DECAY: A SERIES OF PRINTS DEALING WITH THE DECAY OF BIOMORPHIC FORMS THROUGH MULTIPLE STATES

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

Nicholas W. Ball

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Thesis written by
Nicholas W. Ball
B.F.A., University of Cincinnati, 2007
M.F.A., Kent State University, 2010

Approved by

__________________________ , Advisor
J. Noel Reifel

__________________________ , Director, School of Art
Christine Havice

__________________________ , Dean, College of the Arts
John R. Crawford
DECAY: A SERIES OF PRINTS DEALING WITH THE DECAY OF BIOMORPHIC FORMS THROUGH MULTIPLE STATES (22 pp.)

Director of Thesis: J. Noel Reifel

This thesis focuses on the expressionist abstraction of bodily forms through the process of decay. The multiple states of each decaying form show the gradual progression of disintegration over time. Because decay can occur at uncontrollable rates, it is a process that depends on both the amount of time and exposure to the environment. As each image breaks down, the print matrix also begins to deteriorate and weaken as imagery is redrawn and removed. The once vivid and almost seductive qualities of the plate or stone begin to soften and fade away as each state is developed. Each suite of images depicts a biomorphic form that resembles ribs, musculature, organs or skin. I am fascinated by the natural repetition of each curvilinear rib that forms the volumetric structure of a rib cage.

Each image has been printed in the traditional media of lithography, intaglio, serigraphy or relief. The printing methodology for this thesis was to combine at least two of the traditional print media in each printed state. Lithography and intaglio were found to be appropriate choices for this series of prints because they are both versatile media that can be easily reworked in multiple states.
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This thesis focuses on the expressionist abstraction of bodily forms through the process of decay. Each image is created to show a compelling biomorphic form that depicts a sense of power and beauty. The multiple states of each image show the gradual progression of decay. Each image and print matrix is in a constant state of breaking down as subsequent states are developed. The once vivid and almost seductive details of the plate or stone begin to soften and fade away as imagery is added and removed. Because decay can occur at uncontrollable rates, it is a process that depends on both the amount of time and exposure to the environment.

My interest in the abstraction of decaying forms comes from numerous inspirations and experiences. I worked at a local family-owned butcher shop when I was fourteen. If I was not already desensitized from the shock of violent movies and video games, this probably did the trick. The idea of cleaning up fragments of meat may not seem enjoyable or even bearable to most people, but it was alright for a first job. I will never forget the sight of those shimmering meat hooks that held the weight of flayed cow carcasses or the long, fresh strands of ground beef that oozed from the grinder. I also had an unforgettable experience with decay while working at this butcher shop. The shop saved a barrel of meat scraps that a company would later pick-up and recycle by turning it into soap. Apparently, the company had not picked up this material for a long time, or there was a barrel that was previously forgotten. I had to clean out a barrel of putrid meat
scrap. The rotten stench of the meat had an instant effect of nauseating horror over my body. No road kill could ever smell this bad to me!

Each suite of images depicts a biomorphic form that resembles ribs, musculature, organs or skin. Ribs have become a reoccurring motif for several reasons. I am fascinated by the natural repetition of each curvilinear rib that forms the volumetric structure of a rib cage. It also functions as a shield for the vital organs encased within it, as it provides a strong barrier of protection. A rib cage to me is one of the most interesting parts of an animal life form.

The invented environments begin to have dramatic effects on each biomorphic form. Each environment is indicated through the use of color, texture and atmospheric representation as it interacts with the strong contrast of the decaying form. It is impacted dramatically as its corporal form breaks down through the progression of multiple states. This environment of the background begins to change as it physically becomes smaller and loses its predetermined frame. It is affected by the decomposition of its decaying form, just as much as the decaying form is controlled by its environment. This mutually dependent relationship between the form and environment creates visual conflict throughout each suite of prints.

As an artist, I understand the importance of choosing the proper media for producing desired outcomes. I have chosen to work in lithography, serigraphy and intaglio for this body of work. I find lithography and intaglio to be appropriate choices for this series of prints because they are both versatile media that can be reworked in multiple states. Artists such as Rembrandt, Picasso and Jasper Johns have worked
similarly to create multiple states and image variations. I have also chosen to work in lithography because it is a challenging, newly explored area in my development as a printmaker. Serigraphy is appropriate in the production of this work because it seamlessly blends with the lithography and intaglio media.

The production procedures for this project are very methodical and precisely planned. In the case of the litho-based images, an image is drawn onto the litho stone with traditional materials such as grease pencils, crayons and tusche washes. Once the stone is properly etched, the element of serigraphy is introduced. Photo transparencies are made for each color that will be screen printed in the image. After each field of color is printed on the sheet of paper, the black lithographic image can be printed on top.

The method for reworking the image to produce a progression of decayed states is achieved through counteretching the stone. This allows changes to be made to the original drawing, either by subtracting or adding to the image. The altered image is then etched and prepared for printing just as the first state was prepared. As each state is reworked, remnants from the previous state stay visible and workable as new elements transform them into a new composition (see Figures 9-13 and Figures 14-16). I have also dealt with the process of decay by spot-etching areas of the image that needed to be lighter and more worn out. This technique of deliberately over etching the litho stone speeds up the rate of decay as it breaks down the image quite rapidly.

The intaglio-based images were started traditionally with the techniques of line etching, scraping and burnishing. I then combined intaglio with serigraphy to create a more dramatic separation between the decaying form and its background. After running
into problems with paper expansion from dry to wet, I decided to print only the first state in this manner (see Figure 5). I then began to dramatically etch the plate to create a deep, open-bitten area that would allow me to print the image in both intaglio and relief. The image’s lower disintegrating form section of the plate was inked in intaglio, while the remaining raised areas were rolled up in relief (see Figures 6, 7, and 8). I then created multiple states from the plate as I etched and resurfaced it with a grinder to produce areas of strong contrast and texture. Thus, the deterioration of the lithographic and intaglio matrices parallels the depiction of decay in the imagery.

Color plays an essential role in my work. It provides a distinct separation between the rotting form and its environmental counterpart. A chronological pattern also becomes established as the colors change in each state. The fresh, vibrant tones of color become transformed as they appear to react to the decay around them. As each biomorphic form breaks down, its color starts to fade and become less dramatic. Likewise, the environment becomes affected as its colors become worn out, dull and neutralized.

The subject of decay has been a commonly used theme in art for some time. Many baroque still-life artists used the element of decay in their paintings as a way to convey the passage of time and inevitable death. Paintings of flourishing flowers and exquisite fruits show the naturalistic elements of beauty and life. However, further examination of these works shows that some areas are beginning to rot and/or become infested with bugs or even spiders. Vanitas still-life painting is also similar to the theme of this thesis as it portrays life and death through objects of specific meaning. Elements
such as skulls, clocks, and musical instruments are just a few of the many examples that signify that life is only so long and can’t last forever. The song has been played, the candle cannot burn forever and the half empty cup will never become full again.

Many artists of the twentieth century have also worked with some element of decay. One artist that stands out is Dieter Roth. His approaches to decay as a process for producing art are very direct and literal. Roth made paintings and sculptures with food materials knowing that they would rot and drastically affect the visual qualities of the work. Ivan Albright’s grotesque portraits are emotionally charged with the essence of decay. The eeriness of light and shadow create a strange mood throughout many of his paintings. Several other artists, such as Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon and Jenny Saville have also explored bodily decay in their work.

This project has been both a challenging and rewarding experience for my development as a professional artist. It has been the most ambitiously structured project that I have ever tackled. The conceptual and technical processes of the work have proven to be successful after much experimentation with the integration of several print media. As the project progressed, I became more aware of each print medium. I learned that serigraphy and lithography work very well together, and that serigraphy and intaglio take more time to perfect.

My future work will continue to explore themes of decay. I will continue to investigate alternative techniques for breaking down imagery and their print matrices, as well as integrating print media. I am also very interested in developing the presentation of my work to create alternative experiences with the viewer, in such formats as print-
based artist books and site-specific print installations. I feel that these expanded ideas and formats will further enhance the originality, quality and growth of my work to come.
Figure 1

Ball, Nicholas, *Decay*, Gallery Installation
Painting Gallery, Kent State University
Figure 2

Ball, Nicholas, *Decay*, Gallery Installation
Painting Gallery, Kent State University
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Ball, Nicholas, Decay, Gallery Installation
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Ball, Nicholas, *Decay*, Gallery Installation
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Etching, drypoint, and serigraph on 26” x 20.5” paper
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Etching, drypoint, and relief on 26” x 20.5” paper
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Ball, Nicholas, Ribbed Form 2, 2010. Lithograph and serigraph on 17” x 14” paper
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Ball, Nicholas, Ribbed Form 3, 2010.
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Ball, Nicholas, Ribbed Form 4, 2010.
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Ball, Nicholas, Ribbed Form 5, 2010.
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Lithograph and serigraph on 40" x 29" paper
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Ball, Nicholas, Biomorphic 2, 2010.
Lithograph and serigraph on 40” x 29” paper
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Ball, Nicholas, *Biomorphic 3*, 2010. Lithograph and serigraph on 40” x 29” paper