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Spring 2015

Slave castle

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Recommended Citation

Deaton, Thomas Edward. "Slave castle." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2015.
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SLAVE CASTLE

by

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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 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Anita Jung

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Graduate College
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Thomas Edward Deaton

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the
thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in
Art at the May 2015 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Anita Jung, Thesis Supervisor

Robert Glasgow

Laurel Farrin

Susan White

To no one. This is born alone, die alone shit.

To me death is not a fearful thing. It's living that's cursed.

Jim Jones

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to, in no particular order:

Ronnie Masters, Mom, Dad, James, Richard Wenrich, Jeramiah “Rub n Tug” Arneson, Ross Mazzupappa, Patrick Casey, Allison “Tequila Al” Rosh, Josh McDevitt, Sarika Sugla, Laura Lomas, Kristina Paabus, Tyler Watkins, Kelsye Fruge, Sara Delahoussaye, Marion Trosclair III, James Van Way III, Patrick Charles, Daniel Dekerlegand, Tim Livdalen, Chris Cormier (for missing while firing a rifle at me,) Woody Randall, Beardie, Weirdie, Jim Jones, Anita Jung, Laura Jorgensen, Brian Guidry, Brian Kelly, Tom Christison, Blake Ortego, Cami, James Franco, Red Gatorade, Red Gatorade Guy, MTV, Beavis, Butthead, Burger King, Jeremy Clarkson, Sid Chafetz, Warrington Colescott, John Fogerty, Philip Morris Co, Electric Wizard, Ramesses, Creepoid, Stump and Satan. Begrudgingly, Christine Peirce too.

Shout out to Danny Brown, Quelle Chris, Ghostface Killer, Yeezy, Mr. Ghetto, Big Freedia, R Kelly, El-P, and Killer Mike.

RIP Biggie and Tupac. Thank you.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The work described in this thesis is a series of narrative prints detailing the exploits of a criminally inclined religious cult. These prints encourage an open dialogue about the nature of religious practice and serve as a cautionary tale regarding absolute power and the importance of questioning authority and generally accepted beliefs.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up in South Louisiana, although I was not raised in a religious household, I was keenly aware of the influence and practice of religion around me. Religion existed as a mysterious and secretive organization that I felt strange not belonging to. Catholicism, which is arguably the strangest and most esoteric branch of Christianity, is the predominant religion practiced within the Acadiana area. As a child, I found the idea of the Holy Trinity, the Eucharist, and holidays such as Easter, Ash Wednesday, along with the season of Lent to be concepts that were both alien and difficult to understand.

As an adult, my interest in religion has not diminished, but now I have a better understanding of the things that confused me as a child. My work before moving to Iowa focused on images and ideas about ritual and superstition within mainstream religions. My current interests include more unusual influences such as witchcraft, Satanism, the occult, cult fringe groups and religious extremists.

SLAVE CASTLE

Slave Castle is a series of figurative prints whose images form a visual narrative depicting a fictional cult group's increasing perversion and eventual dissolution into criminal circumstances. I pick up the story after the cult has been established and existed for some time. They have pooled their savings to build and move into an isolated compound, the brainchild of the cult's founder, prophet, and leader. The subsequent prints detail the daily lives of the cult members and their lifestyle of hedonistic forced drug and alcohol abuse in addition to their absolute submission to the will and whims of their prophet who claims variously to be a direct line to God, an angel, Satan, and God himself.

The story ends as a member of the group begins questioning the prophet's judgment and increasingly erratic as well as paranoid behavior. Fearing for her personal safety as along with the health of her child, she places a clandestine phone call to her mother whom she has been estranged from for the duration of her time in the cult. The phone call is cut short, as the prophet had foreseen the potential undermining of his authority through her actions. Acting quickly, he decides to have her sacrificed as part of a religious ritual, making an example of her and the consequences for her lack of faith. Subsequently the members of the cult dismember and bury the body in accordance to their prophet's demands, implicating all of them as accomplices and active participants in the crime.

Weeks later, in response to a missing person's report filed by the victim's mother after finding her daughter unreachable by phone, police arrive at the compound and recognize it instantly as a drug den. A raid takes place and the narrative ends as the cultists are packed into squad cars and driven away.

In presenting this story, I encourage dialogues on the nature of organized religion, social conditioning, and the dehumanizing effects of prolonged drug usage. In their members, cult groups generally stress a lack of individuality, an unwillingness to question authority, and a willingness to submit to the will of a powerful figure. While behaving this way under the power of a cult leader or drug addiction is generally viewed in a negative light, many of these same qualities are prized (although phrased differently) in other parts of society and in more established religions. Replace "submission to a cult leader" with "submission to God" or "obeying the law" and you have a radically negative message transformed into a message generally held in a positive view by the large part of the average population. While a cult leader or the government is a human, he/she or they are going to be fallible, whereas a "god" is not. This is the primary disconnect for me, as all leaders are human. The primary difference between a cult and a religion is the perception held by conventional society and how much the cult breaks with the core values of popular belief.

Organized religions (for the most part) do not conflate the church leader into a god, and thus are subjects to the laws of man. Once a religious leader begins to believe he/she is above the law then society deems that religion to be dangerous, illegitimate and a cult. Religions become cults just as political leaders become tyrants. *Slave Castle* is a warning about the dangers of unchecked power and blind following.