Navel Gazing

Andrew J. Macasil
CUNY Hunter College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds
Part of the Art Practice Commons

Recommended Citation
Macasil, Andrew J., "Navel Gazing" (2016). CUNY Academic Works.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/49

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Arts & Sciences Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Navel Gazing

by

Andrew Macasil

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2016

Thesis Sponsor:

May 20, 2016
Tom Weaver
Date
Signature

May 20, 2016
Carrie Moyer
Date
Signature of Second Reader
Table of Contents

I. Thesis

II. Works Cited

III. Images

IV. List of Images
My family is deeply religious (Southern Baptist). I grew up going to church three times a week and my parents were very visible in their leadership roles: my father as pastor and choir director, my mother as Sunday school teacher, choir vocalist, and church secretary.

Being born into a large family makes it easy to feel like one is lost in the mix; I am not the oldest, I am not a twin, I am not the only girl, and I am not the baby. I am, however, the only gay one. I am the only fat one. The inability to understand my ethnicity (more on this later), the crushing religious oppression, physical and emotional abuse, compounded by the anxious, self-awareness that comes with being a queer youth, rendered me with a perpetual feeling of disenfranchisement.

Somehow, along the way I cultivated the ultimate solution to my predicament: seek approval and validation wherever possible.

Since elementary school, I received praise for my artistic abilities--gaining respect from my peers and laurels from authority figures. I noticed a direct correlation between how “photo-realistic” my illustration was and the degree of validation received for my effort. The need for validation became the ultimate motivation for developing my drafting skills, which, in turn, provided me with a component of my identity that was both distinctly positive and uniquely mine. Unfortunately, this caused me to form a hierarchical opinion within Fine Art that privileged high realism, from which any deviation (by my own hand) was equated with failure. I transformed Art into a religion with its own dogma that would oppress me for years to come. In fact, I still find it embarrassingly difficult to break away from this approach to drawing and painting.
Starting in 2010, the trajectory of my work has followed a path that investigates the construction of identity and its various components: body politics, sexuality, religion, socio-economic positions, and race. I experienced camaraderie, commiseration, and erotic thrill in the works of artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz, Paul Cadmus, Pierre et Gilles, Tom of Finland, etc. In terms of painting, I resonated with the sensibilities of artists such as Elizabeth Peyton, Joan Semmel, Philip Pearlstein, Maria Lassnig, Hernan Bas, John Singer Sargent, etc.—as well as more graphic-oriented artists such as Alphonse Mucha and J. C. Leyendecker. Conceptually, my work is informed by Georgia O’Keeffe, James Gobel, Ain Cocke, Kehinde Wiley, Cathy Opie, Egon Schiele, Francis Bacon, etc.

From the age of thirteen, I was heavily influenced by singer-songwriter, Tori Amos, who addresses controversial subject matter such as sex, religion, rape, masturbation, misogyny, and miscarriage. The daughter of a Methodist preacher, part American Indian, and child prodigy of the piano, Amos’ music spoke to me in ways I would not fully understand for years to come. Destined for deviance, Amos’ work explores feelings of alienation, exploitation, and an outright defiance of heteronormativity in sophisticated and poignant ways—lyrically, vocally, and orchestrally. It was in this woman that I, for the first time, experienced my emotions represented in another person in the public arena. Due to my history of investment in technical finesse, it is helpful to consider an artist from another medium as providing a source of self-identification and a model of addressing life concerns for my work.

As a young teenager, I would spend most of my free time drawing, using comic books as source material. Mostly, I was concerned with the work of artist Jim Lee who, at the time, worked for Marvel. This passion for drawing strengthened my drafting abilities while
reinforcing unhealthy and unrealistic ideals of body image. Eventually, I graduated from illustrations to realistic drawings of celebrities with whom I was fixated—namely, Tori Amos, Michelle Pfeiffer, Madonna, and Lucille Ball. With each drawing I pushed my technique to become as photographic as possible, which was helpful in mastering the medium of graphite but contributed to my dogmatic relationship to imagery.

I initially took up self-portraiture as a mode of generating imagery that was more earnest and investigating identity became a driving force in my work. By contemplating how the representation of a body can act both as a container of consciousness, and a metaphor for the interior-exterior duality of the human condition, self-portraiture has proven to be an effective way of communicating such complexities.

Although my self-portraits evoke a discourse that may refer to race through the very representation of my multi-racial body, my work has yet, or is just beginning to, unpack what it means to have grown up being half-Filipino in the predominantly Latino areas of Los Angeles. My childhood lacked any significant presence of Filipino culture and my father did not teach any of his 10 children his mother language (Visayan). Ignorant of Philippine history, I failed to see how my father’s diaspora directly yet discretely influenced my upbringing. However, in the last year, I have taken it upon myself to learn about Philippine history (from Magellan to the post-American Empire, into the 1980s). This new knowledge has helped me to understand the culture that was so formative to my father’s mindset and various life choices (a Filipino expatriate’s pursuit of “the American dream”). Although my Filipino heritage might not manifest directly in my work, it plays an important role in my attempt to unpack and understand the formation of my mindset and various life choices—in essence, my identity.
My intention for a work or series of works typically begins with one of the following impulses: (1) diaristic disclosure, (2) sociological investigation, or (3) celebratory subversion. Diaristic disclosure entails a narrative examination of my life in search of experiences that I may consider *worth* sharing. In this approach I may also consider addressing parts of my physical body about which I am either confident or insecure. The revelation of my identity is not just cathartic, it is also strategic: I believe that if I discover and share something deeply personal about myself, that the viewer may, in turn, experience something revelatory about their own lived experience. That is, I hope that the exploration of my specific identity will help viewers to be more specific about their identities. Areas of my identity under investigation include: gender, sexuality, race, weight, religion, and childhood traumas.

Initially, I made realistic drawings from photos that I took of myself (impulse #1). Ultimately, each photo chosen as a source from which to draw was highly editorialized: lighting, angle, expression, composition, etc. were all considered in the selection process with the misplaced goal of presenting myself as an attractive image, rather than significantly investigating my genuine issues with body image. The editorializing resulted in images that (unintentionally) distanced the representation of myself from the viewer, which was antithetical to the original intention in utilizing self-portraiture. The pictures were taken from an elevated angle to make me seem thinner than I actually am; a flooding of light would be used to reduce the signs of aging in my face; the sheen of my hair was often emphasized to demonstrate its health and fullness, contributing to a virile appearance; and composition was executed in such a ways as to omit unflattering excesses of fat. Eventually, I discovered that this disingenuous way of representing myself (emphasizing that which about myself I feel pride and concealing that which about myself
I feel shame) was not only yielding less impactful works, I was unwittingly reinforcing the standards of beauty that I sought to expand.

I desired to represent myself in a more raw and direct way by moving away from photography as source material and started making paintings from my mirrored reflection. Most of these paintings are on primed paper, approximately forty-two by seventy inches, and depict myself either meeting the gaze of the viewer or presenting myself looking at my own body. One such painting depicts me standing in my studio wearing shoes, socks, and briefs, while holding a drawing pad and pencil; there is a vertical band of pale blue along the far right of the picture plane, which, along with the small (backwards) text on the waistband of the briefs, reveal that the painted image is that of a reflection in a mirror against my studio wall.

This approach to self-portraiture seemed more effective in generating more honest representation but my painting technique would still have to develop in such a way that demonstrated a more logical relationship between the production of a painting (paint application, color, size, scale, etc.) and its image. My paintings would need to exemplify an internal logic that suggested cause for how and why they exist; to allow content to dictate appearance and not the other way around.

When motivated by sociological investigation (impulse #2), I am impeded by the neutral attitude of journalistic reporting; the task becomes more difficult to convey a sense of feeling born out of first-hand experience. However, I am quite compelled by my precarious position as I make observations as both an outsider to and member of the community in question (typically, the fat, queer, male body). I say “outsider” because I am not actively involved in “the scene” (gay nightlife, romantic/sexual relations, etc.). But I am a member of the community both by
convention and self-identification; I am a queer cis-male of a certain size and shape, which categorically identifies me as a “Bear” or “Chub”.

This sociological impulse drives me to ask a generalized question of my own community: how do they do it? How do other men like me negotiate the human condition today? How are they utilizing digital photography, social media, and the internet to form and sustain human connections? How do they direct images and text to express their own sense of identity?

The impulse of celebratory subversion (impulse #3) is the most whimsical and light-hearted of the three impulses that have driven my work. It offers the opportunity to revel in defiance, to embrace autonomy, and rebuke normativity for its oppressive exclusivity. When pursuing this impulse, I am more inclined to employ seductive, painterly techniques, and indulge in heightened sexuality/eroticism. Figures that arise from such motivation tend to either be objectified or confrontational to the (male) gaze. An example of this can be seen in my painting, *Self-Portrait As St. Sebastian*, in which I present myself as a flamboyant and flippant St. Sebastian pierced by arrows, adorned with a gold halo and bright green nail polish, with red rhinestones dripping from the figure’s wounds. The figure has a plastic pink appearance, with purple hair, enhanced eyelashes, and shimmering pouty lips (thoughts of a sex doll were inspirational here). Engraved in the tree behind the figure (St. Sebastian is often depicted tied to a tree or column) is “J.C. + S.B.” (Jesus Christ + St. Sebastian), suggesting a homoerotic relationship between Saint and Savior. In place of a gloomy backdrop common to representations of St. Sebastian, there is a bright blue sky with swirling clouds above an overly saturated green field punctuated with colorful flowers and a yellow brick road, a *double entendre* that refers to the streets of gold in Heaven and implies that St. Sebastian is a “friend of Dorothy”,
a slang term for a gay man.

In this state of mind, I am most interested in disrupting normative standards of beauty and gender. The conventions of beauty and gender (insofar as they relate to “masculinity”) that I find suspect include, but are not limited to: white supremacy, athletic build, body hair (maintenance), youth-centrism, the supposedly universal appeal of big dicks, and the diverse forms of misogyny. Like other forms of privilege, misogyny inhabits the minds of gay men in subtle and invisible ways; it creates a damaging false binary that encourages gay men to reject feminine traits and effeminate sexual partners/friends. For example, the term “masc for masc” is used to connote that a queer male self-identifies as masculine and seeks a mate who self-identifies the same way. Misogyny in gay men reinforces the idealized male form; it ignores the true nature of gender, which is not only socially constructed, it is a non-fixed spectrum subject to fluctuation. In an attempt to feel more socially accepted, gay men who allow misogynistic attitudes to govern their sense of self only further the plight of their community by propagating binary thinking—the very thinking that marginalized them in the first place. Gay misogynists not only betray all women, they also betray all non-heteronormative folk. As a gay man who identifies as a feminist, I believe the two struggles (feminism and queer equality) are inextricably entwined.

Body positivity and gender ambiguity come to the fore here but I am also met with a general obstacle: how can I champion the marginalized body without reinforcing pre-existing conventions? In other words, how shall I pursue a new model of representing the fluidity of beauty and gender, without the trappings of creating formulaic artwork? This is the project I have set for myself as the basis of my thesis presentation.

The psychoanalytic theories set forth by Melanie Klein propose that the psycho-social
The construct of the self is built through a cycle of object relations, which begin at birth and carry on into adulthood. According to Klein, the cycle operates through a series of projections and introjections that are fueled by desire (life and death instincts). Through experience and fantasy, these projections and introjections create and culminate in mental and emotional associations one forms with a part-object (e.g. the mother’s breast), and consequentially with a whole object (e.g. the mother). Essentially, it is the negotiation between the part-object (psychic fantasy) and the whole object (the real) to which Klein attributes the maturation of the self; through the position of what she calls ambivalence: coming to the understanding that reality is more complex and morally ambiguous than one initially perceives it to be.

My investment in Kleinian theory resides in using the human navel as a vehicle to investigate the body as image, site, and vessel in order to further explore the construction of identity. The position of ambivalence results in a socialized notion of the body as a stable entity. Embracing the impulse of celebratory subversion, I seek to dismantle my own history of socialized development; to better understand the emotional connections between my self and others. My approach originates in and is generated by engagement with the body as a psychic field. In an attempt to resolve this issue via painting, I believe the mysteries of such a pursuit will somehow reveal themselves through the very properties of paint: color, luminosity, translucency, opacity, and “fat over lean” (the process of building up the surface of a canvas with thin layers, diluted with oil, before applying thicker layers combined with less oil).

Over the past few months, my work has expanded from the traditional definition of self-portraiture to include tightly framed images of navels or compositions that highlight the navel to exploit the form as a bodily metaphor, with the hope that the materiality of paint will help
describe certain felt experiences and make my work less reliant on illustrating what something looks like. By focusing my imagery on the navel to the exclusion of the profile of the whole body, I create an effect that I am calling disembodied by which the viewer has to consider the body in relation to its fragmentation and obsessive treatment rather than as a coherent totality. The disembodiment speaks to the relationship between the part and the whole, while the scale provides a confrontational, disconcerting image that speaks to the intensity of a bodily experience in need of mediation via vivid color and expressive mark-making.

I find the navel to be a fruitful form to employ as a bodily metaphor to address the complexities of identity for a variety of reasons: the navel is an indexical scar of one’s original dependency and adult autonomy and is physically unique; the navel can appear as an orifice, a protrusion, or flush with the surrounding skin, and is a non-gendered form; the symbolism that one can attribute to the navel’s convex-concave shape can signify the human drive for physical, emotional, and spiritual connectivity with others; the nature of the navel and its obsolete, biological functionality may also serve to signify one’s mortality by pointing to one’s birth; the tightly framed navel destabilizes heteronormative, bodily image, and offers a more critical approach to the representation of human form and identity.

In Light In Painting by Mieke Bal, the navel is described as the “...token of autonomy of the subject, male and female alike; a center without meaning, that allows the viewer to propose new readings to meet his or her needs, but without letting those readings fall into the arbitrariness that leads to isolation and irrelevance (62).” Bal also notes that the navel as a bodily metaphor (as opposed to phallic or yonic icons) functions by “...shifting gender to an altogether different moment (62).” Looking to the navel as a form also promotes the individuality that is embedded
in identity, without catering to any sort of aesthetic hierarchy (belly buttons are as repulsive as they are attractive).

The disembodied image of a navel evades placing the figure to whom it belongs in a specific environment. The zoomed-in, large scale navel leaves no room for a background, which I do not necessarily consider to be a complete resolution. Just as Kleinian theory suggests that a mature state of self includes the reconciliation of a part-object and a whole object, my work may progress to reintroduce the representation of the body as an object in space. I am still very interested in the potential of represented space to function as location (in tandem with time and temperature) or to contribute to the figure in a metaphoric and/or psychological capacity. A domestic setting may be used to convey intimacy, voyeurism, or the hidden/shameful; landscape may be utilized to imply a sense of discovery, an exploratory attitude, or suggest a new/changing perspective; and then there is an environment of fantasy that may be a surreal or ethereal non-environment.

My current naval paintings have progressed to include more painterly decisions such as color, scale, and evidentiary applications of oil paint, oil, and solvent. These paintings range approximately between twelve and seventy-three inches on their longest sides, depicting a relatively small, disembodied naval in the center, surrounded by drips and fields of color that are more associated with abstract painting. The naval is centralized as a confrontational, disembodied image that functions more as the umbilicus of the painting itself, rather than a mere cropped image; the coloring is non-naturalistic; drippings of paint and interactions between varying amounts of solvent and oil offer a form of hands-free mark-making that provides a sensual, optical experience for the viewer. The intentional drippings and painterly textures
created by these interactions speak to the materiality of the medium, but also function metaphorically and analogously to the body (i.e. bodily fluids, excretions, the ontological surface quality of skin, and the layering that exists in both human flesh and identity), as well as an optical experience that speaks to the enjoyment and excitement in the act of painting.

Some of my paintings are made in a more traditional sense: less visible brush strokes (resulting in a higher level of rendering), more naturalistic color, and the employment of grisaille (a painting technique by which color is built on top of a black and white layer). Other paintings seek to emphasize their objecthood. For example, I had a canvas custom-made in the dimensions of my body (height by width), with all four sides of the canvas painted, which expands and decimates the traditional picture plane. Another example of emphasizing a painting’s objecthood can be seen in an oval canvas whose surface I built up and reformed using cold wax medium; this medium was also used to sculpt a small, three-dimensional navel in the center of the canvas. The texture of this piece is visibly hand-sculpted, demonstrative of the analogous relationship between the artist’s eye/hand to the art object and the artist’s eye/hand to the human form.

Image sources for my paintings range from observation (willing friends), to imagination/memory, to Instagram, to Google search, to dating apps, to looking at my own body. When I work from a photo, I find that the work becomes more about the image as content: the capacity of dissemination; mastery of skill; the time and labor spent to create the image, which translates to a feeling of preciousness and elevated attention to detail; and ultimately creates a more conclusive image. Whereas working from a sketch, memory, or imagination results in work that addresses more directly the subject as content and the painting as a technical and imaginative artifact. My new work communicates sensations more than it makes declarations.
Currently, I am making works that combine these two approaches: a highly rendered central image (the naval) that dissipates into abstract color and marks. A painting or drawing, no matter if its surface appears to be smooth or impastoed, maintains an aura whose physical presence is undeniably tied to its content. These works are more concerned with transmitting feeling, which is expressed through mark-making and color (metaphoric or analogous); they possess varying levels of finish, and are more open to interpretation.
Works Cited


Fig. 11
Fig. 13
Fig. 15
List of Images

Fig. 1 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 9”x12”, 2016
Fig. 2 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 9”x12”, 2016
Fig. 3 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 24”x73”, 2016
Fig. 4 – Macasil, Andy. Ink on paper, 14”x17”, 2016
Fig. 5 – Macasil, Andy. Ink on paper, 14”x17”, 2016
Fig. 6 – Macasil, Andy. Ink on paper, 14”x17”, 2016
Fig. 7 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 24”x30”, 2016
Fig. 8 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 24”x30”, 2016
Fig. 9 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 18”x24”, 2016
Fig. 10 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 18”x24”, 2016
Fig. 11 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 9”x12”, 2016
Fig. 12 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 30”x36”, 2016
Fig. 13 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 46”x52”, 2016
Fig. 14 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 36”x42”, 2016
Fig. 15 – Macasil, Andy. Oil on canvas, 36”x42”, 2016