

**Down the Rabbit Hole**

By

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“Down the Rabbit Hole” refers to the portal where the strange world of my childhood memories enters my art. It is the journey of my senior project. As the paints begin to harden on my paintings and palette, I am amazed at where this year has taken me. This thesis paper is an attempt to understand my journey; to synthesize my internal and external circumstances and transform them into art works.

Although I am an American, I was born in Switzerland, and lived in Taiwan for eight years. I consider myself somewhat of a modern day “*flâneur*,” a man of the crowd. I am invigorated by the diversity of people that roam city streets. Intersections have become my laboratories; I find them to be little microcosms of modern life. Its close proximity to the city is one of the major reasons I chose to study at Purchase College. Its location allowed me to embark on adventures into the city.

The day I arrived in New York, as I emerged from the dark subway on to 42<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway, something amazing happened. As I exited the terminal and looked up, the sun snuck through a little crack between the towering canyons of buildings and beamed down on me. At that picturesque moment there was no doubt in my mind of what or where I was going to paint. As the beam of light shone down on me I looked on at the most complex intersection in the world, “Times Square”. See image (01RobertFuerer).

I soon bought a cigar box size easel and took my oil paints into the city and painted small studies at Times Square. Back at Purchase I completed larger works based on the studies. I executed the pieces in bold, and expressive brush strokes.

The use of these strokes is due to my obsession with Van Gogh's brushwork. I'll never forget December 19<sup>th</sup> 2009 when I spent three hours standing in front of the "Potato Eaters" at the MoMA. As a tear rolled down my cheek I was a bit embarrassed. How had a two dimensional plane with pigment and binder on it brought me to tears? Can art actually change the world? How can I affect others in this same way? I began to have a huge desire to make work that people could stay with longer. As I counted brush strokes that made up the faces and hands, I realized that it was the honesty of how the workers were depicted that moved me. Van Gogh captured the emotional character of the workers who could only afford potatoes that they dug out of the ground with their own humble hands.

After that experience in the MoMA with the "Potato Eaters" I realized that the artistic movement called Social Realism intrigued me most. Social Realism was a response to the Great Depression. The style depicts social and racial injustice, economic hardship, and often portrays working class activities as heroic. Social Realism also depicts scenes that typically convey a

message of social or political protest edged with satire.

I believe my interest in Social Realism is rooted in the fact that my father is a common person who has struggled because of the class structure in America. Being an immigrant from Switzerland, my father always felt like an “Alien”, as he described it. Painting the workingman is my way to talk honestly about my father and all other people who receive W2 forms for Tax purposes. My father, like the “Potato Eaters,” works to support his family. Most laborers’ lives don’t pan out according to the “American Dream.” However, these workers find purpose in their lives by keeping food on their families’ tables. The workers depicted in my paintings and sculptures keep “Times Square” moving. They are the glue that holds society together. I see them as beacons of hope, because like my father, they never give up. To me these pieces are portraits of unsung heroes; they are the garbage men, traffic cops, subway drivers, and concession stand workers.

The depiction of workers in the first semester of my senior year became an engaging subject. However, I was not satisfied with how I was painting them. My frustrations came from realizing that the expressive brush strokes that I had applied with brevity were actually overdone. The texture spread out too evenly on the canvas and created a static, visual noise. Beyond texture problems I had also gone overboard by exaggerating a heightened

experience of color from the actual scene. I decided the pieces had become what I would call, “colorfully dull.” It is a perceptual phenomenon called cross-cancelling of brightness or saturation. Not knowing exactly how to improve my urban paintings I cleaned my brushes and put them aside.

That is when the global economic crisis of 2008 hit. The collapse of the real estate market devastated my family as well as millions of others. My wife and I lost most of our savings. Those were our darkest hours of marriage. Because of the stress we temporarily separated. I was at an all time low. At the time I was doing one of my typical urban paintings from a study, when I had the sudden urge to destroy something beautiful. Up until that moment most of my art had been about hope and optimism. But that moment changed everything. My appetite for destruction influenced me to jump “Down the Rabbit Hole”. As I did something emerged from the subway or should I say my “sub-conscious.” I remember being so infuriated that I painted a sinister rabbit head over one of the innocent ladies faces in the middle of the canvas. See image (03RobertFuerer).

At the time of painting the first rabbit’s head, I did not realize its’ significance. I continued to follow the rabbit as it became a crucial device of digging deeper into my artistic soul. The question of what it meant plagued me day and night. As I uncovered its identity I was taken back to my

childhood. When I turned 8 years old, my life was tainted when my pet rabbit “Black Ninja” twisted into a monster, biting me, tearing out my pet duck’s jugular, and cannibalizing its own babies. It was then that the rabbit’s ears became the handle my father grasped to end its life with one swing of my Louisville slugger bat. The sound of the crunch of its’ skull and sight of its’ lifeless body never left me. I was afraid but pleased, happy it would not kill again. But in the process I had become the murderer. I felt responsible. I trace my loss of innocence back to this moment. The moment I realized that life is full of heartbreak.

This tragic event found expression in my art and then it began to multiply like rabbits. Next, the rabbit’s ears appeared on a sculpture of a woman. This breakthrough excited me greatly. I then traded my brushes in for a sculpture tools. And something amazing happened as I began to sculpt fulltime. As I crept further and further down the rabbit’s hole, in my unconscious my creative ideas began to flow and become more spontaneous. I made many sculptures of these “man-rabbit beasts” which I first sculpted in clay. Because of the onslaught of so many ideas for new pieces I devised a way of covering the clay pieces with shellac and gesso that would make them hard enough to display. This approach was liberating, because I didn’t have to stop to make molds for a more permanent material like bronze, risking

that the rabbits in my mind might escape. Dismissing the use of kilns and molds gave me absolute freedom to experiment. Through this new found freedom I found that transparencies of encaustic had a life-like effect which I use over collage and mixed medium.

Because the content in my artwork was evolving, the artist I look at for inspiration changed. I stopped looking at David Kapp, and Yvonne Jacquette and started looking at Neo Rauch and the Leipzig School. This gave me new composition ideas and let my mind travel wherever it wanted. I began to sculpt and paint without knowing exactly where the piece would take me. This new method allowed for more freedom; sometimes I removed entire characters or added new backgrounds halfway through the piece. My paintings became a never-ending journey, not a planned station to look forward to.

One of my worker symbols, the garbage man has evolved. On top of the normal duties of his vocational role, the garbage man or working man – wearing his quasi-philanthropist-super hero uniform (being the red executioners jumpsuit) and carrying a baseball bat, battles his arch nemesis, the rabbit. See image (04RobertFuerer). These new narrative developments led to a new approach to my content. My “Neo-Social Realism” took on a new surrealist approach which became a better way to express my ideas.

Surrealistic ambiguity allows me to investigate the shady side of capitalism, corporate greed, war, and the loss of innocence through making people ask questions about the works abnormal qualities.

The journey of my Senior Project has taken me deep “Down into the Rabbit Hole.” My work has taken a different route than I ever imagined. My large-scale painterly realism paintings, were an important stop on my journey into my subconscious. In my current work I am excited to see how these difficult themes of social dysfunction are now charged with the pains of my childhood memories along with the current state of middle class America. The figural representation of Social Realism I started out with has matured and has started to take a surrealistic turn. This paradigm shift has also had effects on all other aspects of my process. I now paint with a much broader language and my edge conditions and content has also matured. The struggles it took to make these pieces taught me that narratives should be left open to interpretation. And in the end I was also able to finally lay my guilt of the black rabbit to rest.