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## ARTIST

### Somewhere Between Here and There

#### Link

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My passion is printmaking, but somehow when I started teaching I slid into Foundations sinkhole where I have had my feet stuck in the mud. If you are anything like me and my colleagues at the Myers School of Art, the hair on the back of your neck prickles at the mere mention of the word Foundation; who knows what debates over differing pedagogies will ensue. Despite wishing for more time in the printshop with a crew of evolving printmakers at my side, I love the Foundation classroom. Each semester I get to watch a group of new students awaken and start to grapple with 2D Design and consider exactly what this whole art thing is all about.

Before the first critique we begin to analyze some of the dilemmas that face art makers must confront. We discuss internal context and external context. We discuss the region of discourse that exists between the artist and the viewer. We discuss the difference between seeing and observing, the contrast between the viewer and the encounterer that Arthur Danto addresses in "Why Does Art Need to Be Explained? Hegel, Biedermeier, and the Intractably Avant-Garde"<sup>1</sup> the introductory article to Linda Winetraub's book *Art on the Edge and Over*. The viewer approaches an artwork and sees it with the expectation that the *picture*<sup>2</sup> in front of him or her will show something. The encounterer, however, approaches the artwork and lets the *image*<sup>3</sup> approach him or her as well. The encounterer expects to be analytical of what s/he sees and be challenged by what s/he observes. Seeing is, in many ways, a passive activity; observing is an active endeavor. Seeing is looking at the surface; observing is diving in.

Much of this discussion is based on semantics. But, we talk about the fact that words are very specific and that there are many words that can be used seemingly interchangeably. However, if one considers the true meaning of the words that one chooses then one can communicate precisely and succinctly. Words are verbal language. The elements and principles of two-dimensional design are the core of visual language. We arrive at the understanding that with acute consideration, specific choices, and diligent effort one can not only use this visual language to speak to one's viewer, but also converse with him or her, inviting participation in the artwork as an encounterer.

In my mind the critiques that follow are stellar, of course, thanks to this brilliant, crystal clear discussion. In reality it is closer to the great sucking sound of me trying to extract my feet from the Foundation mire. But the groundwork is laid, and the students are beginning to consider the realm where art exists and the dynamics of visual communication. In this idealized world, which is often too far away, the dialogue is not about the validation and imposition of one person's opinion over another's, but understanding the differences between the intentions of the artist and the observations of the viewer. The dialogue is a means of exploring the space in between these two. It is about navigating the undefined, intangible expanse somewhere between me and you, somewhere between here and there, and existing together within that space.

I find myself living within this space in almost every aspect of my life. I am a printmaker, but I often find myself working in painting or with photography. I am an artist and I am a teacher. My degree is in printmaking, but I teach mostly foundations. (A student once commented that she was surprised by my work in our faculty exhibition; she was surprised that the artworks that I showed were prints and not foundations.) I am a professor, but I feel like I have so much to still learn. I am a husband and a father and somewhere in there I am me. I am torn between what I want and what I need. I want to believe, but I can't help questioning and doubting. I love food and cooking, but I am not crazy about dishes. I am who I was as a child, but I am an entirely different person. We all have these different roles or different sides to our lives, none of which specifically define who we are, but all of which play active parts in our identities. It is from this place that my artwork develops, that it begins to take form.

For a number of years my love of food has been the impetus for my paintings and prints. While I find myself departing from that body of work in some ways, I still return to the core of my investigation. That is the consumption and digestion of food as metaphor for the ingestion and rumina-

tion of life experiences. Three times a day we feed our bodies. Our entire lives are spent feeding our consciousnesses.

In my images I use varying forms of representation to speak of the different ways in which I experience the world and the incongruous effects these experiences have upon my personality. The process of developing my images is analogous to the way that new observations are assimilated with past experience and digested to determine who I am now. Through my layering of images, techniques, and print media, I create visual meals to serve my viewer. I invite the viewer to consume images set at a table constructed with metaphors and to consider our common experiences, and the invaluable moments in his or her life as related to food.

*Lifeblood* is an installation whose elements include an eleven-foot by four-foot dinner table, fourteen photogravure/intaglio prints, and an audio heartbeat. Each framed print is the size of a dinner plate. There are no chairs. These were my meals. I invite the viewer to ponder my images, the leftovers of experiences I have consumed.

In *Comfort Food* I layered paper, pencil, acrylic, wax, a cut-up cookbook, oil paint, and oil pastels to create images that I paired with written or diagrammed memories. The works speak about movements from here to there, ingredients to dishes or meals, experiences to memories, food to memory.

*Dinner* is about the process of creating, consuming, and experiencing a meal. The images are the size of a tabletop and were created the way a meal would be served. I set the table, served the food, consumed it, and have left behind the memories of specific meals. *Dinner* is about the importance of food and memory as observed through four different dinners that marked significant moments in my life.

In my work I also investigate the means by which my identity, our identities, are constructed. I find that my images and series of works invariably become self-portraits at specific moments in time as much as they address their own intended content. On one level, my individuality is determined by my distinct genetic composition. However, that who I am is in a continuous state of evolution that is impelled by everyday experience. I ceaselessly consume commonplace events upon which my mind feeds. Some of these happenings are expelled immediately, some linger, others are hidden away and saved for later. Regardless, all of these mundane details are the extraordinary ingredients that flavor my identity.

*Full* is a series of 20 digitally altered photogravures. Through the use of digital imaging and photogravure, these prints investigate how we construct and define our identities within the consumer culture that we live. What do we consume—products, food, experience—and how do we know that we are or are not full? Combining photographs of opened men's stomachs with metaphorical representations of the things that they have literally and figuratively consumed, these black and white images independently become allegorical portraits of each person presented. Collectively these works investigate the symbolism of the belly in the male persona. Whether an assertive demonstration of power and status, a modest statement of virility, or simply a part of the body, the belly is transformed into a container of emotions expressing both individuality and commonality.

Working in painting and printmaking as well as other media creates the opportunity for me to look at the same interests through different processes. While I approach all of my artwork through the lens of a printmaker, the inherent dissimilarities in process of varying media, even the many printmaking processes, force contrasting ways of approaching image construction and different ways of thinking and solving a problem and thus different solutions. Process is so much a part of who printmakers are. We envision an image and arrive at notions or even specific plans of what that image will be, but because there is so much process involved, the work very often evolves into an image that we could in no way have predicted. After that initial idea has developed, we must deconstruct the image and find a way of reconstructing it with a printmaking process. Through the processes of proofing and making state changes we could arrive at several iterations of the same idea. In many ways printmaking is as active a participant in the creation of a print as we are. Paintings evolve through process, too; however the effort inevitably results in one work. The concept could be explored in a broader manner through the rhythm and repetition of working in a series, but there is still only one of each work.

*Borrowed Heaven* documents the landscape around Lower Piney Creek in Banner, Wyoming, a landscape of great differences—lush creek beds and parched, barren prairie; brilliant sunshine and sudden, dramatic storms; the light, ever-changing sky and the weighty, enduring land; the luminous days and the consuming, dark nights. These images are observations of moments of change when these contrasts are tangibly evident, moments that are so beautiful that, when caught, transport us beyond ourselves, freeing us from the gravity of the everyday world.

I have wondered where the truth lies in art for a long time. The questionability of truth in photography has long been debated. With digital imaging and its editing possibilities this truth is now acknowledged as absent. But where does it exist in the work that is constructed with hand on pencil on paper, brush on canvas, etching staff on copper?

Tim O'Brien places us dead center in this dilemma in his "work of fiction" *The Things They Carried*. The book begins with seemingly true tales of O'Brien's time as a foot soldier in Vietnam; however, the reader finds him or herself not only amid horrific tales, but also between different versions of the same stories that morph and evolve with changing timelines, omitted details, and added facets. The reader is placed in the position of complete confusion questioning the veracity in the stories and the book itself. O'Brien creates a place where the viewer is confronted with the atrocities of war, its resulting memories, and the obscure ensnaring reality in which its veterans live. The book is about its content, but also about the qualities of memory and the craft of storytelling. We must question whether through time and its altering effects on our perceptions, through repetition and process, we draw closer to the discovery of truth or we leave it far behind?

In Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities* we read of all the cities through which Marco Polo has adventured as he recounts them to Kublai Khan. It is only through reading descriptions of over 50 cities that we realize they are all based upon Marco Polo's own recollection of different aspects of his native Venice. This exploration is a document of examination and imagination through repetition. It yields a representation of a place that exists in memory. This representation is a more precise and simultaneously more abstract than any singular image could be.

The works that together form *For What Is, But Will No Longer Be* draw from several significant personal experiences that coincided in the fall of 2005—the discovery of a piece of music that addresses the endurance of time, ever-present change, and human mortality; a trip to Cairo, Egypt where I visited the Al Azhar Mosque; and grieving related to loss and the resulting changes that are effected upon one's life. The work was influenced by these specific experiences. The work would not have existed if these experiences were not filtered through my mind. I wonder, though, if the actual work begins to address my intentions, or if its true content becomes more about memory, repetition, and the use of the imagination to tell a story and try to make sense of the many concurrent aspects of my life at a specific moment in time. What is important here? I find myself with the question that I ask my foundation students. Is it in my intention, is it in the work itself, or is it in the understanding that the viewer reaches through the experiencing the work? Are the ideas that led me to create the work the more important or is it what the ideas have become and the dialogue that exists between me and my audience?

Through personal experience with the finality of death, we come closer to comprehending life. The experience of happiness would not be as luminous, if we did not recognize that pleasure exists in transitory moments. Much of the joy of life is toned with the understanding that loss is the constant, quiet companion of living.

Traveling with a group of printmakers to The American University in Cairo, I visited the Al-Azhar Mosque. The beauty of the space, of the glowing, amber light that streamed through the windows, was stunning. It was for me a moment of exhilaration, awe, and peace. Yet, for the many people around me it was a part of the meter of everyday life, like the precise repetition of the ornamentation that surrounded me. I was thrilled by the moment I was living, but saddened that it was not universal and that it would soon be lost and in the past.

This longing is the subject of Arvo Pärt's music for piano and orchestra, *Lamentate*. In this lamento, the piano moves through the constant of life with quiet progressions and strident leaps of joy. Always; however, the cadence of life is toned with an undercurrent of unsatisfied desire, a yearning for the shattering of what Pärt describes as the "boundary between time and timelessness."

*For What Is, But Will No Longer Be* is a response to experiences like mine in Cairo and is inspired by Pärt's music. The varied pulse of life is made tangible with the rhythmic presentation of amber-toned lithographs. This meter is punctuated by moments of idealized peace as represented by captured landscapes organically reaching for permanence where there is no solid grasp.

Pärt states "Death and suffering are the themes that concern every person born into this world. The way in which the individual comes to terms with these issues (or fails to do so) determines his attitude towards life—whether consciously or unconsciously." With *For What Is, But Will No Longer Be*, I honor the relationship between living and loss.

In his book *The Visual Elements of Landscape* John Jackle states that "a memory is what is left behind when something happens and does not completely unhappen."<sup>4</sup> John Berger stated in his BBC series *Ways of Seeing* that, "an image is a sight which has been recreated and reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved—for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a way of seeing."<sup>5</sup>

I see my images as records of memories of that have been detached from the place and time where they existed and are preserved in a visual format. My images evolve from the things that I have encountered that have not completely unhappened and become things that reappear on paper, panel, or canvas and in the observations of my viewer. My images tell stories whose truth is in their objectness, their physical existence.

Currently I am working on a series of prints that consider water. Water is always the same and always different. It is placid and violent. It transforms our environments and through it we see the world differently in its reflections. The images have begun as photogravures. I don't yet know where they will go, but they will exist somewhere between idea and process, truth and memory, somewhere between you and me, the artist and the viewer. My work evolves from all of these places and will come, no doubt, come to exist somewhere between here and there.

<sup>1</sup> Danto, Arthur, *Why Does Art Need to Be Explained? Hegel, Biedermeier, and the Intractably Avant-Garde*, in *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970s—1990s*, Litchfield: Art Instincts, Inc., 1996. pp 12-16.

<sup>2</sup> Picture—n illustration 1: a visual representation (of an object or scene or person or abstraction) produced on a surface.

<sup>3</sup> image—n representation 1: an iconic mental representation; 2: language used in a figurative or non-literal sense.

<sup>4</sup> John Jackle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Group, 1972) p. 9-10.