Not Fully Formed...

Elizabeth Adare Brown
Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa
Part of the Art and Design Commons, and the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation
Not Fully Formed…

Adare Brown
B.F.A. Thesis Painting
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Art
Washington University in St. Louis
2016
ABSTRACT

An appraisal of the artist’s place and responsibility in the diluted, steaming [sic] timeline of *show and tell* as is now experienced daily by artist and audience alike. The predicaments and possibilities are posited, assessed and adjudicated sequentially. These actions are set against a backdrop of art history and emergent narrative methodologies in the arts. The judgments inform the studio practice.
I. Everybody is an Artist

*I thought I had something so simple to say. Something useful to everybody”… “When did I go wrong? I really have nothing to say, but I want to say it all the same.”* Guido Anselmi in Fellini’s 8 ½ (1963)

Here Fellini & Co. preempt Warhol’s irony and anticipate contemporary social media wherein competing and comparable identities pursue purpose in the supposed uniqueness of their existence amid what appears to be an infinite stream of like minded people. Narratives are cut and pasted for reliable delivery to a consuming horde. Appropriation is applauded. The selling of one’s own story to a world of salesmen renders the act insignificant, even infantile. Those who’ve managed to sell the stories back to their own authors have thrived.

II. The Artist as Conscious Provocateur

“*Your intention was to denounce. But you’ve ended up supporting it like an accomplice.*” Carini (critic) condemns Guido (director) in Fellini’s 8 ½ (1963)

Wittingly or not, an artist’s actions must either challenge or commemorate. As such the artist’s contribution to the societal narrative, regardless of scale, is an ethical consideration. This is not a value judgment and the great fact of creation (as of the physical universe) would seemingly invite more of the latter and in fact has. But what of the initiator’s intent?

Douglas Rogerson recently posited that, ‘most art narratives are retrospective projection upon formal studies. Despite the artist’s initial intentions, meaning is an afterthought, whether it comes from the artist, the critic or the viewer.’ Walt Disney would seem to agree. In considering the philosophy behind Mickey’s magic with Aldous Huxley, Walt stated:
“Hell, Doc, I don’t know. We just try to make a good picture. And then the professors come along and tell us what we do.” (Kanfer)

Such statements do resonate and an artist’s intentions even when offered usually speak more of the artist than of the oeuvre. But an acceptance of their nihilist outlook offers only a foregone recognition of the artist as a mindless cog in a forthcoming narrative.

III. The Painted Language

“The differences between painting and verbal narrative appear so obvious and extensive that one may ask whether they should even be compared”…” (Hogan)

Hogan continues, “For our purposes, the most fundamental connection between verbal and visual art is that representational works imply a represented world. Viewers do not simply see that represented world directly. They construe it by processing the information given on the canvas. Moreover, the purposes of this construal are the same as in verbal art - emotional response and thematic reflection.” (Hogan)

Typically narrativity tends to privilege exterior events and dismiss internal or mental actions. Painting, which scores low on narrativity, does the opposite. Narrative painting is usually differentiated from non-narrative painting by its ability to depict the “pregnant moment” (Nan), the “pregnant moment” being the equivalent of the climax of a literary text. From there, the viewer should be able to project forward and backwards into time to complete the narrative and access the story.

Irrespective of intent, painting’s inherent virtue has been conscripted to the service of class, power, gender definition and other permutations of the deadly seven. Painting is an establishment art; its reception and primary propagation depend upon the inclination of established gatekeepers. While fresh and powerful technological avenues of dissemination have and continue to appear, they typically mimic, or even bypass, the critical discourse of the cognoscenti, which painting has historically relied. This could be a good thing, or not. In any
case its liberation is assured; in no case did the act of painting itself instigate the vehicle of its communicability. This may signify either opportunity or portent, depending on one’s preferences in an increasingly manipulated world.

IV. Sometimes Narrative is not Enough

“[N]o tale can ever be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism.” Wolfgang Iser

I have found that in the work of Anne Carson she is attempting (and succeeding) to reach beyond reportage in transferring a ‘mindsense’ directly to the reader. She establishes a mental territory wherein the reader might experience a cognition beyond mere comprehension. “The Carson method... proceeds through juxtaposition rather than metaphor-making. What you get is the overall action of the mind rather than the high-shine lacquer of the apt image.” (O’Rourke)

Sometimes narrative is not enough.

Significantly Carson’s transference is achieved with a pronounced reduction in the word count typically utilized by narrative. In this respect it heads directly toward the focused brevity of painting. She utilizes imagery. Allegory and image can illustrate complex ideas and concepts in simple ways.

A psychiatrist like Elisabeth Kübler-Ross might outline five common emotional responses common to grief as she did in her 1969 book, On Death and Dying. Carson's

"… method is less to try to solve the mystery of life and death than to enact it, to dramatize the mourner’s mind as it seeks to understand what happens to the vanished.” (O’Rourke).
At the extradiegetic level of discourse, Carson’s work does not depict a sequential narrative of action, but rather a spatial view of amalgamated thought. Carson sees that words only point towards ideas and that cognition, both for herself and her audience, requires something more. She views language as essentially unstable by nature and finds it ultimately incapable of stating truth.

V. The Collected Narrative

“You see, what stands out at a first reading is the lack of a central issue or a philosophical stance. That makes the film a chain of gratuitous episodes, which may even be amusing in their ambivalent realism. You wonder, what is the director really trying to do? Make us think? Scare us? That ploy betrays a basic lack of poetic inspiration.” Carini, Federico Fellini’s 8¹⁄₂ (1963)

A single image might struggle to be understood, a collection, even a small one, adds significantly to the development of a narrative potential. While a progressive narrative may prove incompatible or counterproductive in painting, a collected narrative prevails and is inherent to an artist’s production. Anne Carson again delivers a workable model. Her primary device is the rigid partitioning of brief narratives. The writing strikes one as the result of scattered seeds in a formal garden, not unlike dissimilar objects unified by their grouping and proximity. The regularity and separation provided by the partitioning allows one to tie together, even idealize, disparate ideas and imagery into a powerfully poetic narrative. Digressions arrive naturally and memorably.

This process seems natural because it is. While foreign to literary convention it resembles the way we typically think, and readers intuitively recognize this. Inspiration lives side by side with dread, regret with hope. But they rarely overlap. They must be processed individually and sequentially. Like cognitive thought, like dreams, like collected paintings.
The formal staging of her organization allows ideas to be scattered almost independently and still develop into a cohesive narrative. The strength of her technique amplifies her substance. It is an inclusive methodology. No extraneous brilliance need ever be abandoned. An iconic framing assures both gravity and relevance. The technique also grants Carson a rare gift of immediacy, as if the thoughts she is having are simultaneously emerging for the reader as well. Her work is assembled imagery heading towards mindset. A typical Carson 'book’ takes less time to read than a gallery visit.

VI.(1) A World of Their Own

“We create our own reality, we simply do it like the blind men in the parable of the Elephant” Ian Welsh (2015)

In paint, language is flexible. Through repetition, a symbolic language can be established. In Philip Guston’s late paintings, through the repetition of gesture, pose, and icon between works, a consistent language is developed. With it he renders static psychological worlds. Eyes meet, but communication is impossible. Guston's paintings suggest nothing before or after them. The subjects are isolated from any larger context. They are placed in a context of limited dimensions, a context that shares their characteristics. His subjects are trapped in a closed
interior reality; grounded — to the exterior that they deny — only by a few recognizable signs of modernity.

VI.(2) Set Pieces in A World of Their Own

“A beautiful woman looking at her image in the mirror may very well believe the image is herself. An ugly woman knows it is not.” Simone Weil in Waiting for God

My current practice commenced with micro-narratives in populated Set Pieces. Their subject's complacency is intended to be emblematic of a bigger societal picture. I sought to challenge apathy as cultivated by our society and as found in myself. These characters are not 'fully formed' in any sense of the word. They are worn, unwilling, morally suspect and consumed by their own leisure. The float listlessly, isolated from all but an immediate and reflective
environment. Reality is construed only in dreams (Dreamy) or at the overlooked margins of the context (Fried Egg). They are become their surround.

These pieces also began my efforts to disestablish the longstanding and banal characterizations of women as challenged by the work of Chris Kraus. The female body is tendered ironically in salmon pink, resisting caricature in deference to complexity the paintings swear out the shapes forced on to femininity:

I render within shallow circuitous spaces, focusing on relationships between form and setting. I repudiate Ingres's Odalisque and dismiss the narrative of the gazing eye. I do not idealize. These largely sexless entities are complicit in their apathy and forthcoming agony.

VII. Resetting the Stage

“Enough of symbolism and these escapist themes of purity and innocence.”
Guido, from Federico Fellini’s 8 1/2

Fried Egg’s completion signaled a respite from directly figurative work. The vase now stood in as I shifted my attention from narrative to facility. This investigation was anchored in the still life, the backdrop and the frieze. I built alternative structures from pieces of historical
and personal precedent. The work functioned as an exercise wherein objects were realized conversely from their representations into reality.

*Still Lifes of Painted Objects*, 2016. Oil on Canvas on canvas, steel hanging structure, steel pedestal, mdf vase.

Placement endows the still life. The implications of representation as aspiring to authenticity were actualized in this overture to reverse engineering a compositional mainstay.


The still lifes expanded to installations wherein an alternative and exegetical logic could be established.

VIII. The Ramparts of Self-Perception

*Such a monstrous presumption to think that others could benefit from the squalid catalogue of your mistakes! And how do you benefit from stringing together the tattered pieces of your life? Your vague memories, the faces of people that you were never able to love...”*

Carini, Federico Fellini’s 8½ (1963)
The one unpardonable sin in politics or in art and is to fall for your own act. I worry about this. In the contemporary moment, an identity as a painter is a self conscious one, rife with brooding masculinity, poetic association and the like. The performance of it all can be devoured by its own mythology and the conditioned expectations of precedent. An education in painting is therefore a mixed blessing. It both reconciles and perverts the circumstances that led one to it.

“Does analogy make emotion less sincere?”

“Love challenges us to express ourselves elegantly and ambiguously. But meanwhile you were Back at the Ranch” (Kraus 70)

According to Godard, “Narratives ‘formulate prescriptions that have the status of norms’”. (Godard 115) These ‘prescriptions’ preserve a certain status quo. Godard also has faith in narrative’s ability to be ‘re/written.’ I’m not sure that I agree as rewriting leaves too much intact.

I am now focusing on the ‘floating-ness,’ the pulling apart of cinematic moments, in shifting from the object to the action. Armed with an earnest faith in the painted language the new work intends to illustrate a wider spectrum of the experience being portrayed and to address the myriad sensations inherent to the acts or subjects being depicted.

The new work is intended to absorb the viewer, to place the viewer within the actual border of the scene itself, as opposed to the detached vantage of the voyeur. The viewer is directed neither inward nor outward, but rather among.

In *Flight of the Demoiselles*, two legless left feet preclude soundness as they are encountered at rest upon a precarious path. The mind's eye struggles to reconcile the familiarity
of their bipedal relationship with the absence of their disparate proprietor. The disposition of their accouterments contrasts sharply with that of their condition and surround. The subjects predicament is fresh and foreboding. The viewer's vantage emerges as suspect.

Sick Mood at Screening. Desire is a personal manifesto on mortality. It derives its title from Munch (Sick Mood at Sunset. Despair), it’s imagery and objective from Peter Watkins’ depiction of Munch and milieu in his studied 1974 film Edvard Munch. It’s sick moods are the exhaustion and resignation that result from realization: we are all eventually reduced to emblematic subjects whose earnest acts are assimilated into the learning curves of future vampires.

That said, the temporal juxtaposition that hindsight allows is in useful in expanding the rigid posture of historical imagery. Approaching theses tropes in an ambiguous and personal manner requires a delicate unraveling of the unavoidable paradoxes of life.
Still Life with Apples depicts naive contemplation in the shadow an impending yet undefined encroachment from above. There is an anticipation and even more so trepidation that is shared with the localized viewer. Its serenity belies its gravity.

Two new works are infatuated with infatuation and its tendency to overwhelm while obviating the repercussions of its forbearance. It’s good while it lasts. Venus and Adonis are The Agony and The Ecstasy depict frenetic action in a close cropped portion of an implied expanse.

Digital imagery is useful and compelling. It lies easily and convincingly when desired. A useful tool no doubt, in and of its own right, or in service to the constructed world we will be inhabiting for the foreseeable future.
Raw Honey, 2016. Plaster, Raw Wood, and Oil Clay. 26” x 22” x 3”

Plastiscene, 2016. Oil on Canvas. 54” x 96”
Works Cited


Godard, Barbara. *F(R)ICTIONS: Feminist Re/Writing Narrative*


List of Figures/Illustrations

1. Philip Guston, Bad Habits. 1970. Oil on Canvas, 185.5 x 198. Cm.
3. Diagram illustrating the perspective Guston depicts in his late works.
4. Pool Scene, 2015. Oil on Canvas, 46“ x 34”.
5. Dreamy, 2015. Oil on Canvas, 36” x 80”.
6. Fried Egg, 2016. Oil on Canvas. 54”x 84”
7. Open_Hapiness, 2016. Oil on Canvas. 54” x 48”
10. Diagrams illustrating traditional structures of viewing shown alongside a diagram of the perspective I am attempting to generate in my own work.
11. Flight of the Demoiselles, 2016. Oil on Canvas. 40.5” x 44”
12. Sick Mood at Screening. Desire. 2016. Oil on Canvas. 36” x 44”
13. Still Life with Apples, 2016. Oil on Canvas. 16” x 18”
14. Venus and Adonis, 2016. Oil on Canvas. 16” x 18”
15. The Agony and The Ecstasy, 2016. Digital Print on Stretcher Bars. 60” x 84”
16. Raw Honey, 2016. Plaster, Raw Wood, and Oil Clay. 26” x 22” x 3”
17. Plastiscene, 2016. Oil on Canvas. 54” x 96”