

THESIS

BEAUTY IN DECAY

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ABSTRACT

BEAUTY IN DECAY

Industrial Agricultural complexes offer an aesthetic beauty in the decay of its materials and structures. American interest in agriculture as an investment in domestic self-reliance has waned over time leaving behind gigantic structures that are left to deteriorate without upkeep. The lack of upkeep causes a physical deterioration of the structures and the materials. My work exposes the beauty in this deterioration through the use of the formal elements of painting. Color, texture, form and light are the elements used for the execution of my paintings. Canvas size also plays a key role in my work as it places the subject matter on a historically relevant scale in a similar fashion to the painting *Burial at Ornans* by Gustav Courbet.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Larry E. and Judy N. Brakefield and my sister, Stacey E. Brakefield for their dedicated support and love. I couldn't have come this far without you.

To Mark Savina for being part of my family and supporting me.

To my extended family for pushing me to keep going.

To my family that is no longer on this earth, I think of you everyday and hope that I've made you proud.

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BEAUTY IN DECAY

My paintings attempt to capture the current state of the structures and materials found in Agricultural Industrial complexes through aesthetic exploration of color, texture and form. I am specifically interested in the complexes that are not contemporary and represent a time when America as a whole invested in domestic agriculture. These complexes contain an aesthetic beauty found in the colors, textures and forms affected by decay and deterioration usually revealed by natural light. By necessity, these complexes are founded on geometric forms and durable materials. Over time those materials begin to break down with exposure to the natural elements. The repetition of geometric forms brings unity to the composition as well as gives the aesthetic elements a dimensional form on which to exist, much as a mannequin gives a form to a dress. I believe that natural light is the best source of light to reveal these aesthetic elements.

Historically, agriculture has been a theme in art. It was a sign of the domestication of mankind and its dominance over nature's process for the benefit of the race. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the presence of agriculture in art was a statement of wealth and prosperity. It was portrayed in terms of ownership by landowners and the elite. In America, rural towns became the new territories that could claim ownership of agricultural goods and controlled the dispersal of these commodities to other towns. These towns were connected by railroads, rivers and eventually highways. Farmers became elevated in the status as they contributed to the progress of society by laboring on behalf of other citizens.

Prior to World War 2, America began to reinvest in itself on many levels. Agriculture was a way of remaining independent. Large structures were built to store and process the food. These structures were so large they bordered on the sublime. As it stands now, there is a battle between investment in American agriculture and capital gain. Much of our food is grown outside

of the United States. New agricultural complexes are no longer a large part of the Industrial scene. The idea of a self-sustaining America is becoming more a concept of the past and complexes are being abandoned. My paintings focus on the formal aesthetics of what happens visually to the complexes when they are abandoned. I find beauty in this type of decay. Many consider these complexes a part of a by-gone era despite their importance to the town in which they exist. They are just another part of the landscape or a landmark that represents another time.

By the end of World War I, America had begun to turn against the decadence of Europe.¹ The concept of self-reliance became a staple of progressive thinking and America began to work on domestic reliance and the investment into all things “American.” This renewal of pragmatic thinking towards Industry in America influenced the art of the time. Precisionism (1914 to mid-1930’s) was a movement in which artists created work that reflected the ideals of Industry. A clean line, precise renditions, observable color, geometry and the “true” nature of a subject was of great importance to these artists. Charles Sheeler (b.1883- d. 1965) and Charles Demuth (b.1883- d. 1935) were the leading artists of that movement.² Their work celebrated American Industry as a progressive concept.

Other early 20th Century artists that celebrated Agriculture and Industry (combined as well as separately) include painter Thomas Hart Benton, printmaker Louis Lozowick, and painter Georgia O’Keefe. Their work may overlap in similar themes but in execution they are vastly different from each other. The influence they have on my work is that they give me a point to jump off as well as a counter to what I do in my own work.

¹ Diana Murphey, Editor. *Precisionism in America 1915-1941: Reordering Reality*. (New Jersey: Montclair Art Museum, 1994), 15.

² Murphey, *Precisionism*, 15.

Demuth and Sheeler focused mainly on functional structures and industrial complexes that often contained vertical structures of some variety. (Figs. 1, 2) They seemed to choose subjects that contained repetitive geometric forms that were broken up by other functional elements such as trusses, telephone poles, guide wires, chimneys and beam support structures. These additional functional elements lead the viewer around the paintings while simultaneously creating their own clean geometrics. Demuth used watercolors for some paintings and thinned oils for others. This allowed him to manipulate the light and the “freshness” of the color on the canvas. Sheeler honed in on basic industrial colors and stretched their elements to fit into his color puzzle.

Benton was a Regionalist painter that was concerned with the narrative of active agricultural practices. (Fig. 3) Much of his work during the Depression Era focused on romantic narratives of agricultural laborers. He approached the subject with a humanistic intent. This is contrary to his contemporaries- O’Keefe, Lozowick, Sheeler and Demuth. It is also contrary to the work of Dula as well as my own. Like Lozowick, Sheeler and Dula, I choose not to include the human figure in my paintings while Benton seemed to use them exclusively. I do not add them because the figure implicitly creates a social and political context. Our current relationship to agriculture in America is complicated. America has abandoned its investment in agricultural independence. I believe that the lack of human presence in these structures directly results in the exposure of the structures to the elements and therefore do not need a human figure. This is what creates the still-life that interests me.

O’Keefe painted some industrial structures in her career, though they were focused more on the idea of geometric architecture in a landscape and intuitive reaction to color than industry as the center of the subject matter. *East River from the Shelton* is a great example of this. (Fig. 4)

Her use of color is emotive and sensational rather than realistic. The geometric forms are silhouetted against the backdrop of a landscape rather than explored as a focus. In this way she is similar to Demuth in execution. My paintings, however, focus on the forms of the functional geometric shapes and regards texture and color as integral parts of representing them. My use of color is based more on natural colors I perceive in a particular object and find beautiful rather than a more emotional one.

Lozowick created Lithographs of industrial subject matter in a similar way to Sheeler. However, his use of value over precise linear elements is more in line with my own work than Sheeler's. His lithograph *Tanks #2*, explores industrial tanks and their adjoining pipes as objects that are receiving light, thus creating a still-life rather than an illustrative image of the tanks. (Fig.5) This makes his work a more formal exploration of the subject than an emotional one. This is something that I completely agree with in that it removes the viewer an intuitive half step away from the object. This creates a slight romanticism of the subject.

After the height of Precisionism, interest in American Industry then faded as a subject matter of aesthetic importance in the art world until recently when Rick Dula (b. 1957) picked up on the concept. (Fig. 6) He began painting portraits of Agro-Industrial complexes just under a decade ago. His work centers on the idea that these complexes were once grand structures that are now fading into ruins. The complexes are in various states of decay and disrepair. He calls his work an "obituary" of the subject rather than a celebration as Sheeler and Demuth saw it. It would also be prudent to call his (and Sheeler's) work a series of portraits of Agro-Industry. Sheeler and Dula both placed the subject (industrial complexes) right in the center of attention in the composition. The structures are treated with extreme care to maintain the truth of the nature of the components. Each aspect is modeled with realism in mind, and the character of the

buildings comes through. For example, Sheeler's *Ballet Mechanique* maintains the quirky nature of the angles in which gigantic pipes are routed around a catwalk. (Fig. 7) Dula does this in *Pueblo Steel Mill* where the arrangement of discarded objects in the yard is natural and follows the flow of a makeshift road in the dirt. (Fig. 8)

My interest in industrial subject matter comes from various sources. I am from a family that has traditionally worked in industrial settings. Many of my relatives have been (and are) coal miners, farmers, railroad workers, and military. Generally, my neighbors also had similar lives. My immediate family, however, did not work in these settings, so I am removed from that particular way of life. However, hearing detailed and saturated stories about life in industrial settings has created within me a sense of romanticism. I find myself thinking about the people who work there, the history and politics of industry in America and the sublime nature of the size of the buildings and equipment.

Another part of my interest comes from the areas in which I have lived in my life. I grew up between the edges of the port city of Baltimore and rural Howard County, Maryland. Both areas were industry-based as well as centers of agricultural commerce. My environment was filled with buildings that had an industrial purpose and whose shapes made up a complex that was constructed to fit a function. They have a relationship to their environment that is both functional and visually navigable, much like a still life.

With these aspects as the background of my interest, I have often found myself thinking about industrial complexes as more than objects of romantic contemplation. I found an aesthetic interest in them as well. I find myself drawn to objects with peeling paint, rust, cross-braces, color-coded pipes and other industrial materials, even when they are independent of a structure. When I explored Colorado, I found different types of industrial structures and complexes to

contemplate. The companies that owned the new complexes created varied products from cement to grain. These required a new variety of materials, shapes and textures that I had not experienced before. I found this visually and sensually exciting. The materials that I was previously acquainted with included brick, smooth cement, oyster shell retaining walls, wood, rebar, water and metal piping. The complexes that I found in Colorado use rubber, canvas, glass, corrugated metal sheets, corrugated cement blocks and large amounts of painted metal. These materials tend to stand up to the elements within the Colorado landscape if kept up properly.

When they are not kept up properly, they quickly begin to deteriorate and decay. My work primarily focuses on the portrayal of the aesthetics of this deterioration. As the materials deteriorate, they change in appearance- they become rusted, tattered, flaky, dented, faded, chipped, brittle and they can lose parts of their structure altogether. These actions alter the structure to create a new one. As these things happen to the materials they become simultaneously an object caught in time and one of aesthetic value. Colors are revealed through the process of deteriorating. Textures are created and exaggerated by exposure to the elements. The individual elements are geometrically shaped into cylinders, rectangles, cones and ellipses. Natural light tends to reveal more of these interesting colors and textures than artificial light.

Agricultural complexes tend to contain a variety of repetitive shapes in their structures. This fulfills the adage that form follows function. For example, cylinders are easier to fill and empty than a square and most industrial machines fit better within a rectangle than a dome. Silos are cylindrical and vary in size as do the pipes that connect them. Most of the basic structures are rectangular and range in size. These geometric forms become the basis on which texture and color exist, like a mannequin that models clothing in a store. These forms are where the deterioration is most apparent and from where I draw inspiration.

By necessity, complexes also tend to expand from the inside out with internal objects married to objects outside of a building. Silos become connected to the interiors of a building as well as to grain chutes below. Pipes can protrude out of a rectangular building and into a smaller rectangular receptacle which in turn is braced on a metal frame that can be accessed from below. Expansions onto the original buildings come with time. This often creates a visual disjointedness that is appealing as it usually means a change in a materials length of exposure to the elements. It also can give a subtle hint of geometry if it protrudes. Visual navigation through the complex can create moments of drama and compositional interest that can be strengthened by natural light falling across it.

Natural light is very prevalent in Colorado and large structures cannot escape it, especially when they are centered within an expanse of land. While natural light is a component of deterioration, its value in my paintings is more of an aesthetic one. I feel that it is what best reveals and informs form, color and texture. Sunlight will fall in such a way that will block out parts of a complex while lighting others. Depending on the time of day, this can be dramatic and selective. This allows me to see only parts of the complex. It creates a beautiful moment in which these objects exist in their current ignoble state.

One can link this approach back to the Realism movement of the 19th century. Specifically, Gustave Courbet (b.1819 - d.1877) and his revolutionary painting *Burial at Ornans* which depicts commoners. (Fig. 9) His painting showed these peasants as he found them- un-idealized and “ugly” or natural. He depicted common people with sincerity and decency on a large canvas. A critic named Etienne-Jean Delecluze (b.1781- d.1863) wrote about the painting: “How could the artist...paint two such ignoble caricatures as these beaules?”³ Similarly this is a sentiment felt by many in the art world regarding the nature of agriculture and industrial themed

³ Hatje Cantz, *Gustave Courbet*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 175.

paintings. To Courbet, however, these ignoble creatures were beautiful in their frank and humble representations.⁴ This set the stage for later artists to depict mundane subjects as a worthy of interest.

My interest in the textures, colors and forms of Agro-Industrial complexes comes from the same vein in that these complexes are mundane ruins on the landscape. They are often labeled eyesores and are bypassed by the people of the very town it helped to create, much as the “beadles” were viewed in the time of Courbet. Beadles are defined as ugly, unappealing or unrefined people.

Courbet, Sheeler and Dula painted on medium to large scale canvasses. As an example, one of Dula’s paintings is a mural that expands across the breadth of a whole wall at the Denver Art Museum. It is titled *A Moment in Time: Here, Now 2009*. (Fig. 10) By comparison, Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans* was approximately 20 feet long. The size of Courbet’s canvas led to scandal because that particular size was reserved for historical (and often religious) subject matter.⁵ But, this made way for other artists who chose to portray subjects of historical significance that did not meet academic standards. Sheeler painted industrial complexes on a slightly smaller-than-historical scale with most of his works expanding no larger than three feet in either direction. Dula paints on surfaces that range between sixteen inches and wall sized. By placing the subject matter on such a large scale canvas that was traditionally reserved for historical subjects Courbet, Sheeler and Dula are giving weight to the subject as equally important. This is the underlying theme of their work. Sheeler recorded the industry as it was

⁴ William Vaughn, *Arts of 19th Century*, transl. James Underwood, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 33.

⁵ Cantz, *Courbet*, 175.

happening in his time while Dula is painting the abandonment of those ideals.⁶ It is my intention to continue to paint these subjects on a large scale to preserve the implication of their value. In order to record this beauty, I visited several industrial complexes on multiple occasions. I finally settled on the abandoned Farr's Feed and Grain complex in Ault, Colorado because of the variety of aesthetic values from all sides of the complex. I went at different times of the day to evaluate what the complex could offer aesthetically. I found that that the light was most dramatic and useful during the morning, afternoon and evening. This is because the complexes contain so many tight and densely constructed spaces that light from directly above could not penetrate it and therefore couldn't give life to the forms in the way that I prefer. Light from any angle that is not perpendicular to the horizon was able to expose beautiful moments for me to paint.

My process for recording these moments starts with discovery. In Colorado, industrial complexes are fairly easy to spot as they are generally the tallest manmade structures in any given area. As I find places to paint, I record the location and feasibility of returning to the place with regards to safety. It is important to me to find a complex and explore it in person before deciding to situate myself there for the duration of a painting. This way I can "feel" out the areas that I want to focus on and am able to react to them. This creates a dialogue between myself and the objects that I paint. I feel that this dialogue allows me to get more information out of the objects than if I had just used a photograph. Information such as dramatic temperature changes or subtle textures can be perceived that give a more natural appearance to the painting. For instance, the dramatic lighting in *Inclusion*, from the diptych *Exclusion/Inclusion*, called for luminous

⁶ "Rick Dula Artist Statement," *William Havu Gallery Online*. Accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.williamhavugallery.com/category/rick-dula/>.

colors in the background that were both cold and could be read as texture. (Fig. 11) That particular angle of perspective meant that I needed to portray a large range of value in a small space. This called for a stretching of the types of colors that I used. I mixed mostly cool grey-violets for the shadows. They feel both cool and luminous and read as a matte surface. I do not get that type of information from a photograph as I feel that they have a tendency to flatten out the image. Photographs are for general references such as proportion, light angle and notes about the time of day.

After I have selected a space to paint, I bring several things with me to the site- small canvases and acrylic paint, a sketchbook and watercolor or ink and/or charcoal and paper. I make intuitive color based sketches on site to give me studies to take back with me into the studio (Fig. 12). This allows me to bring back moments of light that I would otherwise lose in a photograph as well as intuitive responses to the subject that I can selectively utilize at a later time. Since light is such a strong element within the painting, I often make ink, pencil or charcoal value sketches to help me narrow down a specific way of exposing the light. (Figs. 13, 14) Since there are no colors in these sketches, I can focus on the values in the composition and how light navigates through the space. I also feel that because I am dealing with geometric shapes that occupy space the fluidity of ink and charcoal allow me to practice the repetition of shapes in a way that warms me up for applying them to a larger scale.

Agriculture on a large scale generates gigantic man-made structures that are on the edge of the sublime. Their ability to store and process food is nearly incomprehensible. Through my use of perspective, my paintings bring the viewer into the picture plane by placing them directly in the path of the composition. By using such extreme perspectives the viewer must comprehend the size of the objects in relation to their own size and position in front of the canvas. This

creates a dialogue between the viewer and the painting. For example, *Exclusion*, from the diptych *Exclusion/Inclusion*, is a tower that is shown in extreme perspective. (Fig. 15) It begins at the base and accelerates towards the sky. I chose to represent it in this way to force the viewer into the picture plane so that they are saturated by the image.

This is also the reason why I choose to work with vertical canvasses rather than horizontal ones. One of the most notable characteristics of the subject matter (the silos, elevators, towers, etc.) is that they are gigantic in comparison to humans. They expand upwards and tower over the landscape. This is part of their visual appeal to me. By working vertically I am also able to remove extraneous information that would detract from the subject. Information such as other buildings not related to industry or agriculture, homes, roads, and restaurants imply a contrast between the old and the new that can be interpreted in political or social ways that I do not intend.

Due to the size of the canvas I find that it is often easier to work in the studio rather than in plein air. I prefer to make smaller studies on site based on the formal aspects as well as intuitive responses. I bring acrylic or watercolors with me when I want to record color information. I obtain information about the color by observing the light and its effect on the structures. I try to record the local color first. Then I seek out luminous colors in shadows and the colors associated with the type of light at that time of day. Sometimes, when I find that I am struggling to understand a color, I mix several possible colors and record it in my sketchbook with notes about the mixture. If I am seeking value or structural information, I bring ink, pencil or charcoal with me. This way, I can understand the visually navigable space that exists without the complexity of color. Working in value also allows me to see the form of the object without being distracted by its color or texture. I find that using these studies along with notes and

photographs allow me to recreate what I am interested in on a larger scale. The color information in my sketchbook allows me to choose which colors are more appropriate for the compositions in the early stages of the painting. It also allows me to edit out extraneous information not in line with my artistic vision.

Along with Dula, I believe that color coupled with light is the most important aspect in depicting texture and form. In Agro-Industrial complexes, there is always a variety of old and new textures on simple geometric forms that capture the light. Textures are created by exposure to the elements, repair and the composition of the materials. When lit, the complex becomes a type of landscape composed of metal and cement. The light will fall on the forms and reveal their true nature. This can be deformed, rusty, painting, broken, smooth, etc. and will ultimately be based on the object and its state of decay. Color is the key to exposing the nature of these textures and forms. This is visible in my painting *Farr's Feed and Grain, Morning* where I have used color synonymously with light to create a visual sensation. (Fig. 16) I depicted the textures of grass, corrugated metal sheeting and rocks as a way to balance the smooth texture of pipes and rust on binding metal elements.

Light falling on form should be represented according to the way in which it is perceived. For example, I use warm, bright colors and more implied or actual texture to represent areas of light while shadows are handled with minimal detail and cooler colors. It is necessary to use an expanded palette to model forms even though minimal tones would suffice. This, I believe helps to expose the beauty of the complex as I find it.

The nature of oil paint is malleable and easily suited to creating tactile textures on the canvas as well as implied ones. My painting style incorporates a variety of these textures. Some areas of the painting are smooth while others have a slight build-up of paint. The intention is to

create a subtle sensory experience beyond the implied texture on the two dimensional surface. This, along with control over the shape and size, is the intent behind my use of hand built canvases. A rougher surface will allow more paint to stick to it than a smoother one. Using several layers of gesso that are not sanded in between will generate a rough painting surface. This allows me to use thin paint for luminosity and more subtle textures by exploiting the canvas weave as I did in *Inclusion*. This also controls the level of paint build up I can achieve because the lowest level of paint is flat and everything layers upwards from that point. This is generally referred to as the principle of fat over lean.

Along with the use of the fat over lean technique, I utilize oil painting medium that is conducive to this type of application. The mixture is one part refined linseed oil to 4 parts turpenoid with approximately an eighth of a teaspoon of dammar varnish per 8 ounces of mixture. The turpenoid acts as a thinner while the linseed oil retains enough fat to keep the paint and medium mixture from breaking apart. (This is a similar concept to adding egg to a cake batter.) This particular mixture is better suited to painting objects that are rusty, dry, and matte as other mediums such as galkyd or liquin can produce a shiny surface. As paint layers thicken through process, less medium is needed. This creates stiffer paint that can be applied differently than more diluted, fluid paint. Using paint in this way allows me to create areas of implied texture as well as a bit of tactile texture.

By focusing on the way that light reveals elements of deterioration and decay in industrial structures I have explored the beautiful moments that can exist in a mundane structure. The aesthetic value in this creates evidence of time as well as a glimpse of beauty in an otherwise ugly structure. Using materials that are flexible in their uses such as oil paint allows me to create

a sensual portrait of a time and place that isn't as easily replicated by photograph. It is my hope that this will enable the viewer to see the decay of the structures as a beautiful glimpse at a mundane object.



Fig. 1, Charles Demuth, *Aucassin and Nicolette*, 1921, Oil on Canvas, 24 1/8 x 20 in., Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio.



Fig. 2, Charles Sheeler, *American Landscape*, 1930, oil on canvas, 24" x 31", The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

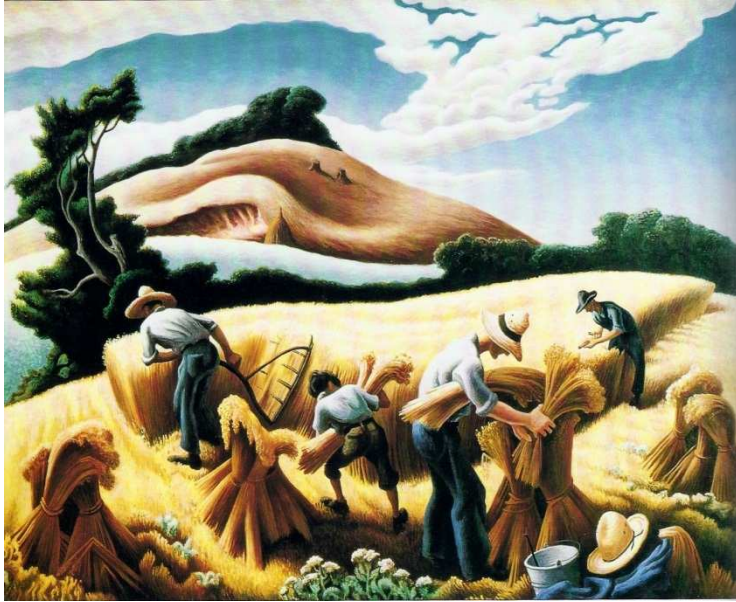


Fig. 3, Thomas Hart Benton, *Cradling Wheat*, 1938, tempera and oil on board, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis.



Fig. 4, Georgia O'Keefe, *East River from the Shelton*, 1927-28, oil on canvas, 27" x 21", New Jersey State Museum, Trenton.

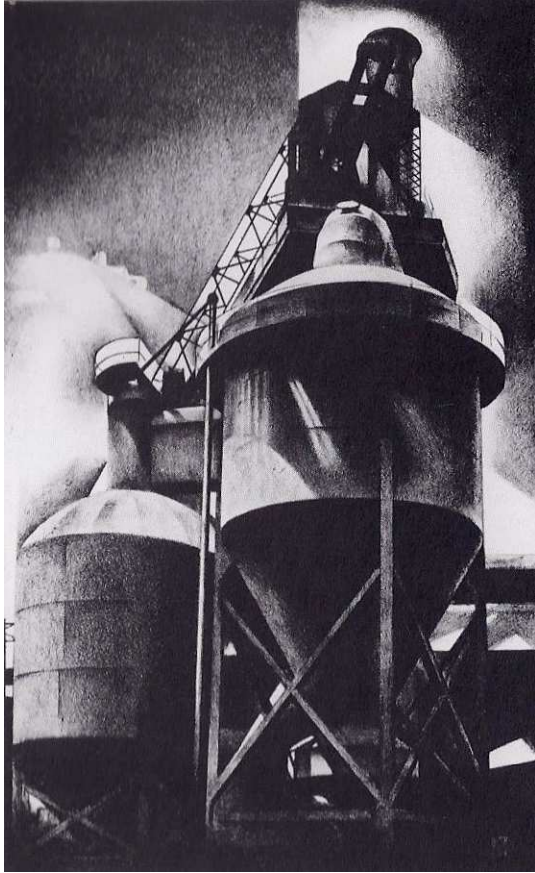


Fig. 5, Louis Lozowick, *Tanks #2 (Steel Plant)*, 1929, Lithograph, 14" x 9", Collection of Burr C. Miller.

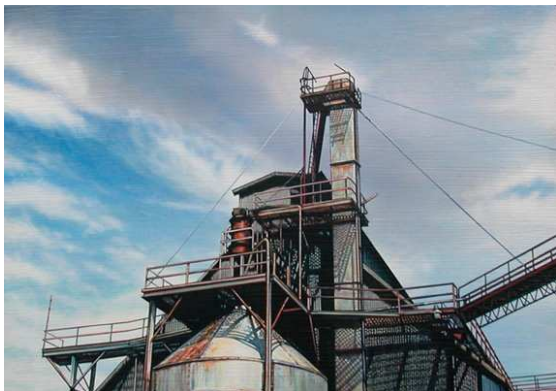


Fig. 6, Rick Dula, *Loveland Structure*, 2003, acrylic on panel, 10" x 14 1/2", William Havu Gallery, Denver.

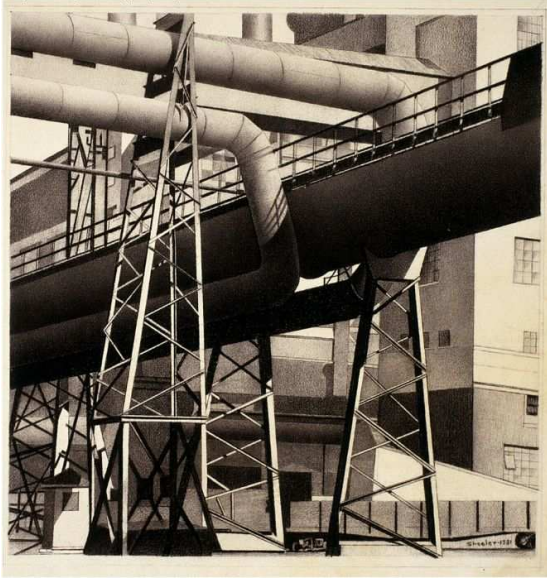


Fig. 7, Charles Sheeler, *Ballet Mechanique*,



Fig. 8, Rick Dula, *Pueblo Steel Mill*, 2008, 30" x 64", acrylic on canvas, William Havu Gallery, Denver.



Fig. 9, Gustave Courbet, *Burial at Ornans*, 1849, Oil on Canvas, 202 ¾" x 263", Musee d'orsay, Paris.



Fig. 10, Rick Dula, *A Moment in Time: Here, Now*, 2009, acrylic on wall, 18' x 32', Denver Art Museum, Denver.



Fig. 11, Jennifer Brakefield, *Inclusion (from Exclusion/Inclusion)*, 2014, oil on canvas, 42" x 72", Collection of the artist.



Fig. 12, Jennifer Brakefield, *Color Study for Farr's Feed and Grain*, 2013, Collection of the artist.



Fig. 13, Jennifer Brakefield, Study for *Exclusion/Inclusion*, 2013, pencil on paper, 4" x 6", collection of the artist.



Fig. 14, Jennifer Brakefield, Study of silos, 2013, ink on paper, 4" x 6", collection of the artist.



Fig. 15, Jennifer Brakefield, *Exclusion C*, 2014, oil on canvas, 36" x 72", Collection of the artist.



Fig. 16, Jennifer Brakefield, *Farr's Feed and Grain*, 2013, oil on canvas, 48" x 72", Collection of the artist.

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