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Anecdotes

by

James Bellucci

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

05-19-2009

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Anecdotes

by

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B.F.A., Photography, Shepherd University, 2002

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Abstract

Anecdotes is a set of illustrations derived from Biblical text, scientific discovery and self-created stories. This body of work questions these texts through the temporal nature of the anecdotal storytelling convention. The images, created through the manipulation of three-dimensional materials such as paper, cardboard, string, and fabrics in constructed sets and photographically represented as a two-dimensional images, question the authenticity of the grand narrative. The images explore scientific discoveries along with religious beliefs revealing my reservations, perceptions, and sentiments toward both. In considering my changing knowledge and beliefs from childhood into adulthood, *Anecdotes* deconstructs these conflicting narratives into a directorial agenda that subverts, parodies and internalizes each text.

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Chapter I: My Role as Storyteller

Storytelling has existed since the formation of spoken, written and visual languages. From early cave paintings and Greek poetry to television news broadcasts, storytelling is a medium in which information is conveyed to audiences by oration, writing or visual depictions of events in a captivating manner. Poems, novels, parables, drawings and paintings can take form as stories, transmitted by the faithful storyteller, who accounts past events as though he or she were present during these historical moments. The storytelling practice reveals the interpretation of fact to fiction as information is stated and re-stated throughout generations of writers, visual artists and orators. The storytellers' artistry in delivering information produces highly crafted compositions that merge fact and fiction into enticing vessels of teaching material and entertainment used to convey narrative knowledge of the world. The craft of storytelling manifested in visual and written language transmits morals and entertains audiences in forming relationships between storyteller and listener.

The convention of anecdotal storytelling deals with the transmission of information about real persons while entertaining an audience. The work, *Anecdotes* is a set of photographic illustrations derived from Biblical, scientific and self created stories that are visually translated in an anecdotal style, revealing to viewers a questioning of the translation of information from fact to fiction in the storytelling practice.

My role, as the anecdotal illustrator, is to interpret written stories that have shaped my knowledge of religious ideologies, scientific discovery and myth.

However, Biblical passages and other religious ideologies are rarely associated with the ephemeral nature of the anecdotal convention of storytelling. Using the anecdote to illustrate Biblical passages lends itself to a secular notion of the story in contrast to the dogmatic quality of religious texts, and functions to find a sense of levity and play in how I portray these stories. Dealing with the enduring nature of Biblical narratives through the looking-glass of the temporal anecdote, I am able to revive a personal and contemporary reflection on these stories. The specific grouping of Biblical and scientific stories blends into a third type of story: the personal narrative. Growing up with a childhood rich in Catholic catechism, my imagination was filled with Biblical stories that would later be scrutinized as I matured into adulthood. Educated in the public school environment, classes in natural sciences questioned many of the principles of my religious upbringing, thus early on I was perplexed as well as fascinated by the conflicts between science and religion.

For example, the piece, *Beringer's False Fossil Machine Revealed!* (fig. 1.1) combines the discovery and fabrication of fossils, divine creation and the validity of scientific discovery into a seemingly nonsensical illustration of a significantly historical event. Eighteenth century natural scientist, Johann Beringer, was credited with finding fossils he claims were directly created by God and placed on earth for him to find. Years after the release of his infamous text, *Lithographiae Wirceburgensis*, depicting these claimed divine fossils, it was believed that Beringer's discoveries were carved by human hands. My rendition



fig. 1.1 *Anecdotes; Beringer's false fossil machine revealed!*

of this story shows the interior of Beringer's study, where he is depicted as an ape chiseling away at a Lügensteine (lying stone) as he is being spied on by a curious lemur through a window. Opposite in the foreground is a completed fossil tagged with the label YHVH, standing for Yahweh, the anglicized translation of the Hebrew name of God. My selection of this story results from my interest in the verifiability of scientific knowledge merging with divine creation.

My version of this story is derived from the natural science historian, Stephen Jay Gould's story about Beringer's false fossils. In my craft as the anecdotal storyteller, Gould's historical and intellectually comparative storytelling is visually represented as a parody of the story, placing Beringer as a primordial ape, groveling around his laboratory as the divine creator of his uniquely false fossils. Gould's story projects an unsettled case of a deist

paleontologist trapped between the empirical thought of scientific deduction and an unprovable notion of Godly creation. I have empathized with Beringer, torn between science and creationism, aimlessly questioning both approaches and falling somewhere in-between faith and logic. The ape, Beringer, is a self-reflection in my devolved feeling of being submersed in a society that desires to know all the grand unexplainable answers to human living. The lemur peering in through the window is also me, watching my ape-like self attempt to discover a higher knowledge, as though such an answer is found in the library, laboratory or somewhere in the heavens. The act of creating this work is self-reflexive of my role as storyteller, I am not only commenting on my reading of the original text, but how I imagine I would be placed in each narrative.

The word “Anecdote” is defined as: a short and amusing or interesting story about a real incident or person; an account as regarded as unreliable or hearsay; the depiction of a minor narrative incident in a painting.¹ Anecdotal stories many times illustrate a story with a sense of humor or seriousness about an incident, however, what is most interesting are how these stories are told and certain elements are omitted, emphasized or altered for effect.

Selection of the title *Anecdotes* is the result of a personal deconstruction of the ever-imposing allegorical presence of texts from my childhood to adulthood. Unlike allegorical metaphor, the term *Anecdotes* represents the temporal play of the story, revealing its inherent fabrication, dissecting its moral underpinning, and placing forth my role as director in making each narrative depicted my own.

1. Oxford American Dictionary, *Anecdotes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

In this work I am interested in how anecdotes and allegories framework particular details of the narrative to emphasize the desires of the storyteller.

For example, parallel to these literary devices, a cabinet of curiosity (wunderkammer²,



fig. 1.2 Joseph Cornell; *Object-Les Abeilles (Bees attacked by the pale blue sky)*, box construction, 1940

16th century Europe) frameworks eclectic specimens of nature into a spectacle of wonder and inquiry, drawing new connections between otherwise separate natural elements. Similar to this juxtaposition of specimens, the manner in how information is introduced in the storytelling practice enables the storyteller to tailor the story to create new and unique moral, social and cultural underpinnings. In the 20th century, Joseph Cornell's melding of objects representative of nature and astrological symbols in the miniaturized Victorian box transforms the miniature wunderkammer into a dream-like and sublime representation of the implied story (fig. 1.2). Connections between elements are alluded to, but not overtly created, resulting in an open-ended play of narration. Each image in *Anecdotes* juxtaposes allegorical symbol with personal story, similar to the narrative mode in which Cornell formulates the dream-like narrative in a miniaturized world of objects bearing significant and cryptic relationships and messages. From the Biblical to scientific variations created in

2. Oliver Impey. *The Origin of Museums* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

Anecdotes, each depiction is a personal dialogue and visual representation of my relationship with each story as indicated by use of the paper cutout and the inherent constructed nature of each set.

One important component of the work *Anecdotes* is my notion of interpretative storytelling. I define the process of translating the text of a story into visual scenes as interpretative storytelling. These are my stories, reflections and comments about other stories based on the visual depictions I imagine while reading texts. The decisions I make include the characters I choose to create or replace as protagonists or antagonists in each story, the environment in which they are placed and how both of these elements interplay with the unfolding of an action occurring before the camera lens. I first remember a story by the events that occurred, such as, a camel passing through the eye of a needle, Johann Beringer's fabrication of false fossils or Dante Alighieri entering a dark wood. Secondly, I consider my current sentiment toward each of these stories. Based on my standpoint of each story, I then sketch a scene of the set I am looking to create, based on the action of the story I want to emphasize. I then select from a collection of animal illustrations the characters I want to act out each scene. These two-dimensional cutout characters are then placed in each set and photographed.

These texts come into my understanding by an act of wonder as to how they would look if I were actually there. My imagination fills with the infinite amount of things that could happen in each narrative. I think about how my presence in each narrative could potentially change its outcome. Moreover, in this work, I am utilizing and subverting allegorical metaphors such as the

replacement of characters and environments to prod the notions of each story. This written thesis will explain my motivation and creation of *Anecdotes*.

Chapter II: Narrative and Photography

Like photography, the grand narrative is potentially accountable for transmitting some sense of truth, yet can rarely be substantiated with evidence. However, in this lack evidence, the grand narrative still contributes to shaping moral and social guidelines in conveying religious knowledge. Grand narratives seek to define the cultural and historical underpinnings of belief systems; they are the master narratives on which many other narratives can be based. Theological texts such as the Bible, Qu'ran, Torah and Bhagavad Gita are considered grand narrative scriptures, which seek to explain the creation of the earth, the purpose of human life, the balance of the universe and knowledge of good and evil. These texts attempt to explain the intangible, unprovable facets of existence pondered by humankind for millennia. One strategy in *Anecdotes* is to situate philosophically oppositional narratives together in a series that reinforce a personal narration of each text. For example, science and religion come to terms with their differences in two ways: either to demarcate where religion ends and science begins by separating logic and faith, or by fabricating unique outtakes on similar topics. The notion of intelligent design would fall into the category of unique accounts for the concept of natural selection and evolution. Christian Fundamentalism has cleverly designated an intelligent creator of the universe and life forms. The scientific community would argue this creation is the result



fig.2.1 *Anecdotes; Darwin Overboard!*

of millennia of random adaptation to environment, otherwise known as natural selection. Intelligent design and natural selection are theories and not proven laws, substantiated by tangible evidence. *Darwin Overboard!* (fig. 2.1), proposes a humorous question: what if Darwin never made it to the Galapagos islands? Furthermore, what if he never deduced his idea of natural selection? This work probes at the speculative notion that if Darwin never existed, would someone else have thought of natural selection? This image reflects a distrust in even the empirical knowledge of Darwin's theory of natural selection, wherein the factual writing of the *Origin of Species* is deconstructed into a child-like mode of play. *Darwin Overboard!* opens the question of "what if" in detaching the narrative from its popularized history and connection to a general knowledge of evolution. This work transforms the notion of Darwin as a fictive character in a whimsical

environment lost at sea, divorcing any sensibility of the actual occurrence of historical events connected to human evolution.

Although, modern science has segmented and categorized knowledge into organized sectors, opposite of the narrative tradition, this is not the way scientific discoveries were first transmitted to audiences. Only since a postmodern discourse of narrative knowledge has science separated its discoveries away from the narrative approach into compartmentalized, independent areas of study. Therefore, scientific narratives in their earlier form work as companion and counterpoint to grand narratives of religion. Both theological and early scientific texts struggle with substantiating proof in their statements. They are bound to the narrative traditions of history, and in one way or another resort to telling stories. Science, like religion is bound to creating a verification (or falsification) of narrative knowledge via transmission of content through social and historical means. Verifiability or falsification of evidence supporting stories is created by a predetermined set of qualifiers. Science reports its findings in an epic manner to a populous of the scientific community that has established the pre-conditions of this new evidence. The evidence seems valid, but the determining factors were preset to meet the findings of the evidence. Popular science brings to mainstream media the evidence and the rules of what is and is not evidential to new scientific discovery.

In *Anecdotes* the lack of verifiability of the story is exposed in the staged visibility of the image and reflects to viewers the very plasticity of the narrative illustrated. In concert with the deflation of the grand narrative and verifiability

of scientific study we can find a correlation in the statement by Jean François Lyotard that:

Narrative knowledge does not give priority to the question of its own legitimation and that it certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof. This is why its incomprehension of the problems of scientific discourse is accompanied by a certain tolerance: it approaches such discourse primarily as a variant in the family of narrative cultures.³

Lyotard's mention of "narrative cultures" admits the variation of scientific discovery as part of an epistemology that attempts to divorce itself from the narrative tradition, however is bound to this tradition by its submersion in culture that is dependent on narrative transmission to teach and comprehend knowledge. Amidst a growing number of the populous that does not adhere to religious beliefs, there is an undeniable history and knowledge of the past that uses allegorical devices and the narrative model to explain the unexplainable phenomena scholars and theologians have pondered for centuries. Philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, makes the argument in regard to the story that:

There were no facts independent of our theories about them, and that consequently there was, and could be, no one way of viewing, classifying and explaining the world which all rational persons were logically obliged to accept. Such theories, it was suggested, were better seen not in terms of natural law but 'fictions,' stories which we constructed to explain events. The stories we use to explain events compartmentalize the randomness and discord of life that otherwise remain unexplainable without being manipulated into a story.⁴

The model of story formulates a chronological and relative manner in

3. Jean-François Lyotard. *The Post-Modern Condition : A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 27.

3. Stephen Prickett. *Narrative, Religion, and Science : Fundamentalism Versus Irony, 1700-1999* Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

looking at the world and life in regard to the past, present and future. Stories are how I rationalize the unexplainable, even if the story itself is non-sensible or fantastical, it finds purpose and meaning to me within the realm of the story. Kuhn's statement rationalizes the model of the story as a vessel for creating a sense of organization of thought when considering the unexplainable and chaotic nature of the human condition. The "once upon a time" tradition of the storytelling practice distills information into a palatable formula of understanding by fusing the rational with the irrational and actuality with fantasy.

Anecdotes explores a personal narrativity of selected texts. This narrativity is a temporal horizon in constant transition as I remember, experience and re-read the selected texts found in *Anecdotes*. Paul Ricoeur's explanation of narrativity, a connection between time and narrative, places the reader wherein "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence."⁵ Considering Ricoeur's statement on time and narrative, *Anecdotes* is operating through a personal relationship with these selected texts over my childhood, adolescence and adulthood in perpetual flux of new, past and present experiences and reflections of each selected text. In merging universally known stories with those that are obscure and personal, my goal is to fuse the universal grand narrative with my narrativity and reflection of each story. For example, *Who Were The Players At Sodom And Gomorrah?* (fig. 2.2)

5. Paul Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative, Vol I*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.



fig. 2.2 Anecdotes; Who Were The Players At Sodom And Gomorrah?

illustrates the Biblical story of the destruction of the ancient cities, Sodom and Gomorrah by the wrath of God. The Old Testament illustrates these cities being destroyed by a fire storm as a result of the ungodly sexual acts of the people who inhabited these cities. My rendition of this story depicts chimpanzees engaging in sexual acts while their city is destroyed by a meteor shower of pale sperm-like forms. The desaturated environment is symbolic of the salt and sulfur deposits found at the present day sites of Sodom and Gomorrah. The lack of color and double reading of the meteorite sperm storm emulate the prudent reaction I have when reading this story.

The primary question I ask when reading this scripture relates to the

creation of the human body by God and its denial of pleasure of that creation. Sexual acts are human and to be considered a gift of existence. This depiction of Sodom and Gomorrah reveals primates that are posed in their sexuality, looking back at the viewer and not fearful of the destruction of their cities or judgement of their sexuality. Max Ernst's surrealist novel, *Une Semaine de Bonte* (The Seven Deadly Elements), illustrates characters in

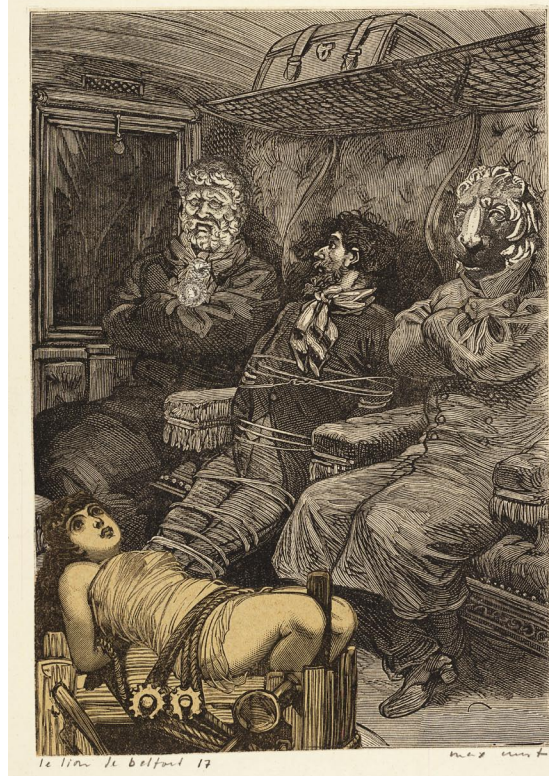


fig. 2.3 Max Ernst; from *Une Semaine de Bonte*: *Le Lion de Belford*, 1934

precarious and often violent or sexual situations, comparable to the instinctual acts of animals (fig. 2.3). Similar to my version of Sodom and Gomorrah, Ernst's imagery anthropomorphizes characters to blend the carnal and instinctual acts of animals with the civilized attire of human conduct. Many images throughout the illustrated novel interchange animal heads or body parts with their human counterparts as indulgent and distressing acts unfold. Ernst's images correlate to my use of animals in *Anecdotes* and their imbued presence. The strategy in my work is to de-evolve the narrative and the highly invested notion that narratives transmit some sense of believability or truth.

Narratives and photography each deal with a depiction of reality that are made believable by their own innate qualities. Photography records subject

matter in significant detail and narratives use either actual people and events or cleverly inventive fictitious characters and actions to paint a realistic or naturalistic happening of an event. Participation in viewing a photograph or reading or listening to a narrative, engages one to acknowledge the possibility that what is being portrayed is fictive yet still believable or partially based on factual events. Audiences participate in the deceptive nature of photography and narratives in a tension between believability and disbelief. Roland Barthes statement that “myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no substantial ones,”⁶ evokes an endless approach to the narrative convention by means of how the story is presented.

The container of the story, otherwise its type, such as parable, allegory or novella, fall within a certain uniform identity in structural elements, but the content is always subject to manipulation and re-contextualization by intent of the storyteller. Barthes’ statement speaks to my childhood and adulthood perceptions of the story through an oscillation between the two. In my adulthood I recollect these childhood stories with scepticism whereas in my youth I was either horrified by the consequences these stories implied or enamoured by the visual references they created. In the present, I manage these adult and childhood perspectives by creating this body of work. In my role as the anecdotal storyteller, my visual utterance of each text is distinctly shown by manipulation of characters, environment and selection of building materials.

5. Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.

Just as religious narratives can be used by parental figures to establish moral guidelines for the social education of children, science is always fulfilling its own legitimacy for new theories and discoveries. The assignment of characters in *Anecdotes*, is my deconstruction of this belief/ disbelief relationship of the narrative. My rendition of the *Expulsion of Adam And Eve From The Garden Of Eden* (fig. 2.4), depicts two primates with the human heads of Adam and Eve being driven off by a gorilla pounding its chest. The King James Bible states, “therefore the Lord God sent him (man) forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims (angelic beings), and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.”⁷ With Adam and Eve’s new found knowledge of good and evil, by Eve consuming the forbidden apple, they are forced to live outside of the lavish Garden of Eden. My rendition of the story depicts Adam and Eve as monkeys, for I believe this is the devolved level at which the story is geared in revealing any human understanding of knowledge.

Through the replacement of characters, and by representing Adam and Eve as monkeys, my allegorical move in creating this piece was to de-evolve the serious nature of this Biblical passage. However, I did not go overtly comedic in distorting the content of this story. The goal is to subtly imply my version of the story, yet make the identification of the story on behalf of the viewer still apparent. This story, like many stories of the Bible admits to me the closed-minded nature of many of the passages from the Bible. Clearly, the whole point

6. Old Testament, King James Version, Genesis 3:23,24

of the Bible is to have everything matriculate back to God, but when strict followers of the Bible make this the primary text that forms their knowledge of the world, a societal division occurs based on belief systems, void of any tangible



fig. 2.4 Anecdotes; *The Expulsion Of Adam And Eve From The Garden Of Eden*

evidence. The division of belief systems has produced an era of perpetual holy wars, overstated dogmatic principles and feelings of distrust between ideologies based on texts and tradition. My critique is on the system of differences between theological and scientific epistemologies and how these spheres of thought are judgmental in accepting the notion of the other. Within my scope of argument between science and religion, I still adhere to the faith-based ideology of believing in something that I can't explain. Notions outside rationality are part of the human condition, human curiosity and the formation of faith, as a way to cope with everyday life. My questioning arises with the extreme actions this knowledge produces, rather than the knowledge itself.

However, this being stated, an argument comes to play wherein a historical notion of reality vs. symbolism forms the division between actual and ascribed believability. Catholics believe in the physicality of Jesus, the Son of God, as "divine messenger and 'son of man' as this individual case is meant to be entirely real and not symbolic."⁸ In my spiritual growth with Catholicism, the Bible is understood as a document of actual, real, happenings and is not to be considered as fictional stories or be taken in illusionary context. The symbol, moreover, symbolism "is the coincidence, or rather unity, of something specific and concrete with something that goes beyond specificity and concreteness."⁷ The anecdote and photography share a grounding in translating from specific physical realities a new collective adaptation of something happening. The camera frame selects information to form new meaning from the specific content

8. Erich Kahler, *The Inward Turn of Narrative*, trans. R. and C. Winston (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 50

that stands before the camera lens. The anecdote makes a similar move by revealing odd and unusual information about actual people and events in a universal conveyance of humor, tragedy or any other humanistically relatable emotion.

Chapter III: Constructing for the Camera

A catalyst for creating the work is my ability to illustrate these human-crafted stories, and also emphasize their fabrication. The hand work of cutting out paper with a razor blade and the occasional burr that remains, allude that these stories are not, or were ever, an account of actual events. In understanding the fictive nature of the narratives I have selected, this work enables me to take authorship in translating the slippage of the narrative into visual form by using materials that reveal this trace.

Many of the images reveal traces of the artist's hand made by showing cut marks in the materials, brush strokes in painted areas, curling on the edges or wrinkling of paper. Rather than use facile and exact materials, I sought for a tactile construction that straddles the ornate and the rustic. Hand work provides the sense that these sets are individual works created by a person. The showing of handwork is important as it reveals a trace of my unique creation.

In creating the work, I want my ideas to be refined with the complexity of matured aesthetic thinking, while creating visual elements that are referent of a child-like imagination. Creating work referent of a child-like imagination matriculates to how I still perceive stories today. Without the act of play when

thinking about an existing story, all mysticism for me is lost. Two spheres of perception are at play in *Anecdotes*, my childhood instincts to manipulate characters and my adult knowledge to understand the underlying moral codes of each story and how I might change these codes.

A Letter From The Primates To Christ (fig. 3.1), depicts Christ crucified, pivoting on a golden cube inscribed with text from Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. In the bottom of the frame, standing under the golden cube is an aggressive outward staring mandrill. Nearby a smaller primate is holding a letter addressed "diseases." The golden triangles surrounding Christ in this scene symbolize geometric forms of logic, an opposition to spiritual reflections on existence. The cutout Giotto⁹ painting of Christ crucified in the image, implies Christ being impaled by these golden wedges of logic as he suffers on a fulcrum of Darwin's ground-breaking theories on evolution. The letter addressed "diseases" resonates from a personal skepticism of dogmatic practices that divide communities more than uniting them, failing to understand the benefits of "the other." In this work I combine the symbolism of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus with the persistence of scientific discovery as they draw lines in the sand between faith and logic, discovery and spirituality. This personal narrative is a representation of my questioning as to who exactly was present during the crucifixion of Christ. I question whether it is important for us to know this. Collectively, society does not need these stories to know how to treat each other moralistically. The personal narrative depicted in *A Letter From The*

9. Giotto, crucifix (after restoration), Tempera on panel; 215 x 159 ¾ in., Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy, c. 1285 -1290



fig. 3.1 Anecdotes; A Letter From The Primates To Christ

Primates To Christ represents a lifetime struggle to place the Biblical narrative within a framework of myself as individual and contributor to society, a society I feel is too wrapped up in the argument of creationism, evolution and existence. I believe these pursuits are self indulgent and a distraction from the more universal problems of the human condition. They are age-old questions with an uncertain relevance to me. The strategy of placing science and religion together in conflict in the work illustrates to me that these majestic stories are just long-lived excuses for tackling the bigger moral and ethical issues challenging humanity. The play of each story and the imagination imbued in making the story come to life are my focus within the obviously fabricated nature of the work.

The theatrical set has the capacity to transform the ordinary into the fantastical. Looking at Victorian set design, I formulated how I wanted texture, color and pattern to merge into unique environments for each set. I approached the building of each environment as though I was creating small theatrical sets. The cutout and layered, sometimes tessellating, flat graphical elements of late Victorian sets inspired use of the paper cutout. The influence of late Victorian set design in this work bridges the gap between two-dimensional collage elements and the development of these elements into the three-dimensional space of the set. Late Victorian set design used levers and pulleys to move elements within the set to enable naturalistic movement of characters and props. Like the Victorian interior, the paper cutout mimics the tessellating painted flats moving on the stage to give a sense of objects floating and interacting with characters.

Camera framing and use of dramatic lighting elevate the action into a directorial state that controls the focus of the viewer. Technical decisions such as depth-of-field and lighting are made based on how they will impact my version of each narrative for the viewer. Through the camera I transformed the constructed nature of the work into a film still environment, mimicking animation. In Yuri Norstein's, *Hedgehog in the Fog* (fig. 3.2), animation merges two-dimensional characters in three-dimensional space, blending the static quality of the characters body with dynamic movements and environments that create vast focal depth. Norstein's animation works like a moving collage in the illusion of three-dimensional space. The head, body and legs of a character move like separate cutouts attached at multiple pivot points. Movements take on an effect as though someone were in the background with poles attached to



fig. 3.2 Yuri Norstein; film still from *Hedgehog In The Fog*, 1975

different body parts of the figure making them dance across the screen. My sets are designed to exist in two-dimensional photographic space, where elements become flattened in perspective to compress as much information as possible into the frame.

Although the photographic image has the capacity to deceive, it also creates belief in what it reveals. This revealing nature of photography transforms my sets from three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional allegory prodding back at the viewer. For example, *Darwin Overboard* (fig. 2.1) is constructed entirely of paper elements, consisting of painted cardboard, tissue paper and printed graphics on paper. The photographic image transcends these sets into theatrical environments. This two-dimensional photographic representation is influenced by allegorical painting. Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*¹⁰ reveals the allegory to be a representation of what could be and not reality itself. The dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon (Plato's brother) indicates that the shadowy forms on the cave wall are only illusions of forms and not the object that creates these forms. Furthermore, the language used to communicate these forms can only be comprehended through the understanding of an idea.

The allegorical painting shows what could happen -- an idea as illustrated by painting and not an actual event. These sets as photographs become recordings of something that existed which illustrates their apparent fabrication. These images are evidence of how my imagination perceives these stories. The collection of images that comprises *Anecdotes* is the genesis of bringing to fruition

10. Plato. *The Republic*, trans Benjamin Jowett. 360 BCE, Book VII.

the way I think about texts. A text for me is a visual illustration of an idea, object, person, or series of events. In reading these texts, I am actually re-writing them as they become mental images. Best described by Roland Barthes, this would be considered a writerly act of engaging these narratives, in which he explains “the writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.”¹¹ Barthes statement projects that the text is simply what we make it. Falling within the play of text, no two readers will comprehend the same passage of text identically. Each will interpret the text different in dialogue with themselves.

Whereas painting and sculpture often lead a viewer to acknowledge the hand of the artist that could inevitably diminish a sense of naturalism, photography has the capability to establish a connection to the real, even if what is depicted is apparently fabricated. The fabrication of the sets and the fabrication of the photographic image coincide to ask the question: who is to say that any of these stories actually happened, or that something constructed to be photographed has any comment on any representation of an actual event? The physicality of what stands before the camera lens is bound by the same distortion in representation as any other physical, literal reality that can be photographed. The set is no more actual or physically tangible than the story. This is my goal.

11. , Roland Barthes. *S/Z*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 5.

In revealing the handwork of my sets in the finished images, I am working in an opposite manner as many Flemish and Italian Renaissance painters when they depicted allegorical content.

The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch depict such allegories as *The Last Judgment* (fig. 3.3) which portrays very dark and hallucinogenic renditions of characters in a scary, yet believable way.

Such paintings strive to make the fictive elements of



fig. 3.3 Hieronymus Bosch; *The Last Judgment*, Oil on panel, 1504

the allegory come to life. Allegorical painting during this period worked toward symbolizing a deeper meaning behind subject matter by illustrating Biblical content in a naturalistic manner. In revealing traces of handwork in my images the fictive nature of the story is revealed through the openly constructed quality

of the work. I want to reveal the fictive qualities of the story rather than create an illusion that makes them naturalistic.

The image begins as a basic sketch of elements and characters that are derived from the story I am illustrating. Sets are built from fabric, papers, foam-core, cardboard and other found objects. Characters in the sets are carefully selected based upon their personification and alteration of the original character they represent in each story. The levity or seriousness of a character plays a key role in the reading of the final image. Aside from the species of animal selected for each role, facial expression and body posture are primary characteristics that discern which cutout or object are desirable matches for each story and environment. Many of the elements are modular, so that planes of focus can be manipulated to emphasize particular characters or elements for narrative effect. Use of digital capture enabled me to see each solution faster. The ability to quickly review the digital image offered me the option of shooting each set at various angles and to make necessary changes such as repositioning foreground, mid-ground and background elements. Similar to painting, the results of the digital photograph are instantaneous, facilitating a more streamlined and intuitive manner of working. Intuition in creating the work is important as it enables a sense of play with elements and the story.

Da Vinci Battles Celestial Fossil Matter (fig. 3.4) incorporates ornate gift wrapping paper that was scanned into a digital file, traced into linear paths and then manipulated in scale and shape. Then colors were modified and the pattern of this image was printed several times larger than the original, to create the



fig. 3.4 *Anecdotes; Da Vinci Battles Celestial Fossil Matter*

background. This background was then partially cutout and raised away from the back wall of the set to create a three-dimensional sense of wind carrying a single tick on its gale, bringing the background into the foreground strata on which Da Vinci is standing. The foreground is made of phone books soaked in red wine, coffee and clothing dye and stacked in a way that shows the viewer the saturated edges of the paper.

Although at first notice a viewer would not recognize the strata as piles of phone books, it was important that the viewer could know that the strata was made of some kind of book, a vessel of knowledge. In this piece the book works as a symbolic foundation (physical and metaphorical) that Da Vinci uses for



fig. 3.5 Anecdotes; Will You Travel Through The Eye Of A Needle?

support against his enemy of false pseudo-scientifically influenced knowledge handed down by the Catholic church. One section of the foreground book page strata is exposed to the viewer and can be partially read, containing background information about diseases and their treatments from a *Diseases of Cattle*¹² farmer's handbook. My overall goal was to portray the institution of religion as a parasite on reason and scientific rigor.

The larger goal throughout the work is to set up opposing spheres of thought against one another in each tableau, either by creating a sense of seriousness or levity about the actions unfolding before the camera lens. *Will You Travel Through The Eye Of A Needle?* (fig. 3.5), prods at the story of "Matthew 19:24" from the New Testament. This passage states "And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."¹³ The following scripture questions this happening by the prophets, and God's reply is "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." The message I read from this passage is that anything is possible, but I do not need the Bible to tell me this. Moreover, this allegory is positioned in such a way that imposes an authority that only God can achieve.

The action of the small primate carving the needle alludes to my questioning as to who created this story. The fearful prophets? A primate from the animal kingdom? Most important, how pertinent is this? A story of this magnitude with such strong visual representation could either drive a child into

12. Vickers T. Atkinson. *Special Report on Diseases of Cattle* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1912).

13. Anonymous. *The Holy Bible, New Testament*, Mat. 19:24.

fear or toward an unattainable goal of trying to be as powerful as God. For me the implied allegorical message was lost in the translation of biblical text, because of the recollection of my childhood reaction and how I now understand this as an adult. My illustration of this story prods at a reverse evolution in humans that are reduced to investing so much time and effort into a fictional story as though it should be something to teach morals about material wealth. These morals have merit, however, the manner in which they are told in the Bible personally translated to a more fearful depiction of God instead of an admiration. The ongoing question I have asked myself for the past year in making this work is: Why are humans so dependent on religion and/or scientific reason to dictate the manner in which they conduct their lives? This rhetorical question permeates my standpoint on religion and science. These spheres of thought interact in a confusing manner to distract the masses from living simply in concert with others, and produces more philosophical and theological division rather than unity.

Chapter IV: Action and Internalization of the Text

The implication that each tableau is engaged in an action unfolding from a narrative, brings the images out of a dormant stillness and makes the impact of the work more dynamic. In defining *tableau*¹⁴ in reference to this work, I found that in creating my versions of these stories it was necessary to make the still-life

14. Definition from Oxford American Dictionary: a group of models or motionless figures representing a scene from a story from history; a tableau vivant.

construction imply an action in order to transmit my version of the narrative to the viewer. In this work characters look back at the viewer, as though the viewer is interrupting the scene as it unfolds. The characters are breaking the “fourth wall,” or disrupting the suspension of disbelief of the fictive story on stage, as viewers watch them perform. Their posed gestures and eye contact with the viewer, acknowledge their fictive performance. In *Will You Travel Through The Eye Of A Needle?* (fig. 3.5) a small lemur stares back at the viewer, standing behind his creation of a large wooden needle. Evidential of his creation is a large mound of wood trailing off from the base of the needle.

The question I propose to the viewer is: how could a flat paper cutout carve a wooden needle? The hand of the artist or some other intervening force could be the only logical answer. The overt fabrication of the tableau and the act of creation of the needle within the tableau intentionally evoke the action implied tension of the tableau vivant. The static nature of the paper cutouts work against the implication of movement, while other elements connected to the act occurring are revealed to the viewer. The inexact placement of “who did what” in the tableau emulates the uncertainty of who exactly authored the Biblical text.

Erik Jarvik and Pope Urban The III Compete In The Classroom To Teach Evolution (fig. 4.1) shows two small primates at the back of a classroom throwing spitballs at each other as they listen to lectures on intelligent design and evolution of the human mind. The primates at the back of the classroom represent us. Do we need such explanation and disagreement on the formation of humankind? This is a primary question I offer the viewer with this work. I think



fig. 4.1 *Anecdotes, Erik Jarvik and Pope Urban III Compete In The Classroom To Teach Evolution*

to myself “who is fooling who” and then with this thought in mind, I seek to invert the topic with a sense of levity.

The characters in each set act as instigators in a long standing story gone amiss, with a questionable authenticity to the believability of that story. These interpretations prod the very notion that all stories, even those scientifically based find certain roots in fiction and are the culmination of previous thoughts and texts. Julia Kristeva’s three fold dimension of a text, the writer, addressee and cultural context, manifests intertextuality¹⁵ as a basis for a text to supersede a singular viewpoint from either the reader, writer or cultural platform. Texts

15. Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* edited by Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 37.

are dialogical in nature, the words on the page are recognized as an intersection with other words and their meanings between reader, writer and the cultural backgrounds of each. Intertextuality of a text in this work is the stitching of various renditions of a singular literary story into my singular visual representation. In making this work I am not only being highly selective of each individual story, but the characters by which I choose to emphasize my viewpoint. Their intertextuality is a culmination of my viewpoint of the story colliding with the original text and academic insight from others about the text. In this combining quality of the tableau, characters are posed in each scenario as though they are actors on set. Paper cutouts and their function in collage as the marriage of heterogeneous components form a new relationship within my creation of each tableau. This new relationship is a reflection of my play within the story. The paper cutouts act as a stand in for the original character in the story, stripped from their original connotation and placed into my act of play.

My presence in these stories results from the mental perspective of signs imbued onto childhood memory competing with my present reflection of known and new signs, symbols and meanings associated with religion and science in my adulthood. I am enamoured by the memories I have of these stories, but I manifest their visual representation through my experiences and knowledge as an adult. My storytelling process is an effort of varying perspectives and interests. Comparing this approach with the work of surrealist collage, both culminate in an approach where disparate elements combine to form new and unique interpretations. The surrealist collage, with its automatist heterogeneity of

subject matter, explodes the cohesion of logical storytelling. As elements are torn from meaning and re-purposed in the unconscious canvas, the story becomes perverted, rambunctious and nonsensical. This is similar to my replacement of characters and deviation from original texts in my interpretative storytelling process. The influence of surrealist collage to re-purpose existing social codes and symbols to form new meanings parallels my use of cutout material that subverts the original characters of the text to form new renditions of existing stories.

The natural history scholar Stephen Jay Gould writes essays on many topics related to natural history and the myths that have been uncovered throughout the 20th century. His stories, vastly entertaining in rich empirical fact, carry with them supplemental, and many times anecdotal information that carry the reader through an entertaining passage of information. The work is simultaneously fictive and factual, enlightening and opinionated. This writing method translates a construct of historical time into human time through the narrative process.

Gould's stories are digested through a reader's building of the events through their own perspective of time, relative to themselves and their internalization of the events told. My relationship with time, or human time, is the oscillation between my childhood and adulthood perspectives in reference to the temporal present. Whereas historical time references a linear time line of the events of my life from beginning to an eventual end, human time in reference to this work represents the collision of past memory with present reflection of each text.

Scientific stories, although founded on empirical thought, upon occasion are passed through generations by storytelling conventions that merge fact with fiction and accounts of the real with myth. *Da Vinci Battles Celestial Fossil Matter* (fig. 3.4) came to realization after reading a story by Gould on the topic of Leonardo da Vinci's studies about the formation of fossil matter. Renaissance scientists, in an act of self-preservation from Vatican influence conjured up the notion that fossils were mimetic impressions of nature formed by celestial matter descending from the heavens. The power of the Vatican influenced scientists to mix truth with fiction to secure the teachings of Christianity and to promote God's dominion over all traces of living matter. Da Vinci, in disagreement with this theory, studied the ebb and flow of riverbeds and concluded that fossils are the result of biological remains that become pressurized in sedimentary rock. Of course, this is what scientists conclude today. However, fueled by the pressures of the church, I find it believable to think that scientists actually concluded that fossil matter was the result of celestial intervention.

Although modern scientists can exercise freedom of beliefs without persecution or death, there still exists an overt tension between religion and scientific discovery -- an invariable game of leapfrog where belief systems are being modified and made contemporary to entice audiences in believing one side or the other. A specific example of this is intelligent design. The story and narrator have always been the connecting point between data and purpose, belief and action. I can attempt to understand fossil matter by looking at diagrams and data, but when I am told a story, the information provided comes to life, it

is illustrated through my own experience that I bring to the story and actively engages my perspective of knowledge.

Da Vinci produced many dogmatic works throughout his life, however firmly held his ground in regard to his scientific theories and inventions. Here we have an individual simultaneously painting renditions of the “Last Supper” while inventing war devices and debunking many pseudo-scientific notions of the time. Thus, *Da Vinci Battles Celestial Fossil Matter* (fig. 3.4) illustrates Da Vinci standing on a rock formation constructed from pages of a book titled “Diseases of Cattle” from a 1912 handbook for farmers treating diseased livestock. Da Vinci holds above his head a circle compass as he motions to thrust downward onto a tick, my symbol for the celestial matter that according to Gould’s story is the source of all fossil matter. In my work, Gould’s recapitulation of Da Vinci’s rigor in the field of natural sciences is personified by the tick as celestial matter, my symbol for the enduring antagonist falling from the sky and attacking Da Vinci standing upon knowledge of the parasite in which he wards off. *Da Vinci Battles Celestial Fossil Matter* (fig. 3.4) is a personification of Gould’s story as I imagined it while reading his engaging text. My rendition of the story creates a protagonist/antagonist relationship between Da Vinci and the celestial matter, one that may or may not have actually existed, however one which I have created through my internalization of the narrative.

Anecdotes relate to a narrative anthropology that deconstructs the narrative in history and time to transmit to a reading audience the personal reflection of a text. I find this work is speaking to the slippage that occurs when regimented

fact and measured time become obstructed by memory and recollection of events from the past. A personal narrativity refers in this work to the stories I have constructed about myself as I manage to understand, deconstruct and internalize the stories I have selected to represent in this body of work.

Inevitably, the actions of the narrative are being performed by animals, specifically primates, an evolutionary predecessor to humans. This move is to de-evolve the notion of the weight empowered onto the narrative, prodding at the actions sometimes taken in the guise of being “in the name of religion” or in the “discovery of science.” Working previously with paper cutouts on two-dimensional surfaces, in this work I have explored the manner in which cutouts work in three-dimensional space. These cutouts are purposeful surrogates of any mimetic quality to re-creating a naturalistic rendition of my characters. They allude to their own transient existence. For me the paper cutouts represent the slippage in memory where an impressionable moment is quickly remembered and dismissed.

Chapter V: Anecdotes Installed and Concluding Thoughts

Initially, luminous gilded framing was used to draw attention to paintings under low light situations before the use of brighter electric lighting. I chose to present *Anecdotes* like Renaissance paintings because, though photographic images, they translate to me as paintings. While the endpoint of the creative process is the photographic image, the content of these images are approached with the thought of building up planes of space like a painter building up

layers of paint. The work reveals unique handwork and a sense of detail in construction that references my presence in the act of creating the photographic image. Furthermore, the detail of cutout elements and overall maximal filling of space with patterns and line work is emulative of ornate Renaissance design. Ortega y Gasset references the frame as a “neutral object” that “limits itself to concentrating attention and making it spill out onto the picture.”¹⁶ The frame as the “neutral object,” containing the image within, allows the image to meld visually with the surrounding environment. Gasset argues that this four-sided container becomes neutral when it emulates the formal qualities of the image within, striving to erase the separation between the image it displays and the environment of the gallery. The gilded frame draws attention to its contents by finishing the hard, linear and unfinished edges of the image. This quality of the frame allows the image held within to flow outward onto the gallery wall.

My strategy in placing the photographs in ornate frames is to make them reminiscent of 14th to 16th century European painting. Herein I am appropriating the aura of the painting as a singular non-reproducible object. However, upon further inspection, the viewer discovers these frames are filled with subject matter and use of materials that denies a Renaissance naturalist approach of visual storytelling. The ornate frames used to present the work, mimic the ornateness of the photographic images held within. This is an extension of subverting a story by extracting its characters, changing their role and then placing them back into the original container from which they came.

16. Eli Wilner. *The Gilded Edge: The Art of the Frame* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 25.

Anecdotes presented in gilded, ornate frames, re-contextualizes the tradition of the painter's frame. The idea is to deconstruct the naturalistic illusion of the narrative painting itself. Placing my renditions of these narratives into traditional ornate frames simultaneously appropriates the concept of the singular painting as a unique object, while dismissing this notion entirely with the discovery of the reproducible photographic image.

The contemporary work of British artist Banksy, whose sarcastic and dissident imagery of societal and consumerist structure plays with self-reflexive graffiti and alteration of iconic fine art imagery reveals an ironic approach in visual communication. On certain occasions, Banksy installs altered paintings (fig. 5.1) in public museum spaces that comment on high and low class culture and the elitism of the museum institution. As with the infrequent comments made by Banksy about his work, I find reassurance in his utility of art as a community based part of society and not something to be purchased and exhibited on behalf of the privileged collector. Like the ingenious nature of the story, viewing should be a public endeavor which is not classified by monetary entitlement. However, I acknowledge *Anecdotes* works in a different mode of subversion, where the narrative is subject for ridicule based on modes of empowerment given to the story, storytelling and the culture absorbing these influences. The common bond as art-maker I have with the works of Banksy employs my entitlement to the story, to make it personal and to promote viewing audiences to do the same.



fig. 5.1 Randy Kennedy. 2005. Need Talent to Exhibit in Museums? Not This Prankster. New York Times Online, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/24/arts/design/24arti.html> (accessed Apr. 15th 2009).

The Polyhedron Carried Away By The Pest Of Logic (fig. 5.2), stems from a personal dialogue with the creative process and framing this experience into the intellectual structure of academia. In the creative process of making Anecdotes, I approached the building of each work as an allocation of building materials and conceptual parameters which enabled my intuition and pre-production thoughts to merge. I am thinking before and after creating a work, but rarely during the act of making. Before and after completion of the work I am engaged in thought processes with myself. During the act of creating I am in dialogue with the work. Wu hsin¹⁷, the Chinese acknowledgement of “no mindedness” occurs during the creative process. “No mind” translates to me as not over-thinking a work and trusting the forethought and path I have chosen for each

17. Carol Becker, *Nowhere From Here: Contemporary Art and Buddhism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 23.

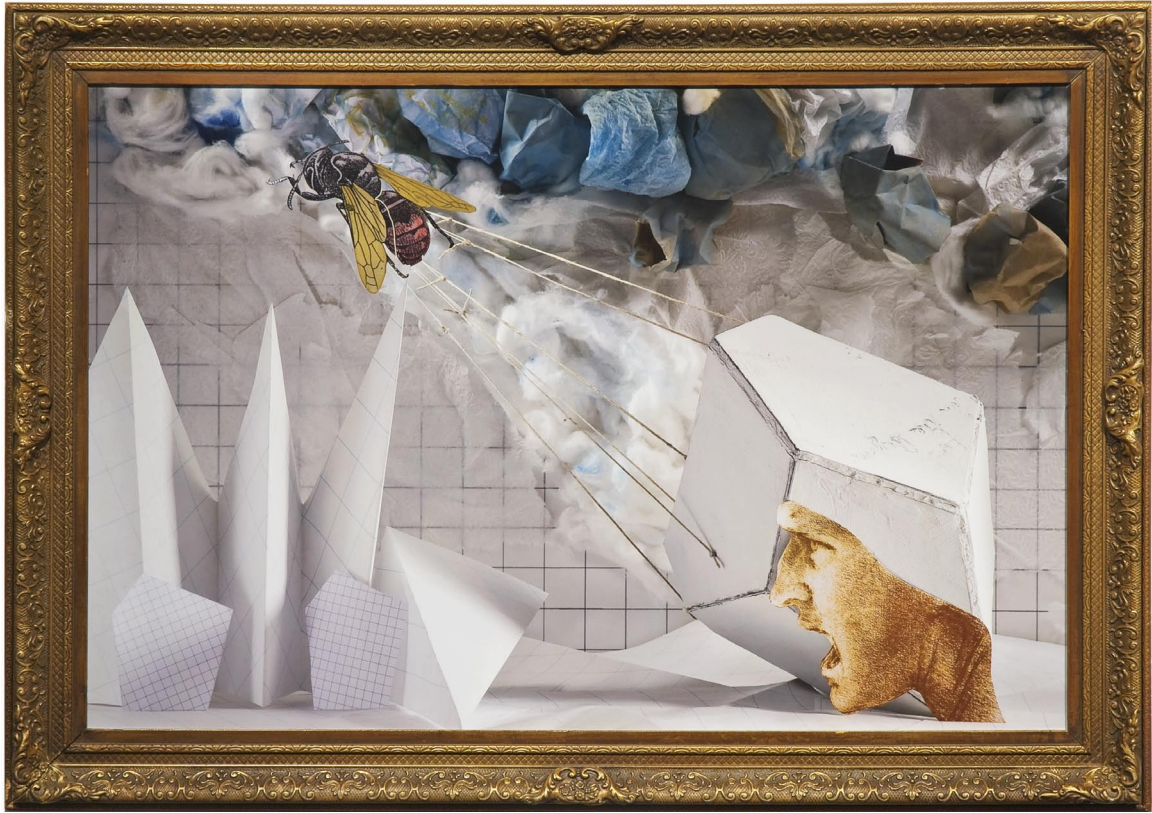


fig. 5.2 *Anecdotes, Polyhedron Of Creativity Carried Away By The Pest Of Logic*

visual representation. *Polyhedron Of Creativity Carried Away By The Pest Of Logic* is a visual representation of this process wherein the pre-thought and post-thought processes of logic are confronted by the ephemeral creative present in which the excitement of play are manifested into the end-point of a visual work. The five-sided polyhedron head in the foreground represents me engaged in the creative process. Dragged away by the bumble bee of logic, I am in persistent conflict with the intellectual articulation of my creative process.

The images presented in *Anecdotes* are all a direct reflection of this conflict. A conflict with the story and its gravity imbued on the childhood imagination, that conjures up notions of fear and escape from the grim realities of everyday temptation. This work is my most personal and is the genesis of producing more works which will be based upon an inner-narrative that does not necessarily

adhere to the confines of a pre-existing story. I envision the production of new work that is a more lucid representation of my present sentiments about life. I will create new characters that will include friends and family, that are illustrative of conversations about collective fears, ambitions and thoughts on the present and future. The concepts underpinning *Anecdotes* provides a substrate which held, revealed and expressed my relationship with nostalgia for, and general conflict with, the past. I foresee the continuation of the work presented as a manifestation of present and future ambitions, fears, misconceptions, parodies and dialogues lost in translation between myself and the other.

The notion of *Anecdotes* was to embody scientific, theological and self-created stories as visual creations of pre-existing texts. What I am most concerned with is transmitting to the audience a sense of play involved in the work. The response to the work has satisfied these expectations. Viewers perceived the general ideologies behind each story within the image and enjoyed the playfulness of the work. I am elated in my ability to visually communicate texts, however, I also enjoy the fact that audiences can imbue an infinite number of different readings into each work. Visually transmitting the exact narrative, although important, is perhaps secondary to evoking the act of play and sense of wonder as I work and when these images are viewed.

The coincidence of showing the work in conjunction with the pop culture references of toys in post-apocalyptic speculative fiction in Daniel Chou's *Toymonger*, provided a wide contrast of how artists tell stories in two entirely different yet complementary approaches. Fueling a story that shows

a whimsical speculation of what could be the demise of toys, *Toymonger* depicts the tableau vivant filled with three-dimensional toy characters in post-apocalyptic environments. *Anecdotes*, working with pre-existing narratives, and the use of two-dimensional cutouts to reveal the fabrication of the story, shows the interchangeability of characters and subversion of the story to revive a personal connection back to the original text. On exhibit together, *Anecdotes* and *Toymonger* provided the viewer with two different and unique approaches to the constructed image, making the overall experience of each body of work more playful and exciting.

Overall, *Anecdotes* was successful as a cohesive expression of stories with which I have an intimate relationship. This body of work proved to be a cathartic release and provided a deeper understanding of my personal narration of life. This body of work establishes a personal intimacy of my childhood in the public sphere, perhaps through sharing these narratives with someone else, they may re-discover a personal gravity with stories lost, forgotten or buried in the misadventure of adulthood. The ability to re-establish a connection to the forgotten narrative may be a simple re-authorship on behalf of the viewer that I hope begins with the sharing of this body of work.

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