

2016

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https://scholar.colorado.edu/art_mfa/75

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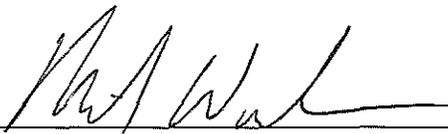
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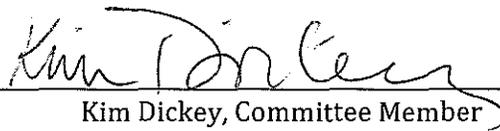
Recollections of the Mysterious
By
Terry Campbell

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
Department of Art and Art History

Recollections of the Mysterious
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Terry Campbell



Mike Womack, Committee Chair



Kim Dickey, Committee Member

Scott Chamberlin, Committee Member

The signatories have examined the final copy of this thesis, finding that both the content and form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above-mentioned disciplines.

Introduction

The most important part of art for me is the narrative. I'm a painter and I paint stories. Some may see the stillness of a painting as a narrative shortcoming. I see stillness as its greatest strength. A painting can't speak for itself so the viewer has to.

When I meet a new person and I'm trying to break the ice I will ask them to tell me their best story. For example, if the person is an accountant I will ask them "what is your best accounting story"? Everyone has a story and hearing how one tells a story can help me understand the person better. A great storyteller can turn their trip to the grocery store into an enthralling story by providing details that a bad storyteller often overlooks. The most captivating stories one tells are often about events that deviate from one's normal day-to-day life. For some people, this means finding a dollar on the street; while others it could be seeing Bigfoot. Even though we live in a world where cameras capture the majority of our life, so many of our experiences happen so quickly that they aren't documented.

For my thesis show, I created three paintings of events I witnessed that were so strange that the images are ingrained in my memory. While each painting provides clues of my experiences it is my goal for the paintings to remain mysterious to the viewer. All I need the viewer to know is my paintings are reenactments of mysterious moments I witnessed in my life. It is my belief the viewer doesn't need to understand the narratives in my paintings to enjoy them. My paintings capture one moment to represent the story. These moments show the climax of each of these stories and set the mood and essence of the experience. It is

my hope the viewer is willing to suspend disbelief for a moment. I want the viewer to contemplate the mysterious stories I have presented to them and to recognize the moments in our lives that break the monotony of living - the moments that captivate our imaginations and remind us of the magical nature of being alive.

Process

A good painter and a good filmmaker approach their making in a similar way: they frame what's important; use color to elicit emotion; and hide, or take out what will confuse the viewer. Unlike film, painting is given just one moment instead of a scene. After I decide what story I'm going to paint, the first step in my process is a photo shoot; a reenactment of my experience. When creating my reenactments, I'm often able to take photos at the location where my stories happened, other times I have to build a set as a stand in for the experience.

I have to be able to see what that story looks like as a single image in my head before I start taking photos. I then stage that scene and capture the scene I have created with photography. Each photo shoot begins after weeks of gathering objects, finding people and scouting locations. I then take hundreds of photos looking for the moment of serendipity when I find an image that resembles my memory. These scenes are ingrained in my memory because the scenes have compositions that were striking to me at the time I witnessed them. Often my final photo has to be taken into Photoshop where I crop the image or add elements missing so that the image matches the memory. This can mean moving a figure or adjusting the levels of light.

I use a printed version of the photo selected and draw the image on my canvas. When I start to paint I start making choices about color. Often my color is exaggerated or dulled to convey my feeling of the memory. For example, in the painting *Moffat Tunnel Mystery*, I used a lot of warm colors even though the figure was surrounded by snow because warmth was part of the memory. In the end my paintings are not realistic representations of my photography but a compression of the memory.

Role of Photography in my Painting

Photography is good at capturing a moment in time but I'm not interested in creating an exact moment. This is why I'm not a photographer. The moments of the stories I'm reenacting don't exist as photographic images in memory. Photography is a tool I use to help me remember and see moments from the past with clarity. I want my paintings to capture the feeling of a moment that a viewer may or may not believe happened. I take great liberties in changing my paintings from the photos they are based on. The painting becomes a more accurate depiction of a moment from my past.

The list of representational contemporary painters who use photography to aid their painting practice is long. Painters that range from Michaël Borremans to Eric Fischl have discovered what a camera can see that the eye can't. Photography has changed our perception of reality and has had a great influence on contemporary painting. Photography has given us the ability to see from many different viewpoints very quickly by capturing light. I have found being able to crop

an image is a great tool in creating my painting compositions and working through ideas of space before I start drawing out my paintings.

There are many reasons painters choose to use photography in their painting practice and each artist answers this question in a different way. Arthur C. Danto reminds us of how photography has affected our perception of reality when describing the famous photo taken by Edward Muybridge, which proved horses run so fast sometimes they are completely in the air. "Painters decided that Muybridge's images showed what horses really look like when they run, and in effect copied Muybridge's photographs in their paintings of horses, even though that is not at all the way we see horses when they run." (Danto 105) In the same way I use photography to understand what a space looks like.

As much as I enjoy using a camera to help add to my painting process, I recognize a camera isn't always a good thing. Even the best camera fails to capture accurate color. A camera interprets color giving it a value of ones and zeroes, then the image produced is changed again when printed. Once I have a printed image it is far removed from what I was looking at the time I took my photo. A great photorealistic painting looks exactly like the photo reference it came from but the painter had to give up control of interpretation to the camera. Despite the shortcomings of using a camera, what it gives me outweighs the drawbacks.

Thesis Show

Five years ago, I was walking during a snowstorm in Denver and slipped and broke my leg very badly. I had to have surgery to have my leg fixed. After my surgery, my friends showed up with wolf masks on their faces to surprise me. It is

this type of strange behavior my friends know I love, but this image is also the last thing one wants to see after waking up from anesthesia! My new thesis work started with this image embedded in my head and the desire to show it to others. I began with the question, “how do I tell this story in an image”? Often my viewers overlook the complexities of my stories. This also speaks to the nature of how words can tell a complex story and a painting has a harder time expressing a complexity because it’s frozen. Often my stories become less important than the viewer’s own projection of narrative onto my work.

I was directed to the writing of Roland Barthes and his essay *The Effect of Reality*. Barthes talks about what makes something real to a reader are the mundane elements “Even if they are numerous, the “useless details” therefore seem inevitable: every narrative, at least every Western narrative of the ordinary sort nowadays, possesses a certain number.” (Barthes 142) Even though Barthes was talking about writing, “useless details” are also important in any narrative form. I always believed that what makes a painting real are the dramatic elements not the mundane ones but both of these concepts need to be working together at the same time. With this revelation I began my new thesis work. Leaving some areas of the painting more rendered than other areas creates a hierarchy. This is also a tool used to guide the viewer to a possible protagonist. Using less rendered areas to describe space became my way of using the “useless details”.

My favorite painting of all time is *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth. The painting is an image of a girl lying down in a field. The viewer is not able to see the girl's face and she seems to be looking at a house. I always believed this was about a

person collapsing from melancholy. I identified with this person crushed by the weight of the world falling to her knees because I have been that person many times in my life. Wyeth captured a feeling of loneliness by showing her in such a large open space. He took the time to paint each piece of grass to capture the desolation of her environment. I later learned it was about a handicapped girl trying to get up a hill not a person overwhelmed by the world. Learning that the artist's narrative was different from my own was heart breaking to me. I was still able to empathize with Christina but no longer believed we had shared a similar moment. I projected my own life onto *Christina's World* and empathized with Christina. I was still able to enjoy the painting but no longer believed we had shared the same experience and feelings. I have come to understand people project their life onto the paintings they see to understand them. At times an explanation can ruin a painting for the viewer. In this paper I will explain my process in creating my thesis work and why I chose to paint the stories I did, but I'm no longer interested in telling people what to feel. The image of the painting is the story. Knowing people will be projecting their own meaning onto my paintings is liberating not defeating.

Surgery Room Wake Up

The first painting I created for my thesis show was *Surgery Room Wake Up* a painting depicting me coming out of surgery surrounded by wolves. I'm scared of hospitals and wasn't interested in going to one to recreate the experience of wolves in my surgery room. Also trying to get permission was an unwanted burden. Luckily my good friend Chris Bagley collects movie props. He had everything one would need to create a hospital inside of his living room in Cheyenne, Wyoming. I'm

sure many drive by this small unassuming house and have no idea of the treasures inside. It took many hours to move objects around to create an empty room. It was there that we built a makeshift surgery room as I had remembered it. I used friends as my actors and directed them as I took photos to recreate the experience.

The day my friends walked into the hospital to surprise me stands out in my life as one of the most amazing things I've ever seen. They walked into the hospital room quietly as to not to scare me. When I opened my eyes I saw three people with wolf faces. It was clear that they were human because of their clothes but I was confused and didn't know if what I was seeing was real. As I came to, I understood what I was seeing was real and I understood it to be a joke but decided to shut my eyes afraid of the wolf people.

When I started my thesis work I wanted the viewer to see what I saw. I decided to make paintings that seem as though the viewer just walked into a room and discovered these moments the way I discovered them. After coming out of surgery I was on a great deal of drugs and confused. My perception was warped and I had a hard time understanding where I was. In this particular painting I had to change the perspective of not what I saw but what the moment looked like if I had walked into this room. While the other two paintings depict what I saw, *Surgery Room Wake Up* is the only painting that shows me in the frame. It was important for the viewers not only to see the wolf people and gurney but to see me in the picture on the table with my eyes closed.



Surgery Wake Up, Oil on Canvas, 2016

Moffat Tunnel Mystery

The painting *Moffat Tunnel Mystery* is about a time when I was walking in the woods and came across an abandoned cabin. I looked inside and saw a man sitting in a chair. He had a tan mask on his face. He was holding a goldfish bowl with what looked to be goldfish inside. He was wearing a one-piece green suit that seemed like a work suit of some kind. Seeing this man in the cabin was very strange because one of the walls of the cabin was missing and there was five feet of snow surrounding the cabin. I had no idea what he was doing and why he was there with such strange objects. I only looked into the cabin for a second and don't believe he saw me. Many years later I returned to the abandoned cabin to recreate the experience. There was no masked man there this time but the same chair the man was sitting on remained.

I was able to take several reference photos of myself dressed as this man and used these photo to make the painting.

I started to think of my new paintings as crime scenes, every object or character was now a clue for the viewer. The more details I could provide for the viewer, the more tangible my paintings would become. For example, in the painting *Moffat Tunnel Mystery*, I painted a large pile of debris in a cabin. My old approach to painting would have been to get rid of anything superfluous. I felt by leaving these objects in the painting the image become an honest depiction of what I witnessed. These small details are what make a painting real for the viewer; because the story the painting is based on is so strange few will believe it to be truthful.



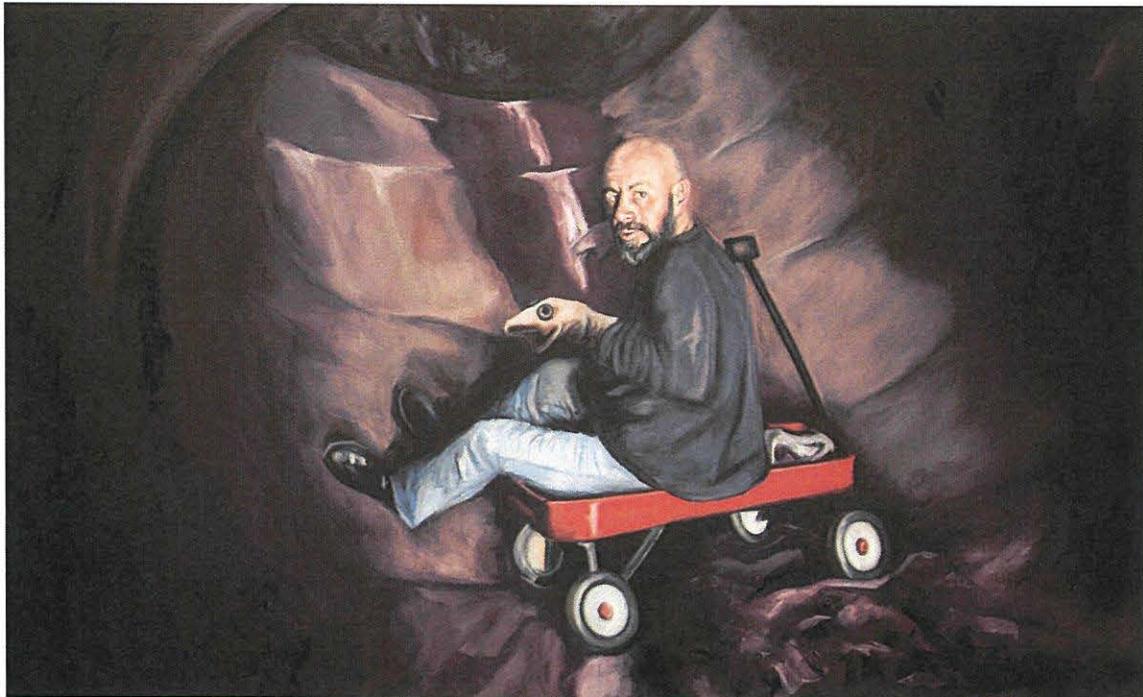
Moffat Tunnel Mystery, Oil on Canvas, 2016

Sewer Puppets

I often seek out interesting places to take photos. On one such adventure, I walked into a sewer pipe along the Platte River. Most of these pipes are covered with bars to keep people out. I had passed one uncovered sewer pipe hundreds of times but always walked by fearing I would get hurt if I ventured inside. The day I chose to enter the sewer was a typical overcast spring day. I can't remember why I was compelled to venture into the sewer this of all days. This was an experience outside of my comfort zone. I waddled my way through the cement sewer pipe keeping my legs on the sides of the large pipe so I wouldn't fall into the water that ran between my legs. After several hundred feet I found a very interesting location to take photos and to my horror: another person! Much like seeing the man in the woods, I had no idea what this man was doing down there. I don't know his reasons for being in the sewer and I was too scared to stay around and find out. The man was clean, wearing a black sweater and jeans. He didn't look homeless nor did he look like an eccentric art student like myself. He seemed to be about forty years in age. The man had socks on his hands and seemed to be making shadow puppets on the wall from a light source I couldn't locate. He was sitting in a rusted red metal wagon that must have been very difficult to pull into the sewer, but it kept him out of the water. I wonder who he was and what he was doing there. I went back to this location to recreate this strange encounter and take reference photos for my painting. I was able to talk my friend Chunk into being the stand-in for this person so I could take photos to recreate this scene. Chunk had a baldhead and beard, just like the man I saw in the tunnel. I remember the scene so well but wouldn't

recognize this man if he walked passed me on the street. *Sewer Puppets* was the last painting I created for my thesis show.

After finishing the three paintings for my thesis show I got a better understanding of why I created these three stories out of all of the stories that happened in my life. It comes down to the level of detail in each story that made the stories interesting to me. Just seeing a man in the sewer the interesting but not worth painting. What made each story stand out is large amount of strange things happening. He was on wagon, he was in the sewer, he was bald and he had a sock puppet. The three stories I picked to reenact stood out because they all have many strange elements.



Sewer Puppets, Oil on Canvas, 2016

My views on painting

I have always been mesmerized by what a painting can be with so little. It doesn't need electricity like other mediums. Even the most poorly executed painting takes more time to create than one of the millions of selfies made each day. The magic of painting begins in the approach. Seeing a painter's hand in a painting connects me to that person.

For me the most evocative art is shrouded in mystery. A painting that does this well is the *Orator* by Magnus Zeller, a painting of a group of people who seem to be hearing words that are making them go crazy. It makes me wonder what the audience in the painting is hearing. The best thing a painting has going for it is that it can't speak. Some paintings have titles; others might have text but these are both static. A good painting is a puzzle, a mystery that needs to be solved by the viewer.

Painting is the tool I use to arrange my thoughts. Painting has always been a battle for me, but one I always come back to. I was once asked why I get out of bed to paint. I didn't have a good answer to that question at the time but have come to understand what painting does for me. I have a hard time keeping my thoughts in order. Painting is the tool I use to arrange my thoughts. Some of the best advice I have ever heard one painter give to another comes from Eric Fischl talking to Alex Katz. "Alex Katz, the contemporary pop-realist painter, once told me that you have to learn to paint as fast as you think. If you paint faster than your ability to focus and concentrate, you will miss your mark - and if you paint slower than your inspiration, you'll get bored and distracted". (Fischl 151) As I'm about to leave graduate school, I'm starting to find how I need to work as a painter and learning to

paint as fast as I think. I have found my paintings start to fail when they become a chore to finish. I believe it's important to recognize my best practices and remember what I need to create.

My Education

I was not taught to paint in an academic manner when I received my BFA from RMCAD in 2005. In my painting classes we were encouraged to experiment with material and content was more important than realism. Many MFA graduate students I meet express a similar experience in their undergraduate education. Having learned about the Leipzig School, I have become curious what my life and work would have been like if I had received a more traditional academic approach to painting. Perhaps I would have given up a long time ago. I have always felt like a folk artist even though I have had a formal education. I believe all great artists do the best with the skills they have and are always working on improving them.

Existential Dilemma

Creating art has always given my life meaning and purpose. I used to have the feeling that by making art I would somehow uncover the answers to the great mysteries of existence. While working on my thesis paintings, I realized I'm not interested in trying to create profound paintings that somehow answer all of the big life questions I have. That's not the type of person I am and I now understand answers will not make my work better or more profound. Camus says "From the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they

simultaneously exalt - that is the whole question.” (Camus 17) For my thesis show I created paintings of moments in my life I don’t understand. I’m intrigued by the unknown and embrace the mystery of life. This is why I make paintings that don’t answer questions but mystify.

I personally think life has whatever meaning we give it. If life has no meaning the act of painting is also meaningless. I have been able to give my life meaning by embracing its absurdity and I do this by making my paintings. Now that I almost have my MFA, I see how little I really know. Last year I realized I have been in school for 28 years without taking a break either teaching or being in school. I don’t yet understand the path my life has taken but recognize being an artist is what gives my life meaning and purpose. I look forward to the next chapter of my life whatever that will be as I create art to help me navigate my reality and give my life purpose.

Conclusion

I have seen many strange things in my travels but the three moments I painted for my thesis show stand out. I’m not interested in convincing anyone that my stories are true. I just want to tell my stories and painting lets me in the manner I want to by not giving everything away to the viewer. The stories that inspired my paintings seem very unbelievable and strange but that is why I picked these stories to paint from all the experiences I have had up to this point in my life. Some might believe my stories are works of fiction with just enough detail to make the viewer wonder about their authenticity. Assuming that my paintings are based on truth or fiction can be left up to the viewer.

If my work is successful, the viewer will be willing to stand in front of my paintings and contemplate my mysterious narratives. Perhaps they will try to use the clues I have left for them to understand what I saw. So often we walk through this world oblivious to what is happening around us. It is my hope my paintings will remind others of the surreal, magical moments that happen in our lives.

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