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Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Can't Tell / Won't Tell

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Joshua Jon Miller

Committee in charge:

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair
Professor Ruben Ortiz-Torres
Professor Anna Joy Springer
Professor Marianna Wardwell

2015

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

DEDICATION

To Lance Miller

EPIGRAPH

“The high ambition, therefore, seems to me to be this: That one should strive to combine the maximum of impatience with the maximum of skepticism, the maximum of hatred of injustice and irrationality with the maximum of ironic self-criticism. This would mean really deciding to learn from history rather than invoking or sloganising it.”

-Christopher Hitchens

“I have little regard for an art that deliberately aims to shock because it is unable to convince.”

-Albert Camus

“By destabilizing signs of race, gender, and sexuality these artists draw critical attention to the cultural constructedness, the artifice, of the sexual roles and identities we inhabit. In this way they remind us that our pleasures are political and that our politics can be pleasurable.”

-Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

ANYA GALLACCIO MELINDA GUILLEN

JULIAN ROGERS

AMY ADLER

NORMAN BRYSON

MARIANNA WARDWELL

DOMINIC MILLER

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Can't Tell / Won't Tell

by

Joshua Jon Miller

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair

The body of work presented in *Can't Tell / Won't Tell* consists of nineteen wall-mounted sculptures, three floor based sculptures, four body-size painting, and twenty-six foot long panoramic painting (fig. 1). All of the works are figurative, with imagery primarily sourced from thrift and antique store objects. They present a range of questions about material culture, sexual and racial identity, and culturally embedded languages of abstraction. The thesis essay and interview examine the artist's approach to this range of subject matter, his processes of formulating the work, and biographical anecdotes informing these processes.

BETWEEN EMPATHY AND THE LIZARD BRAIN

The works in this exhibition engage contentious territories of identity, mortality, sexual perversion, race, colonial history, and guilt; all of which are approached with a sense of ambivalence. Similar to the way Carroll Dunham describes the phalluses in his landscape paintings, they are “boundary markers, or maybe radioactive objects in a kind of natural environment.”¹ As viewers experience my work, these toxic themes and objects can cause a seesawing in their minds. Perhaps initially seduced by the work’s warm colors, rich surfaces, and representational imagery, viewers tend to grow nervous and unsure of how to orient themselves as they become aware of polemical content. This uncertainty is what I’m attracted to in other artwork, and it is the sentiment I pursue in my own work.

Interrogation is central to work like this, and questioning the author’s motives becomes part of how the work functions. Thus, the exhibition’s content exerts a significant pressure on me, forcing me to engage in conversations I might otherwise avoid. This process of self-reflection and dialogue forms the core of the work and its primary value, far more than any naive hopes of the viewer’s transformation.

While these pieces may seem much more confrontational than my previous work, they aren’t a wholly new trajectory; instead, they offer a more direct engagement with narratives that were previously sublimated. This new work, in its openness, picks a fight. In the coming years, my work will inevitably be affected by the residue of my

¹“Press Release: Carroll Dunham Paintings on Wood 1982-1987” Skarstedt.com, Skarstedt, February 19, 2008, November 10, 2015, <www.skarstedt.com/exhibitions/2008-02-19_carroll-dunham/>

experiences making this show as well as the struggles and responses it elicits. A closer look at the work I've produced over the last decade reveals that it has always revolved around themes of identity. I've been trying to understand the mixture of firmness and facade that makes up an identity, particularly my own. When I'm asked about myself, I can project certainty, but inside I know that any answer is provisional. Because of this malleability, I rely on tangible, exterior objects – collectibles, clothing, scars – all of which constitute what one could call the electives of life. My studio work has latched onto objects as a way to consolidate and define my identity, and to understand aspects of human interaction through objects.

INTERVIEW: JOSHUA JON MILLER AND MELINDA GUILLEN

April 2015

MG: What is the relationship between the paintings of objects on shelves and those with flesh, skin, bodily representations?

JM: Well they have some core similarities. The shelf paintings and the sculptures are about likeness and comparison: small alterations made to similar objects in order to see how their signification changes. When I have an idea I always need multiple iterations; I never trust a single manifestation. It's similar to how the scientific process requires a control and variables. The panorama (fig. 2) is an exception to that mode, because I stick with a single depiction of each object. But this was a specific gesture where I wanted to present a narrower, more linear narrative rather than the sort of multiplicity that takes place with the grid (fig. 3) and the wall of busts (fig. 4).

I don't want the sculptures to be a smooth transition or replication of what the paintings are doing. What I want, instead, is for them to confront and amplify each other. I think seeking formal symmetry is a common mistake that painters make when they decide to work in three dimensions. For me, it's really about the emotional interaction the viewer has with the object. Formally they're very different: paintings hold to the wall and lack the physicality of sculptures. While paintings operate through invitation, sculptures push out at us; they occupy the room as a being might. In that sense, sculptures are less abstract, they're physical before they are ever illusionistic. The

material, the joinery, the shine, the sense of weight all become much more critical to the experience. I think a lot of work in sculpture, particularly when it uses pre-existing objects, is about figuring out how to create a sense of separation between its quotidian origins and its. If tuned right, sculptures become foreign bodies in our presence; they can be physically threatening.

In both my sculptures and paintings, I'm trying to destabilize the viewer. All of my work has dealt with identity through looking at the objects we collect, but in the recent pieces, I'm trying to be more honest about the darker subtexts. These are the first major sculptures I've made since being an undergraduate, and it's actually the first time I've so openly tried to address psychological content with objects. From a technical standpoint, this is very new to me and it proposes a number of possibilities that head off into rich and unknown territory.

MG: Can you elaborate on the tensions of art historical taboos in the work, and the way you attend to certain conventions and traditions? I'm thinking of the playful polemic of race and skin tone, but also the aesthetic interests and themes shared, for example, with artists like Picasso and Mike Kelley.

JM: First of all, tension, taboo, transgressing known boundaries, and revealing hidden boundaries is what art, in its ideal form, is all about. There's a sad paradox that so many of us go to school to study "heroes" who often didn't go to school or were kicked out of the academies. Institutions aren't the rigid places they were 50 and 100 years ago, but

there is still a conservatism that we should be aware of: a resistance to the unruly, irrational, and contentious. I had a relatively tame, suburban childhood but have felt a slowly growing desire for conflict. The writings of Gore Vidal and Christopher Hitchens have helped me channel my iconoclastic and contrarian impulse.

That being said, the counterintuitive aspect of transgression is that it requires not only knowing, but even honoring the conventions being transgressed. So, if I want to question the mass of an object in a painting, I have to paint a shelf, a ledge, a pulley, a lever, wind, a shadow; some familiar physical force or object that indicates mass, weight, and dimension. Likewise, if I want to talk about identity, ethnicity, or sexual fantasy, I have to paint things that have controversial histories. In my case, the work echoes the objectification performed by Gauguin or Picasso, but it's much more self-reflexive. There is a game being played with the viewer, similar to the games played by Balthus, Mapplethorpe, or Arbus. More than anything, I keep a Mike Kelley quote in mind:

It's always been very important to me that my work has a socialized veneer. I've never wanted my work to be associated with the Dada sensibility – to be perceived as simply negational. I want the initial perception of it to elicit comfort, which then starts to break down. You come to recognize that it's not what you thought it was. Works that are too negational on the surface repel viewers before they can become involved. I want the viewer to spend enough time with the work to discover all the jokes and

*perversities at play. If the work immediately insults viewers, they will just ignore it.*¹

You also mention playfulness, which in my mind is indispensable. Playfulness is frequently talked about in terms of strategy, particularly in regard to the way comedians can access some of the most repressed aspects of a culture. In his final interviews, Duchamp explained how he arrived at some of his ideas: the Society of Independent Artists, *Fountain*, Rose Selavy, leaving art for chess. Much of his work was driven by a very bratty or punk attitude. He doesn't talk like an orator, but like someone annoyed with the clichés of his peers and wanting to fuck with them. I think many artists we admire share a similar attitude, and it's an attitude that I try to hold onto in my studio. A willingness to lampoon myself, to be mean to my friends, to turn left when going right, seems like the obvious choice. But playfulness exists in privacy also.

MG: Can you talk a bit more about the private aspects of playfulness? Does play enable you to express something private or fucked up, or does it merely mediate between the private experience and its public manifestation? More simply: is play in your work a cover-up?

JM: Well there are two ways to take this. First of all, there are paintings that I make for myself, that I may or may not show to anyone and definitely wouldn't exhibit. These are paintings of things that are too fucked up, too silly, or too pretentious. But I have to get

¹ Mike Kelley interview with Isabelle Graw, Mike Kelley, Phaidon, p. 25, 1999

them out of my system. It's similar to the way I can't move forward in a conversation until I blurt out the inappropriate thing that a conversation might be delicately trying to skirt around.

In the larger sense, though, I would indeed say that playfulness is used as a cover-up in my work. For example, the painting *Love and Boredom* (fig. 4) was a way to manifest and expel a persistent sexual drive that I often felt burdened with. I had the idea that if I were to cut off my penis and shove it into my ass it would simultaneously castrate, satisfy, and cork my sexual desire. In the picture, this image is painted on the bottom shelf, with white balls on the top shelf, and decapitated shark heads on the middle shelf. [Fig. 5] The shark head is a manifestation of animal impulse and the death drive, while the white balls are a conceptual resting point, a formalist escape from the morbid images that fill the rest of the painting. All of this imagery is contained within the theater of a still life format, or a series of glyphs. The formal playfulness is a veneer or armature; it gives me the freedom to engage with the works on a personal level, entertaining or exhausting strange, dark, or unethical desires.

MG: Ok, so though you work intuitively, what restrictions do you feel are still present and how do you envision your work without them?

JM: The term "intuitive" is something of a sore subject for me when it's used to refer to ways of working. More than anything, this is the fault of artists who don't spend enough time decoding their more automatic decisions. I have a neuroscientist friend at Caltech

who was reading a book about intuition (or “unconscious recognition memory”). The author postulates that the sixth sense is a level of brain activity that makes millions of minor calculations about peripheral information: sounds, things in the corner of your eye, a story you’ve heard but sort of forgotten, basically information that is there but not part of your more conscious thought. The argument is that your brain communicates the sum of these calculations to your body via simple sensations like fear, confidence, confusion, and nervousness.

Similarly, Spike Lee’s documentary *Kobe Doin’ Work* (2009) describes how Kobe Bryant has honed his motor skills. His reflex reactions to standard situations and secondary reactions to more complex situations are ingrained to such an extent that he can think about things like game strategy, psychological strategy, and coaching-level decisions as he dribbles down the court and drains threes. To go back to art-making, there is a documentary from 1946 which films Henri Matisse in the act of painting. Upon viewing the footage, Matisse had something of a panic attack when he saw how many miniscule and important decisions he was making without even being aware of it. All of this is to say that intuition is crafted through practice: through the information we feed our brain, where and how we choose to live, which sorts of activities we repeat, and which ones we avoid or let atrophy. In setting up my life and routines, I’ve tried to be mindful of these things.

When it comes to restrictions, I have a lot of intuitive blocks that have to do with Christian guilt. I talked earlier about being a contrarian, but I still have to make a very conscious decision to vocalize my dissent, to knowingly piss someone off, or to reveal

things I feel guilty about. I carry a lot of sexual guilt, racial guilt, and patriarchal guilt. I don't think any of these feelings will go away through making the work, but I think I'll be able to relieve some of the pressures of suppressing them, and also hopefully drag some people into the mud with me.

MG: I meant "intuitive" as distinct from other sometimes useful differentiations, like "research-based" or "multimedia" ... It's more about the initial instincts of your process, since it's clear to me that you don't derive a methodology from theory and apply it. You also don't take a deterministic approach to your work.

JM: Ok, I see what you're saying. In terms of methodology: if I had one, I'd say it was negation. I locate fields of information that I don't want to be associated with personally, or that I don't want the things I make to be associated with, and then try to be very careful to steer clear of them. These are things like commercial design, slapstick, paternalistic or didactic tones, lazy anthropology, and indulgently inconsequential imagery. Outside of these and a few other things, I try to give a good deal of latitude to the objects I make, because they have their own identities. An artwork can be thought of as a collaboration with physical material. Materials have their own properties that are independent of an artist's concepts. To add to this, signification is always changing and always particular to the individual viewer. So for me, a work is a success if it manages to keep viewers in the same room of thought as me, to have them chewing on the same questions I'm chewing on.

In terms of methodology, it's also critical that the things I make stay mysterious to me. I operate from the stance that if I'm bored with the work or can predict its moves, so can the audience. I'm always pushing the complexity so that it's just beyond my own grasp. The sculptures in this show are even further beyond my grasp than my work normally is. [fig. 6]

MG: How does this body of work reflect your experience in the MFA program, specifically? Also, how do you see your work continuing on after this particular context?

JM: Probably the biggest change in my work has to do with clarifying what I want to be talking about. Prior to UCSD, my work was starting to get too hung up on material experimentation, which was allowing me to avoid emotional content. There were a lot of unnecessarily suppressed or cryptic signifiers. The suppression was partly due to the fact that I had spent the last 7 years making work that couldn't be hidden from my parents or grandparents. Of course, repression can also make a rather inconsequential thing seem indispensable, which I think explains some of the sexual content in my work.

Since joining UCSD, I've found some close allies and a community that has allowed me to work through a range of narratives and include images of sex, ethnicity, identity, guilt, and manipulation. I've found myself surprisingly close to the concerns I was addressing toward the end of my undergraduate studies at UCLA. The difference is that now I know much more about the world through reading and experience, and have a

much deeper empathy for people in my community. Going forward, I expect that the work will continue to evolve in terms of formal complexity while also getting more indulgent, more verbose, in terms of psychological content.

MG: Can you expand on the body and skin tones or flesh as doorways to address sexuality and gender? Moreover, can you comment on the relationships between skin/flesh, the body, sexuality, the object (and maybe even abjection) in your work?

JM: The sculptures are like the paintings in that bodies are dismembered into inanimate parts. At some points they are isolated signifiers (genitalia or heads), and at other times they are lump objects with residual cultural signification (arm, banana/penis, oranges). I suppose I have a lot of questions about my own identity. I spent a good deal of my twenties trying to figure out if I was gay or if I was more interested in fantasizing about and fetishizing homosexuality. I've settled on the idea that sex (and friendship, for that matter) is lovely, terrifying, boring, alienating, or depressing, whereas fantasy is always pleasurable. This realization pushed me further into my paintings and sculptures, into objects: collecting them, altering them, playing doll house, playing dress-up. Once I started amassing objects, I felt much more whole. This made me wonder about how much we rely on cultural objects to buttress our identities.

For the last few years, I've been covering some of these objects and paintings with thick oil paint that approximates flesh or scar tissue. This may have to do with a desire for something more alive than the wooden and ceramic objects in my home. The

masks and busts in my thesis exhibition relate to that impulse, and marry it with a curiosity about modes of painterly and sculptural representation. The fleshy masks reconfigure familiar and very loaded signifiers of human flesh tones, facial morphology, hair types, and culturally rooted languages of abstraction. These new combinations bounce between themes of biological evolution, android futures, body modification, multiracial identities, religious ceremonies, black face, humor, and the abject: without ever settling. That instability of signification and identity is what keeps me engaged in my work. The title of the exhibition, Can't Tell / Won't Tell can take on multiple meanings, it's a reflection on a censorial, and homophobic, policy enacted by the US Government, an acknowledgment of my cultural ignorance in regard to the exhibition's colonial content, and above all, an assertion of the game I want to play with the viewer.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Can't Tell / Won't Tell, installation view, 2015



Figure 2: Codex with Petri Dish, Oil on Canvas, 50" x 312", 2015



Figure 3: Love and Boredom (13), Oil on Canvas, 70" x 96", 2015



Figure 4: Can't Tell / Won't Tell, Installation View, 2015



Figure 5: Love and Boredom (2), Oil on Canvas, 48'' x 56'', 2015

Fig. 6



Figure 6: Old Woman with Shark Eyes, Acrylic Paint, Prosthetic Eyes, Party Mask, Wood, Aluminum, 12" x 10" x 18", 2015