

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Theses

5-1-1997

Depiction of portraiture, Likeness vs. Representation

Mario Guarriello

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Guarriello, Mario, "Depiction of portraiture, Likeness vs. Representation" (1997). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The College
Fine and Applied Arts in Candidacy for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

“Depiction of Portraiture, Likeness vs. Representation ”

Mario R. Guarriello

May 1997

Chief Advisor:

Edward Miller/ _____

Date: 5.20.97

Associate Advisor:

Robert Dorsey/ _____

Date: 5/19/97

Associate Advisor:

Robert Cole / _____

Date: 7/2/97

Fine Arts Department Chairperson:

Luvon Sheppard/ _____

Date: 6/15/97

I, Mario Guarriello _____, hereby grant permission to the
Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part. Any
reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Date: 7/7/97

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

II. Looking Back

- a. Major Decisions
- b. Influences
- c. Visuals

III. The Thesis Itself

- a. Process & Ideas
- b. The Paintings
- c. Visuals

IV. Looking Ahead

- a. Illustrator vs. Fine Artist
- b. Style vs. Substance

V. Conclusion

VII. Bibliography

INTRODUCTION

So the dreaded 'Thesis Paper' begins. I hope this paper can help you, the reader, understand the thought process behind this body of work. I have always felt that my artwork should stand on its own legs, unsupported by flowery, artspeak. This body of work is completely different from anything I have attempted before. This paper is as much an experiment as the work itself.

I have divided this paper into three major sections; Looking Back, The Thesis Itself & Looking Ahead. I have found that this thesis has not only become about the last year, but my career as an artist. Starting from the day I walked into my first RIT drawing class, to the day when I finished my Thesis, I am looking in three directions at once. I look to the past, to see how I have grown, as an artist and a person. I examine the present to understand what I have become, including the thoughts behind my artwork as well as the work itself. Finally, I look to the future to see where I can and will go, and what I will become, the end result of this journey.

I have chosen my advisors in keeping with the idea of looking at myself from three directions. Prof. Bob Cole, my freshman drawing teacher. Prof. Robert Dorsey, my undergraduate Illustration teacher. Finally, Prof. Edward Miller, my graduate Painting teacher. Each Professor has been invaluable to my artistic development; past, present & future.

MAJOR DECISIONS

I had decided to pursue Fine Arts Painting as my graduate degree after talking with Professor Luvon Sheppard, an influential man, in my education as well as my life. Luvon told me that to learn more about myself I had to grow, then look back, to understand where I was. We had talked about various schools and their respective programs, but the biggest discussion was about which major to choose; Painting or Illustration. Luvon then told me why he thought Painting was for me, because I was an Illustrator, not a Fine Artist.

I remember thinking that he wanted me to spend thousands of dollars to do something that hated me, as well me hating it, painting. Shep gave me his reasons for his outlandish proposal; I would learn more in an area that was unfamiliar, than I would pursuing an area that I knew and was comfortable in. As an undergraduate I always thought that the Fine Artists, the Painters, are too 'out there' for me. I did not have a scarring family trouble or unresolved parental conflicts, therefore what was I to paint. I was convinced that modern day artists, painters in general, were masters of BS.

However, Luvon would not back down, I am glad he did not, and Fine Arts Painting became my major. So I became an Illustrator in Painter's clothes, determined not to budge in my beliefs, my definitions of Illustration and Fine Arts, and not to become a Painter.

INFLUENCES

I am unable to take total credit for my development as an artist. The numerous teachers and professors along the way certainly deserve credit. I've never met some of the most influential people in my education as an artist, other artists, past and present. There are so many artists, I cannot possibly name or remember each one, however there are some major standouts, illustrators & fine artists alike.

Comic books illustrators dominate my influences, from history's immortal Jack Kirby to today's Travis Charest(fig-1a), comic books have always been the largest influence in my life. I tend to admire illustrators that bring more than good anatomical drawing skills to comics. Bill Sienkiewicz, has fused fine art illustration to the comic book storyline, books bred of this fusion are called graphics novels. Sienkiewicz has brought an incredibly versatile style to comics, at times a dark sinister look(fig-1b), as well as some quite playful images(fig-1c). Sienkiewicz's talent appears effortless and broad. Sienkiewicz's illustrations exude a confidence and limitless creativity, a creativity I hope to equal one day.

Gregory Manchess(fig-1-d), illustrator & artist, has been essential for my artistic development. Manchess has helped change my aesthetic attitude towards my own painting. Manchess provided a new direction for my work. Manchess' style hit a nerve somewhere within me. A revelation hit me, the more I strive for realism, the more elusive it becomes. I was painting myself into a corner(pun intended), the tighter my painting became, the less tolerant my artistic ideas became. Studying Manchess' work has helped rescue me from the tight, realistic, closed-minded aesthetic that I was headed for.

When it comes to my ideas about paintings, there are a two painters who stand out among the crowd, Lucian Freud & Francis Bacon(fig-1h). Lucian Freud(fig-1e), the portrait artist, is the single most influential painter to me. Freud's ability to capture such

depth and color within a single brushstroke is utterly amazing. The paintings are so tactile and so painterly(fig-1f). Freud's(fig-1g) portraits have such a presence whether you are 5 or 25 feet away. Freud handles the paint as a master, he does not bend the paint to his will, but rather works in conjunction with paint itself. Freud's skill, cooperating with the paint, a concept that I have tried to adopt in my own work.

All these influences have helped to create the artist before you. These artists, and numerous others, have not only helped to develop my artistic style but my sensibilities about art as well. Although unseen, the change in my artistic temper, is by far the most notable piece of work in all of this thesis.

"YOU THINK *ME*
HEARTLESS.

"HEARTLESSNESS IS
A PEOPLE THAT ALLOWS
THE NAZI MENACE
TO SWALLOW
HALF OF EUROPE.

"POLAND.
CZECHOSLOVAKIA.
AUSTRIA. HUNGARY.
FRANCE.

"BEFORE *ANYONE*
TAKES A STAND.

"NOW, *MULTIPLY*
THAT SAME *APATHY*
ACROSS AN ENTIRE
GALAXY --

"-- AND YOU WILL HAVE
THE *SLIGHTEST INKLING*
OF HOW THE UNRELENTING,
UNSTOPPABLE *EVIL* THAT
THE DAEMONITES BRING
FORTH WENT *UNCHECKED*.

"PLANETS
SCORCHED.

"CHILDREN
SLAUGHTERED.

"ANY *HOPE*
VANQUISHED.

"ONLY A *HANDFUL*
OF US HAVE DRAWN
A LINE IN THE SAND.

"FOREGOING OUR
FAMILIES, OUR
PERSONAL DESIRES.

"AND IF THE *COST*
TO STOP SUCH A
FOE IS *THE WANTS*
OF A FEW --

"-- SO BE IT.

"FOR THE *ALTERNATIVE*
IS MORE HORRIBLE THAN
YOU CAN IMAGINE."

GHOST RIDER

▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲

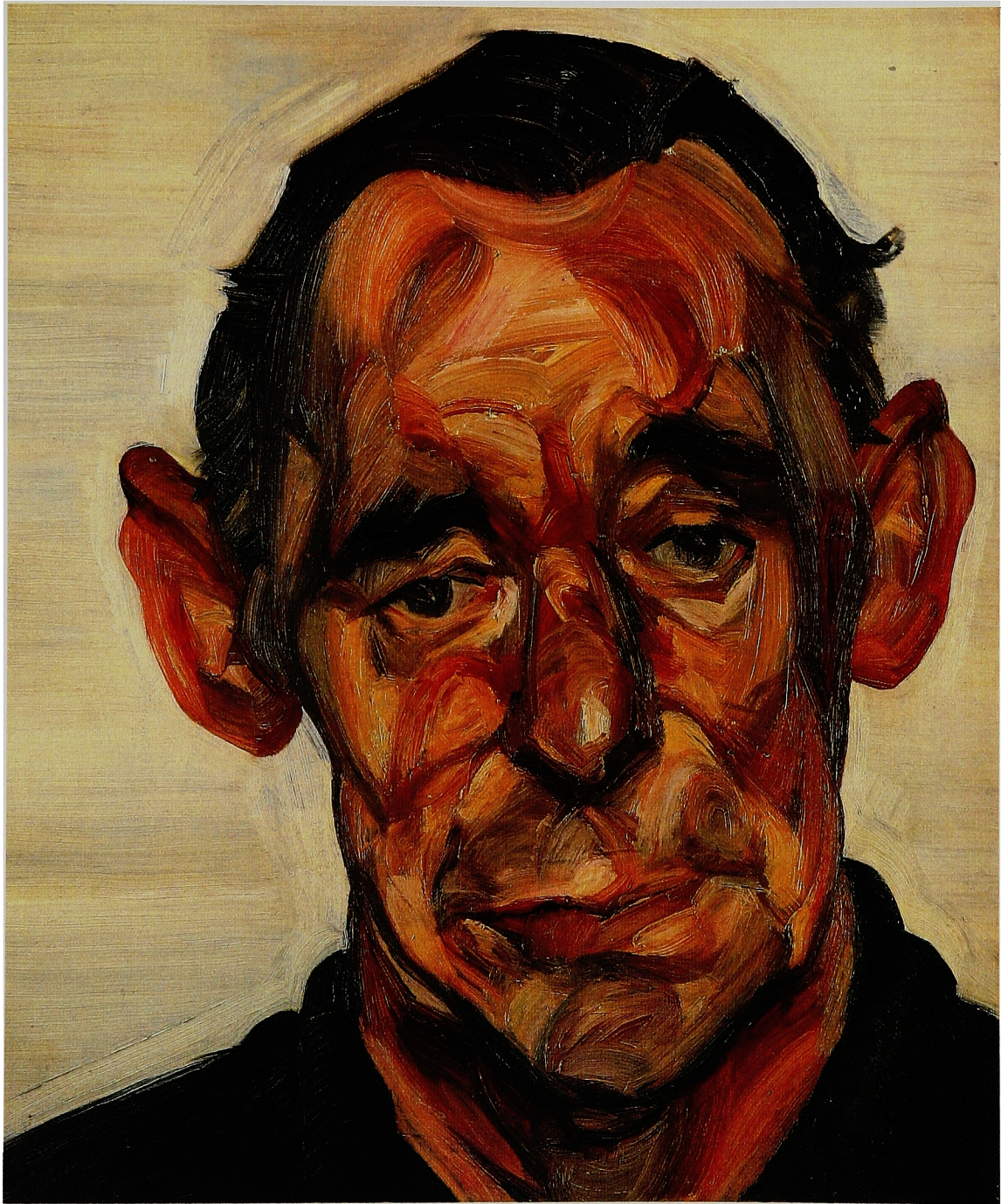


WARLOCK

Evilman



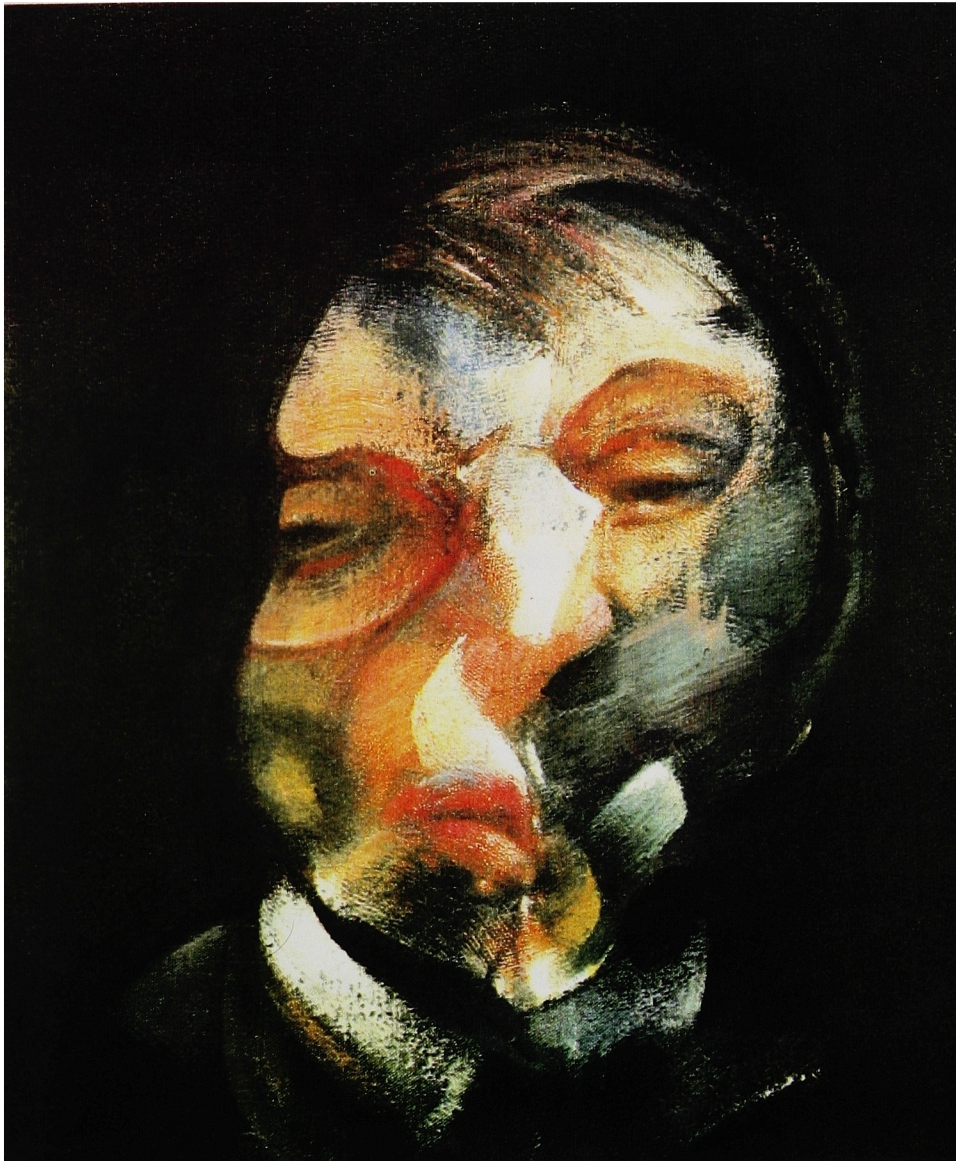
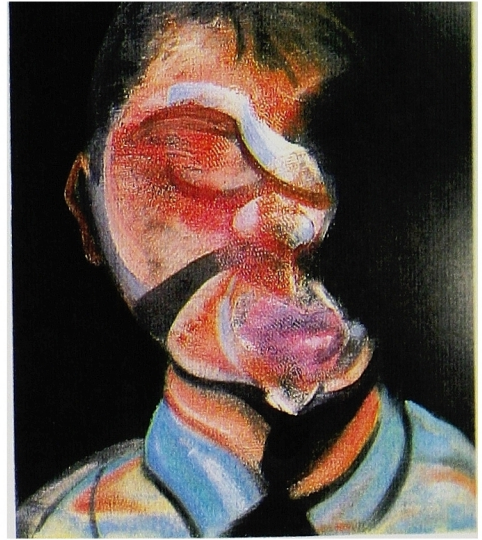
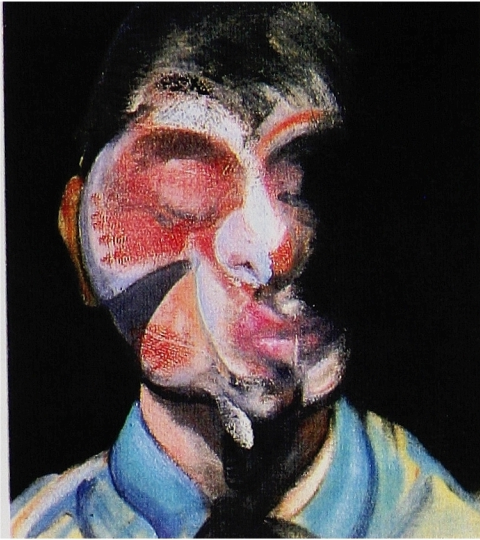
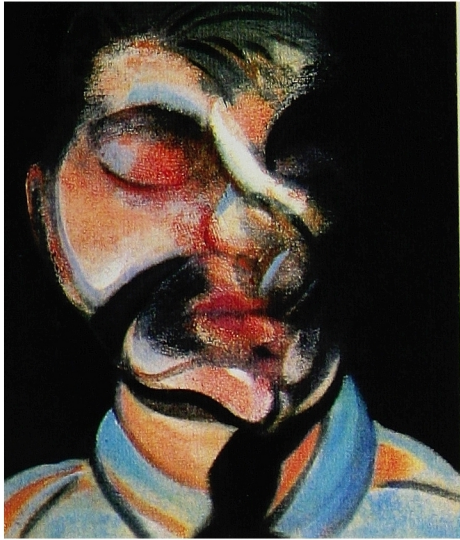






76

Three Studies for Self-Portrait. 1972.
Small triptych.
Oil on canvas,
each panel 14 × 12 in. / 35.5 × 30.5 cm.
Private collection.



77

Self-Portrait. 1971.
Oil on canvas,
14 × 12 in. / 35.5 × 30.5 cm.
Louise and Michel Leiris Collection, Paris.

PROCESS & IDEAS

The portrait. The simplest explanation of my thesis work. I set out to identify the rules of conventional portraiture, discard them, and redefine them in my own terms. I wanted to create a sense of tension or drama within my portraits, to distance my work from the typical boardroom portrait. It was imperative that I attack my work. When I say 'attack', I mean to throw myself into the process of painting.

Considering how I used to paint, I needed to redefine my painting process, to match my newfound artistic reasoning. The prospect of redefining my artwork itself was daunting, but to reinvent how I approach painting, has been a struggle. I discarded previous notions about painting; preparation, process & overall development. I was forced to develop a method of working according to my updated artistic sensibilities. I worked strictly with the paintbrush. I refused to sketch in the basic composition on the canvas beforehand. Without an underlying sketch, I had no outlines to follow, my paintbrush was free to roam as need be. I could sit before a painting with nothing but a general vision of the completed painting, unhindered by a drawing, free to let the painting develop itself.

Then I started applying the paint, pure and unmixed, letting the color relationships form themselves. Color and color theory have always been one of my weakest points, so I stopped obsessing about them, and painted by mixing the colors on the canvas. As the colors mix themselves, I am relieved of duty, no longer pressured by color and its' millions of theories. This is not to say I have no understanding of color or that my color palette has become garish; the canvas has become my mixing palette.

Visibly, my application of paint onto the canvas is the most dominant change in my work. Instead of working with thin washes of color, to build a realistic rendering, I chose to apply paint directly. I built my layers with full fledged brushstrokes, wet into wet painting, not thin washes drying in between one another. I used pure color to build planes

within the portrait, then went and built planes of color within the original planes. By constructing my portraits this way, wet into wet, I am able to unify the colors. The nature of oil paint, and its slower drying time, lends itself towards this end. Each successive brushstroke mixes its color with the color on the canvas, thereby giving the painting an overall unified look. Each brushstroke is a single facet, and my paintings are built upon thousands of these facets, combining to form an image.

To break the conventional rules of portraiture I first needed to understand the rules. I set out to disregard these rules and to invent a set of successful new rules. After scouring Rochester area libraries, I came to my own conclusions, about the general rules of traditional portraiture. 'How-to Books', 'Techniques for', and similar books reside everywhere on the shelves. They formulate basic ideas about composition, color, and technique. These rules are so formulated, so unbending, its as if art is a mathematical equation. If painting 'A' has both 'C' and 'D', then it is correct. However, if the painting includes either 'B' or 'E', it is incorrect. I ask; where is the learning or personal interpretation in this approach? There are general guidelines and boundaries, set to help people understand aesthetics, so that they can choose to disregard these ideals if they wish.

I have been taught that a viewer sees the portrait in four stages. First, the eyes, the viewer is immediately drawn to the eyes. Secondly comes the head as a whole unit. Then the body and or clothing. Last, if applicable, the hands. This is how your average viewer perceives a portrait. I challenged myself, as well as the viewer, to devise a less formulated way to paint, and view the portrait.

The human figure is the fundamental principle of my painting. I find nothing more interesting than the endless multitude of expressions the body can convey. Either in the tilt of the head or the subtle flick of the wrist, the human body is the most amazing creation in nature, and at the very center of our existence. I wanted my paintings to interpret a reality,

not to portray the exact likeness of an individual. The full rendered photo-realistic painting certainly has merit as a technical achievement, but lacks soul, and is nothing more than painted photograph. I needed my paintings to have a soul and a life of their own.

THE PAINTINGS

With my set of unbreakable portrait rules in hand, I set out to create my new rules, and break as many of the old as possible. My first attempts at the thesis paintings were a failure. I was under the 'thesis spell', a belief that I was to create such masterful works of art, I put an unreasonable amount of pressure upon myself. So I decided to do some warm up paintings, small 8" x 10" portraits, to get rid of the preciousness. So I sat down and began to work, without sketches, to paint portraits. The results astonished even myself. I was able to accomplish my original goals, without any undo pressure. Why? I look back and see that I was able to relinquish the precious hold on my work and to experiment. The series, and painting itself, "Rogues Gallery" were born.

In these paintings I believe I was the most experimental. I challenged myself to create 9 to 12 original compositions, within an 8" x 10" frame, using the head itself. So I began to vary the position of the head, relative to the dimensions of the canvas, and the angle by which it is viewed. In most of the "Rogues Gallery" series, as well as "Isolation" and "Epiphany", I decided to eliminate the first stage of viewing. I eliminated the eyes. I wanted the viewers to make a connection with the portrait. A connection to the portrait not based on the union an individual makes with another by eye contact. I chose to stimulate the unease people experience when another individual will not make eye contact, especially in conversation. I cannot fathom, at what hidden human level, why eye contact is so important.

I wanted to tackle composition in an unfamiliar way. I chose to place the heads uncomfortably close to some edges, eliminate parts of the face, and rearrange the point of view. Lastly, I chose to paint unflattering portraits, by that I mean not taking artistic license, to beautify my subjects. I've received numerous comments that I've painted a series of

boxers or mug shots. Comments I am more than happy to receive. I wanted my “Rogues Gallery” to be just that, a collection of swarthy, rugged, at times leery individuals. After all, the title “Rogues Gallery” is a direct result of these comments.

“Isolation” and “Epiphany”, are two self-portraits, direct results of my experiences in the Graduate Painting program. “Isolation” is the first painting I did for my thesis work. Isolation, my first feelings, at R.I.T.’s off campus painting studio. I was an illustrator among fine artists. I felt cut off from what was comfortable to me; the R.I.T. campus, illustrators and illustration in general, and people of like mind. I was alone in a room full of people. With “Isolation”, I tried to capture those feelings, and I turned myself away from the viewer. I turned from the viewer because I didn’t want to confront the viewer, but rather to represent introspection. “Isolation” is a representation of my first year of graduate work.

“Epiphany” represents the second year of graduate work. After taking the summer off from school I came back to my studio. So I started to paint again, but I was unable to recapture the previous year’s style. I had to reinvent myself again. After two months of painting, something seemed to click, and everything fell into place. I became comfortable with the idea of painting and my personal style. “Epiphany”, is meant to capture a moment, the moment of understanding and acceptance in my painting.

“Contemplation” differs from the rest of the paintings. The rest of the paintings used a warm palette, of colors, heavy with oranges and browns. I wanted to experiment with a cool palette. I wanted the viewer to be confronted by an individual within the painting itself. The image inside the painting is deep within thought, mired in the black of the background, somewhat revealed. I painted “Contemplation” for viewers to see a representation of my thought process behind the paintings.



Rogues Gallery



Rogues Gallery
Detail 1



Rogues Gallery
Detail 2



Isolation



Epiphany Detail



Contemplation

ILLUSTRATOR VS. FINE ARTIST

Perhaps the most significant revelation in my two years of graduate work, has been the understanding of my two artistic selves. I graduated from R.I.T. an Illustrator, I will graduate in May '97 as a Fine Arts Painter, but I am more than the sum of these two degrees. I am a hybrid of my two education's, with two different points of view, able to view the world of art with an enhanced awareness. There were times that I felt an internal struggle, two artistic selves and their respective aesthetics, warring for dominance.

I entered my graduate work an Illustrator. I was prepared to undergo a change, one I wanted to welcome, but soon came to disgust. At first I was open minded to a change towards Fine Arts but soon became uncomfortable with the process. I felt assailed by students, by Fine Art itself and at times, professors. I was told to loosen up, paint larger, and do something unorthodox in my process of painting. If I spread my canvas on the floor, spilled paint on the canvas, then walked on it, I could become an painter. Luvon Sheppard always told me that I'll learn more when I'm uncomfortable and provoked to question my surroundings. If I did my graduate work in Illustration, what more would I learn, and how much more could I grow? I needed to be thrown to the wolves and fend for myself. I did just that. I fought my fellow students, Fine Art and professors. I was an Illustrator, an Illustrator, not a Painter or Fine Artist.

For the first year I questioned painting; process, ideas, and subject matter. I defined painting and illustration, with regards to my personal ideas, and started to understand what I wanted from my graduate education. I defined the illustrator as 'Style' and the Painter as 'Substance', ideas I'll explain in the next section. I felt the Illustrator and Painter to be two sides of the same being; the commercial artist and the personal artist. the Illustrator creates work for others, turning their ideas into reality, sending their message. The Painter creates artwork personally, utilizing his/her own ideas, to convey a personal message.

STYLE VS. SUBSTANCE

style (noun) 1: distinctive way of speaking, writing, or acting 2: elegant or fashionable way of living

style (verb) 1: name 2: give a particular design or style to

As an Illustrator I was concerned with the output of my labor, the final art was of the utmost concern, not the process of creation. I was worried about whether a client would be satisfied with the work, if my work was visually impressive, whether I was proud of the work and creating my own marketable visual style. After all I wanted to be a successful commercial illustrator. I needed clients and prospective clients to find my work creative, visually impressive and original.

In Illustration there is no need for hidden messages and interpretation by the viewer. Clients want visual impact, artwork that will sell a product, or convey a message. Sometimes the Illustrator is a hired hand, a professional artist brought in to create a piece of artwork, nothing more. The gallery is not the goal for the Illustrator; book covers, magazines, or posters are the vehicles for display.

Mario Guarriello, the Illustrator, was not concerned with the substance of the piece. There is no need to go deep beyond the surface of an illustration. I was engaged by the surface of the artwork and I wanted others to be as well. I wanted my artwork to make people look twice and say "That's amazing", nothing more. I felt the Painter wanted people to be provoked by his or her artwork. The Painter was concerned with the 'Why' of painting. There were ideas, thoughts, and concepts beneath the surface of a painting. Painters wanted viewers to explore this world, the Painter's world. I did not need to involve this extra baggage in my illustrations, I would not, and I was at ease.

sub•stance (noun) 1: essence or essential part 2: physical material 3: wealth

To Mario Guarriello, the Painter, I was concerned with the process of creation. I needed to understand the ‘how’s’ and ‘why’s’ behind my work. I wanted to provoke the viewer either into action or thought. I was uninterested in the commercial success of my work. I was painting for myself and a select audience. The audience would be people interested enough in art, as a whole, to come and view my work of their own volition. My work would not be a book cover, a movie poster or other image unavoidable in today’s society.

These paintings are meant to grab a viewer and pull them into my work. Then the viewer could interpret the painting as they saw fit. The work was meant to be discussed, interpreted, and even argued over. It was undesirable to create work for another person to sell their message or their product. I wanted to be no one’s hired hand, I wanted to be my own art director, to set my own path.

I’ve been in the Illustration room enough to hear many conversations about ‘style’. How C.F. Payne creates his work; first the drawing, then a layer of ink, then an oil wash, then etc. “How do I create these effects like C.F. Payne”; it was all students were concerned with, traveling a beaten path. In that path there lies no discovery, no learning, and no self-exploration. Influences are very important, but there must be a point of departure from them, to become your own person. Sometimes artwork must be more than just surface, there can be no house without the foundation.

CONCLUSION

I've come to the end of this dreaded thesis paper, but not the end of my education. I trust that this paper has helped enlighten you to the method behind my madness. I wanted you to understand that this thesis is more than just a body of work and a paper. The most critical part has been the journey, from the beginning Illustrator and Painter to the hybrid Illustrator/Painter I've become. The journey has been the most worthwhile experience of my graduate years. I've grown more in the past two years as an artist than I could have believed. This graduate work has been invaluable in itself, as well as making my undergraduate education more valuable. I am able to look back at the Mario Guarriello of May 1995 and understand exactly where I was then. I can look at Mario Guarriello of today and have a clearer view of the road I am on.

I understand the invaluable support my advisors have been and I hope they can be proud of my growth and my work. Special acknowledgment goes to Luvon Sheppard, the man who pushed me into the fire, and helped to mold me into something better, stronger than I once was.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ballinger, James K. Frederic Remington. New York, N.Y., Abrams in association with the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1989.

Daugherty, Charles Michael. 6 artists paint a portrait, Alfred Chadbourn, George Passantino, Charles Reid, Ariane Beigneux, Robert Baxter, Ann Toulmin-Rothe. Westport, Conn. : North Light Publishers ; New York : distributed by Watson-Guptill Publications, 1974.

Hughes, Robert. Lucian Freud paintings. New York, N.Y. : Thames and Hudson, 1987.

Lampert, Catherine. Lucian Freud : recent work. New York, N.Y. : Rizzoli, 1993.

Leiris, Michel. Francis Bacon, full face and profile. New York : Rizzoli, c1983.

Sylvester, David. Francis Bacon. New York : Pantheon Books, 1975.

The Artist by himself : self-portrait drawings from youth to old age. New York : St. Martin's Press, 1979.

The portrait now. London : National Portrait Gallery, c1993.