teens and my tool of choice was *Adobe Illustrator*, a vector-drawing program that allows me to create clean, flat images (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1:
Illustration from book, Zoomates
(Digital; 2002)

Figure 2:
Illustration from book, Zoomates
(Digital; 2002)

However, the more I refined the style and made it my own, the more I missed working in more traditional methods. The coldness of the computer left me wanting to work with more tactile mediums. Therefore, one of my initial goals for the graduate program was to create works removed from the computer. I would use pen and paper, watercolor and acrylics to produce the bulk of my art.

The first semester was a time of exploration. I wasn't quite sure yet exactly what my graduate work would consist of. Should I continue creating illustrations or should I try my hand at contemporary art? The program seemed to be focused more on conceptual over applied arts, so I felt undecided as to which path to take. I figured the best thing to do is to start creating *something* and seeing where it took me.

I once described my mind as one of those old Hollywood back lot scenes from the 40s and 50s, where different movie characters in full costume are hanging out having lunch together waiting for their callbacks. There's a cowboy from an old western having

a conversation with a Roman Centurion, or an Egyptian slave sharing a drink with a green alien from Mars! These are the characters I like to draw and I thought this would be a good place to start. I scoured the Internet and television for interesting character images, focusing on characters that could be considered "every day" personalities, as opposed to fantastical characters. I quickly settled on the movie staples of cops and gangsters. The images on which I based *"Portrait of a Cop"* (Figure 3) and *"Lefty"* (Figure 4) immediately struck me because of the police officer's uniform and the almost stereotypical garb the gangster (Al Pacino in character for the film *Donnie Brasco*) wore.

Figure 3:
Portrait of a Cop
(Ink and Digital Color; 2004)

Figure 4:
Lefty
(Pencil and Ink; 2004)

I approached these initial images almost as exercises to get my creative juices going and they served as a springboard for most of the graduate work that followed.

THE GRID

After these initial drawings, I began to experiment deeper with mediums. Inspired by the paintings of Gary Baseman, whose works often consist of bizarre characters in surreal settings, I began to paint characters on 8-inch x 8-inch store-bought canvases. These paintings, among them *Island Guitarist* (Figure 6) and *The Commuter* (Figure 7), were reminiscent of gag panels in the newspaper comics page. Sometimes they were funny, sometimes they contained a pun, but they were always cartoony.

Figure 5:
Island Guitarist
(Acrylic on Canvas; 2004)

Figure 6:
The Commuter
(Acrylic on Canvas; 2004)

I then created several of these small canvas paintings and grouped them into one large work. The piece, called *Channel Surfing* (Figure 8), consisted of twenty 8-inch x 8-inch canvases grouped together in a grid, four canvases wide and five canvases deep. Each canvas consisted of a single character, white with black outlines, on a solid background colored yellow, green, red, or blue. The idea for which characters I painted developed as I channel surfed on the television over the course of a weekend. As certain characters on TV caught my eye, I would write their names down on a sheet of paper. Later, I painted the characters on the canvases. In this format, the work took on a look reminiscent of games such as *Concentration*, a *Rubik's Cube,* or a tile puzzle. The

response to this first piece was favorable and the grid quickly became a recurring motif in my work.

Figure 7:
Channel Surfing
(Acrylic on Canvas; 2004)

After creating *Channel Surfing*, I knew I had touched on something new and interesting with my art, but I struggled with where to take it. I didn't want to repeat myself, but wanted to continue the use of the grid. I experimented with making the

individual canvases relate to each other more, as in *Versus* (Figure 9), which is comprised of six canvases aesthetically similar to *Channel Surfing*. This time, the canvases were broken into three sets of two and grouped according to the images that represent each other's nemesis. For instance, the image of a cat was paired with that of a dog. While this work was similar to *Channel Surfing*, it lacked any real substance behind it besides its obvious gimmick.

Figure 8:
Versus
(Acrylic on Canvas; 2005)

At the same time I was creating work for the MFA program, I was still taking on freelance illustration jobs in order to make ends meet. Having to create art for both school and clients, combined with working a forty-hour week as a designer, was beginning to take its toll on me creatively. What I really hoped to do is find a way to combine my graduate and freelance illustration work. I decided my course of action would be to harvest images I had already created for my next piece.

Part of my process of creating illustrations consists of drawing the same image repeatedly until I am happy with the drawing. As a result, I often have dozens of sketches of a single character in slightly different poses, styles, and mediums. Upon realizing this, I cut these sketches into 5-inch x 5-inch squares and framed them until I had thirty frames in all. Still keeping with the grid motif, I hung them on the wall five frames across and six frames tall (although this piece would later grow to a total of 36 frames), resulting in a work titled *"Attention Span"* (Figure 10). Whereas *"Channel Surfing"* was about my lack of focus while watching television, *"Attention Span"* dealt with my obsession drawing the same thing over and over and over again.

"Attention Span" is what I consider is my *"Eureka!"* piece; the work where I felt the concept of why I create what I create was finally coming to light. Finally I was developing a style that fed off my illustration work and served as an amalgamation between my illustration work and work that fit into the contemporary art world.

Figure 9:
Attention Span
(Mixed Media; 2005)

OBJECTS AND BRANDING

In the middle of my second year, I created a brand featuring original characters, including t-shirts, buttons, lampshades, window clings, clocks, and plush figures. At the time I felt it was the natural progression of my work. I had just completed the piece called *"State of Heads"* (Figure 10), which consisted of 25 canvases hung in a grid layout and *"Broken Heroes"* (Figure 11), which was comprised of a grouping of four canvases.

Figure 10:
State of Heads
(Inkjet on Canvas; 2005)

Like *"Channel Surfing,"* each canvas of both pieces contained white-colored characters on solid backgrounds, also inspired by images and characters I saw on television. This

time, however, instead of painting it in acrylic, I drew the characters on paper, scanned the drawings into the computer, and printed them on canvas that I stretched over a frame. The stretched color canvas wrapped around the frame, so that the color progressed around the edges. I constructed them this way because I felt it emphasized my view that each canvas was an individual object as opposed to just a painted surface.

Figure 11:
Broken Heroes
(Inkjet on Canvas; 2005)

This took me to what I believed was the next logical step to my work: actually creating objects of my work. Inspired by the designer toy craze, I set out to create a brand of characters and objects to put them on (Figures 12-19). Not knowing exactly how to sew or sculpt, I teamed with people who were able to take my character designs and make them into plush figures and sculptures. While the response was mostly favorable, the character line did not reach a level of originality I was happy with. It seemed that I was merely regurgitating what others had done before me and was not creating something original. I also did not feel as if I had control of how things would turn out, so I took a hiatus from creating the characters until I can create a design that is unique to me. I hope to revisit this in the future.

Figure 12:
Clopsie
(Felt and flannel stuffed with cotton; 2006)

Figure 13:
Clopsies
(Felt and flannel stuffed with cotton; 2006)

Figure 14:
Alberto
(Felt and flannel stuffed with cotton; 2006)

Figure 15:
Augie
(Felt and flannel stuffed with cotton; 2006)

Figure 16:
Popsie Group Clock
(2006)

Figure 17:
Alberto Popsie Clock
(2006)

Figure 18:
Broken Hero Clock
(2006)

Figure 19:
Popsie Sculpt
(Painted clay over armature; 2006)

THE THESIS SHOW

The final MFA thesis show quickly came upon us. When it came time to choose the work to include in it, I realized that it mostly needed to be new work. I would be displaying in an area larger than any I had displayed in before and I wanted to be able to fill it.

I was assigned a large wall in the gallery and quickly decided that I would attempt to expand on my previously created work, "*Attention Span*," and fill it up with small, 5-inch x 5-inch squares of drawings I scavenged from my sketchbooks. The gallery walls are carpeted and I knew from previous experience showing there that the small frames used in "*Attention Span*" would prove difficult to hang, especially in a grid format. Upon the suggestion of a classmate, I decided to mount the images on lightweight ¾-inch black foam core and Velcro each piece to the wall. Since the mounting would cause it to look different than "*Attention Span*," this piece became a new work. The plan was to cover the wall with six rows of forty images totaling 240 squares, although this layout quickly changed upon installation. Once in the gallery, it became obvious that the intended layout did not achieve the imposing look I envisioned. Instead, it became a more organic grid, breaking free of the cold rectangle. I called the work "*Pieces of People We Love*" (Figures 20 and 21).

Figure 20:
Pieces of People We Love
(Mixed Media; 2007)

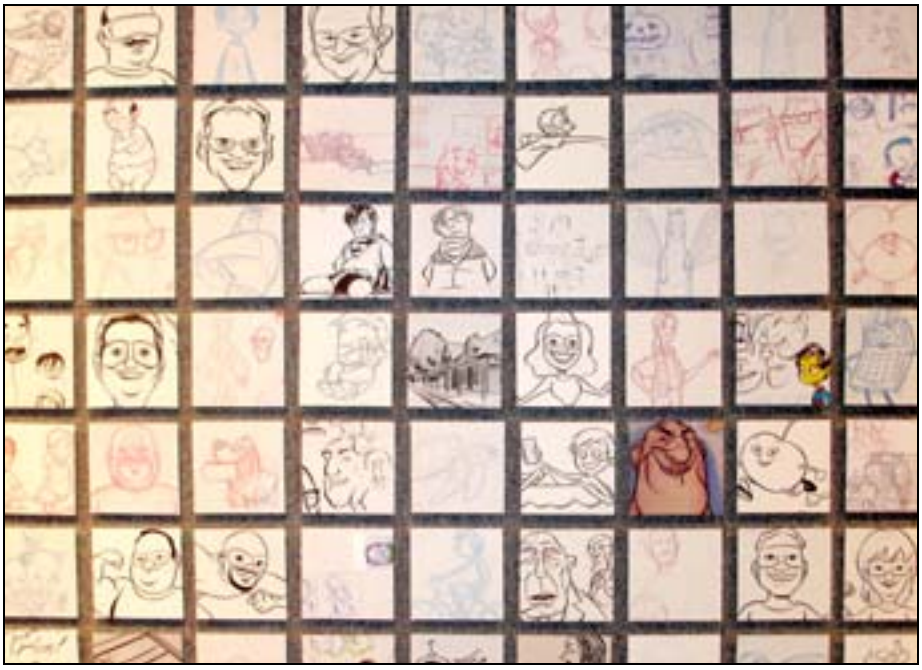

Figure 21:
Pieces of People We Love (Detail)
(Mixed Media; 2007)

Upon seeing the small pieces sprawled out on the wall, I suddenly felt very exposed. I realized that this particular work, and "*Attention Span*" before it, reveals more about me than I was prepared for. Somehow, looking at it felt as if I were giving the world a peek into a diary of sorts. Both pieces consist of sketches I never intended to show anyone. Now, I had exposed the good and the bad of my work for all to see.

Another new piece I created for the show was a series of drawings again inspired by images I saw while watching television. For "*Stuck In A Moment You Can't Get Out Of*" (Figure 22), I decided to continue with a traditional medium and created it with pencil and markers. The colorful figures centered on the paper also gave it an appearance reminiscent of animation cells, which reinforced the idea that the images were inspired by popular media.

Figure 22:
Stuck In A Moment You Can't Get Out Of
(Pencil, Ink, Marker; 2007)

Along similar lines I created the piece "*The Execution of All Things*" (Figure 23). Like "*Stuck In A Moment,*" "*Execution*" was created traditionally with pencil, acrylic, and watercolor. However, "*Execution*" is not as polished as "*Stuck In A Moment.*" By using the acrylic paint and roughening the paper with an eraser, I created a texture on the paper that I usually reserve for my sketchbook.

Figure 23:
The Execution Of All Things
(Pencil, Ink, Watercolor; 2007)

Finally, rounding off the new pieces created for the thesis show are *"My Old Friend"* (Figure 24) and *"Oh Well"* (Figure 25). Each piece was created by stuffing canvas with cotton and painting the surface. I created these figures to act as a bridge between the drawings and the plush figures I intend to continue with.

Figure 24:
My Old Friend
(Acrylic and Marker on Stuffed Canvas; 2007)

Figure 25:
Oh Well
(Acrylic and Marker on Stuffed Canvas; 2007)

CONCLUSION

They say hindsight is 20/20, and it certainly applies to my 3+ years in the graduate program. Many times I questioned whether I should even stay in the program or if I even need an MFA degree. Now that it is over, however, I am proud that I was able to stick to it and see it through. I have learned a lot about different aspects of the art world, what it takes to put on a show, and about myself as an artist. I have also been able to study with great artists, both teachers and students, and have had the opportunity to see them in action working on their art. I've been inspired by my time here more than I anticipated I would be. I'm not sure if I have been a great student or even if I took advantage of the time as much as I could have, but I'm proud of the work I've done and the work ethic I've exhibited.