

ME/YOU

A Thesis

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by

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Introduction

John Szarkowski, curator of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, theorizes in Mirrors and Windows -- American Photography since 1960 that all photographs fall on a continuum between two poles: mirrors and windows. He defines mirrors as romantic; they reflect an inner portrait of the photographer. They explore internal reality and are self-expansive and usually less naturalistic and more distorted. Windows, on the other hand, invite the viewer to share the world explored by the artist. The viewer sees into the private world of the subject as if he were looking through a window. Windows are realistic.

Since I have used photographs consistently to produce my art, I find Szarkowski's "windows and mirrors" concept useful in explaining my own work. I have worked from photographs that I took, mirroring my own life. I have also worked from "found" pictures -- unclaimed photos that I have gotten from camera stores -- that allow me to see into the "windows" of anonymous people's lives.

On the surface, it is easy to classify my works as either window or mirror images. But even the "found" photos, because I choose those that show unusual lifestyles

similar to my own, are not only windows, but mirrors as well.

I try to express a feeling or create an emotional tension with each figurative image. I choose a wide range of experiences and situations, often very ordinary situations, lifting them out of the ordinary. I select pictures of people in awkward situations and present them in uncomfortable surroundings, without flattering or glorifying them.

Most of my subjects are people outside the mainstream of American society. These pictures are like slivers under the skin. They have an irritating or uneasy quality. My choices and treatments amount to a personal interpretation of society, since I, too, live outside the mainstream.

I work in various media. I am a printmaker who makes lithographs and etchings. I also paint on canvas, glass and paper; combine oil pastels with monotypes creating mixed media work.

Often, I use what materials are at hand. For example, I found a large double-weight piece of glass, so I looked through my collages to see which image would translate best into that medium. The result was "Pooey Paradea Paris." (See Plate I.)

My earlier work was from black and white photos, so I chose images that translated best to make black and white prints. When I started Ohio State University, I tried to

make color prints to look like my paintings and found that, because the medium is different, they do not translate the same. So I choose certain pictures to make into prints and others to make into paintings.

The choice is often dictated by the scale. If it's an image that I feel needs to be large and in color, then it is best used as a painting. If the size is unimportant and I want the image to be intimate so that the viewer comes close to inspect it, then I will make it into a small pastel or etching.

I came to the printmaking department at Ohio State University as someone who makes art using many different media -- not just as printmaker but as a painter as well, using for each piece the materials that will best present each image.

History

Art has been an important part of my life from early boyhood. I grew up in a small South Carolina town where my parents ran the drug store on the square. Before and during grade school, I worked behind the candy counter at the store, selling cigarettes and newspapers. Most of the time I looked at movie magazines, drew pictures of my favorite movie stars, and peeked at photographs that had been brought in to be developed and hadn't yet been picked up.

I continued to draw all through school, and I planned to be an artist. I wasn't involved with sports and other things my peers were interested in. But being involved with art made me feel that it was okay to be different; it helped me to be more comfortable with myself.

Around 1967, my father gave me my first camera, and, because the company that processed the film for the store didn't charge my father, I took many rolls of film during this time.

After I learned to drive, I started delivering medicine after school. I took the camera with me on deliveries to find subjects for the art work I needed for a portfolio. The snapshots I took were of people sitting on their front porches, waiting for me to bring their prescriptions. I used these pictures, along with some old family photographs, and began to work from them. Growing up in Clinton, South Carolina, I had not been exposed to much contemporary art. I was not familiar with the term photorealism, but without knowing it I was working in this style. It came naturally to me and felt honest.

After high school I came to Columbus to attend the Columbus College of Art and Design. During my first two years in art school, I focused on the photographs I had taken in South Carolina, continuing to paint and draw. I became more involved with printmaking processes.

My rural and small-town photographs began to seem too removed from my new life in Columbus. I began to paint the figure from life to prove that I could "draw" and did not need to depend on photographs. But I soon became bored with painting nude models. I felt my work should mirror my personal experiences.

I started taking photographs of my close friends, many of them fellow students. Most of the pictures were simple portraits taken in posed photo sessions without any emphasis on background. I produced a drawing, "A Cock and Bull Story," (See Plate II), allowing myself for the first time to combine two different photographs to make a single image, instead of working directly from a single image.

I began by photographing my friend against the wall, letting him react however he wanted. I mounted my camera onto a tripod and experimented with timed exposures, so that I could interject myself into the picture-making. The finished drawing suggests a psychological interaction between the two figures, although they were taken from two different stills. By combining the figures, I mirrored what was happening in my personal life -- the realization that I was gay.

My social life became very important. For a short time I stopped working in a representational manner and used simple words to convey concepts about socializing in gay bars. (See Plate III.)

But I missed the figure in my work. I continued once again to work from photographs that depicted my lifestyle, although I stopped reflecting my social life to paint portraits of a man I became involved with. (See Plate IV.)

I did not feel comfortable showing my family my work that openly depicted my life in the gay subculture. After showing them "A Cock and Bull Story" (My father was by now very ill), I returned to focusing on the snapshots that reflected my past in South Carolina. Since I work in a representational manner, my work can easily be accepted by people who are not trained to look at art. The subject matter is what I felt my parents could not accept about my art, not the manner in which it is executed.

My father died, and the drug store closed. I brought back to Columbus all of the photographs that remained unclaimed from the store, including many that I remembered looking at years before. I started sorting through these unclaimed pictures, along with some that I had taken when I was a kid, most of them dated 1967. I became less interested in continuing with images that reflected my emotional life in Columbus. Both the unclaimed pictures, and my own snapshots captured my childhood and brought those experiences of the past into the present. I was looking through a window of my past. The "found" photographs were not of my immediate family, which made them more universal. Yet

these pictures of strangers carried a sense of my past because they were of people that lived in my home town.

I had a hard time dealing with the death of my father. I stopped working from the pictures I took in 1967, choosing only pictures of people I didn't know. I consciously made choices that would separate my art from my personal realm. (See Plate V.) In my pictures, I was avoiding confrontation with personal subject matter, in the same way that I had dealt with my father's death. Looking back, I realized that my choices to some extent reflected aspects of my personality. In an indirect way, the pictures helped me deal with death, in the same way that "A Cock and Bull Story" forced me to deal with my sexual awareness.

To obtain new sources from which to work, I began buying boxes of unclaimed photographs from local camera stores in Columbus, boxes that had been there for years, just like the batch of pictures I took from my father's drug store. My work became more painterly, I think, because I did not know the people and did not have to be concerned with flattering my subjects or getting a good likeness.

I started putting borders of flat color around many of my images to make them look as if the viewer were looking into people's private lives. This reinforced the picture plane, such as borders do around some photographs that are

commercially printed. I used borders, and still do, to create this "window" device that makes my pictures feel more two-dimensional.

Selection Process

Viewing many "found" pictures at once is similar to flipping the channel selector on a television set. This ultra-fast sorting of images shows many different aspects of American society, documented by unknown amateur photographers who felt a need to record the special events in their lives. But when I flip through literally thousands of pictures, one after another, I become aware that people always tend to take photographs of very similar situations. In selecting the pictures that would be useful to me in making a work of art, I go through my large supply of pictures making decisions very quickly, yet not indiscriminately. I intuitively select and save those images which include some element that describes an aspect of the human condition that most people normally would ignore.

Subject Matter

The subject matter in a photograph is usually my main concern, and not the quality of the photograph or the composition. I like finding pictures of people who are isolated from society, similar to the way I feel about being gay. My involvement with images of people outside

the mainstream of society gives me a better understanding of my own position.

I often choose snapshots that are witty or sensual, or depict unrestrained behavior. For example, I like exaggerated arm gestures or other motions of people caught in action. I like pictures that capture people's emotions in a way that I could never capture in a single picture myself because I probably would not be allowed into the situation, and even if I were, the people would not act in the same candid manner in front of me.

Besides the main subjects of the pictures, I notice their surroundings. Everything -- the style of the furniture, decorative pattern of the draperies, wall pictures, the clutter of everyday life -- becomes important. The figures are presented in environments that describe their personalities.

Occasionally, the subject matter is not what catches my attention. Most people would think over-exposed, poorly focused or processed pictures to be useless. I find these qualities often enhance images, making an ordinary event seem even more ordinary, not the special occasion the photographer imagined it to be. I like my art to depict something that is not usual or acceptable by the general public, even if the subject is as common as a dog swimming in the water, or someone sleeping (See Plate VI).

The individuals that I choose to portray are generally considered "outcasts" of society. For example, I have produced many pieces portraying transvestites (whose isolated lifestyle is hard to comprehend even for most gay people, much less the rest of the population) from candid "backstage" photos a friend supplied me. (See Plate VII). I began going to the local gay bar when they had "drag shows" to take pictures for source material, but these pictures tended to have a "posed" look because the people were performing and didn't reveal much about their real personalities.

When using "found" pictures, I am looking for a universal, showing that even though these subjects are not the norm, they exist in society. I want to communicate individual experiences in various subcultures, not flattering them, but being realistic. For me, art should have a certain edginess to it. I want my images to be moving in a candid, direct manner.

"Pygmy" (See Plate VIII) is a piece taken from a "found" photograph showing a midget entering a room full of normal-sized people. The small man becomes the center of attention because he is different from the rest. This, to me, has a humorous appeal. The black man greeting him is cropped off at the head, reinforcing the midget as the focal point of the picture. He commands most of the

attention, even though the interior scene has a lot of visual activity.

The intaglio print "Que Dogs" (See Plate IX) portrays another unusual situation. Instead of a conservative college fraternity, I picked a "found" photograph of what looked to be a black fraternity initiation. Both males in the print are wearing overalls and have their heads shaved, as part of a routine being performed on a stage.

From the many snapshots of this ceremony, I chose the one that best depicted the attitude of the macho-looking group. Using his hand, one man is crudely groping his crotch. I printed the edition of "Que Dogs" on paper I cut with pinking shears, giving it a rough, irregular edge. This helped to enhance the image and give it added tension.

Synthetic Composites

Frozen water pipes caused my studio to flood twice during my first winter at Ohio State University, destroying most of the photographs I had collected over the years. I went to local camera shops to gather new source material, but the idea of working from completely anonymous pictures no longer interested me. I realized that if I wanted to change the direction of my work, this was my opportunity.

I started borrowing pictures from friends that had significant meaning to them. I began taking more of my own pictures that once again involved my friends and my

interests. I saved as many of the pictures as I could from the floods and cut them up and combined them with my new personal and "found" pictures. For the first time since I drew "A Cock and Bull Story," I was able to make up my own stories, instead of relying solely on the "straight" photographic image.

Szarkowski uses the term straight in Mirrors and Windows to define a photograph "in which the fundamental character of the picture is defined within the camera during the moment of exposure."¹ He described manipulated photographs, like the composites I began making, as synthetic.

The "synthetic" or manipulated composites gave me the freedom to select any background and place whomever I wanted within the scene. By placing people anywhere within the composition, I can create my own fake-drama. This process of setting up a made-up scene is similar to the look of composite photographs that were often seen in newspapers in the early development of photography and more recently on the covers of cheap tabloids. (They remind me of the movie magazines I looked at in my father's store.)

Manipulated pictures do not have a finished quality like the "straight" photographs that I had previously worked from. I wanted my new work to have the same

¹ John Szarkowski, Mirrors and Window -- American Photography since 1960 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1978), p. 21.

assembled look as the original composites. The collages retained a rough, cut-out quality caused by "careless" scissor marks. This technique gave a white outline to the figures against the collage (in contrast to "A Cock and Bull Story," where the splicing is smooth, giving the impression that the image was taken from a single "straight" source.)

The pictures that I saved from the studio flooding had an added meaning, since they survived. I tried to duplicate their mangled, battered, half-destroyed look when I transformed these pieces into a print or painting.

The manipulated images combine both "mirrors" and "windows," making it harder for the viewer to distinguish between the personal and the impersonal. With the process of collage, I am reflecting a "mirror" of myself, even though the images may be of unknown people. I like to raise questions with the viewer as to exactly what is taking place.

Deliberate Ambiguity

I give my pieces titles that don't spell out meanings, but rather invite the viewer to think about what they mean. For instance, "Publicity Pose" (See Plate X) to the viewer might not be a drag queen. It could be a woman, an unsuccessful actress. The title doesn't give it away, whereas if I had called it "Charles" or "Drag Queen," the

meaning would be obvious. In a way, I am playing with or teasing the viewer, presenting one with having to figure the images out, hoping that if I don't supply all the answers, people will spend more time looking.

Synthetic composites allow me to create new meanings from pictures of occasions that are familiar to all of us, like family reunions, weddings, and holiday rites and ceremonies. The lithograph titled "Split Rite" (See Plate XI) was produced from a single image of a man holding up a candle at a wedding ceremony. The pictures I worked from showed an Asian couple getting married in a very private and intimate setting. The series of photos became very repetitive and mundane. By dividing a picture in half and isolating the image of a man holding up a candle, I opened the possibility that the picture depicts an act of violence. My interpretation transforms a mundane affair, inviting the viewer to wonder about the image and the artist who created it.

The lithograph "Pull Over," taken directly from a "found" photograph, (See Plate XII) depicts two men in an apartment. One man is smiling and turning the lamp either on or off. The other man is removing or putting on his sweater. Again, without seeing the other pictures that were taken before and after this particular shot, the viewer can choose from a multitude of interpretations as to exactly what is going on in this image.

"Black-Eyed Susan/Curtain Call" (See Plate XIII) was one of the first pieces I produced by combining a picture I personally took with a found image. I altered the content of both pictures by collaging them together.

At this time also I produced the reverse oil painted on glass titled "Poosey Parades Paris" (See Plate I). It has the same theatrical quality as "Black-Eyed Susan/Curtain Call." The building created a stage on which I could place one of my friends. I wanted to create the feeling that she is unconcerned, disconnected, with the military scene behind her. Although her chin is completely covered by her sweatshirt, her smile is evident. Through manipulation, I am putting two unrelated images together and connecting them in a way that makes the viewer think the entire situation actually took place.

With a reverse glass painting, like "Poosey Parades Paris," the first stroke is always visible, unlike layering or building up paint on canvas. The finished product is not viewed until the piece is finished.

At this time I also started making monotypes using plexiglass and the intaglio press, based on the synthetic collages. (See Plates XIV and XV.)

New Directions

I recently started placing two completely different images next to one another. This gives a different feeling from collages placed on top of each other. Butting two images together, I can make images that appear on the surface to be banal or inconsequential have a deeper or more complicated meaning. Pictorially, they may look as if they don't have anything to do with one another. By combining and joining them I can give them a jarring, awkward look, similar to the composite photos. They look deliberately disconnected, with each celebrating different values or cultures. With this method, I can juxtapose contradictory meanings. I can give the impression that the match was chosen at random. By combining images, I can raise more questions as to my intentions, thus enriching the meaning. The possibilities this technique offers seem infinite.

Conclusion

My art has evolved a great deal since the days when I drew from magazines in my father's drug store, from simple images on paper to collaged and composite images from a variety of sources, executed in several media. Yet it consistently expresses my own personality, from the artistic "loner" growing up in the isolation of a small

southern town, to the lifestyle I have chosen in a subculture of a large city.

My present work shows aspects of everything that came before it, if not on the surface, at least in the development. I will continue to work the way I am working now, switching back and forth, using pictures that are personal and also detached, voyeuristic images.

I no longer try to emphasize one over the other, realizing that whether I use "straight" or manipulated pictures, they all overlap, making my work more complex in the analogy of "mirrors" and "windows." The combination lets me change images constantly; therefore making different statements even though there may be a visual similarity.

My intent is to present ideas so that they are not completely predictable but yet, I hope, not misunderstood. I want to convey humor, yet not poke fun, because, after all, I am depicting people who, like me, live outside the mainstream of society.

I want to reach not just artists, but also people who are untrained as artists -- people like those in my pictures.

My goal is to work in an environment where my work becomes marketable, so that I can produce art at a steady, continuous pace, the way I have been able to do in graduate school. I may have to teach or do other kinds of work, but

my hope is to make enough from my art that I can be where
I'd rather be -- in my studio, producing art.

Bibliography

Szarkowski, John. Mirrors and Windows -- American Photography since 1960. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978. Distributed by New York Graphics Society, Boston.

PLATE I



PLATE II



PLATE III

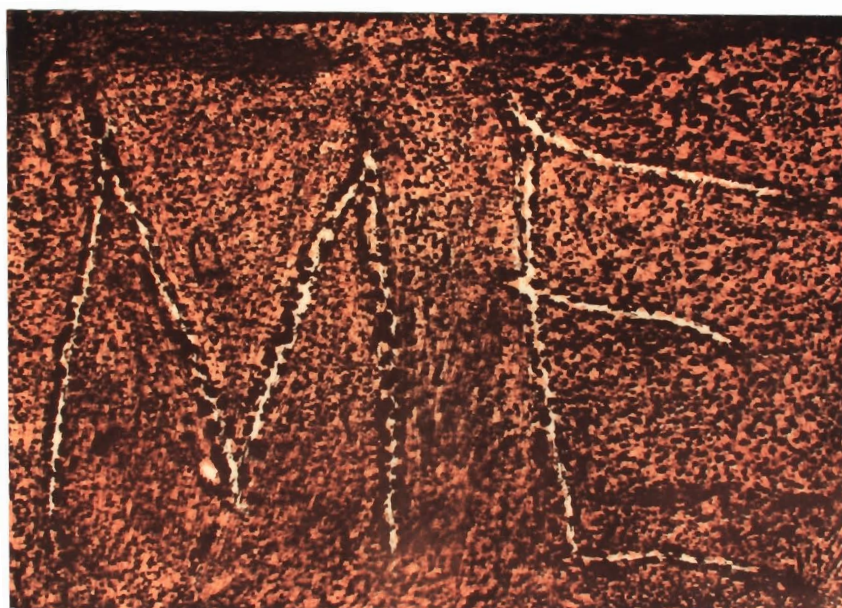


PLATE IV

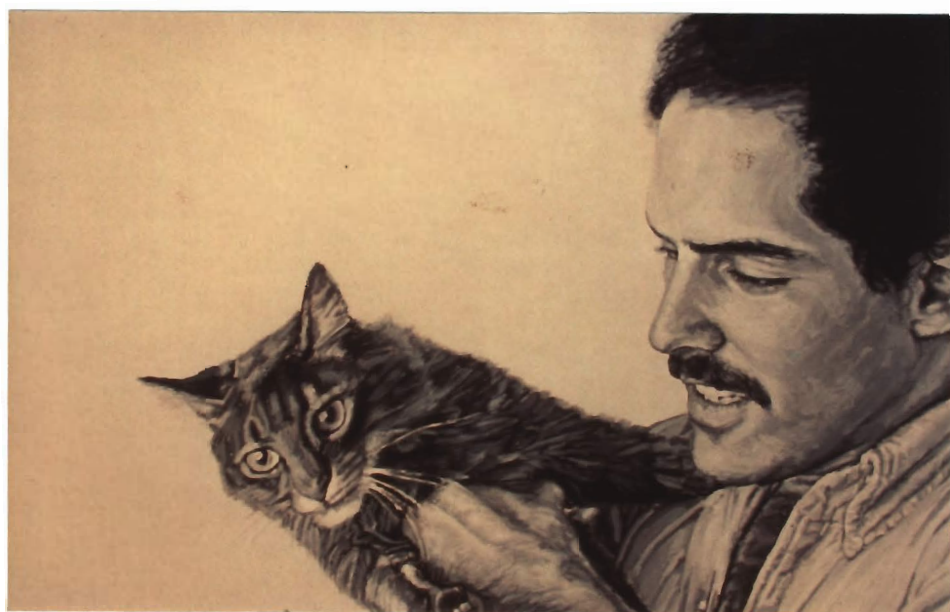


PLATE V



PLATE VI



PLATE VII



PLATE VIII



PLATE IX

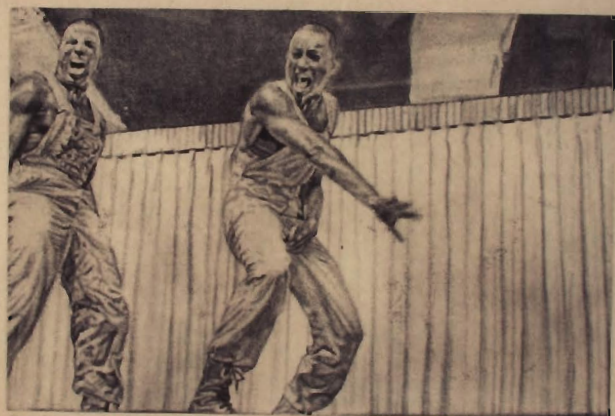


PLATE X



PLATE XI



PLATE XII



PLATE XIII



PLATE XIV



PLATE XV

