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Optimistic and a Little Flawed

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Optimistic and a Little Flawed

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of the requirements for the degree of
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by

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Abstract

The accompanying exhibition to this paper, *Optimistic and Flawed* is a body of drawings and objects that explores the liminal space between playful and intended actions. Inspired by the landscape of the yard and the actions that take place within, the goalless play of a child and the laborious maintenance of an adult. The value of play exists within labor and labor exists within play. The drawings observe this through the theoretical framework of telic and paratelic motivational states as they relate to drawing. Abstracted yards and landscapes provide a space for the labor of the hand. A history of marks is created revealing the search for beauty within each intentional and unintentional mark. The quality granted through ad hoc methods is vital to achieve a balance between these fluctuating states. The exhibition of drawings seeks to validate the importance of play within practice and embrace the flaws and imperfections and inevitable self-editing that result.

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Introduction

Within drawing and object making there is a kind of honesty, authenticity, and beauty. I seek to achieve this in my work. It lies within the vulnerability and promise that a drawing can have when it comes from the hand. In the following text I will explore how play, adhocism create a visual experience that favors beauty, slowness, and the value of quietude. Throughout the body of work construction methods question stability, the mark making is at times doubtful, and others is overly confident. This method of working brings two modes of being together. Wood taped together with a few nails holding it in. Drawings glued to wood as a hanging apparatus. Simple solutions to simple problems. These types of marks leave a trace of the hand and the person behind them and the process of decision making that went with each move and the continuous editing that happens. The history of marks reveals a search for achieving a finished state, a point when the accumulation of marks has pushed itself so far that any additional marks will break the harmony of these elements. This built-up history is a result of tender handling of the material in pursuit of finding a balance with it's finished state.

Drawing, for me, comes from a desire to collect. Collections are a series of moments. I make drawings in search of moments. This desire to collect is related to the desire to make. Collecting has always been a part of my life, I keep many collections, books, records, art, photos in digital places, but the collections I am most interested in are the ones whose purpose is to collect and admire. When I think of these types of collections I think of coins, rocks, anything were the purpose of keeping it is to bring it out of a box once a year to admire. There is something special that happens in this moment. I can remember some of my favorite coins in my collection and how upon holding them that admiration is felt each time. I also see this in trading cards. As a child I remember how special it felt to behold the gleam and glow of the radiant sun

against my holographic Charizard Pokémon card. So precious that I did not even play with it and it spent most of its time in a sleeve with other cards thought too fragile and precious to risk exposure to the elements.

Elaine Scarry speaks about this idea of “terrestrial plentitude and distribution”¹ and its relationship to beauty. How there is a will to create more and more so that eventually there will be enough. I think about this a lot when I work. With each new collage I am slowly working my way to plentitude within my collection. Within this document I will describe how the careful orchestration of all these different components (ad hocism, collection, a pursuit of beauty) result in a finished work.

Drawing, Moments, and Motivational States

Many of the drawings and collages show a laborious type of mark making. An anxiety riddled fuzz growing from one object to another. This mark making is rendered in shimmering glitter and metallic ink within the microcosms of the shelved collages and the rough abrasion of crayon on raw canvas. A drawing simultaneously acts upon each individual mark and the summation of the whole. As a collection of marks, they stand for a fluidity between moments in time. I am motivated by the pleasure gained from stepping back to view the result and driven in the moment from start to finish by a pleasure for the act of mark making.

British psychiatrist Dr. Michael Apter theorized that there are states and frames of mind that characterize an individual’s motivation at any given point in time.² An individual tends to be in a more playful (paratelic) state or serious-minded (telic) state depending upon the circumstances at any moment. Within this framework there are many pairs of motivational states.

¹ Scarry, E. *On beauty and being just*.

² Apter, M. J. *Personality dynamics: Key concepts in reversal theory*.

The two states in the first pair are listed above. These two states help demonstrate if a person is motivated by achievement and future goals, or the enjoyment of the process in real time. This pairing has an interesting relationship with drawing as it relates to the flow state theory described by Deborah Harty “The state of fusion or flow was only one aspect of the fluctuating state of consciousness. It existed in opposition to an acute awareness of self or environment. The repetitive drawing process could induce long periods of fusion that led to several hours of time having the perception of a few minutes. The awareness of self or environment was reinstated when a discomfort in the physical boredom due to the monotony of the repetition of action renewed attentive awareness and the fusion or flow state was interrupted.”³ This flow state or fusion is both fueled by paratenic and telic modes. When in the weeds of a drawing, when each mark is vibrating into the next, when fusion is achieved, there is both a desire to keep drawing for the sake of feeling the pleasure in each mark and at the same time when fusion is interrupted and the fusion is broken there is still a moment of pleasure in seeing the ground coverage made by all of those scratchy marks.

The installation of this work within the gallery runs on several key factors that explores the interplay between two dimensional and three-dimensional objects. Many sculptures exist in a state of flux. These objects interface with the drawings behind them and with each other. Recreating a moment of fusion or flow state for the viewer, allowing for moments of engagement and interruption. Each day of the show’s run these sculptures move and are composed in new ways. These sculptures are outfitted with casters allowing them the ability to glide from one side of the gallery to the other, each inch they change the composition of the space. Some objects

³ Harty, Deborah, drawing//phenomenology//drawing: an exploration of the phenomenological potential of repetitive processes.

have a fixed outcome and certain expectations when they enter the space for installation, others do not and are meant to be arranged on site. The works composed on sight include the larger orchestration between the cut outs and their interactions between works. New compositions and moments are created with each new arrangement.

My goal with this installation method is to break up the space into a series of interactions. I want to create a playful place of viewing, the intent is not to transport the viewer to a certain place using landscape, but to invite them onto a set. Diving into the portals of the smaller collages and navigating the larger world of the cut outs. These two scale shifts allow the viewer to join their internal realities with the external via two modes of the mind. Donald Winnicott the English psychologist observed that playing lies outside the individual “it is not inner psychic reality. Thus, play consists of the child collecting objects or phenomena from external reality and using them in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality.”⁴ Viewing can be a playful activity, as theater and media theorist Maaïke Bleeker argues: “What seems to be just “there to be seen” is, in fact, rerouted through memory and fantasy, caught up in threads of the unconscious and entangled with the passions. Vision, far from being the “noblest of the senses,” appears to be irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. More than that, seeing appears to alter the thing seen and to transform the one seeing, showing them to be profoundly intertwined in the event that is visuality.”⁵

The collages mounted on cut acrylic sheets reflect Bleeker’s argument about the irrational inconsistent and undependable sense that is sight. They allude to places, scenes, figures, but refrain from giving the any absolute descriptors, they are abstractions, playing with our

⁴ Winnicott, D. W. Essay. In *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: a Study of the First Not-Me Possession*

⁵ Bleeker, M., Sherman, *Performance and phenomenology: Traditions and transformations.*

perception. They shimmer as light reflects off the glittered gel pen marked surface and figure ground relationships are swapped. This inconsistent mark is reminiscent of a holographic or “shiny” trading card. Each one of these is a portal into a particular time and place. At times they are a jewel like world with a colorful glow. Other times, when the light and angle are altered, they lose this quality. This interplay between the light and marks acts as a subtle reminder for the mark’s importance. These collages are self-referential to works I have made in the past and to themselves. The process starts with photographing a drawing, printing it, composing a new drawing, photographing that one and printing the result. This final print is then cut and drawn on one last time before mounting onto its final resting place. They keep a record of earlier works dating back several years buried under the glittery shimmer of their new life. A history of drawing made for this moment. The importance of a moment is heightened when viewing these collages. The quality of light play that happens when they shimmer in a ray of light creates an aura of precious objecthood.

This precious objecthood can be seen throughout many works within the show. Primarily within these collages mounted on acrylic and their counter parts, the laminated drawing fragments. The idea that something can be picked up and shimmered in the light as if some precious object that no other can possess is a quality, I look to achieve within this work. It is a feeling related to collecting and coveting objects. Trading cards, coins and just about anything you can collect has this aura. A sense of awe, wonder and admiration that strikes as the holder examines the precious object against the light. This sensibility is promoted through the glitter, the tightness of the mark making and the lamination of the drawings.

Triangles and House Paint (Material and Matter)

Images from my childhood inspired much of the work in this exhibition. I grew up in an old house that called for many repairs. Most of these repairs were carried out by my parents. Looking back, I see the similarities of my parents fixing up an old house and myself as a child playing. Both actions are a way of projecting the internal onto the external. An optimistic search in pursuit of something better. The works in this exhibition are created through a majority of household material. Insulation foam, a barrier material that separates the inside from the outside. A material that lives in the liminal. The cut-out forms on casters are made from this material. Their operation within the gallery is to act as a set piece one that the viewer can engage with on a scale familiar to their own. Some are reminiscent of foliage, trees, fires, mountains. General suggestions to shape and form. This allows the viewer to project themselves onto these objects. Routing their memory and fantasy to complete the image.

Throughout the work in the exhibition, you will find many shapes, but no other is as prominent as the triangle. At least for now at the time of writing this, triangles are my favorite shape. Prior to this exhibition if you were to ask me what my favorite shape is I would not have an answer. Possibly it might have been the rectangle for its consistency and familiarity it has in our daily life. Unlike the rectangle, triangles are one of the most stable shapes. For me, the triangle has come to represent a few things. One is the accumulation of a byproduct in the rough form of a triangle, I have come to call this formation a mound. These triangular and mound like formations could be the byproduct of play, thinking of the dirt dug up when I was a child. It could also be the by-product of labor. A pile of leaves is the result of a few hours of handling a rake. Triangles have also come to represent the trinity of stability. The stability I felt growing up and learning alongside my sisters. The triangle sits as an effigy, a representation of the work of

childhood and the influence and importance of the structure created around three individuals growing up alongside each other. Throughout this work you will find many triangles. Some are more mound-like with curves and more akin to a hill or mountain. Some are without a doubt the most triangle triangles I was able to recreate. In short, triangles represent growth. With an accumulation of marks that eventually form a triangle (mound) the start is always uncertain, but there is optimism in the action of creating each one and watching their potential as they grow.

The palette is inspired from aspects of domestic life. The colors used to paint the sculptures originate from paint samples discarded from home projects. Some of these paint samples come from the people around me who are currently remodeling or painting their homes, others come from a selection of paint sample discards from the hardware store. These colors are agreeable, nothing is too harsh or too bold. Choosing the right color to paint the walls of a kitchen is not easy, there are many casualties along the way. In the hardware store some of these samples never make it out to their intended consumers as they were slightly off hue. I like this idea of a search for perfection and the casualties that amass along the way. Not too dissimilar from the number of selfies found in your camera roll versus the minuscule number that make it out into the world, or how when removing shelves in a home can reveal all the layers of paint from years gone by, all the different versions of someone's perfect wall color covered by the next occupants. Optimistic and a little flawed.

Play, Drawing and Adhocism

I view drawing as having a particularly important relationship to time and a useful tool when thinking about how I can prolong a moment. It also possesses the freedom, movement and exploration inherent in play.

Play is free, is in fact freedom.

Play is not "ordinary" or "real" life.

Play is distinct from "ordinary" life both as to locality and duration.

Play creates order, is order. Play demands order absolute and supreme.

Play is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it.

- Johan Huizinga "Homo Ludens"⁶

Often, when I am drawing, I do not have a road map, an under drawing or sketch to work from. It is a series of marks in response to the mark before it. I engage in an act of total play with no objective other than to create an accumulation of marks. I could call this automatic drawing, mindless scribbling, or something of that nature, but I consider it play. There are times within the making process that calls for an end goal or objective when I encounter these moments in the studio, I see the play and fusion state merging into ad hoc methods of construction. This method of working, when problems are actively being solved in the moment leads to surprising solutions. The phrase "ad hoc" could refer to several things; a committee arranged in response to a particular issue i.e., an Ad Hoc Committee to address a certain issue. Issue is presented, a committee is arranged and after a solution is found the committee dissolves. The ad hoc action does not live on. Only for the moment it is needed. It could also relate to a mode of direct action as in an ad hoc corkscrew fashioned out of a screw and pliers. A solution created in response to a need for an action. I prefer thinking of it in relation to its translation from Latin "For this" or "for

⁶ Huizinga, J. *Homo ludens*.

this situation.” A response to a situation in the moment. I see drawing as having ad hoc tendencies. In this mode of making, every move is decided by the move before it. Through this way of drawing the mark builds up and flows together in a series of lines and marks that are related in their response to one another.

A drawing as discussed above is a series of moment interconnected through the hand and the life of the draftsman, the interaction that happens when I am drawing in a kind of automatic fashion where each mark is a response to the last activates a sensibility within the work that is ad hoc. The flow of linework is not predetermined it builds up. Creating mounds and channels of marks in vibrating and creating pathways and channels for each mark that comes after it. Drawing in this sense is ad hoc. Each new mark acts a response to the previous mark and will call for a response from the one that comes after. I see ad hoc methods of making as an engagement within the paratelic and telic motivational states. It inhabits the liminal space between goal-oriented objectives. The use of adhocism to achieve a work of art is nothing new to the art world. The work of Sara Sze follows some of this modality. In speaking with Phoung Bui in 2010 when asked about the use of blue tape Sze replied “It’s at once incredibly useful as a practical tool and also relates to the very idea of temporality, desperation, improvised construction. It makes you feel that these objects could be made by anyone who would put in the time and effort.. You don’t know how it stays together.”⁷ New Museum's 2008 exhibition “Unmonumental” which centered around objects from a sculptural point of view featured torn, fragmented objects implying the kind of disregard of finish that Raphael Rubinstein speaks of in

⁷ Earnest, Jarrett, Lucas Zwirner, and Phong Bui. “Tell Me Something Good: Artist Interviews from the Brooklyn Rail.” In *Tell Me Something Good: Artist Interviews from the Brooklyn Rail*, 445–46. New York, NY: David Zwirner Books, 2017.

his essays on Provisional Painting⁸. All of these references have a kind of casual energy about them, one that does not hide process behind polish.

Working Towards Beauty and Addressing Flaws

As I mentioned above, a large part of creating this body of work included self-editing and an embrace of the idea that a search for perfection will result in a number of casualties, works lost, painted over, forgotten or simply edited out. The capitalist realism of our contemporary life does not have time for play or for mistakes. This is not absolute, but it goes without saying that past a certain age despite its cognitive and behavioral benefits, many of us eventually exchange play for pursuit of the more immediately tangible. A question I consider often is what flaws or accidents or unintentional by-products of the process do I allow to make it to the final stages. The foam cut outs have lived through many variations. Painted over and over in search of the right look. It is a type of curation of self if I were to embrace every flaw and mistake made along the way they simply would not look halfway pleasing to the eye. I want to make things that are pleasing to the eye. I want to feel good while making and feel the same kind of energy when looking. There was a time when I questioned this self-editing behavior now, I see it as another natural reaction to my earlier moves. I might not take 10 pictures to get just the right one, but I may take 2 or three and I am okay acknowledging this in my work, even as it may be at odds with a pure embrace of the beauty in the imperfections. Thinking about this process as I painted foam cut outs over and over brought me to the realization that the reductive mark was just as

⁸ Rubinstein, Raphael. "Provisional Painting." *Art in America*, 2009.

valid as any other. The editing and covering were still a search as authentic as any mark in a drawing. With each coat a bit of optimism that this fresh layer would be the last.

Reflection

Large Grassy Mound, that is the name of the work that drove most of the work within *Optimistic and Flawed*. It is a collage mounted on clear acrylic with white spray paint obscuring the negative space of the acrylic creating a milky flat void that closely hugs the collage. The edges of *Large Grassy Mound* are rough. They are cut by hand. Only a few hand cut acrylic made it into the show. This one was the first I made of its kind. This work in particular embodies the aspects and criteria for success that I have outlined above. It is a result of ad hoc making. A response to a thought in the moment, a need to give these collages a place to live that did not close them off with a frame. The acrylic and the collage came together in a moment. The edges of the acrylic were cut by a rotary tool. A rough line made in sharpie can still be seen where the initial objective for the cut was made. The actual cut however is several inches above and fails to follow the round curve dictated by the sharpie. It would be easy to cast this off as a prototype, or proof of concept for future works, and in many ways, it does hold those roles, but it is also one of the most precious works within the show. It embodies the honesty of the hand. The intention can be seen through the not so elegant attempt. This work is the strongest in my eyes for two reasons, its not easily replaceable in my collection and I can visibly see the process of play and learning taking place within it. Full of optimism.

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