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The Pink Passenger

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by

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ABSTRACT

The work I have created during my time as a graduate student is a reflection of the dialogues I have en-

gaged in with other artists and acquaintances both in and outside of the academic arena. Stylistically

this work is derivative of my involvement with graffiti, Tattooing, and underground comics. I have devel-

oped the icon of the rider to represent the agency and responsibility of myself as an artist in reflecting

these various contexts.

INDEX WORDS: Rider, Beast, Graffiti, Tattoo, Underground comics, Artistic agency.

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my Son, Conrad.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank my thesis committee for guiding me through this process. Thank you: Pam, Teresa, Craig and Joe.

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Introduction

The work I created during my time as a graduate student is a reflection of the dialogues I have engaged in with other artists and acquaintances both in and outside of the academic arena. This work is influenced by my career as a professional tattooist and the process by which I collaborate with each of my clients in the design of their tattoo. My engagement with graffiti culture through the 1980s and into the 21st century added a competitive component to the project. Other important historic influences on this work are underground comic books and the Mexican print maker Jose Guadalupe Posada. It is from Posada's image entitled "Calavera Don Quijote Y Sanco Panza" that I derived the "Passenger" character that appears throughout the work. These dialogues begin with me questioning a specific formal problem. After discussing this issue with others my next step is to figure out which suggestions are most interesting or valid to explore. The paintings become the next step in the dialogue. Each painted solution brings up several new problems during ensuing critiques and those problems fuel the next round of paintings. Each painting begins as an automatic drawing within set of parameters. The formulation for how each piece develops has many variables but I have tried to control these variables to a degree, so that it is only the critical comments that I am focused on during the painting process. I have limiting color scheme, surface dimensions and subject matter so that those choices do not factor in during the painting process they have already been set before paint is ever applied to panel.

Beginning the Dialogue

I began to realize this project during my final year of graduate school. Involved in conversations with professors and peers I was able to admit to myself that the content of the work was primarily dependent upon the context of the critiques. This realization led me questions about artistic agency in my own work, wondering what I did actually bring to the work and what parts were influenced by my engagement with my M.F.A. program and ultimately, beyond that, my artistic agency in larger social contexts.

Though artistic agency has been a subject of my work for years it was with this body of work that it consciously became central in my work. I had been taking critical comments as challenges to address further work. At the beginning of my third year of grad school I had an epiphany that this dialogue between the critic and myself was the actual content of the work and not some larger social message existing outside of this process. Previously I had always accepted peer and professor suggestions and attempted to assimilate them into new work, but I had always tried to fit it into a larger social context. This was the first time that I realized that I was working specifically as a response to a critical comment and that my audience was initially very limited to the critic and myself. My art has always been my most effective means of communicating with the world. However, my thesis work is a shift toward listening to individuals and responding through paint in an ongoing dialogue. I have started calling these works "painting dialogues." In a sense, my response stems from an ego centered place in which I am attempting to "one up" the critic by responding to their challenge, proving to them and myself that I am exceptionally competent. More importantly it comes from an attempt to build

a dialogue between the work and the viewer, to better understand the interaction between my audience and my work, ultimately to communicate more effectively.

As a specific example of this process I will recount the process of the first three paintings in this series. The first painting, "Urban Hermit" was a response to a critique with Ralph Gilbert (Associate Dean of the College of the Arts and Sciences at Georgia State University). I had pre-sented several drawings to Ralph that I had been working in previous weeks. He told me that the power of my work came from my ability to make iconic figures and that I had developed a great cast of characters with which to work. My greatest weakness was that I did not give these figures an environment in which to exist. His suggestion was that I should pull back on the fig-ures and work on creating spaces that give them a context, inserting figures only after building this environment. I saw Gilbert's suggestion as a challenge and started working on my response that evening. The resulting painting, *Urban Hermit,* was my initial attempt at creating this envi-ronment. As the title suggest I wanted to create the feeling of an urban landscape. I began with a series of geometric forms working very intuitively in an automatic drawing style, laying in large color fields and trying to capture the feeling of dense complexity that I experience when I am in the city. Only after working out the majority of the composition did I allow myself to in-sert a figure. *Urban Hermit* is the first composition in this series in which the "Passenger" ap-pears.

After finishing *Urban Hermit* I felt the need to pull back from working on such a large surface (8' X 2') and work out aspects of the first painting that I perceived as problematic on a smaller scale. The second surface was 2 X 2 feet. Still focused on Gilbert's suggestion to build

environments I again set off to create a world, this time devoid of figure. I also wanted to incorporate organic and geometric forms more effectively than I had in the initial composition. This second painting was intended to be a pure landscape but it only created new problems. I had absolutely saturated the surface with different textures and this cancelled out the possibility of a focal point or a place for the viewer's eye to rest. After showing this image during critique and hearing some of these same concerns from my peers and from Matthew Sugarman (the professor leading the seminar) I decided to start a third composition. Working from suggestions to be more reductive and selective in my choices of textures, allow the forms room to breath, and create several focal points, I set off to make a third painting. Only after completing this third painting did the second one make sense as a response to the first painting. Seeing the second and third side by side they feel as if they are in response to each other and they have nice diptych energy between them.

I am not worried about reactions from multiple viewers contradicting each other, because multiple readings of the same painting create the possibility to explore each idea in a different composition. Neither do I go back and make the suggested changes to the painting but rather I start a new painting as a response. This way the paintings do not become an end in and of themselves but they serve as part of the ongoing dialog. Only through the completion of several paintings do I feel that there is any finality. Hopefully that same finality will spark other issues that need to be addressed in future paintings.

Introducing the Passenger

In the process of making my paintings, I have adopted the symbol of the "rider" or "passenger" as a metaphor for this project. The "rider" does not appear in all of the images, but recurs sporadically throughout the series. This figure appears as a humanoid form on the back of a beast. Sometimes the beast and figure merge into one being, other times they are clearly delineated as two forms. The "Rider" represents the question of agency. If the focus of this work is to translate the suggestions of others through painting, then there is some ambiguity about whether I as the creator of this work embody the "rider" in control, or the "passenger" being lead, or maybe even the "beast" being ridden. The rider is a metaphor for a series of conundrums that life has posed to me about my identity as an artist. It is an autobiographic symbol: am I riding? Am I a passenger? Or am I the beast? It is part of my personal narrative. I first started using this rider image as a child after seeing a mural-sized reproduction of Jose Guadalupe Posada's print, "Calavera Don Quixote y Sancho Panza" (Skeleton Don Quixote and Sancho Panza) in an exhibition of the Mexican printmaker's work while on a family road trip to California.

I was twelve years old and the image was reproduced as a thirty-foot long mural on the outer wall of the gallery. My parents purchased a copy of the print from the gallery shop and it hung on my bedroom wall for the rest of my adolescence. Over the years this image has recurred in my work but only in recent years has the idea of agency between the rider and beast become important in my work.

My graffiti, tattooing, and comic work evolved side by side with my canvas work so it is natural that parallels continue to emerge in each practice and that my fine art practice would be highly derivative of the others. The rider and beast have made appearances outside of my canvas work; showing up most dominantly in my graffiti where the letters of my pseudonym (CERO) are turning into creatures. Letters are anthropomorphized with mouths, eyes and claws emerging from the stylized text.

Figure 1. Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera Don Quixote y Sancho Panza*.

It is therefore no surprise that the conceptual and aesthetic qualities of my M.F.A. work largely derive from graffiti, tattoo, and underground comics. Over the past twenty-five years I have invested a great deal of time in these three genres.

Personal History

I began writing graffiti at the age of eleven, emulating the marks of other graffiti writers I saw around my neighborhood in the 1980s. Graffiti's aesthetic and ideologies have been integral to all other art forms that I have engaged in, and in, part explain my present project of painted dialogues. Graffiti writers are a competitive group (myself included). The whole idea is to be "the most up" meaning that you have painted and written your "tag" (pseudonym) on more surfaces throughout the city than any other graffiti writer in that city. On top of that you must be the most original (innovating something within the graffiti scene). It is not enough just being "the most up." I would like to point out here that though originality is above all else im-portant, what graffiti writers mean by "originality" is actually extremely limited innovations within a rigid set of letter formations. If you are "the most up" and you have the most innova-tive style then you will be dubbed a "king." As a king in the graffiti world you win the admira-tion of younger writers, called "toys," who aspire to be king. These novice graffiti writers emu-late your style and praise your actions. Adversely this admiration draws the jealous attention of graffiti writers who are contending for kingship or have previously owned a crown and have now been, in a sense, dethroned by your newly gained royalty. I have been at all levels of this continuum: toy, jealous contender, king, and dethroned. Some of this competitive attitude has trickled into my academic career and into my thesis project. I feel that my response to the comments of others is a type of show-and-prove in which my painted responses must not only fulfill the commenter's suggestions but must exceed their expectations. Often, a single com-ment elicits two or three paintings, just so I'm sure that everyone involved in the dialogue knows that I am fully capable and not in some way lacking. It is a one-up-man-ship that has

been with me since middle-school. Over the past decade I have turned this attitude in on my-self to fulfill greater personal goals competing against my own previous successes, however its residual effects still manifest externally from time to time.

My career as a tattooist for fifteen years has also influenced the Painted Dialogues. Each tattoo that I apply to a person's skin is a collaborative process between that person and myself. It begins with a discussion about my customer's interest in subject matter, placement, size, col-or palette, mood, and price range. I then draw a rough draft of my interpretation of their idea. My customer then furthers the dialogue by suggesting alterations to the design if he or she is not content with the initial sketch. We will sometimes go back and forth about the execution of the design based on their desires and my expertise on the subject for longer than the actual application of the tattoo takes. Engaging in a similar dialectic process in my academic work seems very natural after having spent ten hours a day for the past fifteen years developing a very similar work practice in the tattoo industry. There are obvious differences between my work practice and my painting dialogues but the later has so many derivatives of the first that the procedural aspects of these paintings seem as linked to the process of tattooing as the aes-thetic influences.

In the later half of the 1980s I discovered underground comics; starting with MAD mag-azine artists like Al Jaffee and Don Martin. As I got older I moved into more adult comic artists like Vaughn Bode and Robert Crumb. I idolized these artists for their off-beat sense of humor and numerous counter-culture references. The influence of underground comics upon my Painted Dialogues is less apparent than that of either tattooing or graffiti; however I have

created these paintings in a sequence; one painting builds upon the next. Comments from several critiques will merge into a singular image three paintings after the initial critique, thus building the story line (not unlike one of Robert Crumb's more complex comic strips). Also the rider character recurs in many manifestations throughout the series and though each rider and beast looks very different, they represent the same character in each. It's as if there is a story line moving through the paintings as they build one on top of each other.

The aesthetic influence from each of the three aforementioned genres is self evident in my painted dialogues. The highly stylized, graphic, iconic character of the riders could fall into any of these genres. The brightly colored backgrounds appear straight out of a graffiti mural, and the linear defining of key areas is a direct reference to comic books. It has not been my intent for this body of work to emulate all or any one of these genres or even to make reference to them. They simply come out of me intuitively as a result of making them a part of my ongoing artistic practice.

Parameters

This body of work is a concerted effort to learn how to communicate more effectively with my audience. Drawing and painting throughout my life has been my most effective means by which I communicate with the world. Creating images has given my life meaning in a variety of contexts and I continue to see it as the mode by which I engage the world. In this context, for the purpose of my learning experiment, I have limited my primary audience to just a few people, namely those whose comments I am directly addressing in each of the paintings. Here is a hierarchy of who I perceive my audience to be: first and foremost, my professors and my

fellow graduate students at GSU; secondly, other artists that I have shared this work with and received feedback from, other graffiti writers, tattooists, and appreciators of pop-surrealist artwork, and then more inclusively, the rest of the art appreciating world. It is important to me to be liked by my audience, even if they feel a bit uneasy about the colors, compositions, or subject matter. It is my intent to make a positive impression upon them. I want the viewers of my paintings to be as excited about my work as I am in creating them. It is my hope that assimilating the suggestions of others into the dialogue of my paintings, people who have not been included directly will feel the energy of that synergy and be stimulated by it.

The rectangular panels for these paintings are based on a one to four ratio that I have worked with in the past. I borrowed this format from Taoist scroll landscape paintings that I saw while I was an undergraduate student at Kennesaw State University. The one to four ratio was not a standard dimension for Taoist scroll paintings but rather an estimation of there dimensions that I made while looking at such scrolls. Also the possibility of building vertical and horizontal compositions and manipulating space depending on their orientation is thrilling to me. The ability to show expansive horizontal landscapes and condensed vertical cross sections that collapse space and perspective in upon themselves is inherent in the one to four ratio and it becomes an added challenge as well as a choice about the compositions orientation.

I have also set limitations for the color scheme. I have chosen to work predominantly with pastel colors to offset the overtly masculine aesthetic in my work derived from graffiti, tattooing and underground comics. Pink, teal, cream and purple are the primary colors of my palette. Black and red are also used to give it a bit more punch. Each piece begins with tinted

ground (pink, teal or cream). The basic composition begins as an automatic drawing sketched directly onto this ground with acrylic paint. My only concern at this point is to keep the initial suggestions of peers and professors in mind and to give the painting its orientation. The majority of my paintings and drawings over the past five years have begun as automatic drawings as I feel that it allows for more compositional variation than methodically planned ones.

Conclusion

This work represents a reductive self reflective approach to painting that I have not previously possessed. I have learned from this experiment in Painting Dialogues to be a more thoughtful artist by not only listening to my audience, peers and professors but also to examine the process and motives behind my art making practice. Through this I have begun to see the connections between what I once perceived to be disparate practices. Tattooing, graffiti, and comics have been integral in forming the work that I make and it is much clearer now how each has added to the whole rather than being compartmentalized. These painting dialogues have just begun and as a series they may end at the completion of this graduate program but I anticipate further collaborations throughout my life where I will function in differing capacities.

Figure 2. *Urban Hermit*. 8'X2', acrylic on wood.

Figure 3. *Horror Vacui*. 2'X2', acrylic on wood.

Figure 4 *Binary*. 2'X2', acrylic on wood.

Figure 5 *Rider*. 1'X4' acrylic on wood.

Figure 6 *Run*. 6"X2', acrylic on wood.

Figure 7*Homunculus.* 1'X4', acrylic on wood.

Figure 8 *Confrontation*. 1'X4', acrylic on wood.

Figure 9 *Sleipnir*. 1'X4', acrylic on wood.

Figure 10. *Sign of the covenant*. 1'X4', acrylic on wood.

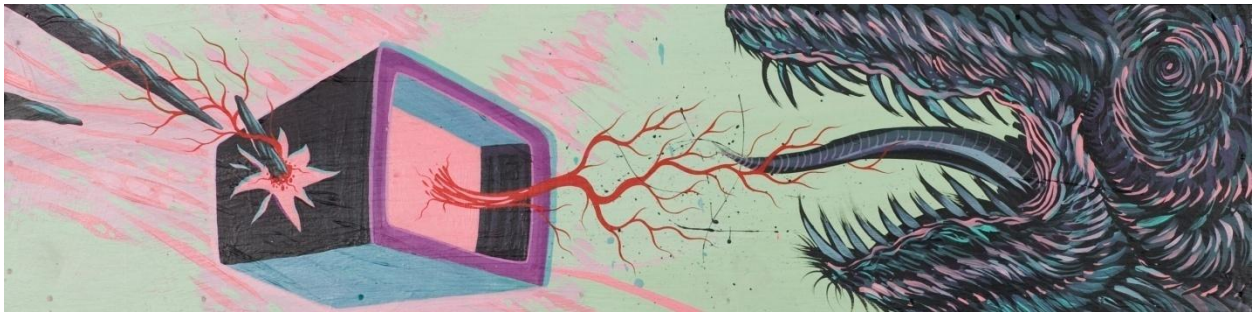**Figure 11.** *Fallow*. 6"X2', acrylic on wood.
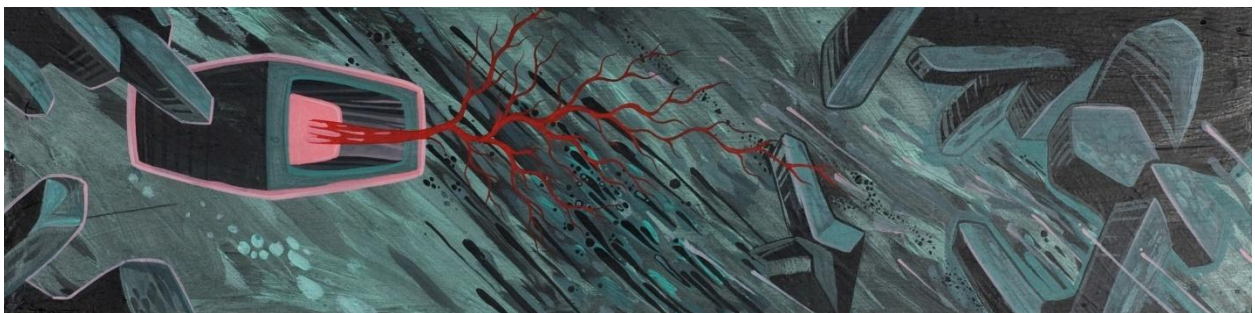

Figure 12. Widdershins. 6"X2', acrylic on wood.

Figure 13. Deosil. 6"X2', acrylic on wood.

Figure 14. Advarsary. 22"X16", acrylic on wood.

Figure 15. Origen. 2'X6", acrylic on wood.

Figure 16. Hybrid, 4'X1', Acrylic on wood.

Figure 17. Fertile. 2'X6", acrylic on wood.

Figure 18. Putrifaction. 2'X8' acrylic on wood

Figure 19. Putrefaction. 2'X8', acrylic on wood

Figure 20. Return. 2'X8',acrylic on wood