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Everyday Haunting

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EVERYDAY HAUNTING

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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By Thomas John Condon Jr., M.F.A.

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: Sonali Gulati
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This document outlines a journey of self-exploration, discovery, construction and destruction. It is a story of learning, a testament to impermanence, and a proposal for possibility. The words and work contained in this document are exclusive to the thoughts and actions of one man that hopes to share with others.

This document was created in Microsoft Word 2004 for Mac, Version 11.2.

Before I Act

Before delving into the choppy waters of whom I am and what it is that has brought me to this point, there are two short stories that must be told. Both of these events have been instrumental to my development and growth as an artist.

Interestingly, neither of these events happened inside the studio, the institution, or the gallery. In fact neither one have anything to do with art what so ever, but they have everything to do with my growth as an individual and as an art maker.

The first of these two events happened to me when I was 15 years old. By this point in my life I had already involved myself in the beginnings of my experience as an artist. My childhood had been spent drawing clown faces for my own amusement and the attention of my mother. Once in high school, my first elective chosen was always an art class. On a very juvenile level I was visually aware of my surroundings and my ability to record them by hand. I realized that I was much better at completing the assignments for drawing class than Algebra.

The First Story

One fall afternoon my family and I were visiting my Grandmother's house for dinner. I had a headache and asked my Grandmother for some Tylenol. Not thinking there was much difference she gave me Aspirin instead. My Mother had never given

her children Aspirin to avoid Rhys Syndrome. Six months later it was discovered that I was exceptionally allergic to Aspirin.

For the six months that followed, I suffered mysterious symptoms that eventually became life threatening. My body was acting as though I was allergic to everything. Hives the size of dinner plates and extreme swelling were ravaging my body. Multiple allergy tests had been executed showing that, with no known provocation, my body had suddenly become allergic to almost everything. I spent days were spent feeling ashamed of my physical appearance because my face would be so swollen that I looked like a bright red turnip had replaced my head. Nights were spent sleeping upright because of a swollen throat or tongue.

Treatment of these symptoms was an extremely heavy dosage of steroids. Although the steroids helped control the swelling and hives they caused rapid weight gain. Within three months my body had gained almost 50lbs. After many failed attempts the Doctors finally tapered my body off of the medication. They informed me that because of the high dosage and length of time that my body had become addicted to the medicine. While on the Steroids my immune system had effectively shut down. If I became sick my symptoms would be extreme. I fell ill shortly after.

In one month beyond other serious ailments my vision had deteriorated from perfect to tunnel vision to intermittent bouts with complete blindness. After multiple visits to different hospitals I was diagnosed with a disease called Idiopathic Pseudotumor Cerberus. Exactly what causes this disease is unknown, however it usually only develops in women of child bearing age. As a result of being weaned from the steroids

my body had started producing too much cerebral fluid. So much that the pressure on my optical nerves had become too great for them to continue functioning.

As a last ditch effort I was administered a spinal tap to relieve the pressure on my brain, optical nerves, and spinal cord. This procedure caused me more pain than I thought I would ever experience. Within 45 minutes of the procedure being completed I began to regain my eyesight. Two years later and countless visual fields, eye exams, medications, and the constant threat of yet another spinal tap, I was released from the care of my Doctors.

The Second Story

A friend of mine had just transplanted herself from the city to the country. She had decided to take her family's offer of a rent-free farmhouse in the middle of rural Maryland. Her house-warming party included 10 kegs of beer, multiple DJ's, bands, equipment, a portable dance floor, and one Chow Chow named Hayden.

Early in the evening Hayden had a disagreement with a mother cow. Enough blood was drawn to require the leashing of Hayden but the party continued. As the night proceeded the party grew and the dog stayed leashed. Being a dog owner, I kept close attention to where and what Hayden was doing. Eventually I suggested to my friend that I take him for a walk. She was busy showing her new dance steps to friends, which did not include a dog leashed to her arm. My suggestion was welcome and Hayden and I were off.

This walk was for Hayden. I followed his steps. After hours of being leashed to many people of varying levels of intoxication I thought he would enjoy some

exploration on his own terms. The evening was well lit by a full moon and the now distant light of the party. Hayden and I moved from barn to bush soaking in the growing silence of our adventure. Suddenly Hayden took a sharp left and headed straight into a completely dark garage.

The next memory I can recall is standing outside the structure where Hayden had stuck himself apologizing to my friends. Friends and onlookers, watching with horror, asked me if I was okay. My thoughts were clouded and my answers were unacceptable. My friends lead me back to the farmhouse and into the bathroom to clean me up. Upon looking into the mirror I realized that I had missed something big. My face was covered in blood and dirt. Hands were meticulously picking large and small rocks out of my face. Questions were being asked of me pertaining to who the President was, what day of the week it was, what happened on September 11th 2001, and what my name was. The only answer I could provide was how sorry I was. I knew that I had caused some disturbance in the mood of the party and I felt horrible. The partygoers decided that I would be fine with the exception of the cuts covering the right side of my face. I was put to bed with a glass of water and left for better times.

By 5:00pm the emergency room doctors had surmised that due to my fall I had broken both of my arms in multiple areas. The scaphoid bone in my left wrist had been crushed rendering my dominant hand useless. My right elbow and fibula had been broken as well. Severely bruised kidneys caused internal bleeding and my skull had been cracked. Memory of the exact chain of events eluded me because of the trauma to my head. For the next eight months my arms were entombed in fiberglass casts.

Eight months of complete dependence upon someone else. I could not feed, drive, clothe, or bathe myself. If I wanted to go in or out of any door, with or without a knob, I required assistance from someone else. During those eight months I had a lot of time to think about how fragile life is. I thought about the experiences of losing my eyesight completely and then having it returned, breaking my arms almost beyond repair, and requiring an electronic shock bracelet to sonically encourage my bones to grow. Two hundred and forty eight days of contemplation, re-thinking, self pity, aggravation, dilution, sedation, construction, and destruction. My life was still moving forward, slowly, without the use of two arms.

If in one moment, a moment I am still not able to recall, my life could change so drastically, I thought; what might happen next? This question is understandably unanswerable, but the realization of its implications and possibilities is awe-inspiring. In retrospect I believe that these experiences have taught me more than I realize. I still discover lessons derived from those periods. More than anything I have learned about impermanence. Possibility and chance have become friends of mine. Depending upon what I have now to carry me forward is of little comfort. The ability to adjust, adapt, and reposition myself to be able to work in the unknown is priceless. In Vik Muniz's Reflex A Vik Muniz A Primer he states, "The factors that contribute to a person becoming an artist have nothing to do with when he starts – they have more to do with when everyone else stops." (Muniz, 10) I have learned to work with what I have.

Materials are Fleeting

In High School my main mode of art making was Photography. As an undergraduate, I found that I could not take any photography classes unless I was an Architecture student. Since I was not interested in studying Architecture, I felt backed into a corner with no creative outlet. It was then that I decided to take a painting class, a new practice that I found intoxicating. Learning to paint was similar to the magic experienced in the darkroom when printing for the first time. I was slowly learning a new craft of self-expression. For six years I feverishly pursued this new world. Painting allowed me to make beautiful objects that spoke to emotions connected with childhood. Exclusion from a real space, either by my hand or my imagination, was depicted with expressive marks, empty spaces, and single figures. Stretching to lengths of 15ft. and heights of 8ft. my paintings were beginning to demand not only space, but also a certain care and attention to their well being as objects. From their audience, these objects elicited feelings of sadness, elation, loneliness, and safety. I felt as though I had found my way of giving birth, letting parts of myself live on their own away from my protection. These paintings also allowed me to step back and understand parts of my own experience externally. The personal gratification of creating what felt to me as some sort of external entity was consuming. (Fig. 1-3)

In my sixth year of practicing as a painter I fell 18 feet onto a concrete floor (The Second Story). Walking away from that accident with two broken arms, two bruised kidneys, and a cracked skull, I had no idea what lay ahead. As a painter, I was unable to continue working with the materials I had grown so fond of. Even after the casts were removed, my left wrist, while repairing its self, had produced a bone spur that prevented total mobility. Being left handed and usually working on large surfaces with oil paint kept me from returning to my learned mode of creation and expression. I desperately searched for any way to continue making art. It was at this point that I moved towards collage. Theoretically, the formal aspects of collage related to my experience of being and transforming. To make a collage you must destroy one image in order to construct another. This was exactly what was happening to me as an artist. It was as though the painter had to be torn up before another kind of artist could emerge.

Rationalizing working in this manner was difficult. When I made a painting the object seemed to retain a residue. The paintings seemed to have a little bit of me left in them. The marks I made on the canvas conveyed a sense of presence. Residues of the artist's movements across the surface were magnified by traces of my hands movement. At the same time they were very clean. I painted very thin so that the surface would remain as quiet as the tooth of the canvas. Collage had always been a rough way to work out ideas before executing them. The product usually looked unfinished and naïve. To bring this type of work into a gallery had never been an option. I took pride

in the skill of craft that was present, and controllable, in my paintings. Working with glue, scissors, and paper made me feel like a glorified scrapbook mom. However, at this point, two of my arms were being held captive by protective fiberglass. My left arm was wrapped from my armpit to the tips of my fingers. My right hand was free but terribly unskilled. Eventually I was able to train it to perform crude tasks. Out of desperation to continue working a pair of scissors and uncountable photocopies became my new paintbrushes. Wood panel and Rabbit Skin Glue became canvas. There was no stretching or construction, just a trip to the hardware store and a helpful sales person. Even though my left hand was locked still, I was able to place large objects between my exposed fingertips. After much trial and error oversized Oil Sticks and poured or dripped paint became pencils. During those 8 months all the materials that I had grown so fond of transformed. It wasn't that they were gone; I just couldn't use them effectively.

This transformation was difficult and painful but also rewarding. (Fig. 4-6) By working through this obstacle I learned an invaluable lesson. Restricting my work as an artist to one medium was in turn containing the breadth of work that I was capable of producing. By diversifying and increasing my skill level in multiple areas I was also increasing possibilities for new directions in my work. In a sense I was expanding my vocabulary. Now I was able to speak with more confidence and eloquence through my art.

There is no guarantee that my body or my tools will be in the same state tomorrow as they are today. By losing what I thought defined me as an artist and a

person required me to redefine who I was and what I did. Had it not been for the urgency to continue making art paired with the seemingly insurmountable obstacle of my physical disability I would probably still have limited myself to stretch canvases and work with oil paints.

Having moved from one medium to another with an open invitation to the challenges as well as the rewards of this act, I decided to return to Photography in graduate school with refreshed and renewed enthusiasm. While in graduate school, I have sewn self portraits, digitally scanned my body, painted, worked with different types of encaustic and papers, printed larger than life images from photocopiers, experimented with burning various photo papers, assembled multi-layered collage paintings and managed to use a camera with all of these processes. With each new process investigated, I introduced new possibilities into my work. With each new material came a new set of problems. How could I affect an un-mounted fabric in a similar manner as a photograph? Could encaustic take the place of oil? Is a scanned or photocopied image as versatile as a negative? Each of these questions demanded, if not a clear answer, focused attention. By constantly moving from one material to another I was sharpening my skill, not as a painter or photographer, but as an artist. This practice in its self has become vital to effective communication with my audience and myself.

Today I work with an antiquated Photocopier. This allows me to rework an image countless times before ever making a decisive mark, or considering the final product. Also, by using this machine I feel more connected to the actual making of the image, as opposed to sitting in front of a computer and watching a program manipulate

digital information. However, its machinery is quickly deteriorating. The next time I walk into the studio it may not work. Digital cameras have outdated my analog camera. The film I am most fond of is no longer being made. A certain type of paper that allowed me critical success is no longer available. All three obstacles are not only challenges to me as a craftsman but also as a thinker. There is no certainty in the physical.

Don't Forget to Breathe

Repetition has become an integral component of my process. By concentrating on one act at a time I am able to direct my attention to precisely control my actions. Skills are kept sharp by constant practice and repetition. When entering the studio to work I try to achieve a quiet hum. This is not to imply that my studio practice includes Zen inspired breathing techniques, but rather a constant and steady flow of energy and production. For the past two years, my work has become inextricably linked to the use of an antiquated photocopier. This machine has allowed me to explore abstraction through uncountable acts of image making. With every push of the copy button I quickly load a single piece of paper and ready my hands for the light to move across the lens. When the light begins its trek across the glass my hands push and pull the image being recreated. By following the light of the photocopier I am able to stretch, twist, mirror, and bend any image into a new representation of the one in hand. A single image could be worked with for hours. Generations of the first image begin to form an expansive extended family of the original. "To copy is to extend the symbolic value of an image by suffusing it with new technology, thus updating its rhetorical approach. To Copy is to use the past as a tool, an elevated base on which we can build the future." (Muniz 69) One distant relative of another image may become of specific interest to my eye.

This selected piece will then be pushed through another distortion by rotating the paper from side to side and repeating the same process. While moving through this practice the image begins to create it's self. Line transforming from abstraction of image to a woven pattern of mirrored marks that barely resemble the original. Through this act of distortion I am visually addressing the disparity between our public and our private self. My thoughts turned towards the difference between our self-image and the images that others see when they look upon us. At one point in my life I lost over one hundred pounds in one year. At the end of that year I was constantly showered with compliment on my new body. When I looked in the mirror I still saw the image of a man that was very over weight. I could not reconcile what I saw with what others saw. By distorting line drawings of the figure I am able to speak to the mental disconnect between self and other, specifically dealing with body image. They also become referential of wallpaper or elaborate prints on fabric, while at the same time remaining a simple photocopy.

During this process of working with the image I move into a quiet space that is shared by my machine and myself. It is in this space that my hands start to move at their own will. My eyes move over print after print searching for a combination of marks that require further investigation. My subconscious may speak louder than my conscious in this space. This quiet area becomes a safe space to explore and expand the territory of my thought process and actions.

Fire Dragon/Black Snow

A month before my thesis show, while working in my studio, I caught on fire. Once again, within 20 seconds I was transported from one end of life to the other.

I moved from a distant quiet place where I was acting as a single cell. Functioning alone guided my action, physically and mentally. Breath moved in and out of my body slowly. Below me lay a single sheet of paper printed with an image of myself as a child. The surface stretched to the length of ten feet. A small, slightly dysfunctional, kitchen torch extended its potential from my left hand. Flame poured out of the spout with a soft hiss. Earlier in the day I had painted the sheet in a mixture of wax, blue pigment, and turpentine. Smothered to satisfaction the surface was ready for its next transformation. As the flame approached the paper, the wax seemed to cringe in anticipation. Painted textures sunk into the paper with the passing of my hand. Melting into puddles and then reshaping into craters that were only truly visible with the aid of touch. Robbins egg blue swam beneath my hand and froze solid in its absence. Soaking into the paper, the stained wax transformed the surface from light reflected in white to a transparent mist. Never challenging its creator, the fire that rose up from the surface was timid compared to its parent. Under the constant surveillance of my breath

the paper stayed cool while heat was applied. Flame danced across a floor that stretched 400 times what my breath could control. With each surge of heat my lips puckered, waiting for their call to action. Drawing air in to ready my lungs became mechanical. The relationship between my self and my work was lucid. Without either part the whole would be lesser. I touched and it responded. Energy undulated rhythmically between figure and ground.

As suddenly as the first spark ignited the gassy breath of the hand torch, the dance between the image of myself and my physical self ended. A small pocket of turpentine had been sealed beneath the surface of the wax. While the torch melted through its protective layer the turpentine exploded with an unexpected force. One flame after another rose up in defiance. My breath no longer held domain over this experience. Now it was the fire's turn to take the dominant roll. I would follow its lead. Seemingly aware of its newfound power it lunged at me. Flames leaped four feet in the air. It was as if my art was warning me to step back before it became too powerful. Immediately my free hand began to pound on the fire. Wild with excitement the flames dodged my hand refusing to be controlled. Seemingly annoyed by my advances the fire began to grow from my hand. With the wax acting as its host my hand was now coated in the burning angry art. I watched as my body fell into a bath of flames. All of the physical energy that had been placed upon the surface of my reflection, to slowly release with each new visitor, was reclaiming its self. My work and my image were

being burned out of existence. Within seconds a vigilant studio mate had grabbed the unlighted end of my image, run up the stairs towards the exit, and thrown it out of the studio. Another few seconds passed and the whole event was over. The comfort and trust that I had enjoyed only seconds before was now floating up into the air in the form of ash. Weightless black and grey flakes of charred paper drifted through the air, denying the assumption that it was ever mine to begin with. Lost inside the ash was the image of me.

Something Better

With the open ended promise of this being the art of the new, the art that crosses the boundaries of the institution and slides below the radar of those funding, Post-Studio art has claimed a territory so large that it has become difficult to see the edge. How exciting it has been to become an art cowboy! Constantly challenging convention, not only wishing a freedom found outside the white cube but demanding it. Trading in my paintbrushes for a blowtorch, cameras for photocopiers, glossy venires for soiled paper. I hold a camera phone in hand and a Kinko's charge card in my pocket ready to ride off into the unclaimed land of 21st century art. With a strong wind of lawlessness at my back, I have become a rebel of the institute free to run in any direction. No history/baggage slows my ride into the possibility of expression. The only weight that heavies my load is locked away somewhere behind my eyes, for use in case of emergency. What I steak as my own will be fair ground to fight on. Refuge may be found temporarily inside the arms of the established, but quickly thrown away for the dream of autonomy. Support/funds and love/recognition may be sent from home/institution, but a Thank You card should not be expected. Explanations for my actions will not be needed in the uncharted hills of the post-graduate/Post-Studio art

world. I will define myself and lay my own rules of right and wrong. Although the world from which I came from is not so distant, its centuries of standards and expectations will not be applied. This Post-Studio artist will rule himself.

This view of the artist who employs a multitude of devices and techniques to create and communicate may be romantic but also a surprising reality. From Vic Muniz to Henry Darger to Duchamp our understanding and definition of art has been stretched and twisted in every direction.

There is a marked tendency among certain artists to move beyond years of deconstructionist critique to explore a similarly utopian impulse, to arouse empathy in the viewer through the communication of their own efforts to explore the liminal space between the conscious and the unconscious, the perceptible and imperceptible, the self and the other. (Schimmel, 30)

From experimentations with equipment to destruction of established theory art has been made. Child bearing nuns and inverted nipples bring us closer to hearing the artist's voice. Sigmund Freud drawn in Boscov Syrup and childhood toys as wartime photojournalism has revealed alternative stages on which to express artistic notions. The ever-expanding space of the internet and the digital revolution have prompted us to question any definition previously held of what it is that makes something a undeniable work of art. Parallels have been drawn and chasms opened all with the hope of making just a little more room for myself in the world of art.

Although easily connected to the institute, the post-studio artist will not share a history with any. Helplessly linked by it's physicality, to painting, sculpture and

photography the art object will continue to be viewed and judged by centuries of institutionalized thought and theory. The Post-Studio artist strives to break free from this world by refusing the confines of the easel, camera, and chisel, but most of all, the studio. (For the sake of argument, I define the artist's studio as a specific space that is confined to the sole purpose of an artist creating work, where one escapes the distractions of everyday life such as: unpaid bills, phone calls, needy pets, etc.)

It is at this point that I find myself shifting in my seat. I am not suggesting an attitude of Pluralism.

–No one was ever satisfied with pluralism as a concept: it may well describe the absence of a single prevailing style, but it does not describe the presence of anything. A critical concept that embraces everything imaginable is not of much use. (Grundberg, 6)

I am proposing a letting in of fresh air. The possibility of something else, new practices and ideas, makes my mouth water with hope. The comfort of the has-been and already done seems stifling. What was once a safe place for understanding and judging is now riddled with questions and misconceptions.

The VCU Fire Safety Engineer's Report reads:

“Today we had a fire alarm caused by a student using turpentine on a picture and then using a blow dryer to dry the picture. As the student discovered, blow dryers and turpentine together cause big problems with fire. Please do not allow this practice to continue in the facility. If this is necessary, then the proper facility must be used, i.e., accomplished inside an approved hood system. By this note, this practice cannot be allowed.”

Thanks

Freedom from the studio may not be the second coming of an art deity shining new light onto a world of established mildews and molds. Post-Studio cowboys/girls

might have more ties to the land from which they came than I have alluded to. The studio may continue to be referred to as a sanctuary for the emerging and seasoned artist. But the possibilities that lay outside our chosen discipline open the door to the unknown. Although the sun has melted the wings of Icarus it has not stopped giving.

Direct, unmediated confrontation with the source of light means, paradoxically, the death of vision - the clouding over of the eye that dares to look, that surrenders to the persuasion of desire over reason. (Lucier, 457)

Shouldn't this desire always precede reason? Is there reason in the heart of the artist? If we weren't brave enough to look into the sun, to demand the secrets of its power, could we still continue to walk forward?

Caught Looking

I grew up in a home that was attentive to the arts. Every holiday season my mother would take my sisters and I to a ballet. With each trip to our grandparent's house we would visit the Smithsonian Museums. When we were very young it was the Natural History Museum that captured our attention. Soon we graduated to the National Gallery. It wasn't long before I discovered the East Building. I would spend long quiet moments staring at the Rothko's. Andy Warhol seemed to be some sort of advertising rebel that happened to slip into the collection by mistake. Next to a wall sized painting by Sigmar Polke, Campbell Soup Cans seemed dry and boring.

As a young student in painting I admired almost any work that was related to the Black Mountain School. It seemed that every artist that emerged from its program was an unmistakable individual. Their art had an energy and spirit that invited imagination and hope. Pop Art sparked my interest with its plastic colors and slogans of Americana. German Expressionists pulled at my soul with their grey skies and scraped out forms and faces. However, I was inspired and driven by just as many influences outside the art world.

The young artist cannot be trained by theory and history alone, just as no one can learn to swim by watching the Olympic games. The gift of transformation occurs at the precise instant one feels a complete connection between the hands and the intellect. Practice doesn't make perfect; it makes practical. (Muniz 89)

The smart design of Rave flyers reminded me of a contemporary interpretation of Russian Constructivism and Pop. My eye became so sharp that I was able to tell what city held the party just by the style of design. Street posters and band flyers showed a minimalist ideal of black and white communication. Along with design, the actual experience of these sub-cultures moved me towards my own expressions. Listening and moving to music became the dominant force behind my creative energy for over a decade.

There is a particular relationship between music and ecstasy, a relationship that has been evoked and used in most cultures since the earliest rituals. Music and sound affect our bodies and emotions on a primal and immediate level, perhaps because they are related to the dark and blind experience of the womb, modulated only by the rhythm of a mother's breathing and the sounds filtering in from without. (Christov-Bakargive, 144)

It was in this world of sound and energy that I found a space yet undefined by reality. Filled with emotion and flamboyance the nightclub was a place to become someone or something else. Protected by the flashing lights and the communal beat of the music I was free to perceive a new reality.

Since the hallucinatory narratives of Hieronymus Bosch, the artistic dialogue between the external world and internal perception has revolved around the inner workings of the unconscious mind in relation to the visual perception of three-dimensional space. (Iles, 153)

The list of artists and thinkers who have influenced me is exhausting. To pick just a few names and assert why they are more important than others would be outside of who I am and how they have effected me. I am informed and enchanted by looking. Any other type of information does not supercede visual information. I learn by looking. Here is a short list, in no particular order of Artists and writers that have

greatly influenced my art and my thinking. I will couple some of these individuals in groups according to how they have influenced me.

Franz Kline, Phillip Lorca Dicorcia, Edward Ruscha, James Rosenquist, Takashi Murakami, Fred Tomaselli, Alex Katz, David La Chapelle, Ray Kass, and Mark Rothko have taught me about color. Donald Kuspit, Susan Sontag, Janet Cardiff, Andy Grundberg, Myer Vaisman, Vito Acconci, Arthur C. Danto, John Cage, and M.C. Richards have all affected me with their thoughts and writings. Hieronymus Bosch, Andy Warhol, Gilbert and George, Christian Boltanski, Barbra Kruger, Tim Hawkinson, The Stanr Twins, Mark Ryden, David Salle, Yayoi Kusama, Ida Applebroog, Glenn Goldberg, Sandy Skoglund, Henery Darger, David Carson, and Arturo Herrah all influence my thoughts on design. Andreas Gursky, Vic Muniz, Gerhard Richter, Kiki Smith, Kara Walker, Gary Schneider, Joan Fontcuberta, Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, Pipilotti Rist, Sigmar Polke, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Tansey, Eva Hesse, Anselm Kiefer, Francesco Clamenta, Leon Golub, Jenny Saville, Rachel Whiteread, Henery Darger, Irwin Worm, Arthur Tress, and Douglas Gordon show me that there is more out there than I have yet realized. As a post script I would like to submit that almost any of these names could be interchanged with another and still hold true.

Can you see my Refraction?

For the past two years I have had the considerably privileged opportunity to contemplate what I thought was the other. Not focusing on myself as the young artist but the thoughts and actions of the socially/mentally disturbed and those of the child. These two completely individual experiences can not be truly shared without realizing the chasms and bridges between both. Both of these groups experience the world in front of them as a new experience. Their respective lack of experience or inability to retain and learn makes each moment an object of wonder. Both stand outside the confines of society.

The mental state of the socially dejected, either by consequence of one's own hand or the hand that was genetically dealt, is one of confusion and awkwardness. The disturbed do not look to the outside world for validation of their own reality. Their eyes are turned inward in search of a peace that is not found in the outside world. Outside functions as a distraction or disturbance upon their struggle for clarity. As the ultimate savage, unresponsive to social structures, this group may produce a skewed reflection of reality unlike those of the Expressionists. The work of Henry Darger, Ray Johnson, and possibly van Gogh are examples of this disconnect with convention and society at

large. All three artists show a reflection of the external that has been distorted by their untethered connection to any real social structure.

The mindset of a child is equally untouched by society. This newness is not a malfunction on their part but a condition directly related to time. Each day presents a child with new experiences. One object after another is placed before them in to foster growth and learning. Each child's interaction with these objects is unadulterated by convention. A delight in the unknown and excitement for what comes next is fully intact. It is not until social exercises and group dynamics come into play that a child starts to realize his/her extension into the world beyond their own. With age, playing dress-up becomes gender specific and imaginary friends leave home. The Tooth fairy morphs from a cherubic grandmother with wings to a masked man with a screaming drill. With each moment of demystification a child moves farther from their drunken state of wonder.

Both of these mind sets have provided me with countless opportunities to re-examine what it is that I call reality. By attempting to place myself in the land of the unaffected I invited new connections with myself and the outside.

To be childlike was the only way of renewing one's sanity in an insane world, even if the child's sanity has something insane about it from the adult perspective. The child's world is hardly as insane as the adult world, and its insanity is tempered by delight in life. The dialectic between the delightfully creative child - it is a dialectic between social pathology and individual health - drives and shapes modern art and society. (Kuspit, 138)

The first body of work that I presented while in Graduate School was based loosely around the experience of watching my Grandfather fall prey to Alzhiemers. As

the disease developed his mind began to distort and reorganize his past experiences. Some of these were events that were shared by both him and I. Listening to him recount what had happened earlier that day was like watching a kaleidoscope's colors unfold. I knew the base colors but was unsure of how they might combine and collide. Attempting to bring this confusion of the real with the constructed to my work was difficult. I arranged photocollages as though I was caught in a game of Memory with myself and the memories of my Grandfather. Using a combination of glue, wax, sandpaper, and fire I attempted to age the images that I had constructed. (Fig 7-10) After many failed attempts to bring my personal experience with his elusive medical condition into the light for others to see, I moved on to something that I felt could be shared by all, childhood.

Each of us was a child at some time. Recallable memories stutter in time specific to the individual. No matter how small the memories are we all remember the first time we were effected by an external party. For some the first memories are that of elation connected to an accomplishment like learning to ride a bike. For others the most resonant memory lies in a darker space. The first time I was pointed out as the other is personally inescapable. After being ridiculed on the playground for my weight I took my first step away from the group. Growing in the care of my family I was constantly reinforced with positive energy. My parents were proud of me for who I was, not what I looked like. However, outside of the home I was left to fend for myself. My recovery from this first separation from the group is still an open project. Childhood scarring is some of the most damaging. At a young age a child has yet to develop

defenses for attacks from the outside. Their reasoning has not matured to that of an adults with the ability to qualify how others will effect them. It was in this feeling of the first that I was interested in investigating.

At the age of 20 I lost over 100 pounds in under a year. This physical change was incomprehensible for my mind. Although I was showered with compliments of how much better I looked I was unable to see this when I looked at my reflection in the mirror. Looking down at my body was still an act of shame and discust. Eventough my new physical appearance was being confirmed by the outside, I was unable to shake the years of social distance caused by my physical appearance.

My next body of work, that extended through the rest of my Graduate education, was an investigation into the disconnect between our own self image and the image of self that others are presented with. At the age of 20 I lost over 100 pounds in under a year. This physical change was incomprehensible for my mind. Although I was showered with compliments of how much better I looked I was unable to see this when I looked at my reflection in the mirror. Looking down at my body was still an act of shame and discust. Eventhough my new physical appearance was being confirmed by the outside, I was unable to shake the years of social distance imposed by my physical appearance. This lack of communication between the physically real and the unresponsive mentality of a socially abused man was confounding.

Through many experiments with distorting images of stock figures from an archetectual flash book I was able to visually approach the confusion I was experiencing. By dragging these recognizable images across a photocopier while

creating the reproduction I was able to stretch and mirror the human figure. The resulting images were recognizable but unsettling representations of what might be conveyed from one mind's eye to another. Some of the figures were placed into photographs of foreign locations. (Fig 11-14) Others appeared in a white void so that all investigation of image was left to the figure alone. (Fig 15-17)

It was at this point that I started to acknowledge that my inability to reconcile my physical appearance with my mental was due to the emotional scarring that I had suffered as an overweight child. Scarring became of special interest to me. I turned to a process earlier used to age an image. This time I used fire exclusively for its power of destruction and transformation. With the aid of a specific heat sensitive photo paper I was able to evoke brightly colored lines that resembled scars. This process was extremely exciting because each mark made was an unknown. The paper was slightly light sensitive, so over the period of 12 to 20 hours the color of the mark made by the flame would change in color. Color is the most direct way to control or invite emotional changes in the viewer's experience. Through color you can denote right and wrong, good and bad, danger and calm. (Fig 18-21) Unfortunately this specific paper was a limited resource. Even though I was enchanted by this new found technique I was excited to see if I could continue working in this manner without being exclusive with materials. With continued use of my photocopier I began to transfer large images onto paper with Acetone. To continue my use of color and reinforce the allusion to residual childhood experience I melted crayons onto the paper in bright, thick, clumsy lines. (Fig 22-24) Resulting from the various experiments with materials and processes

I am now printing larger than life images of myself as a child. Currently I am constructing a small army of, larger than life, 10 foot Toms. These are printed by a large format photocopier and then worked over with fire and wax. (Fig. 25-27) I plan to experiment with the installation of these images in various venues. The possibilities of working with large sheets of paper seem endless. I am confident that soon I will be directed towards another form of work that might better serve my purposes. Until then my exploration of process and material will continue to center it's self around the distant worlds of the socially distant.

Do Not Use A Hammer

I am just at the beginning. The words found on these pages have transformed from fleeting ideas, to post-it-notes, to complete sentences. Soon they will cover over with more notes and bigger ideas. All to be eventually shadowed by both victories and losses, are yet unknown.

It is this unknown that I find so compelling. In the time that has passed while studying art in graduate school I have been broken down and put back together. The construction and destruction was not managed or executed by any one party, however all the work was located to one site, myself. I am still riddled with questions and constantly looking over my shoulder for the next wave of unexpected ideas, energy and emotion. I feel no closer to any definitive answer to the questions I had upon entering the institution, but I do have more resources to draw from than ever before. Now it is time for me to put the pieces together. The puzzle that contains all the small fragments of what it is that I am to become is slowly transforming from a choppy mosaic to a solid, clear, readable image. It is at this point that I lift my eyes from myself to scan the area that lies in front of me. Although what comes next is unknown, I am hopeful. What I offer is fullness coupled with a wanting of more.

The possibilities that lay in front of my are not limited by medium, dialect, physicality, or even four walls. The expanse that my mind has traversed in two short years is surreal. Upon entrance to graduate school I was acting as a painter in photographers clothing. Upon my exit I don't believe that either of those terms encompass my work as an artist. While looking over it all at once, if that is even possible, my body fills with uncontrollable emotion. Sometimes it all seems too big.

New methods of working with encaustic and large sheets of paper have allowed me to be more prolific. When I install this work it almost functions as soft sculpture, not being confined to the walls or the floor. I am able to roll up my work and put it in the corner when I am done for the day. My space is not controlled by the size of my work. I look forward to finding new ways to show my work to the public. Residencies, grants, teaching, and fellowships are all waiting for my attention. Along with all this I must continue to make. I am proud to be an artist

All parts should go together without forcing. You must remember that the parts you are reassembling were disassembled by you. Therefore, if you can't get them back together again, there must be a reason. By all means, DO NOT USE A HAMMER.

(IBM maintenance manual, 1925.)



Figure 1 *Family Tree*, Oil on Canvas, 46"x38"

2000



Figure 2 *Unexpected Development*, Oil on Canvas, 72"x34"

2000



Figure 3 *Air Dry*, Oil on Canvas, 32"x48" 2000



Figure 4 *Mothers Day*, Mixed Media, 85"x28"

2002



Figure 5 *Sleeping Giants .001*, Mixed Media, 48"x48"

2000



Figure 6 *Sleeping Giants .002*, Mixed Media, 48"x48"

2000



Figure 7 *Hello, my name is MARY*, Photo, Fire, Rabbit Skin Glue, 48"x48" 2004

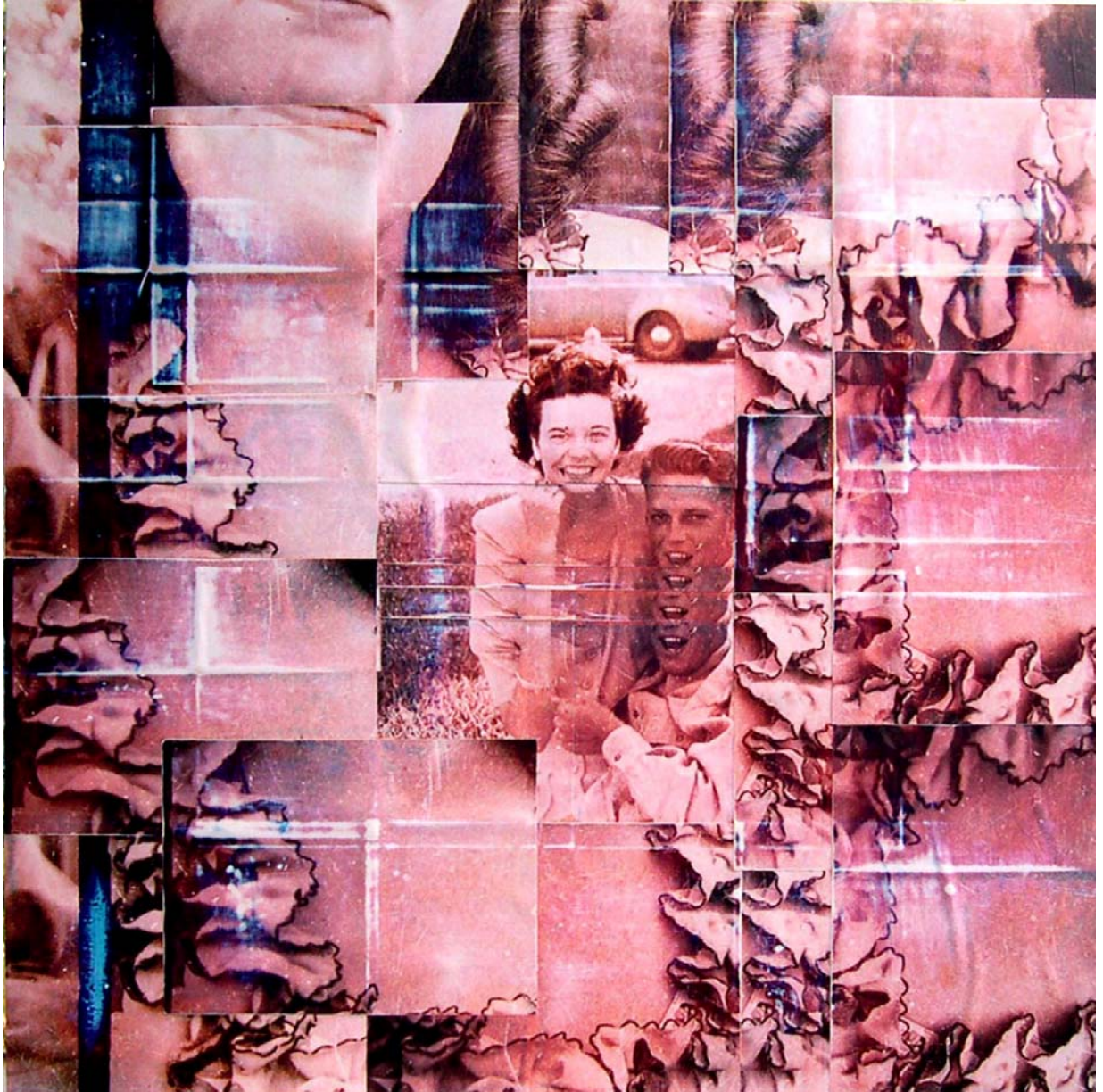


Figure 8 *Collecting Smiles*, Photographs, Fire, Rabbit Skin Glue, on Wood Panel,
24"x24" 2004



Figure 9 *Thin Veil*, Photograph, Rabbit Skin Glue, Fire, on Wood Panel, 24"x24"

2004

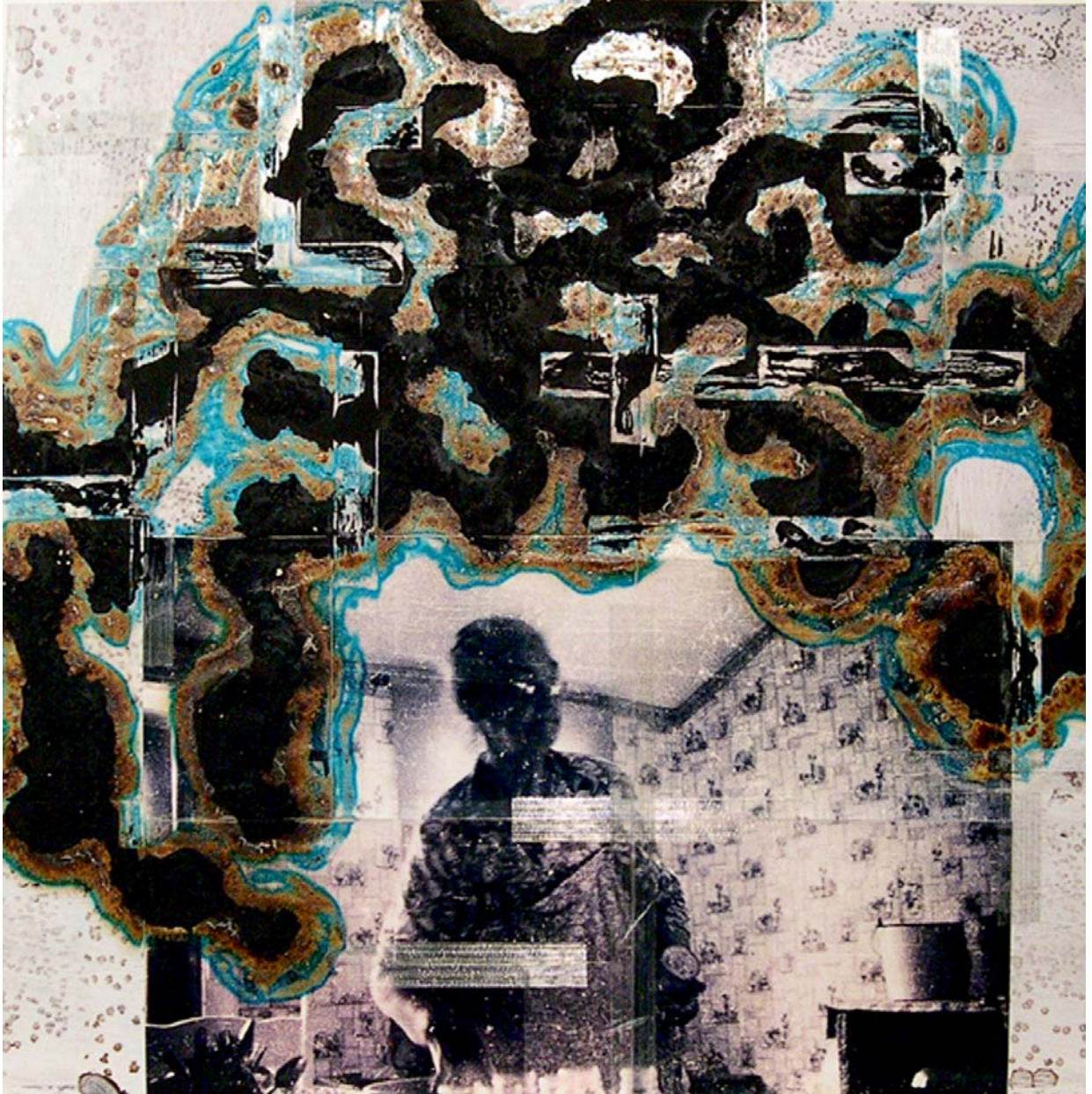


Figure 10 *Canning Prunes*, Photographs, Enamel Paint, Tape, Rabbit Skin Glue,
Fire, on Wood Panel, 24"x24" 2004



Figure 11 *Opportunities*, Digital C-print, 36"x24"

2005



Figure 12 *Family Vacation*, Digital C-print, 36"x24"

2005



Figure 13 *Palace King*, Digital C-print, 36"x24"

2005



Figure 14 *Souvenir*, Digital C-print, 36"x24"

2005

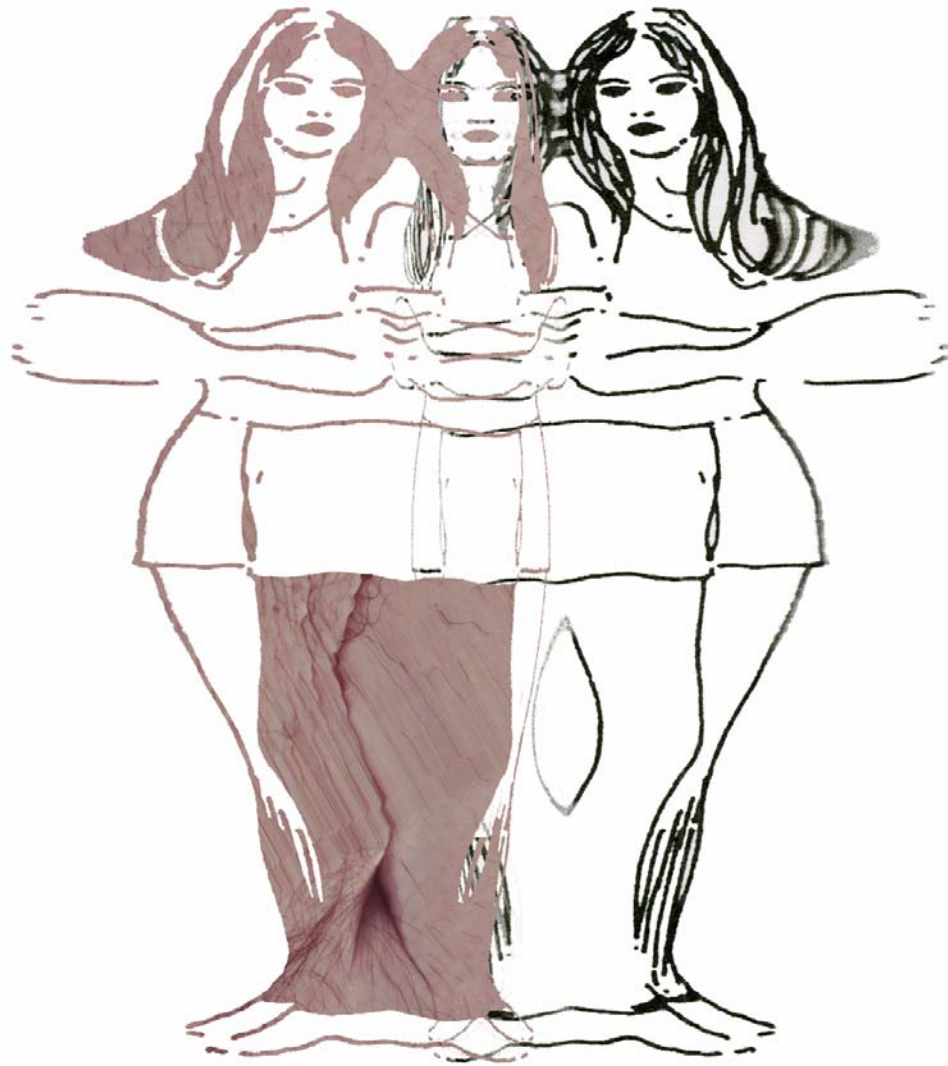


Figure 15 *Beside Myself*, Pigment Print, 10"x10"

2005

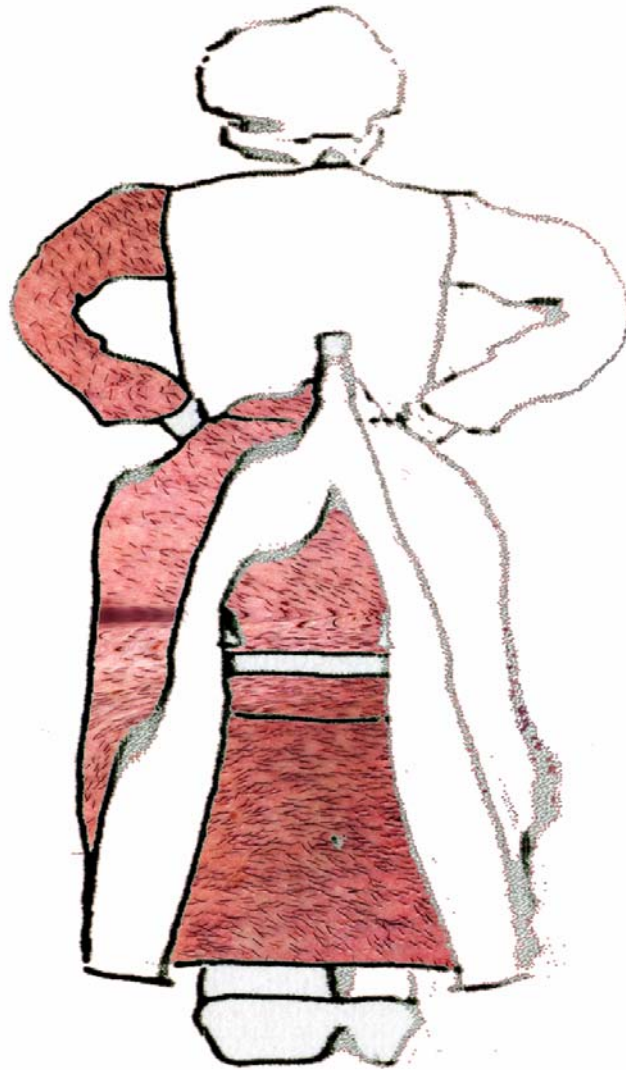


Figure 16 *Late Alarm*, Pigment Print, 10"x10"

2005

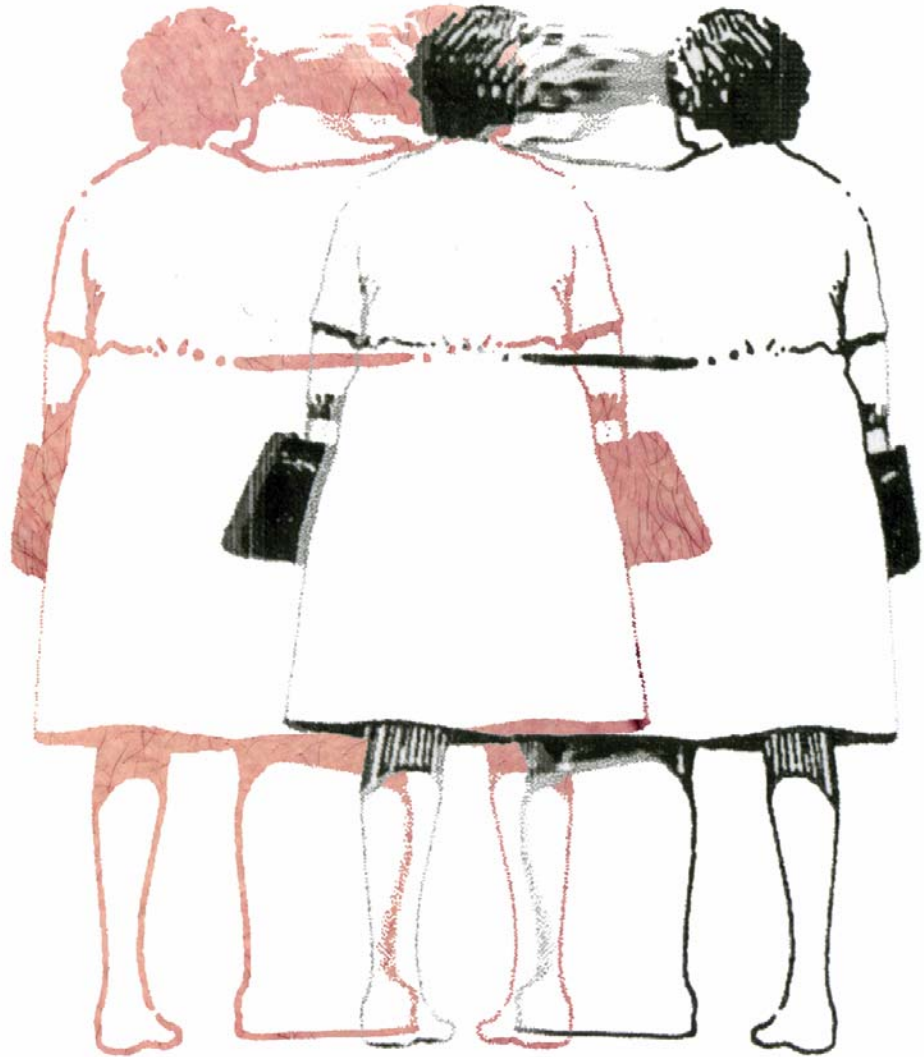


Figure 17 *What am I Forgetting.* Pigment Print, 10"x10"

2005

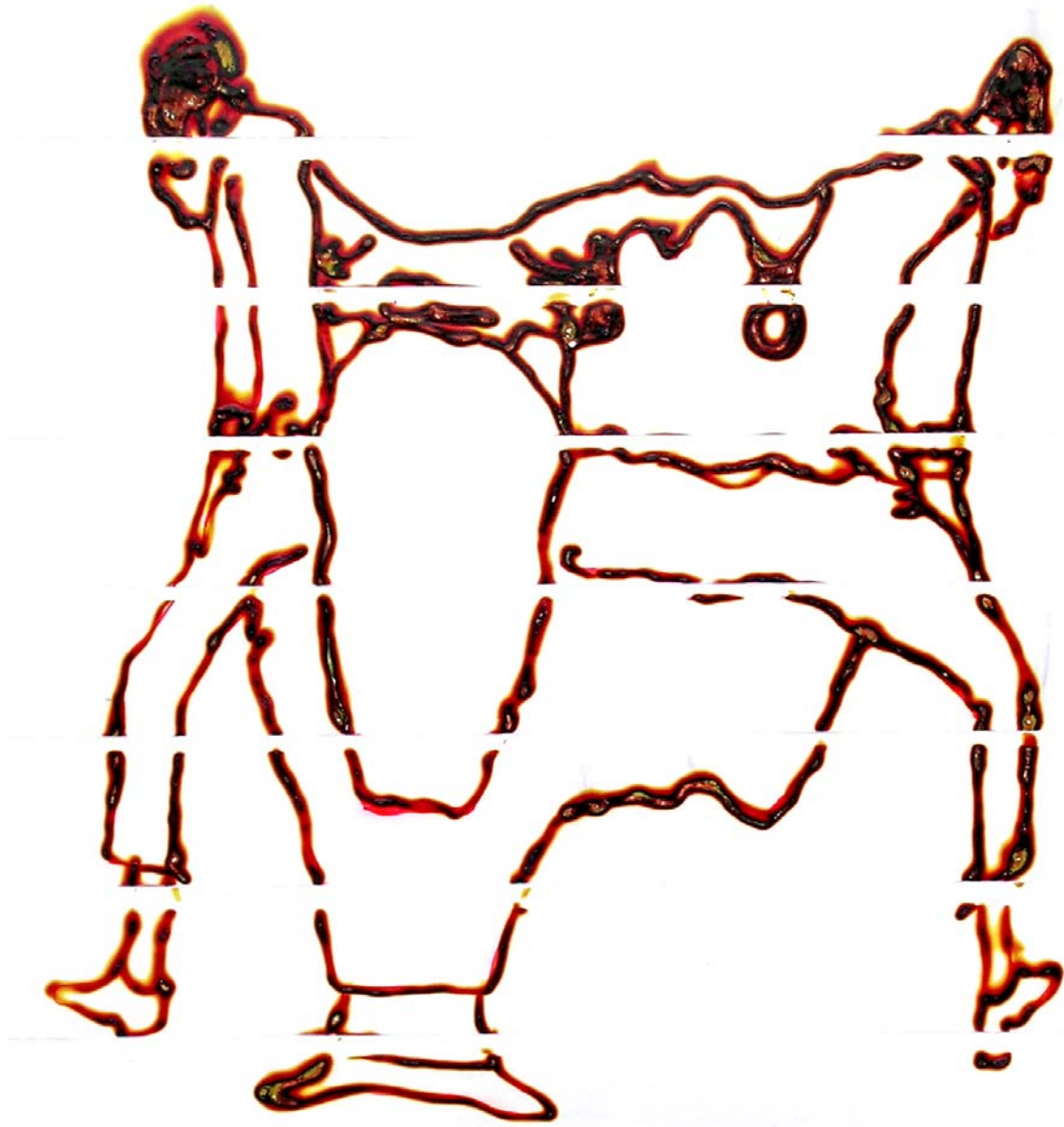


Figure 18 *Stepping Out .001*, Thermal sensitive Photo Paper, Fire, Rabbit Skin
Glue, on Wood Panel, 46"x46" 2005

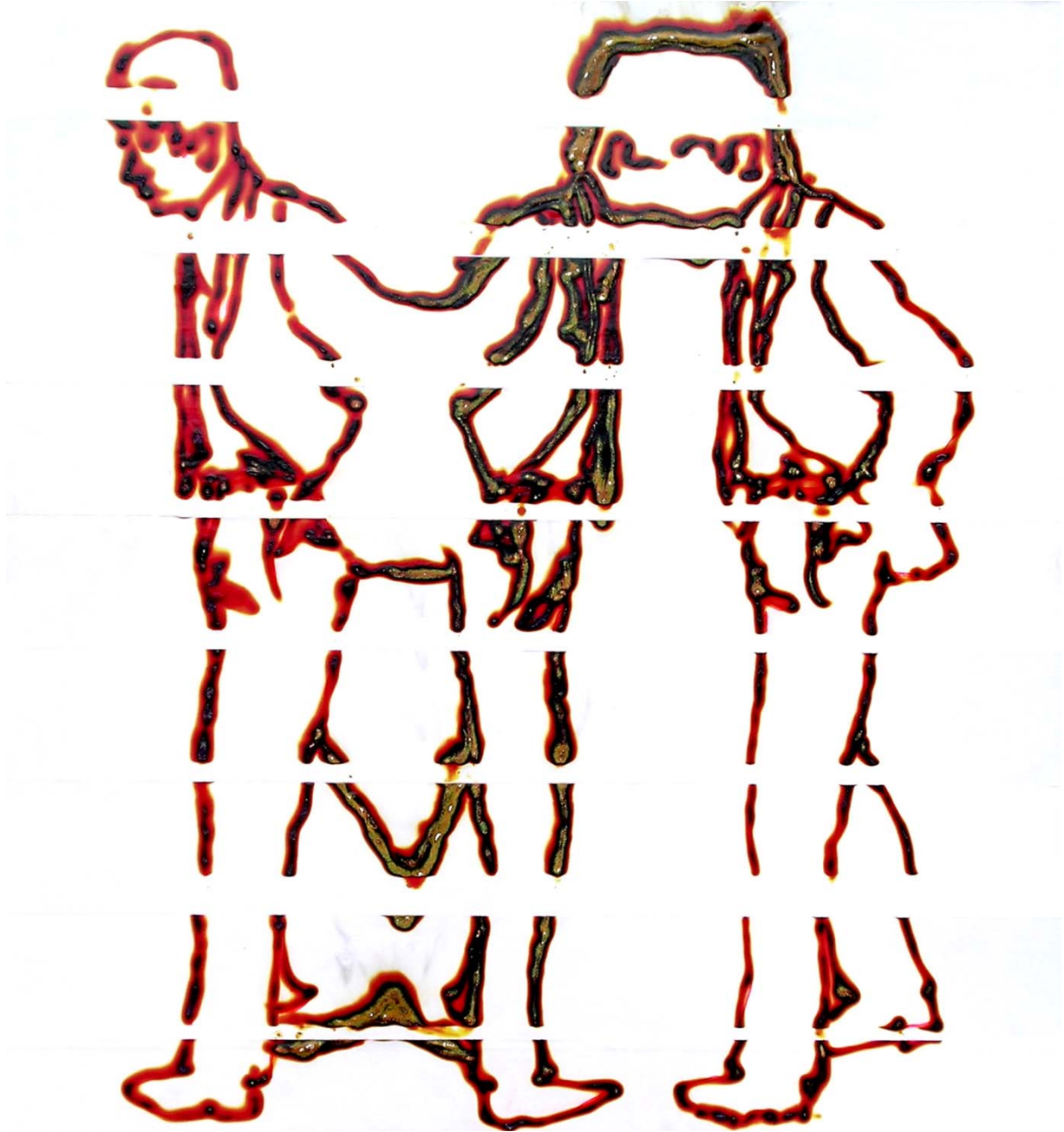


Figure 19 *Stepping Out .002*, Thermal Sensitive Photo Paper,

Rabbit Skin Glue, Fire, on Wood Panel, 52"x48" 2005



Figure 20 *Lunch Line*, Thermal Sensitive Photo Paper, Rabbit Skin Glue, Fire, on
Wood Panel, 38"x36" 2005



Figure 21 *Recess*, Thermal Sensitive Photo Paper, Rabbit Skin Glue, Fire, on Wood
Panel, 40"x36" 2005

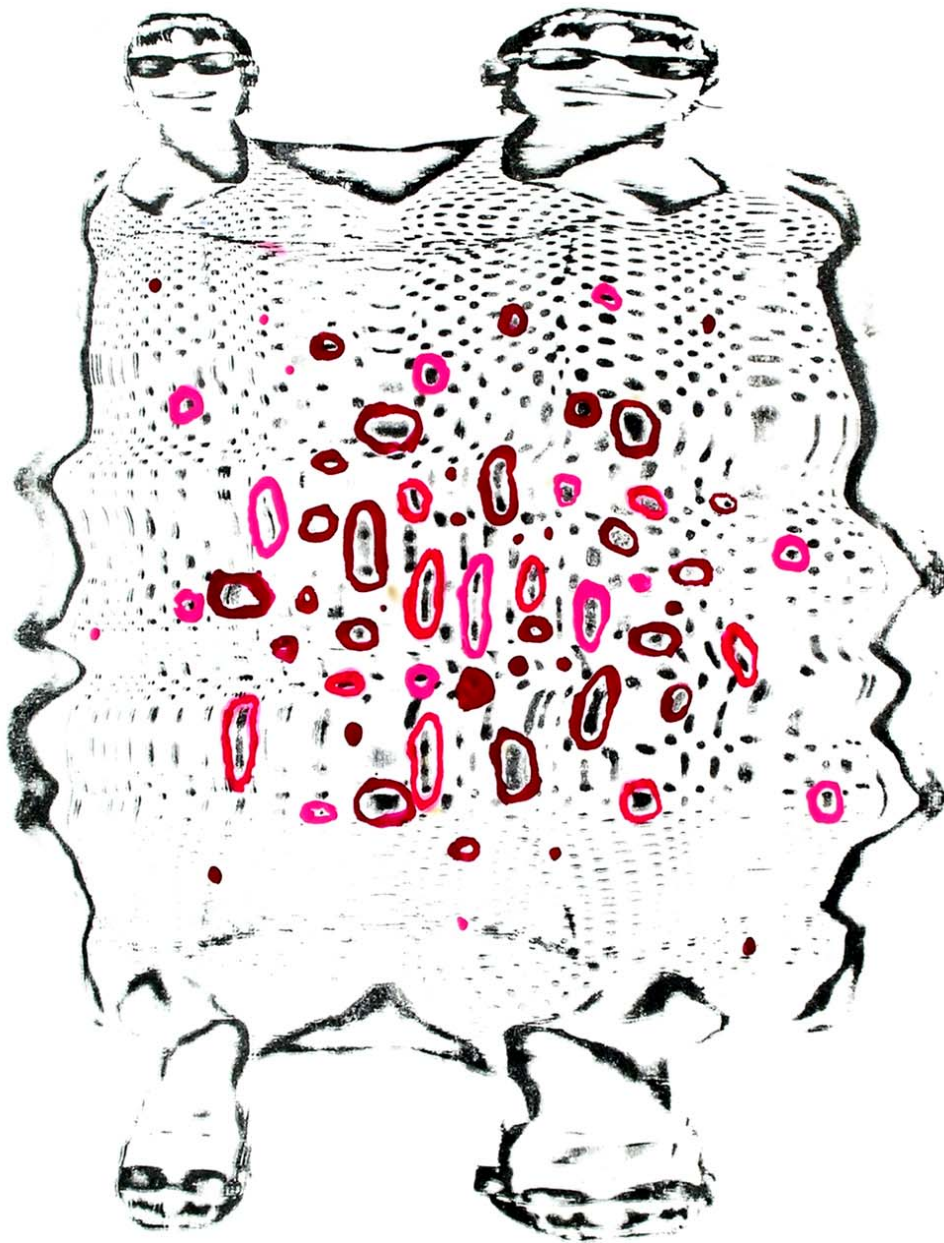


Figure 22 *Irresistible Kiss*, Photocopy Transfer, Crayon, on Paper, 24"x44" 2005

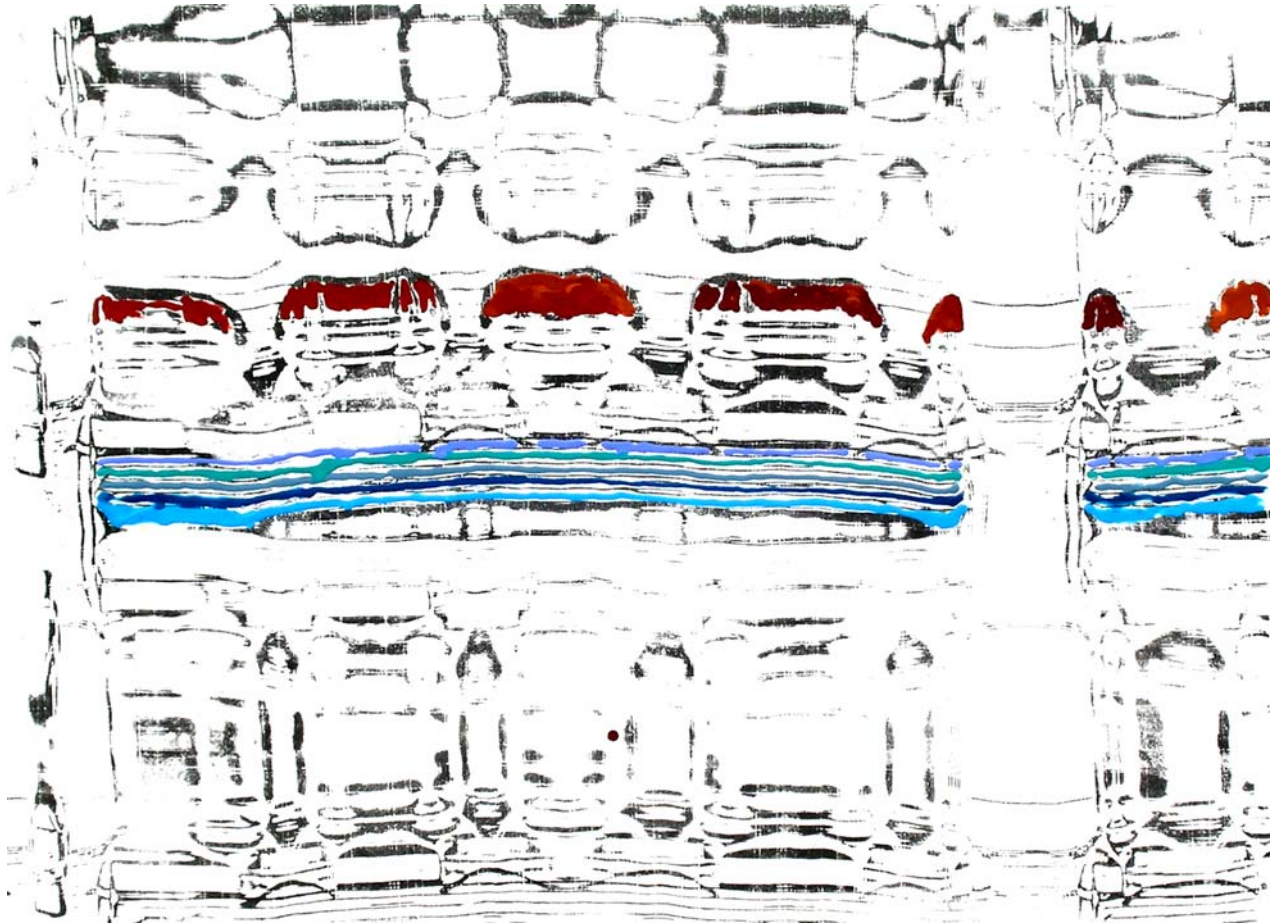


Figure 23 *Wild Blue Yonder*, Photocopy Transfer, Crayon, on Paper, 24"x44"

2005

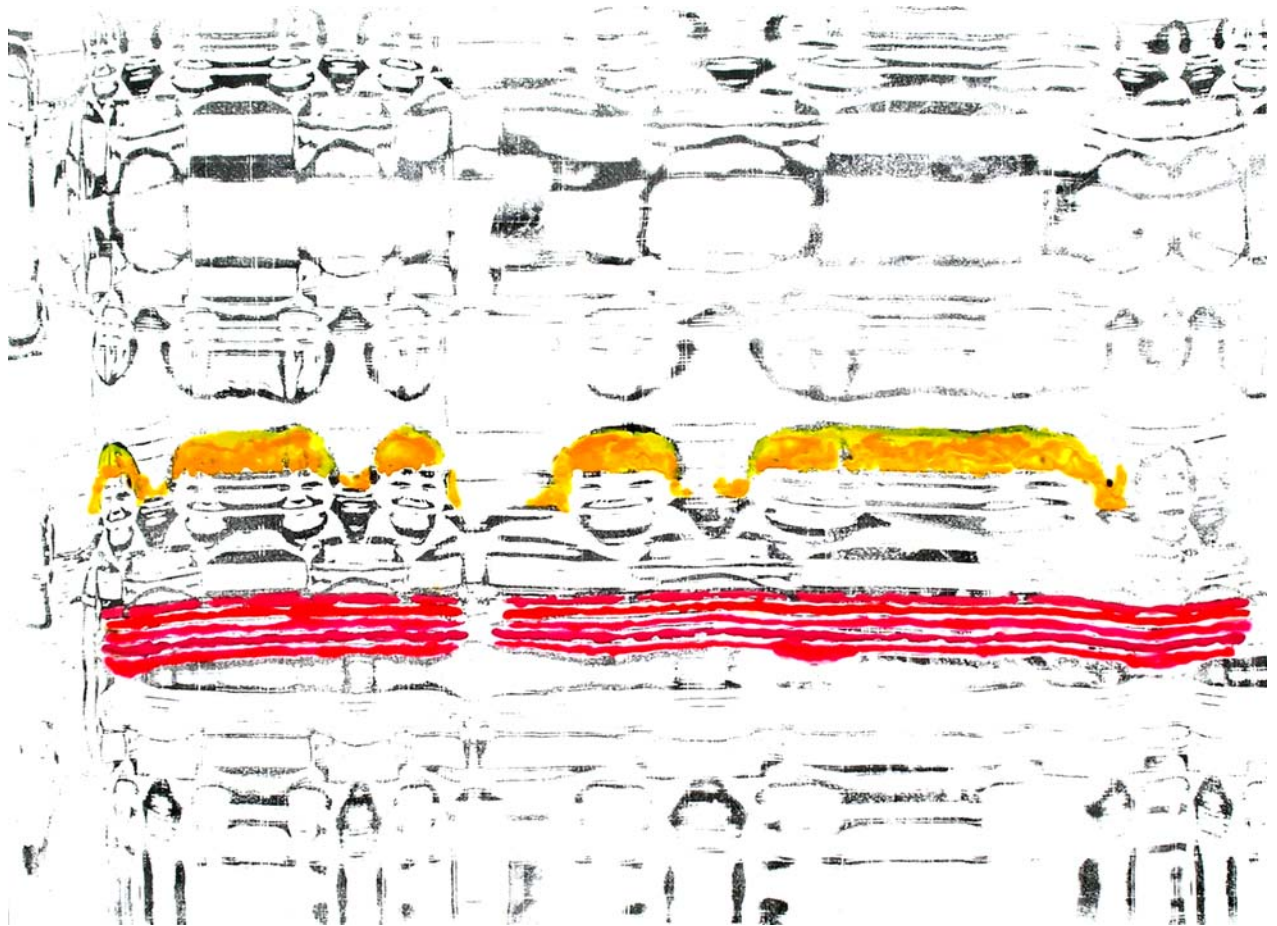


Figure 24 *Tickle Me Pink*, Photocopy Transfer, Crayon, on Paper, 24"x44"

2005



Figure 25 *Reading Out Loud*, Photocopy, Wax, Pigment, Fire, Installation View,
Each Panel 10'x3' 2006



Figure 26 *Reading Out Loud (detail)*, Photocopy, Wax, Pigment, Fire, 10'x3'

2006

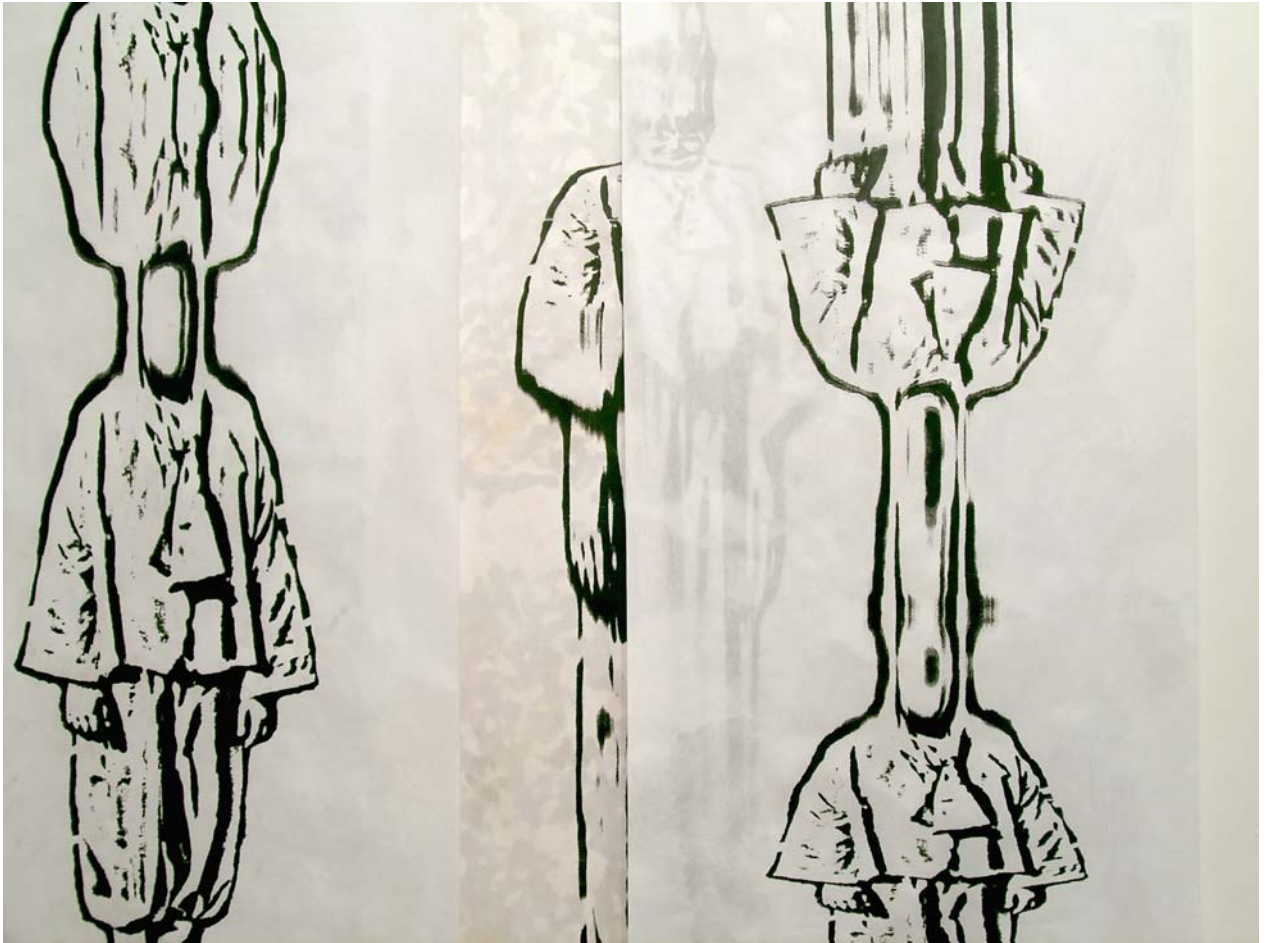


Figure 27 *Reading Out Loud* (detail), Photocopy, Wax, Pigment, Fire,
2006

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Vita

Thomas John Condon Jr. was born in Bath, Maine, U.S.A. in 1977. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts, concentrating in Painting, from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 2000. In 2006 he earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Photography and Film from Virginia Commonwealth University. Currently he lives and works in Richmond, Virginia.