

NO ARMS TO HOLD YOU

by

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About a year ago I had a conversation with an artist friend of mine who said that in order

to be a great artist we must make honest work. She said the only way to be truly honest is either to “break yourself, or get broken.” This idea was shocking to me; the simplicity of it was marvelous. I had been in a relationship with my girlfriend for four years. When she moved across the country she fell into a state of depression and attempted suicide. That was my initial break. All my family history had taught me innumerable skills to paint and construct artwork, but no amount of skill makes you a great artist. To be great, and that is the aspiration, you have to dig down deep into yourself unashamedly and drag out your inner fears. Painting is a battle. You against yourself, you against the paint, you against the surface, you against today, yesterday, your childhood, your mother, your girlfriend, your fear of success, your fear of loss, your fear of death, you against art history, you against Picasso, Kippenberger, Basquiat, you against society, against social expectations, you against your heroes, and against your demons.

Painting is a battle for honesty, and in my guilt and shame and sorrow that was the chaos and confusion following her attempt I continued to crack myself open until there was no hope of hiding it any longer. The tightly controlled realistically rendered paintings of empty chairs were subsumed by expressively painted figures on wood panels. The wood was a practical material switch; canvas would never have been able to withstand the actions taken against each piece. Beating, carving, dancing, throwing, cracking, falling, I acted violently against each painting. It was cathartic, it was childish, and it was necessary. I exhibited absolutely no control in those initial paintings. I could barely hold myself together, but I was developing a way of working, a process that simultaneously incorporated my entire educational experience and rejected it. Since then as I have continued to work with the same energy, the development has been one of refinement and control. I have consciously attempted to reign in my berserk aggression and energy while trying to not have a rigid and established formula. So here we have a breaking point, then further self-destruction, and as a result an ability to expose a deep and fearful honesty through the means of painting. This turning point in my life occurred atop a family immersion into the world of theatre and art which both contributed to my childhood.

My father is a scenic painter, faux finisher and an artist; my mother has been a seamstress, costumer, scenic painter, actress, house manager, stage manager, and voice-over artist. I have spent my entire life in and around the theatre and arts. As a child I was read art history textbooks to go to sleep, and at nine I began assisting my father at clients’ houses, as well as assisting my mother in the local theatre. The varieties of surface textures found in my paintings are derived from numerous techniques learned from scenic painting and faux finishing, as well as experimentation with the materiality of paint. I use an assortment of tools to apply and remove paint, including but not limited to: brushes, brooms, feather dusters, fly swatters, sponges, stir sticks, shoes, wood graining tools, palate knives, razor blades, wood carving tools, and spray bottles. In the theater a set is constructed to be used, and abused, and then thrown out after a few weeks, this has instilled in me an “anti-preciousness” about materials and composition. I will not throw out the physical object, but I will abandon a composition freely by changing the surface drastically. Also the speed with which a show must be fabricated directly correlates to the swiftness in painting each piece, and the turnover rate of productions parallels the completion of once piece and the generation of the next. In this way the layers establishing the underbelly of these paintings are a visual manifestation of my upbringing. The background literally is my background.

Once I was able to understand that I was expressing my inner fears and emotions in my paintings in a new and direct way I began to consciously paint about the feelings of loneliness and loss of my girlfriend across the country. Emotional hardship is the predominant theme of the body of work I am graduating with. Everything about trying to understand my feelings has been a pushing and pulling, a hide and seek. Subconsciously, innately, I understand them, but not in any verbal way, I often do not know what a painting is specifically about until weeks later it finally clicks into place. It is like when you cannot remember a word but it is on the tip of your tongue, like an object in a locked box, you can hear it rolling around but you cannot see it. For me, the painting is the locked box, and weeks later I find a key and discover its real purpose. Until then I focus solely on the formal qualities of the painting. Colors, value, form, line, composition, texture, all participate in the puzzle to work out a well-constructed painting. While obsessing over the formal aspects of a painting I am releasing the demons within and without noticing. As time has passed I have become aware of the recurring imagery and now bodies missing limbs, heads missing bodies, and their corresponding shadows all hold conscious, intentional content.

The most difficult part of a long distance relationship is the most obvious; the physical separation means that you cannot hold each other, literally. The visual expression of this feeling becomes a metaphor like, “when you are gone, I have no arms to hold you.” This was the initial thought when I denied my figure arms. Sometimes the arms are stubs, as if afflicted by leprosy, they are decaying piece by piece. Then the legs began to go, as in “I would travel but I have misplaced my legs.” The distance between us, and the impossibility of crossing that distance can be unbearable at times. This led further to denial of a full figure within the picture plane, “we two become one, then you left; now I am half.” Separation, loss and distance are the emotional content behind the metaphors creating the fragmented figures. When I expanded on the idea of leprosy I found myself painting heads with no facial features, as if the eyes, nose and mouth had fallen off. In doing so it is not simply a head but a pound of flesh left at my feet. “When you left, you took part of me with you,” I found myself thinking, like a shrunken head, or a token of battle. These are perhaps over-simplified renditions of the feelings of loss and longing, but the paintings are heartfelt. Bodies dissolve into the landscapes retreating in fear, limbs are lost or misplaced, and heads detach like souvenirs.

Initially, the shadow imagery was a formal solution anchoring the figures in space. Theatre lighting, with its colored gels and gobos, is used as a tool to convey the mood within each scene. The lights are hot and intense, producing harsh, long, colored shadows. In my paintings the shadows have come far from simply being a formal conceit, they contribute greatly to the sense of distance between the characters, the separation, loneliness, and isolation. The length of shadows indicates time passing like the sun setting in the distance, alluding to time and space simultaneously. The figures are further pushed into different spaces when their shadows do not parallel each other indicating separate light sources. The light also represents responsibility, as in, the spot light is on you, and it is your soliloquy now. With multiple shadows in multiple directions there are multiple lights and multiple responsibilities. The shadows usually do not correspond to the shape of the figure being lit. I add heads, faces, arms, breasts, and legs to shadows of figures that may or may not have them. This mostly stems from formal considerations of value and weight, but the shadow is an extension of the self, as when Peter Pan loses his

shadow, it was a part of him he could not control without wrestling it into place. In this way a figure could feel incomplete but its shadow knows otherwise. Only under the light can you see a shadow, illuminating your true character. Peter Pan playing with his shadow is also a representation of loneliness and childish creativity. He is alone with his shadow, and so plays with it like he would another person. Embodying responsibility, truth, distance, time, and loneliness, the shadow has many hats to bear.

Other factors within the paintings that produce, enhance, and contribute to the emotional content include the texture and tactility of the paint, as well as the use of written words. Whether matte or glossy, rough or smooth, thick or thin, constructed of line or shape the textural qualities a figure is made of forms their personality, and the differences between them accentuate their distances. Paint can be applied over drawn lines, like skin over bones. When the background is painted in around the drawing it is as if we are looking at the ghost of a figure, the hole where a whole once was. The whole body, or the fuller one, props nearby as blatant contrast. Like in Our Together Home, the female on the right is a ghost figure turning away in the opposite direction from the full-bodied figure on the left. The left figure has wood grain texture underneath a layer of thick, smooth paint, and has been rooted in position like a tree, which then caught on fire. The distance between the two women is felt through their positioning as well as their obvious textural differences. In the painting Think Big We Do the thickly applied material of the right figure creates a gooey looking musculature without any apparent skin. The smaller figure to the left, like a ball of stone, is a form made of only skin-like paint. This sets up an inside/outside dynamic, by allowing us into the body of one and keeping us removed from the body of another. The painting also has large floating breasts poured on and cracked open like skin. The inability to touch my partner while separated comes across in my constant experimentation with the application of paint and various textures.

As someone growing up with artist parents in the theatre it had never occurred to me to not be an artist, the same way it never occurred to me to become one. I learned the tools of the trade but remained unaware of the effect it was having on me. My parents liked that drawing and painting kept me busy, and quiet, and out of trouble. It was encouraged. So my engagement with a conscious artistic expression was slow and cumulative. By the time I became aware of a desire to produce work I was a teenager and the medium I chose was collage. This basic concept of juxtaposing found imagery has as much play today as it did back then. Writing into my paintings stems directly from collaged type in my earlier work. Instead of found words I include my own love letters, poems, and narratives written to and about my partner. This is a very direct form of communication, or rather, attempt at communication. As I have slowly learned to paint again since that traumatic breaking point, I have also re-taught myself how to communicate. This is an arduous process that does not come easily to me. The difficulties in overcoming our long distance relationship can be visualized in the attempts at direct communications that have been painted out, obstructed, and obscured by the rest of the painting process. The obfuscation of direct language denies clarity of communication, which accentuates the separation of lovers and their longing to be together.

When I dream I am hardly ever in my own body, I dream in the bodies of others. In a spiritual sense this has translated to a belief that my body is just a borrowed tool and upon my death I return this tool to the earth. The concept of borrowing tools, like borrowing library books, led me to believe that creating a likeness of a person does not

mean that you have captured anything from them. The truth of a person, what makes them who they are is vastly more complex. It is like when someone asks you why you love him or her, there is no single answer except for “everything”. Because highlighting one aspect, like answering, “because I love your smile,” belittles all the rest. You love a person for their entire being, and the truth of that being is not captured in a likeness. The skill of painting a face from life is helpful but unnecessary in expressing the depth of an individual. Heads and bodies do not have to attach, or more so, they do not have to fit together. In my paintings the heads are often detachable like a consciousness dreaming in other bodies. Paintings are frozen in time even when depicting movement, so a face on a painting will remain in the expression forever, like a mask. Which has brought me back to primitivism, and tribal sculpture, where I am currently focused.

The masks and sculpture of primitive cultures as a primary source for the making of art is a well-established tradition. These cultures were abstracting the figure centuries before Picasso was born. But art history does pivot on the life and times of Pablo Picasso. It is impossible to paint without acknowledging him. Perhaps it is overtly clear in my paintings that I hold that belief. The fragmentation of figures, and the use of shadows, words, and masks can all be found throughout his oeuvre. My work is also influenced by the history that succeeded Picasso, namely Guston, DeKooning, Rauschenberg, Alice Neel, Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Martin Kippenberger, Georg Baselitz, the rest of the Neuen Wilden, Julian Schnable, Leon Golub, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. These are all undoubtedly major players in the history of art, and important figures for our generation to grapple with, but still I find Picasso at the root of all these artists. In 1906 he began painting people with masks for faces, most famously in Les Femmes d'Alger in 1907. There he aligns his female prostitutes as animals, and like their day jobs of presenting whichever face is most pleasing to the customer, he replaces their faces with the masks they truly are. This discovery of primitive abstraction leads to his invention of analytic cubism, and the fragmentation of the human form burgeons from there throughout the rest of his life. Synthetic cubism followed incorporating collaged pieces of newspaper and found objects into the surface of the canvas, as well as painting the written word, as in Still Life with Chair Caning from 1912. Later, in the 1950's he produces the paintings The Shadow and The Shadow on the Woman, depicting the presence of watcher/lover hovering over a female nude. Both examples contribute to the artist/model theme that runs consistently throughout his entire career, and through nearly every body of work. He returned to the studio over and over again to paint, or draw, or etch, his connection to the model. In general Picasso appears to have been genuinely painting his emotional life, and with each style and body of work he attempted to find a better, more sincere or direct, way of expressing those emotions. My paintings are implicitly tied to art history in their thematic content, combining of assembled imagery, use of materials and artistic process.

My father would say “to paint is to welcome the unborn into this world.” This would lend to the argument that painting is indeed not dead as so many have claimed. My future development as an artist and painter hinges primarily on the assumption that you cannot kill this medium. In my last few months of working this semester I opened up a number of possibilities for the direction of my work. I have returned to the primary sources of contemporary painting, while also returning to the primary sources of my own practice and education, in the theatre. The use of masks during rituals of life and death,

and the art of the theatre expressing the inner conflicts that are also of life and death, are intimately linked. To explore the imagery of these two mythic practices while deepening my understanding of my own emotional tides and the ability to communicate them seems like a natural progression with incalculable choices. The world is big, and I am small.