

THESIS

SOMEONE WHO LOOKS LIKE ME

submitted by
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Spring 2005


COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

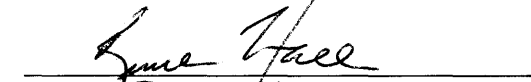
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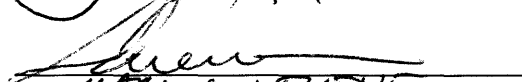
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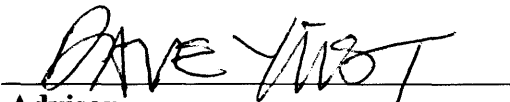
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Abstract of Thesis

SOMEONE WHO LOOKS LIKE ME

Thematically, my paintings reflect the life long struggle of coming to terms with self identity. The process of creating art enables me to navigate the complexities of identity while examining the connection this has to our emotional behavior. I use the figure as a tool to explore the space between self actualization and self presentation. Dualities, their balance and imbalance, make up the majority of the questions I address in my work. The primary examples are self/other, emotional/corporeal, private/public, sameness/difference, and reality/performance.

I'm interested in challenging societal conditioning which teaches to disguise homosexuality and emotional expression, and question how this conflict constructs our self identity and self worth. My emotive response to these issues is the driving force behind my work. This thesis is a visual journey through the obscurity of existence, a search for a sense of recognition within oneself.

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This thesis is dedicated to whomever it may concern.

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THESIS

SOMEONE WHO LOOKS LIKE ME

“The image of the body traces two opposing currents. The one seeks the profound identity common to all beings, the other stresses their difference.”- Phillipe Comar

“It is always the display of the body that creates irritation, discomfort, reaction. It is the body that reemerges under layers of symbolism and sublimations, to be exhibited, pulsating nervously, participating in a series of uncomfortable references, hidden, secret, which declare the plane of existence, the escape from the totalitarian and anonymous system of the mask, the functional gap of the bureaucracies of socially accepted behaviors. And the certainties of normality crumble under the blows of a succession of emotional implosions that create a radical and desperate attempt to reappropriate one’s self.” - Francesca Alfano Miglietti

Thematically, my paintings reflect the life long struggle of coming to terms with self identity. The process of creating art enables me to navigate the complexities of identity while examining the connection this has to our emotional behavior. I use the figure as a tool to explore that space between self actualization and self presentation. Dualities, their balance and imbalance, make up the majority of the questions I address in my work. The primary examples are self/other, emotional/corporeal, private/public, sameness/difference, and reality/performance.

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IDENTITY & EMOTION

The conceptual basis of my work is derived from two main ideas. The first one is the discovery and acceptance of a true self identity, suppressed by means of both personal and social presumptions of the “other”. The second concept is purely emotive. This includes personal emotional expressions, the process of mental self talk and the psychological repercussions of unhealthy identity development. These themes coexist throughout this body of work, however, the context alters from painting to painting. Some pieces focus on the coming to terms with a lesbian identity, for example the labels that we adhere to our selves in relation to the labels that are unwillingly applied to us.¹ I also explore the connection between our emotional and physical beings, and how their affect on each other contributes to one’s understanding of oneself or others . The search for love and acceptance is also a powerful reoccurring theme. I specifically question whether self love and romantic love can exist without one another.

The private vs. the public dichotomy plays a key role in the development of my imagery. I attempt to personify that tension between who I am and who I “should” be. The effect I want to achieve is usually a sense of unease or discomfort, one that is intentionally directed towards the viewer in order to evoke a response of empathy or rejection. I see this as symbolic of our social interactions, where we constantly pass judgment from person to person based on a system of similarities and differences. This

¹ See Labeled, (Fig.5)

system is constructed through a combination of physical attributes, personal experiences, biases, presumptions, and cultural and religious influences. I believe that this process of judgment heavily influences one's development of self identity and emotional health.

There is a constant conflict between social pressures and one's personal desires.

Homosexuality is a prime example of this type of issue, where self presentation becomes a social performance that further distorts one's sense of identity. This conflict all too often leads to unhealthy perceptions of self worth within the gay and lesbian community. I ask the questions: "Who is responsible for this problem? Who am I and who are you in relation to this?" I try not to project an answer but rather present enough information for the viewer to question their own preconceptions. I do not believe that I can truly change anyone's opinion. I can only attempt to make these issues visible and thus validate them as a real issue.

I try to articulate a visual language that is legible, honest and universal enough that any individual, despite their sexual orientation, can relate to the work via the composition. To do this I emphasize emotion. The emotions I try to evoke include, but are not limited to; shame, sadness, loneliness, inadequacy, apathy, pride, courage, empowerment, vanity, self love, self loathing, vulnerability, tension, desperation, discomfort, rejection, negative self talk, alienation, fear, and fragility.

My work functions as a process of resolution to the emotional and personal struggles within my own life. The issues I can not resolve or want to see change are those I visually manifest. Each one of my paintings could arguably be seen as a self portrait.

The emotion behind each piece is inspired from something I experience; the process of documentation is an exorcism from that feeling. In order to have this abstract concept more tangible I articulate it through a visual image of the body, usually my own. The process of painting is an attempt to diffuse or minimize internal struggles by projecting them onto something physical, thus more conducive to manipulation and control. That physical element is initially a photograph, then transfers into paint on canvas and then finally experienced by the viewer. But then the question becomes; “does this transposing allow one to reshape or deconstruct the self image or does it further confirm or enhance it?” Again, this is a question for the viewer.

VISUAL LANGUAGE

The formal elements in my work are intentionally configured in a way that will readily convey information. The elements that make the reading apparently facile include photo references, composition, the use of the figure, text, scale, style and color. The placement of the single figure in a central and frontal position within the painting is a device I use to facilitate an interaction between the work and the viewer.² This type of composition creates an environment that is best suited for direct visual communication. The intimacy and confrontation created by the one to one engagement is further enhanced

²The exception to this statement can be seen in The Muse (Fig.13) where there are two figures. However, it being a double self portrait, the two figures function as a whole by symbolizing two halves of the same person. The position of the figure on the right does however create the same sense of interaction that my single figures typically evoke.

by the encounter with the gaze of the painted figure, which both attracts and discomforts.

The majority of my figures are placed in an environment that is void of information.³ This is intended for two purposes; the first is to emphasize the figure and the emotion it embodies. The second, is a dramatic construction that manipulates the idea of time. My work does not try to replicate an event or place in time, but rather is a personification of an emotion or internal struggle. The figures are all aware of the spectator's attention and are willing in their display. I create a composition that counters the idea of the viewer as an unwanted voyeur, instead I want to empower my figures. I want to give the subject an opportunity to participate equally to the visual dialogue with the audience. This is a device I have appropriated from my research into feminist philosophy.

The visual codes that I employ are geared towards relaying information to the audience. Hairstyles, clothes (or lack thereof), props and text are all incorporated to convey some kind of emotional information. Clothing, one of the most obvious symbols, not only conceals the body but acts as protection or adornment.⁴ A quote from A History of African Art best explains the use of clothing and hairstyle in my work, "Dress is a primary civilizing phenomenon, a means of symbolic communication. Operating in a matrix of cultural codes and personal preferences, it conveys to informed onlookers a

³In Hunting Ground (Fig.1) the figure is placed in front of a target, this is obviously a conceptual symbol rather than an indication of a specific environment.

⁴Rain Coat (Fig.11) is an example of how I imply that dress is a form of symbolic protection from emotional pain.

culturally constructed self or identity.”

My understanding of color has developed extensively throughout my thesis. It has become one of my most powerful tools of communication. I intentionally employ a bright palette to both attract and resonate. The vivid colors are also intended to contrast with the darkness of the content, which goes along with my interest in dualities. I purposely experiment with different color schemes that have psychological associations.

THE WORK

The thesis consists of several different series of work that utilize different visual themes. These can be broken down into the mask images, the text images, the self portraits and the target image.⁵ Hunting Ground (Fig.1) stands alone as a series mainly because it marks a conceptual and stylistic turn in my work which was important to the development of this thesis. Hunting Ground is a direct response to the current American debate over same sex marriage, which is using the personal lives of gays and lesbians as a political and moral battleground. The discussion and changing legislation surrounding this issue has not only increased awareness and support for the GLBT community but has brought on a conservative backlash from politicians and religious groups. I see this image as a symbol of lesbian and female empowerment. The questions I address in this piece are: Does our empowerment make us a target? Or does our strength come from our

⁵ Some of these themes overlap into other series.

refusal in to be targeted?

The mask is an obvious visual symbol that reveals that there is something hidden or concealed, in this case an assuming of a false identity. The mask acts as a physical manifestation of religious and social facades that all people, most specifically homosexuals, are forced to wear or choose to impose on themselves. The mask implies that what is underneath may be more hideous or artificial than the mask itself. For me the mask conjures up ideas of disguise, fear, performance, defiance, discomfort and sexual deviancy.

To Whom it May Concern (Fig.8) marked the first work in which I incorporated text and assemblage. The words “ I love you” are written on a torn page of an old book and adhered to the canvas. The text from the book is meant to further engage the viewer beyond the words of love. The text from the page is also indicative of a failed romantic relationship. This piece explores the blindness and imprisonment that comes along with the search for love, while also questioning whether or not we are aware of the messages we present during this process.

In Perverted Fruit (Fig. 6) the figure is wearing a t-shirt in which the word “pervert” is written backwards. This inversion of the text is intended to imply a mirror image, an attempt to connect the viewer with the subject by placing them within the emotional context. A True Story: Erased 100 Times or More (Fig. 7) is a self portrait where the figure is holding an index card that the words “unlovable freak” was written and erased over one hundred times. The words, image and process of writing and erasing

are all symbolic of the negative self talk that reiterates in my mind. This self defeating repetition that eventually affects my relationship with myself and others.

The majority of my work consists of self portraits because my conceptual subject matter is emotionally autobiographical. Self portraiture is a means of thinking through my presumptions of self identity. I also use it as a display of vanity, which intentionally contrasts with the self defeating context in my work. Self portraits function as a way of questioning the social taboo of too much emotional disclosure. It is also the aesthetic device that I use to ask the question, rather than affirm, “Who am I?”

CONCLUSION

“Above all else, it is about leaving a mark that I existed: I was here. I was hungry. I was defeated. I was happy. I was sad. I was in love. I was afraid. I was hopeful. I had an idea and I had a good purpose and that is why I made works of art.” - Felix Gonzalez-Torres

I want to come full circle and conclude this thesis by explaining the title, Someone Who Looks Like Me. Just as my work has a multitude of meanings so does this title. It makes specific reference to the moments of self discovery that occur throughout life. The recognition and loss of the person I once was, the person I think I am or the person I want to become. It also refers to that same process that happens when we fall in love, the recognition or loss of oneself within another human being. It is also meant to connect the imagery with its audience, in hope that the viewer can see reflections of themselves within the work. Finally, this thesis is an autobiographical exploration representing *someone who looks like me*, but it does not render me whole. It is merely a

compilation of emotional fragments of someone that I thought I once was, I think I may
be or would like to become.

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Fig.1, Hunting Ground, oil on canvas, 42" x 72", 2003.



Fig.2, Conformity to Fact, oil on canvas, 36" x 44", 2004.

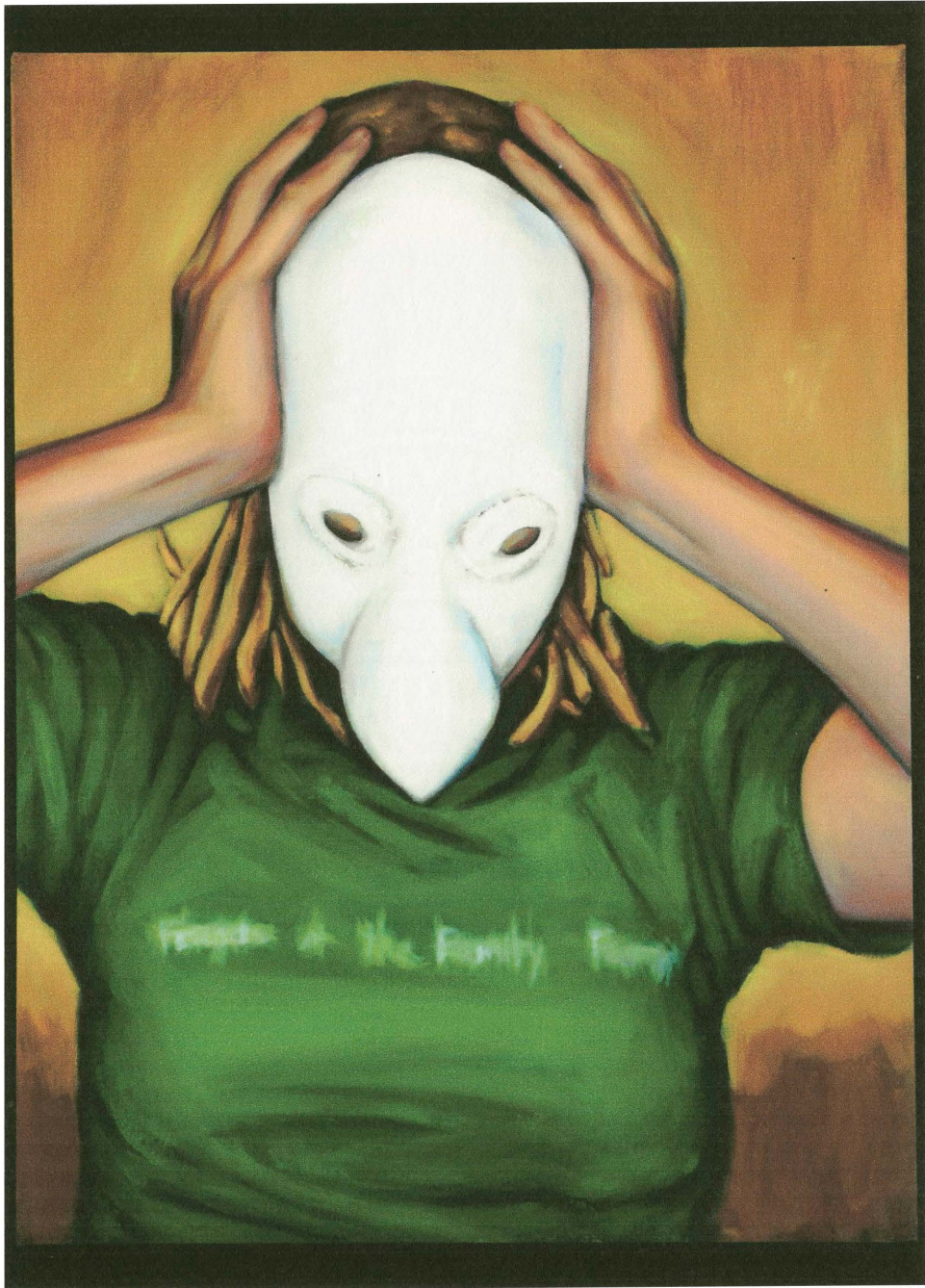


Fig.3, Friends of the Family Farm, oil on canvas, 24" x 32", 2004.

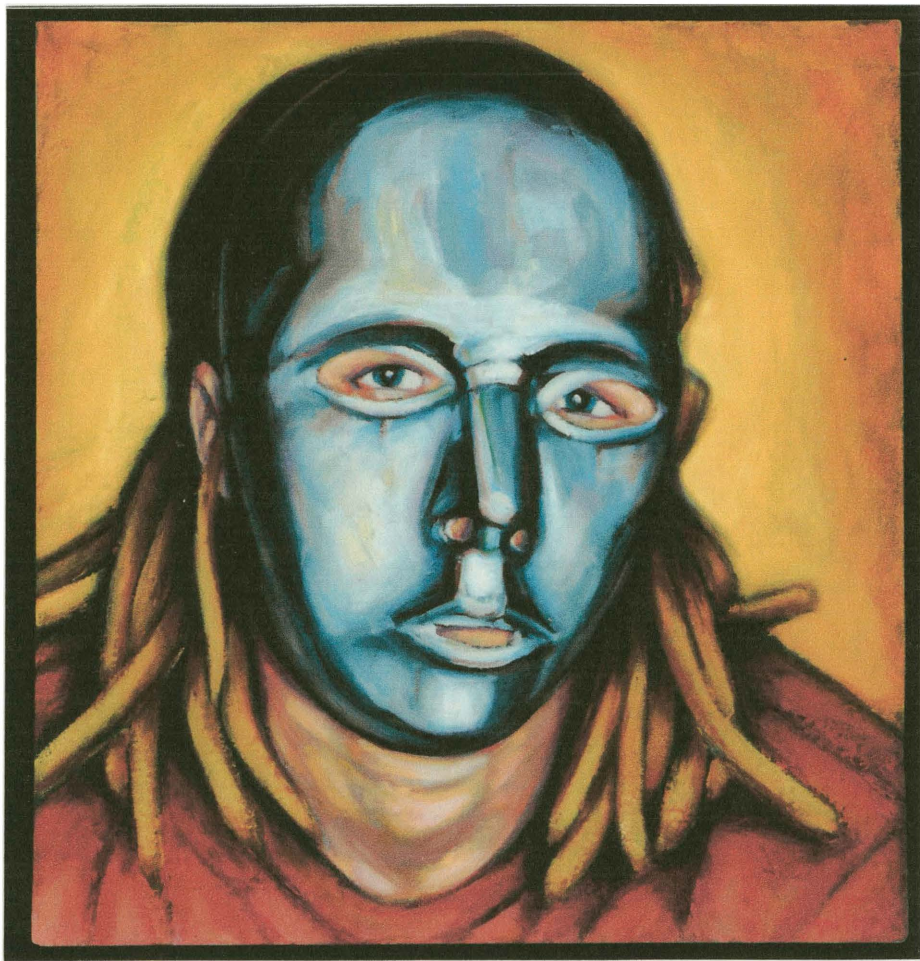


Fig.4, Self Portrait as a Monster, oil and wax on canvas, 15" x 17", 2004-2005.

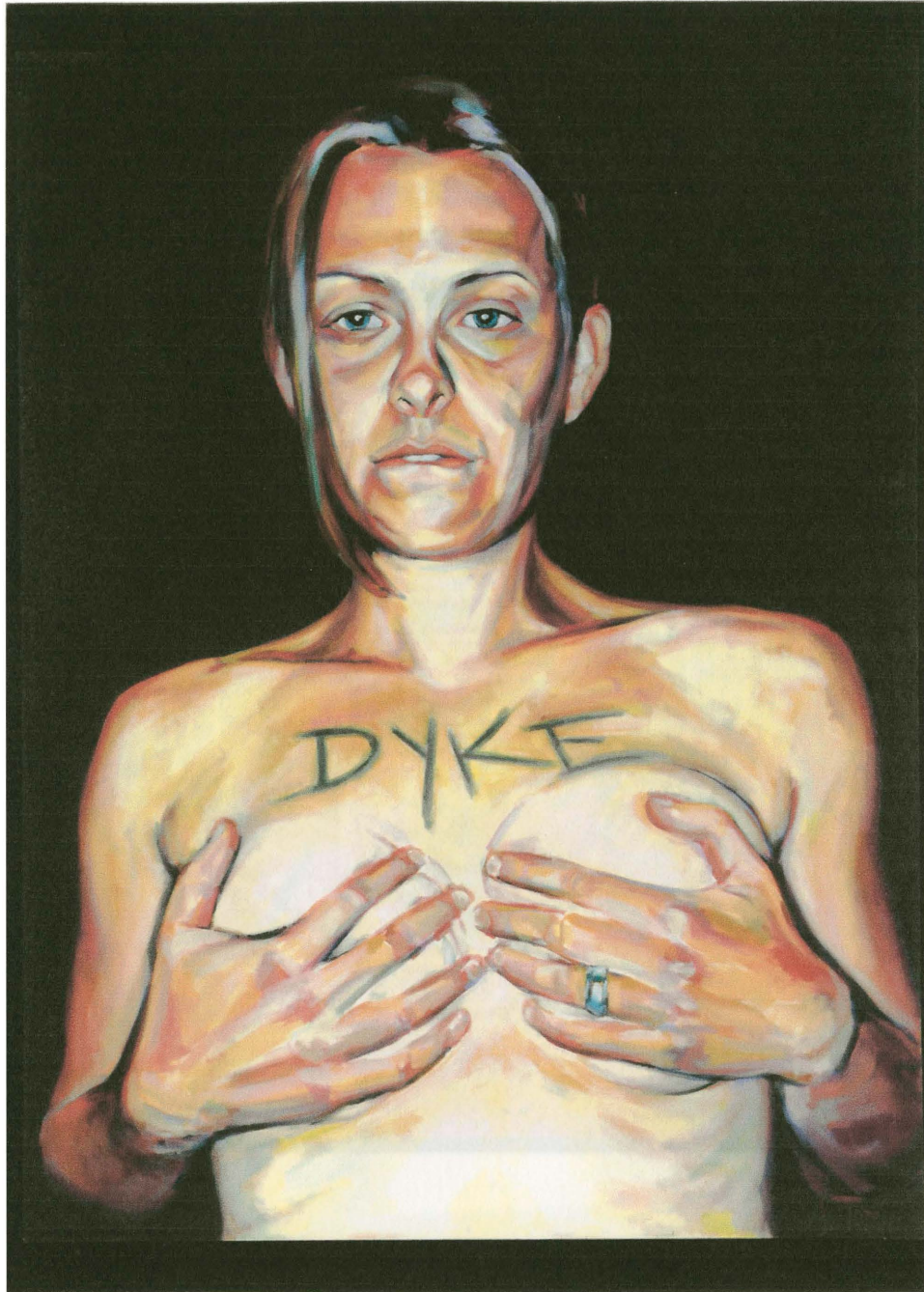


Fig.5, Labeled, oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2004.



Fig.6, Perverted Fruit, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 2004.

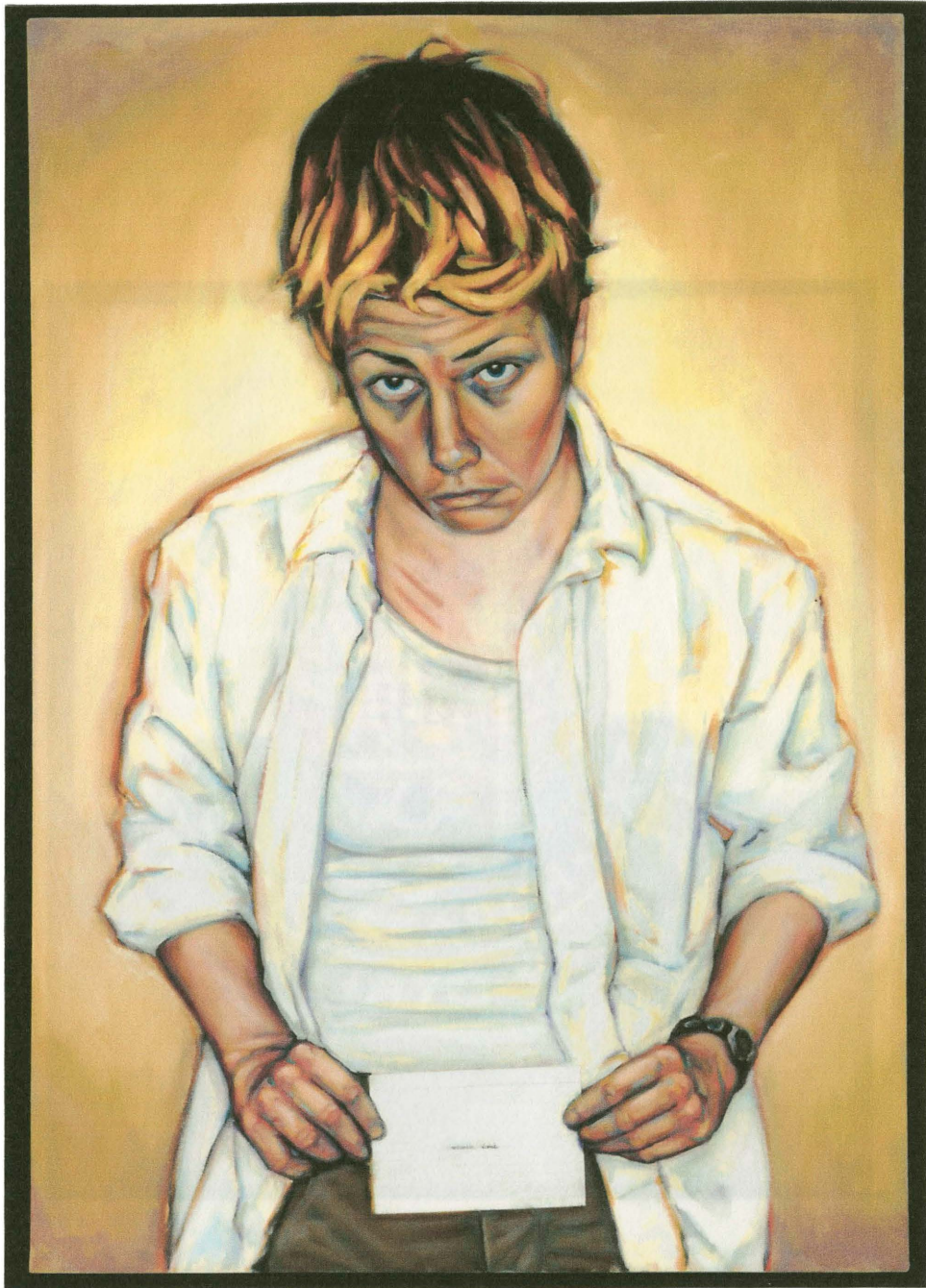


Fig.7, A True Story: Erased 100 Times or More, oil on canvas,25" x 36",2005.

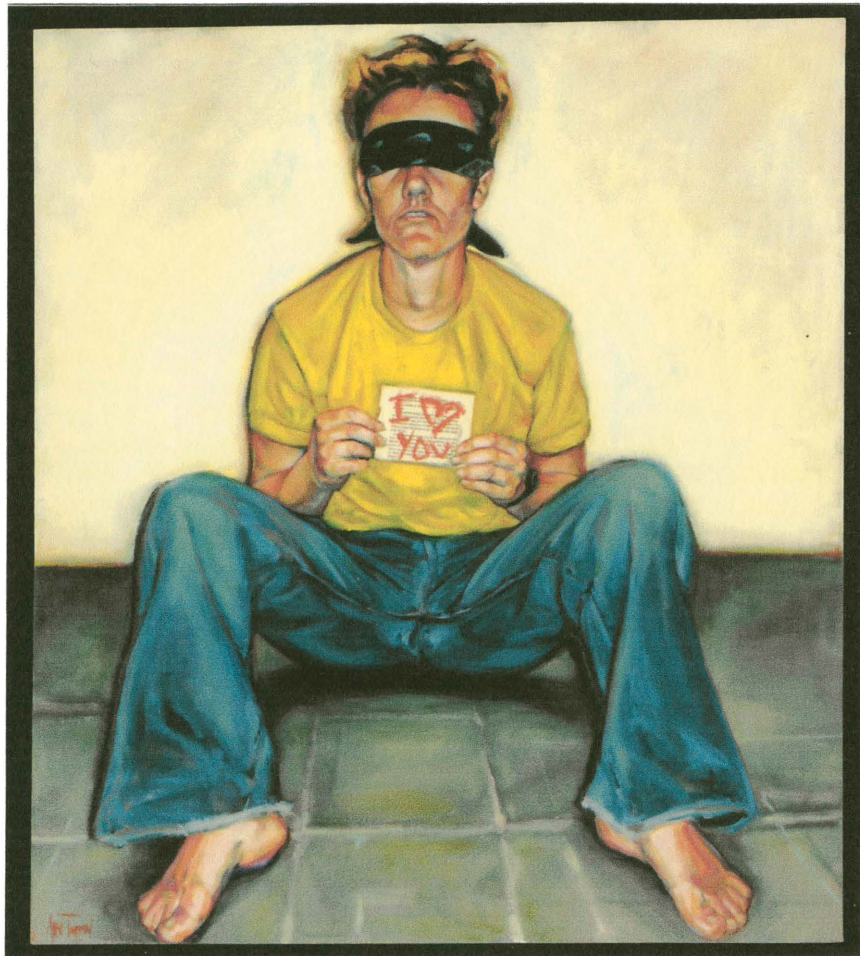


Fig.8, To Whom it May Concern, oil on canvas, 42" x 48", 2004.

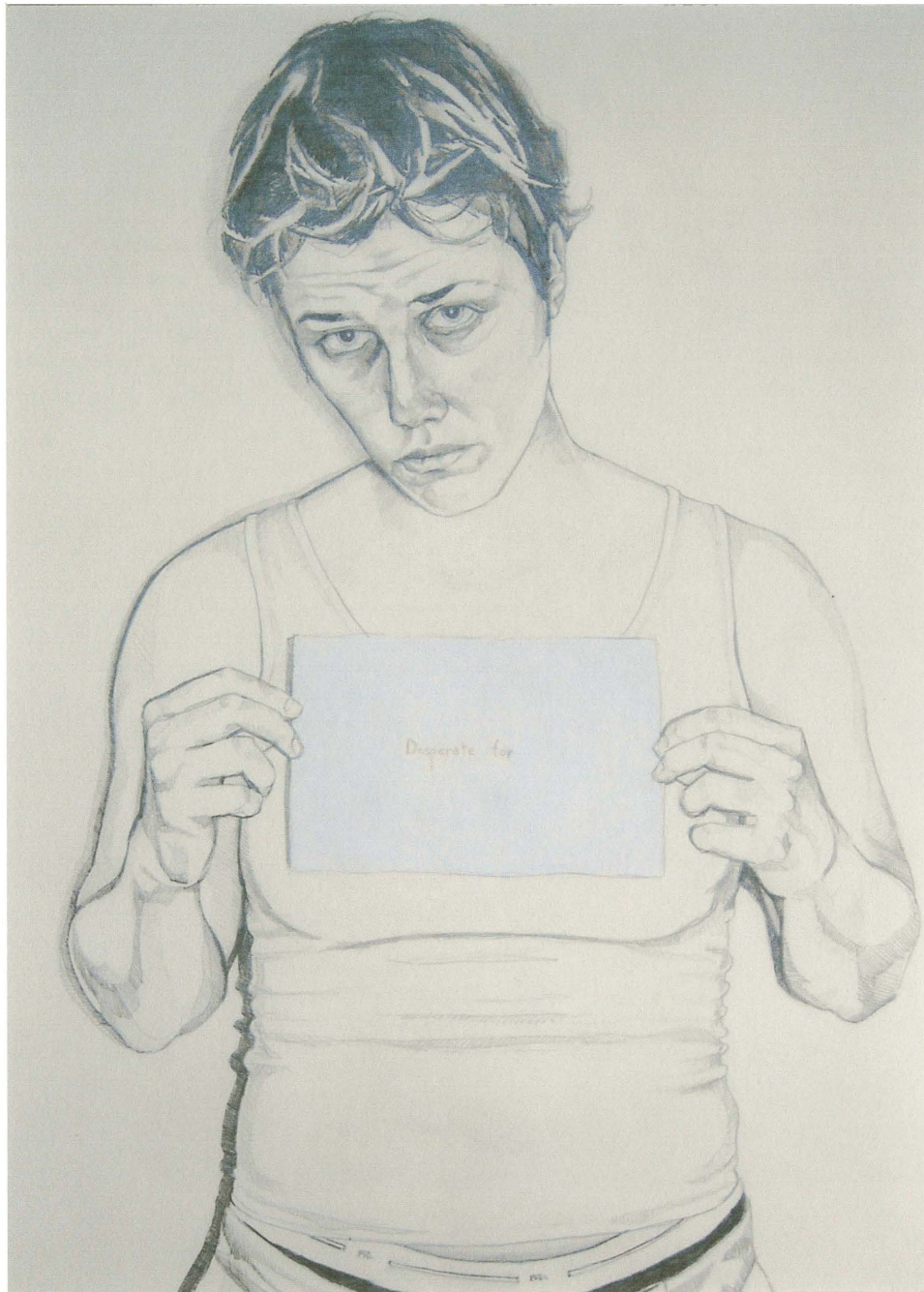


Fig.9, Someone Who Looks Like Me, graphite on paper, 24" x 36", 2005.

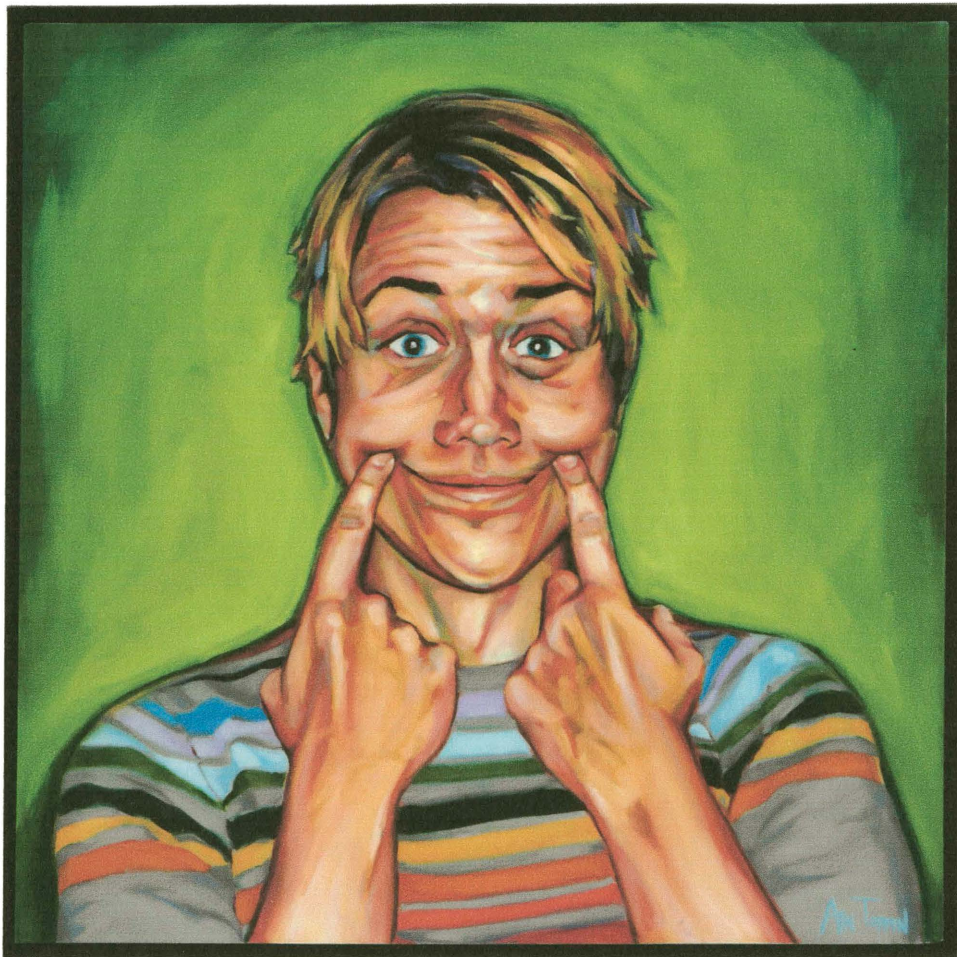


Fig.10, Happy, oil on canvas, 24" x 24",2005.



Fig.11, Rain Coat, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 2005.

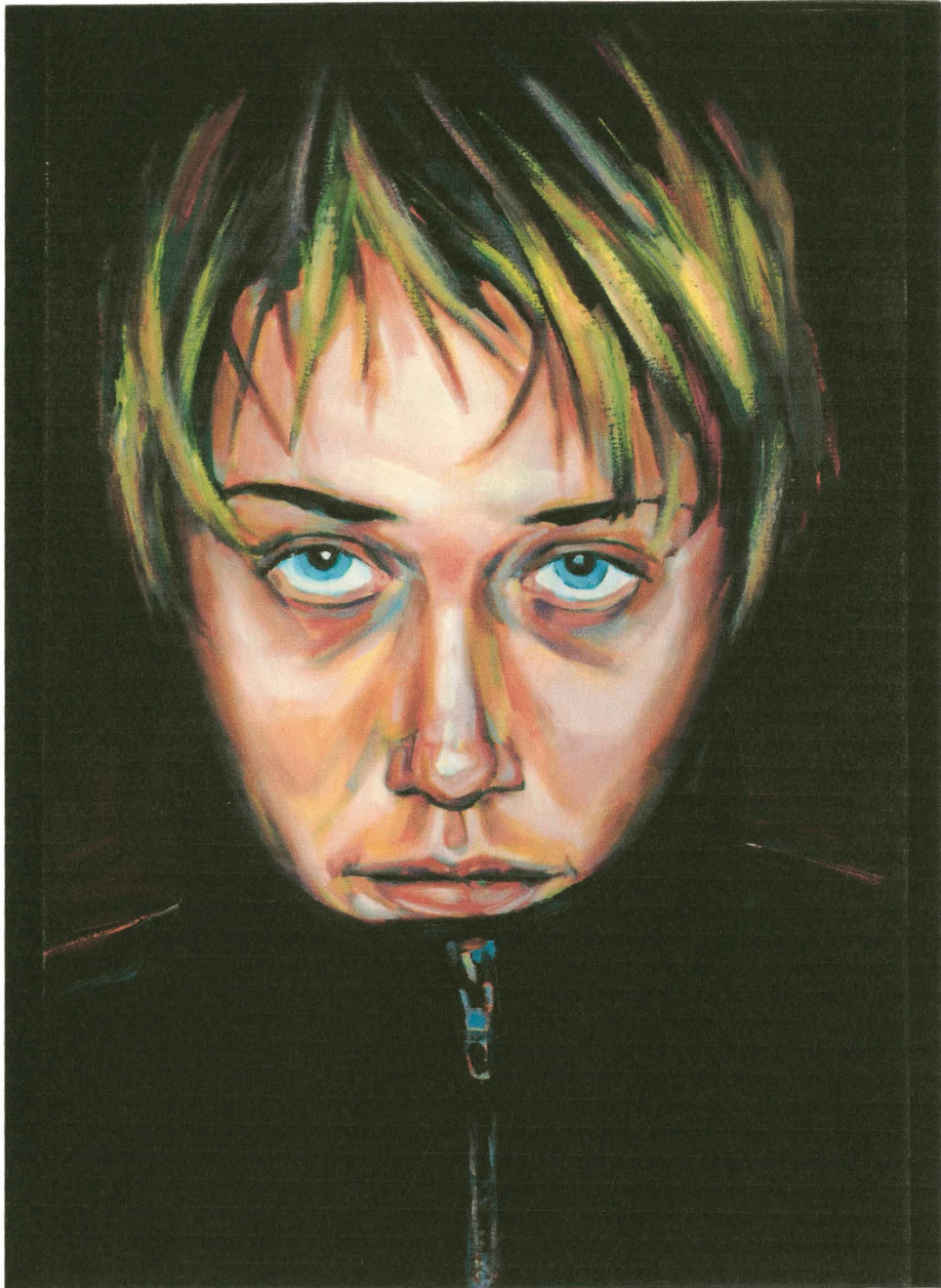


Fig.12, Obscure Vanity, oil on canvas, 16" x 24", 2005.

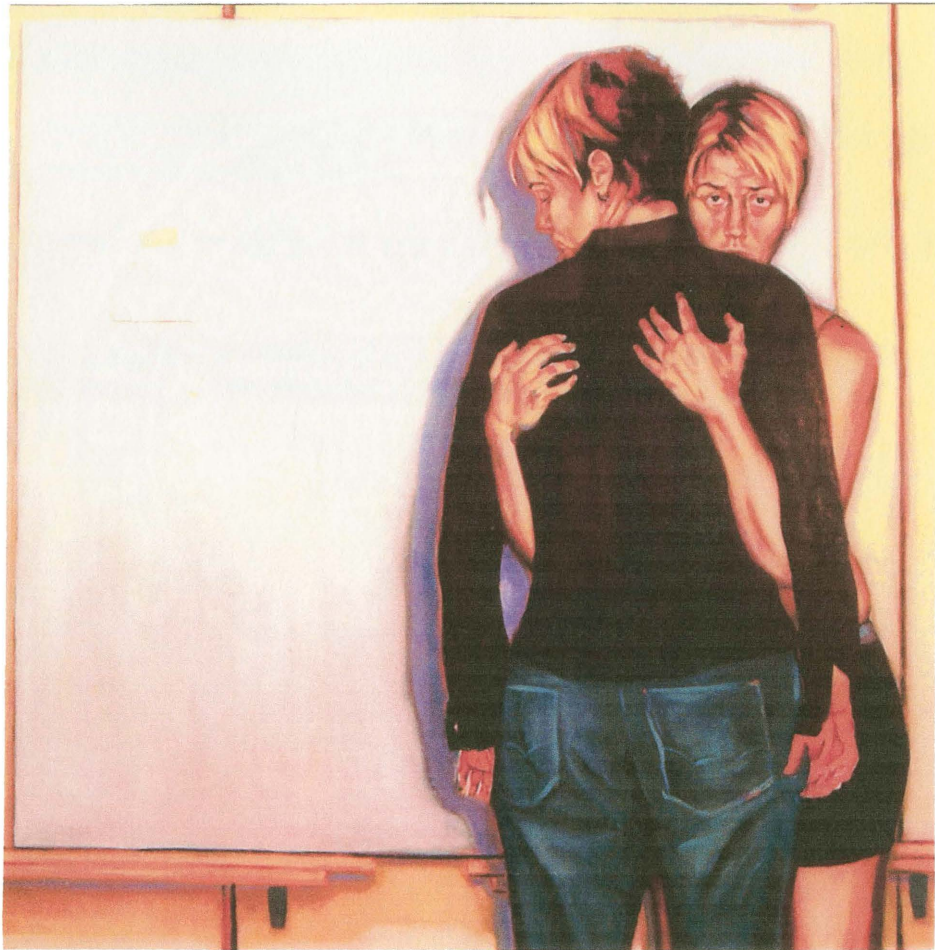


Fig.13, The Muse, oil on canvas, 72" x 72", 2005.

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