

Summer 8-2-2012

Exposed

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Exposed

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Fine Arts

By

Shelly Barq

B.F.A University of Southern Mississippi

August 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude towards my sponsor,
Richard Johnson, and my thesis committee Jim Richard and Cheryl Hayes
for their direction and support.

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ABSTRACT

My work centers on formal process with a narrative of human interaction. In my observations of human social behavior I often notice that physical insecurity is the enemy of initial contact between two people. Constant exposure to superficial beauty can lead us to negative self-comparison and over time mold personalities. Patterns and repetition are also predominate in my work and serve as representations of behavioral patterns perpetuated by society's physical standards. I create paintings with collage on canvas to articulate the formal aspects of abstract paint. Emphasizing compositional elements such as color, line, shape and texture, I juxtapose images of balding male scalps with images of idealized female nudes, creating a duality of stereotypes.

In this paper, I will investigate and analyze the evolution of my paintings, in chronological order from the beginning of my academic career to present.

Keywords: formal abstraction; linocuts

INTRODUCTION

My work is a composed visual commentary on human social interaction through the elements of formal abstraction. I aesthetically and intuitively chose colors, shapes, textures and images to alliterate a chaotic world within a flat picture plane . It is evident that my art is not completely dependent upon a social purpose. However, it is the force of the social interactions that have given me inspiration for the imagery I have chosen. "People are never more insecure than when they become obsessed with their fears at the expense of their dreams.¹" The recognizable elements in my paintings, the aerial view of a balding man and an idealistic female nude, for me, represent a desire for the unattainable.

Repetition is an important component in my painting process. Linoleum cut reliefs of heads have a sculptural and personal connection for me. Each carving is of an image that I selectively chose and allows me to implement a tactile pleasure. The linocut heads are the method that simulates repetition being applied as a stamp. The weight of the stamped paint on the canvas, for me, gives the image and attractive linear quality similar to a drawing. The repetition becomes a pattern as the overlapping heads float in congested areas on the painting. For some viewers, the shapes create abstract images of their own. It is not important for the

¹ Norman Cousins

viewer to understand my underlying philosophical idea beneath the painting, only that the formal aspects of painting are accurate.

Sigmar Polke's, *This Is How You Sit Correctly* (after Goya), 1982, is the painting that has influenced my ideas. The collision of two varieties of background fabric, one illustrative 'child like' animal motifs, and the other 'abstract', with overlaid, disconnected, fluctuating linear images is what attracted me to this style of painting. I also had emotional response to his "intermingling mass-media imagery with diverse 'high cultural' implications."² Following David Salle's superimposed floating images and Philip Guston's shift from Abstract Expressionism to figuration based on his daily insecurities, obsessions, and moods was my personal breakthrough.

² Hopkins, David. *After Modern Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 200

EVOLUTION OF THE BALD MAN PAINTINGS

Arriving at my latest series of work was not easy. Many of my attempts were unsuccessful or usually quoted as “safe”. I found that analyzing my journey helped me understand the growth in not only my reasons for painting, but the development of my style, the painterly quality and process which now encourages me to make art.

EARLY WORK

The paintings in my first year of graduate school reflected my being a product of my environment. I started drawing and painting at a very young age. When it came time for college I wanted to learn a new art...one that would “guarantee” a job out of school. I learned quickly when I graduated and started working that commercial art was not for me. Close to ten years later, I made the decision to start painting again. Deciding on a subject matter was a whole new challenge. After much thought, I realized that relating to my family background would be most appealing to my internal passions. I decided on a Barq’s Root Beer can.

My initial sketches were of the Barq’s can. The beginning stages were illustrative in nature, a consumer commentary inspired by the likes of Andy Warhol. As I played with the positioning of the can, a new direction began to emerge. Instead of a Warhol-esque illustration, I began to

notice the beauty inherent in the design of the can itself. This idea of an organic design rising forth from an inorganic subject was something new into which I could really submerge myself.



Can Series (#1), 2009

I started thinking of the proverbial treasure-trash dichotomy and noticed it's blatant presence in my work. I was interested in the possibility of transforming an image that many people associated with waste or garbage into an image that was aesthetically interesting. It was this observation---the existence of innate beauty in the commonplace, everyday object---that influenced the progress of the project.



Can Series (#2), 2009

In fact, there is so much more to discover in the development of this concept. I then began to notice the elemental design inside every object I see. Through the use of subjective observation, I began to discover that art is, in fact, everywhere and I looked forward to finding more ways in which to expose interpret this idea to its fullest.

The next series, the *bottle cap* series, was the continuation of the same everyday consumer concept. Being focused most on the formal aspects of painting, I switched from canvas to paper and softened my pallet. The abstracted bottle caps are a repeated image floating in unidentifiable space. I was interested in how it functioned in space and how ones experience can shift at different vantage points.



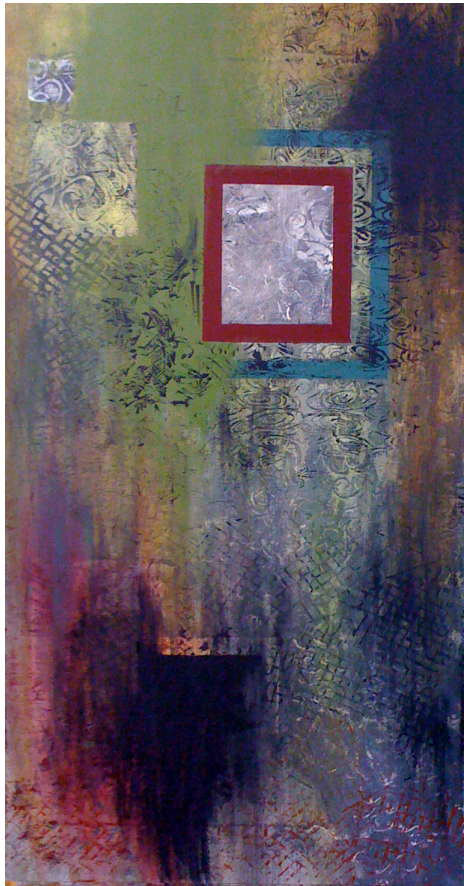
Bottle Cap, 2009

What if I just used shapes and patterns instead of the Barq's cans or bottle caps? I knew that I was much more in sync with the aesthetic "decisions" I was making rather than the images themselves. The cans and bottle caps were an obvious decision for me in the beginning, but it was exactly those items (and that world) that I was trying to move away from. I was painting what people already knew, or thought they knew about me. Abstracting the image where it was semi-unrecognizable to the viewer felt incomplete. There was not enough of myself in the painting. They were colorless and passionless. I needed a total new direction.

I started focusing on printmaking process, hoping to figure out ways to incorporate them into my painting. I found images of vintage wallpaper patterns and made them into linocuts.

PROCESS: STARTING POINT FOR AESTHETIC DECISION

The new paintings took shape through a continuous process of layering and anonymousness handling of line, form and color. As the intuitive logic of each composition unfolds, life-like forms are defined. The use of linocuts are the predominate approach in this process. I incorporated both grid and arbitrary patterns by applying the linocut stamps onto the canvas. My method primarily involves a continuum of layered stamps and washes. While veiling and revealing masked areas I was trying to re-work and surprise myself while being open to the aberrant.



Layer Series (# 1), 2010

I focused on creating juxtaposition between the illusionistic space that I describe and the physical surface of the painting. Planes that appear on the foreground are often the first layer of the painting. Through the layering process they become encapsulated in the structure of the image itself. Geometric shapes both overlap and combine with the overall space of the painting. The detailed elements of the linocuts might have hovered over the edge of representation but are overpowered by the atmospheric perspective created by the color scheme. The main purpose was to suggest a humanistic image though formal irony.



Layer Series (#2), 2010

BUILDING A NARRATIVE

My esthetic decisions became redundant, academically and in my personal purposes for art making. The paintings needed some individuality. My next series of paintings I began with an intimate narrative.

I am interested in the idea that we do not experience the world through memory or thought as a whole but rather in bits or fragments, which are part revealed, part concealed, spontaneously, through time. I decided to embrace this concept in my painting process.

I started with geometric shapes, primarily a rectangle, a relatively unnatural form, to suggest a closed off sheltered environment. Within are ornate patterns which represent the way I was taught things “are” and that they “should” be, which is very structured and pretty...and, to me, fake. I then used my linocut patterns as a stamp to represent the mimetic quality of this experience.

In my new paintings I took this approach and applied it to an actual event or experience in my life. I then titled each artwork before I began, and the personal narrative gave me as much subjectivity as I felt was necessary to indulge further into my paintings. As I painted, I was making more conceptual decisions, not necessarily just visual decisions, but those based on sources and reality: places, ideas, objects and moments. I was pursuing a method by which to depict my feelings both at that very

moment in time, and oppositionally, the feelings that I had about that moment in retrospect. Would the meaning be lucid or not? I then tried to call to mind the source of the idea and let form direct the image toward more clarity, expressed through the representational handling of the painted surface.

“Wheelchair in Denver”, is a title I gave to describe extraordinarily absurd, hilariously deranged stories that summed up a decade of chaos in my life. All stories set in different area codes and years apart, evoke the same evolution, revealing truth within the layers and the way the paint is handled. The truth always seemed to be more chaotic and messy as it evolved. I strived to convey both intimacy and turmoil with the juxtaposition of the dark gestural brush stroke with the tranquil under painting.

I was looking at a number of current painters for influence. Daniel Hesidence’s range of dense surfaces to delicate washes and frenzied brush marks compelled me to become more gestural in my work. The painting by Dendiz Harms, Kleinburgsieben, 2002 and a quote by Thomas Nozkowski, “I believe in those principles of not doing preliminary sketches- of acting, not having a preconception of where you are going to go”.

LATEST BODY OF WORK

As I analyzed the stories and time period that I was referencing in my painting, I found there was an underlying philosophical meaning to it all. What symbol could connect all of the circumstances that stimulated such a convoluted growth?



Exposed (# 1), 2011

I once designed a catalog in undergraduate school for a communications company with the word “gravitate” as the headline for their promotion...my design won with a photographed image of a rear view of a bald man’s head. An old wives tale says a man loses his hair because of the gravitational pull of the earth. Another states the gravitational pull of the moon enhances mental illness, hints the term “lunatic”. I combined the two concepts and the bald man’s head captivated the provocativeness I was searching for.

A contour linocut of a bald mans head became my emblem for both men and women’s obsession with physical beauty. Gestured brush strokes and the linocut stamps are taken from figuration with a narrative while incorporating ultra-flat geometric shapes and irregularly angled lines against organic-like motifs. I have integrated collaged photographs of idealized female nudes that both interact with the brushwork of the paint. “An illustrated form tells you through the intelligence immediately what the form is about, whereas a non-illustrational form works first upon sensation and then slowly leaks back into fact.”³ The collages add a recognizable element to the otherwise abstract work. As in Katy Moran’s

³ Nickas, Bob. *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*. New York:

Phaidon, 2009: 263

work, “inventing little mysteries that play off our visual habit of searching out something recognizable in abstraction.”⁴

I feel an intimate encounter with my stretched canvas although the scale and rough deportment wouldn't agree. Moran, who exposes her canvas by removing the voluptuous acrylic brushstrokes with solvents and abrasion to mimic the effects of damage and deterioration. I plan a masked off area, so when revealed it represents something unattainable from within. Folding and crumbling up the painting in between painting sessions leaves scars and blemishes on the surface, which adds another visual effect while playing a huge role in my concentration of the narrative.

⁴ Ibid., 263



Exposed (#2), 2012

Conclusion

The consistency with all of my work is the observation of human behavior in the presence of insecurity and instability. I am interested in patterns, not as decoration, but as representations of natural behavior processes. Behavioral patterns are an after-effect of a transformation signifying time and change. I am drawn to geometric, organic and linear patterns juxtaposed with thick brush strokes of acrylic paint, collaged paper photographs and exposed canvas. I use these concepts as a starting point and apply my own system of working as a painter.

Finally, I feel that my paintings have matured over my three-years of study. I have gained a better understanding of the development of my process and ideas, and I believe I have strong ground on which to build.

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Vita

Shelly Barq was born in Biloxi, Mississippi in 1980. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Southern Mississippi (Hattiesburg, Mississippi), where she studied Graphic Design. Shelly joined the University of New Orleans in 2009 to pursue studies leading to a Masters of Fine Arts degree.