“I Quit,” A Contradiction

Thesis

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Abstract

In a storm of pressure, social obligation and misperception, the ability to investigate creativity and meaning is unique, and upon reflection, this thesis inquiry is the first step of recovery from a Master of Fine Arts. From this experience, I produced three pieces which were created as a single work for the Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, “The Mirage And The Rainbow,” entitled: “Cream Dreamy,” “It’s The Invisible Expectation,” and, “Seems Fine.” In this thesis, I am returning to the center of the storm and evaluating the discoveries made while considering the idea and expectation of the professional artist. To be specific, I am investigating an atmosphere, the characteristics of a place, subsequent abilities to create and perceive, and ultimately, how this process developed something made.
Dedication

Dedicated to the conversation of the Master of Fine Arts program at The Ohio State University
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# Table of Contents

Abstract.............................................................................................................................................ii  
Dedication........................................................................................................................................iii  
Acknowledgments............................................................................................................................iv  
Vita....................................................................................................................................................v  
List of Figures.......................................................................................................................................vii  
Introduction.........................................................................................................................................1  
I Quit...................................................................................................................................................1  
The Subject That “Was”....................................................................................................................7  
Catalogue-Books and a Wall Piece..................................................................................................15  
Now What?..........................................................................................................................................20  
Bibliography.......................................................................................................................................21
List of Figures

Figure 1. Early studio work............................................................................................................3
Figure 2. Early studio work............................................................................................................3
Figure 3. Holes..................................................................................................................................4
Figure 4.”Quit” by Ed Ruscha.............................................................................................................5
Figure 5. “Sup’ Internet”...................................................................................................................7
Figure 6. First use of computer-page imagery................................................................................12
Figure 7. Computer-page samples...................................................................................................13
Figure 8. “The Mirage And The Rainbow,” thesis exhibition .........................................................17
Figure 9. “It’s The Invisible Expectation”......................................................................................18
Figure 10. “Cream Dreamy”............................................................................................................19
Introduction

My artist intention is to make nothing; it’s a pretty practical plan, and the only way to focus on a broader set of issues that have creative possibilities. One consequence of making nothing is that there is no consequence—an idea that gives me momentum to focus and create work. Reflecting back to where my mind needs to be in order to create, I have come to realize that the physical where that I work has had the greatest impact on my projects throughout the process of their execution. In addition, although little aware of the kind of science behind atmospheres and quotidian landscapes (including their scale, color, texture, and etc.), I am positive that the pervading characteristics surrounding a place demonstrate commanding properties to the psyche. For an obvious example of what I have just described, consider nurse uniforms which are often printed with happy bunnies and dancing cupcakes—purposeful to influence a specific characteristic tone to a specific place (using the leverage of visual image). I would like to investigate the power of places that I have experienced, and divulge the impact of their atmospheres on my creative process and resulting body of thesis work.

I Quit

The first year of my MFA, I shared a studio with a painter who made a massive painting of red, sinewy, and meaty human parts; a tangled mass of bodies, leering teeth, and tissue. This
piece hung ten feet wide and twelve feet tall across an entire wall the whole year. At the time, and I don’t think this was naive, I conceptualized that the “professional, working artist,” worked in a studio space, a magic-wizard center where art happened. I never had a studio space before, I never considered myself an artist before either. Imagine as an introductory experience, sharing a studio space with a big, hanging, paper-slab of meat-flesh.

As you could probably guess, my first studio atmosphere had interesting consequences to my art inception. Sitting in that space prompted an imagined authoritative voice to instruct in my mind, “in a studio space, you must make art,” “the professional artist works in a studio,” however, as I continued to remain in that atmosphere, another voice (circumstance of the big meat painting), started to chime in the word “meat.” “In a studio space, you must make MEAT art,” and “the professional artist works in a MEAT studio.” I started to think in an honest measure of distress, about Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story about the yellow wallpaper. Everyone has slightly manic tendencies, I started to notice how sharp all my pencils were, and how little they made marks. This visually confrontational atmosphere made everything (literally and figuratively) severe, sharp and red—that painting-presence was eating me and my work with all of it’s teeth.

I would believe that most artist’s want to control how they use the studio, and unfortunately, this desire was the first mistake that I made in that space. The visual tension surrounding the execution of any project resulted in actual consequences to my process. Because I consciously or unconsciously thought that you had to make art in the studio, the only art things

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1 Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a short story about a woman confined to a room due to her doctor/husband’s questionable diagnoses. Because of her confinement she becomes – in various levels of psychosis – enthralled and disturbed by a particular yellow wallpaper that decorates the space.
that I managed to produce were representations of holes and big empty spaces—forms with big bites out of their centers. I painted things without middles (the space and everything behind it), I drew big frames with charcoal (which I sometimes filled), I pulled out scissors and cut out the holes ... eventually I had to make myself quit because I came to a standstill. It turns out that you can’t make a hole deeper than a cut when using a piece of paper; sure, there is an activity of filling and blocking-up, but on the whole, this process became destructive to everything that I had permitted myself to consider as art up to this point—specifically to my tagline as “a printmaker.”
The word “quit” has the biggest empty hole of all, especially when the “Q” is capitalized. It is a big looming letter-mouth, that can eat the rest of itself, and other things. I quit thinking of the studio space as a functional space, and I quit thinking that art was a rational discipline. Being a realist first, I knew that I was not going to quit graduate school, but I also knew that I had to quit making art, or trying to be a “professional artist.” Just the same, “To quit,” is a verb that might truly be the sneakiest—each time that an, “I quit,” happens, something else starts at almost the exact moment as a quitting contradiction. When my, “I quit,” happened, I made a decision to
take my pencils and a stack of computer paper home away from the studio space. These materials were nothing to the art world that I understood, they were not art materials, and I knew I could use them without any consequences. I drew and wrote whatever I wanted, specific and non-objective, on stacks and stacks of computer paper, and thought of them as soliloquies.

I came across a gunpowder drawing, a surreal reverie by Ed Ruscha, which gave me some context at this point during my MFA. His piece called “Quit,” is an image of the written word in a font of curled paper ribbon, suspended over a crunched pencil; the pencil-object draws on a perimeter path, a line around the edge of the hovering word “Quit.”

Figure 4. Ed Ruscha, “Quit,” gunpowder pigment, colored pencil, 1967
This drawing influenced how I thought about images, and transformed what I thought about text. I recognized the floating text and peripheral pencil that existed in an artificial, suspended pool of space—as this space was visually similar to how I approached the spaces of my computer-paper meditations. While working I hesitated, skirted even around the perimeters of what “was” whatever subject I happened to draw or write about—I myself recognized it for what it represented, which seemed to be enough; and if there was one thing that I was vaguely aware of all along, it was that I needed to keep my pencil on the peripheral outline, and not land somewhere in the obvious.

I began to visually investigate text, and the quickening power that it has in employing a narrative within an image. I took classes on narrative theory, read a lot of Barthes and I also developed a new consuming habit of reading short stories. This is where the questions started: what are these computer-paper things? why the writing? what is the imagery and why do a lot of the representations seem familiar? does this have personal significance, and if so, what is the original form? Asking these questions led to an organization of the material, and at that time, my central question for the stacks was to find patterns within them. In returning to these inquiries, I have come to a comprehensive conclusion that the subjects came from spaces where I have been. Spaces recollected as physical and mental landscapes, and the autobiographical experiences and histories that happened within these spaces.
It seems appropriate to offer a sample of what was written and drawn on the computer pages in order to demonstrate the complexity of material that I was dealing with. I have chosen to include two narratives and several examples of visual imagery; these are all untitled.\(^2\) I have specifically chosen a pattern of examples that seem to deal with perception—the specific perspective that ultimately served to shape my thesis work. Following these representations, I

\(^2\) It is worth mentioning that these narratives have been slightly altered in order to present them in an appropriate and grammatical format—they are not direct copies from the written form, as the originals are even more rococo in structure. I never actually intended to read or use any of these stories when I originally wrote them.
have included a plausible analysis of how these stories were taken from their written idea and deliberately structured with “art” materials into a body of work. This analysis includes: the subsequent resolutions and tensions, possible ambiguities between form and content and a description of the work. The actual work comprised of three separate pieces entitled, “Cream Dreamy,” “It’s The Invisible Expectation!” and “Seems Fine,” which were exhibited together as one installation at the Urban Arts Space in the MFA thesis exhibition, “The Mirage and the Rainbow,” in 2014:

Written around June 2012

Almost everything perceived on an ocean floor blobs around with the current and hazes into incomprehensible, farsighted landscapes. Negotiating underwater deals preemptively with the peripheral edges of a fogged mask, where the pressures of the depth pinch the foam around your cheek; a strain-and-pulley tension from an invisible source that weights the eyes, the lungs, and the heart. A hyper-awareness of the mass and velocity of the body fills the mind—the gentle twisting of a vest, the bobbing weight of a rubber line resting in hand. Here the sound and task of breath fills beyond the ears into every thought and movement, and the direction of the eye helplessly follows pelotons of carbon dioxide bubbles in stage to the surface. This breath, while the loudest thing, is a micro-moment in proportion to fathoms and leagues of syrupy water—the diminished space of the compressed lungs labor in descent, and a spectacle too huge to comprehend fills the entire volume of the eyes.
There is little (if any), body and mind space left to perceive monsters that are looking at you. The water is filled with creatures, slimy coatings, textures of turquoise, craggy, jutting choral, and a blue so heavy, permeating, murky and infinite. If a photo taken of a site – upon later investigation – reveals hidden creatures stacked in ocean shelves, and inconceivable diversities of color, how then, can the actual perspective of the eye be relied upon to summarize a truthful perception? Is it possible to create an accurate atmosphere of meaning while in such a constricted physicality? On the other hand, the heart, lungs and other organs tell the truth, they exist to push and pull, to collapse and expand function. The intestines – for example – swirled around in your guts, aspire more truth in a single enzymatic reaction than a lifetime of compared visual and mental perceptions. The eye is about as reliable as the photograph, and where both often project a determination of truth, they can also deceive with aggressive persuasion.

Meaning seems to be an atmosphere, a perspective landscape created as a function of compaction under pressure; this pressure is invisible on the surface, but is just as real as the the pressures of the sea, and comes from forces, other people, and yourself.

Written around December 2013

On the mountain the weather swats at you, even on the most gentle of days. The sun with a brilliant, zinging, white fury. The snow and its variants, in assorted cyclic pressures, pummeling across every surface. While the body is largely protected from the conditions, in other ways it is ridiculously exposed on raw territory: steeps, valleys, sweeps and climbs. Thin air weaves your
cardiovascular system into a grimace, the glare and wind squint your eyes into tears, and your chin into a chapped tan.

I am a girl on the mountain. I crisp over textures, heavy handed and loud—other times (when really fortunate), I pitch down a fall line of the softest marshmallow-pudding fields which fill my mouth with a sour and wet, creamy-crunch. Here in speed is where my snap-judgement configures itself over obstacles, negotiating, and resonating—the strongest metals bend like a magic trick.

Perception is based on gear, protection, and then skill—or at least that is what one would think. If you are a girl on the mountain, your volume of perception is noted in the same split-instant, snap judgement of a slalom turn. Neither the weight of memorized muscles under thudding centrifugal force, nor the tendons and snaps of a pronated inside heel make any difference to the unbending metal of “the imperious gaze.”

To return however, to the direct, imperious gaze: which does not evade, hesitate, freeze, flinch. Analysis has also foreseen this case: such a gaze can be the fascinium, the wicked spell, the evil eye, whose effect is to arrest movement and to kill life.3

Here on the mountain, an “evil eye” is materialized by a gazer (male or female), shot as an invisible expectation and pattern to an atmosphere. Here a single thought can arrest authority and kill assurance.

I had to stand next to a balloon of perception blown out of proportion on the mountain almost every day. I puffed out my stature, I puffed out my words, my qualifications puffed out

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shimmering from my jacket, “puff, puff.” As much as I puffed, my air could not enter the balloons because they were already overfilled with the most incorruptible materials: steel, a really hard rock, a diamond the size of a water cooler. Sometimes, all that I could manage to do is chip off a small corner of a balloon, and compulsively like a child I would put it in my mouth, a small and weird hard candy; Around and around my tongue it would go, melting slowly, tasting sweet and proud.

It is astonishing to me how aggressively a human body will act when it relies on eye and mind perceptions: truth! the most corrupted truth without adaptability or variety! “How many gazes are thus merely instruments of a single finality: I gaze at what I am looking for, and finally, if one may advance this paradox, I see only what I gaze at.”

I had to try my best to pop the balloons, to dash the rocks, and to send them floating into proportion. Sometimes, I pushed my supposed influence-weaknesses to the forefront just to see a more dramatic burst: the bursting was often quite dazzling. There you perceive while noticeably squinching your features.

A few patterns between these examples are quite evident to me now. The choice of words in the writings, words like: pressure, volume, perception, descriptions of the body, and moods of atmospheres. These are the patterns that have shaped my creativity during my stay here in the midwest. I know I have missed the landscapes of the west where I am from, and it looks like memories from there, as well as a poignant gesture of perception, have been leaking all over my stacks of computer pages. The writing is a little cryptic, there is an indication of specific autobiographical histories and specific places, however, there is no direct narrative—the imagery

4 Ibid.
as well can be recognized to demonstrate similar characteristics of the atmospheres, but are represented, for the most part, in a symbolic nature. Ed Ruscha’s crunched perimeter pencil comes to mind again, skirting around the edge of the page and the dominant subject of the floating text: there is quite a bit of floating text screen-printed on my thesis project.

Figure 6. Untitled, screen-print, 2013 (First computer-page imagery)
Figure 7. Sample computer page drawings, pencil, gouache, ink, 2014
For the thesis exhibition, I chose to narrow my focus to a single idea of perception. I made this choice as the specific narratives had too many ambiguities and seemed to confine my work to a limited collaboration with a possible audience—it turns out that I am not at all interested in illustrating a narrative either. By condensing the narrative into an inventory of the material (which is what the computer-pages were anyway), into a catalogue, I felt that this would lend a viewer to create a new perception. As a small sample of representation in a specific moment within my inquiry, the work I created in tandem with this thesis research all dealt with the intent to create an atmosphere of perception. Whether this perception is correct or not as it pertains to a “real” or “true” perception was not the inquiry, but how to interpret illusion and misperception as keys to understanding a path of meaning through direct experience; I wanted to manufacture an object that approached this idea. I had no intuitive intention to make this work, but, I had to make this work in order to fulfill an organized requirement; while this may sound acidic, it is not, it is merely a reflection on how the physical form of my work became what it ultimately did while in an atmosphere of pressure.

There were many obstacles I experienced during the physical production of the pieces. For some reason, I concluded that the computer pages were not going to be the work (although I now relentlessly question that logic), but I understood printmaking as an “art” material and had been particularly interested in how screen-printing layered on transparent vellum; I had no idea however, how I could display the vellum with its properties. After much back and forth deliberation, I decided to hand-bind the sheets of vellum into a book—and while I was committed to this decision, I did not know how I was going to retain the transparent quality of the pages with
a heavy book-cover. This problem turned out to be the most difficult, agonizing even. I had many people offer me hundreds of suggestions which complicated the matter greatly, and ultimately I made a choice to integrate the catalogue-book onto the surface of a custom-built table (the table acting as the cover). The catalogue-book could then be approached comfortably, the pages turned without too much effort, and the book as an object of furniture, a characteristic of place.

After conceptualizing these objects, I realized that I wanted to push the idea of atmosphere without necessarily turning the work into an installation. This idea evolved into a wall piece that could exist as a compliment to the objects and cause the eye and body of a viewer to move throughout the space to experience the imagery. This idea of movement is a pattern that I have noticed in all the work that I conceptualize.

Catalogue-Books and a Wall Piece

“Cream Dreamy,” and, “It’s The Invisible Expectation!” are two separate works that operate in the same way. Both pieces are bound catalogue-books made up of screen-printed transparent vellum pages, permanently fixed onto the surface of a wooden table. The tables are wax-stained, have tapering legs, and are taller than a standard table; the top of the tables reflect a translucency, where through a velvety sheet of frosted plexiglass, a punctuation of cut-out shapes and interior light are revealed from the inside of the table structure. Directional appeal reflected by the materials can persuade an advancement, a request for reveal through a movement of the foot, or the touching and turning of an imperfectly transparent page. The hand can unveil an
intimate atmosphere of meaning through levels of evolving perception as the screen-printed images on the pages collaborate while turning, in their various levels of transparency.

Screen-printed imagery uncovers floating references of experience with perception on the catalogue-book pages: cotton bulges of text, say “puff, puff” and “it’s the invisible expectation!” CMYK process candies and rocks float in speech bubbles and are figuratively concerned with the audible. Halftone ice-creams sandwich a literal human bust of confection in dreamy, dissected sections of brain. The atmosphere of my body is represented there in imagery: my memory, my thought, and my form, all modified from the computer-page stacks.

Directly behind the tables upon the wall during the exhibition, “Seems Fine,” a composition of paper forms were installed in the Urban Arts Space to further the comparative aspect of the concept in a graduated range of scale, color and height. The paper cut-out shapes of language-filled speech bubbles and snow puffs rely on visual elements found in the book-catalogue to propose a situation of misperception. The paper text represents language and morphs upon the wall, weighting up the mentally spoken on an imperious path.
Figure 8. (l-r) “It’s the Invisible Expectation,” “Seems Fine,” “Cream Dreamy, 2014
Figure 9. “It’s The Invisible Expectation,” 2014
Now What?

Now that I have made these things, exhibited them and am reflecting upon the results, I have come to a few conclusions: first, is that over the course of my MFA I have had many shifts of understanding about my capacity as an artist, second, is that I need a different weight of pressure (other than that of a degree-designated obligation) to exhibit my work. I have come to evaluate what I had previously considered expectations, and have developed a different view on the domain scholastically and socially: I do not need a studio to compose ideas, I do not need to make work that hangs on a wall in a frame, I do not need to show the work that I make in a gallery, and I do not need to work quickly. The fact and truth of the matter is that I make work whether I intend to or not, only I can decide how that work should develop and only I can decide what to do with it once it is made.

Creating work under the pressure of a thesis exhibition has not the best way for me to work either, and the real question for my future is how do I push myself to collaborate with an audience; who is my audience? where is my audience located? and is it important to me to sell my work to the audience? While I continue to work whether or not I have an audience, my goals in maintaining my practice are to find out how to make what I create matter to the conversation of art, to stretch an awareness and activity of creativity, and to communicate how these practices can enhance day to day experience.
Bibliography