A SELF PORTRAIT

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

by

Sean Patrick Foley, BFA

The Ohio State University

1993

Master's Examination Committee:

Stephen Pentak
Alan Crockett
Mary Jo Bole

Approved by

Advisor
Department of Art
This Thesis Is Dedicated
To My Mother And Father
VITA

May 21, 1969.........................Born - South Bend, Indiana

1991.................................BFA, Herron School of Art
Indianapolis, Indiana

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Art
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.......................................................... ii  
Vita................................................................. iii  
List of Plates...................................................... v  
A Self Portrait..................................................... 1  
List of References.............................................. 18
# LIST OF PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLATES</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Mortality Play</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II Suburban Newscast</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III I Rot</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A SELF PORTRAIT

My paintings have lots of things in them, mainly images. Some people think they are confusing; and they probably are, but that's O.K.. They act as containers for my ideas. Images gather on and in the surface, and those images all work together or against each other to create a mood. I like having lots of things to look at in my paintings, so I won't get bored looking at or thinking about them. They are like a day or something. You know how each day feels different or has a different character than the day before? Well, what makes a day a day? I think it's all the stuff that you see, experience, and happens to you that day. You can stub your toe, watch some bad news on T.V., have an argument with a friend, eat lunch, feel crummy about that argument, have a bad critique, get no mail, realize there's no food to eat; and then, all of a sudden, you see your cat do something really stupid. You go to sleep thinking "I love my cat," and the day has suddenly become good. I don't think this would happen without all the other stuff. Sometimes people say, "Geez! You have about ten different paintings in this painting!" I think to myself,
"Well maybe. But it's really just one with a lot of stuff."

If our life lacks brimstone, i.e., a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force. (Artaud)

I remember walking to the railroad tracks with my Mom when I was about seven years old. We walked along the tracks, all surrounded by lush green grass, bushes, and trees with bugs hopping and buzzing all around. It was a sunny, blue-cloud day; and the air smelled like hot tar and oil. Cool breezes carried the fragrance of wildflowers to my nose and eyes reminding me of the naturalness of this place. We skipped from tie to tie looking to the white-gray rocks for souvenirs. Mom told me that she played here when she was little. I learned about flattening pennies on the track, and how the railroad was a good place to walk because you couldn't get lost. I found a railroad spike and other pieces of rusty bric-a-brac. Mom says I used to love trains, probably because they were the only things I could hear, and the conductors always waved back. I do remember that Mom scared me. She'd always tell me not to stand too close to the tracks when a train went by, or else it would suck me right underneath it. It doesn't really bother me that she said that. In fact, it made the trips to the
railroad more exciting and real; and it still does. Now, in retrospect, I realize that came from the same woman who told me not to eat the cookie dough because it had raw eggs in it, and I would die.

I'd like it here if I could leave and see you from a long way away. (R.E.M.)

As I walk to school, I imagine myself in my studio. I imagine creating whimsical characters, beautiful colors, catching and recording a fleeting glimpse of a much larger vision. I imagine rich textures and gestural strokes. Everything looks so good in my head. Lost in my imagination, I walk down Seventeenth Street past the Wexner Center towards Hopkins Hall feeling terribly proud of myself. I walk through my studio door which acts like a sieve checking all my thoughts (delusions), and I feel myself (physically and mentally) sink into ignorance. I begin my routine and realize I am an idiot dilettante, and it would be a lot easier walking around daydreaming.

I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley stays shut up in his house all the time... it's because he wants to stay inside. (Lee)

I sit in front of a new panel, palette on my right, music on my left. Stare. The ideas have gone away. My
hand is lazy, and I suddenly feel sleepy. I stand up and begin to pace. I change the music, make coffee, and suddenly feel hungry. I make a black and blue wash to kill the white. The wash still has undissolved chunks of paint in it because of my impatience, and I feel even worse. It's so thin. I'm convinced I've run out of pictures. I get up, pour my coffee, and sit down again. I rub the wash off the surface in disgust; and suddenly, I add white with a small brush (I always use white and I don't want to.) Eventually, I wipe that off; and roughly five hours later, I quit and go home. This happens all the time; and what makes me furious is that these paintings always get finished, and I don't know how.

Late in the evening, I stretch out on the couch. My legs are heavy, and my eyeballs ache. I pull a soft, yellow blanket over my body, as I rest my head on a pillow. The T.V. is on; the lights are dim; and the cats are sleeping at my feet. I feel warm and drowsy. There's an old movie on T.V., and I ignore my life.

All powerful feeling produces in us the idea of the void. And the lucid language which obstructs this void obstructs the appearance of poetry in thought. (Artaud)
Sometimes I just paint outlines because suggesting a thing is more interesting than showing it. I think it gives me more breathing room for telling stories, and it allows other people to participate by not being overtly specific. One of my paintings (Plate I) has a rough outline of a prone, androgynous figure on a plain piece of plywood just about as long as the figure. I used a reddish-brown wax color with the intention that it would end up looking like a detailed green-skinned medieval type of figure laying on or under the ground. After I roughed in the figure, I found it strangely disturbing. I decided to keep it that way, but I was still thinking of my original idea. I attached this panel to the rest of the painting, but it seemed awkward with the other part. I made a frame for the figure to act as a bridge between both paintings. I knew that I wanted to paint the frame but wasn't quite sure how. One day I was walking to school. It had rained the night before, and the air smelled like a stagnant lake. I noticed worms all over the sidewalks; and somehow, that seemed real strange today; so I decided to paint worms. I painted them around the frame on plain wood pretty realistically. It took a long time but was worth it. I placed the frame on the panel and forgot about it. During my review, my committee asked me to describe this painting. To my surprise, I stated my
original idea which I, at the moment, realized no longer existed. Something more enigmatic and versatile laid before my eyes. A transparent scratchy figure with no real substance in a kind of box frame with worms parading around it. It was better than my original idea. Something magical happened to the feel of the painting when I put that rough image next to the other panel which was more tightly rendered and specific. It just makes more sense.

Atticus said Jem was trying hard to forget something, but what he was really doing was storing it away for awhile until enough time passed. Then he would be able to think about it and sort things out. When he was able to think about it he would be himself again. (Lee)

As I sit on my stool painting, I'll occasionally feel a strange sense of familiarity with the paint. I realize that the painting is painting itself. It's very exciting. I drink coffee, turn up my music, and smile enjoying this play unfolding before my eyes. I cherish and work for these moments. They don't last long, and it will certainly be terrible tomorrow.

When you're in the studio you're surrounded by friends, enemies, critics, artists, family, and one by one they leave until you are alone. And then, ideally, you leave. (Guston)
The 100 Center was an old brewery in Mishawaka, Indiana turned into a kind of "old times" market with small specialty shops. It was really a beautiful place on the St. Joe River. Everything was made out of red bricks -- the buildings, roads, sidewalks, planters, the tall round smokestack that rose above the rest of the bricks, and even some trees were filled with bricks. I always felt different when I was there. Once Dad took my brother and me there to Christmas shop for Mom. It was snowing big, fluffy, northern flakes which stuck to everything and actually felt warm when they hit my face. We stopped at a "old fashioned" ice cream parlor. It was so warm and clean inside. Dad bought us ice cream cones even though it was winter, while he sipped from one of those really tiny cups he always had. Even back then I knew how beautiful that time with Dad was.

When the child was a child
It didn't know that it was a child.
Everything was full of life and all life was one.

(Handke)

Other people thought it was weird, but we just weren't finished at the railroad until Mom dug up a milkweed plant to take home and plant in her flower garden to attract Monarchs. They don't eat anything else. Walking home was kind of funny. We'd be walking down the street carrying this really
tall weed, and Mom actually felt guilty because she thought she was stealing and might get in trouble for taking a weed! Well, we planted it, and I forgot about it until one day I saw a caterpillar crawling around and eating the plant. I guess it took the Monarchs a while to find it. We put the caterpillar in a jar with milkweed leaves and sticks, so it could eat and have something to crawl around on. One day it just stopped eating and stood real still. Shortly afterwards, it mysteriously turned into a bright mint-green chrysalis with tiny gold dots wrapped around the top. It hung from a stick by a jet black rope and stayed that way long enough to lose my attention and surprise me again when I noticed it had become transparent. I could see muted black and orange wings tucked neatly inside. I focused on the chrysalis and witnessed a miracle. As it emerged I shook with curiosity and amazement.

Between the Idea
and the Reality
Between the Motion
and the Act
Falls the Shadow. (Eliot)

Aimlessly pushing paint, making pictures, and feeling guilty about wasting so much time on these paintings, I always forget the excitement of discovery and the
subconscious. I’m frightened every step of the way. I try to relax by painting a familiar image like a cat or house or something like that, but the way I paint it thoroughly disgusts me. It looks like a foundation year painting, all thin with dirty colors and no substance. Strokes disappear into each other, and there is no value range to speak of. It’s terribly boring. I decide to do something “wild” to the cat, so I can jazz up this mundane piece of trash. I paint the cat green. Oh, no! It looks so ugly. I used that tiny brush again which doesn’t hold much paint. Why do I do that? I scrape it off thinking about how boring a person I am, and if I have any other job skills to fall back on. I think like this a lot when I’m in the studio while all the time forcing myself to paint anything or anyway that pops into my head. Usually, this is when I start falling asleep because my mind is so blank. I force myself to keep putzing around with whatever is on the panel in front of me; and, sometimes, the panel lets me enter the painting. Without any warning, I’m thrust into a new frame of mind, a different place; and I see a new world unfold itself before my eyes. Most of those originally “boring” images are still there, but now they’re something entirely different. They’ve come to life each with its own personality. I don’t know how that happens. What makes this moment different from all those earlier ones? One
of my favorite teachers once told me that "the only way to get there was to paint your way there." I guess that's what I work for. To get out of here and be somewhere else.

Every real effigy has a shadow which is its double; and art must falter and fail from the moment the sculptor believes he has liberated the kind of shadow whose very existence will destroy his repose. (Artaud)

I fell asleep between just about every paragraph.
Read the scene where Gravity is pulling me around.
Peel back the mountains Peel back the sky
Stomp Gravity.
Into the floor.
It's a Man Ray kind of sky.
Let me show you what I can do with it.
Time and Distance
Are out of place here. (R.E.M.)

In some of my paintings, there are these houses, sometimes one sometimes several (Plate II). They also look like arrows pointing to the sky. Light pours out of the windows and sometimes floats through the air and across the ground illuminating parts of the darkened outside world. They're kind of like people. They contain things that are unique to a particular place. The contents remain unknown unless you're invited in, or they are destroyed.
When I was younger, I'd draw really long continuous, Ed Emberly-like narrative landscapes on rolled computer paper to kill time. I loved inventing new images and making them interact with the rest of the picture. When I started art school, I forgot about my fascination with those pictures and decided to start making "art" because I didn't see anyone around with those sensibilities. During the first two years of art school, I painted gestural abstractions because it looked like "art." My professors loved it, and nobody else seemed to be dealing with images. People liked those abstract pictures, but they just weren't fun to paint anymore. I was so lost. I met Richard Hull the summer of my junior year at a painting workshop at the University of Notre Dame. He was a visiting instructor who showed at Phyllis Kind Gallery and worked in Chicago. He was a lot younger than my professors at school and more friendly in discussing artworks. Watching him paint for two weeks was more helpful to my development as a painter than the two previous years of art school. The way he delicately painted images and was open to new ideas within the painting reminded me of my long narrative landscapes and fascination with my imagination. My trips to the Art Institute, Navy Pier Art Expos, and Phyllis Kind Gallery came flooding back to the present. Damn, I loved the things I saw at those places, and now I knew why.
That work looked like or, more importantly, had the feel and emotion I remembered my early child drawings had: variety, humor, weird shapes, a dreamy cohesiveness, and images. It was quite a revelation; and, as Guston said, "It felt like I had come home." I turned to Chicago and its resources as a kind of anchor, a friend, while I churned out these personal narrative paintings amidst peer pressure and professors who shunned my new discovery. Chicago was the catalyst through which I discovered folk art and reaffirmed my love for Paul Klee. Over the past three years, I've studied with other artists who are more indirectly related to Chicago and have, in my opinion, challenged the Imagist tradition and pushed it to a more universal and complex aesthetic. One is Michael Nakoneczny whose treatment of paintings as things/objects I found very similar to my aesthetics and love for early Christian altarpieces. The other painter is T. L. Solien from Minnesota. His rural imagery with its pathos, nostalgia, and subtle humor I find very familiar and in line with my own visions of my life in the Midwest. Nowadays, I'm not so lost; and I love painting.

I need them only for my own use and guidance until I have done something for myself by their light. If the lamp smokes or smells I shall try to trim it. If it does not give light enough, I shall sell it and buy another.  (Joyce)
I've just finished a painting (Plate III). Well, that's not a good word. I've never really "finished" any paintings. I quit when I'm sick of whatever I'm working on and nearly on the verge of setting it on fire and throwing it out the window. Anyhow, this painting is my first triptych, and it's kind of like a self portrait, but not really. My stomach had been bothering me; and, as usual, I had absolutely no idea what I was going to do next, so I painted a picture of the inside of my stomach. That led me to a kind of retrospective glance at my medical past. The second panel was based on my head, and all the physical problems associated with that. The third panel was based on my leg which, like my head, has taken a lot of abuse. I used my life experiences as a catalyst to help me get the painting started, but it's not really necessary to know me to interact visually and mentally with the painting. I think this piece ended up to be more about "painting" than some of my other pieces; and it almost acts as a checklist of painting techniques and knowledge obtained thus far in graduate school. But then again, maybe that's not it at all. It's really hard for me to talk about recently finished work. When I finish a painting, I set it off in the corner of my studio to let it age while I work on a new panel. Slowly I begin to realize what caused me to paint it, what it might be about; and I begin to notice the
things that bug me. Once these three thoughts have been pondered sufficiently, I either leave the painting alone; or I go ahead and make the necessary changes. Sometimes those end up being slight revisions or a complete overhaul of the existing painting. This triptych hasn't set around long enough for me to make a decision on it. There are so many things to look at and new ideas to think about in this triptych that it seems very confusing, but I like that. After I make some more paintings, it will begin to make more sense. Living like this can be very frustrating, but it's worth it. My life and my art would be boring without it.
PLATE I

Mortality Play
PLATE II

Suburban Newscast
PLATE III

I Rot
LIST OF REFERENCES


