

John Moran PhD dissertation

Birthdate: Sept 26, 1979

Title of dissertation:

“The Importance of Socially Engaged Art in Public Space”

The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design
Arts/ Glass

Based on reading, analysis of the concept and realization of his dissertation, after taking into consideration the creative output, I highly recommend that John Moran be awarded an academic Ph.D. title in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and conservation.

I make this recommendation with no reservations and with enthusiasm. It is my feeling the candidate has fulfilled the requirements. My decision is based primarily on the artworks themselves and how they are reflected in the written document.

In terms of John’s previous achievements in his artistic career, I find that he has a most accomplished exhibition record. He has actively exhibited both solo shows and in group shows at prestigious venues. In this area, he exceeds most artists of his age and stature. He has also been very active in curatorial projects as well as attending conferences. He has received numerous awards. In short, his professional record is *outstanding*. In this area, he exceeds the requirement for the PhD.

Commentary and analysis of artwork and dissertation:

Do the words of the thesis support the artwork itself? That is the one of the most critical questions when considering a thesis project. It is not a matter of yes or no extremes but where on the spectrum the relationship of theory to practice lies.

One (possibly tiffing note): the title of the thesis is misleading as “Public Space” is really not brought up. A simple solution would be to delete it from the title and the reader would be none the wiser.

I find that John Moran’s words and images are suitably matched. To summarize in a single paragraph, John’s work is inspired by figuration and materials, and he chooses contemporary social themes such as corporate greed, immigration, religion, and right-wing politics to directly address his concerns about the world today in a narrative fashion. It is his hypothesis that art, specifically figurative, narrative art is a way of generating empathy, something desperately needed at this time. Most artists have a conscience and create work in keeping with their ethical code. Many want to address specific social issues before it’s too late. John is no exception. In short, his work explores current social themes from his point of view as a citizen of the United States, as a liberal, as someone raised Catholic, a white male, and someone living away from their home, and a “stranger in a strange land”—during Covid (which no doubt impacted his thoughts on “public space”).

Based in his personal religious upbringing and his thoughts on contemporary culture, John has come to place of acute questioning and critique. Not content with received “wisdom”, lore, and practice, especially as he sees the world in a dire condition of pre-collapse, John seeks to give

voice to his concerns, partly to alleviate his own angst and perhaps partly to raise awareness, if possible. Most obvious in John's project is his intellectual content and the material of glass which are directly addressed, less obvious is his concern with design.

One might add that John is a person of some modesty when it comes to understanding the importance of his artistic voice being heard. In other words, John doesn't present himself as a be-all-end-all authority on any social issue and the thesis clearly demonstrates while he ascribes to beliefs, he doesn't believe it is his right to jam them down anyone's throat. This alone is a generosity which presumes an intelligent audience and goes a long way in creating an open atmosphere where one is free to consider his artworks without the threat of a morally superior lecture. One catches more flies with honey, and John seems to understand he is most persuasive when being less didactic. This is gleaned from the dissertation itself, I think the work sometimes leans more towards didacticism than is necessary to make his point and that is something John might want to remain vigilant about in the studio, when developing ideas into image.

The written component of the thesis works best as a description of the artist's philosophy as well as a general description of the contents of the artist's "cranial stewpot" as opposed to an attempt to directly correlate verbal thought to individual works or to direct the viewer into certain meanings. I can't say enough how important I think this approach to a thesis project is. A visual artist should always maintain their right to claim a certain amount of "unknowing" in the creative process. Indeed: it cannot be creative if it is in the realm of the already known. That said, in my response, I will attach works to words as an example of one viewer's ("informed") response.

Figuration, Empathy, etc.

In "Building a Lexicon", chapter 1, John discusses the relationship of art to empathy. I would have advised John to save the discussion of empathy for the chapter after the one on figuration as I believe establishing the figure as the main subject in general is necessary before discussing how it is employed specifically. Perhaps it's not my job here to critique the organization of the paper, so take that for what it's worth.

As for figuration: As a figurative artist myself, Chapter 3, The Figure and Society, Between Realism and Recognition was near and dear to my heart. What could possibly be said about figuration that has not been gone over a trillion times before? Well, most scholarship has been by art theorists and historians, and much can be learned from psychologists and neurologists that has enormous bearing on how we understand figurative art.

Indeed, we humans enjoy looking at humans. Apropos of science, there is a great primate study showing chimps, when given a choice, prefer looking at pornographic images over drinking their favorite beverage, cherry juice. So apparently, the preference for figurative "art" extends beyond humans. What does this prove? Well, it proves that there is no real need to create emotional connections from scratch—just include images of humans and voila! The connection is already there, waiting to be exploited by the artist! A question remains, though, as to how we perceive "others". Does a "person" with whom we do not identify as "family" or "friend" have the same effect? One imagines it is a matter of degree and what one has been taught.

To confront a human *image* is perhaps to awaken a part of the brain that cannot distinguish between image and reality. Like a creature which reacts to its mirror image (dogs, birds, primates), there must be part of our brains which *cannot* tell the difference between an image and reality and part that *can*. For this reason, images of humans are *inordinately* powerful, if not downright threatening. It's easy to condemn the long history of censorship as evidence of overly sensitive prudes who wish to commandeer human expression as well as oppress certain bodies—but I think a nod must be given to iconoclasm which must also arise from a fear that the images *feel a lot like they do indeed contain a modicum of living soul* and thus are magical and compete with gods and must be destroyed lest they overpower us. The “valley of the uncanny” is part of every effective figurative image, which makes them both compelling and creepy, but elevates them from re-presentational to presentational. (“*Eyes often have an implicit censorious power. Post a large picture of a pair of eyes at a bus stop (versus a picture of flowers), and people become more likely to clean up litter. Post a picture of eyes in a workplace coffee room, and the money paid on the honor system triples. Show a pair of eyes on a computer screen and people become more generous in online economic games.*” --Robert Sapolsky)

Human being's desire to represent themselves and to experience these representations takes many, many forms—not just art, porn, and advertising. It would be interesting to investigate, for example, the use of effigies to enact political statement at rallies and riots, how children interact with dolls (hint: it's not all cute and endearing!) as well as how we interact with human (and animal) corpses. Why do we prefer TV to radio? Because the weather, news and traffic are more interesting, more compelling, more *believable* when I can see a human body telling us things. We are so drawn to understanding body and mind as separate that much is revealed in our interactions with “pure body”. Bodies are so pervasive, like the proverbial fish in water, we don't even notice how they direct our minds.

I found the discussion on eyes and skin in John's third chapter fascinating. Yes, eyes and skin are essential in creating a figurative representation of a person. If they are flubbed, the representation will remain forever unconvincing. Even work that is abstracted or distorted is subject to this demand. This brings me to the importance of facial expression in figurative art. Large portions of brain software are given over to reading human expression. As a figurative artist, I know how even the tiniest non-tweak can change a despairing look to a hopeful one. The most microscopic adjustment of an eyebrow and a face toggle from rage to wonder. Not to mention that most expressions are admixtures, a reflection that we feel many emotions at once. The eyes might be joyous and the lips disapproving! Ad nauseum, ad infinitum. So, the expressions on John's figures add considerably to the content of the work.

Example: *Prey for the Sinners*. The face is competent but a bit doughy—this is especially noticeable because the hand holding the floppy sword is so incredibly well done! Certain features around the eyes seem abbreviated. I know how hard this is, but I would spend some time working on these details. Almost all figurative “mistakes” look generic and similar to each other—but when you get it “right”? it will have all the individuality of an actual human.

A better example is the face in *Crying with Silent Lips*. The face is not only anatomically more convincing, including the hair, but it expresses a spectrum of emotions which is much more human than expressions of singular, “pure” emotions. After all, we are often feeling several things at once.

The face in *Searching for the Dark* is interesting as it is a face that seems bewildered, and perhaps a little stunned at the same time.

I am in no way suggesting it is optimal for John or any figurative artist to attempt maximal tight-fisted control over the process of creating an expression. However, they do have ex post facto editing power. And I do believe, old fashioned as this must sound, that extra drawing, sculpting in something more forgiving than glass (like plasticine) are important ways to stay in shape. A viewer will forgive you for a slightly tubular, inarticulate thigh. They will be less forgiving with the hands and not forgiving at all with the face.

In John's work, the "valley of the uncanny" seems to be evoked but it seems that it may be happening a bit out of John's control. In cases like this, again, I do not advocate more control so much as scrupulous editing and awareness of what has been created.

Having established the irrevocable, powerful, response to a human figure, now one can make a case for how it engenders empathy (or doesn't)

Empathy, John says, begins in our own suffering which allows us to understand the suffering of others. It's hard to disagree that what the world needs now is more compassion! But empathy and compassion are not the same. This may be a petty criticism of words rather than principles, but I would distinguish between "empathy" and "compassion" as my understanding is that we are hard wired for empathy. This function is the basis for compassion—i.e., without it, you will not be able to feel for others. However, empathetic people may or may not be motivated to alleviate the suffering of others. A grotesque example is a sadist, they must understand *exactly* what hurts the most to achieve their own perverted pleasure—that requires empathy, but most certainly *not* compassion. For more read Robert Sapolsky's excellent book *Behave*.¹

In fact, neurologists are increasingly discussing this topic, so there may be more sources.²

One thing that would be utterly fascinating in this thesis (or anywhere) is a discussion of how images *specifically* influence empathy and ultimately compassion. When we see a living person suffering, if we are compassionate, we reach out to alleviate their pain, we show tenderness and mercy (especially if we are witnessing this firsthand, although there is the "Samaritan Effect" to take into account). But what if the suffering is merely in image form? What impact does the 4th wall, the artifice of art, have on the process? Does it encourage compassion, or does it excuse us from the actual work?

John cites sculptor Patricia Piccini, whom I agree is onto something of critical importance when she states, about her own work, "They are more vulnerable than threatening". This is how a visual artist can elicit compassion (from those capable thereof)!

Later in the dissertation, John states: "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." Perhaps this thought would work better in the previous chapter on figuration. The artifice of art makes it possible to cope with aspects of life too depressing, too overwhelming, to frightening to

¹ Another suggestion is Anthony Damasio's book: *The Self Comes to Mind*.

² Also, neurologists are increasingly discussing something called "neuro-aesthetics" which is an interesting topic, although they seem a little late to the art game, just sort of fumbling about figuring out that humans are wired to have aesthetic preferences! Thank you, science, enjoy the show!

deal with when they actually occur. Art can be a safe venue for rehearsing and healing as the “heavy lifting” is imaginary and doesn’t usually involve actual loss or...it can reawake trauma! So, while we may tend to disparage artifice as everything we hate and fear: inauthenticity, falsity, and deception, it has its good side!

The Christian church, John points out, is a great purveyor of images of suffering although it should be noted they can be oddly non-vulnerable looking depictions! The analysis of Pieta and Kienholz’ Five Card Stud is interesting—I would like to know more. But also, there must be some scholarship on images of martyred saints and how they work the fine areas between schadenfreude, sado-masochism, instruction on how to process our own suffering and moral suggestions on how to address the suffering of others. When does an artwork tumble into voyeurism, into delectating on shock value? When does it raise awareness and when does it anesthetize? (Interesting fact: the word “anesthetize” is the opposite of “aestheticize” etymologically speaking). When do images of suffering and vulnerability enable reflection and when does they just encourage our worst instincts? How much depends on the eye of the beholder and how much can (or should) the art direct a viewer to a specific interpretation?

What is Art For by Ellen Winner discusses some of these themes and her research has had some interesting results. Her research showed that the clear answer is that we are *not* necessarily moved to compassion by images. ☹️ Although the advertising departments of “Save the Children” and others clearly disagree. This brings up some important questions for the artist interested in evoking compassion: How much shameless manipulation is fair and how much is foul? To the righteous demagogue, the answer may be *all* is fair in love and war. I would be stunned if the human condition could be healed by a demagogue though, and John is scrupulously avoiding that having experienced it in the church of his childhood to negative effect. Images of orphaned humans (or puppies, kittens etc.) with pleading childlike faces call forth a gush of oxytocin—a hormone which is involved with the creation of breast milk, as well as compassion (although it is also indicated in protecting one’s inner circle, so it is not always about compassion towards outsiders). These wide-eyed orphans can also play on our guilt, shaming us into action, for what it’s worth. This is a cornerstone of “kitsch” images and I think there’s a risk of tugging a little too hard on the heartstrings of the viewer. Manipulating empathy can go too far and backfire into a realm of cloying kitsch, preachy demagoguery, or just plain irritating attempts at telling folks how they ought to be feeling.

So, does John’s work create empathy and or compassion?

By the fact that he uses figures, he creates empathy by taking advantage of our automatic tendency to do so; a fact he clearly understands. Does he create compassion? Maybe. Example: *When You Wish*. I appreciate the desire to express vulnerability in order to elicit compassion, but I think this is so close to going too far and it becomes a bit overstated.

The racial identity of John’s characters (*When You Wish* and *Crying Without Lips*) must be addressed--as it will be subject to intense scrutiny, at least if the work is shown in the USA. If any white person did not get the message that Black Lives Matter meant that *black lives matter*, well I don’t know what to think. But what is the white artist’s role? What does it mean for a white person to call for empathy? Might that be seen as a sanctimonious form of pity? When is it okay for a white person to depict a person of another race and when are they exploiting that person’s body for profit? (Never mind financial profit, there is gain in career, attention, even in morally

“virtue signaling” etc.) John’s intentions are clear to himself and probably his social circle. They are honorable and earnest. But they will *not* be clear to strangers, as we saw with Dana Schutz. It is probably made even worse by the fact that John is male. I fear the work will appear patronizing and smug. Here is a suggestion: find a person of color who will be brutally honest with you who is willing to discuss your work from this angle. Be aware you are asking them a big favor, so this needs to be an equal exchange of services. As I understand it, people of color feel justifiably re-exploited when asked to vet the work of whites. Read as much as possible on this issue to prepare, but I do not feel I can speak for how this work might seem to a person of color.

Politics, social issues, narrative content

John moves on in chapter 3 “Narrative Imagery, Religion and Martyrdom” and chapter 4 “Counterfeit Consumerism and Pop Culture” to discuss the specific narratives he uses to generate empathy. In this section, John establishes that his narratives of choice are influenced by his religious upbringing and thoughts on contemporary culture, such as corporate greed and the ever-widening gap between subjective and objective reality.

As John explains it (in Chapter 1), the use of “typically American” capitalism tropes like McDonalds in art et al, are highly recognizable and thus he is using their familiarity as insurance his work would be understood. It felt like John was struggling to reconcile that with a need to simultaneously to critique the institutions themselves. But they seem kind of at odds with each other. I feel there is a deeper connection to be made: Americans focus their worship on commercial entities. It is not only a critique of corporations but of how individuals experience spirituality in Capitalism run amok.

But John is not off the mark when he points out the recognizability factor. Citing the fact that religion is still an enormous influence on our culture (and many others), John sees great value in plumbing the vast archive of iconography and mythology of the Christian church. These narratives have been critiqued endlessly, perhaps a discussion of their persistent appeal as art subject even in more secular contexts is in order.

John’s main supposition is that recognizable characters and narratives enable empathy to greater degree than, say, something non-referential. I feel like certain pieces of music might constitute evidence to the contrary. But Barnett Newman’s ideas about the differences between European Modernists and American seem every bit as naïve as John portrays them!

John states: “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.” Excellent point, although the disparity between “high” and “low” persists, regardless of much lip service to the contrary. And I think this gap is not as simple as getting mad at “snobs and elitists” and tearing down boundaries to celebrate everything. That’s too easy. Some art does stink! As Louis Pasteur allegedly said, “I don’t distinguish between pure science and applied science, only good science and bad science”. In art, though, that leaves open the giant abyss wherein our “good” tastes are derived from poisoned wells, even if only subconsciously. Our very definitions of art, genius, masterpiece, excellence are all influenced by this. My conclusion here is that while John makes a good case for accessible narrative to be of importance, it can go both ways.

I felt the following paragraph is worth repeat in full:

“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’³ 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.”

This to me is the very gist of the entire thesis and state succinctly and effectively John’s motivations and inspirations. One cannot offer critique on this statement without dismantling his entire creative process. Here we understand the seamless integration between content, narrative and design.

Does John’s work enact or enable a “journey from disturbance to warmth”?

To varying degrees. *Crying Without Lips* did that best for me as I read the pink, dripping horses as flayed and appreciated the empowered, albeit somewhat overwhelmed child, at the helm. This became a metaphor for traversing life’s difficulties.

The two-dimensional pieces (*Adam and Steve*, *The Wrath of Maria*, etc.) seemed to be experimental in nature and not quite ripe yet. While they use recognizable imagery, they seem a bit obvious, a bit too easy. Also, the nod to stained glass seemed unconsidered. On the other hand, they seemed to be attempting humor which can be very welcome when contemplating the dire and dreadful, so I applaud John taking that particular risk with his work and encourage him to do further exploration of this nature.

The gap between reality and fantasy and the notion of subjective truth vs objective informs John’s inspiration as well, and in the work as well, in his use of fairy tale and recognizable cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse. These are discussed as having a dual purpose of condemning the failure to live in the real world (and thus resulting in the election of leaders like Trump who exploit those who cannot think critically enough to recognize his con) as well as pointing to giant corporation like Disney who feed our escapist, narcotic worst selves. I would add to the critique that one of the most disheartening aspects of this disparity and of a phenomenon like Trump’s persistent purveying of “alternative facts” was a devaluing of the human imagination. It forced us the USA into a position of having to choose between the subjective and objective when perhaps it ought to be “both/and”? The human imagination with its aporial⁴ capability of believing in magic and science simultaneously is one of the most exciting things about human consciousness when it doesn’t default to paranoia and superstition. As an artist, I think insisting upon the primacy of our imaginations is essential—especially as art tries

³ <https://www.patriciapiccinini.net/writing/0/427/61> [access: 04.02.2021]

⁴ “: a logical impasse or contradiction especially a radical contradiction in the import of a text or theory that is seen in deconstruction as inevitable “from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aporia>

ever harder to distance itself from religion and ally itself with social studies and science. To assert the individual idiosyncratic imagination is one of the most outrageous, courageous and noble acts of political defiance one can ever perform. Even if it is not recognized as such.

John has a vivid imagination, and it is reflected in every single piece in the thesis exhibition. And yes, I would like to see him use it even *more!* To develop one's imagination is to recognize that systems of power would like to colonize and co-opt your imagination and replace it with their safer, more acceptable images for their own ends. For. This reason alone, I question all appropriated, prefab imagery! So, while I understand the impetus to throw it back in the face of our corporate overlords, perhaps in skull form, I would also consider what it means to speak entirely in one's own voice. (Who hasn't disparaged of the students who never do find their own voices and who's images are all appropriations? God save us from the Google image search drawing school of thought.)

John is comfortable distorting reality to create his own original characters as well and he is strongest when he does so without trying to conform to a preconceived idea the character must conform to. Examples include *When You Wish*, *Crying Without Lips*, *Searching for the Dark*, *Prey for the Sinners*.

The use of the "Mickey Mouse" like skull in *Travelore*, brings up something I was not aware of until recently and that is that Mickey Mouse as depicted by Walt Disney was based on Little Black Sambo. No idea what this might mean to Deadmaus who also uses it but consider yourself informed! The skull version is interesting, and I think the use of the engraved surface is seductive.

In chapter 4, John points out the creeping implication that "we have become anesthetized by the corporate activity and control that dominates our lives" and his work addresses this best in his use of recognizable corporate images such as in the two-dimensional works and his use of Disney characters in *Travelore* and *The Crossing*. I do find it a little confusing, though as these pieces seem to be about national boundaries, immigration and all the attendant recent issues of border crossings. What Disney has to do with that specifically I don't really follow. I can imagine one could create an effective verbal defense: however, it is not inherent in the sculpture itself.

John might benefit from researching the use of satire and parody in art. There is a long, long history of visual art engaging in satire and parody and yet, it also occupies a lesser role in hierarchical models of fine art. Presumably, it serves a purpose, which would make it utilitarian and excluded from "art for art's sake". But there's always Daumier and Hogarth, and more recently Maurizio Cattelan, Banksy, John Currin and others, like MAD Magazine. The use of satire and parody often employ humor, oftentimes extremely uncomfortable humor, to expose cultural hypocrisy. Parody and satire almost always employ figurative exaggeration and distortion. I suppose one way this works is that by distorting the figures to make them "othered" so we can cope with the human frailties being exposed without it being overly personal or threatening: the viewer can laugh at the joke while feeling they are not indicted.

If John had chosen to do so, this might have been a good place to discuss the idea of public work. In the USA (and elsewhere) there have been recent controversies surrounding monuments. As I mentioned before when talking about iconoclasm, this is a case of figuration being central to the issue. Never mind the most obvious cases (who wants to think about a slave trader in a public

park, once that has been brought to our attention?) What strikes me is that public art containing human bodies is always going to offend someone somehow. So, the dilemma does one choose to make private art which is limited in its outreach, or public art which will risk great controversy. For a fascinating read on this topic, I suggest "I Was Opened" by Anonymous from issue 65 of Cabinet Magazine. (I have a pdf)

Glass

The final chapter on glass I will not discuss except to say that as a glass person myself, it was an eloquent discussion of the topic. There were no surprises here: many who work with the material cite its metaphorical richness and the communal aspect of glassblowing.

The one thing I wish to state is that John's sculptural skills hot-working are exceptional. I cannot imagine a more demanding and challenging method of sculpting something as intricate and demanding technically as a human figure. He is one of a handful worldwide who has done anything remotely convincing with this technique and that should be acknowledged in his PhD review. Every single sculpture in the exhibition is an example of John's technical prowess and should be recognized as such.

To sum up--Discussion of John's aesthetic.

Since John's writing deals primarily with subject, I will take a few moments to deal with object. I look to art for an integration of subject and object. As a viewer, I have no questions, issues, or quibbles when I am in the presence of something that is an inextricable, indivisible relationship mind, hand, and eyes, of intellect, technique, and design.

Design giving rise to narrative; narrative giving rise to material, material giving rise to design in any combination, this is an optimal condition for art. In an integral situation, if one component is altered, the entire construction falls apart, becomes dis-integrated.

John's work is obviously weighted towards the conceptual. In positioning materials and design as subordinate to "IDEA" he deprives himself of the opportunity to recognize that materials and techniques are ideas, yes, they are even IDEAS! I see that as present in the work itself, so I think John, you ought to stand up proud and claim it! This is a strength of John's work.

John's work has plenty of design ideas, few of which are discussed. Tell me about color choice! Tell me about scale! Tell me about texture, form, light! All of which John is competent in, sometimes highly competent. It is evident in each piece that the decisions were made with great deliberation. They don't always work perfectly, but they aren't default.

In sum, the work works.

Finally, I repeat:

Based on reading, analysis of the concept and realization of his dissertation, after taking into consideration the creative output, I highly recommend that John Moran be awarded an academic Ph.D. title in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and conservation.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Judith Schaechter'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Judith Schaechter, Adjunct Professor of Craft, Tyler School of Art, Temple University,
Philadelphia PA
August 2, 2021