

Revised Maps of the Present

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

Steven Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, in *The Grand Design*, coined the term “model-dependent realism”, claiming that everything we know about reality is from observations based on models. They believe that different world picture models prove to be equally valid, and the “true” nature of reality is impossible to pinpoint. My paintings are models of the universe that I know through experience; experiments using scientific observation combined with intuition.

I’ve coined the terms “paradoxical realism” and “magical absurdism” to define what I do. A visual paradox happens when logical perspective collapses in on itself, illustrating reality from multiple points of view at the same time. Absurdity adds a bit of humor to my concepts; makes them more entertaining and easier to digest. Viewers should have fun with my work; but, at the same time, I want to have a scientific basis for what I do. Like Hawking, I’m interested in showing that several models of reality can be equality valid, even as they contradict each other.

## DEDICATION

Thanks to everyone who has helped me along the way, and to anyone who has contributed to this global community of the arts. It is together, through our love and support, that we can all survive and thrive.

## EPIGRAPH

*There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in*

*~Leonard Cohen*

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## **DESCRIPTION**

There is a moment when all planning stops; and all logic becomes null and void. When every possibility has been considered, and there is no chance of survival, the decision-making part of our conscious mind becomes aware of its unimportance, and shuts itself down. There is a new freedom, released from the burden of self, released from civilization; and, at last, pure acceptance of the fact that you are about to die.

When the first hit came, I didn't even feel it. My pre-conceived notion of pain and pleasure no longer applied. They were just concepts. The rusty nails at the long end of a two by four pierced through my skin and cracked into my skull, knocking me unconscious to the ground. It was the scene in the movie where the music grows louder and more intense. It was really happening. I had a vision of someone flying away, returning back into the sky. It was really happening. Fade to black. Fade to white.

Help arrived in the form of a large Irish man on a bicycle, my friend and roommate coming home from his job as a bouncer at a local punk rock club. He found me bleeding to death on the street, surrounded by a gang, as the leader continued to break apart the bones in my skull with his wooden weapon. My friend identified himself with a shout that sent the crowd scattering off in all directions, except the leader, who was tackled and, later, arrested. My jaw was broken in seven places that night. In the ambulance, an incubation tube tore the fleshy pipes of my throat as it was forced down to control my breathing. The bones in my face were reconstructed in the emergency room, and, three weeks later, I was released.

What I really saw that night, and in the weeks to come, I cannot describe. I can, however, say that reality stretches far beyond what is perceivable within the physical world. I was made aware of an alternate dimension that exists outside of that realm. I was

resurrected with a new outlook on life, and a responsibility to share my experience with others.

I concluded that the role of an artist is that of a modern day shaman; an existential and psychological healer. Art can communicate with others at the most intense psychological level possible. It is here that we can begin to understand each other at the core of our being, and figure out the meaning of this thing that we call existence.

My work is a study of the diversity of human perception. I am fascinated with how we interpret the world from our own vantage points, coloring everything we experience with learned customs, beliefs, and inner feelings. Through a new means of constructing physical space, I entice viewers to experience a painting as if they are actually living inside of it.

From cubism, I borrow the idea that an object can be seen from multiple vantage points at the same time. As the viewer's focus shifts around the painting, the edges of objects shift with them. The angles of these different viewing points create overlapping lines that become more disjointed towards the outer edges of the canvas. In this way, I am developing a mode of representation and narrative in painting that, while making use of tradition, reflects the perspectival realities of our contemporary digital age.

In the Renaissance, artists worked together with scientists, astronomers and mathematicians to understand the rules of the universe, “translating physical space into the mathematical terms of proportion and perspective to produce works that tricked the eye and rivaled nature” (Dauben). Leonardo Da Vinci, in his book *Codex Leicester* (1510), solved the mystery of “Earthshine,” a phenomenon that occurs every 30 days when sunlight is bounced from the Earth to the moon and back again. This discovery was made 25 years before Copernicus published his sun-centered theory of the solar system.



Fig. 1. Leonardo Da Vinci, *Earthshine*, 1510.

Today, quantum mechanics are changing the way physicists perceive the universe. M-theory (an extension of Super String Theory) has defined eleven dimensions made up of strings that vibrate at different frequencies. Thomas Young's "double slit experiment" (1801) examines interference patterns of light photons, when passed through two slits. The most astonishing thing about this experiment is that the behavior of the photons changed when the data was being observed and recorded. The presence of an observer actually changed the way the light operated. This opens up a floodgate of existential questions concerning our influence on the universe, as observers.

My art attempts to use an ancient form of representation, oil painting, to depict the ideas of contemporary physics. I am introducing concepts that are accepted by scientists, but little explored in pop culture and media. By showing different moments in time existing together in the same place, I can explore the idea that linear time is not experienced the same by every participant. General relativity taught us that "spacetime" follows different principles based on motion and gravity. Quantum physics explores the idea of infinite probable realities, each existing in their own alternate dimension.

I play with these ideas, warping time and space around certain symbols that heavily resonate in our collective unconscious. Certain objects can have “psychological weight”, which, like gravity, attracts the surrounding space to it. Physical space, in my paintings, expands outward from the center, as it does in the expanding universe theory. In my most recent paintings, the surrounding environment will warp around the parts of the painting with the most importance. This device is a useful tool to help direct the eye of the viewer around the picture plane and make the canvas pulsate.

Connecting art and modern physics is a recurring theme in my work, but there are several other elements that play a part as well. My background in socially-conscious rock music (i.e. DIY punk rock) has led me to study comparative world cultures and subcultures, with an emphasis on primitive societies. Every culture has its own unique set of customs that its members might no longer be aware of. The punk movement introduced me to new ways of existing, in which a primitive sense of survivalism outweighs cultural norms.

We are born into a particular civilization; and that becomes our reality. From birth, we are indoctrinated with layer upon layer of ritual and regulation. As time goes on, these customs become so ingrained in our minds that we are hardly aware of acting them out. Like breathing, they are a part of us. The way you look, dress, think, speak, stand, and smell are all, in some way, controlled by subconsciously buried ritual.

My work depicts this struggle to balance our learned social upbringing with our primitive nature. Certain characters will appear acting like animals, naked and fornicating, while others will be participating in normal, metropolitan activities. There is a romanticized, almost comical, description of nature, through celestial clouds and magnificent birds. Traces of industrialized society, symbols of authority and consumerism are depicted in a negative

light, swirling around in an infinite maze of confusion. These idealized binary opposites are meant to contain playful sarcasm and important underlining messages.

I avoid specific political targets, and keep things adaptable to various situations. An oil painting must last a long time and inspire viewers of different generations with different social issues. Like the Koans of Zen Buddhism, my parables are meant to be relevant at any time. They contain paradoxical elements, that, when meditated upon, will inspire viewers to abandon traditional logic in order to achieve intuitive enlightenment.

Film is another influence in my painting style. In my undergraduate years, I studied film, mostly making experimental art videos. I learned how to construct a story through cinematic images. I studied how different types of composition and lighting can alter the emotional outcome of the film. I really loved making movies, but hated relying on other people to create my vision. I was too much of a perfectionist to work around the limited schedules and drive of others.

When switching over to a career as a solo artist, I brought my cinematic vision with me. I wanted to compress an entire movie into one painting, complete with all of the emotional and psychological twists and turns. I had to limit myself from going too far over the edge; but still maintain the same eccentric intensity.

The character arc of the protagonist is very important to me. The protagonist must go on a journey to overcome obstacles and defeat the antagonist. During this time, there is a transformation, in which the character changes into something greater than he/she was before. I can relate to this in my own personal struggle in overcoming financial hardships. Money was never something that I had access to, coming from a single parent family and leaving home at the age of 16. My experience has always been one about making something

out of nothing, endlessly searching for answers in an empty void, until learning to create my own reality. I learned to survive, and transformed into the character that I am today.

Immediately after high school, I joined a punk rock band and toured Europe, playing for thousands of people and sleeping in occupied abandoned buildings. It was here that I first experienced the beauty living off the grid in alternative communities. I took an interest in people's stories of survival, triumph over oppression, and finding the calm in the center of the storm. I developed a romantic idea of the human struggle to survive, be free and find happiness.

My first paintings at LCAD were very personal. I had to work through some PTS (post traumatic stress) from my recent near death experience. I wanted my paintings to honestly what I was feeling; but they ended up being a self-therapy session. My triptych, "No Reception," was a collage of different visions, centered around the night that I was attacked. I still don't know what it means, but I knew that I had to paint it before I could paint anything else. There is a naked woman on a pay phone, a person freaking out in the back of an ambulance, and a little girl spinning a top in the middle of the street at night. The girl is being confronted by two policeman who seem very alarmed; but their intent is unclear.



Fig. 2. Timothy Smith, *No Reception*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 3' x 4'.

I was soon able to get out of my head and communicate with a larger audience. I now incorporate mythologies, metaphysics and elements of pop culture into my work. The work is still very personal, but more universal in a sense. I also have begun a series of portraits of friends and other artists. Focusing on figurative features helped me connect my love of the human experience to painting.

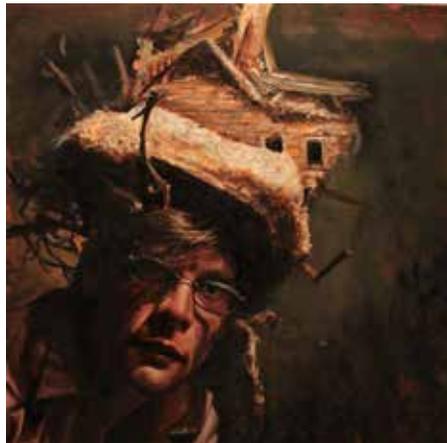


Fig. 3. Timothy Smith, *Joe Underground*, 2012, Oil on wood, 2' x 2'.

My recent work incorporates cubism, realism, and cinema into a single frame. I borrow from cubism the idea of seeing an object from multiple perspectives at once, where the edges of a straight line shift as they move throughout space. I depict the turning point of a story, loosely based on what I have experienced; leaving the narrative open to multiple interpretations.

I want the viewer to feel like they are really standing (or floating) in my painting. They have the option to look up and down, or left to right, and the painting moves with them. The piece “Untitled (For Now)” is a good example of this. I am showing how the objects in the room shift as your focus point shifts. There is not *one* door, sink, tub, toilet, floor; but *many* depending on where you are turning your head. One small space can be expanded into an infinite array of multiple perceptions.



Fig. 4. Timothy Smith, *Untitled (For Now)*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 4' x 5'.

As I was working on this experimental painting, I attempted to preserve the unity and disunity of physical space. Some color patches will transition smoothly (or graduate) into another; as others will be cut off by straight lines. This is to give the feeling of change from one glance to another as the person is looking around the room, isolating and framing individual scenes while taking conscious/subconscious snapshots. It is also a reference to the multi-dimensional reality that we are living in.

This painting, like all of my others, attempts to break down the walls of perception of physical reality. For me, this is the ultimate goal of communication between individuals: to tap into the roots beneath the structure of consciousness-as-we-know-it and expose something incredible; something real that has been hidden. It is the same feeling that children have when they see something new for the first time. Their experience is sacred. There are no filing cabinets that exist in their minds to classify their discoveries. As time goes on, we become desensitized and bored. The energy still exists, but we put up blinders to prevent us from seeing it. My job is to shine a light on the walls that prevent us from fully experiencing reality in the purest of forms. Once we know where these walls exist, we will have the power to overcome them.

## RESEARCH

The journey into studying the nature of reality started with psychedelic literature from the 60's and 70's. I became fascinated with several underground hippie authors, from Aldous Huxley to Baba Ram Dass. I was drawn into the world of mysticism and metaphysics.

My entire life changed when I read *The Unknown Reality* by Jane Roberts. This psychically-charged book (usually found in the occult section) is a practical guide to accessing worlds outside of physically oriented consciousness. Jane Roberts is an author who combines psychic phenomena with practical metaphysics. All of her books are literally “ghost written” by a spirit who identifies himself as Seth. Seth discusses everything from the nature of consciousness to OBOs (Out-of-Body experiences). I am much more interested in the teachings of Seth, than I am in the fact that he is a spirit contacted through a medium.

To me, the most relevant part of Seth’s teachings is the idea that “You Create Your Own Reality.” In other words, the walls between our consciousness and physical reality are non-existent. If the world looks ugly to you, that means that there is something in your head that is ugly which is actively controlling your experience. This is one of the most empowering ideas that I have ever come across.

I still have a strong appreciation for this type of literature; but I feel that it was putting me into something of a culture void, and I might forever fade into obscurity. It was hard to argue my points in conversation when my only source of reference was outdated and untestable by the scientific method. I stopped talking to others about my magical experiences because, unless they had experienced a similar occurrence, no one believed me.

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert M. Pirsig, helped me unite the mystical and scientific parts of my brain. It also introduced me to the Chautauqua, a long

journey where self discovery and an inquiry into values takes place. I had taken my own motorcycle journey across the U.S. years before I read the book, and spent countless hours thinking about life and philosophy. Pirsig's story really helped me put my experience into perspective.

The book tries to bridge the gap of rationality and romanticism with “the Metaphysics of Quality”. According to Pirsig, Western thought is divided into a subject/object duality. “Quality” is an undefinable, universal force at the core of both sides of this duality. It is an empirical truth that exists before any intellectual assessment can be made.

My work is highly inspired by these two authors. The physical rules of the reality that I create on canvas are always in flux and altered by the psychology of the characters living in the painting. Pirsig's idea of “quality” is achieved through illustrating the duality of binary opposites in a harmonious, complementary dance.

Recently, I have been studying quantum physics. Quantum physics touches on the same points that Roberts and Pirsig are saying about the universe, but in scientifically testable terms. Stephen Hawking recently wrote a book called *The Grand Design* that discusses current world ideas of how the universe behaves. What was interesting to me was the idea of “model dependent” realism. This is a theory that everything in the universe can only be explained through the use of models, and these models can be changed based on what is relevant in a particular time and space. According to this theory, the “true” reality is impossible to pinpoint, and is unfathomable without the use of models.

Borrowing from Roberts, Pirsig, and Hawking, I create models of the universe that operate on a physical and psychological level. My work uses multiple overlapping models of physical reality to describe space. Psychological and emotional weight plays a significant

part in structuring the physics of these model universes on canvas.

I am also influenced by Gregory Crewdson, a contemporary American photographer who uses elaborately staged scenes in small town America to produce surreal narrative imagery. Many of his images are turning points in a story, where the plot is mysterious and opened to interpretation. They capture a contemplative moment of the calm before the storm; where, through a life changing revelation, the main character is transformed.



Fig. 5. Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 2002.

I like Crewdson's images because they linger in the viewer's mind, leaving them curiously intrigued. In my work, I focus on these same types of character transformations, and leave the story vague enough to be interpreted differently by all types of viewers. I feel a kinship with Crewdson. We are both focusing on an underlying mystic meaning that hides behind cinematically orchestrated scenes.

Another source of inspiration for me is Mark Tansey. Tansey is a monochromatic painter who comes from a family of art historians. His work is packed with symbolic meaning concerning language and images in the post modern world. "They encourage the viewer to begin by interpreting the painted scene on some basic level and then to progress to more recondite meanings." (Danto 19) The most powerful part of any image is how it directly effects the viewer's subconscious. This more primitive level of communication is the key to achieving any sort of dialogue between the artist and his or her audience.



Fig. 6. Mark Tansey, *The Innocent Eye Test*, 1981, Oil on canvas, 78" x 120".

In my work, this primitive communication is achieved through color harmony and well balanced composition. By studying old master techniques, I have learned to speak to audiences at a subconscious, aesthetic level. While viewers are looking at my paintings, trying to decipher meaning in the symbols, they are being drawn in deeper by these underlining elements.

In my paintings, I am attempting to inspire the same intense, emotional reaction that is felt in a good movie. Certain films contain a philosophical weight that carries over into a person's life. The movie “Jacob’s Ladder” is visually masterful and existentially terrifying. It is a complex psychological puzzle with several mysterious pieces of information that tie tightly together as the story proceeds.



Fig. 7. Adrian Lyne, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1990.

It is the story of a man who has died and is navigating through purgatory. He thinks he is living a normal life with his girlfriend in a crummy New York apartment, with flashbacks of the Vietnam war and his past marriage. When things increasingly become more absurd, and weird manifestations of demons began to appear, he starts to question the nature of his reality. The movie switches beautifully between Jacob's three realities, giving us mysterious clues that may or may not lead us in the right direction.

My work is highly influenced by this movie. I paint psychological puzzles filled with absurdity and paradox. But more importantly, there is a message in this film that I really try to capture. It is the idea that the devils trying to tear your life away are really angels trying to free you. It is all a matter of how you look at it. Your perception of reality changes the nature of the world you think you live in.

I try to show how things can be interpreted in different ways, and that is it important to develop an understanding of everything before one can decide what the truth is. One day, certain characters in my paintings will appear to be protagonists, the next day they are antagonists. It is all a matter of perception.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I carry around a sketchbook and voice recorder everywhere I go. I either write down or record everything that is in some way connected to my art. To me, “painting from life” means compiling a collection of direct experiences, dreams, and conversations; and making paintings based on them. Concepts for my paintings are developed over several months of note taking. I am, of course, still working on other projects during this time.

My rapid-fire imagination constantly shows me new visions. I have learned which ones to select based on the feelings that I have when the vision occurs. There is a certain overwhelmingly powerful feeling that lets me know which ideas have the potential for success.

My original visions are extremely vague ideas. The piece “7<sup>th</sup> and Main” started with the idea to paint a horizontal street scene in downtown Los Angeles. I toyed with this for about a year before I finally committed to my imagery. At first, I wanted to paint a spontaneous street musical comprised mostly of homeless people; where every piece of paper blowing in the wind lined up in a perfect, harmonious balance. This was the initial premise that later evolved into something else.



Fig. 8. Timothy Smith, *7<sup>th</sup> and Main*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 9' x 5'.

I began taking several pictures of the city and strangers that agreed to pose in dramatic stances. I sketched the photos that I liked and tried to start arranging them. The randomness of the photos spawned more ideas that lead to more photo shoots. From my first sighting of the strange dentistry billboard with the large smiling mouth, I was attracted to the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and Main instantly.

This piece really started to come together one night as I was riding my bicycle past the intersection and saw a vision of three children holding a map. It flashed in my mind and I had a heartfelt emotional reaction to it. I stayed on that corner for about an hour, squinting and concentrating, trying to really understand what it was and what it meant.

I scheduled a photo shoot that week, using my cousin and her friends as the models. My background in film is always pushing me to make more elaborate and cinematic visions. I find it important to use three point lighting. Often, I will construct props and costumes to

make things more theatrical and absurd; but, in this case, it wasn't necessary. The kids all dressed in very vivid colors that made the painting theatrical enough.

The painting I had done previously, “Untitled (For Now)”, was my first experiment in using panoramic perspective. It was successful and I decided to commit to a series of paintings based in that style. It presents a view of looking in all directions at the same time, borrowing from structural elements from cubism. I conducted several experiments in which I stood in one place with a camera, turning it slightly in every direction and snapping shots. I put about two hundred of these photos together in photoshop to create an image where space expands outward.

This painting style stems from my attraction to modern physics, and my attempt at visualizing it. It encompasses multiple ideas that I studied about probable dimensions and warping time and space. I imagine that this disjointed image is what the world would actually look like if we could perceive into multiple dimensions at once.

Using this panoramic style for “7<sup>th</sup> and Main” worked well to actualize the vision, and brought about new connections. The wrinkled map that the kids are holding echoes the map of the entire conjoined space of the scene. They appear to be lost, but don't look scared. I wanted to push the idea of adventure and discovery. They are not really lost, they are explorers trying to figure out the new rules of a rapidly changing world.



Fig. 9. Timothy Smith, *7<sup>th</sup> and Main (detail)*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 9' x 5'.

For my surfaces, I trade off between oil on canvas and oil on poplin (100% polyester) glued to a wood panel. I choose the size of the materials based on how large of an idea I have. I like working bigger, but sometimes have to tone it down due to size constraints.

After creating the surface, I sketch on it with charcoal. Then, I use black and white to lay in the foundation. This is great because it feels like a big drawing and helps me to easily correct proportions. Then, I start with the color, building it up, layer by layer. Sometimes, I apply a separation layer of liquin or galkyd. This helps make the surface look deeper and makes the dark colors stay vibrant.

As the paint progresses, I may decide that a certain area would look better with texture. I use a palette knife to smear thick paint, let it dry and do it again with another color. I usually finish a textural surface area with a thick glob or tinted galkyd or liquin. This

creates a candy-coated sheen atop a rough, chaotic core.



Fig. 10. Timothy Smith, *Signs of Life*, 2012, Oil on polyester on bowed wood, 34" x 60".

It is very important that my painting feels real, emotionally. Capturing and preserving a feeling is a key element in what I do. For “7<sup>th</sup> and Main”, I stayed on location with a sketchbook for several hours, encountering beggars, drug dealers, pigeons, bicyclists, fashion students, and little dogs with stupid haircuts. Direct experience with my subject matter is necessary to keep the energy of the piece. Even though I did not actually paint everything and everyone that I encountered; the feeling is there, hidden in the subtle variations of each brush stroke.

## **CONCLUSION**

At surface value, my paintings are quirky, socio-political parodies dramatizing the nature of civilization, reality and consciousness. Stylistically, there is a playground of symbols scattered atop bright, kaleidoscopic backdrops. Classically orchestrated figures act out modern day dramas in the chaos of a downtown metropolis. There is an exploration of absurdity in modern civilization, with a focus on interstices, anonymity, technology (specifically: digital communication), and the nature of logic itself.

I have experienced something that is undefinable, unable to be documented, and very rarely observed. I believe that everyone experiences this at some point in their life; but, because there is no way to talk about it, or even analyze it in the current cognitive structure, it is forgotten. I am proposing that the right combination of images could be a catalyst for releasing this intuitive energy, and spread like a virus around the planet. I am taking on the role of a modern day shaman. My goal is to change the structure of consciousness as we know it.

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**APPENDIX:**



Plate 1: Timothy Smith, *7<sup>th</sup> and Main*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 9' x 5'.



Plate 2: Timothy Smith, *Untitled (For Now)*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 4' x 5'.



Plate 3: Timothy Smith, *Contract*, 2012, Oil on polyester on wood, 38" x 48".



Plate 4: Timothy Smith, Switch, 2012, Oil on canvas, 5' x 4'.



Plate 5: Timothy Smith, *Signs of Life*, 2012, Oil on polyester on wood, 34" x 60".



Plate 6: Timothy Smith, Fortune Teller, 2012, Oil on canvas, 3' x 4'.



Plate 7: Timothy Smith, *Titled*, 2012, Oil on polyester on wood, 7' x 5'.



Plate 8: Timothy Smith, *The Birth of Civilization*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 4' x 5'.



Plate 9: Timothy Smith, *No Reception*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 3' x 4'.

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