Good is dead

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GOOD IS DEAD.

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on a visual re-representation of tales from the Old Testament, a canon throughout the history of Western art. I place constructed plasticized models within Biblical allegories in order to satirize the representations of the body evident throughout history as well as those present in contemporary media. In the thesis work I seek to bridge a gap between the past and present. I want the images to dwell between the intended moral pedagogy of the Bible and contemporary society’s perceived deviance, by linking historical painting and current digital photography, and between antique ideals of the body and present-day distortions of those ideals.

In this work, I utilize appropriated imagery from contemporary periodicals to illustrate how the manipulation of the body has evolved through centuries of painting dominated by a male perspective. This practice continues to be pushed in current digital practice. In this work, I digitally collage scanned images from fitness, fashion, celebrity, and pornographic magazines to create monstrous people. These creatures I create are as much a comment on the fabrication and retouching of personalities in the media as the strains people place on their bodies to achieve a more “acceptable” appearance.
1 Good Is Dead

For the third critique, Mike went first; he probably felt like it would give him an advantage. The assignment was to “design a poster, so that upon seeing it, the viewer will feel strangely compelled to start an action or cease one.” He placed the large-sized piece of paper on the wall, made sure it was straight, stepped back, and admired his masterpiece. Once again the craftsmanship was impeccable. In the manner of a Grant Wood assistant, he produced a rolling countryside, complete with a shiny tractor, barn, and silo. Then across the sky in vibrant orange, Mike had rendered three tilted arcs of text: Keep America Beautiful. Stunning.

Slowly Professor Winter stood up, took a sip of his coffee, and stated, “How are we supposed to do that?” Was he looking at the same poster as the rest of the class?

“Do what?” Mike replied.

“Keep. America. Beautiful. What does that even mean?” Winter asked. “Does it mean canvassing the countryside with sentimental claptrap? Haven’t we seen enough of this sort of thing?” Winter went across the room and grabbed a book titled Titans of Industry, a mammoth Social Studies epic that made you want to steal it and run toward the nearest bonfire. He leafed through it, found what he wanted, tore it out, and slapped it on top of Mike’s recently slaughtered project, leaving the type untouched.
Now instead of an artistically rendered country landscape was a black-and-white photograph of the industrial center of Pittsburgh. Smokestacks and black filth. Absolutely disgusting in its appearance and absolutely amazing in its message. Professor Winter had turned the message around completely and constructed a new meaning. Astounding. He went back to his chair, sat down, and lit up his pipe.

Turning back toward everyone he said, “This class is not a pretty picture postcard, it’s an urgent telegram. Stop thinking outside the box and start questioning why it needs to be a box. GOOD IS DEAD!”

— Chip Kidd, *The Cheese Monkeys*

This critique has always stuck with me, though unfortunately I was not present for it, as it took place in a piece of fiction. It demonstrated to me that the most powerful message is not always the most aesthetically pleasing, and that to obtain the strongest concept you may have to sacrifice beauty. Many Modernist artists have interested themselves with the anti-aesthetic, including Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, graffiti artists, and the Dadaists. Yet photography has often had a problem in this department. Beside the rare attention paid to Nan Goldin or Robert Frank, most photographers have concerned themselves with aesthetic mastery. Discourse has revolved around artists that are proficient with large format cameras, obscure historical printing practices, or trompe l’oeil digital manipulation.
As I began my graduate work, it was important to me that the images contained evidence of my hand. This concept began in the Masterpieces series and continued to be important in the thesis work. I wanted the images to be overtly “Photoshopped.” To obtain this aesthetic, I turned to bad Photoshop techniques. I made images using jagged-edged models, bad selection methods, and irrational lighting situations. This technique allowed me the opportunity to turn the work’s content around on itself, addressing pressures on appearance placed on today’s society through the bombardment of images that have been heavily manipulated with digital technology. My manipulation enabled the viewer to witness the sources for the images.

Although the phrase “Good Is Dead” began as a way to explain my ideas behind my technical approach of image making, it also explores other concepts addressed in the work. “Good Is Dead” in the religious sense demonstrates how both the clergy and followers of faith have moved away from upholding a moral authority and have moved toward challenging and opposing that authority. It is in this case a play on words related to Friedrich Nietzsche’s infamous term “God is dead,” wherein Nietzsche believes that God is not able of acting as a foundation for any sort of ethical code. “Good Is Dead” also associates itself with Immanual Kant’s reflective judgment of the “good,” where “good” is seen as a judgment that something conforms to morality. Viewed in the context of the pressures of personal appearance and the manipulation of photographs in order to idealize the human form, it acts as a call to arms. The goal is for the viewer to question the manipulation of images. This manipulation leads our society to pursue a perfect, unattainable beauty.
1.1 An Aestheticized Judgment

The 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant begins his third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, by stating, “If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful...we refer the representation to the subject and its feeling of pleasure.” Kant’s opening thoughts could describe why, in contemporary digital practice, the representation of the subject is pushed beyond the presumptions of the viewer. These expectations are expanded due to the ability of technicians who can easily shed pounds from a model’s body, remove unflattering marks, augment breast size and shape, increase muscle tone, and improve hair and makeup without the need for a stylist.

Kant described four different types of aesthetic judgments in regards to taste. These are the agreeable, the good, the beautiful, and the sublime. The agreeable and the good are universals – that is to say they are either agreeable or good, or they are not. Beautiful and sublime are what Kant saw as “subjective universal” judgments. The agreeable comes from a personal judgment and is simply sensory. The good is essentially a judgment based on ethics and morals. One can see why the digital technician’s intentions are considered morally and ethically corrupt when they endorse the concept of “Good Is Dead.” Through practices of illusion and trickery, they fool the viewer into believing that what they are looking at is, in a term, “gooder”

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than it appears. So, what is made good through the technician’s manipulations should, indeed, be made dead, as it is morally dishonest.

The other two of Kant’s theories, beauty and the sublime, are seen as subjective judgments that are not attached to any unconditional or unwavering idea. Kant believed, however, that they did fit into a general, if not a majority consensus. Kant saw beauty as having “the form of finality in an object.” An object may be made for a reason, even though it may not have a sensible purpose. Flowers are beautiful, but as they are created for a reason in nature, they lack any real purpose to humans. Beauty is the shallow end of the art pool; it exists in art that lacks a concept.

An artistic representation links itself with the divine through what Kant referred to as the sublime, the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of an object. Landscape painters and photographers have used the concept of the sublime in their imagery to link the heavenly to the landscape through the awareness of wonder in a scene. I see the Kantian sublime in the standards of beauty that exist in the bodies created in paintings, photographs, and my images. It occurs in both the act of being drawn to the nude form and being horrified by our own transience. The standards of beauty have evolved through centuries of painting and largely revolved around a society’s perception of the Biblical. The representation of characters and illustrations of the stories from the Bible allowed the artist an excellent chance to push the standards for what a human could look like. This is due to the fact that these images were supposed

2 Kant, Immanuel. p 47.
to represent not just Biblical characters, but characters made in the likeness of God.

The Bible states, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” It is through this faith-based principle we understand the artist’s pursuit of perfection in the representation of the human form. A more idealized image of a human translated to an increased beauty in God.

1.2 A Biblical Explanation

In the beginning of Martin Scorsese’s film The Last Temptation of Christ, a notice scrolls across the screen. It reads, “This film is not based upon the Gospels but upon this fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict.” It is a movie in which the Son of God doubts his father’s intentions to the highest degree (let’s not forget the exclamation, “Father, why have you forsaken me?”). In an attempt to decrease controversy, the filmmakers elected to place a warning explaining the film’s purpose. This seems to nullify the purpose of creating a controversial work. In order to seek a higher public acceptance, the creators of The Last Temptation of Christ backed away from distinguishing what made their film unique.

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The art historian Linda Nochlin discussed the artist Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* (figure 1.1) while it was on display in the controversial exhibition *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum. She observed, “Who says that religious art shouldn’t be a bit shocking? Why should it not, indeed, shock us out of our spiritual complacency, rather than lull us into it?”\(^4\) To challenge convention is the current circumstance of artistic practice. Since almost the very beginning of Christianity there has been a moral principle to being an artist; one was called to it as much as one was called into the ministry. As an artist, one was to uphold a certain constant level of morality. That is, “the artist early was given to understand that if his art was to reach the proper level of moral truth, it must be formally perfect and speak only the highest beauty.”\(^5\) This statement speaks of the moral truth as if it is no way corrupt, which I do not believe is true. To speak of corrupt morality, one must turn to improper formal aesthetics. I relate this back to the allegory with which I began this thesis, the anecdote from *The Cheese Monkeys*, where “Good Is Dead.”

Art and religion today consistently find themselves at odds, and yet both seem to address a profound desire in the human soul. For centuries, art’s place, for humanities sake, was in creating illuminating religious images that did very little to deviate from doctrine. It has not been until relatively recently that the role of religion in culture has moved from one of revering to one of reviling. I choose to revile the current circumstance of the church, because I see it as only appropriate given their


current state of affairs. At a time when the Roman Catholic Church in the United States has paid more than $2 billion in legal settlements to victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by its priests, it seems wrong to not challenge the morality standards of faith. By creating collages based on stories from the Old Testament, I am able to juxtapose current ethical topics with those that are centuries old (e.g. murder and sex) and at the same time challenge dogma.

To create the heroes and heroines of the Old Testament in my images, I utilize appropriated photographs from contemporary magazines. This practice illustrates how a celebrity-obsessed culture creates gods and goddesses out of movie stars, supermodels, and pop singers. When making an image, I use features from well-known celebrities; those features are always combined, obscured, or distorted. That is because I wish for the work not to compare Paris Hilton to one of the women in Lot and His Daughters (figure 1.2), but to compare the contemporary celebrity to the historical Biblical character. For many, nightly shows such as Access Hollywood and Extra! have became another form of religious worship. Tabloids have become gospel. And paparazzi photography has become sacred iconography.
Figure 1.1 *Lot and His Daughters*, March 2007

Figure 1.2 *The Judgment of Paris (after Rubens)*, February 2006
1.3 The Role of Humor, Irony, and Satire

About a month after God created Adam and Eve, he decides to stop by the Garden to see how they are doing. He comes upon Adam and asks, “How are things going with you and Eve?”

Adam replies, “Well, everything was going just great until a few days ago. Then Eve started getting moody and cranky. She hasn’t been very cooperative and neither of us understand why. Now this morning she woke up to find blood all over her legs.”

God asks, “Where is Eve? I need to talk to her.”

Adam replies, “She went down to the river to get cleaned up.”

God replies, “Oh, no! I’ll never get that smell out of the fish.”

—Anonymous

Many people respond to jokes strongly, even angrily, proving that comedy can contain a serious message—that jokes are more than laughter-prompting impulses. Sigmund Freud alleged that every joke could be condensed to a serious thought, a point of aggression aimed at showing superiority toward the joke’s subject. Henri Bergson preceded Freud’s theory in believing that comedy was an unconscious way to ridicule
and humiliate others in order to correct them\textsuperscript{6}. Utilizing both Freud’s and Bergson’s theories, it is easy to see in the above joke that the intention is to criticize women.

If we were to remove the last line of the preceding joke, the punch line, it would read as little more than an interesting anecdote of woman discovering her period. It is the punch line that prompts the sudden cognitive reorganization that makes a joke a joke. Jokes are much like tales in that they both are fictitious stories told to enthrall the listener; yet these two fictions differ in many ways. The joke is short and is apt to be bizarre and absurd, while the tale is longer and tends to emphasize the typical and the rational. The greatest distinction between the tale and the joke is that the tale takes an actively didactic role, whereas the joke desperately avoids any moralization\textsuperscript{7}. Using these criteria, my work fits into the gap between jokes and tales, as they are often absurd and strange but have an edifying purpose in revealing the end of society following any moral code.

The humor in my images lies partially in the way the subjects make the viewer respond and partially in the absurdity of the scenario depicted. Many of my pieces feature the subjects engaged in some sort of socially deviant behavior, whether it is exposure of their body, incestuous sex, or murder. In these images, regardless of actions they are engaged in, the subjects are smiling idiotically or gazing seductively at the viewer. The subjects ignore ethical standards in favor of attention-seeking

\textsuperscript{7} Oring, Elliott. pp. 81-86.
behaviors. Their actions further illustrate the concept of “Good Is Dead,” as the participants are no longer capable of supporting any ethical conventions.

In re-examining the theory of Henri Bergson, we see similarities to the definition of satire, where vices or inadequacies are held up to censure by means of ridicule and irony. In my work, I use satire to illustrate the failings and double standards of the Christian faith. Satire is a frequently used element in contemporary culture to criticize groups. Television shows such as The Simpsons, South Park, and The Colbert Report all satirize the very groups to which they pretend to belong: the modern family, Americans, public figures, and politicians. In Sacha Baron Cohen’s film Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan, the character Borat parodies how the West prejudices Eastern cultures by satirizing what is erroneous with Americans’ views on racism. The goal of the satirist is to correct what they see as wrong in the group in which they are assimilated.

2 Creation and Evolution

In my work, I see my critique of the digital manipulation of images, my reaction to religion, and my use of satire as the main themes important in Good Is Dead. I remember driving home after my initial visit to the Rochester of Institute of Technology campus, when many of the concepts prevalent in this work began to come together. It was during this drive that I realized I wanted to scan magazine images and digitally collage them together to make my art. I wanted to create my own monstrous
people in order to comment on current digital practices of augmenting or airbrushing photographs. It was soon thereafter that I realized that in order for this body of work to succeed, it needed to comment on the fine arts fields precedent in pushing the human form in representation beyond the expectations of the viewer. By thoroughly thinking out aspects of the work before beginning to generate images, I have a better grasp on what the work is about and how it can evolve later.

As *Good Is Dead* evolved, it began to incorporate many more concepts outside the main themes. After creating images such as *The Judgment of Paris* (*after Rubens*) (figure 2.1), I appreciated that the work could be taken more seriously when the hint of a greater story or allegory was shown, as it took the image outside the realm of a one-line joke. The same is true for when the created people began to integrate into the background instead of appearing in the foreground, and when signs and symbols from art history began to enrich the imagery.
2.1 An Allegorical Interpretation

“Nothing so testifies to an artist’s lack of genius as resorting to allegory.”

— F. M. Grimm

I began my investigation of the representation of the nude in art history and its relationship to contemporary practice of digital manipulation in media by focusing on Modernist master paintings whose subject was the female nude. Through the work’s evolution, I began to realize that it was coming off as a one-line joke and needed more substance to sustain the image’s loaded concepts. As a result I found myself attracted to allegorical forms of representation, and I began altering master paintings that had innate sexual undertones to comment on the role of sexuality in contemporary society and the manipulation of the human body, both female and male. This evolved into an exploration of Biblical tales that contained elements of the erotic. I found it fascinating to find such tales in religious writings, as sexuality seemed to be the antithesis of such teachings, and I desired to once again allegorically remark on how sex is considered today. In his article “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” Craig Owens states that throughout allegory’s history, “it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present—these are its two most fundamental impulses.” This is the gap I seek with my work; I want the images to dwell between the morality of the Bible.

and the deviance of contemporary society, by linking historical painting and current
digital photography, and between antique ideals of the body and modern distortions of
those ideals.

2.2 Scopophilia and the Reversal of the Gaze

Scopophilia is the concept of receiving pleasure by looking. Sigmund Freud theorized
that scopophilia manifested itself by viewing people as objects, by exposing and
dominating them with the gaze. In my work, I expand this concept by having the
subjects smiling cheekily or gazing back at the viewer. The models accept the viewer’s
gaze, deconstructing the viewer’s illusion of looking in on a private world and
disrupting the possible pleasure the spectator could enjoy in the voyeuristic act of
looking.

In her pivotal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey
sets up the argument that cinema has created a stage where the male gaze can thrive
upon the female actresses. By participating in the audience and by associating with
male stars of the film, the male viewer has the opportunity to stare freely with pleasure
at the female form. Though Mulvey speaks only of cinema, many of her arguments can
be applied to photography and other visually representative media. Mulvey has written
that the cinematic experience itself is set up to encourage this behavior in males. She
writes, “The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of
power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator….This is made
possible through the process set in motion by structuring the film around the main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify.”

Mulvey explains that, “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium.” By selecting allegories where the female is the controlling figure, using her sexuality as her power and dominating over her male counterpart, I deconstruct Mulvey’s concept. In images like *Judith and Holofernes*, I contrast images like *Lot and His Daughters*, where different sexes are in the controlling roles. This is in order to see if indeed a male hero acts differently with the gaze than does a female central character.

2.3 Eroticism, Sexism, and Idealization

Shortly after beginning to create the images for the *Masterpieces* series, I realized that it was difficult to create nudes without the work being referred to as pornographic. It was increasingly more strenuous to depict nude women without being referred to as sexist. When the images evolved into allegory, they began to transcend pornographic or sexist imagery, as their new context allowed the viewer to see the images as more than just depictions of nude forms. The same was true when I began depicting men along with the women I was creating. In her book *The Nude Male in*

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10 Mulvey, Laura. p 19.
Contemporary Photography, Melody D. Davis writes that, “To symbolize a woman by her genitals is sexism, yet to symbolize a man by his penis is an ‘ideal’.” The penis as an ideal stems from classical representations and can be further understood in the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, in photographs like Tom (figure 2.4). Mapplethorpe transfers the “erection” onto the body, where the muscles function as metaphors for the genitals. This is a basic conceptual element that I continue to question with pieces like Susanna and its counterpart The Drunkenness of Noah. Both are stories about gazing upon nude bodies, and I question how this gaze acts differently between a nude female form and a nude male form. Mulvey has written that, “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification,” yet I see direct similarities between the objectification of Susanna’s confrontational pose and that of Noah’s centerfold-esque gesture.

2.4 Between Photography and Painting

In an interview with curator Rochelle Steiner, the contemporary painter John Currin said, “The people I paint don’t exist. The only thing that’s real is the painting. It’s not like a photograph where there’s another reality that existed at a certain moment in time in the past. The image is only happening right now and this is the only version of

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it. To me, that’s fascinating. It’s an eternal moment.\textsuperscript{13} In my own work there are reality-based elements, yet the final image is hypermediated to the point where the original image is beyond recognition. This is how I feel my work enters into the area of painting. Much like Currin, I am interested in this eternal moment that has equal parts past and present and that can only exist through my representations of people who don’t exist. But unlike Currin, I am interested in a representation that is photographic in its appearance. This is why the images I create must be constructed in the manner they are. The content can exist only through a photographic representation, though at the same time it needs to exist through appropriation, not allowing the images to become exactly what they are commenting on, idealizations of body style.

The concept of photography remarking on painting is nothing new; since its invention, photography has been painting’s bastard little brother. In order for photography to be taken seriously as an art form, photographers felt as though “something had to be done other than the simple presentation of an individual photo.\textsuperscript{14} Photographers such as Oscar Gustav Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson used combination printing to create allegories similar to those that had been seen in painting. They idealized a view and used technology to obtain that view. This is much the same way that contemporary photographers such as Jeff Wall, Beate Gutschow, and Lorretta Lux idealize an image. This thread of idealization runs through my entire work. It exists in the construction of the bodies within the landscape.


\textsuperscript{14} Brugioni, Dino A. \textit{Photo Fakery: The History and Techniques of Photographic Deception and Manipulation}. Brassey’s. Dulles, Virginia. 1999. p. 27.
2.5 Constructing a Landscape

When I began creating the images for the *Masterpieces* series, I used landscape merely as a backdrop on which to display my monstrous women. As the work evolved, so did the environment in which my creations performed. This allowed the viewer to begin a narrative with the image. It has now reached the point where the landscape in which each piece is played out is as important as the actors and actresses who play out each scene.

The landscape imagery used in my photographs is all appropriated imagery from search engines such as Google and photo-sharing websites such as Flickr. For the first few months I did not understand the importance of working in such a fashion. I just did so for ease, and it allowed me quick access to thousands of images that I could use to create my work. Now, however, I find it pertinent to work this way. I find it attractive to use landscape photographs that people deem beautiful enough to have taken in the first place, but to which they have also given a name and attributes and shown on the World Wide Web. The subject matter of these appropriated photographs becomes an additional element in my created idealized landscapes, an idealization that, in the practice of landscape painting, is hundreds of years old.

Painters such as Thomas Cole and others of the Hudson River school used a romanticized view of the landscape in their images, often exaggerating or combining
elements to depict a landscape with a higher beauty and spirituality. Many of the Hudson River school painters in fact believed that nature itself was a direct manifestation of God. The associationist philosophy of Archibald Alison, who wrote Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste in 1790, was well incorporated into the aesthetics of Thomas Cole. In his book on Cole, Earl Powell wrote, “Associationist theory ascribed to every object in the natural world the capacity to evoke trains of thought, and it argued that everyone had the capacity at some level to develop those thoughts….By contemplating a picturesque landscape, one could develop a series of associations that would lead to a form of spiritual union with the Almighty.”¹⁵

Figure 2.1 *Susanna*, September 2006.

Figure 2.2 *The Drunkenness of Noah*, January 2007.
2.6 Signs and Symbols

The artists of the early 20th century aimed to show that the importance of art lied in its color and form. By attempting to abolish the symbols in art that had existed since the caves at Lascaux, France, Modernists intended to change the perceptions of art and the artist. These tides again began to turn in the 1930s with the dawn of what critics labeled “Neoclassism,” or a return to representational forms of art. Suddenly, however, the average man was unable to recognize the subjects or understand the implication of the works of art of the past.

Andy Warhol challenged himself to reintroduce these themes and symbols into art by exploring the use of contemporary symbols in historical paintings, such as in his series of The Last Supper, 1986. Here he incorporated commercial logos into images based on Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of the same name. In one of his many paintings based on the da Vinci piece, Warhol added in the logos of Dove soap and General Electric, along with at generic price tag of 59c. While the Dove soap logo refers to the Holy Spirit of Christianity and the General Electric logo alludes to the enlightening father, God, the price tag carries on the Warholian concept of the commodification of everything.

In my thesis work, I re-examine art historical signs and symbols to challenge the viewer to determine the allegory behind the image. Utilizing art history texts, I exploit the same symbols artists have used to illuminate subjects. We could examine
the use of symbols my image *Lot and his Daughters* and they would eventually lead us to
determining the tale of Lot and his daughters. Behind the subjects lies a field of
poppies, which are used as a symbol of fertility, as Lot’s daughters believe they need to
repopulate the earth after the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. Poppies are also used to
signify ignorance and extravagance. In my image they indicate Lot’s own ignorance of
what his daughters have planned for him, and the daughters own lack of restraint in
committing incestuous activities. Beside Lot and his daughters, we witness three
bunnies foreshadowing the activities the daughters have planned for their father.
Historically rabbits have been used to symbolize not only lust and fecundity but also
the defenseless, which Lot is when the daughters make him inebriated. They seek
refuge from the fire and brimstone raining down on the cities behind them under a
tree, a sacred object inhabited by God.

Though all my work contains symbolism to this extent, I do not expect every
viewer to understand or be knowledgeable of these signifiers. I request only that the
viewer question what the symbols may epitomize. Utilizing these art historical symbols
elevates my images beyond nudes speaking to only color and form into an arena of
greater discourse.
It was important to me that people who would never hear my thesis defense or read my thesis paper understand where the work was coming from and what it was about. For that reason, more importantly than the images or this paper being titled *Good Is Dead*, the exhibition itself needed to have that title and display that concept with little additional reading. Utilizing my background as a graphic designer, I created a branding for the show that illustrated the concepts of the thesis within a design. Using Max Rhodes, a deconstructed font designed by Eduardo Recife that bordered between illegible and handwritten, I constructed a logo for the show that illustrated what my images were theoretically about. The deconstructed nature of the font enabled my title to illustrate the antiaesthetic apparent in my work. Containing what appeared as a crossed out letter “O”, many viewers read the title as *God Is Dead*, immediately relating that concept to the work.

I enjoy it when my work can be read on numerous levels, much like how the audience related to the title and logo of the show. There is the face value, the ugly font, or the funny picture. The more time the viewer spends with the work, however, the more information and content they are able to pull from it. The following sections include information that I think about when creating my work, information of which the viewer is most likely unaware but which is important to me nonetheless.
3.1 Image Creation

Constructing the digital images for *Good Is Dead* is a time-consuming process. After the conceptualization of the image, research in art historical references leads to gesture studies used in the genesis of the particular image. These gesture studies would not be viewed by anyone, and I did not see them as any sort of academic study for a particular piece. They were merely created in order to give myself map to work from in the further construction of an image.

The most labor-intensive aspect of the foundation of an image was not the actual digital construction but the search for each of the model body parts and landscape elements used in the scene. There can be five to ten body parts used to create a character in an image. Because of this, much time has been spent perusing numerous magazines for not only the correct positioning of body parts but in finding easily reproduced usable images. The same is true for the landscape imagery, though often an image’s ability to be reproduced well is compromised for an image’s content. (This can be seen in my image of *Cain and Abel*, where the image of the tornado contextually worked so well that little thought was put into the fact that the photograph needed to be increased by over 400 times its original size to fit into my image.)

Research into art historical signs and symbols begins to lead my visualization into what the picture will finally look like. As the landscape begins to take shape in a
piece, elements in the scene begin to get refined. Pieces of the landscape in the scene are easily moved, swapped out, or changed to both help the image contextually and improve upon it aesthetically. It would not be until this point in the construction of an image, after typically a month of work, that I would begin a dialog with my peers about how the image is viewed, if it is succeeding in conveying my intentions and optional allegories.

3.2 Collage Studies

After working on an image for a few weeks, it was difficult to dramatically change it post-critique, let alone acknowledge that the image failed and needed to be completely recreated. When the creative process for Abraham and Isaac was finished, I realized that the first version had missed my intentions and was simply a recreation of previous takes on the story. I immediately began to create a second version, one that transcended prior views of the Biblical tale. Though I learned a lot through this process, it took more than two months, more time than I had to spend on each image.

This is how my Collage Studies began to be created. The Collage Studies were started as an introductory step in the creation of the thesis work, Good Is Dead. The goal for each Collage Study is to allow myself the opportunity to lay out composition, gesture, characterization, and storyline quickly and easily. I see these as academic studies, comparable to how an artist may do preliminary drawings before beginning a painting. Creating these studies permitted me the opportunity to take advantage of
some creative concepts I was not utilizing in my earlier processes. I was able to draw from other sources; magazine photographs began to influence my compositions. Rather than just art history influencing my creative process, illustrations for romance novels and wrestling pictures became models for my imagery. I also became more instinctive and spontaneous, allowing for the chance of collaged body parts to depict the image’s composition instead of my calculated layout.

There was a very therapeutic aspect to creating my Collage Studies. At the time I began to construct these studies, I went through a rather difficult breakup with the girl I had dated, lived with for the previous two years, and considered spending the rest of my life with. At a time when reading theory, writing a thesis, or pushing pixels for hours let my mind to drift off into space, cutting heads and various body parts from magazines allowed me to generate something new, unfamiliar, and positive.

These studies gave the viewer the opportunity to witness my early creative process but also easily exemplify concepts of the work and its influences. Since early in my graduate school experience, the collages of Hannah Hoch and Robert Heineken had set a precedent for the images I was creating, and my Collage Studies demonstrate this influence to the viewer. These collages, with my creations’ caricatured features, reveal to the observer an elementary view on the manipulation of bodies by the media.
3.3 Exhibition Atmosphere

Upon entering the gallery for my thesis show, *Good Is Dead*, I wanted the viewers to have an experience in witnessing the work that no other format would give them. Early in the creation of the thesis (after creating my first version of *Abraham and Isaac*, which was only my second thesis image), I made the decision to stick to a type of formula for each of the images. The remaining images were to be created in a portrait orientation and were all the same dimensionality and size. My concept for this was based in depictions of *The Stations of the Cross* that I saw as a young altar boy growing up in the Catholic Church. Although my images were to be based in the Old Testament and the images of Christ’s last moments are based in the New Testament, I felt that utilizing this technique would give my images the ability to be viewed as a suite or group.

Next I started to think about the production and display of the images. My *Masterpieces* series contained all large-scale digital c-prints printed on glossy paper and push-pinned inside rudely constructed shadowbox frames. I saw this technique as successful for the *Masterpieces* for numerous reasons. First, the glossy c-print related to the glossiness of the media from which my images were drawn. Second, the framing technique gave the work a playfulness that demonstrated the intention of my poor Photoshop technique; it also demonstrated concretely the “pin-up” culture in which so many of my images are based.
For the thesis exhibition I decided to change a few of these display options. The glossy digital c-print changed to an inkjet print on art paper. This was because I began to see my images as much related to painting as they were related to photography. I felt that this printing output helped to demonstrate this as it is ink being placed onto paper. The framing also changed for the *Good Is Dead* thesis exhibition. The images were framed in beautiful professionally constructed cherry wood frames and were mounted instead of push-pinned inside. I felt that this display method allowed the work to be viewed more seriously.

The images were all printed the same size, thirty inches by forty inches. The large size of these prints allowed the viewer to better witness the overtly poor Photoshop technique in the work. I saw this scale as illustrating – in the words of theorist Roland Barthes – my “punctum.” The viewers get poked by this technique and attempt to figure out why this method has been used, leaving them disillusioned about the manipulation of images in the media. The scale of the exhibited images gave the audience the opportunity to see them in a unique way that other screening methods would not allow. They were able to see flaws in the image, which only the large size allows, making that viewing experience unique.

The space itself allowed for a special viewing experience. After walking down a dark gray hallway, the viewer enters a dimly lit gallery space in front of a bright red title wall pronouncing *Good Is Dead*. Surrounded by nine large-scale images and a wall-sized grid of twelve collages, the audience is given the opportunity to casually
view the imagery. I utilized the dimly lit gallery space, as I desired the viewer to have a personal spiritual experience. Best when seen alone and in the evening, the show was able to transcend just a display of photographs to become an exhibition of experience.

Figure 3.1 Good Is Dead Exhibition, Cain and Abel, October 16, 2007.
Figure 3.2 Collage Study: Cain and Abel #1, January 2007.

Figure 3.3 Good Is Dead, Exhibition View
Himiltsy went next in our critique. After Mike’s gruesome slaughter at the hands of Professor Winter, I felt that it would be impossible for anyone to convince our esteemed teacher to start or stop any sort of action. Himiltsy slowly yet confidently made her way up, lugging something enormously heavy wrapped with a plastic tarp. She unwrapped and pulled out a piece of crumpled sheet metal about two-and-a-half feet wide and three feet tall. It took the little girl all she had to hoist the piece onto the chalk ledge and let it land against the wall with a clang. It read:

NO PARKING
7 AM-5 PM
MON THRU FRI
VIOLATORS
WILL BE TOWED
AT OWNER’S
EXPENSE

There were two nasty gashes on it—one at the top and one at the bottom—both centered.

She was pleased with it.

Winter was not. “Darling, Christ on a bicycle! You were supposed to design it yourself!” Rubbing his eyes, at wit’s end, “When are you going to decide to do some work?”
“I altered it! It used to be on a pole! I made it my own!” Himillsy was practically throwing thunderbolts. “Work? When was the last time you climbed onto the roof of your car in chunky heel sandals in the pouring rain, with nothing but a Phillips screwdriver and a ball-peen hammer, to rip a five-ton sheet of steel from a the base of a streetlight at four o’clock in the morning?” She was breathless. “Without getting arrested? If that is not work, Mr. Winter, then enlighten me, forsooth, what is?”

“Thinking up your own idea, girlygirl. Not the township’s.”

“What about Duchamp? He said a piss pot was Art, and Shazam! it was art.”

— Chip Kidd, The Cheese Monkeys

Arguably Marcel Duchamp’s single most influential piece, Fountain (1917), revolutionized the art world like almost no other. Through the invention of his readymade, Duchamp challenged the arts by rejecting the prevailing standards in art. This theme was the predominant concept that drove the Dadaist, a group of visual artists, poets, and designers creating after the First World War. These artists focused their anti-war politic by challenging the notions of artist as genius. They achieved this by utilizing ideas of chance and appropriation in the construction of their art. Starting around 1916, this movement lasted not even a decade. Afraid that they would become what they opposed, the new standard in art, they began to break apart in 1923.
This is the conundrum with the antiaesthetic. It slowly becomes the aesthetic, the new standard. It needs to end before it becomes the new style. After the first part of the 20th century, when pieces such as Kasimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1913) and the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock ruled much of the discourse surrounding the art world, it is easy to question why there has been such a return to figurative modes of representation in painting. I believe it is because the avant-garde movement had little more left to say. What more would another *Black Square* state that the previous one did not? Would the creation of thirty more drip paintings change how we view the previous Pollock paintings? The answer is nothing and no. The art world changes when it needs to change, when the different becomes the norm.

Though *Good Is Dead*, it can never really not exist. It is an idea, a concept—not an art movement. Its death now could bring about change, but it must always continue to change, continue to die.
**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**


