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What Do They Want From Me and What Do I Want for Myself?

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WHAT DO THEY WANT FROM ME

AND WHAT DO I WANT FOR MYSELF?

by

Joshua Logan Dailey

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

August 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Robert Glasgow

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

Joshua Logan Dailey

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art at the August 2013 graduation.

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CHAPTER I

CARROT CAKE

Once I cracked 4 eggs into a large bowl with 1 1/4 cups of vegetable oil, 2 cups of white sugar, 2 teaspoons of vanilla extract, 2 cups of all-purpose flour, 2 teaspoons of baking soda, 2 teaspoons of baking powder, 1/2 a teaspoon of salt, and 2 teaspoons of ground cinnamon. I mixed all of these ingredients together and then stirred in 3 cups of grated carrots and folded in 1 cup of chopped pecans. I poured the resulting mixture into a greased and floured baking pan. I placed the baking pan in an oven that was heated to 350 degrees Fahrenheit.

Fifty minutes later, the ingredients listed above had combined to become a carrot cake. Nothing short of a miracle can ever bring those ingredients back.

CHAPTER II

CONVENTIONS

I arrived in Iowa City in August of 2010 to pursue my graduate degree in printmaking. Since that time, there have been numerous occasions where I have been asked to write about my work or have been asked to explain the ideas behind my work. On many of those occasions I have been told that my explanation left something to be desired. I am not sure how to resolve this issue because sometimes I am not exactly sure what my intentions are and sometimes I don't feel like there is a satisfactory explanation for what my intentions are. I am interested in these scenarios where the commentary surrounding an artwork might be insufficient or even counter-productive to the understanding of that artwork. I would like to examine the issues that might accompany the use of the English language (or any other spoken language) to describe works of art that might defy or attempt to defy explanation.

There must be some cases where words are not adequate for describing a work of art. I am not talking about the times where it has been deemed that language has been used poorly or improperly. I am not talking about grammar or spelling mistakes or the discussion surrounding a work being structured in a confusing or unhelpful manner. I am talking about cases where considerable effort and consideration have been put into explaining a work and yet there is still something lacking. Here, it is important to make the distinction between the artist feeling that something is lacking in their own description and the audience feeling that something is lacking in the artist's description.

Should the artist feel that something is lacking when they cannot explain the reason for making an artwork? The truth of the matter is that the impetus for a work may

be vague or unknown. There are often multiple and disparate sources of inspiration. When this is the case, it seems understandable that there would be difficulty in describing the resulting art. However, it has been my experience that the artist is expected to know where their artwork comes from and have a clear intention for making that artwork. Indeed, there have been many cases where I have felt as though I were giving a "sales pitch of intention," as it were.

The expectation that your intentions will eventually have to be "sold" necessarily influences the approach to creating the work. This influence does not have to be negative, but in my experience it imposes a more restrictive framework from which to build ideas. For some artists these restrictions may be helpful, but for me it seems that there is a greater potential for success (however that may be measured) when there are fewer restrictions to the thought process.

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT CREATOR IN THE SKY

"What happened?"

"You fell off the ladder while you were cleaning your gutters."

"Am I dead?"

"Technically, yes."

"I always wondered what the Great Creator In The Sky looked like (Figure 1)."

"Now you know."

"There is something I want to ask you – when you were creating the universe, how did you decide what the sunrise would look like?"

"I did not decide what the sunrise would look like. The sunrise looks that way because that is the only way that it can look."

"Oh. Well it is difficult for me to believe that something so – so – I don't know. It is difficult for me to understand what you mean. The sight of the sun rising is so transfixing – so spellbinding – so magnificent. It must have been created that way for a reason. It must have been created out of some type of understanding."

"Give me your hand Julia."

Julia extended her hand to The Great Creator In The Sky. The Great Creator In The Sky took Julia's hand and then Julia understood the nature of the sunrise and many other magnificent things.

"It is time for you to go home Julia."

Julia woke up to the sound of footsteps in the hallway. She was at home. She was in her own bed. She had sustained injuries from her fall. She remembered meeting

the Great Creator In The Sky. She remembered that they had touched. She remembered the joy of understanding many magnificent things, but she could not remember what any of those magnificent things were.

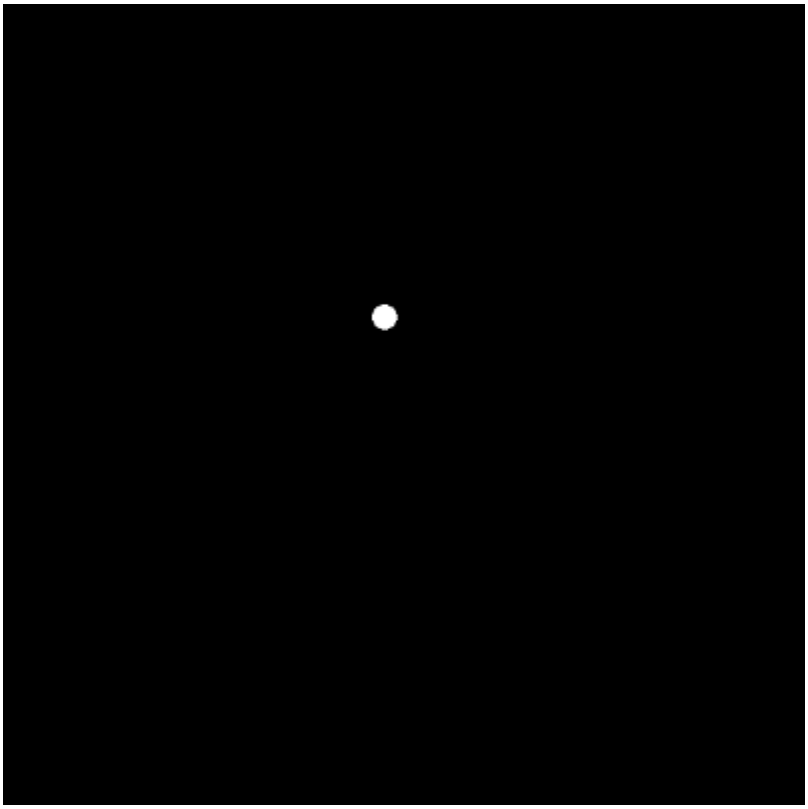

Figure 1. Julia's thought process as she imagines the appearance of The Great Creator In The Sky.

CHAPTER IV

RETURN TO CONVENTION

I might look at a piece of art and it might be so beautiful that I do not have any words for it. I might meet the artist who made the beautiful piece of art and they might say something about the work that made me like the work more, but they might also say something that made me like the work less. There might also be situations where I disregard what the artist has to say because I think they are full of shit. Or I might think the artist is confused about his or her own work and I will make my own decisions about their work. How do you know that an artist is being honest about their work when they speak about it? How do you know that an artist understands the significance of their own work?

Some artists say things to encourage people to like their work more. I think that an artist should say what they believe about their work and not worry about what will happen when people hear what they have to say. That is probably more complicated than it sounds, but how else will we know what the artist actually thinks? If the artist is confused about why they made something, they should sound confused and they might also be difficult to understand.

In an academic environment it is understood that the artist must be able to speak and write about their work. However, I think there are many cases where the meaning of an artist's work is lost, or at least partly lost, when the artist speaks or writes about their work. In fact, I feel at some level there may be an *inevitable* loss of meaning when an artist discusses their work. This is not to say you can't or won't get more enjoyment out of a piece of art after hearing the artist talk about that work. What I mean is that

wherever there is a translation, essentially, some of the meaning is lost. A book translated from another language will never be quite the same as reading it in the language that it was originally written. Likewise, I believe that something is lost when "translating" an artwork into words. An artist will never be able to convey the full range of emotions, sensations, and ideas (conscious or unconscious) that went into the creation of a work.

When an artist sets about creating a work and the accompanying meaning that is generated by that work, it seems that there are two easily distinguishable approaches. The first approach is to clearly conceive of an idea and set about making the work based on that idea. In this approach, the idea behind the work might be conveyed or translated to the viewer with great clarity, as the language behind the idea has been thought out before-hand. In the second approach, the idea behind the work may only be loosely conceived of or, arguably, not conceived of at all. In this case the artist may set out working based on raw emotion or intuition. It seems that in this second case an accurate translation of the concept behind the work would be far more difficult. It is also more likely in the second case that the artwork will be negatively impacted by introducing a concrete explanation. What may have started as something verging on intangible might be forced into a more tangible realm (and also farther from the artist's original impetus) by the introduction of words. This raises a couple of questions. First, how much importance should we place on maintaining the original, ethereal impetus behind the work? Secondly, how much is the viewer likely to get out of such a work in the first place?

Some might argue that an inability to explain an artwork is an indication that the work is deficient in some way. But, aren't ideas that cannot be expressed in words ideal candidates visual representation? There are many examples of words for which there is no good translation from one language to another – isn't it possible that an artwork might describe something for which there is no good translation? Might this lack of translatability be where the beauty of the work lies? Might the introduction of words push the work out of this untranslatable sphere and into a less interesting space? How difficult a work is to put into words might even speak about certain desirable qualities in that work.

In today's academic art climate we are led to believe that a work has not completely come into being until it is written or spoken about – the work is an inseparable combination of artist creation and the discourse surrounding that creation. What does this mean for art forms like graffiti, where the artist may not play a role in this discourse except for in the creation of the art itself? Is the graffiti artist less of an artist if they do not speak about their work and have an artist statement prepared? I love graffiti, but 999 times out of 1000 I will never hear what the artist has to say about their work. This does not diminish the power of the work for me; in fact that may be one of the great sources of power for the work.

CHAPTER V

THE SMALL BLACK DOT

Once there was an artist who lived in a remote village. She lived in a small hut made from mud, straw and sticks. From her hut, she could hear the rambling of a clear stream.

One morning, the artist set out to make an artwork that could be understood on every level, by any person, down to the very last detail. She decided that her piece would be titled "The Small Black Dot." To create the piece she would simply paint a black dot, on a white piece of paper, exactly one inch in diameter.

The artist took a clean, white sheet of paper out of a wooden box that she kept various supplies inside of. She used a compass with a graphite pencil attached to one end to draw a circle that was exactly one inch in diameter. When the time came, she would fill in the graphite circle perfectly with black paint. She placed the piece of paper with the circle on it back into the wooden box and placed the lid back on the box.

The woman then set out to clear her mind of all distractions. She meditated continuously for 367 days, stopping only for food, water, sleep, and to use her outhouse. She woke up on the 368th day with her mind perfectly clear. She walked over to her wooden box and pulled out the sheet of paper that she had drawn the graphite circle on. She carefully removed a small, glass bottle of black paint from the wooden box and took out a small paintbrush made with fine horsehair bristles. She gently shook the bottle of paint and once it had settled, she removed the cork that was sealing the bottle. She dipped the brush into the paint and carefully filled in the circle. She made a perfect black

dot; none of the paint went outside of the graphite circle. She waited for the paint to dry and then carefully put the piece of paper back in the wooden box.

The next morning, the artist packed some supplies and her wooden box in a canvas knapsack. She traveled downstream in her canoe for several weeks until she reached the nearest city. It was a sizable city with several places she could exhibit work. She made this long and difficult journey each time she had new work to share. She hoped a gallery would be willing to exhibit her piece, *The Small Black Dot.*

She had worked with the galleries in this large city before and had no trouble finding a venue for *The Small Black Dot.* She left a detailed artist statement at the venue outlining her ambition to create a work that could be fully understood on all levels. In creating such a work, she would ensure that her intentions as an artist were fully comprehended and nothing was left unexplained. In her eyes, this flawless transmission of idea to audience was greatest feat an artist could hope to achieve.

Much to the dismay of the artist, her work was met with harsh criticism. Critics wondered why the black dot in her image was not perfectly centered on the piece of white paper. They wanted to know why the paper was not a circle, or a square, or why the black dot was not simply cut out of a black piece of paper. One critic labeled her work "deeply flawed conceptually," claiming that, though admirable, the thought of perfect transmission of idea to audience was an impossibility. There were others still who understood what the artist was attempting, but simply were not moved by her work in any way. Then, there was what many saw as the greatest flaw in her work – in order to complete this perfect transmission of idea to viewer, the artist required the viewer to paint their own black dot, on their own white sheet of paper. In order for the viewer to fully

understand her intentions, they were also to meditate however long was required for a "perfectly clear mind," before painting the black dot.

Critics and audience alike bemoaned the many variables that could conceivably interrupt the perfect transmission of idea to audience. One man claimed that he could never paint a circle as nicely as the artist had done. A woman who saw the show said she didn't even know how to meditate. Another man wondered why he would go through all the trouble to understand the intentions of some artist he didn't know or care about. Another woman said that she was perfectly capable of clearing her mind and painting a black dot, but what would it do for her community?

Upon the closing of the artist's exhibition, she put *The Small Black Dot* back into her wooden box, gathered her belongings, and returned home the same way she had come to the city. She had much time to consider what had been said about her work. Not all of the reviews were negative; some people had been profoundly affected by her work.

When the artist arrived back at her home she removed *The Small Black Dot* from her wooden box and pinned it to the interior wall of her hut (Figure 2). Every artwork she had created had its own specially designated place on the wall of her hut. She examined each of her works and for a moment, felt quite discouraged. Then, almost as if she had been jolted into action, she sat down and began working on her next piece.

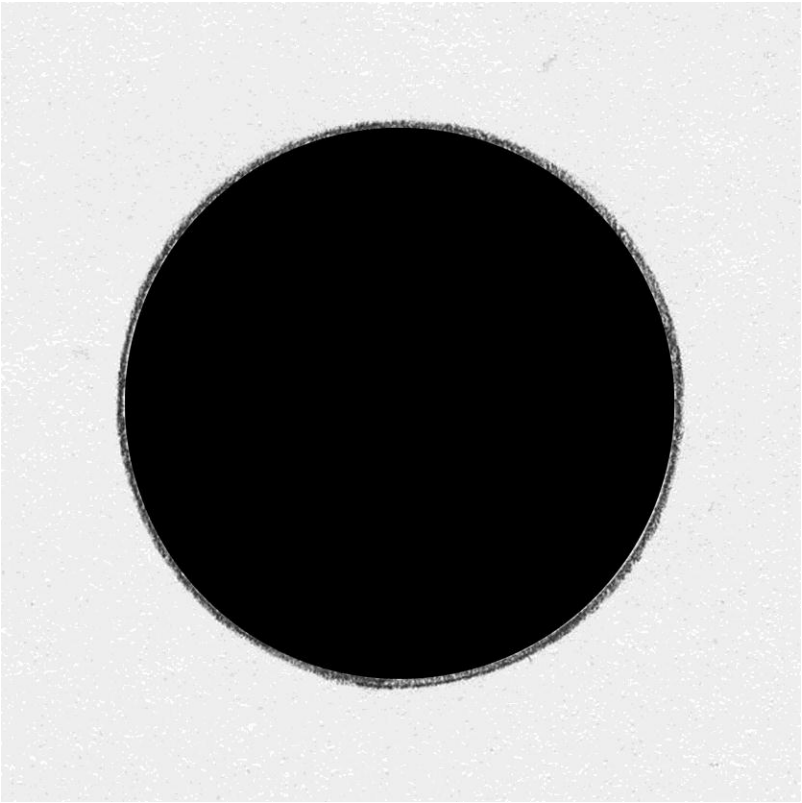

Figure 2. Detail of the artwork titled *The Small Black Dot.*

CHAPTER VI

SLIGHT RETURN TO CONVENTION

Lots of people are very self-conscious. Artists are people – except for when they are elephants that paint with their trunks or monkeys that paint with their fingers or computers. Sometimes I think that artist statements were invented because people are self-conscious. The artist wants to make sure that people know that they are smart and not clowns (or they don't present an artist statement because they are afraid people with think their ideas are clownish). The viewer does not want to feel lost, because feeling lost is uncomfortable, so they also need the artist statement. Some viewers don't give a flying rat's ass about artist statements because they can see the artwork just fine. I don't think there is anything wrong with that. Sometimes I read artist statements. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes they shed light. Sometimes they are the cause of darkness.

CHAPTER VII

THE SUNRISE

Once there was a middle-aged man who lived in a small town with his mother. As long as the man could remember, his mother had been waking up early in the morning to watch the sunrise. She would sit on the front steps of the porch where she had an unobstructed view of the sun rising beyond an immense field of grass and wildflowers. Sometimes, if the man was awake and had nothing to do, he would watch the sunrise with his mother. Sometimes she would say to him, “isn’t it beautiful?” and the man would simply nod his head “yes”. This would always make the man feel sad because he didn’t really think there was anything special about the sunrise; he just nodded his head “yes” because he knew his mother liked the sunrise so much.

One day the man woke up and went outside to watch the sunrise, but his mother was not on the front steps of the porch. The man went to his mother’s room to find that she had passed away in her sleep.

The next morning, the man went outside to watch the sunrise (Figure 3). On that day, for the first time, he understood why his mother enjoyed the sunrise so much.

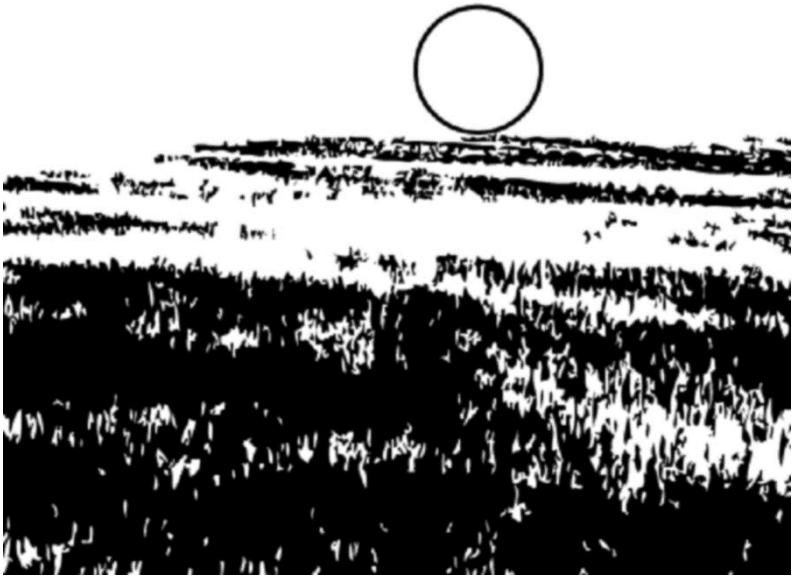

Figure 3. The sun rising over an immense field of grass and wildflowers.

CHAPTER VIII

THINGS MUST BE NEATLY PACKAGED

Are there cases where the artist statement is irretrievably imbedded in the artwork? Is it conceivable that a work could be made in such a way that talking about it would destroy the piece? These are the kinds of questions that interest me as I move towards the next phase in my progression as an artist.

It seems strange to me that something like art, which has its roots in expression and creativity, would have such dull and uninventive conventions surrounding the discussion of artwork. I think it should be kept in mind that there are many outstanding alternatives to artist statements – I knew an artist that would read someone else's short story when asked to talk about his work. I feel that the academic conventions surrounding artist statements and the "selling" of intention cut off many potentially fruitful avenues of expression. They encourage the artist to think in a certain way, necessarily constraining the creative process. Artists must consider more creative ways of disseminating their ideas. We must make room for the possibility that certain works cannot be resolved through conventional discourse. We must make room for the unexplainable.

CHAPTER IX

THE INSURANCE SALESMAN AND THE ASTROPHYSICIST

Once there was a young insurance salesman who enjoyed the sunrise very much. The young man lived happily with his mother, who was an astrophysicist.

Every morning the young man would drive east on a long, straight highway to get to work. On this particular morning, the young man was driving into one of the most fantastic sunrises he had ever seen.

When the young man returned home in the evening he told his mother about the sunrise. She said she had seen it too and that it was, "very impressive." Then she said, "Isn't the world an amazing place? Who can say why the world has turned out the way it is today? I mean, the sunrise is nothing more than the sun coming back into view after another day has ended and yet it has the capability to leave us totally amazed." Upon hearing this, the young man was struck with a terrible emptiness. "A sunrise is nothing more than the sun coming back into view," he said in a low, monotone voice. It was if a spell had been cast upon him.

The next morning the young man got into his car and put his key into the ignition but he did not start the car. He just sat silently and did not move. After several minutes had passed he reluctantly turned the key and started the car. He drove east on the highway; the sun would be rising soon. He saw the warm glow of the sun working its way above the horizon. Then he simply saw the sun come back into view (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The sun coming back into view.