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Ruin

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

in

Visual Arts

by

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2014

The Thesis of Walter Lawrence Sutin is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego
2014

EPIGRAPH

And you, you bandit, you bandit, ah, you are killing me,
Water bandit that sharpens your knives in my eyes,
You have no pity then, radiant water, lustral water, that I cherish!

Andre Breton

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ruin

by

Walter Lawrence Sutin

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Amy Adler, Chair

This text will examine the technique and symbolism of my series of pen and ink drawings entitled Ruin. These drawings were made in reaction to a trip to Israel that I took in 2010. They investigate the ways in which humor and automatic drawing may be used to enter into a conversation about religious and political conflict.

RUIN

My current series entitled "Ruin" is the result of my exposure to the cultural and political climate of Israel during a Taglit journey that I participated in during the summer of 2010. The Taglit birthright journey is a free trip to Israel for young Jewish adults the world over. It was part political seminar and part religious tourism. Roughly translated it means birthright in Hebrew. This supposes that Jews should visit their homeland. I found myself overwhelmed by Zionist propaganda and group bonding over religious feelings. We visited information centers where we examined bomb casings that had been launched across the border at Sderot. We spent the entire trip bonding with Israeli Defense Force troops. We had four hours of sleep a night on average. There was a great deal of crying. When we reached the top of Mt. Masada our guide yelled at the top of his lungs through his tears that we were all "Romans returned home!". The intensity of these experiences gave me a new perspective on the middle east and history in general.

What was most striking to me about Israel was the simultaneity of the ancient and the modern in every day life. As a pantheist and religious skeptic, I am naturally sensitive to the ways in which religion and political power structures weave together. I wanted to find a way into the hybridization of myth and power in contemporary consciousness through my painting. While the realist interpretation of history and religion is complicated it is valuable to explode the

moment in order for everyone to meditate and draw new connections to their reality.

My work strives to exist where provocation and upheaval are constant. The expression of emotion and the subconscious comes to me through my reproduction of natural phenomenon through drawing. Chance and accident in art allow me to cast off the chains of doubt and be free to expand into both abstraction and representation. This is appropriate because I believe the ways in which one encounters life are governed by chance as well. My thesis consists of a series of drawings entitled Ruin. Thematically they explore the simultaneity of the old and the new. It is about the ways in which the scale and urgency of internal and external conflict are defined. This is accomplished by looking at elemental forces within and without the body. My visual language is cryptic. I have created it to trace my personal struggle between hope and doubt in political and spiritual life.

There was a game that the surrealists would play for hours on end. It involved gazing at a stain on the wall to discern the accidental narrative or psychological drama of the accidental form. This is the space in which my work has developed. The idea of found form in which an accident may inform representation or visa-versa. There is a process of constantly dividing bodies into systems and gestures. Fluid and solid inform one another. There is a push and pull between representation and abstraction in my work. It is a process of producing systems and ruptures of systems. The bodies are stilted seeming to be fitted together out of building blocks. The bodies leave human anatomy

behind in favor of surfaces that seem to crawl and react to their environment. Fluidity is imposed on solid form. Motifs realized with a shivery line make surfaces seem to communicate and balance one another through a common textural language.

Through biomorphic abstraction I am playing with the boundaries between figures and their environment. These are walls of the illusions of life that create suffering. I am meditating on the universal by having forms appear to shed and adapt their crawling skins to link into their environment.

Almost every plane and field of color is outlined and defined by webs of line sharply contrasting what is beneath. I have found that working on paper with pens and ink provides me with heightened immediacy, speed and saturation. The way that the surface sucks up the ink is more satisfying to me than layering on top of a plastic gesso. I enjoy scratching at my surface nervously. It's cathartic for me to take a magnifying glass and make things shimmer with a fine texture. I love the long hours of solitude. I also like the idea that much of my obsessive rendering will only be noticed fully through patient contemplation.

The forms are made to radiate beyond their boundaries through the careful use of color. I frequently use whitened tones and pastel schemes to complete scenes of tension and violent intrigue. I am fascinated with the use of pastel tones in painting but also in life. They recall the hospital environment but also the kitsch of home and gardens magazine or hallmark stores. In the clinic pastel colors are used for their calming effect, but also because they will be bright enough to reveal dangerous fluids and waste. This sort of brilliance is

most interesting to me when overlaid by more shadowy subject matter. The damaged bodies of troops and lovers stand in stark contrast to their frosting colored environs. The bright palette lends a sense of humor to the work. It lends an unexpected sweetness to the uncanny subject matter. Being able to laugh about fear and insecurity brings one closer to understanding of the darkness within. In the home these tones are usually used to drive away our fears and desires in favor of domestic complacency. In my work they are associated with aspects of consciousness that are both peaceful and invasive.

To decipher violence with art is nothing new. People are fascinated by depictions of pain. In order to overcome pain one must first effectively notice it. Works such as Goya's Disaster's of War have become invaluable classics for their ability to express the darker aspects of war truthfully and with vigor. It is equally telling to see people's reactions when in 2003 the Chapman brothers unveiled Insult to Injury. This was a series in which a pristine set of the Disasters Of War etchings were defaced in an adolescent way with clown and puppy faces. This shows that the depiction of violence once given great weight and majesty may become as limiting to our consciousness of these events as ignoring them would be. My work is similar in that it takes a mythology and conflict of great scale and obstructs its representation with a language that is more visceral and personal. This is done as much out of frustration as it is out of self exploration.

I began to investigate the early mythology and art of the Palestinians, Sumerians, Jews and Caananites. I was immediately drawn to the themes of

land and water. War and religion concern themselves endlessly with these two things. I wondered and still wonder if the way our politicians' relationships to nature imitate our religious leaders' and visa-versa.

Water appears in these myths as a chaotic and destructive force. It is the kind of destruction that is sanctioned by the divine. The flood of the Christian bible comes from a long line of myths going back to the earliest agrarian societies. I found that this fit well with my previous work. I had already worked to portray the displacement of the body and the increase of flow through rupture and decay. I am also interested in the reclamation of space by bodies and the reclamation of bodies by space.

I read all of the parts related to land and water and then cut them up in the patent William Burroughs fashion. For the first half of the series I would use these ancient narratives as starting points for exploding contemporary conflict. Spaces with a brightly colored miraculous appearance would swallow and drown damaged bodies in olive drab military uniform. I wanted to provide a permeable view of recent history that ingrains a sense of urgency and conflict but also ethereal bliss. This is a calming space in which to ground ones self before moving forward.



Figure 1: *Scapegoat Ritual Occupation*, 2013
Pen, ink and gouache on paper

In *Scapegoat Ritual Occupation* I juxtapose two actions. One is the ancient Canaanite scapegoat ritual. The scapegoat ritual was a ceremony in which the disabilities of a community were put into a sheep. The sheep was then slaughtered and thrown into water for the gods as a sacrificial offering. The second action is the occupation of the underwater space by a protestor in a tent. This references the tent city in Tel Aviv where I spent the night talking to activists after leaving my tour group. Tent city was a camp which was set up for almost a year on Rothschild Blvd. to protest social and economic inequalities in Israel and Palestine. In this work the sheep becomes a stand in for the collective disabilities of a community. It is then dissolved into the divine destruction of the water.

My intention is made most apparent in the enjambment or juxtaposition with the image of the tent. The underwater tent is born out of the flow of the river and the divine. It is fertile destruction, a space in which to coexist with the chaotic destructive forces. It is the nourishing aspect of the water. The figure in the tent has determined to live without air. They have made a great sacrifice by doing this. I am observing the ways in which protest camps provide a temporary society in which the anarchist may display their ability to live outside of work in defiance of capitalist notions of time.

Time becomes a focus as the ancient or primitive is made to exist simultaneously with the contemporary. This space is created to overwhelm the bodies and make the viewer question their function. This type of space functions to boil the body down into a radical sensorial machine.

I paint the body in a way that is reminiscent of the classical or baroque. Those models of figuration are expanded upon to create less objectification and more action. I want to create references to performance and body art. The bodies in my work exist to express emotion and struggle. I want to look at human impulsiveness and how it guides social interactions. The figures in *Scapegoat Ritual Occupation* are isolating themselves in ecstatic reactions fueled by a group ritual. The gestures are subtle yet complex. Basically their desire for the love of their god overwhelms them and they try to escape their bodies by covering their faces, writhing or weeping. They are being overwhelmed by their interactions with blood and water. Nudity could mean that they are more

vulnerable or less depending on individual perspectives on nudity. They could be very comfortable with their bodies, or simply exposed.

This piece deals with the out of body experience, the psychedelic experience and other sensual interactions between nature and the body. The waves created by casting the sheep into the water are traced and expanded into the ways in which the grass grows. It's subtle but the grass is separated into rings edged with purple loose strife. Purple loose strife is an invasive plant that I was responsible for removing from a garden that I tended while an in residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan Maine in the summer of 2013. Purple loose strife and scapegoating are both things that invade the collective unconscious. One is an object and the other is a ritual but they pull together as equally problematic yet connected to the beneficial destructive impulse. This is why I choose to portray them in a cosmic flow that is bedazzling and bright.

Particularly interesting to me are the links between religion and nationalism. The moralistic myths surrounding land use have historically provided pacifists and war-mongers alike with the fuel for their causes. Agrarian communism within the back to the land movement of the 20's and 30's in Germany stands in stark contrast to the types of agrarian communism represented in the murals of Diego Rivera. It becomes all too easy for revolutionary struggles of agriculture to be exploited by conservatives pushing for a move to tradition. I would like to investigate this type of agricultural imagery

more clearly in future work. For now I have taken a step back to investigate what religion has held true.



Figure 2: *Wound Interrogation*, by Roberto Matta, 1949
Oil on canvas, 150cm x 196cm

I am portraying how religious experiences of life have been shaped by perceptions of natural phenomenon. All of the bodies are like plants. They are shedding, sunning, soaking up water and decaying. Separation from the earth is painfully obvious. They are striving to be more like their vegetative surroundings despite their consciousness which isolates them. This type of figuration builds upon the legacy of Roberto Matta. Matta endeavored to build upon bodies, weaving them in and out of abstract space, both forming and inhabiting it. When bodies try and control space and the cosmos they end up losing much of their being to become partially inhabited by the void. The bodies leave anatomy behind in favor of surfaces that seem to adapt to their environment and become absorbed and altered by the spaces surrounding them. These uncanny figures are emblematic of transparency and what he refers to as the transparent totem.

"If the contemporary was at a point of primitive society when these societies proposed themselves totems to represent their functioning as a group, today this totem would have to be transparent...representation of society today would be transparent. Most of the things that affect us are not things we see, like in the case of primitive people, but they are things that come from forces like the psyche."ⁱ

Matta was creating a dream environment in which the wraithlike specters called the Vitreurs could build the physical incarnations of the automatic reality of the subconscious. Vitreur is French for glass craftsmen. If you look at the figures in *Wound Interrogation* they are sliding in between plates and forming axis after axis. Hands dissolve into jointed planes at right angles. The limbs of multiple figures combine to frame squares of negative space. What became revolutionary was the way this style existed at the intersection of biomorphic abstraction and representation. He was portraying humans as biological machines, but in a way that questioned this view through a nebulous and volcanic rupture of these systems. The volcano was an important device in his work. He ventured to volcanoes in South America for inspiration. This device intersects well with my work both formally and conceptually. Everything is splitting, oozing and solidifying.



Figure 3: *Divine Intervention*, 2012,
Pen and ink on paper, 10"x14"



Figure 4: *The Heavenly Court Objects to the Smiting of the Waves*, 2012
Pen and ink on paper, 10"x14"

The powdered wig appears in both Divine Intervention and The Divine Court Objects to the Smiting of the Waves. In my paintings the powdered wig puts justice in the hands of any character, not just the righteous. Powdered wigs are worn by characters that hold control over other characters. This symbol should take on a more anarchist aspect. It's like the old saying, "there's no justice there's just us". I want to show that we should desire to balance our society without the power structures that fuel war. My powdered wigs seem more like symbiotic parasites that are dividing and shifting. They are braided and seem to be about some kind of beautification of their hosts.

In divine intervention a male god figure has penetrative sex with a phallic bolt of lightning. There are penis fish gathering beneath this homoerotic energy center. The divine homosexual god is parting the seas bringing about change as he sees fit. On the left we see a seemingly feminine goddess figure atop a cloud extends a hard-edged zig-zag phallus of lightning into the water. There some underwater people cuddle it amorously. This shows how our relationship to the divine must shift and change to balance with our bodies and worldview.

In "The Heavenly Court Objects to the Smiting of the Waves" a man doing yoga has a powdered wig on his head. This is in part a reference to a Caananite myth that explains the divine courts' decision to allow the destruction of the flood season in ancient Palestine. I thought it was interesting to have the yoga mat to reference meditation and the physical manifestations of the spiritual as expressed by body movements.

While most of my work seems marked by a sort of isolation of the body in personal ecstasy there are some works such as divine intervention that are marked by sexual acts. The main goal of the work is to crush the systems that chain us into conflict. Humor and abundance are important methods of seduction. Abundance meaning that love is not a resource that can be diminished. The way I portray this love is through an obvious attempt at balance. The bodies are balanced by agricultural type production of meticulously drawn plants and waterways. An artist friend once said that my figures look as if they are having a great deal of fun. I feel like they can be in pain at the same time as they are having fulfilling or fun experiences. Humor is about breaking down social norms and dismissing what is most challenging in our lives as ridiculous when compared to love.

ⁱ Miller, Nancy. *Matta: The First Decade*. 1982, Brandeis University Press, Boston, MA

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