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It's Always Better With A Good DM

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It's Always Better With A Good DM

A Thesis

Submitted to the 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

David Thomas Colannino

B.A. University of Rhode Island , 2007

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Abstract

It's Always Better With A Good DM is about our relationship with objects and maps as a vector for fantasy. Beginning from the premise that humans understand the world via narrative, I am concerned with the loss of imagination in adulthood in lieu of ideology, which is no more real than stories of future and fantastic places.

Keywords: Colannino, David; Deleuze, Gilles; Lyotard, François; materialism; cartography; Kelley, Mike;

§ Part I: Narratives and Spaces

I have been interested in narratives since I was very young. Like most children, I would create all sorts of fantastic worlds colored with various characters, creatures and unsophisticated ethical observations. Unlike many children, I never lost these interests, even to the detriment of my social standing in the pubescent social order. I obsessively read sci-fi and fantasy throughout high school. I was prone to daydreaming about strange worlds, albeit rife with the tropes of the genre.¹ It was not until I began to study philosophy and literature at university that I started to consider the narrative from a more distanced and academic perspective, i.e., studying the history of concepts and texts and deconstructing their form and content. It was through Jean-François Lyotard that I first began to conceptualize a radical reductionist approach to understanding language and narrative forms.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard describes the postmodern situation as one where there has been an utter collapse of the metanarrative.² Instead, he argued that there exists a variety (perhaps as many as there are perceiving subjects) of micro-narratives. Each narrative is constructed out of a sort of internal linguistic system wherein the respective system defines *a priori* its own truth as well as the methodology in which to prove said truth. For example, if I were operating under a

¹ Tropes of the sci-fi and fantasy genres include good/evil dichotomies, gratuitous violence, and archetypal characters, e.g., the young hero, the wise sage, etc.

² It is not my intention to present here any comprehensive discussion about the various nuances of modernity and postmodernity. However, for the sake of clarification, I understand the shift from modernity to postmodernity as a shift away from objectivity (i.e., any classic structuralist argument) to a multiplicity of perspectives. There is a tradition of subjective epistemology that passes from Spinoza to David Hume to Nietzsche, and therein snakes out in the 20th century, however, it is only in the late 1960's that it becomes fully represented in the global psyche.

scientific structure (vis-à-vis language), I would define a proposition as true based on my ability to demonstrate the validity of the proposition through a series of controlled and repeatable experiments (demonstrative truth). On the other hand, if I were attempting to prove a religious truth, I would argue directly against demonstrative truth and rather define a proposition as true based on a principle of faith: true belief being belief without proof. These ideas enabled me to begin to see the world in a very open manner wherein life was a series of unique perspectives.

My readings of Lyotard dramatically shifted my perception of how I had hitherto considered reality. Though, through an earlier obsessive study of Nietzsche, I had already embraced wholeheartedly the essential subjectivity of reality, Lyotard's revolutionary re-conception of the narrative invoked the fundamental relationship between narrative and perception. Our perceptions are influenced by the linguistic relationships we use to describe the very same perceptions.

During that same period, I was also carefully studying Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Among other things, Deleuze and Guattari built a constructivist philosophy wherein all thoughts and ideas were defined as material. Furthermore, these material thoughts were explained as created within the subject (immanent) rather than from outside (transcendent). According to Deleuze and Guattari, when one understands a concept, one is actually re-creating the concept. In other words, the text acts as a sort of catalyst for thought rather than the provider of prescribed ideas.

Lyotard's destruction of the metanarrative exposed the full influence of language on the human psyche. If, and this is old news at this point, the subject is the essential arbiter of his or her own universe, and, for whatever reason, said universe is abstracted

again (the first abstraction being the perceptual apparatus itself) into language, then it would appear to me that at the heart of every idea is a narrative. If we juxtapose the above reading of Lyotard with Deleuzian materialism, we are left with an interesting system, wherein creativity is essential and always at work. Even the most reactionary conservative is actually creating an entirely new and unique worldview.

The combination of Lyotard and Deleuze's philosophical narratives (or, rather, my re-conception of their narratives) sent me on an intellectual path that is only now forming any cohesive sense through the medium of art. I had struggled towards the end of my philosophical studies in finding any sort of meaning with research for the sake of research. I wanted to do philosophy not study other philosophers, and I began to turn to art as a way of presenting philosophical ideas.

Prior to graduate school, I was focused on two distinct ideas. The first concerning the ontology of the artwork. Using deconstruction as a tool, I started to make work that considered text as image and image as text, as well as a short film that mixed 18th British satire tropes with a science fiction narrative. The second concerned the narrative itself, especially attempting to find ways to apply the narrative visually. I also began working on a series of illustrated maps of a world some 350 billion years in the future. In this world, the continents have returned to Pangaea and are populated by a variety of different pseudo-human species. The textual companions to these maps were devoid of specific characters and were intentionally dry, mocking the style of 19th century historical secondary sources, specifically with an abundance of ridiculous footnotes.



§ Figure 1: *New Pangaea & New Panthalassa*, screen print on paper, 22 x 30 in, 2012

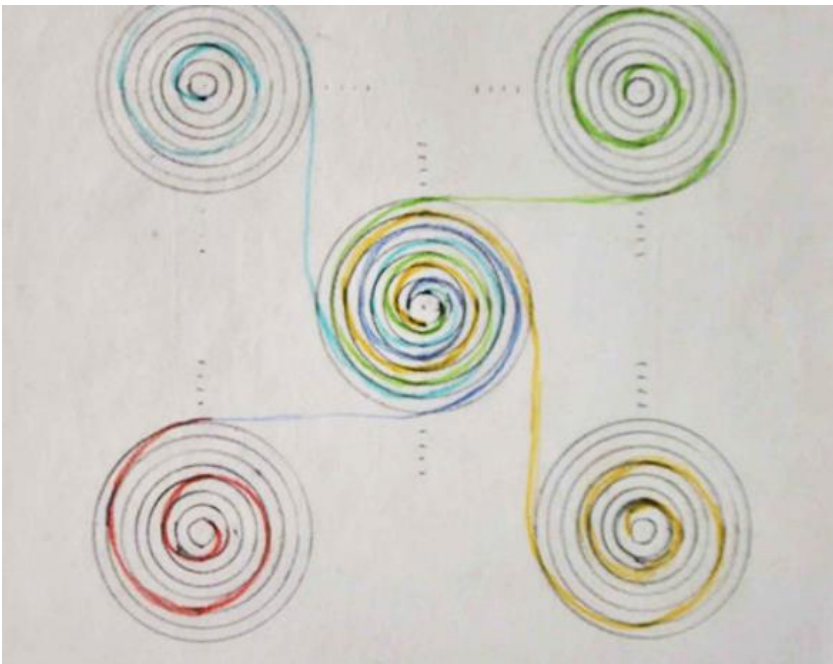
I was obsessed with conveying a world where the structure of people's ideas (through language) embraced my own view of narrative's power on our thoughts. For two thousand years, billions of people have lived and died believing a fairy tale about everlasting paradise as an accepted truth and yet many of those same people would consider a story about dragons as escapist. The irony of the situation was too much for me. Through these explicit narrative images, I sought to highlight the underlying narrative aspect of life.

At this point in time, I was working mainly with print. I was hugely influenced by the DIY culture of my home town: Providence, RI, especially the type of work

presented in a ten year retrospective of Providence poster art at the RISD Museum titled *Wunderground*, as well as the work at Cinders Gallery in Brooklyn. The posters, especially those by Brian Chippendale, Mat Brickman, and C.F., were often intentionally sloppy, contained a bright and psychedelic color palate, and contained bizarre narratives. There was also an emphasis on doing the whole process by oneself and as cheaply as possible. This, along side the thriving noise scene in Providence, was my first real exposure to contemporary art. I was mesmerized by the atmosphere of creativity centered inside the abandoned industrial spaces in Olneyville. Anything seemed possible, and art shifted from some vague historical tradition of painting to something more visceral and spectacular.

§ Part II: How to make a Map

When I first arrived at graduate school, I began working in a reductivist manner following the Deleuzean definition of art and my own tendencies for deconstructionism. Furthermore, I have always been infatuated with minimalism, and upon discovering the work of Ruth Vollmer, I began working wholly with the repeating line. Each line created the system (pattern) for the next line to form a purely aesthetic composition.



§ Figure 2: Ruth Vollmer, *Spiral Drawing*, Graphite, color pencil, on paper, 1973

However, this series of drawings were conceptually only performative. *Circle* (figure 3) is the best example of this type of work. The 5 by 4 foot ink drawing on paper consists entirely of a repeated fractal .005mm line. *Circle* is foremost about the arduous task and art as a vector for meditation. As the circle extended it began to take as much as 45 minutes to draw one line.



§ Figure 3: *Circle*, ink on paper, 48 x 60 in, 2014

I am unsure as to what attracted me at first to the simple line. The line began to signify several different forms, e.g., time (timelines), space (in relation to time), and a commentary on reduced formal aesthetics. At the time, I was caught up in my own extreme reductionism, i.e., I was actively attempting to create beautiful images because I believed art ought to be reduced to an object that is essentially perceived aesthetically. My mistake here was in my reduction itself: there are no essentials. Reducing and deconstructing ideas is a tool and a method not a metanarrative.

The most interesting aspects of this series of works were the performative elements (endurance) and the inherent meditative characteristics built into the process itself. I began to research Richard Long, specifically *A Line Made by Walking*. However,

I was not really interested in pursuing this conceptual paradigm and began to bring cartography back into the images.

Cartography represented two things for me. The first was its attachment to my early youth, which, for some reason has always seemed to me as the most authentic time, where we haven't really learned how to lie yet to ourselves yet. As a child, I obsessively studied maps. At five I could correct my parents about geography. At six I could list every state, its capital, and at least one other major city. I copied the maps on the inside covers on my fantasy books later, and played Risk and D&D with my friends. The map creates a space that is absolutely open to fantasy, as in the act of fantasizing. One can create entire histories of a place on the walk to school. The second was its insistence on substance. The map commits ideas to places. It gives us the topology of an idea greater than the perspective granted within our eyes.

I had always thought of the line drawings as maps of spaces, often describing them representing the infinitely small. *Red II* (figure 4) was an early attempt. Here I began to subtly shift the perspectives within the space by moving the various lines under and over each other. I was attempting to create maps of the smallest (and thus unperceivable) spaces in the universe.



§Figure 4: *Red II* (detail), ink on paper, 2013

However, this description felt labored. The images were abstractions. I might consider them to be a map of an unknowable space, but nothing within the image necessarily conveyed this idea. I wanted to make work that re-conceived space to be more inline with my materialist perspective as well as giving more respect to the infinite and anti-anthropocentric reality as opposed to some sort of bastardization of 18th century humanist metaphysics. I realized relatively quickly that this is actually an inherent quality of abstract imagery itself and that I was merely re-orienting abstraction from transcendence to a creative materialism. This desire comes through my interest in Deleuzian epistemology.

Throughout Deleuze's oeuvre, he attempts to shift concepts about thought from transcendent to material as a way of re-positioning epistemology and metaphysics away from a mind and body duality. Thought is substantial not ethereal. When we think, we think inside our brains not outside. Our thoughts extend the universe. They do not flee it. Perhaps it is my own tendency to require a complete analysis of everything as a way of forming patterns to come to some sort of objective subjective understanding of myself, but I find it impossible to begin any discussion of my ideas and myself and not describe the importance of materialism to my worldview. Here I owe a great debt to materialist tradition in philosophy,³ especially Deleuze. The lines were visual forays into the Deleuzian concepts of difference and repetition. Each line signifies substantial thought (material), but also describes the state of things according to Deleuze (difference and repetition of intensities). However, if I applied Lyotard the work fell short. My narrative ideas are as good as the next in terms of their ability to describe truth.

³ Heraclitus, Spinoza, Hume, Nietzsche, and Bergson specifically.

In my second year, I began to mix painting with my drawing. I became more explicit with my use of mapmaking techniques and began to appropriate parts of NASA planetary maps into the images. I began to appropriate the color palate and shapes of a topographical map NASA printed of the surface of Mercury. The artwork contained an arbitrary key that conveyed what different marks symbolized. Yet, I remained dissatisfied with the extent form dominated the imagery. My conceptual concerns were still not overtly part of the work. The context that I wished to convey was too vague and more or less absent.

In light of my concerns, I started to approach the work through form and not content. I began a series of drawing mounted on 2'' thick boards cut into shapes taken from the paintings. Here the images were influenced by the paintings and not any philosophical musings. By this time, I had developed a more specific style and color palate. I worked from memory of maps rather than maps themselves and was freer with my colors. I also started using enamel purely for it's formal qualities. The result was a more organic process of production.



§ Figure 5: *Fragment III*, gouache, enamel, acrylic, ink marker, and graphite on paper mounted on plywood, 22 x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ in, 2015

For example, *Fragment III* (figure 5) features a new looseness of line work and easy mixture of media. In loosening up, I was able to become freer with content. The hidden city in *Fragment IV* (figure 6) provides just enough content to transform the image from an abstraction into a literal map, but the map no longer needed to describe a specific type of space. In other words, I found that working through form I was able to arrive at content. The work made more sense because I was considering it less as a vehicle for conveying a pre-meditated and structured idea and rather a synthesis of the two operating cohesively and concurrently.



§ Figure 6: *Fragment IV*, gouache, enamel, acrylic, ink, and graphite on paper mounted to plywood, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ in, 2015

This synthesis is best realized in *Topo I* (figure 7) and *Topo II*. Both of these paintings are overtly sculptural. I layered hand shaped wood into a large topographical map of non-specific spaces. The layers obviously mimic terrain. However, the applied paint (enamel) does not follow the topology and I specifically allowed for brush strokes

as a way of challenging the object's sculptural nature. Like maps, different textures symbolize different types of terrain, though it is not important that the viewer know the specific significance. I am interested in conveying obvious spaces of abstraction as a way of forcing the viewer to question how they conceive of space, specifically the space in which thoughts (concepts) populate. This follows from my background in Deleuzian thought, which, as stated earlier, involves a way of thinking where all thought is created.



§ Figure 7: *Topo I*, enamel and house paint on plywood, 43 ½ x 28 x 4 ½, 2015

With *Fragment III* and *Topo I & II*, I was also able to force the point of layers. I was influenced here specifically by the work of Julie Mehrtu. Mehrtu's work is incredibly map-like. *Co-Evolution of the Futurhythm Machine (after Kodwo Eshun)* (figure 8) uses various media to overtly establish different spaces within the piece. Furthermore, each media is dealt with in a different manner as a way of augmenting its respective layer. The graphite, for example, is placed first and is the most cartographical.

In *Fragment IV*, I adopted a similar format. The tight pen work occurs below the paint. Gouache is applied in various circular forms that are sectioned off by multiple layers of enamel, and thus there is a tactile topology within the piece.

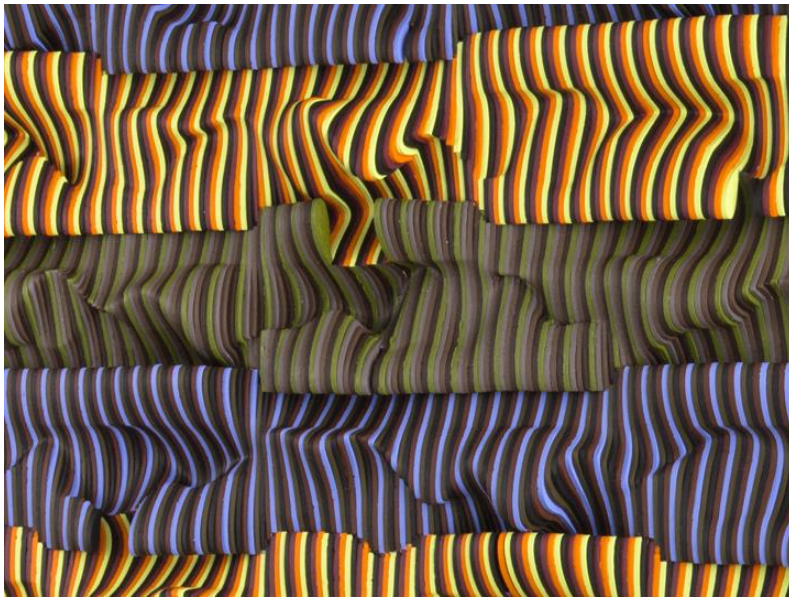


§ Figure 8: Julie Mehretu, *Co-Evolution of the Futurhythm Machine (after Kodwo Eshun)*, Graphite, ink and acrylic on canvas, 108 x 120 in, 2013

I am very attracted to the color, sheen, and texture of enamel. While I was making the fragments, I developed a specific color palette, which is very much influenced by several Providence based artists, specifically Jungil Hong, Brian Chippendale, and Ara Peterson. All three artists liberally apply incredibly loud colors. There was something very satisfying to revisit childhood influences and loosely borrow various aspects with my own practice. For example, my movement away from the more dramatic blacks and

reds into using a palette most likely found in a child's bedroom was directly influenced by Hong and Chippendale.

As I became more confident in the work, I began to use these fairly playful colors, e.g., teal, pink and any fluorescents that I could get my hands on. The topographical paintings for example, are very much influenced by Peterson's sculptures, e.g., *Wavepack (Yellow, Blue, Green)* (figure 9). My new lack of 'serious' colors was an important transition. Somehow, by using 'playful' colors, I was able to actually play more with the process, and through playing, I was able to generate more work much more easily.



§ Figure 9: Ara Peterson, *Wavepack (Yellow, Blue, Green)*, Acrylic on wood, 30 x 56 in, 2012

The painting and drawing portion of my thesis show began to take form. I made a series of panels, cut into shapes that mimicked individual painted sections within the earlier paintings in drawings. However, the series of fragments was abandoned shortly after finishing the last coat of gesso on the last panel. At a whim, I had returned to working on the paper alone and I composed *Map 98ww89* (figure 10) in between coats of gesso. All at once, I found myself back at the beginning. However, the color and

composition had evolved, and the finished work did not seem as labored as the earlier pieces of a similar fashion. Thus, I abandoned the fragments and embraced a return to painting and drawing on paper. These new works continued the imagery developed with the fragments, i.e., mixing drawn ink lines with painted shapes. I enjoyed the negative space around the fragment (drawn in pencil) more than mounted paper on shaped wood. I also began titling the maps with a series of random letter and number combinations (often chosen purely by the aesthetic of their combinations). For example, *Map 98ww89* is a palindrome.



§ Figure 10: *Map 98ww89*, enamel, gouache, vinyl, acrylic, ink, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 22 x 30 in, 2016

I focused more on mixing various media types e.g., enamel, gouache, vinyl paint, watercolor, liquid and heavy body acrylic, colored pencil, graphite and marker. The materials themselves became signifiers of certain actions or spaces within each individual piece. Small dots of various colors (often fluorescent) repeated in various sizes. These dots were repeated in larger swaths of paint as a way of indicating different perspectives of space. The perspective of the whole piece itself was still that of a map, and I continued to hide small cities in the works to push this point. Lines cut through, under, and over the layered color as a way of expressing energy, layers, and time within the map.

The space depicted is dynamic, and the small size of the repeating line achieves this illusion via the inability of the eye to really focus on a single line. Although I had not intended to, I realized that I had subconsciously applied a complete Deleuzian structure to the maps with each specific media symbolizing a different concept within my understanding of his way of structuring the world.

In the Deleuzian model, philosophy begins as construction. Philosophy is essentially a fabrication of concepts, and “constructivism requires every creation to be a construction on a plane that gives it an autonomous existence.”⁴ Situating philosophy as concept creation on an immanent plane changes the nature of thought from transcendent to immanent. If thought is immanent (flowing from) and not transcendent (flowing to), it also follows that thought must be creative, as the idea is formed out of minds and not an action of minds entering some other realm, upon where one plucks an idea as one would an apple. It also positions the creative act in its own space, which is itself created.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 7.

It is important to understand that I do not see the maps as illustrations of a Deleuzean model, but rather as an essential part of my artistic process. I do not think about making work by applying Deleuze's theory of aesthetics, rather I apply his philosophical concepts subconsciously and with little regard to whether or not I understand his concepts academically, but rather symbolizes an another essential concept for Deleuze: the fold, or an application of "Deleuze's own thought into the thought of another...a force of the outside that folds [on] the inside."⁵

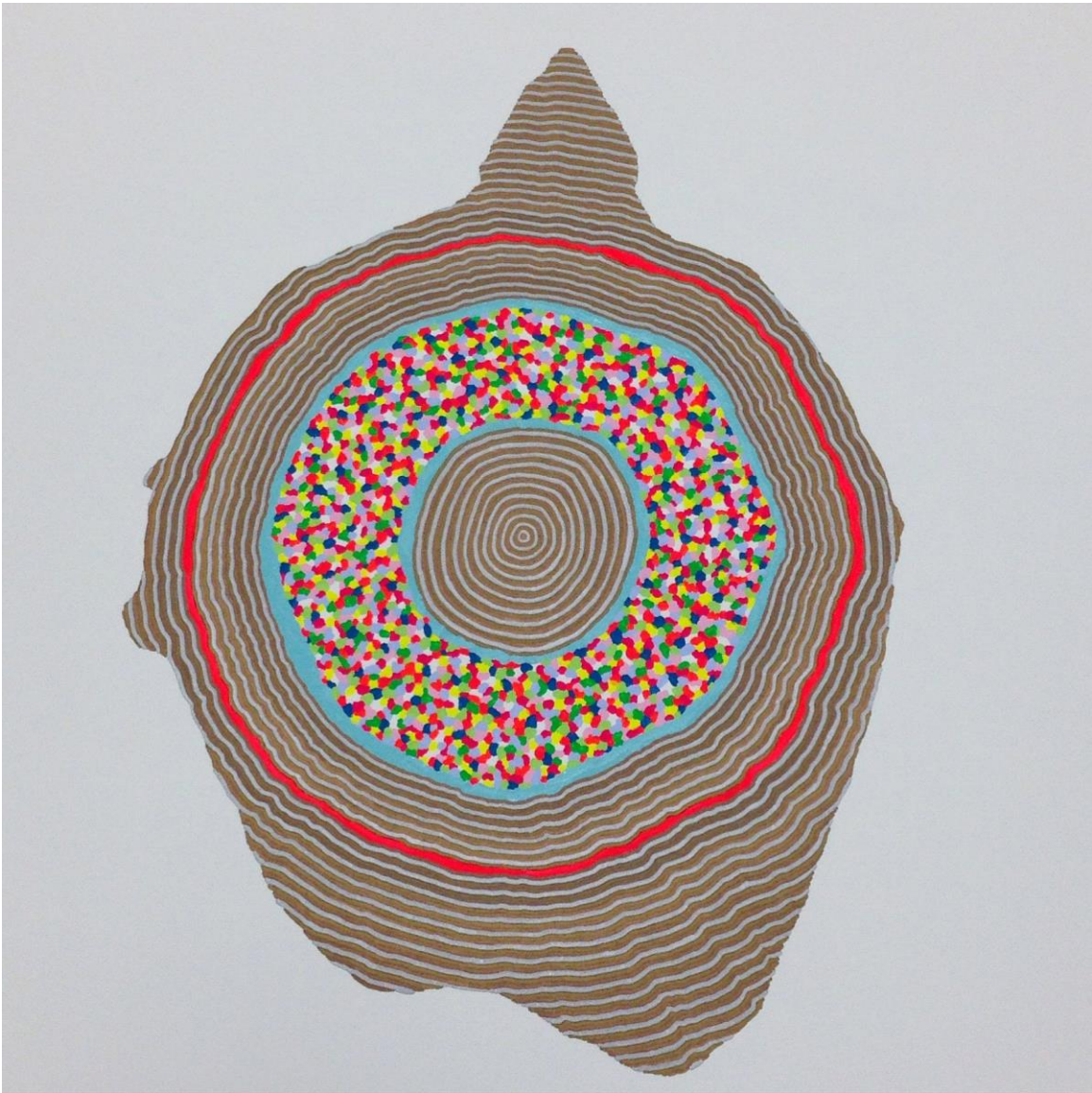
Map 421f7 (figure 11) for example is framed into a penciled line that references the fragments and the topographical paintings. The initial stage of framing the composition of the rectangular surface embodies the plane of immanence. The fractalized lines bring into focus the concepts of difference and repetition in that each line is based on the last (repeating) but are slightly altered. There are inked black lines—products of energy and time—drawn as a way of expressing the multiple layers within the space as well as symbols of catalysts: intensities, or the force of relations between forces. Furthermore, *Map 421f7* contains several various types of space. The smaller sections of color (the painted dots) are smaller versions of the shape itself (the plane of creation/immanence).

The larger sections of color that operate in two ways: firstly, as merely larger versions of the painted dots as a way of expressing depth (e.g., the red liquid acrylic space in the top right corner), and secondly, as wider forms of the line, in other words, larger fields of energy that cut and bracket various areas. (e.g., the long teal line in the center). There is also a city, found in the center of the space, which indicates that the

⁵ Simon O'Sullivan, "The Fold," in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, edited by Adrian Parr, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 102.

space is a map. It's a playful childish rendering of a walled medieval town. The metallic circle, itself mimicking the ink lines provides yet another layer.

Ultimately, even if the work is intentionally aesthetic, it is very much a foray into new ways of approaching space, both the space of composition (my own practice, or rather how I arrive at imagery), as well as projections of new mapmaking techniques.



§ Figure 11: *Map 421f7*, marker, vinyl, enamel and graphite on paper, 22 x 30 in, 2016

§ Part III: Sculpting stories

Throughout this whole time I had embraced sculpture as a way of expressing more explicit narrative based art through figuration and installation. My figurative drawings are quickly rendered comical and psychedelic images influenced by numerous artists including C.F., Roland Topor, Rene Laloux, Brodsky & Utkin, and, critically, Luigi Serafini. Because I was so new to the medium, I was able to begin very organically, without any expectations. I found the environment very conducive for experimentation.

Curro (figure 12) illustrated the bizarre birthing method of some strange being. The piece was installed in a bed of sand in order to insinuate terrain beyond the form itself. As I became more confident with the medium, I began constructing a series of smaller sculptures out of variety of materials e.g., clay, wood, bronze, plaster, plastic and aluminum. The work was taken from the earlier future world I had been working in prior to graduate school. I began to work inside that world, adopting the identity of a specific pseudo-human species that have a religion based on archiving and preservation and once in the respective lives, undertake a ‘sabbatical’ wherein they travel for years collecting and studying a specific area. However, the above narrative and my own descriptions of the objects are not important outside of the fact that the viewer be aware that they exist, which I have indicated through the use of exaggerated subtitles (itself a reference to 18th century British satire, especially Henry Fielding). The work overtly uses the trope of the cabinet of curiosities as a way of speaking on the process of world building through objects.



§ Figure 12: *Curro*, plaster, 17 x 42 x 16 in, 2014

I made little sculptures every week with the intention of making a cabinet of wonders from the far future. This project was sort of a mixture of Mark Dion's work creating cabinets of curiosities with specific narrative structures with Serafini's *Codex Serafinius* (a treatise written in nonsense with absurd illustrations), and my own world building. The work was playful, but did not exactly seem adequately realized.

It was not until I made *Please Play With My Toys* (figure 14) that the sculptural and two-dimensional works finally amalgamated conceptually. *Please Play With My Toys* is about the apparent ease with which children imbue their toys with narrative life. For

me, that narrative life is analogous to how adults color their own lives through what they believe to be objective truths (ideologies), but are in fact subjective constructs.

The installation contains a handmade quilt, made with the type of space patterns one might find in a child's bedroom, including my own pillowcases. The quilt acts as a platform for narrative construction and it is populated by rearrangeable cast plastic toys. This is an ode to Deleuze's plane of immanence: the space created by the subject and then populated by concepts (in this case the plastic toys). The toys are meant to be played with the ideas that come about through this act of play is just as much a part of the work as the more tactical elements are. *Please Play With My Toys* also contains specific references to several Mike Kelley works.



§ Figure 13: Mike Kelley, *Arena #7*, found stuffed animals, wood, and blanket, 11 1/2 x 53 x 49 in, 1990

Kelley has become very important to how I orient myself within contemporary art.

Through reading about Kelley and studying his work, I realized that my work had always been about childhood, specifically the act of childhood fantasy. I believe that we are always world building. We do not passively exist within the world. Rather, through

language we construct narratives to explain and to color. This is a creative enterprise, although, very often it happens subconsciously; in other words, if gods can exist, why not dragons? Kelley was, of course, very concerned with childhood and memory. *Educational Complex*, for example, is the recreation of models of every educational institution he attended during his life from memory. I am also very much concerned with childhood, but less with memory and more with the act of fantasizing (with objects as vectors) and play.



§ Figure 14: *Please Play With My Toys* (installation detail), fabric, cast plastic, cassette player, Holst's *Planets* & The Alan Parson's Project's *I Robot* on cassette, interactive piece, dimensions variable, 2015

Please Play With My Toys rocketed me into an entirely different place artistically. The same day I formulated the piece, I began working on *Sandbox With Shai-Hulud* (*Geonemotodium arraknis*). *Sandbox* is a playful appropriation of the sandworm from the novel *Dune* placed inside a child's sandbox. The piece, placed outside the gallery, operates as an entry point into the show, overtly establishing the content of the show, namely childhood play (the sandbox) and the influence of science fiction and fantasy. The explicit reference to *Dune* is homage to the influence of the book on the world of science fiction. There is a reason Jodorowsky tried to bring about a vision of the book in cinema. *Dune* changed the game of sci-fi and fantasy. It presented a future reality where the perceptual apparatuses of humans have undergone various changes and the world-building element takes these changes into consideration. Society in *Dune* does not reflect our own. It is completely foreign. It is this shock that perpetuates my interest in sci-fi and fantasy. I like the loose hypothesis (shift a variable ever so slightly and see how it plays out) as a vector for creative thought.

The sandbox is more than a place to play—it is a child's sculpture studio. There, creatures and cities are born and destroyed. *Sandbox With Shai-Hulud* (*Geonemotodium arraknis*) follows the pattern established in *Please Play With My Toys*: the vector, e.g., the blanket or the sandbox. I use this device because I want the audience to actively participate in the act of world building. Like with *Please Play With My Toys*, *Sandbox With Shai-Hulud* (*Geonemotodium arraknis*) is interactive.

I invite the audience to sit in the sandbox and use the typical toys to sculpt things out of the sand around the worm. The sandworm is constructed out of a durable foam so that the audience can touch the object freely. However, I am not overly concerned with the duration of the piece. If it is somehow destroyed during a show, I would consider this an aspect of the installation itself.

Texture is an important consideration in my work. The two dimensional works consistently play with variations of surface. For example, several layers of enamel creates a shiny and thick surface that I will often place adjacent to a single layer of gouache or vinyl paint. The differences in surface are topographical. With certain sculptural works, I want the audience to be able to participate in the work in a tactile manner. I find that in the process of creating the sculpture, I engage with the materials in such a fashion, and that it becomes necessary for the audience to participate in the same way. This is pedantic in a way. I am hoping that the sensation of touch acts as a vector for imagination. Again, the point is not that the participant arrives at a specific narrative, but rather that they engage in the more subconscious narrative creation that occurs in childhood.

After *Please Play With My Toys* and *Sandbox With Shai-Hulud (Geonemotodium arraknis)*, I began to rethink my earlier intention of making the futuristic cabinet of wonders. The idea shifted to using a pre-existing narrative rather than my own, and the artifacts I constructed from the future transformed into the pieces of a nativity scene. *Nativity Scene: Wherein all nonfiction is shown to be fiction* (figure 15), carries the same ideas that I was working with when creating the cabinet of wonders, however, rather than force the audience to engage circuitously with world-building, I embraced the directness of appropriating a pre-existing narrative. The piece is overtly irreverent. I mix creatures

from *Dungeons and Dragons* (e.g., *The Mindflayer*) with the traditional elements of a nativity scene. Moreover, the sculptures themselves do not in anyway reference traditional sacred figurines. This is my way of mocking religious narratives. As I have mentioned earlier, I am consistently frustrated with the tendency, specifically with religion, for people to convey stories as truth. For me, there is no real nonfiction, just variations of subjective truth. I am not concerned with spirituality, nor am I making any statements about the existence of a god or gods, but I cannot help but find it ridiculous that people allow themselves to believe in specific stories (e.g., the immaculate birth of Christ in a stable) as objective facts and not part of a specific mythos greatly changed over the years. *Nativity Scene: Wherein all nonfiction is shown to be fiction* is about the absurdity of these stories.



§ Figure 15: *Nativity Scene: Wherein all nonfiction is shown to be fiction* (installation detail), clay, bone, aluminum, wood, dehydrated toad, ink and paper, dimensions variable, 2016

My thesis show is titled *It's Always Better With A Good DM*. DM is a colloquial abbreviation of dungeon master, a term from the popular roleplaying game, *Dungeons & Dragons*. The show mixes the two-dimensional maps with various sculptural installations. However, both aspects are joined under an audio tour of various excerpts from the first edition *Dungeon Masters Guide*. Any game of *Dungeon & Dragons* requires a dungeon master. The dungeon master controls the narrative of the story through third person narration and non-player characters (NPC's) and guides the player characters (PC's) through the world. A good game of *D&D* requires a good dungeon master even more than a good player. In *It's Always Better With A Good DM*, the viewer is meant to experience the entire show under the influence of the guide, which presents the rules of the game and advice in how to control the game. I want the viewer to be the dungeon master. My hope is that he or she engages with overt world-building and therein begins to reconceive of their own latent world-building of the everyday.

I think of my work as narrative. Inside the drawings and paintings are hidden maps of cities, mountain ranges and rivers. Various peoples populate these places, but I leave it to the viewer to color their lives. The sculptures and the installations operate in similar ways. I build my work out of specific narratives, but I present it free of any sort of character description. The work is the map on the first page of a choose your own adventure novel. The terrain is present, but it is up to the viewer to populate it with their own ideas. This represents what I believe is already going on for people in their day-to-day lives. We go about coloring the world with what seem to be objective ideas, but are in fact invented and ordered in a much more creative way internally.

My work is foremost about the human love affair with fantasy. This is most palpable in children. Every child becomes a necromancer with his or her toys. They sit and imbue plastic figures with life and some sort of narrative structure (even if just a name) or they transform a common stick into a sword. Adults have a more difficult time. Their fantasy is reality itself—a subjective narrative construction. This show asks the viewer to embrace their own role as creator of their own unique world.

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Vita

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