

The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design
Faculty of Ceramics and Glass

The Importance of Socially Engaged Art in Public Space

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Doctoral Thesis

In the area of fine arts.
In the discipline of fine arts and art conservation.

Supervisor:
prof. Kazimierz Pawlak

2021



European Union
European Social Fund



POWR.03.05.00-00-Z021/17-00

Internationalization of education, a competent teaching staff and modern management as a guarantee of quality and international presence of the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław.

The project is co-financed by the European Union from the European Social Fund.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was John.

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Chapter 1
Context and Building a Lexicon

“Contexts. Our perception of the world, its structure and nuances constituting it, depends on the context. In our turbulent times – when various contents are interwoven, forming hybrids of real information/facts – it is the context that becomes the only connector between the recipient and full knowledge which can be easily accepted as true. Because we want to assimilate sensations quickly. The meaning of words we use and images deprived of context in the ethos of entities professionally involved in distributing information gets distorted and creates a misleading picture of reality. In the era of optical fibre, thousands of shared hyperlinks and tags, we are unable to conceal information, but we can aptly manipulate it, shape it to lead to confusion or excess, overstate or understate, use it to distract attention or attract to the banal. But what if our only chance for Truth – the context – can also be created by positioning interdependencies between contents, ideas, images and symbols to educate the recipient whose ignorance and apathy are his sole survival strategies? How to grasp yet another piece of information in which violence and fear are juxtaposed with an advertisement promoting exotic, unforgettable holidays in the Far East?”

- Dominika Drozdowska¹

Why?

Three letters, simple yet profound. A fundamental question we ask ourselves, as humans, as artists. It is the first question we learn to ask, often without understanding the given answers. It is a question we cannot always easily answer, yet dictates how the majority of us lead our lives. From the basic fundamentals of our existence to the in depth understanding of complex mechanisms, it drives our curiosity - making us distinctly human. It is a question that has been answered for millennia, yet is always left unanswered. It is our foundation.

As I begin this writing, it is the eve of the Presidential elections in the United States. I find myself in a state of déjà vu: fearful, anxious, and cynical towards the idea of societal development. It is uncomfortable and unstable. Unexpectedly, I find security here; this is what drives me to create. “No great art was ever created out of comfort.”²

¹ D. Drozdowska, *A Still Life*. Curatorial Statement to Exhibition, Wrocław, SiC! Gallery BWA Galleries of Contemporary Art, 2017. <https://bwa.wroc.pl/language/en/events/a-still-life-john-moran-2/> [access: 4.26.2021].

² Ben Weinman, *The Dillinger Escape Plan*. The quote was used in several interviews over the course of the 20 year existence of the Dillinger Escape Plan. I believe Weinman was paraphrasing Joyce Carol Oates “My belief is that art should not be comforting; for comfort, we have mass entertainment and one another. Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate and may not even wish.”



Rioters climb the walls of the U.S. Capitol Building in protest of Donald Trump losing the election. Jose Luis Magana/AP. <https://www.npr.org/>

Art is a mechanism; it is a tool we can use to express complex ideas, emotions, and discontent offering an alternative to apathy. It is a powerful tool and an important device for social change and political dissent, but it is often neglected. In this chapter, I will attempt to illustrate the significance of politically motivated art accessible in the public sphere and introduce (and in later chapters reconcile) the lexicon of the repetitive imagery I utilize and build a link between the broader theoretical or conceptual ideas and my own connection to them.

As Drozdowska points out, we seek 'truth' through context. It is the base for our understanding, but it is constantly being manipulated through media, advertising, entertainment, and political demagogues. Society is often in a state of individual apathetic denial until the point that these individuals are directly affected by the changing state of oppression or zealotry that has again been on the rise in recent years. We sit back and observe as we are entertained by Huxleyan (pseudo) Alphas devolving the fragile equality we believe we have achieved. Our indifference is shaped through our (in)ability to empathize. But this is not to say that we are lacking empathy by nature.

According to Judith Butler: "The Public sphere is constituted time and time again through certain kinds of exclusions: images that cannot be seen words that cannot be heard. And this means that the regulation of the visual and audible field – along with the other senses, to be sure – is crucial to the constitution of what can become a debatable issue within the sphere of politics."³ While she points to the exclusions within her statement, there are certainly other criteria dictating the political; this conversation is equally led by the visual and audio fields that are not excluded and continuously streamed into the public sphere. The democratization of dissent has created a foothold for atomizing society. The belief that one must question

³ J. Butler, *Is Judaism Zionism?* Essay in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 75

everything has become so dogmatic, that it leaves behind the criticality of dissent and leaves one searching for the 'truth' by turning only to those who share similar beliefs and perceptions.



Exemplary Pseudo Alpha Jacob Chansley (right with fur hat) and others are confronted by Capitol Police. Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP. <https://www.usnews.com>

In Malcom Gladstone's book *David and Goliath*, he addresses the somewhat misconceived notions of the 'underdog' citing examples where many individuals overcome their inherent limitations, even in the direst situations. That is not to say that limitations and hardships lead to success, but that in some cases limitations give perseverance and strengthen certain successful individuals. While this sentiment is important and gives hope to individuals who face structural limitations, it also has the counter effect of glorifying the struggle rather than the achievement. We see this glorification become ever more present in the discourse and political rhetoric in the public sphere, especially in more conservative circles. In regards to conservatism, I am not referring only to religious or political conservatism but to an overall dependence on tradition and fear or opposition to progress, though in many ways the rhetoric of religious and political conservatives is derived from these principles. To clarify, my thoughts on this are not an attack on conservatism, nor are they a defense of progressive ideology, rather a critique on the inability to break free from the dogmatic rhetorical narrative that is inherently embedded within these doctrines.

"I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Suffering is the root of all empathy; without having experienced some form of hardship, we lack a fundamental base for empathizing. As I previously stated, I do not believe that individuals lack empathy by nature but our societal perception, and successively the perception of individuals that exist within contemporary society, is superficial. For many the basis for empathy is limited to their own individual experience of hardships or limitations, and the inability to fully relate to those outside their own social or familiar circle.

It is through this celebration of hardship that conservatism has gained popularity and grown towards oppression rather than the personal freedoms it so cherishes. Gay marriage has become 'a war on traditional marriage'. The inclusion of non-Christian celebrations has become 'a war on Christmas'. This rhetoric is used as a device for political gain, but more importantly it continues to atomize our already divided population. This political sectarianism certainly centerstage in American politics, but as the world watches on in disbelief, we see the same sentiment arising across Europe, especially as the UK brexits the European Union and Poland creates LGBTQ free zones.

"One of the great achievements of the doctrinal system has been to divert anger from the corporate sector to the government that implements the programs that the corporate sector designs, such as the highly protectionist corporate/investor rights agreements that are uniformly misdescribed as 'free trade agreements' in the media and commentary. With all its flaws, the government is, to some extent, under popular influence and control, unlike the corporate sector. It is highly advantageous for the business world to foster hatred for the pointy-headed government bureaucrats and to drive out of people's minds the subversive idea that the government might become an instrument of popular will of, by, and for the people."⁵

The divided populace seeks to vilify those for whom they lack empathy – those with any beliefs in opposition to their own. In this dangerous and hostile environment, empathy is disrupted. "The severity of political conflict has grown increasingly divorced from the magnitude of policy disagreement, requiring the development of a superordinate construct, political sectarianism — the tendency to adopt a moralized identification with one political group and against another."⁶ This sentiment appears on both sides of the spectrum; neither the left nor the right can claim innocence from participation from this doctrinal divide. Our society is again at a point in its existence where the focus needs to shift from each other to 'the powers that be'. We need empathy. We need recognition.

⁴ Intentionally used out of context from: M. Gladstone, *David and Goliath*, London, Penguin Books, 2014, p. 97.

⁵ N. Chomsky, *Trump in the White House*, Essay from *Optimism over Despair*, Great Britain, Penguin Books, 2017, p. 125.

⁶ E.J. Finkel, C. A. Bail, M. Cikara, P.H. Ditto, S. Iyengar, S. Klar, L. Mason, M. C. McGrath, B. Nyhan, D.G. Rand, L. J. Skitka, J. A. Tucker, J. J. Van Bavel, C. S. Wang, J. N. Druckman, *Political sectarianism in America*, Science Magazine, Vol. 370, Issue 6516, p. 533. <http://science.sciencemag.org/> [access: 9.9.2020]



Black Lives Matter demonstrators peacefully protest the murder of George Floyd, a black man kill by police officers in Minneapolis.

Alex Brandon/AP. <https://www.aljazeera.com>

In the contemporary public sphere, analogy is often used in an attempt to invoke empathy through a sense of understanding, but how can this understanding occur? “The suffering of one people is not exactly like the suffering of another, and this is the condition of the specificity of suffering for both. Indeed, we would have no analogy between them if the grounds for analogy were not already destroyed. And if specificity qualifies each group for analogy, it also defeats the analogy from the start. The obstruction that thwarts analogy makes that specificity plain and becomes the condition for the process of pluralization.”⁷ It can never be a place of identical circumstances, therefore the sense of understanding is potentially reached through recognition.

If our perception is limited through our own experiences, how can we achieve empathy? I believe we overcome our limited perception at one time or another in our lives. Someone or something we have distrusted or disliked based purely on our individual ignorance, later seeking an escape to our preconceived prejudices when discovering their inaccuracies. We find exceptions, reveling in the sentiment that ‘this one is different than the others’ or ‘that is a good one’. But this is simply an act of recognition; an acknowledgement of our ignorance. This limited perception is where the majority of our societal empathy lies, blind to the experiences of trauma in others unless they correlate with our own, but it can shift. Rather than hiding behind our ignorance, we need to work towards accepting our own hardships without invalidating the trauma of others.

⁷ J. Butler, *Is Judaism Zionism?* Essay in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p.87



Contemporary artist Ai Wei Wei posing as a dead child named Alan Kurdi on the Greek Island of Lesbos. Rohit Chawla/AP. <https://www.theguardian.com/>

“How broad, how deep is your empathy? How broad, how deep is one’s own imagination? Right back to Shelley. And most importantly for me – and this is something that makes it difficult for a blues man like myself to remain for too long in an academic context – when you have that kind of orientation, you’re always full of righteous indignation and holy anger at injustice. There’s a sense of urgency, a state of emergency that has been normalized, hidden, and concealed. So you get a little suspicious sometimes of the discourses that can easily deodorize the funk that’s there, that don’t really want to engage the catastrophic, the in which the U.S Constitution didn’t want to talk about the near-genocidal impact on our red brothers and sisters or the slavery of black people and act as if they don’t exist.”⁸ – “We must attempt to always ensure that things are not so sterilized and sanitized.”⁹

This is the root. This is the point at which political and socially motivated art begins. We work towards achieving an environment where conversation is possible, even with our given differences and perceptions through a visual simile. Just as dystopian fiction focuses on and intensifies suffering and injustice in future societies in allusion to those within our own society, political and socially motivated art share in this focus. Ironically these dystopian fictions have become so engrained in our populace that they seem somewhat prophetic, further intensifying the need for politically and socially driven artwork in the public sphere. As contemporary art shifts towards beauty and banality through its market driven decent, there must be space for the discomfort of these trends.

⁸ C. West, *Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalistic Civilization*, Essay in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 97.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

Chapter 2
Narrative Imagery, Religion, and Martyrdom

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...”

- Thomas Jefferson.¹⁰

Jefferson wrote these words in order to express his (and the founders') beliefs that all men were created equal, yet he owned over 600 slaves. Though beautifully written and inspiring enough to spark a revolution, it is also clearly a focus that these rights are left to Men and Men alone. The entire myth of American equality is built on this ideal, yet overlooked in the wisdom of the “founding fathers” was that their ambiguous infighting and disagreements left an ineffectual void in the methods of governance and a vague illusion of justice still debated and disputed today. Their act of uncertain dissent helped build the confusion of the United States, initiating an oxymoronic concept of universal rights and freedoms limited only to the few.

In my art work, I struggle with this confusion and how it has impacted not only the history of the United States, but also the history of many other nations and cultures and the influence on contemporary times. In their ambiguity, the founders introduced the idea of separating church and state after witnessing the control these powers had over societies, intending to build a better life for themselves and future generations. Somehow though, religion dominates and controls much of the dialogue in contemporary American life. It is a culture governed by corporate greed, corrupt capitalism, and moral uncertainty, yet at the same time is populated by friendly, helpful individuals misled by their leadership. Though many find it simple to criticize, it is equally as important to see the impact American culture has worldwide and to question how the evolution from revolutionary thinkers to deceitful demagogues has occurred.

Religion still plays a major role in American society. Even in the seemingly secular aspects of society, there is a firm dichotomy of right and wrong, black and white, conservative or liberal, or Democrat and Republican, which I believe is fueled by a specific narrative that is rooted in religion and dispersed through the imagery, iconography, and mythology of the church. As the current consumer culture evolved, it followed the dogmatic path laid out by religious doctrine, spreading the word as a capitalistic missionary.

The narrative iconography of the church is forced into our personal environment through its occupation of public space. It is a powerful device used for indoctrination and social control.

¹⁰ Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, 1776, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript> [access: 4.26.2021]

To be clear, it is not that the Catholic church is the only religion to use this tactic, but it is the one with which I am most familiar, so it is the one I critique most freely. The current idealization of jihad and salvation through martyrdom of extremist Islamic groups is not far removed from the idolization of martyred saints in Catholicism. The idolatry of the two dogmas is completely in line with each other, separated mainly by the land mass on which one was born. As Descartes consciously acknowledged in his provisional moral code¹¹, Ricky Gervais so poignantly summarized the conviction succinctly, “isn’t it lucky that people are born into the right god”.¹²

Religious iconography, more specifically Catholic iconography, is visually confrontational and constructed of a narrative understood by those who are initiated into its belief structure. The imagery chronicles the mythology built around the teachings and beliefs of the church and is finite in its construction, meaning conceptually composed of a past, present, and future. The past consists of the history, whether the foundational narrative of Christianity or the account of an individual’s acts within the church. The present is meant to relate to the experience and understanding of the believer and how these beliefs relate to their own lives. The future tells of end times and/or salvation, instilling fear and insisting only those who believe can be saved from suffering. Though I am a non-believer I was raised Catholic, and still for many people this narrative is extremely real. This method of storytelling is very powerful and inherent in the iconography of many religions, and further so in the narratives of contemporary politics. It is the basis for the Orwellian concept: “Who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”¹³, and has been usurped as an instrument of propaganda. According to Chomsky, simply the use of specific language in the media is a method intent on offering a representation as reality and falsifying history.¹⁴

For instance, in Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, one of the aspects of this work that makes it so powerful is the application of this narrative structure. The past is evident in the dead body of Jesus, the work would have been made under the understanding that the viewer knew the subject matter, therefore would know of the passion and crucifixion and understood the meaning of the figure. The viewer experiences the present as they bear witness to the suffering of Mary, who we know from the mythology is the mother of Jesus, as she is frozen in the moment of loss and mourning for her murdered son. Finally, we know the future (or at least the doctrine) that Jesus will rise again to bring about end times and salvation. This narrative is of course supported by the physical properties of the work, though even if one is not an initiate of the church, the work is still accessible. The narrative is controlled through the visual aspects of the work in order to speak to people, through the precision of the sculpting the viewer is able to experience the suffering that Jesus had undergone and the lament that Mary is expressing.

¹¹ “The first [maxim] was to obey the laws and customs of my country, and to adhere to the religion in which God by His grace had me instructed from my childhood, and to govern myself in everything else according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions, being those commonly received among the wisest of those with whom I should have to live.” R. Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*. 1596 – 1650. New York : London : Macmillan ; Collier Macmillan, 1986. P. 21.

¹² R. Gervais, *Why I’m an Atheist*, Interview, New York, The Wall Street Journal, 2010. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-SEB-56643> [access: 4.26.2021]

¹³ G. Orwell, *1984*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1949, p. 37.

¹⁴ N. Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, 2nd Edition, New York, Seven Stories Press, 2002, pp. 35-37.

Why is this narrative form of artistic expression so poignant? Thomas McEvelley writes of Edward Kienholz's *Five Car Stud*: "A narrative takes place in time, and as Aristotle noted, it tends to divide time into beginning, middle, and end sections that are basically exposition, complication, and resolution. A sense that all this exists, maybe lurking in the background, is present in many three-dimensional works of art, not least the Kienholz's'. Sometime multiple implications conjoin in meaningful cognitive structure. In *Five Car Stud* the whole narrative – beginning, middle, and end – is present plainly before us... Though the work remains a representation, a sense of the things themselves comes through with a heavy impact."¹⁵ What causes such a heavy impact? The grasp of the narrative and the voyeuristic participation as a bystander, witnessing the present while realizing the past and the future. This narrative can be so powerful, because it is something experienced in the daily lives of people, if not through direct experience than through the view of the world which we are presented through the media. It is recognizable.



Five Car Stud. Edward Kienholz. Photographed by John Moran at M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium. 2019.

The use of an accessible narrative is a powerful tool in order to touch on the emotions of the viewer. While the iconography of religion is important to the understanding of the narrative, it is not necessary the most important aspect in understanding or being moved emotionally by works of art. The subject of an emotional connection in art has certainly been debated, discussed, and dissected at length, but in the end the answer lies in who the artist is trying to reach as his or her audience. Barnett Newman states that the European Modernists were responding to ideals of beauty built over the ages in relationship to Christian legend, but that the American artists were not constricted by obsolete legends or myths. "The image we

¹⁵ T. McEvelley, *Ed Kienholz's Shifting Location: Five Car Stud in Europe Again, [in:] Five Car Stud*, Catalogue to Exhibition, Denmark, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2011, p. 94.

produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.”¹⁶ Honestly, this idea that these artists are operating outside of a mythos and freeing themselves of the devices of Western [art] has created a disassociation between art and the uninitiated viewer. Even in Barnett’s own description he is solely referring to connection to art and the philosophy of art, but denying the reality from which European [Art] grew and its connection the lives of ‘ordinary people’. Leaving behind the narrative, though important in the context of modern art, has generated a chasm between much of the contemporary art world and the uninitiated public, creating an elitist visual language unapproachable to many.

The concept of an accessible narrative has become a basis for my thinking and the core of the philosophy behind my work. The layering of seemingly random instruments of capitalism and current consumer society in my work is interspersed with references to historical imagery, often rooted in Christianity or Catholicism. It has been suggested that I apply religious imagery to contemporary issues as if they are two opposing concepts separated from each other, however though I do not believe we live in a fully secularized society. The incorporation of these two notions into one that is distinguishable by the viewer is a reflection on the state of things as I see them. That is not to say that there are not secular pockets in contemporary life, but that these are still intertwined with the history and belief structure of religious doctrines, especially through the narrative.

With every action there is a reaction. In order to question the current narrative laid out in [American] society, I rely on the images which directly allude to the roots of these narratives. As an aside, I do not believe by any standards that only American society is dictated by these political, historical, and social narratives.

Having lived in Europe for many years, much of the norms and ideals of individual countries and their respective societies are driven by the same narratives only derived from a different context. The current isolationist rhetoric in much of European politics, is built on one very similar to that of the United States. Ironically, Newman’s own idea of ‘being set free’ from the historical narratives of Europe is almost in itself directly related to the American mythos of freedom, based in the actual, revolutionary colonial separation and is maybe a residual of this history. That being said, in my own perspective, the employing of religious iconography also directly alludes to these narratives and how they carry over into contemporary European and American society. Very often, my work is described as being ‘typically American’ in its use of popular imagery from consumer culture, as if McDonalds, Coca Cola, or Apple were solely an American phenomenon. Even though these brands are common across the world, they are still assumed to be a ‘problem of American capitalism’ rather than recognized for what they are, a worldwide institution. The purpose of compiling this imagery into a relatively transparent narrative is to question and point out these idiosyncrasies and create an emotional reaction counter to the one generated by current myopic, socio-political viewpoints.

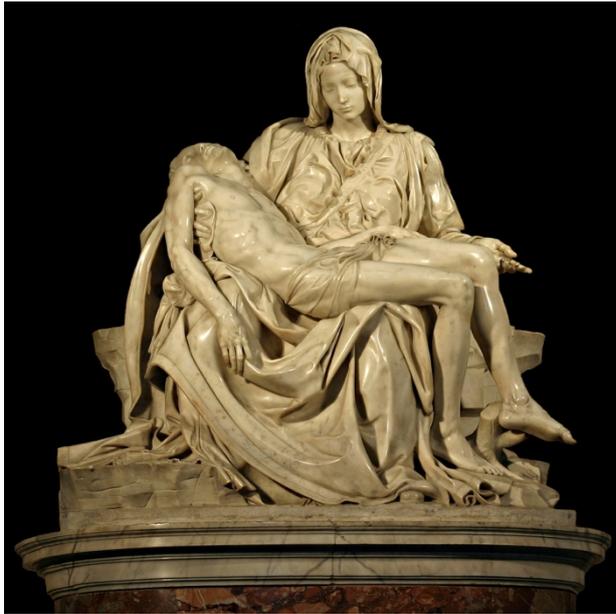
¹⁶ B. Newman, from *The Sublime is Now*, [in] D. Cunningham, *How the Sublime Became “Now”*, [in] Symposium Volume 8 Issue 3, Fall 2004. Contemporary Issues in Aesthetics. p. 555.



Eldorado. Einar and Jamex De La Torre. Photo: Alicja Kielan.

Though I utilize this tool as a form of dissent in artistic creation, I am certainly not the first artist to employ the use of recognizable storytelling as a form of protest or in order to draw an emotional response from the viewer. Again, in reference to Kienholzes' *Five Car Stud* and many of their other works for that matter, the artists make use of many of the same faculties. Visually the Kienholzes' work references tableaus, even calling them as such, which are derived from the religious sculptural counterparts. They also made use of images from American society, especially featuring aspects of consumer culture. In a completely different vein, somewhat in the realm of propaganda itself, Jacques-Louis David makes use of the iconography of Christian substituted with a more contemporary subject matter in *The Death of Marat*. The painting was a tribute to the one of the Jacobin leaders of the French Revolution, Marat; in some ways it is meant to glorify the murderous revolutionary through references to the entombment of Christ and Michelangelo's *Pieta*. He creates a sort of secular stigmata, attempting to replace the saints of Catholicism with revolutionary martyrs.¹⁷ Einar and Jamex De La Torre use the Christian elements of Mexican culture as a foundation for their work, combining and overlaying them with contemporary political figures and historical references in order to address issues of diversity and immigration. The tradition of Christian imagery in Mexican culture runs deeply, being a consequence of colonialism; their matter-of-fact usage of this imagery creates a narrative in which the viewer understands and relates to their bi-cultural reality.

¹⁷ Dr. B. Harris and Dr. S. Zucker, *Jacques-Louis David: The Death of Marat*, January 7, 2016, <https://smarthistory.org/jacques-louis-david-the-death-of-marat/> [access: 04.26.2021]



Michelangelo, *Pieta*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/>



Jacque-Louis David. *The Death of Marat*.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/>



Sloth. Einar and Jamex De La Torre. Photo: Alicja Kielan

These are just a few small examples of artists utilizing the tactics and iconography of religious art in order to address contemporary issues. One of the reasons these works are able to draw an emotional response is through the viewers connection to these images and their endurance through time. Returning to the notion of a 'secularized' society, one of the reasons these images have sustained is that religion still plays a big part in society. Even in the non-religious, mainly atheistic Western countries, such as Belgium, France, or Holland, the holidays and working hours are still dictated by religious doctrine. One can argue that in the United States there is a separation of church and state, in turn creating a secular society, yet the American president is obliged (unofficially) to be pious and offer thanks to god during

their engagements with the public.¹⁸ The debate surrounding abortion, gender equality, and sexuality in the United States (and some European countries) is almost entirely dictated by the morality of Christianity. Western countries like Spain and Italy are still governed by traditions of Catholicism. The church has managed to use its worldwide political power in order to cover up and protect the molestation and abuse of tens of thousands of children (of which we know). In order to perceive the world as secular means to deny the reality of many. Unfortunately, I believe there is a large portion of contemporary art is made in this vain, existing in a bubble of initiates who think that these concepts are historical rather than contemporary, creating an atmosphere of art for only the intellect.

The use of religious iconography is not necessarily meant to be an allusion to or a criticism of religious doctrine but a reflection of the complexity of contemporary socio-politics in society. As I have tried to show in this chapter, the use of these images or the concept of an accessible narrative is a tool for generating an emotional response from the viewer, hopefully engaging them to reflect on the issues I am addressing in my work. While these elements are important to the visual language I employ, they are not the central focus and only a part of the broader lexicon. They are a window into viewing the world through different eyes and a formidable instrument to combat the underlying narratives that are present in the current, divisive climate.¹⁹



New Times Roman. John Moran. 2012.



Sale of the Deathman. John Moran. 2013.

¹⁸ R. N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, [in:] *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, from the issue entitled, "Religion in America," Winter 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1, pp. 1-21.

¹⁹ Ideas from this chapter were influenced by: N. Chomsky, *The Secular Priesthood and the Perils of Democracy*, [in] *On Nature and Language*, New York. Cambridge University Press. 2002.



Feint Denis. John Moran. 2019.



Feint Bartholemew. John Moran. 2019.



Feint Hippolytus. John Moran. 2019.



Feint John. John Moran. 2019.



Feint Sebastian. John Moran. 2020.



Feint Phocus. John Moran. 2020.

Chapter 3
The Figure and Society, Between Realism and Recognition

“Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement.”²⁰

- Ralph Ellison

The human figure is recognizable and relatable. Within all of our differences in viewpoints, cultures, and beliefs, we share this commonality. Even though we are different physically, our similarities bind us. We are confronted with images and representations of the figure on a daily basis, whether in advertising, news, entertainment, or art; yet even with this over saturation of artificial bodies we still connect and acknowledge these representations.

The emotive response of the viewer can be induced through the execution of the representation and the expression in relation to the subject matter. As Ceysson and Bresc-Bautier write about Michelangelo’s *Pieta*: “Pensive and compassionate as if its transfixed by an inexpressible grief, the Virgin contemplates the limp body of Christ, lying across her ample cloak. The virtuous verist accuracy of the rendering of the bone structure and inert stiffened muscles of Jesus defies commentary.”²¹ Even if the viewer is unfamiliar with the specific subject matter, they are able to empathize with the mother through her expressions and posture. We recognize the suffering of a mother losing her son through the beauty and execution of the sculpture.



Details of Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. <http://www.italianrenaissance.org>

This same material virtuosity is often employed by the hyperrealist sculptors to draw an emotional or visceral response from the viewer. Ron Mueck for instance uses his technical prowess as a means of expression, yet disassociates from the experience of the object –

²⁰ R. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York, Random House, 1947, p. 14.

²¹ B. Ceysson and G. Bresc-Bautier, *Sculpture From the Renaissance to the Present Day*. Koln, Taschen GmbH, 2006, p. 613.

“imbuing [his work] with a life force that evades the artistic register of representation.”²² He allows the believability of his work to make its own statements with little context, focusing more on the shifting scale and perfection of the technique. “They do this well, very well. Which explains the intense visceral reactions that they provoke.”²³ The depiction of the figure in and of itself is the method of delivery, requiring the viewer to step outside of their natural senses and believe in the impossibilities of the work. Their expressions of vulnerability in contrast to their immense scale, or inversely of strength and resilience contrasting their minute stature, invite the viewer to reflect existentially on the individual and its presence within our environment.



In Bed. Ron Mueck. 2005.
<https://ropac.net/>

Duane Hanson on the other hand, utilizes both the representation of the figure and their environment to illustrate specific socio-political situations and compel the viewer to empathize with the figure being represented. His depictions of individuals of lower-middle or working class individuals speak to a specific point in American history through their clothing and dress, yet they connect with the viewer on an emotional level through their serene reflective gaze or the specifics of their character. “Hanson suggests time in a dual way: not only do his subjects carry in the flesh the scars of their own experience, but their clothes and appurtenances tie to the prevailing taste of a moment in history. Traditional sculpture had

²² J. Shaughnessy, *Real Life by Hand [in] Real Life*. Catalogue to Exhibition Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 2008, p.17.

²³ J. Shaughnessy, *Real Life by Hand [in] Real Life*. Catalogue to Exhibition Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 2008, p.18.

made it possible to escape from time; with Hanson, sculpture became the means of focusing attention on time at all levels.”²⁴ Much like the effect of Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, we are drawn to empathize with these figures and ‘believe’ in them and their situations, regardless of their connection to a definitive place and time.



Man with Walkman. Duane Hanson. 1989.
<https://visualdiplomacyusa.blogspot.com>



Homeless Person. Duane Hanson. 1991.
<https://visualdiplomacyusa.blogspot.com>

While the hyper-realists draw an emotive connection to their sculptures through solemn reflection and serenity and exacted depictions of specific socio-political situations, the absolute perfection of these too perfect works can leave them seeming lifeless, rather than life like. In viewing the *Pieta*, we are not tricked into believing that the sculpture is in anyway ‘real life’, yet we still have the ability to empathize with the figures, arguably even more so than their hyperrealist counterparts. The expressive portrayal of the figure, even in absurd and unbelievable situations, has the ability to create scenarios which beg for empathy and recognition.

Patricia Piccinini works from a similar starting point when conceptualizing her work: “connection and empathy are at the heart of my practice [...]. Many of the works are beings of one sort or another; creatures. The word creature comes from middle english and means literally ‘something created’. My creatures are just that, imaginary beings that are almost possible. They are not always traditionally beautiful, but they always have a beauty and an honesty within them. They are more vulnerable than threatening. People sometimes find their strangeness off-putting at first, but they usually learn to see past this. The creatures literally appeal to the audience’s empathy, they entreat the viewer to look beyond their strangeness and see the connections.”²⁵

²⁴ B. Ceysson and G. Bresc-Bautier, *Sculpture From the Renaissance to the Present Day*. Koln, Taschen GmbH, 2006, p. 1081.

²⁵ <https://www.patriciapiccinini.net/writing/0/498/61> [access: 04.02.2021]



The Carrier. Patricia Piccinini. 2012.
<https://www.designboom.com/>

Edward Kienholz also touches on this idea with his politically charged, narrative work. Aesthetically his work pulls elements of realism and contemporary life, but they are abstracted. The connections between the found objects and the somewhat crudely or grossly depicted figures in his tableaux and installations ground the absurd and unbelievable into a very relatable reality. The disparities of these conflicting images are so obvious, that they become nearly seamless in the recognition of the content of his work. “[H]owever shocking or confrontational the works could be, their settings were rooted in everyday experience and quite recognizable settings.”²⁶ Kienholz manages to bring to life the emotional discontent and offer a poignant critique through the sheer fabrication of his work. “The work of art, the representation, the sculpture, the fabricated piece and its reality in the world, and then the reality of the actual act in the world, the real violence. People are afraid if this piece is shown

²⁶ R. L. Pincus, *On a Scale that Competes with the World: the Art of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990, p. 48.

it could trigger violence. There is a type of confusion where viewers see a work of art, a representation, as if it's the actual thing and the artist is the perpetrator. They blame the artist and sometimes believe the work of art is glorifying the act."²⁷



The Hoerengracht. Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin. 1983-1988.

<https://hart.amsterdam/>

²⁷ R. Ohrt and P. McCarthy, *Shining the Lights, in conversation on Five Car Stud and the work of Ed Kienholz*, [in:] *Five Car Stud*, Catalogue to Exhibition, Denmark, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2011, p. 102.

These artists all utilize different aesthetic styles to create a recognizable emotional connection to their work and subject matter. The visual impact of their technical and/or expressive material handling opens a door for the viewer to enter but leaves enough room for investigation and reflection. Though the styles may differ immensely in their execution, they achieve similar goals by using the figure as an invitation to the viewer to consider broader existential concepts and the implications of specific details related to the overarching narrative.

In my own aesthetic exploration of the figure as a means of socio-political expression, I am searching for a place between these two visual ideologies: meticulously crafted and lifelike, yet crude and childish. This 'in between space' derives from the variety of different materials I work with and how they interact with each other physically and conceptually. The different materials challenge me to understand and study the figure, yet also offer the freedom to experiment with their tangible existence in a realistic setting. The figurative aspects of the sculptures are in essence assemblages, with the exposed flesh body parts being sculpted in glass and the clothing of the figure being composed of various materials including fabric, epoxy resin, acrylic, and latex. Patricia Piccinini puts it perfectly, "If I want the viewers to get anything from my work it is this experience of a journey from disturbance to warmth."²⁸ The empathetic experienced by the viewer comes from the recognition of the figures coupled with the believability of the combination of materials and their handling.

Each material is used for a specific purpose. Much like in Kienholz's work, the materials must cause the focus to oscillate between the absurd and the believable, in order to critique actual situations occurring daily in our lives that seem completely absurd in this day and age, all of which again becomes completely grounded through the lifelike depiction of the figure. When I speak of the lifelike depiction of the figures I am not necessarily referring to statuesque perfection or the hyper-real modelling of an individual, rather the imperfect fluidity that 'real life' offers. As I stated previously, each material offers completely different aesthetic qualities derived through both their own inherent properties and the technical handling of each one and the choices made throughout the creation process.

For instance, the exposed flesh of the human figure is sculpted from molten glass; the process is called hot sculpting and is done free hand rather than through the use of a mold. Working with hot glass presents several challenges that create obstacles while offering opportunities that differ from more traditional sculptural materials. Aside from working to develop the technical skills to render figures in hot glass, I also try to find a way to utilize the qualities of glass to emphasize the life that I am depicting in the figures. One of the criticisms I have of the hyperrealist sculptors is that the skin tends to appear 'plasticky' and hard rather than soft and fleshy; I try to capture the soft and fleshy nature of skin with the inherent translucency of glass. In order to mimic this 'fleshiness', I layer colored glass powders onto the transparent molten glass in a variety of different orders. Most of the skin tones require between 12 and 16 layers of color as a base and then additional color sifted on to the sculpture in specific areas during the working process. Recreating these fleshy skin tones requires extensive experimentation in order to create realistic tonal values. When the glass is still hot, the colors are deceptive due to the glow of the molten material; the true color is only seen when the

²⁸ <https://www.patriciapiccinini.net/writing/0/427/61> [access: 04.02.2021]

glass has cooled 1150° C to room temperature. Once cooled, the layering of the flesh tones coupled with the transparent glass mimics the translucency of skin, allowing light to penetrate the surface, but not allowing it to pass through the object.



Details of glass components. John Moran

"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

- Matthew 6:22–23²⁹

The most important aspect of the relatability and recognition within the figure is their lifelike portrayal, rather than a hyperreal or statuesque resemblance. One of the defining characteristics of their lifelike appearance is the glossy nature of the eyes in contrast to the soft texture of the flesh – even though both are achieved through the same material. To achieve this aesthetic, the eyeballs are made separately beforehand and heated up during the process in order to combine them with the sculpted glass head. The eyeballs are made using a torch and applying colored glass strings to a white glass ball, and then covering the whole thing in clear glass. The shiny surface of the clear lens contrasts the matte flesh tones and helps to attain the eerie lifelike quality I am striving for in the figures and is emphatic of the emotional expression of the subjects I am depicting.

The coupling of the flesh tones and the addition of the eyes, may separate my work aesthetically from that of other hot glass sculptors, but that is not to say that there are no other figurative glass sculptors employing similar techniques. Two of my contemporaries who stand out in this field are Martin Janecky and Ross Richmond. Both artists have paved the way for hot glass sculpting through their own development of techniques and willingness to share these techniques openly within the glass community.

Focused more on the statuesque perfection and a hyperreal portrayal of the figure, Martin Janecky's work refers more to classical figurative sculptures. The technical precision with which he creates his figures evokes a similar serenity and believability as the work of Ron Mueck, but the color choice surface treatment puts a classical spin on the contemporary. The hollow gaze of his figures evokes sympathy and compassion in the viewer, similar in many

²⁹ Holy Bible New International Version.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%206%3A22-23&version=NIV> [access: 02.11.2021]

ways to early Hellenistic sculptures, such as the *Boxer at Rest*.³⁰ While his incredibly detailed and anatomically perfect figures are technically astounding and demonstrate his material mastery, they exist as statuesque illustrations of anatomical perfection. Janecky is consistently pushing the boundaries of realism within glass sculpting and inspires my own technical pursuit of consistently improving figurative depictions.



Boxer at Rest. Hellenistic Bronze Sculpture.
<https://archaeologistsdiary.wordpress.com>



Grouping. Martin Janecky. 2021. Photo: Martin Soukup.
<https://www.facebook.com>

Incredibly skilled as a sculptor and the innovator of many of the techniques that hot glass sculptors³¹ employ, Ross Richmond “focuse[s] mainly on the figure, capturing a moment, a gesture, a quiet interaction between people or an individual, and their thoughts.”³² Richmond is one of the first studio glass sculptors pursuing a realistic depiction of the figure, further developing many of the techniques that he learned working with Pino Signoretto and William Morris. Richmond’s figures illustrate existentialist concepts through meticulously crafted and brightly colored figurative elements coupled with symbolic objects that lead the viewer to reflect on the intentions of the work. Richmond’s illustrative style laid the groundwork for many glass artists, including myself, and helped create an environment where technical prowess is coupled with conceptual intent.

³⁰ <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/boxer-at-rest/> [access: 04.11.2021]

³¹ Both Martin Janecky and myself have learned from the various techniques Ross Richmond has developed

³² <https://www.travergallery.com/artists/ross-richmond/> [access: 04.13.2021]



Soul Searching. Ross Richmond. 2006.

<http://www.rossrichmond.com>



Clown with Snow Shoes. Pino Signoretto
<https://www.schiavonglass.com>



Inuit Mother and Child. William Morris.
<https://www.schantzgalleries.com/>

One of the aspects of hot glass sculpting that gives the material its life is the physical nature of the process, one which requires maintaining a constant working temperature of 1150° C degrees or more. In order to maintain this temperature, glass artists must begin to work on a single piece and continue through the process until the piece is complete, without pause or the possibility of stepping away from the piece. Unlike many traditional sculpture materials, liquid molten glass cannot be sculpted with our hands, therefore we must instead manipulate the material using a series of metal tools, while continuously keeping the molten glass in motion to fight gravity. This constant movement of the material both gives it a life of its own and adds an incredibly physical aspect of the making process. For instance, the figurative components I create range between two and eight hours of continuous focus and movement, in order to maintain a working temperature hot enough to avoid sudden and total loss but stable enough to maintain the form being created. Needless to say, these sessions are physically and mentally straining, but they do force decisive action and decision making while deeply immersed in the creative process. Each sculpture requires a tremendous amount of planning and engineering, but at the same time facilitates flexibility and reactionary thinking during the creative process. It is this oscillation between structure and turmoil that gives the figures life.

This 'in-between space', floating between structure and turmoil, also reflects in our daily life, establishing an imperfect familiarity and opening an entry into building a visual relationship with the viewer. Martina Weinhart writes that Kienholz's depiction of Western consumer culture is so close to life that it strives for the vernacular. "It is not least about overcoming the vehemently contested boundary between art and life [...]. Even beyond their themes [...], since they derive immediately from the store of real objects of the respective period of their origin. From this point of view, we are witnesses to a surreal battle of *matériel* over the depiction of reality."³³ I am striving to create a similar visual experience for the viewer, a vernacular recognition that encourages reflection rather than a purely cerebral consideration.

Vernacular recognition is essential to the overall uniformity of the aesthetic; without this the pieces seem disjointed and composed rather than lifelike and relatable. The combination of the planning and engineering of total sculpture paired with decisiveness and immediacy of the glass process led me to seek out and discover other materials that I can manipulate through similar practice. Sculpting with fabric and textile in combination with acrylics and resins allows me to incorporate the same articulate planning in the conception of a sculpture, and definitive immediacy in the material manipulation that gives these conceptions a breath of life. Each piece of clothing is unique, designed with a specific purpose and concept in mind. The patterned fabric or branded imagery refers to the underlying concept of the piece, but also brings a sense of 'reality' to them. The clothing is constructed on top of layers of polyester/cotton fabric in order to offer strength and weight to the fabric so it can be coated in resin. This step adds a visual density to the fabric, giving it the appearance of a solid mass rather than 'wet fabric' with resin application. With the fabric coated in clear epoxy resin, I am able to situate fabric in order to give it a sense of movement and allow it to harden in a position natural to the posture and refer to historical art or a recognizable image at the heart of the concept of the piece. This 'frozen fabric' appears as if it were in motion and creates

³³ M. Weinhart, *The Disorder of Things: The Moral Assemblages of Edward Keinholz and Nancy Reddin Keinholz*. [essay in:] *KIENHOLZ*, Catalogue to Exhibition, Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle, and Basel, Museum Tinguely, Manchester, Cornerhouse Publications, 2011, pp. 40-41.

compositional movement as in Baroque and Rococo sculpture and painting. The fabric is then coated several more times in clear epoxy resin to give glossy surface to the clothing, contrasting matte or rough surface of the glass body parts. This combination of elements creates an extremely life like feel, and brings life and tension to these figures, illustrating the underlying concept behind the work.



Modesty. Antonio Corradini. 1752.

<https://www.livemaster.com/>

The lifelike nature of the glass elements of the figure in combination with the 'real' clothing is what dictates their believable existence within their surroundings and offers insight into recognizing the underlying subject matter. The realistic yet expressive execution of the figures in relation to the subject matter is intended to draw an emotive response from the viewer and connect them with the narratives that are being presented. When the viewer begins to recognize and relate to the figures empathetically, they become aware of the societal critique presented in the work. Recognition brings responsibility and responsibility denies ignorance.

Chapter 4
Counterfeit Consumerism and Pop Culture

“The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real.”³⁴

- Jean Baudrillard

The idea of what is truth or fantasy is becoming increasingly subjective. The singular experience of individuals dictates their own understanding of what is inherent truth and reality or what is mythical, fantastic, or absurd. This in-between space of dueling realities is what I find interesting, and it is the base concept behind the layering of symbolism, images, and narratives in the work I create. It is the question to ask, what is provocative or offensive? The art work referencing real life events and situations or the real life events and situations themselves.

“The objective profile of the United States, then, may be traced throughout Disneyland, even down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd. All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic-strip form. Embalmed and pacified. Whence the possibility of an ideological analysis of Disneyland []: digest of the American way of life, panegyric to American values, idealized transposition of a contradictory reality. To be sure. But this conceals something else, and that "ideological" blanket exactly serves to cover over a third-order simulation: Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”³⁵

Even in his critique of the consumer driven, illusory, hyperreality of United States, Baudrillard also falls into his own trap of seeing this phenomenon mainly from the viewpoint of an outsider, judging from a point of seemingly moral superiority. While I agree with his sentiment, this false representation of reality does not exist only in the United States (in fact Disneyland Paris opened only four years after the quoted text was written). Maybe it is the unfortunate downside of globalization or maybe it is just the nature of human beings, to consistently understand the world from our own subjectivity, dismiss anything we do not understand or agree with as false, and believe fully in our own, subjective truths. But then again, that is the point.

³⁴ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, Selected Writings, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, pp.166-184. https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html [access: 04.12.21]

³⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, Selected Writings, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, pp.166-184. https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html [access: 04.12.21]



Disneyland California. Jeff Gritchen. <https://people.com/>



Disneyland Paris. Laurent P. <https://www.sortiraparis.com/>

It is important that in the artistic world I am creating, materially and conceptually, the counterfeit exists in order to give the illusion of comfort. The characters, objects, and imagery that exist in this world are rooted in a recognizable reality; they feel real, yet are undoubtedly fake. Like plastic gift store Virgin Mary statues that you find in Catholic homes or plaster replicas of classical sculptures you find on the lawns of the middle class neighborhoods, they are representations of perceived reality. Though each element individually is meticulously

crafted and carefully considered, together they reveal of the underlying existential examination of our own observations. They are not genuine articles but merely replicated versions of reality, intended to coerce a consideration and reevaluation of perception.

In discussing Robert Gober's intentional fabrication of the natural elements of his work, Maureen Sherlock writes, "the Americans choose two primary methods of personal salvation which correspond to the different religious conceptions of nature that permeate the American temperament: the Calvinist intensification of an authentic experience of the immediate; or the Unitarian constitution of meeting through authenticating and transformative labor."³⁶ As a twisted interpretation of the same idea, I see the contemporary vision of personal salvation as an achievement of consumer wealth or celebrity status, rather than the veneration of natural, a religious conception of status. The illusion of salvation. In this state, "no one has any worth beyond his or her appearance, usefulness, or ability to 'succeed'."³⁷ The same correlation between the laborious material counterfeiting and the layering of referential brand and pop elements, transcends these objects to a level beyond that of celebratory representations of ordinary life, into an illusion of the sacred.



Untitled. 1995-1997 (detail). Robert Gober.

³⁶ M.P. Sherlock, *Arcadian Elegy: The art of Robert Gober*, Arts Magazine, Nr. 64, 1989, pp 44-49, cited in Schimmel Paul, *Gober is in the Details*, Los Angeles and Zurich, The Museum of Contemporary Art and Scalo Verlag, 1997, p. 52.

³⁷ C. Hedges, *Empire of Illusion*, New York, Nation Books, 2009, p. 32.



Untitled. 1995-1997 (detail). Robert Gober.

The pop-corporate imagery and references act as a surrogate for a specific idea. For instance, Disney symbolizes capitalism, not capitalism as a theoretical social governance system, but as the greed driven, unjust feudal system it has morphed into. The idea of Disney itself is an illusion, no longer linked to a person, but a conglomerate corporation that found success through the white washing of cultural histories and fables which were hijacked in order to create a trademarked concept owned by an undying entity taking litigious action against even the smallest use of ‘their’ property.³⁸ It is merely an example of the absurdity that exists in our reality and our apathetic inability as a society to recognize or alter it. Even if we are aware of the deception, we still accept it in our desire for simplicity and entertainment.

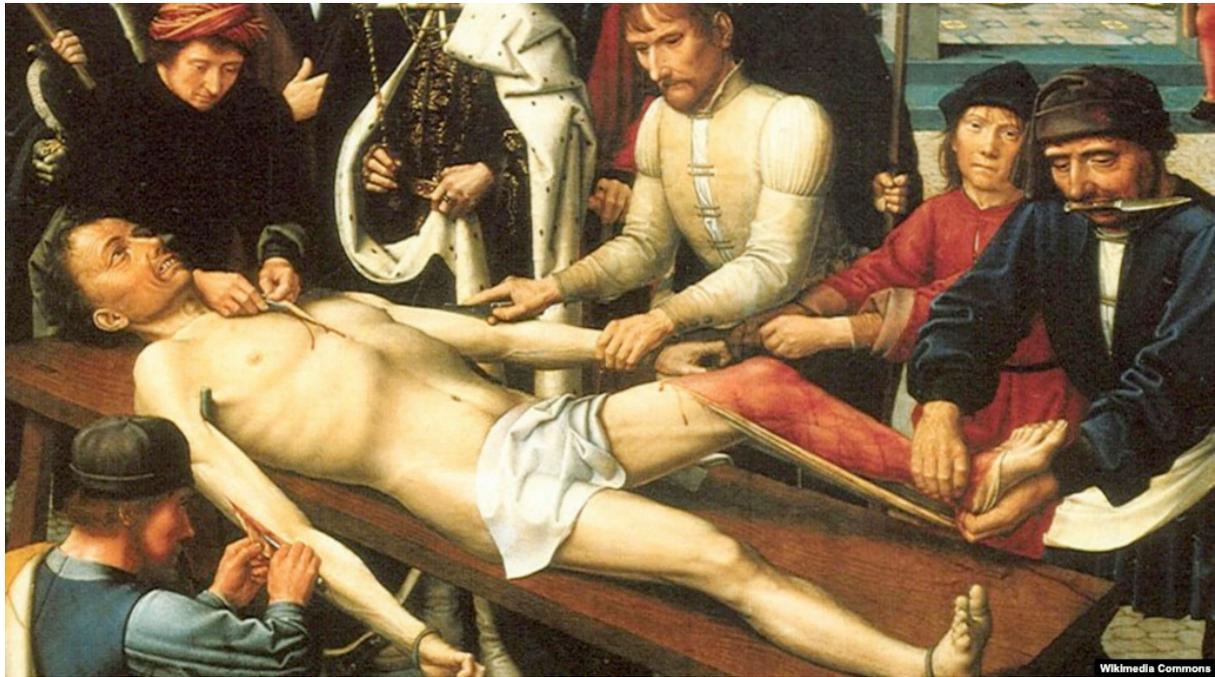
“We have grown accustomed to images of torture, violence, and death in the form of historical paintings and in sculptures of Greek heroes and gods as well as Christian martyrs and saints as to hardly recognize their cruelty.”³⁹ While this is true, as is the fact that we are constantly barraged with images of violence and death in popular culture, we also witness the real-life deaths of young men by the hands of the police or images of dead children being used as political fodder. The illusion runs so deep, that there are those who can dismiss the idea of systemic murder and accuse the families of murder victims of being crisis actors or

³⁸ Since 1976, Disney has effectively lobbied for extended terms and single-handedly changed copyright law in a way that has stopped authors and creators from building on popular ideas.

<https://www.financialpoise.com/copyright-law/> [access: 04.24.2021]

³⁹ R. Sagmeister, “Sex” and “Death”: *The Body as Battlefield between Heaven and Hell*, [in:] *Jake and Dinos Chapman*, New York, Distributed Art Publishers, 2005, p. 34.

believe that the global pandemic we are living through is a conspiracy orchestrated by Bill Gates in order to microchip and trace the entire population while blindly signing user agreements that directly allow corporations to track their activity. Our ability to discern what to trust or distrust has been tainted and confused.



The Judgement of Cambyses. Gerard David. 1498. <https://www.rferl.org/>



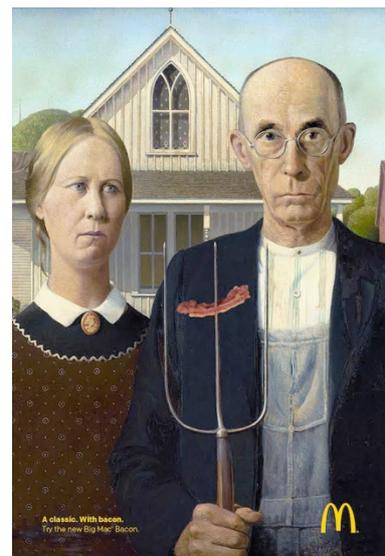
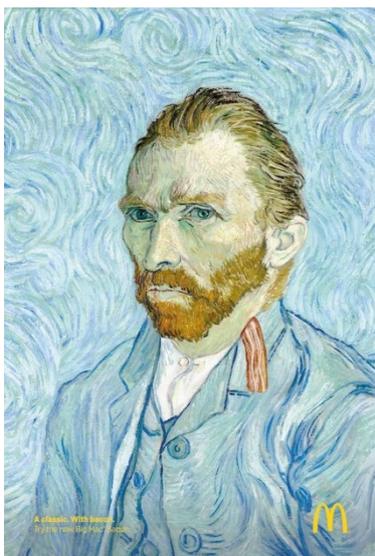
Saint Denis Picking up His Head. Pantheon Murals, Paris. <https://daydreamtourist.com>

Just as we have grown accustomed to violence, we have become anesthetized by the corporate activity and control that dominates our lives. "The purpose and goals of the corporation are never questioned. To question them, to engage in criticism of the goals of the

collective, is to be obstructive and negative. The corporations are the powers that determine identity. The corporations tell us who we are and what we can become. And the corporations offer the only route to personal fulfillment and salvation. If we are not happy there is something wrong with *us*. Debate and criticism especially about the goals and structure of the corporation, are condemned as negative and “counterproductive.”⁴⁰ Only through this type of thinking could someone like Donald Trump become President, while branding Make America Great Again on merchandise produced through cheap Chinese labor. The belief that someone or something (as corporations hold personal status) that has risen to power through subverting the system would be intent on pursuing any change that does not hinge on their own self-interest is naïve and absurd. Yet this absurdity has become the theater of our reality.



Rediscover the Classic. Botticelli, The Birth of Venus. <http://artnaos.net>



Big Mac Bacon. McDonalds Advertising. <https://www.creativebloq.com/>

⁴⁰ C. Hedges, *Empire of Illusion*, New York, Nation Books, 2009, p 117.

The socio-political critique of our current events is not in contrast to the brightly colored Disney princess sculptural elements, nor is the representation of childhood memorabilia as memento mori; they are intertwined with the intention of illustrating the illusion of our reality. The fluctuation between serious subject matter and childlike objects reflects the battle between perception and understanding, the point where our ideals and beliefs come into question. When our experiences disillusion our pre-conceived understanding of the world; it is an incredibly fragile and uncomfortable situation. But it is also a very real situation for many people.



Huddled Mess (detail). John Moran. 2020. Photo: Nathan J. Shaulis.



Crying with Silent Lips (detail). John Moran. 2021.
Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Crying with Silent Lips (detail). John Moran. 2021.
Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Huddled Mass. John Moran. 2020. Photo: Nathan J. Shaulis.



Happy. From the Mickey Mori Series. John Moran. 2018.



Decadent Decay. From the Mickey Mori Series. John Moran. 2021.

Chapter 5
Transparency, Community, and Viscosity

“For the first time in history, glass is now being used for the purpose of making sculptures and installations. However, the barriers between contemporary arts, crafts and decorative arts, initially divided the artists exploring glass as well. They all had their own backgrounds and traditions, and transitioning from one field into the other was problematic. Even introducing glass programs in North American universities didn’t counter these tendencies. The gestural impulse evident in the works of artists such as Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Barry Le Va and Eva Hesse was chiefly deployed in the use of common industrial materials. Glass, when it was used, continued even then to be commercial plate or mirrored glass—and it was expressly void of ornamentation. Studio or sculpted glass in the decorative arts tradition was as yet not considered to have a place in advanced sculpture. For most of the modern period, the visual art world has had tacit, and sometimes highly articulated, prejudices against the decorative-art world, whose practice it often derides as ‘artsy’ and ‘craftsy’; and the decorative art branch of contemporary practice tends to regard its counterparts as academic and elitist.”⁴¹

- Koen Vanderstukken

Before delving conceptually into the use of glass and the various other materials I use in my work, I will first introduce them practically, hopefully offering insight into the artistic processes that support my conceptual endeavors.

I have been working with glass for more than twenty years. During this time, my feelings on the glass world and the fascination around have oscillated between seeing it as a club for lovers of the material, one of which I was not necessarily a part, to a supportive and generous community striving to reach new goals and bring innovation to this material with over 5000 years of history. Throughout this journey I have focused my efforts on working with hot glass, a material sometimes held back from its potential of being used as a medium for artistic expression by the artisanal and craft history and the thought numbing intrinsic beauty and mystery attached to it. Though there is a very long and rich history of glassmaking, the studio glass movement – meaning artists using glass as an artistic medium within their own studios rather than in the factories – only began in the early 1960’s. Within its 5000 year history, the working methods have essentially remained unchanged since the advent of the blowpipe – nearly 2000 years ago. The studio glass movement brought a new life to this artform and with its new technologies and a communal aspect that was not present before.⁴² What other artistic medium holds such a rich history, yet is still so young in its development?

Over the past sixty or so years, this movement has not only impacted the conceptual practice but has had a hand in developing the necessary technology, an immense development that has allowed artists to build and maintain studios on a scale which was not previously

⁴¹ K. Vanderstukken, *Glass as a Critical Lense*, <https://www.berengo.com/journal/glass-as-a-critical-lens-2/> [access: 02.11.2021]

⁴² <https://timeline.cmog.org/> [access: 02.11.2021]

conceivable. In my own relatively short career as an artist, I have seen the equipment and technology develop alongside of and in support of the artistic endeavors of the artists working with the material. For example, one of the main tools I use in my studio practice, the oxygen propane torch, was nearly impossible to find in a studio in the late 1990's when I began, yet is now exists in a variety of shapes, sizes, and manufacturers and is a standard piece of equipment in almost every hot glass studio. Without this single technological advancement becoming readily available, hot glass sculpting would still be extremely rudimentary.



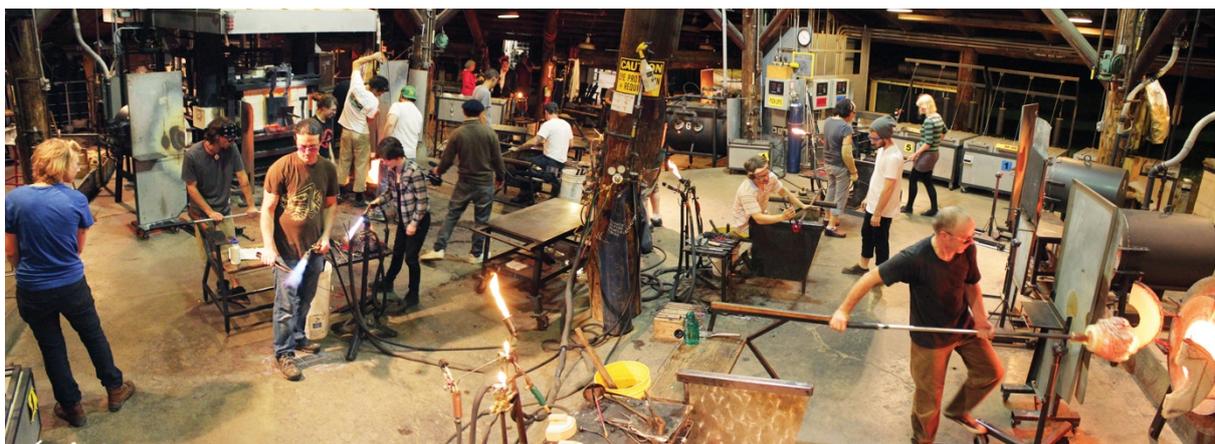
Sharpened Nortel Mid-Range Torch. Courtesy of Ben Sharp.

Working with hot glass requires a tremendous amount of overhead and equipment in order to begin. Due to the necessity of a semi-industrial studio and equipment needed to maintain a solid working environment, hot glass work is inherently expensive. Sculpting with hot glass, especially through the methods I employ requires working with a skilled team of artists and/or crafts-persons, in order to assist in the technical processes. To work with hot glass, one must learn to work as an individual as well as a team member. Hot glass is nearly never done alone, as it physically limits the achievable objectives. In working in a team, the person who is leading the piece is the decision maker, therefore the assistants are obliged to follow the directives, in turn working respectfully. The head glassmaker must learn to express their ideas and directions clearly and distinctly while managing several different aspects of the process simultaneously. Cooperation is essential to working with hot glass and collaboration is one of the most important aspects of the process, spurring experimentation and the expansion of knowledge.



FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE in Action. Gent Glas. Photo: Evert Van Laere.

Working with hot glass is dangerous and requires a level of responsibility outside of the creative process. The ovens must burn continuously at 1150° C (2150° F) in order to keep the glass in a liquid state. Aside from the resources needed to keep generating this heat, via either gas or electricity, there are safety requirements and precautions that must be taken. A hot glass studio requires the members of the community to learn to be dependable and share the responsibility of maintaining and running the equipment. The danger in working with the material also makes it exciting and alluring for many people, drawing them in to commit to this required attentiveness and become part of the greater community.



Pilchuck Glass School Hot Shop. <https://northsoundlife.com>

The physical nature of the material demands one plan to methodically beforehand and to work quickly and immediately throughout the process. It tests both conceptual thought processes in the planning and intuitiveness in creation while maintaining continuous communication with the team of makers. It is important that we learn to work as a team and grow together as a community, respecting each other and the studio, but in order for this community to grow, it must focus on building an open learning environment; knowledge

sharing and public outreach are essential to bringing in new members. Working this way offers an alternative vision of the lonely artisan keeping their trade secrets locked away, as it has existed historically.

As the studio glass movement developed, it pulled hot glass from the confines of the factory and created an artistic community. It created an open atmosphere for collaboration and the sharing of knowledge and creation, expanding the technical and conceptual ideas and understandings of glass as a material.



Harvey Littleton and students watching demonstrations at the first Toledo Workshop. 1962. Photo: Robert C. Florian.
<https://cmog.org>



The students of the first studio glass workshop at the Toledo Museum of Art. 1962. Photo: Robert C. Florian
<https://womenshistory.si.edu>

“Why Glass?”

Throughout my artistic career I have been asked this question countless times in one form or another, only to have avoided answering it as it is some ways insignificant to me. As I have pursued the idea of an artistic public space, I have found that even though this question may be irrelevant in many ways, the answer is also at the base of my artistic practice and creative process.

Glass has a number of inherent properties that are attractive to conceptual artists and craftsmen alike. Specifically speaking transparency, fragility, light refraction, magnification, and fluidity are all conceptual and practical properties of glass that I tend to actively ignore, or more truthfully, disregard completely, in my use of the material. That is not to say that these properties are not important, but I personally do not find the academic and intellectual pursuit of inherent material properties interesting or relevant in the realm of contemporary art or society. As these themes become increasingly commonplace foundations for contemporary art making use of glass, I am much more intrigued by the less obvious properties of the material.⁴³

⁴³ In 2020 alone, there were a series of Glass exhibitions titled: *Fragile, Transparent*, or another variation of a rather basic misconception of the material properties.

But what we are not does not define what we are.⁴⁴

The materials I use set up challenges for me. Working with hot glass is enticing and mesmerizing. It is scary and exhilarating. It is dangerous and consuming. Historically, practitioners of these mediums kept their techniques hidden from the public and secret from their competitors. The glass industry has been especially guilty of this tradition, keeping their secrets locked up in the factories or hidden away on their islands. Given the esoteric history of all these crafts, it is ironic that the technological and conceptual advancements over the past five decades has been largely due to the knowledge sharing and open community that came from these studio artistic movements. When I began working with glass, there were very few artists working with the material figuratively in the hot shop, but those that were, were doing so openly and teaching their techniques in order to spur a new momentum. This laid a foundation of skills and techniques which pushed to develop further alongside of the conceptual evolution of ideas and aesthetic, and now have the opportunity to share with and inspire others.⁴⁵



Einar and Jamex De La Torre as visiting artists during FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE. Gent Glas. Photo: Evert Van Laere.

Working with fire is invigorating. From the beginning as a molten mass to creating a form as sculptor, it is necessary to react with the material. In order to control the heat and movement, we must understand temperature both visually and physically. We must be able to determine the viscosity and make split second decisions in order to create works of art and avoid sudden total loss. At first the movements are counter intuitive, but with experience, these actions become second nature. Even after working with this material for so long, I still feel like there is a constant opportunity to continue learning and discovering new ways to think with it.

⁴⁴ This thought comes from a quote often misattributed to Jane Austin, but is attributed to Andrew Davies: “It isn't what we say or think that defines us, but what we do.” *Sense and Sensibility*. Miniseries Directed by John Alexander . Aired January, 2008, on BBC One. <https://1000quotesproject.wordpress.com/2018/08/02/557-it-isnt-what-we-say-or-think-that-defines-us-but-what-we-do/> [access: 04.07.2021]

⁴⁵ Over the past 22 years, figurative sculpting techniques in hot glass have become very common, as have the tools and technology needed to focus on method of sculpting.

This was, and still is, for me something exciting and creatively stimulating about working with glass. Throughout my research I continued to focus on the figure, continuously rethinking my strategic approach to the sculpting process depending on the variations within the work. This constant reevaluation of the process has prompted me to also reevaluate my approach how to introducing the material to a new generation of makers in the studio.

“In moments of national division, young people have played a disproportionate role in deepening the American democratic experiment. The black freedom struggle and the anti-war movement in the 1960’s were largely sustained owing to their vision and courage. As older folk become jaded , disillusioned, and wary, the lively moral energy of reflective and compassionate young people can play a vital role in pushing democratic momentum.”⁴⁶

This may seem like a far stretch from the material explorations I expressed in the above paragraphs, but it also what has driven the content of my work and forced me to reconsider my perceptions and preconceived notions of the importance of social and political art in public space over time. Social and political art does not necessarily refer to artworks made in relationship to societal or political agendas, but it can mean a community of artists who demonstrate and illustrate the goals of an inclusive community through artistic practice and public inclusion.

Of all of the materials that I work with, I still have the deepest connection to glass. Conceptually and practically this material is important to me, but beyond these points there is an even greater aspect of glass that has kept me engaged with it for more than half of my life: the community. This community has been integral to my development as an artist and as a person. Through my research, I have focused on this aspect of the material and how it has become important to my process and the content.

“Glass was the ultimate medium to radically fight the narrow-mindedness of the 19th century Bourgeois. It became the symbol for transparency, clarity, openness, honesty, democracy, justice, etc. Its influence is still tangible in the glass skyscrapers today. In many public buildings like parliament buildings or court houses that incorporate large glass walls, it is the visual transparency of glass that forms a powerful metaphor for openness, fairness, democracy, etc.”⁴⁷

This community offers more than just an opportunity for knowledge expansion; it is also a support system for likeminded artists who often find themselves far from their homes and loved ones. My life has always been nomadic. As an artist, and especially a glass artist, travelling comes with the territory. I never felt solidly grounded to my home town and left as soon as I was old enough. What continues to impress me is how much of a family I have gained through my artistic career.

⁴⁶ C. West, *Democracy Matters*. New York, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 174.

⁴⁷ K. Vanderstukken, *Glass as a Critical Lens*, <https://www.berengo.com/journal/glass-as-a-critical-lens-2/> [access: 02.11.2021]



Teamwork on FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE. Gent Glas. Photo: Laure Fradin.

While art in the broadest sense has the ability to reach a diverse public, Art (with a capital A) is often centered around commercial or academic viewpoints. I believe an important aspect of social and political art is having a supportive and inclusive community to explore and understand and criticize and improve. Being a part of a community built on the concept of accessibility and inclusion, makes it is possible to create a genuine space for artistic expression rather than one focused on a 'free space for creatives'. The idea of a 'creative community' or 'creative city' is much more engrained in the ideals of gentrification than it is in inclusion. Rafael Schachter directly addresses this challenge in her essay *The Ugly Truth: Street Art, Graffiti, and the Creative City*. "Today, city authorities all over the world have become entranced by a concept. They have become entranced by the possibilities of what is termed the creative, by the Creative Class, the Creative City, the Creative Economy, entranced by a cultural policy in which urban regeneration and renewal are linked intrinsically, inseparably, to the arts and other 'creative' practices."⁴⁸ This marketable concept of 'creative communities' is not a genuine creative space, nor is the hierarchical academic canon.

"A market-driven technocratic culture has infiltrated university life, with the narrow pursuit of academic trophies and the business of generating income from grants and business partnerships taking precedence over the fundamental responsibility of nurturing young minds. It is imperative for the adults who have made the life of the mind their life's calling to

⁴⁸ R. Schachter, *The ugly truth: Street art, Graffiti and the Creative City*, Art & the Public Sphere, Vol. 3 Nr. 2, 2014, p. 163.

be engaged with the wider community and play a vital role in furthering the national discourse on the important issues of the day by exercising the ways of truth telling that engage youth. Young people are acutely aware of the hypocrisies of so many adults in the political and business worlds, and that's why those of us in the universities who are free to speak more frankly without worries of recriminations – though the degree of that freedom is under fire – can create such an important bridge.⁴⁹



Youth glass blowing workshops. Gent Glas. 2020. Photo: Bries Geerts.



Public engagement during FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE. Gent Glas. Photo: Evert Van Laere.

⁴⁹ C. West, *Democracy Matters*. New York, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 186.

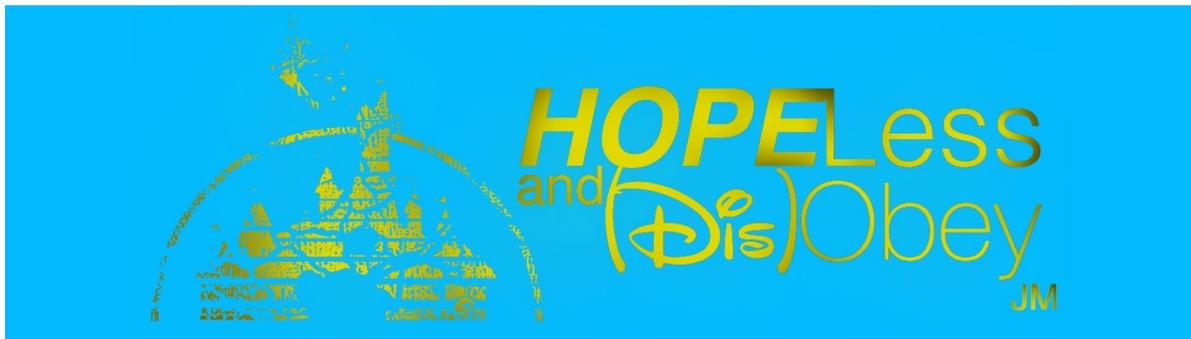
Art has the potential to play an essential role in community and as an important aspect in socio-political awareness. When talking about socio-political awareness I am not referring to politics in terms of the society, but in the ways that interaction in a community instills empathy and awareness in public policy and the effects it has on a diverse public. Being part of an artistic community focused around working with hot glass has not only given me these opportunities, but it has the ability to reach a broad range of people, while concentrating on teamwork, creativity, and communication. As an artist and a glassmaker, I am an advocate for such communities, focusing on the technical learning of the material, while envisioning its use artistically.

Unfortunately, I believe there is a large portion of contemporary art that exists in a bubble of initiates who think that art is above these issues, creating an elitist atmosphere. So, when I speak of accessible, socio-political works of art and its importance, I refer both to works employing an accessible narrative as a tool for generating an emotional response from the viewer, hopefully engaging them to reflect on these issues and communities that support and understand the importance of these narratives. Through the use of the performative, enticing process of glass making, a community can be built which offers an avenue of expression to people who may not have access to it. Through this community an environment of empathy and understanding through personal expression and communication is created, in turn initiating more individuals into the arts and creating a more inclusive and accessible society.

Exhibition Images
Hope Less and (Dis)Obey
Works by John Moran

For additional photo documentation, please visit the online exhibition:
<https://www.backdoorart.com/hope-less-and-dis-obey>

For video documentation, please visit:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2RovCQhgaA>



Once upon a time... lost in a sea of stone and rubble, we discovered a new existence. From the inside looking out, we longed for understanding, waiting for a happy end. But this is not a fairy tale.

Hope Less and (Dis) Obey takes a trip into a world of confusion and (self) reflection created during the last year. Colorful and dim, dark and cheery, this work explores the world my mind has built over the past year as we have lived in isolation, enjoying our time to focus while longing for distraction.

With the pandemic looming and closure of most public spaces, I decided to build an exhibition space in my studio in order to place the works together in a physical space. Each piece in the show reflects on the concepts explored throughout this writing. The overall focus of the exhibition is our own perception of reality and what happens when our understanding of the world comes crashing down around us. The past year has given us as individuals the chance to share a similar experience on a near global scale. Even though we shared the same experience, our individual realities were affected in entirely different ways.

Each piece in the exhibition explores these different realities, questions them, and reflects on them, with no intention of finding an answer, simply seeking peace within them.



Hope Less and (Dis)Obey installation Views. 2021.
Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Hope Less and (Dis)Obey installation Views. 2021.
Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Adam and Steve. Digital Print on Glass.
2021. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Our Lady of FATTYma. Digital Print on Glass.
2021. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



The Wrath of Maria. Digital Print on Glass.
2021. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Keep It in the Family. Digital Print on Glass.
2021. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



When a Butterfly Flaps Its Wings. Digital Print on Glass. 2021. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Dreaming Of.... Digital Print on Glass. 2021. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Prey. Digital Print on Glass. 2021. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Don't Be Afraid. Digital Print on Glass. 2021. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Mirror. Mirror. 2021. Free-hand sculpted and engraved glass, acrylic, mirror, gold leaf.
Collaboration with Marta Byrdziak. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Mirror. Mirror. (details). 2021. Free-hand sculpted and engraved glass, metal, gold leaf.
Collaboration with Marta Byrdziak. Photo: Mike Van Cleven



Travelloro. 2021. Free-hand sculpted and engraved glass, metal, gold leaf.
Collaboration with Marta Byrdziak. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Travelloro (details). 2021. Free-hand sculpted and engraved glass, metal, gold leaf.
Collaboration with Marta Byrdziak. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



The Crossing. 2021. Free-hand sculpted and engraved glass, acrylic, gold leaf.
Collaboration with Marta Byrdziak. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



The Crossing. 2021. Free-hand sculpted and engraved glass, acrylic, gold leaf.
Collaboration with Marta Byrdziak. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Searching for the Dark. Collaboration with Susan Taylor Glasgow. 2019.
Free hand sculpted, slumped and fused glass, epoxy, fabric, latex, enamels, metal. Photo: Mike Van Clev



Searching for the Dark. Collaboration with Susan Taylor Glasgow. 2019.
Free hand sculpted, slumped and fused glass, epoxy, fabric, latex, enamels, metal. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Prey for the Sinners. 2021.

Free hand sculpted glass, acrylic, textile, epoxy resin, gold leaf, altered stuffed toy. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Prey for the Sinners (details). 2021.
Free hand sculpted glass, acrylic, textile, epoxy resin, gold leaf, altered stuffed toy. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Prey for the Sinners. 2021.

Free hand sculpted glass, acrylic, textile, epoxy resin, gold leaf, altered stuffed toy. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Prey for the Sinners. 2021.

Free hand sculpted glass, acrylic, textile, epoxy resin, gold leaf, altered stuffed toy. Photo: Mike Van Clev



Crying with Silent Lips. 2021.

Free hand sculpted glass, acrylic, fabric, latex, enamels, polystyrene. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Crying with Silent Lips. 2021.
Free hand sculpted glass, acrylic, fabric, latex, enamels, polystyrene. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Crying with Silent Lips. 2021.
Free hand sculpted glass, acrylic, fabric, latex, enamels, polystyrene. Photo: Mike Van Clevon



Crying with Silent Lips. 2021.

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Decadent Decay. Mickey Mori Series. John Moran, photo: John Moran, 2021.

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Sharpened Nortel Mid-Range Torch. Courtesy of Ben Sharp, photo: Ben Sharp.

FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE in Action. Gent Glas. Photo: Evert Van Laere, 2018.

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Einar and Jamex De La Torre as visiting artists during FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE. Gent Glas, photo: Evert Van Laere, 2019.

Teamwork on FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE. Gent Glas, photo: Laure Fradin, 2019.

Youth glass blowing workshops. Gent Glas, photo: Bries Geerts, 2020.

Public engagement during FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE. Gent Glas, Photo: Evert Van Laere, 2019.

Exhibition Images

Hope Less and (Dis)Obey installation View. John Moran, photo: Mike Van Clevon, 2021.

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Mirror. Mirror. (detail). John Moran and Marta Byrdziak, photo: Mike Van Clevon, 2021.

Travellore. John Moran and Marta Byrdziak, photo: Mike Van Clevon, 2021.

Travellore (detail). John Moran and Marta Byrdziak, photo: Mike Van Clevon, 2021.

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The Crossing (detail). John Moran and Marta Byrdziak, photo: Mike Van Clevon, 2021.

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Prey for the Sinners (detail). John Moran, photo: Mike Van Clevon, 2021.

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Crying with Silent Lips (detail). John Moran, photo: Mike Van Clevon, 2021.

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