

THE WORLD IS OUR PLAYGROUND

By

Michael B. Shissler Jr.

Submitted to the School of Art+Design
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Fine Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

December 2009

Accepted:

Melissa Chaney, Professor

Sponsor

Len Stokes, Professor

Second Reader

I have always had a fantasy to be the protagonist in a great adventure story. This past year I have had the great fortune of traveling throughout the country with my closest comrades as part of a musical act, in which we celebrate being in the moment and being as happy as can possibly be while having as much fun as one can. These road trips we undergo bring us throughout this great land I call my home, however it wasn't until such an excursion that I discovered how strange and surreal this land is. I had never realized how much I hadn't ever seen or even knew existed. Indeed the best part of a road trip is the open window, through which you witness unimaginable terrain. Not only have I realized how truly large the United States is, but have found a particular interest in the dramatic change of climate and scenery that takes place, it seems, with every state border you cross.

On these road trips I *am* embarking on my own adventure, and in my artwork I try to depict these adventures through large-scale vignettes. My vignettes are amalgamations, representing various occurrences or select moments from most of the outings we undergo. Within them I am the protagonist, my canvas is the performance space. My comrades take center stage. Engaging in their assigned roles, they act as my cast of characters that exist in a reality show from my own memory. Taking full advantage of their environments, they will laugh in the street, run through a field of grass, go down a river, ultimately, be themselves.

I try to create a world which acts as their playground, in which both the "cast" and "stage set" harmoniously co-exist, and where the possibilities are endless. Neither one overpowers the other, yet relate in a way where the figures encounter their surroundings eagerly like little children. I steal land masses from a library of photographic images from which I edit unlikely or complementary sceneries together to form new organically structured landscapes. This way,

multiple points of view can be seen together, with some of my fondest memories, like photographs glued to an internal scrap-book in my mind.

My past system of painting would be to work directly from a single photograph, making in essence, a large scale version of the original document, and this troubled me. Why had I created a painting that already existed in another form? In my mind there was no definitive difference between the painting and the photograph. As much as it makes me uncomfortable admitting it, the act of painting started bothering me deeply. I grew tired of trying to fit into the role of a “painter.” I became exhausted with conforming to a rectangular boundary of stretcher bars and the monotony of learning traditional painting practices. I felt that there were solid rules I had to follow: that I had to conceive an idea, sketch it out, crop it, stretch canvas to the accurate size and shape, mix colors for hours, build up the structure of an image, and then worry about whether I’ve placed a stroke in the right place.

So I took a brief hiatus from painting to experiment with assemblage, where the materials were tangible and in front of me. All I had to do is pick up a material with my hand and set it here. Trying to use as much “found object” medium as possible, it was as if (when I’ve stumbled upon a new material) I had found a treasure that I had to play with and figure out how to re-use it, and in doing so, recycle it. When I do use found material, I like the idea that it can still be recognizable as what it is, as well as what I am making an allusion to. For instance, trees do not have buttons or buckles on them, but cut bits of fabric can resemble ruffage, and restate that it is indeed a cut up t-shirt and show how else we can use unwanted things. I became interested in

how David Hockney used photography to take small pictures of specific parts of a scene and collaged them all together to make a new whole. As I started this practice, my scene was recreated for me in my studio.

Soon after I made a second discovery. While working on a mixed media collage of a landscape with three of my friends sitting on a rock ledge in the forest, I was shaken with awe at the eerie similarity between the composition and color scheme of my painting to Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass*, a painting that deals with socializing, loafing, and personal enjoyment while recognizing people's attachment to the Earth. At that moment I realized just how much my fascinations related to Manet's work, sending me on a spiral of curiosity down his path. I was impressed with how he didn't mimic nature, but rendered it with ease and grace, just enough so you could understand depth, lighting, texture, scale. Manet made it all look so simple. He succeeded in alluding to nature with paint as I had tried with found material.

An investigation of Manet's work made me realize what exactly I could do with paint, which I couldn't do with my found materials. I longed for the colors I could produce by mixing pigment and slowly brought painting back into my work. I learned how to use the paint effectively for my own purposes.

Another classic painting that has inspired me greatly is Watteau's *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, in which a couple is viewed several times in the act of getting up from sitting beneath the trees to a new destination. It is handled much more romantically than Manet, with particular attention paid to the foliage and rocky land structures, which I try to emulate in my own work.

To investigate my theme of people in nature I've been looking at artists like Albert Pinkham Ryder, Henri Rousseau, Gustav Courbet, and Anselm Kiefer. I look at Cecily Brown

because she is able to depict nature as untamable and thriving, and her brushstrokes are equally so. I also admire how Peter Doig romanticizes his forest scenes. They do not particularly look realistic, but you can tell that the river is a river, and that those are supposed to be bushes. His work comes off as majestic and mysterious. I also took much interest in the work of Alfred Leslie, who in a similar vein, recorded landscapes from his road trips. His landscapes are intricate and very wide open with extreme depth, which I tried to recreate in my own work. I am also very attracted to the way which Eric Fischl views and portrays his subjects. Though humorous and/or awkward, his figures feel solid, fleshy and as if they belong there.

The work of contemporary painter Adam Cvijanovic have also influenced me, how he paints landscapes on Tyvek paper, which he then cements to the wall, so that there is no definitive border. It appears as if he had painted directly on the wall, so that his strokes are not contained, but float freely. These paintings influenced me when I started doing work on large pieces of canvas stapled to a wall (to be later displayed hung on grommets), rather than creating stretched canvases.

With representation I became interested in obvious distinctions of time and place, comprising images of different days, with different lighting, and climates. Having no borders I could start and finish anywhere I wanted to. It was a relief. I wasn't making paintings anymore; I was retracting and capturing my memories. My canvases were no longer just pages from my adventure story, but pages from an internal memory scrap-book in my mind, acting as containers where I can add or subtract whatever I feel is essential. I became deeply interested in how these memories relate to each other, and how multiple memories, even if completely unrelated, can function together when laid out on a two-dimensional surface.

Through such a practice, my formations of paint stand freely, centered on the canvas' surface, and expand outward in every direction until they stop abruptly or drift away from the action, thus creating their own border. This allows them to stand upright on their own, and to exist as they need to, or as I see fit, like a sketch freshly scribbled on the page. The leftover negative space is necessary to keep the vignette open enough as to potentially continue moving, like the clouds will forever keep rolling on at their own pace, exhibiting the limitless fun, energy and possibilities in life.

Mountains may mismatch and crumble into the ocean, or a river may flow directly into a street. I try to playfully render the landscapes along shifting horizon lines, which cover many different scopes of depth in one piece. Some areas you may be able to drift far back into, in other cases your path may be blocked with frontal action.

When creating a world, I try to pay the most attention to colors and lighting, in order to mimic a landscape, but have come to alter certain colors I find may enhance the final product. Sticking mostly to naturally found hues, I may enhance the brightness or temperature of one color to illuminate an area of particular fondness. Changing abruptly, the colors I choose also act to represent differing times of day in one viewing. Loosely laid down gloms of flat color are laid down first, and areas of interest come to life with multiple layers of color for differing weights and textures to elude to nature without exactly mimicking it. Because I have been to these places only once, I am not too familiar with them, and therefore not interested in depicting the minute details, but try to suggest to these scenes as real places that I have invented as my own, as if I own them, as I own my memories.

Nearly every painting I have produced includes a friend of mine. I realize this now, looking back on all that I have done. In doing so, I have attempted to make my work somehow autobiographical; not necessarily just about myself, but about my generation and who we are, how we act and feel, and what we do. Each painting is comprised of the people I admire and the activities we do together that I find unique and special to us. I believe my interest in this topic stems from psychological issues of coming of age and self discovery, which are prominent in the years spent in college, as one learns how to come into oneself and gain one's independence. From the moment I met these people I was interested in how they dress, what music they listen to, how they carry a conversation, etc. Seeing as how we are young people in college, I am attracted to hinting at promiscuities of sorts that are associated with young people and the process of coming of age. I wouldn't say that I am merely trying to capture today's youth, but trying to capture the feeling of living in the moment, specifically mine. Autobiographically speaking, it's as if these vignettes I am creating are personal diary entries, or Polaroids that know no limits.

More importantly, however, these paintings became much more than homework, or a practice in my education. For the first time the existence of my work made sense to me. It wasn't made for a grade; it was made from a place of love and admiration for the people that matter to me, in the places that we had shared. No longer "paintings", they became treasures. And each one pays homage to the memorable landscapes I have witnessed and acts like a temple worshipping the moment I had shared with the most important people to me. This is essentially what I have created for myself, a dedication to what is important to me and my comrades: to live life to its fullest, without regret, and

to face our beautiful environment as what it is, a playground to be shared.