Hostages

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Hostages

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

By

Dane Hansen
B.F.A. University of Montana, 2013

May 2017
Acknowledgement

For all the faculty who have had to endure my rambling, shambling manners and conversation. Thank you for your patience and guidance.
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Abstract

*Hostages* contains two interwoven analyses of the author's visual investigations. *Living Figurative* discusses the psychological space in which figurative and literal may become confused, and the way in which figurative threats operate beyond their natural boundaries. The result is a cycle of delusion, blame, and deflection, perpetuated through verbal nonsense, which is then validated through spectacle. Apocalyptic literature and conspiracy theories function through this method. While most of society believes *Nobody* is to blame for cultural conflict, the extremist uses the force of *Not-Me*, the ability to make a caricature from oneself and place it on another. Photojournalism uses this same mode to turn its subjects into dignified caricatures. *Worse as a Picture* contends that the artist can help viewers disarm internalized, figurative threats through exposure to the concept of death. This should be done through gradual, subliminal means, as there is no way to fully comprehend finality.

Keywords: Photography, Subconcious, Conspiracy, Death, Apocalypse
Introduction

I am following a trail of blood, both literal and figurative. This is a definitive characteristic of all predators, across species: the ability to perceive prey, shadowing them until a moment of weakness presents itself. It is difficult to imagine a shark or mountain lion without their sensitive awareness of the creatures whose flesh will sustain them. My experience is the opposite of these organisms. I am an unlikely hunter, whose perception is dulled and imprecise, often wandering. My search is often after the fact, trying to distill a common thread from seemingly scattered and arbitrary imagery. The uncomfortable truth that has come from this process has been to consistently see a pattern of threat and deception lying under the calm surface of exterior awareness.

This is not to say that these agitations are entirely negative: fright and deflection steer the body and mind away from harm. In their natural state, they are a healthy, normal part of the human condition. We do not, however, develop in a state even remotely resembling our ancestral environment. Through the course of my investigations, I discovered the ways in which unconscious mechanisms that are meant to guide us to safety and camouflage us from enemies have become overextended, strained, and broken. I do not believe this is a passing error in our cultural development, and instead represents a kind of shared, strategic delusion that helps sustain an environment of implied violence.

My visual explorations use photographs, ready-mades, found documents, and silkscreens to examine these emotional controls, which have both inner and outer components. In the course of my recent studies, two distinct lines of thought have
developed, which thematically overlap in ways I find significant enough to pair them together. *Living Figurative* discusses the mental space in which figurative and literal may become intermixed and confused. This, in turn, gives rise to an inner part of our being that utilizes abject, traumatic experiences that empower symbolic threats to become endless, imagined suffering. Further, the way in which this is achieved is through a specific kind of call and response: the quiet, covert patterning of irrational material within consciousness, and then emotional validation of it through spectacle.

Its companion *Worse as a Picture*, is a discussion of a visual dialogue that may open the possibility for irrational, visually constructed fears to return to a neutral, intermediate position. This leaves open the possibility for the viewer to return metaphorical pain to its proper orientation, as a detached indicator of discomfort, rather than a physical reality.
Living Figurative

1.) Black Square

My father and I are on our annual fall hunt on the Montanan hi-line, where hilly prairielands seem to expand outward for days. I am about six years old. My brother, just a few years older, is here too, tired and worn out, as we plod along in a weathered, old, full size sport utility vehicle. There is so much irony in the name of that automobile: The Suburban. It seems to call to mind the comforts of a modern home in an idyllic vision of middle America. This car was far from that place. It had an eight track player, a dented, rusting, cream-yellow exterior, caked dirt all over the interior, and a splattered layer of what was identifiably the brown of old blood in the long, cavernous back. Inside there, gutted deer with hollow, open chests were loaded in so casually, one after another, sometimes stacked in a pile.

My father has a sort of quiet reaction when he sees a small group of does along the fence line: he silently stops the car, parks it, and picks up the rifle from the seat beside him. He steadies himself on top of the hood of the car, and I watch as he fires several shots, the loud, shocking sound of gunfire reverberating against the car. In the next minute, I see he is shaking his head. He opens the door and quietly says to stay put, and not to move. I wrap myself under a blanket, as he and my brother quietly depart to try and find an animal he has shot, but not killed.

It is twilight, and then quickly, dark outside. He is following droplets of blood down into the twisting coulees and gutters of the Big Sandy Creek. The first thirty minutes pass, and I am fine, huddled under a green wool blanket. As forty-five minutes approach, I start to worry, thinking something is wrong. An inner struggle emerges: to
leave the car is to risk death, not just punishment and scorn. It is too dim to see where they have gone, but I am also scared that they are hurt or lost.

I will never forget this quiet murmuring, a slow, rising conflict during my two hours in that lightless void. In the dim, nearly blue light of the evening, I lay flat in the cold. I was paralyzed, watching images appear and disappear, and people speaking to me who had presence but no form. I was not dreaming, and yet it seemed as if I was inside myself, unable to move or act. What remains poignant is the way I seemed to have little control over my inner voices: it was as if they were someone else, giving a command or demanding an action. I am nearly crying when my father and brother come back, empty-handed, dour-faced with deep guilt over the painful, slow, agonizing death that animal would suffer.

As I reflect back, I realize that this space, and my presence there is not something I have ever departed from. The voices and images have faded, but often in a moment of distress, I can feel them aching, casting doubt and uncertainty. This is the site of subjectivity: a place where memory and sensation are continuously merging. The friction of these gives rise to emotions, which radiate upward into consciousness. The way in which this happens is disturbingly reflexive and taboo: to comprehend this area is to also realize the lack of control one has in relation to it. One perceives external consciousness as a kind of object controlled by deeper forces.

I represent it as a kind of black square, which is a symbol that has been used to indicate psychological interior regions by both occult and modern practitioners. Mine is placed as an entrance to an industrial building at the edge of civilization, in an abandoned, neglected rock quarry (Fig. 1). It is continuously open, a small section of the image that completely dominates the space, a black hole that conceptually
obliterates everything around it. Leaving society also means letting go of its inputs, the ability to seek consensus and reassurance. As thoughts float upward without finding these calming constructions, the shape of subjectivity becomes more apparent: it is a liminal doorway that is continually opening, then quickly closing. The black square does not have the properties of a real world locale, and so it exists as both a screen and a pathway. It is a sort of conversion zone, where multi-dimensional experience is compressed into a flattened, reduced form.

Let us imagine a movie theater: looking up at the stream of light exiting the projector, one sees nothing but a narrow, colored band that is indecipherable. This is not unlike the electrical currents that the brain produces, in that we cannot directly see what they contain until they come into contact with the screen, dispersing to create a two-dimensional form. The difference between this model and the reality of our sensory processing is that the mind projects forms onto the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings it is currently experiencing, masking our real sensation. Without these previously imprinted models, experience remains formless, unable to be referenced and compartmentalized.

It is tempting to compare this state of inner and outer reality expressed through the black square with Brian O’Doherty’s discourse on the white cube, Modernism’s attempt to tame and objectify this zone. This, I have found, is somewhat like defining cattle by pointing at the corral they are kept in. The white cube may create, as O’Doherty explained, an alienated setting for the spectator to interrupt and double their senses, isolating and validating art for the public,¹ but the thoughts and experiences

squeezing through the black square often have very little need for any kind of consensus. They are free range: able to exist in spite of common discourse, taste, or decency, sometimes far from any kind of shared cultural experience.

One could draw a comparison to Plato’s cave, but I feel like this is limiting, implying that the lower realms of consciousness are inferior and best disregarded. Through the course of my visual studies, I have inferred the opposite of Platonic thought. I find that the way in which forms are constructed in this internal environment matters much more than to prove the existence of universal, external form.

Over more than a decade, my practice of panoramic photography has drawn me to scenes which indicate a mental void. These images are of quarries, trash dumps, industrial zones, car accidents, and abandoned, cluttered rooms. Jeff Wall’s Destroyed Room has given some clarity to what I was looking for in these images: a way to think about the digestive process of the mind, utilizing a real world space (Fig. 2). Black Square is the culmination of this study, to determine how the liminality of a landscape resonates with similar, inward expressions of betweenness.
Fig. 1. *Black Square*, 2016, Printed 2017. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x259.8cm.

I find that Kazimir Malevich’s theories of non-objectivity, and his analysis of Cubism confirm my result. Malevich took his process of reductivity much deeper than I ever will, down to pure, unconscious, overlaid and merging geometric forms. However, pulling back from these so called “pure” works, and to his thoughts on Cubism and Futurism, I find an expression of subjective space closer to its real world appearance. Rather than expressing multi-dimensionality, Cubism and Futurism mirror the reductive, merging nature of mind. According to Malevich, this process continuously produces new forms at the same time it destroys old ones, which it first bends and distorts. On Futurism, he states,

I consider that the intuitive in art had to be understood as the aim of our sense of search for objects. And it followed a purely conscious path, blazing its decisive trail through the artist. (Its form is like two types of consciousness fighting themselves)

But the consciousness, accustomed to utilitarian reasoning, could not agree with the sense that led to the destruction of objectivism.

The artist did not understand this aim, and, submitting to this sense, betrayed reason and distorted form.

The art of utilitarian reason has a definitive purpose.
But intuitive creation does not have a utilitarian purpose.  

When I look at Malevich’s Black Square (Fig. 3), I know that it is meant to be the first and most supreme form of non-representation. I also cannot help but to think that this is the closest symbolic approximation of the screen where the two states of mind he

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speaks of will meet, the figurative game board and field of their interplay, where subjectivity dominates, impressing feeling onto form. This is strictly within the realm of formal aesthetics: returning to higher spheres of identifiable figuration, indexes, and symbols, there are so many messier variations than the straightforward conflicts of intuitive and utilitarian, conscious and unconscious, subjective and objective. Here is where I diverge from Malevich: the work that follows has been an effort to understand the dirty, inconsistent psychology of threats. This irrational blackmail of the inner mind has its own logic that is culturally unspeakable and frustratingly intangible.

II.) Here Comes the Bogeyman

Meditating on the many forms of non-objective painting, from Malevich to Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and John McLaughlin, I see no marks, but the footprints of a great, lurching beast. It is older than art, civilization, even life. Marks are made on surfaces throughout known time without the intervention of consciousness or biological animation. The impact of heavenly bodies on each other leads to the basic chemistry and components for life, from which we have emerged as complex beings. It is absurd to think that we do not continue to express those forces instinctively.

There is another black square, engraved centuries earlier, by the English occultist Robert Fludd, in his 1617 Treatise *Utriusque Cosmi* (Fig. 4). It has the latin title, *Et sic in Infinitum*, This For Infinity. The void going forever: before creation, nothing. When I look at this vacuum, and see the visibly etched marks that comprise it, and the title twists for me. If there is an empty perfection before time, then everything after has been continuous marks, imprints, occurrences, so deep that they comprise an impenetrable barrier to order and grace.

This is the heart of terror: not the end, but believing in endless life, motion, pain, that leaves marks again and again. It is not the finality of death that is the most terrifying possibility, but the thing imagined hiding after.
On page three of Francisco Goya’s *Los Caprichos*, there is an image that tries to dispel this superstition. *Que Viene El Coco* (Fig. 5) shows a mother with her children, who are terrified of an ill-defined figure that appears to be some clothes draped over furniture, or a living thing imagined in dim light. (The title translates roughly to *Here Comes the Bogeyman*)
Goya’s caption reads, "Lamentable use of early education. To cause children to fear the bogey-man more than his father and so make it afraid of something that does not exist." ³


This statement is perceptive beyond its time, stating rationally what is now common, unhappy knowledge. First, that the concept of other is something we are mostly taught: at a certain age, we are led to believe that there is a repulsive place where bad people, monsters, and ghouls will devour or enslave us. This is a distraction: there is something more tangible that actually can harm if not obeyed: a father, whose masculine protection of the household also carries with it the possibility of violence if the members of his family resist his rule. By comparing these two things, Goya informs us of a thesis to Los Caprichos: that what follows is an outgrowth of these two irrationalities, an intertwined pattern of fearing and hiding from figurative, imaginary things, while tolerating the continual, menacing ultimatum to obey real authority.

The actual bogeyman of the picture is the scared, panicking look of the children, who clutch for their mother, who seems calm and collected. It is as if the bogeyman is emanating outward, and coming back to the family unit, a loop of deflecting threatening elements of the real world onto obscured, half visible things. This is not unlike balancing cards against each other to make a three-dimensional surface: two layers of intangibility giving shape and depth where there seemed to be only flatness. The mother's face in the dark has a floating, unreal, serene quality, so opposite of the nebulous, un-faced thing that stands with a concrete posture. They complete each other; the face of the mother comforts and provides refuge from the unknown thing which she has authored. El Coco is one of the more frightening bogeymen, the kind that parents tell their children will murder and eat them for their bad behavior. Both children and parents on a deeper level know the
bogeyman is the parent: like other animals, able to destroy their young and consume them, if misbehavior and stress warrant it. Goya would later elaborate on this thought with the horrible *Saturn Devouring One of His Children* (Fig. 6). Saturn, the ultimate father, exercises his right to eat his young at the slightest hint that they might overturn his reign.

In the centuries since this picture was made, modern psychoanalytic thought has given us insight into this situation: the bogeyman is a modification to the sense of oneself as other, during the mirror stage of development in infancy and early childhood.\(^4\)

Misrecognition matters here: one learns the external form of the body, and how to control it, giving rise to imagining one’s external form. This is an unreal thing deep in the unconscious, and not something we are in direct control of; the image of oneself always carries a painful quality of being a fragment, something which one will learn is other.

This alone does not make the bogeyman. Extra steps are required: as this specular I transitions to the social I, parental authority mediates the process of presenting oneself to the world.\(^4\) Punishments, fear, stigma, and abandonment are attached to one’s sense of other, which is in turn adhered to the feeling of self. As vague, formless shapes find their way into the zone which I earlier called the Black Square, otherness floats upward, meeting these impressions. Alone, huddled under a blanket in faint light, eyes halfway open, the mind’s eye finds shape in the shadows: ghastly, ugly monstrous faces and non-corporeal, ethereal forms that firmly state that they are external, despite originating within.

Looking at a mirror, through a window, I momentarily found a form which is my closest visual approximation of this process. I see the vague, dark shape of myself being reflected, but I cannot identify it definitively as being me (Fig. 7). The window reflects

the light around it, but my shadow blocks out enough glare to allow me to see the mirror inside, which repeats this form. The bogeyman, by my best approximation, is a shadow within a shadow, a crude bit of consciousness inserted into unwanted feelings of otherness, always just around the corner, but never fully met. I am the thing in the dark, stalking myself.

Fig. 7. Here Comes the Bogeyman, 2015, Printed 2017. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x129.5cm.
III.) Horla

When threat is paired with form, the result is not unlike some species of spider: waiting quietly in a hole, they lunge forth to seize their target, carrying it below, where it will be rendered into a hollow, lifeless shell. The shell is then worn externally, an armor it quietly lives in. Yet, it is seen as external, something outside us, a changing configuration of imagined threats. One burns their hand on the stove: the pain of the real feeds this thing, giving it animation and shape. From the actual experience, the image of a red hot stove is paired with unpleasant sensations, guarding and guiding us away from being burned.

Most peril is figurative. Real, threatening, disfiguring pain is only experienced in small, shocking doses, while the figurative world contains inexhaustible expressions of potential trauma and pleasure. These are intermixed signals of punishment to be weighed against reward. As I try and further describe these conditions, definitions become difficult. These are not what Lacan called the Gaze. That word describes the belief in objective judgment, the ability to construct signs, objects, and narratives from the ambiguous features of people, places, and things. What I am attempting to describe comes out of an older force, moving underneath and through this system, waiting for the moment when its agents can assign pleasure or pain to the most raw, indefinable stimulus. I conceive that the gaze is merely their outstretched hand, reaching into our overt consciousness to place pleasure upon another’s face or body, and pain onto a fist, an aggressive posture, or the orange-red color of fire.
This imprecision is further confused by the way these presences present themselves to the world: externally, outside of the body. In sickness and distress, one may find them extended beyond the vagaries of a shaded room, increasingly overlaid into waking life. One feels something is overtly in control of one’s actions from outside their mind and body, despite originating inside one’s self.

When Guy De Maupassant gave these feelings, thoughts, and impulses a name near the end of the 19th century, he was suffering from the neurological effects of late stage syphilis. He called them the *Horla*, and it is awful to understand that when De Maupassant wrote a short story of the same name, he may have been experiencing the same chilling condition as its narrator: the sense that something is always near, able to take possession of one’s being, but resolutely external. The word, *Horla*, is itself a reflection of this power. Translator Charlotte Mandell suggests that it is a portmanteau of the French words “Out” (Hors), and “There” (Ia), and likewise the narrator of *The Horla* never suspects that the *horla* who is haunting him is internal, even though the reader knows it to be implicit.

In a crisis between *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt*, outer and inner conception of one’s being, when unconscious material swells upward at a dangerous pace, is it so far-fetched to conceive that a *horla* might be partially dislodged into our waking life? This is not unlike an organ extended past a sphincter, exposed and festering in a place it should not be. Objective space is an inhospitable environment for them,

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but the *Horla* are a magnitude stronger than our rational minds, easily able to upend reality into whatever narrative will meet their needs. As outer consciousness becomes their fragmented possession, one slowly feels as if their actions are unwillingly controlled by someone else, but are blocked from seeing the origin point within.

My suspicion is that contemporary communication, media, and networking have made boundaries thinner, and the doorway for their entrance bigger. As we receive more information through spectacles, it becomes difficult to ascertain between one’s own thoughts and exterior information, causing internal threats to seem increasingly real. Guy Debord explains,

> The spectacle erases the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed. It likewise erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of alien everyday reality, is thus driven into a form of madness, in which by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to fate.⁶

Fate is a word that carries with it the fear of potential estrangement, exile, abandonment, loss of love and life. Exterior awareness has been re-oriented to meet fate’s demands, disregarding tangible sensation in favor of poorly understood, second-hand threat.

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http://www.antiworld.se/project/references/texts/The_Society%20Of%20The%20_Spectacle.pdf
For many months, I have often found myself staring at a strange image of two tigers imprinted on a piece of waved, curving fabric, vexingly fake but also a ghastly menace that feels real enough to attach to deeper feelings of fear. (Fig. 8). The image is not of Horla: they have no fixed form, and there is no objective way to represent them. We can only understand their intimidation, what they want us to see, and feel. The image of the tiger asserts that the danger here is false, a sign rather than a present, pressing situation. What has kept my eye affixed is the way the left tiger's face folds downward into a void, where metaphorical and real hazard are equal. As I say these words though, I remember there is no comparison between the two: figurative threat is often so powerful in its present state that it is not uncommon to go through literal hell in order to avoid a figurative one.

Winding further into the black curve of that angry split, I sense another thing: that Horla are always plural. There is no one unified, single Horla; they are conflicting, contradictory things, mixes of instinct and subconscious thought that make themselves known through signs, voices, and gazes. Stripped of these things, and forced to signify without their normal means, one can see their expression as pure abstractions, freely moving marks, continuously forming paths that intersect and re-intersect so densely as to become an impenetrable mass.

Re-attaching indexes, signs, voices, and ideas to this movement, their basic function becomes more clear: they ascertain whether to resort to fight or flight, whether it is safe to act on a need for hunger, thirst, shelter, or sexual attraction, and who can be trusted on an emotional level.
There is something throughout history which is disturbing about this essential component of the human condition. Rather than acknowledge these figments as a guiding force, they have become ghosts, demons, ghouls, and all other manner of convenient bogeymen. With discipline and mental training, it may be possible to consciously negotiate with the many-faced, inner self. In spite of those healthy expressions, the person who chooses to live in denial of their fears and desires is seen as a saint, while healthy bartering is often believed to be conniving, common, and scandalous.

Fig. 8. Horla, 2015, Printed 2017. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x129.5cm.
When I look at Martin Schongauer’s Renaissance engraving, *The Trial of St. Anthony* (Fig. 9), I no longer see someone resisting evil, but a person deeply out of touch with themself. As he floats in the air, alone in the desert, or in a dream, strange creatures pull him from all sides, making demands and ultimatums, which St. Anthony patiently ignores. This disavowal of desire is as much a crime in the reality of the unconscious as the greatest atrocities are in our waking life: in this picture St. Anthony is a man who is murdering himself through piety, slowly starving and ignoring the animal components from which he is made. His face reminds me of the type of person who would say that a wolf is evil and a lamb good, because a wolf will eat a lamb, without acknowledging that good and evil are human concepts that have no equivalent in animal behavior. His overall demeanor is the jaded pose of someone who has determined that it is simply his fate to patiently suffer having a body and mind, while he waits to be rewarded for denying the existence of those things.

This mistake of place can be seen in an illustration accompanying an early edition of DeMaupassant’s *The Horla* (Fig. 10): as the narrator looks in the mirror, he sees himself, but does not recognize one part of him submitting to another. Instead, the wispy, ineffable thing floats away from him. He is sure the source of his crisis must be with that cloud of smoke, just outside his grasp.
http://www.metmuseum.org/
IV.) Where There is Law and Order

As I prepared to leave Montana in July of 2014, a curious thing happened: a pamphlet fell from some old, local magazines and publications a friend had given me to make collages from. The words at the bottom of the page have permanently etched themselves into my consciousness. They read:

“SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL POLICE. WHERE THERE IS LAW AND ORDER, THERE IS NO COMMUNISM.”

This work, Ted Billings’ 1969 leaflet *DEN OF THIEVES*, has the same ferocious kind of lies I know from our interconnected age, but I could not look away from its much earlier, brutal form. Each letter was typed by hand, overlaid with stamped red statements that resemble dried blood, like “GOLD MUST GO,” or “THE U.S. WILL BE BANKRUPT BY 1970 – BANKER ARTHUR UPGREN,” or the uncomfortably underlined word *Moneychangers* (Fig. 11). The return mailing address is in Denver, Colorado, not far from the conceptual territory of my youth. I had never lived outside of Montana for more than a few scattered months until my relocation to Louisiana. As I scanned over this document, and considered my recent diagnosis of high functioning autism, I felt a twinge: here was someone I could have been, unable to contain continuous thoughts about an evil cabal ruling the world, while patiently deflecting charges of anti-semitism. It is prophetic how the ignorance, fear, and hatred of this document has been profoundly distilled into compact, internet-esque, twitter-like statements.

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Fig. 11. Ted Billings, *Den of Thieves*, 1969. Typed, stamped, and marked paper. 21.6x 27.9. From the author’s private collection.
Here is where I deviate from Debord: I do not come from a place where spectacle has a monopoly over hearts and minds. When I watch the strange, ugly political situation currently unfolding in 2017, it is certainly easy to imagine that the shocking statements, obvious corruption, fake facts, and total disregard for objective reality are pure expressions of a culture entrenched in spectacle. However, Ted Billings reached for, and found these things with little care or need for specular validation. His home has been made inside of the black square, a marginalized, lone voice directing its foulness outward while hiding its true intention to alienate and fragment reality.

Rather than a visually reactive route there, his path is was found through an inability to comprehend modern macroeconomics and a firm belief that, “GOD’S INDIVIDUAL will again be free to make his own DESTINY.” This is a direct example of the type of thinking that Debord speaks of: Billings is an individual so removed from spatial, three-dimensional reality that his logic in this work consists almost entirely of magical thinking. His ultimate conclusion is that it is his fate to suffer, in order to return free will to other individuals. This “freedom”, however, is under the watchful, terrorizing gaze of imagined, divine wrath.

Despite the visual loudness of this document, it is important to remember that the crackpot frame of mind is not necessarily blaring or obnoxious. Many cults and radical groups I have studied have leaders whose quiet, insistent presence confirms deep irrationality for followers. This is the firm hand that holds the door open, allowing logical fallacy to begin circulating in the unconscious. When a
culture begins to placate its members by validating irrational superstitions and, those things will eventually become its master.

I have reproduced this document as a large silkscreen that comprises half of the work *Passover* (Fig. 12), out of a need to understand how conspiratorial, magical thinking forms without any kind of specular vantage, but simultaneously leaves the door open for spectacular madness. Enlarged and pushed from the private sphere of consumption and into the public realm of the white cube, I feel that its form and purpose speak volumes about a reality which requires no objective input, only raw feelings connecting random, misconstrued facts.

Fig. 12. *Passover*, 2017. Serigraph, 76.2x110.5cm.
One thing that I must elaborate on is that I have an uncomfortable foothold and vantage in this world. I was not formally diagnosed with a spectrum disorder until a few years ago, but I can attest to having a quiet rage that comes with being in discord with others’ body language, and the greater culture. I feel constantly out of touch with outer voices while simultaneously painfully aware of inner ones which never fully manifest into coherent narratives. Despite this confusion, I find that they must be expressed, and no matter how hard I consciously try to restrain myself, they embarrassingly spill outward. Sometimes this is as word soup, and at others, confusing, half-formed polemics.

Ted Billings’ writing remains urgent for me, because its logic, rhythm, and crudeness have the same buried, not quite conscious affect I know is similar to the words I am constantly attempting to contain. This rambling, monstrous quality is why I speak so firmly of the horla: it is as if I am not in total control of my voice. It is a traitor, turned against me, and I nervously acknowledge its ability to embarrass and isolate.

This combination of blurted, unpolished language and inability to hold back illogic characterizes work that opens the door for an earth-flattening, mind-altering type of irrationality. Consider the greatest expression of this in the western paradigm: *The Book of Revelation*. In its original Greek, it is full of misspelled, coarse language;\(^8\) and its author is vague: we only know that he was exiled to the island of Patmos for an unspecified crime, and most likely is not the apostle John. *Revelation* is not scholarly by the standards of the period, but unlike the dullness that makes up

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\(^8\) Kim Mark Lewis, *How John Wrote the Book of Revelation: From Concept to Publication* (N.P., 2015), XX.
the bulk of religious text, it has a definitive form meant to open this gateway between subjective and objective mind, allowing all manner of phantasmagoria through. One only needs to casually mention seals, trumpets, and horsemen, and quickly, visions of murder surface, blood pouring in the streets and fire at every corner.

This could be understood as the result of spectacle: our mass media has pinned simple, straightforward symbols onto John’s surreal, vague fictions. Still, if this writing did not invite forth imagery from abject trauma and nightmarish constructions of the other, these would not have been expressed as spectacle in the first place. Spectacle, by my approximation, does not appear to be an exclusive, one directional affair, as asserted by Debord.9 Perhaps for a large section of humanity, spectacle is a constant force to be imitated, creating the thin grounding for fair cultural play overseen by an inert, unchanging god. However, for an ever present minority of emotionally maligned, socially isolated people, this is not the case: our routes to madness are shorter and more severe.

Reflecting and reproducing socially correct signs of spectacle does not matter much for a volatile, subjective-minded person. Unplugged from culture in a distant province, their violent visions run in a reverse direction: signs accumulate into indexes, and objects return back to indefinable, formless absurdities. One cannot definitively know what John the Revelator meant by mentioning a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns with seven crowns, praising a beast from the sea. It remains immeasurable, suspended over the reader without concrete explanation (Fig. 13).

9 Debord, 9.
This is not the easy dialogue of religious validation: it does not invite the reader to find a sense of spiritual normalcy and institutionally approved action. It is meant to intentionally undo those relationships, returning power to an irrational, personal place of disorder and panic. Experience under these premises is shoved out of utilitarian need and into the grasp of intuitive reasoning.

Similarly, the rude red of Ted Billings’ stern warnings is a simple sign of color to the conscious mind, but to the inner reality he targets, it occupies a position between figurative and literal: here is the blood of patriots, spilling forth, to inform us about how freedom is being threatened by a foreign party. That his statements resemble modern postings from our electronic world reveals that these templates existed well before the rise of our current technological paradigm, which has lent an air of freshness to old foolery.
V.) Nobody Has Blinded Me

“Friends, no-man kills me; no-man in the hour of sleep oppresses me with fraudulent power”

-Polyphemus, The Odyssey.10

To the right of my enlarged reproduction of Ted Billings’ conspiracy tract, I have placed a symbolic, odd overlay: a cartoon of a sad clown, on top of which a surreal, floating halftone illustration of a pirate covers both eyes. The pirate only has one eye: a patch covers the opposite side of his face. A cyclops emerges for me: a great, primordial figure of combative, unapproachable masculinity (Fig. 15). There is a trauma causing agony and terror, that has been overlaid with a misdirected rage. A streak of red marks this cycle as requiring of bloodshed to sustain it. When compared to the archaic form of the Polyphemus, as imagined by the 18th century classicist Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein (Fig. 14), the mythic and modern versions combine in my imagination. The cyclops thrusts forward across history to devour my life, and any potential lives to come.

Homer’s cave is a different arrangement than Plato’s later exercise. It is inhabited by a great, inhuman expression of hostility, which follows no law. Men become its food; it keeps them captive to consume them at its leisure. Out of desperation, the men captured in this cave devise a plan: they will blind the creature with a searing, hot spear, and use further deception to escape.

This episode momentarily reveals a lubricant in the machinery of civilization, which has outlasted every god, religion, and institution, while existing continuously through them. It briefly appears when Odysseus whispers something into the Cyclop’s ear: that his name is No-man, or in more concise, contemporary terms, Nobody. This is done to avoid wrath, punishment, and death by divine force for the sin they will commit: sharpening a pike, they shove it into the eye of the drunken monster, permanently blinding it. Moving its rock and stumbling out of its cave, Polyphemus screams, “No-man kills me,” to its one-eyed brothers, who give no aid. Meanwhile, his father, Poseidon, remains momentary unaware of his misery.

The anarchic system of warlords and their right to express extreme violence is the cave we have never left. The vicious heart of patriarchy sometimes beats quietly, but it still lives. Odysseus has long exited the fictional location of his story, but our barbaric, ancient order remains, sometimes hidden under layers of refinement, and at others, overtly present. The constant force of men destroying men, in order to more perfectly own women and make progeny does not leave.\textsuperscript{11} It finds a sublimated voice, a soothing ideal, like chivalry or honor, both subtly indicating male disposability interwoven with a right to make women property.\textsuperscript{12}

Both of these words also contain the intangible presence of Nobody. As long as a grotesque status quo is presented well and with a coded, friendly, banality of routine, patriarchy is not believed to exist, even when in plain sight. Within a span as short as a generation its true form can be germinated and sprouted, enslaving

\textsuperscript{12}Veblen, 59.
and destroying hundreds of millions of lives. *Nobody* has a kind of nicety about it: without culpability for prior events, each generation carries its blindness, able to rebuild and forget about the calamity slowly brewing under the surface.

For someone like Ted Billings or John of Patmos, *Nobody* is unacceptable. Their minds contain a kind of masculine fundamentalism which requires blame. The extremist worships blind aggression and demonizes those they feel are unaccountable. They favor a society with more coercive features which would furnish them with powerful protections and influence. Their wish is to regain permission to satiate their slow, lustful appetite to subjugate others.

Those with a crackpot-perspective believe *Nobody*'s refined form of patriarchy can only hold so long. Still, they are groping in the dark, unable to coherently piece together an objective model of when a collapse, or apocalypse, will bring their savagery into favor. This passion for the return of “true” patriarchy is littered with failed predictions and bizarre preparations.

When tensions do begin to mount, the crank-thinker knows how to amplify their efforts, battering the shell of civility with their preferred deception, *Not Me*, the destructive twin of *Nobody*. While *Nobody* is a faceless thing content to let injustice and cruelty disseminate, a person who carries *Not-Me* is usually ready to punish *somebody*. The fanatic is always a friend of *Not-Me*. In times of unrest, they find greater ease in spreading their favored companion.
Fig. 15. *Passover* (Detail), 2017. Serigraph.
V.) The Great Humorist

Look in the mirror and touch your face. Now harder, and pull it any which way you like. Make the ugly or the silly one that our mothers told us not to, because it might stay that way. You have summoned Not-Me, the destructive form of Nobody. It is the ability to contort and make oneself unrecognizable, to express that one’s face is just hollow fragment, and that one’s actions are something that this empty figment did, the result of a temporary change in disposition or attitude. It lends the power of invisibility, helping us slide away from crimes we commit and others we merely benefit from.

We laugh as it twists atrocity into comedy, and other’s weaknesses into the worst kind of threats. This is different from Nobody in that we are not completely blind to our lie: we have a justification for it. When I look at the picture of my good friend Riley Flynn making his face unrecognizable for the camera, with one side expressing conscious horror and the other pulled to a total sloth-like, disaffected boredom, I can perceive this effect (Fig. 16). It deflects gaze so effectively, placing it on others, that I simply cannot see Riley there: he has momentarily slipped out from my view, from my memories and knowledge of him, replaced with an irrational, improbable creature capable of anything. After he returns its face to its original position, I will recognize him again, as if he quietly exited the room and returned.

While Nobody might have a taste for blinding and confusion, it at least deflects responsibility out into a diffuse void. Not-Me is a true vector for insanity and suffering, as it points judgment back at the mass of humanity like a murderous gunman randomly picking targets in a crowd. This is a hidden force, that, by my approximation, actually can take nearly complete control of one’s gaze. Its targeting follows the path of least resistance: whoever can be blamed will be, in accordance with the ease of doing so.
There are consequences to using this force. *Not-Me* is cruel to the careless. It can, and will, choose aliens from outer space, giants under the hollow earth, a racial minority, conniving women, bankers, a hidden cabal of secret elites, or any number of government agencies, as being to blame for one’s shortcomings. If it desires to bend our rationality backwards, shamefully exposing our mental frailty, it can do so, while others laugh. We are each sure that we are immune, unable to imagine that such embarrassment can happen to us.
Not Me, however, is the one truly cackling underneath our facade. The companion piece to Passover is titled Christmas Future. It depicts Not-Me, in its signature hand-over-the-face position, ripped from the Family Circus comic (Fig. 17). In a lower layer, Tischbein’s Polyphemus seemingly becomes an endless spread of red, touching a maddeningly scribbled series of circles that seem to indicate that he is the hidden author, floundering in the dark to find a target. The thing being circled obsessively is the birth certificate of Barack Obama, a benign subject made controversial with thinly veiled racism.¹³ My imaginary conspiracy theorist writes, “WHERE IS HIS MOTHER’S MAILING ADDRESS?” over and over again, denoting that there was no mailing address listed for Anne Dunham, Obama’s mother (presumably because it was the same as his father’s). Not-Me has a kind of arrogance about it: its user partially knows their own racism, but enjoys the inexhaustible argument their superficial denial will bring.

When I think of Not-Me, it brings to mind American Soldiers marching German civilians out to see where the strange smells of sweet burning meat had come from, the mass graves and piles of bodies at Buchenwald. I can imagine the smoldering ruins of Berlin, and the cognitive dissonance that there was simply nothing that could have been done. It is the White American who says their ancestors didn’t participate in slavery, while benefitting from a system stacked in their favor. Here is the driving force behind the idea that nuclear weapons should

even be made, let alone stored and pointed at anyone: we will not be the ones who fire the first shot.

It also happens to be a little boy, pointing and saying it was his sister’s fault a vase was broken while playing with a ball in the house. It is something so small and trivial as blaming the dog for passing gas, but also an angel of destruction and breaker of nations. We rightfully feel paranoia and unease that Not-Me exists. At the same time, we are sure that it is other people in denial, and not us.

Fig. 17 Christmas Future, 2017. Serigraph, 76.2x110.49cm.
VI.) A Hand Over the Face

Jeff Wall’s piece, *Mimic* (Fig. 18), shows *Not-Me*, in what may be its first pure, concise depiction in visual history. A white man walks down the street, making his eyes slanted at a man of Asian descent. The perpetrator shows his ability to turn himself into a caricature, which is then used to flatten the reality of another human being. He is projecting the fragmentation of *Not-Me* as a casually hidden cultural weapon, which can be concealed as quickly as it is brandished. This inability to hold an offensive, crude liar accountable causes a kind of learned helplessness, a passive acceptance of oneself as a spectacle, a random collection of external signs instead of a living being.

Returning again to my photograph, *Not-Me* (Fig. 16), I find the weird, deflective pose of my close friend has an additional function beyond avoiding judgment. In order to bring out this phantom this photograph has been extensively manipulated to create otherworldly contrast and ambience. *Not-Me* is the ability to make a caricature, originating with the manipulation of one’s own face and voice, learning to make a fake, usually rude surface that is not recognized as oneself. This floating thing can then be placed wherever its holder likes, turning another person who is comprised of complicated experiences and desires into a crushed, absurd narrative that is easily disregarded or violated.
I have great difficulty with documentary photography, which I feel makes a 
dignified caricature of its subjects, turning them into rigid, symbolic models to be read
as a kind of information which Roland Barthes called Studium. The producer often
molds their raw material, other humans and situations, into a form which gives the
removed spectator a sense that they are well informed about people without having

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met them, or that they know a place because they have seen pictures of it. This is because these mass produced-images seem to align into repeating patterns.

This is a kind of Not-Me which the photojournalist eagerly indulges, using aesthetics and circumstance to manufacture the falsehood of archetypal conditions based on momentary glances and pose. Not-Me is covertly given a kind of mystical nobility through aesthetics and narrative, a slick packaging over the vulgar reality that Not-Me has taken the place of a real person. Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother (Fig. 19) provides a well-known example of this: most viewers will never know that its primary subject has a unique name, and a history before and after the publication of the photograph. They simply feel that it has come to represent the tenacity and steadfastness of motherhood in the face of adversity; I find it revolting that her actual experience has been invalidated, with Not-Me in her stead, again, with a hand, tantalizingly on her face. Martha Rosler has commented on this situation, how the document becomes a thing separated from reality to support particular convictions and ideologies, stating,

A good, reasonably principled photographer I know, who works for an occupational health and safety group and cares about how his images are understood, was annoyed by the articles about Florence Thompson. He thought they were cheap, that the photo Migrant Mother, with its obvious symbolic dimension, stands over and apart from her, is not-her, has an independent life history. (Are photographic images, then, like civilization, made on the backs of the exploited?)

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16 Rosler, 315.
Florence Thompson, the migrant mother in *Migrant Mother*, remains an enigma to such a kind of viewer and producer of photography. For them, the external fragment that was copied from her real existence is particularly helpful in making a figurative worldview, the universal condition of motherhood, into a fixed, literal thing that cannot be extinguished or altered.

The camera in this case may as well be a gun, a thing to kill the subject. Their shape is skiinned, and tanned like a hide, to cover and protect *Not-Me*. Rosler has identified the ugly face of the behavior: making lower classes and marginalized groups into a kind of prey for both sides of the political spectrum. For the left, this means an endless supply of oppressed victims used to feed their sense of moral correctness, while the right uses the same pictures to construct a narrative about parasitic freeloaders burdening the system.

Rosler explains,

Documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery. One can handle imagery by leaving it behind. (It is them, not us.) One may even, as a private person, support causes. ¹⁷

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¹⁷ Rosler, 306.
Fig. 19 Dorothea Lange, “Migrant Mother”, 1936, in *Dorthea Lange (55s)*, by Mark Durden. (London: Phaidon Press, 2006), 12.
VII.) Red Robe Backwards

I am following the color red, again, this time in Houston. It is October 2014: I have come here for the purpose of obtaining printing equipment, but am momentarily distracted by the color red drifting down a sidewalk during what photographers call the “Golden Hour”, the last sixty minutes before twilight. This stark, straight, receding light striking this fabric made a rich, strange hue that I can only compare to the bleeding red of an old tube television. I am quickly exiting my vehicle, and within distance to make an image; there is something about this robe that seems to hang outside of consciousness, like Goya’s bogeyman, a piece of fabric which has been assigned psychic presence.

Then I am too close: the person on which this object rests has seen me, glancing backwards at a moment when I am pressing the shutter. The object I had so sought out to complete my vision of the colors and situations that define Southern photography, is suddenly de-objectifying, becoming a person, someone who does not deserve to be suspiciously followed and made into a photograph. I approach them and profusely apologize, but they are gentle and confident that when I show the photograph I have just taken of them. They do not care, and smile and ask where I’m from, whether I work for a newspaper. I cannot forget their words: there are so many photos in the world, what difference does it make?

The memory remains as fresh now as it was years ago: as I look at Red Robe Backwards (Fig. 20), I see the end of the trail of blood, the target that Rosler has so eloquently described. Where I desired to make an object, there was a person behind it, and her eyes speak of a reality that I have no factual access or insight into. It is not just the difference of our age, gender, and race, but the more tangible reality of time turning
her and me into dust. When her life is extinguished, what she has seen will vanish along with the pain, sorrow, and joy that accompanied a life. It is easy enough to imagine her living through segregation and systemic oppression, but the hard reality is that I cannot accurately express her truth. Even if I conducted long interviews and documented her entire existence, these things would still be vicarious signs of a life, not the life itself. If there is a universal element here, it is the condition of impenetrability, the wall of death which stops the gaze.

I am a fool to think that a photograph can give any kind of accurate depiction of the place and time she is from. In her eyes, I can only see myself standing there, threateningly pointing a camera. I understood, for the first time, representation as a kind of butchery. It is a forced fossilization of reality into a small, distant thing for our thoughts and feelings to be imposed on. Not-Me finds a concise, unclouded reflection here, not unlike a mirror amplifying light into a burning heat. As I imagine myself creating the situation which resulted in this photograph, I feel a brashness and ignorance, the privileged assumption that photographs constitute a higher expression, that I accurately can capture the world as it is. Each time I look at this image, I sense that there is something slowly strangling my empathy, trying to destroy and replace me, and that I must firmly remove its grip.

I do not wish to make my way in life scraping the exterior form off other humans, to advance the agenda of Not-Me. Does it matter whether that act has been assigned a profane or sacred status? Each moment of life is unique and haunting, and cannot be precisely replicated. As it passes, so do we. The continuous, flowing, unending path of reality cannot be conscripted to deny death. It constantly asserts finality, while the copy can be contorted to say otherwise.
Fig. 20 Red Robe Backwards, 2014, Printed 2016. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x129.5cm
Worse as a Picture

I.) Fresh Prints

There is a photograph my father flinched at when he viewed it in my thesis exhibition. *Fresh Prints* depicts a hand, covered in bright crimson, reaching into the entrails of a deer, held in a position that indicates a firm grasp of something deeper (Fig. 21). It is the grip of my friend Jenni, who works much of the year as a forester along the Montana-Idaho border. Her hands are far rougher than the majority of men I have ever known.

My father also has weathered hands again, after resuming his practice as an electrician. This is mostly to ward off the boredom of retirement in the isolation of eastern Montana. As a child, though, I remember his hands having the smooth sheen of a bureaucrat. Sometime before I was born, he had switched away from pulling wire to moving a cursor on a glowing green screen. His days were filled with connecting vectors that would form precise drawings, to be translated into roads, boat ramps, and trail heads, and other access points into the wilderness. The hunt was a connection to his past, before computers and office politics, when he and his father would haul carcasses together.

As we are looking at this image and he jerks back, I gently remind him that when I was six years old, his hands guided mine into the remains of a deer to remove intestines and touch the heart. I did not wince, despite the fact that it was slimy and gross to touch the recently deceased. It was also a new sensation, and I had little programmed reaction to the sign of death. He believed it was important to understand that a corpse provided us with food. Before I turned twelve, we rarely ate red meat that wasn’t wild game.

Looking at a photograph of this, though, my father is taken somewhat off guard, and responds to me, “But it’s worse as a picture. We were always in a hurry.” This is true: the speed at
which an animal is dressed gives little time for contemplation and an articulated response. Still, these were only short moments that pale in comparison to the years we spent hanging deer in the garage, skinning them, sawing off their heads, burning leftover hair, wrapping cuts and grinding scraps into hamburger. If anything, I might expect him to feel hungry, instead of having squeamish regrets.

I don’t feel sad, amused, disgusted, or peckish looking at this photograph. I only find some satisfaction that it has good composition and vibrant color. The reaction it gives to others is remarkable: I have often heard that it is painful, even traumatizing to look at. Perhaps this is a side effect of religious manipulation and cinematic depictions of torture. Whatever the case, there is no pain in the photograph: that has been carried by the viewer, and drawn out by its scenario. The animal was dead, and the moment has long passed.

Fig. 21 Fresh Prints, 2014, Printed 2016. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x129.5cm
II.) The Deathless

Observing the abrupt borders, peculiar angle, and close-up position of *Fresh Prints*, reality becomes warped in a fashion that I believe triggers certain internalized spectacles that form the fictional lake of fire. By that, I mean an imaginary place of boundless suffering. This is unfortunately a fixed feature for so many minds, including mine. I feel rage at the way it was so carefully manufactured by John of Patmos, a criminal whose writings I believe have an explicitly sociopathic bend. As discussed earlier, John’s method was a mixture of precise patterning and indefinite terror, leading only to perpetual agony or eternal bliss. Death is not considered a possibility in his paradigm. One cannot simply exit into nothing, outside of punishment or reward.

The long term results of this work are ghastly, lowering the quality of life for those who are emotionally affected by such brutal hogwash. Consider the *horla*: in a healthy state, one might expect them to be expressed as simple, stern reminders not to act carelessly, spoken in the voice of a parent, inhabiting a quiet corner of shame and injury. Instead I, and many others, have endured so many unpleasant visions of a dark place where wicked things will pursue and consume me, severing and reconstituting my body ad nauseam. I sense much contemporary civil discourse is stuck in the Middle Ages, despite gluttonous amounts of new science, art, and freedom. I cannot conceive why else depictions of hell remain so emotionally relevant. When I view images like the Limbourg Brother’s 15th century miniature of Satan sucking the souls from earth to be excreted into its bowels (Fig. 22), I find cerebral tension rustling awake childhood fear, when I should simply laugh at its ridiculousness.

I often feel as if I have done great wrong, whether I am aware of it or not. There is a sense that I owe favors to other people and invisible deities. As these thoughts and feelings bedevil me, I find it conceivable that deathlessness is not just an element of the social contract, *but is the root of the social contract*. We have agreed to act fairly out of a hope for a better future, and to avoid
the wrath state and god. All of these entities, future, state, and god, are binding expressions of the deathless: they are constructions that carry indefinite threats of harm and reward, to be avoided or controlled. Their invisibility is ensured through interpersonal communication: both captor and captive, every citizen is an agent of deathlessness, ensuring that death is never fully comprehended. Deathlessness is the thing that keeps our sense of mortality safely sealed away.

The artist and author can reveal that condition, and give our audiences opportunities to break with its unspoken bargain. This gift was given to me from my parents, who simply wished me to have a realistic relationship to food. Through the finality somewhere in the glossy, empty eyes of an eviscerated creature, I became aware of death’s profound, quiet expression, and came to understand it as a calm, reassuring ally against the emotional bullying and chicanery of culture.

If one wishes to exit from civilization, it can only be through death, in both figurative and literal ways.

Fig. 22 Limbourg Brothers, “Lucifer Torturing Souls as Well As Being Tortured Himself in Hell,” (Detail). From Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry, by Raymond Cazelles and Johannes Rathofer. (Tournai: Renaissance Du Livre, 1991), Folio 108r.
III.) Going the Distance

What I have to do by using photography is to think about the other important image inbetween, the world of the copy. Photography has no originality. Please don’t say this is art, this is art, like that. If you have a camera, you can make a copy.

-Daido Moriyama

The companion to Fresh Prints is a photograph entitled Baby, taken minutes before (Fig. 23). It depicts the exterior form of a small deer, dead, and laid out on newspaper, ready to be processed into food. To bring it home was not my idea: this was the keen intuition of Julie Thompkins, who in turn enlisted our friend, Jenni Boutz, during the last day of 2014. On a drive, in Montana over that winter break, Julie spotted it and decided it was freshly dead, as we had not seen it on our way out. She stopped the car, and we quickly grabbed its legs, loaded it into the back of her vehicle, drove home, and then hauled it up the stairs of her collective apartment building.

Seeing it laid out on the floor, I asked to photograph it, using a tripod. I curled the legs to imitate Muybridge’s horse (Fig 24): it seemed to sparkle with youth and vigor despite its recent demise. This photograph is also flipped upside-down in my presentation. That, combined with heavy dodging and burning, gives it a floating presence. The hovering quality of the image implies that the space is not real, causing tension with the indexical quality of photography, which we are conditioned to see as real.
Fig. 23 Baby, 2014, Printed 2017. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x129.5cm

Fig. 24 Edweard Muybridge, “Sallie Gardner Running”. In Eadwaerd Muybridge: The Stanford Years 1872-1882, by Anita Ventura Mozley (Stanford: Stanford Art Department Press, 1972), 104.
I feel that *Baby* is in the same emotional territory as Daido Moriyama’s image of an infant in *Farewell Photography* (Fig. 25), despite their superficial differences. His is a shaky, carelessly composed, out of focus image that is barely identifiable as a baby. The violating nature of the proceeding photographs creates a compulsion to act, out of empathy, to “save” the child. This is an impossibility that the subconscious struggles to comprehend. For me, the baby turns into a blank space; I find my ego bruised and my limitations exposed as I try to reach through, finding nothing.

Moriyama’s rough, tensely indicated nature of the figurative void in *Farewell Photography* is therapeutic for me. As I rustle through its pages, I have moments of great distress followed by periods of grace, as I perceive the emptiness behind figurative representation. I have given the title *Baby* to my photograph of the small deer, because it causes similar feelings. I enjoyed the flavor of the small deer’s meat, and the aesthetic look of its form, but that satisfaction is empathetically broken by the way it seems to continue running forward, ceaselessly startled and scared.

Rebecca Solnit’s writings have offered me some explanation as to why this occurs: the work reveals a buried kind of cognitive dissonance. On the surface, I say that I am comfortable and emotionally prepared for death, which gives me great relief, but there is still a deeper part of me that does not understand or accept what death is, even as I have my hands inside of it and my eyes directly on it.

This is not unlike the deathless landscapes I remember her explaining when she visited my Alma Mater. The speed of modern transportation shields our minds from the danger and trauma caused in slow travel; when we look at landscapes in the contemporary era, they become expressions of natural wonder, rather than imparting a sublime feeling of horror at the
starvation, thirst, and injury one can experience when traveling long distances by foot. Similarly, we do not see the labor and toil that goes into producing our food, or the lives of animals who provide its protein.


The visual work can bridge that gap; the deer in my photo can still be understood as a sort of Momento Mori: the old, Northern European tradition of painting and photographing still lifes with goods visibly perishing to remind the viewer of their temporary existence (Fig. 26). The dead animals of those images stay dead, however, while *Baby* perceptually survives, moving forward in spite of having passed on.

The pose of Muybridge’s horse which was placed into *Baby* gives a cerebral affect where the deer has animus and motion that it cannot stop despite its displacement from life. As the

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form of a deer is taken from indexes of woodlands and plains, one begins to imagine the natural landscapes it has been violently removed from. These elements allow the possibility to see both death and deathlessness. One may hope that this animal can escape from its two-dimensional cage while simultaneously acknowledging the truth that its flesh has been eaten and its bones discarded. In perceptual uncertainty, between life and death, or what Freud called the Uncanny Valley, we can either choose to resolve the conflict of deathlessness or avoid it. By picking the concrete fact of death, I find a piece of my sanity returns from the hellish constructions of magical thinking.

IV.) Dog Meets Dog

Something has happened in the last decade of my life, noticeable and unnerving, as I recede from youth and its forced social proximities. I feel more on edge and quicker to place people and events into narrowing categories of judgment. My sense of exploration has become diminished, now only comes in unpredictable, short spurts. I am less able to sustain it for long periods. All roads seem to point back to the screen, and its safe, comforting pathways that I’ve known from before. I feel a crushing sensation, like I’m less able to intuitively process external reality. Each of my visual works in this thesis has been affected by this distant, saturnine pattern of retreating emotional capacity. I increasingly cannot perceive what is in front of me unless it contains elevated levels of sudden, shocking motion or otherness. For a time, these qualities dominated the bulk of my work.

It may sound bizarre, but on first moving to New Orleans, I experienced little emotional change from my time in Montana, despite incredible contrasts in culture, demographics, climate, and landscape. I outwardly perceived that it was shockingly different, but failed to emotionally grasp onto any sense of newness or excitement. Partially, this was depression, but it also was a longer term problem caused by autism’s slow, grinding disconnection of sign from feeling.

The easy answer to this is that I am under the spell of mass media, pornographic stimulation, and flippant social updates. This is only partially right. The full truth is that I am obstinate: the part of me that wishes to exist inside is much stronger than the part trying to have new, external sensations. This zone has given me a familiarity with my logical fallacies, inner threats, and self-deception, but I am tired of my emotional mind’s stubborn desire to stay in that area. When it does briefly emerge, it is anxious and confused, ready to quickly withdraw at the first sign of trouble.
This puts pressure on my superficial visual awareness and verbal reasoning to do the heavy work of maintaining consciousness without consistent spatial and emotional logic. I feel betrayed by these parts of me that only feel comfortable behind a screen or a book. My intuitive brain is a scared traitor, neglecting its duty to read the non-verbal cues of others, causing pain to even look someone else in the face. It cowers in the dark as I talk at someone without giving any room for their thoughts or input. My objective mind strains to see where the subtle cues are to shift my dialogue, and often fails.

I sometimes look at the old logo of the RCA dog, Nipper, (Fig. 27) gazing into a bullhorn, seeing nothing, but allegedly hearing his original master, the artist’s brother who had been dead for some time. My experience is there: fixated on an unreachable voice inside, I am losing the ability to connect it to forms outside, no matter how loudly and piercingly they scream at me. The image was painted over one hundred years ago, before any of the major twentieth century “isms” and their reversals. Its kitschy, mass produced quality lacks intellectual rigor. Despite its low-brow overexposure, it incisively defines my situation: frozen in time, emotionally stuck to psychic debris.

“This dog instantly became a part of me”, Moriyama has said of his famous image, Stray Dog (Fig 28). Perhaps his vision is reflected in that wandering, feral creature, open to ongoing, new possibilities. Mine is irritatingly confined; I am fixated, like the canines in Dog Meets Dog (Fig 29), trapped in a moment of uncertainty between sign, feeling, and action.

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Fig. 27. Francis Barraud, *Dog Looking at and Listening to a Phonograph*, Oil on Canvas, 1898, 71.1x91.4cm. From “The Wrong Dog”, By Roger Angel. The New Yorker Online, November 30, 2011. Accessed March 7, 2017. [http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-wrong-dog](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-wrong-dog)

In *Devil*, another photo of a dog, we see the disgustingly cute face that seems to not know what it sees or who it is (Fig. 30). I am like this dog, whose eyes are two blank discs open to the world, taking in everything and comprehending nothing. As my retreating intuitive logic is fails, it leaves scattered signs in a sort of tunnel vision. Autism has been sometimes understood as an extreme expression of the male brain. By this, I mean a greater ability to remove empathy from physical action for short periods and rationally setting abstract plans into motion without considering emotional ramifications.22

Part of my consciousness has been contorted to achieve an end I did not design. This is a violence I did not consent to, and I am not alone in my discomfort. As Debord concluded, we are all moving towards a generalized kind of autism, which spectacle both induces and presents itself as an escape from.23 I understand contemporary patriarchy as a repetitive, cultural circuit of fear, gaze, entertainment, and disconnection that bends most minds to its rhythm, while breaking others. I feel the blows of this constant force, like a bat beating a piñat, an exterior autism hammering against an inner one. Here I find my role in this vile system, which I narrowly avoided. I might have been like Ted Billings, spewing forth ambiguous threats and deflections and seeding toxic masculinity in my wake.

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23 Debord, 63.
Fig. 29. *Dog Meets Dog*, 2015, Printed 2017. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x129.5 cm.
Fig. 30. Devil, 2015, Printed 2016. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x64.8cm
V. The Winding Path

When you’re trying to understand how the environment is affecting an animal’s behavior, you have to look at what the animal is seeing.
- Temple Grandin

There is no solution because there is no problem.
- Marcel Duchamp\(^\text{24}\)

Solution and Problem are empty words, interior signs which can only move to the edge of the mind, but not beyond it. Like the seven-headed dragon with ten horns and seven crowns, they must have an external thing to bond with, to be perceived as literal.

I am fond of Marcel Duchamp. Each of his works seems to answer such non-questions with non-answers, revealing the space that all of these things exist in. Hat Rack (Fig. 31) is a work that paralyzes the objective side of my mind. Its projected shadow onto the wall of the gallery becomes a sign of an insect for me, but also just the meaningless, two-dimensional outline of an absurd object, not unlike the aforementioned seven-headed red dragon. It is a pure index which becomes a flattened sign with the potential for a completely different symbolic reading than the original object.

I have converted a gunstock and camera into a readymade, which I feel mimics *Hat Rack'*s intermediary position between signified and sign (Fig. 32). The gunstock has no gun, but is a device with a flat surface to mate with a Single Lens Reflex camera. It was produced by the Dasco company in the 1960s, who gave it the name “Trigomatic.” Installing a telephoto lens onto a camera, threaded into the Trigomatic’s mount, I then turn the camera around in a reverse position. This makes it so that as I hold the Trigomatic to my shoulder, I am then looking down the barrel of the camera’s lens in the opposite direction (Fig. 33). An unfocused rectangle of reality appears out of the “back-door” of the camera. This image of the wrong end of the viewfinder and is then reflected into its pentaprism, and hurled down the barrel of the lens to my eye (Fig. 34).
Fig. 32. *Slash Fiction*. Readymade, 2015.

Fig. 33. *Slash Fiction* (Demonstration of Holding Position), 2015.
The camera and gunstock are both phallic shapes with threatening possibilities that have been married together. In that mindset, I call this object *Slash Fiction*, after the infamous genre of fan-produced literature. In this kind of writing, two strong, heterosexual male characters from a famous work of popular fiction first reveal their private vulnerabilities, and then make passionate love. Emotional fragmentation, through the destruction of the connection between sensation and empathetic response is a severe weakness I experience through autism. It is also the endgame of the forced masculinization of our perspectives through spectacle. One increasingly sees distant, emotionally removed events which must be quickly reacted to with shallow feeling, as intuition is given less time to process exterior sensation.
When I think of autism as a problem, I only see the angry faces of others, unsure of how to superficially appease their demands for proper reaction. To actually perceive its shape is another thing: I can see the deeply uncomfortable unreality of my interior mind. It is a gutless bastard. Fleeing downward at every opportunity, it carries with it indexes and signs needed to decipher the coded gestures and postures of body, face, and location. My intuitive mind prefers to be alone, depersonalized, making friends with delusions, twisting facts into strange, backwards constructions that have the stinking illogic of an autodidact. That awkward, isolated inner conversation is then slammed into my vocal cords, spilling outward onto whomever I come into contact with. Hollow reaction violently shoves me into further hollow reactions.

Encountering animal behaviorist Temple Grandin’s “Stairway to Heaven” has offered insight into how I might shape a new internal environment that limits that outcome. Her models for leading cattle to slaughter allow them to feel comfortable in their settings, gradually winding around into a building with dim lighting, catered to their sensitivities. Bovines are easily lead along a curving shape as long as it seems like there is more path ahead (Fig 35).25 Death awaits them, but they calmly, unknowingly walk towards it. They do not usually bolt or panic, even as they are gradually pushed into the cramped, padded rooms that proceed before the brain-crushing mechanism. Like a prey animal, my unconscious fears stimulus it comprehends as foreign, recoiling at the aspect of not instantly having a corresponding answer for a sensation. It needs gradual, sloping information to lure it out, rather than a sudden, forced ejection under stress.

I have searched and found an equivalent mode of art with similar patterns to calm my intuitive mind. It contains facsimiles of the contradictions my emotions have difficulty processing, presented in a way which piques its curiosity. This is combined with a sense of conceptual movement forward, along a gradual path with interesting shapes and outward expressions of betweenness, unimpeded by overwhelming sensations and situations.
VI.) Dog Looks, Dog Listens  
(Conclusion)

In the construction of the installation *Dog Looks, Dog Listens* (Fig. 38), I was inspired not only by Duchamp, but also by Moriyama and Rosler. Each of these artists have created works that are meant to question boundaries between figurative and literal, offering the viewer the option to turn things back to imaginary, empty, harmless forms. Moriyama is the roughest of these three, applying the concept of extreme equality to images. He allows hundreds of photographs, ranging from sloppy, indistinguishable blurs to concise, razor sharp compositions to comprise one work in book form. The bleeding together of images mimics the mind doing the same thing throughout our waking hours. The ability to perceive the vast, discarded bulk of visible reality disarms my objective mind, in much the same way Duchamp's *Hat Rack* refuses to become strictly sign or object. Moriyama’s breadth confronts me with the knowledge that only of a fraction of a percent of what I experience will ever become a sign, index, or imaginary object.

Rosler’s *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* also contains objectivity blockers, and an arrangement that echoes Moriyama’s use of equality. Stark, empty scenes from the Bowery in Manhattan, like empty stairs, corners, and entrances are presented with arrangements of harsh words that do not become sentences. These were originally shown in frames of exactly matching size in a kind of near-perfect Cartesian grid. Viewing the inadequacy of the work to fully objectify its subjects, I find that my external mind surrenders, while my subconscious remains fixated on words like *shellacked*, which lazily floats on the surface of consciousness. My inner mind strains to understand their significance when paired with the banal exterior of a bank (Figures 36 and 37).

plastered       stuccoed
rosined        shellacked
    vulcanized
    inebriated
    polluted

*Dog Looks, Dog Listens* was built to reflect these subjective preferences; they are images that tease and coax my unconscious outward, by presenting external forms that operate using the rhythm of its logic. They are meant to cycle through my memory, jamming my conscious, verbal comprehension with ephemeral, inexplicable, yet aesthetically pleasing contradictions. The photographic components of this group, *Tower, Snake, Mirror, Devil, Bottle, and Frame* (Fig. 38) all have low key, high contrast, black and white printing with unearthly tones that alternatingly shift forward and recede. Each has a kind of visual riddle that my waking side understands easily, but that my subconscious must conceptually work through again and again. *Mirror* (Fig. 39) for example, is not a reflection of a lake, but an upright image of the sky, seen through foliage, that has simply been turned upside down. *Bottle* (Fig. 40) has a flat blackness that creates confusion around the sign and index of a vessel, neither of which can contain liquid: only a real bottle can. The closeness of the images is similarly intentional. It allows my mind to freely associate between photographs, rather than to fixate on one particular work. This further shifts my intuitive mind forward.
Fig. 38. *Dog Looks, Dog Listens*. 2017. Installation.
Fig. 39. Mirror, 2015, Printed 2016. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x64.8cm
Fig. 40. Bottle, 2015, Printed 2016. Archival Pigment Print, 86.4x64.8cm
On the right hand side, below the photographs, is a readymade composed of two RCA 45EY2 vinyl record players, each with six stacked red copies of Elvis’ *Jailhouse Rock*. These are kept at a very low volume, and the players are mechanically made to keep restarting and replaying the top disc after it completes. This portion is entitled *Let’s Rock* (Fig. 41). The motion of the record players delights me: they are in a peripheral zone, glimmering, shiny, ephemeral things appearing and disappearing. The lyrics to *Jailhouse Rock* become disjointed and layer over each other, floating in and out of awareness. Its message of having fun while in captivity creepily validates my feelings that interpersonal communication is an act, performed for an audience. The doubling of sounds, meanwhile, prevents me from being able to hear the lyrics as they were intended, subliminal and buried. Instead, they become poignant moments of uncertainty. Like the words in Rosler’s *Bowery*, they hang in my consciousness for indefinite periods.

These works keep my internal self preoccupied in the same way a bone does for a dog, helping it release stressful, anxious energy. The path is obscured for my intuitive logic to unwittingly stumble into the conscious realm. Disarmed of the idea that there is a correct way for anything to exist, my emotions hold steady as they become fascinated with the external world, rather than hiding from feelings of otherness.
Fig. 41. *Let’s Rock*. Readymade, 2017.
Bibliography


VITA

Dane Hansen was born in Great Falls, Montana. He obtained his BFA in Studio Art from The University of Montana in 2013, alongside an additional minor in Art History. Photography became a part of his art practice in 2000. His ideas and methods were initially developed through extensive trial and error.