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The weight of knowing

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THE WEIGHT OF KNOWING

by

Andrew Michael Casto

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Bunny McBride

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Andrew Michael Casto

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine
Arts degree in Art at the May 2010 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Bunny McBride, Thesis Supervisor

David Dunlap

Steve McGuire

Michael Perrone

Mat Rude

To Heidi, Amari, and Laney

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION……1

THE WEIGHT OF KNOWING…….……..2

INTRODUCTION

My current body of work follows an autobiographical inquiry into the formal relationships objects, bodies, and relics undergo when subjected to the downward pull of gravity.

Gravity in this context serves as a metaphor for the responsibilities of parenthood balanced with Studio Art practice in daily life.

I choose to see this accumulation of responsibility as a condition of refinement, as opposed to one of entropic deformation. Within this framework lies a rich and varied life experience which has the power to inform one's artwork, parenting, and livelihood.

The following is a detailed look into the responsibilities I carry into the studio. My hope is that it is uninhibited and honest, and gives the reader a sense of who I am and have been as I create this work.

THE WEIGHT OF KNOWING

I started in Ohio.

We left it all. All we had built and dreamed. We sold our souls daily for a plan we knew was naïve; above us really. It was all we knew to do. We were young.

Ohio.

By the river, where it flooded sometimes.

Gasoline is what I remember.

My father came every weekend. Spent money. Helped. Talked. Loved. He is an anchor of remembrance, a man and a truck of tools. We fed him conversation, sandwiches, and jobs around the property.

And when it was time to go I signed everything. I signed our names: Andrew, Dad, 6/05… Andrew, Heidi, Dad… 8/07, etc. Work like this should be claimed. It meant something in the doing… not so much in the product, but in the making of it.

That is the premise I start from. That is the learning I did.

We left it, and I am still sorry. But it was agreed that we must. Chances are few and we had one. It was our responsibility to take it.

I learned about responsibility when I swept floors and cleaned the bathroom at Gray's shoe store.

Bob Gray was a man of responsibility, and notoriety, for a shoe salesman. Gray was a war vet, Korean I think. His receipt book at the counter said “RPG” on it... his initials.

Ironic.

I didn’t get it then, and only just realized it now.

My book said “AMC.” I felt official.

I sold maybe 3 pairs of shoes in 2 years of work.

Mr. Gray caught me lying once, about needing to miss work. I wanted to be with my girlfriend, to come home from a trip a day late. I told him something else, maybe that I had a school function. He said he thought about firing me, but couldn’t because he liked me, believed in me, wanted to keep me working in his shop. It was a second chance from a straight shooter.

He was teaching me a lesson the whole time.

I thought I was learning to sell shoes for $4.25 an hour, sweeping the floors, washing the windows, and vacuuming. But we were friends, and I needed his help with discipline. That was clear to him I think. It is clear to me now.

I remember the grit of the comet in the sink. The smell of the ammonia for the bathroom floor. Shining the brass drain fixture, Windex on the mirror.

Mr. Gray told me about the first time he ever drove 75 in a car, on the way to a burlesque show. He was reckless, he said. Young. He thought they were going to die. He was scared, but excited. It was 1950.

Fast.

There was a yearning for the past in his voice. His eyes twinkled when he told me.

Tears almost.

Now my eyes twinkle... tears sometimes.

Youth is a thing of beauty, but only insomuch as we can memorialize.

Our act of remembrance.

Our memories each precious.

Today I remember my dog, Laney Roxanne Casto.

She was a thing of beauty, a stallion in full glory

.

She was 6 and a half years old, 75 lbs, and black with brown markings. She was fit, proud, and joyful in everything she did. Yesterday I had to give her away to the animal shelter, and it nearly destroyed me.

My love for this creature was like any boy's love for his first dog, even though I am old for a "boy". She had been with us nearly seven years.

Since she was a puppy.

Now the house is empty and quiet.

Unprotected.

There is no tail thumping to wake the baby.

No shit to pick up in the yard.

No hair in the carpet.

The things that used to bother me, and annoy me about her are misnomers. They are our love on a cellular level. Building blocks discarded.

Laney bit Amari on the face yesterday. It was nobody's fault, except mine maybe. Amari crawls fast now. She loves the dog. Laney is unsure about Amari, nervous, and fully aware that her place in the pack has been shifted farther down. The whole eight months of Amari's life has been a trial for Laney.

A learning to unlearn.

Unlearning all I had taught her about her place in our family, and about the rules she lived by. Laney couldn't unlearn the rough play that was so much fun when she was a puppy. She growls and plays tug of war. She runs around the dining room table to play keep away from me, and most recently from Amari, who is no match for Laney's stallion gallop.

I set my soup bowl down for Laney to lick.

I am the good cop.

Laney licked the bowl, focused on her treat.

A reward for her patience.

Amari crawled fast to touch Laney, who was surprised.

She reacted the only way she knows how, and snarled and nipped Amari's cheeks.

No blood.

No breaking the skin.

Small bruises later.

Amari cried hard, but not for long. Everything seemed fine, and I reunited them, and got Laney to lick Amari's face in forgiveness.

And then I remembered the time the cocker spaniel growled at Laney, and she nearly ripped his leg off. It cost us $898.00. I wrote the check.

Or the time I let her out front of the apartment with no leash, and she nearly killed a dog who just happened to be in our yard at the wrong moment. His name was Bear.

I remembered my wife's hesitance, and her worry around the dog ever since the first moment of latent aggression arose.

I remembered also my promise to myself:

That if I ever feared for Amari's safety, or If Laney ever did any worse than growl at her… or used her teeth… I would have to, no matter what, choose my daughter's safety.

I would have to give up my first dog.

I would have to take her myself to the shelter, hug her, kiss her, and let her go.

Because she is a dog, and my daughter is a child.

And Mr. Gray taught me about responsibility.

When you are responsible for things, people, and animals, and they depend on you for their livelihood, you have to have to make hard choices, and follow your head and your heart.

My heart tells me that I love the dog so much.

But my heart also tells me that my daughter's needs have to be first.

There was no choice.

I called Heidi. I had thought about not telling her it happened, and keeping Laney. I knew this was foolish, but I am greedy, and want both my dog and my daughter. I told her, and she cried.

I cried.

We agreed.

And I took Laney to the shelter.

I took her, and her bed, and her favorite toy, and I gave her to a nice pretty woman. When I was done filing out the form about Laney's personality, likes and dislikes, idiosyncrasies, and habits, she took her from me. I told her I loved her, and she licked me some, and that was all.

It costs twenty five dollars to give your dog to the shelter in Iowa City. I paid them $150, and told them I wanted to make a donation.

It didn't make me feel better.

When it was time to go I asked if I could see Laney one more time, and the woman told me that it was a bad idea. That seeing her again would only confuse her, and make her think that I was always coming back. I agreed with her, and understood that Laney was not my dog anymore. It was the hardest thing I have ever done.

And I have run the marathon in Cincinnati.

Laney always chased flashlight beams, and shadows. It was my fault. It was my fault because when she was a puppy, I thought it was cute and funny that she chased the flashlight. I bought a small laser pointer to exercise her with. She had so much

energy. Our yard was two acres then, and I could stand on the back porch with the laser pointer, and run her around the yard full speed until she was totally spent.
It made her calmer in the evenings then, and helped with the chewing.

And ever since then she has loved flashlights. She hears the clicking sound and looks right at the ground, waiting for the beam. She licks the carpet wet when a shadow falls in just the right way. I don't do it anymore though, because I think it's bad to feed her neurosis. It clearly consumes her. But the flashlight reminds me of her, because she was so quirky and interesting. It was her vice, and she coveted it, and loved it.

So I went to the tattoo parlor last night, called Nemesis, which I heard was classy, and I asked them to tattoo me with a flashlight with her name on it. I asked for it on my left shoulder, so the beam would point to my heart.

It still burns a little today.

It took and hour and cost $60.00.

Now Laney is always with me. She is here now, in my memories, and on my arm.

She will always be my first dog. So beautiful and strong.

And it was my fault.

I encouraged the light chasing.

And I encouraged the rough play.

I hit her when she was bad.

And I praised her when she growled at suspicious looking men.

I thought I was helping her to understand who to protect us from.

I thought the hitting was the only discipline that would work.

I didn't know what I was doing. She was my first dog.

She is a happy and joyful creature, except when there are other dogs around. Her happiness was so overwhelming that I think the aggression had to be put there. I don't think it was natural to her. I think it came from me, and my aggression, and my inexperience.

And now it is a part of her. A reaction that comes out every once and a while, just when your guard is down, and you only think of her as a sweet and beautiful dog who sleeps most of the time.

And then she bites your daughter's face, and cowers and feels sorry about it afterwards.

But your daughter still cries, and your wife is still frightened, and you know you have to make the hard choice.

Even if it is your fault.

Even if it isn't right for Laney.

And you give her away.

You put her life and everything she knows in the care of strangers. Like giving your child to a daycare, permanently.

You try to not notice her absence at home.

You try to tell yourself that it's what you had to do, and that this time we were lucky no one was hurt.

You try to feel ok,

You try to work in your studio, and write your thesis, and enjoy your daughter.

This is pressure… weight.

And this is the responsibility of a parent.

And this is love.

Mr. Gray would be proud of me. My dad is proud of me. My daughter is happy and full of life and discovery. These are my consolations, and this my love for my dog, and my daughter.