

THESIS

CUT WITH YOUR EYES, GLUE WITH 'EM TOO

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ABSTRACT

CUT WITH YOUR EYES, GLUE WITH 'EM TOO

In the mode of postmodernism, my work attempts to create a meta-narrative by using elements of the larger, grander, and delusional narrative of our American experience. I am interested in exploring the effects of experience (things that happen to us and to objects) on our perception and creation of reality through my artwork. Experiences in general are communicated through signs, symbols, and configurations. These configurations, especially through media, can become a screen preventing direct access to experience. They also can act as a block supplanting real experience with a form of mitigated experience. By deconstructing and reconfiguring symbols and iconography of American mass media from the 1940's - 1970's my collages become a vehicle of communication that seek to destabilize the original intent and message behind many of these source images. Through this process, I hope to create a dialogue of the collective experience. I do this through the physical aspects of the work, through the social implications brought in by the fragments, as well as through personally relevant meanings and associations that I deploy in a satirical way.

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MOTIVATION, PERSONAL HISTORY, TRAUMA

My motivation to create works of art has spawned out of a few instances in my youth. In my early teenage years, I had disconnected and withdrawn from the world around me. I went from a curious, energetic, boy with a mouth that didn't stop moving to a polar opposite. My social circle shrank to a handful, my care to socialize was gone, and I just merely existed. Life shifted from a focus on external dealings to internal thought. This all started at age nine when my father's brother, Mark, died while cleaning his shotgun and a shell that was still chambered fired off. He had trouble financially and on occasion lived with us while remodeling and fixing up our house. My immediate family was not that much better off and my dad was working tirelessly as an accountant to make ends meet. At times I would only see him for a couple hours a day. Because of this I became very attached to Mark, who was around most of the time. He was my big brother, my best friend, and my second dad. My world was utterly crushed when he left us. I stopped talking to people. I stopped doing school work. I just moved from point "A" to point "B". School sent me to the in-house social worker who tried her best to reconcile my situation. After weeks of boring meetings on life and constant reminders of the pain, I soon learned how to act, that is to say, I learned what needed to be said/done to be deemed fit enough to leave. I was no longer bad at lying, and would use it as a shield against my true feelings. This was not without its own drawbacks in the form of being alone and misunderstood. I always remember the sheer amount of times as a kid my family would ask "why don't you smile," "smile more it won't hurt," "if you smile you'll feel better." I was content, but never happy enough to show it. I began to question why my emotional state was different, why I couldn't relate to the emotional responses others had while experiencing the same things. Two years later, on July fourth, my

family and I were getting ready for a short drive to the Green Lake Parade. Surrounded by vehicles on the highway, and about halfway there, my dad saw that we were approaching a car at the top of the hill rather fast. Within a few seconds we realized the vehicle was on the wrong side of the highway and we didn't have room to merge into the other lanes due to the holiday traffic. We were hit head on by a drunk driver and spun around six or seven times due to my dad slightly veering right at the last second. I passed out and woke up to my mom comforting my sister who was screaming, her face covered with blood. My dad was doing the best from his position as the dash and wheel had been pushed back onto his lap pinning him into place. I was shaken up and only had a bruise or two but as I sat on the side of the road waiting for the emergency crews to cut my dad out of the car I could not help but think I was going to lose another family member. As I had already noticed, the other driver had not made it.

The traumatic effects of these two events pushed me into my own world and would play an important role in my search for meaning in life. I didn't notice at that point, but I was suffering from depression and anxieties which disconnected and withdrew me from the world. I was dwelling in my own world of thought. It wasn't until I graduated from high school, became an adult and got diagnosed with depression and anxiety in my twenties that my parents told me Mark committed suicide, that he too was depressed, and that my symptoms ran in the family. With all that had happened to me during this time I lost the ability to communicate, to genuinely connect to others, and subsequently I lost my place in society. Art opened up these channels again by allowing me to freely expel my internal self. The pain, hate, aggression, and anxieties I had been holding back could be safely talked about outside a straightforward conversation. I could transmute these feelings and ideals into an abstracted form, meditatively and at times

unknowingly. Humor and play began to take root as an approach to soften the edge and I began to look towards how experiences in general structure our world views.

EXPERIENCE

Experiences, in a casual sense, are the things that happen to us. In a first person reflection of the events making the experience, we form knowledge of it, subjectively adding meaning to whatever has happened. This alters the personal perspective in which we dwell, ruminate, and communicate. This can affect the way we interact with others and how we receive them and their communication. It is hard to say that our synthesis of personal and collective knowledge is a result of genuine observations. That is because other modes of perception can guide the outcome. These modes are mostly indirect experiences coming from sources such as newspapers, internet, books, movies, and art, to name a few. These mitigated experiences can become a placeholder for genuine experience. The conclusions gained through the consumption of these placeholders can be skewed by the personal intent of those who create them and can cause problems when taken at face value. We define the possibilities of our own experience through the simple act of reflection and communication of the experiences.

To philosopher Giorgio Agamben, “experience” can be seen in the relationship between language and pre-language (infancy). Spoken language is used to communicate our experiences.¹ Through the system of language, we generate a configuration of symbols (words) that can be spoken. Each word is attributed meaning based on what it denotes or how it has been used. Through naming, precise communication of ideas is possible but that ability limits the possibilities of genuine experience.² Infancy is that in which experience tries to break those limits by moving back to a genuine encounter. In its pure form, infancy is found mostly in the early ages of childhood before adopting a spoken language and can be glimpsed later on in the

¹ Giorgio Agamben, “Infancy and History: The destruction of experience”, *Radical Thinkers set 2* (2007), 15-70.

² Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the language of Man” in *Selected writings: volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: First Harvard Press 2004), 73.

act of childlike play.³ Before language, we have no guiding or limiting notions when observing our surrounding and it can be said we have genuine experience.

When trying to communicate our experiences through languages, we as adults, are negating the limitless potential experience can offer. In lieu of genuine experience we end up experiencing language itself - mitigated experience. This is why Agamben says “the question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us.”⁴ What we access is not direct experience but a linguistic account of it. When we consider the new technologies used to “experience” the world--newspapers, internet, phones--we start to distance ourselves from a first person perspective, from genuine “experience.” Agamben refers to this mitigated experience as being “subjected to the imposition of a form of experience as controlled and manipulated as a laboratory maze for rats.”⁵ This control and manipulation of experience gives authority to those who control media to give us an experience that reflects their ideals, and their interests.

Agamben’s idea of language and the notion of “infancy” is shared and possibly rooted in aspects of Walter Benjamin’s thought. Benjamin considers experience not necessarily as the carrier of knowledge but as something that happens in between event (stimulus) and cognition (reflecting on the stimulus), and that it is something attributed to the interaction. Benjamin focuses on the idea that experience cannot be interpreted as something static, it is not quantifiable, it is a quality.”⁶ This is to say that true “experience” is part of an *a priori* event, and not the event itself, also that experience cannot be reduced down to a system (Stimulus “A” + Stimulus “B” = Experience “C”). The crisis of experience Agamben talks about is rooted in

³ Agamben, 15-70.

⁴ Agamben, 15.

⁵ Ibid, 18.

⁶ Sean Fox, “Walter Benjamin and the Supplementarity of Experience”, August 2014, (accessed 3 March 2016), <https://www.academia.edu/9700499/Walter_Benjamin_and_The_Supplementarity_of_Experience>

Benjamin's *On language As Such and the Language of Man*. This crisis consists in that true experience is unattainable because man's language names, and through naming, limits the potential of the named object.⁷ Both Benjamin and Agamben agree that this is when we begin to experience the language that defines the object rather than the object itself. This is where-from I draw most inspiration for my work - where I look to define myself, to find my place in society through my art. It is also where media and history conflict with experience. In our world, they are important factors in determining how experience filters our perception of reality.

My artwork moves from notions of experience to specific narratives through the image making process of collage. Each image I source is pre-loaded with ideologies instilled in its usage. As these images amass in my work, fragmented narratives develop through their amalgamation. I source images based on my personal experience with them and how I see them fitting into what is already present in the work. This begins to form loose narratives, much like the fragmentary aspect of montages. Take the work, *Accumulate Currency, Disregard Women* (FIG.1) for example. As I began to construct this work through sourced imagery, a male theme started to emerge. Images of guns, hoses and telescopes took on a sexual character through my experience of them as innuendo. I reinforced this sexual aspect by the inclusion of male beatifying product ads and a fragment of an ad for an illustrated sex manual coyfully placed. Other elements added formally such as the icebergs and rock (bottom to bottom-left) took on a new masculine character. A narrative was formed out of the process with my experiences of these images as a guide.

What is interesting is that on the other hand, viewers go through a similar but opposite process when dissecting the work. Narrative is obvious in the configurations of sourced images, but is still in a state of fragmentation as they do not yet know how to read the work. My art

⁷ Benjamin, *On language*, 70-74.

becomes like a Mad Lib, viewers are forced to place their own experiences onto each image in an attempt to decode its larger meaning. Through the viewer's interpretation of the work they are made aware of their own experiences of the images present. This awareness makes them to reconcile these experiences with the way I present the configuration of imagery. As such, the work forces the viewer to become aware that they are interpreting. The work forces them to reflect on it in the first person.

PLAY, INTUITION AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

Through play, children forego general knowledge of objects in favor of a use that suits their specific imagined purpose. One such purpose might be to remove imagined ghosts from their house. I will give an example from my childhood that illustrates this point. Around age five a picture was taken of me playing “Ghostbusters.” Lacking in movie quality props I decided to supplement the power pack and ray gun with whatever was close at hand (FIG.2). For the power pack, I looped the feet of a blue folding director’s chair around my shoulders like a backpack. The ray gun became a hand held “View-Master Show Beam Projector” and, just because it fit on my head so well, I used a green toy bridge as a helmet. As a kid, that came naturally to me. We stop thinking in this manner as we get older and there comes a time when we become adults, start being responsible, and stop experiencing the present and start reflecting on the past to decode the present, therefore missing it completely.

Agamben’s idea on how play can change and profanate the dominating patterns of meaning that limit experience is apparent in my use of toys as a child. In play, miniaturized instances of real objects of the adult world are removed from their instrumental function and, by doing so, the objects are also subtracted from the synchrony of the adult world and released into the diachrony of the child’s. Play as an artistic process of making allows me to bypass the established use of images or conceptions. It also allows me to re-experience those images as something new. I understand that this might only happen briefly as my own artistic and formal language starts to itself limit genuine experience of my imagery.

Initially when at play (which for me as an artist is same as being “at work”), I have no prior conscious contexts to limit the potential of the work, rather, as I progress, themes or ideas

arise out of the play. Sometimes I expand and sometimes I subdue these emerging themes. It is at this point that I recognize a specific theme or idea and my choices go from playful to analytical as I have recognized a structure which begins to limit the potentiality of the work and gives it a clear direction. To Agamben, my experience then shifts into the experience of language itself, a visual language in the broader context of verbal language. It is at this moment that language/narrative becomes part of my medium. An example of this takes place at the moment when in my work, *Accumulate Currency, Disregard Women* (FIG.1) I noticed and accentuated the sexual male theme. Agamben asserts that while "ritual fixes and structures the calendar, play, on the other hand, though we do not yet know how and why, changes and destroys it."⁸

Intuition and the subconscious are also important components in my process of play. While at play, the process of art transmutes and abstracts my internal voice. What was internal rumination becomes external play resulting in a visual exploration of my emotional states and physical responses to experiences of the world. These responses coagulate in an intuitive studio process, a back and forth interaction between me and my work, where I inform it as much as it informs me. I find that a meditative state is reached during the process and a decompression of my mental self plays out subconsciously. During the process, I start to recognize themes or similarities formed through this interaction and I take steps to either play up or subdue the direction the work is moving in. At this point intuition starts to play an important role in the formal structures and visual relationships of the work. Intuition, to me, is in part speaking directly from the animating force beyond the body, such as divine or other worldly guidance. Intuition is also a regurgitation or manifestation of our bodies' subconscious thought derived from experience. Activities reinforced through repetition cement thought patterns, modes of

⁸ Agamben, 70.

seeing, and muscle memory into our subconscious minds. This allows for ease of reproduction without conscious awareness, and at some level could cause problems.

Our supplanting of genuine experience for that of mitigated experiences (those catered to us by media) sets up ideologies in our subconscious that we tend to take for fact. At times without knowing it, we reflect those ideologies onto others without intention. For five years, I had the privilege of running a YMCA-based skate park in Mankato, Minnesota. During that time I was a mentor to multiple youths. Watching them grow up during the impressionable time of their teens has really made me question the effects media truly has. One kid in particular, who lived with his single mother, came under the impression that the way in which “men” conducted themselves on shows like “Jersey Shore” and rap music videos was normal. His experience of “man” derived through media made him think he needed to be super aggressive and cocky, have big muscles, be tan, call women names, and flaunt his money to be desirable to women and fit in with other males. I, too, am subject to similar media influences, as not all my experience is genuine. Through play, intuition, and the subconscious I am at times contradicting and at times reinforcing aspects of genuine and mitigated experience from my personal standpoint. My work resides in the tension set up through this relationship.

TECHNIQUE AND FORMAL LANGUAGE

Collage is used extensively in my work. On the one hand, it fulfills my need to manipulate a physical object. On the other, it allows for me to bring in images pre-loaded with ideology. What is interesting to me about the process of collage is that I am cutting out parts and components of a larger social mediums – changing, altering, and at times isolating or reinforcing their intended use. This process reflects the way in which experience is mitigated through media. When the viewer considers their prior experience or lack thereof during the contemplation and deciphering of my work, they will have a personal and intimate understanding of it. Images combine towards a narrative that is above their pre-loaded ideology. Such meta-narratives are visible in my work, *Just Keep Stacking* (FIG.3). What we first see are three towers consisting of hats and wood surrounded by some colored material. The viewer's experience, derived from contemplation, will differ based on their understanding of the forms present. For example, the hats are sourced from a Disney coloring book and each have a different style. By engaging the work, a viewer's personal and shared experiences of the style, whether consciously, unconsciously, or not at all, become a factor that can lead to different feelings and understandings of the signs and configurations in the work. If by chance the viewer so happens to come across the sourced images' real world counter-parts, then again they might derive a new experience based on what is seen in my work. These levels of readability can be pushed further with a multitude of relations and amalgamations of disparate imagery. This work, for example, is a parody of the Max Ernst's work titled, *The Hat Makes the Man* (FIG.4). The viewers who recognize this will have a different understanding of the piece when compared to those who do not. I can see this as a close to genuine experience. This is due to that fact that I hope that even if

the viewer does recognize my imagery, the playfulness of the work allows for a new configuration to emerge, one that permits the viewer to re-experience its potential outside its typical usage.

Mimicry is another technique I employ in my work. To me, the mimicked form is hollow, a mere visual copy devoid of meaning as it has no prior usage. By closely copying the form and style of sourced images, I am allowing moments for the viewer to imbue meaning into them. What I find interesting about this is that because of their visual similarity the viewer mistakes the mimicked image for a real image. This prompts them to imbue the mimicked image with preconceived notions based on the original, in turn acting as a mitigating force of experience and another mirror to how meaning is formed through it.

Text and titles also becomes important in my work and serve as a guide into my personal narrative, as well as an altering character of the images present. As I've stated before, my process is intuitive and narratives form slowly out of the collage process. Text comes mostly into play when I recognize a theme. Looking at my work, *Typical White Birches* (FIG.5), we can see various female related images, mostly of the body. The use of ads and selective crossing out of text puts more emphasis on the words still readable. In this work particularly, I placed an image of the female body next to an ad that reads "no handling charge, just pay price you see." By crossing out select words, the ad now reads "no handling, just see," adding a new meaning to the adjacent female form. The work to me is about the "typical white girl" or "basic," as it is a slang term, playing on the vicinity of "birch" and another similar derogatory word. These terms have come to represent a girl who is all about image, who imitates but has no substance of her own. My use of text and title here and in other works are ways in which I guide the viewer's direction and use of experience when deciphering the narratives present. I do not mean condone the

perspectives seen in the work but to ride the edge of condoning and critiquing the imagery present. This adds personal tension to the work, as viewers are responsible for constructing a narrative based on their experience.

My work tends to take on a social political character that speaks loosely about domestic issues, gender, race, and their visual representations. This happens through the intuitive use of sourced imagery and the inherent notions packaged with them. These also arise out of my own subconscious thought, as I am always engaged in a search for self, what does it mean to be, and how do we communicate that visually. The use of wooden constructions (poles, logs, etc...) has become a repetitious form in my work. On one hand, they are symbolic of the structures that set up our perspectives of our world. This is shown in my work by the use of implied perspective (diminishing scale, overlapping and foreshortening) and how that sets up the space of the drawings. On the other hand they can be seen as the animating characters in my work, a stand in for the figure. Works such as *Privilege* (FIG.6) and *Bring Home the Bacon* (FIG.7) are solid examples. By having these constructions as both structure and figure I'm trying to relate them to the idea that people are responsible for the construction of their own world views.

The use of illustrational or low art images from comics, magazines, and coloring books are repeatedly used as sources I pull imagery from. The playfulness associated with coloring books and comics adds to the playfulness of my work. I feel that this allows me to soften the seriousness in favor of humor and circumvent mental walls of the viewer by not directly speaking to areas they might be overly concerned with.

ARS POETICA

To me art is a reflection of past or present society or something spawned out of an association with it. Art can manifest itself figuratively or abstractly. But most of all art is a personal expression. In my work I express myself through intuition,. Themes in my work arise that are related to society at large. This is inherent in the use of collage, but in my use of it I reflect my own personal understanding. My work is not out to solve or remedy any of the problems I put forth. Rather, I would hope the viewer learns to think more about the implications a mere surface reading can have on our understanding of the world around us. In my works on panel, I create a dialogue between interior and exterior. The images present on the panel suggest the external world and its mass stimulation quality. The drawings on the wall behind the panel suggest the interior world, our minds. The wooden structures stand for the self that builds-up and defines, both the internal and the external worlds. The white painterly strokes are not only a reference to other high art practices but stand in for the repetitious experiences that ossify our perceptions (FIG. 1). In combining collage, namely of media and illustrational low art practices, and subsuming them into a high art practice, I am critiquing the visual standpoint of what is to be considered art. It is not the final visual product, traditional techniques, or genres that make good art but works that prompt the viewer to question, ruminate, and change.

FIGURES



FIG.1
Accumulate Currency, Disregard Women
Colin Ruff, Mixed Media, 2016.



FIG. 2
Image of myself playing “Ghostbusters” 1992

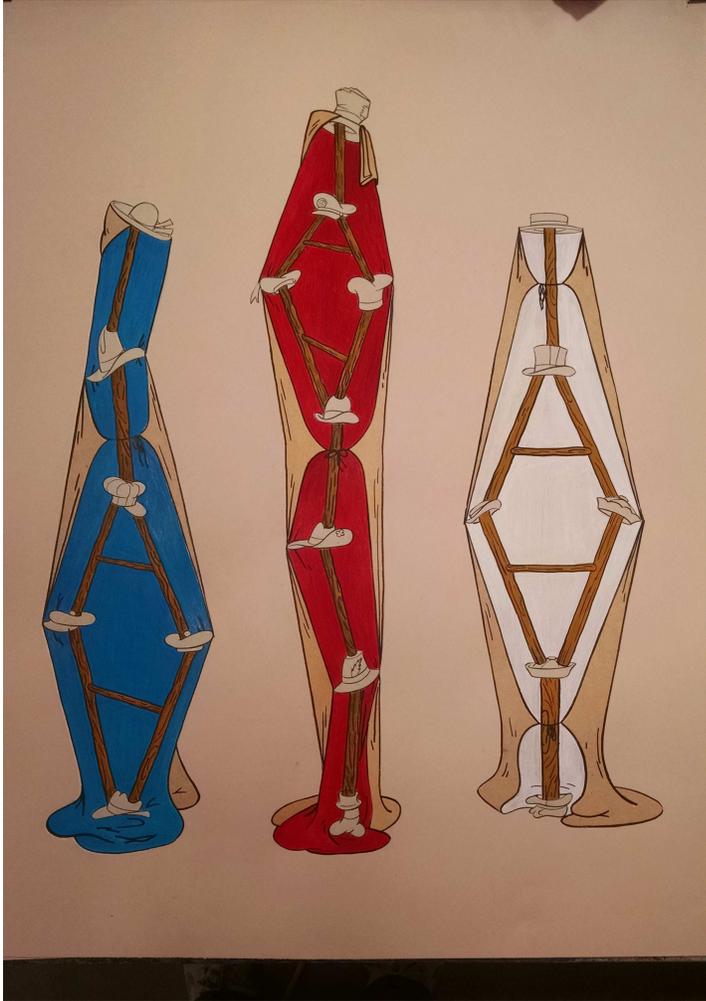


FIG. 3
...and they just keep stacking.
Colin Ruff, Mixed Media, 22"x 30", 2014.



FIG. 4
The hat makes the Man.
Max Ernst, 1920, Gouache, pencil, oil, and ink on cut-and-pasted printed paper on paper, 13 7/8 x 17 3/4" . MOMA, New York N.Y.



FIG. 6
Privilege
Colin Ruff, Mixed media, 22"x 30", 2015.



FIG. 7
Bring home the Bacon
Colin Ruff, Mixed Media, 22" x 30", 2015.

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