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THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts Degree at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD

By Ruby Wescoat, MFA

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This Thesis is my effort to understand what subjects I find interesting and why. In the processes of writing and making sculpture, I discovered that my underlying fascination is in history. I am interested in places and objects for their individual qualities, but I also want to know how they relate to the world. If I am drawn to an ancient place or object, I want to examine how it fits into the contemporary world, and visa versa. The complexity of these relationships is increased by the vast number of histories (or stories) that are intertwined in the world.

Over the course of the thesis I write about my various influences, and the development of my work from undergraduate to graduate school. This progression has

been from observation of natural world to a more complex questioning of how the world came to be what it is. I conclude by defining the direction in which I want my work to continue: directly along the border between myth and reality.

The History of the World

The Victorians might have seen the world as a surprise ball. The technology of the Industrial Age was spreading across the surface of the earth at the same time that the remains of ancient civilizations were being unearthed 50, 60 or 80 feet below the earth's surface. What wonder or existential dread might these events have inspired in the people of the time? So much had obviously come before them and their culture was rapidly being outpaced by the Modern age. But now that time has passed, and the Victorian world has become yet another layer of historic civilization upon the earth's crust.

In some places it is possible to see thousands of years of human history at a single glance. The modern city of Giza spreads out around the pyramids. The Acropolis is still visible above the traffic and Internet cafes of Athens. Who could have predicted this living collage, and who knows what it will become?

My own experiences of such historic places have been mixed. For example Rome's past and present seem perfectly integrated, while historic Athens seems completely estranged from its contemporary offspring. One main difference is economic; Rome has strong economy independent of tourism, while Athens does not.

Another difference between the lives of these cities is geographic. The forum, the coliseum and the pantheon are right in the middle of Rome, at or below the level of the city. Even though there are throngs of tourists, the sites are allowed to exist in a minimally

self-conscious way as the rest of the city goes on about its business. There is even an animal shelter that operates in one corner of the Area Sacra forum.

The Acropolis however is perched on a hill above contemporary Athens, and it seems to exist as its own little island in a traffic circle while the city below exploits it. It is surrounded by busses and hotels and coffee shops that cater to the legions of tourists that visit every year. While my experience of Athens is limited, I got the feeling that the Acropolis was not allowed to exist in the present, but kept imprisoned in the past so it would continue to make a profit.

Does the attention of the world smother and diminish these places, or is the phenomenon of tourism part of the collage for better and for worse?

These are the questions that interest me and inspire my work. I find this time-lapse vision of the world to be simultaneously amazing, horrifying and absurd, characteristics that are reflected in my art.

A Couple of Inspirations

Like the Victorian world, my interest in art was formed by a vision of the past and the march into the future. Growing up I was greatly enamored of the “high-tech” billboards that lined the streets in Chicago. My favorites were a Coca Cola sign that lit up and flashed different patterns, and an ad for a grocery store in which the panels flipped

over and showed different images every few seconds. Naturally I gravitated towards Pop art, which I found hilarious for its glorification of the lowbrow, banal art of the product.

At the same time I was developing an obsession with Ancient mythology. I lived close to the Oriental Institute in Chicago, and would regularly visit the winged bulls and mummies that it held. The museum had its own atmosphere, which was quiet and dim and ancient in contrast to the rest of the city. The sculpture inside had a quiet, serious power that (as in much ancient art) I still find stunning.

The Subject and its Context

Realism is my natural way of working. Striving towards an accurate portrait of an object or creature is an expression of love for the subject. One gains an intimacy with her subject through intense labor, and the art is a marker of the time spent studying the subject.

The first sculpture I made was a six-foot concrete alligator. I did not have a model, so I struggled to decipher each part of the animal with Xeroxes and magazines. The feet and the teeth were especially important, and especially hard to understand. I found the alligator inexplicably hilarious and delightful. I imagined the pleasure of being an alligator basking in the sun. When I was finished sculpting I felt satisfied that I understood the alligator, if only through its form and my appreciation.

As my work evolves, however, I want to see my subjects in more complex contexts and relationships with the world. In fact the context can become the most interesting part

of the work. How do these creatures or objects that interest me fit into the collage of the world and of time?

My thoughts about this relationship between the subject and the world began with a series of wool quilts that I made in collaboration with my mom. We worked with diverse images of objects and creatures gathered from accumulated newspaper clippings and encyclopedias. By packing the images tightly together within the quilt's borders, we alluded to the strangeness and complexity of the of the world's inhabitants. How curious that all these different manifestations can exist together in the world.

One of the quilts, *Space Junk*, exemplifies the balance between humor and horror that I strive for in my work. My first thought about the phenomena of space junk is "how apocalyptic to be surrounded by a whirling bunch of garbage." My second thought is "I wonder what kind of garbage it is? Probably some nuts and bolts, a muffler, a shoe, a bible..."

Surreal Contexts

The surrealist interpretation of this relationship between subject and context interests me, in particular the work of Rene Magritte. Magritte placed great importance on fidelity to nature, but manipulated the context just enough to throw things off balance. The 1952 painting *Les Valeurs Personnelles* (Personal Values) depicts an average bedroom. It has a wood floor with two oriental rugs, a bed in one corner and a wardrobe in the other.

Several mundane objects are placed around the room: a comb, a glass, a powder brush, a match and a cake of soap. But the objects are vastly oversized, they tower above the furniture, and the walls are painted sky blue with clouds.

What is the viewer to think? Is this a still life in a bedroom or a bedroom in a still life? Does the scale of each object somehow relate to its significance, or is the artist implying that these things are all equally insignificant in comparison to the sky and the world beyond?

I am going to go out on a limb and say that Bob Dylan (whose music inspires me) is also a surrealist, and that he is famous because he introduced surrealism to music. His songs often involve ordinary stories and objects that are made extraordinary by their surroundings and juxtapositions:

Johnny's in the basement
Mixing up the medicine
I'm on the pavement
Thinking about the government
The man in the trench coat
Badge out, laid off
Says he's got a bad cough
Wants to get it paid off
Look out kid
It's somethin' you did
God knows when
But you're doin' it again
You better duck down the alley way
Lookin' for a new friend
The man in the coon-skin cap
In the big pen
Wants eleven dollar bills
You only got ten

(Bob Dylan, *Subterranean Homesick Blues*.)

Current Work

Throughout graduate school I have been looking for ways to explore these ideas. For my candidacy review I showed two pieces, *These Things Happen* and *A Beautiful Oblivion*. Each was a diorama mounted behind a wall, with a small window allowing the viewer to look inside.

These Things Happen

In *These things happen*, an American subdivision burns in the foreground while a smiling Hindu goddess looks on, untouched by this human tragedy. The goddess is Durga, both the mother and the destroyer of the universe. By juxtaposing these cultural images, I mean to compare two notions of time, the linear and the cyclical. From the traditionally linear western perspective, this fire is a tragic event in a long story comprised of individual stories. Each story is significant and accounted for by an omnipotent narrator.

From a traditionally cyclical eastern perspective, this event is a tragic role that will be replayed again and again, just as the universe will be recreated and re-destroyed forever. Better luck to the individuals involved next time.

Perhaps both versions of the event are correct, civilizations are continuously created and destroyed, but each story is slightly different.

Beautiful Oblivion

In the second piece, *A Beautiful Oblivion*, a pack of feral dogs runs through the streets of an abandoned suburb. The landscape is dusted with snow, and there is the pink glow of a city in the distance. It is an ode to a suburb in Colorado where I took many nighttime walks. The streets were almost always devoid of people, leading me to imagine it as a ghost town and wonder what it would be like as an architectural ruin.

It is hard to imagine one's own time taking on the mysterious, nostalgic luster of the past- everything seems too obvious and ordinary. But give it enough time and it will certainly look romantic to someone.

MFA Show

Oracle

In my second year of school, I have worked on three main projects. The first is a video animation that I call *Oracle*. It begins with a close up shot of a sphinx lying on a rock, gently fanning its wings. Eventually the camera pulls back and a sublime mountainous vista appears (made from a painting of the American West by Albert Bierstadt). The sphinx then gets up and vomits photographs from around the turn of the nineteenth century, and the sky turns dark as the photos pile up to create their own mountain.

The idea for this project came to me almost fully formed except for the American landscape, which I believe is what makes it work. It is the American story, which is all

about the transition into the industrial age, and the changes that development can make to the land.

The photos that create the mountain are not of factories or blight however; they are primarily images of beauty. There are lots of portraits and seascapes and female nudes. There are photographs of Victorian archeological expeditions in Egypt and Greece. They are idealistic and romantic images, just like the culture that set about reshaping its new world.

The sphinx as narrator of the story is my favorite aspect of this piece. I love having a mythological character from a long dead civilization (our philosophical forbearer, in fact) be the oracle. It appeals to my desire to see the world in layers of collage. If the sphinx can foresee our blunders in a time so much past her prime, undoubtedly she has seen around the next corner as well.

The Last Supper

The second piece is called *The Last Supper*, and it continues my theme of the rise and fall of civilization. It consists of a long, narrow table piled with food and models of architectural icons from various millennia. The table is tilting at an alarming angle, as if the ground below is slowly swallowing it up.

There are numerous references I considered while working on this project. The tradition of still life painting with its records of bounty and warnings of vanitas is an

obvious inspiration. The pleasure I took in sculpting the various items must be similar to the pleasure that a still life painter takes in painting the sumptuous display.

Some of my references are purely formal, my models of the Great Pyramids made me think of pyramids of oranges in the grocery store. The curls on the Buddha's head made me think of a plate of snails. The leaning tower of Pisa made me think of a wedding cake, and so on.

Another allusion that occurred to me while working was the table of Miss Haversham in Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*. Miss Haversham was forsaken by her fiancée on the day of her wedding, and in mortification she stopped the passage of time (to the best of her ability) at that moment. And so the cakes and gifts still sat moldering on her dining table some fifty years after the event took place. Ideally, my table has an air of petrification and abandonment similar to the one that Dickens' describes in Miss Haversham's house.

But mostly I thought about the cruise liner and the Grand Tour, a tradition that is still alive and well. The luxury of consuming a decadent feast is somehow similar to the luxury of consuming experiences of the Wonders of the World. The experience will come and go very quickly, but it is bound to leave a lasting impression in its wake.

Conclusion

In *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis creates a mythical world that can be accessed through the back of an old wardrobe. One goes deeper and deeper into the wardrobe, pushing through layers of coats until he arrives on the snowy edge of a forest marked by a lamppost.

I would like my work to exist in that place where the coats turn into trees, and the real world meets the fantastic. I want to examine nostalgia and try to create that thing we think we missed, that imagined world, half fact and half fiction.

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