Sweat Equity:
the Self-Conscious-Public-Contrarian-Voyeur

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My work examines a voyeur culture preoccupied with sex, drama and the lives of others. It is not my intention to offer a representation of “reality”, but a simulation of an imagined actuality. The nature of this contradiction influences my painting process from conception to resolution. My paintings are simultaneously voyeuristic and participatory, erotic and sterile, stiff and fluid, analytic and absurd.

I am aware of the dimensional limitations of traditional painting, and I believe the paintings’ audience is savvy as well, yet I urge the audience to believe these two dimensions to spill out of the hand-constructed wood panels. I self-consciously use paint to address painting’s history and the use of illusion to create dynamic spatial relationships on a flat surface. Through the use of trompe l’oeil and decorative painting techniques, I construct conceivable yet strange spaces while deconstructing the communal notion of a shared reality. Various objects of narrative significance are arranged in ways similar to that of Giorgio di Chirico and Rene Magritte: oddly familiar and subtly askew. Faux finishing techniques are used to enhance this artificial notion of actual objects in three-dimensional space. Simulated textures act as visual anchors in these wildly mannered compositions, alluding to the material world through their beguiling execution. There are elements that anyone can recognize: textures, colors, objects, but they are urged away from representation and into simulation. In Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulations* there is a list of successive phases of an image that moves from representation to simulation:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

The paintings become a reality in and of themselves, a series of simulacra, or a simulacrum. The objects and the space they occupy are no longer referencing a reality that precedes itself: they become means by which to achieve a mythologized actuality. This methodology employs an understanding of the quantum phenomena that is colloquially referred to as the “Rashomon Effect” (Frenkel). *Rashomon* (1950) is a Japanese film by Akira Kurosawa in which a samurai is killed and various characters recall the experience of witnessing the murder, but their stories all contradict one another. The plot of the film begs the question: whose story is real? The “Rashomon Effect” asks an even deeper question: is there an absolute truth, or is our belief in an objective reality just an illusion? These paintings pose similar questions: how much of your particular experience of reality is manufactured by your perception? Are you willing to alter this perception in order to gain a more considered understanding of reality?

In *(Small Death) on the Observation Deck* (2014) a pair of grayscale legs wearing kneepads jut out of a pool with no true bottom. An off-white tube weaves through construction framing studs, finally sinking into the same pool, penetrating a pink pool float. The pool water is handled in a convincing fashion, as is the faux marble patio that surrounds it, yet the large Colossus-of-Constantine-inspired foot, flexed in coital tension, seems to have an extra toe, and a giant roll of paper towels co-mingles with the legs and tube. All these elements: a pool and its water, a pool float, legs, knee pads, a disembodied foot, et cetera, act as players in a completely manufactured reality that offers the viewer participation in a voyeuristic act.
There are a number of conditions that constitute a voyeuristic act. Elisabeth Schellekens states in her essay “Taking a Moral Perspective: On Voyeurism in Art”: (c)entral to voyeurism in general... is the idea that we not only enjoy watching something, but that we take a kind of delight in the fact that we should not be watching that something” (310). In addition to this central tenet of peeping are three conditions. The first voyeur condition: the incident being watched must be of an intimate nature: sexual acts, bathing, dressing, arguing, etc. The second tenet constituting a voyeur act is the notion that the subject(s) being viewed are typically unaware of their being observed. This lack of consent appears in degrees; the viewer may be undetected or partially revealed, or there be a certain understanding that there is the opportunity for a socially acceptable level of voyeurism: glancing into neighbor’s yards, catching a glimpse through the windows of an opposing apartment building, or scrolling through a stranger’s photos and various other postings on social media. The third of these requisites for classifying a voyeuristic act is the notion that voyeurism rests on an asymmetrical relation between the observer and the observed “insofar as it assumes a lack of perceptual reciprocity” (Schellekens, 315). Elisabeth Schellekens goes on to quote Joel Rudinow from his book Representation, Voyeurism and the Vacant Point of View for emphasis on this third stipulation: “(t)he voyeur seeks a spectacle, the revelation of the object of his interest, that someone or something should be open to inspection and contemplation; but no revelation or openness is conceded.” (177)

The Exhibitionists painting series (2014-15) combines elements of scopophilia (voyeurism) and passive scopophilia (exhibitionism) by placing sculptural figures in erotic scenarios upon pedestals for viewing. This series of paintings uses trompe l’oeil and faux finishing effects to render these
imagined shunga sculptures in an exhibition space. Exhibitionists (numbers 2 through 6) are based on shunga (spring drawings), a Japanese form of erotic ukiyo-e (pictures of the floating world) woodblock prints (Evans, 9). In the beginning of Shunga: Erotic Art in Japan, Rosina Buckland offers a succinct explanation of the shunga genre:

The term shunga refers to a genre of erotic imagery, often explicit and usually beautifully produced, exploring endless variations of love-making, both male-female and same-sex, and extending to scenarios from the realms of fantasy. Images may also depict scenes of flirtation, arousal, foreplay and post-coital relaxation (or exhaustion). The subjects of shunga are by and large the ordinary men and women of urban Japan, shown in everyday situations. The settings are as varied as the characters, many encounters taking place in homes (often watched by other people in the house), as well as working environments and out of doors (9).

While most shunga contain exaggerated explicit representations of genitalia, Exhibitionists subtly creates sexual innuendo through the abstractly depicted figures and their implied actions: hair-pulling, straddling, lifting up of fabric, movement under fabric, smoking, et cetera. This omission of overt sexuality triggers a voyeuristic reaction in the viewer: fabric and hair disguise faces and allow the audience to observe and contemplate the wood and stone figures fussing under wildly mannered robes and bedding. The figures in the paintings seem unaware that they are being watched, though it is clear that they are putting on a show for a suggested audience since they are placed upon a pedestal typically used for exhibition. Exhibitionists invites the audience to watch a private encounter while the work acts coy about the viewer’s participation.

In several of my paintings I offer the audience a sense of occupying the false space constructed in the painting, as well as addressing notions of masculinity in contemporary consumer culture. The Soft Opening series features paintings within the constructed space, pedestals and sculptures on the paintings’ two-dimensional wood panel. Soft Opening #1 places black marble
statue of a muscular male arm atop a white stone pedestal in a white-walled space. The marble arm is dark and heavy, handled in a purposefully flat manner that simultaneously fights illusion while implying that this inanimate object is capable of flexing and squeezing a grip-enhancing workout apparatus. It further suggests that through the act of this imagined flexing bursts of confetti are released into the space. This is a celebration of the developed male form, an idealization of how maintaining a healthy body image is worth perpetual celebration. However, a contemporary man needs to have impeccable taste and a disposable income, not just a healthy build. These facets of masculinity are considered to be just as sexy as a toned physique, as evidenced in Schroeder and Zwick’s analysis of a liquor advertisement:

To order and consume the right product (even the choice of restaurant) expresses the man’s cultural capital... the ornamental femininity of his date further enhances his capital accumulation, and her apparent pleasure at his beverage brand reaffirms his masculinity, attractiveness and taste in one go. (37)

In the advertisement there is a mirror that “embodies contradictions of the consuming male; one must be vain and attractive, as well as rational and sophisticated.” (Schroeder & Zwick, 37) The magical mirror presents a more attractive male than the male in question. This ideal appearance, a complete artifice, is produced through his typically attractive female date’s approval of his drink choice. In Soft Opening #1 there is a combination of these concerns of the contemporary consumer male: how can a man be cultured, sophisticated and maintain optimal focus on a health regimen? What kind of decisions or products can be made to demonstrate this well-roundedness? Ultimately, how does one negotiate these appearances of vanity and rationality, and is it in the interest of themselves or others?  Soft Opening #1 acts as a
self-portrait, a mirror by which I imagine my own ideal that is produced by a synthesis of culture and self-consciousness.

Reflections and narratives in a similar vein are present in “1-900-REFLECT”. A phone is perched on a white window sill as a white ladder comes up through the open window which reflects the space inside. The intention of this reflective device is to place the viewer in the imagined space of the painting. This placement offers a variation on voyeurism in painting:

“(T)here is room to take a step back from the point of view an artwork invites us to inhabit and conceive of that very perspective as part of the experience afforded by the artwork itself. From this angle we ‘might see both the painting in question and ourselves framed as attentive audience.’”
(Schellekens, 310)

The title “1-900-REFLECT” is important in providing a more specific narrative for the painting. 1-900 numbers are often associated with phone sex hotlines geared towards lonesome or deviant males. By placing the viewer in the lonely man’s room, most likely a hotel room (this is due to the apparent immaculate upkeep/implied sterility appearing again), there is another kind of voyeurism taking place: the one in the aforementioned quote inspired by Charles Harrison’s Painting the Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art. The viewer assumes role of the lonely man and the audience may imagine each other calling the hotline or escaping down the ladder. Still, artifice is present despite the audience’s engagement.

Like a set on daytime or reality television, pornography or a performance stage, my paintings allude to, yet are removed from, the “real world”. My work and its source material imply an understanding of reality, but waive representation in favor of spectacle.
Bibliography/Works Cited


Rudinow, Joel. "Representation, Voyeurism and the Vacant Point of View."


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>![Small Death](74x526 to 262x712)</td>
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(Small Death) On the Observation Deck  
36” x 36”  
Acrylic on wood panel  
2014 |
| ![Exhibitionists #2](308x524 to 496x712) |  
Exhibitionists #2  
36” x 36”  
Acrylic on wood panel  
2014 |
| ![Exhibitionists #3](74x256 to 262x445) |  
Exhibitionists #3  
36” x 36”  
Acrylic on wood panel  
2015 |
| ![Exhibitionists #4](308x257 to 496x445) |  
Exhibitionists #4  
36” x 36”  
Acrylic on wood panel  
2015 |
Exhibitionists #5
36” x 36”
Acrylic on wood panel
2015

Exhibitionists #6
36” x 36”
Acrylic on wood panel
2015

Soft Opening #1
36” x 36”
Acrylic on wood panel
2014

1-900-REFLECT
36” x 36”
Acrylic on canvas
2014