

THESIS

**IT'S GONNA TAKE A LOT OF LOVE
TO GET US THROUGH THE ADVERTISEMENTS**

**Submitted by
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**In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523
Spring 1989**

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER
OUR SUPERVISION BY KEITH LOUIS FOSKIN ENTITLED IT'S GONNA
TAKE A LOT OF LOVE TO GET US THROUGH THE ADVERTISEMENTS
BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

IT'S GONNA TAKE A LOT OF LOVE TO GET US THROUGH THE ADVERTISEMENTS

My paintings identify and enact the moment when perception, shaped by cultural images collides with experience. Through the recreation of this moment my paintings illuminate unrealistic or stereotypical points of view. They focus on American popular culture's manipulation of image. Each painting acts as a metaphor for my perceptions and challenges the mass media's illusionary and cursory imagery. In content my paintings explore and recreate the paradoxical nature of American popular culture. I imply a sense of contradiction through ambiguous spatial development and the utilization of dichotomous cultural, metaphorical and symbolic images. My painting's formalistic expressiveness suggests that experience can offset American popular culture's manipulation of perception.

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THANKS TO:

My Graduate Committee:

David L. Dietemann, Manfred Enssle, Gary Voss, and Dave Yust.

DEDICATION

**To my friends Jaynie and Richard,
and especially to my twin brother Kevin.**

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Within contemporary American life, the mass media is assuming a powerful role in the shaping of individual perception. Television, movies, magazines and advertising all create fast exciting images of life where most dreams are expected to come true and mass audiences are persuaded to accept fantasy as real. But this illusionary world contrasts with the everyday world that is, in comparison, often quite tedious, difficult, unexciting, and occasionally harsh. My paintings focus on the paradoxical nature of American popular culture and the subsequent conflict it creates; conflict Americans (and in particular the generation born after 1955) feel when life doesn't live up to the expectations created by popular culture's superficial imagery. Every day Americans are faced with the realization that a lot of the information that's conveyed through television, newspapers, press conferences, publicity stunts and advertising is quite misleading and often untrue. I am part of a generation that was raised with and, in a sense, conditioned by the mass media's overwhelming presence, everything from the image of John F. Kennedy to television shows such as Gunsmoke. I suggest this resulting paradox and conflict in two ways: conceptually, through the utilization of dichotomous cultural, metaphorical and symbolic images; and visually through spatial development, composition, form and the physical and emotional character of oil paint.

My paintings do not necessarily imply that American popular culture is entirely superficial or that its imagery is completely manipulative. For me it has provided some positive experiences. For instance, The Beatles played an important role in my adolescence and early twenties. In 1965 they were a "pop group" that sang "love songs" to a teenage audience. But in just two years (1965-67) they developed into four serious artists exploring inventive forms of popular music. More importantly (from roughly 1965 to 1970) they also became increasingly aware of social problems surrounding the late 60's and their "popular" music addressed such things as alienation, revolution and spiritualism. The Beatles helped me form a personal outlook that I still, in part, retain today and my development echoed theirs. Popular music helped me "see" through some of the illusions generated by American popular culture. Ironically, the positive aspects of American popular culture sometimes negate its own powerful manipulative influences and my work suggests this irony.

My paintings symbolize a loss of innocence. They reflect an existential period (1965-1975), uniquely American in nature, when a generation stopped perceiving the world as primarily imaginary and innocent. My paintings are passionate expressions symbolizing a generational struggle to find meaning in a sad confusing and often debasing culture; they reflect an outlook that is both innocent and jaded, as well as existential.

Although I focus on the negative aspects of American popular culture my paintings also suggest that to see its illusionary nature could be a potentially positive experience, quite powerful in itself.

Such an experience can expose the mass media's manipulation of image. My paintings attempt to pinpoint the subtle ways American popular culture shapes the thoughts of a majority of Americans.

For me as a painter the most important aspect of art lies within the process of painting. If possible, investigation into the meaning of a painting should begin with the painter *while he or she is in the process of painting it* and perhaps a responsibility of the painter is to convey *what occurs, both conceptually and visually while a painting is being created* !

When I begin a painting I start with a loose and somewhat chaotic set of ideas and notions of composition. For example, the following notes relate to the painting Maps Are Flat: People Are Not (Plate 1):

memories of a 4000 mile trip, by car
 the real journey was nothing like the one I had
 imagined experience negates expectation
 maps symbolize an ordered predictable view journeys
 show the unpredictable nature of any trip- road
 construction- bad weather- getting lost
 driving across Illinois one day-heat wave- 102
 degrees- my car is overheating, so am I, (so is my
 bother's Labrador and I am concerned)
 lines on maps never convey the realness of a river or a
 mountain (or the impact)
 humidity, heat, night, day, distance, interstate 15, 80,
 70, overpasses, buildings, people
 many people
 and a lot of places seen in a short period of time
 a month- August 1988--- Tommy, Gina, Lisa, David,
 Mike, Gloria, Aunt Sally, Uncle Gren, John, Mike, Mary,
 Ellen, Denver, Laramie, Salt Lake City, Laramie, Grand
 Island, Holiday Inn, Omaha, the Missouri River,
 Milwaukee, east side of Lake Michigan, north west
 Chicago, Chicago, Navy Pier, Dick's Last Resort, Museum

of Contemporary Art, west side of Lake Michigan, Stevensville, St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver, and finally back home.

With these thoughts in mind I started to paint an unordered series of images recalling past experiences of a trip I went on in August 1988 (this stage is often quite chaotic and I respond in an intuitive manner). After awhile a painting began to materialize consisting of images (a map, road signs, highway forms and mountains) color (predominately a warm and cool organization - earth tones placed on the left and blues and greens on the right) and a compositional value structure (a dramatic light area centrally placed, flanked by dark areas). Throughout this painting's development many changes occurred, certain ideas, memories were emphasized or deemphasized. For example, figures changed into buildings and a line representing a highway became an overpass. Composition also went through transformations; value structure changed; lines were added; lines were taken out; paint was scraped off; images were repositioned. A structure of thick to thin application of paint suddenly appeared. A stronger value organization grew out of a previous one. While developing this painting I continually asked myself questions and adjusted the composition accordingly; questions such as: "Is the value pattern appropriate? Do the painted images reflect my style; are they placed in a manner sensitive to compositional requirements? Why does the area to the left of the large overpass trouble me? Is the color rich and inventive; does it express my intent? Have I established a unity of form and concept?" As fewer questions came to mind this painting began to exist on its own; the images seemed to express the ideas I

had in mind; color felt right; value looked good. All my paintings are created like this, from a pool of ideas that constantly seems to change. For me, the process of painting is important, but a completed painting never really conveys all that went into creating it.

Compositionally my paintings work like a series of operatic acts. In opera the story line is apparently unimportant. But its beauty lies within the power of the music to convey intense deep emotions and the story line acts as a context for the performance of the human voice. In regard to this, the narrative factor of my work creates a context for the expressive performance of composition, color, form, and paint. For the most part, my paintings are emotionally expressive statements, not literal ones and should be taken as such.

On a conceptual level my paintings examine a variety of conflicts that popular culture induces (as mentioned above). Some reflect personal experiences. For example in the painting mentioned above (Plate 1) I enact a memory of a trip I took across the Midwest in August of 1988. Before leaving I had created an unrealistic set of expectations partially influenced by an old television show, Then Came Bronson, a few movies and several travel brochures. But after 4000 miles in a car, in the middle of a heat wave, I realized that the trip was quite different than what I had imagined it would be. In this painting (plate 1) a map sits in the center, and a collection of landscape forms (mountains, overpasses, and buildings) surround it, grow out of it. Maps are abstractions, a series of lines and shapes representing roads and

states, rivers or mountains, an uninterrupted predictable view, implying distance, direction, and connection, a symbolic journey. But an actual journey conveys so much more "real" information. Maps fail to record the effect of a mountain's beauty and size on a person standing at its base, or include unexpected difficulties that modify a journey, like road construction or bad weather. Maps show cities as a series of streets, not as dynamic living entities. I started my trip in the abstract world of a map (and travel brochure) and after about 700 miles and Salt Lake City, I began to realize that I was driving in the unpredictable realm of human experience.

Sometimes American popular culture creates such a strong stereotype that a majority of Americans experience conflict with it. For example, in America, the mass media portrays women in a stereotypical fashion, as predominately young and beautiful, sometimes intelligent and often sexy. Women are cast in superficial roles, as objects impeccably groomed and dressed, able to wash clothes, raise children, arrest criminals, and argue difficult cases in front of the Supreme Court, apparently all at the same time. I object to this superficial depiction of women. Many individuals of both sexes take this image as a standard of performance and either consciously or unconsciously evaluate themselves (or others) by it. It is a standard that is inadequate and often destructive. Several of my paintings suggest the conflict women feel (and indirectly men feel) when faced with this stereotypical image. Some women feel pressure because they can not live up to the stereotype. I imply this in the painting Twelve Years Into The Brochure (Plate 4) with a

young woman who begins to realize that living in a "stylish" neighborhood falls short of past expectations. Other women feel pressure because they just can't get rid of the stereotype. For instance in the painting Caught Between Rodin's "Caryatid Who Has Fallen Under Her Stone" and Miss October (Plate 2) I imply that a husband or lover refuses to see a particular woman as she actually is, or in another painting A Corporate View (Plate 8) I echo the frustration a woman might feel when an employer hires her because of her appearance and then expects her to perform like some woman on television.

In my paintings a major visual and conceptual component is the female image. I sometimes use this image on a large scale as a metaphor for conflict, a symbolic representation of a personal (not necessarily my own) and cultural struggle with the mass media's unrealistic distortion of women. In several paintings a female figure develops out of an abstraction, out of a pose reminiscent of a magazine cover or an advertisement (Plates 2, 4 and 6). In a sense, this figure becomes a real women involved in a dynamic growing changing process; she feels pain, grows older and eventually she will die. I also use the female image on a smaller compositional scale, in a sense, as pictographs representing the manipulation of sexuality to market products. I imply this in the painting It's Gonna Take A Lot Of Love To Get Us Through The Advertisements (Plate 9) when I compositionally direct visual attention to such pictographs of women. I focus on the objectification of women because it is found everywhere in American popular culture and

causes perhaps the greatest amount of frustration and conflict, for both women and men.

In several paintings I examine another source of conflict: the paradox of American politics. In America the mass media portrays politicians generally as strong patriotic leaders and competent honest representatives. But then incidents such as The Bay of Pigs or Watergate surface. It is unsettling when a President appoints a chairman of an Ethics Commission who spends the majority of a confirmation hearing defending himself against strong allegations of "unethical" behavior. Several of my paintings focus on the moment when political idealism collides with the reality of world politics. I accomplish this by placing idealized symbols in a less than idealistic context. For example, in the painting Not Quite Brought To You In Living Color (Plate 3) I use a star as a skull. In the same painting eagles and televisions are set in a foreboding composition. This painting suggests the paradoxical nature of popular culture's political imagery; it acts like a newscast that switches from a press conference where President Bush speaks of patriotism and idealism, to a Senate hearing focused on the Iran-Contra Affair and then to a commercial, all in less than five minutes.

In my paintings a spatial ambiguity implies a sense of contradiction. A spatial distortion pulls a viewer back and forth through an area that seems open and closed, a surface development both two dimensional and three dimensional in character. In one painting Just West of Post Modernism (Plate 6) I create an interior sense of space, but the placement of three rows of figures, one row in front of the other, appears inconsistent with the rules of

perspective or the spatial character of the room. The second row of figures seem misplaced, not set in a proper perspective context. In another painting, The Pink Television (Plate 5) an interior space is also developed, but a television set and a group of figures are all flattened, like cutouts on a wall. In other paintings (plate 2 and 10) I flatten an interior space and develop a figurative three dimensional space. A spatial inconstancy also exists between some of the figures, where one is flat and another exhibits a three dimensionality (plate 2 and 6). This spatial ambiguity is metaphorical in nature and represents the struggle and conflict between a frequently "one dimensional" American popular culture and a multidimensional human being. The mass media, with its stereotypical objectification, often attempts to impose upon human beings a "one dimensionality," enticing Americans with a superficial definition of life.

Personal experience works as a qualitative acid that eats away at the superficiality of American popular culture and I metaphorically imply this in all my paintings. For example, in one painting, Twelve years Into The Brochure (Plate 4) a woman realizes that the image of a fancy suburban life that she chose does not exist. In another painting, titled He Died Propped Up In The Family Room Watching A Rerun Of Magnum P. I. (Plate 7). I respond emotionally to an industrial accident that occurred at a Union Carbide chemical plant in India (1983), which left thousands of Indians dead or injured. Union Carbide is a strong symbol of American popular culture. Most corporations are generally concerned with the health and welfare of people and the

environment. Yet sometimes the mass media depicts a company as operating safely, when in reality it is acting in an extremely dangerous and irresponsible way. The American mass media understates or, for the most part, ignores the fact that quite a large percentage of American industry uses or produces extremely deadly "things" (toxic waste, radiation, chemicals, etc..) I suggest this when I place popular imagery, like eagles, televisions, and pictographs of advertised images of woman in a context of death and destruction; a context created through composition and color. All my paintings, in one way or another expose the frequent unwillingness of the American mass media to show the "unpleasant" side of life.

Through the expressionistic usage of paint and the development of transparency (where parts of a skeletal system show through (Plates 2, 3 and 6) or where objects are overlapped and still seen (Plates 2, 4 and 9) I imply a sense of transcendence. In my paintings I start off with images, like a map, a figure, or a flattened interior space and take these through a transformation, achieved through the process of painting. I also incorporate symbols like mountains (plate 1, 2, 4 and 6), windows (plate 4) and doorways (plates 6) to suggest that transcendence is difficult, but possible for anyone willing to him/herself from a materialistic society.

In America, the mass media holds a strong grip over Americans. In my paintings all symbols of American popular culture, like the star, flag and map remain intact; the female figure is forever stuck in a provocative pose. Human experience

constantly erodes the marketing tactics inherent in a materialistic society. But the sheer persuasive power of the mass media is overwhelming and it constantly presents "unreal" images to "real" Americans. The paradoxical nature of American popular culture seems to create a perpetual state of conflict.

In conclusion I should emphasize that my paintings are positive statements. Even though my work focuses on American popular culture, it is not merely a collection of statements that identify (or condemn) America's tendency towards the banal and manipulative. Very few Americans need to be reminded that new car advertisements, game shows and docudramas are debasing or "just plain stupid;" it's obvious. My paintings do not stereotype American popular culture as completely superficial. They are just about people and the frustrations and conflicts that a complex and paradoxical culture creates for them. They are passionate existential responses (uniquely American in nature) to a world that is both meaningful and meaningless. They express innocent generational memories such as the idealism of JFK as well as the sad reality of his death and what came later.



Plate 1. Maps Are Flat: People Are Not - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas - 72"x 84".

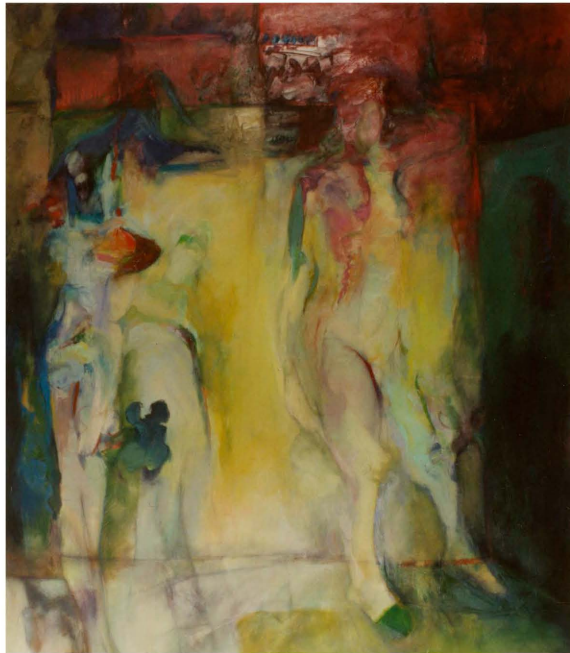


Plate 2. Caught Between Rodin's "Caryatid Who Has Fallen Under Her Load" and Miss October - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas - 56" x 68".



Plate 3. Not Quite Brought To You In Living Color - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas - 59"x 68".

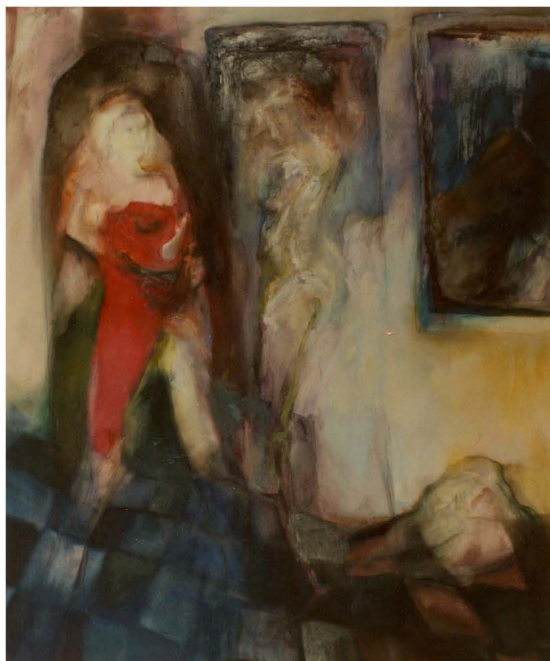


Plate 4. Twelve Years Into The Brochure - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas - 56"x 68".



Plate 5. The Pink Television - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas
- 56"x 62".

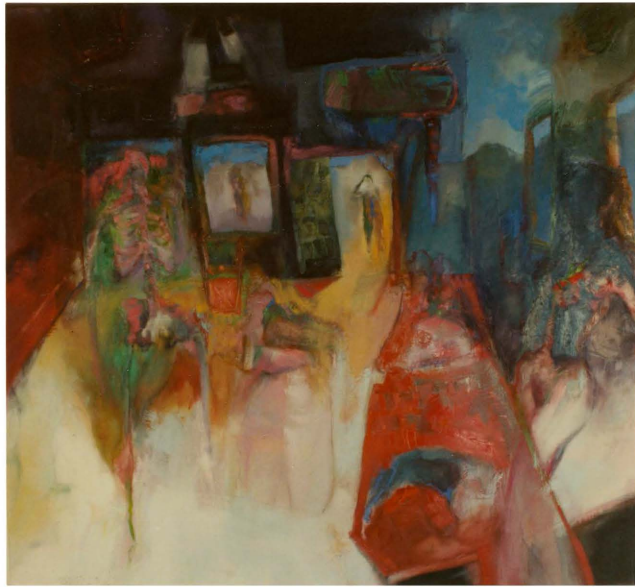


Plate 6. Just West of Post Modernism - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas - 60"x 66".

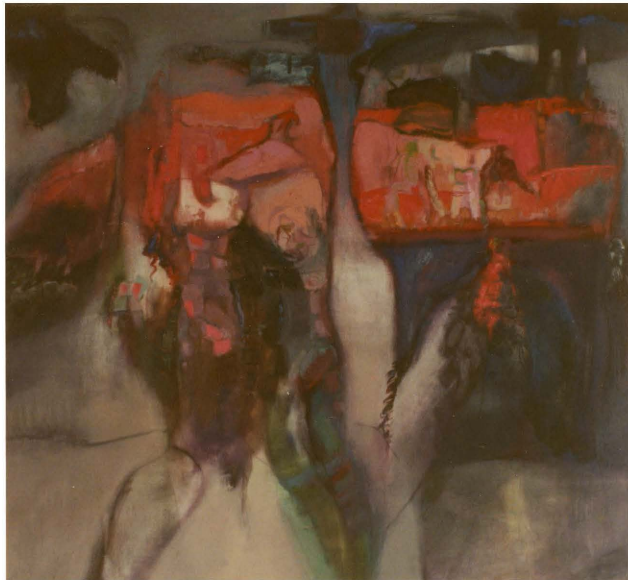


Plate 7 He Died Propped Up In The Family Room Watching A Rerun of Of Magnum P. I. - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas - 60"x 66".

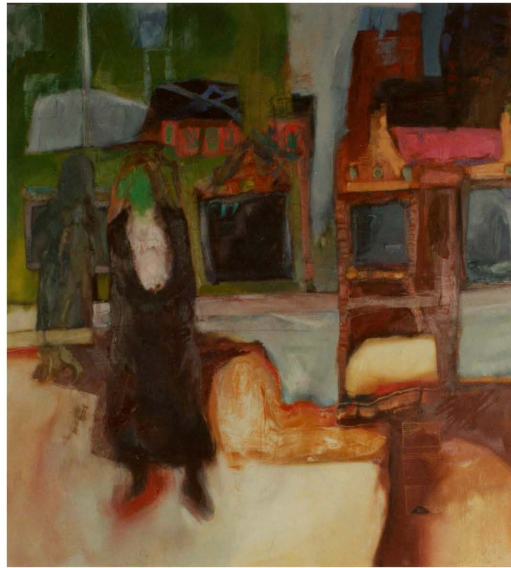


Plate 8. A Corporate View - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas - 60"x 66".

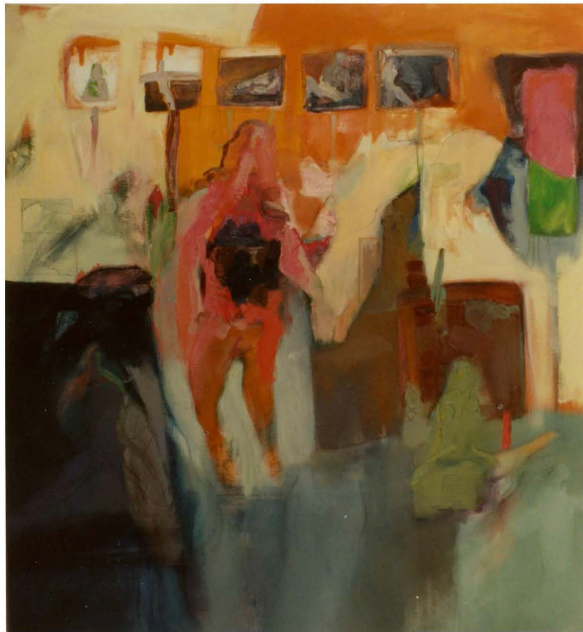


Plate 9. It's Gonna Take A Lot Of Love To Get Us Through The Advertisements - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas- 60"x 66".

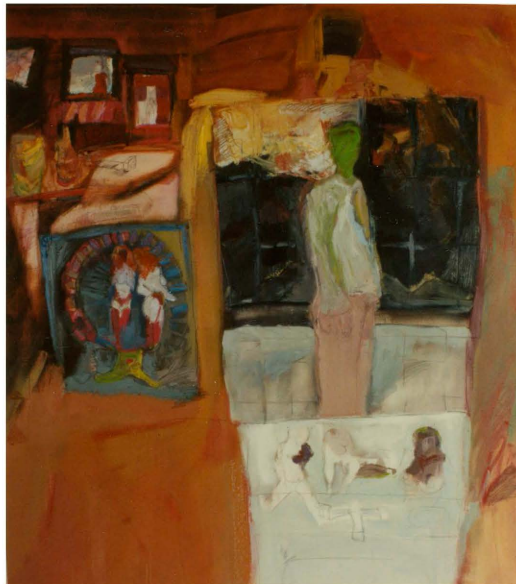


Plate 10. A Portrait Of The Artist: Like Looking In The Window And Seeing A Police Car - oil, graphite and charcoal on canvas - 54"x 60".