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FROM AUTONOMY TO COLLABORATION: A CREATIVE PROCESS

by

JAMES E. JOHNSON

Under the Direction of Dr. Melanie Davenport

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this auto-ethnographic and art-based study is to examine how the experiences throughout my life have influenced my practice as an artist. It is within the context of a socially constructed past and present place that I will explore my own process in terms of collaboration and the implications for an artist-teacher, or teaching artist. I reflect upon how my values and philosophy as an art educator have been formed from the synthesis of my experiences. My relationships with a gallery, its clients, and a fellow artist provide the context for reflecting about my process and gaining insights into my potential role as a model and influence on my future students.

INDEX WORDS: auto-ethnography, collaboration, modernism, postmodernism, artist-teacher

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JAMES E. JOHNSON

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

Master of Art Education

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2013

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this study I have examined how experiences throughout my life have influenced my practice as an artist. By engaging in this reflective soul searching, I have become more conscious of how my values and philosophy as an art educator have been formed as a synthesis of these experiences. Through this auto-ethnographic inquiry, I have honed in on, with a refreshed measure of lucidity, my reasonable intentions when engaged in the reading or the production of an artwork and will bring that insight into my teaching.

I suggest that the examination of my journey from childhood image-making to mature exhibiting artist has strengthened my ability to model and personally reference some behaviors which Paul (1993) refers to as being exhibited by “fairminded” thinkers (p.526). A candid awareness of self in relation to others may be shared with students to initiate a dialogue that I hope will provide a platform for caring, in pursuit of enhanced critical thinking skills through aesthetics, collaboration, cooperative learning, and eventually service learning. I believe that when preparation meets opportunity a continuum of symbiotic growth is set into motion.

Early Influences and Beyond

When thinking of my earliest influences as an artist, I recall practicality as being a value that I was encouraged to embrace as most important. My father was a police officer by profession. Included among his many talents, he possessed an often clever and inventive approach to home repairs. Door mechanisms were returned to working order with American manufactured pliers and a visit to the coat closet for a wire hanger. I cherish the memories of sounds, smells, and eventually creative hours spent in my father’s woodworking shop. Much more formally

guided influences were aligned with my mom's perception of practicality, and included community art classes. I was encouraged to accompany her to tole painting classes and learn to sew. Examples of these influences have surfaced in my paintings. As an undergraduate student, I experimented with sewing two sections of canvas together when solving the problem of money vs. material in pursuit of my desired surface dimensions. It is here that I can recognize the synthesis of my dad's autonomous example of making do with what is readily at hand and what my mom impressed on me as useful skills and social rewards. Whether it was woodworking or stitchery, I was taught by demonstration (ie. the effects of sanding with or against the grain of wood, preparing a needle with a manageable length of thread) followed by observed practice that would become gradually independent or done in conjunction with my siblings.

My parents raised boys, I being the middle of three. Our suburban middle class existence was idyllic from my perspective. By day we were often free to explore the surrounding "woods" that could be accessed by a path known by us as "the rock road." Doebler Drive was a double dead end and was intersected by a minor road that led to the labyrinth of neighborhoods and plazas that was North Tonawanda, New York. Unsupervised routines included exploring nature and forging friendships. The weeks were framed with family routines as well. My grandparents, the Tacks, visited every Friday for lunches that I can recall as creating anxious moments for my mom and where I might find myself encouraged to push a vacuum cleaner over burnt-orange shag carpeting. It was also the day of encouragement and praise from my grandfather who always asked me if I had any new drawings to show him. Lloyd Tack was a factory foreman and a freelance sign painter who doted on my grandmother with many courtesies (e.g., faithfully helping on and off with her coat) that, in contemporary times, face near extinction. The reciprocal of our hospitality occurred on Sundays when my Grandmother would often prepare dinner for us

amidst the immaculate condition of her nearby home. As both Johnson households were on the weekly guest list, my father's parents also experienced my grandmother's delicious cooking and love of a more formal than casual dining experience. The glasslike finish of her coffee table required coasters and was never intended to support one's feet. A child's energy was held at bay, taken outside, or banished to the basement. The basement was the preferred choice considering that the "taking it outside" option lacked the exploration luster of our own home and self-control proved challenging among brothers. It was here, in this virtually sound proof subterranean oasis, that we were allowed the freedom to be kids and unleash our energy by playing ping-pong or billiards. Accessibility to these energy-venting outlets was always contingent on the dimensions of my grandfather's latest painting project. Often, large sectional signs would render both game tables covered with plywood and used as easels. This space was permeated with the combined aroma of enamel and mineral spirits that varied in intensity depending on if a job was underway or the amount of time that had lapsed since the last project. There was a degree of excitement for me when our rumpus room was transformed into a working space. The atmosphere changed from promoting the reflexive actions and luck of parlor games to something deliberate and systematic. Transformed in appearance by a neat arrangement of brushes, sticks, tin cans, and jars of paint, this space also seemed to harbor residual energy from prolonged focus. Evidence of where my Grandfather had tested the load of pigment held by a brush and being able to identify where he had stopped working, offered a vague sense of narrative. His reference materials (ie. logos, fonts and color schemes) changed, however, there remained the common thread of an individual and personal system intersecting with a brand of logic.

It was these early experiences that left little doubt for me as to what course of study would be my focus as I entered college. No, not ping-pong... it was painting that would become

my passion. The transition from a public school arts education to the expectations of a university art program was drastic. My seventeen-year-old identity was not ready to be considered as anything less than the “school artist” and criticism was a foreign concept for me. The constant encouragement from family, friends, and teachers, who had declared that I had talent, was suddenly absent. Because I had embraced this agreed-upon notion of my ability as some sort of predetermined destiny, I anticipated that college was to be the same string of successes that were accomplished with joy and ease. To the contrary, I quickly realized that my grade school peers and I had been held exempt from any of the challenging thinking that experiencing art through discussion as well as practice was designed to elicit. I was no longer praised for such accomplishments as copying the likeness of Sylvester Stallone or Kevin Costner from the cover of the HBO guide. I can recall a comment from one undergraduate studio professor, when I attempted to communicate what my motivation or intended message concerning the subject matter, technique, composition, etc. of a piece was, as “I don’t understand how that is either here nor there.” Comments such as these encouraged me to speculate as to what my influences were and how they related to the artistic choices I was making. Concentrating on communicating a message with what I was producing, rather than only improving my technical skills, was frustrating for me. I found it insulting when, during an academic advisement meeting with this professor she suggested that I change my major to art education. She explained that her feeling was that I would make a good role model for children. It may be that she also thought that this course of study might fill the gaps in my understanding of what art was supposed to achieve.

Discouraged and unsure of where my studies were taking me, I jumped at the chance to leave the university behind. A good friend and fellow student of mine had learned of summer employment opportunities in Alaska. The posting was in the university newspaper and promised

that adventure and fortune awaited us as employees of a salmon cannery. After selling this plan to our somewhat leery families, we hopped a Greyhound bus from Buffalo, New York to Bellingham, Washington, which proved to be a test of both physical and mental endurance. In Bellingham, a ferry that was bound for Ketchikan, Alaska wound its way through the waters of the inside passage that separates the United States and British Columbia with us as eager passengers. Upon our arrival we were informed that a fisherman strike, spawned by Japanese competition driving down the accustomed paycheck of the American boats, was underway. As a result, we were invited to choose a spot in “tent-city” and wait for production to resume. Tent-city consisted of a gridded maze of unoccupied modular homes onto which the cannery had permitted us and other squatters to tether our makeshift homes. The strike continued for over two weeks and the summer climate of southeast Alaska tested our abilities to shield our nylon dome from torrential rain. These downpours that locals described as “dime-size and sideways” graced us five out of the seven days of the week. Remarkably, we stayed dry but this achievement did little to ward off any stir crazy feelings that began to arise.

It was Ketchikan’s public library that was to offer us daily shelter following a two-mile stroll that tested the resilience of our rain gear. Here I would sketch and soon compile a series of Alaskan themed pen and ink postcards that I was able to present to a gift shop owner who allowed me to sell them on site. This shop was located on Creek Street among a span of tourist traps waiting for those brave enough to leave their cozy cruise ship. It existed as a haven for me where I was able to escape the climate and earn a total of twenty-one dollars. The cannery work resumed and we were able to earn little more than what would allow us to return home with our stories and embedded wanderlust.

The Ketchikan experience was the beginning of a string of adventures that would find me living, working, and painting on an island resort in southwest Florida. This circumstance allowed me to finance a trip to Europe where I was able to experience the museums that housed many of the masterworks I had studied at Buffalo State College. It was inspiring to roam the Louvre, Vatican, Rijksmuseum, Prado, and many more. Standing before so many impressive works of art as I traveled by train from country to country has left an indelible mark on me as an artist. I would eventually make my way back to Alaska twice and then to North Carolina where I would meet my wife and experience the birth of my son Calder James.

The mood in Asheville was bohemian with a thriving art community that was saturated with the natural beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Daily routines included lulling my newborn son to sleep with stroller rides that were often accompanied by my rendition of a musical narrative by Nat King Cole or James Taylor. It was these naps and the serene means through which they were achieved that afforded me incremental creative hours. Painting and drawing supplies were cued up in advance to seize these moments that were free of infantile play, feedings, diaper changes, and baths. This was the beginning of a need (ie. minimal time, son growing, studio shrinking!) to streamline my process. I began to realize that organized routine strengthened my strides creatively as well as domestically. This has instilled in me a situational awareness for appropriating adjustments to my workspace and process.

Current Professional Influences

More recently, I have found creative inspiration from yet another source. I was introduced to Geoffrey Lee of *Modern Now* gallery after he and his wife had purchased a small painting of mine from a show that was held at Metro Gallery and Framing in June of 2012. Both galleries are located in Studioplex, which was once a factory space that has since been repurposed

as living and workspace rentals. Mr. Lee had recently situated his family and gallery within the Studioplex community. His knowledge of mid 20th century modern art gave him an ability to quickly recognize the artists that were influential to my practice. After establishing this communicative rapport, I soon began helping Geoffrey prepare the open air corridors for an artist market idea he was calling Studiofest. We built panels that would hang from the exposed cement framework of the building. Artists would exhibit their work on these suspended walls and sit nearby while courting potential buyers and braving the intense temperatures common to July in Atlanta. Many of the ground floor businesses had agreed to open their spaces and allow a handful of more fortunate artists to display their work in the comfort of air conditioning. It was the creative energy of the project and the growing sense of belonging to a community of optimistic thinkers that fueled my voluntary efforts.

My first painting collaboration with Geoffrey Lee entitled *Walking Man* (Figure 1), was approached as a mock up for a four-panel piece that was to be painted on hollow interior door blanks each measuring 32" x 80". These would inhabit the front windows (Figures 3 and 4) of *Modern Now* gallery for an eight-artist show entitled *Body of Work*. Silhouetted forms would draw inspiration from the stop motion photography of Eadweard Muybridge that captured the human body in motion. Further impetus was drawn from a painting of mine where spontaneous line work peeks through silhouetted abstract forms. This piece was entitled *Spun by the Larvae of Moths* (Figure 2) and was to be on view inside during the *Body of Work* show. Photographic frames that traced the stride of a bearded man offered the preliminary (mock up) panel subject.

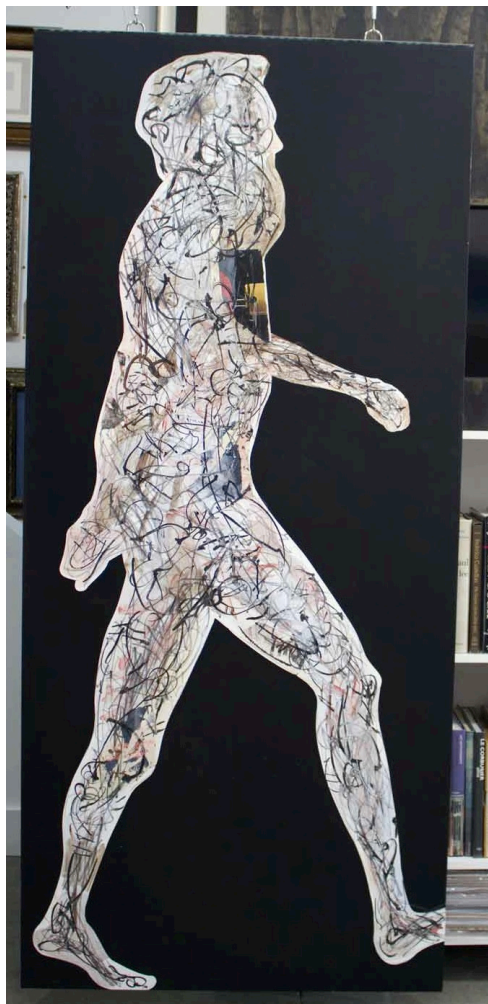


Figure 1. James Johnson, *Walking Man*, 2012, acrylic and collage on wood, 32"x80".



Figure 2. James Johnson, *Spun By the Larvae of Moths*, 2001, acrylic on paper, 17"x16".

I produced the silhouette sketch in the main corridor of Studioplex. This was where the construction of more gallery panels ensued simultaneously, and a torrential downpour hammered the corrugated steel roof overhead. The energy of construction and Mother Nature's drama created a sense of urgency and prompted me to produce a quick charcoal layout of sweeping lines and rough details. As I was flushing out the form within these directional lines and crude details (ie. posture, head, hands, feet), the storm reached a crescendo and the succession of leaking ceiling panels, flickering lights and a blackout halted production. We fumbled through the darkness by cell phone light cleaning up supplies and laughing about the epic conception of *Walking Man*. I was struggling with my departure from strictly non-objective work. Geoffrey was quick to comment on how the line quality as well as the shapes and the motion of my prior work could be perceived as figures. I took comfort in his comment of cohesion and continued to push myself. At this point, production was moved from the corridor of Studioplex to *Modern Now's* gallery space. Again there was the buzz of a small crew busily hanging panels and adjusting lights. I had decided to use painter's tape to mask the shape and preserve the interior details of *Walking Man*. The line was easily read through the tape and trimmed with a blade. I then masked the positive space with craft paper that by now, included charcoal, acrylics, and collaged magazine pages. This prepared my surface to be rolled with a flat black paint that would surround the migratory figure. A test of removing a small portion of the tape immediately following the application of the paint, revealed the crisp clean line that I desired. Satisfied with the results of the mock up, I turned my attention to the multiple panels that were to portray the succession of postures contained in the act of a jumping man.

Using the Muybridge photo frames as a reference, I chose four that seemed to accomplish the illusory motion I sought. Keeping in mind the importance of proportion and placement, I

used a grid to accurately enlarge and position the images with a ratio of one inch representing one foot. It was agreed by Mr. Lee and myself that the aluminum mullions that separated the window space where the pieces would be exhibited, echoed the storyboard-like separations of movement that appear when a strip of motion picture film is viewed without aid of a projector (Figures 7 and 8). Following the gridded layout of the four panels, I began to compose these irregular picture planes. Geoffrey had expressed to me how he envisioned these pieces as being



Figure 3. James Johnson, *Jumping Man*, 2012, acrylic and collage on wood, each 32"x80".



Figure 4. James Johnson, *Jumping Man*, 2012, acrylic and collage on wood, each 32"x80".

much looser than my past work. For me, the confines of this static outline as a picture plane felt rigid from the start. He reminded me of my existing inclination to paint on irregular objects such as salvaged picket fence sections and garage doors. Like being coerced from a ledge, I again found solace in the cohesion. These conversations throughout our collaborative process gave consideration to everything from materials and working space, to composition and theme.

During this first project, Geoffrey and I were developing a system for working with one another. Our closeness in age and the fact that we were both married with children offered us common ground. We both had a keen interest and had studied art history. We were able to make and share frequent historical connections during this initial collaboration and during those that would follow.

Key Terms

Aesthetics- “is commonly known as the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values” (White, 2009, p. 1).

Auto-Ethnography- Method of qualitative research wherein, the researcher records and then reflects upon, subject related, experiences as a means to engage, deepen, and connect personal insights with a broader social context.

Collaboration- Exchange and discussion of intellectual property (ie. personally constructed experiential knowledge), sharing production tasks in pursuit of a common goal, or collective problem solving.

Collaborative learning- Suggested as originally developed for adolescent and adult learners.

“Assumes that resisting the task, rebelling against the teacher, and questioning each other’s views within a group may be inevitable and often necessary aspects of learning” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 17).

Cooperative learning- Suggested as originally developed for primary school children. Students are held “accountable for learning collectively rather than in competition with one another” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 16).

Modernism- Moderns sought to free the content of their art production from the strong representational traditions of 19th century. Individual experimentation with form that emphasizes the processes and the materials therein, are notable inclinations among this group.

Postmodernism- The postmodern perspective purports that: “...any given meaning exists only in a socially constructed web of other meanings. These meanings are constructed in a group context, through dialogue. In this way the power of the group, not the individual is again the center” (Anderson T. & Milbrandt M.K., 2002, p. 6).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide a personal account of my development as a practicing collaborative artist toward my goal of becoming an inspiring art educator. I focused on a variety of collaborative experiences and have drawn inferences from these paths in an effort to reveal how habits of higher order cognition might be combined. These relevant situations have included working with a gallery to produce site-specific pieces for that gallery, working with clients of the gallery on tailored commissions, and finally experimenting with materials and dual ownership of production with artist Brett Jones. By reflecting upon my process in relation to others, I seek insights into my potential role as a model and influence on my students.

Timeline and Desired Results

The timeline for this study included a somewhat retrospective approach that has in turn focused on the production of one 22.5” x 25.5” and two 46.5” x 16” acrylic paintings on wood

to be completed by mid-March of 2013. In my reflections, I have incorporated the experiences of the commission work that followed the previously mentioned window panels that were executed during the summer and fall of 2012. This design has served as a means to compare and contrast these and all relative experiences to this current effort during the reflection process while keeping mindful the educational issues revealed throughout my research. Guiding this inquiry were the following questions:

In what ways might a collaborative process affect us as community of artists and teachers?

What habits of higher order cognition do I use when planning and producing my art and how might an awareness of these behaviors affect my future pedagogical practice?

In the following review of literature I explore collaboration, contemporary perspectives, influence of modernism, and the concept of artist-teacher. While not exhaustive, it is inclusive of major ideas and issues that are related to my study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Among my concerns in this auto-ethnographic study are concepts of collaboration in art making, collaborative and cooperative teaching, the teacher as artist, and the impact of cultural context, specifically, the predominant Western art movements of the previous century.

Collaboration

Vygotsky (1978) has suggested that social interaction is the initial phase to learning. This is then internalized and added to a learner's repertoire of experiences from which they may draw. If one accepts the apparent logic embedded in this theory, one might conclude that collaboration is at the core of education and worthy of close consideration. It then becomes an issue of kind and quality. Who is interacting? How are they interacting? An educator may design a particular experience for students with specific learning objectives in mind. The success of achieving the objectives is subject to variables that are on one hand assumed and on the other unknown. The assumed variety may be the result of the teacher's own education that has introduced the developmental stages of the learner. These, Vygotsky believed, existed in tandem with higher order cognitive abilities that had yet to mature and could do so with the help of an adult or more astute peer. The unknown variety may be as commonplace and varied as each child's family dynamics or what, if anything, the student had for breakfast. Before appearing to advocate that the art room be equipped with a row of atelier-style omelet stations, I turn to an example (Hutzel, K., Russell, R., & Gross, J., 2010) of a thoughtfully designed situational experience for students. The premise of the curriculum unit that was developed and implemented by eighth-grade teacher Julia Gross, was to combine the concepts of social and emotional learning (SEL) and service-learning with art education. Eighth-grade students were situated as mentors to a group of pre-

kindergarten students in the production of an art project that the older learners eventually took ownership of. In Gross's account of her second year of implementing this collaboration, she tells of her decision to relinquish much of the teacher control that existed the previous year. They began by examining and discussing a quilt that was the by-product of this prior design experience. In this way, before any interaction took place between the older and younger children, the eighth-graders were encouraged to devote careful consideration to the dynamics of the proposed situation. With a tangible example of possibilities before them, it was decided that the quilt project was too difficult and a possible detriment to the full participation of the younger learners. They brainstormed new ideas and discussed their collective concept of collaboration. The group focused in on the word "helpful" and agreed that the word summed up the spirit of the collaborative process. It was then agreed that each letter of this word would be produced in teams. Gross observed that: "The eighth-graders learned to be helpful as they collaborated with the younger students, and the students all learned to brainstorm and make changes to the original plan as they went along" (Hutzel, K., Russell, R., & Gross, J., 2010, p. 16).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), suggest that self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills are among the core competencies that promote academic success while placing the child's well-being at the forefront of this pursuit. It is believed that cross-disciplinary collaborations reveal powerful insights that produce valuable connections that in turn, enhance understanding. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) targets skills and attitudes that might promote healthy student psychological growth. Service learning (SL), on the other hand, provides a strategy of integrating meaningful community service with instruction and reflection. By pairing these and using art education as a vehicle, Gross and other like-minded educators (Hutzel, Rus-

sell, & Gross, 2010) propose a synthesis that is rich with virtually endless possibilities. These art educators seem to adopt a postmodern perspective on the art making process that strives to imbue meaning collectively and reflect the constructs of the group. Individual expression is valued in terms of enriching dialogue that forms and propels the bigger idea.

Contemporary Perspectives

“The postmodern practice of collaboration extends beyond the artists themselves and to the viewers who become directly active in the art through participation” (Taylor, 2002, p. 125). The postmodern perspective purports that: “...any given meaning exists only in a socially constructed web of other meanings. These meanings are constructed in a group context, through dialogue. In this way the power of the group, not the individual, is again the center” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2002, p. 6).

During a visit to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo New York, which because of its distance from Atlanta occurs far too infrequently, I experienced an exhibit of recent acquisitions that included a piece that I believe may fit the criteria of postmodernism. With children in tow, my wife and I proceeded as usual to peruse the more conventional objects that either stood on a base or hung on the wall. For me, a postmodern perspective is recognizable when an object or experience conceptually addresses and then challenges any long agreed upon perception of what art should resemble. Eventually we stumbled (my youngest may have drooled) upon what appeared to be a stack of paper that stood knee high and was resting on the gallery floor. The mass of approximately 39 x 27 inch sheets of paper were printed with two identical gold circles that were composed visually stacked and touching one another slightly. I was surprised when the museum guard encouraged us to not only to touch the work but also to remove the top sheet and take it for our own. I could not help but reflect in this moment on the multiple visits to galleries

and exhibitions where it could be heard from children and adults alike, “I just want to touch it”. As art gallery visits with toddlers can quickly become a recipe for duress, our group fled the gallery shortly after this encounter that day with our souvenir and minimal adult discussion about the novelty of the artist’s concept (ie. deconstruction of the “look, don’t touch” policy).

I later discovered through research that this piece, *Untitled (Double Portrait)*, was created in 1991 by Cuban born American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (<http://www.albrightknox.org/collection/recent-acquisitions/piece:gonzalez-torres-double-portrait/>). The doubled circular forms are a reoccurring theme in Gonzalez-Torres’s work and are intended to evoke the uniting of a like pair of people in togetherness, solidarity, and love. The artist’s involvement in the Whitney Independent Study Program in the early 1980’s culminated in an awareness of postmodern theory. It is suggested that the artist’s choice of common, even whimsical, materials paired with the nature of his practice, denied any typecasting of the openly gay Latin-American artist. In addition to his paper “stack” pieces, Gonzalez-Torres incorporates clocks, mounds of candy, strings of lights, jigsaw puzzles, photographs, beads, mirrors, and billboards into his work. He joined a New York-based band of artists known as Group Material in 1987 and in doing so, immersed himself in cultural activism and community education. Upon the occasion of Gonzalez-Torres’s joining the collaborative, founding member Tim Rollins departed in order to give more attention to his group of South Bronx students known as the Kids of Survival. Group Material disbanded in 1996 when Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS-related illnesses. The group challenged the art world for 16 years in ways that held true to their 1981 manifesto that stated the group’s intention as striving to “explode the assumptions that dictate what art is, who art is for and what an art exhibition can be” (Griffin, 2012). I am interested in this aspect of the “assumptions” about art that are continually pushed and skewed at the inception of

every new artistic movement throughout history. Postmodern artists blatantly and boldly present a more than ever inclusive and widely accessible means of expression, that both values and places collective consciousness at the inquisitive forefront, intent on deriving multiple meanings inherent to their art.

Influence of Modernism

Modernism espoused the notion of the individual artist engaged in isolated practice. Moderns sought to free the content of their art production from the strong representational traditions of the 19th century. Experimentation with form and emphasis on processes and the materials are notable inclinations among this group (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2002). It was particularly the mid-twentieth century abstract expressionists (ie. Gorky, DeKooning, Pollack, etc.) who I would inevitably gravitate toward for inspiration. Early on in my drawing practice, I would copy portraits with a ballpoint pen from photographs, as well as invent and copy cartoons--mainly for the amusement of friends and family.

Upon entering college I embarked on my first serious attempts of negotiating how to produce images with a brush and paint. I was drawn to the work of Roy Lichtenstein because many of his canvases had a cartoon quality with which I felt an affinity. My professors began to urge me to seek alternative exemplars for the sake of becoming more expressive with the medium. Upon visiting the Albright-Knox art gallery, situated across the street from the university, I was confronted with Arshile Gorky's 1944 painting entitled *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*. It was the ambiguity and the manner in which the paint was applied that attracted me. These brightly colored forms before me, paired with an uncanny and 'nearly' recognizable landscape or interior space alive with energy and movement, made for a lasting impression on me. I researched and familiarized myself with the work of Gorky, as well as his influences and contemporaries. I be-

gan a routine of visiting the room that housed Gorky's impressive canvas. This wing of the gallery quickly revealed itself to me as containing a collection that amounted to a who's who among this group that touted "art for art sake," in concert with many artists that were influential to their ideas. Works by, to name but a few, Pollack, DeKooning, Matta, and Gottlieb adorned the walls of this grand space. One of the ideas within this body of work that intrigued me was the technique of automatism, "...which was to free the artist from his inhibitions by creating spontaneously, without premeditation or final aim" (Spendor, 1999, p. 89). Influenced by Andre' Masson and Stanley William Hayter, It was Matta who shared these ideas of reckless spontaneity with Gorky and the New York artists. According to Splendor (1999), Peter Busa recalled a gathering at William Baziot's apartment to discuss artwork with Matta, Krasner, and Pollack as follows: "Matta would look at it and make some comment as to what dimension we were reflecting. And he had organic attitudes about whether you were reflecting a rhythm that would be associated with water or with fire or with rock forms and so on" (p. 215). As a way of arriving at consequential forms from which to compose a picture plane or presented as the finished product, the vast experimentation with this concept is what continues to strike me with awe when in "the room" at the Albright-Knox. As I recognize my current influence and interest in the postmodern approach to art making, I cannot deny how the contrasting individually expressive and experimental concerns of the modernist perspective has left an indelible mark on my development and continued exploration of artistic voice. I have continued my painting practice for over 20 years in this vein. Now, as I immerse myself in the study of art education as a discipline and a practice, I find myself seeking a new synthesis, that of artist and teacher.

Artist-Teacher

As I examined the literature concerning the challenges and benefits of maintaining dual professional identities of artist and educator, I discovered many historical precedents. Medieval workshops developed into Renaissance art academies. The dynamic was often that of master and apprentice. During the Renaissance for example, a three-step process was advocated. This sequence found students permitted to only draw from other drawings initially. They then advanced to drawing from plaster casts and eventually from a live model. This was thought to enhance an ability to draw from memory and to enable artists to invent poses and arrange compositions in their heads (Elkins, 2001).

The purpose for creating art was, and is, dictated by the social structure of a society. In turn, this purpose directly influences the nature of instruction. Efland (1990) wrote, “a typical medieval patron, a bishop or cardinal, would have played an active role in determining the form, content, and aesthetic features of a work being commissioned” (pp. 4-5). This structure reduced the artist to a technician of sorts, whose task it was to merely solve the problems associated with the making of a particular object.

During the Renaissance, however, patrons began to entrust the artist with artistic choices. However, the artist’s employment remained contingent upon the shared beliefs of the patron. In contrast, the contemporary artist is revered as a member of a “social and intellectual elite” who is detached from the patron altogether (Efland, 1990). It is, of course, within changing societal tides that the educational appropriateness of the term artist-teacher is criticized and debated. Among the questions raised concerning this title, Day (1986) asked: “Why is art the only field or subject in education that employs a hyphenated image for the teacher?” (p. 41). Two decades prior, Byrd (1964) addressed this issue of semantics by concluding that,

In the end, it depends upon one's definition of the word, artist-how broad or narrow society will eventually determine the word to be. My own preference is for the broader definition-for calling the man or woman an artist who continues to think as an artist thinks, who continues to develop and use his skills creatively for whatever purpose may be required by his profession. (p. 135)

Contrary to Day, who suggested that the artist-teacher scheme represents a conflict of interests and is "problematic", research shows that recognition as both an artist and a teacher has proved extremely empowering for art educators who found ways to fuse the two roles together. It has also been suggested that this synthesis makes for a more interesting environment that is more likely to enhance and hold student engagement (Hatfield, Montana & Deffenbaugh, 2006; Graham & Zwirn, 2010). This proposed synthesis in service of enhanced engagement, may set the stage for meaningful dialogue between self-assured educators and their students. Meban (2009) writes that "rather than the aesthetic being conceived of as an experience that takes place between an individual and an art object, it is conceived as an inter-subjective process in which meaning is derived collectively" (p. 33). Student engagement is what will promote this "inter-subjective" sharing. Here the group is positioned, guided, and encouraged by the demonstrated credibility of an artist. Assuming that this relevant presence inspires collective involvement, it may in turn add breadth to the cultural, political, historical, and social understanding of a given artifact as well as exercise an ability to empathize with one another and beyond. I recognize how, despite my past stubborn inclination to identify solely with the modernist myth of artistic autonomy, meaningful expression in art cannot exist in a self-enjoyed vacuum. I further suggest that albeit insular and elitist, even the modernist perspective must not ignore how any design of a socially constructed means of exchanging ideas will serve to propel and present the human experience. It is within the context of a socially constructed past and present place that I have explored my own process as an artist-teacher, or teaching artist. In the following chapter, I have

provided more details that address the methods by which I have approached this arts-based research project.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Exploring my options for conducting this inquiry, I found that certain methods seemed to hold promise for revealing that which I sought. As I conducted this study, I used the strategies described below to reflect upon my collaborative process and gain insights into my potential role as a model and influence on my students. These different collaborations have included working with a gallery to produce site-specific pieces for that gallery, working with clients of the gallery on tailored commissions, and finally experimenting with materials and dual ownership of production with artist Brett Jones.

Methods

I have conducted an arts-based and auto-ethnographic study wherein I have identified, reflected upon, and drawn implications for my future career in art education, as they relate to my influences and practice as an exhibiting collaborative artist. Originating as a qualitative means of research within the field of anthropology, the auto-ethnographic method sought to experientially record the lives of “primitive” peoples. It differs in design from its predecessor, ethnography, in that auto-ethnographic inquiry achieved an “insider” perspective as the cultural context of the study became directly relative to its subject. In this way the researcher’s subjectivity was immersed in the actuality of the place and the people, and not contained solely within an autonomous and personally specific contextual comfort zone (Duncan, 2004). Lowenheim (2010) suggested that:

Autoethnography is a way and method to reflect on the mutual constitution of the self and the social. It allows one to consider how her/his personal and professional subjectivity was constructed and how her/his actions in the world reproduce or change this world. Autoethnography enables one to acquire an agentive role in the world by highlighting

one's uniqueness and voice. It also aims to create mutual empowerment among people, ordinary individuals, by means of identification, connectivity, and empathy. (p. 1023)

To these ends, I have to utilized journaling and photography to capture the triumphs and challenges of collaborative art making from my perspective. Although this collaborative effort has consisted of artist Brett Jones and myself, Mr. Jones has not participated in the research aspect of the project. The project has involved the production of one 22.5'' x 25.5'' and two 46.5'' x 16'' acrylic on wood paintings that further push the experimental techniques that I have explored throughout my painting career and, most recently, during my experiences this past summer at *Modern Now* gallery.

Throughout the collaborative process, I have utilized reflective journaling, photographic documentation, and notes regarding conversations and processes as means of data collection. As soon as possible after a session of working together, I compiled my thoughts and analyzed each aspect of the collaboration. I then examined my notes for recurring themes and concepts in order to derive conclusions and implications.

In the following chapter, I will explain the process and describe the outcomes of my evolving collaboration with Brett Jones and show images of our work. In the final chapter I will explain the overarching ideas that emerged and their implications for classroom practice.

CHAPTER 4

COLLABORATION REFLECTIONS

I describe below my processes as interpreted from the notes taken throughout my collaborations. Because my collaboration with Geoffrey Lee initiated my interest in this topic, I start my reflections with insights gleaned from that experience. This led to Brett Jones and myself working on the same surface and a variation of the collaborative relationship in general.

Commissions

When visitors to the gallery showed interest in my work but were unsure about how the specifics (ie. size, colors) might fit into their living spaces, Geoffrey began to offer home art consultations that I was encouraged to attend. One might think that this service was solely intended for the very particular client and at first I thought it to be excessively accommodating. However, the idea of catering to individual aesthetics was surprisingly attractive to some. I was of the understanding that the patrons of the galleries that I have been involved with in the past, merely had a love of art and occasionally stumbled upon something that they connected with and just could not live without. Perhaps this serendipitous encounter and subsequent purchase that I describe is the norm, and the attraction here lies in the fact that catered production is normally reserved for the elite. This accommodating service pushed my collaborative efforts further still. The commissioned pieces that followed *Jumping Man* were the products of this concept that strives to consider not only a client's space, but the experiences that have shaped their personal interests, and aesthetic sensibilities as well (Figure 5). Just as the reinterpretation of ideas from



Figure 5. James Johnson, *Links I and II*, 2012, acrylic and collage on acrylic, 95” x 35” (installed commission).

an earlier painting were incorporated in the silhouetted figures of *Jumping Man*, it was a technique of collage under Plexiglas that I had experimented with in the past that made possible the kind of customization that intrigued patrons (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Applying collage on acrylic for *Links I and II*, 2012.

These past paintings (*Over World Tennis I and II*, 2006) were executed by first peeling the protective plastic from one side of the acrylic sheet and continuing to work in a flat position producing broad gestural lines using a china marker. In this piece the theme of tennis was decidedly present from the start and guided my approach. Rather than initiating any attempt at representation, tennis as a theme offered me something tangible from which to extract an essence. I recall thinking of the act of swinging a racquet and combining this unassociated, yet familiar, movement with the automatic execution of my preliminary marks. I found similarities in the fact that both actions require a balance of muscle relaxation and deliberate intent. At its best, the balance must exist in a symbiotic moment that becomes increasingly involuntary through repetitive practice. I then familiarized myself with the movement that this action had embedded in the piece by examining the results of this initial gesture. The collage material I used in these pieces consisted of *World Tennis* magazines from the 1970's that I had acquired from my Grandfather's estate. The periodicals were disassembled by carefully removing the staples that bound them and were then applied as single two page sheets using a clear acrylic gel medium. The positioning of these pages was dictated by the aforementioned compositional inferences that were arrived at through the very deliberate reading of my initial marks. In this way, I was able to decide where I would allow particularly interesting or decidedly relevant text, color or images to remain decipherable. These spontaneous lines that served as a compositional guide, were the product of a series of haphazard actions that were initiated with cavalier confidence. By this, I am referring to the technique of automatism that relinquishes control of premeditated form and relies on muscle memory to achieve compositional variety, repetition, and movement within the picture plane. Once the pages were positioned, I then flipped the piece, peeled the opposing protective plastic, and began painting on the opposing side (Figure 7). The chosen pages provided a starting point



Figure 7. Painting on opposite side of collaged acrylic for *Links I and II*, 2012.

from which to compose and emphasize the movement of a viewer's eye around the picture plane. Photographs and advertisements were rich with athletic gestures, as well as colors that referenced the sport of tennis and guided both composition and palette.

During our consultation visits, Geoffrey and I were granted an opportunity to experience the client's home and receive a tour from the owner that encapsulated aspects of their identity. I imagine the client in these moments as engaging in a type of critical thought. As they walk us through their home and provided an impromptu presentation, they were at once summoning metacognition as a means to weave together personal experiences and aesthetic preferences. Each adornment holds varied degrees and kinds of meaning and represents choices that range from an apparent logical inclusion and placement, to those that are more personal and require a somewhat persuaded justification.

Here I am able to identify this social interaction as being both collaborative and postmodern. It is collaborative in the sense that it is a forum for the exchange of ideas that seek to un-

cover meaning while strengthening and offering direction, or a common goal, to a working relationship. By its very nature, this relationship increases the complexity of the construction of meaning. It offers a more collective perspective that recognizes that what is produced won't retain meaning solely from the artist or the client, but rather result in a combined relevance that is authentic and resembles a postmodern perspective. Our host clarifies the connection of self to objects and reveals how the decisions of what a person chooses to surround themselves with are not solely arrived at through aesthetics. These choices are often a synthesis of personal taste and private relevance in service of identity comfort. It was after the client had shared snapshots, stories, and assorted keepsakes that they had acquired from family and important relationships throughout their lives, that this interaction seemed to change from coldly charted to honest communication. As this sense of trust began to develop, I too felt comfortable explaining the more personal aspects of my practice and the paintings that had peaked their interest (*Over World Tennis I and II*, 2006). In this unguarded state, I could share memories of my grandparent's and their home. I explain their television as a receiver of nothing but tennis matches and how the sounds of swinging racquets, grunts, and footwork upon the court surface are vivid for me. Commentators heard speaking as though divulging a secret, and how the hushed crowd of spectators intermittently erupted in a blend of pleasure and disapproval, remains engrained as one of the soundtracks of my childhood. I reveal how these are among the thoughts I entertained as I worked on the paintings and employed the same sticks and brushes that my grandfather had used to letter trucks and signs.

There exists a myriad of preconceived notions about the relationship between an artist and a client. In these situations Geoffrey served as a mediator of sorts who could keep the conversation on track with his awareness of the background information we each were discussing, as

well as his foresight of how these details influenced the common goal at hand. He occupied a middle ground in the sense that he recognized the connections, as he had already discussed with each of us much of what was being shared. The connections are not seamless and reveal conflicts as well. I feel that mentioning this idea of conflict is necessary in respect to the nature of any collaboration and art in general. A degree of flexibility is important when negotiating contrasting ideas and is an invaluable aptitude for purposes of art production. It became necessary for me to practice some flexibility in regards to the planned design of this project.

Variation

Throughout the busy summer and early fall, Geoffrey had continued to stress to me how the influx of interested clients and subsequent commission projects would wane following the holidays. He assured me that regardless, we would produce another 4' x 8' Plexiglas piece that he was interested in commissioning himself. Due to the accuracy of his predicted slump in business and the resulting need for him to direct his energies toward drumming up book and print sales on E-Bay, his commission project was placed on the backburner. I did heed his warning of how this productive lull was on track to occur in the final stages of this research project. I began to habitually share with others what Geoffrey and I had been doing and how it had become the topic of my project. It was during one of these casual exchanges of catching up, that Mr. Brett Jones suggested that he and I should do, as he put it, a "collabo". He continued to explain that his current employment as a set painter with a variety of film productions in the Atlanta area had rekindled his creative spirit and ambitions. What he sought was an outlet that was separate from work where he might experiment with the many techniques and materials that he was exposed to on the job. I invited Brett over for dinner and our first official "collabo" meeting. He showed me process pictures that captured the progression of how a recent set production project required

his team to emulate a castle interior using wood, styro-foam, and painted finishing techniques. The set of photographs traced the progression of applied layers that concluded with a very convincing illusion of standing inside an ancient construction of massive stone. We continued to discuss the concept of layers and decided that for our art production purposes, we would begin with a hand-off arrangement, wherein Brett would begin by preparing the first layer on a modest panel of salvaged one-eighth inch plywood underlayment measuring 22.5" x 25.5". This repurposed panel was structurally framed around the edges with $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 4" pine boards that created a tray-like object with a 4" depth. His plan was to apply a stucco-like material called versa-bond with a trowel and build up the face and sides with a thick application that he would repeatedly skim over. Brett achieved this on three like panels (Figure 8) within two days and returned for dinner and our first exchange.



Figure 8. Above shows the first prepared surfaces by Brett Jones.

I began to fear that this different approach to collaboration might result in the absence of tangible themes that were extracted by familiarizing myself with the client's life experiences and

interests. I soon recognized however, that since the exchanges between my new collaborator and myself often included sharing a meal and project specific conversation, there existed similarities in the social dynamic of past consultations involved in the commission pieces. It also became clear that the difference could be found in the fact that any guarantee of producing a commercially viable work of art was no longer an issue. We had planned on each reacting to the others medium driven comment in anticipation of presenting a visibly traceable conversation. To the delight of any staunch modernist, Brett and I had set out to combine our painting techniques in the production of what would, in some respect, amount to “art for art sake”. During our conversation at this initial exchange, Brett mentioned that his impression of the panel he was most pleased with was that of curtains. He had pulled much of his material down in a vertical path with a wide spackling blade. On his admitted favorite of the three, he allowed a hooked tail to remain intact with the finish of some strokes. We decided that this piece that we were now discussing as curtain-like, was where we would begin. We spoke of the connections between curtains and layers in terms of veils that either completely mask or partially obscure what lies behind. Further affinities could be found in how curtains related to the entertainment industry as a means to create suspense, transitions, and illusion. I decided to write Brett’s shared comments directly on the side of the piece and while doing so I noticed its resemblance to the constructed appearance of a miniature stage.

Armed with a surface and our discussed impetus, I entered my studio space in the accustomed solitary fashion. Deciding to begin in graphite, I quickly discovered that the textural terrain of the picture plane was unforgiving to the challenge of producing immediate gestural marks without continually breaking the lead of the pencil. I solved this by pinching a piece of the bro-

ken lead between my fingertips and continued my marks with a more stabile and less impeded extension that better captured my whole arm movements (Figure 9).

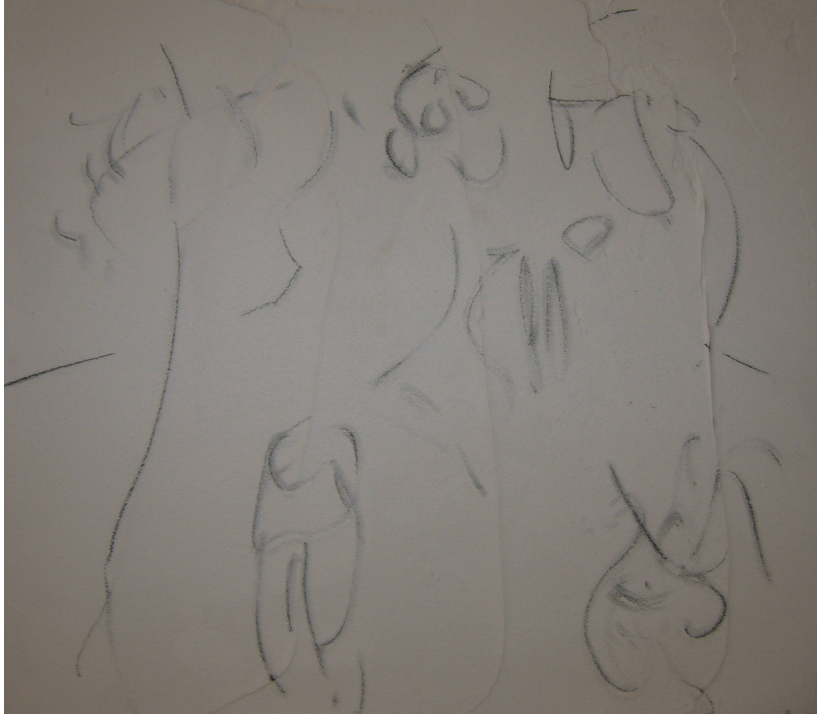


Figure 9. Above shows my initial graphite marks on *Curtains*, 2013.

I then applied a thinned out blue acrylic medium with loose brushwork that followed the directional path of the graphite lines (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Above shows thinned acrylic gel medium tracing directional lines of graphite marks on *Curtains*, 2013.

With much of the white ground tinted blue I then began to flush out and compose the lines, and subsequent forms, with grey acrylic paint (Figure 12). Brett returned that evening to break bread, discuss and exchange *Curtains*, and drop off two 46.5" x 16" prepared panels. He brought them in and set them on the floor stacked horizontally, one on top of the other, and leaned the pair against the wall. He explained that he envisioned this as the orientation of the two panels that would read as one diptych. I agreed with him about this choice and shared the fact that the 46.5" x 32" overall dimensions was a familiar and comfortable canvas size that I had worked with repeatedly in the past. The surface he created on the face and 4" sides of the panels gave them the appearance of lightly stained concrete slabs. The chosen industrial compound known as Ticque, is intended as a base for plaster and stucco applications on walls and ceilings. Mr. Jones explained that this material choice was based on a combination of what was readily at hand

in the production of a current set effect, and how my paintings gave him the impression of graffiti that often appears on concrete walls. I could appreciate the fact that although Brett was at work, he continued to consider our project and make connections that offered him a sense of reason that he applied to his next move. We had momentum now and Brett seemed pleased with what I had done to *Curtains*. He listened intently to the order and reasoning behind the choices I had made, and appeared eager to react.

I was so anxious to test how my familiar medium of translucent acrylic would respond to this unfamiliar surface, that I began to apply my first layer of brushstrokes on the top panel immediately after swapping goodbyes with Brett. The following morning, being pleased with the wet appearance of these dried marks, I continued my layout of only the top panel of the pair. My intention was to allow the directional lines to traverse the seam of our decided diptych. In this way, even the small automatic marks from the evening before could be considered and emphasized as among those that connect the panels. In other words, I was free to engage in additional spontaneous marks on just the one surface and not be hindered with much concern for how the lower plane would connect. The marriage of the two would occur by setting the lower panel in place and visualizing the trajectory of the lines from the upper panel. Thinking of where they intersect the lower plane, each other, and finally dissipate, would serve to organize and link the second surface. I decided to make the additional guiding marks by scratching the surface using the corner of a chisel. These impressions appeared as stark white lines and in this moment I realized that Brett must have applied a wash that tinted the panels as his last move. This contrast enabled me to easily read the movement of my chiseled marks as I plotted the migration to the lower panel and emphasized the combined composition using grey acrylic paint (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Above shows grey acrylic connecting diptych panels, 2013.

Latter that afternoon, Brett called to inform me that he too was inspired by our meeting the night before and had added his responsive layer upon returning home. He was ready for another exchange and it was decided that I would be making the delivery to his space.

Change of Exchange

At the time, I gave little thought to the potential results of altering where we exchanged our art. Up to this point Brett had volunteered to bring everything to my doorstep. However, as he discovered when dropping them off, the dimensions of the diptych panels were a tight fit in his Honda Accord. He had also expressed a desire to work simultaneously on the larger pieces. I would soon find out that, as a result of being pleased with a sprayed on treatment that he had applied to *Curtains*, his next move required us to convert his back deck into a larger makeshift spray booth to accommodate the increase in scale of the diptych. I was excited to be venturing beyond my “push it back under the stairs” studio and I loaded the paintings into my truck. When

I arrived at Brett's house he was in the process of unrolling plastic sheeting on his back deck and shouted for me to "come on in". *Curtains* sat leaning against the adjacent wall as I entered, and the transformation was striking. Brett had changed the entire pallet of the painting overnight from cool blues and steely greys (Figure 12), to warm umbers with glints of metallic gold (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Above shows *Curtains*, 2013 prior to Brett's first response.



Figure 13. Above shows *Curtains*, 2013 following Brett's first response.

Brett soon came in from the deck to find me inspecting his additions. Promptly asking me what I thought, but without pausing for a response, he went on to explain that he anticipated that our visual dialogue would amount to “push and pull.” With this being said, I was appropriately reminded of the artist-teacher Hans Hofmann, who is quoted as saying: “It is not the form that dictates the color, but the color that brings out the form.” Brett assured me that he had never heard of Hofmann or of his theories concerning the spatial effects of color. He was merely referring to how he intended to “push” the elements of surface quality and color pallet to the point of often obscuring my previous actions. His hope was that I would then “pull” from this obscurity, the old actions as well as new discoveries. I immediately had an appreciation for his proposed spontaneity and faith in happenstance.

Boo-Boo Kitty

In addition to covering much of his deck with plastic, Brett had brought out bins and buckets containing supplies that we may need. Among the more familiar tools such as brushes, rollers, rags, etc., there stood a chrome canister with a trigger-equipped hose connected to it. This was the larger of two sprayers. Both could be manually pumped up to supply needed pressure. His plan was to use them to apply and manipulate a whitewash treatment on the diptych. Brett had pre-mixed a diluted quantity of whitewash and filled the smaller sprayer with it. The larger of the two was filled with water only and, as Brett would demonstrate, offered him room to experiment with the application. For example and among other variables, the distance of the nozzle from the surface of the painting changed the appearance of the whitewash. It could be observed as concentrated when held inches away, completely obliterating the under-painting, and then hazy or restored with a rinse of plain water from the larger tank. From increments of feet away, and now wet from the rinse, droplets would dapple and bleed. We stood there and admired the most interesting of these gravity trails and Brett continued to rinse away the more mundane. Deciding to lay the pieces flat in an attempt to preserve the most attractive sagging, I noticed that Brett was apparently captivated by something that this repositioning revealed on the panel's edge. Pausing and tilting his head from side to side he exclaimed "Hey, checkout Boo-Boo Kitty". I had noticed as we worked side by side that evening, Brett was using the term "boo-boo" interchangeably to describe both the positive and negative results of our actions. Now, he had animated the term as some sort of feline partner that I had yet to meet. So I asked: "Who is Boo-Boo Kitty?" He pointed out a spot on the edge where some of the whitewash had changed direction either from the shifting of the panels or a burst of air from the empty sprayer. Brett continued to explain that on film sets in Atlanta, Boo-Boo Kitty is an expression used to

describe both desirable and undesirable accidents during production. As an example of its use, he told me that he might in one instance be asked to “repeat that Boo-Boo Kitty” and in another told to “wipe up that Boo-Boo Kitty”. With this clarification, I recognized that he and his co-workers were identifying the emergent and exploitable moments that often occur in the arts. Among the “lessons the arts can teach education”, Eisner (2002) identified “the importance of being flexibly purposive in the course of one’s work” (p. 205). We allowed the whitewashed layer to dry and loaded the panels into my truck. I responded to this treatment the following morning in my studio by restating some of the washed over shapes with both grey and white acrylic gel medium mixtures (Figure 14). I also worked back into *Curtains* by restating the greys as well as scratching additional marks on the surface (Figure 15).



Figure 14. Above shows Brett’s washed treatment and my restated shapes on diptych panels, 2013.



Figure 15. Above shows my second acrylic and scratched response on *Curtains*, 2013.

Over the next two days Brett and myself continued to work from his deck where we found a rhythm that was comparably absent in our original hand-off plan. We experimented with masking areas of the diptych before spraying (Figures 16 and 17) as well as dripping pigment onto the surface of *Curtains* to later be manipulated with sanding (Figure 18).



Figure 16. Above shows Brett spraying pigment on masked diptych panels, 2013.



Figure 17. Above shows drying stage of washed and masked diptych panels, 2013.



Figure 18. Above shows Brett Jones sanding his final dripped response on *Curtains*, 2013.



Figure 19. Above shows completion of *Curtains*, 2013, acrylic on wood, 25.5" x 22.5".



Figure 20. Above shows finished diptych panels, *Untitled*, 2013, acrylic on wood, 46.5" x 32".

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In both my research and collaborative practice, I am able to identify what I believe to be three overarching themes. Therefore, in conclusion I will discuss professional development through collaboration, collaboration as a modernist dialogue, and collaboration as a postmodern confluence. I will make recommendations that pertain to the applicability for each and K-12 art education.

Professional Development Through Collaboration

The empowerment reported by art educators who were able to balance the practice of their art and their teaching (Hatfield, Montana & Deffenbaugh, 2006; Graham & Zwirn, 2010) is worthy of acknowledgment. It seems plausible that the balance might occur in cases where each relates to and strengthens the other. For example, when reflecting on my experiences with clients and their desire to negotiate the specifics of very personal commission pieces, I see opportunity to share these first hand encounters with my future students. Rather than merely offering myself credibility as an artist who is sought after by collectors, scenarios of this kind may serve as real world examples and provide an authentic segue into projects for students. My community of art students could be organized with its members in groups being assigned the specific “roles” that aid in the realization of a mutually meaningful commission. Students would take on the roles of artist, client, and gallery representative, for example. The artist’s responsibility would be to identify their influences as they pertain to why and how they create their art. The client would provide personal criteria as it relates to what they envision as an artwork that represents their experiences, identity, and imagined lifestyle. As a mediator, the gallery representative would seek a synthesis between the two, arbitrate, and offer compromise. Each student could

have the opportunity to take on each different role in rotation in order to better appreciate this kind of collaboration.

Collaboration as a Modernist Dialogue

When introducing students to modernism, some discussion of the myth is in order. The notion that the artists who were involved in this movement occupied studios that resembled conditions of solitary confinement should be addressed and challenged. For example, sharing the parlor game inception of the Surrealist technique known as “exquisite corpse” might reveal the role of collaboration and emphasize the social habits practiced by this group. By presenting a project to students in terms of it being a game, there is potential to hook the engagement of a broad range of grade levels. Groups would fold a sheet of paper in as many sections as there are participants. Drawings are made in the quadrants separated by the folds. It should be stressed that random subject matter should remain secretive and is encouraged as offering variety and interest when juxtaposed beside the following contributors addition. Each addition should continue slightly over the fold before it is passed and will serve as the starting point for the next drawing. Opportunity exists in such a playful climate to connect with one another through cooperation, inventiveness, and humor. Exemplars such as Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte might be familiar to some, and could be used as motivation or fodder for discussion. Comparisons can be made to the deliberately composed juxtapositions of these masters and actual examples of the Surrealist technique of exploiting unplanned accidents. A resource for these game-play images can be found on exquisitecorpse.com and include the collaborations of such moderns as Duchamp, Tanguy, Breton, and Miro. This style of exchanging artwork that each artist contributes to in sequence is how I began my collaborative work with Brett.

Collaboration as a Postmodern Confluence

As a result of my collaborative efforts and the variety of their dynamics, I have in many respects undergone a reconceptualization of my artistic identity. Where once I embraced the modernist myth of creative autonomy, I am increasingly finding it hard to imagine the value in isolated artistic practice. During my most recent meeting with Brett I was explaining to him how when I think back to before I had entered school, began working with Geoffrey and now him, I practiced painting consistently but it was very repetitious, like talking to myself. I explained how I had thought of this time as comparable to a musician that obsessively practices his chops. The motivation for the musician however is usually the moment when they are able to jam with a fellow musician. Practicing your chops assures that what the player adds to the musical dialogue has substance or a broader repertoire for improvisation leading to discovery. This collaborative shift gives the visual artist the opportunity to relish in the rewards the musician cherishes. When teaching students, the idea of comparing bands of postmodern artists to bands of musicians might offer greater accessibility. This may serve to add identifiable excitement to the potential rewards of collaboration. The comfort of the familiar might create a conducive atmosphere. They may be more at ease with the suggestion of choosing a partner to work on a project simultaneously. An atmosphere of combined exploration should promote reactions to the natural chain of events as presenting growth opportunities and always optimistic. Never should it be heard from my future group of artists that 'I ruined it.' Never should they hesitate in discussion because they believe what they are thinking would be 'ridiculous to say.' Each moment of inquiry presents opportunities that require decisions and problem solving. I have found that uncertainty and conflict can reveal avenues that illuminate connections. These connections add meaningful breadth to subsequent decisions and encourage experimental processes. For me, the

studio has always been such a place where rules are pushed, consequences are observed and parameters invariably flex.

Conclusion

The reminiscent thought required to zero in on the experiences that have influenced and shaped my artwork has been a difficult and foreign exercise for me. It has till now, been a consistent practice of continuing where I last set down my brush and never digging much deeper than revisiting a particular painting that seemed relevant to a current effort. This tracing of childhood, adolescence, young adult and questionable maturity, through a lens of the creative impetus that has been my constant condition, has shed much light on where my strengths as an art educator may lie. I have attempted to recall the impressionable moments in my own art education. These range from being built up at an early age as possessing talent, to later being discouraged from pursuing art making altogether by a handful of bitter and insensitive mentors in my undergraduate studies. This is not to imply that all of my undergraduate professors were a discouragement. It is merely a reminder that I will carry into my future classrooms of how damaging flippant comments can be to an aspiring artist, and in contrast how powerful a love of subject and teaching can be. “The roles of artist and teacher require a delicate balance for it is easy for a teacher's artistic passions to overwhelm a burgeoning, fragile student voice” (Graham & Zwirn, 2010, p. 230). Sadly, and as testament to the damage an educator may have on their students, I found it much more difficult to recall the excellent artists who were also excellent professors at Buffalo State than it was to dredge up memories of the other excellent artists who were as I previously mentioned, bitter and insensitive as educators.

As evidence of the positive impact collaboration can have, I noted several comments shared by Brett Jones during the times we worked together. For example, he explained to me

how sharing photographs of our collaborative process with his mentors and co-workers offered him credibility. More than just fodder for small talk, our efforts were acknowledged as part of Brett's professional development and portrayed him as being passionate and dedicated to honing his skills. He also shared a recent issue at work where scenic personnel from L.A., who were considered masters of their specific specialties (i.e., plaster, paint), had been brought to Atlanta for a particular project. Concerns about losing work or being replaced began to dominate conversations and caused anxiety among the ranks of the Atlanta-based crew. Rather than being engulfed by the paranoid chatter, Brett explained to me that he was able to identify and convince others that this circumstance resembled opportunity more than threat. Part of this realization he was able to credit to the value he had placed on our recent exchange of ideas and knowledge.

In conclusion, I would like to revisit my original research questions, and reflect on any insights I have gained into these topics. My first question asked: In what ways might a collaborative process affect us as community of artists and teachers?

The social aspect of collaboration is its power and has the potential to enrich or damage. Learning to value and respect the opinions of others has far reaching implications. Accepting and practicing this behavior promotes the power of the group, and is projected and built upon with demonstrated care and optimism. The practice of anything involves the connotation of desired growth, and seldom if ever resembles only linear charted triumphs. There exist set backs that may occur in the beginning, middle, or end of nurturing an idea. Collective problem solving increases the complexity of this venture. The idea of modeling desire and optimism is where I believe exists the opportunity for complexity to inspire rather than confuse.

My second question asked: What habits of higher order cognition do I use when planning and producing my art and how might an awareness of these behaviors affect my future pedagogical practice?

I am constantly seeking logical relationships when planning my art. Observational interpretations involve critically comparing and contrasting combined techniques that guide the production phase of an artwork. For example, I am able to recognize the success of a given synthesis in moments when decisions of execution are achieved in stride. As my compositions are abstract, the inferences I draw are derived through process, and strive to exploit such elements as repetition, emphasis, and balance. I would suggest that the practice of planning and analyzing the information contained in a picture plane, has groomed me for facilitating classroom conversations concerning the anatomy of a variety of compositions.

I will continue to seek collaborative opportunities and cull from these experiences beneficial insights that will promote my practice of teaching and of art. It is my hope that this combination of past and future relationships will strengthen my ability to design meaningful experiences for my future students. I consider this proposed balance as professional development that will enable me to empathize with and encourage a variety of creative spirits.

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