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Dismemory: On history, the Southern imaginary, and abusing the visual record

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**Dismemory:
On history, the Southern Imaginary, and abusing the visual record**

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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Richmond, Virginia
May, 2012

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My thesis has been a labor of love, and there's no decent or sufficient way to show the gratitude shed abroad in my heart at the thought of my graduate experience, and the people who made it so challenging, enriching, and worthwhile.

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- Noah
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And finally: Cervantes wrote, "He who sings scares away his woes." For forty years, my mother and father have taught this lesson to anyone within earshot. This work is for them.

DISMEMORY: ON HISTORY, THE SOUTHERN IMAGINARY, AND ABUSING
THE VISUAL RECORD

By Matthew Pendleton Shelton, MFA

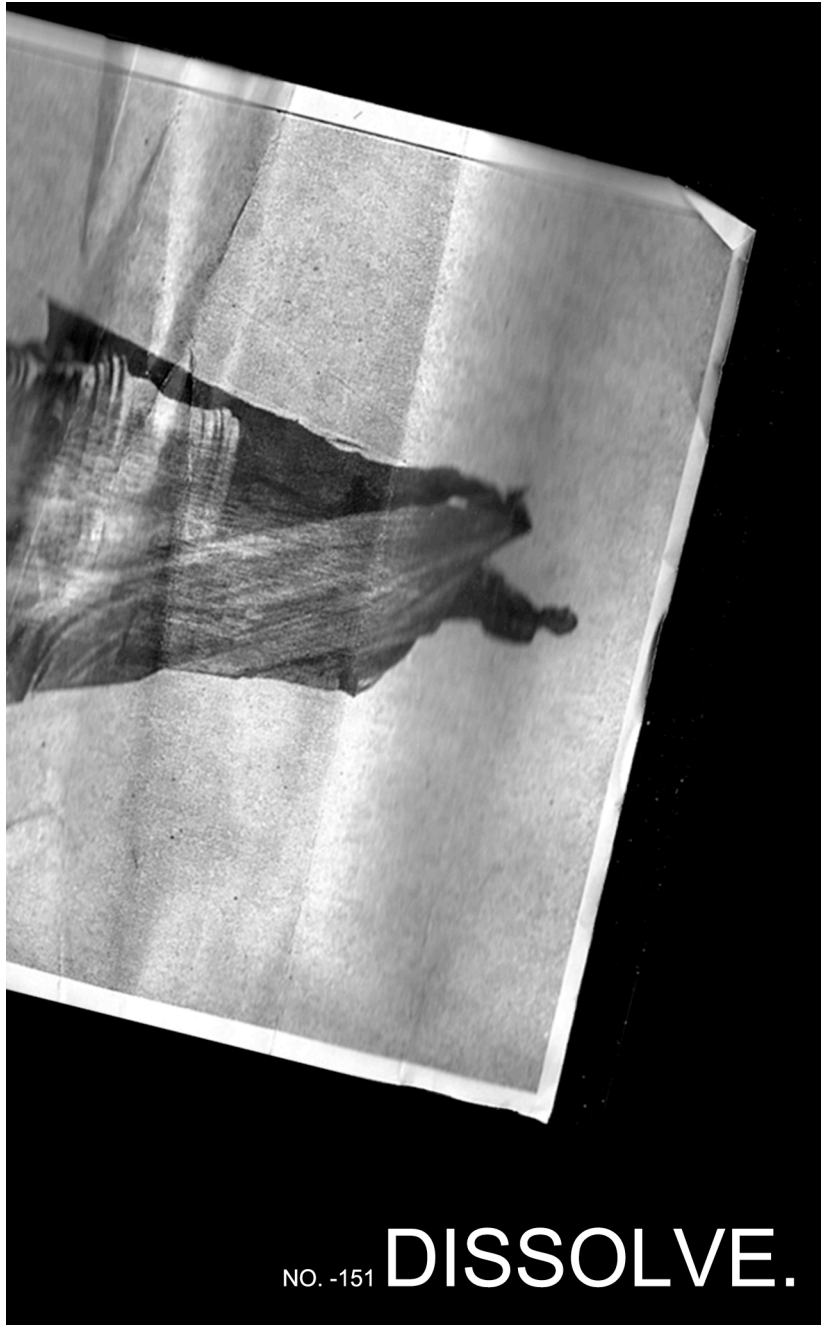
A thesis (or dissertation) submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012.

Major Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking

Abstract

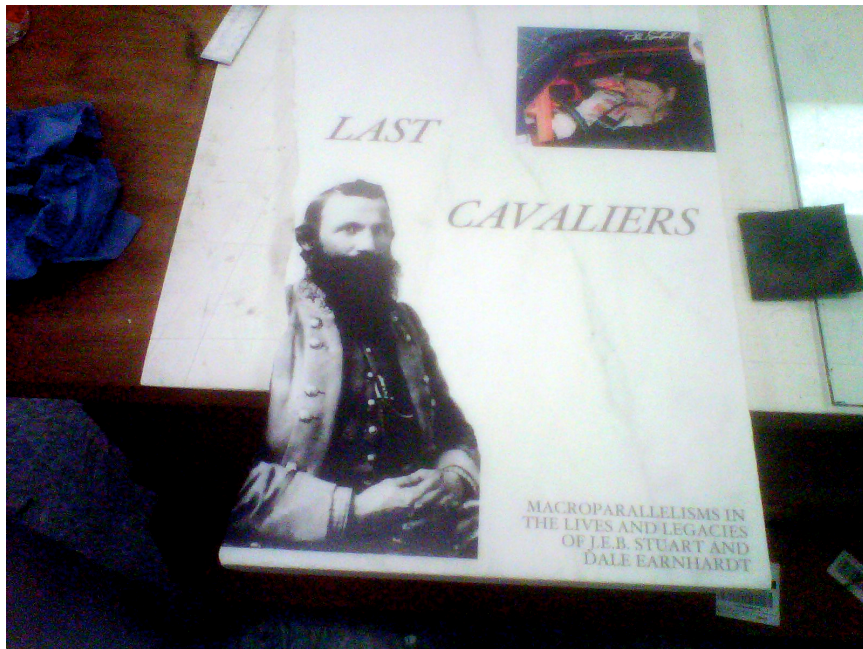
Using the literary device of a fictional interview between the artist and a sympathetic intellectual, I explore concepts relating to subjectivity, pedagogy, memory, “Southernness,” whiteness, the deceptive nature of images, social justice, and 20th century art as they relate to a contemporary artistic practice.



DISSOLVE.

(THE JOURNAL OF SOUTHERN HOMES & GARDENS)

Issue -1



Matthew P. Shelton, *Blackberry Photo of Transitional Object No. 2*, cell phone photograph of object (inkjet print on marble, 26" x 17" x 1.5"), both 2012.

Dismemory

An Interview

Participants:

Chase Berry

Matthew P. Shelton

I first met artist and teacher Matt Shelton at a mutual friend's bachelor party—called the "Backporch Jam-bo-ree"—on a secluded farm in northwestern North Carolina. He quizzed me about the differences between New York and Chicago ("I was raised to fear a metropolis, so of course I am fascinated by them," he confessed), insisted on testing my melodica skills, and bristled when I suggested that Judas may have been the most faithful disciple—one of the more provocative lessons I took away from Union Theological Seminary, in Manhattan, with which I'd recently parted ways (unamicably). If I recall, he demonstrated a terrifyingly convincing "Rebel yell" at one point, confiding in me that it was his "guilty pleasure—literally!" He ended the night mumbling about Coleman Barks' apparent monopoly on Rumi translations, which are viewable as some "very hippy YouTubes of him reading the poems," and how he was okay with all that, "even if he is a freaking Tarheel."

Given my cursory knowledge of contemporary art, and my utter non-Southernness, I was surprised when Matt emailed me to see if I was interested in interviewing him for an emerging publication. "It's a fake journal—a DIY intellectual journal—about the South," he said, "whatever that is." He assured me that my contentious bearing, my failed religiosity and minor in poetry were enough to keep it interesting.

We spoke in his home studio in Richmond, which he described as "a disaster." I'm not sure which he was talking about.

Chase Berry
2012

Chase Berry: OK, I just pressed “play.” I want to get this on the record. How come you’re “Matt” when we met at the Backporch Jamboree and “Matthew P. Shelton” when I go to your website?

Matt Shelton: You think it’s bad or something?

CB: It’s a little pretentious, I think.

MS: I agree. It smacks of trying to distinguish myself. Ever notice how many artists are three names now? Or have an initial? But what’s a name? My mom used to call me “Matthew P.”

CB: Shouldn’t your work distinguish you?

MS: That how you want to start? There’s a lot of Matt Sheltons out there, okay? Google “Chase Berry” and see how many come up.

CB: I have. I’m glad we’re sympathetic to each other’s vanity.

MS: Yes. Moving on?

CB: It seems like you’re interested in violence.

MS: What makes you say that?

CB: Well, there are several objects in here that appear to have been violated. There’s a book that has somehow been wrapped around itself and bound shut with a zip-tie. There’s a picture of Emmitt Till. There’s a large print of a torn and punctured photograph of a man—perhaps made with bullets?

MS: Well, yes, I am interested in violence, if by “interested” you mean “acting out.” I soaked the book in water for two days, then bound it. And the image is of a photograph from a book that I drilled to pieces.

CB: A very safe, anal-retentive violation. A sort of impotent violence. You target inert objects.

MS: For better or worse.

CB: But these acts are pretty loaded, especially in a room with pictures of Emmitt Till. Not to mention a white artist.

MS: I know. It must look horrible. I try not to think about it.

CB: You try not to think about what?

MS: How ideas about me and my issues—personal, psychological issues—are present in, or at least projected onto, the work. How the work inevitably invites that. Sometimes I make something and all I can think about is what the viewer is thinking about the artist: “Wow, the artist in this video is really digging around in that book with his drill. He must be really angry AND sexually repressed!”

CB: Is that true?

MS: Of course, but who isn’t? To me, those more individual pathological issues are not so much the point. Problematic things feel good all the time. Knowing that doesn’t make them less problematic or necessary. But it was deeply satisfying to repeatedly drill that book in particular.

CB: What about that book, in particular?

MS: Well, it’s a pictorial history of the South during the Civil War titled *Embattled Confederates*.

CB: So it wasn’t enough for the South to lose the first time?

MS: You think the South lost? Like, totally lost? Because it felt more complicated than that to me as a child—

CB: Well, they did.

MS: Yeah. I guess so. Growing up in the South, I didn’t really have that impression. I also didn’t have language for my feelings about it.

CB: So you actually thought the South had won?

MS: No, not at all. I knew we lost. I can’t believe I just said “we.” Like I’m a Confederate. I knew the South lost the war. But, being born and raised in a poor, rural area, you see the lay of the land. Some of it is overt—like Confederate Flags—and other parts are just as concrete, but not given a symbol in the same way. Like,

how no one was wealthy. Just middle class or mostly poor. Or how exceptional it seemed when people of different races interacted in a non-commercial setting.

CB: Now you're saying the South lost.

MS: Yes. It did. I guess what I'm saying is, at least the story I've told myself, is that there was a gap between my perception of my community's day-to-day conditions and what I learned about the "South" that people meant when they talked about the Civil War. So, some folks wore Confederate t-shirts hatefully, some people participated in re-enactments reverently, some people named their kids after Confederate ancestors, like my parents, and I knew all this was related to the South of the Civil War. But then, living there made me feel like a loser. Or at least conflicted.

CB: You don't think winners feel conflicted?

MS: I'm just saying it's not their job to feel conflicted. Feeling conflicted doesn't serve the winner's interest. The reward for winning a fight is to never have to think about the fight.

CB: Or never having to acknowledge your victory. What do you mean when you said, "Living there made you feel like a loser"?

MS: It's a depressing place, because it's a depressed place.

CB: Where is it, exactly?

MS: Danbury, Stokes County, North Carolina. In the northwestern part of the state, close to the mountains, bordering Virginia. There's little to no industry besides government jobs and teaching. Historically, it's agricultural, and a little textile. But a lot of that stuff has gone overseas. And during the war, they had an iron furnace down by the Dan River, which helped furnish the Confederacy's steel. We know how well that worked out.

CB: What do you mean?

MS: Well, a lot of historians argue that a major reason the South lost is because it just couldn't make enough steel to keep up structurally or militarily. The North kept pulling up the tracks, which Virgil Caine mentions in "The Night They Drove Ol' Dixie Down."

But the iron furnace is still there, in a park, between a parking lot and a baseball field.

CB: So, you grew up in the South, and were named after a Confederate ancestor, and lived near a historical site relating to the war. But a lot of people meet those requirements and don't end up destroying Southern history books.

MS: They might if they read more. (Laughs)

CB: Or they might become a re-enactor.

MS: I feel a distinct impulse to distance myself from the Confederacy. It's reactionary. As someone raised in that culture, but also raised as a liberal, I felt the need to define myself against this notion of "the South," which, in my mind at the time, was backwards, racist, sexist, homophobic, you name it, and all of that is filtered through today's lense as the legacy of the Confederacy. At the same time, I had this tremendous connection to the landscape that was developed through my family's history as farmers, and through outdoor activities, like hiking and fishing and hunting for arrowheads. I wanted to hold onto that feeling of connection to my heritage, but I could not divorce it from the parts of that story that, you know, fit the stereotype—like the slave owner, Pendleton, who is my middle namesake, and who fought for the Confederacy.

CB: I see that. But why is this feeling so intense for you? The fact that you feel that way implies you feel suffocated by it. To a lot of folks, and not only "winners," this is a non-issue. This was 150 years ago, which, in America, is ancient history.

MS: One person's ancient history is another person's Sesquicentennial. I grew up in a household where the past was a goldmine—it was like a puzzle that one could put together and find out what today is made of. My parents, and my dad in particular, collect old stuff, books about old stuff and books about collecting old stuff.

CB: What kind of stuff?

MS: Anything of local historical interest—jugs and vessels made by North Carolina potters, arrowheads and other Indian utensils, bottles, postcards, instruments, coins, gems. And while a lot of it they got in flea markets or antique malls, a lot of it was found in the ground—a field by the river, in a neighbor’s front yard, in an old dump in the woods. You don’t know how many times I’ve seen my dad get on his knees and stick a knife in the ground, metal detecting. There was always this sense that there was treasure everywhere if you were willing to dig. And more than likely, you would find a bottle cap. But you might strike it rich.

CB: So, the drilling act represented digging for something?

MS: No. That would be revisionist. (Laughs) I wasn’t looking for something then, or even hunting anything, except the destruction of this form. I was being impulsively destructive. It was after, when the book fell apart and thousands of little bits of paper started to fall out that I began to look for something. Or rather, something found me.

CB: What do you mean?

MS: Well, because I had drilled the book, it looked like it had been shot up. But the holes in the scraps of paper instantly read to me as eye and mouth holes, like a mask or a ghost. I became very interested in this idea of an eye or a mouth as a puncture wound.

So I began to photograph those scraps of paper in a kind of pseudo-archival manner, on black velvet, to isolate and dramatize the silhouette. And the more I looked at them, the more faces I began to see. I had one of those works critiqued, and some peers were talking about “the face.” Other folks didn’t see it, so the ones that saw a face went up and pointed it out. There were at least three or four faces different people were seeing, between the holes in the paper and the intricacies of the silhouette of the scrap, but all directly related to the negative spaces in the image.

CB: In the final print, the scrap of paper exists in a kind of void, a black, empty space, isolated, as you said. It gives a feeling of absence.



Digital composite study for *The Revenant*, 2012.

MS: I think the dislocation of the pieces of paper is important—their status as fragments, decontextualized, removed from their meaning-giving page and book. Disordered.

CB: They exist in a state of apartness. But also, the notion of a cut-out eye or mouth alludes to blindness or hunger. A sort of impoverished state.

MS: Yes. Something about that notion—of eyes created by puncturing—seemed very literal to me, in terms of the way violence or abuse recreates itself. For instance, people who molest children are likely to have been molested as children themselves. Witnessing or being a victim of violence creates this puncture wound that one then sees out of.

CB: So this work proposes that being from the South is like being a victim of a form of violence?

MS: Yes. Violence is at the very core of Southern identity. Through slavery, through fundamentalist Christianity, through Jim Crow and Southern politics, through its deep familiarity with the military and prison-industrial complexes, through its laissez-faire approach to labor and environmental regulation, Southerners are governed by the memory of violence. Mostly for people deemed deviant—people who are poor, or queer, people of color, immigrants—but also generally for anyone who has the audacity to speak out about the backwardsness of the status quo, or for anyone who falls in love with someone categorized as deviant—white Southerners who manage to jeopardize their privilege, intentionally or not. I’ve lived my entire 29 years in the South, and I have never been to a place here that I would not characterize as deeply segregated, outside of Faith Community Church in Greensboro, NC. And that is an exception that proves the rule. So when I go somewhere that’s not, or where it’s at least complicated by numerous sightings of, for instance, interracial couples, or a business that seems to serve a racially and economically diverse clientele, I have a moment of cognitive dissonance. And that is what living in a space that has been repeatedly traumatized—by slavery, by war, by hate crimes, by Jim Crow, and by the silence of the New South—does to you. It makes one anticipate separation rather than community.

CB: Hence the punctures for eyes.

MS: Right.

CB: Like the Klan.

MS: Yes. I think of the Klan when I look at these images. The KKK is an easy target for anyone wanting to demonstrate their not-racist-ness. I guess I’m more interested in humanizing the Klan.

CB: You’re defending the Klan?

MS: Humanizing is not defending. It’s just having the courage to acknowledge that under the hood is a human mammal, just like myself—someone with whom I share 99.9% of my DNA. So, basically, we’re built out of the same stuff. So, what makes a

person do something evil? Unless we’re prepared to say that only insane people join the Klan, or the Invisible Committee, or the Tea Party, or the Panthers, or whatever group you see as beyond the pale, one has to assume that life experience compels those decisions.

CB: So Robert Chambliss had no choice but to build the bomb that killed four girls in Birmingham in 1963?

MS: No. That’s not what I am saying. What I am saying is that demonizing individuals doesn’t get us closer to examining the actual problem. Actually, it *is* the problem—this notion that one must triumph over and against another person.

CB: That sounds like loser-talk.

MS: Yes, it is. Among other things.

CB: I see that work and I think about these goofy peach-colored masks Krewe members in Mardi Gras parades wear. I went in the early 200s to visit a friend at Tulane. It was so strange to see these white men—and they are overwhelmingly white—who I presume are among the city’s elite, throwing out beads to the adoring masses.

MS: Old Mardi Gras regalia bears strong resemblances to early Klan attire. I know a lot of folks don’t necessarily see that in the work, though.

CB: But you’re destroying a book about the Confederacy! How can you say, “Among other things,” even if others don’t read that content instantly?

MS: I just don’t like to presume that my audience sees masks everywhere like me. I feel like it’s my job to make them see the masks, or ghosts, that I see—not to presume they see them, too.
CB: You mentioned Mardi Gras masks, which is interesting, because unlike some of your other work—the 12 cots made of found hot pink canvas come to mind—this work does not directly relate to New Orleans.



Parade riders in the Krewe of Endymion, New Orleans, LA, 2011.

MS: No, it doesn't. But I do like for there to be a bit of goofiness or slapstick or flat-footed humor in the work. Most people don't pick up on it, because it's in the same room as a bunch of really dark, intense stuff, but I do see humor in the work.

CB: You see it, but you don't encourage it?

MS: I like to think that I let it speak when I can get out of the way enough to do so. I think the images from *The Revenant* are actually very funny, because of how dumb the holes and mouth look. It reminds me of a dead fish, lying there in the bucket, mouth wide open and no eyelids to shut. What's dumber-looking than that?

CB: Why do you want them to look dumb?

MS: Because what's dumber than war? What's dumber than slavery? It sounds like I'm trivializing a horrific disaster, but I mean it. I imagine the young merchant marine on his first trip on a slave

ship thinking, "Oh, this is not going to end well." What's dumber than shutting down entire school systems rather than integrate them, as occurred in the Massive Resistance campaigns of the '50s, '60s and '70s? This sense of digging one's own grave—and cutting off one's nose to spite one's face—and that being an undeniable pattern in our history as a people is, for better or worse, my jet fuel. What's dumber than wearing a cheap-ass, bizarre, peach-colored plastic mask to cover your peach-colored face? The barbaric lengths to which people have gone to distinguish whiteness as the pinnacle of civilization is tragic, but it is also comic when I think about how backwards and self-defeating it is.

CB: You just got the crazy eyes.

MS: I know, I felt myself go into preacher mode.

CB: It's funny; you kind of are an evangelist. It's pretty clear you have core beliefs; you see it as your job to spread them; you speak passionately about them.

MS: I considered going into seminary when I was in high school. I grew up in a very religious and liberal household. So the presence of doubt was not denied. One of my earliest memories is of me, sitting on the floor of the living room, playing with blocks, and stopping to ask my mom how we knew God existed.

CB: What did she say?

MS: Well, first, my older brother kind of scolded me, pointing out the window to our yard and saying, "Matt! How do you think that tree got out there!" I mean, he was only about 9 or so, so it makes sense that he would want to demonstrate his piety. But my mom was very gentle; she said, "We don't, Matt. That's why we have faith." I didn't bother asking what that was.

But, to respond to your characterization of me as an evangelist, I would say that's true. I try not to be an ideologue. I try to embrace complexity, and to stay away from prescriptive summations of present conditions or circumstances. But I think that after I was exposed to African American history, which wasn't an academic priority for me or for any of the schools I attended before college,

and had the chance to witness the work of interfaith, cross-racial, radical justice advocates in college and after—

CB: With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Greensboro?

MS: Yes, among other things, especially in New Orleans, all relating to antiracism—The Undoing Racism trainings of the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, the white antiracist collective called European Dissent, and even through the Episcopal Church, as a member of Trinity Undoing Racism Network. Through those experiences, I started to see the gaps in my own understanding. I started to see how my reality—by which I mean patterns of movement as well as thought—was constructed to avoid interaction not only with racism, but with race at all. With people and places having different histories than my own. There was this tremendous silence around it. My parents grew up in the South at a time when they bridged the gap between segregation and integration. They were white students who saw “colored” and “white” signs at one point, then became friends and peers with people of color later. So, there wasn’t some generational discussion going around when they became parents questioning what they were going to do to make sure their kids didn’t internalize deeply imbedded ideas about white superiority and black inferiority. They were making it up on the fly, as parents must. And I think that generation thought, and that we think today, still, that as long as we tell kids everyone is equal, they will then act accordingly. But the reality they see might tell a very different story.

CB: That must have been true for you, then—did you experience this cognitive dissonance as a child?

MS: Absolutely. I mentioned that everyone where I grew up is pretty much poor. Not global-scale poor, but poor by American standards. I grew up thinking we were rich because we lived in a big, old house in the middle of town and lots of my friends and classmates lived in trailers. The truth is we weren’t rich, but my parents were college educated, which was exceptional in that time and place. I grew up knowing I was going to college. I grew up anticipating a world outside that world. Which is a good thing, because in that world, there was a lot of pressure around race.

Neighborhoods were segregated, even in Danbury, a hamlet, really, and socially things were segregated. So no wonder the kids don’t just work it all out at school—perhaps the only time in their lives in which they have substantive exposure to, if not interaction with, people who are different.

I did have a close friend, Brian, who was African American, when I was five. We did sleepovers and birthday parties together for a few years. When I was 9, though, I transferred schools to be closer to where my mom taught, because I had such bad asthma that year that I often had to leave school midday. My new school was on the northern side of the county, a very country area, and did not have one black student in grades K-6. I noticed, but peripherally—the way one notices and responds to architecture without recognizing it.



Monument to Jefferson Davis, vandalized after Justin Sipp was killed by police at a traffic stop, March 2012.

CB: You've mentioned New Orleans a couple times. What's your relationship to the city?

MS: I moved there with my now-wife, Emily Zeanah, in 2006.

CB: Was that a Katrina-inspired move?

MS: As much as I hate to admit it, yes. Emily's family moved there when she was 10, so she kind of grew up there.

CB: So her family was living there when Katrina fell?

MS: Yeah. Their house took four and a half feet of water. Their street is about half a mile long, and one end was dry, while the other was under 8 feet of water. Their house is kind of in the middle. We visited in December 2005, four months after the levees failed, and her parents and youngest sister were renting a first-floor apartment Uptown while they cleaned up and fixed their house. I had no way of comprehending what that time was like for them. They drove us around. Seeing the kind of damage we saw in Lakewood South, Lakeview, Gentilly, the Lower 9th Ward and St. Bernard Parish was just unbelievable. You really cannot understand it until you see it. Actually, I still don't understand it.

CB: Why do you hate to admit the move was Katrina-inspired? A lot of people think going to help out after the storm was an unselfish, honorable thing to do.

MS: That's right, and a lot of people made incredible heavy-lifting contributions through their volunteering. But I'm a selfish person. I never gutted any houses or anything. Right before we left Greensboro, a friend who was much more radical and politically savvy than I asked me if I thought that was the best thing to do—to go there.

CB: As opposed to what?

MS: As opposed to raising money and awareness from where I was, in NC, and doing as much as I could to make sure displaced persons could get back home, rather than go there and kind of take their spot.

CB: Would you really be taking someone else's spot by moving there, though? Is it a zero-sum game?

MS: I think people with mobility—meaning the ability to choose where one lives—don't think of living situations as zero-sum. They don't necessarily wonder how their living somewhere inherently changes that place. I know I didn't, really, until about that time, think about gentrification, for instance, or the role that my friends and I played in it.

CB: So this person was asking you about gentrification.

MS: Essentially. But this was also less than a year after a devastating flood. There was an intense land grab going on, and young, idealistic, often white people were participating in that, I think mostly unknowingly, though that doesn't change the impact. But I was clear to point out to Gigi, the friend, that I am actually a selfish and not very outgoing person. I had never volunteered for any kind of cleanup or helping situation before that, even in NC after hurricanes and whatnot. So, I have no doubt that were it not to my connection to and affection for New Orleans that I got through my relationship with Emily, I wouldn't have gone or even considered it. Her having family there gave me some feeling for going.

CB: So, she wanted to go, and you went along.

MS: I was actually a little more gung-ho than she was. I was ready to leave NC, I liked New Orleans, I thought we might be able to help with something, and it would give Em a chance to kind of be there with her family, and figure out her relationship to the city. I had the privilege of it not being home for me—that makes it very complex; anyone coming back to New Orleans after the storm can tell you that. It's the same place you knew and loved and hated, but radically altered by the disaster.

CB: I don't want to go too far down that road; have you noticed how little we're talking about your artwork?

MS: I guess. For me, this is all content—the historic circumstances of something like Katrina being connected to the

Civil War, Reconstruction, Redemption, Jim Crow, Civil Rights... and how individuals relate to them, or don't. I find the idea that the inequality that was made so terrifyingly clear by the flood was basically slavery's chickens coming home to roost incredibly compelling and well-founded. It's a religious, narrative, constellation-drawing mindset. It's obvious to me, like—just connect the dots.

CB: You mean all these events are connected. Like that Mark Twain quote: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

MS: Yes. Which is perhaps more easily seen if you lay out a timeline of the last 400 years. But I like smashing them together—something from what we understand as the past and something from what we see as the present—to hopefully encourage or magnify their connectedness.

CB: Drawing constellations.

MS: Not my words, unfortunately. I thought I got it from the writer Teju Cole, who said in a recent article about good intentions and the road to hell, "His good heart prevents him from thinking constellationally." He was talking about Nick Kristoff, the journalist. But then Emily said I stole it from one of her papers, which I read before that. So who knows.

CB: You're so careful to give credit.

MS: Sometimes. It's a Peter Pan ethic—steal from the rich. Steal from stealers. Not your partner.

CB: You do in the series of works that look like book covers, for instance.

MS: Well, sort of. I give a kind of cursory description to add content or give a little context. But I don't usually cite the photographer or the source of the photo. I think of them as codices, because that originally meant "block of wood," which nicely connects the project to text as embodied in an object.

CB: Their objecthood is kind of slippery. One's printed on a dry-erase board; another on marble; another on glossy paper.

MS: Right. That's part of the recipe, I guess, and the impulse towards building connections—the distance between the form and the text, the form and the image, the text and the image, the possible implications or connotations each of those has. All artists do it, but I want to amplify that process as content as well as the images, text, and materials.

CB: You want the viewer to engage in a kind of deconstructive exercise, as well as think about what it means to "put it all together."

MS: Yeah. I don't think it's as simple as, "1+1+1=3," though. It has elements of arithmetic, but that breaks down pretty fast, because the "math" changes entirely based on what the viewer knows about the content.

CB: They, the books, can seem pretty out-there at times. Take "Prominent Apologists," for example.

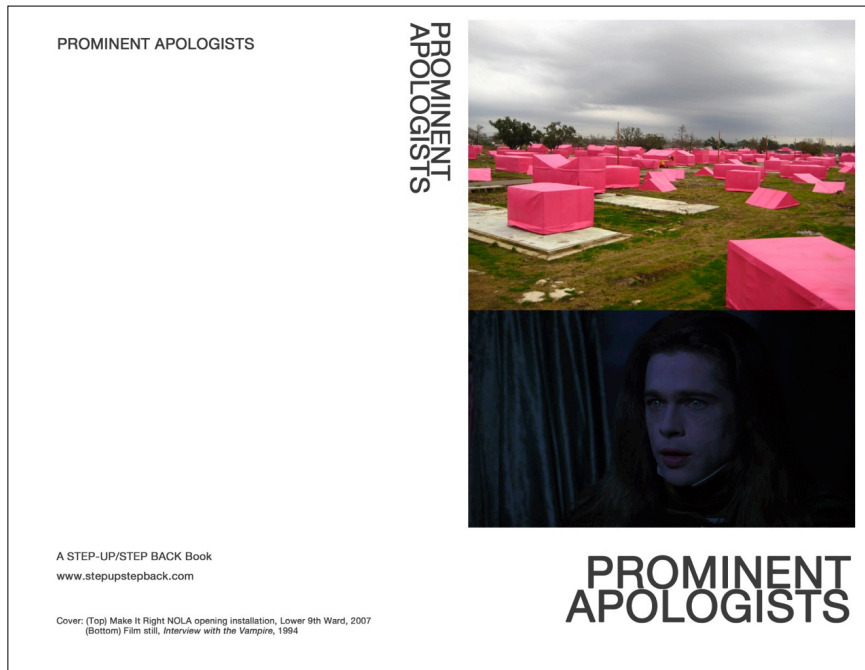
MS: Yes?

CB: I don't get it. I mean, I enjoy looking at it. I enjoy the color relationships. I enjoy the kind of junior varsity graphic design of it. But I'm initially disoriented by its strangeness: here are things I recognize, such as a landscape photograph, or something that reads as a dramatic photograph or still, and words, which I can read. But they're arranged strangely. It took me a minute to consider, "Maybe this is supposed to be like a book cover."

MS: Right. And then you're like, "What the hell is that pink stuff?"

CB: (Laughs) Exactly. What's Brad Pitt doing here?

MS: Well, book covers are essentially illustrations, or ads for the contents, you know, "Here's what the inside is about!" And I find that most interesting when the contents of a book are really dangerous—when these little abstract icons called letters can change the way animate beings behave, or make them really angry, or threaten their identity. So I guess I see books as being a place where artistic radicality and political radicality can intersect.



CB: But the obvious thing to point out is that these works are just images, with no pages. They could, I guess, be dust jackets. Why not write the books? Are they cynical?

MS: How would they be cynical? Wait, first: I don't write them because I don't have the patience, or interest, at this point, to write them. And for me, the work is done. I don't want to pin them down with meaning. Like butterflies. If it's an actual book, then there's no conversation about what a book is or does. Writing it out would make for a boring and mercifully brief book. But also, there are clues. The image gives descriptions of the photos featured in it.

CB: "Top—Make It Right NOLA opening installation, Lower 9th Ward, 2007. Bottom—film still, *Interview with the Vampire*, 1994." But what if I don't know what the Lower 9th Ward is?

MS: Depends. Are you American?

CB: Yes.

MS: Then you're asleep. Right?

CB: Or that the picture is of Brad Pitt. You could say, "Brad Pitt as Louis in *Interview...*"

MS: I could. But a big part of that is that a lot of folks will recognize him as him. He's prominent.

CB: So he is the "Prominent Apologist"?

MS: He's one. The trick is that certain works, in specific places, require no explanation—the contextualization happens outside the work, in other signifiers. If I showed the "Prominent Apologists" piece in New Orleans, for example, people there would have access to the signifiers in a very different way than someone who wasn't familiar with it. And part of my journey as an artist—and I think every artist has to do this one way or another—has been to be able to say to myself, "I'm willing to cut that person loose."

CB: Or cut the work loose.

MS: How so?

CB: Accept that the work's meaning is out of your hands. Allow for a "wrong" or "bad" interpretation.

MS: Either they will see it and maybe appreciate it abstractly, formally, or they won't, because, without the context, it could be quite a meager offering as art. Not everyone who looks at the sky sees constellations, though. It doesn't make the exercise of looking less valuable. Not that I would ever compare my work to looking at stars! If given a choice to look at Matt Shelton art or go out for a walk, go for a walk!

CB: But what does it mean—

MS: What *might* it mean.

CB: What could it mean—that better?

MS: Yes.

CB: What could it mean for someone from New Orleans?

MS: I can't say what it would mean. And I didn't mean to suggest that the meaning would simply unfold like a map if you knew what the images and words reference. But it would perhaps put them in a realm of meaning, where they could hold the signifiers up against each other. Someone from New Orleans might—if they pay attention to art, or city politics, or urban planning, or architecture, or celebrity life there—recognize the pink objects or the words “Make It Right NOLA” as being a non-profit that Brad Pitt established to build sustainable, affordable—though that claim has been contested—hurricane-resistant homes for residents of the Lower 9th Ward, which is a working-class black neighborhood that was virtually wiped out when a loose barge hit the levee wall at the Industrial Canal during Hurricane Katrina. They'll know what Brad Pitt looks like, because of his prominence as a part-time resident of New Orleans and general celebrity, and recognize him in the film still. They might know the film's arc, that much of it takes place in south Louisiana, and that it was written by Anne Rice, who used to live in New Orleans. That Pitt's character, Louis, is tragic, and basically runs around the whole movie crying because he hates being a vampire.

CB: Hence the “apologist” part? What's that got to do with Make It Right?

MS: Well, it's called “Make It Right,” suggesting that something—or someone—was wronged. So, on that level, it's kind of an apology. But apologists are generally regarded as people who defend a way of living or thinking, rather than apologize for it.

CB: Brad Pitt's project there, I admire it. People will say, “Well, at least he's doing something!” Unlike you, perhaps? Making objects that do nothing? That don't even do what they propose to do, which is be books? That's what I meant by “Are they cynical?” They're so empty. HOLLOWED-OUT.

MS: Touché. Yes. If only every poor neighborhood in America had a celebrity sponsor.

CB: But how would that area be if Brad Pitt weren't doing that work?

MS: I think a better question would be, “How would that neighborhood be if its residents had been brought back to rebuild it themselves?” We're making choices. Brad Pitt would agree with me I think. I think he stepped in because so little was being done. But ideally, Make It Right wouldn't exist, because it wouldn't have to.

CB: What's “Last Cavaliers” about?

MS: You tell me.

CB: Well, JEB Stuart was part of the Civil War, and Dale Earnhardt is a race car driver. And it's on marble. The text suggests there are similarities between the two. They both have facial hair. They're both white males—both Southern. So, it's about Southern white males?

MS: I mean, for me, I don't know what that is, that object. But I feel like there's a sort of internal rhyme that I want to occur.

CB: Like Mark Twain's history.

MS: Right. Or actually, to not rhyme when necessary—to have it cut off abruptly. To have it be... insufficient. So, JEB and Dale rhyme to me, and the broken white marble kind of rhymes with them—what they symbolize—tough, rugged, decorated—but how that comes together—the printed ink and the rock it's on—specifically seems awkward.

CB: Stamped, or superimposed. Are there similarities between them?

MS: JEB and Dale? Big ones. Besides both being Southern white men with intense eyes and facial hair, they both wear uniforms. They both were known for how well they rode their steeds around their opponents. Both flashy—you can see that in NASCAR in general, with the brands all over the cars and coveralls, and JEB wore a sash, and a red cape, and an ostrich feather, and even cologne when he went to battle.

CB: Really?

MS: Both were killed in their ridiculously violent professions. JEB was shot by a Union private in retreat, and died a day later, in Richmond. Dale died while blocking opponents so his teammate could finish first in the Daytona 500. The point is, I guess, to draw out the values that render a Southern hero—tragedy, premature death, sacrifice, masculine authority. Basically, anything that puts it in line with a kind of conservative Anglo Christianity.

CB: End of book.

MS: You can see why there's no point in writing it! But seriously, that's what makes it interesting to me. It could be almost any pairing of Southern heroic figures and the message would be the same. The open-endedness would not be tolerable as a book.

CB: You've discussed these pieces as "open-ended," as "intersections," and discussed their formal vagueness—

MS: Instability—unreliability.

CB: Yeah, unreliability is a good word for it. They present as one thing but don't fulfill expectations.

MS: Well, books are like that in general. Books are mostly not about paper or even letters. They are about ideas. So there's this block of wood, essentially, that has nothing to do with a block of wood.

CB: Is that anti-formalist?

MS: I would love it if it was. But I don't really know if that's possible. I catch your drift, though. In painting, one tries to bring all elements into some kind of internal and collective harmony, meaning they address what they are made of and how they are made. You know, a painting isn't a window to another realm; it's an object. It's furniture.

CB: So, you're kind of saying, in these pieces, "This is not a book."

MS: Yeah. Or, more accurately, "A book is not a block of wood." The text is to be found elsewhere.

CB: Do you ever get comments about using text, or overusing it?

MS: I had a seminar teacher who forbade me from using text in my work. That didn't go well. I listened—I'm a teacher's kid; I do what teacher says. But I was just more frustrated than ever, and I think it could have been more productive to ask, "Why do you trust text so much?" Which is where I am now—healthy distrust of text and images.

CB: Are you comfortable with fiction?

MS: Not particularly. It seems so outlandish—audacious. I have very little audacity.

CB: What's audacious about fiction?

MS: Just, you know, making it up. It's irresponsible! Escapist. At least, for me it is.

CB: Some people need to escape.



René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1921.

MS: They should... I guess. I like fiction. I read fiction, I watch TV. I go to lifestyle malls to see movies about things that never happened for the air conditioning and immersion. But—I don't know. Perhaps that would be an interesting work for me—to make an escapist story.

CB: What would you escape?

MS: History. Aforementioned chickens. I guess I feel like there's so much fiction out there already, so much escapism masquerading as history.

CB: Like what?

MS: Like, oil. The war on Iraq. The truth being, "We invaded this country which basically has no power to attack us pre-emptively because we have a serious oil addiction and zero political will to do anything about it, or about the cars we drive that are unnecessarily big, unnecessarily inefficient, and unnecessarily underoccupied." That's a bad example, but it comes to mind because of how delusional it is.

CB: There's that cut-off-your-nose-to-spite-your-face preaching again. So you make artworks that are like fake covers for nonfiction books that don't exist.

MS: Yes, my wild foray into fiction.

CB: It's interesting how a devotion to the real ends up producing surrealist works.

MS: I hadn't thought about them as surrealist.

CB: Magritte did this, too—drawing the viewer in with the familiar, only to find the painting had its hooks in them a moment later. There's this play, this back and forth, between illusion and interruption of that illusion. I saw several of his works at the Peggy Guggenheim house in Venice, and they were even more uncanny than in person.

MS: I've been there! I love the ones where he uses a silhouette of tree-tops to create a nighttime street scene on the bottom half of

the painting and a daylight blue sky on the top—it's both noon and midnight simultaneously, and to the eye, it's logical. Amazing that his work could make your brain distrust your eyes.

CB: Trust and betrayal. Always reminding you that it's not what it's supposed to be.

MS: Or not cut out to be, in the case of those cover images.

CB: So, I see. It isn't cynicism—they're insecure?

MS: Those pieces began as a way to kind of smuggle overt political content into my work. I'd been bossing my work around for months, trying to make it "useful," to make it have a "greater purpose," i.e. "educate" the viewer about things I thought the viewer needed to know. But I ended up with a total non-conversation between the form and the content, because content would not negotiate with form or material under any circumstances. Almost by default, I did not consider material first—found or otherwise. That is, I did not ask first what the material was best suited for.

CB: What changed?

MS: Well, two things. First, the cots. Here's one.

CB: I presume the material is important? It's so *pink*.

MS: Yeah. I found it behind a Rite-Aid-turned-black-Episcopal-Church in the Lower 9th Ward called All Souls. I'd been teaching an art class there for their summer enrichment camp and saw a pile of this pink stuff in the parking lot.

CB: You recognized it?

MS: Instantly, from that Brad Pitt project, Make It Right. They kicked off the housing initiative with an architectural art installation of pink house-like tents that were actually just canvas wrapped around scaffolding. It reminded me of the Selma-to-Montgomery March, when tenant farmers were living in tents because they'd been evicted from their farms for their political activity.



All Souls, Trust Fall, Evasive Maneuvers, Parachuting In, Neither Here Nor There, et al., 12 cots, found canvas material, wood, steel, thread, each 28" x 26" x 72", 2011.

CB: But the pink structures, they weren't inhabited, were they?

MS: No. That's not the point of this work, exactly.

CB: But the pink canvas helped you work through your form/content dilemma?

MS: I had to deal with *what that material was*. Does that make sense?

CB: Kind of. You mean the history of the material began to inform what you created with it?

MS: Yes: Everything about it—that it was canvas, that it was used in a commemorative art installation, that it had sat around in the rain, and re-used as a dropcloth, and god knows what after the installation, that I found it under the conditions I did...

CB: Then you thought, "Cots"?



Tent city off Highway 80, Lowndes County, AL, 1965

MS: No, actually not. That was intuitive. Who knows where that notion came from. But thinking about the history of the material—disaster, displacement, our worst impulses and our best efforts to remember and forget—helped me trust that impulse. It needed to be cots, and they needed to be empty.

CB: Forgive me if I don't read that connection. Why did they "need" to be cots?

MS: Something about the purpose of a cot—a temporary home, a place for the wounded.

CB: And empty?

MS: No need for them. They are intentionally in the wrong place—there are no wounded because there is no fight, or little fight, and there is little fight because the people aren't there.

CB: Isn't there a piece by Joseph Beuys—

MS: You know more about art than you let on!

CB: I just know there is a lot more to know.

MS: Clever.

CB: Anyway, there's a piece by him, I think, that has a bunch of sleds with some type of gear on them?

MS: They had, like, flashlights and felt rolls and fat on them.

CB: Were you thinking of those?

MS: Not directly, but I love Beuys. I think of that piece as hopeful—so indicative of that idealism he promoted.

CB: Your cots—what are they called?

MS: They have many names: *All Souls*, *Parachuting In*, *Neither Here Nor There*, *Evasive Maneuvers*, *Trust Fall*. I can't think of one thing to call them, but I like all of those things, and I like them together. They don't each possess a single name, either, like Santa's reindeer. It's just one piece with many names.

CB: Okay. But, they don't seem optimistic.

MS: They don't? That's good. They feel strange and sad to me.

CB: But I could see why one, upon encountering them, and not knowing the history, would feel like they were woefully lacking.

MS: And other artists have told me that. Classmates, professors, visitors all wanted them to go back into service, to complete the circle and return to a purpose. But I wanted it to be more of a parallel move that commented on their origins—art inspired by, capitalizing on, reminding us of—disaster.

CB: Did anyone feel that?

MS: This is a good example of what I mentioned before, about cutting some audience loose. Maybe even myself, like that Guston quote. In this case, most people felt baffled by the work. But one friend, an activist in New Orleans named Lydia, when I described the work to her, and the puzzlement it inspired in people, said, "Are you kidding? It's about disaster capitalism!" And she's right. It's about disaster capitalism. And about art's relationship to that.

A double-bind. We have to remember, and remember poetically, but we can't build careers out of remembering.

CB: So how does that relate to Beuys' optimism?

MS: Well, Beuys really invited and desired others to see him as a sort of mythic healer. I admire his engagement, his desire to muddle the everyday and the precious, as well as the political and aesthetic and spiritual. But the cooptation of his body of work into a primarily formal and stylistic legacy demonstrates, I think, the insufficiency of his good intentions. I hesitate to call him naïve, or shrewd—many have called him both—but I will call him charismatic, which is not enough. I think his idealism mirrors other idealisms of that time. And what we see now, both within and outside art, is that good intentions are often very seductive and charismatic, but not enough.

Things have gotten very... complex. We're all so complicit, and even if you could extract yourself, there's no "pure" place or ideology towards which you could move.

CB: So the piece with mobile beds is actually about immobility. You mentioned another thing that either pushed you or allowed you to explore the relationship between material and meaning?

MS: I saw this book in the library. The cover was direct—a simple gray field of color, sans-serif font, and a black and white picture of rolling hills. And all it said was, in all-caps: *TAKE BACK THE LAND: A COMMUNITY PLAY*. It simply smashed together a radical statement with the notions of "community" and "play," as though it were enough to have a play about people doing radical things. It seemed so certain about its own meaning, and yet there were no instructions in the book about how to identify or form a community, or about how to get that community to want to see or participate in that play.

CB: So it felt...

MS: Insufficient.

CB: You're trying to make objects that feel like that?



Joseph Beuys, *The Pack*, 1969, 24 custom sleds, van.

MS: The difference between the poetry and promise of the cover and the actual contents was astronomical.

CB: It was a bad play?

MS: I'm not a playwright, but yes. It was bad because it was like watching an afterschool special—that didactic and pedantic...

CB: But, in these works, you seem to be embracing that... didacticism? Is that a word?

MS: I want them to be blunt, and dumb, like a billy club, yes, but still mysterious, still obscure. I mean, what does "Take back the land" really tell you? Nothing, except maybe that this play is kind of Marxist or something—maybe the author would advocate some kind of redistribution of wealth.

CB: You were taken with the book, no? Didn't you say that?

MS: Yes! It had that e-flux ascetic aesthetic, it was radical, it would show me the way!

CB: The way? To what?

MS: To a political artform, I guess—a way to serve both the masters—

CB: You mean, maintaining your allegiances to both leftist politics and contemporary art?

MS: Yes, but maybe just myself. Maybe those pressures don't actually exist, but I imagine them as voices, or demands, competing for my... faith. One voice says I must be committed, ultimately, only to art—which is to say, to truth—that I should betray everything and everyone if necessary to make the best work. The other says I must be committed ultimately to only justice.

CB: But something changed through this work? Something that allowed these demands for truth and justice to converge? Or dissipate?

MS: Well, discounting even the content of the images, the fact that they resembled covers of books that do not exist made them deeply ambivalent as objects. Anything that full of promise is bound to let you down. As you said, "Images that fail to be covers for books that don't exist." And this ambivalence just made any attempt to make the work about my "sincere" feelings about justice, or history, futile. So they became very flat-footed and sort of utopian as I realized that I could design an image that would suggest a book I wanted to exist.

CB: Can you give an example?

MS: Sure. One image is for a book titled "ADAR: The American Directory of Antiracist Realtors."

CB: It's a horrible puke yellow and has a digitally altered image of a Gee's Bend quilt on the right side. I notice you always reference the "authors," but rarely name them. On this, it says, "By the author of *Entropy V. Security*." On another—the dry-erase board, it says, "By the authors of *Rehearsing Our Terrors*."

MS: I want the authors to be as... vague as the texts. That way, I also get to work in little poetic devices that come up as I am working on the piece. I'm not sure how I came up with the "entropy versus security" binary split, or what it has to do with real estate, except that it's, once again, a question about values—life being essentially in flux, and entropic, and security being about preserving, separating, defining.

CB: Does that relate to the quilt image?

MS: Yes. I basically just digitally erased or covered over the pink squares in the middle of the image.

CB: And it's a Gee's Bend quilt? The symbol of the merging of high art and functionality, no?

MS: Absolutely! Their authenticity is so palpable and delicious—

CB: Their? The quilts or the makers?

MS: Both, actually—their authenticity is so intoxicating to us today—the jazzy, brilliant design of the patterns, the signs of wear on the work clothes used to make them.

CB: Kind of like a working class black neighborhood.

MS: Yes. So "real." What's happening today is that "culture" is being conflated with "lifestyle," and lifestyle is becoming more marketable—we're finding ways to sell culture more, like real estate.

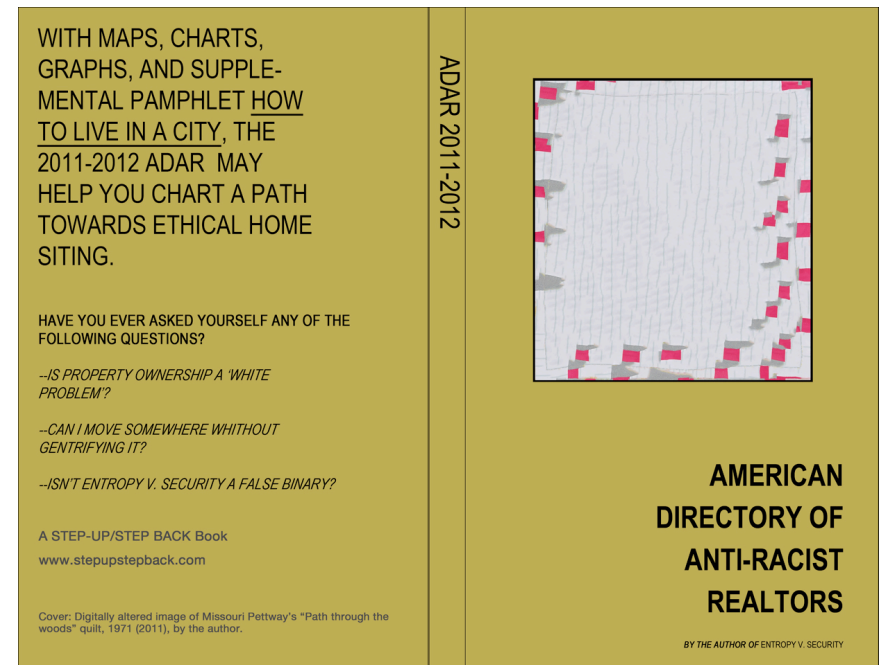
CB: Or art. Do you think all neighborhoods are authentic?

MS: Aren't they? I didn't say all neighborhoods are great places. Or places at all. It seems to me that, in order for an area to be a place, the people there have to be places.

CB: Uh.... Care to elaborate?

MS: Culture is what makes a place feel like a place—culture being some kind of relational history that exists between the land, one person, and another person. Culture meaning that people carry the memory of these relationships in their habits, their paths, their rituals, their values. Culture exists everywhere people are, but it

can get very weird. Like the Florida panhandle, especially a place like Seaside, where *The Truman Show* was filmed.



CB: Which was about a man whose life turned out to be a reality TV show. That was shot in a real place? On location, I mean?

MS: Yes, a town where people live. It was designed as this marvel of urban planning, which it is—it's dense, it's efficient. And it's exclusive and overwhelmingly white. And the way one participates there is in a culture of spending—at good restaurants, tasteful book and record stores, boutiques. It's basically a few steps more human than Disney. And a thousand times more intoxicating.

CB: Because it's a place where people actually live?

MS: Because it's a utopian place free of blight and crime and poverty. It's escapist.

CB: Fictive, even. It raises the notion of, well, I mentioned the word “uncanny,” and when I look at these works—the book covers—I’m reminded of the concept of the Uncanny Valley. Are you familiar with it?

MS: It’s from robotics, right? The idea that the closer something gets to resembling what is “real”—like a robot, or a prosthesis—the more offensive a person’s response to it?



Still from *The Truman Show*, 1998.

CB: Exactly. The more haunting or disturbing it feels.

MS: Like the *Chucky* movies, where the doll came to life and murdered everyone. I never saw them because the promos scared the shit out of me! That’s why the Uncanny Valley idea is important. And Magritte. In Seaside, you feel like something is wrong because everything is right.

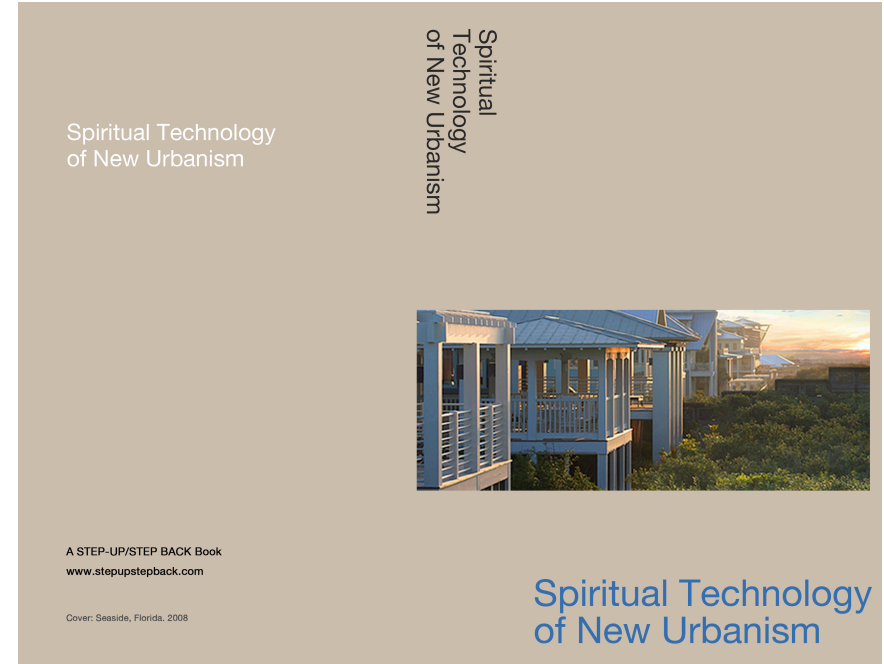
CB: Is this what “Spiritual Technology of New Urbanism” is about?

MS: Yes. It’s about what makes it possible to never have to think about how much that sunset costs.

CB: It looks like a pharmaceutical ad.

MS: That’s very good. I’ve been doing some contracted work for a national bank that’s based in Virginia. They have a large art

collection, and have just acquired more banks, so it’s expanding even more.



I make and install text panels for the artwork in the corporate offices, several of which are in this area. The spaces are so strange; they’re like no other place, but like several other places. They remind me of hotels, malls, dorms, and airports. It feels so much like a hotel that you almost do not see the art as a force of habit, like when you’re in a hotel. But there it is, and some of it is very good. Brian Ulrich just had a small show there, which I’m sure he was thrilled about.

CB: Who’s that?

MS: A photographer who just joined VCU’s faculty this year who photographs suburban decay. But the art there, at these offices, has to compete with dry erase boards, and internal marketing signs, and plants, and water fountains, and even ATMs. It’s so hard to see the work. The art feels like this underclass of objects. The images are totally impoverished by their surroundings. It

engenders a sort of flattening or elimination of any sort of visual hierarchy one might have. The art loses its authority... to a six-foot-tall Viking holding a sign.



Blackberry picture of an entrance to a corporate office building, Richmond, VA, 2012

CB: Do you see that as democratizing?

MS: No. I see it as leveling. Like a city being leveled. But it's reality—we have all this flashy print competing for what is limited eyesight. I'm interested in how places like Seaside, or a lifestyle mall, or the banks promote a sense of placid stability through their corporate, modular, homogeneous design. It feels like a fortress—steeled up against the forces of human error or emotion.

CB: Gives a whole new feeling to the phrase, "Internal Marketing," doesn't it?

MS: Yes, and you raise a good point. I think the book covers are about this: internal and external marketing. Not communication, but messaging. Deluding oneself; escaping.

CB: I meant to ask you this earlier, but do these works have titles, or are the titles of the works the same as the texts they allude to?

MS: For a while I thought that was the case, but it seemed too obvious, and I hate calling work "Untitled," and they are in a series, as you mentioned. Additionally, as some of them found suitable forms, like marble, a dry-erase board, or sintra, their character as objects gained prominence in my thinking. Recently, though, I found out about this concept of the "transitional object," from my wife, who was making certificates to give to some senior women she'd been counseling in a group at a nursing home. The certificates signify the closure of the experience; the beginning of the end of life after their group with her. It was a comforting thing.

CB: Isn't that the word they use for "blankies," too? That little kids have?

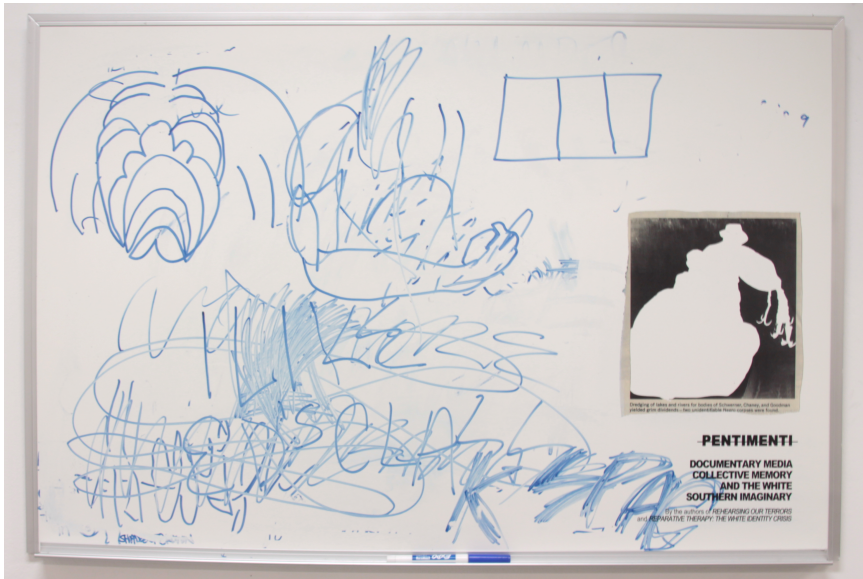
MS: Yes. For them to transition into individuality. But there is also the concept of transitional phenomena, which might be a behavior that emerges, like a self-soothing activity such as thumb-sucking. Both transitional objects and phenomenon develop consciously and not consciously as a way of individuals process change—as a way of comforting, and even of recontextualizing oneself.

CB: And, as Emily's story about the certificate attests, apparently, at any age.

MS: That's what struck me. I enjoy interposing different languages as a way of generating dialogue between them, and you alluded to that when you posed the double-meaning of "internal marketing" a minute ago. Calling these "transitional objects" begs the question: "transitioning between what?"

CB: Or, "What change does this commemorate?"

MS: What end, or beginning, does this signify? Right. But it also suggests an object that is itself in transition; that does not properly reside in one language over another. Placed, or trapped, between a language of image and of text, of sculpture and of painting, of aesthetics and of politics, of knowing and mystery.



Study for Transitional Object No. 1, custom inkjet-printed dry-erase board, after exhibition at Reference Gallery, Richmond, VA, 2012