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Hues of Humanity
St. Mary's Project in Studio Art
2016 - 2017

I think about the term “humanity” a lot, contemplating what it means to be human and what embodies our nature. The phrase “human nature,” by definition, refers to the core characteristics of our makeup: our emotions, psychological tendencies, and behaviors. However, this becomes muddled when we bring individuality into our frame of thought; that which exists as a result of our own unique experiences and inhabited environments. Yet, there still remains a core set of values and emotional states that connects us as human beings. We all feel pain and sadness, happiness and anger, and despite how we want things to go or how we want to respond these things will alter who we are as people and shape the structures of our living. In continuation, the word “hue” in art represents a color or shade and as a general definition pertains to an aspect of something. Thus, the images that I’ve created in this body of work are a testament to the aspects of humanity, my personal human experience.

Over time, I have realized certain consistencies in my work. The idea of the autobiographical and automatic narrative is the main theme that repeats itself in my art. Automatism is an idea that resulted from the Freudian psychoanalytic theory, where this expression of creativity resulting from uncensored mental associations was thought to provide some significance towards our lives.¹ Surrealist artists such as Max Ernst gripped onto this method of art making and produced sensational and often times erotic images. Collage was a main focus when it came to carrying out the automatic narrative, taking images that resonated with the artist in a random way and merging them together. Until last year, I never used collage in my fine art practice. More and more, I became drawn to taking bits and pieces of separately

¹ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Automatism."

formed materials and putting them together in a way that brought out emotion within me. There is no conscious reasoning, just action breeding from pure emotion and unconscious ideas. I start to feel my heart race as I do this as I become almost aggressive, grabbing bits and pieces of materials and pictures and quickly structuring them together to form a new object. After this process, I come to grips with what I am feeling and what I want. From that point, I am able to begin creating a composition that is representational of this experience and this emotion. This is when my paintings become very directly autobiographical because I am showing something of personal significance while placing my own body and facial features within the composition. By placing myself in these paintings in such a clear format, I become more ingrained and involved in it, seeing myself in the painting at a whole new level.

Max Ernst is an artist that resonates with me, particularly within the duration of this academic year. I find myself fascinated with works of surrealism, especially in regard to how automatism is carried out. As I was starting to design these warped self-portraits in my head, I spent a fair amount of time examining *Pieta or Revolution by Night* by Max Ernst. This painting is considered to be a self-portrait of the artist and his father.² The figure (Ernst) is being carried by a mustached man in a bowler hat, kneeling, but likely to move as we assume he is taking the figure he is cradling somewhere soon. In the background is an angled brick wall and a staircase below a less detailed figure that is considered to be either Sigmund Freud or French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, with just the outline of the figure existing and appearing like a graffiti drawing, on the opposite side of the wall. Ernst's father takes on the role of the Virgin Mary, as he mimics the famous interpretation of the dead body of Christ being cradled in her arms. What's most interesting to me about this piece by Ernst is the placement of himself into a famous scene,

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"Max Ernst, and His Paintings." Max Ernst - Paintings, Biography, and Quotes of Max Ernst.N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.max-ernst.com/>>.

producing a new meaning and a different emotion than what we see in the original pieta. Having the father figure replace this symbol of the maternal places an interesting perspective on gender roles as well as producing an autobiographical narrative. Thus, these sorts of pieces became of greater inspiration for me as I moved from work that was on a more passive side as far as my involvement to creating images of myself into my paintings, to serve the meaning in a more clear and defined manner. I began more and more to utilize Ernst's idea of automatic painting as I moved forward with my work.

One of the main aspects of my work has been the use of the figure, and in particular, the nude figure. Although the nude body is a common feature in historical art works, the nude female body is one that has a history of being sexualized or depicted specifically for a male audience. This is something I have been working towards and explored extensively over the course of this year. As a result, feminism and sexism have become themes that direct what I choose to create. I was particularly inspired to explore these sorts of schemes upon reading *Wet*, written by Mira Schor.³ She starts the preface by referencing a collective group of paintings titled *Dickheads*, portraying red penis heads against a bright background. This immediately got me thinking about male representation versus female representation and how sexuality and genitalia are expressed for both. The fact remains that it is far easier to render an image of a man without sexual connotations, but it is quite the opposite when it comes to the female form and femininity in general. Even a male in a passive position can still be perceived with strength and masculinity, but a passive female figure is related to thoughts of weakness and fragility. Even female representations created by female artists are referenced with an air of delicacy. Schor mentions this occurrence in regard to an article written about Kiki Smith where the author, Christopher Lyons, mentions her imagery of the human body, but in a gentle sense. Thus, being able to

³ Schor, Mira. *Wet On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012. Print.

originally and fiercely render an artwork involving the female figure in nude format becomes an unbelievably daunting task.

I'll admit that my first piece created at a large scale for this project, *Away from the Sprawl*, has the female figures in positions more passive than I would have liked in regard to executing a feminist based piece. It succeeded in its intention to depict how I feel physically and mentally in nature, but the figures fall into the same realm of historical female representations, which is a manner that can be viewed as partially sexualized and weaker in appearance to a general audience. Therefore, my second piece of fall semester, *Me & the Mountain*, was made with a more direct purpose and a confrontational tone.

Earlier in the year as well as last year, I was much more entranced in the works of Thomas Cole. Cole created works centered on the picturesque, with a specific appreciation for assorted features of the American landscape, most commonly depicting aspects of cliffs as well as clumps of trees. He noted that all that encompasses earth is connected to us as human beings, offering us delight and a sense of spirituality.⁴ When it comes to figures being placed in Cole's paintings, they begin to mirror the landscape with which they reside within. For instance, *The Voyage of Life: Manhood* portrays a young man in a small boat entering this rocky and storm ridden chapter of living, perhaps with little certainty of survival. In comparison, *Away from the Sprawl* uses the human body similarly as I have two female figures responding to their surroundings. On the left side, the figure observes an open landscape with a flowing river and rolling hills. She gazes at it in a comfortable regard, as the issues she once may have encountered appear insignificant. The right side pictures a woman in a balled up position, surrounded by a deep and dense forest of trees. This figure is turning to nature in a time of turmoil, feeling the scenery around her as one would feel a hug, although the dark greens provide a more contemplative state of existence.

⁴ Cole, Thomas. "Essay on American Scenery." *The American Monthly Magazine* 1 (1836): n. pag. Web.

Despite never really representing the chaotic side of nature like Cole does in *Manhood*, I draw from his scenes of grandeur often as they grasp all the symbolism and emotion that nature is possible of exhibiting.

Sally O’Riley expresses a similar interest to Cole towards nature, despite Thomas Cole’s time of existence being nowhere close to the contemporary art period. O’Riley explains that “For contemporary artists, the romance of nature has been all but replaced by conflicting emotions that draw as near to horror as they do to wonderment...placing us in an ambivalent relationship with something we perceive as emblematic of goodness and morality alongside the perspective of it being an unpredictable force of destruction.”⁵ This parallels our general understanding of human nature and the idea that we have the ability to do good as well as cause a substantial amount of harm, both to the world and to each other on a much more personal basis. O’Riley continues, discussing the body in terms of contemporary art by stating that “Figurative painting in particular has readmitted the emotional and socio-political subjectiveness banished by Modernism, and its formal criteria have been adopted as ways of creating meaning rather than as an end to themselves.” She references Marlene Dumas’s paintings in this particular chapter of discussion, fitting the standards of this new criterion as the body is used to display an intimate moment, where sexually explicit content is implemented to express pleasure, hurt, and human desire.

I thought about Sally O’Riley’s discussion of the body in contemporary art a great deal as I entered the spring semester. This is when I began to dive into the notion of mental health in a more obvious fashion. Instead of representing nature and the human body in a more generalized way, I wanted to exclusively use my own body and draw from my own very personal experiences as Dumas is described as doing, albeit less sexualized. And this is exactly what

⁵ O’Reilly, Sally. *The Body in Contemporary Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2009. Print.

prompted my creation of *Various Disgraces*, a large and chaotic mixed media piece. In an Ernst type manner, I very automatically started throwing paint and drawing on the paper, expressing a state of turmoil I was finding myself in at the time. The lines that appear in the background and the colors present were the first things I added to the paper, acting from pure emotion. Anxiety has always been a struggle in my life, as I am apt to feeling overwhelmed. Thus, it felt very necessary for me to express this struggle through my art. When I experienced someone referencing my medicated history in a very negative way, I was reminded of artwork that I saw over the summer where pill bottles were joined together to create a sculptural work of art. Despite knowing that just because I have been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder, I am mentally capable of anything and have had my fair share of success, I still felt a desire to confront myself and my mentality. I started to paste these labels from my medications into my painting as a way to own this aspect of my life, while simultaneously showing my impulse to escape this facet of my existence. This is a moment where my work very clearly shifted into the category of autobiographical narrative. Furthermore, this became a moment where I was very aware of my process as an artist; collaging a medley of subjects and experiences and tapping into refined emotion through the usage of color.

In addition to thinking about the representation of the figure in contemporary art, I was also closely examining the compositions of David Hockney. He utilizes line and color in his compositions in a way that I, too, sought to do. The lines in his landscape very prominently affect the gaze of the viewer and this made me ponder the ways I could use line to emphasize my meaning and content. Although his landscape paintings have been a huge source of inspiration for me in a technical and compositional sense, I began to become further interested in his slightly more abstracted paintings and drawings, where unusual shapes and patterns inhabited both

backgrounds and foregrounds. One example is his work titled *Self Portrait with Blue Guitar*, an oil painting on canvas. An interior home space is pictured with Hockney sitting and painting at a purple and red marbled table. The background includes things like an orange outline of a house and a bust that appears to be made of stone. Existing among those representational objects are these patterned shapes that look to be floating in air, but it remains hard to tell. My painting, *Various Disgraces*, is composed in a similar format; the figure being one of the clearest and largest points of focus as it is surrounded by a combination of well-known and unidentifiable objects and scenes. This makes the painting begin to feel overwhelming, but that is just how life goes sometimes.

Another artist that became a crucial figure in the development of my artwork was Paula Rego. Rego's style is quite different from mine, as her figures encompass a softer depiction of flesh and line. However, I would argue that our content is not too estranged. A lot of her work has the female form drawn in uncommon positions and developed from her own life and experiences.⁶ The pieces that I resonate with to best extent are the drawings that were created as a part of *The Dog Woman* series. These works place the female figure in this animalistic role within the domestic sphere of living. Even though there are no other figures present in these drawings, we still feel the presence of a male character lurking due to the gaze and body positions of the dog woman. To some capacity, I find my mixed media piece *R U Feeling Ok?* beginning to mirror some aspects of the original *Dog Woman* pastel drawing. The facial expressions of the figures in both images are appearing to express a personal kind of pain and exhibit a heightened aggression in the form of body positioning. However, the background is tremendously different in contrast to Rego's.

⁶ McEwen, John, and Paula Rego. *Paula Rego*. Vol. 2. London: Phaidon, 1997. Print

The piece, *R U Feeling Ok?*, is a continuation of my autobiographical narrative. Similar to *Various Disgraces* the main focus is the state of anxiety that I feel at times and more specifically, the motions of a panic attack. I can recall instances in public where I freeze and everything around me blurs. People start asking if I'm okay or offer a friendly greeting, but I remain frozen, trying to grasp myself and return to a state of normalcy. This seemed to occur more this year, as I faced a plethora of situations that sparked these modes of behavior, making it more necessary for me to express my emotions and thoughts through art. The specific piece *R U Feeling Ok?* is based on a selfie I took where I physically assert the turmoil that I feel within, and I used that image as a reference throughout the creation of this painting. In contrast to Rego using the same model, Lila Nunes, as a reference when creating autobiographical narratives, I've gotten into the habit of taking pictures of my own body, easily moving myself to any desired position. It is not the most ideal situation to paint a figure from a photograph rather than from life, but it feels like a much more personal method; not relying on anybody but myself. The forest in the background begins to imitate this perspective of feeling lost in these overwhelming scenarios. However, ripped pages from an old meditation book push through and start to look like thought bubbles when observed from a distance. A viewer can't read what these blurbs of text say without getting rather close to the painting. This requires the viewer to confront this aggressive, frontal facing figure. Just as I combat my anxiety with these positive messages, the audience begins to do this as well as they shift between the words and the facial and body features of the figure, eventually impacting how this figure is received and ultimately removing some of the feelings of fright one might have when first observing this painting.

The third piece from my final exhibition is titled *Head-Case / Nature Eraser* and depicts a head split almost precisely down the middle, while a tree and other natural forms appear to be

growing between the two pieces. In the farthest point in depth of background imagery are a set of abstracted shapes; green and white squares, red squares, and a blue circle. Unlike my other two paintings, this work is far less aggressive. It symbolizes a type of acceptance and a moment of inner peace that I often encounter when surrounded by nature, often done so through the action of a trail run. The nature is supposed to represent this healing force as that is how I experience it most often. There is also a hand extending from the tree trunk, reaching towards the remnants of another figure covered by a sheet like blanket. This represents a reaching towards something that I was perhaps once very afraid of; an intimate connection with another human being. These instances always bring forth risk, but as is true for many scenarios, risks can reap great rewards as well as the opportunity for growth. This piece was one that involved the most consideration out of the three and I think it represents a desire and love I have for a lot of things, contrasting the fear and anger apparent in my other works.

To conclude, I will use the words of the great Paula Rego: "If you put frightening things into a picture, then they can't harm you. In fact, you end up becoming quite fond of them." I believe that very accurately sums up my painting experience with my St. Mary's project. My journey through these paintings has allowed me to confront some of my greatest fears and emotional tragedies. It has been about facing the parts of human nature that frighten us and often drive us into a crazed state. The visceral state can be a dark and eerie place to find yourself, as logic exists in a minimal format there. However, it can also be a place to garner clarity and love. At the end of the day, we all go a little crazy sometimes, and that's okay. To be human is to feel and to feel is to be alive and to be alive is a lucky thing to be.