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Synthetic Constructive

Synthetic Constructive

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

By

Jonathan W. McDaniel
Colorado State University
Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2010

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Professor Kristin Musgnug
Thesis Director

Dr. Leo G. Mazow
Committee Member

Professor Stephanie Pierce
Committee Member

Professor Sam King
Committee Member

Abstract

Synthetic Constructive is an exhibition of paintings and collages, both reflect the building and managing of synthetically constructed places and expose the human condition of struggle in both the physical world and the emotional world. I view these works as synthetically created arenas that inform my understanding and experience of natural forces that cannot be rationalized or neatly ordered. Though inspired by and constructed from the imagery of the after effects of devastation they become more than that as they explore these relationships. It is important that these works, both as collages and as paintings, reflect the search and process of their creation.

Acknowledgments

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Dedication

Synthetic Constructive is dedicated to my parents and brother, whose endless support made this possible. To Gillian S. McDaniel, a source of inspiration and unending support through everything. To the memory of Doris Crenshaw whose constant love and belief made all of this possible.

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I. Introduction

The works presented in this thesis show represent the accumulation of my exploration for the last three years. During this time I have made large changes both stylistically and conceptually in my work by emphasizing the formal elements of painting. By initially reducing and focusing my artistic language I have been able to produce works that are both complex in construction and formal in their properties. This has also allowed for the inclusion of generative narrative in their creation.

These works are a far cry from the figurative and observational work I was making when I started the program. Through research on both historical and contemporary artists I have been able to explore and create work that reflects a shifting focus towards formal painting and away from simply recreating the natural world. This change extends to the process of the creation of the works as well. The introduction of collage into my practice has helped to change the focus of my work from technical representation to abstraction. This change has freed me to be able to construct the synthetic spaces presented in this exhibition.

II. Development

As I began my graduate work I resisted letting go of the figurative and perceptive painting ethos that I carried with me from my undergraduate program. I believed that I would be continuing my exploration into the figure and the rendering of its form while I was here. It was not until I began to explore the reduction of forms and colors that it sparked a creative and

exploratory rejuvenation in my artistic practice. The first of these explorations is what led to my inquiry into perceptually based abstraction of the spaces around me.

These first paintings, though planar abstractions, were still deeply rooted in my perceptual observation background. By painting the spaces around me; the studio sink, the end of the hall, and my painting table, I was still able to hold on to the familiar while I began to explore the possibilities of painterly abstraction. In these paintings the use of white became a way to edit and reduce the visual answers that came with painting from life. By using subtle shifts of hue and saturation in creating space to show a space that was in transition from a simple direct observation into an abstracted synthesized space. This discovery gave me a way to start to control the painting and not be constrained and bound to the image that it was being derived from.

It was at this time that I began to experiment with the use of collage to help manage my use of colors and to act as an intermediate step into abstraction. Collage became a way for me to explore relationships in an abstracted format before working on the paintings. It became clear to me early on that I needed an intermediate step in fully manufacturing spaces before I could just paint them.

Following this revelation the paintings began to work towards constructing a hierarchy of expected and unexpected movements of forms by folding and condensing objects. By choosing redacted and simplified elements the focus could shift on to the harmony, repetition and color interaction of the image. To further emphasize this changing focus the palette reflected a tension between the constructed elements and those of nature. By the stacking and combining of these built and natural objects that huddle together yet are also simultaneously coming apart physically and optically the tension in the paintings manifests.

Through a selection of specific moments where edges meet to create tension and a focus is placed on the archeology of the history of the painting, this creates a major emphasis on the search as a focal point.

These tensions are formed in a few different ways in the paintings and are important in the reading of them. The tensions are created visually through the different marks being used to differentiate natural and built elements. They also use scale and disruptions of expected spaces to visually create tension. A conceptual tension is also formed between seriousness and humor in the construction of visual languages taken from graphical imagery, video games, cartoons and painterly history. These paintings come together in moments of assertive boldness and clarity while being encompassed by events of doubt and insecurity. These paintings simultaneously acknowledge the seriousness and the history of the enterprise of painting, yet allow a subtle underlying humor.

Though these large scale reductive paintings were a huge step to where I am now in the exploration of painting, they became too confining and frankly formulaic in the construction of their space. It was this realization that enabled me to not just reduce and edit the space, but also to be able to overly saturate it with information and then redact back out of it. It is in being able to work both reductively and additively in the painting that it becomes a process and not just an exercise that can be preplanned beforehand. It became important that in these synthesized spaces both fractal and planar movement could coexist with observation and memory.

III. Artistic Influence

While I have been influenced by the work of many many artists, I will focus here on the ones with the most impact on my current work.

a. Historical

The biggest influences on my work now are the cubist painters, especially the Synthetic Cubism of American art. The flatness and geometric structure of the works and the frontal and flattened structures of Synthetic Cubism have been a big influence on the way I piece my worlds together. The collage-like fashioning of objects and passages has helped me create a visual language to use in both the paintings and in my collages. Max Weber's definition of the 4th dimension resonated with me strongly: "The consciousness of a great and overwhelming sense of space-magnitude in all directions at one time..." in his 1910 essay in *Camera Work*.¹ This idea has been a big influence on how I think about assembled space, the manipulation of direct observation, and the memory of places.

By starting to manipulate direct observation I began to make a steady and marked transition from solely perceptual painting into the abstraction of it. The artist Stuart Davis said, "Art is not and never was a mirror reflection of nature. Art is an understanding and interpretation of nature in various media."² Thinking about the constructed world in Cubistic terms we can see it as a representation of isolated aspects of objects rather than its overall appearance, using visual ambiguity and inventing of visual equivalents for rhetorical tropes such as synecdoche.³ Not unlike synthetic cubism I am using bold colors in combination with flattened compositions and adding in vernacular imagery, specifically the water tower.

I have been looking at Edward Hopper for a long time, and although our work is superficially very different I have pulled in his use of vernacular structures and some of the ways he worked in abstraction. With the inclusion of the vernacular image I am also grabbing on to the visual

cues and language used by Hopper. Through his use of the vernacular architecture of New England, the houses and lighthouses of the area, they change from objects for simple perceptual painting and transitioned into something more important.

He transformed them from mundane and utilitarian objects into actors in his stage settings. Not unlike Hopper I have moved towards abstraction through the interplay of color and form as editing tools first and then as an object to manipulate. Hopper also edited out the grit and the grime from paintings whether they are the seashore of New England or the depths of the big city, his works appear as sanitized versions of themselves. Like Hopper I also edit out the filth and decay of my constructed places, substituting an ordered chaos for what is a place of disorder and turbulence.

While I have been pulling from many other sources these have had the greatest impact on my current works. Like the American Synthetic Cubists drew on the language of Picasso and Braque, specifically their geometric reassembling of the visual world, they too influence me directly and indirectly. Affecting the way I interpret these constructed worlds of my works through broken blocks of color and simplified geometric shapes.

b. Contemporary

Contemporary influence on my work extends well past the world of paint. The world of movies, video games and pop culture in general has been a major influence on me and on my perception of the world. Like Hopper, the cinematic world helps me think about how to set a stage and how allowing objects, like buildings, to act as a presence transforming the every day

object into something more than an incidental structure. In this same fashion the world of video games has helped me create an invented world.

For me video games are the ultimate immersive constructed worlds. The early video games placed the player into fantastical worlds that were not bound by the laws and physics of this world. Due to technical limitations of early games the creators developed their own set of languages that were understood to refer to more complex forms and spaces. For example bricks, tubes and dungeons were all universally used to construct worlds, provide transport and create stages for epic battles. My response to video games has less to do with the physical reference of these objects and more to do with the way the games are built. Every part of a game is constructed, edited and manipulated. From the characters to buildings and mountains even the light is constructed and fabricated. For me this realization that these things are all able to be manipulated, replicated, deleted and controlled allowed me to understand how I can do the same with the static image.

The contemporary artists that I am looking at are doing this as well. Looking towards the world around them and then creating, adjusting and abstracting it into something familiar but not exacting. For these reasons I'm interested in the works of the artists Mark Lewis, Sigrid Sandstrom and Benjamin Cohen.

I was originally drawn to Mark Lewis's paintings for the intense palette that he leaned towards. His intense and rich blues against an equally magnificent range of poppy oranges that bring a juicy freshness to the landscapes and helped to separate nature from the man made. I also was interested in his use of orthogonal and transversal lines to set up a forced perspective to lead the viewer into the picture plane. But, as I worked more with collage these gave way to another interest, piecing together and constructing space.

His collage work has really helped me to understand planar relationships and how simplified forms that become forced together and observed, begin to create powerful spaces. Through the process of repeated layering and adjustment it became possible to create relationships among the minutiae of everyday life. This process also allows for a visible archeology of the creation of the works. It is in these visual traces of the construction that the process of creation becomes, for me, as important as the whole image itself. Here the mundane and the ordinary briefly get to be center stage and the underlying epicness of the ordinary gets its five minutes of fame.

Through the viewing of the works of Sigrid Sandstrom I began to see the potential for the combination of realism and abstraction. In her earlier work she began to abstract over the top of realistically portrayed nature images, specifically mountains. She would block in geometric planes that acted as both ice sheets and avalanches and as something lighter and more flexible, she referred to these as paper and ice. These flowing and moving geometric chunks moved over and through the landscape. In her later work the realism of nature has been replaced by the suggestion of it through shape and color arrangements. She is intertwining solid voids with brushy and jagged rectangles or sometimes with more biomorphic shapes.

It is also around this time that she began including the facsimile of tape in the paintings. Though it appears that she had been using tape to create straight crisp edges in her work previously, now she includes the appearance of actual tape into the work. This inclusion is something of interest to me; I have and often do, used tape as part of the collage process but do not use it as a device in my paintings. The use of the remnant of tape, often in a hue of the colors of tapes most often used in this process, acts as the man made element in her paintings. These taped structures are most often overlaid over a palette of primarily earth tones. She is using color and form to differentiate between the natural and the man made worlds. This is something that I

have also been employing in my own work, separating out nature and the synthetically built by color and form instead of the realistic rendering of natural forms and the constructed forms.

Not unlike myself, Benjamin Cohen is in search of a balance between abstraction and realism. In an article about his approach to his work it lists among his main considerations his ‘tug-of-war’ with representation and abstraction.⁴ That push and pull can be seen throughout his works, both in the still life and in the figurative works. He builds these arrangements in the computer by photoshopping found images together and then painting the digitally constructed collages. It is in this arrangement of interior and exterior spaces and images that he allows the sometimes sparse and sometimes all encompassing paths of painterly stroke and swath to take over. He pushes and pulls and blurs the line of the perceptual painting and that of abstraction.

It is in this place of push and pull that I find him significant and influential. Working into and out of loose painterly strokes and back into solid defined objects his paintings makes the viewer work to gain access to them. He simultaneously allows the viewer in and walls them out of the space. Like him, I too am trying to find the balance between the painterly and the crisp edge. How much can I obscure and how much can I reveal. How little can I live with or how much can I stand. It is these worlds of extremes or opposites that I find painting an exciting and challenging endeavor.

IV. Process

a. Collage

Inside of collage I found a freedom and a way of thinking that allowed me an intermediary step from my head to the canvas. As my artistic voice grew and the painting questions that I am trying to answer changed so did my paintings. They steadily changed and became much more abstract in their nature but I was unable to simply sit down and paint in this way. It wasn't until I began reducing and removing color and representation from my painted work that I found that I needed an outlet for the colors and ideas that I was removing. This outlet for me became collage.

The first collage was a beautiful mess. It was a semester's worth of built up ideas, objects, colors and emotions that had no place in the main body of work. It is my mental vomit and it really couldn't be described as much more than that. But there was so much built into it that it has continually informed everything that I am currently working on.

As I refined my collages I needed a way to help control and edit the way I thought through them. After experimenting with different papers, surfaces and media I began to use the paint chips that you find at the paint departments of hardware stores. I eventually settled on the colors of the Pantone collection, limiting myself to the colors available. These colors provide a crisp and vibrant color palette to work from and keep the collages in tune with a contemporary design element. By not thinking about indoor spaces and the outside spaces as being separated it allows me to reference both simultaneously.

By keeping the color palette reduced I am forced to think my way through the space by paying special attention to the relationships of color, shape, value and directional thrusts. As I am thinking my way through a composition I create receding and protruding visual planes without the use of solid perspectival line and conventions. I am also able to build relationships of objects through a common constructed color language used through out.

I am able to separate out manmade elements from those of the natural world. This separation speaks to the tension of the control humans seek over nature and nature's unpredictability. By greatly reducing forms I can still construct these worlds through the relationships of color to form. I am using biomorphic shape to describe foliage and choosing shades of green to further emphasizes the naturalness of it. I often fragment large spaces into blocks of colors that act as sky or ground. I add to this by building into these spaces with the refined chaos of the mangled and battered human built world and the natural world.

b. Painting

The paintings come from the collage but often only resemble them in passing. The collage is a starting place for the paintings to evolve out of. The collage is the first abstraction and the painting is an abstraction of that abstraction. I knew early on that I wanted these to be more than a mere enlargement of the collage. I wanted them to be open so that I could solve and understand them as they developed. At some point in the process of painting the paintings take precedence over the original ideas, and I want them to be about paint and not cut paper. Though there is a glorious beauty to the meeting of the edges of cut paper it is not necessarily the beauty of the language of painting for me.

In the process of painting I look to expand on the language that is created by the collages, not simply to mimic the collage but to act on the needs of the painting itself. By allowing questions of colors, scales, and amounts to arise the painting becomes a fluid and changing dance between plan and need. Unlike working from observation or reference there is, for me, an opportunity to improvise the notes of the painting. Allowing the voice of the paint to sway and adjust to the

confines of predetermined structure. By adjusting and considering the colors and forms applied in paint the painting stands separate from the collage.

Working in this manner has greatly helped me to engage in the give and take between not only realism and abstraction, but also source and painting. This struggle keeps me engaged in the work and in the process of painting. It is again an exercise in opposites for me, I work small and exacting on the collages and then open up and react freely on the larger canvases.

V. Descriptive Analysis

The works in this exhibition consist of two different bodies of work, collage and painting. Though separate in the physical sense and in the process of manufacturing them they are tied together in the conceptual impetus. Both reflect the building and managing of synthetically constructed places and expose the human condition of struggle in both the physical world and the emotional world. I view these works as synthetically created arenas that inform my understanding and experience of natural forces that cannot be rationalized or neatly ordered.

In my lifetime I have been touched by three major flooding incidents. Two of these floods are from my home state of Colorado and the other in an adopted home; New Orleans.

The first flood, the Big Thompson Flood of 1976, was a devastating event. On July 31, 1976, during the celebration of Colorado's centennial, the flood swept down a steep and narrow canyon, claiming the lives of 143 people. A wall of water more than 20 feet high raced down the canyon destroying 400 cars, 418 houses and 52 businesses and washed away most of Highway 34. For the years following I was surrounded by the emotional and physical damage to the community and the terrain of the area. The second flood was also a Colorado flood that affected

much more area; Colorado Springs to Fort Collins. This flood had fewer deaths but damaged 19,000 homes and destroyed at least 15,000.

Though I was attending school here in Arkansas, the images and stories from friends and family were hard to ignore. Though I felt disconnected from the reality of the destruction I could feel the pain and uncertainty from those there. I tried to formulate the impact of the chaos and relate to it from 800 miles away. I began to try and order the chaos of the destruction through the ordered telling of it by the people it impacted.

Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding in New Orleans are something that most people saw. Although I had moved out of New Orleans a couple of years earlier it remains a place near and dear to my heart. The untold power and horror of the images had a strong effect on me; even as the people I knew there were safe.

It is in these moments of disaster that nature shows its teeth. As they happen, our senses of security are washed away. The separation between the seemingly everyday and the sublime manifests quickly and violently in these moments. Because of this my work has turned towards the balance of containment and wildness, the struggle between order and chaos as it unfolds.

a. I Want to Paint it Black, Oil on Canvas 5' x 6'

This painting (figure 1) is based on one of my early collages. It directly references images from the Colorado floods of 2013. The painting strikes a tenuous balance between the chaotic aftermath of destruction and of the solid and protective presence of the water tower itself. The tension is further highlighted by a precariously perched rock in the upper left corner.

Here we can see the structure of the synthetic space: blocks of flat color nestled into the lower left quadrant divided by a strong diagonal line from the rest of the painting. This line acts

as the horizon line between the earthy natural colors along with the fabricated manmade shapes and the primarily blue and white sky. The grey rock form sits in the upper left corner blocking out what could be the sun. It threatens to flatten the large blue form below it. To the right side the water tower stands heroically against the void of the blues and whites of the sky.

If the upper right side is the clear and calm side of triumph of man over nature then the lower left side is the chaos and destructive aftermath of nature. The understructure of tertiary colors lies buried beneath the mass of debris and the tangled lines above it, receding deeper into the picture plane. The tangled and woven mass is given an underlying sense of order by the repetition of forms and color. The lines above it have a structure and rhythm to their piled up forms. Here nature and the human made combine to become a woven mat of chaos and constructed order.

As the destructive forces of nature threaten to crush the human made invaders, then to do the human forms seem poised to take control back. As the rock threatens to smash the collapsing house form and the destructive force of water has bent the manmade to a tangled mess, the water tower seeks to regain that control and authority over nature. The water tower acts as mankind's heroic attempt at the containment of nature. It becomes humanities enforcer of its authority over nature.

Drive by most towns and you will see a looming tower built to contain water for use at our leisure. Though built for this utilitarian purpose, they also become monuments to announce the presence of the civilized world. Often they carry the name of the town inscribed on them or the local sports team emblazoned on their side. They become visual avatars for the area they protect with their very sustenance.

VI. Conclusion

The works presented in *Synthetic Constructive* are oversaturated explorations into shape, form, and color. Though inspired by and constructed from the imagery of the after effects of devastation they become more than that as they explore these relationships. It is important that these works, both as collages and as paintings, reflect the search and process of their creation. I hope people will engage in the search of meaning between form and shape and the narrative of control and disaster. For me, leaving the push and pull of representation and abstraction and the exacting construction and painterly enlightenment to be viewed is an exciting experience. I find exploring and viewing the mounting tensions between the collages and the paintings to be an exciting back and forth as well.

¹ Max Weber, The Fourth Dimension from a Plastic Point View, Camera Work 31 (July 1910), 25

² Stuart Davis, "Introduction." Abstract Painting in America (New York: exh. Cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935) unpaginated.

³ Hollis Taggart Galleries, Inheriting Cubism: The Impact of Cubism on American Art, 1909-1936, Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York, New York 2001, 36-40

⁴ Oehlen, O and Butzer, A. (2001) 'We Won't Let Phantoms Splotch Our Sweaters: A Conversation Between André Butzer and Albert Oehlen. In. Takis, F. ed. Albert Oehlen – Terminale Erfrischung: Computercollagen und Malerei. Hannover: Kestner Gesellschaft/Holzwarth Publications.

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Appendix



Figure 1: *I Want to Paint it Black*, Oil on Canvas, 2014