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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

*Repetition/Series*

By

Anthony Trinchera

06-23-2006

## Approvals

Chief Advisor Dr. Thomas R. Lightfoot  
(Please type)  
Thomas R. Lightfoot  
(Signature)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Associate Advisor Eileen Feeney Bushnell  
(Please type)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Associate Advisor Luvon Sheppard  
(Please type)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Department Chairperson Donald Arday  
(Please type)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Introduction**

The basis for my thesis is a minimalist approach to making art through the exploration of process, series and repetition. Thematically, the core of the artwork that I produce revolves around a simplification of the forms and designs that I choose to portray. Artistically, I am interested in various qualities including line, flatness of shapes and simplified color range as they are applied to the two-dimensional. This manner of working stems from a desire I have to forgo realistic depiction of my subjects in favor of a more abstracted approach.

Working within an educational framework, I preferred to rely on my intuitive abilities and utilize repetitive technique for the production of artwork. Having abandoned any preset notions of image and form, I sought to focus on the outgrowth of ideas that sprung from a purely formal and media driven methodology. It was my intention to use repetitious methods of working in order to explore deeper subconscious issues within myself and investigate the role that process plays in accessing personal content.

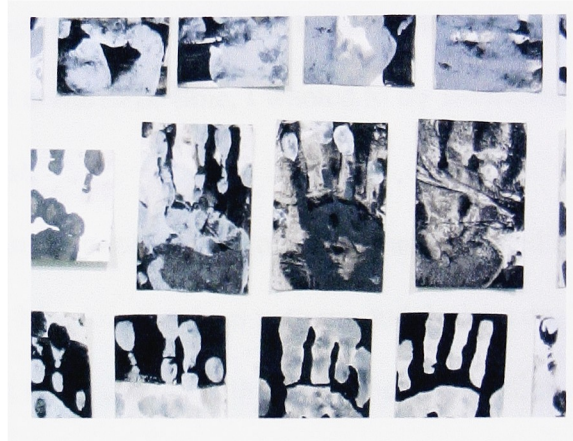
Four projects best illustrate my thesis goals. Since process is a primary element involved in my thesis, I will describe these various projects in detail and talk about the many issues that arose during the evolution of these series. I shall also discuss my inspirations for work, cite art historical references and analyze my thesis exhibition. I will form a critical evaluation of the work, discussing the relative successes and failures that I experienced, and finally describe how the thesis has affected my future as an artist.

## Four Series

### 1. Handprints



**Fig. 1. *Meat Hooks*, 2003.**



**Fig. 2. *Meat Hooks* (detail).**

The basis for my thesis work began roughly midway through my first quarter at RIT. I was dealing with a lot of frustration because I hadn't created art on a regular basis for about three years and found it very difficult to plunge back into a life that would see art as a daily occurrence. I came to RIT thinking that I could go back to the kind of art-making I'd done several years before, namely large non-representational oil paintings. I had tried this approach to making art in the beginning of my first quarter at RIT, but attempting to begin again from where I'd left off several years before proved unsuccessful. Too much time had passed for me to still retain interest in my previous manner of working, and I felt as though I had to somehow regain my enthusiasm for art in general. At the time I thought trying something new and completely different would help to inspire me creatively and recapture my passion for making art.

I made a rather spontaneous decision to use 4" x 6" index cards as my working surface. I'd used the cards for an earlier class assignment and realized that I enjoyed them as a working surface because of their small format and sense of immediacy. This

format was something that I was not used to and it forced me to adjust my manner of working to suit the size limitation. Since the area of the card surface was so miniscule, I had to decide how to utilize the space through technique. I could not execute intricate, detailed drawings or paintings on cards, but at the same time, I wanted to try something atypical of what I would normally have done.

Acting on impulse, I placed some cards on the floor of my studio and crushed bits of a charcoal stick into them with my foot. I explored various patterns and designs on several cards and then gathered some of the black dust from the crushed charcoal sticks. This dust was combined with water and smeared onto the cards using my hands. I tried many different ways of applying the wet media to the surface of the cards and eventually settled on creating individual prints of my hands, palm side down. I enjoyed the immediacy and ease of the process, which allowed me to work rapidly making one print after another. I found the image created by my hand to be an interesting abstraction representation that retained figurative characteristics. Aesthetically, each print was a flat form with virtually no detail, but remained easily recognizable as a hand. Most of the prints were composed of six elements: my palm and the five separate fingers. Yet I did vary the images to a certain extent by printing single fingers and no palm or vice versa. Sometimes I would simply print one finger by itself or try different combinations. Through this process, I believe that I was working through a desire to portray a figurative element within my work using myself as the impetus.

As the project progressed, many changes occurred with regard to imagery and materials. Through repetition, I was able to push the inherent potential of the card format and introduce new materials into the process. Over time, I experienced a need for the

process to grow and transform, and as such, I initiated various changes including the employment of black acrylic paint and collage. Using this new media had a direct effect on the imagery being produced and fostered changes to the printed images themselves. I found that making a print with acrylic paint as opposed to using wet, ground charcoal yielded different results because the reaction of each, when coupled with the index cards, was not the same. The resulting forms took on different characteristics dictated by the media. For example, a print made with charcoal would produce a somewhat lighter and blurrier image than one made with acrylic paint.

When the project was finished, I'd created about 300+ handprints [Fig. 1] that I affixed to my studio wall during the course of the series. The prints displayed multiple variations on form, technique and content all based around the likeness of my hand [Fig. 2]. Since I'd worked on the majority of the prints in a rapid manner, I was not always aware of what was occurring within the prints themselves. Generally, I would make a print, set it aside, and then immediately move to on to the next one. However, taking the time to observe the finished series allowed me to recognize that I was dealing with imagery based on figurative and spur-of-the-moment actions. The prints themselves had a very "quick" look about them, meaning it was visually evident that I'd created them at a brisk pace. This "fast" look was recognizable through splatters of paint or wet charcoal, and movements of my hand on the paper surface, which created "smeared" or "wiped-across" qualities.

Through placement on the wall, I could see series within series occurring and groupings that were created merely by chance and random positioning. In terms of display, my feeling was that once they had been mounted, the cards belonged to a

particular group and represented a specific portion of time that I'd spent on them. I did not set out to create self-portraiture per se or depict the human form realistically, but my own individual representation had been made so clearly that I cannot deny the personal account being portrayed. Ultimately I was creating a very personal statement using repetition to show each individual mark I'd made. I think the entire series functions as an account of a period within my life that saw my enthusiasm for art returning. In a way, it serves as an in-depth document from which I could trace a passage of time by the marks my hand had made. By looking at certain groups of cards, I could recount the amount of time spent during a particular session or identify when a change or transformation to the process had occurred.

The entire experience had been very liberating for me because I no longer felt held back by any personal artistic constraints or expectations. It was very freeing to cast aside certain previously held notions I had about making art such as creating realistic or visually correct representations of subject matter, i.e., figures, objects. In addition, I wasn't concerned with traditional aspects related to art such as high-grade materials and the "proper" usage and application of media. In the beginning I didn't care or even give much thought to the manner in which the finished prints looked. In that respect, I was more interested in repeating certain process-driven steps. I was working spontaneously and at such a rapid pace that if a print didn't look particularly appealing, I would simply set it aside and move on to the next one. At the same time, through exploration and experimentation, I became invested in this method of producing in multiples.

One of my other previous notions for making art was the traditional manner of creating one piece of artwork at a time. I'd spent most of my artistic life focusing on

creating single, individual paintings, drawings, prints, or sculptures that could be regarded as independent efforts. With repetition, I felt that each individual print functioned as a part of a group aesthetic. In other words, I didn't regard the prints as separate finished pieces that could stand on their own as individual works of art. The power of the series came from the sheer quantity of prints, which work together to form a larger whole.

It was during these sessions that I first experienced a true feeling of rhythm through repetition. By "rhythm" I mean that I'd achieved a sense of comfort with my work process and a physical connection to the act of creating art. Having come from an Abstract Expressionist background and as someone who enjoys physical activity, being "in-the-moment" and "one" with the artwork is a sensation that I very often strive for. Frequently, the process of creating art is for me both physical as well as psychological. For the Handprint Project, I was using my physical self as a tool for creating the work, with my hand functioning as the direct means for the application of media to the surface. My decision to work in this manner stemmed from a feeling of physical comfort in placing wet charcoal or paint onto my hands and forming the images directly. My interest in this method was established very soon after the first few prints because the visual quality of the handprints combined with the corporeal component needed to produce the images was very appealing to me. I enjoyed the creation of the prints physically because I was able to move about as opposed to sitting in one place and working. This feeling of movement contributed to the execution of the prints in many ways. For example, I made some prints that could only have been executed by standing up, bending down, using the wall as a surface or slamming my paint-covered hand down

hard onto a card. All of these actions were an effort to achieve certain visual effects, but at the same time, I could tell by the movements I was making if a print would be successful or not. In a way, it was very comparable to exercise and the feeling of satisfaction one can experience when the body and mind are in fixed unison.

The Handprint series ended when I became no longer interested in the style of the imagery and the process needed to produce the work. I felt as though nothing more could be done with the series and that the limits of the technique had been pushed as far as I could take them. After producing so many prints, the excitement I'd experienced at the beginning had worn off and I felt it was time to start something different. I was still very interested in exploring repetition, but I wanted to channel my enthusiasm and energy for this method in a new direction.

Each new series of artwork that I created yielded a personal challenge, namely finding a technique that would fit in with the repetitive manner that I wished to continue. To work repetitively means having the patience to do the same thing over and over again. This can become very monotonous, even tedious, so it was important for me to find techniques that would be interesting enough to work with. One of the problems I faced when working in multiples was that the technique involved had to lend itself to the repetition. This exploration led to much experimentation with my artist materials in order to find the right method.

## 2. Drip-Paintings

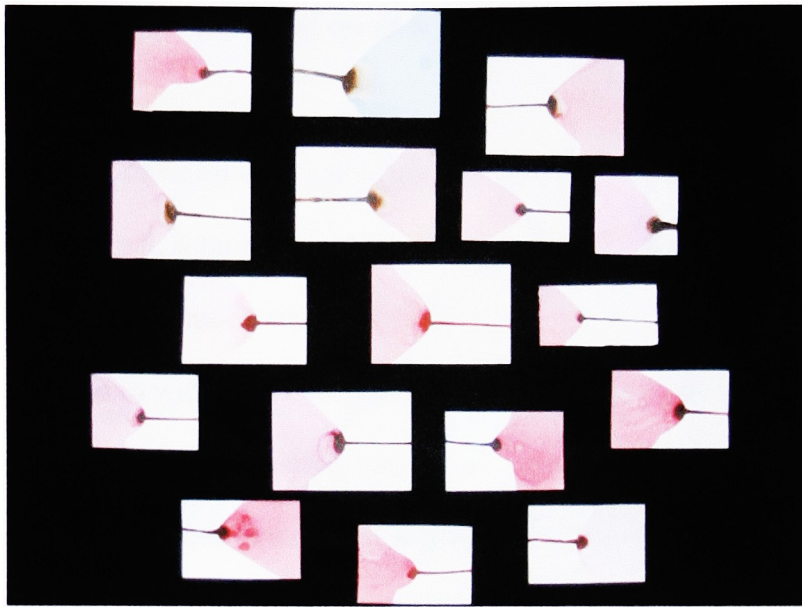


Fig. 3. *Untitled (Drip Paintings)*, 2004.

After the Handprint project, I continued to work repetitively on the index cards, using acrylic paint with various brushes. After much experimentation, I abandoned the practice of applying paint directly to the cards with a brush and settled on a technique of bending the cards lengthwise in a half-moon style and dipping them into a separate containers of water tinted with red, blue or purple paint. As with the Handprints, I wanted to keep the color range to a minimum and the forms simplistic so that I could replicate the process with ease. When I pulled a card out of the container, I could retain a small amount of water on the short end and tip it in such a way as to have the excess water run down the center lengthwise. The result was a half-moon stain of diluted acrylic paint with a line or drip coming out of the center.

After I made several dozen of these small index card drip-paintings in rapid succession, I noticed that the series was lacking a certain visual component. I found the

shape I'd created to be aesthetically pleasing, but the image itself was too empty and simplistic, as if it were just a working exercise rather than a finished piece or part of a series.

The solution I came up with was to add a "highlight" to each dampened card. This consisted of a small, semi-circular blob of concentrated, or straight, paint applied to the intersection of the half-moon stain and the drip [Fig. 3]. Executed in this manner, the blob of paint blended in with the surrounding forms. I noticed that with each change I made, my process became more complex and involved more steps. Consequently, I needed to adjust my technique to suit each new modification. I realized that I needed to work much faster because I had to add the paint highlight while the surface of the card was still damp. Timing was everything with this project and I practiced the technique repeatedly in order to achieve the sense of rhythm that I desired.

With this project in particular, there was a kind of push-pull I was experiencing with regard to the amount of control I actually maintained over what was happening. On the one hand, I developed this technique through trial and error and felt comfortable overall with it. However, I never felt in complete control because I was working with the effect that gravity was having on the water and paper. This lack of control was exciting to me because I was never one hundred percent sure of what would happen when I tilted the cards. Sometimes I misjudged and the water would drip in a direction I hadn't intended resulting in a ruined card. There was an element of chance involved, and it was almost as if I were betting on whether or not I could be successful at this technique. If I were correct in my judgment and actions, the result would be a card that I was pleased

with and could add to the series. If I were incorrect, I would have to deal with the frustration of wasted time and effort, something that could break my sense of rhythm.

This lack of control was reinforced when I enlarged the scale of the paintings. I felt that I'd pushed the potential of the index cards far enough and no longer experienced the same sense of challenge from the small format. By increasing the scale, the difficulty in making the paintings would intensify and I would again be tested in my ability produce the paintings to my satisfaction. I was also curious to see the results from using larger quantities of paint and water on bigger sheets of paper.

I increased the scale gradually, going from the small index cards and somewhat larger pieces of paper to bigger 22" x 30" sheets. I wanted to continue with the same basic shape, but the increase in scale required a different manner of creating the principal forms. I was unable to dip the pieces of paper into the water because they were too big to fit into a container. As a solution, I decided to apply the diluted paint to the surface with a large brush. The half-moon shape was easy to recreate, but the challenge was in the actual tilting of these larger sheets of paper and the application of the highlight. The large sheets were heavier and required both of my hands to steady the paper while I manipulated the drip down the center. It was very clumsy in the beginning and I had to practice this quite a bit before I could make all of the steps work in unison.

A curious visual element became apparent early on in the series when I was still using index cards and experimenting with the highlight area. I created this shape purely out of experimentation of materials and did not intend for it to be representative of any particular subject. However, I noticed that when I took the finished paintings with the highlight added and turned them horizontally, they appeared to have a figure-like quality.

The shape of the image combined with the flesh-like colors I was using made the half-moon form look like an abstract version of a woman's breast in profile. The drip resembled a very elongated nipple, which appeared as though it were being pulled right off the edge of the paper.

I believe that this series, along with the Handprint Project, represents a personal, albeit subconscious, return to the figure as a source of subject matter. I had not done any in-depth studies of the human body for several years, so I wasn't ready nor did I desire to jump right in and make paintings based on proportionally correct or realistic representations. However, I was at the time doing some figurative drawing on a limited basis, slowly working my way back to comprehensive studies of the human form. I felt a certain amount of comfort in studying a subject I'd had previous experience with and I believe this enjoyment influenced the Drip Paintings. The human body has always been a source of fascination for me, but I'd never explored it on as abstract a level as I had with this project. I've always been drawn to the figure because of my interest in physical activity and how the human body functions, that is, the mechanics of it.

I think that subconsciously I desired very much to explore the figure in my painting, but I wanted to do it repetitively and create images through distortion and simplification of form. Since I'd been drawing my entire life and had become well versed in this form of figurative art, I believed I could branch out and make representations in an unorthodox manner. As I had before, I did not set concrete goals for achieving these results, but instead worked through an intuitive process based on concepts that were familiar to me.

### 3. Fold-Over Paintings

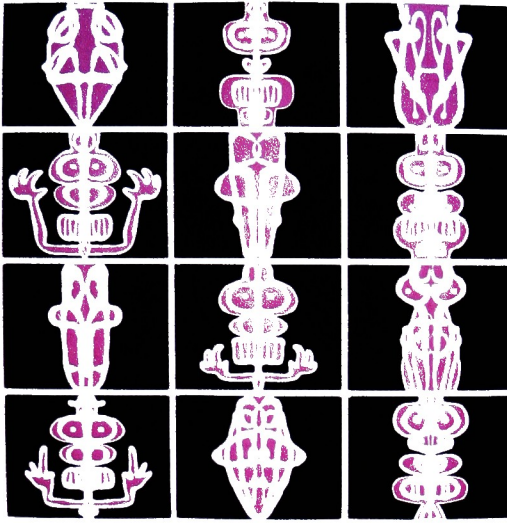


Fig. 4. *Gorilla Gods*, 2004.



Fig. 5. *Hand+Heads*, 2004.

For my next project, I again sought out a new technique to use for repetition. As with the previous two series, I experienced a feeling that I'd taken the process as far as I could and no longer desired to work with the same method. Looking back, I can make the very clear observation that my desire and enthusiasm for using certain techniques were somewhat fleeting, lasting as long as several months or as short as a few weeks. After a certain amount of time had passed, I would begin to feel that I'd exhausted all of the possibilities for a particular repetitive action. The sense of monotony associated with repetition and performing the same set of steps repeatedly would begin to wear on me to the point where I could no longer continue. Eventually, my interest for these techniques would run its course. I consider my use of repetition to be a concept based on creating artwork through means that were temporary in their employment. I would work on these projects at such an intense pace that my sessions seemed like short, forceful bursts of

creativity that would last several weeks or months. Once the energy was expended the project was over. I was unable to continue same method for very long and needed to effect a change in the manner that I created art. This is how I would move from one project to the next.

I was primarily concerned with creating paintings in ways that were unfamiliar to me. I'd experienced enjoyment from the finding of new techniques and wished to continue on a path that would sustain a sense of wonderment through discovery. At times I would feel like an inventor who has made a significant breakthrough and experiences a rush of excitement from having developed something new.

I began the next body of work by placing some latex paint into 16 oz. plastic containers and dribbling it a little bit at a time onto the surface of some sheets of colored paper. My decision to use latex was based on several factors. It was readily available (I'd already had some in my possession) and could be used in large quantities for minimal expense. In addition, I was interested in the thick quality of the paint. The thickness of the paint did not allow for excessive spreading (something I did not desire), but it was still fluid enough for me create designs through pouring and dribbling actions.

After I'd dribbled a design on the paper, I would fold one half of the sheet over and then pull the two halves apart in a Rorschach ink blot test style. My arrival at this method was the result of random experimentation with materials and time spent deciding if the process was interesting enough to continue. I had to ask myself if I would feel comfortable enough with this newfound technique and if the images produced were visually satisfying. I based my satisfaction about the images on what I considered to be aesthetically interesting. As an artist, I have certain standards that are very personal with

regard to what I like or dislike. Specifically, I was searching for a method of repetition that would produce imagery employing bold color, strong contrast, and simplification of form. I believe this was an effort on my part to form images of a graphic nature that would in a sense catch the viewer's eye through swirling designs, symmetry and vivid color. I was seeking to produce work that was not subtle and could also draw its visual power from mass numbers. By creating vibrant, attention-grabbing paintings in large quantities rather than small, I believed the impact could be strengthened visually.

As the series progressed I began to formulate images that were figure-like in appearance, but still largely abstracted. These individual forms, one per sheet of paper, were born out of the movements I'd made while I was dribbling the paint from the containers. I found enjoyment in creating swirls and loops with the paint, and likened the movements to gestural sweeps that one might execute during more traditional drawing. I'd again returned to the figure as a source of inspiration, but this time I was more aware of my subject matter. Traditional figure drawing had at this point become a regular occurrence for me and this undoubtedly influenced these fold-over paintings. The first set of images took on a gorilla-like appearance and I referred to these as the "Gorilla Gods" [Fig. 4]. Though these paintings did not look fully human and possessed qualities of a somewhat "animal" nature, they could still be clearly read as figurative in appearance.

The Gorilla God paintings were based on a very symmetrical method of creation. The design for each painting was formed by its being reproduced almost identically on each side of the sheet through the folding of one half onto the other half. I'd become attracted to symmetry because it was in effect a byproduct of the process. I was once

again dealing with the element of chance and the excitement related to a feeling of the unknown. In order for an image to be created, I had to speculate as to how the dribbled paint would react once it was folded from one side of the paper to the other. The nature of the paint (its very thick, fluid quality) was such that the dribbled design I created on the one half would change as a result of pressure exerted from the folding action. This time, the significant lack of control was an even stronger component of the process than my previous series. I frequently experienced surprise and amazement at the results of the folded sheets of paper. In many cases, the finished design would be completely different from what I'd expected and this sense of wonderment fueled my enthusiasm for the process.

Following the Gorilla God pieces, which constituted the largest set of fold-over paintings, I continued with the fold-over technique, but moved on to explore new imagery. I chose this time to deal with the human body more directly by creating six fold-over paintings of hands in a straight-on view. The hands exhibited an appearance of reaching upward toward a face that I'd collaged into the open space between them [Fig. 5]. This break-up of the space set these Hand+Head paintings apart because the strong quality of symmetry, which characterized the Gorilla Gods, was now diminished by the introduction of a foreign element into the open area. The addition of the face-image was an effort on my part to fill up a significant amount of empty space in the picture plane and portray a more accurate rendering of human characteristics. These were not fully formed human figures, but rather, components related to the human body – namely the head with facial features, and two hands. I was attempting to represent the human form

more realistically, but I wanted to approach this manner of depiction gradually because I was still in the process of returning to figurative representation.

#### 4. Tony-Heads

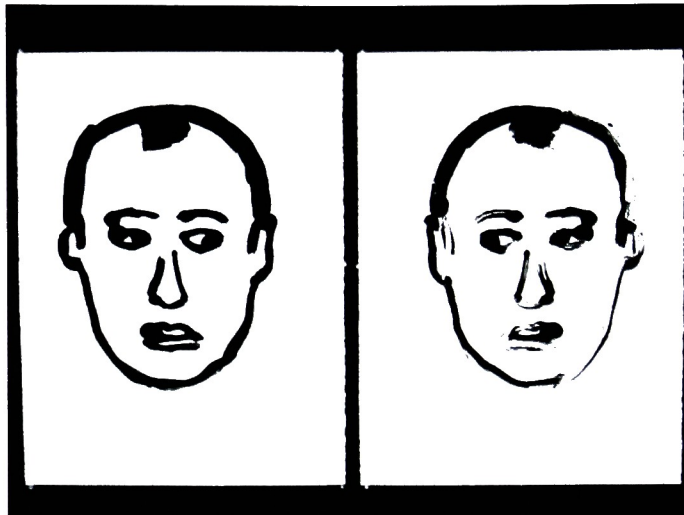


Fig. 6. *Tony Heads*, 2005.

The final series I focused on was the series that relied more on traditional artistic methods of creation than any other. Drawing is an ability that has always come naturally to me and is an activity in which I am constantly involved. It was through the act of a certain kind of drawing, namely stream-of-consciousness drawing, that I had produced the image of the face that was eventually collaged into the Hand+Head paintings and became the focus of my last series. This generic face was not new to me, but rather something that adorned my notebooks, pads of paper, folders, etc., for years. I'd created this cartoon-like image spontaneously through sketching as way to deal with uninteresting, monotonous or protracted moments in my life. I look this type of sketching as a coping mechanism that is calming to me. I suppose the drawn head itself came about because of my lifelong interest in the depiction of the human figure.

When I started to use the face in my artwork, I changed it slightly so as to resemble my own head. At first, true self-portraiture was not my aim because I was seeking to avoid more traditional approaches to the creation of art. Yet, with my first two series I was delving back into my interest in the human figure through abstraction. In the third series, I'd made a conscious decision to show further identifiable human attributes in my paintings. I believe this choice carried over into a deliberate objective to portray an even more recognizable representation of the human form. For me, nothing was more recognizable than my own head. I also wanted to use a subject that was familiar to me so that I could more easily replicate it for a series.

The face was a very simple design, just a drawing usually done on whichever piece of paper was readily available to me. I enjoyed the simplicity of the form and noticed that I could reproduce it with ease. Since it was something that I was familiar with, I did not have to spend a lot of time practicing the way in which I wanted the image to look. The challenge was in increasing the scale, which is something that I decided to do early on because up to that point, the face had been just a tiny sketch. Since the sketch was something that I'd replicated countless times on a miniscule level (I would usually do many of them at a time), my interest in the smallness of it had ceased. My intent was to make the face a more prominent and visible image.

Starting out, I used a large house-painting brush with black, and occasionally, dark blue acrylic paint on sheets of paper that were 22" x 30". As I'd done in the past, I experimented with my materials until I became settled into a series of actions for the production of each individual image. Increasing the scale meant that I would have to produce the head in a manner very different from the diminutive faces I was used to

making. Now, I was spending more time producing the individual features and as a result, the face had become much more complex. The process to produce just one head was far more involving at this scale I needed to employ a series of brushstrokes that would work with repetition.

After spending some time and letting the series develop, I decided to take the project in a different direction by making some simple offset monoprints from the wet acrylic pieces [Fig. 6]. Making prints seemed like a logical step to take because with this approach, I could replicate the head almost immediately. Once I'd pressed a blank sheet of paper onto the wet acrylic drawing, I would have an instantaneous copy of the original.

After doing just a few of these monoprints, I noticed that they possessed certain visual qualities separate from the original drawings. There was the clear indication of the brushstrokes evident in the prints and a particular roughness of form that was caused by the contact between the two sheets of paper. Additionally, the original drawings themselves had been altered slightly from the pressing of the paper. As a result of this contact, the lines were flattened making them fatter and thicker. Since my own head was the catalyst for this series of paintings, their forms, despite being abstracted and simplified, retained for the most part, my true anatomical proportions. With the monoprinting process, my face and head had become distorted to the point of being almost unrecognizable. The head was much heavier and bulkier. It was as if a new head was formed with only a few of my features remaining. Seeing my own head altered in that manner was something I'd not expected, and as a result it was a bit startling.

After producing a fair amount of drawings and monoprints, I increased the scale of these "Tony-Heads" in an effort to further challenge myself and break away from the

monotony of the process. I acquired some photo-backdrop paper which came in very large rolls, roughly 9' x 40', and cut it down into four separate rolls each measuring about 53" x 16'. After tacking the rolls to a wall, I proceeded to use black latex paint with large house painting brushes to draw large heads one after another as quickly as I could. I found that the best way to execute this repetitive action was to start at the top of the head and work my way down, filling in the features of the face as I went along. This method of drawing was quite contrary to the techniques I'd traditionally used. In drawing, I'd become accustomed to first rendering the overall shape of the subject and then filling in the details afterward. But these fundamental elements of drawing were irrelevant to this particular process because I was not seeking to make an accurate rendering of my face. The Tony-Heads acted as a kind of icon or symbol from which I was deriving a certain utilitarian use – namely a source for repetitious action. Instead of each head functioning as a conventional self-portrait with finely detailed facial attributes, I was using the image as a kind of mass produced character that was extremely graphic in nature: a flattened, simplified form, which seemed to float on the white surface of the paper.

However, making my head into a symbol or icon was a way for me to place myself directly into the work and add a personal component to it. At first, I denied the fact that these really were self-portraits. No matter how much I attempted to look at these paintings as separate from myself – icons or symbols without personal meaning or attachment – there was the undeniable fact that they looked very much like me. I think there was still an element of the impersonal in creating so many of them, the idea that individual identity can be lost among mass numbers, but portraying myself in this manner

could not stifle the fact that these were very large representations of my own physical form, no matter how abstract I'd made them.

I believe that with this particular series, I felt the strongest connection both physically and psychologically to the actual process. This was due to the fact that I was using techniques with which I was experienced. Consequently, I didn't need to go through the progression of familiarizing myself with my brushes and paint or spend time learning how the materials would behave. The previous three series had relied on techniques that were unfamiliar to me and were not "standard" methods for creating art. They were also based on more complicated procedures, which required more attention and practice for execution. Therefore, I needed to spend time learning how the processes would operate and take more care in implementing said techniques.

## **Influences, Inspirations and Comparisons**

When I began the work that would constitute my thesis, I drew inspiration from a number of influences, which acted as pre-existing constants that I was always subconsciously aware of.

The influence of Asian art was a point of reference that I could clearly look to or at least be conscious of as an inspiration for certain projects. My interest in Asian art and philosophy goes back a number of years and during this time I've come to identify more strongly with Eastern methods of depiction than Western. My own education is steeped in a Western perspective to render realistically when depicting a subject, be it a landscape, figure, object, etc. From an early age, I was adept at this method, especially when it came to drawing. However, as I studied Asian art and became aware of the philosophy behind it, I realized that realistic representation does not have to be the main objective of art. Accordingly, I became more interested in simplification of form and flatness of color as they are applied to painting and drawing.

I was particularly attracted to traditional Chinese watercolor painting and ink drawing wherein the subjects, which are taken from life, are simplified down to their basic structure and color is limited in its usage. Chinese artists developed methods and techniques for the portrayal of specific subjects that were based on strict rules of depiction. For instance, in traditional Chinese painting the portrayal of a bird or flower is based on a series of meticulously developed brushstrokes and movements of the hand and wrist. The resulting drawing or painting is usually comprised of a flattened image or images that does not place emphasis on such Western-based concepts as volume, weight, light and shadow. Chinese artists believed that by portraying a subject in this manner

they could capture the inner essence of it [Fig. 7]. To these artists, it was more important to focus on the subject's spiritual existence and try to project this concept visually rather than concentrating on the subject's outward appearance.



**Fig. 7. Wu Changshuo *Flowers*, 1910.**

My attraction to this kind of artwork is not purely aesthetic. I enjoy the artwork for its simplicity and the graphic quality it exudes, but I also admire and am influenced by the Chinese artists' search for knowledge and the pursuit of a certain level of perfection through repetition and practice of technique. I see a correlation between this method of learning and my own search for a kind of perfection through repeated actions and techniques. In my own work, I very clearly set standards based on aesthetics for myself to follow with regard to each specific series and practiced my technique over and over in order to attain a level of perfection in my mind.

I need to take a moment here to clarify what I mean by “perfect”. The term “perfect” can be interpreted in a number of different ways, but for most people “perfect” is typically associated with the idea that something is flawless. I am using the term here

to express what I feel to be a personal ideal and individual interpretation of the work and process. My intention was to push myself to a point where the images I produced could be refined no further. Seen in this way, perfection meant a kind of self-satisfaction that I'd truly made the best possible effort to produce my art. My level of perfection had to be based on something; a degree by which I was judging whether or not a series was working. The physical satisfaction or comfort I experienced was not attainable unless the outcome, meaning the image being produced, was to my liking. As a visual artist, I had to base my judgment as to whether something was working or not on what I was producing aesthetically. In the end, like Chinese artists, the visual result is what I was striving for through practice of technique. If I felt that I could attain this satisfaction physically without the visuals, then there would be no point in creating art.

Chinese artwork constitutes my first real exposure to the art of Asia, but over the years my interest has extended further into other regions and countries formally referred to as "Oriental". Within the last several years, I've studied Japanese art, specifically, the woodblock prints of the Ukiyo-e genre. These works, which derive much of their style and philosophy from the art of China, are characterized by flat, simplified forms that demonstrate a highly decorative quality.

The Ukiyo-e genre is divided into two time periods: the Edo Period from the late 1670's to about 1867, and the Meiji Period from 1867 to circa 1912. *Ukiyo*, meaning, "floating world", is a reference to the young culture that flourished in the cities of Edo (modern day Tokyo), Kyoto and Osaka. These artists combined restricted color with extremely intricate patterns and designs, usually incorporating black outline to confine their shapes [Figs. 8, 9]. Subjects included landscapes, the theater and pleasure quarters.

Often, Ukiyo-e artists would portray a person wearing a finely detailed garment, with the figure itself represented by a few dark outlines. This simplifying of the human form was,



Fig. 8.  
Kunisada *The Hour of the Snake*, 1856.



Fig. 9.  
Kunisada *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido*, 1852.

like that used by the Chinese, something the Japanese artists strove for in an effort to capture the inner qualities of their subjects rather than their true outward appearance. *Ukiyo* is also a homonym for the term "Sorrowful World", which refers to the earthly plane of death and rebirth from which Buddhists sought release.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, I've become aware of contemporary Japanese artists including Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara. The work of these artists has its influence in Japanese comic book art or "manga" as well as cartoons, posters, and signage. In Murakami's Super Flat Manifesto, he states, "The world of the future might be like Japan is today – super flat. Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional."<sup>2</sup> I see a connection between this type of philosophy and my own work. For instance, my

Hand+Head Fold-Overs as well as the Tony-Heads, with their stark black outline and almost cartoonish appearance, are similar to Japanese signs and pictograms which can be found all over cities such as Tokyo.

Murakami too has worked with repetition in his own work, using the images he creates as statements on the notion of the individual living among the masses. Prints such as *Flower (Superflat)* (2003) [Fig.10] and *Killer Pink* (2005) [Fig. 11] employ identical images, but in separate ways. *Flower (Superflat)* utilizes abundant flower/human face imagery crammed together for the purpose of filling the entire area of the picture plane. While the same as *Flower (Superflat)*, the imagery of *Killer Pink* is less plentiful. In this work, Murakami increases the size of the flower/face forms, showing them in close-up and spreading them out, leaving more room for negative space. The imagery of both works is composed of the same flower/face symbol repeated many times, with the only difference among them being color and size.



Fig. 10. T. Murakami *Flower (Superflat)*, 2003



Fig. 11. T. Murakami *Killer Pink*, 2005.

Murakami continues this theme of repetition in the two prints, *Louis Vuitton Eye Love Superflat, Black* (2003) [Fig. 12] and *Louis Vuitton Eye Love Superflat, White* [Fig. 13]. These two works, which depict simple designs and symbols, are virtually identical except for the differing color arrangements: a black background for the former and a white background for the latter.



**Fig. 12. Takashi Murakami *Black*, 2003.**



**Fig. 13. Takashi Murakami *White*, 2003.**

Murakami's work often carries with it the theme of mass production as way of commenting on his own society's obsession with consumerism and the Japanese' love of all things material. Through his art, Murakami creates sculptures, paintings, drawings, toys, blow-up dolls, books and videos that focus on bright, eye-catching imagery, which are reminiscent of the seemingly infinite number of material products available to the Japanese people. All of these artworks are commercially reproduced for Murakami who markets them to the public.

Though Asian art has had a profound impact on my recent work, I am still very interested in much that Europe and America have to offer. One artist who has had a significant influence on my recent work is the American Jonathan Borofsky. His

conceptual methods of creating were particularly influential beginning with my Handprint series.

Borofsky (b. 1942) is regarded as one of the pioneers of installation art, and more precisely art that is labeled “site specific”. He is also known for work that is purely conceptual in nature. Borofsky’s conceptual mode of creating is particularly evident in one of his earlier works titled *Counting From 1 To 3227146* [Fig. 14]. Based almost solely on the notion of repetition, Borofsky’s 34-inch high stack of plain 8 ½” x 11” graph paper contained numbers going from 1 into the millions written on the pages. Borofsky gave up art in favor of counting full time. The artist said that he was interested in the consecutive nature of counting and the fact that numbers are such an



**Fig. 14. Jonathan Borofsky *Counting From 1 To 3227146*.**

part of everyday life. He states, “Numbers are like God. They connect us all together in a way nothing else does. Like magic.”<sup>3</sup> Borofsky continued with the project for several years, but expanded upon it by sketching and doodling on the pages as he was counting. Eventually, those sketches became the artist’s main focus, but he did not stop counting altogether. *Counting* as a project may have come to an end, but Borofsky continued to count by using numbers as a way to sign his drawings. He simply carried on from the last number he had written on the graph paper and used the subsequent numbers as his signature on most of his later artwork.

Another characteristic of Borofsky’s work is that it cannot be labeled as belonging to any particular style. His work is essentially multi-faceted in terms of the media he uses and the projects he undertakes. Not one to restrict himself to only one form of art-making, Borofsky has been known to work in drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, video, film, sound production and a host of other media. I feel a connection to this manner of creating art because although I primarily work with two-dimensional media, I do not wish to limit myself to one or two specific styles. Each project I worked on for my thesis was very different from the one that came before in both process and imagery created.

Borofsky’s ability to carry out projects like *Counting* is representative of the artist’s extraordinary sense of discipline as it is applied to his art and life. To count day in and day out without fail for several years demonstrates a drive that can be described as obsessive in nature. To me, discipline is very important and remains a necessity, which extends into much of my daily life. I am the type of person who needs a certain amount of structure in my life, so it would only make sense for this to filter into my methods for

creating art. Like many people, I go through certain daily rituals. One very important daily ritual I have is exercise. For many years now I have devoted a certain amount of time every day to working out. This daily ritual has gotten to the point of being automatic, something I don't think about or question, I just do it. My habit for exercise grew out of a need to keep my body in shape following several major injuries. I am driven by the need to be functional in life and rather than relying drugs, the exercise serves to keep me physically sound and able to do the things I want to do, including making art. As a result, if I do not exercise and maintain that level of discipline and functionality, I feel as if I'm losing control.

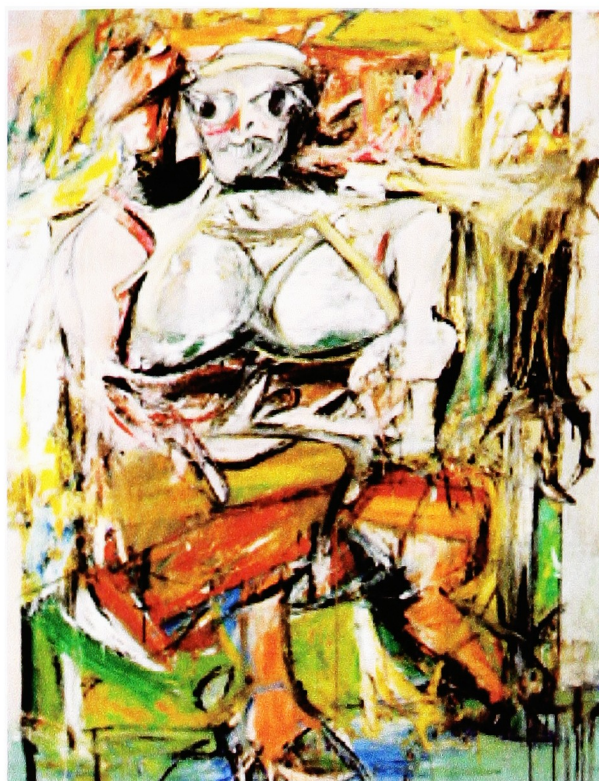
Like exercise, art, especially drawing, requires a certain amount of practice or time spent doing the physical act in order for the artist to remain adept at it. For myself, if I refrain from drawing for an extended period, I become "rusty" when I return to it and not able to produce at the artistic levels I have for myself. If I cease drawing for a while, I'm always able to return to my former desirable level, but not without much practice. Hypothetically, if I'd taken an extended leave from a series and then tried to return it immediately, I would have been unsuccessful. I would have had to take time to work back up to that particular level of art making.

These levels refer to feelings I have in my mind as to what I think my art should look like. Again, it is matter of personal taste as to whether or not a drawing or painting I've created is what I consider to be "good." Sometimes these levels are not permanent in the mind of the artist and change over time. Frequently, I will create something that I think is first-rate and experience a particular amount of excitement and sense of accomplishment. Then I will put it away and not look at it again for a certain amount of

time, return to it, and consider it sub par. All of my series employed abstraction of the figure in some way or another and I had different standards for each that were based on how I felt at the time of their creation.

In a number of ways, creating art has been for me comparable to a kind of physical act, like exercise. When I was working on a project that would employ a particular refined technique, I could not just come in fresh every day and produce right away. Each daily session of work involved a certain amount of “warm up” time wherein I would have to do a few practice pieces before I got into a groove or rhythm. I would see each drawing or painting that I made as a repetition or “rep” as it is referred to in exercise terms. With certain projects I felt as though I was in constant motion, going through the steps needed to create each individual piece of work. I believe the discipline that was involved in creating the series helped me to begin the projects and sustain my interest throughout their duration. Each project represents a kind of temporary obsession for me wherein I was so engrossed in the process that I had to keep going until my interest wavered. At times while I was creating the Tony-Heads, I felt as though I were working in an Abstract Expressionist manner, something I’d had years of experience with.

Approaching art in a physical way was something I very clearly intended and I think this had a direct influence on my decision to use figurative imagery. Like Willem De Kooning, a very physical painter, I wanted to employ gestural sweeps of the brush to display the presence of my hand making the marks, but also convey a human element to the imagery. De Kooning’s *Woman* series of the 1950’s [Fig. 15] depicts human females



**Fig. 15. Willem de Kooning *Woman I*, 1950-52.**

buried beneath the artist's exceedingly heavy, physical brushwork and thickly applied paint. As viewers, we can look at his paintings and actually trace the marks he made. Though De Kooning's work has been characterized as making a rather misogynist comment on the cultural state of women during the mid-Twentieth Century, he also desired to show his own physical being within his art. He created paintings that portray the human form through imagery and at the same time, put himself into the work by making the presence of his own hand evident.

## **Conclusion**

Each project I worked on for my thesis was an essential component in the construction of the larger body of work. Each series represented a certain amount of learning that I consider vital to my development as an artist. Even the series that I deemed less successful were important learning experiences that aided me in better understanding the kind of art I have chosen to pursue. If I thought that a particular technique I was trying out was not working, I would abandon it and move on to the next one with the knowledge I had gained. I've discovered that working in this manner requires a certain amount of time spent in order to realize if a project is going to succeed. Trial and error remains one of the cornerstones of my process and I sometimes do not realize that a series isn't working until I've produced a large number of drawings and paintings.

The aspect I am most critical of was my thesis exhibition. The installation of the show was in itself an education and I learned a great deal about the type of artist I had become as result of the work I produced. Working repetitively, and for that manner conceptually, was something that was entirely new to me. Consequently, when it came time to install the show, I was a bit lost. I had a lot of choices to deal with regarding the manner in which the work should or could be displayed. Display had been an issue for me throughout the thesis, but it was something that I really only had to address during critiques. With the show I now had to make some concrete decisions about problems that previously had only been in the back of my mind. This was the most troubling and confusing question: How do I display this work?

The problem stemmed from the fact that I had a very large amount of drawings and paintings to choose from and decide how to display. This brings up an important issue that I'd been dealing with since the Handprint series. When working in multiples, I was confronted with the question of whether the pieces that made up a series could be displayed on their own as individual works or did they need to be displayed together as a group? My conclusion was that it really depends on the series.

The Handprint project was such a vast and varied series that in some cases, finished prints could in fact work as individual pieces. Still, there were some that weren't as successful as others. This was not a problem because the so-called bad prints would merge within the larger group as a whole. Amongst the 300+ prints that I'd created, groups within groups had been formed which could very well have been displayed separately. However, I believe that displaying all of them together gave the series its visceral impact. The Fold-Over series essentially functioned the same way as the Handprints in that some of the paintings worked on their own and some did not.

The group aesthetic also applied to the Drip-Paintings, but as the project evolved, it became more complex and the paintings became more individualized. This individualization applied mainly to the later paintings in the series that were spread out over several sheets of paper. With these paintings, it became more difficult to include them with the smaller pieces simply because of the amount of space they required for display.

The project that relied most on group display was the Tony-Head series, primarily the larger drawings. The sequence of actions with the brush yielded drawings that were very similar visually. Seeing one head displayed on its own would probably not elicit

much of a reaction from a viewer. But I was concentrating on quantity, scale and sheer numbers with this project in particular. Accordingly, the group dynamic worked best.

These factors affected my planning of the thesis show, but essentially, I was not interested in displaying any of the drawings or paintings individually. I had created these pieces as groups and wanted them to stay in that format for the exhibition.

For the show I had secured the glass display cases on the third floor directly above the Bevier Gallery at RIT. I made the decision to use this space because of the amount of work that I wished to include. It was simply not possible for me to show all of my work in the gallery because there were eleven other graduate students in the exhibition and I needed quite a bit of wall space. I was required to use some of the space in the Bevier Gallery and this consisted of two portable walls pushed together and a couple of lectern-shaped pedestals. I used one side of the double walls to install the Handprint project and the other side to exhibit some drawings I had made. The lectern-pedestals were used to hold six sketchbooks that I included because I thought the drawings contained within them could help to illustrate the repetitive theme I'd been concentrating on. I was satisfied with the Handprint display, but I thought the other side of the wall was unsuccessful. It seemed rather barren with only three drawings on it and the lecterns made the sketchbooks seem out of place.

The only concrete decision I made before installing the work on the third floor was that I wanted to have the large Tony-Heads, done on 16' pieces of photo-backdrop paper, line the two shorter glass cases, running the length of each wall. These two cases were of equal length, roughly 45'. My purpose was to have the Heads visible from the gallery below. However, I did not want the Tony-Heads to be fully visible from the

gallery, but rather slightly obscured by the ledge formed by the open-ceiling gap of the gallery. Essentially, my intent was to have the Heads appear to be peeking over the ledge if one were to stand in either the front or back of the gallery. As such, I had to hang them at the proper height. If they were too high or too low, the peeking effect wouldn't work. After some trial and error, I was able to achieve this and was very pleased with the way it turned out.

My main concern was with the middle glass case on the third floor where most of the work was on display. This was the longest of the three walls, about 56', and provided the largest space for display. I was very torn about what artwork to include in this space and how it should be exhibited. I knew that I wanted to include certain things, but was unsure about other works. In the end, I resolved to carry out the entire installation with no set plan in mind. This proved to be very difficult.

I had separated out each series on the wall. While some of the projects worked well in the display, others did not. I was satisfied with the display of the Fold-Over paintings and another piece, the Bills Project. But after I was finished, I realized that there was a lot of unused wall space that diminished the exhibit as a whole. In addition, the overall lack of cohesiveness among the series as they related to each other was, I think, confusing to viewers.

Most of the pieces had been hung relatively quickly with push-pins. My reason for this manner of hanging was that since the pieces were produced quickly, I thought they should be hung in a way that would demonstrate this aspect. My goal was to create an informal atmosphere within the installation that would reflect the processes I had employed to produce the work. Ultimately, I failed to achieve this objective and an

overall sense of formality was established with the installation that I felt was out of place for this type of work. It was a very neat and orderly exhibit and I believe that was the problem.

My artwork essentially projects a feeling of the unconventional. It is ultimately conceptual in nature and as such, it should be exhibited in a manner that emphasizes this notion. I do not think this was achieved with my thesis show. However, I realize now that I needed to go through this experience in order to understand that there is a proper or at least better way for the work to be exhibited. Although the show was a disappointment to me overall, it was a very positive learning experience for the future. Thus, I now feel more confident and able to deal with exhibiting this artwork in its finished form.

I now recognize that this type of artwork requires a space that is open to new concepts in art rather than a traditional gallery setting. Looking back on the thesis show, the changes I would have made involve making a better effort to illustrate the controlled chaos that I experience when I produce repetitively. If repetition is the main idea of this work, then it is something that should be emphasized.

In the future I would like to experiment with the display of the work in various ways. One of the ideas I have is to take work from several of the series and combine it in a very unorganized, almost haphazard style. I envision obtaining a large wall space and cramming it with drawings and paintings until the wall itself disappears behind the artwork. I would also like to move beyond a simple wall-type of display, utilizing floor space, tables, desks, shelves, etc., in an effort to display works on paper in a stacked manner.

## **Final Thoughts**

As a result of my exhibition and the fact that it was supposed to represent the culmination of my thesis, I realized that my original intention for the thesis was unclear to myself as well as to others. I knew that the thesis was supposed to serve as an investigation of an idea and I had a rather difficult time, at least in the beginning, of clearly identifying that idea. With regard to the three aspects of process, series and repetition, I wasn't necessarily trying to explore whether one was more important than the others. Yet, when I began my second year, I thought I was most interested in the process of making art. In this paper, I've gone into detail about the actual processes I underwent to create the artwork, but as I moved closer to the conclusion of my thesis work, it seemed that repetition was really the most important thing to me. Looking back, it was the act of repeating to achieve a meditative sense of rhythm and a level of perfection in technique that brought me the most joy and satisfaction as an artist.

One of the concepts I struggled with in displaying the work was whether to show or illustrate the process from start to finish. This approach meant that I would have shown all of the drawings or paintings from a given series regardless of whether I thought they were good or bad. By displaying the work on a wall, the viewer would probably not have much difficulty deciphering the overall concept being presented. However, during the course of the thesis I came to realize that although process was something I was indeed very interested in, it was not the idea I ultimately wished to convey to viewers. Consequently, I focused primarily on showing the drawings and paintings that I felt best represented a particular series. This is a concept directly related to aesthetics and the feeling that as an artist, I am still very concerned with creating visually pleasing artwork.

In conclusion, I believe the thesis has taught me that process, and in particular repetition, remain a primary means of locating meaning, function and form within visual artwork.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Ukiyo-e," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ukiyo-e&oldid=59783478>.
- <sup>2</sup> Takashi Murakami, *Super Flat* (Tokyo: Madra Publishing Co. Ltd., 2000), p. 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Ann Curran, "Jonathan Borofsky Nobody Knows His Name, Everybody Has His Number," *Carnegie Mellon Magazine*, Spring 2002, [www.cmu.edu/magazine/02spring/borofsky.html](http://www.cmu.edu/magazine/02spring/borofsky.html).

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