O TO BE A FISH

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores ideas of natural history, memory reenactment, and a re-interpretation of medium as source for painting. The author makes abstract paintings of human scale that reference the natural world and reflect personal observation. The author writes about taxidermy, personal experiences, and the practice of painting.
Dedicated to my mother and father.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapters:

1. Introduction ................................. 1
2. Tiger Barb .................................... 3
3. Painting and Taxidermy .................... 7
4. Red Fish ...................................... 13
5. The Body, Water, and Medium .............. 19
6. Nautilus Shell ............................... 21
7. Conclusion: O to be a Fish ................ 24

Bibliography .................................... 31
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURES                      PAGE
1.  Tiger Barb.......................... 6
2.  Still life with Fish.................. 12
3.  Red Fish............................. 16
4.  Red Fish (detail #1).................. 17
5.  Red Fish (detail #2).................. 18
6.  Nautilus Shell........................ 23
7.  Water Study #1........................ 25
8.  Water Study #2........................ 26
9.  Water Study #3........................ 27
10. Snail.................................. 28
11. Pipe.................................. 29
12. Ice Skating........................... 30
PREFACE

I woke up one morning when I was eight years old and heard a rapid tapping through the wall next to my bed. I mimicked the sound by rapping a knuckle on my desk. <Dack, dack, dack, dack, dack>.

After a week, I heard faint chirps on the other side. I told my father about the nestlings. He showed concern. The next weekend, he propped a very tall ladder against the back of the house and climbed to the second story. I watched from the ground as he carried up a trowel and bucket and covered up the hole.

When he came back down, I asked him, “but what about the baby woodpeckers?” He said, “Oh, don’t worry, they’ll just dry up”.

The next day the baby woodpeckers cried and cried. The following day their cries weakened. Finally, I lay in my bed, stared at the ceiling, and couldn’t hear them any more. Seventeen years later, I imagine their mummies still in the insulation.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The crayfish molts once every few months. He sits motionlessly for some time while the ties between his insides and his outsides sever. In a series of wiggles and thrusts, he casts off his shell and then pauses, suddenly estranged from what he once was. Each molt accommodates growth and he has emerged larger and brighter. His new surface however is soft and vulnerable. He finds a crevice and meditates upon the alienation of his being from his appearance and waits for his new self to harden.

The snail grows his shell in a spiral. With each successive snail year, the mouth of the snail’s shell rotates and expands around an axis, building upon previous rotations. A cross section of a snail’s shell reveals in profile every stage of its development from infancy to adulthood.

These paintings are the latest project in a long series of discarded projects and they are the culmination of a steady path of inquiry. To make a new painting is an activity of growth --- a process that casts aside previous work and also consumes each stage of development. This development of this body of work has involved
the study of taxidermy, human anatomy, experimental video, museum display, fish keeping, and painting. In retrospect, rather than being eclectic, this path has followed a very narrow and persistent desire to study and make work about living things and the relevant phenomena that surround their deaths.
CHAPTER 2

TIGER BARB

The surface of *Tiger Barb* is sliding down (Figure 1). Drips approach the bottom of the canvas like sheets of water frozen mid-cascade. The mixture of umber and ultramarine is dark and penetrable in the middle of the painting. At its edges, white shows the thinness of the dark surface and reveals the canvas’ support structures.

Two distinct streaks of white pigment move across the picture plane. The arc on the left swoops past the corner and returns towards the center. The arc on the right makes a roller coaster’s loop. Each arc quickly blends into the ground in blurs of umber and blue.

The paint aligns into patterns that suggest movement. One white streak right of center has the tear drop body of a fish. One mark on the right arc below the midline cuts across the tails of two other marks and echoes a streak near the bottom.
The painting is as tall and as wide as me. Its dimensions are the measure of my height by the measure of my arms' span. To measure the vertical stretcher bars for cutting I stood against them and made a mark with a pencil flush with the top of my head as my father did to chart my growth when I was a child. To determine the length of the horizontal bars I dipped my finger in paint, balanced the bar across my shoulder blades and spread my arms. I cut the bar at the mark my finger left against the wood.

I began the painting by drawing a large circle with oil stick. I rotated my straight arm around the axis of my shoulder in a swift and continuous motion. I waited two days and then with a screen printer’s squeegee I spread burnt umber thickly across the surface.

Without waiting for the first application to dry I applied ultramarine and umber in a near black to the right half of the canvas. The existing paint shifted unexpectedly under the skin of the new layer.

The next day I applied a mixed black across the whole surface. Stretcher bars behind the edges of the canvas disrupted the movement of the squeegee and created a perimeter of unpainted ground.

I made a mixture of titanium white, stand oil, and Japan drier. Then with a palette knife I flicked the mixture onto the canvas and moved the pigment across the surface with the squeegee.

I made an earlier painting with an extended brush that I intended to act like a fish. I thought that specks of colors on the canvas could motivate the path of a
continuous line. I imagined that I could make a painting in the manner that fish move to food.

To make *Tiger Barb*, without deliberating about the nature of the marks I allowed the squeegee to respond to the surface. The white pigment directed the movements of the squeegee and the arrangement of the marks left in its path.

In 1977, Bill Viola made an early art video entitled “Sweet Light,” in which the flight of moths is a primary motif. One static shot looks into a dark open space while illuminated moths fly toward and away from the camera. The video records their paths through the blackness with an extended exposure that transforms the insects into streaks of light that gently fade. Viola’s single shot holds the light of the moths on the screen but does not fix it. The moths float away and the shot ends.

The day that I finished my painting I watched a small ornamental fish dart in a corkscrew pattern around the stem of a plant in my home aquarium. I made my final actions on the canvas with the singular event in my mind. I made movements to equate my hand to the body of the fish. The resulting marks preserve the fish’s path as it moved in space and in my memory. They also preserve my movements on the canvas.
Figure 1
Tiger Barb. 2004
Oil on canvas,
72” x 72”.
CHAPTER 3

PAINTING AND TAXIDERMY

One of my first painting teachers, Nancy Mitchnick had my class paint still-life's comprised of foods and animal specimens borrowed from the Harvard Peabody museum of natural history. I painted an arrangement of a red snapper and a mounted crow (figure 2). Between sessions I covered the red snapper in plastic wrap and put it in the freezer. The crow I left on the pedestal.

As an introductory painting student I believed I was simply making a painting of two animals. Later research into the process of taxidermy taught me that a mounted crow was not wholly a crow but a preserved skin stretched over a wire and wood form. The mount was the husk of a crow, positioned to play an actual crow. Thus I painted a representation of an animal rather than an actual animal, and the object I made was a representation of a representation.

As of late I’ve come to understand my undergraduate still life painting as a composite of remains. The mounted crow was comprised of the enduring aspects of an organism’s life processes: the assimilation of nutrients, the propagation of its tissues, and the expression of its hormones. The skinning and fleshing of the
hide entailed a dismantling of the animal but the taxidermy process reassembled and reorganized the animal’s parts. The work of the taxidermist also represents the remains of his activities and thus, the finished crow is not only a selectively reshuffled version of its former self but a work of collaboration between a bird and a man.

The painting of the crow also brought about a doubling of artifacts. The object of the mounted crow usurped the parts of the real crow and thus supplanted it in the real world. The painting however made no effect on the mount that by its nature has presumably remained unchanged. Like a casting or clone, the painting of the crow is made redundant by the existence of the original.

After the painting was completed, I tossed the second object of the still life, the fish into an empty garbage bin where it hit the bottom with a loud bang. Where the painting brought about a doubling of artifacts for the crow, it became the only evidence of the fish’s existence. In this way, the passage of time gives significance to that which does not change in conventional ways.

As an undergraduate I once visited the non-display collection of the Harvard Peabody museum of natural history. I accompanied a friend who was conducting research into the global distribution of magpie (Pica pica). She opened a flat wooden drawer from a wall of drawers to reveal a hundred neatly preserved specimens. The birds lay neatly on their backs. Their wings had been folded to their sides and their legs had been set to extend towards the posterior. Cotton balls protruded from behind their open eyelids. Tied to one of its claws, each bird had a yellowed tag that noted the locale and date of the bird’s collection. Isles of
drawers that resembled an enormous library card catalogue held thousands of birds with tags. One tag said Siam, 1890 and the name of a river basin.

My friend sat at her desk and carefully removed scales from specimens’ legs for genetic analysis. Standing over her stood the articulated skeleton of a moa bird, an extinct six-foot tall flightless bird from New Zealand. I slid my finger across the grooves of its brown vertebrae and looked into its vacant eye sockets and wondered if someday DNA would be taken from this specimen too.

When I visited the museum two years later I came across a new display about the practices of 19th Century naturalists. A display placard beside a stuffed New England mountain lion described how genetic information from the nineteenth century specimen aided researchers in the contemporary study and conservation of the Florida panther.

Museums are a repository for the remains of life forms, to be studied and kept from the instability of the outside world. They are the catacombs of powerful secrets to be unlocked by able future generations. As cloning technologies improve, flesh may return to that which we know only as skeletons and dusty hides.

Francis Bacon often depicted flesh as if it were returning to or departing from a skeleton. In an interview between him and David Sylvester, the two men segue naturally from the topic of portraiture to death. A portion is transcribed as follows:

Sylvester: You’ve painted a great many self-portraits lately, haven’t you,
many more than before?

Bacon: I’ve done a lot of self-portraits, really because people have been dying around me like flies and I’ve had nobody else left to paint but myself...

Sylvester: You don’t like to go on painting portraits of people after they’re dead?

Bacon: It seems a bit mad painting portraits of dead people. After all, you know that, if they haven’t been — what’s it called? --- incinerated, they’ve rotted away; their flesh has rotted away and once they’re dead you have your memory of them but you haven’t got them. I’m against incineration, because I think that in thousands of years’ time, if the world exists at all, it will be a bore if there’s nobody to dig up.¹

By his own account, Bacon utilized photographs and his memory to make portraits of living subjects.² Here, he suggests however that making a painting of the deceased from memory creates a conflict with the actual state of their flesh and the reality of their absence. For Bacon, who was coincidentally a staunch atheist, painting dead people seemed only as reasonable as resurrecting them.

Art and technology professor Midori Kitagawa and I once had a conversation about the impulse to paint. We discussed an article in the New York Times about an urban trend in hoarding. The article described several accounts of men and women in New York City pathologically compelled to save objects. One elderly man who collected and repaired discarded small appliances and toys could no longer walk through his kitchen because of the several hundred toasters and blenders that cluttered the way.

² Sylvester, 38.
"He picked up things that he thought people were throwing away and still had life," said Ms. Golick, a founder of the hoarding task force, which will hold its second conference at Cardozo on Jan 21. "He was very upset that this was a disposable society and that people were very quick to disregard things of value."³

Kitagawa told me that when she was a very young girl, within a short period of time, her best friend and her grandfather passed away. She explained that their deaths spurred her to make paintings. I thought that she took up painting to express her grief, but to my surprise she said, "I made paintings because I was afraid I was going to die and leave nothing behind."⁴

The process of painting makes enduring objects by transforming activity into artifact. Gestures leave marks on the surface and layers accumulate upon each other but never vanish.

Painting is also a process of preserving subjects. As a beginning painter, I witnessed the last days of a fish’s existence and preserved its image. As a student of taxidermy, I learned to extract and prepare parts of an animal to signify the entire animal. The subject of painting is that which the painting extracts from the world and fixes. The subject is what one tries to save, tries to prolong, tries to encapsulate.

When a painting is complete however, it no longer refers to the real world and is real only as a painting. To exist, it is severed from the processes of life and in

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⁴ Midori Kitagawa, formerly Associate Professor, Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design at Ohio State University and currently Associate Professor, University of Texas at Dallas School of Arts and Humanities, Personal Interview, 20 Jan. 2004.
this way it is like the stuffed bird that is no longer a bird. It is the product of life and is a propped up death. It plays at being alive but is the opposite.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells the story of a man whose portrait changes and ages instead of him. The living painting is only as feasible as the immortal human. The painter perhaps strives for both.

*Figure 2.* Still life with fish. 1999
*Oil on canvas,*
*20” x 26”.
Collection Lisa Haber-Thomson*
CHAPTER 4

RED FISH

When I was a boy, I walked down a creek bed with three or four other children. In a deep pool, I saw an orange red fish with black stripes.

The fish looked at me and then darted under waterlogged leaves. It was as long as my spread hand from pinky to thumb, high bodied, boldly marked, and out of place in a mid-Ohio creek bed. None of the other children seemed to have seen it.

Redfish is smooth like a lacquered wooden tabletop. Long edges made by the path of the squeegee catch light and run parallel over the dark canvas. They run together as if directed by a current.

Under the lines a red figure hovers left of the middle and halfway between the top and the bottom of the canvas. Cadmium red emerges from the black and then dissolves into murky mixed hues. In the center of the canvas a flare of white trails off into empty blackness (figure 4). The red marks suggest a cohesive entity
but are difficult to comprehend. They form a figure that is disjointed and obscured (figure 5).

For two quarters I kept a pond in my studio. It involved black plastic, a Rubbermaid tub, 150 gallons of water, an air pump, a filter, and a school of eight Giant Danios (*Danio malabaricus*). The fish wove patterns in the black space as they chased one another and broke the surface to snatch alighting flies.

When I began this painting I intended to make a schematic image that described the movements of a school of fish. I first made a series of black marks across the prepared surface with a small no. 2 brush extended by a six-foot rod. I intended these marks to be the trails of fish. Over these black lines, I applied a beige varnish to give the marks a ground. The canvas felt empty and I applied burnt umber in broad continuous loops with a house painter’s brush extended by a four-foot mop-handle. I’d made this brush two months before to mimic a fish’s caudal fin.

After several days I blackened the canvas. I used a screen printers squeegee and mixed large amounts of oil with burnt umber, ultramarine, and cerulean hue pigment in a ten-gallon glass aquarium. The oil created an even diffuse reflection, in which I could see my hand and face.

The first version of the canvas consisted of the dark and reflective ground and two distinct white blurs in the upper middle of the picture plane. The white marks mixed into the black ground and streaked as the result of the motions of their application. The application of the medium created grooves along the edges of the squeegee’s path and the ridges caught light that broke the consistency of the
ground and drew attention to the picture’s surface. Other bumps and scratches did
the same. After additional experiments ruined the surface sheen, I reapplied the
glaze medium and introduced a cadmium hue that became the image of my red
fish.

Using the squeegee with viscous pigment I described the water that is the
medium of a fish. As a fish’s fins push against a current, I pushed against oil. I
learned that to paint as a fish, it is more important to create the medium of a fish
than tools that resembled its body.

The painting is more a pond than a picture. It embodies the water’s reflective
sheen, its ripples, and its perceived depth. I do not presume to understand the red
figure any more than I did as a child however the painting enables me to revisit it
and redress it.
Figure 3.
Oil on canvas,
72" x 72".
Figure 4.
Red Fish (detail #1). 2004.

Oil on canvas,

72” x 72”.
Figure 5.
Oil on canvas,
72" x 72".
CHAPTER 5

THE BODY, WATER, AND MEDIUM

The summer of 2004 was an Olympic summer. I watched the women's diving competition in my studio. The divers controlled the path of their bodies in the air as if they were drawing a line on a tangible ground. They twisted and rotated and fell without resistance propelled by the force of gravity.

Diving is a significant visual motif of Leni Riefenstahl's film, *Olympia* that documents the 1930 Berlin Olympics. The film features extensive slow motion pictures of divers in air. And unlike contemporary diving coverage the film refrains from following divers' bodies to their splash. The frame stays trained upon their flight, extends it, replays it, and even shows it in reverse. Riefenstahl refuses the inevitable result of gravity in favor of an illusion of superhuman flight.

Jasper Johns' drawing, *the Diver* (1963), offers an alternative interpretation of diving. The picture is composed of charcoal, chalk, and paint on paper. The surface is more than seven feet tall and six feet wide. Two panels meet down the center of the frame. The prints of two feet and three hands appear on a ground

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bluish gray ground of charcoal. They appear small relative to the scale of the support. The footprints are together at the very top of the canvas. We assume they are those of Johns himself. Two handprints at the very bottom of the canvas are the end points of mirrored arcs drawn in chalk and charcoal. They connote movement – the motion of a diver’s arms as they come together before striking the water.

The body is transcribed in the drawing surface. Like da Vinci’s Vitruvian man, the drawing describes a human’s full range of motion. The borders of the picture represent the limits of the body and the included area represents the domain of free movement.

The body is the tool of drawing. Marks are made in charcoal with the palms of hands, the bottoms of feet, and the arcs of arms. The drawing is conversely the medium for the body, both the material upon which it impresses itself and the material in which it is suspended. Whereas Riefenstahl depicts diving as a mastery of the air, Johns’ describes it as the act of attaining submergence.

As a human being, I am not equipped to treat the air as medium but as a painter I can move across the picture plane with zero resistance. I turn somersaults, glide effortlessly, and move pigment with the muscles in my arms. The track I leave is the direct print of myself, a mark that leaves no room for illusion and bears only truths.
CHAPTER 6

NAUTILUS SHELL

I sat outside on our porch one day by myself and an eagle flew by, at the level of the porch canopy. The eagle had an enormous wingspan and I felt the air move from one flap of its wings.

My parents didn’t believe me and I had no proof of what I’d seen.

I could only tell them that I felt the wind from its wings and that the wings were wider than me.

The painting, Nautilus Shell is the measure of my finger to my elbow squared. Centered and distinct from a white and umber ground, a swath of pigment and oil extends upwards to the top of the frame and falls back behind itself. A ground of umber shows through thinner glaze near the center of the turn and the curve of its escape. The implied volume is reminiscent of a nautilus shell. The form levitates subtly before a like-colored ground.

At the outside edge of the curved shape, paint stands accumulated and dried in wrinkly skins. The wrinkles interweave in spontaneous stripes and braids. At the
edges of the curve they resemble froth of an impending wave. The wave is too heavy to complete its unfurling; it pauses and dries on the canvas.

I made the small paintings by moving medium on the surface of the picture and stopping at some point where I felt the arrangement had some coherence and unity. Unlike the body-sized canvases that involved multiple layers of paint, the small pieces involved only one layer of wet medium.

The making of *Nautilus Shell* was much like playing in the sand or splashing in water. The painting does not represent the building of an object; it represents an activity in which I partake. The final image is made in an act of freezing play.
Figure 6.
*Oil on canvas*,
20” x 20”. 
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: O TO BE A FISH

Paint bears my movement across the canvas. Each mark is a trail. Each edge of medium shows the swath of my hand. When the medium dries, the trails, the marks, and the evidence of my passing are fixed and I’ve preserved a form of myself. In this work, where I am my body, the impact of my body is the impact of myself. I am suspended in medium and I wonder if this is what it is like to be a fish.

I am trying to find a familiar place where work is a natural and logical extension of my being. The work is not the result of a conscious decision, deliberation or calculation. It is a biological process. The process involves the proportions of my body, like a shell or a house, or a bed. When successful, activities conducted in this manner assume inevitable conclusions, where I cannot help but make the work that I make and do the things that I do. Fish are one hundred percent, perfectly equipped to be fish.
Figure 7.
Oil on paper,
20” x 20”.
Figure 8.
Oil on paper,
20” x 20”. 
Figure 9.
Water Study #3. 2004
Oil on paper,
20" x 20".
Figure 10.
Snail. 2004
Oil on canvas,
21" x 21".
Figure 11.
Oil on linen,
20" x 20".
Figure 12.
Oil on canvas,
73” x 71”.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


