The Shooting: A Cautionary Tale

THESIS

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

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The Ohio State University

2015

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Abstract

*The Shooting* is a multi-media installation that uses strategies gleaned from comics to present a cautionary tale about juvenile delinquency. While the story itself has a linear sequence, it is told through images and comics embedded throughout a simulated domestic interior. In order to animate the work, the viewer must step into the stage-like set of *The Shooting* and participate directly in assembling the story that is at its core.

In this paper, I discuss the context of *The Shooting*, paying particular attention to the ways in which comics and art intersect. I draw a distinction between the terms “cartoon,” which I use to describe a simplified style of drawing, and “comics,” which I use to describe a way of functioning. Using this as a guideline, I examine connections between the work of fine artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Joseph Cornell, and Ida Applebroog, and comic artists, particularly Chris Ware.

I also discuss narrative structure of *The Shooting*, which utilizes the literary device of a frame narrative. After discussing selected details of the installation, I examine two works that led to *The Shooting* and consider several possible directions for subsequent work.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to the many teachers that have guided me through the swamps and alleys of my life.

I owe a particular debt of gratitude to my artistic mentors, including Rosemary Luckett, William Barnes, Javier Tapia, Mark Kang-O’Higgins, and George Rush.
Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my thanks to my committee members, George Rush, Laura Lisbon, and Todd Slaughter, for all of their help in creating both this thesis and the installation it discusses. I would also like to thank the various members of The Ohio State University faculty with whom I have had the honor to work, including Ann Hamilton, Dani Leventhal, Michael Mercil, Jennifer Schlueter, and Suzanne Silver.

Special thanks to the good people of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, particularly Caitlin McGurk and Susan Liberator, and to Tom De Haven and Jared Gardner, who taught me a great deal about the medium of comics.

Finally, I owe tremendous and undying gratitude to my family and friends, without whose support I would be lost.
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Introduction

The story that unifies *The Shooting* is a work of fiction that is loosely based on actual events from my youth. Over the years, the real-life episode that inspired *The Shooting* has calcified into a neatly bundled story that has become a part of my personal mythology. At its core are troubling questions of personal responsibility and culpability, which keep it relevant in my mind. I wonder why my friend would have done such a horrible and foolish thing. I wonder if there was some way that I could have prevented the events. I wonder at how the entire community failed those three troubled boys, and what kind of justice prevails when a foolish boy is sent to prison for 15 years while a pedophile remains free. But mostly I wonder about what my friend was thinking as he stood there on the doorstep of a stranger with a loaded gun in his hand.

*The Shooting* is also a rumination on the relationship between high and low art– between culturally esteemed fields such as gallery painting, installation, and theater and culturally undervalued fields such as comics, decoration, design, everyday objects, and handicraft. Integrated throughout the work’s form and subject matter, there runs a quiet monologue on my own uneasiness about the position of my work within the gallery and fine art context. I am particularly interested in the ways in which comics and painting intersect. Rather than just appropriating a simplified cartoon style, *The Shooting* explores ways in
which my painting can utilize the narrative strategies of comics to tell a story within a gallery installation.
Chapter 1: The Shooting

*The Shooting* (Fig. 1) was a mixed media installation that was exhibited at Urban Arts Space Gallery in Columbus, Ohio. Positioned in the rear of the gallery on the lower, industrial-feeling level, the installation occupied a transitional space where the upper and lower levels met. The piece occupied a space approximately 14’ x 14’ that was nestled in a large corner and bounded on one side by a large concrete column and by concrete stairs on the other.

The base of the installation was a 10’ x 10’ carpeted platform, on which a simulated domestic interior had been assembled using second-hand furniture. Two stretched muslin panels were fastened to the sides of the platform nearest the gallery corner. These panels were trimmed and painted to give the impression of interior walls, but were built in the manner of theatrical stage flats. Multiple paintings and framed images hung on the walls, and the space was decorated with a number of image-bearing objects. A flickering television screen showed a distorted, static image, and a newspaper Sunday Comics section lay on the coffee table. The main lighting in the scene came from a lamp beside the couch, which was augmented by targeted lighting from the gallery ceiling.
Figure 1: *The Shooting* (Installation View), mixed media, 2015

The tall gallery walls of the corner behind the platform were painted an uneven, matte black. The 2’ space between the platform and the walls was filled with handmade, paper marsh grass, set into a raised cardboard ground. Pieces of actual trash were littered throughout the cardboard area, which angled down to meet the gallery floor in a smooth, fluid curve. The grass, litter, and cardboard were painted uneven black to match the gallery walls.
The sound of crickets and night birds played from the stereo beside the TV, interspersed with the occasional buzzes and clicks of signal interference.

The Story

One morning, Nate Wilbur skips school with two acquaintances, Pete and Evan. The trio spends the morning doing drugs, drinking stolen liquor, and running around the waysides of their suburban neighborhood. As the day wares on, Evan and Pete bring Nate into the plan that they have been secretly harboring. Using a pistol that Pete had stolen from his father, they intend to shoot a well-to-do neighborhood man, Mr. Pasco, and steal his car. Through peer pressure and coercion, Evan and Pete convince Nate to be the gunman. Grudgingly, he knocks on Mr. Pasco’s door and fires a single shot at point blank range. Though Nate intends to kill him, the shot is inexpertly fired, and Mr. Pasco is merely wounded. The boys escape into the woods and hide. After three days of rumor and media circus, the police manhunt captures the boys. In custody and facing trial, Pete hangs himself in his cell. Though never officially corroborated, it comes to light that he had been the victim of molestation by Mr. Pasco, who had been his soccer coach. Evan, for his part, confesses to an addiction to heroin and pins the masterminding of the plan on Pete. Though he was the last to become involved in the plan, Nate is handled severely since he fired the actual shot. He is tried as an adult and convicted of attempted murder and other charges. He receives a lengthy prison sentence and his friends are left to wonder how he came to make such a terrible decision.
The Characters

Nate Wilbur is a personable slacker whose poor judgment leads him to commit the crime. He has an unpleasant, alcoholic father and is the victim of bullying.

Evan is thrill-seeking stoner who is the impetus behind the plan to steal and sell Mr. Pasco’s car. He is addicted to heroin and in search of money. While we are told little about his family, we know that they are wealthy and the source of his destructive behavior.

Pete is an aggressive, athletic bully, who supplies the gun with which to shoot Mr. Pasco, his former soccer coach and probable sexual abuser.

Mr. Pasco is well-to-do realtor who lives in the neighborhood of the three perpetrators. Ostensibly the trio is motivated to kill him in order to steal his luxury automobile. As events unfold, it becomes apparent that the real motive of the crime is rooted in his other role in the community: enthusiastic soccer coach and probable pedophile.

Brenda Scarf is a freelance reporter who is called in to cover the Pasco shooting. She had previously done a puff piece on Mr. Pasco and is convinced that he is a pedophile.

Willie is a minor character that appears throughout the Sunday Comics, he is the friend of Nate and offers observations on the incident.
The Format

The Shooting builds its totality using three distinct concepts of space.

The first type of space is the physical presence of the installation within the gallery. The concerns of this type of space address the direct physical interaction of the work with the viewer and the environment. This includes issues such as the work’s orientation relative to viewers; the ways in which the work interacts with the specific site of Urban Arts Space Gallery, such as walls, columns, and stairs; and the material composition of the work.

The second type of space is one of mimetic representation. Here, the objects in the gallery space are understood to represent a space that the viewer must imagine. The collection of furniture and household items, for example, are not simply objects on a platform, but rather an evocation of a domestic interior with specific connotations. The black-painted grass and walls also function on this level, but present an ambiguous, liminal space that simultaneously evokes the black box of the theater and a trash-strewn marsh.

The third type of space is pictorial and encompasses the central narrative. This level of space is actually an aggregate of individual pictorial spaces that collectively form the imaginary world of the story. An alternate view would cast the pictorial space of the
images as one type of space and the emergent space of the story as a fourth type of space. To me, however, the story and these pictorial spaces cannot be separated. A summary of the plot can be made, but the story itself lives in the embodiment of it, which in this case is the pictorial space.
Chapter 2: Comics

In conceiving of *The Shooting* and the works preceding it, I was heavily influenced by the work of comic artists and the scholarship surrounding them. My interest in studying comics began when I enrolled in a summer term course at Virginia Commonwealth University, which was taught by the author Tom De Haven. Though I had read comics casually since childhood, I had never given consideration to the mechanisms and intricacies of the medium. By analyzing works such as *Jar of Fools* by Jason Lutes, De Haven demonstrated how the composition of visual elements within a comic both guide the reader’s eye and add to the content of the work. This relationship of elements is known as panel dynamics, and over the years it became increasingly important in my own work.

During the decade between that seminar and my arrival at OSU, the field of comics studies has gained a tremendous amount of momentum. The development of the field can be seen in the proliferation of comics-related conferences and symposia, the increased availability of scholarly publication on the subject, and the growth of institutions to collect and study comics.
When I applied to OSU, I had no idea that it was home to the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, which is the world’s largest public archive of American comics and comics-related ephemera. Through this lucky coincidence, I have been able to attend comics-related lectures, conferences, and workshops, as well as study original drawings and converse with the librarians. The BICLM contributed to creating *The Shooting*, both through the ideas it helped me explore and by providing access to the Sunday comics section that I used as a template.

In order to properly contextualize my rationale for creating *The Shooting*, it is helpful to make a sustained digression into some basic comics theory and to discuss some of the cultural and formal intersections of comics and art.

**Comics vs. Cartoons**

On November 3, 2014, the Wexner Center hosted a conversation between the painter Carroll Dunham and the critic Robert Storr. Although I was unable to attend the event, I was able to live-stream the audio as I jostled along on the bus. Listening to these two intelligent men converse, it occurred to me how loosely the terms “comic” and “cartoon” are used outside of comics scholarship. This crystalized a half-formed idea that I had been attempting to address in my work. I had been looking at the narrative strategies of comics as potential solutions to the challenges I faced in my own attempts to tell stories with paint. Yet, I continually found myself stuck for reasons I could not identify. I was attempting to distill some essential quality of comics to import into my work, but instead
repeatedly found myself working only with a handful of stylistic motifs. In listening to Dunham and Storr discuss Dunham’s newer work, it occurred to me that they switched casually between the terms “cartoon” and “comic” as if they were synonyms. This was the problem with which I myself was dealing. I was attempting to learn from comics, but inadvertently found myself referencing cartooning instead. While this may seem like nit-picking, for me it was an important realization that allowed me to clarify how I was thinking about the material.

In its original usage, the term cartoon denotes a simplified, reference drawing made in preparation for a more developed work, such as a fresco or painting. In the 19th century, the word came to be applied to stylized, satirical drawings and subsequently evolved into its current usage.¹

The term comic is a historically derived term that comes from the comic’s early home in the “funny pages” of the newspaper.² Having evolved as a colloquial term, it is problematic both because it implies humor and because its usage was popularized before attempts to define it were made. As such, it is an ill-fitting term, which has spawned

¹ Ron Tyler in *The Image of America in Caricature & Cartoon* (Fort Wayne: Public Library, Fort Wayne, 1975), 2.

² The first publication of comics to use the term “comic” in the title was *Comic Cuts* by Alfred Harmsworth’s Amalgamated Press in 1890. The publication sought to out maneuver the tawdry “penny-dreadfuls” by producing a high volume of wholesome entertainment available for a half-penny. Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix, & Graphic Novels* (London: Phadon Press, 2001), 19.
numerous ill-fitting replacement terms, none of which have fully taken root. Most contemporary practitioners and scholars, however, accept the flawed term and simply work with it. While there are numerous overlapping and competing definitions of comics, one can broadly state that comics are inherently sequential.

In an effort to tease apart the two terms in my own thought, I arrived at the following distinction. “Comics” refers to a way of functioning, while “cartoon” refers to a style of rendering. To illustrate, consider a photograph of a running dog (Fig. 2). Without stepping completely away from the terms as I am using them, this image can neither be described as a comic nor a cartoon. If we add photos of the dog approaching from a distance, passing, and then running off (Fig. 3) the sequence functions as a comic. Yet, this sequence remains decidedly not a cartoon, because it is still made of photographs.

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3 Two widely known alternate terms are “graphic novel” and “comix.” Graphic novel is a term attributed to Will Eisner, though a recent exhibit by the BICLM casts some doubt on this. It fits well for longer, more serious works like Maus or Berlin, but its implication of length fits poorly for shorter works. Moreover, the term graphic novel has a connotation of pretension when applied to works that do not have the necessary gravitas. The term “comix” originated due to the x-rated nature of the underground comics it described, which were a counter-cultural reaction to the constricting rules of the Comics Code. The underground movement that used the moniker was highly political and subversive, but ultimately lost its momentum as did many similar counter-cultural movements of the latter half of the 20th century. Sabin, 92-129.

4 Many early definitions stressed common aspects of content, such as Colton Waugh’s 1947 definition that emphasized the presence of a continuing character. Others such as M. Thomas Inge required that comics be serially printed in newspapers. Later definitions, such as those by Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, focused primarily on formal aspects, such as the interaction of text and images, and the presence of sequential images. Beaty illustrates how problematic all of these formal definitions prove to be, and he argues for a culturally based definition modeled on the idea of the Artworld put forth by Arthur Danto and developed by subsequent authors. Bart Beaty, Comics Versus Art. (Toronto, Buffalo, New York: University of Toronto Press, 2012). 26-48.

5 It is interesting to note that by adding a speech bubble (Fig. 4) the single panel is put into a contentious category. Often called a “gag strip,” the single-panel comic is held to not be a comic by McCloud, whose emphasis is on sequentiality. Beaty, among others, contests McCloud on this by pointing to the gag strip’s place within the tradition of comics. See later footnotes for more discussion on this topic.
Figure 2: Not a cartoon, not a comic

Figure 3: Not a cartoon, but functionally a comic

Figure 4: Not a cartoon, but arguably a comic
Example: Lichtenstein vs. Abruzzo

To see how this cartoon/comic distinction is applicable to painting, we can look at Roy Lichtenstein’s *Sleeping Girl* (Fig. 5) and compare it to the comic from which the image came.

According to the Lichtenstein Foundation’s Image Duplicator website, the image of *Sleeping Girl* is appropriated from the story “Don’t Kiss Me Again” in DC Comic’s 1964 book *Girl’s Romance* #105, by Tony Abruzzo (Fig. 6). The original page consists of two rows of three panels, featuring a conversation in which the comic’s protagonist is lamenting the infidelities of her artist boyfriend.

Figure 5: Roy Lichtenstein, *Sleeping Girl*, 1964

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Figure 6: Tony Abruzzo, “Don’t Kiss Me Again”, Girl’s Romance #105, 1964

The image depicted in Sleeping Girl is a close crop of the protagonist as depicted in the bottom left panel of page. The panel represents a moment of emotional turmoil. In the original context, the rendering of the girl’s face is subtler, with variations in line width and in application of color. Lichtenstein’s rendering, in contrast, has been harshened, drained of movement, and rendered in flat tones and over-sized Ben-Day dots. Text in the original panel allows the reader to interpret the girl’s expression as the inward-turned crescendo of despair. With this text removed, Lichtenstein’s image transforms into the
more superficial reading of her closed eyes, and, cued by the title, we imagine the girl to be asleep.

As discussed in the previous section, the panel plays two roles in the context of comic books. Considered in isolation, the panel is a static, composed image, akin to a painting or drawing. Within the page, however, “the panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided. The durations of that space are defined more by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself.” On the comic page, the panel exists in relation to the other panels, creating an implied temporality in which the movement and narrative of the story occur.

Viewed in this light, the page of Girl’s Romance from which Sleeping Girl was appropriated functions on an entirely different level than Lichtenstein’s painting. As the reader moves into the page from the top left, the panels increase in size and zoom in on the protagonist’s face. This crescendo is created efficiently by the offset edges of the two larger, close-up panels. The strong diagonal axis created by the repetition of the protagonist’s head and hair pull the reader from top right to bottom left. In this quick flick of the eye, the images become a sort of flip book— the head turns; the eyes close; the hand raises; the background shifts from brightness to darkness. Entirely lacking this dynamic, the image that Lichtenstein appropriates is a fragment of the total work, akin to a rendering of a film still. What Lichtenstein appropriated was not comics per se, but

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rather a style of cartooning that he associated with the genre. Adam Gopnik discusses this relationship at length in the catalog to the MoMA exhibition *High & Low*. He notes that Lichtenstein “had to aggressively alter and recompose [the images] to bring them closer to the platonic ideal of simple comic-book style— he had to work hard to get them to look more like comics… His early pictures work by making images more like the comics than the comics were themselves.”

So, we can say that in this work Lichtenstein appropriated an image from comics, and that he worked with an exaggerated style that originated in comics. However, this work does not actually deal with the sequentiality that is essential to comics.

**Comics and Time**

Generally speaking, a comic is composed of individual subunits referred to as panels. The break dividing these panels is known as the gutter. This division can be a simple line or an implied separation, but most often it is a small strip of color or blank page. This unassuming bit of space is what makes comics work and why they are such a compelling medium.

When confronted with the disjuncture created by the gutter, the reader’s brain associatively connects adjacent panels and fills in the missing narrative. This is referred to as closure. As long as the narrative thread is sufficiently strong, we create a temporal

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relationship between panels, which can encapsulate a single, simple action or even a span of a million years. In this way, deciphering the visual components of a comic is much more akin to reading text than watching film, in which the impression of movement is created through the passive viewing of a rapid series of still frames. In comics, the reader is an active participant and must constantly fill in the missing sections to create time. Moreover, the reader must also read clues contained within two panels to infer what is intended to have occurred in the gutter separating them. As an example consider a simple, two panel comic in which a man is first seen worrying over a recipe in the kitchen and then seen receiving compliments on his cooking at a dinner table (Fig. 7). Between the first and second panel, the worried protagonist can be imagined to have gone through the various steps of preparing the complicated recipe. In this way, entire actions or scenes can occur in the thin strip of gutter between panels.

Scott Bukatman explores the relationship between comics and early chronophotography, which was a precursor of cinema. He draws an interesting distinction between the continuous images of Étienne-Jules Marey and the discrete panels of Edweard Muybridge as indicative of distinct modes of conceiving of the moment and its relation to the image. Bukatman, Scott, The poetics of Slumberland (Berkeley: University of California Press2012), 27-76.

McCloud discusses this at length, noting how the changeable the imagined scene can be. “To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths.” He also notes how this is used in film as an occasional effect, but suggests that it is far more essential to the medium of comics. McCloud, 68-69.
Even within a single panel, time functions very strangely in comics, as Scott McCloud illustrates (Fig. 8, 9). Although the image gives the impression of depicting a single moment, the text occurs in a linear, sequential order. Therefore, the events on the left-hand side of this panel happen before the events on the right-hand side. In that way, a single panel is both a fixed point in time (the static image) and duration of time (the linear text). Coupled with the highly variable time spans contained in the gutter, this mutable impression of the moment makes time in comics very complicated.

Interestingly, McCloud’s own description of this characteristic appears to me to undermine his assertion that single panel strips cannot be comics. In the example that he provides, the different speech bubbles can be viewed as sub-panels that transform the drawing itself into the gutter. While this sub-panel idea does not hold within a strip with a single speech bubble, the sequential nature of the text itself imparts a temporal aspect to the single panel that to me makes the strip function as a comic.
These temporal distortions are in no way restricted to comics, however. Different points of a narrative can be collapsed into a single, seemingly unified image that encapsulates a heterogenous moment. In his study of American melodrama, Bruce McConachie calls
attention to an advertising poster from c.1870 in which different parts of a play’s story are depicted as occurring simultaneously. This expository technique is as home in advertising images as it is in didactic paintings meant to convey historical or religious stories. A masterwork such as Scenes from the Passion of Christ by Hans Memling, (Fig. 10) shows this condensed narrative deployed with great skill. At first glance, the painting appears to be a single view of a busy city. Upon further inspection, it reads as a sequential narrative that tells the entire story of the Crucifixion. It is essentially a comic without distinct gutters. Additionally, two Flemish figures, presumably the artist’s patrons, kneel in the lower corners of the painting, further complicating the temporality of the image.

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12 Bruce McConachie, Melodramatic Formations (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 138.
13 Images such as Memlings further complicate the conversation regarding the single-panel comic. If we consider Memling’s painting to function as a comic, we are faced with the decision of whether to consider its undifferentiated image as a single panel or as multiple panels whose borders are implied by the composition, rather than explicitly stated. Either option raises questions about McCloud’s statements regarding the single-panel comic.
The jarring presence of these two anachronistic figures hints to another strategy by which a single image can encapsulate multiple points of time. By allowing the unity of the image to rupture, an artist can insert multiple points of time into a single image. These hybrid images can form a sequential narrative directly, as in the cover illustrations of pulp novels, or create more cryptic interactions as in the work of Max Ernst, Neo Rauch, and Julie Heffernan. Whether the relationship between juxtaposed images is sequential or associative, these images use a visual disjuncture to create a break that functions as a gutter. While this technique is used sparingly in mainstream comics, it dominates the work of alternative comic artists like Lynda Barry. Her dense, intricate comics are laden
with collaged elements and owe a heavy debt to Dada, Rauschenberg, and other fine artists.

Comics Intersecting with Art: Chris Ware

While I have studied the work of many comic artists in the course of my time at OSU, Chris Ware continues to be my strongest inspiration. The depth and breadth of his work is truly impressive, and it is no surprise that he is the subject of multiple scholarly articles, monographs, and books. Often, his work uses the traditional grid of panels for linear flow, but just as often he incorporates jarring interjections of text, advertisement, or pure pattern. Throughout his work, Ware explores the formal potential of comics, with dense, diagrammatic constructions. While most traditional comics follow the format of text, using a single thread of meaning that is read in a linear, front-to-back fashion, these comics exploit the non-linear potential of visual communication. The reader traverses the page along multiple paths, constructing the full meaning only after multiple passes. In this way, Ware builds a bridge to different forms of drawing that is distinct from most other comics being made. An excellent example is the stand-alone image that is in the front endpaper of Ware’s book Jimmy Corrigan (Fig. 11). While it contains elements of narrative, this image is not so much a story as a detailed analysis of the medium of

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14 One notable exception is Kevin Huizinga’s comic Ganges. His work, which is a meditation on insomnia, explores the kind of large, abstract questions one might ponder while desperately attempting sleep. As Isaac Cates notes, “like Ware’s diagrams, they offer an alternative to strictly diegetic imagery and its limited explanatory perspective.” Isaac Cates, "Comics and the Grammar of Diagrams" in The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking, ed. David Bell and Martha Kuhlman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 100.
comics. The comics scholar Isaac Cates compares this piece to the golden plaque sent into space with the *Pioneer* spacecraft. Self-referential and self-contained, it is “a dense, heavily encrypted diagram, in which much of the diagram’s work is dedicated to explicating its own system of codes.” As the overture to a larger, equally complex narrative work, this displays a level of self-awareness and sophistication that adds depth to the more traditional aspects of the work. Ware’s work highlights an unfortunate imbalance in current comics scholarship. Though it is a hybrid medium that uses both text and image, a disproportionate amount of comics scholarship comes from literary studies and focuses on the textual aspects of the work. Ware, in contrast, comes from an art background and devotes a large amount of energy addressing the complicated relationship between art and comics, as well as his anxieties about the legitimacy and societal worth of his chosen craft.

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\(^{15}\)Interestingly, without so much as a word, in this diagram Ware even manages to dispute McCloud’s assertion about the exclusion of the single panel strip from the genre of comics. Cates, 91.

\(^{16}\)Bart Beaty discusses the history of this imbalance and states that “[o]ne of the significant consequences of the literary turn in the study of comics has been a tendency to drive attention away from comics as a form of visual culture.” As a demonstration of this, note that all the comics studies courses offered at OSU are through the department of English. Beaty, 18.

\(^{17}\)For a full discussion of this subject, see Katherine Roeder, "Chris Ware and the Burden of Art History" in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, ed. David Bell and Martha Kuhlman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).
Figure 11: Chris Ware, from *Jimmy Corrigan*, 2000
I was particularly influenced by Ware’s recent masterwork *Building Stories*, which takes the form of a box filled with books, pamphlets, and other printed media. Each element, including the box itself, contributes to a single large narrative. Yet, each element is semi-autonomous, and the reader is free to read them in any order. This open approach to storytelling was especially influential in my thinking about how to unfold the narrative in *The Shooting*.

**Art Intersecting with Comics**

If we pinpoint Chris Ware as an example of comics meeting art, it is worth exploring examples of where art meets comics. As noted above, many artists, such as Lichtenstein, who ostensibly engage with comics appear to me to be more interested in the stylistic conventions of cartooning than in the sequential functionality of comics. Of the two artists that Ware himself cites as direct influences, the first, Philip Guston, appears to fall into this category and will not be discussed in this paper. The second, Joseph Cornell, bears further consideration. Although he does not directly reference comics, he engages with sequentiality in a way that resonates with Ware’s complicated constructions. I will also discuss the artist Ida Applebroog, whose works engage with both cartooning and comics, and occasionally bear an uncanny resemblance to Ware’s, although I have seen no grounds for drawing a direct connection.
Like Joseph Cornell, Chris Ware not only creates within the strict boundaries of the page, box, or object, he also calls attention to the artifice of his medium. Ware plunges the reader in a confusing, labyrinthine page. He routinely mixes traditional left-to-right/top-to-bottom elements with diagrammatic constructions that move the reader around the page in unorthodox ways. By dissection, Ware lays bare the structure and logic of his world and lets us enter into it fully.

A stunning example of this can be found in the end papers of one of the modules in *Building Stories*. (Fig. 12) The module itself is a large format, hardbound book with no external features other than the beige cloth of the spine and muted blue-green of the cover paper. This blank exterior is the first hurdle that the reader must overcome, as there is no indication about which way to orient the volume. There is, however, a “right” and “wrong” way to open the book, since the contents of the book are uniformly oriented. If the reader chooses incorrectly, the page he encounters is entirely upside down, with one notable exception. The false-front page features a large image of the female protagonist that disjointedly spans three panels. In the “correct” orientation, the figure is upside-down, yet when the page is encountered in a reversed position, the figure’s orientation appears to be correct. The face of the figure is positioned near the center of the page, and acts in the manner of a decoy, allowing the reader to incorrectly register the page as correctly oriented, if only momentarily. Already, we find Ware to be challenging our assumptions and forcing us to actively engage with the act of reading.
Figure 12: Chris Ware, from *Building Stories*, 2012
Once we have arrived at the “real” front page of the book, our sense of disorientation is hardly assuaged. Opening the book, we are faced with a dense knot of text and images. The construction takes the form of two nested, offset lozenge shapes and is anchored by a large circle. The circle is split into red and green halves along the axis of the spine. The text of the circle is oriented along the spine, perpendicular to the conventional reading axis. The spine and color shift act as a poetic enjambment, splitting the text into two different beats: I JUST WANT TO FALL ASLEEP/ AND NEVER WAKE UP AGAIN.

Having read these lines we enter into the maelstrom of Ware’s design. Guided by red and white arrows and directional text, we loop around the page, leaping from text to representational image to symbol. Some of the text is placed directly on the page, while other text is situated within thought bubbles or at the end of lines indicating the source of a sound. The text is chaotically oriented and, in some cases presented vertically or in reverse. The entire construction is placed on a black background, which upon close inspection proves to be an all-encompassing thought bubble wrapped around a panel of the protagonist lying unhappily in her bed. This panel, in turn, creates a spinning sensation when coupled with the two, similarly rendered panels that are embedded within the network of thought. Notably, however, these two panels are shown from the first-person perspective of the protagonist, showing them to be of a piece with the subjective whirl of thoughts.

Confronted with this complex puzzle of words and images, we are required not only to navigate and make meaning of the piece, but to decipher the visual language of the
construction in order to make such action possible. This engagement with form does not allow for easy reading. We must abandon the comfort of a traditional format and enter into a system in which the rules are unclear.

In this, Ware resembles a more frenetic version of Cornell, whose boxes are mute until entered into and deciphered. Formally, the work of both artists contains elements that overlap in interesting ways. First, and most obviously, both are largely concerned with methods of subdividing the rectangle in ways that create stable, dynamic compositions of rectangular and non-rectangular elements. Both display a disjunctive sense of pictorial interaction. By forcing seemingly unrelated elements to abut, they evoke novel connections that produce strange and unexpected formulations of meaning. Moreover, both use panel dynamics to create pacing, movement, and visual rhythm. Though the term, which is native to comics, can only be applied loosely to Cornell’s work, it is evident to a degree that the connection seems to hold.

Take, for example, Cornell’s piece *Untitled (Medici Princess)* (Fig. 13). While the piece does not contain an overt narrative of the sort that Ware deals with, Cornell nonetheless communicates a strong sense of identity and presence. Formally, the composition is subdivided into semi-autonomous, rectangular, elements that carry our attention through the content of the work. The blocks and strips of images barrage us with fractured details in a way that is similar to Ware’s dense panel constructions, though Cornell is working in an associative and lyrical fashion. The central portrait of the princess anchors the work,
but her face is repeated on either side of her, interspersed with other faces and numbered blocks. The vertical strips of city maps bracket the character, suggesting her position of power. In tandem with these strips, the orange ball by her hand can be seen as a globe or a sovereign’s orb. Yet the row of toy blocks beneath it simply a child’s toy. By reminding us of the open associative game playing of childhood, Cornell asks us to similarly play with meaning in his own work.
Figure 13: Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Medici Princess)*, c. 1948
In a work such as the *Untitled (Medici Princess)*, we can draw a direct line between a 
work that exists entirely within the world of art and a body of work that sits squarely in 
the language of comics. Ware’s explicit citing of Cornell as an influence makes this 
connection quite plain. The similarity between the two bodies of work is even more 
interesting for the profound ways in which the work functions differently. Even in a 
dense diagram like the *Jimmy Corrigan* introduction, Ware’s commitment to logical 
explication demands an underlying sequential structure. This ties him to a linear portrayal 
of narrative time. Since Cornell’s piece is essentially lyrical, he is not bound by the same 
requirements. Instead, Cornell is interested in objects that “manipulate perceptions of 
time, space and motion…” dream machines that “release the dreams and inner visions of 
the poet-painters…”

*Applebroog and Ware*

While Cornell’s work fosters a diffuse sense of time, the work of Ida Applebroog freezes 
and compresses time in a way that intersects with Ware. Early in her career, Applebroog 
made a series of small books that she would reproduce and distribute at no charge. These 
books, which she called “performances”, made use of a single repeated image, given 
narrative through the addition of text and animated through the action of turning the page.

In *Now Then*, a squat, generic man sits in a chair behind a proscenium of curtains and a 
blind. From panel to panel, the man remains fixed, varying only through the fluctuations

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of Applebroog’s drawing hand. After the first silent panels, we come upon the words “Now then,” which seem to act as dialogue. Then comes the pause of another wordless panel followed by one with the loaded words “Take off your panties.” The wordless panel that follows, though identical to the first, has lost all neutrality and brims with tension and uncertain narrative. If we assume that the man is, in fact, speaking, we must immediately ask ourselves a bevy of questions: To whom is he speaking? What is the context here? Is this consensual? And of course, is the command being followed?

As Arthur Danto points out when writing about Applebroog, the addition of two simple lines of text creates a powerful, open-ended drama that makes us complicit to the extent that we become witnesses and reflexive voyeurs.\(^{19}\) In their original form, Applebroog’s books differed from comics in that each picture was given its own page, slowing the reader’s progress and punctuating the experience with the act of page turning. They were, however, book-bound and intimate in the way of comics, and their message was delivered personally, from book to reader.

In her later work, Applebroog left the page and moved into the gallery space with large installations and assemblages. In these works, she shifts away from a sequential exposition and displays these repetitive panels simultaneously. Though these works are not bounded by the strict borders of the page, they resemble the composition of Ware’s

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work more than the work in books. In these assemblages, large panels abut rows and clusters of smaller panels, creating visual rhythms that are evocative of Ware’s comics.

For example, in Shirley Temple Went to France (Fig. 14), Applebroog creates a dense, complicated space that can be navigated along multiple paths. The multi-panel assemblage is anchored by three, large yellow panels, each presenting a simplified figure with an incongruous, horrible head. Even within these three images, Applebroog plays with our formal expectations. In the two right-most figures, the bizarre heads are separated from their bodies by both a shift in representational technique and by segregation onto separate panels. Here Applebroog capitalizes on the power of even the slimmest gutter space. With this hair-thin division of substrate, she opens the possibility that these terrible heads are not the literal heads of the figures— that they might exist in a different conceptual or metaphoric space. However, in the left-most yellow image, she contradicts this possibility by including the grisly head in the same panel as the body, implying a shared pictorial space. Yet in the manner of a double negative, she contradicts this inclusion by separating the head from the body within the image itself, thus creating a house of cards in which contradictions balance each other to create a kind of stability. Furthermore, we see this two-and-one set up repeated in the strips of smaller panels that flank the larger, yellow figures. In these three vertical panel groupings a cluster of three repeated panels is set within a darker frame, which abuts a fourth image that is larger than the three repetitive panels. In the two left-most groups, the single image is placed beneath the others, creating a rhythm that, described in morse code, looks like “••• –”. After the
first two groupings, Applebroog literally upends our expectations by placing the fourth image above the others, resulting in “—•••”. Visually the entire sequence reads “•••—/•••—/—•••“. These vertical groups act as a counterbalance to the horizontal row of mismatched panels. Within the larger, yellow panels, three lightly drawn vignettes stand in contrast to percussive rhythm of the other groupings. Like a visual sand trap, these drawings force us to slow down, because their low contrast rendering makes them difficult to immediately decipher. The fact that these drawings are borderless superimpositions allows them to integrate into the larger image and function as a part of it, rather than separating out into discrete elements. In a way, these pale drawings create a scaffold that allows us to move horizontally across the bottom of the images without “falling off” the bottom of the panel. As the only non-yellow color in the entire piece, the red drawing in the rightmost panel acts as the visual hub around which the larger order of the composition rotates. Our eyes are free to move along any of several concentric, arching paths that circle around this red hub and move us from the sexualized embrace of the couple at lower left to the ambiguous, somewhat formal embrace of the couple at upper right.
Applebroog’s act of rhythmic composition reminds me of Ware’s comments about his own work. “The moments are inert,” he says, “lying there on the page in the same way that sheet music lies on the page. In music you breathe life into the composition by playing it. In comics you make the strip come alive by reading it.”

As far as I know, within Applebroog’s compositions there is never a sequential movement. As such, the identical images perform a contradictory double task. On the one hand, they are so obviously repetitive, that our eyes hardly pause in moving across them. Yet, the expectation of sequential change, coupled with the slight variations of the drawn line, cause us to return to the images in search of some unseen difference or clue.

Here, Ware is less obscure than Applebroog in the use of this strategy. Harnessed with the task of overt storytelling, his repetitive panels do change, however minimally. Yet, in allowing us to move along the arc of the narrative, Ware utilizes a visual rhythm that is very similar to Applebroog’s. As an example, the last page of a module from Building Stories (Fig. 15) features two basic actions: an old woman contemplatively eats lunch, and a fly moves around the room. Barely deserving the word “story,” these two pseudo-narratives exert only a modest influence on the panels of the page. With the exception of a single, half-slice of apple, Ware quietly denies us any visible change in the physical attributes of the objects represented. We cannot see the level of water decrease in the glass. We cannot tell how much of the sandwich has been eaten or when. We assume a general temporal flow from upper left to lower right, as is the convention, but very little in the actual scene confirms or denies this movement. Thus, we are free to read the piece according to any of several potential paths. Since no clear chronology is offered, each option is as plausible and eventually futile as the others. The result is a stifling sense of anxious immobility, which becomes particularly maddening when paired with the staccato reappearance of the fly.
Figure 15: Chris Ware, from *Building Stories*, 2012

Taken out of context, this page is nearly as static as the changeless panels of Applebroog’s work. In addition, it displays a percussive use of panels that is very similar
to those in Shirley Temple Went to France. Rather than taking leaps in the panels’ subject matter, however, Ware stays focused on the banal details of the scene at hand. In this manner, the “• • • –” of “same-same-same-different” becomes more like a dripping faucet than a beating drum.

*The Shooting and Comics*

My goal in *The Shooting* was to use installation as a means to engage with the sequential functionality of comics. Like *Building Stories*, *The Shooting* could be “read” in any order, though the core story would have a definite beginning and end. Having been raised in an image-laden household, I was fascinated by the potential for the imagery of the domestic interior to carry the weight of a narrative. In *The Shooting*, I saw an opportunity to create an installation that treated these objects like the panels or pages in a comic.
Chapter 3: Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of *The Shooting* is built around the framing device of the domestic interior, which works in an analogous manner to a literary frame narrative. My decision to work in this format was influenced by William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* In his novel, Faulkner uses four narrators to tell the story that is at the heart of the book. While the story’s basic plot arc is revealed fairly quickly, its intricacies are unveiled only as the narrators revisit portions of the tale. In this way, the book mimics the way that stories and knowledge are passed along in families and communities. Faulkner’s narrators each bring a particular viewpoint to the book, and each of the four sections of the book is structured according to a different literary genre. In this way Faulkner brings another level of content to the work based on the connotations of these recognizable types of story. These frame stories allow the central narrative to exist as a story within a story, distancing it from the reader and coloring it with the voice of the narrator.

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21 For example, for all of my remembered life I have known that my grandfather once owned a ribbon factory, but lost ownership. Only later when an unwelcome guest arrived at a wake, did I learn that this was due to some malfeasance of his brother-in-law and that this had produced a schism in the family. At present, I do not know the details of these events, or even the accuracy of what I have been told. Were I to investigate by interviewing my relatives, the story would unfold in very much the same way as Faulkner’s book.

I chose to fictionalize the events to be better able to focus on the formal opportunities that the project presented. But my decision was also made to reflect my primary experience of the actual events as a story. Though the real-life gunman was a personal friend, my experience of the events was exclusively secondhand—rumors in school, bits of information in the broadcast news, one or two awkwardly penned letters from prison. I had not skipped school with the three perpetrators. I was not there on the doorstep or hiding out in the woods. I was at home, sitting in my living room and going about my life. Therefore it seemed appropriate that the viewer should encounter the fictionalized narrative as a story within the installation as a whole.

This narrative strategy has been implemented many times in the history of painting and can be seen quite clearly in Parson Weem’s Fable by Grant Wood. (Fig. 13) The painting deals with the fictitious story of George Washington and the cherry tree, which is now a part of the folk history of the United States. By situating the core story behind Parson Weems and his stage-like curtain, Wood establishes a frame narrative and cues the viewer that what is being presented is fictitious. This allows the viewer to read Washington’s incongruous adult head as a wry comment on the nature of mythologizing, rather than as a literal absurdity.
The domestic space of *The Shooting* is a frame device that functions in a similar manner. However as a frame story, the domestic interior is conspicuously lacking characters and a plot. This void can be seen as being filled in two different ways. Since the domestic interior acts as a medium to convey the core narrative, it can be viewed more as a vignette than a full story. It evokes a sense of place and time, and each of the individual elements of the domestic interior conveys its narrative content using a different set of associations. Some, like the ink drawing, are rendered with a greater degree of realism,
but no one item is privileged as being the definitive version. Alternately, the viewer can be seen as the protagonist of the frame narrative, and the story is precisely that of discovering the central tale. In this way, the domestic interior serves as a frame story in the manner that Beth Newman describes in her discussion of frame structure of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. According to Newman, the frame story both domesticates the story it contains, and adds extra charge to the story by seducing the reader into its interior.\(^{23}\)

It is in order to better serve this function that the installation space of *The Shooting* is patterned after a stage set. Stretched-muslin “soft flats,” typically used in theater design, stand in for walls and a raised platform differentiates the entire scene from the surrounding gallery floor. The black-painted gallery walls evoke the neutral black box of the theater, creating a space that is at once tightly contained and symbolically open. The theatrical connotations of the stage are a clue that this space exists to house a story. Since there are no actors in *The Shooting*, the viewer must step onto the stage and activate the work, much like Ware described the reader doing to the inert information of a comic.

In planning for the platform and the domestic interior it contains, I frequently referred back to an essay by the author Michael Chabon\(^ {24}\). The piece compares Joseph Cornell and the director Wes Anderson, but could easily be expanded to include Chris Ware. The


crux of the essay is that the artifice of their work serves as a boundary that allows us to view the work as a miniature representation of the world as a whole. I found the idea of artifice as boundary to be compelling and implemented it in building the platform. For this reason, there are no edge treatments in *The Shooting*. The sides of the platform and the flats are simple, untreated wood. When the carpet, the paint, or the trim reaches the edge of the platform or flat, it ends abruptly. Likewise, the black marsh grass is obviously made of paper, and the ground sprouts from is unabashedly cardboard. To me, the distinct boundary of artifice sets up a clear threshold for the viewer beyond which everything is artificial. It asks the viewer to suspend disbelief and lays the groundwork for the participatory game of deciphering the piece.
Chapter 4: Individual Components of *The Shooting*

*Sunday Comics Section*

On the coffee table of the domestic interior lies a facsimile Sunday comics section in which the characters and dialog of the strips have been transposed to tell the story of *The Shooting*. This is the core of the installation and does much of the work of storytelling. Engaged viewers may sit on the couch and spend time reading the numerous strips or doing the word find puzzle.

Since I wanted the comic section to be appropriate for time period of the piece, I went to the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and requested an intact Sunday comic section from the late 1990’s. What was available was the May 2, 1999 issue of the Chicago Tribune’s Sunday comic section. Working directly from this document, I digitally recreated each strip, altering the characters and the dialogue to fit my plot, but attempting to leave the key elements in place. My goal was to directly reference not just the cultural institution of the comics section, but the individual strips themselves. There were some comic strips that were iconic to me that were not included in the Chicago Tribune, so I sampled them from a contemporaneous copy of the Daily News from New York. Working with directly appropriated imagery limited how I could alter the storyline of the strips. The result was a semi-collaborative process in which the form of the strips determined the specific details.
of the larger narrative. This process felt very similar to collage, in which existing images and patterns must be reworked to fit the intended design.

I replaced some parts of the original newspaper with invented elements based on remembered features of childhood newspapers. These include the *Wacky Word* puzzle and *Nature’s Corner*. *Wacky Word* is a word-find puzzle whose clues summarize the key elements of the story. It allows the viewer to physically alter the installation and reveals a secret message once the words are found and the remaining letters unscrambled. *Nature’s Corner* is a brief educational feature describing three problematic invasive plants. The images that accompany the text portray locations depicted elsewhere in the story.

The *Sunday Comics Section* reads in roughly chronological order, beginning with Nate and Willie walking to school and ending after the events have unfolded. Despite the stylistic shifts between individual strips, the iconography of the characters remains consistent. With occasional digressions and flashbacks, the strips weave into each other and flesh out the specific details of the story. It was important to me that the eponymous moment of the actual shots being fired not be included in the Sunday Comics Section, since it is meant to be an element of a larger work, not a complete, autonomous piece.

*The Sampler*

The simple question, “Are you a coward?”, at the top of this element cuts to the core of Nate’s motivation. Since it does not have a designated speaker, it hangs in the air at once
self-admonishment and coercive peer pressure. The abrasive sentence is positioned at the threshold of the platform, confronting the viewer immediately upon arrival. The question, and the imagery that goes with it, is made more forceful by being cross stitched in the form of a sampler. Traditionally done in embroidery, this form is a standard item in American folk art. It serves as both showcase and proving ground for the maker’s stitching skill. The text included in a sampler is typically religious, inspirational, or commemorative.\footnote{Jean Lipman & Alice Winchester, The Flowering of American Folk Art (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 94.}

The aggressive, caustic question and the violent imagery subvert a form that is emblematic of diligence and virtue. Rather than being uplifted or comforted, we are thrust into the tense standoff moments before Nate moves beyond the point of no return.

The Ink Drawing

I chose to put this melodramatic image at the visual center of the installation, because it encapsulates the central moment of the story, namely “the shooting”. As discussed earlier, this decision was inspired by William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! In accordance with this model, the ink drawing immediately presented the casual viewer with the plot’s climax. Engaged viewers are then left to fill in the details through subsequent investigation.
It was also important to me to not include the actual act in either this drawing or in the Sunday Comics Section. This decision was based on two factors. The first has to do with the imagined power of the gutter. Like an offstage event, an act that occurs in the gutter occurs in the imagination of the reader. Since it is both participatory and perpetually being renewed, an act in the gutter can often have a power that a depicted act does not have. The second factor stems from a discussion of one of N.C. Wyeth’s dramatic illustrations for Treasure Island. In this discussion, David Michaelis compares Wyeth’s tense illustration Israel Hands with a more staid illustration of the same scene by Walter Paget. Wyeth’s is both more powerful and more dynamic than Paget’s. Aside from being more masterfully rendered, the main difference between the two is that Wyeth’s depicts the moment just before the shot is fired, whereas Paget’s shows the moment just after the shot is fired. Like action occurring in a comics’ gutter, the promise of impending calamity is far more riveting, because we imagine what is about to happen, whereas a depiction of calamity itself often falls short.

The Donation Jar

One of the more humble objects in the domestic tableau is an empty pickle jar labeled “The Nathan Wilbur Legal Defense Fund.” With its crudely rendered drawing and rough-cut notebook paper, The Donation Jar is unassuming and out of place.

In analyzing the efficacy of the work as a whole, I find the pickle jar to be one of the more problematic and interesting elements. As a narrative-containing object, the pickle jar is the most heavily invested in the frame-space of the domestic interior. Rather than simply inserting itself mimetically into the living room context, the pickle jar explicitly suggests the existence of actors who inhabit the same world as the viewer. While all the objects suggest some form of character through their aesthetic and temporal connotations (ie. who would own this couch? Who put the comics page on the table?), they can be taken as a whole to simply be evoking a thematic context for the work. The pickle jar, in contrast, directly presents the handiwork of a naive author, whose identity is never made clear.
Chapter 5: Precursors

Poisons in the Home, 2014

Poisons in the Home (Fig. 17) was an experiment in multi-panel composition that was created in my studio and never exhibited. The piece is composed of dozens of panels of varying sizes and compositions arranged on top of rough, direct wall drawing. A dense cluster of images and words balances precariously above the outline of a paunchy, supine man. Within this grouping, each panel functions largely as an autonomous unit, connecting with the panels around it associatively and foiling attempts at direct linear narrative. Taken as a whole, the piece explores the literal and metaphorical poisons of a suburban domestic scene. While the looseness of the grouping and the disjointedness of the elements allow for a more open interpretation, they do not allow the piece to build a larger internal structure or cultivate directionality or temporal relationships.
Figure 17: *Poisons in the Home*, mixed media, 2014

Lines of text traverse the work creating tentative connections and fractional bits of narrative. While much of the text is original, the majority is drawn from *The Shoelace* by Charles Bukowski. The poem itself deals with themes of quotidian despair and “the swarm of trivialities/ that can kill quicker than cancer.” The poem is not presented intact, but rather carved into chunks and scattered throughout the larger, pictorial panels. To the casual viewer, these chunks read as autonomous, somewhat disjointed snippets, but once
the reference is discovered they allow a viewer a semi-hidden throughway to traverse and link the different panels.

The panels in the work break into three categories:

- 2”-4” canvas-board squares with text from health warnings written in black over a red ground
- 2”-6” shallow canvases with sentences describing personal fears written around the perimeter of the canvas and spilling onto the front on which there are images of demons drawn from medieval woodcuts and engravings
- larger, pictorial panels of varied sizes on which disjointed text, imagery, and collage depict stylized, cartoonish scenes of domestic strife and toxicity.

While the piece was an important first step for me, it had aspects that I immediately found problematic. Most importantly, the panels used in the piece were traditional in format, material, and size, which overly emphasized the rectangle and the grid. This limited the ways in which the image could be deployed. In an attempt to ameliorate this, I used the sides of panels for text and images, but viewers had a hard time engaging with this content.

_Private Traps (Conversation from Psycho), 2014_

The multi-element painting _Private Traps (Conversation from Psycho)_ (Fig. 18) was installed in the HH464 Gallery for the OSU Painting & Drawing Area Critique. It is
structured around a segment of dialogue from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. The conversation progresses in a roughly linear fashion from upper left to lower right. The two voices of the speakers are designated by color and font category (Lila Crane: red script, Norman Bates: dark/purple block letters).

![Image]

Figure 18: *Private Traps (Conversation from Psycho)*, mixed media, 2014

In *Private Traps*, I set out to explore two problems that I encountered in *Poisons in the Home*. Rather than using a non-linear structure, as I had previously, the central exercise of this piece was to compose around a single, continuous line of text that could be followed from left to right. I was curious how I could achieve this without allowing the words to dominate the composition and without simply resorting to a comic-style
dialogue. Additionally, I set out to push the material aspects of the work beyond standard, rectangular substrates. Though still using traditional art-making materials, I allowed myself greater liberties with their handling.

The reception of this piece was problematic, as viewers were confused by the eclecticism of the components. Although my goal had been to create a tumult of images and associations, the lack of accessibility alienated the viewers and kept them from engaging with the core content. This directly led me to adopt a unified, streamlined format for The Shooting.
Chapter 6: Implications & Possible Directions

In preparation for *The Shooting*, I made several scale models of the installation as it would appear in different spaces within Urban Arts Space Gallery. These miniature sets allowed me to physically reconfigure elements of the installation to streamline and troubleshoot the concept. The models were interesting and compelling objects, which could become finished work with improvements in construction. By alternating between drawings, paintings, and models, I can explore and refine an idea, while amassing a new body of work. As the work coalesces, plan to develop another large, site-specific installation.

I was particularly interested in the strange space that developed in my studio when the parts and prototypes of *The Shooting* began to interact with existing art. For example, the space between the wall and the stage flat became a claustrophobic, corridor-like passage that provided a jarring context in which to view hanging work. Since the wall was painted with the same pattern as the flats, the space gave the impression of existing inside the work. I found this to be exciting and full of potential. I immediately began to wonder how I might effectively incorporate this sensation in my work and how such a space might change if executed in miniature.
I also responded strongly to the imagery of the surreal swamp invading a domestic interior. On a metaphorical level, it points to the anxieties and malaise that often hang beneath the quotidian veneer of our lives. More concretely, it draws a direct line between the manufactured space of the interior and the ecologically tumultuous space of the suburban wayside. Much like the subject matter of *Poisons in the Home*, the conflation of wetland and living room allows me to work with the physical and social problems of mainstream, middle-class America, while being free to delve into personal themes or fantastic imagery.

While I enjoyed the challenge of working with a single unifying narrative, I also found it to be somewhat restrictive. I plan to temporarily step away from this aspect of the work, working instead with vignettes and discrete narratives. It is possible that a unifying narrative will emerge in the process of putting together a larger installation, but I would like to begin the work with the freedom to explore and experiment.

I would also like to experiment more with sound. The audio component of *The Shooting* was plagued with technical difficulties, but added to the immersive aspect of the work. I would like to build upon this initial effort in future projects. Rather than manipulating pre-existing recordings, as I did in *The Shooting*, I would like to create ambient marsh sounds using material that I gather myself. For my next project, I plan to gather recordings of domestic sounds and use them to construct loops that emulate frogs,
insects, and birds. I would like to experiment with decentralizing the audio, so that the viewer is surrounded by individual noises, as one might be in a real marsh.

Perhaps most importantly, *The Shooting* demonstrated to me the importance of having a central framework to unify my efforts. While I investigate the ideas just discussed, I will bear this lesson in mind and continually strive to streamline and integrate the various aspects of my work.
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