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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

Snakes in the Nest

by

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Date: 06/23/2016

Written under the direction of and approved by

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Abstract

This document accompanies my thesis titled, *Snakes in the Nest*, which was exhibited in the Bevier Gallery for two weeks in April 2016, and consisted of five paintings and one sculpture. In this essay I outline both the artistic influences and theoretical research that shaped the creation of my work. I argue that the construction of my identity has been largely manipulated by a culture of escapist consumerism as well as social conditioning performed by my society to maintain a gender binary. The making of my thesis exhibition sparked an investigation into my ongoing involvement with art. This called for an examination of my relation to pop culture at a time when I was transitioning from childhood to adulthood.

This thesis document is divided into three Sections: Context, Evolution of the Work, and Conclusion. In the first section, I relay anecdotes from my childhood to offer a glimpse of the contemplative space I entered as I was developing my artistic idiom. Next, I list influences from the world of contemporary art in order to situate my work within a creative discourse that is very much of this moment. In the second section, I discuss the making of the artwork, describing how my process evolved as I confronted obstacles. In the final section, I offer both a reflection on the experience of creating this specific body of work and an analysis of the exhibition.

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SECTION 1 - Context

Personal History and Influences

It is 1980 and I am 7 years old, running through the woods behind the red and white house my parents are renting in rural East Syracuse. My older brother is wearing a gas mask from the local army and navy surplus store, and he is stalking my cousins and me, mimicking a killer in a slasher flick.

Later we will pretend to be army men fighting a nameless war with no known cause—a mere pretext to shoot fake guns at each other. My uncle was a soldier, and he met my aunt while stationed in Okinawa. My cousins shamelessly call their mother a mail-order bride. It is the first time I ever hear this term, which was probably taught to my cousins by racist neighborhood bullies who had learned it from their parents.

My childhood memories are structured like this. I recall specific events that thrilled me, like when my brother took on the masked persona of The Creeper and chased me through the woods. However, a mist formed by time obstructs my visual recollection of these experiences. My memories are crowded with images, sounds and scents from that era. Our house smelled like wood varnish and sweet cereal. I can see He-Man and Star Wars toys scattered on the floor of my room next to Elfquest comics and Dungeons and Dragons game modules. Hanna-Barbera and Sid and Marty Kroft populate my Technicolor backdrop with their fantastic menageries. I hear chart topping rock songs by Journey and Van Halen.

I consider these memories to be distinctly American not only because of the specific pop culture fragments that are embedded within them, but also because of my emotional relationship to those fragments. When I remember certain images from that time, I recall how I felt when I was young and the world was magical and limitless.

I wonder though if my behavior during these developmental years was also distinctly American. As children, my peers and I acted out scenes from American films and television shows. It was a type of role-playing that prepared us for scripted interactions with coworkers and strangers in our adult life. My current identity as a white American male and as an artist is deeply influenced by American escapist culture.

When I began to draw seriously, I pored over Elfquest, my favorite comic book, in an effort to understand how the marks were made. I aimed to mimic the artist's manner of rendering the hair of both the male and female characters, which was always long and wavy. Attempts at copying those marks were consistently met with failure and frustration.

Looking back, I realize I just needed someone to tell me that the inker used a brush and not a ballpoint pen. As a child, I did not understand the importance of using the right tool for the job. I was not even aware that there was a toolbox for making art. Regardless of my mother almost naming me Vincent after van Gogh, no one in my family was an artist. As far as I am aware I am the first Durgee that ever stretched a canvas.

When I look at the panels of an Elfquest comic today, I easily find the images I used to practice with, and that heavy sense of frustration rushes back; but so does the thrill of discovering an artistic image with the power to transport me to other worlds. My urge to make art began there.

The 1980s marked the beginning of an artistic journey that shaped much of my identity. The type of art I was most familiar with back then was genre illustration. As I approached adulthood, I realized that adults could make a living by creating paintings of dragons and starships. At Syracuse University I earned a BFA in illustration and shortly afterwards scored a few low-paying illustration assignments for small press fantasy and horror publishers. Painting realistic fantasy images, however, was much more tedious than I had anticipated. I soon lost my fire, with no significant paycheck to account for the work I had produced.

It was not until I discovered the punk band, Lightning Bolt, and subsequently the art collective known as Fort Thunder, that my interest in making art was rekindled.

A. Fort Thunder and Brian Chippendale

Fort Thunder was established in Rhode Island in the late 1990s by a group of Rhode Island School of Design alumni, mostly trained as printmakers and cartoonists. They were connected to the local punk/noise music scene, operating as an art collective under the D.I.Y. principles of that community. The converted warehouse they lived in became their venue for musical performances and the mounting of art exhibitions.

Though several artists made up the original group, childish imagery and tacky color palettes became their unifying mode of expression. Punk wizards inhabited psychedelic landscapes within drawings that lacked the refined craftsmanship usually found in fantasy art. There was such a deliberate primitiveness in techniques and materials that their artistic merit could have been overlooked, and yet these young artists eventually made a splash with their inclusion in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, drawing attention of several prominent art critics. Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* opined that: "The 2002 Biennial, almost entirely shaped

before Sept. 11, is American in a different way, one that has absolutely nothing to do with patriotism but has at least something to do with a spiritual history, from the transcendentalist 19th century to the psychedelic 60s to the standing-here-wondering now." (Cotter 2002)

It is difficult to understand how Fort Thunder reflected on our shared spiritual history, because for all the dizzying content, little has been said, either by the creators or the art critics, about intentionality. There is a clear reference to childhood in the recognizable images of cartoon characters and a 1980s design aesthetic in form and color, but it is subverted. So much of their art is like Lisa Frank illustrations gone awry. (figure 1)

In 2006, Brian Chippendale (born 1973), one of the founders of Fort Thunder, published a comic book called *Ninja* in which he incorporated old action comics he had drawn in sixth grade with surreal adult drawings, revealing a direct link to the formation of his visual language. As ripe as this process is for psychoanalysis, no one touched it. Reviewers of the book typically anchored their conclusions on its formal qualities.

Douglas Wolk of *Salon* wrote, "Chippendale is fascinated by patterns, both of design and of behavior, and he'll often find a visual gesture he likes — overlapping whorls, thin horizontal stripes, tiny matrices of black and white triangles — and fanatically repeat it until it all but devours everything else in his compositions." (Wolk 2007)

This could easily describe the meditative doodles found in the margins of a sixth grade student's math notebook. In fact, it is hard to tell if Wolk is talking about Chippendale's adult marks or the original drawings he made as a child.

Whether the subversion of childhood nostalgia is in need of deeper critique is not as much an issue as the fact that Chippendale and his peers have been allowed to create in a space void of real critical analysis. The privilege of a white American artist is evident in the ease in

which he can steer the dialog towards style over content. It could be described as camp if the influence of Fort Thunder had not permeated so much of contemporary design and fashion.

Many white Americans are descended from colonialists, linking them to a shameful heritage of cultural acquisition and appropriation. They stole treasures from conquered people and placed their most significant artifacts in museums. Manifest Destiny wiped out entire nations of tribal people, erased their history, and institutionalized their craftwork like spoils of war.

As a white painter, I struggle with my place of privilege, but also accept it as an inescapable facet of my identity. As a child I was interested in the commercial products of non-white cultures, like breakdancing and Anime. Though this mirrors post-colonialist obsessions with cultural artifacts from foreign people, it was also a way of filling the cultural vacuum I experienced in a working class, white American suburbia.

Chippendale works in a style that is ideal for a dialog about American childhoods. Art about memory is very personal, but it can also connect one to others. Nostalgia, as Svetlana Boym points out in her introduction to *The Future of Nostalgia*, is about something greater than the individual. "The consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales. Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory." (Boym 2001)

When I discovered Chippendale's art, I felt intimately connected to it, but I realize after years of reflection that it is a very superficial connection, much like boys bonding over their favorite comics. His marks remind me of the comics I used to draw when I was young, but there is no deeper context, nothing to contribute to our national biography. As an artistic identity, he has chosen one that is actually very American. He is the type of white, male artist that enjoys the

privileged position of formalist neutrality championed by American art critic, Harold Rosenberg, in his 1952 essay, *The American Action Painters*. Instead of talking about what it means to be a generation X American raised by television and comics, Chippendale makes his work entirely about the joy of mark making.

I wanted to find artists that communicated deeper insights about themselves and their society through artwork which, like that from Fort Thunder, utilized the fantastical visual language of children's cartoons and games. Though there are American artists that fill this role, an international survey revealed the most inspiring work.

Escapist consumerism is not unique to America, but there are distinctions in how people from varying nations relate to escapist imagery. For instance, Japan has a unique relationship of exchanging escapist culture with America. Rooted in recent history, it is a relationship that began with domination, with the first explosion of an atomic bomb in warfare, nicknamed Little Boy by the American Air Force that delivered it.

B. Superflat and Aya Takano

In the early 2000s, Japanese artist Takashi Murakami (born 1962) organized a series of exhibitions highlighting Japan's newest art movement, Superflat. The third and final show, called "Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture” was held at the Japan Society in New York City in 2005. Having already been interested in Murakami's work, I wanted to see more from his peers. What I saw at the exhibition changed my understanding of art.

Superflat is a postmodern style that combines elements of pop art and expressionism in a similar but more focused way than Fort Thunder's output. To say it is heavily influenced by

manga and anime falls short of the nuances of the style, and any mention of its relationship with Japan's subcultures demands a deeper understanding of Japanese society.

Though it may be reductive, a summary is in order. Otaku is a subculture of enthusiasts who pride themselves with their insular knowledge of certain aspects of popular culture while rejecting normal society; something like the punk nerds I identify with in America.

Superflat is as much an extension of Otaku culture as it is a political mode of artistic expression. It is a style that celebrates childhood imagery while emphasizing that imagery's affiliation with American culture. Post-war Japan modeled its cartoons and toys after Western studios such as Disney, but in a style that transformed them into something culturally unique.

"Otaku have reclaimed topics, imagery, and behavior that have long been taboo, and identified apocalypse as their common obsession and cartoons as their in-group language... They willfully embrace childish tastes and the feelings of safety they induce." (Munroe 2005)

As artists, they bring to their creative work a sinister undercurrent to reflect their nation's social ills. They use childhood visual elements to illustrate a society of forever children who are alienated by their past and privately yearning for a mature identity in the global sphere.

Where that subtle unease is mirrored in the neon skulls and frenetic music of America's Fort Thunder, there is an absence of reflection. Many American artists seem resistant to psychoanalysis, while Japan's Superflat artists expose and investigate their social ills, and with the Little Boy show, open a dialog to encourage healing.

As a child, Murakami's reaction to seeing the bombings on TV "was an ambiguous mixture of awe and remorse—His generation, raised in the 60s and 70s, watched as the memory of war was subsumed into (cute) media culture; with Little Boy, Murakami states that his purpose is *to go back to the origin of postwar trauma*." (Munroe 2005)

Aya Takano (born 1976) has a uniquely personal way of engaging with her generation's psychosis regarding life after the atomic bomb. For one, her paintings are utterly feminine. It is difficult to find male figures in her scenes. Much of her paintings are of female identities inhabiting utopias where they are free to exist without judgment. Of her work she writes:

"I think that they accentuate how I feel about science fiction, which is that it works like a strong drug, filling you with a sparkling inebriated feeling, and giving you a glimpse into a completely different kind of society, which might be the key to a freer existence."(Takano 2006)

I felt something like sparkling inebriation the first time my cousins came back from Japan with toys and comics. The artwork was so strange and beautiful, like treasure from another world. Certainly it was a type of science fiction that offered a glimpse into a different kind of society. It could be argued that my colonialist heritage had something to do with my fascination with these objects, but I like to think that my connection to fantasy and science fiction is a feeling shared by Takano, nuanced only by nationality and gender.

I left the Little Boy show inspired, and returned to my apartment to work on a new painting to be titled, *Keep on the Borderlands* (figure 2). I deliberately appropriated a scene from the cover of a well known Dungeons and Dragons game module and added colors and marks that were reminiscent of other visual styles from my childhood, namely graffiti and anime. I wanted to tap into the things that enriched my life when I was young. I considered the work to be more expressive than anything I had painted prior to it, but it lacked the honesty of Takano's work because I was simply referencing fascinating imagery from my youth without psychoanalyzing it, without expressing anything unique about myself.

I realize now that what Takano is explaining in conversations about her work is how escapist consumerism of Japan shaped her identity. This understanding of Takano's impulse to

paint helped me understand my own impulse. It gave me a clearer theme to reflect on while painting.

C. Jules de Balincourt

To find an American artist who straddles the line between Superflat and Fort Thunder I look to Jules de Balincourt (born 1972). Just as Takano uses art to express a longing for her version of Utopia, de Balincourt's art reveals a desire to find his tribe. His paintings are difficult to categorize as a whole because they seem to change style and content from work to work, with the marks themselves being the only distinguishing signifiers of a single artist's hand, but there are repeated ideas that allow for general groupings. One common idea de Balincourt explores is gatherings of people. He has painted rock concerts, communes, pagan rituals, crowded beach scenes, and business meetings. The identities of the people in his paintings vary in race and gender and in some cases are difficult to read because of a psychedelic treatment of color. Red and blue skinned people wearing only masks camp out on a rooftop overlooking a suburb in *Feast of Fools* (2004). The fact that camping is another repeated motif supports a guess that de Balincourt is reflecting on his nomadic childhood. He was born in Paris and spent much of his early years living in various cities across Europe. As a teenager, he resided in Southern California and joined the surf culture there. At the heart of his crowd paintings is his search for identity. The artist commented on his displacement in a recent interview: "I went from well-behaved Parisian parks to the Venice Beach boardwalk, where surfers, hippies, dropouts, gangsters, and skaters all collided in one place. It was freeing for me, and fascinating to

experience this at such a young age. And somehow I still feel a little bit like an outsider in both cultures... since I was never fully immersed in either." (Nickas 2005)

Similar ideas are conveyed in de Balincourt's map paintings, rough, often inaccurate depictions of the United States and Europe. In paintings like *U.S. World Studies II* (2005), he seems to be criticizing what he envisions is the worldview of the average American, a worldview proven to be not only globally ignorant, but uneducated in regards to national geography. According to a National Geographic Literacy Study conducted in 2006, only half of the 500 Americans could find New York or Ohio on a map.

de Balincourt's painting *Getting to No France* (2008) may be a comment on his detachment from his place of birth. It is clearly a map of Europe. In the center of each country is a colored bar which is either hiding the name of the country or exists to suggest that names are unnecessary for places we no longer inhabit. It could be something like my fog of memory. He remembers being a child in Paris, but the visuals of those memories are incomplete.

Jules de Balincourt's paintings are about an American experience specific to an outsider with a unique view of American identities. His life experience has shown him America from the outside and from within. I want my paintings to be considered honest expressions of a particular American identity, and de Balincourt's paintings offer an example of how it has been done successfully by one of my contemporaries.

Section II – Evolution of the Work

Like de Blaincourt I wanted my art to speak openly about my personal identity. Like Takano, I wanted the finished painting to be a welcoming entry to the fantastic wonderland of escapist landscapes that nurtured me, and like Chippendale I wanted to reconnect directly to the art I made when I was young, but in an honest reflection of my mature skills.

I approached the work for my thesis, *Snakes in the Nest,* with an abundance of visual references from the late 70s and early 80s, a time from my personal history that I feel holds the richest imagery. I also returned to the master painters that influenced the style of my fantasy illustrations. I studied the compositions and bold marks of Francisco Goya (born 1746), specifically in his Black Paintings, and I rediscovered the atmospheric color fields of J.M.W. Turner (born 1775). The haze of Turner's British landscapes was perfectly adaptable to my images of dreams and memories.

I soon found that the act of painting was superseding my thematic intentions, and my subconscious was directing the marks. The result resembled the fog of memory more than any direct representation of cartoons or toys. The process was reminiscent of the freedom of creating art during my formative years. Having learned the trick of imitating the appearance of hair with a precise turn of the brush, I found that I could not stop making those marks, and I repeated them regularly in my compositions.

Painted in oils, the five paintings that embodied the majority of my thesis included a triptych. The selected paintings had been initially designed as individual works in a series. During the final thesis review, I relayed concerns of limited gallery space to my thesis

committee. Michael Amy, my associate advisor, suggested that three of my paintings be arranged as a triptych, playfully referring to them as the *Garden of Earthly Disgust*, a reference to Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

As a triptych, my three paintings occupied the space in a visually cohesive way, their close proximity emphasizing their aesthetic connections. Marks and colors on the edge of one painting inadvertently smear into the next, as if planned.

The triptych also portrayed a creation narrative. Their arrangement in the gallery forced the viewer to approach them from right to left. In that order the paintings began with *The Griffin's Egg* (figure 3), which depicts a fragmented landscape of drifting forms, some recognizable, with shimmering sky and water visible through the gaps. An eyeball hovers near an obscured space helmet. There are marks that look like graffiti or kanji and marks that look like flora. These objects seem unformed, as if still developing. Many creation stories begin with chaos, so I presented this piece as the beginning of my identity, the primordial soup of the experiences that made me.

Second in the triptych was the central piece, *Cyclops* (figure 4), which evokes Odilon Redon's painting, *The Cyclops*. In Redon's piece, a one eyed creature is watching over an exposed female figure. In my painting, the figure is ambiguous, rising from a flesh toned mound. It is impossible to tell its identity. This figure, little more than a head of hair seen from behind, represents the unconstructed identity whose formation is overseen by the eye, but the figure is also confronting the eye.

In recent years, the cyclopean eyeball has become prominent in many of my paintings. It began as a pair of eyes from a childhood nightmare. They belonged to the character, Snuffaluffagus, from the children's TV show, *Sesame Street*. In my nightmare the eyes were

disembodied and huge, with long black eyelashes dangling in front of the pupils. The eyes were peering into my bedroom window, watching me. When I ran to another room to hide, the eyes would follow me to the windows there. In fact, the horror of the nightmare was born from the anxiety of being watched relentlessly by an alien intelligence.

The triptych ends with *Take the Long Way Home* (figure 5). The title of the painting, taken from a song by the rock band, Supertramp, suggests a journey that brings you back to where you came from. In it the eyeball is wearing a blonde wig reminiscent of the elven curls I had practiced drawing when I was young. The ambiguous identity in *Cyclops* has evolved into an eyeball, or else the cyclops is masquerading as an artificial identity. Since the eye represents society, then both scenarios can be true. The unformed identity is destined to become a watching eye regardless of which costume it wears. I believe that the act of policing the social behavior of others is learned through observation and developed during childhood.

My childhood is remembered as a place of safety and discovery, like a nest, but as an adult I can reflect on how much of my personal development was guided by escapist consumerism, with much of my learned behavior a result of imitating adults in films and on television. Judith Butler's seminal essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* distinguishes gender identity as "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo." (Butler 2003) Citing the works of social theorists and anthropologists she proposes that the gender binary is a dominating model that defines both superficial and internal aspects of one's identity regardless of nationality. I agree that gender appears to be a construction aggressively policed by society, especially during childhood. The games I played with my brother and my cousins helped me experiment with performances of masculinity, but the experiences were confused by society's conflicting portrayals of men. In looking for male

identities to imitate on television, I was faced with the hyper-macho template of an American male in Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* and a blurred gender template in rock stars like David Lee Roth or Kiss. The cartoons of that time further confounded identification.

Androgyny was an accepted way to present one's identity in the early 80's, especially within consumerist entertainment like the videos on MTV, but also in the imported cartoons I enjoyed. I do not mean to suggest that there has been some nefarious effect on me from having been confused by the survey of male identities I tailored myself after. I am simply understanding myself better through self-psychoanalysis, understanding why I am fascinated by certain visual media from my childhood.

Still, these reflections on American identities can lead to disconcerting conclusions. Even today, prepubescent children, who are naturally androgynous, are coerced into a gender binary. American parents pass on consumerist behavior, branding their children with clothing and toys and thereby engaging in a consumer culture's ritual of an identity construction which ensures procreation. According to modern sociologists it is a ritual that increasingly manifests behavioral problems with each generation since the baby boomers. (Schor 2005)

Sobered by feminist theories on the gender binary and refusing to ignore how this social construction relates to my identity and therefore my art, I was inspired to create a nest form. I wondered what a bird's nest made entirely out of children's clothing would look like. As I developed the idea I realized that I wanted to include a metaphor for the danger of consumerist culture within a nest that is supposed to offer safety to developing youth. I decided that snakes would make an interesting addition to the sculptural nest.

I selected an assortment of boys' and girls' clothes from thrift stores which were visually gendered by colors and images. It was not a difficult task. Girls' shirts and dresses were

consistently decorated with flowers and Disney princesses. The boys' apparel was decorated with military camouflage, monsters, and sports team logos.

I created a large bowl frame out of iron rods and intertwined the chemically stiffened clothing to form a nest large enough for a human child to sleep in. I then fabricated a serpent out of clay and used it to make a mold from which I created twenty serpents out of flexible polyurethane foam. The serpents are posed in a way that indicates their emergence from the folds of children's clothes, their bodies intertwining to finish the uppermost layer of the nest. I used the hair-like marks in my paintings as an aesthetic connection between my sculptural work and my paintings, applying their movement to three-dimensional forms like the clothing and snakes in *Ouroboros* (figure 6). I had hoped that the interwoven clothing would be evocative of the marks in my paintings, as if the nest were an object that had somehow been brought out of the memory landscape into the real world.

In the painting, *Someday We'll Find It* (figure 7), there is a masked figure wearing red lipstick with wavy blonde hair falling past the shoulders. The lipstick and hair feel uncanny. There is a sense that, like the mask, the treatment of the hair and lips are simply there to hide an identity and not to emphasize a feminine gender. I have heard viewers liken the figure to a superhero in drag. The image comes from a1970s anime called *Gatchaman* in Japan, which was translated into English for American television by Hanna-Barbera Productions. I remember a specific experience I had with this show as a child in 1980. In the story, the main characters catch the villain, Zoltar, and unmask him after which it is revealed that Zoltar is, in fact, a woman with long blonde hair wearing lip gloss. One of the baffled protagonists actually describes their enemy as *a beautiful blonde*. Until that moment, Zoltar spoke with a masculine voice and was regarded with male pronouns. Immediately after the unmasking, Zoltar escapes,

still chuckling like a man as he runs off. In the following episode there is no mention of Zoltar's revealed gender, and the character continues to speak in a man's voice.

The incident was so peculiar that it stayed with me into adulthood. It has been the topic of conversation with my brother who remembers the episode. Years ago, I found original Japanese episodes of *Gatchaman* with English subtitles. Among them was the episode where Zoltar was unmasked. In the original script the characters are shocked by the villains identity not because she is a woman but because it is someone they know. In fact, the gender of the exposed villain is never brought into the discussion. Zoltar's unmasking was not originally meant to reveal his true gender. I believe that Zoltar's confusing appearance was an example of the effeminate man, a common type of villain in 70s and 80s anime.

What I had witnessed as a child was a glitch in our cultural exchange. The American translators simply did not know how to react to the villain's androgyny. This is a result of American culture's devotion to not only a strict gender binary, but to a rift between the extreme sexual overtones of adult entertainment, and the absolute lack of sexuality exhibited in children's entertainment. As Butler observes in her essay, American children are urged to behave a certain way associated with their physical sex so that their performance of the gender binary promises the reproduction of their society (Butler 2003). However, as a child I was never given the proper context for what my prescribed gender performance was preparing me for. I never had a talk with my parents about procreation. My childhood friends and I had a class in grade school that covered the logistics of copulation, though it was met mostly by embarrassed giggles since we had already found enough clues in our parent's films and television shows, if not in our fathers' adult magazines, to have made some sense of it all. This example of how consumerist culture

permeates American society has lead me to consider the psychological meaning behind some of the prominent elements in my landscapes.

The amorphous clouds in paintings like *The Griffin's Egg* do more than represent the haziness of my personal memories, they illustrate the absence of needed information in our collective memory. Within the painting is a landscape of rifts and caves that made my journey to adulthood incomplete. So even as I celebrate the images that emerge from my fondest memories of childhood, my art can also be seen as a criticism of how our American culture sometimes fails to nurture our childhood identities. Like Takano's Japan, America remains a society of forever children.

Section III - Conclusion

On reflection, my thesis exhibit was confined to space limitations that challenged my presentation of the finished pieces. I was persuaded to adjust my body of work by removing digital prints as well as a sculptural eyeball.

That said, editing the work down to what was presented may have strengthened the overall exhibition. The triptych was a result of negotiating with the exhibition space. Arranging the three paintings in that way forced a narrative reading of the joined paintings, and revealed formal connections that could not be seen otherwise.

My history with painting begins with fantasy illustration, contributing in a small way to the escapist consumerist culture that I now contemplate as I reflect on my thesis. The techniques I learned as an illustrator were utilized in the creation of new paintings as I attempted to create a visual map of my personal history. The resulting fragmentation of styles and forms feels almost like collage. Though this disjointed presentation of styles falls short of accurately depicting my memories, the process has sparked a fresh understanding of them. I will never stop growing as an artist. What I learned from the creation of these paintings will be instrumental in my new endeavors.

Ouroboros was the weakest component of the final presentation of the thesis. Its failure to connect visual with the paintings may have been a matter of placement, something I should have dedicated more consideration to. As a stand-alone piece however, it did have some merit. The texture of the snakes' scales contrasted nicely with the smooth fabric and vibrant colors of

the clothing. I would like to continue with fabric and foam sculptures, perhaps incorporating them more directly with future paintings.

During my Thesis Defense, I was asked what I expected the viewer to take away from art that is hinged on so many personal memories. The question seemed obvious, and yet I had not really given it deep consideration. Once I was put on the spot, I struggled with it. At best, I hope that my work connects the viewer through recognition to an intimate part of myself. I believe that art should reflect one's culture in a specific time, a responsibility that began with cave paintings. To me, visual art is strongest when it expresses something profound about humanity which cannot be expressed through words. With my thesis, I wanted to begin a contemplation about the cultural development of American identities. I initiated it by considering my own identity as a male American artist. By making the content of the work personal, I was able to use the process of art making as a means for self-psychoanalysis. That journey was augmented by scholarly research which led me to fresh conclusions regarding the impact of escapist consumerism on my American identity.

Snakes in the Nest is a display of dreams and recollections. It is an intimate expression of how I have been influenced since childhood by popular culture and mass media. I am offering this visual experience for inclusion in the current art discourses that relate to identity.

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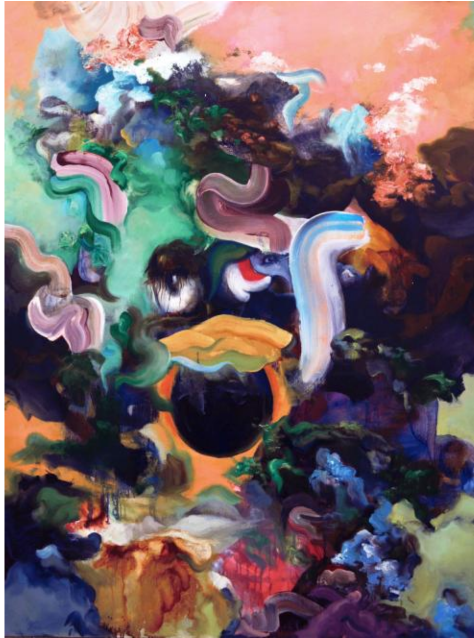
figure 1

figure 2

Keep on the Borderlands, 2005, Shane Durgee

figure 3



The Griffin's Egg, 2016, Shane Durgee

figure 4

Cyclops, 2014, Shane Durgee

figure 5

Take the Long Way Home, 2015, Shane Durgee

figure 6

Ouroboros (Snakes in the Nest),2016, Shane Durgee

figure 7

Someday We'll Find It, 2016, Shane Durgee