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The Embedded American Artist

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The Embedded American Artist

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

Jason Edward Chaffin

B.F.A. Kansas City Art Institute, 2005

May, 2010

Acknowledgments of Boundless Gratitude:

This examination and reckoning of my motives and methods was made articulable by my graduate instructors and peers at the University of New Orleans Fine Arts Department. Ultimately, I have arrived at exactly where I needed to be in my personal confidence and knowledge of the validity of my motives and the soundness of the methods I pursue to express and expand them professionally from this point forward. I would like to thank Jim Richard* (my major advisor), Christopher Saucedo (my minor advisor), Doyle Gertjejansen* (Graduate Coordinator), Lawrence Jenkins* (Department head and conscience), Cheryl Hayes and Dan Rule. Without these people I could not have reached this point.

*Denotes members of my thesis committee

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Performance/sculpture, 226 red balloons, handmade tomato-box desk, framed photo of Katie Couric at an American Medical Association press conference, 14 photo diary of an ass' day, operational phone with fresh cucumber handset/receiver, fecal costume w/corn silk tie.

2. Been There, Live Here. (2008)

Performance/sculpture, 13 common Louisiana houseplants, futon, double-door storefront. Additional support: Heather Weathers, Trista Douglass, Don Lewis, and Brian Civello.

3. Brotherhood of the Pigeon (2009)

Performance/sculpture, two 12-piece chicken dinners, a kit of pigeons, additional support: Zachary Kraft and Timothy Kraft, Heather Weathers. Soundtrack: Mike Patton and Dillinger four: "When good dogs do bad things"

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Performance/sculpture, one 120lb pile of fine sand, one 225lb pile of fine sand, each dropped into cone form, one expanding foam negative of each, placed upside down next to its source to form its inverted shape. The piles succumb to gravity with the ground vibration of viewers.

6. En Passant (2003-2006)

Performance/photographic series, thirty-six photograph series shot over three years from the vehicles of paid/unknown drivers across Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana and Michigan.

7. This Marriage (2008)

Performance/photographic series, eight photograph series shot over 24 hours in Kansas City, Missouri.

8. Walton, NY (2007-2008)

Performance/photographic series, eleven photograph series shot over 24 hours in Walton, New York

Abstract

As our world ramps up the speed of its connections, our identities merge with increasing speed and angles of confluence. Not only are new identities created, but also the more fringe social and cultural elements of our world are exposed to mainstream consciousness.

My work is a product of my own fringe background (namely its sheer breadth of experiences not normally visited upon a single person's life). My aim is to add variables to our social and cultural speed of combination and new variety by creating work that is derived from my own experiences to speak to those who are of the newer combinations and newer social recognition. I am motivated to create this work both to perpetually define and redefine myself, and also to give ground to an 'identity of no identity' on a global scale, to our artistic dialogue and catalog.

Keywords

Chaffin, Art, Sculpture, Identity, Fringe, Culture, Fugue, Transience, Demographic, Category, Biography, Performance, Fraternity, Déjà-Vu, Material-specificity, Technology, Connectivity, Memory, Idiom, Character, Iteration, Diaspora

Part I: Statement and Introduction

The uncommon breadth of my youthful experiences gives me the desire and ability to contribute to the dialogue of the arts an evolving, lifelong body of work examining the nature of identity, its relationship to aesthetics and the biographical meaning of my materials.

I am reminded and encouraged to bring these works into existence by the lesson I am taught repeatedly as I traverse degrees of personal exposure to race, class, gender and more; that comprehension carries not half of the currency that *being* does.

I am driven by an ambivalence of identity. My varied past drives me to seek representation of myself in others and simultaneously to represent others through my characters. This exchange is a component of my work through which I discover myself, and using myself as a particular demographic or icon, my audience may discover their own existence in the views of others.

The era in which I grew up, made almost frontier-like in comparison with the exponential mutation of the social

categories and demographics of our age (the public perceptions and instances of mixed race children born are simple examples) is rapidly faded by the speed of our age. That my own experience can hardly be in my estimation 'compartmentalized' makes my brand of work especially relevant to the social politics and identities of our era.

My work is not only a method for retaining and defining my identity in an era when an identity such as mine can actually exist and be recognized, but also an effort to describe our human connections socially. This is the kind of effort that not only brought about the vision and ethos of the internet, but one that strives to bring the inevitable consciousness and humanity to technology that is making possible all of our efforts and needs to connect.

Part II: "Identity Ergo Autobiography"

To render the idea of identity, I refer to the plain framework laid down in a passage in Debbie Lewer's work *Post Impressionism to WWII* wherein she recalls:

"...the Methodological rethinking of art history as a discipline that was conducted with the most urgency in the 1970s and 1980s, when structuralist, Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic theory was marshaled under the hopeful banner of "The New Art History." They deal less with the imminent characteristics of artworks than with ideological constructs of identity - sexual, racial, cultural, economic and political - as these are mediated through aesthetic production and reception. From the readings here it is possible to consider how art practice may both affirm and destabilize such cultural constructs."(1)

The most fulfilling exchange between the artist and viewer occurs when affirmation and destruction of those cultural constructs are not mutually exclusive, but when they are simultaneously present, allowing the artist and viewer to trade places via work that deals with identity. Art can thereby use

the 'open-ended question' to de-polemicize the sexual, racial, cultural, economic and political, focusing instead upon the shared experience.

Our representative existence in this world fluxes with the tides of every human systematic paradigm that we are subjected to. If we grow up within a certain locale or language or race or class or gender, we gain something from it that defines us. The negation of 'the absolute' within the ideas of post-modernism and employing the boundless reach of populism bolstered by the reach of current technology (which is an attempt to connect all of us, but in doing so it must categorize us until these categories become meaningless) are products of that infinite mass of definitions. As an American artist I live in *the* incubator of the most exposure and opportunity, of *the* most categories and their milieu.

My background has led to the absence of a baseline experience of a specific nameable segment of America, which leads me to relate to all of it and none of it. Whereas the term *diaspora* refers to the different climates thrust upon and results garnered by the scattering of a group of peoples, I have had such a broad and conflicting base of experiences that my own personal experience has been diasporic. This accumulation of

exposure has been across country and continent, across race and language and sexuality, and from poverty to riches, to name but a few. All of these perspectives form my being.

My work is the balance of the expression of and search for, an identity that possesses exceptions and contradictions. It exists for me to 'speak outside of myself', through viewpoints that would not normally be expected to be mine but with which I have experience. I was raised with such a constant fluctuation of nearly every category during the first twenty years of my life that each idiom of a particular system of values or beliefs challenges or distorts the truths of the other. With my work, I define and redefine myself to remain true to the freedom of that flux but also for a moment to define the world and myself.

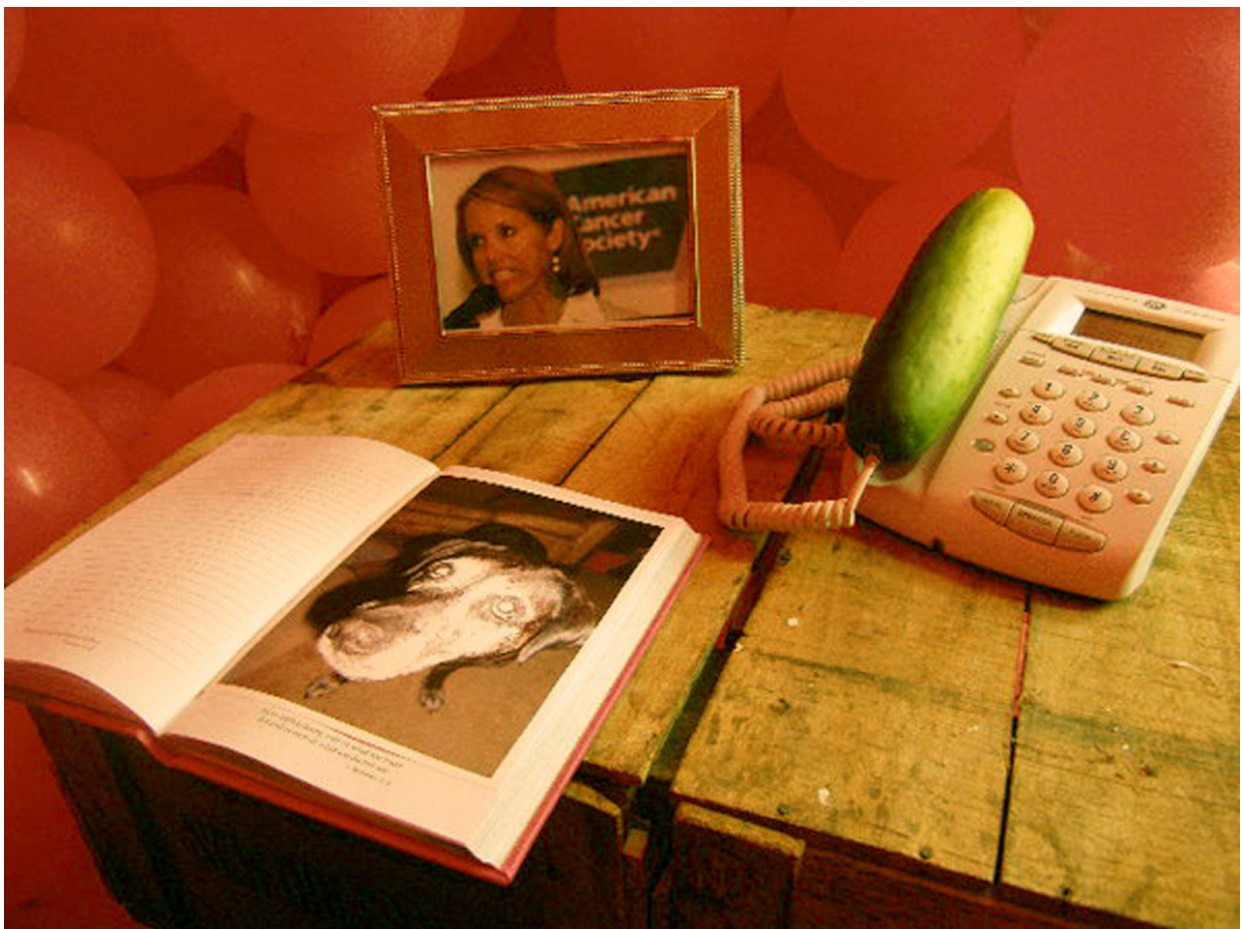
If I am to address ideas that I understand to be feminist in nature, I call upon my experience of watching my sister being born and the midwife culture surrounding my mother, as well as my mother's expanded parental role in my father's absence. In the work *Secretary of the Interior* I play the part of *Feces*, the Secretary of the Colon, in a male solidarity with the feminist movement, not as the anus may be for a man, counterpart to the vagina in a female in the realm of sexuality, but as I understand the Feminists to represent with the vagina, a symbol

of specific health issues and vulnerability native to their gender. By the simplest comparison, reproductive system cancers are the third leading cause of death for women and colorectal cancers are the fourth leading cause of death for men. (1a)



Secretary of the Interior-(performance/sculpture)-2008

Younger generations of feminists will abhor the label 'feminist' and I tend to agree with them. I don't believe that an artist should co-opt a system that excludes them, but instead make that system obsolete. Initially this work can be misread by those deep within the politics of feminism as saying that 'the man's anus is equal to the woman's vagina and may support their objection with statistics that claim that 'more women die from health issues related to their reproductive organs, than do men from their digestive tract.'



Secretary of the Interior (Detail)

This is an example of how movements become dull and politics tend to quorum and hamstring even the brightest. This work, as solidarity for the depth of the vagina as a badge or feminist symbol, is rightfully mindless of the nature of advertisers and other non-artists that the more politicized movements attempt to co-opt and equalize.

If I am to explore language, I am bound to draw upon the fact that my family selectively spoke English, Suisse-French, German, Métis and Gujurati. If I am to understand my overly spacious and lonely country to recall transience and the North American underclass experience, I have a wealth of information provided from having spent my first twenty years being trucked through thirty-four states and four countries. In the work *Been There, Live Here*, I describe the differences of sought and declined gaze between performer and audience, in two extremes I have experienced in people's openness and warmth in different parts of the country, under different population size, climates and other stresses. I describe a formal sterility and avoidance alongside comfort and greenery and embrace to describe the way in which expectations are related to stereotypes.

I have re-presented this work through video but without sound as a means of creating an atmosphere akin to surveillance

that places the viewer in front of a documentation of this work as a 'voyeur of voyeurs,' to become self-aware and more



Been There, Live Here-(performance/sculpture)-2008

conscious of their reaction to the initial crowds' reaction. I want the viewer to, assisted by silence, consider whether the

initial audience's response (to gawk, to kiss, to laugh, to avoid, to stare, to seek out the denied gaze) relates to their own and why. This work stems from language and travel and accent, the self-consciousness of speech and level of public affection acceptably displayed based upon what part of the world or country one is in at the moment. These aspects change vastly from place to place and describe us intimately.

Departing the isolation of my youth, into a stepfamily of many siblings and being reunited with my rather large family years later inspired me to create *Brotherhood of the Pigeon*. This two-monitor/two-channel video performance was created to describe dominance and fraternal pressures and comforts as my instant inheritance of sibling rank has presented those pressures and comforts to me. The constant theme in this work is uncomfortable closeness and frank, competitive lack of manners. The level of fraternity I had experienced being both an only child for nine years and later rudely competing with four brothers born four years apart from each other is vastly different.

Sometimes it is uncomfortable, physically, that they are closer to each other than I am to them since I was not raised with physical affection, even in the sense of camaraderie by

men. Typically, if I were to touch a man, it would have been during a fight or a handshake. Because of them, I learned to be more affectionate with men and learned what the language of male affection is; where its sense of humor is applied, where its irony is. We push each other to be grosser and fight for the chicken. We make threats and demand our territory and prize but we understand rank and we defend each other. Like any of these



-Brotherhood of the Pigeon-(performance/sculpture)-2009

other human social systems I am describing with my works, I had been incomplete prior to experiencing them. I express this not only with the action of the frames juxtaposing the wild animals and the men who act like wild animals, but also in the tightly framed, frenzied action that closes all of the occupants and their faces into a shameless and gross rugby scrum. An

underlying theme in this work is the inherent socialism amongst brothers amidst their competitiveness. We worry and celebrate each other's successes and would always be biased for each other, but most desperately avoid the process suffering our own losses to be manifested into the jealousy which causes brothers to consume each other. We teach each other to be fair and sporting among each other and dread (as those with incarcerated family must) the moment we are forced to choose against our brothers as a result of them forgetting us in their actions.

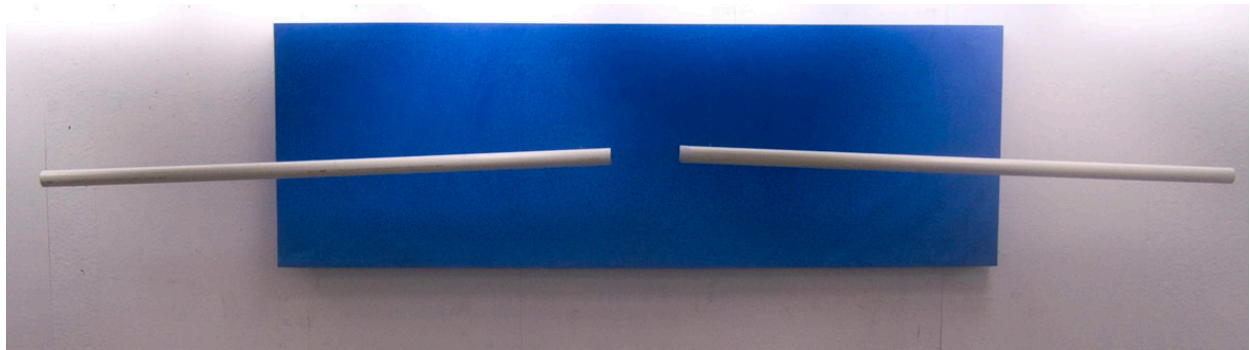
Part III: Aesthetic and Mode

I create photographic works and interactive sculptural works. Both varieties involve performance but the performance plays a different role in each kind of work. Each of these modes has an aesthetic result that is the product of the process of the performance.

With my sculpture-based work, I recall moments of inspiration that occurred with specific materials and situations of my experience and then compose these materials to describe the impetus of the original conditions in which that discovery occurred and transmit some of the meaning of the biography within the materials, within the shared experience of the

performance the objects yield. I encounter the inspirations for applying these materials when they arrive in present day situations and the déjà-vu results in a comparison of metaphor and context regarding the material and its universe.

In the work *Comb filters and their Pilots*, the moment of inspiration surrounding the work was a young time in my life when I had happened upon a large PVC pipe in a creek bed and tried to comprehend the sound effect that was coming out of it, by which time in I had already flown eleven times on the white-winged TWA planes.



-Comb Filters and their Pilots-(performance/sculpture)-2009

In the middle 1970's at every airport, there were vending machines from which one could (and we did) purchase life insurance before your flight. The tension of a still young and accident-prone industry then has been replaced by different tensions now. This work recalls the peacefulness of the idea of

flying. The pipes float as model planes do, on clear line, in front of a blue plane created by computer assisted paint-matching photographs of the sky. When the viewer places his or her head between the PVC 'wings' and ultimately forms the body of the plane with their own body, while facing a 'sky' they hear the sound that one hears in a plane's cabin, the harmonic hum of engines in sync during a plane's flight, resulting from the pipes' 'comb-filter effect'.

My sculpture-based works' materials are of biographical origin; selected from inspirational origins that are tied to my identity and I apply an aesthetic form that does not completely obscure the different materials' origins by rigidly marrying all of the components' level of polish. I also do this to create an aesthetic imbalance or discord that fosters a dialogue about the interchangeability of the common versus the precious and the artifact versus commodity. Duchamp complains how Sisyphean the task is and how mindfully one must ignore both the fashion of aesthetics and its anti-fashions:

"I thought to discourage aesthetics...they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal in their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty." (2)

I am deeply invested in questioning the dynamics of the process by which one views or interacts with works of art. As the bounds of technology continue to change and augment who we are and what our symbols and gestures mean, old truisms of expression are threatened by new abilities. That which may have once been immaturely proclaimed 'dead' can be given new reason for being, paths for growth and dialogue with the present, by the application of new technologies. I believe that painting, for example, has something new to say vis-à-vis plastics that change color when electric current is applied. Our materials are now suspect in their manufacture and subject to protectionism, patriotism, availability and even safety. Even the spaces in which we present work have new concerns that affect them. The forays made by artists working with sound have not only been met by the needs of manufacturers for what seem like market-driven decisions, e.g., to fit as many sound works in one space as possible with regard to sound isolation and bleed-over, but also in technology's increasingly central role in art works such as focused sound and infinitely concealable trigger mechanisms. Still, old habits confront new artists. In my work *Comb Filters* I have included where one expects to encounter symbols; upon the title plate, an encouragement and illustration of the interactive operation of this work because I couldn't bear to add pedestrian symbols which force the destruction of a kind of

'third wall' to the viewer, right through the body of my work. In my work *En Passant*, a work shot from moving cars, I have encased the prints behind automotive glass thereby granting the viewer the original perceptual context of the images, even while the prints themselves exist in a gallery context. These are examples of how the plethora of materials and presentation options available to artists and enhanced by technology, can reinvigorate the discussion of any facet of our artistic definitions.



-Matched Pears Aging- (performance/sculpture) -2009

The work *Matched Pears Aging* is comprised of two conical piles of sand which form visual questions of optimism and pessimism, regret, value and remaining life; of push and pull, using the metaphorical 'freed contents of an hourglass'. The larger pile of sand is 225.lb, same weight as me, the smaller pile is 120.lb, same weight as my wife. The piles slowly succumb to gravity next to their foam negatives that share a related topic with sand as an abrasive: old elbows. These plain, composed materials are the same kind of materials my wife and I are currently using, domestically in our lives. I honor that humble impetus by letting them still be what they are while contextually altered. Elementally they stand for aging and erosion and decay, but they have been arranged to describe that anything the years subtract from my being, she replaces with her presence. Their cumulative value becomes one of looking forward to decaying together in direct opposition to fearing decay.

My photography is the product of a different order of processes than my sculpture-based work. My photographic series are the result and record of the performance that yielded them. My photographic works are a re-postulation of the effect of spending my youth isolated from people and society and as a sometime homeless transient/ sometime latchkey/ sometime extremely rural child.

For my photographic works, I travel to American cities I do not know, that resemble memories from my transient youth, to present the photographic embodiment of a past psychological state (of being spirited throughout North America) from my present perspective, to the viewer, in order to speak to any quantity of that perspective which resides in them and raise the dialogue of change within ourselves.



En Passant- (performance/photograph) -2003-2006

The *En Passant* series was shot entirely from moving vehicles driven by people I had paid to drive through cities I did not know, and to not reveal where they were going or where we were at any time. I undertake this process to understand the perspective of most Americans who are very familiar with their surroundings and examine the value and danger of being lost, and trade with them some essence of that with which I am familiar.

The inspiration for this series comes from an effect I still encounter arising from my parent's bitter custody battle and my father's actions of kidnapping me and taking me to California and Mexico to evade my mother. To this day, on long trips, I acquire the same feeling upon entering the car (mine or anyone's, driving or merely riding) that I am fleeing, being cast to the wind again, burning all bridges and have no control or idea where I will end up. From inside the car and that specific psychological space, I continuously select and shoot images that are identical to or evoke specific memories of that flight.

Once on foot, in a city I do not know, I photograph a 'coda series' to each car trip, walking through it, until I am able to navigate it. These trips usually last two weeks in total.

My process of finding my way out of those areas or cities yields the helplessness and subjectivity I felt when young and transient and that feeling's representation presents itself in the landscape around me, to be retransmitted through the photograph. I make these journeys where I am unknown; to a place I do not know, to revive the feeling of freedom that accompanies that fear of being unformed and non-existent, in correlation to my formative years.



This Marriage-(performance/photograph)-2008

Disoriented, I search the buildings and landscape for those that reflect a feeling of absence most deeply. I photograph in their architectural and environmental metaphors evidence of the things that I long for at the point when I am most without them: security and presence and connection and familiarity.

My composition is a product of making agreements between my foot speed and my eye. I utilize a blurred focus to suggest fear and frenzy at disorientation and to reduce the light's ability to assist in plainly revealing form. I have been principally inspired by Nan Goldin's philosophy to allow the moment to define the qualities of the photograph. "...structured pictures, seemingly clear relationships-in order to break them with often blurry elements..." -and we traverse back into the subject of identity; *"Nan Goldin reminds us that identity is not a condition, but rather is- if one must put it into words- a permanent search, that every human soul, every human is familiar with more than one side of the coin."*(3)

I create a composition that references memory rather than reality with its acuity and saturation and I employ repeated elements and color schemes as my allowed formal elements when framing a shot. *"This is precisely what attracted Basquiat to bebop: the way it used repetition, reproduction and*

improvisation to transform or "artistically other" the shape and meaning of somebody else's originals..."(4) Basquiat re-appropriates the 'other' through his repetitious vocabulary of the decay of the mark through the idiom of his hand and his sense of composition and visual identification and urban symbolism's empty entity-owned opportunity of entendre. I use the iteration of places and people being interchangeable to begin the conversation of similarity and dissimilarity.



-Walton, NY-(performance/photograph)-2007-2008

I seek out un-peopled architecture, obliterated signage and landscape at a speed where I can bring across the frantic searching and the unsafe and momentary nature of my presence there. This space of time exists in the immediate absence of people that reflects the absence of people during my young life. It exists in every long abandoned house near a highway, eaten away by vegetation and fire, in the American West, in a sleepy city at night, everywhere that we simultaneously do and do not exist.

It is in this mode as the crush of our connections and knowledge advance us and weigh us down that we document and fantasize our obliteration even while we still live and thrive. We are now deeply affected by a reality that advertising has always attempted to expunge from our being (because we don't buy things when we are listless or morbid or serious). Art and Humanity in general is weighed down in a pessimist age that can be attractive in its lack of responsibility and downright dangerous in its ability to incline one towards writing an epitaph for a place that still had a chance. This is not my mode. I am recording the death of the power the past had over me and the irony of these twinges of feelings that suggest that it still does, constantly rebuilding its final mask in this era of shrinking present tense and rebuilding myself with every new

understanding. This act is my homage to the struggle between what has shaped us and the point when we become sentient enough to begin reshaping, maybe augmenting or even repairing ourselves.

My photography may strike the same feeling or tone as the general pessimism of the era but it should be understood as a triumph over the immobility of the past, burned in memory, equally as ineffectual as the pessimism of the present. I extricate these experiences from the past to conquer them, to stay optimistic, to stay able, to stay self-sufficient. This will not be my last dispatch. The embedded American artist understands his experience to mirror his country; the only country in the world which possesses all of the world's peoples, which holds greatness in its grasp through its best opportunity: If all of the world's peoples are to coexist in equity and representation, the blueprint for that success can only be laid here in this country, for it contains all of the world's cultures, but only by equally representing and protecting the cultures of which it is compromised. I make work to be represented as I do, to represent others.

Part IV: Conclusion

The 'character' is central to my work. That 'character' is represented by memory and architecture or landscape (as with my photography) or by the costumed avatar within the work, be they human or otherwise, or by the viewer, when the function of the work requires some effort or input on their part. I am currently auditioning a series of rooms, which will function as central characters. Ultimately all of the components of my work, including the physical thing that they happen to be, are components of my identity in this perpetual self-construction and examination. I am the kind of person who will not be complete in my existence until the very end. This work is the search for every last understanding of my personage and capabilities as a person, this is the searching question that is often squelched by an easy life of clear identity whatever it be provided by whatever truths one is anchored to, whilst young, from which we all drift further away from each and every moment.

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Vita

Jason Edward Chaffin was born in St. Louis, Missouri and received his BFA from Kansas City Art Institute in 2005. He is currently living in New Orleans where he co-founded *Ottercorp Worldwide Inc.* artist studio with his wife, the artist Heather Weathers.