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## Newer Versions of the Same Thing

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Newer Versions of the Same Thing

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

John Fields

B.A. University of Alabama at Birmingham

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## **Abstract**

I am interested in the role photographs play in the everyday life of contemporary society, and more specifically the people and memories that occupy those photographic images. In my work I attempt to take the specific moments caught in seemingly meaningless photographs and elevate their importance through painting and animation. I want to linger on the idea of experience and the closing gap between real-life experience and the experience gained through viewing man-made images.

## **Introduction**

When I was 17 years old I suffered an anxiety attack that resulted in a self-imposed isolation for six weeks. During this time I began to think about, experiment and create short films and drawings and paintings that were informed by sequential imagery culled from a variety of sources. Underground and independent comics influenced me by their graphic depiction of figures and empirical environments. In much the same way that action and emotional trajectories are fragmented in comics, I began using film and digital photography to record my emotional ranges by recording my face for long periods of time on a daily basis. I also explored these shifts in emotion through a combination of my photographic images and different drawing textures. Like other artists (Brodsky) I began to use drawing and photography to chart my improvements and plummets.

Months later, after I had slowly rejoined the outside world, I was no longer creating self-portraits. Photographing and drawing my own image had been a secret obsession, one I did not share with anyone. It wasn't until five or six years later when I was given a self-portrait assignment that incorporated photocopied images, that my mind returned to those activities I had started in my bedroom as a teenager. This assignment was the beginning

of my desire to become an artist; it suddenly gave validity to my secret obsession and enabled me to push my experimentation to new levels. This simple classroom assignment spawned a series of 15 drawings I did as an independent study course in my junior year as an undergraduate student. I found myself reaching back to techniques I had begun to use with my experimental film and drawings years prior, only now I had several years of study in literature, film and fine arts to inform my decisions and intentions.

In this series of works I strove to create large drawings that encapsulated my interests in mortality and gestalt expression. By making the works on a larger-than-life-size scale I hoped to create a large arena in which the viewer could become immersed. In many of these early drawings, like my time spent in isolation years before, I was interested in creating physical objects that documented my emotional shifts. I often used fragments of digital photographs taken of a single figure but shot from multiple angles. When assembled the fragments would form a cohesive whole that represented several individual moments in time forced together to create a slightly disorienting effect. These photographic fragments were collaged together using a variety of materials and media, giving the work a tactile and textural quality I found greatly satisfying. For me, the photographic fragments in my drawings further embellished the disconnection between



recording actual experience and expressing my emotional states with a heightened approach to feeling by expressive mark-making.

At this time I also introduced the idea of diary writing that I collaged as background into the work to mirror the fact that these objects were from my past. These writings were very personal stream of conscious ramblings written in an almost illegible script. To the viewer, these text usually served as nothing more than another layer, an atmospheric texture.

By the end of undergraduate school I had created a body of work consisting of about 30 mixed media drawings heavily influenced by the themes of time and memory explored by South African artist William Kentridge , Czech Republic Surrealist animator Jan Swankmajer and Susan Sontag's writings on photography. I graduated from college with an increasing interest in drawing, animation, and the history of guerilla film-making and a drive to seek out ways to combine the three.

## Newer Versions of the Same Thing

I slowly began to let go of my obsession with self-portraiture in my first few weeks of graduate school. It was around this time that I started to use friends as subject matters for my portraits. This switch from auto-biography to biography occurred as a way of coping with my new environment. I became less interested in tracking my own mental and emotional fluctuations and more interested in making sense out of "candid" or seemingly meaningless moments that I had recorded or photographed. I was interested in making sense of why these moments seemed to have importance attached to them. At the same time in my films and animations I was interested in using my face and gestures not autobiographically as images, but to make the viewer consider their own relation to the world.

In the first batch of works I created in Graduate School, text became more and more prominent than in past drawings, and I switched from using my stream of consciousness texts to texts written a long time ago by my grandfather. My subjects were moving away from the autobiographical, and so were the other aspects of the work, the text and photographic image. The text was no longer a device used to create a textural background for the drawing, but was now composed much of the clothing and other inanimate objects that appeared in the work.

The best examples of these drawings are two works *Eric* and *Drunks*. Both

works showcase the evolution of the existing techniques from my undergraduate work (charcoal, Conte crayon, text and digital imagery) into the new body of work. I was still incorporating these methods in my works mostly out of a longing for familiarity. Having just moved out of state for the first time in my life I was reluctant to experiment too much in my work at first. While everything about my life at that moment was completely new, my work became a connection to the things I had left in Alabama.

I began the drawings with a series of digital photographs that I altered in various imaging software, the images were then printed on lined notebook paper and collaged into a grid formation loosely based on the grid-like pixels found in low-resolution digital images. Often the individual collage elements are printed in different proportions or in some cases from entirely different images. When assembled together, these subtle inconsistencies in proportions create slight distortions in the subject's physical features. This is probably most evident in the faces of the figures in *Drunks* (Figure 1), many of their physical features (eyes, noses and hands) are slightly larger than they should be. Once the basic composition was formed I would unify the digital prints and obliterate the printed ink using a combination of ink and charcoal applied directly to the printed image. While the subjects were everyday people in banal settings, the digital manipulation and assemblage of the digital prints create a

disorientation I hoped to pass on to the viewer.



**Figure 1: Drunks, 2004, Charcoal, ink and conte on notebook paper, 38" x 70"**

There are noticeable differences in the implementation of text in *Eric* (Figure 2) and *Drunks* compared to the drawings I made prior to graduate school. While still handwritten, the text is no longer my own or stream-of-consciousness,



**Figure 2: Eric, 2004 Charcoal, ink and conte on notebook paper, 30" x 44"**

but is now a series of borrowed hand-written documents that belonged to my grandfather. While the text still maintains a journalistic consciousness, but is now a series of borrowed hand-written documents that belonged to my grandfather. While the text still maintains a journalistic intention, it is no longer my journal but a collection of biblical sermons with a specific point of view. So the text may no

longer be written by myself but still remains biographical due to the relationship my grandfather and his views and influence over what would become my immediate family. In some ways the borrowed text becomes more personal than the passages I wrote. I feel the use of the bible sermons may have created a barrier between the work and the viewers as they try to make the connection between the writings and the imagery. The combination of imagery and text created a sort of fragmented narrative I felt drawn to, and this interest goes back to my obsession with time, memory and the snapshot photograph. In addition to the narrative quality, the text became an integral part of the actual construction and composition of the final drawing. Instead of floating in an atmospheric void, the text now becomes a physical presence in both the work and the subject. In both *Eric* and *Old Man* (Figure 3) the text only exists as a collaged element describing the shape and form of the figures' clothing. I felt drawn to the artifact quality of the found writings and decided to give them a real physical relationship with the figure. In drawings the text describes all non-organic components represented in the drawing. The text ceases to be writing on the surface of a work but a physical object with its own history.



**Figure 3: Old Man, 2004, Charcoal and ink on notebook paper, 44" x 30"**

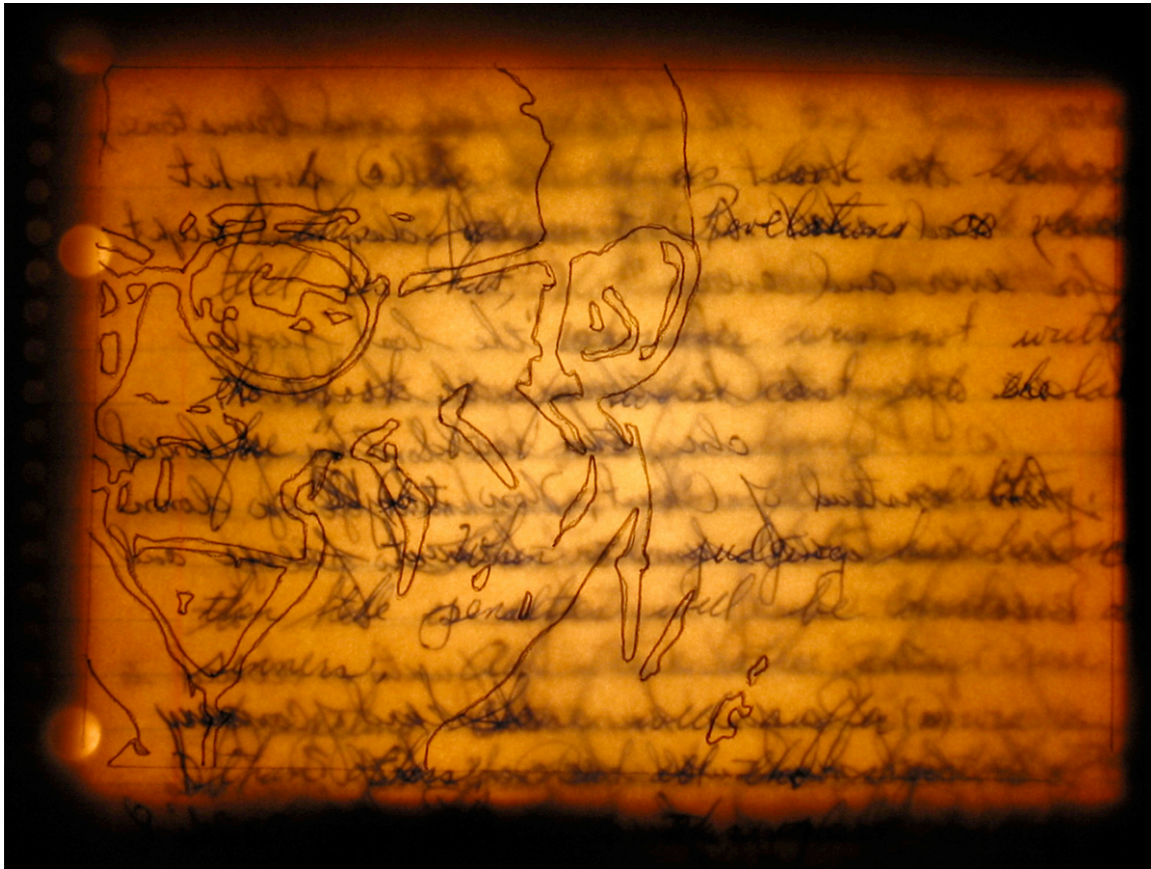
## Animation Tests

I continued at the same time to try more and more experimental digital drawing processes and used an expressive approach to pluralistic angles and perspectives. I strove to embellish the finesse of my mark making, blurring the line between photographic image and academic representational drawing. This approach to elaborate mark making would surface later as the layering of brushworks in portrait paintings. It also spurred my interest in finding new ways to approach my films and animations. I wanted to create vignettes and fragments of narrative images using physical gestures like rubbing my face and bodily appendages engaged in repetitive gestures. I built my own light-box and created miniature sets and tableaus that would allow me to work in a physically and emotionally intimate locale. By creating my own animation process and all my own props and machinery associated with process I started to consider the importance of exhibiting the elements of the process in much the same way a painting is made up of brushstrokes or a drawing of expressive or ritualized marks.

Over the course of my first year in graduate school I created a series of animation tests that utilized a various number of techniques, processes and presentations. The first of these animations was a piece entitled *Bored* (Figure 4), a nine second animation set on an endless loop depicting myself in an uneasy and restless sitting position inspired by nicotine withdrawals. *Bored* consisted of a



series of 180 5" x 6" ink drawings on tracing paper. Using my newly constructed light-box I photographed each individual drawing on top of the hand-written bible sermons utilized in my recent set of drawings. The result was an animation that



**Figure 4: Still from Animation Test 1 (Bored), 2004, ink on paper**

expressed the ephemeral and atmospheric qualities of time and memory that so interested me at that stage in my work. However, what probably interested me the most was a complete accident. I had not given much thought to the actual subject matter of the animation. I chose to animate myself because I was so familiar with rendering my own image on paper, but the seeming lack of action or narrative was

slightly absurd when stacked against the amount of time and effort that went in to creating the work.

The idea of creating an animation that was almost inanimate became of great interest to me, and for my next animation test I set out to execute this idea. I took a spiral bound sketchbook containing a hundred sheets of paper. I had an idea that I would draw the same image of an ink-bottle over and over again until the ink of my pen ran out of ink. It took me weeks to find a pen that would run out of ink in roughly one hundred pages. Once the drawings were complete I photographed each drawing and strung the images together to form an animation of an inanimate and stationary object. The only movement came from my own inability to precisely recreate the same image over the span of 99 drawings and the movements created by the pen running out of ink.

Not completely satisfied with the final animation of *99 Ink Bottles*, I began work on my next animation test entitled Face Smudge. One aspect of the previous animation that seemed to interest people was my decision to include the area of my workstation surrounding the drawings in the final animation. *Face Smudge* (Figure 5) consisted of 180 8 x 10 sequential charcoal drawings depicting my hand rubbing my own face. The drawings were smudged to create the illusion that somehow my drawn hand was smudging the medium as it rubbed my drawn face. When photographed and animated I included the area surrounding the drawings in an

attempt to create not just a series of images but the illusion of a moving drawing.



**Figure 5: Still from Animation Test 4 (Face Smudge), 2005, Charcoal on paper**

This idea of the moving drawing led me to the next and final animation test I would complete while in graduate school. My goal with this animation was simply to create a moving drawing that would be displayed on a wall alongside a series of inanimate drawings. I made a series of drawings of my own hand in various stages of opening and closing into a fist. Each drawing was on 8 1/2 x 11 paper and hung in a horizontal line on the wall. The group consisted of five sheets

of paper, four were charcoal drawings of my hand in it various moments of action with the fifth being a digitally projected animation of the hand opening and closing.

## Confrontation

During my struggle with drawing and due to ambivalent feelings towards a lot of my major work, I turned my attention back to video and animations and started to experiment with green-screen technology. I painted a wall in my studio in a chroma-key green paint and began a summer-long project that resulted in my video piece titled *Confrontation* (Figure 6).

This is the first time in my graduate work that the portrait loses its candid snapshot-like quality and becomes an intentional attempt to mask the identity of the subject. For the installation I applied large amounts of covering black make up to my face and my girlfriend's, removing any trace of identity. The make-up allowed me later to digitally alter our appearances, all but removing the usual physical features that define the human face. I then videotaped each of us separately in front of the green-screen wall. Using film-editing computer software, I removed the green-screen, placing the figures in a white void-like space focusing only on the figures as they stared curiously out towards the viewer or each other. I also incorporated sound as an element in my work for the first time. This was initially conceived to add another layer of "otherness" to the environment the figures occupy. The idea of role-playing had been an important issue in my work so far, the roles played out by the subjects of my paintings were the real life roles

we inhabit in daily life, the confrontation piece was a way to explore a fantastical sort of role-playing.



**Figure 6: Still from Confrontation, 2005, Digital video projection**

## **Failures and Paintings**

As I was creating my animations I had begun to reexamine my drawings and work on paper. I had been developing some ideas for a series of paintings for many months but lacked the confidence to commit to a medium that seemed so foreign to me at the time. I decided that my sense of satisfaction with my animations gave me the opportunity to make my first attempt at painting. My first attempt was a pair of paintings made of solid red fields of color surrounding a single, tiny, figure (one male, one female) located in the center of each painting. These figures were loosely based on anatomical and internal diagrams taken from outdated grade-school science textbooks. This use of solid color would later become a major element in my work. This simple composition led me to attempt something a little more complex. My next painting was a disastrous failure, I lacked a lot of the basic fundamental techniques involved with full color painterly representation. After what I considered to be my first flat-out failure in graduate school, I was forced to rethink my approach to painting.

I wanted to capture my ideas about everyday gestures and household routines in painting so I created a series of invented movie still paintings by taking digital images drawn candidly from my domestic experience both around my house and from some of my favorite movies. I was at this point very critical of how the paintings looked. I liked the use of minimal color or entirely grayscale value

range, and its association with still photography and cinema history and the idea of these images being fragments of a non-existing larger whole that was continuous. The result was a pair of small acrylic paintings on paper *Dead Man* (Figure 7) and *Front Porch* (Figure 8). *Dead Man* was a painted still from the Jim Jarmusch film of the same name. This image was one that had been in my mind since I was a



**Figure 7: *Dead Man*, 2005, Acrylic on paper, 14" x 20"**

teenager. I had recently seen the film again while searching for images to use while developing my skills as a painter. The image is of a man lying on the ground shown from the shoulders up in a profile view. The figure's head is resting on the remains of an extinguished campfire that forms a sort of halo. This image seemed to express some sort of religious iconography but with a macabre



sensibility. The second painting, *Front Porch* is what I referred to as an



**Figure 8: Front Porch, 2005, Acrylic on canvas, 14'' x 20''**

invented movie still depicting a seemingly meaningless moment in my own life.

The most significant aspect of these paintings, however, is that they mark the first time I employed a specific technique of painting that would remain present in my work for the next couple of years.

## **Portrait Paintings**

While working on my Movie Still paintings, I was still insistent upon painting from photographs, but I struggled greatly with the translation from photographic image to painting. As I had done so often in the past, I turned to something with a familiar (the digitally altered image) as a means of approaching a new and less familiar medium (paint). Influenced by the work of Wilhelm Sasnal, Alex Katz and more importantly Lisa Ruyter (although the extent of her influence on my newer work was unknown to me at the time) and my sponsor Jim Richard, I arrived at a method of creating images from photographs that could be easily translated into a painted one. I was striving to make my painting process more about the recording of information than about painterly expression. Through digital manipulation I could separate colors (grayscale values at this time) into series of sharply defined shapes or “islands” of value very closely resembling the pattern used in camouflage. This process offered freedom from the overwhelming intimidation I felt from the world of the painted image. By breaking down and separating color shifts and value ranges, I created a methodical and calculated system for describing photographic information through paint.

My first major series of paintings incorporate many of the elements used in my work up to this point. Once again I turned to my friends for subject matter. Each painting contains a single figure painted on a horizontal canvas. The

horizontal orientation of the canvas makes reference to my earlier Movie Still paintings and works against the traditional vertical portrait. The height and weight of the canvas is loosely based on the 16 x 9 ratio used in the presentation of a feature film. By placing the figure in a canvas of this shape, I hope to emulate the opening credits of any hip contemporary film in which the audience is introduced to a group of distinct characters through flashy graphics, colors and freeze-frame visuals.

Each figure is placed on the canvas, roughly following a rule-of-thirds composition, slightly off-centered. Each figure stares directly at the viewer, and while the subjects appear to be aware of the camera, each specific image that ended up as a painting was taken without the subject's knowing. By photographing the subject in between "takes", I am able to capture a moment that retains many qualities of the snapshot photograph while giving the figure an unguarded and unposed expression. This creates an uneasy sort of confrontation between the subject and viewer, this is probably best seen in *Yevgeny* (Figure 9) and *Amanda* (Figure 10).

Behind each figure is a solid color field inspired by bright colors used in children's product packaging and popular advertising. Each painting displays a different color background limited to five colors. I was interested in creating a



**Figure 9: Yevgeny, 2006, Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 30"**

a large group of work that would always be exhibited in groups of five and with each color represented. Limiting the color choices gave me the flexibility to swap and substitute different paintings within the group much like a manufacturer will create variations on existing products in order to increase sales.

By incorporating the references to film and consumer products, I do not intend to create nostalgia as much as mean to give a sense of familiarity to the viewer. Even when the viewer does not know the subject personally, the psychology represented in the subject's facial poses and foundations from which the visual elements are derived create accessibility to the work.



**Figure 10: Amanda, 2006, Acrylic on canvas, 48'' x 30''**

## **Masking the Figure**

After an entire year of painting grayscale figures that exist in solid fields of color, I began planning several possibilities for a new series of works. I am currently at the mid-point in a group of paintings that explore many of the things mentioned throughout the majority of this paper.

Depicted in the paintings are a series of masked figures in various poses. Like most of my works, these begin with a photographic image that is then digitally altered and finally transcribed into a painting. While they still retain a snapshot-like quality, their source images are very deliberately and specifically posed and composed (Figure 11). When creating the images, I strive for a journalistic or expose` type of photography. I want the represented figures to be very aware of the viewer. The work becomes possibly the most narrative driven (although still fragmented) I've created.

The figures' faces are completely covered with masks made from flower-patterned cloth. There is a total removal of the familiarity that played so prominently in my previous work. The use of the masks raises questions about the intentions and the nature of the narrative. By adding the masks, I wanted to have the viewer debate their function and purpose. Masks can be used as disguise, for protection, for ceremonial purposed or in a punitively. I wanted to create an

ambiguity about their purposes, but as the series progresses the figures become more agreeably sinister and threatening.

One important thing to note on this group of paintings is the use of color. This is the first time I have incorporated a full palette of color. While still using the “camouflage” painting technique (which takes on a new meaning with these secretive figures) I have removed the grayscale and started to paint the actual colors from the original source images. This use of color seems necessary to the documentary feel I am trying to impose on the work.



**Figure 11: Something to Look Forward to, 2007, Acrylic on canvas, 72” x 96”**

## **Vita**

John Fields was born at 7:45 pm on April 30, 1979 in Birmingham, Alabama. He received his B.A. with a major in Art Studio/ Drawing from the University of Alabama at Birmingham in 2003. On March 23, 2007 he had his MFA Thesis Exhibition at the University of New Orleans.