

A Series of Narrative Drawings

Most people don't remember much from when they were five years old. For me, that was nearly eighteen years ago. But on December 25, 1990, my five year-old self had an experience significant enough so that many years later, the memory of this day would stay with me in vivid detail. I can tell you what I was thinking when I opened my eyes that morning. I can tell you whose voice I heard coming from downstairs and exactly what they said. I can tell you what happened at 11:23am. Yes, it was Christmas, but that's was just a coincidence. My intense energy and elation came not from opening presents, but from the fact that I was now a big sister. I was sitting on our old green couch bouncing my knees up and down with nervous energy. The instant I heard our car pull around the teardrop, I bolted out the front door. I was wearing white and pink sneakers that were soiled when I planted my foot in a mud hole that was just below the driver's side back door, but I didn't care. The first time I laid eyes on my baby sister, she was sleeping in her car seat in the middle of the back of our white Volvo station wagon. I remember this moment, and the seemingly insignificant, unrelated details of the day so well because of the way I was feeling; unbelievably excited.

My past exists in my memory as a sea of mental pictures, almost like snapshots of my experiences, and the feelings associated with these experiences as I remember them. With time, most of these memories blend together and become blurred. There are however, parts of my past that stand out. These moments are sharper, more vivid snapshots scattered among others that have lost their detail and specificity. What makes these snapshots stand out? They are all moments that involved a heightened emotional state. Emotionally charged moments, regardless of the type of emotion, make for clear, long-lasting memories that float to the top of the ocean of experiences that is my past.

I respond very strongly to emotions and feelings, so that's what I'm interested in. As a young adult, many recent emotional moments in my own life, as well in the lives of my friends, have stemmed from romantic relationships with all the pleasure and drama that comes with such affairs. In this body of work I'm depicting narrative drawings which display painful, frustrating, or just plain hard emotionally charged situations associated with such involvements. Each drawing tells a story. The most important thing I convey to my viewers is negative emotions associated with romantic relationships, for example sadness, frustration, or confusion. I allow my audience to sense a figure's emotional state and a plot in each narrative communicated through gestures, body language, and expressions. Other elements such as clothing and props assist my narrative in some instances. I speak of personal emotional experiences and my ability to recall intimate detail, so while one might expect that my narrative drawings describe emotional moments from my past, they are in fact not necessarily direct quotes from my life. I make this choice because my ultimate goal is not to have my audience understand my own personal relationship drama, even though aspects of my

experiences lie within my work. My goal is to create work that resonates with all young adults because relationship drama is an experience commonly associated with this age group. I speak to them about specific emotions (agony, regret, loneliness, confusion, empathy) in a language everyone can understand.

Although I have a specific situation in mind when I create a narrative, it's most important that each individual finds their own way to relate personally to the drawing. An individual's understanding of my narrative will be colored by their own experiences. Ultimately, however, the overarching idea will be clear. For example, the emotional topics of my drawing *Abrupt Upset on the Beach* "Just... Don't" are exasperation and remorse. It shows two people, a man and a woman, between whom there is obvious tension, standing on a beach. She has her back to him and she's looking down with one hand holding her head and the other flung in the air which says plainly, "leave me be!" She looks like she's about to cry. He's facing her backside with his face in one hand while the other hangs down. He's looking down as well.

The gestures, positions of the figures, as well as my choice to present this work in two pieces, contribute to one's understanding of exasperation and remorse. Scrutinizing the gestures suggests the woman is more distraught and exasperated and the man more remorseful. This is because her pose is far more rigid and tense, and she's the one facing away, while his arm hangs limp at his side and his hand cradles his hung head, and he remains facing her. The fact that the figures each occupy a separate page reflects their current failure to understand the other person. With this information, my audience can understand themes like exasperation and remorse. It's easy to be upset and remorseful if you misunderstand or are misunderstood.

The narrative can be interpreted slightly differently. When I created this drawing, I imagined two passionate, head-strong people in a relationship where, as a result of their personalities, there was frequent drama. I imagined this because I can relate to it. My drawing was an account of a squabble. Another individual may look at this drawing and see someone breaking up with their girlfriend. She's intensely upset and exasperated and feeling despair at the same time. As the title indicates, it was unexpected. He feels guilty, sorry, and deflated. Of course he cares for her. How could she possibly understand his reasons? Perhaps this is a person who has broken up with someone, and, even though it was at their hand, it was still very painful. Another individual who might see it this way is someone who has been broken up with, and is relating the woman's emotions to his/her own. Whatever way one sees it, they understand the emotion of upset and exasperation as well as dejected remorse.

Another example of one of my narrative drawings, *First on Cosmo's 'How to Forget Your Ex' List: Girl's Night Out*, is about pain caused by absence and missing someone. In this drawing, a girl is sitting on the floor with her knees

pulled to her chest clutching a picture frame. Her brow is knit and her head is down and simultaneously turned away from two friends standing beside her on her left. The closest friend reaches down with her left hand in an attempt to pull the picture frame out of the girl's grasp, while her right hand rests compassionately on the girl's shoulder. The second friend lifts her hands in a shrug as if to say, "Please, he's not worth it!" The girl is wearing sweats, and her friends are dressed up. Her turned head reads as reluctance. She clearly doesn't want to go out, while her friends are encouraging her to do so. We know this because of the title.

This drawing is organized compositionally so that it conveys compassion and allows the viewer to understand that the girl on the floor misses someone. The figures construct an implied line such that the viewer's eye goes directly to the heart of the narrative: the girl balled up on the floor, but more specifically, the picture frame, and the middle figure's arm leads one's eye right the sacred object. The picture frame is a prop that allows people to understand the theme of missing someone, because we understand the implied inhabitant of the frame to be the object of her emotional distress. Also, the fact of figures crowded to the left of the picture plane let's us understand that they have moved in to be closer to their friend who is upset, a compassionate gesture.

Again, it is possible to imagine a girl who has just had her heart broken, as I did. However, it is also possible to imagine a girl who has chosen to end her relationship, and now realizes she made a horrible mistake, but regrettably, it is too late. The latter interpretation of the narrative is slightly more complex, but still possible. In either case, people understand this girl's emotional grasp on a person who used to be in her life, as well as her current feelings of attachment and missing that person.

I gradually became aware of creating narratives. At the end of last semester I was drawing the figure. After spending the fall semester searching, and had finally re-discovered something I genuinely loved to draw, and it seemed like it would make a good project for me. It was a tried and true art subject and I enjoyed the process of rendering the forms. I decided photographing the figure beforehand would be the best thing for me to do, since it was unlikely I'd get any one of my friends to stand in one position for five hours. It would give me something to observe as I drew. As I instructed my model to move in front of the camera I was thinking about interesting formal compositions and how the light fell across the curves of the flesh. To be completely honest, my first idea concerning the figure was to take pictures that zoomed so far in on the body that it was no longer a body. This would allow me to focus solely on light and shadow. I could think about the way the bones and muscles rise and fall under their blanket of skin. But my interests strayed. I started to zoom out when looking through the camera lens. I incorporated the whole arch of the back and some of the leg and forearm. Now, it was clearly a body. I continued drawing what I photographed. When it came

time for the mid-semester critique, I was surprised to hear that people viewed my work as highly sexualized. I wanted to align my work with that of Renaissance artists, not Playboy magazine. I thought that within an art context, my work would be about the aesthetics of the human form. Historically, the fine art nude has been considered to transcend direct sexuality. I started researching paintings of nude women in the Renaissance and finding contemporary examples of art that depicted nude women. I concentrated on the difference between sexual and non-sexual, and what difference there might be between naked and nude.

My subsequent work aimed at desexualizing the body. I made a work that depicted two naked girls sitting on the floor engaged in conversation. Essentially, this was a mini-narrative. The good thing was that I was working towards change. I was no longer cropping the head of my models; a cropping that eliminated the gaze between the viewer and the model which not only made the drawing erotic, but erotic in a voyeuristic way. I was also consciously avoiding a sexualized pose. I avoided things that had contributed to the eroticism of my earlier drawings like hands covering private areas or caressing legs, the arching of the back, the craning of the neck, but the nudity of the figures continued to provoke a sexual interpretation. However, I didn't think about things like my audience was. I was still ignoring the statement that the image made. This would be a completely different image had the girls been clothed. The hair band says something. The girl on the right leans toward the girl on the left who leans away. That also says something. Are they lovers? I discovered that those things that the artists considers, as well as those things he or she does NOT consider, effect the statement that the work makes. The finished work has intention of its own, and it doesn't care whether the decisions made by the artists were conscious or unconscious.

At this point I decided to pursue narrative drawings of hard or painful emotional moments in romantic relationships. My work at the end of the fall semester was telling a story, but I was not aware of the story. Now I would make decisions taking my audience into consideration. I would think about the impact of the decisions I made in terms of a goal for my end product. I was going to have a specific and purposeful intention of which I was in control, something my work had been lacking up to this point. At first it felt like I was completely starting from scratch in turning to narrative drawing, but that's when I realized that I'd been dealing with narrative already. The difference was making a decision to intentionally and directly craft a narrative, taking control of the narrative content rather than having it form itself from the sheer implications of the highly charged body.

There are several artists that have influenced the evolution of my work and ideas. The first artist I'd like to discuss is Eric Fischl. Fischl is the most famous contemporary painter of narrative images. He started painting just at the start of

the postmodernist movement when there was a transition from the abstract to the representational. Figuration was once again popular. Fischl began his career creating autobiographical images based on his childhood and his upbringing. His autobiographical paintings are based on experiences and memories, as he was deeply affected by the harsh reality that was his family life. He paints images of American suburbia and “morally ambiguous, tragic-comic images [that] reflect the frittering away of American expansiveness, American economic and cultural swagger, American star turns on world stages (Whitney 11).” Fischl’s work, like my own, reflects a shared experience, in his case the shared cultural experience of American suburbia, however his work goes against the typical Suburban stereotype of a happy nuclear family. On the contrary, his work includes themes such as isolation and abandonment and odd juxtapositions. Images of children playing with a dog are not as innocent as they sound. The image seems atypical, and the innocence so dubious, so that one cannot help but think immediately of what the dog’s presence represents (because it is so much more than just a dog). Some would call his work disturbing. A characteristic of Fischl’s narrative paintings, according to an interview with Fischl conducted by Donald Kuspit, is that “it becomes increasingly hard to place a story (Avedon 38).” That’s because Fischl strives for work such that “greater pregnancy of meaning and moment can be generated than in customary straightforward narrative (Avedon 38).” According to Kuspit, Fischl’s work is mostly about the tension present between figures. Of course I’ve encountered his work previously during my career at St. Mary’s, but I re-discovered him when I decided to do away with nudes. There are two specific pieces which demonstrate Fischl’s ability to capture expression, a quality I greatly admire, and one I strive to achieve. Fischl’s 1987 *Scarsdale* and 1985 *Bayonne* both communicate a mood of loneliness or nostalgia through the face of their subjects. I respond most strongly to Fischl’s *Funeral*, 1980. This painting, and one other, *A Woman Possessed*, 1981, are the only two paintings Fischl describes as being autobiographical (Whitney 15). Growing up, Fischl and his family had to deal with his mother’s drinking problem, a problem around which they were all very united (Whitney 15). She was killed in a one car accident when she ran off the road. Fischl’s *Funeral* is a composite of images taken from a distant vantage point of the family as they spread her ashes in the Arizona desert in a rather clandestine ceremony. The painting is about “death’s devastation of the living, bleakly isolated in grief or, like the boy looking at the viewer (hating the camera, transfixed by the camera), sullen distraction (Whitney 15).” Specific paintings like this one are about exploring the full psychological depth of a memory.

Kenney Mencher is a contemporary American narrative painter who I discovered just this semester. Admittedly he is redefining and reinforcing stereotype so much so that his work becomes cliché. At look at paintings like *Havana* and *Stan the Man* reveals his direct quotation of stills from film noir. Mencher shared some information with me about his narrative paintings. He said, “The stories are based mainly in clichés about human relationships. Most paintings are inspired

by how I see people interact. I'll see something happen on TV or a movie or in real life that strikes me as being funny but also a sort of universal truth about people. I'll write down what I've seen as a sentence in a sketchbook and then design a photo shoot based on the concept." However, movies and television are often times an unrealistic representation of human relationships and interactions—they are idealized. His work displays recognizable interactions with which we, as Americans, are familiar as stereotypes. Unlike Fischl, Mencher is not exploring memories of his past, so his images are further removed from reflecting a true human condition. Oddly enough, it is possible that Fischl's paintings which defy the standard suburban stereotype truly reflect a more real human experience than Mencher's which display instantly recognizable "Hollywood" interactions as they are based on Fischl's life. The fact that Americans know and understand Hollywood quite well doesn't change the degree to which it accurately portrays human interaction. Mencher is creating more lighthearted images. I'm interested in Mencher's detailed depiction of expression and gesture of the figures in his narrative painting. Gesture and expression are my ways of conveying emotion to my audience.

Mencher's narratives are deliberately ambiguous. He states, "The stories in paintings are left deliberately ambiguous or open ended enough that the viewer has to have a stake in interpreting the story and adding meaning to it. Even though the paintings are painted realistically with a lot specific details, in a definite narrative sequence, I invite the viewer to interpret or negotiate their own story or meaning for the painting or series of paintings..." An example is Mencher's *The Music Lesson*, in which a man that appears to be the teacher places his hand on his pupil's shoulder. This is a seemingly innocent gesture; however we're left wondering if it is open to other interpretations?

There are similarities between myself, Fischl, and Mencher. We are all dealing with narrative that is, to some degree, deliberately ambiguous in hopes that the viewer will bring their personal interpretation to the piece. Mencher and I are dealing more with direct narratives in the sense that what you see is really what's going on, as opposed to Fischl who focuses less on the concrete narrative and more on asserting a theme. Fischl and I, however, unlike Mencher, are dealing with emotionally charged memories and personal experiences.

William Kentridge is an artist I discovered for the first time last semester when I was working with the outline of forms. He works in a variety of mediums including video and 2-D media, as well as collage and charcoal. I was initially drawn to Kentridge for his rendering style, and realized he creates time-based narratives by filming a drawing, changing it slightly, and filming it again. This process continues until he has created an animation that moves across the page. Ever since his early films, he's been dealing with the nature of human emotion, however, it is not his films that captivate my attention (Cameron et al. 13). It is the manner in which Kentridge manipulates charcoal holds my interest.

Kentridge states that his drawings are about fluidity, and how things are solidified or become unclear during the creative process. For him, content is derived from process, and the meaning comes from the making (Abrams 12). His lines are jagged and abrupt, and he is very unafraid to make marks. It is as if his will to transform the charcoal is a rapid process in a constant state of transition. He also uses the eraser as a drawing tool. I see many similarities between Kentridge's style, and the one I've developed over the course of the charcoal drawings I've created this semester.

For me, art is a way that I can communicate and share my ideas with the outside world, but it's also important to me that people can involve themselves in my art. My art allows me to express myself and provides an emotional outlet, but is also able to unite a vast audience on the basis of common ground. I want to communicate common experiences and construct my narratives in such a way that the greatest number of people find that it reflects their personal tale of woe.

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