

Telling Stories, Again:
Theories and Aesthetics of Narrative Political Art

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Introduction

This is a story about storytelling. It is about the development of an artist – the search for an appropriate visual language, the philosophers and artists that inspire, and the inevitable politics of storytelling. According to those closest to me, I have been telling stories since before I can remember, but it has taken me until this point to realize the magnitude of my preoccupation as a storyteller, and its centrality in my artistic practice. Though I consider myself to be a political artist, I now have come to understand the subtle, yet indispensable differences between art *about* politics, and political art: art intended to produce results. I am not convinced the latter is desirable for me, as the former increasingly informs my decisions.

As I made what proved to be a rather difficult transition into my advanced art studies, I rejected the familiar, if sometimes heavy handed, modes that proved successful for me in the past, and embraced wholeheartedly what I assumed was the proscribed level of conceptualization and abstraction often dubbed “High Art.” Though I had some initial conceptual successes tackling the social issues pressing on my conscience – primarily in the form of trashing a gallery floor with red iron oxide – my developing portfolio was eventually cluttered with a myriad of failures, and false starts that all too often produced undesirable reactions. In my rush to become a sophisticated political artist of the “highest” sort I forgot to take the time to reflect on my sources of inspiration, my motivations for producing, and sensibilities that made my artwork successful in the past. This is not to say that I ignored these things outright, but rather that their unshakable presence beneath the surface of my practice began to function in confusing and unintended ways. Where I once had such clarity of vision in my content and production, I now found myself struggling to find my voice and sense of purpose.

As it turns out, high-art aesthetics, political interests, and perhaps even my own stubbornness do not make for effective studio companions. Contemporary artists such as Doris Salcedo, Ai WeiWei, and Marina Abramavic – to name but a few – have produced highly successful art careers making social commentaries through simple formal/ conceptual gestures or performances. In my convoluted mind, however, the complex entanglements of different social issues are seemingly incompatible with such reductive conceptual methodologies. This is not to argue that the artwork of the aforementioned lacks complexity. On the contrary, it takes a great deal of skill, and ingenuity to be reductive while also maintaining effectiveness in one’s artwork.

Yet, while this sort of art garners praise for its subtlety and sophistication, I continually find myself returning to the “low” aesthetics pioneered by artists on the fringes on art history.

As I attempt to bear witness to the frightening uncertainty of the Trump Era, rationalize centuries’ worth of mythologized American history, and wrestle the ever present identity politics of whiteness and masculinity (not least because I am a man, white, and presumably entitled to all of the advantages *patriarchy* confers on such individuals) I continue to mull over the apocalyptic if not prophetic vision of Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School. If it holds true that art, and aesthetic experience “can reveal the truth of the ‘system of illusions’ (*Verblendungs-zusammenhang*) that is capitalist production and consumption,” then art in its myriad of forms remains a potent tool for reflecting upon our present time.¹ Where I am drawn away from increasingly popular forms of *Artivism* (activist art), and back toward the peculiar aesthetic sensibilities of say Funk artists, various Chicago movements, and otherwise “outsider” artists (to employ the pejorative term) stems from Adorno’s qualifiers. For art to maintain its effectiveness it “must stand apart from [social] reality” by self-reflecting “its own non-identity,” and acknowledging “that the destructiveness of capitalist modernity is such that art is already caught up in ambivalence in its very attempt to bear witness to this destruction.”² As many *artivists* attempt to skirt the machinations of the “culture industry” through happenings, and experimentation in non-objectness and the ephemeral, I have maintained a faith in objects and their steadfast interpersonal power. On the surface, *Artivism* appears the perfect antidote to Adorno’s “culture industry.” Indeed, I devoted a great deal of time and effort to model my art practice in this way. I am not convinced, however, such autonomy is even achievable if not desirable. Capitalism, as is the case with all human institutions, will someday prove its own impermanence while art objects have proven time again to be surprisingly permanent; think 40,000 year old cave paintings. I would not presume my own creations to last nearly so long, but I do yet find value in the permanence of objects.

With prologue in mind I endeavor to describe, and analyze my affinity for all things Funk. To this, I will also explain my sense of craft, the crude aesthetic I employ, and my belief that this adds subtle layers of meaning within my narratives. I am ever fascinated by the artist’s role as a cultural producer, and the implications – or indictments – this bestows in terms of the

¹ Austin Harrington, *Art and Social Theory: Sociological Arguments in Aesthetics*, Cambridge,

² *Ibid*, 167.

politics of memory, and aesthetic. As these positions take hold within, I do my best to confront urgent contemporary issues while bearing witness to the subjective, illusory, and meta-symbolic.

By no means is the following meant to function as a manifesto (though I briefly entertained the notion). There are also important aspects of my practice of which I am unable to address within the scope of this analysis. I would have liked to more thoroughly discuss the themes present within my work; however, I decided to devote this work to the art theoretical considerations that have influenced the form of my artwork over the last three years. And so this is a snap shot of a moment in my development, a key to understanding why I have arrived where I have (as well as how to make sense of my visual insanity) while acknowledging that there are no perfect solutions in art, and that my practice is apt to further develop going forth.

The Artist and Cultural Production:

Creating Memories

To paraphrase a recent speech by Debra Modellmogg, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Nevada, Reno, art is the way in which a society defines itself, its values, and how it wishes to be remembered. This sentiment weighs heavily on my practice, in part because of my lifelong interest in history and anthropology. Some of the most significant exposures I have had to past societies happened in art museums. Indeed, the vast majority of primary source material available to historians and archeologists comes in the form of visual art. The ancient Romans, for example, are renowned for their propensity to immortalize their exploits in stone tableaus (fig. 1). But, what of the art of our own societies? How does art come to shape our identities, molding the ways in which we experience the world? What are the ethical implications artists must navigate? These are the questions that haunt my studio practice, and influence my research.



Figure 1: *Trajan's Column*, 107~113 CE, marble, 30 by 35 meters. (University of St. Andrew's, 2018).

Part of my fascination with ancient cultures has always been mythology. From the bird headed gods of the Egyptians to the heroic epics of Greek warriors, such narratives from the past are still captivating to audiences thousands of years later. What is often thought of as American history is rather boring by comparison (it does after all lack the same edginess as a crocodile-headed hippopotamus that awaits to swallow your soul in the underworld). Perhaps because American society came of age during the Enlightenment, an era of *science* and *reason*, mythological stories are relegated as obsolete rationalizations of the real world. In reality, American history is far more mythologized than is recognized in popular opinion, the results of which having significant consequences in our daily lives. As observed by the historian, Richard Slotkin, it is “Through myths the psychology and world view of our cultural ancestors are transmitted to modern descendants, in such a way and with such power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected.”³ Cue visions of an axe wielding George Washington, cherry wood splinters still fresh under his fingernails, snatching dishonest children from their beds. Though the actual story to

³ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600 -1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 3.

which I refer is far less Grimm, such myths do exalt the historical figures beyond reproach wherein which their mythologized characters can be used to justify ignoble ideologies and actions. Unfortunately, many conversations about American mythology are derailed by assumptions that the mythologized past is historic fact, a challenge I confront regularly in my artwork. Nevertheless, my practice still responds to myths as well as my relationship to the mythmaker (as all artists are mythmakers of sorts) by both revealing and critiquing the myth in dominant cultural narratives.

Though American myths may be hard to identify, it is very much found in the way the dominant culture conceives of itself. Author and social critic, Viet Than Nguyen, describes this self-conceptualization as “the identity that pretends not to have an identity, that denies how it is tied to capitalism, to race, and to war.”⁴ For this reason, the content of my artwork is by in large characterizations of whiteness and masculinity. It is essentially a process of making visible the otherwise invisible tropes of the dominant culture. At times, this manifests as visual articulations of preexisting myths (George Washington as the honest virtuoso), at other times it is myths of my own fantasy (monstrously large, gender bending, orange faced black widow spiders). More often, however, it is a combination of the two juxtaposed against stereotypes of the Other. For reasons I will discuss further in the final section, symbols of industry, the desert, and the iconography of the Wild West are also highly prevalent in my myth narratives, as these are inseparably bound to white, and masculine tropes. I will return to how I represent and critique such myths, but first I will examine why I think such work is necessary.

The United States is somewhat unique in the world as it lacks any true singular history. Aside from the indigenous peoples who exist on the unseen fringes of American society, peoples of various Diasporas populate the United States, creating a rare situation in which citizens are forced to invent a nationalism only vaguely linked to ancestral pasts. As it turns out, artists in the United States are particularly influential in this identity vacuum. Slotkin states, “Mythmaking... is simultaneously a psychological and a social activity” where “The myth is articulated by individual artists and has its effect on the mind of each individual participant, but its function is to reconcile and unite these individualities to a collective identity.”⁵ From the artifacts of artistic

⁴ Viet Than Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 221.

⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

production it is “that the role of the artist... becomes important as a means of controlling and directing the development of the myth, limiting or augmenting its power to induce the mythopoeic affirmation in its audience.”⁶ For me such a statement acts as a calling. Given our current administration’s propensity for creating its own reality, fabricating its own “untruths” as is politically convenient, the stakes for artists as mythmakers seem all the direr.

In a culture acutely defined by its recent artistic production, I cannot help but worry over the susceptibility of art to interference by exploitative forces. Nguyen warns of the cultural power inherent in art:

Art is the artifact of the imagination, and the imagination is the best manifestation of immortality possessed by the human species, a collective tablet recording both human and inhuman deeds and desires. The powerful fear art’s potentially enduring quality and its influence on memory, and thus they seek to dismiss, co-opt, or suppress it.⁷

Indeed, if one desires to undermine a society shaped by artists since its inception (the United States), art is as appropriate an entry point as any. I do not mean to imply that every artist must be political in his or her practice – though there are undeniable political implications in such decisions – I do have a sense of personal responsibility in this regard. As a democratic citizen devoted to the study of art, art is my greatest opportunity for political speech and social impact. Through art I can act upon the mythic past, revealing it as such, and perhaps helping curtail its subliminal powers.

As the post-war period referred to as the era of the American Culture Wars suggests, the answer to a singular national identity hinges on the way the United States remembers itself, the myth as articulated by the dominant culture. At play is what W G Sebald termed “secondhand memory,” the notion that we can recall memories we did not directly experience ourselves.⁸ We can think of secondhand memory as a collective conscious that we inherit in part through personal experiences of artworks and cultural artifacts, be they paintings, anthems, or those dollar store flags people stick in their lawns. To expand this theory, Nguyen refers to the “industry of memory” – not to be confused with a memory industry – that “includes the material

⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁸ W G Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 89.

and ideological forces that determine how and why memories are produced, circulated, and [controlled].”⁹ Ruling elites have a vested interest in maintaining the production of artwork that aligns with dominant cultural narratives and values. Of course, in a democratic society, their will always be voices of dissent seeking their own control of the narrative. As historian Andrew Hartman summarizes, “the history of America, for better or worse, is largely a history of disputes about the idea of America.”¹⁰ As it happens, art is often the epicenter of such disputes due to its significant cultural influence, exemplified by the legal battles that ensued over Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (fig 2), and his receipt of a National Endowment for the Arts grant. Less visible to the public, art is also too often the means by which cultural agendas are subversively advanced by those in power.



Figure 2: Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ* (from *Immersion*), 1987, dye destruction print, mntd, (Artnet, 2018).

⁹ Nguyen, 107.

¹⁰ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2.

Many art historians regularly advance the notion that Abstract Expressionism was the high point of American art, with figures like Jackson Pollock championing a form supposedly beyond the kind of mythopoeic power I have argued thus far. It remains a major influence on contemporary art, with certain ideals found within my own practice. Yet, the characteristic spontaneity, sophistication, and utter lack of representation are not as innocuous as is often believed. Claudia Mesch argues, “The cultural events of [the Cold War] period make clear that formally advanced or completely abstract art proved to be quite available for appropriation, since the State, particularly in the US, could fill this art, apparently without subject matter, with *any* subject matter it found most persuasive of its own goals.”¹¹ This is a bleak suggestion, nevertheless, also something of a rallying cry for an artist such as myself. Whereas many contemporary artists (political artists included) borrow aesthetic cues from supposed apolitical Abstract Expressionism and high modernism, I often worry over the potential traps of ambiguous visual language, and instead pursue more direct, often lowbrow cultural material via a Funk aesthetic. In the battle over American myths, however, I find the greatest challenge to be that of navigating urgent ethical questions. Lest I cast myself as a hypocrite, how do I resist merely perpetuating the cycle of propaganda?

It is easy to recall an eye-rolling piece of art: a Cheeto faced Donald Trump standing in naked glory with tiny, flaccid, sausage penis gently blowing in the breeze. Funny if not redemptive given the outrageousness of the time, such art does little to distinguish itself from the same annals of history as images of blackface, or Injun Joe. The problem with propaganda is that it fails to address the complexities at play in the world while promoting the same mythopoeic cultural narratives of *them and us* that the most sinister ideologies are built upon. Colloquially dubbed the “one liner,” it is no surprise fine art critics frown upon such artwork. Ever my guide on such matters, Nguyen offers a solution for breaking the cycle of propaganda by way of what he coins “just memory.” Just memory is a process wherein which nationalism is overcome through a combination of ethically remembering our own as well as the Other, “constantly [trying] to recall what might be forgotten.”¹² He continues by saying, “Any project of the humanities... should thus also be a project of inhumanities, of how civilizations are built on

¹¹ Claudia Mesch, *Art and Politics: A Small History of Art for Social Change Since 1945* (New York: IB. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2013), 5.

¹² Nguyen, 17.

forgotten barbarism toward others, of how the heart of darkness beats within.”¹³ The hypothetical Trump image is one-dimensional in this regard, but it also misses critiquing the myth that makes a figure like Trump possible. To this Nguyen adds, “Without the... kind of panoramic recognition... and what one might colloquially call seeing the bigger picture, the danger is that blame and responsibility would fall only on the self and the individual, rather than on societies, cultures, industries, states, and war machines.”¹⁴ As I seek to *re-member* history, to truly upset the dominant narratives, the challenge is to simultaneously address the complexities involved while revealing the myths that make the narratives possible.

As I continue to develop techniques of criticism without creating propaganda, I have shifted away from narratives about specific people, or groups of people in favor of those that address the broader ideologies and cultural institutions. The juxtaposition of tropes against the stereotypes commonly used to legitimize those tropes is frequent within my practice. I believe in doing so it is possible to explore complex social dynamics while also revealing the absurdity of tropes and stereotypes and the first place. Betye Saar is especially adept at this, and is effective in both recalling past racisms as well as reclaiming the narrative altogether. In her assemblage *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (fig. 3), an otherwise racist depiction of Black women is transformed into a symbol of pride, power, and perseverance. What is important to note is that historical social atrocities – slavery, blackface, and the commercial cooptation of both – are given equal representation to a figure that is simultaneously both caretaker and freedom fighter. In spite of the obscene caricature, Saar recasts Aunt Jemima as the resilient guardian of her otherwise helpless oppressor, as represented by the wailing baby. Aunt Jemima is liberated but, more importantly; the myth of white supremacy is inverted - exposed as a farce.

¹³ Ibid, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid, 79.



Figure 3: Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, mixed-media assemblage, 30 x 20 x 7 centimeters, courtesy: the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles; collection of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum. (Frieze, 2018).

This acknowledgement of complexity, of the potentiality for the human and inhuman, and the challenge of sacred myths is similar to my approach in *A Bit Tied Up at the Moment* (fig. 4). A boot clad foreman rests perched upon his mount, yet closer inspection reveals he has tied himself up with his own tool. He is the model of productivity, yet rendered incapacitated. Though he has assumed an active role, he in fact occupies a more passive position. Ironically, the “genuine burro” saw horse that props up this figure is far more productive. Of course, there is still a clear hierarchy present, as is a system built upon exploitation. In the context of labor relations, the viewer can deduce that the parties in question are intimately linked, simultaneously acting on one another in a way that transcends traditional assumptions of victimization while also upsetting the validity of the productivity myth. Or so I hope.



Figure 4: *A Bit Tied Up at the Moment*, 2017, mixed media.

The role of artists as mythmakers in American culture is unavoidable within a system of political consequences for our aesthetic choices. The power of myth still readily functions in American culture, drawing in my artistic energies. The challenges I confront, however, are ones of the subjective nature of aesthetics and the staunch opinions regarding the possible solutions.

The Artist Versus the Reporter

By comparison to the art movements of the preceding 50 years, contemporary artists are increasingly engaged in political debate with regard to the social instabilities of the time. Political artists' aesthetic debates run hot, as do opinions of the artist's role in social movements: how directly should artists be involved? What forms – or lack of form – best confront the capitalist machine? As the critic, Jack Burnham, observed when discussing high-modernism:

We are now in transition from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented* culture.

Here change emanates not from *things*, but from the *way things are done*.¹⁵

Such a transition has been profound across the social landscape with contemporary art as no exception. As an emerging artist endeavoring to find footing, this dilemma rattles my skull at odd hours of the night. My guilty confession, I am an object maker. I wrestled with conforming my practice to a *systems* orientation – finding some success in interactive ephemeral work – but there remains something personally powerful (gratifying?) in objects. They resonate in ways intangible artworks do not, and I am still in the process of working out why. Fortunately, there are compelling arguments made by others confronting this same quandary.

The simplistic binary of socially concerned art places active performative artwork in opposition to the more passive style of visual reporting; in a systems-oriented culture the former gaining in both popularity and regard. Nato Thompson, chief curator at Creative Time and one of the foremost critics of activist art, identifies “two strands of artistic production [that] stand out as important precedents in informing much of the art and political work of the recent past: social aesthetics and tactical media.”¹⁶ A reluctant technology user myself, I am primarily concerned with social aesthetics. My most direct participation in social aesthetics occurred during my first year of graduate school when I created the installation *33,000: More Than a Number* (fig. 5). Gallery visitors were invited to walk over 33,000 square inches of unfixed red iron oxide powder stenciled into small, repetitive, coffin like forms. The drawing was representative of a statistic on gun violence, with activation happening through an unpredictable performance. I intended for the work to be utterly transformative not only in regards to the deterioration of the imagery, but also in terms of a visceral experience for participants. In some regards the resulting conversations embodied the subject beyond best expectations, however, there were certain ambiguities involved that derailed the intended connections. Rather than discussing the broader social implications inherent in isolated acts of gun violence, debates revolved around ethical concerns of my “artistic” contamination of public spaces, destruction of private property (clothing, shoes and the like), and fears over potential health risks. As I discovered, this is a pervasive issue in the realm of social aesthetics. According to Thompson, “The paranoid suspicion that the ambiguous

¹⁵ Jack Burnham, “Systems esthetics,” *Artforum* vii/I, September 1968, 30-31.

¹⁶ Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-first Century* (Brooklyn, New York: Melville House Printing, 2015), 17.

artistic gesture is, in fact, propped up by a cabal of elites trading in social capital is, at this point, an American trope.”¹⁷ Social aesthetics are difficult to relate to when the vast majority of potential audiences are lacking in the contextual/ conceptual knowledge required to interpret such art effectively. There *is* validity in the trope. Through the chaos that ensued over my installation, I gained a fantastic story to tell, and thus also gained social capital as an artist. My intended political debates, however, were always just out of reach. While social aesthetics seems to circumvent bourgeois attitudes, it simultaneously relies upon a language of high-art now many decades old.



Figure 5: 33,000: *More Than a Number*, 2015, red iron oxide on butcher paper, 648 by 48 inches.

My suspicion is that is that the issue of social capital is not the only problematic domain in social aesthetics. The attraction in both social aesthetics and tactical media is that this new art

¹⁷ Ibid, 50.

transcends the illusory, achieving a state of “reality.” Activist art – *Artivism* – claims aesthetic activity just as it implies tradition mediums such as painting or sculpture are aesthetically passive. *Artivism* is superior because it lacks tangibility. *Artivism* is never acted upon; it is always *Artivism* that does the acting. *Artivism* is the sacred merger of art and life, beyond the corruptibility of capitalism because it is lacking in *objectness* – physical form that can be owned and traded. Such transcendent power, however, relies upon the assumption that conceptualism and performance are rightful heirs to modernist/ post-modernist theories, that art could escape the clutches of the illusion and realize a utopic vision without distinctions between art and life. The critic and historian, Claire Bishop, is skeptical at best. In *Artificial Hells* Bishop traces a lineage that places “the pre-history of recent developments in contemporary art... in the domain of theatre and performance rather than in histories of painting or the ready-made.”¹⁸ I raise this point not to claim that *Artivism* is something other than art, but that it confirms my suspicions, in art there is always only the illusion. Theater may be comprised of living bodies, but it is no more *real* than is a drawing of cheeseburger. As it stands, in order for *Artivism* to produce the change it claims as its objective, the audience must make the same interpretive leap from aesthetic experience that is required for an art object to be impactful.

Leon Golub arrived at similar conclusions in his pursuit of painting at a time when many of his contemporaries were first pioneering social aesthetics. An art purist of sorts, Golub states, “As we dig ourselves into and out of modernist/post-modernist dilemmas of appearance, representation, ‘appropriation’ and ‘false consciousness,’ we are at continuous cross referencings (cross purposes) as to what is real as against what is ‘real.’”¹⁹ In a rapidly changing art world, Golub maintained that paintings were equally powerful political instruments, and an unrivaled medium for reporting the world’s atrocities. In one catalogue statement Golub writes, “The very grotesqueness and vulgar presence of these images attests to their actualization as embodiments of the ‘news.’”²⁰ The painting’s surface may be an illusionary reference to real life, yet the *objectness* of the painting gives physicality to the illusion. When considering an artwork like Golub’s *Mercenaries IV* (fig. 6) elements such as point-of-view, palette, and scale contribute to

¹⁸ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2012), 41.

¹⁹ Leon Golub, *Do Paintings Bite?*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist (New York: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1997), 67.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 71.

an aesthetic experience that produces tangible affects on the viewer. The ‘real’ becomes real. Social aesthetics produces affect in much the same way, but I believe there is something more honest in the language of painting. We know how we are to approach interpreting a painting because a painting is always just a painting.



Figure 6: Leon Golub, *Mercenaries IV*, 1980, acrylic on linen, 120 1/10 by 229 1/10 in, image by Museo Tamayo. (Artsy, 2018).

With all this being said, utilizing social aesthetics or more traditional mediums may not be so radically different; they merely act as different ways of generating aesthetic experiences. However, the question of the art object and capitalism remains. Social aesthetics abandoned the object in an effort to produce aesthetic experiences unburdened by capitalist pressures. More often than not Thompson is right, however, when he states, “There is nothing that is outside the culture industry’s grasp, no matter how authentic it may seem.”²¹ Where cooptation fails, tradition often finds affirmation. As Golub says, “Even antagonistic goals or counter-actions will give credence to the [taken for granted] situation.”²² When it comes down to commercialism, industry, and the bourgeois, Robert Smithson summarizes it best, “I think it is time we realized that there is no point in trying to transcend these realms.”²³ Such lines of reasoning resonate with

²¹ Thompson, 12.

²² Golub, 81.

²³ Moira Roth, “Robert Smithson on Duchamp, an Interview,” *Artforum*, vol. 11, October, 1973, 47.

me, affirming my affinity for objects. The object too, be it painting or sculpture, lends itself readily to narrative. Humans have utilized such means to share stories long before the first texts were drafted. For obvious reasons, we may never know the full history of performance, but for me attempts at reinventing the *art* wheel is a concession to the pressures of newness capitalism demands.

And so we return to the aforementioned *Mercenaries* painting. There is earnestness in simply depicting the news; yet, Golub allows himself aesthetic liberty that transcends the goals of mere documentary. Golub had political aims, seeking to generate emotion through deliberate representational choices. Whereas *Mercenaries* could have been executed in objective photorealism, gestures charge content. It difficult to imagine a viewer unmoved by the aggressive brushstrokes, or vivid pallet of the painting, nevertheless, this is precisely the fear social aesthetics responds to. Affective or not, in the act of reporting via the object there is always inherent value. Such objects act as artifacts to be experienced by audiences across time and space, a characteristic the ephemeral act is incapable of achieving. Nguyen states:

“No aesthetic work is inherently powerful. Nevertheless, it is better to have a memorial that can be ignored than no memorial at all.”²⁴

In social aesthetics, this is a missed opportunity. Whereas the object permanence of the painting potentially transcends the limits of time and space, performances are fleeting, privileging an isolated group of participants never to be recreated or re-experienced again.

My current body of work, *Il Deserto*, comes from precisely such a place. The desire to generate affect is omnipresent, yet it stands as a memorialization/ reflection on memorial first and foremost. It departs from a Golub-esque reporting, however, in that it does not attempt to depict actual news. If “reality” is present, it is only so far as my own confrontations with events, symbols, and emotions are concerned. It is memorial only to one man’s internal/ external experiences and should not be read as a depiction of “true events.” In a drawing like *She’ll Polish Your Knob Too, but It’ll Cost You Extra* (fig. 7) actual historical references such as Blackface comingle with my own symbolic representation of idealized white womanhood. Of course nothing so outrageous as a French maid sweeping racism under the carpet of the frontier actually occurred (so far as we know), but the “truth” in it is captured and reported. The outrageous Blackface did exist just as the “civilizing” hand of whiteness served to obscure the

²⁴ Nguyen, 67-68.

obscurity in it. I must acknowledge the dangers/ shortcomings in working in this manner; certainly there is never doubt of the presence of my own personal bias. We expect our histories and news to be free of angles or agendas. Such is that histories and news never are completely objective, and I hope *Il Deserto* is a bit more honest in this regard. The French maid is clearly a genesis of my own imagination. Not to ignore that what is missing from the narrative is just as telling as what is present. So it goes, *She'll Polish Your Knob...* self-consciously considers the act of reporting just as it does the reporting. And, if the subtleties of all this go unnoticed, there is always solace in its very existence as record.



Figure 7: *She'll Polish Your Knob Too, But It'll Cost You Extra*, 2017-18, mixed media on tea stained paper, 40 by 33 inches.

In summary, the debate between the *Artist* and the reporter is somewhat inconclusive. Like all aesthetic experience, it generally comes down to personal preference on the parts of both artist and audience as it does to anything else. Each mode of expression has the potential for

aesthetic experience just as it has the potential to be commodified. After dabbling in social aesthetics, I came to the conclusion that the ambiguities in performance are every bit as conflicting as the illusions in painted surfaces, and the temporal quality of non-objective artwork is personally dissatisfying. Social aesthetics may be more “contemporary” form for art to take, but having pursued both activism and “reporting” I find final affirmation in the object. When all is said and done, I maintain that art objects – in their physical permanence artifacts – are meaningful, lasting vehicles for interpersonal communication.

What Craft and Aesthetics “Say”

Three words uttered as an impromptu conclusion to a studio visit developed into a guiding principle in my practice: oddity, clumsiness, scale. These characteristics remain listed on my studio door a year and a half later as a daily reminder that formal choices resonate conceptually; that *how* something is represented is as important as *what* is represented. Oddity, clumsiness, scale.

In thinking about oddity, clumsiness, and scale, the artist, Peter Saul, emerges as a personal prophet of sorts. “Consistency is boring,” he declares. “Like if you look at a canvas and all the brushstrokes go to the left... the painting is dead as soon as it has total consistency.”²⁵ Evoking the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism, in Saul’s summation, vitality in art is derived through the artist’s unpredictable hand. If Saul is consistent about anything throughout his career, it is only in his proclivity for the odd, clumsy, and unexpected aesthetics that emotionally charge his content. Noodle arms, hyper-saturated colors, and scathing cultural juxtapositions in paintings like *Pinkville* (fig. 8) smack of the surrealistic intensity characteristic of the very subject of the painting, the Vietnam War. In much the same way as Golub’s heavy-handed expressionism, Saul embraces crude formal aesthetics that emphasize the vulgar nature of his content. Just as the Vietnam War embodied “oddity” in the sense of the cultural juxtapositions of the warring parties (East against West, Communism against Capitalism), “clumsiness” in terms of the military and political handling of the war, and “scale” in that Vietnam can never be understood in terms of the localized conflicts the name given the war suggests, so too do Saul’s paintings give form to these descriptors. Yet, Saul troubles in that many of his later paintings are

²⁵ Peter Saul, interview by Judith Olch Richards, November 3-4, 2009, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

executed in a kind of airbrushed perfection, landing in a realm of high craftsmanship that diminishes the potent politics inherent in the artwork. To this Saul explains:

I know my pictures aren't being read the way I would like them to be. So at least they're appreciated technically, you know?²⁶

I suppose there is a certain sense of *oddity* in the juxtaposition of the immaculate, painted surfaces against the crudeness of the adolescent imagery, but ultimately there is a conceit to the unyielding sense and sensibility of bourgeois tastes so far as Saul's craft is concerned. It is to acknowledge a problematic trope in art that in order to break away from some conventions others must be adhered to.



Figure 8: Peter Saul, *Pinkville*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 90 by 131 inches. (Venus Over Manhattan, 2018).

As my artwork confronts the tropes and stereotypes of American mythology/ ideology in my content, so to does it confront certain tropes in craft and aesthetics. Assuming that anti-aesthetic is an aesthetic itself, and that art can and should properly be judged on its aesthetic/anti-aesthetic merit, why is it that poor craft is so easily dismissible; a marker of unintended error

²⁶ Dan Cameron, *Peter Saul*, (Newport Beach, CA: Orange County Museum of Art, 2008,) 52.

rather than an intentional, communicative choice? From an archival perspective, objects should be well crafted in the sense that they should function as intended by the artist, but by no means does this suggest that mastery of craft is the measure of an artwork or artist. Responding to the question of craft, Irving Kristol once stated of art at its best:

a politically charged art that is utterly contemptuous of the notion of educating the tastes and refining the aesthetic sensibilities of the citizenry. Its goal, instead, is deliberately to outrage those tastes and to trash the very idea of an “aesthetic sensibility.”²⁷

I do not go so far as to take this to mean that art should necessarily be ugly or oppositional (as noted earlier in Golub’s warning about the taken-for-granted), but that when art merely conforms to popular notions of acceptability, when the crudest of subject matter is made to be palatable by way of high craft – as in the case of Saul – it loses much of its aesthetic resonance. Suddenly, shocking content reads as a gimmick or publicity stunt rather than a genuine subject. Echoing these concerns, Thompson calls upon artists to develop “a language that is able to reckon simultaneously with the gesture and the broader infrastructures that create its impact.”²⁸ To this end, I see the languages of craft and aesthetic as a means of addressing the binary of the didactic versus the ambiguous gesture, as craft functions within the nuance of visual language with the power to augment our response to content.

And so I return to oddity, clumsiness, and scale. As I attempt to directly confront the vulgarity in the social themes I am interested in while still maintaining a sense of nuance and complexity, I often find myself caught in the push pull of the didactic/ambiguous. Pushed too far towards the didactic, vulgarity quickly becomes propaganda. Gone the other way toward the ambiguous, red iron oxide on a gallery floor simply becomes an abstract gesture divorced from the conceptual concerns it was meant to embody. If concepts fall between the poles of the didactic/ambiguous and still communicate effectively, the *how* of craft is as important in visual language as the *what* of content. Oddity, clumsiness, and scale inform the appearance of content, yet they also inform craft. Gestures like broken boards, dripping glue, and unrefined tool marks found throughout the drawings and sculptures *Il Deserto* “speak” to vulgarity as well as any images of oozing genitalia in a Saul painting might. Emerging from the aesthetic theories of

²⁷ Irving Kristol, “It’s Obscene, but Is It Art?” *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 1990, A16.

²⁸ Thomson, 54.

Abstract Expressionism, an otherwise innocuous symbol is dramatically altered via the way it is made and presented by the artist. Though my artwork emphasizes representation and narrative that is inconsistent with the Abstract Expressionist movement, attitudes about *making* are equally conceptually relevant.

While major art centers like New York City and Los Angeles were both refining and responding to bourgeois aesthetics, artists from Chicago associated with the Hairy Who and the Imagists, as well as the more loosely affiliated West Coast movement of Funk were exploring the interplay between craft and content with complete disregard for popular notions of artistic sophistication. Not surprisingly, these movements are often described more by their similarities to music than they are the visual arts. On aesthetic attitudes of the Hairy Who, curator Bennett Simpson describes a “blues” aesthetic:

The blues is a sensibility or stance shaping culture. The ‘always’ present participle of synthesizing, combining, becoming, and displacing recalls the ‘form of diversion’ that [blues scholar Albert] Murray identified as ‘the nature and function of the blues.’²⁹

Such description is strikingly similar to aesthetics of Funk art. The critic Peter Selz writes of Funk:

Funk art is hot rather than cool; it is committed rather than disengaged; it is bizarre rather than formal; it is sensuous; and frequently it is quite ugly and ungainly. Although three-dimensional, it is non-sculptural in any traditional way, and irreverent in attitude. It is symbolic in content and evocative in feeling.³⁰

Indeed, Funk artists and the like find their voice through unmitigated improvisation that is impulsive, compulsive, and unedited. Such an attitude of making often results in artwork that appears random or poorly constructed – indeed, sometimes it is – yet I argue that it is this raw state that makes Funk art aesthetically affective. Like a blues soloist riffing on a well-known tune, the Funk artist creates in real-time, responding to spontaneous internal and external inputs, riding a wave of thought and emotion without pausing to edit. As a result, the objects retain evidence of the hand of artist, bearing witness to the feelings of their maker.

²⁹ Bennett Simpson, *Blues for Smoke* (Munich and Los Angeles: Del Monico Books/ Prestel and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012), 9.

³⁰ Peter Selz, “Notes on Funk,” *Funk* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1967), 6.

When transitioning from my installation, *La Terra Promessa*, this was precisely the attitude I had to resolve. As I developed the conceptual background of the exhibition, my research connected disparate theories of class, race, and gender. From this, I conceived an installation meant to communicate the ways American elites have manipulated the ideologies of white supremacy as a means of consolidating capital, and political power. Though I knew it was important to address the inherent complexity, I felt compelled to use the reductive language of abstraction, creating for myself ambiguous forms without giving my audience any real means of interpretation, nullifying much of the potential affective power in the process. In my installation, Klansmen took the form of transparent plastic cones (fig. 9) while I constructed a shack to represent poverty, and class oppression (fig. 10). These aesthetic moves were not outright failures, but the conceptual leaps were too far to make. On the one hand, the cones embodied (in terms of material) the kind of crudeness I see in the Ku Klux Klan, yet they also attempted to speak in clean, reductive, formal language divorced from crudeness. Where I may have utilized a more expressive figuration demanded by my subject, I edited myself, choosing a form that not only fell short of the complexity I wanted to convey, but too often not falling anywhere at all. The challenge then, was to stop editing. I needed to allow myself the freedom to explore the widest possible range of visual language, from high to low, to juxtapose symbols and – at times literally – to stick things together with reckless abandon. Working through the sculptures and drawings of *Il Deserto*, this process sometimes results in the same sorts of dead ends, requiring me to revisit and rework. I should qualify here that this rarely means editing out, but rather adding more content or “roughing up” my previous work. More often, however, this process successfully yields sculptures, drawings, and combinations thereof that portray the complexity I need while still packing an aesthetic punch.



Figure 9: *La Terra Promessa*, 2016, mixed media installation, dimensions variable.

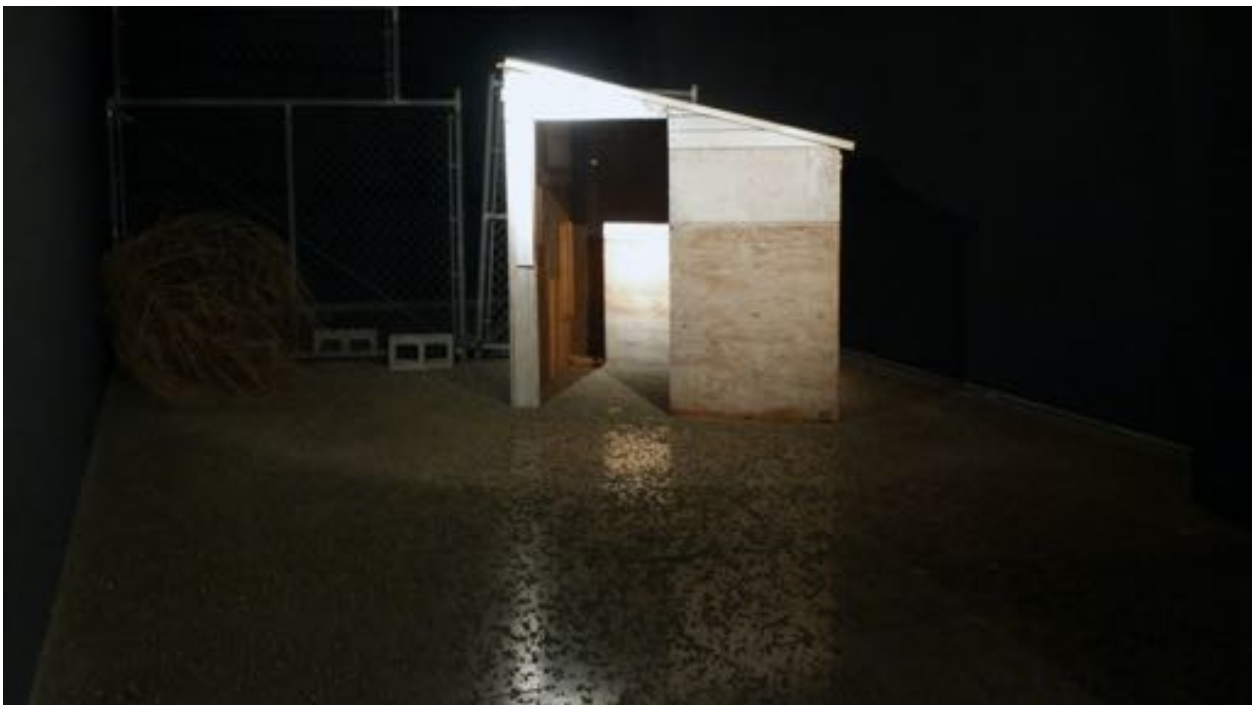


Figure 10: *La Terra Promessa (The House They Built for Me)*, 2016, mixed media installation, dimensions variable.

The honesty I find in Funk is a frankness that is never preachy or forced, but organic and always somehow deeply personal. This is communicated through the unmitigated gesture as well as an openness to visual multiplicities/ inconsistencies that parallel the complexities of our

perceived realities. Funk is “messy” because life is messy. What works in one circumstance may not work another. As the artist William T. Wiley observed of his own art, “Whatever particular form of expression my art language wants to take, from abstract to representational to imitational to whatever the voice or the heart, or the mind or soul wants to say, then letting whatever language seems the best conveyer of that thought from word to image is what I try to let happen.”³¹ Wiley’s half hazard constructions like *Slant Step* (fig. 11) are responsive in this way, rejecting limitations imposed by notions of purity or genius in favor of more unpredictable streams of consciousness. *Slant Step* is constructed in a crude manor with whatever commonplace materials were at hand. This suggests a sense of urgency, but also embraces a language of craft and aesthetic that is consistent with the sculpture’s subject matter. The imprecision of craft as well as the inaccurate rendering of the human form give form to the narrative as implied symbolically by the figure’s “dunce” cap. Had Wiley chosen to cast this figure in bronze using realistic or idealized human proportions it would resonate much differently. Funk is drawn to the vulgar and the mundane because it wrestles with the same quandary of life and art that Abstract Expressionism and social aesthetics respond to – though it grounds its practice in objects rather than performance. Wiley’s choice to use masking tape and permanent marker is important precisely because they are utilitarian, and resonate with their commonplace origins. In this way, Funk art dispatches with artistic conventionality, embracing the forms, quality of craft, and materials needed to successfully elicit the desired affect.

³¹ William T. Wiley, interview by Paul J. Karlstrom, October 8-November 20, 1997, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 11: William T. Wiley, *Slant Step*, 2010, mixed media, 10 by 3 by 3 inches. (Artslant, 2018).

In embracing Funk aesthetics I pursue all manner of materials, and visual languages as needed to fully explore my subject matter. Such methodology is echoed in the principles of “oddity, clumsiness, scale.” In constructing a narrative of an ominous water well, as in *It’s All Fun and Games ‘Til Someone Pokes Your Eye Out* (Fig. 12), the oddity of a hand carved wooden vulture perched upon an actual recycled oil barrel helps contextualize the scene. Though one is a “real” object, the other crafted, the aesthetics of Funk allow me to successfully blend the two. The barrel as a readymade uses the language of conceptualism to incorporate the object’s actual utilitarian history into the narrative. Meanwhile, the wooden vulture draws upon a representative vernacular more common in folk art. Using the language of craft to its full extent, the exposed screws, rickety joints, and rough carving lines speak via their clumsiness to the crude and vulgar nature of the subject. Of course this, as well as the quality of mark in my two-dimensional

compositions also make visible my presence within the artwork. In Funk, this is what Dan Nadal refers to as “a direct connection not simply between art and life but also between the artist’s inner, subjective experiences, and the outside world.”³² It is the understanding that “reality” or the macrocosm is always filtered by illusions of the microcosm (scale). For me, my research into the constructions of masculinity and whiteness stirs at best a sense of uneasiness within me, at worst an unshakeable feeling of despair. In “slapping” my artwork together I seek to embrace these feelings, allowing my craft to speak in nuance that imagery is somewhat incapable of.



Figure 12: *It's All Fun and Games 'Til Someone Pokes Your Eye Out*, 2017, mixed media.

Whereas many of the –isms of visual art are somewhat self-limiting, Funk aesthetics embrace the widest possible scope of visual language, not least of which is the language of craft. Though this openness can sometimes make Funk art hard to understand or appreciate for its

³² Dan Nadal, *What Nerve!: Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present* (Providence, RI: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design/ New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2014), 130.

technical merit, I value its ability to adapt and bear witness. In *Il Deserto* when wandering pencil marks and splitting boards are embraced for their “linguistic” potential, and for the vitality they impart on the piece. My content and concept is certainly is politically charged almost by default, but it is through oddity, clumsiness, and scale that I am truly able to embody these ideas.

Putting It All Together:

The Significance of Trans-History and Meta-Symbolism

Given Funk’s propensity for combining seemingly incongruent subjects and aesthetics it is inevitable to raise questions about how such artworks should be interpreted. Such juxtapositions in Funk rarely yield straightforward conclusions, a characteristic further complicated by Funk’s lack of a singular stylistic convention. Yet it is Funk’s opacity in this regard that is also its means of clarity, for in Funk even the most disparate ideas are recombined and connected, revealing the unexpected to those patient enough to look. For an artist seeking to respond to socio-political issues – without coming across as preachy – such possibility in Funk is of utmost significance. As Jeremy Anderson observes, “Art is perhaps the only instance where seemingly unrelated ideas are completely related and accepted without the slightest feeling that they have been pounded into an ideology.”³³ There are, of course, instances in which art is utilized toward ideological ends. In Funk, however, the practice is about finding/ following one’s instincts without attempting to sway the viewer to a particular outcome. In Funk it is the *space* between symbols, styles, and ideas where the discoveries are to be found. An artwork may begin somewhere, but this does not predicate it concluding in any particular location.

When first beginning to explore what I would later discover to be a Funk methodology, I continually found myself needing the threads of my inquiry to end in a place of specificity (artists are – after all – expected to have all the answers). In following these threads I frequently arrived at compositions or assemblages that seemed too broad and disconnected in their scope. Yet, there was/ is an overriding sense that this is precisely the space my artwork needs to occupy. Aesthetically, it falls somewhere in between the didactic and ambiguous. In terms of craft it is clumsy, never so repulsive, but never refined. The content is representative, yet embracing fully embracing the subjective nature of symbolism. This space in the middle is simultaneously specific and abstract. This is the space of the trans-historic and the meta-symbolic.

³³ Karen O. Janovy, ed., *Sculpture From the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Brokks, 2006), 100.

Drawing from terminology typically found outside of the realm of fine art, I often refer back to what Kimberly Crenshaw has termed “intersectionality,” the guiding vantage point from which contemporary social sciences attempts to reconcile the peculiarities of the world. Rather than analyze topics of study as isolated phenomena, intersectional analysis seeks to understand the complex interrelations between race, class, and gender, to name but a few areas addressed within its scope. Intersectional analysis dispels with the notion that these are separate entities, while also accounting for our linguistic and cultural barriers to understanding the aforementioned as one in the same. We might colloquially call this “seeing the bigger picture.” As the name implies it is the intersection – the point of convergence – that reveals a greater kind of understanding. Visually, this is precisely how assemblage art functions. In a Willie Cole sculpture (fig. 13) women’s shoes are crafted together in the form of an African mask, yet both mask and shoes never lose their original identities. Shoes and mask alike possess unique and individual histories, but it is at the point of their intersection – by way of assemblage – that new meanings are discovered. These new meanings then reverberate back outward, influencing our understandings of the individual components so that they are forever changed in the viewer’s mind. Groups like the Hairy Who as well as Funk artists were not only adept at using materials in this way, but also proved exceptionally open “toward assimilating visual and cultural styles and sensibilities from a wide range of sources.”³⁴ In doing so, these artists unify otherwise disparate concepts in hopes of creating a moment of synthesis through visual unification by proximity. This is a process of realizing more complex understandings by literally *seeing* the maximum number of inputs brought together. Assemblage and Funk are the artworld’s equivalence of intersectionality. This is the space of the middle.

³⁴ Nadal, 49.



Figure 13: Willie Cole, untitled assemblage, 2007, shoes, steel wire, monofilament line, washers, and screws, 15 3/4 by 14 by 15 inches. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018).

A theory more commonly associated with visual art is that of meta-symbolization. For some, developments from modernism to post-modernism mark “an important genealogy in mid and late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century American art that refuses the allures of “pure” form... and explicit social or political messaging... in order to concentrate on the mechanisms, techniques, and visual lexicons woven together in a project of reflection.”³⁵ The meta-symbolic accepts the subjective in aesthetic experience, anticipating the viewer’s interpretation of an artwork to be influenced by prior knowledge and experience. It also understands, however, that the viewer’s perspective is not fixed, but potentially influenced by inputs from the artist. In this way, through meta-symbolization, entirely new meanings are created or discovered. It is not unreasonable then to think of the space between the didactic/ambiguous not as a conceptual dead-end, but rather as a space of potentiality.

³⁵ Gary Carrion-Murayari and Massimiliano Gioni, ed., *Jim Shaw: The End Is Here* (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc./ New York: New Museum, 2016), 14.

In thinking further about that “reflection” aspect of meta-symbolization, we find a key difference between “movements” like Funk, and many of its predecessors and contemporaries. Whereas the Avante-guardists, for example, sought to realize the praxis of life in art by stripping away at symbols through increasingly reductive aesthetics, artists like Jim Shaw aggressively incorporated a wide range of source material from everyday life. According to critic, John Welchman, “Shaw’s practice reminds us that commentary on the mobilization of symbols does not depend solely on the abstract depreciation of symbolic forms, but also on their irresistible hyper visibility, capricious self-contamination, and manic coupling.”³⁶ In this way, the Funk aesthetic and meta-symbolization function as a mirror, creating a place of infinite potential where symbols are constructed and deconstructed as they are reflected back at the culture from which they derived in the first place. The late H. C. Westermann, and Terry Allen are particularly influential practitioners of the meta-symbolic for me.

Never one to succumb to conventional art wisdom with respect to materials, H. C. Westermann freely incorporated objects of the mundane and popular cultural variety in assemblages along with his own hand crafted objects and painted imagery. In doing so, Westermann’s compositions generated new narratives. As the art historian, Jonathan Fineburg, states by “[permitting] their original, often vulgar, context to survive their incorporation into his work” the viewer is made “acutely aware of the multiplicity of contexts and semantic levels that coexist in Westermann’s work.”³⁷ The sculpture *Brinkmanship* (fig. 14) illustrates this through Westermann’s incorporation of a toilet float in an otherwise representational sculpture. By utilizing the float, in its original form, with flat cutouts of smoke, figures, and other objects Westermann recasts the float as a human head while simultaneously invoking its usage in a toilet tank. The artist, then, relies on the semantic connection of the material to comment on the character of the individual represented by the assemblage. According to Fineburg, “This point of reference in ideas rather than directly in the physical world results in a revolutionary concept of figuration in which a recognizable abstract symbol... functions on the same level as an image with a direct reference in nature.”³⁸ In this way, Westermann’s artwork demonstrates the meta-symbolic nature of art – whether an object is “real” or merely representative – with meanings

³⁶ Ibid, 46.

³⁷ Jonathan Fineburg, *Art Since 1940: 3rd Edition* (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011), 255.

³⁸ Ibid, 259.

constantly in a state of flux, and never quite as direct as they appear. Of course they also utilize the “mirror” effect, incorporating objects directly from culture in order to comment on culture.



Figure 14: H C Westermann, *Brinkmanship*, 1959, assemblage of plywood, electroplated and welded metal, bottle cap, and string on plywood base, 59 by 60.8 by 49.2 centimeters. (Hirshhorn, 2018).

Terry Allen’s work functions similarly – though the connections are often looser – with the compositions developing around ideas rather than things. This is described by Dave Hickey as a “happenstance logic of discovery, casual acquisition, and personal attachment – of finding one particular thing at one particular time then letting a world accumulate around it, in rough contingency, nothing quite fitting or not fitting.”³⁹ Indeed this is precisely how a series like Allen’s *Juarez* functions as he seamlessly moves between the strictly two-dimensional, two-dimensional with assemblage components, and fully realized installations to bring his music album (under the same title) to visual life. *Melodyland* (fig. 15), a mixed media wall piece, is one such artwork from the series that brings together seemingly unrelated and meaningless objects and photographs to develop a sense of narrative by the objects’ physical proximity and incorporation within the same composition. When considered individually, objects such as

³⁹ Dave Hickey, *Terry Allen* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 1.

burning pianos or maps of the southwest are conceptually unrelated. Assembled together, the viewer is forced to reconcile their disparate meanings, generating a narrative in the process.



Figure 15: Terry Allen, *Melodyland*, 1974, mixed media triptych, 40 by 90 inches, destroyed, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Lubetkin. (Hickey, 2010).

This is much the same methodology at work throughout my own exhibition *Il Deserto*. In similar fashion to Allen, I let a world accumulate around theories of race, gender, and the environment, freely referencing whatever images, objects, or ideas I happen across in my research. Knowing that this occasionally results in the unintended, the challenge then is allowing meta-symbolization to do its work, trusting in the process, and never forcing meanings when they are not there. Like Westermann, it is also a process of allowing ready-mades to resonate with their inherent traits while simultaneously re-contextualizing them by way of my own handmade objects and compositions.

My sculpture, *At Least We've Got Balls, Again!* (fig. 16), demonstrates the meta-symbolic at work via the usage of an actual cast iron tub along with representative figuration sculpted in wood and clay. The tub, left largely in its unaltered, original form invokes its utilitarian context as an object for bathing, and cleanliness. Turning it on end, and housing a miniaturized figure in it, however, is to reference the bathtub grottos typically found in a folk context as devotional shrines to the Virgin of Guadalupe. All of this is re-contextualized yet again by the likeness of George Washington, patriotic kitsch decorations, and other objects to

develop a unique narrative with new interpretations. By way of these juxtapositions I ask my viewer to consider the role of the mythologized history of the Founding Fathers in contemporary American culture. The material history of the bathtub is relevant to the narrative, yet the tub itself takes on new form in the context of the assemblage.



Figure 16: *At Least We've Got Balls, Again!*, 2017-18, mixed media.

Other material choices found throughout *Il Deserto* function in similar fashion. In my sculptural assemblages I rely heavily on clay and recycled wooden palettes, both of which have strong material histories. Ceramic – especially raku fired, and commercially molded figures – is frequently used by the memorabilia industry to create trinkets that influence our sense of personal and cultural identities (fig. 17). Such items may seem innocuous enough, but as I explored in the first section, reinforce cultural norms by way of trivializing visual representation. Similarly, Wooden palettes invoke issues of labor and industry, a topic inseparably linked to constructions of masculinity and whiteness as well as the social concerns these constructions raise. Though my process divorces these materials from their original contexts, their material

histories act subtly within the meta-symbolic framework. Further considering *At Least We've Got Balls, Again!*, it becomes clear that I am relying upon the presence of both of these materials to add conceptual layers to the assemblage. My drawings heavily feature oil pastels as well as a faux-aging process known as tea staining. Often regarded as a lowbrow medium, oil pastels are primarily used by school children, amateur artists, or artists seeking to execute quick studies rather than finished artworks. Likewise, tea staining is an inexpensive process frequently used in crafting to make paper or fabric appear antiquated. Using these mediums prominently in my drawings is to connect them to my content where they inevitably comment on mass culture.



Figure 17: Jim Shore, enesco rotating musical Uncle Sam figurine. (Amazon, 2018).

Of course all of this happens in subtle and subjective ways. Such is the nature of meta-symbolization. Sometimes the connections are direct, as is the case with the kinds of materials and imagery I use, yet my process and compositions obfuscate in a way that also lands the finished artworks in something of a place of ambiguity. This is precisely where the excitement of Funk aesthetics lies for me, the space between the didactic/ambiguous. As intersectional analysis teaches in social science, it is the place where points converge that the greatest discoveries and understandings are found. In *Il Deserto* I do this literally, by incorporating such a wide range of materials and themes as well as figuratively by embracing an aesthetic sensibility that never solely lies at either extreme.

Conclusions

Il Deserto is something of a point of both arrival and departure. It is the result of a myriad of failures in trying to find the proper visual language to work through my social concerns. Fearing that art based in traditions of painting and sculpture lacked in affective power, my first solution was to experiment with interactive installation otherwise known as social aesthetics. I was disappointed to discover that this sort of artwork is more ambiguous than I anticipated, finding that artistic intentions are not always immediately apparent, and that participants could easily have unintended experiences with my artwork. More recently, I find myself disturbed by the notion that this methodology too closely resembles “reality,” and in many ways enabling the exploits of the culture industry because of its ambiguity and ephemerality.

As I moved back into the realm of object-oriented aesthetics, I attempted to communicate via the language of abstraction. Abstraction spoke to me as a gesture of sophistication and possibility, but resulted in artwork that too often landed in the same sort of ambiguous space as my interactive artwork. My abstraction also lacked in an emotional quality sometimes best conveyed by craft.

My solution, at present, is to embrace the aesthetics of Funk. With Funk, there is room to be direct without being didactic. Because of its affinity for all styles, Funk communicates in a surprisingly complex manner in spite of what is often an unsophisticated appearance. Within such an aesthetic framework, materials, symbols, and sense of craft function in building a unique narrative world from which I am able to reflect on American society and culture. In *Il Deserto* I have pursued a visual language that in many ways allows my artwork to embody the form that my thinking about subject matter so often takes. It is a way for me quite literally to explore all of the connections and threads I see layed out before me. This visual complexity does mean that my artwork is open to a vast range of viewer interpretation – potentially yielding meanings I did not anticipate – yet this seems like an appropriate position for my art to take given it exists within a democratic context.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the areas upon which I would still like to build, and have yet to fully resolve. Though I am drawn to the ambiguity of symbols, there are times in my practice when their usage too abstract. My narratives are heavily inspired by American mythology, yet I still have room to be more direct by using characters such as Daniel Boone or

Davy Crockett more pervasively. Specific myth stories could similarly be more heavily referenced in my artwork.

While I am drawn to materials and their unique histories, I also have concerns as to how they function sculpturally. Unlike paintings that always exist as illusionary spaces, sculpture tends to blur the boundaries between the *real* and the “real.” In this way, the ambiguity in sculpture is problematic just as I argued it is problematic in social aesthetics. I have tried to reconcile with this, self consciously revealing the artifice in my artwork – a topic I was unable to discuss fully within the scope of this paper – but I still worry over how found objects are to be received by the viewer. With this in mind I see my practice slowly abandoning the use of such materials in favor of pure ceramic assemblages, as ceramic is a material with significant history as an illustrative material.

In saying this, however, it is only to recognize that the subjective in art and aesthetic experience produces an uncertain environment with which artists must contend and adapt. There are no perfect solutions, no results that will work for every artist, nor resonate with every viewer. And perhaps this is where the true democratic power lies in art, and why I am drawn to visual language as the communicative tool of choice for critiquing the ideologies produced within my culture.

Annotated Bibliography

Allen, Terry. *Melodyland*-“The Radio,” “Gonorrhea Madonna,” and “Piano”-from *a simple story* (Juarez), 1974. Mixed media triptych, 40 by 90 inches, destroyed. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Lubetkin. Dave Hickey. *Terry Allen*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010.

Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2012.

Art critic and historian, Claire Bishop, writes extensively against participatory art in her book *Artificial Hells*. Though this text is antagonistic and pejorative of both social aesthetics and activism, Bishop does raise a number of legitimate concerns with regard to the politics involved in both. Of the major themes in this book, is a recurring argument that all art is always artifice. This echoes my own feelings towards social aesthetics, and is a reason I continue to value object based artwork.

Burnham, Jack. “Systems esthetics,” *Artforum* vii/I. September 1968.

Jack Burnham identifies a key social transition that has had major impact on the development contemporary fine art. This changed has been accelerated via the rise of digitization, social media, and the Internet. As an object oriented artist, I will have to contend with not only the popularity of virtual and participatory art, but also with audiences that are desensitized to physical reality.

Cameron, Dan. *Peter Saul*. Newport Beach, CA: Orange County Museum of Art, 2008.

Peter Saul was written as a retrospective and analysis of the artist Peter Saul. Through essays and interviews, the text provides a summary of Saul’s career, and the social conditions that have influenced his artwork. Most notable is Saul’s commitment to the use of provocative, offensive and/or controversial imagery as well as a commitment to figurative painting especially during eras when this was considered to be passé or obsolete. Though the content of his paintings is crass, Saul seeks to counteract this, and seduce his viewers through his well-rendered, technical painting skill. Important here too is Saul’s insistence that his artwork is not political, but rather an unmediated representation of subject matter that is both interesting to him personally, and part of a greater public discourse. This text is particularly useful in two ways. First, it helps me better understand the successes and pitfalls of using “heavy handed” imagery and/or content through the career of Saul. Second, it also helps me to identify the key difference between my own art and Saul, which otherwise can be seen as derivative in certain regards.

Carrion-Murayari, Gary, and Massimiliano Gioni, ed. *Jim Shaw: The End Is Here*. New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc./ New York: New Museum, 2016.

This survey of Jim Shaw's art highlights not only Shaw's influences and sources, but also opens with an analysis of the theoretical ideas Shaw's practice is framed around. Having spent decades fascinated by countercultures and subgroups of the US, Shaw's artwork breaks down the meaning of symbols by way of a process known as meta-symbolization. With the subject of symbols in mind, my own work seeks to build on this, by bringing symbols together in the hope that they may generate new meanings or reveal something previously unknown or unexpected. I frequently draw from similar sources as Shaw.

Cole, Willie. Untitled assemblage, 2007. Shoes, steel wire, monofilament line, washers, and screws, 15 3/4 by 14 by 15 inches. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/495572>.

Fineberg, Jonathan. *Art Since 1940: 3rd Edition*. Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011.

Jonathan Fineberg's survey of modern and postmodern art includes extensive essays on Peter Saul and H. C. Westermann. This quote comes from an essay on Westermann that analyzes the effect of Westermann's unique approach to assemblage and drawing. Westermann is a major influence on my practice, especially his usage of symbols and materials. Like Westermann, my artwork also tends to have a cynical humor to it.

Golub, Leon. *Do Paintings Bite?*. Ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, New York: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1997.

This collection of essays, transcripts, and artist statements documents Leon Golub's developing artistic manifesto over a period of 50 years. Some of these texts describe Golub's approach to his own artwork while other texts function more as a reaction to capitalism, politics, and the state of the art world at the given time. A common theme throughout Golub's writing is his belief in the role of artists as cultural producers, and reporters of cultural conditions and current events. From this position Golub is highly skeptical of "Art for Art's Sake" as well as art motivated by profit and the *art fair*. Though I do not necessarily agree with Golub that artists need literally report on global events, I nevertheless draw from Golub as I develop an ethics of artistic practice within my own work. More importantly, I believe Golub serves as a prime example of how more traditional mediums such as painting and sculpture are as aesthetically affective as participatory art.

Golub, Leon. *Mercenaries IV*, 1980. Acrylic on linen, 120 1/10 by 229 1/10 in. Image by Museo Tamayo. Artsy. Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/leon-golub-mercenaries-iv>.

Harrington, Austin. *Art and Social Theory: Sociological Arguments in Aesthetics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004.

Austin Harrington's book describes and analyzes various modernist aesthetic theories, of which those put forth by Theodore Adorno and the Frankfurt School have been personally influential. Adorno's skepticism on art, entertainment, and the culture industry has caused me to consider my own participation within this social system and the possible ethical implications on my practice. It was this theory that prompted me to further emphasize the illusory and artifice in my art.

Hartman, Andrew. *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

American historian, Andrew Hartman, documents and critiques the American culture wars from 1945 to the present. Though Hartman has an undeniable liberal slant in that he is more overtly critical of conservatism, *A War...* functions well in identifying key issues, and influential figures in contemporary struggles of American identity and values. Among the many issues covered in this history, Harman highlights a number of controversies regarding the arts as well as the role of artists in American society. He also discusses the US's surprisingly ambiguous history, which is of particular interest to me as an artist that references history extensively within my practice.

Hickey, Dave. *Terry Allen*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010.

This book by Dave Hickey examines the art of Terry Allen, organizing chapters by way of Allen's different ongoing series. Hickey's prologue explains not just his own approach to writing and understanding the art of Allen, but also attempts to describe Allen's peculiar way of working. Hickey argues that Allen approaches visual art the same way one would approach writing music. I find that my process is similar to Allen's, and that my art frequently falls in the same hard to define place Allen's does.

Janovy, Karen O. ed. *Sculpture From the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery*. Lincoln, NE: Bison Brokks, 2006.

This quote by Jeremy Anderson helps differentiate visual language from other forms of communication. There are subtle, perhaps unexplainable ways that art is able to investigate ideas via aesthetic experience. In my own practice, I frequently bring together otherwise disparate sources to create unique narratives. Though my art is certainly political in nature, it is never intended to function ideologically.

Kristol, Irving. "It's Obscene, but Is It Art?" *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 1990, A16.

Though somewhat bombastic, Irving Kristol's quote offers a direct challenge to conventional wisdom with regard to craft and aesthetic. For me, Kristol seems to suggest that political art, or art about politics is compromised of its integrity when it is made palatable for easy consumption, especially as dictated by the tastes of gatekeepers and the elite.

Mesch, Claudia. *Art and Politics: A Small History of Art for Social Change Since 1945*. New York: IB. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2013.

Claudia Mesch's history of political art provides an overview of socially engaged artwork throughout the world since WWII. Mesch has identified a number of the most prominent political art movements including more commonly known movements such as Feminisms, the Anti-War Movement, Environmental Art, and Queer Identity, but also those lesser known or accepted such as American Abstract Expressionism. This text is most useful as a timeline for understanding the evolution of political art in a global context.

Nadal, Dan. *What Nerve!: Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present*. Providence, RI: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design/ New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2014.

This survey of "alternative" American art movements accompanied a retrospective under the same name. Along with the Hairy Who and Funk, Nadal covers movements, groups, and unaffiliated artists such as Destroy All Monsters, H. C. Westermann, Forcefield, William Copely, Jack Kirby, Elizabeth Murray, Gary Panter, and Christina Ramberg. Together, this retrospective was meant to identify art typically left out of traditional Western art narratives. A number of the artists included in the this text are major influences on my own work, and the collection has helped me to better understand the position my art occupies in contemporary art.

Nguyen, Viet Than. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nguyen's book, *Nothing Ever Dies*, examines the politics of art and memory with specific reference to the Vietnam War. Nguyen analyzes how different cultures from the East and West have used film, literature, visual art, and memorials to shape cultural memories. This discussion raises many important ethical considerations to which Nguyen proposes his own solution. Along with readings from Theodore Adorno and Richard Slotkin, these authors have helped me mold and affirm positions I have taken with regard to my art practice.

Roth, Moira. "Robert Smithson on Duchamp, an Interview." *Artforum*, vol. 11, October, 1973.

This quote by Robert Smithson was cited by Leon Golub in an essay entitled, "What Works?." Smithson's point is that – because capitalism is able to coopt all forms of culture – efforts to circumvent the capitalist system are always in vein. Therefore, it stands to reason that artists' energies are better directed toward critiquing the system rather than pioneering new, but potentially less meaningful forms.

Saar, Betye. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972. Mixed-media assemblage, 30 x 20 x 7 cm.

Courtesy: the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles; collection of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum. Frieze. Accessed April 4, 2018.

<https://frieze.com/article/influences-betye-saar>

Saul, Peter. Interview by Judith Olch Richards, November 3-4, 2009, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Peter Saul is quoted here discussing his early, more expressionistic paintings of which de Kooning was a major influence. Saul's earlier artwork was virtually unsellable, which Saul attributes to its crudeness. I find this a potent example of market driven aesthetics, and why more artists are reluctant to utilize bad craft in their practice.

Saul, Peter. *Pinkville*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 90 by 131 inches. New York, Venus Over Manhattan. Accessed April 4, 2018. <http://venusovermanhattan.com/exhibition/from-pop-to-punk-2/>

Sebald, W G. *On the Natural History of Destruction*. New York: Modern Library, 2004.

As cited in Viet Than Nguyen's book, *Nothing Ever Dies*. Sebald underscores how the process of developing personal memories is a social activity. In a society like the United States, where artists are especially influential in shaping cultural identity, art can have major impact on what is remembered, and what is forgotten.

Selz, Peter. "Notes on Funk," *Funk*. Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1967.

This essay was written as an accompaniment to one of the first major exhibitions of Funk art. In contrast to other art movements, Funk artists did not classify themselves, or affiliate with one another. By way of his exhibition, Selz was attempting to quantify what he determined to be a trend in West Coast art. The principles of Funk, as outlined by Selz, resonate with the characteristics I have been developing in my own art.

Serrano, Andres. *Piss Christ (from Immersions)*, 1987. Dye destruction print, mntd, 59.1 x 40 cm. Artnet. Accessed April 4, 2018. <http://www.artnet.com/artists/andres-serrano/piss-christ-from-immersions-F2kcx7tMYak0dnCyIQjjHQ2>

Shore, Jim. Enesco rotating musical Uncle Same figurine. Amazon, Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://www.amazon.com/Jim-Shore-Rotating-Musical-Figurine/dp/B01BE13ODI>.

Simpson, Bennett. *Blues for Smoke*. Munich and Los Angeles: Del Monico Books/ Prestel and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012.

With groups like the Hairy Who working out of Chicago, it is no wonder that the often hard to describe art movement is related in musical terms. The Hairy Who were known to frequent blues clubs, and blues musicians likely influenced these artists. I often listen to the blues when working through drawings and/or assemblages that require a great degree of improvisation and spontaneity. The blues is all about the soloist, and this is a fitting metaphor for the state I am trying to achieve in my artwork.

Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600 -1860*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973.

American historian, Richard Slotkin, traces the development of American mythology from puritan colonialism up to the American Civil War. In this analysis, Slotkin identifies key themes that are integral to conceptualizations of contemporary American identity. These include captivity plots, the presence of the wilderness, and the need to civilize. Slotkin's over arching thesis is that these mythologies become harmful when they are uncritically used to justify ideological beliefs. *Regeneration Through Violence* not only helped me further understand that themes present in my artwork, but also helped me to define my sense of purpose.

Thompson, Nato. *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-first Century*. Brooklyn, New York: Melville House Printing, 2015.

Nato Thompson discusses various courses contemporary political art has taken as it attempts to find to most impactful forms possible. Thompson's work underscores that there are no perfect solutions in political art, but that artists must continue to refine their visual vocabulary if they are to successfully upset the influence of capitalism. Of his major arguments, Thompson identifies that the major conflict in political art and activism is the debate between didactic and ambiguous gestures. Thomson acknowledges that most art rightly falls somewhere in between these polarities, and points to this middle ground as being the most effective space for art to communicate.

Trajan's Column, 107~113 CE. Marble, 30 by 35 meters. University of St. Andrew's. Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/trajans-column/the-project/what-was-trajans-column-for/>.

Westermann, H. C. *Brinkmanship*, 1959. Assemblage of plywood, electroplated and welded metal, bottle cap, and string on plywood base, 59 by 60.8 by 49.2 centimeters. Washington D.C., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/h-c-westermann/>.

Wiley, William T. Interview by Paul J. Karlstrom. October 8-November 20, 1997, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

One of the most prominent and prolific Funk artists, Wiley continues to be influential in my practice. Significant in this quote, is Wiley's determination not to allow his art to be defined by style, but rather to determine style with regard to how well it relates to an idea or concept. This attitude toward making is a definitive characteristic of art classified as Funk.

Wiley, William T. *Slant Step*, 2010. Mixed media, 10 by 3 by 3 inches. Artslant. Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://www.artslant.com/ew/works/show/273871>.