Time and the Narrative Artist

A Discussion and Comparison of Artist’s Usage of Content and Form in the Production of Narrative and Time-Based Art

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Abstract

Sequence and narration have always caught my attention, whether in film, animation, or graphic stories. As a result, the main focus of my work is storytelling. This concept is coupled with the idea of time and space, whether portrayed literally on a canvas or physically as a short film. The physical space of the image also always acts as a catalyst for the layering, movement, characterization, and symbolism of areas within a final project.

It is my own work in painting and animation, as well as the traditional and contemporary artistic theories of ‘time’ in relation to space, content, and form, that this thesis discusses. Two of the primary tasks of the artist are to capture and convey. Through their conceptual skills of design and the creative process, they are able to formulate ideas and create visual works for display. Whether widely displayed in galleries or museums, or simply created for smaller or personal satisfaction, artists materialize the ideas, thoughts, and concepts that rest in a mysterious world of the human mind, otherwise devoid of visual contact. They see, they experience, they think, and they create.

Yet between abstract ideas and themes such as love or sadness, and imagery such as landscapes and figures, I have found that no idea consistently permeates through art like the idea of time. Sometimes intentional, but always unavoidable, time in art remains that single, barely comprehensible theme that is omnipresent. On Earth, it surrounds, organizes, and pushes mankind. Time brings life just as soon as it takes it away and maintains a constant flow of relentless change. In art, time can appear as simple imagery, like a clock or a sunset, or even as a barren landscape, scarred by age. It can be a waterfall symbolizing change through time or even a complex installment or sculpture, taking the viewers time to explore. Time could even be embodied by a piece marked with a sense of age or of historical significance. It may also be as literal as a film, animation, or narrative sequence of events. In other words, what begins as a seemingly simple concept, branches incredibly to become not so much an idea, as it is a force, finding its way described in nearly everything.

Time can thus be determined unavoidable in art, as at any given moment, if this premise seems inconsistent, one can easily say that even the most obscure piece took time to create and takes time to view and experience. At this level, artists then have the option to explore the facets of time further. When dissecting a work, the two most important components include content and form. Both at the artist’s disposal, he or she may apply both or perhaps one more than the other. So while content and form reside as two of the artist’s most significant tools, how and why would he or she capture and further explore the essence of time in art?

This question acts as my starting point for a historical perspective on ‘time’ within art. It will then continue to develop the thesis into a more contemporary, personal, and focused look at time and sequence in my own art. I will explain how my work has evolved and has been influenced by traditional time-inspired painting as well as my own interests in the more literal nature of ‘time’ inspired by animation and narration.
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Introduction

Two of the primary tasks of the artist are to capture and convey. Through their conceptual skills of design and the creative process, they are able to formulate ideas and create visual works for display. Whether widely displayed in galleries or museums, or simply created for smaller or personal satisfaction, artists materialize the ideas, thoughts, and concepts that rest in a mysterious world of the human mind, otherwise devoid of visual contact. They see, they experience, they think, and they create.

Yet between abstract ideas and themes such as love or sadness, and imagery such as landscapes and figures, no idea consistently permeates through art like time. Sometimes intentional, but always unavoidable, time in art remains that single, barely comprehensible theme that is omnipresent. On Earth, it surrounds, organizes, and pushes mankind. Time brings life just as soon as it takes it away and maintains a constant flow of relentless change. In art, time can appear as simple imagery, like a clock or a sunset, or even as a barren landscape, scarred by age. It can be a waterfall symbolizing change through time or even a complex installment or sculpture, taking the viewers time to explore. Time could even be embodied by a piece marked with a sense of age or of historical significance. In other words, what begins as a seemingly simple concept, branches incredibly to become not so much an idea as it is a force, finding its way described in nearly everything.
Content and Form

Time can thus be determined unavoidable in art, as at any given moment, if this premise seems inconsistent, one can easily say that even the most obscure piece took time to create and takes time to view and experience. At this level, artists then have the option to explore the facets of time further. When dissecting a work, the two most important components include content and form. Both at the artist’s disposal, he or she may apply both or perhaps one more than the other. Through form, the artist considers size, texture, medium, color, tone, shape, movement, and even subject matter, or a simple literal meaning of the piece. By employing these aspects, the artist creates what is to become the embodiment of the visual sense. [Reynolds p. 70] Often then, form lends itself as a key vehicle for content. While content is obviously not possible without form, form always must have some sort of deeper meaning, whether greatly significant or simply a “why?” describing the artist’s intentions and decisions.

So while content and form reside as two of the artist’s most significant tools, how and why would he or she capture and further explore the essence of time?

An Investigation of Form and Time

Creating an art piece is a constant decision making process. Form provides numerous factors at the artists’ disposal such as compositional elements, mediums, techniques, and other visual components. The artists must carefully choose and discern
between which techniques and mediums to apply in order to fulfill their visions as accurately as possible. And when attempting to capture a sense of time, whether for mood, setting, to strengthen content, or consumer and commercial appeal, the processes are remarkably effective.

The single most important art genre to greatly consider ‘time’ was the Impressionist movement. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Denver Art Museum collaborated in 1999 to exhibit a show featuring impressionist works collected from European Art Museums. Their web site, www.impressionism.org, gives an outstanding overview of the era.

Critically rejected at first, Impressionism chose to break ground in form in ways that at the time seemed completely radical. The impressionist painters chose to stray from the traditional subject matter of religious or historical ideas and reflect on places and scenes that they were familiar with. Many of the landscapes they painted failed to provide the romanticized version, as they felt that nature itself was beautiful and exotic without need for exaggeration. Their compositions were dynamic and forewent the straightforwardness of traditional styles, while their palettes were bright and lively, straying from the darker colors of before. But most importantly, their main focus was to capture the moment— to freeze the subject at any given time. [16]

To do this, many times the painters would quickly mix their bright colors directly on the canvas, while the spontaneity and quickness of their mark making and broken brush-marks connected to that particular instance of the subject in time. The time period itself brought new innovations as the Industrial Revolution advanced. The study of color
theory soon expanded and explored the areas of the color wheel, complementary colors, as well as useful observations such as when a subject’s cast shadow is sometimes tinted with its complement. More so, the introduction of the camera into the 19th century allowed the Impressionists to accurately capture the subject in an exact position for the exact moment. This idea allowed them to truly study the movement of the figure and of life as well as to examine the features of the picture taking results that could be applied to canvas, such as composition, perspective, focus, and split-second instances. [15]

This idea of the moment began to gain strength with the opinions of critics and collectors. Eighteenth century German art critic G.E. Lessing explained that while art typically presents space, it should also deal with the element of time and single moments. Lessing pushed for the idea of the “purity of the moment” which he would essentially idealize as the process and experience of painting. [Lippincott p. 194] Anything more that served to enhance or complicate the moment only created pictorial noise and tainted the piece.

Many of the painters during the era sought out to establish a ‘moment caught in passing’, as John House puts it in his analysis of Claude Monet’s piece, *Impression, Sunrise* (1873) [fig. 1]. In order to accurately capture the variety of temporary colors, artists like Monet would quickly produce quick oil sketches that would later be referenced and re-worked within the studio. However, part of the failure of the first Impressionist show in 1874 was that the audience failed to understand that the point of presenting a rapid-looking painting as a finished work was to express the instantaneity of the subject and the essence of the moment.
Other paintings such as Monet’s *The Railway Bridge at Argenteuil* (1873) [fig. 2], similarly sought to capture the essence of a frozen moment but was also reworked to include more detail and deeper content. The full trees indicate the summer season while the brightly white bridge pillars and crisp shadows suggest a particular time of day. His choice of certain subject matter also throws forth an excellent time-suggestive meaning, where a moving train symbolizes accurate timekeeping as opposed to the leisure like attitude of the onlookers and the sailboats, engaging in not so precisely timed activities. [p. 196]

Interestingly enough, Monet felt that though these paintings captured a moment in time and involved the viewer in discovering one instance, the quickness of execution of some paintings left him feeling dissatisfied. He began to realize that though it seems logical to capture an instance in an instant, true instantaneity took time to acquire. Here Monet states his realization while painting haystacks at different times of the day and year:

“I’m working away at a series of different effects (of grain stacks), but at this time of year the sun sets so quickly that I can’t keep up with it… I’m becoming so slow in my work that it makes me despair, but the further I go, the better I see that it takes a great deal of work to succeed in rendering what I want to render: ‘instantaneity’, above all the enveloping atmosphere, the same light diffused over everything, and I’m more than ever disgusted with things that come easily, at the first attempt.” [qtd. in Lippincott p. 196]
As a result, he found that instant paintings left the viewer little to explore. Only by investing more and more time into the painting would he achieve a connection between art piece and viewer, or essentially allowing his paintings to take longer to observe.

G.E. Lessing was further fueled by the idea that choosing the right moment was a critical step. The instance should be the most ideal moment that is able to accurately establish the nature of what is being depicted. [p. 194] Italian Baroque painter, Caravaggio, enlisted the idea of chiaroscuro, contrasting dense shadow with forms of bright illumination, in order to fully capture a moment and add believability as well as a complementary sense of a particular drama. His painting *The Calling of Saint Mathew* (1599-1600) [fig. 3] demonstrates his wonderful usage of balancing chiaroscuro compositionally. The upper left and bottom right corners provide an excellent dark balance, while the group of figures as well as the ray of light and window emerging from the darkness seem to form a slight Z shape. The viewer is able to identify that this scene is probably taking place at early dusk, where the warm light flows through the window while the ray angles in a sunset like fashion. The shadow also complements the character of each figure, as the darkness adds mystery to the caller and the light illustrates both Mathew’s and the others’ surprise.

By choosing these particular moments that were infused with drama and emotion by the lighting, the painter is easily able to capture the mood. Though this extreme lighting only emphasizes particular moods, this idea of capturing the form falling in and out of shadow provides an incredibly effective technique in such cases. Not only this, but
it invites the viewer to complete what is not physically viewable, thereby also inadvertently involving them more deeply into the given ‘moment’.

This idea of involving the viewer to connect them to the piece can also be more modernly seen in the work of Jim Dine. In many cases he will use implied line, where the viewer makes up and completes the form that is not entirely there. Similarly, he may go to the other extreme and carefully allow an excess of scribbles or fluid marks to somehow seem to attract the eye into forming one solid line. One example is his untitled tool series where he renders his depiction of different kinds of tools, such as a hammer, a drill and bit, and a C-clamp. Here the business and seemingly randomness of the ink and graphite builds the already recognizable form (even with hints of chiaroscuro around the figures) and invites the eye to take the time and gain a sense of completion.

These artistic ‘tricks’ applied by Dine, Caravaggio, and others not only involve but eventually lure the viewer into seeing not so much what the subject matter is, but how and when it looked at that particular moment. The idea is to draw the viewer in and carry the viewer to the time of the execution of the work and the moment portrayed.

Lessing further states it best that, “The longer we gaze, the more must our imagination add; and the more our imagination adds, the more we must believe what we see.” [p. 195] This idea identifies the benefit of involving the viewer, whereby the moment is made more instantaneous and believable.

Skillful technique and careful style can easily produce the desired intent for an essence of time, but there are also processes where the entire work itself undergoes a unique artificial ‘aging’.
Painters have always depended on glazes and varnishes throughout the painting in order to bring unity and conformity to their color arrangements. However, over time, it was found that these varnishes, especially the final layer, tended to darken the painting. However these ‘aged’ paintings found a respectable audience in 18th century England, as the timeliness presented unique character to the piece. As a result, artists took advantage of this style desired by consumers and collectors and began to artificially ‘age’ their work. [p. 179]

English artist Sir Joshua Reynolds was known to sometimes coat his paintings with a brown varnish in order to achieve this ‘time’ effect. [p. 179] Not only this, but he and many others found that by blowing smoke onto the surface of their works, or ‘smoking pictures’ as it became known as, tinged the paintings with a unique essence of age.

Eighteenth century artist William Hogarth declared his disgust with the technique. He asserted that the process fails to enhance the piece but rather inevitably destroys it. Time should be left to do it’s own work. His 1761 engraving Time Smoking a Picture [fig. 4] demonstrates his point. [p. 179] Here, a father-time figure is seen darkening the picture by blowing smoke. His sickle, however, has cut through the painting, explaining that time will eventually age the painting anyway, if not prematurely by this process. Hogarth is also satirizing the entire ‘aging’ technique in general, as a large jar of varnish is also clearly visible as well as a marble statue found in pieces, under which he writes, “As Statues Moulder into Worth.” While these ideas were effective in capturing the
appearance of physical time, they were not always respected, as artwork was, and still is, artificially aged and cheapened in order to appease consumer taste.

While these techniques catered to a nostalgic fad, they were and still are carried further in order to carefully replicate and forge art for the purpose of deception. The techniques vary from artist to artist, often not revealed or otherwise circulated through secretive art underworlds.

Patience is often a necessary virtue for forgers. Much like smoking a painting, wood was often exposed to various elements. Imitation Louis XV and XVI furniture was known to be stored in London for a few months where the fog and damp atmosphere could warp the wood accordingly. [David p. 307] In order to duplicate drawings, Chinese forgers allowed ink to penetrate the paper followed by soaking the page in water. It was then laid out to dry on a lacquer surface nearly thirty times a day for a month. Still, there is nothing like the real thing, indicating the steep prices for the rarity of unused early 19th century sketchbooks. [p. 308]

Visually, the medium is also very important for an aged feel. One technique involves applying a small amount of spirit over dry tempera causing craquelure as it evaporates. [p. 308] Another method applied to known forger Han van Meegeren mixed oil paints with the artificial resin Bakelite, that after rolling and baking, produces an enamel-looking surface not unlike 300 year old paint that is also undetectable by some modern solvent tests. This was demonstrated in his forgery of Johannes Vermeer’s “Supper at Emmaus” [1936-7]. Other forgers tend to use a layer of gelatin for similar effects. [p. 310]
Time from Content and a Deeper Meaning

The content of a work of art can vary in degrees. Any piece will carry some questions as to the artist’s intent, thusly noted as a mild form of content that does in fact go deeper than the literal meaning. Others go far beyond the subject matter to allude to ideas and themes that can carry and branch out enormously. Artists have unlimited ways of allowing their content to bear a sense of time through such venues as an historical allusion of a person or event, commenting on a time period, or even making the viewer aware of a different perspective of ‘time’ as society knows it.

Combing the figures of the past with social issues or ideas of today is one method in which contemporary modern artist Miriam Schapiro addresses time. Schapiro’s work wishes to identify the question of how a woman can address her position of personal identity as both a woman and an artist in modern times. She explores and is driven by the idea of the woman artist not being recognized not only historically but in modern society as well. [Gouma-Peterson p. 13]

During the mid-seventies, she established a collaboration series involving her identification with other women artists whom history failed to record. Her work in “Collaboration Series: Mary Cassatt and Me” involves small reproductions of Cassatt’s work surrounded by colorful patterns, almost quilt-like in design. Later collaborations even involved applying the quilt and fabric work of other anonymous women.
Her collaboration of the late eighties ties in the historical perspective of mid-20th century artist Frida Kahlo. She identifies with Kahlo as a woman artist enduring the hardships and obstacles of not only society but also of being a woman. She connects with Kahlo, “because she was a remarkable painter, one who understood from her own house of pain, a woman’s suffering and indignity. She was the consummate creator of the diaristic, intimate worlds she inhabited.” [p. 123] Her 1988 work *Conservatory*, along with other works in the Frida Kahlo series, reflect her disappointment in the ultimate effectiveness of the feminist movement. As the title suggests, Schapiro is compiling her own historical identification and connection with her ancestry of women artists. She states, “Frida Kahlo is part of my history… there is nothing left for a woman artist of the eighties than to be a curator of her history.” [p. 125]

Another interesting piece in the series is her work *Time* in which a seated woman artist in man’s clothing is in contrast to a younger, more lively woman artist with a palette. Based on Kahlo’s *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* [fig. 5], it expresses Schapiro’s concerns of time passing as well as a loss of status due to aging. It gives a sense of liberation through changing times while some woman may still harbor a feeling of constrain and indignity. [p 123]

Similarly, content may dictate current events that can then act as historical mark makers. John Covert’s 1919 piece also entitled *Time* becomes drastically more historically significant as time has progressed. It presents itself as a rather visually unattractive, yet strangely interesting abstract piece. Amid divisions of black, white, and
gray compositional elements, Covert has riddled his work with numerous upholstery tacks, spurring questions about quantity and meaning.

Firstly, the movement of two columns of tacks beginning at parallels and diverging suggests the idea of non-Euclidean space- more about this later. More importantly, throughout the piece are found equations, formulas, and numbers. The day and night time abbreviations of AM and PM are clearly visible, as well as the number 4, establishing the idea of the fourth dimension, or time.

These mathematical allusions can date back to the era of the painting’s creation in 1919, where the breakthroughs of Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity of 1905 and the General Relativity Theory of 1916 was being discussed and considered throughout the world, as well as of course various art circles. [Dietrich p. 20] This piece not only shows deeper importance to the general idea of relativity and time, but also signifies how significant it was to those who lived during the period when this discovery began to gain popularity. It, in effect, takes the viewer back to a time when these ideas became a central scientific and social issue.

However sometimes historical markers can in fact falsify the ideas of the period that their content portrays. Contemporary photographer Leandro Katz explores these records and twists his own content to signify the inconsistencies. He does this simply by comparing two conflicting settings and letting the viewer identify the drastic differences. The Catherwood Project, as he has named it, involves 4000 black and white and 1800 color photos each displayed next to its Catherwood counterpart, that is, a romanticized
depiction of various ancient sites of Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan drawn by Frederick Catherwood during the colonial period. [p. 28]

Catherwood’s drawings dictate the form of the period and the struggle to break from a romantic style for a site unsuited for such exaggeration. Katz revisits each site and attempts to unveil the reality of its nature. [pgs. 28-29] Thus, by taking advantage of the loaded significance and character each site provides, in reality and historically, Katz is able to allow his content to take off on its own, showing quite clearly its evolution through time as well as a sense of the mindsets of those who experienced it in the past. He has essentially established a connection between two groups of viewers who are separated by time.

Another concept of time in content, aside from instance and extended time, is the idea of ‘slow-time’, explored in the works of modernist painter Helen Lundeberg. In a 1997 article in Artweek Magazine, freelance writer and artist George Tapley critiques and explores her pale, empty desert landscapes.

At first, he is incredibly dissatisfied. Lundeberg’s form offers no visual stimulation or eye-grabbing interest. Tapley, in effect, waits for something to happen, as he professes that, “Time should be no obstacle.” [p. 17] Yet upon further thought regarding why he states this, he realizes that the consumer lifestyle and the modern fast-paced city lifestyle has stunted his eye.

Again he examines the piece, noting the small, detailed imagery of a shell, fruit, or leaf in contrast to a vast, airy desert landscape. The light, as well, flows throughout,
sometimes cold or glaring, but providing a fitting, dull atmosphere. He resolves that the works are decently composed, yet can find little contentual meaning.

At last, however, he realizes a critical connection to ‘time’. He writes, “These paintings are about waiting as a positive value. Patience, not escape, is the message.” [p. 17] He further quotes poet W.H. Auden, “O let not Time deceive you. You cannot conquer Time.” Tapley finds himself so wound up in the instance of paintings and the modern consumerist speed of life that he had neglected to identify himself and the work with “earthly time and experience.” [p. 17] This idea of slow time is portrayed, and rightfully so, as a necessary element in human life. Through slow-time alone can one gain experience, knowledge, and come to understand any other concept of time within it.

**Which, if either one, is more successful in capturing the essence of time, content or form?**

Regardless of the fact that content is not possible without form (in considering form to be the physicality of the piece itself), is either one more effective in conveying a sense of time than the other?

One simple way to determine the competing effectiveness of content and form is to consider them combined. Rather than judge a piece, strong in content, with another that displays an intriguing sense of form, we can consider one that effectively involves both. Two bodies of work to regard are that of contemporary printmaker, Thom Shaw and neo-expressionistic artist, Francesco Clemente.
The rapid nature of woodcuts can either create tension or complement the subject matter. The mark making in Thom Shaw’s piece, *The Malcom X Paradox: Assassination #2* (1994), complements the idea of life quickly fleeting. This notion presents the opportunity to question which carries the piece farther with a sense of time, the flying clock and X-marked body or the swift marks and gestural body?

In this case, it may be apparent that both are effective. The flying clock symbolizes that time has left the man, who has evidently, been the subject of violence, while wearing the X insignia that is now often worn unknowing of the anti-violence that it stood for. Rather than alluding to the civil rights days of Malcom X in the 1960’s, this work takes the viewer to a more current time and place, today, where young African American men are sometimes found in urban gangs, harming and killing each other over current social and economic issues such as drugs and money. [Dietrich p. 31] This is the idea of content marking a time.

On the other hand, the subject matter of the stunned figure coupled with the movement of the wood markings arrives at a specific instance. This instance is the point of contact where life meets death and the quickness of the transition. More accurately, this case marks the penultimate moment, a technique in capturing the moment immediately before a significant action. As a result, the viewer is left with both a feeling of instance and of historical significance.

Where Shaw’s content and form both hold up on their own for a complementary sense of long term and short term time, Francesco Clemente’s use of expressionistic
figures to produce content displays how capturing the essence of time may require a marriage of the two.

Author Rainer Crone describes in the artist reference site www.artchive.com how Clemente’s stylistic range varies generally from religious symbolism and beliefs to personal feelings and cultural relationships as well as human ideals of culture and society. He does not tremendously vary his execution of stylistic form in paintings, but rather in his content, typically ranging from symbolic self-portraits to highly suggestive, yet surprisingly subtle tragic, sexual, and spiritual scenes. His early paintings make references to myth and cultural allusions as well as religious ideas of both the west and east, strengthened by his studio ties in India, Italy, and America. [Crone]

Crone also identifies that when not making direct allusions, however, Clemente’s art can be viewed as a modern answer to abstract and surrealist art. His work, like surrealists, attempts to disrupt the viewer’s previous knowledge of a situation, and reevaluate it in a new meaning. However, Clemente’s imagery is typically original with newer meaning, rather than calling on traditional images with loaded meaning. He uses the figurative form to establish an acute expressionistic meaning rather than for narrative intentions or setting descriptions. He intends for the power of the expression of the figure to carry through his ideas of a dream-like and impossible, yet seemingly attainable world. It is of a reality established before any pre-judgements or symbols from our own world are applied, a contrast of untainted fantasy-time and Modern Earthly time. [Crone]

On display in the Art Gallery of New South Wales is one of Clemente’s 1981 works *Water and Wine*. This piece directly addresses modern man and how his ideals
have changed from his ancient self. It depicts a man (Clemente himself) holding the head of an upright, non-threatened cow. Below is a woman looking to feed off of the animal’s udder. It has been noted that Clemente often applies his experience in India throughout his painting, which is more than apparent in his image style, but is more so relevant in this particular painting’s content. The gallery itself suggests that the artist sees the cow as a sacred symbol of a time when man and nature lived harmoniously as well as non-threatened by the dominance of either one. The man stands so as to seem to complete the leg and head of the beheaded cow, while using one hand to imitate a horn, ultimately suggesting a prehistoric re-integration of man and beast.

Since Clemente finds himself occasionally referencing ancient Roman times, the woman could appear to relate to the classic Romulus and Remus story where the two young founders of Rome were raised by a she-wolf and are depicted drinking from the animals breasts - a solid symbol of life and connection between man and animal. However, this merge of man and animal also seems to lend a new sexual meaning, as the man has essentially changed the gender of the animal by completing its left half with his own body. The woman is then engaging in what could be demonstrated as acts that have also separated man with nature, or the idea of sex for pleasure rather than an ancient sole purpose of procreation.

By limiting his rendering and value modeling, he is able to allow the viewer to focus on the pure expressionistic and contour qualities of the figure. It is this idea that seems to be the most interesting, and is a very ambitious way to engage the viewer, by making he or she think not so much deeper, but rather more freely. However, by using
these very graphic, seemingly obvious symbols, such as the hand in *The Four Corners* (1985) [fig. 6], his figures and cow in *Water and Wine*, and his numerous other depictions of animals such as in *Map of What is Effortless* (1978), his work sometimes seems to lack an eye-catching significance. This point alone could in fact detract many viewers from taking the time to realize the content of his work. Thus, his expressionistic figurative form and the sense of time and the change of man in his content ultimately depend on each other. Neither is more important, as without such graceful form, his content would be lost, and without such lush content, his simple yet interesting 2-dimensional figures would lack their potential and simply be meaningfully hollow.

Picasso, on the other hand, was known to do just the opposite with his figures. Where Clemente’s figures were to be purely expressionistic in their reference to time, the figures in Picasso’s ‘neo-classical’ paintings were extraordinarily narrative and suggested continuity.

Much like a movie scene, his 1920 tempera painting, *The Rape*, depicts a woman reaching for her fallen soldier as a spear bearer struggles to break her away. As the author, Elizabeth Cowling, describes it cinematically, the viewer is able to:

“…infer from the active poses what has just happened (the warrior fell to the ground having been fatally wounded by the spear bearer, the woman then knelt lovingly over him, and then the spear-bearer began to drag her off him), and what will happen next (the assailant will hoist her onto the horse and then will gallop away as she screams and flails.)” [Cowling p. 5]
Again, one can see how the subject matter and compositional figurative choices allow for theme of the picture to be carried further and beyond what the viewer can truly see. Picasso’s 1922 painting, *Two Women Running on the Beach (The Race)* [fig. 7], uses similar techniques to freeze time, choosing unique characteristics of the moment that can lend itself to a fuller meaning. Here, the stance of the women suggests movement. Not only this, but their hair as well as the rippling fabric indicates a climactic frame in a race-like narrative. [p. 5] Again, the viewer can infer those frames beyond the picture, as in what may happen, and what lies next.

So while Picasso’s narrative content can be attributed to his formal choices of instance, as well as Clemente’s figures largely responsible for his extensive span of historical and personal reference, form can be said to be somewhat limited to instance in itself, while providing content with a wider range of time. Otherwise, as seen in Shaw’s piece, it may be completely independent of content, while simply providing another interesting time perspective.

**A Contemporary Explosion**

The history of art has utilized, explored, and manipulated ‘time’ in countless fashions, and whether maintaining a functional or conceptual basis, remains a prominent and pregnant theme. However, what is most intriguing about the artists’ usage of time is the ability to express and relay much more than is apparent. While this has been an
obvious tactic of the narrative piece for centuries, the concept soon contorts even more to develop into an almost idealistic form of a time-telling work of art— the comic strip.

From the earliest characters such as the ‘Yellow Kid’ to ‘Charlie Brown’, the concept of reoccurring characters over a period of frames embodies narrative storytelling and the most literal occupying of a viewers reaction time. However, regardless of filmstrip style presentations, there are certain unmistakably effective formal strategies that may be utilized in order to grant even a single frame a wealth of time-telling description and narration. This goal is effectively achieved through illustration and an analysis of formal quality. In this case, however, it is almost as if form is the content.

While impressionism remained satisfied with depicting the passing of a brief instance, one artist was able to efficiently employ similar tactics in order to develop not only a moment, but also a rich, chronicled place that contained people, places, and things. Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh was posthumously noted for his contributions to the developing expressionistic art genres at the turn of the 20th century. His life was complete with struggle, depression, hope, and doubt until his tragic death in 1890. Yet as completely complex as his personal life was, his artistic career maintained a consistent evolution that eventually developed into the academic and commercial success of his more mature work. When inspecting his own interests, however, there remains a clear stylistic influence that is best associated with the flatness and graphic technique of the narrative and cartoon genre. These deeply embedded methods eventually gained his paintings scholarly credit, whereas the methods themselves typically remained connected with ‘cheap’ and ‘commercialized’ art. As a result, he was greatly influenced by
unconventional ideas, specifically in illustration, while, most importantly, his unique mark and graphic style can now be seen mimicked in the contemporary comic and sequential art genre, a medium in which he has granted credibility. Van Gogh is identified as the bridge between time-based fine art and modern cartooning.

**Shaping an Illustrator**

In 1858, American cartoonist and caricaturist Thomas Nast was hired as staff cartoonist for the *Harper’s Weekly* publication in New York City. On staff for twenty years, Nash introduced political caricature as well as associating political parties with animals such as a donkey and an elephant, while pushing the concepts of crosshatching, graphic tonality, and line weight. Eventually earning popularity and respect for his innovations in political cartooning, especially during the American Civil War and Reconstruction period, his work was globally noted. More specifically, it was collected and studied by Vincent van Gogh [Boime].

Van Gogh’s style was heavily based from a strong knowledge of Dutch landscape as well as French academicism and realism. Attributed with postimpressionism, van Gogh also played a very influential role in expressionism, as his mark making and colors constantly indicated strong emotional expression.

His work especially influenced the German expressionists of the Die Brücke group who resided in Dresden and Berlin between 1905 and 1913 [Delahunt] [fig. 8]. German for “The Bridge”, Die Brücke was meant to not dictate a specific style, but to
bridge art into the direction of a better future by utilizing strong, graphic expressionistic marks and composition, especially with woodblock prints.

It was van Gogh’s graphic sensibilities, however, that enticed his work to trigger the expressionistic styles of contemporary cartooning. This position can only be clearly seen, however, with regards to how van Gogh himself was influenced. The Rijksmuseum van Gogh in Amsterdam, owns twenty-one Thomas Nast cartoons that were in the possession of van Gogh himself. Of these twenty-one, fifteen had been mounted and bound in an album [Boime]. Van Gogh had collected these clippings in hopes of developing his own illustrative style.

Though van Gogh never mentions Nast by name, his collection included a number of Nast clippings that were remarkably similar to his own sketches and drawings. Among van Gogh’s collection were four of Nast’s cartoons—Pomps and Vanities, Bill Sykes, Duty and Pleasure, and Constancy [fig. 9, 10, 11, 12]. When comparing these cartoons with van Gogh’s Orphan Man with Top Hat and Umbrella Under His Arm, Orphan Man with an Umbrella- Seen from the Back and Orphan Man with Top Hat and Stick- Seen from the Back, [fig. 13, 14, 15] the similarities of subject matter and technique are obvious. While the subject matter is a clear indication of consistency, especially depicting the figure from the back, there is also clear evidence of crosshatching and the development of a boldly defined figure, though a ground is not indicated. These four drawings were, in fact, part of a series of thirty-seven that other sources indicate may also have been attributed to an illustration, Heads of the People, found in the English periodical The Graphic, which van Gogh actively read at the time.
More impressive is the similarity between an 1881 Christmas card by Nast [fig. 16] which van Gogh had saved and the composition and style of his 1882 lithograph, *Sorrow* [fig. 17]. Nast chooses to depict a summer day, though it is indeed a Christmas card, with a figure positioned at a riverbank. Sunflowers in the background as well as pair of shoes beside the figure suggest imagery that may have roused van Gogh’s initial interest. Both images include subjects that retain distinct shapes while line weight provides interest throughout each composition.

Most importantly, however, is the indication of a specific border. Van Gogh implies a tight rectangular case around the figure, significantly activating the negative space, most impressively above the head and to the right of the back. Nast’s border is even more clearly defined and decorated, again with sunflowers. Even clearer is the inclusion of the English title, “SORROW”, at the bottom right, used to signify mood, character development, and imply a story for the woman. It is the narrative aspect of Nast’s cartoons as well as the capitalized English text accompaniment that begins to become apparent in van Gogh’s work. [Boime]

Again, however, these line and compositional elements are not found exclusively in *Sorrow*, nor are they completely attributed to the influence of Thomas Nast. Van Gogh greatly admired the work of all the English draftsmen of *The Graphic*, whose apparent kinship he admired and was perhaps his inspiration for the artist’s community in Arles [Druik, p. 32]. *Sorrow* was indeed an attempt at the draftsmanship and social commentary found in editorial illustrations of the time [p. 32]. Van Gogh’s interest in Japanese prints was also a primary instigator in the spatial development and color palette
of his work. Now, he wished to combine the idea of graphic commentary with the vividness and power of the flat, Japanese print. In order to accomplish this, his work rapidly shifted to oil and watercolor [p. 33].

At the time, Japanese prints were typically being shipped to the west in terms of packaging cushion for items shipped from the east. Van Gogh had acquired a considerable collection of these packaging fillers, to which he was drawn to the exotic formal elements that they were comprised of. It was not until the late 1880’s when his vision of combining the formal aspects of the prints with the mark of the brush was fully realized in *Pear Tree in Blossom, Flowering Plum Tree, and The Courtesan* [fig. 18, 19, 20]. Though the latter two were copied directly from Hiroshige and Eisen, respectively, *Pear Tree in Blossom* specifically utilizes his ability to combine the formal Japanese space with appropriate symbolism to infer meaning.

Rhythmic and focused by means of a raised vantage point, *Pear Tree in Blossom* was envisioned as the center of a triptych. The blossoms present themselves as receptive to realization and faith in old ideas. More importantly, though, is the butterfly found within the tree itself. It symbolizes “personal and spiritual metamorphosis” [p. 104], especially in reference to the recent death of van Gogh’s mentor, Anton Mauve [p. 104]. A tree stump is also found to the right of the piece, indicating death in contrast to the rebirth of the blossoms.

What is also important to note formally, however, is the development of a narrative, which will be noted time and time again. The blossom tree itself is emphasized with a varying dark outline, separating itself from the field. The personification of the
tree begins to become obvious, especially when put in dialogue with the stump. Van Gogh states, “Either the ground and the figures must be brought more into harmony and form a dark silhouette against the light sky-or sky and ground must form together a misty gray whole, against which the toneful planes of the figures stand out.” [Boime]. At last, his figure-ground formula begins to indicate the relationship between composition and the characterization of his subjects.

Van Gogh’s love for the Japanese culture, no matter how little he truly understood, led him South to Arles, France. Here, he envisioned a closer connection with the people, weather, and scenery by essentially imagining France to be Japan. In this sense, he believed that “if the Japanese are not making any progress in their own country, still it cannot be doubted that their art is being continued in France.” [p. 98]

Along with his visions of Japan in Arles, van Gogh also discovered “pure Daumier” [p. 174] in the people of the town. Honoré Daumier, at the time in France, was a painter and caricaturist, as well as one of the forerunners of cartooning, whose subject matter dwelled on not only politics but on everyday people and themes. Van Gogh was drawn to his wit and expression, and constantly associated the people he observed with those of Daumier. Here, he found interest in the seemingly mundane, as it seemed everyone, in actuality, had a story all to their own.

One distinct example is his painting Falling Leaves (1888), painted amidst the Roman ruins of Arles. When compared to Daumier’s sculpture, Ratapoil (1851), van Gogh’s inspiration for the man with the umbrella is obvious. This series will later show
how well van Gogh was, in time, able to manipulate the landscape in order to further emphasize a setting and story.

As he maintained interests in illustrations from France, America, and England, as well as his love for the formalities of the Japanese woodcut, Van Gogh had eventually developed a distinct graphic edge as well as an acute eye for the importance of the mark. His attention to process and the accumulation of brushwork and expressive color granted his subjects the dynamism that begged storytelling and narration.

**Developing Space for Narration**

It was now clear that much of van Gogh’s interests resided in the work of more illustrative artists. His primary concerns were with spatial relationships instigated by mark and shape, as well as making certain that he identified with his content, as was exemplified with the political and social nature of *The Graphic* cartoons. His figures and subjects now had meaning and character, especially when coupled with the environments that he carefully crafted to fit his conceptual intentions.

One of the most important ideas he had acquired from studying Daumier was the idea of painting things as he felt them and not necessarily as they truly are. This idea was further emphasized by the writings of Zola, which had also been playing a significant influence on his philosophical life. Zola described art as, “nature seen through temperament,” an idea van Gogh took to heart [p. 39]. It was this mentality- the importance and uniqueness of the artist’s eye- that van Gogh identified with. Throughout
his life he had held a number of positions and careers, none of which had granted him any complete satisfaction. At least with art, he would begin to understand the artist’s role as an objectifier and philosopher, while finally incorporating through oil paint all of the varying factors that had shaped his life.

The benefits of Daulmier and Zola’s ideas grant an artist a sort of power over his or her surroundings. With this power comes comfort and satisfaction in the knowledge that perception and reality simply become what one makes of it. While van Gogh struggled to piece his own life together, he at least found hope and inspiration in the creation of a world uniquely his own. Space and shape in his work began to be intensely manipulated in order to cooperate with content. Landscapes began to be edited and altered to work in ideas not readily present. He even began to work from memory, an idea he was not particularly fond of, but one that Paul Gauguin had insisted he pursue during their time spent together. Van Gogh was now beginning to grant his spaces and landscapes just as much characterization and narration as his figures, instead of just complementing them.

Early on, his character development skills were also finely tuned and his stories and content were specific and legitimate. He was deeply attracted to and sympathetic towards the lives of the downtrodden. One of his first successful paintings, _The Potato Eaters_ (1882) [fig. 21], depicted a family who he had spent time with. Later, he took in the pregnant prostitute, Sien, and who had been the model of his piece _Sorrow_ [p. 32]. He was also interested in the lives of those close and familiar to him. Especially during his time in Arles, he had befriended the postman, Joseph Roulin, and had painted six
portraits of him. Here, he even declares, “I paint the postman as I feel him,” an idea directly mimicked in the teachings of Daumier. It was his goal at the time to allow his mark to become “more spontaneous, more exaggerated,” as seen in the postman’s knobby hands, thereby allowing form to speak more of the subject than the image itself [van Gogh, 25].

Along with images of the postman, he had painted a number of images of sunflowers, all unique in mark, but also very consistent in composition. By painting the same subject multiple times, he automatically implied a sequential nature to his work. Though perhaps not meant to all be displayed together, except for the sunflowers that were seen around the Arles studio, they each had evolved one after another. In his mind, whether he was painting from life, or from a previous painting, he would improve, alter, and change the image. It was then clear that the final image, whether of the postman, sunflowers, The Sower, or any other repeated subject matter, was a piece changed over time, and whose story was one of refinement.

However it was his single scene narratives that fully utilized his ability to alter background and construct the ideal dialogue between figure and field. His scenes that had been painted throughout Arles, especially those that included couples, clearly commented on social and political implications that were only possible by his artistic liberties taken in developing the composition. As mentioned earlier, Falling Leaves was one of many paintings that signaled social themes such as companionship and religion as well as political ideas like industrialization. Other pieces, such as Allée des Tombeaux [fig. 22] and Falling Leaves (like title), emphasize these themes.
In *Allée des Tombeaux* (1888), the clearest indication of theme is the distant factory in the background that billows out clouds of smoke. What remains interesting about this piece is the blatant part in the trees, and the adjustment of the factory to be seen through them. This is one of the best examples of van Gogh altering space in order to manipulate theme. A second similar example of encroaching industrialization is seen in *The Yellow House* (1888) [fig. 23]. Here, despite the narrative aspects of the house itself and its implications of van Gogh’s anticipation of Gauguin’s arrival, he paints a distinct train in the background. Again, clouds of smoke flow from the train, invading the plane of the vividly blue sky.

*Falling Leaves* I and II deal with the idea of companionship, but tie in the formal ideas of intrusive and competitive composition. The trees in each form a repetitive rhythm that both outnumbers, and in some cases, traps the figures. They break the plane continuously while the figures seem to float, unattached to any of the cool, dominant trees. The paintings also address the formal issues of thick paint versus thick line. In this sense, there is an ideal balance between subject and form, and remains the only aspect that the figures and trees have in common. Again, what is important to realize, is how effectively van Gogh had construed space in order to further address the figure and to complement narration.
A Peculiar Point of View

Work that he had done indoors also successfully strung together strong narrative qualities with ideas of the expressive mark. Interestingly enough, however, van Gogh began to depart from the figure and personify subject matter and spaces. Specifically, his chair paintings that mimic the habits and lifestyles of he and Gauguin form almost the perfect single scene story, and when in context with each other, paint an even broader idea.

_Gauguin’s Chair_ (1888) [fig. 24] is decorative and ornate. In a letter, van Gogh describes it as, “somber reddish-brown wood, the seat of greenish straw, and in the absent one’s place a lighted torch and modern novels.” [van Gogh, 24] It sits stern and conservative, complemented by a flat, green wall in the background. The blue streaks of highlight across the legs suggest a cool, softly lit room. There also appears to be a significant dialogue between the candle on the chair and the candle on the wall, perhaps a symbol of van Gogh himself as an onlooker. What is clear, though, are the props on the chair as representations of Gauguin’s interests. Even the lit candle seems to insinuate a life presence that is near or one that will return to the chair.

_Van Gogh’s Chair_ (1888) [fig. 25] is a much simpler straw chair positioned modestly on a red tiled floor. The composition appears to be based around the primary colors, blue, yellow, and red, signifying a simple, yet respectable palette. There is, however, a great amount of tension when considering how each peg in the chair has further been outlined. As a result, color and line compete for control of the composition. The pipe, handkerchief and tobacco create a narrative focus, as well as the box of onions
in the background that imply a sort of curious, yet uncertain revelation about the artist. In his book, Thomas Hardy states that, “In distorting the perspective of the floor and the chair leg, van Gogh imposed his own personality upon the work, stressing the subjectivity of his view [Hardy, pgs. 43-44].” Finally, the idea of distorted space is made clear. Van Gogh had taken the ultimate step in manipulating representational space—departing from the Euclidean conventions of traditional perspective.

For centuries, the Japanese had taken advantage of distorted perspective in order to compose and reveal the appropriate subject matter for a narrative. The Tale of Genji series, for example, was one of the most popular graphic scroll novels in Japan. It enlisted the use of the birds-eye-view, the removal of roofs of houses, as well as simple, three-quarter perspective to fully depict the characters within their environment. More importantly, however, was the idea of allowing architecture to mimic the desired mood. For example, strong diagonals cutting across the composition would indicate tension and drama. Designs, fabric, and patterning also played an important role in manipulating the tone of the setting. [Mason]

While van Gogh may not have been familiar with this particular series, he was sure to have noticed the techniques and successful Japanese compositional methods found in the prints he collected. In his painting, The Bedroom (1888) [fig. 26], van Gogh creates his most successful alteration of space to fit mood and content. Georgetown University professor of philosophy, Patrick Heelan, provides a detailed, mathematical and scientific look at the unique distortion van Gogh enlists. His essay, “Visual Space as Variable and Task-Oriented: A Study of Van Gogh’s ‘Modern’ Use of Scientific
Perspective” discusses how van Gogh had separated himself from the traditional uses of Euclidean perspective and had forged his own, influential way of observing and altering space.

Heelan first explains the set up of the bedroom. He states that, “The shadows and the cast shadows are suppressed; it is painted in free flat tints like the Japanese [Heelan].” He goes on to account that in Euclidean geometry, perspective is infinite. That is, light continues in a straight line. Two beams will never cross each other as long as they begin as parallel. Here, Heelan argues that van Gogh was aware that he had discovered a new form of perspective. He continues that, “his work gave artists courage to throw away the constraints of Enlightenment rationality, with its trust in formal rules, logic, science, and objectivity….Nature was a Book written by God in the language of geometry…Van Gogh was the rebel hero who liberated human creativity from the whiff of authority, law, or regulation [Heelan].”

Heelan’s argument even suggests that pictures based on Euclidean perspective may not even be accurate. Referring to the Müller-Lyer Illusion [fig. 27], he demonstrates how two equal lines appear to not be equal. This is due to the conventions of traditional geometric laws and how accustomed a typical viewer is to what should be happening pictorially. Furthermore, a viewer’s eye could even construct the top line to seem to rest in a sort of background field. Again, this implication is a pure habit of Euclidean thinking. [Heelan]

When observing The Bedroom, Heelan finds that it is almost as if van Gogh has used three distinct modes of vision. He states:
“[This] phenomenological space is (1) finite in size, (2) it is divided into near, middle, and far zones with the following characteristics, a. the near visual zone presents its physical counterpart as if the latter were seen through a wide-angle lens, b. the middle visual zone presents its physical counterpart in a quasi-Euclidean (or ‘Newtonian’) terms, and c. the far visual zone presents its physical counterpart as if it were seen through a telephoto lens. (3) Despite these unusual qualities in the structure of what is seen, the viewer nevertheless experiences the phenomenon as a vigorously ‘realistic’ presentation of a life-size inhabited room.”

The floor tiles do not extend out the window, the chair seems to meet an upward moving floor, and the bed curves back toward wall. Each serve to bend towards a direction that makes sense to a specific view- about three feet from the actual piece. The space is finite, and therefore non-Euclidean, but more importantly lacks any distraction outside of itself. As a result, the viewer develops an intimacy with the space and can easily disregard the unconventional perspective. One is easily able to assume interaction with it, especially when considering the natural objects around the room as well as the two chairs. Though van Gogh intended for this piece to instigate “sleep” and “absolute restfulness” [Heelan], it is very capable of doing the opposite, igniting tension from such an unfamiliar arrangement.

Heelan continues to illustrate van Gogh’s use of binocular visual space:

“Binocular vision permits the viewer, when actually looking through a perspective frame, to see a little more to the right and left than the viewer would see in monocular vision. Since the center -- the Newtonian zone -- is virtually Euclidean, the excess is compressed into the right and left margins of the painting which seem to be distorted relative to a pure monocular projection.”
It is clear how much van Gogh was influenced by the unconventional and exaggerated. He admired cartoons, caricatures, exotic and unfamiliar prints, as well as innovations in spatial orchestration. Furthermore, his subject matter implored storytelling as well as the necessity to demonstrate his own views and feelings through his imagery. His work went on to influence countless artists as well as provoke artistic genres, from expressionism to cubism to modern and contemporary art. However, the very same genres that inspired him, specifically cartooning and sequential art, remain primarily underground and disassociated with fine art, as seen now in the contemporary setting, much like the Impressionists and Expressionists of his period. What ideas in this genre, then, formally and content-wise, have successfully endured that van Gogh had lent a hand in maintaining and granting credibility?

The Contemporary Impact

Van Gogh’s interest in distorting visual reality is a concept repeated time and again. Many contemporary comic artists share a like vision with van Gogh in their attempts to create a space that is not only unique and otherworldly, but that also demonstrates their own voice through the expressionistic mark. The liberties they take with perspective, shape, color, and mark all recall van Gogh’s own interest and struggle with conventional compositional strategy. Similarly, van Gogh demonstrated how beneficial expressionism is to the sequential narrative.
One of the primary ideas from Gauguin’s influence on van Gogh was the flatness of shape. Recall van Gogh’s own comments concerning figure and field relationships. It was important to van Gogh to allow both character and background be separate in their own right, but at the same time provide a dialogue about each other. *The Night Café* (1888) [fig. 28] is a key example of the flattening out of space. Nearly every object in the room is exclusive to its own shape and rules of perspective. Primarily, the pool table and back of the room provide the perfect comparison to Heelan’s analysis of *The Bedroom*. The pool table, like the front of the bed, seems as though it had been painted through the viewing of a wide-angle lens. Similarly, the back of the room is finite and flattened. Despite this distortion, however, most of the major planes and shapes remain flat and value-less. Even the walls neglect to capture any of the shadow or light that is very clearly being illuminated from at least four ceiling lamps. *The Yellow House* and *The Bedroom* paintings also demonstrate the importance that has been placed on shape and flatness in order to dictate space.

The importance of van Gogh’s perspective was clearly studied during the pop-art era of the 60s and 70s. In 1977, Spanish painters Rafael Solbes and Manuel Valdés worked together to complete a homage to *The Night Café* in their piece titled the same [fig. 29]. In their piece, they were sure to emphasize the cubist feel of the room, as well as the flattened planes [Brooks]. Similarly, Roy Lichtenstein, who nearly single-handedly bridged the gap between comics and fine art back in the 60s, also painted a number of bedroom scenes with similar points of view to that of van Gogh’s. However, the most striking, of course, is his direct copy, and modernization, of the very same
painting. His piece, *Bedroom at Arles* (1992) [fig. 30], demonstrates the very same concepts van Gogh was concerned with, but portrays it in the simple language of comic art. Each plane is simple and easy to read, however by dictating the room in such a simple language, and almost eliminating mark except for the Ben-Day dots, which he was famous for, the uncomfortable distortion of the room becomes clearer [Harden].

This idea of exaggerated perspective is best illustrated in the work of late 1990’s comic artist Jim Mahfood. He utilizes a flattened graphic space, but like *The Bedroom*, allows his beautiful attention to graphic flatness to be undermined by dynamic perspective. He also employs an angular mark in all his subject matter, where looking for a perfect circle in any of his work would almost seem impossible [fig. 31]. The hands, joints, and faces of his figures are most always squared off in some way. Note the similarity between *Sorrow* and figure 32. Both figures are composed with a careful, contour mark, while changes in shape are either dictated by smooth, slow curves or by rapid, angular decisions in direction, as in the knees, elbows, and head/hair line. [Mahfood, 18]

Much like *The Bedroom* and *The Yellow House*, Mahfood’s architecture tends to flow in a non-Euclidian motion. Note how, in Figure 33, buildings in the background seem to sway with the rhythm of the composition. This rhythmic interpretation of art may be attributed to Mahfood’s work as a DJ as well as his love for music, “Music moves me and totally influences the way I think and make art. The music determines what the finished art will actually look like. I don't really like one aspect of making art better than the next. These forms of expression are all equally important to me.” [Mahfood, 1]
Through this rhythmic sense, design also begins to play an important role. Much like in van Gogh’s work with the Roulin family and his portraits of *La Berceuse* [fig. 34], not to mention the rhythmic feel of *Starry Night* (1889) [fig. 35], Mahfood’s murals also share an attention to pattern and detail in design. This idea occupies the negative space, but allows it to supplement the nature of the figures.

This is also especially evident in van Gogh’s piece *The Courtesan*. Interestingly enough, Mahfood is also highly influenced by Japanese brushwork, as well as the graphic nature of woodcuts [fig. 36]. Overall then, the ideas of design and expression overwhelm these pieces. A great deal of importance is placed on the strength of the mark, and especially when limiting a piece to a specific palette or simply black and white.

As shape, line, and mark act as means of personal expression, no contemporary comic artist utilizes these tools as extensively as Rob Schrab. His dynamic lines, squaring off of forms, and angularity, are also seen mimicked in van Gogh’s work. Interestingly, though, is the efficiency of mark both artists strive to gain from their art. Van Gogh’s best example is seen in his *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Charles Laval* (1888). Each mark is confident, especially the lock of hair above the ear fashioned with one brushstroke. Though much of Mahfood’s work also strives for a confident mark, his overall compositions are not nearly as dynamic as those produced by Rob Schrab.

Rob Schrab graduated from the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design in 1992 where he promptly joined the local improvisation troop Comedy Sportz. With little success, he returned to his comic book roots and began his own company in 1993, Fireman Press Ltd. Here, over the next five years, he crafted a twenty book series on a
The disposable robot assassin named ‘Scud’, which was even suggested to be made into a film by Oliver Stone in 1996. Despite commercial success, video games, and short films, it was his work on the original *Scud series* (1992-1998) that remains the most dynamic and provocative [fig 37].

Many of his characters involve robots, where limbs and bodies automatically beckon angular movement and flattened space. Much like Mahfood, where even the features of the human figure are often times squared off, Schrab’s three-quarter views of box shapes and architecture demonstrate the successfulness of using non-Euclidean perspective.

It is also apparent that van Gogh’s space was influenced by the build-up of mark making. This is where his trademark style of mark following and building up around form indicates pattern, but more importantly, a rich atmosphere. Pen and ink artist Robert Crumb, who was very prolific during the 60’s, 70’s and trough today is one of the underground artists whose overall mark making style points to van Gogh. His incredibly generous and repetitive mark fills in his skies and landscapes and grants tone within his figures. As demonstrated on his many covers, such as the ones seen in Zap Comix, as well as his portraiture [fig. 38] when compared to van Gogh’s [fig. 39], Crumb employs a rich, almost sculptural mark. As was seen with the confidence of Schrab’s line work, Crumb’s repetition of mark mimics the sculptural aspects of van Gogh’s thick buildup of paint and design.

By far, however, the single most interesting similarity between the work of contemporary cartoonists and van Gogh is the use of ‘black outline’. Granted, in some of
van Gogh’s work, the outline is a color, as seen in *Van Gogh’s Chair*. The line, however, remains a darker and distinct outline and is in fact securing what is inside, which, in this case, is the sculptural, dynamic paint within the pegs. This use of the ‘black outline’ is consistently seen in comics and especially in pen and ink work. It is even a clear aspect of van Gogh’s influences, such as Daumier and Nast. Visually, how does this technique operate and what seems to be the point behind it?

Fundamentally, it highlights the object and or character. In doing so, it allows them to stand out in the composition. The outline gives them organization and identity, an idea that is very important in character development, narration, and storytelling. For example, in *The Night Café*, the owner towards the right of the pool table, is in fact outlined. Not only him, but the pool table itself is outlined. As a result, the viewer is brought back to the idea that this separation of identity also complements the flattening out of space, as mentioned earlier.

Again, whether these artists were directly influenced or not, it is clear that van Gogh was one of the first artists to develop these styles and maintain the techniques that were later embraced by contemporary artists. He had been taught by studying the formal and conceptual ideas of illustration and cartooning and it was these very ideas that his work later inspired. However, the question remains as to whether there was any consistency in the influence of van Gogh’s content. This question, of course, has been already answered, when considering the visual strategy van Gogh employed. His spaces and figures were determined to interact and overwhelm viewers in a unique, powerful way, while noting the sensitivities of the artist. His process also served as a uniquely
expressionistic view, where the build up of paint and mark mimics the creation of an idea and a story.

If there was, in fact, any overlap in content, however, it is clear that the same ideas that dominated van Gogh’s imagery, dominates Daumier’s, Nast’s, Schrab’s, Mahfood’s, etc. That idea then, is the observation of common people as well as the political and social ideas that were important to the artist at the time. And when combined with his formal tactics, his messages were clear and convincing.

**Conclusion**

While both content and form can offer a window to view a specific time, form can be more effective in exhibiting an instance in time. Content, however, remains an excellent vehicle for portraying extended time periods.

To roughly break things down, form allows the artist a variety of instantanaity and a sense of ‘Short Time’. The Impressionist movement identified the infinite quality of time, where each moment is different and unique, as best demonstrated with Monet’s varying haystacks. This specificity can be captured by careful color choice and the movement of marks. In the case with van Gogh, his formal strategies and theories that have influenced contemporary cartoonists ultimately become his content. The idea is that form is used as a vehicle for content- his work dictates extensive narrative qualities specifically through formal technique. This process stands as a convention of content.
Form may also serve as a window for the viewer in order to see the subject as the artist saw it at the time. Not only this, but by connecting and allowing the viewer to become part of the piece during observation, the artist has effectively involved the viewer and transported them to their point of view. By leaving form to sometimes be completed by the imagination, the believability and connection is inevitably heightened.

The familiarity of time can also be taken advantage of when attempting to artificially age and give the illusion of time. By allowing the piece to include or display signs of aging, the viewer then considers the piece to be. This method is accomplished with excessive or tainted varnishing as well as other physical additives, such as smoke.

These techniques of form all successfully present the essence of time. Each, with the exception of artificial time, attempts to portray a moment, or a brief time period. Artificial time, while not explicitly capturing an instance, rather applies the current views of what an aged piece or object would look like. And though the work itself may not intend to capture a moment, it can be said to have instead confined years of time in one instance, a truly unique accomplishment.

As discussed with van Gogh, content can be considered as more successfully displaying extended or ‘Long Time’. Part of the beauty of a deeper meaning lies in the vastness of its interpretation. This then allows the artist to connect other times with current, or viewer time. In this way, a gap is bridged and the parallels of differing time are made apparent.

This is very clear in work such as Miriam Schapiro’s, in which the artist feels such strong ties with an historical figure, that the content automatically reflects a solid
connection of similarities through time. Similarly, Leandro Katz’s experience in comparing current cultural perspectives with older ones enables a specific look of a society’s general point of view.

Helen Lundeberg’s ultimate idea in her work also generates an interesting position on time. Her work with the theme of ‘slow time’ shows how all other aspects of time, parallels or instances, are pieces of man’s slow, prolonged, and patient time on Earth, which is a greatly significant consideration.

Thus, perhaps the results of such a question may seem rather obvious, as the issue of ‘time’ itself is a very vast and interpretable idea. However, it is an interesting finding that time can at least be broken down into the two subgroups of momentary and prolonged. As a result, it is this finding that is, in fact, not obvious until time’s connection to art is examined more closely.

The general theory then, is that the physical aspects of a work can embody a moment extremely successfully as they are the physical mark left by the artist. The materials they used, the subject matter, as well as the formal choices to produce the work are obviously apparent and create a sense of freshness as being the product of the artist’s hand.

Likewise, the extensiveness, and occasional generality, of content is best used to demonstrate entire ideas and a wider time span. So while content and form continuously play off of each other in countless varying circumstances, when attempting to capture a sense of time, each remains significant in its own right, rather than outweigh the other.
Epilogue

The Practicalities of Content and Form

I wish to allow the aforementioned to serve as a type of background manual for the explanation of my artistic ambitions. From page one, it dictates not only my fundamental interest in the topic of time, but what my inspiration and creative motives are grounded in. In my own artwork, I take the ideas of content and form very seriously, as of course they have been taken likewise throughout history. But while it is a logical process to break down the two in an analytic discussion such as this, it is not so easily done when considering how and why the piece itself is created.

In other words, if there is one thing I hope is made inherently clear within this entire thesis, it is the fact that in art, content and form are fused. There is an essential relationship between the two. While one may sometimes be more apparent than the other, they feed off of each other and, as mentioned earlier, one is inevitably summoned with the creation of the other. Only in discussion are they separate, which dictates a good portion of the last forty pages. This is the nature of text and technical breakdown. But whether or not one is more obvious than the other, they exist together in art co-actively.

No where in art is this more apparent than when dealing with the issues of time and narration. This is precisely the frame of mind that has fueled my work over the last three semesters and has built logically to the premonition of the animated feature. The
idea seized my fascination last Fall, and I undertook the most successful independent challenge of my undergraduate artistic career.

**The Artistic Career**

My primary goal as an artist is to explore two-dimensional narration while implying action and characterization. Animation, sequence, and narration have, naturally, always caught my attention, whether in film, illustration, or graphic stories. The main focus of my work is storytelling. This concept is coupled with the idea of time and space, whether portrayed physically on a canvas or literally as a short film. The physical space of the image also always acts as a catalyst for the layering, movement, characterization, and symbolism of areas within a final project.

My earlier work with painting typically remained exclusive to one canvas. I have used highway icons and other imagery to dictate how people occupy space. The process also acts as a story, where the varying images are permitted to ‘speak’ with each other by their physical placement while also complementing and staying consistent with the content. For example, in *Four-Way Stop*, the idea is cooperation, where sharing and sacrifice is necessary for efficiency. *Overpass* deals with the necessity to be at the same place at the same time. As a result, the images compromise and neither give themselves up nor detract from each other. Finally, in *RR Crossing*, there is no compromise, as the car is subservient to the train, and every element of the painting struggles to be seen.
My work in printmaking is more about multiple sequence, as opposed to the singularity of the canvas, yet remains consistent with these themes of the juxtaposition of multiple images. This is where I have utilized the stylistic approaches of such artists as Jim Mahfood, Robert Crumb, and especially Rob Schrab. Much of their use of form and line variety with a pen and ink have inspired my desire to portray strong, black and white images. Thus, the linoleum print serves as a highly effective method in portraying clean, graphic black and white compositions. My subject matter is typically composed of people, places, and things, at many times chosen at random. They are brought to unification by the use of a consistent 1/3” black inked frame around each item. By accumulating a series of various framed “nouns”, I am able to re-arrange and print countless compositions. The viewer is then pushed to identify a relationship between the nouns, given the strong sequential nature of a series of images.

**The Arrival of the Narrative Artist**

For the culmination of my undergraduate artistic career, as well as the cornerstone of my thesis, I at last had arrived to video art, combining linear and disjunctive narration and a consistency within my previously stated ideas. My initial work dealt with the end result as being a narrative painting that dictates the history of the process as well as an animated short, also re-telling the story of the developing piece. The initial procedures and outcome were largely based off of the ideas of animator William Kentridge as well as the economic limitations of being a student. I worked with a single sheet of paper, coated
with many layers of acrylic paint for durability. I then went to work on an intuitive journey using nothing more than vine charcoal, an eraser, and my sister’s digital camera. Whatever came to mind, I began drawing until my thoughts wandered to the brief interaction of two dogs. This was partly to satisfy my mounting need for structure and story, as well as to test my skill and attempt to accurately mimic the motion of an animal. The resulting film, “Woof”, does not contain the initial intuitive fumbling, but is instead cropped to highlight this first successful animated short.

My next task was to appease the need for structure that I had been craving. I found it necessary to develop a story line and characters, simply for the sake of direction. This work would be the centerpiece of my thesis, amply tying together art and time. “James McGill in... Keep Your Ear to the Grindstone” soon turned into the most arduous task I had ever had the gumption to begin. This was partly due to my choice of materials. I decided that I would record the accumulation of scenes and instances while conveying the very classic, and very literal, tale of ambitious corn salesman, James McGill, who falls in love with a young lady, Salt and Butter Sally, only to bump heads with her overprotective brother, Sol the Mechanic. Already, the plot and character development seemed daunting and regrettably, the eventual video only established about 40% of the original story. Ideally, with this project and those forthcoming, I wished for the final paintings to serve independently from the animations, though it was clear that both complemented each other as narratives in remarkably effective ways. By combining the formal manners of impressionism, also much to the credit of van Gogh’s landscapes, and the dry media of gestural animators like Kentridge, the video was in fact a very
successful and frighteningly interesting piece of work. The painting, however, buckled under the toll of time and the over-worked composition resulted in a very large and unattractive mess.

Though I had yearned for structure and felt uneasy with intuition, I decided to attempt to combine the two. “About and Out” follows a series of seven paintings depicting a single character in vague environments. During each, the mark-making was recorded, paying special attention to the process and attempting to capture the essence of a moment. Not only this, but I discovered that by recording each piece, it was necessary to tremendously slow down the process, shooting a frame for every three or four brushstrokes made. As a result, I found it helpful to really consider each stroke, and attempt to extract as much mileage as possible from each mark, being sure that it would effectively move the painting forward from the last shot. This was where I realized that my love for pen and ink narrative artists struck me at a different level. Within their work, there remains a tremendous dependence on line and the efficiency of mark. This process was indeed the ideal study of the careful and formal development of a character. At last, each recording was connected to relay the story of a man, panicked and confused by an unknown force- possibly that of the intuitive nature of his creator, the artist.

At this same time, I recorded a purely intuitive piece entitled “So Who’s Next”. Here, like “About and Out”, I presented myself with a series of images that would later interact as a whole. The difference being, much like my linoleum work with printmaking, I used arbitrary imagery and forced them to cooperate in a formal, conceptual, and most importantly, narrative manner. As I found it necessary, I
incorporated more physical pieces to the puzzle and thus expanded imagery as I saw fit. Working on “About and Out” and “So Who’s Next” at the same time granted me the freedom to step away from either at any moment and limit the “burning out” so typical of such a labor intensive procedure as animating. At last, however, I had accomplished an effective series of paintings while also relaying the independence of the stand-alone film.

It was this independence that was to spawn my final step- a film that would not be clamped down so strictly to the formal outcome of a painting. While it seemed my content was tremendously fervent by utilizing the idea of the history of process and time-based art, the formal elements, while effective, seemed at times to force themselves into a purely aesthetic direction. Though many of the paintings were by no means beautiful, I typically felt obligated to assure myself that in the end, I would not only have a video, but a highly successful work of art. This pressure annoyed me.

It was not until this Spring that I had the time and motivation to actually pursue the ultimate narrative, viewed strictly as an animated short. I brushed up on many animation fundamentals, many of which attempted in “James McGill…”, such as the walk cycle (by far the most difficult action to convey in animation), and carefully developed a story and characters with enough flexibility for creative freedom and intuition. I bought materials I felt best imitated those of a professional animator while also noting my budget. The difference this time was that while each painting was slowly built up and manipulating on canvas, each frame in this latest film would be painted on a transparency with specially treated paint, so that it may overlay onto a background. In this way, I would be able to focus on the figure within a field, without having to worry
about the two physically connecting and contaminating each other, as well as having to deal with the issues surrounding a supplementary painting. “What Does That Tell You?” tells the story of a young boy who realizes that he has the key to predicting the future. Unfortunately, in order to prove this to himself, he must be killed just as a dream had indicated. Though he is unable to predict his demise accurately, they do in fact lead him to his death in a different manner, suggesting the implications of fate. He is then swept into a dream-like coma state, where he is of course free to control not only his every move, but also that of the world around him. The dream-like nature of this animated short enabled me to employ that same artistic intuition as necessary. Also, I found it imperative to incorporate a small amount of actual organization and structure, but not nearly to the extent of earlier works. “What Does That Tell You?” was also the vehicle for applying my true animated style for the first time, as I carefully considered both the comic book and film-making style of Rob Schrab, my overall influence. Overall, I find it very reassuring to realize how systematic my artist interests naturally led me through each step. Throughout each phase, time was indeed the driving force and an immensely fruitful source of inspiration and creative material.
Bibliography


