

Don't Know Yet

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## ABSTRACT

Barnickel, Chris MFA, Laguna College of Art & Design, April, 2009. Odyssey. Major  
Professor: Grant Hier

My thesis series is an exploration based off of personal and observed experiences. It is an investigation into the relationship that modern man has with both the artificial world he has created for himself and the surrounding natural world. I depict hypothetical moments that exhibit the sense of an all-encompassing solitude a vast natural environment has to offer. A dichotomy between the natural and the artificial has manifested throughout this series. In these paintings I include modern day cultural artifacts incongruent to these environments of seclusion that feel out of place, superficial, and disruptive to the peaceful mood of the painting. In much of my work, a protagonist, with whom I hope the viewer can empathize, is walking on the outskirts of civilization. There, cheap and disposable objects from the culture that he is seeking a temporary refuge from interrupt his solitude. For perhaps a brief moment at these places of solitude outside of civilization one is confronted with the overwhelming vastness of one's surrounding environment. The awareness of something so infinite and powerful creates an alternative to the chaos of modernity. Yet for only a fleeting moment is one able to forget the petty worries and desires that this culture puts such importance on.

### Introduction/ Description

After analyzing the entirety of my work up to this point, I have found consistent idiosyncrasies inherent to every piece. Every piece I have created, that I consider successful, deals with isolated figures in vast natural landscapes, many of which are just outside of civilization. It was not a lucid decision to create this reoccurring motif in my work, but reaction caused from some innate and subconscious desire. The isolation I depict is not an isolation that has been imposed on the subject, but an isolation resulting from a desired escape. These moments of isolation consist of individuals inhabiting places of quietness and simplicity, where time moves less quickly. The individuals' desired isolation is the result of dissatisfaction and unfulfillment in the lives they have temporarily left behind.

I find it interesting that I have subconsciously been painting people in these environments of extreme vastness—places like a boundless desert or a beach that is encompassed by ocean. I live in such a complex society yet I am compelled to paint people outside of it. We have achieved a great deal in the past hundred years, but as we progress we continually become disconnected with nature, while our minds become more and more occupied with artificial, visual and auditory distractions.

On a drive from Southern California to Las Vegas I pulled my car down one of those roads-to-nowhere that lead about 1000 yards into the desert and abruptly stop. It is a strange experience to be completely isolated—other than the faint buzz of the I-10—from civilization. After experiencing how powerful the sound of nothing was I was reminded how few times I've experienced such silence. By being able to see for miles in

360 degrees, I became aware of my complete isolation. The only complete privacy from the probing eyes of fellow humans I routinely experience is that which is usually indoors, and even there, there is the awareness that you may be very close to other people—they may be just outside the door. Being completely aware of real isolation enabled me to (mainly on a subconscious level) let my guard down and forget my self-consciousness, which is to say, my consciousness of my self. I'm sure that two or three hundred years ago this would be a fairly common situation for the average person, yet being so foreign to me, it resulted in an extremely rare and powerful experience. Now, does modern man need a simpler way of life or at least more experiences such as these? Would it affect the quality of his life? I don't know. I am concerned about painting what is meaningful, powerful, and important to me. Hopefully as a citizen of this time and place, I can help others to understand what it was like to be around today.

This series is an investigation into the relationship that modern man has with both the artificial world he has created for himself and the surrounding natural world. I've begun to explore this strange, fast-paced, ever-changing, industrialized way of life the Western world has created. I depict hypothetical moments that exhibit the sense of an all-encompassing solitude a vast natural environment has to offer. Yet in these paintings I also include modern day cultural artifacts incongruent to these environments of seclusion that feel out of place, superficial, and disruptive to the peaceful mood of the painting. A dichotomy between the natural and the artificial has manifested in multiple forms throughout this series. For instance, the open space of a vacant beach is opposed by the confined space of a distant cityscape. A tranquil walk is interrupted by an unnatural and artificially painted crab or a shiny, plastic blowup doll. A clustering of

overly artificial lights of a distant city may break the atmospheric twilight of a natural beachscape, or the natural curves of a coastline may take on the attributes of the man-made curves and lines common to city streets.

Having grown up in this modern age, every aspect of this time and place can only be perceived as normal to me. The rapidly advancing speed at which its technology progresses is ordinary to me, and I anticipate the constant changes of lifestyle. Viewing a live telecast of a space shuttle leaving the Earth's atmosphere from halfway around the world isn't a big deal. The awe of having a videoconference via a laptop computer with a friend thousands of miles away wears off after only a few minutes. Like in the allegory of Plato's Cave, viewing this society from a point of view of one who has lived the entirety of his life in it, makes it extremely difficult to see that this is truly one of the most unique times in human history. So what captures the focus and brings excitement to a civilization that is as technologically advanced as ours and commonly experiences events that would have been unimaginable to any culture of any other time period? What are the things our culture craves, needs, strives for, and what are our ideals, worries, fears, and desires?

Our economy, thriving off its ability to mass-produce, can only sustain itself through mass consumption. In order for our industry to grow so must our wants. Advertisement agencies meticulously study the human psyche to find out what drives us. It is a fairly new thing for mankind to have a society wherein production has far surpassed society's needs for survival. Billions of dollars are spent on advertising each year, targeting our baser, id-driven instincts. As products are continually becoming more and more short-lived we more frequently get our fix from replacing the old with the latest

and greatest. It is this aspect of our culture that I have trouble keeping up with. These objects, which bring momentary happiness and fulfillment, constantly leave me empty and unsatisfied. There is an odyssey every human has had to experience, one in which choices, distractions, obstacles, conflicts, deceptions, and opportunities are presented to him thereby clouding his course as he navigates with hopes to find some kind of satisfaction—something real, meaningful, and genuine in life. I think that today that course has become more treacherous than ever before.

In much of my work, a protagonist, with whom I hope the viewer can empathize, is walking on the outskirts of civilization. There, cheap and disposable objects from the culture that he is seeking a temporary refuge from interrupt his solitude. In developing this series, I've lately been asking myself: what are the objects that are most strongly marketed, sought after, and coveted in our culture today? I have been considering their importance, whether or not we need them, and why it is that we desire them so strongly. I've begun to investigate these objects of our culture and to consider how they reflect us. I am interested in how we use them, make them, and how flippantly we dispose of them.

I find it interesting how many of our disposable items are made of plastic, one of the longest-lasting materials on the planet. We aim for perfection in the construction of our products and in many cases we seek a perfected, archetypal form. I believe a great deal can be learned about a culture by looking at the aesthetic idealizations it has. Look at a Barbie doll, for example: it is constructed of a smooth, blemish-free plastic surface and has extreme, unnatural anatomic standards of perfection. Here the ultimate goal is not to perfectly mimic a female, but to create a perfect female. If mimicking of reality were the objective, then blemishes, a few average characteristics, and the common

anatomical irregularity—which are found on even the most beautiful woman according to Western standards of beauty—would help present a more realistic representation of a female. In the case of Barbie, however, man is no longer trying to mimic reality, but to improve upon it. Yet here his “improvements” to the female form fall short. If a Barbie were real and life-size, she would appear strange even freakish looking amongst the natural humans walking down the street. This phenomenon of extreme idealization can now be observed in not only our modern goods and products, but also contemporary surgery and beauty enhancement. Modern materials such as silicon are now being used to help the individual achieve their ideal bodily form with the aid of plastic surgery. Will archaeologists of the future unearth the skeletal remains of humans resting alongside of curiously smooth, curvaceous, plastic artifacts? Will this age be coined the “Plastic Age”?

While our technology is continually progressing at an exceedingly rapid pace, it is unremittingly innovating modern man’s lifestyle, while eliminating many aspects of life with which, in the scope of human existence, mankind has always had to deal. With an exceedingly efficient ease of survival, we deal with aspects of life that are unique to only the here and now. For example, in terms of food production, it is possible to produce more food on the same plot of land while using far fewer men than ever before. This leaves more food and more time for everyone, resulting in a new issue—the overabundance of time. With our ease of survival, we’ve developed new technologies to occupy our idle hands, not leaving a spare second unaccounted for. This new lifestyle that solves so many problems that have plagued mankind for all of his existence, leaves many aspects of human life neglected and atrophied. For instance, with the distraction of

new technologies such as TV, radio, iPods, and the Internet, we can fall into the routine of our day with hardly any time for simple contemplative thought. While we are occasionally jostled by the powerful forces of nature in the form of earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes, our general conquering of the elements has greatly reduced the frequency of confrontations with our mortality.

Our survival is now contingent upon things like the stock market, whether we have healthcare, and whether a particular insurance plan will cover us. The modern man, the provider of the family, no longer brings home food by hunting or harvesting it; he brings home the bacon, pre-packaged and genetically modified in plastic, not paper. While there are these many wonderful solutions for the inconveniences of daily life, some of man's innate desires and needs are now being neglected and left unfulfilled. A temporary slowing down, quieting, and simplifying is for some individuals a welcome vacation from the common, fast-paced life. I can't say whether or not this is important, in the hunter-gatherer sense of the term, for the "survival" of humanity. It is, however, something that I am continually drawn to in my work, and something that I personally feel a desire for in my own life. As a citizen of the most technologically advanced/reliant era the world has ever seen, I can try my best to show what it is like and how it feels to live here and now.

## DESCRIPTION OF WORKS

### “Point Pleasant”



Fig.1 *Point Pleasant*, oil on linen, 43x47 in.

This was the first painting I attempted for my series. I was trying to portray the idea that there was something missing from our society. The mere stimulation of a person’s baser instincts by the over-abundance of entertainment that a boardwalk has to offer can ultimately leave one unfulfilled. I painted the girl on the very edge of the water, as far away from the festivities as she could get. With

ick turned to the man-made wonderland, she

looks off to the ocean. My hope was that the negative space created by the atmospheric sky hopefully would portray the vastness of nature, especially in juxtaposition with the claustrophobic space allotted to the world of man.

### “Snorkel”

In this piece I wanted to continue exploring the idea of a vast, all-encompassing natural world that poses an



Fig. 2 *Snorkel*, oil on linen, 43x47 in.

alternative to our modern society. With a fear that this piece was becoming too saccharine or spiritual-seeming, I greatly embellished the lights in the left-hand side of the painting. My original intent was to hint at a pier or inhabited coastline, but as I exaggerated them they became more playful while taking on a bizarre, surreal quality. They seemed very artificial which, to me, portrayed the artificiality many aspects of our culture exhibits. As my other works progressed and I began to further explore the objects we make, I felt I needed to go back into this piece. I then added the snorkel to the figure. I felt that a snorkel was the perfect plastic facial accessory to counterbalance the overly spiritual mood to the painting.



Fig.3 *Bird and Crab*, oil on linen, 30x48 in.

#### “Bird and Crab”

Here as I continued with the idea of a person’s search for peace and tranquility, I began to investigate the hollow and artificial hindrances they are constantly interrupted with. Here the main figure’s footprints and the direction he is facing indicate that he is walking away from the upper left corner of the picture, where there is a radio tower and artificial lights, his focus is set upon a crab that is painted with unnatural, artificial colors and placed in the bottom

right corner of the page, as far away from the artificiality of the upper left as possible.

While working on this piece I began to experiment with how I might

compositionally break up space. I became more interested in making a complete picture, which is not subservient of a figure or main subject matter, but a picture that comprises every inch of the canvas into a beautiful portrayal of abstract space. I became interested in how I could take natural space—in this case a beach--and compose it in a more geometric manner.



Fig.4 *Sirens*, oil on linen, 20x30 in.

### “Sirens”

In this painting I continued to explore the “chance encounter with distracting artificiality” narrative, but I turned to a more humorous and sarcastic subject matter. With the idea in mind of examining a culture by its artifacts, I inserted two blow up dolls lying washed up on the shoreline of this beachscape. These items speak about our civilization in multiple ways. The most obvious is their status as manmade archetypes of a female figure.

They are constructed with the perfected curves, lines, and surfaces of modern machines and materials—perfections which render them merely crude and void versions of the human figure. Then there is their orientation: they are haphazardly littered across a natural landscape. With this painting, I hoped to ironically convey the exploitation of the male libido through the objectification of the female form in visual communications. Spanning from Titian’s paintings to modern advertising campaigns, sex has been used to sell. Here, where the female forms are being objectified—becoming objects, I’m most reminded of many Anders Zorn’s paintings who had many paintings which consisted of

idealized women lying naked on the water's edge for no other reason than the arousal of the male gaze. I thought it would be fun to use a blow up doll.



Fig.5 *Woman*, oil on linen, 20x36 in.

### “Woman”

In this piece I've continued with the blow up doll subject matter. She is in the foreground, standing in a pose common to that of a fashion model, in a bikini, and standing on water—an arrangement which gives her an almost deified quality. I wanted in this painting to create an effigy that exhibits modern man's idealizations as well as his attempts to improve upon the human form while personifying his growing separation from the natural world.



Fig.6 *Jellyfish*, oil on linen, 22x35 in.

### “Jellyfish”

In this piece I wanted to compose a natural landscape that tends toward abstraction in lieu of balance and design. I felt a figure was unnecessary. Other than landmasses and stranded footprints, washed-up jellyfish are the only subject matter the viewer has to consider and empathize with.

## METHODOLOGY

Every painting begins with an initial source of inspiration. That inspiration may come in forms such as a drawing in a sketchbook, an experience or even just simply a mental image. While at this point I may not understand the reason for my affinity towards these ephemeral ideas, nor the totality of what they represent, something compels me to investigate them for a better understanding and to develop them into something more lasting.

For me, the first step in this creative process is to begin developing a composition onto paper in order to create a unified whole that considers subject, form, and content. It is important that I pay attention to balance, proportion, dominance, movement, and viewpoint. By abstracting objects and handling them as shapes, tone, and color, I am able to organize the composition into a visually harmonious space.

When I am considering the point of view, it is important for me to remember that this is where I will be placing the viewer. While this may seem obvious, it is commonly overlooked on a conscious level but is extremely critical on a more intuitive and subconscious level. For example, the viewer may be positioned in the sky, water, or on a mountaintop. It may be a realistic point of view or an unrealistic one. The viewpoint may be closer and more confrontational or farther off and more voyeuristic.

Psychologically, the viewer will have a different experience from one viewpoint to the next. In the painting “Point Pleasant” I wanted the viewer to empathize with the kneeling figure, therefore the painting’s viewpoint was made very low and close to the subject’s

eyelevel. In “Snorkel” I arranged the viewpoint so that the viewer would be standing in the ocean right next to the figure.

It is critical here that I address the figure-ground relationship; this tends to be one of the most important factors in my work and was especially important to this series. If a composition consists of a figure inhabiting a bedroom, for instance, then it is important to consider how the size and color of the room, as well as the volume of contents within it, will affect the piece psychologically. A painting of a man sitting in a small, cluttered room with red walls, for example, will feel much different than a painting of the same man occupying a large, neatly-organized room with white walls. The first image will give a more claustrophobic feeling while the second image will create a sense of ease and tranquility. My work in this series tends to gravitate towards a more extreme figure-ground relationship. The figures in it occupy a much smaller-than-average portion of the picture-plane and are surrounded by an atmospheric and moody landscape. Leaving a larger portion of the picture plane for the environment, I’ve been able to better portray a vast, natural world.

The body language of the figure(s) must be considered—both that between figure and figure and between figure and viewer. For example: is the figure turning away, making eye contact, looking up or looking down? Does the pose depict action or contemplation? Is the pose natural or unnatural, realistic or theatrical? Again, all of these elements play a large role in the overall mood of the piece. A figure staring directly at the viewer will help to create a sense of confrontation, whereas the figure turned away will give the viewer a more voyeuristic view into a more personal and natural image. All pictorial elements of form, subject, content, figure-ground relationship, body language,

and viewpoint are considered as the image is being constructed.

Once I have arranged the pictorial elements and have developed a clear tonal composition, I will then start to work on its color. I try different color schemes with quick oil sketches or either *gauche* and/or watercolor studies. The color scheme the painting has affects its overall mood. At this point things like time of day, weather conditions, lighting, and atmospheric conditions can be examined and experimented with. This, like almost all of the steps I take, ultimately comes down to trial and error and is essentially judged by my intuitive response towards the overall mood and feeling that the painting emits. When I am happy with color and have a general idea of how this painting's overall color scheme will look, I sometimes scan the study into the computer so that I will be able to use the program Adobe Photoshop. Photoshop allows me to quickly adjust colors and tones of pictorial elements, to crop or expand, move subject matter from one place to another, and see it enlarged or shrunken—along with countless other possible alterations. Seeing and comparing these oftentimes very subtle changes enables me to create a much stronger piece by having more control while achieving this in much less time than would be possible without the assistance of the computer.

By this time in the process, the composition I have created is solely derived not from nature, but from mental imagery or memory and sketch work. I enjoy letting my own interpretation—and not that of the photo reference or the rules of nature—guide me in composing the image. In “Bird and Crab”, I wanted compositionally to have a horizon line which intersected the image towards the top while not forcing the figure's perspective to be painted from an extremely high viewpoint, as required by nature. I found that it really didn't matter that the figure was photographed from around five feet

high when he should have been depicted from a viewpoint at the height of about 10 feet. Since photo shoots usually cannot recreate a scene exactly how it is made up in my composition, I am usually forced to use a multitude of different images from different sources. While this is not necessarily the easiest way to produce a painting, I believe this is what ultimately lets my work be less inhibited and more unique. It helps me hold truer to the overall mood initially called for by the work, while not allowing the feel of a photo shoot to dictate the painting.

I can't say the way I work is the most efficient way to create a painting. I always tend to make things complicated for myself, which is something I do not just in painting. A struggle—along with [and perhaps actualized by] my stubbornness—always tends to manifest in my work, which has become one the idiosyncrasies that I have come to embrace.

Once the time has come to actually paint on the canvas I start drawing with my brush using burnt umber. I'll just draw it out as best as I can, not projecting or using a grid, because I find that doing the latter often causes me to start losing my fingerprint on the drawing. Once I have everything drawn in, I'll try my best to work tonally first, establishing the lights and darks. This only happens, however, if self-control reigns supreme. The painting usually starts off loose and experimental. The beginning of my painting is where I tend to experiment; I consider adding or subtracting formal elements, and tweak the composition so that it works on its given scale. As the painting progresses I am constantly problem solving, making colors work, building form, giving more attention to detail and developing the overall mood of the piece. Each painting poses its own problems and creates its own unique journey.

## RESEARCH

Art is extremely subjective and best viewed in relation to its context and time period. For example, one would have a different reaction to a Pollack when viewing it for the first time in 2008 than they would have had if it were viewed the year it was painted. Art—especially realist painting—is relevant to the spirit of the ever-changing culture it comes out of. The art of the past that I am drawn to the most usually entices me either aesthetically, psychologically, or both. It is interesting how my taste in art is constantly changing. This may occur from my growth as an artist or just the evolution of a painting's cultural relevance. I may be drawn to a painting of the past for reasons the artist never intended, but simply because something about it signifies something important to me. Additionally, as my views and perceptions change throughout the progression of my life, so do my views and perceptions regarding art. Some art I used to enjoy and praise is no longer appealing to me, while other works that I used to simply pass by or even criticize have become some of my favorites. These works have remained the same; the only change that occurred was the change in me. I don't believe that one should look to the discourse of art with the mindset that art is progressing, but more so with the awareness that the context in which it is being viewed is changing. My belief is that a painting should be painted with sincerity to relevance towards the here and the now.

In creating my art I am not attempting to add to a forward-moving historical sequence wherein art is thought of as progressing in quality. I believe this can be the wrong mindset to have in making art. No one can say objectively that the art of ancient

Egypt was better than Byzantine art or the art of the Italian Renaissance. One can only say that they are different. After viewing the 17,000-year-old Lascaux cave paintings, Pablo Picasso said, “We have invented nothing”. Art created solely with the intent that it is better painted than the art of the past or present may produce art that relies merely on technique (i.e. trying to make it look more realistic) or melodrama.

There is a great deal that can be learned when an artist looks to the masters. When an artist is able to understand how the master was successful in depicting not only their subjects, but also the spirit of the time, he can begin to understand why that master’s solutions were effective. In attempting to better understand certain artists and why they painted the way they did, it is important for me to know who their influences were as well as their individual and cultural contexts. For example, in paintings today it is not uncommon to see a strongly lit, single figure, more or less centrally positioned, and painted with a completely black background. Here the artist uses this technique of strong dark and light contrast known as tenebrism only to show off his or her rendering of form and to make a painting that looks like that of an old master, such as a Caravaggio. Caravaggio used this technique not to make his work look like anyone else’s but to better communicate his work. The dark background helped to enhance the divine light, reinforcing the painting’s narrative as well as alluding to the struggle between good and evil. Today it usually means the artist likes showing off how well he can paint. Coming from a school that has a very classical approach to the figure, I realize that it is very easy to become overly infatuated with technique and mere mimetic depiction of form. One can begin to scrutinize a central subject while neglecting treatment and attention to the overall picture. As one becomes more and more obsessed with technique, the connection

to what is being depicted seems to weaken.

The highly skilled painter David Leffel, whose work mainly consists of still lifes, landscapes, and portraits, has produced books, DVD's, and workshops dedicated to teaching one "how to paint." While, teaching is an admirable profession, and painting



(Fig. 7) David Leffel, *Love for Three Oranges*, 24" X 20".

this one is trying to mimic are circumscribed by their own specific times and places; this painting, however, has lost touch with contemporary life.

As I began to focus more on creating a fully composed image, and while wanting to learn new ways to represent visually without being overly theatrical and dramatic, I found my way to the work of Puvis de Chavannes. Puvis, an artist that has recently become more and more influential in my art, was extremely influential to several of my favorite artists. It is interesting to see how they

instruction is a necessity for the artist, biased instruction, dogmatic rules, and a cult following of a painter can hinder the artist. If the artist is not careful he will be left with no voice of his own. (Fig. 7) For example, the below Leffel painting adds nothing to the discourse of art, it merely recapitulates the art of the Baroque. The subject matter's only purpose is to signify the look of an old master painting. The paintings



(Fig. 8) Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Poor Fisherman*, Oil on canvas, 5'1" x 6' 3/4" ca.1881.

referenced him and borrowed many of his pictorial elements for their own work. Puvis, being an artist almost completely forgotten and widely undervalued today, was respected greatly in his time. His influence was seen in the work of Seurat, Gauguin, and Picasso, just to name a few. What I find extremely attractive about Puvis's work is that he often portrays his subjects with a subtle sense of realism. Where many of his predecessors and contemporaries used dramatic picturesque effects, he managed to communicate similar themes, (i.e. Biblical stories or Greek mythologies), and emotions equally as well, but with much greater subtlety. Here are two separate renditions of the *Prodigal Son* story. One of Puvis's contemporaries James Jacques Joseph Tissot (Fig. 9) chooses to illustrate the climax in the story where emotion is at its height. This has been the more common solution for artists who have illustrated this story. Puvis, on the other hand (Fig. 10), chooses to paint the point of the story where the son is caught in a moment of contemplation, where he is feeling regret and remorse. It is in this moment when he chooses to return to his father. Puvis's depiction gives the figure interiority, now the subject is not merely an actor posing, but a multidimensional human being.



(Fig. 9) James Jacques Joseph Tissot, *The Parable of the Prodigal Son According to St. Luke: No. 3. The Return.*, Etching and drypoint on Paper 50 x 62 cm. ca.1881.



(Fig. 10) Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The Prodigal Son.*, Oil on canvas, 130 x 96 cm. ca.1879.

Artists learned how to portray emotive pictures in a different way because of Puvis. It would be subjective to say that the realism in his work is superior to that of the other masters of his day, but it is safe to say that his was different. Perhaps so many of Puvis's successors were drawn to his work because it posed a refreshing alternative to the work of his contemporaries, speaking more powerfully to them while suiting their modes of expression better.

Another artist I feel a connection to, who paints the powerful subtleties found in real life with great care and poignancy, is Edward Hopper. I don't know if I am drawn to his paintings for the same reasons that he was drawn to paint them. I can, however, relate to the calm, quiet moments that he painted, because I have experienced similar moments myself. I



(Fig 11)Edward Hopper, *New York Movie*, Oil on canvas, 32 1/4" x 40 1/8" ca.1939.

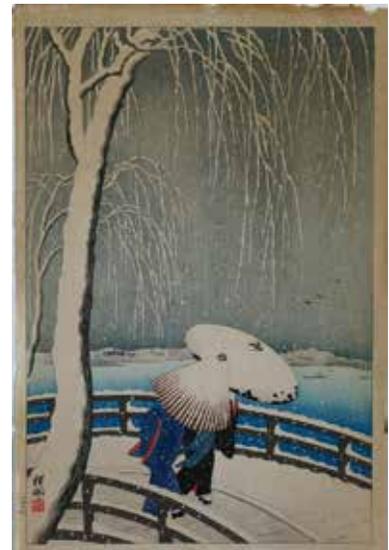
find it interesting that I was not drawn to his work until fairly recently. Perhaps at this stage of my life, with the current economic and social circumstances beginning to mimic those of the Great Depression (when Hopper created his finest work), I am able to better value and understand his work. When viewing a Hopper painting, I always feel like I, the viewer, am looking through Hopper's eyes viewing the scene how he initially viewed it. He was extremely successful if this was his intent. I have been able to study his work, analyze how he used space in composing of images, and learn from his success in portraying these moments with the hope that such analysis will enable me to more successfully visually communicate ideas or emotions in my work. For example, in "New

York Movie” (Fig. 11), Hopper paints a scene of a movie theatre, which depicts a lone, contemplative movie attendant that isolated from a crowd of moviegoers. He uses a large vertical shape that divides the canvas into to halves to visually create this separation. Movie attendees and orthogonal perspective lines point away from the woman who is only occupying a small section of the picture plane, enhancing her feeling of isolation.

Regarding the way I’ve begun to depict space compositionally: it is not hard to see a correlation between Japanese wood blocks and my work. Being concerned with the connection between man and a vast, all-encompassing natural environment in this series, I’ve found it helpful to study the compositional solutions of woodblock masters. I’ve been able to learn from their unique understanding of the relationship found between positive and empty space depicted in their beautifully balanced images. As it states in Japanese Prints, Gabriel Fahr-Becker explains:

In the process, the eye inspects not only the shape of the lines which together go to make up a blossom, a wave, a fold or a hand, but also, and with the same attention, to intervening spaces, or rather, the emptiness in between. It is this emptiness that determines the rhythm of the drawing and the tension in the pictorial plane. (28).

Here (Fig. 12) two figures are walking over a small wooden bridge in the midst of a snowstorm. The depiction of the elements is an important characteristic of this image. The two figures only occupy around one tenth of the picture plane, and the environment takes up the remainder. A white snow-covered bridge resides in the foreground, a spectrally cool



(Fig. 12) Ohara Shoson, *Umbrellas in Snow*, Color woodblock print, ca. 1931.

blue is used to depict the river in the mid-ground, and a dark sky is painted with a cool grey for the background. Everything in this image works together creating a powerful and extremely cold-feeling natural environment that these two poor individuals are caught walking through.

### JUSTIFICATION

For me, my art serves a completely selfish purpose. It is always gratifying to have others praise me for my work, but I feel and hope that I am transcending that superficiality. I want to paint without any concerns about how others will judge the painting. I want to convey only what is important and meaningful to me. I do not want to be concerned with making paintings that are justified by their usefulness to our civilization. I have no great mission to critique or stir up society. I do not believe that I have the wisdom and perspective to judge or critique society nor would I feel vindicated in doing so. Right now all that I have and all that I want to paint embraces my subjectivity and involves my experiences, my baggage, my tastes, and my desires. My paintings can function as a way for me to make sense of and to interpret the world I live in. They are a way of communicating experience. They help me work out personal issues. Even when I am not consciously honest with myself, shreds of truth and desire constantly find their way into my work, helping me to discover what is really important to me.

If I am being honest with myself regarding my work, and if I do not get too concerned with making good, sellable products, then painting can act almost as a Rorschach test. Artists are drawn to certain imagery, certain social situations, subject matters etc. For me, the act of painting requires that many hours be spent working on

paintings composed of very personal, ephemeral ideas, vague ambiguous memories, and powerful experiences. Only after spending such long periods of time with and on them am I able to make connections, beginning to better and more clearly understand why it is that I have been drawn to this certain subject matter.

In this series, isolated figures inhabiting vast atmospheric environments just outside of civilization are a recurrent motif. For example “Snorkel” depicts me in the foreground wading out into the ocean. Behind me, taking up approximately one-fourth of the overall painting, is an ambiguous coastline, comprised only of exaggerated colorful lights. Before me, taking up around two thirds of the composition, lies sky and water separated by a breaking wave. What I have come to understand about the presence of this dichotomy between nature and civilization in my work is that, in me, there is a desire for a break from this constantly accelerating, fast-paced way of life that is idiosyncratic to this unstable and ever-changing civilization that I live in. These paintings suggest my longing for escape from things like the incessant voice of advertisers and the distraction of the media. It is possible if I am not careful that I will spend almost every waking moment being bombarded with these distractions that will thereby occupy the majority of my thoughts. I have been dealing with a desire to reject this aspect of society—mainly subconsciously—in my paintings for some time now, and through self-reflection and self-discovery, I have been able to understand this desire more clearly.

It is in the act of slowing down, by isolating myself—if not physically then mentally—from these distractions, that I find my revelation. I have begun to focus more on what is truly important to me in my life. Through slowing down I am able to sort out, re-evaluate, and systematize my lifestyle. I have become able to appreciate with

heightened senses many of the things I have constantly taken for granted. By slowing down I am able to better appreciate the natural world we live in, enjoying the relationships I have with people while I still have them. Slowing down allows me to have the time to process things with consideration and not through my baser instincts.

My paintings also give me a platform from which to explain what I can never put into words. They can help me, someone who is horrible with words, express certain experiences which I would probably never otherwise be able to articulate. Painting serves as a means of non-verbal communication. For me, linguistically I can only create a poor rendering of these intangible moods and moments that are powerful, significant and symbolic experiences in my life. I find that through the medium of paint I am able to communicate these moods and moments. I can create a sort of visual journal allowing me to better understand their importance. There are certain experiences that we do not have words for—their significance may be so abstract and intangible that perhaps only poets would attempt to describe them with words.

While art can express and communicate on a micro-level for the individual human experience, it also helps portray the human experience on a sociological macro-level. Certain artwork is described as capturing the zeitgeist of a certain time or era. Zeitgeist, meaning the defining spirit or mood of a certain time in history exhibited by the ideas and beliefs of a society. This is part of the reason why art of the past and present is valued in our society today. Artworks become artifacts of a civilization, giving information about the shared psychology of the individuals it is comprised of, helping create a better understanding to how humans reacted to life in their given sociological circumstances. This would help future generations learn differently than just dry analyses in many

history books. If one wanted to learn how the individual psyche had been altered in post world war Europe, looking at Dada and Surrealism art then comparing it to Europe's pre world war art would help in understanding. Perhaps art will show future generations what life was like for a citizen of this culture in this period.

## GOALS & INTENTS

Part of me feels like this series should be a nice and neat, cohesive and unswerving group of paintings that, in a linear fashion, clearly depicts an unambiguous and consistent idea. The best way to create sellable artwork is to make each piece stylistically cohesive. It is apparently what many galleries are looking for. It may be the best way to create a successful career, if you consider a successful career as selling a lot of paintings. Yet I have opposing thoughts when considering my intentions for painting and why I originally enjoyed doing it in the first place. The careerist mentality is all that is wrong with the art world. It is tempting to try to find a marketable technique and subject matter, turn on autopilot, and treat paintings as products on a production line. Yet this is where growth as an artist often seems to practically cease. I do not want to let my series and my career be dictated by marketability. There will always be idiosyncrasies and stylistic similarities that give my body of work cohesion. I believe that my work will have the cohesion necessary for a show by honestly dealing with the subjects I am instinctively drawn to at this epoch of my life. Each painting poses its own problematic and I acknowledge that a problem may be best solved by its own unique approach.

My goal with this series is to grow as an artist and to create an honest and hopefully compelling body of work. I would hope to approach each painting genuinely

using the best means to bring it into fruition while embracing any stylistic changes I deem necessary. To fear that my work might stray from the aesthetic whole of the series while at the same time trying to discover new and more enriching ways to depict my work seems counterproductive to me. It would be forfeiting creativity for product, inhibiting the growth of an artist in exchange for the growth of a career. If money is my ambition, then I should find a new career; if fame is my aspiration, I'm marked for disappointment; and if praise is my intent, then I'm destined for triteness.

### CONCLUSION

This series started off with a reexamination. By looking at the entirety of the work I had created up to that point, I was able to acknowledge qualities innately in my work that were sincere to my unconscious thoughts, aversions, and desires. I saw the reoccurring theme of isolated figures inhabiting vast natural landscapes that possess exaggerated atmospheric conditions, and I was able to discover that my wants and desires were, on a subconscious level, compelling me to paint this reoccurring scene of solitude. Therefore I was able to analyze and question why I had been compelled to paint an antithesis to the complex modern society I live in. That sent me on an exploration into the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial—the natural world and the man-made civilizations that reside inside it. I was interested in the incongruence between that which is given to us by nature and that which man makes on his own in an attempt to improve upon the natural world in order to better suit his needs. This also brought me to consider the effects individuals experience as they adjust to this constantly changing world.

In most of the works in this series I depict a sense of solitude and equilibrium via these natural environments, which I then juxtapose with objects of modern man's handiwork. This series began with a lone figure looking away from an active world of modern amusement, to an impartial gaze at a crab enhanced with the synthetic colors common to the world of man. An effigy suggesting man's improvements to the human archetype while displaying modern man's growing separation to the natural world was incorporated in it. Then it ended with an attempt to compose a picture that shaped a landscape into a simplified design attempting to find a synthesis between man and nature, balance and design. I did not finish this series with answers, but rather, with questions. They are questions I want to address in my future work regarding form, composition, the natural vs. artificiality, the real vs. simulation, and how we as humans might fit in the middle of the latter dichotomies. These are the questions I will pursue in my work for years to come.

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Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, France, 1824-1898

*Poor Fisherman*, 1881

Oil on canvas, 5' 1" x 6' 3/4"

Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France

ARTstor: LESSING\_ART\_10310751688

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, France, 1824-1898

*The Prodigal Son*, 1879

Oil on canvas, 130 x 96 cm.

E.G. Buhrlé Collection

James Jacques Joseph Tissot, France, 1836-1902

The Parable of the Prodigal Son According to St. Luke " No. 3. The Return

Etching and drypoint on paper, 50 x 62 cm.

ARTstor: AMICO\_CLARK\_103905003

Edward Hopper, American, 1882-1967

*New York Movie*, 1939

Oil on canvas, 32 1/4" x 40 1/8"

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US

ARTstor: LARRY\_QUALLS\_10311286020

Ohara Shoson, Asian; Far East Asian; Japanese. 1877-1945

*Umbrellas in Snow*, 1931.

Color woodblock print, 38.5cm x 25.5cm.

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, US

ARTstor: CMA\_.1997.121

Appendix

Fig.1 "Point Pleasant", 2008. oil on linen, 43" x 47"



Fig.2 "Snorkel", oil on linen, 38" x 60"



Fig.3 "Bird and Crab", 2009. oil on linen, 30" x 48"

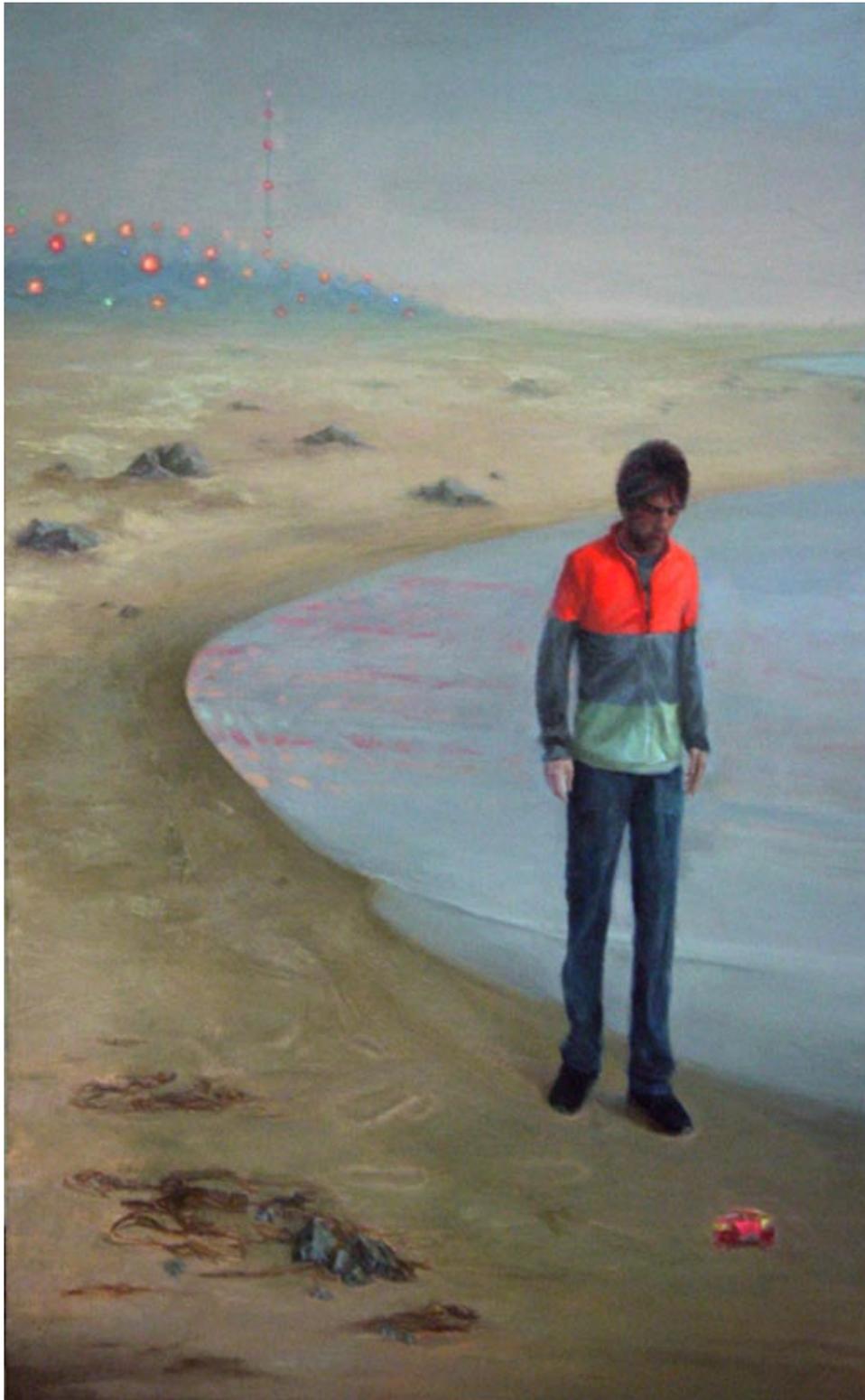


Fig.4 "Sirens", 2009. oil on linen, 20" x 30"



Fig.5 "Woman", 2009. oil on linen, 20" x 36"



Fig. 6 “Jellyfish”, 2009. oil on linen, 22“ x 35”

