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What happens to a dream deferred?

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"What happens to a dream deferred?"
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What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore-
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over-
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

HARLEM by Langston Hughes
I believe that everyone must handle things in their own way to remain true to their goals and themselves. I have strived to stay loyal to this idea during my thesis, because any superficial attempts at representing my views on racial subjects have fallen short of honesty. An honest representation of any subject comes from the heart, and is a fresh and exciting image.

I motivated myself to produce as much work as I was physically capable of while striving to maintain a high level of aesthetic quality. In order to reduce confusion and convey my ideas clearly, I have divided my thesis into three main categories. The first category is process versus product, this section deals with my approach and technique in creating a painting and how that effects what I feel my product should be. The second category is artistic influences, which traces the evolution of my painting style. This section also presents my point of view concerning the separation of Fine Arts and Illustration. The third category focuses on my use of subject matter and how it has evolved throughout my thesis. My conclusion will summarize these three categories, critically analyze the work, and present my direction for the future.
I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?
I do not know,
    Lord God,
I do not know.

PRAYER by Langston Hughes
technique (tek nek’)n. 1. the method of procedure in artistic work, scientific operation, etc, 2. the degree of expertness in this 3. any method of doing a thing

My method or approach to painting is a variation of an old master's technique, today it is referred to as "oil wipe-out." It begins as a form of additive-subtractive painting in establishing a middle tone and a sense of light by applying an oil wash across the entire surface of a work. With a basic drawing underneath as a guide, the areas of dominant light are removed by rag or brush. This establishes a neutral base and acts as a unifying agent to the painting. My variation to this method adds a number of surface layers and allows me to utilize the texture of the surface, and an ability to have my artistic intuition guide me in decision making.

Through experimentation with materials, all of my work has evolved to being painted on stretched cold press Arches paper. I found the give (or flexibility) of canvas to be awkward for a rough handling of the surface. To begin a painting (after working up the concept in small sketches), I stretch the wet paper on a Homosote board by stapling the edges with a staple gun. With the paper still wet I apply a thin layer of gesso and let the surface dry. If I desire a textured surface I will apply a heavy coat of gesso with an old brush, or collage other papers onto the surface with matte medium, then lightly gesso again to have a uniformed painting surface. I start the drawing in graphite concentrating on line and shape. When the line-work is established I apply a light spray of workable fixative. With compressed black charcoal I cover the entire surface and blow off all of the loose charcoal particles. I then erase out lights and
shapes to create a strong initial contrast and basic lighting. With the drawing stage complete I then apply a heavy coat of fixative to the surface of the work.

I have found that I have a basic framework to this point, but from this step on I allow my intuition to come into play. I mix media, sand out textures, and collage in elements to find what I feel will be the final image. I do not have the ability to mentally visualize a painting before-hand, I must physically view the paint. In other words, I often continue to work on the painting until it visually states what I want. I want impact on an emotional level as well as the visual level. I have found that taking periodic breaks to walk away from the work, or to judge it critically from a distance has increased the visual strength in many of my paintings. For intuition to play a part in a painting it sometimes can mean that I will have to allow the work to move in a new direction, but that is where I establish a connection to the work. In the painting “Notdanaanymore” (fig. 1a), I worked myself to a standstill. I had painted a mediocre portrait of a friend, but remained unsatisfied with the outcome. This “standstill” helped me to decide that I would attack the painting through collage, additive-subtractive painting, and experimentation allowing a whole new image to emerge. I have tried to break the habit of preciousness with my artwork. If a painting is not working, why keep it? I have learned (albeit not easily) to utilize and take advantage of a paintings strengths, and discard the weakest points.

My process has three basic stages: careful planning, happy accidents, and critical analysis which leads to revisions. This process fulfills my artistic and expressive needs, and unilaterally nurtures my responsibility as a professional craftsman. In finished form my product must address questions on three levels: the first of which is the skill level. Have I satisfied myself and performed to the best of my current abilities? Second, have I provided a painting that carries an emotional and visual impact? Third, does my painting portray my artistic vision as well as provoke a viewer with accessible (versus personal) visual beauty? Accessible beauty (in my opinion) revolves around the established
subjects in Art History: the human figure and landscapes, which makes a connection with viewers through personal relationships. Personal beauty is of inner interest to the artist, and resides in areas such as abstraction and experimentation with ideas and materials. Both are valid forms of beauty, but I have chosen to stay close to the older publicly accessible beauty to reach the largest possible audience with my work and to introduce experimentation into my work to achieve the best of both worlds. When the actual art object is complete I have a need to finish strong, by this term I mean to present the work in a suitable manner. I believe that every painting has a proper presentation, it may be matted and in a frame or simply pinned into the wall with push pins. This is an important stage that many young artists do not use to their advantage, but I believe if there is going to be critical analysis of the work, let it be of the work as a whole and not just the craftsmanship or the presentation.

When I am immersed in process I rarely find myself considering what the final product will be, often I only look to the steps immediately in front of me. I am working towards the image I want, not how it will look in a frame, or how much it will sell for. I know what will happen with the materials I am using. I have struggled with oils long enough to know what I can currently do with them, but there are always happy surprises that will accompany constant experimentation. Both the process and the product are important to me, and I have tried to consistently balance the two in each painting that I approach and complete.
"Notdanaanymore"
My old mule,
He's got a grin on his face.
He's been a mule so long
He's forgot about his race.

I'm like that old mule-
Black-and don't give a damn!
You got to take me
Like I am.

ME AND THE MULE by Langston Hughes
Artistic influences have played a dominant role in my development as an artist. Although there are endless names of people who have influenced me in some way, I have narrowed the list to four artists that are constantly in the forefront of my evolution: Greg Spalenka (fig. 2a), one of the most respected illustrators in the editorial field; Jim Dine (fig. 2b), a strong influence through in figure drawing; Gustav Klimt (fig. 2c), a nineteenth century artist popular for his figurative work that is elegantly woven with symbol and design; Kent Williams (fig. 2d), an illustrator who brought a dark painterly feel to a floundering comic book industry.

The most important aspect that I have taken from these influences is the additive-subtractive painting approach. I have found that a progression of paint on a surface produces a sense of history, shows the hand and vision of the artist, and displays for the viewer the evolution that the image has gone through with each layer of paint. With each layer a new painting is created, and there is a new direction for the artist to follow. The largest work in my thesis exhibition is entitled “Klan”, this is an example of one of my own paintings that has gone through many stages of development. The first stage was one of tight realism involving the main Ku Klux Klan figure and a cityscape. I was disappointed with the outcome, I felt that the overall impact was lacking any deep emotional strength. The second stage (fig. 2e) was begun with a deep wash across the entire surface. This set the main figure into shadow and edited out the cityscape. I felt that large tonal areas of color would be more appropriate for emotional impact, rather than the cityscape background that added a soapbox preaching aspect to the work. I set this stage aside for the summer months and experimented with materials and collaging items into work. Upon returning in the fall I worked up thumbnail sketches for a new composition involving the use of existing drawings collaged into this stage of the work (fig. 2f). The next step was to unify the entire painting to avoid a stuck-on look. Each stage of this painting was a new direction, but all are apparent in the final work, and necessary for a better understanding by the viewer.
I have found that bridging the gap between Fine Arts and Illustration has had a very positive effect on the direction of my work. As there are many forms of art, there are also many forms of illustration. My area of interest has focused on editorial and conceptual illustration. Editorial illustration generally revolves around writing based on political or social commentary. The illustrator is given the freedom to produce the idea of the article and interject personal views into the work. Editorial Illustration has a rich history ranging from David Levine's Lyndon Johnson (fig. 2g), to Marshall Arisman's dark paintings of urban violence (fig. 2h). Conceptual illustration is based on the use of metaphor to convey meaning. Conceptual work is often found in the editorial field, but in recent times it has also become a mainstay in advertising and corporate fields. Conceptual illustrators have found respect greatly in part due to the work of Brad Holland (fig. 2i). His work balances both aesthetic visual beauty and a strong visual concept.

Many connections and similarities can be found between representational fine artists like Jerome Witkin (fig. 2j), and illustrators like Skip Liepke (fig. 2k). The obvious connection is the influences that the Old Masters have had upon these artists. The work can be viewed as a serious study of the human figure and human nature, or in the case of a contemporary artist like Robert Longo (fig. 2l), as humor and drama. Many illustrators are overlooked as artists seriously exploring a subject because their studies are not considered to be an important body of work. I disagree. The work is rarely viewed as an important development of an idea unless the viewer is familiar with the artist, there is a notable exhibition of the work, or the work is visible in every major magazine in print. If the work is viewed together there is a cohesiveness in exploring a subject like that of a fine artist. The major difference in the artwork of the illustrator and the fine artist is the kind of thinking that can occur for the viewer of the work. The illustrator must often provide an overabundance of information in order to capture a viewer flipping through the pages of a magazine. The visual punch is provided to stop a
viewer and draw them into the story, as well as to illustrate a narrative theme. The independent artist does not need to convey a story, and it is understood that the viewer is not flipping through a magazine--but confronted with the actual artwork in a specific environment. If the viewer finds the work appealing, they will begin to decipher the work on a physical and emotional level. This difference of the physical presence of artwork is most often bridged when an illustrator has been given creative freedom without the necessity to provide all the given information to the viewer. This allows the illustrator to produce an image without the luggage of the accompanying story. The difference of physically viewing the actual artwork versus a reproduction of the art can only be bridged as illustrators begin to exhibit artwork in galleries.
It's inside me.
I keep trying to kill it.
But it just won't.

Kent Williams
"Klan" (stage II)
"Klan" (final stage)
Marshall Arisman

Fig. 2h
Brad Holland

convocation alright, but he was very weird. I have a feeling the Shriners would have begged him to join and then encouraged him not to attend meetings. Braque would have been a Mason.

WM: Not unless he was the highest degree.

BH: Right. Name some modern artists.

WM: Wyeth. Hopper. Hopper wouldn't have been a Shriner.

But N.C. Wyeth had the making of one.

BH: I thought the Wyeths were a lodge by themselves. You mean

BH: Do you think so? I think he's a problem. He painted all those people in turbans and harem pants, though, didn't he? But I have a feeling Rembrandt wanted to be a Shriner and hated himself for it. You can see it in the self-portraits. In half of them he's a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and in the other half he looks like a guy who'd say, "Meet the wife." He's a problem alright.

WM: What about you? What lodge would Brad Holland belong to?

BH: The Masons, I think. He was part of the Masons.
Jerome Witkin

Fig. 2j
They took me out
To some lonesome place.
They said, “Do you believe
In the great white race?”

I said, “Mister,
To tell you the truth,
I’d believe in anything
If you’d just turn me loose.”

The white man said, “Boy,
can it be
You’re a-standin’ there
A-sassin’ me?”

They hit me in the head
and knocked me down,
And then they kicked me
on the ground.

A klansman said, “Nigger,
Look me in the face-
And tell me you believe in
The great white race.”

KU KLUX by Langston Hughes
Hatred and racism have no place in this day and age. I was born into this society, and with that birth I am not only a member of this social structure, but I also have a small voice in its workings. It is now my turn to get involved with my beliefs, or get out of the way. I chose to get involved in the only way I know how, my artwork. This type of involvement keeps me painting and creates a feeling of social responsibility on my behalf. With this tool I can reach people that I don't even know, whether it be for a moment or a lifetime; I can confront them with my viewpoint. This viewpoint is not new, it is not revolutionary, it is however mine. There has been so much said and written about racial subjects that I began to realize that I could not say the same thing and expect something new. This is when I began to deal with how the subject effects me personally. The subject is packed with emotions for myself and the viewer making it next to impossible to reach anyone without them having feelings on what I was trying to say. I did (and do) not expect to change the world, because that would be nothing more than an idealistic heroic ego taking charge. I only wish to participate in the search for a solution and a better understanding of an ever worsening situation in out society.

In this thesis I have tried to represent no one but myself. I have tried to stay away from soapbox preaching in order to give the viewer a chance to think. The idea is if my viewer ponders about racism, it might cause them to get involved in some small way like myself. Everyone knows that it is ridiculous to judge someone based on their skin color, but in this day and age it is easy to fall prey to the numerous traps of pigeon-holing. Pigeon-holing was a term used when I was in grade school. It was the method a teacher used to determine what level of understanding a child is at. The teachers would label your level and that is where you remained through your entire pre-high school education. The same approach is used by our society when confronted with the unusual or the different. As a society with information whirling all around us we need to know what to expect from that which we are not familiar with. It begins with appearance and what we can expect from that. If we see that every actor on television
who is black is a criminal, we expect blacks to be criminals. If every senior citizen is portrayed as a frail, senile person, then it is natural to expect that from everyone you meet. If every woman is portrayed as a sexual object, that is what we expect. Pigeonholing makes day to day living easier by limiting how often we must adjust to that which we are unfamiliar. This is not to say that we cannot differentiate fantasy from reality, I am only stating that we are bombarded by stereotypes everywhere we go and this causes our belief system to wander astray and racism is born. To fight racism means a fight for truth, a truth revolving around our society which consists of human beings who cannot survive without each other. We are all capable of emotions, thoughts, and pain. Racism does not only hurt those that it is directed towards, it hurts all that come into contact with it, it acts like a grenade thrown into a crowded room.

One of my goals in this thesis was to find a way to represent my anger towards a racist philosophy. I explored many ways of presenting my subject, and I tried to explore many areas of racism. I have tried to present my ideas on the Ku Klux Klan, black civil rights leaders, hatred based upon stereotypes, and racism in popular culture. Sometimes my exploration worked, sometimes not, and often someone was offended in some way. Many times the reaction was due to a white males handling of racial subject matter. I am not a shock artist, and offending anyone was not my intention. Any controversy was the result of exploration in a sensitive subject area. The answers that I have searched for have been to my own questions and I was fortunate to reach a viewer or two along the way.

Each subject carries with it a certain amount of baggage. "Martin Luther King Jr." (fig. 3a) holds the memories of the civil rights movement of the nineteen-sixties. In his persona rests the hopes of a race of people, and a nation's hope in ending a history of racial strife. I wanted to represent his status in current times as a hero, but also as a man willing to give his life for the truth he represented. Starting with the basic idea of a peaceful man experiencing a violent death I leaned towards a traditional portrait with
subtle symbolic representation. A wreath held by King symbolizes his compassion towards people, and symbolizes his assassination by gun-fire. I feel I am plagued by literalism, and I began to make a conscious effort for a subtle form of symbolism. I have strived to become less literal and break my former habits. I have struggled to break my habit of sentimentalizing racism and pleading my opinion to the viewer. I have also tried to break my habit of providing an overabundance of information and presenting my subject in a manner to be understood immediately, I want to give the viewer a chance to form their own opinions on my subjects and my artwork.

I displayed four paintings (fig. 2f, 3b-3d) utilizing white sheets in separate symbolic manners. In a literal sense with racial overtones, there was the painting entitled "Klan" (fig. 2f). I stated my disgust and fear of the subject in a clear manner. The other three paintings became part of an idea based on the presence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the emergence of self-esteem among Black Americans. The painting "X-hat" (fig. 3b), has a dual idea in its conception. The first is in unison with the concept of the sculptural painting "Malcolm X on a Pop-Tart" (fig. 3e). The notion of popular culture purchasing a popular symbol in the civil rights movement to gain respectability (as well as money) is intriguing. Many of the people who purchase the fashionable clothing, car deodorizers, or that spout the slogans are only faintly aware of the significance of the "X" symbol, they are only interested in it as a fashion. The significance of the "X" symbol is that the letter X represents the true African name that was taken from the slaves by their white owners. In the 1950's, a black political and religious organization known as the Nation of Islam denounced their slave owners name and replaced it with an "X" until the day that they could proudly go by their true African name. Beyond the reason for the "X", I personally feel it represents a breed of human leadership and strength that is rare in difficult times, not a symbol to be used as a trendy fashion. Pop-culture will latch onto any symbol like the barnacle on a whale- that is to say only if there is capital to be gained. At the same time as the popularity of the emergence of the "X" symbol Ren and
Stimpy (Nickolodean cartoon) was popular, as well as Wayne and Garth (headbanging), characters from a Saturday Night Live. With popular culture producing such mismatched images such as these, the founding idea of the “X” symbol becomes weakened by its use as a trendy item over its symbolic status for a lost heritage. Arguments have been made by the producers of the “X” fashions that the message is reaching a larger population. I disagree. Many of the people sporting the fashions are unaware of the struggle that existed in the civil rights movement, therefore they are not wearing the symbol to make a statement, it is only for fashion. It also sends a mixed message to youth that everyone “sells-out “ sooner or later. The message wasn’t for money making purposes, it was to provide hope and heritage to a race of people.

If the individuals are unaware of the symbol, they are cloaked to the richness of their history and heritage; thus the cloaked figure with the “X” hat. The Pop-Tart symbolizes pop-culture and it also symbolizes American junk food. The idea of putting Malcolm X on a Pop-Tart came from a brainstorm involving two other people, and it is only fair to give credit where credit is due. The idea started as a way of making money from collectible baseball cards. In joking about the idea with Graphic Design student Meg Galetta, and professor Bob Dorsey we decided on edible baseball cards. This way the kids get to collect their favorite baseball players and can have a fun treat. This perpetuates the sales as the kids need another card after they eat the one they buy. At the time this idea came about the U.S. Postal service was holding a debate over which Elvis Presley stamp they were going to issue, the young Elvis, or the old Elvis. I thought about combining the ideas to put a civil rights hero (who has no U.S. stamp) that is part of Pop-culture on a symbol of American junk food. Food for the masses of Pop-culture, unhealthy food with a political agenda. An endnote being this piece was the most “popular” work in my show (no pun intended).
"Dream Deferred"
"Untitled dancer"
"Malcolm X on a Pop-tart" fig. 3e
Bear in mind
That death is a drum
Beating forever
Till the last worms come
To answer its call,
Till the last stars fall,
Until the last atom
Is no atom at all,
Until time is lost
And there is no air
And space itself
Is nothing nowhere,
Death is a drum,
A signal drum,
Calling life
To come!
Come!
Come!

DRUM by Langston Hughes
To conclude this thesis means that I close a chapter of my life, and in this chapter I have learned a lot about myself and my artwork.

I have learned of the similarities and the differences that exist in Art, specifically the gap between Fine Art and Illustration. All the fields of art depend upon the creativity that an artist can muster from within while producing the artwork. There is a common ground between Fine Arts and Illustration as both fields thrive on their creative approaches to art. The illustrator has the freedom to produce work as they see it, but must always link the work in some way to whatever it may be that they are illustrating. It could be a book, an article, a record album, or even a poster for the circus, but they all need to fulfill the need of the client. A Fine Artist has only to answer to themselves, except in instances where a gallery or dealer wields the power to dictate an artist's direction, this would then link a fine artist to the same limitations as an illustrator.

The situation regarding where the reasoning for the work originates is the fundamental difference concerning the two fields. The illustrator is conceiving an idea by narrowing the conceptual process to the narrative framework, whereas the Fine Artist is broadening the conceptual process for themselves as well as the viewers range of thought and expanding upon a viewers visual appreciation. I chose the field of illustration because my approach to realism and my painterly handling of materials is readily accepted by editorial and conceptual illustration. I enjoy the challenge of creating a visual image for a client and at the same time trying to appease my explorative artistic nature. The economic and social climate that I live in does not allow many artists to survive solely off their work. I want nothing more than to enjoy a career that fulfills my creative needs and brings me great happiness and peace. I find the solitude and meditative process involved in painting allows me to communicate with myself, solve problems, and grow mentally as an artist and as a person. I cannot fathom working 8 to 10 hours in a job I
find no joy in, only to come home lacking the energy to paint. I have found that working in the field of Illustration produces this much needed solitude and also provides the economic basis for my survival.

This economic, social, and political climate that does not allow many artists a chance at survival is also the proper climate for Racism and many other forms of prejudice to grow. This conservative climate questions the value of art, and more importantly the public funding of the arts. With conservative politics and economic woes on the rise, fear of poverty or loss of power multiplies among the weak areas of our social system. Those who have the money and power want to keep it, and those who don't need to find a way to get it. Anyone with a different value system is suspected of being capable of doing harm to the norm that currently prevails. This causes a separation of society into cliques and groups that allow different types to find people with the same views and tastes. As these groups become more and more solitary the fear of others who are different grows. In my opinion these are views that are expanding. In the last year the United States has experienced the violent beating of Rodney King followed by a massive miscarriage of justice in the acquittals of the police officers involved. The acquittals were followed by the most severe "social demonstrations" (riots) that this country has seen since the Watts riot of 1969. This was said to be good for the country, "it would send a message to the white public," is the label the media attached to the riots. I completely agree. The message was to fear anyone that was black, it was incredibly damaging to the already turbulent racial condition in this country. I personally feel that the country has not only taken a step backward, but we are going to experience a resurgence of hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan that feed on times of ethical and moral uncertainty. This is all happening in front of my eyes and causes great despair for me.
CONCLUSION

I chose to break up each section of this thesis with poetry by Langston Hughes. Hughes creates a feeling of a lost dream in his work, each poem captures a rhythm and a sense of belonging to the history of this world. He writes about the truth that I have mentioned, and develops the idea that no group in society should be crucified for the color of their skin. I believe that I could have included Langston Hughes in the section for artistic influences because I have learned the value of a good influence in my education.

My education has come in stages, and I am satisfied with my work at this stage. Although I am satisfied, it does not cloud my vision as to what I need to improve upon. I believe my work to be too dependent on my technical skills with my materials. I can see that this skill is too often a crutch for my weak points. I know that improvement is necessary in the early conceptual stages of my work, as well as in the area of design and composition. I often find that I am rushing to the actual painted stage because that is what I most enjoy, but I have been trying to slow myself down in order to create a strong foundation for each painting. My weak points are all goals that I will tackle in my future because my education does not end here; it only transforms into something more personal and less public.

I learned that a sense of humor about yourself and your artwork makes life more enjoyable. I am proud of my thesis exhibition, and thankful to my committee members who gave me a loose reign and plenty of valuable insight.
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