Bystander

Paul D. Van Hoy

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Bystander

By

Paul D. Van Hoy II

Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Dr. Therese Mulligan - Chair

Date

Dr. Jessica Lieberman – Committee Advisor

Date

Alex Miokovic – Committee Advisor

Date

Patti Russotti – Committee Advisor

Date

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ABSTRACT

My thesis raises existential questions about identity and the construction of meaning using language as a premise and platform to provoke inquiry about the distinction between various classifications of viewer. A reexamination of the term bystander compelled me to create violently themed imagery in order to locate boundaries within viewership roles. Although it shares similarities with the roles of observer, spectator, and witness, in terms of the bystander’s visual observance of an event, there are unclear connotations that allude to varying degrees of lucidity and sentience among these roles.

The agency of the viewer is evaluated by his/her level of cognizance and participation in the observed event. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière referred to a heightened state of a viewer’s self-awareness as an ‘emancipation of the spectator’. This is where the viewer abandons their passive role of observation for one that is rational and presently engaged. Following Rancière’s argument, my thesis suggests that the bystander is transformed by the context and circumstance/s of his/her surroundings (violence) and elevated or ‘emancipated’ to a status of self-awareness that exceeds all other kinds of viewership roles. Thus all other forms of observation are rendered obsolete as the bystander achieves a new status—an alterity that surpasses his/her own inert physical presence in the world.
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I. Introduction

With my thesis I wanted to create a drama – using provocative imagery – that would initiate existential questions about identity. Images of ourselves have historically provided a distance from which we have been able to examine the vast characteristics of our complexity. The photographic image has served many functions over the continued course of its use, from status symbol of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, to a function as historical / taxonomical document or article of propaganda and possession. Presently, image predominates nearly every location where the eye may come to rest or wander as advertisements are inextricably linked to our consumer culture. Thus image provides us a reflection of who we are;

“The notion that man possesses, in addition to a physical self, a symbolic self is widespread, perhaps universal… A mirror corroborates this. It does more: it reveals the symbolic self outside the physical self. The symbolic self is suddenly explicit, public, vulnerable.”

Photography, being the fixed, literal image of what presents before the lens seems to offer even more significant clues about our identity than the mirror’s fugitive reflections. Attached to photography is an abiding psychoanalytical pretension which offers us hope and promise that we may be able to not only apprehend who we are but, more importantly, why we are.

Throughout my career as an image-maker I have been most fascinated by the relationship between image and viewer, and the way we construct meaning

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around images according to our status and signification as a viewer. There are several permutations of the viewer’s position or status in relation to viewing – i.e. the onlooker, the spectator, the witness, the observer, the voyeur, etc. However, the viewer as bystander stood out to me as a role differentiated from all others.

I was unclear as to what exactly a bystander was so I began reviewing stacks of magazines and web articles searching for the word in context. I sought to locate clues and clarification for what was being denoted with each usage of the word. Who is the bystander demographically? What is his or her role? What constitutes or confers one as a bystander? After reviewing over a thousand non-related articles in popular magazines ranging from news media and consumer reports, to fashion/beauty, I found that the term bystander implied violence, without exception, in every instance of its use.

For me, this raised many questions. First, how do we approach violence or rather, the implication of violence in our culture? How or in what ways is a viewer transformed by a proximal act of violence? How does one’s proximity or interaction with violence afford them this distinctive classification? How does the presence of implied violence affect the image/viewer relationship when we examine the bystander through representation as the primary concern/subject? What becomes of violent imagery when it is stripped of context and purpose? Often, images of violence are employed to entertain and excite us. Although graphic images of violence proliferate throughout all channels of popular media – in isolation they become taboo. Why is this? Would an audience be willing to
appreciate the images as beautiful objects in lieu of their personal ambivalences about blood/violence? The questions I wish to elicit with my thesis work are by no means new questions, but timeless questions reconfigured to critique the social status quo as it pertains to our current relationship with violence and images.

A. Defining the bystander

What remains in the wake of wars, violent unfoldings and unforeseeable tragedies? Bodies, bullet casings, black boxes, and bloodstains are often all that is left. Those fragments of forensic interest that invoke the stories of those who have suffered, those who cannot speak. But what about those who bear direct witness? What of the bystander?

The bystander is defined as a civilian who is disengaged from any act of war or the commission of crime/s. In a sense, the bystander is an unwitting witness and, in the present arena of atavistic terror and warfare, he/she has become the corporeal canvas upon which the values and beliefs of the civilized world explode. The bystander is transformed by way of sacrificial spectatorship; exiting the symbolic like a newly exploded star, enveloped by the event horizon of the violent act.

According to definitions, the bystander is an individual who is present yet uninvolved, a chance spectator. However, conventional definitions fail to address issues of context and consequence altogether, they fail to address the nature of the ‘event’ to which one is present and uninvolved. In fact, definitions

provide no distinction between the circumstance/s that qualify or characterize an individual as a bystander as opposed to an audience, witness, onlooker, voyeur or spectator. On the one hand, the bystander is an ambiguous presence, while on the other, he/she could be considered an absolute presence. Definitions provide a basic platform of description and scope of the bystander’s designated role, but remain just as equivocal as all other viewership roles. They attempt to delineate boundaries using words that have boundless potential for alternative meaning and interpretation. Such definitions, which are both concise and unclear, can only leave one to wonder about the vagueness of viewership altogether. However, if we consider the current social lexicon, the word bystander does, in fact, possess a reserved and rather specific meaning, since no other substituted word seems to carry the same weight. Take for example, someone in attendance at a tennis match, the spectator. To refer to that individual as a bystander as opposed to a spectator invokes concerns that an otherwise competitive sporting event may have gone awry, occasioned by an act of violence.

One such instance, during which viewership roles were modified and revised from that of spectator to bystander, was during the tennis match between Monica Seles and Steffi Graf that took place in Hamburg Germany in 1993 during which Seles was stabbed in the back by a deranged fan while seated courtside and surrounded by six thousand spectators. In the days following the attack, news reports no longer addressed fans as spectators but instead as eyewitnesses. Clearly classification and status had been altered by the observed
proximal act of violence. Furthermore, it would not have occurred as strange, or unusual, considering the violent circumstances of that particular match, to refer to the spectators as bystanders, although the term bystander is usually reserved for violent acts that result in one or more fatalities.

It is precisely these ambiguous, yet implied, sets of circumstance that precludes the bystander from any ‘alternative’ definition in which violence does not play a dominant or significant role, thus relegating the bystander to an altogether different status of signification. Let me briefly consider the distinction of the voyeur verses the witness. The term voyeur alludes to a context of sexual atmosphere in which the viewer is transformed by his or her furtive point of view and lascivious pursuits. An image that comes to mind to illustrate this point would be Jean-Honore Fragonard’s The Swing, 1767. In this painted scene a mirthful young maiden swings from a nearby tree. As she kicks her legs up at the apex of her ascension, a young nobleman, concealed in the underbrush, peeks up her dress. In contrast to the implied perversion of the voyeur, the term witness alludes to a context of judiciary systems and courtroom proceedings, but more specifically, the term witness implies a duty and obligation to uphold the truth in the presence of a ‘judge’. The witness is transformed by the sovereignty of the courtroom and the task that lays before him/her to tell the truth in its entirety, per his/her sworn oath to God. In a sense, the witness is the most forthright and objective variant of the viewer. An example of this would be Caravaggio’s The

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3 The Swing, 1767. Variously known as L’oscillation and Les hazards heureux de l’escarpolette. A quintessential example of Rococo style, this painting by Jean-Honore Fragonard depicts a young maiden being guided on a swing, by her lover, into the view of a young nobleman positioned to look up her dress.
In this highly dramatic scene, which depicts the Binding of Isaac, an angel of God appears and intervenes at the exact moment when Abraham is about to take Isaac’s life. A ram is substituted in his stead as the death of his son is averted and Abraham’s loyalty to God is affirmed. This scene could have numerous interpretations but the parallel between Abraham and the ‘witness’ is an obvious one for me. Abraham is compelled by what he sees, he is compelled to do the ‘right’ thing as it is revealed to him by what he witnesses. By virtue of what is revealed and thus witnessed, Abraham learns there is something greater than himself at stake and responds with the necessary action. It is as if he is a conduit and agent of truth, transformed by divine intervention and an inherent duty to act in accordance to God’s law.

The bystander has existed for as long as there remains a record of man’s history if we acknowledge violence is not a new occurrence. However, the term bystander invokes sentiments of alarm and anxiety more relative to recent acts of terror and war such as the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Media’s usage of the term ‘bystander’ has not only contributed to the popularity of the word but also attributes to it a sort of buzzword status that most Americans are now commonly familiar with. However, even if we were to disregard media’s influence on the currency and circulation of this term, the reality of the bystander is owed almost exclusively to the existence and cultivation of violence at large.

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4 The Sacrifice of Isaac is a painting by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio who was Rome’s most famous artists of the 17th century. The painting depicts the Binding of Isaac from Genesis 22 in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah in order to prove his loyalty and obedience to God.
B. Emancipated Spectator

In a March 2007 *Art Forum* article entitled “Art of The Possible”, French philospher Jacques Rancière discussed the politics of art and image in an interview conducted by Fulvia Cernevale and John Kelsey. Among the many topics of discussion, the viewer as spectator was given specific attention as Ranciere spoke about the emancipation of the spectator as well as art’s ability to emancipate us: “Art in and of itself is not liberating; it either is or isn’t depending on the type of capacity it sets in motion, on the extent to which its nature is shareable or universizeable.” Rancière postulates that emancipation cannot occur when a work of art presumes the ignorance of its audience while at the same time predicting the outcome of the viewer’s reaction. Therefore, within art forms, emancipation fails when art attempts to preempt the gaze of the spectator: “Emancipation is the possibility of a spectator’s gaze other than the one that was programmed. This goes for the critical artist as well as the window dresser.” In Rancière’s explication of the emancipated spectator, the individual exchanges their passive role as a rationalist for the role of the empiricist, he or she exits the theater of theoretics to emerge on the stage of practical contact.

“He must be pressed to abandon the role of the passive viewer and to take on that of the scientist who observes phenomenon and seeks their cause. On the other hand the spectator must eschew the role of the mere observer who remains still and untouched in front of a distant spectacle. He must be torn from his

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5 “The Emancipated Spectator,” *Art Forum* (March 2007) : 258. Jacques Rancière is a French philosopher and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris (St. Denis). The Emancipated Spectator was an article published from an interview with Rancière in which he discusses the passive and active roles of an audience in relation to works of art.

6 Ibid., p267.

7 In philosophy, empiricism is a theory of knowledge emphasizing the role of experience and evidence, especially sensory perception, in the formation of ideas, while discounting the notion of innate ideas.
delusive mastery, drawn into the privilege of playing the rational viewer for the experience of possessing theater’s true vital energies.”

Though it was not a deliberate or premeditated intention to ‘emancipate’ my audience I believe that all works of art privately endeavor to do this. And if this is not the intention of the artwork then it is certainly the intention of the gallery. My only deliberate intention dealt with defining relationship binaries between viewer and image to gain insight and understanding of the processes and reasons for which we construct meaning from images portraying the empirical encounters of viewer and violent subject. The bystander is meant to implicate the viewer as an actuated participant in the scene, not a mere observer.

II. Philosophy / Artist’s Intent

I must preface what follows by stating that this is a personal essay, not to be viewed as an appraisal of the human condition or a piece of sociology, but, rather, a provocative inquiry and revelation of personal beliefs regarding the construction of meaning, morality, and human insatiability as it pertains to violence. For critical purposes, when I make future reference to violence I am speaking of transgress, physical acts resulting in bloodshed and or death. When I employ the term ‘bystander’, I am referring to a sentient human being who physically observes an act, event, or depiction of violence either during the actual event’s unfolding. When I speak of observation I am referring to an active and engaged role that distinguishes the viewer as ‘emancipated’ based on the

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8 “The Emancipated Spectator,” Art Forum (March 2007) : 272
preceding criterion.

Some may believe that my work is a critique or an indictment of dark human desire or, perhaps, even a celebration of sickness, and that such a celebration would identify one as a misanthrope or nihilist. But, to be clear, this work is not about sentiment or concern for what stands to be lost or left behind. It is about subverting and circumventing our constructed reality. My intention as an artist is to ascertain a principle reality or an origin independent of man’s existence. I am an existentialist in many manners of speaking, holding firmly to the belief that man creates his own meaning and purpose in a world absent of any God. But, my intentions are futile and inherently flawed. I contradict myself by having intention/s at all if, in fact, it is my belief that all intellectual contributions are equally arbitrary and meaningless. This is not at all an attempt to obfuscate my motives or evade the apprehension of my audience. I find myself often confined within the shrinking space of my own incredulity. I am beset with beliefs that preclude me from continuing to do what I do (make images). I attempt to make sense while all the while I am mocking sense-making. However, my skepticism toward ideas, language and systems of signification is balanced equally by reward as it is by burden.

I have freed myself from morality’s hegemony and achieved an amoral perspective. I have reached emancipated status in a sense. This self-emancipation entails ceaseless analyzation and deconstruction of my own ideas and rationalizations, which are equally fraught with arbitrariness, as humankind
resembles to me now an aberration of consciousness seeking paternity (origin) from constructed fathers —God the Father. I use a constructed system of language and meaning to apprehend an existence that is entirely owed to construction. I excuse my egregious contradictions by creating imagery with intent to reveal these hidden hypocrisies of our constructed reality. My thesis for example, was not conceived for the purpose of telling my audience anything at all. My intention was not to wipe away obscurity but to contribute to it.

It is my belief that through the process of abstraction we can become distracted from the doldrums of our unchallenged existence and begin to beg questions that lend to an elevated state of self-awareness. Even if those questions never receive complete or resolved answers. I provide viewers with images representative of viewer relationships using provocative subject matter. By offering no context to corroborate the visceral outcome of each image, I seek to induce inquiry about how we resolve for that which is unknown to us. Not just the question of how, but also why do we create meaning for images? That question can then be expanded to ask why we construct meaning at all?

III. Thesis Images

“The spectator must be released from the passivity of the viewer, who is fascinated by the appearance standing in front of him and identifies with the characters on the stage. He must be confronted with the spectacle of something strange, which stands as an enigma and demands that he investigate the reason for its strangeness.”

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Individually, my thesis images are divisive. They appear incoherent, lacking provocation and context, but, collectively, their meaning creates its own environment of normalized violence and sedate acceptance. The images were conceived as a collective whole – in my opinion, they are interdependent upon their numbers for their success. Inundating my audience with images of implied violence was critical to the affect I wanted to impart. Populating a gallery space with such a large number of images almost guaranteed that my audience would not favor or become partial to just one single image. This repetition of imagery was intended to result in the effacement of details and particularity possessed by each individual image, which, at first, may have seemed the preoccupation and intention of the artist. However, when positioned amid a gallery space filled with fifty images, it is difficult to convince oneself that the imagery is a mere exhibition of formalism or contrived of for the soul purpose of shock. The descriptiveness of the imagery no longer competes with the concepts of the work as the reaction to the subject matter fades with exposure and inurement – this could not have been accomplished with a gallery of only ten or twenty images. Ultimately, the transmission and communication of my concepts relies, almost entirely, on a universalizing that can only be achieved through repetition. For me, the significance of repetition is centered on emphasis, for which I’d like to use a quote from Gertrude Stein.

“There is the important question of repetition and is there any such thing. Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be? There can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must
each time use emphasis, and if you use emphasis, it is not possible while anyone is alive, that they should use exactly the same emphasis. And so let us think seriously of the difference between repetition and insistence.”

A. Implication of Violence

The implication of violence within each image serves to shock, but also to anesthetize the viewer in its en masse presentation (fifty plus images, all adhering to the same formal/compositional format). Environment and theatricality were key components to how the work was first conceptualized. My process began with concepts of absence, constructing meaning on the absence of an event, anchoring a feeling or sense of absence on an interdependent but complete visible presence — the bystander.

The presence of the bystander almost always assumes a set of preexisting conditions, a plot and perpetrator/s as well as a victim or victims. Still images of violence seem to challenge our ability to reconcile what is often reconciled for us by motion picture. Such images of violence became scarce if not non-existent in the mediascape following the outcome of Vietnam War. So, within the last twenty-five years our acquaintance with violence has been primarily motion-oriented. For every instance of violence presented, whether it be news or entertainment related, there is always supplementation to provide explanation. Most importantly, this supplementation, whether it be voiceovers, captioning, or internal narration (actors thinking aloud), exist to offer context. We seek to locate the logic of maniacs and madmen, as senseless and

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unreasonable acts of violence seem to perplex us beyond all other mysteries of the world.

B. Context

It is precisely those preexisting conditions, which prime-time television, motion picture, and media premeditates, these supplemental details, which I have removed from the equation of my images with intent and purpose. What set of circumstances and in what context contributed to my pictured subject’s blood-spattered condition? What is the storyline, the setting? Who are the characters? What was the motive and why did violence result? All questions that prompt the audience to seek meaning beyond the subject at hand. However, in my images, the bystander confronts the audience with scant evidence and indication as to what circumstance/s and or event/s precipitated the final photographic outcome. As if driven by instinct or obsession, we wish to possess understanding of these images; classification and categorization are imperative to our sense of understanding. Certainly, with images depicting or conveying violence our desire and need to ‘know’ is as insatiable as our desire to consume such images. In my work this desire to ‘know’ is pre-empted by a kind of pictorial closure to meaning due to the non-resolution of the violent event. There is effect without the indication of cause. Thus the viewer is left to perpetually question the event, the present circumstance of the bystander without a known past or future. Like Rancière’s ‘emancipated spectator,’ the viewer then leaves mere observation behind, for a more self-actualized participation in the evolving pictorial moment.
Image #47 illustrates this point. Here we can identify a female subject centered vertically in the frame from the chest up. She appears to be in her mid-fifties and has blood spattered across her face, neck and hair. Her countenance is one of ‘horrified shock’ and ‘unmistakable fear’ as by one of my viewers. The circumstances or cause of the violent event are unclear given the depth of field and minimal inclusion of any background elements. However, most of my viewers create elaborate stories for my thesis images. One such story told to me suggested that the woman, a retired housewife and empty-nester, was taken by surprise amid her morning routines by her despondent husband who, at the precise moment that the photograph was made, shot himself in the head squarely in front of her. Clearly this would be an impossibility given the direction of her gaze and the supposed positioning of her suicidal husband. In addition, any such reality would be inconceivable given that all the images share this same point of view. My viewers also make note and distinction between who is a victim and who is a perpetrator. This is equally fascinating given that these are only representations and those audience members who willingly submit their ideas are fully aware that the images are not real.

By providing evidence or suggestion of a violence, via the presence of the bystander and blood, I am able to elicit the attention of an audience who has already absorbed and acquired a taste or distaste for violent imagery through channels of popular culture and art. Each image, like a crime scene, is thoroughly examined by the viewer as an attempt is made to solve for the unknown
variables; the source, origin, circumstance, and even the motive of the violent art. The reconciliatory process of sense-making or, alluded to in this case, crime-solving, is hindered as the viewer searches in vain for the key to unlock the circumstances of the event and the bloody presence of the bystander. The viewer then is forced not only to engage the face-value of the image, confronting a titillation inspired by an inexplicable act of violence, but to walk away unresolved, a sacrificial spectator. The viewer doubles as the pictured entity, habituated by this visual/psychological process. The absence of the subject/s from which the blood was shed, the victim whose identity is never established or revealed helps create the conundrum. These images are not meant to make sense. In the end, they were intended to make a mockery of sense making altogether.

Removal of contextual artifice (time, place, violent act) is intended to emphasize the bystander as the main event, not a secondary or symptomatic event. I desired to introduce an audience to a kind of contextless violence, an ‘environment’ that meditates not on causation but on sheer presence and present moment outcome. The unknown engagement of each bystander should bear only minor consequence. Its mystery exists only to pander or flirt with, rather, our sense of curiosity; to provoke the flight instinct that sends us searching for answers (rationalizations) in the presence of the ‘unknown’.

C. Blood / Expression

The most visceral feature found in each image is blood, which serves a similar function as a sort of billboard used to broadcast and illicit attention. These
are visual incentives with ulterior motives engineered to entice and attract the audience. The subtextual seduction of the work is consigned to the cooperation of an audience who is willing to make meaning without defaulting to metanarratives, an audience willing to entertain the isolation of a single idea - the suspension of time and circumstance in which what is present signifies only itself.

The indexical approach and subsequent categorical ‘look’ of the images varies only slightly to offset visual redundancy; some subjects are placed centrally while other are placed slightly to the left or right of the frame. All subjects are photographed from the chest-level upward with critical emphasis placed on gesture and expression. A countenance of ecstasy, awe, fright, and apathy pervades the many of the subjects. The preeminence of each photographed subject’s gaze in my images portend immediacy and questioning, while the subject’s solicitous look leads the viewer to self-introspection and questioning.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} The importance of the gaze in my images provokes a conversation about the theoretical notion of the “gaze” in the works of scholars such as Foucault, Lacan, and Mulvey.
The appearance of my thesis images has been commented on as having a reminiscent quality of film. I am assuming this referencing and likening to film stills is the result of the imagery’s boldness of color, dramatic lighting, technical acuity and visceral subject matter. In addition, the images capture expressions that are not commonly thought to be flattering for photographs. The expressions are extremely gestural. Combined with the lighting, color, and environment, they seem to transform my subjects into actors in the eyes of my audience. Perhaps, this ‘look’ is suggestive of a theatrical intentionality more commonly associated with motion picture? Nonetheless, this interpretation raises many intriguing questions about the medium of photography itself. Is it purely the aesthetics of each image that lends to this interpretation or does this, perhaps, reveal something about the prevalence of violence within motion picture and our corresponding expectations?

When my thesis images are referred to as resembling film stills, I am led to believe the viewer is responding to a thwarted expectation. An expectation that he or she will be presented with the events of a story, thus enabling reconciliation and closure. To me, this is the format of most cinematic and motion picture-oriented narratives. The image is assumed out of its native context (motion picture) and contemplated as part of story. To me, this indicates an aversion to fragmentation and stillness on behalf of the viewer, specifically to images that appear strange since it is assumed that they have been removed from an orderly sequence. The notion that a still image is part of an absent or omitted whole is
likely owed to the sense of possession between motion picture and violence, and the strict censorship that often prevents violent images from reaching newspapers and other print media.

IV. Conclusion

My thesis is a product of questioning, similar to all of my previous bodies of work. I wanted to construct a pictorial drama in which I could raise existential questions about identity. How and why do we construct meaning around images? Why do we seek resolution and attempt to conquer images by making sense of them? In this process of reconciling what appears before us, what is lost, and equally, what is gained? Are we conquering images when we make ‘sense’ of them—when we ‘get’ them or is that how they conquer us? I possess an extreme fascination with this relationship between image and viewer, through the model of the bystander. The bystander is emblematic of the relationship between image and viewer, albeit a relationship consummated by an observed/proximal act of violence. I want my audience to question. That’s all I’ve ever hoped for with the work I’ve produced. Particularly, in this case, questions arising from the subject of implied violence.

My subjects are mere props— they have no histories because I have provided them with none. They exist nowhere else in this world or at any other time excluding the represented moment of the image itself. So it is my hope that my audience will ask questions that reach beyond the salient features of my images and ask why these images exist at all—what compelled the author?
How and why am I, also a viewer, affected/unaffected by the presence of violence?

A. Construction of meaning

The underlying architecture of my thesis deals with identity at the surface, but more importantly, it wishes to confront the construction of meaning. Questioning should not end with why the subjects are smeared and splattered with blood – that is the bait question. The underlying question is why do we prescribe meaning to images at all? I believe that the empirical world is not enough to satisfy or sustain humankind’s universal need to ascertain origin and purpose. Since I am not exempt from this ritual of transposition I will limit this response to my own reasons. For me, first and foremost, image caters to my sense of vanity and my overwhelming sense of entitlement, my right to own and possess. But beyond those reasons, image has the uncanny ability to transform the banal into the beautiful, the ordinary into the enigmatic. The world is simply more majestical as represented in images. But above all, image reserves a place where we can associate freely without having others police what we believe. Though our relationship with subject matter may forever be influenced by moral dictation, the vehicle of image remains unregulated by this authority. Image in some ways renders us all equals – not only its subjects, but its viewers.
B. Cultural view of violence

In my introduction I asked how do we look at images of violence? I think we look at images of violence with reservation and ambivalence. When we observe another’s pain or suffering we feel it necessary to look away out of respect. We are taught as children not to stare. Though we may be sympathetic and concerned for another’s welfare, we all have morbid curiosities that compel us to investigate beyond the enactment of social courtesies. I’m sure none of us are exempt from slowing down at the scene of a car collision. Images of violence draw on human curiosity, but they deliver and reveal the gore and grotesque in full, larger than life, bold description. Many of my audience members remarked to me that they were initially shocked and felt uneasy about my thesis images, but couldn’t quit looking. Some even whispered in a low register as if to avoid negative judgment, and said, “but they are such beautiful images.”

Photography possesses an inherent evidential quality that, for many, can substantiate the truth or rather, is analogous to truth. When photographs allude or depict a person’s pain or suffering in an artistic fashion, we seem to reject these images as being insincere and lacking design beyond their agenda to deceive us, manipulate our emotions, or impress us with their craftsmanship. Given that my work may risk dismissal for these reasons I chose the following quote from Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others:
“For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance. Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don’t have the look that comes from being ‘properly’ lighted and composed, because the photographer either is an amateur or – just as serviceable – has adopted one of several familiar ant-art styles. By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative – all widely distributed images of suffering now stand under that suspicion and less likely to arouse facile compassion or identification.”

For me, Sontag’s quote addressed a relevant issue consequential to the ways audiences have referred to my work as appearing ‘glossy’ or ‘slick.’ The very style of my pictorial expression was often reduced to an exercise of descriptive formalism. Even more directly, I have previously been told that my work appears insincere and contrived. Remaining faithful to my style and creating technically beautiful images of subject matter otherwise seen as grotesque was crucial to how I wanted my thesis images to ‘look’. To me, technical acuity suggests nothing about the absence or presence of concept and or an artist’s intentionality. I believe these claims to be more revealing of a viewer’s suppositions as well as their habituation to convention. Challenging convention is a foremost premise of my thesis.

Another one of my many interests in the bystander had to do with his or her proximity to death — exiting consciousness and the symbolic. The bystander bears witness to the momentary disintegration and dislocation of constructed reality. They literally stare awestruck into the mouth of the abyss and then return to sentience. It is this paradoxical limbo between consciousness and

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unconsciousness that the bystander traverses by way of violent ejection from the symbolic that holds much interest and appeal to me. Like the implication of violence within each image, there is only implication that this phenomenon has occurred. The transcription of awe, terror, fright, and ecstasy on the faces of my subjects proved to be a critical qualifying factor in the image selection process when editing down to fifty images for the exhibition. The mouth hangs slack, the eyes fixed and glazed, the pupils dilated as the very essence of my subjects seems to have been siphoned out by some abysmal force.

C. Cultural relationship with violence

So, how does our culture regard violence? Violence fits into the equation not only because it is a fundamental distinction of the bystander, but because we have such an abhorrence and affinity for it. It is visceral and people will not rest or relent until they have made sense of it. I offer them no chance or possibility to make sense of the implied violence in my images, at least not a sense that I've willfully contributed to. I'm curious about the process of how we 'look', but specifically how we look at violence - can we truly 'see' it or do we just gaze upon its surface where our rationalizations and resolutions skip like rocks across water?

Can violence exist without history and without context? If we remove these articles of identity what are we left with? Perhaps, all that would remain would be a chasm of unanswerable questions. I believe that violence existed before human consciousness and will linger long after human extinction. So, yes violence can
exist in absence of history and context. Would we recognize it? I think so, but beyond recognition would we understand it? I think not, but it is my belief that our present sense of understanding, as it pertains to violence, is an illusion or white lie if you will. A passable explanation legitimized and endorsed by consensus. It is my opinion that violence is the manifestation of spiritual disenfranchisement and a rejection of rationalism.13 Humankind is still donning the yoke of undetermined purpose and pulling the same cart full of unanswered questions. In spite of all our intellectual efforts and advancements we have only seemingly drifted further from determining our metaphysical point of origin.

Our world is quickly succumbing to calculation; communication and satellite navigation technologies have granted omniscience to the masses as determining one’s exact location in the world have become common features of cell phones. We are a vain and overconfident race impaired by our conquistador like arrogance. We have led ourselves to believe that we ‘know’ anything at all about our existence beyond what Descartes found to be incontrovertible in his Discourse on Method — we do exist.14

We are uneasy when we are alone – left to our own devices. We are co-dependent, constantly seeking distraction from the company of computers, the escape of entertainment, the sanctuary of soundtracks – every moment

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13 In epistemology and in its broadest sense, rationalism is any method of deriving truth and knowledge through the use of reason. It is a skeptical stance where one doubts everything in an attempt to assess the world from a fresh perspective, purged of preconceived notions.

14 René Descartes, renowned French philosopher of the seventeenth century who wrote the philosophical treatise, Discourse on Method. This text is most famously known for the phrase, “I think, therefore I am.” Using his skeptical approach to doubt everything, Descartes was able to determine that in spite of his doubting of a physical existence, he could not doubt that he possessed thought. Thus, he was able to prove his existence.
mediated by media and muse. I believe introspection is becoming less common, and this world has become more a world of surfaces. What is it about questioning our existence that frightens us so?

Could it be that modern man and woman ranging from the Wall Street stock trader to the suburbanite wife pulling weeds in her herb garden and, not to be forgotten, the soldier made self-conscious of his or her every move by the attention of sniper fire, suffers still from an anxiety of being eaten and overcome by a beast more powerful? Was man born good but then forced into evil out of necessity - “kill or be killed”? Furthermore, why does interspecies violence exist - why do we kill one another? Are we disobedient heathens - does God have anything to do with the equation of why we kill?

Perhaps violence predominates due to sheer boredom since there now exists no greater, more ferocious predator than man himself. But what about the man within man - the one possessed of the power to kill - he who carries the indifference of his orphan status and an angst driven by a doubting of his own purpose? Perhaps it is this version of man we are attempting to eliminate when we kill ourselves. It is a paradox that perpetuates its own polemical existence, we kill to eliminate those who kill, those who no longer possess an ambivalence toward killing, so they will not kill us.

Susan Sontag wrote that violence turns anyone subjected to it into a thing. “The scale of war’s murderousness destroys what identifies people as
individuals, even as human beings.”\textsuperscript{15} I find myself in agreement with this observation but add that identity is a mere product of representation – it is a fictive facsimile much like an image. At one’s death representation is all that remains to corroborate his or her existence. Without representation the ephemerality of our essence, our identity is irretrievable. What do we ultimately forfeit when we lose the illusory figment of what ‘represents’ us (our identity)?

Sontag also states: “War inverts values and morality; all that defines our world and our reality.”\textsuperscript{16} But, for me, my primary interest is precisely the loss and inversion of this value system. How else could I ever be certain that morality and meaning are anything but mere arbitrary contrivances unless those ideas and systems of reverence are toppled?

This is the liminal edge, the altar where I worship. Where I contemplate unconsciousness and fetishize nothingness. Is this a pursuit of Zen? No, it is my own private indulgent escapade, my quest for a futile fantasyland. For what I seek requires remission of the senses, a wordless erotica, enveloped by the unrequited echo of a paradox. The existence of my preoccupation is dependant upon presence and absence (a double jeopardy of presences). The conscious mind can never experience its inverse. So, why do I try, why do I do anything at all?

In an invented world where even nothingness has a namesake, a symbolic value, even nothing is something, a derivative and distillate of consciousness. I


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p 61.
continue to live so that I can contemplate death - this is existence to me. An existence owed entirely to meaning, and consciousness above all.

We are all bystanders in some capacity. We are engaged in the act of looking from the beginning of consciousness. We contribute our entire lives to the production of meaning, reconfiguring our identity as we perambulate the boundaries of viewership and the varying distinctions therein. Distinctions which are determined not only by the context of what is being viewed but also by the transformative properties attributed to those present circumstances. As it stands, if we consider the various roles within viewership as a hierarchical model of emancipation, the bystander seems to represent the pinnacle.

In the end I have come to understand the bystander as the true ‘emancipated viewer’ - empowered by the preeminence of violence, transformed by transgression. It is the bystander who contemplates from the terminal location of consciousness – the present. For the bystander, history and context exist only as extraneous items of circumstance when presented with the unrepresentable. All other forms of observation are rendered obsolete as the bystander achieves a new status, an alterity, which surpasses his or her own inert physical presence in this world.
Selected Bibliography


