1. What is the relationship of the finite subject to the infinite ground? 2. How do we use where we segregate the subject from the ground to construct reality? 3. In what ways can we destabilize this constructed reality to highlight its inherent instability?

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College of Art, Sam Fox of Design and Visual Arts,
Washington University, 2015
Abstract: This essay catalogs interests within my works and traces connections between these works and particular structuralist, post-modern, and post-structuralist themes. Artists influential to or congruent with the aims of my work are also discussed within this three-part essay around these discussions present in my work: 1. What is the relationship of the finite subject to the infinite ground? 2. How do we use where we segregate the subject from the ground to construct reality? 3. In what ways can we destabilize this constructed reality to highlight its inherent instability?

Introduction:

Within my work, I am interested in painting the armatures of cognition that govern the way we see and interpret images. For instance, I want to paint how the conceptual framework surrounding a tee shirt functions and differs from the conceptual framework surrounding a horseback-riding lesson and the ways these subjects are embedded within and connected to the construction of our realities. In particular I am interested in how the ground acts as an framework for understanding through which the subject is interpreted. This investigation hinges on the exploration of three questions integral to the creation of my paintings: What is the relationship of the finite subject to the infinite ground? How do we use where we segregate the subject from the ground to construct reality? In what ways can we destabilize this constructed reality to highlight its inherent instability?
Part 1. What is the relationship of the finite subject to the infinite ground?

Calvin Miceli-Nelson, New Rules For Pool, 2015, 19 x 24”, oil on canvas.
In painting, “New Rules for Pool,” I was thinking about how a pool ball is defined by the rules the game of pool sets up. Within this assertion there is an understanding that something we thought to be a part of the subject is actually part of the ground or vice versa. Due to the interrelatedness of the subject and the ground, we see that to understand a subject we must look outside of it.

This thought within my work allies with a number of structuralist tenets and interests, summed up nicely by Donald Palmer within his book, *Structuralism and Poststructuralism for Beginners*. The first idea is the structuralist conception of the world as an organic as opposed to atomistic entity.¹ The doctrine of structuralist organicism states, “that reality exists as a totality, as an organism. The parts are only real insofar as they are related to each other and to the whole.”² In addition, “According to the most radical version of structuralist organicism, reality is composed not of ‘things’ but of relationships.” Structuralism also provides us with the “claim that every object is both a presence and an absence,” because an “object is never fully there insofar as its begin is determined by its relation to the whole system of which it is part, a system that does not appear to us.” Lastly some structuralists state “each object reflects the total system because “the total system is present in each of its parts.”³ All of these comments, like my work, expose a frustration with the seemingly impossible task of dividing the world into

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² Ibid. 2
³ Ibid. 3
discrete segments due to their interconnectivity and an interest in the uncovering and reexamination of the intangible and unseen relationships that things have to each other.

Building on these conclusions, we can see that to understand a subject we must look outside of it. However, at what point do we stop moving away from the subject and deem this the edge of the ground? At what point do we stop moving things from the ground into the subject? Can this line between relevant and irrelevant information be constructed without leaving out legitimate connections and preserving illegitimate ones? Through these questions we begin to get at the frustration inherent in the task of segregating the finite subject and the infinite ground.


As seen between “Earth” and “Shoes Earth,” my work often involves a zooming out that reveals more information relevant to the subject, or a new ground needed to understand the subject. These works address the problem stated above: because the
ground is infinite and is composed of other subjects, which have their own grounds through which they must be interpreted and understood, at what point can we stop zooming out? Based on the necessity of the ground in the understanding of the subject, we enter into a system in which in order to really understand a single thing we have to know everything. However, much like those living within Jorge Luis Borges’ Library of Babel, the infinite nature of our universe conflicts with the finite nature of our life and keeps us from understanding the universe in totality even if the path to all its information existed before us. The frustration caused by the impossibility of the inclusion of the infinite can be seen in Italo Calvino’s “Adventures of a Photographer” as well. Within this text, Calvino outlines how the inability of including everything necessitates curation.

In order to comprehend the subject eventually we have to curate the infinite and define the subject by drawing a line between things that pertain to the subject and things that don’t. Through Calvino’s text we can see that within this act of curation, aimed at creating a manageable reality, we actively exclude information and in doing so construct a fictional reality.

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Part 2. How do we use where we segregate the subject from the ground to construct reality?

Calvin Miceli-Nelson, Dog Trick, 2015, 29 x 32”, oil on canvas.
Within my works I am interested in the place where we segregate the things in the ground that pertain to the subject and the things in the ground that do not. Within the painting “Dog Trick” the dog exists as the part of the ground that gets to be a part of the subject (the subject being whatever is placed on the empty white circle and square) and the wall exists as the part of the ground that doesn’t. As mentioned earlier though this process creates a fictional reality, it creates a stable one in which the subject can be assessed.

These relatively stable objects containing both the subject and the things from its ground that pertain to it creates fiction in that it births an aura that exists collectively as more than its component parts through which the subject is tinted. The creation of this new thing shares a corollary with Sergei Eisenstein’s comments on montage. He notes that “when playing with the pieces of film, [early filmmakers] discovered…that any two sequences when juxtaposed inevitably combine into another concept which arises from that juxtaposition as something qualitatively new.” Eisenstein extends this phenomena past cinema, noting that it is “one which accompanies the juxtaposition of two events, two facts, two objects.” He states that that this juxtaposition “[gives] rise to ‘third something’.” Within my work I often investigate the role this “third something,” formed from the juxtaposition of the subjects and the things that pertain to it, segregated from the infinite grounds from which they came, as an armature of cognition that shapes the creation of our realities.

In their moment of relative stability, these objects with outgrowths protruding off of them seen in paintings like “Dad and Dylan on a Clay Vase” (reproduced on the next page) act as vessels for a subject and all the things that relate to it. This subject ground

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6 John Baldessari et al., *This Not That* (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1995). 13
7 Ibid. 15
hybrid contains the things moved from the infinite ground into the finite subject that are deemed relevant to its definition. I am interested in how these relatively stable objects can be used as signs of a subject in the creation of identity morality and utopia. How they are used to say I am this, this is good, and if I were to make the best place this would go there.

Within my paintings, it is important to express individuality and identity in a manner that mirrors and exposes the ways we are allowed to relatively safely express these tenets within life. As a means of being honest with the viewer, I attempt to push my expression to spaces in which expression is relegated in real life: objects and the object like things of words, dances, t-shirts, curtains, lampshade patterns, cocktails, and images of these things. These things act as identity commodities. John Baldessari states that he chose to use “newspaper photographs, film clips, and text”8 because “traditional painting” is “too elitist to make any appeal to the people of today.”9 Through a similar process my work desires not to alienate the viewer or over simplify the complicated matter of individuality in the world we operate in daily, simultaneously falling under the spell of and looking skeptically at the notion of authentic expression and identity.

8 Ibid. 15
9 Ibid. 22
Calvin Miceli-Nelson, Dylan and Dad on a Clay Vase, 2015, 11 x 13”, oil, paper, and collage on canvas.
In addition, within my work, I aim to paint things that appear in life congruent to what I find lodged within my head. It is a photographic process that depicts moments in which the two realms meet. I am looking for things that lose the least in this transition.

This portrayal of recognizable, vernacular objects and ideas coincides with a long Post-modern tradition perhaps beginning with Pop Art in which artists and viewers treat “impersonal” subjects as signs and act, often ironically, as “anthropologists or semioticians, decoding” the human emotion and expression lodged within them.\(^\text{10}\) The branding and the tying of image to object is a reality we have been aware of for a long time. Yet, this phenomenon seems especially pertinent within a time in which it is becoming clear than even family relationships, actions, and events are being used not by corporations in the creation of fiction but by individuals in acts of self-branding we take to be reality. Illuminated brighter than before by the rise of social media, the role these relationships, actions, and opinions play and always have played as social currency in the creation of identity is becoming increasingly apparent. My desire to point out these curated and seemingly inauthentic elements of identity posing as natural acts dovetails with another postmodern art historical trend aimed at “unmask[ing]” the deception of “representational media.” Noel Caroll argues that Postmodern works often carry an ideology which claims that though many “traditional” forms of image making may seem “transparent…unmediated…unstaged” and “natural…all representations [are] highly mediated.”\(^\text{11}\)


\(^{11}\) Ibid. 298
In addition, the gestures within my work that examine the potential artifice behind supposedly natural elements of identity collide with another important historical antecedent. In her “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” Judith Butler, building on the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Foucault, and Sartre argues that in contrast to the biologically determined category of sex, “gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time.”\(^{12}\) Comparing these acts to those seen in theatrical contexts, she notes that gender acts as a socially constructed aspect of identity that is “put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure.”\(^{13}\) Looking through the art historical canon perhaps no one has expounded these tenets more directly or successfully than Cindy Sherman in her critical recreations of Hollywood female “types.” Following Sherman’s lead, Nikki S. Lee echoes these post-modern, post-structuralist, and feminist ideas, opening the conversation up include not only to gender as a form of performance but also race, culture, and personality.

Within Joshua Abelow’s paintings we too can see a conversation on the roles individuals occupy within the generic frameworks provided to them. Within two paintings titled “Running Witch” (Figure 1 and Figure 2) the artist’s strategic use of an internal/external dichotomy sets up a dialogue on the self, within Abelow’s work often represented by a stick figure, and it’s relationship to the “costume or mask” it inhabits.\(^{14}\) In these pieces, Abelow uses the iconic silhouette of a witch culled from folklore, as a vehicle for personal expression. In doing so it becomes both a limiting factor and a

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\(^{13}\) Ibid. 531

defining element of the individuals expression that occurs within it. Within the press
release for her 2014-2015 show “Pictures Punish Words,” Avery K. Singer is described
as an artist who “processes everyday occurrences and realities within her
paintings…demonstrates rituals and social patterns” and presents “stereotypes of the
artist, curator, collector and writer.”15 Her studio scenes brilliantly strike at the staged
artifice of traditional artistic identity and the mythos of the “genius” that accompanies it,
while simultaneously celebrating it as a beautiful but awkward and bizarre ritual (Figure
3).

Werner Herzog’s films Aguirre, Wrath of God, and Fitzcarraldo, make statements
on the constructed nature of identity and reality as well. Within these films, Herzog
creates an uncanny system in which it is hard to tell if an actor is playing his or her role
based on what they think something else wants them to be doing, what they think they
should be doing, or if they are doing something they cannot help or are entirely unaware
of. Through this system Herzog creates a document of a person pretending to be
someone, a sentiment that gets at a truth inherent within life. One way he manages to
create this system is by imbuing his films with elements of authenticity that validate the
bizarre, banal, unconvincing and awkward moments in front of and behind the camera.
By doing the “real” thing like pulling a steamship up a mountain in Fitzcarraldo, Herzog
avoids having to make the film look real at all. Herzog can include in his films whatever
moments of awkwardness that would normally reveal the artifice of the staged event in
any other event. Within this system where he has created his own reality Herzog asks, if
the actor wears the clothes, and says the words, and pulls a steamship across a mountain.

15 Avery K. Singer, “‘Pictures Punish Words’ : Avery K Singer,” accessed March 20,
Is he not transformed into the character? Is this not how anyone is transformed into the person they are?  

In a similar manner Beckmann’s “histrionic” paintings portray “the world as a masquerade.”

For a party to be well composed for him it had to contain one old fashioned debonair aristocrat, two or three spectacularly beautiful women, some business-like energetic bourgeois, a vivacious swarthy and somewhat mysterious art dealer, and several slim intellectual adoring youngsters.

Beckmann’s embrace of costume highlights his attraction to individuals that, through their adoption of a caricatured persona, seemed to acknowledge the artifice of their own being. Fabrice Hergott notes that Beckmann also painted numerous self portraits dressed as a clown. She argues, “these clown costumes give the impression that they are disguises superimposed on the personality of the German painter,” demonstrating Beckmann’s own inability to “extricate [him]self” from this masquerade.

In this move and similar portrayals of modern identity within his works, Beckmann shows the “artificiality” of modern role as nothing more substantial than “papier mache.”

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18 Kessler, *Max Beckmann’s Triptychs*. 11
19 Fabrice Hergott “’German Follies’ Critical Response to Beckmann’s Exhibition in Paris” Tobia Bezzola and Cornelia Homburg, eds., *Max Beckmann and Paris: Matisse*
Furthermore, Robert Storr states that “[Phillip] Guston was the first to latch onto the potential contained in Beckmann's mix of nested symbols and theatrical” settings, noting that both artists portray their subjects as “actors and props” and concentrate on depicting these “human things.” He adds in paintings such as “Painter's Forms…an equivalency is created between objects and language.”

Within my paintings I explore how my subject ground hybrids are used to construct an artificial yet relatively stable language of signs composed of objects, actions, events. I am also interested in the formation of these subject ground hybrids as representative of both their maker and their user and the role they play as tools of marginal expression: the expression that leaks out from the process of an emotion bound and desire driven individual inhabiting a supposedly functional framework. My work aims to point out that it is not just false or bad things, or outdated identities that are artificial: it is all things. This assertion in some ways disarms the critique of something as artificial as inherently invalid.

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Part 3. In what ways can we destabilize this constructed reality to highlight its inherent instability?

Calvin Miceli-Nelson, Taking Photographs of Shoes, 2015, left panel (19 x 24”) center panel (26 x 32”) right panel (19 x 24’), oil on canvas.

Within Jorge Luis Borges Library of Babel, he notes a phenomenon central to the use and interpretation of signs.

I cannot combine some characters “dhemrlehtdj” which the divine Library has not foreseen and which in one of its secret tongues do not contain a terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god.21

Throughout the history of philosophy many have come to a similar conclusion. Hal Foster traces the “historical instability of the sign” linked inextricably to both post-structuralism and post-modernism within his work “Wild Signs” drawing on the works of thinkers like Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Saussure, and Levi-Strauss. He notes Derrida’s claim, stating that the problem with thinking of signs as universally understood and constituting something real is that that within our “system…the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.” Due to this phenomenon “the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.” Baudrillard agrees that “now, in a second moment [i.e., of post-structuralism, of post-modernism]…the signifier” has been liberated from “the signified, or from meaning proper.”

My paintings often strive to highlight this instability by destabilizing the reality set up by another image. The objects themselves are unstable for a variety of reasons. First the segregation of the finite subject form the infinite ground is an inherently subjective process even if agreed upon by a massive audience. How the subject is shaped depends on what it is contextualized with. In addition they are unstable because these subject-ground hybrids act as vessels to be filled with individual meaning convenient to the narrative of its beholder. This sword may be filled with my girlfriend Greta and my friend Logan and it is stable in that it represents my girlfriend and my friend. However, it is unstable in that your relationship with your girlfriend and with your friends shapes

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what these things mean to you and my relationship with them shapes what they mean to me.

Calvin Miceli-Nelson, Greta and Logan on a Clay Sword, 2015, 26 x 32”, oil on canvas.

How can we highlight the instability inherent within these objects? One method is through zooming out and exposing unseen information previously left out of this subject ground hybrid. This act calls into question to where the line was previously cut between the things relevant to the subject and things not relevant. In doing so, this process destabilizes the validity of the existing subject-ground hybrid by momentarily reconnecting the finite subjects to their infinite grounds.
(Top) Calvin Miceli-Nelson, Dog Trick, 2015, 29 x 32”, oil on canvas.
(Bottom Left) Calvin Miceli-Nelson, Dog Trick 2, 2015, 15 x 26”, monoprint.
(Bottom Right) Calvin Miceli-Nelson, Dog Trick 3, 2015, 15 x 26”, monoprint.
Another method of destabilization I employ, seen within Dog Trick 1-3, is the inclusion of competing visual languages. The conflict between the images highlights that at most only one of these depictions could be acting as a transparent window onto the world of objects it contains, causing the viewer to struggle to understand what these objects truly look like on the other side of the mediation inherent in the image making process.

The exposure of artifice also acts as another method of destabilization. Within Dog Trick 2 we also see that some of what we believed in Dog Trick 1 to exist as spots on a dog are actually hanging from ropes from the ceiling in front of the dog. This is an example of zooming out aimed at the exposure of artifice. “Suit’s Earth” demonstrates another method of exposing artifice within my paintings: the inclusion of incongruent realities that force the viewer to accept both cannot be real.

The last method of destabilization I use in my practice is taking something that is assumed to exist in the creation of the image and asserting it exists within the real space the image describes. This blue and black and white monochrome palette with which I often paint acts as a device that we usually associate with the process of recording an image. The inclusion of full color photographs within this monochrome space asserts that the image recording process that made this image is capable of transmitting color. With this information in mind the monochrome appearance and crudeness of the forms are understood as properties of the objects themselves rather than characteristics of the image making process. The photographs, through their highly identifiable nature, act as a way of gauging the mediation present in the image through the amount of deviation that they exhibit from their normal appearance. In contrast if we were to see blue, black and white
Calvin Miceli-Nelson, Suit’s Earth, 2015, 19 x 24”, oil on canvas.
monochrome photographs in the image we could conclude that the space described is in full color abstracted into a monochrome rendition.

These strategies and their effects link to a number of artists whose works also aim to destabilize notions of reality through pointing out the instability of the sign and the subjective nature of interpretation.

Max Beckmann’s work describes the instability of the sign due to the multiplicity of narratives. Rob Storr notes, his works often portray scenes in which a dislocated character from another work may reappear, a “protagonist of a story may show up several times, or episodes from [a] story that happened in sequence may be presented in contiguous sections.” Beckmann further confused his works by including “simultaneous contrast[s] of narratives, moods, pictorial systems or points of view,” within his images.24

Similarly, within her paintings, Anne Neukamp, through oscillating between two poles, that of abstraction and that of the figurative presence simultaneously depicts signs and “strip[s] them of their univalent impact.”25 Birgit Effinger states “Her works move within a logic of shifting and undermining and stimulate the most diverse interpretations.”26 Torey Thornton’s work too sits in this liminal space as he allows his painted motifs be used as both abstract and representational elements. Using context to create scenes in which iterations of repeatedly used icons sit within varying levels of representational plausibility, Thornton rethinks the boundaries between these two

categories and their mutual instability within image making. His works demonstrate the transformation of something that signifies nothing into something that signifies something not through changes within the entity itself but rather within its surroundings. Within Figures 4 through 6 we can see the transformation of an abstract shape into a hat.

Similarly, within her painting “Gentle Alien Contemplating Sculpture,” (Figure 7) Ida Ekblad directly comments on the subjective process of interpretation, depicting a subject outside of our reality evaluating an example of a distinctly human sign.

Michael Williams’ paintings highlight the effects shifts within the armature of cognition through which the viewer interprets his paintings have on his work. His works within his 2007 solo show at CANADA Gallery, which seamlessly blend airbrush and digital printing techniques, kept viewers like Jerry Saltz “probing” these works in an effort to determine “their processes and painterly source.” Within this series Williams capitalizes on the identical nature of the two marks left behind by two tools that each bring with them different legacies and connotations, by using their singular appearance as a fixed variable against which the implications of the either process and the effect they have on the work can be assessed. This conceptual swing he imbues within his work allows the “meaning” of the work to be lodged not within any particular mark and the qualities it contains but rather within the speculative mind of the viewer.27

Through the process of revealing new information, my work documents the rigorous process of scrutiny that accompanies judgment, struggles with the limitations of perception and asks about the existence of a single real “reality.” I am engaged painting

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from my head, sites, characters, and things with contrasting tones, conflicting information that together form an ersatz storyline.

Within this essay I explore things I have learned through painting and their alliances with ideas that I have come across before, after, and during the construction of these works. The works have spawned from simple ideas, luck, intuition, and practice and now in retrospect I feel they dovetail with the thoughts laid down in this essay. That is not to say these works are illustrations of these principles contained within this essay or that I even had a particular effect in mind at the beginning of their making. Within my process I often make first and then look at what I have done and decide whether or not that is something I want, rather than the other way around. Many of these ideas are not evidence of a vision, but rather aids in determining what makes this work good. For me it seems that only after I see the correct answer as a good painting in front of me can I see the existence of an original idea or desire. My relationship to painting is similar to Max Beckmann’s process outlined in his timeless words:

The picture to me speaks of truths impossible for me to put in words and of which I did not ever know before.  

28 Kessler, Max Beckmann’s Triptychs. 9.
Bibliography


John Baldessari et al., This Not That (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1995).


Joshua Abelow, Running Witch, 2014, 60 x 45,” oil on burlap.
Joshua Abelow, Running Witch, 2014, 54 x 72,” oil on linen
Avery K. Singer, Performance Artists, 2013, 104 x 78”, acrylic on canvas.
Figure 5

Torey Thornton, N/A
Figure 6

Torey Thornton, N/A