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SMP in Studio Art: 2015/2016

Never Like This

It may seem like it should have been a simple decision, but it really wasn't. I never asked to be like this. I never wanted to be. I never wanted to be different from everyone else and have my mind burdened with such pressure and misconstrued monstrosities. *Never like this* is a series of large scale drawings that deals with the notion of an internal versus external conflict with one's identity. Through drawing I create semi autobiographical narratives that often times are told in three parts. I draw on personal experiences pertaining to my relationship with being gay.

Growing up as a closeted homosexual, I would be confronted with issues and decisions that I was not able to talk to anyone about. Making art slowly became my outlet for dealing with conflicts and in doing so, my works became cathartic. The act of making a drawing becomes an important part of self-reflection. The process is the manner by which I would come to terms with and more deeply understand what was going on in my own life and how I was dealing with the stress of hiding my true self. I create semi autobiographical narratives that often times are told in three parts. I draw on personal experiences pertaining to my relationship with being gay.

Being that we all reside in this heteronormative society, a society in which the "normal" is deemed as the heterosexual, it is overwhelmingly taxing on one's mind to try to come to terms with one's self in a homosexual sense. It creates this inner turmoil that must be resolved at some point but in a process that is hidden and not supported by the heteronormative views of society. Personally, drawing was my go to form of releasing stress and coming to terms with my personal problems during this time of change. Living in St. Mary's County Maryland, a rural area, for most of my life, I was not in an environment that was conducive nor accepting of this process of self-acceptance. Drawing was an easily-accessible form of self-expressionism that was quiet,

cheap, and something that was encouraged in school. Through drawing, I was able to deal with inner turmoil in a semi-public manner but remain private about their true intentions. I was able to take anything I was feeling or experience, characterize it and relate it to a picture or design that I wanted to explore and then just have at it. Charcoal was especially my favorite because it allowed me to create works that were more realistic, but also because of its ability to maintain a high contrast in works—the dark values were as dark as they could get and if you were careful, the lighter values were as well. To me, high contrast that was developed through a black background spoke to pain and aggression and the subject matter of pieces were always someone screaming or crying.

It was not the actual work that helped me, but the process of making it. I felt my works were done when I saw my own emotion in them. Being that emotions do not occur just once, it was appropriate that I produced more than one work centered on the same issue. *Never like this* is comprised of ten individual large scale drawings that can function separate from one another but in order to invest more in the sentiments and narratives that I wish to portray, there are three triptychs in the series.

In order to create this experience as the maker, I become the outside viewer looking in. Voyeurism is an act of viewing a situation from the outside. Persons on the inside do not know they are being observed. Even though I tried to hide my inner turmoil, I always thought that someone was on to me, that someone was watching and that they knew my secret. After coming to terms with myself, I would often think in retrospect about the way in which I handled things and even how things are handled through a voyeuristic lens. In a way of speaking, I drew the actions of my younger self through the eyes of my older self. This body of work is no longer about my younger self but is a story that reflects my own perspective of the gay dating culture as a grown gay man. Conflicts with the notion of self, feelings of shame and constant loneliness, are not specific solely to the gay community or me but are crucial in unraveling untold stories.

In recreating personal experiences, I find that is very important to become the “director” in the grand scheme of things. Making sure that everyone is positioned correctly and that the manner by which the viewer is peering in on this scene is crucial to my work. Growing up gay, there was a constant fear that someone was watching, and I wanted to exploit this sentiment. Not only with my personal experiences does voyeurism touch on, but also allows me to explore this underlying notion of a sexualized subject which is particularly evident in gay culture.

Historically speaking, the notion of a sexualized body is not something new, but it was more traditionally done through the use of a female subject. Both Edward Hopper and Eric Fischl draw heavily on this notion of the sexualized female figure, but in my work it is appropriate to replace that with the male figure.

A reference that I draw the majority of my inspiration from is twentieth century American artist, Edward Hopper. Hopper employed a sense of voyeurism that spoke to how life was carried out in the early nineteenth century by allowing the viewer to look in on private scenes. These scenes often times depicted heterosexual couples, men, or women and in several cases nudity. These figures, paired with various visual cues, encompass a fetishized aspect of heterosexual culture, most importantly that of the male gaze. This male gaze is something that is potent in the homosexual community as well. The search for the perfect, Greek god-like muscular body with just the right amount of masculinity tied in. This also functions not only as what is longed for, but the notion of an internal conflict of the desire to look a certain way and the expectations that society has placed upon certain individuals versus how we truly appear.

With this notion of dualities, one of my works is centered on the idea of dualities. Inspired by Robert Longo’s “Untitled (Frank and Glenn Fighting)” from his “Men in Cities” series, I created a work that deals with an internal conflict. I depict the struggle of coming to terms with one’s identity, a metacognitive process, but through a physical manifestation in my work titled “Duality”. Robert Longo is an artist that relies heavily on the notion of creating a

drawing. It is not just about drawing, but the process of taking a photograph and then recreating a drawing from that photograph as a manner of reclaiming that image as his own. By reclaiming it as his own, he capable of editing the information that he wishes to portray, he re-contextualizes the information so that it is seen in a more ambiguous manner. I relate to him in this aspect in which I can take an image and edit out certain information or focus more on a certain aspect whether it be the musculature or the intensity of the contrast created by the lighting in the picture, as a way of utilizing it more for my own artistic intentions or portraying conflict.

Being a twin really set this stage for me in this identity-conflicted series in that I am gay and my twin is straight. We are identical and in so it is interesting to see how we were biologically split from one egg, and became these two separate entities that look similar on the surface but are different beneath it. Elaborating on this sentiment of being two pieces of one whole, I related that idea back to the conflict of identity. Although I was born gay, I did not accept that aspect of myself until later on in life, it was something that I always knew but something that takes time to settle into especially living in a heteronormative society. While coming to terms with myself, there was a constant battle between my perceived self, who I projected to society and who I actually was.

This idea of fighting with oneself is the reason I was drawn to Longo's work. "Men in Cities" is a series that is full large scale drawings of contorted bodies against a white background. A white background that is absent of information allows the viewer to bring to the work their own preconceived ideas and make the piece something that is more personal to them. It appears almost as if these bodies are being attacked by an invisible force and for me that force was this struggle of identity. Their contorted bodies characterized the struggle and pain that I was associating with coming to terms my sexuality. In my own work, however, I wanted people to be able to pick up on this internal struggle more and seeing his work "Untitled (Frank and Glenn

fighting)” allowed me to put that into a specific context of manifesting the idea into two physical depictions.

Visually, my work “Duality” depicts two figures on opposing sides of a vertical layout. The background is empty and void of information. In this vertical layout, one figure is seen in the bottom half pushing upward while the other figure is at the top, pushing downward. The two meet in the middle where their heads touch. This connection of their heads, being that there is no definitive lines or space between the figures at this point, represents them being one in the same. The tonality of their skin does not differ, only slightly in certain places, and their arms are intertwined to represent connectivity and struggle. In comparison with Robert Longo’s piece, both are based in the figure with an absent background.

Having an absent background allows for the piece to be re-contextualized in more ways than imaginable because it lacks any context other than what surrounds it and what the viewer brings to it. Longo’s work also comes to a single point where the figures appear to become conjoined. His work is positioned horizontally with a figure on either side, rising from the bottom in a trapezoidal shape. In Longo’s piece, however, there is a difference in the visual presence of the struggle. His piece seems to be more about pushing away, the struggle is evident in the figure’s face, where as mine is more calm, the struggle is there but there seems to be an acceptance of it. The figures are unified and embraced where as Longo’s are trying to get away from each other.

Going along with this notion of hiding, another aspect of gay dating culture that my work deals with is the relationship that gays have with facilitating communication through the use of phones and apps in search of an “immediate love”. Although the intention of these dating applications is to end in face-to-face interaction, users have more than often wondered whether that physical encounter would be the best way to characterize their interaction, and most decide that it isn’t. (Roth). When I first delved into creating these narratives, they were representative of

film noir in that they did not contain anything that brought them into a current time period. I was creating work that was meant to represent the present, but lacked anything to bring forth that notion of being in the same time period as today. This issue arose from utilizing the voyeurism that I found in Edward Hopper's works but without re-contextualizing it into the present.

I introduce visual images of technology into contemporary scenarios. Cell phones and music create a direct link in my work to my generation and the current time period. Technology as a means of communication but also as an escape route is present in my work. It is becoming more and more evident that technology is altering how people communicate in today's society, but in terms of gay culture, it is a growing problem that appears to be a solution to the "hiding" that they have encumbered from their heterosexual counterparts. It allows them to communicate with immediacy but also creates a false sense of acceptance and even love—something everyone is searching for in some aspect.

By incorporating smart-phones, I am able to antagonize concerns that face not only the gay community, but the majority of contemporary society. Face-to-face communication has become outdated and we are all attached to electronic devices. The use of dating apps and texting as a means to facilitate communication is practically a growing endemic. Behind a screen, we can be whoever we want, and in doing so, we create a false sense of identity through technology that almost never meshes with our actual, in-person identity.

In my work, "Triptych (The Weigh Down)", I explore the relationship between technology and gay identity through the use of three different figures with a low posture, a phone next to them or in their hands, and a dark lit room. There is an essence of waiting in all three parts of the triptych. The first panel depicts a man laying in bed, a bed that appears to have enough room for two people, staring at a tablet in his hands as if he is waiting for a notification to appear. The second panel, the most intimate of the three, shows a man laying on a couch in a semi-fetal position. His phone sits on the edge of the couch as he watches with a sorrow filled

expression as if he has lost all hope that what he wants to happen will happen. The third and final panel shows a person that is seated in his room. His room is dark but is also a mess, guitars everywhere and boxes and random things scattered among the floor. His room is lit by a blank television screen and placed behind his back is his cell phone.

I positioned the three panels in this order to give light to the motions that go along with waiting for someone to message you on your phone instead of just calling them or meeting them in person. They are in a hierarchy of intensity, the first panel showing a general placement of waiting. In most cases, people message until they fall asleep in bed. The middle panel, however, does not even take place in a bedroom, but on a living room couch. This is the climax of the waiting where the figure is not even in a place of his own dwelling or comfort and is losing hope that he will receive a message. The final panel shows an abandonment of the phone; he has turned his back on it but remains isolated in his own disseminated confines.

Another work that deals with the relationship between gays and technology is in my work titled, "Triptych (Why don't you be you and I'll be me)". Although this narrative pertains to me personally, by creating large works that are over six feet tall I believe that I have given them a greater importance and role in the overall scheme of understanding the private scenes of a closeted homosexual.

Being that this situation spanned over two years, I had to choose specific points that I believed portrayed the important points of the story. A beginning, a middle, and an "end". The beginning was an initial meeting at my work place, the middle was an attempt to end things between the person and myself, and finally the narrative ends in solitude. All three positions encompassed a voyeuristic perspective. One where the viewer was looking in on this private story, but also one in which I was looking back on the way in which I handled a certain situation.

The middle part of the narrative was heavily tied to a text message; a message I used in an attempt to end a friendship. In order to bring about a more current take on voyeurism, I had to

contextualize what “private” means in my generation being that we are so heavily tied to technology. Nothing is more invasive in this generation than looking at someone’s phone, especially without their consent. The panel showed the viewer looking over the shoulder of a version of myself while I was writing a text. Surrounding the figure were song lyrics, another attempt at showing how technology influences not only my life, but relationships in general. Personally, I use music as an outlet because I feel that songs are better suited to speak to a certain situation than I am capable of putting into words myself. The lyrics that were written around the figure are directly representative of the music that I listened to during this time as a coping mechanism for what was taking place.

Moving more in depth with this body of work, the relationship between technology and gay culture becomes more in depth with the introduction of dating apps. Touching on the way that gay people turn to dating apps on smartphones as an alternative to meeting people in person. There is an entire world at their fingertips and all based on GPS location. In a sense this makes things easier by taking the guess work out of figuring out who is gay and who is not but also shows more information such as interests, how far someone is from another person, and even several pictures of them depending on the app that you use. This form of interaction, however, is not limited to only the gay community, it is also used by heterosexual people.

It is evident in my work that the nude figure is prominent. As said above, it speaks to multiple things, one being the fetishized male gaze that is encompassed in the gay community. It also, however, speaks to vulnerability. The process of finding oneself, especially when it deals with accepting yourself as something that society has told you over and over again is wrong, is something that becomes a very vulnerable process. Attempting to be true to yourself while combating the preconceived ideas that have been instilled in your head is a taxing situation that I would never wish on anyone, but it is simply something that happens. Growing up, I was taught that men are not to be vulnerable, it is a weakness. However, through this process of finding

myself and also creating these works, I have abandoned that notion and allowed myself to be vulnerable. Had I not, I would not have been able to portray my ideas in large scale, semi-autobiographical narratives.

In my work titled “Triptych (Reiterations of Shame)”, I explore the notion of shame in a narrative manner. It was called to my attention that narratives can come from emotions, not just story lines. Emotions are something that we do not feel only once, and they do not only appear to us in a single instant. They are something that we go through, repetitively, over a span of time. There is a feeling of shame that I am certain is prominent with the majority of people who come to terms with being gay. You want to be true to yourself but you feel like you are going against everyone’s wishes for you, everyone’s plans and everyone’s expectations and in this conflict, shame is found.

Eric Fischl is an artist that I drew connections to and inspiration from in creating this triptych. According to Schjeldahl, Fischl believed that everyone could see what he was thinking and because of this, he cannot lie when asked about his life, for him, painting should be about asking. These transparent thoughts that Fischl characterizes in his works is something I relate to in my own work. Growing up closeted, I had many stories that I did not wish to tell anyone, even though when they would ask, I felt that they already knew. I wish to capitalize this notion in the rendering of my drawings in order to make that moment of asking a more available monitor for viewing.

Being that my work is heavily tied to personal experience, I also relate to Fischl in that realm as well. “He maintains the gap between ‘the man who suffers and the artist that creates’”(Schjeldahl 13). With this quote, I was able to relate my own suffering as a closeted gay man and relate it to my artistic practice. However, with my work, they are a form of cathartic action, the act of letting go of a harboring of ill feelings. I see a divergence in our art however, in that Fischl is very much tied to the sentiment of location. I, too, draw from that sentiment but in a

different manner. Fischl uses the location in his drawings and paintings to attribute something specific about that specific space where as I only hope to give an ambiguous relationship between the viewer and the setting of the pieces.

This triptych takes place in the bedroom, a safe haven for most. Your bedroom is your room, you are free to be as you are and feel as you are. In the first panel, the figure is in a fetal position with his head hanging low. He sits on top of his bed and the only light that is illuminating the room is what is shining through the shaded window to the right. The center panel depicts the same man, sitting on the edge of his bed semi-engulfed in blankets. He is looking into the window that now appears open from the amount of light that is being emitted. At this stage, there seems to be some self-reflection occurring which goes along with feeling shameful. We sit and we reflect upon what we have done in an attempt to rid ourselves of this awful, weight bearing sentiment. The final panel ends in the figure fully standing, fully nude, but with his back turned to the viewer. He is up against a wall and there is little light coming from the window at this point. With his back turned to the viewer, the figure also covers his butt with his hands, placing them directly over the most vulnerable opening on his body. The placement of his hands over this area is a notion toward sodomy and the manner by which homosexual sex is looked down upon, especially if you are on the receiving end. Across cultures, being the “bottom” in a relationship is associated with being feminine, taking the role of the “woman” in the relationship and is valued less than the counter part of being a “top”. The figure is facing a wall because the shame that he was once being relieved of, he is now regressing to.

Never like this is series that draws heavily on personal experience, I wish to utilize that experience for two reasons. The first being a form of cathartic release. The process of making a piece allows me to become more accepting and understanding of the experience that I am drawing upon for inspiration. The second being the portrayal of this experience in a public form that allows people in the gay community but as well as the general public to get a glimpse of an

inner turmoil that is not only specific to myself, but this community that is still in the process of being fully accepted by their heteronormative counterparts.