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Postures

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Postures

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
Studio Art

by

Natalie Sciortino

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2005

May, 2008

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend Jeffrey Rinehart.

Table of Contents

List of Work	iv
Abstract	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 – Biographical Background	4
Chapter 2 – Recent Influences	7
Chapter 3 – Self-Portraits/Katrina Landscape Series	9
Chapter 4 – Spectacle	12
Chapter 5 – Monochromes & Dichromes	16
Chapter 6 – Juxtapositions (Reinventing Reality)	19
Chapter 7 – The Individual & the Collective	21
Chapter 8 – Portraiture	24
Conclusion	27
Images of Works	29
Bibliography	34
Vita	36

List of Works

1. *Self-Portrait with Shoehorn (in front of family home Post-Katrina)*
Oil on canvas
6' x 6'
2. *Projections*
C-print
16" x 24"
3. *Tuxedos (from Homonymic)*
Oil on canvas
8" x 8"
4. *Pupils (from Homonymic)*
Oil on canvas
8" x 8"
5. *I Can Only See Them in Terms of Myself (Artist as Father, Mother, Brother & Self)*
C-print
16" x 24"
6. *Battery Charger (with details)*
mixed media
dimensions variable

Abstract

In our present image-laden environment that only seems to keep growing, the nature of how we see and interpret this visual information becomes highly relevant for me in my art. Spectacle, nostalgia, notions of portraiture, theatricality and other visual reflections of our present culture industry, are all elements that I address in my work. It is with these ideas in mind that I construct visual fields where disparate forms and images coexist, forming new narratives aside from their individual isolated implications; incorporating art production methods that construct an evolving dichotomy that contains a sense of play, tension, and irony while evoking references to our current social experiences.

Keywords: spectacle, nostalgia, portraiture, collective consciousness, culture industry

Introduction

The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life.

- Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or “recognized.”

Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Mind*

We often look to fictionalized realities through literature, film, and other media as a means of illuminating our own realities. We look for points of connection and resonance in other stories to help us understand our own. We invest in these forms of reality through watching, analyzing, comparing, or even enjoying them. In my own artistic practice, I utilize these visual forms of altered realities from popular culture and personal history, often reflecting dichotomies within our personal and social experiences. These forms of the universal and personal reveal something about our own realities and the levels of authenticity found therein. Even something as familiar as a family photo becomes a form of our own personally produced media – a reflection of how we wish to be viewed, societal standards, and cultural implications. Aside from directly questioning the power of images, I have also been interested in exploring forms of spectacle in our society¹, preconceived notions, nostalgia, the nature of portraiture, visual reflections of our culture industry, and social spaces. In my art, I am interested in the intersection of imagery - that point at which the individual meets the collective. I seek to construct fields where disparate forms and images coexist forming new narratives from their individual isolated implications. I try to incorporate art production methods that compliment or clash - an evolving dichotomy that creates a sense of tension, play, and irony while evoking references to our current social experiences.

¹ Usage of the term spectacle refers to the art historical reference originating in Guy Debord’s canonical text, *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Imagery and visual information surround us constantly. It is incredible to fathom the likely millions of images one views in a year – in a lifetime. We live in a system of removed realities that in a sense become their own reality – a reality of sub-realities, each one imbued with its own truth and inferences. These images found within our society are all meant to *convey* something. Perhaps the usages of these images are financially motivated, socially related, aesthetically centered, or simply a conduit of information. These images become their own form of visual semantics – a system of signs and signifiers where sometimes the message is more obvious than others. The perception of the message also changes with each viewer, as individuals bring with them their own set of background knowledge and personal experience. For instance, a resident of New Orleans would probably view Kara Walker’s, “After the Deluge” show in New York much differently than those in New York City.

In literary theory, this idea is referred to as, “Reader Response Theory” where the reader (or viewer) will interpret a work based on his or her own *schemata*, or background knowledge. Also, no two people will have an identical reading of the same thing. Readers essentially create their own text as they incorporate their highly individualized experiences into the interpretative transactions they encounter with the work.² This is possibly more pronounced in visual art when extracting meaning is almost a natural reaction. While some may choose to accept art purely on its own terms as a sensory experience, especially for abstractionists, most generally approach a work of art and search for deeper inferences and levels of meaning. These visual transactions in specific relation to art are discussed in depth in such texts as John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* and

² R. Baird Shuman. *The Past as Present: Reader Response and Literary Study*. P.30
Louise Rosenblatt’s work, “Literature as Exploration” was first published in 1938 and was tremendously influential on modern literary theory and has seen a resurgence of interest in recent decades.

James Elkins' book, *The Object Stares Back*. Both Berger and Elkins make the case for a better-rounded understanding of how we see things; going beyond the biological and considering the psychological, social, historical, and spiritual as well.³ When one is viewing even something seemingly as straightforward as a family portrait, one is actually viewing the way of seeing of that photographer or painter. As with the reader-response theory, seeing is never the same within the individual and no two people will see the same object the same way.⁴

The nature of imagery, our relationship to it and its importance, is one that becomes central to art history and especially to contemporary art as it relates to our current social experiences. It is an issue that I like to emphasize in my own work. I constantly ask myself, "Why am I making this piece of art and what makes it art?" While I am not always sure of what the complete answer is (and often the answer changes with each work), I constantly seek to understand my intentions and expectations of myself as an artist. I suppose that much of my work deals with questioning and exploring this visual language as much as possible. I enjoy thinking about that string of associations that go through one's mind when looking at particular images and perhaps undermining, or at least altering, those associations to some extent. While no two people will view something in the same way - that is not to say their interpretations won't overlap or relate. There is a general expectation of interpretation that comes to any approach of a work of art. There are shared experiences that stem from our "collective consciousness," that result in general associations made for most people, that are then personalized and applied in different ways.

³ James Elkins. *The Object Stares Back*. "Psychoanalysis, neurophysiology, phenomenology, existentialism, experimental and clinical psychology, painting, art history, medicine, strains of poststructuralism are all at work on questions of how we see..."(14)

⁴ Ibid. Pgs. 40-45.

Chapter 1 - Biographical Background

Through family and New Orleans culture, art has always been part of my life. One of the most influential factors in my life has been my father. He developed a reputation around the city as a distinctive architect with unusual biomorphic designs that were akin to the work of the Barcelona architect, Antonio Gaudi. The houses I grew up in were also his designs. Clearly there was no way for me to escape this saturation of living in an environment that was completely “out of the box” where the people that I lived with were always stressing the importance of the arts in everyday life. My dad often spoke of other architects and artists as if they were the founding fathers of a new democracy that should be upheld and emulated. As a little girl, my mother would often take me to the art museum where I remember almost spiritual experiences of awe and wonder at the wide array of paintings and sculptures. I had always loved drawing (usually houses, because of my dad) and was constantly exposed to new forms of art, which became addictive and inspiring.

In school, I was immediately brought into the talented and visual arts program based on a series of drawings I completed in kindergarten. The TAV program was pivotal in my artistic growth. The teachers introduced to me a host of contemporary artists and constantly took us on field trips to local art museums and galleries. I still have fond memories of my Chuck Close-inspired self-portrait and my giant Claus Oldenburg coffee mug. This early exposure to contemporary art and artists was pivotal in my early artistic development. Through examples in both my own personal life and those contemporary art figures introduced in school, I was given a preliminary model for creativity and art making. These experiences inspired me to further my understanding and familiarity with the theories and practices of art.

In high school, my understanding of and focus on contemporary art deepened. My drive to make art only intensified, and in college I continued to invest myself in becoming an artist. The open forum of current art was exciting to me. I was eager to become part of this national and international visual dialogue found within the contemporary art world - joining in something larger than myself.

The art world's current pluralism seems to be characteristic of a time beyond postmodernism. There seems to be a void of classifications, leaving everything "up for grabs." There are no more rigid philosophical or formal standards coming from movements like the "School of New York" or Neo-Expressionism. There is more of a focus on interdisciplinary methods and materials. In one of his last essays on modernism, *Modern and Postmodern*, Clement Greenberg laments this shifting of standards, as he is one the most ardent champions of the modernist era decrying "philistine taste" and "middlebrow demands." In her book, *Postmodernism*, Eleanor Heartney best describes our newfound liberating atmosphere:

During the heyday of postmodernism, artists happily attached their names to the work of other artists and renamed what would once have been termed plagiarism as 'appropriation.' Stuffed bears, plastic bunnies, lava lamps and toilet-bowl cleaners invaded the museum to be displayed with all the protective security once awarded the Mona Lisa. Hoary forms of academic painting that had been neglected to the dustbin of art history were suddenly a la mode. New rules governed the artistic enterprise. The revolution against the modernist faith in universality, artistic progress, shared meaning, and quality was complete.

This lack of stringent limitations has allowed for a plethora of art forms and new media. Mass communication and the high accessibility of images have helped to feed this growing trend that spills over into the increasing globalism of art⁶. The hold of certain centers in the art world is

⁵ Heartney, Eleanor. *Postmodernism*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2005. pg.12

⁶ In the text, *Is Art History Global?*, James Elkins examines these trends in current art theory and criticism.

loosening as other areas around the world such as Berlin, Brazil, and Japan are coming to the forefront.⁷ These freedoms have shaped my outlook as an artist.

My work began to take focus in my last year in college. Through painting, I was striving to create a cohesive body of work that juxtaposed personal imagery (memories) and unrelated thrift store kitsch objects. This idea of exploring and even questioning ideas of personal experience, nostalgia and cultural quirks would continue to find its way into my work in graduate school. I also began approaching my compositions as painted collages – bringing together various unrelated imagery from photographs, found objects, and abstract forms into the same field of painting. Additionally, I started experimenting with various painterly surfaces that would appear again in my graduate work.

⁷ Buruma, Ian. “The Genius of Berlin.” *New York Review of Books*: 1/17/2008, vol.55 issue1. P.45-47; Behrman, Pryle. “Here, There and Elsewhere,” *Art Monthly*; July 2006. Issue 298. Pgs.1-4; Tomii, Reiko. “Historicizing Contemporary Art: Some Discursive Practices in Gendai Bijutsu in Japan.” *Positions*. Winter 2004, Vol.12, Issue 3, pgs.611-641. These three articles are examples of increasing attention on centers of international contemporary art.

Chapter 2 – Recent Influences

My ideas and expectations for graduate schoolwork suddenly shifted with the arrival of Hurricane Katrina. I relocated to the Art Institute of Chicago where I was able to take three contemporary art classes. As a visiting student, there were countless other opportunities to attend shows, artist lectures, demanding critiques, and overall sharing of ideas with other graduate art students. I began looking at artists such as Merlin Carpenter, Luc Tuymans, Peter Doig and Matthew Barney as well as art theorists like Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida and James Elkins⁸. I also had the opportunity to study with James Elkins, who had a profound influence on the way I thought about both contemporary art and my own artistic practice.

While in Chicago, I mostly did works on paper that I could work on in the confines of my small dorm room. These become studies for larger works that I would complete once back in New Orleans. After getting a full dose of conceptual and theoretical art issues in Chicago, I was ready to return to New Orleans and start painting as large as possible. This manifested itself into a series of five paintings that are life-size self-portraits.

These paintings began out of some of the same ideas as my undergraduate work but they were also in direct response to the recent hurricane. It was something that I could not avoid as I felt the lines between life and work fading during this time of upheaval. In the Introduction to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, there is a particularly interesting entry from the diary of Franz Kafka that speaks to this relationship between tragedy and art:

⁸ The Frankfurt School and other socialist interpretations of art (i.e. the “October Group”) were highly informative and interesting for me.

Anyone who cannot cope with life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate...but with his other hand he can jot down what he sees among the ruins, for he sees different and more things than the others; after all, he is dead in his own lifetime and the real survivor.

On a personal level, I could not get past this new form of existence in post-Katrina New Orleans. Life had to go on, there were no other options, but it would have to go on in the most unusual of circumstances. During my first trip back to the city in October after Katrina, I was immediately struck by how desolate and strange things now were. Everything was covered in a thin film of dirt left behind from the receding waters. The scene appeared like a nuclear fall-out – men and women in white suits and facemasks wondered about clearing out the debris from their homes. Military police canvassed what was left of the neighborhoods as Red Cross trucks brought people basic necessities – food, water, hygienic supplies, and more. In the midst of this enormous undertaking of rebuilding our homes and lives, we were all expected to exist and keep conducting the same routines as before (eating, defecating, self-hygiene)¹⁰. I could not help but think about the irony of this whole situation and the strange removal and distance I forced myself to have from the disaster. If I thought about it for too long, I would become too depressed and overwhelmed by it all. Every place that was once familiar growing up was gone, as well as many of the people I knew. At times, my experiences felt as removed and split as my juxtapositions from my undergraduate paintings. I wanted to capture my new feeling of existence both conceptually and formally through these self-portraits.

⁹ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. P.19. Referencing Kafka diary entries from October 19, 1921.

¹⁰ I reference these activities as an allusion to the later activities my self-portraits would depict.

Chapter 3 - Self-Portrait / Katrina Landscape Series

During this time, I began looking to other artists who incorporated painted collage to look for alternative painting methods to expand and broaden my artistic practice. I referred to artists like David Salle and Terry Winters, as well as more recent ones like Merlin Carpenter and Jeff Koons. In the series titled, *Self-Portraits in Katrina Landscapes*, I began with loose, washy monochrome backgrounds behind the comparatively naturalistic painted figures as a convergent relationship. The figures seemed to float on the surface of the painting while still conveying a relationship to the landscape images behind them as entities occupying a foreground. The loose monochromatic backgrounds focused on the use of value to create space and began to take on a “film still” or snapshot look. The drips started out as an incidental first coat but then I decided to keep them, becoming interested in the painterly tension that this created next to the more controlled fleshed-out painterly figures.

I strived to really push scale for the first time in making life-size work that aimed at creating more of an interaction with the viewer. It was important to me that the figures were exactly my height and looking at the viewer. I wanted this eye contact to create a dialogue between the painting and viewer. I was thinking about Manet’s life-size figures of beggars/philosophers in the Art Institute Museum of Chicago and their dynamic relationships with the viewer.¹¹ I was also reading James Elkins’ book on painting and the nature of seeing, *The Object Stares Back*. In the book, he discusses the way in which when we are looking at a painting that is looking at us, we are also looking at the artist (who was the first “viewer”). Elkins refers to this idea of duality in viewing as “the gaze,” which brings up the title, *The Object*

¹¹ Edouard Manet. “Beggar with a Duffle Coat (Philosopher)” and “Beggar with Oysters (Philosopher). Both 1865/67.

Stares Back. Some of these ideas and broader issues about the way we view paintings were on my mind. The weight and presence of a life-size scale figure in the room had an important impact on me. In paintings such as *Self Portrait with Shoehorn*, the figure relates to the same space as the viewer in its life-size dimensions and direct outward gaze. The figure stares directly out at something beyond the scope of the composition – beyond the physical painting. The “stare” is only created by the presence of a viewer and when approached in something like a gallery setting, there is an exchange between two onlookers, one real and one fashioned. Each figure within this series contains this confronting gaze.

Also in the self-portrait series, I was attempting to deal with issues of simultaneously individual and collective experiences. I put the individual self in generic, universal activities (eating, personal hygiene, defecating). In the paintings, I included backdrops of various flooded places around New Orleans that had personal meaning to me. The figure was engaged in mundane, but necessary, daily activities. Again, I was going back to those ideas and feelings I had immediately after the storm. When tragedy strikes on that scale, it feels like it has only happened to you, but in this case, it happened to thousands. In a 1979 interview with Franz Hak, Joseph Beuys speaks to this idea of a commutative relationship between the highly personal and the universal. It is this aspect of using the personal narrative to speak to something universal that interested me. While it was a universal experience for the thousands directly affected, it was also a global universal knowledge, to greater and lesser extents, of the events of the storm. The further universality of tragedy, loss, destruction was also something to consider alongside these shared human activities of daily life.

At the same time as the paintings, I constructed digital work that also stemmed from the desire to create the same juxtapositions but in a more playful manner; so I layered the serious hurricane clouds with images of Chicago's Thanksgiving Day parade. Living in a very bustling Chicago after leaving my flooded hometown was strange for me. It was two extremes of existence – desolation and abundance. The simplest way to express this dichotomy was through images of Katrina itself layered with something in my transplanted home that represented this feeling of silliness and cultural excess. As I watched the balloon parade go down the street next to my dorm room, I knew that I had to use those images in some fashion. They were representations for me of man's ability to be entertained and distracted from more sinister aspects of our existence.

Chapter 4 – Spectacle

There is a wonderful quote that Guy Debord utilizes in the beginning of his essays on “The Society of the Spectacle” that addresses our overall contemporary state of postmodern reality:

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence...*illusion* only is sacred, *truth* profane. Nay sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.¹²

It is this very idea of wedding the illusion with reality that I examine further in the context of the sacred with my digital work. The photographic references that I incorporate throughout my work are also part of this idea of degrees of separation from reality that Debord refers to. In his opening chapter, Debord goes on to state, “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” Nietzsche also echoes this sentiment concerning our existence within a world of removed realities when he states, “Our modern culture is not a real culture but a kind of knowledge about culture.”¹³

Issues of industrialization, consumerism, and popular culture’s relationship to art throughout Postmodernism were all ideas that I directly or indirectly dealt with in my work. Another great reference for me was Clement Greenberg’s ideas of kitsch, as I believe that popular consumerism and avant-garde culture can still have a dialogue.

¹² Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Here deBord quotes Feuerbach’s Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*. (p.11)

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Use and Abuse of History*. Trans. Adrian Collins (New York, 1949), 34.

He describes this idea in his *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*:

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money -- not even their time.

I viewed imagery like the giant lone Muppet heads as images of our popular culture on many levels: as images of television entertainment, of parades and of “spectacle” overall. In their balloon form, they were real representations (as they entered our real space) of pop culture icons that originally existed in television cartoon form. The idea of this ritual of watching and being entertained was being celebrated, even idolized in these gargantuan balloon forms. The possibility that they were realities of “surrealities” interested me. They were also comical in a way since many of them appeared to be decapitated. When we see Bert or Ernie (from Sesame Street), we see most of their bodies. As teams of people struggled to hold on to these windblown giants, I could not help but think of Gulliver’s travels and the Lilliputians.

When I combined the image of the storm with the parade, they came together effectively. Working with Photoshop, I manipulated areas of the image to make them advance and recede. For instance, the image of Kermit the Frog nicely shifts shape into a large looming storm cloud – giving it a narrative beyond merely putting two ideas in the same picture plane. Each part interacted with another in a way that was almost painterly (or at least how I approach some of my paintings with a shifting, blurring and cohesion of color, line and values). Additionally, as these images represented aspects of our consumer society, as I was also thinking about ideas of culture industry and spectacle.¹⁴

¹⁴ “spectacle” in the Debord sense and “culture industry” as used by art theorists such as Benjamin Buchloh in *The Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* and Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations*.

Another series of work that further explored this nature of spectacle was *Battery Charger*. This series began as an array of small collages on paper arranged in plastic sandwich bags pinned to the wall. I incorporated imagery from pop culture past and present. I used movie stills from iconic productions such as *Dirty Dancing*, *Star Wars*, *Princess Bride* and *Neverending Story*. Also prevalent in the series, were family portraits from television shows: *Lassie*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and even *Donald Trump*. These all represented forms of culture industry engrained in our American social consciousness. They relate to these fictional realities we observe and relate to aspects of our own realities. After all, we enjoy characters that we can identify with or a plot line that resonates in our own lives somehow. Each collage utilizes a variety of media: tape, paint, glue, metallic varnishes, and found imagery. In some, I used the tape as a device to conceal and reveal aspects of the image of the same time. The tape became a new way of mark making for me, where I really appreciated the layers, colors, and thickness it created. I later framed these works inside shadow boxes to allow higher visibility of the work while maintaining the texture and varied look of the surfaces. Each one captured a pose, posture or reference to these ideas of spectacle.

I think that these works contain themes that have stayed consistent throughout my work: portraiture, culture industry, forms of nostalgia, spectacle and theatricality. Portraits continue to appear, especially in the paintings, on a regular basis. Culture industry and nostalgia manifest themselves through my use of various objects and icons of our society. Specific sources for my portraits may be family albums (my own and others) or aspects of commercialization in society from eras like the 1950's or 60's. I use the word "forms" to avoid the assumed sentimentality that goes with the word "nostalgia." These works evoke a sense of particular era but without a wistful overtone. Rather, I want to examine the past through a lens that may be indifferent,

ironic, or even satirical. This sense of nostalgia could also be viewed as a form of social historical commentary perhaps. Lastly, the issue of spectacle and theatricality is also evident from early on, especially in the digital work. Overall, these themes undergo a progressive development through later work as these ideas appear separately and simultaneously.

Chapter 5 - Monochromes & Dichromes

The second main body of paintings was the Monochromatic/ Dichromatic Series that I began in fall of 2006. I was inspired by the previous self-portraiture series, but wanted to broaden the scope of the monochromes in terms of subject matter, scale and color. I particularly enjoyed the look of the monochromatic backgrounds in the earlier paintings and sought to experiment with that stylistic element. I began incorporating a greater variety of imagery from more sources. I found myself drawn to certain types of subject matter: 1950's American advertising, muscle magazines, childhood and recent photographs from family albums and other things that contained that thrift-store kitsch aesthetic. For me, there is a strong attraction to strange, static, narcissistic, and idealistic qualities of imagery evident in a variety of pop and personal sources.

There is something intriguing about the idea of presentation: “presenting” ourselves, a product, or another person. In his essay on the portrait’s dispersal, Ernst Van Alphen establishes the pictorial genre of the portrait as central to the history of bourgeois western culture. In a successful portrait, “the viewer is not only confronted with the ‘original’, ‘unique’ subjectivity of the portrayer, but also of that of a portrayed.”¹⁵ Linda Nochlin describes this as “the meeting of two subjectivities.”¹⁶

What we choose to reveal and to hide is important, as this becomes valuable indicators as to who we are as individuals and a society. This idea connects strongly to spectacle and theatricality – where things are imbued with a direct and indirect narrative. It is those indirect, or sometimes accidental, narratives that interest me. For instance, the original advertising image of

¹⁵ Van Alphen, Ernst. “The Portrait’s Dispersal: concepts of representation and subjectivity in contemporary portraiture.” From the book: *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*. New York: Manchester University Press. 1997. Pgs. 239-256.

¹⁶ Nochlin, Linda, “Some Women realists”, *Arts Magazine* (May 1974), p.29.

a young boy eating Spaghetti-Oh's was probably intended to be charming and enticing, yet the unusual size of the child's head, or his plastered-on smile may give impressions of irony or social expectations. In each image I chose, I based my decision on discovering that hidden narrative and intentionally exaggerating or manipulating certain aspects to convey my point.¹⁷

Although conceptual motivations were behind my choices, I was equally interested in formal concerns. After completing several paintings of only one color, I began to create works with two different colors. I wanted to use two varying layers of colors to produce a strong and interchangeable relationship between background and foreground. I approached each painting with a similar method. First, I covered the canvas with one solid color. Then I loosely brushed and dripped a second color on top. The next layer would include my image(s) of choice rendered in the same color of the first application. In this way, I was pushing the foreground back into the background. I found this technique to have an interesting visual effect. It became a subtractive process where the image was essentially the negative space formed out of the drippy layer.

Overall, the application of paint was both haphazard and manipulated. I enjoyed the contrast that this created where carefully detailed sections of painting were layered on top of or next to very loose, brushy paint. There was a wide range of mark making that worked well in harmony.

The paintings that were the most successful turned out to be those that incorporated images with many degrees of value. The muscle man, atomic bomb, and range of human figures all worked well because of their versatility of values. This only seems a natural quality for paintings with very limited palates. My favorite piece from this particular series was *A Value Study*, as the billowing clouds from the bomb worked well with the drippy paint (that looks like

¹⁷ Another great example of an artist that does this successfully is Marlene Dumas in works such as *The Teacher* or *Black Drawings*.

falling matter) and complementary colors of green and grey. With this style of painting, the image is not always readily apparent. The process of the painting indirectly abstracts the image. I think that those pieces that fit into that category of semi-abstraction are the works that are most effective.

I was also thinking about answers to questions such as, what makes an image “loaded”? How can an epic event be reduced into iconic representation – event as image? I wanted to see what would happen if I rendered such a symbolic thing in a painterly way. Aesthetically, I was also playing with “undulating” values – laying down an initial value, dripping complementary colors on top, thereby pushing values in and out. I think that the choice and nature of the imagery was also very important. The most successful pieces from this series were the ones that were dynamic compositions with a range of values that coincided well with this particular style of painting.

Chapter 6 – Juxtapositions (Reinventing Reality)

During this time, I produced some collages involving painting and drawing. I wanted to create another variation on the paintings of childhood imagery in the form of drawings and collage-like fields. These pieces consisted of contour-line drawings of posed children with painted images of various objects: matches, an anchor, thighmasters, etc. Some of these works on paper would later become the basis for more paintings. Here again the basis of my concept was to bring together disparate images and create a new narrative. The images by themselves are ordinary but when positioned near each other, they can take on a different connotation (i.e. when the staple remover is next to the girl and appearing half her size, it becomes a somewhat amusing threat). Each work still contained a snapshot portrait of a lone figure.

The digital/photographic work at this time, shared the same ideas. I had just returned from studying in Rome, where I found much imagery and inspiration. The resulting series was a spin-off of the previous storm parade series that combined the serious with the not so serious. Instead of landscapes, I was using sacred interior spaces. I still utilized balloon characters as well as other two and three-dimensional ones. One of my favorite pieces involved Richard Meier's Jubilee church in Rome and the digital insertion of a Pikachu image to appear as a projection. With these church interior/pop image collages, I discovered a way of opening up more possibilities for myself both in image making and subject matter.

Aside from branching out aesthetically with my digital work, I was also trying to question our sense of structures and symbols and the meanings they carry. Are these meanings intrinsic to those sites or are they transferred? If they are transferred, how so and what does that imply? I was interested in how suddenly the tone and idea of an Italian church changed when something like a statue of Ronald McDonald was placed inside. Or perhaps the way in which a

Bernini ceiling takes on a different narrative when an image of Mr. Moneybags is seen leaping across. Immediately, associations can start forming – such as the role of capitalism and consumer culture in the formation and continuation of western civilization. One might also consider the comparison and contrast of the role of religion and that of pop-culture in our society.

The simple juxtaposition of two common images that would probably never coexist in the same setting was engaging for me on both aesthetic and conceptual levels. I was reinventing my own realities through digital manipulation. Like the previously mentioned Feuerbach quote, I was literally equating “the highest degree of illusion” with a version of “the highest degree of sacredness.”¹⁸ Furthermore, this notion of spectacle and theatricality is highly evident within this series when one can easily describe church as a form of theater complete with an audience of spectators, a stage and performers. As a form of theater, viewers are there to watch, and perhaps invest themselves emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

¹⁸ For me, while these church images may arguably not represent the *highest* form, they are in essence an effective example of Western sacredness. This religious imagery befits the idea of sacredness defined by Webster as “**1 a:** dedicated or set apart for the service or worship of a deity <a tree *sacred* to the gods> **b:** devoted exclusively to one service or use (as of a person or purpose) <a fund *sacred* to charity> **2 a:** worthy of religious veneration: holy **b:** entitled to reverence and respect **3:** of or relating to religion: not secular or profane <*sacred* music>”

Chapter 7 - The Individual and the Collective

In most of my new work, I am trying to shed previous hesitations and choices concerning subject matter or mark making by becoming more process orientated. In addition to experimenting with various methods (taping, pouring, collaging, inking), I also incorporated different materials such as ink, enamel, watercolors, and gouache. I also decided to break out of my strict serial approach to making work. Instead of feeling obligated to complete an entire series centered on one idea, I wanted to generate many different ideas into singular works. Often these ideas overlapped and involved imagery that contained piles and accumulations of things. Piles and groupings of teeth, breast-like shapes, chickies, mattresses and ambiguous cat-people were among some of the subject matter. I like the idea of repetition, pattern and accumulation - the intersection where the individual meets the whole or group. Things take on a new and interesting identity in a mass (both aesthetically and conceptually). As a grouping, these objects carry a much different presence and weight than just seeing them singularly.

Later these ideas of groupings and collectivism would take the form of human figures as in *Homonymic* and *Sun-Debs*. In the monochromatic triptych, *Homonymic*, groupings of male figures are depicted in various poses and settings. In one, a large group of men in tuxedos poses as if for a group shot. I intentionally painted these loosely and crudely, so that there appeared *en-masse* and lost any semblance of individuality through facial features or bodily characteristics. In another, I painted four soldiers with rifles in a similar manner and then the last painting presents a class picture of pupils and teacher. Through the nature of the uniforms the men are wearing, the monochrome and the lack of detail in their faces, the figures become something else – almost a pattern or mannequin. The female counterpart to this notion of subjectivity is further explored in *Sun-Debs*. A parade of bikini-clad women struts across a wooden stage upon a beach-like setting.

Their faces are blurred, lacking definition and individuality. They become more like impersonal objects than depictions of individuals. The nature of the beauty-pageant event naturally acts as a tool in this regard, but the way I chose to paint them further objectifies these women. They are portraits that almost deny their portraiture nature. Van Alphen also speaks to this relevant idea of exploring subjectivity and representation in contemporary portraiture.¹⁹

As some of the work took on more of a “faux naïve” look with cruder methods, I pushed that aesthetic in different ways. I wanted to negate my own work and my own conventions of painting. I strove to be purposefully inarticulate. I began painting over parts of my own paintings with varying degrees of success, pursuing the idea of undermining the sanctity and preciousness of my own work. I would begin with a traditional scene and then collage in elements that were completely unrelated. It was from a few of these paintings that I realized the next natural step would be to paint on *other* people’s paintings.

This led to a body of work involving found paintings collected from thrift stores. I was attracted to the idea of what other people may have found interesting but then disposed of for some reason. What was the story behind the paintings – who owned them why did they give them away, why did I buy them? By painting on these found paintings, I was ascribing new and unintended (by the original artist) values to them. It became a type of collaborative effort, sometimes spanning decades of time, without the other artist ever possibly knowing about it.²⁰

¹⁹ Van Alphen, Ernst. “The Portrait’s Dispersal: concepts of representation and subjectivity in contemporary portraiture.” From the book: *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*. New York: Manchester University Press. 1997. Pg. 254. In this text, he embraces the work of Marlene Dumas as an example of this.

²⁰ Webster defines collaborate as “to work jointly with others” where *jointly* means “combined” and not necessarily *united*.

In some works, I made a conscious effort to incorporate my elements into what was already there. In a small landscape painting, I inserted dozens of small robots onto the hills and valleys already in the background. In another, I incorporated silver rockets onto the image of a field and filled an already existing wheelbarrow with my breast-piles. In other instances, I purposely did not want to marry my additions to the existing imagery, but instead focused on marring the surface itself. One of the more successful paintings in this series involved a found painting of a large tree onto which I dripped and poured different splotches of blue, grey, green and yellow. The result was an image that appeared like a Christmas tree gone terribly wrong or a decorating fiasco. The most interesting thing about these pieces, for me, is the degree to which the found image dictates the direction of the painting. I enjoyed experimenting with a variety of degrees of intentionality and the unexpectedness of not knowing what paintings I would be able to find and work off of. The possibilities are limitless, yet quite limited all in the same time.

Chapter 8 - Portraiture

The other direction in my recent work is the continual development of the idea of portraiture. The idea of posing and posturing is one that interests me on many levels. It is not just a way for us to convey the most important information about ourselves (faces, clothing, accessories) but also a representation of the way we choose to be perceived. It is not always just the way we choose to be perceived but the way the *portrayer* chooses to show us (unless they are the same person). The idea of posing is so calculated to begin with, that we all take certain issues into account – the way we smile, fix our hair, stand or button our shirt. A lot of my previous work also dealt with these notions of “presentation” and spectatorship. We are posing for others to look at us later, perhaps as a way of cataloging family history or maybe a ritualistic social exercises. One of the most intriguing images I utilized was one of two young boys sitting on Santa’s lap – something that most children growing up in the United States experience or are exposed to (one cannot go to a shopping center during holiday time without witnessing this ritual). In *Untitled*, I intentionally exaggerated certain aspects of the figures’ facial features and expressions to emphasize a certain awkwardness and tension in this typical holiday event. I like to think of myself as a strange anthropologist when I approach my artwork – cataloging strange activities of Americana. I take something familiar and divorce it from its original context (as an activity or family photo collection). It becomes an event for examination, a strange specimen. I encourage viewers to reconsider familiar cultural activities and ask ourselves why we do them.

I developed the theme of portraiture more in later work through a series of watercolors. I loved the tedium and craft-like nature of the watercolors that seemed to fit naturally with the banal and tedious nature of posing that goes along with portraiture. In *Father Stands, Mother Sits*, I depicted a family portrait where the negative space of the blank paper was intentionally

vast. I wanted the void to be apparent and to give a certain psychological narrative to this little family. I rendered the family in almost paper-doll like sizes and styles. This particular work became a more directed social commentary. Given the title, I was calling attention to the structure of typical family portraits as a reflection of patriarchal societal values. Rarely, is a family shot where the mother or child is standing with the father seated – if the father is seated, then the mother is as well, she is never superior in her stance. While these characteristics are a general social perspective, I intentionally utilized my own family image for my own personal reasons relating to my experiences with this patriarchy. While others experiences may have been more indirect, or only for appearances sake, my own family experience was dominated by this notion of male authority and female submission. As in all portraits, the figures face the viewer for surveillance and interpretation. As the artist, I am interested in re-contextualizing these “presentations” in an effort to examine possible ulterior meanings or other indirect narratives.

In the photographs, *I Can Only See Them in Terms of Myself (Artist as Mother, Father, Brother & Self)* and *I Can Only See Him in Terms of Myself (Artist as Husband & Self)*, I decided to take this notion of the surveyor and the surveyed another step further. Introductory ideas discussed in both *Ways of Seeing* (Berger, John) and *The Object Stares Back* (Elkins, James) was again influential for me. In the first chapter of his text, Berger states, “...although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.” I realized that my own perceptions of those around me could not be divorced from the limitations of my own understandings. I could never truly know my brother (father, mother, husband, etc.); I could only see them in light of my own judgments – thus never escaping outside of myself. It has much less to do with narcissism, and more to do with physiology; I can only *see* (understand, interpret, know) with my own eyes and mind. In essence,

I was seeing my own “projections” onto them and created digital images that literally reflected this psychology. These works reflected this idea of never escaping my own subjectivity. In each image, I digitally affixed my face onto the faces of each family member. With the family shot, I intentionally picked expressions and faces that matched the relative ages of each individual I was projecting upon. In each case, the overall visages contain a certain sense of awkwardness, bewilderment, or strangeness. While I could have utilized any individual that I may see, I chose to incorporate those persons closest to me (domestically, not necessarily emotionally), and to the viewer in terms of the familial relationships the figures represented.

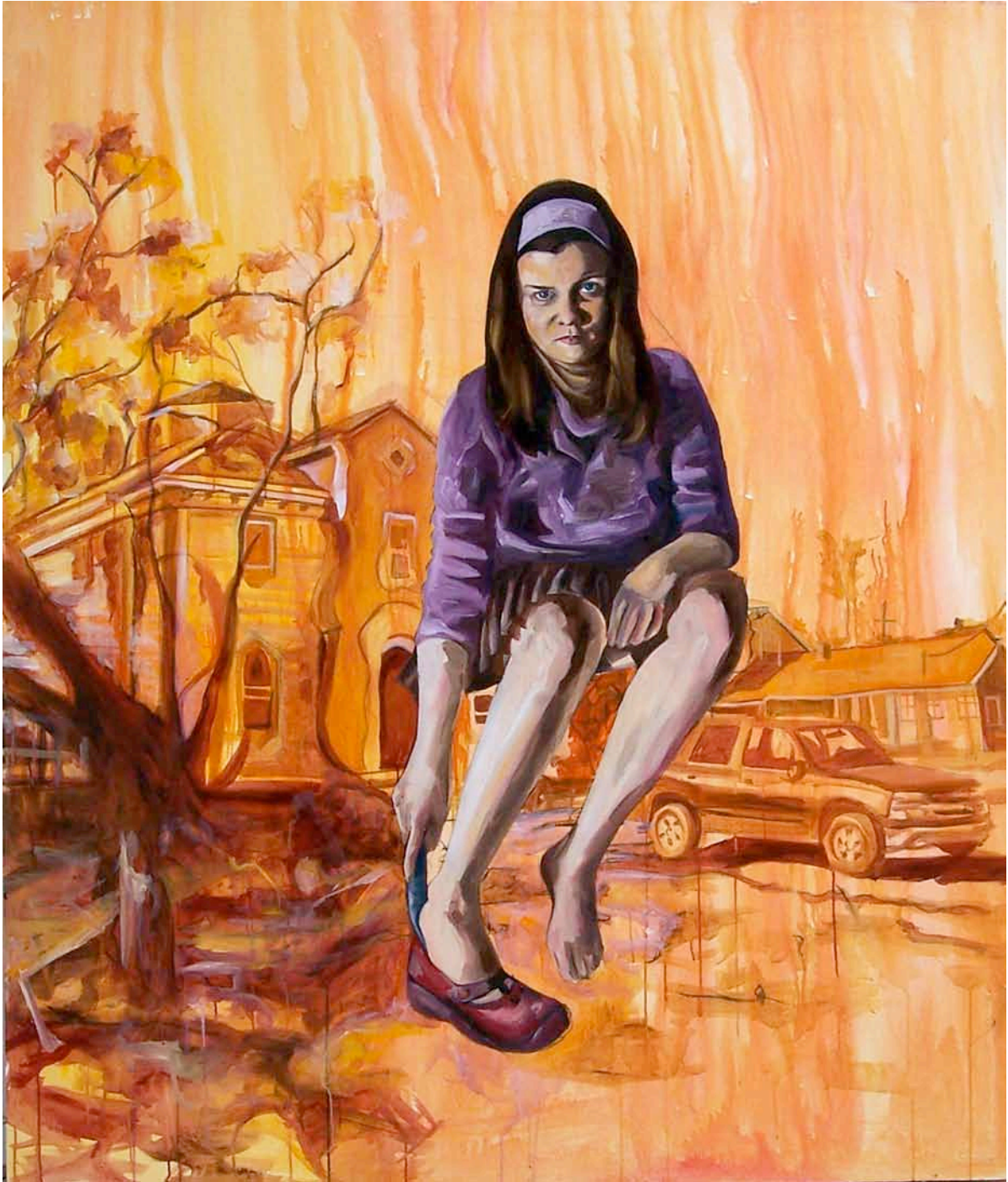
Following this series of work, I completed a work in my mind that was one of closure and separation. *Umbilical* became a conceptual finale to all of the self-referential work I had completed. It depicts another self-portrait, only this time my head is down, the face obscured as I stare into my lap, where I am severing my own umbilical cord with a pair of scissors. It appears like another mundane event or normal undertaking as the figure is dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt with no shoes. The trail of umbilical cord trails off, becoming a small pile of glitter. It is a moment of self-liberation and revelation, further implied by a heavenly light formation of white and gold lining tape descending from above the figure. The adult figure looks inward instead of outward, giving the viewer a voyeuristic role in this absurd, faux-spiritual, and surreal situation. It is a moment of familial and self-separation and perhaps marks a turning point in the nature of my own work.

Conclusion

Throughout my graduate schoolwork, there have been numerous relevant artistic and literary influences. In much of the earlier work, I was looking at artists like Merlin Carpenter, becoming very much attracted to loose painterly style, monochromatic scenes, and appropriation of painterly strategies into collages. I was especially drawn to his images of fleshed out figures situated in lightly painted backdrops. These floating figures and spaces evoked a sense of memory or cinematography. I was also looking at Luc Tuymans' detached, fragmented, and lightly painted generic scenes. Much of his work is photographic-based with pallid colors, not carefully painted, that often depict socio-political events. Much of my own work is based on this photographic reference and a similar exploration of banality in everyday imagery.

After seeing his work in San Francisco, I was immediately drawn to Tim Gardner and his use of very personal images. His use of watercolors to create highly self-conscious backdrops, and his snapshot aesthetic are all influential aspects of his work for me. His family portraits that contained a wonderful static, stale, and awkward quality also motivated some of my work. The intentionally awkward portraiture work of artists like John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, and Karen Kilimnik were also engaging and influential for me. Also amidst many other artists that I was investigating, Marlene Dumas emerged as a favorite. Her loosely, heavily outlined paintings of groups of individuals were intriguing for me. Like Dumas, much of my work incorporates highly generic individuals in groups. Her unique and aesthetically charged questioning of individuality through portraiture hugely informed my work. Other important artists that emerged for me were Wayne White, William Cordova, Lisa Sanditz and Paul Chan.

While the work of my graduate years emerged in a wide variety of styles, subject matter and forms, several themes remained constant. I found myself inspired by many unique artists and philosophers with similar concepts and styles, while retaining a strong sense of my own individual aesthetic and ideas. These themes and ideas center on representations of our human condition in the form of portraiture, culture industry, spectacle and nostalgia. Often these ideas overlapped both formally and conceptually. I have utilized these issues in an effort to subvert my own “nostalgia”. Time is a strong element in most of my work. Each figure or place can be positioned in a certain time in American history. Whether the source draws directly from my own personal history or from images that reflect our mass cultural collective history – each one has its influence on the individual. One is much more immediate and perhaps familial while the other one still directs a certain influence on many individuals at the same time. The images of popular culture icons and old family photos that I reference in my work all have something in common. They contain ideas, aesthetics and personas that are both highly personal while remaining universal as well. These categories of imagery become part of our American “cultural collective” that make up our own individual schematas. They influence not only how we conduct our personal transactions with art, but also the way in which we read everything around us. Overall my work is seeking to explore the nature and aesthetics of those influences and their place in our world.



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Vita

Natalie Sciortino was born in New Orleans, Louisiana and graduated Magna Cum Laude with a B.A. in Elementary Education and a B.A. in Fine Arts from the University of New Orleans in 2005. Sciortino has also studied abroad in Greece during her undergraduate studies and Italy during her graduate studies. She is the recipient of several awards and honors including the BORSF Fellowship award, the Trish Hollis Design award, the Joan Mitchell Gulf Coast Artist award, membership in both Phi Kappa Phi and Kappa Delta Pi honor societies. Natalie currently lives and works in New Orleans with her husband, Jeffrey.