

5-18-2007

MirrorMirror

Alfred Podesta
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Podesta, Alfred, "MirrorMirror" (2007). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 525.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/525>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

MirrorMirror

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

Alfred Alexander Podesta

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2002

May 2007

for
Kezziah
and Bettie
Podesta

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	iv
Abstract	v
Introduction	1
On the Trail	2
A Close Look at Bunnies	5
Dolls and Dancers	14
Bikes, Fingers and Teeth.....	19
Conclusion - So, What is it All About?	24
Bibliography	30
Vita.....	31

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: <i>The Wall's Feet</i>	4
Figure 2: <i>Showing My Hand</i>	5
Figure 3: <i>Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Comfort)</i>	6
Figure 4: <i>Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Hubris)</i>	10
Figure 5: <i>Self-Portrait as Bunnies (How Things Work)</i>	12
Figure 6: <i>PodestaManet</i>	15
Figure 7: <i>PodestaMorrisSchneeman</i>	16
Figure 8: <i>Let's Dance</i>	17
Figure 9: <i>Let's Dance (remix)</i>	18
Figure 10: <i>Conjoined</i>	20
Figure 11: <i>Finger Grill</i>	21
Figure 12: <i>Sendak's Mouth</i>	21
Figure 13: <i>FingerTooth</i>	23

ABSTRACT

In the work I am presenting for my thesis exhibition I have culled the rich fantasies and experiences of my childhood and re-contextualized specific bits of those through the filters of adulthood, experience and education. The central work in this exhibition is a series of sculptures titled *Self-Portrait as Bunnies*. In each of these works I present adult-sized and adult-featured versions of myself in child-like poses.

This thesis will primarily be involved in examining this series and will do so in two ways. First by introducing the works – what they are, how they are made, the evolution of ideas from one to another – and second by looking at the larger themes in the series - both inherent and suggested. To properly locate the self-portraits, an examination will also be made of the work made prior to and concurrently with them.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1979 my family moved to an enormous, abandoned poultry farm in rural Virginia. For a child it was a paradise. There were half a dozen barns of different shapes and sizes. There were vast fields in which could be found the remnants of old plows. There was a wood through which a small stream flowed. There was a grass marsh with the remains of an abandoned boat near the edge of the creek that coursed through it. After reading “The Wind in the Willows” I cut and dragged saplings into the marsh to recreate Ratty’s riverside wharf. After a trip to an amusement park I dug, smoothed and cordoned a portion of the field to make my own putt-putt course. After reading “Watership Down” I ventured into the wood armed with a pair of rusty gardening shears where I cut my way into a briar thicket to make my own warren. In all of these activities I was following a guileless and naive creative imperative – making a direct connection between idea and object, concept and creation, without the filters and sensible mental blocks that develop as one ages. This period of my life provides the primary source material for all of the work that I have gathered together for the exhibition that accompanies this thesis.

My artwork has always focused on the figure. At times this focus has been direct and at others oblique and ephemeral – merely suggesting an animate presence. When I returned to the University of New Orleans in the fall of 2004 to seek an MFA in sculpture I knew that I wanted to continue to work with the figure but I wanted to find a new approach. My initial efforts were primarily earnest failures – educational but failures nonetheless. I began to see that I was trying to make work that was too catholic, too outside of my own experience. I realized that I needed to make art from a place I knew more personally and so I decided to do that literally by working from my own figure and from my own experiences. I was looking at many different artists at the

time but two in particular, Tom Sachs and Matthew Barney, were really resonating with me – Sachs for the playfulness, youthful exuberance and immediacy of construction methods employed in *Nutsy's* and Barney for the complexity, thoroughness and intoxicatingly lyrical fantasy aspects of his *Cremaster Cycle*. Through my experimentation and through the influence of these and other artists and conversations with peers and instructors, I was finally able to break with the precision and anonymous formality of my earlier work. It was this line of investigation that led me to start culling my early childhood memories for material and, eventually, to the creation of the series *Self-Portrait as Bunnies* - the central work in the exhibition that accompanies this thesis.

There are three pieces that were made prior to the *Self-Portrait as Bunnies* series that provide the foundation for the subsequent work and a brief discussion of those seems germane to this analysis. The self-portrait series, in turn, has led to several other related sculptures, drawings and photographs that I will also introduce. For the sake of clarity and convenience, the bulk of this paper is divided into two broad sections. The first presents the works in a linear exposition focusing on how they are made, look, led from one to the next and the thought processes behind them – a detailed examination of the mental and physical aspects of studio practice that have parented these pieces. The second focuses on clarifying and re-encapsulating the main ideas and themes that apply to the body of work in general, and to certain pieces in particular, by looking at how those ideas reach out of the studio and into the realm of critical analysis.

ON THE TRAIL

As mentioned before, when I first came to graduate school at the University of New Orleans I was looking for a new approach to art making. My first efforts in this direction

stemmed from a simple phonetic association between the words “ottoman” and “auto man” or “automaton”. I explored this connection by making a plaster reproduction of the ubiquitous, round vinyl ottoman (sometimes called a poof) but replaced its center upholstery button with a plaster cast of my navel in a convolution intended as a snarky homage to Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* and Nauman’s *Hand to Mouth*. The resulting piece, *(Auto)Man* (destroyed by flood), was painted to look like white vinyl but had a faint blush of fleshy color around the navel. Because of the subtleties of the paint job and since the scale of the umbilicus is so close to that of the button it is replacing, it requires looking carefully to see that the object is not just an ordinary ottoman. By combining this common piece of furniture and a belly button I was trying to get my viewers to connect the piece to themselves and also possibly to connect to a time in their childhoods when their navels were a source of fascination and amazement. This attempt at suggesting for the viewer an intuitive notion of a self-obsessed and inquisitive stage in childhood is a trope that is present in nearly all my subsequent work. (This idea can be related to the *mirror-phase* of Jacques Lacan’s Imaginary stage of early development¹ and will be explored further in later chapters).

Continuing with this anthropomorphization of banal objects I made *The Wall’s Feet* (figure 1). In this piece I sculpted scaled up versions of my feet and cast them in white plaster. These were inserted in the base of an 8’ high wall and the foot/wall junction was trimmed out in white acrylic fur reminiscent of the fur trim at the bottom of some satin dressing gowns. The ambiguity of whether the feet are the wall’s or belong to someone behind the wall kept the visual focus jumping between the feet and the blank wall above. (This ambiguity seeded the

¹ Laplanche, Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. p. 210.

indeterminate nature – chimera or costume - of the later self-portraits.) With only the feet as a clue the viewer kept looking for the rest of the figure – trying to fill in the blank.



Figure 1: *The Wall's Feet*, 2005, mixed media, 16" x 4" x 5".

I followed *The Wall's Feet* with a similar piece called *Showing My Hand* (figure 2) in which a flesh-painted plaster cast of my hand is reaching out from under the wall and pulling it up like a piece of drapery. This piece obviously owes something to Guber's isolated legs and half figures but the connection is superficial. Guber is investigating ideas of loss and parsing of the body.² My piece, while aesthetically bound to his, is imbued with a hokey, cinematic quality that makes it mirthful, ludicrous and entertaining. This was truly new ground for me. Letting my work be a little ridiculous loosened me up – something I desperately needed to do – and also

² Causey, *Sculpture Since 1945*, pp. 256-258.

gave me access to the tools of entertainment and humor. These tools have since become central elements in my work.



Figure 2: *Showing My Hand*, 2005 3"x6"x1".

A CLOSE LOOK AT BUNNIES

With this new willingness to use humor as an element in my work and a desire to employ the experiences of my childhood I began work on *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Comfort)* (figure 3). The specific childhood experience that was the seed for this piece was an obsession I had when I was about four or five with a one piece, zip-up pajama. When wearing this I felt protected, invincible and a little outside of myself. I didn't have ready access to television but I had seen Bugs Bunny cartoons. The plastic soles on my suit reminded me of that character's feet and made me feel I was transformed into some other - a fiction or an imaginary other - a bunny. Musing on this I also started thinking about all of the time I had spent alone as a child, creating imaginary two person games, qualifying my experience of solitude through interaction with an

imagined other. This led to the idea that I should create twin bunny self-portraits - an idea I struggled unsuccessfully to rid myself of.

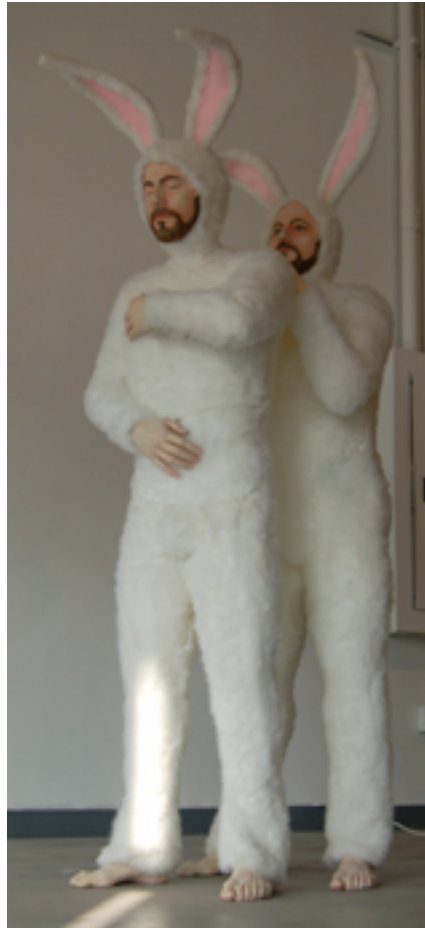


Figure 3: *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Comfort)*. 2005-06, 90"x28"x36".

The decision to create self-portraits seemed a natural next step in the process of using my own experiences as the material for my artwork. In the three previous pieces I had already done that to some extent by using my navel, feet and hand. To work with my entire figure seemed almost obvious. Less obvious was the use of bunnies. As said before, the idea is rooted in memories of a particular pajama I had as a child. More than just being a reference to a particular childhood experience it also just felt right. The oddity of having grown men dressed as bunnies ties into an enigmatic world of fantasy that I was hoping to capitalize on. The bunnies also offer

the dual and opposing references of cuddliness and the virility that is necessarily associated with their fecundity. This is a good conceptual companion to the idea that the bunnies might be two halves of a projected self-image and it was this desire to have the finished piece represent an experiential dichotomy that made me want to use doubles – in this case a consoler and consoled.

There are a number of art world precedents for the use of bunny imagery including Barry Flanagan's extensive use of hares and rabbits (not bunnies but aesthetically related) and Jeff Koons' stainless steel reproductions of inflatable Mylar bunnies. There are also uses of bunnies in film that have stronger ties to my work. In both "Harvey" and "Donnie Darko" the protagonists are visited by rabbits only they can see. Perhaps the best link to the memory of my relationship to the pajama that started this line of thinking can be found in the movie "Gummo".³ One of the characters in this film, Bunnyboy, wanders his devastated town in a filthy hood with pink bunny ears. The hood acts a form of protection against the depravity that surrounds him – a surreal and desolate version of Linus' security blanket. This adopted bunny persona becomes for Bunnyboy a source, and in fact his only source of comfort. Bunnyboy's retreat into his costume can be seen as a direct analog, albeit far more grim, to the sense of security I gained as a child from wearing my pajama.

Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Comfort) consists of two life-sized sculptures of myself, one standing in front of the other. The one in front is looking down and cradling his stomach with his eyes closed. The one behind is grinning and clasping the front one's shoulders. I chose this pose because it seemed an evocative way of addressing the idea of imaginary companions and combining it with the idea of a dual projection of self. Both figures are covered almost entirely in acrylic bunny fur. The exposed areas – hands, feet and face – are semi-realistically painted

³ *Gummo*, DVD, directed by Harmony Korine.

plaster life casts. The figures themselves are sculpted from blocks of foam applied to a wooden armature. The fur is applied tight to the implied musculature of the figures. This creates an ambiguity as to whether it is suit or skin. The pieces are my height, 6'2", but with their ears they loom over most viewers at about 7'6".

There are several ideas introduced here that recur in all the subsequent pieces in the series. One of these is narrative isolation - the interaction between the figures is closed. The front one faces down with closed eyes and the one in back stares off into the distance in such a way as to make it impossible for the viewer to intercept his gaze. The bunnies are oblivious to the viewer. This device creates a palpable division between the space occupied by the bunnies and the space occupied by the viewer. To illustrate this distinction compare Charles Ray's *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...*⁴ to George Segal's *Man on a Bench*⁵ (or any of his solitary figures on park benches) or Antony Gormley's *Total Strangers*⁶. In the piece by Ray the viewer is excluded, held outside the action and relegated to the role of voyeur. The eight self-portraits form a closed loop (quite suggestively) that succinctly limns the space in which the art is happening and the space in which the viewer is standing. The converse effect can be seen in the Segal and Gormley pieces. With the Segal the viewer feels invited into the sculpture by the ordinariness of the situation and in the Gormley by the anomalousness of the situation. The banality of Segal's "everyday" person and the oddity of Gormley's placement of the figures each create an open loop that viewers complete with their presence. This strong viewer/object delineation in the *Self-Portrait as Bunnies* series underscores the suggestion of childhood fantasy by stressing the bunny-figures otherness. Or, to state this idea differently - by creating this

⁴ Paul Schimmel, *Charles Ray*. 32.

⁵ For an image see <http://www.miandn.com/artists/georgesegal>

⁶ For an image see <http://www.antonygormley.com/>

separation, the viewer can more easily imagine the bunnies as existing in a separate and different way.

Another idea that runs through all of the series involves gesture. In spite of the smile on the back bunny's face, the real "expression" of the figures is in the positioning of their hands, ears and even their feet. This is extended and heightened in the rest of the series by making the faces expressionless and identical, which compresses their individual identity and makes them more interchangeable. This interchangeability is important because it reinforces the idea that the figures are all permutations of the same fantasy projection. They are multiple and yet single – all images of the same character. The idea of gestural differentiation within these pieces has its roots in Robert Morris' early work, specifically his *L-Beams*. In this work the three identical shapes are imbued with different gestural attitudes solely by the way they are positioned. In a 1995 interview Morris even described these as synecdoches for the figure – referencing the figure by isolating only the roughest elements of gesture.⁷ (The series that *L-Beams* are a part of is also referenced in the Morris piece *Site*, my recreation of which, *PodestaMorrisSchneeman*, is discussed later in this paper.)

Living with these two bunnies in my studio, constantly feeling their presence in almost alive terms, led me to start contemplating the whimsical notion that they, like the Grimm Brother's industrious shoemaker's elves, might be doing things when I locked up for the night. It was with this in mind that I began working on *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Hubris)* (figure 4). I imagined a scenario in which the first two figures had taken it upon themselves to make their own "Alex," mimicking my creation of them. This scenario seemed like it would provide strong connections to the ideas already presented in *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Comfort)*. Through the

⁷ Karmel, *Robert Morris: formal disclosures*. p. 97.

bunny-figures creation of an other relating to their form it seemed the viewer could be connected to the idea of the bunny-figures as being an other created from my form – the bunny-figures attempt to ground and explore their own experience could be equated with my similar attempts.



Figure 4: 3. *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Hubris)*, 2006, 30"x120"x60".

This piece consists of two more of these bunny figures made in the same style as those in the earlier piece but stretched out on their stomachs on the floor in a pose immediately recognizable as that of children at play. They are intently engaged in modifying a stuffed white toy bunny into a crude and improvised version of me. One is pulling a t-shirt onto the toy bunny. The other is cutting off its ears with a pair of scissors. They have made a mask for him out of a fake Artforum magazine cover. This fake magazine has my face on the cover and the caption “Alex Podesta: vivisecting the new YBA” [young bunny artist], an arrogance that nicely mimics the arrogance of the two figures and also, because the two bunnies are mutilating a toy bunny,

can be seen as referencing the dissected animal pieces of Damien Hirst, the most well known of the artists actually referred to with the YBA [Young British Artists] acronym.

What the two bunnies intend for their creation is not clear and that open-endedness allows for many different associations. This could be an homage or part of a ritual - people have been making fetishes and idols for at least thirty thousand years. Or perhaps it is an effigy intended for a burning or voodoo ritual – a means by which the bunny-figures are acting out their anger and frustration with their maker. The idea of it as an action with Judeo-Christian religious references bears out easily in a number of ways: the creation of Adam in God's own image; the tradition of the golem; the making of a false idol to Baal; the hubris of the citizens of Babel. The cutting off of the toy bunny's ear could even be seen as an oblique reference to Peter's attack on Malchus in the garden of Gethsemane and the overall composition of the piece may remind some viewers of paintings representing Judith and her maid slaying Holofernes. The flexibility of these references taken in conjunction with the parenthetical title of the piece serve to create an interesting ambiguity as to who is being hubristic. Is it the bunnies for trying to create a version of their maker or is it the artist for trying to make versions of myself?

While all of these references are interesting, it is their cumulative effect rather than anything specific that is most important. By this I mean that while these allusions serve to ground the piece generally within a cultural and artistic tradition their purpose within this piece is to push the viewer to circle reflexively to the context of the interaction between the two bunny-figures and the toy bunny.

There were many things happening with *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Hubris)* that I found interesting but the area that I most wanted to highlight and seemed most translatable to another piece was the directed and child-like activity of the two bunnies. I had conceived the first self-

portrait to be interacting in the way children might but upon completion that suggestion was not as strong as I had hoped. The reference to childhood was too subtle and the unwanted homoerotic references too strong. In the second self-portrait the bunny-figures' poses and the mental markers for their activity are undeniably child-like. By this time I realized that this would need to be a series of at least three or four sets and I wanted all of them to be fully immersed in this presentation of childhood exploration.



Figure 5: 6. *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (How Things Work)*, 2006. 90"x96"x42"

Casting about for how the next set of bunnies might be arranged I remembered an interaction between my younger brother and myself when I was about six or seven. We were sitting on the floor and I had a pile of chess pieces beside me. I was trying to teach him how to

play the game by showing him how the different pieces were allowed to move but the whole enterprise was a farce because I didn't have a board. I was earnestly trying to teach and he was earnestly trying to learn but we lacked a fundamental ingredient. This interaction can be seen as exemplifying an arrogance stemming from ignorance or naiveté. An analogous example of this flawed, inherently child-like sincerity that most will be familiar with is that romantic kissing is usually explained or demonstrated before there is a real awareness of the libido. The child has some of the information, wants to learn, but without this one crucial bit of information the lesson is null, understandable only in retrospect.

With this idea in mind I began working on *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (How Things Work)* (figure 5). The title of this piece comes from a children's book by David Macaulay called "How Things Work". I had spent a great deal of time as a child with a forerunner of this book by Joe Kaufman called "Joe Kaufman's What Makes it Go? What Makes it Work? What Makes it Fly? What Makes it Float?".⁸ It explains, in simple drawings, easy language and creative paralleling, how everyday technological items function. Images from this book and references to it appear in a number of pieces I have made recently. In this particular piece it references not just the book itself but also the concept of the book – presenting complicated ideas in easy to understand analogies for the consumption of children. One of the bunny-figures has made a set of marionettes out of two toy stuffed bunnies using some sticks, string and black tape. For the benefit of the second bunny-figure he has outfitted these with scissors and is standing up, using the marionettes to act out a fight in which the toy bunnies are trying to cut each other's puppet strings. The second bunny is sitting on the floor, leaning back and watching this educational demonstration in conflict. Whether the lesson is about the future of the two bunny-figure's

⁸ Kaufman. *Joe Kaufman's What Makes it Go? What Makes it Work? What Makes it Fly? What Makes it Float?*.

relationship or about conflict in general is unclear and immaterial. The lesson is simply alluding to the framework of dispute and a child-like assessment of conflict.

For the exhibition accompanying this thesis all of the pieces from the *Self-Portrait as Bunnies* series will be shown together as one installation. By grouping them in this way I hope to reinforce the child-like nature of the pieces. Ideally the grouping will be read as a preschool or kindergarten environment – the seemingly perfect framework for the themes of childhood investigation that are a part of all of these works.

DOLLS AND DANCERS

At about the same time that I was working on *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Hubris)* I began working on a series of photographs that also explored bunny imagery. These came about from several different impetuses but started primarily as an antidote to the incredibly time consuming nature of the *Self-Portrait as Bunnies* series. These works offered the opportunity to work quickly on a small scale and have finished works in a matter of days, not weeks or months.

Two of these photographs are *PodestaManet* (figure 6) and *PodestaMorrisSchneeman* (figure 7). For both I dressed up identical Barbie dolls in bunny costumes I had made for them. The dolls are ostensibly male but I specifically chose ones that appear almost gender neutral. (Yet it is interesting to note that even though the dolls bear little or no relationship to me, in the context of my work as a whole they still read as self-portraits). I then built sets in which they were posed and photographed. The first of these sets was built to look like the room in Manet's *Olympia*. The painting was faithfully reproduced except I left out the cat at the foot of her bed. The two figures, Olympia and her maid, instead of being racially differentiated as they are in the original, are represented by identical dolls, but still retain the poses in the painting. By making

them the same I was trying to connect back to the idea in the bunny self-portraits of representing two parts of an interpersonal exchange with one repeated figure. This forms a nice contrast though with the idea discussed earlier that the self-portrait series forms a closed loop, putting the viewer in the position of voyeur since Manet's *Olympia* seems to challenge the viewer's voyeuristic tendency.



Figure 6: *PodestaManet*, 2006. 12"x17".

The set for the second photograph in this series was built to look like the stage on which Robert Morris and Carolee Schneeman enacted the performance piece *Site*. Their piece consisted of Schneeman posing on a simplified version of Olympia's couch behind a screen of Morris' Minimalist sculptures that he removed, one at a time, eventually revealing Schneeman. This

slow, reductive action served to highlight the idea of voyeurism that was part of both *Olympia* and *Site*.

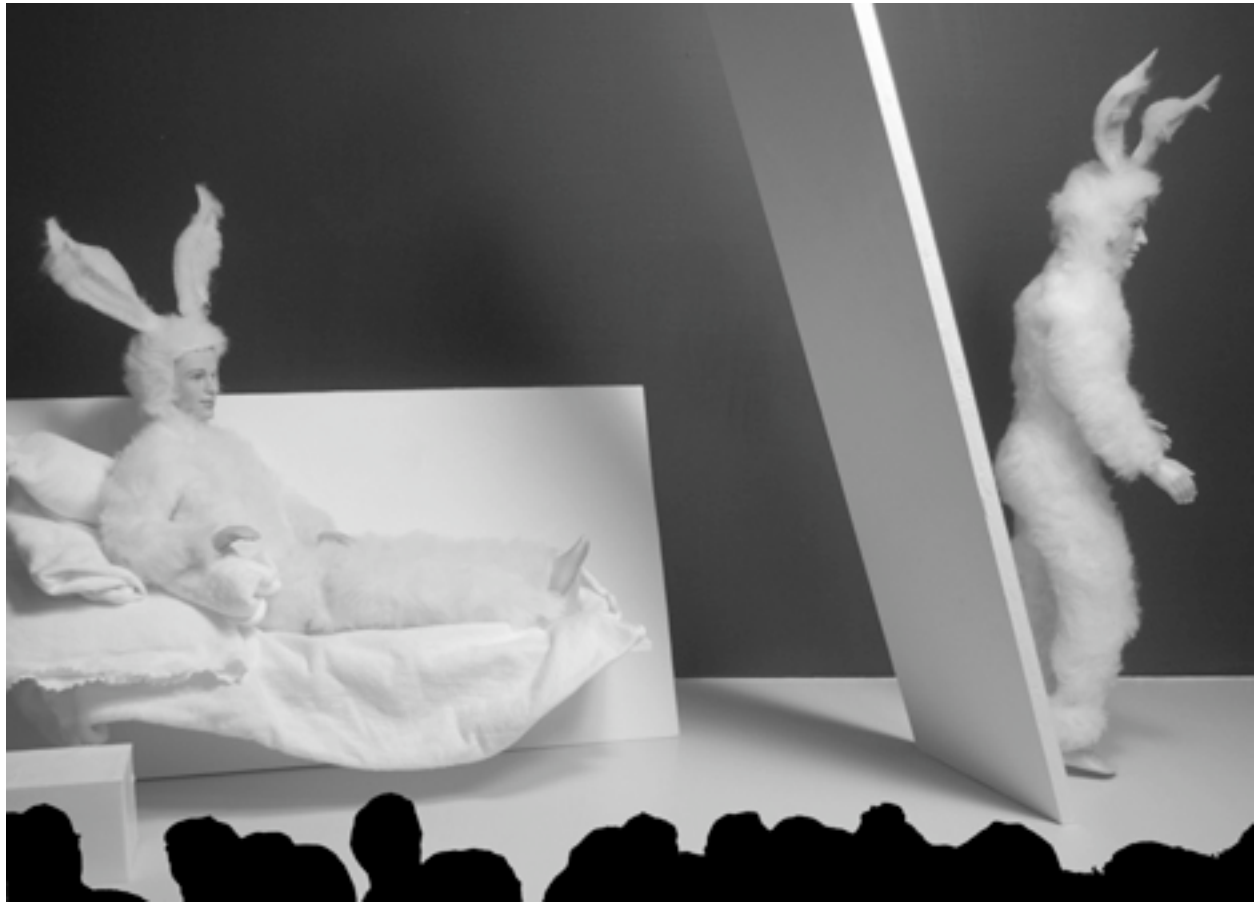


Figure 7: *PodestaMorrisSchneemann*, 2006. 12"x17".

When Manet painted *Olympia* he was most likely modeling it after Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and when Morris and Schneeman performed *Site* they were certainly modeling it on *Olympia*. It seemed fitting, therefore, in a piece about doubling and copying that was referencing a series of sculptures about doubling, to make pieces that were copies of copies. This line is intensified when one realizes that *PodestaManet* is the result of a two-dimensional painting being copied as a three-dimensional set and then re-converted to a two-dimensional photograph. In *PodestaMorrisSchneeman*, which goes through these same conversions, there is the added layer that *Site* is a three-dimensional interpretation of a two-dimensional painting but is known to

most art viewers only as a series of black and white stills. This jumping back and forth between two-dimensional and three-dimensional form connects these photographs to the post-modern ideas of simulation. For me, though, it is intended as a reference, a means of connecting my work to an established tradition and not as the focus of the piece. The use of the familiar dolls ties these photographs to the self-portrait series by exploiting their inherent links to childhood. In presenting these vignettes I'm trying, once again, not just to make art historical references but, more importantly, to also push the idea of children at play and the immediacy of the direct approach of that play.



Figure 8: *Let's Dance*, 2006. 11"x18".



Figure 9: *Let's Dance (remix)*, 2006. 12''x18''.

In working on the *Self-Portrait as Bunnies* series I used detailed photos of myself as guides. So that I could see clearly and in the greatest detail, these photos were taken nearly in the nude. Having so many of these photos around the studio I started to look at different ways they might become works in their own right. As a child I had become fascinated with an image from the Kaufman book I mentioned earlier that showed a group of kids dancing to the tunes emanating from a phonograph player and had been trying to find a way to incorporate my memory of this image into a piece. These two ideas came together in *Let's Dance* (figure 8) and

Let's Dance (remix) (figure 9). In *Let's Dance* three different bikini clad versions of myself are shown dancing together to the tunes coming from a floating portable radio. A staff of music is illustrated emanating from the radio complete with the notes to a simple G, A, B chord progression. In *Let's Dance (remix)* two versions of myself are caught in the same dance. The figures are grounded in both pieces by a slightly tilted horizon line. The backgrounds are reduced to a washy white. These pieces continue to explore the multiples of self and fantasy of childhood found in all the works presented so far. By removing the bunny costumes though, there is a de-layering that I think heightens the nostalgic, wistful nature of these two pieces. They feel a little like scrapbooks, a little like old magazines and a lot like a glimpse into real solipsistic dementia.

BIKES, FINGERS AND TEETH

After completing *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Hubris)* I began to work on another piece in that series that would have had two bunny-figures riding bikes together. As the work progressed though I became more and more interested in the way the bike elements were coming together and I started to see them no longer as props for the bunnies but as stand-ins for them. So I dropped the bunnies and brought the two bikes together as *Conjoined* (figure 10). In this piece the forks of two children's BMX bikes are joined together onto one front wheel. The bike's frames and forks are covered in white acrylic bunny fur and the other areas are primarily black with a few spots of chromed hardware. Both of the bikes also have drive mechanisms made from electric can openers mounted to aluminum chassis. These impel the bikes towards each other with equal force resulting in an animated shoving contest.



Figure 10: *Conjoined*, 2006, 84" x 26" x 96".

This piece mirrors the duality found in the self-portrait series and reinforces the idea of the two as part of a single whole. It also makes a big step away from the self-portrait series. In all of the bunny pieces the two parts are working in tandem - consoling, crafting, instructing, but working together representing projections of the self with a common goal. In *Conjoined*, however, the parts are working against each other. This perhaps makes this piece the best literal illustration of classically understood isolated parts of self in conflict with one another. For example the Taoist idea of the yin and yang, Freud's theories of the id and ego or, to bring it back once again to children's literature, the big me/little me dichotomy. This piece continues to underscore the idea of a child's concept of self by the fact that the two bikes are, in fact, children's bikes. They are also engaged in a pushing contest reminiscent of the playground. Additionally, it is implied that one of the bikes will eventually win but by the bikes being nearly

identical to one another this eventuality is not loaded with hierarchical import - the viewer cannot really cheer for one over the other or assign a value to the one that does win.



Figure 11: *Finger Grill*, 2007, 12" x 18".



Figure 12: *Sendak's Mouth*, 2007, 12" x 18".

One day while thinking about something else and tapping my fingers together I was struck by the visual and functional connection between fingers and teeth. This is certainly a simple observation but one that I could not get out of my mind. I started making sketches of this in different configurations but then remembered Michelle Elmore's "grill" photographs (extreme close-ups of mouths with an abundance of gold teeth) and found the proper direction for this idea.

Finger Grill (figure 11) is a digital collage of twenty-six photographs in which a close up of my mouth has the teeth replaced with fingers. This piece is the farthest satellite to the main thrust of this body of work but it still connects well because it embraces, and yet heightens, the absurdity found in almost all the others. Comparing it to *Showing My Hand* and *The Wall's Feet* one can see that it is working with many of the same ideas but in photographic form. There is an uncomfortable mental dislocation that occurs because at first glance the viewer's mind does not quite recognize what it is seeing. The image is familiar but wrong.

I made several versions of this photograph and one of these, *Sendak's Mouth* (figure 12), is a digital print on matte paper that is painted and drawn over with acrylics and graphite. This piece has some of the same uncomfortable quality as *Finger Grill* but this is lessened by the harmonizing effect of the over-drawing and painting. The result seems to have some of the aesthetic characteristics of Maurice Sendak's illustrations. This connection meshes perfectly with the idea that all of my work is a culling of childhood experiences and fantasies in that for many viewers a reference to Sendak is a reference to their own childhood experiences and fantasies.

While working on *Sendak's Mouth* I was reminded of a particularly strange fear that stuck in my head when I was about five or six. After misunderstanding a story I read, I became convinced that if I – indeed if anyone – were to smile or laugh too hard then my mouth could

connect at the back of my neck and the top of my head would fall off. I decided to combine these two ideas and began work on *FingerTooth* (figure 13).



Figure 13: *FingerTooth*, 2007, 14"x75"x28".

This piece consists of a single figure about 6'2" in height. It is sculpted out of Styrofoam and covered with the same white acrylic fur as the self-portraits and bicycles. It has feet and the suggestion of legs attached to a slender, tapering, phallus-shaped figure. For a mouth it has an

upper and lower jaw filled with fingers that go entirely around its head. The fingers are set in jaws of bubble gum. I used bubble gum for several reasons. First, it just looks fantastic. The pink of the gum alludes to the color of actual gums but the color is so unnatural that the effect is unnerving. When the piece was first made it even retained a layer of spit from the installation process. Second, bubble gum seems to be an accoutrement specifically of childhood, not adulthood. Finally, when looking at this piece the viewer is connected to the idea of my having chewed the gum in order to apply it to the work.

This piece is certainly a product of many of the same thought processes that led to the earlier works but it is pushing much further into a world of pure childhood fantasy. Whether or not this marks a real shift in focus in my work is hard to tell yet but at this stage it is certainly an interesting addendum to the overall body of work.

CONCLUSION - SO, WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

So far, in discussing the works that form the basis of the exhibition that accompanies this thesis paper, I have focused on a direct exposition – what was made, how it was made and what the memories and influences, both internal and external, were that guided its creation.

Throughout this process I have referred to the ideas that my work is about the role of fantasy in childhood, the longing for companionship and security in childhood and how these both can carry into adulthood. These are the ideas that all of my works and particularly the *Self-Portrait as Bunnies* series have been taking as their inception points. This was meant to describe an illustrative goal of the work – not an attempt at regression on my part. I trust it has been made clear that these ideas, in a crudely conceptual way, have been a means of framing my approach to art making – a means of exploring my practice in the studio. I am, of course, intrigued by

these ideas, but only at their most fundamental level and as a gateway into exploring my own childhood as source material. This being such a crucial focus of these works though, it is necessary to discuss ways in which those ideas reach out of the studio, out of my head, away from the pieces themselves and into the world at large by looking for corroborating evidence for the intuitive allusions discussed thus far, trying to tie them back into the work that has already been presented.

The psychoanalyst and theorist Jacques Lacan provides an interesting beginning for me in this pursuit with his ideas regarding the development of consciousness in children. He divides this development into two main areas, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The primary focus of the Imaginary is a pre-linguistic stage of consciousness that centers on the visual recognition of images that he calls the *mirror-phase*.⁹ (This is where this paper and accompanying exhibition get their titles. *MirrorMirror* is meant as a reference not just to Lacan but also to the ideas of doubling, self-portraiture, vanity, and of course, “Snow White”).

The *mirror-phase* is marked by several different developments. At first the child is absorbed in bodily sensations but is starting to perceive the outside world through symbols and fantasy. The child then starts recognizing the world as a mirror of itself, identifying with the reflected double but because he is lacking in coordination and a control of what he is seeing mirrored, this leads to a fragmented body-image.¹⁰ Laura Mulvey explains this part of Lacan’s idea by saying that “...the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body.”¹¹ This dual relationship exists in the

⁹ Lacan, *The Mirror-Phase as Formative Function of the I*. p. 620. From *Art in Theory*.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 621-623.

¹¹ Mulvey. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. p. 985. From *Art in Theory*.

child's mind through fantasy and is based on the image of a counterpart that can only exist by virtue of the fact that the ego is originally another.¹² As the *mirror-phase* reaches its conclusion this pleasurable dual existence is unified. The child moves from the Imaginary to the Symbolic and becomes an *I*, co-opted, or to use Lacan's word, mediatized by society.¹³

Within this idea of a *mirror-phase* there are several points of interest with regards to my work – particularly those of an early, fractured sense of self that brings the child pleasure and of a sense of loss when those parts are unified. This can be seen as relating directly to the initiating ideas for *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Comfort)*. In this piece the back bunny is comforting the distraught front bunny. The two are adult-sized and featured but are presented in childish outfits or personas. Because of this paradoxical pairing it is possible to see the front bunny's distress as being caused by a longing for some missing aspect of childhood and by looking to Lacan's *mirror-phase* it is possible to further speculate that what he is longing for is his more perfect reflected image or the sense of self that was originally outside of himself.

By thinking of the two bunny-figures as representing discreet parts of a whole and by following in this same psychoanalytic mode it is possible to further postulate the front bunny as representing the id and the back bunny as representing the ego. This idea was suggested in a generalized fashion earlier in relation to my intuitive reasons for using doubled images.

The idea of the id and the ego originate with Freud and are explained by William Crane in *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications*. The id is the most primitive and illogical part of the personality and its primary goal is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, generally by reducing tension. It contains basic drives and impulses and also images and sensations that have been suppressed. The id, in early development, creates fantasies to reduce

¹² Laplanche, Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. p. 210.

¹³ Lacan, p. 623.

tension in the absence of another palliative.¹⁴ The fantasy coping mechanism described in Lacan's *mirror-stage* is a product of the id and it is during this stage that the foundation for what will eventually be the ego is formed.¹⁵ The ego is the part of the personality that is based in reality – that is rational and wary. The ego modifies the impulses generated by the id and while the ego functions independently of the id, the ego derives all of its energy from it.¹⁶

By looking at this model it is possible to interpret the front bunny's distraught state as being instigated by impulses originating from the id and if those impulses involve a longing for a past, unresolved state then we can further see them as irrational. The back bunny then becomes a representation of the ego. By trying to comfort the front bunny this can be seen as representing the ego's attempts to subjugate the id. This model can also explain the back bunny's smirk if we take that expression to represent a knowing or wry appreciation of the realities of the actual world.

This same formation of the id and ego can be seen as illustrated in *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (How Things Work)*. By trying to naively explain the fundamentals of conflict to the reclining bunny, the standing bunny can be seen as representing the ego. By passively observing this scenario, perhaps even wishing its necessity out of existence, the reclining bunny can be seen as representing the id. The idea that this piece is representing the division between the id and ego can perhaps also be seen as reiterated by the two toy bunnies' evenly matched conflict.

The third portion of Freud's construction involves the superego. This forms what we can refer to as a conscience or system of morality. The superego, in Freud's estimation, is formed first as a result of the child's relationship to its parent's total control of its existence. This

¹⁴ Crain, *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications*. p. 260.

¹⁵ Laplanche, Pontalis, p. 251.

¹⁶ Crain, p. 261.

concept of the superego continues to form through the individual's relationship to role models. It consists of both ingrained ideas of retribution for negative behavior and rewards for positive behavior.¹⁷

Applying this construction to *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Hubris)* we can see id, ego and superego triad illustrated. The two bunny-figures on the floor can be seen as linked as the drive and the modifier – their curled toes representing the id and the child-like explorative nature of their activity representing the ego. Their joint efforts can be seen as trying to appease or access their maker, trying to understand a force – equatable with parental control – higher than themselves – a representation of the superego.

Another idea that I have introduced is that the bunny-figures can be seen as representing imaginary friends. During early development children use cooperative play, imitate parents, have intense curiosity about their bodies and often develop imaginary friends. Fantasy play is an important component of early development and the creation of imaginary friends is both healthy and relatively common with two-thirds of children reporting having had at least one. Imaginary friends can develop out of a desire for companionship, as a way to work through fears, or as a way to deal with actual or perceived restrictions. In most cases these fantasy companions simply fade from the child's experience, their disappearance unmarked by any particular event. In some instances the imaginary friend remains for much longer and can engender the creation of entire fantasy worlds.¹⁸

This has significance in several ways when looking at the *Self-Portrait as Bunnies* series. A different but related way of looking at interaction between the two bunny-figures in *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Comfort)* than was discussed in relation to Lacan and Freud could be found

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 262-263.

¹⁸ Taylor. *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them*. p. 4-7.

in focusing on what happens to the imaginary friend when it fades from the child's experience. If the two bunnies are seen to represent imaginary companions, an idea supported by their alluding to the rabbit figures in "Harvey" and "Donnie Darko", then perhaps what the front bunny is lamenting is an estrangement from the one who imagined them. Following this idea, the two bunny-figures in *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (Hubris)* can be seen as trying to re-create the one from whom they are now estranged and the bunny-figures in *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (How Things Work)* could be seen as having given up on the one who thought them into existence. They are now perhaps engaged in the process of creating their own imaginary friends from the stuffed toy bunnies. Another way of examining the role of imaginary friends, perhaps suggested by the series, can be found by focusing on how, when the child does not part from them, they can lead to the creation of entire fantasy worlds. Looked at in this way, all of the bunnies group collectively into one unified projection of some unseen characters imagination.

Through looking at Lacan's idea of the *mirror-phase*, Freud's id, ego and superego triad and Taylor's description of imaginary friends I have tried to connect the intuitive ideas that inform my studio practice with some of the formal ideas that the resulting work engenders. In this case those formal ideas have been from the areas of developmental psychoanalysis and developmental psychology. This would seem appropriate since the work gathered for this thesis exhibition focuses on aspects of childhood, specifically the role of fantasy in childhood, the longing for companionship and security in childhood and how these both can carry into adulthood.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Causey, Andrew. *Sculpture Since 1945*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Crain, William. *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 2000.
- Gummo*, DVD. Written and directed by Harmony Korine. New Line Home Cinema, 1997.
- Karmel, Pepe. *Robert Morris: Formal Disclosures*. Art in America. June, 1995.
- Kaufman, Joe. *Joe Kaufman's What Makes it Go? What Makes it Work? What Makes it Fly? What Makes it Float*. New York: Golden Press, 1971.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Mirror Phase as Formative of the Function of the I*. found in Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood, eds.. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- Laplanche, Jean and J.B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. New York: WW Norton and Co., 1974.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. found in Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood, eds.. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- Schimmel, Paul. *Charles Ray*. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998.
- Taylor, Marjorie. *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

VITA

Alfred Alexander Podesta was born in central North Carolina and grew up on the brackish swamps of Tidewater in eastern Virginia. In 1992 he moved to the big city of Richmond, Virginia where he attended Virginia Commonwealth University. Fate and circumstance brought him to New Orleans in 1997. In 2002 he completed his undergraduate studies and received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of New Orleans. He returned to his alma mater in 2004 to pursue a Master of Fine Arts.