Torn away

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TORN AWAY

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Why am I so afraid all the time? Why do I feel so alone? Why can't I just be like everyone else? This thesis is an attempt to find answers to these and other questions that I face every day—it unearths the very assumptions and perceptions that make up the reality I experience.

My strategy is to create a visual context, a common denominator with the outside world so differences and inaccuracies between my perceptions and those of others' become readily apparent.

Magazines are a real, physical part of our common cultural landscape and they play a role, even if only a small one, in how we understand the world at large. By collaging magazine images I can reshape the reality they present into something more familiar to my own and hopefully, in the process, learn how to reshape my life into the one I long for.
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Introduction

This thesis is about many things. It is about being alone, hopeless and helpless, and in constant fear of what's around the corner. This is about being different—about experiencing the world in fundamentally different ways than everyone else.

For many years I thought my only problem was a deep and constant depression. When every day is a bad day, everything hurts, and all you want is a way out, it becomes all you can think about. It was the obvious subject for my artwork.

Looking back through my older works and previous series it's obvious to me just how ill I was back then. I can see how the dark and colorless impending doom of the Amelia series led to the pure nihilism of the Chemical Paintings. I can only wonder how I made it through it all.

Because I was entirely preoccupied by depression, it never occurred to me that other issues could be hiding beneath it all. Now, with increased medications and therapy, I have a better idea of what it is I'm dealing with. Though I still struggle with depression, it's no longer the star of the show.

The new focus of my attention is called Social Phobia. It's the reason I have almost no friends and no close relationships. It's the reason why I won't leave my
apartment for days at a time or answer the door or the telephone. It's the reason why some of the most basic tasks are also some of the most difficult.

This is what my thesis is about. It’s being afraid of everyone, from friends and family to the random person walking down the street that I’ll likely never see again. It’s fear of being judged. It’s the inexplicable feeling that, despite any and all evidence to the contrary, you secretly hate me or dislike me or have some negative criticism about me. It’s about not being able to trust other people. It’s about only feeling safe and comfortable when absolutely no one is around.

**Regarding Others**

It was years ago, during my undergraduate studies, that I discovered a pattern in the works I was making at the time. Here's a perfect example:

*Figure 1: Relics, 2002*
Though there is much I could say about this and other works from my undergraduate years, I want to point out just one thing in it for now. Look at the relationships between the weird, squiggly figures: there’s a whole crowd of them along the bottom and then there’s the lone figure in the light bulb. This may seem like a small detail but it was revelatory for me when I first noticed it; it was the first time I realized just how important my relationships with other people were—that my lack of friendships wasn’t a byproduct of my depression but a separate set of issues in itself. It’s more than an isolated incident—it has over and over found its way into many of my images, including my thesis works.

For example, look at the collage in figure 2.1. Figure 2.2 is the same work on which I’ve overlaid arrows and circles so you can better see what I’m talking about.

The loneliest place really is in the center of a crowd. Pure solitude, isolation, is an easy thing to handle because it’s safe. I can push aside my problems and distract myself. The real trouble begins with other people—even with only one other person around I become very anxious and self-conscious. I can’t ignore the sadness and loneliness because it’s right there in my face in the severe disconnect I experience just from another person’s presence. This effect only grows worse as more people are added to the mix.
Figure 2.1: Untitled (Tricycle)

Figure 2.2: That kid with the goggles is such a freak, ain't he?
In the works of *Torn Away*, I place myself in the role of “the Other,” albeit in a twisted form. Typically, the Other refers to people of a race or gender or sexual orientation that is different from what is considered to be the cultural, social norm. (In very simplified terms, the Other could be any demographic considered to be a “minority.”)

Being the white heterosexual male that I am, I can hardly claim that I am the Other. This is part of my point. Even though I am not the Other, even though I *do* belong (not just with my fellow white heterosexual males but with all of the human race), I *perceive* it—I *feel* that I am the Other, an outsider, an outcast.

**A Source is a Source, of Course, of Course**

It might seem stupidly antithetical to my goals to work with magazines. These are intensely personal experiences that I’m trying to convey, yet there is nothing personal or intimate about magazines. They’re printed by the millions. They’re designed to appeal to a broad spectrum of people. They’re made to be disposable.

And there are many alternatives that are (seemingly) more appropriate. I could be painting or drawing, making something expressive or abstract, and approaching my subject head on through self-portraiture. Yet I’ve chosen instead
anonymous figures to take my place and I've used mechanical reproductions over something purely handcrafted.

I have several different explanations for this approach. One is that I'm transforming the constant bombardment of information and images we experience (á la The Ecstasy of Communication⁷) into something torturous. It's not at all far-fetched to say that all of our newfangled gadgets have significantly altered how we interact with other people, with one of the end results being that we can only interpret reality through images. And perhaps this trend has gone so far that I can only understand myself through media imagery, thus I would be totally dependent upon these images to give form to my anxieties.

Secondly, one of the things I so dearly want my work to do is communicate. And what better way to do this than by using materials already designed for exactly that purpose? According to El Lissitsky: “No kind of representation is as completely comprehensible to all people as photography,”³ and, while this isn’t always true for all of photography, it certainly is for the photographs printed in magazines which, by the very nature of the medium, must appeal to hundreds, thousands, or millions of readers.

What I'm writing in this thesis I hope one day to be able to say out loud to another human being. I consider these artworks a stepping stone towards that
goal. Using images straight from magazines instead of something handmade out of paints, pencils, pixels or whatever is a conscious effort on my part to make art that, hopefully, will effectively communicate. I feel I can be successful because the works in *Torn Away* were made from images that were already intended to communicate, to be understood, to be consumed.

And, lastly, using magazine images could be a safety mechanism that detaches me from the works and lets me avoid the realities of my life. On top of that I’d also be preventing viewers from experiencing the same, which, ultimately, allows me to escape their scrutiny.

This last explanation I fear is the most accurate. I feel it’s a failure on my part. Not only have I failed to take an important step towards recovery but I’ve also undermined my own attempts to communicate and connect with other people.

**Immediate Questions**

The most annoyingly common and commonly annoying question I get is, “Why aren’t you working digitally?”

Worse still is when people just assume that I’m making my work this way. I suppose I shouldn’t blame them though. After all, aren’t all the cool kids doing
it? Isn’t it the future? So why would I do something so crude and so primitive as a traditional collage? Wouldn’t a digital collage be easier? Shouldn’t I be cutting and pasting with Adobe Photoshop instead of cutting and pasting with a knife and glue?

Here’s the simple answer: I hate that, on a computer, I can’t directly access my image (I move a mouse and it moves the pointer on the screen that operates the computer program which manipulates the image). I hate that I can never manage to do what I want exactly. I hate that images become near infinitely malleable and that no one ever has to make a commitment to anything (I can’t un-tear or un-slice a magazine page, but I can undo all I want in Photoshop). I hate that all the control and all the options seem to drive artists, myself included, to “make it perfect,” to every minuscule detail to the n\textsuperscript{th} degree.

Now here’s the pretentious answer: digital imaging technology and its adoption in our daily lives represents a shift away from reality. Not that the concept of “photographic truth” ever held too much water, but at least with traditional photography we could assume that "no matter how much darkroom fiddling someone added to a photograph, the picture was, at its core, a record of something real that occurred in front of the camera. A digital photograph, on the other hand, can be a Photoshop fairy tale, containing only a tiny trace of a small
So, why am I making collage? I like working with my hands. I like having direct control. And I like the *reality* of it.

**More Issues with Magazines**

Making these collages wasn't all fun and games. (Not buying it? Okay, fine, it was all fun and games.)

What I really mean to say is that these collages, though they look chaotic and haphazardly assembled, weren't made without care. But, because of what I want these works to say, technical skill and formal perfection end up being rather trivial. It turns out that the most important decision is the less obvious one of how I choose my source imagery.

Each clipping, each torn piece used in my collages was originally published within a particular context. Sometimes that context only exists in the magazine itself—but other images have contexts that travel far beyond the page. These images have been repeated over and over on television, billboards, newspapers, the internet, and, yes, magazines and each time they appear they are connected with very specific ideas, objects, or other images until we, the viewers, can no longer separate the two. We are akin to Pavlov's dog, except
instead of hearing a bell we might see, let's say, a photograph of President Bush, and instead of drooling we think "The War on Terror."

Now all this contextual baggage can be useful if politics and pop culture are what you want to talk about. For instance, artist/dadaist Hannah Höch’s 1919 work, "Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany," (Figure 3) is crammed full of well known figures—including two fellas named Marx and Lenin and, let's face it, you can't use either of those two anywhere and not think Communism.

Another good example is Richard Hamilton's 1956 work, "Just What Is It that Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?" (see Figure 4) Instead of using clippings of famous people as Höch did, Hamilton focuses more on images taken from advertisements and pop culture, such as the tin of ham, Tootsie Pop, the Romance comics, and the Ford hood ornament. And because these images have been branded—labeled with a specific product name or logo—they are connected to a particular context in a way very similar to Marx and Lenin in Höch’s work.

But you may have already noticed that I'm not interested in the kind of subject matter that Höch and Hamilton are, and so it makes sense that I select my imagery differently as well. All the loaded images, the ones with far reaching
Figure 3: Hannah Höch, “Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany,” 1919-1920

Figure 4: Richard Hamilton, “Just What Is It that Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?” 1956
contexts that Höch and Hamilton and many other artists use to great effect, have no place in my works. Social anxiety isn't at all affected by politics or pop culture. All it takes is one obvious clipping of President Bush or Britney Spears for one of my works to lose their focus.

Instead, all that matters is other people—not well-known people, mind you, but the obscure and semi-anonymous people who were caught in some photojournalist's lens or were hired that one time to appear in an advertisement for Pepto Bismol. These are the people whose contexts are limited to the page—only a very, very small number of viewers might recognize the person in the image or remember where the clipping was taken from.

Of course, I have made exceptions. I won't tell you which well known figures I've used or which works they're in. Maybe you've already found one or two already and have been calling me a hypocrite all this time. I will say that whenever I do make an exception I've done so consciously. Often the person is wearing a look, an expression that I find irresistible, but, still, I can't let one ingredient ruin the recipe—I always try to obscure these famous faces through pencil marks, slices, or tears.

Ultimately, my works have a precariously thin line to straddle. And, to be real for only a moment, I know that there will always be people who will read
my works as if they are in the same vein as Richard Hamilton or Hannah Höch. The medium is the message, after all. I have to strong-arm them into working for me. While I believe I'm successful at it, only the viewers can say for sure.

![Figure 5: Hannah Höch at work.](image)

**When Art Stops Being Polite**

...and Starts Being *Real*

Each of us exists in our own reality, our own dimension. What we think and feel and how we perceive the world and ourselves are all part of it. Part of learning about myself and my mental illness was to realize that this isn't just theoretical hooey—it's very real. I've learned that my reality can be wildly inaccurate and thus everything I think, say, or do must be second-guessed.
So in an environment where I can only manage limited amounts of trust in myself, in others, and in most artistic mediums, it seems all that’s left that I can consider trustworthy are physical objects—the artworks I’ve created.

Cutting out an image from a magazine is only a small step away from cutting the real object out of real life, just like Hannah Höch is doing in Figure 5. The images, though most likely heavily edited before being published (and may even never have existed in the first place), have been fixed in ink on the page. They are a part of reality because they’ve been printed, sent through the mail, held with real human hands, and looked at with real human eyes. They occupied parts of people’s lives—even if only for a few seconds. With scissors and glue I can manipulate these small pieces of reality directly. And, more importantly, by collaging images I can manipulate pieces of a shared reality and shape them into an image that more closely resembles my own private reality. This “exploitation of the chance meeting of two distant realities on an unfamiliar plane” is an attempt to create real images of how I really am.

**Pasting It All Back Together**

There is a lot of information and meaning I hope to pack into one image.

Thankfully, I don’t have to rely upon a single image to do all the work. I can take
several images, each one representing something slightly different, and glue them together into a single whole. I’m taking the multidimensional mazes of my experiences and squashing them flat, like some cubist painting.

Perhaps Calvin can explain this better (Figure 6):

![Calvin comic strip](image)

Figure 6: I’d like to thank Bill Watterson for allowing me to use this comic without his permission.

Or, for those of you who prefer “serious” art history, here is some Picasso painting (Figure 7).
I’m invoking Cubism here primarily for aesthetic reasons. What better way to represent a shattered personal perspective than through a shattered visual perspective? Today, however, Cubism is old hat. In today’s world, the works in Torn Away would instead be given the very postmodern label “schizophrenic.”

To be clear, I am not using the label “schizophrenia” in the clinical, psychiatric sense. I am instead referring to the appropriation of the term as “a suggestive aesthetic model” by critic/theorist Fredric Jameson.6

In his book, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson describes schizophrenia as the fragmentation cohesive experience. Like viewing only a few seconds of a movie, reading a single page randomly torn from a book, or seeing only a small part of a larger image, the information needed to make sense of the fragment has been torn away (pun intended). And “when that relationship breaks down... then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers.”7
Jameson’s concept of schizophrenia is not only an excellent description of the works in *Torn Away* and the process of making them, but also of my personal internal experience—the one that has driven this thesis.

What I am doing now, where I am at, what I am thinking—the realities of this current moment are all infused with the memories and emotions of past events. Every moment of panic and every anxious episode I have is, at its core, a reliving of previous experiences. Lay on top of this the future: the all the possible outcomes and the countless imagined "what ifs" that run through my head. And sandwiched in the middle of this is the present—what is literally happening in front of me at that moment.

Thus the “personal identity [of the schizophrenic] is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present.”8 Everything merges and turns even the most innocuous of situations into an ordeal. And this “breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis.”9 Or rather, in human-speak, acting and living in the moment isn’t possible. There’s no clear action and no obvious response to anything because the events in front of me have been crowded out by those of both past and future. And I can’t trust
Figure 8.1: Untitled (Having a Ball!)

Figure 8.2: Now in Technicolor!
my instincts or gut reactions because they are the cause of all this to begin with.

So what does this mess look like? Take a look at Figure 8.1.

In this example, the central figure (outlined in blue in Figure 8.2), the one that represents myself, is really a composite of different faces. This is the psychological cubism, the Jamesonian “schizophrenia” I experience—different thoughts and feelings, representations of past and future, are broken into pieces and then reassembled to create a new whole. Thus I become the Other, not only in my relation to other people, but to myself and my own experience.

**Masks: Useful Metaphor or Just Cliché?**

"The face is the soul of the body," Wittgenstein tells us. "The lamp of the body is the eye," Jesus proclaimed from the Mount. But let’s not kid ourselves—the face and eyes are hardly reliable measures of one’s inner being. After all, the polygraph was invented because of a need to look past the surface to ascertain the truth. To put it plainly, the face is one of our most expressive and communicative tools but also one of the most guarded.

"If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." We make efforts to be polite, sociable, and welcoming. We use "small talk" to smooth over the awkward and uncomfortable moments we share with other people. We deny
ourselves the feelings we have and the actions we want to take because they are socially unacceptable:

In life, the mask is man's living disguise, ever-changing in its reason and reasoning, intent and intensity. It tries to hide the real man in us, to give weight and power to externalized fear... It can grow into the grotesque image of man's distorted mirror reflection, or be man's visualization of his constant escape from himself in his anxiety as much as in his playfulness....

The world is full of masks. We have learned to live with them on our faces and on those of our fellow men without being aware of it.\textsuperscript{12}

Just as my use of magazine images leads some viewers to thoughts of social commentary, my use of faces leads others to the metaphor of the mask. Each of us, as part of an audience (of any display or event, not just of artwork), connect the dots between what we see and what we already know and have familiarity with. As I superposition multiple faces and arrange them around a single figure I create a situation that screams "mask!" and, compared to the rather extreme nature of the personal experiences that fueled my works in \textit{Torn Away}, the concept of the mask seems downright universal. And perhaps that's more than enough reason to follow this line of thought. But thankfully the mask metaphor isn't very far from my intentions and thus I haven't taken steps to avoid it.
One of the most prominent aspects of my social anxiety is a lack of trust in appearances. “You can't judge a book by its cover,” the saying goes. But unlike books, it's impossible to check inside the cover of every human being you cross paths with. If you haven't figured it out yet, these book covers are masks.

The feelings of paranoia and anxiety in social settings develop from the impossibility of 100% certainty of safety, that I can never see behind the masks others wear, that no one has a concealed weapon, or that there is no wolf in friend’s clothing quietly waiting to disembowel me at the slightest hint of weakness. And in response I bolster my own mask, like a suit of armor, to try

Figure 9: Untitled (Carved Mask)
and appear like a normal person who is perfectly fine in these social situations and whose gut isn't telling him to run away and hide.

Though I never consciously set out to do so, there are several examples where I've used the mask metaphor explicitly. Returning to Figure 8.1, you might have noticed the luchador masks in the background (which have been circled in red in 8.2). Masks! Or for an even better example, take a look at the collage in Figure 9.

See that large wooden head thing? That's a mask!

But even though I've used masks in the literal sense in several of the works in Torn Away, I have problems with the mask as a metaphor. Though it is useful as a starting point for accessing the works, it begins to break down under closer scrutiny.

Take another look at Figure 9 above. Though I'm afraid this subtle detail is lost in a 2D reproduction, it's an important one—the cartoony but human set of eyes collaged with the mask doesn't depict a person looking out from behind the mask. It can't because the eyes were pasted on top of the mask.

You may think I'm splitting hairs with that example. That's fine, I can take criticism. But all of you non-believers out there might want to take a look at
Figure 10.1: Untitled (Upbeat)

Figure 10.2: Which face is the real one? And which one is Waldo?
Figures 10.1 and 10.2 before passing judgment.

*Untitled (Upbeat)* is an excellent representation of the Jamesonian “schizophrenia” I experience but how does the mask metaphor fare here? As Figure 10.2 so colorfully illustrates, there are plenty of faces, each of which could be counted as a mask. But there’s one important piece of information missing. Which is the real face? Is it mixed in among the masks? Would we even know what it looks like? Is there even a real face behind all that?

Don’t try to answer those questions—I meant them rhetorically. Besides, they’re misleading. The truth is that *none* of those faces are masks. *All* of them are real. And the wooden mask, remember from Figure 9? It’s a real face too.

Are you lost yet? Me too. And that’s the crux of the whole thing. My daily experience is a swirling vortex of thoughts and emotions that can grow so intense that not even I know what they’re made of. (Some may say this is part of my “subconscious” but I’m not sure—I’m no Freudian.) This is my mask, the part of myself I still don’t understand.

**Conclusion: Art Is Nice**

I’d like to say that I’m much better now. I’d like to suggest that the struggles that went into this thesis and its images, my depression and social
anxiety, have been alleviated and that I'm stronger from the experience. I'd like to
tell you that I now have the things I've dearly wanted for so long—close
relationships, good friends and meaningful interaction with other human beings.
I'd like to be writing all of this out, but none of it is true. Despite this and despite
the obviously dark nature of this thesis, I try to view it as something positive.

One of the key aspects of mental illness these thesis works dealt with was
the creation of alternate realities—ones where even the laws of physics are bent
and warped by the metaphysical laws of depression, anxiety, and paranoia.

These psychological universes are tiny. Perspective is obliterated, actions
are constrained, and opportunities are limited. This total disconnect is the reason
severe mental illnesses are terminal—to be completely isolated in one's own head
also means being cut off from any reason to continue living.

_Torn Away_ is, if anything, a step in the opposite direction. Where I once
would employ shadowy, alinesque, and almost shapeless representations of
other people I now use images of actual people. Instead of surreal landscapes, I
now make environments of real places, objects, and textures. I've given up
complex transformative processes of photography in favor of the simple and
direct process of collage. These are not just matters of aesthetics, these are
conscious decisions to be grounded and connected to the real world.
This thesis also creates context of a different kind. A byproduct of having faced these demons for my entire lifetime is being ignorant of what it is to be “well,” of what life could be like, and what end goal I should have. But though I have no idea where I should be headed, I know very well where I’m coming from. *Torn Away* is just that—a body of images depicting the hellish, nightmare world of anxieties and depressions concentrated and reified into a compass point, a star in the sky, a signpost, or some other fixed position I can navigate by so that, where ever I may end up, it sure as hell won’t be there again.
Endnotes


5 Max Ernst, “Beyond Painting.” In *Beyond Painting and other Writings by the Artist and his Friends*, dir. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, Schulz, Inc. 1948), 3-19.


7 ibid.

8 ibid.

9 ibid., 27.

11 Matt. 6:22.

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