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Yours Truly: And Other Ways of Saying I'm Still Here Under The Rubble Of This Exploded Building

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Abstract

In my digital painting, *Mount Culling*, 2019, a mound of objects sits on a pile of white rocks that protrudes from a watery plane. The surface of the plane stretches back to the horizon. The head of a bull in the center, a broken-down van with its rear end ripped off sits as if crashed on the rocks. A man's head, eyes closed in restful repose is large and sculpture like, making the other objects seem like toys. The head is an industrial hue of orange-yellow on the edge of the rocks half sunk into a black and oil slick, reflective plane. I respond to generational gaps of material use within our environment and how their material ideologies, based on historical context, globalization and business ethics, reveal a nihilistic response to our current environmental crisis. I gather landscapes from around the world sorted in folders separated by its ground type. Grass fields, dirt roads, forest floors, rocky surfaces, etc. are sorted and collected for use. I choose figures to be used, scanned men and women who serve my purpose, my manipulative needs. I sort through rare artifacts, laser scanned with hi-resolution textures by international museum study interns and uploaded for educational purposes. I find models of broken down cars, cheeseburgers, lamps, bullheads, forks, spoons, etc. The possibilities are endless. My goal is to build 3D asset collages built in an x-y-z grid, scaled, subdivided, extruded and adjusted for visual acuity.

Yours Truly: And Other Ways of Saying I'm Still Here Under
the Rubble of this Exploded Building

by

Stephen James Farrell

B.F.A, The State University of New York at New Paltz, 2016

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University
August 2020

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Acknowledgements

To my wife Sasha
and my daughters Nina and Zoya
thank you for all your love and support.

We are made stronger together.

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“We all know in what danger we all are (in) global warming...ecological catastrophes...But why don't we do anything about it? It is...a nice example of what in psychoanalysis we call “disavowal” ...“I know very well, but I act as if I don't know.”... in the case of ecology, I know very well there may be global warming, everything will explode, be destroyed. But...what do I do? ... I see nice trees, birds singing and so on. And even if I know rationally this is all in danger, I simply do not believe that this can be destroyed. That's the horror of visiting sites of a catastrophe like Chernobyl...We are not wired to even imagine something like that. It's in a way unimaginable...what we should do to confront properly the threat of ecological catastrophe is not...to break out of this technological manipulative mold and to found our roots in nature but, on the contrary, to cut off even more these roots in nature. We need more alienation from our life-world, from our...spontaneous nature. We should become more artificial. We should develop...a much more terrifying new abstract materialism, a kind of a mathematical universe where there is nothing. There are just formulas, technical forms and so on. And the difficult thing is to find poetry, spirituality, in this dimension to recreate- if not beauty- then aesthetic dimension... in things like this, in trash itself. That's the true love of the world.” - Slavoj Zizek, from the Documentary, *Examined Life*, 2008. (standing in front of a pile of garbage)

“The planet is fine; the people are fucked” – George Carlin

I. Contemporary Man

Gauguin escaped the piles of garbage, the human waste and industrial stink of 1890's Paris to seek out the “exotic”. To collect tropical views, natural women, clean

saltwater and the Tahitian heat. He was applauded for painting vibrant images of what factory mass production and strangling population densities choked out. Landscapes of France burned and flattened by paved roads, industry, and the development of high rises by and for a swarming populace; who, just like Gauguin sought a way out. A way to return to the "natural". We bought plane tickets with our indebted point system credit cards, agreed to be assigned to us through ignorant algorithms of racist and gendered credit judgments and max interest rates so high our great grandchildren will be dodging creditors and continuing to throw out our junk mail after we're dead and buried.

We then complain about our taste-less in-flight dinner at thirty-five thousand feet and a selfish baby crying while trapped in a pressurized metal tube with wings screaming five hundred miles an hour over the Pacific Ocean controlled by a computer system and two sleepy pilots, who; may or may not have been partaking in some pre-flight cocktails. We fall asleep to high definition movie libraries, play Candy Crush and make the trip with such speed the clocks on our phones conveniently turned themselves back in time. A trip that took Gauguin weeks to travel while eating oranges to fight off scurvy lacking Neosporin after stubbing his toe on the main deck of his sailboat.

We take cruise ship buffets as personal challenges, accepted and immediately regretted; there is no such thing as unlimited crab legs. We burned up all we could pull from our nutrient rich sub-layers of dinosaur fossils and millions of years of dead plant matter to cut through the ocean at 25 knots while playing doubles shuffleboard on the top deck of the S.S. Grand Douchebags. We follow Gauguin, we vacation, we swim with bright colored fishies. We awe at families of sea turtles migrating the hell out of there and snap pictures of locals selling "handmade" trinkets bought in bulk from China,

sarongs cherished through preset sunset filter settings of colored pixel montages on the beach. A pure piece of the world we share, upload, comment, like, favorite and download Gauguin's path so many times the coral reefs surrounding the islands off of French Polynesia are "bleached", a polite post-impressionist way of saying dead or dying. In our quests to escape we leave trails of garbage in an enthusiastic disassociated trampling of everything we touch. Exploiting our environment for personal amusements. We thought we were enriching our lives and half-blindly ignored the dilution of another. An abuser's arrogance is their disassociation. We were all accomplices. We will not be stopped.

II. Standards Man

The wood must be soft, light and durable. It must withstand a large amount of pressure from a canvas being wrapped and constrained over its mitered joints. I use pine, sometimes referred to as common board, in widths of one inch by three inches or two by four depending on the size of the finished canvas. The pine is economical, a simple equation of strength plus cost equals quality. I'll purchase in bulk; like wholesale buyers of a year's supply of toilet paper, searching for the lowest price per wipe. I'll spend my time searching through nearly double the amount I will purchase putting aside the gnarled ends, the gashes and the large knots looking for the straightest planks, the cleanest edges. I look down the length of each for warping from poor kiln drying and ragged shipping practices. All this will complicate the build. It will create bowed stretcher frames out of alignment and they must never bow, they must be straight, the viewer knows this and without question they assume it should be square. These mistakes will

be judged and the painting is a failure, next. They know when things are out of alignment. We can judge an error quickly. This is made by someone who makes mistakes. I plan accordingly. I buy eight-foot-long pieces from a fortune 500 company that buys quantity and crushes their competitors with low paid workers and limited health benefits. They have the best prices in town and it's always available. I use a table saw; a surprise of a wedding gift most likely purchased from the same company continuing to support the inheritance of undeserved wealth who donate to senators and presidents who support bills in favor of congress removing female employee's reproductive health insurance and each subsequent generation is further and further removed from reality and I lay all the wood out to be sanded down with a 180 grit sand paper, smooth enough to clean the edges and keep the wood looking consistent but not finished.

My power tools; a mitered saw, hand saw, table saw, all built from metal and plastics sourced globally from countries that don't have air pollution regulations; where safe waste management doesn't exist and their garbage contaminates the only drinking water for an entire village of under-educated, under-skilled people. Children, grandparents, friends, dreams, rights, lives like ours just somewhere else away from where we can see them I keep building. They keep needing aid from other countries. I keep cutting forty-five-degree miter joints, skill sawing lap joints, and chiseling out unnecessary wood that will just get in the way of a perfect connection. Their grandchildren are forced out of their homes by deforestation and denied entrance into the first world. They will be judged for what they don't have and we'll blame nobody but them. I use wood glue; a powerful adhesive when applied to cut grain, making its way

through the cracks to fill the woods pores to create a tight bond at the mitered joints. This powerful adhesive of formaldehyde, polyvinyl acetate and rubber, a substance that will last forever and leak into every crack and crevice until it can even out to a smooth impenetrable surface so hard that our grandchildren won't be able to dig through to escape from inevitable acid rain showers is the best material for the job. It's archival. I plug into the grid my high powered electric nail compressor set to no more than 110 PSI to tac together the corners by burning coal or burning natural gas or nuclear heat turned into steam that generates turbine power so I can nail these corners together properly and it won't break when I hand stretch the canvas over the edge while they're still airdropping billions of tons of cement on Fukushima and Chernobyl for the next thousand years.

The canvas, a 10-ounce cotton roll of unprimed raw canvas with a medium tooth is a good balance of durability and price that's strong enough for heavy impasto and smooth enough for small detail as the website suggests. The cotton now picked mechanically by large gas-powered, farm beasts, whose harvesting patterns are navigated through satellite systems that upload data to world-conquering monopolies and burn barrels of fuel daily as year-round production never ends is the most traditional surface for painting. I unroll, stretch, bound and pull taut over the frame the clean canvas. I work diligently to get it as tight as my grip can allow. Both of our thresholds tested. I load and grip tight a heavy-duty staple gun with quarter inch staples. I start in the middle of the frame, working in a cross pattern from the center of each side I staple once then move across to the next side in a north, south, east, west until a few inches from the corners.

The corners are folded neatly laid flat along the canvases edge clean out of sight and out of mind just a distraction displaced.

I stir a gallon bucket of gesso with a wood paint stick until consistently white. No streaks. No irregularities. This particular acrylic gesso is cheap, watered down student grade, a compromise. I understand more layers will be needed to be applied but also less money will be needed for me to continue. Time versus money. I begin in the middle brushing on generously and with some urgency changing how I hold the large three-inch brush every few minutes, it's heavy when filled with paint my grip needs a rest. I paint the edges. I let sit to dry for a few hours. I go do other things while it prepares itself for me. Then I sand the canvas first with a rough 180 grit then a fine 220 grit sand paper to remove the visible memory of the brush strokes. There is no going back until flat and even in its consistency. I want smooth. The sanded gesso dust is wiped away with a clean rag. Another coat of gesso and sanding again and again and again. The canvas tooth is barely visible now underneath all these polymers and latex, titanium white pigment and chalky powder of gesso that will never not exist. It can be destroyed though, with flames, force or high humidity but even then the fumes of their deletion will be collected in the atmosphere swept along with the prevailing winds and introduced into the stew of chemical reactions created by the suns UV light penetrating someone in Australia who has to apply a thick cement paste across any bare skin so as to not blister and bubble from the increased radiation of their wholly depleted ozone just so they can put their garbage out to the curb or walk their dog, Spot; who, in his final years, now wears small booties on his delicate gray and black spotted paws so his nails don't melt

like stinking wax on the scorching sidewalk. But my blank canvas sits in front of me and it is bare and it's not enough it needs more.

I mix oil paint with a petroleum based mineral spirit, odorless but irritable. The way I like it. I keep a fan moving across my work area so the fumes don't knock me out and I fall unconscious. The paint is mixed loose and viscous. It needs to spread. The paint is extended in its transparency, its pigment stretched thin. I use a large brush. I paint without a direction. I just need results. I just need to get the paint on the canvas. I let this stain sit for a minute to set. I use a clean rag to wipe the wet oil stain off the canvas, leaving a smooth texture and a value I will use to greater judge the tonal relationships of my underpainting.

The rag I will reuse. The rag made from my old clothing I have outgrown in size and style. From a fashion that didn't make its way to the clothing's country of origin until after we sent them back all of our leftovers. Our overstock and overproduced, discarded and forgotten products. Our waste of pie chart power appointed mismanagement and overconfidence burying them under our garbage; our scraps becoming their rolling landscapes of futility and subjugation. Small hands picking through mountains of our waste for recyclable bits to pay for their days food, water and shelter. I stained the layer to simply wipe it away and now I am left with what has survived. I persist. I am a painter.

I multiply the width of my canvas by .1618, Fibonacci's method at work to this day. Easy on the eyes, keep the brain working less, seduce them into a beautiful image and the ideas have penetrated easier by a slippery lube of formulaic manipulations. In nature, all things grow at a rate of 1:1.618. A leaf, a stem, a shell, muscle, bone, tendons, we are connected to this number. I use it to relate to peoples understanding.

To peoples most comfortable version of the world. I make two vertical lines equal distance from both sides using my equation. I do the same horizontally. I am left with a rectangle in the center of the frame. Where the lines intersect is where I place my most important parts of the image. I halve the bottom rectangle and draw a line horizontally; this line is my horizon, it's where I look off into the distance and everything gets smaller and smaller until I don't even have to paint it. It's lost in the atmosphere of space.

Whether I use the lines or not, I draw them. They are a tool to make it easier and more comfortable for the viewer to understand and appreciate the image.

My paints are red, blue, yellow, brown, black and white. I purchase these oil paints from a small online manufacturer of fine art supplies. They are solvent free tubes of rich pigments sans Cadmiums, banned in Europe for a spell for fear of artists cleaning their brushes and contaminating water supplies. But I live in the United States of America and it's my damn right to poison myself and others by chance if I so choose. These more natural paints allow me to work without concern of toxicity, headaches and physical degradation. All concerns as I grow older, not forgetting though most of the damage was already done pressing my young nose against microwave glass, soaking my eyes with the radiation of spinning carousels of bubbling mac n' cheese bowls in eager anticipation of filling voids of emotional maturity preteen angst and ended up clogging arteries, slowing my metabolism to the speed of melted cheddar and removed all hopes of ever regenerating those lost cellular data, bricks bicycles potatoes and giving cancer a booster seat up to the genetically predisposed table of cells around my breasts, liver and prostate. I have a limited palette of color I use. A cohesive group of colors to maintain harmony and balance.

The frame is built, the canvas stretched, primed, sanded, stained. The under drawing complete, the painting commences.

III. Traditional Man

My painting, "Enough Talk" from 2019 centers around a single female figure, placed slightly off-center of the canvas. She wears a blue dress, relaxed, sitting upright in a small chair. She holds a single potted plant in her outstretched hands above her heart. The plant, a modest cold green and blue. Her face is obstructed by a small brown rodent clasping onto her face. Her chair rests in the landscape of a bloodied open mouth, tree stumps, mangled vines. An environment of trouble and concern. Gold and silver fillings shine in the cavities of the teeth. Blood seeps out over the tongue and through the gaps over the gums. A dog laying across the tongue, at rest or at peace, its own mouth open and leaking red that blends into a warm, saturated red background. Vines carry green and yellow from the center of the image out to the right of the canvas, they create faces and figures through the crossing of their limbs. On the bottom-right, two women with outstretched arms in mid-carol stand on a rock above the surface of the liquid under a cloth they share covering their identities but not their action. On the left side of the canvas a gathering between two men with their backs to the viewer and a third black hooded figure hold conversation. The three figures are chest high in the liquid. Above them a large bovine creature with its rear end to the viewer expels a green gas from its anus which rises up and moves across the canvas creating pollution. Hulking over all is a large yellow figure, limp and weak, it rests its long arms and hands

on the vines in repose. The creation is just the beginning, the care for what comes from it is exhausting.

IV. Lawn Mowing Man

I have access to a web through which I interface through a high-resolution pixel montage of light the wide, expansive and endless Internet. Ripe with opportunity and waste the Internet has been host to our new world, our entertainment, our sadness, our enlightenment, our protests, our screams into the void. A place where the illusion of control and freedom collide to give me opportunity. The Internet is another means to gather material this time for digital image making that remains digital, that remains pixel based and screen oriented. The spaces I search are websites built for the uploading, sharing and selling of three dimensional models. One of many of these new worlds commodity bought and sold through a globalized and industrialized twenty-four seven hours of operation. The materials are bought by commercial users, graphic designers, visual effects artists, animators, prosumers, hobbyists, tech savvy and educated with technological privilege in the pursuit of digital communication. Videogame creation, architectural renderings, institutional education can all begin with these 3D assets. A first world flea market bazaar with a high cost of admittance.

They are building from the ground up new ways of seeing, new ways of collecting our world through camera tracking, image sampling, data transfers, file uploads and software development. Their material lies in coding, twisted binaries, smashed algorithms, jitter, denoising, damping, rendering. Textures are gathered through photography lenses and laser sight projections collecting data from actual space or built

through node based systems of connected inputs and outputs, shaders and mixers. I look through refreshed page after refreshed page of digital models, collection databases of uploaded three-dimensional imagery to source objects. A heavily burdensome task for computer processors calculating shapes in virtual space made of vertices; where in a three dimensional space their location exists as plotted points. I search for the materials of our world, reassigned and remodeled to function in a purely digital space. I collect rock samples, in file types that are compatible with my rendering software. I gather landscapes from around the world sorted in folders separated by its ground type. Grass fields, dirt roads, forest floors, rocky surfaces, etc. are sorted and collected for use. I choose figures to be used, scanned men and women who serve my purpose, my manipulative needs. I sort through rare artifacts, laser scanned with hi-resolution textures by international museum study interns and uploaded for educational purposes. I find models of broken down cars, cheeseburgers, lamps, bullheads, forks, spoons, etc. The possibilities are endless. My goal is to build 3D asset collages built in an x-y-z grid, scaled, subdivided, extruded and adjusted for visual acuity.

V. Digital Man

In my digital painting, *Mount Culling*, 2019, a mound of objects sits on a pile of white rocks that protrudes from a watery plane. The surface of the plane stretches back to the horizon. The head of a bull in the center, a broken-down van with its rear end ripped off sits as if crashed on the rocks. A man's head, eyes closed in restful repose is large and sculpture like, making the other objects seem like toys. The head is an industrial hue of orange-yellow on the edge of the rocks half sunk into the black and oily reflective plane.

The objects above the surface refract onto the body of water rising up to swallow everything. An orange fish circles the mound and looks towards a sinking row boat filled with a collection of statues of the same small boy; the boat and boys together descending under the water's surface. A building's roof is partially visible above the water, a drowned facility of use no more where a large foot, proportionate to the males head, rests behind the mound of rocks. The foot is draped in a metallic cloth that reflects the lighting of the environment, immobile, at rest. The sky is pitch black without stars, it reflects nothing. It gives no direction.

VI. Thesis Man

We are dominated by material based objects, sourced, travelled, manipulated, realigned, sold, subjected to the rigors of contemporary needs, of human use, abuse and environmental changes. Chemical and non-chemical reactions, interactions with other materials, with each other. Incapable of self-care. They need us, we created them. They will one day drown us. They need an empathetic eye, one that recognizes their importance in the collective bonds of chemistry of morphing stew of our environment that has and will continue to affect us.

This is the stress and strain that seeps its way through our unlocked windows at night. The twenty-four-hour news cycle that continues when you "sleep" "perchance to dream¹", burning a hole through fragile optimism with relentless information. It's hard to see any part of our living world that is not affected by the grim disorder of

¹ A quote from William Shakespeare's, *Hamlet*. Prince Hamlet looks to death as a way towards a new future, free from his stresses.

disassociation; the removal of the singular from the collective. Nihilism as culture is a growing sentiment among younger generations who have unlimited information of how their world is eating itself. How do you know what is most important to you when it's in your face at once? A hierarchy of dilemma stacked irregularly.

The images I create are an extension of these stresses, figures and objects of contradiction, surrealist environments reflecting abused relationships, disassociated production habits of objects that exist in our world and their effect on each other. Through an environment of crisis, dilemma, existential dread I represent our stresses, our responsibilities of being a part of a shared experience. Through these devices I employ empathy as a tool in understanding face value and how our commonalities create bonds, how they create tension when placed in peril. Placing the symbols in precarious and existential crises I communicate a loss of power. I am a mound of dirt, a contorted figure, masked nude men in long gym socks, a woman holding a potted plant, I am a dead dog and a man carrying an animal to safety and the same man carrying it to its death. I am teeth that bleed, a demolished van in a rising tide. I am broken solar arrays and smoke-filled rooms. My contemporary experience is presented through my images as a recognition of the interconnectedness of materials, objects, people, animals, the man-made and natural in moments at odds and moments of coalesce.

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