Zig Zag Wanderer

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Zig Zag Wanderer

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

By

Samuel Stolte Williams

B.F.A. Texas State University, 2013

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Acknowledgements

I dedicate my thesis to the University of New Orleans Fine Arts faculty members as well as my peers within the Master of Fine Arts Program. I would especially like to thank the members of my Committee: Cheryl Hayes, Dan Rule, and Rebecca Reynolds for all their leadership, guidance, and valued assistance. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their optimism and support.
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*Lines that start with italics are Sam Stolte Williams images*
Abstract

Narratives recollected from popular sources such as podcast and websites often inspire my animations, paintings, and drawings. My work serves as a pictorial manifestation of everything from visualized passages in literature to eavesdropping. I zigzag from one source to another, combining found images that are loosely associated with one another. I combine them in a simulated collage in order to form an interesting composition. My purpose is to create a magical moment that pulls us away from the monotony of life. Storytelling not only allows one to see oneself and how one relates to others, but it also can provide a way for a person to cope with the unpredictable nature of existence. I am hoping that my art will provide opportunities for the viewer to expand his/her own unique personal narrative.

Keywords:
Animation, Drawing, Narrative, Association, Humor, Painting
I love unearthing strange stories, many of them from history and many from fiction or myths. I prefer stories that have some relationship to the human condition. The historical stories that I find most significant are the ones that may have been overlooked or forgotten. I look for loose associations that might have a vague connection to these stories. I use these stories and their connections as an impetus for creating many of my artworks. In the creation of my artworks, I use found images and piece them together in a simulated collage. I often add text to these images that is appropriated or created by me. These texts can be complex and ambiguous, or something as simple as a one liner. Brad Neeley, an artist whose work I greatly admire, spoke about how history relates to his art and how it can be ambiguous. He stated the following: “I like to read. I like classics. I like to know how we got here. I like stories of people who did the hard work to set up our easy ass lives. History is complicated. It may not even be real. I am fascinated with it. It’s all ghosts.” Although many of the stories in history that I am inspired by are based on real life events, in my art, whether they are real or not is not what is most important to me. What is important to me is that they connect to a bigger picture of the human condition.

In high school I discovered a Surrealist named Rene Magritte. Magritte’s images were strange, like other Surrealist paintings, yet his subject matter seemed to have a basis in real life. They appeared to be more poetic and less about shock value than some of Salvador Dali’s paintings. A glimpse of a narrative seemed to be unfolding. Magritte once spoke about what he

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1 Brad Neeley, “IAmA: I’m Brad Neely, Creator of China, IL; ...,” Reddit.com, January 7, 2013.
thought the intention of painting was: “the function of painting is to make poetry visible.”²

Randa Dubnick, in a journal article about Rene Magritte, explains various techniques used in Magritte’s work: “He arbitrarily juxtaposes unlike objects to reveal a hidden similarity, and playfully upsets normal contiguity. Although he often distorts both similarity and contiguity at once, many of his images play games primarily with metaphors, while others concentrate on metonymy.”³ While I did not intentionally try to imitate Magritte, I have used symbols in similar manner in some of my paintings. In *A Bemoaning Evading* (Fig. 1.) and *Fray Tormenta* (Fig. 2.), I first realized that I might want to create images based on narratives that are not grounded solely on one’s reality, but rather the way one experiences those realities. In *A Bemoaning Evading*

![Fig. 1. A Bemoaning Evading, 2016.](image1)

![Fig. 2. Fray Tormenta, 2016.](image2)

(Fig. 1), I represented a lawyer turning his back towards a jellyfish underwater. The impetus for this painting came from a joke I read about how lawyers were basically the same as spineless

³ Ibid., 409.
jellyfish. This was a use of metaphor that I thought was funny and would make an interesting painting. The impetus for the painting titled *Fray Tormenta* (Fig. 2.) came from a story I read about a preacher who was also a wrestler and was once an addict. I instantly thought about the correlation of how a priest fights for his soul while a wrestler fights for his status. I incorporated hammers and a lamp to be symbols of god’s wrath and truth.

In some of Magritte’s images, he depicted life in a way that could actually happen, but probably would not happen. One of these images is titled *The lovers* (Figure 3). This painting made me think about all the ways that we attach meaning to aesthetics or beauty. I interpreted it as people covering their faces with cloth so that they could see beyond the preconceived judgments and expectations that beauty might cause. This kiss creates a sense of magic or

![Fig. 3. Magritte, The lovers, 1928](image)

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heightened reality. In one way, they are achieving a deep intimacy while at the same time they do not even know what each other looks like.

I enjoyed the questions and the answers that I would come up with in reaction to Magritte’s paintings. It was like a puzzle that was not meant to be solved but rather allowed the viewer’s interpretation of the work to become a part of the way one experiences the work. In the past, it was assumed that the artist gave meaning to the art when it was created. However, what we see now is that the viewer’s interpretation of the art also gives it meaning. This is one of postmodernism’s key assumptions. I see my artworks as a continuation of this idea. According to Levy (2015), Magritte’s favorite catchwords were “the mysterious, the hidden, the marvelous, and the imagined.” In my art, I feel connected to all of these.

In many ways, I relate it to magic, an old hobby of mine. Often after one sees a magic trick performed, there are viewers that come up with their own interpretations of how the magic trick was done. However, many are left dumbfounded when they realize that their solution was not only wrong, but also there were many other solutions. What I enjoyed about Magritte’s paintings is that even though our interpretations might not be what he was originally trying to express, they still had validity for the viewer. In some ways the viewer of a magic trick or artwork are similar. They both want to believe that their interpretation is the right one.

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7 Silvano Levy, Decoding Magritte (Bristol: Redcliff Press Ltd., 2015), 9.
Background

During my senior year in high school, I went to a Picasso/Matisse exhibit in Jackson, Mississippi. I was so enamored by their work that from that point forward, I primarily did abstract paintings, focusing on form, color and line. During my first year of graduate school, the works of Amy Sillman and Richard Diebenkorn heavily influenced me. I enjoyed their color palettes, the juxtaposition of organic and geometric shapes, as well as their use of glazing and scumbling. I was particularly drawn to the way Sillman abstracted figurative shapes to the point that they might not instantly be recognized for what they were, while she still allowed elements of representation to exist.  

Fig. 4. Sillman, *U.S. of Alice the Goon*, 2008  
Fig. 5 Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park #24*, 1969

Sillman’s attitude toward using figurative shapes to create abstract

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works was this: “I think of myself as liking two things that are friends and antagonists.”

In order to find interesting shapes to use in my paintings, I would search for unique stories online, in literature, and in real life where anomalies or abnormalities would occur. My goal was to reconfigure images in a way that they might not have normally been seen. My hopes were that this would come up with a new image that had never been seen before and thus interest the viewer (Fig. 6, Fig. 7). During one of my graduate school critiques, my professors asked me what my images were based on. I then proceeded to tell them the narratives that the images were loosely based on as well as the impetus behind the images. Some of the professors then proceeded to tell me that they felt the original narratives that had spawned these creations seemed almost more interesting than the images themselves. So I allowed my work to become

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more representational. I also began to concentrate on what specific methods were most effective in depicting the key elements of the story. My figurative artworks are influenced by a sense of ambiguity and using found images, loose association, humor and irony, gestural mark making and unpredictable color, and free verse poetry. These are all things that define my art.
Ambiguity and the Use of Found Images

My art can be ambiguous at times. There are many ways that a sense of ambiguity can be created in artworks that deal with a narrative. Omitting specific details or adding elements to the original story are some ways that allow this to happen. Raymond Pettibon, an artist who I am influenced by, also allows a sense of ambiguity to exist in his work. In an article about Pettibon on the website *Hyperallergic*, Thomas Michelli mentions how the ambiguity in Pettibon’s drawings can effect the viewer: “The ambiguity conjoining word and image turns the experience of looking at Pettibon’s work into an interior journey on the part of the viewer, weaving through a weirdly sensual middle ground between thought and emotion.”¹⁰ I felt connected to this statement because I believe that my work also allows the interpretation of the viewer to have validity. By piecing together images and texts that come from a variety of sources, new meanings arise that might not have been there before.

One example of this in my art is a drawing titled *Shiny and Admired* (Fig. 8). In the original interview that the source material was derived from, the figure in the video was wearing plain black sunglasses that did not match her shirt and the time of day was in the afternoon.¹¹ I chose to change the color of her sunglasses to match her shirt and to also change the time of day to nighttime. I felt that by doing this it would allow the viewer to question whether the figure was...
being purposefully ironic or was just unaware that wearing sunglasses at night was considered a hip thing to do. I also felt that by painting her sunglasses the same color as her shirt revealed an underlying feeling that she was more concerned about aesthetics than she was willing to admit. This is not supposedly what she wanted to be. In another one of my paintings titled Smiley (Fig. 9), I created a sense of ambiguity between the text and image. I wrote, “Loneliness will inevitably come. It’s best to be prepared.” By depicting the figure behind bars, one might assume that prison life is lonely, but they could also assume that loneliness is a prison of its own.

I also use found images in my work. Many modern collages also use such imagery, such as the work of Hannah Höch. She used figurative elements from found images in her collages and describes collage as “a newly created entity, made from alienating components.” Höch, who celebrated differences, was herself Jewish and bisexual, living in Germany, a country that demanded conformity. Höch felt that it was the artist’s job to rebel against this monotony. In

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14 Ibid., 11.
my opinion Höch believed that if people could put themselves in another person’s position, then they might better understand their perspective. Höch states:

I would like to blur the firm borders that we human beings, cocksure as we are, are inclined to erect around everything that is accessible to us…I want to show that small can be large, and large can be small, it is just the standpoint from which we judge that changes…I would like to show the world today as an ant sees it and tomorrow as the moon sees it…I should like to help people to experience a richer world so that they may feel more kindly towards the world we know.\footnote{Ibid.}

My work connects to this idea because I am often trying to search for stories about historical events or people that never received their fifteen minutes of fame. Even though my work doesn’t always use collage, the way that she uses a found image is something I can relate to. The true nature of collage allows contrast to happen naturally. This is due to the fact that different parts of the composition usually come from a variety of sources. When I want to describe the whole reality of something but am missing a component of the entity, I still have to search for something that relates, or is closely related to the piece that I am missing. I am drawn to stories that seem to have a missing component or could be elaborated on. This allows me to envision other entities that might coexist within the story. For instance, in one of Höch’s untitled works (Fig. 10) from the year 1930, the top half of the figure seems to be adopted from one source while the torso comes from another source. The mere change in size creates a strange contrast.

The impetus for \textit{Caught By Code}, (Fig. 11), was inspired by an article that I discovered on the Internet that was about Samuel Morse.\footnote{Dan Lewis, “Painting in Dots and Dashes,” \textit{Know I Know That’s Half The Battle}, December 6, 2017, http://nowiknow.com/painting-in-dots-and-dashes/} I read about how Morse’s wife died when he was out of town, and he didn’t get the news until she had already been buried. He then developed
morse code as a faster method of sending and receiving information. Morse hoped this would prevent others from having to experience this same situation in the future. It was interesting that several years later, a man who murdered his own mistress would be caught on a train, after

Fig. 10. Hoch, Untitled, 1930   Fig. 11. Caught By Code, 2014   Fig. 12. Telegraph Operator

police were informed of the murderer’s description by using Morse code.\textsuperscript{17} I added a couple dancing in the background to the original image of the man using Morse code in order to illustrate the murderer and his mistress (Fig. 12). I drew them fading into the distance to display the fact that it would be many years before Morse code would be used to catch the murderer. I also added a knife in the murderer’s hand that is behind the woman’s back.

My painting Which Came First The Gnat or the Note? (Fig. 12) is based

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
on my own real life experience. I was trying to go to sleep, but I was awoken by a monotonous buzzing in my ear. I soon realized that it was coming from a gnat. My instant thought was first, how annoyed I was, and then second, how amazing these little creatures are that they know exactly where to go in order to disturb you the most. To me, if their goal was not to disturb me, then they might as well hang out by my knees or feet. It was several days later, when I was driving in my car, that I heard a jazz rendition of a show tune titled “Johnny One Note.” The website The Singing Librarian states that this song “tells the ridiculous story of an opera singer who was cursed so that he could only sing one note, and could sing it so loudly that all other noise is drowned out.” This instantly made me laugh because I could not help but think about the gnat that had annoyed me days before that was only capable of buzzing the one note.

During this time, I had been looking at some of Raymond Pettibon’s work (Fig. 14) where he used collage to form his composition. In his composition the main figure was depicted from many different perspectives. I chose to do this as well, but my main figure is only depicted twice. My images are arranged in a way that resembles collage but is not actually collage. Evan Moffitt, who is an assistant editor of Frieze, describes Raymond Pettibon’s art making and collage technique as follows:

Pettibon’s drawing process is a simulated collage, mirroring the cut-and-paste technique of postmodern novelists like Burroughs and Kathy Acker. He draws incessantly from television, magazines, newspapers, and the illustrations in pulp fiction detective novels, keeping “dead files” of images to revisit later. Like a magic sieve, Pettibon sifts through this stream of information to create final pairings of image and text, which bristle with

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characteristically dark and jagged humor.\textsuperscript{19}

Even though my process of drawing and painting resembles Pettibon’s, I do not keep files of images. If I am drawing it, chances are it is going to be used in a painting.

Another way that I have been influenced by Pettibon is how he comes up with his images. In an interview Pettibon stated, “It was always the idea that came first, and the idea had a visual concept to it, and that’s when I came in and did the drawing.”\textsuperscript{20} This is how I create images as well. It starts with reading or hearing an interesting story. Later, I respond to this story intuitively with creating images. It always starts this way. Brookelman stated in \textit{The Frame In the Mirror} that in collage:

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig13.jpg}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig14.jpg}
\caption{Fig. 13. \textit{Which Came First ...}, 2016 \hspace{1cm} Fig. 14. Pettibon, \textit{No Title (Have You Seen?)}, 2011}
\end{figure}


each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading; that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists … of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition.  

I do agree that what makes collage so great is that one can tell that the images came from different sources. However, the great thing about simulated collage is that when these fragments start to take away from the flow of the composition, one can alter them however you like. For instance, if a color or size needs to be changed, you can change it.

I think that one of the greatest things about using collage with narrative works is that it challenges the viewer by using a non-linear approach. After finding one image of a man asleep at the piano, I realized that I wanted to use this image but that I also wanted my viewers to see what song he was actually composing. In the original image of the man asleep at the piano, the angle did not work to show the sheet music and the gnat would be so small that it would go unnoticed. This made me come up with the idea to paint these images as if they were made utilizing collage techniques. My final interpretation of a narrative that might go with this painting could be stated as follows: A jazz musician is exhausted after spending all day trying to compose a new song. After becoming so exhausted he tried to take a nap, but was soon awoken by an annoying gnat. The monotonous buzzing this gnat produced inspired him to write the song “Johnny One Note.” In real life, the song “Johnny One Note” has many different notes, but in my painting the sheet music displays only one note being played over and over and over again. I chose colors from a

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jazz album that I had seen, and also chose a satellite to emphasize the loud buzzing noise that a gnat might make.
Loose Association

In many of my artworks, I use loose associations to further develop my concepts and compositions. One way that I allow loose associations to occur in my work is by not planning everything in my compositions at the beginning. I have faith that as long as I keep on looking, listening, and remaining curious, then the answers will eventually come to me. One artist who has worked together with Raymond Pettibon and has also influenced me is Marcel Dzama. When asked in an interview whether the subconscious was important in the making of their art collaboration, Dzama stated, “Yes, a lot of drawings started with having no idea what we are going to draw, and we would just let the drawing guide us to what the work became, with no plan.”

Fig. 15. The Boy Blue, 2015

Fig. 16. Fine Art On Billboards

In my painting The Boy Blue (Fig. 15), I was inspired by a story I read about New Jersey in 1963 and how people were fed up with seeing billboards lining their streets. The advertising

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corporations thought that they could sway the public’s opinion of billboards by convincing them that the billboards could be used to introduce the public to art instead of solely using them for advertisements. They did this by placing reproductions of fine art on billboards for a short period of time. One of the pieces they used was Gainsborough’s *Blue Boy*.\(^{23}\) I was saddened to discover that this educational device was no longer used. Based on loose association (Fig. 15), I changed the text that read “The Blue Boy” to “The Boy Blue.” I also added an image from the nursery rhyme “little boy blue” to the billboard in place of what was there before.\(^{24}\) I also blurred it to reveal how cars might see it as they were driving by.

![Image](image1.png)

*Fig. 17. The Messenger, 2017*

![Image](image2.png)

*Fig. 18. Turner, Rhythm Rockin’ Blues, 1995*

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Another one of my artworks that uses loose association is titled *The Messenger* (Fig. 17). What inspired me to create this artwork was the legend of how the original sound of distortion was first made while recording the song titled “Rocket 88.”25 It turns out that a rock and roll musician that helped write the song had an amplifier that had fallen off the roof of his car while traveling to the recording studio. The sound engineer tried to fix it by using newspaper. The sound that was created between the fluttering of the newspaper and speaker caused distortion to happen.26 In the painting, I chose to depict the singer of the song, Ike Turner (Fig. 18.), as a paperboy, riding a bike and delivering the news. I did this because if it wasn’t for the use of the newspaper, chances are the sound of distortion would have never occurred. I later discovered some words from one of Federico Garcia Lorca’s poems that I appropriated in my painting: “Drink the tranquil waters of the antique song.”27 I also appropriated some words from one of Charles Baudelaire’s poems: “hope like a bat goes beating the walls with her timid wings.”28 I included these because when I read them, I could not help but think about how distortion was an older sound that had been used for decades and how hard it originally was for African American musicians to become successful in rock and roll. This not only required determination but a lot of hope. The text from these poems also made me think about how the Mad Hatter in *Alice In Wonderland* loved to have tea parties and loved to sing “twinkle, twinkle, little bat.”29 I thought

26 Ibid., 73.
29 Lewis Carroll, *Alice In Wonderland*, DVD, Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske (1951; Burbank: Walt Disney Productions, 1951.), Film.
about how Rock and Roll can make some people feel tranquility just as much as others prefer a cup of hot tea. Therefore, I chose to include a bat and a tea spout in my painting. Even though the bat and the tea spout were not directly related to the song “Rocket 88,” they were loosely associated in my mind.

One of my animations that I used loose association to create is titled Astroloom (Fig. 19). An article about Maria Merian, an entomologist and botanical illustrator, who discovered that insects were not spontaneously generated out of wool, inspired it.\textsuperscript{30} What I thought was fascinating about the article was the fact that many people believed in a type of magical thinking called spontaneous generation before scientific discoveries changed their thinking, such as moths springing from old wool. I later discovered that wool is used in an astronaut’s spacesuit because of its fire resistant qualities.\textsuperscript{31} This made me think about how funny it would be to see an


astronaut weaving wool, so I created the image. The astronaut and the spinning wheel are loosely associated, and their commonality is wool. My free verse poem ends with me stating the witty remark, “Maria would have been proud to know that the wool that she studied so closely would soon line the costumes of astronauts, helping them to feel a little bit safer, not about spontaneous generation but about not spontaneously combusting.”
Humor and Irony

Another aspect of many of my artworks is their relationship to humor, sarcasm or irony. In the book *The Artist’s Joke*, Sigmund Freud defines a joke as “the arbitrary connecting or linking, usually by means of a verbal association of two ideas which in some way contrast with each other.” Kuno Fischer, a philosopher, states that a joke is considered a “playful judgment.” I have always been drawn to humor, mainly because I enjoy its unpredictable nature. I believe that much of life can become very mechanical, almost like one is living in the movie *Groundhog Day*. Therefore, we must keep a curiosity and interest about things or ideas that might be new to us. Great humorists often portray the belief that “laughter is synonymous with hope.” Humor allows us to come to terms with parts of ourselves that might be unconscious, that we have a hard time accepting. I believe that the more integrated we are with all of our emotions, the better chance we have to be happy and successful. Art can have a way of doing this as well, because it allows us to look at the ugliest parts of ourselves without getting bogged down in the sadness of a particular situation. One of my favorite artists, Raymond Pettibon, shares this feeling by stating, “in art, impurity is not a mortal sin.” In art, we can break rules that we would be punished for in real life. For instance, in an article titled “With Art You Can Move Pyramids”, Karen Bray Davis shows us an example of this:

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33 Ibid., 26.
34 Ibid., 16.
35 Ibid., 16.
In 1982, *National Geographic* “moved the pyramids.” Using expensive digital technology (proto-Photoshop), layout editors scrunched two of the Pyramids at Giza together so that they would both fit on the magazine’s vertically formatted cover. The photojournalist who captured the original image noticed, complained, and controversy over the ethics of photo manipulation ensued.36

If anyone in real life had actually tried to move even one square foot of the pyramids, there would be serious consequences.

In *Rude Awakening* (Fig. 20), on the right side of the composition, a woman gasps when she discovers that a man who had recently passed away and whom she was romantically involved with was leading a double life and was involved with another woman. I was originally inspired to create this artwork after reading about a man who was involved with two different women. In the original article, there were two identical photos of the husband with two different obituaries. One was written by his wife, and one was written by his mistress.37 In one he had a nickname,

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Blast, but in the other he didn’t have a nickname.\textsuperscript{38} I thought that it would be funny to add in the newspaper that Bill was a “Blast” to be around. Obviously neither woman, when faced with the reality of his two-timing, would say he was a blast. After reading this article, I couldn’t help but think of the two women’s reactions so I depicted a woman who was holding up the newspaper in extreme shock. This represented humor to me because of the fact that two obituaries about the same man would in one say “his loving wife” and the other would say “his girlfriend.” I felt this was a good example of dark humor.

In \textit{Time Bomb} (Fig. 21), I depicted a man who had been hiking on Mount Everest. He was nude with only his backpack on his back. He also had a roll of toilet paper between his feet. This image was created after reading an article about how Mt. Everest has become covered in human excrement because there are no toilets at the high altitude. Also, the number of hikers has multiplied. Therefore, to dispose of their waste, the hikers dig holes and leave it behind. In the article, Everest is called a “fecal time bomb.”\textsuperscript{39} I chose to depict the hiker as nude with only his backpack to further drive home the idea that this hiker, in all his arrogance, was not conscious of the destruction he might cause. I could envision him feeling like this mountain was his own personal bedroom and restroom. The image that I came up with made me laugh, but in reality, the story is sad. I placed the hiker as if he is sacrificing himself in a Jesus-like pose when what is really being sacrificed is the mountain. This is what I would also consider dark humor.

In \textit{On Her Own} (Fig. 22), I remember seeing a man that was wearing a t-shirt that portrayed a

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

woman in a strip club, on a stripper pole, and it had the words, “I support single moms” written on it. At first, I didn’t know exactly what the shirt meant, but later after researching it, I realized that there are many single mothers that must resort to being strippers in order to support their children. Not only do they make good money, but it gives them time to be with their children during the day. I chose to depict a stripper wearing Wonder Woman’s costume, cradling her baby as if she was between shifts at a strip club. This was to signify just how far a mother would go to provide for her children. I also felt that there might be a sense of irony in this image because if someone truly had the powers of Wonder Woman, then why would they choose to be a stripper? I also chose to show a sign that stated “Fighting Our Way for Equal Pay,” to show how women have fought for equal pay. It is unfair for a woman to make less than a man for the same job and then, on top of that, many end up having to be the head of their household and raise
a child on her own. Although this is not, in reality, humorous, I felt this image could show the difficulty mothers face while at the same time showing how these mothers are Super Women.

In *Life’s Constant Reminder* (Fig. 23), I had been reading some interviews and looking at some of the artworks that were created by David Shrigley. Even though I did not connect to many of them on an aesthetic level, I did connect to his self-deprecating and dark sense of humor. I was watching a football game when I saw someone fumble the ball. It was so close that it was within the grasp of his fingertips. I thought about the fact that no matter how we try to be prepared for life’s trials and tribulations, one’s life can change in an instant. I found an image where the football player was grasping at the football, and yet the football was levitating right above his forehead. I removed some of the background, I changed the colors, and I added the words “Learning to embrace life’s constant reminder, that we never have a grip on anything.” This painting directly relates to Shrigley’s idea (Fig. 24) that at any time any one of us could have the rug pulled out from underneath us.

Fig. 25. *Survival Without Purpose, 2014*  
Fig. 26. Neeley, *Skeleton Antler, 2014*
In my painting *Survival Without Purpose* (Fig. 25), I read two articles, and even though they were different, they had a similarity about them that related to uselessness. One was focused on parts of the human body that no longer have a purpose, such as the tail bone or male nipples.\(^{40}\) The other website focused on how pandas have many things about them that seem to be useless, such as their short digestive system and their lack of a sex drive.\(^{41}\) During this time, I had also seen Brad Neeley’s *Skeleton Antler* (Fig. 26), which could appear to be about an animal’s revenge towards humans. Even though my concept was not related to this idea, I could see how some might mistake it for such. Throughout these five artworks, I really felt connected to some of David Shrigley’s works and words. Dave Eggers, the interviewer, stated that Shrigley had “a dark humor, that comes from a place of frustration, of wanting better for humanity.”\(^{42}\) Shrigley replied: “I suppose it is a cathartic thing, it enables you to say what you want to say, and vent your anger about the lunatic, idiot world we live in… I kind of assume that’s a given for everybody, that everybody feels that there are quite a number of aspects of contemporary life in an advanced capitalist society that are really unacceptable, but what can we do to change it? Make stupid drawings, I suppose.”\(^{43}\)


\(^{43}\) Ibid.
Gestural Mark-making and Unpredictable Color

In addition to a keen sense of humor, I use gestural mark making and unpredictable color. In art, the word gestural has been defined as “vigorous application of paint and expressive brush work.” The reason I am drawn to gestural mark-making is that it is more expressive than regular mark making and implies a sense of movement for the viewer. This type of mark-making also implies a sense of history because one can often see where one mark overlaps other marks, revealing which lines came first, giving the viewer a sense of the artist’s process. Three artists who have influenced me with regards to gestural mark making are Vincent Van Gogh (Fig. 27), Toulouse-Lautrec and Raymond Pettibon. Two of these artists, Van Gogh and Lautrec, were influenced by Japanese calligraphy. In Eric Gelber’s article on Van Gogh, he states the following:

it’s certainly the case, that when a brush is used in his drawings, he seems to use it in a very sinuous and calligraphic way. Marks are independent and rarely blended… Van Gogh teaches us the following, that a drawn line is not just a drawn line. He instilled his line with veracity and an energy that continues to elude classification. His graphic resources, stippling, cross-hatching, a barrage of multi-directional slashes and whorls were always contained and smartly delineated compositions.45

In a book titled *Japanesque*, Karin Breuer mentioned that, “Lautrec was equally fascinated with Japanese calligraphy and drawings. He admired the spontaneous, confident economy of

brush drawings in particular and learned many of the techniques by experimenting with a sumi-ink writing set that he had imported from Japan.”⁴⁶ The brush allows more gestural mark-making to be present than the pen does. The width of the line changes based on how much pressure is used. According to Pettibon, “the brush, whether it is black and white or with colors, has been a major tool since early on. You can draw a finer line with a brush than you can with a pen, for instance, you can go from a very fine line to a very broad line in one stroke.”⁴⁷ I prefer using a brush as well because the line quality can change so easily. This depends on how much pressure one uses and the amount of ink in one’s brush. It also matters how fast or slow the artist’s gesture is. I enjoy the excitement of its unpredictable nature. In *Out of One Car and Into Another* (Fig.

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28), cross hatchings appear in the jacket of the men helping the skeleton out of the car, and in
*Bright Like A Shining Diamond* (Fig. 29) the expressive lines that appear in the beard and in the
shirt of the musician were not drawn by pencil first and ink later, but were drawn freehand. This
allowed me to have a looser feel than if it had first been drawn with a pencil. Because the
painting (Fig. 29) was based on a musician that I saw in downtown New Orleans who seemed to
take better care of his guitar than he did himself, I really wanted the beard to appear scraggly. I
added a sticker to his guitar that states the phrase: “bright like a shining diamond” to emphasize
this point.

Of equal importance with my gestural mark making is my use of unpredictable color. Many
of the colors in my compositions throughout undergraduate and graduate school share many of
the same colors that are in Matisse’s color palette. For instance, the painting titled *Better In
Photos (Improvised Parts)* (Fig. 30) uses many of the colors in Matisse’s *Basket with Oranges*

![Fig. 30. …Improvised Parts, 2015](image1)

![Fig. 31. Matisse, Basket With Oranges, 1913.](image2)

(Fig. 31). I think one of the reasons I was drawn to Matisse’s painting was that it seemed “other
worldly.” Perhaps this was because a wide and diverse range of Oriental works influenced him. I
thought that using colors in my painting (Fig. 30) that might have come from a different culture
would be appropriate, since the inspiration for this painting was based in Cuba. The article that
inspired it discussed how Cuban cars looked “better in photos” but in reality the cars were close to falling apart.\(^{48}\) I found this interesting because situations can look quite different according to our perspective. To me, the cars could have been anything. Matisse spoke about how his colors did not always have to relate to the natural world: “When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky.”\(^{49}\) I also use colors in abnormal ways in my work. One reason I do this is because I don’t always enjoy the colors of the natural world, and the other reason is that it allows us to see things in a new way. Judi Freeman speaks of what led to Matisse’s use of liberated color:

> In some ways Impressionism and its successors had led artists to a dead end, especially those wanting to paint modern life. The Impressionists and the realist artists preceding them had already done so, outdoors, at diverse times and seasons and with figures from a variety of social classes. The emergence of the Fauves coincided with a quandary among artists and critics regarding the future of painting. Since the Fauves wanted to paint nature, they needed to find a way to distinguish that painting from what had come before.\(^{50}\)

Matisse didn’t just want to paint things as they were in reality. He wanted to permeate these subjects with their essence, as well as expressing the emotions that he felt about them.\(^{51}\) I connect to this idea because in my work I am more concentrated on capturing the essence of things than depicting them exactly as they are in reality.

I have also been influenced by the colors used in Looney Tunes, Pulp magazines, and what

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\(^{50}\) Judi Freeman, *Fauve Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 14.

Robert Rauschenberg calls “pedestrian colours.” Catherine Craft, an author and curator, explains what Rauschenberg meant by this phrase: “He started buying discounted paint at a local shop, taking whatever was available…He aimed to recreate the urban stroller’s experience of noticing, for example, a red brick building, a green traffic light and a yellow taxi all at once, without attaching special importance to one colour over another.”52 I enjoy “pedestrian colours” because not only are they unique and unusual but the combinations of how they occur in life is what makes them even stranger. For instance, when shopping for colors or paints in the store, reds are with reds, oranges are with oranges, etc., but when colors are placed next to each other in the world around us, they are placed in unique combinations as well as random percentages. I haven’t used discount paint, but I do try to mimic unique color combinations that I see in my environment in my work. There are also times when I simply try to reflect on what I feel would be the mood of some of the images in my composition.

Fig. 32. Loneliest Bachelor, 2016            Fig. 33. Endless Summer II Poster, 1994.

For instance, in the painting titled *Loneliest Bachelor* (Fig. 32), the article I based the painting on was about a cycad that was the last of its kind. Without it ever being able to pollinate, the chances of its genes spreading would be impossible. I chose to add boxer shorts to the illustration of the cycad as a way of reiterating that it was male and ready to pollinate. Because the cycad shares characteristics with palm trees, I wanted to find colors that somehow related to the beach. I used many of the colors in the poster for the movie “The Endless Summer” (Fig. 33) to form my composition.

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Influence of Poetry on Animations

Last but not least, poetry has influenced my paintings as well as my cut-out animations. David Dunning describes cut-out animation as follows:

Cut-out animation is one of the oldest and simplest animation techniques and has many forms and variations. Essentially, cut-out animation involves producing animations using 2-D characters, props and scenes cut from materials, such as paper, card or fabric. Animators divide characters into smaller segments, piece together the individual cut-out shapes and move them in small steps, taking a picture -- with a film camera capable of taking single pictures -- at each step, to create the illusion of movement.\(^{54}\)

I was drawn to this style of animation for a couple of reasons: first, because I don’t have to redraw the same thing over and over again like frame by frame animation; second, because the movements look a little awkward because the paper shapes often remain the same while the movement changes; and lastly because I enjoy the historical relevance. Many people that have used cut-out animation in the past cut images from magazines, photos, etc. Most of my images are hand-drawn.

One technique and literary device that has had an effect on my poetry is the cutup technique and free verse. The cut-up method is similar to the process of collage, but instead of using images to cut up and rearrange, one uses words or phrases.\(^{55}\) Burroughs, who believed that the best writing had an element of spontaneity, spoke of this method as follows: “You cannot will spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of


My poems are created in a similar fashion. I use fragments of phrases that I am drawn to from things I hear, things I read, as well as looking at websites and listening to podcasts. These are later gathered together to form sentences that loosely convey the points that I am trying to illustrate. Some people might call it an intuitive response. For instance, in the cutout animation titled *Indescribable* (Fig. 34), which is inspired by an article that I read about Charles Darwin’s life, I portrayed how the aspirations and dreams that we have for our lives don’t always go as we wish and can swiftly change. I did this by stating, “life has a way of popping the balloons in our eyes, and it came like a wave’s commotion.” These words came from fragments of other sentences. The animation and poem illustrate and describe how Darwin grew up as a rich kid without purpose who had a taste for eating exotic animals. By studying animal behavior and suffering life’s trials and tribulations, Darwin gained a new respect for these exotic creatures. He developed this admiration by noticing that animals suffer just as human beings do.

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56 Ibid.
Another literary device that shapes my poems is free verse. The website *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains the differences between free verse and poems that rhyme:

Free verse, poetry organized to the cadences of speech and image patterns rather than according to a regular metrical scheme... It does not have the steady, abstract rhythm of traditional poetry; its rhythms are based on patterned elements such as sounds, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, rather than on the traditional prosodic units of metrical feet per line. Free verse, therefore, eliminates much of the artificiality and some of the aesthetic distance of poetic expression and substitutes a flexible formal organization suited to the modern idiom and more casual tonality of the language.58

I have used free verse in all of the cutout animations that I have created thus far, including *Raincheck* (Fig. 35). *Raincheck* is about the speediness of living in our society and how the wealthy and the poor are affected differently. For instance, when people need to take a break, their options are dependent on income. I was drawn to create the animation after losing my

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brother to drugs. Not long after his death, I read an article about a pink dolphin called the boto.\(^\text{59}\) In the article, it spoke about the mythical powers that the dolphin possessed; one of them was shape-shifting into a human at night.\(^\text{60}\) I chose to depict the dolphin jumping through a hula-hoop, but on the other side he disappears. I thought that this image connected to the story because vacations or breaks in our lives allow our worries to disappear, even if it’s only for a little while. At one point the poem mentions, “For those that can’t afford a vacation, drugs are a tragic treasure, and they go like a blowtorch through butter.” I use free verse instead of rhyming poetry because I feel that forcing one to rhyme consistently can hinder what one is truly trying to say. One poet who uses free verse that I have been strongly influenced by is Charles Bukowski. I enjoy his no-filter attitude and that he tries to find the perfect words to explain what he is feeling as accurately as possible. Bukowski describes the power of words: “Poetry is what happens when nothing else can.”\(^\text{61}\) He also stated, “Genius might be the ability to say a profound thing in a simple way.”\(^\text{62}\)


\(^{60}\) Ibid.


In conclusion, my work focuses on both the real and the unreal to create images that can be woven into a narrative. It is my hope that when people view my work, they might see parts of themselves, and it will stir their imagination. We live in a world that is so focused on differences that it is easy to overlook our similarities. These similarities are important to remember. They serve as examples of how to overcome great obstacles as well as reminding us that suffering is part of being alive. I believe that suffering is alleviated when it is shared, and humor is best when it is directed at oneself instead of at others. I feel that much of life’s intolerableness can cause great laughter when one is removed from the situation. After all, as Hannah Höch once said: “I want to show that small can be large, and large can be small, it is just the standpoint from which we judge that changes.” Or as Dr. Seuss, one of my favorite artist and authors says it: “even though you can’t see or hear them at all, a person’s a person no matter how small!” I believe that my artworks share this concept that how we view ourselves and the world around us is only a matter of perspective, and this could change at the drop of a hat. I would like for my work to encourage inquisitiveness and to promote curiosity in the viewer about their relationship to others and to the world around them.

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Vita

Samuel Stolte Williams was born in Dothan, Alabama in 1977 and grew up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He received his B.F.A. Cum Laude, from Texas State University with an emphasis in painting in 2013. He also was an art instructor for Totally Cool Totally Art program at the Dougherty Arts Center in Austin, Texas, as well as a gallery attendant at the Ohr-O’keefe Museum in Biloxi, Mississippi. Stolte moved to New Orleans in 2014 to begin graduate studies at the University of New Orleans.