Prosaic (dis)appearance

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Prosaic (dis)appearance
Ontology of Exaltation and Abnegation

by
Waller Austin

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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St. Louis, MO
May 4, 2017
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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on issues uncovered in my pursuit of acceptance as a visual artist. Through consolidating beliefs and ideals of art and juxtaposing historic themes and current trends with personal life experiences, I resolve to construct artworks as dizzying, thought-provoking environments. Recollections of memory are largely anachronistic and profound memories are typically associated with trauma or paradigm change within an abrogated system of faith or other conviction. I question the framework of conditioned vocabularies that inform judgment about any explicit perception.

Considering processes of thinking and the experiential re-engineering mechanisms that establish long-term memory, I endeavor to create works that are dialectic and resonate with a general audience, so as not to be subject to any overdetermined lens for critical understanding. With a Postmodern attitude, I address challenges of post-colonial times by actively engaging structures of mimicry and hybridity via the appropriation of common themes in contemporary art.

Personal anecdotes that manifest the direction of my practice, and brief discussions of artists who have influenced my conceptual underpinnings, as well as my material and esthetic choices, including Marcel Duchamp, Dieter Roth, Mike Kelley, and Sean Landers, are included. I stress that the identity I deliver through art is to be recognized as apocryphal - simultaneously indulgent and self-abasing. Through an interrogation of originality and authenticity, I challenge the viewer to examine their own systems for consideration and interpretation of any prescribed visual language.
I. DISGUST AS OPPORTUNITY

It’s good to know how to read, but it’s dangerous to know how to read and not know how to interpret what you’re reading.

—Mike Tyson

Offending people is a necessary and healthy act. Every time you say something that’s offensive to another person, you just caused a discussion. You just forced them to have to think.

—Louis C.K.

Any good art should encourage cockamamie interpretations and conspiracies.

— John Currin

I am an interdisciplinary artist with an emphasis in installation work that utilizes painting, sculpture, and performance. My works incorporate processes of decision making that revolve around play and leisure with a conflation between art history, humor, and mythology. I address an open range of content stemming from an interest in identity, mimicry, and hybridity. As an artist, my goal is to muddy and force a complication of information, and to incite intuitive and inventive thinking within my audience.

I make art to entertain myself, and it is an added bonus if others take an interest in my efforts. I am elated if the audience has trouble understanding the work but still invests time considering its significance. When people have positive or negative responses, I am equally pleased. The worst reaction an audience can give is ambivalence, although that often happens when the spectator seeks some standardized read. My work is layered such that if one attempts to determine an overall meaning, the viewer will find that effort to be unproductive. If I have done my job well, the audience will remain curious after first being drawn in with tantalizing finishes, and then confused with various levels of nuanced content; both provocative and banal.
Above all, I would like to create new encounters for the spectator with themselves, with other members of the audience, and with a place. Environments are unique in how they operate within the mind, as space is the bedrock to which all memory is tied. Recollection of memory is largely anachronistic and our deepest memories are typically associated with trauma or some paradigm change within a system of faith or conviction abrogated. Offering a departure from normalcy is an ideal strategy for activating minds and initiating critical thought processes that construct and fortify memory. I don’t care if anyone remembers me, but I would like my work to be situated within the viewer’s memory such that they may recall where they were when they saw it.

The work I make is a response to my own experience, all derived from some confrontation with work and ideas outside of my ever-evolving wheelhouse. My artistic foundations are both grounded yet liberated via rapacity for what I see as great art and a proclivity with appropriation. Products of mimeses continue to shape my own identity; conditional as a process of living and interacting with others. My interests lie in the anti-aesthetic, which continue to develop with my curiosity for an expanded view of art within contemporary practices and unruly expositions. I immerse my practice in the consideration of all things novel to me in an effort to push my craft and induce new strategies for reflection that permeate scenes outside of my comfort zone.

I entered graduate school as a painter with the ambition to take on challenges of new media and a desire to develop new skills and methods of practice through an investigation into my self, my surroundings, and the media that I activate into visual language. Paint is simply pigment and binder. Artists have the privilege to choose how to further define these two elements. Over the past three years, I have dedicated much of my
studio practice to utilizing Crayola crayon as a both paint and sculpture material. The resulting works occupy a place in the art historical cannons of encaustic painting and wax sculpture. They catalyze a nostalgic phenomenon for older audiences and flatten high and low art, providing understandable access to a younger audience. Although I alter their physical form, these pieces retain their intended function as mark making devices.

II. PLAY

The overreaching influence of global capitalism continues to encourage the progressive specialization of thought and labor. This trajectory of concentrated specialization is conditioned in our youth, reified in academics, and broadly apparent in "real world" employment statistics. The normal path and model for becoming any sort of professional entails a layperson or novice mimicking an expert. This imitator or trainee earns agency only after attaining a level of mastery necessary to complete the newly acquired skilled tasks with proficiency. In a sense, learning and practicing new skills is analogous to role playing, a constructive game that connects the imaginations of all sociable children. Play is critically important in thinking and making, though a professional whose sole practice revolves around play can seem disingenuous or incompetent when contrasted with traditional work. Play engenders sociability and directs cognitive development. It is through play that children cultivate a sense of obedience to rules and also counters this discipline by allowing children to create and experiment with accepted guidelines. These capacities are crucial tools for entering the workforce with tractability.
Imitation and representation are both offspring of mimesis. Mimicry is the effect of the doubling that takes place when one culture dominates another, comparable to a student-teacher dynamic. The student uses the teacher to gain agency in a field of study. Consequently, the dominated mimics the dominant, just as immature artists copy masterworks. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha documents how members of the dominant culture encourage mimicry among those they dominate, as observed in the colonial situation as well as postcolonial ones where there is a large incentive for minorities to assimilate into the majority culture. Hybridity takes the colonized away from their own culture and identity, shaping a people who are neither themselves nor their colonizers, becoming people who are "in-between," stripped of their original identity. This is where I always find myself: between knowing and un-knowing.

There are various means through which mimicry challenges dominant cultures. In her book *Enacting Englishness in the Victorian Period: Colonialism and the Politics of Performance*, Angenia Poon notes that if the “other can speak English, play cricket, drink tea, and do all of the other things that make up Englishness, the dominant culture can also appear ostensibly as a performance.” Englishness is not something that one is born with so much as it is a set of behaviors that one learns and represents. This situation is also manifested in the art world as an art student is inducted into the professional community once he/she has acquired the ability to engage the language of art, demonstrating its vocabulary, grammar, and syntax with fluency. Discussions of mimicry are constructed around ambivalence. In order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce inconsistency and difference. The colonizer wishes for the colonized subject to mimic the dominant society, but prefers an imperfect performance from that subject. In negotiating
the diversity brought about by cultural encounters, dominant cultures encourage mimicry and in the process a hybridity develops.

It follows that hybridization is not an exclusive condition with a depreciatory outcome for subordinate groups. Theoretically, in an open-dialogue situation consisting of a group, cherry-picked from a diverse pool of cultures, where the parties within the conversation disavow their hierarchically preconceived status by relinquishing both privilege and stigma, members may exert equal influence on one another. My work actively engages mimicry and hybridity by appropriating common themes in contemporary art and imitating specific ideas and esthetics of existing works of art. I see the art world as a playground where I am free to try out all of the equipment. I am a steward of the schoolyard— playing games, adjusting the rules — and when recess time is up, I share these borrowed playthings with the other children.

III. LANGUAGE REDUCTION AND EXPANSION

*Along with material itself, color is one of the most loaded signs of the quotidian.*

—Mike Kelley

Many young artists have an absurd desire to solve all of the world’s problems with one work of art. Their goal is to hit a homerun with an inexhaustible amount of layers of content in order for the work to never lose its profound impact, validity, or resonance. Other artists set out to pare down all but what is most crucial in the delivery of their chosen idea. Breaking down language into its most basic elements of phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, syntax, and context, we find that subtle nuance can often generate exponential difference from conception to reception.
Visual language relies heavily on color; a palette to be particular. After viewing an exhibition of works by Robert Swain, who dedicated his career to representing the most subtle differences in color, I thought it would be a fun exercise to use a the 24-pack of Crayola crayon as a point of departure in leveling the pretentiousness of this type of modern art. The product of this activity where I limited myself to readymade unmodified color, fresh from the Crayola factory, where I simply poured monochrome paintings tawdrily embellished by inscribing my own name in a manner similar to that of Josh Smith, ultimately became the impetus for my thesis work.

Fig.1 - Kelly, Ellsworth Munsell Color Study 1942 Acrylic on paper 8½ x 14 in
In 2008, Ann Temkin curated an exhibition titled *Color Chart* for the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibit examined the “use by artists of ready-made color in two separate but related senses; color as store-bought rather than hand-mixed, and color as divorced from the artist’s subjective taste of decisions.” Ellsworth Kelly’s student copy of the *Munsell Book of Color* (fig. 1) was presented as evidence of his formal training at Pratt Institute, prior to befriending John Cage and Jean (Hans) Arp, whom he credits for “providing liberating inspiration with unorthodox methodologies for finding and making art.”

Blinky Palermo began making his cloth pictures in 1966, the year that Joseph Beuys selected him to be his master student, as well as the year that Gerhardt Richter began composing his Color Chart Paintings. For this body of work, Palermo plainly used readymade tinted fabrics and sewed them into reductive compositions before stretching them over painting frames and random objects. This interest in the reduction of decisions within the process of creation has become a growing force within my practice.

Fig. 2 - Kelley, Mike *Missing Time Color Exercise No. 2* 2002 Acrylic on wood panels, magazine covers, wood, and plexiglass 47 ¼ × 92 ¼ in
Finding humor in the critical misreading of his work, where his stuffed-animal toys were attributed to child abuse, Mike Kelley shifted his practice to engage the unintended reads in jest. In turn, he assembled gridded arrangements incorporating teen magazine covers with isolated monochrome color panels as new elements with in his body of *Missing Time Color Exercises* of 1998 to 2002 (fig. 2). This is the edge that propels me to locate and secure good in even the worst of views of my work.

**IV. INDULGENCE**

Leisure is one of the foundations of Western Culture. “Culture depends for its very existence on leisure, and leisure, in its turn, is not possible unless it has a durable and consequently living link with the cultus, with divine worship.”

My resolve to become an artist was born out of meditating on the old saying, "find something you love to do and you’ll never have to work a day in your life."

My vision quest for identity began the very moment I became self-aware. One born in 1981 is positioned exactly between the taxonomic parameters of Generation X and Generation Y, with no obvious generational association. As the third son of a homemaker and a renowned surgeon, I was content with my birth order; the spoiled baby of the family; but just a month before my sixth birthday, my younger brother was born and ever since I have been subjugated with the least coveted role of "middle child."

Middle children have a keen awareness of parental neglect, and my mother’s response to my behavioral issues was to assign me long sentences of solitary confinement. Locked in my father’s office, I could hear my brothers enjoying themselves beyond my chamber. It
was quite tormenting to hear them running up the steps and traipsing through the house, observing them through the window, gleefully role-playing and chasing each other around the yard, as I sat in my own silence dwelling on my unfair abandonment.

Since I was coddled as a young child, "timeouts" earned after my younger brother was born established a routine where I learned to pacify myself through the act of drawing. My “cell” was devoid of childish things. There was a large wooden desk a few feet from one wall, along with two painfully uncomfortable chairs, which were the only pieces of furniture in the room other than the bookshelves lining the walls, floor to ceiling, bulging with stacks of textbooks, journals, files, folders, notes, and papers.

Curiosity got the better of me as I began flipping through the pages of my father’s massive collection of medical textbooks. I was tantalized and fascinated by these grotesque depictions of external and internal human anatomy. As a diversion during my detention, I uncovered a scheme to distract and entertain myself by tracing, copying, and improvising new forms from and within the anthropomorphic design. I was enamored by the unknown potential that I could communicate through developing a composition of simple gestures, marks, and lines into discrete and discernible forms. As people identified with the images within my drawings and complimented my "talent," it filled me with pride. My mom loves to tell the story of how the Valentine’s Day bag that I crafted in kindergarten was censored by my teacher; expurgated and quarantined away from the lot of my peer’s goodie bags. My brown paper satchel was not embellished with a typical, symmetrical heart-shaped ideograph, but with a blue and pink cross-section of a dissected human heart, complete with Latin labels. This early skill I developed for drawing eventually suffused me with the desire to become a professional artist.
Every so often we would take a family road trip to another city and visit its cultural museums, as well as a science museum or aquarium. Inexorably, my older brothers would convince my parents to return to the science museum for a second day. If I had been well behaved during the trip, my father chaperoned my brothers while my mother would graciously escort me to an art museum.

On one particular excursion to Washington DC when I was roughly nine years old, my mother took me to the Hirschhorn Museum while my brothers were across the street, touring the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. This was the first time that I had been to a contemporary art museum, and we were lucky to have the space almost to ourselves. There were only a few examples of work on view that I felt compelled to admire. I was not yet capable of assessing the value of reductive and abstract modern art. At the end of our tour, we entered a giant room displaying an installation of several of Jackson Pollock’s (fig. 3) all-over, action paintings, and my mom said, “well, you want to be an artist, and this is modern art, so you better take note.” She walked off as I stared in disgust at a massive splatter-painted canvas littered with what I would come to know as studio detritus. Standing there, carefully looking and considering the entire picture plane, I noticed a bottle cap, bits of gravel, hair, and cigarette butts, pieces of a cellophane wrapper, and chewed gum. I must have stood there staring for fifteen minutes (an eternity for a nine-year-old), taking everything in about the surface as I projected my own judgmental content upon the piece. Just as I become conscious about the time I had spent looking, a crumb of this work of art fell to the floor just at the edge of my peripheral vision. I instinctively turned my head toward the motion as the tidbits made a clack on the floor that was just audible enough that the gallery attendant also noticed. First he
looked at me as if I were guilty of touching the work, but as he must have immediately realized, the painting was self-destructing and actively deteriorating. He gave me a little wink and simultaneous nod. I ran off to find my mother and kept that traumatic experience to myself for twenty years, until I was ready to unpack my relationship with art and intelligently evaluate artworks in terms of esthetics, context, and content.

When I first encountered those Pollock paintings, I was unprepared to appreciate them. I could not allow myself to consider how this junk stretched over a frame was important enough to occupy its position, inhabiting an expansive portion of the opulently appointed walls. I was uninterested in the paintings, yet they have been stuck in my psyche; the scene replayed itself in my head and spread its roots both consciously and

Fig. 3 - Pollock, Jackson *Number 2* 1951 Collage on paper soaked in glue, pebbles, twine, wire mesh, newsprint, and oil on fiberboard, 41 ⅞ x 31 ⅝ in
unconsciously into my being, though I attempted to dismiss its significance for many years. Now, I look back at that event and reflect, nostalgically, as if it was a divine intervention rather than a chance occurrence. Witnessing the literal and rapid deterioration of such glorified artwork within its sanctuary-like environment, intended for public worship as a fetishized art object, has come to operate as direct permission from the art gods to play and not take each artistic pursuit too seriously.

I set out to follow in my father’s footsteps and enrolled in a challenging pre-med curriculum, but he discouraged me from becoming a physician. So, I adjusted my educational path into a pre-law track and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. Following graduation, I began an internship as a clerk at a local law firm and soon discovered that the lifestyle of an attorney was not for me either.

My girlfriend came to my rescue, securing a job for me in banking as a teller. After a few months, I had earned a horde of professional designations and was promoted to the position of office manager. Soon, I noticed the condition of the financial world beginning to shake, and I began to question my own involvement and collusion within the financial machine. I felt that my contribution to the world should have more substance than an abstract paper trail of deals and contracts shuffling capital. Close to my breaking point, I quit my corporate job with a one-sentence resignation written on a Post-It note.

Working in the retail financial industry was an educational journey that served to establish a solid understanding of the nuanced ways in which capital supports progress throughout the world. Advising people about establishing personal and business credit, purchasing health and life insurance, and investing in stocks, bonds, and mutual funds did
feel somewhat charitable. What I was missing was tangible proof of my work that could resonate in posterity.

I decided that it was time to work for myself with my own hands and started my own real estate development company with a friend from high school. I acquired new skill sets with foundation work and masonry, framing, roofing, siding, draining and irrigation, insulation, plumbing and electrical, flooring, trimming, and the rest of the finishing details. The credit crunch hampered our sales and as the mortgage industry contracted and regulations increased, our properties hung in limbo until we decided to liquidate all of our real assets. On that day, I decided that I should return to my most nascent ambition of becoming an artist.

Though I have been an artist for as long as I can remember, being a legitimate artist requires much more than self-validation. Agency is only acquired via public subjectivization. Even the most casual art observer has the capacity to discriminate in terms of taste to cast judgment. It is not that I crave attention, but I hope that both the casual observer as well as the informed art connoisseur will take notice of my work. I came to art school to facilitate a professional practice, but now my views on art have complicated my intentions for making.

When I enrolled in graduate school, I was confident in my status as a painter. Painting has a historic tradition as the oldest medium, with the potential to represent unknown worlds while preserving its conventions with humble tools. The freedom granted through employing a brush and the speed of production made painting seem like the best way for me to work through ideas. Studying first at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I was introduced to the painters who attempted to end the practice of
painting, beginning with Malevich. Newman closed the door, Rothko pulled down the shades, and Reinhardt turned out the lights. The idea of the death of painting piqued my interests and, like Steven Parrino (fig. 4), I ‘started engaging in necrophilia.’ I found it terribly offensive and also humorous that Parrino bent, twisted, warped, distorted, contorted and “mis-stretched” his canvases. This love of art coupled with violence, indifference, and anarchy seemed like a warm place for me to settle.

Fig. 4 - Parrino, Steven *Untitled* 1997 Enamel on canvas 60 x 60 in

After unpacking the efforts of Duchamp’s campaign for readymade utility and being introduced to Sturtevant, Richard Pettibon, and Richard Prince, I decided to take on appropriation with full force. Interrogating originality and authenticity, I would sit in the museum and write exacting directions for how to compose specific paintings, and then pay undergraduate students to actually paint their interpretations of my language. I
remade masterpieces into silly toys and dexterity games. Then I turned to my professors, reducing their paintings into naïve paint-by-number compositions that I filled in with melted crayon, in an effort to have fun while commandeering their work, simultaneously elevating and marginalizing it. Finally I am at peace with the role of professional amateur and, like the clubfooted Hephaestus, I have found dignity in the pride of my work rather than myself.

Fig. 5 - Roth, Dieter Bunny-dropping-bunny 1968 Straw, rabbit droppings 7¼ x 8 x 4 ⅞in

Over the past two years, I have removed myself from the art market, initially to reinvent myself but also to generate a marketable inventory for when I introduce the new me upon graduation. When I entered this graduate program, just having some work hanging on a wall was enough, but now I feel walls are only small portions of space that can be activated by art. Considering humor, the absurd, and materiality led me to make slightly more palatable versions of Dieter Roth’s (fig. 5) Bunny-dropping-bunnies as I
have started to explore the objectness of my creations rather than relying on pure painterly language. Recently I have been toiling away, feverishly studying the works of Edward and Nancy Kienholz (fig.6), Duane Hanson, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and Robert Gober to serve as an impetus for my thesis exhibition.

Fig. 6 - Kienholz, Ed Back Seat Dodge ’38 1964 Polyester resin, paint, fiberglass, and flock, truncated 1938 Dodge, clothing, chicken wire, beer bottles, artificial grass, and plaster cast 120 x 145 in

V. BRANDABILITY AND SUPERFICIALITY

There is a gaping hole around which my self is constructed and I love myself. The ego depletes itself but I am still in love- in love with you, but even more so, the idea of you. Add this together, and it becomes the idea of you and me.¹

During my junior year at college I dated a young woman who was attending Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. I had known and been attracted to her for nearly eight years, as we both had attended the same private secondary school in Louisville,
Kentucky. Now that we were adults, I felt compelled to engage in a mature relationship with her that would ultimately bring meaning to my life. She was a triple major, focusing on studio art, art history, and contemporary curatorial practices. This was a classic long-distance relationship, where we would visit one another every two to three weeks and catch up on a physical level, participating in entertaining outings as a couple. We took turns coming up with novel and exciting activities to create new experiences with the hopes of enriching our connection.

On my fifth or sixth visit to Ohio, I decided that I would impress her by taking her to the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. At this point in my life, I was still very unimpressed by contemporary art aesthetics. We spent nearly three hours meandering around the space and as she oohed and aahed, gasping about the brilliance of each piece we encountered, I hemmed and hawed in disgust for the artwork, the artist, the museum, and her appreciation for the lot. I asserted that I could ‘stick a paintbrush in my ass’ render any of the works that she found so appealing to a level that would be indiscernible from the originals. She insisted that I lacked both the talent and the intellectual capacity to create any forgery worthy of such noteworthy distinction.

We settled the disagreement with me resolving to complete an appropriate work that possessed the most exceptional qualities of distinguished artistic talent and creative innovation, which happened to be a nine-foot tall portrait titled *April* (1991), by Chuck Close (fig. 7). I admitted that I was amazed by how he handled the fusion of color and mark making. Since I was studying physiological psychology and perception at the time, I was very interested in deciphering how exactly he was able to manifest this image. I
tasked myself with painting an oversized image of my girlfriend by appropriating Close’s method.

![Image of Close's artwork](image_url)

**Fig. 7 - Close, Chuck April 1991 Oil on canvas 100 x 84 in**

When I got back to Louisville, I went to the bookstore and purchased a book that illustrated Close’s printmaking practices. It broke down his processes in a way that assisted me greatly in reverse-engineering his computational and painterly style of rendering. Next, I went to the craft store and bought a four by five foot stretched and sized canvas as well as a starter kit of acrylic paints and began gridding out a photograph of my girlfriend, crafting colorfully abstracted biomorphic amoeboid shapes, cell by cell, on the canvas. After working on the piece for nearly one hundred hours, my girlfriend called to tell me that our relationship wasn’t working out and she was more interested in
our just being friends. I put down the brush, but having made such an investment of time and effort, I could never part with the painting (fig. 8).

Fig. 8 - Austin, Waller Christine 2004 Acrylic on canvas 60 x 48 in

Years later, I met my soul mate, Whitney. We fell fast in love, purchased a home together within months of our first date and were married just over a year later. My wife and I had several conversations about this painting and though it was odd for both of us to be in possession of this large painting of my ex, we both felt that there was something about it that was too precious to reject or destroy, and so I stored it in one corner of our basement.

A few months after we were married, an old high school friend came by to sell us life insurance, a crucial hallmark to nuptial reification. While guiding him through a tour
of our home, he quickly noticed the Close-style and immediately made me an offer to paint a portrait of him with his grandfather, which I accepted. Soon after that commission was completed, a handful of his acquaintances were calling on me to patronize my new practice. After driving a few pieces up to New York and down to Florida, I began to think about how I was creating commodities and realized that I had to keep producing high quality products so that I wouldn’t disappoint my collectors for being a one hit wonder who fashioned a few unicorns only to fall off the face of the earth. I decided this would be my career. I still remember how peculiar and refreshing it was when I wrote the word ‘artist’ in the occupation box on my tax forms in 2008, and thinking that I had finally arrived at a calling that was most appropriate for my personality and life goals.

Although I was enjoying my new career as a professional artist, it wasn’t long before I found myself socializing within a network of highly trained and educated art people. As I mingled with local art critics, collectors, and gallerists, it soon became quite apparent that I was missing one critical component of a professional: a credible education and fluent art vocabulary. I felt incredibly ill equipped and inadequate in the company of my peers. It was embarrassing that I couldn’t contextualize my work; much less understand any of the art jargon involved in any intellectual line of critical commentary about my ideas regarding contemporary art themes. My paintings were being purchased by folk and naïve art collectors and after attending a few dinners; I began to feel as if I was a joke or a buffoon. Days after returning from a benefit for the American Folk Art Museum in New York, I applied to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s graduate painting program.
Not three months later, I received a letter of regret from the school— the letter mentioned that while I did not have the tools to discuss art on a graduate level, I did have a strong portfolio and they offered me a ‘Presidential Scholarship’ to attend as a ‘prior degree student.’ So we sold our house and I moved my wife and children up to Chicago with me so that I could be immersed in a serious art culture, and gage whether I could handle the challenge of going back to school.

I hit the ground running, and concentrated my efforts on unpacking my relationship with both process-based and appropriation art. I was enamored with the work and logic of Marcel Duchamp, leading me to acquire a new understanding for Andy Warhol, and eventually to following in the footsteps of Elaine Sturtevant. At first, I went around the Art Institute of Chicago, spending hours absorbing the collection and developing a quasi-spiritual relationship with many of its treasures. I remade paintings by Pablo Picasso and Francis Picabia, slightly skewing them and rendering them with even more modern and vibrant acrylic color. I played around with 3D design and used Makerbots and Laser cutters to make dexterity toys of various scale turning Malevich’s rigid suprematist compositions into interactive games. In the spirit of Sol LeWitt, I wrote directions detailing how to paint specific works within the Art Institute’s collection. I paid undergraduate students to render these works within a very limited period of time according to however they interpreted my language under my supervision while I provided the materials.

I was trying my hardest to find or define myself and yet I was producing work at a maddening rate. I began copying works of my own instructors, skewing and altering them slightly in Photoshop, projecting them onto doors, and then repainting them paint-by-
number style with poured melted crayon. It seemed funny to me at the time; it was both a way to pay homage to the professors whose work I admired as well as a way to subvert their importance. It was an exercise in piracy, parody, and reverence. Still it left me empty upon the completion of each piece.

Entering graduate school at Washington University, I was still floundering about, not knowing what I wanted to make or who I wanted to be. Though I understood this situation as the perfect place to reinvent myself, I was still focused on the thoughts and ideas of others and utilized disparate imagery as a means of deflection from revealing much about myself, not realizing how much I have inside me that many would value as compelling content. My advisors put me on academic probation for being unproductive and emphasized this idea that I needed to formulate a real plan for “branding” myself. Though I admit I needed this kick in the ass as motivation, I was a bit irritated that they hadn’t appreciated my intangible efforts, particularly because I had taken note that several of my peers had been less productive and only shown student-grade work that was both ineffectual and trivial. I resolved to make a plethora of bad art to serve as both an institutional critique and to fulfill my obligation to be prolific.

I went around the studio studying the works of my peers and began making one-off quotations of my colleagues works, playing with low materials and challenging myself kinesthetically by manipulating novel mediums used by each artist. I began to admire the “shitty” works of artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Dieter Roth, and Dan Colen (fig. 9). This anti-esthetic was beginning to grow on me. I also began to take this idea of “branding” to heart. Riffing on the work of Josh Smith, I literally branded my name into 25 monochrome crayon paintings. At the end of the spring term I decided to
display a collection of nine photographs that I had printed on Dibond that documented a solo nude performance that I enacted on the outskirts of Valentine, Texas, during a class trip to Marfa in February, 2016. Using the Prada Marfa installation by Elmgreen and Dragset and the desert landscape as a backdrop for my body, I effectively made a non-statement that was so ostensibly heavily layered with meaning that no one seemed to be able to locate- but which everyone thought looked like good art. Next to this grid of images hung a six-foot-wide crayon over wood enlargement of my signature. Illegible in its abstraction, it was milled from Baltic birch with a CNC machine and painted with a hybrid mixture of Crayola crayon on its outermost vertical face and embellished with brilliant stratosphere blue glitter along its perpendicular perimeter surfaces. The effect yielded an uncanny relation to a poorly drawn dark cloud that bedazzled the surrounding wall and operated in a manner merging high and low art in terms of content, process, and medium. Finally, after two full intense years of art school, I felt like my art was beginning to function ideally as my subject matter was actually being communicated to the viewer in unison with my choices of material substance.

Fig. 9 - Colen, Dan TBT 2007 Oil on canvas 67 x 112 in
VI. APOTHEOSIS AND SELF-ABASEMENT

To want fame is to prefer dying scorned than forgotten.\textsuperscript{xi} —E.M. Cioran

My study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago initiated both a broadening of my art knowledge and technical practices as well as a commitment to reduce and consolidate what I was putting out into the world. I was learning about how to deal with the anxiety of failure. I came into that program as a guy who was ostensibly trying to enter the contemporary art scene by mimicking a dated esthetic of an aging artist, Chuck Close. It wasn’t long before I realized that what I really had most in common with Close was the fact that I wanted to be validated and/ or canonized historically. I have always had a strong desire to be successful at every endeavor to which I commit my time. I believe that anything worth doing should be done well, and I hold myself to very high, if not unattainable, standards.

I am privileged, but also handicapped, to have a well-documented and rich ancestry, not necessarily in terms of financial wealth but historic accomplishment. Of course, there are numerous ancestors in my family lineage who never really amounted to anything, but I was raised with the understanding that I was special simply as a successor of great people. As a boy interested in American history, I grew up believing it was an honor to be a direct descendant of the First Families of Virginia. This legacy of Virginian ancestral feudalism began with a few of my ancestors who were part of the original Virginia General Assembly that was established in 1619.

The most immediate example of familial ambition and achievement for me would be my father. Before my grandparents divorced he, along with his two younger sisters, was raised mostly by his grandparents. He overcame this obstacle and received a full
scholarship at a private military high school. Next, he attended Dartmouth College, where he double-majored in biology and chemistry and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. He went on to Harvard Medical School and then completed a fellowship at Johns Hopkins. I was born while he was in the eighth year of an eleven-year residency at Duke University. When he finally achieved the title of pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon, he was one of only 120 doctors in the world to have this specialized designation. He has since authored dozens of articles for medical journals and textbooks, taught thousands of medical students the nuances of his practice, not to mention the thousands of lives that he has saved. I rarely saw him while I was growing up and, as a child, it took a long time for me to understand and cope with his absence by accepting that sick and dying babies were more important to him than me. Observing his work ethic has had an incredible impact on how I approach and commit to any task.

Thinking about what my father does on a daily basis really puts things into perspective, especially considering how indulgent my “work” is. I take my profession very seriously as play. I find it very rewarding just speaking to normal people about what I do. My wife has been involved in the corporate world, her entire adult life, and currently works for a bank as a senior product development officer- a role with duties that once bored me to tears. I meet people with similar occupations on a regular basis through a number of professional networks and activities related to my children. When I tell people that I am an artist, it always amazes me to see how excited they become, as if being an artist is a departure from reality. People are always so curious about what I do as an artist and it seems as if they hope I engage in the most abnormal of practices.
Sean Landers is an artist who takes these feelings of self-obsession to heart - we have a lot in common. In his memoir, [sic], he compulsively writes from an apparent stream of consciousness that teeters on the line between earnestness and complete deception. He includes thoughts that many people have, but no one would actually vocalize for fear of ridicule or harsh judgment. Life is a lot like this. I came to the realization long ago that most of what we say to one another are absolute lies, even if we intend to tell the truth, we often end up embellishing the reality of things to make for a better story. Sometimes we fabricate the entirety of an event, while other times we may insert little white lies just to complete small portions of omitted memories for the sake of continuity.

VII. RITUAL AND RESTRICTION

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.\textsuperscript{xii}

—T.S. Eliot

I remember spending an entire three-hour session in my first college level philosophy class discussing the merits of altruism. Ultimately we all came to agree that there was no such thing as true altruism, because the idea of selfless concern for others still requires a desire to give. Even if some favor to another comes at one’s expense, there is a self-congratulatory, as one would have to be mentally impaired not to consciously perceive pleasant feelings as a result of deliberate assistance. In essence, even the most philanthropic among us are self-serving egoists.

At a very early age I decided that I wanted to give my body to a medical school upon my death. It is odd that I have never felt completely attached to my body, though it
is the only thing that I truly possess. I played football, wrestled, and powerlifted during middle school and high school, but this performance was largely made to impress others in order to fit in and become validated within the community as a hard worker. As my body transformed, I was neither pleased nor appalled by my form, though I have always been comfortable with it, regardless of my shape. I honestly never considered myself esthetically attractive, and accepted any compliment and insult about my looks with a grain of salt.

The truth is that we are always being viewed when we enter a public space, and our bodies are being judged, whether we like it or not. Over the fall semester of my second year of graduate school, I kept coming back to how the use of my body in my final exhibition as a first year student was appreciated. There is something about displaying one’s own naked body that establishes trust for the viewer on an intimate level. It is a leveling performance of sincere acceptance of one’s self, undisguised vulnerability, and audacious exhibitionism. In considering how to activate my paintings within a space in order to add to the theatricality of the presentation, it seemed that including sculptural components that reflected a conversation of color, classification, and labor would elevate the overall work. Using my own body was the only way. But how could I move a sculpture of my body out of the realm of being cliché?

I decided that the best way to capture the attention of my audience was to document another performance through sculpture that illustrated both commitment and transformation. I began researching the impressive performance artist Tehching Hsieh, who for dedicated himself to completing incredible feats over durations of one year. Being that I only had fifteen weeks to complete a project I resolved to restage a
performance by Eleanor Antin (fig. 10). In 1972 Antin took a series of 148 photographs of herself losing a total of ten pounds over the course of 37 days, recording a transformation of her body that was scantily perceptible. As my weight often fluctuates by 20 pounds over the course of a season, I wanted to see how much weight I could lose over the course of one school semester, leaving enough time to document the transformation, and I set a goal of losing 80 pounds.

Fig. 10 - Antin, Eleanor Carving 1972 (detail) 148 Gelatin silver prints and text panel - each photograph: 7 x 5in

Antin’s performance resulted in both weight loss and a change, however slight in her appearance. The timing of this document situates the piece as a critique on patriarchal social domination and the unfair control that men exert over women in setting and regulating irrationally high standards of beauty. My partial appropriation of this work is
more a critique on the male gaze, consisting of the stereotypical objectification of a female body as the male role retains a position of power. The more I considered this dynamic reversal, I began to question if it were even possible to reciprocate, or if my body would inevitably still be considered and addressed under the male gaze in a homosexual manner. This line of thinking seems somewhat humorous but also problematic, because it is difficult to imagine the piece’s ultimate reception.

On January 13th, 2017 I solicited the help of three peers, who assisted in making a silicone mold of my 240-pound body. At first, my intention was to create two crayon casts of my body, one obese the other emaciated - standing in mirrored contrapposto poses, seemingly reflecting upon one another. Due to the fact that my assistants, nor I had ever made a complete lifecast of a human body, technical problems began manifesting themselves straightaway. From my research, we were prepared for the silicone mold and the plaster mother-mold to be completed within a two and a half hour time frame, but the process ended up taking just over four hours.

The silicone application was finished after 3 hours. Although my original pose was such that I had a straight and level line from my right foot running to the top of my head, after ninety minutes my right foot had fallen asleep and my lower back was in terrible pain. My body forced me to adjust my position such that my weight was equally distributed between my two feet. At this point I knew that I would have to make some significant alterations to my original plan. The silicone began to demold before the first piece of plaster was applied to the exterior surface, creating unnatural gaps and undulations on the silicone façade.
The weight from the front half of the plaster shell was so heavy that it was tilting my entire body forward, bending my hips and back, distorting the cast of my body. As the back half of the shell was being applied, my legs began to bend at the knee and the front part of the plaster mothermold also began to pull away from my body. Before the mold had cured, I had come to accept that this body would be incredibly wonky, and knew that I would have to work this challenge to my original idea into a new way of thinking about the final exhibition. With all of these position changes occurring within the molding process, I felt obligated to take a pose borrowed from ancient kouros sculptures (fig. 11) for the final cast. I was elated when I emerged from the silicone mold to see that it was salvageable. Although many aspects of the process had gone awry, the silicone face that would form the surface or skin of the body still had forensic detail, which was very reassuring.

Fig. 11 - Unknown Artist Anavysos Kouros 530 BCE Marble with remnants of paint 81⅝ x 21⅞ x 20 in
The next day, I began my starvation diet and intense workout regimen. To do this I, along with my wife and children, had to make tremendous sacrifices. I limited myself to a diet consisting of one apple and one can of tuna per day, and I started a program of strenuous physical conditioning that included a combination of aerobic and anaerobic exercise as well as yoga and Pilates training for 30 minutes every morning and evening. Within the first 30 days, I had lost 36 pounds. My strict meal schedule followed that I fasted until 1pm, ate the apple, and then came home from the studio around 11pm to consume my can of tuna.

The fasting resulted in a euphoric high that lasted until around 3pm each day. By 7pm, my energy levels hit a wall. Though I worried about my stamina and ability to complete this test of endurance, I reluctantly pushed on to prove to myself that I could tolerate the pain and that I had the will to succeed. Announcing this feat to all of my peers helped to reinforce my transformation. My concerned family, friends, and mentors were constantly checking in on me and their praise for my determination and verification of my aesthetic transition encouraged me to continue, even on days when I thought I might fall over from exhaustion.

After 83 days, I had lost a total of 73 pounds – down to 167 from a high of 240. Though, I was a slightly disappointed, not having reach my goal of losing 80 pounds, I am certainly satisfied that I am able to show markedly different representations of myself in three-dimensional form. Though I had desired to exhibit an emaciated body, I now looked fit and healthy – more of an idealized version of myself than I had anticipated. With this, I will surely be viewed as even more of an egoist.
VIII. THE SPECTACLE

Mr. Pink: Why can’t we pick out our own color?
Joe: I tried it once, it don’t work. You get four guys fighting over who’s gonna be Mr. Black. Since nobody knows anybody else, nobody wants to back down ... So forget it. I pick. Be thankful you’re not Mr. Yellow.

My thesis work, Prosaic (dis)appearance (fig. 12) deals with humor, and mythology of the artist, with a conflation among art history, entertainment, commerce, labor, race, sacrifice, humility and ascension. This exhibition consists of an installation of painted and casted objects arranged in tableaux that will hopefully implicate all parties within the experience. One hundred and fifty-two one-foot square monochromatic Crayola crayon paintings, on gessoed linen stretched over poplar panels, are installed in a nineteen by nineteen foot cruciform arrangement over a sheet of reflective Mylar stretching from the floor to the skylights. This ensemble functions as a direct manifestation of Crayola’s packaging logic for their Ultimate Crayon Collection. The curved and dimpled surface of the mirrored Mylar sheeting is tucked between the paintings and the wall so the audience can see themselves in relation to the piece and surrounding space. The irregular surface of the Mylar yields a distorted reflection through its funhouse undulations and serves to elevate the painted works while concurrently presenting itself as a cheap and lowbrow material associated with party balloons and streamers, communicating a feeling of promise and assurance to the viewer.

Each panel contains a sensuous surface of pure color from Crayola’s Ultimate Crayon Collection complete with a hand inscribed name for each color, taken from the wrapper. Though I stayed true to the spelling of each and every textual assignment marked on 151 of these crayon wrappers, I chose to omit the word “white” from the
white painting. With this subtle gesture of exclusion, I implicate myself as a “white” person and the problematic stigma associated with the lack of its recognition. As white invariably serves as the base to which all other colors are compared, writing the word “white” on the white painting would be most redundant. This absenting non-gesture also serves to probe the audience to question what whiteness means to them, especially the veiled and blatant privilege of whiteness.

Fig. 12 - Austin, Waller Prosaic (dis)appearance 2016-17 152 Paintings with four sculptural components; aluminum, crayon, 48,648 crayon wrappers, gesso, linen, poplar, reflective Mylar, stainless steel 224 x 224 x 60 in
Text is ‘vision’ for those who cannot see. It explains the world in terms that render its very explanations meaningless. More real than the real, text seeks to illuminate the world with a light so intense it will irreparably damage the retina, leaving the reader in a position where s/he, too, can no longer see.xiv

The two bodies casted in crayon are placed directly in front of the paintings, positioned in a five by ten-foot rectangular bed of 48,648 crayon wrappers. The 21,000 orange wrappers and 24,000 silver wrappers are arranged in a checker-pattern composition and 3,648 wrappers made from all 152 colors combine to frame a perceived rug or carpet. The front and rear sections of a broken silver crayon cast of my nude standing obese body are splayed as open shells at opposing angles with the wall, one foot out from the wall. Standing directly in the center of the carpet of wrappers, between the two halves of the prostrated body will stand the idealized cast of my nude body after weight loss, made from orange crayons with a stainless steel armature core.

I did not make this work for art historians, curators, writers, intellectuals, or even collectors. These works were fabricated for and about myself as gestures of the unapologetic guilty pleasure of a self-aware egoist. I made this work for the art-uninformed public in an effort to reify stereotype that burdens middle-class straight cis-gender white male artists. The instillation of objects (painted sculptures) may serve simply as a documentation of my life; exposing a public to what I made and how I lived from the beginning of August 2016 through the end of April 2017. Ostensibly I made an excessive amount of meaningless paintings with a material that many deem non-archival and reject as a medium worthy of high art consideration. With a rigid view of creative control, I restricted myself to making as few decisions as possible for the sake of
efficiency in production and consistency of product. There is a tongue-in-cheek tribute to artists whom the public believes to be crazy.

I have no intention of shutting down the conversation about this work by providing each detail of meaning, but I will give a bit of insight. The cruciform operates as both a beacon, calling people to gather around the site as well as an icon of Christianity. I find it amusing that Crayola has used this symbol in order to promote the consumption of their product and brand. The crayon serves as an access point into nostalgic experience that directs the mind back to its childish sensibilities. The text operates on a number of levels, but ultimately signifies glottochronology, stereotype, and basic discrimination within the visual field. My body is presented to assist the viewer in associating his/her own body with the space, to implicate the spectator as voyeur, and to activate ideas within them on how they see themselves within their community and in comparison to their own ideal or imperfect vision of themselves (fig. 13).

Fig. 13 - Austin, Waller Prosaic (dis)appearance 2016-17 (detail)
Originally when considering the choice of Crayola color to use in the casting of my bodies, I wanted to make them from a hybrid of the 24 pack to emphasize that I am an amalgam constructed from the physical matter and intangible ideas of many. Unfortunately, the mixture of these colors creates a rich and dark greyish brown, that the public would see as black-pigmented skin, and I have no interest in the kind of antagonism and alienation that would result from a white man representing himself in black skin. I chose silver crayon in jest towards the recent works of Charles Ray (fig. 14), as I find a certain humor in the absurdity of machine-milling a life-size body from a solid block of stainless steel. I chose orange for the skinny body as a riff on insults hurled at Donald Trump’s complexion of ‘Cheeto dust,’ which I assume is a product of cheap bronzing cream or a poor spray-tan treatment.

Fig. 14 - Ray, Charles Young Man 2012 Solid stainless steel 71 ½ x 21 x 13 ½ in
Oddly enough, the silver crayon settled in the mold like layers of sedimentary rock. As luck would have it, my chubby body has the appearance of stone, with an uncanny association to the myth of Medusa – who turns men to stone upon gazing at her. Curiously, my orange body is in much better shape in terms of a virile young male esthetic, yet the orange color is quite difficult to look at due to the nature of that particular color’s radiance. This turns the myth on end, if it followed that like a phoenix, a creature of great power and beauty had emerged from the death and decay of a lesser being.

And the rug ties the whole thing together.
END NOTES

1 Robert E. Johnson. "Ebony Interview with Mike Tyson." *Ebony*, September 1, 1995. 82.
6 Ibid., 17.
7 Ibid., 46.


