

St. Mary's Project: *Disrupt the Familiar*

Chance Hazelton  
Artist Statement and Research  
SMP in Studio Art, 2013

We live in a world where images flash before our eyes in rapid succession on the television, on our computers, and even when looking out a car window. Today's world has become the opposite of invigorated seeing. Graphics that infiltrate our everyday world include clipart and emojis. These icons are predigested ideas with the main goal of conveying a message in as little time as possible. It is like the male and female gender icons on bathroom doors, even in our peripheral vision we can quickly identify which is the female and which is the male but we do not actively pay attention to them. The interpretation of our surroundings becomes reliant on quantity rather than quality. We have begun to envision our-world by breaking down visual language into a type of graphic modern day hieroglyphs, where the images lose their identity as images and have instead become synonymous with words and phrases.

In my gallery show, I present three images that have been deconstructed and reconstructed in unfamiliar ways. Although this may sound cliché, I want the viewer to stop and smell the roses. We are constantly pushing ourselves to work harder or longer, and have begun to miss out on the finer things in life. Although outside of the gallery my viewers may be overworked and too busy to stop and enjoy life, inside the gallery I want to offer a reprieve from the every day hustle and bustle by providing images that will entice the viewer to observe, examine, and reimagine the objects I have created and their origin.

When I began my St. Mary's Project a year ago, my initial goal was to make a body of work that explored the fundamental elements of art; texture, form, space,

shape, color, value and line. My interest in teaching and my future short term goal of going to graduate school in art education spurred the conceptual idea that through creating, I could teach my audience a new way of looking. Over the course of the project, instead of being the teacher, I found myself in the role of the student. I actually needed to be taught how to slow down and experience the world around me. I learned a great deal about the way I look at the world and discovered the art in everyday objects that frequently go unnoticed. I created digital drawings of each of these ordinary objects, but discovered that I had not abstracted the image enough. I needed to present the viewer with a puzzle, where the familiar aspects of objects are abstracted and address the idea of identity and recognition, where I remove imagery from its synonymous word counterpart. My primary goal has thus evolved into a need to disrupt the 'familiar' as a way to reinvigorate our visual relationship with the world around us.

The manner and degree in which I abstracted the objects progressed over time. Initially I translated what I saw into a photograph and then I emphasized the details of the object through digitally carving a white line on a black scratchboard surface. I had succumbed to the phenomena of becoming familiar with my surroundings. I began overlooking the images just as others overlooked the objects the images were based on. I needed to stop and reassess what exactly I wanted my work to convey and then approach the project from another direction. I came to the conclusion that my drawings had become predictable; they were black and white line drawings of recognizable shapes. What I had to overcome and disrupt in my

drawings was the inclination of humans to create assumptions, habituation, and label things as familiar. We like to control what we see, and the best way to do that is to assume an object's identity, become familiar with the possibilities in which we will most likely interact with and experience something, and then create a frame of mind that all of the possibilities fit into so that we can be familiar with the object the next time we come across it.

If for example I see a tree for the first time. The first thing I am going to do is take an inventory of the features a tree must have to be characterized as a tree and separates it from other flora; there is the trunk, hard bark, branches, leaves, and the more vertical orientation. I will then take note of where I will most likely see trees; outside with other trees. But if one day I come across a tree fifty stories up growing on the side of a man made monument, I will be suspicious and pay more attention to that tree than any tree I may have seen that morning on my way to the building because the other trees were had grown from the ground, like I had become familiar with and begun to expect.

The predictable, like the trees in a forest, is overlooked, it has been seen before, time and time again, but when we look at a tree, or in this case artwork, that challenges our understanding of what the object is, we are intrigued and seek to explore the image further. When recognizable shapes are decontextualized and become unfamiliar we are captivated by the abstraction, but also find vestiges of recognition and the fact that the object is recognizable but not nameable creates a sense of tension between the viewer and the piece that leads to a longer reading of

the artwork, similar to a tip of the tongue experience. We know we should know what we are looking at but we just cannot come up with the name of what we are looking at.

In order to re-envision the objects, I had to wholly remove the familiar from the depiction of these so-called ordinary objects, which lead me to collage and crop my drawings. We are intelligent beings and can identify an object not just by what it is and the details within, but by the space it is contextualized in. We can easily recognize and differentiate the silhouettes of people and trees on a beach at sunset. I needed to go a step further than creating black silhouettes, because although black and white drawings are not seen as often as sunsets, they are still familiar. By completely removing the representational from the image, I have literally placed the details at the forefront of my work. My drawings have become deconstructed versions that repeatedly present details through overlaying, collaging, and resampling the features that initially drew me to the objects. Through this process I have given the drawings their own identity separate from the representational images whose identity can be assumed. By creating an image out of the parts rather than the whole, the detailed features are inherently accentuated because they become the vestiges of recognition the viewer clings to in order to make sense of what they are seeing.

The notion that no two people will interpret the world exactly the same way but are still able to understand familiar objects similarly is the basis for my artwork. What I present to my audience is based on my drawings of seven objects, edited with emphasis on details that intrigued me and then presented in the gallery at

overwhelming sizes. Although I am visually interested in familiar objects, this does not mean that my audience would have been interested in the same object if they experienced it out in the world. Through my reimagining of the familiar object I am able to present images based on familiar objects that others have overlooked in a visually intriguing manner, allowing the audience to see something else that adds a whole new life to the pieces.

Photography facilitates the creation of my artwork, but photography is not my artistic medium. In the past, artists, such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, have utilized photography in a variety of ways that facilitate their art without using the photograph as the final art piece. Moholy-Nagy works in photography and drawing that illustrate light that have then evolved into sculptures with light elements. Moholy-Nagy's *Light Machine*, for example, reinvigorates seeing. Moholy-Nagy envisioned a sculpture that created an all-encompassing psychedelic environment through projection<sup>1</sup>. My installation projection is larger than life, but only with black and white components. Rather than traveling across the room, it is stagnant and allows for an investigation of the marks. Instead of interacting with the space, it interacts with the other decontextualized paintings on either side of the projection. The transitional space between my three pieces, where the work fluctuates from the tangible to the ephemeral, adds a new level of abstraction to the unfamiliar.

The black and white line work in my drawings is reminiscent of Frans Masereel's woodcut graphic novels. Masereel's images are heavy in black and uses

---

<sup>1</sup> "SFMOMA Moholy-Nagy's Lichtspiel Schwarz-Weiss-Gray (Lightplay Black-White-Gray)." The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/1> (accessed April 26, 2013).

the white of the paper to define the shapes and details<sup>2</sup>. For Masereel, the white becomes the outline of people and the background<sup>3</sup>. By using the white as both a background and a mark, my images can be understood as either positive or negative space. Neither designation of the marks as positive or negative will completely alter the understanding of the work and instead they are more likely to work synonymously within the images. Due to the highly abstracted appearance of the images due to the resampling and layering of drawings, the works become more ambiguous and unnamable, unlike Masereel's detailed scenes. I consciously entertain the idea of ambiguity when creating marks in my work whereas Masereel's use of dense black ink in concert with his dark subject matter solidifies Masereel's work, resulting in the visible image constantly being understood as the positive shape of the subject. There is no abstract or ambiguous element in his woodcuts; if there were then they would not have so easily been sequenced into wordless books.

My work, although influenced by Masereel's use of black and white, is not influenced by his sense of storytelling. Where Masereel creates coherent scenes full of common cities and rooms full of people<sup>4</sup> that do not require much detail to understand the sense of location; I work to create very detailed close-ups of ordinary objects in the world that are more often than not unrecognizable due to my cropping and collage choices. These choices are made with the intention of

---

<sup>2</sup> Lanier, Chris. 2007. "The "Woodcut Novel": A Forerunner to the Graphic Novel". *World Literature Today*. 81 (2): 15.

<sup>3</sup> Beronä, David A. 2008. *Wordless books: the original graphic novels*. New York: Abrams, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Beronä, 17.

portraying important descriptive parts of the image rather than portraying an image that is recognizable and a barely altered drawing of the object. I remove the context of the image, which adds to the abstraction of the image, through cropping but also through changing the space by digitally collaging and resampling and layering the same image on top of itself. One goal of my abstraction is to remove both temporal and spatial context as a way to remove the coherence that gives an image its clear, recognizable identity.

Though my drawings are visually linked to printmaking in the marks that are made, the manner in which my work is presented and installed brings to mind contemporary artists that work with the idea of time and projections, such as William Kentridge. Although Kentridge projects films and I project stills, our projected work is similar in that we project drawings that have been modified, erased, and reworked. Kentridge works with charcoal and reworks the drawings into frames,<sup>5</sup> while I work digitally and rework the images so that they may be layered, rearranged, resized, and projected. Kentridge would install his drawings alongside the projected film so that there was an opportunity to view the drawings and then watch them evolve in the films<sup>6</sup>. My installation also provides the opportunity to look at, in greater than life size detail, reworked images that are tangible as well as an image that is projected and thus not directly linked to reality.

Like the differences my work has with Masereel's, in that my work is not sequenced and does not lend itself to storytelling, Kentridge's work utilizes a drawing technique that allows each drawing to portray an element of time so that

---

<sup>5</sup> Farrell, Laurie Ann. 2002. "[Review of] William Kentridge". *African Arts*. 35 (2): 82.

<sup>6</sup> Farrell, 82.



when they are sequenced together into a film, every mark that has the essence of movement when drawn then has actual movement on film. My drawings do not portray time; instead my drawings compress time. When the viewer looks at the projected images, they will see an image that portrays multiple moments at once, combining the drawing of the object as well as my memory of the object. The viewer will find some recognizable parts and then search for these features repeated throughout the work, thus extending the amount of time they would stare at such an ordinary object during their everyday life. My work slows down time for the viewer by extending the amount of time they would stare at such an ordinary object during their everyday life. My work requires the viewer to investigate the drawings rather than present drawings in movement or in real time in which the viewer can skim them and move on.

Kentridge's films use light in a way that my work may utilize in the installation process, where the light becomes an element of the piece. In Kentridge's installation of *Shadow Procession* (1999)<sup>7</sup>, a seven-minute film of paper cut-out figures marching to music by the Johannesburg musician Alfred Makgalemele<sup>8</sup>, Kentridge positioned the film so that it cast the shadows across the floor where the audience entered the gallery space. This use of light both created a liminal space as well as required the audience to interact with the artwork. The creative use of light and shadow did not add an element to the work directly but instead forced the audience to become part of the work. The placement of my digital projector from

---

<sup>7</sup> "The 59th Minute." Home | Creative Time.  
[http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/59/artist\\_kentridge.html](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/59/artist_kentridge.html) (accessed April 26, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 81.

the gallery ceiling may force the viewer to walk in front of the projected light, making their shadow become intertwined with the black marks of my drawings. The distance of the projector from the wall can either force the viewer to walk in front of the projected image, especially since the viewer will be used to standing close to the wall from examining the images painted on the wall on either side of the projection. I will not intentionally force a manner of interacting with the pieces onto the viewer by creating a mapped out plan of where the viewer can and cannot walk and will instead allow this aspect of the work to develop naturally. If someone approaches the wall and accidentally disrupts the projected light of one area of the projection while looking intently at another section, than my work is a success. As long as I can get the viewer intrigued in the details of my work and create a desire in them to investigate these details further than I am satisfied. If their shadow becomes a part of the work for that moment in time then so it will be.

## Bibliography

- "SFMOMA Moholy-Nagy's Lichtspiel Schwarz-Weiss-Grau (Lightplay Black-White-Gray)." The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA).  
<http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/1> (accessed April 26, 2013).
- "The 59th Minute." Home | Creative Time.  
[http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/59/artist\\_kentridge.html](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/59/artist_kentridge.html)  
(accessed April 26, 2013).
- Beronä, David A. 2008. *Wordless books: the original graphic novels*. New York: Abrams.
- Farrell, Laurie Ann. 2002. "[Review of] William Kentridge". *African Arts*. 35 (2): 81-83.
- Heyne, Renate, László Moholy-Nagy, and Herbert Molderings. 2009. *Moholy-Nagy: the photograms ; catalogue raisonné*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz.
- Kentridge, William, and Cheryl Kaplan. 2005. "The Time-Image". *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. 27 (2): 28-44.
- Kentridge, William, and Lilian Tone. 1999. *Projects 68: William Kentridge : the Museum of Modern Art, April 15-June 8, 1999*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Lanier, Chris. 2007. "The "Woodcut Novel": A Forerunner to the Graphic Novel". *World Literature Today*. 81 (2): 15.
- Levinger, Esther. 1987. "The Theory of Hungarian Constructivism". *The Art Bulletin*. 69 (3): 455-466.