Counting Clouds, Finding Sheep

Master in Fine Arts: Painting & Drawing

Graduate Thesis

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It was a lovely painting, but the girl always hated it. Hated being stared at by the artist, hated the loving attention paid to her thighs, hated her parents for making her sit there. It was a lovely painting that needed, wanted, to be destroyed. For the young girl who spent a lifetime squirming under its gaze, it was necessary to destroy it. She handed it to an artist friend: “Use the canvas, but I would just burn it.”

The artist saw a cat grow on the girl’s face, a lake and clouds that burst out of the frame. She saw cats in the clouds and imagined a sky full of cats. She contemplated starting a cat cloud cult, or adopting an alter ego with free range to play as the crazy cat/cloud lady, but finally settled on a MFA program at SUNY New Paltz. It was by far her most reasonable choice. It was either walking the streets talking to clouds or becoming a teacher.

Despite this reasonable life choice, the cat clouds demanded to be depicted. Cats domesticated us, or so the story goes, and stories often have a grain of truth in them. Humans love stories, whether true or not, and stories can bring us together or push us apart. “(...)Fiction has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so collectively. (...) Myths give Sapiens the unprecedented ability to cooperate flexibly in large numbers” (Harari, 25). We are living in a story right now: it is called the Corona virus pandemic. It is a true story. I can’t wait to hear how it turns out.

It has been a long journey to this day, the day of my graduation. The journey began long before SUNY New Paltz, ten years ago, in an undergraduate program in Studio Art. Before that, a decade providing early education for my children. And, even before that, a child in a loosely organized Vermont hippie community; a 1970’s childhood strongly influenced by Rudolf Steiner and Wilhelm Reich, a strong desire for white bread and skippy peanut butter, and a capstone in fear of the Cold War and AIDS. I have spent most of my life resisting structures and
simultaneously being drawn to the wisdom of academic learning. This life journey has prepared
me, no doubt, for this very moment.

This very moment... The whole world is staying home, except for the essential people,
which brings up a whole bucket of messed-up thinking and worry about not being essential—as
if choosing to pursue art is not messed-up enough before the global pandemic apocalypse.
Meanwhile, I paint and finish my thesis.

Change of thought: the internet is the perfect vehicle to provide information (good,
bad, and indifferent) to the masses. You can watch anything, including non-narrative videos of
cats doing nothing but being cats, and the news, fake and real—you get to decide which is which.
You can confirm your own bias ANY TIME you want. I have been thinking a lot about this
amazing tool that can speed humans along to their happy state of feeling completely confident in
what they know, while not at all knowing what it is they don’t know. (Burton, par. 13)

What has this got to do with my art? My art is non-written, yet it wants to exist. It is
tied to story, narrative, as much as I—the artist—am tied to narrative as a human being. Even if
my work were minimalist abstraction it would be tied to narrative. If you asked my art (and if it
could speak) what it loves, it would say much about existence, play, joy, color, and a whole list
of sensory words, and also about wanting to be seen. If you asked my art what it hates (and
please do, because my art LOVES to talk), it hates elitism (ugh) and formulas (ugh ugh),
boredom (so much ugh) and linear thinking (ughughughughughgh). Oh but, did you see how a
“hug” comes out of a whole bunch of “ughs”? Magic. (Abram. 111)

You will come to know my art by its beauty, humor, cartoon quality, and an
unwillingness to grow up—all played with a quiet subversiveness. And its familiar subjects:
animals, landscapes, cats, clouds, and people. My art would tell you, if you have stayed long
enough to hear this—and my art wouldn’t care if you did or didn’t, because my art believes that some things resonate with you and others don’t (and really, who cares anyhow?)—that it ultimately wants to give pleasure, to stimulate the mind.

My art seeks to tie into the viewer’s patterns of learning, experience, and sense of the world. It reaches for the wisdom that comes from life. I keep telling my art that this is way too complicated to delve into, because of the nature/nurture argument, because of language constraints, because of neurology and psychology and sociology, but my art can be single-minded in its pursuit of being (I asked my art these questions on day 43 of self-isolation).

For research I walk, read, and observe, pulling from dreams and perceptual illusions. I speak with people and draw insight from every conversation. I engage with phenomena such as pareidolia, apophenia, cognitive dissonance, and wordplay such as pacifiCATion and eduCATion—vicious and delicious—because if we can’t name it, it does not really exist. (Macfarlane. 24)

Perspective is personal. Pareidolia is a phenomenon that occurs when the mind responds to visual and hearing inputs, and perceives familiar patterns (faces, words) where none actually exist. For example, seeing animals on cave walls, faces in wood grain, and Jesus on toast. It is also part of a larger psychological category of behaviors called apophenia, defined as making mistaken connections and creating meaning between unrelated things and random events. For instance, a profound moment with a blue heron may indicate to a person that their long dead grandmother is present. Humankind developed this tendency as an early evolutionary survival skill; it is an intrinsic part of who we are and how we operate.

Cognitive dissonance plays into my work; feelings take the lead, even when methodical thinking may be called for. Just as Reich’s later non-peer reviewed work led him to
confirm his own wonderful and non-conforming theories, my art insists on living in this territory between the reality of the thing, the story of the thing, the symbolic memory of the thing, and the magic of the thing. Like language, it represents all of these things and more. Like language, it is open to interpretation.

As an artist, I am interested in illusions, allusions, and delusions. Those places where, at any given moment, a small element (such as a cloud pattern) takes on meaning from our experiences, our belief systems and the sensual influences of that moment, such as the smell of lavender or a cool breeze on the back of the neck. In this way patterns and connections we make, fact or fiction, become our reality. Nan Shepard observes in *The Living Mountain*, this phenomenon in the ever-shifting landscape of her beloved Cairngorm Mountains: “Such illusions, depending on how the eye is placed and used, drive home the truth that our habitual vision of things is not necessarily right: it is only one of an infinite number, and to glimpse an unfamiliar one, even for a moment, unmakes us, but steadies us again” (Shepard, 101)—piece written during the World War II. Nan Shepard had been hiking the Cairngorm mountains in Scotland for over 3 decades. Making sensory observations, Shepard knew her mountains inside and out, and she wrote beautifully of the landscape. Her writing is radical as it unearths cutting-edge philosophical epiphanies. “In the mountains, she writes, a life of the senses is lived so purely that ‘the body may be said to think’” (Macfarlane, 73). Her position was cutting-edge as modern academic thinkers were arriving at similar conclusions about color perception, touch, and embodied knowledge such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theories of body-subject. Shepard’s research was walking in the hills. What we see CAN manifest into unexpected configurations—there can be multiple realities where “ugh’s” become “hugs.”
On a trip through Northern Ireland, I noticed that the sheep in the wild and open fields under an endless sky appeared as soft, grey-white boulders while simultaneously mimicking the clouds above. As open spaces are part of our human history, sheep are too; like the horizon line, the sheep visually connect the rock of the earth with the immense sky. I relish the moments when my brain’s nonsensical connections override what I think is reality. All of these layered connections tumble around in my brain, as connections and missed connections happen in all brains. “Are they sheep?” Yes, but not completely. They are rocks, yes, but they are also clouds... but not completely. This is serious...but not completely. This is funny...but not completely.
Bibliography


Images

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Images 1 - 6 details of Counting Clouds, Finding Sheep installation in my backyard, oils, graphite, charred wood on gessoed laser-cut birch, pine, acrylic on canvas, 2020

Image 7 installation plans for Counting Clouds, Finding Sheep, graphite on paper, 2020

Image 8 details of work in studio, Counting Clouds, Finding Sheep, acrylic on canvas, 2020

Image 9 Education, Pacification, Cat Myth, oil on appropriated portrait and frame, oil mixed with dirt and bought canvas lined with fake fur, acrylic and paint pens on canvas, 2020

Image 10 detail of Counting Clouds, Finding Sheep in process, 2020