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Nocturnal toys

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Nocturnal Toys

by

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of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Ronald Rozencohn

Graduate College
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Lee Allen White

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree
in Art at the August 2017 graduation.

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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

I'm interested in the scar tissue, the blemishing of our perception from the ache of longing and estrangement that comes from repression and returns as enigma. I'm investigating the notion that the body itself is a puppet that succumbs to the control of outside forces, making it vulnerable to mistreatment.

The paintings come from cathected suffering through reminiscences brought forth from amorous memories, resulting in new encounters that replace old associations. It is the memory, not the event, that becomes traumatic.

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The Thing

We live in a social structure which continually permits, if not actually encourages, conflict and suffering. In human relations there is a line that is constantly inexorably traversed. This is a chasm that blurs the line between subject and object, person and thing. In the appetite of having the other as thing, which one can treat as one pleases, there is inherent a principle of degradation of human nature. The body is a temple bound of disparate parts, alienated, that forever holds its own impenetrable soul.

Mario Perniola states that, "A single part of the body of our partner becomes the object of extreme attention, of sexual investment that severs it from the living and functioning organism" (31). The dimension of subject/object is fearlessly enlarged, to the point of objects adopting an independent existence as a function of that superficial inwardness laid siege to the special object.

Each partner is the other's God, unconditionally indicted to a master and slave relationship. This voluntary submission is sexual martyrdom, a reduction of the soul to a thing that feels. According to Perniola, "Upon the vertical movement, rising towards the divine or descanting toward the animal, follows a horizontal movement toward the thing"(4). The human becomes animal in the compulsion and hunger to dominate in a reciprocal manner.

"The idea of individual as entity surrounded by a halo of inviolable intangibility may have its own legitimacy at the political level, but at the level of sexuality it leads to a frigid and bloodless comradeship that wears out and exhausts itself in a chain of permission, consent, concession, as if every embrace were the result of a more or less explicit negotiation, of timid and embarrassed requests, of awkward and uncertain favors." (Perniola 22)

The artwork presents the object in relation to the thing, rendering it both present and absent. The figures, implacable in their appearance and resistance, stance or stare. Incorporated with external perspective within an ensemble,

the thing's position is realized within the range of objects, as a form of reconciliation.

In order for the artwork to successfully disrupt hysterical and paranoid perception, there needs to be an interchange between excitation and communication that cuts into ontological uncertainties. The paintings and objects are different by-products for dealing with states of changed subject/object relationships and associations.

The Doll

The doll symbolizes fantasy and emotional involvement and identification. The Parisiennes gave dolls to little girls as playthings when their (dolls) career as a fashion figure had ended. (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*) The doll was seen as the very image of innocence: "Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or the God" (Kleist, 1810). The doll being related to the innocence of the child may be a reason why children have traditionally been given them.

We see examples of sadism and control as early as childhood. There is a play between domination and submission that happens in the imagination. One wants the doll to be a friend, but the frustration builds up in its infinite unresponsiveness. The doll possesses an indifference to acceptance, inducing an equally growing indifference in the child. Like a failed relationship, "it is unmasked as the gruesome foreign body on which we squandered our purest affection." (Rilke)

"Baudelaire ponders the paradox of an inert figure endowed with a special force, here from the vantage of the child, for whom the toy represents not only the first concrete example of art, but also the first metaphysical stirring. However, this stirring can turn aggressive, even sadistic as the child strives to get at the soul of the toy, shaking it, banging it, and finally prying it open, only to be devastated by the discovery of its utter soullessness. This moment marks the beginning of stupor and melancholy." (Benjamin)

Once the adult becomes associated with the doll, it can become a thing of intense ambivalence. Even when produced from scratch, dolls sometimes appear as emblems of a private childhood, or relics of a collective past; in which guises, they can carry a sense of aura, or uncanniness. The doll is no longer an emblem for innocence. It becomes a symbol for a deep concern with the past that represents childhood.

The doll and puppet figures then tend to be seen as primordial examples of representation. For example, Emmy Henning's sympathized with her dolls in a way that was deranged and closer to the art of the insane than to toys of children. Her dolls are both transgressive and regressive, suggesting an uninhibited world of anger and play. The use of dolls seem to suggest a different conception of art in general – not as something made by a few specialists for public display, but as a creative act and imaginative form of practice.

In Hannah Hoch's work, she implies that the modern subject is hollowed out by mechanization or commodification. Her photos present new women of the era as subject to cultural stereotypes and manufactured desires imposed on them from without. She presents women as a construction that is shown to possess agency of her own– even the agency to transform her constructed image. Dolls were ideal instruments to thematize with this ontological uncertainty because they are ambiguous in their mode of existence; they are objects and machines that look like people.

They are objects, which are not aesthetic, not utilitarian, not abstract, and not ready-made. They are like artworks in that they are designed objects, which can thematize important issues; but on other hand, they differ from artworks in that they are not looked at in a public space, but are used in the private practice of playing

Paranoia creates these latent dolls armed like insiders, strategically presenting themselves as passive, waiting, reticent, shy – every form of behavior strongly prohibited if not outright eradicated by the on demand gregariousness and invasive packeting of time imposed by network capitalism.

The dolls are not made to be quasi-subjects , nor are they fully at the mercy of a subject, they can act, or they can refuse to be actors, they can just be stuff and go to sleep, they can absorb all content all thought and desire in a material mess. They make you cringe, they are a theory problem, becoming a borderline subject.

The Trauma

In war, people dispose of each other's bodies and cover them up like dogs do their own shit. This is a kind of relationship analogous to mutual relationships with sexual benefits. Instead of burying the bodies in dirt, one covers the body in their own fluids. Dogs piss on anything and everything they want to claim. Man's urgency to conquer goes back to the beginning of recorded history. Yet we celebrate Christopher Columbus, a murderer that committed genocide. The human is an almost God and an almost Animal. Trauma does not provide an offering or solution for man's troubles, but it simply claws at his soft under-belly

People are relentless in their giving and takings of one another. People are meaner on the Internet, empowered like the bar hopper's frequent one night stand. There are so many reasons to lie and cheat when one can be connected with everyone at once. Man's impotence allegorically achieved through mutilation. Killing, and post-traumatic stress are interlinked by the extreme inhuman capacity of the individual will. It is a clash of elements which force the co-existence of the beautiful with the repulsive, sublime with the gross, and organic with the mechanical.

A soldier shell-shocked from witnessing and committing murder brings man to a state of awareness that will permit no evasion. The post-traumatic immortally glued to the television set of repeated memory. Flesh cannot be looked at again and treated the same way in civilian life.

This mortal heartbreak is the temperament formed by the unmanageable design of our condition. Once psychologically induced with this kind of suffocating hysteria, the person becomes nearly paralyzed in social interaction. You get the sense one couldn't live through it again. One could never have the strength to hurt someone so permanently, forever cringing in cowardice at the sight or sound, guilt and shame.

As the American soldier's tank grinds and smashes every body part that belonged to a mother underneath the gnawing, gashing centipede of phallic machinery, some helpless victim records a mental vision to stake the rest of their lives on. Disease manifests through representation.

The body itself is a puppet, seemingly under the control of an outside forces, which is the impression given by seizures and the manifestations of insanity. The soldier, made into a puppet and caricature for the country, becomes haunted by war dreams that are belated attempts to prepare the subject to master the shock of the event. A post-stricken, shell-shocked individual can only futilely repeat a useless preparation.

“An uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some repression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surrounded seem once more to be confirmed. Freud argues that there exists an instinctual compulsion to repeat, to return to a prior state. Hysterical patients suffer principally through reminiscences” (Foster, 1993).

When a lover commits suicide, it's impossible. There will never be a reason because of its transformation to perpetually, “not this,” or “not that.” “My “I” is no more essential than the thing that I hold. It too, is “not this”, a simple and indifferent universe; that slips away towards any other immediacy”(Perniola). Therein lies the blame and assuming of responsibility.

To have the courage to die by one's own hand, is to have taken the plunge many times before. No longer daunting, the death drive seduces like a cooing whisper caressing the heart. To kill in the defense of oneself against barbarian mistreatment, constant

belittlement and defilement of a sacred, premature sexual organ. It is analogous to the South African boy watching his mother get raped with a sub-machine gun in the Apartheid. Premature initiation into sexuality is as brutal and ruthless as witnessing the murder of a parent. It is as unforgiving as nature herself.

In *Foul Perfection*, Mike Kelley states that, “Pornography portrays sex as if it were a puppet show acted out by detached members. The whole terrain of porn is organized according to body part or substance: pornographic parts are cut out and isolated, and thus no less metaphoric: they become objectified stand-ins and unreal substitutes for themselves. In this way they gain the distance of the fetish. Repressed in tone, they rise presumably back into consciousness in their new form.” (2003)

If we look into our common experience for something that may be analogous to the neutral feeling of becoming thing, we find it in the splendors and miseries inherent in drug addiction. The general tonality of the drug addict seems characterized by feeling one’s own body as thing, by making the body extraneous like clothing, by removing oneself from the cycle of tension. When nothing else interests you or attracts you except the evil and the vice, you have led the mind and the body to the extreme regions of the non-living.

The loving sublimation and animal degradation qualities in drug usage are instruments for philosophy or for the practice of sexuality, to generate interesting thoughts or some exciting images. The inorganic evil of dependency and being unable to do without something physical is a reduction to thing, just like the substances used by drug addicts.

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