

5-22-2013

Exitus Acta Probat

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Rochester Institute of Technology

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School for American Crafts
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts**

**EXITUS ACTA PROBAT
ZACHARY JOHN TAILLIE
5/22/13**

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ABSTRACT

EXITUS ACTA PROBAT

ZACHARY JOHN TAILLIE

There are many ways in which to tell a story. Through the years humans have told stories by speaking them, writing them and through visual art forms. Stories can define and/or reveal the limits of a person, a place, a movement, or a thought. My art work has been inspired by human stories. My thinking has been shaped by events which I feel the need to communicate through my work. I am not alone in understanding the many meanings of things at the different and deeper levels thought.

My thesis work is generated from a multitude of sources that over the years have influenced the way I think and live. Influences such as Homer's *Odyssey* have taught and then often reminded me that man has had to contend with hardship, greed, and love over a period of a lifetime. I have also been influenced by early American history, and my need for patriotic pursuits such as reenacting one of the United States bloodiest wars, which has often been misunderstood by so many.

My art forms explore my own personal story. The story of what I have learned, and what I need to say, relates to the world around me. This thesis seeks to address the multiple influences that shape and define who we are. The body of work is a collection of stories containing very literal and metaphorical meaning, which is rich with hidden symbolism that will become apparent to those willing to remove the layers of imagery.

EVOLUTION OF MY WORK

For me, the development of my work took place over a long period of time. The search for my history as well as my family's roots has helped me to come to know and enjoy history. My love for history has led me on a quest which has since become an obsession. That love of history eventually came to be one with my artwork, setting the stage for my thesis. The greatest struggle for me has been learning to take what I have learned from the past and relate it to what is relevant in the present in the form of current art forms.

Over the past few years, my work began as a tribute to historical forms that have certain connotations, meanings, and functions. Early in the creative process I began by re-creating ancient vessels such as amphora and kraters out of metal rather than the original clay or glass materials. The scale of my forms was diminutive in comparison to their original counterparts. My intention for creating these metal replicas was to take an object with a designation such as "historical relic" and re-assign a new meaning by changing its properties and perspective. If one were to remove the artifact (in this case let's say an ancient amphora in a museum), from its pedestal does this change our perception of its function? Is it still an artifact? I chose my new miniature metal amphorae and reassigned them a new role by placing them on a person as jewelry, no longer a vessel, or an artifact.

I began to try and bring art forms from the past and transform them and personally re-interpret their meanings or functions. I chose language and words of significant meaning to my contemporaries and myself, and then assigned those words as titles to several of the small vessels. If a vessel was originally intended to carry an object or liquid, could it contain a new idea or thought? Though this challenge proved to be interesting, it was

also limiting. Using only a few vessels combined with certain words was making it difficult to tell a story. My perspective on what needed to be said was grander than the limitations of my few art forms and words. I then realized that the art forms on the pedestals could be re-interpreted and changed by any means that might help tell a story. I discovered new ways to explain the nature of things. The amphora was no longer just an amphora; it could become whatever I chose it to be by the context in which I placed it. My art forms were no longer limited by the assumption that it had to be something crafted or created myself. I could take any object that had pre-conceived notions surrounding it, and give it a new meaning.

When I communicate thoughts between people, I do so with a sequence of events lined up in order to keep what I am saying cohesive. I desire my work to also communicate this way so that the stories and events connect with each other. I create a dialogue. Each individual composition is intended to tell a unique and select story, such as greed, love, war and loss. When viewed together this body of work would all relate to each of the other pieces within the collection. As individuals we are not defined by one point of view, therefore this story has many facets.

INSPIRATION

The inspiration for my art derives from my passion for history and my love of story telling. I am inspired by the stories that make us human. American culture tells us stories that define who and what we are as a people, and what we should want. As human beings we use stories to relate what we know and what we want to convey to others. I am inspired by the stories that define who we are. Therefore, I pursue the telling of these stories to relate what I know with what I would like others to know. I do this by visually

conveying my messages.

Noah Webster is one individual that set up guidelines that I like to mirror in my work. Webster was one of the founding fathers of the United States and the author of America's first "National" Dictionary. He believed that in order to tell a uniquely American story, we needed to develop a unique national culture and language. According to Webster "A national language is a national tie, and what country wants it more than America?" (Lepore, 5). Webster published his first dictionary or, spelling book, in 1783 in order to set apart our story from that of other countries stories. Webster hoped to bind Americans together with common grammar, spelling and language. Just as Anselm Kiefer has been accused of being a Nazi for his nationalistic ideas, Webster was accused by historians of perverting his nationalism into an isolationist/racist agenda. While Webster may have wanted to use his national language as a way of isolating and identifying non-Americans out of his new American nation, his dedication and ideas can not be ignored.

My work is also inspired by the art of Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer's use of nationalistic motifs and imagery as well as his use of lead inspires the motifs in my own work. Kiefer also speaks harshly about Germany's past, in the same way that I want to speak about my country's actions. As Germano Celant states "He tackles Germany's past with the awareness of touching on a subject that is wretched and unfortunate, inauspicious and calamitous for his culture." (Celant, 14) Celant continues by saying that Kiefer feels as do I that "Art, if it is to be really effective and truthful, must have the strength to face up to all dramas and tragedies, to face them and transcend them." (Celant, 14) I love Kiefer's illusions to lead as an alchemical agent. As Celant asserts, Kiefer uses the alchemical idea of lead as a symbol of subterranean energy; the "impregnating material of all

transmutations.” (Celant, 18) Lead is something that was thought to be transformable into gold. Alchemy follows two common thoughts. The first being the transmutation of base metal into gold, which is the ultimate goal in the process of perfection. The second being that a spiritual regeneration or transmutation of the soul occurs. I find it intriguing that alchemy can be viewed as a chemical process or as a spiritual process in the disguise of science. The idea of transmutation of metal and spirit apply well to the work that I have done using lead. Lead as a weapon can be changed into lead as a toy with very little and subtle work.

Another source of inspiration for me was Homer, in particular, his poem the *Odyssey*. I find it amazing that over 2,000 years have passed since this story was written and it is still loved and relevant. The reason? This writing speaks about man's trials, his faults and his loves. It still *resonates* with today's reader. As D.S. Carne-Ross states in his writings on Odysseus, “the odyssey is an amenable poem open to all comers in search of delight, and from antiquity has lent itself to a wide range of interpretation.” (Carne-Ross, X) I admire how Homer sends Odysseus on a quest to find what he desires. Odysseus longs to return to his home, his wife, and his son. In order to do so he must contend with all manner of human faults and misgivings. He deals with greed, revenge and love. Through these tribulations he learns and grows as a person, just like we grow as individuals. I desire my work to speak about the trials and tribulations of man so that others can view them, understand them, and perhaps alter the course of their own destinies. As Carne-Ross mentions, “The *Odyssey* is rich in the social nuances and psychological delicacies” (Carne-Ross, IX) of Homers age. Carne-ross calls The Odyssey a great narrative genre in the way that my work conveys a story of a journey or

several stories depending on how one views the collection.

Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus has to contend with escaping from the embrace of the goddess Kalypso, defeating the Kyklopes the giant one eyed man eating monster, Sirens and a host of would be suitors for his grieving wife. His journey brings Odysseus back and forth across the then-known world. I do not try to claim that my work tells stories as grand as Odysseus, it's more that story that is the important part of my work. I desire a spectator of my work to visually experience the same sort of narrative that a reader of Homer would experience when reading Odysseus's story.

My own personal experiences as an observer of history have greatly influenced the themes of my work as well, and listening to family stories of ancestors has shaped the ideas that I need to share. My art is influenced by my blind grandfather who used music to express his happiness and frustrations with the world. He had to find some way to communicate his story, and music set him free. This thesis is also influenced by the bitter silence and hatreds that another family member felt towards a long defeated enemy he had fought in the Pacific so long ago. Torture, death and violence haunted him for more than sixty years. My experience as a re-enactor of American history has influenced this work as well. The American Civil War and American history during the Victorian age has influenced the looks and the textures of this artwork through an aesthetic I find particularly timeless and appealing. Whether my interest in the past is from researching a long forgotten relative that served the Army of the Potomac or just obsessive curiosity I do not know, but the influence it has over my work is undeniable.

I see my work as a commentary on the experiences of the common man throughout history. I am inspired to create work that lets the viewer know who I am, what I have

seen, and what I desire them to know. Without addressing where we need to go, without looking at where we have been, one might forget and thus repeat. I want to pursue knowledge and challenge and influence. This work addresses the everyday struggles we have had with adversity, trying to find a place of comfort in an ever-changing world. My thesis art is influenced by the richly patriotic experiences that have ebbed and flowed during my own lifetime, as well as the experiences that have defined previous generations. My art is also inspired by a sense of place. The role I play is that of an average citizen in modern day America. This time in America is unique unto itself, but the United States of the past is never far away with its influence.

In displaying my work, I wanted it to be regarded with some spectacle. One of the biggest influences on the presentation of my work has been the legendary showman P.T. Barnum. Prior to opening his circus, Barnum ran one of New York's most lucrative attractions. Barnum's American Museum was a marvel in marketing and showmanship that caught the attention of a nation with its bizarre spectacles and cutting edge advertising. Barnum knew that at the start of his career he saw that everything depended on getting people to think, to talk, and become curious and excited over and about rare spectacle.

Red velvet-covered pedestals in the presentation of my thesis work and the inclusion of raw meat in the work "Dira necessitas" channeled that Barnumian attention grabbing magic. I wanted to use Barnum's techniques to draw the viewer in and force them to think. Also as a proud patriot, Barnum did not simply use his museum as a means of monetary gain; he created it in order to make it one of our young country's greatest institutions for the development of American culture. For twenty-five cents patrons could

see Barnum's attractions such as the Fe-jee (Barnum's Spelling) mermaid, a secretly fabricated fish-monkey, or attend exhibits promoting temperance reform and Shakespearian drama. I produced my work to match Barnum's attractions combining sensational entertainment with gaudy display and instructional and moral teachings. The inspiration to use Latin in the names of my work relates to a similar trick used by Barnum in his museum. By adding a confusing or important title to something, you have elevated it above what the ordinary person is used to seeing. Latin to the ordinary person is a bygone language used by priests and doctors, making this language a mystery to everyone else. The item or event displayed is now a curiosity worth looking at and understanding. The man who understands, or thinks he understands it is superior to his contemporaries.

To Barnum the story show was just as important as what he was showing. Often the item being displayed by Barnum was far inferior to the story that he attached to it to generate interest! It is the Barnum story or pitch that I emulate to reproduce in my compositions. A great example of Barnum's story telling ability is an ad that he placed in New York papers to generate interest in the Fejee Mermaid hoax.

THE MERMAID AND OTHER WONDERFUL SPECIMENS OF THE ANIMAL CREATION.-The public are respectfully informed that, in accordance with numerous and urgent solicitations from scientific gentlemen in this city, Mr. J. Griffen, proprietor of the Mermaid, recently arrived from Pernambuco, S.A., has consented to exhibit it to the public, positively for one week only! This animal was taken near the Fejee islands, and purchased for a large sum by the present proprietor; for the Lyceum of Natural History in London, and is exhibited for this short period more for the gratification of the public than

for gain. The proprietor having been engaged for several years in various parts of the world in collecting wonderful specimens in natural History.

(P.T. Barnum, 238)

THE WORK

Work 1.

The first work in my collection is the map titled *Alea Iacta Est-The Die Is Cast* . Upon first inspection this composition is a rather self-explanatory work, small toy soldiers are carrying flags that are crafted from U.S. currency. The surface of this map is covered with additional money in the form of US coins. The map is reminiscent of the type of map that one would find either in a war council, or alternately, on a game board. Here, the transmutation between weapon and toy begins. As a person further studies the map, they discover that the money on the map is concentrated on particular geographical areas. In total, the surface of the map board is covered with 237 coins and 13 toy lead soldiers. The lead soldiers are cast from pouring molten lead into antique lead molds. Ancient cultures used games, such as backgammon, as a means of settling belligerent disagreements, and as I look at our culture, it would sometimes appear as if the powers of the world regard conflict as a game. Human beings have used the game of acquisition for our own greedy desires, and in the process, have disregarded borders, and laws. The more we have acquired, the more we need to maintain our grasp on what is already in our hands. This is a game that perpetuates itself to no end. The human race has developed a self-sustaining game of acquisition. The symbolism embedded in *Alea Iacta Est* is

abundant. The lead references malice, weapons, poison and belligerence. This is physically manifested in that it has literally taken the forms of soldiers. However, the lead soldiers also represents youth in that form of a childhood toy, which is a metaphor for how we use our young men and women to play the global “game” of conflict. The use of currency as the material in the flags represents the ideas that cultures have embraced as important. These flags also can be easily rendered with the money of any nation that has foreign interests. The hands of the Western world are not clean. That is why the work is relatable to many people regardless of nationality. Conversely, the image of the American dollar speaks as loudly to other cultures as to our own. The U.S. dollar has become an international icon for success, greed, and power. The coinage on the map consists of 237 coins. I have added one coin for each year that the United States has been in existence. For each succeeding year another coin can be added thus continuing the game indefinitely.

The use of lead for the soldiers is reminiscent of similar lead soldiers depicted in Anselm Kiefer's work *Die Überschwemmung Heidelbergs I*, 1969- where Kiefer combines images confronting his country's past in order to understand and explain these atrocities to us. I desire my work to bring forth an awareness of the past for my viewers and to confront them in the same way as Kiefer forces Germans to face their problems and work towards transcending them.

Work 2.

Dura Necessitas or *Grim Necessity* consists of a large apothecary or drug store scale. On one side of the scale I have placed thirty coins, on the opposite side of the scale one

pound of raw meat. The thirty coins used in the work are U.S. currency. The coins can represent our own willingness to accept bounties or state funded incentives to do the bidding of others. The meat is a pound of liver. The intention being that this blackened and bloody image will shock and disgust the viewer into realizing that the prices we sell things for is not always appealing, nor is it in most cases healthy for us.

The object of *Dira Necessitas* is to reveal to the viewer the price for which we are willing to sell ourselves. Every person has a price. People are willing to go to great lengths to get what we want. Each person has his or her own motivations, whether it is money, sex, or power. For example, in the Bible, Judas betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. The decision is ultimately ours to make, but the price is always going to be offered by someone, and the cost will be high. This lesson is intended to be a reminder of how carefully we should make these decisions. The pound of flesh is also a reference to the sacrificial offerings that are found throughout the *Odyssey*. One such offering is found in Book III where Telemakhos offers an invocation to Athena.

Thrasymedes in a flash

Swung the axe, at one blow cutting through

The neck tendons.

The carcass now sank down, and they disjointed

Shoulder and thigh bone, wrapping them in fat,

Two layers, folded, with raw strips of flesh.

These offerings Nestor burned on the split-wood fire

and moistened with red wine.

(Homer, 48)

The choice to use found objects in this composition allowed me to say what was needed therefore making it unnecessary to create any new objects to say what I wanted. By combining three objects from everyday life, I was able to convey all that was needed. Separately, these objects mean little, but combined, the story becomes one of great magnitude.

Work 3.

Disjecta Membra-The Scattered Remains consists of a large copper tube that has been formed over a steel stake thus representing a large caliber shell casing that has been damaged or detonated with violent force. Issuing forth from the shell are the remains of hundreds of damaged lead toy soldier arms, legs, and torsos. The lead soldiers are again cast from antique toy molds. The shell itself has been warped and damaged by excessive hammer blows and then tempered and blackened by filling the cavity with gunpowder and detonating it. The resulting explosion created a realistic burn feature as well as a strong odor of incinerated powder that I intended the viewer to experience as they approached the work. Here, the lead toys are all badly damaged so that they can be visibly seen as something that has been used to hurt or be hurt. As such, *Disjecta Membra* speaks about the human cost of conflict. Often, when humans wage these weapons against each other, its forgotten, or not realized, that the result of this decision is very often destructive and damaging to fellow men. There is always a human cost to war. The average man or woman never experiences the blood and nor smells the acrid aromas of burnt destruction, and thus our detachment results in our own belligerence. I have used the lead again to depict the soldiers/toys as a nod to Kiefer again as well as an elusion to

Alchemy. The lead depicts the transmutation of the darker elements into a sublime light. The theory being that this work of arts story can transmutate into something lighter and positive or luminous as apposed to the harsh reality of its broken and poisonous nature.

Work 4.

Presentation of Arbiter Eligatiae-Judge In Matters Of Taste consists of a large balance scale constructed of brass, with a patina applied to give it an aged appearance. On the top of the scale rests the depiction of the head of fate. The face is created by chasing the design into the brass. It is a sinister fate that keeps watch over our decisions and allows us to topple over and destroy ourselves when we step too far in any one direction. On one side of the scale I have placed several small vessels made of porcelain and silver. I fashioned these vessels into the shape of containers such as amphora and craters. These are vessel shapes that have become familiar to us through our association with Greek history. The intention of the vessels is to transport one's hopes and desires within them. Man's hopes and desires have not changed over the past two thousand years. On the surface of these vessels are carved several words denoting subjects or things that have a positive influence on me, such as "Artwork, Home, Sex, and Comfort".

On the opposite side of this scale are goldsmith weights of various sizes. Upon closer inspection, these weights are made of copper and can be opened from the bottom to reveal an item or items symbolic to the markings on the exterior of the weight. On the exterior I have replaced the weight measures with words and dates alluding to the various weights or burdens we carry as individuals. I, like others, am weighed down by the pressures of life such as paying bills, the fear of death, and the consequences of uncontrolled anger. These weights balance precariously against the lighter vessels on the

opposite side of the scale. Should someone place too many of any one thing on either side of the scale, the entire apparatus would come falling down. All this is done under the callous eye of an indifferent Fate. The intention here is to speak about the ways in which life is balanced. Any excess in any one direction can lead to our downfall or destruction. The idea of light and darkness is played out in this work in the same alchemical way that lead transmutes into gold. The creation of another story based on the transformation of my fears and delights, lightness and darkness is left up to the viewer to develop.

Work 5.

A Contrario-From A Contrary Position

This work has several optical devices assembled from various materials such as copper, lead, steel, and glass. In the immediate area preceding the monoscopes is a small box containing several cards on which are printed images that portray fears and desires. By taking one of the cards, the viewer is encouraged by means of instructions posted next to the card box, to place the cards into one of the various monoscopes. Each monoscope is different in construction. The length and diameter of the viewing device create subtle yet different viewing experiences.

The monoscopes are reminiscent of antique, stereoscopic devices that were once a popular entertainment found in Victorian-era parlors. The principle behind the stereoscopic viewer was that an image, or rather a dual image that was printed on a card could be placed into the viewing device and a primitive version of 3-D could be achieved. The premise was that despite the fact that the ordinary person would probably never be able to visit the exotic locations printed on the cards, they would be able to experience them visually. I printed onto card stock a series of images consisting of visual

representations of “fears” and “desires”. The images used are about money, sexuality, death, mortality, and power, to name a few. When a person selects a monoscope they can then pull a card and place it into one of the devices in the same fashion they would a stereoscopic card. The resultant image thus is altered. Only a portion of what is printed on the card is visible. Thus what you get to see is never the same nor does a person ever see one of the fears or desires in its entirety. The monoscope forces participants to see things quite literally from a different point of view.

When looking at another person's fears or desires, one does not see the entire picture. The monoscopes challenge us to look at the subject matter in a different way than a person expects, thus reminding us that one can never fully understand one another. We can only ever know parts of one another and trust each other as best we can. While my fears may be another's desires, my perception of something will inevitably be different than the next person's. Thus the difference in the viewing tools never allows the same image to be experienced by more than one person in the same way.

The central piece to the collection of monoscopes is the glass device. This monoscope has no interchangeable card or picture. The device is an opaque glass tube with a fixed interior image. The glass was cut and sandblasted on the inside. On the exterior of the monoscope is an eyepiece. Underneath the eyepiece is written, “*Hoc Erat In Votis,*” which, when translated means “This was among my prayers.” Above this is a chased silver eye. The image of the eye is the left eye, traditionally associated as the eye of logic and reason. The eye is a symbolic reminder that no matter what we do, we often believe that there is a higher power that watches over all our decisions. That power may be God or one that may be within us. It is up to us to keep our decisions logical and reasonable.

Placing this monoscope to your eye reveals an image of another eye on the interior of the piece. The nature of the reflected eye and its meaning is intended to vary from person to person. Is it the eye of God? Is it the eye of your lover? Is it your own eye? Only the viewer holds the answer to this personal and intimate question. No one else is entitled to be a part of the same experience.

Work 6.

Bella Gerant Alii-Let Others Wage War consists of a large caliber artillery shell that has a viewing port added to the bottom of the shell casing. The shell is suspended in front of an antique mirror by several strips of ribbon in the colors red, white, and blue. The shell itself is held in place by a large brass arm that distances of the viewer in front of the mirror. When the viewer steps up to the shell and peers through, they can clearly see that their image is the only thing that is visible in the opposing mirror.

The concept is that when one decides to choose to use belligerence as a means of getting what one wants, that person needs to take ownership of that choice. Ultimately they are responsible for the actions that they have chosen. In a world that has become so used to the idea of pressing a button and getting what one wants, man has now become too far removed from our acts of aggression. We no longer view our acts of aggression as something for which we are responsible. The weapon or the implement becomes responsible. In the work, the bomb is the weapon, but the mirror shows us that the responsible person is behind the bomb. The participants essentially wash their hands of the blood while letting the destruction take place miles away from our clean doorsteps. I hope to remind my viewer that they are the one that make the decisions that affect others and ultimately themselves. This work allows us realize the effect that our belligerence

has upon ourselves in the same way that Odysseus has to recover from his long military service and put himself back together again. Throughout the *Odyssey* we learn how the hero has to learn the extremely more difficult art of having to live in a more or less peaceful world.

CONCLUSION

When I set out to create a body of work that was generated by language, I could not realize the importance of the stories that would emerge. As the years passed I have come to realize is that I am a storyteller. What has become so abundantly clear to me is the importance of keeping what I want to say relevant to those to whom I am speaking. In a society that has become accustomed to conflict, I felt that it was time to remind others of conflicts in our past in hopes to somehow lessen the conflicts in our present and future. When people forget the conflicts from the past we can no longer maintain the valuable lessons that others sacrificed for us to learn.

I had a very difficult time moving from the mind set of the fine jeweler to the fine artist. Looking at a concept and relaying a more abstract story was more difficult than I thought. The past few years have opened my eyes to seeing the world around me in a new way. I can now see the story from several points of view instead of just one. I am hoping to become an educator as soon as possible. The conceptual thoughts and considerations of the artwork that I have studied will make me a much more effective educator.

This has been my journey, my odyssey. It is a story of the world in which I want to live and the world I want it to be. I feel that I am not alone in my views and opinions, and hopefully my work has touched a chord in others: as Barnum would have wanted, "To make you think, talk, and become curious."

Barnum once told a story where he made reference to what he called “soft soap” and I think (and hope) that my work may also provide some “soft soap” for my audience as well. While traveling in France in the mid 1800s Barnum encountered a philosophical old man who asked P.T. what are the requisite qualifications of a good showman?

Barnum replied the first qualification necessary was a thorough knowledge of human nature, which of course included the faculty of judiciously applying of soft soap.

When the old man asked what he meant, Barnum told the old man that it was the faculty to please and flatter the public so judiciously as not to have them suspect your intention.

My intentions hopefully have been clear to the viewer, but I hope they retained a bit of the showmanship and entertainment that Mr. Barnum might have cracked a philosophical smile at and yet have taken my show seriously as well.

IMAGES

1. **Monoscopic viewing device, A Contrario**
2. **Shell Viewer, Bella Gerant Alii**
3. **Full view of Shell Viewer, Bella Gerant Alii**
4. **Lead Soldiers, Alea Iacta Est**







