

ARE YOU A SUNRISE OR A SUNSET?

A Thesis

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of Cornell University

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Master of Fine Arts

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis turned in to Cornell University on May 10, 2019 is a summation of the exhibition “Are You A Sunrise of A Sunset?” held in Hartell Gallery from April 22-26, 2019. This paper features documentation images and ancillary texts that attempt to describe the motivations and strategies of the artist. As many aspects of school have been under construction, the statements and opinions expressed in this paper do not necessary reflect those of the artist and may change or void. This text is incomplete and copyleft.

The exhibition consists of 10 paintings, a parachute, a stage, a model plane, a microphone, and a looped audio recording.

To my family,

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Martha

John

Kate

Max

Harriet

Ben

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank those who made an extra effort to help one another in challenging times. I am very grateful to the many students, faculty, staff, and community members who have helped me survive. Thank you.

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A. QUESTION

Are you a sunrise or are you a sunset?

Is our day at its beginning or at its end?

It's quite hard to tell sometimes, perhaps it is easy if you really study the matter. But who has time to study such a single thing like that any more? But the main question asked is more about perspective and it is a question posed to us as much as it is posed to any particular painting.

Are you half full or half empty?

Art, I completed this education.

Are you now finished with me? Or finally born free?

A couple years ago I might have described to you how my process is about a sort of subtraction. I might have said subtractive or better yet reductive. I might have started by saying how I am a "process-based" artist and how I use some specific materials and processes to impress meaning upon the surface and another material or process to remove it. Then I would ruminate on what's left behind. I would talk about *the void* or I would quote Freud or try to keep a straight face while trying to say the word palimpsest. This is the dead language of a successful art education.

You see the ship has sailed. Just as you have given up on us, we have given up on you. Everyone has left the station. Pack up the van. Hit the ejector button —escape— surrender — and get me out of here, they've said. A nail in the coffin. A clean slate. Th-that's all, folks. I wished for my thesis to be an expose and explanation of my time here. But I cannot bring myself to complete such a task. The language of abstraction is also too convenient an escape.

In the business services office, the staff members told me they had been asking each other who is a sunrise person and who is a sunset person. Are you a morning person or a night-owl? My poster had somehow burned the question into the plasma screen tv hung outside their cubicles. How wonderful! A few teachers have also tried to solve the riddle. Most people need orient themselves around a fixed point in a circadian society. I have always been a sporadic insomniac, but as I get older, the days get shorter, and the morning are opening up. I don't think it is a question that the paintings can answer.

The point is that we live in a question, not a statement. Right?

B. EXHIBITION

Circling the gallery is a collection of ten oil paintings: two large works and eight small studies. The canvas is imperfectly dotted with white gesso grounds and heavily-diluted oil paint is applied to surface. The dilution soaks into the exposed fibers of the canvas fabric and sits on top of the areas of hardened gesso. (A professor explained to me that the gesso glue seals and protects the fibers from rotting and so now I quite look forward to the day that these unprotected surfaces begin to show their mold.)

Following that initial application, I wipe up the surface with rags. It is an attempt to paint with as little material as possible. My process is relies upon an ethic of frugality and necessity. The splotchy dotting was first discovered when I tried to stretch out a half-empty can of oil grounds over a large surface as if I were trying to extend the life of a can of foodstuffs. This is similar to my exploration in bricolage furniture that attempts to use only the materials that are around me. For a long time I have had a rule from a Basim Magdy video playing in the back of my head: “Never buy or exchange anything.” These paints are expensive: use sparingly. What enters the fibers cannot be removed and what touches a clean white surface still leaves a stain.

I have ruined all my clothes by spending so much time in the Foundry. Almost everything I own is dirtied and stained. I never cared much for fashion but I have now learned that presentation is a very valuable thing. So as I drew closer to my times end, I began cutting up all of my sullied shirts and pants and socks into the paint rags.

These were the rags I used to wipe away my work from the surface and I piled them up by the door in a corner of my studio. I used to love the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (in fact, his is one of the few art books I own) not only because his expressions contained such great joy and sadness, but because they disrupted the experience of art, like a friend.

I guess I was tired of these clothes and felt liberated by embracing the destruction of my possessions before another upcoming big move. I have spent a lot of time in the studio finding very complicated ways of cleaning and organizing my surroundings. I want to use all of my materials up. Go back to square one.

Or perhaps this is a form of growing up by ridding my closet of the fittings of my childhood. Either way, the trash gets picked up and the longtime drappings of my body are shed and returned back to the dump. This is an unavailable detail of the paintings, but I like to think a little bit of my skin cells have rubbed off on the works. I have always tried to be the kind of person that would give you the shirt off my back if you needed it.

The smaller paintings are studies in color and technique building up to the two large paintings. They are presented such that the exhibition can be seen en suite as a timeline—as a performance and historical trace of mind-body. Repeated ad infinitum, all surfaces becomes a palette or a testing ground for the next great work. The banal

content of clouds was fitting of an unfortunate kind of emptiness I have been feeling. I used to love the end line of Kushner's *Angels in America: The Great Work Begins!*

The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work Begins!

In the center of the exhibition, across from the glass windows of the Dean, I have built a small stage furnished by a microphone stand modified with a model airplane and two speakers. The speakers play a lecture titled "The Artist in Times of War" by the American Historian Howard Zinn. The lecture, given in 2007, rumbles through the room and speaks about a time of great surveillance, professionalism, and conformism. What does an artist do in/to/for society? How should they be? What acts are artistic? In times when drones can peak through all clouds and all text can be copied and pasted, the artist's resistance to the prescribed order of things and their pure survival is a great contribution itself. Zinn repeatedly stresses that art needn't be anything specific, but something *transcendent*. Transcend the here and now, the madness, terrorism and war, the disciplining, the speed and velocity and orthodoxy of modern life. There is no doubt the societal frameworks and pressures that Zinn observed over a decade ago have only grown larger and more complex. The artist need not apologize for it is their job to think outside the boundaries of permissible thought and dare to

object. If it is permissible, I would apologize or state my own regret for not engaging in real political fringework as a student in this program. Don't vote Dumb Reed!

The lecture is metaphorically spoken through a small wooden model airplane attached to a salvaged brass microphone stand. It is a 1/100 model of the famed Concorde Jet that flew supersonic commercial flights from 1976-2003. The name was a political linguistic gesture to mark the collaborative union of France and Britain. It was introduced following the Cold War and the Vietnam War as an international vessel capable of shortening the distance between nations. It ultimately ended after a series of failed flights and the attacks of September 11th scared the business public away from international travel. One of its last flights—London to Washington in under 3 hours—brought Tony Blair to meet George Bush to plan the next great war. The Concorde rests now as an icarus icon of human conquest and ambition. Did you know the plane actually grew or stretched one foot in length while in flight? So did the passengers, I imagine.

The passengers were mostly businessmen. The plane was only affordable for the lucky few. After all, it is a device that has the power of collapsing space and time and time is the most finite resource of all. The plane served an industry that seeks to do more with less, to maximize while minimizing. It is an icon of a mythology fueled by motivational posters and paintings of wandering men lunged out before the cliffs of destiny. *What will I accomplish?* These strong forces of capitalism are still at work and

show no sign dissipating. The Concorde will be picked up and put back together by a new group of enterprising technophiles, probably ones educated in the halls of this very school. So learn a new language, so speak to them. I hope that artists do not fear engaging with the tides of the time. Or transcendence will be cannibalized. This I am not sure of.

Before taking down the show I invited a professor of German Studies to visit the show. In her class, I had studied critical modes of intensity in literature and struggled to complete an assignment that might fictionally capture my day-to-day motivation to create. I had met with her earlier to discuss the challenges of recording a diary and the value of ambiguity, abstraction, and incompleteness. She pointed to the large red-orange sunset and explained to me the uniqueness of a similarly-colored painting by Casper David Friedrich titled “Woman Before the Rising Sun (Woman Before the Setting Sun)”. The central figure of a woman, her back to the viewer, looks out upon a sublime hillside. Her future is uncertain.

LIST OF IMAGES

1. Installation View: Detail of Concorde Model Microphone
2. Installation View
3. *Safety Net*, 10 x 10 feet, parachute, gallery wall
4. *Blue Sunrise*, 84 x 55 inches, oil on canvas
5. *Red-Gold Sunset (Gold-Red Sunset)*, 45 x 107 inches, oil on canvas
6. *Untitled (Blue-Pink)*, 14 x 14 inches, oil on canvas
7. *Untitled (Teal-Yellow)*, 14 x 14 inches, oil on canvas
8. *Untitled (Cobalt)*, 14 x 14 inches, oil on canvas
9. *Untitled (Stormy Teal)*, 14 x 14 inches, oil on canvas
10. *Untitled (Deep Blue Green)*, 14 x 14 inches, oil on canvas
11. *Untitled (Morning Yellow)*, 14 x 14 inches, oil on canvas
12. *Untitled (Blue-Orange)*, 14 x 14 inches, oil on canvas
13. *Untitled (Stormy Blue-Orange)*, 14 x 14 inches, oil on canvas



























C. GENERAL

My artwork changes in form, medium, and intention, but it has always existed as an expression in relation to my conditions. I make paintings, sculpture, furniture, ceramics, woodcraft, video, performance, and other expanded fields. I participate in some traditional object-based notions of art—including the notion of labor as a redemptive force—but I present my work in simultaneity, in incompleteness, and in performance, to expose the production experiences of artists and dismantle hierarchical experiences of viewing art objects.

My paintings are concerned with what lies on the surface. They sit upon my experience of skin. They say to be in New York, you will develop a thick skin. I have very thin skin. This may be due to my upbringing in the Midwest—or—due to a combination of steroidal ointments I use to treat an autoimmune condition. My skin is lily-white and it gets red and itchy and I scratch at the scabs that heal. (My skin is not a site of historical violence, as it is for others.) My paintings are an accumulation of the material around me followed by a removal process.

My films have thus far been a collection of handheld family movies, B-roll footage of moving water, and camera tracings of body parts. I have come to understand these works as a form of mapping: making an atlas of my psyche in place and time.

The artist and their artwork only exist in context. It is the responsibility of the artist and the task of art to address what lies on the surface of things and propose alternatives. I affirm my belief that art is a functional device and applies itself in correction of the soul.
