

2013

Now and then

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NOW AND THEN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agriculture & Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art

by

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B.A. Western Illinois University, 1995

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August 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Frederick Ortner, Denyce Celentano, Ed Smith, Kelli Scott Kelley, John Malveto, James Beaman and Mark Zucker. I would also like to thank Don Crouch, Michael Mahoney, Julie Mahoney, Jan Clough, Ed Gettinger, Lisa Walker, Chris Kahler, Jenny Chi, Robert Horvath, Patricia Belleville, Glenn Hild, Andrew Brown, Malia Krolak, Renee' Smith, Meg Holford, James-Nelson Boreen, Amy Dertz-Boreen, Nicole Chellino, Mary-Devon Dupuy, Ritu Roy, Kyla Nance, Amy Kacsmarcy, Corinne Nelson, John Costello, all of my friends and family as well as my parents Jerry and Toni Arthur.

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ABSTRACT

I am interested in painting that begins in observation and manifests itself as a meeting ground of the subject and myself. My paintings explore color and spatial relationships as well as a surface that is manipulated over time. I often paint from nature on site as well as from small sketches and drawings that are later brought back to the studio and painted on a larger scale.

INSIDE THE NOW AND THEN

My father left me in the dark corridor. “Wait here while I turn on the lights”. I remember being frightened and cold, and the air was filled with the smell of stained wood bleachers and dust. I would stare into the darkness, only able to hear my father’s footsteps leaving me. I heard the switches flip and a hum as the lights began to awake. I could see the trusses slowly reveal themselves and my hand begin to appear before me. I was a small boy but it is one of my strongest memories from childhood. My father was the coach at the local high school and would take my siblings and myself to the gym to play. Our high school’s gym was probably the largest building in town, minus the grain elevators and hammer factory and the only structure known for its architecture. Designed by Ralph Legeman, at the time it was built it was a bowl that had been carved into the ground with bleachers that would rise up around you. The ground floor of the gym was surrounded by glass windows on all sides that would illuminate the building during the day and would ice over in the winter. This was my place to play, imagine, dream and was even my first studio. I would sit with my legs tucked under the bleachers drawing on the back of event programs as screeching fans and an enthusiastic band played their best rendition of Louie Louie, both of us intent on our respective tasks. Not much has changed. I am still influenced by my surroundings yet also immersed in this other reality. The more I paint, the more I realize I live inside the now and then. Undeniably in the “now”; as engaged with the subject as possible and yet also in the “then”. What is the then? It is both the past and the future; what I had for lunch, how my parents are doing, thoughts of past relationships, was that mark in the right spot, the pain in my hands, the song that is stuck in my head and everywhere else the mind goes as you paint.

MY HISTORY IN BATON ROUGE

Admittedly the first year in the program was not my strongest year. I felt somewhat stilted and unsure of myself. While I never abandoned my beliefs about painting, I did try to step out of my comfort zone. I experimented with using color in a conceptual and invented way, as seen in *Abstract I*. In *Abstract II*, I explored the possibility of working on a painting continuously over the course of a year. Both added to my vocabulary as a painter and for that I feel some satisfaction.



Scott Arthur, *Abstract I*, 2010



Scott Arthur, *Abstract II*, 2010

I also had a brief interlude working with performance and video art. The possibilities of performance and installation are fascinating. The potential of considering space, light, sound, and staging all seems like a fantastic challenge. In my video *Slap*, I examined a repetitive motion and the gesture it creates. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the piece was the way the slight variation in acoustics, repeated in a sequence of three, created a trance-like state which given enough time could become hypnotic and meditative.

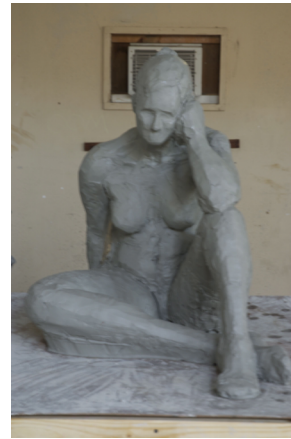


Scott Arthur, *Slap*, 2011

In my second year I was working with clay for a figure class. Understanding how tactile senses can inform a two-dimensional work was an important lesson and one I have applied in my own teaching. *After Maillol* shown below portrays two views of a full-scale model. The planar and reductive forms will recur throughout my work.



Scott Arthur, *After Maillol*, 2011



Scott Arthur, *After Maillol*, 2011

In the spring semester of 2011 I enrolled in a landscape painting class. I had never painted outside from nature before and found the challenge of painting landscape nearly overwhelming. There were a number of influences during this period but one idea of significance that came out was pushing beyond my natural preference for simplification

and in general trying to expand my vocabulary as a painter. My painting *May Street* is an example of attempting to push beyond my preferences. This was also a painting where I revisited the same motif, a practice I have enjoyed ever since.



Scott Arthur, *May Street*, 2011

In the fall of 2011 I began working with several paintings of the figure. As seen on page 5, some works were oils on mylar, some were acrylic on paper and others were washes on watercolor paper. There were a number of artists I was looking at during this period but some that seem most relevant are Louisa Mathiasdottir, Leland Bell, Nathan Oliveira, Édouard Vuillard, Fairfield Porter and Milton Avery.



Scott Arthur, *Mary-Devon*, 2011



Scott Arthur, *Nicole*, 2011



Scott Arthur, *Nude Study*, 2011

I feel that the commonality of all of this work is the return to the reduction of form to a more essential state. This idea of the Gestalt principle of deletion continues to recur in my work. There is something in the reduction of forms that I feel allows the still life, figure or landscape to say more with less information.

The pains in my chest woke me up at 3:00 a.m., I looked out the window and I could hear the whistle of the engine calling back to my car. Across the prairie I could see a faint image of a pair of bushes lit only by the moon. During this time many of the ideas I will discuss were not nearly as fleshed out as they now seem but were certainly all affecting my work. I became fascinated with night colors, maybe as a result of working alone late

into the night. I was interested in the way they blend together, how difficult they are to identify and particularly the effect of nighttime light pollution on colors. I also visited the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, IA on my trip home and was pleasantly surprised at their collection. I walked right past the Ad Reinhardt at first, which is what he would have wanted. *Abstract Painting No.6* is his work, which consists of 12 black squares with shades of various colors that are nearly imperceptible. I came back to the work and found myself gazing into it. After the rods and cones in my eyes adjusted I began to experience the colors emerging from the darkness. The experience felt much more revelatory than simply an awareness of how the eye perceives color. It was at first an appreciation for an interesting work of art, then the awareness of self, time and space and then simply awareness; finally I was left with only experience.



Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting No. 6*, 1960-61

Mark Rothko is another artist that always remains in the back of my mind, as well as Donald Judd. I became interested in the concepts that influenced many of these artists. Judd was very influenced by eastern culture and aesthetics. The Japanese concept of Wabi-Sabi came up in my research during this time. Wabi-Sabi has a very broad

definition but one idea that resonated for me is discussed by Andrew Juniper, who explains: "If an object or expression can bring about, within us, a sense of serene melancholy and a spiritual longing, then that object could be said to be Wabi-Sabi." (11). As seen in my works *Night 1* and *Mom*, I became interested in the objectness of the paintings as well as the slightly flawed surface and nearly symmetrical balance.



Figure 11. Scott Arthur, *Night 1*, 2012

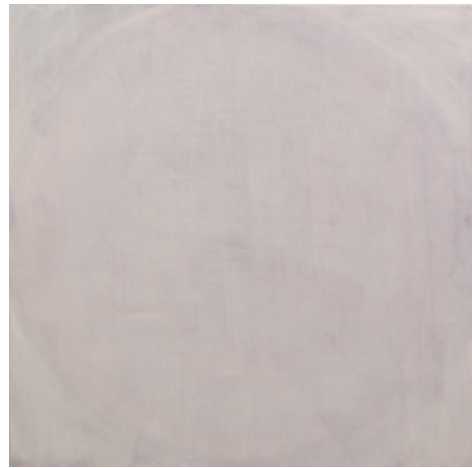


Figure 12. Scott Arthur, *Mom*, 2012

A MEETING PLACE

Many of my paintings are views that I see everyday. These motifs can be as common as a cluster of buildings I pass walking to class or my first view as I leave my apartment.

Much of the way I think about my work is in regards to a meeting or middle ground between the subject and myself. I work from direct observation and the canvas is where my subject and I meet. This means I am open to the moment I share with a person, or building or still life object. It used to bother me that my work would look different from piece to piece; now I feel it is an important part of being open to the experience. At times I paint with an impasto style and as of late with thin washes, but I try not to work with a pre-planned orchestration but rather allow the moment to guide me. How I handle paint is definitely a response to everything in that moment, which includes both the now and the then. I have also tried working from small sketches and scaling up my paintings. It is interesting to have that feeling of distance from the moment, but I have to allow the new situation to be alive, just as I had while creating the sketch.

RELATIONSHIPS

As a result of being a student and being a teacher I have become very aware of relationships within art. It seems like such an obvious possibility that I may have occasionally utilized but feel like I am now really starting to understand. When I go out to paint I am always looking for some relationship that excites me. Also, as a result of teaching, I became very interested in the idea of mass notan or the observation of value shapes. In the past I had not realized how important value can be in regards to movement and composition in painting. In Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Pitcher*, illustrated below we can see the original and the two value notan next to it, which reveals the value structure.



Vermeer, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, 1664

SPACE

I must admit that space is a formal concern I had not emphasized much before, but remains a choice that I feel is specific to each artist. At some point in my time at Louisiana State University I realized that it would be beneficial to absorb as much as possible from faculty and peers around me, as I realized that in the future I will not have the benefit of such insights. My natural inclination is towards the intimacy of shallow spaces but I have pushed myself to see how deeper spaces could be another possible formal consideration.

SURFACE

Surface is something that has always been evident in my work. I love paint. In the past I have used thick layers of impasto-style painting. As with many of my natural inclinations, this is something I have pushed against while studying in Louisiana. Working with a thinner application of paint never appealed to me until I saw Patrick George's work in person. His thinly applied washes seemed every bit as rich and viable to me as a Frank Auerbach painting. I have also been exploring the type of surface I begin to paint on. In the past I have used the backside of masonite to begin with a surface similar to a thick linen weave. Most recently I have found that a high-quality thick gesso applied with a trowel and then rolled over will give me a toothed surface that I feel works well with my desire to paint thick, but also somewhat in layers, as seen in *Lot* below.



Scott Arthur, *Lot*, 2013

SUBJECT

I enjoy painting subjects that others might find uninteresting. A common expression among teachers is that it does not matter what you paint but how you paint it. I believe the broader suggestion is that even the most quotidian of objects could become fascinating if treated with the proper respect. This notion is best illustrated by much of the work of Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin. The majority of Chardin's work represents the still-life objects and everyday people and settings of his life. The majority of my thesis work consists of landscape paintings. I would often walk about looking for a motif and found myself starting to look down. I noticed the potential for these little landscapes just by focusing on what was at my feet.



Scott Arthur, *Reflected*, 2013

Through the process of working and particularly of being a resident of South Louisiana you cannot help but notice the differences between nature and civilization. Some of my work began to focus on the geometric nature of buildings and houses.



Scott Arthur, *Downtown*, 2013

I have tremendous respect for artists that came before me. I also appreciate when artists adopt a motif in relation to another artist's work: for example, the influence Matisse had on Richard Diebenkorn's work and the influence of Japanese painting on Van Gogh and Degas. The studio view motif is one that I find timeless and compelling. The feeling of inside and outside being compressed to the flat surfaces we work on is an interesting consideration to begin with. *Studio View* addresses shifts in scale and the play of depth; and yet there is still a feeling of being trapped.



Scott Arthur, *Studio View*, 2013

CONCLUSION

My back itched; I lay in the thick shag carpet of my bedroom trapped inside another thick summer. Every once in a while I would catch a cool breeze and the sweet stink of the lilac bush below my window would climb into my room. I sat with the moment, both of us listening to the robins and the distant train, and the weight of my body was dissolved by the awareness of a violet gray sky that pressed up to my window and we waited for the first firefly to end the day. I was in the moment, in a space, yet outside of time.

My brush drags across the dry panel as the creamy oils are pushed into each other. There is a quiet dialogue between my gaze and the motif. The sky tells me to lower my arm, a curve in the road suggests a twist of the wrist, I can smell dust from the fields in the air, and a bead of sweat that started 92,960,000 miles away on the sun runs down my back like a cool exclamation that I am inside the now and then.

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VITA

Scott Arthur was born in Bushnell, IL. He had no formal art training until arriving at Western Illinois University where he studied painting with Michael Mahoney. After completing a second degree from Western Illinois University Scott began living and working in Chicago and later Oakland, CA as a graphic artist and art director for the next nine years. In the fall of 2009 he was admitted to the Master of Arts painting program at Eastern Illinois University. After completing the requisite one-year program Scott found employment at Carl Sandburg College. The following year he applied to several graduate schools and selected Louisiana State University. He studied from the Fall of 2010 to the Spring of 2013 with Rick Ortner, Denyce Celentano, Ed Smith, Chris Johns, John Malveto and Kelli Scott Kelley.