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CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in the Department of Art

The University of Mississippi

by

MARTIN A. ARNOLD

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

The expressiveness of the human figure is the vocabulary and syntax that I use to explore the things that make us human. In coming to really know an individual, we not only gain insights into our own psychological make-up, but we may extrapolate our findings to the broader human condition. Although intimately concerned with highlighting the characteristics that make my subjects distinctive, I am equally determined to examine those traits underscoring our commonality, that bind us all into a human family. I attempt to pull back the curtain of privacy and allow viewers to intrude on my subjects' thoughts and ponder their perspective. I want viewers to confront the same questions that I pondered as I stood before my model, brush in hand, "Who is this person?", "What is going through this person's mind?" and "How does he/she perceive me?"

The people that I paint embody the idea of a neighbor that lives across the street or perhaps passes us each morning in the hallway. They are of any age, ethnicity and of either gender. They appear self-assured and in control of their space.

The primary role of these paintings goes beyond the snagging of a viewer's attention. They purposefully allude to the silent, invisible souls of these subjects that reside beneath the surface of what is physically apparent to viewers.

I stage subjects alone, alert and attired indifferently; all non-essentials are discarded.

Because there is little else to ponder, viewers' attention is left to linger on the stark humanity of the person before them.

Defensiveness is avoided by posing models in a suspended moment and lost in thought. Eye contact becomes the conduit that intimately links viewer to subject, allowing one soul to non-verbally, intuitively communicate itself to the other. In returning the subject's gaze, we are inextricably drawn into a slow, downward-spiraling vortex, to the very core of their personality.

For my work to be successful it must compel viewers to peer beyond the superficial, to ferret out the meaningful. Ultimately, through my figural paintings, I want to make people feel what it is like to be in my subjects' shoes.

DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to S.A., who set out upon this endeavor with me but could not complete the journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest gratitude to Professor Philip R. Jackson, my painting instructor, who encouraged me every step of the way and impressed upon me the relevance of contemporary realism as well as instilling in me a deep reverence for painting. I am profoundly indebted to Professor Sheri Fleck Rieth, our Art Department chair, who considered all of the graduate art students to be her 'children'. When the going became difficult, it was comforting to know that Sheri was in our corner.

Professor Mathew Long provided the inspiration that prodded and challenged me through the graduate program. He and Professor Jackson embody for me what it means to be an artist.

I also wish to thank Dr. Betty Crouther and Dr. Thomas Dewey for their unflinching support over my entire tenure as a graduate student at The University of Mississippi. The genuine friendliness and concern of these two excellent instructors inspires and humbles me.

A special thanks to Durant Thompson for his genuine concern and understanding but especially for his insights regarding my work.

It is appropriate that I extend my heartfelt appreciation to two undergraduate instructors who helped make my graduate experience possible. Alexander Stelios-Wills and Jo Powers gave me many of the skills, motivation and confidence that I would need to go all the way.

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LIST OF IMAGES

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CHAPTER 1

MY CONCEPT

My figural art is about duality, about the commonness and coincidental uniqueness that lies at the very core of our human nature. It is about the strengths and vulnerabilities, the hopes and fears residing within viewers and reflected in my subjects. Put differently, my paintings are about the things viewers perceive about my subjects and then recognize as resident in their own make-up. Through my paintings, I establish a human connection, prodding observers to recognize these shared commonalities even as they celebrate my subjects' individuality. We all know that basic necessities such as sexual drives, the need for understanding, love and security, clamor and compete beneath the surface. My paintings pay homage to this reality and hopefully draw viewers into a world that extends well beyond the comfort of their personal space.

I am less concerned that my work be judged "contemporary" than I am that each painting addresses a transcendent, timeless present and speaks like the almost imperceptible voice of the human conscience, softly but relentlessly. I deliberately forego idealizing my models, choosing instead to focus upon the inner beauty that emanates from the actual features of both male and female subjects. It is important that viewers experience my subjects one-on-one, therefore I present each figure alone, life-size and standing before the observer, face to face.

In this body of work I examine five diverse subjects. A thirty-five year old,

Hispanic-American male, a Caucasian female of approximately twenty years, a twenty-two year old African-American female, a twenty-eight year old Caucasian male and an Asian male of approximately thirty-five years. Three of these subjects are friends and the remainder is acquaintances who I felt would make ideal models for this series.

My painting titled, “Wesley”, [Plate 1] called for rather harsh side lighting to stress his straight forward, no-nonsense, independent demeanor. In our many exchanges about graduate school, I have been struck by his determination to surmount hurdles and achieve his goals. I elected to depict him standing, engaging viewers with direct eye contact and feet planted firmly on the floor to communicate his determination to stand his ground. I want the viewer to recognize his refusal to be intimidated or manipulated. He exudes self-assurance and we may surmise from his demeanor that once he makes up his mind, he is not easily swayed. Obstacles are merely challenges to this proud Hispanic-American. On the other hand, his overall posture convinces us that if we are willing to meet him half-way, he is entirely approachable. I employed a coarse, dry-brush technique on Wesley’s shirt to underscore his masculinity. His disheveled hair and muscular arms and hands support this interpretation.

Lighting for my painting, “Hunter”, [Plate 2] was arranged slightly more frontally than that used for Wesley’s. She exhibits a similar self-confidence but the prevailing impression is more dramatic and passive. I felt that frontal lighting better emphasized her open and trusting personality. I encouraged this model to choose her wardrobe for this portrait. Extending this freedom provides additional clues as to a subject’s personality. Hunter’s slightly bowed head and upturned gaze betrays mild shyness, an observation that is supported by her soft, low voice

and her tendency to be overly concise. The hint of an amused smile tugs at the corners of her mouth, suggesting perceptiveness and even a playful cockiness.

In “Kellee”, [Plate 3] my subject is a theatre major who is passionate about her acting career. We became friends within minutes of our first meeting. She is genuine, bubbly, extremely agreeable and enthusiastic. But Kellee has another side that I wanted to explore in this painting. Beneath her alluring effervescence, she is concerned about what the future holds for her. In this pose, her expressive, upturned eyes convey these apprehensions, alerting us to her dire misgivings. The slight slouch to this actress’s shoulders and the self-conscious, awkward positioning of her hands do not express self-doubt but rather uncertainty about what lies ahead. Her days as an undergraduate are drawing to a close and, with graduation looming; she must ponder her next big step. This otherwise confident, independent, hard working young woman is looking to us for reassurance. I chose to sacrifice the use of color in this painting to both accentuate her heightened anxiety and to better articulate our empathetic response.

“Allan”, [plate_4] depicts a friend of mine who is a member of the Art Department staff. He and I share a love for representational, realist painting. In his art and work, Allan is very detail-oriented; his paintings require an enormous amount of patience. Though a fine artist, Allan demonstrates humility and even a tendency toward self-deprecation. He is easy-going, soft-spoken, supportive and very careful never to offend. I chose this relaxed, informal pose to relay Allan’s casual, engaging manner. His torso is turned at an angle to us, alluding to his self-effacement and his automatic, deflective responses to any sort of praise. Allan’s face however, is turned toward us in earnest acknowledgement of our presence. He exudes confidence.

In my painting of Hosik [Plate 5], we see my friend from South Korea. He is a ceramic sculptor whose artwork, though heavily conceptualized, is both process and results oriented. Hosik proudly expresses his cultural values and familial ties in his artistic eclecticism. He draws upon his deep affection for family members, both living and deceased, to provide his sculptures and installations with expressive impetus and symbolism that resonates with both Asian and non-Asian viewers.

His courtesy and genuine concern for others in the art department, serves to supplement his limited use of English. Hosik demonstrates a disregard for his own welfare as he deals with the struggles innate to graduate school and in the making of his art. This is alluded to by the tattered, clay splattered apron that he has worn throughout his entire graduate tenure. The rolled up sleeves express both his self-reliance and his willingness to do whatever is necessary to bring his ideas into a three dimensional realm.

CHAPTER 2

MY INFLUENCES

Robert Henri spoke of a brotherhood that stretches back into millennia. “Through art, mysterious bonds of understanding and of knowledge are established among men. They are the bonds of a great Brotherhood. Those who are of the Brotherhood know each other, and time and space cannot separate them” (Ryerson 19). We painters are linked by ties similar to the biological ties that link us all to ancestors and progeny.

Johannes Vermeer through his deft use of subtle lighting delicately revealed both subject and environment. He demonstrated utmost respect for his subjects, who are usually performing some mundane task. In one of Vermeer’s paintings, *Girl in a Red Hat* the artist introduces us to a young woman. Her parted lips and raised eyebrows suggest that the viewer has perhaps caught her off guard. By offering observers little by way of explanation, Vermeer infused his compositions with mystery. My own work reflects this artist’s fondness for common folk and his use of seemingly non-posed poses. Like Vermeer’s subjects, the people who I paint are neither aristocratic nor strikingly beautiful. They derive their subtle appeal from their obvious humanity and manner. In this way, I hope to establish a sense of timelessness and to transcend portraiture by having my paintings speak expressively of humankind. Also, following Vermeer’s lead, I incorporate a degree of vagueness into each painting, both to heighten a sense of mystery and to invite a variety of interpretations by viewers.

Thomas Eakins’ figural works both complement and reinforce much of what I gleaned from Vermeer’s work. For me, Eakins personified the ‘warts and all’ approach, believing that the human figure’s beauty issues from its factuality and not from some murky, transient notion of

beauty. What an American critic writing in *The Art Collector* observed of Eakins' painting, *Salutat*, can be extrapolated to much of his work, "...always coarse, never beautiful, but often true" (Kirkpatrick 445). Henry Adams declared, "In some way Eakins' paintings clearly deal with the issue of what people think and feel, what they are concealing or attempting to conceal, and how we relate to them" (Adams 383). The supreme realist, Eakins resisted social pressure to flatter and to prettify. Truth to him was beauty.

A contemporary artist whose work has influenced my own is Istvan Sandorfi. He deftly married the realistic to the surreal. His figural compositions exude an intense, foreboding, sense of mystery, sometimes bordering on the bizarre. His later paintings depict introspective figures who appear distracted, disconnected and vulnerable. Often, his subjects engage observers directly and at times they seem entirely unmindful of viewers. Perhaps, in an attempt to address contrasting moods that he perceived resident in his models, he posed them sitting or standing next to themselves. Often the subject is making eye contact with the viewer as she is painted huddled next to herself, with eyes downcast, engulfed in introspection.

Like Sandorfi, my goal is to manipulate line, color, form and texture, to immerse viewers in a non-threatening world of my creation, a world wherein they may scrutinize my subject and hopefully, metaphorically at least, slip their feet into another's shoes. I share Sandorfi's predilection for detail, his dedication to realism and his decision to incorporate mystery into his compositions. Like Sandorfi, I want my paintings to convey the impression that my subjects are not only aware of the viewer's presence but that they are intently reciprocating that viewer's curiosity and scrutiny.

CHAPTER 3

MY TECHNIQUE

I hand stretched canvas over a standard 96 inch high by 48 inch wide stretcher frame. Three coats of white acrylic gesso were then applied to the stretched canvas.

After executing drawings of each subject on a large sheet of paper, I transferred the renderings onto the canvases via powdered graphite rubbed onto the reverse side of the paper. I then applied a fixative of clear acrylic spray over the canvas to prevent the drawing from smearing.

In order to make the painting process more manageable, I broke it down into two steps. First, I generated a grisaille under-painting, concentrating on establishing a full range of values. I intended for large areas of this under-painting to remain exposed in the final painting, so I included as much detail as possible in this step. I used a limited palette that included Buff Titanium, Mars Black, Lamp Black and Ivory Black.

Secondly, I applied glazes of thin transparent washes of oil color over the areas of the under-painting that I wished to emphasize, building them up gradually creating a multi-layered effect. Subtle areas of an impasto application were used to heighten the sense of three-dimensionality in each figure.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

My paintings are admittedly portraits, but for them to be successful in my eyes, each one must transcend simple portraiture and relate viscerally to a wide cross-section of society. In other words, while I strive to create paintings that accurately portray a specific individual, physically, spiritually and psychologically, these figural works must be functionally representative of many individuals. In each figure that I paint, it is vital that viewers consciously or unconsciously recognize aspects of their own inner life. I want viewers to confront their own humanity as they peer into my subjects' eyes. The hopes, needs, apprehensions and loves that resonate within the hearts of my subjects, also reverberate within observers' hearts. In the end, I hope observers conclude that regardless of size, gender, shape, color, clothing, socio-economic status or education, they share my subjects' psychological image and likeness. If my paintings transfix or shock, let it be at the realization that my subject is hugely reflective of the viewer, and ultimately that we humans are fundamentally alike.



PLATE_1

Wesley

Oil on canvas, 2011

96" high x 48" wide



PLATE_2

Hunter

Oil on canvas, 2012

96" high x 48" wide



PLATE_3

Kellee

Oil on canvas, 2011

96" high x 48" wide



PLATE_4

Allan

Oil on canvas, 2012

96" high x 48" wide



PLATE_5

Hosik

Oil on canvas, 2012

96" high x 48" wide

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VITA

Martin was born in Michigan in 1947. His career as a designer of automation machinery spanned thirty-seven years. In 2006, after the manufacturing industry experienced a protracted economic slump, he moved to Mississippi and enrolled at Mississippi University for Women in Columbus. His lifelong love of drawing seamlessly translated to painting. Soon the artist was winning awards in statewide art competitions. Upon graduation in the Spring of 2009 with a BFA with teacher certification, he elected to continue his studies by pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree at The University of Mississippi. Now, poised once again to graduate, Martin is looking forward to teaching foundation courses in drawing and painting at the college level while pursuing an active career as a figure painter.