Looking for Light

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of MFA in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
2010

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Abstract

In my search for the way light can dictate the overall expression of an image, I have found that light is the means that activates the different elements that have been applied to the surface of an image. Color, subject matter, and gesture can emphasize, enhance, and focus the beauty of how light can capture a mood. All of these elements are a factor in how light can imply movement, depth, and emotion.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Charles Massey Jr. for his continual support throughout my graduate experience, Sergio Soave for challenging my understanding of what is necessary, and Pheoris West for imparting his love for color to me. I would also like to thank Richard Peterson for giving me an understanding of drawing, the vision to study art, and an understanding of community.
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Looking for Light

The allure of drawing came from my fascination with creating a moment in regard to an idea, a brief image that can piece together the importance of a specific moment within an idea or narrative. This fascination with creating originated in my childhood, but it began to mature in college as I progressed in my understanding of light, which allowed me to create more believable moments. The more I understood how light defined the values that made up individual objects, the more I was able to manipulate a two-dimensional surface to produce a scene that was cohesive and clear. There was a sense of power that came from creating these scenes or worlds, and light was the key to that power.

By the end of my undergraduate study, I was making worlds such as in *Married to Misery* (Figure 1) that resembled nature but ones that were slightly manipulated so as to place emphasis on certain elements within the narrative being projected. They were fantasy lands in which I would utilize dynamic perspectives to create environments that I would populate with multiple objects, which were the means that I used to create a narrative. The placement, size, and light that I used in the creation of these objects opened up a dialog about my frustrations with the “American Dream,” which is the belief that possessions, marriage, and stability are the foundational ingredients of a fulfilling,
happy life. Much of my frustration stemmed from the lack of vitality I observed in the lives of people that lived out this philosophy.

However, my original understanding of art-making was to fill a two-dimensional surface with an abundance of marks to come to a point of completion in any given piece. I believed that I should define an idea with as much information before reaching critical mass. The problem that would arise is that there would be no room to breath. With the inclusion of so much subject matter, there was not a lot of focus on any particular point.

Somewhere within this creative process, I got caught up in details that did not matter so much for the narrative. It became about the creation of the world itself rather than the message behind the work. From a story-tellers perspective, I became far more interested in the setting rather than the ideas being defined. The concept got lost in my lust for exaggerated textures, dynamic perspectives, and crowded compositions; thus, my perceived direction was different than the actual direction I was taking with the inclusion of these elements. There was no real focus as to what I wanted to make known to the viewer other than the skill I wielded. So I began to draw the human figure in a minimalist style by removing a select amount of details. I was surprised with the amount of expression I could achieve with a limited amount of information.

These drawings focused solely on the figure with very little context or background to provide a reference. This lack of context forced me to look at just the figure and the
means with which I used to define it. In the image *Nothing I Can Do* (Figure 2), the figure was drawn in high-contrast which forced me to think a lot about what information translated as light and shadow. This led me to be very specific with the lighting that I would use for my figures. In controlling the light, I came to the conclusion that light is what I had been seeking. The information that it reveals about a figure goes further than the actual surface. There is a depth that can reveal a certain amount of emotion.

It is during my time in graduate school that I came to realize that I needed to take a closer look at what the high-contrast stylistic way of working was revealing. Through this process of searching, I made the decision to focus on the power that light has in controlling the overall expression in an image. The decisions that I had made in translating the different values of the reference photograph I used to create *Nothing I Can Do* were able to capture a specific mood that I was feeling at that current point and time in my life. It became my belief, or theory, that by controlling the source of light and its effect on simple forms, I would be able to better understand the power that light has in controlling the perception of the purpose or meaning of an image.
Figure 2: Nothing I Can Do
Process

In order to better understand how perception could be controlled by light, I had realized my satisfaction in capturing a real, felt emotion in an image that consisted of simple shapes, which became apparent when I started making stencils. With their use I started making abstract representations of complex objects and figures that were captured in dynamic lighting to simplify what I was seeing. By using stencils as a tool in this practice, I was able to select the amount of specific information that was necessary to define these objects and apply them an infinite amount of times upon various surfaces. Stencils can be quite limited in how much information translates from a sketch; therefore, it requires the artist to generalize the shapes of the darks and lights of an image. By using these generalized shapes, more focus is placed on the form created by the contrasting shapes rather than the subtle value changes or lines that can be utilized in drawing. This abstraction forces one to carefully consider light and shadow to define the form. Within this form, a particular, felt expression can be emphasized because a strong focus is placed upon the separation of light and shadow.

The versatility of a stencil is most obvious in its ability to reproduce information upon several different surfaces. Within this reproducibility, motion can be implied by applying a stencil onto one surface multiple times. I was not interested in this aspect of the stencil
process, but there was another implied motion that became apparent. This motion came about by applying the stencil upon the same surface of the drawing, Detail of King of Spades (Figure 3), that was used in the creation of the stencil. Not only was there implied motion through physical displacement but also a motion of transcription from one medium to the next. Seeing this transcription from one medium to the next on a single surface made me more aware of the change of expression through style and color.

A question of the structuring of values (light to dark) arises when dealing with a stencil and the relationship to its origin it portrays. I have found that the values produced with a stencil is proportional to the amount of deviation or liberty that I have taken in the translation of the original drawing that was used to create the stencil. Stencils that were created from an undeveloped drawing could take on a vitality that was not evident in the original drawing through the addition of improvisational details; whereas, stencils that were created from a well-rendered drawing have the tendency of focusing more attention on their origin. The values produced in this manner can become tied much more to the original source, drawing or photography. The image of the Female Profile (Figure 4) is a good example of deviation. I spent more time on the creation of the stencils than I did on the graphite rendering of the original photograph. Because of the time and the concentration spent, the combination of stencils work to express the features that originally caught my eye in the photograph rather than expressed in the sketch.
I wanted to understand this stencil/origin relationship further so I made another composition with hands. In the drawing with the graphite-rendered faucet and hands, *Empty* (Figure 5), I wanted to emphasize the gesture of the hand in regard to the faucet above. The problem I encountered was that the addition of the stenciled hands would have implied motion from one to the other, but my interest was directed at the potential created by the hand’s gesture of anticipation of water from the faucet. This implication of anticipation and potential was created by the gesture, paper size, and the positions of the hands and faucet. I was satisfied with the display of emptiness that was being expressed. Light can create a dramatic expression, but composition does play a role in providing an understanding of a narrative.

In the next image that I constructed I planned to have enough room for the stencil to operate without overloading the image. I started the image, *Detail of Stain* (Figure 6), with the intention of creating a stencil from a graphite-rendered drawing of my hand. The hand gesture that I decided upon was far more active than the image of the faucet and hands. The translation of the active gesture in a high-contrast stencil worked well to enhance the aggressive gesture of the hands.
Figure 3: Detail of King of Spades
Figure 4: Female Profile
Figure 6: Detail of Strain
Medium

My biggest frustration with the stencil process was that most of my figures operated within the empty space of the paper. After using an airbrush to spray watercolor to apply a stencil, I found that watercolor could also be used to create a subtle variation of color on paper that functioned as an environment by pouring the liquid pigment directly on top of the paper. I wanted the figures or objects that I was creating to have a natural connection to the context or environment in which they operated for the purpose of reinforcing a particular expression. I came to this conclusion when I made an image using a plastic skeleton of a human torso, Yellow Torso (Figure 7). I chose the torso for the complexity of the ribcage, which emphasized the contrast between the darks and lights of the torso. Using a single source of light allowed for a dramatic contrast between the areas exposed by light and the areas hidden by shadow. I created work from a photograph that showed the inner space of the torso between the ribs in the front and the descending spine in the back. The chosen composition was considerably complex in regards to the light that shined and reflected off the individual ribs and other bones.

I made a drawing of the composition and then created multiple stencils from the drawing of the torso. I cut two stencils to create the torso and applied them onto paper. I was surprised that I was able to capture such a detailed structure with simple forms. With
the use of only one stencil, I was able to create believable space inside the rib cage of the torso; however, the overall expression was still lacking because the whites that represented the light were empty. By empty I mean there was no actual application of medium to represent the light; the light was the original paper color.

I was using watercolor with an airbrush as medium to apply the stenciled image. In my use of watercolor, I noticed that I was able to create some beautiful washes by applying an abundance of watercolor upon a paper surface. Wanting to use the wash as a base color, I cut another stencil to represent the whites of the torso. I applied a latex mask through the white stencil to protect the whites from being covered by the wash that I would apply. After applying the wash and the two other stencils representing the shadows, I removed the latex mask and was rewarded with a controlled representation of a torso immersed in the context of a fluid watercolor wash.

The masked whites were the major contributors to the magic of this image. The white areas were still empty, but the process of extracting the whites from the wash gave the whites much more life. I attribute this life to the fact that the whites were extracted from the fluid, watercolor wash. The attributes of the watercolor wash were being imparted to the whites as well as the other stenciled areas that had been applied over the wash.

I enjoyed the overall affect of the wash, but I was not happy with the rigid permanence of the stencils on the paper. I wanted to be able to manipulate and extract a
figure from the watercolor wash itself, and I also wanted to utilize the control that came through the direct application of drawing on the surface. This is important to understand because in the past I would choose a subject and then create the environment around that subject; whereas, now I wanted to create an environment and extract the subject from that context. The stencils were useful in helping me to understand the affect that the context had upon the subject, but I wanted to be able to continue to change what was happening on the surface, which is why I decided to start drawing my figures with color pencils.
Figure 7: Yellow Torso
Subject Matter

I find that I have very little understanding of any given object if I have not taken the time to look at it and draw it. It is in this practice that I take the time to carefully consider how light wraps around an object, how an object sits in space, and how an object translates two-dimensionally. With this understanding, I begin to better understand how an object feels, how it exists subjectively as well as objectively. I am not talking about the sensation one feels in physically touching an object. I am talking about how it feels visually, when your eyes fall upon that object transcribed onto paper. It is the felt visual expression of the object that interests me. I want to know why and how an object or figure can project a feeling or emotion depending on how it is drawn.

That curiosity has led me to believe that light is a major component of how an object or figure operates. Ivan Albright wrote, “In painting what do I have to work with? Darkness and light fused into twilight and shadow, movement and the motionless” (Sweet, 16). There is an ever-changing movement of light that can play across a surface, which gives a viewer a new perspective with each passing moment. I am looking for those particular moments where the war between light and dark create a pocket of contrasting value, a reflection on the underside of an object, or a sliver of light to define a surface that might have been missed otherwise. All of these moments provide visual
depth. Depth is created by light; therefore, I want to see as much detail as I can with the hopes of translating that knowledge into a figure/object that expresses the original form’s volume.

One of the major subjects that I continue to draw is my own hands, *Graphite Sketch* (Figure 8). I have done this since the beginning of my formal training as an artist for various reasons through the years. I enjoy hands because of their ability to show human expression without all the excess baggage that might accompany the entirety of the human figure. I do not have to worry as much about time period, recognition of the person being drawn, or a variety of other specific factors when drawing hands. Hands are complex forms that have the ability to interact with tangible objects in a way that can speak volumes using very few words. Depending on the position of the hand that is drawn, an artist can show a wide range of emotions, gestures, and actions. I think of hands as being a simplification of the entire body, which allows me to focus on the action that is being expressed through the hand’s gesture.

The objects that I draw are typically manipulated by the hand and provide clues to the narrative that emerge from my work; however, the purpose of the work that I am currently creating is focused more on understanding how light dictates the overall expression of an image; it is not specifically focused on a particular narrative that might emerge from a single image or series of images.
Figure 8: Graphite Rendering
Composition

I stated above that my older compositions, similar to *Married to Misery* (Figure 1), were crowded with multiple objects and figures. These compositions were geared towards describing a narrative by creating a believable environment through my understanding of drawing. It was my goal to create dynamic and complex compositions that were enjoyable in viewing them. I used distorted perspectives, exaggerated textures, and high-contrast to create some narrative scenes.

I have departed from that typical means of composition to gain more understanding of the elements that dictate the overall expression of a work of art. The biggest change I have made has been to scale back on the amount of subject matter. I wanted and needed to focus on the relationship between the figure and the environment/context. Obviously, with the inclusion of fewer elements, one is able to focus more clearly on how each of the elements promotes the overall expression of a piece. It has forced me to be mindful of the placement of a figure or object in an environment, in this case one that is much less specific or iconic.

Much of the decision making in regards to placement of a figure or object has been to allow a watercolor wash to act as an open environment. I wanted the environmental
quality of the wash to inform the figure that was extracted from the wash. In the *Detail of Sepia Wash* (Fig. 9), the position of the faucet was placed in the upper right corner to focus on elements that I chose not to define. Being close to the right edge, the faucet implies that there is a wall to the right, which can imply that there is negative space covering the rest of the composition. With the placement of the faucet at the top, the fact that there is no water coming from the faucet becomes much more prominent. I wanted the elements of this image to imply a similar sense of emptiness in my earlier drawing of a faucet, *Empty* (Figure 5). In regard to placement, I decided upon a similar strategy with *Mineral Orange Wash* (Figure 11) in that the perspective of looking up at the faucet places focus on the potential emergence of the water from the faucet. The perspective places emphasis on the moment right before the hand begins to turn the faucet on to allow water to exit the faucet.
Color

Color has never been a major factor in the construction of my work in the past. I was more interested in color as a compositional strategy to separate different areas of a picture plain rather than a serious means of expression. It was not until I began to work with watercolor that I began to pay closer attention to the relationship between light and color. I attribute this to the subtle variations that occur in the application of watercolor. The fluid application reacts with light in a way that feels much more natural compared to an application of acrylic or oil-based paint.

It is not hard to associate colors with emotions. I have noticed this connection in my limited use of color, and this correspondence has been a major interest for me in how color can change the voice of the light in a composition. I rely heavily on light in my work as I have indicated, but much of my experience with light has been either grey-scale or monochromatic. I have never taken the time to sit down and observe color the way I have observed the mechanics of light. I know this to be true because of my more limited, past experience with its use in lithography.

I consider my abilities in the use of lithography to be my strongest skill out of all of the printmaking processes. Within the process of lithography, an artist is normally
confined to working with an oil-based, black pigment; whether, one is making a touché wash, drawing, or acid tint, they are always working with black in the initial creation of the process. If one is creating a layer that will be printed in color, then in their mind they have to consider to what degree of black is necessary to the original drawing in order for it to express the color that they are considering for that layer. For me, this has never been an agreeable approach to color.

It is only when one begins to print that color becomes a part of the process in the traditional approach to lithography; whereas, with the use of watercolor and color pencils I have been able to study color through direct application on paper. My initial approach to this application of color has been modest, to say the least, because I have found that color has a way of overpowering other elements in a drawing. I say this only because of how I have layered color in printmaking techniques. If I did not mix enough transparency in an ink, the detail of another layer would be lost all-together.

I have purposefully limited my color palette in the hopes of distinguishing the effect that different colors have on a surface. I naturally gravitate towards muted earth tones of a warmer palette because of my experience in lithography. Working with muted colors makes for an easier transition from a grey-scale oriented process. Because drawing has always been foundational in my artistic practice, I also gravitate towards colors that are known for being foundational in observational drawing. The colors that I refer to are red iron oxide and sepia. It was not until I started working with colors, like raw sienna, that I
began to notice how light responds to specific colors. Raw sienna in *Apostle* (Figure 10) and *Mineral Orange Wash* (Figure 11) reflected a particular voice of light that felt alive to me. It has a vitality that implies movement and action as if it activates the figures that it illuminates. It is my belief that the old masters, such as Domenico Beccafumi, understood this when he created the chiaroscuro woodcut *Apostle* (Figure 10). A warmer palette implies motion when applied to a hand; whereas, a cooler palette is much more stiff and stabilized.
Figure 10: Apostle
Figure 11: Mineral Orange Wash
Another factor that became apparent with the use of color has been the gestural marks that can often be left with the application of a color. In Mineral Orange Wash (Figure 11), I began with the application of a raw sienna wash. I chose this color mostly because previous attempts to use this color resulted in a warm glow. The watercolor that was applied in this case was far more stubborn in its dispersion than previous washes; therefore, I had to be a little more aggressive in the application of the pigment upon the paper. The end result was a slightly turbulent wash with currents of movement that have a tendency of moving the eye across the paper.

I decided upon a picture of a hand in the process of turning on a water faucet. I believed that the raw sienna pigment would create light with a bright glow that would activate the hand to give the impression that it was about to turn the faucet on. I achieved this affect rather easily, but I also found that the more agitated gestures found in the wash I had created also conjoined with the hand to produce a much more aggressive impression of the hand’s action.

In other images with the mineral orange, the reflection of the light from the color gave off a more majestic glow, which I attributed to the color alone. I did not achieve that
same result with *Mineral Orange Wash* because of the forceful application of the pigment, which, in turn, created an aggressive heat. The voice of the color was contingent upon the pigment, as well as the gesture utilized in applying the color; therefore, the expression of the hand became much more aggressive than anticipated because the gesture of the wash had deviated from my original intention. I had been much more focused on the pigment rather than the function of the wash’s gesture.
The gesture of the watercolor wash in *Mineral Orange Wash* made me much more aware of how the attributes of the watercolor wash are imparted to the figures within that context. The implied action of the hand turning the faucet on became much more aggressive due to the turbulent gesture of the wash. The movement of the wash was imparted to the hand and the faucet as I have noted.

The potential of a color can become infinitely complex depending on the avenue that is taken in regard to its application. It is evident that the aggressive application of pigment as a context becomes much more prominent in the relationship between the figure and that context; the expression of the figure becomes inseparable within its environment. The same can be said with a much more docile wash; however, more emphasis is placed upon the figure rather than the soft context in which it operates; the figure becomes the more prominent factor in the overall expression of an image. Regardless of the application, context can influence the expression of light.
Color, Gesture, and Context

At one point, in my frustration with color I decided to create a new image where no mistake would be made in regards to the purpose of the color. In Red Mark (Figure 12) I started by using graphite to render a picture of my hands because I was unsure of whether or not I wanted to utilize a stencil as a means of implying motion. This uncertainty was cleared up as soon as I applied a vivid watercolor wash of red and brown. The motion that I was seeking came about with the trail of red “blood” extending from the severed right hand that my left was holding. The combination of the vivid red and the rendered hands brought about a result that was certainly direct in its use of color.

Sitting back and thinking about what I had just made, I came to the conclusion that the two things that I enjoyed in this piece were the drawing of the hands and the red watercolor wash. Neither of these elements was at war with each other and they both informed each other. The problem I was having with the stencils was that they did not interact too well with the watercolor washes that I was growing to enjoy. With this in mind, I decided to explore a way of combining these two elements.
Figure 12: Red Mark
Technique

The culmination of all the elements described above is evident in the means that I used to create Red Oxide Wash, Sepia Wash, and Mineral Orange Wash. In Red Oxide Wash (Fig. 13), I began by soaking the Rives BFK in water to allow the paper to swell consistently. Once the paper was removed from the water, I then set it onto a masonite board for the application of the red oxide watercolor. I chose red oxide for the subtle warmth of the color. The moment I applied the red oxide wash the pigment reacted swiftly. It spread across the paper surprisingly quick.

Once I was satisfied with the overall wash, I decided that I would draw my hands in a non-aggressive position in the lower left-hand corner with a terra cotta, color pencil. The pencil allowed me to have the desired amount of control in slowly rendering the values evenly. Once the overall form was defined with the color pencil, I then removed the watercolor wash with a tuff eraser which abraded the paper.

I was pleased with the combination of the loose wash combined with the tightly rendered hands. The reductive whites gave the rendered hands a real sense of depth, and the soft, muted, red-oxide wash provided a calm environment in which the hands operated. The voice of the light that reflects off of the red oxide wash has a warm
expression, which is not overpowering. The gesture of the wash that comes through the deviation of the watercolor also served to impart a soft quality to some of the lightly rendered parts in the hands, but the hands feel really solid because they were rendered so heavily.

I was looking for a compromise between the figure and the ground in hopes that they would impart a better understanding of how light is affected by the different elements utilized. Overall, I feel that the amount of light that defines the hands works well with the context of the soft, fluid wash. The warmth and softness of the red oxide wash combines with the open gesture of the hand to create a serene depiction of water falling into open hands.
Figure 13: Red Oxide Wash
Conclusions

In my search for the way light can dictate the overall expression of an image, I have found that light is the means that activates the different elements that have been applied to the surface of an image. Color, subject matter, and gesture can emphasize, enhance, and focus the beauty of how light can capture a mood. All of these elements are a factor in how light can imply movement, depth, and emotion.

Color was the biggest contributor in the expression of light. The color of any given environment is going to dictate the overall voice or emotion of the light that emerges. It transforms the way that light interacts with the other elements. Any figure that is drawn will take on varying degrees of vitality depending on the pigment that is used to define it; warmth can produce movement, neutral colors can shape the focus of a subject, and the cold colors can capture the stillness.

Pigment sets the mood, but the gesture of a color can set the pace. In the application of a color, gesture can enhance the temperature, movement, and feeling of a color as in Mineral Orange Wash (Figure 11). Gesture has a tendency to transfer the quality and degree of its agitation to the subject that is present within this context.
The choices that are made stylistically in defining the subject matter determine the amount of light that will emerge within that figure. High-contrast can bring focus to the form; whereas, a larger range of value can emphasize the quality of light wrapping around a subject and defining its volume; therefore, the light can direct the emphasis on the form that is captured.

My evolving state of understanding and progression in the art-making process over the course of the last few years can be seen in the comparison of *Nothing I Can Do* (Figure 2) and a similar Self-Portrait (Fig. 14) that I have just finished. In the creation of this new self-portrait, I have realized that the overall expression of the form is what drives me to understand the mechanics of light, color, composition, context, and narrative. The combination of the hard white and black stencils to create my figure shows my desire to capture the presence that I wish to express, but it has also shown me how the different combinations of defining specific values can emphasize a particular expression of that form.

The stenciled white is highly stylized for the purpose of capturing the musculature of the arms and the dynamic texture of the pants that the figure wears. The black stenciled areas act more as an anchor for the form, but the white provides a vibrant blend of form and volume that gives the figure character. Combining that form with an underlying composition of imagery as context and an image of a figure sitting within a narrative context is achieved. The actual composition of the underlying context in this example
was applied haphazardly, but it has served me well in informing me of the potential that a carefully considered context can provide towards a narrative, which I plan to explore in the future. It is my intention to continue to utilize the stencil process to explore the various means of expression that can be achieved through diverse constructions of the various layers that will interact one on top of the other as well as in a possibly unified combinations. Further exploration is also necessary to address a more thorough understanding of the complexities of color relative to light and the role each has in creating viable and meaningful content.
Figure 14: Self-Portrait
Works Cited