

THESIS

UNLIKELY ASSOCIATES

Submitted By

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Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2009

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

April 2, 2009

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY KENNY MCBROOM ENTITLED *UNLIKELY ASSOCIATES* BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work



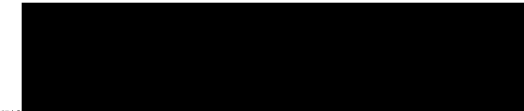
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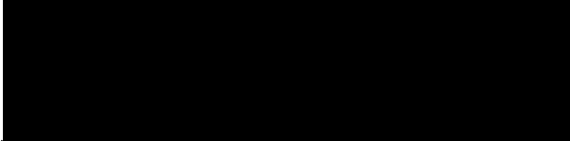
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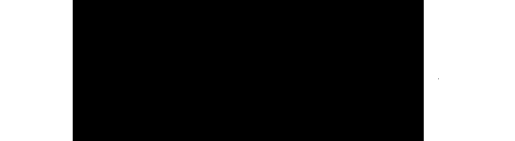
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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### UNLIKLEY ASSOCIATES

It is my intention in the following written thesis to construct an investigative explanation regarding my own personal work and artistic philosophy. I shall incorporate influences from my own personal experience, 20<sup>th</sup> century European and American literature, and art history--specifically post-1940 American art. Significantly serious topics such as war, economics, history, death, and academia are investigated through the visual language of sci-fi, cartoons, comics, and zombies. Both arrangements of visual dialogue, the serious and the comedic, contain subject matter that greatly interests me. These function as uncommon idioms, and create an interesting visual as well as a distinctive social commentary. These works occasionally involve well known cultural imagery. My ambition is to show a parallel between the oftentimes historically indicative conceptual nature of the work itself and the sometime seemingly ridiculous or dramatic imagery depicted.

I try to create work that provides the signs and clues for a complicated mystery with numerous components.

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An explanative analysis of my work shall be made in the following written thesis. I, like many artists, have been significantly influenced by science fiction, cartoons, and comic books. I have been influenced equally by the work of numerous contemporary American and European writers, musicians, and visual artists. Finding and combining similar ideals from both of these creative camps has caused my work to convey a conceptual correspondence between the two groups, and to have coordinative elements from them to exist together in a successful painting.

I have five pieces planned for exhibition in my upcoming thesis show. They consist of three shaped canvases and two rectilinear paintings. The shaped canvases are meant to emulate the outer contour of the *Millennium Falcon*, a starship from the popular *Star Wars* film series. The other two paintings reference zombies and cowboys.

In the original *Star Wars* trilogy, the *Millennium Falcon* is Han Solo and Chewbacca's starship. It is an old, unique and reliable ship. It is arguably the single most recognizable icon in the sci-fi series, and the series itself is arguably one of the most recognizable subjects in today's popular culture. More than anything, it is very fast, and able to complete the Kessel Run in less than 12 parsecs.<sup>1</sup>

Every fictitious ship has its conceptual origins in history and literature, as well as every fictitious tale (to a certain degree) in general. *Star Wars*, like most sci-fi, utilizes classic storytelling conventions. It uses the traditional themes of the quest, the prince/princess, the father/son, foreign lands, the comedic sidekicks, and many more. For example, simply using

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<sup>1</sup> Lucas, George, dir. *Star Wars*. Perfs. Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1977.

the theme of the quest has its roots in: Greek mythology (Ulysses going off into the unknown), Victorian England (exploring the Americas, India, and

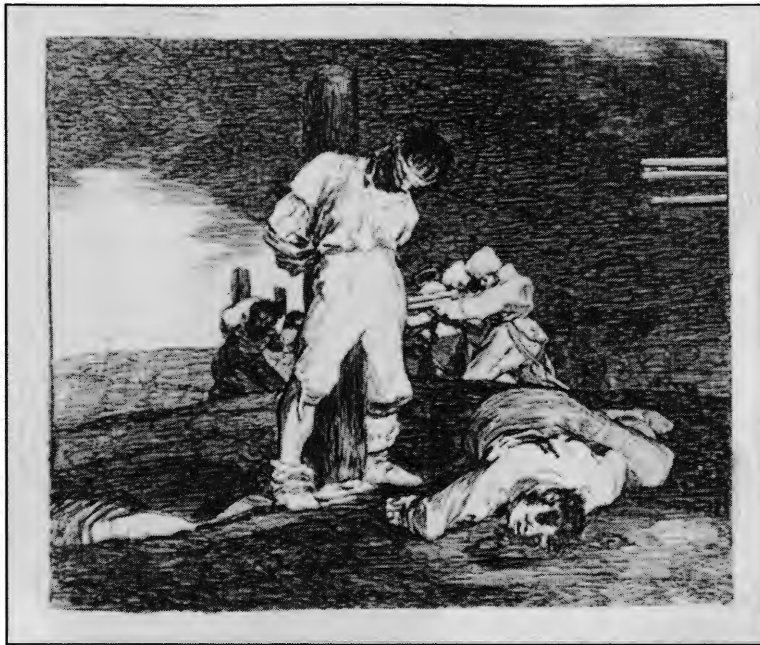


Fig. 1, Francisco de Goya, *Y No Hai Remedio*, from The Disasters of War series, 1810-1814, etching, 5 ½" x 6 ½," Georgia Museum of Art, Athens.

northern Africa), America (heading out west), and many more.

These romanticized notions of exploration, adventure, and excitement fit right in with the mentality of America's youth. They are advertised to be

some of the advantages of enlisting in the

military. The results of some enlistments are seldom the fantasy they may have been daydreamed to be. Ducking in trenches, taking beaches, and dropping atomic bombs can also be eventual results.

Historically, one of the most important functions of art was to depict war. This can still hold true today. Portraits of prominent generals and renderings of battle scenes suggested history, humanity, and nationalism. Paolo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (1450) features a chaotic clash between the Florentines and the Sieneese, as well as a celebration of discoveries in perspective. Francisco de Goya's *Disasters of War* (1810-1814) (fig. 1) prints are disturbing and gruesome in their depiction of battlefield horrors.

Fig. 2, *Normandy Offensive*, 2009, acrylic and charcoal on panel, 60" x 49."



Fig. 3, *Trench Storm Troopers*, 2009, oil on panel, 60" x 49."



Fig. 4, *Alderaan Actualized*, 2009, oil on panel, 60" x 49."

These examples led me to establish the primary purpose of this *Millennium Falcon* series (figs. 2-4); The creation of a comparative analysis addressing concepts of grandeur, adventure and excitement. These images are then contrasted with images of war, heightened drama, and disaster. Mythological tales can be heroic and moving, but we don't often recognize the consequences of that myth. George Lucas used many significant themes, but they were all situated safely within science fiction. These paintings bring the concepts to a more somber arena.

The three Falcons are similar, conceptually. They are all representative of visual relationships that deal with wartime scenarios and the science fiction mythos. Star Wars takes reference from western, mythological, and samurai themes, and every plotline in Star Wars relates back to historical and literary tales. The idea of using a Star Wars format for a war-themed painting can also call to mind the *Strategic Defense Initiative*. This particular Star Wars is the United States' defense system against nuclear ballistic missiles that was conceived in the 1980s.

There is no shortage of information available regarding where George Lucas has found creative inspiration. The choreographed TIE fighter space battles are taken from World War II aerial dogfight scenes.<sup>2</sup> The quest to rescue an abducted Princess Leia relates to Achilles' quest for the abducted Briseis in Homer's *Iliad*.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 5, *Normandy Offensive* (detail).

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<sup>2</sup> Salewicz, Chris. *George Lucas*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press. 1998. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Calder, Angus. *Disasters and Heroes: On War, Memory, and Representation*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004. 118.

Formally, the Falcons are slightly difficult. The Millennium Falcon has a very oddball and distinctive shape. Lucas claims to have come up with the design of the Falcon after looking at the contour of a hamburger with an olive stuck through it. My initial ideas were to conceive of imagery that had formal elements related to the shape of the canvas. Immediately I thought of ice cream cones, a human tooth, light bulbs, stocky male figures, and balloons. The problem was that most of these forms are somewhat ridiculous, for a painting that is attempting to be relatively serious. I, of course, usually have no problem whatsoever with this. However, using a five foot sci-fi intergalactic starship as a painting platform is ridiculous enough. Putting cartoons, ice cream cones, or balloons on these canvases would be like putting slapstick on slapstick. This is why most *Three Stooges* episodes were only about 15 minutes long. This is also why I never really enjoyed the *Three Stooges* feature films.

As of right now, I have simply decided to let the shape exist as a conceptual window to the image, without typically relying on significant formal devices. I believe that shaped canvases are the appropriate vehicle for my imagery. I used the exact contours of an iconic shape, drawing stark attention to it, whereas a painted replication could be dismissible. They are large, measuring approximately 60"x 49." I feel that these paintings need at be at *least* this size. The large scale of the work allows the viewer to enter the space of the imagery without the framing shape dominating. This facilitates the transition between object and image. Additionally, the Millennium Falcon has been produced as a model kit and as a children's toy

for many years, and if the paintings were any smaller, their scale would be too similar to these toys.

Regarding their construction, they are essentially made by the adhering of a sheet of hardboard onto a specific cutout system of 2'x 4's. There are two or three bracing bars on the backs. I typically do not use nails or screws on the surface, unless using the appearance of its construction works aesthetically. For example, *Normandy Offensive* (fig.2) does use two panels of hardboard (producing a horizontal seam) and screws. It is more of a gestural chaotic composition, so the moderately rough appearance of the construction hopefully works.

I do work to find imagery that can successfully inhabit this form. I have used the gunner's turret shape again in the upper right corner of *Normandy Offensive* (fig.5). Additionally, the shapes of the figures' helmets, as well as the large ominous smoke cloud mirror the curved shape of the canvas itself. It is my intention to have these repetitive forms help keep the image and canvas shape together, while the way they are rendered keeps them visually tied to the image. My motivation is to get the viewer to try and understand why these specific disparate images exist together on the same surface. Using dramatic and historical imagery, popularized contour shapes, and the title of the piece, the works create a conceptual asymmetricality that can prove to be unusual and intriguing.

I intentionally used a muted palette with the two soldier paintings (figs. 2, 3). It's not a very bright atmosphere in the trenches. My idea is to have the iconic contour be flashy and comical enough, and using this kind of formal combination adds to their comparative conceptualization. It is

perhaps important to briefly point out that I am in no way mocking the military. Again, if I had depicted cartoons or comics in war scenes, coupled with the contour, the work could be interpreted this way, and that is not my intention.

It is fairly important to me not to be known as the “Millennium Falcon guy.” I enjoyed doing these paintings, and I will most likely do more in the future. I am attracted to using the Falcon contour, but more importantly, I am simply attracted to using iconic popular imagery in general. Using popular recognizable images in art is certainly nothing new. Neither is even using these images in comparison to other conceptually or formally linked images. However, I have used the contour of a popularized shape as a conceptual and formal subject while using 2D imagery as additional content. This is, to my knowledge, a relatively unique concept. The Falcon shape was a good launch pad for this idea. I initially thought of other iconic contours (and they are everywhere) that I could potentially utilize in the future. A flying Superman, the McDonald’s “M,” the Batman symbol, and a Mickey Mouse shape all immediately came to mind.

I find that I am most interested in academic and artistic resources that attempt to merge different aesthetics in art. The usage of comparisons and contrasts from seemingly separate subjects can create more sophisticated and distinguished work. Early medieval grammarian Geoffrey of Vinsauf (ca. 1200) argues that there are two kinds of comparison. One is to overtly present a particular resemblance, one in which signs are explicitly pointed out. The other is to create a comparison in a hidden way, one in which no sign is pointed out. It is introduced not by its own traits, but with

masked features, as if there were no comparison there at all. The comparison is taken from elsewhere, but it then (if successfully executed) seamlessly seems to fit into the context. This gives the idea the ability to exist both here and there, inside and out, and far and near.<sup>4</sup> Vinsauf feels that this latter style of comparison is, without question, superior. This observation was written regarding poetic comparison specifically, but I feel it is relevant in all the arts.

Not all art should be easy. The majority of it, in fact, should require a fair degree of investigation and interpretation from the viewer and this type of comparison encourages that. I enjoy complex comparisons in literature, music, philosophy, and of course the visual arts. In the following few paragraphs, I shall give a few short examples of some influences whom I feel are working similarly.

I have made the text in *Swimming with Sharks* (fig. 6) to be dry and slightly esoteric. It features a dialogue between two employees of an unspecified corporation. One offers professional advice to the other. Influenced by the enigmatic open-endedness of contemporary writers such as Raymond Carver, Italo Calvino, and Samuel Beckett, I have used a relatively parallel style of narrative in my work. The usage of comedy cannot be ignored. Forcing creepy zombies in a swamp (p.16) to have a conceptual

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey of Vinsauf, "Poetry Nova," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, eds. William E. Cain, John McGowan, Laurie Finke, Barbara Johnson, Vincent B. Leitch, and Jeffrey J. Williams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 232.

Her conviction always inspired me.  
“Times like these, you just gotta try to stay  
lively, keep your head up, and try not to get  
dragged down to their level, ya know...  
Why I’ve been swimming with sharks like  
these old guys for longer than I can recall.”  
This can be a terrifying ruthless business  
and I think I found that out too late.



Fig. 6, *Swimming with Sharks*, 2009, acrylic, transfer, and ink on panel, 60" x 48."

connection with two corporate employees, presented formally in an art gallery setting, is automatically humorous. The utilization of humor in all of these pieces is a side note. Humor assists in making the work more approachable, and as a point of entry for understanding. The main content deals with layers of seemingly inappropriate disjunction.

In Beckett's short play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), the main character, Krapp, spends an exorbitant amount of time (the entire play) sitting all alone, miserable, cataloguing his unhappy life's events into a tape recorder. The old man goes on and on about missed chances, lost loves, and his decrepit health. To complement this dismal self-address, Beckett supplements Krapp's tedious monologue with some good old fashioned slapstick, having him nearly slip on a banana peel on a few occasions. Combining two very different types of storytelling into one work lets *Krapp's Last Tape* enjoy a very specific sort of success. It joins the serious and the critical with the ridiculous and absurd. It is comedy that is guided towards self-realization. Using some aid of humor, I bring these significantly serious topics to light, and point them back to contemporary culture. I believe that my work enjoys, in a visual way, a similar aesthetic to *Krapp's Last Tape*.

In music, contrasting lyrics and rhythms can work to create compelling compositions as well. Contemporary popular musician MC Lars (real name Andrew Nielsen, b. 1982) takes seemingly unconventional subject matter and puts the lyrics to hip hop beats. This creates a nontraditional paradigm shift. Lars is interested in, among many other topics, historical and literary themes. He has referenced William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* in his raps. Lars describes his work in the following quote:

I always try to pick content that makes an interesting narrative, and I always try to reinforce a thematic message in my songs. I like to use my paragraphs as defending statements and the chorus as the thesis. Juxtaposition of cultural icons is only worth doing if it can be done in a surprising way that elicits an exciting response from the viewer. I have a similar approach to my samples. It has to be surprising and the whole must be greater than the sum of the parts.<sup>5</sup>

I agree with MC Lars regarding idea sampling. Indeed, the whole must be greater than its parts. In my work I have used images of zombies, business ethics, and cowboys (fig.8). Not doing anything with images other than what they initially convey does not do much to make the work successful. This is why I don't do paintings about zombies eating humans, or a dandy cowboy riding and exploring the Wild West. It doesn't push creativity from the artist or the viewer. However, in sampling an iconic contour and associating it with other images, I have tried to create numerous components existing within a complex narrative.

If there can be an artist who was influenced by the idea of utilizing icons, it is without question Andy Warhol. Warhol rose to

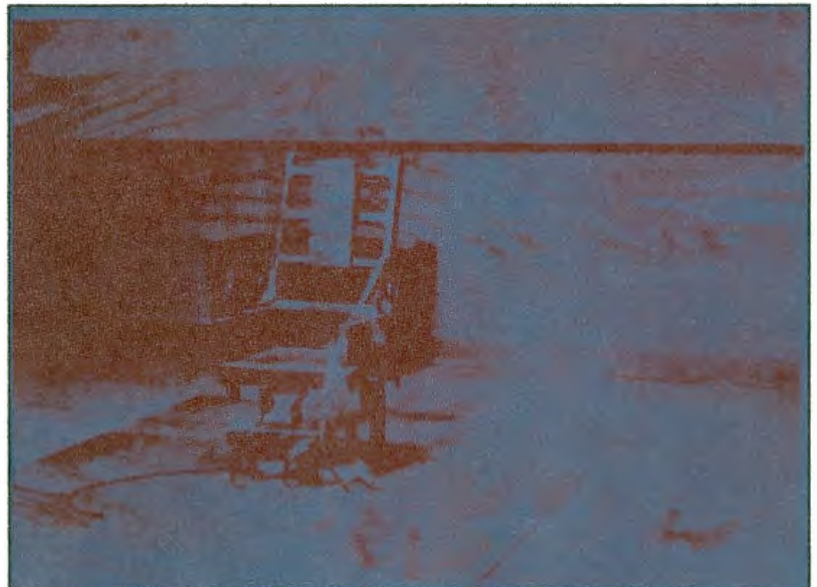


Fig. 7, Andy Warhol, *Big Electric Chair*, 1967, acrylic and silkscreen on linen, 54" x 74," The Estate and Foundation of Andy Warhol/VBK Wien.

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<sup>5</sup> Personal correspondence: E-mail message from resource, March 15, 2009.

extreme fame through re-representing the popular cultural products, people, and symbols of the contemporary world. Warhol's *Disaster Series* took America's attraction for the gory and the gruesome and used it to create a sublime series of works. His unique aesthetic of giving the viewer what they wanted, over and over again (Hollywood actors, Coca-Cola, dollar bills, etc) now became more of a social statement than ever before. The obsessed public now got repeated images of grisly car crashes and solemn electric chairs (fig.7).

The pairing of the "Warhol look" with the disturbing popularized images was unusual. It took two seemingly very different sets of narrative, and combined them to create a specific message.



Fig. 8, *If You're Gonna Die, Die with Your Boots On*, 2009, oil on canvas, 44" x 44."

Sampling and correlating these different elements seems, in a sense, like a natural progression. It has been said before that there are no more original ideas. This may be true. However, the idea of using connective threads between these unusable ideas is limitless. The ease of access to virtually any piece of information today is phenomenal. The connections between these become new individual ideas of their own.

One, no doubt, iconic contour is that of the cowboy. I have used the recognizable outlined shapes of a cowboy hat and a six shooter in *If You're Gonna Die, Die with Your Boots On...*(fig. 8). Up until roughly the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cowboys of the American west developed a personal culture of their own, frontier and Victorian values that even maintained some remnants of chivalry.<sup>6</sup> Continued ideals of Manifest Destiny pushed these settlers out west, cultivating the land as they went. Such hazardous work in isolated conditions also bred a tradition of self reliance and individualism. There are negative parallel themes in the mythology of the American Wild West with those of Homeric epics. For example, through the macho, arrogant, and proud ideals of conquest, the theft of Native American land was validated to these cowboys. This mentality also applies to their killing of the Native Americans, lawmen, and strangers. In the end, there is a sense of assurance given. This is because, through violence, some sort of justice has been done. The same can also be said of their mentality towards women and their general status as prizes to be had. So, a seemingly friendly iconic symbol is spliced with a destructive and violent narrative. This conceptually links *If You're Gonna Die...* with the Millennium Falcon series.

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<sup>6</sup> Atherton, Lewis. *The Cattle Kings*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961. 241-262.

In *If You're Gonna Die...* the valiant, heroic, and familiar silhouette is rendered housing a barren, dry, plowed field, with an old, rusted, lonely tractor sitting useless among the dust. I wanted the title to give the piece a confident, defiant, cocky attitude. It is also the title of an Iron Maiden song. The depressing scene clashes with the audacious bravado mythos associated with the American cowboy. The candy sweet image of Gene Autry has sauntered through a western town, and is smothered by a dreary bleak vision of dead dreams and ambitions.

The shaped vignette hopefully functions as a window into this narrative. The figure is situated inside a flat grey ground. This grey is intended to match the same 15% gallery grey currently used in the Curfman Gallery, where the thesis exhibition will be held. The flat grey ground serves as a window into a distant scene. This gives the piece an additional sense of dry, esoteric despondence. The cowboy outline is zoomed in to a degree in which the contour is recognizable, but not immediately so.

The concept of the joke, and what can be considered funny, and why can it be considered funny is constantly debated. A zombie or Millennium Falcon painting may be humorous to some, or not at all. On others it may be completely lost. Sometimes it simply comes down to people's tastes, other times it's more analytical. Freud argues that jokes, in order for them to be truly considered as such, *must* be told to someone else. The process of constructing a joke is incomplete, when then joke only occurs to one.<sup>7</sup> Henri Bergson is of the opinion that some things just simply cannot ever be considered laughable. Bergson points out, for example, that a landscape

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<sup>7</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*. New York: Norton & Company, 1963. 143.

painting may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; but it will never be laughable.<sup>8</sup> These opinions on humor may hold some merit for some, and none for others. So, I am aware that this body of work may be appealing to a certain viewers, and not to others. However, I have executed them with a degree of care regarding construction, technical painting and formal concern to hopefully keep everyone interested.

Humor has always been a partial element in my work, and it will most likely stay that way. Humor is a large part of a lot of artist's works. Simple humor though, isn't enough. Funny paintings can *very* easily, and often do, become one-liners. I have the same opinion of beautifully rendered paintings, and of any work of art that is essentially about one thing. If a work is about just one thing, then it's not about enough. Subjects like family, cartoons, gender, space, pornography, figures, text, comedy, light, and so many more all get redone over and over and over all throughout art history.



Fig. 9, *Swimming with Sharks* (detail). Examples of zombies.

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<sup>8</sup> Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Norwood: Norwood Press, 1911. 3.

Utilizing two of these in art is fine, and using more than that is *much* better. However, using a single one of these in my opinion is not. That makes it boring, dismissible, and ultimately unimportant.

*Swimming with Sharks* (fig.6) is a painting that combines the metaphors of zombie culture with the ones in the contemporary business world. In science fiction, and primarily through the vision of director George Romero (b. 1940), zombies are, of course, the reanimated human corpses who's sole ambition is to walk the Earth in an never ending unquenchable search for human flesh (fig.9). I've featured four zombies in this painting, because that's a number in which one might find oneself in real trouble in that swamp. If it were only one or two, their chances might actually be all right. Not surprisingly, this type of situation can be comparable to today's business world.

Cutthroat industrialists, lawyers, governmental figures, and more can be notorious for ruthless trade tactics. Zombie scholar Kim Paffenroth makes note of the parallels between humans and zombies:

Many humans are more petty, predatory, and selfish than any zombie could be, for their intellect does not undo or diminish such bad characteristics. It only enables the humans to act on such urges with greater cunning, subtlety, and effectiveness.<sup>9</sup>

Zombies have a rich referential conceptual aesthetic. The idea of referencing zombies as a biting satirical metaphor regarding business, ethics, religion, and so on has been done in contemporary culture numerous times in television, literature, and music. Zombies repeat the behaviors and

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<sup>9</sup> Paffenroth, Kay. *Gospel of the Living Dead*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006. 12.

mistakes of their former human existence. Zombies' selfish indulgences are symbolic of human sin, addiction, and greed. They have been regarded among some critics as being a projection of postmodern capitalism's worst anxieties about itself.<sup>10</sup> So, they've been accredited with this cultural, literary, and cinematic significance, but to my knowledge they have not been utilized in painting this way. They've been humorous, frightening, and gory. Any zombie paintings I've seen seem to just use these traditional zombie related themes, without going much farther.

The term *zombie* itself though has been occasionally removed from its traditional context. In sci-fi author Robert Heinlein's *All You Zombies—*, the term refers to a string of the protagonist's time travelled, inter-bred familial members.<sup>11</sup> This re-interpretation of a previously recognized term creates an unusual and unique type of notion. This alteration of contextual connotation is not dissimilar to me putting metaphorical zombies in the business world.

It may be said that only a certain type of person or audience could appreciate these thesis works. I am aware that dealing with these specific iconic subjects can limit "who gets it." However, it is important to point out that very few works of art are appreciated by all people, all the time. There will almost always be someone who doesn't get some art, for whatever reason. It could be on a formal level, on an idea-based level, or both. Minimalist painting could be said to have a selective audience, as well as avant-garde performance art. Punk rock, existential literature, and political

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<sup>10</sup> Beard, Steve. "No Particular Place to Go," *Sight and Sound* vol. 3, no. 4 (April, 1993): 30.

<sup>11</sup> Heinlein, Robert A., "All You Zombies--," in *The Mirror of Infinity: A Critic's Anthology of Science Fiction*, ed. Robert Silverberg (New York: Harper and Row Publishing, 1970), 223-253.

stand up comedy can be added to that list. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) is arguably one of the most esoteric individuals throughout art history, whose work very much dealt with the alienation of the viewer. His *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23) (fig.10) is an arrangement of abstracted pistons, chocolate grinders, and numerous nonrepresentational shapes on transparent glass. Through analysis, art critics have now formulated images (and coordinating narratives of) a wasp, nine bachelors, parasols, a magnifying glass, Oculist Witnesses, the Milky Way, and more.<sup>12</sup> All that being said, it doesn't really bother me to acknowledge that my viewing audience may be selective, because for most art that is the case.

My current work is a conceptual and formal attempt of a mergence of seemingly unrelated ideas. I have been influenced by a number of contemporary literary and visual resources, as well as a fair amount of sci-fi, popular music, comics and movies. In my work relatively comical topics such as science fiction,

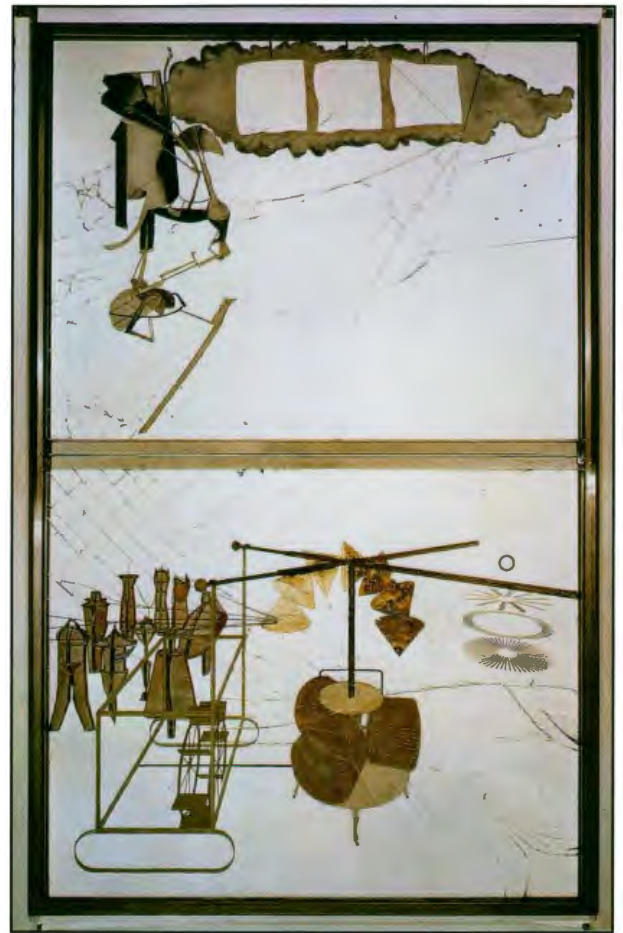


Fig. 10, Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915-23, oil and lead wire on glass, 109" x 69," Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

<sup>12</sup> Ades, Dawn, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins. *Marcel Duchamp*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1999. 82.

cowboys and zombies are juxtaposed with the significantly serious subjects of corporate gain, war, disaster, and depression. I am motivated to create art that provides the signs and clues for a relatively complicated mystery, a mystery with numerous elements.

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11. Personal correspondence: E-mail message from resource (MC Lars), March 15, 2009.
12. Salewicz, Chris. *George Lucas*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press. 1998. 65.

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