“IF SHE COULD RELAX, DON’T YOU THINK SHE WOULD?”

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

by

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I would like to acknowledge my thesis advisor, Martin Ball for all of his help and guidance throughout my time at the painting program at Kent State University. It was his help, guidance, and knowledge that helped me come to a deeper understanding of my work and how to push the work in a stronger direction.

I would like to thank Gianna Commito for all of her support, knowledge, and expertise. She helped me go beyond my comfort zone and to critically think about my work in new ways. She has been a wonderful mentor and example for me to look to.

I would also like to thank Arron Foster for pushing me to new limits in my print work. His extensive comprehension of printmaking methods helped me strengthen my print work and led me to new explorations.
“IF SHE COULD RELAX, DON’T YOU THINK SHE WOULD?”

My artwork functions as a personal expression of repressed emotions. I convey various negative emotions through the use of formal elements in my paintings and monoprints. My paintings and monoprints contain anxious and chaotic scenes that function as non-linear narratives from traumatic experiences in my life. The creatures operate as alter egos of myself representing my repressed emotions, or physical characteristics of my appearance. Creating my art allows me to work out personal issues through the use of forms and materials. My art pieces contain various applications of paint, jagged and gestural marks to form the figures, along childlike graphic imagery such as bulging eyes and crooked teeth. The paintings and monoprints contain energetic reds, acidic yellows, and vibrant purples which add to the energy in the work. The ultimate goal of my work is to spark an emotional response within the viewer. Ideally, I would like the overload of hectic information to evoke within the viewer a constant anxious feeling; the same feeling I experience as a result of my battle with anxiety. I am consistently told by others around me to just relax. Through the work the viewer will experience the anxiety that I constantly feel and am unable to escape. If I were able to relax, I would. The overwhelming sensation of anxiety is always with me.

I came to the graduate program at Kent State University straight after earning my Bachelors of Fine Arts Degree from the Cleveland Institute of Art. I joined the program hoping to strengthen my skills as a painter and the work I was creating at the time. Previous to the program, I created paintings that contained singular figures that functioned as my alter egos. The paintings did not contain backgrounds or bodies, focusing directly on the singular portrait. My portraits at the time left the viewer experiencing very little, beyond a direct reflection of
themselves. I knew the work fell short when it came to material quality and conceptual depth. At this point I entered the program and my work began to develop in a positive direction.

Expressionism can be defined as an artistic style that departs from the conventions of mimesis and naturalism seeking to convey the artist’s inner experience by an obvious distortion of natural objects, and exaggeration of form, for the purpose of emphasizing emotion, mood, or anxiety in my case. A lack of confidence in my painterly skills produced a bland use of form and materials. I spent my first semester exploring and playing with paint, materials, and my application of them. During that time, I began adding backgrounds and bodies back into my paintings. I created a number of small-scale paintings, along with a series of large-scale head paintings. The backgrounds contained washes of color, while the figures were executed in thicker paint and gestural strokes. This series strengthened my paint handling, but did not push the conversation within the work. It was suggested to me, to combine multiple figures into one piece. I experimented with this idea through collage and mixed media. I created two collage pieces using, paint, canvas, paper, ink, and other various materials. The work was lacking a personal emotional release that I only felt through painting, along with an understanding of how the figures interacted among one another in the work.

This realization came to me during the Spring 2017 semester. That was a prolific period for me, full of revelations in my work. I worked steadily on the process of bringing my characters together. Through this process I experimented with methods such as chine-collé, a print technique where an image is transferred onto thin paper and then bonded to a heavier material, and frottage which is a rubbing technique. During that time, I created a number of smaller pieces. Some of these pieces were my first attempts at combining my creatures solely through painting. That semester I also worked on a six foot by eight foot scale painting, which
ended up being a useful exercise allowing me to work out interactions between the characters. The piece became overwhelming, but gave me a chance to experiment. The painting entitled, *Family Portrait* (Figure 1) was on upstretched canvas and was where I worked to bring the figures together in a singular painting. It was in this piece that I attempted those various processes that ended up not working for me because the painting became busy with too many characters that were not functioning together in the piece.

I did find great success however through another method of working, which was mono-printing. The monoprints I created were doing something my paintings were not doing. In my piece, *Internal Screams* (Figure 2), four figures were brought together in one single scenario. There was an ease and freshness in the print, that did not make it appear over worked. At times, creating a painting would feel daunting to me. I returned to the paintings many times adjusting details that would end up flattening the expressive quality of the paint. There was a lack of preciousness when creating the monoprints in a single setting that allowed me to loosen up and get more aggressive with the materials and gestural marks. This ease of execution made it possible for me to get lost in the work instead of focusing on reworking every little detail. I realized that whatever was working in the prints, needed to come through in my paintings.

What was suggested to me next completely changed my work. It was suggested that I create a catalogue of my characters and explore what they meant to me. This was a pivotal moment for me. I took a step back and really thought about what these characters were trying to convey and the relationship they had with one another. I came to the realization that a way to bring the characters together was through combining non-linear narratives of the traumatic events that these figures were expressing.
It was after this major breakthrough however that I reached a roadblock. I began overthinking and overworking everything in my work. I spent the summer attempting to bring the figures together, trying to figure out how to make the paintings as successful as the prints. It was not until a month before my Candidacy Review that everything fell into place. My monoprints were coming out more successful than my paintings because of the way in which the monoprints were created, in a single setting. The ease and varied sense of touch in the prints were not in the paintings, because the paintings were being overworked and painted over many times. I kept working back into the paintings, with the idea that I had to have a perfect painting. As a way of bringing this mode of working from my mono-prints into my paintings, I began sanding over my paintings and working back into them in one session, returning the next day to reassess them. This process not only helped me figure out how to bring the figures together, but it helped me loosen up with my mark making. My marks slowly became more fresh and aggressive. By sanding into the paintings and working back into them in a single setting like the monoprints, I lost that daunting feeling of preciousness.

This led me to my Candidacy Review, where I ended up presenting a progression of five new paintings demonstrating the new direction my pieces took as non-linear narratives between my figures, representing traumatic experiences from my past. One piece that was successful was, *Nighttime Dreams Followed by Midnight Screams* (Figure 3). The painting contains six figures in a nighttime scenario about internal struggles of anxiety and insomnia. The piece shows a figure lying down with its head on a pillow, eyes wide open, unable to sleep due to fears and anxieties. Above is another figure being strangled and tortured by the anxiety and confusion, which are represented by the graphic figure in the upper left corner and the purple ambiguous character on the right. Swooping down is a character representing the nightmares that used to,
and at times still do, plague me. Finally, in the left corner is a figure which is observing the entire scene, unable to do anything as the figures suffer. This piece was the most successful painting from my review as the figures interact with each other in a manner that evokes an anxious feeling. The composition brings the character together in a way that they don’t appear just randomly placed. There was a more diverse paint quality in this piece than my earlier paintings, with various washes of color, and looser brush marks. The piece had a dark color palette that I felt helped create an anxious, eerie mood. This piece is an example of the direction I am taking for my final show.

Throughout my time in the painting program I have strengthened not only my material usage, but gained a stronger understanding of conceptual contexts for my work. My artwork is inspired by past German artists and groups such as the pre-World War II group, Die Brücke along with other post-WWII German artists. I look to artists from this period for their aggressive and emotional execution of the work, consisting of jarring colors and tortured figures. I see similarities in my work to artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. I am attempting to convey anxious emotions in my paintings through the use of formal elements just as Kirchner’s paintings do. My use of saturated reds, greens, and purples is similar to his color schemes containing vibrant reds and acidic greens. Just like Kirchner’s paintings, my artwork is attempting to induce raw emotions that are the result of traumatic experiences to evoke within the viewer emotional responses. It is because of these similarities that I look to various German Expressionist artists such as Kirchner.

My work shares connections with the short lived CoBrA group in the 1950’s. Some of the leaders of this group were Karel Appel, Asger Jorn, and Carl Henning Pedersen; just to name
a few.\footnote{Willenijn Stokvis, \textit{COBRA The Last Avant-Garde Movement of the Twentieth Century} (Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 2004): 9.} The group is named after the three cities, Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. The work of this group could be characterized as art of the untrained artist; containing loose gestural marks and bold color choices. Artists within the group were inspired by art by children, the mentally ill, and vague ideas of primitivism. The CoBrA group was influenced by various German Expressionist artists and groups for their aggressive use of abstraction, fractured forms, and harsh black jagged lines.\footnote{Eleanor Flomenhaft, \textit{The Roots and Development of Cobra Art} (Hempstead, NY: Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1985): 13.} My work contains similar formal elements to that of the CoBrA group, such as the use of child-like imagery, bold saturated colors, along with energetic mark making. My work is driven by my battle with anxiety, depression, and traumatic experiences from my childhood that are with me today.

I see similar formal and emotional elements between my work and that of Karl Appel, one of the founders of the group. His use of primary colors induce a jarring effect that I feel is present in some of my paintings. The focal point of many of his figures are their faces which have large swirling eyes similar to the eyes on the faces of my characters. My figures have awkward, mangled bodies, which I relate to the awkward bodies of his figures that have sticks arms and legs. Both mine and Appel’s characters appear anxious, terrifying, yet innocent. There is a direct and energetic child-like quality to his work which I can relate back to the figures in my paintings.

I have come to understand the formal and graphic relationships my paintings have to Neo-Expressionist artists of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, naturally German Neo-Expressionism. I have looked at artists such as George Baselitz, Rainer Fetting, and Phillip
Guston. I am also drawn to artists working in the Lower East Side of New York in the 1980’s. Their use of graffiti art and cartoonish elements relates to my work. I feel my work mirrors some of these characteristics as my figures are bold and graphic and often contain cartoon-like eyes and facial expressions. Some of the East Village artists I have looked to are Jean-Michael Basquiat, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and Frank Holiday. I’ve always been particularly drawn to Keith Haring’s paintings for their cartoon-like elements, lively colors, and energetic aura. I was struck by the concepts behind Rodney Alan Greenblats’ work in the article “Slouching Through Avenue D,” however. The article goes into detail on the art scene in the East Village of New York, including the galleries, political and social controversies, and the variation in the styles of work.

Rodney Alan Greenblat created child-like cartoon characters that functioned as alter ego of himself, touching a part of us which does not grow up.3 In my work I am creating alter-egos of myself to deal with traumatic experiences stemming from my childhood. My work shares this idea of holding on to childhood and the loss of it too early. I lost my childhood and innocence too early as a result of situations that were out of my control.

Of the all the East Village artists, Jean-Michel Basquiat is one I closely look at. In my own opinion Basquiat is the perfect mix of the CoBrA group and the East Village artists. Artists in the CoBrA group are loose and gestural in their mark-making, while quite a few artists in the East Village are more graphic or cartoonish. Basquiat’s work is loose and gestural, with various graphic imagery. I believe this would be a good way to describe my own work. My paintings and

mono-prints are made up of a combination of gestural and fluid mark making combined with graphic elements similar to that of Basquiat.

The conceptual contexts for my work not only connect to artists of the past but also to contemporary artists such as Dana Schutz and Nicole Eisenman. The work of Nicole Eisenman serves as an example of combing numerous different characters into a single setting. She is able to bring together stylized figures and combine them with characters that could have walked straight out of a cartoon. In my own work I am attempting to combine various characters that each represent a different version of myself. Dana Schutz influences my work because of the multiple ways her figures are viewed. They appear cute, yet at the same time grotesque and humorous. The characters in my paintings are often perceived in various ways. They can appear awkward and humorous, while also appearing anxious and angry. Both above artists have been important influences when figuring out how to bring my own alter egos together in my artwork.

I consider the strongest piece from my M.F.A. defense to be my painting, *Open Your Eyes Peanut* (Figure 4). The painting contains two figures holding down another character forcing its eyes open. This painting brings together many elements from my work into one piece. The energetic yellow green, bold reds, and eerie purples flow create jarring sensation next to one another. This piece contains a larger range of material usage, with layers of gesso, glitter, and acrylic mediums that are then overlapped with washes of color. There are various marks, scratches, loose brush strokes, and applications of paint as opposed to a single flat surface. Graphic elements juxtaposed to sanded areas pop out in the piece. *Open Your Eyes Peanut* demonstrates the new material discoveries I have made throughout my time in the painting program.
A second piece from my M.F.A. Thesis defense that I feel is successful is the monoprint, *Turn a Blind Eye* (Figure 5). This is due to its subtractive mark making process. The piece is done in deep purples, reds with portions of yellow and green. There is an angry and anxious aura demonstrated in the piece through the aggressive and gestural scratches in the print. This piece has an illuminating quality, where ink and water mixable oil paint was wiped and scratched off the plexiglass. This monoprint expresses raw emotions through materials in a manner that is not overworked, because of this I believe it is my most successful monoprint.

My time in the Kent State Graduate Painting program has been an extremely beneficial experience that has strengthened my work and grown my confidence as a painter. I have gained an understanding of Expressionism and the role that formal elements and material usage play in my work. I’ve learned to own my anxiety and use it as my tool to push and create work. I might not be able to relax, but I don’t know if I would change that. My anxiety and past experiences have allowed me to create work I am proud of and gave me an ultimate purpose to create.
Figure 1

*Family Portrait*

Acrylic on Unstretched Canvas

72 in x 96 in
Figure 2

*Internal Screams*

Monoprint on Paper

22.5 in x 15 in
Figure 3

_Nighttime Dreams Followed by Midnight Screams_

Acrylic on Panel

48 in x 32 in
Figure 4

*Open Your Eyes Peanut*

Acrylic on Panel

36 in x 30.5 in
Figure 5

*Turn A Blind Eye*

Monoprint

37.5 in x 28. in
Figure 6

*There’s No Going Back*

Acrylic on Panel

36 in x 30.5 in
Figure 7

*Jagged Man & Little Booger*

Acrylic on Panel

32 in x 27.5 in
Figure 8

*The Month*

Acrylic on Panel

36 in x 24 in
Figure 9

*I Never Did Learn How to Wear the Poker Face*

Acrylic on Panel

24 in x 22 in
Figure 10

*Let Me Show You How to Be a Dreamer*

Acrylic on Panel

36 ft x 36 ft
Figure 11

*If She Could Explain*

Acrylic on Panel

36 in x 36 in
Figure 12

_Worn Out Faces Are Familiar Friends_

Acrylic on Panel

28 in x 24 in
Figure 13

*Death by Cadmium Red*

Acrylic on Panel

32 in x 42 in
Figure 14

Scratches, Scars, & Crooked Smiles
Acrylic on Panel
34 in x 26.5 in
Figure 15

*Everything Was Fine, Everything Was Mine*

Acrylic on Panel

43 in x 37 in
References

