

THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF FEAR

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ABSTRACT

All living things communicate, but humans have the most complex systems for doing so with approximately 3000–6000 spoken languages. Our need for language is constant. Without it, we cease to be part of a community, a culture, a group. Our cohesiveness as a group is solidified through communication that extends beyond auditory language to include a variety of visual languages. As an artist I create illusions that are one type of visual language.

My current body of work is a series of paintings that juxtapose living and dead flesh, human and animal life, beauty and grotesqueness in an attempt to capture the emotional landscape of our fears. Such fears are experienced in the creeping psychological darkness that surrounds our sleeping and sometimes waking nightmares; it is these fears that I attempt to manifest in a visual language.

I strive to create both an accurate portrayal of the figure and an emotional connection with the human psyche by pulling the viewer into dark, looming psychological states of tension, mystery, death, alienation, and horror. I focus on fears of death, dehumanization, loss of control, vulnerability, darkness, and the unknown in an attempt to convey the associations between them and to place these anxieties within a context to confront them.

I am inspired by many artists who have come before me, and I seek to carve out my voice among them. I endeavor to do this through the use of sound principles and techniques. I want viewers to experience my paintings—enter into the narratives and emerge feeling exposed to their own fears and energized to confront them. My thesis is the construction of these ideas, images, and possibilities.

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DEDICATION

To my wife and children, for giving me the courage to pursue unthinkable dreams; my parents, for believing in me and encouraging me to believe in myself; and my grandmother, for putting a paintbrush in my hand and telling me I can do anything.

EPIGRAPH

Fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.

—*Bertrand Russell*
British logician and philosopher (1872–1970)

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DESCRIPTION

Fear. By simple definition it is an unpleasant emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. Some fears are deeply rooted and complicated while others are simple and straightforward. Fears can be anything. Our experiences, subconscious desires, and memories seem to be some of the causes of fear, and each of us clings to a different combination of fears built up by those. And yet many of us share common fears as well: fear of loss, vulnerability, death, fear of being overlooked or underappreciated.

In a moment—a singular experience—fear can freeze us. Extended beyond that moment it can halt our progression and stop us from reaching our full potential. At those times, fear has the power to destroy, with the victims being relationships, ideals, dreams. Yet at other times, fear can propel us forward, motivating and pushing us beyond what we thought capable. At those times, fear gives us the power to create.

Whether we allow fear to be a destroyer or a creator in our lives is determined by the choices we make. And perhaps *how* we work through our fears affects how we let it play out in our lives. Sometimes through our fears we create illusions—hallucinations that challenge our rational thought. Fear, then, becomes a visual language—a dialogue we hold within ourselves.

My thesis work is an attempt to capture the visual language of fear on canvas. It consists of thirteen pieces, including seven portraits, two triptychs, two figure paintings, one landscape, and one still life.

Evolution

I started the MFA program with an empty palette, meaning I had no idea what my thesis would be. I did, however, have preconceived notions of what kind of work I would be

doing. These ideas were that I would create beautiful, technically sound paintings of the figure and that I would end up with a consistent body of work. I was excited about the latter, mainly because my work up to that point was thematically and stylistically varied and I didn't have much that I was overly proud of. I felt that putting together a show that was consistent in both those areas would set me up for success in the gallery market, with my aspiration being that I would be able to support my family by creating and selling these works.

Over the course of the first year, I discovered that painting "pretty pictures" wasn't the same as painting meaningful pieces that created a dialogue (see Methodology). I went through several different ideas, with each idea leading to the next, until I finally realized that what I was trying to discuss was fear.

Catalyst

I began working on a piece that represented several dreams I had about destruction, in keeping with one of my first thesis ideas about dreams (see figure 1). When conceiving the piece, I wanted to include a figure, a landscape, and a still life to show each of the major genres of representational work. One of the artists I have studied in-depth over the last few semesters is Vincent Desiderio. His work includes many triptychs and diptychs. Through these multi-image formats, he is able to bring unification in unexpected ways to help create humanistic stories. I decided to incorporate that same formatting into my own work by creating a triptych, which would allow me to explore various aspects of destruction and its affects while including each of the desired genres.

I started with a figure screaming and enraged. Isolating the figure was important to create the sense that one feels when experiencing loss. I covered the eyes in order to make

the figure anonymous. I intentionally did not paint the feet to represent how tragic events make us feel unstable, easily able to fall. The figure is screaming and flexing to show that despite having a voice and power, we cannot always stop what is unavoidable.

The second image that I worked on was the destruction of a town. Here the buildings are torn to bits, thrown around, and discarded, representing man's inability to harness nature. It also speaks to the sudden devastation that can happen at any time. The third image of a small baby doll amidst the rubble brought a feeling of what one could lose and a solemn darkness that I felt the piece needed overall. This piece was the catalyst for all my subsequent pieces about fear.



Figure 1. *Destruction*, 2011, Mixed media on duralar, 24" x 48"

Transition

After completing the *Destruction* piece I recognized that the ideas I wanted to follow, the ones that were most interesting and intriguing to me, were nightmares. I could remember them to a higher degree of clarity than my other dreams. And hadn't that piece really originated from nightmares and fears?

When I was a child, my nightmares were about things I didn't understand—monsters, aliens, pain. I would watch a scary movie or listen to a story and envision a variety of fearful things. As an adult my nightmares have become less about monsters and more about losing control, making life-altering mistakes, being torn from loved ones. They are about taking away my choices. Ultimately, I believe nightmares are a visual representation of our mind working through fears. The power our fears can have over us is overwhelming. In the past I have let some of my fears overtake me and stop me from making choices. Fear cripples people: fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of death, loss, not being seen for who you are, to name a few. As I considered the evolution of my ideas, the theme of fear became obvious.

When thinking about what to paint next, I was introduced to Justin Mortimer's work by a fellow student. Several of Mortimer's paintings, specifically *Hill* and *Community Project*, made me think of the Holocaust (see figures 2 and 3). As I considered that awful time in human history, I thought about the dehumanization of Hitler's victims—how he stripped them of their identity and possessions and assigned them numbers and matching rags to wear. They were herded into train cars, driven to inhospitable locations, and forced to walk, work, sleep, and live in inhumane conditions. Then they were murdered and thrown into pits. Surely such dehumanization and cruelty encompass some of the worst nightmares—and greatest fears—in the history of the world.

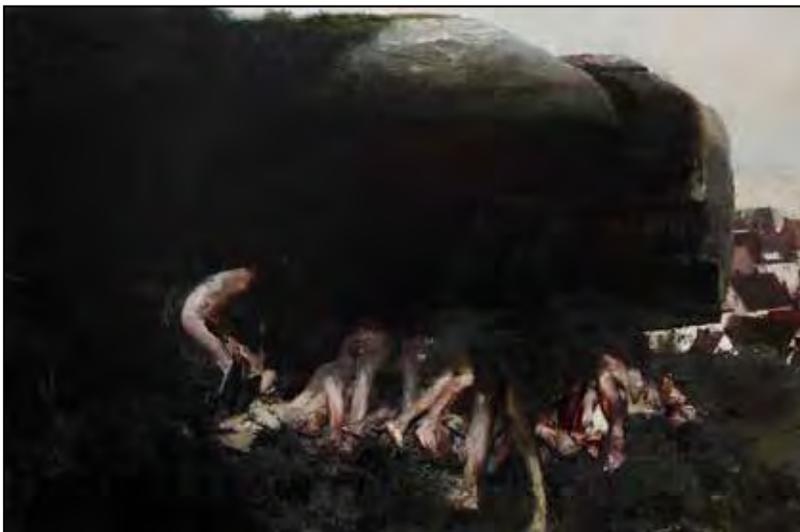


Figure 2. Justin Mortimer, *Hill*, 2009, Oil on panel, 61 x 81 cm

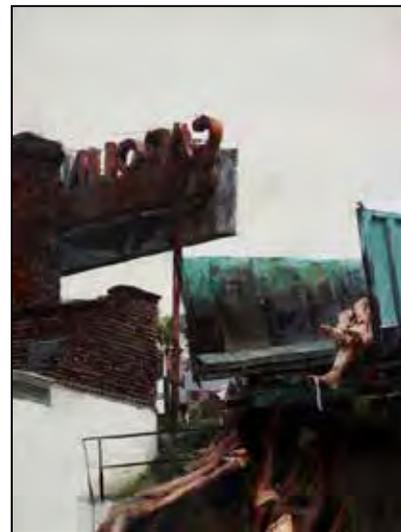


Figure 3. Justin Mortimer, *Community Project*, 2009, Oil on panel, 80 x 60 cm

Raw Fear

I had no desire to paint the emotional and physical nightmares of the Holocaust, but I also couldn't let go of the images of people being treated less than human, like raw meat. At the same time, I knew that I wanted to paint something different. Prior to starting the program and during the first few semesters at LCAD, I was working on so many paintings of nude figures that I'd grown tired of them. I wanted to paint something that had the feel, color, and technical aspects of a figure but that was not another nude. Raw meat as a representation of humanity seemed the right choice. It had similar coloring, after all, it was made up of the same matter that we are. But in some ways it could be considered more visceral and grotesque than a figure.

So I began working on *Rabbit I* (see figure 4). What intrigued me the most about meat was that people find it disgusting, and yet they eat it. Most people buy their meat from a store. They pick up a package and all the dirty work is done for them. They have limited connection to the animal that they are going to eat—the animal that gives them life. I am neither a vegetarian nor a vegan, and my aim is not to discuss for or against. But I wonder

how many people in our modern society of convenience would still eat meat if they had to do what it takes to get it from the farm (or wild) to the plate.

I discovered that there are some connections and some disconnections to this consuming of flesh and what it means to be flesh. I felt it fit into the realm of fears because as a society we tend to dissociate from things that are too hard or too messy to deal with. We want the meat but we don't want to be a part of killing it. We want to consume but don't want to deal with the repercussions of our consumption.

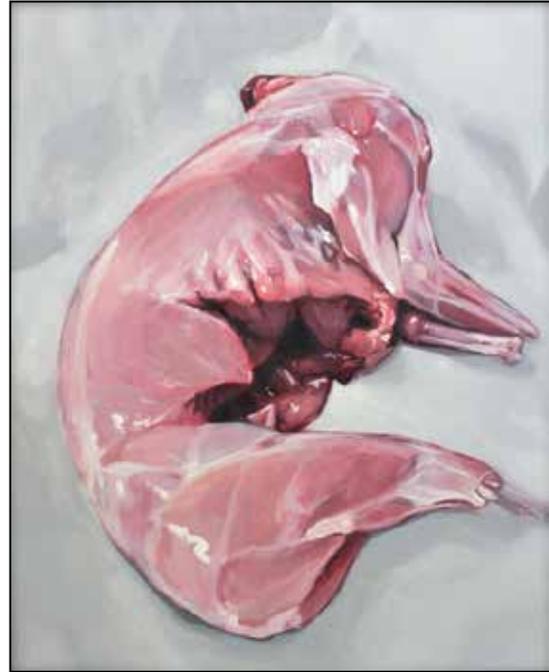


Figure 4. *Rabbit I*, 2012, Oil on board, 28" x 22"

My next piece, titled *Raw*, was born out of a desire to further my exploration with meat (see figure 5). I had started painting the rabbit, and while waiting for the first layers to dry I began this second painting of lamb shanks. I enjoyed painting something that had a close relation to the human figure without needing such extensive knowledge to make a believable image. What I have come to understand is that people can tell when an image of a human figure is incorrect, even if they can't tell you exactly what is wrong. This creates a huge amount of pressure to perform to a high standard. Additionally, human figures often portray emotion, which can be difficult to get exactly right. With raw meat, all pressure is off, enabling me to focus more on form, color, and lighting. I explored the use of new textures and mediums as well, and enjoyed the process of painting these pieces.

These paintings can fit into the realm of fear in several different ways, dependent entirely on the viewer's perspective. The animals are stripped down and exposed so



Figure 5. *Raw*, 2012, Oil on board, 42" x 28"

completely. Often our fears expose us in ways that we're uncomfortable with, in ways that make us feel raw and inhuman. From another angle, we fear what is gruesome, grotesque, and dark, and yet we surround ourselves with it in television shows, film, and the news. We're exploring our fears or maybe even letting them play out in what we view; artwork can offer a similar type of experience.

I don't want to attempt to list all that viewers could see in my work; ultimately I hope each piece would become a catalyst for discussion.

And as I worked on these two paintings, I liked the different directions such discussions could go.

Exploration

Since I finally had my focus, I dove into research about fear. Part of that research included watching horror films. In the documentary *Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, well-known filmmaker John Carpenter stated, "Fear is probably the most powerful emotion we all feel as humans. We all are afraid of death and loss of a loved one, loss of identity. All the things you see in a movie, we are all afraid of." Each of my next pieces was influenced by my research into horror films (see Research) and focus more wholly on such universal fears.

Sacrificial

The lamb head piece, titled *Sacrificial*, was generated from a model pose in my mythology narrative and symbolism class with Scott Hess (see figure 6). The original pose actually consisted of two models, but as I moved through my sketching and painting process, I chose to focus more on one model. Then as the piece evolved I decided the original pose wasn't working the way that I wanted it to, so I used a photo from an old shoot I'd done during my undergraduate studies and imposed it over the bottom half of the painting.

I began this painting while simultaneously working on *Rabbit I*, and I knew that I wanted another relation to that work. This meant I needed an animal in the picture. Perhaps one of the most universal symbols for innocence and sacrifice is the lamb. In the *Bible*, Christ is often referred to as the Lamb, or Lamb of God, because of his purity and his ultimate sacrifice for humanity. This comparison seemed fitting for a discussion about women.

Around this same time, I discovered Nicolas Uribe's work through his website. In several of his pieces he replaces a woman's head with an object or animal, and instantly I knew how the lamb could be incorporated into my piece.

Women sacrifice a great many things, but one of the first sacrifices that mark their journey into womanhood is of their body. There is a great deal of fear surrounding sexuality, morality, and loss of innocence within our society. When becoming

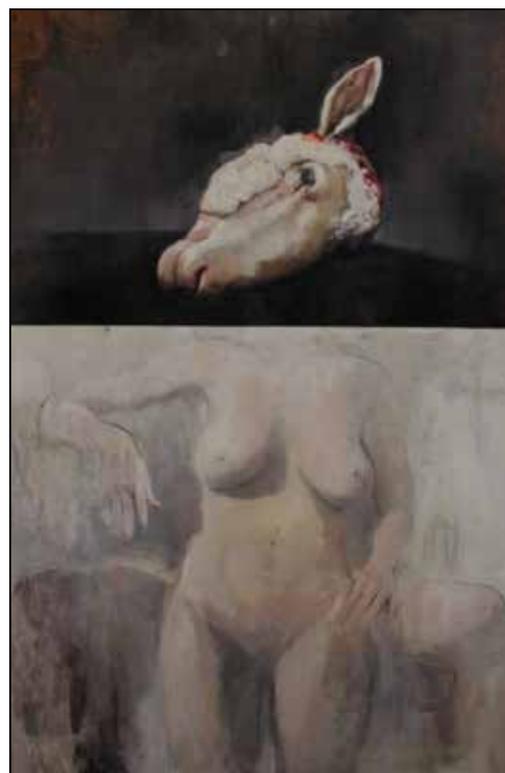


Figure 6. *Sacrificial*, 2012, Oil on board, 42'' x 28''

sexually active, women sacrifice their virginity and innocence, and ultimately the way society views them from that point on. The decision of when to give up childhood and enter the responsibilities of adulthood creates a lot of fear, and I believe is something young women think about quite often, perhaps at too early an age even. Additionally, contradictions arise for women regarding what makes them beautiful and desirable: being sexual and sensual or chaste and innocent—and women feel they have to sacrifice one or the other but can't have both. I wanted this piece to visualize a combination of fear, sacrifice, and sexuality in women.

Judith & Holofernes

I remember the first time I saw Gustav Klimt's *Judith I* because it was one of the most inspirational images I have ever come across (see figure 7). I discovered it during my



Figure 7. Gustav Klimt, 1862–1918, *Judith I*, 1901, Oil and gold plating on canvas, 84 x 42 cm, Belvedere, Vienna

undergraduate studies as I perused one of my professor's books. I was drawn to its simplicity and beautiful use of color. It used two worlds—modern and academic—to depict the sexual and violent moment of a woman gone rogue. Here was the ultimate femme fatale.

So when Scott Hess assigned a project about mythology, which he classified as including any type of scriptural narrative, I thought of painting the Judith and Holofernes story with a few twists. Around that time I had begun watching *Breaking Bad*, a television series that portrays an ordinary man making choices that lead him down morally corrupt paths. Ultimately his choices are led by fear,

and I saw through his narrative that the subject of Judith—a woman who seduces and kills a man to save her people— would speak to violence provoked by fear.

I wanted to include historical references in my work, so I reviewed all the well-known paintings of Judith and Holofernes. The two that stood out to me the most were

Klimt's and Caravaggio's (see figures 7 and 8). I chose to incorporate Klimt's commanding figure pose and Caravaggio's lighting into my piece (see figure 9). There is a lot of symbolism incorporated in this story, which is perhaps why so many artists



Figure 8. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1571–1610, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1598, Oil on canvas, 57" x 76", Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome

have chosen to paint it. One of the most interesting interpretations, not surprisingly, is Freud's, which says that the decapitation

of Holofernes is a symbol of his castration for taking Judith's virginity.

My aim with this painting was to create the feeling of shock and fear that comes when the viewer is confronted with a horrific event. I portrayed Judith as a nude figure to symbolize her vulnerable state. I placed her in the middle of a curving road so that there is no way to avoid her: the viewer comes upon her quickly, without warning. She cradles Holofernes' decapitated head in a tender and romantically proud display of pleasure. Both Judith's and Holofernes' heads are shrouded in darkness to create added tension and mystery.

I wanted the viewer to find additional meaning upon closer inspection of the painting. To do this I included a tattoo of Medusa on Judith's chest. Medusa was said to be a beautiful but prideful woman. She was arrogant enough to claim herself more beautiful than the

goddess Athena. Athena was so outraged that she transformed Medusa into a gorgon—a hideous creature that turns onlookers to stone. This addition to the painting was intended to raise several considerations: one, whether or not the viewer should even be looking at Judith in her vulnerable state; and two, that by killing another person, Judith has perhaps become dangerous and hideous like Medusa. Her beauty is then questioned by her actions.

I intended Judith to have a look of contempt and strength with sexually charged undertones. Her figure is planted firmly in the road, obstructing the viewer's path to travel forward. The sense of being blocked is also heightened by the rocks to her right and the dark woods to her left. The state of vulnerability then transfers from the woman to the viewer, creating a realization that danger may exist for us in the way that it had for Holofernes.



Figure 9. *Judith and Holofernes*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

This was a difficult painting for me to create; I struggled with it for nearly two semesters. However, I learned an incredible amount about painting techniques and what is needed in creating space or environment. Working on such a large canvas was daunting, and I felt a sense of fear each day I approached the work, as if at any moment I might botch the whole endeavor. But I believe overall it was successful because of the tension that I was able to create and because I took several great ideas from others' and mashed them together. I would, however, love to revisit the whole idea again at another time.

Campground 1

One of the most frightening places for me as a child was the woods at night. I would often go camping as a young Scout, and during those outings I would wake up in the middle of the night and have to use the restroom. I was terrified to get out of the tent and stumble through the darkness. I was scared of what *could* be out there, even if I didn't know what that was. My terror of the woods derived from a fear of the unseen. In *Campground 1*, I attempt to bring this terror to the viewer (see figure 10).

I wanted to include a figure that was inspired by some of Justin Mortimer's images. He keeps a vague narrative and a limited palette (see figures 2 and 3). His images are



disturbing, showing human body parts strewn across the ground. I wanted to set the same tone, but where his images tend to show the aftermath of something horrible, I chose to show the

Figure 10. *Campground 1*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 48" x 72"

moments leading up to what might be. I attempted to build a sense of suspense not by telling the story but rather by inferring what might happen, which allows viewers to place their own fears into the piece.

Cellophane 1–7

In reviewing my body of work thus far, I felt it needed something intimate, something small but loud. As humans we relate to one another by talking, and we best understand each other when talking face to face. So I painted several portraits that included fellow artists and friends, a model, and a child (see figure 11).

We often distinguish each other based on our facial features. However, in these small portraits viewers will have a hard time distinguishing key features of each portrait. I used the small, square format to keep an intimate feel. And yet each of the faces are covered from view and placed against a dark background to make seeing them difficult. You have to really look at them to figure out who they are.

One of the strongest and perhaps most motivating fears is that of not being meaningful. We fear that our lives will not have held meaning or purpose, that when we are gone we will have left no mark and will easily be forgotten. This fear motivates



Figure 11. *Cellophane 5*, 2012, Oil on board, 10” x 10”

people to work hard, to enact change in a world that is fast-paced and forgetful, to do something to *make* themselves be remembered. I added blood over the faces for two reasons: first, to make these pieces memorable. Second, as a reflection of another type of fear.

I painted these pieces as I researched horror films, and they were heavily influenced by John Carpenter's explanation of the types of horror film:

Essentially there are two kinds of horror movies. One is, it's all about where evil is, the location of it. So we can imagine ourselves around the campfire and the wise man, or whoever, is talking to us about the location of evil, he says, "Evil is out there in the dark. It's beyond the woods. It's the other tribe. It's the people that don't look like us, that don't speak like us." And that's the external evil. That's the other. People that aren't like us.

But the other location of evil, same setting, the campfire, shaman (wiseman) says, "Actually, the evil is right in here. It's in our own human hearts." *That* particular story is a harder one to tell. It's easier to talk about the other. It's harder to say "I have met the enemy and he is us. We are the enemy." (*Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue*)

So the blood also becomes a way of reflecting the evil we don't want to look at, the evil we fear within us.

In smaller realms, in the day-to-day living, we fear that people will not see us for who we are or that we'll be judged by how we look. I know that I have judged others for the way they look or the clothing that they wear and made preconceived notions about them. It is an unfair thing to do, and yet it is a natural thing that we all do, often without even realizing it. We don't want to be judged ourselves, and yet we are constantly assessing the people around us and reacting based off what we see. These portraits aim to express those fears of not being seen for who we are—of not being seen or heard at all.

Quietus

This work evolved over the course of two semesters and only came to fruition towards the end of my last semester. I had finished painting *Rabbit I* (see figure 12). And despite struggling over how to make it sit on the paper, I loved the piece. But I wanted it to say more than it was telling people. As I discussed this with John Brosio and Randall Cabe (my mentor and advisor, respectively) in a critique, John mentioned that it can be helpful to create the complete show in your head and then draw it out on a piece of paper. This exercise helped me consider how each piece would look when hanging with the others and what relationships the pieces would have. Through it I was able to see that the rabbit, while great on its own, was missing some kind of relationship to my other work.

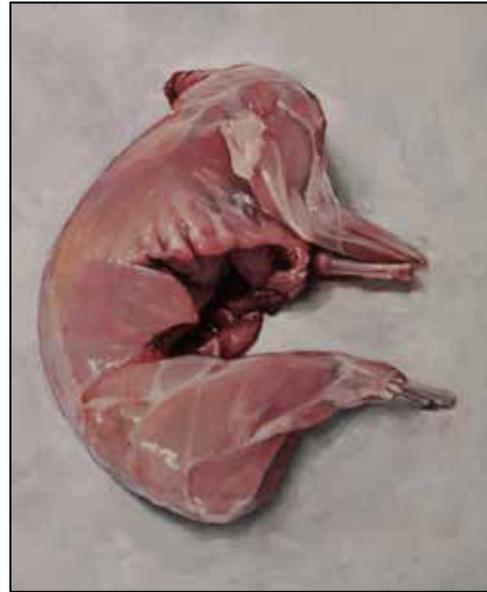


Figure 12. *Quietus (detail 3)*, 2012, Oil on board, 28" x 22"

After pondering this missing connection for weeks, I realized that the topics I was attempting to discuss here were morality, death, and life. I just had not gone far enough with the process. So I took what I had learned with the *Destruction* piece and decided to make another triptych.

I first added a second rabbit in order to create balance in the composition (see figure 13). I also recognized that the work was lacking in its ability to relate back to the viewer. That meant the centerpiece needed to include a human. And since the rabbits were shown in their raw forms, I wanted the human to connect to the animal flesh by being in a raw form as

well. I began researching art history because I remembered that Leonardo da Vinci kept



Figure 14. *Quietus (detail 1)*, 2012, Oil on board, 28” x 22”

medical art records. Through that route I stumbled upon a medical artist who had etched an image of a pregnant woman who died (see figure 14). I had been searching for an image that could represent both life and death, so as soon as I saw the etching I knew it was the necessary centerpiece for this triptych.

The combination of these three pieces was meant to discuss both death and life (see figure 15).

From my research into horror film, I watched an interview with several well-known filmmakers.

Regarding such films, Joe Dante said, “The appeal of horror movies has always been about confronting death, and, in their various ways, these movies help us cope with that. And that’s one of the reasons it’s been such a long-lived genre, even from literary times” (*Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue*). I aimed to create a piece that, like horror films, would force us to confront our fear of death: fear of leaving others behind, fear of what comes after, fear of *how* death will come. And even fear of others leaving us behind.

But this piece also represents life. The rabbit has died in order to sustain human life. This mother was sacrificing her body in order to grow life. Her body has become a vessel of life just as the rabbit’s body is a vessel for life, merely in different ways. When the viewer looks



Figure 13. Jan van Riemsdyk, 1750–1788, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, 1774, Copperplate engraving, National Library of Medicine, Maryland

at the human form, there is an instant understanding that this is a woman and a mother, and yet we have no identity to form any opinions about her. This brings out questions: Will someone remember her? Mourn her? Whom has she left behind? What value does her life have now?



Figure 15. *Quietus*, 2012, Oil on board, 28" x 74"

I had already planned for *Quietus* to be the final piece for my show, and I believe that it successfully rounded out my exploration of fear. Through this exploration I recognized the need for individuals to confront their fears in order to overcome them, and my work attempts to aid in that process. I found, also, that I was able to confront and overcome some of my deepest fears, and I have emerged a better artist because of it.

RESEARCH

Art

I spend countless hours studying art in books and magazines and online. I enjoy figuring out how someone created a color or painted a shadow that falls just perfectly and contemplating what a piece is conveying and how it fits into the larger conversation of art history. As a result, many artists have heavily influenced my work. But the following artists have had the biggest influence on my thesis show.

Vincent Desiderio

I was introduced to Vincent Desiderio's work when one of my advisors, Perin Mahler, loaned me the book *Vincent Desiderio: Paintings, 1975-2005*. I was amazed by Desiderio's ability to convey a story that is as confusing as it is dramatic. His work speaks about real life—about struggles and hardship—in a way that I had never seen before. His entire body of work, but *I Liberati* in particular, helped reiterate that my paintings could be about much more (see figure 16). This piece inspired me to hold deeper conversations within and between my paintings, which is especially apparent in *Quietus* and *Judith and Holofernes*.



Figure 16. Vincent Desiderio, *I Liberati*, 2011, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 66" x 88 1/2"

Desiderio's work also points out the frailty in the human condition. And, through his formatting in triptychs and diptychs, he brings unification in unexpected ways that help create incredibly humanistic stories (see figure 17). My formatting of *Destruction* and *Quietus* was directly influenced by his multi-image pieces.

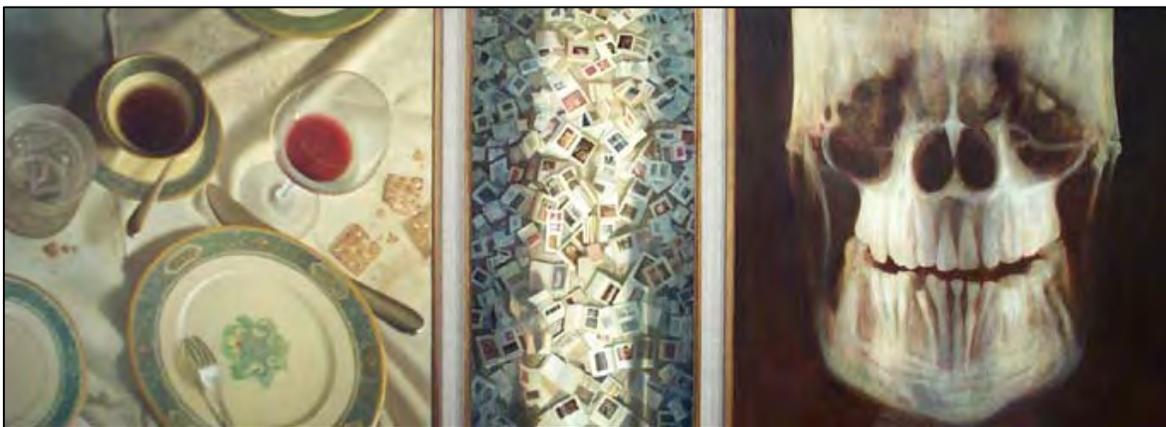


Figure 17. Vincent Desiderio, *Isthmus*, 2000, Oil on linen, 48" x 124"

Many art critics have declared that art is dead, which can make it discouraging to pursue as a profession. Yet Desiderio defends painting and explains how it still fits into a modern, contemporary world. When asked by art historian Dede Young if painting still possesses the same degree of effectiveness that it once had in reaching its audience, Desiderio responds:

Painting is uniquely effective for the questions I pose for myself. It allows me to activate parts of my imagination that are less accessible to other expressive strategies. It's a kind of theoretical blackboard. Anyway, it is not painting per se that is in question; rather, it is our myopia to the possibilities of painting.

(Marlborough 3)

This gives me hope and helps me feel that there are other artists who are actively working to show the world that art is alive and necessary. It also inspires me to incorporate my history, knowledge, and individuality as I create because what I have to say is just as important, individualistic, and meaningful as all other voices.

Nicolás Uribe

I discovered Nicolás Uribe's work as I was perusing other artists online. I admire his ability to incorporate art history within his work and make it new. In particular, his pieces *Dissección* and *Infanta* heavily influenced my work on *Sacrificial* (see figures 18 and 19). I borrowed some of the conventions that he uses, such as limiting the color palette and removing the identity of the subject by blocking the head from view. In *Dissección*, he painted over Picasso's *Guernica*, adding realistic figures and a more technical approach to portray the deadly scene. I realized that I also could take from an old idea and interpret in a new way.



Figure 18. Nicolás Uribe, *Disección*, 2008, Mixed media, 70 x 155 cm

He did the same thing with *Infanta* by painting a nude over Velázquez's *Infanta Maria Teresa of Spain*. I like how he pays homage to the old masters and ties himself to their knowledge and work while simultaneously creating his own voice in a new language.



Figure 19. Nicolás Uribe, *Infanta*, 2008, Mixed media, 90 x 70 cm

Neo Rauch

Perin Mahler loaned me two books about Neo Rauch during my second semester when I started talking about changing my thesis direction. At first glance the images were so strange and nonsensical that I was not sure what to think about them (see figure 20). I didn't particularly like his color choice; it seemed a bit too chalky, which removed it from reality. It all seemed cold and isolated. His technical ability was evident but at times completely ignored what is plausible. In many of his paintings the scale of subjects was strange, and the compositions seemed as if everything was placed to make the viewer feel uncomfortable. As I contemplated all the reasons I didn't like the work, I realized that Rauch was using those techniques to enhance what he was trying to say. And it made sense.



Figure 20. Neo Rauch, *Hatz*, 2002, Oil on linen, 82.68" x 98.43"

Here was an illusionist who said no to most conventions and in doing so created a surreal yet significant reality. Rauch brought me to the understanding that painting is a way of creating a new reality. The artist is in control of what is possible and no rules exist. I realized that my paintings are simultaneously a hallucination and a reality in and of themselves and that they don't have to conform to what we consider to be real. I still attempt to ground my paintings in reality, but when I understood that they are a window to their own space and realm, I stopped limiting myself and my ideas. This epiphany came as I was working on my *Destruction* piece, and affected all subsequent pieces and the way I now perceive art.

Literature

Richard Schmid

One book that has helped me in many technical aspects is *Alla Prima: Everything I know about Painting* by Richard Schmid. Schmid covers a plethora of information on just about everything. With the encouragement of my first mentor, Joseph Todorovitch, I bought and read the book cover to cover, twice. It was a good read on techniques and helped me as I created the contrast, value, and shape within each of my works. It is an excellent reference to have and will be a helpful tool when teaching.

Film

Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film

After I decided to focus on fear I started researching horror movies and a few television shows. I would watch one almost every day while I painted or sketched, and their influence was conscious as well as subconscious. Each gave me ideas about what I wanted to convey or not convey and how to accomplish that in better ways.

I learned that horror movies speak about what is happening politically, socially, even economically within the culture and time they are made. What becomes interesting is to see how much American culture has changed and become increasingly violent over the course of less than a hundred years. Through the advent of the movie camera and photography, the public has become increasingly more aware of what happens during war and even sees real violence from the battlefield through those mediums.

Because audiences have seen what war actually looks like, directors of horror films have to add more and more violence in order to shock the public. What started as somewhat romantic monster movies moved to increasingly more horrible and violent subjects. This results in a society that understands and sees horrific acts of war, murder, rape, death, mutilation, and all manner of horror that we fear and becomes desensitized by them. Just going back to the 1970s, most films by today's standard would be somewhat silly and not frightening. So as I worked on my pieces about fear, I knew I had to include some shock value to call the viewer's attention.

Morality is also a big part of what these movies are talking about. Often the only person that survives in horror films is the one who is not participating in drugs, alcohol, and sex. They also question what morality is and what role each person plays in upholding that moral code as a member of society.

Watching these movies made me ask a lot of questions: How does this shift in morality and violence affect society? Does it affect our fears? Do people have more to fear today than thirty years ago, sixty, a hundred? Has fear changed?

I don't think that fear itself has changed; it still has the ability to control and limit individuals. But I think that we have more to fear, and media intensifies those fears by

showing us more of them. Author John Kenneth Muir explained, “What’s happening in the world is reflected in our nightmares” (Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue). My thesis work then attempts to make sense of those nightmares and of the world.

I am not a big fan of horror films, but I have a deeper appreciation for them now that I understand them. I still have trouble viewing them as entertainment value. But as a means to understand those who are different from us and our own ability to be cruel, I find them capable of enlightening. One of the problems I see in the horror film genre is that the overtly shocking display of violence and sexual content that they often bring only perpetuates what is already a dysfunctional, removed, and violent society. I tried to have my paintings discuss fear and confront fear without being overtly sexual or violent.

Breaking Bad

A friend suggested that I watch *Breaking Bad* when he heard my thesis was about fear. I had not heard of the TV show but decided that it sounded interesting. Within the first episode I was completely shocked and hooked. It’s about a high school chemistry teacher who finds out he has terminal cancer and only has a few weeks to live. So he decides to cook meth in order to provide financial stability for his family after he dies.

Through this fictional story I saw that each person has the propensity to become evil and that even people who do something with good intentions can hurt others and themselves when they don’t follow ethical and moral codes. It shows what fear can compel us to do.

METHODOLOGY

Art is a visual voice that, like speaking, has fundamental structure and principles. In each, how well we use that structure determines how clearly we can communicate. Just as

one begins mastering a language by first learning basic words and sentence structure, those who want to master a visual language must first understand its basic principles.

Artistic principles include but are not limited to value, form, line, shape, design, color, and craft. I try to work directly from life so that I can be more sensitive to these principles.

Maintaining my own creativity is vitally important to me. Creativity can be cultivated by using a variety of techniques and materials. I use a diverse set of materials and challenge myself to experiment within my ideas and test the outcomes. My goal is to discover what is driving the art and to solve any problems through my techniques.

I try to maintain an open dialogue with faculty, mentors, and peers. Critiques are a valuable learning method as they reiterate what has been taught, create a vocabulary, and encourage dialogue about the work; often this dialogue has led me to discover other possibilities. This dialogue also needs to include a study of historical and contemporary art. Just as we need to be surrounded by native speakers of a language in order to fully master its nuances, artists need to be immersed in art culture in order to grasp its visual language. This immersion includes placing my own work in context with the work that has come before and what is being created now. Studying other artists and their works can also aid in problem solving. I spend many hours researching other artists to help guide me through the process of a single painting.

Initial Ideation

My ideas come when I am about to fall asleep, while I am sleeping, and when I am about to awake. The idea may be an image that I see, or it might be an entire dream that I break down and change to fit my concepts. Each work is also influenced heavily by previous pieces, since one leads into the next. Often I will take what I learned on the last work and

will come up with better ways to say what I wanted. Sometimes new ideas come while I'm in the throes of a current piece; at those times it is hard to complete the current work because I become disinterested in it and would rather start on the new idea. It takes a lot of concentration for me to stay focused on a project until it is fully complete. Sometimes I need to look at it anew and see what aspects I am missing in order to get myself interested in the piece again.

In order to explain how I arrived at my idea about fear, it is reasonable to follow the path that led me to it. This realization of my idea took the entire first year of school, which was frustrating and hard.

First Steps: Pretty Pictures

When I entered LCAD, I began with an empty palette. I was okay with this since I had been told not to come to school with a pre-determined thesis or even an idea of a thesis, but rather come ready to develop one. The reasoning was that classes and discussions would influence me and through them ideas would come and possibilities would present themselves. However, one week into classes it was if everyone had a great idea and I was outside looking in. I felt behind from the start. So I painted my assignments. One assignment was to create a painting that showed an interior view moving to an exterior view. I painted *Capistrano Mission* (see figure 21).

My next assignment was to create a piece that holds a discussion with history. I chose to contrast the early moving picture *The Arrival of a Train at the Station* through my piece



Figure 21. *Capistrano Mission*, 2010, Oil on board, 22" x 26"

Railroad 245 (see figure 22). I wanted to show that the train experience—one that through Lumière’s film might be considered only a phantom of life and a loss of fulfilling experience—could become both a representation of the vitality and vividness of life and a fulfilling experience through art. I created this panoramic to give a feeling of movement and included several vanishing points to tell a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end.



Figure 22. *Railroad 245*, 2010, Mixed media on illustration board, 12” x 60”

While I felt that each of these pieces was successful in portraying my intent, I still lacked clarity and purpose for an entire body of work.

Next Steps: Water

Then I came up with an idea about water and how life revolved around this substance. It was a theme that I thought would allow for paintings that a lot of people could like. Subsequently, I stumbled through the next few months trying to come up with interesting ideas for paintings of water and continually failing.

Toward the end of that first semester I began a large painting of my daughter (see figure 23). The idea came to me as she was lying on her back in the bathtub. As I watched her, I noticed her ability to be in her own world and in reality at the same time. She was surrounded by floating toys in an environment that seemed to defy the bounds of gravity. I was excited about the idea, and the drawing came swiftly. Then I started painting. And it was turning into the same type of painting that I always did of a perfect person in her perfect world. Of course I worked hard and it was a decent painting, but it wasn’t saying anything



Figure 23. *Floating*, unfinished, Oil on board, 48" x 32"

new. I felt frustrated and angry with myself because I could not figure out what I wanted to say, what I wanted to paint.

I repeatedly started with ideas or sketches only to realize that painting them would not be exciting for me. I went through several ideas over the next few months, but the truth was I didn't know what I wanted and it was getting old. Looking back now, I see that I was playing it safe by trying to make art for other people instead of trying to make art that I enjoyed.

Realizations: Dreams

Then, in the middle of the second semester, I attended an evening critique. During the critique a discussion arose about where ideas come from. I realized that most of my ideas come while I dream or just after I lie down to go to sleep. In those quiet, contemplative moments I have a chance to synthesize the days' events, and my mind opens to new ideas. Exploring my dreams seemed a much more personal and interesting subject for me, and I immediately began working on several ideas. The idea may be an image that I see, or it might be an entire dream that I break down and change to fit my concepts. Each work is also influenced heavily by previous pieces, since one leads into the next. Often I will take what I learned on the last work and will come up with better ways to say what I wanted.

In one dream, my wife and I were in a grave and our daughter was watching us. I was struck by the possibility that at any moment my children could be left alone in the world.

Becoming a parent has opened a whole new realm of worries, and a lot of those worries are realized in my dreams. This scene both fascinated and terrified me, and I knew it would make for an interesting painting.

That same class discussion also helped me step back to see myself in a new way. One of the reasons I chose to attend LCAD was change—I knew that this program could affect a change in me and my work. I realized that I wasn't allowing myself to change; I wasn't challenging myself intellectually. To do so, I needed to move off the comfortable road I'd been taking. As I thought about exploring my dreams, I saw that I could paint anything I wanted or imagined, even if it wasn't pretty pictures. What I mean by pretty pictures is not the execution of technique, but in the subject matter. Painting difficult subjects instead of landscapes and simple portraits requires more thought, deeper exploration. And this time during school was the perfect opportunity to do that—one I might never have again. I also realized that I needed to take myself seriously as a professional, and to do so I needed to stop playing things safe. Changing my thesis and my mindset seemed an easy decision after that.

It was hard, on the other hand, because I knew that exploring the “not-pretty” world would be incredibly challenging. But I said goodbye to the portraits and beautiful landscapes that everyone loved and admired in my work to start making work that I wasn't sure would sell at the end of two years. It felt like a big risk and an uncomfortable one. I questioned it daily. Yet it felt right, and that was freeing.

Then the work began.

Transitions: Nightmares and Fear

While that second semester helped me gain confidence and focus in the direction I was taking, I realized during the summer break that my ideas about dreams were still too

broad and were taking me in too many directions; I needed to narrow my thesis to one singular idea. I had begun working on my *Destruction* piece at that time, which came from several dreams I'd had. And I realized that the ideas that I wanted to follow, the ones that were most interesting and intriguing to me, were nightmares. I could remember them to a higher degree of clarity than my other dreams. And hadn't my pieces about death and destruction really originated from nightmares and fears? I had finally found my thesis.

Gathering Reference

Once I come up with an idea, I let it brew for several days and think about how I might convey it. Then I start making small sketches. I don't want them to become too precious, so I remind myself that I can always throw them away. This keeps me from restricting myself to playing things safe. During the sketch period, I look at other artist's work that inspires me. I make lists of objects, colors, pieces, etc. that I may want to include in the painting and additional ideas or aspects that I want to convey. This process may take several months or a few days.

With *Judith and Holofernes*, I knew I wanted to paint the scene with some modern twists. So I first began by sketching a tattoo design for Judith (see figure 24). I planned to



place the actual design on a model's chest for a photo shoot. I used the same process that a tattoo artist would, minus the final inking with a needle. First I created the drawing, then traced it onto carbon-based transfer paper. Next I put Speed Stick on the model's skin, and then I placed the transfer paper onto the designated skin area and patted it lightly. Then I

Figure 24. *Judith and Holofernes* (tattoo design), 2012, Colored pencil on duralar

removed the transfer paper, and the tattoo design was left. Then I began the photo shoot.

Once I have a solid concept and a rough composition through sketches, I then take reference photos. With Judith, I knew I wanted to use the same pose as Klimt's *Judith I*, so I took photos of the model in the same poses. I use a digital camera so that I can load the images onto my computer for later viewing. If a figure is needed, I find a model as well. I decide on a light source to work from that reflects the mood I am going for. I shoot as many photos as I can, maybe three to four hundred, so that I can have different angles and sizes. Using my MAC mini and 52" TV screen, I am able to view several photos and works of art at once. I am also able to view things at a very large size on the screen, which is incredibly helpful. If need be, I will redo a photo shoot as well before moving forward.

Assembling Compositions

Once I have reference photos, I again create sketches, this time to determine the best composition (see figure 25). To account for lens distortion in my photo references, I will cut and paste many photos together in addition to utilizing memory of past projects and my understanding of anatomy. Because I have often done enough in the assembling of the composition through sketches, this phase moves fairly quickly.

Sometimes I generate small studies that are almost finished drawings, which I use as reference later. I also create color studies and large drawings on paper or duralar in order to explore the relationships



Figure 25. *Judith and Holofernes (sketch)*, 2012, Graphite on canvas, 48" x 60"

within the piece (see figure 26). This helps in establishing tone and values early on and allows me to work out the big problems at the beginning without jumping onto a canvas too early. Sometimes new ideas come while I'm in the throes of a current piece; at those times it is hard to complete the current work because I become disinterested in it and would rather start on the new idea. It takes a lot of concentration for me to stay focused on a project until it



Figure 26. *Campground 1 (color study)*, 2012, Oil on board, 9" x 18"

is fully complete. Sometimes I need to look at it anew and see what aspects I am missing in order to get myself interested in the piece again. If I lose interest enough that I don't want to work on a piece, it generally will be discarded around this stage.

Next I build my ground or buy one. I usually use birch panels because I love painting on a resilient surface. I want my paintings to last for as long as possible, so I use materials that have stood the test of time. I use the best brushes, paint, ground, and mediums I can afford because the quality of materials directly affects the quality of the piece.

Executing Final Image

At this point I am ready to transfer my sketches to the surface. Then I begin painting lean layers first, which means I use thin, transparent washes that work up to the fat, opaque paint. I also work from large, ambiguous shapes up to more details as the piece progresses. That way if something feels out of place, I can easily change it, which saves a lot of time. Of course sometimes I have to move things around later no matter how much I might plan ahead. But ideally most big composition changes happen early on.

During these stages of building the image, I focus on value shifts. This is done by creating my dark values and my light values, with twice as many light values appearing in the piece. I paint several layers in order to establish those lightest lights and darkest darks, which gives me the range of tones I am working in. Once that range is determined, it

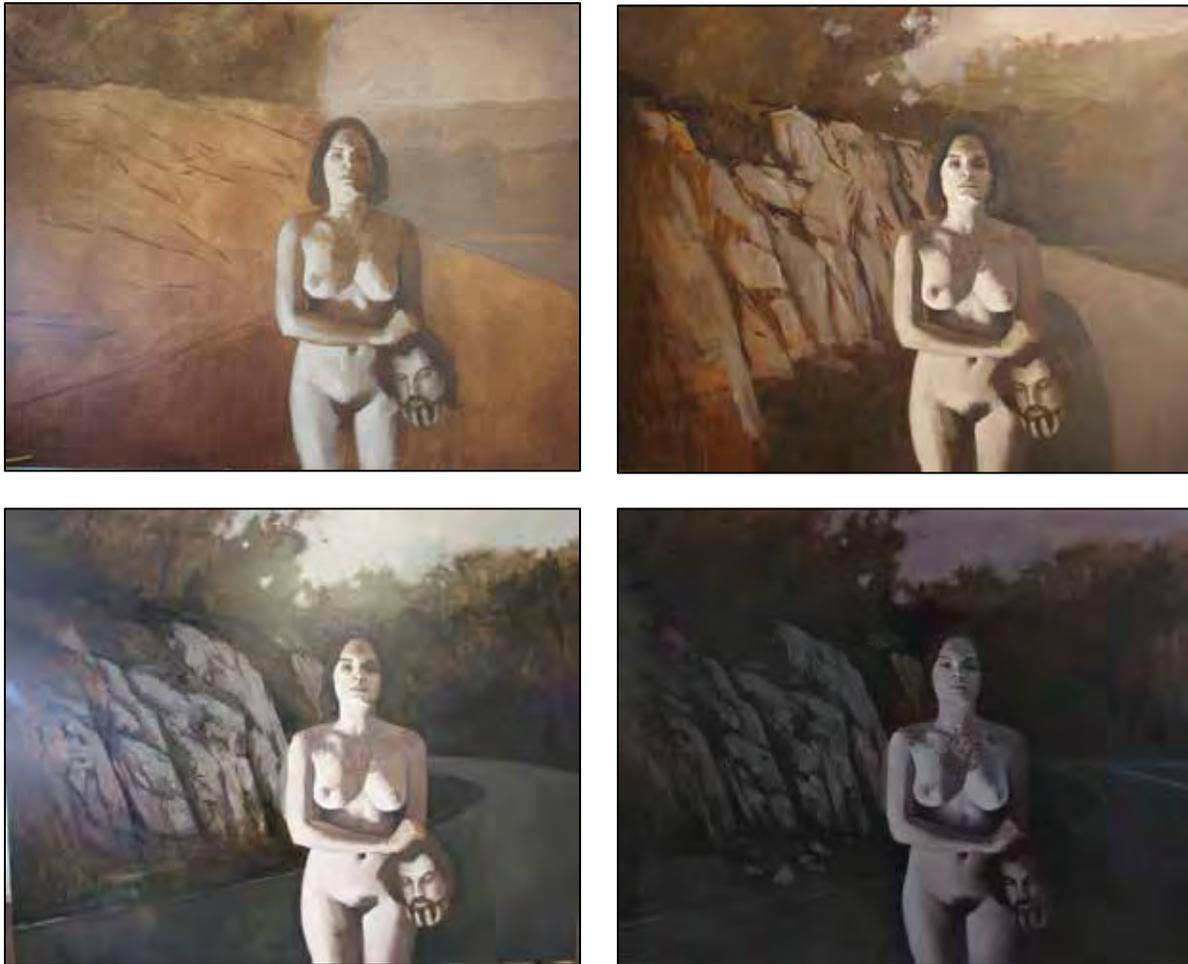


Figure 27. *Judith and Holofernes (in progress)*, 2012

becomes a matter of filling in the rest of the drawing with the appropriate value. I also plan out how I will direct the viewer's eyes to where I want them to look by using shape, line, edges, and other techniques. Figure 27 shows the process of adding layers, values, and tones and changing details in a piece.

A single work might take anywhere from one day to six months. I try to allow time for my work to breathe and change. Even if I have a clear direction, sometimes it changes because of medium, sometimes because of the size, and sometimes because better solutions present themselves. In the case of *Judith and Holofernes*, I made some last-minute additions to the piece based on a critique with John and Randall. The three of us discussed that the figure was lacking form, and we concluded that using blood would enable me to express the form better. It would also give a more dramatic and realistic feel, since beheading someone would create quite a mess. John suggested I take a look at his painting *Fatherless Bride 2* (see Appendix B) to see how he had used blood to heighten the contours of the figure. It was a real help and made the painting much better (see figure 28).



Figure 28. *Judith and Holofernes*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

On occasion I have left work sitting for over a year if I cannot see what it is missing. In those instances I set the piece aside and pull it out at random times to see if I have figured out a solution. Once the project is to my satisfaction I will complete it with a varnish of some kind after it has sufficient drying time—preferably a month if I have time to wait that long. The varnish brightens the dark and flat areas that are hard to see and also acts as a protection for the painting; it is what brings out all the hard work that has been done and makes things look finished. Then the work is ready to be framed and hung.

CONCLUSION

The process of creating an entire body of work around a centralized theme forced me to consider the voice I intend to add to the ongoing conversation of art history. When I entered the MFA program I had the intention of making pictures that were technically crafted and could be well-received. I only studied work with these qualifications, and I aspired to be like the artists who created such work. And I didn't consider my voice as necessary or even interesting enough to say something of value.

Without realizing it, I was minimizing my abilities by refusing to look deeper into myself. However, that changed over the last two years as I learned to let go of preconceived notions and allow myself to paint any subject that piqued my interest. While I still want my paintings to be technically sound, I learned that I can do so in a more thoughtful way. I realized that even if I paint a pretty landscape, figure, or portrait, I say something about my subject and myself. And since this craft *is* a language, I need to make what I'm saying worthwhile.

I was also hesitant to explore dark subject matters because I didn't want my family, my church, or society to think poorly of me. Fearing the question "What's wrong with him?"

almost deterred me from delving into the subject matter of fear. But with the encouragement of faculty and mentors I realized that confronting my fears would make me a better artist.

This process of discovery was incredibly fluid: every painting I worked on informed the next by showing what I was lacking, what I needed to leave out, and how I might convey the message in a clearer or more interesting way; thus each painting was only realized because of what came before it. Additionally, each painting helped me discover the value and power of my voice. I realized that what I wanted to say wasn't about choosing a morality to flaunt; rather, it was about providing an experience that would allow the viewer to confront fears, ask questions, and discover answers. In the end, the body of work I created *is* disturbing, which means I accomplished my goal in visualizing fear. In so doing, I overcame many of my fears as an artist and gave myself permission to join the ongoing conversation between my predecessors and contemporaries.

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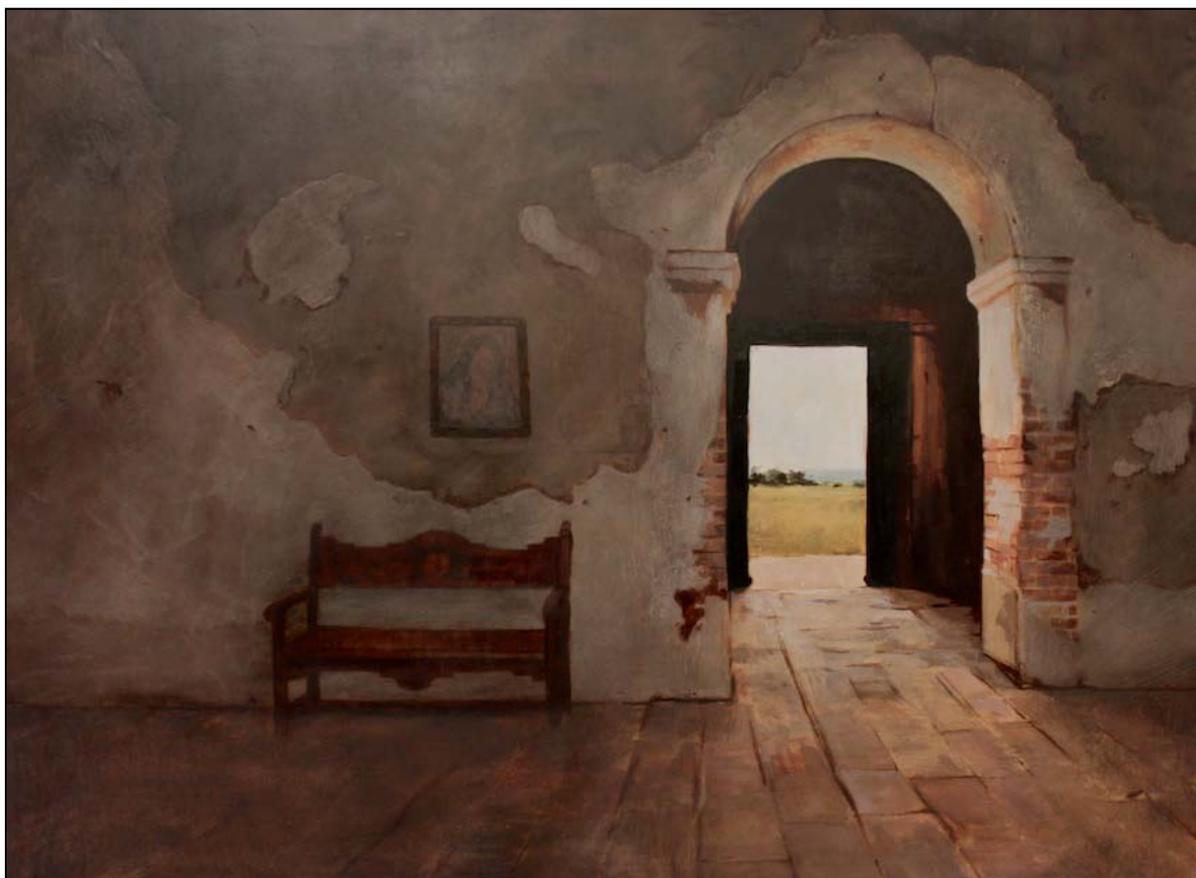
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APPENDIX A



Capistrano Mission, 2010, Oil on board, 22" x 26"



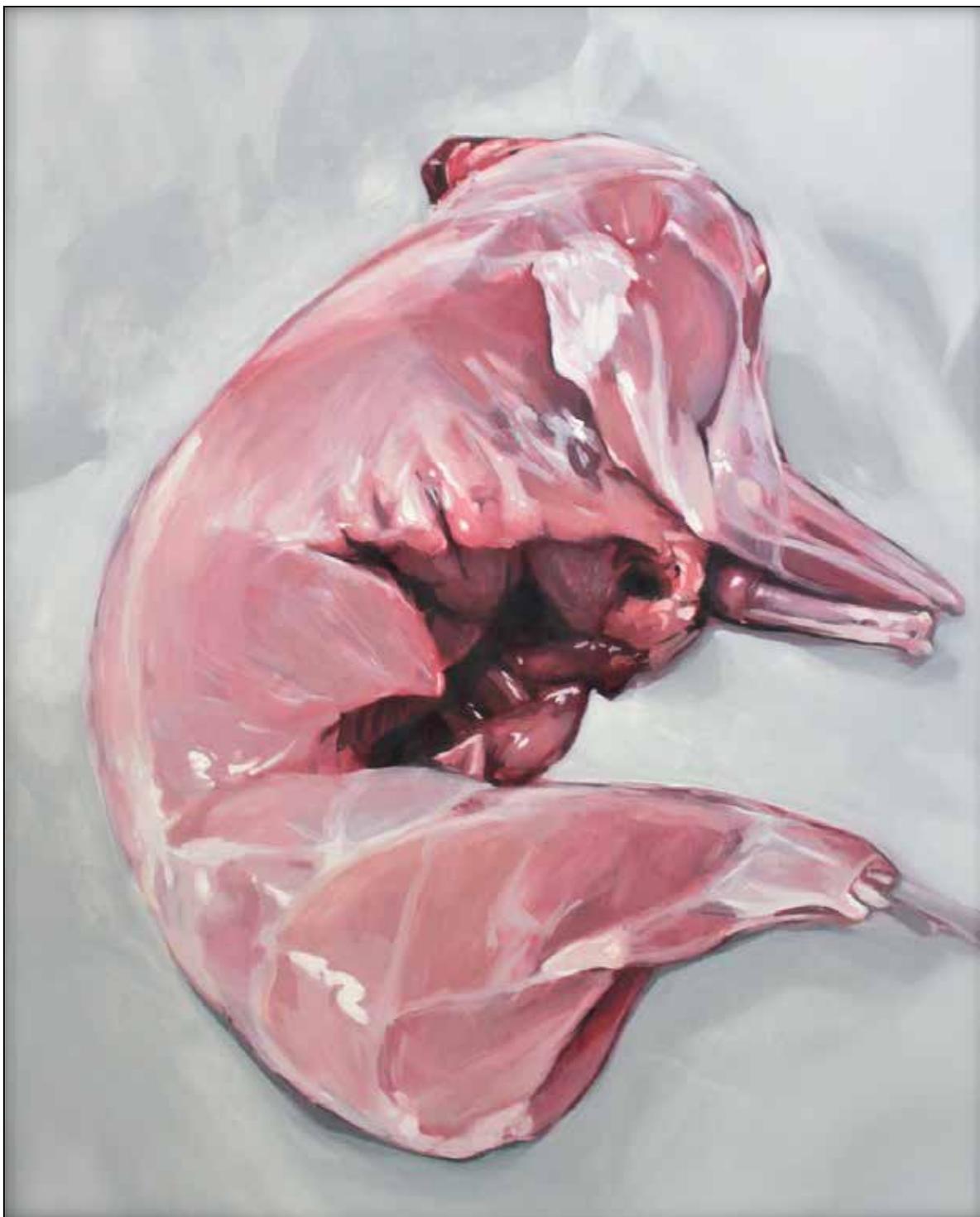
Railroad 245, 2010, Mixed media on illustration board, 12" x 60"



Floating, unfinished, Oil on board, 48" x 32"



Destruction, 2011, Mixed media on duralar, 24" x 48"



Rabbit I, 2012, Oil on board, 28" x 22"



Raw, 2012, Oil on board, 42" x 28"



Sacrificial, 2012, Oil on board, 42" x 28"



Judith and Holofernes (tattoo design), 2012, Colored pencil on duralar



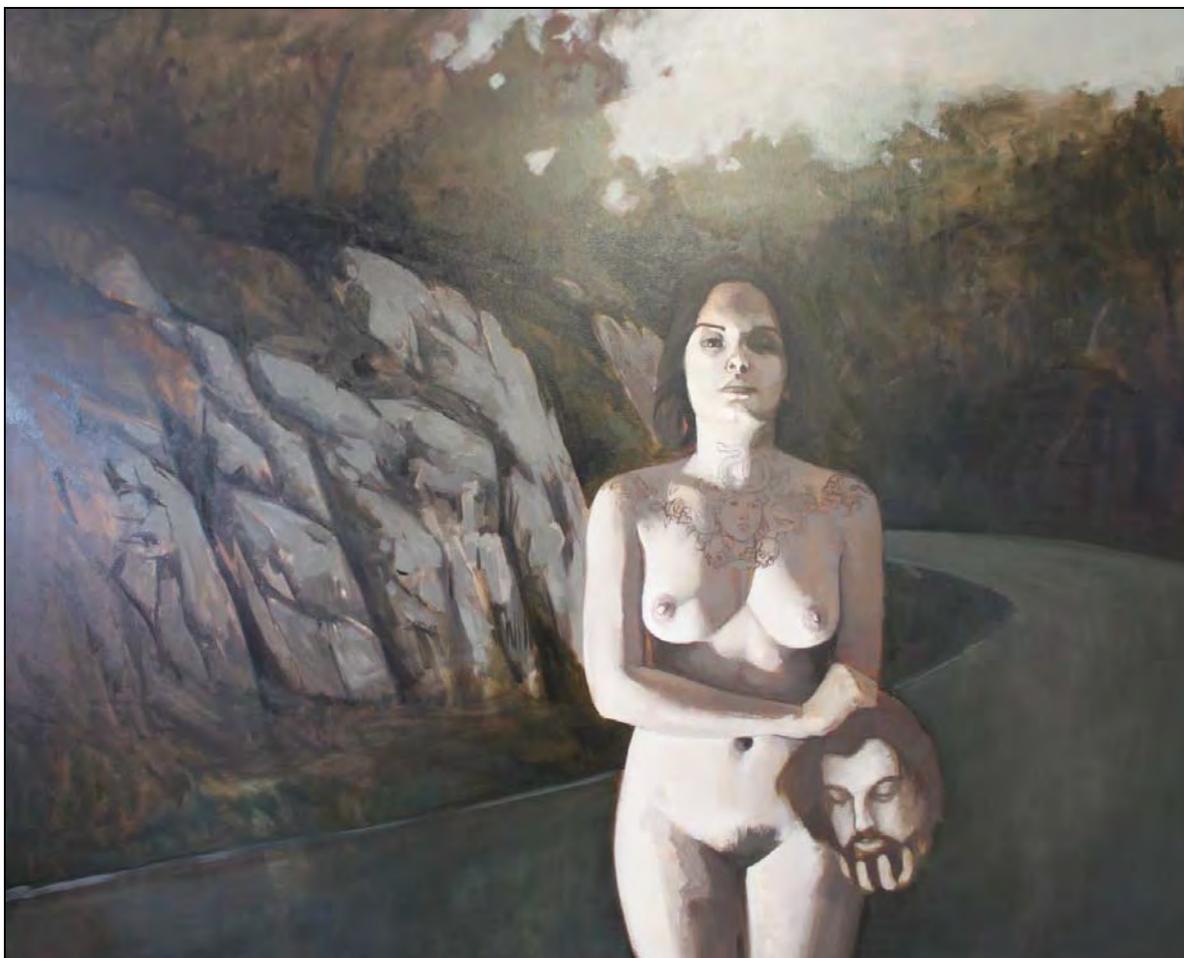
Judith and Holofernes (sketch), 2012, Graphite on canvas, 48" x 60"



Judith and Holofernes (in progress), 2012



Judith and Holofernes (in progress), 2012



Judith and Holofernes (in progress), 2012



Judith and Holofernes (in progress), 2012



Judith and Holofernes, 2012, Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"



Judith and Holofernes (detail 1), 2012, Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"



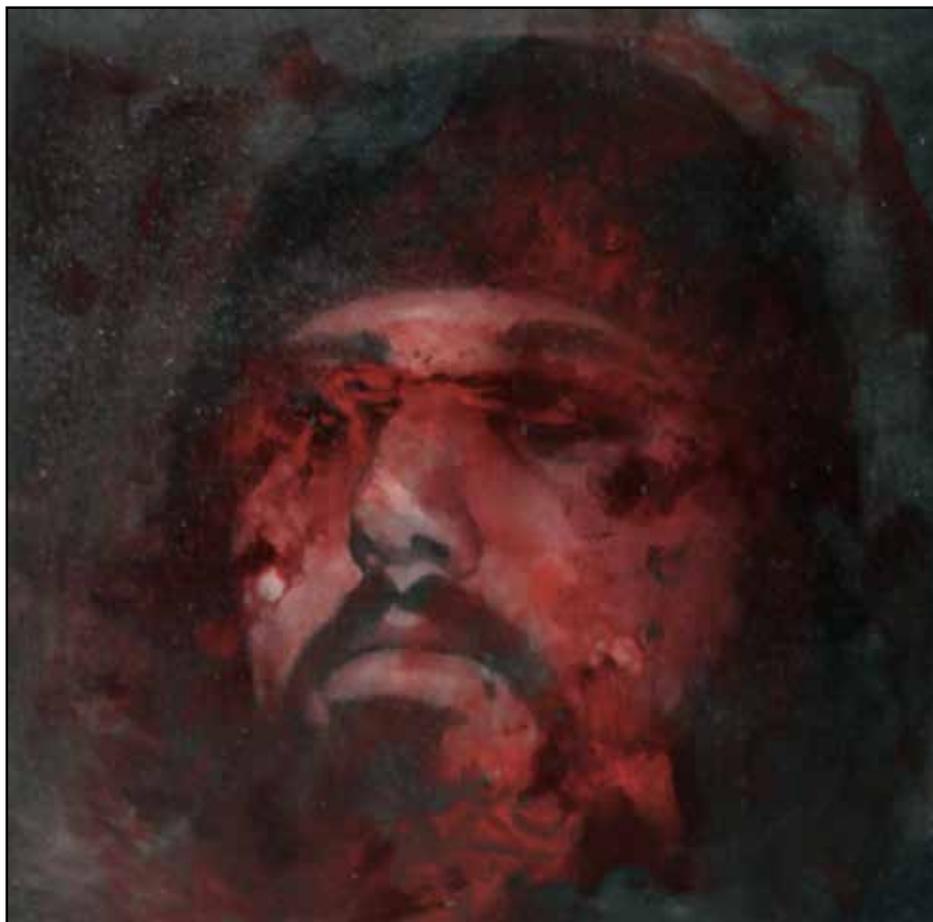
Campground 1 (sketch), 2012, graphite and ink on paper, 4.5" x 9"



Campground 1 (color study), 2012, Oil on board, 9" x 18"



Campground 1, 2012, Oil on canvas, 48" x 72"



Cellophane I, 2012, Oil on board, 10" x 10"



Cellophane 2, 2012, Oil on board, 10" x 10"



Cellophane 3, 2012, Oil on board, 10" x 10"



Cellophane 4, 2012, Oil on board, 10" x 10"



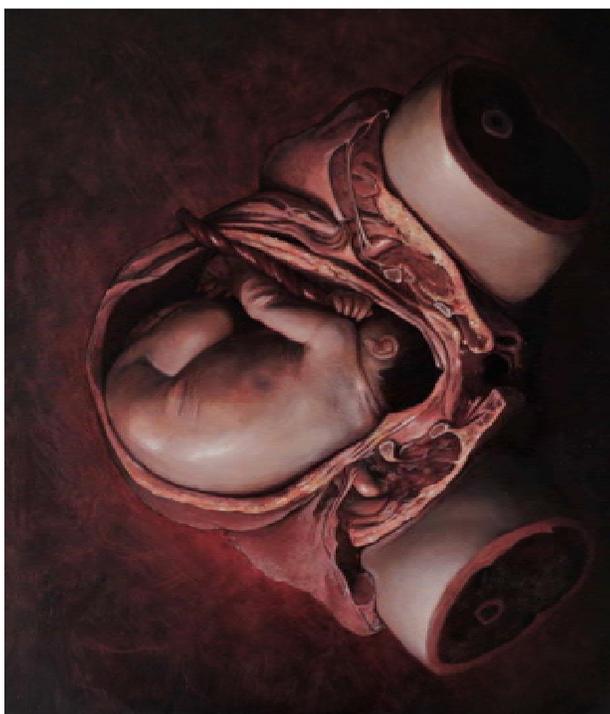
Cellophane 5, 2012, Oil on board, 10" x 10"



Cellophane 6, 2012, Oil on board, 10" x 10"



Cellophane 7, 2012, Oil on board, 10" x 10"



Quietus, 2012, Oil on board, 28" x 74"



Quietus (detail 1), 2012, Oil on board, 28" x 22"



Quietus (detail 2), 2012, Oil on board, 28" x 30"



Quietus (detail 3), 2012, Oil on board, 28" x 22"

APPENDIX B



Gustav Klimt, 1862–1918, *Judith I*, 1901, Oil and gold plating on canvas, 84 x 42 cm, Belvedere, Vienna



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1571–1610, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1598, Oil on canvas, 57" x 76", Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome



Vincent Desiderio, *I Liberati*, 2011, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 66" x 88 1/2"



Vincent Desiderio, *Isthmus*, 2000, Oil on linen, 48" x 124"



Nicolás Uribe, *Dissección* - *Dissección*, 2008, Mixed media, 70 x 155 cm



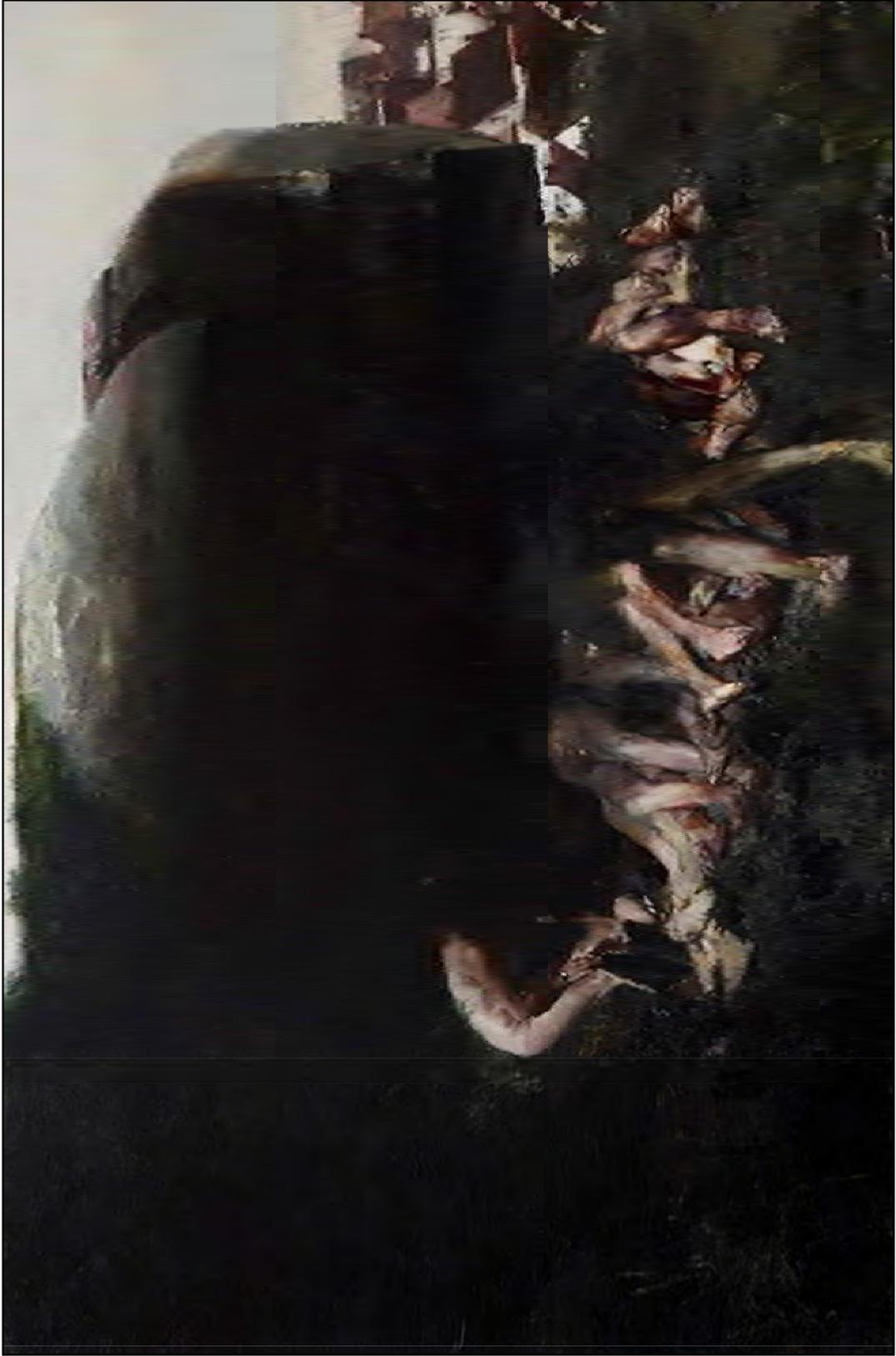
Nicolás Uribe, *Infanta*, 2008, Mixed media, 90 x 70 cm



Neo Rauch, *Hatz*, 2002, Oil on linen, 82.68" x 98.43"



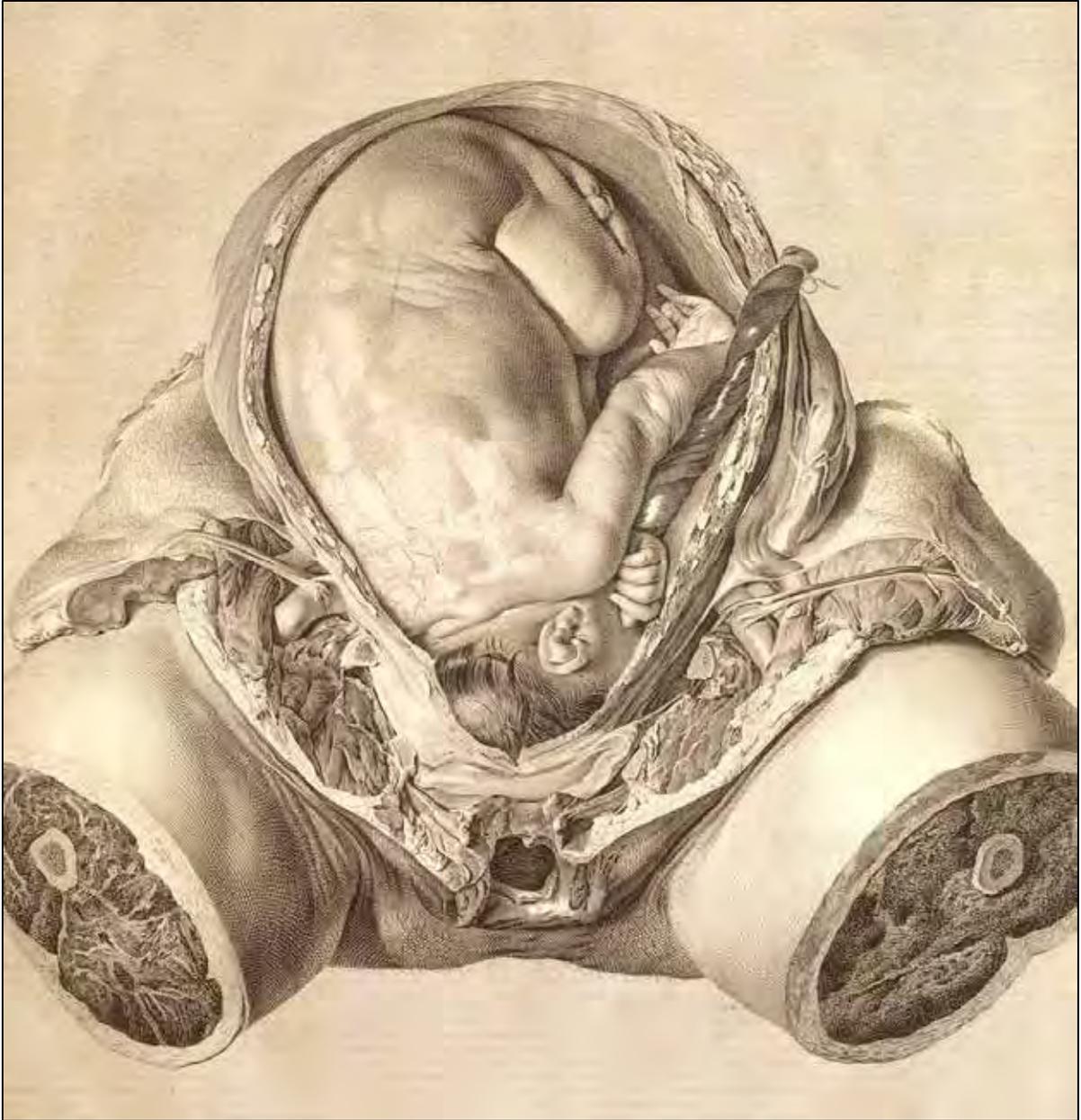
John Brosio, *Fatherless Bride 2*, 2007, Oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



Justin Mortimer, *Hill*, 2009, Oil on panel, 61 x 81 cm



Justin Mortimer, *Community Project*, 2009, Oil on panel, 80 x 60 cm



Jan van Riemsdyk, 1750–1788, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, 1774, Copperplate engraving, National Library of Medicine, Maryland