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Threatening Skies

by

Brandon Dunlap

A non-thesis project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts School of Art and Art History College of Visual and Performing Arts University of South Florida

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Some of us prefer illusions to reality. Authenticity is valuable, but it can only exist with a certain amount of fantasy. Value is derived from oppositions; the binary thinking of thesis, antithesis and finally synthesis is what leads to something of value. Sometimes the fantastical is what is cool, sometimes the authentic is what is cool. Keeping up with what is cool can be exhausting work, and the trick is to make that work look effortless while at the same time constructing the look which conquers today while foreshadowing tomorrow. My life and my artwork are chaotic and unorganized because I like it that way. So, I’m sitting down to write this paper literally surrounded by unarranged piles of notes, articles, sketchbook pages and various other scraps of paper I’ve compiled that deal with my work and what it represents.

There are many people who have grown up with a lot of sensory overstimulation from advertising, videogames and television. I consider myself one of those people, and therefore I like people who blur the lines between fine art and what is commonly considered low art: graphic design, illustration, graffiti, comic books, etc. As a child, my first experiences with and exposure to art were taking walks from the train station to the Art Institute of Chicago. I remember that peeling stickers or flyers off the buildings along the way and placing them in my backpack for future reference was just as or even more gratifying than viewing the exhibits in the museum.

When I was 12, I purchased a Hieronymous Bosch poster from the mall. The irony of buying “The Garden of Earthly Delights” from a poster rack that also contained C.H.I.P.S., Battlestar Galatica and the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders posters didn’t strike
me until many years later. Some people tend to underestimate the power of the media’s ability to mold our lives into something almost fantasy-like. I hung that poster in my room and used it as a frame of reference for many of my early drawings. Like Bosch, I began cramming every empty space on the paper with some tracing from a comic book or trading card until the image was overloaded. I still use that composition strategy in much of the work I do; today I continue to be influenced by poster art and street art while at the same time looking at artists who treaded the line between the gallery or museum and the more accessible outside world, such as Andy Warhol, Jean-Michele Basquait, Winston Smith and Sue Coe.

Another visual and political influence has been the punk rock records I collected. The artist Raymond Pettibon illustrated most of the Black Flag album covers, and Winston Smith designed the controversial punk band the Dead Kennedy’s infamous album covers and now their works can be seen in some of the most exclusive galleries from Manhattan to Los Angeles. Many times, the artwork on the album cover and on the record sleeve was just as important to me as the music on the record. My fascination with advertising and the parallels it has with street art has continued to grow over the years. Artificial values, commodity culture, consumer objects and their control of our lives, and subversive advertising are all subjects I employ in my work.

How is something sprayed or pasted on to a wall in a public space any more distracting or harmful than a huge billboard or bus stop kiosk? Barry McGee, who started as a street artist and now is an acclaimed up-and-coming star in the elite art world, often
talks about the parallels between graffiti and advertising. He said, “Advertising is
subversive and far more damaging, where as most of the stuff done on the street is very
close to the truth.”

Many of my early pieces were made for the street. They were drawings or
photocopy collages, and some contained some sort of text that in many instances was
inserted for aesthetic purposes only. In this work, there was no political or social motive,
the pieces were executed merely for my own selfish ego gratification. They were like an
advertising campaign but with no product to sell or urgent message to make. But I think
those pieces and the act of putting them outside gave me an awareness of the two
distinctly different art universes that existed: the commercial and the “fine art” worlds.
Putting work on the street is a very simple form of visual communication, but it’s very
direct as well. If someone feels strongly about something or just wants to be seen, it’s just
a matter of going out to the street and writing what you want. Then it’s there and now
people have to deal with it. One of the few ways to get heard or seen is to use street art.
The medium is part of the message. It's an act of defiance. Because of its street smart
savvy and brash success the narrow grey area between the two worlds have shrunk even
further, as advertisers have begun to use the underground subculture as an aesthetic to
target youth culture.

There are two worlds in which I have developed as an artist. I have my friends
and peers that I interact with in an art school environment, and then there are those
friends of mine that are adamantly opposed to this type of environment. They are self-
taught anti-establishment types that feel the fine art side of the art world is detrimental to being a pure, raw and exciting artist. Some have tried art classes and became disenchanted. I feel there are definite pros and cons to both sides of that equation as I feel I’ve benefited immensely from both camps. I also feel I have the vision and artistic freedom to pursue a direction in my work that most formally trained artists don’t. I’m more in touch with a broader audience, my work speaks a language and has a freedom people can relate to and is accessible. I also feel I’ve benefited from the interaction with students and faculty. The critiques, feedback, and suggestions have been essential in my growth as an artist. I’m not where I want to be, I probably never will be, but that’s good motivation for my personal growth as an artist.

My work is an attempt to culminate the ideals of both; the exclusive art world that at times can feel elitist to some of us, and the more person to person interaction of doing street art. I can blur that distinction by creating and integrating images in both galleries and on walls, benches and other various public spaces while realizing that both are equally valuable in my work. I tend to treat a project that will be installed on the street with the same planning and preparation as something I would show in a gallery space. The media has demonized street art, our public space is being privatized and shut off from us. Although it’s fairly easy to paint over and pull off the so-called “vandalism,” a property owner will generally do everything in his/her power to deter a street artist from using his/her space as a personal expression. By many, this street art is looked at as a fusion of both creative and destructive art forms.
Many earlier paintings were made as an exercise in process with little or no thought given to reasoning beyond that. I feel that an artist’s experiences, interests, and ideas will reflect in his/her work, whether he/she chooses to address the content or not, it is still there. I feel this type of art making mindset is just as valid as more conceptual ideals, but I have matured with experience and my work’s content has grown in complexity and overall personal meaning. Originally, I didn’t have any desire to bring the posters, flyers or graffiti into my academic work. In addition to wanting to learn more about myself, I decided to go to art school to learn about the art world, the vocabulary of it and most of all myself. In that fine art context, the more I learned about the academic art world the more my interest in what was going on outside of it increased.

Most of my work is mixed media; I’ve been trained to use what I can find. Although now I have a greater access to materials, I find that utilizing what I have helps me not only in my process; it is also an important aesthetic element of the work. By combining various types of surfaces, paints, and stains with printmaking and stenciling processes I have control over each individual piece. Total control is not the goal, so being somewhat intuitive and allowing accidents to occur are crucial elements in creating work.

Printmaking can be described as a very mechanical process; by adding the hand painted or sprayed elements I not only control the outcome and individuality of each piece; but it also forces me to interact more personally with the project. Over time, I’m gaining the ability to better plan the many layers embedded in each image. This process still allows for discovery within each piece and keeps the work exciting while retaining a
mass produced or mechanical look to it that I enjoy. Often, by mixing certain types of materials I allow for unexpected results to occur, which for the most part not only functions as a personal learning tool but as a unique aspect of each piece.

Repetition is an element that I use for a variety of reasons. It helps establish expectations of recurrence while giving pleasure to the viewer. It can also invoke memories and past experiences. Further, it also deals with production and consumption. Industrial standardization and the idea of appropriation might be considered a special instance of repetition. An artist that borrows from a previous source thus establishes a kind of continuity and working of time.

The way I see it, pop culture, whether current or from the recent past, is a valuable resource and should be examined and stolen from as carefully as and in equal measure to art history. If you really have artistic awareness, you will consume commercialism. The products of pop culture become fodder for your own personal expression.

As I stated earlier, I have been influenced and inspired by a variety of artists and sources. My work deals with the underlying subversive nature – or the darker side – of popular culture. In my painting “Huge Gay Fan Base,” I take a jab at current California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. A well-documented staunch Republican, this right-winger was once one of the late gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s favorite models and a subject in a series of his provocative photographs. Of course, Mr. Schwarzenegger
tried to sweep that under the rug during his recent gubernatorial campaign. Nonetheless, there are literally dozens of Gay Arnold fan clubs and websites from around the world. In my work Arnold appears shirtless, buff and surrounded by covers of 1950’s and 60’s gay male magazine covers. There are a number of hyper-masculine/ homoerotic images that surround the painting, that address the issue of how closely related those two kinds of male sexuality can be.

We are a society that is overly preoccupied with celebrities and fantasy images, even when the celebrities themselves take a hypocritical turn. This celebrity culture evokes an unhealthy interest in the lives of the rich and famous. Pablo Picasso said it perfectly: “Good taste is the enemy of creativity.” Even though my work about Schwarzenegger may not be in good taste, I think it is effective.

“American Jingoism” features a portrait of John Wayne beside two hunting vests adorned not only in camouflage, but “overly” patriotic fabrics featuring such phrases as “God Bless America” and “Land Of The Free.” John Wayne is often considered the prototype that represents red-blooded American courage and honor. To some he is considered the prototype that represents red-blooded American courage and honor. To some, he is the archetype of male fear, oppression, and the “good-old boy” mentality that seems to have grown in our country in the last few years. Personally, I feel that many Americans have taken being patriotic to new levels of absurdity. Whether through a “These colors don’t run” throw pillow or a “Support the Troops” bumper
sticker on the back of a trophy wife’s gas guzzling Hummer, it’s gotten terribly out of hand. The piece also makes reference to the current president’s “cowboy” posturing.

I do not use celebrity images in much of my work to glamorize the subject, as Andy Warhol did, rather I do it to point out that Americans should take a closer look at their idols and whether or not they deserve the adoration. Many celebrities are not really people with special attributes, but are simply marketing products. Sometimes I’m not so much poking fun at the celebrity themselves but the context in which I’ve placed them. My print “Black Velvet Pam Grier” features the famous African American actress printed on black velvet and displayed in an ornate frame. Black velvet paintings have become a universal symbol of kitsch., and in truly honoring Grier I am at the same time aware of the kitsch elements of her career.

Some of my work has become political as well. It is in response to what I view as toxic and detrimental policies this country and its politicians have enacted in recent years, I’ve done a series of stenciled paintings on suitcases bought at thrift stores and garage sales. The luggage is painted with a portrait of George W. Bush’s face with some of his notorious, confused facial expressions. The text reads:” Get Packing.” I have left a number of these pieces in and around downtown Tampa during the busiest times of day to observe the public’s responses and force some kind of reaction. In the piece, “Please Lord, Send Me A Black President” I’m interested in addressing the need for drastic changes to be made in our political system in order for there to be any real political or
social improvement. It is also a reference to a common theme in films featuring actors such as Chris Rock and Martin Lawrence.

In other works I reference and integrate many of my own digital photographs into my series of portraits and self-portraits. Instead of just using the picture, I’ve tried to manipulate the subject and his/her context. The manipulations don’t necessarily have anything to do with the personality or any memory or experience dealing with that subject. The picture is mechanical and I try to keep the changes very intuitive and mysterious. By adding my friend John McGrane’s portrait on to a body with tentacles or feelers, it provokes possible frustration or a revitalizing of the viewer’s perception of the subject and attention to detail while in turn being humorous as well. I am interested in the reaction people have when they recognize the subject but not the context in which they have been placed. I enjoy listening to people’s reactions and their interpretations to the image and the central narrative they create with their own imagination regarding the subject.

I’ve also begun to use my own image in recent works, which is something I had never really had interest in doing previously. By using my own image instead of appropriated images, my work is more personal; tying together the personality of the artist with the work produced. I use a portrait of myself in both “Become The Symptom” and “Super-Infectious.” These two pieces are about what I call empathy overload, which is when people are bombarded with an overload of negative images and constant non-stop advertisements. Instead of fighting it, you succumb to it and eventually become part
of the cycle. The treatment of each portrait is different and depends entirely on the mood or circumstances that may have been affecting me on that particular day.

My ceramic work is merely a three dimensional extension of my two dimensional work. I approach the layering and color techniques with the same mindset. Those pieces are a reference to my hobby of collecting strange toys and action figures, and they deal with elements of cartoon violence. They are a contrast of the sickeningly sweet imagery of Disney-like cartoon characters and the sinister and sometimes violent themes lurking subversively underneath the surface of those same cartoons. At times they may also represent people, and the shadowy side we all attempt to repress. I’m also interested in how making these three dimensional objects can eventually help me with dealing with space and depth in my other work.

Working without a recognized rationale is scary territory, how do I answer when someone asks, what kind of artist are you? I haven’t a clue. If you can draw or paint you are an illustrator. But if you are too mentally gifted to be burdened with actually developing a style, technique, or making visually aesthetic work, you belong to the select few who have cerebral powers to speak in an elite language of theory. In an academic art environment, sometimes there seems to be a fixed system of rights and wrongs. The current attitude of modern artists has shown favoritism towards artists who practice the doctrine of theoretical assemblage over emotional, technical, and physically produced expression. There is a huge range of commercial and graffiti art that is very exciting and
requires a wild imagination. The artist that can draw or paint does have a language, we just need to develop a stronger vocabulary.

’60s minimalism and ’70s conceptualism are again overshadowed by a very decorative form of art dealing with popular culture that became popular in the early ’80s and has again emerged in the last three or four years in some major museum shows. I feel my work fits well in that context, but can also transcend it. Corporations are making a killing off branding graffiti and street-like art to their so-called “urban market.” As this type of art has proved itself to be both popular and profitable, galleries and art collectors have embraced it as well.

But there are still people out there painting walls and trains in the dark for no other reason then they love it. Sometimes it is only a matter of weeks, days, or even hours before your masterpiece will be covered up. Being fashionable and cool is the hell that we’ve made for ourselves, where is the value in fashionable? What happened to making work that is eternal? Where is God in this? Temporary infamy has replaced the divine, and that temporary infamy is embraced by faithful artists and viewers as an earth-bound version of immortality. The artist in me would gladly give up fingers and toes to assure myself a life of coolness. My work belongs to both the art world and the street, and like graffiti artists and taggers, I do it because I love making work, not talking about it.
1.) Untitled, 2004, installation of mixed media paintings on wood and canvas

2.) Detail of above installation
3.) “American Jingoism”, 2004, sewn hunting vests w/silkscreen portrait
4.) “Please Lord, Send us a Black President”, 2004, mixed media on canvas
5.) “Super Deluxe Skull Punisher”, 2004, mixed media on canvas
6.) “Become the Symptom”, 2004, mixed media on wood
7.) “Become the Symptom 2”, 2004, mixed media and found object installation

8.) “Sci-Fi Quilt”, 2004, sewn quilt and silkscreen
9.) “Catacomb, ceramic w//found object”

10.) Detail of above image
11.) center view of gallery
12.) “Huge Gay Fan Base”, 2004, mixed media on canvas

13.) “Super Infectious”, 2004, mixed media on canvas
14.) detail from “Huge Gay Fan Base”
15.) “Sweetest Kittens Have the Sharpest Claws”, 2004, mixed media on canvas
16.) “Pam Grier on Black Velvet”, 2003, silkscreen on black velvet
17.) “Beauty”, 2004, ceramic
18.) Untitled, 2004, ceramic
19.) Untitled, 2004, ceramic
20.) “Portrait Series”, 2004, silkscreen and mixed media on canvas
Image list:

Image 1, Untitled Installation of Paintings, 2004, various sizes, mixed media on canvas
Image 2, detail of image 1
Image 3, American Jingoism, 2004, 16x20, silkscreen (portraits) and hand-sewn hunting vests
Image 4, Please Lord, Send Us A Black President, 2004, 24x48, mixed media on canvas
Image 5, Super Deluxe Skull Punisher, 2003, 16x20, mixed media on canvas
Image 6, Become The Symptom, 2004, 32x40, mixed media on wood
Image 7, Become The Symptom 2, 2004, 24x48, panels with manikin and pedistol, mixed media on wood with found objects
Image 8, Sci-fi Quilt, 2004, 60x60, silkscreened hand sewn quilt
Image 9, Catacomb, 2004, 30x42, ceramic with found object
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Image 16, Pam Grier, 2003, 16x20, silkscreen on black velvet
Image 17, Beauty, 2004, 14 inches tall, ceramic
Image 18, Untitled Cup Form, 2004, 7 inches tall
Image 19, Untitled Ceramics, 2004, 7 inches and 14 inches tall, ceramic

Image 20, Portrait Series, 2004, various size portraits, silkscreen on canvas