PERCEPTIONS OF REALITY

by

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ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the relationship between the human psyche and the perception of reality through the use of computer generated media.

In a society in which we are bombarded with multimedia technology, we must look inside our selves for a true understanding of our past and memories. Rather than it acting as an escape from reality, my art becomes an opening for truth in reality.
I dedicate this thesis to my father, Stanley Dombrowski.
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Ayn Rand once described Objectivism as a “philosophy for living on earth.” She believed that Art was an essential element of man’s existence. What really intrigues me about Rand is her definition of the artist: the artist’s goal is to bring man’s conceived view of reality to a concrete image. The viewer needs visual justification in art to continue to live his life in the way that he sees fit. According to Rand, the artist illustrates a certain value or moral system that the viewer either will agree or disagree with.

Throughout Rand’s essays, I am fascinated with the possibility of interaction between the artist and the viewer's psyche. This possibility made me start questioning the power of art and its ability to direct and influence a wide array of viewers. By using the word “direct” I do not mean so much in the sense of a propaganda poster, but more that each viewer arrives to a specific place in his subconscious after viewing a piece of art that intentionally was not intended to illicit that emotion. Rand states, “Art is the selective recreate of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value judgments.” (Rand 19) Whereas Rand’s objectivist theory has the viewer / artist relationship based on values, I strive to achieve a specific memory or event in the viewer’s life: a type of recollection of thought.

Hudson River School

From my early experiences, the Hudson River School of art has always intrigued me. Aesthetically, I was always drawn to these images for their sense of scale and grandeur. The illustration of often idealized landscapes that would invoke the ideals of romanticism
really struck me as the ideal of “beauty” in landscape painting. The artists’ reasons behind creating the paintings differ from why I create my art. Though their pursuit of exploration, discovery, and belief that nature was based in the literal “manifestation of God”, I’ve always looked upon their paintings more as depiction of the artist’s own personal utopia.

Many of the Hudson River School painters would actually re-create these environments from memory due to the fact that the easel, paints, and necessary tools would be hard to set up in the actual “plein air” locations. Therefore, a single environment represented no real place but rather an idealized one: the definition of utopia. Often times they would composite sketches from various locations to complete one painting. People often ask if I have traveled to experience these environments I create; the answer is no. No single setting I construct is meant to be a specific time, place, or period. When the artist of the Hudson River School would journey to these settings he would either sketch the area or purely reconstruct them from memory. I am taking my memories not from travel, but purely from forms of media that were not available in the mid 19th century.

Some of the artists of this school that stand out and affect my work are Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church, and Thomas Cole. Of the three artists, I am most inspired by the skies of Church. The luminist execution and land to sky compositions, though almost equal, seem to melt into one another, and the flow of the pastoral landscapes moves with the same current as the clouds.
James Casebere

After a review of the work of James Casebere, I began to understand the idea of simulated realities in the contemporary art world. Casebere, to me, was the bridge from art to art theory. At first glance, Casebere’s environments appear to be bleak photographs of abandoned spaces. After further research, I realized that he was actually constructing these spaces on a miniature level and then photographing them. He purposefully makes his spaces void of any detail, thus making the viewer “fill in the gaps and to create a context in which to view and understand his images.”(Zellen)

Whereas most works of art require the viewer to look into the soul of the artist, Casebere requires the viewer to search within his own soul for the meaning. This intrigued me, and marked the first occasion I witnessed the artist allowing the viewer to add to or dictate the context and content.

Plato

As I continued to explore the context behind my works, I began to read more and more about the philosopher Plato. I was primarily interested in the study of platonic realism. In my abstract I asked the reader to imagine a red juicy apple. This apple, according to Plato, is an “archetype” of a real apple. The scenes I create are meant to illustrate this Universal, a world that truly doesn’t exist except within the viewer’s imagination. It is up to the viewer to relate this model to his own life. For instance:

Imagine a still life of a bowl of fruit. Contained in this bowl are luscious red apples. Imagine a realist painting of these apples. Though our mind perceives this fruit to be realistic and true, the actuality is that there is no apple like this (the envisioned apple) in
existence; in fact, it is the ideal of the apple which we imagine. The apple is an abstraction or a concept of itself. What we believe to be an ideal, almost always tends to stray from the physical apple. Through the body of my work, I explore this ideal imagery and why we perceive things as we do. The mind perceives what the eye sees, differently for every person. It tends to play optical illusions on the mind when cued. Through a (hidden) veiled dialog contained in the content of the imagery, the artist communicates with the viewer. My work tends to cue these optical illusions.
CHAPTER 2: INTRODUCTION

I delight in conjuring a unique perception of the physical world. At first glance, my work is taken as photorealistic, similar to the work of the photorealist painters and the trompe lœil illusionists before them. However, the work is not simply a mirrored analog of the natural world. It is more than a sleight-of-hand—much more than a formal reconstruction of the natural world. The eye tends to play optical tricks on the mind when cued by various indicators and signals. My work attempts to prompt and stimulate these optical traps.

In interactions with my viewers, I have repeatedly observed a common preliminary reaction. Although one’s initial cognitive response may determine the work to be photographic, when I reveal it is not, the viewer immediately focuses on the work in a new way and recognizes the falsity of it. I have also observed that once the reality principle moves beyond photography, a viewer begins to look for new meaning and new context in an attempt to empathize with my intentions for the work.

Art is often defined in different ways. To some, art is meant to illustrate and depict and praise shared values and morals of both the artist and the viewer while others tend to interpret a piece of art their own way and find their own meaning, void of the artist’s influence.

Marshall McLuhan writes, "The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and relevant from which new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of
the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance an numbness imposed by them on our senses.” (McLuhan 55)

It is my objective to merge these multiple perceptions of viewing art into a contemporary medium of a digital age. I choose not to illustrate a specific time period or place, yet, combine multiple spaces to create a place for the viewer to interact with the piece. I am interested in stillness and a sensation of timelessness.
CHAPTER 3: AN EVIDENT REALITY

As a boy, I vividly remember playing with my toys in my room. I would dive into my toy box, select my action figures, throw a blanket over my head, and play. Underneath this veil I would create fantastical worlds for these imaginary figures to reside in. My mind fabricated the detail down to the color of the rocks on the ground. From an early age I was always a dreamer, creating worlds from what was not there. My imagination eventually developed from simply playing into actually creating art. As a child I wasn’t always focused on creating super realistic worlds. As I got older, these worlds became more and more fantastical and abstract.

My early art consisted of cartooned figures with mis-proportioned faces contained in invented worlds. As I entered higher education, I kept this idea of art making close to my heart. I applied and was accepted to the animation major and was ready to pursue making my imaginative fantasies a reality. Then what truly was reality became evident.

On December 6th 2003, while I was finishing my first semester of computer animation, my father suddenly passed away. I often wonder if this event played any role on the path I continued in art. Like a lot of people, when someone close is suddenly lost, one begins to question existence and even faith. As a result, my art was directly influenced by this event. After returning from Christmas break, I continued my progress in computer animation, but now I began to be less focused on character and more focused on environments and creating simulated realities. At the time, I didn’t really know why I was creating these spaces--just that they came easily to me. Now I realize in retrospect that I was able to set my own boundaries, my own constraints, to worlds that would appear to
be of our own, yet I would have total control in every aspect of its existence. This came at a time when my questioning of our own reality was being heavily contemplated by me. The worlds would be inhabited with a sensation of beauty but an eerie stillness would still exist. I began to become more and more involved in the methods of creation and less and less with the meanings behind them.

Figure 1: Family
CHAPTER 4: YEAR 1

My goal upon entering the graduate program was to pursue perceptions of reality. I had not discovered why I was creating these works, but I did know they were easily achieved and would continue to develop in my mind. My goal, at first, was to use the computer to produce the most photo realistic images as possible. Computer generated imagery, at the time, was not common in the international art world. Still not truly understanding why I would create such images, I attempting to “trick” those who didn’t understand my methods. I began to refer to my art as the “illusionary disposition” since the first things out of a viewer’s mouth was, “How did you do that?” My goal at that moment was to prove that computer generated imagery was an art form, and I began to slip farther away from finding my true concept. Being more naïve, I suppose than anything else, I thumbed my nose to the, or should I say what I thought to be, technical un-expertise of those using computer graphics in the art world. I researched artists such as Gary Hill, who presumed was a “one trick pony.” Hill was marketing from a medium that most people truly didn’t understand, and thus his art would obtain automatic acceptance. I kept pursing technical perfection, trying to take my works to a photographic limit. It was with my “cloud” piece that I was confident that I had truly fooled everyone. “Now they will learn what computer generated art is,” I proclaimed. But when that time came, everyone looked at my clouds and said “neat picture” and continue on to the next piece. This was the moment I realized that I was going in the wrong direction, and artists such as Hill were deliberate with their execution, for it depicted their concept.
Figure 2: Canopy
Figure 3: Deep

Figure 4: Untitled
In the beginning of my graduate studies, I frequently created landscapes that lacked any sort of depth, landscapes that were dominated by foliage and included a subtle hint of a luminist sky in the distance. The interior scenes I produced were bleak and cold, many times only illuminated by a singular light source. At the time, I was in the habit of creating singular objects such as churches and windmills, which lacked an environment. Still set on the “illusionary disposition,” I had not yet reached a concept.
Figure 6: Forest

Figure 7: Mill
Figure 8: Upward

Figure 9: Window
CHAPTER 5: YEAR 2

As my second semester began, I became more exposed to new artists and began to incorporate their ideas into my works. I also found myself studying the masters of the past, such as the paintings of Caravaggio and Rembrandt. I began to study their use of light and sources of light to achieve more of a mood to my works of art. I also was intrigued by the works of the Hudson River School and artists such as Thomas Cole and Frederic Church. I began to study their compositions and explore how they handled depth in their landscapes. These elements taken from these artists opened up a whole new world of possibilities in both mood and atmosphere. I began to refer to my work as taxidermy of nature, living objects strategically positioned in space to give an illusion of life. However, the unsaid yet evident reality of death lurks in the background. My pieces were then and remain relatively uninhabited by human form. The spaces are meant to convey a sense of time before they were tainted by man. Slowly but surely, I moved toward the reason for creating these works.
Figure 10: Cove
Along with the further development of my landscapes, I stumbled upon that which would eventually lead me into my first experience with cognition and physiology of vision. After one of my rendered pieces had not turned out to my liking, I was left with what is called an alpha channel, an almost black and white negative of a piece. I decided to show this piece during a critique. Much to my surprise, this technically plain and simple composition received more attention than my other pieces. People began to compare it to an inkblot test. What I found most intriguing was that every person experienced the abstract images in a different way. Some saw them as sexually charged, while others saw them as specific locations. This event was a turning point in my art work. I began to realize that art had the ability to influence other memory so I began to re create previous
pieces both in still and video using this alpha channel technique. The results led me to include more universal elements and symbols that would intrigue the viewer to connect with the piece on his own terms.

Figure 12: Negative

Figure 13: Negative #2

During my second year, I began to study artists who created simulated realities and discovered the work of James Casebere. I was truly amazed by both his technical execution and his ability to let the viewer’s imagination determine the location of the piece. By using stripped down spaces Casebere allowed the viewer to fill in the blank. This concept became the next goal for my works. I began to include recognizable elements throughout my work such as a canyon in the desert scene, or a specific texture on a rock in the jetty piece. I also realized by mimicking certain compositions, that viewers would relate my work to specific time periods. This was my inspiration for the Cloth Series.
Figure 14: Island

Figure 15: Darkness
Figure 16: Cloth #1

Figure 17: Cloth #2
The Cloth Series portrays a similar theoretical objective of the landscapes. Compositionally, one could view each still life as a landscape. The backdrop acts as the sky and the foreground cloths horizon is that of mountains in the distance.

Figure 18: Cloth #5

The Cloth Series is meant to use a relatively contemporary medium and suggest feelings of neoclassicism. While creating many of these pieces, I was heavily influenced by the works of Jacques-Louis David. In figure 18 I intentionally attempted to depict the “Death of Marat.” The landscapes are derived from Luminism and the Hudson River School, while the Cloth Series is Neoclassicism. Though many art historians consider both these styles to vary drastically, I tried to fuse these two theories using a contemporary medium.
In the process of creating the Cloth Series I really shied away from the use of color. I wanted the viewer to focus solely on the shape and form of the cloth itself. By forcing the viewer to focus on one distinct element, I realized that I could begin to direct their focus. As Casebere had done, I allowed the viewer to fill in the context of the pieces. Eventually, the Cloth Series led toward the creation of my vanitas works. Going from the slight hint of symbolism, I decided to take this style in the totally opposite track. I used such famous symbols for life and death as the skull and candle. Also I incorporated books, purposefully with no titles, to allow the viewer to relate to these symbols as I had in the previous Cloth Series. Both these series were an experimentation to see what the viewer would react to and be more involved with, within my works. I took this information and began to relate it to my landscapes as well.

Figure 19: Vanitas
Figure 22: Fern

Figure 23: Triangle #2
CHAPTER 6: YEAR 3

This led me into my final year of graduate studies and the exploration of cognition within my art. I realized that people connect images within cloud forms in real life, so why not incorporate certain patterns in the clouds in my pieces? I don’t mean that I am creating the illusion of a dragon in the cloud, but more along the lines of the flow of my cloth in the Cloth Series, incorporated into the sky. In other words, I am using the clouds as a method to drive to the viewer to focus on certain elements or lead their eye around the piece. I remained ambiguous with regard to the time and space of my pieces, and I feel I will continue to do so. I began to rely more on repetition in the elements throughout my worlds. Increasingly, I am not reliant on the piece being perceived as a photograph. If I ask a person to draw a cloud, they most likely will not illustrate the same thing as if we were to look up into the sky right now.

Figure 24: Cloud
As I have felt that I have begun to master my craft, my works have begun to incorporate movement. Through my studies, I have gained a respect for time arts. The difficulty of making my images move lay in that I still wanted have them contain elements of silence and stillness. I have chosen to keep the times of day and location of my moving environments vague. For instance, the “Godray” video was inspired by the John Brett painting “The British Channel Seen from the Dorsetshire Cliffs,” 1871. Brett had a tendency to aim for both a scientific accuracy along with a religious undertone. Where Brett has chosen to depict a more heavenly calm in his composition, I have purposefully chosen to show a different type of calm. Originally, I had the preconception for the piece that the storm has passed, and although darkness is still evident in the background, the mid and foreground contain glimpses of the heavens. Though, after listening to the critiques of the piece, I noticed that I was receiving two very different responses from the piece. The majority of the younger audience interpreted the piece as I had, the storm passing while some of the older audience interpreted as the storm had yet struck. Personally, I wanted to capture the variable moments of hope that person feels in the time of peril.

As of now, the prints are and will be the focal point of my work. My video pieces are meant to be an extension of the prints. In the end, I feel that the prints are more along the lines of literature, allowing the viewer more room to interject their own imagination.
Figure 25: Above

Figure 26: Cold
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

I want my art to delve into the viewer’s subconscious. Let each individual be taken to a certain place from their life. The places I continue to create are not recreations of one time or space, yet collages of what I have seen in my life. I have realized why I have chosen this medium rather than purely taking a photograph.

Contemporary society is bombarded with mass media where technology is unavoidable. We live in a culture reliant on media, and media is reliant on itself. We have television award shows for television on television. The line between what is real and not real is becoming nonexistent. We can watch the new Die Hard film and we believe that a 54 year old man is actually jumping off of a skyscraper.

My realities are simulated; I want the viewer to be absorbed in my art as he would be absorbed in his own memories. I believe the computer has become an extension of our minds. I have the ability to easily control every aspect of my art, from the light to the weather to where each object is placed. I hope simply to guide the viewer in his experience with my works.

Society has become accustomed to a mass abstracting of reality. Even our so called “reality TV” is scripted and therefore not reality. It makes people believe that is the way things are, but truly they aren’t. My artwork is scripted, although, hopefully, unlike most television and movies, the viewers will be able to see themselves in my work. My art becomes someplace they have been or they would want to go.
I have learned to use art as my own meditative process. It allows me to have control of all aspects of my world and lets me get away from the realities that bombard me all of my life. I want my viewers to experience this same escape. My works are meant to take them into their own imagination. Though I am illustrating what is in my mind, I leave certain elements vague for the viewer to be able to turn my piece into their own. Rather than it acting as an escape from reality, my art becomes an opening for truth in reality.
REFRENCES

