Nightlife, or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Form

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

in

Visual Arts

by

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015
DEDICATION

The show and paper are dedicated to Amy Adler, whose advice and consideration acted as a lens through which the paintings and the paper presented here have passed. My story and work continue along a new trajectory thanks to you.
“Narcissistically created art is entirely uncompelling only when accompanied by intellectual justifications; these are always and without exception rubbish.” -Peter Schjeldahl
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Nightlife, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Form

by

Julian Joseph Rogers

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Amy Adler, Chair

The paintings included in my thesis exhibit consist of three different series, which are related technically, formally, and art historically. Depictions of fruit, tabletops, and clothing, while recontextualized in a more contemporary conversation, all have their roots in the long tradition of still life painting. This tradition is something I find interesting for its exacting record of both common objects and the means by which they were recorded, as well as the lowly place that still life painting had been historically accorded. The objects in my paintings are represented as they might be seen in the dark, or an approximation or imagination of such. The reasons for this treatment are varied, and they have changed during the course of my making them. In order to explain the reasoning behind this, I will have to first describe the work I have made during my time at the University of California, San Diego.
Nightlife
Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Form

As psychoanalysis made its way from Europe to America throughout the 20th century, it moved swiftly into different fields of research. European commitments to original texts were exchanged for a new pliability in which psychoanalysis was itself distant and abstract enough to be applied freely from the military bunker and the advertising billboard to the architect’s hallways and the silver screen. For artists in particular, the notion of psychoanalysis and the unconscious would be thick in the blood for decades, and it is still in frequent use today by artists like Shana Lutker and Matt Mullican. When I first came to UCSD, my interest in psychoanalysis and the therapeutic process was evident in my paintings. The images depicted (couches, young wrestlers, images of autoerotic asphyxiation, holographic skulls, etc.) were taken largely from the Internet, and aside from their consistently small sizes, had little to do with each other aside from how I perceived them as relating to my unconscious fears and desires as well as how they related to the popular themes (within the aesthetics of psychoanalysis) of sex and death. A brick wall could mean an unconquerable psychological limitation, a young wrestler could act as a stand-in for anxious pubescent sexuality, a mannequin head could be named after a terrorist and represent a kind of alternative life story, or a painting of a Virgin Suicides DVD would be made because it reminded me of a drawing my dad did of my mom during the year that they were together. This was, of course, insular and
personal work, and didn't stand up to the ideas I was being exposed to in graduate school. The images that I was using seemed torn between what they were and what they were being used for. That is, I was trying to say something personal through impersonal means. Here's a useful anecdote for the situation I found myself in, which comes from a meeting between Salvador Dali and Sigmund Freud. Dali is looking for an interpretation of his paintings, ostensibly a visual recording of his unconscious. Freud elegantly states that it is in classical paintings that he looks for the unconscious, but that in Surrealist works he looks for the conscious. Although I had developed an engrossing language between me and my paintings (akin, perhaps, to the motives driving Max Ernst’s photographic collages), they were neglectful of any viable contemporary audience, and from the outside looking in it appeared that I was trying too hard. My time at UCSD can be characterized as a transformation in making implicit in the work what was once explicit. That is, by the end of my third year, I would be making work that had been conceived along formal strategies more than anything else, yet that would reveal to me the kind of personal insights that I had strived so hard to demonstrate just three years earlier, when formal considerations were left in the dark in favor of spotlighting the string-pulling of my visual unconscious (framed more by Adam Phillips than Sigmund Freud). The above-mentioned anecdote would then seem to provide the beginning and endpoints of my narrative trajectory during grad school, in which I learned to keep the personal personal. Still in my first year, however, the lesson was in the making, and the next step for me was to attach my interests to something more relatable and objectively verifiable.
I began working from film stills. I had found fourteen years’ worth of home movie footage taken from an average South Carolina family mostly during the late 60s and 70s, and over the months I came to realize how working with this material was a way to frame my unconventional upbringing. The images from these paintings were scenes out of ordinary lives (fishing, visiting the beach, hanging around the house), yet they were painted in such a way as to make them less recognizable and therefore more abstract. This was my way of both forcing a separation between the unknown domestic filmmaker and their archive as well as creating a type of ownership for myself. This move was a way for me to examine my past, as well as the way that I live now, because chances are that I wouldn't have become an artist had I grown up in this typical American family.

My way of making marks had changed too; small brush strokes, cobbled together en masse, left a trace of the noise found in the super 8 films from which they came. The overall coloring of the paintings, typically a saturated brown that concealed other colors, was derived in part from my thinking about the color casting in Instagram. Instagram tints photos to roughly the aesthetics of the 70s, producing a kind of politically-null, carefree nostalgia that revels in the past, and I would learn from this that a color wash could produce a kind of undeniable emotional filter on an otherwise normal scene out of everyday life.

While working on these paintings, I developed a habit of walking around at night in order to study and enjoy how visual rules could change so dramatically in low light. I was particularly taken by the simple exercise of trying to see color while the color receptors in my eyes were shut down. At some point, it occurred to me that much of the attention that I was giving the visual world was done under the condition of being
temporarily colorblind, and then remembered that when my dad, who is colorblind, taught me how to draw when I was six or so, he also told me what it was like for him being colorblind. The lessons and anecdotes, I remember, wove together for some time. I hadn't remembered this for decades, but I used to imagine what it was like to be colorblind all the time, right around the time that I started to think about becoming an artist when I grew up. So it occurred to me that I had been replicating this childhood imagination by walking around at night, effectively making myself colorblind. The exchanges here, between conscious and unconscious, formal and abstract, the eye and the environment, amounted to a revelation as this was the real deal, what they call transference in psychoanalytic terms. It immediately cast all the work that I had been doing into the background. I made four initial paintings of fruit as if seen at night and realized pretty early on that something was working, that still life paintings of apples and oranges answered a lot of the questions posed by my previous work. What’s more, my work could adopt a new language, a language about color and form and less about history and desire, and this change could come about quite quickly.
Chapter Two: Night Life

So where are we now and what do the paintings do? Rendering still lifes as if seen at night was first and foremost a materialization of the pleasure generated by trying to make out colorful objects in the dark. But it was also a way back into realism, which in today's art scene is burdened with problems, among them the idea that illusionistic space is difficult to believe in when one is considering the mark-making abilities still available to the human hand. By reducing a certain amount of information in a realistic scene, the eye has to work harder to make sense of what is happening. What I found is that if I shift the overall color cast towards blue or brown, for example, the eye has no problem believing that a banana or orange could be blue or brown. The still scene seems normal, that is, uniform and intact, although a new type of attention can be paid to form. As Steven Prina says of his monochromatic pink furniture-based sculptures, “they actually have a skin that envelops the objects and alters the way in which we apprehend that skin.”

While on this basic level, realism is being subtly coerced into a formal language, there's also a question of what to make of the night, that is, of the dim light that illuminates these objects. I know why I began making these paintings, but as they stray from these initial intentions they must have something like a new fuel source to keep moving. That fuel is privacy: privacy in form. Among other things, nighttime provides cover for a wide range of activities, and in the minds of those running around at night, there is a simple recognition that one is less scrutable in low light. One’s nightlife, then, is potentially more liberated and more protected at once. Formalism is another kind of
privacy. In Dave Hickey’s *Air Guitar*, the case is made that in academically-leaning art, what the work means is more important than how it looks, whereas in the art market, the intentions and meanings of artworks take a backseat to their aesthetic mobility, which is to say that formalism can provide cover for an artist’s intentions. While at first blush this feels liberating insofar as I am happy to focus my energies on painterly decisions, I have also found that when I make purely formal decisions, something unexpected reveals itself to me in the work.

I am not attempting to approximate colorblindness, nor replicate night vision. A nighttime walk among the jewels of the Stewart collection provides a couple of examples as to how green and purple can be included among the more natural colors of night. Bruce Nauman’s multicolored glowing neon piece colors the sky around it while John Baldessari’s colored glass doors at Geisel Library filter the natural world around them. There is, then, a fluidity between natural and unnatural light as well as between the eye and the environment, as in how Baldessari’s piece acts like sunglasses covering the eyes while Nauman’s actually projects color into the night sky. A darkened scene, after all, could represent both dim lighting or failing vision. Environmental darkness was conflated with colorblindness in the initial stages of developing this series, which leaves me with a sense of openness and play in regards to the different ways in which colors can be compressed into near monochromes.

The various fruits used in the paintings lend themselves well to both the art historical and the phenomenological. Fruit has appeared in still life paintings for hundreds of years, and has become such a staple of the genre that it was often one of only a handful of elements anchoring the still life paintings of Picasso, another major staple
being the table. In *Looking at the Overlooked*, Norman Bryson analyses the still life genre along various trajectories of thought, one of which is how background informs the autonomy of the foregrounded still life. In my paintings, fruit is strewn about at the top of a mountain. A mountain is cold, hard, distant, dramatically larger than the human body, and generally speaking cannot be moved. On the other hand, fruit is small, malleable, can be processed by the human body, and provides nourishment. The background, then, frames the still scene in a number of ways, and together they create a small world of metaphoric possibility.

Another thread in Bryson’s analysis deals with paint handling as it pertains to the presentation of visual information. This is a bit difficult to explain briefly, but in Cotán’s still lifes, for example, the reality of the objects is achieved through brushwork, that is, the painter accommodates the subject. In Caravaggio, by contrast, the objects of the still life are in the service of the painter, which is another way to say that he observed reality and then signed his name onto every leaf and lemon peel. I tend to find myself in both camps, bending the rules of a detailed reality only where the eye is willing to fill in the gaps, but never really to make my brushwork evident. Darkening the scene, I find, creates a kind of desire in the eyes to make right what one sees. One gets pulled in, so to speak, and if the hand is evident, one gets pushed back out. But, like a high definition television, too much information can be visually repulsive, so I go after that thin slice of accuracy in which the viewer’s eye gets absorbed in looking.

This act of looking gets slowed down as one’s eyes adjust to the compressed range of colors and tones. Fruit is one of those categories of objects in which the color corresponds directly to the shape; if someone says, “yellow fruit,” a banana or lemon will
come to mind, and if one sees the outline of a banana, their mind supplies the color. Some of the fruit in the paintings is harder to see; maybe its complete shape is blocked by rock or its color is too removed to make out. Because these normally lightning-fast visual interpretations that our brains make are slowed down, it is possible to actually notice your brain switching back and forth between using color and shape to understand what it sees.

As I mentioned earlier, the tabletop is another standard element of still life. I was drawn to using the tabletop because of how I saw Picasso upending both the physical reality and the tradition of still life painting. Picasso’s reverence for Raphael comes through in the very idea of Cubism, as Raphael in his paintings offered more than one vantage point onto a single scene. Picasso of course exaggerated this, and in doing so the tabletop began to align itself with the canvas. He would often seem to hover above the table while also looking at the objects atop it from the side, thereby creating a flat plane upon which he could describe and critique form. I did my best to take this as a starting point, making, first of all, the canvas the exact size of the tablecloth, which, when covered with plates, utensils, and wooden boards, has the illusionistic depth that the actual canvas has on the wall, about two inches. Within this set up, there are subtle references to seeing the objects from the side, or evoking the idea of a kind of rotation around the painting, but my attempt was to try to do this as realistically as possible, so the results are in no way dramatic. In order to fake seeing an object from the side, I would tilt plates at an angle or cut an angle out of a piece of board. Also I would set up the still life on a large piece of plywood so that I could rotate it around under the sun, photographing it from a ladder above as the shadows crept around the objects as in a sundial. Photoshopping these different shadows together, so that they run and
contradictory directions, has two useful effects. It gives a sense of something rotating around the painting and it also links itself to early Cubist collage. The woodgrain in the paintings support that link, and the hope is that a viewer will take these clues and wonder whether they are getting both what goes on top of and under the table at the same time, as a play on Picasso as well as a testing of what realism can get away with.

As with the fruit paintings, the tabletop paintings imply a sort of off-camera human presence. As one’s eyes adjust to the darkened scene painted with a mostly mechanical sensibility, there is evidence of more decisions being made. Someone had to haul the fruit up the mountain and set the table, and this performative or sculptural side of the paintings prevents them from being too cold. Monochromatic realist paintings from James Whistler to Peter Rostovsky and Victor Man seem to be aware of the emotional temperature of implied distance, each dealing with it in a different way. Just as there is an above and below to the tabletop, there is also a before and after. The plates are clean, but the napkins have been thrown down. When is dinner? It is just after the microwave goes ting, and it does not take place at a table.

When looking at still life painting, I find it useful when I am made aware that the artist has selected and composed the objects he or she chose to paint because it is in this sense that the world of shapes and textures can be seen as the dynamic range of marks that the painter is capable of. For my own part, when I look at which rocks to photograph it is as if I am choosing between thin and thick lines as I would in a drawing. When the same can be said for all of the bits and pieces that compose a painting, it is not hard to make the jump and think of the sculptural compositions as the gestures that make up an abstract painting. This idea is what helped fuel the final series of the show, and the
implication of my body in a more direct way came along with it. Although I have tried off and on for decades, I can't really make abstract paintings, but what I can do is look at a crumpled shirt on the floor and see that it has a nice general shape, that the folds fall among that shape in such a way as to create further unpredictable lines and patterns. Composing and painting a handful of my own shirts and pants on the floor allows me to pretend to be an abstract painter and to introduce much larger swaths of color into the paintings, which I really enjoy. It is a far cry from Willem de Kooning, but it’s also 2015. I suppose in terms of reading these paintings, they could be about bathing, sex, a messy room, self-portraiture, etc., so in this sense I find I have to keep them from being about any one of these things so that they can be partially about each of them. Really, if anything they are about the clothes abandoned by homeless people that I find walking around in unusual places at night, that and my studio. Regardless, the simple task of these paintings is to try and crossover as much as possible into the language of abstraction and maybe lend support to the idea that what happens in the construction of a still life can be considered performative.

This is how I learned to stop worrying and love the form. This is my nightlife. What comes next is not ruled by form alone, however, but rather the balance between the need to surprise myself and the need to be a useful participant in a community. As I began to talk less and less about my personal life over the last couple of years, I noticed that some professors implored me to draw into my work a greater social consciousness. Ironically, having gotten to know me better, one even told me I should make more use of my personal history in my work. I have been trying to think about this, and I do feel some
ambivalence about pulling much of my inspiration from long dead artists and a genre of painting that eschews the social about as much as is possible in realism.

When Brian Wilson sang, “I know there’s an answer, but I have to find it by myself,” it was in a song about finding a way to make solitary types understand that they are part of something bigger, but that line is also something I hum to myself walking around at night. I think one of the reasons I walk around at night is just to sink into the pleasure of looking. It has helped. A lot. Right now, this may be all I can ask for. If someone needs to get more social value out of a painting, they can hold it up and block the sight of modern life, because much of it hurts to look at. This is perhaps cynical, but so is the implication that beautiful things do nothing for people. To me, this is like saying good food does nothing useful. Humming that song at night and imagining I've got a hold of something is its own reward. All I can do is put the work out there.