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Why the ocean's near the shore

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University of Iowa

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WHY THE OCEAN'S NEAR THE SHORE

by

Alexander James Hanson

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: Associate Professor Isabel Barbuzza

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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

Alexander James Hanson

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: _____
Isabel Barbuzza, Thesis Supervisor

Sarah Kanouse

Anita Jung

Rachel Williams

For my mom, of course.

Oh, I would tell you why the ocean's near the shore, I could think of things I've never think
before, and then I'd sit and think some more.

The Scarecrow
If I Only Had A Brain, The Wizard of Oz

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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The following pages are thoughts and ideas that go through my head when creating art that is intended to be seen, analyzed and somewhat understood by an audience. Though there are some aspects contained within that may touch directly on how I make sculpture on a practical and aesthetic level, my hope is that this document will function more as a work that will provide the reader with a sense of hope as it relates to art making, that while what we do as makers can often seem pointless, we must have some kind of faith that art can be useful, and we ought to try to make sense out of things if we can. If there is any reason at all why I continue to make things, beyond general foolishness or to prevent from being bored, it lies somewhere said or unsaid within this document.

The title of this document, “Why the Ocean’s Near the Shore” comes from the song the Scarecrow sings in The Wizard of Oz “If I Only Had a Brain”, stating that if only he were smart enough he could tell Dorothy something meaningful like why this is the case; this may not be so impressive to someone with a brain, but for someone without, it is certainly profound.

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ROAST CHICKEN

My little brother is 25. He is quite possibly the best woodworker that has ever walked the face of the earth. He lives in Seattle where he fixes and builds guitars. Last December I decided instead of going home to celebrate Christmas with my parents, I would take a trip alone out to the west coast and spend a week with him. Often when I talk to either brother we always end up talking about food, things we have been cooking recently, strange things we are thinking about trying, etc. While in Seattle I tell my brother I'd like to go to the famous Pike Street Market, you know, the one where they throw fish. Other than the Market being an incredible place to see tourists, Christmas Eve by the water was a lovely sight; 50 degree weather, fresh seafood and vegetables, everything you could want. We decide, since it would be just him and I we were going to make a good couple of meals with stuff made from the Market as a gift to ourselves. Roast chicken and appropriate fixings were on the menu for Christmas day.

Through the evening, we cook and have good conversation. During our preparations, for some reason my brother starts to cut and juice a bag containing what must have been \$15 in limes, I assumed were for some quantity of cocktails. He tells me he is going to make a glaze out of the juice combined with something like a half a bottle of soy sauce, some flavored honey his roommate had, and a handful of chopped ginger and something else, maybe chili powder or something, for the \$30 dollar piece of wild salmon we bought for dinner that night. I tell him he can go to hell if he thinks he's going to put anything on my fish other than salt and pepper. After much argument, he unhappily agrees not to coat the salmon with the grey syrup boiling on the stove. We cooked, he

forgot about it, we ate the salmon with a nice salad and it was among one of the best meals I have ever had. The night progressed.

The next day was mainly spent prepping things for dinner. Sometime throughout the night my brother had decided the glaze he made was actually a marinade for the chicken. Having barely won the argument the night before over the exact same mixture, I conceded to his whim under the condition that the chicken would not taste like Chinese food. He assured me it wouldn't and we continued on with the prep. My brother proceeded to cram a few fist-full's of chopped onion up the poor chicken's backside, plop it into a Dutch Oven, douse it with the mixture, throw all the potatoes in the pot, slap a lid on it and throw it in the oven.

“You can't roast a chicken in a pot with a lid on it. Also those potatoes are going to soak up all that lime stuff and they're going to taste like that.”

“I've done this before, just do your stuff and I'll take care of this” he goes.

I continue with my *stuff*. Everything finishes. We bring it to the table to eat. I don't know if you have ever had boiled chicken before, but it leaves something to be desired, think wet, pale skin and dry meat. I am feeling a little bad for my brother as we start to eat, thinking he doesn't much care for the meal he has created for us for Christmas. I politely eat a piece and a helping of the lime potatoes when my brother says, “oh, that lime...that's *so* good.” I look at him as if he was crazy as he goes on “you can

really taste that soy too, isn't that awesome?" and lastly, "but I'm really not sold on the cranberry sauce, I don't think it really goes with the lime."

By the end of his raving over his genius creation, I am fuming. My brother with the inclusion of a few too many dissonant ingredients and a bit too much ego has effectively ruined what may have otherwise been a nice dinner. After eating and going over in my head what went wrong, I felt like it had something to do with art.

First, materials and concepts: limes are good, soy sauce is good, chicken is good, so why not do it all? Because we can all agree a certain material is "good" or has "a certain material quality" that we "like" or "enjoy", warrants its inclusion in everything we do? One of the best pieces of advice I got from a professor once was "you don't have to accomplish everything with one painting." Because we like traits in some art pieces such as absurdity, or humor, or honesty, or beauty, or nature, or uncertainty, or preciousness, does not mean they all need to be included every time we roast a chicken.

Second, the desire to make it taste like anything and everything: often with the inclusion of a variety of different mediums, methods and messages, a piece of art can take on a personality disorder. By trying to include Asian flavors on an otherwise French dish like roast chicken it can suffer from being "*kinda* this and *kinda* that" however doing neither very well. This discord is often spoken about as something desirably "interesting." However this friction is embodied in food in a very different way, because at the end of the day someone has to eat it, and since eating at least forces you to confront your true tastes by nature you have to put it in your mouth, it more vividly exemplifies what clashes. Just because we can make something using every flavor we have ever enjoyed, does not mean we need to.

Third, the ego: Food Network cooks have quite a lot in common with artists of our day – the effort of not only creating something, but creating something with their *own little twist*. It is this twist that makes the thing unique. The aesthetic Bobby Flay uses to brand his food is some kind of chili and cilantro oil. What if he makes a dish where cilantro oil would clash with the flavors? He would go ahead and put it on anyway, it is inevitable, that's the only way he knows how to plate food. I wonder if the quest for expressing individuality in cooking happened because somewhere along the line, some chef stopped thinking about the chicken and started thinking about themselves.

I have another plaguing thought. I can appreciate human inventiveness and the desire to employ true experimentation and play, and I do not believe harmony is the only thing one should seek when encountering or participating in the world, however, does this experimentation provide anything further than “*seeing what chicken can do*”? If this is the case creativity seems incredibly masturbatory. Do not get me wrong, I can appreciate a fine chili oil drizzled on a plate, however if we are simply chasing aesthetics do we somewhere along the line forget we are cooking a meal for someone? Is it not enough that we make good food? At what point were salt and pepper not enough?

INTENTIONAL IGNORANCE AND MAGIC

In my previous work I spent a heck of a lot of time looking for meaning in the wrong place. I realized this one day when I was sitting around by myself looking at a piece of ¼” plate steel I had welded together. After about 20 minutes or so I began to uncontrollably laugh at myself – I had been taking the pursuit of sculpture so seriously that I spent the better part of my night alone; looking at a piece of steel that didn’t care about me while I tried hard to figure out what it *really meant*. Once allowing myself to step back I realized what I was trying to do is learn something meaningful about the universe; through a model that resembles this universe just as much as it does a baby wolverine; that is, not at all.

In all this time and effort spent making I was attempting to get at the essence of something, of anything, it didn’t matter what, it was just that essence was important and we should try to get to the bottom of what things mean. I attempted to do this with a strategy of paring things down, distilling them to till they didn’t reference anything other than themselves with the hope they will transform from opaque to transparent, where the world is simple, chaos is ordered and everything makes sense. While I believe it is a worthwhile pursuit to try to find the point to our short lives on this planet, but let us not assume we are going to find it out by *meditating* on the meaning of objects that we can choose whatever the hell they mean.

It is often assumed and often used in general conversation that knowing more about a subject will strip the magic out of it. Someone once told me that if you have any doubts that God exists you should take a look at a raspberry, as if that should provide you

with the required information to believe that there is some omnipotent raspberry designer; this is foolish. We know grass grows because it rains, it does not rain because grass needs water. This view is not meant to limit the imagination or diminish a view of a greater meaning, it is simply used as a device to state that if there is a magic, a god, or an intervener, we understand that we should look in the right place for it, which is probably not in fruits we find at the grocery store.

The desire we have for things to be magical in art is to say we want to be deceived. We want sculptures to levitate in the air and we don't want to see welds or parting lines in our bronzes. While slickness and polish can be useful in works to convey ideas, the way something is made is a part of the work. If it is a fiction we are buying into, all that is required on the part of the artist is employ enough skill to get the audience to "buy" it. If something is designed to look "as if it were floating" by using fishing line, I will say it appears as if it were intended to appear to be floating; and not that it is floating, is it? Though this delineation seems minute, the confusion between the two contributes to whether we are experiencing magic, or an illusion; which are very different things. The term skeptic has taken on an insult or an almost vulgar connotation aimed at belittling particularly *prickly* people. But if we want to fool ourselves and assume that every time we give something a silver lining that the thing in question is silver all the way to the down, we are ruling out the idea that there may be magic out there, because we accept the simulation more readily than the potential possibility. Let's look for magic somewhere else besides at the circus.

It is important to make sure no one is deceived into thinking they are uncovering something mystical when it is actually not. If magic doesn't exist, then that is just fine;

but rather than mourning, we should rejoice, because we should prefer a world where that is the case. Things do not close off when you find out more about them, they open wide. The notion that intentionally vague artworks are valuable because it allows you to find out *what the artist is trying to say* rides parallel to encountering a man pulling a rabbit out of a hat, that is the *what the hell is going on here* question, which is rather close to entertainment, which falls incredibly short of what art has the capacity to do, which is seeing the world freshly.

I would like to share a story of I think of often related to this idea: an Indian rationalist Sanal Edamaruku who investigated an alleged miracle in Mumbai of a 12' concrete statue of Jesus on the cross "weeping". Crazy. Edamaruku traveled to the site, which had been declared a miracle by many including the Catholic bishop of the area. It had become a pilgrimage site, where people would approach and touch the water; some even took to drinking it, after declaring it "holy". Surely this piece of rock could not be crying – Edamaruku did a little investigating. Turns out in fact this statue was not weeping because of an act of divine intervention, it was crying because of a leaky bathroom pipe from a nearby sewer was flowing to close to the statue; through capillary action the thirsty concrete was drinking up the water, all the way up the statue and falling down as if the statue itself were shedding divine tears. Though this may have bruised a few egos and possibly caused a little discomfort to those who had to explain to their loved ones who they may kiss from time to time why they were putting toilet water in their mouths, this was in fact not miraculous. Many people went crazy, accusing Edamaruku of blasphemy, and demanding his arrest. Though such proof does not exist for all miracles, quite yet, consider this an example of how when we take assign words

like holy and sacred to objects, places or events that it feels like a huge defeat when we figure out the plumbing has just gone bad. Rather than being upset by the one who will see the world without magic, we can use this method of seeing the world with a level head as an actual favor to those who retain faith by encouraging us to confront the possibility we are just encountering unexplained things. That taken into account, capillary action is fascinating to witness, and I find most concrete sculptures incredible anyway, they are not however miraculous.

Let us remember that the grass is not always greener on the other side, perhaps there is no grass or even no other side; we have just believed someone who told us some time long ago. Even if the other side does exist and it's as lush as they say, we should start with the idea that it probably doesn't and hope to be proven wrong later.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Art making can seem frivolous. You cannot eat art; it can't keep you warm; most things I create are not necessarily valuable or sellable. Art being almost completely lacking in every aspect of what it means to be traditionally *useful*, confronts the artist with existential questions such as “why the hell am I doing this?” or “is this just a waste of time?” or, even better “I wonder if I’m actually making a difference.” Though these questions may have beak answers, it is important to confront them and not hide them somewhere in the back of our minds. Bottling up and burying those ‘bad’ thoughts can cause them to explode at a later date, throwing us into a tailspin of despair. It also should be noted that if we hide these fears somewhere away it causes us to be afraid of these things when they surface. It is not a bad thing that it is possible that we can live our whole lives and not do the right thing once. It is because of our decisions concerning our desires and fears that motivate us to change the world as we see fit. Compassion can only be achieved if cruelty exists, and we can only overcome our own failures if we acknowledge them. Decisions are made by us; and while it may be scary or frightening to think that our lives can be pointless, it is so much better than living in a world where free will does not exist. It is good that we have responsibility; it keeps us in check and allows us to live in a world we can assume we affect. If we assume no responsibility for what it is we do, that allows hopelessness to run rampant and produce widespread uncaring.

Think of the awful but commonly used phrase “I will love you no matter what.” I do not want to live in a world where there is someone (save my mother) who loves me no matter what I do. I struggle and attempt to always make good decisions, sometimes I

cannot or do not, and I accept the outcome of these situations. The decisions, good and bad that I make are mine and contribute a great deal to what makes me who I am. What we do matters and what we make matters, art is a thankless pursuit, but we must have faith that our pursuits as creators can sometimes be fruitful, even a little, even if just for a little bit; however to confront this, we must be able to confront the very real possibility that we could in fact screw it all up.

Art lends itself to the conversation of being skeptical of its relevance. It often can be seen as supplemental, which no doubt each of us have experienced when talking to a *reasonable person* about anything from the “waste of perfectly good steel” a public sculpture may incite to the question your uncle asks you at Thanksgiving dinner “what can one do with an art degree?” Everyone is unsure about how their life pursuit fits in. Let us acknowledge that what we do has the possibility to not matter at all. Keeping that in mind, let us move on and assume we have a say in the matter.

As art students, we often make work with the goal of surviving intense scrutiny, the goal I have is more than that. I make sculpture about things that plague my mind. I do not think one necessarily needs to be *tortured* over what they are making work about, however I think that the things that cause me to think are things I do not understand. Creating work, while it helps understand things like purity, usefulness, or hope, it really just helps me get those things out of my head long enough to organize the rest of the stuff in there before it gets packed back in, almost like bringing all of your stuff out of your garage so you can actually sweep the floor. It is my goal to use sculpture to realize my thoughts and predispositions rather than simply having faith I am living a conscious life.

Faith is fully believing something will turn out a certain way without having all of the necessary information, whereas hope is an expectation things will turn out a certain positive way. Hope implies effort, where faith is not. Faith can be dangerous, and deciding to avoid thinking there might be something wrong with the world prohibits the possibility there might be something we can do and there might be something we can change. We live in a world where we should assume there are consequences to our actions because if we do not assume this, the alternative is catastrophic; consider global warming as a good example of this. But if we look at it through the optimist's eyes we can say something like "at least we don't have to shovel our driveways or scrape off our cars during the winter." We can still dream what it may be like to live in a perfect world and have aspirations of one day making that happen, however there is no evidence that provides us with the thought that we already live in one.

I am deeply disturbed by people who do not care for those around them; compassion only exists because cruelty does. If we only see puppies, and unicorns, and hearts, and rainbows, and flowers, and springtime then we put out of our minds road kill, and lies, and disease, and pollution, and money, and winter which are all very real things. If we do not acknowledge cruelty we cannot flex our compassion muscles, which is incredibly good for living in a world with others in it too. It is the people in my life that are important, art is the way I keep people in my life that matter, sculpture makes your friends your friends.

LEAVING VIEWERS IN THE DUST

This document would not be complete without me discussing the possibility of potential failure we have to find meaning, retain hope or move forward in a world with gratuitous evil. Note that it is rather easy to point a finger at the world or point out the faults of everyone, however, who the hell am I to say what people ought to believe. Faith, as previously defined is the belief that something will turn out a certain way without having all the evidence required to have complete certainty. Since I do not possess all of the information about whether or not someone should have faith if a god exists or if my friend will pick me up from the airport, I do not attempt to make work that leaves people in a state of despair.

Although I am interested in themes that may touch on a level of darkness or sadness about the world we live in, after all, the world is a scary place. We coexist with flesh eating viruses, high taxes on cigarettes, people who drive drunk in neighborhoods with small children, and people who don't even believe climate change is real. What I aim to do is create a deeper understanding and justification for why we should be hopeful in a world that has at least a great deal of evil in it. Through bleak propositions or outlooks I put forth I attempt to allow a platform for a viewer to come to their own conclusion with my efforts primarily acting as the saw that cuts the branch they are sitting on, as well as a guide that attempts to drop them on something soft. I want my work to show people to joy and that a real lasting version of it can be arrived at from an incredible melancholy state.

Fuller or more encompassing versions of use, necessity, purity, joy, magic, persistence, and hope can be achieved when we freshly look at them. Knowledge of these things is good. Examining these things may strip away some of the mystery much of us love so much, but having a faith that survives doubt is much better than one that was never put under the same microscope.

I want to be able to constantly reconsider what I often believe to be underlying reasons for how to live a good life and how to make the right decision. Often people are fence sitters, which may be the only people you can appeal to concerning questions of how to live a good life. I want to be the person to shake people off the fence, not just so I can watch them fall, but so I can catch them before they hit the ground.