

UNDERLYING SELF

by

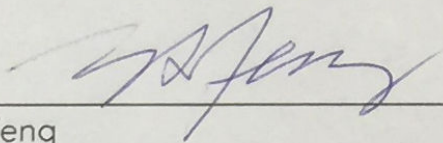
Aaron Forrester

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts

Thesis Advisor: Z.L. Feng

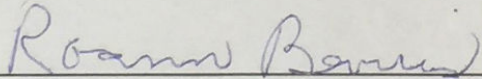
December 2014

Copyright 2014, Aaron Forrester



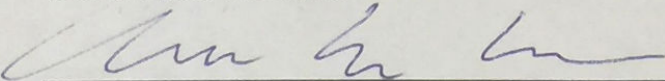
Z.L. Feng
Thesis Advisor

11/18/2014
Date



Dr. Roann Barris
Committee Member

11/18/14
Date



Andrew Ross
Committee Member

18 Nov 2014
Date

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my wife and sons for supporting me,
especially when it meant time apart.

Acknowledgments

Sitting down to write this, thinking of all the people who have had a hand in my success over my time at RU, is humbling. My professors, each with different impacts, personalities and skill sets, were equally important. Leah Gose was integral in encouraging and pushing me to higher standards during my time of exploration. She opened new avenues for expression in my work. Z.L. Feng rekindled my excitement for working with my hands and mastering drawing and wash techniques and blending them with photography. These two together were pushing for new ways of not only looking, but also expressing my ideas. I can't thank them enough. Roann Barris gave perspective and tough love for finding my literal voice. Roann's classes were engaging and stimulating, feeding directly into my other professors' input and conversations. Andrew Ross, even though only being with me a short time, has been both insightful and helpful. My professors and I didn't always see eye to eye, but I could tell from each one of them that they always had my best in mind, and wanted me to be successful.

There are two others who played a huge role in my success. Karie Edwards and Derek Reynolds were two confidants who were always uplifting and encouraging. Without Karie I'm pretty positive I wouldn't be writing this thesis at all. Her friendship has helped smooth out the rough times and accentuate the good. I not only walk away from RU with an MFA but lifelong friends.

Lastly, I want to thank my wife. Her sacrifice has been the greatest of all. She has dealt with time apart, financial challenges, late nights, and a bunch of my whining. Through it all she has been a pillar of encouragement and peace. Without her, I truly would not be where I am today.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Introduction.....	6
Influences.....	8
Methodology.....	11
Conclusion	14
Works Cited	19

List of Figures

Figure 1: James Jean, Puppet. Ink on Paper, 10 x 9", 2013	16
Figure 2: Henry Cartier-Bresson, MEXICO. 1934. Mexico City. Calle Cuauhtemotzin	16
Figure 3: Nicole Kidman – Vanity Fair by Annie Leibovitz, December 1997.....	17
Figure 4: Bec Wonder, Marko, 2011, Paintography.	17
Figure 5: Overwhelmed – Aaron Forrester, October 2014	18

Introduction

This series cohesively blends photography with different pen drawing and ink wash applications. This style of mixed media creates a surreal treatment using images depicting a mood of the model and blending them with stylized imaginative drawing. Using portraiture in this series allows me to impose an identity and an emotional response beyond what the photograph produces alone.

Mixing together photographs and drawings has been a mostly subconscious practice of mine for years. Making doodles and embellishments to books and folders without taking notice of it as a viable form of expression changed once I began working with DASS (Digital Art Studio Seminars) transfers. I saw a feasible way of creating that collaboration between drawing and photography in a more intentional way. The transformation made by drawing onto an image and creating a completely different interpretation of that image is an extraordinary concept to me. The doodle can be a glimpse at the internal, the unseen, the emotion that we may hide. The style of drawing on these works is reminiscent of different drawings and doodles I have done throughout my life. They are small glimpses at my own thoughts and feelings. Combining the photograph of the external with the drawings and emotion of the internal gives an expression of the whole person, more so the one that tends to lie hidden beneath.

I also find an attraction in using photography in a way that cannot be precisely replicated because of the less-than-perfect science of DASS-transfers and hand drawing. This goes against a photograph's most common trait of mass reproduction.

Mixing these temperamental transfers with the visible hand of the artist in the pen marks and strokes creates a combination that for me expresses the lucidity of emotions perfectly.

My initial desire for the viewer is a clear conveyance of the emotion depicted. Then moving closer and seeing the details of the drawing and the balance with the photograph, the viewer's imagination is sparked. The intensity of the emotion in the photo is heightened with the addition of the drawing, the two work in balance to achieve something that wouldn't exist without them both being together.

Through the combination of mediums, mainly photography and forms of drawing, I have created my expression of the emotions felt throughout life. The photograph represents the factual exterior that we all see everyday, combined with drawings that reveal the normally invisible emotions that lie just below the surface. To express these emotions through multiple mediums in concert with one another gives a richer identifiable feeling of the emotion. The styles of drawing used are pulled directly from my subconscious. The doodles I have made for years were a visual release of the things that I often kept hidden away from others. I have taken the main shapes and styles of these subconscious drawings and purposely introduced them in to my work. These drawings, mixed with portraits and the colors I envision, build a tangible expression of what I feel lies beneath the visual exterior. This body of work is a look at the layers and facades of people. I want to reveal these layers simultaneously through multiple mediums to embellish what I perceive to exist.

Influences

My attraction to many mediums over my life has led to a diverse group of artistic influences, ranging from photographers to painters and graphic artists. In some cases the commonality may be very small. But like this body of work, as well as in my mind, they find their place together.

James Jean, a multimedia artist, normally begins with a drawing and then moves in several possible directions. He paints with oil and acrylic or works in graphite and charcoal, often using Photoshop to finish his work. His works span from cover art for magazines to gallery exhibitions to three story murals on buildings. Jean's work has a very surreal quality to it. His subject matter is rooted in the real world, but moves into a darker and warped version of reality. This is where I found a connection to his work. For example, he may use imagery (Figure 1) of a beautiful woman mixed with grotesque characters surrounding or even coming out of her.

This type of imagery ties directly to my desire to create and display the possible inner emotions of a subject. Jean has been the most influential artist on my work over the past few years, although during that time I was unaware of how impactful he would turn out to be. I was first drawn to his ideas and themes, but also came to be enthralled with his range of mediums and mastery over them. I felt a kinship in the idea of expression not being limited by one given field or medium. While I aspire to master these other elements used in my work, I'm no longer afraid to step outside my lane of artistic traffic.

Henri Cartier-Bresson is my photography godfather. His philosophy helped form my way of looking at different situations as I began to photograph (Figure 2). Cartier-Bresson was one of the foremost in his field of photojournalism in the 1930s, while at

heart he was influenced by surrealist painting. A few of Cartier-Bresson's quotes best encapsulate his ideals to me. "For me, the camera is a sketch book, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity."¹ The idea that photography was just another form of sketching appealed so much to me, and I feel it ties to my work. He looks at his subjects as art in the making. He needs only to pluck them from life in an instant sketch. Here is that back and forth between surreal and real life when it comes to the function of a photograph – how it can sometimes be more than just documentation. It becomes a powerful expression.

In his belief, you painted by viewing, waiting for life and all the pieces to fall into place, then you sketch. "To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression."² While my current work in mixed media differs greatly from this type of photography, I am still trying to capture that significant sketch that expresses my intentions. By gathering together different elements and arranging them in such a way that they become greater than the sum of their parts, I feel as if Cartier-Bresson and I are connected. While he is working in the moment and I am constructing my pieces we are searching for the larger expression.

Annie Leibovitz is a photographer best known for her work with celebrities. She started with *Rolling Stone Magazine* in the 1970s and has had a career in portraiture since. She is not highly stylized in her work per se, but she is, in my opinion, one of the best ever of capturing a trueness of her subject. As her career has evolved over the years,

¹ HCB Foundation n.d.

² (Fynn 2012)

Leibovitz has become more theatrical in some of her series of work but is still able to retain a bit of the true personality of her subject (Figure 3). She has always had a way of combining the surroundings of the portrait almost as a supporting character to the main subject. This consideration of support from props or locations is intriguing to me. So many try awkwardly to incorporate the environment, Leibovitz does so flawlessly. I think there is a reason for this which lies behind the camera, before it is ever picked up. She really tries to know who she is photographing, normally meeting and talking with them the day before and getting an idea for how to express what she sees in them.

The idea of viewing someone and trying to see what makes them tick, or perhaps what lies beneath, draws parallels to my work. I have tried in my work to draw the viewer in to see the emotion that lies beneath the exterior of people – sometimes visible, most times not. Nevertheless, we make assumptions from the clues we are given. I, too, want to show the unseen from my perspective.

Bec Wonders is a photographer, painter and clothing designer. One of her bodies of work combines her dark portrait images with painting over portions of the face, revealing another face emerging from beneath (Figure 4). Wonders's concept is closely related to my own. She has created an almost dual personality in her works with the photograph being the "reality" that we mostly see. The painting portion of the person inside, tearing their way out, is also a reality, just one suppressed from view. We share in the idea of the duality of expression being seen simultaneously.

Methodology

Underlying Self is a combination of DASS photo transfers, ink washes, and pen and ink drawings. The combination of all of these processes creates a melding together of not just mediums but concepts. To see the importance of each medium, let me provide some background on how they are created and combined.

To create a DASS transfer your image is printed in reverse to a special transparent material with a chemical on one side that suspends the ink and allows it to be removed on the surface of the substrate. A mixture is created using DASS products and isopropyl 91% alcohol. This is applied to the area to which the transfer will be affixed. It is a very delicate process with a high probability of error. The image is laid into the liquid and, as the backing is removed, the ink is pulled off the transparency and suspended in the liquid on the work. Because of the process, all work that needs to be behind the image has to be created first. There is no way to penetrate the transfer once it has been made. This leads to no small amount of panic before each application, as hours and hours have already been put into a work that could be ruined in a matter of minutes.

Ink washes form the backgrounds and add to the lucidity of the emotions in the work. These washes are created using different colored acrylic ink added to water. The water is poured in certain areas on the surface of the piece. Ink is added and immediately begins spreading throughout the water. The mix is moved by tipping, holding and wedging the board into different positions.

The inks are combined on the piece itself; the adding and mixing of color and flow can be controlled, but only to a degree. If the natural characteristics of the water flowing and the ink mixing and running are tampered with too much, the outcome

becomes stagnant and muddy. Controlling water mixed with inks on a large surface, such as most of these works are, is no small feat. Since the ink and water do not instantly dry, there is always the possibility of it running in directions or to places you don't desire. It is a work in controlled chaos.

Pen and ink drawings exaggerate the in-between of the reality and fantasy.

Although there are different applications and mediums used, such as colored pencils and Prismacolor markers, the line work and ink washes along with the photographic images are the visual common thread. The pen and ink drawings bring the artist's hand into each piece. Most of the pen work is done last, layered over all the other processes. There are portions of the drawings that are near the transfers that need to be completed before the transfer is applied so that the two can overlap.

Obviously, like most works of art there is a great deal of planning about composition. I have generally made smaller versions of the final piece as well as sketched out all the layouts before beginning. I will often finalize with an overhead projector and sketched elements to achieve the correct size and location of parts of the work.

I have constructed all aspects of the final work. I cut all the wood, built the entire frame backing as well as the frame. They do not have a glass or acrylic surface covering them, but are sealed from the elements. I have created this work in a large scale. The size is important for a few reasons.

My emotions are felt powerfully and passionately. There are some that could be more intimate and explored in the future, but the emotions chosen for this body of work are large and powerful. The works themselves have detail that I want the viewer to be engulfed in, to encapsulate their entire view (Figure 5). The finished sizes range from

36X48”to 36X72”.

All of these steps, sizes, and mediums offer a glimpse at the complexity of emotions and things hidden away from most. But I feel as though they work harmoniously together to create something greater than their parts alone.

Conclusion

Having such a diverse background in the arts of graphic design, sculpture, drawing, and photography gives me a unique perspective. When approaching an idea for a new body of work I allow all of these influences to inform my process. Just because you can do something doesn't always mean that you should, and this applies to creating my work. Ultimately, my goal is clear expression. I feel like there are no rules for this goal. No matter the inspiration or goal behind the works themselves, the common thread is exploration and expression.

The combinations of these different processes and their type of expression are as important to the concept of this body of work as the idea itself. The photo transfer in its delicate manner and imperfect presence is optimal for the narrative of the face we all put on when emotions may be more at work than we care to admit. This process also makes this image a one of a kind. There is no way in my process to get the exact same application of these images a second time. The line work and drawing aspect again link to the subconscious free drawings of my life. Taking these themes of line quality and subjects from these subconscious drawings and intentionally applying them to the work is a connection to the underlying emotion. This work is tedious and time consuming, but also very cathartic. This release of moods and feelings through drawing can be similar to expressing your feelings verbally. The freedom and natural way of the ink and water washes are crucial to the lucidity of emotion. Try to control them too much and the outcome is stifled and muddy. Working with what you have and encouraging flow in directions you want gain the best results.

This work has come from my continued searching and pushing for expression. I think this work fits into the current narrative of art, embracing the tools and culture that inform art. Taking what tools are presented and using them to speak in a way that is not prevalent is important to me as an artist. These combinations and personal aesthetics have created a true style that is all my own. I'm proud of a work that has been forged from my influences, to be sure, but synthesized in a new way by my hand.

I could not have imagined at the beginning of this journey that this is where I would wind up. This work is important to me and my development as an artist, but also to my desire to inspire and guide others to these places for themselves.



Figure 1: James Jean, Puppet. Ink on Paper, 10 x 9", 2013



Figure 2: Henry Cartier-Bresson, MEXICO. 1934. Mexico City. Calle Cuauhtemotzin



Figure 3: Nicole Kidman – Vanity Fair by Annie Leibovitz, December 1997



Figure 4: Bec Wonder, Marko, 2011, Paintography.



Figure 5: Overwhelmed – Aaron Forrester, October 2014

Works Cited

Fynn, Shaun. studiofynn.com. September 2012.

<http://www.studiofynn.com/journal/decisive-moment-understanding-convergence>

(accessed March 20, 2014).

HCB Foundation. henricartierbresson.org.

http://www.henricartierbresson.org/hcb/home_en.htm (accessed March 20, 2014).