

## THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF NARRATIVE

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina  
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Studio  
Art.

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April 2019

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my loving, supportive wife Anna Skinner for whom this graduate degree would not be possible. Without her encouragement I might never have submitted an application to the WCU masters program, and once accepted into the program, her double-duty as mother and sounding board for my many artistic quandaries allowed me to persevere and find my direction over the last three years.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Ron Laboray, Tom Ashcraft and Matt Liddle whose guidance and friendship during my time at WCU has been invaluable- and though she's not officially on my committee, I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. Karen Britt who generously gave of her time and intellect in the service of this thesis paper.

Lastly I would like to thank all the other graduate students in the MFA program and the faculty who helped make my time at Western so rewarding. I will remember you fondly.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF NARRATIVE

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In her essay “On Narrativity in the Visual Field: A Psychoanalytic View of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*,” Efrat Biberman asks: “Does narrativity by definition contradict visuality, and if so, why is it so prevalent in the context of painting?” (*Narrative* 14.3 (2006): 237-253, at 237) As one of the primary objectives of my painting is eliciting narrative potential through my images, the question of whether a visual experience is compatible with narrativity—something typically associated with the more temporal tradition of literature—is particularly relevant to my work and thus forms the subject of my critical essay. My initial investigations into narratology and the theories of Roland Barthes and Gerald Prince make clear that the concepts of narrativity are applicable not solely to the written word, but also to the visual arena. As Marie-Laure Ryan writes in her essay “The Modes of Narrativity and Their Visual Metaphors,” “reconstructing the plot is as fundamental to the understanding of the narrative text as identifying the depicted object is to the mental processing of a representational artwork.” (*Style* 26.3, (1992): 368-387 at 370) Concepts such as the micro-narrative and the macro-narrative, as discussed in Ryan’s piece, speak to the subjectivity by which viewers decipher narratives found in a work of art and touch upon one of the foundational impulses behind the art-making process throughout human history.

As a painter, the *act* of painting is integral to the process of discovery that occurs as I find my way to a finished composition. My recent body of work is primarily figurative, though the figures exist in an ambiguous picture plane along with abstract patterns, scrawled text and gestural marks that trace the evolution of the final image. I often work in the diptych format, echoing the panels found in comics and graphic novels and referencing both the passage of time and a binary narrative relationship. The figures that inhabit my paintings are based on personal and historical photographs and, recently, video stills taken with my phone. The relationship between photography and painting as exemplified by artists such as Luc Tuymans, Gerhard Richter, and Peter Doig has opened a direction for experimentation: by enlarging images found in photographs and rendering them in paint on canvas, the photographed moment is re-contextualized as a work of art directly linked to the figurative tradition of painting, and quite literally given new life through the act of painting, divorced from mechanical methods. The image has been transformed through the artist's particular handling of paint, and given meaning through the simple fact of having been selected from innumerable choices. The images that I arrive at in my paintings suggest narratives that touch on themes of memory, history, masculinity, alienation, fatherhood, and our complex relationship with the natural world.

## INTRODUCTION

On November 7, 2018, *The Guardian* newspaper published an article titled “World’s Oldest ‘Figurative’ Painting” about newly discovered cave paintings in Borneo that radiometric dating determined were 40,000 years old. Three weathered large beasts and negative hand imprints in groups or by themselves span a wall in rusty shades of ochre. The prehistoric painter’s process was tactile and physical; did the artist press his or her hands to the rock and blow paint from the mouth, leaving these evocative gestures as a kind of signature? A testimony that they were there? As a figurative painter, I can not help but feel kinship with those Paleolithic cave artists. While the impetus for those paintings—celebrating a kill, a ritual, perhaps signifying an abundant place for food—may come from an entirely different need from my own, the imperative I feel to make art is certainly linked to an ancient, uniquely human need to articulate and define the world we inhabit. Whether it is appeasing the gods or the mind, art-making is inextricably linked to our humanity—and by extension our narratives.

The body of work exhibited in my thesis exhibition at Western Carolina University includes a collection of figurative paintings that illustrate the narrative focus of my work over the last three years. In this paper, I examine several aspects of my work that, when combined, articulate my aims. Broadly speaking, these aspects include the narrative quality of my work and the themes associated with that narrativity; the process of working from photographs, including precedents established by artists such as Gerhard Richter and Andy Warhol; and the visual dialogue between abstraction and figuration that when combined creates an engaging yet slightly disorienting experience for the viewer.

## NARRATIVITY

To understand the ways in which my work invokes narrativity, it is first necessary to define the term. Historically, the concept has been studied in the context of literary traditions, where it is used to refer to events that take place in a chronological sequence and have a causal relationship. A narrative therefore involves scenarios or plots that evolve over time with the audience engaged in a prolonged experience. How then can a painting be considered narrative when what is represented is a single image? For centuries this question has been fodder for much philosophical debate and is still very much a topic of discussion among philosophers, as evidenced by the academic jousting taking place within the pages of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

In the eighteenth century, the German philosopher and art critic Ephraim Gotthold Lessing distilled debates concerning the use of narrativity in paintings versus in literature as the argument between time and space. In Efrat Biberman's essay "On Narrativity in the Visual Field: A Psychoanalytic View of Velazquez's 'Las Meninas,'" she summarizes Lessing's position as follows: "Painting, by its nature, is a spatial mode of art, in contrast to literature, which functions in time" (Biberman, 238). Further discussion of the temporal nature of narrativity is found in Bence Nanay's essay "Narrative Pictures," in which the author examines the work of three leading contemporary philosophers of aesthetics who have tackled the conundrum of visual narrativity. Each of the three philosophers—David Velleman, Gregory Currie, and Noel Carroll—arrive at similar places in answering this question: What constitutes a narrative? As Nanay writes, "Carroll, Curie, and Velleman all agree that our engagement with narratives implies some kind of representation, some kind of connection between two or more different events" (Nanay, 120).

Given the narrative structure that these philosophers and others have used to define narrativity, the limitations of the painting medium would render it unable to offer the viewer a narrative experience. Nanay places the three philosophers just mentioned in the same camp as Lessing when it comes to considering the narrative limitations of painting. According to Lessing, “It is to a single moment that the material limits of art confine all its imitations. The artist, out of ever-varying nature, can only make use of a single moment” (qtd. in Nanay, 122). In the opening pages of her essay, Biberman adds to the case against narrativity in painting by citing the preeminent champion of nonnarrative painting, the critic Clement Greenberg, whose famous essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon” is an argument in favor of the purity of nonobjective painting, which is unburdened from any of the narrative considerations that Greenberg saw as incompatible with the medium of paint. Writing on the presumed incompatibility between narrative and painting, Biberman frames the discussion as “the opposition between form and content, in which literature represents content, while painting represents a formal materialistic object, which content is only a marginal aspect of, or even totally eliminated from” (Biberman, 238).

We can see how painting, with its static presence of immovable imagery might seem limited in its narrative potential. In fact, there are more layers to this discussion and ways of looking at narrativity, which contradict the arguments that painting is incompatible with narrative. It is within these deeper layers that the presence of narrativity in my painting is bolstered. The figurative imagery that I paint presents a suggestive narrative whose aim is to trigger narrative associations within the viewer. The figures in my work have a mythic quality to them and represent what Lessing calls the “pregnant moment,” in which the full storyline might be compressed into a single image. Unlike historical narrative paintings whose “pregnant

moments” represent the dramatic zenith of a known storyline—whether mythological, biblical, or historical—the imagery in my painting is not tethered to any established narrative and instead is dependent on the viewer to create its narrative—something Nanay refers to as the “narrative engagement” (Nanay 124).

Nanay also suggests that images depicted in a painting are not necessarily without a “temporal dimension”; something depicted in a painting may represent actions that extend beyond the “pregnant moment” and are filled in by our imagination. In his essay Nanay again cites Lessing to support the idea that the temporal quality of narrativity might be achieved outside of the specific painted image and exist in the imagination of the spectator. Quoting Lessing, Nanay writes, “The longer we gaze, the more must our imagination add; and the more our imagination adds, the more we must believe we see” (qtd in Nanay, 122). It is precisely this sort of effect that I strive for with my paintings. A moment or action is depicted in my painting, and the viewer’s imagination fills in the backstory as well as the future story that relates to the figures. Nanay elaborates on the narrative engagement of the viewer by using as an example a Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph depicting a man jumping over a puddle. Nanay writes that this simple image triggers an engagement with the viewer; the action leading up to the leap and, later, the landing of the man in the water are stitched together by the viewer’s imagination. Other examples that he cites are Jacques-Louis David’s *Death of Marat* and *The Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon and the Coronation of Empress Joséphine*. In the *Death of Marat* we see the episode depicted, that of Marat having just been killed, and our imagination then works to piece together the story and conjures an action that has led to this scene. In the painting of Napoleon’s consecration, which depicts Napoleon I holding a crown over the head of his wife, Josephine, our

imagination completes the action of the coronation and, if the viewer is historically informed, expands the narrative to include the events leading to Napoleon's rise and fall.

According to Nanay, there are two things happening in a painting—what is being depicted and what is represented (cite p.#). Some paintings represent something grander and trigger a more elaborate narrative while others are more modest in what is represented. Nanay argues that paintings that offer the greatest narrative engagement include what he calls “goal-directed actions,” meaning the actions depicted are in service to some apparent goal. The more dramatic the goal, the stronger the narrative. It becomes apparent then, according to Nanay, that the narrativity of a painting is not fixed and, while some paintings are not necessarily narrative given the paucity of what is represented, others offer a powerful narrative engagement. Addressing this range, Nanay quotes the philosopher Gregory Currie who states: “‘narrativity’ comes in degrees and any account of narrative should be able to accommodate this fact. A Vermeer is less narrative than a David, but it is more narrative than a Cezanne still life. Similarly, our engagement with narratives should also come in degrees” (Nanay, 125). This range of narrativity plays out in my own work. In general, I seek images that strike a balance between subtle and slightly enigmatic and something more archetypal.

An important factor in determining the narrative strength of any one of my paintings is the lived experience of the viewer. A viewer knowledgeable about art history will automatically perceive my art through a filter of historical associations that are likely unknown to the lay viewer. The two different viewers might discern on a basic human level some of the obvious narrative cues that my imagery incorporates, but the myriad other differences between the two viewers, both in terms of art historical knowledge and lived experience, fosters an entirely different narrative engagement.

In his essay “(Re-)Creating Order: Narrativity and Implied World Views in Pictures,” Michael Ranta explores how the worldviews that a spectator brings to the experience of looking at a painting help that viewer get their bearings within the narrative structure of a painting, especially a painting with strong narrative content. Ranta uses the examples of Giotto’s frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel and Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* to illustrate the ways in which pictorial narratives can bolster certain belief systems, both universal and specific, and function as a mirror that reflects the belief system of the painter’s milieu back on to the viewer. Ranta writes, “Giotto’s frescoes and Bruegel’s *Icarus*, like many other pictures, express ontological and ethical assumptions, touch upon viewers’ existential interests, fears, and hopes, and provide narrative scaffolding for the fragility and vulnerability of human existence, thus making them tellable or noteworthy. These pictures tell stories, more or less explicitly, about the world (or some of its aspects) and about possible or recommended ways of acting and interacting” (Ranta, 26).

My process for making art may seem intuitive to me and without any rigid agenda, yet the fact that I am drawn to certain images is surely the result of my own cultural indoctrination. Given the somewhat ambiguous nature of my imagery, it should be apparent that I am not consciously advancing any particular worldview or belief system, yet by painting images that have an archetypal bent, my hope is that the images might evoke certain universal themes such as humankind’s place in nature and the idea of a subjugated “wilderness,” chaos versus order, alienation, and the pursuit of the divine, to name a few. I expect that on some level the viewer will look at my work and see some vestige of themselves reflected to them, perhaps on a very subliminal level that connects with their own beliefs and concepts of the world.



## Diptych as Narrative Device

After discussing the perceived problems with pictorial narratives and the ways in which they differ from the narrative format expressed through literature, I turn next to an examination of some of the formal aspects of my work that partially bridge this literary-pictorial divide. One experiment, in particular, is the use of the diptych format. The first painting of the series that I completed in the Western Carolina University MFA Program was a diptych painting called *Frontier Transmission*, which consists of two 48-by-48-inch canvases that deal with themes of colonial legacy and humankind's expansionist cravings. On the left side of the diptych, a portrait of a nineteenth-century general with Maori-style tattoos on his face is nestled into a vaguely militaristic flag-like design, which, in turn, is nestled into a highly stylized landscape. On the right canvas, two fighting polar bears are depicted in a field of intense orange overlooking a distant sea and horizon line. The effect of the diptych is to establish a binary relationship between man's militaristic legacy (represented by the general) and the raw wilderness he constantly seeks to subjugate (represented by the polar bears). Would the painting have been as effective with the same imagery painted on one large canvas? To a large degree, yes, but for my own artistic goals, the diptych was an important device that echoed the narrative format of comics and graphic novels, thereby helping to trigger a narrative association. However tenuous that association, I believe that the painting is stronger for it and therefore justifies the use of the diptych.



Figure 1. David Skinner, *FrontierTransmission*, 48" x 96," (diptych), oil on canvas, 2016.

*Frontier Transmission* was followed by a painting called *Tree Chapel*, which is also a diptych of the same size. Once again, I intentionally set out to establish a binary relationship between the left and right panels, which, in this painting, address the tension between the domestic expectations of the nineteenth-century matron depicted in the painting and the lure of the wilderness, free from oppression, as painted in the right canvas. Once again, the use of one large canvas would have been effective to a certain degree, but not as effective as the diptych format.



Figure 2. David Skinner, *Tree Chapel*, 48” x 96,” (diptych), oil on canvas, 2017.

Though I don’t directly reference earlier uses of the diptych format, similarities between my work and such artists as the fifteenth-century Dutch artists Roger van der Weyden and Hugo van der Goes can be drawn. As in my work, many of the diptychs found in the Middle Ages present a binary narrative between two panels whose overarching message is supported by the two individual images. For instance, in Van der Goes’s *Descent from the Cross*, the left panel represents the action of Christ being brought down from the cross and the right panel shows the crowd’s reaction to this event. The figures in each panel are painted close-up, and together the two panels are intended by Van der Goes to demonstrate the type of devotion that is expected from Christian worshippers. Analyzing diptychs by both Van der Goes and Van der Weyden, James Marrow writes in his essay “Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance”: “More significantly, in these remarkable works the artists separate pictorial elements normally united in one composition, devoting one section to the traditional focus of the event, Christ on the Cross or the Deposition, and giving equal

pictorial weight to representations only of reacting figures. In both diptychs, in other words, reactive emotional experience is given parity with its historical stimulus” (Marrow, 157).

In all of my work, my aim is to present imagery that finds the poetic sweet spot between obscurity and clarity. As stated before, my imagery only suggests narratives and leaves the narrative solutions to the viewer. In certain instances, I find that the use of a well-placed word helps to direct the narrative and offers clues as to my narrative intentions. One such painting, completed in fall 2018, is part of a series that focused on the experience of Dick Proehneke, a man who moved to a remote part of Alaska in the 1960s, built himself a cabin using only hand tools, and stayed there for thirty years. The story intrigued me. While viewing the 16mm film that Proehneke made of his experience, I found that, by pausing on certain frames, interesting compositions emerged that, in my opinion, would make compelling paintings. One such painting, *August Cut*, relies again on the diptych format to set up a narrative sequence involving two images of Proehneke. On the right side of the diptych, we see Proehneke cutting logs for his cabin, and on the left panel, we see him carrying a log back to his building site. It is a simple narrative upon first glance, but given the severity of the wilderness where Proehneke was building his cabin, the act becomes critical to his survival. In order to communicate the time of year that the narrative takes place, and to hint at the urgency of the task at hand, the word “august” is scribbled across the top of the right canvas. It is not a loud pronouncement, but rather a subtle signpost. As with most of the text incorporated into my paintings, the images generate the text. I often try out different words before arriving at the one that fits. I do not have a rigid formula for the work, and some paintings stand alone without either text or a diptych format. Through the process of making the work, the format and content come into focus. The main

hurdle when first starting the painting is what to paint, which brings me to the next section of the essay: the pursuit of imagery.



Figure 3. David Skinner, *August Cut*, 36" x 72," oil on canvas, 2018

## PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE PAINTED IMAGE

I am working at a time in history when painting, particularly figurative painting, has secured a dominant position in the art world. Given that my figurative imagery is inspired by photographs from various sources, my work could be considered a collaboration with the authors of these photographed images. This collaboration is often the result of random encounters with old books, magazines, or videos, which trigger unexpected narratives that I explore through my painting process. Unlike in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when artists used photography as an aide-memoire, much like one might use pencil sketches to develop a composition, my use of photography is more influenced by certain artists from the 1960s whose work initiated a new dialogue between painting and photography. This dialogue involved a reexamination of the ways in which painting, through the use of photographic source material, could break away from the rigid standards of modernism as exemplified by pure abstraction. Artists such as Vija Celmin, Gerhard Richter, Richard Artschwager, Malcom Morley, Richard Hamilton, and Andy Warhol, among many others, sought to reintroduce the world of imagery back into painting, resisting Clement Greenberg's dictate of "renouncing illusion and explicit subject matter" (qtd in Rugoff, 12). Elaborating on this reactionary trend, Ralph Rugoff writes in his essay "Painting Modern Life," "...for artists in the early-to-mid 1960s, painting from photographic sources offered an escape route from what had become a limiting formalist end game. Figuration—considered regressive if not reactionary since the critical triumph of abstract painting in the 1940s—was seized upon by these artists as a means of resistance to modernism's linear 'progress.'" Whether delivered in the form of Warhol's pop irony or the subdued banality



of Celmin's work, the direction that this new generation of artists took was decidedly less concerned with the existential heroics of the Abstract Expressionists and more in line with the media-saturated moment that the 1960s represented. Much like the media saturation of today, though tame by comparison, the plethora of magazines, newspapers, television, and film in the 1960s reinforced the idea of a visual experience removed from reality. As Rugoff writes, "Artists found themselves working amidst an explosion of reproductions and images in comparison with which first-hand experience seemed to diminish in importance" (Rugoff, 13).

At the dawn of photography, it was thought that this new invention sounded the death knell for painting because images of the world could now be captured in an instant and with a truer sense of reality than the painted verisimilitude that had previously been the purview of the arts. Many would argue that this disruption accelerated the modernist trends that had begun to emerge in the late nineteenth century and thus it is ironic that photographic images in the 1960s facilitated a reengagement with the representational imagery that it had originally undermined. Rugoff points out that in this sense painting "encompassed photography to redefine and extend its conceptual reach"(Rugoff, 16). Not only did these painters (myself included) embrace photographic images by reinscribing them into a new context, they allowed the viewer to encounter that photographed image in a way that was more consequential, or at least required a greater degree of psychological investment. Again, Rugoff writes: "...painting managed to instill a crucial delay in our response to overexposed photographic imagery. It thus opened up a space for re-evaluating the meaning of our mass-produced pictures of modern life, and for reinvesting feeling into images whose affect has been drained through repetition" (Rugoff, 16).

My painting departs from artists of the 1960s and many contemporary artists working today with imagery sourced from photographs in that the antiquated imagery that I employ for

the majority of my paintings does not comment on our contemporary culture and is more timeless in its intent. My interest lies in the way a photograph that indexes an exact moment in time can be reimagined as a more-or-less anonymous symbol positioned within the thread of a suggested narrative. In Martin Herbert's essay "Rehearsing Doubt: Recent Developments in Painting—After—Photography," he writes that "A photograph is typically intended to convey visual information about something that actually exists or existed, and is tied to time, place, subject; a painting more easily partakes of the symbolic, and of ambiguity" (Herbert, 42). So by reformatting the photographed figure into the medium of paint, the figure is no longer tethered to the specificity of time and place. Additionally, whereas the original photograph captures the gaze of the model looking at the photographer (in portrait photography), the viewers of my paintings become stand-ins for the original photographer, compressing time and setting the stage for an odd encounter with a stranger from another time. In fact, as the painter, I myself develop a relationship with this stranger from the past.





Figure 4. David Skinner, *Two Brothers*, 60" x 48", oil on canvas, 2018

Part of the editing process when choosing images involves relying on some kind of innate connection to particular figures, either by way of a certain expression or body language or clothing. I need to be intrigued by the image and see in it a quality that creates a narrative spark in order for me to want to paint it. Whether using my own photographs, or ones that I have found, my aim is to find images that, when painted, transform a fleeting moment into something imbued with deeper meaning. For example, while looking through videos that I shot of my son swimming at the YMCA pool, I paused on a particular moment when my son was floating on his back with his arms to the side in an almost Christ-like pose, with the black line of the pool mimicking a cross. I was not drawn to the image for its religious overtones, but rather I was drawn to the strange expression on my son's face that suggested both tranquility and unease, or what might have been the sense of disorientation that floating in water can bring. Though the image has emotional resonance for me as a father, for the anonymous viewer the image of this young boy floating in a pool of water presents a more universal and symbolic significance, disassociated from the kind of personal connection that I have to the image. Through the process of capturing images from video stills, and pausing on certain moments in a video that would otherwise be inconsequential, I am able to isolate unexpected gestures and poses that when made more monumental through the process of enlarging and painting, creates an image that transcends an otherwise mundane moment and imbues it with a mythic quality.



Figure 5. David Skinner, *Floating World*, 48" x 96," oil on canvas,

When writing about the painter Judith Eisler, an artist who works in a similar fashion, Martin Herbert frames her process as follows: “Eisler—watching arthouse DVDs with a finger on the pause button, then making paintings from her stolen moments—halts the flow at unmemorable images; the ones we’d blink and miss, but which attain an unlikely power when painted” (Herbert, 47).

In another painting, using a video still as my source material, I capture the moment when David “The Bullet” Smith sits on top of his cannon, eyeing the distant net in which he will hopefully land. I remember standing below the cannon and looking up at this human cannonball, dramatic clouds serving as backdrop, and thinking what a funny yet arresting image it was. We are a species that revels in spectacle—and the spectacle of a man being shot out of a cannon at the state fair is hard to beat. The image is both heroic and tragic at the same time, embodying the type of dichotomy that I seek in an image. Yes, the image represents an act of courage, but it could also be seen as an image of futility. What happens if something goes wrong and this human cannonball dies? Is there meaning in the gesture or is it simply a senseless act of derring-



do? Or does the image represent human's quest for flight, or to ultimately ascend to heaven? One image frozen from a video still becomes a mythic symbol, loaded with interpretive potential when scaled up and recontextualized in paint.



Figure 6. David Skinner. *Dreams of Flight*. 60" x 48." oil on

In the painting of my son, as with all of my figurative paintings made using photographs, the resulting image in some ways becomes a self-portrait, not only in the sense that certain innate characteristics are directing me to the images that I decide to paint, but once that decision is made, the way I paint (the colors chosen and the gestural way in which paint is applied) become identifying traces of myself. Unlike some of the painters mentioned earlier, particularly the pop artists, the figures in my work do not come from a place of cynicism, but rather are representative of a subjective investigation of form and content that is more earnest in its aspirations. In my work, the paint itself becomes part of the subject. Its tactile physicality bolsters the themes that are explored as well as defines my own signature style. When looking at the current trends in figurative art, whether the epic realism of Jenny Saville or the expressively odd figures of Dana Schutz, we see a celebration of the visceral potential of paint and a field of artists examining the figure through very defined stylistic signatures in paint. In looking at ways in which the artists' own style infuses the current trend in figurative art, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev writes in her essay "A Strange Alliance: The Painter and the Subject," "In the case of many paintings recently made from photographs, the inanimate nature of the subject/model is counterbalanced by the particularly strong presence of pictorial agency and the painter, anachronistically and solipsistically 'painting' in a society where painting is an obsolete way of producing images"(Christov-Bakargiev, 35). For me, this investment in "pictorial agency" is manifested not only in the handling of the painted figure, but also in the way abstract elements are incorporated into the picture plane, creating a juxtaposition between a painted depth of field and the flatness of the picture plane. This stylistic mash-up leads to the discussion of abstraction and the figure in the next section of the essay..

## ABSTRACTION AND THE FIGURE

One of the currents in modernism is the turning away from illusionistic space toward a focus on the picture plane itself, which inevitably led to a greater sense of flatness in painting. This interest in the surface treatment of a painting informs all of my work and, though there is a certain degree of three-dimensionality in the way that I paint my figures, the surface of my paintings is also flattened and animated through gestural marks, text, and other abstracted patterns that serve to support the narrative content. The effect is an assemblage of images and shapes that disorients the viewer and suggests a riddle that the viewer is invited to solve- much like the mysterious Borneo cave paintings with its painted hands and stylized beasts. In writing about the “flatbed picture plane” in his essay “Sheer Sensation: Photographically-Based Painting and Modernism,” Barry Schwabsky quotes the work of critic Leo Steinberg in writing: “The flatbed picture plane was a surface on which pictorial events and images were distributed like items scattered across a table or some other horizontal plane, or across a vertical one like a bulletin board, but in any case, ‘no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes’” (Schwabsky, 26).

An example of this interplay between the flattening of the picture plane and three-dimensional rendering appears in my painting titled *Outpost*. The painting, a diptych, incorporates a patterned motif that surrounds the portrait of a bearded military figure on the left side of the diptych and, on the right, a crude skeleton figure embedded in a field of red. Painted above the skeleton is a simple structure positioned in an ambiguous field with telephone poles running behind it. The effect is a collection of images both three-dimensional and abstract that when viewed together presents a kind of ambiguous storyboard. The abstract pattern could be

interpreted as a reference to wallpaper and the genteel realm of the domestic, whilst the crudely painted skeleton with images of small military-style tents scratched into the surface of the paint references mortality and the battlefield. I did not paint a “scene,” but something closer to a collage whose meaning was intentionally vague. Ultimately, my goal is to achieve the right balance between a painting whose meaning hovers between legibility and enigmatic.



Figure 7. David Skinner, *Outpost*, 36'' x 72'', oil on canvas, 2017.

There are certain paintings in which the figure is removed from the picture plane, and the only reference to a narrative is the text. In these paintings, the attention to abstraction is more prevalent than others, yet even in these reduced compositions, where abstract marks predominate, a narrative component is offered. In essence, my painting *Island* could be considered an abstract work, yet the word “island” scrawled in the lower part of the canvas directs the viewer toward a possible meaning that would not otherwise be apparent. In paintings

such as *Island* my reverence for the artist Cy Twombly and his celebration of gestural paint is clear. In his essay “Your Kid Could *Not* Do This, and Other Reflections On Cy Twombly,” Kirk Varnedoe writes of Twombly’s facility with paint as follows: “He thus began sure in the knowledge that art of great power and complexity could be built up from elemental marks and ragged, accidental effects—slashes of paint, even skeins of dripping—that were in themselves apparently artless and without order. He understood that the recurrent challenge was not simply to adopt different forms of such seeming disorder, but to weave from them new languages that were adequate to respond to the subtleties of a personal temperament, and sufficient to evoke an original set of metaphors about modern experience” (Varndoe, 19). In the end, the mechanism of metaphor—the use of images as symbols—is integral to the visual strategies I employ as an artist. Whether those metaphors connect with the broader audience is, in many ways, beyond my control and never guaranteed.





Figure 8. David Skinner, *Island*, 60" x 48," oil on canvas. 2017.

## CONCLUSION

The narratives that I assemble via figurative imagery, text, abstract marks, and patterns make sense to me, yet whether or not the viewer threads together a compelling narrative, or any narrative at all, is out of my control. The thrill for me as an artist is to create a visual platform from which different outcomes are gleaned. My hope is that the imagery that I bring into the world finds an engaged audience that is curious about the stories I tell. My own understanding of the work is sometimes tenuous, yet this ambiguity keeps me engaged with my work long after it finds its resolution. The nature of our visual world is one of instantaneity and impatience, and if my work can counteract this impulse and instead encourage a thoughtful and drawn-out engagement with art, then I will have achieved something meaningful.

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