

THESIS

A HISTORY OF PECULIAR TRAITS AND OTHERS

Submitted by

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Department of Art

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Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

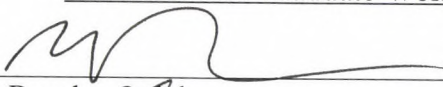
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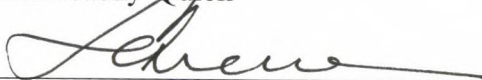
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR
SUPERVISION BY JOSHUA HOUSE ENTITLED A HISTORY OF PECULIAR
TRAITS AND OTHERS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART
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Committee on Graduate Work



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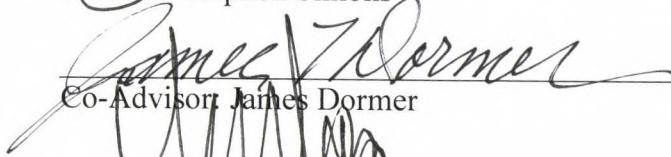
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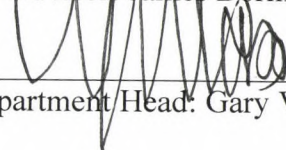
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

A HISTORY OF PECULIAR TRAITS AND OTHERS

My paranoid neurosis is the focus of my recent printmaking work. The absurd and frequently surreal imagery is derived from the continuous oddity of my everyday thought, from issues I know are clearly the result of overactive imagination or the serious dread of bizarre circumstances I often find myself in. The medium of printmaking allows for obsessive levels of detail and engrossment in the image making process, as well as a granting the ability to make unique marks that other mediums are incapable of. By placing these thoughts in figurative scenarios in a playground of psychological space, I synthesize the connection of symbolism in relationship to personal experience. The final product is a dialogue between the absurd idea and the logical means attempted to bring understanding.

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The influence of the subconscious has become inescapable. When you choose to embrace concepts of absurdity, the subconscious impulse never ceases to assert itself. Andre Bretonⁱ, the recognized father of Surrealism, wrote frequently about the subconscious and its influence on thought. It is history that continues to haunt decisions, animal instinct that preserves and sustains, the voice of doubt and the unfounded encouragement.

My work is an exploration of the subconscious through methods of the absurd. How have experiences, dreams, images, and memories helped to shape what I now identify as my paranoid neurosis? Furthermore, will my understanding of this neurosis and its components change the nature of this affliction and how it affects me? Or, am I mistaken in identifying these notions as a collective neurosis, and not just personality?

By implementing an absurdist perspective, as discussed by Albert Camusⁱⁱ and Soren Kierkegaardⁱⁱⁱ, I have been able to better understand the nature of my neurosis. The absurdist asks, "Placing myself out of comfortable or logical choices, what is the next implausible leap that will expose a higher honesty?" This is the question I have asked myself countless times in recent years. How can I hope to understand why I cannot bear crowds if I do not place myself in the middle of one? How can I justify my paranoia in relationships if I don't participate in any? The inconsistency and unexpected nature of results from placing oneself in harm's way is enough validation for me to believe absurdism holds some merit. My work is concerned with exploring and understanding the

nature of my more peculiar traits, specifically, my collective neurosis through absurdist methods.

Before I can recognize a trait as being particularly unusual, I must first acknowledge my awareness of the ongoing clash between rational thought (logical) and irrational thought (absurd). I have the capacity for both behaviors of mind, yet I find my tendency is preference for the irrational, the absurd. However, logic is necessary to understand the absurd. Both methods of thought bring relevance to each other, the irrational provides alternatives that the rational cannot fathom, and the rational possesses the ability to analyze what the irrational cannot simply observe. One can't exist without the other.

The natural turbulence between the logical and the absurd is where my dilemma occurs. My neurosis allows for logic to describe it, but logic cannot make sense of it. The absurd allows and encourages the neurosis. The absurd shows several paths to the few presented by logic. I know that my thoughts are irrational; the task of understanding them is difficult. The faculty of logic provides some instances of clarity when analyzing myself, but frequently the irrational traits are made more unusual upon study. Much of what I find about myself can be embarrassing, yet the fact that I find something embarrassing spurs me to investigate it further in my work. I'm not interested in creating delusions or manufacturing a grand image of myself, my interest is in the honest dissection of myself.

The writers Franz Kafka^{iv} and Charles Bukowski^v are two highly influential literary sources in these regards. In their writings, they are quick to expose their own faults and weaknesses, and are prone to exaggerate these notions to the point of sheer

absurdity. While doing so, they maintain a quiet dignity devoid of pleas for sympathy. They simply exist as they do because that is their nature. Kafka was terrified of relationships even though he could never vocalize a firm reason. Bukowski knew he hated being in the company of people but was still compelled to seek out women. Both were casualties to the argument of rational and irrational.

My gnawing paranoia is a frequent representative of the irrational. Frankly, no explanation can be given to properly justify the delusions caused by the paranoia. In some circumstances, the delusion is informed by a minor occurrence that plants the seed of paranoia. I once put on a pair of shoes and a large wolf spider crawled out through one of the holes for the laces, but not after giving me a painful bite. For twelve years now, I cannot put on a pair of shoes without shaking them out vigorously. In the unworn shoe I see centipedes crawling, spiders lurking, unspeakable things in the darkness that have no business being there. This is a legitimized paranoia instilled by the desire to avoid physical pain.

Most examples of my paranoid beliefs defy legitimate reason. I become petrified at the idea of silverware scraping together. Imagining the sounds of a fork and knife mercilessly grinding at one another causes my skin to creep and the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end. I even make special effort to never make contact between various utensils while eating. I've never experienced anything to give cause to this concern. The metal etching needle that scrapes against the metal printing plate in printmaking should bother me due to its similarity in sensations to scraping silverware, yet it causes no reaction in me. This silverware paranoia mystifies me.

This isn't to say that nonsensical delusions are useless; they just lack sensible origins. Visions of secret groups plotting my doom provide me with a particular fortitude to deal with the mundane annoyances of minimum wage work and long lines at the grocery store. I simply do not care about certain discomforts, because my imaginative paranoia will always provide worse alternatives that could be troubling me instead. The paranoia becomes a hindrance when my expectation for the worst fails to present itself. I grow bored and impatient. In effort to feel right, sometimes I place myself in situations where the worst is inevitable. It becomes alarmingly simple to nurse a paranoia into being, rewarding me with justification.

After one month of dating a woman, I realized that we had never been a fight. We had never had a fight and this was surprising because she should have been thinking about leaving me. She should have thought to leave me because she certainly could have done better. I'm in a relationship that hasn't made me miserable and I'm waiting for the axe to fall. My history with women is less than successful; this tends to be a regular theme in my work. The paranoia never goes away. Sometimes delusions do me the honor of being visibly ridiculous, sparing me from myself when "Why aren't I miserable yet?" fills my thoughts. This irrationality remains unjustified.

My work has made me grow concerned over my ability to discern rational from irrational delusions. This makes little sense, since delusions are by definition false beliefs. The method for culling these notions into clear statements is a convoluted process due to the ever-changing nature of thought. The following explanation of my method for creating a print will emphasize the difficulty of this subject.

My prints begin with writing. The written word provides me with the immediacy I lack in my drawing techniques. I begin with an idea, often a realization from that day, and allow the free association of thoughts to occur. My dreams are influential, because in them I cannot censor myself. I am helpless to the machinations of my mind. I am confronted by pure emotion, and my responses are raw and unpracticed. There is nothing but honesty in dreaming, even if the memory is nothing more than a faint feeling afterwards.

I had a dream that I couldn't remember. I went to work and then I got off of work at six and went home, ate some, and passed out on the floor. The feeling when I woke reminded me of a time when I was a kid and got my first knife. I carved the word "hell" on the headboard of my bed. My parents saw it and were furious, my mother asked me if that's what I thought, that I was in hell. I told her no, and that I was sorry. I don't know why I did that.

Other times, fluidity in ideas is achieved by intentional sleep deprivation. This method becomes strenuous at times, but with proper perseverance, one simply just becomes too tired to construct diversions from the truth. Responses to stimuli become exaggerated and quick, and impatience sinks in. Thoughts bleed into one another and associations grow naturally with the forming sentences.

Just the thought of all of those official forms and watermarked documents and signature and citations raises the most crippling sadness and the desire to chain smoke until all the bottles in sight are emptied. Suddenly, a panicked thought that I'm late even though there are months to spare. I need to work but the room is cluttered and out of order, there's no symmetry in here and the growing facial hairs won't let any real

thinking happen anyways. Giving one hour to rest leads to two, which leads to three, and then waking up properly takes more time and then I've wasted four hours to rest and not work. All of that paperwork comes to mind again. I've missed five phone calls and I've forgotten obligations, my crooked back won't crack back into place and I feel what is probably another tumor in my elbow, the one in my drawing arm. Another hour later and I'm laughing to myself in my studio, because drawing myself tortured by all of those nothings reminds me of falling asleep in class. I sit up real hard because I think I'm falling, everyone notices, and I just fake like everything I did was on purpose.

The figures I select are visual associations to the previously written ideas. At times, the associated selections are simple. The woman holding a skull represents my medical concerns (Fig.4). A dead fox represents my superstitious caution of dead foxes (Fig.18). Other times, the selected image's connection with the idea it represents may not be as straightforward. A bird is a fleeting contemplation of death because of an experience from my childhood.

It was spring and the stink of fresh cut grass was everywhere. A hatchling lay dying on the sidewalk and left a glazed trail from the broken shell. Blue veins ran under the wet skin and around the blank white eyes. The mouth hung open, maybe gasping, and the movement gradually became stillness. Asphalt from the parking lot stung my nose, and my friend's mother pulled me away from the bird, saying that I shouldn't look at things like that. The few wet feathers looked like hair, and I remember thinking, "Will I look like that when I die?"

The majority of the figures depicted do not represent actual people. They are landmarks of memory. Using a collection of photographs, scraps, collaged images, and

invention, the characters personify memories. They come from different times, different eras, often unconnected by conventional means of categorization. They are inhabitants of the visual subconscious, evocative of moments associated with the imagery. One series of Francisco Goya's^{vi} prints depicts the people of Spain as terrifying monsters, representative of the societal ills of the time. The figures became projections of his subconscious. His critical eye used in his commentary is the same I attempt to use when I develop my own work.

The paintings and drawings of Hieronymus Bosch^{vii} are both visual and conceptual influences in regards to my own figural choices. Bosch's large arrangements of figures show the culmination of multiple allegorical representations and the effects of their interactions. These interactions are used to develop a multi-faceted allegory, displaying a complex system of values inspired by church doctrine. The allegorical representations in Bosch's works developed a multitude of interpretations because of his mixture of symbols; the alternative view of his works as alchemical depictions is just one example of atypical reading.

Personal experience changes the significance of particular symbols. Some meanings remain consistent between viewers, while others are subjected to the rigors of experience. In my own experience, very few visual archetypes are static in meaning. The duality of symbols embraces the potential of change. A skull is seen as a warning of death, while alternatively acting as a reminder of life. With every new work I make, my understanding of older work is affected. New facets of understanding are revealed, and the complexity and relationships of symbols develop with time.

I am hesitant to portray colleagues or peers in a literal method. To do so would read as a critique of them, rather than the intended critique of my interaction with them and their impact upon my subconscious. I primarily leave depictions of those I know to the realm of allegorical figures. However, I often appear in my own prints in a very literal depiction (Fig. 4), (Fig. 5), (Fig. 8), (Fig. 9), (Fig. 15). When I make an appearance in a print, it is usually for the sake of communicating an overwhelming self-consciousness. This should not be mistaken for egocentrism or narcissism; it is quite the opposite. Using images of myself is often the most efficient method of exposing flaws in an explicit manner.

My interaction with allegorical figures is representative of my feelings toward the particular subject. The series is an attempt to show a psychological self-portrait, regardless of the presence of my figure in the composition. The frequency of my appearance in a print usually signifies the extent of my understanding of the subject. Prints where my figure do not appear are the most hallucinatory delusions or responses that remain largely acknowledged as speculation on my part, usually bearing little merit as a rational thought (Fig. 6), (Fig. 11). These thoughts have become a ritual. Their impressions last upon me, even though their ridiculousness makes itself clear.

Explicit violence frequently appears as a motif in my work (Fig. 3), (Fig. 13), (Fig. 16). This violence is typically directed towards my represented figure. While I am not violent in behavior, the violent thought is no stranger to me. Violent thought usually occurs to me at unexpected moments. Once, during a pleasant evening with friends, I couldn't help but imagine the horror of my head spontaneously exploding in the middle of my friendly conversation. I would be conversing and then to everyone's surprise my neck

would become a fountain of gore as my arms flailed wildly at my sides. There is no rational explanation for why I kept imagining that scene, but it kept reoccurring to me throughout the evening until I had no other course of action but to laugh. The meaning of such thoughts eludes me, and accordingly I investigate their significance in my work.

Images of decapitation are frequent in my work (Fig. 7), (Fig. 10), (Fig. 12). To me it represents the cease of reason, the intentional removing of thought from the actions of the body. During the French Revolution, in the so-called Age of Enlightenment, thousands were decapitated at the guillotine. The removal of the monarchy with the celebrated ritual of decapitation is grimly poetic to me. In Yes, Let's, an angry crowd carries my severed head upon a spear (Fig. 14). In times where my mind races, creates a sickness in me, and argues with my neurosis, I wish there were such a simple way to quiet its attempts at reason. I often long for silence of mind, a stillness of thought. My over-analysis of thought suffocates my mind, only strengthening my resolve to the absurd way.

The use of negative space implies an inward psychological domain instead of a literal and physical interpretation. The emptiness places a focus on the relationships between the depicted characters instead of a relationship of the characters to a place. This relationship was first realized chronologically in Distractions Tend To Do As Their Names Imply and was further pushed to remove any possible reference to place in Spit the Decadence (Fig. 1), (Fig. 2). Both of these works were instrumental in my aesthetic decisions present in the completed body of work. The etching process used creates an emphasized and eaten border around the image. The border is an important and constant

feature. This element of border provides a further enclosure of the picture space and reemphasizes the space as psychological and not physical.

Specifying a location would be redundant in many cases, because some figures are allegories of past experiences that partially represent a place they occurred in. If a figure represents my scorn for my adolescence in Colorado Springs, there is no need to place that figure in a depiction of Colorado Springs. The location is inherent in the allegorical figure's representation. Most other allegorical figures have absolutely no relationship to the concept of location. The irrational disturbance caused to me by onions, represented visually by a well-dressed ape, has nothing to do with a place (Fig. 4). Onions will upset me anywhere.

The plates are visually imperfect, lacking a pristine clarity or cleanliness of appearance. Their worn surfaces are suggestive of experience. The marring of the surface is achieved by physically carrying the zinc plates with me as I go about my basic routines. Zinc is a heavy material, and the motion of walking with several zinc plates in a backpack produces unique scratches and marring of the surface, revealing imperfections and producing an historical record of the time spent contemplating the images that would eventually become etched on the plate. Like the burden of carrying heavy plates with me, the ideas developed on the plates are frequent burdens.

Titling the work is an important element of the viewing experience with printmaking because titles appear directly below the image of a print. My titles come from the initial writing phase of my work. The titles frequently undergo changes before completion because my thoughts toward the idea are often undecided. I write the proposed titles on unfinished proofs of the works, making an occasional change to

wording while I dwell on the idea. Other times, titles feel appropriate immediately and never change from their original writing. I want a title to help communicate what I'm trying to say in the imagery, but not bully the viewer into an over-specified reading. The symbols in a print are incredibly personal and are joined by others to form a complicated situation. Their interpretation by the viewer becomes assisted by a proper title.

Humor often invades the titles and lends an unorthodox reading in many prints. Paperwork, Paperwork, Paperwork, and Paperwork shows a pile of decapitated corpses atop a hill of skulls (Fig. 17). This print isn't meant to be funny; the humorous title simply highlights the absurdity of the subject. The images and coinciding titles work in a dichotomous relationship. At times, the title is the descriptor to the image, while other times the image is the descriptor to the title. My crippling phobia related to unnecessary paperwork makes me physically ill. I close my eyes and see plagues, war, and death. The horrific scene is envisioned because of simple paperwork. I know this is ridiculous.

For the purpose of interpreting the images, titles provide all of the supplemental information that I would want to give the viewer. I find it necessary to give clues due to the large variety of symbols colliding within a single space, but an over-explanation would kill any sense of mystery. A lengthy explanation of any print would be futile, because their meaning isn't permanent. My understanding of my work changes with time, and while the subjects remain unchanged, my relationship as a viewer to my work is one of fluctuation.

These prints serve as an artifact of my thoughts from specific moments. I look at many now and my response is different from the time they were conceived. I remember the beginning, but rarely does the beginning resemble my current understanding. My

capacity for change feels constant as I find new peculiarities to dwell upon. If that is so, then my efforts to work in the subconscious and the absurd will remain a similar constant.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ Breton, Andre. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. University of Michigan Press, 1969.
- ⁱⁱ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: First Vintage International Edition, 1991.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. St. Ives: Penguin Books, 2003.
- ^{iv} Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1947.
- ^v Bukowski, Charles. *Women*. New York: First Ecco, 2002.
- ^{vi} Goya, Francisco. *Los Caprichos*. New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1969.
- ^{vii} Dixon, Laurinda. *Bosch*. London: Phaidon Press, 2003.

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- Breton, Andre. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. University of Michigan Press, 1969.
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- Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1947.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. St. Ives: Penguin Books, 2003.

IMAGES



Fig. 1, Josh House, Distractions Tend To Do As Their Names Imply, 2009, etching and aquatint on Rives BFK, 18"x24", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 2, Josh House, Spit The Decadence, 2009, etching and aquatint on Stonehenge, 7 ½"x15 ½", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 3, Josh House, I'm Terrified of Happiness and I'm Inclined To Prove It, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2009, 18"x24", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 4, Josh House, I Can't Stand It, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2009, 18"x24", Collection of the Artist

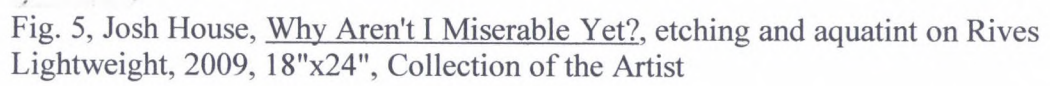


Fig. 5, Josh House, Why Aren't I Miserable Yet?, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2009, 18"x24", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 6, Josh House, The Secret Society of Women Committed to My Doom, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2009, 18"x24", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 7, Josh House, Let's Make A Show of This, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2009, 8"x10", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 8, Josh House, I Haven't Tried This Yet So I'll Try It, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2009, 8"x10", Collection of the Artist

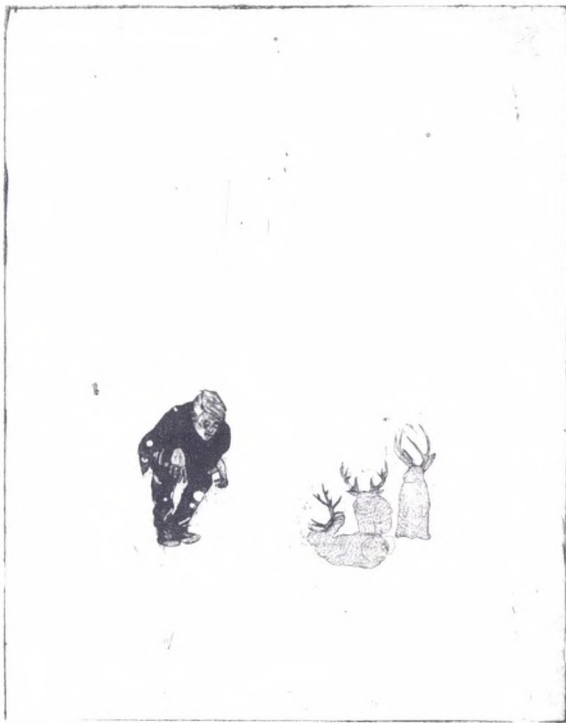


Fig. 9, Josh House, Tell Me How, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2009, 8"x10", Collection of the Artist

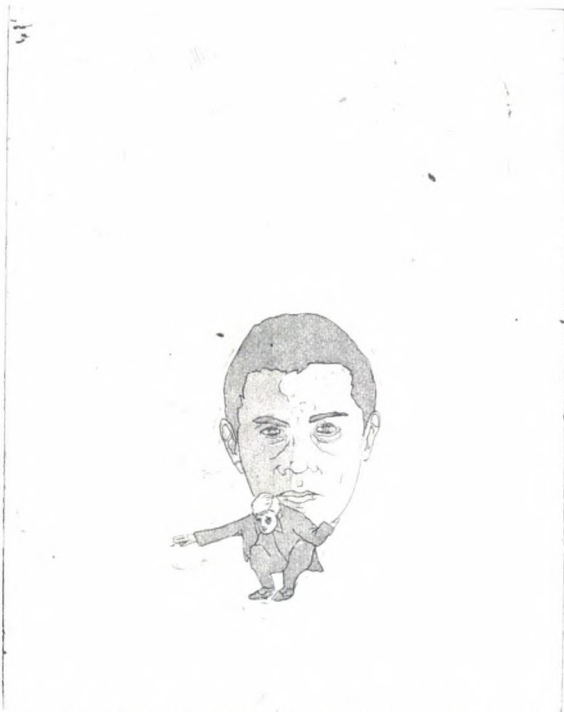


Fig. 10, Josh House, Bela Calls My Bluff, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 8"x10", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 11, Josh House, Somebody Keeps Knocking On The Same Door, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 6"x8", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 12, Josh House, The Guy Without A Head Had No Manners, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 6"x8", Collection of the Artist

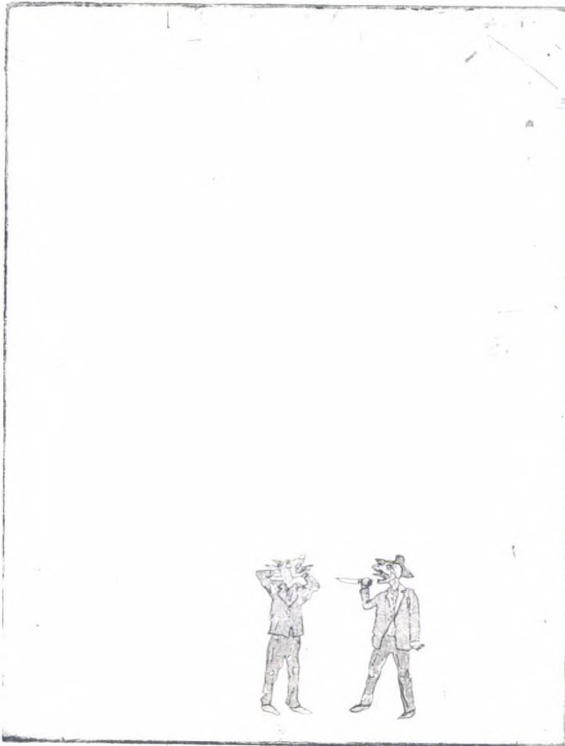


Fig. 13, Josh House, I Think I Want All Of Your Money!, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 6"x8", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 14, Josh House, Yes, Let's, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 6"x8", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 15, Josh House, I Don't Like Anything I Make, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 6"x8", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 16, Josh House, Stop Me Before I Keep Speaking!, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 6"x8", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 17, Josh House, Paperwork, Paperwork, Paperwork, And Paperwork, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 6"x8", Collection of the Artist



Fig. 18, Josh House, I Believe In Some Ghosts, etching and aquatint on Rives Lightweight, 2010, 6"x8", Collection of the Artist