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Between Death and the Grave: Constructing a Setting for the Event of the Question.

A Thesis Presented

by

Daniel Hess

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Stony Brook University

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This thesis is a tying together of literary, philosophical, art historical, and personal cords into a cohesive and in-depth investigation of my recent work. This chronological study of my more mature or realized works from the past three years is broken down into three principal areas of focus: sculptural installations, video installations and drawings. After establishing a personal and philosophical foundation, the architectonic, theatrical, cinematic and physiological structures represented in these works are addressed with regard to formal and conceptual concerns. I address the transition of my identity as a painter to that of an artist working with video installation and large-scale drawings. This concept of existing between contrasting states of being has become a recurring fixture in my recent work. This place of transition is revealed as a working-through or visual investigation of the relationship between theatricality, death, politics and religion. A primary point of philosophical reference is the work of Merleau-Ponty and his concepts of visibility and a lived body consciousness. Additional philosophical works from Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Francois Lyotard are cited in relation to my art making process. Diverse literary and art historical references and sources are also cited, from El Greco's *The Burial of Count Orgaz* to Melville's *Moby Dick*, from Didier Maleuvre to Copley's *Watson and the Shark*.

Dedication Page

This thesis is dedicated to
Max, Jordan and Jonah,
my three most beautiful works.
I applaud your love and courage
in overcoming the space between.



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Chapter I

Introduction

“To breathe one’s last breath is to begin an action that one never finishes. To die is to achieve the paradox of an unconcluded event, an event that never, as such, ends happening. Suspended, like a trace, the trick is to see it.”

Didier Maleuvre

A lifelong chronic illness has made fully aware that this construct or container we encounter the world through is in fact a membrane or threshold between internal and external realities, each contending for custody of my worldview. In 1992 my consciousness of this threshold took on a magnitude of greater proportion when I had a severe anaphylactic reaction that resulted in a near death experience. I was informed by doctors that my body had a memory and that it would hold onto this moment and be primed or poised in a place of expectation for this incident to happen again. To address this embodied memory of death in my work without trying to overcome it or to side step it I had to give it a form or reference.

The works represented and explored in this thesis are my attempts to make visual, to give form to, this embodied memory of death. For me, overt theatricality has always represented a contrived framework, a place of death within which a false self resided. I would let this memory of death become the construct or theatrical veil surrounding my work; a constructed visual statement of this not being that, referring to the life, the painterly and gestural elements as well as the open pregnant space within.

This chiasm between death and the grave is for me the quintessential setting for the event of the question. At once, a constructed place of indiscernibility; yet of all knowing, perfect clarity of being and visibility as well. My intent is that the drawings, video installations and sculptural installations explored in this thesis, occupy this place of crossing, poised between polarities; both now and then, coming and going, present and absent. Works such as *Death and the Grave*, *One Forty Six*, *The Whale* and *Swallowed in the Sea*, will hover, then for a moment be still, at this threshold or lull, where that inner dialogue of heightened expectation is most audible. To realize this place of crossing in my work, I let go of the idea of myself as a painter, but as I ventured into sculptural and video installations as well as large-scale drawings, I continued to be interested in touch, light and the body.

The integrated architectonic, theatrical and physiological structures represented in the works discussed are a substitute for the lived body. These are constructed to reveal that a transition between two states of being is taking place. This transition is a working through or visual investigation of the relationship between death and theatricality, religion, and politics and the point or limen at which these concepts yield to an authentic experience or proof of that place beyond self. This investigation reached a point of conclusion in the work *The Misrepresentation of God in America* from the Thesis Group Exhibition.

This thesis will establish and clarify the main elements, motifs and passages that keep returning and coming to the surface in my recent work. I will reference works by other artists, both literary and artistic that have influenced the conceptual and formal genesis of these works. A primary point of philosophical reference is the work of Merleau-Ponty and his concepts of visibility and a lived body consciousness. Additional philosophical works from Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Francois Lyotard are cited in relation to my art-making process.

Chapter II

Personal History

*“If I didn’t look back at all that trauma, the sadness of the last forty years,
then I really wasn’t worth my salt.”*

Carrie Mae Weems

Before proceeding into a chronological description of the more substantive works from the past three years, I feel it is of great importance to give a personal historical context to the major themes that will be discussed. Politics, social responsibility, philosophy and spirituality are for me linked at their essence or core. I cannot speak to global politics and its relationship to my belief structure; I can only, and will confidently, speak as an American, a white middle-aged American male. This is the only camp I can authentically operate out of, and over the last three years I have gained a precious understanding of my limitations in speaking from or as another. In my work I have consciously labored to keep nothing hidden, letting construction, intent and conceptual shallowness be on open display. I have come to regard this personal and institutional nakedness or revealing as the greatest strength of my work. I must allow all contrivances to rise to the surface so they can be seen as what they are; theatrical constructs. For any substantive awareness of my working process to occur during this reading I need to first look back, to bring to the surface, the social, political and spiritual forces that have formed my self-portrait.

I was born in the sixties, 1962 to be exact. My first memories of the world outside myself were images of the Vietnam War on Television. Then came Watergate and the fall of a president. All this political drama was, at the time, slightly above my intellectual pay grade. What I did understand was the visceral cinema and music of the 1970’s. The mainstream arts were

infiltrated by unapologetic intrusions into the status quo. Nothing was safe and nothing was sacred; dealing with suburban angst and social injustice was the order of the day. Films like *A Clockwork Orange*, *Deer Hunter*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Apocalypse Now* ripped middle class American eyes open to the truth of taboo subjects that had, in the recent past, been kept neatly and tightly hidden away. Bands like *The Who*, *Pink Floyd* and *The Rolling Stones* gave voice and substance to the angst of a repressed generation that had no identity, one that had grown up being lied to. This is the general context of my early formative years; the specific or personal context is where the meat is, where it gets tricky, where the bypassing of psychic roadblocks really hurts.

My first memories of the world inside myself were of being sick. Not the kind of sick you get over, but rather the kind of genetic sickness that is part of your construction. I had inherited from my mother's side of the family a severe immune deficiency that resulted in a painful and sometimes debilitating skin condition. Doctors told me early on that a life beyond forty years of age was out of the question. In looking back, I now see that the weight of knowing that this organ you encounter the world through, the largest organ of the body, would not get better and only proceed further and faster into decay; this psychic weight of knowing was greater than the physical sickness itself. This concept of skin, of flesh, as a separating agent or curtain between an individual and experiential truth is something that will return again and again and eventually establish itself as a prominent fixture in my current work.

I was raised Catholic, the kind of Catholic who went to church several times a year. The kind who in his early teens would go to five o'clock mass to check out the girls and then go and get drunk in his friend's basement. My father, whom I had a distant relationship with as a child, was a high school athletic director and basketball coach. Saturdays during basketball season you

would find a mixture of white and African American athletes, members of my father's team, over at our house. I spent my early years thinking that this state of equality was the norm. My awakening to the fact that the world for the most part operated contrary to this unity was a defining moment in my psychological as well as artistic development. In the mid 1980's I was attending the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. During this period I found myself time and again within diverse situations, in the company of older African Americans and black South Africans. In both cases I saw that their belief system was an active and authentic one. These African Americans, who had lived through the reality of racism in both the north and the south, spoke of seeing firsthand the struggle and the victory that was the civil rights movement. Apartheid was still the national policy in South Africa and the fight for freedom spilled over into the streets and galleries of New York. I had several works in an Artists Against Apartheid show where I met poets, artists and political freedom fighters from South Africa who had been imprisoned for their acts of resistance. Again they spoke of their faith as alive, an active force for good in the world. It was at this time and because of my interaction with these individuals that I began an in depth studying of the teachings of Christ. I say this because what I have learned of grace, forgiveness, rest and faith has over time been in large part co-opted by a new American Christianity based on theatrics, greed disguised as prosperity, political posturing and institutional racism. This is the intersection of politics, belief and theatricality that is coming to the forefront in my recent work.

Chapter III

Philosophical Context: The Event of the Question

“Lyotard is not interested in questions of fashion or playfulness. Rather, the role of art is to disturb and disrupt consensus and to make possible the emergence of new forms and voices that increase the range of possible ways to phrase experience.”

Simon Malpas

Now that I have, albeit in a brief way, established a foundation of personal history, both public and private, I need to address the issue of the philosophical context of my work. I see this as a necessary grounding of my art making process into a larger context, one that is outside myself, outside the personal in the realm of a shared conscious and unconscious experience. I see no discrepancy or disconnect between my personal spiritual and political views and the reading of my work through the work of Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Lyotard. I can no longer, due to the restraints imposed by my physical condition, view my work apart from the philosophical context of Merleau-Ponty, and his concept of a lived body consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, the artist as he approaches his work, brings his body with him; his aim is visibility, to capture his own seeing. His desire is to exist in this place of visibility but he must do so in and through his lived body. In Merleau-Ponty my work is revealed in the philosophical context of the modern transitioning into the postmodern. In terms of the postmodern, the main elements, motifs and passages that keep returning and repeating in my body of work, readily avail themselves to be read through the work of Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Through Deleuze I will investigate aspects of the work set within the context of the triptych as well as how main passages of the video elements and drawings relate to the haptic functioning of the eye. For

Lyotard, the postmodern sublime was an event that took place in the indeterminate, immaterial place of the between. In this setting, disparate and recurring passages of my work will be revealed as distinct examples of Lyotard's concept of the postmodern sublime and the event of the question.

Chapter IV

The Body as Container, The Container as Construct

“There is no being without nothingness, but nothingness can only exist in the hollow of being, and so consciousness of death carries with it the means for going beyond it... The only experience which brings me close to an authentic awareness of death is the experience of contact with another, since under his gaze I am only an object just as he is merely a piece of the world under my own.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Hegel's Existentialism*

Walking back into an academic environment after being away for over twenty years was somewhat disorienting. I had thought that I was firmly situated in a certain artistic identity with a determined method of production. Early in my first semester I would realize that this was not the case as my identity underwent a drastic revision. During the first year of my MFA program I had to operate out of an extremely confining studio space. The condensed space of the studio became a pressure cooker of ideas; forcing me inward to distill down my intent as well as the realized form my work would initially take. I became quickly aware that I was not a stranger to this place of compression.

When you go through long passages of illness or physical compromise everything becomes internalized and the scale of that internal reality grows exponentially. Thus in a desire for an authentic representation of this experience in my work I began to focus on the concept of transition as place and the body as container - for all that came before and for all that could

potentially happen next. Merleau-Ponty states in his essay *Cezanne's Doubt*, "There is no difference between saying that our life is completely constructed and that it is completely given. If there is true freedom, it can only come about in the course of our life by going beyond our original situation and yet not ceasing to be the same" (72)

In the past I used the example of the seed in relation to my work, both to help me to grasp or define these notions of embodied transition, potential and memory, as well as a genetic pattern for growth, all contained within a form or construct. Some of my early successes in attempting to make visible these concepts were large sculptural steel and linen fabrications that examined the relationship between this inner structural complexity and a simplified outer housing.

While in the past I operated without full understanding, the confinement of my studio brought about in me a clarity of purpose and an awareness of intent that I had not previously experienced. I know now that what I was after was a chiasmatic construct, a sculptural installation that would give place to or house the crossing between realities or states of being. I equate this to the stretcher bars of a painting that give spatial context and dimension to the canvas, yet contain neither the seen nor the seer, neither the subject nor the object.

A careful study of the *Phenomenology of Perception* reveals various distinguishable but inseparable levels of analysis starting from a *fundierende* (or foundational) analysis of the structure of appearing. Therefore there are at this level no unified perspectives, there is no recollection, no recognition, no organization of stable schemata: There is no distinction between veridical and illusory appearances. If one were to see a completely strange object—so strange indeed as to not be recognizable as an object—as he investigated such a phenomenon, he would find himself in this situation. (Dreyfus 560)



Figure 2. *Death and the Grave, One Forty Six*. 2010. Site-specific installation.

Wood and house paint, 82" x 118" x 94".

It was in this small studio, where I began to embrace the death of my identity as a painter who paints, that I constructed *Death and the Grave, One Forty Six* (Fig. 2). I knew that the room itself, this place of great personal transition, had to be the locus of the work. As such I emptied the room and inscribed on the opposing walls in printing ink, two rectangles of different dimensions based on my physical proportions. These rectangles represented for me not only a coming and going but also a defining or separation between my external, physical space and an interior psychological reality. Maybe I unconsciously felt that painting had turned its back on me: whatever the reason, it was here that I decided to turn painting in on itself, to make a construct that would render me deaf to an inner dialogue taking place. I was also consciously aware of my intent to render the room unusable. The consequences of both of these decisions

would force me to move on. The resulting site-specific sculpture was built around the specific dimensions of the studio as well as the two inscribed rectangles (when completed, even the line on side of the structure when viewed from the outside, lined up perfectly with the edge of the now obsolete door). The only way to view or experience the work was now from the outside looking in, through a large mirrored glass window with a perfectly placed central support.

It is important, that before moving forward I address a key issue with regard to this work, that of memory and its relationship to representation. Memory is one of the main cords that bind together the complete body of my work. What is the visual scale of a memory? Is memory or are specific memories, points of departure or anchors that ground us to our past experiences?

Perceptual experience, according to Merleau-Ponty, displays “a genre of being with respect to which the subject is not sovereign, but without his being imprisoned in it...the ambiguities of perception carry over to the realm of memory, which is “inspired by a past that apparently escapes it.” Merleau-Ponty suggests that the only way to remain true to the ambiguities of memory, e.g., the immanence and the transcendence of the past is “to refrain from posing the problem in terms of representation”. (Krell 503)

In my earlier work, I would take images of my previous pieces and set them up as binary pairs. These images would often take on the role of figures in a disconnected landscape. The chiasm that fell on the empty space or clearing between the pairs of images created in the work a dialogue between past, present and future. This way of positioning the work establishes a history but never forms a conclusion. It also comments on an on going relationship between structures and the possibilities for older work to exist in a new context.

Merleau-Ponty compares time itself to a gesture that “envelopes all the muscular contractions that are necessary to realize it.” Finally, if memory is neither conservation nor construction, neither storehouse nor interior decorator, then neither is it the contrary of forgetting. “True memory,” according to Merleau-Ponty is to be found at the intersection of remembrance and oblivion. (Krell 503)

My intent for *Death and the Grave, One Forty Six*, was for it to occupy this timeless place, as it was always there. Inhabiting its confined space with substantial poise, it existed as a moment given form at a threshold between two polarities. It was both here and there, coming and going, present and absent. When viewed at night from the outside, it glowed with a great deal of quiet, unspoken presence as the dark facade of the building disappeared. A key point that I realized through this piece, one that would greatly influence my subsequent works, was my desire not only to render visible but to make still the exact moment of transition between two states of being.

For the *Brood* group show from my first year, I wanted to see how the construct from *Death and the Grave, One Forty Six*, would function if liberated from its sight-specific confines and placed in a gallery setting. I was interested in how the piece would translate into a foreign setting, one that was substantially different contextually than the original. I went back to some of my original writings, done when I was designing *Death and the Grave one Forty Six* and found this notation, “I will first begin with the construct, the housing or stage setting that will contain the play of life and light”. I knew that this was an opportunity for me to continue to explore the relationship between theatricality and death, this time in the form of a freestanding sculptural installation.



Figure 3. *Death and the Grave, One Forty Sixteen*. 2010. Installation view.

Wood, house paint, fabric, plexi-glass and Vaseline, 82” x 118” x 94”.

Overt theatricality has for me, always stood as a symbol of death, as a contrived framework within which a false self resided. I would let this framework or wooden construct be the veil that would surround this work, as a statement of this not being that, referring to the theatrically represented embodied memory of death within. To encounter the revealed authentic you have to pass through the contrivance, always tending toward unconcealed truth, but never fully arriving. This place of crossing, this hovering at the threshold, is the place of visibility within my work. In *Death and the Grave, One Forty Sixteen* (Fig. 3), I celebrated this passage back and forth between death and life, or between death and the grave by allowing this theatrical reference to die a death of its own, and yet it lived on. Again existing out of time as an oddly constructed coffin containing within a bed of rich fabric folds. This is my attempt to make visual in three dimensions a painterly passage of light, a constructed memory or *memento mori* of all still life paintings that have gone before.



Figure 4. *Death and the Grave, One Forty Sixteen*. 2010. Interior view.
Wood, house paint, fabric, plexi-glass and Vaseline, 82” x 118” x 94”.

In his essay, *David Painting Death*, where he discusses David’s painting of *The Death of Marat*, Maleuvre states that, “For there to be an *imago mortis*, an image of death (or of anything), there must be a *mors imagines*, a death of the canvas, vanishing on visual contact so that our *looking* at the canvas may become *seeing* (Marat). Painting, as the truism goes, is indeed a mirror: in it, the image of death scans in reverse and reads the death of the image...For if (Marat) had actually experienced his death (if his death had been his), we would have lived through the crossing (*ex-periri*) and thus found himself to be alive on the other side. (Maleuvre 14)

While I felt that *Death and the Grave, One Forty Sixteen* did not succeed on all levels, it did present me with an opportunity to confidently invest in a work a sense of humor and satirical irony. This work marks the point where I started to feel comfortable dealing with the issues of religion, death and sexuality through my not so subtle comic sensibility. Through a shift in

perspective *Death and the Grave, One Forty Sixteen* (Fig.4), opens itself up to the viewer, who can only see the work's interior through one of three small peepholes. Viewers had to inspect the works exterior and after getting in close proximity, place themselves in the uncomfortable role of the voyeur in a public setting. While some viewers saw the work as a giant vaginal reference, others saw the hidden bed of rich red fabric as a comment on the relationship between repressed sexuality and religious formalism.

At the far end of the work's interior a plexi-glass panel covered in Vaseline defused the incoming light. This light for me was always a painful reminder, a comment on the role of the cinematic or of video as successor to painting's past throne in the place of visual discourse.

Death and the Grave, One Forty Sixteen, witnessed the complete dismantling of my identity as a painter while cementing my decision to embrace video to advance my artistic vision.

Chapter V

Video as Mirror

“In the self portrait, the chiasm discloses itself, demonstrates itself, makes itself evident.”

Hugh J. Silverman, *Traces of the Sublime*

To fully realize the scale and scope of that place of crossing in which I desired to operate I had to turn away from any notion of myself as a painter who paints with paint to that of an artist who “paints” within sculptural installations with video. For the purpose of clarity, I have stated that I am a painter and have operated as a painter for some time but the truth is that I have not produced one painting in over twenty years. Still, in my practice, in the daily writing about, planning and producing of my work, I have convinced myself that I see and stand as a painter. I understand the nonverbal dialogue of painting and agree with Merleau-Ponty in that, “Painting gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible”. (Merleau-Ponty 27) “Painting establishes what Merleau-Ponty calls “visibility.” Visibility arises out of the conjuncture of the visible and the invisible, out of the making visible of what is invisible to everyday seeing.” (Silverman 371) Over the years I have tried to fine-tune my ear to the nonverbal dialogue between the passages of tactile lights and darks, the self-referential constructed space that for me only exists in painting. I knew that as I journeyed into video I would take with me my tactual sense that was the cornerstone of my lived body experience of the world. The purpose of these sculptural installations and video elements is to see painting in a new context.

In painting, the self-portrait is the quintessential example of and location for visibility to take place. For Merleau-Ponty, this was realized in the connection between painter and the paint on the canvas. To best realize this connection in my work I would hold up a mirror and through video try to achieve this visibility that I seek.

A self-portrait is produced in the activity of self-portraiture. The self seeks to render itself visible by painting a picture of itself with the use of a mirror. What appears, what is made visible is the painted self. In self-portraiture, the self offers a plan of itself; in painting oneself, one draws oneself out. The self-portrait cannot be a drawing or image of the self understood only as soul; it must also involve the body. In the self-portrait, the self is necessarily represented as embodied. (Silverman 369)

To achieve this, I would have to invest in my video a conscious awareness of the intimacy that can only be attained through the sensation of touch. The video elements of the works discussed in this chapter are shot through planes of glass and plexi-glass on which is applied paint and Vaseline. This established the picture plane again and allowed me to interact with it as I apply and attempt to wipe clean or remove the Vaseline and paint. The result is a blurred and shadowy, haptic exploration into an inner embodied consciousness.

Both works being discussed in this chapter, *The ladder* and *The Whale*, contain a setting, a construct or frame that gives place to the visual dialogue between the medium of video, and the nature, as well as the act, of painting. This theatrical housing gives a nod to perspective, revealing that a transition between two states of being is indeed taking place. This container serves a locus within which my video self-portrait and investigation into the embodied memory of death would play out. The video element within the construct represents the unconcealed

genetics of each unique work. This genetic structure contains both the memories of the past as well as the potential for the future, all being made visible at this current threshold or chiasm. If the work is successful both elements will give place to a moment or state of lull where that inner dialogue is most audible and death speaks to life, reason and empathy speak to politics and the medium of video speaks to the history of painting.

Once I embraced the mediums of video and film, I began, as I hoped, to see the act of painting in a completely new context. Apart from the materiality of the paint itself, which has a life of its own, similar processes of expression could be worked into new contexts with all the same considerations, such as light, texture, space and movement from one passage to another.

In his essay, *The Film and the New Psychology*, Merleau-Ponty states, “The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything but itself. The idea is presented in a nascent state and emerges from the temporal structure of the film as it does from the coexistence of the parts of a painting. The joy of art lies in its showing how something takes on meaning—not by referring to established and acquired ideas but by the temporal or spatial arrangement of elements. (Merleau-Ponty 57-58)

I stated that in my earlier work, *Death and the Grave, One Forty Six*, I sought to turn painting in on itself, revealing a view of the framework while containing or removing the viewers access to the inner dialogue taking place. In *The Ladder* (Fig.5), this same construct, having been liberated from its site-specific confines, has now been given an opportunity to speak. It has been turned to confront its audience, its public face reconstructed as a triptych framing the video element. For technical clarity the white zone of wood that contained the

peepholes within the frame of the work's façade has been replaced with a rear projection fabric onto which the video will be projected from the interior of the piece. The entryway into the body of this work was no longer a peephole but a triptych frame: in the role of both frame and hinge this becomes a major element within the video projection while at the same remaining a distinct



Figure 5. *The Ladder*, 2010

Video projection, wood, house paint and rear projection fabric. 82" x 118" x 94".

and separate component of the construct. For Deleuze, the diagram, a model of decentralized mapping, exists between the three zones framed in a triptych, having no point of priority or center. In a triptych, all the circulation of the painting's surface as well as the "Rhythm" happens through the hinges or through the white lines that serve as hinges. Within the circularity of the triptych, the hinges produce the "Rhythm". The "Rhythm" does not stop at these hinges but continually moves through the diagram or mapping and collapses into a zone of indiscernibility.

For *The Ladder*, I painted the walls and floor of a workroom a dark color and installed this sculptural construct. It was in this state, a work of absence, a hollowed out body or void waiting to be filled. The nod to perspective in the work was being compressed by the space into a moment waiting to happen. Then, the void had to be filled. The resulting video is a journey for three different characters, one being myself, through the history of the piece. Again the self-referential video passages were filmed in an exact proportional space that mirrored the work's interior. The 12-minute video and sound installation, projected onto the rear projection fabric from within the piece, was an investigation into the birth, life and death of this specific work of art.

An important aspect of this work that needs to be addressed before we move on to an involved discussion of the video element is the sound. The booming, detached echoes that run throughout the piece are based on a memory of being in the hull of a ship and hearing this sound of great scale that surrounded me, as well as permeated my individual, intimate space. The sound itself in this piece acts as a hinge holding the different video passages together; it is both in the work and not in the work, both obscuring and clarifying at the same time. There is no narrative element in the audio, it is pure sensation and thus compliments and magnifies the reading of the specific video passages.

I see the video element in this piece as a single expression that can, for the sake of discussion, be broken down into four sections; the "preface", the "clearing" and two nameless main body passages that run in an overlapping sequence. Here again, the preface section brings into question its own position or standing within the work. Does it precede the work or is it contained within the work, or a separate element altogether?



Figure 6. *The Ladder*, 2010. Video still.

The preface appears on the surface to be an explanation being carried out by a mute faceless character we only see in silhouette. The truth is that here an interrogation is taking place bringing to the surface a question of judgment. The postmodern sublime is not a statement but a question. This ties back to the concept of an epistemology turned into an interrogation, not directly an asking about, but an asking between. This asking between sets up the video passage being read in the context of the postmodern sublime and the event of the question.

The preface is followed by a brief passage I refer to as the clearing. This section has a specific purpose as it directly precedes the main body passages of the video. *Lichtung* in German means a clearing, as in, for example, a clearing in the woods. Since its root is the German word for light (*Licht*), it is also translated as "lighting." In Heidegger's work it refers to the necessity of a clearing in which anything at all can appear, a clearing in which some thing or idea can be unconcealed. This is a brief passage but important in its function of providing a clearing so the event can appear or be revealed in the following passages.

In the sculptural work of Barnett Newman, the “zips” or spaces between the vertical sculptural elements could be seen as the event of the question. It is in this space between the vertical constructs that we have the unrepresentable presented in a presentation. It is the question, “is it happening?” Before we can know what is taking place, what is happening, we must know if something is happening; before we can ask, “what is happening?” we must ask, “is anything happening.” I clearly see a relationship between the first body section of video in *The Ladder*, and Newman’s sculptures, as in both, a setting is constructed for the event of the question. In these video passages (Fig.7) I, without emotion, create a location for the event by placing vertical white “zips” of wood in direct relation to the frontal plane of the video image. The gaps are given place and shift in size and scale as I proceed through the piece.

This brings up the notion of time in relation to the postmodern sublime. The postmodern sublime, the space of “the here” and “the now” resides in and out of a grounded context of time as the instant, the occurrence. This place or these places of inscription cannot be marked on a temporal line and as such cannot be inscribed in the past. These moments of interruption exist as a space or spaces that interrupt conformity.

What is truly being presented here is not the vertical white lines but the immaterial that resides between them. The presentation of the immaterial is central to the concept of the postmodern sublime. One is able to detect that something is present and to ask the question, “is it happening?” and “what is happening?” We are unable to fully determine what that something is because it is the indeterminate. This is because the presentation of the immaterial is the event of the filling of the space; it is the imminent subject never to arrive, the event of the unrepresentable in a presentation. It is the bringing out of a moment that cannot be brought back into the material, phrases or occurrences that will never be constituted as objects. “Viewed as occurrences,



Figure 7. *The Ladder*, 2010. Video still.

phrases are, in classical language, ultimates...Understood as an occurrence; a phrase co-implies a nonphrase or the abyss of the nothing” (Gasche 118).

While viewing this piece, some people used the word “liminal” in their description of the work and of their experience. Since this term liminal or liminality, is associated with Lyotard and the postmodern sublime I feel it needs to be addressed. In German, one word for the sublime is *erhaben*. Breaking this word down you have, *er* – to lift up, and *haben* - to have. Another word for the sublime in German is *sublim*, *sub* – below, and *lim*, being derived from the Latin word *lemen*, or line which translates to liminal. This is better understood as the edge or threshold of experience or sensation. Both *erhaben* and *sublim* function in relation to this line, *erhaben* being lifted above and *sublim* being below.

In an attempt to allow this experience of being brought to an edge or threshold in the work I knew I had to resist associations by the viewer to technology and to all the technical

aspects of video production. These aspects had to be subverted, as the work itself was a conscious rejection of being viewed as a statement of technical efficiency and productivity.

In the Postmodern Condition, Lyotard argues that the 'human' is reduced to a technical product: the sum of its genes, the result of its upbringing, and the product of its labor. In this way, he claims, the human is being transformed into something inhuman by the capitalist 'vanguard machine' that 'drags humanity after it, dehumanizing it' in the drive for ultimate efficiency...In contrast to this technological inhuman, Lyotard claims that art points toward another form of the inhuman: the potential for being taken hold of by surprising and uncanny transformative possibilities that cannot be predicted, explained or mastered by technologically based systems of reason. He locates this sense of the inhuman in the 'anguish of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious but also making it think'. (Malpas 90-91)

After *The Ladder*, I knew that my next venture into video installation would need to increase its physical and emotional scale. *The Whale* (Fig.8) was based on two passages in the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" from Melville's *Moby Dick*. The work turned out to be this Odyssean journey into the heart of my middle-aged American whiteness. The current political climate and the potential for an era of endless war had me deeply questioning my role and responsibility as an artist. I knew right away that I had to commit fully to the epic nature of the work for it to attempt to succeed.

One passage of video required me to paint a 15' x 30' ocean backdrop as well as build the front half of a life size colonial rowboat where I could film what was a comment on Copley's



Figure 8. *The Whale*, 2011, Installation view. Wood, joint compound, acrylic paint, polyurethane, plastic sheeting, sound and multiple video projection, 10' x 28' x 23'.

painting *Watson and the Shark*. This loaded allegorical painting was a symbol of the first colonies, the potential of a young America's beginning. All of the figures represented on board the lifeboat, even the African American sailor, are depicted as willing, committed fully to being the much-needed salvation of Watson, desperately reaching out from the water for assistance. In my version, I place myself in the boat as the new America, the embodiment of indifference, rejecting the pleading of a dancer as she mimics the gestures of Watson in the painting.

In another passage of video, I filmed a friend, an Asian American artist, a woman, who was in the military, in Iraq, in charge of a group of mostly white male soldiers. She had returned home from her tours with no trace of the war on her. She became for me an embodiment of sacrifice and grace. I filmed her in a different location walking in and through the actual sculptural elements of the work, those that would be present in the gallery. The result of projecting these passages back onto and through the elements themselves gave the work a sense of memory, a history of its own as well as validity as an entity.

A work that greatly informed how I would attempt to represent these figures in relation to their space was El Greco's *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, oil on canvas, from 1586–1588. The upper portion of the canvas depicting the unseen realm of the angels and heavenly host is compressed into the same pictorial space as the living attendees at the actual burial below. According to the art historian, Harold Wethey, “ He has succeeded in eliminating any description of space. There is no ground, no horizon, no sky and no perspective. Accordingly, there is no conflict, and a convincing expression of a supernatural space is achieved. El Greco's Mannerist method of composition is nowhere more clearly expressed than here, where all of the action takes place in the frontal plane” (Wethey 56, 80).

The sculptural elements of *The Whale* were designed around the specific dimensions of the gallery and resembled large portals interspersed with wall sections constructed out of rough wooden boards and planks. All the wooden elements were hand worked, coated with joint compound, sanded, whitewashed and treated with gloss polyurethane, all adding to the work's own sense of history and memory. Three projectors, projecting onto and through the elements, turned the front section of the gallery into a larger than life triptych painting. In addition to the main three frontal sculptural elements, there were an additional two portal structures and wall sections that mirrored the front of the room and were freestanding, confronting the viewer in their physical space. I believe this determined the viewer's commitment to the work, as they had to choose to stand behind or enter the pregnant space of the overall structure and commit to stand “within” the piece. All this in conjunction with the sound, a disparate compilation of ambient noise, classical and rock music, resulted in an immersive, ethereal, and contemplative space for the viewer to encounter the revolving video passages.

My intent was for the epic depiction of these figures trapped within a journey they did not choose, to elicit an empathetic response from the viewer. I knew that it was not judgment but compassion that I wanted to be the bond between the viewer and the work. Due to the some of the introspective, self-portraiture nature of some passages of video, it was important to me not to come off “preachy”, consumed in my personal narrative. I wanted there to be enough breath in the video portion of the work for the viewer to bring his or her own story into play. As in the work of Bacon, we encounter a figure or figures “in” a background without a complete story or narrative.

The illusion of narrativity is undermined, however, by the “imprisonment” of the figures...but it is not only this cage that isolates. Also, the unbelievable space in which the cage is located is not a neutral environment; it is totally uncanny. Completely infinite, like the sight of the ocean, it is at the same time totally confining, like a dungeon.

(Alphen 494)

I became aware later as I watched a video of the installation that on a secondary level, the figures in the video take on the role of the attendant or the figural attendant. In this case they serve the same purpose as the triptych frame itself, a hinge that aids in and allows the circulated “Rhythm” of the piece. No specific pieces or elements of the video can be picked out as having priority. This lack of center is based on Deleuze’s concept of the diagram. The diagram functions like a map; it is rhizomal, making reference to a plant that has no centralized system. For Deleuze it is an example of an open network of relations or a body without organs, no (organ)ized central system such as a central nervous system.

In *The Whale*, I again wanted to operate at this lull or place of crossing and to give “proof” or substance to the landscape beyond self. To succeed in this and to bypass a shallow formal discourse of the work, it had to function as in painting, dipping, “into the net of brute sense” (Silverman 371). As Silverman states in his essay, *Cezanne’s Mirror Stage*, “Where science stands back from things in order to make sense of them, painting dips into the very texture of the sense of things” (371).

It is in this place of brute sense that I see the greatest potential for a clarifying and revealing of the work’s intent to exist. What began as a desire to render a self-portrait, as seen through the “mirror” of video, was now an authentic entity; free from all the constraints of a closed narrative, *The Whale* enabled its viewers to lose themselves in the act of seeing themselves see.

Chapter VI

The Physicality of the Spirit, the Remnant of Touch

“The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God!

Who can tell it?”

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

My third year thesis solo show came quickly on the heels of my second year show *The Whale*. I took down *The Whale* in April and through the studio lottery had drawn the first exhibition slot for the following semester. Even though gallery viewers told me that *The Whale*, the introspective investigation into my middle aged American whiteness, was a success on several levels, I came away from the experience somewhat empty. The remnants of the show were some installation photos and a couple of Blu-ray DVD's. I fully understand that this is the nature of our current artistic climate, to press headlong from one show to the next but I at this point in my development needed something more. I needed a tangible remnant of my physical and emotional engagement with the work. It was at this point that I decided that my thesis solo show would consist almost entirely of large-scale drawings.

I had until 2001 always worked through conflicts and concepts through large-scale drawings and works on paper. Due to the trauma of my near death experience and my resulting divorce and separation from my children, I had abandoned this practice altogether. In deciding to undertake this drawing show, I had to come to a point of closure with regard to this extremely difficult period of my life. I am, during the act of drawing, walking through the emotional and

physical process of the work coming into being. My sense of mark-making and touch is intrinsically connected to the work as it reveals itself. With my decision to reengage with the act of drawing on a large scale, I realized that I had been emotionally healed and that possibly, I could see this act in a new and more realized context than I had previously. I could now without hesitation or doubt see drawing as an authentic and visceral investigation of the space between and a representation of the indeterminate place of the event of the question - something that four months earlier, I could only see myself realizing through the medium of video, and the access it granted to me in the context of constructed space, motion and time.

As I said earlier, the time slot I drew for my third year thesis show was four months after my second year video *The Whale* installation was de-installed. I knew that in this short amount of time I could not fully separate myself from the emotional, political and philosophical concerns I tried to investigate in *The Whale*. Since I was attempting, through this decision to have a show of new drawings, to deal with painful truths of my past, I decided to look to the actual event that inspired Melville's *Moby Dick*. In 1821 the whale ship *Essex*, while at the furthestmost point of its search for whales in the Pacific, was rammed and sunk by an 85' bull sperm whale. The twenty-man crew was forced to abandon the sinking ship into the still functioning small rowboats. This is the point at which the story becomes so poignant. The crew now had a decision to make. Would they travel 1,200 miles with the currents and the wind to the Marquesas or the Society Island chain, or would they reverse their course and travel against the wind and tides 2000 miles to the coast of Chile or Peru?

Wisdom would state that the decision was a simple one. There was however a fear among the men, rumors, stories, that the Marquesas as well as the Society Islands were inhabited by cannibals. Based on this fact alone they decided to go the long way to back around, against

reason and the tides to seek safety. When two of the eight survivors were plucked from the sea 90 days later they were found sucking on the bones of their dead shipmates. They had become what they most feared, cannibals. When you have a severe anaphylactic reaction to something you eat, you are told by doctors that your body is now primed, your senses heightened in expectation of another incident. It is explained to you that anything you ingest could trigger this next, and because of the severity of the previous incident, most probably fatal reaction. As the doctors deliver this information, you can feel fear gripping you, wanting to take root. You then soon determine: I have a choice, whatever the outcome, I can make decisions based on wisdom and the best possible course of action, or I can become directed by superstition, fear and ungrounded rumors of the unknown. An attempt to give place or representation to this moment of decision, in the immensity of an unforgiving sea, is how my thesis show, *Lessons from the Essex* came into being.

I not only saw a direct correlation between the *Essex* narrative and my personal history but a direct relation to the politics of fear engaged in by my country over the past decade. Unknown peoples and cultures are demonized with the intent of moving a society away from choices based on wisdom toward those based on fabricated rumors of terror. As a result we have become what we originally sought to avoid, a society of lost freedoms and individual rights, where the fears of the uninformed are fed upon by those in power. I now had some meat of my own, something to chew on, as I attempted to make visible in charcoal this choice that would lead to a directly related conclusion.

Two works from the *Essex* exhibition that best exemplify my intent are *The Death of Richard Peterson* and *Swallowed in the Sea*. As these works came into being they revealed to me

how I could authentically occupy a place within the larger narrative while leaving enough breath for the viewer to make their own associations.

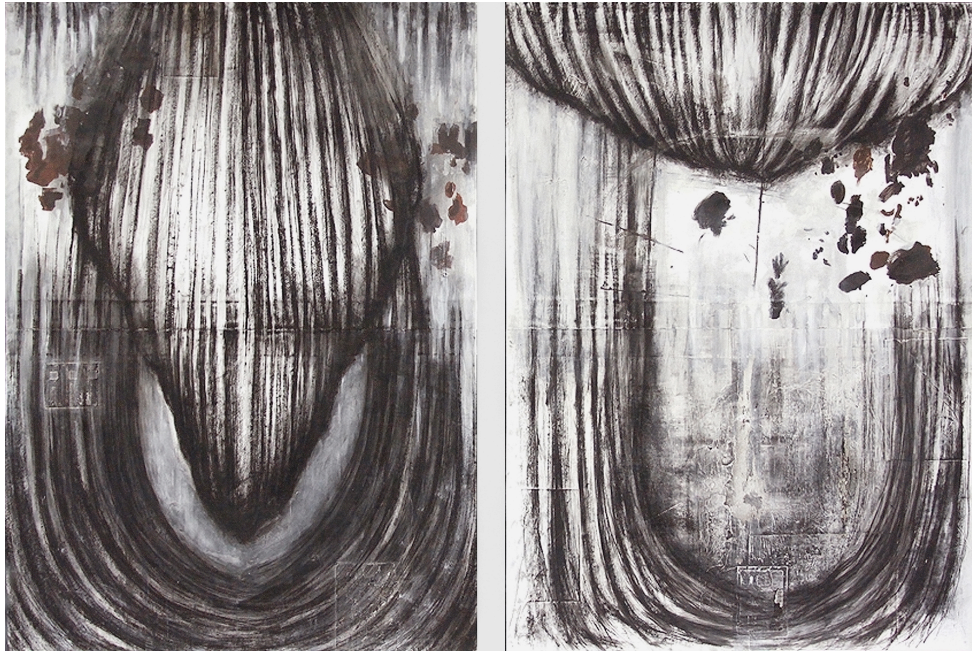


Figure 9. *Swallowed in the Sea*, 2011.

Conte crayon, charcoal, collage, clear gesso medium and house paint on paper, 60.5" x 88".

Swallowed in the Sea (Fig.9) is a singular work consisting of two large vertical pieces of paper. This was the first to be worked on as I ventured back into large-scale drawings that would make clear to me my method of production for all of the works in the show. I had a concept of a proscenium as well as an open and closed entryway or portal before beginning this work. Again the theatrical motif of drapery that I used frequently would find a prominent place in this work. As I stated, I wanted these works to relate to the larger *Essex* narrative but I also wanted them to result in a visual conclusion uniquely their own. As I began working on the piece I could see how the theatrical motifs were transforming into representation of a biological or physiological threshold. The frozen moment of hovering in the between that I want to embody in my work

started to take form in a previously unexplored manner. Also the desire that I have for my work to occupy a place of shifting scale between the individual and the corporate began to be realized. I relate this transformation from theatrical construct or drapery to biological form directly to Merleau-Ponty and his concept of embodied consciousness. The *Essex* narrative had been distilled down to being ingested physically, swallowed up by a scenario so much larger than myself. The theatrical references, while retaining some measure of their own identity were also transformed into muscle or sinew or folds of flesh. Some thought that I was giving form to the grooves on the outer throat of a baleen whale that expands when feeding. Others thought that I was relating the *Essex* to the biblical story of Jonah. If this was the case it was done so unconsciously.

While I feel the piece successfully renders this grand scale, it is the simultaneous references to the intimate, to the oral or vaginal orifice that intrigues me the most. I had made up my mind during the production of these new works that I would let my physical interaction with the paper, my gesture and mark making, determine the visual outcome of the represented forms. The fact that this narrative of confronting death based upon irrational decisions found its form in a clearly oral and vaginal reference meant to me, that my process of production was correct and the place I was operating out of, authentic. The relationship as well as the indeterminate space between sexuality, (folds of) flesh and death is a constantly returning signifier in my work.

I am reminded as I elaborate on the forms in *Swallowed in the Sea*, that in German the word *fleisch* is used for both the terms meat and flesh, therefore creating indiscernibility. Deleuze in his reading of the work of the painter Francis Bacon differentiates between flesh and meat in his concept of the humanimal. This conjoining of flesh, bone and meat is where the bones are the structure and the flesh is the bodily material covering the bones. The meat is the

area of confrontation between the flesh and bone. The flesh pulls away or emerges from the bones and what we are left with is the meat or the presentation of the between. Even though there is a great difference of intent and manifestation between my work and Bacon's, both visually reference the deconstruction of structures of flesh. It is intriguing to me that, for both Bacon and me, these structures as they transfigure and separate from their bone-like supports reveal a locus of the indiscernible.

At the point at which I decided that *Lessons from the Essex* would consist entirely of drawings I pinned a postcard up on the wall of my studio. The postcard was from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and was an image of Ingres' *Odalisque in Grisaille*. With these new drawings I would be dealing with theatricality and death in tones of grey and Ingres' work continually resonated in my psyche. The image of the sensual elongated almost fishlike female form, looking out at the viewer and beckoning them into the drapery-framed void, would be a key reference or point of departure for several of the works in this exhibition.



Figure 10. *The Death of Richard Peterson*, 2011.

Conte crayon, charcoal, collage, clear gesso medium and house paint on paper, 78" x 155".

Nowhere is this reference more visible than in the large work, *The Death of Richard Peterson* (Fig.10). In preparation for the condensed period of production for my thesis solo show I read Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea*, a beautifully written historical account of the *Essex* tragedy. One of the eight survivors, Owen Chase, had kept a journal recording the daily struggle for survival. In this journal he records that the first people to die were the black sailors. Here I saw that even in the heart of the sea, the politics of race were still at play. At the moment of decision to start eating their fellow shipmates, the account of one particular individual, a black sailor by the name of Richard Peterson stood out to me. He, after a period of being understandably afraid and distressed by the unfolding nightmare, had come to a place of great resolve. In his journal Chase writes how Peterson, a spiritual man, had come to a calm, stating that he knew it was his time to die and that his body could be used as they saw fit. After stating this he lay down in the bottom of the rowboat and peaceably died. This stood out to me for several reasons. For one, Philbrick makes clear in his book that death by starvation is a brutal and prolonged process. In addition it is apparent to me from Chase's account that Peterson did not want to survive if it meant that survival was based on the eating of his fellow shipmates. I saw in this an incredible dignity and resolve in the face of the most dehumanizing of all possible situations.

I knew that my depiction of this event would have to be on a larger scale than usual. I also knew that it was important for me to set this moment, that of the death of an unknown African American sailor, into the established context of historical painting traditions. I placed the unrecognizable figure of this black sailor at the moment of his passing into a setting based on Ingres' *Odalisque*. The drapery framing the void again takes on the form of folds of flesh or sinew making the reference to being swallowed. The pillow, propping up the figure, takes on a

more monumental role as a marker for the threshold of passing. What was a plush bed of fabric has taken on the form of the bottom of the rowboat where various dark forms of the deep writhe and intertwine. The image of an apple (Fig. 11) appears nested within these forms. This obvious reference to the biblical story of The Garden and the knowledge of good and evil was a reoccurring motif in my early drawings. In the bottom of the boat of a starving sailor this food, this symbol of a place of all knowing, remains untouched, uneaten. The apple remains whole because Peterson's transition across the threshold of death is in process but stilled, not completed. As such this reference exists simultaneously within and beyond the established narrative.

In my rendering of and physical interaction with this large work I found myself in a method of mark making I can best describe as the physicality of the spirit. I found myself reliving my near death experience and the physical state of turbulence that occurs at this threshold between two states of being. I was, in my gesture and mark making, holding on while letting go, trying to register that moment when the space of crossing between the physical body and the spirit becomes indiscernible. During this process the narrative of the work became dislocated and the overall space of the represented moment condensed. I became aware that this flattening of the image resulted in an overall reduction or dismantling of the optical space. What I was witnessing was a drawing progressing toward pure sensation. For me, *The Death of Richard Peterson* clearly relates to Deleuze in his reading of the work of Bacon. Since we are dealing with an unknown figure in a space, against a ground, we must first establish Deleuze's principal points concerning figuration.

“Figuration and narration are only effects, but for that reason they are all the more intrusive in painting.” (Deleuze 110) With Bacon, we encounter identifying marks (a chair, the

pope or a carcass), but this is as far as we can go in terms of recognition, we cannot form a narrative from the given information. “No” is the primary meaning in a setting of no answers. The figure’s identity is displaced, generalized, as it defies identification. What we are left with is the pure presence of the figure. The attendant function is one of waiting, with no identity, as one that “happens to be” there. Only when we are liberated from figuration and narration can the primacy of the optic world be dismantled. The haptic vision of the eye is a function that only observes a tactile space. The eye wants to find meaning (narrative) but no meaning is found. The eye is liberated from its optical function and now sees as a polyvalent organ. The eye sees the drawing, as if it were a hand, as if it were touching the typography of the surface; the access to the work is through the senses, through touch as the hand is given primacy.

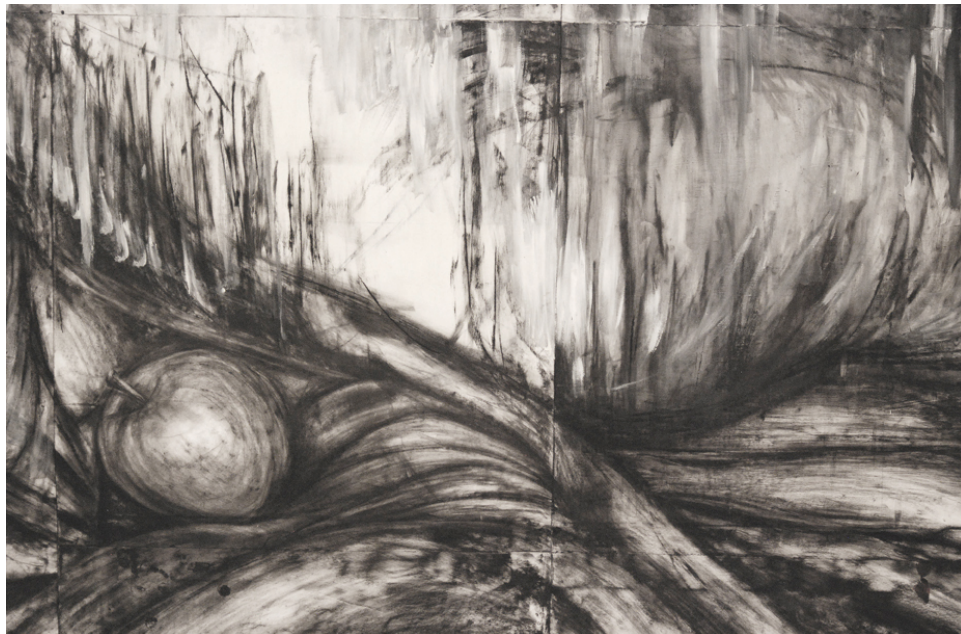


Figure 11. *The Death of Richard Peterson*, 2011. (detail)

Conte crayon, charcoal, collage, clear gesso medium and house paint on paper, 78” x 155”.

For Deleuze, the experience of a work is based on sensations that circulate, making their source difficult to determine. What we have is presence made visible, not a narrative, as

sensations existing beyond a narrative. Our focus here is the articulation of “Rhythm”; the circulation of pure presence, pure intensity, pure decentered sensation. In *The Death of Richard Peterson* invisible forces are witnessed in the process of being made visible.

Chapter VII

The Chiasm Between Doing and Knowing

Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

Matthew 7:22

For my part in *Bound*, the Thesis group exhibition, I proposed a reconfiguration of the video installation *The Whale* as well as the displaying of two large drawings from the *Essex* exhibition. In meeting with the gallery director and walking through the space allotted to each artist, she presented me with the opportunity to show on a large vertical section of wall. I knew right away that even though the show was opening in less than two months I had to do a large work specifically for that wall. Due in part to the positive response for the recent large drawings from *Lessons from the Essex*, I knew I could not pass up this opportunity to take a drawing to a level of scale and presence that I had previously not realized. I on one hand did not want to play it safe, I knew what I was envisioning for that section of wall had the possibility of working. On the other hand I did not want to place myself - with twenty-two available days to work on the piece in the studio—in another pressure cooker with a good percentage chance of failure. For the scale of the drawing I was planning, and due to the size of my studio, I would not be able to see the work in its complete state until it was installed in the gallery.

My decision was made for me one night while watching highlights of a Republican debate. Rick Perry, the Governor of Texas, a candidate well known for his large stadium prayer meetings and so-called biblical stances on certain issues, had recently been found to own a large

ranch that was known by the name *Niggerhead*. Even though this information had surfaced, he at this point was still in the race, and during the highlights I watched that one evening, was still regarding himself as the Christian conservative choice for the upcoming presidential election.

I am not naïve; I know that for as long as there has been politics there have been frauds and charlatans, doing whatever was needed to secure the election. There is however something new taking place in this current political climate, something beyond vile, that I see as extremely dangerous. In bliss of ignorance they stand believing they represent God and that we are in desperate need of a hybrid political and religious leader. I then watched as these so-called religious leaders demonized the working poor of this country and attempted to systematically dismantle all of the past successes of the civil rights movement. What I needed to give form to is that which I have come to regard as the exploitation of belief.

The Misrepresentation of God in America (Fig.12) started taking form as a visual commentary on all of the political posturing above as flesh. A mountain of flesh propped up by a quasi-religious, quasi-political theatrical setting. Many of my drawings in the past began with the notion of an altar. A place where the visible or material is consumed or gives way to the invisible or immaterial as it comes into being. Here the setting that props up the flesh also anchors it in its claustrophobic space. Large reddish brown passages of paint represent embers rising from a place usually reserved for sacrifice while they simultaneously bring to mind clumps of fecal matter. Two vertical tablet-shaped forms reveal the possibility of a place of exit while they reinforce the imprisonment of the flesh, compressing it against the drawing's frontal plane. Are these a reference to the tablets of the Ten Commandments? If so, the prominence of the flesh has

rendered them blank. In the chiasm, between these forms, partially obscured by the pinnacle of flesh, lies the fragile potential for change and the possibility of giving voice to the *differend*¹.



Figure 11. *The Misrepresentation of God in America*, Installation view, 2012.

Conte crayon, charcoal, collage, clear gesso medium and house paint on paper, 200” x 114”.

I spent a month last summer reading *The Last Judgment*, a book about the political and religious climate during the period of the Renaissance in which Michelangelo produced the massive altarwall fresco by the same name. This period was a time of great social, political and spiritual upheaval, and Michelangelo’s work became an embodiment or point of focus for all of

¹ “Lyotard maintained in *Le Différend (The Differend)* (1983) that human discourses occur in any number of discrete and incommensurable realms, none of which is privileged to pass judgment on the success or value of any of the others.”(Kemerling) *The Differend* exists in the chiasm between irreconcilable parties as a potential for dialogue and the re-establishment of justice (Lyotard np).

the overheated rhetoric of the time. The thing that intrigued me the most about this work, something that I desire to manifest in my own, was Michelangelo's decision to make this moment of ultimate transition stand still. James A. Connor writes in *The Last Judgment*, "Unlike the ceiling which unfolds the long story of salvation history spun over thousands of years, *The Last Judgment* captures a single instant, a stop-time photograph, a mad swirling drama like storm clouds caught in the act, a fresco full of *terribilitá*, the catastrophe at the end of time" (viii). Perhaps it was a not so unconscious nod to Michelangelo's altar that made me collage a photo of my face (Fig. 13) into the bone like sections, or what some viewers have referred to as "the duck", undergirding of the mountain of flesh. If I was going to make a judgment concerning indifference or speaking from a position of a lack of knowledge then I will begin with myself. It is obvious that the above-mentioned text was an influence on my decision to structure my piece as a reinterpretation of the large frescos or altarpieces of that period. I do feel however that my motivation was something simpler, more basic.



Figure 13. *The Misrepresentation of God in America*, 2012 (detail)

Conte crayon, charcoal, collage, clear gesso medium and house paint on paper, 200" x 114".

I was made aware from discussions with my fellow third year MFA candidates that the majority of them were planning on presenting large-scale works for the group thesis exhibition. I did not want—even though I knew that the scale of my work would be large—this drawing to be overshadowed by the massive sculptural works and installations with which it would share the gallery space. Drawings for some occupy an authentic but secondary role or position in relation to what they call more realized works. *The Misrepresentation of God in America* was for me coming from a very raw and personal place, that intersection of politics, race and religion, and I could not have it be considered as a secondary tier work. This is what was in the forefront of my mind as I entered the studio every possible working day. It became a wrestling match between my desire to see what I would dare call spiritual reason being given proper form, and the fact that I knew my rendering of this would change nothing.

During my production of this work I came across a beautiful quote by the sculptor Doris Salcedo concerning her political art. She was asked what word best defines her work and answered the following, “ The word that I feel best describes my work is impotence, I am completely impotent, I feel that I am responsible for everything that happens and I simply arrive too late. I cannot give anyone back their father or son nor can I fix any problem. It is a position of a lack of power, but as a person who lacks power I speak to those who have power.”

I agree fully with her on her position but feel the intent of my work shifts when it comes to whom I chose as my audience. I believe that those in power are isolated from reason by their own choosing. *The Misrepresentation of God in America* is directed at the viewer as individual entity. I have tried in this work to give form to a private altar. The intent is to remove a veil and give the viewer a private or personal visual experience of the disgusting scenario of flesh given a

place of power or prominence. Their judgment, not mine, will determine the effect or conclusion of the work.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion

“If you work conscientiously and hard at it and there’s something inside you that is of interest, that is what will come out, you yourself will be the film, the film will always be you.”

William Kentridge

One thing I have come to understand is that when we die we die alone. It could take place in a room full of people and yet the ultimate threshold of transition is for us to cross as a single entity. This is not an attempt to conjure up an emotional response, deep-seated fears or morbid fascinations. It is a desire to give unique form or representation to that which cannot be represented. The place between death and the grave is for me the pure embodiment of the event of the question. This is the setting where, in the immaterial moment, all will be known. This moment of embodied conscious awareness of all that came before, as well as all that is about to begin, is what I will be seeking to give place to in my work from this moment forward.

My participation in the MFA Studio Art program as well as my interaction with my professors and peers has brought me to this realization. I had to first learn through a place and period of great pressure what I was not. Then the vacuum created began to get filled. I have come to understand the level at which religion, politics and race have always been intertwined. I have also become aware that throughout history the intent or agenda behind the individual or institution mingling together the above-mentioned determines the “blessing or curse” impact on society. I was thus forced to find an authentic place from which I as an artist could speak. I could

not just turn away from my years as a theatrical artist paying the bills for a family unit that is no longer a unit. I had to embrace this death and not side step it but rather give it form as it existed in my psyche.

Without my venturing into the study of Philosophy and its ability to give my work a context outside of self, I would have been rendered immobile by the immense weight of the self-referential nature of my work. My better understanding of Philosophy has informed me that with modernity there is always anguish. The anguish of thinking of itself as ending, the anguish of thinking that there is nothing new that can be presented. As an artist, I am constantly faced with the possibility that this life-changing personal experience which I consider the driving force behind my work, my contribution, my now, has somewhere else already been give more accurate form, been better constructed, or better accomplished. I have, through what I have invested in my MFA, matured enough to realize that I am not committed to this task out of a nostalgia for a past experience, or for that which has not been presented before or “this well” before. I find the locus of my production in the postmodern sublime, where I can construct a still moment, a place of decision, a question that is woven between the past and the future.

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