The Art of Bringing Things Together

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

My art explores multiple ways and approaches to image-making. By extracting information and imagery from many different sources and synthesizing them, I embark on a journey of discovering forms that may exist in real space or in spaces of their own. My work is constructed with found imagery appropriated from my external environment, the internet, and imagery that I create. I then configure and develop the imagery through a series of physical and digital layers. The imagery that I extract from my external environment includes hand-writings, graffiti tagging, spills, and sometimes, found drawings. The imagery produced are gestural line drawings and paintings that are a synthesis of organic and sometimes geometrical qualities.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my family who has continually supported the growth of my art and I as a person. Thank you for your love and support.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my committee, Pheoris West, Sergio Soave, and Charles Massey Jr., for their encouragement and help throughout the past two years. I would also like to acknowledge my former mentor, James Dupree, for believing in me and helping me to unlock the potential of my art that I had yet known to exist. This work would not have been possible without all of their help and support.
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2011..........................Armadillo Fine Art Publishing New York
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii  
Dedication ....................................................................................................................... iii  
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... iv  
Vita ....................................................................................................................................... v - vi  
List of Figures ..................................................................................................................... viii  
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1  
  i. Building a Visual Vocabulary: Learning the process of Image-making ............... 1  
Chapter 1. “A Whole New Thing”: The Transition to Graduate School ................. 8  
  i. New Tools & Techniques ......................................................................................... 11  
Chapter 2. Printmaking – Making the Transition from “Digital” to “Physical” ....... 17  
Chapter 3. What’s Next? ................................................................................................. 22  
Chapter 4. Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 23
List of Figures

Figure 1. Examples of the work of Abdul Mati Klarwein ......................................................... 2
Figure 2. Photographs of the Māori ................................................................................................. 3
Figure 3. Photographs of hair designs ............................................................................................... 4
Figure 4. Examples of the work of James Dupree ............................................................................ 5
Figure 5. Images of graffiti tags ........................................................................................................ 6
Figure 6. “The Funky Side of Life”, 6 X 8 feet, Mixed Mediums, 2010 ............................................. 8
Figure 7. Study, “Splitting Headache” .............................................................................................. 10
Figure 8. Foam Core Board Model of “Splitting Headache” ............................................................ 12
Figure 9. Wooden Model of “Splitting Headache” .......................................................................... 13
Figure 10. Priming the surface of the masonite cut-out version of Splitting Headache ............. 14
Figure 11. Work in progress, “Maggot Brain/ Splitting Headache” .................................................... 15
Figure 12. Study for “Out of my mind, Just in Time” ...................................................................... 17
Figure 13. Looking at the art of drawing in a new light ................................................................... 18
Figure 14. Monotype prints ............................................................................................................... 20
Introduction

In this thesis I plan to discuss the significant factors that have influenced my art and diversified my visual vocabulary. The transition from undergraduate school to graduate school has played a big role in the direction of my art and has opened the door to many possibilities of what constitutes a work of art. I will also write about some of my thoughts about particular works and what I have learned in the process of making them.

i. Building a Visual Vocabulary: Learning the process of Image-making

I think that every artist has an idea, whether clear or fuzzy, of what their thoughts would look like if they were to visually describe them. I never quite possessed the skill and imagination to thoroughly render those thoughts and ideas to their greatest potential in my early years of undergraduate school. One of the artists that I admired during that period of time was Abdul Mati Klarwein. Klarwein was a German painter best known for his works that were used on the covers of record albums during the 1960s and 1970s.
Klarwein’s work (Figure 1) serves as an example of the way I imagined my work would look in a language of my own. I enjoyed the collage-like aspect of his work and how he weaved many different types of imagery together cohesively. I felt as if he could include almost anything in his work, and it would make sense or not feel as if it was out-of-place. It would take some time and learning before I could build the skills necessary to construct a sophisticated work of art with similar visual qualities.

While attending the University of the Arts, I picked up the practice of hair designing. Before then, I had been cutting hair for extra income since high school, but it was not until college that I decided that I wanted to elevate my hair cutting practice. While attending undergraduate school in Philadelphia, I would often see men and women with different types of linear designs in their head around the city. It was not a simple mark in their head, such as a line or two. It was an elaborate design that took the form of almost
anything from a person’s name to an abstract design of some sort. I was fascinated by these designs and they soon became a part of my practice.

To get me started, several of my friends let me practice making designs in their head. Among searching for imagery to draw from, I looked at art forms that took the form of linear designs. These sources included contemporary and tribal tattoos.

One set of tribal tattoos that I looked at specifically was Moko tattoos of the Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand. The Moko tattoo’s spiral design was based on the structure of a fern plant, and these particular tattoos represented different levels of social status among the Māori people (Figure 2).

![Photograph of Māori individuals with Moko tattoos]

Figure 2. Photographs of the Māori
In several hair designs that I styled, I used some of the same design elements found in Moko tattoos; spiraling and geometric-like patterns are examples. As my popularity and customer base grew, my designs grew more elaborate and ambitious (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Photographs of hair designs

The funny thing about my experience with hair designing is that the knowledge and creativity never seemed to cross-over into my visual vocabulary of painting. These two art forms remained completely separate until my visual language began to break down, and different types of art forms began to share the same space during my later undergraduate years while taking classes with Philadelphian artist James Dupree (Figure 4).
While studying under Dupree, I began to look for new types of materials and surfaces as tools for expression. My color palettes became more ambitious and my compositions - more complex. My imagery began to slowly change from figures to non-figurative shapes and patterns. I was introduced to a wider field of vision whereby the combination of color, composition, and technique can transform an artist’s visual landscape and imagination.

As I continued to build and redefine my visual vocabulary, I began to open the “playing field” to more dynamic compositions. I began to build a single image by including parts and pieces, as well as my color palette, from several images that I selected from the internet.
During my later years in undergraduate and early beginnings of graduate school, two sources of imagery that I was attracted to and used as a source for my drawings, paintings, and color palettes were graffiti tags and nebulas.

Graffiti tags are public graffiti markings that may appear in the form of simple or complex written letters of the graffiti artist’s name (Figure 5). Drawing from graffiti and other forms of imagery allowed me to create more dynamic and vivid compositions. At the time I was drawing from graffiti tags, I was not aware that they represented letters of the graffiti artist’s name. I only saw them as extraordinary shapes and forms that I have never seen in a work of art before. The letters were exaggerated to the point in which they represented something much more than just a letter of someone’s name. These letters had character, personality, and were incredibly lively. The colors were vivid and hyper-real. It was if these graffiti tags were made of raw energy and could burst off of their surface at any moment. They completely dominated whatever space in which they resided. I was captivated by these tags and their wild, explosive and funky color palate and wanted to bring these qualities to my art.

Figure 5. Images of graffiti tags
Nebulas are interstellar clouds of gas or dust in outer space. Nebulas were of the most incredible color phenomenon I had ever seen. The colors were vibrant, outer-worldly, and psychedelic-like. These were made of unique and atypical color combinations and seemed to be the perfect fit for my drawings. These colors were also reflective some of the music genres that I listened to at the time and even now: funk, psychedelic, hip-hop, soul, jazz, rock, foreign, or a fusion of several or all of these music genres. Some of the names of particular songs became titles for a few of my works – one, for example, “The Funky Side of Life” (Figure 6), by the musician Madlib.

These sets of imagery played a prominent role in the compositions and color palettes in my work.
Chapter 1. “A Whole New Thing”: The Transition to Graduate School

I made the transition to graduate school at The Ohio State University immediately after I graduated from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The first work that I made was a large scale painting titled “The Funky Side of Life”. Around this time, I began sculpting the shapes in the paintings to give them more of a relief-like appearance and to add a greater sense of physicality to my work. “The Funky Side of Life” represented my continuation of the exploration of color, form, and composition and the dominance of scale.

Figure 6. “The Funky Side of Life”, 6 X 8 feet, Mixed Mediums, 2010
After the idea of drawing from graffiti tags began to wear a bit thin, I looked for other sources from which to draw. These other sources included other forms of writing, including: Asian calligraphy, Middle Eastern letters, found cursive writings, Non-representational imagery, such as spills and splatters, and imagery that I looked at and developed through hair designing were also included as were other sources for color palettes, including: photographs of parades, oil spills, nature, and natural phenomenon, such as rust and discolorations in the sky and water.

Nearing completion of “The Funky Side of Life”, I felt that these shapes and forms in my work were beginning to move into a new direction. I looked at an earlier drawing that I had completed several months before and noticed that there was something different about this drawing that I liked. Typically, while developing what I considered a completed drawing, I filled the entire space with layers and layers of these shapes. In this particular drawing, these shapes did not meet the edges of the paper. Instead, they formed their own edges, and from there, I began the see the forms in a different light. As I worked on my drawings from that point, I explored more of what the outside edges and characteristics of these forms looked like (Figure 7).
These shapes and forms seemed to clump together to form a conglomerate mass and, in a sense, found their newfound independence in their autonomy from the edges and limitations of the structure from which they were born. No longer were these shapes and forms bound by the edges of the paper. No longer did they serve as fillers of a space. They began to serve the purpose as building blocks of densely compacted forms and layers of information – information taken from a variety of sources that I then re-contextualized and re-configured to the point where these shapes and forms nearly became independent of their original source (much like the heavily exaggerated letters of graffiti tags). This realization excited me, and from that point, I felt as if I could move forward with the progress and growth of my art.
i. New Tools & Techniques

Coming to the realization of these new sets of forms that my drawings were beginning to take, I thought of the idea of possibly transforming these two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional forms. However, with only a limited amount of skill of how to actually build these forms, I needed to take some time to learn some other tools and techniques that enabled these forms to be built. This required several huge learning curves. The first of many problems ahead of me was finding suitable materials to build these forms. Of course I needed a proper supporting surface to construct these forms, but I had no idea what that surface would be. Because the edges of these forms were so complicated, a thin sheet of wood was a possible solution for the surface, but cutting these forms out of the wood was not possible, except with the use of a router. However, the process of using a router was not an efficient solution to the problem.

While shopping for materials to use in another project, I stumbled across the idea of cutting these shapes out of foam core board and applying resin to the surface to create stability (Figure 8). Using only the foam core board for an early prototype, I later shifted my attention to more efficient methods and materials for bringing these forms into fruition.
Around that time, I was taking hours with artist Sean Foley and Art and Technology Professor Ken Rinaldo. Sean Foley encouraged me to speak with Professor Rinaldo about working with the CNC Machine in the woodshop of Hopkins Hall to construct the forms in my drawings. After a few conversations with Professor Rinaldo, he instructed me to learn the computer design programs, Adobe Illustrator and Cinema 4D. He also referred me to a few people with knowledge of and access to the CNC Machine – a machine that uses these programs to cut out shapes. From that point, I spent the rest of the quarter learning these new software programs.

The first work that I constructed utilizing the CNC machine was a success. Impressed with the results of the wood cut-outs (Figure 9), I immediately began making more cut-outs of several other drawings.
The next problem that I encountered was figuring out how to frame and prime the surface. For the back of the structure, I was planning on building a wooden frame that drifted close to three-and-a-half to four inches off of the wall to give the impression that these forms were floating off of the wall and were almost “life-like”. To prime the surface, I took each cut-out shape to the spray booth on the fourth floor of Hopkins Hall and covered the surface with gesso (Figure 10).
Because I was still concerned with the issue of introducing a greater sense of physicality in my work, I decided that I wanted to adhere textured wall paper and marble paper to the surface of these forms to give them more of the appearance of some kind of skin. After I adhered the textures and marble paper, I glued the layers of shapes together. I then glued the wooden frame to the back of the structure. Next was the final process of bringing these forms into fruition. That process was applying color to these forms. After weeks of re-designing them in computer software and bringing them into their physical form, I finally had the opportunity to engage in the process of re-introducing the “physical hand” into the work (Figure 11).

Figure 10. Priming the surface of the refined masonite cut-out version of “Splitting Headache”
These paintings (five paintings, in all) took me well over a year to construct, and after a year of working on them, I felt a bit “burnt-out”. The problem that I experienced with this mode of “making” was that I did not feel very comfortable taking many risks in my work,
and because of that, I felt as if the paintings lacked a real sense of energy, immediacy, and spontaneity. These paintings did not reflect that same excitement that I experienced while making them. They felt slow, meditative, and lacked a sense of unpredictability and “raw” energy. The works did not “feel” as excited as I felt while making the work, and I felt that was a problem.
Alongside making the paintings, I continued to work on drawings. One of the things that attracted me to the practice of drawing was the immediacy of the art form. I could make a drawing in a couple of days as opposed to making a painting, which took anywhere from a several weeks to a couple of months. I would always receive comments and criticism that my drawings had more of a real sense energy and immediacy that my paintings lacked.

Figure 12. Study for “Out of my mind, Just in Time”
However, at the time, I did not compose drawings with the idea of them being “independent” works of art. They were only rough sketches that served as blueprints for possible paintings. I only considered drawing as a tool by which I roughly recorded my ideas and thoroughly refined those visual recordings in the process of painting. A component that I used in combination with drawing was digital imaging, computer software. Using this software allowed me to layer up to five to ten drawings on top of one another. This was a huge benefit in terms of expediting the process of drawing (Figure 12). While editing out particular aspects of my drawings, I slowly began to consider my drawings as independent works of art. With some drawings that were composed in this manner, I was unsure whether or not I wanted to translate them into paintings. I began to see different types of forms taking shape. I saw the presence of the frame re-emerging in my work. Broken and torn forms began to appear. At that time, automatic writing played an even more important role in my drawings (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Looking at the art of drawing in a new light
I felt as if these new drawings that I was composing were really compelling, but something was missing. It was something about these drawings that felt “too digital”. The “physical hand” felt as if it was nearly completely removed from the works, and I disliked that quality. The imagery in the drawings looked very physical, but they did not “feel” very physical. They were completely flat and lacked a sense of tactility. All of these issues that I had with the drawings were characteristic of the very medium from which they were produced: a commercial printer. Even the size and the scale of the drawings were reflective of the medium from which they originated. These qualities of the drawings really “got under my skin”, and I began to search for other methods of printing.

During my second-to-final quarter in graduate school, I decided to take a printmaking class with Professor Charles Massey Jr. After explaining the problems that I was having with my digital prints, Professor Massey encouraged me to look toward more traditional methods of printing.

One method that I was particularly interested in was relief/monotype printmaking. After taking a relief/monotype printmaking class in undergrad, I had a bit of experience with that form of printmaking and was familiar with some of the characteristics of the prints that could be produced.

The first few prints that I made were not very large in scale. They were unique in the sense that they were composed on a single sheet of paper. Working in this manner, I felt a bit limited. I felt as if I was an artist who built compositions by extracting information
and pieces from other things, found or created. As I continued to make more and more prints, I began to take more liberties with the work. Knowing that I could produce nearly one hundred prints in a week, I began tearing prints in half and cutting out pieces that I liked from other prints. I embarked on the process of “finding” the image just as I did with the digital prints that I made. This process of finding typically involved making numerous prints and extracting information out of each or a few of them until I found an arrangement of the particular pieces that I liked (Figure 14).

![Figure 14. Monotype prints](image)

This mode of making introduced a number of elements into my drawing process. The resurgence of the “physical hand” in my drawings really took shape in the prints that I began to make and was a key element that was absent in my digital prints. The issues of speed and immediacy had taken on an entirely new definition in the prints that I made in comparison to my paintings. These prints possessed a sense of urgency and a faster speed, which was not found in my paintings. New types of forms and imagery appeared
in the prints. There were “real” spills and splashes. Some of the edges of papers were cut, torn, or unaffected. In some of the prints my fingerprints are present.

The element of dulling refinement, or rather “taking the edge off”, is nearly, if not completely, absent in these prints. There are not any erased areas or digitally edited blemishes. Each mark that is made cannot be removed unless it is physically removed from the paper. In printmaking, I have to work with whatever information I have in front of me, whether this information is “easy on the eyes” or not. I have to find ways to bring these parts and pieces together in a single composition, and I enjoy that challenge. I find the process of discovering something that had yet to exist very rewarding, and there is a real sense of authenticity and “life” that happens from making art in this manner. These new ways of working and thinking about my art appealed to the greater sense of depth, authenticity, and vitality I wanted to bring to my work.
Chapter 3. What’s Next?

With the modes of making that I have learned in printmaking, as well as new processes and techniques that I have learned from making paintings, I intend to explore a mixture of these materials, techniques, and processes coming together in a singular work of art. I am interested in creating works with a fusion of different speeds, a greater sense of urgency, as well as, greater physicality. I am also curious about the types of forms, shapes, and marks that would happen if I brought the practices of painting, printmaking, and even a mixture of digital and other physical practices together. The issue of scale in my work has also become a concern as it has shifted from the idea of dominance and “filling the space” to issues of autonomy within the space. At this point in time, I am super excited to follow the new direction of my work with my newly acquired knowledge, techniques, and processes of image-making that I have obtained here at The Ohio State University.
Chapter 4. Conclusion

When I think of my process of making a work of art, it reminds me of a DJ in how they sample, recycle, and blend songs, sound bits, and different music genres together to create a sound of their own. My visual vocabulary has become more fragmented and diverse as I continue to discover newer modes of making and redefine myself as a fine artist. However, what I have been most interested in is what becomes of the parts and pieces of information once they are synthesized in a work of art. Do these works function as a single entity, or are they operate by drawing associations from the very sources of which they originate? Can these works of art function as something of their own, something greater than the sum of their individual pieces, similar to the way in which music is constructed? Questions of this nature continue to drive me towards finding those answers in the process of image-making, a process that continues to grow more exciting one artwork at a time.