Re-Drawing History: 
the Artist as Author and Historian

Master's Thesis

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By

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Abstract

My thesis work explores narrative and the relationship between the artist, author, and historian. My approach includes the construction of historical narratives; the relationship of myth, memory and history; the visual arrangement of space in two-dimensional images to communicate an expression of time; visual legibility and cultural literacy; and the use of narrative in the construction of identity. This document is written in sections encompassing a narrative description of my work; an analysis of types of visual narrative structures; and modes of narrative production in my own work. There are also extended sections discussing my work included in the MFA show, On the Origins of Western Imperialism, its proposed companion piece, America, and an on-going project to create a deck of playing cards at the Logan Elm Press (LEP). Another section expounds upon the primary influences on my work, including the graphic, using examples of the work of artists Edward Gorey, Aubrey Beardsley, Francisco Goya, Raymond Pettibon, and Nancy Spero; Le Tableau through analysis of two works by Hieronymus Bosch and contemporary artist Karin Mamma Andersson; and Medieval Art, including paintings and drawings by Pisanello and Uccello. In addition to this are a discussion of the historical content of my work and its relationship to its subject; my primary intellectual influences regarding history, memory, and the archive; and an investigation into the construction of the Outsider Artist identity and my relationship to it.
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Vita

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Chapter 1

Narrative Description of Thesis Work

I have been exploring issues of narrative, text, myth and history through-out my time in the MFA program. My most recent work, *On the Origins of Western Imperialism* (and its incomplete companion piece), best synthesize an articulation of these interests. I will narrate an overview of my work during the course of the MFA program; how it reflects the development and expression of my interests; how and what I was learning; and how it led to my most recent work.

Prior to entering The Ohio State University's (OSU) MFA program, I had been working as a Children's Librarian at a Bronx Branch of the New York Public Library. It was a small branch with a very consistent user base. My patrons were more or less the same children everyday who I came to know well. As I would often draw at work they became interested in the things they saw me make. I initially felt frustrated by the difficulty in getting many of my young users to connect to books and reading, but I found that my drawings were an excellent tool for them to explore storytelling with. They readily analyzed and described the plot of my images- sometimes in outlandish narrative! As this became a common practice and something that we all looked forward to, I began to draw even wilder images for them to narrate as well as made images in collaboration per their narrative specifications. For some, it became a kind of competition to see who could devise the most outlandish story.
As this practice continued, some of the children began drawing their own images and replicating this game of narration and illustration with one another. These stories and images defy categorization, but many were pictorial and absurd, often involving the Bronx, our library, zoo animals and plants, and cartoon characters. After I left the library, I continued to create pictorial images of strange, abject, or absurd scenes that were odd and open to interpretation. It was pointed out to me in the first few days of the program, that in all of these images, time was stilled mid-action at the apex of events. My best intuition as to why this was is because that is largely how book illustrations are constructed. Perhaps after being surrounded by pictures books, I had internalized their structural conventions.

As I began the program with this same focus of creating images of frozen scenes, the content of these scenes quickly became narrative depictions based in obscure histories. All of these works were monoscenic, meaning that one single moment of a story was portrayed (usually at the apex of the story) and this one moment represented the rest of the narrative. Examples of works I made in this way are [Rabbit Breeder], [Tennessee Fire Department], [Dancing Plague], and [Sarkozy expels the Roma]. In these, I used imagery exclusively without character dialogue-bubbles. My intention was to convey a specific narrative scene, but because I was working with obscure historical or news-related narratives, most viewers were not equipped with the knowledge to decode the image and the content remained inaccessible for many viewers.

Work that I began looking at during this time include Kiki Smith's illustrations of fairy tales and mid and late medieval images, such as those by Bosch and Botticelli. Kiki
Smith's works allude to cultural stories that are easily communicated and understood. In images like *Born* (depicting Little Red Riding-hood) and *Pool of Tears* (Alice in Wonderland) she is working in serials of monoscenic narratives. Within individual images, it is easy to discern the story and moment that she is representing. In this way, they offer a narrow and specific interpretation. Medieval imagery is often concerned with summarizing a biblical tale within a single frame, such as images of the Nativity, Annunciation, or the Crucifixion. Images like these offer cues into the stories and scenes they are depicting and rely on the viewer's knowledge of the tale in order to convey their meaning. They are closed to interpretation, meaning that they represent specific scenes and characters.

In looking back at the images I made early in the program, I notice a sensation that time is suspended. All of the characters are in half-gesture and action is unfolding. Laura Lisbon's seminar on *Le Tableau* provided a new framework for understanding images of this kind. One quality of pictorial tableaux is that they are frozen moments in which time is suspended. These scenes are not necessarily meant to be read as part of a larger story because each stilled moment contains the summit of its narrative meaning. Similarly, Tableau Vivants have a history of re-presenting successive scenes from well-known literature or history, in which actors create a series of still frames from the narrative. The whole of meaning is reduced into a frozen moment. My work was similar to this concept of Tableaux Vivants in that I was composing a single scene, but dissimilar in that I was working with obscure narratives that required more context for my specific meaning to be communicated. It was not possible for me to convey a sequence of time or
show the unfolding of action in these early monoscenic drawings.

Subsequently, I read Will Eisner and Scott McCloud's books on comics and sequential art. I began thinking about frames and how to control the unfolding of time and allowed myself to use text to propel narrative action. In works like [Comstock], [Helen Keller], and [Bird], I started playing with both the balance of text to image as well as the pacing or rhythm of time. I found it difficult to balance text and image so that they work together to propel a story. [Bird] is a series of eight panels in which the same image is reproduced but the text and background color change to propel the story. In [Helen Keller], the images serve more as a decoration to which the words are affixed. The images are useful to the narrative only in that they support it. [Comstock] is the most successful of these works because it articulates a specific narrative through both images and words and shows a sequence of time.

I tried to step back from prescribing specific meaning by using words and text more abstractly. I began collecting images of recognizable figures (people with stories and meaning attached to their image) in order to use them as a vocabulary. There are generally agreed upon understandings of what George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Osama Bin Ladin represent in our culture and their visages have become cultural symbols to which we respond. I began to play and manipulate these symbols by grafting them into my images and literally drawing them out. By re-contextualizing, reconfiguring, juxtaposing, and puppeting their image into my own scenes and dialogue, I could play with their cultural/historical/narrative meaning.

The idea of puppeting history (See Carolyn Steedman under Content section) led to
sewing dolls that represented historical figures, specifically individuals with activist histories. I created dolls of Noam Chomsky, Lucy Parsons, Judi Bari, Margaret Sanger, Malcom X, Abigail Adams, and Mata Hari. These specific figures were chosen as anti-heroes: historical figures with complicated lives and stances, representing values and ideals outside of the dominant paradigm. The dolls are stitched of cloth (muslin, felt, and cotton) and stuffed. Their faces are drawn with thread and some have yarn hair. Their bodies are elongated, disproportionate to the human form, and uniform, comprised of white upper bodies and black lower bodies. I was thinking of them as mimes or having interchangeable bodies or as being part of a set in which their only individuality is their head and superficial characteristics. I was thinking of their interchangeability or superficiality in relation to these individuals who, as historical figures, are reduced to superficial identities of what they symbolize historically or politically (as anti-war, anti-racist, pro-earth, pro-choice, pro-labor, et cetera). As individuals, their complexity and human individuality are lost. I thought of the doll as both commemoration and ludicrous portrayal, as well as a metaphor for historical manipulation. The way in which a doll is manipulated and made to move is similar to the way in which these figures are shaped and manipulated by history (See Steedman under Content Section).

With the series of works [Assassins], [Animal Stamps], and [Medieval America] I tried to step back from narration. I began identifying structures, motifs, and icons to assemble a vocabulary with which to shuffle, arrange, and play. In [Assassins], I began to use text to create blocks of shape. The letters form sentences with meaning, for example from the Catholic Office of the Dead, «Timor mortis conturbat me>>, but are repeated
so that their legibility is not emphasized as much as the shape they were occupying. The images are of presidents and their assassins, which are shapes made through phototransfer, another kind of stamping technique. My thoughts were of creating a kind of bestiary, creatures made of grossly combined elements. I was inspired to use these icons by the Stephen Sondheim musical *Assassins*, in which he complicates the relationship between history's heroes and villains. Sondheim humanizes the assassins by exploring their motivations and desires. They and the presidents are shown to be similar, as both act out of a belief that they are doing what is right for the country. He complicates the common interpretation offered by history of assassins as “bad people” who threaten America's greatness and represent antithesis to American values. The way in which Sondheim revises history to reconsider another interpretation of events is an impulse I feel in my own work.

[Animal Stamps] is another series of work in which I tried to step back from creating a closed narrative with a specific meaning. It is comprised of a series of small colored pieces of paper, in which each piece of paper operates as a distinct frame. The images are of various animals that I drew and made into polymer stamps. These stamps enabled me to establish a set of glyphs in a controlled vocabulary. I had a limited series of stamps to recombine and rearrange. I also began to move away from word-based content to use rubber alphabet glyphs for their shapes. I reduced the letters to shapes and began stamping them in ways and patterns to convey a sense of emotional/intuitive character and narrative. For instance, the 'V' works very well as a flying bug or bird, whereas an 'X' works well to indicate where something has fallen or been emptied. By creating a set
of stamps, I found that I was able to simply play and focus on the shapes and spatial relationships that I was creating. I could let go of my adherence to specific intellectual narratives to explore the narratives held in shapes, pattern, and my materials.

In [Medieval America, various works], I continued to try to relinquish control of narrative content by identifying and using icons, structures, and motifs found in medieval art and American iconography. I began by culling disparate sources to work directly from electronic reproductions of primary materials. For example, I used the online archive of Matthew Brady in the Library of Congress to recreate scenes and characters from the Civil War. I used the Smithsonian and Beineke online collections to recreate American iconography taken from currency, crests, and pop culture, as well as antique firearms.

Concurrent to my studio practice, I took Karl Whittington's Medieval Art and Architecture course in Winter 2011. Many of my works at this time were in direct response to topics discussed in class such as the placement of saint iconography throughout the nave and apse in Christian churches; enculturated visual vocabularies including the orants pose, hand of god, and hell mouth. I appropriated from these sources to redraw, combine, and layer recognizable symbols with specific meaning from distinct lexicons (or “vocabularies”). I did not want to establish a specific narrative argument or sequence of time; rather I sought to play with the combination of these different grammars and symbols. I also continued to use phototransfers in combination with pen, ink, or graphite to complete the images. This combination of techniques results in combination of quotation and manipulation that blends together ambiguously. It also lends to a sense of the image emerging from and receding into space, like the surface of a sea; everything hangs to-
gether, barely in some places and more tightly in others so that it is not always clear what is drawn and what is reproduced.

I also began thinking about my works as a serial or set. Several of these images were made using structures directly taken from biblical images (the Madonna Enthroned, the Magi, the Three Marys, The Annunciation) but with icons inserted from American History (such as George Washington, Elvis, Eleanor Roosevelt). I was not intending to create a specific story but was striving to re-present a story and complicate it. I think that the Christian Narrative and American Narrative are twin tales of providence and manifest destiny. I explored their relationship through the subversion and arrangement of each culture's visual images and structures. By moving and arranging these elements I could learn about their relationship through visual composition and logic, which is distinctly different from establishing linear verbal logic.

At the same time, I was also continuing to create hinged (jointed) dolls on various papers. I stopped working with my stuffed dolls after several video attempts, but the metaphor of historical puppets felt extremely appropriate for the way in which I conceptualize history (see section on content). I liked the uniformity of the cloth dolls (black legs, white upper bodies, distinct faces) and wanted to recreate this in the paper-dolls. I sought the standardization of a set established through identical bodies and interchangeable body parts. I created several dolls then began to manipulate their bodily structure further. George Washington was given the head of Jesus in his hands and Thomas Jefferson held Charlemagne's. I made conjoined twins of George Bush and Osama Bin Laden. I also began reconstructing the body using the same parts only out of their conventional ar-
rangement. I was interested that they had the same totality of parts, but some felt more whole in that they were arranged differently. These dolls were just like play things. They were kind of tacked onto the studio wall and scattered around my desk, but they allowed me to move and play with them to see the different shapes made by parts of the human form in other configurations.

In doing research for [Medieval America, various works], the type of visual research I assumed generated more work. I like the process of assimilation; of finding something specific and combining it with other elements; of redrawing in my own hand. This realization was made through Suzanne Silver's seminar on Art and Spirituality in which I created a set of secular holy cards. This concept furthered my play in the manipulation of prescribed structures by subverting their expected content. Inversions reveal our expectations. By creating a series of holy cards with secular saints, I am outlining a cosmology and redefining the sacred. To create these cards I asked myself: if I were to create my own cosmology, who would be the important figures? In considering my identity and cultural context, it made sense to look toward progressive activist women with a connection to Ohio who lived sometime in the past century or so. I used techniques of phototransfer and ink drawing and created them in a set of five, looking to Victorian holy card design in order to adhere to historical motifs and spatial organization.

As I researched tools of divination, including Tarot cards, for a presentation in Silver's seminar, I became interested in the history of Tarot and playing cards in general. It is asserted that games reproduce cultural values and meta-narratives on a small scale through ritual and play [See Barthes in Toys]. Games reinforce hierarchies, mores and
manners, and cultural beliefs. An example of this via playing cards is that they commonly utilize a deck with a royal house, which symbolizes the highest cards in the deck. This mirrors the existing social order in which royalty sits atop hierarchy. This symbolic social order was inverted during the French Revolution, in which games were played “aces up,” a symbol of the people's power to which the revolution aspired.

In researching the historical use and design of playing cards, I discovered the online playing card collection of the Beineke Library at Yale. I became fascinated by the variation in composition, motif, and decoration. The endless iterations of theme and design in these artifacts reveal something about the way their makers and users thought. Each individual expression is a unique take on a standard design and reflects the cultural values, interests, or current events. Playing cards are functional items, but their stylistic expressions have changed over time. Their images (along with their modes of use) both reflect and reinforce social mores and manners. The subjects chosen for commemoration and decorative-use reveal something of the culture that created them.

At this time, I began conceptualizing my thesis work as an exploration in historical narratives and the role of an artist-as-author-as-historian. I am interested in the way that history is written and culturally transmitted. Through material reiteration, historical narratives are mythologized and serve to both inform and reinforce belief structures. History is not a concrete thing, but a subjective and malleable interpretation of select events and characters, which are alternately suppressed and exaggerated. Time can become both folded and layered, simultaneous and linear. The playing card deck seemed to be an ideal form in which to play with these ideas.
My deck of cards began as a loose interpretation of Plato's *Republic*, in which the traditional Kings, Queens, Jacks, and Aces were replaced respectively by Philosopher Kings (Gramsci, Marx, Habermas, and Adorno), Activists as the Military Class (Judi Bari, Malcolm X, Helen Keller, and Lucy Parsons), and Artisans as the Mercantile Order (Alice Waters, William Morris, Gutenberg, Michelangelo) and Plato's Ideal Forms (Beauty, Wisdom, Truth, and Justice). Eventually, as I continued my research into the history of playing cards, I began to take note of motifs and themes that reoccurred over time and across cultures, such as personifications of the seasons or elements, or commemorative decks celebrating historic figures or events (such as the Wonders of the World). I began to assimilate these themes into my own deck, envisioning the whole as chronicles in the history of playing cards. Thus far, my deck also contains the seasons, elements, celestial bodies, planets, animal kingdoms, tools, wonders of the world, and traditional fine arts, and Jokers (Bowers or Euchres). My deck is parts personal cosmology, historical research, and interpretation of Plato's *The Republic*.

Each card in this project has been produced through visual research to both synthesize and reinterpret historical forms and images. The deck consists of hand-drawn images, each corresponding to a particular card and suite. I have made polymer plates of these drawings to be printed on letterpress. Each edition will also include a handmade box made with a die-cut and a printed index. Through making this project, I will have learned how to use the tools at Logan Elm Press (LEP): how to made polymer plates through the creation of digital files, negative creation, and plate exposure; how to use a die-cut and fold boxes; how to set up a press, including inking and registration. Beyond
technical learning, this project allowed me to think through ideas of authorship.

The act of authorship is one of inclusion and exclusion. Collecting is an act of authorship. By working with a set or collection, I was able to see this tension more clearly. Narratives emerge from the arrangement of pattern and variance in a collection. Historians and curators generate meaning through the selection of events or objects. By gathering them and placing them near to one another, relationships are generated that produce meaning. This is an activity shared by historians and curators as well as artists and writers. They decide what belongs; they select and suppress [things], rearrange and restate them to create new meaning. This is an act of imposition, be it the imposition of narrative, order and design, logical sequence, or relationships. By collecting icons and ideas to include in my card deck, I realized that I was creating a narrative or cosmology. In thinking about narrative as a series of sequential moments, I realized that narrative too is a collection. It was the act of privileging and suppressing different moments in order to generate a specific meaning from a particular set (collection) of actions, events, and people.

Importantly, this project allowed me to continue to complicate ideas of inversion and subversion which were important to beginning my next work, On the Origins of Western Imperialism. This is a hand-drawn book combining text and images, which explores the construction of historical narratives via the story of Portuguese exploration. My story posits that western empire is not natural or inevitable, rather that colonialism developed from a set of arbitrary choices that were later codified, mythologized, and perpetuated by subsequent powers. My project presents a critical history by making explicit the percep-
tions and assumptions which guided the Portuguese as they built the first of successive western empires via the exploitation of Africa. Though the Portuguese had no model to follow, nor designs or even concept of empire, their choices were not naive or benign. Their actions were arbitrary and unconscious, yet informed by a deep narcissism, sense of entitlement, and exploitative impulse that has been continued by subsequent Western empires.

In telling this story, I am exploring the idea that history is interpretive, not objective fact. History is the product of an author imposing a narrative upon the Past in order to derive meaning from events. History is typically produced by the victor; it is written whereas myth is spoken. By codifying narratives in book form, histories became static and authoritative. As subsequent historians write new narratives, they cite previous texts, lending legitimacy and authenticity to their claims. The conglomeration of concurring cultural narratives mythologizes our understanding of the Past to create a cohesive narrative that describes the present as the inevitable culmination of earlier events.

*On the Origins of Western Imperialism* plays with the construction of historical narrative through inversion. The content of the narrative was established through memory and conversation with my partner instead of book-based research, revisiting techniques of oral pre-histories (myth). While the veracity of the narrative goes unchecked, I reconstructed the material reality of the period using art historical and visual resources. I cite “image-facts,” which depict characters and objects in the tale. As historians use citation to anchor their narratives in other accounts, I adhere and connect to other visual sources. This practice establishes the cross-references that mark the agreement that underlies all
facts.

To find images, I used a deductive method of visual research (a search-and-retrieval method), in which I sought visual reproductions of specific objects, character, and places to use as reference for my depictions. The tale was devised first, and then images were puppeted to serve it. My research was conducted using books and electronic resources exclusively and only to recreate a visual culture, never to fact-check the intellectual narrative. I tried to be as accurate (geographically, chronologically, culturally) as possible, but at times used images that were only chronologically and loosely culturally accurate. For instance, I used many images from Uccello, Bosch, and Pisanello, who were not Portuguese, but who offered a similar chronological period. My visual research included costumes and hats, portraits, ships, and weapons, but intellectual research was intentionally limited to archaic slang and insults.

On the Origins of Western Imperialism is story is told in three chapters. The first tells of King Joao and his invasion of Ceuta, in which his efforts to seize economic control were foiled. The second tells of Henry the Navigator sending Vasco de Gama along the African coast in pursuit of “glory and riches” and in so doing misunderstands and mistakenly attacks the native coastal dwellers. The third chapter tells of Henry the Navigator sending Bartolomeu Dias in pursuit of a mythical medieval white king of Africa, Prester John. His impetus is the naive belief that he will be able to forge an alliance with Prester John, born of their shared identity as white Christians, and wage a two-front war in Africa. Throughout these chapters, the narcissism and ego-centrism of the Portuguese is unbridled. Their motivations are self-serving and choices are made through misunderstand-
In order to complicate the relationship between history and myth (what I see as being central to this work), it was important to me that this piece be made in book form. Story-telling began as an oral form of cultural memory-keeping. As writing technology was developed stories began to be written down and codified in book form. The distinction between myth and history is that myths are spoken and histories are written (See Steedman under Content section). Their content could be virtually identical, but the terms carry different connotations and goals. Myth is typically ascribed characteristics such as being memory-based, subjective, and fantastic, whereas history is ascribed qualities like logical, sequential, and factual. Myth is easier to identify as being subjective, because it is told by an individual teller, who is made visible via their unique voice. Histories are equally subjective, as they are told by individual authors with biases rooted in their cultural/gender/class/racial identity, but the voice of the unique author is subsumed by the uniformity of printed type-face. A function of type is that it renders the author invisible; they are visually indistinguishable from other authors. As the author is assimilated by the machination of type, all history-tellers assume the same visual voice. The simultaneity of the loss of the individual voice and the sheer mass of printed history garners the appearance of objectivity. The guise of objectivity contrasts the oral story-teller, who is identifiable through their unique vocal characteristics, serving as a reminder of their context as a biased and subjective knower.

This is a big idea. But for this reason, it was important to me that my authorship was visible in every aspect of the work. The “type” that represents the narrative (objective)
voice was hand-stamped in a way that there is no uniformity or regularity established in spacing or alignment. Similarly, the character dialogue is hand-written. In written histories, dialogue is often presented as a series of quotations. These quotations are taken out of context and rearranged by authors in order to further their argument. I have simply made my dialogue as explicitly my own as possible. I am making my characters say whatever I need them to say, but I am not attempting to disguise this fact visually or otherwise. Further, though I was working from visual sources, all of these visual quotes are assimilated and rendered via my hand. There is no collage in this work, no cutting or pasting. Everything is hand reproduced and filtered by me. In this way, all of the content, be they quotations or not, assume a uniformity that is produced by my hand rather than a machine.

The book is an important cultural symbol that represents the transmission of knowledge. It can be read infinitely and doesn't change, it is trans-generational, it represents objectivity, and it is a physical thing, an object. In the past, published works were treated as fact because they have been vetted by publishers and recognized as authentic or truthful. It was important to me that this story be told through a book to assume the same status and also to function as a book in that it is read linearly from left to right, in a path our culture considers forward in time.

I intend for this work to eventually have a companion book, *America*, in which I will use an inverted model of visual research. I would like to visit historic sites and museums in order to immerse myself in visual and material culture. I will draw (literally) from the collections and begin to build my story out of the compiled evidence. By using this in-
ductive model of research, I will produce visual “data” to then build a narrative with. This companion volume will look to American Expansion and manifest destiny via episodes of Lewis and Clark, the Mexican-American War, and the Trail of Tears. By comparing these American narratives of exploration and exploitation with those of the Portuguese, I hope to examine the myths surrounding western empire. I believe that stories of early European colonialism are later used and incorporated into ideologies of American empire. The codification and encasement of historical narratives are used to justify and express the underlying cultural myth that empire is an inevitable outcome of western destiny.

The structure and display of *On the Origins of Western Imperialism* and *America* are designed to demonstrate this relationship. Their arrangement will be that of a Medieval typology, in which events in the earlier story prefigure events in the latter. When displayed horizontally, with one placed above the other, their physical placement and relationship to one another enhance their meaning through cross-reading. This is borrowed from the structure of medieval Bible Moralisees, in which events from the Old and New Testament are paired together in two vertical columns. Scenes from the Old Testament appear in chronological order top-down and are paired with scenes from the New Testament which appear in chronological order bottom-up. Each horizontal pair of images are intentional and reveal new meaning through their coupling. As events in the Old Testament prefigure those of the New Testament, events in my story do the same. I use events in early Portuguese colonialism to prefigure those in later American empire. By parallelizing these as twin stories, I will explore the historical logic that is used to justify western
empire.

The cultural myth of empire is a tale told about the inevitability of western destiny and dominance, which is rooted in an identity of exceptionalism and practices of exploitation. While the Portuguese and American explorers had very different ideologies and self-justifications for their actions, what unifies them is the way history is used to look back to narrativize them. This work allowed me to explore the relationship between myth and history, which I now view as central to my MFA thesis. I was able to explore the construction of historical narrative through the subversion of the actual myth of the Imperialism (by making it explicit) and by inverting the modes in which historical narratives are produced. I have learned that I am not as interested in telling stories as I am in representing them and in complicating the idea of history and its production.
Chapter 2

Types of Narrative Structures

_On the Origins_ also represents an attempt to work within a continual narrative. This means that throughout each chapter of the book, time is unsegmented. There are no frames or marks to delineate a new moment in time. Characters repeat as time unfolds. Models of narrative structures have been a central focus in my thesis work. While I was a Teaching Associate for Laura Lisbon's intermediate drawing course, I began to research narrative structures in preparation to teach a unit on narrative art. I discovered that narrative art is often categorized by the way in which time is organized. This was a very significant revelation in my work. The most clearly delineated categories of narrative art are monoscopic, polyscenic, and continuous structures [See Franz Wickhoff]. In addition to these designations, there are several more ways of conceptualizing narrative structures, such as layered, sequential, and other permutations.

Monoscopic is a single scene, a window into a frame in which time is suspended. Polyscenic is also one scene, but its scope is increased to include the unfolding of multiple actions and narratives. Examples of polyscenic narratives include much of Hieronymus Bosch's work, including the _Garden of Earthly Delights_. To reiterate, continuous narratives are those in which time unfolds and multiple points in the action are shown. Time, however, is unsegmented by frames and characters repeat linearly throughout the
piece. Examples of art historical works structured in this fashion are *Trajan’s Column* and *The Bayeaux Tapestry*. Other categories include layered narratives, such as those images in which time is compressed and layered onto the same “frame.” Characters are depicted in multiple phases of action but within the same setting. It can be very confusing for the viewer to navigate the ordering of time unless they are familiar with the story. The most encountered example of this type of work is Massachio’s *Tribute Money*. The last type of narrative structure is sequential. This includes comics, cartoons, films, and narrative works in which time is segmented by frames. Each frame is monoscenic and narrative meaning is generated by arranging the frames sequentially and reading across as a whole.

As mentioned previously, all of my early work was monoscenic, meaning that it showed one specific moment in time-space and insinuates action before and after it. I then began working sequentially in frames. I tried to interrupt these narrative structures through the creation of sets [Holy Cards], [Playing Cards], [Dolls], in which there was no specific nor time-based narrative to derive. *On the Origins* includes layered narrative in parts, such as in chapter two when <<The Portuguese Capitulate>>. I use hinged doll parts layered in various papers to indicate movement and the layering of moments into one scene. Notably, I also used this concept of layered time in a project I assigned my Beginning Drawing students. We visited OSU’s Insectary and drew specimens there. In addition to mapping space we explored the concept of mapping time. Living specimens will move as they are drawn, but to compensate for this, my students continued to draw the specimens in their new formations. As the bugs moved over the course of several
hours, their movement is mapped and layered onto the same page which serves as a record of time. It has been an extremely valuable avenue for me to learn with my students and to explore concepts simultaneously in my studio and in my class.
Chapter 3

Section on Modes of Narrative Production

In addition to narrative structures, my other major avenue of exploration has been modes of narrative production. I have identified seven impulses in my own work. They are: to tell, to compile, to put together, to allegorize, to revise, to re-mythologize, and to record. Of course, these are only general categories with unclear boundaries and limitless permutations.

To tell is a function of storytelling. It is to impose a linear narrative onto events which are strung together in a chronological sequence, whose selection and relationship produce a specific meaning. Works include [Comstock Laws], [On the Origins], [Bird].

To compile is the selection and compilation of things, in which elements of each thing are alternately suppressed and revealed in order to draw similarities and comparisons between the whole set. The collection is comprised of pattern and variance. Bias emerges through the act of selection (inclusion/exclusion) and the arrangement of these collected materials to assert a relationship among objects and to compose an overall narrative (sum of components). Criteria are developed to determine what belongs or does not. My deck of cards represents an attempt to collect structures and themes from the history of playing cards. My criterion was that objects had to be previously identified and recognized as playing cards by the Beineke Library collection of playing cards. Though I am unsure
of the Beirneke's collection policy, I assume that their identification is through a combination of phenotypical appearances and qualities (hand-held size, images on face of card, numbers and suits, and patterns in the type of numbers and suits to appear) and intended or actual use (as a source of amusement, game-playing). My set of choices assumed these materials were of uniform use (games) and functional qualities (suits, numbers, face cards). However, I became interested in the stylistic choices and objects of representation depicted by these functional objects and in the limits of what could and could not be altered in playing cards. For example, horizontal instead of vertical arrangement is unusual but possible, whereas card suit/number identifiers on the face and verso of the card do not occur as the result would be unplayable. I became more attuned to the thematic patterns and modes of representation that occur in cards over time and region (most specifically Europe). For example, it seems that many card decks include royal suites. Thematic decks are also common, including: cartomancy, seasons or elements, planets, locations (ie: touristic), and historic (persona or battle) commemorations. I was interested in exploring the thematic variations and in cataloging them by re-presenting them. My decisions regarding inclusion/exclusion were made via empirical assessments of styles and motifs; I wanted to include types that were both typical and atypical. I did this through mass processing i.e.- by looking at numerous decks of cards through the online collection to subjectively discern between repetitive and isolated occurrence in motif and structure. Inclusion thereafter was based simply on taste and personal aesthetic value. Other works related to the compilation or collection impulse include [Holy Cards], [Playing Cards], and [Dolls].
To put together is a function of juxtaposition or combining unlike elements in order to extrapolate meaning. The elements put together are not necessarily similar, nor dissimilar, but are distinct from one another and selected for their ability to produce meaning in their combined staging. My secular holy cards sought to create a set of cards representing activist women from Ohio. By using the holy card format, I sought to re-envision the way these women are perceived, as well as the way we conceptualize the sacred. I brought them together to highlight their similarities through the collection (their similarities being their connection to Ohio, Female-bodied, and dedication to activist causes). By retelling their stories in a sacred context, as part of a set, I sought to generate new meaning. Other words rooted in the put-together impulse are [Holy Cards], [Playing Cards], [Medieval America], and [On the Origins and America].

To allegorize is to tell a story through symbols. The symbols stand in for what is being represented and in this way produce multiple layers and meanings. Works in this manner include [Sarkozy Expels the Roma], [Animal Stamps].

To revise or to re-mythologize is to reinterpret a previous narrative in order to rectify, reinforce, or reveal something new in either the narrative's meaning or in how the narrative was previously told. History is a record of knowledge about the Past that has been written by largely by white, abled, wealthy, European or Anglo males, and often tells stories about people unlike themselves (female, people of color, different abilities, children, non-European, etc.). This is an inherent imbalance and bias that has been increasingly acknowledged and addressed through the development of critical histories. I am committed to the experiences of marginalized peoples and organizations, whose beliefs and in-
terpretation of the world around them are different from the dominant paradigm. Works demonstrating this impulse include [Comstock Laws], [Helen Keller], [David Barton], [Bible Series], and [Jefferson and George].

To record is to document and can be related to commemoration. Recording is not a neutral act, rather it is an act of authorship and bias enacted via selection and framing. Some of the earliest work I made in the MFA program I thought of as re-presenting obscure historical events from tertiary sources in monoscenic panels. For example, [Dancing Plague] is a reconstruction based on historical images and written documents describing events of this nature in Germany at the time. Works made in an impulse to record or commemorate include [Tennessee Fire Department], [Dancing Plague], [Rabbit Breeders].
Chapter 4
Narrative Description of Primary Influences

The Graphic

The relationship of my work to the graphic has been primarily affected by Ed Gorey, Aubrey Beardsley, and the etchings of Goya. All three of these artists exhibit prominent use of a frame (inserted onto the page) and monoscenic narrative structures focusing on human events with fantastic elements or heavily stylized elements inserted at times. The use of line is emphasized in their work to create areas of shape, mass, and texture, and they do not exhibit strong reliance on tone, washes, or color. Furthermore, all three of these artists work in a context of mass-production, in which their works are readily available to people and able to be handheld or viewed in the home. While each of these artists expresses different impulses, each is working in a narrative tradition. They are communicating human experience through image.

Gorey's drawings have the appearance of etchings, particularly through his line work and hatching. He also uses areas of tone and patterns of texture to delineate spaces. Gorey works in both monoscenic images and also sequentially to tell book-based stories. It is rare for his work to include text within the image, typically they are accompanied by a caption that provides insight into the content. Text and image are separate; often illustrative, but at times in an equitable relationship in which both elements reinforce the oth-
er. His work is stylistically recognizable and uniformly formulaic, it is equal parts whimsy and gloom. His narrative content draws from disparate sources, such as Victorian culture and the ballet, and reveals a world that is both fantastic and absurd. The subjects and objects of his work are highly stylized and reductive. The shapes of his figures remind me of medieval bodies, in that they do not conform to realistic conventions and are elongated. I have read his book for years and when I look back to my work early in the program, I can see Gorey's influence very clearly in the way that I was composing my pages like small stages with demarcated areas of texture and tones.

Unlike Gorey's use of tone, Beardsley work consists of high contrast black and white. His images are primarily transmitted through books, either as illustrations, decorations, or advertisements. Beardsley worked as both an artist and an illustrator (for many texts, such as Oscar Wilde's Salome). His images are typically spatially flat and divided into levels of depth, which is communicated through scale. His work invokes a strong sense of design and motif. His lines are exacting and precise, their weight and thickness are used selectively to communicate volume and weight. Natural motifs are common, such as flora and vegetation, and the influence of Japanese patterning seems obvious. His use of patterning to fill spaces and incorporation of white areas has been instructive to me. I am less interested in the content of Beardsley's work or his figuration than I am in his use of line and areas of solid black and white to create shapes and pattern.

While Gorey and Beardsley utilize ink mediums, Goya reproduced his etchings via the printing press. Goya's images serve as a historical record and political commentary on his times. The emotional tenor is dark and unveils a kind of terror or anguish; he is re-
cording the lived social reality of his time. His etchings show strong use of line but generally contain more tone and depth than either Gorey or Beardsley's ink-based drawings. Goya's compositions were especially instructive to me: every part of the image is activated, each tone and shape is locked into the surface of the image; every part interrelates. Often, I have found myself redrawing Goya etchings in order to better study his images and their composition.

Other significant though not necessarily primary influences on my work are Raymond Pettibon and Nancy Spero. Pettibon works in a graphic, line-driven manner. Pettibon challenges the preciousness felt in Beardsley or Gorey's exacting work by the looseness of his hand and relinquish of technical control; he is open to chance and variations in media. Pettibon's images seem to take him just a few minutes as opposed to the hours of hatching evidenced in Gorey's illustrations. His approach to narrative feels experimental and unformulaic. Pettibon borrows heavily from comic art, in that he utilizes comic conventions like speech bubbles, frames, and XX!!?$@#$E-like text. He seems to work in primarily in tightly cropped monoscenic images rather than sequential or another structure. Pettibon's influence encouraged me to incorporate other kinds of media and to relinquish my expectations of what a narrative sequence or comic “should do.” He encouraged me to work more quickly, to be less precious, and to embrace a lack of control.

Nancy Spero is another important influence. I became interested in many of the different techniques she used to explore narrative content, like stamping, establishing vocabularies, alternating use of space and object, as well as her interest in figuration. In works like Sky Goddess/Egyptian Acrobat or Notes in Time she seems to build up sets of
vocabularies based in the figure, which she then plays with and rearranges to generate meaning. The same figures and shapes are repeated (either printed, stamped, or drawn out). Each iteration is slightly different either by intention or chance. The uniformity and variance in her vocabularies layer and contribute to their interpretation. Spero's visual vocabularies seem to center around the body, either whole, disfigured, or in parts (such as in *Notes in Time*). She shapes and manipulates the figure the way a composer arranges notes in a score. It seems she uses the figure as a kind of glyph that embodies a textual meaning. The repetition and variation elaborate meaning. This concept became central to the mode in which I was constructing my own visual vocabularies and reducing letter glyphs to shape. Tangentially, Spero is instructive in her spatial organization. Her work includes dense areas of layering and overlapping, open spaces, and patterns of semi-regular intervals. The way in which space and object interact has obvious connection to text or notation. The shaped spaces that surround are as legible as areas filled by object. This is something that concerns me in my own work, as I am creating narrative texts; images that are meant to be read.
The content of my work has been shaped by my interest in critical histories, folklore, and current events. Books I read while in the MFA program that best exemplify this interest are *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, *The Renegade History of the United States*, and *Solidarity Forever*. Both works present critical histories of the United States. *Lies My Teacher Told Me* examines a series of textbooks used in US public schools in order to analyze how the past is manipulated and encoded into these texts in order to promote a set of values and beliefs. The author argues that histories are far more complex than the way they are told and mythologized in schools and the media. He interpolates new historical narratives out of those told in high school texts. He uses the same characters and sequences of events, but tries to remove ideological bias and present a historical analysis that is contextual and open to fault.

Similarly, Thaddeus Russell posits that history does not unfold in the way that historians would have us believe. In *The Renegade History of the United States*, he asserts that the impetus behind great social changes is actually the derelicts and renegades of society. He also argues that history bestows individuals with significance that does not belong to them. Russell argues that history is a construction which is revised in retrospect in order to create heroes and icons who prop up our American mythology. Yet these figures themselves did not forward great changes in society, rather it is the misfits who have attribute to that claim.

*Solidarity Forever* is a written text of an oral history of the International Workers of the World (IWW). This text presents a critical retelling of United States history since the
1900s from a labor, specifically a Wobbly, perspective. This retelling continued to affirm my conviction that histories are embedded with moral codes and ideological beliefs. Solidarity Forever's radical representation of labor history and significance contrasts the dominant cultural paradigm. I also watched *Matewan* at this time; my original intention for my dolls was to create a video in which they reenacted the movie.

In addition to these titles, I made many works in direct response to the narratives and ideas I was reading, including the aforementioned material, as well as articles in the *Economist* (*The Faith and Doubts of our Fathers*), news items (like [The Fire]), and obscure historical narratives (such as *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities*).

Tangential to thinking about narrative are concepts surrounding the archive and the construction of history. In particular, I am indebted to the writings of Carolyn Steedman and Henry Glassie, both of whom were critical to further developing my conceptualization of History. During the MFA program, I reread *Dust* by Carolyn Steedman. In library school at Pratt I had become very interested in the idea that books are written by individuals and these histories are not objective sets of facts but are interpretations of experience and events that are accepted as objective truths. I continue to return to this idea of history as a word used to represent the objective past, but actually refers to one individual's retelling, what they have written. A professor introduced me to Steedman's *Dust*, in which she discusses this very issue. Her book is partially a response to Derrida's *Archive Fever* and also a series of thoughts on the archive. She conceptually separates the past from history and describes the way in which the archive is used to manipulate and represent the past through history. Steedman writes that history is not the past, it is a written story.
told about the past in order to derive meaning and understanding. History is often told by the victor and used to justify the past as a means of arriving at the present. Further, that the author manipulates past events and figures, putting them here or there and making them speak in order to tell a tale. This manipulation of facts is a puppetry of the Past.

Folklorist Henry Glassie is another influential writer whose work on narrative I discovered quite late. His sensibility is of one committed to social justice and everyday people. In *History's Dark Places*, he writes that “History is not the Past. History is a story about the past, told in the present, and designed to be useful in constructing stories for the future” (Glassie, p. 1). He develops the idea that the past is gone, but is shaped and retained by oral myths and written histories. He asserts that history contains a narrative which rarely changes. While the histories of marginalized groups are increasingly made visible, their histories are accepted only insofar as that they can support and fit into the dominant paradigm. He asserts that we should seek a “disorienting experience in the world,” in order to reconsider our relationship to others and our linear narratives about the world. (Glassie, p.5). I found these ideas to directly relate with my own and to support the histories proposed by Loewen and Russell. I am interested in subverting histories, recombining histories, manipulating histories, and reconstructing histories. The ideas of these authors enabled the development of my own thinking that history and myth are constructs used to provide meaning, that they are one-sided, constructed, and encoded with particular values; that they are interpretations, not concrete facts.
The Tableau

I am drawn to Medieval, Byzantine, and Flemish paintings for the way in which the space is organized as a stage into which the viewer peers. This idea was further articulated for me in Le Tableau seminar, as many works are characterized as tableau for this sense of staging. Scenes appear as small stages (or tables) upon which action unfolds. The viewer can look into, but not enter the work. There is a clear division that one is looking into a similar but somewhat otherworldly space. As I began to use the tableau as a framing device to understand other images, I saw this feature in both the contemporary artists I look at like as Karin Mamma Anderson, as well as artist's such as Hieronymus Bosch.

The final assignment in Laura Lisbon's seminar on Le Tableau was to propose two works for inclusion in a hypothetical Tableau show. I proffered Bosch's *Table of the Seven Deadly Sins* and Mamma Andersson's *Room Under the Influence*. *The Seven Deadly Sins* is a play on the idea of tableau. The piece is supported by a table structure, inviting a literal reference to the tableau. On the table's surface are painted diagrams. These diagrams themselves allude to notion of tables as the arrangement of information. They reference the tableau through the concept of the diagrammatic, the chart, the graph, the ordering of knowledge, the table.

Bosch 's work has been be described as nightmarish morality pageants and this work is no exception. The content of the large central wheel bears seven segments, each delegated one of the seven sins as enacted in daily life. These individual slices are small windows into separate scenes, each presented as a tiny stage upon which action is being
played out. Time frozen at the apex or the moment at which the transgression is occurring. The viewer is invited to look into but at the same time is kept out of or is alienated from the space. Much like a theater stage, the viewer can look in but not go in. Starting at the bottom and traveling clockwise are depictions of wrath, envy, greed, gluttony, sloth, extravagance (or lust), and pride. These scenes are not allegorical, but are everyday depictions of sins.

Within this larger wheel the viewer is confronted by Christ, or what is referred to in several essays as, “the eye of god.” The quote below Christ is “cave, cave deus videt,” the Latin for “beware, beware god sees.” In each of the four corners are windows of smaller scenes showing the death of the sinner, judgment, hell and glory. At top of the table, the inscription from Deuteronomy translates to “they are a nation void of counsel, there is no understanding in them” and below that, “o if they were wise and they understood, they would consider their later end.”

This work is a morality pageant in which sins are enacted in situations that are recognizable and accessible to the viewer. In the middle of these sin enactments, the viewer is confronted by God and at the same time occupies a god-like perspective, having an ability to look out over multiple simultaneous scenes and perspectives from a central, heavenly vantage. In this way, the viewer is like a god and is able to look down at the folly. Further, [she] is implored to make choices different from the fray. This work defines various sins in a daily context. It is acting as a warning and reproach against certain specific behaviors. The work insists that god is watching and that the sinner will be punished. As such, The Seven Deadly Sins is acting as an apparatus. It is embodying and asserting the
expectations of the state. It is acting as a cultural tool, a tool of the state and religion, to articulate and reinforce cultural norms and expectations that enable and lubricate social order.

The contemporary artist I chose was Mamma Andersson. Her images are dreamy open narratives scenes. She usually either chooses to paint desolate landscapes or domestic scenes, sometimes with people but sometimes not. A lot of essays about her work describe it as at the intersection of space and time, a space that narrative naturally occupies. Her paintings are fascinating for their ability to seemingly both slow time and enliven space. Her works brings to mind excerpts from Proust's *Bedrooms*. In this essay, Proust revisits the bedrooms he's slept in. He remembers and rediscovers these spaces in the real time of memory, but at the same time he is an outsider to these recollected spaces. He is invited to look, but is distanced and cannot intervene or interact with the physical place. I find this quality to be present in Andersson's work, in that it is inviting but distancing at the same time. It is a space that can be touched but not entered. It shows another world, one which is similar but different. This tension between enchantment and estrangement is what ties this work to the idea of the tableau.

Generally, Andersson applies her paint either in thin washes or thick globs. Many of the strokes she uses to apply paint with are intentional art historical references. Joe Fyfe talked about the importance of the haptic in tableau and the tactility of Andersson's work exhibits this quality. The way in which she alternates heavy layers and delicate washes provide her environments with contradictory qualities that are both ephemeral and concrete. Her images vibrate and and seem to buzz; they are illusionistic, yet incomplete.
In looking through her oeuvre, there are some works that contain areas of blackness. These dissolutions in the image are sometimes like halos that hug and encircle areas of focus, at other times they are like floaters that interrupt the image. How they are meant to be read is unknown (to me), but the way in which I approach them is as the blank spaces in memory or re-conjuring. A kind of literal depiction of images that emerge and recede in memory; a separation or mediation that prevent one from fully remembering or fully seeing something in the mind; a fragmentation. The black areas represent, in a way, the unmemorable or what cannot be redrawn to mind. They are a kind of darkness that shields some memories from grasp or perhaps the fragmentation of memory.

Andersson's work is often described as a kind of staging. Sometimes literally, such as in *Rooms Under the Influence*, in which a room sits upon a stage. It is a room that we cannot enter, only can look at, signaling a stage or doll's house. This connects her work quite literally to the staging or mis-en-scene of tableau vivants or pictorial tableau. It is a space that one can look at but not enter.

These two works by Bosch and Andersson exemplify qualities of the tableau, specifically a tension between entrancement and enchantment, stillness and frenzy, that have influenced my own work.
While at OSU, I took a medieval art course which introduced me to new ways of conceptualizing image-based literacy. Medieval Christian images and architecture are structured in a way to communicate about the image being viewed. They exhibit visual devices which act as signifiers and can be read by those who are literate in them. It became easier to decode and read these images as I began to learn about the ways in which medieval images are structured and the motifs that reappear and why. I began to borrow these devices and incorporate them into my work to add layer of meaning. Specific examples include: the orant pose, variations in halos to indicate the levels of divinity, the hand of god, and allusions to specific stories, such as The Nativity, Birth of the Magi, and The Annunciation (a scene that does not actually occur in the bible). These scenes are culturally legible and do not depend on any specific artist's representation of it, instead, the conglomeration of iterations have variations and patterns that reinforce cultural understanding of these stories.

Pisanello's *St George and the Princess of Trebizond* is an important piece to me, one that often appears in my work as quotation. Pisanello layers his shapes and figures in a way that is very dense and flat. It is remarkable the way in which further investigation yields new figures, costumes, and depth. The spatial organization contributes to this, through layering and the putting-together of figures, costumes, and objects. While there is an illusion of depth in this piece, this is largely communicated through scale (such as the structure shown in the back of the image) and atmospheric perspective (the black background and the white foreground). I am struck by the flatness of the entire image. Not only the relation between objects, but each object seems to merely lie atop the can-
Though the color and texture is subdued, it is these joining together of areas that create the scene.

Pisanello's drawings and studies are also important to me. His renderings of animals and people in various positions strike a balance between emerging and receding from the page. Contour lines solidly define the mass and volume of the objects through shadow and gradated tone, but like a cartoon, the boundaries of the body and space are constructed through contour-line alone. The interiors of his figures are as emptied and white as the space on the other side of the body's border. This gives his figures the appearance of both occupying the page and disappearing from it. There is a tension in each figure that is both solid and fleeting. This tension is one that I explored through my own drawings.

The figuration of bodies in medieval artwork also appeals to me for its reduction to shape. Visually, I am interested in the play of shapes, their arrangement and relationship to one another. Bosch, Breughel and Uccello's work share a strong sense of figurative shape and compositional tension between emptiness and density, quickness and slowness. Their canvases seem to be encrusted with areas of dense activity in which many actions are unfolding quickly, yet at the same time there are areas of emptiness and those gestures of haste are stilled.

Uccello's paintings, specifically *Hunt in the Forest*, *The Battle of San Romano* and *Consecrated Host* series are images I return to again and again. His work bears a strong sense of staging in which the architecture or environment hold and frame the action of the image. His images have clear but limited depth and utilize pattern. Whether a literal
patterning (such as a tiled floor or stairs receding into the background), the repetition of similarly scaled and positioned figures across a page, or a mess of identical spars placed in regular angles across a scene, Uccello's images carry a strong sense of rhythm. He relies on scale, direction, and layering to do so, building regular patterns while also interrupting them by introducing variation. The arrangement of his canvas is extremely controlled and creates a legible flow for the viewer's eye to travel across the canvas.

Like Uccello, Bosch too stages scenes in his painting. For example, *Garden of Earthly Delights* is a triptych showing heaven, Earth, and hell. Each of these scenes are framed by the physical architecture of the object. Time is simultaneous and stopped so that these figures are stilled mid action. The space is constructed so that there are two layers: the environmental landscape and the characters whose actions unfold upon it. There is a clear separation between the environmental “stage” and the actors, with no believable relationship between them. The actors are grouped into small companies, each engaged in their own diversions and disconnected from the rest. The depiction of their bodies are expressive, each figure contorted into a shape that is active. Limbs jut out in all directions, making sharp angles and straight lines; there is not a body at rest. Along with these figures are shaped objects, strange bubbles and fountains. These bodies and objects are disconnected from their landscape and I cannot help but to imagine them against a white background, devoid of an environment. It is these spaces between them, the communicative power of their legible bodies and the tension between areas of density and desolation that interest me.
Outsider and Visionary Art

Because I do not have a studio art background, I had never really considered the way in which I was making images before joining the MFA program. My experience could be called culture shock. As I was introduced to the work of outsider artists and self-trained artists, I found an affinity with them. It allowed me some mental freedom from the self-consciousness I was feeling. I would not say that I looked at any artist more than another, rather I absorbed these artists together as part of a category or artists working outside of the art hegemon. The most immediate observation I made of self-trained artists was how thorough the spatial or intellectual logic of their work was carried through completely, in contrast with the seemingly haphazard or unplanned feeling of their work.

Later, I returned to these artists in my Folklore class through a project on folk art and artists. With regard to identity politics, I became increasingly interested in the boundaries and classifications of folk artists, visionary artists, and outsider or self-trained artists. It seems that these terms are often used interchangeably though they actually have very specific meanings. Folk artists are those people who share, reproduce, and transmit knowledge of their particular folk group. Their identity as artists may be self-claimed or ascribed by an outside community due to their materials or aesthetic conventions. Visionary artists are those people who are not trained as artists but have an impulse to communicate through materials whose aesthetic elements such as pattern, texture, color are identified as artistic communication. It seems that many artists who are identified as visionary artists are either spiritually visionary (in that they are communicating with or recording the divine through visual means) or psychological patients or drug-users. Self-
trained or outsider artists are those artists who make work or have learned to make work outside of an institutionalized art context. However, this is a tenuous definition that is largely ascribed by the dominant art culture. Even the most celebrated artists such as Henry Darger have not developed their own means of artistic communication totally outside of the western art world. Darger taught himself composition, how to read and arrange a page, by looking to other western artwork and children's coloring books. In this way, he is instilled with the same cultural sensibilities as artists working within the art world. Point being that artists, like groups of people, are ascribed identities though they may not identify in the same way, nor may those ascribed identities be logical or appropriate.

For further elaboration on the subject of Folk Art, I have an included an essay I wrote on Folk Art and Folk Painting for Merril Kaplan's Introduction to Folk Studies course, Spring 2011, in Appendix A.
Conclusion

My thesis work in the MFA program has explored the intersection of narrative, text, myth, and history through several lenses, including comics, medieval art, folk studies and critical histories. The content of my work has largely been culled from the archive: narratives containing strange, obscure, or inverted representations of the Past. But the deeper subject of my work is in the construction of historical narratives, which I have pursued in different ways. I have manipulated the practice of historical research through intervention, interruption, and inversion and imbued narratives with bias by redrawing them or by selective collecting. I have analyzed depictions of space and time in 2-dimensional images and I have explored the politics of historical narratives and the ascription of identities. I have experimented with the legibility of both text and image as affected by their arrangement and composition and I have identified modes in which historical narratives are constructed through image-based media. The capture and translation of time and its unfolding is at the heart of both word and image-based narrative. The act of narration is an inherently political one which asserts a representation of reality that is rooted in a specific bias. Artists, authors, and historians as acculturated individuals with unique experiences participate in the construction of the world through their work.
American folk painting, as it is typically identified, is a misnomer. What is recognized by the Western art establishment as American folk painting is an ascription applied to work, which is actually much more aligned with the European fine art tradition than any folk practice. In searching for an American folk art practice, the painting genre has been highlighted by academic and curatorial authorities. Folk painting is portrayed by the art world as a diminutive emulation of traditional painting. It has historically been associated with rural or poor populations, marginalized groups, or eccentric outsiders. Attempts to characterize folk painting as something other than fine art have long laid in aesthetic evaluations of individual paintings and by later attempts to understand the artist's relationship to their community and tradition. American folk painting and fine painting share such blurry boundaries, it is questionable whether there is a distinction at all.

What is Folk Painting?

Definitions of art are problematic. Definitions are different, unique to particular areas of study. A folklorist uses the term differently than an art historian. A possible solution is through the use of genre. Abrahams defines genre as named pattern of expression that enables identification of traditional form and conventional contents of artistic representation, including materials, dramatic structure, and structure of context (1975, pp. 193-98). Essentially, that there are recognizable patterns in content, structure, or material which
allow something to be classified with other like kinds. It is an externally applied identifier, imposed upon the object. Abrahams states that most traditional genres are named through a combination of patterns in form, content, and context; ie, painting is recognized and named as such because of its use of paint as material (1975). Painting, as a genre, is recognizable by the use of paint applied to a surface using tools such as brushes or pallettes knives, etc. Sometimes painting is representational (figurative, landscape, et cetera) and sometimes on a flat two dimensional surface with four corners. There are types of surface that are more likely to be painted on like as canvas, paper, cardboard, concrete. Painting in particular is a static genre. Once paint is applied to the surface, it is separate from the artist. The performer has expressed “himself in a concrete form that remains after the moment of enactment... Having performed, the artist steps back and lets his creation 'speak for itself’” (Abrahams, 1975, pp. 206). The performer-artist is separate from their creation. The object is mobile and can be relocated to numerous contexts apart from the author. It is capable of being reinterpreted anew, separate from its creator and creative process. The object is a documentation of a gesture or enactment performed by the artist. It will continue to exist separately and long after the gesture-action has ceased to be performed.

American folk painting as an area of study was conceptualized out of American art historical scholarship and curatorial work (Delacruz, 2000). It is an imposed way of classifying objects and phenomena. From its very inception, folk painting has been considered as something other than, or dependent on, fine painting. It has also been historically associated with certain geographical regions or as exhibiting certain qualities of inepti-
Holger Cahill was one of the earliest art historians to write extensively about American folk art. He was not a folklorist, rather an art historian who was very interested in folk culture (Vlach, 1985, pp. 148). Because his primary framework was that of Western Art history, Cahill turned his attention foremost to the genres of painting and sculpture. He used the established fine art masters as measures of comparison for folk painters. He regarded folk art as something in contrast to or in opposition from fine art. He also perceived folk art to be a culturally impoverished descendant and implicitly dependent upon fine art (Vlach, 1985). What Cahill articulates is a perception of folk culture as a separate or lesser culture that exists in opposition to fine art.

Folklorist Alan Dundes posits that a critical aspect of “folk” is that they are a dependent entity. Folk are “defined in contrast to or in opposition with some other... group” (Dundes, 1977, p2). They are not “normal,” they exist only in relation to another social group. Folk, at one time, were thought to be from the lower stratum of society, in contrast with both “savage” and “civilized” societies. Traditionally been conceptualized as emerging from rural, poor, or uneducated areas, “folk” have a traditional connotation as a sort of middle, peasant society; an otherwise marginalized group (Dundes, 1977). These dichotomies are attempts to make sense of the distinction between folk and fine art, but they are constructed classist and racist assumptions that are easily disproved or exceptionalized. Henry Glassie argues that notions of folk art as rural, poor, sacred, spiritual, et cetera are erroneous, as are suppositions that fine art is realistic, abstract, progressive, rich, et cetera (Glassie, 1989, pp. 227). Perhaps the reasons for this misperception are two-fold: one is because the visual aesthetics of folk art are misperceived as be-
ing naive or quaint, and two, because of negative assumptions toward the identity of folk artists. This perception of second class art is congruent with attitudes of having been produced by second class populations.

Interestingly, as American folk painting became more widely accepted as “legitimate” art (exhibit-worthy art) by the American scholarship and curatorial experts, similar aesthetic developments occurred in “fine art.” Art Brut, Expressionism, and Dadaism are movements characterized by similar visual styles that deemphasize technical skills in favor of expression and chance (Delacruz, 2000). As the “naive look” of folk painting gained greater credibility, it lead to problems in defining folk painting from a purely aesthetic standpoint. Because of the visual similarity of work being created across the disparate arenas of folk and fine art, new ways to distinguish between them were developed. The identity of the creator and their art-process became new places to locate distinction (Delzcruz, 2000). Under the “folk” umbrella many new categories were identified based on the artist's socio-economic background. Some of the most prevalent terms to emerge: self-taught, outsider, visionary, psychiatric, primitive, child, or black art. These distinctions maintained an outsider status to the fine art world, implying a naivity or “Otherness” either through artistic training or identity (Fine, 2003). However, it also raised further questions into process and the context of the authoring source.

Specifically, questions regarding definitions of who and what “folk painting” consists of were further tangled with, questions of who are the folk and what is art? Virtually inseperable, these questions provide distinct approaches to the same quandary. The term “folk” has many connotations and the modes in which it has been approached have mu-
tated over time and differed among disciplines. Some of the multifarious ways of defining folk are: people who do the same thing; people associated by common beliefs, knowledge or cultures; through association of produced material; by knowledge reproduced from traditional sources.

Glassie posits there to be many ideas of “folk” and “art”, whose definitions are the historical products of different periods (1989, pp. 34). Definitions are inherently political and change overtime to reflect cultural attitudes and values. “Art represents and sanctifies what is valued in a society” (Metcalf, pp. 271). While for Glassie, “art is what is best, deepest, richest in every culture” (1989, pp. 10). Art is a deeply complex communication that can take place in different media. Art varies per culture, yet American-European cultures overemphasize the value of painting and sculpture. In looking for art, we have sought only work that reflects our own preferred genre. Glassie said in regards to art, “if we think it must resemble ours, we may miss what is best and distort cultures by overemphasizing media that may be of marginal importance” (1989, pp. 50). Looking for paintings and sculptures in pursuit of folk art will not lead to folk art. Art is culturally specific; aesthetics and form change from culture to culture. To expect that all art will mirror European-American conventions is to distort and impose a false reality onto other cultures.

Genre is a useful lens with which to examine material culture, but it is important to note that genres are externally applied. One form in a particular community may establish an entirely different relationship from another context/group. The relationship of community to painting varies per context. Genre is one way of identifying art, but actual def-
initions of painting, as well as folk and fine art are troublesome. Genres have fluid, permeable boundaries that have largely been imposed by outside sources. One of the implications of applied definitions is that they easily lend themselves to the establishment and maintainance of hierarchies and separatism. Painting as a traditional genre in Western art may not be the primary mode of artistic expression in another culture. But because Western art history privileges painting as a fine art genre, it focuses on locating painting in other cultures as a primary expression of artistic communication.

**Folk artists as People Who Make Folk Art**

Glassie argues that to call something “folk art” asserts that art was the intention of the creator, and that “folk” provides information about an artist's sources (1989). Essentially, that a folk artist derives their knowledge, technique, and skill from traditional sources (to make a piece of art). But what is a traditional source? Glassie identifies tradition (in folk arts) to be connected to a common source of inspiration and to be outward in shaping collective consciousness (1989). Many folk artists, working in pottery, quilting, or weaving, employ specific modes of production and aspire to certain aesthetics. In Western painting, tradition implies a particular set of techniques and materials, further, that there must be something to draw upon. Dundes argues that if an individual presents a set of “idiosyncratic gestures … he would not constitute a 'folk’” because “at least two individuals would have to share them” (1977, pp. 8). An individual expressing himself may not be representing a collective understanding or practice. In order for work to be traditional, it must be connected to a common understanding or collective agreement.
Folk art is an individual's expression of the community values into which they were born, while fine art is an individual's expression of the values of a group through elective association (Glassie, 1989, pp. 214). It is important to understand artists by looking at both what they create and their personal context in order to interpret their work. An artist's sources and their re-iteration are central to understanding their identity (Wexler, 2005). In this respect, many of the “folk artists” received in the fine art world have NOT been traditional folk artists. Rather they are self-taught artists who are aligned with the Western art tradition. In 1942, (folklorist) James Thomas Flexner identified criteria establishing three classes of painted pictures typically identified as folk art: Artisan painting, which consisted of pictures by professionals with slight training; amateur painting, done by nonprofessionals for personal pleasure; and folk painting, reserved for expressions grounded in local custom, passed down from one generation to the next via shared experience. (Vlach, 1989, pp. xii). Artisan and amateur painting make up the bulk of what has been identified as American folk art.

Two such major artists recognized by the art world as “self-taught” or “outsider” are Bill Traylor and Henry Darger. Yet, both artists have cited European-American art work, media, and images as source work. They have referred to these sources in order to figure out how to visually represent their content. Henry Darger, perhaps the most acclaimed “folk” or outsider artists, is heavily represented at the American Museum of Folk art. During his life he worked as a dishwasher and wrote what is thought to be the longest piece of fiction in the English language. His paintings and drawings are described as naïve and childlike in both content and appearance. Yet Darger’s sources are well known:
mass-produced coloring books and art historical images (Karlins, 1997). Bill Traylor too, a well-represented African-American painter from early in the 1900 was a self-taught artist who, once “discovered,” was encouraged and mentored by academic artists. Both artists' work fit into the traditional western cannon of painting. Their works are clearly identifiable as paintings and they utilize the appropriate materials and techniques to gain entrance into that genre.

Vlach argues that “works of folk art obviously have a tradition,” and that “folk art is nothing if not traditional,” although its tradition may or may not be an academic one (1989, pp. 347). Because artists reproduce knowledge in a visual form, it may be possible to read, trace and identify their cultural sources. In trying to locate the distinction between folk art and fine art, the relationship of the the individual to the community is useful. In the cases of Darger and Traylor, they were more aligned with the history of Western art than they were with a localized folk group. As amateur or outsider painters they engaged the genre of painting as understood from an art historical framework. While they employed unique understanding of two dimensional space and methods of representation, they engaged the genre as they were acculturated to do. They do not depict or use localized, collective knowledge in the production of their paintings, rather they are directly drawing upon the European art historical tradition.

Painters make reference to previous sources simply through their choice of medium. Their decision to work on a flat, mobile material using a limited set of tools as well as the selection of content and manner of arrangement are learned literacies. Painting is a self-referential medium, reinforcing its own tradition with each iteration. Because all
knowledge is derivative of previous knowledge, Glassie asserts that “all art is traditional” (1989, pp. 188). Art and artists resynthesize their sources, while communicating something about the future. The act of painting references previous paintings (sources). As a product it communicates something about itself and its relationship to the past. The western tradition of painting is reiterated by each painter who references it through their work. In this way, American folk painters are quite aligned with traditional fine painting.

**The Folk Umbrella**

The process of identifying folk art has historically been to identify work that is “visually inferior” and to then examine the identity of the artist to place them into whatever folk category (Fine, 2003). Many of the American painters who are considered “folk artists” have been self-taught, “naive,” or outsider artists, which means that their work has been created outside of academic art and scholarship. Through self-education, these artists have looked to other artists and “traditional” western art to solve and represent visual problems. While these artists represent singular visions, their work is congruent with standards of western aesthetics: their paintings are recognizable as paintings. The form allows entrance into a genre, though their particular use of artistic elements may be unique. Vlach argues that the presentation of these works as typical folk expressions completely overturns the meaning of *folk* (1989, xii).

This is not to say that artists cannot nor do not express communal values or experiences. On the contrary, there are clear examples of folk artists expressing collective beliefs and knowledge. Some examples of this include aboriginal painters, Quaker painters,
Bengali potters, American quilters, and the many thousands of “crafts” people (an imposed division of utilitarian vs non utilitarian art) the world over. Psychiatric art is often produced by groups of artists working together in therapy or courses. They often share styles and solutions to visual problems (Robson, 1999). Children's art, when produced by local groups of children, or children exposed to similar sources of knowledge (ie, books or television), reproduce shared knowledge (expression of motif, content, ways of representation). Many artists use their work to reinforce their community ties through arts like carving, quilts, pots, baskets, dolls, etc (Vlach, 1985, pp. 346). To reiterate, this is in contrast to American painters considered “folk artists” in the contemporary art world, when upon examination of their source material it becomes clear that they are not expressing collective knowledge or beliefs from a local community, rather they are expressing skills culled from art historical sources. This indicates that painting is a genre dominated by Western art historical thinking. By both the modes of production and collection/curation, folk painting is inseparable from fine painting.

Glassie said, “there is no such thing precisely as folk culture” (1989, pp. 228). Further, there is truly no clear definition of fine art. Without this, there can be no definition of “folk art.” Fine art exists solely as a historical accumulation of objects and as a historical narrative imposed on the past (1989, pp. 227). In looking for traditional folk art, the obvious genres (to Western Art History) have been painting and sculpture. Yet, much of the perceived American folk painting is actually a mode of traditional Western practice. And as Flexner argues, stylistically derivative forms (of fine art), are specifically NOT products of folk traditions (Vlach, 1988, pp. xii). Outsider or self-taught artists are typi-
ally not expressing a localized knowledge; rather they are reinforcing interpretations of the painting genre. They utilize the same conventions and expectations of the painting genre, yet execute it in a way that “art authorities” consider quaint or naive.

Dundes identified the dilemma and thought that the folk provided a definition no more satisfactory than the lore (materials) (1977). The idea of “folk” as people who are from a common group who make things is problematic because some people identified as “folk artists” do not express shared group beliefs. Use of terms such as “psychiatric” or “child” art has labeled painters with a concept that subsumes the rest of their identity. It effectively essentializes a person's work via their perceived social group. The difficulty of identifying artwork by their creators is that it is a disservice to the content. Artwork containing virtually any subject created by black artists typically is reduced to “black art,” irregardless of meaning (Vendryes, 2001). Women’s art was for a long time identified as just that and in some circles continue to be so. Artists who fall outside of the hegemon (white, educated, middle-class) tend to be subject to identification based on phenotypical qualities of their identity, irregardless of the content of their work (Metcalf, 1983). Defining work by its authoring source alone leads to categorization of art, which undermines the artistic message. This is another mode of racism and classicism that furthers the marginalization of minority groups. Work created by white artists is not defined as “white art” and is privileged with classification based on content. Work by all artists should be given the same treatment and not labeled “black,” “child,” “psychiatric,” or “folk.” Folk art can no better be described by the identity of the creators, nor by its aesthetic content. Vlach maintains that careful attention to the details of artist's lives as
well as their immediate community are essential towards understanding what a particular artist's work means and why it is important (Vlach, 1981, pp. 165). Without this, he says, folk art is just a “convenient umbrella under which many orphaned objects find shelter” (1981, pp. 164).

Folk Art as Commodity

Folk art has been legitimated and lent the status of “Art Proper.” The increase in publications on the topic and institutions devoted exclusively to it, “helped establish folk art as a vital category of artistic production” (Brody, 2003, pp. 261). It has become an economic commodity, Brody argues, “aggressively marketed” by people such as Herbert W. Hemphill Jr, one of the founders of the American Folk Art Museum (2003, pp. 261). While the application of labels such as “folk” or “outsider” could be perceived as the legitimation of marginalized viewpoints by the art world, Brody challenges this and argues that contemporary outsider art is “a marketing ploy,” one that “bolsters and defines a new category of art that can be marketed and sold” (2003, pp. 272). Exhibitions and collections promote a type of aesthetic, a way of identifying the way outsider art “should look.” Archtypal examples of folk art indicate a clear historical preference for painting.

Gary Fine concurs, positing that contemporary outsider art is a marketable niche which exploits myths favoring individual creative impulse and notions of purity. The art world sells folk art that emulates a set of aesthetic preconceptions and has a particular biographical narrative attached to it. It champions the artist as an outsider, one driven to express their unrestrained emotion (Fine, 2003): The outsider artist as the crea-
tive genius, inspired from within; the eccentric creator compelled to express his inner world. Material scholar Kenneth Ames (1977) describes five variations in the promotion of the idea of folk art. They are:

1. the myth of individuality,
2. the myth of the poor but happy artisan,
3. the myth of handicraft,
4. the myth of the conflict-free past,
5. the myth of national uniqueness.

These myths promote the idea of the rural, diminutive, national character and importantly, identify folk art as being unlike or different from fine art. The work is marketed on the strength of the biography. In the case of Darger, the artist's biography has been shaped and interpreted by the art world. He is depicted as a loner, a creative genius, an eccentric.

David Brody points out that in contemporary outsider art, it is often the collector who is showcased by exhibitions. “It is the collector whose ability to 'discover' the realm of the unknown that gets showcased in museums, such as the American Folk Art Museum” (Brody, 2003, pp. 260). The artist's creative sensibilities are oft subsumed by the connoisseur's aesthetic discernment (Brody, 2003, pp. 260). Contemporary outsider art becomes a commodity to be consumed while the art world proper is reinforced through its creation and legitimation of “the Other.”

Conclusion

Since its inception, folk painting has been considered a second-rate or diminutive
form of art. Even Holger Cahill, historically one of folk art's greatest champions, called it “a 'second-rate' kind of art” (Vlach, 1985, pp. xi). It has been conceptualized as inept, flawed, or naive, as an unequal component to fine art, lacking in terms of application and technical skills such as perspective (ibid). The real American folk painting is work that we are unwilling to recognize as folk painting and much of America's great folk art has not been expressed through the medium of painting (though exceptions abound, such as Quaker painting traditions). In trying to locate folk art, the art establishment made a narcissistic mistake of looking for a paltry version of itself. It identifies work that was similar in form, then proclaims it to be lesser for expressing skills and techniques differently.

The European-American painting tradition is folk, in a way. It expresses a shared understanding of what painting is and how it should be executed. There are communal sources of understanding and each new painting continues to shape and form the way the painting genre is understood in the present and future. What has historically been identified as “folk painting” in America, is really a small component of all fine art. The great reservoirs of folk art in America can be found all over, including painting, as well as in Jazz and Blues music, quilting, pottery, and other categories that exist outside of traditional concepts of “fine art.” Painting is a mode of expression that may simply be inadequate or inappropriate for certain culture's communication needs.

There are a multitude of artists working in a folk tradition across the globe and in America. There are many folk painters in America, but there are also many more forms of visual communication outside of painting and sculpture. Artists who are historically represented as American Folk painters work from the same sources as fine artists. There
is little discernible difference between artists conceived as “folk” or “fine” other than the label they are ascribed by the art world. As Henry Glassie said, “Most fine art is folk art” (1989, pp. 227).
after many days at sea

the ship moors near to a coastal village.

In fact, he does.
They searched the cellars fruitlessly.
Donald imagined things.
A BREATH REALISED, HELD...
FOR THE NEXT BEAT...

WELL IT WAS TRUE, IN A WAY...
THAT HIS HEART HAD COUGHED...
I CANNOT BREATHE, IT AL-... 
SO SAID.
Bibliography

The Graphic


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“The Faith (and Doubts) of Our Fathers” in *The Economist* 12/17/2012

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