Perfection and System: Painting the Ideal

A Master’s Thesis

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By
Winnie Sidharta, B.A.
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Thesis Committee:
George Rush, Advisor
Laura Lisbon
Philip Armstrong
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Abstract

My work concerns with the constant search for a system to represent perfection and the ideal in portraiture. Artists from medieval to contemporary have been searching for a structure of the ideal representation whether it is within the context of religion or in popular culture. I’m drawn to the image’s ability to evoke a kind of self-conscious illusion of perfection, through which the physical bodies of the model are equated with the manifestation of the ideal. The impossibility to represent perfection leads me to examine the potential aspect of classical technique in contemporary modes of painting. My painting processes engage with images mediated by the mechanisms of photography and film, which allows me to explore ideas of cut, sequence, and montage while still engaging in direct painting from live models. Through experimentation with representation and abstraction, my work aims to develop a system that engages with both traditional and contemporary modes of painting, as a means of challenging our cultural constructs and cultivating new ways of thinking about the body within the space of painting.
For my family: my parents, brothers and sister
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Vita

2012.................................MFA in Painting and Drawing, The Ohio State University

2011-2012..........................Instructor of Record, Department of Art, The Ohio State University

2010.................................Graduate Administrative Associate in the Department of Art, The Ohio State University

2008-2010...........................Instructor, Ivy Academy Multiple Intelligences Pre-School, Beijing, China

2009.................................Instructor, Foundation Drawing and Painting, Dream Arts Center School of Arts and Music, Beijing, China

2007.................................Certificate Program in Oil Paintings, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China

2007.................................Designer-Illustrator, Peking University Press, Beijing, China

2006.................................Designer-Illustrator, Chinese National Geographic, Beijing, China

2000.................................BA in Visual Communication Design with honors, Department of Art and Design, Petra Christian University, East Java, Indonesia

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Awards and Selected Exhibitions

2012..........................MFA Thesis Show: Next Wave, OSU Urban Arts Space, The Ohio State University

2012..........................Joan Mitchell MFA Fellowship, Candidate, The Ohio State University

2011..........................Fergus Memorial Scholarship, Recipient, The Ohio State University

2011..........................Image: Self, Hopkins Gallery, The Ohio State University

2011..........................Recent Arrivals: Department of Art Graduate Students
Hopkins Gallery, The Ohio State University

2010..........................Jue Festival: Deploy/Disarm, CNEX Salon, Image Base. Beijing, China

2010..........................International School of Beijing Art Auction, The Orchard, Beijing, China

2008..........................International Student Juried Exhibition, Recipient, China Art Today Museum, Beijing, China

2004..........................The Best Final Project, Recipient, Visual Communication Design, Petra Christian University, East Java, Indonesia

2004..........................Final Projects Exhibition, Petra Christian University,
East Java, Indonesia

Publications

2011..............................................Fergus Memorial Scholarship-Exhibition Catalogue

2012..............................................Image: Self-Exhibition Catalogue

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art

Area of Emphasis: Visual Arts
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Introduction

Throughout history, portraiture and figurative painting have shown a constant endeavor to represent the real world. However, the evolution and influence of other mediums have challenged and influenced both painting and the way we see representation. For example, it is sometimes speculated that since the advent of photography, painting has been freed from the strict adherence to mimetic representation, opens up the questions of identity, class, value, culture and narrative. With this framework, the processes of representation and figuration began to evolve from merely illustrating an important event (religious, heroic, etc.) in the most convincing way, to analyzing ‘how’ a picture is made. Pictures not only convey recognizable images, but also constantly challenge our expectations of those images through models that are constructed by the artist. Strategies such as staging, reference, gender play, repetition, inversion, cut, sequencing, and compositing create an array of ambiguities, which both subvert our expectations and open up the potential for new ways of reading paintings.

My fascination with figurative and representational painting has led me to explore various systems within art making. The systems that I find the most intriguing are those that evoke a kind of self-conscious illusion of perfection. This is especially evidenced in most Medieval and Flemish paintings, in which the figures
are considered both iconic and accurate in their naturalistic representations of the holy subject models. Figures in Medieval painting are often very rigid, composed and seemingly lifeless. This rigidity is echoed in the geometric patterns, which surround the figure and compose the environment. Such careful structuring of the picture allows the figure to disappear, leaving behind only the concept of its presence. The impossibility of representing perfection paradoxically acts to suggest that such perfection exists. Only through the void between the perfection of the subject and the impossibility of this representation can a realization of the ideal materialize. In the first chapter, I will elaborate the influence of this art historical period into my work especially through the belief that nature and artifice could evoke the idea of imitation of the ideal.

Mass media and popular culture are riddled with similar systems of imaginary perfection and illusions of empowerment. Fashion photography employs various staging techniques to evoke sensations related not only to the history of portraiture and figurative painting, but to the very act of viewing historic works as a kind of conscious voyeurism. In fashion photography, the illusion of accessibility emerges as we are given a standard for re-modeling ourselves as if our physical body was a manufactured form. Two levels of substitution are occurring. First, the model is equated to an image represented in paintings. Then the image is woven into a contemporary context allowing it to be more readily absorbed. This accessibility is expressed in the surrounding content of the fashion industry itself, which unites the image and its context. In this act, as in the Byzantine construct, the
figure disappears, in this case leaving in its absence the model ready for our consumption. In chapter two, I will elaborate some of my works by making connection with artists who are using distortion in their work to evoke imperfection as another type of ideal.

To elaborate my process in thinking about painting and ideal representation, in Chapter three, I will make connection between my exploration with portraiture and the margins of the body through the medium of collage. I will also describe my process in live painting by collapsing the art historical sources that inspire my work. Although Byzantine, Medieval and Renaissance portraits can be similar with the process in some respect, there are very few – if any – portraits taken from life in Byzantine art.

In the last chapter, I will point out the return to painting as the subject. My hope is for the painting to supersede the subject so as to reach something beyond the conversation of technique. Our way of seeing these images is conditioned by habits, expectations and social norms. But I'm not only fascinated by the construction of seeing but also by the idea that painting is a re-configuration of internal experience. My work does not take the notion of the ideal toward an absolute norm, but rather questions the power of idealization through a constant searching of the experience in the process of making.
Chapter 1: Perfection and Embodiment of the Ideal

In her book, *Heterosyncrasies: female sexuality when normal wasn’t*, Karma Lochrie argued that there is no ‘normal’ body in the middle Ages. Lochrie’s important argument on the difference between ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ before the 19th century provide the basis understanding of the notion of perfection in art and society that deeply engaged in religious culture. In the middle Ages, the concept of the ideal and perfection was only found in Christ and only gained through the imitation of Christ. The idea of *imitatio* formed a way of life for medieval people and became the basis for their devotional practice. In making works such as illuminated manuscripts, medieval monks worked on highly detailed paintings with full attention and care; their pain and pleasure in the process functioned as a devotional practice. In contrast with the aspect of imitation of the ideal in religious culture, the notion of ideal after 19th century conforms and changes along with the concepts of attractiveness and sexual norms in social developments.

The emergence of heteronormativity in the 19th century and the influence of popular culture have worked to construct our idea of beauty in relation to symmetrical features and the golden ratio of proportions. Karma Lochrie brings forth the idea of perfection as a norm that was born through the invention of statistic in the 19th century by Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian statistician. Quetelet
applied a mathematical order and measurement to the concept of “The Average Man”, that theorized the “racial purity” to preserve on race and become the center of gravity for society. “The Average Man” started to become a norm of what constituted the ideal, which is a form of fiction to encourage desire as a way of life\(^1\).

Fashion photographs promote the social norm of the idealized body that is detached from spiritual value and inner transformation. The value of fashion photos is constantly challenged and questioned because of their close affinity with consumerism, pornography and the objectification of the female body. Nancy Hall-Duncan pointed out that these characteristics of fashion photography often place it as “the subject of ephemeral ends and misplaced value.”\(^2\) Furthermore, its creative force is also compromised under the control of the commercial world and its publications.

In our time, we see this same devotion to detail in the hyperrealist painting in Andrew Wyeth’s pictures of Helga. *Braids* is an example of the artist exhibiting his care and love for the subject as content. Wyeth himself pointed out that he wanted to achieve something beyond technique: “I think one’s art goes as far and deep as one’s love goes.”\(^3\)

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In the picture, Helga seems contained and isolated inside the picture frame. Her eyes are looking away from the viewer. The dark background surrounding her heightens the melancholy atmosphere of the portrait. In her braids, we can witness the meticulous precision of Wyeth’s brushstrokes. The interlacing of each strand of hair is painstakingly rendered using layer upon layer of egg tempera. Wyeth was not devoted to love of Christ but to the modern concept of romantic love. In this context, romantic love is translated through the craft of painting for its own sake.

Figure 1. Andrew Wyeth, Braids, 16.5”x20.5”, Tempera on Panel, 1977

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The same attention of detail is also shown in the Book of Kells (picture below). Compared to Wyeth’s Helga, the artists of Kells focused even more attention and care on the decorative elements that compose the book. The complex design perplexes the viewer with an intensity of process that reveals the artists’ intention to achieve the impossible. The monks that painted the book had to go through a consuming and painful process that became part of their devotional journey and servitude of God. The monks of this book as well as Northern Renaissance painters believed that each painted element was manifested with life and spirit and would reflect back onto our senses: “We fell in love with every blade of grass, every tiny twig, and refused to let anything escape us.”

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Figure 2. The Book of Kells, The Opening Words of St. John’s Gospel (Folio 292r), circa 800

Not all approaches to the invocation of perfection are related to beauty. I found the crucifix (Gabelkreuz) in Germany to be strong evidence relating the devotional acts of making with the ugliness and sacrificial love that is intended to reflect Christ's internal beauty. Unlike a 'polished' depiction of the crucifix, the Gabelkreuz subverts our conception of the ideal model of Christ. Christ’s twisted hands and flayed skin on his feet are truly hard to observe. The strangest thing is that the artist of the Gabelkreuz painstakingly and passionately carved every wound and pocket of decayed flesh in order to summon the presence of the perfect and immaterial body of Christ. Similar with the book of Kells, the obsessive attention to detail and surface in Gabelkreuz was created through very rhythmical and repetitive

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motions. In *Gabelkreuz*, the wounds look surprisingly identical and formally appealing. The artist probably makes them by pushing a drill into the wood just a bit. Not only the wounds look ugly and painful but they also function as spots and decorative elements.

Gabelkreuz complicate the paradox of internal-external, beauty and ugliness in the process of imitation of the ideal. For medieval Christians, the deformity of Christ’s body was a true reminder of *imitatio*. The contemplation of our inner person and interior vision will form transcendental beauty as distinct from our exterior selves, deformities and weaknesses. This is what Christians call the true perfection of the image of Christ that is stamped in every believer’s heart.

The idea of embodiment of the Divine and the reproduction of icons explain the role of sign as object of veneration that is believed to have the same divine power as the original. The deep desire of medieval believers to see the Divine triggered the reproduction of the Veronicas in the early 13th century. With these reproductions, the public had access to an experience of inner, Christ-like transformations through the kissing and touching of the image. Inspired by Hans Memling and Rogier van der Weyden’s painting of Christ giving his blessing, Durer pictures himself transfigured as Christ, fixing his eyes towards the viewer. His symmetrical golden face is adorned with glowing curly hair while his hands are gently touching the fur coat. Durer portrays himself as both individual and icon.

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In his writing in the 19th century, the author Baudelaire created an interesting connection between the natural and the supernatural in the context of artifice. He suggests that cosmetics are tools for women to defy the natural and to embody the supernatural, as a form of animism. Artists throughout the history of portraiture and icon painting have been attempted to shape the supernatural into physical being through the suggestion of the soul and spirit that are present in the figure. Baudelaire also suggested that it was more natural to be artificial than it was to deny ourselves the opportunity to fake perfection. He recognized that it was natural to desire perfection and unnatural to be ok with what we were given. Fashion Photography resemble Baudelaire’s concept of the intimate relationship between the natural and the artifice.

In my own painting, the constant challenge to define perfection is mediated by the combining the aesthetic of fashion photography and Byzantine icon paintings. I’m interested in the transformation potential of materials in the process of working and re-working the surface of painting. My method of working with dry on dry watercolor has a closed affinity with Wyeth’s application of egg tempera. The layers need to be dry in order to absorb the subsequent colors while still maintaining the crispness of lines. This method of layering is different, for example, from the spontaneity of wet on wet and the soft edges produced in the watercolors of such artists as Turner or Homer.

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In *Gunter*, I was interested in combining both decorative shapes derived from magnified projection of patterns and deliberate invention of shapes on the paper. Rhythmic motion and repetition of shapes function to evoke the internal-external through the use of abstraction and representation. The hyper-realistic rendering in a way confuses the boundaries between them. The likeness of the model is interrupted with a screen of patterns in an attempt to restrict our reciprocal gaze with the subject. The psychedelic use of fluorescent color suggests refracted lights that are spreading on the model’s skin and his surrounding environment. The placement and installation of *Gunter* and other works requires that it is displayed so it floats via pins a few inches away from the wall. Although the paper has a wavy surface, this placement of the painting puts emphasis on the paper allows the work to assert itself separately from the wall. This independence from the wall intensifies the flatness of the paper while at the same time projecting outward, the perception of illusionary space on the surface of the painting.
Figure 3. Gunter, 22”x30”, Watercolor, Tempera, Acrylic and Ink on Paper, 2012
Chapter 2: The Uncanny and The Crisis of The Ideal

Reflecting on the idea of the inaccessibility of ideal representation in the medium, I bring the crudeness of paint to the surface. In the *Sunglasses (Blue)*, the bright blue background suspends the figure and reflects the light that radiates from the yellowish skin tones. The painting presents both the type of model seen in commercial photography as well as a brief glimpse of individuality through the imperfect rendering of her features. *The sunglasses#2-Blue* brought up a question on the other existing type of ideal in the form of imperfection, which also subvert the notion of ideal in fashion photography.

Far from ugliness but lying somewhere between the threshold of beauty and imperfection are the uncanny depictions of mundane human reality. Juergen Teller creates infamous works that capture the imperfections of supermodels and actresses. Teller has had a long collaboration with famous designers and design houses such as Marc Jacobs, Yves Saint Lauren and Celine. Instead of emphasizing the superficial beauty of his model, Teller captures the imperfect skin texture and the sagging eyes and breasts of his subjects in a way that had not previously been seen in fashion photography. The lighting in Teller’s photographs seems very harsh and un-flattering. The reality in his photographs somehow becomes more appealing
than the plastic/doll-like quality that had previously been considered the norm in the fashion world.

Figure 4. Sunglasses#2-Blue, Watercolor and Acrylic on Paper, 22"x30", 2011
This subtle twist of reality in the depiction of individuality and the confusion between the real and the unreal is also inherent in the paintings Jean Dominique Ingres. In addition to the precision and tightness of his technique, Ingres made use of strange lighting and unusual skin tones making the figures appear dead.

Figure 5. Ingres, Madame de Sennones, 106 x 84 cm, Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes, France, 1814-1816

Through these imperfections, we are asked to see something beyond the figure, perhaps another point of focus, which remains open for the viewer’s interpretation. Different with Teller’s depiction of imperfection, Ingres’ figures are idealized—their skin is impossibly smooth. The figures in his painting seem to have very pliant limb that can fold into the composition based on the artist’s intention. The use of lighting and technique of oil painting are very strange.

In the similar quality of feeling, I painted the *Seated Woman* based on an existing commercial photograph. The ghostly image of the young woman evokes the unnatural color of her skin. The ambiguous lighting and cloud-like shape surrounds her support the uncertainty of her character and the hidden narrative of the painting. Her gaze is directed towards the top right margin of the paper as to suggest the source of light. The white of the paper becomes the skin for the figure and the lights in the space.
Figure 6. Seated Woman, Watercolor on Paper, 45"x33", 2010

The obsession to embody an ideal is further explored in contemporary art. Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Nikki Lee, Adrian Piper and Eleanor Antin are working with the problem of the crisis of the ideal by playing roles and taking on
identities in order to bridge the gap between the individual and society. In this context, the embodiment of the ideal is pictured in the process of becoming and subverted in relation to notions of the sublime. What makes me interested in these artists is that they are trying to bring popular culture into their definition of the ideal self as it occurs within a social construct.

The big differences between my paintings and the work of the artists in this section is that I don’t make self portraits, at least not yet. The process of becoming and iconization of the subject interest me more than the pre-occupation with self-portrait as the icons. Furthermore, I believe that the process of interpretation and staging of composition become the act of becoming where the subject and the artist are manifested as one in the painting.
Chapter 3: Collage, Montage and The Margins of the Body

In my painting, I equate the margin of the body with the margin of painting and collage. I’m drawn to the breaking point and the continuous aspect of looking at painting and collage. I use collage to bring the flat surface into real space by creating different elevations. Picasso’s construction of Still Life with Guitar (1913) successfully brings the literal flat painting into three-dimensional aspect of sculpture. The bas-relief structure has the ability to push the depth of the collage into a suggestion of a shallow depth.

*Figure Shift* plays with different three-dimensional elevations that look like bas-relief. These elevations reminded us of pinball games, vernacular imagery and fragmented film screen. Using two existing watercolor portraits, I cut and pasted parts that have varying height from the base surface. This process of re-structuring the surface through weaving of shapes and colors that are assembled and put together breaks down the structures of the previous portraits. The figure morphs into the background as in camouflage. Within this construct, composite of forms and collage are moving back and forth within the space of painting.
Figure 7. Figure Shift, 22"x30"x4", Prints and Collage from Two Existing Watercolor Portraits, 2012
My fascination with parts and whole in collage, leads me to play with order, sequence and composition inspired by the experience when we are watching a film. The ability of cinema to create an internal experience is highly dependent on montage, through which the gap and the cut between each scene unconsciously become invisible through the whole reading of a film. The mechanics of film has further inspired my questions regarding the nature of representation in painting.

The idea of internal-external, pain and pleasure as a form of devotion is inherent in the depiction of the Gabelkreuz, as well as in devotional film such as The Passion of Joan of Arc (French: La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc) by Carl Theodore Dreyer in 1928. As an early silent cinema, Dreyer brilliant use of montage supports the strength of compositional balance, symbolism and expression as in painting. The strength of this film is the iconization and the role shift between actress Renée Jeanne Falconetti and the image of Joan of Arc. Falconetti is immortalized as the female martyr and we, as the viewer take her as the ideal model of virtue while simultaneously understanding her as a living actor.

Inspired by cinematic images and montage, I painted Girl on the Grass (2011). I was not intending to make painting to be like film and vice versa; instead I was fascinated to think of it as a tableau vivant where the forms are distilled with no beginning and end. The multiple ordering of images creates different ways of reading and thus multiple interpretations. In other words, it’s the hypothetical montage that inspires the work although films have deep impression on how I approach it. In my other paintings, I used patterns to challenge the limit our
perception. I painted the space surrounding the figure into an excess of fragments and repetitive shapes. I use a limited color palette inspired by the monochromatic aspect of early cinema, to suggest a nostalgic recollection, and detachment from reality.

Figure 8. Girl on the Grass, 74"x44", Watercolor on Paper, 2011

The green shades and the white of the paper make up the girl's skin so that it looks pale and un-natural. The shadow of the leaves that falls onto the girl's face creates an interaction between the left and right painting which supports the slowness of looking. The realism in the paintings does not show a definite picture of
what the painting is about, or the identity of the girl on the grass. My intention is to bring a space into my painting that ambiguously functions as a support to the body that seems to almost disappear.

The mechanics of film, repetition, sequence, animation and distillation of forms are further explored in the *Four Figures*. The painting confuses the order and sequence of beginning and end. Theoretically, the painting could evolve more but the excess of patterns and repetition stops at the frozen moment according to the margin of the paper.

In the painting, four figures emerge from a chaotic pattern that fills the entire surface of the painting. The figures are all walking in the same direction, as if they are taken from sequential imagery from film stills. The clarity of the figures' contours is broken into puzzle pieces and they almost disappear into the background. Cutouts of body parts taken from magazines are intertwined with the foliage pattern surrounding the main figures. Cutouts of male and female bodies are attached to one another in a complete fusion of hermaphroditic characteristics. The colors, patterns and bodies collapse and the edges of things are blended into a sinuous path. Branches become legs; eyebrows, hands and hair continuously support one another. The magazine print of women’s luminous skin becomes the color of sunset sky and drying autumn leaves.
In this collage-based painting, the flat, ornamented surface transforms the image into a camouflage screen seen from ahead on. The line that forms the lower ground divides the whole picture plane horizontality and vertically. The elaborate pattern is coded with notes in the background, which act as instructions for colors in certain areas. This seemingly ordered system was subsequently betrayed in the
process of making the painting. For example: the letter ‘b’ indicates not only purple but also pink, orange and yellow ochre, etc. The painting confuses the boundaries between clarity and order, repetition and the breaking of continuity. While referring back to the photographic images, the tension between paint and photographic imagery is established as the edges of shapes and colors compete with one another for a surface that goes back and forth into the shallow depths. Only the lower ground that has the most neutral colors and plain ground supports the fragmented image from disintegrating.

The multitude of repetitions of bodies, patterns mimics the repetition in films and the process in which the painting is made recalls the animate and stillness of the tableau.
Chapter 4: Live Painting

I’m interested in the strategies implemented by medieval and renaissance artists to create schemes of representation. Artists in these periods believe that by utilizing a formulaic schema that they would be able to represent the “essence” of a subject in its true form, thereby endowing the painting with a soul. What’s even more fascinating is the idea that the scheme simultaneously represents both the truth and the ideal form. This rigid yet liberating system is dependent on a specific formula. Unlike the Byzantine construct of rigid formula, my portraits were made through the process of observation and staging that is closer to the Renaissance scheme of painting from life. I establish a set design in my studio and direct the whole painting session. The experience of being in the present, painting the figure is important for my process in trying to experiment with my own scheme of representation.

In my painting, Angel, I was particularly fascinated by the contrast between the idealized body in the naturalistic depictions of male figures in Renaissance art and the non-sexualized bodies of saints in Byzantine paintings. These two different schemas for capturing likeness have provided fascinating tools for me to experiment with in live painting.
Figure 10. Angel, 45"x47", Watercolor and Tempera on Paper, 2012

Even though Angel is closer to Renaissance’s scheme, I’m also bringing together the style of commercial fashion photography and the surface and composition of Byzantine icon paintings. The application of gold in Byzantine icons does work somewhat differently, possibly because it’s hammered gold leaf or
because it is made up of gold-colored glass in a mosaic. The application of gold paint in Angel happens on both the top of the paper as well as underneath the painted figure. This method produces the shimmering effect that situates the source of light as emanating from the figure while also creating a seductive surface.

Unlike the frontal view of most Byzantine icons, I incorporate the ¾ pose common in Northern Renaissance portraits. The space surrounding the figure is ambiguous and flat, produced through the harsh process of adding and scrubbing away multiple layers of paint. By incorporating acrylic, latex, tempera, glue, gel mediums and sandpaper in the painting, I was able to work with construction and deconstruction while still responding to the paper’s ability to withstand the harshness of the process.

Angel’s gesture suggests the exposing and covering of his body, bringing the quality of both masculine and feminine. In the middle Ages, Christ was sometimes considered as both masculine and feminine. The wound in his chest is pictured as an opening and a source of love, as milk that overflows through a mother’s breast. The challenge of uniting two opposing ideas has been a continued interest to my own practice. By bridging together the spiritual elements and the stylistic aspects of commercial photography, I would like to question the role of the norm in shaping our expectation of the ideal body as to diversify our understanding of the problems of representation.
Chapter 5: The Painting as the Subject

Thinking through the subject and material of painting, I’m searching for something beyond the intentional operation of ‘effect’ and techniques. The sensation that we feel when witnessing a gunpowder explosion is wondrous and dramatic. Merely imitating it just seems incapable of producing the sensation of its explosive quality. I’m challenging the possibility of making the ‘wondrous’ sensation through the work by producing an excess of colors, patterns and the use of new materials in order to challenge the limits of our perceptual expectations when confronting the seemingly decorative.

In his book, Leonardo’s Incessant Last Supper, Leo Steinberg points out that painting’s materiality could be in itself the subject and the ‘miracle’ of the painting. Steinberg uses the example of the miraculous event of Jesus and Peter walking on water to express a transformation of the water as it gravitates toward the divine rather than an embodiment of divine power via the human figures.

In The Last Supper, a famous fresco by Leonardo Da Vinci, Steinberg pointed out the distortion of perspective in the painting as the ‘miracle’ of the space surrounding the Divine. Christ is sitting in the center of the picture plane and the lines are receding toward his head establishing the vanishing point for the painting’s one-point perspective. The perspective of the space, which doesn’t support the rule
of foreshortening in perspective, becomes an intentional operation that creates the transformative ‘effect’ in the painting’s appearance. Like the miracle of walking on water, the space that surrounds the Divine is materially transformed into the space of painting.

This fascination with a kind of in-between space and the figure is shown in Michael. The flat patterns and colors on the paper simulate the effect of silkscreen printing. In the painting the separation between solid body and excessive patterns are set in contrast but the margins are blurred through surface treatment and repetition. The figure becomes the center of gravity while the space is revolving around him. Michael looks unaware of the chaotic environment that envelops him. He remains static and calm as he rests his arm on the chair. This appearance of the fatigue of the beautiful male figure is expressed through the softness of his arms and legs that appear as bundles of fabric. The sudden cropping at the bottom margin of the picture provides an interruption for the overwhelming space. The painting reminds the viewer of the Girl on the Grass because of the figure’s gaze, cast out beyond the limit of the paper. In Michael, there is a less relational quality of the gaze, which allows him to become the object of the viewer’s focus. We are left to wonder where or what he is viewing.
Thinking through the intention of technique, the subject, and the materiality of paint, I would like to further examine the systems of painting and the transformations that come about through repetition and various surface treatments.
It is through this continued examination of the image and its relation to the physical material that I hope to uncover new ways of experiencing a re-definition of the hidden structures in representational painting.
Conclusion

The system of figurative painting and the question of the ideal have been a constant interest in my practice and research. The impossibility of painting perfection allows me to engage in an active research of the artist’s intention in representing people and holy subjects within the history of painting and popular culture. The art historical periods I’ve chosen to focus on are: Byzantine, Medieval, and Renaissance with addition to Contemporary Fashion photography and Cinema. Informed by the various mediums that Classical and Contemporary artists have employed in their art practices, I move forward fascinated by the fact that painting continues to involve itself in the task of constructing systems to represent the ideal.

This research has also led me to examine the different ways in which my work engages with perfection and notions of the ideal. In the first chapter, for example, I compared the meticulous rendering of the Book of *Kells* and Wyeth’s *Braids* with the grotesque *Gabelkreuz*. In chapter two, I explored the idea of the uncanny and the crisis of an ideal that is embedded with imperfection and distortions, despite the painstaking techniques of rendering that endow the figure with superhuman qualities. It is to these sources of unnatural depiction and imperfection that my practice responds as a way of countering the established norm of beauty in portraiture.
Working with collage and paper, I'm also intrigued by the margins of the body as well as the continuity and breakage in the reading of the work. I explore both the literal surface of my collage and the illusionistic space of flat painting. I incorporated decorative elements through shapes and colors and tight representations of the figure alongside the chaotic elements. For me, the painting weaves abstraction and representation with the internal and external systems that structure the work.

The aspect of nature and artifice is also significant in my thought process. I work with both observation painting and staged photography. The breaking of the sublime by popular culture provides a ground for me to re-construct new ideals. Finally, I returned back to the medium of painting as the subject. I believe that the union between technique, paint and paper to construct a space about painting will replace the notion that perfection can only be addressed by producing a masterpiece, and take the viewer deep inside its material environment. Momentarily escaping the normative expectations of the outside world the viewer can relax his or her guard and become absorbed by the work. The hope is, that by engaging with the painting, the viewer will be able to co-create a new understanding of the ideal through an active participation, not unlike a devotional act.
References


Appendix A: Inspirations and Influences

The following is a list of inspirations that have persistently influenced my thought process in the studio. The list ranges from thought provoking painters, choreographer, writer and film directors, whom I found a lot of connections with the way they are trying to define perfection and the ideals through spiritual experience, re-definition of mediums and the notion of accessibility. Their pursuit of the ideals has enriched my work both visually and conceptually.

Vincent van Gogh
Eduard Manet
Andy Warhol
Eduard Vuillard
Gerhard Richter
Pina Bausch
Fyodor Dostoevsky
Ukiyo-e
The Virgin Spring
Blow-Up
The Passion of Joan of Arc
That Obscure Objects of Desire
Andrei Rublev
Nostalgia
The Offering
Solaris
Dark Night of the Soul
Yasujiro Ozu (小津安二郎)
Chen Hongshou (陳洪綬)