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In The Care of Rabbits

The Relationship of Chance, Icons, and Surreal Imagery in the Narrative of the Individual

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Introduction and Safety Instruction

The work began when I was sifting through an old cabinet and happened upon a set of Tarot Cards. I found the images mysterious and alluring, and I have a tendency to hold on to things; some might be so bold as to use the word hoarder, so naturally I kept the cards I found.

Over the next several weeks I found myself handling the cards more and more. I kept them in the front pocket of my backpack and thus they became my constant companions. One night I was speaking with a friend and I mentioned the cards. I told her there were 14 cards in total and upon hearing this detail; my typically very sane, very rational friend recoiled with unease. Apparently I had an incomplete deck, a very bad concept in the Tarot world. My friend recommended I should burn the cards or get as far away from them as possible.

I did neither of these things. The cards still live quite contentedly in my backpack front pocket. I can’t say for sure the precise reason why I keep them, but I do know that I was impressed with their power over my friend. Each card holds an image, a name, and an immense amount of meaning. The Tarot tells the future, reveals the past, and permeates the minds of the superstitious. How was it that these small, cardstock-printed items were influential? I set out to find the answer.

It just so happened that the cards came to me at a crucial time in my artistic development. I had been generating work containing symbols and characters but I had no way to organize them. Images had no purpose each seemed distant from the next. My thoughts were fragmented and disorganized. I found myself searching for a way to bring
everything together in a coherent and useful way. The solution was evident: I would make my own card deck.

With this decision came several additional decisions. The first of these was deciding, declaring rather, that my deck would have no limit. Moving through life, there is the potential for an infinite number of occurrences and interactions. The deck exists as a tool to collect those interactions. The second decision I made was that the deck would exist as both a means for organization of my ideas as well as a tool for visual narrative generation.
Rules, Regulations, and Guidelines for Success

Throughout my research of art and art history I am most intrigued when I discover instances of guidelines concerning image making or image generation. A specific example of this is found in the illustration of Medieval Manuscripts. A curious document known commonly as *Ulpius the Roman* contains a list describing the appearance of Christian figures, such as the Prophets, the Apostles, and Adam.  

[B.] *On the appearance of each of the Prophets*

*Isaiah:* an old man with a long beard coming to a slightly sharp point.  
*Jeremiah:* also an old man, with a slightly more pointed beard than Isaiah.  
*Ezechiel:* a long head, smoky (i.e., dark) face, and a rather long beard.  
*Daniel:* a eunuch, exceedingly good-looking.  
*Baruch:* a long head, clipped hair, with a curl in front, and an altogether long beard, rounded and slightly curled…

This text is particularly noteworthy as it represents an attempt at a collective guide for the depiction of certain figures, yet it also reveals the author’s own desires and opinions. Here is the universal aligned with the individual. We find in manuscripts and prophet books a wide variety of depictions of figures, suggesting that the *Ulpius* and similar iconographic guides may not have been the utmost priority. Guides such as this do; however, have a certain appeal to those attempting to understand and decipher the figures portrayed in Medieval and religious imagery.

Embracing the desire of the author/artist to assign specificity to image and the desire of the viewer to have a key to the visual language, I compiled my own list of guidelines. Each card or element has specific laws regulating how it interacts with others.

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i Lowden, 1988, 51  
ii Lowden, 1988, 51  
iii Lowden, 1988, 51
and how it is to be depicted in each new narrative painting. The following is an excerpt from the book of rules I have devised.

Teeny Tiny Tetherballers
Represent Competition
Characters must engage in some form of competition
Internal (competition with self) and External (competition with foe) are both permissible.

The Baristaur
Represents things out of place / hard work
Should be carrying or spilling coffee
Must be wearing Apron

The Traveler
Represents the Journey
Must be holding fishbowl
Must have Bucket on Head
A perpetual sidewalk follows him
If an action card, all rules for him are transferred to the lowest level character

The Holy Grande
Represents ultimate achievement
Is read only as action or object (Not Character)
A character achieves an ultimate goal or comes very close to doing so
1  
*Teeny Tiny Tetherballers*, 2013  
Acrylic on Panel, Printed Card

2  
*The Traveler*, 2013  
Acrylic on Panel, Printed Card

3  
*The Baristaur*, 2013  
Acrylic on Panel, Printed Card

4  
*The Holy Grande*, 2012  
Mixed Media, Printed Card
Now I'm a Believer

Religion was a crucial element in medieval art and manuscripts and continued to be an influence in the Proto-Surrealist work of Hieronymus Bosch. In the work of Bosch, the main figures are often recognizable as Biblical icons, the narratives, while populated with strange and bizarre imagery detail draw on religious themes and narratives. Being raised in a non-religious household, the figures of Christ, or Mary, or Adam and Eve, had no greater significance to me than any other character I might encounter. Unable to connect on a purely religious level, I sought to find my own images, and my own icons.

My Madonna could not be the Christian Mary, but could exist as my neighbor, Lee, a man with a talent for chain-sawing and cat collection. Lee exists in my reality and has had more of an impact on my history and subconscious than any religious or Christian figure. The physical person upon whom Lee (Plate 5), is based, represents the seed of truth that inhabits each of the icons. As the gilded medieval icons demand belief, so do the illustrative figures in my work. There are no photographs of Christ, no portraits of the actual Mary. These figures

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Rowlands, 3
exist and hold significance because of belief. People must to believe them to be true without the aid of specific visual proof.

I ask the same of my icons. There is no specific proof that any of my works are based in truth or reality, yet there is a sense of the “what if.” There is mystery and power in the fact that all my images could be. “Could be” is more powerful than “is.”

Deciphering Bosch

Nearly every text I encounter concerning the artist Hieronymus Bosch can’t seem to help describing him as enigmatic or mysterious. But what of this enigma, wrapped in mystery, and steeped in secrecy? The perplexing imagery of Bosch is a major influence in my work. Like most viewers approaching the work of Bosch, I was drawn initially to the huge triptych works. The Garden of Earthly Delights is populated with thousands of strange beasts, weird creatures, and human and animal figures. In the work we are not looking at a painting, rather we are peering into the world of Hieronymus Bosch.

“All these elements in medieval art that arose from men’s dreams and fantasy were brought together by Bosch and moulded by him into a unique and coherent language, in which the most diabolic and apocalyptic ideas could be readily represented.”

-John Rowlands

In a small detail of the right wing, of the Garden of Earthly Delights (Plate 6,) animals and human figures are depicted as being similar in size and expression. In the Bosch detail, the figure of the Rabbit represents a demon, clothed as a man and armed with a bizarre weapon. Bosch extracts elements from his life, thoughts, and experiences and assigns purpose to these fragments. Religion is a key influence on the work of

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Rowlands, 5
Bosch, with specific focus on Old Testament imagery and the merging of religious doctrine with astrological and alchemical content.\textsuperscript{vi} In my work, symbols such as the Rabbits are generated from my own experiences. When depicted, the Rabbits are given hats to signify their purpose: not as demons, but rather as healers, or helpers. I am creating a visual language and a coherent system of image organization.

\textsuperscript{vi} Martin, 1
6
Hieronymus Bosch
Right wing detail from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*
ca. 1500-1505
Oil on Panel

7
*In the Care of Rabbits*, 2013
Acrylic on Panel

8
*The Nurses*, 2013
Acrylic on Panel, Printed Card
In the Care of Rabbits (Plate 7) and The Nurses (Plate 8), represent how that visual language is created. Once, in a deep daydream, I found myself placed in the supervision of two large rabbits, who then proceeded to remove and untangle a wadded mess of black string from my chest cavity. Once finished untangling, the Nurses gingerly replaced the string. I remember feeling weirdly complete and content after the experience. The Rabbits, from that point onward, became the symbol for healing and resolution of internal issues. The Nurses card pulls content from the larger image, within which, imagery is pulled from my own life and experience. The card represents the attributing of specific meaning and purpose to the iconographic characters. Viewers of the work have the option of assigning their own meaning to each image, while presented with a guide to understanding how each image functions within the life of the artist and the overarching scenario.

**Breaking Things Down, Building Things Up**

“Dada writers and artists attempted to dismantle traditional values, norms and codes of communication and thus to deconstruct contemporary culture.”

-Rudolph Kuenzli

The Dada movement emerged in part due to the frustration of artists during World War I. Dada artists rejected conventionality, as they could find no meaning or reason within their society. Dada artists deconstructed the world around them and used the pieces, the base elements to produce Dada artwork. Poetry and writing from this movement often consisted of taking words or fragments out of a newspaper and

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vii Kuenzli, 1
reassembling them through chance. Building blocks of context and information in society were stripped down to have no meaning and then reassembled.

My work breaks down moments and memories of the past and removes any extraneous information. These collected and pared-down moments exist as cards and are used to generate new ideas and narratives through chance. The past seems concrete and fixed, much like the typed words in a newspaper, yet through Dada it becomes apparent how simple it is to break down the past. The past and the future are then put on equal grounds, each being made up of the same fragments.

**Fables, Folklore, and Fairytales**

In the collection and translation of images into cards, or players, within my larger system, there emerges a clear stylization and use of saturated colors. As the content and characters in my work are extracted from my history and life, so is the style in which the images are portrayed. In addition to the influence of Medieval Manuscript imagery and the vivid works of Bosch, children’s book illustrations are highly important to the work. I was raised on the stories of King Arthur and his Knights, the adventures of Superheroes, and countless folk stories from across the globe. The images encountered in the formative years, have no doubt permeated the subconscious. As stated previously, religious iconography has very little impact on my own history and upbringing, however there is personal significance of images aimed at children. In children’s book illustrations, and particularly in comic book art there is a clear use of simplification, both for the accessibility and the recognition of character. An easy example of this is the idea that Superman always wears the same outfit. He is recognized more quickly by the bright
blue and red, than the precision in which his face is depicted. We as an audience become attached, not only to the man who is Superman, but also to the symbol of Superman. This is what I believe to be the difference between figure and character in a visual narrative. The way in which an iconic character like Superman is portrayed, is equally as important to whom is being portrayed. Stylization of images and saturation of color recall the images that permeate and captivate childhood and allow the viewer to step into another frame of mind for viewing the work and interacting with the images.

**Surrealists Playing Games**

“It is impossible for me to look at a painting without seeing it as a window. The first thing I want to know is, “What do you see through the window?” It must look upon some “outrageous spectacle.”

-Andre Breton

Surrealist art, largely influenced by Dada, rejected many notions of society, religion, and the conventions of the everyday. Those concerned with Surrealism turned inward toward the depths of the mind. Through psychoanalysis and Freudian examination of the self, Surrealist artists such as Andre Breton, Joan Miro, Salvador Dali, and many others attempted to extract images and symbols from the subconscious. The resulting paintings depicted the twisted forms and the sometimes-haunting landscapes of the mind. The “fusion of reality and the imaginary” becomes ever present in these images.

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viii Passeron, 59  
ix Passeron, 90  
x Passeron, 95
We are constantly viewing the world through two lenses; the lens of that which is corporeal and physical, and the lens of that which is constructed only in the abstract. The place where the tangible and the intangible meet is the surreal state. For artists such as Dali and Yves Tanguy, the surreal landscape was dark, mysterious and at times quite bleak. I seek to pay homage to my own experiences and thus exchange the flat stretching horizons of many surrealists, for the pine forests, rolling hills, and unreal blue skies of my own subconscious. My mind and personal history has been infused with rich Technicolor.

Memories, thoughts, and images are translated into symbol. Artist Di Chirico aided the development of surrealist painting with *The Child’s Brain*. The figure depicted in this work becomes the icon for the “Father” in many following Surrealist works. Surrealist Joan Miro also sought to develop a symbolic visual language where geometric lines and shapes represented archetypical characters. Every day the mind collects objects, moments and fragments and in the subconscious stores, sorts, and juxtaposes these collected fragments.

In my research of surrealism, I was delighted to discover information detailing the Surrealist games. André Breton, along with several other artists created methods for art making that existed as games or exercises. Among these methods developed were the “Exquisite Corpse,” the “Marseille Game,” and the “Analogy Cards.” The latter two of these games had to do with “the construction of circulation of
cards.” xi

The Marseille game, modeled off of a Tarot deck known as the Tarot de Marseille, contains figures such as Baudelaire, Lewis Carroll’s Alice, Sigmund Freud, and Pancho Villa among many others (Plate 9.)

The artists extract figures of importance from their own lives and transplant them into the game. The Marseille game represents the “desire [of the surrealists] to navigate their future, so to speak, through the influence of other revolutionary minds.” xii The Game of Marseille represents the desire of the artist to make sense, or system of a variety of influences on both conscious and subconscious.

In the creation of a deck of cards, I, like Breton, incorporate distinct images and figures that hold significance to my life and experience thus far. Heaven (Plate 10), represents past memories of bonding with my father over cheap Chinese cuisine. This is the tangible element. The subconscious significance is the acceptance of the “Golden Sun Buffet” as a potential afterlife destination. Warm and meaningful memories of parent-child bonding are fused with the desire to return to this state of happiness in death.

xi Getsy, 65
xii Getsy, 65
The interplay of title and image is crucial to the work. As with each work, when translated into card format, the title is included as a key part of the object. In *Heaven*, there is tension between the profound unknown of the afterlife and the humorous image of a Chinese buffet.

**Take a Chance on Me**

“The surrealist card game, undertaken in transit and a time of great uncertainty, works to foreground human agency in the situation where fate, chance, or the specter of totalitarianism seems to have over taken it.”

*Getstyxiii*

The interplay of chance and agency is crucial to Dada, Surrealism, and in turn, my own endeavors. Breton and other surrealists sought to distance their use of chance from the destructive, or deconstructive nature it had within Dada. Through Freud, the surrealists agreed that the unconscious had its own language and as “all languages have meaning—they can as a result be subjected to decipherment or interpretation.”xiv Seeking to prove that the unconscious did produce meaning through chance, surrealists incorporated symbols and influences of the unconscious into a coherent system.

The images in my own deck are generated from the conscious, subconscious, and often a hybrid of the two. By inserting these images into a cohesive deck, each with rules and purpose, chance can be used to generate new narratives, expressed in a visual language, rather than a spoken one.

*Stolen Eyeball* (Plate 12) represents an example of a narrative image created through random selection of two existing cards: *Three of Moles*, and *The Keepers of the*

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xiii Getsy, 67
xiv Lejeune, 100
Eye (Plates 11, 13). This coupling resulted in an interesting occurrence. *Three of Moles* is one of the “house cards” within my deck. These cards are composed of families; Sparrows, Moles, Toads, Snails, and Trout. The house cards exist solely as participants, or players, upon which the other cards express meaning through their interaction. Blue clothing and blindness are traits belonging to and representative of the Mole family cards. For this reason it was particularly curious when *Three of Moles* was selected to interact with *The Keepers of the Eye*. The latter card exists in my universe as fates, or muses. They represent the knowledge of the unknown and through their shared eyeball they see infinite futures and possibilities. Drawing the two cards together allowed for a scenario in which an individual, normally without vision, or visual knowledge of the world was suddenly given the power to see the limitless depths of the future.

11 *Keepers of the Eye*, 2014 Acrylic on Panel, Printed Card

12 *Stolen Eyeball*, 2014 Acrylic on Panel

13 *Three of Moles*, 2013 Acrylic on Panel, Printed Card
It’s All Coming Together

Moving forward from works such as *Stolen Eyeball*, which depicts a single scenario, I generate images with numerous scenarios and character interactions happening all at once. In *Sponges as Weapons*, three separate narratives occur in a single frame. Each scenario involves three cards. The primary action involves, *The Littlest Headhunter, Sponge Phobia,* and *The Holy Grande.*

This work represents the result of the visual system I have devised. The system has three core parts, the first of which being the painted works. Figures are extracted and collected from my conscious and subconscious, simplified and stylized, they act as the saints and holy figures of my own experience. The second part of the system is the deck itself. Serving as a tangible, touchable tool, the deck allows the images to exist and interact within an established framework. The images are the building blocks of a visual language. The third element of the system is the set of rules or guidelines governing the interactions. Ascribing meaning to the images and forcing their interaction through game-play and chance, I am able to generate bizarre, active narratives that categorize the past and reveal the limitless potential of the future. Viewers can bring their own interpretations to the work and if they so choose use the cards to generate their own narratives. As the viewer has the option to decipher the images I generate, I too must continue to decipher the symbols in my own life and find significance within my thoughts and experiences. I will continue to explore image generation within this system in an attempt to discover purpose within the narrative of my life.
Sponges as Weapons 2014
Acrylic on Panel
Bibliography


