A Portrait of the Artist as Sisyphus

Jared N. Crane
CUNY Hunter College

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A Portrait of the Artist as Sisyphus

by

Jared Nathan Crane

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Thesis Sponsor:

Dec. 21, 2015   Brian Wood
Date           First Reader

Dec. 21, 2015   Carrie Moyer
Date           Second Reader
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I. A Portrait of the Artist as Sisyphus

“The Gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought for some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.”

-Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

In his 1942 essay on the value of personal existence, Albert Camus proposes that to forego asking life’s big, ultimately unanswerable questions in favor of outlets that calm one’s anxieties about the human condition is to commit what he termed “philosophical suicide.” This can be done in several ways: most extremely by nihilistically accepting the futility of life and physically ending it, but most commonly by practicing religion or indulging in cultural entertainment. To avoid these escapes, he suggests that one lives an absurd life by scrupulously challenging its fundamentally uncertain and fickle nature. The absurd human must treat the capricious nature of life with scorn, which prevents them from committing suicide in both the literal and figurative sense. To do so would be to accept the futility of life and reinforce its meaninglessness.

Camus elucidates that human life is inherently absurd in its repetitiveness, and the best we can do is to defy its insignificance by enjoying it. Without us there is no absurd, for without consciousness there are no desires or nostalgia to be satisfied. Animals are subject to the same repetitive life cycle; however, they do not experience it in the same conscious way. What makes human experience particularly absurd is our awareness of our Sisyphean condemnation, or ability to become conscious of it, if we avoid the trap of
philosophical suicide. Despite being condemned by the gods to an endless cycle of repetitive, futile labor, Camus wants to imagine that Sisyphus defiantly takes pleasure in his curse - an archetype for the Absurd human:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.¹

In light of this I believe that art, like life, can be meaningful if one approaches it as a Sisyphean undertaking. Unlike Sisyphus, I’m not reduced to pushing the same rock up the same hill; as a painter, my approach to creating art is open to variables. Usually it’s a basic starting composition and color palette that’s preconceived; then as I begin to introduce materials and imagery, the painting evolves. This balancing act between planning and improvisation is integral to the process.

Having left behind the Virginia wilderness for New York’s urban cityscape, I often find myself observing the roll geometry plays in mankind’s harnessing of the natural, organic world. Geometry is a language that humanity has conceived of to both describe specific spatial ideas and relationships, and to comprehend and structure the world according to an organized logic. In the arts, linear perspective is a fine example of this in its use of the grid as a means to designate space within a picture plane, and in the physical world it similarly structures the architecture of entire cities. It’s used to take natural substances and form them into blocks to make our buildings, or concrete slabs for

our sidewalks, which are then laid out and built up into the mapped grid of city streets and buildings. Geometry manages to organize the bustling energy of both human culture and curated pockets of the natural world.

Painting has always seemed a medium in which to visualize the dynamic of this relationship through painterly forms with strict edges, and over the last couple of years I’ve worked through several different series of abstractions that exemplify this. In a series of small 12 x 12 inch works on canvas from late 2013 to early 2014, I used semi-controlled processes, such as pouring and scraping to create grounds, and then layered them with more tightly articulated forms. These forms were both created from my imagination as well as taken from the language of design, and I view these pieces as small tests that allowed me to extend both my abstract, painterly vocabulary and material techniques. I spent a decade cooking in high-end restaurants, and I often refer to these paintings as hors d’oeuvres or amuse bouche – smaller portioned finger food to be eaten in preparation for the main course.

In one piece, titled It’s Ice (2013), two light blue rectilinear forms with rounded corners and wobbly contours are stacked horizontally over the majority of a tangy, lime green surface ground. The forms were rendered with spray paint over a frisket stencil, so they appear slightly cloudy or atmospheric in color, but precise in their clean edges. A third rectilinear form made of a thick, translucent layer of phtalo blue Galkyd sits perpendicularly over the other two forms in the right half of the canvas. Although slightly clunky in its shape with a texture best described as a kind of goopy, wrinkled skin similar to blueberry jelly, the edges are also clean and the corners sharp. Other works from this series feature different compositions but similar facture, and were initially made to
inform larger paintings.

Before I began to translate the ideas and techniques in these smaller pieces to larger surfaces my focus shifted predominantly towards the painting techniques I was using to develop the surface grounds, and I began to leave the more tightly articulated forms out entirely. As a self-described Romantic, nature has always been of interest to me, and I began to conceptualize the pouring and scraping of paint as a way of allowing chance to influence the work.

In Thomas McEvilley’s 1993 essay, *Seeking the Primal Through Paint: the Monochrome Icon*, he argues that the seeds for monochrome and color field painting were planted in the literature of Goethe and the Romantic landscapes of J.M.W. Turner. In his own words:

The fascination with the sublime progressively ate away at the figure and hypostatized the activated ground. In the twentieth century it devolved finally on the monochrome surface, the pure ground into which all figures have dissolved, as its central icon, representing the blank of the erased cultural world, or the blissful sleep of the soul which has returned to the One. The evolution of the sublime from the landscape theme into the pure one-colored surface was foreshadowed in Goethe’s book ‘Farbenlehre (Theory of Colors), published in 1810. In this work, in addition to various optical studies, Goethe attempts to bring the realm of color experiences into a unified Neo-Platonic view of the cosmos. The desire for unity leads him to the monochrome idea.

He goes on to explain that upon reading Goethe’s *Theory of Colors*, Turner went on to make two paintings illustrating its points, and in his old age his works would undergo a shift that has been considered the beginning of Modern art. Between 1840-45 Turner’s seascapes changed as the horizon lines disappeared, along with everything else. “Boats dissolved into the sea, waves merged imperceptibly with light, all the elements mixed in a
huge cauldron and returned partway along the road back to primal chaos”.

After reading this, I began to think less about color as flavor and instead as a representation of light and metaphor for consciousness. During the latter half of 2014 I created a series of variously sized atmospheric abstractions that were made through a cyclical process of pouring layers of paint mixed with a range of various mediums at different viscosities and saturations, and then sanding down the surface to let previous layers creep back through.

The largest piece from this series, *Sisyphus* (2014), hung 80 x 66 inches in size and was comprised of two tall rectilinear panels hung tightly together. The left panel was the wider of the two, 80 x 36 inches in size, and featured an atmospheric surface mostly rendered in a warm, slightly translucent, pinkish orange. Areas of earthy brown, purple and green showed through in parts. The surface of the right panel, sized 80 x 30 inches, was covered in a fairly transparent, milky white glaze, allowing the viewer to gaze through its translucent veil into the atmospheric ground of dark crimson and greens.

Dividing the picture plane into two frames with a seam brings up the issue of time, of which I’m aware, but in this piece I was more interested in creating an individual work containing multiple spaces – as if these separate panels were portals that lead the viewer into similar yet different experiences of space.

After making a dozen paintings in this manner, I began to question whether this approach to painting could still represent the sublime. Feeling the need to use imagery

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that more directly speaks to modern culture’s relationship with nature, I thought back to my days breaking down and cooking butchered animals for human consumption, and began viewing agriculture as one of the most crucial ways humanity engages with nature. In early 2015, while still giving great attention to the paintings’ facture and material experimentation, I began to rework several of the paintings from the previous series as I inserted livestock imagery into the work. The left panel on Sisyphus became part of Carcass of Pork (2015), which features a splayed pork carcass hanging from a slaughter house gambrel hook over an irregular ground of textures and colors varying from white and blue to violet, orange, and green.

The beef carcass motif is seen in early Dutch paintings, but is perhaps remembered most often with Rembrandt and then later as reimagined by Soutine and Francis Bacon. Bacon used the carcass in relation to ghost-like images of the Pope, in which it represented the flesh of man and emphasized our existential condition in direct contrast to a symbol for spiritual transcendence. I’m appropriating this reading while further considering how the carcass and meat hook represents humanity’s relationship with nature. I chose a pig carcass for both its reference to sloth and gluttony in ancient Christian symbolism, as well as its allusion to cultivation and consumption in contemporary society. Other works from this series feature abstracted representations of a sow providing sustenance to her young piglets or shoat, and a close up of cow utters hooked up to a milking machine.

In The Feeling of What Happens neuroscientist Antonio Damasio postulates that consciousness is trigged through our sensory interaction with objects or memories of objects, and is inseparable from emotion. Everything we come into contact with triggers a
non-verbal feeling in the deepest level of our consciousness that bubbles up through several stages to become our conscience. He explains:

    The enchainment of precedences is most curious: the nonconscious neural signaling of an individual organism begets the ‘proto-self’ which permits ‘core self’ and ‘core consciousness’, which allow for an ‘autobiographical self’, which permits ‘extended consciousness’. At the end of the chain, ‘extended consciousness’ permits ‘conscience’.³

I’m less interested in these specific stages of consciousness than I am the concept that the residue of these nuanced emotional responses to objects by the self are carried over from object to object, building our consciousness along the way as we make distinctions between them. In response to Domasio, I propose that the structural foundation that is the basis of semiotics is actually the last stage of human consciousness. Our ability to associate not just feeling, but also meaning, with sensory input is key to human experience.

    The relationship between object, feeling, and meaning has become another guiding concern in my work. As a young artist studying classical drawing techniques at the foundation level, I became keenly aware of the physical differences and nuanced feelings between objects, and as a cook I spent years contemplating these distinctions between flavors and aromas. In my most recent work I have moved on from purely agricultural imagery to include other collaged elements – from three-dimensional objects, to photos cut from nature magazines, to the reappearance of the design features and imagined forms from my earlier work. Looking at artists like Robert Rauschenberg,

Sigmar Polke, Anselm Kiefer, and David Salle, I’ve concluded that all imagery - whether abstract or mimetic, drawn, printed, or photographed - is a material that may be manipulated.

The single most consistent theme in the work is steady experimentation with both material and imagery. I’m aware of a painting’s position as both an image and object, and often find myself straddling the dichotomy between these contradictory identities. Its ability to become sculptural, illusionistic, a window, or collage, makes painting a complicated discussion.

Perhaps to achieve real, Sisyphean absurdity, art must display a degree of contradiction? Approaching painting as an alternative, visual mode of thinking that is in constant tension with language, I want to play with the boarders of interpretation, making room in the work for contradictions between hostility and humor, elusiveness, tactility, sophistication and clumsiness. The forced interaction between the varying resonances of different mediums, media, and imagery in my work is intended to highlight the structure of meaning and manipulate sensations. In lieu of the manufactured products that are revered by our industrially driven society, they are the unapologetically strange, hand made expressions of an individual. The creative process is intuitive and experiential, resulting in form closer to visual poetry than sensible equations.

Keeping us from nihilism is our willingness to give meaning to life through living it with sincere awareness – thus Sisyphus pushes the rock up the hill, and I make paintings.
II. IMAGES REFERENCED

1. *It's Ice*
   2013
   Oil, acrylic, & spray-paint on canvas
   12 x 12 inches

2. *Sisyphus*
   2014
   Oil, acrylic, and spray paint on birch panel

3. *Carcass of Pork*
   2015
   Oil, acrylic, and spray paint on birch panel
   80 x 66 inches

4. *The Unsettling of America*
   2015
   Oil, acrylic, and spray paint on birch panel
   80 x 54 inches
III. IMAGES OF WORKS EXHIBITED

Jared Nathan Crane

Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition

December 10, 2015- January 10, 2016

1. *Enchanted Honey*
   2015
   Oil, acrylic, silkscreen, collage, and canvas on birch panel
   94 x 84 inches

2. *Junk Food*
   2015
   Oil, acrylic, spray paint, silkscreen, collage, and canvas on birch panel
   84 x 126 inches

3. *Cream*
   2015
   Oil & acrylic on birch panel
   52.5 x 48 inches

4. *No Man’s Land*
   2015
   Oil, acrylic, silkscreen, collage, and canvas on panel
   48 x 36 inches

5. *The First Elephant in the Room*
   2015
   Etching, monotype, and chine colle on paper
   14.5 x 19 inches

6. *The Second Elephant in the Room*
   2015
   Etching, monotype, and chine colle on paper
   14.5 x 19 inches
IV. INSTALLATION

Jared Nathan Crane
Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition
Installation View
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Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition
Installation View
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