Between The Alarm Clock And The Cell Phone

by

Sam Bornstein

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Thesis Sponsor:

12/15/2017
Drew Beattie
Date
Signature

12/15/2017
Carrie Moyer
Date
Signature of Second Reader
Dedication

This thesis paper is dedicated to the memory of my brother Dande, may he rest in peace. Dande was a poet, a Goth, and an outsider historian.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the conditions that have allowed me the privilege of making my artwork, and all my fantastic teachers both inside, and outside of the framework of an art school.

Thank you rent control, which has allowed my artist parents to remain in New York City and raise me. Thank you CUNY, for pricing your MFA program at a cost that has allowed me to get a Masters Degree.

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- James Ensor, Christ’s Entry Into Brussels, 1889.

- Philip Guston, Monument, 1976.

- Piles of shoes at Auschwitz.

- Edvard Munch, Between the Clock and the Bed, 1940 – 1942.

- Philip Guston, Stationary Figure, 1973.

- Mary Frank, Of Then and Now, 1991-92.


Between the Alarm Clock and the Cell Phone: The Temporal-Cultural Matrix of Fantasy in Contemporary Painting

Introduction

We find ourselves in a peculiar situation in the first half of the 21st century, creating images that express our sense of ourselves and our time at a moment when more visual history has existed than at any era of human existence. Despite the abundance, variety, immediacy, and systematically social nature of contemporary visual culture, contemporary painters still create imagery that is personal, singular, material, and psychological.

The temporal-cultural matrix of fantasy refers to the relationship between the artist’s use of fantasy, and the sense of time and culture that is particular to their experience\(^1\). It also refers to the way in which fantasy and the Fantastic\(^2\) can provide a space for critique, escape, relief, or commentary on those conditions.

Evoking European history painting and genre painting, my latest work depicts groups of figures working together on strange, ambiguous tasks.


Populated with workers, soldiers, and people engaged in leisure activities, the invented world recalls contemporary life, hazy memories of the past, and daydreams. In creating this atemporal world, I took inspiration from my own life, sense of history and time.

The title of this thesis refers to Edvard Munch’s painting, *Between the Bed and The Clock* (1940-3). For me this title has always brought to mind a very specific zone of experience and painting: between the personal, introspective world of the mind (the bed) and the impersonal, outside demands of society, time, and history (the clock). Another common understanding of this painting is that it shows Munch contemplating his own mortality, his time, and his place in the world. In my work, this is the best space to fully translate my life experience into form and, in so doing, to say something about contemporary life in general.

The subjects that I was considering in creating these scenes relate to time and history: changes in communication technology, my relationship to the Jewish Diaspora, wage labor, crowded New York City apartments, and art making. The paintings create an atemporal interior space that has its own internal logic, imprinted by our moment. To paint this world, I used a variety of paint applications, printing, stenciling, and collage as ways to represent various sensations of physical motion in time. These became embedded in an atmospheric field, upon which I painted groups of figures in oil paint.
A Contemporary Sense of Time and History

Contemporary life is a hall of mirrors; a great variety of things happen and swirl around before our consciousness, forming a complex, and at times, fractured atmosphere. This is a condition created by our current state of technological development, which affects our culture, our fantasies, and the way we use and perceive our time.

In contemporary painting surveys such as MOMA’s The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World, curator Laura Hoptman made efforts to connect atemporality and our moment in time. Many of the artists included in this show employ a variety of references to different eras, and incorporate a plurality of painting applications, as I do in my current paintings. In addition to the paradox of atemporality representing a specific time, the show underscores a continued movement in the arts away from realism and the literal toward imagined forms and spaces. Perhaps this is because the sensation of time found in fantasy, the imagination, and dreams is not governed by the usual demands of what is actual.

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History and the Imagination

Many well-known painters of history were also painting images from their imagination and from everyday life. Diego Velázquez painted intimate kitchen scenes as well as court commissions such as *Las Meninas* (1656). Francisco Goya painted his fantastic nightmares as well as paintings of historical events such as *The 3rd of May* (1814). In these works, you can see a subtle crossover between different practices. *Las Meninas* (1656) is psychological and autobiographical, while Goya’s fantastic scenes seem to suggest truths and feelings about society. Goya’s *The Burial of the Sardine* (1812-1819) for instance, seems to foreshadow the work of Ensor and Beckmann in their depictions of celebration slipping into madness.
In the Postwar Era, Philip Guston’s late work drew from some of these sources to create paintings that allude to both his personal life, and to his place in time. In Guston’s piles of shoes for instance, we wonder if he is referring to Auschwitz, to his brother’s amputated legs, or to a personal obsession with piles like those of his trash collector father. An either-or interpretation of this work does not do it justice, since the work addresses his psychology rather than aims at realistic depiction of society. This ambiguous space of fantasy allows the painter freedom to make equivocal statements about his relationship to subject matter, combine multiple references, and create works that generate meaning by virtue of their openness. If, in fact, Guston wanted to address Auschwitz, his private and indirect way may have been the most authentic, for him.

Philip Guston, Monument, 1976. 
Piles of shoes at Auschwitz.
In her essay *The Holocaust and the Fantastic: A Negative Revelation*, Gila Ramras-Rauch proposed that events in world history that seem to defy logic and our understanding of reality create an unreal context for literature and artworks that address them\(^4\). Since these events materialize unfathomable states of existence, she argues that they constitute a “negative revelation” that warps the way in which even the Fantastic tale operates, since there is no secure ground of normalcy to retreat to. This essay echoes my own thinking, in that I believe that Tzvetan Todorov’s conception of the Fantastic can help us understand the way that we process both the positive and negative revelations of history.

When dramatic changes occur in our lifetime, the feelings of unreality that might accompany them may create grounds for fantasy that are departures not from a sense of reality, but from a sense of unreality. This was an important aspect of the fantastic for me to consider, since the cultural memory of diaspora was a major reference point in my paintings. The history of the Diaspora is filled with facts and details that are experienced by many as negative revelations about the potential of human nature and world events. As well, the consideration of the sensation of technology and its uses as magical might produce a sense of hesitation or doubt of the real, to which a fantastic tale

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relates. One of the reasons that my latest paintings are somewhat subdued in their tone and fantasy is in consideration of the subject matter.

**Context in Painting History: Between The Clock and The Bed**

Philip Guston, *Stationary Figure*, 1973.

Painting has a tendency to integrate art history into its present condition, since the historic span of painting reaches back past written history. Whether regarded as ruined, enduring or simply shifted, art history presents a roster of possible strategies for the contemporary painter. Conversely contemporary painters may use a Brechtian by-any-means-necessary approach to get at their aims, ignoring formal or academic conventions or standards of taste. These two

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approaches can be used in tandem to reinforce or activate each other. If pursued with enough force, the negotiation of recently reclaimed aspects of the past and a Brechtian approach to the raw and new will certainly advance painting. I’m invested in this approach of integrating old forms and sensibilities with new ones.

Alternative lineages of art history can cause a subtle but powerful change on our interpretation of painting, even familiar painting, because they expose how the culturally-embedded linguistic and theoretical frameworks influence our reading of the works. Artwork made from the imagination that has been influenced by Northern European Romantic, folk-allegorical, symbolist, visionary, or satirical origins are of interest to me because the images in these do not serve primarily as liberators of the unconscious, as in a Surrealist idiom. German Romantic painters were painting visionary and fantastic images based on portions of the Old Testament. The artists that they inspired had a completely different set of concerns and strategies.

Forgoing slick neoclassical paint-handling, artists influenced by Northern European sources often allow the nature of the material qualities of paint to relate their experience to time, and make statements about their surroundings. Edvard Munch, and his painting Self-Portrait Between the Bed and The Clock (1940-42) would be a good example of this sensibility. Munch invented a deeply
personal, influential form of expressionism, using symbolic characters that warn viewers of the darker undertones of human existence. It’s often the paint itself that tells the story. It can be the color that oscillates between drab and bright, or the slow moving line of his brushwork that suggests depth and potential. As he invokes the sunset and the corpse, the potential is often death.

In his book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, art historian Robert Rosenblum traces a lineage drawn from the Romantics through Expressionism, to the present. He points to the Romantics and the heraldic symbolism and composition of William Blake to explain many of the expressionist-symbolist tendencies that have persisted through modernism.⁶

In the Munch painting *Between the Clock and the Bed*, for example, we see the artist juxtaposing elements in a painting as if he is composing a sentence from left to right. This suggests a flattened, almost linguistic sensibility. The Modern German artist A.R. Penck will take these tendencies to the extreme in his representations suggestive of glyphs, while the tendency is more subtle in other artists. Phillip Guston and Robert Rauschenberg would similarly combine symbolism with an expressive use of paint evocative of movement. In Robert Storr’s article *The Beckmann Effect*, he supports a connection between the

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compositional logic of Max Beckmann and Postwar American Art. The lineage from the Romantics to the Expressionists to contemporary art is the context in which I view my recent paintings.

In traveling to Poland, I discovered some of the oral culture that my family lost in their immigration to the United States: Ashkenazi Hasidic Jewish storytelling traditions that were synchronous with Romanticism. Both traditions drew inspiration from the Old Testament or Torah, stories based on allegory, symbolism, and supernatural events. Prior to writing The Metamorphosis, Franz Kafka may well have been aware of Ashkenazi allegories in which humans are transformed into animals. Marc Chagall, on the other hand, painted images that appear to be directly taken from the Hasidic legends, although art historians often describe his imagery as “folkloric”, and his innovations as belonging to French Modernism.

Contemporary Painters

Mary Frank was a student of Max Beckmann’s, and she created a body of work that fuses fantastic imagery from her imagination with references to Classical art as well as Abstract Expressionism. Doing this draws a connection to

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her time period, and proposes an independence and freedom from the
references and attitudes of one’s era, even while engaging with them. Her
languid use of material slows down our read and changes our perception of her
version of Abstract Expressionism and Classical art. When I asked Mary Frank
about her choice to integrate these two references, she alluded to interactions
with painters like Willem DeKooning, who would denigrate her artwork because
it was figurative, and thus not of the time. Frank’s choice to reach back to what is
Classic suggests a response to DeKooning’s critique that foreshadows
contemporary painting as presented by *The Forever Now* exhibition at MOMA.

Mary Frank, Of Then and Now, 1991-92.  

Kerry James Marshall, Dana Schutz, and Tal R on the other hand are
examples of painters using art historical references in a way that embodies the
pressure exerted on us by the past. They deploy an overload of reference that
may suggest that the past is persistently alive, and that there is a need to
address it. For Kerry James Marshall, wit and irony leverage that pressure, while the integration and clash of references conjure very specific feelings about how one fits into or feels alienated from society.

In a similar fashion, R.B. Kitaj’s painting, *Jewish Rider*, takes Rembrandt’s *Polish Rider*, and sticks the horse beneath the Jewish train passenger’s seat. The sad joke is that Jews were attacked by Polish raiders on horseback in the Pogroms, and that the locomotive became an icon of Jewish annihilation. The horse might also refer to the Hasidic Legend, *The Magic Horse*, in which a man’s companion lives on after death in the form of his faithful horse⁹, or it might refer to the Der Blaue Reiter group.

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My Artwork in the Temporal-Cultural Matrix Of Fantasy.


In my paintings Bathtub Hebrew School, and Babushkas Sell their Pills at Brighton Beach, I created ambiguous narratives drawn from my life experience.
The paintings make use of both traditional appearances and more contemporary paint applications. The color palette is a combination of the muted colors suggestive of older traditions, with sprays or spikes of intensely hued or neon color belonging to our current visual culture. The characters use contemporary technology, but their activities and surroundings are suggestive of nostalgia and the past.

The complexity of the figurative compositions, and the diversity of both references and materials used is intended to allude to the hall of mirrors we now have with history and fantasy. This relates to my place in time, to the Diaspora, technology, work, and how to paint these relationships.

This fusion is also a formal approach to painting, one that places the emphasis on my relationship to making the painting and recording an experience rather than a rendering of a hypothetical reality in realist or illustrational terms. The looseness and unfinished appearance are intended to draw attention to my interaction with the surfaces. The paintings serve as a record of my attempt to excavate or weave a history through fantasy and material engagement.

Embedded in the surfaces of the paintings are burned pages of a vintage hobby book, screen prints of television static, screen prints of the illegible text
of a book of Ashkenazi legends, stencils of noise, and spray paint. These are often subtle, and may not be noticeable without close looking.

The painting Babushkas Sell Their Pills At Brighton Beach is taken from my experience as an outsider visiting the Russian-Jewish community of Brighton Beach. The Babushkas sell pills and a salted herring, while an orthodox woman drinks beer. There is a flattened set of Piano Keys at the bottom of the painting, with burned and collaged sheet music on top of it. Silk screened onto the bodies of the Babushkas and the beach is an unreadable text, a distorted version of a Hasidic folktale, The Parable of The Fire Tender. These elements are noticeable when close to the painting, but difficult to see from afar.

The painting has the orange and yellow color of a sunset, but a dusty one, perhaps an old image of a sunset printed on paper. The fantasized image is inspired by a news story that I read about old women emigrating from the former U.S.S.R, forced to sell their prescriptions on the street just to make ends meet. I imagined my Russian Grandmother in the same circumstances, had she not left Europe earlier.

In the painting Bathtub Hebrew School, I remembered my own Hebrew School in the basement of the Westbeth Art Center. Using the odd memory of studying the holocaust at age 9 in that community center, I made the ambiguous but ironic choice to have the students studying in bathtubs. This
alludes to the gas chambers, but also the joys and innocence of early childhood play. In a similarly dual reference, the Hebrew school teacher uses a whimsical double-headed eagle sock puppet to explain European History, in front of a map of Europe painted in hazy spray paint. At the bottom of the tub are collaged and spray-painted images of Nazi warplanes from a vintage toy
catalogue. The very bottom of the painting shows the back of people’s heads as they type on highly abstracted laptops.

**Conclusion**

Rather than creating stories with static allegorical meanings in these paintings, I was more concerned with embracing equivocality and ambiguity, drawing the viewer into a process of interpretation. The atemporal atmosphere of the paintings, the integration of a variety of paint applications, and the depiction of multiple figures engaged in a range of activities are joined by the depiction of various kinds of reading to create a meta-discourse of images in the paintings. Computer screens, books, maps, and images and objects made within the world depicted suggest different eras and ways to read an image. At the same time, the characters were painted in a manner that asks the viewer to interpret (or read) their state of mind. In this way, there is an invitation for the viewers to enter the work, to be these people.
Bibliography

Works Cited


“The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World | MoMA.”

*The Museum of Modern Art*,


Image List

All artworks are from 2017. The exhibition took place at 205 Hudson Street on December 14th, 2017.

- Bathtub Hebrew School, Burnt Paper, Screen Print, Spray Paint, Oil, and Acrylic on Canvas, 6’x 6’.
- Babushkas Sell Pills At Brighton, Sheet Music Paper, Screen Print, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 6’x 6’.
- Detail of Babushkas Sell Pills At Brighton
- Flag Makers, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas. Stuffed Soldier Makers. 6’x 5’8”.
- Interrogation, Screen Print, Spray Paint, Oil and Acrylic On Canvas. 6’x 6’.
- Books on Face, Oil and Acrylic on Panel, 24” x 20”.
- Installation Image #1
- Installation Image #2
- Installation Image #3
Bathtub Hebrew School, Burnt Paper, Screen Print, Spray Paint, Oil, and Acrylic on Canvas.
Babushkas Sell Pills At Brighton, Sheet Music Paper, Screen Print, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas.
Detail of Babushkas Sell Pills At Brighton.
Flag Makers, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas.
Stuffed Soldier Makers, Paper, Screen Print, Spray Paint, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas.
Interrogation, Screen Print, Spray Paint, Oil and Acrylic On Canvas.
Books on Face, Oil and Acrylic on Panel.
Installation.
Installation.
Installation.