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Though it can be assumed that any artist living at any time goes through some sort of stylistic change, one can always see art historical influences, to some degree, in their work. My recent themes have included pseudo-criticisms/commentaries on technology, art, and art school. Drawing influence from horror movies, television commercials, comic books, cartoons, philosophy, war, art history and so on, my works attempt to create a combination of a high/low art relationship and present the arrangement in an aesthetically successful way. My own work is currently at the beginning of a change in approach, regarding appearance, though I will attempt to give a fair assessment to prior works. The future pieces will still have a strong conceptual link to everything described in this paper.

I try to keep a lot of cogs turning in terms of ideas. Critics and viewers have seen my paintings as a very interesting point of view or criticism on contemporary popular culture. My work may not "*Preach nonsense and anti-art with a vengeance,*"<sup>1</sup> like the Dada movement did, but certainly plays with a lot of the same conceptual and visual ideals. Recently I have found myself with very little interest in formal issues and craftsmanship in art. I have been much more interested in storytelling and the

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<sup>1</sup> Janson, H.W. and Anthony F. Janson. *History of Art*, 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishing, 2001: 798.

conceptual qualities that may be exhibited in a work. It's not a total disregard for the past, like Dada was, but I do feel a lot of indifference. This attitude and the nature of my work firmly plants me in postmodern territory.

My recent pieces have been working in a couple of different directions. In regard to medium and technique, my recent compositions have been primarily consisted of drawing, chemical image transfers, and silk screening, using very little literal paint on my paintings; I have been working in a very slick clean sort of fashion. This is not the result of a dislike of actual painting, or even a question of my own technical ability, but simply the best way in which to achieve the recent conceptual image for which I am striving for.

I, of course, am influenced by a great number of modern day artists and writers: Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Johns, John Cage, Warhol, Edward Ruscha, Raymond Pettibon, David Byrne, Italo Calvino, Raymond Carver, Scott McCloud and so on. Specifically two contemporary visual artists who I believe to have the most impact on me at this specific point in time will be discussed. These artists are Vernon Fisher (b. 1943) and William Wegman (b. 1943).

These two artists have an uncanny ability to mix absurd imagery effectively with very high intellectual material. In the 1984 mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap*, the

character David St. Hubbins quotes, "It's such a fine line between clever and stupid."<sup>2</sup> How true that can prove to be. Wegman and Fisher are very aware of this concept, and are successfully able to walk that tightrope and exist in both.

Wegman and Fisher's work both undeniably relate to the work of Dada artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), is possibly the epitome of ridiculous art with a very serious conceptual connotation. Rather than its function of being a men's restroom urinal, *Fountain* becomes a type of artistic, monumental object. Like all contemporary artists, Fisher and Wegman are familiar with Duchamp's legacy, and have rich connections with the same ideas of conceptual art.

In Vernon Fisher's work, fact and fiction in the pictures often become interchangeable. The imagery is very mixed. Contemporary art critic Dave Hickey has described Fisher's work as:

Imperfectly analogous juxtapositions of three imperfectly distinct kinds of phenomena (the personal, the social, and the natural), described by three imperfectly distinct information systems (literary narrative, the iconographic image, and the cartographic grid).<sup>3</sup>

In Fisher's *Model Citizens* (Fig. #1), we see scattered images of analytical cross-section diagrams of brains and skulls, elements of connective instructional text, two

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<sup>2</sup> Guest, Christopher, Michael McKean, Rob Reiner, and Harry Shearer, *This is Spinal Tap*, MGM Entertainment, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Hickey, Dave, *The Code of the West. Vernon Fisher* (Exhibition Catalogue), La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989: 25.

painted vignettes of a shot down fighter plane crashing into the sea, and a large loose pile of chalkboard erasers and sticks of chalk. Hickey is right; Fisher does often work with narratives, iconographic images, and cartographic grids. In *Model Citizens* however, he doesn't make use of the grid, as he does other works. The usage of blackboard imagery represents history and myth.

They also represent an idea that another instructor or artist was possibly in that location expressing ideas before he was, and there still are remnants of that

artist's ideas (myths) existing

underneath Fisher's plane. These artists work in a very interesting way. They rely on complicated imagery, with an underlying sub-narrative.



(Fig. #1) Vernon Fisher, *Model Citizens*, 1997. Oil and Acrylic on canvas, cast epoxy, erasers. Canvas 84"x89.5." Overall variable.

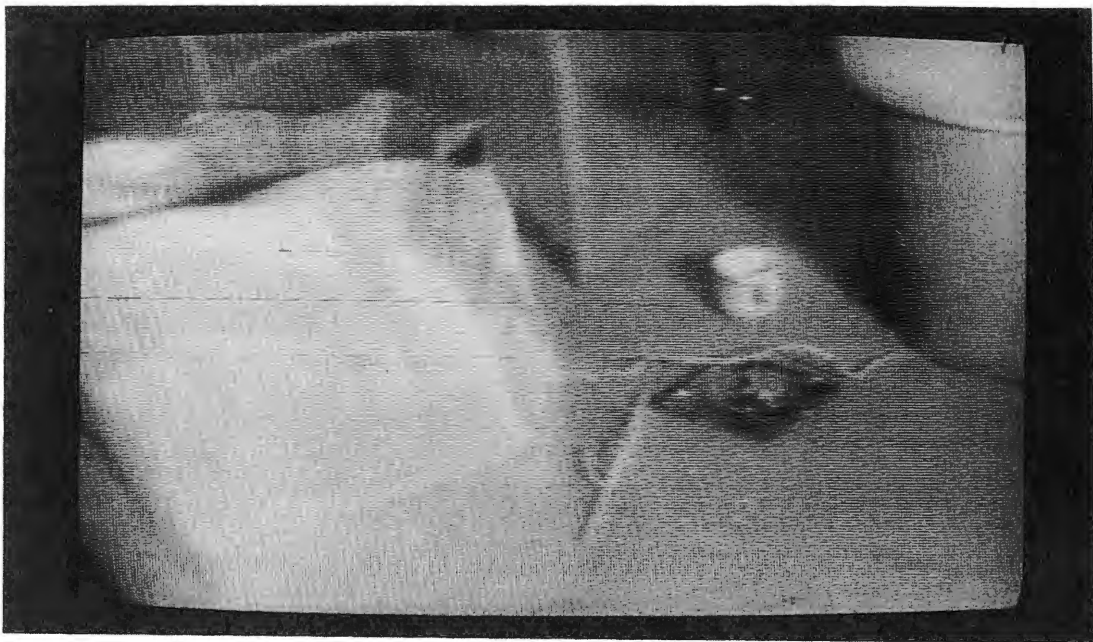
The imagery in *Model Citizens*, however, is quite absurd. It's a painting of brains; brains with the suggestion of cross sections, and of connective tissue. The chalkboard image is larger than life with mounds of chalkboard erasers and chinks lying piled on the gallery floor. He also depicts is a sequence of dramatic plane crash vignettes. *Model Citizens* is very silly and almost gross looking, with a sophisticated gloomy veneer.

William Wegman is most well known, perhaps, as the artist who portrays dogs in his pieces, the most famous was his first pet weimaraner, Man Ray (1970-1982). Though Man Ray was only used in about 10% of his work, most people think of the dog as almost universal in Wegman's work. Wegman stated, "*It irked me to sometimes to be known only as the guy with the dog, but on the other hand it was a thrill to have a famous dog.*"<sup>4</sup> Wegman uses his mediums to express his familiarity with popular American culture nuances, where mass media produces art forms far more conventional and trivial than those of contemporary high art. It could be argued, however, that high art in American is very much enriched by mass culture. Toying with trivial forms is an intellectual pastime for individuals whose interest grows in direct proportion to their ambivalence regarding these forms. In spite of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ross, David. "An Interview with William Wegman." *William Wegman*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990:19.

laughter and obvious comedy inherent in Wegman's work it confronts us with the tragic isolated look of an individual, a loner, in a sense. David Ross argues that Wegman's work "*Deals with a deep sense of loss and anxiety...concern about the end of the world.*"<sup>5</sup> This extreme sense of desperation and narcissism coupled with the obvious ridiculous imagery create in Wegman's work a world of scrambled sensibilities.



(Fig. #2) William Wegman, *In the Cup*, 1972, video still.

-Hey Bill.

-Yeah.

-Where are you?

-I'm in the cup.

-All right, I'll talk to you later.

-All right, see ya.

Wegman's video piece titled *In the Cup* (1972) (Fig.#2) leaves the viewer with the same sense of desperate, dry, and lonesome obscurity as the Fisher work does. The *In the*

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<sup>5</sup> Ross, David. "An Interview with William Wegman." *William Wegman*: 19.

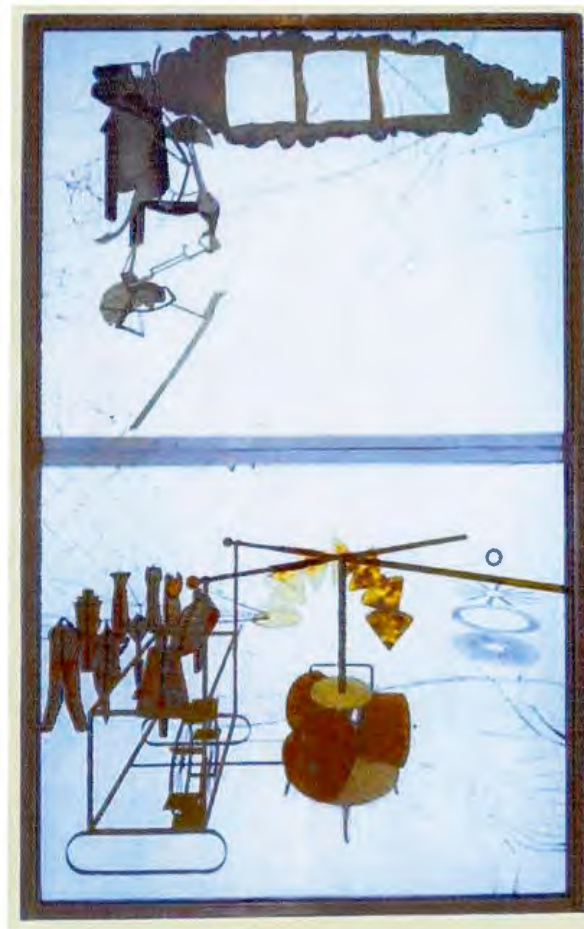
*Cup* video runs in real time, but there are no changes in shots, and it remains motionless. A simple voiceover runs for a few seconds. The dialogue is provided below the image, as a caption.

The work is a great combination of idiotic and brainy. Even though Wegman's films and photographs deal with a very strange criticism of high art and philosophical thought, they are visually executed in a quite elementary, stupid-looking way. They're all quite ridiculous, and that contributes to their brilliance.

During my undergraduate years at the University of North Texas (2000-2005), I dealt with a lot of comic imagery and graphic work. In graduate school at Colorado State University (2007-2009) the work still uses elements of these, and it has developed into something more substantial. I've essentially been working in two modes. In the first, I attempt to convey a distinct singular comparison or idea I've come up with. For example, work like *Gasoline Alley, Even* (2006) (Fig. #5) relates to visual and conceptual characteristics of Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, (Fig. #3) (1915-1923) and Frank King's (1883-1969) *Gasoline Alley* (Fig. #4) comic strips. Both of these works maintain a specific degree of sophistication, while also having an



interesting silly quality. I mean this to a certain extent, of course.



(Fig. #3) Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915-23. Oil and lead wire on glass. 109"x69."



(Fig. #4) Example of Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* strip, January 21, 1971. Copyright Chicago Tribune.



(Fig. #5) Kenny McBroom, *Gasoline Alley, Even*, 2006. Transfer on canvas. 45"x39."

The bird's-eye layout of the original content of this particular comic strip reminded me of the overall metaphorical movement in Duchamp's piece, *The Large Glass*. I was very interested in how all the elements and panels in both pieces function individually, yet an overall view reveals a very intriguing and complicated coexistence between all these individual components. In comparison, all the individual characters in my piece have a dialogue with other figures, all contained in their own private

square. However, the visual point of view and the overall conceptual discussion link all the boxes together. There are similar occurrences in *The Large Glass*. Individual components, such as the churning chocolate grinders and the waiting bachelors, all have distinctive operations, but are also all function with each other to make the piece suggest symbolic movement and narrative.

The second mode I've been working in is a more open-ended conceptually. There isn't necessarily one specific idea or narrative I am intend to convey. Through more planned formal arrangements and more mixed (sometimes arbitrary) images, the paintings have a more "open to analysis" kind of sentiment. I come up with a comparison of objects and/or ideas and display them on a surface together. These things are typically related by name, appearance, or concept as seen in my *Complementary Painting* (2007) (Fig. #6).



(Fig. #6) Kenny McBroom, *Complementary Painting*, 2007. Oil, acrylic, and transfer on canvas. 36"x48."

I was thinking about how things in our world co-exist with others, and how some items rely on others for completion. In *Complementary Painting*, complementary mathematical numbers and angles, appear with visually complementary colors. It also includes the visual pun of the complementary salt and pepper combo. To top it all off, I've also depicted a gentleman receiving a compliment on his new haircut (possibly a complimentary haircut?). There is no precise conclusion or point I'm trying to make with this painting; I am only drawing connections with varied imagery across a field. I'm not trying to tell you

about what kind of person my grandfather was, or how you should feel about the war on terror. The viewer can take the imagery and put together the pieces and understand what I'm attempting to say, or not. Formally the work functions on a fairly successful level, so it can survive on that. The imagery is so mixed and varied, that viewers remark the piece could be seen as an examination into the calculated etiquette of simple table manners (passing the salt and pepper) and that is just fine.

*Gasoline Alley, Even* and *Complementary Painting* can also be viewed as an analysis of the academic system and of the study physics, respectively. *Gasoline Alley, Even* is an examination into the high art academic world of Duchamp and conceptual art. *Complementary Painting* incorporates intellectual assessments of complementary angles and numbers, while remaining light-hearted with supplementary imagery. The comic strip formatting and the seemingly random selection of imagery is a fun approach to dealing with reasonably dense material.

*Complementary Painting's* conceptual links don't match exactly with Dada influenced thinking, but certainly has ties. Dada's ideals, that all artistic rules had been obliterated by World War I, are certainly quite a bit more serious than my own thoughts on artistic change. However, I do share some of the same attitudes. I have recently

lost almost all interest entirely with aesthetic subjects such as; Balance, unity, shape, form, space, line quality, and mark-making. These are the majority of all of Modernism's ideals, ultimately. I am simply too interested in narrative work, work that does *something*, besides relying on simple aesthetic conventions to do so. I reiterate that I cannot claim though that my new biases are entirely Dada-influenced. Color and scale still are elements that I find necessary to successfully navigate in work, even in narrative work, so it is not entirely a disregard for the past.

I'm unsure whether or not it's a personal philosophy at this time, but I certainly feel that I can't take my art too seriously. It's a painting, they come and go. War, hunger, and poverty are more than serious enough issues. I think it's more important for artists to consider themselves performers or even entertainers to some extent. We make art for public display and understanding. It's very important for some work to be approached seriously, of course, but not mine. Comparably, Wegman used a Polaroid photograph of his grey, melancholy dog to illustrate topics such as high fashion or as criticism of academia.

Having worked through at least two distinctly different visual styles, and currently envisioning a third, it is challenging to see my work aligned with a particular

artistic canon or a group with distinct sensibilities. However, conceptual connections to Dadaist ideals definitely are apparent in my work. Additionally, rooted in Dadaist principles, the contemporary artists Vernon Fisher and William Wegman's work generate a specific attitude and reaction unlike any other specific art historical movement.

Regardless, I find this postmodern contemporary painterly conceptual movement very unique and intriguing, and have made an effort to invest myself thoroughly in it as much as possible.

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