No ordinary sleep

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
of the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

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The thesis of Jessica F Mockrin is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

No ordinary sleep

by

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Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

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Professor Amy Adler, Chair

No ordinary sleep includes nine works that combine oil painting with photographs printed on canvas. The painting and the photograph are not resolved into a continuous image but rather left with the seams exposed: painted figures floating in an uninhabitable, photographic space. The nine images depict the same two young men, nude and in close proximity to each other but rarely touching. These paintings raise questions about modes of reproduction, the use of the composite, fantasy, kitsch, desire, homoeroticism and identity. In No ordinary sleep, instead of making “straight” paintings, I am muddying the waters of identity, gaze and viewpoint to create queer
images that are a hybrid of painting and photography, that cross and confuse assumptions about desire, and that are not defined by established plateaus.¹

¹ Amy Adler, personal communication, 18 May 2010.
No ordinary sleep

Illustration 1: Les Belles Endormies, 2010
Introduction

A friend of mine was interning at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla a year or two ago when they exhibited a show of works added to their collection over the past 25 years. I visited *WEIGHING AND WANTING: Selections from the Collection* and lingered in the room with Lisa Yuskavage, John Currin, Lucian Freud and Eric Fischl for a long time. John Currin’s nude, *The Hobo*, was a blonde with pendulous breasts and transparent blue panties. My friend reported to me that halfway through the exhibit, this painting had to be removed for cleaning. Someone had jerked off in front of and onto Currin’s nude, possibly out of lust, possibly out of indignation.
This crude act of claiming the picture as a sexual object for this man’s own purposes could have been genuine—a fan of *Juggs* magazine may have been overcome by desire having recognized his fetish in a most unexpected place—or, perhaps, it could have been a critique of the sexual connotation of the image as degrading and thus worthy itself of degradation. Whatever the motivation, I am both compelled and horrified by this act that riffs on desire in order to function simultaneously as both homage and critique. As much as I like John Currin’s painting, it doesn’t arouse any similar passion in me.

I see something much more my style in David’s *The Death of Young Bara*, whose subject is all of the following: eroticized in death, female and male, beautiful, adolescent, and cherubic.

*Description of the work*

My thesis show includes nine works that combine oil painting with photographs printed on canvas. The painting and the photograph are not resolved into
a continuous image but rather left with the seams exposed: painted figures floating in an uninhabitable, photographic space. The nine images depict the same two young men, nude and in close proximity to each other but rarely touching. A spatial and emotional distance separates not only the figures from each other, but also from the background. The models for the images are my friends, who are in their mid twenties, one gay and one straight. Although they are well of age, in the paintings they look barely legal, their smooth-skinned bodies and soft curves reminiscent of adolescence. Although the models do not have a romantic relationship in real life, they share a similar build and a willingness to perform, and their personal interactions have a sublimated erotic charge or energy that interest me.

Illustration 4: Detail, No ordinary sleep (desert), 2010

In the images, their nude and eroticized bodies are torn from pictures I took and relocated to the site of cold Northern landscapes and barren deserts. Their bodies are sliced and misshapen; curved torsos rest on shrunken limbs. There are either too
many appendages or too few. The scale of the bodies in relation to the landscapes ranges from the miniature to the gigantic. In three of the paintings, the figures are sharply reduced in scale and awkwardly placed onto paper sculptures (planes, boats and cranes) navigating an expressively painted landscape reminiscent of German Romanticism. These paintings raise questions about modes of reproduction, the use of the composite, fantasy, kitsch, desire, homoeroticism and identity.

Relationship to former work

Several of my interests from my 2008 body of work, Young Professional, have carried forward into this project. In that group of paintings I worked with friends of mine who are young corporate workers from New York and asked them to perform fictionalized versions of themselves for me. The resulting portraits were not really paintings of their individual psychologies but ones that pretended to be so. Both bodies of work share a similar interest in the juxtaposition between figure and ground.
In *Young Professional*, the painted figure is floating uncomfortably in uninhabitable space, but instead of resting against a hyper real photographic landscape, the body is juxtaposed with a flat monochromatic painting.

The complex and shifting relationship between painting and photography is a question that I have continued investigating in my current body of work. Both projects rest on the use of photography as a tool to distort the body. By relocating an image taken from one point of view into a space that presents a different viewpoint, I was interested in both ungrounding the viewer and reshaping the body. In *No ordinary sleep*, by shooting from above and with a wide-angle lens, I was able to rearrange the relative size of the limbs with foreshortening. In *No ordinary sleep*, I deliberately re-drew the bodies to emphasize the weight of the body in relation to gravity and to exaggerate the models’ postures.

My paintings continue to emerge from love affairs with other images – Old Master portraits, French Neoclassical paintings and slash art – and engage with questions of contemporary painting in relation to sincerity and irony. I have
been working from the catalog of historical and contemporary painting techniques – European academic realism, German expressionism, abstract monochrome, faux finishing home decorating – to collide these styles against each other in the same frame.

In *Young Professional* 2009, I made a large-scale portrait of one of my corporate subjects in his living room. The walls and floor were faux finished, the portrait was realistically rendered, but the tiger portrait beside him was dripping with expressionist impasto. I am interested in using these conflicting types of painting to create a collision between different kinds of space within the picture plane.
Modes of reproduction: painting / photography

One of the questions raised by the work emerges from the incorporation of printed photographs on canvas, removing them from their familiar commercial context of both hotel room art culture and the Thomas Kinkade empire and reframing them within the dialogue of figurative painting. I am playing off the contemporary idea that an image becomes somehow more valid and valuable just by being printed on canvas.

The photographs that create the backgrounds of my paintings are in themselves unremarkable, maybe even less original works of art than the images Thomas Kinkade creates, such as his work *Sunrise Chapel* above, which, if nothing else, certainly projects a point of view. The landscape photographs in my project are empty and dense, functioning like wallpaper in their patterning with excessive detail. The all-over compositions of the photographs are of the order of what Roland Barthes terms *studium*, “that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: I like / I don’t like. The *studium* is of the order of liking, not of
loving.” The photographs give you nowhere to look. They are void of what Barthes calls punctum: “a photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me but also bruises me, is poignant to me.” This rupture is something that breaks through the even field of pixels or film grain to compel the eye and demand the image be looked at again and again. As stand-alone photographs, my bland backgrounds contain no charge, instead conveying only dissolved information. The gesture of these photographs function as the opposite of romantic painting.

The content of these photographs reinforces the void of meaning in the commercial, mass-produced art world that they reference. The cheapness of commercial work lies partly in its trickery - is it a painting or a print? The mark in Thomas Kinkade is an empty mark, a dollop of impasto meant to signify painterliness, expressiveness and artisticness. The more dollops of impasto, the more valuable the work. This transformation of painting into inkjet print editions is a further widening of the gap between original artwork and reproduction – a destruction of aura. In arguing that the reproducible work of art, the photograph, has destroyed the aura of the original work of art, Walker Benjamin suggests that the unique presence of an authentic work of art lies in its historical association with ritual and its original magical, religious use value. Benjamin goes on to say, “...that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art... One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the

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3 Roland Barthes 27
domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.” If the reproducible nature of the photograph was sufficient to destroy the aura, then Kinkade (“America’s most collected living artist”) has surely relegated it to oblivion. So what might it mean to reframe an image, void of aura and stained with commercialism, within the realm of high art and the dialogue of contemporary figurative painting?

The void, the loss of identity and the absence of meaning are favorite subjects of the postmodern condition. In my current project, the empty container of the photographic landscape printed on canvas is a void to be filled. The goal is to make something poetic out of nothing. The very familiarity and banality of the landscape subject deepens the challenge of making the art work. Before I started painting, I surveyed the printed landscapes on canvas and I felt that I was starting out with less than zero. Rather than confronting the neutral space of the blank canvas, I had given myself a handicap and I needed to rescue the image, to bring it back from the dark side. My project is not a Duchampian toilet – beyond assigning aesthetic value to a banal object through recontextualization, this body of work is a rescue mission, an impregnating of meaning through selection and craft.

In thinking about what it means to reframe the commercial reproduction in the context of the highly-valued work of art, I looked to Richard Prince as a master of reframing. His work rephotographing commercial advertisements and transferring them to the gallery context manages to invest the images with a new meaning. A

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5 Walter Benjamin
member of the late 70s *Pictures* generation, Prince and many others critiqued the integrity of the image and its claim to truth. Writing in a Richard Prince catalog, Nancy Spector explains, “Images, according to this logic, are never innocent, self-contained entities, but rather links in a chain of meaning that reverberate culturally, socially and politically to mediate our own experiences and desires… The goal was to determine whether the very mechanisms of representation – like those of ideology, which are seamless, transparent, and always present – could be critiqued, dismantled, or transformed.”  


7 Nancy Spector 28

In this manner, Prince’s *Cowboys* series, taken from Marlboro advertisements, critiques the artifice of the images while simultaneously investing them with an authority and an aura the “original” ad had no claim to. The images oscillate between empty and full, between illusory and real. It’s a good trick. Prince states that through appropriation, he is trying to add to the existing reality of an image to create a
“virtuoso real— a reality that has the chances of looking real, but a reality that doesn’t have any chances of being real.”

I am also dealing in an additive process based in appropriation and simulating already existing imagery. My hopes are to create something that might look real if the viewer squints her eyes but falls apart when put together in the mind. Many of my landscape photographs are found online and taken from anonymous makers. Mixed up in this group of landscapes originating from places I have never been (Cambodia, Italy, Niagara Falls) are my own photographs. There are no clues as to which are the authentic, “original” images taken by me and which are the borrowed ones, questioning the mystical value of the artist’s own hand. In creating this project, I was thinking of the artist as collector and editor, wherein the artist’s eye is valued as well as the hand. Richard Hawkins describes this type of selection in relation to collage in this way:

The other kind of collage embraces a fragmented representation of the subject and treats the street or the media stream as a resource from which to pluck reflected aspects of subjectivity, re-using and re-combining them in an attempt to fashion an uncontainable, unrepresentable desiring self. …This kind of collage is related to what the scrapbooker or fan does with their favorite images: after seeking them out or collecting them, he or she cuts them up and either by putting them next to each other, altering them or taping them to a bedroom wall, turns a mass-produced image back into an original; a reclamation of the world’s images and probably something much closer to how the psyche constructs an identity out of what passes by.⁹

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⁸ Nancy Spector 28
On top of my partially borrowed landscapes, I’m pasting my versions of a selective grouping of appropriated and reinterpreted imagery from French Neoclassical art, German Romantic paintings, and slash art in order to recycle these well-known types of imagery and reclaim them as my own imaginary vision.

One of the acute differences between photography and painting is painting’s ability to compose and to give different weight to parts within the frame. The landscape photographs I chose for this project, devoid of a *punctum*, suffer particularly from this deficiency. In his essay *Before Photography*, Peter Galassi states, “Of course many early photographs sought to emulate the look and meaning of traditional compositions, but the medium often defeated them. The photographs obstinately described with equal precision (or imprecision) the major and minor features of a scene, or showed it from the wrong point of view, or included too little or too much.”

In *No ordinary sleep (desert)*, the feature I find interesting in the photograph is the lines of the dead bush, which create a drawing in and of themselves. However, the

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“promiscuous camera”\textsuperscript{11} insisted on describing all the other unimportant details with equal precision. Painting in this work is an attempt to rescue the all-over compositions of the photographs with the reinstatement of a moment of hierarchy. In these images, the \textit{punctum} is laid on top of the photographs in the form of the painted figures. What does it mean to place a lovingly-painted, hovering figure of a male nude on top of this mechanically-reproduced, unauthored photograph printed on canvas?

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image11.png}
\caption{Illustration 11: The Theban Band, Frodo/Sam}
\end{figure}

\textit{Collision: Composite-Collage and the Truncated, Hovering Figure}

The collision of photographic and painterly mediums creates an uncomfortable and unenterable space. In these works, the painted figure is inserted into the frame and interrupts the continuous three-dimensional landscape. This type of compositing references slash art “manipulations” like Frodo/Sam from \textit{The Lord of the Rings} by The Theban Band. Slash art and slash fiction depict moments of homosexual intimacy between fictional straight characters from popular media, such as Kirk/Spock or Harry

\textsuperscript{11} Norman Bryson, Class lecture, Rethinking Art History. UCSD, La Jolla, CA. 14 October 2009.
Potter/Draco Malfoy. The Theban Band, who are particularly skilled and highly-respected slash artists, create composites by Photoshopping the faces of the characters from moments of pain onto idealized bodies and then pasting those together into a new space. This clumsy but earnest process is mimicked in my paintings, where the bodies are brought together from different moments and placed into a third setting.

The use of composite also references the contemporary use of green screen in movie-making, which allows a superimposition of figures into any setting. In my paintings, there is a visible attempt to place the figures into three-dimensional space in a pseudo-convincing way. This type of composition relates to the Renaissance conception of perspective, wherein a stage is constructed inside the frame, upon which the figures are to be placed in perspective. In *Before Photography*, Peter Galassi cites Paolo Uccello's painting *The Hunt in the Forest* from 1470 as an example of this kind of composition.

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12 Peter Galassi 17
In comparison, the modern way to compose a picture in perspective was developed in the 19th Century, where instead of constructing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane inside the studio, it became more acceptable to create images from direct observation and to imagine the three-dimensional world as an uninterrupted field of potential two-dimensional images.\(^\text{13}\) By comparing Uccello with Degas, Galassi states the difference between these two methods this way, “Uccello worked from pieces to a whole: he synthesized. Degas worked from a whole to an aspect: he analyzed.”\(^\text{14}\)

In this sense the composite is a crude attempt to compose an image in the Renaissance sense of perspective, synthesizing disparate images into a whole. The composite image suggests a visual resolution of bodies in three-dimensional space that the eye wants to accept but the mind rejects, flattening the picture plane.

Contemporary artist Matt Lipps has inserted cutout photos of eroticized men into photographic backgrounds, playing with scale and perspective in a manner similar to my current project. In the image below to the left, Lipps places the figure on the chair as if he was almost sitting back against it. The miniature scale, the cut-off legs and the nod to proper perspective all unsettle the image and create its sense of humor.

Contemporary artist Richard Hawkins has created many collages that are a “single element on top of a single other,” often a roughly-cut figure placed on top of an abstract painted or printed field similar to the example above to the right. Hawkins explains this choice as an attempt to play with the limits of collage and to reduce its

\(^{13}\) Peter Galassi 17-18

\(^{14}\) Peter Galassi 17-18
language to a bare minimum. In addition to our shared interests in compositing and men, Hawkins also collides photography with painting in his collages, typically employing the inverse of my current project – a photographic figure over a painted background. In Hawkins, there is no playing with scale or perspective but instead the creation of an abstracted space. It is as if Hawkins uses a green screen to place the objects of his desire inside a swirling, psychedelic, painterly vortex.

Illustration 13: Matt Lipps, Untitled (chair), 2002-2003

Illustration 14: Richard Hawkins, Loiterer 8, 2009

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15 Ann Demeester and Richard Hainley 33
In *No ordinary sleep*, the collision of painting with photography has more to do with combining levels of idealization, realism and hyperrealism within the same space. The distinction between real and ideal dates back to the Renaissance, when painting was split into two categories - the first a creation of the imagination from inside the studio and the second the study, a record of reality or nature itself.\(^{16}\) The study was valued less than the idealized composition and a split was created between a low, imperfect reality and a high, imagined ideal. Much of the inspiration for my project came from looking at French Neoclassical paintings of idealized and feminized male bodies. When reading Peter Galassi, I was interested to learn that, “Neoclassical theory widened the gap between observational study and finished picture,”\(^{17}\) based on a return to classical principles and ideal bodies. Thus in the era I was pulling source material from, the real and ideal exist in wholly separate categories but they collide in my project, still separate and creating an uneasy co-habitation.

\(^{16}\) Peter Galassi 20  
\(^{17}\) Peter Galassi 21
The realism in these works lies in the photograph, whose comprehensive detail creates a hyper real record or index of the world. The photographs’ banality is contrasted with the ideality and the imaginary of the painting of the figures. The result is a composite of painterly figures that hover weightlessly over the photographic ground. The figures are truncated and dropped into the frame from another narrative. In the largest painting, the figures hover in the clouds, making explicit the weightlessness of the floating figures that is alluded to in the other paintings. These images deal with two kinds of touch (or the lack thereof) – the touch of the body to the landscape and the touch between the two bodies.

When creating these images, I was thinking of the landscape as a field through which I could weave the figures to distort and elongate their bodies. This is something that Shunga, Japanese erotic woodblock prints from the 16th-19th centuries, does extremely well. In addition to the enlargement of the genitalia, which Norman Bryson describes as the morphology of desire (increasing the size of those body parts in

Illustration 16: Detail, Les Belles Endormies, 2010
proportion to their level of erotic investment)\(^\text{18}\), there is something funny going on under those robes. There is an impossibility to the construction of the bodies; in this image here, the man’s head seems to emerge from his chest instead of his neck. Although these figures clearly occupy the same space, the flatness in these images creates a sense of distance – the bodies don’t so much wrap around each other as overlap. The bodies in my images share this quality, not quite touching the landscape or each other. This lack of touch results from the flatness of bodies that are hard-edged, having been cut out and dismembered. A dimensional thigh, abruptly cut off, quickly becomes flat.

Illustration 17: Eizan, Untitled, c. 1800s

Slash art is also about a lack of convincing touch, a juxtaposition of figures that clues the viewer in to the fact that this image represents something that cannot be realized. The fact that the image cannot unify in space creates a compositional reference to fantasy and unfulfilled desire. The two bodies come from different places and the faces come from two other places, creating a Frankenstein image of crossed

\(^{18}\) Norman Bryson, personal communication, 26 February 2010.
gazes and Photoshop hair. This empty gesture at touch heightens the sense of longing embedded in the image.

In my painting of the figures entwined in the desert bush, the figure’s hands are open as if to embrace the torso of the other figure that has been cut away. His hands holding this negative space can be read as a metaphor for the lack of touch and lack of intimacy throughout the project. There is no eye contact between the figures in these works – even when they are facing one another, they have closed their eyes. Typically one figure is looking at the other, but the other is refusing to return the gaze, lost in some private reverie or purposefully withholding. There are very few full views of faces and no figure looks out from the frame, keeping the viewer closed out of the picture. The lack of touch and denial of intimacy lead to a frustrated and sublimated sense of unfulfilled desire. The emotional content that results is on a low frequency, leaving a gap in which the sentiment begins to emerge from the artificial cues to emotion present in the images - the mannered body language and the romantic plays on the landscape. The emotion comes from the landscape itself. By placing the figures
on to the landscape, the emotion leaks out of them and into the site, as if their emotions are imagined to be at the scale of nature.

In relation to the landscape, the figures oscillate between the scale of the miniature and the gigantic. This inaccurate juxtaposition of scale throws off the viewer’s association with the figures and bars entry to the image. Even when the figures are large in relation to the landscape, most of the figures are painted very small as if they could fit in the palm of one’s hand. These miniaturized figures are weightless and diminished, their shrunken size significantly reducing the eroticism of the nudes. Instead of life-sized, lovingly painted expanses of curving flesh, these images depict tiny, insect-like bodies that are all sharp angles and severely chopped or protruding limbs, dehumanized and repulsive. Could this be a fantasy that is aroused by belittlement?

Three of the nine paintings in the show depict embracing male couples, shrunken to the size of paper sculptures that have become animated within a romantic landscape. By placing the bodies onto paper planes, boats and cranes, the shape of the bodies are compared with the sharp folded angles of the paper. These tiny, twisted bodies have more in common with the hovering Zephyr in Anne-Louis Girodet’s *The Sleep of Endymion* than they do with the curving form of Endymion himself. The Zephyr’s moth wings and sharply angled limbs transform him into a fluttering.

19 Norman Bryson, personal communication, 26 April 2010.
repulsive insect\textsuperscript{20} that the sleeping Endymion would probably be terrified to discover flapping so close above him if he woke from his enchantment.

\[\text{Illustration 19: Anne-Louis Girodet, The Sleep of Endymion, 1791}\]

\textit{Painting as Fantasy}

The juxtaposition of scale in \textit{No ordinary sleep} creates a site of fantasy. Painting is a type of fiction: a fabricated illusion that in attempting to capture or record something, creates something else entirely. The Greek myth of the Corinthian maid Dibutade has been claimed to describe the origins of painting and of portraiture. She traced the outline of her sleeping lover’s face onto the wall on the night before he was to go to war so as to keep a memory of him. According to this myth, the urge to paint has its roots in desire – the desire to trap a person or to cherish the person’s features through tracing them.

\textsuperscript{20} Conversation with Norman Bryson
Why else do teenagers draw pictures of their favorite celebrities in the corners of their notebooks, and more recently share them online, if not to try to claim them or adore them in some way? Can drawing or painting bring us closer to our desired love object? Is it a way of creating a relationship between an impossible desired object and ourselves, or is it a placeholder for desire that in fact represents the denial of pleasure? Artists including Amy Adler, Karen Kilimnik, Richard Hawkins and Elizabeth Peyton have mined this rich territory, investigating the relationship of painting and drawing to latent adolescent desire.

Illustration 20: Amy Adler, King, 1994

Illustration 21: Karen Kilimnik, Prince Charming, 1998
The silhouette of the Corinthian Maid’s portrait is a shadow of her lover, a line that represents him but can never become him. Coinciding with the time period of the creation of the French Neoclassical paintings that I used as source material, the myth of the Corinthian Maid as the origins of painting was particularly popular in Europe between the 1770s and the 1820s. It makes sense that this myth would be revived at this time as part of the general interest in classical themes, but the romanticism of the story of the Corinthian maid seems to also mirror the romantic sensibilities of the times that feed into my current project.

The historical painting techniques that I am using are also lifted from the European tradition. I create flesh by building up alternating layers of transparent lights and dark warm and cool grays, my paintbrush creating and caressing the surface of the body over and over again. This loving construction of surface references the association of this type of realist/idealistic painting with desire and pleasure. In painting only the figures in this way, I am giving them importance and investing them with longing. When the landscapes are painted in the three images with paper sculptures, the landscape also becomes the site of painterly and sentimental investment, and speaks to the creation of a fantasy space that is juxtaposed with the reality of the photographic space in the other images.

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The lure of the French Neoclassical

Mannerism, gender-bending, sentimentality, kitsch, corruption, cherubs, homoeroticism, idealization and the grotesque…what’s not to like? When I first stumbled across images from the French Neoclassical era, I was looking at a collection of paintings published in Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation by Abigail Solomon-Godeau. The works in the book were selected to illustrate a specific vision and to document imagery from the outskirts of the French Neoclassical canon.

What attracted me to these paintings is similar to what interested Solomon-Godeau – something wonky is going on with gender in these pictures. So many male nudes, their bodies feminized and elongated, were lain out before me, passively floating objects to be looked at. In some cases, as in this painting by Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, the male nude is deprived of agency before an active and much less eroticized woman. In others, a single male nude is depicted lounging and surrounded by putti.
In looking at these pictures and imagining the men who consumed them, wrote about them and made them, it seemed to me that a latent homoerotic content was palpable, all the more interesting because it was so heavily coded and sublimated in layers of clouds, Greek myths and winged cherubs. It's possible that this was a product of my imagination. My 21st century eyes are most probably unable to relate to modes of viewing from the 19th Century, but I was equally interested in how these images might be recoded in a contemporary gaze.


Hernan Bas, a contemporary Miami-based artist, has been heavily influenced by the decadent period in literature from the end of the 19th century. He states that his work is concerned with a “lost language, of the way ideas could be conveyed within a period in a subversive way. Something that seems so sentimental can convey a desire abhorrent to the moral structure of the time.”22 This quote describes a seduction

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22 Hernan Bas and Mark Coetzee, “Interview: With Apologies to Hockney, We Two Boys Together Clinging,” *Hernan Bas: Works from the Rubell Family Collection* (Miami: Rubell Family Collection, 2007) 35.
similar to the one I feel towards this selection of French Neoclassical paintings, the contradiction that they might contain something subversive under all that saccharine sentiment. Hernan Bas is also interested in coding and the question of how covert messages are slipped past the censor. In this painting entitled *Well-Aged*, Bas’s young boys sip wine and lazily scratch their chests in a decorative wood. They aren’t looking at each other, so what clues suggest a love interest between the two boys? Bas’s work plays off adolescent boys’ penchant for close friendships that slip between homosocial, closeted and homosexual. Maybe this forest drink is foreplay, maybe this blond boy’s glimpse of his friend’s belly will spark a heretofore unnamed desire, but the viewer is the one who brings this sexual content forward. We are just looking at two boys in the woods and interpreting their gestures through a particular screen.

Illustration 24: Still, Star Trek: The Motion Picture, 1979

Slash fiction writers also make work around the extraction and embellishment of gestures. They have to walk a delicate balance: redirecting their stories to homoerotic ends while staying close enough to the script and characters to make the
illusion believable to their fans. Their strategy is often to elaborate and recontextualize gestures and eye contact from the original scripts, such as the scene between Kirk and Spock from the Star Trek movie.

I am interested in this process of reading hidden codes and the recontextualization of ambiguous gestures. Under camouflage of innocence, the work can have a kid-friendly reading as well as a more adult interpretation. I am also interested in this swapping between public and private – in slash, public culture and media are reclaimed to become a private affair, the domain of projected personal fantasies. Similarly, art historical images can become recoded according to contemporary viewpoints and personal desires. Recoding and recreating are ways of claiming an image for one’s own purposes that seem both innocent and powerfully subversive. These private acts of perversity, as small and limited as they may be, seem important because of their honesty. They may be crude methods, but they seem a valid

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way to reinvent the world if only because they are the only means open to most people. Perhaps the viewer’s private reading can actually assault the authority and meaning of an image, subtly or as aggressively as the anonymous jerk-off who ejaculated on John Currin’s painting. Perhaps someone who really gets off on Twinklight (the gay porn version of teen movie Twilight), or a girl obsessed with Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo & Juliet era Leonardo DiCaprio might find a French Neoclassical male nude fetishizable in the same way.

Illustration 26: Richard Hawkins, Urbis Paganus IV.9.XVI. (Hercules II), 2009

Someone who has investigated this kind of backwards-glancing fetishization is Richard Hawkins, who in his body of collages Urbis Paganus created new, pornographic contexts for classical sculpture. Through repetition of the image, sometimes three photographs of the same classical sculpted rump, and through the dirty-minded text, Hawkins reveals his fetish for the ass, suggests the classical sculptor’s latent fetish for the ass, and makes his viewers’ complicit participants in the
fetishization of the ass, a threefold fetishization that layered a screen of perversity over familiar classical “faces.”

In the French Neoclassical paintings, something else is also at work. If this homoerotic content exists, it would be the most genuine part of the painting, the rest of the image an outburst of artificial sentiment and corruption. In my work I am interested in using the coded languages of the landscape and romanticism in order to disguise the genuine longing, seen in the loving way the figures are painted, within an artificially sweet environment. Without that perverse charge or erotic reading, the work (mine and some of the French Neoclassical paintings) could become vapidly sweet and decorative.

Why male nudes?

As I have been working on this project, I have been asked many times, “What is a presumably straight woman doing painting gay men?” and “Where does your desire exist in this project?” I have almost as many potential answers as I have questioners.

The moment of conception for this project came after realizing my interest in the lithe, grotesquely flexible bodies of French Neoclassical nudes. At a party I saw two friends of similar height and build dancing together. I asked them if they would pose naked together and they agreed without hesitation. Most men I have approached are extremely reluctant to pose nude, but these two were interested. They are both natural performers and uninhibited about their bodies. During our first photo shoot, I
drove them into the Southern California desert. We parked on the side of the road and hiked down a steep hill, past an abandoned truck to a clearing. They were quiet and subdued throughout the shoot, stiff and careful with each other. I had been attracted to them because of their fearlessness and seeming openness with each other, but in the moment they seemed awkward. They were very careful about what parts of their bodies touched each other, hugging around the shoulders but jutting their hips apart. By contrast, I did two very different shoots with two sets of women. The women had much higher energy, weren’t shy about being naked, laughed the whole time, and unconcernedly pressed their bodies together in any which way. And yet when other people have looked at the photographs, they have said that the men look much more comfortable and natural together than the women do. I mentioned to one of my male models that I was afraid they had been uncomfortable since they were so quiet, and he responded that they were quiet because they were so comfortable. He interpreted the girls’ laughter as a sign of how awkward and ill at ease they felt together.

I write this because the more I’ve spoken with people about this project, the more I am convinced that all of this information seeps through. People feel the lack of intimacy between the two men and suggest that I should have used actual lovers instead. People wonder about the nature of the sexual desire depicted – why is it so sublimated, so awkward? And I think it’s because I am not working with models that share an open, explicit desire for each other but am instead working from a kind of sublimated desire – whatever the gay man might feel for the straight friend, and the similarly unspecified desire of the straight man for the gay friend. By engineering this
complicated situation of the two of them naked together and performing for me, I think the work depicts these desires that are in themselves sublimated and far from straightforward. And that includes my desire, perhaps halfway hidden from myself, to see two attractive young men with similar body types get naked, roll around together and follow my instructions.

So what’s the deal with these semi-adolescent boys? The 18-22 year old adolescent-looking, effeminate thin boy, sometimes referred to as a twink, is a social construct, a male body type that has been objectified on gay porn sites and in the media from Calvin Klein ad campaigns to High School Musical. The boys in No ordinary sleep fit this description and their indeterminate age could represent adolescence and a time of sexual development or ripening. However, the highly mannered gestures of the figures strongly reference the putti of European paintings and the ambiguously-gendered young bodies of Greek mythological figures featured in French Neoclassical paintings. In my paintings, this fetishized type is layered with other clichés – the romantic landscape as the site where anything can happen, the clichéd gestures that playact at emotion instead of being emotional, the sunset, and the clouds. The small (or sometimes giant) scale of the figures shifts them away from the cliché of the twink as the bodies become less recognizably human and eroticized.

As much as I am interested in complicating the sexual objectification of this body type, I am complicit in it as well. While poking fun at the eroticization of the male putto-twink by layering them with veneers of sentimentality, there are moments

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of genuine heat that manage to sneak past the censor. The sentimentality and mannerism is the excuse, the screen that hides the real desire at work here; the heat comes through in a moment of looking straight up a young man’s rear end, or looking at another man’s figure grotesquely opened into a Z shape.\textsuperscript{25} This is a body type I find sexy, (maybe?) no apologies needed. Richard Hawkins’s work frequently depicts Japanese teenage fashion models and young Thai prostitutes. He has been questioned about the objectification, eroticism and Orientalism in his work and I found one of his statements interesting. He argued, “Lots of bad art is made in the name of polemics and even very socially minded admonitions. Though I do have some polemics of my own, making something interesting to look at or filled with desires and epiphanies seems equally important. I’m always thinking that the last thing you’d want to do to desire is to make it culpable.”\textsuperscript{26} Richard Hawkins loves Classical asses and Japanese models in their underwear; I love pretty boys that look a bit like girls.

*Desire is a one-way street / Unfulfilled doesn’t even come close*

So why did I want to put two men together? Where do I fit in to the scenes that I have been painting? There are two positions of desire that I could occupy – the desire to observe from afar that which is unattainable and the desire to embody a different type of body and to project myself into the scene.

By painting a scene depicting two male nudes, I am creating scenes from which I am ostensibly excluded and can only resort to looking, a type of scopophilic

\textsuperscript{25} Norman Bryson, personal communication, 26 April 2010.
\textsuperscript{26} Ann Demeester and Richard Hainley 28
pleasure. This is a desire that gets off on yearning for that which does not respond back and on being excluded and unfulfilled. None of the figures in my paintings are looking out of the frame and they tend to have their eyes closed, refusing a connection with the viewer. This suggests that the longing is unrequited but it is also a passivity that allows the viewer to look over their bodies with impunity. These paintings are embodiments of the desire to look and if painting is about anything, it’s about looking. Slash art itself only exists in this context. The scenes depicting Legolas/Boromir in an intimate embrace are only realizable in the space of art making and depict a desire that is desperately impossible to fulfill. This earnestness is what makes it so charming.

Richard Hawkins also creates work about unfulfilled desire. Many of his collages depict fashion models, famous actors, and porn stars and suggest a shrine-like devotion and unattainable longing. Hawkins also uses text to highlight this unrequited desire as in five collages titled ‘Crush I–V’ which feature beautiful young men and accompanying Post-it notes that say ‘suffering’, ‘pain’, jealous’ and ‘regret’.  

Contemporary artist Monica Majoli’s Untitled series from 1990-1998 of small, exquisite oil paintings depict homosexual S&M scenes her friend would recount to her after his experiences. Through meticulously applying many layers of thin glazes of oil paint, she builds a luminous surface to contain these aggressive and explicit acts, exploring her desire to experience something she could only access through painting.

The 1969 short story *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* by Yasunari Kawabata, from which the title of my show *No ordinary sleep* was taken, is a fictional story that also eroticizes the passive and the unfulfilled. It describes a brothel where older men can pay to spend the night next to a young girl who has been drugged into a heavy sleep and will not wake. The women are virgins who are dosed unconscious, stripped nude and placed into bed. The men lie beside them, looking, smelling and touching the dormant bodies of the young women. This desire is completely unfulfilled; the women are unresponsive to the men’s presence and the men are not allowed to defile them and so can only look. Theoretically, the men are too old to function in the way they once did, and so content themselves with this other type of erotic engagement. However it doesn’t seem like a runner-up sensual activity; it seems to describe a different type of desire that involves the thrill of being denied pleasure and the investment of erotic power into a passive, sleeping object.

Illustration 27: Monica Majoli, *Untitled*, 1990
If the desire of a woman to paint two men in a homoerotic embrace describes something unattainable, then it is fitting that this lack should be figured through painting, which in itself is the construction of an object to serve as a placeholder for the real object of desire, like the Corinthian Maid’s portrait.

Then again, there may just be something funny about women and their flexibility of identification. Take the Theban Band and their explicitly male homosexual slash art, for instance. Although everyone assumes they must be a group of gay male artists, they are actually two queer women from Australia. And those first slash fiction stories that found erotic meaning in the interactions between Kirk and Spock? Written by heterosexual women.

In fact the majority of slash fiction writers are believed to be heterosexual women. Why is it women who are creating these homosexual narratives? A possible explanation for why women would want to eroticize men together is suggested by John Soltenberg: perhaps women are interested in creating alternative gender roles in terms of “mutuality, reciprocity, fairness, deep communion and affection, total body integrity for both partners, and equal capacity for choice-making and decision-making.”

This explanation sounds potentially accurate but is a bit dull and lacking in erotic titillation. I’m not sure if it can explain what’s going on when a man is looking at breast-implanted naked twins in Playboy or watching all that lesbian porn that

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29 Robert Hobbs 67
31 Robert Hobbs 68
clearly isn’t aimed at a lesbian audience. That is something about the Other, voyeurism, scopophilia, the unattainable, immaturity, transgression, narcissism… all much dirtier and more interesting than reciprocity and fairness.

Illustration 28: Caravaggio, Narcissus, 1597-1599

Maybe it is about exoticism and my desire for the Other. Perhaps I am looking at my male models in the same way that a straight man looks at a woman or the way a male college freshman might poster his dorm room with photos of girl-on-girl action, but instead of proclaiming it in a straightforward way, I have repressed the erotic content within layers of art historical references and kitschy artificiality. Maybe I have been apologizing for my lust and my pursuit of beauty and pleasure, by trying to sublimate it and encode it behind a screen I have erected to protect myself. Something more perverse than desire itself.. a closeted imaginary.\(^3^2\)

\(^3^2\) Norman Bryson, personal communication, 26 April 2010.
Or perhaps women can identify more easily with other bodies. Why do many women, gay and straight, like to watch gay male porn? In a 2009 article from The New York Times describing the “mystery” of women’s desire, scientists reported a gulf between what women said turned them on and what physically aroused them. Whereas men, both gay and straight, physically responded to whoever their orientation indicated they would be attracted to, gay and straight women were all over the desire map. Regardless of orientation, women were turned on by everything: men with men, women with women, men with women.\cite{Berger}

Theorist Kaja Silverman puts forward an argument to explain why, according to psychoanalytic theory, the female spectator might be more free to identify with alternative images and subjects than men. According to Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, “The ego comes into existence at the moment when the infant subject first apprehends the image of its body within a reflective surface” and he argues that the subject can identify only within the limit of what is reflected by the mirror.\cite{Silverman1}

However, in a later seminar Lacan put forth the argument that the subject also assumes a visual identity from an external representation that is not reflecting – from the screen (or image repertoire, the repertoire of representations) which shows us how we are perceived by the cultural gaze. The identity a subject assumes is thus exterior to the self and culturally constructed.\cite{Silverman2}

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\item \cite{Silverman2} Kaja Silverman 18
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Silverman argues that the subject who is disempowered economically, racially, and sexually and cannot access an idealizing image of self through the screen can become very capable of identifying with alternative images.\(^{36}\) She states “the disenfranchised subject often identifies at a distance not with other disprized bodies, but with those that replicate the cultural ideal.”\(^{37}\) Through a detailed explanation that involves the Oedipus complex and the castration crisis, Silverman explains that women cannot typically ally themselves with an idealized image of self and thus it can be argued that “the conventional female spectator enjoys greater identificatory freedom than does her male counterpart.”\(^{38}\)

Perhaps this flexibility of identification that women enjoy suggests a possible explanation for not only The New York Times article’s findings but also all those heterosexual slash writers and my interest in depicting two men together. As much as the act of portraiture is about desire, it can also be about a type of projection, using the medium to occupy another person’s desire or viewpoint.

In Amy Adler’s project “Jeff Burton Box Covers” she created a series of drawings of male porn stars working from images shot by artist and friend Jeff Burton, who takes photographs on L.A. porn sets. She explains, “When I draw I’m intimate with the subject, and these drawings held a real charge for me. It’s easy for me to step into the frame – as easy as it would be for a gay man.”\(^{39}\) The act of drawing itself, of layering pastels to build flesh, was the conduit that established intimacy between the

\(^{36}\) Kaja Silverman 35  
\(^{37}\) Kaja Silverman 26  
\(^{38}\) Kaja Silverman 35  
artist and both the subject and the viewer. In this project Adler was not only occupying a different framework of desire, but also literally occupying the viewpoint of the photographer Jeff Burton. This occupation of different viewpoints is something Adler has explored throughout her career, the morphing fluidity of her identity as the maker questioning the nature of the gaze. Instead of being easily able to categorize or understand the work of art as a gay imaginary, the complexity of viewpoint deflects the viewer’s gaze away from the represented figure and back to the identity of the artist. This shares a similar strategy with Monica Majoli’s Untitled project, who’s finely-rendered oil paintings of gay male sex acts raises questions for the viewer about Monica herself and her complex relationship to the image.

Illustration 29: Amy Adler,Untitled (Jeff Burton Box Covers), 2005

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40 Amy Adler, personal communication, 18 May 2010.
41 Amy Adler, personal communication, 18 May 2010.
Contemporary painter Kurt Kauper makes the gayest paintings imaginable but is quite straight. He has painted fictional opera singers, Cary Grant naked and numerous hockey players, both nude and uniformed. While discussing the naked hockey players in an interview with the *Boston Globe*, Kauper states, “People didn't really ask the question so much as assume that I'm gay. If a woman paints another woman in the nude, it would be interpreted as a painting having to do with a woman's identity. But when a man paints this painting, it's associated with homoerotic activity.”

That underlying question about Kauper's sexual orientation is carried over even when he is painting women, such as his fictional opera “Divas” which read more

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as a love affair with opera, fur and beautiful ball gowns than with the women themselves.

![Illustration 11: Kurt Kauper, Diva Fiction #8, 1999](image)

Far from being a mistake, I think the assumptions about Kauper's sexuality that infiltrate his work are a result of his skillful use of painting to explore and challenge customary ideas about identity. During a studio visit with contemporary photographer Eve Fowler, who has frequently taken images of men, she mentioned that a charge is invested in images when the identity of the artist contradicts the viewer’s assumptions. If the name Jesse is on the gallery list and this body of work is on the wall, viewers assume that I am a gay man. My parents deliberately gave me a unisex name in the hope that I wouldn't be discriminated against based on my gender and its most
interesting application has been in allowing me to play with assumptions about gender and identity as an artist.

In *No ordinary sleep*, instead of making “straight” paintings, I am muddying these waters of identity, gaze and viewpoint to create queer images that are a hybrid of painting and photography, that cross and confuse assumptions about desire, and that are not defined by established plateaus. Painting and portraiture have the ability to address complex issues of identification, projection, identity and desire. Desire has an alternately extremely personal or collective nature. During my studio visit with Fowler, she felt that the men in my paintings were not sexy – they needed longer hair and larger muscles. During a group critique with writer Sarah Bynum, she responded to the work by identifying it as a heterosexual female imaginary, loaded with an erotic charge that relied partially on narrative and sentiment. In an e-mail from an older gay

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43 Amy Adler, personal communication, 18 May 2010.
man, he stated that he kept forgetting I was female because he found the images so sexy he assumed I must be a man. I’ve been told decisively that the work looks like a gay man made it; I’ve been told a gay man would never have made the work. As concerned as people are when artists cross these boundaries, there seems to be no one firm accepted idea about what is gay or straight and what the female heterosexual gaze might encompass. It seems there is still space left for imagining.