WORRY MY HEAD:
AN EXPLORATION OF HEAD-LIKE FORMS
AS AN EXPRESSION OF EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of my thesis is the use of the head or head-like form as a visual expression of personal struggles with existence. The head, which I believe to be the most basic visual signifier of the human person or sentient existence, both acts as a useful model within which to explore and express fundamental concerns regarding the having of a self while also serving to succinctly allude to the anxiety of such concerns for the viewer.

INTENT

The head seems a natural fit for such an exercise, in that the head is the container for the idea of self as the shell for the brain, is the seat of the senses and addresses what for me are the critical concepts of life: existence itself, embodiment, the particularity of being one mind or being (self) as opposed to another (the other), the conundrum of consciousness, the strangeness of being human, the apparent locus of free will, and the decision to persist in an unchosen existence. This last point is perhaps the most important, and is arguably the primary guide of this work—to face the raw and dark side of experience without turning away or giving up. I am not seeking to address experiences, but the nature of experience itself; what is known in philosophy as qualia, such as what it is like to see the color red, feel pain in your foot, or any other conscious experience. I grant that such concepts could warrant voluminous philosophical treatises (and have done so), but it is not my goal to communicate any particular message or belief, as I regard such quandaries as ultimately unsolvable. Simply put, my particular experience as a conscious being derives from qualia that are unique to me. With this thesis I am working to visually express my struggles with experience (and specifically the aforementioned themes) through my working process and the finished marks that result.

The commonality among the various existential concerns I just elucidated is that each results in
an accompanying emotional state. Considering these difficult intellectual quandaries can result in difficult psychological conditions. I find painting expressively offers a slow release of these energies, namely anxiety, frustration, depression and confusion. This thesis exercise is the culmination of a journey towards succinct and raw expression of such concerns through the visual depiction of personal psychological space.

DEVELOPMENT

Before entering the graduate program at Kent State University, I experimented with various themes. I in turn painted abstractly, worked with figuration, and immediately prior to graduate school created a large series of landscapes. My abstractions lacked a strong conceptual motivation. They were instead guided by a habitual stylistic tendency that resulted in mainly atmospheric and tonally constructed paintings, with my palette’s colors hovering in a middle gray tonal range. I worked largely with a subtractive process, whereby I wiped out bold initial marks that may have been interesting in favor of safe and unchallenging passages. Such a method fit naturally with landscapes, whereby I chose only to deal with a sky plane, a ground plane and the meeting of the two at the horizon. While some of these paintings were formally pleasing, I recognized personal limitations but was at a loss as to how to progress beyond them. I wanted to access a more engaging, exciting and authentic mode of working.

Upon entering the graduate program, my initial paintings were attempts at more interesting abstraction. I tried making use of sketches I had developed on the computer in Photoshop as a starting point. But the act of painting was largely imitative of these sketches and resulted in uninspired and stilted mark making. The sketches also failed to maintain my interest when I sized them up from the computer screen to a large canvas. Interestingly, my current thread began with a canvas off to the side upon which I would use up extra paint. The marks were haphazard, intuitive, and made with little care or hesitation. I hadn’t even considered it a piece in progress, but it resulted in a revelatory moment where I felt the promise of a freer expression. As opposed to making a preconceived painting, I decided to simply paint.

Working automatically and without a plan or guide, I followed my marks where they led and tried
to listen to the suggestions they offered. From one of these loose sessions, where the hand led the mind and not vice versa, I began to see heads emerging, and decided to follow that path. It was the beginning of a focus bringing me to the present time and this body of work. The significance of the change was one of finding a model grounded in a simple but strong concept, and just as importantly of feeling a sense that I was accessing a deeper part of my self. I had previously been forcing paintings through a limited knowledge of both painting itself and of my own abilities. Now I was crafting paintings more organically, following, instead of suppressing, raw instinct and expressive inclination. Where my earlier paintings showed space without presence, I now found meaning in exploring raw presence or existence in the much more charged suggestion of psychological space.

Just as my current body of work is markedly different from my pre-graduate program efforts, my pre-candidacy review work served as an intermediary stage between then and now. It foreshadowed my thesis work, but still showed some of my earlier limitations. One of the struggles evident in my pre-candidacy paintings was my continued tendency to use a tonal palette. My colors continued to skew towards a middle gray value and lacked the vibrant saturated colors I now employ. Not only were my colors muted, I also did not carefully consider the colors I was using. I frequently found I had used my entire range of paints on a single work, resulting in an unfocused and arbitrary appearance with an unclear mood. Another transitional aspect of that work was in my tendency to isolate an ovoid head-form from a chaotic all-over ground by painting out the outer edges and corners with a flat color. I was attempting to focus the action within a typical head-like form by negating the areas that make up the non-head space. Such actions not only resulted in an only partially activated surface, they also served to bluntly distinguish figure and ground. While the heads I crafted in this fashion were definitely abstracted and often engagingly strange, they acted more as fantastical portraits of specific beings or creatures, which I came to feel was contrary to my intentions. Where those efforts suggested beings, I needed to change my approach to address the *state* of being I wanted to convey. Before I relate how I came to solve that problem, I would like to discuss the methodology I have developed to such ends.
METHOD

I begin by employing automatism, initially through the first several layers and in frequent bursts thereafter. I believe the application of chance and automatist techniques reflects the arbitrary nature of thought, and allows the chaotic chatter of consciousness an outlet into the physical world. As a piece progresses I will work more intentionally, reacting to the automatic marks, while still trying to maintain a certain looseness. From there on, my method involves walking a line between the instinctual and the intentional. My practice is expressive in nature, but I am not opposed to editing, fine-tuning or enhancing an initial expressive mark, so long as my clarifications stay to true to the initial expressive spirit.

Specific techniques I have employed in this discovery process are the use of energetic lines, both painted, poured and squirted, splattering of liquid paint or loosely mixed pigment and medium, removal of pigment through scraping, and the pulling of colors with a drywall knife. I sometimes place a second canvas face down on freshly applied paint, as in the surrealist technique decalcomania, then blot or pull directionally. As I build up facture I create a secondary visual element, one tied to but independent of the forms depicted by color. I also take advantage of the wide range of acrylic media currently available to employ variations in viscosity, thickness, transparency and finish to expand my vocabulary, including pouring medium, string gel, glaze, and both matte and gloss varnish used in the same piece to add yet another layer of information. More recently I also have made use of the relatively new acrylic spray paints from Liquitex which enable soft edged forms and subtle gradations of color. As the mind is infinite, an open ended and expansive painterly grammar can only serve to more richly represent it. I also rotate my canvases frequently to limit conscious decisions and allow unintended imagery to take form. Another step towards this employment of chance can be seen in several newer works, where I am treating four separate square canvases butted up against one another in a grid form as a single piece. Such an arrangement allows for the option to rearrange the canvases frequently to again foster unintended relationships, and to further dislocate physiognomic signs, such as eyes, nose, ears and mouth. This method again serves to reinforce the turbulence of mind I seek to convey.
My marks function as remnants of physical acts arising from psychological states, as much as they contribute to the image of a head-like form. The head form that results is equal to, yet functionally different from, the suggestion of my thoughts or psychological space as evidenced by the abstract marks. My expressive approach is crucial to a sense of trying to stay on course in a raging stream, to allow oneself to be battered only with the goal of remaining unbroken. To draw or render images tightly would be akin to trying to assert my will or force sense on a senseless condition, which is fundamentally contrary to my intent. I am simply trying to stay afloat and express the movement of the waters, frequently turbulent with occasional moments of calm. I use vivid color to the same effect, with bright clashes to indicate confusion and noise, and occasional areas of harmony and rest indicating moments of reprieve. My work ends not only with an image of a head (however distorted or obfuscated it may be), it is also importantly guided by the flickering in and out of head-like forms that suggest themselves to me as I work. My work displays the labor and struggle of creation as a reflection of the daily struggle inherent in existence itself. Pulling out and shaping head-like forms imposes a degree of order on the chaos, but it is one I intend to be unstable and uncertain. I create a visual manifestation of the sense of interiority I experience.

I should also mention another factor that is integral to my creative process. I almost exclusively listen to heavy metal music when I work. This genre which I favor above all others is at turns aggressive, belligerent, despondent, mournful and angry. Such dispositions are aligned with the fundamental mind states I seek to convey. I find that listening to such music while I paint helps to sustain the underlying mood I am accessing and literally energizes and focuses my actions and decisions.

From the first head I painted in graduate school, which was arguably quite literal in its depiction of an ovoid head with standard features, my heads have continued to dissolve into less and less literal head depiction, where there may be no skull-like shape and a minimal representation of features (for example rather than painting an eye in an illusionistic manner, I place a stab of thick paint that might suggest an eye only in context). It has become less and less important for me that my paintings resemble
heads due to the fact that I believe the paintings continue to express, and may even do so more effectively, the interior head/mind-space of the self. I have moved farther and farther from resemblance in order to depict raw existence as I feel it. It is important to me that my paintings arrive at an exciting yet accessible state. I also actively seek to confuse figure and ground to depict the constantly shifting nature of thought and mental focus.

If I paint for myself through the majority of a painting’s creation, it is still my intention that the final product be engaging for the viewer, and subsequently invite a prolonged and stimulating consideration. To me, this goal to moderate (but by no means wholly subdue) chaos with a tenuous balance represents the daily struggle to accommodate difficult existential concerns and channel them into an ultimately manageable, controllable and communicable form.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES

There are various relevant moments, persons and movements in art history that inform this body of work. To begin with, I will discuss a few significant artists that have long inspired me to pursue painting as a primary passion. I would point first of all to artists I encountered previous to entering the graduate program. One such artist is Willem de Kooning. De Kooning’s mixture of figurative imagery with violent, turbulent, and apparently chaotic marks affected me deeply. In De Kooning: a Retrospective, John Elderfield writes that abstraction and figuration was not an either/or choice for de Kooning, though for the art world of the time they were.¹ My work continues this precedent, in the combination of the two choices or approaches. I use basic physiognomy to allude to person or mind, and abstraction to represent the mind’s immaterial nature and contents.

Elderfield also writes de Kooning would “limit the number or prominence of strongly distinguishable centers of interest.”² While my work has definite areas of dominant interest, I avoid

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². Ibid., 16.
singular focal points in an effort to drive the eye to continually search and remain uneasy, amplifying uncertainty while denying the ability to fully resolve or rest. This effort results in a viewing experience that mimics the psychological states I portray. Also speaking of de Kooning’s compositions, Fairfield Porter wrote “nothing gets in anything else’s way, and everything is at its own limit of possibilities.” I admire and emulate this maximizing of a painting’s surface, where an abundance of possibilities are expressed and even apparently exhausted, avoiding potentiality in favor of excess, representing the infinite nature of mind and the unceasing stream of discursive thought and emotion.

Another relevant theme that I see as legitimating my process is revealed in a discussion of de Kooning’s use of surrealist techniques that limit the will. Elderfield writes,

de Kooning’s ability to perform quick gearshifts between the rational and the transrational should not be confused with what has been called ‘de-skilling.’ When moving into a state of negative capability, he did not surrender skill along with will, but relied on it in order to trust what could be gained by being in uncertainty—and the ability to shift gears required its own kind of skill, which [he] made into a habit.

I see a strong affinity here with my own method. Each time I paint I allow myself to slip back and forth between willful and spontaneous marks, the latter resting on an ability built through practice and habit,
which I believe makes my work successful and something more than just a wild stabbing of a loaded brush driven by blind emotion. I frequently employ an intentional letting go of conscious decision during the act of painting, but I make no attempt to limit the richness of expression that experience and manual ability impart to the work.

De Kooning “spoke of associating the material surface of the paint... with an experience of the body–his own body as well as his subject’s.”⁶ I seek to do the same with reference to the mind. On one level my paintings are images, composed as all images are of shape, line, hue and value, but I could cover one of my paintings with a layer of opaque white and all would by no means be lost. The facture I impart to my surfaces conveys the emotion driven process through a wholly different, but no less important manner. De Kooning would go so far as to say “the figure [is] the surface crust.”⁷ Elderfield also speaks of de Kooning’s use of a rendered icon, such as a mouth, to act as a synecdoche for the painting as a whole.⁸ In my work, twisted grimacing mouths, or frantic staring eyes likewise set the tone for the expression, where arguably wholly abstract passages also are read as grimacing, twisting and straining without an obvious appeal to any kind of representation.

De Kooning said that for him “art never seems to make me peaceful or pure. I always seem to be wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity.”⁹ Elderfield writes “dispute still continues over whether or not what ensued should be characterized as misogynist aggression.”¹⁰ While de Kooning’s motivations may be debatable, what seems undeniable is a power of emotion and humanity wholly divorced from sentimentality or whimsy. I will address this immersion in and depiction of raw, unedited emotion in more detail below, and find it especially telling that such a theme comes up in nearly every artist to whom I relate.

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6. Ibid., 32.
7. Ibid., 31.
8. Ibid., 28.
In the book *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Achille Bonito Oliva states that Basquiat’s work referenced “Willem de Kooning for the figurative slant of the images.”  

I have also always been attracted to the work of Basquiat. His bold, blunt and colorful images, which mix figuration with a seemingly hurried graphic immediacy piqued my interest. But more than that I found a strong affinity with the emotional punch his works convey. Exactly what that attitude was I never thought to explore, but recently while doing research I read an essay that stated his work draws strongly from his anger.

Critic Henry Geldzahler asked the artist “is there anger in your work...?” Basquiat responded, “it’s about 80% anger.” Geldzahler followed up with “but there’s also humor,” to which Basquiat said “people laugh when you fall on your ass. What’s humor?” He seems to be saying the humor in his work is not like that of a clever joke that tickles the fancy, but more like an uneasy smile or inappropriate response when facing something you don’t understand, because you don’t know what else to do. Upon learning the importance of violent emotion in Basquiat’s work I immediately knew that was a primary source of my fascination and felt connection. While my work looks very little like Basquiat’s, it does come from a similarly human and authentic place—one of striking back at one’s circumstances (his frequently social, my own—mental) and expressing a fierce response. Of Basquiat’s work, historian Richard D. Marshall states “there are also paintings in which the number and intensity of the words, and the ferocity and velocity with which they come at us,

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are more like a form of enraged talking back and shouting, even screaming.”\textsuperscript{14} While I do not depict words in my paintings, the density and abundance of painterly grammar in my work seeks to accomplish this same sense of shouting/screaming. Where Basquiat had to deal with issues of race, stereotype and prejudice, I deal with my existence itself, independent of particular circumstances of place or identity.

Aside from the expression of anger, another commonality I share with Basquiat is an expression of irreverence and comic absurdity. Where he uses incongruous imagery, text and inscrutable signs that insert a dark levity even when seeming to address very real and difficult subjects, I address difficult emotions and mental states in my work but represent them with wild, near comical forms and harsh physiognomy (such as multiple eyes, huge snarling mouths, and animalistic snouts in place of noses). I present the head in this way in order to depict moments of struggle as absurd fascinations, acknowledged and accepted for whatever duration they may linger, rather than as states of permanent, life-long despair. Also, the bright and vivid pallet I long admired in the work of Basquiat, is for me a symbol of bravely living with difficult emotions and ideas, while turning the very thing that threatens to complicate life into that which enriches it.

I also see a similarity in the specific way I represent the face in my own work with that of Basquiat’s. One commonality is the use of teeth as the main sign for the mouth, displaying anger, fear, bewilderment and shock. Another common method is the rendering of wide open eyes without lids, seemingly forced to confront whatever enrages them. I see the use of outline rather than painterly modeling to create facial features as another way to ratchet up intensity and immediacy in the communication of raw emotion.

Basquiat was plainly influenced by pop culture.\textsuperscript{15} This observation is evidenced by his subject matter and his use of a graphic sensibility.\textsuperscript{16} I am interested in pop culture only insomuch as it is an


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
unavoidable influence on the mental content of any currently living member of American society, including myself. I am not trying to point to specific cultural touchstones but am instead interested in alluding to the pervasive noise in the mind, which is arguably due in part to the pervasive noise outside the mind in the arena of daily life. My heads, though not quite cartoons, do in fact skew far closer to a graphic, so-called low art end of the spectrum than they do towards any naturalistic, refined depiction of the human head/visage. In employing such a treatment I am able to rapidly express the fleeting torrent of thought and feeling I acknowledge in the moment of creation. My work is influenced by the fact that when Basquiat paints heads, they are not naturalistic, but seem to show what is going on inside the heads (or his head), where a naturalistic depiction of a head serves to obscure such things. There is an ugliness to his figures that affects me deeply. They seem genuine—cutting and sarcastic maybe—but no less honest.

Jeffrey Deitch states in Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street “Basquiat’s work extends the anti-harmonious side of modernism with its embrace of chaos and chance.”17 My work is highly dependent on chaos, with little to no planning, instead using a methodology of shaping through accentuation or elimination of the initial automatic chaotic marks.

Another historical source I discovered early in my interest in art was that of the German expressionist Egon Schiele. He is yet another artist for which the figure is the locus around which his own personal expressive style vibrates. His use of tense, anxious and searching line suggests bone and sinew more than flesh. I respond to his raw visceral depiction of the human person, which seems to state more about the artist

18. Egon Schiele, Self Portrait Pulling Cheek, 1910, gouche, watercolor and charcoal, 43.3 x 30 1/2 cm, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina in Reinhard Steiner, Schiele (Cologne: Taschen, 2004), 6.
than whatever subject he at that moment depicts. Schiele’s line, more than anyone else’s, serves as the inspiration for my own hand. My forms, likewise depicting the person, are knobby, taut and twisted, threatening to contract into knotted cramps or snap like tendons stretched too far.

I more recently re-discovered the work of another artist I believe influences my approach—Francis Bacon. I recall seeing his work decades ago and finding it deeply disturbing, in fact almost revolting. After many years though I became transfixed with the simultaneous horror and beauty of his twisted tortured figures. From Bacon I learned the figure, and namely the face, can be almost unrecognizably twisted and pummeled at the will of the artist, and in suffering such abuse serves to more directly relate an emotional tragedy far more succinctly than an expression naturalistically rendered. Due to Bacon’s precedent in doing near unspeakable violence to the figure I similarly express a darkness through my own unique and personal distortion of the sign that is the head.

This brings me now to a movement with which I perhaps have the strongest affinity, though one that I knew nothing about before coming to Kent State—CoBrA (standing for the movement’s founders’ origins: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam). While there is an obvious link in that they and I paint heads in a loose expressive manner, there are conceptual and motivational commonalities as well as the methodological.

Again, anger comes to the fore. Victor H. Miesel, states in *The Roots and Development of COBRA Art* that “Cobra art is imbued with darkly compelling and violent emotions.”20 French art critic

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Michel Ragon stated “Cobra humor was absurd, often bitter and at times ferocious.”\textsuperscript{21} Just as I focus on the head in a twisted and abstracted way, these artists portray basic physiognomy in a crude, gestural, violent, childish and naive fashion using vivid, jarring color and chaotic, automatic marks. Looking at these artists, such as Karel Appel, Asger Jorn and Pierre Alechinsky, has certainly inspired and influenced my current body of work. Though their movement flowered decades ago (though a few are still working), their relative anonymity in the current North American art canon makes them fresh for mining. While visually my work may reflect elements of theirs, there are certainly differences between us, namely in the intent of the work. Where Cobra artists were reacting against the rational world that inconceivably produced the horrors of the second World War, I am reacting not so much against the outside world as I am the inside world of self-awareness, and the struggles I find fraught within. But as Willemijn Stokvis states in \textit{COBRA: The Last Avant-Garde Movement of the Twentieth Century}, these artists tried “to do away with everything that proved hollow and superficial; to search for the deepest, most extreme significance in life and art.”\textsuperscript{23} I am aware of such themes as cynicism, irony and critical distance in contemporary art, but I am much more interested in the honest sincerity displayed by the Cobra artists. Cobra figure Christian Dotremont stated “There are

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{karel_appel_two_heads_1953}
\caption{Karel Appel \textit{Two Heads}, 1953.\textsuperscript{22}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{21} Flomenhaft, \textit{Roots}, 14.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Cobra: The Last Avant-Garde Movement of the Twentieth Century}. (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2004), 10.
more things in the earth of a painting than in the heaven of aesthetic theory.”24 While their movement’s origination may seem relatively distant on the rapidly moving timeline of art history, the need for sincere human expression can never wane. I am firmly committed to engaging with and expressing my own experience, as this is my only opportunity (lifetime) to do so. While there is certainly nothing wrong with irony and cynicism per se, for me to try to adopt such a stance would be contrary to my nature and current interests, which skew unapologetically sincere. Sincerity does not however negate anger, absurdity, or any other disposition, as I see and experience every mood or thought, however passing, as integral to my existence. I also do not believe I am alone.

I would here list a selection of contemporary artists with whom I see thematic and stylistic commonalities. While I cannot go into detail about the individual intent of each of these artists, I see similarities in the results of our respective efforts. There are several artists showing today who are painting dark, frightening heads in a painterly gestural style. Summer Wheat’s figures appear decaying, rotting, and screaming yet comic in their over-the-top treatment and depiction. Allison Schulnik treats the head as something fearful and twisted, and makes no attempt to hide the materiality of its creation. Her work, like Wheat’s, is arguably celebratory of the medium of paint. Like much of my thesis body, Schulnik’s surfaces exhibit a strong, dynamic facture. Evidence of charged, expressive gestures is clearly present not only in the color and tone of pigments used, but even more so in the thick turbulent surface of the paintings. These surfaces, like mine, also give testimony to a history of struggle in their creation.

Less obvious in their depictions of heads are Cesar Lucchini, who makes reference to his head paintings as “almost a head” and Jackie Saccoccio who calls a series of vaguely ovoid forms “portraits” though visually they could only be so in a most minimal sense. That said, they are not lacking in an emotional resonance suggestive of life. I would point to the power of suggestion in titling or presenting a body of work. While a head might not be the first thing you see when looking at these artists’ images,

24 Ibid., 194.
once the title (suggesting head or portrait) is considered in the viewing, a kind of transformation takes place. Simple marks and abstract passages suddenly take on an emotional tenor. A stroke of gray is now sad, a stab of red angry, a running blue smear is despondent. My work is likewise at least partially dependent on context and association, disclosed primarily through the titles I use as clues to guide but not force a viewer’s thoughts. I see the confluence of imagery, abstraction and context as tributaries that alone might not make much impact, but when brought together form a powerful stream that churns and swirls as a unified yet shifting force.

Lastly I would mention as a contemporary link artists whose image making veers into a maximalist territory with densely packed color and line forming shapes apparently from intuition, with possible imagery waxing and waning from within the chaos. One such artist is Steve Dibenedetto.

OUTCOMES

While I make an effort to let each painting evolve organically into its own unique form, I will now point to one specific painting I feel is especially representative of all the themes and methods I have mentioned. This piece is titled *Echoencephala* [Fig 6]. Before I begin a discussion of the visual form of the painting, I would like to briefly state my purpose and method for titling my works. Just as the paintings evolve during an interplay between chance and decision, I seek to keep a similarly loose grip on the process of titling my pieces. Once I complete a painting I allow it to gestate in my studio for a period of time before I assign it a title. I will then listen to whatever phrases, images, or ideas bubble to the surface of my consciousness. With a minimum of intention, I again allow an outlet for the chatter of inner mental life to find entry into the piece, this time through words. I select a phrase I find to be as open-ended as the painting process, while adding another layer of content that I feel enhances the tone. I will also often choose titles that are somewhat tongue in cheek, in an effort to provoke thought, interest and puzzlement for the viewer. I believe a clever title acts as a lure to snag the viewer just as the visual elements reel them in. While I take my art and practice seriously, I feel there is room, possibly even necessity, to make the final twist of completing a piece a tiny bit humorous, reflecting the decision to
engage with dark themes and rise above, rather than succumb to the dangers of the emotions expressed.

_Echoencephala_ is a polyptych composed of four 36” x 36” canvases butted flush against one another in a square grid. It is acrylic on canvas, 72” x 72” in total, and was completed in 2013. As for the process, I first began by putting on music that matched the mental state I intended to express. For this piece, and most others, I chose aggressive heavy metal. I began the piece by covering each of the four canvases individually with large color fields to activate the complete surfaces. I then placed large globs of
paint of different colors, as well as clear gloss gel (to provide a slick movement and variegate the intermixing of colors) on the surface with a palette knife, then immediately drew a drywall blade through the globs in a gestural, automatist fashion with no regard for imagery or design. Once dry, I repeated the application just described but instead of dragging with a blade, I used a form of decalcomania, pressing two canvases face to face and drawing them apart laterally, creating an utterly blind collection of marks. Still firmly rooted in automatism, I then placed the canvases one by one on the floor and squirted liquid paint on them, again with a gestural and expressive motion. I repeated this process several times, frequently pressing canvases face to face and dragging, and sometimes lightly drawing a blade through the rivulets of squirted paint to change their width and appearance.

After I achieved a richly variegated image, I then began to work slightly more intentionally, responding to what I blindly created, using brushes as well as blades. As the painting continued to develop, my level of intentionality increased as I began to see the head(s) within the chaos. While I emphasized or negated certain passages, I consistently maintained an approach that stayed true to the expressive nature of the initial automatist marks. I also at this point began to rearrange the panels, both by rotating them individually and by exchanging their positions within the grid format. At one point I saw and drew out a large overall head form but wished to fracture it in keeping with my theme of rapidly fluctuating psychic states. The head rearranged lost its sense of features within a skull, and began to more fluidly express psychological rather than physical space. Such signifiers for human psychic turmoil can be seen throughout the group, tellingly functioning in more than one mode. For example, I see the smallish circles rising from D1 diagonally up through B4 as being both a row of teeth, individual noses/snouts or eyes of multiple beings, or even just eyes without owners. I also see the individual canvases as containing their own singular heads, for instance the top left canvases has what could be two eyes in pink and black at the top two corners and a row of pennant shaped teeth in the lower right as well as in C1 and B3.

The fluctuation, indeterminacy and opportunity for malleable interpretation is precisely in line with how I want these paintings to function—churning, uncertain, overwhelming, and impossible
to process in a single glance. Indeed, I craft my paintings to allow for completely different reads
upon repeated viewing. This painting also exhibits a sense of shallow space, with the linear elements
overlapping small sections of color at the back and each other in the fore. I choose to depict a shallow
space to reflect the relative opacity of the mind. I see my thoughts, but I cannot in truth understand the
space they inhabit or know their true source or depth.

_Echoencephala_ is again characteristic in that it is an all-over painting, easily imagined to spread
indefinitely in all directions. Yet unlike a Pollock where one square foot could easily be exchanged with
another, I portray more particularity where each moment of the canvas has a unique appearance, intended
to imply specific moments or segments of thought and feeling. One can imagine the image spreading
indefinitely beyond its boundaries, but I crafted the piece to portray a sense it would continue to shift and
impart wholly novel information as it continues rather than mirror or repeat anything actually seen within
the frame of the piece.

I choose colors that enforce the mood I am expressing. This decision may or may not exist prior
to beginning a piece. In fact this piece now under examination, which primarily exhibits pink, red, orange
and ochre, had at one stage quite a lot of blue. In an effort to achieve a degree of clarity, I painstakingly
replaced almost all the blue with various shades of orange to narrow the palette and tighten its impact.
This piece is also typical of this body of work in the employment of bright, saturated color. When
representing the mind, no color can express the richness and density of mental life. Brighter colors come
closer than muted ones. I also prefer a strong palette to show an engagement with the overwhelming
nature of thought and display an effort to make the best of consciousness. I translate struggle, which leads
some to bleak surrender, into something bright and energetic that can be repurposed for good.

The final characteristic of this piece I will address is size. I would just pose the question, how big
is the mind? The brain fits within the skull, a small thing relative to the world, but the mind paradoxically
occupies infinite space while being wholly immaterial. My preference for relatively large supports simply
allows me to express and depict more of the density, richness and power of inner mental life.
To return to my comments on clarity—it may seem contrary to my stated purpose to speak of clarity in the context of these chaotic, maximalized surfaces. But what I am doing is expressing a mental state not in an effort to replicate it, but rather offer it up for contemplation. If a painting arises out of a noisy anxious mental space, I craft the painting to allude to noise and anxiety, not actually create these sensations for myself or the viewer. I feel *Echoencephala* represents anxiety (as well as a host of other emotions), but I have carefully corralled the expression into an image that invites prolonged viewing, with a payoff of providing a richly stimulating visual and mental experience.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would state that I have succeeded in creating a body of work that performs in the way I have described and in how I intended. Like any successful artist, I have found a way to take physical raw materials and combine them with conceptual material to create something novel and affecting. While I operate in an expressive framework, itself a mode of practice that cycles in and out of fashion, I use it in novel ways to create images that have previously not existed. This comes in part from the physiological nature of my own body, partly from acquired skill built from practice, but most importantly from my mind, which like all minds is completely unique. I have found a language to express the concerns of my mind, in this case the struggle with the emotions that arise from the consideration of difficult ideas. Such consideration is not an activity I turn on or off opportunistically to achieve this end. In fact it is a characteristic inherent to my existence, and one which has at times been a challenge to my own well-being. It might be said art should not be therapeutic, or that if it is it lessens its import. I counter that all human activity is at base intended to be therapeutic. I believe all we undertake is in an effort to sustain ourselves. (Granted, we are frequently utterly shortsighted as to the true effects of our actions.) That said, through this thesis exploration I have allowed myself to make paintings out of a place of necessity rather than one purely of choice. I believe they are stronger and more authentic because of it. I have developed a method that has served not only as an academic experiment but also as a powerful personal medicine. I cannot prove, but I can definitively state, that the expressive energies I released in
my paintings have significantly served to ameliorate the very conditions I sought to express. If others can see both the evidence and resolution of such struggles, or even go so far as to identify with them themselves, this exercise will have achieved another level of success.

While the intent and methods I have developed in this body of work could certainly serve as a basis for my practice indefinitely, I am excited to expound and advance upon this base. In this work I tried to simplify things to their most elemental states—the nature of my experience as a conscious being expressed in paint, and a simple set of signs to point to conscious life: head-like forms. There may be minds that exist outside of heads, but at this moment in history we have no certainty such entities do or could exist. So I chose the most basic signifier that is necessary for conscious existence, the house of the brain and seat of the self, the head. I also chose to focus on what I felt were the most powerful emotions in my experience, those that go hand in hand with struggle: doubt, fear, anger, anxiety, uncertainty, sadness and confusion. I would like to explore expanding beyond negative mental states to ones that are more nuanced and complex, and experiment with choosing to express such states through more complex and nuanced signifiers. I am firmly committed to an expressionist stance. The ability to render what is inside the mind on what is outside the body is what fascinates me in my own and in other artists’ work. I am anxious to take what I have developed here and continue to build on the knowledge and skill I have gained.
Fig 7. *Circling Sorrow*, polyptych, 50 x 50 inches, 2013.

Fig 8. *The Jury*, 47 x 63 inches, 2013.
Fig 9. *Blindfooled*, polyptych, 50 x 50 inches, 2013.

Fig 10. *Thoughts Like Bees*, 46 x 44 inches, 2013.
Fig 11. *It’s My Fault (Line)*, 42 x 40 inches, 2013.

Fig 12. *Adamant Even*, diptych, 48 x 48 inches, 2013.
Fig 13. *Inside Snout*, 60 x 57 inches, 2013.

Fig 14. *Sinus Pressure*, 66 x 54 1/2 inches, 2013.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


