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## Dual Tense

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Dual Tense

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master in Fine Arts  
in  
Fine Arts

by

Robyn Michelle Denny

B.F.A. Louisiana State University, 2008

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a description and analysis of work I produced at the University of New Orleans during my Graduate studies. My work centers on the theme of tension, human interaction, and the vulnerability and dominance of those interactions. I create paintings, drawings, and prints to articulate my theme of tension. These works of art are meant to describe the feeling of tension through my mark making.

Keywords: Painting, Prints, Tension, Human Interaction.

## INTRODUCTION

My work intends to show an element of fear by isolating figures on empty backgrounds. I want to express the feeling of human interaction and friction through a visual language of figures pushing, pulling and fighting within a landscape of aloneness. I have shown “tension” through the use of non-touching of figures, overlapping fighting figures, constriction of movement, eating or consuming, visual spikes protruding from bodies, and finally wrapping of figures. The line moves around the figures and entraps them. The figures become one with the space around them. Each form takes on its own meaning but they all have the idea of tension in mind. I also want to convey an idea of trapped suspension, the idea that the figures were always in this painting. Their lives are the painting and nothing else. They exist only for the viewer.

I paint people for the emotional response it forces the viewer to bring to the painting. The viewer is a person looking at a painting of figures and therefore brings personal history to the work. The viewer comes to the work with their own responses but also understands my intent. I respond emotionally to paintings by Balthus, Francis Bacon, Dana Schutz, Kathe Kolowitz, and Laylah Ali. These artists use figures in many different ways, some to act out an action or interaction, some to comment on society, and others to make a statement about the physicality of the paint. Each allows the viewer to connect with the subject and wants that connection between viewer and subject.

Most of my most important influences are figural artists. I find that I respond stronger to figural work that therefore choose to work with the figure. When I was

younger, my main influences were Pablo Picasso, William DeKooning, and Egon Scheile. These artists will always be a huge part of why I want to make art, but the drawings I have discovered by these artists are now more influential to me as I produce art. I have begun to draw as my main form of art making. The drawings are the end, not a sketch for an end. I have always kept a sketchbook and drawing has always been a huge part of my art making process. The more I “found” printmaking and saw the use of line, the more I began to think about drawings as an objective, this has heavily impacted me. Picasso’s *The Bull*. State I-IV 1945, led me into printmaking. His different use of texture and the line in those prints is beautiful. Kathe Kolowitz was the next big influence as far as printmaking. Her use of narrative and ability to show pain through line and the use of heavy darkness influenced me greatly. Printmaking had a major role in my ideas about drawing. Once I made the discovery of drawing I began looking at artists like Julie Mehretu. Her work is a mixture of landscape painting, diagram drawing, and gesture drawing. Although her work is not figurative, I pull a lot of influence from her because she has so much energy and clarity to her abstract drawings. The lines and gestural elements in her work feel like a storm or cloud that catches the viewer off guard, while still allowing it to feel like a cityscape or other developed urban landscape. Her use of line has greatly affected me in my current body of work. The different sizes and textures of her lines influenced me to explore my own line quality. She mainly uses white space in her work and her cityscapes sit on top of that space. The pieces float on the background but still feel like a place the viewer could visit. My choice for making drawings instead of paintings is very

intentional. My development into drawing began with me working on intaglios while doing paintings that were unsuccessful, I then started working with screenprint monotypes to combine my love of color and line. By using graphite powder, painting has really informed my drawings. The lines are now painted, the drawings begin with a brush or rag and I draw or erase into them. My paintings in my first year of graduate school were too concentrated in the history of painting; my influences were not contemporary and my work suffered for it. My intentions were getting lost in my inability articulate my subject. I have since developed my ideas and developed my line quality so that it better serves my intentions. Drawing has helped me move into a new and exciting place where my intentions match my art making.

## INTENT

My intent is often to communicate a narrative of a violent nature which can be interpreted through the marks I use, and the body language of the figures. The body language has an aggressive choreography of the figures in a fighting type of dance. The bodies are very lyrically painted but have an abruptness about their gestures. The lines I use in the bodies of the figures that form the gesture are very curvy and full of movement. The movement itself is the abrupt part of the gesture. The people look trapped in an uncomfortable moment. The intention is that the figures look beautiful at first glance but the more time the viewer spends with the piece the more pain they see in the action. The expression is pain or fear. The figures are trapped in a moment of isolation.



A contemporary artist who has influence on my current body of work is Dana Schutz. I was drawn to her because of her color palette and use of figures, but I discovered her work has the violent references as well as comedy that I appreciate. Her series the *Self Eaters* has impacted the way I make art the most. Her ideas on consumption are critically important sources of inspiration and validation. Her subjects consume everything in their midst and, finally, themselves. I find the pieces in the *Self Eaters* series to be signifiers or metaphors for the end of time, or at least the violent conclusion of their time. I have used the similar ideas but have taken my work in a somewhat different tangent. I use the end of time aspect in my work as well, although I intend it more as a reference to an unreadable or suspended time or space. My figures are dealing with not only tension and social interaction, but also eating each other. My ideas with the *Eat* series were more about a physical manifestation of social hierarchy and how the figures in the painting rank themselves. Most of the figures were both eating and being eaten. My intent is for the work to be seen as a visual commentary on family psychology and groups. This body of work is utilized a way of restating the manner in which humans fall into categories. Schutz makes her figures recognizable as different sexes but the viewer is able to identify with her work. The commentary is not on the sex of the figures, but rather its action. I brought this to my work through the use of ambiguous figures. I use ambiguous figures and want the viewer to understand my purpose because he or she identifies with the subject of the painting. We are all human and therefore are able to identify with a painting of a figure because of its instant identifiable nature.

My work centers on visual tension illustrating the struggle with the self and the self versus others. How we as people function in the world. How we deal with everyday activities and personal struggles. My work asks questions about interactions between people: family, friends, work relationships, the human challenges, and rewards of being social creatures. I evoke that imposition, and put that feeling into the work. The art I have produced in my time at UNO has all had the same underlying theme of tension, aggression, and hostility, pent up anger invasive, or intruding behavior. I present the situations, as they are happening and just about to happen. I have developed different visual vocabulary to describe friction. I began with trying to capture the moment in between action, and then moved on to people eating each other, spikes, and figures wrapped in binding. Each one represents tension and yet is different. I want to show the feeling of anticipation through the use of different marks on the paper. I have shown "tension" through the use of non-touching of figures, overlapping fighting figures, constriction of movement of certain figures, eating or consuming, visual spikes protruding from the figures' bodies, and finally binding of figures. Each visual form of this aggressive teasing took on its own meaning but they all had the intention in mind. Eating figures take on ideas of cannibalism, which is not the only intention of the piece but it is a fine addition to the work. The first paintings were of figures running through fields about to be attacked by each other or an outside source, which one of these things might happen is not clear. The figures were painted with the idea that they existed in our world. And therefore functioned with the same pain and fear. Physically, they would function in our world. The next series of paintings allowed the

figures to be in their own world. The bodies of the figures were painted overlapping each other. The intent was to communicate a non-verbal dialogue of tension through dominance and submissiveness of the respective figures in the painting. The new use of outline of each figure and the gesture of their action was supposed to emphasize, while at the same time reinforcing intensity. The figures are overlapping and intersecting but share the same color of outline, and therefore are one being in the end. The majority of the bodies shared the same structural lines. One figure was beginning to consume the other.

#### EARLY WORK

The paintings in my first year of graduate school were of two figures running in a barren landscape. The idea behind these works was to showcase tension and trust, or the lack thereof. The barren landscape was supposed to imply vulnerability and danger. The landscapes were also intended to give the idea of a post-apocalyptic world. The figures were trapped there, in time, suspended in their anticipation. I really wanted to get across an idea of trapped suspension. I wanted the idea that the figures were always in this painting. Their lives are the painting and nothing else. They exist only for the viewer.

In the earlier work the figures in my paintings were running from each other or an antagonistic source that was unknown to the viewer. In those first paintings it was very important to me that the viewer not be able to fully define the source of the conflict. The idea that the figures were trapped inside the painting, within that moment forever, was very important to the iconography of that series. The feeling of suspension was what I was

attempting to convey. One person running in an open field of grass never touches the other figure. This marks the beginning of struggle between two figures, which is now a common manifestation, and a common theme throughout my work. I am engaged by the pursuit of trying to capture tension as an anticipated moment is about to happen. The suspense in the work, at this point was an absence of action. The anticipation of the action of the figures is the tension. Element of fear, two figures in total isolation. Alone.

### *EAT* SERIES

The next series, the *Eat* series, were of figures consuming each other, these pieces were sketchbook size, which made the viewer walk up to them, stand close and explore the texture of the piece. The figures were consuming or eating the other figures on an imposing and light consuming black background. The black signified space but also allowed the figures to remain on a shallow plane. By getting rid of the backgrounds I had been working with in previous series, the idea of the work became more about the interaction between the figures. The viewer is forced to deal with the action of the figures consuming the other figures, and then ease into the nuances of the piece and explore the tactile qualities. The shallow space was created by the integration of each screen print beneath the ink. The inks reacted in such a way that the screen print shows through the ink, limiting the amount the viewer falls into the space. The black india ink cracked enough to show the color through the ink in some places. It allows the viewer to see the screen print under the black ink. The sheen of the ink contrasts with the screen printing ink, and makes the black seem not so empty, which helps put the figures in a space. These layers allow the viewer to feel the history of the piece, layers help the viewer decode the narrative. The vague

narrative is human interaction, group psychology and everyday emotional dominance. The combination of painting and drawing in these pieces was very important to how the piece worked as a whole. The effect of the ink cracking was something I did not intend to happen, but it made the piece successful.



FIGURE 1: *Eat* series, 2009

### *TEETH* SERIES

After the success of the *Eat* series, I began experimenting with plastic Yupo paper and different Japanese papers, both of which have translucent qualities to them, yet they are totally different in the paper spectrum. The synthetic quality of Yupo paper has become a great aspect of my process. Initially, I used it only with intaglio ink, which was repelled by the plasticity of the paper, and I did not feel like this was something I needed to explore.

Currently I'm using it with many different mediums, but mainly graphite and gouache. I began the semester after the *Eat* series with ideas that the figures eating each other felt a little too violent, so I began making prints on plastic with figures biting or eating their hands. The series that followed was a brief encounter with abstraction in nonobjective monotypes. I used Japanese rice paper and the plastic paper but used the same themes in both sets of monotypes. The figures are virtually unrecognizable. I was trying to gauge the degree to which my ideas required the faces of bodies in order for the audience to understand my intent or for the viewer to become engaged with the image. I started taping off different parts of the plate before I printed on the paper, which had found its way back into my current work. These prints were unsuccessful in terms of my intention; the response was not what I had in mind, and they were read in a different way than I intended. I continued with the Yupo paper and started experimenting with pencil, which led to powdered graphite, watercolor, tape, and gouache. Although these particular pieces were unsuccessful, I think the current body of work was very much influenced by the experimentation in this period. I am currently still working with the same materials but reworking the subject matter.

The drawings on Yupo began after the monotypes of the previous semester. I thought that the eating of food and hands was, again, no longer working, so I began to reconsider my imagery and intent and switched gears. The *Teeth* series came next. I used spikes coming out of bodies in this series. Two figures were in the drawing with spikes coming out of their backs. The spikes are impaling each figure, however much the one figure is hurting the partner; the partner is hurting the figure with the same amount of

injury. They are enduring and imposing the same amount of pain. Both figures in these works are equal. Before this series the figures had been either good or evil, or dominant and subordinate, only now I was exploring the equal ability to administer and endure pain of two beings. I wanted to show a different side of relationships between people that I had not explored in my previous work. By letting the figures hurt and be hurt I was engaging and considering the idea that the world was only theirs. It was meant to be the end for this series and the physical end for those figures. The spikes represent teeth, canine or shark type teeth, to me; the teeth are on the outside of the bodies, as though part of an exoskeleton. The figures live inside the painting as a symbiotic set but would eventually die. I direct the narrative and subsequent action to that the figures in my work all meet their end. The violent dances or battles never have survivors. The idea is that the work is the last stand or the last lesson before the end.



Figure 2: *Teeth* series, 2010.

## FEET EATERS SERIES

The figures in the *Teeth* series only exist in the space of the painting. They only function together. I was working on the same ideas of aggressive human interaction, but trying to come up with new possibilities of how to illustrate it. This led to my *Feet Eaters* series. These figures have something binding their bodies to another figure. The binding can function as yarn or intestinal shapes wrapping the figures. I want to keep the possibilities of what the binding is open. I don't want the view to feel as though it is one particular type of string or yarn. I want the binding to be able to be many different things. The intention of the wrapping was to completely consume the other figure. In some of these pieces there is only one figure because the other one has been swallowed. These are pieces about the aftermath of the action. The *Feet Eaters* series was all done on pre-cut, no bigger than 30"x40," sheets of translucent or opaque white plastic. In the next series I



explored the size of my work.



Figure 3: *Feet Eaters* series, 2010

### WRAPPING SERIES

The *Wrapping* series followed the *Feet Eaters*; it followed the same intent and explored new ways of how to visually show tension through mark making. The size difference made an impact on my subject matter. The figures went between the binding or wrapping. I felt that I did not need to articulate the figures' bodies any longer. I allowed the binding to describe the bodies, without having a hand or foot out for the viewer. I feel that these pieces still have the emotion that the other pieces have, even though the figures are

more hidden between the engulfing marks. With the pieces of work being so much bigger, 5'X7', I was able to really explore the different ways to make marks on the plastic paper. I erased and wiped the graphite powder and water mixture, and with the new size the wiped marks became completely different than they had been before I changed sizes. The new size also engages the viewer in a new way. The piece was all encompassing for the viewer. The intent became more about the viewer's reaction to the piece and not so much the narrative style with which I had worked initially. I do not feel like the narrative of the previous work is over-bearing or a complete story, but figures interacting always implies a narrative. The narrative in both the *Eat* and *Teeth* series is a vague narrative but still understandable from the viewer's standpoint.



Figure 4: *Wrapping* series, 2011

## CONCLUSION

The idea of visually describing human interaction has been my main theme in my current body of work. Working with different visual versions of friction or anticipation, I developed a vocabulary of marks that visually describe vulnerability and dominance. Each series I created has a different version of aggressive interaction behind it. The first few series dealt with figural based moments about to occur and the absence of action, the pause is the suspense. The next series explored figures interacting and eating each other in a hierarchal order: Figures eating smaller children, figures eating while being eaten. And the last set of series deals with figures being binded in a type of string or thick cylindrical form. These pieces explore control and human interaction. The viewer should take away from these works the idea that one the figure has dominated the other figure to oblivion or non-existence. My work has gone through a great transformation during my time at the University of New Orleans. My work started off completely figural and now, after three years, has changed in many ways. The figures are now behind the marks. They are implied by shapes of lines, not drawn out and completely recognizable. The figures will always be in my work in some way but for right now in my current series of work they are engulfed by line and not articulated. The theme remains the same but the work has gone through many different versions where I try to visually describe aggressive human interaction.

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## VITA

Robyn Denny was born in Louisiana and grew up in St. Amant, Louisiana. She attended the Louisiana State University and graduated in 2008. She moved to New Orleans in 2008 to study at the University of New Orleans. She currently lives in New Orleans.