

2010

# A Verbal Snapshot of Visual Scrutiny Primarily in the Sphere of Art

Matthew Alverson

*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/2155>

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).

A Verbal Snapshot of Visual Scrutiny Primarily in the Sphere of Art

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

by

Matthew Seth Alverson

Directors:

Peter Baldes, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking  
and  
Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May 2010

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	iii
Abstract .....	iv
Preface .....	1
I .....	2
II .....	6
III .....	12
Summary .....	32
Bibliography .....	33
Vita .....	34

## List of Figures

1. <i>Gray Painting</i> .....	13
2. <i>Best Part of a Bad Painting</i> .....	13
3. <i>Hole for Bad Ideas</i> .....	14
4. Various artworks.....	15-17
5. <i>Fence</i> .....	19
6. <i>Bed for One</i> .....	20
7. <i>Untitled</i> .....	20
8. <i>Silver Portrait</i> .....	21
9. <i>Woman Bending Over</i> .....	21
10. <i>Photograph</i> .....	22
11. Various Photographs .....	23, 24
12. Jan Provost, <i>Martyrdom of St. Catherine</i> (detail) .....	25
13. Rogier van der Weyden, <i>St. Luke Drawing the Virgin</i> (detail) .....	25
14. <i>Man and Baby</i> .....	26
15. <i>Mop</i> .....	27
16. <i>Silver Mountain</i> .....	28
17. <i>Self-Portrait</i> .....	29
18. <i>Cosmic Tiger</i> .....	29
19. <i>Cosmic Tiger Table</i> .....	31

## **Abstract**

### **A VERBAL SNAPSHOT OF VISUAL SCRUTINY PRIMARILY IN THE SPHERE OF ART**

By Matthew Seth Alverson

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010.

Directors:

Peter Baldes, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking  
and  
Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking

Finding and extracting meaning from the world I encounter every day is the primary motivation behind my creativity. Filtering perception and separating the important bits of information by selection or elimination is the crux of this investigation. This process is one of finding rationale in futility and applying meaning to meaningless encounters. The significance of life is not fixed and it is our responsibility to make it up to best suit the desire to have purpose. Depending on the way something is looked at determines the meaning behind it. Anything can have content if it is seen and translated a certain way. Aligning this inquiry to the course of painting is how I examine the pieces of information that have potential importance. Painting allows me to slow down, scrutinize, and evaluate the way I perceive reality. Every image seems unrelated but is actually connected by an undercurrent of doubt at every level of creation.

Preface:

I came to graduate school to break my previous habits and notions of painting. Further schooling seemed to offer the most opinions and viewpoints that I could get in one place and over a relatively short period of time. My intention was to experiment with how and why I make images in hopes of completely dismantling and analyzing what painting means for me altogether. To do this, I knew that I couldn't try to solve any problems or define my practice, but rather find problems and exemplify them. My goals were never oriented toward unity or cohesion in any sense. From as many aesthetic angles as I could, I wanted to align my attitude towards life with imagery and the process of painting. My work here doesn't represent any solutions; it is merely an example of a line of inquiry into what painting means for me. I am not necessarily certain of anything I have made, but rather skeptical and confused. My intentions have mostly been satisfied.

I.

Information comes at us from every direction and our brains need to make sense of it for the purposes of survival. For instance, when our eyes pick up a sensation, it is broken into countless pieces of raw input. All of this input travels to our brains as disparate fragments where they then get measured against all of our previous experiences, memories, and emotions. This happens in a split second, of course, but we only form an idea of what we are looking at *after* this relative comparison. We have to understand if an object is dangerous or threatening, benign, or perhaps beneficial. Our capacity to form narrative structures is absolutely necessary for our survival and longevity. We had to evolve a kind of intelligence that would help us string together all the random sensory input. This spawned a propensity for humans to be creative with our surroundings because we couldn't survive any other way. We had to invent tools. And with this creativity comes the burden of analyzing every bit of input. We have to apply meaning to information in order for us to use it to our benefit. We can't help applying narratives to everything; it's natural.

This entails, however, that meaning is not intrinsic to anything we perceive, and it only gains meaning through our relative understanding of everything else. In other words, we have to create meaning to suit our continuation in a given environment. I outline this phenomenon because I see the way I make artwork as analogous to this whole process. Rather than creating meaning for the purpose of survival, I am finding and creating meaning for symbolic reasons. Making artwork is an epistemology of sorts; not the search for the foundation of knowledge, but rather the foundation of meaning as it relates

to a need for symbolic utility in life. It's about filtering perception and the constant flow of visual information to separate the important bits of information by a process of selection or elimination. It's about examining these bits slowly and carefully; measuring them against all my previous experiences, memories, and emotions. Art deals with a desire for aesthetic pleasure, whether it's visual, linguistic, aural, and/or conceptual. The real medium of art (of any genre) consists not of images or objects but of the effect on the mind of the artist and viewer. Art doesn't penetrate the mind directly but it can produce a cascade of neural events that culminate in significant thoughts or emotions often interpreted as metaphor.

An article on the Huffington Post called "Toward a Broader Understanding of Religion's Functions" written by Philip Goldberg outlines five criteria that put religion in a context that will hopefully foster a more progressive dialogue on the subject. They are:

1. Transmission: to impart to each generation a sense of identity through shared customs, rituals, stories, and historical continuity.
2. Translation: to help individuals interpret life events, acquire a sense of meaning and purpose, and understand their relationship to a larger whole (in both the social and cosmic senses).
3. Transaction: to create and sustain healthy communities and provide guidelines for moral behavior and ethical relationships.
4. Transformation: to foster maturation and ongoing growth, helping people to become more fulfilled and more complete.



5. Transcendence: to satisfy the longing to expand the perceived boundaries of the self, become more aware of the sacred aspect of life, and experience union with the ultimate ground of Being.

People may need these things to feel fulfilled. Art can function similarly for those who are not religious.

The process of art is itself a metaphor for creation just as Adam in the Bible was made from the dust of the ground. It turns materials or actions into a signifier that represents something else entirely. The existence of art shares the same problems I have about the existence of our lives. I look at art hoping for a clear reason for its existence. To have this answer can make me more comfortable with the lack of purpose in my own life. If I can connect the existence of something to a reason for it to exist, then I am happier. Art doesn't have a clear practical application for peoples' domestic lifestyles, so it helps to have a theory that explains why art exists like a story (theory) of why and how we exist. That's why people like big bangs and evolution and gods and mythology. It provides a paradigm of thought to help explain why and how we are. Paradigms of art making are important too because they provide a theoretical framework to interpret the reason for art's existence. And that in turn helps me comprehend life a little better. It makes me forget that we are just cogs in a biological wheel of senseless procreation. I want, need, and expect these explanations. They comfort my most existential fears.

This is a weakness however. Relying on a categorical framework to understand life (or art) is way too easy and lazy. I try to resist any type of formula for creation. Sometimes the most interesting things are the ones that defy reason, like ghost stories, U.F.O.s, and David Lynch movies. Theories try to make disparate information look cohesive, where one thing is related to everything else. There is no neatly wrapped explanation; the world is more complex than what any preconceived ideas offer. Philosophers have been grappling with these fundamental ideas for millennia. The only thing that has changed is the cultural circumstances by which we have to frame such questions. The inquiries keep getting amended but never answered, which is a good thing. Dogmas and ideologies are invented to cope with the innate anxieties and insecurities people have about life. They help some people (erroneously) understand where we came from, where we are, and where we are going so they don't have to think about it anymore. The biggest challenge is to accept that there are no answers to these questions and that we have to keep thinking.

II.

Aesthetics is important. I'm not just talking about visual aesthetics, but the appearance of every form of communication. It is how people sell things to one another, whether it's a product, a relationship, an idea, etc. For example, on a social level, everything Americans encounter is presented to us via people that traffic in the affairs of aesthetic creativity.

Everything has been engineered to look a specific way so we can better understand its function and context. For instance, the idea of America looks, sounds, and feels a certain way via subconscious modes of communication that strive to make ideas look more appealing. It looks like the stuff on postcards and television. It sounds like the rhetoric of politicians and pundits. This is how people are sold on the idea that Americans are striving for freedom, liberation, and equality. All of these ideas are cultural memes that have aesthetic qualities that are propagated by everyone in a culture through every kind of medium from schools to journals, magazines, television, radio etc. It is a giant web of memes that have been packaged for us by our cultural circumstances. These memes give a specific context for people to think about their place in society. They work the same way ideologies do but on a more local or practical level. The framing of an idea is what leads us to have certain expectations about how everything functions. The aesthetics of ideas in our culture categorizes information to make it easier to interpret, which is fine for most things, but I have a problem when categorical interpretation gets applied to artistic endeavors.

I've been dating a girl who listens to contemporary country music on the radio. We drive around a lot, so naturally I've had to listen to it as well. I hate this type of music but I

don't protest because that is what people do for each other when they are in love. She puts up with The Melvins, I put up with The Dixie Chicks. It's give and take. Besides, I've always believed that even in the face of the most distasteful swill, if I stomach it for long enough I might just be able to learn something from it. I don't know if I have learned anything yet, but listening to this top-40 trash got me thinking about a few things. One thought is that people are very complex. They can have good taste and bad taste all at the same time and for different reasons. Sometimes I wish I wasn't so closed-minded so I could appreciate more. The other thought was what this music might say about our culture in the realm of creativity.

It seems that the best we can hope for with contemporary music is for any given song or band to actually fulfill what it aspires to be within a given genre. All of the "country" music on the radio is not actually country music. The genre hasn't progressed or changed to fit the current zeitgeist, it has altogether died. All of these songs are kitsch dressed up in the aesthetics of what we understand to be country. The lyrics are mostly about how the songwriter is the epitome of living a rural lifestyle, crooned with an unmistakable southern twang. And if that isn't enough to prove that the song is country, the string sections carry the old and lonely warbling of the slide guitar. Hank Williams in part canonized what we call country music, but it seems that contemporary musicians have missed what Hank was really doing. They took the slide guitar and the twangy voice, and left behind what was actually amazing. New pop artists are taking the form of country music and neglecting the content completely. The Dixie Chicks aren't country, they only sound like it. And it works the same for other supposed genres of music. Nickelback is

not rock n' roll; they've merely taken the guitar distortion and vocal energy of bands like The Stooges and turned it into an updated monster of mediocrity. Most approaches in pop music are a reference to something else greater that came before it, and rarely ever live up to the earlier versions of music they are stylistically mimicking. The point is: these examples are all style and no substance, or all form and no content. There doesn't seem to be any emotional motivations for making such music. The expression is empty. If you took away the aesthetic style of an Easton Corbin song, like the twang or the slide guitar, the only thing you'd be left with is a cliché spoken-word poem. If you took away Hank's twang and slide guitar, you'd still be left with gold. Or, to follow an analogy: the artists on my girlfriend's car radio are just actors. There is something real they are referencing, but they never go beyond following the script they've been given. Even if they write their own script, it is still a formula they are following to perform. On the surface, some of these pop songs are about real things like life and love, but they don't have the individual intention behind them to be anything more than contrived and affected sentiments. Hank sidesteps this problem by merely being honest. Sometimes that is all it takes to make amazing things happen.

What gives rise to new genres is when lots of people begin to understand and emulate a given mode of inspiration. New emotional and conceptual underpinnings find an appropriate way to be expressed. The aesthetics of these genres only enforce the mood and psychological import of these approaches. The form and the content are harmonious in these cases. They service one another equally.

The gloomiest part about all of this is that, by and large, even the really good bands these days are still only fulfilling what a genre expects of them. The good bands just do it really well. For instance, Pissed Jeans is actually making rock n'roll. High on Fire is making heavy metal. Neko Case is making country. Sharon Jones is making soul. They all demonstrate the form and content of that understood mode of music making with precision and excellence. They exemplify their respective genre based on how that specific genre operates. The best musicians can't seem to abandon or transcend the tropes of the genre they fit into. Even if they did, they would likely fall into some other genre or category hybrid. The most weird and out-there forms of music still fit into some genre just by the sheer fact that there are so many others doing similar weirdo things. Whether I can stand to listen to it or not, I always get really excited when I hear a band that I can't immediately place in some grouping. I get even more excited, on repeated listening, when the music grows from something I'm not crazy about into something I can't get enough of. Just as this happens with music, visual art can work the same way for me. I'm much more interested in art that doesn't immediately fall into some recognizable form of production. For instance, I had no taste for Bruce Nauman's work when I first encountered it. I had an expectation about art that was based on superficial visual intricacy, and Nauman did not fulfill my cravings with his neon pieces, wax sculptures, videos, installations, etc. But with further viewing and thinking, the complexity of his work always unfolded a little more each time. His neon piece *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* was the access point I needed to understand the rest of his work. I interpret this piece as being somewhat sarcastic, but at the same time it is direct and honest. It is self-consciously aware that transcendence is what he might be

after, but ultimately art is inept at doing that very thing. What excites me is that there is no apparent formula for his work. When there isn't an obvious formula for making art, it forces the viewer to make connections that are under the surface of individual pieces. As revelatory as individual pieces can be, I'm much more interested in the underpinnings that possibly link them all together. Just like Hank, the surface might be beautiful, but the gold is still underneath.

I'm not suggesting that there is, or can be, a solution to this; I only want to point out that this is a topic that I consider quite a bit when it comes to my own practice. It makes sense to categorize things according to similar qualities; but in the context of creativity, categorization only limits the possible approaches and interpretations. Any strategy for making my artwork is viable as long as it can satisfy the need for expressing something genuinely interesting about my life as I encounter it. Genre specificity and categorization is something I try to avoid or at least disregard. The distinction I'm trying to make is the difference between art that narrowly questions a specific issue (like photo-realism) and art that questions anything without commitment to any style or genre.

To minimize the dangers of turning into some rote art-making machine, sometimes I play a thought game that helps me be honest about what I should make. I pretend I'm the last person on earth and nobody will ever see what I'm making. It eliminates the fear that someone will make fun of me for what I made. Some of my best pieces have been produced when I think I'm the last person and that all viewers are dead. The source material I use is not limited to any one subject; and any instance, experience, image,

object, or idea can elicit a work of art. The purpose of this is to squeeze meaning out of my everyday life and to stay engaged and active with my surroundings. It's a form of therapy, a catharsis of sorts that expresses my attitude towards life by aligning it with the process of painting. I never think about other people's expectations when I conceive of making work.



III.

One of my biggest influences recently has been Martin Kippenberger. The aesthetic qualities of specific pieces aren't my concern though. What's important is that his process foregrounds some of the things I strive for with my own work. He never adhered to preconceived notions of art making. Anything he encountered could bring forth a work of art, sometimes for reasons that seem totally arbitrary. His mistakes were shown along with work that was more successful, but it's difficult to tell which is which. He seemed to recognize the failure of a single piece having the capacity to communicate a single meaning. Meaning is not fixed in one place with his work. It is fluid, inconsistent, and one piece only gains meaning relative to everything else. The scope of his work is wide and difficult to concisely explain. It is extremely autobiographical and self-reflexive, but usually presented in a way that shows the fallible nature of himself and thus the viewer. He describes the curiosity that's necessary for him to make art, but refuses to lead anyone to a specific destination. Because it is so messy and seemingly unfiltered, it is about something much more complex, and thus more human.

An open-ended practice with unfixed and unbounded interpretation is something I strive for. I want my practice to be a process of questioning my surroundings, where the line of inquiry is highlighted more than the product. Kippenberger helps me see how this might be possible for myself.



Figure 1. *Gray Painting*

This is a field of neutrality and the only attempt at an expression is neutral itself. It is a non-expression on a non-surface. It is a failed effort at trying to make something meaningless. No matter how hard I try meaning is unavoidable.

Anything built with intention can have a meaning associated with it, even when it's an attempt at canceling meaning. That then becomes the meaning.



Figure 2. *Best Part of a Bad Painting*

I set out to destroy a painting I made a while ago for disappointing me. I started by painting over the parts I liked least. I first took away the aspects that hinted at a narrative. Then I painted over the bits that looked stupid in relation to the previous moves. So it went for a while. At some point the only thing left was a hand. I decided to keep that part.

Since one of my concerns is to make work that gets filtered through my environment, it is necessary that my practice is frequently cannibalistic. Once a piece is created it becomes part of my reality and sometimes doesn't deserve to exist as it is. Everything I paint is a way to correct the things (whether it's a photograph, or just an idea) that don't deserve to exist as they are.

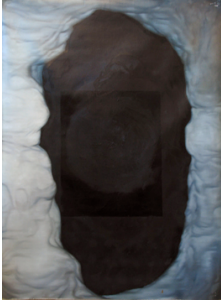


Figure 3. *Hole for Bad Ideas*

This is an ongoing piece that doesn't have an end in sight- so long as I keep having bad ideas, which is highly likely. It is a dark cave that I throw lifeless thoughts into. Each thing that gets painted in the hole eventually gets painted over with another layer of black. It will never fill up and nothing will ever escape. It gives me the freedom to be as stupid as I want without the guilt of wasting materials on new canvas. At this point there are over twenty or so paintings in the hole.

Here are a few examples of my favorite pieces of art that inspire me:



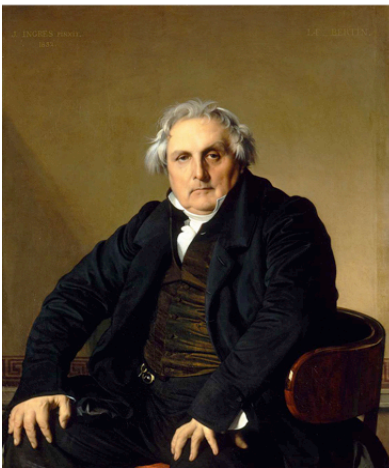
Gerhard Richter  
*Toilet Paper*



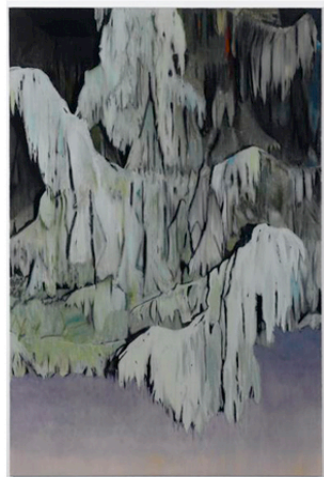
Theodore Gericault  
*Study of Truncated Limbs*



Albert Bierstadt  
*Storm in the Rocky Mountains*



Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres  
*Portrait of Louis-Francois Bertin*



Eberhard Havekost  
*Gast 4, B10*



Hans Memling  
*St. John Altarpiece (left wing)*



Artemisia Gentileschi  
*Judith Slaying Holofernes*



Jan van Huysum  
*Vase of Flowers in a Niche*



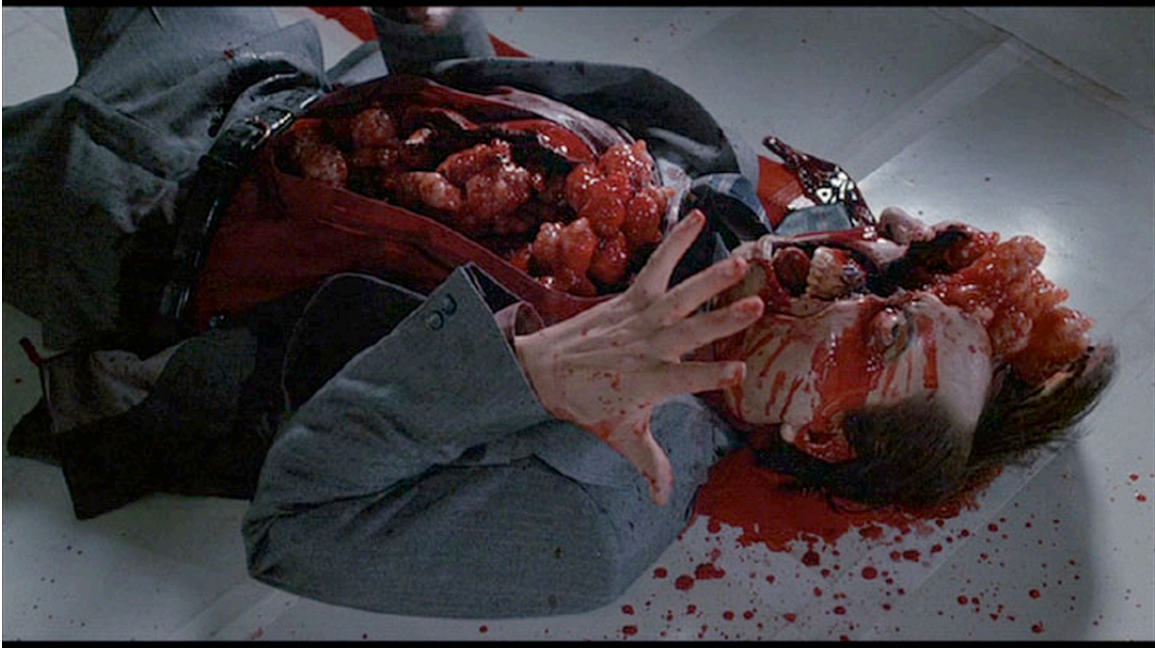
Gerard David  
*The Judgement of Cambyses (right panel)*



Robert Campin  
*Portrait of a Woman*



Pieter Breugel the Elder  
*The Triumph of Death*



David Cronenberg  
still from *Videodrome*

Figure 4. Various artworks

Some of my paintings are based on photographs I see. The photos usually come from the Internet because that is the embodiment of the leveling of importance that happens with technology. Everything is given equal screen space. The Internet is an environment of unfiltered information just like everything else we perceive. It deserves attention too because there might be something meaningful in there. Digital technology makes image making so easy, the people in developed countries use it as a forum to post just about every private aspect of their lives for anyone else to see. Its as if the advancement of our technological society has rendered personal identity totally obscure. People throw images, words, and videos that represent their lives at a giant simulated interface in hopes of gaining some foothold on their place in the world. I know this because I use Facebook too. People make me sad. There's hopelessness in even the most banal information people provide. There are over 200,000 videos on Youtube of people just farting. If that's not universal desperation, I don't know what is. I like to use the Internet for some source material because of this desperation. The photos I use are ones that look like the potential content of the image was completely overlooked. It is never an image that looks like it had intention behind it other than documenting some useless experience so someone could put it in his or her digital scrapbook and remember something about their lives when they get old. These images are the most anxiety-ridden for some reason. Maybe because they are so unspectacular, there is no fathomable reason they exist in a public source like the Internet other than to chronicle the passing of another person's arbitrary life. This inspires me. Painting provides a certain intentionality that the photos I use don't offer. The filtering process and the creative intention are the most important aspects of this method. It's about filtering perception to separate the important bits of information

by a process of selection or elimination, and examining these bits slowly and carefully by painting them.

When I paint a picture based on a photograph, I never directly quote that image. I strip the photos I choose to work with of everything but the bare essentials that attracted me to the photo in the first place. The reason I'm drawn to photographic images is mostly because of the unnatural lighting, the cold colors, and the stark ambiance. I have to invent much of the visual information because some things don't need to be in the image, or the source image is of such poor quality there isn't much information to begin with.

Sometimes I use a very small portion of a photo because that's what is important to me in that image. This forces me to deal with the subject matter and the mood of the image in a way that mere observation wouldn't allow for. The primary thing I am imitating from the original image is the quality and character of atmosphere the photo provides.



Figure 5. *Fence*

I saw a picture of someone's back yard that had a rickety fence and a bunch of trees beyond it. The rest of the picture was useless but I was drawn to the background, so I decided to paint only a part of the fence. In my painting, the fence is fore grounded and in focus. The composition is bisected and static, and there are no diagonal lines that would make it look dynamic. The immediate focus is the fence, which is a barrier that was designed to keep things in or out of a chosen perimeter. The only thing beyond this barrier is the material from which it was made. Whether this fence was designed to keep



the viewer in or out of the picture is of no consequence, because what is on the other side is just more of the same. It's a natural constraint behind a fabricated constraint. You can only escape to equal limitation.



Figure 6. *Bed for One*

This is a resting place only meant for one person at a time. When you go to sleep here you will be alone. The bed is in a cramped space with no embellishments. There isn't even a book to read to make you sleepy. You will only go here when you have nothing left to do with your day. As much as this painting is about death, I wanted the bed to be inviting. The colors around it are cold but the bed is lush and warm.

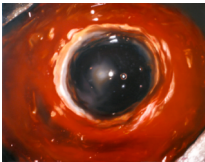


Figure 7. Untitled

This painting references an ambiguous photograph that looked like a bloody eyeball and the cosmos all in one. I tried to accentuate these qualities when I painted it.



Figure 8. *Silver Portrait*

This lady makes me so sad.



Figure 9. *Woman Bending Over*

I didn't want to paint this picture. Like much of the above images, I saw a photograph one day that made me uncomfortable to look at. The thought of spending hours of my time rendering the flesh in this image made me a little sick to my stomach. Sometimes though, the things that make me the most uncomfortable are the things that I need to confront. We all have the tendency to view people this way. I don't want to think of people as grotesque, faceless, embarrassingly shameless, unaware pieces of fleshy matter. But maybe sometimes they are that way. I felt guilty for finding humor while I was painting it. I want the viewer to feel the same way when looking at it.

When Bret Easton Ellis wrote *American Psycho* critics berated him for being a sadistic and misogynistic creep who was only promoting negative behaviors and attitudes. Lars von Trier has been criticized in some of the same ways for his films. By portraying people in the ways these artists have a tendency to do, they offer a glimpse into the darkest parts of the human psyche. They help people imagine what it might be like to do

horrible things, like murder, stalk, rape, torture, etc. Everyone has the capacity to be atrocious, and sometimes I want to assume the responsibility of processing these thoughts and images so people can see what it might be like to be so repulsive. I don't actually want to harm people, but like Ellis or von Trier, it is useful to visualize what it could be like just in case I have any doubts.

On a side note, but still crucially related:

I had the option to see the police photos of the car accident that were taken the night my brother died. Morbid curiosity won over my rationality and I saw over a dozen shots of the scene. I believe the curiosity is innate. I want to see the possibilities of how my life might come to an end and what it might look like.



Figure 10.

Here's what I learned from looking at my brother's crash photos:

Some things, no matter how disturbing, are worth looking at and thinking about because they offer crucial insight. Discomfort is where some of the best content lies. Also, death doesn't have a specific aesthetic. It doesn't look like a horror movie. It looks like everything else. It looks banal and commonplace, because it is.

Here are some pictures I got from the Internet that make me feel particularly hopeless:





Figure 11. Various photographs

Even though I invent most of the image when I use a photo as reference, there is still observation of something that already exists. I figured in order for me to progress as a painter I would have to commit to some of the things I think about making art. I decided that the best way to charge an image with my own personal weirdness was to not reference anything and just paint based on how my mind perceives visual information. I have always been inspired by old paintings that look odd because the artist wasn't painting from direct observation, like some of the Flemish masters. There is something genuinely disturbing about the way Jan Provost renders a scene of torture and decapitation, or the way Rogier van der Wyden renders a baby Jesus suckling at Mary's breast. Whether the subject matter is disturbing or innocent, the real magnitude of the imagery comes from the way the subjects are painted with sincere intensity. Even a straightforward portrait can look supernatural if treated the way these artists painted them.

Figure 12.



Jan Provost  
*Martyrdom of St. Catherine (detail)*

Figure 13.



Rogier van der Weyden  
*St. Luke Drawing the Virgin (detail)*

Getting away from observational painting has freed me to paint in a way that won't allow for corrections based on examination. Painting a subject slowly and without reference also slows the viewing process. Demanding a more attentive gaze while painting a picture will in turn ask a viewer to slow down so they can fully process the information. A painting is not just about what is painted; it is intimately linked with *how* it is painted. Formally, the *how* is the emphasis of all painting whether the painting has a recognizable subject or not. Since my psychology is mostly depressive and anxious, it certainly adds a particular mood to the picture that wouldn't be there to the same degree if I were actually looking at something. Not that there is anything wrong with painting from observation, but painting straight out of my head allows for something distinctive to happen with how the picture looks. Anything has potential content depending on how it is looked at. A silly object can mean so much more than what it is if it's seen and translated a certain way. This line of thinking is probably the most important strategy that I have developed recently.



Figure 14. *Man and Baby*

This is the first painting I made without anything to reference. I wanted to get away from observational rendering in hopes of charging the painting with an ambiance that can only come from how I think things might look in a certain setting. I chose a subject matter that seemed to be very innocent. I thought, "There's nothing sweeter than a man changing a baby's diaper." I also liked the implication that the full cycle of life is all in one frame.

One person is on his way out and he is taking care of the person that is only at the beginning. Since I like the coolness of flash photography, I pretended it was a photograph when I was painting it. It has stark shadows and washed out colors. In a slightly different way, I wanted this harmless subject to be as creepy as one of van der Weyden's previously mentioned paintings due to how it is rendered.



Figure 15. *Mop*

This painting started out as an illustration of a scene in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. It was the scene where a sexy woman in a bathtub seduces Jack Nicholson's character.

When they start making out, he catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror and realizes that the beautiful woman he thought he was about to have sex with has turned into a rotting zombie corpse. I love that scene but the painting I was trying to make of it was horrible.

So I painted over it. Then I thought of the scene in the movie when blood spills out of the elevators into the halls. I love that scene too. I wondered what it would be like if I were a janitor in that hotel and had to clean up that mess. It seems that death and violence are all

around us anyway, so cleaning up blood in a hotel is just like cleaning up the rest of the blood in our lives. If I had to clean up that much blood I would probably use a mop

because I don't know how else to do it. After a while of cleaning though, I would realize that the task of cleaning the amount of blood in our lives is pointless. I would give up.

That's why the mop is all alone. I applied the red paint much like it was being spilled.

Then I wiped it with a paper towel to make it look like it was actually being cleaned up.



This gives the mop a more direct presence than if the blood was painted with a brush. The mop looks like its actually being used on the surface of the painting itself.



Figure 16. *Silver Mountain*

I was always a big fan of Bob Ross before he died. When his T.V. show was on PBS I would watch it everyday after school. I loved his pre/post-cognitive approach to painting landscapes. He had a wonderful way of boiling down the complexities of painting recognizable objects to a few very simple steps that anyone could understand. I was fascinated by his disregard for how something like a tree actually looked. If anyone followed the straightforward algorithm of Bob's technique they too could make a beautiful landscape that looked like any place they wanted to go. I loved being in his landscapes. They were so unrealistic they were able to hold a better grip on the fantasy. Sometimes though, when he was painting a mountainous scene, I wanted him to stop right after he followed the steps that made the paint look like a believable mountain. I thought it didn't need any trees or lakes or cabins. Those only got in the way; it would get too convoluted when he painted the rest.

This painting of mine is done with what I learned from Bob Ross without all the other unnecessary elements of his landscapes. I started one of his paintings and stopped where I always wish he stopped- with just the mountain. It is the zenith, the summit, the apex, the acme, the crest, the pinnacle, the top, the peak, and the climax. It is the ultimate goal to be attained. It is the status we base our lives on. It is hopeful. But this mountain is cold,

artificial, bleak, and formulaic. It is not based on reality or observation, but based on whimsy. The paint is applied with a palette knife in inarticulate strokes. This fantasy is cheap and has repeatable circumstances. If you replicate the steps you will get a very similar outcome every time.



Figure 17. *Self-Portrait*

This is how I feel after the last two years of my life. (It doesn't have anything to do with school by the way.) I am somehow more or less in one piece but nevertheless battered, broken, naked, distended, amputated, face down, prostrated, and virtually without identity... just another mound of disgusting flesh with no surroundings. This was painted very slowly and carefully so as to not miss any details. Sometimes it's important to take time while thinking about and looking at death or violence.



Figure 18. *Cosmic Tiger*

I was listening to a lot of Steve Reich's minimalist phase patterns when I decided to make this piece. That music makes me feel like life is a slow and grueling process of repetition that has no climax. I can only tell there was some progress when the music stops, otherwise it seems like it could go on forever. I wanted to make something that likens my

life and my studio practice to the exhausting stasis of the universe. I had this silly wooden tiger sitting around for a long time and never knew what to do with it. It's poised in a way that would suggest action and brutality, but it is ultimately pathetic because it's an awkward little carving that doesn't even have a real tigers correct proportions. It implies unattainable ambitions. It represents me perfectly.

In the video the tiger rotates unperturbed and without end on a single axis slightly above a white surface. As it rotates, it spits and coughs blood, which over time land on the surface to form a speckled circle of internal viscera. This cycle starts with blood and ends with blood and there is never a climax of action. It makes no progress; after the circle is complete it seamlessly starts over just to perform the same action again and again ad infinitum. The tiger rotates like a planet in the empty cosmos. The senseless cycle of life and death are born out of blood and never ending. It's a metaphor for creation. The tiger is myself, and everything I produce spews from an internal morbidity with no precision. On the surface, our lives look like potential action and advancement; however, we are actually ruled by very simple biological concerns that drive us to cyclical repetition and fix our potential to a single point on a relatively small base that isn't going anywhere either.

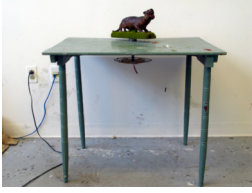


Figure 19. *Cosmic Tiger Table*

After I made the above-mentioned video I dismantled the contraption that made it possible. When all of the extraneous pieces were gone I decided to keep the rest intact, which was a table with the tiger on top and some mechanical apparatus underneath. It didn't look like anything I had ever made before and that made me happy.

Summary:

Over the last two years, I kept notes of everything I was thinking about regarding art.

Expressed here are the key points of how and why my work has changed recently. This doesn't detail all of my motivations for making artwork. It is more a broad and general snapshot of where I am as an artist right now with an emphasis on the personal research I've done while at VCU. Much of this thinking will change in time, as will my work.

## **Bibliography**

Goldberg, Philip. "Toward a Broader Understanding of Religion's Functions."

Huffington Post., 21 Apr. 2010. Web. 2 May 2010.

## **Vita**

Seth Alverson was born on November 1, 1979, in Spring, Texas and is an American citizen. He graduated from Klein Oak High School, Spring, Texas in 1998. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from the University of Houston, Houston, Texas in 2002. He has exhibited his artwork at an assortment of very generous art spaces.