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Abstract

I paint a portrait to undo a person. I achieve this by painting representations of them in acrylic paint on top of wax that is then melted away. All of the brushed-on material remains but it no longer resembles the person. Some of them are men who abuse their power, some are archetypes of masculinity. They have constructed themselves to be something that they are not and they are falling apart. Removing the picture of someone is not the same as actually removing them, these men remain in our lives. We do not want to see representations of them so this process only changes how we view them. It points to the collapse of the white male identity as it has been currently constructed. If we can see them changed, but not gone, then we might begin to construct something new out of what remains.

Thesis draft 7.8 Turek

by

Joseph Turek

B.F.A., Clarke University, 2010

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Painting

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Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iv
Selfhood-hate	1
Performing to be hated	4
These objects have a pleasurable horror	7
The encounter	11
After nothingness	14
Works Cited	16
Vita	17

Selfhood-hate

Hate is a word that can be used to subjugate. I utilize the word hate in the context of my art to refer specifically to the subjugation of parts of my selfhood, my behaviors, and my choices. It is a re-made word. I use the word within the context of my own use-case. It is used with poetic license while writing about my work in ways that I will define. I am specifically targeting the white male identity as it is constructed by my own choices. This hatred antagonizes the dominant white heterosexual masculinity from within, this is a directed self-misanthropy.

This self-hatred points outwards when those who share my identity display these toxic characteristics. This is my research. This is not a malicious hatred, it is only concretized in thoughts, made manifest as art. I am directing this at a representation of this identity in its worst form. This is a very specific hatred that I extend outward to other despicable white males because it is prevalent in white males and I share the blame. This wickedness is my own, the examination of the identity starts with an examination of myself.

This hatred of those who are horrific is a common hatred, we detest those who oppress others. Society will try to correct these negative behaviors, but the punitive measures they take steer clear of the language of hate. The word "hate" alludes to prejudice, the unjust, and it is a cruel and unusual punishment. These very systems that claim to avoid hate play host to all sorts of unearthed prejudices. I will endeavor to

explore my identity's role in these systemic injustices as the work progresses and I am starting with the surface of the toxic white male identity.

There is a concern for the behavior of others that is not expressed as hatred because the word often connotes hate speech, it is hate speech and the sentiments it belies that underlie the very fabric of these systemic injustices. The omnipresence of hate speech in toxic white male circles is a testament only to the pervasiveness of the unsaid toxicity. I reclaim the word hate and I turn its energy back at its abusers.

This art is not hate speech, hate speech is toxic and harmful, and it is speech that toxic white males use to subjugate others. This is a precise form of self-hatred born out in public, a communal site for hatred. I use this word hate to dismantle this image, this group, its power, so that its potency as a word is pointed back its white male abusers. We express concern for one another and correct one another gently so as to encourage better behavior, but this is not enough in the syntax of this artistic argument. I am calling here for people, of every identity, to challenge the toxic manifestations of this particular identity. There is a moral imperative that my works of art do not express, but I state this imperative here as a mantra. The actual process of dismantling and accusing abusers of their crimes remains in the realm of the systems that enact these penalties, but here we call out the image and strip it down.

Changing another person's behavior is a costly and mostly ineffective investment. Changing bad behavior is a problem we have yet to solve and will not be solved by my

work.¹ The hatred I am speaking of is a frustration with those in power, it is an internal and private hatred. A hatred one can experience contemplating an image. The position of those in power will not change without radical alterity. We need to change how we view those in power with a repetitive, almost prayer like call, to behold in dismay. I am after this change in perception, an othering of this selfhood, an othering that is couched in painting.

We need to look at them, these men, with disgust and skepticism at the outset. If only in our mind's eye, not to sour our relationship with others, but as an approach to their behavior with due prejudice we rarely bestow. A painting could remind us, as it lives with us, that a comfortable familiarity is now spoiled.

When I paint, I am seeking a discomfort. I am seeking to discredit the ease at which white men maintain their image as it has existed in painting. It is a place I cannot avoid; it is a place that needs to change before myself and other men begin to see themselves differently. We, as an identity group, may conceive of ourselves as free of wrongdoing. However, it would be remiss to see oneself as free of mistakes, and there is a history of abuses at the hands of those within our identity that we can rectify.

When Steven Parrino said he wanted to engage in necrophilia with the supposed death of painting, I can sympathize with his need to reanimate the dead parts of

¹ See <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/solving-one-problem-solve-others/>

history.² You have to innovate within the medium to reactivate it and make it your own. In the same sense, I want to reanimate the wounds inflicted by the worst members of my identity. There is historical baggage that comes with painting as a white male. Thus, I perform painting to be hated to mine this baggage. I reactivate the historical connotations and identity of white maleness in painting so that it can be destroyed and changed.

Performing to be hated

There is a militant purity to creating impenetrably harsh walls of physical emptiness, I create a wall of noise. This noise is parallel to performance. It is similar to an actual noise artist blasting static, a metal musician repeating the same riff, or any extreme sound artist droning on and on. I create an encounter with non-representation that is confrontational to the wholeness of being.³ The attitude of performing as something *to be hated* is a valid stance for a performer.⁴

² "When I started making paintings; the word on painting was PAINTING IS DEAD. I saw this as an interesting place for painting ... death can be refreshing, so I started engaging in necrophilia ... a kind of post-punk existentialism. I am still concerned with "art about art," but I am also aware that "art about art" still reflects the time in which it was made. (Parrino 2003) Pg. 43

³ "In your manifesto, you use the term, saying that "the harsh noise wall is militantly pure in its non-representation". What would you say to people who might find this notion of 'purity' problematic?... As far as the 'rejection' of the world is concerned, I'm possibly taking an extreme political position, but one that is neither totalitarian nor aggressive in any way. I'd describe myself as an individualist anarchist, but one for whom action comes through noise, not through criminality or violence." (Williams 2014)

⁴ "Indeed, '*feeling hated*' might be transient and delicate, but when one performs being-hated, one (according to Ahmed) "assumes the character of the negative. That transformation of this body into the body of the hated, in other words, leads to the enclosure or sealing of [oneself] within a figure of hate" (57). When you are hated, you are no longer a person, just a vessel for trapped affect that can no longer circulate within the social. You become someone else's effigy, affectively shut-off and ready-to-burn. However, perhaps we could say too that *performing being-hated* — intentionally inhabiting this socially constructed, sealed body — is an abstraction that also detains the hated person in a moment of existence." (Low 2015)

This is a brutal depiction of bodies falling apart that speaks to my inner sense of self hatred. This is a site for others to hate this identity, free of judgement. This is a site for the viewers to bob their heads in acknowledgement of the noise they see, to their own rhythm of experiences. This choice to be noise communicates this failure of humanity, it is in simpatico with others who feel the same way.

When I state that I perform to be hated, I am specifically allowing the audience to direct their strife at the depiction of toxic white masculinity. Toxic is to be understood here as the common use of the word to describe “toxic behaviors/personalities/people”. The subjecthood of my white male identity is reflected in my work. The negativity associated with this maleness is not a statement that maleness is a monolith, incapable of nuance, change, or positive behavior. Often when I speak of the toxic white male I remove the word toxic and talk about white maleness. The white maleness herein is always assumed to be toxic as a means of inducing doubt about the owners of the identity. It is referred to in broad strokes as almost entirely toxic because I and many others experience it as such.

Male toxicity, corrupt hegemonies, and abuses of power cross racial, socio-economic, and class boundaries. Within my white male identity is a toxicity I and many other men have wrangled with unsuccessfully. Managing this disorder is an ongoing project. This affliction is made manifest through the depiction of others who reflect these toxic traits. In doing so I see my own reflection.

The recognition that this identity has and should be equated with its toxic traits is achieved through continual repetition of portraits. This forms the association in the viewer that white men have a particular brand of terror I wish to examine. This is the lens through which I see “performing to be hated” as acting within. I will perform the ritual destruction of these bodies until it establishes a new association for the image.

The experience of gazing at the abuser is one often fraught with negative experiences for women, people of color, and children. Here the abuser is laid to ruin, almost past recognizability. This brand of terror, while not unique to white men, is the consequence of an attitude that is present in white men and myself. Conceiving of a new shape for the identity will require that we dismantle these attitudes. Our language must be harsh, unforgiving, and incite a reaction. Hence the insistence that I perform a hatred of the self, that white masculinity is toxic.

First, I use this self-hatred to dismantle my identity, then, as I exhaust this destruction I will rebuild this identity as the work progresses. I perform this destructive act again and again to reassure the viewer that there will be enough image commodities to attest to this dismantled self. These image commodities are paintings. Even though there will never be enough, the gesture is an incomplete artistic endeavor regardless of the sense of completion.

The word “hate” is appropriate for the extreme violence that the paint depicts, it expresses the sentiment imbued into that paint that I wish to rid myself of my identity.

The object of a painting is a site for this hatred. It is the goal for my work to provide these sites for hatred and it is the reason I making any art at all. I want to take down what should not be there to see what shall remain.⁵

These objects have a pleasurable horror

Paint is a beautiful material. Beauty is derided as a distraction from the politics of a work.⁶ Artists that are politically engaged can make a beautiful form with a message that is outspoken on an issue without catering to aesthetic frivolity or didactic finger-wagging.⁷ I am thinking here of the gleeful bird-flipping riotous destructive tendency in all of us when we think of horrific beauty. This is a humorous and beautiful dismantling. A pulling apart that looks new and so in turn one thinks in innovative ways.⁸

Through my aesthetic of dismantling paint, I have hopefully created a distinct encounter that populates the political discussion surrounding the familiar parts of the

⁵ Paul Chan said there is, "undiscovered country of things that ought to be undone" and in this new space we can determine what will stay or go. Paul Chan- "Waiting for Godot in New Orlean An Artist Statement" in (Chan 2014) Pg.160

⁶ See, (Asavei 2015); See also: "We are not interested in ... conjuring a play of images for its own sake. We are not postmoderns. We are activists... | Our first goal was to show this basic economic reality of water in California in counter-distinction from its possible scenic representation. This may seem obvious enough, but the productiveness of just this enterprise became evident when an environmental organization giving us an award requested that we put more shots of "beauty" and "wildness" into an exhibition of the work." portions throughout (S. S. Morris n.d.) (unpublished manuscript); See also (E. Morris 2017)

⁷ While working with the artist on their sculpture *The Resilience of the 20%* I was struck by Cassils ability to make manifest the violence against transgender people in the sculpture a two-way dialogue of violence experienced and violent resistance in one sculpture. This understanding is the result of extensive conversations with the artist during the Atelier 600 course at Syracuse University in Preparation for Cassils P.A.F.A. show *Melt/Carve/Forge: Embodied Sculptures By Cassils*.

⁸ "In their passage from the critical to the ludic register, these procedures of delegitimization have almost become indiscernible from those spun by the powers that be and the media or by the forms of presentation specific to commodities. Humour has become the dominant way in which to exhibit commodities, with advertising now increasingly used to play on the undecidability between a product's use-value and its value as a sign-and image-support. In a society which functions within the accelerated consumption of signs, playing on this undecidability is the only remaining form by which to subvert the meaning of protocols for reading signs." (Ranciere 2009) Pg. 54

object. A new aesthetic for a new discussion criticizing the politics of toxic masculinity and race. Ultimately this will deny the aesthetics propped up by that toxic identity.

I do not want to make International Art English “press-release art” that looks like “zombie formalism”.⁹ This is where the understanding of commoditized beauty often resides. The derision of this abstract work is directed at its consistent sameness and its lack of engagement with the outside world.

I want to situate my work as having a direct relationship with the world despite the inherent contradictions of the medium’s insular nature.¹⁰ I recognize that painting is primarily contemplative. This is a slowly unfolding event that has many stages of recognition within a viewer’s mind. One can recognize that these objects are pleasurable, beautiful even, but it is in recognition of their horror.

These horrible objects are paintings. A painting is the artist’s ghostlike presence in the material.¹¹ This labor is “private and concrete” and it is an index of the artist’s life and times.¹² I believe I communicate my life as it is and as I want it to be perceived

⁹ “this type of painting claims it is associated with something outside itself it suffers symptoms of “press-release art, in which the theory behind the work justifies, or overtakes, the work’s existence.” (Ammirati 2015); See also: (Levine 2012); See also: (Saltz 2014)

¹⁰ “The painting under consideration here ... It tries to talk to painting’s potential by adding to a history in which it finds value. Painting of this ... mixes collections of ideas and orientations with its subject matter, some of which might be at times richly opposed, and it tries to situate the world inside the painting beside issues of the world outside of painting” In “Post-Critical Painting” by Andreas Fischer in (Fraser 2017) Pg. 120-121; See pg. 19, “How the World Came in” Achim Hochdorfer in (Hochdörfer 2016.); See also Pg. 297 In “Refresh Abstraction! Day Glo Neo Geo” by Pamela C. Scorzin in (Wünsche 2016)

¹¹ “What we encounter in painting is not so much the authentically revealed self of the painter, but rather signs that insinuate that this absent self is somewhat present in it.” Isabelle Graw “The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons” (Graw 2016) pg.51 “But in painting it is all of its signs-iconic or symbolic-that simultaneously evoke the ghostlike presence of their absent author. This is owing to their enhanced physicality or, to use a more common term, to their emphatic materiality.” (Graw 2016) Pg. 81

¹² (Graw 2016) Pg. 100

when I paint. A painting is an index of my life. I am actively performing as something to be hated when I melt members of my identity group. I do this to speak about this era.

A painting is not the result I want. It is not a societal, structural, cultural change in the behavior of the men in my identity group that contribute to the toxicity. The act of painting only to mutilate is an act of cleansing through cauterizing the wound. It is the creation of a painful presence of open wounds, ones that I have helped create, and now I am tasking myself with closing them. They are ugly in appearance and in concept because no image could fully suffice for the work that must be done.

That is the future of the work, true healing and reconstruction of the identity and the wrongs it has inflicted. The work will move forward into this unwanted laceration. Digging into these wounds deeper and deeper to find the meaningful sources of the problem is what is needed of men in my position. Both as artistic puzzles and conceptual ones. They are meant to be solved but now they are merely frozen in time as the layers of a painting.

The unfolding of this intention in the mind of the viewer is a space where everyone can safely despise this identity.¹³ One can gawk in horror at the work. This site of violence and hatred changes others, it is my affect that I am transmitting towards others. Hatred is a part of a cycle, a back and forth that is akin to affect.

¹³ (Onfray 2015) pg. 45 47, 138

Performative ugliness is hedonistic, a comforting sadness.¹⁴ I say hedonist because my concern for my pleasure leads to a concern for pleasure through self-negation. This is my affect that I am transmitting towards others.¹⁵ The viewer can take pleasure in this demise. The material allows for an active self-negation, it is familiar and foreign.¹⁶ The work will progress in the future and so will my understanding of this pleasurable melancholy.

¹⁴ The lyrics "I miss the comfort in being sad." Come to mind. (Cobain, Novoselic and Grohl 1993)

¹⁵ "the transmission of affect is precisely the opposite of the sociobiological claim that the biological determines the social. What is at stake is rather the means by which social interaction shapes biology. My affect, if it comes across to you, alters your anatomical makeup for good or ill. This idea, perhaps more than any other, stands neo-Darwinism on its head." (Brennan 2004) Pg. 74

¹⁶ "In Johns's words, encaustic "coincided with my thirst to use everything that was discrete... the veiling process of his complex multi-layered encaustic technique complemented his desire to "hide my personality, my psychological state, my emotions" -- a search for neutrality." (Stavitsky 1999)

The encounter

When my audience encounters the work, they will encounter it first as an abstract elusive discordant form. However, there is more to this thought. No one has seen paint pulled apart by the brushstroke in this particular way.¹⁷ The work is a very personal visual language that is communicating very real things. When my audience welcomes this foreign material as correlating to the real world then the audience has a personal stake in the work and the conversation starts.¹⁸



*a white male 53, Encaustic wax and acrylic on paper
23 x 17 in. Private Collection*

This abstraction is a strategy to

¹⁷ At least to my knowledge, every encounter with the work has raised genuine and rhetorical questions such as, "How is this made?", "What is this?", and "Is this paint?" This is from studio visits with other artists, professors, and other viewers. While this is not proof of its absolute novelty with regards to the history of technical applications of paint, it is at least a testament to its unfamiliarity as a technique at best. Please inquire with the author if this claim is unfounded, I always seek examples that place the work in its proper history/context.

¹⁸ "it is necessary to think about the possibility of visualizing abstraction beyond the *abstract visible form*. Then, the duality of abstraction as an aesthetic principle as well as a form of communication... *becomes obvious and comprehensible*." My own emphasis added. Pg. 283 in "The Appropriation Of "Abstraction" Beyond The Aesthetic" by Wiebke Gronemeyer in (Wünsche 2016) See also: "we need ... allow painting to achieve '*relevance*' by anchoring its particular unity in a vital context. ... The proposal an artwork makes in this view is an *artistic* one... So, the '*analogy*' to the external world lies in its structural parity to a given phenomenon (that is properly contextual), while the '*variables*' in the proposition are immanent to the artwork and essentially self-referential... abstraction can express the power of networks and connectivity (Lombardi, Mehretu) [etc. etc.]... Abstract artists, armed with an edifying understanding of both their medium's history and their world's present still have plenty of work to do and, despite the humbling shock of postmodernism, they possess the philosophical mandate to justify it." (Hassall 2013)

communicate something nonverbal, it is something that struggles even as it is visualized.

When a viewer agrees to look at the work in terms outside the abstract, they recognize the loss apparent of the sitter. I make choices to reference that the sitter has a race, a gender, and these are choices I carefully consider to trigger just enough recognition from the audience that something was there. This starts with a change from recognizing an abstract form to recognizing that form is a dissolved portrait.

A portrait is static, it edifies the sitter. It has this long history, this baggage, of edifying colonialist old dead white men. I take this on in broad strokes. The trope as it exists now is well documented but I mine its contemporary precedents. White men in the present are called out for all kinds of crime, not all of them are noticed. Moments of public shame allow for a multiplicity of people within and without this identity to gaze at this representation anew. My portraits destroy all of these shameful men indiscriminately, dismantling these incarnations of violence requires this approach in my view.

The sitter is losing their form. Portraits are stable and still. These portraits are dissolving. They're haunting and sad. A viewer is not threatened by this history of dominance. This is the loss of the white male. This person has controlled the world and that control is fading away, but it is not completely gone. You can see it evaporating out

of his body. The loss of identity and structure. I am dissolving this structure of white male identity.¹⁹

I destroy the presence of my hand by destroying the brushstrokes I lay down in the work. I want to negate my agency in the world, I leave my agency as this big mess of materials.²⁰ This deleted agency starts as a body. A fallible, abject, horrific, and despicable body. Kathy Acker said it best:

“As long as we continue to regard the body, that which is subject to change, chance, and death, as disgusting and inimical, so long shall we continue to regard our own selves as dangerous others.”²¹

My paint is as flesh permeated, my work folds like sinews, strands of hair and skeins of skin all over itself, this is to be as a body.²² Abject bodies put our own sense of a whole self at risk of being what we know ourselves to be.²³ I make the paint flesh, real corruptible mortal flesh. When it peels away from what it covers, this is an encounter

¹⁹ For the previous paragraph and the following section, special thanks to the artist Deborah Roberts for her thoughts during a conversation about my work. Her insights were instrumental in forming an articulate description of my ultimate hope for the viewer's encounter with the work.

²⁰ Harding uses grids that slough off of wet paint to question “what counts as an object, or what it means for an entity to be coherent.” (Elliot 2012) ; also, “I'm not interested in depicting my own struggle. I think setting up this precarious situation was a way of trying to fool myself out of my own agency, or of isolating my own agency to a specific and narrow set of options that has to do with responding to physical conditions and to making an object that is somehow transcendent of the act of renderings.” Also, “I like stripping away some of that baggage. For example, I don't like to see evidence of the hand in my painting. In my paintings, I find that it refers too much back to me.” (Owens and Sullivan 2017)

²¹ On pg. 100, footnote 67 where Acker is contextualized in the abject theories, and is cited as “Kathy Acker, “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body,” in *Bodies of Work: Essays* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1996), 150.” in (Hochdörfer 2016.)

²² This phrase is a combination of Lucien Freud with commentary of Francis Bacon. Upon entering Lucien Freud's retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, I read the wall text which stated, “I want paint to work as flesh...” The quote goes on in the accompanying publication, “I would wish my portraits to be of the people, not like them. Not having a look of the sitter, being them... as far as I am concerned the paint is the person. I want it to work for me as flesh does.” McInnes, Robert. 2010. *Lucian Freud: the studio*. München: Hirmer Verlag. Pg. 146; “When the skin is not the body's envelope, then skin and body can no longer adequately be distinguished from each other. Body and skin permeate and sink into each other.” “The question of the abject in the work of Francis Bacon” Ernst van Alphen in (Arya 2016) Pg. 124

²³ “The question of the abject in the work of Francis Bacon” Ernst van Alphen in (Arya 2016) pg. 121

with the abject horror that is a body that is no more. This work is the territory of a shredded surface, a ghostly presence, an origin that has no definable state in the now or the past, it is a hauntology.²⁴ I want and hope that this encounter changes what lies within white male subjecthood, but this surface change will suffice for now.

After nothingness

This last lingering moment of intention is where the work acknowledges its nihilistic existence. This is the work as an anti-painting.²⁵ I want to dissolve my agency into this nothingness. The problem then becomes how do you move forwards without this sense of humanity. I do not want the viewer to conclude their experience with an emptiness. I want their associations to this identity to be empty.

This power that evaporates from him, the sitter, has to be reconstituted somehow. When the work moves forward in the future I will be able to reconstitute this identity, to fill it with meaning. For now it is enough to have it fall apart. The ugly power of the white male still lingers, I do not think it will go away but I can remove its presence in images.

²⁴ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/hauntology>; see also <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/why-burials-untrue-is-the-most-important-electronic-album-of-the-century-so-far/?mbid=homepage-more-latest-and-video>

²⁵ "What I was doing could well appear as anti-painting, whereas what I wanted to show, ... was what a painting could be if disencumbered of object, color, and form-offering nothing more than fragments of a space." "Interview with Martin Barré" by Catherine Millet on Pg. 193 in (Armstrong 2001)

Meaninglessness is everywhere, I want to reach this meaningless because I wish to assert my purpose in spite of its ambivalence.²⁶ I try to make meaning out of what is now a moral failure of my own imagination to think of a world without these systemic injustices. Realizing a better future takes work, every time I try to be a better person it does not work.

Tackling the real injustices is work I will undertake when I teach. But that should not mean that I never can change, only that I will arrive at a different conclusion than the one that exists now. If I am to be hated, I will make the most of it. There is a future I can envision that includes my input, for now I take great pains to rid myself of the parts that do not belong in that future.

²⁶ "I am a nihilist precisely because I still believe in truth, unlike those whose triumph over nihilism is won at the cost of sacrificing truth. I think that it is possible to *understand* the meaninglessness of existence, and that this capacity to understand meaning as a regional or bounded phenomenon marks a fundamental progress in cognition." (Niemoczynski 2013) Pg. 29

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Vita

Joe Turek received a BFA and Art Education certification to teach high school art from Clarke University. He has taught in the Midwest for four years before temporarily leaving the profession to pursue his master's from Syracuse University. In addition to his creative output as an artist he is the assistant director of Talent Agency Teen Portfolio Development Inc. where he teaches inner city Syracuse teens art as well as completing other administrative tasks for the non-profit. In the spring of 2018 he will be one of the Turner-Klaus L.A. Semester artist in residence. His current body of work is about his subjects' loss of control, toxic masculinity, and the portrait painting process.