IT'S MY BACKYARD AND WELCOME TO IT

(A view beyond the white picket fence)

A Thesis

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To my sister, Mandy
VITA

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ITS MY BACK YARD AND WELCOME TO IT

(A view beyond the white picket fence)

In chapter seven (Culture as Nature) from his book The Shock of the New, Robert Hughes, art critic for Time magazine, discusses how a changing environment has affected artists and the works of art which have been produced during the second half of the twentieth century. Hughes suggests that, unlike artists of previous centuries for whom nature was tranquil and passive, the artists of today must compete with their environment or become buried by the wave of images produced by modern technology and progress; something Hughes refers to as "our forest of media".

During the 1950's, artists such as Rauschenberg, Johns and Warhol began to use the images and objects produced EN MASS by their culture as part of their own visual language incorporating the multitude of these culturally produced images into their own work well aware of their potential provocation. This was the beginning of a practice which, to this day, is still being explored. I feel a peculiar kinship to the views presented by Hughes in this chapter. I say this because his discussion relates directly to the art which I am currently producing and, likewise, parallel my current philosophies on art. But there exist a history which leads to all this. A period of my life when I considered art from an entirely different viewpoint and I produced art in the comfort of a much more static, naive milieu.

My early training as an artist could easily be considered by most people as being traditional and conservative. It was a training which focused primarily on the mastering
of technique and the understanding of the formal elements of art such as line, shape and composition; rather than on the formulation of concepts and ideas. At that time, art was more simple and more pure than it is for me today. One could even say that I regarded art with a kindled spirit of romanticism. I revelled in my ability to recreate, with extreme naturalism, objects and figures from my environment. Indeed I must say that, in retrospect, it seems that my only concern was the technical rendering of a beautiful picture. Consequently, I gave little thought to the images I was using and, likewise, paid little attention to how these "beautiful pictures" reflected my own personality.

By the time I entered graduate school I was extremely doctrinaire. I spent my first year making drawings much like the ones I made as an undergraduate; highly detailed renderings of figure executed in either pencil or charcoal on paper. Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of these drawings was the criticism which I received. There was a tendency for people to discuss "how" they were drawn rather than "what" was drawn, and, for me, this entirely defeated the purpose for making them. I felt that I desperately needed to reach a point where people could get beyond my technique and focus on what my drawings were about. Even so, I was reticent to make changes in my art because making changes meant giving up what had become convenient and comfortable for me. Making changes also meant letting down my guard and opening myself up to vulnerability.

I did, however, eventually get around to making what I consider admirable developments in my work. These developments occurred during my second year and are the offspring of my discussions with Randy Bolton, a visiting artist in Printmaking. Mr. Bolton's insightful criticism enabled me to relate to my work in ways I had never before considered, while his delicate yet deliberate suggestions inspired me to move away from my old work habits and explore a variety of approaches to making art. He
constantly challenged my naïve conceptions. In some ways, he took away that kindled spirit of romanticism, but, in return, he offered a new philosophy; an endless perspective of what art can be.

Before I could make these changes, however, I first had to acquire a more thorough understanding of the images which I incorporated in my work. This goal was easily obtained when I began to make lists of the different images that I was using. These lists enable me to think of all the possible conclusions that could be derived from the relationships between different images, and to consider how these conclusions could differ if I were to alter the positioning of an image or if I were to omit an image altogether. Thus I had reached a point where I took responsibility for the images I was using; choosing only those images that would most clearly convey whatever message I was trying to present. It was at this time that I began to move away from drawing as a means of presenting my ideas to explore alternate methods of creating art.

The first physical changes in my work initiated from the completion of a large, unstretched canvas titled He Knows His Power Dangles Elsewhere (Plate I). This piece marked the first time that I included real objects as a visual image in my work. In He Knows His Power Dangles Elsewhere, I attached a pair of women’s stiletto heels to the chest of a male figure. The transformation which occurred, from stiletto heels to a pair of breasts, fascinated me and inspired me to move away from drawing altogether to focus on the combination of real objects and raw materials. The first work of this nature, which I refer to as a construction for lack of a better label, went through numerous changes and is perhaps the one from which I learned the most. It is the first work of mine which contained no drawn elements, comprised solely of real objects and raw materials, and is, for me, the turning point from which all major changes occurred.

In its initial stages If At All Possible, Never Swing Along (Plate II) was very much a mockery of women’s beauty. More specifically, it was a recipe for beauty. This idea,
a recipe for beauty, is not uncommon to our society. Advertising constantly offers us images of beautiful women with the suggestion that if you combine this product with that product you, too, will be beautiful. Thus, *If At All Possible, Never Swing Along* consisted of a number of objects that can be associated with a woman's beauty. Objects like a lacy dress and an assortment of sewing pattern pieces for a dress.

The associations did not stop there, however. With this construction, I attempted to not only make a mockery of society's idea of beauty but also a mockery of painting as well. As an artist, I found myself surrounded by a number of people who had rather lofty ideas in regards to painting. To these people, painting was a supreme art form, all other methods of making art did not count. I strongly opposed this elitist mind set and decided to include a painting as yet another object in this construction. It was important, however, that this painting refer specifically to a genre of painting deemed significant according to art historical standards. Thus I approximated a facsimile of a color-field abstraction; one that would suggest or bring to mind the paintings of the late Mark Rothko. I chose the paintings of Rothko because I personally find his work provocatively beautiful and thought it appropriate to the context of this piece. To the surface of this painting, I pinned my assortment of pattern pieces using straight pins in an attempt to deliberately deface the painting, and, likewise, suggest a lowered value of painting as a whole. This construction also contained one other object: A clothesline over which was hung a white sheet on which was drawn a simple outline of Botticelli's *Venus*. I included the outline of Venus for two reasons. It made an art historical reference which, like painting, was something I was beginning to consider more thoroughly. It also referred to the idea of beauty.

The inclusion of all of these elements, like tangents in a conversation, seemed to dilute the focus which I had intended. Thus I began to remove from *If At All Possible, Never Swing Alone* objects which, after more thorough consideration, seemed
unnecessary. I first removed the dress after considering that with the pattern pieces a real dress seemed rather redundant. I also removed the clothesline and sheet with the outline of Venus.

What remained was a black rectilinear framework divided into unequal halves by a lathed column (also black). This framework had existed from the beginning and was more or less housing for the different objects. The painting also remained but I had removed the canvas and replaced it with fabric. I made this switch because the painting, as a painting, did not meet the standard of quality that I felt I needed and I believed that the fabric stretched around a support was a sufficient reference to painting. I still pinned pattern pieces to this pseudo-painting but had eliminated all but three. The shape of these three pieces refer specifically to male and female genitalia. In the center of the left half of the construction, I hung a framed reproduction of Fragonard’s The Swing which depicts the coquettish play between a man and a woman. The framed reproduction, hung quite low by two wires from the top rail of the framework itself suggest a swing. By eliminating what I considered unnecessary objects, I had altered the meaning from a simple statement about female beauty to a more direct statement about male and female sexuality and the "love games" that people play with one another. The reference to both painting and art history, which I considered too important to omit, still existed vis-a-vis the stretched fabric and Fragonard reproduction.

After completing If At All Possible, Never Swing Along, I continued to explore, in a variety of directions the combination of raw materials and real objects. This exploration followed no logical order or progression. In fact, during this time, I made a conscious effort to avoid falling into a programmatic method of working. With each piece, I encountered a new and different experience. Each piece influenced and fueled the next without limiting its possibilities. There existed no impossible combinations. Nothing was too absurd or too excessive for me to consider it art.
From this exploration, painting emerged as a positive, functional aspect of my work. I found that I was constantly searching for a structure on which I could attach various objects and materials, and, like the black framework used in *If At All Possible, Never Swing Alone*, the surface of a painting quickly became that structure. Likewise, I was able to reintroduce drawn images back into my work via the physical act of painting. But unlike the earlier drawn images, which were somewhat pristine and sophisticated in their depiction, these images were painted in a very rough and decadent manner. The purpose of this decadence was to question the limits of a painted image. How badly could something be painted before it is no longer considered art? I also continued to explore the use of art historical references by placing reproductions of paintings by other artists within contexts which connote interpretations never previously associated with these paintings. The inclusion of these various painting aesthetics in my work allows me to question previously accepted norms and to challenge various restrictions applied to painting.

What I have learned from this change in methodology is that art is, for each individual, very different, and this means that my art has to be as sincere and true to my personality as I can possibly make it. I believe that I have produced from this newly acquired creative freedom a body of work which is richly diverse. Work which is publicly accessible in its presentation of images and objects while at the same time extremely private and personal in its intent. From this, I am able to see and understand a number of themes or motifs which resurface at various levels of intensity throughout my work.

Perhaps the most repeated and, likewise, most painfully private of these themes is sexuality. I have come to consider my work as an opportunity to blatantly question the stereotypical roles that men and women play in society and to present struggles for male and female positions of dominance. *He Knows His Power Dangles Elsewhere* (Plate
I) is, no doubt, the one work of mine most indicative of this theme. In this work, male sexuality is represented by the image of a male figure and a rifle. The rifle is intended as a phallic symbol and as a representation of male dominance. Female sexuality is represented by a pair of stiletto heels attached to the male figure's chest to connote breasts as well as images of a dress and purse. These two trappings, both worn and held by the male figure, also serve to emasculate the male figure.

There exists in this work a struggle for sexual identity and a battle between the two sexes to have power and control over each other. This struggle closely parallels my search for sexual identity and the questions I have asked myself regarding my own sexual preferences. In He Knows His Power Dangles Elsewhere the sexes merge to become one. Man as woman. Woman as man. The sexes no longer mutually exclusive or clearly delineated. The presentation of sexual themes in my work has enlightened me to more thoroughly consider how my past has affected my developing personality. As a child, raised without a father and surrounded by three sisters, I more or less had to put forth a conscious effort to learn male behavior. I have no way of knowing how much this lack of male companionship has affected my sexual orientation. I do know, however, that the guilt I associate with this orientation is, no doubt, the one obstacle that keeps me from coming to terms with my sexuality. Dealing with the issue of sexuality in my work has enabled me to overcome some of this guilt, but I still have some doubts and insecurities. Nonetheless, I look forward to resolving this issue on a personal level and believe that when this occurs sexuality will cease to be such a strong focal point in my work.

Another theme embodied in my work, which itself is closely related to the theme of sexuality, is the idea of camouflage. I have begun to incorporate into my work various fabrics and materials whose visual patterning suggests camouflage. The use of these materials, to physically cover the surface of cut-out shapes of figure, refers to the
masking of physical characteristics and personal traits. My intent is to provoke questions regarding how we as individuals present ourselves to others and to suggest the idea that things are not always as they seem to be.

One work of mine which deals specifically with the theme of camouflage is Ready Or Not, Here We Come! (Plate III). This work consists of four separate individual elements all of which in some way or another suggest camouflage. The two outer elements are cut-out shapes wrapped with material. The two central elements are both paintings. One of the paintings depicts two windows framed by a leopard print material. Both of these window forms include lace curtains which only partially hide the sexual practices of two figures. The other painting depicts a scene from Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland which includes the cheshire cat who, of course, is capable of disappearing at the most opportunistic moment.

The combination of these four elements suggests how we are all capable of deceiving others with our appearances. I am aware that, just like the sexual themes discussed earlier, this also exemplifies my own personality. I keep to myself aspects about my life that I feel are unaccepted by society. It is my belief, however, that I do not act alone on this venture and feel confident in presenting this issue as a suggestion of wide-spread human behavior.

It has been suggested to me that my work is flavored with a somewhat angry tone. If I consider this with sincerity and honesty I can only suggest that this anger is very much a part of my personality. No doubt it can be associated with the guilt I feel in regards to my sexuality along with past experiences which I do not care to discuss at this time. My work is also flavored with sarcasm, but, unlike anger, sarcasm is something I consciously intend to express. Perhaps my sarcasm intensifies the anger in my work. Nonetheless, I see it as adding to my work another dimension, yet another level of meaning. The irony that my sarcasm creates is, for me, one of the most provocative
aspects in my work. It presents an uneasiness or edge which I believe provides power and truth to the social themes I am exploring in my work.

Graduate school has been a rewarding experience. I came here somewhat naive and extremely close-minded in my approach to art. The discoveries I have made, not only in my own work but also in my reassessment of art history and the art world in general, permit me to leave here believing that all of life is open to art. It seems important for me to move my work away from aesthetic values to embrace social themes; especially at a time when our own government is providing censorship for the presentation of art. There is no doubt that there will be fourth and fifth generation of abstract expressionists. Generations of artist who will continue to dabble in line, shape and color convinced that these formalities express the very vein of their existence. I should not jest, there is always the possibility that I may come around to dabble in these issues myself. Until then, however, I will continue to explore myself as an individual set against the backdrop of an ever changing society of which I am an avid participant. Picket by picket, I intend to tear down the fence that has sheltered me from the rest of the world. After all, it's my backyard; welcome to it.
PLATES
PLATE I, HE KNOWS HIS POWER DANGLES ELSEWHERE
PLATE III, READY OF NOT, HERE WE COME!
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