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Marais des Cygnes

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MARAIS DES CYGNES

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis documents the concept, process, installation, and specific pieces in my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, Marais des Cygnes. The Marais des Cygnes is a river in southeast Kansas and western Missouri, near a Bleeding Kansas-era massacre site of the same name. The river is notorious for flash flooding, was named by French explorers and translates to Marsh of the Swans. The work is about a fictional wandering car thief and alcoholic named Vernon, the bad guy in my novel. Vernon is obsessed with the distant past, particularly the time before the Louisiana Purchase and the Louisiana of his Cajun grandfather Gaspard. A fisherman, bird-watcher and alligator enthusiast with a phobia of cartoon penguins, Vernon moves from town to town, throughout the South and the West, stealing, drinking, gambling and conjuring up the history of an ever-changing American landscape.

Vernon functions as my alter-ego as well as my window into the past, an age of metal motel keys, fast American cars, paper gas station road maps, wooden fishing lures, service stations, windup clocks, glass motel ashtrays, postcards, obsolete casino poker chips, cards, dominoes, and typewriters. Although he can be seen as representative of a dark side, as he is a criminal, he also connects to my compulsive behavior, sense of humor and my travels and my wish to do so. He partially stems from my photography, but can be activated through this or via painting or collecting objects. It is the act of watching, looking at cars, at landscapes, which activates Vernon. I have attempted to examine him through these means. It is an attempt to suggest his presence through objects and to conjure him in a sense through a construction of materials related to him and to myself. These items may be actual objects, which are intended to be seen as evidence or just messages intended to suggest a mental state, such as paranoia or anxiety. The exhibition includes paintings, drawings, photographs and installation work.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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Richard Jordan, Lee Chesney, Linda Montano and Thana L.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Stephen M. Orr and Bonnie Orr.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1- Introduction	1
Chapter 2- Photography.....	3
Chapter 3- <i>Marais des Cygnes</i>	5
Chapter 4- The Origins of the <i>Marais des Cygnes</i> Installation.....	7
Chapter 5- The Installation.....	11
Chapter 6- Conclusion.....	21
Illustrations.....	22
Bibliography.....	65

"My thought comes from painting even if I don't paint."

Donald Judd¹

Introduction

The work is about my travels and the fictional travels of Vernon and the way in which fiction, like a dream, may seem true in the moments of experiencing it. The coyote in the writing is intended to be an instrument of nature against man. In the photograph I believe the dead coyote illustrates the destruction of nature by man (*See figure 1*).

I added spray paint to the materials. I sought to evoke night landscapes in particular at this juncture. If Vernon is driving while just a bit drunk, he may see things, such as neon signs, as blurry and blown out, and I find this effect somewhat similar to the photograph one gets from a camera with a racked focus. The beauty of the electric colors remains, but the focus is blurred and softened, made less sharp along its edges. The other mental state I associate with Vernon is desperation, as with when he is lost along the Cheyenne River. At this point he is going through delirium tremens, is out of water and food and is tired and irritable. He also has a concussion from the car accident he had before setting out on foot. The accident makes him angrier and more paranoid and violent than ever. I wanted to filter my work through his mental state. Vernon was never a painter. He was a thief and a killer. If Vernon did paint he might paint on non-art material surfaces. I spray painted scenes on the reverse sides of Clayboards. I really wanted to distance myself from the stretched canvas and its attached conventions.

¹ Quoted by Elger Dietmar, "Introduction", *Donald Judd: Colourist*, Hannover, 2000, p. 20

The intersection of my psyche and the alter ego of Vernon are inescapable, as fictional characters are always a part of their makers. Compulsive behaviors like stealing or collecting or driving intrigue me, especially in combinations.

Photography

On a road trip in 2006 I saw much of the plains between Texas and Montana. The El Raton in Raton, New Mexico, the Luna in Clayton and the Texas in Sweetwater, Texas were among the first theatres I ever photographed. The next summer I drove from Texas to Colorado, to California, photographing theatres and whatever else I found of interest, sandstorms clearing above taupe mountains, cottonwoods, saguaros, the Painted Desert, giant metal kachinas, or the Purgatoire River. The trip led to the creation of Vernon Choteau, my first bad guy character.

It was ultimately via these cinema trips that I would create Vernon through my personal experiences of travel through small towns of the south and southwest (See figure 2). The 2007 trip throughout the Southwest, among other trips, also helped me to devise a structure for my MA painting exhibit, titled *Purgatoire*. The Purgatoire River would also eventually relate to Vernon in the novel. Vernon would also stare, as I had, at the silverberry along the narrow banks of the little river winding through the plains of Southeastern Colorado.

I've seen small towns crumbling from within, all across the West, scenes of rusting gasoline pumps, rotted beams of failed farmhouses and decaying edifices against a backdrop of light, space and landscape unmatched on earth. I enjoy the feeling of existing as an outsider passing through places, capturing some aspect of them, and then leaving. There is a distancing effect involved in photographing places, although I also meet people more often in this pursuit than when in a studio painting. It is less private, but similarly solitary and solipsistic.

The interconnectedness of my road trips, their photography, the writing of my novel and my painting exhausts me. The driving is first, the photos come second, records of the sights, the writing and painting become fractured windows into the memory of the road and the places seen, like the Purgatoire River, seen, photographed, written about in my fiction and painted while

listening to Harold Budd as I did driving in summer 2007. The landscape is not a landscape because it is only a layer obscuring various different planes, magma far below, sky beyond, caverns, pasts buried, things which exist continually after passing even if they are invisible most of the time. I feel like a witness and a recorder of a dying America, closed theatres, broken cars, crumbling infrastructure. The works of John Margolies, William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, Jeff Brouws, Gerd Kittel, Garry Winogrand, Ed Ruscha, Robert Frank, and William Christenberry all inform my photographs.

I documented cars, dating from the 1960s through the 1980s, (*See figures 3 through 19*) particularly in the summer of 2011 in Wyoming, Idaho, Montana and Colorado. I considered what types of cars Vernon would like to steal and those I would like to photograph because of my visual attraction to them.

Marais des Cygnes

The Marais des Cygnes River was named by French explorers for its appearance, one of marsh, and the swans, probably Trumpeter Swans, found there in the past. As Vernon's last name relates to the Chouteau brothers' fur-trapping empire I thought it would be appropriate to use a French river name. As the voyageurs once plied the rivers of the region of the eventual Louisiana Purchase— a region largely consisting of the drainage of the Missouri and the Mississippi Rivers— it seemed consistent to select a river name within this region. The Cheyenne River, a tributary of the Missouri, also plays a crucial role in the novel. Certain Mason jars in the installation contain water collected by me on the day when I drank from the Cheyenne River after getting lost in the South Dakota Badlands. I have carried this water ever since 1998, in its original plastic bottle used to collect it, and had since transferred the water to glass jars (See figure 20) for a previous installation as well as for *Marais des Cygnes*.

Vernon has a fascination with birds, rivers, and American history— the latter particularly as it relates to French exploration in the west. I had seen an osprey or maybe a goshawk in the trees not far from the Marais des Cygnes Massacre site. The large, ghostly white predatory bird impressed me and cemented my attraction to the three French words. I had visited the Bleeding Kansas-era massacre site once before at the end of my 2010 Nebraska and Kansas plains cinema documentation trip and had immediately gravitated toward the words. I had attempted subsequently to access the Marais des Cygnes National Wildlife Refuge. There was even the coal-fired La Cygne Power Plant nearby, which seemed to fit in with the dark edge of the location. The words seem to connect very different eras of American history. The name is at first connected with the age of French exploration, then the time of Bleeding Kansas followed by the Civil War, then the Theodore Roosevelt-initiated National Wildlife Refuge system and it

ends with the Industrial Revolution and the legacy of burning of fossil fuels, which still affects the environment negatively today and at least into the foreseeable future.

The Origins of the Marais des Cygnes Installation

In the fall of 2010 I began to collect objects such as fishing lures, old alarm clocks, and telegraph insulators. I wanted to utilize objects to suggest evidence of Vernon's existence, and of his mental states over a period of many years. Vernon is a car thief— a profession I see as the modern equivalent of horse thief. In western fiction the horse thief is often regarded as the lowest of the low. I wanted Vernon to be the modern equivalent of this character type. Vernon is also a killer.

There is a restless drive within certain humans to move into ever deeper, farther interior or exterior territories at whatever cost. Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*, considered restlessness a particularly American trait. Vernon Choteau, my Cajun antagonist from Napoleonville, Louisiana, feels invincible and free, and he cannot save himself.

Vernon reflects concerns about issues of environmental degradation such as drained swamps, diverted and dammed rivers, strip mines, oil spills, deforestation, pesticides, destroyed salmon fisheries, and various other disasters caused by human activities. He is troubled by the loss of the ivory-billed woodpecker or Lord God Bird and the Southern bottomland wooded environment. He is somewhat of a wing nut although he is tempered by his illicit means of finance. He has been corrupted by money and his need for it, and by his desire to continue down a road he knows leads to a dead end, namely gambling, drinking, spending and giving up on life, at least what the rational society at large construes to be life.

Vernon is not a hoarder. He may have been drunk and stinky and a compulsive gambler, thief and collector, but he never accumulated trash within the confines of his domicile. I think it is critical to divide the ranks of the hoarder from the collector or packrat. The hoarder may keep everything, including trash, while the collector collects certain objects, perhaps too many, yet

this doesn't indicate garbage and the health hazards it entails. The installation was not intended to reflect a hoarder's reality, or even a collector's one. It was meant to express my research into aspects of his and partially of my own insanity and link the two memories, one fictional, one true of Vernon and myself. Although there were earlier permutations of the installation that contained more chaotic configurations I wanted to show some level of collectedness to the mind of the character. As cigarettes may calm the mind of the smoker, the collected objects may calm the anxious collector.

I have seen a good part of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. There is a sense of distance in parts of each of them not found elsewhere. Traveling alone across the West, always with a camera, has given me many settings for my writing.

I would never have thought of Vernon without my seeing, in late May 2007, while traveling alone, the Arkansas and Purgatoire Rivers on the Southeast Colorado plains and sensing a loneliness and splendor in the vast land. I stood on a low bridge above the swollen Arkansas and it seemed to emanate some primeval, phantom power as the sun's light faded across the plains as birds swooping and rising. I also stood on a hill near there and saw the Rockies where pioneers along the California and Oregon Trail stood. The west has long held a potent allure to me as a place of freedom, refuge, danger and reinvention.

The feelings of being an outsider I experienced as I photographed small towns led me to Vernon. I have encountered questions and stares from locals, including, on occasion, law enforcement officials, as I have stood on main streets shooting pictures. I started to wonder what it must be like to feel watched, to really be paranoid and to be so because you are actually looking for cars to steal instead of cars or old gas stations to photograph.

Although Vernon is a wandering car thief, and killer he is also a confidence man, although this is absent from the writing at this point. He is also an environmentalist, at least in his mind. He is in many ways opposed to human infrastructure, particularly dams and those forces, such as draining or logging, which interfere with or destroy swamps or bayous. The former antebellum plantation Madewood, near Napoleonville, produced sugar cane, and many bald cypresses in the area were felled for its construction. This is abhorrent to him. He recognizes the death of the last Ivory-billed woodpecker and the destruction of the Singer Tract as a permanent loss. Sugar cane still grows in vast fields in Napoleonville and the Bayou Lafourche, once called the Lafourche des Chetimachas, located by the courthouse, suggests little of the distant past, seeming more like a canal than even a small river.

Vernon has a feeling of kinship to the birds of the North American continent, particularly the osprey, the woodpecker, the roadrunner, the swan and the Canada goose. He regrets the loss of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker before his birth. In a sense he takes it personally. The swamps and bayous beyond the sugar cane area of his childhood are his psychological refuge. I had envisioned him as a latent ecological terrorist in the Earth First! or Earth Liberation Front tradition. I don't know about the word terrorist in this sense, but he is decidedly anti-human in many regards, with a similarity to Edward Abbey. He is a kind of human in his mind, but a kind of robot, a visible calculating pump, or creature as well. He comprehends the actions of his existence as not necessarily compatible with his view, but he is harboring a complicated nest of resentments against various groups for various reasons, some justified and some not. Vernon is opposed to damming rivers, automobiles, logging and mining, yet he reaps the benefit of those things of civilization and recognizes the conflict inherent within. In an alternate reality (or

fiction) he would have been a wildlife biologist or a historian. Instead he is a wandering thief, intrigued by the earth around him, with many unfulfilled dreams of nature.

The Installation

I looked at the paintings of Keltie Ferris. The layering intrigued me as did the simple, yet evocative compositions. I feel they read as futuristic yet they seem to be archetypal. Her work influenced both my large Belgian flax linen canvas paintings and my small works on paper alternately composed of spray paint and acrylics.

I made an oil pastel drawing about the Marais des Cygnes massacre site with the raptor, probably an osprey, I had seen (as influenced by the black stone Horus statue at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City). I used very acid green and brown-tinged colors to express the landscape near the massacre site and the wildlife refuge.

I utilized paintings and drawings and one lithograph in the installation to reference various aspects of the work. Some drawings are sketches related to my research into cars Vernon had stolen, but they also relate to my collecting of scale model cars like the drawing of the 1971 Dodge Charger R/T (See figure 21). The paintings tended to predominately represent a window into Vernon's mental state, these being like blown fuses scattered throughout the ruins of his mind. The paintings may also suggest the swamp or plains that Vernon and I have traveled through. The lithograph entitled *Eastland Highway Hypnosis (Wake Up, Stop Dreaming)* is a reference to the time I almost crashed on I-20 heading from Alpine to Dallas. The tires in the installation were the tires on my truck when this occurred. The print is also the only successful one from my lithography endeavors and would not have been successful without Mauricio Linares-Aguilar's assistance. I found the process very difficult to work with and intriguing in its relationship to drawing.

In the process of considering the installation I had considered utilizing the objects within a motel room setting. I had found an ideal room at the Thunderbird Motel in Pocatello, Idaho,

where the television had color bars (See figures 22 and 23) and I used the room key and fob and my hunting knife (See figure 24) in various locations in the room. It was an attempt to visualize what a room Vernon had been in would look like. Although I'm sure an interesting installation could be done in a motel room, I felt the objects looked too posed in the setting and I wanted something mediating my subconscious with his, not a realistic, accurate depiction of a time and place. I was not entirely thrilled with the photograph becoming something more than documentation, of it needing to become the entire installation work. I later started collecting the motel keys and fobs in order to suggest travels over a long period of time (See figure 25).

I was attempting to collect whatever I thought Vernon might have collected had he spent enough time living alone in an old house. The red painting relates to the red sunset light coming through the blanket-covered windows of the house I lived in for four years. The items are not necessarily in the novel, though they could be added as details at some point. The objects (as did the photographic trips) allow me to delve into Vernon, both in terms of our similar compulsions and in what he might have encountered throughout his life, that which I discover almost as clues. They flesh out blank spots within the novel and function as research for my writing and for my art. The art must function according to color, form and space, while the words must tell the story, with some visual aspects, but none approaching the detail of an installation. I think Vernon would covet objects, whether they were cars he stole or postcards sent to him from his Uncle Remy, he would place a disproportionate value on whatever he admired. I am the same in my realization of the futility of holding on to possessions, while always wanting more. It is the cycle of compulsion I reside in that informs this work.

This kind of work would not be possible without Marcel Duchamp and the advent of performance art. Professor Linda Montano was very influential in my thinking on performance

art, which entered into my installation, in particular it is revealed in the compulsive collecting and traveling I have engaged in for months leading up to the exhibition. Richard Long's concept of the act functioning as the art itself is significant to me. I feel an object can be valuable, but experience more so. I researched Joseph Cornell. His work is astonishing, and he retains an atmosphere of mystery I aspire to attain. I also examined the work of Daniel Spoerri. As Arturo Schwarz notes "The great breakthrough in the history of art came with Marcel Duchamp, who with his *Readymades* challenged the very concept of the artwork. Spoerri too has rejected established aesthetic canons."²

My work differs from Spoerri in that I am not trying to depict with the same degree of accuracy a moment in time. My work is much less about food and eating. Only the bottles of liquor and the pecans, walnuts and Brazil nuts suggest the aspects of eating.

An old desk I spray-painted with petrol (a color similar to malachite) was utilized to evoke a sense of the motel room of the past. The large framed reproduction painting of a mountain scene, which to me recalls a certain era of the décor of a motel room, was placed over the desk. The framed reproduced painting of a mountain scene conjured up images of an old motel room's decor. I also thought about the concept of nature and depiction of nature as a place of refuge. Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* utilized a painting of a river to connect the Chief to the natural world no longer within his reach.

In the motel desk area of the installation (see figure 26) I wanted to suggest both the sense of a dated motel room of a certain era and the majestic landscape of an idealized American West. I also used an alligator suitcase filled various items to suggest travels (See figure 27). The large printed reproduction painting was selected for both of these reasons. It also worked well

² Schwarz, 41.

with the circa seventies fringe buckskin coat and the unopened jigsaw puzzle (see figure 28) with the *Autumn in Montana* scene of *the Pinnacle* in Glacier National Park. I thought the fringe coat was perfect as it suggests not only the seventies, but also the age of the mountain man and the voyageur, periods of fascination to Vernon. The Bay Oil Kansas Nebraska map (see figure 28) on the chair relates to the connective tissue of mapping and to the obsessive amount of time I spent gathering all the rarest brands of petroleum distributors' maps from between the 1930s and 1980s. The partially linear sequencing of objects is meant to suggest the conflicting aspects of a compulsive yet reflective personality and also to interweave the various repeating elements of the installation together. Vernon's repetitive, anxious, and other thought patterns are filtered through my process of selecting objects and painting, drawing and photographing.

The postcard of the fifties businessman in an old motel room (See figure 28) references old motels and the traveling salesman figure. My grandfather was a traveling salesman, a fisherman, and a hunter. The Afghan blanket (See figure 28) on the chair was one I bought it at a general store in Louisiana with a sugar cane field out back. My grandmother sewed Afghans.

I have always thought the trays within the faux alligator briefcase (See figure 29) were related to display cases salesman used. I am referencing this as well Vernon's compulsive gambling and my collecting by adding row after row of obsolete casino poker chips from Nevada dating from roughly the 1940s through the 1980s. I added the old print of the osprey (See figure 30) as it was Vernon's favorite bird of prey, a fishing one. Also, I have collected prints since my first trip to Harrod's print shop in London in the early 1980s. I also photographed an osprey in the Atchafalaya, and saw one in Montana twice, one at the headwaters of the Missouri River, and perhaps once near the Marais des Cygnes in Kansas.

The Pacific Northwest totem pole figure (See figure 31) positioned on the petrol painted

desk were intended to suggest the region and the culture of the Pacific Northwest. I believe the black, smaller figure to be of the raven (See figure 26), that other trickster, who along with the coyote retains such significant meaning in Native American religion. The larger totem is a coin bank. In the new West, nature is a commodity, including timber and salmon as well as the symbols and characters of Native American culture. The motel postcard is of the Sacajawea Motel in Lewiston, Idaho, (See figure 31) which relates to Lewis and Clark and their famous Shoshone guide Sacajawea. The reference to Idaho also connects to the Northwest and to the rugged, majestic landscape in the painting above the desk. The color of the blue of twilight in the image relates to the lighter blue of the vintage Motorola radio on the desk (See figure 31). The Best Western Travel Guide (See figure 31) suggests the early chain motels and the transition away from the quirkier era of the independents. The Arkoma ashtray (See figure 31) conjured up the 1960s to me. The turquoise and brown colors suggested sand and water, echoing the water in the painting above. The water's almost malachite blue connected well with the Petrol colored desk surface and the auburn and tan grass and woods by the water matched the fringe coat well.

Deputy Dawg and Albert Alligator (See figure 32) represent the South and the inaccurate depictions of it in cartoons as well as other media. Deputy Dawg was a cartoon I watched often at my grandparents in Palestine, Texas. In the Pogo Possum, Deputy Dawg, Woody Woodpecker, Felix the Cat, and other comics scattered throughout the installation I wanted to suggest both Vernon's childhood as well as some of my own. For Vernon, the Southern locale swamp characters of Pogo and Deputy Dawg and the somewhat related Woody Woodpecker represent the distant past not only of childhood, but also of a long-gone era of Cajun Louisiana.

The Royal Crown pomade products (See figure 32) are, along with the black comb, cheap gold cufflinks, keys and chain, and cigarette meant to suggest the presence of the character in the

room. In the Coen Brothers' *Raising Arizona* Royal Crown the criminals breaking out of prison used Royal Crown Pomade. They slick their hair back with the pomade in the gas station restroom before stealing a car. The keychain is a lenticular waving Esso Drop Man (See figure 32) and some of the keys are to a Ford. The dark gray metal Winky! Robot (See figure 33) by the tire has yellow and black lenticular eyes that follow the viewer, winking, as the viewer moves across the gallery, thus referencing the voyeurism of Vernon and his feelings of being surveilled as he travels or cases targets. The photograph of the robot in front of the End of Trail Motel in Broken Bow, Oklahoma is intended to link the robots with the motel imagery (See figure 34).

The Esso Drop Man, Deputy Dawg, and Albert Alligator images are present in other areas of the installation. The tan alarm clock (See figure 32) is meant to symbolize the passage of time, the ticking clock of the thriller, the heartbeat of Vernon and the idea of the travel alarm clock. The postcard of The Gables Restaurant at night in Marshall, Texas (See figure 32) is intended to show a spot that Vernon ate at with his Uncle often. The black and white mug shot of the man who I imagine as the ideal depiction of the younger Vernon (See figure 35) was added to suggest crime as it was in the past and Vernon and my attempt to build him, to envision him properly. I imagined him smoking at the desk, reading or writing a postcard, thinking about the past, stealing, gambling, getting drunk and fishing.

Those items presented in the gallery only hint at the actual collections of old gas station maps, robots, and postcards of the Lincoln Highway, Route 66 and numerous other western-themed postcards. In 2011 I stood along the Lincoln Highway in Laramie, Wyoming photographing the golden Mustang and the Thunderbird Lodge neon sign (See figure 36) I found the postcard from perhaps fifty years previous to my standing there, and it is that transportation back in time, which obsesses me, in all of my work. There are scenes I remember

and times before my life I like to imagine, the Pony Express Trail, the Oregon Trail, or the Lewis and Clark expedition.

I looked at the work of Edward Kienholz. Of Kienholz's installations Martina Weinhart notes that "it shares with Romanticism a love of the fragment and the beauty of decay; with Surrealism, the combination of antithetical objects..."³

Unlike Kienholz's work, I have no intended political messages. I also tend to collect and assemble objects, photographs, paintings and drawings with an eye towards what would be construed as aesthetically pleasing colors. And except for the car crash photographs and perhaps the dead coyote photograph there are few elements that shock the viewer unlike much of the content of Kienholz, such as in his installation *Five Car Stud*. Although Vernon is violent there is little visible reference to the more shocking aspects of this presented in the installation. I had a very big hunting knife I purchased from a pawnshop, but as with alcohol, bullets or pistols, it is not possible to display these objects in the gallery. I think cars are crucial in my work. I admire John Chamberlain's crushed car sculptures and their utilization of gleaming colors on crumpled skins.

I also looked at Fred Wilson and Mark Dion. The main difference between their work and mine is my attention to specific colors and the concept of a fictional character relating to the selections of colors and objects. I feel more like a painter than an installation artist. I also am not trying to reference the museum, however, I am making decisions about what to display, so there is an inherent aspect of curating involved.

As the work was also intended to be a reflection of my aesthetics filtered through Vernon and an interpreting of him it was not critical to shock the viewer. I wanted to present settings

³ Weinhart, 41.

and objects that evoked the past, but connected with the fiction. I was not seeking a complete verisimilitude in my work. I included real elements from the past to evoke moments related, sometimes directly and at times indirectly to myself and to Vernon. Other materials acted as research tools or artifacts. My photographs of the Atchafalaya in Louisiana (See figure 37) were a part of researching the novel and subsequently the installation.

However, I am assembling a single character with these possessions and the shell of the house is not empty. I am presenting the imagined contents of an amalgamated house of my conjuring with real objects with fictional connections to Vernon. Objects retain a certain mystery, especially when we are far removed from their production, first sale and subsequent sales. Most of my objects were purchased, but at times I found them as well. There are unknowable narratives attached to objects. I'm interested in the larger historical context and in the mysterious nature of them. I have an attraction to the colors of motel keys, glass motel ashtrays, and casino poker chips.

The glass motel ashtrays consisting of various colors (See figure 38) were positioned throughout. In selecting the ashtrays I hoped to convey a sense of Vernon's wandering over many years. I have, in the novel, situated him in an old house along Highway 50, where he lived, drinking and killing time and his liver. In 1995, with my best friend from Austin, Texas, I first crossed the Great Basin on Highway 50. The endless sagebrush and low ranging valleys beneath snow-capped mountain ranges left a lasting impression on me. I had seen a lone house on the range, and over time I had begun to think of it as a refuge. Whenever things headed south I would remember it, wishing I could live alone in the house. The solitude of the landscape had marked me.

I connected the entire installation by using automotive wiring, specific related colors and categories of objects such as dominoes, playing cards, film, maps, dots, eyes, plastic alligators, and fishing lures. I found a blue Sunoco mechanic's jumpsuit (See figure 39) to use for the installation, which served as an entry point. I added an embroidered Vernon name patch to make it Vernon's. I added an orange pack of Pall Mall cigarettes. I utilized the blue and green dominoes (See figure 40) to connect the objects and to relate to the concept of games of chance, luck and gambling as well as repetition and compulsion. I placed the ceramic Woody Woodpecker (See figure 41) and the red Bakelite dice in front of the spray-painted red-clouded surface to achieve maximum color intensity. This area was intended to draw the eye in, to focus on a surface meant to reflect the anxious mindset of Vernon. The green plastic alligators moving along the wall with the automotive wire and lures (See figure 42) were intended to cause the viewer's eyes to move back towards the next set of images and objects.

The collecting of casino poker chips, certain postcards and many of the ashtrays and some of the road maps was intended to specifically relate to the state of Nevada and its history in terms of the Pony Express Trail, mining, gambling, the Lincoln Highway and westward expansion. I collected items such as old miner's candles (See figure 43), bid (and unfortunately lost) on panoramic black and white photographs of Austin, Nevada taken by a former railroad photographer.

Many years later, in August 2005, I moved from Southern California to Alpine, Texas. I would spend the next four years living in the house owned by my best friend. The house needed insulation from the cold winters and foundation repairs among other things. For months I lived with an undiscovered gas leak, carpenter ants, beetles, mice, fleas, yellow jackets, moths, geckos and warped floors. I once opened a drawer in the kitchen and saw piles of keys and mouse

droppings. I closed the drawer and never opened it again. There was a room, which I never went in as it contained leftover possessions of the owner. I became interested in the concept of the forbidden room as discussed by Freud. I imagined all the previous inhabitants in the old house, the second oldest in town, and thought about how many must have been crazy. There was a long red desk in the house with a strange shotgun holster-type device below it.

Conclusion

I feel the primary motivation of the installation work is to examine the relationships between my true past and Vernon's fictional existence within a contemporary art context. I sought to achieve this by accumulating a cluster of several collections of objects and combining these with my painting and photography. At times I wanted to see things through his mindset instead of my own. This could occur through the compulsive collecting, my painting or especially while driving on any of several research trips at which times I photographed various buildings or scenes found along highways like Route 66 or the Lincoln Highway.

Even if I were to attempt to be done with my examination of Vernon I don't believe he will be done with me. He represents a vanishing American character type and something larger than himself. He is symbolic of an era of America long gone. He is informed by the landscape of the South and of the West. I have started to think of him as a figure akin to those found in tall tales. I like to imagine him as someone who is the ultimate survivor, someone who has traveled more than anyone else, stolen more cars, and existed in an exaggerated state outside of society.

Illustrations



Figure 1– *Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, digital photograph.*

This photograph taken in November 2009, is of a dead coyote near Stephenville, Texas that appears to have been shot by a landowner and then strung up along the fence. I had seen this at times in East Texas as a child, and I never forgot the sickness of it.



Figure 2—*Westward Ho Motel, Clovis, New Mexico, 2007*, digital photograph. It was during this road trip that I started feeling like an outsider as I traveled from town to town, visiting rivers, crossing the plains, and photographing the landscapes I encountered.



Figure 3—*Orr, Marais des Cygnes, digital photograph.*

This photograph shows a black Ford GT I spotted in August of 2009. It runs well. *Groom, Texas, Route 66, 2009.*



Figure 4— *Green car, Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, 7:30 pm, July 30, 2011.*



Figure 5— 1970s pale yellow Oldsmobile Tornado and Sage Room, North Front Street, Rock Springs, Wyoming, 7:27 pm, July 31, 2011.



Figure 6—*Pale yellow Oldsmobile Tornado turning left onto K Street from North Front Street, Rock Springs, Wyoming, 7:33 pm, July 31, 2011.*



Figure 7– *Brown Oldsmobile Tornado, M Street, Rock Springs, Wyoming, 7:51 pm, July 31, 2011.*



Figure 8– *Blue Ford Galaxie 500, Green River, Wyoming, morning of August 1, 2011.*



Figure 9– *White 1969 Pontiac Firebird, Eight Ball Motel, Lincoln Highway, Fort Bridger, Wyoming, 3:30 pm, August 1, 2011. The 1926 Black and Orange Cabins are visible behind the vehicle. Fort Bridger is to the right of the orange structure.*



Figure 10– *Brown car, Pocatello, Idaho, August 2, 2011.*



Figure 11– *Butte, Montana, August 3, 2011 at around 9 pm.*



Figure 12– *Blue car, Hardin, Montana, 9:07 am, August 4, 2011.*



Figure 13– *My ride inside a red-orange 1960s Dodge Charger, Midwest, Wyoming, August 4, 2011.*



Figure 14– *Red-orange Dodge Charger, Midwest, Wyoming, August, 4, 2011.*



Figure 15– *Blue Chevrolet, Midwest, Wyoming, August 4, 2011.*



Figure 16– *Nice Car, Douglas, Wyoming, 1:10 am, August 5, 2011.*



Figure 17– *White Pontiac GTO, Bennett, Colorado, 10:01 am, August 5, 2011.*



Figure 18— *Yellow Mercury Comet near Deer Trail, Colorado, 12:17 pm, August 5, 2011.*



Figure 19– *Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, digital photograph.*

This photograph from 2011 shows a green Chevrolet muscle car, probably a late 1960s model, shows the kind of vehicle Vernon preferred to steal. I have been documenting muscle cars with my camera for years now. I almost bought a black 1968 Chevelle once. In cartoons alligators are always green, though they are black in life, and I always liked the association of green with alligators and thus with Vernon.



Figure 20– *Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, multimedia.*

This photograph shows the water I collected from the Cheyenne River in South Dakota in glass jars. One robot, some alligators, automotive wire, dominoes, asphalt, fishing lures, a motel key, a comic with Woody Woodpecker, two oil company patches and a map are also visible.

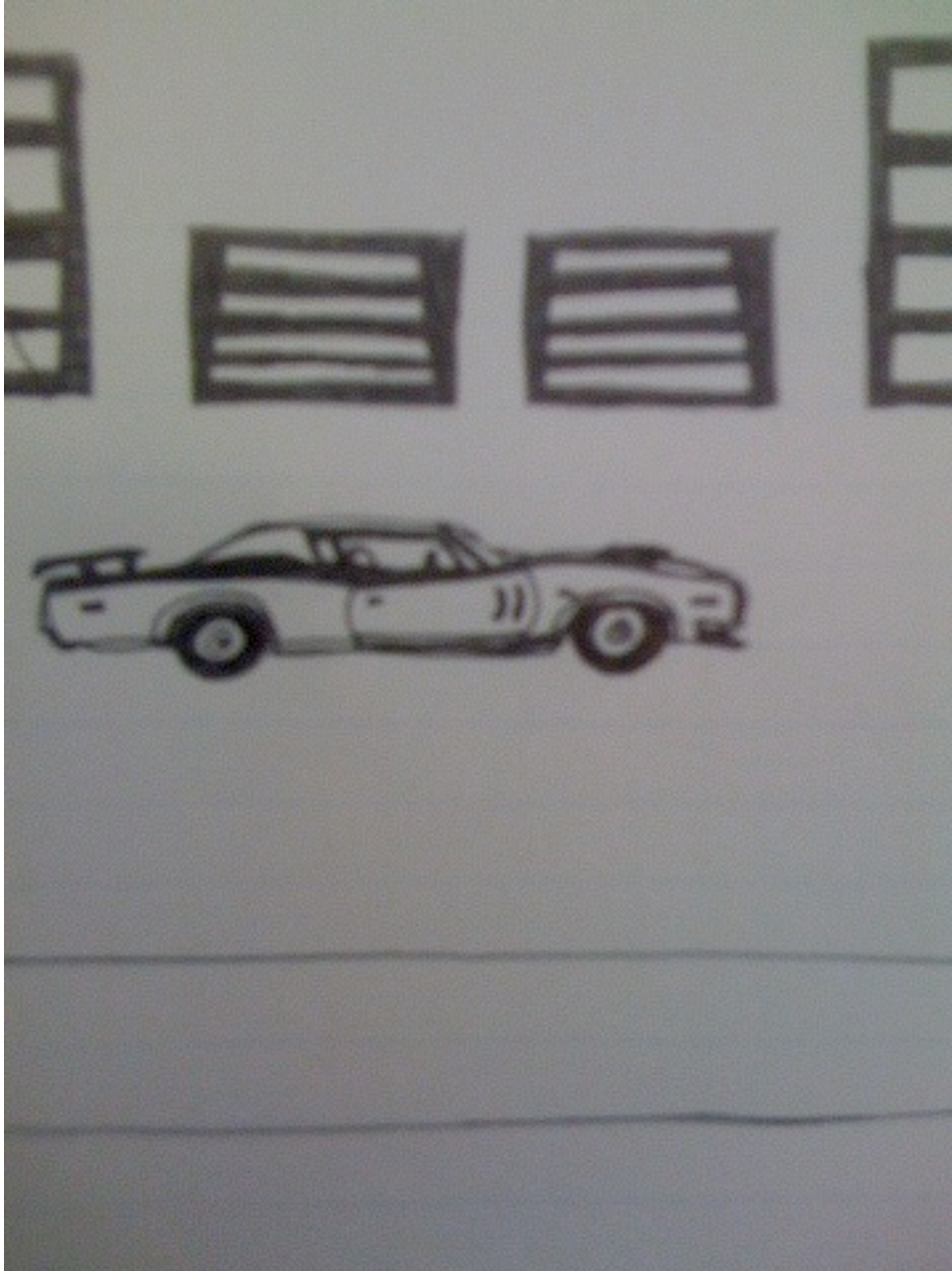


Figure 21– *Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, drawing.*

This photograph shows a drawing of a 1971 Dodge Charger R/T with the Air Grabber hood scoop raised to intake fresh, cooling air for the engine. This is the car Vernon steals in Cheyenne, Wyoming.



Figure 22— *Color bars, Thunderbird Motel Room 325, Pocatello, Idaho, about 3:27 am, 8-02-11.* I remember color bars, it's the eighties again, a perfect suggestion of the motel of the past.



Figure 23— *Color bars, Thunderbird Motel Room 325, Pocatello, Idaho, about 3:27 am, 8-02-11.* I pulled back the sheets to resemble the way a bed looks after someone has slept in it. I wanted to suggest the presence of Vernon.



Figure 24— *Thunderbird Motel Room 325, Pocatello, Idaho, about 3:27 am, 8-02-11. The hunting knife, motel key and fob, cash and my wallet on the motel table.*



Figure 25– Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, multimedia.

This area shows the motel keys I collected among other objects such as the oil pastel of the Marais des Cygnes and the osprey. I feel the influence of Cornell here.



Figure 26—*Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, multimedia.*

This photograph shows the motel scene and the corner with maps of Nevada, the Western United States, the image of an old New France map, and the Jarbidge Mountains of north central Nevada topographical map. It also shows the dead coyote and an image of a roadrunner. The Oregon Trail's Chimney Rock and wild horses are visible.



Figure 27– *Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, multimedia.*

This photograph shows the alligator suitcase with various items. The photograph is Vernon's Uncle Remy. I bought the soap in Opelousas, Louisiana. Felix the Cat, Woody Woodpecker, and two alligator items are also visible. The painted photograph shows a 1922 Colt .38 with a black walnut stock, possibly owned by a private eye or a police detective.



Figure 28— Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, multimedia.

This photograph shows the jigsaw puzzle with a majestic landscape similar to the mountain painting. The Afghan was purchased on my Cajun Country research trip. The Bay map of Kansas and Nebraska and the motel postcard with a possible salesman are also visible here.



Figure 29– Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, *multimedia*.

This photograph shows the collection of casino poker chips beneath the motel desk.



Figure 30– Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, multimedia.

This photograph shows the casino poker chips and the osprey print. These were stolen.



Figure 31– Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, multimedia.

This photograph shows the Motorola radio, the coin bank totem pole, the Arkoma ashtray, the Best Western Travel Guide, and the postcard of the Sacajawea Motel in Lewiston, Idaho.



Figure 32– Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, multimedia.

This photograph shows the configuration of items on the petrol colored motel desk.

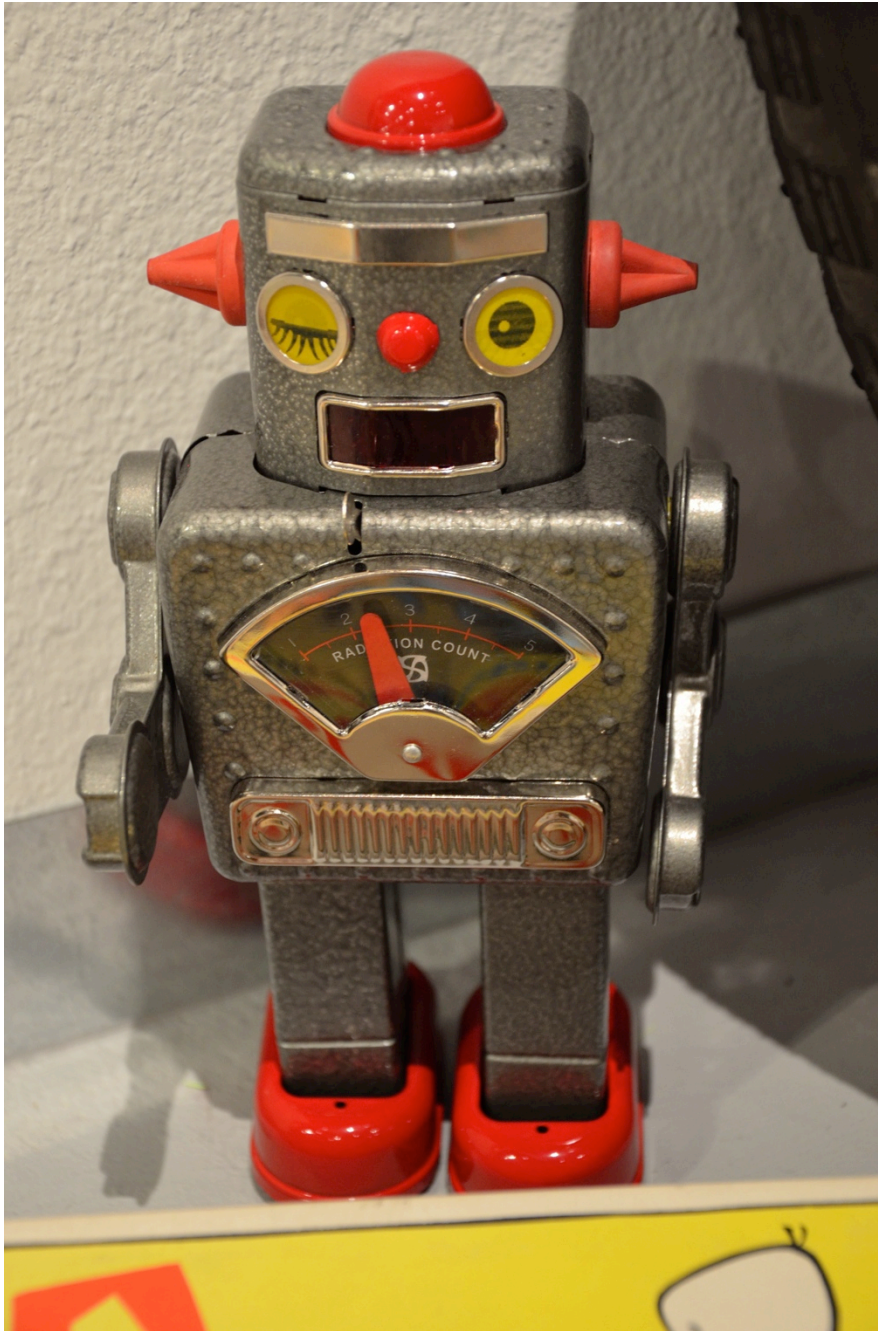


Figure 33—*Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, multimedia.*

This photograph shows Winky! Robot as seen in the installation. The lenticular eyes wink as you move around the robot.

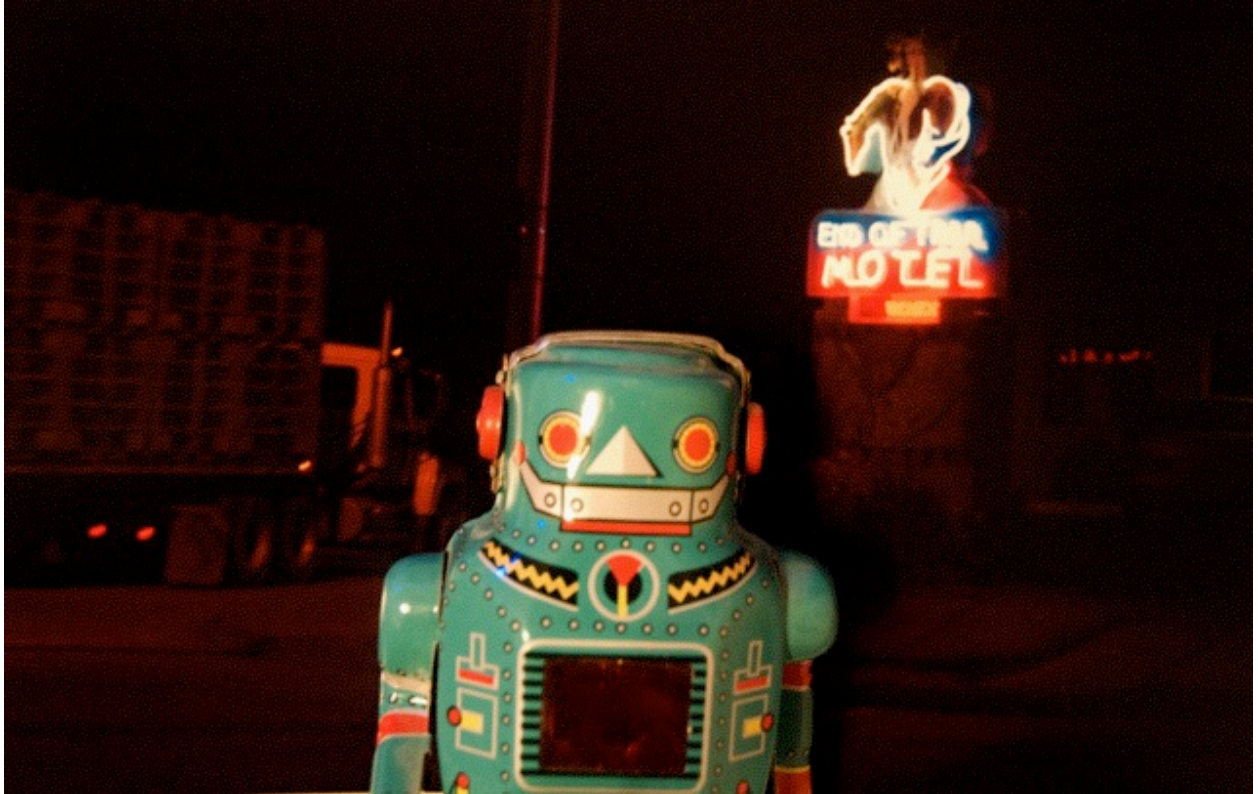


Figure 34— *Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, digital photograph.*

This photograph from Fall 2009, shows the robot featured in the installation as he exits the End of Trail Motel in Broken Bow, Oklahoma.



Figure 35—*Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, appropriated photograph.*

This photograph shows the photograph of a criminal I acquired and appropriated. I had always imagined Vernon to look about like this person. The slicked-back hair relates to the comb and the Royal Crown pomade on the motel desk.



Figure 36– *Thunderbird Lodge with golden Mustang, Lincoln Highway, Laramie, Wyoming, 1:19 pm, July 31, 2011.*



Figure 37– *Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, multimedia.*

This photograph shows the Atchafalaya Basin in Louisiana in August of 2008. This was a very critical research trip that guided my fleshing out of Vernon Choteau. This is where Vernon and his Uncle Remy fished. Roseate Spoonbills, spooked by the boat, fly away. Later, Vernon feeds the man who kills Remy to the alligators not too far from here.



Figure 39– Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, multimedia.

This photograph shows the starting point of the installation, the blue Sunoco jumpsuit worn by Vernon during his brief stint as a service station mechanic.



Figure 40—*Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, multimedia.*

This photograph shows another Woody Woodpecker, the Esso Drop Man, the use of green and blue dominoes to link elements such as gambling, liquor, motel, and automobile ephemera both in terms of color and composition.



Figure 41– Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, multimedia.

Detail photograph of ceramic Woody Woodpecker and roadrunner on birch board in front of spray-painted reverse side of board and vintage red Bakelite dice. The reds were positioned in this manner to achieve the greatest impact.



Figure 42– Orr, *Marais des Cygnes*, 2012, multimedia.

This photograph shows the densely packed collection of objects below the green plastic alligators and the watery, blue painting and fishing lures.



Figure 43—*Orr, Marais des Cygnes, 2012, multimedia.*

This drawer box contains a disassembled robot, a railroad wrench, the miner's candles, a busted valve from my truck, and a blue hex nut found with a rock stuck inside it on the road in Fairfax, Missouri, after having to turn around from the northbound highway to the interstate being flooded.

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