

2009

# Kingdom Compossible

Ryan Lauterio

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

© The Author

---

Downloaded from

<http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/1821>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

School of the Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Ryan Lauterio entitled KINGDOM  
COMPOSSIBLE has been approved by his or her committee as satisfactory completion  
of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

---

Hilary Wilder, Assistant Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking, School of the Arts

---

Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking, School of the Arts

---

Jack Risley, Professor, Department of Sculpture Extended Media, School of the Arts

---

Ron Johnson, Assistant Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking School of the Arts

---

Holly Morrison, Chair, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking, School of the Arts

---

Richard E. Toscan, Dean of the School of the Arts

---

Dr. F. Douglas Boudinot, Dean of the Graduate School

May 12, 2009

© Ryan Lauterio 2009

All Rights Reserved

KINGDOM COMPOSSIBLE

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

by

RYAN LAUTERIO

Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009  
Master of Arts, California State University of Sacramento, 2005  
Bachelor of Arts, California State University of Sacramento, 2003

Director: HILARY WILDER  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May 2009

## Acknowledgement

I would like to use this space to express my thanks first and foremost to God for it is truly and only You that all things are possible through. This is also especially dedicated to my best friend in all the world, my lovely wife, Laura, who without your help and support I could not have done this. I love you Babe! I would also like to dedicate this to our child to be, whom I found out was coming the night before my thesis show opening, which made everything all the more meaningful in so many ways. I love you and can't wait for you. A very special thanks also to Jack Risley, Ron Johnson, Hilary Wilder, Sally Bowring, Gregory Volk, AFO and all of the friends I made here at VCU, it is you who truly made this time very special.

## Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements .....	iii
List of Figures .....	vi
Chapter	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 THE WONDER YEARS (formative indeed).....	5
3 NEO-MOD SCHOOL OF PAINTING .....	10
4 SWIMMING UP STREAM (moving towards a worldview).....	19
5 THESIS WORK .....	31
BARA .....	35
MONO-RAIL ( <i>at wits end infinite welcome</i> ) .....	38
SUN BURN ( <i>feet firmly planted in mid-air</i> ) .....	45
6 CLOSING STATEMENT.....	55

## List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1: Hulk Transformation Sleeping Bag.....	2
Figure 2: Un-Changed.....	13
Figure 3: My Grandpa’s Front Porch.....	15
Figure 4: In Clear View.....	15
Figure 5: Paradoxical Parade for the Radiant Lamb.....	17
Figure 6: Reclining Superheroes in the Act of Duty.....	19
Figure 7: Interior proposition for an exterior space.....	27
Figure 8: Tilted-world (portable sensory pane).....	29
Figure 9: GOLD-RUSHER.....	31
Figure 10: META-GULF.....	33
Figure 11: Lower Story Solution.....	37
Figure 12: BARA.....	37
Figure 13: MONO-RAIL.....	38
Figure 14: Monorail Google image.....	39
Figure 15: Universal Studios Jaws.....	39
Figure 16: MONO-RAIL detail.....	40
Figure 17: MONO-RAIL detail.....	42
Figure 18: MONO-RAIL detail.....	44
Figure 19: MONO-Rail Detail.....	44
Figure 20: Anderson Gallery Thesis exhibition shot.....	45

Figure 21: SUN-BURN.....	50
Figure 22: SUN-BURN detail.....	50



# Abstract

## KINGDOM COMPOSSIBLE

By Ryan Lauterio, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

Major Director: Hilary Wilder  
Assistant Professor, Painting and Printmaking

Does God exist? Can we know for sure? What might it mean to know this? Furthermore what might it look like to make works of art while also seeking to find answers to these questions? This thesis details my personal experiences growing up in a world steeped in postmodernism and my move to answer such questions while looking to develop a meaningful, clear worldview and body of work. I have turned my focus on specific episodes in my life, which significantly illuminate a progression of thinking and experience. Together these thoughts and experiences have become the impetus for both questions and propositions embedded within the long haul of my work culminating in my thesis exhibition.

## INTRODUCTION

I grew up loving the Incredible Hulk; he was truly amplified humanity wrapped up in green. To me, he seemed the perfect example of everything a superhero should be, he was very human and humble yet also transfigured, transforming, full of rage, and to top it off he had the power to change any kind of circumstance. Once on the way to a celebration dinner for my just-married aunt, I ran into the crotch of the actor Lou Ferrigno in a parking lot. It was really him- *the Hulk*. I remember standing frozen in awe as he patted my head and my parents laughed in embarrassment while pulling me away telling me to watch where I was going. I knew he was an actor but I could not help but wonder if in him resided the green Hulk waiting to mutate. I had a similar predicament with another hero of mine during a trip to the Dodger Stadium with my family when at the half way point of a double header Steve Garvey walked up behind me patted me on the head and called me partner. He then proceeded to ask why I was wearing a fake Astros costume instead of a Dodgers' uniform. Try being seven and explaining to your idol that even in 1982 your parents could not afford his jersey. Only in Southern California can a boy run into his hero's crotch and be patted on the head by both of his idols.



Figure 1: Image of my Hulk Transformation Sleeping Bag.

Growing up in the vicinity of action and sports stars, my young mind ran wild with possibility. But never mind the reputation of my surroundings, my family had its own local claim to fame too as my great grandparents were practically historical landmarks of Venice Beach. They were the ones who first instilled in me a real sense of possibility and I am lucky to have had them in my life until 2005. My great grandfather was the country-music-singing, guitar-playing, folk-painting, railroad-tie-carving, best-junk-man in town. He was nicknamed Doodie Pa by me when I was two and I can still recall how Doodie Pa always sat on his front porch, his “studio,” making all kinds of stuff while he talked with neighbors. In World War II he even gassed airplanes and made grease stick drawings on the sides of planes for the pilots. My great grandparents were also supreme antique finders and obsessed with all things material. They filled their whole house, their garage and even their cars with stuff. Even half of my grandpa’s bed

was stacked to the ceiling. This “hording gene” seems to have been passed down, for I too must contend with my impulses to find and store things, which is an urge that continually manifests itself even in my studio practice.

Without going too far into what might seem to be only a hodge-podge of my fond memories, I should pause to explain that I have chosen to focus on specific episodes in my life which I think significantly illuminate a progression of thinking/experiencing that then has become the impetus for both questions and propositions embedded within a long haul of my work culminating in my thesis exhibition. I view my past experiences as a series of constellation points that are surely in the distance yet very present through my “beingness,” prompting me to both raise and seek to answer questions that often sway towards epic ideas and grand proportions.

With this in mind, this thesis paper is structured in three sections. The first is formed by an autobiographical storytelling of significant points in my childhood. The second is a more present storytelling coupled with a streamed argument/journey that builds a case for my major concerns. The final section concludes with some focused points on key pieces made for the thesis show. This section evolved out of what is shared in the first two. I am looking to reveal what dynamics and ideas are at this point in time resonating with me by indirectly implicating and grounding them in my real experiences. Furthermore I am also looking to establish a platform from which to speak with more authority over the thoughts and concerns surrounding both my work and my world-view. I would also like to propose that if one is to figure out how to make meaningful works

that endure over time it is vital to let the duration of meaningful past experiences run their course no matter how long that might be.

I offer to share as clearly and competently as I can the experiences and ideas I so often in conversation care to express but only stumble through approaching. Having time and time again left those that have visited my studio to stare at me in limbo while I stare at the ceiling, tongue-tied, looking for the words to express what I am thinking about, this one is for you.

## THE WONDER YEARS (formative indeed)

How does one become grounded when the immediate world they are brought up in is fickle, seemingly dishonest and always shifting? This would only begin to describe the circumstances surrounding my upbringing. I grew up moving in and around Southern California in a poor working class family. The experiences of my youth could best be described as extreme and disjunctive. Even my parents cycled through styles and trends at a dizzying pace. One minute my dad was a Mexican guy, tough and “macho,” driving low-rider cars and getting into fights, and the next he was getting his haircut to look like Rod Stewart. My mom was no different, having her hair braided to look like Bo Derek and dressing somewhere in between cowboy and punk rock. By 1980, my parents settled for a time on tattoos and piercings, which they used as incentive to get incredibly mad at and/or fight people who stared at them. Often after a fight, my parents would discuss the finer points of the fight over some fast food and complain about the way people continually seemed to gawk at them for no good reason. This perplexed me as I sat listening to them, for they were the ones putting pictures on their bodies and weren't pictures for looking at? Needless to say it was hard to keep up with their change in personas and/or pin myself on anything solid as nothing was safe from changing quickly.

During this time a normal day at home regularly included me playing with a combination of Legos, toilet paper rolls and Star Wars toys while my mom performed her

daily ritual of cleaning the apartment while listening to music including The Doors, Marvin Gaye, the Beatles, Willie Nelson, Johnny Paycheck, The Charlie Daniels Band and her personal favorite Barry White. When my dad would come home from work, I would get out a rooster shaped ashtray from under his record collection and he would smoke weed and listen to Hendrix as I would dance and perform stunt shows. My dad was Ritchie Valens third cousin and I also grew up believing I was related to a famous country music singer named Lori Morgan. Amidst our own poverty also existed a sense of celebrity and importance as though the famous people related to us somehow made us just as significant.

An always-important future-aesthetic-shaping outing was our frequent family trips to Universal Studios. Take for example the famed tram ride, which transported willing participants through different realities, driving us by a range of film set structures including such Hollywood icons as the Psycho house from Hitchcock, the Jaws monster and the Charlton Heston version of the Red Sea being parted over and over again. The tramcar became the unifying force in the experience of traveling through this fantastical film back lot and my encounter with this effect put into the back of my mind the idea of a unifying vehicle very early on. The usual impetus for a visit to Universal Studios added to this notion of a coalescing force as my family typically made this outing after my parents had a fight and or a break up. This perpetual ebb-and-flow relationship charged the amusement park with extra emotional baggage for me, baggage that was transferred on to other things like Jaws, the Psycho house or Dracula's castle as they were the

backdrop to my parents relationship mending. Within this context I found rejuvenation and repeated hope for the coming of better times.

Drama seems to have been present in my personal life almost continuously. Even my beginning was tenuous for I was conceived on a one-night stand when my eighteen-year-old mother hooked up with a motorcycle-riding, drug -abusing guy who was seven years her senior. My mother was told by her stepfather to get an abortion or move out; but being the fighter that she is, she ignored the threat of homelessness, did not tell my biological father he got her pregnant, and committed to keeping me. Out of these circumstances I have often pondered why it was that I mattered enough to have been kept and whether this was chance or a sign that there is a real purpose for my life. This kind of questioning later turned into a quest to understand if we as a human race are simply a product of chance or the product of intention and, therefore, purpose.

While in the womb I had become stuck in my own umbilical cord forcing the doctors to perform an emergency Caesarean but, miraculously I was born unharmed on November 29<sup>th</sup> at St. John's Hospital in Oxnard, California. While my mom was pregnant with me she was dating a man in the Marines named Craig who, prior to meeting her, was involved with gangs and low-rider cars. By the time I was two years old I was wearing a pasty mint green suit, sitting in the front row of a Catholic Church watching my mom marry who I thought was my dad.

By the time kindergarten came around I was taking art seriously and had my first fight with a kid over how to properly draw a figure. I didn't even last a year before my parents had to withdraw me from school for being too hyperactive (i.e. steam rolling kids



every day during naptime among other bad things). During my second go at kindergarten, kids began questioning if my dad was my real father based on their observations of my white-blond hair and his obvious Mexican ethnicity. Becoming acutely aware of the differences between our looks I began to obsess over whether or not Craig was my father to the point that I bothered my mom constantly about the matter. It was not long before my mom sat me down and explained that Craig was indeed not my biological father, but he was still my dad. Furthermore she told me my biological father did not even know I existed because he was not a good person and she wanted to protect me from him. While trying to take all of this in, my mom then proceeded to tell me I could choose her adopted maiden name Knupp or keep the last name Lauterio. Not knowing what a maiden name was or how I had two dads for that matter and already considering myself a Lauterio, I said, “keep Lauterio.” The whole thing was very difficult to process and drove a deep-seated wedge into me as I sensed for the first time that in some sort of way I was fractured. When I asked to see what my real dad looked like my mom basically said when I was old enough we would go find him. Find him... Finding him became a deep-rooted quest full of wonder for the future and with it came the possibility of being made whole.

Back in kindergarten, the school I was attending held a monthly art show for all grade levels called Fabulous Friday. All day on Fabulous Friday, kids from grades K through 6 would go around campus looking at one another’s art. I was especially inspired by the older kids work; what they were doing caused me to try hard to emulate what they made. While I was coming alive through this art making and viewing process, my teacher took notice of my keen interest in art and felt strongly enough about my artistic

inclinations that she wrote my mother encouraging notes, urging her to keep me involved in doing art. Then in first grade that same teacher took it upon herself to profoundly affect my life by asking both my parents and first grade teacher if I could come during my lunch break to her kindergarten class and teach/inspire her students to build and create things. Her reasoning was that I had a sense of energy and imagination her class did not have and needed. Needless to say I was blown away that she would single me out from a few other kids whom I had secretly decided had superior abilities. This acknowledgement made me self-aware in a way I was not beforehand. I can recall walking into the room without knowing any of the kids and somehow putting those concerns aside enough to find the courage to sit down and help them begin to build. I did this by barely speaking and sort of pointing out where things should go. This small initiation into teaching then caused me to get really excited. I began to express my joy with the others by starting discussions about the possibility of Lincoln Logs laying this way or that. I was invited to come back to the class and conducted a few more sessions spanning about two weeks. That early experience teaching had the effect of wrapping art, helping people and my sense of purpose up even tighter.

## NEO-MOD SCHOOL OF PAINTING

From the times I have spoken of, to the point I will be speaking about, there exist many more equally powerful and important episodes such as finding and having a special relationship with my biological dad at eighteen, and in my early twenties establishing and teaching an art program for violent, at-risk youth at Phoenix High School. But I would like to now make a giant leap in time to emphasize the period of growth where I stepped into some of the foundational ideas about painting, which have become a part of me and pervade what I make now.

After some soul searching, in 2001 I decided to save all the money I could muster, get into my car and drive as far as my money would take me away from the high desert of Palmdale. My money and my 1987 Acura Legend landed me in the painting capitol of northern California... Sacramento! There I enrolled in the art therapy program at California State University, Sacramento. At the time I didn't believe in art alone as a reliable enough pursuit for me, for in truth I had little experience to go on, which affected my confidence. Art therapy seemed to afford the possibility of making art and making sense of the difficult questions that persisted in me. Somehow the two together put me on a course to both make art and reconcile my past.

The CSUS art therapy program had only been up and running for a few years. But by the time I got there, the designer and director of the department had suddenly passed

away leaving the program neutralized. I quickly decided to double major in Art and Psychology. This decision eventually gave way to me stepping out to leave psychology behind in order to focus squarely on becoming a painter. I had come out of an illustration background and had only recently begun learning to paint by way of surrealism. This mode of painting was quickly challenged as sophomoric and taken apart before my very eyes by my first great painting professor, Linda Day. I was dazzled and terrified by her claims as I felt she spoke an authoritative albeit foreign sounding language about art. She was tough, intelligent, “told it like it was,” and had come from New York. This all equaled someone worth taking seriously at that time; in fact Linda was the one who really pushed me to earnestly pursue painting.

The painting department was loaded with teachers and professors steeped in strands of modernist painting by way of Bay Area figuration, Hans Hoffman’s push pull theory, figure ground relationships in the vein of the school’s favorite son Wayne Thiebaud, cubism, and the interface that results out of a hybrid emphasis on impressionism/expressionism. Out of this summation there was a collective effort in the school to express a totalizing mode of painting. This was all new to me and I found my “green” self being caught up in the excitement of feeling that I had a lot to learn. Folks there thought with a confidence and diversity that I had never experienced before even though they debated fiercely, differing in their views on what painting both was and wasn’t. These debates however did not change how painting was evaluated as the macro aim/ideology was collectively agreed upon; the paintings were often spoken about as a thing apart from the viewer. Furthermore most professors constantly asked what any

work at any given time was unto itself before asking what it might be to anyone looking. I really gravitated towards this approach for it placed everything engaging to me onto the painting. I became so serious about producing and talking about painting that while I was still an undergrad, I enrolled in a critical theory graduate seminar.

The MA studio class was taught by one of the most dynamic and intelligent people I have ever known. Oliver Jackson was a 67-year-old African-American gentleman who looked like a charismatic 40-something. Oliver was a tough talking preacher type, and yet also comedic, calling to mind Bill Cosby in his mannerisms. Oliver claimed himself to be a “master” in a serious but playful trash-talking sort of way as he had a well-established reputation as both painter and sculptor. Oliver’s preferred method of teaching involved extemporaneously and expansively speaking about both classical philosophy and contemporary theory while quoting paragraphs or sometimes-even pages out of multiple books. While we had our books out he brought with him no text and I was constantly floored by the way he could tell us what it said inside our books verbatim; and then proceed to expound on the content while all the while we furiously checked our books to see if he was right. Because Oliver was so sharp and the most articulate person I have ever encountered, he was able to persuade me to believe whatever he had to say. He captured my attention as a rare person who could handle so many different aspects of history, philosophy, art and life all at once with such clarity and dynamism that I hung onto his every word and longed to emulate him in my own way.

My first class began by Oliver setting a chicken egg on a blank table and then for six hours he continually pestered us to explain what it was. He pushed us to eliminate ourselves from the equation in order to focus on what the egg did based on whatever non-utilitarian qualities might be discernable as it sat there fully present before us. He used the egg as a tool to force us to realize that we make a lot of assumptions about things in the world and that we might need to spend more time slowing down. In relationship to our work we should use such a method of questioning to get to know whatever material we were using so that we might in turn make a piece with more clarity and voice. Little did I know I was being indoctrinated into a quasi “Greenbergian” academic way of thinking through painting! And yet there was so much more to it, for I can recall other lectures he gave on topics such as existentialism and the book of Genesis that were far superior to anything I had ever heard from any philosophy teacher of mine in the past.



Figure 2: Un-Changed, acrylic on panel, 2002

This was my introduction into seriously thinking critically about art and life in a way I had longed for, by focusing on details and not settling on only easy answers. A year later however, my time with Oliver ended when he retired. His replacement was a painfully shy but even more brilliant painter/thinker named Tom Monteith, who was also Oliver's star student ten years earlier. It was during this transition that things got increasingly complicated for me. I was well enough versed in what I had been taught that I began to question all of it, based on the gaps in places that were perceivable to me. I was pleased to find that rather than retreating from my skepticism Tom was apt to meet me at my uncertainty and was thus more expansive than Oliver. In this respect Tom brought more to the grander conversation, by welcoming argumentation without asserting himself as the "master." Needless to say Tom quickly became the balanced person between the influences of Oliver and Linda for me and ultimately I grew the most by way of our friendship and long-winded informal conversations.

As I continued to learn and grow, I became disillusioned with the ideologies being taught to me. This left my confidence in one ultimate way of painting frayed, thus pushing open my search for a totalizing theory for life. It is important here to note that while I was looking at many modernist painters, I was secretly lusting after the diversity and pictorial imagery of artists like Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Lari Pittman, David Salle, Frank Stella and Sigmar Polke. This conflict of interest caused me to seek where things bottomed out so that I could then justify my work shifting according to my secret painting heroes. My own work became divorced from the kind of modernist European-Hoffmanesque academic painting I was surrounded by. I began to move

towards a more American pop subversion of the Greenberg School of painting a la Rauschenberg by making collages that used modernist notions of quality and flatness but subverted this with every day ironic, pop and abject imagery. These early and important works were made from found materials I received daily by way of junk mail. Through cutting out shapes and forms of things that looked interesting to me, while using old maps and corkboard as the foundation for the constructed images, I ended up filling my apartment with hundreds of densely layered works. These works bore no outright reference to the natural world I was so intensely studying, but allowed me to take that scrutinizing approach to “looking” and turn it to the products of my own nature as it were. It was there that I began finding both commonalities between them. I painted from the collages I liked and translated what I could onto body-sized, six by four foot wood panels, which resulted in my first real paintings.



Figure 3: My Grandpa's Front Porch, collage, 2001



Figure 4: In Clear View, acrylic on wood panel 2002



In addition to my own studio work, I created plein-air paintings and engaged in focused, six to eight hour figure-painting sessions. This blend of working became my training ground for learning to see. I began to notice the shifting nature of whatever was before me through the rapid movement of both light and atmosphere surrounding the thing observed simultaneous with my shifting gaze. Seeking to replicate this combination of relationships brought my works to life. I looked to fuse what I perceived with a direct expressionistic mark making that aimed to emote, so that both an interior/exterior emotional/spatial fusion could bring about paintings, that through the aforementioned nuanced effects became perceivably animated. I was fixed on making paintings that dealt directly with rapid movement through the effects of illumination, the impression of time and atmosphere. By creating a painted field that included all of the above-mentioned qualities I found my interest honing in on the way through paint, a form could seem to be either coming together or destabilizing, depending on the perceptions of a viewer.

As the result of learning to look and examine works of all kinds, my paintings became exceedingly abstract and insular, demanding prolonged viewing and generating inconclusive thoughts. However, my painting pursuits had enabled me to develop a kind of perceptivity that I found personally enriching due to the way it seemed to constantly call me out of myself, pushing me to consider not only what was before me but also pointing me towards seemingly bigger issues outside of art and painting. At the same time I began to dump more expectation on painting only to find that painting gave less back. I wondered what painting really was and what one could do within it.

My studies began to broaden and I wrapped myself up in intense debates about art with my friends, and engaged in very influential conversations with a girl named Laura, (who would later become my wife), about the existence of God, how we could know if he existed, and what the implications would then be for us if we could. In that final respect I wanted to know what it would mean to be an artist while bearing the knowledge of intelligence greater than our own. I could not help but let these exhaustive debates and conversations infiltrate my paintings, which in turn caused my works to carry a multi-dialectical sensibility. The conflation of seemingly irreconcilable points of view, represented by differing modes of painting happening on one surface, dominated my work as I began to introduce more readily discernable references to image. For it seemed to me at the time, viewing the relationships between difficult ideas such as high and low cultural references reconciled on a picture plane might give clues to what is required for these to play out coherently in real life.



Figure 5: Paradoxical Parade for the Radiant Lamb, acrylic on panel 2005

After graduating with my BA in the fall of 2003, I immediately entered into CSUS' MA in Studio Art program in the spring 2004. At CSUS my work developed in direct relationship to the chances I took based on these ideas. I found my focus shifting to how the physical shape of my panels pushed the paintings to aspire towards an architectural form and space, which could then activate a viewer on a physical level; while also presenting a sustained spatial interior. In allowing the paintings to unfold and become more object-oriented the notion of straightforward painting became unstable for me as a pursuit. Even with the new works measure of fullness signified by a degree of drama, irony, humor, contemporariness and image specificity; specificity, which was compounded by the visual way the structure of the painting, was composed as the merge of image and abstraction worked against a dynamic field that undulated between density/objectness and transparency/space. With all that said, and while my paintings were becoming something distinct from my older works, I found myself increasingly dissatisfied and restless.

## SWIMMING UP STREAM (moving towards a worldview)<sup>1</sup>



Figure 6: Reclining Superheroes in the Act of Duty, 2005

During my time at CSUS I began to recognize that I was being too self-centered in my quest for answers by thinking somehow my questions were only about me (yet there were many others who shared similar issues that begged the same questions) and that the answers must somehow start and finish with me. I determined that the issues of personal and cultural identity, meaning, making meaningful things, and God would not be solved through subjectively pursuing painting and/or personal happiness. I was

---

<sup>1</sup> Within this text I cannot begin to adequately approach the magnitude and specificity required with regards to the engaging material I have come upon. To do justice by this would require several volumes of text. However, respectfully I can try to bring to light the things that struck me in the most basic way, choosing to focus on some of the life shaping information by highlighting what has been essential to my growth. I will use primarily a singular text that consolidates the information I found among a broader range of sources.

flooded with the sense that happiness must be a by-standard of purpose and if there is no ultimate purpose or meaning to the nature of being human then there is no way of gaining an enduring happiness that can bring with it a deep, welling peace. A peace that could reach back to the point of my own chance origins or the origins of any other.

Furthermore, I began to realize that if there is no way of philosophically generating a sense of self-purpose that can run deep enough into me and sustain itself, then I must endure forever the distrust, doubt and frustration repressed inside of me from the experiences of my youth. If I could not account for these fundamental problems how could I then, being meaningless in and of myself, expect for a product of my own meaninglessness to then carry meaning? This had further implications for what a work of mine could offer, not just myself, but anyone else if there was no force/God apart from humans esteeming our own existence. I concluded that happiness could not be sustained as my premier object of pursuit. Even more so the pursuit might be contributing to loneliness, despair and perhaps a sense of failure, as happiness cannot be defined in and of itself in order to know how to focus on it as object. In addressing these points I found it difficult to imagine living a life and or making work that by default of no higher-power, could then only dwell in the dark place of existential angst, absurdity, futility and a nihilistic delusion of a “just before my eyes” unspeakable, sublime un-knowable as I had experienced it. I was feeling as though my work was beating a dead horse in an endless array of clever approaches that accumulated in the “fetishization” of art, and an explanation of it as transcendent only through the knowledge of arts unique materiality

and arrangement. This then in turn separates art away from commodity so that it ironically could then become “special” commodity.

Nevertheless, I persisted in believing that there is intrinsic value in the uniqueness of people and the works they make. While struggling with how indeed this was true, I began to think about and understand my life in a more holistic sense. The famous French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) wrote a simple and profound quote I heard at the time; he said that there exists in all our hearts a God shaped vacuum that cannot be filled by any created thing. Focused on whether life had sustaining meaning I wondered, “Are we simply a product of random chance? Did we originate from a meaningless single celled organism that began a long undirected march towards dividing, specifying, and evolving into a dazzling array of complex life forms? Was this the result of intelligent design, luck, or alien seeds? How could we know? Was there a way to fill this vacuum Pascal spoke of?” It seemed that if I could get a handle on these questions I could get a better sense on what a work of art should be.

It is here that I want to move from my past as content into uncovering the more recent and current points of my focus, originating from the specifics I have just described, which now inform and direct my work. From a philosophical angle I continued actively reading such great thinkers as Plato<sup>2</sup>, Aristotle, Plotinus, Heidegger, Nietzsche and Sartre, in order to understand their conclusions regarding existence and meaning. While the discovery that resulted from those studies was vital, two other thinkers greatly intrigued me, Hume and Kant, and it is their thoughts that continue to shape and effect how our

---

<sup>2</sup> In particular *The Republic* and his philosophy regarding the nature of an artist and artistic production.

current climate perceives truth and meaning. I shall like to focus in the simplest terms on why their positions have caused me to move to a more definite position apart from their views and their effects.

It seems one could make a strong argument that David Hume is chiefly responsible for the skepticism that is so prevalent today. Hume proposed that ideas must fall into one of two categories to be meaningful; either they must be true by definition or based on sense experience. This prohibits any metaphysical statement such as “God exists” from having any meaning because it is beyond the testing of the senses.<sup>3</sup>

Immanuel Kant tried to reconcile the certainty of a transcendent realm outside of an immanent realm but at the same time heightened Hume’s skepticism by asserting that we cannot know anything that exists in and of itself. We can only experience our senses, as they perceive what is beyond us. The subjective senses are the primary interpreter of the object.

The relationship of these two philosophies to an understanding of painting is clear. When a painting is critiqued everyone involved is not seeing the work unto itself but only their sense impressions of it. How then can anyone’s interpretation or critique of a work be valid if there is no way to determine anything about the work beyond the subjective senses? Whose view is valid and why? While overly simplified these have been troubling concerns for me.

Thankfully at this point I had come across one of the most useful tools in my pursuit for clarity in the questions I had been posing, the law of non-contradiction, which

---

<sup>3</sup> Norm L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 57. These categories would later become the foundation of A.J. Ayer’s empiricism.

is a basic law of logic, which I came across in an undergraduate philosophy class. And while simple in structure this law “is a self evident first principle of thought that says contradictory claims cannot both be true at the same time in the same sense. In short, it says that the opposite of true is false.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore Hume cannot logically make the claim that there is no truth by stating this to be the “Truth.” Likewise, Kant commits a similar fallacy. He contradicts his claim that he can’t know the real world beyond his senses by claiming he knows what the real world beyond his senses is like, namely unknowable. To claim reality is unknowable is in fact claiming to know something about reality. Both were convinced of the absolute nature of their claims, yet both of their claims could not bear the burden of their own assertions. To clarify further, on his own terms to be meaningful Hume’s definition of meaningful ideas must be either true by definition or verifiable through the senses.<sup>5</sup> Since it is neither, why should I consider his ideas anything other than intellectual dishonesty?

Towards the end of my MA degree I ran into many such self-refuting claims inherent in a range of ideas from faculty and friends, pushing me further away from the ideologies I was being exposed to and in effect pushing me towards the very unpopular idea of objective truth and a higher intelligent designer. My theistic worldview, if I may put it that way, began to come into focus while I was still hoping to get a classical handle on art, life and the “thingly-ness” of the thing. I pressed on to understand Plato’s thinking on form and content, the reasoning for existentialism, and the tenets of modernism and its quest for a unified theory and mode of expression/language that would utopically deliver

---

<sup>4</sup> Geisler and Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*, 56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 59.



the world from its despair with woman/man at its center. I found myself personally shedding the skeptical outgrowth of modernism, postmodernism, along with its splintered and forcefully liberating motives of deconstructing and leveling all hierarchies. Formerly postmodernism seemed to have resonance with me, particularly given my upbringing. However, I grew increasingly frustrated with the symptomatic outgrowth of its preaching, namely, in my experience, an almost dogmatic, relativization of any point anyone could make at any given time. I found this effect suffocating and isolating, as it seemed everyone adopted a “How can you know that?” and “That’s just your opinion” practice of communicating. I also felt that as result of these mindless knee-jerk chants, my peer group and even the culture at large began to avoid discussing anything difficult, altogether.

Thus, my research into an array of major world religions took center stage leaving me to find that they all share some superficially similar things in common, yet are radically different in their core tenets. For example Buddha basically proposed that there is no reality; that all is illusory, negating via relativism several central and pressing issues to humanity such as good, evil, right, wrong, pain, pleasure and the origins of our beginnings. In regards to a higher power he was agnostic tending towards atheism. On the other hand, Hinduism proposes that there are over 333 million gods expressing a pan-polytheistic worldview, a kind of impersonal “god-in-everything.” The Judeo-Christian view is monotheistic, proposing that Jesus is the resurrected Son of God, one of three persons in the holy Trinity. The Jewish faith is also monotheistic but believes that the Messiah has not yet come, departing from Christianity at the point of Jesus. And yet

Islam also holds to a belief in one God although impersonal, but adamantly rejects the claim that God could be human or more than one. Gnostics believe in a disembodied God and reject the material world as evil. Likewise within other religious denominations I also found several compelling differences. For instance Mormons believe Jesus and Satan are spirit brothers fighting over the nature of love and free will. Jehovah Witnesses reject the Trinity and believe that Jesus was only a great moral teacher and spirit. And of course there are also, minor pseudo-religious worldviews trying to compete in the marketplace of ideas.

A further discovery I found particularly interesting revolved around an “angel of light.” Islam and Mormonism share a seminal story, where their respective prophets Muhammad and Joseph Smith were approached by an “angel of light” whom told them both they were to start their religions as the one true way. What made this so interesting is I had heard that the Christian Bible describes Satan as a cunning deceiver and an “angel of light.” These conflicting ideas all intrigued me to say the least, but what was clearly evident was either one religion reflected the truth about reality or none did. But most apparent was that based on their individual claims they could not all be true.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps these religions are all misleading human constructions that level at the point of personal taste. On the basis of my studies, I had determined that there in fact must be some kind of God or infinite intelligence organizing the heavens and the earth that was true apart from blind faith or myth. If true, there should be evidence of this

---

<sup>6</sup> These are generalized points clearly but it is necessary that the specifics I encountered surface in the way they do because my work has a measure of focus on how one might discern these differences in truth-claims in a pursuit of something higher.

intelligence to be found. I began searching for corroborative evidence, knowing that nothing would be absolute considering we are finite beings. This led me to consider humans inability to attain exhaustive knowledge of infinity or an infinite Creator. For in our limitedness this task would be disproportionate. The issue of time became massive in figuring out how one could relate to an infinite Creator because of the way it off sets our finitude against a potentially timeless infinite. Personality then became vital in this emerging equation, as it might signal something about who God is. From that point the monotheistic idea of an infinite yet simultaneously personal God that existed outside of space-time and history seemed to make the most sense. Moreover it seemed humans, by way of living “in-time” in the “active” sense, could only continue to gain(*active*) knowledge, “gain” also then being descriptive of life lived according to the limitations of finitude; and personalness (*intrinsic/active*) might be a way in which one could have the ability to correspond with an infinite being outside of time while still in it. Furthermore, if there was not a Creator where else would personhood come from or creativity for that matter? I began to wonder about the idea of being made in the image of God, and if personal-ness and creativity are something all humans have, whether this is intrinsically linked to what it might mean to be made in the image of God. This pushed me to look for what made the most sense in the most comprehensive way, according to both cumulative truth (all encompassing reality), and accounting for time (*internal/felt and external/perceived*) as it is experienced by humans, while factoring all that could be known in an array of disciplines. No matter how naive I was or am regarding this pursuit,

it seemed that my well-being was at stake- at stake in the sense that if there was anything worth knowing, the knowledge might have great consequence for my life.



Figure 7: Interior proposition for an Exterior space and or “Glacial Sunset Referendum (Sky House and Carpet included), 2007

If science had anything to say on the matter it might be the solid ground from which I could deliberate between the theoretical difficulties of philosophy, religion and culture. At this point some of my most exciting uncoverings occurred. Again there is too much to mention in one paper but for the sake of how this all merges in my work I will highlight some simplified but note worthy points of interest.<sup>7</sup> In 1916 Albert Einstein made a well known yet still electrifying set of calculations indicating the expanding

---

<sup>7</sup> The difficulty in discoursing about my work revolves around my interest in the facts that follow.

nature of the universe, which eventually became known as the theory of general relativity. These findings were against Einstein's own desires for he wanted the universe to be static and self-existent, without reliance on anything outside of its own nature. His noteworthy discovery indicated the universe was not eternal but had a beginning.<sup>8</sup>

Another famous event capturing my attention took place at California's Mount Wilson Observatory in 1927. Edwin Hubble discovered that there is a red shift in light emanating from every observable galaxy. He recognized the shift was evidence that those galaxies were moving away from us at a speed proportionate to their distance from the earth,<sup>9</sup> which is to say the more distant the galaxy, the faster it recedes away from us. This means that if we were to travel back in time experiencing the universe in "rewind," the universe would grow denser as it contracts to the point of finite density, thus becoming the origin of the universe implicating that it burst forth out of "nothing." While we have all heard of the "big bang" moment the profound discovery is that we indeed are part of a temporal universe.

During this time I was listening to and reading philosopher Dr. William Lane Craig's material on the Kalam Cosmological argument.<sup>10</sup> The simple premise is that whatever begins to exist has a cause. The universe began to exist, therefore it logically follows that the universe had a cause. The initial premise of this argument is universally accepted within the scientific community as the Law of Causality and Einstein and Hubble's discoveries give basis for the second premise. It seems that the evidence of a

---

<sup>8</sup> Geisler, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>10</sup> J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 468.

clear beginning to the universe points to a reality beyond space and time that is non-physical and immaterial, and introduces the idea of a divine will validated by scientific evidence rather than theology with the ability to constitute nature out of nothing.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, since it's beginning the universe and all of its matter has been governed by precisely balanced laws of physics, laws that seem to balance on a razors edge such as the gravitational force which holds all matter together, and the nuclear force which pushes all of matter together creating chemistry and thus the fundamental principles necessary to gain life.<sup>12</sup> I was interested to find that gravity and space work together by precisely regulating the speed of the expansion of the universe so that forms great and small can emerge successfully. This precision is extremely significant to the existence of humanity for if the speed were any faster there would not be enough time for forms to emerge at all.<sup>13</sup> This is just one of hundreds of indicators that the universe is fine-tuned for life.



Figure 8: Tilted-world (portable sensory panel), 2008

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 479-480.

<sup>12</sup> As an example of these ideas coming together in one place see "Physics," *The Case for a Creator*, DVD: *A Journalist Investigates Scientific Evidence that Points Toward God* (City:State: Illustra Media, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

All of this evidence eventually pushed any notion of a fluke origin to our universe out of the equation as the evidence only continued to mount towards intelligent transcendence. As much as scientists try to create an environment for spontaneous generation of life to occur, they have been unable to do so. Examples of their failures include the famous Urey-Miller experiment. Had this experiment succeeded, we would know that the combination of chemicals thought at the time to comprise ancient earth's atmosphere are no longer thought to be accurate.<sup>14</sup> "In other words, scientists intelligently contrive experiments and they still cannot do what we are told mindless natural laws have done."<sup>15</sup> Discoveries of cases of irreducible complexity in nature heavily weigh in on the side of design. In his most famous work "On the Origin of Species," Charles Darwin wrote, "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed, which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down."<sup>16</sup> A premier example of a complex organism required by Darwin is the simplest cell itself. Darwin could not have anticipated the knowledge that would later be discovered regarding the intricacies of this most basic form of life. Biochemist Michael Behe's research has led to the recognition that "living things are filled with molecular machines [which are] irreducibly complex, meaning that all the parts of each machine must be completely formed, in the right places, in the right sizes, in operating order, at the same time for the machine to function."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, "Introduction."

<sup>15</sup> Geisler, 118.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (New York:Penguin,1958),171 as quoted in Geisler, 144-145.

<sup>17</sup> Geisler,145. An example of a molecular machine is the bacterial Flagellum, described in DVD. To function, all fourteen of its different parts must be simultaneously running. These parts include a rotary motor, hook region, drive shaft, a propeller, and a u-joint. It contains so many design features that it is hard

## THESIS WORK



Figure 9: GOLD RUSHER (we rode until our teeth hurt), wood and acrylic, 2008

While what I have just mentioned in the last section is truly just the tip of an iceberg of reasons to believe, I have been able to take the implications of a meaningful universe and work backwards to the point of my own beginning to find true value and meaning within the specific things that have happened to me. I have yet to find an argument strong enough to persuade me away from believing on the basis of evidence in a Creator. However, though I have arrived at these conclusions in an open and honest

---

wired to a trans-ductor sensory mechanism which gains information from the environment vital for vision, photo synthesis and much more.



pursuit I have experienced many times in my past rejection and even hostility from both my peers and faculty members at CSUS who dismissed me as being ignorant or close-minded. These difficulties pushed me to long for a peaceful, humble and honest way to reconcile the ideas that began to motivate my pursuit as an artist.

Since coming to VCU I have truly sought to find a convergent form of expression that deals with my invested interest in the things I have spoken of regarding my past, painting, and the nature of existence. I came looking to reinvent my studio practice, to lessen the baggage I have when it comes to painting and to let the ideas I am studying surface in an organic and open fashion. I have sought to work both in painting and in three-dimensional works in hopes that I could make art that revealed much of what has been storing up inside of me. I have looked to do this in a way that would invite open dialogue, by avoiding making closed didactic works that then shut down the responsiveness of any given viewer. I have looked at various different ways of cloaking my ideas most specifically in that of an amusement park mode, only to feel as though none of my approaches to this point have been successful at conveying my concerns. More specifically the dialogue surrounding my work never left the ground. It remained too connected to the direct reference of theme park rather than expanding out from it. However due to the specificity of this paper as well as the range in the immediacy of my new works, this is the first time in my life as an artist I have been able to bring relevant aspects of my focus to bear in such a way that corresponds with my work, while writing a text that directly substantiates my reasoning for making them.

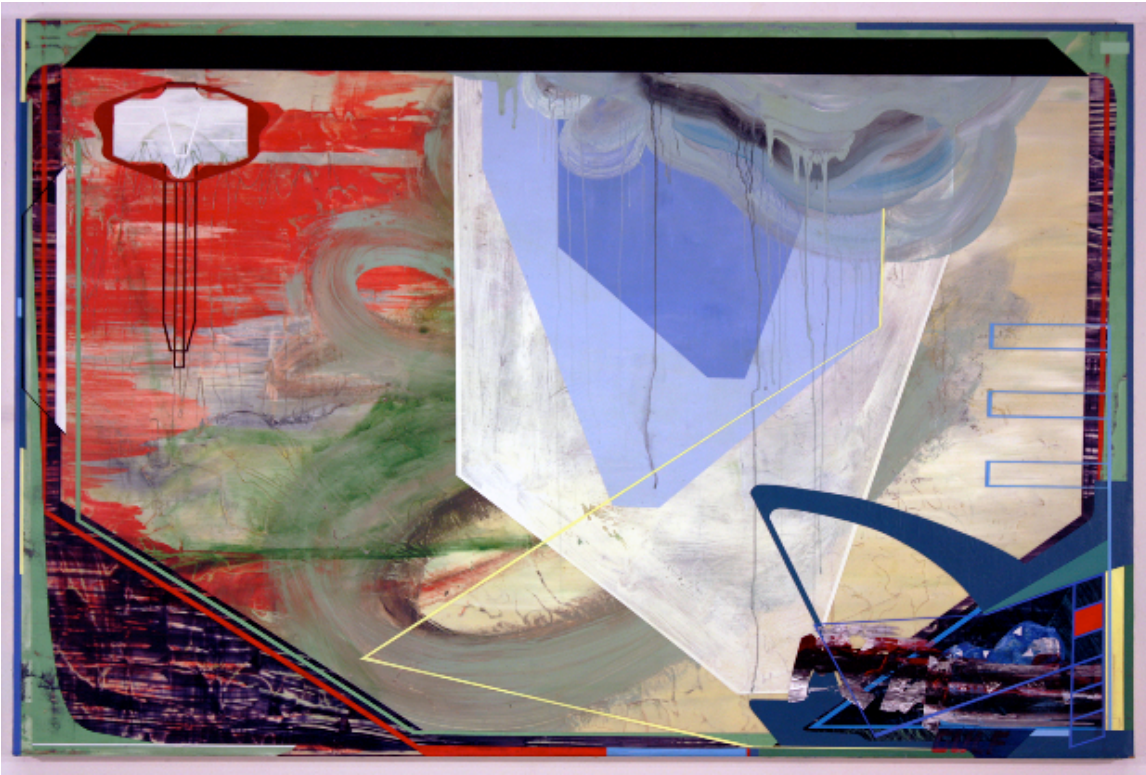


Figure10: META-GULF (inch deep, miles wide), acrylic on panel, 2009

Kingdom Compossible is the title of my thesis show and best describes the propositions embedded in my newest pieces. The title builds off of the meaning behind both “Kingdom Come” and “Compossible.” The way I intend it, Kingdom Come could be described as the next world, the state after death or the point at which the world comes to an end. Compossible means “compatible, able to exist, coe-exist or happen together.”<sup>18</sup> By fusing these two meanings I am looking to create a space under the terms of “kingdom” that becomes a pivot/hinge for thinking through to the end of an age and/or the coming of another. While “compossible” compounds the meaning by proposing, that

---

<sup>18</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “Compossible,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/compossible>. Accessed April 28, 2009.

while there is a shift in the age, what is both materially before a viewer in reality and also what is just beyond ones vision, are coexisting in a manner that is in fact possible and necessary for life. Here is a proposition to reconsider how one perceives the meaning of human existence and what might be missing in ones approach to answering that question. Under the umbrella of the show title, the works flash references immediate to the subjects as I have written about them, both from my personal stories of my youth and the other subjects of interest that I have addressed in this paper. Moreover much of my ideas are heightened through how I have painted the works and the results that follow, such as the diverse effects specific to how paint is interacting with the objects. To activate the ideas visually, painting has become an agent for coherence by subverting the variance of image and object throughout my pieces. This seems to happen by how one can make links that are not privileged to one support or structure, but become common through the consistency of the substance of paint.

The works are forceful and direct while refraining from a high frequency of didacticism. The immediacy of the works relies on the images they conjure, the honesty in the pieces by way of material choices and how the materials are often exposed in places showing what it could be, what it is made out of, and in the middle what it is as it is. Resulting from this is a clearer sense of the pieces' inherent limitations and a push for a point in between instability and stability, as the pieces seem to fall apart and come together by way of construction and materials. The work carries a static/still effect, which indicates a layer of connectivity between the pieces. The connectivity can be activated by what the work conjures collectively in any viewer at any given time. I am interested in

what viewers subjectively project into the truth and specificity of the work and what kind of charge is activated with a projection towards the works. As an example of this, the common and forceful link in all of the work is various qualitative effects of white. Through using shifting consistency of white the work becomes more readily open to the idea of a viewer projecting. In my opinion the most profound and essential aspect of our nature as humans is the will, meaning that even when evidence indicates something we can still willfully reject it. This is also true with works of art. So much of what happens with a work seems dependent on the willingness of a viewer.

#### BARA

I have often wondered what it is that draws people to painting. Some of the best painters I have had the privilege of hearing speak talk mostly about the moves they make with the material. Their conversation seems to remain in the realm of what the material can do and how the painting finally resolved when the artist was done with it. I recall David Reed eloquently describing painting. He made me feel as though he truly loved to dance with the material and that when the dance was over the results equaled both evidence of his touch and fine-tuning while the painting retained a sense of itself. In that respect “Painting” was not done being involved with. It still called for more touch. It seemed to me as though this was the same “Painting” Pollock must have danced with or O’Keefe, Guston, Park, Velázquez or Angelica. It is as if painting really is a monolith that will dance with any who choose to engage with it. That it will never be fully

commanded by the artist, but always somehow present itself as it always has, until it is done, until the painter is done.

These ideas of a timeless thing that invites the imprint of our hand while still remaining fully itself became partly the influence for the painting “BARA.” BARA is the Hebrew word “for made out of nothing or no thing” or “to fatten.”<sup>19</sup> In the Hebrew language there is no exact translation for our English word “create” but “bara” is a close term to it. In that respect this piece initiates the beginning of Kingdom Compossible. I painted BARA in a manner that reflects finite density as I have studied it regarding the Kalam cosmological argument. In sync with the ideas of this piece is a large chevron/home-plate shaped panel with a single luminous central and dense space. The work was made to resist quick or easy references. It is reliant upon the effects of grey and black scraped several times across an intense yellow space, while the wedge form emphasizes a downward overall force through the narrowing of the shape. The interior acts contrary to the shape by conveying an upward-ness sustained through the rectilinear painterly-effects going on in the middle. The middle of the painting is then framed by an expansive sky-like blue space on equal sides, which in and of it self is frontal and tending towards atmospheric in effect.

---

<sup>19</sup> Jeff A. Benner, “The Poetry of Genesis Chapter 1,” *Ancient Hebrew Research Center*, [www.ancient-hebrew.org/23\\_genesis\\_1.html](http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/23_genesis_1.html) (accessed April 29, 2009).

The wedge shape has been in several of my most recent works. I began to think of it in relationship to the analogy of “inch deep miles wide” as a way of explaining a thin worldview, meaning a worldview one could not leap out of based on the width being miles wide. Yet because of its thin nature one might be able to wedge a way through to a deeper, true and preexisting base. In that respect the wedge, in contact with the preexisting base could allow for substantial and sustaining outward growth while re-contextualizing the thin worldview. It is for this purpose that the shape of the painting was made top heavy with a piercing bottom, employing an up-down visual reference. BARA carries a central force while also looking to accommodate the objects made in conjunction with it.



Figure 11: Lower Story Solution, acrylic on panel, 2009



Figure 12: BARA, acrylic on panel, 2009



Figure 13: MONO-RAIL (*at wits end infinite welcome*), mixed media, 2009

### MONO-RAIL (*at wits end infinite welcome*)

MONO-RAIL (*at wits end infinite welcome*) is the shows centerpiece. The shape of MONO-RAIL is based on the design of a hand-held vacuum cleaner that looked like a Star Wars toy spaceship, and on the scale/dimensions and rough shape of the robotic Jaws on the Universal Studios tour in LA; that daily, on a twenty minute cycle, the shark repeated the same act of lunging at an audience of passer-bys in a robotic expression of terror. The primary color in this piece, a pasty mint green, is the color of the suit that I wore to my parents wedding. MONO-RAIL forms a fantastical transportation vehicle, echoing both monorail/ tramcar and roller coaster spaceship. Out of these references the work begins to function like the tram ride did at the theme park, by unifying ones

experiences of seemingly disparate observable realities. The effect perpetuates the notion of a potential passenger within a single unit hence the emphasis on the “MONO,” meaning “one”.



Figure 14: Internet monorail from Google image



Figure 15: Jaws from Google image

Calling on the experiences of studying plein air and figure painting and looking to create an impression of rapid movement based on the effects and nuances of the surrounding environment and the “in time” viewing of the viewer, MONO-RAIL conjures more than tramcar. There are secondary references that occur, reinforcing landscape, constructions, boats and various modes of painting from gestural -abstraction to hard- edge geometric abstraction. These elements coalesce in a comprehensive, contemplative, destabilizing vehicle/painting, refusing to resign itself to one comfortable position or category. Scale imposes itself in the space, as the work is being life sized yet subverted by the color and varied qualities of the piece. The soft pink color, of a matte-like consistency, soaks in the light of the atmosphere it is in, which in turn cuts away at the crispness of the edges of the overall form. The cake-like color, supported by a frosting-like application, softens the exterior of the piece while aiming to elicit visual consumption from a viewer. The hard edge stripes are set off against the soft pink and



white “cakeness”, echoing graphic design particular to the low rider cars my dad drove, and theme-park graphics of tramcars and bumper cars. These vehicles and the symbols of motion function optically as strips of fastness and temporariness, syncing up with geometric hard edge abstraction. The viewer is invited to not sink into those moments, but rather run their gaze along the lines as they invite the eye to move swiftly along until they reach a more frontal, open and matte space. There then the gaze can sink relative to the material visually soaking up light and optically/atmospherically collapsing to a small extent the taughtness of the surface, making the surface of this vehicle carry an impression of a frontally receding picture plane.



Figure 16: MONO-RAIL, side detail

As much as MONO-RAIL can hold prolonged looking on the outside, it was made to also consider on the inside. While keeping continuity between the interior of the piece with its exterior surroundings, a viewer is always able to look through to some vantage point on both the interior and exterior. In some respects it is so one cannot take this giant object/painting in all at once. One is provoked to move around it in order to gain not just intellectual information but also bodily information. In the front cockpit lays the statement *Be Still* in pink carved foam. The text can be read in proper orientation when one is looking from the back to front. The text seems to be surfacing yet embedded information. Furthermore with the billowy pink text comes a reference to something being irreducibly complex, for the text does not break down to smaller parts beyond the letters themselves, but rather is made to work with the rest of the piece in an-all-at once way by being made of the same substance. Counter to that, when one looks from front to back there are “dinged up” door mats that say *welcome* running all the way down to the back. In the cockpit “welcome,” an invitation into action, is neutralized by “be still” which is a call into being rather than doing. Somewhere in the dialogue in the guise of a fantastical transportation vehicle is the contemplative notion of what it means to be both welcome and still within one whole, in a vehicle meant to bring one close to the divine as it were.

Now there are many ways one can read this information and I welcome that, but I am also trying to delicately make a work that carries with it a measure of purpose; purpose that activates a place and particular resonance while maintaining an openness that allows one to seek/project and find out what else might be brought about by

engaging with this work. As this work becomes the centerpiece, it implicates the human



form, both through having an interior that one might enter to move somewhere, but by it also being a bit visceral in and of itself.

Figure 17: MONO-RAIL, front interior-cockpit detail.

Looming in proximity to MONO- RAIL is a levitating human form and quasi-transportation vehicle in its own right. I have gotten out of subways to be greeted by a person performing some kind of cheap trick, musical act, or comedic performance in a desperate yet repetitive plea for their simple needs to be met. While doing so both the plea and the performance wear one another out, softening the poignancy of the act and all that might result from it. This again is where meaning as intrinsic to humans becomes important, especially when the fringes of humanity in the heights of great civic achievements are brought into one intimate space to be observed, while implicating a continual call for action in even the most indifferent of passers-by. As I have been thinking through the idea of public transportation references and the kind of makeshift economy that is set up by street performers looking to others higher up on the food chain for a hand out. I have been moved to consider how the passengers aboard this mass transportation vehicle wear out both the body of the passengers but also that of the vehicle itself, as there is then a collective wearing out of the whole environment by way of consistent repetition of action.



Figure 18: MONO-RAIL, Rear exterior detail



Figure 19: MONO-RAIL, side profile



Figure 20: KINGDOM COMPOSSIBLE, gallery installation shot, 2009

*SUN BURN (feet firmly planted in mid-air)*

First the back-story: In high school I was very fortunate to find some success as a high jumper. In this endeavor, a number of factors have to come together in just the right way such as speed, timing, focus, leaping ability and a will to compete. To understand what I experienced, consider being alone on a runway facing down a bar anywhere from

half of a foot to a foot over your head. Running towards the bar, the texture and qualities of the ground begin to shift as you move from grass or dirt to a rubbery tartan substance just before lifting off the ground to hurl your body over the bar. Furthermore you only have three chances to clear this bar at the designated height and if you do the bar is then raised two more inches for you to complete the process again until you are hopefully the last competitor standing. Built into this event is a preexisting agreement where the participant must decide to at some point acquiesce to his or her human limitations and resolve to fail at the point where the barrier of the bar becomes just out of reach. In spite of this there resides in every jumper a determination to keep trying to overcome the barrier, putting aside all thoughts of failure, always seeking to figure out how to inch by or tweak this or that movement to stay in the competition a little longer. For me this event was an obsession, perhaps even more so an addiction to the sensation of running towards a height greater than my own stature, turning my back towards the height and then driving my right knee into the sky, waiting for my body to reach a perceivable peak so I could then dip my head back, arching my body with my arms laid out, facing my chest to the sky and my back to the earth. For a moment I could sense what it might feel like to defy gravity, a sensation that was other worldly in comparison to walking that left me feeling just for a spell as though time and space stopped and I could levitate or fly. No sooner would I gain even a slight handle on this experience as it was happening before I was already descending back into ordinariness, falling into a giant red or green pit or mat. Suddenly I could hear noise and was back down to earth once again in my normal circumstances. The crowd watching on would applaud, as the sport was also a spectacle.

Somehow the crowd's involvement contributed to my assuring that I had done what I thought I had, but also acted as a reference point for how I could be distinguished from them.

Keeping this in mind, consider now another experience that ran parallel to high jumping for me. While I was growing up my family would frequently visit Venice Beach's boardwalk. At this location an individual instantly becomes a spectator to a multitude of street performers with intense peculiarities, ranging in style and image to personal eccentricities related to drug addiction, mental health-problems, unorthodox - entrepreneurial personas and so much more. I found that the best way to experience these performers was to succumb to their world by silently agreeing to play along with them, believing in their fantasy so that both they and I could be transported out of the present circumstance. It was all a temporary transcendence, subject to being repeated while particular to our innate finitude.

This was not unlike my experience as a high jumper. There were more similarities than differences between us. While high jumping I fed off of my environment and the crowd's energy. At Venice Beach the street magician/musician also fed off the crowd while simultaneously being distinct from them. One distinction I was aware of was that most lived in substandard conditions, oftentimes living on the streets, and also that their bodies were unlike and yet somehow like mine. Their bodies were sun-withered, as they persisted over and over again to publicly perform the act that they felt suited their life which gave them a sense of purpose, presenting a challenge that only they could meet and manage in terms of failure and success. These were possibilities invented out of the



necessity of either not wanting to live a “normal” life or for one reason or another, being incapable of doing so. Even though we were all distinct in our differences, in a larger scope we were also all living under the same conditions, the same reality. The sky hung above all of our heads, our bodies were all suffering the same entropic effects, the ocean was just over there for all of us, just beyond the sand. And what was it that drew us in unity to perform repetitive acts that afforded only the slightest sense of transcendence? We were all personal finite beings with souls, aspirations and longings for significance. We were all trying to organize our ordinariness into systems of our own making, in hopes of achieving the complicated task of living apart from infinite meaning. Feeling that even though on this strange strip of land a kind of launch pad of abject hope, full of dysfunction, diversity and distant, smiling-even ill-faces, there was a special set-apart-from-everything-else intrinsic value in all of us. There had to be a reason for us- some explanation bigger than us all that bestowed meaning from within rather than granting it arbitrarily from without. I wondered why people would continue to show up to the boardwalk if there wasn’t indeed a sense of something we were missing that upon each revisit might at last surface.

I knew then, as I do now, that I am projecting a bit of my own past and sympathies onto this situation, making a connection between the extremes of the boardwalk as a microcosm for the way I was able to coexist in my own personal extremes. However, I felt that somehow just because people, including myself can coexist with extremes in this way and we can be left to our own devices, I was never so sure that we should. Should we be free to make our own subjective standards, sometimes

borrowing from others to fill in our own gaps of disbelief, at any given moment of our choosing? Enslaving ourselves to fickle feelings and seemingly eternal consequences? I could not help but see the trappings of the spectacle as an enabler for addiction and extreme temporary self-exaltation.

On the other hand it was possible for the spectacle to lend itself to understanding that there is a greater significance to reality beyond the immediate circumstance. High jump requires that there be an optimal degree of fine-tuned conditions between the high jumper and the surrounding atmosphere. I realized that this was true for the performer as well. This necessity of critically balanced conditions continued to be true as I panned out to even grander proportions, to the universe itself. Rather than disorder, astro-biologists conclude that there are known to be at least twenty observable conditions that must be fully present in such a precise degree in order for complex life to be.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, only on Earth has this precise combination of conditions been met. Over and over again probability seems to indicate that life is supported nowhere else in the known universe but on our planet.<sup>21</sup> So given the unlikelihood of existence on so many magnified levels I increasingly wondered why it was that anyone could strive for something in a contrived set of circumstances and actually attain it even just for a moment of true weightlessness. Did this correspond to our human inclinations to strive to achieve a greater understanding of our existence and reach for the furthest parameters of reality? Perhaps this was a clue to our purpose. Perhaps there was something transcendent to grasp that was worth grasping.

---

<sup>20</sup> “Astronomy,” *The Case for a Creator*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 21: SUN BURN (*feet firmly planted in mid-air*), 2009    Figure 22: SUN BURN, detail, 2009

In relationship to MONO-RAIL, SUN BURN aims to accomplish the impossible task of packaging the sense of the above mentioned into one looming figure which appears to be somewhere in between the high jump athlete and street performer. This performer affords all who are willing to look on a chance to believe in the impossible and the chance to see the fine-tuned system that enables the figure while simultaneously working against it. Concomitantly by its own free will the figure can use the system to levitate but all the while the entropic features of the system work against it running down

the body, the vehicle of levitation and wearing it away. So while there is another way of existing (levitation/transcendence) within ones own subjective experience that offers deliverance from the day in and day out of suffering, hope seems possible, sort of.

With tattered feet pressed together hovering with force just over a small step-like structure, amidst a launch pad that calls to mind both post-painterly abstraction and high jump runway the figure appears still, focused on a goal just ahead of its gaze. Though the figure is focused the viewer cannot yet see the object that demands such fixed attention for what lies in our immediate focus is the backside of the figure in which resides a small painting. This painting embedded in the lower back where the kidneys would be located is perhaps a code for healing in a place that bears the pain that comes as a consequence of gravity. While this place in the arch of the back can hinge at any moment determining whether or not the figure slumps forward or reclines back, the arms and chest open to the sky remaining in a welcoming gesture.

I feel at this point that I must explain that I fought against making this piece for several reasons. First, the piece seemed to be too literal and therefore not clever. Also I found it difficult to make a levitating figure particularly because it is my first figurative sculpture of any kind. Yet at the same time I felt an internal pressing to proceed with my idea and make the figure no matter how nervous I was. Instantly I felt that in spite of the potential for failure I should embrace it like I had embraced it so many other times in my life because the truth was the piece mattered to me. In spite of the potential pitfalls and trappings that would likely ensue from my inexperience sculpting a figure, there was still meaning in the feat and the object that would come from my efforts. I also considered

that there might exist a shortcoming in working with a figure amidst paintings and a large Mono-Rail. Yet I concluded that in the genuine formal disparity that existed between the works there was a space where things could happen. And yet amidst the disparity there emanated a sense of unity for all of these works were subject to the same conditions, as they all were unified by the same environment and the same maker. Might this be how unity and diversity can exist and work, under one Maker?

Just as I had anticipated I not only struggled with this piece during the beginning and middle of making it but I also struggled with the end. My aim was for the figure to seem immediate, not fussed with, urgent even, retaining a sense of the “now!” but as one comes upon it from the front of the body and finds the figure is only performing an illusion the body is exposed by the truth of the circumstances. Something in that was missing and I realized the body needed to emphasize more than just a literal body. It needed to emphasize weightiness, visceral and almost disgusting weightiness to create an even greater contrast from the backside, which was tattered yet, levitating and light. I took the found suit that I had placed on the figure and covered it in a shimmering Micaceous earth charcoal grey paint and covered the front of the body with layer upon layer of paint, medium and texture to such an extreme that a very painterly-like “visceralness” began to surface and a sense of weight began to create a contrast that seemed vital to the effect and content of the piece.

I found the figure began to be both what I wanted and more. The uneasiness of the piece started to unite with the Mono-Rail, and these two distinctly different images had something underlying in common, the kind of something I had been looking for. For

instance they both bore evidence of a need for something greater and presented an imperfect almost destined-to-fail approach to getting there. In some respect they became enhancers of one another while still maintaining their own particular singularity, bound up in their own specifics. MONO-RAIL and SUN BURN showed traces of longing for the same escape, bearing the weathered effects of time, repetitive action and imperfection. Finally they conveyed a sense of the abject hope that surfaces when one tries under the force of their own ability to both create and live under their own Meta-Physics, that constant evidence of humanness as I have seen it.

In the end this work tries to point out in some sense that there might be another way. We are *welcome* under the force of our own will to proceed as we wish. That we are “human beings” not “human doings” and we can *be still* and know. Maybe there is a truth that is bigger than the spirit of the age, a truth that initiated and sustains finite density and it might be observable if we are willing to shed our selves and reprioritize what comes first.

In closing, these three thesis works come together in a space as much as they can and the rest is left up to any viewer at any given moment. It is my aim that these purposely full and present works can come together in a way that goes beyond the limits of my own personal interest to cross over into something increasingly meaningful. To summarize the show would be difficult but I think it approaches an accurate assessment of the times we are living through. By means of this work I try to honor the best of human intentions while also looking to equally examine shortcomings that might need revisiting not so that a critique of humanity becomes the endpoint of some sort, but so

that a discussion can move beyond critique to asking what is plausible. Maybe we can get far enough away from looking to our own stock and our own inventory for a moment to see that there is something much bigger going on outside of us. I would like to suggest that perhaps the bigger thing going on doesn't need a tower built up to it, for it is right outside our front door, unwilling to compromise our free will, but still wooing us like an echo from a point when all there was, was a finite density, a density that was then spoken into being through a dazzling display of creative force.

## CLOSING STATEMENT

Throughout my life I have always felt inclined to give what I could to others, believing that no one should have to suffer more than they already did, especially if I had something of myself that could be given to them. Instead I have looked to offer both in the work and in this text the best of what it is I have at this point in time to give. Humbly and with no pretense my hope is that this text is connected to reality as it pertains to me, and that within that knowledge, another who cares to read it might find something of clear and real value.



Literature Cited

### Literature Cited

Benner, Jeff A. "The Poetry of Genesis Chapter 1." *Ancient Hebrew Research Center*.  
[www.ancient-hebrew.org/23\\_genesis\\_1.html](http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/23_genesis_1.html) (accessed April 29, 2009).

Geisler, Norm L. and Frank Turek. *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*.  
Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004.

Moreland, J.P. and William Lane Craig. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian  
Worldview*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

*The Case for a Creator: A Journalist Investigates Scientific Evidence that Points Toward  
God*. DVD. City, State: Illustra Media, 2006.



## VITA

**Ryan Lauterio was born November 29, 1975, Oxnard, CA**

### Education

- 2007-09 M.F.A. Painting and Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University
- 2005 M.A., Studio Art. California State University, Sacramento
- 2003 B.A., Studio Art. California State University, Sacramento.

### Awards

- 2009 Joan Mitchell Award, Nominee  
VCU Graduate Teaching Assistantship. Spring semester
- 2008 Covington International Travel Scholarship  
VCU Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Spring and Fall Semester.
- 2007 VCU Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Fall Semester.
- 2006 Jurors Award/Golden Bear, California State Fair  
George Hargrave Award, BOLD EXPRESSIONS
- 2005 JAM Inc. Studio Arts Award  
Best of Show, Union Purchase Award Show
- 2004 JAM Inc. Studio Arts Award  
Increase Robinson Memorial Fellowship Award  
Best of Show, Union Purchase Award Show
- 2003 Fredrick M. Peyser Sr. Prize in Painting  
Award of Merit, California State Fair

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2009 MFA Thesis Show, "KINGDOM COMPOSSIBLE," Anderson Gallery Richmond, VA
- 2005 M.A. Candidate Show, "In Time, Out of Time," Else Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.
- 2004 "Recent Works by RYAN LAUTERIO," El Camino Art Gallery, Sacramento, CA.  
First Year Graduate Show, "Sustained Collision," Else Gallery, California State University Sacramento.

- 2003 “New Works by Ryan Lauterio,” Utrecht Art Gallery, Sacramento, CA.  
 2002 “Interruptions In Normalcy,” Two person collaboration. Installation Space, Sacramento, CA.

### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

- 2008 LIFT OFF! 1<sup>st</sup> year MFA Candidacy Show, Plant Zero, Richmond, VA  
 2007 Unanimous Head apparatus, Fab Gallery, Richmond, VA  
 2006 Pink Week, Cricket Engine Gallery, Oakland, CA  
 Pink Week, Deep Gallery, Sacramento, CA.  
 Bold Expressions, Sacramento Fine Arts Center, Carmichael, CA.  
 California State Fair, Fine Arts Competition, Sacramento.  
 2005 Graduate Award Show, Else Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.  
 Union Purchase Award Show, Union Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.  
 2004 “Tsunami Masquerade,” Group Show, Art Sculpture Lab, California State University, Sacramento.  
 Graduate Award Show, Else Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.  
 Union Purchase Award Show, Union Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.  
 2003 “Deja Vu or Not?,” Graduating Senior Show, Else Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.  
 Undergraduate Student Award Show, Else Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.  
 “Can Art Be Taught?,” Else Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.  
 California State Fair, Fine Arts Competition, Sacramento.  
 Union Purchase Award Show, Union Gallery, California State University, Sacramento.  
 Utrecht Gallery Group Show, Utrecht Art Gallery, Sacramento, CA.  
 2002 “From Various Systems,” California State University, Sacramento Library.  
 Tom Monteith’s Advanced Painting Show, California State University, Sacramento.

### **Teaching Experience**

- 2008-09 Fall/Spring, Graduate teaching assistant/assistantship, VCU, Art Foundation  
 2007-08 Fall/Spring, Graduate teaching assistant/assistantship, VCU, Art Foundation  
 2006-07 Courtyard Private School, Sacramento, CA.  
 2005-07 Joseph Sims Elementary School, Elk Grove, CA.  
 2003-05 Graduate Student Teacher Assistant, California State University, Sacramento.  
 1998-99 Art Teacher for at-risk and expelled teens, Phoenix High School, Lancaster, CA.

### **Other Related Experience**

- 2008 Guest critic for BFA honors Critique Class in Fall of 2008 at VCU.
- 2007 Guest critic for BFA honors Critique Class in Fall of 2007 at VCU.
- 2006 Commissioned to paint diversity themed public school mural.
- 2005-07 Artist in Residence, Joseph Sims Elementary, Elk Grove, CA.
- 2004-05 President of Graduate Art Students Association (GASA), California State University, Sacramento.
- 2004 Presentation and lecture on my work given at CSU Sacramento to the student body and the public of Sacramento.
- 2003-05 Art installation assistant for Mark Emerson.
- 2003-05 Wood Shop Tech assistant, CSU Sacramento
- 2003 Guest speaker for Art college outreach program addressing prospective incoming freshman interested in art.
- 2003 Studio Assistant to Joan Moment.
- 2003 Selected for Arts Bridge Scholarship.
- 2002 Studio Assistant to Judy Pfaff, California State University, Sacramento.

### **Publications**

Northern California Arts, INC. BOLD EXPRESSIONS show catalog, November 2006, p24.

Victoria Dalkey, Art Correspondent. "Where Does 'Heart of Gold' Sleep?" *Sacramento Bee*, 20 August, 2006.

Jack Ogden, Juror's statement. California State Fair Fine Art Competition catalog, August 2006, p24.

California State Fair Fine Art Competition catalog, Artist statement, August 2006, p24.

California State Fair Fine Art Competition catalog, August 2003, p26.