A TO B IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

By

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I have spent most of my undergraduate years trying to satisfy an urge to creatively translate thoughts and words into visual form. I have never been able to fully grasp why I have been pursuing this. However, I have come to find that it’s more important to be aware of the question than it is to have an answer, and also that a passion for art making suffices for producing work. As I became more versed in oil painting I found I could arrive at conclusions that were increasingly complex. My work seemed to adapt to things that were directly relating to me and of what I was thinking about. The evolution of my work, as I have seen it, has followed an underlying theme of conflict. In retrospect I can see this theme as my education has allowed me to paint more personally.

In my first personal non-academic pieces I digitally sewed anatomical parts together into a sort of collage. I would paint from these using references that I made. They were clever portraits that used natural formations of ears and noses to make a face. They were one-liners. Through making these I became even more interested in anatomy conceptually. I tapped into an interest in disease that stemmed from studying physiology. I wanted my audience to see the connections I saw between natural science and art. I made paintings of grotesque imagery but painted in such a way that was “beautiful”. I was aware of an audience, and I was aware of the control that abstraction allowed over them. I could paint and make it about the paint, not about image. I struggled with illusion so that my audience never really knew completely what they were looking at. There was a real conflict.
of interest between the audience and my work, a disconnection in what they were really looking at and what I allowed them to think they were seeing. But the work I was making seemed sterile and formulaic to me, too much like map-making.

The hard edge technique seemed to be too restrictive and predictable. I wanted to break free from sterility and paint over the paint. I wanted to paint between lines and over lines. I became interested in the work of Francis Bacon in the 40’s and Abstract Expressionists like Phillip Guston. I started abstracting figures and I started inventing the figure. My work became even more of a personal product when I began painting from no reference. I tried to illustrate a conflict I felt internally. I made a lot of bad paintings doing this. I tethered myself to nothing and soon found myself abstracting far into foreign worlds and painting and drawing mindscapes.

For a while I made systematic drawings built on logic and specific laws. I created a race of entities built out of line contour and situated them in environments that resembled subterranean or inner space. The settings were built from contour, line, sections, and systems. The work was based on an internal logic specific to each individual work. In this world there were laws that these creatures, that resembled rubber nipples, had to follow. Groups of creatures would follow a specific “attendance rate” and be found in groups throughout the picture plane. With this more conceptual work I eventually felt that I wanted to get back
to the freedom I had previously with paint. I enjoyed how personal this work was to me, but I wanted to feel the paint again.

With my next series I discarded logic and reason while I remained floating in foreign atmospheres. My work became completely non-representational and it was at this time that I really discovered my appetite for the act of painting. Surface texture and formal qualities, overlap and color: I pushed my work further into non-objectivity. I was remembering what it was to paint from no reference. I was simply painting paint and this was very satisfying to me. I began enjoying the viscosity of paint while drawing and manipulating forms with my brush. My brush became an extension of my body, and the relationship between what I saw and thought became closer. Something was still missing though. My work started to feel empty to me. I began to question the absence of a central logic. I had gone too far from anything real and I wasn’t able to know where, exactly, I was. I never gave my audience anything besides a purely visual experience. I felt this series was born from wholesome enjoyment. The highly chromatic palettes and ferocious brush strokes were exciting and I really enjoyed making this body of work, however I needed to return to the kind of naturalism I explored earlier with my drawings.

I became obsessed with analytic drawing and wanted my paintings to have this as a central aspect. I experimented further with the viscosity of paint and
medium. I made a lot of paintings on the floor. My subjects were usually a simple geometric shape or clusters of geometric shapes. My concerns were space, light, color, and weight. I was able to maintain some sense of gravity while experimenting with paint by pouring it and tilting the canvas, and by letting the paint pool and run. However I very soon grew bored with this work and, again, felt that something was missing. I wanted my paintings to manifest an awareness of the greater art world and the history that it was a part of.

I therefore started abstracting compositions of paintings from art history. I would select compositions, like *Rape of the Sabine Women*, that had been painted by many artists. I would overlap these figurative compositions as a foundation for my own work. I was working from *St. Paul Preaching on the Steps at Athens* when I began thinking about manipulating the vantage point from which each work was made. I didn’t want to portray the figure as it was presented in the painting so I decided to place the viewpoint behind the figure. This was a pivotal moment: My work and my thinking have changed since this point.

At one point my investigations of art history focused on Caravaggio. I immediately fell in love with the shallow grounds. Because I was working figuratively at the time, I also fell in love with his attention to the figure. My work became an investigation of Caravaggio’s work. After painting *The Rising of Lazarus*, my muse became *The Seven Acts of Mercy*. This multi figural
composition would allow me to see organizations from behind, from above, from inside structural forms, and in between figures. These investigations lead to a series of paintings based on Caravaggio’s composition. I felt like a mad surgeon looking down at a motionless body. I wanted to manipulate the blueprint and the anatomy of the painting. I began with shaky confidence; I made multiple sketches and slowly eased into the piece. I worked slowly and steadily. It was scary for me to reinterpret the work of a Baroque master. I was thinking of issues of proximity between and among figures. I wanted to understand what tensions I could create and, with seemingly limitless variation, how each figure was specific to a painting. I wanted to know if juxtaposing abstractions of painted groups or social figures and single figures could be understood as differently as I saw them. After many paintings I began relating them to my personal history. I began reacting to memories of personal experience and began seeing the figures as fully engaged in scenes I have lived through. Figures became a means of visual performance. They began to re-enact specific moments from my life. In the gestures I painted I saw the expressions of people I’ve known. They are the people that I surrounded myself with. I painted them as if I had ensnared their movement in a sort of inevitable climax of events. I felt like the puppet master of my paintings and that the choices I made concerning composition and organization changed the nature of each figure in a very real sense. While working, I found myself thinking about certain situations. Personal feelings and apprehensions resurfaced. I started to
work them out in my painting as a way of revisiting a thought or completing it. I wanted to become closer to the painting by relating their scenes and content to their source in Caravaggio’s original. If I painted the three standing male figures striking down the lying figure, what sort of meaning could I convey and how did this relate to my life? If I wanted to paint a male and a female figure inside an architectural structure and another male figure having exchange with each, how does this relate to the context of The Seven Acts of Mercy? I worked from both directions: from content in Caravaggio’s work to my own life and from my own life to the content in Caravaggio’s work. I made this series in reaction to my own person history based on the experience of studying a work of art.

My education in the fine arts has taught me that art has evolving, self reflexive properties. It’s very difficult to make predictions on what an artists’ future work will consider. Art changes relative to surroundings and interests. Whether the artist is aware of this or not, there are consequences to where one’s interests lie. I feel as if my art is, in some ways, completely out of my control. I obey an urge to creatively explore problems. I don’t seek a final answer; it is more important to me that I delve into a project rather than find a solution or fail. My urge is representative of what I feed it, and of what my interests are. It will consume whatever it pleases. To be an artist is to embrace a lifestyle of selfish servitude to one’s self.
Artist: Caravaggio

Year: 1607

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 390 cm × 260 cm (150 in × 100 in)

Location: Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples